
WILLIE ROBYN: A RECORDING ARTIST IN THE 1920s

By Tim Brooks

Introduction

My first impression of William Robyn was that he was very short, very neat, and extremely charming. We met in 1975, during a gathering of former Edison recording artists at the Edison National Historic Site in West Orange, New Jersey. The setting was ironic, for Robyn (pronounced ROW-BINE) had never been an Edison artist. However, his credentials as a pioneer recorder were impeccable. Nearly every collector there knew his name instantly from hundreds of releases on Cameo, Victor, Columbia, and other labels of the 1920s.

Conversation during the hectic gathering proved difficult, but it quickly became apparent that Robyn knew a great deal about the behind-the-scenes operations of the record industry during the late acoustic and early electric period, especially regarding the elusive minor labels, about which we knew so little. Though modest about his accomplishments, he was a prominent artist and had recorded for labels both large and small. Most importantly, at 80 years of age his memories of people and events were still sharp and clear. Here was a potential goldmine of information. What was it like to record at Victor and Columbia, compared with smaller operations like Cameo, Emerson and Okeh? How were the studios run day-to-day? Who made the artistic and business decisions? What were the people associated with the labels really like—studio musicians like Nat Shilkret, Joseph Pasternack and Bob Haring, and businessmen like Cameo mogul Henry Waterson?

Two years later I taped a series of lengthy interviews with Robyn about his remarkable career. He proved an interviewer's dream, friendly, forthcoming, and full of fascinating recollections. What emerged was both the story of a superb and underrated artist, and of the record industry in the 1920s. The following account is based on those interviews, and on much subsequent research. Unless otherwise noted, all Robyn quotes are from my interviews with him in 1977.¹ I have attempted to confirm dates and spellings through contemporary published sources wherever possible, but a few remain uncertain.

Dedication

This article is dedicated to the memory of two friends who helped us appreciate not only the careers, but also the human stories of many early recording artists: Ulysses "Jim" Walsh and Professor Milford Fargo.

Robyn's Early Life

Robyn's early life reads like a microcosm of the American Dream—or, as his friend Milford Fargo put it, “like a soap opera.”² He was born William Rubin in the rural village of Pasina (Pasiene) in eastern Latvia, probably in late 1894.³ Pasina is near the Russian border, in timber and farming country; its economic lifeline is the nearby Zilupe River. William—“Zev” in Hebrew—was the third of about a dozen children of Israel Rubin, a poor tailor, and his wife Gitel.

About half of the village's two dozen peasant families were Jewish, and the rest Christian, and the two groups lived together in relative harmony. Latvia was at the time part of Czarist Russia, and life was extremely harsh. It was a world difficult to imagine today. Robyn had vivid memories of the Czar's dragoons galloping into the village to terrorize the peasants into paying their taxes. As a child of seven or eight he witnessed villagers being beaten and killed by the mounted troops. Disease was also commonplace. When Robyn was about nine, the area was swept by an epidemic of scarlet fever in which as many as three-quarters of the town's children died. Robyn was sent to stay with his grandfather outside of town. When he finally was allowed to return, his family was plunged into grief; some of his own younger brothers and sisters had perished.

Robyn's family was very religious—“painfully religious” as he wryly put it. His father, and the Torah, were the law. Despite little opportunity for formal education, he learned Hebrew and Hebrew traditions at home and from traveling teachers. Two uncles, Ezekiel and Jacob, were non-professional cantors, and it soon became apparent that young William also had an exceptional voice. He frequently sang at services.

At 13, immediately following his Bar Mitzvah, Robyn was sent to work in the larger town of Ljuzyn (modern Ludza), about 40 kilometers away. There was simply not enough food, or money, for Israel and Gitel to support all of their children. Robyn began to develop the independence that would soon change his life dramatically. His first job was in a general store, where one of his duties was to look after the storekeeper's older, mentally unbalanced son. The boy was larger and stronger than Robyn, who had always been small for his age. Robyn understandably feared for his safety, and had to develop stratagems to handle the older boy. Eventually he found another job, with a tailor.

Around 1913, when Robyn was still in his teens, he received news that caused him to return home abruptly. His eldest brother Abraham faced conscription into the Czar's army. Uncle Jacob had been in a similar plight in 1905, but had managed to emigrate to America, and now Jacob had sent a ticket so that Abraham also could escape in time. A ticket to America! On hearing this, however, Israel forbid Abraham to go, and a father's word was law. The second oldest son, Herman, took the ticket but Israel forbade him to leave either.

When Robyn arrived home he said nothing, but secretly found the precious ticket and hid it. The next day, following the traditional sabbath meal, the diminutive teenager nervously rose and began to speak to his family. As he recalled the scene more than 60 years later, he knew exactly what he must do:

“I came home because I had something to tell you. I have the ticket and I have it hidden.” Then I said to my father (firmly), “FATHER, DON'T SAY NO, BECAUSE I WILL DO IT NO MATTER WHAT YOU WILL SAY! So please, say nothing. I have the ticket, and I'm going to go. And that's final. There's no future for me here.” My mother started to weep. Then she said to my father, “Israel... don't... say... a word.” My mother was very emotional. And that was it. Nobody said anything.

The stunned parents did not try to stop their determined son. Most likely, they knew he already was lost to them. He had defied his father.

Beside the ticket, Robyn needed thirty rubles to get into the United States and he had only ten. So he borrowed 10 from his displaced brother Abraham, who apparently bore no grudge, and 10 from his grandfather. The entire village, Christian and Jew alike, turned out to see him off, for it was a journey they all dreamed of making. A younger boy was going with him. "They wouldn't let him go alone," Robyn explained, "but I was responsible. I was a nervy kid." As they boarded the train Robyn was smiling and determined, but as it began to pull out, into the unknown, he cried.

The train took the boys to the Latvian capital of Riga, and then to the Polish border. Poland was also under Russian control, but it was administered as a separate country and the border was sealed. Robyn described the crossing.

There was a society, a private secret society, that took the children through. We were kids... about 12 or 15 people, including me, and we were to steal across the border. There were two guards, who were officials of the Russian Army, who let us through. They got paid for it; you know what graft is. They knew we were coming....

We began to walk, in the middle of the night... through the high wheat fields. There was one man and wife going with us, young people, who had a baby, and (in the middle of the field) the baby started to cry, at the top of his lungs. We knew we were going to be caught, they would arrest us and put us in prison.

It didn't happen that way, thank God. The guards took the wife and child into the guard's home nearby and quieted them. Then we went across. Everybody went through and nobody was left behind. We were all young people.

The boys continued across Poland and into Germany in horse carts, finally arriving in Hamburg. There they were forced to wait for 18 days, with almost no food, starving. Finally, their ship arrived. Before leaving, the refugees were fed some German food—kielbasa, wurst—which the orthodox Jewish boys had never seen before. They were deathly sick as the crowded launch took them to the huge steamer anchored offshore.

The seven day crossing proved uneventful, but Robyn remembered little of it as he was sick in the hold for most of the trip.⁴ As the ship pulled into New York harbor, in sight of the Statue of Liberty, he felt no euphoria. He simply clung, green-faced, to the rail. In a way he was lucky, for some who made the brutal crossing did not survive.

The boys were herded onto Ellis Island for processing. Before long his young companion's brother arrived and whisked him away, paying hardly any attention at all to Robyn. Then Robyn was alone. He was in a strange world, 4,000 miles from home, and could not speak or read a word of English. Not knowing what to do, he huddled all night on the cold bench. He was wearing a formal suit with a black satin sash, which had been sewn for him by his father. In Russia it was considered rather stylish, but here it just looked comical—especially since it was several sizes too big (Robyn's father thought he would grow into it, but he never did). Besides the oversized suit, all he owned was a small straw basket and his tallis, or prayer shawl.

At about five in the morning an attendant came by and looked at the railroad ticket pinned to his coat. The bewildered boy was hustled off to the station at Hoboken and put on a train to Hazelton, Pennsylvania, home of Uncle Jacob. There the conductor put him off.

I'm standing there, looking around and I see nobody is there (for me). I'm waiting and getting worried and homesick. Then I see a girl walking across from the station, across the street. It looks to me like it was Ida, my cousin. I hadn't seen her for many years, but it was Ida.

I shouted to her "Ida!"—in Jewish—and she turned around and said, "Oy! That's... this must be Willie!" She runs to me and we hug, we kiss each other, and she says "come, let's go." We ran all the way to Uncle Jacob's.

The reception at Uncle Jacob's was less enthusiastic. Jacob Traub's wife had died recently, leaving the poor immigrant peddler with a house full of young children to care for while simultaneously plying his trade. He could not cope with yet another one, in place of the man he had expected. Jacob began to talk about sending William back to Russia, and the boy panicked. Never! Jacob relented, and the following Monday took him on his rounds, teaching him the peddler's trade.

