

The Rise & Fall of Paramount Records (1917-32)

About The Two Volume Set

- A two-volume monument to America's most important record label
- Each volume housed in a handcrafted cabinet, in a numbered limited edition of 5000
- Co-released by John Fahey's Revenant and Jack White's Third Man
- Volume One, 1917-1927, release date: November 19, 2013
- Volume Two, 1928-1932, release date: November 18, 2014
- EACH VOLUME contains:
 - 800 newly-remastered digital tracks representing 170+ artists
 - 300+ fully-restored original 1920s-30s ads, images & materials
 - 6 x 180g LPs w/ hand-engraved labels, featuring 87 selections from the set
 - Large-format, clothbound hardcover, full-color art & narrative book
 - Encyclopedia-style reference manual (field guide to artists & tracks)
 - First-of-its-kind music and image player app on custom USB drive

Paramount Records was formed in 1917 with little fanfare and few prospects – its founders ran a Wisconsin furniture company and knew nothing of the record business. Its mission was modest: produce records as cheaply as possible with whatever talent was available. This was not a winning formula, and by the end of 1921 Paramount was on the threshold of bankruptcy.

In 1922 Paramount's white owners embarked on a radical new business plan: selling the music of black artists to black audiences (a market that became known as "Race Records"). This move, paired with equal parts dumb luck, chicanery, a willingness to try anything, and the fortuitous hiring of Mayo Williams (the first black executive at a white-owned recording company), paid dramatic dividends. Williams, a Chicago South-Sider, early NFL player, bootlegger, impresario, and Brown University graduate, would become a key early champion of those two uniquely American art forms, jazz and blues, while maintaining a not entirely benevolent orientation toward the artists themselves ("screw the artist before he can screw you" being one of his mottoes). Via Williams, Paramount scouted talent, ran the offices of its recording operations, and recorded most of its early records in Chicago, unintentionally playing a documentarian's role as it captured the very sounds of the Great Migration in the Midwest.

By 1927, Paramount was the most important label in the Race Records field, selling hundreds of thousands of records. And by the time it ceased operations in 1932, it had compiled a dizzying roster of performers – still unrivaled to this day by any other assemblage of talent ever housed under one roof – spanning early jazz titans (Louis Armstrong, King Oliver, Jelly Roll Morton, Fletcher Henderson, Fats Waller, James P. Johnson, Coleman Hawkins), vaudevillian songsters (Papa Charlie Jackson, The Hokum Boys), the first solo guitar bluesmen (Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind

Blake), theater blues divas (Ma Rainey, Alberta Hunter, Ethel Waters), gospel (Norfolk Jubilee Quartette, Famous Blue Jay Singers of Birmingham), masters of Mississippi blues (Charley Patton, Son House, Skip James, Tommy Johnson), our greatest string bands (Mississippi Sheiks), and the indefinable “other” (Geeshie Wiley, Elvie Thomas, Lottie Kimbrough, William & Versey Smith).

As a body of work, Paramount inarguably ranks alongside the most potent archives of American art, of any kind, ever assembled. This is the curious story of how it came to be.

The label’s story mirrors that of America itself, riding the waves of modernism emanating from post-WWI-Europe and the sufferings and joys of the Great Migration of black Americans from the South to the Midwest and Northeast. Drawing on talent found in its recording base of Chicago but also farther afield in Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee and Louisiana, Paramount was one of the first enterprises of any kind to truly capture the full range of uniquely American forms of cultural expression – what America really sounded like in the 1920s and early ‘30s: its parlor singers, quartets, kazoo benders, balladeers, cowboy crooners, carny barkers, jassers, vaudevillians, blues belters, guitar slingers, songsters, moonshiners and charlatans – the gamut of Melville’s “multitudinous murmurings.”

The Rise & Fall narrative takes the form of a curated exhibit of words, images and music with Paramount at its fulcrum, housed in a lush handcrafted cabinet that harkens back to the wunderkammern, precursors to the modern museum. Each volume's physical form serves as a tribute to the design era represented by its recordings – Volume One takes on the rough-hewn Arts & Crafts furniture stylings of mid-‘20s America; Volume Two reflects this country’s love affair with the streamlined profiles of the “Machine Age” 1930s.

