

## INTRODUCTION

# Phonograph Boom

## *The Expansion of the U.S. Recording Industry*

The unprecedented expansion of the U.S. recording industry that began almost a century ago fundamentally changed the shape and scope of the country's popular music. This expansion was sparked by smaller labels' inability to compete with the industry's most established labels and ended with the first major consolidation of media entertainment industries at the close of the decade. It all felt so speculative and provisional; how long would the public find this or that sound appealing? Recording directors and talent scouts did the best they could to keep up. As freelance talent scout Harry Charles noted, "you had to grab what you could get."<sup>1</sup> This book frames U.S. recording companies as media industries, with deep and abiding ties to other such industries. The recording companies' ties to radio would increase so dramatically by the end of the 1920s that it reshaped both industries, in what was the first major consolidation between entertainment industries in the twentieth century. With radio as the "new national fad," recording companies large and small sought to experiment in the depth and breadth of what they recorded, the technologies through which they recorded, and in connection to the other key entertainment media of the era, most importantly radio and film, in what would be the recording industry's "most turbulent and productive" era to date.<sup>2</sup>

While all sources agree that the recording industry expanded dramatically during the 1910s, estimates vary given gaps in the historical record as well as the recording industry's traditionally low barrier to entry when compared to other media industries. Roland Gelatt's foundational

book *The Fabulous Phonograph, 1877–1977* notes just three phonograph-producing companies in 1913 and 73 by 1916.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Rick Kennedy has noted a similar expansion of recording companies between 1914 and 1917, as the number of recording companies went from a few dozen to more than 150.<sup>4</sup> The 1919 *Census of Manufactures* (published in the 1920 Census) listed the “phonograph and graphophones” businesses among its “principal industries” (ranked fiftieth overall) making “products valued at \$100,000,000 but less than \$500,000,000.”<sup>5</sup> Comparatively, motion pictures appeared in the table with “photograph materials,” ranked eightieth overall, while “musical instruments, pianos,” ranked ninetieth.<sup>6</sup> The absence of radio from this list was understandable, given its nascent status as well as President Woodrow Wilson’s banning of U.S. amateur radio stations from transmitting for the course of the war unless they served military purposes (the ban was lifted in 1919).<sup>7</sup> While the pages of *Talking Machine World* often exhibited a booster’s enthusiasm for the phonograph trade, the paper’s enthusiasm during the late 1910s was well founded.

While the Big Three had asserted their dominance a decade before, this did not prevent competition from new companies entering the market. By the 1910s, companies were making their own phonographs (often discount models) and recordings, modeled after the “vertical cut” disc records process established in France by Pathé Frères in 1909.<sup>8</sup> The problem for consumers—a perennial one in media—was that consumers had to choose between the lateral-cut discs playable on the Big Three’s machines or choose the vertical-cut format offered up by newer companies, including Starr (later Gennett), Okeh, Paramount, Aeolian-Vocalion, and Pathé’s American division.<sup>9</sup> By the end of World War I, many of the key companies here—big and small—were already in existence, but new companies began to emerge, while existing companies created new labels. The impetus was a 1918 battle between Victor and the Starr Piano Company, an unlikely challenger that would battle Victor’s proprietary right to lateral-cut recordings, and win. As Sutton and Nauck suggest, it took a 1922 Supreme Court decision to settle the matter, but lower court decisions emboldened companies to develop lateral-cut disc lines, an “industry-wide” media transition in 1919 and 1920, that allowed consumers to play a much larger variety of discs on their previously purchased talking machines.<sup>10</sup>

Sales of sound recordings surged with “returning troops, wartime workers flush with cash, and music fans whose collections had been depleted by

contributions to the Slacker Record Drives,” which gave records to soldiers to listen to in sometimes far-flung locales, a kind of aural trip back home.<sup>11</sup> The wartime slowdown was replaced with a boom, putting those companies most involved in war-effort production (especially Victor, with its impressive Camden works) at a temporary disadvantage.<sup>12</sup> Companies old and new began making discs for what was a new, broader market, creating a boom that would lead to a dramatic expansion of recording culture in the United States. Roughly two months after the November 11, 1918, armistice that marked the close of the Great War, a January 15, 1919, *Talking Machine World* headline read: “Our National Victory Should Make Business Men Optimistic.”<sup>13</sup> Both the recording and playback process remained mechanical, but the phonograph boom came as old patents expired, court decisions opened up the industry, and new companies sought to compete against the industry’s established leaders. A year later, industry predictions were coming true. The trade journal’s January 15, 1920, issue was full of advertisements from companies like Aeolian-Vocalion, Brunswick-Balke-Collender, Gennett, Okeh, Pathé and others, labels that, as Allan Sutton has suggested, were all producing their own lateral-cut recordings in what was a new competitive context.<sup>14</sup> An April 1919 advertisement declared, “There Has Never Been Such a Boom in the Record Business,” telling retailers that it wasn’t a matter of how many records that could be sold, but a question of “Where Can you Get Enough Popular Records Right Away?”<sup>15</sup> While the Victor phonograph works was still being restored from its wartime role as arms manufacturer, the domestic U.S. market for sound recordings was so great that the company couldn’t keep up. And in the month of August 1919, no new Victor recordings were released so that the company could fill its many back orders.<sup>16</sup> Edison’s ability to respond to recording industry changes was already a problem before World War I, when Edison himself professed technological quality and clarity over the use of celebrity, an increasingly important dynamic in both sound recordings and cinema in the 1910s.<sup>17</sup> To make matters worse, Edison himself became the company’s de facto music director and found himself alienated by the emerging music of the World War I era, especially jazz.<sup>18</sup> Increasing attention was given to both rural—and more specifically southern—consumers at a time when the recording industry was expanding from its traditional center in the American Northeast.<sup>19</sup> Industry trade papers offered tips for attracting consumers while keeping up with demand, through novel and eye-catching window displays or having just the right mix of newly re-

leased recordings. The June 14, 1919, issue of *Music Trade Review*, written by OKeh Records' advertising manager, announced that "The Phonograph Industry Has Become an Ideal Musical-Commercial Power." The article noted that "the phonograph and record industry is decidedly not a fad industry" but one imbued with a "lasting power . . . as vital to the progress of mankind as the telephone, telegraph, the printing press, and several other epoch making inventions of man."<sup>20</sup> On the same page, it was noted that a Pathé Records advance list used an increasingly common approach by companies to fill orders accurately and quickly: retail dealers and wholesalers used telegraph codes and technology to ensure speed and accuracy in filling rush orders.<sup>21</sup>

It was the emerging recording companies that first began recording a wider swath of vernacular American musical and spoken-word performances in an attempt to identify niches through which they could compete with the Big Three oligopoly: Victor, Columbia, and Edison. It was through this search that the naming, defining, and categorizing of jazz, race records, and old-time music impacted the industrial practices of record companies who defined those genres for the buying public. This isn't to say all the music represented in these genres became central to popular music culture. Each genre's music existed both at the center and along the margins of the decade's popular music. Countless other recordings, some of which constituted vital genres and subgenres all their own, continued despite changes that would slow or stop the expansion of the industry's recordings by decade's end.

It is not that recording companies weren't already busy recording various aspects of the American vernacular at the start of the 1920s. It's that the breadth and depth of that activity expanded greatly during the decade, through industrial organization and cultural circulation of sound media, in constant negotiations between musicians and audiences, scouts, wholesalers and retailers, recording engineers, and recording directors. These employees worked in several registers at once: (1) they managed the selection, manufacturing, circulation, and sale of sound recordings for the companies with which they were affiliated, (2) they managed audiences by gauging tastes and participating in the construction of genres, and (3) they necessarily managed a range of social and cultural realities across huge swaths of American society as part of their everyday work.<sup>22</sup>

But even larger dynamics were at work: The convergence of U.S. media industries that began in the late 1920s meant that the recording industry, largely its own industrial entity since its origins in the 1890s,

would cease to stand alone as a discrete entity. They would become part of larger radio (and, to a lesser extent, film) companies in what was the first major consolidation of entertainment media industries in the twentieth century. It is not that recording companies were enveloped altogether, though it may have seemed that way to some in the early 1930s. In subsequent years—even during the Great Depression—new labels (or revamped ones) would continue to exist as stand-alone entities. The recording business's low barrier to entry helped ensure that. But it would no longer be the same as it had been when the leading recording companies stood alone. As is often the case, the changes were not always welcome by those most invested in how companies had operated, nor were the changes always fully spelled out in its trade papers. Many of those who had been financially and emotionally invested in the U.S. recording industry in its heyday did not come to terms with its shifting fortunes until the realities could no longer be ignored. And while the recording industry declined in many ways amidst the rise of radio, it also expanded its breadth and scope in such a way that would help ensure its long-term economic and cultural impact. This change came as the foundational genres of U.S. popular music were shaped and reshaped, before and after many of the recording industry's labels became part of entertainment conglomerates in the first major wave of entertainment media consolidation in the twentieth century.

