Brooks, Tim. 2004. *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890–1919.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Reviewed by Sandra Jean Graham

The post-civil rights era gave rise to a surge in revisionist scholarship devoted to African American music, much of it inspired by Eileen Southern's seminal *Music of Black Americans* ([1971] 1997). Southern and the scholars who followed in her wake restored lost musicians, lost images, lost words, lost scores, and lost experiences to the historical record, which radically changed how we study, perceive, and teach American music. Tim Brooks's magnificent new book on America's earliest black recording artists, *Lost Sounds,* is a treasure chest of new information that reminds us, should we feel complacent, that there is still much work to be done in recovering and understanding America's musical past.

Brooks is the executive vice-president of research at Lifetime Television and the recipient of the Association for Recorded Sound Collections' 2004 Lifetime Achievement Award and the Society for American Music's 2005 Irving Lowens Award for Best Book (for *Lost Sounds*). He identifies and profiles thirty-seven pioneering black artists who began recording between 1890 and 1919, before the 1920s boom in race records. The chapters—each devoted to an artist's biography—are arranged chronologically and illustrated with rare photos, many from the author's personal collection. The book addresses a motley group of recording artists, encompassing a street musician performing "coon" songs, jubilee groups singing folk music, stars from musical theater, monologuists performing comedy and oratory, classical artists, novelty performers, and syncopated orchestras playing early jazz. Not only has Brooks illuminated little-known performers—at least a third of whom have never received scholarly scrutiny—but he significantly augments what we know about more familiar figures, such as Bert Williams, Harry T. Burleigh, James Reese Europe, and Nathaniel Dett.

Reading *Lost Sounds* with CDs at hand is highly recommended. In fact, Archeophone Records has produced a companion two-CD set (ARCH 1005; it shares the book's title and cover art), containing fifty-four tracks by forty-three artists. In addition, reissued recordings are available for the majority of the performers profiled, and these are listed in the book's discography.

The variety of performance styles displayed in the recordings of these performers contrasts markedly with the homogeneous quality of recordings by whites in the same era. Because early recording technologies had only

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rudimentary capabilities for capturing sound, mainstream white recording companies initially used a small group of in-house professionals to record all their music. The song, not the performer, sold the record. In the case of recordings of blacks, however, the opposite was true. White listeners wanted to hear the slides, slurs, and dropped consonants of black music exactly as it was presented on the streets and in theaters, concert halls, and clubs. This more "natural" performance style also appealed to black consumers when they later emerged as a market force. Therefore, Brooks argues, despite accommodations for technology (e.g., the use of voices with strong, penetrating timbres, avoidance of drums, small number of performers), recordings by blacks in this era are more reflective of live performance in their respective genres than are those by whites.

Chapter 4, devoted to the Unique Quartette, the first black group to record commercially, nicely illustrates the issue of performance practice. Organized in 1886, the Quartette recorded black-themed minstrel songs for three different companies between 1890 and 1896. They continued to tour after their last known recording was made, and public clamor for their repertory persisted. This apparently encouraged the Edison label to reissue six of the Uniques' songs, ca. 1897—this time recorded by its white male house quartet. Brooks compares the Unique and Edison recordings of one song, "Mamma's Black Baby Boy," noting that the infectious performance of the Uniques—with its "momentary pauses and bursts of enthusiasm, similar to those of the child who is the subject of the song"—is countered with a deliberate, almost parodic inflection by the Edisons that seems to ignore the emotional underpinnings of the lyrics (80). Such comparative analyses pepper the book and offer tantalizing prospects for future research.