The Artists

Some of the more than 300 artists featured across Volumes One and Two:

Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Coleman Hawkins, Duke Ellington, Ma Rainey, Alberta Hunter, Jimmy O’Bryant, King Oliver, Jimmy Blythe, Clarence Williams, Fletcher Henderson, Ethel Waters, Perry Bradford, Fats Waller, Johnny & Baby Dodds, Lovie Austin, Tiny Parham, Tommy Ladnier, Thomas “Georgia Tom” Dorsey; Famous Blue Jay Singers of Birmingham, Norfolk Jazz/Jubilee Quartette.

Blind Blake, Son House, Jaybird Coleman, Charley Patton, Skip James, Blind Joe Taggart, William and Versey Smith, Tampa Red, Little Brother Montgomery, Blind Joe Reynolds, “Jabo” Williams, Blind Roosevelt Graves, Bo Weavil Jackson, George “Bullet” Williams, James “Boodle It” Wiggins, Louise Johnson, Buddy Boy Hawkins, Willie Brown, Henry Townsend, Rube Lacy, Roosevelt Sykes, William Moore, Blind Joe Reynolds.

Big Bill Broonzy, Papa Charlie Jackson, King Solomon Hill, Meade Lux Lewis, Geeshie Wiley, Elvie Thomas, Charlie Spand, Blind Willie Davis, Bumble Bee Slim, Beale St. Sheiks, James P. Johnson, Ramblin' Thomas, Jaydee Short, Freddie Spruell, Mississippi Sheiks, Ida Cox, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Tommy Johnson, Gus Cannon, Ishman Bracey, The Hokum Boys.

The Format

The wunderkammer, or cabinet of wonder, arose in mid-sixteenth-century Europe as a repository for all manner of wondrous and exotic objects whose categorical boundaries were yet to be defined. In essence these collections – in which art, science and magic were intermingled and had equal standing by dint of their shared capacity to inspire wonder – can be seen as the precursors to museums.

Intended to be closer to an interactive museum exhibit than a conventional music collection, the Rise & Fall wonder-cabinet gives equal status to page-turning narrative, scholarship and new research by leading experts, original and newly created graphic art, industrial design, and compelling analog and digital music experiences. Both volumes include handcrafted packaging, large format hardcover clothbound books, 180g vinyl records plus extensive digital tracks, a complete narrative history of the label, and a visual centerpiece featuring many of the striking original hand-drawn Paramount ads that ran in the Chicago Defender weekly newspaper from 1922-30 – ads which birthed the illustration style of Robert Crumb which in turn begat the styles of many graphic novelists working today.

Furniture Making In the Bloodline

There are also some interesting parallels with co-producer Jack White's own story: Paramount was a side business of the Wisconsin Chair Company, whose main concern was the manufacture of home furnishings at its factory in Grafton, Wisconsin. Its founders got into the record business almost by accident, after Thomas Edison contracted with them to make Edison brand phonograph cabinets when his factory burned down; they then decided to start their own line of phonograph cabinets, and then to produce records to drive sales of the cabinets.

Jack's pre-White Stripes days were as a master furniture maker's apprentice and then as proprietor of his own chair upholstery business. Had things gone differently, he might still be operating Third Man Upholstery there in Detroit. (His upholstery workshop still takes significant pride of place there at his compound in Nashville!) Jack's unique vision, strong design sensibility, and love of the tactile richness of hand-worked wood and metal are soaked into every inch of this project.

Particulars About Volume One:

The Rise & Fall of Paramount Records, Volume One (1917-27), part one of a two-volume omnibus of art, words and music in a limited-edition cabinet-of-wonder format, is a joint release from John Fahey's Revenant and Jack White's Third Man

Records, co-produced by the leading researcher/writer on Paramount, Alex van der Tuuk.