That these myriad changes took hold in the 1920s does not seem accidental. The broader context was a roiling set of contradictions, with new freedoms coming up against repressive and violent backlashes. As Kathleen Drowne and Patrick Huber wrote:

A newly urbanized population clamored for the modern technologies of automobiles, refrigerators, radio, and electric appliances yet at the same time longed for the simpler lifestyles of rural America. Most Americans' standards of living rose, but so, too, did the number of violent, repressive clashes during the decade. Americans reveled in the newfound freedoms afforded them by the automobile, suffrage, consumer culture, yet simultaneously they sought to repress other freedoms through Prohibition legislation, Klan night riding, and religious Fundamentalism. The liberated "flapper" was lauded in music, movies, but . . . was nonetheless expected to settle down and adopt the lifestyle of a traditional married woman. All in all, the 1920s signified a profound shift in behaviors, attitudes, and lifestyles

of ordinary Americans, who found the modern world exciting but also extraordinarily complicated.<sup>23</sup>

Media in the 1920s, T. M. Kando wrote decades later, offered a “hedonistic, glamorous, and make-believe world,” while cultural critic Gilbert Seldes suggested (in 1923) that the “seven lively arts” were at work creating a new American culture, in which he included popular song but only obliquely referenced sound recordings. He noted that tunes of the day expressed a broad array of current cultural attitudes, presenting “rather like contemporary fiction in giving form to social phenomena without expressing approval or disapproval.”<sup>24</sup> The “Jazz Age” may have been given resonance via F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tales of the Jazz Age*, but the terms had already been in circulation as changes (musical and otherwise) seemed to speed up everyday life.<sup>25</sup> Robert and Helen Lynd noted that residents of Muncie, Indiana—dubbed “Middletown” in their unprecedented 1929 sociological study—noted that “Mechanical inventions such as the phonograph and radio are further bringing . . . more contacts with music than ever before.”<sup>26</sup>

By the start of the 1920s, the recording industry’s focus on popular music (as opposed to spoken word recordings, re-enactments, skits, sermons, and so on) served to obscure for some its role as a *media industry*. There are many reasons for this, including the cultural slippage between our conceptions of musical recordings and musical performances, also a problem for cinema, for instance, in distancing its relationship to theatrical performance. By the end of the 1920s, it was no longer possible to ignore the recording industry’s role as media industry, due to the complete recalibration of its relationships with other media industries, most notably radio. Radio’s emergence during the 1920s is breathtaking in scope, even from the vantage point of commonly known touchstones: Frank Conrad’s launch of Pittsburgh’s KDKA in 1920s; the 1921 broadcast of the Jack Dempsey vs. Georges Carpentier boxing match (matches also appeared on 78 rpm records); bandleader Vincent Lopez’s debut on WJZ in 1921, with Paul Whiteman following a year later, along with the debut of Bertha Brainard’s *Broadcasting Broadway*; the first coast-to-coast radio broadcast in 1924; the rise of fictionalized radio narrative serials like *Rise of the Goldbergs* in 1929; and the transformation of radio news via the Lindbergh baby kidnapping case in 1932.<sup>27</sup> Radio’s newly found cultural power and reach led the recording industry to first resist and then to collaborate in varying ways, in hopes of benefiting from radio’s vast simultaneous reach, espe-

cially after the tentative emergence of network radio in November 1926. Radio needed the recording industry after its conceptual tendency toward liveness became increasingly untenable as programming grew. Meanwhile, after years of experiments involving film and sound combinations, the motion picture industry began its sound-on-film transition with a focus on movies that sang as much as they talked. The first half-decade or so of talking motion pictures were defined by musicals, in the form of backstage musicals and revue films of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The convergence was not only based on content. Technological change played a part in the new closeness, determined by various cultural, industrial, and legal forces. The shifting needs of the three industries—the recording, radio, and film industries—came together in new technological practices. Electrical recording would reshape the role of the recording industry as an increasingly important supplier of aural raw material in the face of radio and cinema's demands. All three industries were deeply impacted by the adoption of electrical recording, which brought the radio and film industries together with the recording industry like never before. Both radio and film increasingly relied on the recording industry, while the recording industry itself would become increasingly linked to those industries in turn. Having these companies more closely related did not change the regulatory structures that had emerged around discrete industries, as radio was above all seen as a *communicative* medium and sound recordings and film were more commonly understood discursively as *entertainment* media, a distinction at work in Starr's analysis as well as in the academic institutionalization of media and music studies in the United States and elsewhere. But as I hope this research shows, such distinctions points more to the limits of our own understandings of these media industries rather than the beliefs and dispositions held by those most closely involved.

Between the close of the First World War and the mid-1930s, the central organizing categories of twentieth-century American popular music solidified: jazz (in its first incarnation), "race records" (later blues), and "old-time music" (later "hillbilly," then "country"). Each developed numerous subgenres and styles. Many of the subsequent genres that have emerged relate back directly or indirectly to these three categories, particularly in the social and cultural contexts and values assigned to each. To understand these sociocultural aspects of the industry is to have a good grasp of the historical arc of the recording industry's organizational schema, in which social issues play out through aesthetic categories and questions of taste.



This book maps the recording industry's historic role in the categorization of popular music through one of the industry's central means of organizing music: genre. Genre as I use the term here is understood in its industrial function, a marketing category, shaped and reshaped along the cultural circuit of production, distribution, and consumption. I have no interest here in parsing out the contours of genre in terms of stylistic approaches and lineage. Genres most commonly use aesthetic categories to mask, however thinly, social ones, though those doing so in their everyday work may not have always been aware they were doing so, given deeply ingrained beliefs and dispositions. Any brief aesthetic conversations herein should be read accordingly. That recording companies were unable (or unwilling) to parse out the differences between their aesthetic delineations with a constellation of social and cultural ones should not encourage us to do the same. There is at least some evidence in what follows that scouts were aware that their aesthetic differentiations were born out of social structures and realities more than anything else, and since they were in the business of selling sound recording, they put those understandings and misunderstandings to use. Genre categories, and their social and cultural distinctions, were (and are) created and operationalized by recording companies to sell recorded music as commodities. As such, genres are imbued with a constellation of social, cultural, and aesthetic designations with their own set of specific values, attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions.

By the 1920s, established major labels like Victor and Columbia were outpaced by smaller companies like Gennett, OKeh, and Paramount in their ability to delineate new talent and define new taste cultures. These genre categories functioned as a means for the industry to structure these "new" types of music for specific audiences through linking specific aesthetic styles with social attitudes and beliefs connected to the music. Recording companies commodified the music and artists down through genre categories, the narratives about the music, the performers, and even the details around a given performance or recording session. The key figures in developing these genre categories were the recording directors and talent scouts that functioned as intermediaries between artists, audiences, and the companies for which they worked, either as staff employees or freelancers. Talent scouts, along with recording engineers and some company executives, coordinated the day-to-day business of record making, distribution, and sales, while simultaneously discerning listeners' tastes for this or that niche.<sup>28</sup> These labels traversed rigid and often dangerous social and cultural divides to record ignored or disparaged music by marginalized and



often vilified people.<sup>29</sup> The music and the people associated with it (listeners as well as performers) were represented in catalogs, advertisements, and the trade press, all of which reified these genres in various ways.

The attention to genre's importance here is ultimately in service of this book's larger focus: to explore recording companies' institutional cultures and their role in reshaping American popular music. This reshaping was due in large part to industry expansion in search of market niches, followed by recording and radio company mergers in the century's first wave of entertainment industry conglomeration. A cultural circuit of producers, consumers, and intermediaries defined genres and audiences in various ways.<sup>30</sup> Though profit was the first motive, recording companies were also in the business of making culture, while being cultural institutions all their own. Those institutional cultures were also reproduced in the recordings they made, in the advertisements that sold the recordings, and in the stories they told and retold for decades after the fact.

### Social Contexts: Genre Formations and Technological Origins

The narratives represented here weave in and out of the arc of U.S. recording companies' fortunes during the 1920s and 1930s. In the macro narrative, the U.S. recording industry sales peaked in 1921 at \$106 million, a pinnacle not reached again until 1945.<sup>31</sup> An early 1920s recession kept sales flat for many companies; it was followed by a recovery of sorts after 1925, then by the stock market crash and coming of the Great Depression in the early 1930s. Though some companies found their place, profiting amidst various social, industrial, and technological changes in the 1920s and 1930s, overall sales ebbed throughout this period, finding bottom in 1933, after which the industry's fortunes began to slowly climb once again.<sup>32</sup> But this book attempts to provide contexts for what was happening within these industrial and economic realities, as recording companies began to experiment in unprecedented ways in recording a broader range of American music, while also interacting with other media industries in new ways.

The rise of the U.S. recording industry and its subsequent consolidation into the radio and film industries in the late 1920s and early 1930s represents the earliest consolidation of entertainment media (predated only by the telecommunication consolidation of the telegraph and telephone industries). Both the dramatic expansion into new niches of the recording industry through the 1920s and its consolidation and reconstitution in the face of radio's rise in the mid-to-late 1920s and the Great Depression of

the early 1930s, is reminiscent of what Paul Starr has called “constitutive choices” in the history of media “that create the material and institutional framework of fields of human activity.”<sup>33</sup>

In Starr’s use of the term, he means to map the initial emergences of new media, moments in which “ideas and culture come into play, as do constellations of power, pre-existing institutional legacies, and models from other countries.”<sup>34</sup> Here I extend the concept in two ways: First, Starr largely limits media to “the press, postal and telecommunications networks, cinema and broadcasting,” while phonography gets scant mention in the book’s almost five hundred pages.<sup>35</sup> Second, Starr limits his research to initial moments in which a media is created, defined, regulated, and circulated through a given society.

Media studies continues to have an odd relationship with sound recordings as media. Despite the *de rigueur* sound recording and popular music chapter in introductory media studies texts, the subject is relegated to cameo appearances in subsequent books and courses. Is it that phonographic media’s traditional marginalization in mass communication research was due to deep links between the rise of broadcasting and the emergence of mass communication research? At that point, phonography’s revolutionary impact had faded with its ubiquity, especially given radio’s unprecedented scope and reach? Sound recordings have long been both the raw material used by and for other media of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and an industry all its own, a dual, defining role of lasting importance. But one of the most important contributions of media industries research has been its ability to define intermedial relationships across contexts. These intermedial connections extend well beyond early cinema and early phonography to the present day. In addition to the focus on the recording industry’s transformations of the early 1920s, intermedial concerns accelerate via consolidations and collaborations across sound recording, radio, and film cultures in the late 1920s and through the 1930s. The transition from acoustic to electric recording and playback technologies was key in this regard, a technological shift that was negotiated through a comprehensive restructuring across media industries. But the impacts go far beyond this, intersecting industrial ownership, intertextuality, and the strategies and tactics of those participating along media’s cultural circuit. A strength of media industries histories has been in bringing these intermedial relationships into view, as I do here, through integrating the recording industry into larger media histories, first as a discrete industry in the early

decades of the twentieth century to one inexorably tied to the radio and, to a lesser extent, film industries thereafter. Part of this task is the constant reminder that the recording industry was connected to other media industries, in varying ways, all along.

