

This month: **Leon Redbone** talks to Philip Watson

**Each month we test a musician with a series of records which they're asked to comment on and "mark out of five" – with no prior knowledge of what it is they're hearing!**

ALTHOUGH HE is probably best known in the UK for "So, Relax", his music to the InterCity "Kick off your shoes" commercial, Leon Redbone is a musician of infinitely greater resources. Time-locked in a 78rpm era somewhere between 1900 and 1935, singer, guitarist, banjo and harmonica player Redbone eschews modern popular forms in favour of earlier blues, ragtime, vaudeville and minstrel show traditions. Consequently his low, gravelly baritone is influenced by such singers as Enrico Caruso, Jelly Roll Morton and Bing Crosby.

Redbone is also renowned for his on-stage theatrics – between tunes he entertains with light comedy, visual gags and hand-shadow shows – and, in the US for writing music to various TV and radio commercials for such products as Budweiser, Kodak and All, the great stain remover. His most recent UK releases are *Sugar*, his seventh, and *Christmas Island* (both Private Music), a collection of Yuletide favourites including "White Christmas" and "Frosty The Snowman", which is to be re-promoted in November. A reluctant and inscrutable interviewee, Redbone looks like a cross between Frank Zappa and Groucho Marx, and he answers in a humorous, considered, knowledgeable drawl. Read his responses out aloud in a style as close to a sober WC Fields as you can muster.

#### HARRY RESER

"Crackerjack" from *Banjo Crackerjack* 1922–30 (Yazoo). Reser (bj).

Well, I haven't heard that recording. It's the (George) Van Eps school of playing, but it's not him. It must be Harry Reser. It was marvellous playing, but some of his stuff wouldn't amount to a tin of beans if it was around today. It gives you a light sense, but it wasn't thought-provoking. The things which affect me the most are things which are completely morose, romantic and melancholy, rather than exciting. Yet this was probably perfect. I wasn't awfully taken with all of the notes, but the way they came out – that's about as good as it gets. Five. And a little banjo goes a long way. I have an article on me about a man in Ohio who killed his wife with a banjo; in fact, he used two banjos

to do it. So they can come in handy for other things.

#### SONNY TERRY

"I've Been Your Doggie Since I Been Your Man" from *The Folkway Years 1944–63* (Smithsonian Folkways). Brownie McGhee (g); Terry (hmca, voc); JC Burris (bones).

(Immediately) Sonny Terry. Brownie McGhee. Sonny's certainly the greatest harmonica player in that style. He fits into the classification of the purely acoustic acts, back to the real roots of the blues and the traditions of the 1880s variety shows. This is the real stuff. There's no frills to it; there can be no luxury tax imposed on that kind of playing. It's simple and as pure as you can get from a person to an instrument, without going from person to instrument to electricity to amplifiers and all that nonsense. From the standpoint of the innovative and pure harmonica player that Sonny was, it's a five.

#### BING CROSBY

"Play A Simple Melody" from *Bing Crosby & Friends* (Magic). Crosby (v), Groucho Marx (uke, v).

I've never heard that before. It's Groucho Marx with . . . not Danny Kaye. Let me listen to it one more time. Well, it's a familiar voice, but I don't know.

*It's Bing.*

It's Bing Crosby! Was it after an operation? It didn't sound anything like him; it was so off-key. He was a wonderful singer, but this track sounds awful. In fact it's so bad, it's unrecognisable. What I admire about his singing is his vocal technique which seems to be effortless; it has a naturalness like Caruso. The thing that makes Crosby unique in the annals of popular music is that he was the first person to sing in a relaxed tone. Before Bing Crosby, everybody was pretty formal – the diction had to be formal and the vowels pronounced correctly. Bing relaxed the tone into a conversational language.

*Marks?*

What, based on that performance or his life? Well, it's zero for that track, but for Bing's musical achievement and contribution, five.

#### CLIFF "UKELELE IKE" EDWARDS

"Fascinatin' Rhythm" from *Fascinatin' Rhythm* (Totem). Edwards (uke, v); Tony Mottola (g); Joe Tarto (b).

