Contemporary Collectibles: Grown-ups collect kiddie records

by Linda_Rosenkrantz

In a sense, one can say that the very first recording ever made was a children's record, since Thomas Edison's initial experimental recording in 1877 was of the nursery rhyme "Mary Had a Little Lamb." Between that moment and through the demise of the 78 rpm record around 1960, thousands of albums and single shellac discs aimed at a juvenile audience were produced.

A new book, "The Complete Guide to Vintage Children's Records" by Peter Muldavin (Collector Books), provides a comprehensive overview of this colorful field of collecting, which ranges from readings of classic stories to folk music and opera and nonsense songs, featuring voice talent from Judy Garland to Lionel Barrymore to Fanny Brice to Roy Rogers.

The earliest known record series targeted to the kiddie market was the Bubble Books series released by Harper-Columbia between 1917 and 1922. It comprised of 14 books, each with three small, single-sided records, the sleeves illustrated with attractive line drawings.

A number of other companies entered the juvenile field, among them Little Tots, Cameo Kids, Emerson and Youngster Grey Gull. One particularly popular series, Little Wonder, founded in 1914 by Henry Waterson and manufactured by the Columbia Gramophone Co., included more than 1,500 small, single-sided records (about 40 of which were for children), each distributed for 10 cents at Woolworth's and through Sears, Roebuck catalogs. Author Muldavin (who numbers some 11,000 children's records in his own collection) singles out the early (1918-19) "Talking Books" series - 4 1/8-inch records riveted to die-cut cards - as being particularly unusual and attractive. Its animal, Mother Goose and World War I subjects can reach from $75 to $3,000 at auction today.

The Golden Age of 78-rpm kiddie records is considered to be from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s. Partly this was due to the introduction of "unbreakable" vinyl records, coupled with much more colorful and better designed sleeves and album covers. The profusion of inexpensive product led to a corresponding increase in the production of cheap record players, and the participation of well-known singing and acting talent added further appeal.

Leading the field in this period were Golden Records, a division of Simon & Schuster, with musical renditions of their Little Golden Books, and RCA Victor's Little Nipper series. And now, as Muldavin reports, the field may have come full circle, as some entrepreneurs are considering making vintage kiddie music available on the Internet as MP3 downloads.

Most of these disks can be found for $10 and less, but there are some exceptions. Here are a few rarities and their current market prices when in excellent to mint condition:

"Silly Symphonies," Frank Luther, RCA Victor picture discs, 1934: $2,500.

"Winnie the Pooh: Christopher Robin Songs," Frank Luther, RCA Victor picture discs, 1934: $1,500.

Talking book single of "Snow White & the Seven Dwarfs" read by George Kean, 1938, one side in braille: $150.

Talking book single of "The Story of Little Black Sambo," Helen Hayes, one side in braille: $100.

"Peter Rabbit and Other Stories," 10-inch album, read by Thornton Burgess: $100.

"In the Beginning: Adam, Eve, etc.," read by David Niles, Sholem Asch, 1941: $100.

"Little Johnny Strikeout," Capitol records, Joe DiMaggio: $100.

Columbia Bubble Books, 5-inch album, "The Robin and Wren Bubble Book," 1930: $100.

"Gulliver's Travels," Victor Young and his orchestra with soloists and Max Terr's Choiristers, Decca Records: $150.

"Ballads From the Dust Bowl," Woody Guthrie, Decca Records, two discs: $200.

"Songs to Grow On: Lullabies and Rounds," Pete Seeger, Decca Records, two discs, 1947; $200.

"The Legend of Davy Crockett," Mattel 7-inch picture disc, 1955: $300.

"Cartoon Comics," Record Guild of America 7-inch picture disc boxed set: $240.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

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