

“The Okeh Laughing Record” (1922)

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Essay by Cary O’Dell



*A newspaper ad for
“The Okeh Laughing Record”*



The original Okeh release



From the cartoon ““Sh-h-h-h-h”

Imported into the United States in 1922, the “Okeh Laughing Record”--as it has come to be known--is one of the most unusual, (in its way) influential, and surprisingly enduring novelty records ever recorded.

Actually, there is nothing overly complicated about the recording itself. On it, a solo cornetist begins a rather slow, sad, even funereal performance only to be quickly interrupted by a woman’s high-pitched, unrepentant, seemingly unforced and genuine laughter. She is quickly joined by a second laugher--a deep-voiced male--who, too, seems unable to contain himself. The mystery woman and man’s continuing, building chorus of giggles and guffaws eventually come to drown out, even usurp, the tony musical selection being played. And despite a few attempts by the soloist to resume his playing, his efforts are no match for the wails of impromptu laughter offered by his audience which continues on until the recording ends at two minutes and 20 seconds.

In retrospect, statements to the effect that the “Okeh Laughing Record” consists of nothing but two people laughing, is, in actuality, pretty spot on.

Because it was originally released with no credits or names attached, various “histories” of the “Laughing Record” have come into existence over the years. Generally accepted however is that the original recording was made in Berlin, Germany, in 1920 for the Beka label. Supposedly one of six numbers recorded during that day’s session, opera singer Lucie Bernardo is the disc’s female laugher, musician Otto Rathke her male cohort. Felix Silbers is believed to be the record’s put-upon, drowned-out cornet player. The recording itself was an update/remake of an earlier purposefully laugh-centric recording, “The Misfortunes of Youth,” made by Henry Klausen in 1903.

Issued in Germany, as the “Original Lach Aufnahme,” the Bernardo-Rathke “song” soon became a surprise hit. Proving that laughter truly is the universal language, the disc was soon exported. Its name was regularly tweaked to reflect each nation’s language and, usually, the name of the record label releasing it (for example, in the UK, it became “The Parlophone Laughing Record”). This was certainly the case with the Okeh label, the firm which released the recording in the US in 1922.

OKeh (originally “OKeH”) was a record company founded in 1918 by German-born Otto K.E. Heinemann and drew its name from both his initials and, reportedly, from the 19th Century Anglo-American spelling of a Choctaw Indian phrase that means “it is so.” Though today best known for releasing a variety of early “race” records (including several by Mamie Smith), OKeh was also an important early importer of foreign-produced recordings especially those manufactured in Germany where Heinemann still had contacts.

Once renamed and released as the “OKeh Laughing Record” in the US, the recording proved as successful on American soil as it had been on foreign shores. Though exact figures are hard, if not impossible, to verify, various sources theorize that more than a million pressings of the original “OKeh” were sold, an extraordinary feat in those days before music superstores and digital downloads.

Soon the recording’s inexplicable, surprising success inspired a host of imitators, copy cats and pseudo sequels. The OKeh label itself issued the self-explanatory “Second Laughing Record” and “The OKeh Laughing Dance Record” as well as the equal-time-inclined “OKeh Crying Record” all before the end of the decade. In late 1922, there seemed to also have been an unlicensed American remake issued over Cardinal/Gennett. It featured American vaudevillians and emerging recording stars Al. H. Weston and Irene Young guffawing over a soprano saxophone. Perhaps because they were easy and quick to produce, a host of other “laughing” records also soon flooded the market, effectively creating their own bizarre subgenre. How they were ultimately used—as party background noise or for cheering up its listeners—is, of course, open to speculation.

In the wake of laugh records’ emergence, soon laughter was being heavily incorporated into other comedy and novelty recordings and even into various “straight” musical selections as well. Sally Stembler and Edward Meeker’s comedic 1923 “Henry’s Music Lesson” is punctuated with out-loud laughs. And musician Jelly Roll Morton’s 1927 “Hyena Stomp” has as its chorus a reoccurring round of belly laughs. Louis Armstrong experimented with the technique in his well-named 1933 “Laughin’ Louie” song. And, happy accident or not, Rudy Vallee’s 1934 “The Drunkard Song” is punctuated with the Vagabond Lover’s own mid-song cracking up. Most distinctly, and directly, the “OKeh Laughing Record” served as the inspiration for novelty king Spike Jones’ 1946 recording “The Jones Laughing Record (Flight of the Bumblebee),” where the titular instrumental is interrupted by bee sounds, sneezing and the uproarious laughter of a man and woman.