Sound recording entered a society in which foundational social and economic changes were taking place. “The development of sound reproduction into recognizable media occupies a place among a whole range of social transformations in turn-of-the-century America,” Jonathan Sterne writes in *The Audible Past*. “The very possibility of sound media was structured by the changing economics and social organization of invention, the growth of corporate-managerial capitalism, and the concurrent move from Victorian to consumerist forms of middle-class everyday life.”<sup>36</sup> The fundamental changes in American business in the latter half of the nineteenth century set the stage for the recording industries that expanded in the first decades of the twentieth century. The railroad and the telegraph both were key in the development of modern approaches to production, distribution, and consumption, as well as the rise of marketing as a key element in an increasingly national (and shortly after, transnational) network.<sup>37</sup> The traditional “single-unit business enterprise,” in which one owner or a handful of co-owners ran a given company (a shop, factory, etc.) did not disappear.<sup>38</sup> But it was superseded in various ways by highly organized companies that moved from strictly local or regional concerns to places far beyond. Such operations required a much broader bureaucratic structure in which all-important middle managers as well as an emerging executive elite increasingly defined what “business” would mean moving forward.<sup>39</sup> None of this was instant or automatic. The new managerial structures of American business came about within a specific social and historical series of contexts. Changes to these new administrative and managerial structures included greater productivity and profits at lower cost, a single unit under which a variety of complicated enterprises functioned, and a hierarchy that propelled a given company overseeing it all.<sup>40</sup> “The coming of the large vertically integrated, centralized, functionally departmentalized industrial organization altered the internal and external situations in which business decisions were made.”<sup>41</sup> The upstart labels of the 1910s and 1920s found a place in the gaps of what the Big Three had recorded, focused on “handling local and more specialized aspects of the business.”<sup>42</sup> “The new speed, regularity, and dependability of transportation” meant that wholesalers became “jobbers,” who purchased goods from manufacturers outright (or

sold on commission), while tying into a given company's marketing brand and building a network of retailers and filling the racks of music stores in far-flung locales.<sup>43</sup>

It was the “record men” of the era—sometimes talent scouts, jobbers, and salesmen all in one—that were so vital to recording companies, first located in a small portion of the American Northeast. As new companies started up in the Great Lakes Midwest, they mimicked the Big Three in their corporate structures, though they relied even more heavily on the knowledge of their employees (broadly defined) in the field. “They reported on changing demand, items particularly desired, the general economic conditions of different sections, and, above all, the credit ratings of local storekeepers and merchants. The salesmen also assisted the storekeepers in keeping a stable inventory, in improving their accounting, and even in enhancing their merchandising displays.”<sup>44</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, those who recorded and scouted and sold this music, on behalf of companies in search of viable market niches, crossed vast cultural divides of race, class, gender, and geography, producing sounds by and for often ignored, ridiculed, and marginalized people. This came in the midst of convulsive changes in American society, as the Victorian era gave way to an increasingly liberatory and reactionary age all at once.<sup>45</sup> The way releases were organized—however tentatively—had, in some cases, deep impact over time. The era's cycles of production, categorization, distribution, sale, and consumption of sound recordings had lasting impacts: the reification of existing social and cultural beliefs, attitudes, and prejudices, as niche styles and tastes were shaped into genres.

U.S. recording companies were already busy recording a broad pop mélange, indebted to what William Howland Kenney calls the “Coney Island crowd” tradition, or songs, monologues, and dialogic skits that would have played in the phonograph parlors and penny arcades that would have been part of amusement park culture up to World War I.<sup>46</sup> Some of what was popular in the post-World War I and early jazz age years included a broad mix of “light” or popular takes on classical music via Alma Gluck, who incongruously made her name with a hugely popular version of “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny”; novelty tunes by vaudevillian singer Billy Murray; mainstream dance band music by Paul Whiteman, Isham Jones, and Ben Selvin; popular adaptations of religious songs like “The Great Judgment Morning,” via Homer Rodeheaver; Arthur Collins' vaudevillian trade in racist minstrel-era “coon songs” and Al Jolson's update of minstrelsy with “Swanee”; and Tin Pan Alley numbers like Nora Bayes' take on Richard

Whiting and Raymond Egan's Orientalist tune "Japanese Sandman." For better or for worse, U.S. recording companies already included a wide variety of musical approaches and cultural portrayals.

Genres, like classifications in general, are used in a variety of ad hoc ways, on a daily basis. "We all spend large parts of our days doing classification work," Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star write, "often tacitly, and we make up and use a range of ad hoc classifications to do so."<sup>47</sup> Those who produce, distribute, and consume music—musicians, fans, and the recording companies that are the focus of this book—shape and reshape borders, often reinforced when we cross them. We participate in the shaping and reshaping of these classifications and conventions (or in this study, genre categories) and they shape our everyday lives in often invisible ways, until they "break down or become objects of contention."<sup>48</sup> This makes the work of excavating genre work of the past easier, given that the ideologies have decayed in certain ways while remaining doggedly steadfast in others. It is nearly impossible for us to think outside these categories, which we reify even while we critique them in various ways.

Genre is a central component of this book in that it opens up to a number of important social and cultural functions of media industries' role along the cultural circuit. Like David Brackett (by way of Franco Fabbri), I see genre as fundamentally *relational*. This notion is based in a "system of difference," in which genres function within ever-changing contexts of cultural production as opposed to the mapping of "a trait-based approach."<sup>49</sup> Genres circulate as ever-changing "articulations" and "assemblages" in which popular music genres become recognizable in their dialogic relationship to other genres.<sup>50</sup> As genres emerge, they become iterative, extending genre formations through the citing of musical (and social and cultural) conventions. This approach rightly emphasizes the deeply dialogic nature of genres, not as "quasi-mechanistic" formations in their own "hermetically sealed world," but in a world in which such formations rise, shift, and change.<sup>51</sup>

Genres are not devised by any one actor. As Jennifer Lena has suggested, "music is in need of thick histories," in which genre formations are not solely attributed to "individual genius or serendipity" but formed through "collaborative links with skilled practitioners" of varying sorts, in which music and its circulation is part of a "participatory, community-based activity."<sup>52</sup> These activities can be usefully mapped by an analytical approach based in cultural studies research, which has sought a fuller accounting of the interrelated "cultural processes"—representation, identity, produc-

tion, consumption, and regulation—along the “circuit of culture,” in which these poles come into relation in ways that shift and transform over time.<sup>53</sup> Not surprisingly, all these analytical categories are represented here. But choices must be made, in light of previous research and the agenda of this book, which focuses on recording companies as institutional cultures, first through their role in genre formations and later in the conflicts and collaborations that emerged as many of those same companies changed in various ways with the rise of radio.

Having said that, audiences, in all their myriad complexities, are central to the shaping and reshaping of generic conventions and ever-shifting listener identifications, in the twists and turns of their cultural circulation and tied to constellations of social and cultural formations.<sup>54</sup> As Thomas Schatz has argued, the study of media industries must not lose sight of the roles of creativity, authorship, and cultural production research based in both film studies and cultural studies, amidst ever-shifting relational concerns about the shape of media industries, concentrations of ownership, and mechanisms of control.<sup>55</sup> While this book focuses on recording companies’ roles in genre formations, it is the larger set of participants—sometimes understood as communities—that play no small part in a given genre’s emergence, sustainability, and malleability over time. The kaleidoscope of cultural distinctions that make up genre formations are often arbitrary, but it does not then follow that they are of no importance, because our everyday experience suggests otherwise, when for instance we are insulted by a friend’s rejection of our own tastes, affinities, and dispositions tied to this or that genre. Even as we critique these distinctions, we continue to live with them. As Simon Frith suggests, “the essence of popular culture practice is making judgments and assessing differences.”<sup>56</sup> And as Keith Negus has argued, that process goes on across popular music media culture, including within those recording companies that scout, record, classify, and sell to the larger public. In that sense, I share Negus’ intention to move beyond describing a cultural product via “technical and routine processes and institutionalized practices,” to “understand[ing] the meanings that are given to both the ‘product’ and the practices through which the product is made.”<sup>57</sup>

In focusing on the expansion of folk and pop scouting in the American South, Karl Hagstrom Miller convincingly argues that it was “scholars and artists, industrialists and consumers” that began to segregate what had not been segregated previously, as “a fluid complex of sounds and styles in practice was reduced to a series of distinct genres associated with particu-

lar racial and ethnic identities.”<sup>58</sup> While this book greatly benefits from such insights, I will not try to replicate that here, focusing instead on the institutional cultures, discourses, and contexts that exhibited much of what Hagstrom Miller has identified. When possible, I have tried to also provide glimpses of consumers of recordings where possible. Much of the work here focuses on genres’ industrial contexts and sociocultural circulations, via the nascent recording companies of the era as well as via recording companies’ increasingly close relationships with radio and film. But I do so with the foundational recognition that many of the social and cultural tropes and dispositions date back to colonial America. Genre furthered these existing dynamics as a central organizational (and sales) strategy in media, as an explanatory and narrative model through which a set of proposed distinctions and differences are made “real.” Some of those niches emerged into lasting genre categories, lasting through companies’ dissolution or absorption into other media industries, while others served more ephemeral importance, at least to the companies involved.

