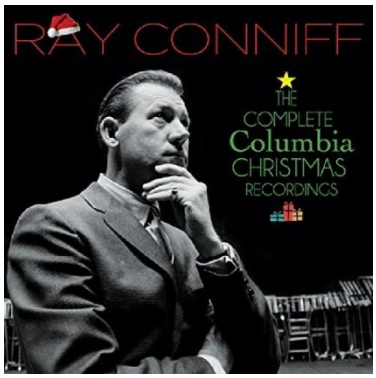
THE COMPLETE COLUMBIA CHRISTMAS RECORDINGS,
a 2 CD set released on the Real Gone Music label in November 2016
A review by Manfred (incorporating a couple of statements by Doug)



First of all, let me point out that this is no bootleg. In fact, it says on the back of the jewel case that "Real Gone Music" is a custom label of Columbia / Sony Music. A couple of years ago, we had some 4 CD sets by Ray on a label with that name, but the logo looked differently, and as any notes concerning Columbia or Sony were missing, everybody thought that they were, let's say "unofficial" releases. Those releases titled "Eight Classic Albums" have never been listed on the official website of "Real Gone Music", either. Well, let's have a close look at this set:

- It's great to have Ray's first three Christmas albums in a single package for the price of one CD.
- The booklet features well-researched liner notes as well as scans of the front cover photographs of the original releases. The liner notes include entries from Ray's diaries and interviews. The notes acknowledge Ray's 40 years at Columbia and his later work, inclusive of the albums he did for Polygram and Abril Music.
- There are some vintage photos, the one on pages 2 and 3 is really great and should have been on the front cover of the set. Both Doug and I think they could have used better photos for the cover. The colour photo of Ray at the 30th Street studio would have at least shown him smiling.
- At the end of CD #2 you can hear Ray's Christmas greeting (which sounds like it was taken from my web page and not a CBS master tape). It's track 14 but it is not documented anywhere.
- All songs appear in their original sequence, and the channels are not reversed. I.e. the girls are on the left channel on "Christmas with Conniff", and on the right on the other albums. Recording dates and matrix numbers are given as well as release dates, composers and lyricists.
- Although it says that the recordings were remastered, both Doug and I have my doubts. Doug wrote, 'they must have tweaked the sound just a bit on "Christmas with Conniff" and "We Wish You a Merry Christmas"; it sounds like they took the audio from the existing CDs. The bells sound a bit brighter on the new WWYAMC and the timings are slightly different. This does not sound like a fresh transfer from the master tape as was done for some Collectables reissues (e.g. "Hollywood in Rhythm"). Maybe I am wrong.' As for me, I compared "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" with my old CD and found the sound crisp and clean on this set. "Here We Come A-Caroling" is absolutely identical to the 2004 reissue, as is "My Favorite Things" from the "Mary Poppins" album.
- More bonus material could have been included, such as Ray's Christmas greetings from various 45s (overdubbing the Singers), alternate takes from the mono Lp, such as "Sleigh Ride" or the unreleased first recording of "Christmas Bride".
- For the album covers they used the new reproduction of "We Wish You A Merry Christmas" rather than the original Lp cover. The back covers and original liner notes are not included. The one used for the inlay from "Here We Come A-Caroling" is reproduced too small to be legible. The other back cover is from "The Robert Shaw Chorale." Why?
- The record labels are not vintage. They could have simply asked us to scan the original labels (6-eye etc).
- Obviously they visited fan sites, such as my "Ray Conniff Encyclopedia" (where else would they get diary entries?). They did not attribute our sites as the source of any information, nor did they mention their internet addresses (URLs).
- The liner notes are brilliant, as stated above. However, some tiny corrections are to be made: Ray's arrangement of "Begin the Beguine" (as stated on page 6) was not based on one of his Artie Shaw charts. Shaw's version was recorded in 1938, years before Ray joined him. Another tiny error: Ray's first album contained 4 previously recorded tunes plus 8 (not 6, as stated on page 6) newly recorded ones.
- It is interesting to see Jeff James' name on this release again. I used to collaborate with him a couple of years ago for Ray's releases on the "Collectables" label. I ask myself why he did not ask me to proof-read the liner notes and why the sources, such as my Ray Conniff Encyclopedia, the Hamilton Library interview (probably the script only, not the video), the "Seconds"-interview/article, and Tamara's new liner notes for the Caroling album-reissue as well as our websites were not mentioned.

Anyway, this 2 CD set is a wonderful Christmas gift, which brings back many lovely memories. Well, it could have been "perfect"... Despite our criticism above, thanks to everybody involved in that project.

Manfred (November 17, 2016)