For six months the diminutive teenager peddled his wares to the coal miners of the region, mostly by show and gesture since he still could speak no English. Robyn sang as he walked, but peddling was hard, disheartening, even dangerous work. Uncle Jacob said that when he approached someone's door, he must never, never step inside unless invited. Jacob once had done so and been beaten severely by a homeowner who took him for an intruder.

Religion was one of the few constants in Robyn's life. Six months after he arrived in America it was Yom Kippur, the Jewish High Holy Days. The local synagogue needed a tenor and the rabbi, hearing about a young peddler boy who could sing, sent for him. It was the first time Robyn had been paid for his singing. People began to notice the boy's extraordinarily pure voice. A businessman named Lewis brought him to his house to sing, where he was overheard by Mr. Greenhaut of the local high school. Greenhaut gave him a letter of introduction to Professor NeCollins, a music educator at New York University.⁵ Lewis also introduced Robyn to a wealthy shirt manufacturer named Max Jacobs, who invited him to come to New York and live with him as a companion for his only son.⁶ Here was the chance of a lifetime, a chance to pursue his first love, music.

New York

Uncle Jacob acquiesced and Robyn quickly prepared to leave. He sold his peddling stock for \$7.10, and sent his brother and grandfather their 10 rubles each. But one set of obligations was exchanged for another. He had been at Mr. Jacobs' spacious, well-appointed home in Brooklyn for only a few days before he felt he had become a freeloader. He moved in with Uncle Jacob's second wife's family (Jacob had remarried after Robyn arrived), also in Brooklyn, but their home was very crowded. What to do?

He had the introduction to Professor NeCollins, but was afraid to use it. NeCollins was a Christian, and an important man, why would he help a poor Jewish boy? So Robyn decided to approach a Jew instead, the famous Cantor Josef Rosenblatt who lived on 114th Street in Manhattan. He went unannounced, searching up and down the streets for Rosenblatt's name on a door.

I'm pressing the button, the buzzer is buzzing, and no answer. I'm thinking I must not walk in because if I open the door I'll get a beating. All of a sudden a short man with a big beard comes down and it is Rosenblatt. I knew him from his pictures. He says "whatsus, whatsus, what's going on, what is it?" He takes one look at me with my big long coat and my funny suit and he says, "oh, what do you want?" So I told him and he says "come upstairs."

I came up two or three floors with him and he hears me sing. He said, "I can't do much for you. But I will send you to my choirmaster, and he will do something." It was a very famous choir, and I went.... The choirmaster listened to me and said, "I'll teach you but I can't pay you anything." I'd have to sing in his choir (to pay for) his teaching.

Here was a recurring dilemma. How would he eat?

Robyn retreated. Finally, he screwed up his courage and went to NeCollins. The professor looked at the letter, then at the diminutive lad standing nervously in front of him, and told him to sing. What he heard convinced him that here, indeed, was a "find."

He said to me, "William, come with me!" He took me over to Wannamaker's, they had a little theater, and I sang for him with their organist. I sang for him a Hebrew song ("A donoi, a donoi"), I didn't know anything else. And they liked it.

NeCollins' wife was a professional singer, so he took the boy to her coach Jerome Hayes, "the best teacher in New York." He also introduced him to Dr. Thomas Topper, a professor at the college.

They were all big people. They heard me sing and (NeCollins and Topper) wanted Mr. Hayes to teach me four songs and put me into vaudeville. I would make money for them and get paid at the same time.

Hayes heard me sing, and heard the story about what they wanted to do with me, and said "I won't do it. This boy needs care, he needs guidance, I'll have nothing to do with it if that's what you want to do with him."

So Robyn was put in the care of Hayes and his wife, who virtually adopted him as their son. It was a relationship that would last for the rest of their lives, nearly 40 years.

Jerome Hayes was a well-established New York vocal coach who had studied with the teacher of Jean DeRetzke and was associated with Cornell University. First, he found William a room on Manhattan's West Side, near his studio, above a tailor shop run by one Sam Levine. Hayes would pay the \$3.50 per week rent. Then he took him to Child's Restaurant on 59th Street and told the manager "This boy will come in here and eat. Every time he comes in you feed him and I will pay." On occasion he would also take Robyn to his home in Harwinton, Connecticut to spend some time in the country.

Robyn still spoke little English, so Hayes took him with some of his other pupils for noontime walks in Central Park. As they strolled along, the elegant Hayes would point at objects with his cane and name them, and Robyn would repeat the words.

The music lessons took place every weekday, and Mr. and Mrs. Hayes were stern teachers. They drilled Robyn in French, German, English, and Italian repertoire, both opera and art song. The very first song he learned was Charles Wakefield Cadman's "At Dawning," a selection that would become a trademark throughout his career. Other typical repertoire included Handel's *Messiah*, *The Elijah*, *Pagliacci*, *Bohème* and "La donna è mobile" from *Rigoletto*. "Before I was finished I knew about a thousand songs," Robyn recalled. "They used to call me 'The Boy with a Thousand Song Memory.' I couldn't read very well. I still can't...; I (relied on) memory." The lessons continued for nearly two years. One might wonder why Hayes would give such extensive, and expensive training for free. After about a year, Robyn asked.

I said, "how am I going to pay you?" He said, "you don't have to pay me. Never will you pay me until you see \$5,000." Five thousand dollars to me was like fifty million dollars. I thought he was kidding.

But Hayes knew what he was doing. The time would come when Robyn would be able to send him regular checks, which would continue for years. There was also another reason for Hayes' generosity, as he later would confide.

He told me very frankly, he said, "You know, William, a teacher can be in business a long time and if they don't get a decent pupil in their studio they can be teaching their life away and their name won't mean a thing. You will make my studio. You will be my star."

In the meantime, to help with the food and lodging bills, Robyn got odd jobs at a hairdresser's, a barber shop, and a grocery. He also enrolled in English classes for immigrants held regularly in the neighborhood. At these nighttime classes he met a youth his own age who helped him land steady work as a messenger for the Goldman Costume Co. on 33rd Street. The night classes also gave him a birthdate. As Robyn

described it, one night the teacher asked a pupil his birthday and the boy blurted out the only month he could think of, "November." It was the 28th, so that became the day. The next pupil said the same thing, and the next, and finally so did Robyn. The whole class, including Robyn, was born on November 28th.

While he studied Robyn began to sing at an amateur night held in the neighborhood.

It was run by a Mr. Warren who gave you ten cents for singing on the stage. Many youngsters, and older people too. And (you'd get) whatever they'd throw at you.... The audience would throw pennies and dimes. There was a big hook on one side of the stage and if the audience didn't like you they'd start screaming and laughing and the hook would come out and pull you off the stage. That would be a terrible thing. I was always worried that I'd get the hook.

Robyn did not get the hook, and in fact was heard by the owner of an open air park in New Jersey who hired him to sing there on summer nights for two dollars a night. Unfortunately, it then began to rain regularly on the dates Robyn was to sing, ending that source of income.

After two years Robyn had made little progress financially, but artistically he had become, at a young age, a trained singer with an unusually broad repertoire. His first major break came not through his sponsors, but quite unexpectedly at the tailor shop where he lived.

I was living at Mr. Levine's, the tailor. Louis Silvers, Al Jolson's music man... and Jean Havez, a writer for Paramount Pictures, came in to try on a suit. I was practicing upstairs, singing "La donna è mobile." Jean Havez says to Mr. Levine "Who is it up there?" So he tells him, "Aw, a greenhorn kid." "Bring him down, I want to see him."

So I ran downstairs... They both looked at me, and Lou Silvers says "I want to see your room." He came up to my room and looked at my music, and says to himself, "you'll do."

They both concocted an idea to put me in vaudeville. Not with the name William Rubin, or Willie Rubin.... My name was "Wolf Scarpioff." They got me a pianist named Leon Varvara,⁷ Leon Goldberg was his real name. He was from Brooklyn someplace, a handsome young boy, very slim. I was short, but not fat. They dressed us up in satin black pantaloons, with Russian boots and Russian shirts. Of course we were both kids, both youths.... I was so backward that they had an awful job to train me not to be so nervous and self-conscious. (Havez) stayed in one wing and Silvers in the other and they pushed me out.

Havez and Silvers were as expert in the world of vaudeville as Hayes was in the realm of classical music. Silvers, only 26 at the time, had formerly been with Gus Edwards and was now Al Jolson's conductor. Havez, 42, was a former press agent for Lew Dockstader's Minstrels and a composer who had written many hit songs of the early 1900s including "Everybody Works But Father" and "The Darktown Poker Club." He was married to vaudeville headliner Cecil Cunningham.⁸

Havez and Silvers were astute. What audience would not like two fresh-faced boys in native costume, both with exceptional talent for their age, performing high-class material? Scarpioff and Varvara opened at the American Roof Theatre in New York on October 13, 1916, with a 10-minute act. Sime Silverman reviewed the act for *Variety*. The trade paper could be brutal with small-timers, but it liked the boys.⁹

Billed as Russian refugees, Scarpioff and Ivan Varvara at the piano are a couple of boys in Russian dress. Scarpioff sings in tenor, quite well, especially for a small time stage. He exhibits more experience and assurance than his apparent youth calls for. Scarpioff mixed his numbers from the operatic to the popular classical. Since he scored so strongly with "Sunshine of Your Smile" at the finish, it should teach him the value of the popular classical over the operatic on the small time. The turn will do easily on the pop circuits, but hasn't sufficient vaudeville to be in the next to closing position.