The Rise & Fall cabinet chronicles in words, images and sound the curious tale of Paramount, an early American record label which, despite being run out of a Wisconsin chair factory, with bargain-basement recording and production methods, by men with few connections to and little idea of what black (or rural white) audiences were interested in, nevertheless managed to create a repository of American art that can stand with any this country has produced.

Volume One focuses on the label's improbable rise from also-ran (known for its "tin pan tone") to Race Records powerhouse, exploring how its fortunes were tied to the Great Migration as well as to its unconventional strategies, "open door" recording policy, opportunism, sleight-of-hand, and incredible luck.

Included in Volume One:

- 800 digital tracks by 172 artists across the Paramount family of labels, including the earliest recordings of: King Oliver, Jelly Roll Morton, Blind Blake, Fats Waller, Ma Rainey, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson, Alberta Hunter, Papa Charlie Jackson, Ethel Waters, Coleman Hawkins, Johnny and Baby Dodds, Bo Weavil Jackson, Jimmy O'Bryant, Buddy Boy Hawkins, Tiny Parham, Jimmy Blythe, and Jaybird Coleman.
- A visual centerpiece comprising the full run of 200+ striking, hand-drawn original ads, fully-restored, as published by Paramount and associated labels in the Chicago Defender newspaper from 1922-27 – ads which are cited as his single biggest influence by American artist Robert Crumb.
- All ads and digital tracks can be downloaded onto the user's hard drive and managed via iTunes or other player software, or managed and played directly via the cabinet's proprietary music-and-image player app, housed on a custom-designed USB drive; tracks can be searched, sorted, grouped, and played by song title, artist, performer, catalog number, matrix number, and recording date, and are cross-referenced to their corresponding weekly ad from the Chicago Defender; users can also choose from pre-programmed playlists or listen to the tracks and watch the images in "radio" and slideshow mode.
- A 256-page large-format cloth-bound foil-stamped hardcover book, with a feature-length narrative by award-winning Chicago-based writer Scott Blackwood, chronicling Paramount's curious tale, along with hundreds of art plates showcasing ads and ephemera from its family of labels.
- A 300-page Field Manual featuring encyclopedia-style bio-discographical entries for 172 artists and their repertoire, with chiaroscuro artist portraits by Tony Mostrom (illustrator for both 78 Quarterly and Derek Bailey's Incus Records).

- A laser-etched, white birch LP folio housing 6 x 180g records, each bearing hand-engraved gold leaf-stamped center labels, and comprising a selection of 87 tracks from the collection.
- Faithful reproductions of Paramount's 1924 and 1927 "Book of Blues" catalogs, and 1920 phonograph brochure from its sister company, Vista Talking Machine Co.
- All housed in a richly-detailed handcrafted quarter-sawn oak cabinet, lushly upholstered in sage green velvet, with custom metal hardware, inspired by the Craftsman furniture stylings of mid-1920s America, and specifically the 1920s portable phonograph cases of Paramount and the VV-50 Victrola of its rival, Victor.

Particulars About Volume 2

Paramount Records is America's most important record label. With due respect to Sun, Atlantic of the '50s and '60s, Motown, Impulse and Stax, Paramount is the label that changed how America thought of itself. It was the first and most comprehensive chronicler of what America really sounded like - on its street corners, at its fish fries and country suppers, in its nightclubs and theaters, dance halls and showtents. The company's open-door recording policy led it to the very bedrock of this untamed nation's blues, jazz, gospel and folk sounds, and ensured that it was profit-seeking Paramount - and not a preservationist body like the Library of Congress - that acted as (unintentional) documentarian, capturing the very sounds of the Great Migration in the Midwest and providing the earliest and most representative snapshot of America's sonic landscape in the 1920s and early '30s.