The start of this book focuses on the expansion of U.S. recording companies beyond the Northeast into the Great Lakes Midwest and then maps the aftermath in which they turned to new niches when their initial attempts at mimicking the Big Three’s repertoire failed. They turned to the music around them, including that of newly arrived musicians from the American South, which in turn led to recording expeditions there, as well as to points around the United States in years to come. And as Karl Hagstrom Miller has noted, talent scouts and folklorists, invested in the purity of the country’s regional vernacular music, were crestfallen to find “Broadway in the backwoods,” which had arrived decades before via sheet music, the vaudeville performing circuit, and the easy portability of sound recordings from people and places culturally, if not geographically, far away.<sup>59</sup>

Not surprisingly, some of the musical styles came in with built-in distortions and prejudices inherent in the structures of American racism, which would show up in genre classifications with no small implications for the everyday work of the industry. Nowhere was this more pronounced than in the form that gave birth to both American popular music and the central importance to authenticity in its production, reception, and circulation: minstrelsy and its cruel depictions in working-class theaters in the white urban North.<sup>60</sup> As Hagstrom Miller suggests, the “cultural component of segregation” was “in some ways more successful than its legal counterpart” in that its “narrative of discrete racial and regional cultures remaining en-



scioned long after the doctrine of separate but equal ceased to be the law of the land.”<sup>61</sup>

This cultural segregation has led to differing accounts of how companies negotiated the processes of scouting, recording, manufacturing, distributing, and selling sound recordings. This not only meant “the business side,” but also the varying cultural barriers that those involved crossed with care and regularity. The music they found, however divided and subdivided by recording scouts, folklorists, and scholars after the fact, were hybridized when “discovered.” “Standard approaches,” Hagstrom Miller writes, “assume that the commodification is a problem that must be investigated, that music bought is somehow less true than music made,” but I share his notion that music is shaped less by “who they were” but by “what they had the opportunity to hear.”<sup>62</sup> This famous dichotomy stubbornly remains common in the present day, though Simon Frith argued decades ago that the music-as-expression vs. music-as-commodity distinction was a deeply flawed way of thinking about popular music. Frith rightfully argued that in the age of sound media, a given media commodity (a sound recording) is often a creative starting point in the hands of others rather than the compromised end of an otherwise pure cycle.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, while the cultural categories that impacted genre formations are arbitrary at their core, their impacts are nonetheless responsible for very real consequences in the lives and careers of those involved.<sup>64</sup>

Technological change is never simple or straightforward, but it is implicated in a constellation of shifting social, economic, regulatory, and cultural contexts. Authors commonly write about technology as an “autonomous” force in society, in no large part due to the difficulty in assigning specific agencies to technological change, as Lisa Gitelman has suggested.<sup>65</sup> Media histories “must be social and cultural, not the stories of how one technology leads to another, or of isolated geniuses working their magic on the world.”<sup>66</sup> Nor are technologies as stable as we often suggest, not “the phonograph” nor “the radio” as we sometimes write, taking a “heuristic” approach that cites a “coherence” that falls apart with scrutiny.<sup>67</sup> The definitional instability of technological media is further complicated by the unstable nature of the “social.” Derived from widely held practices in sociology, common definitions of “society” treat it as a macro state, which we all inhabit. “Problems arise, however,” Bruno Latour writes, “when ‘social’ begins to mean a type of material,” a beginning rather than the result of “actors” (human and nonhuman in Latour’s formulation) in which the “social” is the ever-shifting end result of actors and assemblages and networks

and so on.<sup>68</sup> Through Latour's development (with Michel Callon) of actor-network theory, he sought to contextualize people on a less hierarchical plane in relationship to technological artifacts and formations. Just as the urge to escape technological determinism is easier said than done, Latour outlines the many difficulties in reformulating the social in the ways he suggests. In this book, I have tried to resist assigning agency to large, amorphous "social" trends and have tried to rely on specific actors, relations, and contexts so as not to make claims so broad as to be meaningless.

Thus the emergence of a range of phonographic technologies was in no way preordained. The paths to adoption were tentative and circuitous for long periods of time, only really recognizable as a narrative after the fact (and even then, we have often got it wrong). To begin: It was in no way preordained that the recording industry would be focused on music. Of all the many inventors who had experimented with sound in different ways (Éduoard-Léon Scott de Martinville, Charles Cros, and Alexander Graham Bell, among others), it was Edison that got credit for the "phonograph." The name for his cylindrical recording device was already in circulation as a system of phonetic shorthand stenography invented by Sir Isaac Pitman by the 1840s.<sup>69</sup> Edison's August 3, 1877, experiment with machinist John Kruesi, almost a year after Alexander Graham Bell's successful telephone experiment, is marked as a beginning of sorts. A patent for Edison's new device was granted on February 19, 1878. The inventor first tried to sell his new technology via lectures in which the inventor or his employees would demonstrate and discuss the phonograph's abilities and possible uses. These spectacle-like demonstrations were meant to garner interest in the technology, but any initial amazement regarding the phonograph's ability to separate human voices from bodies had largely waned, as the Edison ledgers suggest.<sup>70</sup>

"In our own times it has become fashionable to declare that music has become a commodity," David Suisman writes. "Like many truisms, this claim obscures as much as it reveals." Commodification, he adds, is a "social and political process, populated by human actors, and one that includes various dimensions and phases."<sup>71</sup> There is no better proof of this than Edison's much-cited trial balloon, in the form of an article published on May 1, 1878, "The Phonograph and Its Future" in *The North American Review*, in which he suggested various possible market uses for the device, including use in alarm clocks, talking dolls, and in the creation of wills, among other uses.<sup>72</sup> As Leonard DeGraaf writes, "The lack of a clearly defined application for the phonograph affected the company's ability to promote

it.”<sup>73</sup> And while Edison’s 1878 essay is sometimes held up to suggest Edison’s failure, most of the uses he predicted came to pass in time. Although recorded music would become phonography’s focus, other strands continued on successfully with relatively little attention. The earlier initiative to make phonographs business devices later found success via dictation machines. But after early business applications failed, Edison gave the rights to develop the technology for use in toys and dolls or as music boxes, but such initiatives never amounted to a viable plan for the phonograph writ large, even if both uses for recorded sound would come into use. But after Edison’s entrepreneurial efforts failed, the inventor largely abandoned the phonograph during work on the technology and infrastructure surrounding electric light, among other projects.<sup>74</sup>

It was the work of Chichester Bell and Charles Sumner Tainter that prevented the new sound technology from drifting into obscurity. Funded by Alexander Graham Bell (Chichester’s distant relative) and encouraged by financier and lawyer (and Graham Bell’s father-in-law) Gardiner Hubbard, Bell and Tainter found funding and a place to work at the telephone inventor’s new Volta Laboratory.<sup>75</sup> During a period in which Edison was distracted by ongoing projects (primarily electric lighting and iron-ore extraction), Bell and Tainter’s patented improvements and the launch of their “graphophone” jolted Edison back into improving his phonograph.<sup>76</sup> After experiments with disc technology, Bell and Tainter decided on an improved cylinder phonograph, with replayable wax cylinders, while also avoiding the wobbling common to Edison’s mandrel-style phonographs.<sup>77</sup> This research would lead to formation of the American Graphophone Company (an ancestor of the Columbia Phonograph Co.), both using cylinder technology, after attempts at merging interests with Edison failed.

After weighing the viability of different uses for the phonograph, Edison and others focused on business applications. This makes sense, as Paul Israel suggests, given the biographies of many of those involved: “Edison and the other major figures in the early phonograph industry shared a background in telecommunications” and thus “were ill prepared to imagine and create an entertainment industry.”<sup>78</sup> To launch his phonograph business, Edison partnered with Jesse Lippincott, a Pennsylvania industrialist who had made his fortune in glass. The North American Phonograph Company’s main charge was to popularize the phonograph as business device. Edison and Lippincott largely built its business model on the telephone industry: regional companies served its areas by leasing cylinder phonographs as a technological replacement for stenographers, who quickly organized

against the technology. But the early phonograph was not fit for such business purposes, given the technology's fragility. Repairing machines was a logistical problem, especially for those local companies farthest west that had to send machines back east for service. This in turn made the leasing model borrowed from the telephone industry untenable for the phonograph, as lessors were not renewing after their initial agreements expired.<sup>79</sup>

In a closed-door 1890 meeting of phonograph manufacturers, the nascent industry's assumptions were laid bare. Lippincott brought all the local phonograph companies together at Chicago's Auditorium Building to discuss present difficulties and future prospects. Attendees revisited technological and business assumptions about the new technology and revisited technological and business models in relation to the design and sale of telephones, typewriters, and sewing machines.<sup>80</sup> Raising these questions again was more urgent than fanciful, as the industry's focus on the talking machine as a business device was facing collapse. While thirty-three companies were represented at the 1890 meeting, only nineteen labels returned in 1891.<sup>81</sup> On the second day of the conference, the agenda turned to talking machines for public exhibition, at which point Louis Glass of San Francisco's Pacific Phonograph Company spoke. "Gentlemen, I have very little to say except, that all the money we have made in the phonograph business we have made out of the nickel-in-the-slot machine. . . . I will state that the first one we put out was placed in the Palais Royal saloon on November 23rd, 1889, and we have taken in from that machine, up to May 14th, last, \$1,035.25."<sup>82</sup> Only Glass and a few other representatives spoke up in favor of the entertainment phonograph, a move that flew in the face of what Edison and Lippincott wanted. Paul Starr notes that it was distributors like Glass who first recognized "more of a market as an entertainment medium than as a business apparatus," for use in "storefront phonograph parlors as well as in such venues as hotel lobbies and train stations." These parlors became the "penny arcades" in which a variety of amusements and automata were also featured.<sup>83</sup>

Edison would never have the same amount of control over the recording industry that he had in those early years, particularly when compared to his control of later technologies, most notably the motion picture. Compared to the sweeping control Edison had with the Motion Picture Patents Co., Edison never had the kind of control in the phonograph business he was able to exert in motion pictures, especially after his partnership with Lippincott dissolved and the business model built around the phonograph as a business device collapsed. And by 1915, Edison's short-lived trust was

ruled in violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, around the same time his phonograph patents were expiring and a new wave of talking machine manufacturers would enter the industry.<sup>84</sup> There are convergences and disjunctures when tracking the development of recorded sound and motion picture technologies in light of Thomas Edison's entrepreneurial attempts to develop both.

"If at first the phonograph record was little more than a novelty, the stuff of entertainment arcades and 'educational' lectures," Michael Chanan writes, "it was also an entirely novel commodity: it turned the performance of music into a material object, something you could hold in your hand, which could be bought and sold."<sup>85</sup> But what that object meant—what it could do—was still being tested in a variety of ways. The growing popularity of recorded sound as entertainment encouraged companies to transform their playback machines from public amusements to domestic devices sold in newly aestheticized cabinets that mimicked furniture styles of the day. This is not to say that other uses were not being pursued, as evident in the abecedary series that appeared in *Phonogram* between May 1900 and June 1901. Each month, another use for Edison's phonographs (ranging from the possible to the improbable) was introduced: an alarm clock; an alert on buoys to warn ships at sea; built-in phonographs on bicycles.<sup>86</sup> Phonographs were increasingly ubiquitous in public spaces. But another article that appeared in the *Phonogram's* June 1901 issue strongly encouraged consumers to adopt the technology into the home: "The importance—we might say the absolute necessity—of music in the well-ordered home is now generally admitted." The article suggested the talking machine as a replacement for both the piano and music box and as an aid to digestion at dinnertime.<sup>87</sup>

The dissolution of the National American Phonograph Company in 1894 allowed existing companies like Columbia and Edison to focus on the entertainment market, while some of those already in the music business founded labels of their own. Performers like J. W. Myers and Russell Hunting first recorded themselves and associates before formalizing the business into labels.<sup>88</sup> Myers recorded under the Globe and then the Standard moniker, while Hunting (also publisher of the *Phonoscope* from 1896) worked at the Universal Phonograph Company, owned by Joseph W. Stern & Company, a sheet music company that made sure to record many of its artists.<sup>89</sup> The Stern/Universal relationship stands as a tantalizing early example of what might have been if a closer organizational structure between song publishing and sound recording had formed, while also pointing out

the largely unmapped relationship between the two fields to date. Stern's activities in the sound recording business ended when Edison stopped supplying cylinders, out of what Dave Laing suggests were growing fears of competition.<sup>90</sup> A symbol of the song as selling point in Tin Pan Alley was reflected in recording companies (most notably Edison) not listing performers on record labels.

