

Columbia's original headquarters building, in Washington, D.C. (1891). The delivery wagon reads "Columbia Phonograph Company" on the side. Note also the bicycles by the steps, used by the company's repairmen on their daily rounds.



EDWARD D. EASTON IN 1891

COLUMBIA RECORDS IN THE 1890's:

Founding the Record Industry

by

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For many years and for many reasons researchers of early phonograph history have directed their best efforts toward documenting the history of Edison's involvement in the field, and to a lesser extent that of the Victor Talking Machine Company. The role attributed to the Columbia Phonograph Company, though not ignored, is exemplified by the treatment Columbia received in Read and Welch's history of the industry, From Tin Foil to Stereo. Columbia was portrayed as a spoiler, avaricious, sometimes underhanded, but ultimately bested, technologically by Edison and commercially by Victor.¹

Yet Columbia's contribution to recording history was fundamental. It recognized and pioneered what we now know as the principal use of the phonograph--recorded entertainment. In a real sense, it founded the commercial record industry. Columbia was the chief promoter of musical records during the formative years of the industry, the first to publicize recording "celebrities," and the first to gain wide acceptance of the phonograph for public entertainment (in juke box "arcades," and later with the first spring driven phonograph suitable for home use.) Today, nearly ninety years later, Columbia is the oldest existing record company in the world, its history dating back to the very beginning of commercial recording.

More important than "firsts," however, which are largely a matter of semantics and often of limited practical effect, Columbia and its president Edward Easton saw and acted on the potential of musical recordings when other companies were unsure of the direction recording technology should take. This was a major risk for a small company still financially insecure, and part of a foundering industry. Columbia risked a far greater proportion of its time and capital to building this aspect of the business than any other company, and it thereby came to dominate the recording field for many years. It was the first true record marketer. Through aggressive management and promotion the Columbia company made both business competitors and the public aware that the future of recorded sound lay primarily in "stored music," rather than in business dictation, talking clocks and toys, or a host of other proposed uses.

This article will look at Columbia and its recording program during the company's first tumultuous decade, from 1889 to 1899.

The Columbia Phonograph Co. was founded in January, 1889, in Washington, D.C. by a group of Washington court reporters and businessmen, chief among whom were Edward D. Easton and Wm Herbert Smith. The original

intended purpose of the company seems to have been to market in the Washington area the products of the American Graphophone Co., a manufacturing firm set up in 1887 to exploit the newly invented Bell-Tainter Graphophone. However, due to the organization of the North American Phonograph Co. by Jesse Lippincott in 1888, combining the interests of Edison and Bell-Tainter in one national sales organization, Columbia was instead chartered as one of several "local companies," with exclusive rights to distribute both Edison and American Graphophone products in Delaware, Maryland and the District of Columbia.

For the first months of Columbia's existence the company was relatively dormant, due to the unavailability of dependable machines. But by the end of 1889 the supply situation began to improve, and business was vigorously pursued.

Columbia's original emphasis, like that of the other local companies, was on the uses of the phonograph² as a dictating machine for businessmen. Columbia was ideally located to exploit this market among the thousands of government and government-related offices in Washington.

However, the promoters of the phonograph were also aware of the potential of their machine for home entertainment. Edison himself had begun what was probably the first regular program of music recording in May 1889, for the benefit of his distributors. But this lasted for only about eight months, after which Edison closed his recording studios, claiming that too many of the local distributors were doing their own recording to make his operation profitable, and that there were too many complaints about the quality of his cylinders. (Edison was in and out of the recording business once again in the mid 1890's, and did not return to stay until 1896 or 1897. Throughout most of the 1890's Edison's emphasis was on improving and manufacturing the phonographs themselves, rather than on recording.)³ Some of the other local companies which were founded during 1889 may have begun small scale commercial recording activities in that year as well, although no firm documentation of this has as yet been found.

Recording was a fairly simple matter in those days, because every cylinder phonograph also doubled as a recording machine. Columbia began recording during 1889, its first year in business, and may well have been the first company outside of Edison to do so. In the earliest known brochure published by Columbia, dated Nov. 15, 1889, the following statement appeared under the heading "For the Home!":

"The musical feature is already attracting a great deal of attention and giving most satisfactory entertainment at the homes of subscribers. The company keeps constantly in stock musical records of orchestras, of brass bands of eight pieces, cornet solos, flute, piccolo, violin, organ, piano, banjo, and other musical records which are sold at a reasonable price and give subscribers the opportunity of having at home at all times a high class of music. We also have whistling

solos by artistic whistlers, which are very popular."

That last sentence, singling out "whistling solos by artistic whistlers," is especially important as it dates Columbia's own recording activities to 1889. While some of the records referred to were undoubtedly manufactured by Edison and merely resold by Columbia, Edison had not recorded any whistling records up to this time.⁴ However, Columbia made a specialty of this type of recording, and a few months later was promoting them--by then identified as recorded by Columbia--in exactly the same words used here.

Although there were no song titles or artists given in the November 1889 brochure, the "artistic whistler" was almost certainly a reference to John Yorke AtLee, a government clerk with an unusual talent. His whistling was loud, clear and piercing, sufficient to be heard even through the primitive reproducing equipment of 1889. AtLee became one of Columbia's first and most prominent artists, mostly, it seems, because he could be clearly heard.

Another early Columbia brochure, dated February 1890, contains statements similar to the above, and in addition lists 98 instrumental titles which could be had on order. The list is identical to one published during the previous month by North American, as its "Catalog of Musical Phonograms ... First Edition."⁵ It consists of Edison recordings, although Columbia was by this time making it clear that it also sold its own recordings, featuring local Washington talent.

One of the first sources of Columbia recording talent was the U.S. Marine Band, "The President's Own," which was based in Washington. In the February 1890 brochure Columbia announced with pride that "...this company has arranged with Mr. Henry Jaeger, the celebrated flute and piccolo soloist of the Marine Band, to keep us constantly supplied with records of his best solos, which will undoubtedly prove a great attraction to subscribers." By the middle of the year arrangements had been made to record the full Marine Band--or at least as much of it as could be squeezed in front of a recording horn. The leader of the Marine Band at this time was none other than John Philip Sousa, but it is unlikely that Sousa himself conducted any of the recording sessions. He left that to his assistant conductors.

A third brochure, dated June 1890, also states the availability of locally made recordings, without listing them. The earliest known "catalog" which does list individual Columbia recordings is actually a single typed sheet, dated October 1, 1890. This one page listing was mailed to Columbia's customers, accompanied by the following letter:

"Dear Sir:

The Columbia Phonograph Company announces, with great satisfaction, that it is now ready to furnish promptly to users of the phonograph, records of the music of the cel-

ebreated United States Marine Band.

"After much costly experiment a stock of records has been secured superior in loudness, clearness and character of selections to any band records yet offered.

"These records are now being sold to nearly all the local phonograph companies in the country; and are offered to our subscribers at the regular price for band records, \$2.00 each.

"Enclosed is a list of band selections to which additions will be made from time to time.

"The Columbia Phonograph Company

By (signed) E.D. Easton"

Enclosed was the typed sheet, headed "List of Selections Played by the U.S. Marine Band of Washington, D.C." It contained 49 selections by the band, divided into marches, waltzes, polkas, galops, yorkes and miscellaneous. Most of the selections were standard band concert fare, including a number of recent marches by Sousa--"Semper Fidelis", "The Thunderer" and "Washington Post". Also included were renditions of two highly popular songs of the day, "Little Annie Rooney" (1890) and "Down Went McGinty (Dressed In His Best Suit of Clothes)" (1889). I have seen two versions of this typed list, differing only slightly in spacing and the omission of one title on one list, apparently by mistake. Both are dated Oct. 1, 1890. Could it be that Edward Easton's secretary typed this first Columbia catalog individually for subscribers?

