

RECORD REVIEWS

Georgia Tom Dorsey 1928-1932: Come On Mama Do That Dance. Thomas A. Dorsey, Frankie Jaxon, Mozelle Ardson, Tampa Red, Bertha Hill, and Stovepipe Johnson. 14 selections, vocal and instrumental, mono. Yazoo L-1041. Yazoo Record Co., 245 Waverley Place, New York, NY 10014.

Please Warm My Weiner. Whistling Bob Howe and Frankie Griggs, Tommy Bradley and James Cole, Buddie Burton, Georgia Tom and Tampa Red, Rufus and Ben Quillian, Hokum Boys, Papa Charlie Jackson, Butterbeans and Susie, Robert and Charlie Hicks, Yazoo All Stars, Memphis Minnie, Leola R. and Kid Wesley Wilson, Bo Carter. 14 selections, vocal and instrumental, mono. Yazoo L-1043. Yazoo Record Co., 245 Waverley Place, New York, NY 10014.

Reviewed by Michael Taft

Last year I attended the Miramichi Folk Festival in Newcastle, New Brunswick, where I heard traditional singers sing many old and beautiful ballads. The one song, however, that the audience demanded be sung again was a humorous novelty piece involving the imitation of various barnyard animals. I'm not sure what conclusion should be drawn from this, except that different members of an audience may appreciate different kinds of music, in any case, it is the nonsensical, funny ditty which has the widest acceptance and which appeals to the largest number of people.

These two albums give a sampling of this kind of music--the "hokum" songs which black audiences, like their New Brunswick counterparts, expected and demanded from performers. There is no set definition of hokum. Stephen Calt, in the notes to L-1041, writes that "catchy, contemporary lyrics and an eclectic use of melody that incorporates ragtime, white hillbilly . . . and even black children's song motifs" make up a part of hokum. To this may be added a dramatic, vaudevillian quality to the performances and, in most cases, a sexual content to the lyrics. Hokum includes not only songs, but skits, dialogues, recitations, and toasts. Hokum is witty, nonsensical, bawdy, and is an excellent foil to the serious, highly emotional blues which the same singers were also capable of performing.

Yazoo L-1041 features pianist Thomas A. Dorsey, a highly prolific composer of both blues and gospel songs. In the 1920s and early 1930s, Dorsey and his guitar accompanist, Tampa Red, specialized in sophisticated, urban songs, often bawdy and often hokum. In 1928 they recorded "It's Tight Like That" (Vocalion 1216), which became a standard hokum number in the repertoires of many singers. Besides making many records of their own performances, Dorsey and Tampa Red were studio musicians who were regularly employed by the recording companies in Chicago to back up other singers. This album, therefore, also features Frankie "Half Pint" Jaxon, Bertha "Chippie" Hill, Stovepipe Johnson, and Mozelle Ardson (who recorded under the names of Kansas City Kitty, Jane Lucas, and Ha-nah May), all accompanied by Dorsey.

The hokum on this album is best exemplified by Jaxon's "Jive Man Blues," which is a half-sung, half-recited toast; by the sung dialogues between Dorsey

and Ardson, "How Can You Have the Blues?" and "The Doctor's Blues," the second of which is especially bawdy; by Ardson's rendition of "Gym's Too Much for Me," which makes use of a play on the words "gym" and "Jim;" and by a vaudeville-type skit performed by Dorsey and Tampa Red, "Crow Jane Alley." This last piece is not listed in Godrich and Dixon's Blues and Gospel Records 1902-1942 (rev. ed., London: Storyville, 1969), and it doesn't sound very much like Dorsey and Tampa Red to me, but nevertheless it is an excellent example of hokum.

