

Re-Issuing The Blues

The practice of re-issuing records is nearly as old as the recording industry itself. Popular demand, licensing, historical interest and company 'take-overs' have been some of the main factors for the appearance, disappearance and reappearance, often under different guises, of thousands of recordings made throughout the industry's history.

Among the earliest recordings made of African-American music were the Spirituals sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, members of and sponsored by the Fisk University of Tennessee. As part of a huge fund raising exercise the group toured extensively both in the U.S.A. and in Europe during the late 19th century. On 1st December, 1909, the group made their first recordings which were for the Victor record company. Three years later the group's popularity came to the attention of the Columbia record company and a recording session was arranged for the 15th October, 1912. Six titles were recorded, one was not issued but the rest were released on the Columbia label. Four of the titles were earmarked for issue, under license, on another label, Silvertone, a cut-price "dime store" label owned by the catalogue company Sears Roebuck and one of those titles was also pressed and issued at a later date on the Columbia label.

The record industry seems to have been uncertain as to how to tap into the growing, potential record buying public, a market that the industry would brand as the "race market". The initial move into the blues was commercially "safe" and calculated.

It is almost certain that, in comparison to the music performed by the female vaudeville blues singers with their jazz band accompanists, the richer, more intense blues of musicians such as Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson and Frank Stokes were already an established part of the African-American music scene by 1920. However, the potential viability of the so called 'Country Blues' was yet to be realised with any great significance and it would take another six years, mainly taken up by recordings of the popular female "Classic" blues singers, before that would happen. In the meantime, the industry could only gauge the popularity of the music by what had already proved itself to be commercially successful.

It was the Okeh label that took the first step at this crucial moment in the history of Blues recording. It cannot be said for certain that the recording company had gone out of their way to tap into a 'Blues Market' but what can be said with certainty is that Fred Hager of the General Phonograph Company, owners of the Okeh label, wanted to record two Perry Bradford compositions; That Thing Called Love and You Can't Keep A Good Man Down.

Hager's choice of singer was Sophie Tucker, the hugely popular white vaudeville entertainer who was regarded internationally as being a 'good time jazz/blues singer' suggesting that he was looking for something a little more raunchy than the run of the mill popular singers of the day. The writing of these songs certainly lent itself towards blues as much as anything else. Perhaps his intention was to combine jazz music with the lyrics of a pop nature (a la 1920's), sung with a hint of blues.

Sophie's recording career had begun ten years previously and she had become known as "The Queen of Jazz" touring with her band "Sophie Tucker and Her Five Kings of Syncopation." It would seem that in the same way that jazz recordings had been given their debut by the all white members of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band three years previously, so it would be that the recording of blues music would be inaugurated by white performer. Yet shortly before the recording was made, a twist of fate denied Sophie Tucker as being the singer that took a quintessentially African-American music into an exciting new era. Instead, she was replaced by a young African-American girl called Mamie Smith who had caught the attention of Perry Bradford. It has been suggested that the major record labels at the time had been unsure of the buying power of African-Americans. That is to say that they felt that African-Americans did not have the income to buy gramophones, let alone the records to play on them. Any reservations that GPC or its counterparts had soon begun to dissolve following the success of the two Bradford composition recordings. In fact, it could be said that the record industry had been a little shaken by the sales figures. Yet despite the records success, it would be another seven months before Mamie, accompanied by her Jazz Hounds, would be re-called to the recording studios on the 10th August