Like many catalogs to follow, this list contained a notice which has proven most frustrating to present day researchers; it is headed "Please destroy all previous lists." Who knows how much documentation of early Columbia history has disappeared forever because of this admonition!⁶

Less than two months after this typewritten list a four page printed brochure appeared dated November 24, 1890, listing 73 selections by the Marine Band and 21 whistling records by AtLee, as well as a general statement that many other selections were available on order. Another flyer, dated December 22, 1890, listed only Marine Band selections, this time 80 of them.

Let's say that great-grandfather had obtained one of these little pamphlets and decided to order a few titles. What he would have received was plain brown-wax cylinders of standard, Edison dimensions: four inches in length by two inches (tapered) in diameter. Each one was individually recorded by Columbia, and would have come wrapped in cotton batten and fitted snugly into a plain, pasteboard container. There were no labels on the cylinders or on the boxes, so a selection could only be identified by the "title slip" in the box, or by the announcement at the beginning of the recording.

These opening announcements, rendered in stentorian tones, were standard practice during the first 15 years or so of recording, both on cylinders and later on discs. One of Columbia's early products would start like this:

"The following record taken for the Columbia Phonograph Company of Washington, D.C., entitled 'The National Fencibles March,' as played by the United States Marine Band."

And then the music would start.

Although there were no labels or other written identification on the cylinders, many had double-edged rims originally intended to hold a thin, ring-like paper label. Columbia recorded on wax blanks obtained from the Edison factory, and Edison had for a time tried such paper labels. They fell out easily, and were soon discontinued. (Not until about ten years later, after mass produced moulded cylinders were introduced, was a method devised for embossing the title on the cylinder itself.)

Columbia did sell three inch cylinders at one time, probably for short letters or other dictation. These were already considered "old style" cylinders by the early 1890's, and it seems unlikely that they were used for musical recordings.⁷ Nor is it likely that the long, narrow, cardboard-based Bell-Tainter cylinders used on American Graphophone's first office machines were used.⁸ Still, a few exceptions may exist.

Prices for Columbia cylinders in the early 1890's varied by selection, generally between \$1 and \$2 for each three to four minute selection. Sales were mostly by mail. Incredibly, it was possible to ship the fragile wax cylinders by regular mail in those days, with little chance of breakage.

THE "JUKE BOX" TRADE

Most of Columbia's production did not go to individual homes, however, but to exhibitors and to other local distributors for use in their coin-operated phonographs. "Coin-in-slot" cylinder machines, located in public places, served as the first introduction to the phonograph for many Americans. The idea of recorded sound was still quite a novelty, and for only a nickel one could hear, through a pair of ear tubes, selections by all manner of bands, singers and monologists. Columbia's recordings were much favored for this purpose because of their loudness and clarity.

The very first Columbia advertisement, in the February 1891 Phonogram, contained testimonials from the Texas, Georgia, Missouri, South Dakota and Florida phonograph companies. Missouri commented that "receipts for slot machines with artistic whistling one third more than any other."

John Y. AtLee and the Marine Band were likely heard on those primitive juke boxes all over the U.S.A.

Columbia itself operated a large number of these one-selection coin machines, and found them to be quite profitable--in fact, one of the mainstays of its business. The June 1890 brochure was the first to mention Columbia's use of the phonograph as a nickel-in-the-slot "Juke box:"⁹

"Automatic Phonographs, to be set in motion by dropping a nickel in the slot, are now ready to be placed; and persons desiring to have them on their premises can make the necessary arrangements with the Columbia Phonograph Company, providing there is a fair chance of profit to the company. These instruments will prove a great attraction in hotels, depots, church fairs, and all places where many people congregate. Particulars, etc., can be had by addressing the company."

Columbia's count of the coin-in-slot machines it operated in the drug stores, hotels and depots of the Washington-Baltimore area stood at "more than 100" in November 1890, 126 in April 1891, and 140 by November 1891.¹⁰ However the company complained during the 1891 convention of phonograph companies that its coin-in-slot business was not yet profitable because the simple coin mechanisms could so easily be "beaten." Reports had it that slugs, wads of paper and even bits of ice from saloon patrons' drinks would set the machines running!

Phonographs and musical recordings could also be had for home entertainment if you were wealthy enough, or if you were a businessman who wanted your machine to do double-duty. For example recording pioneer Russell Hunting stated in the August/September 1892 *Phonogram* that even before he had begun his own recording career he had leased a phonograph for his own private amusement, and was fascinated by it.¹¹ However, the cost of home entertainment was high. Rental of phonographs cost \$40 or more per year, and outright purchase \$150 and up--a lot of money in 1891. In addition the machines were bulky and inconvenient, being powered in most cases by large storage batteries, and were often unreliable. (Columbia attributed part of its early success to its staff of servicemen, who rode around Washington on bicycles, regularly servicing each client's machines.) Nevertheless some people were buying. Another of the local companies reported in 1890 that it had one customer who spent as much as a hundred dollars a week on musical records!

Columbia almost immediately achieved a preeminence among the local companies, based both on its active recording program and on the innovation and drive of its management, led by President Edward Easton. Easton was also a director of the American Graphophone Co., and in that capacity he personally visited all 31 of the local companies during the spring of 1890. The ostensible purpose was to acquaint the Graphophone Co. with their needs, but he no doubt served, incidentally, as an excellent salesman for Columbia's products. Easton was also instrumental in bringing

together the first phonograph industry convention ever held, in May 1890.

COLUMBIA OPERATIONS IN 1891

We have an unusually good picture of Columbia's internal operations and physical plant in 1891, due to some articles about the company printed in the newly established trade paper, The Phonogram. This was only Columbia's third year in business, but the company was already heavily involved in recording and claimed that "we sell more music than all other dealers put together!"¹² In April the Phonogram carried a feature story on Columbia, together with pictures of the company's four story brownstone headquarters at 627 E Street, N.W., Washington. The building was described as follows:

"The main office of the company in Washington is located in the centre of the city, within a quarter of a square of the general Post Office Department, and within a single square of the Patent Office. The display parlors, where the public transact their business, are the handsomest used for the purpose in the country. On the first floor are the rooms of the President and General Manager. The basement is utilized for the electrical department and for repair work. The display parlors are in the second story; the third floor is occupied by the musical department, from which records go to all parts of the United States, and the rooms above for storage, etc.

"Passers-by on the street are daily greeted by the sweetest strains of the world-renowned Marine Band, or the Third Artillery Band, or, perhaps, by the music of the eminent vocalists, instrumental soloists, etc., who are secured for record making and who do their work in this building."

The Boston Transcript had a slightly different view of all this recording activity on E Street.¹³

"The Marine Band, which may be called the President's Own, inasmuch as it supplies all the music at the White House, is rendering itself immortal just at present by having its most harmonious strains bottled in large quantities. When the performers in this wonderful band are all dead and gone, people will still be able to hear it play. Every afternoon it gives a concert in a room on E Street below Seventh, to which no listeners are admitted save five phonographs. The instruments stand in a row on tables, and each of them is equipped with an enormous brass horn. In front of the horns the band discourses the loveliest airs in its repertoire, which are thus recorded on wax cylinders imperishably, for the entertainment of people in all parts of the United States, who have simply to drop a nickel in the

slot and listen to the concert."