The successful opening and *Variety's* favorable review lead immediately to additional bookings. Vaudeville was a huge industry at this time, with thousands of theaters across the country. In the following weeks the boys played theaters in New York City, Troy, Schenectady, Rochester, Detroit and many other cities. Their first bookings were mostly in the Northeast on the Interstate Circuit; then they went national on the Keith and Orpheum circuit. Robyn recalled many stories of dates played over the next two years, from New York to Los Angeles and San Francisco, from balmy New Orleans to frozen Duluth. This was high adventure for two young men. The bookings were made in advance, but they traveled alone on the road and had to make their own day-to-day arrangements. Robyn naturally took charge. When Varvara needed a good piano, but was stuck with an upright clunker, it was Robyn who would go to the theater manager.

Varvara would say "I can't get anything from them. You've got to do it." They wouldn't talk to him because he looked even younger than he was; I looked more responsible somehow. I'd go and talk to the manager and say "we've got to have a piano..." Every time, I'd go. And they'd give us a piano.

Billed as "The Famous Russian Boy Tenor, Wolf Scarpioff, and Master Boy Pianist, Leon Varvara," the act went over well wherever it played. Robyn described their typical turn.

We opened with the Russian song "Vieterock"—"The Wind." Then it ended, there was applause, and I'd sing "At Dawning" and walk off. He would play the "Prelude" (C-Sharp Minor) by Rachmaninoff. Played it very well too. He'd get a big hand. I'd come back and sing *Pagliacci*. Of course I was a youngster and they'd be surprised at what I could do. I'd take two bows and walk off... then for an encore come out and sing "The Sunshine of Your Smile." That was a very big success at the time. We'd always need an encore, but we wouldn't give them more (than one). That was smart because let them want more and they'd come back to hear the kids next time.

Robyn reported that he also sang other operatic arias, Russian folk songs, and sometimes a high-class war song such as "Trumpeter." He did not sing ordinary popular hits such as "Over There," however. This was a classy act, although most of the material was fairly contemporary. Rachmaninoff's Prelude and Cadman's "At Dawning" had both been published within the preceding 10 years. Scarpioff and Varvara were now show-biz professionals, confirmed by the appearance of their names (with scores of others) as members of the National Vaudeville Artists Association in the March 30, 1917, *Variety*. The act brought in \$250 per week, of which the two performers split half—Robyn got \$75, and his accompanist \$50. For the first time Robyn was able to regularly send checks to Mr. Hayes.

One rather striking episode in Robyn's early career remains unconfirmed at this writing. He recalled appearing as Scarpioff at a Friar's Club dinner for Enrico Caruso, and singing, to the great tenor's face, an aria from *Pagliacci*. Caruso could be rather blunt about singers who didn't measure up to his standards, but he was quite taken with the little lad with the big voice and said so to the press. "Caruso was lavish with praise of young Scarpioff" Robyn recalled seeing in the next morning's papers. He was understandably thrilled.

There was in fact a Friar's Club "roast" of Caruso on November 26, 1916, presided over by the club's Abbot George M. Cohan and attended by more than 450 of the biggest names in show business. Caruso was a major media celebrity, and the uproarious affair was reported in many newspapers. The highlight of the evening, following a series of humorous speeches, was a sketch called "Chasing Caruso" written by Havez, Silvers and

Irving Berlin, in which the tenor was broadly parodied. Perhaps this is where Scarpioff appeared. However, he was not mentioned in the press reports I have seen. Perhaps he played a small role, or perhaps there was another “roast” that has not been documented.¹⁰

Nineteen-seventeen and 1918 were busy years for Robyn, as he traveled widely and gained valuable experience on the stage. When in New York, he stayed at a rooming house at 150 West 64th Street run by Mrs. Rose Vineburg, who would become a close friend and business partner in years to come. He also became close to her son, Lawrence, a violinist, whom he had met while working at the Goldman Company.¹¹ Mrs. Vineburg had a phonograph and Robyn would sometimes listen to the records of Caruso and McCormack.

I stole a lot of ideas from McCormack. John McCormack was a giant in his field. After all, I was a foreigner and I had to learn something from somebody. As far as sentiment is concerned I had more than John McCormack, I'm just born that way. But vocally McCormack had a beautiful Irish voice... for instance in “Macushla” he'd sing (sings “calling...”).... I tried to imitate that a little bit, that soft “I.” It wasn't necessary. Mr. Hayes was so wonderful to me, he wouldn't let me budge unless I did just so.

Robyn, the young immigrant Jew, was struck by the fact that so many of the people who had helped him were Christian—NeCollins, Hayes, even Mrs. Vineburg (a German Catholic). In America religious differences did not need to pose a barrier, in art or in friendships. “(Christians) were wonderful to me,” he told me, “they did everything for me... they saved my life.”

Trial Recordings

Robyn's first attempt at recording came in late 1918, while he was still touring in vaudeville. On November 18th he walked into the Victor Talking Machine Co. on 43rd Street, New York City, and simply asked for an audition. Victor, the largest and most powerful recording company in the world, was hardly looking for talent, but he was persistent and his notices from vaudeville were good. Finally they agreed, and two trials were made. The first was the popular song “Somewhere in France” (this was one week after the Armistice!), accompanied on piano by Victor staff arranger Nat Shilkret. The second, made the following day, was one of his Russian folk song specialty numbers, “Ptechka Vieterock.” The Victor people politely said “no.” Two weeks later he went a few blocks south to Columbia, and tried the same thing. Mr. Heindl of the foreign department gave him two trials, but declined to hire him. Robyn was disappointed, but found it hard to press the matter. He did not have an agent to work on his behalf, and his English was still rudimentary. “They wouldn't listen to me,” he told me, “because I couldn't speak. And a foreigner (“Scarpioff”) in those days was poison.”

Scarpioff and Varvara continued touring for a few more months, but the notices were so good—especially for Robyn—that in 1919 he broke up the act and returned to New York. His vaudeville days were over. He said later of himself,

Why did we stop? Because all the newspapers were praising Scarpioff so much that he got swell-headed and he thought that he was ready to do concert work, the way that they wrote in the papers.... Because of such marvelous notices I thought I'd come (back) to New York and I'd really start studying.

Robyn continued to study with Jerome Hayes, and also began work with another, even more eminent coach, composer-pianist Frank LaForge.¹² LaForge, who was then a partner with Ernesto Berumen in the LaForge-Berumen Studios on West 50th Street, was one of the leading figures in the New York musical scene. A Victor recording artist in his own right, he also accompanied such stars as Gadski, Sembrich and Schumann-

Heink; among his pupils were Bori, Matzenauer, Anderson, Crooks, Tibbett, Pons and Alda. His normal fee was \$40 for a 40-minute lesson, but like Hayes he took on Robyn for free because of the great potential he saw in the young man. Whereas Hayes taught songs and vocal technique, LaForge concentrated on the concert and oratorio repertoire.

Robyn was now without a steady income. He secured a position with the Church of Incarnation at 34th and Madison—a Christian church—but they let him go when they found out that “Wolf Scarpioff” was in fact Jewish!

First Released Recordings

Recording remained another potential source of income. Like many early artists, Robyn considered recording not as a route to advance his career, but simply a way to pick up some extra money. This is evident in the following exchange during our interviews.

Q: Quite a few artists when they talk about their recording careers feel that other things that they did were much more important..., that recording was just a sideline.

Robyn: That’s right. The Red Seal artists, like Elman, Caruso, McCormack, Matzenauer, Sembrich..., they were Red Seal stars and they were considered big.

Q: How did you view recording, was it just a job or was it important to you?

Robyn: I was in a different spot than most singers. I was starving to death most of the time. I just didn’t have enough to eat and I was just looking for money so that I could pay my way.

Q: It was a job.

Robyn: Just a job, that’s all, nothing else.

At another point, he put it this way: “I looked at it (recording) not from a history point of view. I looked at it as a living. All I thought about was how to eat.”

In talking to Robyn, I was most interested in learning how performers got recording jobs. Was it through agents, through contacts, a kind of “closed shop”? Did labels prefer to seek out new talent themselves when they wanted it? The answer in Robyn’s case was surprisingly simple. He had no agent, no contacts. He simply knocked on doors. It helped that most of the U.S. recording industry was headquartered in New York City; walking from 20th to 50th Street one would find most of the major studios. Persistence and a strong voice suitable to horn recording also helped.

