

**ALL THE RAGE:  
Nashville Mandolin Ensemble**

**New World Records 80544**

At the turn of the twentieth century, a sound lilted through the air of American music like nothing that had ever been heard before. It inspired one writer to call it “the true soul of music.” It inspired thousands of Americans to pick up instruments and form groups to create this sound for themselves.

It was the sound of the mandolin orchestra, a sound that the Nashville Mandolin Orchestra recreates on *All the Rage*, a sound as fresh and new today as it was in its heyday.

The late nineteenth century was an exciting time for American music lovers. The invention of the phonograph had brought music into the home, and the increased exposure and competition brought out the best in musicians. John Philip Sousa’s band perfected the sound of the brass band, and the Peerless Quartet took four-part vocal performance to a level of perfection. But these were stylistic accomplishments with familiar, existing sounds—brass instruments and human vocal cords. The sound of the mandolin orchestra carried an extra edge of excitement because most Americans had never even heard a mandolin, much less the sound of mandolin-family instruments played in an orchestral setting. The mandolin alone had a distinct, unique sound. When a mandolinist plucked a single-note run, nothing could match its crispness of attack and delicacy of tone. And when a group of mandolin-family instruments launched into an ensemble tremolo, the listener was bathed in wave after wave of the most beautiful sound imaginable.

The mandolin orchestra style could be applied to any kind of popular music, as the music on *All the Rage* illustrates—marches, dance pieces, overtures. The selections on *All the Rage* represent the classic repertoire of the mandolin orchestra—the equivalents of “Hound Dog” and “Johnny B. Goode” in rock music or “In the Mood” and “Take the A Train” in big-band music. Moreover, Americans wanted to play this music as well as hear it. The five-string “minstrel” or “classic” banjo, which had reigned in the latter half of the nineteenth century, was pushed aside, and the guitar was relegated to the position of an accompaniment instrument for mandolin groups as the mandolin became the dominant stringed instrument of the era.

What a wonderful music. What a rich period of American culture. Yet it’s a secret, even to most mandolin players of the late twentieth century.

Virtually every piano player is familiar with the work of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and probably even Scott Joplin, Fats Waller, and Dave Brubeck. Practically every trumpet player has attempted Haydn’s concerto, marched along to “The Stars and Stripes Forever!” and tried to shake his vibrato like Louis Armstrong as part of his learning experience. Even the most self-absorbed rock guitarist is likely to be familiar with the names of Segovia and Montoya as giants of the classical and flamenco guitar, respectively. In the movie *Crossroads*, for example, the young blues guitarist plays a screaming adaptation of a Mozart piece to win a showdown against the Devil’s guitarist.

For the typical mandolin player in America, however, the all-important link to the evolution of the instrument and its repertoire is broken. The American mandolinist today learns the music of Bill Monroe and fiddle tunes—basically the repertoire of bluegrass music. He may adapt other forms

such as ragtime or jazz to the mandolin, but if he has heard of Lloyd Loar, it's only because his mandolin is of Loar's design. He has never seen one of Loar's arrangements for solo mandolin. He has never heard of Giuseppe Pettine or H. F. Odell or the Boston Ideals—names that were once as familiar to mandolinists as Eddie Van Halen, Jimi Hendrix, and Eric Clapton are to guitarists.

For many mandolinists, the discovery of the golden era of the mandolin in America was an unfolding mystery. A quest for information on a Gibson model F-5 mandolin from 1922–24, the equivalent (in bluegrass circles, at least) of a Stradivari violin, will necessarily include the name of Lloyd Loar, who signed the label on these instruments. Further investigation might turn up an old Gibson company catalog, packed with photographs of individual artists and groups in formal concert attire, playing mandolins. Some are playing odd, oversized instruments that relate to the mandolin in the same way a viola, cello, or string bass relate to a violin. Other photos show performers dressed up as if they were courtiers in some European monarchy, again with these unusual variations on the mandolin.

