

Compilations of Popular Music

Popular music began appearing on reproducing piano rolls in 1905, but it was not until the 1920s that this type of music reached peak production. Previously, popular music was characterised by rags, soldier songs, 'coon' songs, up-tempo novelties and sentimental ballads. The 1920s in America ushered in popular music in a way that has never been surpassed. It was a time unlike any other, with its hopes and gaiety, its new dance crazes and the rise of the musical. Much of the music in these compilations was written by American composers and is played by American artists, some of whom were Broadway pianists. The piano roll companies competed vigorously, and songs of the day were quickly issued to capture the market while that song remained popular.

The groups

Presently there are six compilations of popular music as listed below. The works in each group are listed in the catalogues in order of Title, Composer and Pianist, with information about composer and pianists in their respective catalogues.

- **Song and dance** – 200 files, playing time at least 10 hours
- **Cocktail Music and Medleys** – 200 files, playing time 18 hours
- **Ballads** – 100 files, playing time 7 hours
- **Show songs** – 100 files, playing time 6 hours
- **Famous Popular Pianists from the 1920s** – Over 100 files of popular songs played by pianists who also made disc recordings, playing time about 6 hours.
- **All presently available Popular Music from all types of rolls** – over 2000 MIDI files without duplication of performances.

The pianists

It is not known how many reproducing piano rolls of popular music were issued, but there were many more than rolls of classical music. Despite this, there are far fewer popular style pianists compared to classical artists. As well, few of these pianists are known today. Exceptions are George Gershwin and Richard Rodgers, who are better remembered as composers. Duo pianists Victor Arden and Phil Ohman are found in most collections of gramophone discs, as is Pauline Alpert, Billy Mayerl and perhaps Zez Confrey. But the two most prolific roll recording artists were Adam Carroll and Frank Milne. Both pianists recorded extensively for various roll recording companies, but while neither made gramophone recordings they were both consummate and stylish pianists.

All piano roll companies used pseudonyms to give the appearance of a greater line-up of pianists. Milne used at least eight pseudonyms, and in cases of a four-hand arrangement, two of these fictitious names would appear on the roll label. Well-known names such as Ferdie Grofé (composer of Grand Canyon Suite) and Vincent Lopez (band leader) are found on Ampico roll recordings. Neither of these artists made the actual recordings, instead providing the arrangements that would be played by pianists such as Carrol, Arden or others. The addition of extra notes (third hand) is typical of most popular music piano roll recordings.

The MIDI files

The MIDI files have full-range dynamics, and in a typical domestic or small salon environment, a playback volume of 80 to 85 is recommended, assuming full volume is 100. Each file contains metadata that gives the title of the work, the composer, pianist, roll number and issue date. This data can be read by some MIDI file players (VanBasco, Cakewalk). File names show brand of roll with one or two letters at the end of the file name: Ampico: A, AA and AB; Duo-Art: DA; Welte: GW, LW and RW.