(Immediately) Cliff Edwards. Cliff Edwards

was a better singer than Bing Crosby in many ways, but because he had that destructive edge to his life, he wasn't as well-known. You see everybody has their own personality to contend with and in his case he was a big boozier, and a party type of a person, and, who knows, he had health problems as well I'm sure. But Edwards gets five because he was a wonderful conveyor of a tune and he was able to do it even if he was totally out of it, drunk out of his mind.

But this is very definitely from the period I love. The years between 1900 and 1935 were the world's attempt to be civilised, and there was a strong movement for people to try to release themselves from the shackles of imperialism and create a more equitable world.

#### GEORGE FORMBY

"It's Turned Out Nice Again" (Regal Zonophone MR 3066, 78rpm. Formby (v, uke) with orchestra.

(Starts whistling along) It's the Lancashire man. George Formby. I've always liked George Formby, but if I had to be critical I would say that he was the utilitarian version of Cliff Edwards. Because what he did was to be entertaining. He was not bogged down by being a depressed individual; he wasn't going to sing the blues, he didn't have that edge to him. He was the ultimate and consummate entertainer. And he did that about as good as you can get. As far as getting any emotion out of anybody, it didn't happen. But nobody can really analyse or criticise him and his vocal ability – that's not the point – his voice was perfect for reaching people in a comedic way. It's another five.

#### DJANGO REINHARDT

"Old Man River" from *Nuages* (Vogue). Reinhardt (g); Joseph Reinhardt (g); Eugène Vees (g); Stéphane Grappelli (vn); Fred Ermelin (b).

That's Grappelli and Django. This is a late recording – they were at their best in 1934 because it was fresh then and they weren't trying to be experimental. Plus, let's not forget the material from that earlier period was more stable in its formula of progressions; they were just good basic tunes. The late 40s, early 50s stuff went too way out on a limb. But then again the whole world was a little out there in the 50s, gloating on the rewards and spoils of WWII. And that recording was not the best; Grappelli missed all kinds of notes. For Django, top marks.







### STAN FREBERG

"Green Chri\$tma\$" from *The Best Of The Capitol Years* (Capitol). Freberg (v); Daws Butler, Marvin Miller, Will Wright (v) with The Jud Conlon Rhythmaires & Billy May's Music.

It's not the kinda thing I'm interested in. Remotely. Who is it?

It's Stan Freberg. It's his satire on advertising.

Well, it wasn't funny. (Pause.)

What do you say to people who think your advertising work sits uncomfortably with the sincerity of the rest of your music?

I say they're idiots. They don't seem to realise that they survive in a world of advertising, and they themselves are responsible for it. If they wish to retreat from this advertising world, they'll have to go to one of those retreats in Greece where they only allow one sex and praying from morning to

night. The justification for doing it is not just that, basically, I wouldn't be doing this interview without it, but that everybody and everything advertises, including animals. In fact they are genetically designed to advertise – they flash their sexual readiness. And that's exactly what mankind, after million of years, has devised – a means of flashing the necessary response from civilisation.

Marks?

Zero.

### JELLY ROLL MORTON

"Mamie's Blues" from *New Orleans Memories Plus Two* (1939) (Commodore). Morton (p, v).

(After three notes on the piano) "Mamie's Blues". Jelly Roll. My opinion of Jelly Roll almost matches his opinion of himself. *Almost*. I'm one of those people who would even go along with his claim that he invented

jazz; I'd actually give him that. Because those '26 RCA recordings, with his wonderful arrangements, the Red Hot Peppers, with select musicians, has got to be the ultimate in jazz recording. Once you've listened to those, you have to disregard everybody's playing, certainly today. Where's the attention paid to the melody? Where's the order in all the stuff today? Jelly would have hated today's society and music – which allows everybody to do what the hell they like as long as they're having a good time. His ultimate goal was not only to make everything in a perfect order, with some emotion, but to bring to the foreground the beauty of the melody. And for that reason, if I had to name one person who more or less encompasses all the thoughts on music that I have it would have to be Jelly Roll.

Marks?

You'd have to give Jelly Roll a perfect mark, whatever that perfect mark is – five or 500.