His first break was at Emerson on 26th Street, in May or June of 1919. Emerson was an aggressive little label that was putting out low-priced seven and nine-inch records, and Robyn recalled persuading studio manager Arthur Bergh to let him record some popular numbers, which were issued in both sizes. “Scarpioff” and “Rubin” sounded too foreign, so another name had to be found. The results were as mainstream American as one could imagine: on seven-inch he became “William Robinson,” and on nine-inch, “Edward Hamilton.” (Oddly enough the latter pseudonym was also being used by Victor, for popular issues by Reinald Werrenrath.)

Robyn also kept after Columbia, which had a large, active ethnic program, and finally in the late summer Anton Heindl of the foreign department agreed to let him make some Russian sides. These were recorded at the 38th Street studio around August, 1919, and eventually issued in the “E” series under his vaudeville name William Scarpioff. While at Columbia, Robyn met a talent agent named Hugo Boucek who gave him his card. Robyn was getting work on his own, but Boucek said he could do better for him—much better. Robyn promised to think about it.

Two months later Robyn heard about a well-funded company that was frantically stockpiling masters in preparation for the imminent launch of its new label. This was Brunswick, with temporary studios on 21st Street. He talked them into letting him record a popular number, “Tulip Time,” which came out with the company’s first release

in January 1920 credited to “Thornely Crane!” It was Robyn’s only recording under that unlikely name. It was nevertheless cited in *Talking Machine World* as one of Brunswick’s better sellers among its first release.¹³

Additional sessions came in quick succession during the winter of 1919-1920. Fred Hager at Okeh was apparently the first to use the name “Robyn”—a close variation on the singer’s real name, Rubin¹⁴. Composer Alfred Robyn, who was still active in the New York area, didn’t mind. Okeh used him for, of all things, Irish songs (“Mother Machree,” “Macushla”) and the Christian-themed art song “The Rosary”! Robyn maintained that, next to Victor, Okeh made the most technically superior recordings of any label for whom he worked. Sessions at Emerson and Pathé on 42nd Street followed. Robyn recorded additional popular numbers for Emerson (“Was There Ever a Pal Like You?”), and art songs for Pathé, which decided to call him “William Rubinoff.” He recalled that Pathé recorded “on a pipe,” a reference to the oversized wax cylinders the company still used for its masters. Robyn got \$25 per song for his first sessions, and Boucek kept after him, saying “I can get you \$100 per song!” Even deducting a 20% commission this seemed like a reasonable offer, so Robyn agreed and his later sessions were booked by Boucek.

A New Stage Career

Establishing a steady income was still a problem. During that same winter of 1919-1920, an opportunity presented itself that would become a major focus of Robyn’s career. Vaudeville was booming, and so were motion pictures. Someone had the novel idea of combining the two, giving patrons both live entertainment and the latest feature films (silent, of course). The culmination of this trend came on October 24, 1919, with the opening of the huge Capitol Theatre on Broadway and 51st Street in New York. Built by developers Messmore Kendall and Major Edward Bowes, it seated 5,300 persons and was the largest theatre in the world. The *New York Times* stood in awe.¹⁵

The entrance lobby, with walls of marble, is in gold.... The main lobby is walled with walnut, and the ceiling is ornamented with Roman gold and... five murals by William Cotton, an American artist. From the main lobby a marble staircase rises to the grand promenade which has an arched ceiling decorated in ivory and gold with cameo panels. On the wall is another mural by Mr. Cotton which is seventy-two feet long.

The auditorium is... spacious. The great ceiling is divided into one great and several smaller domes, and gold and café au lait predominate in its coloring, as in the treatment of the walls and proscenium, the opening in which is sixty-one feet wide and fifty feet high. Conspicuous in the fittings of the Capitol are French rock-crystal chandeliers. Eleven of these hang from the main ceiling and others are distributed in the promenade and main lobby.... It is reported that their value is \$75,000.

The entertainment was equally spectacular. In addition to a new feature film starring Douglas Fairbanks, the audience was treated to the 70-piece Capitol Band led by Arthur Pryor, solo entertainments by a cast of 80 including Mae West doing an electrifying shimmy to a song entitled “Oh, What a Moanin’ Man,” and an original “Demi-Tasse Revue” staged by Ned Wayburn.¹⁶ Pryor played and 50 dancing girls with battery lamps on their shoes tapped to a brand new song by young composer George Gershwin, called “Swanee.” (Gershwin himself sold copies of the sheet music in the lobby, but the song was unsuccessful—until it was picked up a few weeks later by Al Jolson and re-introduced in the musical *Sinbad*.¹⁷) Said the *Times*,

The finale employs “The Capitol Tower,” a typical Ned Wayburn creation. It includes a double spiral staircase which revolves, illuminated, while loaded with twinkling star-girls.

The three-hour show ran continuously all afternoon and evening so that patrons could come and go at will. Admission for all this ranged from \$2 to as little as 30¢ on weekdays. Even in New York's crowded entertainment world the Capitol attracted a great deal of attention. Nevertheless, by the end of the year attendance had begun to fall off. In December Nat Finston replaced Pryor as conductor, and in February Wayburn's revues were replaced by a new policy of condensed operas and similar high-class "story productions" mounted by William Stewart and Harry Luckstone, formerly of the Metropolitan Opera. Platoons of singers and dancers were engaged—indeed, the Capitol had become a massive employment agency for New York performers. Major Bowes was in charge of day-to-day management of the theatre, and one of those he hired was William Robyn. Though Robyn was only about five feet tall, his strong voice and excellent diction were perfect for the giant theatre.

Robyn appears to have joined the Capitol in February, 1920, just as the new "story" productions began. The first of these, *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, opened February 1st and was based on Longfellow's poem. It starred a cast of 76, including native Indian dancers and an augmented orchestra of 80 pieces. The next few weeks brought *Southland, In a Persian Garden* (with "three genuine princesses" and Robyn as a "youth"), *Cavalleria Rusticana* (an ensemble of 100, with Robyn and Cesar Nesi alternating in the lead role of Turiddu), and *The Artist's Dream*. Robyn received particular notice in the last-named production, with the *Musical Courier* raving about the "lovely tones and phrases" of his solo.¹⁸ For the first time Robyn was featured in the big Capitol ad appearing in the entertainment section of the *New York Times*.¹⁹

These productions were generally from 45-50 minutes in length, and in the cases of adaptations they presented the highlights of the featured opera. They were a fascinating demonstration of how great music could be popularized for the mass audience. They were also grueling work, as the cast had to learn a complete new score every week and perform it virtually non-stop.

We had to learn an opera a week. It was a tremendous job. I used to sleep with the music under my pillow... you'd wake up in the middle of the night and learn more words.

During March and April, Robyn played many diverse roles. In *Pagliacci* he was Peppe; the *Musical Courier* commented that he was "a foreigner, but his English diction is excellent." In *A Bit of Blarney* (for the week of St. Patrick's Day) he was scheduled to sing "Mother Machree," but at the last minute substituted "Macushla"—which was certainly more appropriate, since the plot had him crooning to a dainty young maiden seated by his side (he sang "very beautifully," according to the *Courier*). The following week he essayed the small role of the high priest in Pietro Florida's *Paoletta*. Often he would sing perched on a low riser concealed behind a fence or a low wall, so that he could not look so short. Robyn's exposure at the Capitol dove-tailed nicely with the Columbia, Brunswick, Okeh, Pathé and Emerson recordings he had made during the past winter, most of which were issued during the Spring of 1920. His "Mother Machree" on Okeh 4077 came out in April, just after the theater's St. Patrick's show. ("Macushla" was for some reason held back by the label for two years.)

The Capitol soon made more changes. On May 16th the *New York Times* announced that it had been bought by Goldwyn Pictures; current management would remain in place, but prices would be lowered.²⁰ Two weeks later one of the most famous showmen in New York, S.L. "Roxy" Rothafel was hired by Bowes to direct the stage show.²¹ Roxy was a flamboyant producer, and he invigorated the huge cast. Robyn called him "one of the greatest showmen of his time, after Florenz Ziegfeld." However, Roxy apparently did not hit it off immediately with his pint-sized tenor.

Roxy knew nothing about music, but he had an awful lot of nerve, and was a marvelous showman. None better. (He) had a great feel for production. He was a genius in his own way, but music—no. He would get up and conduct an opera, or anything that was popular, like *Tannhauser* and make a blunder at some most inopportune time. But after all, he was Roxy, and the concert was over, and that was it.

