

MULTIMEDIA REVIEW

The National Jukebox: Historical Recordings from the Library of Congress.
www.loc.gov/jukebox.

The National Jukebox is the Library of Congress's latest addition to its growing list of online digital collections. Even in its initial release (the site went "live" at the start of May 2011), the wealth of material made freely accessible here for the first time is nothing short of amazing. The collection already offers over ten thousand sides of 78-rpm records in new digital transfers that are streamable (but not downloadable) via a flash player application from within a user's Web browser. What once required a trip to Washington, D.C., or to another equally specialized sound archive, is now accessible anywhere the internet is within reach. The project began when Sony Music Entertainment granted the Library of Congress a gratis license to digitize and stream any acoustical-era recordings originally made by what are now Sony-owned labels. The "Jukebox" currently includes a majority of the Victor Talking Machine Company's U.S. catalogue issued from 1901 through 1925, but an expansion is forthcoming. According to the latest announcement on the National Jukebox's home page (as of December 2011), the site will soon bring online "recordings from additional record labels, including Columbia and Okeh, along with selected master recordings from the Library of Congress Universal Music Group Collection." Although the collection is at present restricted to a single label, Victor recorded widely—covering the gamut from classical orchestral and opera excerpts to popular song, theater music, and spoken word—and thus the Jukebox does indeed encompass the richness and variety of the nation's musical life in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Source materials were drawn from the Library of Congress's own holdings in collaboration with the University of California, Santa Barbara Davidson Library, Department of Special Collections, and several private collectors. The path from archive to internet involved a painstakingly meticulous process of digitization. Despite the massive number of records to be transferred, the project's audio preservation unit has achieved a sound quality comparable to what one might hear on CDs produced by specialist labels like Pearl or Archeophone, although with perhaps less post-production intervention to minimize surface noise (and occasionally less than mint condition source records) than these labels' projects typically utilize. Sound quality varies widely across a collection this vast, but the majority of the transfers I sampled were eminently listenable, as if my computer and speakers had somehow transformed into a century-old Victrola on the spot—but without the frustrations of hand winding or replacing worn-out styluses.

The National Jukebox offers a full spectrum of musical genres. Across several hours of browsing and listening (a reviewer is lucky to get such an assignment!), I sampled recordings of minstrel and "coon" songs, Yiddish theater, early Tin Pan Alley, whistling, yodeling, ragtime, early jazz and blues, folk and traditional musics from around the world, full orchestra, piano solos, military band, operetta, and grand opera. (Don't miss the interactive version of the 1919 edition of the *Victrola*

Book of the Opera with integrated audio links.) The collection also includes spoken word recordings ranging from political speeches and poems to excerpts from plays, comedy and novelty acts, and vaudeville skits. Among particularly well-represented U.S. composers are Irving Berlin, George M. Cohan, Reginald De Koven, Walter Donaldson, Stephen Foster, George Gershwin, Victor Herbert, Edward MacDowell, Ethelbert Nevin, Arthur Pryor, Ted Snyder, John Philip Sousa, and the Von Tilzer brothers. Simply put, if Victor recorded it and the Library of Congress had access to it, then it should be here, waiting to be discovered.

A straightforward and effective interface allows users to access this content. The home page offers links to several sample playlists of highlights specially designed to introduce new visitors to the site. A search box appears at the top of every page. Word or phrase searches are acceptably precise, but yield superfluous results too. The keywords “Original Dixieland” led right to recordings from the Original Dixieland Jazz Band—the National Jukebox currently holds twenty sides from this group—but produced 127 hits in total. A search for “Zez Confrey” gave fifteen results, but included recordings both by the Zez Confrey Orchestra and of Confrey’s compositions. Separating the two is more difficult. (This listener was pleased to find “Kitten on the Keys” with the composer at the piano.) The site’s “Advanced Recording Search” only partially enables more precise queries. One can specify keyword searches over artist, title, or genre fields, but not specifically for composer, lyricist, conductor or ensemble. The functionality to limit a search to a single day or date range seems more helpful, yet there is clearly room for improvement in the site’s search capabilities.

Individual recording pages all share the same clear and informative layout. A boxy, grey flash player is embedded within the browser at the top of each recording’s page, thus avoiding the need for a separate player window or additional software. An enlargeable thumbnail image of the disc’s label is also included so that users can “view” the record up close. These Web pages also present complete discographical data, including specific details regarding performer, composer, arranger, conductor, and lyricist.¹ Many of these names are clickable links, through which one can finally get to more specifically sorted lists of recordings. For example, from the Web page for Victor Herbert’s own recording of his “March of the Toys” from *Babes in Toyland*, one can click the link for either Herbert the conductor or Herbert the composer (a solution to the Zez Confrey problem mentioned above). The direct Web address to any recording’s Web page is both stable and concise, allowing for easy bookmarking or link sharing.