Columbia's music director at this time was identified as Professor Bianchi, a former bandmaster himself, who spent much time in "patient experimenting" to achieve the best recorded results.¹⁴ The October 1891 Phonogram published a fascinating photograph of the professor's chief charges, the Marine Band, in the recording room at Columbia.¹⁵ Nine or possibly ten recording horns are visible in this photo, which would seem to conflict with the "five phonographs" reported by the Boston Transcript. Possibly there was more than one horn per phonograph. It would seem that only five or ten cylinders were made at each performance (more for a band, fewer for a soloist). Whatever the exact number, it is evident that recording was a laborious process indeed, and that probably not more than a few hundred records per day could be produced for sale.¹⁶

A number of duplicating schemes were tried in the 1890's, most of which relied on one cylinder machine playing back with the resulting vibrations being mechanically transmitted (by tubes or levers) to another machine set for recording. For a time during the early 1890's Columbia advertised what amounted to a "custom dubbing" operation, offering to manufacture in quantity duplicates of originals sent to it by others. This was done utilizing the Douglass Duplicating Method, to which Columbia had secured exclusive rights. However, neither Douglass nor any of the several other schemes for mechanically duplicating cylinders which were developed during this period proved particularly successful, and many buyers insisted on original records only.

1891

The rapid increase in Columbia's recording activities and publicity is evident in the 1891 catalogs, as compared with the one to four page flyers which had preceded; 10 pages in June 1891 and 14 pages in November. Besides lengthy lists by the Marine Band and AtLee, the June catalog introduced selections by the Third Artillery Band and the first list of vocal titles, accompanied by both piano and orchestra. The singers were not named, but the repertoire consisted exclusively of "light" material, such as vaudeville numbers, sentimental songs and topical items. Among the topical songs were "Near It", "He Ain't In It", "They're After Me" and "It Used To Be Proper But It Don't Go Now". Why these were considered "topical" is not evident, and we will probably never know unless someone finds copies of them. Ethnic humor was also much in evidence, with songs such as "The Whistling Coon" and "Down Went McGinty".

Columbia made no secret of the sources of its talent, almost all of which was local. The catlaog said,

"We draw regularly upon the theatres here for the best songs of the vocalists, serious and comic, visiting Washington. We obtain instrumental solos in the same manner. We have arranged with a well known auctioneer to keep us supplied with auction records covering very many varieties of sales

and interspersed in a humorous way with bids of mock purchasers."

A July 1891 supplemental brochure contained the first listing of dramatic recitations, mostly Shakespearean excerpts. These were said to be by "artists of unquestioned ability", but who these artists were was not revealed. During the summer Edward Easton wrote in the trade press that the noted actor DeWolf Hopper had recently been in Washington, and while there had been engaged to make some cylinders, which were placed on Columbia's coin-in-slot machines around the city. This must have seemed a novel method indeed of promoting Hopper's simultaneous stage appearances. However, there is no evidence that these recordings, which were among the first by a famous stage personality, were placed on general sale.¹⁷

The November catalog listed the first selections by a vocal quartet much featured during Columbia's early days, the Brilliant Quartette¹⁸, including the current sentimental hit song "The Picture That Is Turned To The Wall" (1891). Among the other titles first appearing in the same catalog was that 1890's rouser which is still heard occasionally, "Ta Ra Ra Boom Der E" (1891).

Another recording activity which Columbia pioneered in early 1891 was language instruction. The April 1891 Phonogram explained that,

"For some months past the Columbia company has been giving earnest attention to the development of language-teaching by the phonograph. Dr. Richard S. Rosenthal, the well-known author of the Meisterschaft system, supervises this department--having transferred his headquarters from Boston to Washington for this purpose. In addition to sales of cylinders covering any desired language, of which the company has a considerable wholesale and retail business, Dr. Rosenthal has opened, on the corner of 13th and F streets, a School of Languages. There, at any hour of the day or evening, pupils may be seen gathered about phonographs, studying, with books in hand and tubes in ears, the phonograph educating the ear while the book educates the eye. A visit to this language club is one of the most interesting sights of Washington."

Columbia offered instruction in French, German, Spanish and Italian, recorded on 24 cylinders for each language. Price of books and cylinders for a single language was \$25, which included the right to correspond with Dr. Rosenthal and correction of exercises.¹⁹ Edward Easton himself tried the German course, and reported that he and Mrs. Easton had learned the language in the comfort of their own home using Rosenthal's cylinders.²⁰ By fall special flyers and a full page advertisement in the Phonogram was being devoted to this use of the phonograph alone.

Columbia did a good deal of advertising and promotion in 1891, at least to the trade. Some ads were rather ingenious. One bore this

catchy headline, in bold type:

"YOU AND PRESIDENT HARRISON"

And then, in smaller type,

"... may enjoy together the world renowned U.S. Marine Band if you have a phonograph."²¹

1892-1893

Quite a few new artists were added to the catalog during the next two years. Columbia actively sought and developed talent, both from local sources and by obtaining the services of performers discovered by other local companies (on a non-exclusive basis).

The first vocal recordings by star whistler John Y. AtLee were listed in January 1892, along with the first "negro specialties" by white vaudevillian Billy Golden, including his famous "Turkey In The Straw" (which he later recorded for all major companies). A "limited stock" of banjo and vocal records by Al Reeves was announced in October 1892, the first banjo player to be identified by Columbia.

The first female vocalist to be named appeared in June 1893. Miss Susie Davenport performed 14 titles, including the by then ubiquitous "Ta Ra Ra Boom Der E" and the popular novelty "Daddy Wouldn't Buy Me A Bow Wow". Evidently these were not very successful--the female voice was notoriously hard to record--as Miss Davenport appeared in only one known catalog.

Another female appearing in the same catalog was Miss Emma Williams, performing on the xylophone and piano.

One well publicized acquisition was popular tenor George H. Diamond, who, it was said, was "obtained at considerable expense" and "whose songs are so highly appreciated by users of the phonograph throughout the country." Eighty-two titles by Diamond were listed in a flyer dated February 9, 1893, consisting of 35 sentimental songs and 47 comic songs, all priced at \$1.25 each. However, customers were advised that "owing to the limited number of each selection" second choices should be indicated.

Mr. Diamond's selections were mostly popular songs, such as "My Sweetheart's The Man In The Moon" and the baseball novelty "Slide, Kelly, Slide". However, there were also some interesting topical songs ("When Ireland's Free") and several "low" comic songs. Just what the term "low" referred to in this context is not certain. Perhaps these songs were thought to contain a coarser type of humor, not suitable for every Victorian ear. Among these "low" comic songs were "The Law Won't Allow Me To Do It", "Washington, After Twelve O'Clock At Night" and "If I Were Only Just Behind Her". I have heard what is perhaps the only surviving copy of "If I Were Only Just Behind Her". In it Diamond tells how everyone is singing "Ta Ra Ra Boom Der E". After a series of tribulations at the hands of various people, he is ready to sneak up behind each one of them and give them a "Ta Ra Ra Boom Der E"!

The April 1893 catalog is the first known containing pictures of some Columbia artists, including AtLee, Diamond (apparently selling well, as he was already down to 65 titles), "Pat Brady" and Russell Hunting. Brady and Hunting, and possibly Diamond as well, had previously recorded for other local companies and it is probable that Columbia obtained their records for resale in its Washington territory. The "Brady" series of Irish monologues was originated for the Ohio Phonograph Company by Dan Kelly, who began recording around 1890,²² while Hunting began with the New England Phonograph Company at about the same time,²³ specializing in comic stories about "Michael Casey".

There are few sales figures surviving from the early 1890's, but an item in the Phonogram of December 1892 offers an interesting clue as to how many copies a "best seller" like Dan Kelly might sell in the limited market and with the limited production capabilities of this period. The number of Brady cylinders sold to December 1892 (i.e., covering approximately two years) was said to be about 5000.