Yazoo L-1043 is a hokum anthology and is a fine survey of the genre. Many of the selections must have been stage pieces from tent-show and vaudeville acts, especially the duets. Whistling Bob Howe and Frankie Griggs (a female) and the husband-and-wife team of Butterbeans and Susie perform sung dialogues which are quite bawdy in their use of double entendre and euphemism. Brothers Rufus and Ben Quillian and husband and wife Leola B. and Kid Wesley Wilson sing duets which sound well-rehearsed from stage performances. The Hokum Boys (Tom Dorsey and Ikey Robinson) sing their version of "I Had to Give Up Gym," which, if anything, is more vaudevillian than Ardson's rendition. Tommy Bradley and James Cole do the jug band standard, "Adam and Eve," which may not be classed as pure hokum because of its rough jug band style, but which fits in quite well with the other selections because of its non-serious, mildly risqué nature.

The most interesting selections on this album are two comedy skits on the theme of gambling. Dorsey and Tampa Red perform "The Alley Crap Game" and the Hicks Brothers, Robert and Charlie, perform "Darktown Gambling--The Crap Game," which are both humorous skits involving crap-shooting. The gambling rhymes and terminology are particularly interesting, and one wonders what these performances looked like on stage, if indeed they were performed outside of the recording studio.

Papa Charlie Jackson sings "You Put It In, I'll Take It Out," which derives its wit from a double entendre chorus ostensibly about banking. Jackson also engages in the type of tall-tale joking which must have accompanied his stage performances ("I got one /wōman/ so stingy, she's scared to breathe hard"). Memphis Minnie and Bo Carter sing songs which are quite typical of their bawdy song repertoires (Carter's song gives the album its title).

The album also includes "Hometown Skiffle" in two parts by the Yazoo All Stars. This is quite deceptive, as these selections will be found under Paramount All Stars in Godrich and Dixon, although the original Paramount recording merely reads "Descriptive Novelty." Basically, the record is a sampler, or promotional record issued by Paramount on which a number of their artists perform. The Hokum Boys (Dorsey and Alex Hill this time), Will Ezell, Blind Blake, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charlie Spand, and Papa Charlie Jackson all give a sampling of their talents. I know of only one other example of this type of promotional record--the two-part "Jim Jackson's Jamboree" issued by Vocalion (Vo 1428). My objection here is to the deceptive "Yazoo All Stars" credit. Keeping track of blues artists is difficult enough without reissue companies adding to the morass of pseudonyms.

Not all selections on these two albums are hokum. There are a number of relatively straight blues songs, such as Dorsey's "Mississippi Bottem Blues" and "Second-Hand Woman Blues," Bertha Hill's "Some Cold Rainy Day," and Stovepipe Johnson's "Devilish Blues," as well as Dorsey's two gospel songs, "If You See my Saviour" and "How About You," all on L-1041. On L-1043, Buddie Burton's "Ham Fatchet Blues" is fairly non-hokum, except for the phrase "ham fatchet" thrown into the lyrics at almost every opportunity ("I'll sing this ham fatchet verse, I ain't going to sing no ham fatchet more"). The hokum does not detract from some fine guitar playing, especially by Tampa Red, Scrapper Blackwell, Big Bill Broonzy, Ben Quillian, Memphis Minnie, and Eddie Lang.

Stephen Calt's notes to the Dorsey album are quite informative and go beyond the technical, musicological analysis which is usually on the back of Yazoo albums. Calt has clearly done his homework, as references to Arna Bontemps, W. C. Handy, and the Chicago Defender attest. The notes, if that is the proper word, to L-1043 are entirely uninformative. The back cover is completely devoted to a mock-symposium on hokum in which the participants are thinly disguised personalities (Sam Farters, for example). The humor is already dated; in a few more years it will be meaningless. All I can say is that this attempt at wit is not hokum at its best--Stephen Calt (who is credited for these "notes") has not learned well the art of hokum from the performers on the album. Serious notes to this album would have been especially welcome, as nothing has been written on such obscure artists as Buddie Burton, Howe and Griggs, or the Quillian brothers.

