



AMICA International

Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors' Association

Honor Roll

EDYTHER BAKER
by Bob Pye

From the AMICA, Vol 8, No. 10, Oct 1971

As I begin to write, Edythe Baker is serenading me (and the neighbors on a Sunday morning) with her 1923 performance of "Somebody's Wrong," and I am thinking of what a great difference all the years between the DuoArt days of the early 'twenties and the present have brought to a little old lady, now living quietly in England. And I wish there was more to write about this supreme favorite on jazz-oriented reproducing piano rolls of the 1920's.

Edythe Baker began her roll-recording career sometime around 1920...by 1922, she was listed in the distinguished roster of Duo-Art recording artists, where she was to remain, making some of the finest rolls of her time, until 1926. We think of roll recording now as a prestige occupation, but after my conversation with Welte-Mignon recording artist Johnny Johnson, I wonder just how much prestige there was in recording for roll

companies in the '20's. Johnny recalled vividly (and it wouldn't be difficult to do) that he was paid \$25.00 a performance for making his rolls, and certainly he was one of the top Welte popular pianists--though admittedly their emphasis on popular music was slight. However, it may well be that Edythe Baker and her contemporaries didn't receive a great deal more for their efforts, and it is entirely possible that they enjoy more real celebrity with us today than they ever did with their audience of roll enthusiasts during their active years.

Edythe Baker journeyed to England--quite likely in 1926, as her Duo-Art roll output ceases at that point.



I recall being told of an article in a Duo-Art bulletin with remarks that she was a favorite of the Prince of Wales and custom-recorded rolls for him (my letter to the Prince, now the Duke of Windsor, regarding this has so far remained unanswered, but hope has not dimmed). This would have given her a valuable "in" with the very show-business oriented young nobility of the time. At any rate, we hear no more of Edythe Baker until 1928, when she became a star--literally overnight--stopping the show with her variations on "My Heart Stood Still" in

a Rodgers and Hart revue, "One Damn Thing After Another." C.B. Cochrane, veteran British producer, in his book "Showman Looks On" remembers Edythe Baker as one of the great stars of his career, recalling the Rodgers and Hart revue as "introducing to this country Edythe Baker and her white piano, and the song hit "My Heart Stood Still."

And suddenly Edythe Baker was a British star. A look through a number of British books dealing with the show business world of the 'twenties and 'thirties yields several references to Edythe Baker: "Little Edythe Baker from Missouri with her white piano," one biographer recalls ...and indeed, her white piano became a trademark. She continued as a star in English revues and cabaret well into the 'thirties, and made phonograph records as well.

The gentleman in England who finally led me to Miss Baker herself recalls, "she looked most glamorous onstage, and she was a pioneer in that particular type of piano playing, but she seemed to fade out of the lime light in the late 'thirties."

"That particular type of piano playing" evidentially refers to a popular-classical approach likely fairly similar to Pauline Alpert's; in fact, I was fortunate in meeting an English lady here in Kelowna who had a long career as a pianist in the theatre in England and on the Continent, and she recalled Edythe and her career most vividly. I played a few Baker rolls for her, and she remarked that she would never have thought that it was the same pianist she remembered. A very different style listening to other rolls, she said that there was some similarity to the Adam Carroll rolls of the 'thirties, and a distinct similarity to some records Pauline Alpert made in the 'forties. Again, she recalled the white piano and the elegant appearance Edyth Baker made on stage.

My British correspondent provided more biographical information. "She married into the rich d'Erlanger family, and was a prominent figure in the blasé London society of the 1920's. I believe the marriage was not a success."

The next word of Edythe Baker comes farther on in C. B. Cochrane's book. In 1943, Cochrane produced a giant revue called "Seventy Years of Song," featuring tunes

and performers from the seventy years prior to 1943. An on stage: Edythe Baker at her White Piano, stopping the show as she did in 1928, with her variations on "My Heart Stood Still."

Now, the clock moves ahead to 1971. And my friend in England, after some fair amount of effort, located Miss Baker, and sent me a letter of information on her, which he asked me to keep, as far as detail is concerned, in confidence. And in respect to her, and what she means to all of us, that is how it must be. Suffice it to say that Edythe Baker, now in all likelihood nearing eighty is living quietly in England, long since completely retired, and forgotten in the present day except by those of us who cherish her piano rolls, and the English show-business enthusiasts who remember her later career.

Now, with a modern recutting program of Edythe Baker rolls, any Duo-Art owner who wishes may make a generous sampling of the delights that the Baker piano of the 1920s holds for us--and look forward to the day, not likely too far off, when even the obscure rolls (and let's pray for "Sob-Sister Sadie, The Vamp Cry-Baby") will once again be recalling to us one of the vibrant personalities of the music world of the 1920's.