But with the increased sale of player pianos and piano rolls on the one hand, and talking machines and sound recordings on the other, tensions regarding composers' copyright claims to music being released in these formats reached the Supreme Court.<sup>91</sup> The Copyright Act of 1831 had extended copyright protection to written musical compositions but had no stipulations regarding the mechanical playback of sounds via machines such as the player piano or phonograph.<sup>92</sup> Concerns were great enough by 1895 that song publishers created the Music Publishers' Association (MPA) to address the changing technological contexts in which they worked. So when Congress began to revise the 1870 Copyright Act, the focus was on making sure that new laws addressed the concerns of both song publishers and composers regarding a lack of compensation for music played on these new technological platforms.<sup>93</sup>

While Congress was already at work, the Supreme Court had received *White-Smith Co. vs. Apollo Co.*, in which the White-Smith Music Publishing Company had sued Apollo Company, maker of pianos, player pianos, and piano rolls. White-Smith had published Adam Geibel's songs "Little Cotton Dolly" and "Kentucky Babe" in 1897, and it was the use of the songs by the Apollo Company, maker of player pianos and piano rolls, that had led to the case.<sup>94</sup> The case was argued on January 16 and 17 and decided in favor of Apollo on February 24, 1908, with the Court deciding that White-Smith had not been infringed upon given the differing technological context.<sup>95</sup> This allowed phonograph and piano roll companies to reproduce songs with impunity, which incensed music publishers, who redoubled their efforts to ensure a positive outcome in Congress's ongoing copyright revisions. Another concern moving forward from the Supreme Court decision was this: Aeolian Company both helped financially support White-Smith's court case and bought rights to mechanical reproduction of music from those publishers involved in the Music Publishers' Association. Thus Aeolian had ensured themselves a victory no matter which side won, which led to congressional concerns that Aeolian would create a monopoly in the player piano and piano roll market.<sup>96</sup> These concerns left congressional representatives pondering a future of collusion and a potential Aeolian

lian monopoly, in which the company might control song publishing rights to such a degree that they could control the phonograph and piano roll markets.<sup>97</sup> Those dissatisfied with the Supreme Court outcome redoubled their efforts to influence Congress's ongoing copyright debates. Songwriters and publishers relied on testimony before Congress from celebrities of the day, including composers Victor Herbert and John Philip Sousa, the latter of whom had been an outspoken opponent of "canned music."<sup>98</sup>

In the 1909 Copyright Act, Congress rejected the Supreme Court decision and came up with a plan that became known as compulsory licensing, designed to give song publishers the right to decide on how or whether their music would be licensed for mechanical reproduction, while not allowing that exclusive right in perpetuity. As Edward Samuels writes, "composers could choose whether or not to allow recordings to be made of their works," while charging a price they deemed fair. "But thereafter, any other record companies would be allowed to make their own recordings of the song by paying a fix rate, set in the statute at 2 cents per copy."<sup>99</sup> While the first provision for mechanical playback (via phonographs and player pianos) garnered the most attention upon the Copyright Act's passing, the additional provision for public performance would be more impactful, particularly with the coming of sound film. As Katherine Spring writes, "In the two decades following the Act's inauguration, the economic potential of the second provision became especially apparent to publishers and songwriters, who discovered that handsome sums could be earned by licensing performing rights to venue proprietors."<sup>100</sup> But in the first years following the Copyright Act of 1909, the issue of performing rights remained a thorny one due to great difficulties in enforcement and the arduous task of monitoring businesses that used music without the rights clearance that music composers and publishers so desired. Attorney Nathan Burkan, with the support of Victor Herbert, John Philip Sousa, and others, had been instrumental in the formation of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) in 1913. But enforcement remained an issue, so after attempts at negotiating licenses with individual New York restaurants bogged down, Burkan in 1914 filed a lawsuit on behalf of Sousa, which failed.<sup>101</sup> That failure led to another case, this time brought by composer-musician Victor Herbert, who had heard his song "Sweethearts" at Shanley's Restaurant, down the street from the Broadway opera in which Herbert performed the song with each performance.<sup>102</sup> In January 1917, the case was heard by the U.S. Supreme Court, which reversed the decisions of the lower courts. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in favor



of the plaintiff and on behalf of a unanimous court, saying, “If the rights under the copyright are infringed only by a performance where money is taken at the door, they are very imperfectly protected. Performances not different in kind from those of the defendants could be given that might compete with and even destroy the success of the monopoly that the law intends the plaintiffs to have.”<sup>103</sup> The court had decided that music played in restaurants and other commercial spaces was played for profit as part of what consumers were buying. The ruling gave ASCAP a legal basis on which to collect fees on behalf of its membership, which the organization quickly pursued. “From the beginning,” Paul Goldstein writes, “the central collecting mechanism was a blanket license that would give the licensee *carte blanche* to perform any composition in the ASCAP repertory as often as it wished for a flat fee.”<sup>104</sup> “Performances,” as defined in the decision, considered sound recordings and radio to be the same as live performance. And while live performance in early radio reached relatively few listeners and was seen by many as a way to promote performances, sound recordings, and sheet music, the medium’s increasing reliance on recordings would lead to increased tensions that would flare up throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and beyond. While the emerging events of the 1920s will focus on the recording industry’s expansion and transformation with radio’s rise, this book will necessarily return to questions of royalties and compensation as the radio industry buys up the leading recording companies at the end of the 1920s and start of the 1930s.

What the White-Smith case, the congressional debates regarding copyright, and the formation of institutions like the MPA and ASCAP made clear was that music could be “composition, performance, sound, and object” all at once, while the importance of any one of these would shift depending on the specific economic or institutional context.<sup>105</sup> This was further complicated by the advent of radio, which was first understood as a valuable tool for the promotion of musical artists. Music, newly “free” to radio consumers who increasingly adopted the technology through the 1920s, spread in even broader ways, reaching larger and larger groups of the public simultaneously, as opposed to the largely asynchronous listening habits of phonograph listeners.

If sound recordings represented a challenge to the song publishing industry’s grasp on copyright, sound phonographs and other playback technologies meant a battle for nascent recording companies in terms of patents. The first decades of the recording industry saw collaboration and conflict between the emerging Big Three: Edison, Columbia, and Victor,

as well as various new companies entering the recording market. As early as the 1890s, Columbia and Edison agreed to license each other's patents, which made sense given the close history between the two companies and their sound playback technologies, as well as their shared early focus on the talking machine as a business device. By the 1890s, both Edison and Columbia had debuted entertainment cylinders for the burgeoning home phonograph market.<sup>106</sup> But unlike Edison's phonograph and then American Graphophone Company's (renamed Columbia in 1897) graphophone, Emile Berliner's gramophone debuted in 1895 with a primary focus on the entertainment market. Berliner had understood the difficulties faced by the phonograph and graphophone as a business device and the problems caused by the early gramophone recordings' roughly two-minute playing time. Berliner's gramophone company not only embraced a disc technology rather than a cylinder playback system (such an approach had been a subcurrent in recorded sound research for decades).<sup>107</sup> It also shifted emphasis away from the largely failing business phonograph toward musical (and spoken word) entertainment. The technology and its new focus created both turmoil and opportunity as shifts in playback technologies redefined how recorded sound was produced, circulated, and consumed.

A year after the Berliner disc's debut, his Berliner Gramophone Company entered into an agreement with a Camden, New Jersey, machine shop operator named Eldridge Johnson, who began making entire gramophones for the inventor's company soon afterwards<sup>108</sup> Not long after, Johnson distanced himself from Berliner. In addition to developing his own recording processes, Johnson had good reason to avoid the association. In June 1900, Frank Seaman of the Universal Talking Machine Company sued Berliner for copyright infringement based on discs already being produced by Seaman's Zon-O-Phone (later Zonophone) label, which meant "an end to his American operations."<sup>109</sup> Johnson's gramophone company had worked under various names (Consolidated Talking Machine Company, Improved Gramophone, Improved Record) eventually distancing his own company from Berliner's, buying out the inventor's remaining U.S. holdings and settling on a new name for his company: Victor.<sup>110</sup> The company's new format, tied to an emphasis on musical and spoken-word entertainment recordings, proved successful. While Edison remained dedicated to his cylinder format, other companies were interested in the emerging disc business, as varying inventors and companies fought it out in court.