I will not comment on whether Robert Crumb's art work on the cover of L-1043 is offensive. I am far removed from the culture which is portrayed by Crumb and would prefer to leave any criticism to members of the black community. The flippant attitude of Yazoo towards this album is interesting. I get the feeling that they are not quite ready to accept hokum as an art form worthy of serious study; that they are just slightly embarrassed or uneasy about this material and are trying to camouflage this by creating a second-rate hokum of their own. Calt, in his fine notes to L-1041, decries the fact that hokum "was once routinely dismissed by blues commentators as the most shallow and artless form of blues," and yet the notes and art work to L-1043 do nothing to elevate the study of hokum. Previous hokum anthologies, namely The Party Blues (Melodeon MLP-7324) and Let's Go Riding (Origin Jazz Library OJL-18), had serious, informative notes, and the albums were better for that.

Yazoo's curious attitude towards this material is carried over to the disc itself. Each side of the record has a small introductory cut which appears to be a fragment of some novelty race record. The first fragment is part of some skit and sounds vaguely like the Mississippi Sheiks; the second fragment is laughter off of some rather scratchy recording. Neither fragment is identified. From the folklorist's point of view, these fragments are quite annoying. The value of reissue records is nothing if not the unaltered and unabridged presentation of rare 78s. One wonders what market Yazoo is aiming at. The blues enthusiast doesn't need this sort of thing--he's happy enough with the reissues. The scholar certainly doesn't need all this nonsense, and would be happier with more discographical, biographical, or musicological

information. The person looking for novelty or bawdy material probably wouldn't be interested in forty-year-old blues, no matter how it was packaged.

Despite the packaging, these albums are worth having. The reissue of rare material is always worthwhile, even if the record sleeve is mink-lined and the record giggles when it is pulled from its jacket. I can only applaud Yazoo for devoting two albums to the less serious side of blues, and urge all blues scholars to buy these two records.

The New Beehive Songster, Volume 1: Early Recordings of Pioneer Folk Music. Collected by Austin and Alca Fife, Lester A. Hubbard and others. Compiled, edited, and produced by Tom Carter, Jan Harold Brunvand, and H. Reynolds Cannon. Okehdokee Records OK 75003. 370 West 1st South, Salt Lake City, Utah 84101.

Reviewed by Ormond Loomis

The Utah Mormons were called Brigham Young's bees, and the original Beehive Songster, published in 1860, was one of their song books. The New Beehive Songster is a regional sampler that takes its inspiration from the musical traditions of these Mormons and their descendants. It should be a welcome addition to the record collections of Utahans and others interested in Western folklore and American folksongs. All the cuts on it are made from early field recordings and until now, all but one have not been available commercially.

The album contains sixteen selections, each by a different western performer. There are eleven unaccompanied vocals, three vocals with instrumental accompaniment, and two fiddle pieces. Most of the songs relate specifically to Mormon history. "The Handcart Song" tells of a scheme for crossing the wilderness, whereas "Tittery-Irie-Aye" and "This Is the Place" describe the migration more generally. Other Mormon songs, like other regional folksongs, are based on successes, hardships, and memorable events of earlier days. "All Are Talking of Utah" expresses pride in the group's firmly established identity. "Once I Lived in Cottonwood" reflects the bitterness of one who had to abandon good land for poor. "The Double Tragedy" is a local murder ballad. The record is more than a Mormon sampler, however. There are occupational songs: "The Bull Whackers" and "The Days of '49;" cowboy songs: "The Strawberry Roan" and "The Gol Darned Wheel;" and, as a reminder of the influence of early popular music, a minstrel song: "Watermelon Smilin' on the Vine." Possibly the most delightful of all is "Gay Paree," a breath defying brag (nineteen run-on stanzas).

The sound on the album is surprisingly good when one considers that the average age of the field recordings from which it was made is about thirty years. A scratchy, background hiss is noticeable on several cuts, but the lyrics are always clear, and the tunes easy to follow. According to a record note, they were "electronically filtered." So, the quality is a credit to the field-