Of all the biographies in *Lost Sounds,* the most captivating is that of George W. Johnson, the earliest known black recording artist, to whom Brooks devotes the first part of the book (three chapters). Brooks sets the stage in a present-tense prologue describing the scene of Johnson's trial for the murder of his mulatto mistress:

> Suddenly the room erupts, and the judge gavels repeatedly. "Order, order! Order, or I'll clear this courtroom." He glares down at the prosecutor, a small inept-looking man, who looks back and shrugs as if to say, "Don't ask *me* what's going on." The judge has never seen such a turnout for a case like this. (15)

In the midst of this mayhem "the judge leans over to the court clerk and whispers, 'Who *is* he, anyway?' The answer, if any, is lost in the din." This colorful re-creation of Johnson's trial (he was acquitted) from newspaper accounts and trial transcripts can be read as a metaphor for many of the

stories that follow: black men and women who seized the public's attention during their careers, but whose names were likewise lost in the din (or indifference) of history.

Johnson, whose fame rested on the wild success of two recordings, is one of the more interesting characters in the book. At the instigation of part-time employee Victor Emerson, the New Jersey Phonograph Co. set out to rival the faint recordings that the North American Phonograph Co. had begun supplying for coin-operated machines. Emerson needed musicians. The bottom line required they be cheap, and technology dictated they be loud. Emerson discovered Johnson, a street performer whose specialty was whistling, and signed him as his second artist, for twenty cents per song. Johnson made the trip across the Hudson River to Newark, where he spent entire afternoons singing and whistling the same song over and over again into six machines at once (copies of recordings could not yet be mass-produced). The first song he recorded—at Emerson's urging—was "The Whistling Coon," written by white minstrel performer Sam Devere in 1878 and containing the derogatory caricatures of African Americans typical of its genre. His other big number was in the same minstrel vein: "The Laughing Song" (which Johnson may have written) featured Johnson laughing in time to the music. Both songs are included on the Archeophone CD.

In three and a half years Johnson made 25,000 original recordings of these two songs, meaning that he sang them multiple times at approximately 300 recording sessions. One newspaper article reported hearing that Johnson once sang "The Laughing Song" fifty-six times in one day, and that his laugh was as fresh at the end as it was at the beginning (35). Both the recording of "The Laughing Coon," which preserves Johnson's infectious laugh, and the photograph of Johnson that appears on the book cover—smiling broadly with eyes closed—freeze Johnson in an attitude from which he was never able to break free, despite his best attempts. He recorded other songs, but these were the two that became coin-slot hits and defined the rest of his career.

Although Brooks calls attention to the degradation Johnson must have felt in winning fame by mocking his own race, greater emphasis on this situation would have been welcome. For example, early in the first chapter Brooks writes that Johnson "would become wily under the veneer of affability" (19), but he never returns to this point. Brooks instead observes that Johnson "was able, it seems, to make friends in social classes far above his own" (25), using as an example New York governor Levi P. Morton, who raised $100 to start Johnson's performing career. Brooks seems to equate popularity among white audiences with personal friendships with white individuals; although it seems certain that Johnson did have some white friends (recording artist Len Spencer is one example), none of his friendships

represented a relationship of true equals. Although Brooks acknowledges this inequality when he quotes one of Columbia's attorneys, Rollin C. Wooster, who noted, "Johnson is what you would call a good coon," Brooks fails to explicitly state what made him "good" in Wooster's eyes: the fact that he could earn $35 to $100 a week singing and whistling (57). Once Johnson lost his earning power, his life degenerated. He died in obscurity, an alcoholic and has-been whose outmoded "coon" songs represented an embarrassment to New Yorkers in 1914. Brooks closes his section on Johnson with these lines: "George W. Johnson was, for most of his life, a happy, easygoing man with a ready laugh who wanted nothing more than to get by in a hostile world. He made many friends and brought pleasure to millions more" (71). If Brooks's earlier statement about Johnson's veneer of affability is correct, then these concluding statements do not do justice to the psychic torment of putting on the mask, which was a necessity not only for performers but for all African Americans. Certainly Brooks does not ignore the role of racism in Johnson's career, but his inconsistent conclusions about Johnson's relationships with whites leave the reader with an ambiguous impression.