The skirmishes that would lead to the industry's dramatic expansion wouldn't come from battles between industry leaders, but from upstart

companies seeking the advantages afforded by the most popular playback formats. Claiming patent infringement in July 1904, Columbia sued Leeds & Catlin, disc producers who were supplying lateral-cut disc recordings to smaller record labels as well as a few of their own.<sup>111</sup> The company, founded by Loring Leeds, was in court regularly, the first major case being a suit filed by American Graphophone Co. (Columbia) in 1898.<sup>112</sup> Many more suits would follow. In 1909's *Leeds & Catlin v. Victor Talking Machine*, Leeds' company argued that because Victor had not extended one of its patents in the Canadian market (the Berliner-Suess patent of 1899), U.S. Victor patents were null and void.<sup>113</sup> As David Suisman writes, "The Supreme Court ruled in *Leeds and Catlin Company v. Victor Talking Machine Company* in 1909 that Victor's patented technology comprised the machine *and* the records, thus making it an infringement for another company to produce records playable on Victor phonographs."<sup>114</sup> Because Victor controlled both phonographic media's most successful hardware and software (to borrow contemporary terminology), it allowed the company to dominate the U.S. recording industry like no other: "This was the cultural equivalent of the absolute authority initially claimed over both the physical rails and the means of conveyance . . . and it was not until key phonograph patents expired in the second half of the 1910s that independent cultural producers, in this case, record companies . . . could operate in the business with any kind of reliable legal foundation."<sup>115</sup>

Victor and Columbia then entered into a patent pool agreement, while the Edison company was steadfast in its commitment to the patented technologies of its namesake. This was a huge mistake for Edison, as a Victor-Columbia patent pool ensured its control of the markets for disc and machines. As the only company in the Big Three not directly associated with an inventor, Columbia came to be defined by lawyers and businessmen. Columbia's then-parent company, American Graphophone, controlled the Bell and Tainter patents, signed a cross-licensing deal with Edison by 1896, and "handled and licensed" other companies' talking machines as early as 1897 (the year they launched their own machine).<sup>116</sup> In October 1901, Columbia was able to get into the disc business through the sale of the Globe Record Company's Climax series, while former Berliner employee Joseph W. Jones was working with attorney Philip Mauro to get a patent on his wax recording technology, also crucial to Victor's business.<sup>117</sup> Once the patent was granted on December 10, 1901, "The Jones patent put Victor and Columbia on equal legal footing, with each company holding a patent crucial to the other's continued operation."<sup>118</sup> Victor's Eldridge John-

son responded by purchasing the Globe Record Company, which ended Columbia's disc business via Climax, while Columbia readied a patent infringement suit against Victor based on the Jones patent.<sup>119</sup> Negotiations ensued between Johnson and Columbia's Edward Easton, which led to the first co-licensing agreement between two of the Big Three's most formidable companies.<sup>120</sup> As David Suisman suggests, "Through agreements to share their patents, large firms both minimized costly conflict of uncertain outcome and shored up their own position as industry giants."<sup>121</sup>

These legal conflicts and collaborations allowed the recording industry to challenge Tin Pan Alley in ways it could not before, as companies courted new listeners through more affordable phonographs and, however tentatively at first, expanded repertoire. But this did not mean that Tin Pan Alley's structuring influence dissipated quickly. Like vaudeville, Tin Pan Alley's malleability as a form has meant that its influence is with us still, and not just during baseball game sing-alongs of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" during the seventh-inning stretch. Rather, recording companies entered an entertainment environment largely shaped by practices established by Tin Pan Alley, which had commercialized music decades before.

#### Tin Pan Alley, Phonographic Media, and Commercial Culture

Tin Pan Alley's commercial function had a dramatic impact on popular music and entertainment media writ large. That impact, David Suisman writes, "lay not in aesthetic innovation but in the relation between aesthetic forms and the industry's modern capitalist structure," which made songwriters into laborers and songs into products, organizing American popular music into a recognizable "variety of genres and idioms."<sup>122</sup> Compared to the music that would follow it, some Tin Pan Alley fare seems calculated towards the maudlin, designed to pull on the heartstrings to encourage sales of sheet music in this newly industrialized formation. But it also brought in decidedly new and cosmopolitan influences to the American songbook, borne in part out of the experiences of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, who added their own musical influences. These publishing companies also brought a "brash sophistication that eschewed the schmaltzy excesses of the past century and most of the Italianate ornamentation, relying for spice on borrowings from brass bands, South American dances, the emerging jazz and European modernism."<sup>123</sup>

The music publishing houses of the 1910s were so powerful by 1920 that the key firms—M. Witmark & Sons, Irving Berlin, Inc.; Leo Feist,

Inc.; T. B. Harms & Francis, Day & Hunter, Inc.; Shapiro, Bernstein & Co.; and Waterson, Berlin & Snyder, Inc.—were named in an antitrust suit for controlling 80 percent of songs that appeared on “phonographs, player piano rolls and other musical reproducing instruments,” while fixing prices on recordings and piano rolls sold. The companies formed a joint licensing operation called Consolidated Music Corporation, the entity named in the suit.<sup>124</sup> Consolidated only existed for a few weeks, quickly folding in the aftermath of the federal antitrust suit (quietly dismissed in 1922).<sup>125</sup> The power of the music publishing houses had shaped the U.S. music industry in the first decades of the twentieth century, and they were now jockeying for a place in which the phonograph, the player piano, and other playback technologies were changing some basic assumptions about how music was created, distributed, consumed, and stored. The talking machine entered a commercial environment in which the Tin Pan Alley mode of production, distribution, and performance were steadfast organizing principles.

U.S. journalists often reported on the changes in derisive terms. A 1910 *New York Times* article articulated the how Tin Pan Alley industrialized American popular music, which was as evident in consumers’ music habits as it was in songwriting. Music consumption, the article began, “is as constant as their consumption of shoes, and the demand is similarly met by factory output . . . manufactured, advertised, and distributed in much the same manner as ordinary commodities.”<sup>126</sup> The talking machine was initially seen by song publishers as a new and novel way to sell sheet music rather than as a threat to Tin Pan Alley’s mode of production. In fact, the recording industry adopted many of the same practices already common among Tin Pan Alley song pluggers. They sold sheet music through music shops and department stores, the theatrical and cinematic stages, and restaurants and bars.<sup>127</sup> The business of sound recording would transform the production, consumption, and distribution of popular music completely, even as it adopted key aspects of its business model, including the use of jobbers, who began distributing sound recordings as well as sheet music. In terms of sales, the incorporation of sound recordings in addition to sheet music meant another abstracted means of music (or, more broadly, sound) delivery. As David Suisman rightly notes, “publishers at that time made their money from selling objects (sheet music) that represented something intangible and ephemeral (sounds).”<sup>128</sup> Musicians heard on sound recordings might not know how to write sheet music, as performers played “by ear.” In retail music stores, talking machines were added to the showroom floor, alongside pianos, player pianos, and other musical instruments.

But the phonograph was also recognized as a “champion of song promotion,” as Katherine Spring notes, citing a *Billboard* article that outlined the extended life of popular songs that had already “earned their share of popularity on the regular sheet music market.” It “repopularizes them in a field far more far-reaching and profitable. It also takes songs which would never experience spirited counter sales and popularizes them over the instrument.”<sup>129</sup> In the second half of the 1910s, the Peerless Quartet’s “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier,” the American Quartet’s “Over There (released the same year as the U.S. entry into World War I),” Marion Harris’s “After You’ve Gone,” John Steel’s “A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody,” and Charles Harrison’s “I’m Always Chasing Rainbows” were all popular titles. Tin Pan Alley had already developed cross-promotional opportunities with Hollywood for popular music’s inclusion in silent film, which added fundamental value to cinema’s narrative and affective depth while helping to affirm popular music’s uses across media. “Whether disparaged as ephemera or valorized as products of great artists who resuscitated popular music for mass culture, songs of the 1920s became bankable commodities whose musical features were exploited to suit the narrative functions of an established classical cinema.”<sup>130</sup> Accompanists became customary as films included a thematic song repeated at key intervals in the film narrative, while sheet music covers promoted connections with the latest films. And with the rise of sound recordings as entertainment, those same songs allowed film fans to purchase an object that harked back to the ephemeral cinematic experience, sometimes including a vocal performance by the star of the film. And as radio developed, that medium would become even more important to the circulation of a much broader repertoire of 1920s and 1930s popular songs. But the radio of the 1910s had yet to enter its meteoric rise of the 1920s or its media dominance of the 1930s.

Back on the shop floors, song pluggers’ roles waned over time, since a clerk with no musical abilities could help customers preview a given recording. Recordings were often (but not exclusively) sold in music shops alongside sheet music, pianos, player pianos, and other musical instruments, where customers would come in to speak with clerks about the latest releases. Records were also sold in general stores, pharmacies, appliance and department stores, even in funeral homes for mourners in need of musical accompaniment. The pages of the trade journals offered weekly advice on how to attract customers with eye-catching retail window displays and hypothetical scenarios between clerk and customers, to be studied for successful strategies for future sales. A March 13, 1919, article in

*Talking Machine World* suggested that dealers should capitalize on testimonial letters from satisfied listeners. One such listener wrote in to say that he hadn't been a phonograph fan heretofore, but after one long day at work, he obliged his daughter and listened to Manuel Romain's version of the Tin Pan Alley standard, "I Will Love You When Silver Threads Are Shining among the Gold." "All at once," the listener reported, "my mind rose upon enchanted wings and swung heavenward to the bosom of a rosy cloud. You have read tales about the effects of opium upon the nervous system," he continued, "Well, Mr. Romain's song must have had the same effect on me." Don't clerks realize, the article continued, that such "ecstasies" coming "streight [*sic*] from the heart of a wonderstruck patron—make corking advertisements?"<sup>131</sup>

The recording industry's reliance on the cylinder was becoming a vestige of the past as companies switched to disc methods by the 1910s.<sup>132</sup> By the close of the 1910s, trade journals discussed concerns that some shops had too few clerks on the floor to keep up with customer demand, particularly in smaller stores not equipped with listening booths. Several articles suggested a solution: self-service talking machines for customers to listen to the latest recordings. A January 1919 article in *Music Trade Review* magazine reported that Victor was recommending self-service stations to their retailers, especially in those shops with a single clerk (sometimes the owner). As the article suggested, "Shortage of clerks first led to its inception, though like many other schemes devised to meet war-time conditions it will likely become a fixture in those departments where it is now being used."<sup>133</sup> A southeast Washington, D.C., shop described "as especially crowded in the evening" served as example in a February 1919 article titled "Let The Customer Play the Records." "The proprietor knows only that he has more customers than he can wait on," the article suggests, "and that too many of them only want to hear records which they ask for and have no intention of buying."<sup>134</sup>

With retail shops like these, the U.S. recording industry's dominant companies sought out consumers in different ways: through the dominant labels' chasing a given trend in audience taste until interest waned and through emerging labels fighting for niches, in a broad array of largely unrecorded styles, after head-on competition with the majors proved fruitless. Changes made by industry giants (Victor, Columbia, Edison) and the tactics of smaller labels (Gennett, Paramount, Okeh, Brunswick, and others) helped develop a new broader mode of production, as many recording companies paradoxically became increasingly national (and international)



in reach by focusing on regional niches and contexts. That expansion began to close by the end of the decade as the recording industry moved from one that largely dictated its own course to being part of a larger media industry formation, tied to the rise of radio and the increased importance of film. The connection between the recording industry and radio, which was still in its infancy during the 1920s, would increase dramatically into the mid-1930s.