REPERTOIRE

Popular music in the nineties had a diversity which might surprise some people today. Among the types of songs included in Columbia's 1892 catalogs were parodies, topical songs and political campaign songs.

Parodies of current hits are practically a lost art in today's popular music. In the 1890's, as now, the biggest hits were heard over and over again, in vaudeville, at band concerts, and at the parlor piano. They were ripe targets for satire. Columbia's recorded parodies included "The Picture That Is Turned Toward The Wall", "Maggie Murphy's Home" ("Maggie Murphy's Joint") and the enormously popular "Down Went McGinty" (I'll Paralyze The Man That Says 'McGinty').

Topical songs were also popular, and the 1892 catalog included an interesting recording by the Brilliant Quartette titled "The Fight For Home And Honor (Homestead, Pa.)". Homestead was the scene of a violent strike at the Carnegie steel mills in which 300 Pinkerton guards battled strikers. Seven guards and 11 strikers were killed and many were wounded in rioting on July 6, 1892, and the chairman of the company was wounded by an assassin shortly thereafter. This recording, made at the time of this labor turmoil, would certainly be an interesting social document if any copies are still in existence. Unfortunately very few cylinders of any description appear to have survived from these very early days of recording.

Campaign songs for the 1892 election, which pitted incumbent President Benjamin Harrison against former President Grover Cleveland, were announced in August. Many of these were concerned with issues in the election (e.g., "What Shall The Tariff Be?"), but both the Democrats and the Republicans had a "Boom de Ay" song. And in what was probably one of the earliest phonograph recordings about the phonograph itself, John Y. AtLee sang "You Drop A Nickel, We Do The Rest"--referring to the coin-

in-slot phonograph.

AtLEE AND THE MARINE BAND

AtLee was a fascinating character. According to an item in the Phonogram he announced his own recordings, sometimes preceding his announcement with a few chirps and trills, and was accompanied on piano by Professor Lusby of the Marine Band.²⁴ However, one AtLee cylinder I have heard (from ca. 1893-94) is announced as follows:

"'The Bowery', from 'A Trip To Chinatown', as sung by Mr. John Yorke AtLee for the Columbia Phonograph Company of Washington, D.C., accompanied on piano by Professor Gaisberg."

Fred Gaisberg, one of the true pioneers of the industry, many years later wrote an autobiography (The Music Goes Round) in which he included this engaging portrait of the indefatigable Mr. AtLee.²⁵

"With his pompous announcements (AtLee) introduced each performance in tones which made the listener visualize a giant. But in reality he was a mere shrimp of a man, about five feet in his socks, that little government clerk with a deep, powerful voice. Of this and his fine flowing moustache he was mighty proud. After his office hours as a wage-slave of the U.S. Government, from nine till four, he would return to his modest home where I would join him. In the parlor stood an old upright piano and a row of three phonographs, loaned him by the Columbia Phonograph Company. Together we would turn out, in threes, countless records of performances of "Whistling Coon", "Mocking Bird" and "The Laughing Song". I can still hear that reverberating announcement, "THE MOCKING-BIRD" BY JOHN YORKE ATLEE, ARTISTIC WHISTLER, ACCOMPANIED BY PROFESSOR GAISBERG."

"I was then only sixteen. Some professor!"

But Columbia's star attraction continued to be the Marine Band. They were featured in bold headlines on the cover of every Columbia catalog, and in its numerous trade advertisements. This was probably the first example of a concerted promotion campaign on behalf of a particular recording artist. An item in the March 1892 Phonogram noted that the band had recently departed Washington for a tour of the U.S., and added that,²⁶

"Previous to their departure they were engaged every day by the Columbia Phonograph Company. An immense stock of records was thus laid in, the largest ever thus accumulated in the business."

How tired they must have become of playing "Semper Fidelis" over and over again! The same article reflected Columbia's emphasis on recording in general, saying,²⁶

"The sale of musical records by the Columbia company is developing with great rapidity. More records were sold in March than ever before in the history of that company, which now claims the bulk of the musical record business in the United States."

One reason for Columbia's aggressiveness in developing the record business was necessity. Sales of phonographs as dictating machines had fallen off sharply, and the original Bell-Tainter Graphophone in particular--with which Columbia was closely associated--had proven a failure. Columbia continued to distribute Edison equipment, under the North American umbrella organization. The ties which Columbia still had with Edison at this time were exemplified by the full page picture of Mr. Edison appearing in the June 1892 Columbia catalog, which also contained an illustration of Edison's "perfected phonograph" and directions for its use.

But while Columbia managed to prosper, the American Graphophone Company did not. No Bell-Tainter machines had been manufactured for more than two years²⁷, and the economic depression which hit the U.S. in 1893 no doubt provided the coup de grace. In mid 1893 the officers of Columbia began the consolidation of the two firms, a merger which was completed in 1895. Columbia remained the sales and recording branch, and American Graphophone the phonograph manufacturing arm.

Although many of the other local companies were in deep trouble during this period, some did continue recording, notably the New Jersey, Ohio, New England and Louisiana companies. None appear to have approached Columbia in sales, however. For a time the parent North American company continued to sell musical cylinders to the local companies, for resale, but this ceased when that organization went bankrupt in 1894.

Columbia's business was sufficiently prosperous to allow it to move to a new and larger building at 919 Pennsylvania Avenue, late in 1893. The company was always very promotion minded, and looking for new ways to expose the phonograph to the public. The new building provided space for a novel experiment which proved to be both an excellent advertisement and a financial bonanza. This was the "phonograph parlor", a sort of elaborately decorated amusement arcade devoted solely to long lines of coin-in-slot "juke boxes". Frank Dorian, a longtime Columbia official, later described it this way:²⁸

"A continuous line of mirrors surmounted by electric lights on brackets, ran along each side wall for the depth of the parlor. A paneled ceiling with scores of electric lights outlining the panels and a color scheme of tasteful character made the parlor a very attractive place, while the lavish use of electric lights greatly enhanced its appeal to the public ...

"Some idea of the success of this novel plan may be

gained from the fact that the receipts from the slot machines paid for the rental of the entire premises, and this proved equally true of similar places opened (later) in other cities...

"In all of those places, the most prominent part of the premises was given up to the slot machine parlor and the arrangement, decoration and lavish display of electric lights closely followed the original installation in Washington ... fifty, sixty, or even as many as one hundred slot machines were arranged around the walls or grouped back to back in the open floor space, sufficiently far apart to allow visitors to make their way from one machine to another. It was no unusual experience in all of our establishments to have the crowd so dense that people would line up to take their turn at each machine, and others would be waiting on the sidewalk outside for a chance to get in."

1894

By 1894 Columbia no longer limited its recording to the talent passing through Washington theaters. Correspondence has been located which indicates that Columbia in 1894-95 bought both master and duplicated recordings from the U.S. Phonograph Co. of New Jersey, for resale through its own catalog. Included were such well-known artists as Len Spencer and Issler's Orchestra. Columbia probably made similar deals with other companies as well, in order to expand its artist roster. In addition the April 1894 catalog states that "we bring eminent artists here from New York, Boston, Chicago and other cities at great expense, for the express purpose of making records of their specialties." Among these were Silas Leachman of Chicago (some of his later cylinders were announced that way!) and New York tenor George J. Gaskin. A typed list dated April 11, 1894, announced a series of records by the Standard Quartette, who were described as "gentlemen of color". This must have been one of the first Negro groups to record for Columbia or any other company. (The first Black recording artist was George W. Johnson, "The Whistling Coon", who began with Edison in 1890 or 1891, and who later recorded for Columbia as well). Not to neglect local talent, the same flyer announced some yodling records by one Eddie Giguere, "the well known yodler of the Police Patrol Company".

