

MEET THE PLATTERBUG

BY
J. C. FURNAS

IF THE Boston police ever find a mysterious stranger going to work on the cornerstone of the Boston Opera House with a pneumatic drill, they will be wrong in diagnosing him as a frustrated tenor. Instead he will be a phonograph-record collector no longer able to endure the rumor that numerous old-time records of great old singers are buried there. If, as you stroll in the woods on a certain California estate, the William Tell Overture blasts out at you from a clump of bushes, you aren't having hallucinations. This estate, owned by a pair of wealthy phonograph bugs, is wired for sound all over. Concealed loud-speakers, outdoors as well as in, give forth whatever music is played in the big house. Those are just two samples. When first invented, the phonograph was considered merely a way of taking down dictation or preserving public utterances. But that wasn't even the beginning of the story. Neither Alexander Graham Bell nor Thomas A. Edison could foresee the fifty different kinds of record collectors who are the most picturesque proof of the way Americans have recently taken to the music that goes round and round on a platter.

Any kind of collector is usually a mystery to the outsider, to whom the accumulation of stamps, ivory elephants, old dental tools or hourglasses is necessarily pointless. The possessor of a fine lot of antique dueling pistols, for instance, can only purr over them—firing them off would be too risky. Although usually literate, the august bibliophile seldom reads his folio Shakespeares, and, unless books are to be read, what are they for? But the record collector does make a good deal of sense to the uninitiate because, with a few screwball exceptions, he actually plays as well as loves his records. Each playing wears an irreplaceable disk down a little farther. But he puts it on the turntable anyway, because it isn't the record as such that he wants; it's the music on it.

It is more difficult to understand why record collecting should be largely a man's activity. Women have usually led in supporting music in America. Yet only three or four women are at all conspicuous in any department of the record mania. Perhaps that is because the collector's favorite spot for his record racks is in clothes closets—and no woman could bring herself to spoil good closet space for any purpose whatever. In any case, this is undeniably a stag affair. High-hat record shops report that most of their sales are classical and, of classical disks sold, men buy 90 per cent. Who's Who names in the field are practically all male—Charles M. Schwab, the Duke of Windsor, the late King Fuad of Egypt, young Nelson Rockefeller, the late Sen. Bronson Cutting.

Most collectors, however, are by no means as wealthy as that list might imply. A New Jersey enthusiast in the lowest income bracket is known to skimp on food so he can afford more Ravel and Debussy. Many a minor business executive, with no previous knowledge of great music except that it meant wearing a boiled shirt in a hall stuffy with ecstatic dowagers, has found that he gets a huge, informal kick out of Sibelius or Respighi, and starts

buying records. Presently, informal parties develop where, in appalling contrast to concert atmosphere, he and his friends sprawl at ease on the floor, soaking up immortal harmonies. They often pool their records in an informal musical library, as Benjamin Franklin and his tradesman friends pooled their books. Like that famous circle, these little record cliques include all manner of occupations and interests. Numbered among old-vocal-record specialists, for instance, are a retired ballet dancer, several actors, an oil-company executive, an insurance agent, a member of a textile firm, a photostater in a real-estate office, a college professor and a bank teller.

From the business point of view, all this is just another symptom of the way records have boomed since the bottom of the depression. A hundred million disks were sold at the glorious high point in 1921, when popular radio was still little more than a gleam in the engineer's eye. By 1933, after radio had gradually relegated the phonograph to cobweb gathering in the cellar, only 10,000,000 sold—a 90 per cent drop. Record and phonograph makers were bitterly asking themselves why they were staying in business. Now and again the sheriff



PHOTO COURTESY ROBERT VINCENT

The negative of this very early and unidentified recording scene was found in the Edison laboratories. The long horn piped the sound to a wax-grooving machine on the balcony.

raised the same question. But then the curve of record sales suddenly jerked skyward, doing 35,000,000 last year, well on the way to 55,000,000 this year. Still groggy with delight, the platter industry is going giddily to town, riding a huge wave of phonograph-consciousness of which collectors are the seething foam on top.