The photos are intriguing and may prompt a visit to a vintage instrument dealer for a hands-on exploration of a mandola or mandocello. What did these instruments sound like together? Many of the groups did record, but the discs are still in the hands of collectors, and no compilation or sampler has been released. The quest for further information is frustrating but ultimately as exciting as the music itself.

Unlike any other musical craze in America, the mandolin era can be dated to a precise moment—New Year's Day, 1880, when a group of performers called the Estudiantina Figaroa (students of the University of Figaro in Spain) landed in New York City. The Figaro Spanish Students, as they were called in America, had had several successful European tours, and they made their American debut at Booth's Theater in New York. Ironically, they did *not* play mandolins; they played *bandurrias*, somewhat similar to mandolins in that their strings were arranged in pairs (or groups of three), but they were more guitarlike in construction, with a flat back and flat top. The typical mandolin at the time had a deeply rounded back, made of numerous bent pieces of wood known as “ribs,” and a top with a bend, or “break,” at the bridge. The bandurria was easily distinguishable from a mandolin to anyone who had ever seen a mandolin, but the mandolin was virtually unknown in America in 1880. Consequently, Americans thought the Spanish Students were playing mandolins.

The Spanish Students' outfits—foppish clothing typical of college students in Spain at that time—made as deep an impression as their music, which ranged from sonatas by Mozart and Beethoven to overtures to Spanish dance and polka numbers. A *New York Times* reviewer was moved to report on “their darkly picturesque attire, performing melodies in which the true soul of music was perceivable.”

The irony of the mandolin craze being started by a bandurria ensemble is understandable when one discovers that most Americans who saw the Spanish Students did see bona fide mandolins. The group did *not* switch instruments, however. The original, bandurria-playing Spanish Students went back to Spain after only a few shows, and what most Americans saw were impostor groups billing themselves as the Spanish Students. The most successful of these was made up primarily of Italians under the direction of Carlo Curti, and being from Italy, the home of the mandolin, they played true mandolins.

It was a most unlikely beginning: The mandolin orchestra movement in America was started by the Spanish Students, who did not play mandolins and who, after the first few performances, were replaced by impostors. The growth of the mandolin's popularity, despite such an ignominious start, is a testament to the power of its sound.

The mandolin craze swept the nation, although given the state of communications and technology in the 1880s, a sweep of the nation took considerably longer than it would today. It would be ten or fifteen years before the mandolin surpassed the banjo in popularity and another ten or fifteen years before it reached its pinnacle.

The first nationally popular group was the Boston Ideals, made up of two Boston teachers, A. D. Grover (whose name is still familiar to fretted instrument players as a leading manufacturer of tuners) and George Lansing, and two of their students. They started in 1883 as a banjo "club," or amateur group. They worked mandolins into their show by 1887, and they never mixed banjos and mandolins in the same arrangement. They became the leading professional touring group, headlining their own appearances and also opening shows for Sousa's band. By 1897 they had reached such legendary status that Sam Siegel, a top mandolinist of the era, would write "The Boston Ideals March" (included on *All the Rage*) as a tribute to their accomplishments.

Banjo groups had utilized instruments of different sizes to achieve different voices, and as the mandolin became more popular, makers created a mandolin family in similar fashion. By 1900 the mandola and mandocello had been introduced, tuned to the same pitch as the viola and cello, respectively, and thus opened up the entire repertoire of string quartet music to the mandolin ensemble.

Rising popularity inspired improvements in the instrument itself. The typical mandolin of the 1880s and 1890s was an Italian "bowlback" style that had been developed by the Vinnacia family of Naples in the late of the eighteenth century. In tone and appearance it showed its evolutionary relationship to the lute and was well suited for a chamber performance or a parlor concert. In America, however, the mandolin movement quickly outgrew these intimate venues as Americans took mandolins into larger halls, before louder crowds, and on performance tours that would soon be called vaudeville. The bowlbacks could not produce the volume that American performers needed, nor could they physically stand up to the rigors of hard play and hard travel.