Selections by the Marine Band continued to be best sellers, necessitating many hours by that organization in Columbia's third floor studio. Columbia stressed in 1894 that all Marine Band cylinders were originals--"no duplicates made or sold"--although the company had previously offered duplicates of Marine Band and other recordings.²⁹

Researcher Ray Wile has discovered an interesting court case which indicates just how important the Marine Band was to Columbia during this period. In 1893 George E. Tewkesbury and Len Spencer spirited some phonographs into Washington and recorded a series of Marine Band cylinders of their own, probably for sale as masters to other companies (although they

denied this). Columbia got wind of the scheme and Messrs. Easton and Cromelin rushed into court, on the same morning the recording commenced, to ask for a speedy injunction to stop the interlopers, who they accused of operating in "great secrecy" to undercut Columbia's exclusive and highly profitable Marine Band business. The court eventually agreed and issued an injunction, preventing the two outsiders from making any further recordings within Columbia's Washington territory.³⁰ According to its franchise, Columbia had exclusive rights to all exploitation of the phonograph within its territory--both sales and recording. Outside of its territory was another matter, but perhaps Columbia obtained an exclusive contract with the Marine Band to prevent the band from dropping into other recording studios while on tour.

In January 1894 Columbia hired recording expert Calvin Child as director of its music department. Child had previously been with the New England Phonograph Company for three and a half years. He later went on to play a major role in the recording activities of the Victor Talking Machine Company.

Columbia repertoire continued to stress popular songs, from vaudeville and the parlor music stand. Not all songs which were big sellers in sheet music went over well on cylinders, however. "After The Ball" (1892), which is often cited as having been a huge seller of sheet music and probably the #1 hit of the nineties, was not even listed until 1894. Then Columbia finally issued a whistling version by AtLee and a vocal version by George E. Terry, but the ballad was never featured as widely as many now forgotten songs. Likewise the well remembered "Daisy Bell" ("On A Bicycle Built For Two"), also published in 1892, was not listed until 1894, and then only briefly.

A series of speeches by famous men was introduced in September, among them "Gladstone's Message to Edison", "Edwin Booth's 'Othello'" and the first recording of a phonograph standby of the 1890's, "The Mad Ravings of John McCullough". The "Ravings" were supposedly the madhouse ravings of a Shakespearean actor gone insane, and consisted of bits and pieces of famous scenes all flung together. It was quite popular, and was carried in the catalog for many years. With unusual candor Columbia admitted that all of these speech recordings were "imitations--good ones too--of the voices indicated. This, however, will not make their possession less desirable." It would certainly not make their possession any less desirable today--try and find one!

1895: FIRST OFFICES OUTSIDE WASHINGTON

1895 represented a major turning point in the history of Columbia. It was a year of important changes in the phonograph industry as well. North American had been declared bankrupt in 1894. Edison was tied up in the resulting litigation and unable to manufacture his own machines. Many local companies, denied their source of supply, were in desperate straits, but Columbia prospered, buoyed by the Washington business machine market, its established musical recording trade, its affiliation with the American Graphophone Co. (guaranteeing a supply of machines) and not least,

by the aggressive management of Edward Easton and his associates.

After a period of inactivity, American Graphophone had brought out a \$75 spring driven model in 1894. The combination of lowered price and simplified motive power (compared to the old batteries) was a considerable step forward.

Freed from its regional limitations by the collapse of North American, Columbia almost immediately opened its first office outside of its original territory, at 1159 Broadway, New York City, in 1895. Another office was opened in Atlantic City, where the Columbia coin-in-slot phonograph parlor became one of the sensations of the boardwalk. (A new, affiliated company, the Columbia Phonograph Co. Gen'l, had been incorporated in May 1894 to develop business outside of the Washington territory. However, it appears that Columbia was selling its cylinders--by mail--in other parts of the country even before that. During the 1892 convention of phonograph companies a number of companies complained about Columbia "poaching" in their territories.)

Columbia's chief competitors in the recording field at this time were the New Jersey and Ohio companies. In addition the first flat disc records sold in the U.S. were marketed on a small scale by Emile Berliner, in Columbia's home territory of Washington, D.C., in late 1894.³¹ Most of Columbia's cylinder competition would not survive the decade, but Berliner's disc record would become a potent competitor in years to come.

The upheaval in the phonograph industry brought dangers as well as opportunities for Columbia. Perhaps the most serious threat involved the supply of blank cylinders on which it recorded. Columbia, and most of its competitors, recorded on wax blanks obtained from the Edison factory. With the collapse of the Edison distributorship arrangement this source dried up, endangering the entire Columbia operation. Foreseeing that this might occur Columbia in 1893 undertook a bit of industrial espionage and induced a former Edison employee to reconstruct for it the complex, and secret, Edison formula for making cylinder blanks. This took some time and many unsuccessful attempts, but finally during late 1894 the "secret" process was successfully reproduced and Columbia could begin making its own blanks. Thus for the first time the company was fully self-sufficient, making its own phonographs, blanks and recordings.

As the recording trade began to grow more rapidly, Columbia made some significant changes. A "temporary" catalog which came out in March 1895 was the last of the old style, small format (about 3 1/2" x 5 1/2") booklets to be issued. In mid 1895 a large format catalog was issued which was the first not to headline the Marine Band on the cover (although their records were included). Instead, a broad spectrum of talent was featured. This was also the first catalog in which Columbia used a permanent numbering system for its records.³² Previous catalogs had listed simply artists and titles, and that's the way customers ordered. The new numbering system was a simple block system which numbered all bands and orchestras from 1 to 165, all instrumental soloists in the

1000's, all vocals in the 2000's, and all talking records in the 3000's. This system was used for about a year, and was replaced by a much more elaborate block system in the August 1896 catalog.

The mid 1895 flyer was also the first to contain a single standard price for cylinders, mentioned in the catalog itself. Previously prices had been rather variable, depending on the cost of recording each artist. Prices were now set at 60¢ per cylinder, or \$6 per dozen, a rather substantial reduction from the \$1 to \$2 range prevalent during the early 1890's. Perhaps Columbia was engaging in price competition with the other local companies, or with Berliner's little discs.

Later in 1895, or possibly in early 1896, a full sized catalog appeared (3 1/4"x9", 16 pages) which added new selections to the numerical blocks perviously mentioned. This catalog can be identified by the prominent statement that "The Norris & Hyde Transposing Piano is used for all accompaniments in Columbia records" on the inside cover. As ever, Columbia was not shy in its boasts in this catalog:

"The success of Columbia records has been unprecedented; and the demand for them from all parts of the world has long been great. Our army of patrons knows our records are the best and are cheap only in price."

Ordering instructions requested buyers to specify whether the records were to be used with horn or with hearing tubes--lack of volume was still a problem--and to name alternate choices in case the records wanted were no longer available.

Although a wide variety of titles was offered, about 575 in the late 1895 catalog, depth of stock was not great. A free exchange for other cylinders was also offered to any unsatisfied customer, and worn out records could even be returned in partial trade for new ones--Columbia could shave the old ones down and reuse them.