The paradoxical theory that radio produced this unexpected boom is pretty plausible. While smothering the phonograph with fresh, free entertainment, radio was also educating its public into listening to music, classical stuff as well as popular, and liking it more and more. A public that really likes something

presently begins to want what it wants when it wants it, and there the phonograph has the bulge. Radio musical fare is necessarily table-d'hôte, confining the listener to what program departments see fit to give him. To get his music à la carte, to hear Wagner or Bob Crosby or a mother-o'-mine tenor when the mood is on him, the new music fan turned to records. Simultaneously, radio was encouraging him to do so by developing techniques that accomplished great improvements on both disks and phonographs—things like electrical recording and devices for playing records through the sensitive amplifying radio mechanism. Resulting combination radio-phonographs sold more than 200,000 last year at high prices, and those detachable turntables that make a phonograph out of any radio have swept the country.

Others trying to account for the record boom, point to the huge recent increase in nickel-in-the-slot phonographs in taverns and dog wagons, each steadily wearing out disks day and night, with the proprietor making a profit from the nickels and the record companies falling over themselves to supply up-to-the-minute replacements. Others lay a lot of it to the swing-jitterbug craze. The phonograph has always thrived best when mass dementia-synecopata breaks out, and you can tell the age of the dancers by the hoofbeats per measure. As new and frantic dances replaced the old bored attitude on the dance floor and reintroduced the vibrating chandelier to American life, the phonograph became the same necessity it was back in the days of the toddle and the camel walk. If you wanna cut a rug, you wanna cut a rug, and the radio gives out the appropriate swing only after midnight.

By now, whatever did it, the record craze is so vigorous that newspapers are giving away records and turntables as subscription bait. Record shops are choked with cash customers while the management tears its hair over the problem of getting one client out of the listening booth in time to make room for all the thronging others, each of whom is a potential special-taste collector. Shrewd salespeople serve the cause of great music—and, incidentally, step up the gross take—by educating hot-music-seeking youngsters into a taste for the three B's—Bach, Beethoven, Brahms—that cost much more per disk. The progression, if you're interested, is swing-to-Gershwin-to-Stravinsky-to-Wagner-to-Olympus.

To be called large, any kind of record collection must contain two or three thousand items. A wealthy

New Yorker recently paid \$300 merely to get his collection catalogued. Large-scale record buyers like Charles and Kathleen Norris are said to lay in new disks in hundred-dollar batches, always in duplicate, one set for town, one for the country. The Wilson Record Rental Service, run by an enterprising San Franciscan, is doing very well on both rentals and consequent sales. And, in fire-sale and basement-store neighborhoods in most large cities, a brisk trade in secondhand disks goes on for these musical-library builders whose pocketbooks will stand only so much strain.

Once a man starts on a musical library, he is in serious danger of skidding faster and faster into real rabid collecting. The acquisition of special tastes is the first false step. That can crop out in a dozen forms, such as the ailment of a minor Broadway actor who wants and is rapidly getting all known recordings of the Liebestod music from Tristan and Isolde. A galloping taste for a particular performer, such as Maurice Chevalier or Bing Crosby, produces fan collections of all records they ever made. Of late years, with West Indian cruises so popular, numbers of people have gone quietly off their heads about Trinidad calypsos—the Negro street songs, improvised about local scandals and other current events, concocted by strolling singers for carnival time in Port of Spain. There is an undeniable fascination about both their rumbaish rhythms and the simple-minded lyrics that celebrate the abdication of King Edward VIII, or the visits to Trinidad of both the Graf Zeppelin and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

On the Trail of Forgotten Tunes

SOME sophisticates go for hillbilly ballads, and acquire them in great numbers, even though they were composed and recorded by Tin-Pan-Alley primarily for the side-meat-and-corn-pone trade way down yonder. Others join the cult of English music-hall stuff. The folk touch is pretty insidious in almost any version. That Dark Rapture movie actually started a minor wave of buying records of primitive jungle music. Hungarian gypsy music, which skyrocketed last winter for no discernible reason; bagpipe numbers, of which college boys are particularly fond; records of such *avant-garde* writers as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce reading their own works—a complete catalogue of special tastes in records, all of which recording companies cheerfully supply, would

have the variety of a drink list and the confused effect of a pack rat's nest.

