

# The Sound Record

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## THE SOUNDS OF MUSIC: EARLY RECORDING ARTISTS, by Charles Marowitz.

World Audience Inc, 2008. Large format paperback, 268pp.

\$US25.00 from internet dealers or direct from <http://www.shoppalstores.com/WorldAudience/>

This is a book about songs, performers and popular music. In reviewing the work, Anthony Slide referred to it as a "remarkable volume, which does not fall easily into any obvious category." It is predominantly a series of pen-portraits of various popular recording artists, including Ada Jones and Billy Murray, Sophie Tucker, Al Bernard, Nora Bayes, Helen Kane, Irving Kaufman, Rudy Vallee, Ruth Etting and Harry Richman, although several short essays on particular aspects of popular music are also included. Some of the portraits are biographical in emphasis; others deal more with the featured performer's repertoire, recordings or style. The women outnumber the men, and the emphasis is on the American scene, but both Vesta Tilley and Elsie Carlisle are included. A transcription of spoken recollections of former Edison employee Clarence Ferguson recorded in 1968 forms an appendix.



According to the author in his introduction, "the object of this work is to analyze, articulate and celebrate a corpus of music and musicians... This book has no encyclopaedic pretensions... My guide in this book has been my own musical inclinations..." It is not really a reference work, but rather an affectionate, nostalgic and personal treatment of the named artists, their music and the era. In that regard, it bears some passing similarities to W. MacQueen-Pope's rather wistful surveys of music hall and theatre.

For my part, the highlight of the book was the Ferguson interview, which contained information I have not seen elsewhere. It was particularly interesting to read about Edison musical director Albert Benzler and his complaints in relation to the company's method of determining which records were to be released. It seems that at one point in the two-minute cylinder era, the task had become entrusted to what Benzler contemptuously referred to as "the Jackass Committee," which was made up of various people working in the factory or office, most of whom had little or no musical knowledge. Benzler considered this to be ridiculous, argued with Edison about it and ultimately left Edison to join US Everlasting.

The book is well produced, although proof-reading is rather hit or miss. I was amused to read that Elsie Carlisle "veered" on the obscene, and surprised that "Lambert" and "Lambart" were used interchangeably as the brand name of the pink celluloid cylinders. "Phonoigraph", however, is inexcusable!

A worthwhile read for the nostalgia buff, and a volume suitable to be dipped into when the mood strikes one.

John Hanna