In Kalamazoo, Michigan, a guitarist named Orville Gibson created a revolutionary new style of mandolin built on the principles of violin construction. He believed that wood produced the best tone when it was in an unstressed state. To avoid the stress inherent in bowlback construction, Gibson carved the top of his instrument into an arched shape, similar to that of the violin. Ideally, as he stated in his patent, the back, sides, and neck should be carved out of a single piece of wood, but he admitted that this was impractical. He did carve the back in a shallow bowl shape, using walnut rather than the rosewood of the typical bowlback. He applied his new concepts to two new designs. His A-style had a symmetrical pear-shaped body, considerably wider than a bowlback. His F-style represented a more radical departure from tradition, with a scrolled upper bass bout and three body points.

Orville Gibson's instruments were bigger, stronger and louder than any bowlback, and both the A-style and the F-style were immediately successful. He became a full-time instrument maker in 1896; within six years he could no longer meet the demand by himself, so in 1902 he sold his patent to five

individuals who formed the Gibson Mandolin-Guitar Mfg. Co., Ltd. The Gibson company proceeded to become the strongest force in raising the mandolin to new heights of popularity, and both of Orville Gibson's designs—the A-style and the F-style—remain the standards for American mandolin makers today.

Gibson's first general manager was a music-store owner, Sylvo Reams, and the first sales manager (later general manager) was a former mandolin teacher, Lewis Williams. Reams foresaw the difficulty a new company would have in convincing instrument dealers to accept a radical new product, so he found a more direct route to the player—through teachers. Williams could not only communicate with teachers based on his own experience, he could also promote Gibson mandolins with evangelical fervor. He went on the road recruiting “teacher-agents” who received a commission on every Gibson they sold—effectively bypassing music stores. Williams took a leading role in the American Guild of Banjoists, Mandolinists and Guitarists (which held its first convention, appropriately, in 1902, the year the Gibson company was founded). He championed standardized notation and promoted those publishing companies who supported it. He encouraged the formation of mandolin groups, and if they all played Gibsons, he printed their photograph in Gibson catalogs and advertisements under the caption “Every One a Gibson-ite.” He also contributed to Gibson's ongoing improvements to Orville's original design, improvements that included maple back and sides (or birch in the lower models), compensating bridges for better intonation, and eventually height-adjustable bridges.

The mandolin permeated American musical culture in the early twentieth century. On the serious side, Providence, Rhode Island, became a center of study. Giuseppe Pettine, a native of Italy, was the most famous teacher, and his students included William Place Jr., who would later be billed as “America's Greatest Mandolin Virtuoso.” On the entertainment side, James H. Johnstone, a.k.a. The Musical Johnstone or Jumping Jimmie Johnstone, entertained vaudeville crowds with his performance of “Yankee Doodle Backwards,” in which he played the tune “frontwards” but turned his back to the audience and put his mandolin behind his head. Other vaudeville acts, such as the Noss Jollity Company or the Masqueria Sisters, adopted the foppish attire of the Spanish Students and moved about the stage as they performed.

Throughout the country, in towns and in colleges, mandolin enthusiasts formed amateur “club” groups, typically ranging in size from quartets and quintets to larger ensembles of a dozen or more. Teachers organized their students into groups. For special events, promoters would put together huge groups of 100 players or more; in 1910 the Wurlitzer music company of Chicago signed up 500 players (including some violinists and wind instrumentalists) for a “Mammoth Mandolin Orchestra,” and the company announced plans to go for a 1,000-piece group. The Gibson company sponsored The Gibsonians, which at one time included employees Lloyd Loar (a well-known soloist before his employment with Gibson) and the ex-vaudevillian Jimmie Johnstone. Gibson also sponsored The Gibson Melody Maids, a group of female employees. Many groups included women or were made up entirely of women, and judging by photographs from the period, the mandolin era had the widest participation by women of any popular music movement in history.