It is even possible for those who know the ropes very well to acquire collections of recordings of radio news events such as the Hindenburg disaster and the "At long last" speech. Bootlegging has cropped up to complete the picture. Furtive little companies transcribe Toscanini programs from off the air and sell the resulting disks under the counter, at prices well below legally made records, to thrifty symphony addicts who prefer to ignore the blatant illegality of the transaction. It also stands to reason that, just as in the book trade, the record trade would have its undercover angle in the purveying of off-color and dirty recordings—well organized, with distribution territories neatly mapped out and a wide variety of product.

When a craving for the old-time records that are no longer available in catalogue listings strikes the specializing platterbug, he has reached either the top or bottom of the disease, depending on the point of view. It happens very easily. Many of the more famous disks in any specialty are, so to speak, out of print, available only in secondhand places or in private hands. For many more the original master disks from which individual records are made have been lost or destroyed. Lots of them, you hear, were sold for scrap metal during the World War. The inevitable result has been a snowballing cult of old-record collectors quite outside the general commercial picture, with parallels to stamp and book collecting. Many of the choicer items go way back to the earliest phonographs between 1885 and 1900, covering not only disks but the old wax cylinders that preceded them. Since you can't play a wax cylinder on a modern phonograph any more than you can run an electric-light bulb on kerosene, the old cylinder machines, complete with the horns that looked like the trumpets used in spiritualist séances, are sought for two or three dollars apiece in junk shops. Other enthusiasts have worked out delicate techniques for re-recording the contents of the old cylinders, so they can be played on modern machines. And several organizations—like the Historical Records Society that William H. Seltsam runs in Bridgeport, Connecticut—hunt down old master disks in the record companies' archives and order re-pressings of long-forgotten masterpieces for their subscribers.

Neither antique collectors nor bibliophiles ever went through more than (Continued on Page 73)



Blissful Platterbug Ulysses Walsh, in Knoxville, has just found a rare Billy Murray and other treasures.



Platterbug Dorothy Baker, author of best-selling *Young Man With a Horn*, listens raptly to Louis Armstrong's hot trumpet.

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the platterbug when he starts the agonizing sport of combing thrift shops, junk dealers, secondhand stores, barns, garrets and basements for dead and forgotten disks and cylinders. On his account, the Salvation Army stores that market miscellaneous donations stack all records acquired well to the front, handy for him and also for the dealers' runners, who get there early in the morning to check over the day's catch. The new tribe of dealers are pretty keen and finds are rarer than they used to be. But even so, there just might be a stray example of Ethel Waters' early blues shouting, or another specimen of that startling operatic duet in which the world-famous soprano, peeved at the world-famous tenor for stopping to have a drink on his way to the recording studio, substituted for the proper Italian words the unmistakable English words: "He's had a highball!"

Many collectors spend their vacations touring hither and yon by car and inquiring in small towns for stray stacks of half-forgotten disks. Since grubbing through basements and haylofts is dirty work, the more earnest types do their campaigning in overalls and wearing furnace gloves. Costume and objective combine to give them lots of trouble with people who figure them as either crazy or crooked. The great bulk of what they find is, of course, a dreary round of Dardanella; Yes, We Have No Bananas; and The Rosary. But you never know when something to die for will crop up among the hair trunks, busted dolls and dusty dress forms. Last year, for instance, one of the kingpins of the Hot Record Society got wind of some stuff in an upper New York State barn. The owner, apparently sure his caller was a second-story man trying to case the joint, showed him the lot by the light of a succession of lighted matches. The last match was

gone long before the inspection was complete. Moaning piteously, the collector made a random snatch in the dark, and found, on reaching daylight, that he had a handful of early King Olivers. That may mean less than nothing to you, but to the connoisseurs of early jazz who are known as hot collectors, it is like finding a four-leaf clover on your wedding morn.