Probably the most important addition to Columbia's talent roster in 1895 was Sousa's Grand Concert Band. John Philip Sousa had been director of the Marine Band when it began recording for Columbia in 1890, but he had resigned to form his own organization in 1892, whereupon the Marine Band conductorship was assumed by Professor Francesco Fanciulli (who was mentioned and pictured in several Columbia catalogs). For some reason Columbia did not sign up the new Sousa Band, and Sousa appears to have first recorded on his own for the New Jersey Phonograph Co. in early 1893.³³ However, there is a letter in the Columbia files signed by Sousa which lists 14 titles and states, "the 14 selections in the above list have been played by my band for the Columbia Phonograph Co. of Washington, D.C., March 10, 1895." This was probably Sousa's first session with Columbia. A printed flyer followed announcing the 14 selections, and stating that these were "the only Sousa Band records that have been made for more than two years."³⁴ It added that "the instrumentation of the band is larger than any ever before engaged in making records for the

graphophone or phonograph". Since the Marine Band was evidently using about 15 or 20 band members in its 1891 recordings,³⁵ this suggests that recording techniques had been sufficiently improved to allow even larger numbers by 1895--although probably nowhere near the band's full complement of approximately 50 members.

A number of Sousa and Marine Band members regularly recorded for Columbia as soloists, and 1895 marked the debut of one of the most famous of that elite group--25 year old trombonist Arthur Pryor. Four selections by Pryor were listed in the mid 1895 catalog, described as "the only records of Pryor's solos ever made." Also appearing for the first time in the 1895 catalog were recording pioneers Dan W. Quinn, J.W. Myers (both previously with other companies) and Lilla Coleman. Miss Coleman was the first female vocalist to be listed since Miss Davenport's efforts in 1893, but she was evidently not much more successful. She was listed in only this one catalog. Although "clear, sweet and distinct," her cylinders were admitted to be "suitable only for use with the tubes-- NOT ADAPTED FOR HORN REPRODUCTION" (i.e., not very loud).

The mid 1895 flyer also marked Columbia's first recordings in a foreign language, a series of five Spanish songs by F. de la Rosa, two of them accompanied by castanets. During the next two years many other foreign vocalists were added to the catalog, singing in Italian, French and German.

1896

A rather long gap occurs before the next positively dated catalog, in August 1896, but this is another substantial listing. It totals 15 pages and 453 titles, plus "a large assortment of miscellaneous records ... of which there are not a sufficient number of cylinders of each selection to warrant listing them in our catalogue." The first Columbia records by cornetist Jules Levy were announced in this catalog, with the titles of 13 selections listed in a separate flyer included with the catalog.³⁶ Levy was a major and no doubt expensive acquisition for Columbia. He was by then probably the most famous concert cornetist in the world. Columbia's unrestrained prose was in this case probably justified ("The Great and Only LEVY!! -- Superb! -- Incomparable!"), although the old man had begun his concert career in the 1850's and was by this time well past his prime.

Columbia's advertising claims, though truthful, must often be read carefully, and the flyer announcing the records by Levy is a good example. It states that "he had never performed for the Graphophone before..." This is undoubtedly true, but "Graphophone" was a Columbia trade name. Levy had in fact been among the first artists to make test recordings for Edison's phonograph in the late 1880's,³⁷ and he made a number of commercially issued recordings for Edison/North American in the early 1890's.³⁸

Other selections introduced in the 1896 catalog included Edward M.

Favor's "McGinty At the Living Pictures," which was to remain popular for many years. (This was not, as one might suspect, about motion pictures, but rather about the "human tableaux" which were quite popular in theaters at the time.) Under "Special Talking Records & Novelties" appeared "The Mad Ravings of John McCullough," "Gladstone's Speech on Self-Help and Truth" and "Harry Hayward's Last Words On the Gallows"-- a recording reputedly made by a convicted murderer on the night of his execution, December 11, 1895.³⁹ Such sideshow fare was extremely popular with phonograph patrons in the 1890's, giving some indication of the low esteem in which the "talking machine" was still held.

Another series of political campaign records, this time for the 1896 election, was announced by special flyer. These included reproductions of Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech and McKinley's acceptance speech at the Republican convention (not, of course, by the original orators), plus an assortment of campaign songs.

All Columbia cylinders were renumbered in the August, 1896 catalog, which introduced a new, much more elaborate block numbering system. This system assigned a separate block of numbers to each principal artist. It remained in effect for almost five years, until the 1901 catalog replaced it with a modern consecutive numbering system beginning at 31300. However, records numbered in the old 1896 blocks which remained in the catalog past 1901 retained their original numbers. Thus Sousa's marches were available under their original 500-series numbers until the end of Columbia cylinder production in 1908.

1897: PHONOGRAPHS FOR THE HOME

1897 was the first true boom year for the recording industry. Low priced spring driven phonographs had finally been introduced which were suitable for home use, and this multiplied the demand for records. Edison was back in production, and Berliner's little 7" single-sided discs were being widely sold. More than 500,000 cylinders and discs were probably produced in that year, a huge increase over any previous year.⁴⁰ But this was only the beginning. In 1898 this figure was roughly tripled, and in 1899 almost 2.8 million discs, cylinders and blanks were produced, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Cylinder companies active in late 1896, according to a new trade paper, the Phonoscope, included Columbia, the Chicago Talking Machine Co., U.S. Phonograph Co., Walcutt & Leeds, Bettini, American Talking Machine Co. and the New England and Ohio Phonograph companies. In addition phonograph singers J.W. Myers and Russell Hunting were selling their own recordings directly to buyers. Nevertheless Columbia was in the strongest position of all these companies, and it pressed its advantage. Prices were reduced to 50¢ each, \$5 per dozen, in November, 1896, and new sales offices were opened. As of mid 1897 Columbia was still claiming to "make and sell more records than all other manufacturers and dealers combined."⁴¹

The company's executive offices and recording studios moved to New York on January 1, 1897. Early Columbia cylinders had been announced like this:⁴²

"'If I Were Only Just Behind Her', sung by George H. Diamond, record taken for the Columbia Phonograph Company of Washington, D.C."

But after the move, this was changed to the following:

"'And The Parrot Said', a comic song sung by Mr. Will F. Denny for the Columbia Phonograph Company of New York City."

Thus one clue to the date of early Columbia cylinders is the city mentioned. If it is Washington, the cylinder was made in 1896 or earlier; if New York, it was made after January 1897; if "New York and Paris", it is probably from 1898 or later. This method is not infallible, since the city was not always mentioned. Later it was dropped from all announcements.

The announcements on Columbia cylinders were the subject of special mention in the June 1897 catalog, in connection with the recordings of the newly organized Columbia Orchestra.

"The announcements are as loud and distinct as only Mr. (Len) Spencer can make them, and his quaint negro humorisms, laugh, shouts, etc., so familiar to talking machine patrons, add much to the popularity of these records."

In addition to a long list by the Columbia Orchestra, there were recordings by Sousa's Grand Concert Band, Gilmore's Band and the perennial U.S. Marine Band. The Marine Band had been dropped from the catalog when Columbia moved its studios to New York, as it did not seem practical to bring the band from Washington to New York for recording sessions. But so great was the demand--according to Columbia--that all obstacles were overcome and new recordings by the Marine Band were once again available in the June 1897 catalog.

Columbia's recording director at this time was identified as Victor Emerson, formerly with the U.S. Phonograph Co. and the New Jersey Phonograph Co. Emerson joined Columbia in late 1896⁴³, and was a major figure in the company's recording activities for the next 19 years. In 1915 he left to found the Emerson Phonograph Co.

Until 1897 the classical repertoire had been represented only by band versions of various operatic airs. But now the first faint glimmerings of a classical vocal repertoire appeared. During the spring of 1897 Columbia announced that "operatic choruses by a well trained company have been recorded with splendid results. This is something never before attempted. Every owner of a talking machine should have these records."⁴⁴ However splendid these may have been, they never appeared

in the catalog. The June catalog did list six titles in Italian by E. Rosin, including arias from Faust and Aida. Perhaps more indicative of the state of operatic recording at this time, however, the same catalog also offered an English version of "Ah, I Have Signed To Rest Me" from Il Trovatore, rendered in piercing tones by popular Irish tenor George J. Gaskin. I have heard this cylinder and it is dreadful!

