

Meet The Collector: An Interview with John Wilby, Saturday, March 2nd, 2013

Ken: I'm speaking with John Wilby, a collector of 78 RPM records, in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. John, how old were you when you first started collecting?

John: I was nine years old.

Ken: Nine years old?

John: Yes. My father is a collector, and I heard the music in the house when I was a little kid, and I liked the music, and he started giving me his duplicates when I was in Grade Four, which is kinda unusual.

Ken: That's amazing! I mean, not too many people at that age would have an ear for music like that. What are you primarily collecting now and why?

John: Primarily Twenties and early Thirties Jazz, Blues, and hot Dance music, which is what I've been really collecting all along. I started with Bix Beiderbecke, and sort of went from there. I remember my first mission was to get all the Whiteman "Potato Head" Columbia records, because a lot of them had Bix, and I like that band, but it's grown to be Black bands, White bands, and European stuff. Any good music that period I'm interested in.

Ken: So, how do you find your records now?

John: How do I find them?

Ken: Yes.

John: I still junk occasionally, I buy on E Bay, and from other collectors. I don't really trade too much. But primarily, I would say from E Bay, and buying collections.

Ken: What would you say would be your rarest record in your collection?

John: I've got some test pressing, which of course, are unique. Eddie Lang's test pressing of "Walking The Dog," has the only known alternate take, you know stuff like that.

Ken: Right!

John: I've got some fairly rare Gennett material, and to tell you the truth, I don't really think about that so much, it's just stuff that I want to listen to.

Ken: Of course, of course! So, how many 78's do you have in your collection in total?

John: I would say about 13,000.

Ken: You belong to a group called the 78 Spinners. What do they do?

John: Actually, I don't belong to that group. I'm fortunate that they invite me to their meetings occasionally. There's a group in town called the West Mississauga Jazz Muddies, which I belong to. But the Spinners are really a fun group. They just basically play records. They get together on a Saturday afternoon, and usually have a focus where there's a topic. People are expected to bring a record that fits into the focus. But typically, they go around and each person plays a record, and they talk about it. The person who plays it might tell the others who is on the record, who composed the song, or whatever. But it's a social group of music lovers.

Ken: You run a sideline for collectors called "Jazz Oracle". How did this come about and why?

John: Well it started in the mid 90's, Colin Bray and Jeff Healey wanted to start a reissue label, and in fact they did a reissue on their "Forte" label of Fletcher Henderson, and Louis Armstrong records. They wanted to go beyond that, and issue, at the beginning New Orleans music, and then 20's Jazz. Colin approached me in around 1995 to join he and Jeff and John R.T. Davies. Jeff has to quickly abandon this project because he got busy with his music and related pursuits, playing in bands, and forming his own band and traveling a lot. So it became the three of us, John R.T. Davies, Colin, and I. We decided to pursue this, to preserve the music that other labels weren't touching. A lot of the stuff we've reissued is pretty obscure. Not terribly commercially viable, but to us it's just a labor of love. We don't want to make money out of it, we just want to have the music available to those who want to listen to it.

Ken: What releases can we look forward to in the near future?

John: Well, we've just come out with our Jimmy Lytell release, which is Jimmy Lytell's solo work from 1926 to 1928. We're working on a three CD set of Sam Wooding, which includes a lot of

European recordings. There will probably come out this year. Beyond that, we're working on a Duke Ellington set of his Dime Store labels. That will probably be a two CD set, and will fill in a lot of blanks, where other companies have not made those sides available. So, I would say that is everything we're working on actively. Since John R.T. Davies passing, our activities have slowed down quite a bit, and there was a flurry of activity when he was alive because he was doing the engineering, and was able to provide a lot of the source material as well. It's harder to do then now without his help, but we are trying to do a few here and there and keep things going.

Ken: Right. Have you ever thought about bringing out your own 78 under your label, as I understand the technology does exist?

John: Actually, no. I really haven't thought about that. Yeah, but certainly other people have done it, and it would be possible.

Ken: Well John, this has been a very informative afternoon, and I want to thank-you for your time.

John: You're Welcome.

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Shown in the photograph from left to right: John R.T. Davies, Colin Bray, John Wilby

John pictured right holding his pride Supetone of Alphonso Trent.