By now, various earnest students of recordiana have prepared elaborate bibliographies of the elder disks, going into all the dizzying refinements of flush, sunk and raised labels, and Victor "pre-dog" issues—meaning records made back before the fox terrier was part of the trade-mark. Labels can have their own importance, just as original bindings have for the bibliophile. A few specialists try to get at least one record from every company that ever made records, taking in all the ephemeral little outfits from India to Sweden and back round the other way. But the true platterbug has only contempt for the straight label collector, who, according to horrified whispers, may even saw the label out and throw the disk away. A connoisseur of wines would feel much the same about a man who bought Clos Vougeot bottles for their own sakes and poured the wine down the sink. For, added to the satisfactions of possession, the privilege of keeping immortal voices and orchestras safe for posterity also means a lot to the genuine collector. Whether he goes for pioneer jazz, old-time popular songs, famous people's speeches or the master performances of long-vanished singers, he is bent on rescuing irreplaceable disks from the junk heap and extinction. Even the outsider can agree that that is a fine thing to do.

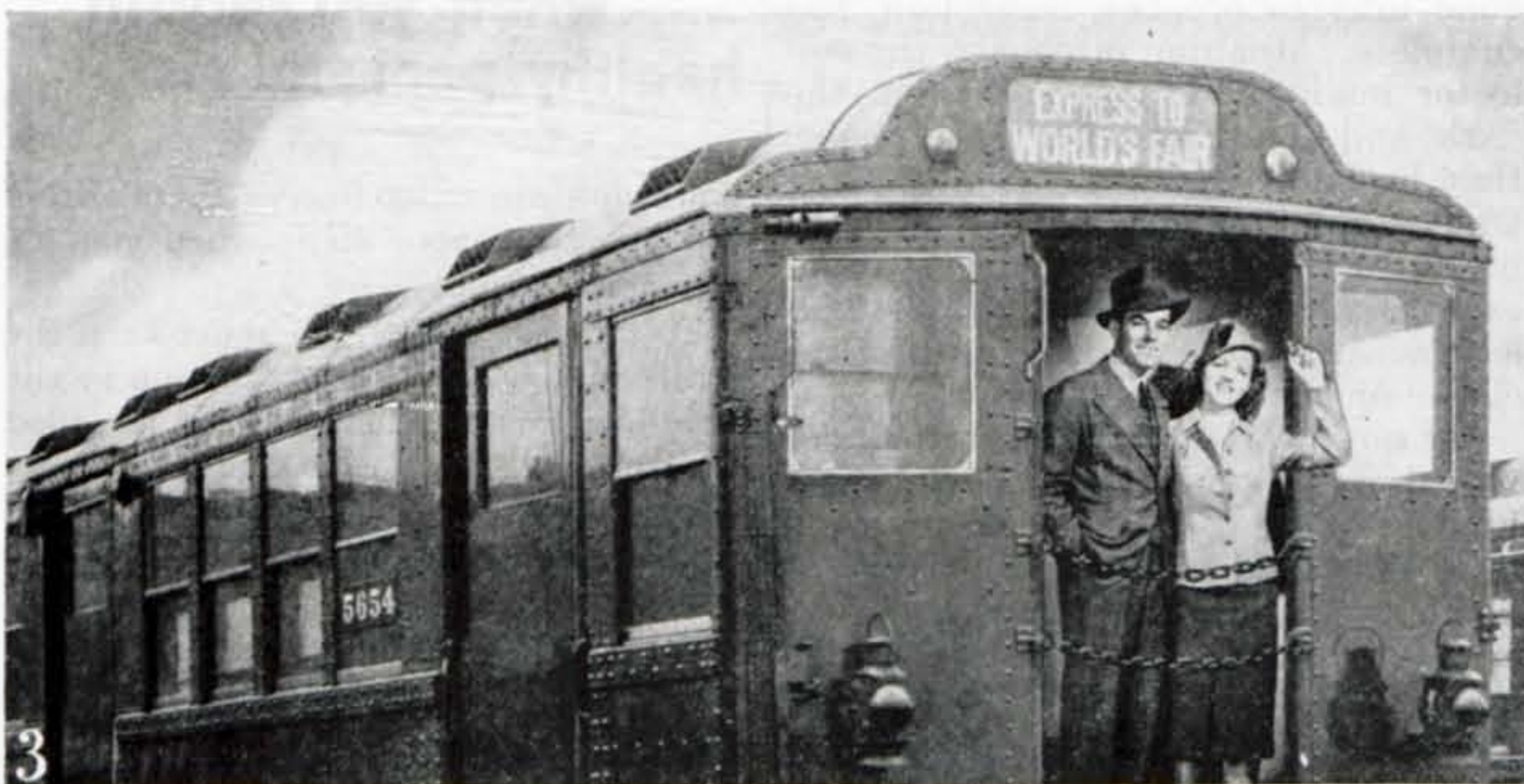
Although commercial dealers do keep the cream pretty well skimmed these days, platterbugs still talk discoveries



June Storey, featured in the Republic picture, "Blue Montana Skies", is shown inspecting...