1898: THE PHONOGRAPH AT WAR

A few months later the country found itself at war. The Spanish-American War was America's first foreign war in half a century, and patriotic fervor filled popular music as it did the popular press. Columbia's lists quickly filled with war-related numbers, both sentimental ("Break The News To Mother" by Gaskin) and martial ("Arouse, Columbia, Arouse" by Quinn). Songs about the sinking of the U.S. battleship Maine in Santiago harbor, February 18, 1898, appear to have been available immediately after the event. These included "The Wreck of the Maine" and "Avenge The Good Ship Maine" by Gaskin, "The Brave Crew of the Maine" by Quinn and of course "Remember The Maine" by both Quinn and Denny.

The March 1898 Phonoscope commented that an innovation,

"...if we have war, will be in the use of the phonograph. Several phonograph companies are preparing to bottle up the din of battle, the shouts of cavalry charging and the roar of artillery, all of which they will place on draught subsequently in their nickel-in-slot machines."

War was declared in April, and ended less than four months later with the capitulation of Spain on August 12th. Two special flyers from this period have survived, one entitled "War Songs For Talking Machines" and the other "Old Glory Set To Music". The prose was stirring.

"You can have the music of the war on your Graphophone. The full list of Columbia records covers some old favorites, ringing with patriotism, and many new songs and band selections of a stirring character."

The accompanying illustration depicted soldiers, sailors manning naval guns, and amid it all a Columbia Graphophone blaring forth "Battle Songs of the Times".

Perhaps one of the most interesting war-related recordings was issued just after the hostilities ended. This was "The Bugle Calls of the Rough Riders in Their Charge Up San Juan Hill", rendered by Bugler Cassi of the Rough Riders.

"He it was who sounded the bugle calls that summoned our brave troopers to victory at San Juan, and he has made a record that is a reproduction of all the bugle calls of the day at San Juan, the calls being interpolated with the

orders for the assembly, the charge, and for the other movements of the troops, and including 'Taps' played at the graves of Hamilton Fish and Captain Capron."

Cassi's record, which he also made for other companies, was announced in an undated Columbia special supplement. The same supplement also included an orchestral "descriptive" of "The Capture of Santiago", full of bugle calls, the thunder of battle and interpolated martial music, and Russell Hunting's "Casey As A Rough Rider".

Columbia did not limit its attention to war-related songs in 1898. Some of the new ragtime and ragtime-influenced numbers⁴⁵ were beginning to appear on the lists, including banjoist Vess L. Ossman's "Rag Time Medley", "Darky Tickle" and "Eli Green's Cake Walk", Spencer & Ossman's "My Gal's A High Born Lady" and several versions of "At A Georgia Camp Meeting". Perhaps the first of this genre to appear in the Columbia catalog was Kerry Mills' cakewalk "Rastus On Parade", announced in August 1896 by the Marine Band.

Popular songs identified with the ragtime vogue as well. Len Spencer's vocal version of "You Been A Good Ole Wagon But You're Done Broke Down" and "I Love My Little Honey" were both identified in the catalog as "rag time melodies", and there was even a number by Spencer entitled "The Wench With The Rag Time Walk."

A notable addition to Columbia's artist roster in 1898 was Bernard Begue, of the Grand Opera, Paris, who recorded necessarily brief excerpts from Carmen, Rigoletto, L'Africana, Les Huguenots and William Tell. A less prestigious, but probably more popular addition was Cal Stewart, whose first "Uncle Josh" yankee monologues appeared in the 1898 catalog. Stewart's long recording career was just beginning at this time.⁴⁶

A sure sign of changing times was the disappearance of pioneer whistler John Y. AtLee from the catalog in 1898. No longer did a performer need only the ability to make himself heard through crude recording apparatus to become a successful recording artist. AtLee made a few discs for Berliner, and was last heard from in early 1899 managing the phonograph department of the Duston-Smith Piano Company, in Charleston, South Carolina.⁴⁷

Columbia attempted a coup of sorts in the popular recording field in 1898 by signing a large number of recording artists to exclusive contracts for the following year. This was unheard of, as singers traditionally worked for a few dollars per performance for any company willing to pay them. Since many performances were necessary to secure any quantity of records to sell, the singers made a good living. But the 1898 catalog carried a reproduction of a letter signed by ten artists, in which they agreed to give their "exclusive services as makers of talking machine records to the Columbia Phonograph Co. during the ensuing year." Those signing were banjoist Vess L. Ossman, Negro singer George W. Johnson, singers Dan W. Quinn, George J. Gaskin, Steve Porter, Len Spencer (who

also signed for the Spencer Trio and the Imperial Minstrels), Russell Hunting, Will F. Denny and Miss Minnie Emmett, and flute and piccolo wizard George Schweinfest. Tom Clark signed for the Columbia Orchestra and the Gilmore Brass Quartet. Also claimed as exclusive to Columbia, in separate promotional announcements, were singers Billy Golden, J.J. Fisher, Roger Harding and J.W. Myers. If Columbia could have kept all of these phonograph artists tied up it certainly would have had a corner on the musical recording trade, but the arrangement evidently was not renewed and all except Clark were back busily making records for any and all companies by 1899. The degree to which all companies drew on the same small talent pool in the early days is truly remarkable.

Columbia's talent was kept busy not only in the recording studio, but also promoting the company's products in other ways. During the long summer and autumn months of 1898 Columbia staged nightly concerts in the spacious display parlors of its building at 27th Street and Broadway in New York, attracting thousands of passersby in to hear live entertainment by such luminaries as Billy Golden, George W. Johnson, yodler George P. Watson, xylophonist Charles P. Lowe and monologist/singer Russell Hunting. All of this was accompanied, no doubt, by a pitch for Columbia Graphophones and records. Piano accompaniment was by Fred Hylands and the program was staged by Harry Spencer, Len's younger brother. The Phonoscope reported that fully 3,050 persons had visited the Columbia showrooms on a single day during this period, and a picture shows a huge crowd enjoying the entertainment.⁴⁸

Two principal catalogs have been identified from 1898, both 3¼"x6", both 32 pages, and with almost identical contents. One is illustrated with drawings of artists and bears the date 1898 on the cover; this appears to have been issued during the summer. The other, which is not dated and not illustrated, is approximately contemporary and may be a dealer's special printing, as it also bears no company addresses.

A NATIONAL--AND INTERNATIONAL--BUSINESS

The years 1895 to 1898 marked an enormous expansion in Columbia's business. As of early 1895 the company had still been a local operation, more or less limited to the Washington, D.C. area. By the end of 1898 --the company's tenth year--its offices spanned the U.S. continent and Europe as well.

Part of this aggressive program of expansion was accomplished by moving into territories whose own local companies had failed in the industry shake-out of the mid 1890's. But Columbia was strong enough to begin absorbing some important and active competitors as well, such as the Chicago Talking Machine Co. in early 1897, and the Northern Talking Machine Co. of Buffalo a few months later. During a three year span Columbia opened offices in St. Louis (1896) Philadelphia, Chicago, Buffalo (all 1897) and San Francisco (1898).

