

Voices of Christmas Past

By Trail End State Historic Site Superintendent Cynde Georgen; from *Trail End Notes*, November 2003

Voices of Christmas Past, a compact disc released in 1999 by Dawn of Sound, is one of the finest collections of vintage holiday recordings ever compiled. Its twenty-three songs span the era from 1898 to 1922, during what collectors call “the acoustic era.” The recording is now out of print, but the contents can be streamed from the Dawn of Sound website.

The following is taken from the recording’s extensive liner notes.



Edison Player, 2013 (TESHS Collection)

The acoustic era covers the period 1877 (the year Thomas Edison patented his talking machine) to 1924, when a method to make recordings using microphones and electrical amplifiers was introduced.

Acoustic records have a unique ‘flavour’ or sound. This sound is the result of how the recording was made. Performers were placed in front of a large recording horn, often more than one. The sound was focused onto a cutting stylus that made an impression on a wax master. The wax master was transformed into a metal stamping master.

From this metal, master recordings were then pressed in shellac or other materials. The ‘flavour’ is the effect of the recording horn. It’s a lot like singing into a kitchen sink! There is a boxy, sometimes nasal quality to this sound and there is plenty of hiss. ...

Of all things Christmas, nothing is more traditional than the singing of carols and songs. Songs that capture in lyrics and in music the many traditions that we have at Christmas - the birth of the Christ child, the Christmas tree, the opening of gifts, and even sleigh rides. Any well-dressed sleigh ride featured those cheery sounding bells attached to the horse's harness. In fact, one of

the most beloved Christmas songs ever, “Jingle Bells,” celebrates this sound and the spirit of a country sleigh ride.

On October 30, 1889, banjoist Will Lyle made history by recording “Jingle Bells,” the very first Christmas record. Although no known copies of this record survive, one of the earliest vocal examples of “Jingle Bells” does survive on an Edison brown wax cylinder entitled, “Sleigh Ride Party.” It was made a decade later. ...

Barbershop harmony was the most popular vocal style of the 1890s. The vocal quartet was well-suited to the acoustic recording process and this explains why quartet records dominated the first few decades of this century. ... While the vocal quartet made for good recordings, large choirs and full orchestras did not fare too well in the acoustic recording era. In order to make choirs and orchestras sound well they were very often radically reduced in numbers. ... The Christmas portion of Handel’s “Messiah,” [for example], was sung by only eight choristers ...

Descriptive and narrative recordings, the forerunner to the radio play, were extremely popular at the time. Comedian Cal Stewart was perhaps the most popular in this genre. His portrayal of the rube “Uncle Josh” delighted everyone. Other fine examples of this lost art form include the comedy skits “Sleigh Ride Party” by the Edison Quartette and “Christmas Morning at the Clancey’s” by Steve Porter.

Traditional Christmas hymns and carols have always been an integral part of the Christmas holidays and were extensively recorded both as instrumentals and as medleys.



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