...one of the 50 new, modernized subway cars built by the Interborough Rapid Transit Company to handle New York World's Fair crowds. These...



...new cars and other I.R.T. equipment use Sinclair products for safe, dependable lubrication in traveling an average of 16 million miles every month. Your...



...car will be safer if you take it to your nearby Sinclair Dealer for lubrication. He has a special chart which enables him to lubricate your car just as its manufacturer recommends. See him today. You'll like the way he treats you.

as prospectors talk "color." Legends of luck abound. The one about how a well-known addict of old operatic disks once noticed that an artist friend of his was using an old record for a palette, cleaned off the crusted pigment and found it was an item he had been seeking for years. The other one about how a stack of old wax cylinders was found in the Paris flea market, all melted into uselessness by the hot summer sun—except one, a rare and brilliant Ernest van Dyck number. Ed Hill, an actor-enthusiast who runs a program of old vocal records on a New York radio station, still breathes harder when he tells about stumbling over a two-foot stack of old operatics in a dingy shop in Greenwich Village—"never had a needle on 'em; mint condition absolutely." You have to know your stuff, look for the serial number pressed into the disk as well as at the label, to be able to recognize instantly one of the five different ways Emma Calvé sang *The Last Rose of Summer*. But to judge from the platterbugs' conversation, it is all worth all the trouble and a great deal to spare.

Even though heartbreak may strike any time. During a cold snap one winter, one of the rare woman experts in the game got wind of a quantity of early waxes in a neighboring city. She set out into the wintry blasts and eventually found the place. But it was a bitter cold day—too cold for the poverty-stricken owner of the records, who, just before she arrived, had stoked his stove with the precious old cylinders she was looking for. Luck was even worse for the Los Angeles platterbug who had smelled out an old stock of rare Gennetts—early jazz of prime quality—in a store basement. Having spent an ecstatic afternoon sorting them through, he took them home and laid them on a chair while he shed his overcoat. His largish mother-in-law thereupon sat on that chair and cracked them all. That sort of thing is likely to leave a scar on the collector's psyche.

The Happy Hunting Grounds

No outsider can hope to know his way around among records, except in a general way. Still the chances are that some youngster you know is a hot collector—colleges are running over with them, incessantly arguing, expertly rhapsodic authorities on the grand early days of jazz. They must not be confused with jitterbugs, however. According to the higher hot collector, the jitterbug is a hysterical ignoramus incapable of appreciating the difference between the synthetic "swing" dispensed by a big-name band in a movie theater and the sacred masterworks of Bessie Smith, Bix Beiderbecke, Bud Freeman, Charles Pierce and the rest of the jazz Valhalla whose immortal hot licks are now preserved only on old records. The word "swing," they say, has now been so abused as a promotion gag that it means no more than "fillet of sole" identifying flounder on a bill of fare.

The prowling hot collector knows—nobody else does—the exact differences between the "Chicago" and "New Orleans" styles of early jazz and can identify them even in his sleep. To acquire a Duke Ellington recording of *Black and Tan Fantasie* is nothing like enough for him. Since Ellington made several versions, the really desirable item is the one recording when the orchestra was superlatively, peculiarly "in the groove," hitting a quality of collective inspiration that it never ap-

proached again on that number. Hot collectors may still haunt cellar shops out of nervous habit. But their principal hunting grounds nowadays are the Negro districts of large cities. In such places the rumor that a white boy coming down the street will give a nickel apiece for old Bessie Smith records often causes something like a riot. Negroes invented jazz and consistently preferred it hot all through the heretical era of "sweet." So any given Darktown often shows rich deposits of the real, primordial McCoy. The trouble is, however, that many such finds are in dreadful condition because, once a Negro got a record he liked, he cranked it to death and seldom changed the needle.