Whatever the reason, Robyn left the Capitol when Roxy arrived and went to Chicago to perform in theaters there. One reason he gave was the grueling pace at the Capitol; another may have been his desire to advance his concert career. However, New York was Robyn's town, and Roxy always was ready to welcome back a performer who would enhance his show. By the end of 1920, Robyn was back on the Capitol stage, where he would stay for most of the 1920s. He certainly got the exposure he needed. One press report said that during a single week in December, the Capitol's audiences totaled 94,501 persons!²²

Robyn's Concert Career

Professionally Robyn was thriving, making a good deal of money (and sending checks to his benefactors), but his real goal was the concert stage. Frank LaForge arranged for him to appear in a local concert at DeWitt Clinton High School, presented by Charles D. Isaacson, music critic of the *New York Globe*. Robyn's new agent, Hugo Boucek, also was working on his serious music career. Boucek, a colorful character who was "never without a cigarette in his mouth and a bottle of whiskey on his desk," specialized in serious artists. Among his clients were his wife, Christine Langenhan, and pianist-composer Mana-Zucca. In the fall of 1920, amid a great deal of publicity, he brought to America the 19-year-old Hungarian violinist Duci de Kerekjarto, who made a spectacular debut. De Kerekjarto soon was taken over by other management and began recording for the Columbia celebrity series. It was an era for youthful prodigies, and there was every reason to believe that Robyn might be the next.

In April, Boucek arranged a concert for Robyn and Mme. Langenhan under the auspices of the New York Euphony Society, at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.²³ No doubt there were other appearances during the summer, but Robyn's major debut in the world of serious music came in the fall. On the evening of Saturday, November 13th, he appeared with Frank LaForge at Carnegie Hall in a program of Schubert, Schumann, Strauss and a variety of less-heard composers including Rosa, Storace, and Hue. He also performed the old Hebrew melody "Eli, Eli" and several original pieces by LaForge. The hall was filled with critics, and it could well be said that this was a make-or-break night for the young tenor. No hall full of critics can ever be expected to totally agree on anything, and some criticism is generally obligatory (else, why are they critics?). Nevertheless, the reviews in the following day's papers were very positive. The *Musical Courier* was enthusiastic.²⁴

William Robyn made his debut at Carnegie Hall on Saturday night, and it can truly be said he achieved a noteworthy success. Beside Frank LaForge, his most valuable accompanist, the tenor looked like a midget, yet nevertheless he displayed enough strength and quality in his voice to surprise and thoroughly delight the good sized audience that had gathered to hear him. His program was both varied and interesting, and the artist did well in selecting numbers that best suited his voice. His arias were splendidly done and also his French group, but he seemed at his very best in the numbers by LaForge (perhaps the accompanist's presence helped a lot!), and also Foote. His enunciation and diction were good and he has a pleasing stage presence; his voice has a wide range and especially his overtones are a joy to listen to.

The *Tribune* was hardly less glowing.²⁵

This young man has experienced many vicissitudes, some of which have forced him into vaudeville and motion picture houses. But his singing last evening plainly showed that his rightful place has finally been attained. Mr. Robyn has a beautiful voice, lyric in quality, which he uses effectively and with skill.... His phrasing was polished, his diction in French, English and Italian excellent, and he showed understanding of the contrasted styles of many composers.... Altogether Mr. Robyn shows very definite signs of a bright future.

The *Brooklyn Eagle* picked up on his unusual background, saying²⁶

A tenor who by the vicissitudes of fate has been buffeted from one moving picture house to another finally came into his right and proper estate Saturday evening.... Mr. Robyn makes no impressive figure on the stage; he is perhaps the smallest tenor in the world—that is, until he begins to sing. His voice, of lyric sweetness, is well handled throughout its length of scale and capable of wide diversity of expression.

Others agreed.²⁷ The *New York American* called Robyn “young and promising” and the *Evening Mail*, “a find among concert tenors,” while the *Evening World* said he sang “with skill and taste.” The *Morning Telegraph* viewed him as “a genuine surprise and delight in a season already too full of the mediocre singers who are flooding our two most important concert halls,” adding, “Mr. Robyn has the kind of voice one just wants to sit and listen to..., (his) personality is as pleasing as his singing.”

The lordly *New York Times* was a little more reserved, though not really harsh.²⁸

His voice is light and of pleasing quality, except in the higher ranges when he attempts to give it greater power; then it becomes somewhat metallic and tends toward hardness. He sings with intelligence, taste and musical feeling; he has good ideas about phrasing and his enunciation in English is exceptionally clear and intelligible.

In general, the few criticisms were mostly technical, and ambivalent. *Musical America* noted in its favorable review that “the backward placement of his tones give them an unpleasant throatiness though he can, when he wishes, bring the voice properly forward.”²⁹ The worst the *Herald* could muster was that “his tone production was not always certain.”³⁰

To celebrate the triumph Boucek took out a full page ad in the *Musical Courier* with a picture of a smiling and confident Robyn, and favorable quotes from seven of the leading reviews.³¹ The following week he booked his new star in concert in Greenville, South Carolina. Later Robyn recalled playing Heron, Illinois and other cities in the east and Midwest with LaForge. He also toured with celebrities such as Mme. Schumann-Heink, a formidable diva who took a special liking to the diminutive tenor, calling him “my leetle Willie!”

During the following year Boucek worked to get Robyn publicity in the serious music press, such as the *Courier* and *Musical America*. He also had bigger plans. Boucek, vocal teacher William Thorner, publisher Henry Waterson and Giulio Gatti-Casazza, the General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera, were close friends and often met to plot artists' futures over dinner. Could Robyn be a candidate for the Met? His short stature might be a drawback in some roles, but given the hefty sopranos often cast as “ingenues,” and tank-like tenors as “youths,” this was probably not insurmountable. Robyn himself got conflicting advice. It was the height of the operatic world, certainly; yet that alone meant the competition would be ferocious. With the galaxy of great voices then at the Met, would he have a chance even if he could make it?

LaForge, who greatly admired Robyn's diction,³² wanted to send him to Paris to study at a conservatory. But that took money, a great deal of it, and Robyn had no sponsor

with such resources. So he continued to do periodic concerts in small and middle sized halls around the country, interspersed with his work at the Capitol, earning constant praise but not the sort of break that would vault him into the top ranks of the concert world.

Exclusive Victor Artist

On another front Boucek had greater success. He was determined to get his client on a major recording label, preferably Victor. The Victor Talking Machine Company was, in a sense, the “Met” of the phonograph world, the biggest and best.

The Victor company, the big Victor Company, was like the United States postage stamp in many ways..., long before you were born. Every place that you went there was a Victor store..., every inky dinky town, not only in the biggest cities.

Robyn protested that he had already made tests for Victor and been turned down. Boucek replied, “Never mind, we’ll make more tests.” And they did. On April 29, 1920, he sang for the Victor horn Cadman’s “I Hear a Thrush at Eve” (which he had already recorded for Pathé), accompanied by the faithful Jerome Hayes on piano. “It was a beautiful thing,” recalled Robyn, “my voice was soft and free. I got the contract.”

No doubt some hard bargaining by Boucek helped. The goal was not just money. Boucek had landed Robyn \$18,000 in recording income in one year free-lancing; at Victor, he was guaranteed \$7,000 per year. But Victor’s distribution, publicity, and prestige was priceless, and Robyn had a firm three-year contract as an exclusive Victor artist.

Robyn described for me in some detail how Victor operated, from an artist’s perspective. His contract was for 20 selections per year, and he recorded at both the 43rd Street studio in New York and in Camden, New Jersey. Bookings and repertoire were controlled by a music committee consisting of E.T. King, Cliff Cairns, and John S. MacDonald, each of whom were musicians and had made recordings themselves (MacDonald had a long career as “Harry Macdonough” in the company’s early days). Robyn dealt primarily with King and Cairns.

Artists, at least those of Robyn’s rank, had no say in selection of repertoire. They were given latitude in performance, however. Among the earliest selections Victor had Robyn record were remakes of two catalog items, “The Palms” and “Oh Promise Me.” Apparently, new masters were needed (the originals dated back to 1908) and a fresh new voice was thought desirable. Those originals, however, had been made by none other than John S. MacDonald (as Harry Macdonough), who now co-controlled the studio! One might suppose that Robyn was required to listen to the originals and match them as closely as possible, and perhaps be coached by MacDonald himself. Not so.

Q: When you remade one of Macdonough’s songs did he come into the studio, and coach you or anything?

Robyn: No, no, no. It was Robyn. He didn’t want to know (about) it.

Q: Did you make any effort to match the original recording, to study how it was done?

Robyn: No, no, never... They wanted you to be you. If you make a song you can’t imitate anybody.

Recording at Victor was highly professional, and of the highest quality. Time and again Robyn returned to this theme in our conversations. He had recorded for half a dozen labels, including Columbia, and none of them came close to Victor in the lengths to which it went to get a “perfect” take, whatever the expense. In addition, the staff conductors with whom he worked, Nat Shilkret, Rosario Bourdon and Joseph Pasternack, were first-rate musicians, leagues above those found at the other labels.

Robyn told two stories to illustrate what he meant.

