

Introduction

For the last quarter of the 20th century, a touring theatrical show known as “The Goodtime Ragtime Vaudeville Revival” presented its winning combination of music, song, dance, and comic and acrobatic juggling to happy audiences across the land in venues ranging from the finest theatrical palaces to the most rickety fairgrounds stage. Every high-spirited performance was packed with jazz, ragtime, and vaudeville songs played on more than a dozen instruments, and enlivened with whirling unicycle stunts, precarious equilibristics, rubber-legged dancing, and synchronized juggling.

The hyperkinetic duo that pulled this off for 25 years was known as “Mr. Slim & L.J.” – That’s me (R.W. Bacon) and my wife and partner L.J. Newton. This book-and-CD set reissues the vinyl LP album entitled “A Panorama of Musical Americana,” produced in 1983 and sold in conjunction with our shows. (Please note that the album’s accurately descriptive title was chosen more than a decade before a music industry organization seized the word “Americana” to categorize a new genre, and narrowed its definition for commercial purposes.) The book includes the album’s original liner notes, plus additional historical context for the music enthusiast, and additional show documentation for the circus/variety enthusiast. The following paragraphs detail how this all came about, starting in the 1970s.

In the early years on the road, indoor theatre shows, clubs, conventions, colleges, and schools dominated the winter seasons, while the summer and fall seasons were booked solid with engagements at arts festivals, music festivals, and major state and county fairs. The largest of the fairs in the latter category (affectionately called “The Corndog Circuit”) drew blockbuster attendance from a regional, mostly rural base. For many attendees in the days before our 24/7 globally-connected world, the fair was their annual trip to civilization. Of course we noticed fellow performers – from headliners to no-name bands – capitalizing on this by selling records, tapes, hats, and t-shirts. Sometimes their concession tables were almost as wide as the stage. My observations sparked the idea to produce an LP album, so that our increasingly loyal following – thanks to repeat engagements – could take our music home with them to enjoy all year long.

VINTAGE *from* VINYL:

Early Recordings of the Goodtime Ragtime Vaudeville Revival

As the idea percolated, we could see how the LP album could also support our educational programs in schools, and our performances and workshops at colleges. So I planned the album not only for musical entertainment, but also for education. Within the time limitations of a long-playing record, the aim was to provide an overview of our repertoire, and at the same time, provide an overview of early 20th century musical Americana in multiple genres. This goal was achieved through crafting carefully-considered medleys, employing our array of conventional and unusual instruments, and reinforcing the musical efforts with ample context in the liner notes. The album was recorded in early 1983 in several “live” sessions at Richard Tiegen’s Plum Studio in Haverhill, Mass., located in the basement of the Haverhill Music Centre on the city’s main street.

For years we sold the LP album and cassette tapes in conjunction with our shows – without the need for a long concession table. Our loyal followers at return engagements were happy to clutch their recordings of our banjo-and-washboard razzmatazz, peppy songs, and one-man-band clatter. At our school engagements, we presented copies of the album to the school library or music teacher.

As the years flew by, the show moved “uptown” in repertoire and venues, so there were fewer engagements on “The Corndog Circuit,” and fewer school programs. Cassette tapes of the album sold out, and pitching the remaining vinyl records slipped down in priority. By the time The Goodtime Ragtime Vaudeville Revival was retired as a touring show entity in 2000, the music media of choice was the CD.

In the last decade, however, thanks to the Internet visibility of the lecture/performance program, “A Vaudeville Retrospective,” and thanks to a few individuals motivated by rosy memories of our long-retired show – there has been interest in our hot jazz and snappy tunes from days gone by. Digitizing the album was put on the “to-do” list years ago, and the project finally worked its way up in priority.

As it turned out, digitizing the music was the easiest component of the project. When I realized that the original liner notes would be all but unreadable if squeezed into a 24-page CD booklet, I decided to move to a standard-size book format. With that decision came the freedom to expand the context and interpretation to make the album even more informative and educative in its new incarnation.

Even though the project inflicted the pain of listening over-and-over to what I sounded like over 30 years ago (... a pain every vocalizing musician lives with), I found that the premise of the work – an overview of real musical Americana in multiple genres – is just as sound today. If I were planning the 1983 project anew with the same constraints of recording time, I might choose different songs in

VINTAGE *from* VINYL:

— Early Recordings of the Goodtime Ragtime Vaudeville Revival —

some categories, but the basic formula and the relative weight assigned to different genres still seems to be in proper balance.

As for the book content, in addition to the liner notes and expanded context, chapters include documentation of the show's "Wow Factor" (i.e. the comic and acrobatic juggling that kept the show on the road); the backstage story of how the show began; appendices with information on the songs, lyrics, composers, and performers mentioned in the liner notes; and recommended reading, listening, and viewing.

The book you hold is a tangible product of decades of study, and insights gleaned from thousands of performances. Less tangible were the performances themselves. Unlike painting or sculpture, the nature of live performing arts is ephemeral: At the very moment of creation the art is gone, existing only in the memory of the audience. L.J. and I are grateful for the enthusiasm, affection, and loyalty of our audiences through the years – which continues to defy logical explanation. There is lifetime satisfaction knowing that we devoted all the positive energy we could muster to bring people together at our shows to share laughter, wonder, amazement, and toe-tapping tunes. As mere performing artists, we had no cure for cancer or solution for world peace. But we could draw people together. When the applause faded and the audience dispersed, we knew that most folks enjoyed at least a happy diversion ... and hoped that every so often somebody walked away with a tiny dose of inspiration as well.

The book-and-CD you hold documents the show as it was at a specific point in time – minus the video documentation not yet available – and the music may jog the memory of those who were there. For those who were not there: Find a pal, put on the CD, and enjoy the razzmatazz of Mr. Slim & L.J. It's OK to laugh, smile, tap a foot, or shake a leg. Grab a guitar, uke, or banjo, or even a couple of spoons, and have some fun with do-it-yourself music. You don't need the electric company, software, or gadgetry. Have fun being human and getting in touch with sound, yourself, and your fellow musical travelers. Stretch your brain. You'll have fun and get smarter at the same time!

If you enjoy the music on the CD, if you are fascinated by documentation of the show in the book, or if you saw our show in its heyday, please know that it never could have happened without cherished mentors, an extended family of fellow troupers, partners among agents and producers, and an enthusiastic public. To all, a big "Thank You."

Happy listening and happy reading.

– **Reginald W. Bacon**
Newburyport, Mass.
January 2017