

Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890–1919. *By Tim Brooks.* Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004. x + 634 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, appendix, illustrations, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$65.00. ISBN: 0-252-02850-3.

Reviewed by Brian Ward

Tim Brooks brings both passion and compassion to the story of the black pioneers who worked as performers and entrepreneurs in the nascent U.S. recording industry. Organized around the stories of individual artists and their recordings, Brooks's narrative is complemented by a list of compact-disk reissues of these long-lost sounds and an appendix written by Dick Spottswood on Caribbean and South American recordings.

Brooks, a journalist, discographer, and past president of the Association for Recorded Sound Collections, is an incorrigible enthusiast. He has a voracious appetite for biographical details about the characters that populate his book, for minutiae about the recordings they made, and for arcane particulars about the companies for which they worked. Consequently, his book's strength lies in its astonishing collection of fact and anecdote, and not in any particular analytical acuity or theoretical insights. Indeed, one of its weaknesses is the absence of a clearly stated thesis or sustained argument to lend coherence to chapters that are essentially biographical.

An indefatigable researcher, Brooks is refreshingly candid about the limitations of the sources available to him. One can feel the frustration when he complains that there is only one extant recording by New Orleans trailblazer Louis "Bebe" Vasnier—a wax cylinder of a mock sermon on "Adam and Eve and de Winter Apple" cut for the Louisiana Phonograph Company in 1892. By the time he managed to secure a copy, "it had deteriorated badly" (p. 88). Consequently, we have only a vague idea of what Vasnier actually sounded like. This problem bedevils Brooks's treatment of several artists whose recorded presence he gleans largely from catalog entries and advertisements in trade papers, rather than from exposure to their recordings. Despite his reverence for facts, his struggles with these constraints lend a speculative quality to a book that is punctuated by an unusual number of qualifiers, such as "perhaps," "doubtless," "presumably," and "it is most likely." There is even a chapter entitled "Rumored

Recordings”—a sort of black phonographic apocrypha—in which Brooks speculates on the existence, or nonexistence, of as yet undiscovered recordings by the likes of legendary jazz progenitors Buddy Bolden and James MacNeal.

Occasionally Brooks’s earnest attempt to tie up stubbornly loose ends leads to modest sleights of historical hand, as in his profile of George W. Johnson. Hailed as the first black recording artist, Johnson may have committed his trademark whistling to a tin-foil recording as early as the late 1870s; certainly, his various versions of “The Whistling Coon” were extremely popular in the 1890s. The chapter on Johnson begins with a dramatic vignette, replete with dialogue, of an 1899 New York courtroom where Johnson stood trial for murder. However, Brooks admits in a footnote that “we cannot, of course, know exactly what was said on that morning” (p. 532). In the same chapter, a woodcut of Leesburg, Virginia, from the mid-1840s—“around the time George W. Johnson was born” (p. 16)—is reproduced, presumably in the absence of a similar depiction of Wheatland, the most likely site of Johnson’s birth. Likewise, a protracted description of slavery and Virginia’s travails during the Civil War era is not yoked to the actual circumstances of Johnson’s own life. Instead, Brooks speculates that Johnson’s family was separated because his father was a particularly rebellious slave (p. 19); that the Civil War “must have been a fearful time” for Johnson (p. 23); and that “throughout the hostilities it is most likely that he took part in the ‘white man’s war’ at the end of a shovel” (p. 23).

If Brooks does not always treat evidence as a professional historian might, there is still much to commend his book. In relating the stories of African Americans who made recordings—some of them, like the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Roland Hayes, and Bert Williams, relatively well known; others, like Carroll Clark, Dan Kilbride, and Daisy Tapley, more obscure—he reveals the commercial practices, economic structures, and production techniques, as well as the racial attitudes, of early industry giants, like Edison, Columbia, and Victor, and of smaller labels, like Zonophone, Emerson, and Busy Bee.

Particularly noteworthy is the chapter on the Broome Special Phonographic Records Company, launched in Medford, Massachusetts, in 1919 by George Broome, a Brooklyn-born African American. This was two years before Harry Pace founded the better-known black-owned label, Black Swan, in Harlem. Featuring leading black

classical musicians such as Harry Thacker Burleigh and Florence Cole-Talbert, Broome recorded African Americans playing and singing the same kind of respectable European concert music that was recorded by Pace. Again, this treatment is notable for its richness of detail, rather than its depth of interpretation. Brooks describes how the label released single-sided discs and charged \$1.25 for them (plus 25 cents for postage, packing and insurance) and reveals the mysteries of Broome's idiosyncratic method of assigning matrix numbers to his recordings. Brooks also notes that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People welcomed the birth of this black-owned business, although he misses the opportunity to probe the links between black commercial enterprise and the NAACP's political agenda. Similarly, the reader is left to ponder the complex relationship between the elite musical repertoire promoted by Broome and Pace and shifting notions of black identity during this period.

If there is an underlying theme to the book, it is that many talented African American singers, whistlers, instrumentalists, raconteurs, preachers, comedians, and even sportsmen (boxer Jack Johnson recorded a commentary on his 1909 victory over the great white hope Jim Jeffries) were economically exploited by early recording companies. And yet, Brooks's portraits of Pace and Broome, of bandleader and Clef Club owner James Reese Europe, and of songwriter-publisher W. C. Handy, show an alternative, if still racially circumscribed, history of black entrepreneurial activity that helped to define a fledgling industry.

If *Lost Sounds* falls short of providing a definitive analysis of the black contribution to the early recording industry, it should nonetheless be the first port of call for anyone interested in discovering which African Americans did what in the industry during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Brian Ward is chair and professor of history at the University of Florida. His publications include Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations (1998) and Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South (2004).