

November 25, 2007

Great Record Collectors of the Past

A Visit With Jim Walsh, January 1 - 4, 1970

By the 1960s Jim Walsh of Vinton, Virginia, was known to record collectors around the world for his highly informative column in *Hobbies* magazine, which he had begun in 1942. He wrote as if he had actually been there when Billy Murray made his first wax cylinder in 1897, and when Eldridge Johnson founded the Victor Talking Machine Company in 1901 (this, I later learned, was because he had begun corresponding in the 1920s with then-still-living artists and executives who *had* been there; he also had a fabulous collection of original catalogs and other source materials from the early years of recording).

I first wrote to Jim around 1962 while I was in college, half expecting no reply to my rather basic questions about the early industry, but to my surprise I got a cordial and information-packed letter. He proved to be both friendly and a fount of knowledge about the early recordings in which I had become so interested. Despite the demands on his time, and the many ailments he seemed to suffer, he never failed to respond to my simplistic questions, usually with a postcard crammed to the margins with detailed information. In 1964 I conducted an hour-long interview with him, by phone, for my old records program on the college radio station, in which he talked about early artists. Our friendly correspondence continued throughout the 1960s, but I still had never met him. In late 1969 I broached the idea of visiting him over the New Year's weekend. He asked that I call him during the last week in December to confirm the visit and get his street address, joking that he never gave it out until needed because he was already unpopular in the post office due to the volume of mail he got.

“The staff at the Vinton post office, especially Philip Stanley and Jim Carter, are my sworn enemies, and never lose a chance of insulting me, nor I of insulting them. I told them this morning I might have an upstate New York record collector visiting me next week and Philip said that if you would agree to work me to death while you are here he would gladly pay your expenses both ways. Jim said that if you would only take me away with you and not bring me back he'd happily settle for that. They express chagrin every time they find me able to walk into the post office, and ask me to go out and die in the gutter, but not to fall dead in the doorway and block the entrance of the cash customers! Professor Plum Duff Walsh, the Poet [*Jim's cat*], has asked me to send you samples of his latest 'Grouch' productions. He writes only about things he doesn't like. I'll have to get him to write a 'Post Office Grouch' poem for me.” [Letter from Jim Walsh, 23 Dec. 1969, with three printed poems enclosed.]

Unfortunately when the appointed time to call came I couldn't reach Jim, despite repeated attempts (pestered by collectors, Jim often left his phone off the hook). Taking a big chance I decided to drive the 475 miles from New York City to Vinton anyway. I did not have a street address—Jim only published his post office box number—so on arrival in Vinton I poked around and found the Dogwood Restaurant, where Jim had once written that he was a regular. I explained my dilemma to a nice waitress and she directed me to a rambling white house on a

large, hillside lot in the distance, at 225 North Maple St., where he lived alone. Excitedly I drove to the big old house but when I got there found that nobody was home. Just a lonely cat on the



porch. The cat and I got along quite well, but had I come this far only to be defeated in the end? I waited for what seemed a very long time. Finally I started walking dejectedly back to my car when a middle aged man came puffing up the driveway, a bag of groceries in his arms. It was Jim.

If he was irked at the imposition he certainly didn't show it, inviting me in and showing me true Southern hospitality. Up close the house was rather ramshackle, looking like it might fall down around us at any moment. But it didn't, intimidated perhaps by the world-class collection of antique recordings, reference materials and memorabilia contained within its walls. We chatted for a while, I took some pictures, and then set up shop on Jim's large desk where I could copy out information from his catalogs. Cats meandered around my feet (Jim had four of them), and there was also a raccoon in the basement which I fortunately didn't meet. Eventually one of the felines jumped on the desk and curled up squarely on top of my notebook. It was none other than Professor Plum Duff. This made it a little difficult to work, but the purring professor and I got along famously, and my friendship with Jim was sealed.

A detailed biography of (and homage to) Walsh can be found on Tim Gracyk's site, www.gracyk.com.

Scroll Down for Pictures of the Visit



1. Jim's house in the distance.



2. A cat says "who are you?"



3. The world's most valuable collection of early record catalogs.



4. A minstrel poster of Jim's hero, Billy Murray, in blackface. Len Spencer is on the right.



5. Jim Walsh



6. Jim in his cluttered study, with an Edison Diamond Disc Phonograph.



7. A leaning tower of records.



8. Stairway lined with posters and photos.



9. An original coin-slot “juke box.”



10. A cat purrs next to my notebook.



11. Jim surrounded by memorabilia.



12. Another cat, and a bucket to catch the roof leaks.



13. The world’s leading record researcher, in front of his manse. Note the red socks.