A World-Wide Hot Wave

Although jazz is natively American, the grand panjandrum of hot collecting is a Frenchman named Panassie. Until last summer he had never crossed the Atlantic. All he knows about *le jazz hot*—and it is an appalling lot, by all accounts—he learned from collecting old jazz records at long range. Since the French make an aesthetic-philosophical cult out of anything they take up, and since France is the cultural leader of a large part of the world, hot collecting is weirdly international. Apparently there is a kind of emotional Esperanto in the miraculous rhythm and tone of Bix Beiderbecke, the hot addicts' martyr saint, and the indescribably "dirty" sounds produced by the immortal Louis Armstrong. The Hot Record Society, for instance, although headquartered in New York, has highly active members in Java, Australia, South Africa, Rumania, Sweden, Switzerland, New Zealand, and other intellectual whistle stops. The exact connection between primitive hot jazz, as dispensed by the New Orleans Rhythm Kings twenty-odd years ago, and the higher cultural life may not be clear to you. But it must be clear enough to Harvard University, which recently appropriated \$250 a year to buy hot records for the university and accepted, with elaborate thanks, the gift of the entire hot collection of Benny Goodman himself.

Two hundred and fifty dollars would be absurd applied to books, paintings or even stamps. But it will go a long way in records, because, although collected more widely every day, even the rarer old disks don't bring prices that would be expected in other collecting fields. Rumor says that \$50,000 was once offered for a Jenny Lind recording owned by the Swedish government and that \$5000 apiece was paid for the master disks of a couple of rare Carusos. Platterbugs deny such reports indignantly—partly because there is little evidence behind them, partly because any secondhand man who hears such exaggerated ideas of value is much more difficult to deal with from then on. Actual price tops are hard to ferret out, because most dealers are avid collectors themselves and would as soon put up their souls for auction as set a figure on their rarest gems. A bid of seventy-five dollars for a very rare Louis Armstrong item was a sensation a while back, but that was a swapping rather than a cash valuation. It is probably safe to say that nobody who knows his way around need ever pay more than twenty-five dollars for anything, and the average range for highly desirable items runs between a dollar and two dollars and a half—often less than the original list price when the record was new.

Collectors say that it will take another generation at least for hidden supplies of rare old-timers to become exhausted, and that, in the meantime, their presence overhanging the market will keep prices about where they are. That has been most disappointing for the occasional bright boy who, getting wind of record collecting, plunged into it for speculative purposes. And even more disappointing for the numerous citizens who, knowing of record collectors and finding a stack of disks on the premises, are always rushing into dealers' shops with an armful of Carusos, planning on paying off the mortgage with the proceeds. It's usually Carusos, because everybody knows he was tops. Just on that account, his records sold in such large numbers that, with a few rarity-value exceptions, his records are still a dime a dozen.

If you still feel inclined to snort at collecting primitive jazz, come into the next ward and meet the collector of old-time singers. Here is class from any point of view. The old disks that preserve the vocal splendors of such gilt-edged names as Patti, Caruso, Calvé, Sembrich, Melba and Farrar so intrigue certain imaginations that at least five New York radio stations find it worth while to present regular broadcasts of them. A Cuban physician recently died possessed of more than 20,000 disks, all operatic vocal items. Voice collecting supports special magazine columns and even an annual convention of enthusiasts. That sense of doing posterity a favor is very strong among them. These old singers, they explain, the kings and queens of the golden age of *bel canto*, are unmatched today because their training was more rigorous than that of the modern singer. Unless collectors hunt down and preserve their records, their excellence will be forever lost. What's more, they maintain, the old-time records, made by the acoustic instead of the electric method, did far better by the human voice. The reverse is true, it seems, of orchestral music, which is why nobody collects old symphonic stuff. So, no matter how flat and thin the orchestral background as Calvé sings Carmen, the song itself, the singer herself, are there in top shape.

Echoes in Wax

Occasionally a top-notch collector has the privilege of playing for some retired great lady from the golden age—Emma Eames, Eva Gauthier, Edyth Walker—records that she made in her prime. She may never have heard them before. Sometimes it makes her cry to be snatched back so suddenly to the Metropolitan or La Scala, hearing her own voice from thirty years ago.