By 1908 the mandolin was popular enough to support two new magazines. Boston publisher Walter Jacobs founded *The Cadenza*, and Philadelphia teacher and publisher Herbert Forrest Odell started *The Crescendo* as the official organ of the Guild of Mandolinists, Banjoists and Guitarists. Both magazines included group arrangements (usually simple enough for an amateur group to play), columns by leading musicians, news, and advertisements for sheet music and instruments. The

mandolin orchestra movement was so widespread that Odell became worried that inferior groups might hurt the reputation of the mandolin, so he wrote *The Mandolin Orchestra*, subtitled “A book for directors, managers, teachers and players.” The 90-page manual, published in 1913, covered everything from instrumentation and conducting style to effective programming and proper stage behavior.

Suddenly, or so it seems looking back from the end of the twentieth century, the mandolin orchestras died. The delineating point was World War I. The beauty and serenity of mandolin music could not hold the interest of soldiers who had been in a war. They looked for something louder and more raucous, and they found it in jazz music (or Dixieland, as it came to be called) and the tenor banjo.

The mandolin orchestra did not just all of a sudden die. H. F. Odell’s grand waltz “The Laughing Eyes,” for example, wasn’t written until 1923, and it’s one of three pieces on *All the Rage* written in the 1920s. The mandolin orchestra died a slow death, as illustrated by the shrinking size of Odell’s magazine, *The Crescendo*. In its heyday it was a large “folio” magazine, but by the end of the 1920s, it was no more than a pamphlet.

Manufacturers also held on to the mandolin after World War I. Gibson, whose entire existence was based on the mandolin, almost went bankrupt trying to keep the mandolin alive. General manager Lewis Williams hired virtuoso performer Lloyd Loar in 1919 as an engineer with the job of redesigning the mandolin line. Loar’s new F-5 model, with a longer neck, violin-style f-holes and a hand-tuned body, made its debut in 1922 and was a commercial failure. Within two years Williams and Loar resigned, and Gibson was desperately trying to sign up music stores as dealers for Gibson banjos.

Evidence of the changing times is clear in old photographs. Two shots of Loar, circa 1924, show him with The Gibsonians. In one photo, they are all playing mandolin-family instruments, but in the second shot, they all hold the instrument that has replaced the mandolin as the most popular fretted instrument in America—the banjo.

In 1922, Jimmie Johnstone concocted a fake photograph of “The Bauer Quartet,” which featured the face of Walter K. Bauer pasted on all the bodies. They are posed casually under a tree (a pun on Bauer’s name), like a group of college kids. Even at this time, when the death knell for the mandolin ensemble had begun to sound, there is still a spirit of youth and fun in the prank. But in a photo of The Gibsonians from 1935, Johnstone, the former jokester, is now a solemn-looking older gentleman—an image that represented most of the mandolin world by that time.

The only musician to bring the mandolin forward into the music of the 1930s was bandleader Dave Appolon, who combined virtuoso playing with a heavy dose of comedy. The mandolin survived World War II primarily because Bill Monroe had made it a vital part of his new bluegrass music, but the roots of bluegrass were in rural string band music and blues, with no link to the mandolin orchestras. By the 1980s, Monroe’s work had been copied and expanded upon by new generations of players, but links to the mandolin’s pre-World War I glory days had dwindled down to Walter K. Bauer, who had studied with Sam Siegel and continued to lead his Plectrophonic Orchestra, and the Milwaukee Mandolin Orchestra, which became the only mandolin group in America in continuous existence since the turn of the century. A few individual players maintained an interest in what had become known as “classical mandolin” style, and in 1987 Norman Levine formed the Classical

Mandolin Society of America to promote the mandolin as a classical instrument, with standards of performance and literature to keep the mandolin alive.