If race overtly defined Johnson's career, it more subtly but just as dramatically influenced the life and career of Charley Case (chapter 13), a monologuist with a delightfully understated style of humor. Although there was nothing in his appearance or family history to suggest that he was African American, for some unknown reason rumors about his racial identity followed him everywhere, and his life and death remain shrouded in mystery: was he black, passing for white? Was his death an accident or a suicide prompted by his mixed-race identity? Brooks suspects that these questions will never be answered. Case first developed his storytelling talents as a lawyer beginning in 1880, but he abandoned law and a string of short-lived business ventures for show business around 1887. Working in blackface, but not in dialect, he told stories on the vaudeville stage, mining his family life for material, for example: "Nobody was ever sent away hungry from my mother's house kitchen. They would go to the kitchen door, take one look, and go away of their own accord" (175). He built a successful career in vaudeville, and in 1909 Victor recorded three of his monologues, one of which is included on the Archeophone CD. Brooks provides complete transcriptions of the recordings and evocatively reconstructs Case's performance style. He also portrays the loneliness of Case's life on the road away from his (white) wife and children. When Case died, the *New York Age,* a black newspaper, printed an article that begins as an obituary but evolves into a sympathetic meditation on passing for white; Brooks wisely reprints the long article in full instead of interpreting it through selective quotation. It is a poignant close to a profile of a man who remained a second-tier

performer throughout his career, living an isolated life on the road under the shadow of perceived mixed-race heritage.

Chapters 14 (on the Fisk Jubilee Singers) and 15 (on Polk Miller and His Old South Quartette) are excellent studies that offer insight into the multiple and conflicting images of "slave music" that were circulating around 1909. The earliest Fisk recordings were made by a male quartet in 1909 for Victor, and many of the songs came from the repertory that had secured the fame of the original Jubilee Singers during their tours of 1871–78. In 1915 Columbia lured them away from Victor; Brooks estimates that the Fisks were the second best-selling African American vocal artists of the pre-1920 period, surpassed only by Bert Williams. Although they did not produce "hits," their recordings remained in print and sold steadily for many years, selling over two million copies, according to Brooks's estimates. One of Brooks's more interesting conclusions is that the Fisk recordings were meant for the white market, since they were issued "in the general numerical series rather than in a specialty 'ethnic' series" (206). He posits that they made their way into middle-class homes throughout the US. Most black consumers were likely too poor to buy record players and recordings at this time, and the major black press (or what survives of it in archives today) did not mention the Fisk recordings. This conclusion is consonant with the image the Fisk singers had projected historically as models for the "cultivating" influences of education on the freedmen. Although the original Fisk Jubilee Singers have received considerable academic scrutiny, Brooks is the first to painstakingly research the earliest Fisk group recordings.

Polk Miller and his quartet offer a vivid contrast. Brooks opens this chapter with the obvious question: "Why, you might ask, would a wealthy, white, southern businessman, former Confederate soldier, and apologist for slavery be the subject of a chapter in this book?" He goes on to offer a fascinating and persuasive answer. Polk entered show business late in life, catering to the same nostalgia for the pre-Civil War South that stoked the public's desire for the Fisks' jubilee songs (215). Born in 1844, Miller grew up on a plantation absorbing slave songs and banjo picking. He began as a solo act in the 1890s, and then took the exceptional step of adding a black quartet around the turn of the century. Miller, who recorded with his quartet in 1909, was one of the few Civil War veterans ever to record commercially.

The group recorded both religious and secular songs, in a "loose and lively" manner that contrasted sharply with the disciplined renderings of the Fisks (221). It would be easy to assume that they appealed to different audiences, but even "enlightened" northerners were drawn to the music and magnetism of Miller and his quartet. Mark Twain, who was a big fan of the Jubilee Singers, doubted that America could furnish anything more

enjoyable than Polk Miller and his "*wonderful four*" (221). The troupe's plantation material was a big success among northerners who found the style of the Fisk singers pretentious and the "stage Negroes" portrayed by Bert Williams and George Walker artificial. (By the latter half of the 1870s a segment of the northern white audience was becoming disenchanted with the Fisk Jubilee Singers, asserting that their sound was becoming too "refined" and that the Jubilee songs were losing their "fervor" and "rudeness"—a point that Brooks does not make but that gives foundation to his conclusions about audience.)