Through all these changes in the recording industry, its reliance on genre remained constant. This relationship between genre (understood as a configuration of social, cultural, ideological, and aesthetic beliefs) and mode of production (in its most concrete sense, how a given company operates) has continued to be an important one to the record industry, because with each new genre and subgenre the industry has the potential to connect with underserved or unrecognized audiences. My analysis begins in 1920, by which time these new labels had asserted themselves through recording previously unheard music and developing new sales and marketing approaches. The musical foundations of the genres discussed here predate 1920, but the start of the 1920s marks the period in which the foundational genres of twentieth-century popular music emerge as industry categories. Importantly, this was made possible in large part by the emergence of smaller labels in the late 1910s that sought out new genres and niche markets to successfully compete with larger labels. This study closes in 1935 or so, by which time enough had changed in the record industry to make it look like an altogether different proposition than a decade before, as the dual forces of radio and the Great Depression had forced the upstart independents to merge with majors or get out of the record business altogether. The recording industry emerged out of this period of experimentation, consolidation, and economic depression as no longer part of a relatively autonomous phonograph industry but as part of a larger media formation that included film and radio. The story recounted here details the ground-shifting transformations that the recording industry faced as its genre boundaries expanded and its industrial formation underwent great change.

Those companies most likely to serve these audiences first are not likely to be industry leaders. In the 1920s, the two clear industry leaders were Victor and Columbia. Victor, with its ubiquitous “His Master’s Voice” ads featuring the omnipresent dog and Victrola in what would become a dominant twentieth-century American brand, had a genealogy that traced back to Emile Berliner and the invention of disc phonography. Victor played

no small part in how advertisers “encouraged consumers to understand themselves through their possessions and to fabricate their identities in and through things.”<sup>135</sup> Columbia, the oldest of all U.S. record companies, had a history that dated back to the 1890s, when the company sold cylinder phonographs for business communication in Washington, D.C. Having the most to lose as industry leaders, Columbia and Victor therefore had little interest in experimenting with new musical styles. The other major player of the early twentieth century, Edison, was in serious decline by the 1920s due to a reticence to abandon Edison’s proprietary phonograph technology, an uneven attention to the quality of music released, and Edison’s own peripatetic ambitions. Together, they were the original Big Three.

For a time in the 1920s, major labels like Victor and Columbia found themselves outpaced by smaller companies like Gennett, Okeh, and Paramount, who recorded the new genres of the day. At the start of the 1920s, the recording industry was still largely an East Coast phenomenon, centered between New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. During the 1920s and 1930s, new industry upstarts had shifted business to what was then known as “the Middle West,” with musical production centered in the industrial centers that drew poor blacks and whites north. It’s become commonplace for me to inform friends from Wisconsin just how many foundational blues recordings were recorded by the Paramount label of Port Washington. Friends are equally incredulous when I mention that Louis Armstrong’s first recording sessions were not in New Orleans but at the Gennett Records studio in Richmond, Indiana. At the same time that many Americans were leaving the rural south for the industrial north, these emerging record companies in the Great Lakes Midwest were there to record them.

This book examines institutional cultures at various recording companies—seen as media-producing, culture-producing industries—and those producers, consumers, and circulators of this sound media who helped shape U.S. popular music beginning in this era. The central questions to which I will continually return are: How did the shaping of genres and shifting recording industry practices and ownership affect one another? How do we account for the practices of the recording industry as reflected in its decision-making and culture-shaping/reflecting mode, both as an industry involved in manufacturing culture and reflecting its own participation as a cultural institution? How did the mediating roles of company go-betweens help to both shape new genres and reflect record companies’ attitudes about those genres? How did competing technologies such as radio influence the

recording industry? And finally, how did the phonograph industry shift from an industry largely concerned with its own fortunes to one concerned with its role in part of a much larger media formation?

### The Recording Industry, Media Historiography, and Cultural Production

An implicit purpose of this book is to suggest that recording industry histories would benefit media industry histories (and, more broadly, media studies) through true inclusion, in recognition of the recording industry's history and its deep and abiding connections to other media industries. As an interdisciplinary endeavor tied to fields each with its own specific emphasis and trajectory, media studies research has been defined in primary terms via its relationships to radio, television, and film (with various digital inclusions in recent years), traditionally "marked more by what it excludes (or what has been excluded) than by grounded inclusions."<sup>136</sup> As Michele Hilmes notes, the media that fell outside of traditional humanities research was traditionally seen as "debased and anti-individual, fodder for sociologists rather than critics or historians."<sup>137</sup> But a focus on media industries—including the recording industries—allows for a focus on "those aspects of cultural production in the twentieth century and beyond that most trouble the humanities-oriented categories of coherence and analysis so central to our understanding of culture itself: the author, the text, the reader." But "the media of radio, popular music, television, and film refuse to conform to comfortable analytical paradigms."<sup>138</sup> "By taking an industries approach to the critical study of media," Hilmes continues, "we are indicating a perspective that is inherently contextual and interrelated."<sup>139</sup> Christopher Anderson and Michael Curtin have also examined the "cultural turn" that has marked the rise of media industry histories, in which media are "not the given facts that precede historical investigation," but the "ongoing social productions, defined and redefined through use, affected not only by events and material conditions, but, crucially, by the language used to describe and discuss them."<sup>140</sup>

Like the study of media writ large, the study of popular music has never had a single disciplinary home. This has been a simultaneous strength and weakness that reflects the multifaceted nature of the cultural form. To date, there has been meaningful popular music research from the study of history, music, sociology, literature, and various interdisciplinary traditions. Each has defined and approached popular music in different ways, but I

have found Simon Frith's definition of the term most useful because of his refusal to embrace "popular" in neither its "of the people" mode, common in folklore traditions, nor in its strict commercial sense, too often understood in opposition to music as cultural expression.<sup>141</sup> The contradictory sets of criteria that hover around the notion of "the popular" is fraught, to be sure, especially when popularity is understood to be synonymous with market performance.<sup>142</sup> The U.S. recording industry encompasses a wide variety of industrial practices, given both the traditionally low barrier to entry to those who start recording companies and the variety of practices that define the differences between the smallest and largest businesses. In this study, I focus on the recording industry first and foremost as a media industry as opposed to the larger definitional scope of "the music industry," which includes music publishing, the market in musical instruments, and so on. The recording industry has been unique in its long-term role as its own stand-alone medium, but one that has played a crucial role as raw material to other media. While these dynamics were present early on in the history of recorded sound, the latter sections of this book outline the intensifying nature of these connections from the late 1920s onward.

Within the U.S. context, the relative lack of recording industry histories and precarity of popular music studies has led to a tendency toward omnibus approaches, at least until recently.<sup>143</sup> This book has greatly benefited from those earlier studies, but it also asserts the need for more targeted histories more common in historiographic work in film, radio, and television. Foundational texts opted for broad historical approaches, investigations focused either on either technological histories of sound recording or broader studies that attempted to map as much as possible. These studies incorporated textual analyses, technological and industrial histories, regulatory contexts, and more. Some histories told triumphal "great men" histories, spent scant time on social or cultural contexts, couched technologies in narratives of inexorable progress, or sometimes dismissed present-day popular music contexts as signs of decline. William Howland Kenney referenced this work in arguing the following: "Cultural analysis of the phonograph and recorded music has languished as writers and scholars alike have favored the study of technology in its many changing forms. This has had the effect of diverting attention away from the ways that Americans interacted with recorded sound technologies, both in producing recorded music and in consuming it."<sup>144</sup> But despite such flaws, these studies also laid a groundwork for further research in that they outlined technological and industrial contexts that might have been lost otherwise.

More recently, cultural histories have chosen more targeted and thematic approaches that suggest a turn of sorts, in which the perennially arriving study of popular music appears to get closer to a destination with each study. While largely continuing the division between technological and industrial histories of previous decades, these new studies (largely from scholars in history and American studies) were informed by the “cultural turn” across various disciplines and a thematic approach that no longer tried to do it all. Not surprisingly, much of this work comes from authors in interdisciplinary contexts. Examples of this approach include Evan Eisenberg (1987), Michael Chanan (1995), William Howland Kenney (1999), David Morton (2000), and so on. Two key histories by David Suisman (2009) and Karl Hagstrom Miller (2010) added much to existing scholarship. Suisman focuses on the social, cultural, and regulatory contexts in which music became a commodified object while Miller focuses on the recording industry’s role in formulating racialized folk and pop genres in the Jim Crow era. This study has also benefited from collectors’ ongoing research and literature. While this work has spent less time on the deeply impactful social contexts in which recording companies work, their dogged attention to detail has added hard-sought evidence, often little known outside this research by those in academia or music criticism.

Within contemporary media studies, popular music has held a precarious place at best, largely relegated to textual analyses of screen-based media. More recently, sound research within media studies has renewed interest in phenomena closely tied to popular music, though the sound studies and popular music research appear to have as many complications as affinities to date. This maps with popular music studies’ complicated and curious theoretical and methodological trajectory referenced above, which has followed a decidedly different course from the study of film, radio, television, and other media forms. This may be due in part to the blurring of disciplinary boundaries represented in the subject. While cinema, radio, and television were all able to define themselves as separate from the theatrical tradition, popular music is still associated in no small way with live performance, even though most of us consume popular music via media much more often. Traditional media studies diverge in other ways, via two important historical dynamics in which popular music doesn’t easily fit. At its inception, mass communication research commonly focused on mass media’s ability to reach large audiences simultaneously, while phonography was most commonly understood as an asynchronous medium and not “mass” in the way that the disciplinary focus on broadcasting had encouraged.<sup>145</sup>

“Common sense tells us that sound recording . . . is a mass medium, just like newspapers, films or television,” Pekka Gronow wrote in his 1983 article “The Record Industry: The Growth of a Mass Medium.”<sup>146</sup> “The problem is in the message,” he continued. “The message of records is usually music, and communications research does not know how to deal with music.”<sup>147</sup> Gronow goes on to suggest that the sale of recordings is one primary means of proving the influence of recordings as mass media. This dynamic points to an important distinction between recordings as media and music as content, which can easily be confused through recordings’ role as media and music’s role as content *across* media platforms (recordings, radio, film, and later media). But it is those traditional connections to other media that were made all the clearer by the first major conglomeration of entertainment media industries in the twentieth century: the 1920s phonograph-radio mergers detailed here, most emblematically Victor’s merging with the Radio Corporation of America (RCA).