The Classical Mandolin Society of America provided the source for information sought by Butch Baldassari, a Nashville-based bluegrass mandolin player. Intrigued by the idea of a mandolin group, but never having heard one, he attended a CMSA convention in 1990 in Louisville and then returned to Nashville and put up notices inviting all interested musicians to form a mandolin ensemble. In October 1991, after four months of rehearsal, the Nashville Mandolin Ensemble made its debut before a sold-out house at the Dark Horse Theater, a local theater group's facility.

Just as the original mandolin groups had done a century earlier, the Nashville Mandolin Ensemble offered audiences a unique sound, never before heard. And the result was the same as it had been for the original groups. As the only large professional touring mandolin group, the NME won a loyal following with its eclectic repertoire, redefining the "Three B's" of music to include everything from Bach to the Beatles to Bill Monroe. Their first album, *Plectrasonics*, released on the independent CMH label in 1995, included everything, from Charles Mingus' "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat" to the theme from the *Star Trek* TV series. Paul Martin Zonn, a jazz and classical musician/composer, joined the group as conductor in 1995, and the NME's first project with Zonn was a collaboration with opera singers on a series of famous arias (as yet unreleased). The group released *Gifts*, a collection of Christmas music, on Columbia in late 1996, again an eclectic work ranging from a jazzy arrangement of "Sleigh Ride" to the Celtic-flavored "Christmas in County Kerry" to a reverential rendition of "O Holy Night."

On *All the Rage* the Nashville Mandolin Ensemble taps the source, the roots, the foundation of mandolin music in America, and the sound is every bit as unique and exciting as it was when it swept the country a century ago. Once again, mandolin orchestras are *All the Rage*. —*Walter Carter*

In addition to playing mandola in the Nashville Mandolin Ensemble, Walter Carter is the historian for the Gibson guitar company and the author of seven books on vintage guitars and guitar history.

## REPERTORY NOTES

1. The Boston Ideal March (1897). Samuel Siegel respectfully dedicated this to the members of the Boston Ideal Banjo, Mandolin and Guitar club. Longer than the standard march form of two strains and a trio, Siegel composed a five-part march which includes two modulations.
2. Laughing Eyes (1923). H. F. Odell composed and published this very typical concert waltz. Reflecting both American and European themes, the four parts of "Laughing Eyes" sets up the musical drama that was apparent throughout the period.
3. La Tipica (1903). Although Carlos Curti is credited with starting the copycat version of the Spanish Students, his real skills were as a popular composer, as well as a noted mandolinist and conductor. His "La Tipica" concert polka here uses an extended form and makes very interesting use of the mandolin's range.
4. Dance of the Lunatics (1912). Another popular composer of the day was T. S. Allen. This piece of his, subtitled "an idiotic rave" in the seldom used schottische dance tempo, draws a parallel to a slow

polka also referred to as the English or the German polka. Allen also had a hit at that time called the “Dance of the Skeletons.”

5. The Flying Wedge (1916). The only composition on the recording written by a woman, Kate Dolby’s tune about football. This version here of a galop is not typically stylistic of the 1825 –1875 versions, but of a more Americanized march-like form.

6. Gloriana (1910). A. J. Weidt’s overture here originally included lines for flute and clarinet. In keeping with period practices we made use of the ample supply of fiddlers within NME’s ranks and combined those lines into a violin feature. It is true that you can do whatever you please in an overture!

7. All the Rage (1915). Written by C. Brunover and published by Stahl of Milwaukee, another hotbed of American mandolin playing, this straight-ahead march form is typical of the period. Marches were abundantly printed during the golden age of American mandolin, and they work just fine 83 years later.

8. Estudiantina (1914). Parisian Emil Waldteufel’s reputation as waltz composer rivaled Strauss’. What we have here is Louis Tocaben’s American arrangement of the piece specifically for mandolin orchestra. The practice of taking a light classical work of this type and rearranging it for the plectral sound of stringed instruments added to the charm of the movement’s repertory.