An integrated playlist feature allows users to build, save, and share their own compilations of songs. This set opens in a separate browser window—songs are easily added by clicking the “+ Playlist” buttons found throughout the site—but the feature is compromised by two significant weaknesses. Although the feature is designed to facilitate continuous listening of multiple recordings, sometimes the addition of a new song to a list in progress interrupts the record being played,

¹ This information comes from the Encyclopedic Discography of Victor Recordings, another part of UC Santa Barbara’s contribution to the collaboration. The catalogue is online and searchable separately at <http://victor.library.ucsb.edu/>.

requiring the user to restart the audio stream manually. Equally problematic, the separate playlist window does not display the full discographical data found on the original recording Web pages. If a user is curious to know this information, he or she is forced to navigate back and forth between the playlist window and the main Web browser. Overall, I found audio playback within the browser from a recording's main Web page to be a much more satisfying user experience compared to the rather frustrating playlist tool.

The greatest disappointment in terms of recording accessibility has to do with the fact that records are two-sided. Inexplicably, the National Jukebox does not link the paired sides of a record together.² A keyword search for "Gershwin Rhapsody" will place the 1924 world-premiere recording at the top of the results list, but each four-and-a-half-minute side occupies its own separate Web page. As with an actual Victrola, one has to switch from one page to another—a twenty-first century analogue to flipping the record over—to listen to the full work. (Adding both sides through the playlist feature, caveats notwithstanding, does in fact remove the need to do this.) Should one want to hear the song that occupied the flip side of John Steel's 1919 recording of Irving Berlin's "A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody," the best approach is to enter the label name and catalogue number—found in the discographical data—into the search box. (Its discmate is Buck and Stamper's "Tulip Time," another song from the 1919 Ziegfeld Follies, by the way.) Any of these slight limitations in functionality should be easily improvable, and hopefully the Library of Congress will pursue such changes in subsequent stages of expansion. They are continuously updating and correcting their record listings. An email sent to the site's development team detailing a few errors I spotted in the course of preparing this review received a prompt reply and should be corrected by the time this is published.

We are indeed fortunate that this nation's preeminent library has entered the historical sound recording arena in such a major way, even if the National Jukebox's current limitation to a single record label does risk giving a one-sided view of the era's musical scene. At last the U.S. can boast of a successful counterpart to similarly invaluable, government-funded online collections highlighting the national recording industries of Canada (The Virtual Gramophone: Canadian Historical Sound Recordings), France (Gallica: Bibliothèque Numérique), and the United Kingdom (CHARM: Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music).³ Although all of these sites are invaluable resources, the specifically U.S. focus of the Library of

² This same limitation plagues multi-record sets. For example, the four movements of an abridged recording of Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony are all on separate pages. A search for the keywords "Mozart Jupiter" places the sides at the top of the results list, but the movements are listed out of order. More attention to the unity of those few recordings of larger-scale works from this period would be most welcome.

³ See the Virtual Gramophone, www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/gramophone/index-e.html; Gallica, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/editors?type=soundrecordings&lang=EN>; and CHARM, www.charm.kcl.ac.uk/sound/sound.html. Both the Virtual Gramophone and CHARM permit the downloading of their audio transfers as digital files, unlike Gallica and the National Jukebox, which only allow online streaming. The Canadian site is by far the smallest collection and CHARM is only half the size of the National Jukebox; Gallica includes all varieties of digital media, not just audio transfers. Whereas the National Jukebox is currently only authorized to digitize records from Sony Music-owned labels, the

Congress's National Jukebox should interest both scholars and the general public alike. The decision to employ this rather catchy yet potentially anachronistic title might suggest as much.⁴ Indeed, the name itself seems to be something of an aspirational one—as much about what the project eventually hopes to become as about what it is right now. The addition of other record labels can only strengthen the value of this resource, yet at over ten thousand sides already, one should find plenty to explore. Start listening today.

Aaron Ziegel

relatively looser copyright regulations outside of the United States allow for a wider range of materials in these other collections.

⁴ The concept of a “jukebox” as a machine that can play many different records on demand accompanied the advent of the electrical recording process and audio amplification, whereas the present so-called National Jukebox includes records from the acoustical era only (hence the 1925 cutoff date).