Sometimes she smiles tearily and says: "Yes, that's just the way Gounod himself coached me to sing that passage. No cadenzas; just the pure melody."

Which is another good reason for keeping these battered old pancakes safe from the city dump. For they often contain the only available information on the exact way the composer himself wanted his work handled—and that is strictly invaluable for the student.

Both a jolt and a thrill went through the platterbugs' world recently when there was unearthed a large collection of old wax cylinders made over a generation ago during Metropolitan performances by a man named Mapleson, then the Met's librarian. Thomas A.

Edison had made him a present of a primitive recording machine and Mapleson amused himself with it by recording the company's voices. At first he worked from the prompter's box with the machine on his lap and the sound-gathering horn, about the size and shape of a bull sea lion, sticking out in full view of the audience. Bitter protests from the cash customers eventually moved him to the backstage catwalk, where, night after night, he recorded twenty or thirty of the world's greatest, singing not in a studio but with all the verve of actual performance. Each morning the artists would drop in for a playback, to hear how they'd sounded. But beyond that nobody took it at all seriously. Nowadays, however, the knowledge that these fragile little shells of grooved wax exist drives collectors frantic. There they are, but the wax has hardened with time and the surface noise on most of them makes them practically unplayable. It's like finding Shakespeare's diary only a few years after the ink has faded just beyond the point of legibility.

Frozen Music

Even the best preserved of these Mapleson records, said one expert listener, is like "listening at the top of a tall factory chimney to singing far below." Yet that masked, remote, sure voice is the great and never-to-be-equaled Jean de Reszke. Which is colossal, if you feel that way about it. For other Jean de Reszke recordings exist only in rumor—one batch, since disappeared, made for an early French company; one item among the relics of Queen Alexandra of England, to get at which would require burgling Windsor Castle; and another said to be the jealously guarded property of an aged American spinster who had a girlish crush on the great Jean.

Collectors take such things so big that explanation falters. Just for fun, Dr. Henry Reichlin, an eminent Austrian collector now in this country, once asked the late Dr. Alfred Adler, the world-famous psychopathologist, how he would account for people going so wild about long-departed singers. Two ways, said the *Herr Doktor*—the enthusiast must be either slightly deaf or slightly hypersensitive to noises. One or the other is often true, says Doctor Reichlin. Whether or not most voice collectors are hypersensitive to noises, they are certainly hypersensitive to one another. Gang feuds and bickerings also exist among hot collectors. But a few of their chief savants, such as M. Panassie and John Henry Hammond, Jr., the radical Harvard man who is the American Little Father and Big Bringdown of Hot, are widely acknowledged to be on the level and know what they are talking about. Among vocal collectors, little of such tolerance exists. Accusations of commercialism, abject ignorance and flagrant faking, fly in all directions, as hotly as during strained relations between rival leading ladies of a tent show. No doubt all that steps up the fun. But it scares strangers. And makes the relief all the greater when the backbiting stops and they start to play a rare old Adelina Patti record, made well after her great days, but still preserving her glorious touch as she sings Home, Sweet Home.

The finer points of both hot and old-vocal collecting may leave you and me a trifle cold. But the down-to-earth department also exists, comfortable as an old shoe, in the shape of collectors

of old-time comic songs and monologues that are guaranteed to transport anybody who can still hear right back to the period of struggle-buggies and peg-top pants. Ulysses J. Walsh, a newspaperman of Johnson City, Tennessee, has a collection of some 5000 items, mostly this sort of thing. Such has been his passion ever since, as a toddling kid, he heard his first phonograph record—a selection with the irresistible title of A Night Trip to Buffalo, or Two Irishmen in a Sleeper. He put in the next thirty years trying to find himself a copy of the record. Only a few years ago he finally succeeded. In the meantime he had become owner of and an authority on practically all the old-time stars of the whirling disks—such as Arthur Collins, Billy Murray, Len Spencer, Ada Jones and Dan W. Quinn. His Billy Murray items alone amount to more than 500—poignant hark-backs to a more cheerful and tuneful past. It is cheering to hear that, somber and tragic as she may be on the screen, Greta Garbo in private life is an addict of this kind of thing. Are you old enough to remember Meet Me in St. Louis, Louis, Meet Me at the Fair? Billy Murray still sings it in Johnson City, as well as Everybody Works But Father, and Oh, You Coon! And Ada Jones still puts the subtlest of cockney whines into Waiting at the Church.