9. My Heart at Thy Sweet Voice (1916). On this very popular vocal selection H. F. Odell puts the tremolo sound front and center for the listener to experience the voice-like qualities that only a mandolin orchestra can produce. This cantabile from the opera *Samson et Dalila* is another European classic reworked to showcase the timbral range of mandolin-family instruments.

10. Sweet Corn (1923). This characteristic march, yet another from the prolific A. J. Weidt, demonstrates how consistent the march form always seemed to be.

11. Texas Fox Trot (1915). Although David Guion is quite well known as a composer, very little is known about this arrangement. The composer and arranger’s original intent was to perform the piece in a strict manner—unlike the performance given here, with a swung eighth-note feel.

12. Silver Ripples (c.1917). We tried to make Warren Dean’s tune a typical Pennsylvania-style polka, by adding accordion. Since he was from York, Pennsylvania, we felt that he wouldn’t mind.

13. Gallantry (1924). This English salon piece found its way into the very capable hands of American arranger H. F. Odell. Herbert Forest really turned this into a beautiful feature for mandolas and mandocello. A classic piece of romantic repertory for mandolin ensemble.

14. Fieldston March (1918). This very spirited march always makes it into an NME concert. The tempo changes and the group’s willingness to chase the conductor makes for a very effective closer to this project. This type of band bravura was the signature for conductors such as Carl King and Henry Fillmore.

Notes by Butch Baldassari and Paul Martin Zonn

## Personnel

Butch Baldassari	mandolin
Rob Haines	mandolin
Richard Kriehn	mandolin
Peter Hyrka	mandolin
Bruce Sweetman	mandolin
Fred Carpenter	mandolin
Steve Dudash	mandolin
Antoine Silverman	mandolin, violin
Charlie Derrington	mandola
Walter Carter	mandola
John Hedgecoth	mandocello
Gene Ford	guitar
David Spicher	bass

Paul Martin Zonn conductor

Special guests: Karen Ann Krieger accordion (track 12)  
Byron House bass (tracks 4, 7, 10, 12)

Produced by Butch Baldassari, Paul Martin Zonn, and Richard Bennett

Recorded at Blair School of Music Recital Hall, Nashville, Tennessee

Recorded by Jacob Lawson

Microphones: Two Gene Lawson L47MP, Peavey VMP2 microphone preamplifier to a Tascam DA-1 DAT Recorder.

Mastering: Jonathan Russell at Georgetown Masters, Nashville, Tennessee

Digital editing: Rob Haines–MicroSound editing system

Final assembly: Don Cobb

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NME photo: Mickey Dobo

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NME uses D'ADDARIO strings on all instruments.

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**ALL THE RAGE 80544-2**  
**Mandolin Ensemble Music from the Early 1900s**  
**NASHVILLE MANDOLIN ENSEMBLE**

- 1 The Boston Ideal March (Samuel Siegel) 4:52
- 2 Laughing Eyes (H. F. Odell) 4:10
- 3 La Típica (Carlos Curti; arr. C. E. Pomeroy) 3:01
- 4 Dance of the Lunatics (Thomas S. Allen; arr. Walter Jacobs) 4:53
- 5 The Flying Wedge (Kate Dolby) 2:13
- 6 Gloriana (A. J. Weidt) 5:27
- 7 All the Rage (Charles Brunover) 2:02
- 8 Estudiantina (E. Waldteufel; arr. Louis Tocaben) 4:35
- 9 My Heart at Thy Sweet Voice (C. Saint-Saëns; arr. H. F. Odell) 5:08
- 10 Sweet Corn (A. J. Weidt) 3:15
- 11 Texas Fox Trot (David Guion; arr. A. Kaye) 3:44
- 12 Silver Ripples (Warren N. Dean) 2:26
- 13 Gallantry (Albert W. Ketèlbey; arr. H. F. Odell) 5:14
- 14 Fieldston March (W. J. Kitchener) 2:10

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