Miller, who as Brooks points out was a racist, nonetheless had a complicated relationship with African American expressive culture. He eschewed the minstrel custom of blackening his face with burnt cork, he avoided the most degrading repertory, and his group performed in social clubs, lecture halls, and conventions as opposed to variety halls, which were considered less respectable. Miller wanted to preserve a folk music from a bygone era, not just because it represented a social order he wanted to restore but because it was music he loved; it had been part of his enculturation. His goal of presenting "authentic" folk music through auditioned performers who were thoroughly rehearsed was, in that sense, as "artificial" as the Fisk Jubilee enterprise. The difference was that the Fisk singers were using their slave songs to dismantle the very myth of the Old South that Miller was trying to recreate, a point reinforced in sound on the Archeophone CD. Both the Fisk and the Miller troupes—in addition to being valuable links to nineteenth-century folk repertory and performance practice—offer fascinating examples of the complexities of interpreting racial responses to African American music at this time.

Chapter 16 focuses on Jack Johnson, the inflammatory prizefighter noted for defeating "the Great White Hope," James Jeffries, in 1910. Johnson recorded an extended description of that fight, which was used to accompany a silent film—not of the fight itself, which was deemed too inflammatory, but of Johnson dressed in street clothes describing the fight. The sound recording revealed a man who treated his opponent with respect and whose pronunciation was "impeccable," which astonished a large portion of the white audience, who believed it impossible for a black man to appear so cultivated. The recording led to a touring vaudeville act in which Johnson described fights; he eventually added humorous stories to his repertory. In 1913 he made a recording on "Physical Culture" that gave advice on how to get in shape. Brooks's wonderful chapter debunks many of the stereotypes that plagued Johnson and offers glimpses into America's early twentieth-century interest in boxing and physical fitness, the brute image of African Americans that was pervading popular culture at that time, and the use of spoken word in vaudeville and recording.

Bert Williams and George Walker (chapter 8) are among the better-known performers covered in the book: Williams has been the subject of full-length biographies, and in 2004 Archeophone released Williams's complete recordings. Nonetheless, Brooks's examination yields much of interest. Williams was the best-selling black recording artist of the pre-1920s period, and even though sales figures are incomplete, Brooks believes that Williams "was undoubtedly one of Columbia's best-selling artists from the day he set foot in their studios" (142). One interesting indication of his popularity is the fact that in 1906, in the wake of his overwhelmingly popular recording of "Nobody" (first recorded by white "coon" singer Arthur Collins for Victor, Columbia, and Edison), Columbia released a new song by Williams, "Let It Alone," in three different formats simultaneously: a 10-inch disc, a standard 4-inch cylinder, and the new 6-inch cylinder—striking proof of Columbia's confidence in his popularity. Most stars of the stage did not record, because the emphatic delivery necessary for the theater was too extreme for the recording studio. Williams was among the few who adapted readily, recording most of his songs in only one or two takes. Brooks also identifies recordings on which Williams served as pianist. The chapter concludes with a detailed treatment of Williams's involvement in Ziegfeld's *Follies,* and a helpful epilogue summarizes Williams historiography and identifies songs of his that lived on in the repertories of other musicians.

Brooks's frustration with attitudes that have excluded certain artists from jazz histories forms a common thread in the chapters on James Reese Europe and his contemporaries (Will Marion Cook, Dan Kildare, Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, Opal D. Cooper, Ford T. Dabney, and the Four Harmony Kings). Brooks argues that some jazz critics and historians have failed to give appropriate recognition to early innovators like Sissle and Blake, whose novelty orchestra the Sizzling Syncopators (formed in 1920) used jazz instrumentation. In a comparison of recordings of "The Dancing Deacon" by Dabney and by Europe, Brooks notes that despite similar instrumentation and performance style, Dabney's band makes sharper attacks, which he attributes in large part to Cricket Smith's strong cornet. (Smith had formerly served as Europe's lead cornettist.) Thus, Brooks argues, "such comparisons illustrate how important it is for historians of early jazz to consider all recordings involving key players of the era, not just those officially admitted into the 'jazz canon'" (405).