One makes mistakes every once in a while. For the best record, (a perfect take) means a lot. Now the Victor company would not let out (anything substandard). For “Molly-O,” I made 17 masters. Pasternack was conducting and he was merciless. He heard the least little bit and he would say “remake.” And we would remake it. You realize what it cost them to make a master. Seventeen! And (they) used the second. That means they were very careful.... I was exhausted when we were through.³³

I asked Robyn whether he had ever had any problems with the recording engineers. He said that when he started with Victor,

They called me in to Camden surely half a dozen times, maybe more, to do (tests), just to sing anything. They told me “William, you’re giving us a lot of trouble and that’s what we want.” You see they had to find the (problems), not only for me. They had many singers under contract.... The best recordings were the Victor company recordings.

Aside from the number of takes, Victor did try to make the recording process as friendly as possible to the performer. Robyn was not coached to vary his modulation, alter his position much or in other ways change the manner in which he sang (although it must have been obvious to him not to project as he did in the vast Capitol Theatre!). He was to sing as he normally did, and insofar as possible the technology would adapt to him—hence all those tests. For example, some performers have reported being told to move back from or into the horn for loud and soft passages, or even having someone’s hands on their shoulders to physically move them during their performance. This was not done at Victor, at least in this period.

Q: When you were recording with a horn, the early recordings for Victor, did you have to learn how to sing into a horn? Was it any different from singing in vaudeville?

Robyn: They would guide you.... For a high note, if you had to give out, as in *Aida* (demonstrates), you let out all you had... (and) jump back just a little bit, just a little.

Robyn reported that Victor had its entire recording apparatus, horns and recording machine, on wheels. (There were normally two horns protruding into the studio, one for the singer and one for the orchestra.) The singer would stand in one spot and if blasting was detected during the trials the equipment, not the performer or orchestra, would move back slightly. Victor spent a great deal of time doing this kind of balancing. The other labels for whom Robyn recorded did not.³⁴

Robyn began recording for Victor in June 1920, and the company’s publicity machine quickly kicked into gear. He would be no “Thornely Crane” here! His first release (“I’m in Heaven When I’m in My Mother’s Arms”/“Down the Trail to Home, Sweet Home”) was issued in October accompanied by a nice photo and write-up in the mass-distributed monthly supplement, welcoming him to the Victor roster. Victor photographers took him to Central Park and other locations to get some “candid” shots—perched on a rock reading, trying out one of his records on a Victrola—for use in subsequent supplements. No other label gave him so much publicity.

Probably the height of this campaign was reached with the release of the aforementioned “Molly-O,” in January 1922. The song was a tie-in with a feature film of the same name, produced by Mack Sennett and starring one of Hollywood’s leading comediennes, Mabel Normand. The film was released in November 1921. Robyn was sent to Hollywood to visit Normand and sing to her on the set (he was distinctly unimpressed with the artifice of movie-making, not to mention Miss Normand’s drunkenness). He also sang the theme song live at the movie’s premiere. Victor sent out posters with his picture advertising the record/film tie-in, and he performed the song in movie houses where the film was playing.

Alas, "Molly-O" seems to have been a flop. It was recorded by hardly anyone else, a sure sign of a dud in the 1920s, and was, in fact, the last popular recording by Robyn issued on Victor.³⁵ Nor did the movie do much for Miss Normand's sagging career, which had peaked four years earlier with *Mickey*, a movie with a much more successful song tie-in. In February 1922, she became embroiled in a scandal involving the murder of film director William Desmond, and then in a murder/rape case involving her close friend Fatty Arbuckle. Her career was destroyed.

The Molly-O tour brought home something else to Robyn. He was at the Mission Theatre in Los Angeles for 11 weeks.

I was there through Christmas week. It was my first year away for Christmas week, and for Chanukah, which come together. I remember I was so lonesome Christmas week because, although I'm Jewish, I lived in a Christian home....

Robyn's best selling record on Victor was probably "Tripoli," a duet with Louise Terrell (whose real name was Elizabeth Lennox) issued in November 1920. Copies of this have been seen with exceptionally high stamper numbers. The reason, however, may have been the song on the reverse side of the disk, a vocal version of the enormously popular "I'll Be With You in Apple Blossom Time" by Charles Harrison.

Even before "Molly-O," Victor had begun to use Robyn for foreign series recordings, and beginning in 1922 he appeared in that series exclusively. At first the material was Yiddish, but later he was given some German and Russian songs, and even the Philippine National Hymn! Many of his "ethnic" recordings were show tunes from the contemporary Yiddish Theatre. He did them all with consummate musicianship, but "demotion" to the ethnic department must have been a disappointment. At least in his ethnic recording he was able to work regularly with conductor/arranger Nat Shilkret, whom he respected greatly. Shilkret was a small man, only an inch or so taller than Robyn, but extremely talented. He also had marvelous powers of concentration.

Nat Shilkret used to go with me on the train (to Camden) and he would arrange the music on the train while we were traveling. I used to say "I'm spoiling it," and stop talking. He'd say "No, no, keep on talking. I hear every word you're saying. I want you to talk, it's better for me."

Years later, when Robyn was singing with an orchestra led by Shilkret, he remembered Nat once lifting the baton and whispering to him, "how did the market do today?"

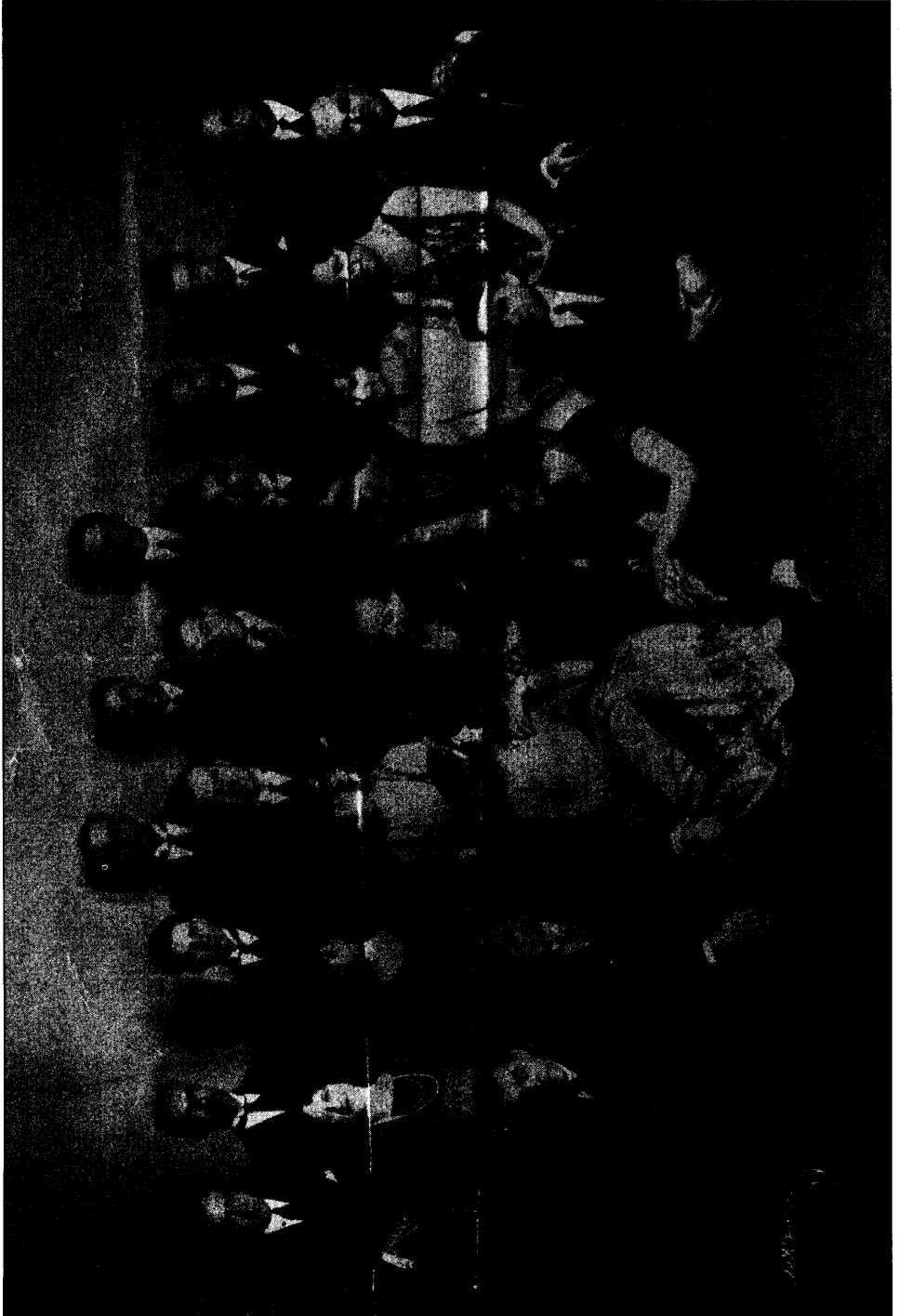
The Victor ethnic department also let him occasionally dabble in more serious repertoire, which no one else would let him record (despite his concert background).

