Vess L. Ossman (1868-1923) was a true pioneer recording artist who began his recording career in the 1890’s. Other early banjoists recorded before Ossman did but few of them were still making records after 1900. In Ossman’s time, the banjo was a wildly popular instrument in America and ragtime was the rage. In an age where there were scores of banjoists were entertaining in theaters across the United States, Ossman was considered to be the gold standard, and his records make it easy to understand why. Like any great instrumentalist, Ossman’s stylings are unique and unmistakable; one needs to hear only a few bars of his playing to be able to identify him. Countless musical greats of his time are forgotten today, but because Ossman was a prolific recording artist for many years, he is well remembered today, primarily by musicians and/or record collectors.

Ossman may be best remembered by his outstanding renditions of ragtime pieces, but he was adept at performing many types of popular songs, polkas, overtures and marches. He recorded prolifically for many of the major disc and cylinder record companies of the day. In the days of spoken announcements on phonograph records, he was often announced as “Vess L. Ossman, the Banjo King.”

Ossman performed and recorded with a number of musicians including other banjoists, vocalists and recorded often alongside the great piano accompanist, Frank Banta Sr. Ossman also organized a string trio composed of banjo, mandolin and harp-guitar. This group, known as the Ossman-Dudley Trio, made several wonderful records.

Ossman composed some of the pieces that he performed as well, such as the “L.A.W. March” and “Just Like That.”

The “Honolulu Cake Walk” was written in 1898 by Joseph William Lerman (1865-1935). The English-born Lerman was a music editor as well as a composer. He also arranged pieces known as “old timers,” such as various Stephen Foster songs. In the 1930 US census he was listed as a “correspondent” for an insurance company. This piece is a fine example of a period cakewalk and Ossman recorded it more than once. Hopefully, Lerman heard it and was pleased by Ossman’s rendition.
Record companies in the 1890’s and early 1900’s issued a lot of instrumental pieces by not only various banjoists but also xylophonists, cornetists, piccolo players, etc. Most of the time, these would be set pieces that were not really improvised as one would expect from a normal jazz record. Rather, musicians would play variations, embellishments and add ornamentations to their performances. This was also true of the piano accompaniments. Scores were followed but “allowed to breathe” rather than be played exactly as they were written.

We are fortunate, not only to have access to so many early cylinder recordings in this age of digitalization, but also to be able to listen to such records with no preconceived notion of which cylinders are more musically important than others. For many years, recordings such as this Vess Ossman cylinder were more or less ignored by the handful of record companies that made a practice of reissuing early phonograph records onto LP and, later on, on CD. They seem to have been considered too “low brow” to be taken seriously by academia, so turn of the century ragtime recordings, while fascinating and plentiful, have been largely ignored, often for decades. Furthermore, these very early records were seldom discussed unless they somehow were shown to have contributed to the development of jazz. Usually, if a pre-1905 record found its way onto an LP or CD era compilation, it would be on a compilation that traced the development of jazz and would be little more than an obligatory opening track by a banjoist or a piccolo player performing a rag. Not seeing this music as important as anything but as a stepping stone to the evolution of jazz doomed much of it to obscurity during the LP and CD age. But the recording industry grew up with the emergence of ragtime and Tin Pan Alley and that is reason enough to take such source material as this more far seriously.

Their reemergence has largely been due to the relentless research of one person, Ulysses Jim Walsh, who wrote a monthly column for over 40 years for “Hobbies” magazine under the heading “Favorite Pioneer Recording Artists.” It is because of Walsh that much biographical information about these early record artists survives at all. Walsh corresponded with turn of the century performers in the 1920’s and 30’s and devoted many columns to many of them. He befriended Ossman’s relatives and conducted interviews with Fred Van Eps as well as others.

Van Eps suggested to Walsh that Ossman, at some point in the teens, let his playing slide by not practicing enough. That may or may not be true, but it is true that by the mid-teens his records were being issued with less frequency as musical tastes changed. His later recordings often featured his “banjo orchestra,” which played music that people could foxtrot to. By the time of his death, ragtime was considered nostalgic.

As record formats changed and fewer people listened to cylinders and the very early discs, records by Ossman and his contemporaries got hidden away in people’s attics, collectors’ basements and in storage areas of various libraries. They were fairly inaccessible to the public. We are the lucky people who, today, get to hear these treasures at the click of a mouse button without having to lug around heavy boxes of fragile wax cylinders. This is a major development and it should be warmly embraced by music fans and historians! Still, so many pre-1902 cylinders have been lost forever and so many more exist in the form of only a single copy.

Notably, as well, if two copies of a cylinder from the 1890’s survives the chances are that they would be different takes made on different dates, some containing better performances than others. Before 1902, there was no way to mass produce cylinders from molds; every record was either an original or a crudely dubbed copy. Ossman and his contemporaries not only had to be able to project into a horn but also they had to be able to play the same selection over and over again without making time-consuming mistakes so that they could produce enough quantities of various titles for sale. A comparison could be made between early film and early recordings: only a small percentage of what was produced still survives.
This entry in the Library of Congress’s National Recording Registry could be interchanged with a number of the other surviving masterful ragtime performances by Ossman that we are so lucky to have at our fingertips. There are so many gems to discover. Any listeners who enjoy his recording of “Honolulu Cake Walk” may want to explore the wealth of other early cylinders by Ossman and others available online and then decide for themselves which ones are masterpieces.

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*The views in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.*