I use the term “recording industry” here to mean commercial recording companies, encompassing both the largest and smallest recording companies that sought to sell recordings (largely, but not solely, music) to consumers. John Williamson and Martin Cloonan have argued, as has Jonathan Sterne, for the multiplicity of the music industries, within which the recording industry is a constituent part.<sup>148</sup> And if there are multiple music industries there are also multiple recording industries, with various roles across media industries and sociocultural contexts, including small commercial record labels that have benefited from the industry’s low barrier to entry, as well as some of the largest and most well-known labels and companies.

Like Keith Negus in *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, my understanding of recording companies encourages a view that understands these companies as multifaceted organizations, in which various dynamics can be at play at any given time, via the cultural intermediaries’ everyday actions that shape what goes on, rather than any conception of media industries as static, monolithic structures.<sup>149</sup> Pierre Bourdieu’s intersecting concepts of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital* have been most important here, as it has been across work in the cultural industries.<sup>150</sup> In an attempt to reconcile the roles of individual actors and larger social formations, Bourdieu sees shifting social contexts (fields) correlating in complicated ways with participants’ subjective responses, dispositions, and tendencies, or *habitus*.<sup>151</sup> For Bourdieu, these fields and subfields were not mere production of objects in any simple way, but a process of cultural production that produces “not only

the object of its materiality, but also the value of this object,” a “recognition of artistic legitimacy.”<sup>152</sup> As Keith Negus argues, the recording industry has been in a state of near-constant adaptation in relation to genre, audience, technology, promotion, advertising, and the law. “Since its emergence at the end of the nineteenth century,” Negus writes, “the recorded music business (and indeed the sheet-music publishing industry from which many working practices were drawn) has been organized according to small-scale productions and selling changing niche markets alongside the creation of big hits and blockbusters. . . . In addition, since its earliest days the recording industry has employed various legal and illegal, small-scale and team-based, marketing and promotional activities as a way of approaching consumers—practices which might well be labelled ‘flexible.’”<sup>153</sup> This is certainly evident in the various strategies employed by recording companies during a period in which American consumer culture was just taking shape. Key among these strategies was a reliance on advertising in the pages of trade journals, newspapers, and magazines. “By 1930,” Charles McGovern writes, “advertising was ingrained in everyday life, not only as a thoroughly integrated tool of industrial capitalism, but also as a widely accepted cultural influence.”<sup>154</sup> Negus characterizes recording companies as in constant flux, not only in their advertising and promotional strategies, but in adaptations to market conditions, changing competition, technological changes, promotional, and legal precedents (paired sometimes with tactics of dubious legality), through which companies have constantly negotiated.

This historiographical work is deeply indebted to the work of archivists and fans, collectors, and discographers. It is also shaped by their interests and questions, by what they decided to keep or dispose of, what questions they may have asked in oral interviews decades ago, what points of view they brought to the work at hand. In the effort to preserve sound recordings, some archives pay less attention to printed materials—business correspondence, catalogs, contracts—in favor of sound recordings themselves. Those players in the recording industry and other media industries of the 1920s and 1930s may have thought of their labor as ephemeral, even unimportant. What they kept or didn’t, what they recalled when asked decades later, shapes this too. Finally, the figures who were understood to be of central importance to the U.S. recording industry were largely white and male, while some researchers have, over time, given voice to others involved. Performers, certainly, but also those worked at companies in varying capacities. I think most clearly here of Harry Pace, Mayo Williams, and



others, about whom you will hear more in these pages. Important work remains to be done in identifying women who were involved, especially those doing the work of songwriters, scouts, and recording engineers, without claiming those roles publicly or even identifying with the roles privately. Here I am also thinking of the work of Aletha Dickerson, who worked in varying capacities for the Paramount label in Chicago through much of the 1920s, becoming de facto recording manager for Paramount.<sup>155</sup> We have yet to fully map those significantly involved in recording companies during this era.

A difficult necessity in researching this era is to be aware of the many myths, biases, distortions, and misconceptions that have emerged in layers between the musicians discussed here and the music they made. One such example, of many represented in this book, is Elijah Wald's reminder that we experience the blues (among other genres) through a haze of previous generations' values and categorizations, in which the genre was somehow separated from popular music writ large. "Writers like myself have tended to shy away from the fact that blues was once popular music," Wald writes. "Its evolution as a style," he continued, "and the career paths of most of its significant artists, were driven not by elite, cult tastes, but by the trends of mainstream black record buyers."<sup>156</sup> Decades and decades of genre articulations and reformations, amidst shifting sociocultural and aesthetic tastes, have made this era's commercial music culture increasingly inscrutable. If we take the mythologized blues, for instance, we imbue Robert Johnson with great importance while ignoring Bessie Smith, or Leroy Carr, for that matter.<sup>157</sup> We (mis)understand the blues through the industry's racist segregation of the music, but also through the framing and reframing via the American folk music "revival," or the British Invasion's fetishization of blues performers found via crate digging and various other layers of meaning that have brought the music to us in the first place. Jazz's many iterations have obscured its origins as syncopated dance music, while the cultural connotations of country—and its ancestral genre titles "old time" and "hillbilly"—have similarly permutated at various points and in various ways, lending toward a certain inscrutability to its earliest progenitors. My own interest in this era is mediated in various ways, from the commercial and cultural contexts of the 1920s and 1930s as evident in documents of the time, to the remembrances of those involved, "rediscovered" by collectors, journalists, and researchers who did interviews and published texts created in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. While my agenda of placing the recording industry squarely as a media industry, one that both produces

and embodies culture in its products and processes, I also hope to restore at least some sense of what the music meant—and what the work meant—to those involved.

The first chapter combines media history and cultural industries research in examining Gennett Records' institutional cultures of production via archival interviews, business correspondence, and the recording industry trade press. The chapter also seeks to understand that culture through Gennett's early 1920s foray into jazz, in terms of recording, scouting, and retail. I have included as many sources and points of view as possible, from Gennett engineers, scouts, and employees, while also recounting musicians' remembrances of recording for the company, including the King Oliver Gennett sessions, which featured a young Louis Armstrong.

But it was a closely related genre that would encourage record companies to expand their scouting activities dramatically. The second chapter traces the discourse that shaped "race records," from discussions of "race music" in the African American trade press protesting the recording industry's representational inequities to the recording industry's commercial adoption of the term following OKeh Records' success with Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues." Key to this adoption is the industry's advertising rhetoric, encoded with the era's virulent racism, as well as direct (if misguided) appeals to African American listeners. The latter sections of the chapter map the African American-owned Black Swan label and its attempts to redefine race records, as well as Paramount Records' expansion into race records via scouting, recording, and retailing the music of the Mississippi delta.

The last of the three genres examined in depth came first to be known as "old-time music." Chapter 3 focuses on the emergence of old-time music as a viable industry category, through tracking both trade-press discourse and talent scout mythmaking in recording the rural white music of Appalachia and points beyond. Key to the emergence of old-time music was Ralph Peer's much-mythologized scouting trip to the town of Bristol along the Virginia-Tennessee border, in which both Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family were discovered. In addition to tracking the construction of old-time music via recording industry and trade paper discourse, this chapter notes the synergistic relationship between old-time music and radio, a technology that helped popularize the music through performers' radio appearances, as well as a vaudevillian take on rural white music and culture via the "barn dance" shows, such as WLS-Chicago's *National Barn Dance* and WSM-Nashville's *Grand Ole Opry*.

Chapter 4 details the consolidation of the U.S. recording industry that

began during the second half of the 1920s. While various entertainment industries had been intertwined since their early histories, the technological conversions to electrical sound in the late 1920s brought together the recording, radio, and film industries like never before. While the biggest companies sought advantages in cross-promotional deals, smaller labels negotiated when and how they might adapt to new circumstances. Labels focused on the most widely popular artists and began to turn away from earlier niche explorations. The chapter offers case studies on Paul Whiteman, Louis Armstrong, and Jimmie Rodgers, all of whom expanded their musical repertoires while seeking cross-platform projects across recordings, radio, and film. Niche artists appeared in film and radio as well, as anyone capable of experimenting across contexts did. The merger between RCA and Victor Records shortly before the stock market crash had tremendous symbolic impact but was just one indication of what was to come.

The final chapter details the Great Depression's cataclysmic impact on the recording industry. What started in the mergers and consolidations intensified in the first years of the 1930s. Despite hard times, the trade press psychologized the Depression by shifting blame from larger societal dynamics to individual retailers' ability to sell in tough times. New realities necessitated the further conglomeration of the recording and radio industries, as well as film studios' ownership of recording companies (e.g., Consolidated Film Industries ownership of the American Recording Company [ARC] and Warner Bros.' brief ownership of Brunswick). The 1929 stock market crash (and the dismal financial reports from the years leading up to decade's end) convinced the Edison company to leave the recording industry in short order. Gennett, Paramount, and other small labels felt the changes most dramatically and sought to persevere by limiting their recording activities and returning to a focus on furniture and appliances, with which both labels' parent companies were most familiar. But it was Columbia's fortunes that would shift most dramatically, as it followed its 1920s successes with financial collapse. The company survived largely on its manufacturing works and then its name, as its ownership passed through various recording and radio concerns (ARC, Grigsby-Grunow, and eventually CBS). In the final pages of the book, I discuss Brunswick's and then Decca's Depression-era success, the emergence of swing, and the advent of the jukebox as some key components of the recording industry's rebirth.

So this research focuses on the recording industry *as* media industry, which media industry histories too often ignore. This also is meant to address the lack of recording industry historiography in popular music stud-

ies, which is too often ignored in favor of contemporary texts and audiences. And rather than a sweeping narrative that tries to retell the history of the U.S. recording industry from scratch once again, I have repurposed both media industry historiography and cultural industries research in an attempt to think about the recording industry both as a media industry all its own and one increasingly tied to other media industries through this pivotal period of transition.

University of Michigan Press  
Limited Distribution