Among his ethnic recordings are selections by Schubert, Mendelssohn, and Strauss. Most of Robyn's known recordings are solos, and he confirmed that he seldom sang in ensembles. This was partly because his strong voice did not blend well with others; and partly because he was not a good reader, often a requirement in ensemble singing. For example he never sang with the Victor Light Opera Company. He did sing a number of duets and trios, however, with Louise Terrell in the popular series and with Anna Hoffman, S. Birnzwieg, Naum Coster, Carl Schlegel, Lucy Finkle, Eva Leoni and Ivan Frank in the ethnic series. He was a member of a Victor studio quartet that recorded in 1922, called on record "The Olympic Quartette" (Cliff Cairns was also a member).

In sum, although Victor gave Robyn welcome publicity, it never used him for the traditional and art songs for which he was best suited. Those were reserved for Victor's large stable of established talent, notably McCormack on Red Seal, Lambert Murphy on blue label, and Charles Harrison on black label. Indeed, even Robyn's test number "I



"An Impression of Roxy and His Gang (By One Who Has Never Seen Them)." Clockwise from top: "Peter the Great" (Harrower) and Doug Stanbury chat; Dr. Billy (Axt) at the piano; a hirsute "Jascha Bunshook," looking like a mad Russian; comedian "Frank Moolan" sound asleep; tiny Wee Willie Robyn crooning "Pleasant Dreams"; Daddy Jim Coombs ("after the manner of Velvet Joe") in a rocking chair, about to sing an ancient ditty to two little girls, Gladys and Gamby; and Marjorie Harcum and "the Blue Blond" (Eugene Ormandy) looking elegant on a park bench. At the center portly Roxy trades non sequitars with Evelyn Herbert: "How is your uncle?" "Oh, he's fine. How's yours?" "I haven't any uncle." "Well, how is he?" "Oh, he's fine." (See text)





Youthful promise: Wolf Scarpioff (Willie Robyn) and Ivan Varvara (Leon Goldberg) dressed for vaudeville.



Opposite Page: Roxy's Gang in 1925. Top row: James Parker Coombs, Clark Robinson, Peter Harrower. Third Row: Eugene Ormandy Blau (looking grim), A. Lufrio, Joe Wetzal, Ava Bombarger, David Mendoza, Dr. Billy Axt, Phil Ohman, Victor Arden, Alexander Koszegi. Second row

(sitting): Marjorie Harcum, Gladys Rice, Evelyn Herbert, S. L. "Roxy" Rothafel, Betsy Ayres, Margaret McKee, Florence Mulholland, Yasha Bunchuk. First row: Tommy Dowd, Douglas Stanbury, Maria Gamberelli, Susan Dunbar, Willie Robyn. From Brooklyn Life, April 25, 1925.



*Robyn is introduced to Victor customers
(October 1920 supplement)*

“Robyn began recording for Victor in June 1920, and the company’s publicity machine quickly kicked into gear. His first release (“I’m in Heaven When I’m in My Mother’s Arms”/“Down the Trail to Home, Sweet Home”) was issued in October accompanied by a nice photo and write-up in the mass-distributed monthly supplement, welcoming him to the Victor roster.

“Victor photographers took him to Central Park and other locations to get some “candid” shots—perched on a rock reading, trying out one of his records on a Victrola—for use in subsequent supplements. No other label gave him so much publicity.”

**William Robyn:
A New Victor
Artist, 1920**



*Robyn appears in a Victor supplement,
November 1920.*

Hear a Thrush at Eve," which he had sung so beautifully, was reserved on Victor for McCormack. The best popular material went to others too. Robyn's chief rival in this regard seems to have been young *Ziegfeld Follies* star John Steel.

Before he got the songs I got them first, because (publisher) Jules Witmark would want me to do the recording. But Eddie King would give it to John Steel.... He was looking at it from a business point of view; John Steel was very popular and a *Follies* man, and so (those I did get) were by sheer luck because I wasn't in the *Follies*. Everything is business you know.

Was Robyn's rather noticeable accent a problem on his popular recordings? Perhaps, although accents were hardly unusual on recordings of standard and art songs in those days. Listeners then did not seem to mind, or perhaps even notice, those things which we notice today. Cantor Rosenblatt was a hit in vaudeville in 1925 singing "Mother Machree."³⁶

Radio Days

It is difficult to appreciate how crowded the New York entertainment scene was in the early 1920s. Every Sunday the *New York Times* contained hundreds of advertisements for movie, musical, and legitimate theaters, concerts, recitals, and other amusements—vaudeville and high art intermixed, big names and small, all for a few cents admission. New songs from Tin Pan Alley and movies from Hollywood were being introduced. In this tumultuous and competitive world the huge Capitol Theatre stood out. To be a featured performer there was to become at least a local celebrity.

Although Robyn continued to do recitals and record steadily for Victor, the bulk of his time was spent performing at the Capitol. Because of his outside activities, he was in and out of productions more than other cast members, but he was nevertheless considered a regular. A highlight of the season was his performance on the Jewish High Holy Days. In October 1921 the *Musical Courier* commented that he was most effective in the "Kol Nidre," which he sang with the Capitol's principal baritone Erik Bye. "The sincerity with which these two singers rendered this beautiful Jewish prayer caused it to be a memorable spot."³⁷ Robyn's recording work was scheduled so as not to conflict. He recalled that normally his sessions were on Monday mornings, one of the few times the theatre was dark.³⁸

Before long the fame of the Capitol and its resident performers was spread throughout the United States, through the new medium of radio. On Sunday evening, November 19, 1922, as an experiment, station WEAJ set up microphones on the stage and broadcast a program of music by the house orchestra, conducted by Erno Rapee (who had replaced Nat Finston in late 1920). Roxy himself did the announcing. The broadcast was so successful that the following week another took place, this time with vocalists Betsy Ayres and William Robyn singing "Where the Volga Flows."³⁹ The Sunday night broadcasts proved so popular that they became a regular series on WEAJ. Commercial broadcasting had begun in New York only a year or so earlier, and the novelty of being able to hear live entertainment from the stage of a famous theatre in one's own home was no doubt part of the appeal. But what ultimately built a large and loyal radio following was Roxy's showmanship, and the friendly, down-home atmosphere projected by his cast. The *Capitol Theatre Family*, later called *Roxy's Gang*, became a Sunday night institution, and was soon being networked to stations up and down the East Coast and as far west as Iowa and Nebraska.⁴⁰

As far as Robyn was concerned, few changes were made to accommodate the microphones.

(It was) the same thing. You just do your show, that's all. They had mikes all over the place. Sometimes they broadcast right from the stage. If a tap dancer (performed), you could hear it.

There are few parallels in modern media for the type of program put on by Roxy. Perhaps the closest was the top-rated 1950s TV series *Arthur Godfrey and His Friends*—another genial host surrounded by a regular cast of entertainers who related to each other, and to the listener, like a family. Neither Roxy nor Godfrey had guest stars. Instead, they presented a friendly, familiar “gang” with jokes, banter, and songs each week.

Roxy's regular cast numbered about two dozen, many of whom were known by their nicknames. Besides Robyn—whom Roxy dubbed “Wee Willie”—there was soprano Gladys Rice (“Gladys”), baritone Douglas Stanbury (“Doug”), bass Peter Harrower (“Peter the Great”), ballerina Maria Gambarelli (“Gamby”), “Poet Laureate” James Parker Coombs (“Daddy Jim”), cellist Yasha Bunchuk (“Jascha Bunshook”), Marjorie Harcum (“Miss Marjorie”), Evelyn Herbert, comedian Frank Moulan, concertmaster Eugene Ormandy Blau (“The Blue Blond”) and assistant conductor Dr. William Axt (“Doctor Billy”). Betsy Ayres, Beatrice Belkin, Rudy Wiedoeft, Lieut. Gitz-Rice, Joseph Wetzel and Gamby's dancing partner Alexander Oumansky were also cast members at various times, and Tommy Dowd was the impresario's right-hand man. In 1925 the *Boston Post* ran a hilarious cartoon entitled “An Impression of Roxy and His Gang (By One Who Has Never Seen Them).” Roxy and Evelyn were imagined bantering weakly at center stage while Daddy Jim got ready to sing an antique song to two reluctant little girls (Gladys and Gamby) and “Frank Moolan” slept soundly. Wee Willie appeared in the lower left hand corner as a midget beneath a giant top hat singing “Pleasant dreams!”⁴¹

The wholesome feeling was enhanced by regular holiday celebrations (Robyn would sing at both Christian and Jewish holy days), and frequent charity work. One 1925 clipping told of Robyn singing “Learn to Smile” especially for a sick little girl named Claire listening in a hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts. The troupe also went on tour, performing for fans in cities up and down the East Coast. Boston was a favorite destination (Robyn usually sang an Irish song there), and the gang was mobbed in Providence by a crowd so enthusiastic that the police had to be called out to restore order. On March 7, 1925, the troupe performed for President Coolidge at the White House, and a large group picture was taken. Some appearances were poignant. Robyn recalled singing for patients at a veteran's hospital in upstate New York where one patient's last wish was to hear Robyn sing. He died as Robyn sang to him.