Even after its initial notoriety died out, the “OKeh Laughing Record” remained strangely, firmly embedded within American culture. Radio humorist Jean Shepherd (whose original short stories developed into the beloved holiday classic “A Christmas Story”) used it regularly in his broadcasts as did Chicago children’s television icon Ray Rayner. Later, the recording would become a staple of Dr. Demento’s weekly radio show. In 1994, American choreographer Paul Taylor created a dance piece around it for his light-hearted dance revue “Funny Papers.” One of the “OKeh’s” most resounding and creative re-uses arrived in 1955 when it was generously sampled for the soundtrack of the animated short “Sh-h-h-h-h-h.” This Walter Lantz production, written and directed by the legendary Tex Avery, tells the story of a diminutive, stress-out bongo player whose attempt to find peace and quiet at a remote spa/hotel is ruined by cornet music and out-of-control squeals (i.e the OKeh recording) blaring from the room next door.

Perhaps one of the reasons that the “OKeh” has endured is that the recording is so open to interpretation. To some, the on-record laughter of both laughers is life-affirming and joyous. To other ears, it sounds haunting, creepy, menacing, maybe even a little demonic.

Equally subjective is just what exactly is happening in the recording itself: Who are these people? What *are* they laughing at? It's long been theorized that it's the cornetist's sorry musical performance which first elicits the laughter which then builds and feeds upon itself. But could only a handful of musical notes (the first laughs are just 15 seconds in) truly inspire such an over-the-top response? And what of the record's male laugher? His on-record volume and velocity (including a full on snort at approximately one minute in) at times exceeds his female companion's. Are they laughing at the same stimulus or has the woman's laughter simply inspired his own? And what of the poor instrumentalist? Is he amused or annoyed? In the beginning at least it certainly sounds like he is valiantly trying to carry on. Eventually however it does sound like he has abandoned the cause and become more interested in simply augmenting the laughs around him than in finishing his performance. (As we never actually hear the instrumentalist and male laugher at the same time, many have long, understandably, assumed that the two were one in the same; it is also what Avery depicts in his cartoon.) The record's laughter, which sounds remarkably genuine and unforced throughout, ebbs and recedes throughout the playing of the disc. Just as it seems to be about to end at one point, it is then suddenly born anew, stronger and more vibrant than before. It crescendos at about 2:20 but, in fact, never actually ends; the record simply fades out as both laughers continue to cackle away.

Today, however, many of the particulars surrounding the recording itself are relatively irrelevant in the face of the record's success and unexpected longevity. It is the infectious nature of the recording—laughter as airborne contagion—that has sealed its place in history. In many ways, "The O'keh Laughing Record" was the world's first "laugh track," a precursor of sorts to the pre-recorded "canned laughs" that today dot almost every TV sitcom and which hope to encourage others to snicker and titter along--perhaps even in spite of themselves. At the same time, it's an ode to the inappropriate, ill-timed, unable-to-be-restrained laughter that comedienne Kathy Griffin has come to call "the church giggles" and which "Mary Tyler Moore" and her stock company so brilliantly sent up in their seminal "Chuckles Bites the Dust" episode from 1975. It is the same type of laughter that often disrupted early, live TV and which occasionally used to break up Carol Burnett and her cohorts on her 1970s TV variety show, and which still today often disrupts the players on "Saturday Night Live." More recently, it grabbed a hold of Anderson Cooper while reporting on CNN. The original "O'keh's" spontaneous gaiety supposedly taking place during a solemn, formal classical musical recital, only contributed to its power, its rebellious and "inappropriate" nature.

If the success--indeed the mere existence--of "The O'keh Laughing Record" and its numerous offshoots seemed for years odd, its strangeness and exoticness lessens today in the world of YouTube and viral videos where short, funny, eccentric, sometimes shocking clips get discovered and then passed around, if not from hand to another, then from computer to computer, briefly uniting people and becoming commonly held talking points and touchstones. Along with being the grandfather of all novelty recordings, "The O'keh Laughing Record" was the pre-internet internet meme of its day, something that originally had to be heard to be believed and whose initial popularity was, no doubt, built largely on word of mouth. Additionally, "The O'keh Laughing Record" helped to expand the perimeters of what could and would be considered entertaining for audiences to listen to and viable for recording and the recording industry to create, both commercially and culturally.

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