And it simply killed. Consider this: in a single 5 year span, these are some of the artists who called Paramount home: King Oliver, Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, Alberta Hunter, Blind Blake, Ethel Waters, Ma Rainey, Papa Charlie Jackson, Eubie Blake, Fletcher Henderson, Big Bill Broonzy, Roosevelt Sykes, Freddie Keppard, Junie Cobb, James P. Johnson, Johnny Dodds, Jaybird Coleman, Clarence Williams, Fats Waller, Gus Cannon, Tommy Ladnier, Coleman Hawkins, and Tiny Parham. And in 1926, of course, the label introduced a Dallas singer named Blind Lemon Jefferson, whose Paramount 78s launched the entire field of solo guitar blues recordings.

And by 1928, just as it seemed Paramount might run out of steam, the label embarked on a second act that threatened to dwarf its first, issuing some of the most coveted recordings in the history of wax, by the likes of: Skip James, Charley Patton, Son House, Tommy Johnson, Blind Roosevelt Graves, Blind Joe Taggart, Willie Brown, King Solomon Hill, Tampa Red, Georgia Tom Dorsey, Little Brother Montgomery, Lottie Kimbrough, Rube Lacy, Meade Lux Lewis, Buddy Boy Hawkins, Ramblin' Thomas, Freddie Spruell, Jaydee Short, George "Bullet" Williams, Cow Cow Davenport, Clifford Gibson, Ishman Bracey, Charlie Spand, Louise Johnson, Geeshie

Wiley & Elvie Thomas, The Carver Boys, Wilmer Watts, Kentucky Ramblers, Famous Blue Jay Singers of Birmingham, The Hokum Boys and The Mississippi Sheiks.

This astonishing second act, in which Paramount (among other things) issued the very first recordings of Mississippi Delta blues, establishing it as a genre, is the subject of the final installment in Third Man-Revenant's commemoration of this remarkable label, *The Rise & Fall of Paramount Records, Volume Two (1928-32)*.

Included in Volume 2:

- 800 digital tracks by 175 Paramount artists
- A visual centerpiece comprising the full run of 90+ striking, hand-drawn original ads, fully-restored, as published by Paramount in the Chicago Defender newspaper from 1928-30 – ads which are cited as his single biggest influence by artist Robert Crumb.
- All ads and digital tracks can be downloaded onto the user's hard drive and managed via itunes or other player software, or managed and played directly via the cabinet's proprietary music-and-image player app, housed on a custom-designed USB drive; tracks can be searched, sorted, grouped, and played by song title, artist, performer, catalog number, matrix number, and recording date, and are cross-referenced to their corresponding weekly ad from the Chicago Defender; users can also choose from pre-programmed playlists or listen to the tracks and watch the images in "radio" and slideshow mode.
- A 256-page large-format cloth-bound foil-stamped hardcover book, with a feature-length narrative by award-winning writer Scott Blackwood, chronicling Paramount's curious tale, along with hundreds of full color art plates showcasing ads and ephemera from its family of labels.
- A 400-page Field Manual featuring encyclopedia-style bio-discographical entries for 175 artists and their repertoire, each written by an expert in the field and all writing and research directed by Paramount authority and co-producer of the set, Alex van der Tuuk; with ink portraits of each artist by Tony Mostrom (illustrator for both 78 Quarterly and Derek Bailey's Incus Records).
- An integrated LP folio built into the lid of the cabinet, housing 6 x 180g LPs pressed on label-less alabaster-white vinyl, each side bearing in place of the label an engraved numeral and hand-etched holographic image (by light artist Tristan Duke); the 6 LPs comprise a selection of 87 tracks from the collection.
- Full-size, freestanding reproductions of showbills, banners, window displays, mail order foldout catalogs and other original ephemera from Paramount and its affiliates.
- All housed in a polished aluminum and stainless steel cabinet, lushly upholstered in sapphire blue velvet, inspired by the streamlined profiles of America's "Machine Age" art deco product designs of the 1930s; more

specific nods are made in the direction of the gleaming metal bodies of both the National "resonator" guitar, a favored instrument of many Pre-WW2 bluesmen, and the portable phonographs of master art deco designer John Vassos for Paramount's well-heeled rival, RCA Victor.