The comic monologue has proved little in American record tastes since the World War, with the phenomenal exceptions of The Two Black Crows, and Albert and the Lion. But way back then, as you may remember, the family's first phonograph was incomplete without No News, or What Killed the Dog, and De Wolf Hopper doing Casey at the Bat. Hundreds more are being preserved by collectors here and there, waiting to educate posterity on what its ancestors roared over and beat time to back in the good old days.

Posterity will owe another kind of debt to a sound engineer named Robert Vincent, who, in spare time, has

dedicated himself to preserving and re-recording off wax all available records of eminent people's voices. Many collectors have a few, picked up at random—perhaps Sarah Bernhardt in L'Aiglon, or William Jennings Bryan sounding off on Immortality. But this man, who, as a kid, knew Edison, took seriously the old gentleman's intention to see the phonograph used for historical purposes. A large number of his historic wax cylinders were acquired by earnest searching in the vicinity of Edison's New Jersey laboratory. Name your celebrity—don't hesitate to go back a way, because the phonograph is a good fifty years old—and here is his voice. P. T. Barnum speaking at a dinner in his honor given by Sir Henry Irving, Bryan denouncing the Philippine annexation; Edison himself telling a whopper about the curative powers of California springs; Woodrow Wilson acting Great White Father to the American Indian; Nellie Melba's farewell speech, with the sobs clearly recorded; Shackleton and Peary; Conan Doyle and Sir Oliver Lodge; Christabel Pankhurst on women's suffrage; Queen Victoria, Emperor Franz Josef, Florence Nightingale, Robert Ingersoll. Even one of the little cylinders that Edison used to send his London representative in lieu of letters—this one bearing the plaintive spoken message in Edison's voice:

*"Gouraud, agent of my choice,
Bid my balance sheets rejoice,
Get me Mr. Gladstone's voice."*

So Gouraud got a record of Gladstone, and Vincent has that too.

He carries on into our own day. As a kid he cajoled Theodore Roosevelt into making him a recording. Recently he has recorded all the present Federal Cabinet—including James A. Farley telling the Republican Party just how to make a comeback—to add to his string of politicians, which already covers every President since Grover Cleveland. Like Mr. Walsh, of Johnson City, he goes on the air with his treasures,

with dramatic sketches culminating in the central figure's actual voice. One of these programs made noble use of what is, by all odds, the most spine-tingling of his records. Nobody could hear it without feeling extremely queer. A record, made in 1890, of the last surviving bugler from the famous Light Brigade blowing the charge as he blew it at Balaklava—on the same bugle, taken from the British Museum for the purpose, and that bugle itself a regimental relic from Waterloo.

Only one other known record could hope to beat that for a time-annihilating wallop. You don't have to believe it, but there does exist a record of the voice of Confucius, Chinese sage who lived some 2500 years ago. Some twelve years ago a famous spiritualist medium began uttering a weird kind of Chinese during his séances—one of those curious cases where a medium produces tongues with which he has no previous acquaintance. His sponsors got Neville Whymant, an eminent English professor of Chinese—a very skeptical type, too—to listen and translate, if possible. It was tough, because this was very ancient Chinese, about as close to any modern speech as Sanskrit is to modern Hindustani. The professor identified it as the language spoken in Confucius' time. The voice had all the right answers, too—called itself by one of Confucius' many names, knew all the others and lots more. When the professor quoted the opening line of a certain poem of Confucius' that no modern scholar can understand, the spook or whatever recited the rest in a manner that cleared up the difficulty at once. At another such séance, operatives of a British record company got the voice down on a record. There it is—pretty badly muffled, but still recognizable to the expert. If it isn't Confucius, somebody, spirit or mortal has a remarkably laborious sense of humor.

That was thrown in just to prove that this record collecting thing gets weirder and weirder as you go along.