Since these musicians worked together and were friends, these interesting chapters are marred somewhat by narrative repetition: we must read repeatedly about Jim Europe's assassination by a deranged band member, for example. Of course, this is noticeable only if one reads the book front to back, as I did, which is not what the author and publisher intended.

Designing the book as a reference work is an understandable decision, but it is too bad, because this *is* a book worth reading cover to cover. Judicious cross-referencing (there is some, but not nearly enough) would have alleviated this problem.

Canon revision is only one of the challenges that Brooks issues in this book. His careful scrutiny of label numbers, for example, counters received opinion about W. C. Handy's discography. In November 1919 the periodical *Talking Machine World* announced recordings of four of Handy's most famous songs, all previously unissued. Although these have never been located, they have been assumed to exist and are listed in several discographies. Brooks demonstrates that the *Talking World* announcement was an error, for the label numbers for these recordings were assigned to a different orchestra in the January and February issues; this was likewise confirmed by the record company's (Lyric) own sales literature.

Brooks's most serious and important challenge, however, is for revision of copyright laws that stifle scholarship and, by extension, censor history. One might expect the early recordings that Brooks has discovered to be in the public domain by now, and a few are. Most, however, are owned by corporations who succeeded the original recording companies. As a result of the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act of 1998, recordings from 1890 will be under corporate control until 2067. By contrast, European countries generally have a fifty-five-year copyright term for recordings, and thankfully many excellent recordings of American music have been reissued by European labels. Brooks estimates that African American artists made about 800 commercial recordings before 1920, most of which still exist. The corporations that control the rights to the 400 still under copyright will not release them, or grant others that right. Brooks knows of only two recordings that have been reissued in the CD era. His plea deserves the widest possible dissemination: "I hope that our scholarly, archival, and political communities will wake up to the outrageous suppression and in some cases actual destruction of our earliest sound heritage" (11).

Despite the rewards to be found in every chapter of *Lost Sounds*, musicologists are likely to experience occasional frustration with Brooks's vague terminology when describing music, and his failure to explain certain conclusions. For example, Brooks claims that the Fisk Jubilee Singers' 1909 Victor recording of "Roll, Jordan, Roll" is "notable here for its oddly shifting harmonies" (197); yet the harmonies consist only of tonic and dominant and, to my ears, are not at all odd. (This recording is available on Document Records, *Fisk Jubilee Singers in Chronological Order,* vol. 1, *1909–1911.*) He writes that the Tuskegee Institute Singers were the first to record choral versions of the spirituals, when the Fisk Jubilee Singers had in fact preceded

them on record. It took me some time to realize that by "choral" he meant there was no solo or lead voice and hence, presumably, no call and response pattern (320). (I should note that this wording was significantly improved in his excellent and extensive liner notes to the Archeophone recording of *Lost Sounds.*) In that same chapter Brooks writes that the Tuskegee troupe's "focus on carefully wrought harmonies did not preclude putting emotion into the music" (326). The assumed link between "carefully wrought harmonies" (another ambiguous term) and lack of emotion is, in my mind, without foundation, and requires further explanation. As for the consistent misspelling of "*a cappella*" throughout the book, one can only sigh.

Occasionally logic seems to fall prey to the pursuit of colorful prose. Brooks writes that dancer Joan Sawyer, who hired Dan Kildare and his Persian Garden Orchestra to play at her club, changed dance partners with "alarming" frequency, but does not explain this choice of adjective (319). When Sawyer dismissed Rudolf Valentino as a dancing partner after six months, he writes, "That would prove to be a mistake." Why? It's unlikely that Valentino would have achieved international heart-throb status by remaining a dance partner in Sawyer's club. (Despite these two examples, Brooks's coverage of dancers Irene and Vernon Castle as well as Sawyer, and of the importance of dance clubs as a patron for these early orchestras, is excellent and most welcome.)