There were thousands of fan letters, including many from women singling out Willie Robyn as the object of their desires. In later years he laughed about it. “Some letter writers wrote all kinds of things to the Major or Roxy. They'd say ‘when Willie Robyn is through singing I have to get into the bathtub,’ or something like that. Hot stuff!” One woman came to the theatre week after week, finally cornering him and telling him “my husband is going to Kansas City. He's leaving this afternoon. I want you to come home with me.” Robyn escaped.

Roxy's Gang was also popular in Canada, and the troupe traveled there in a special train as guests of the government of Ontario. On at least one occasion, in July 1925, the gang broadcast from Ontario to stations in the U.S., giving both them and the Province valuable publicity. By mid-1925 a *Radio World* readers' poll showed Roxy the second most popular entertainer on radio, behind Philadelphia personality Karl Bonawitz and ahead of such stars as Ben Bernie and Jones and Hare, the Happiness Boys.⁴²

Doug and Gamby were billed as the lovebirds of the group, although in February 1926 it was Gladys and Willie who sang Irving Berlin's new love song, “Always.” Roxy

began a syndicated column carried in many newspapers to further publicize the show, and Robyn found himself identified on some record labels and sheet music as a “member of Roxy’s Gang.” But neither he nor anyone else in the cast was the “star” of the show; that role was reserved for Roxy. The individual performer who most often received featured billing in Capitol ads was prima ballerina Mlle. Gambarelli. Years later the charming Gamby was asked what she, a dancer, did on a radio show? She laughed and answered, “Oh, giggle and squeak most of the time. Once in a while I’d recite a little poem or sing some simple Italian folk song or lullaby.”⁴³

Next Issue: The next installment will include Robyn’s experiences at Cameo and the ARC labels, his films, and a full discography.

Notes

1. Minor matters of sequence and grammar have been altered here for purposes of clarity, without notation. Significant changes are indicated by ellipsis, parenthetical insertions, or notes.
2. The only previous known biographical work on Robyn was an unpublished talk by Professor Fargo at the 1985 Association for Recorded Sound Collections Conference in San Francisco, California, based in part on this author’s 1977 interviews. Some minor errors contained in that talk regarding dates and places are corrected here.
3. It became apparent during our talks that Robyn himself was not certain about his date of birth. In later years he gave the date as November 18, 1894. However, at one point he told me that the month and day were made up during his Americanization. Nor does the 1894 date jibe with his claimed age at various later dates. For example, he repeatedly said that he was 14 when he came to America in 1913 or 1914, and a teenager when he entered vaudeville in 1916. However a Russian document submitted at the time of his naturalization (Nov. 9, 1920) gives the year as 1894—no day specified—and his age at that time was entered as 25. Most likely, for show business purposes he claimed to be younger than he really was, a claim made plausible by his small stature.
4. Robyn remembered the ship as the *Imperator* or the *Berengaria* of the Hamburg-America Line. These were two names for the same ship (the name changed from the former to the latter in 1921), a large luxury vessel that plied the North Atlantic route from 1913 to the 1920s. Robyn’s crossing was probably in mid-1913, but despite extensive research I have been unable to find Robyn in the logs of this or other likely ships in 1913-1914, under his own or his brother’s name. He may have traveled under another name, or simply been missed in the cattle-car environment.
5. John E. NeCollins (c.1867-1942). A former high school principal and superintendent of schools in Wisconsin, who moved to New York in 1899 and became head of the school music department of the American Book Company. Later he was associated with the School of Music at New York University. His obituary appears in the *New York Times*, May 24, 1942, p.42.
6. Jacobs’ firm, Jacobs and Janowitch, operated a factory in Hazelton and had offices at 476 Broadway, New York City.
7. The name sometimes appears as Ivan Varvara—even more Russian!
8. Silvers (1889-1954) later composed “April Showers,” scored Jolson’s *The Jazz Singer*, and won an Academy Award for *One Night of Love*. Havez was born in 1874 and died in 1925.

9. *Variety*, Oct. 20, 1916, p.21.
10. Reports have been found in nine papers, the *New York Times*, *Tribune*, *World*, *Herald* and *Sun* in the popular press, and *Variety*, *Musical Courier*, *Musical America* and the *Friar's* magazine in the entertainment field.
11. Robyn apparently moved to this address after his discovery by Havez and Silvers, but before his vaudeville debut. He is listed as living there in *Trow's New York City Directory* for mid-1916, with his occupation given as "clerk."
12. Frank LaForge (1879-1953).
13. *Talking Machine World*, February 15, 1920, p.152. Brunswick reported that "Tulip Time" was one of its "six best sellers" in Chicago, the firm's home city.
14. Robyn was inconsistent in explaining where the name came from. He sometimes credited showman "Roxy" Rothafel with thinking it up, however Roxy did not enter Robyn's career until after the name first appeared on Okeh and later Emerson recordings.
15. "Capitol Theatre Opens to Throng," *New York Times*, October 25, 1919, p.14.
16. The Mae West routine, and the later history of the Capitol, are described in an article about the theater's closing in 1968. *New York Times*, Sept. 16, 1968.
17. Baker, George, "Sheet Music Redux," *Antiques and Collecting Hobbies*, August 1991, p.28.
18. *Musical Courier*, March 11, 1920, p.57.
19. Capitol Theatre advertisement, *New York Times*, February 29, 1920.
20. *New York Times*, May 16, 1920, p.14.
21. Samuel L. "Roxy" Rothafel (1882-1936). He formerly had been with the Rivoli and Rialto Theaters.
22. *Musical Courier*, December 16, 1920, p.64.
23. *Musical Courier*, April 15, 1920, p.28.
24. *Musical Courier*, November 18, 1920, p.32.
25. *New York Tribune*, November 14, 1920.
26. *Brooklyn Eagle*, November 15, 1920.
27. The following four quotes are from November 14 (*American*, *Morning Telegraph*) and 15 (*Evening Mail*, *Evening World*), as quoted in the *Musical Courier*, November 25, 1920, p. 17.
28. *New York Times*, November 14, 1920, p.22.
29. *Musical America*, November 20, 1920, p.43.
30. *New York Herald*, quoted in the *Musical Courier's* "What the Jury Thinks" column, November 25, 1920, p.37.

31. *Musical Courier*, November 25, 1920, p.17.
32. LaForge mentioned Robyn in an article entitled "The Future of American Music Lies in Diction," *Musical Courier*, December 16, 1920, p.10.
33. The files show 11 takes of "Molly-O" over three sessions, with the third take (from the first session) being the one eventually issued. Robyn may have forgotten the exact number, or there may have been additional attempts that were not assigned take numbers.
34. Extensive testing of this kind also has been reported by Edison, however Robyn did not record for them.
35. Curiously, Victor never mentioned the movie tie-in when it announced the record in the January 1922 supplement.
36. Cited in Green and Laurie, Jr., p.329.
37. *Musical Courier*, October 20, 1921, p.56.
38. An analysis of days-of-the-week of Robyn's sessions for Victor (the only label for which we have consistent, precise information) reveals that Monday was indeed his most frequent day for recording, though not by much. His 39 sessions between 1921 (when he returned from Chicago) and 1923 break down as follows. Monday—11, Tuesday—6, Wednesday—8, Thursday—6, Friday—8. Robyn may be thinking of his sessions for the more compliant Cameo label, for whom he recorded beginning in 1923.
39. There seems to have been no reporting of these events at the time they happened, but they were described in detail in retrospective soon after, especially on the anniversary dates of the Capitol's long-running series. See for example the story in *Radio News*, February 1928, and other clippings in the Capitol Theatre scrapbooks at the New York Public Library. Robyn believed that broadcasting began from the Capitol before Roxy arrived, but this seems unlikely as Roxy joined the theatre in May 1920, before any commercial stations were operating in New York. In addition, published reports in the late 1920s always identified November 19, 1922 as the premiere date. Possibly, there had been some earlier experimental broadcasts.
40. Network radio is often thought to have been launched on November 15, 1926, with the inauguration of the National Broadcasting Company's network, however there was much exchanging of programs before that, as evidenced by the Capitol Theatre series.
41. *Boston Post*, May 24, 1925; in the Capitol scrapbook at the New York Public Library.
42. *Radio World*, May 23, 1925. The results are labeled preliminary, but, tantalizingly, no follow-up could be found.
43. *New York Post*, December 7, 1938.