If I could wish for one modification to the book, it would be for a stronger interpretation of its contents in a summary essay. Brooks has grouped the chapters into six parts identified perfunctorily by decade and relation to World War I (1890–99, 1900–09, 1910–15, and 1916–19), yet there are no descriptive titles or part introductions to help make sense of these groupings (if they are not merely arbitrary). An epilogue that reprised some of the many ideas that emerge in the individual chapters would help the reader make sense of these seminal nineteen years. Brooks identifies only two overarching themes in his introduction: the ways in which technology provided new opportunities for black artists, and the ways in which whites and blacks interacted in the recording industry (2–4). These issues can be considered more critically. Technology may have opened some doors, but business practices (some but not all of which were motivated by racial prejudice) shut others. For example, Roland Hayes "chose" to make his recordings with Columbia instead of a smaller outfit like Paramount because Victor and Columbia held the patents for lateral-cut recording, which is what most phonographs played. The smaller companies had to produce vertical-cut discs, which required specially equipped machines and thus reached a smaller audience. Likewise, Victor's caste system of red, blue, purple, and black labels separated artists by genre. Black recording artists,

even if they were recording classical music, would not be admitted to the elite red label. Brooks makes both of these points in individual chapters, but this information is valuable in interpreting his profiles as a whole.

In addition, a more detailed overview of the recording industry in the introduction would lay a better foundation for interpreting the biographies. Brooks announces on the first page of his introduction that, "as tempting as it might be to focus solely on the racial injustices of early twentieth-century America, it is arguably more productive—and helpful to our own time—to examine the ways in which those injustices were gradually ameliorated." Although I am in complete sympathy with this aim, it is equally important that this project be carried out without ignoring racial injustice, and it is hard to balance the two. The booklet accompanying the Archeophone CDs does this nicely through the inclusion of trenchant observations on race and musical performance by Isaac Fisher (a member of the Tuskegee Quartet), Stanley Crouch, James Weldon Johnson, and Eubie Blake. An epilogue that attempted to assess to what degree injustices *were* ameliorated would have been a welcome ending to this book.

Space precludes discussion of all the remarkable recording artists covered in Brooks's volume; those whom I have not mentioned are Louis "Bebe" Vasnier, the Standard Quartette, the Kentucky Jubilee Singers, Cousins and DeMoss, Thomas Craig, the Dinwiddie Quartet, Daisy Tapley, the Apollo Jubilee Quartette, Edward Sterling Wright, the Right Quintette, Wilbur C. Sweatman, Opal D. Cooper, Edward Boatner, Florence Cole-Talbert, and Clarence Cameron White. There is an excellent chapter on Broome Special Phonograph Records, a concluding chapter on miscellaneous recordings, and an appendix of Caribbean and South American recordings contributed by Dick Spottswood. The appendix covers early recordings made by US labels in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, and Brazil, a fascinating topic, although the section seems like more of an afterthought—it is not integrated into Brooks's conclusions.

Since the publication of *Lost Sounds*, two more rare recordings have surfaced, both of which are included in the Archeophone anthology: George W. Johnson's "Carving the Duck" (1903) and the Unique Quartette's "Brother Michael, Won't You Hand Me Down That Rope" (1895)—the latter discovered by some collectors who recognized its importance only after having read *Lost Sounds*. It is exciting to know that the book is having an immediate impact upon collection and preservation.

Lost Sounds is a thrilling book; it is rare to encounter a work of this length that supplies so much new information, causing us to reevaluate and reinterpret our understanding of American music and social history. Equally important is the imagination and passion infusing each biography.

The book's subtitle promises an overview of blacks and the birth of the recording industry, but Brooks has given us much more: biographies that present multidimensional human beings, profiles of entire musical careers (and not simply the recordings that represent them), and an assessment not just of the black actors in this history but their white collaborators as well. The thirty years of scholarship that contributed to this book's creation are evident in every chapter, and Brooks deserves our deep thanks.

References

Southern, Eileen. [1971] 1997. *Music of Black Americans*, 3rd ed. New York: W. W. Norton.