It must have been an especially proud day for Edward Easton and his

associates when the doors of the first foreign office were opened, at 34 Boulevard des Italiens in Paris, in late 1897. Even as the U.S. expansion was going on, exploitation of the foreign market occupied a large part of the energies of Columbia's top management. Additional offices were opened in Berlin in 1899 and in London in 1900. Each included the opulent coin-in-slot "phonograph parlor" which Columbia had pioneered in Washington in 1893. The idea of a coin-operated phonograph arcade was a hit everywhere, although the repertoire placed on the machines had to be varied from country to country. According to Frank Dorian, who opened that first office in Paris, the French gave their ten-centime pieces to the operatic and "high class" selections, while in other countries patrons preferred lighter popular fare.

1899: END OF AN ERA

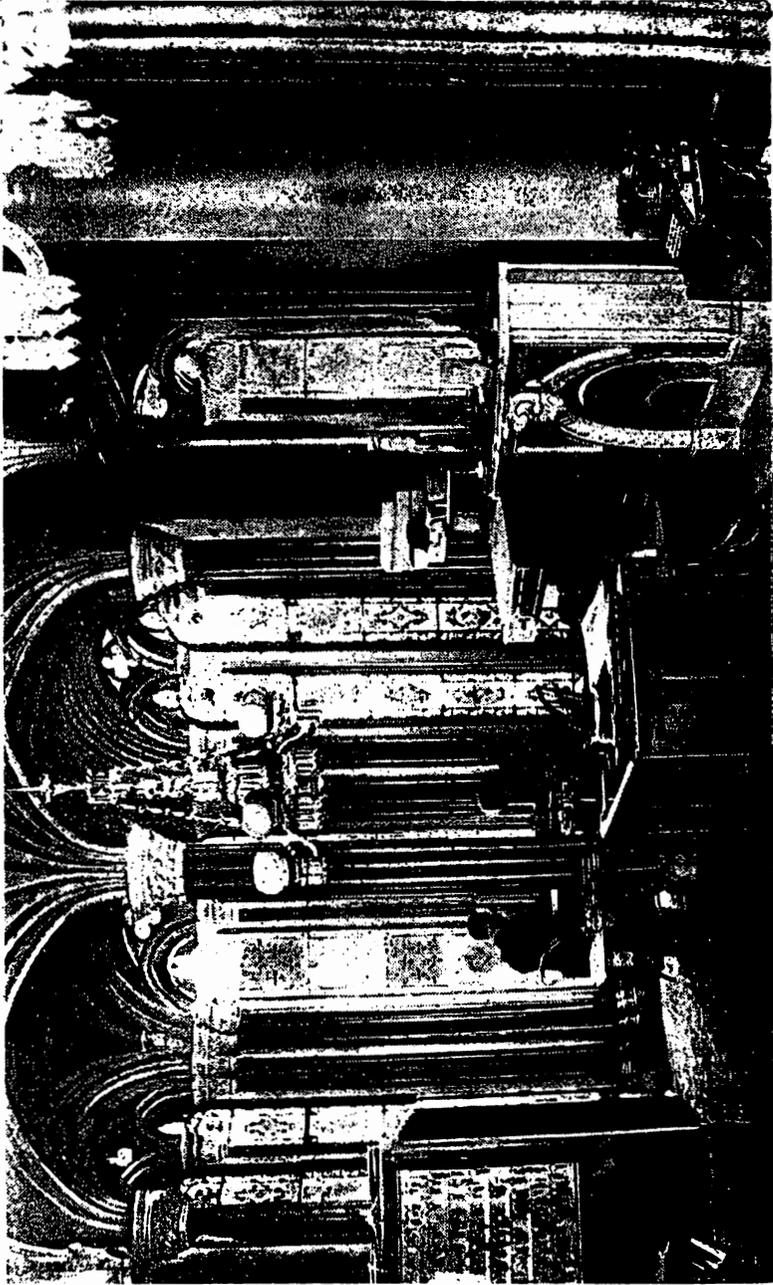
1899 marked the beginning of a period of considerable confusion and turmoil in the phonograph industry, much of it centered on bitter and protracted patent fights. Columbia was very much at the center of this, as it aggressively sought to strengthen its position in the cylinder field and to expand into discs, despite the strong patent position held there by Berliner. Present day writers tend to romanticize this period somewhat, with "good guys" and "bad guys" and clearcut rights and wrongs. But by this time so many men had contributed to the phonograph and had worked for its commercial success that a major showdown was probably inevitable.

Columbia's first tentative steps into disc recording involved the "Toy" disc Graphophone in 1899, which came with a small supply of little discs containing nursery rhymes. The machine was hand cranked and the discs played from the inside out. Columbia did not begin to regularly issue discs until the latter part of 1901, however, under the Climax label.

In the cylinder field Columbia introduced five inch diameter wax "Grand" cylinders in November, 1898, forcing Edison to follow suit. Formerly these oversized cylinders had been used only for studio master recordings. Despite their manifest impracticality for home use, Columbia continued to issue these behemoths for several years. They were extremely fragile and required the same cabinet space for five as would hold 36 standard size cylinders, yet they contained the same short three minutes of music (albeit louder and with supposedly better fidelity). Any selection in the Columbia catalog could be had in Grand format by ordering the regular catalog number prefixed with a "G". The advertising for the Grand was certainly up to Columbia's flamboyant standards: "Speak to it in undertones, it repeats in THUNDERTONES." It never did catch on.

The early days were by now clearly over. Columbia, which had been one of the principal pioneers of commercial recorded music, first as a local, then as a national and international concern, was about to enter its greatest days, under the firm guidance of founder Edward Easton. Its dominance of the recording industry ended with the founding and phenomenal success of the Victor Talking Machine Company (1901), but its greatest

artistic and commercial success was yet to come in the great phonograph boom years of the early 1900's.



Columbia was very proud of its ornate display parlors, on the second floor of its building. The two men seem to be standing near an early treadle-type Graphophone. (1891).

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Without the willing cooperation of persons and organizations such as these serious research into the early history of recording would be difficult if not impossible.

FOOTNOTES

1. Oliver Read and Walter L. Welch, From Tin Foil to Stereo: Evolution of the Phonograph (Indianapolis: Howard W. Sams & Co., 1959). See for example pp. 57, 59, 107-109.
2. Strictly speaking, Edison's machine was called a Phonograph; the Bell-Tainter instrument was at first a Phonograph-Graphophone, later simply a Graphophone. The generic term phonograph will be used here for both.
3. Edison's original recording log shows a considerable amount of activity from May 1889 until January 1890. After that date Edison virtually withdrew from commercial recording, and to fill the gap North American began its own recording program. An explanation of the situation is contained in Circular Letter #21, dated February 24, 1890, from Thomas Lombard, Vice President of the North American Phonograph Co., to the local companies. See also Lombard's comments in the Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention of the National Phonograph Association (1892), p. 83. It is not certain exactly when Edison resumed making prerecorded cylinders for North American, but it was probably not until mid-1892, at which time that company announced a new and extensive series of issues which continued until North American's bankruptcy in 1894. Edison reentered the recording field under his own name in 1896 or 1897. See Allen Koenigsberg, Edison Cylinder Records, 1889-1912, With An Illustrated History of the Phonograph (New York, the author, 1969), p. 136.
4. None are listed in Edison's first recording ledger, covering 1889-1892, as reprinted in ibid., pp. 111-133.
5. ibid., pp. 109, 134.
6. Since the Oct. 1, 1890, list contains this admonition, the possibility exists that Columbia had previous lists of their recordings out which have not yet been found. In view of the covering letter these were probably not Marine Band lists, however. Alternatively the admonition could have referred to the brochures previously discussed, or to the Edison lists being issued by North American, which Columbia would presumably have been able to distribute. North American's first catalog of musical recordings was issued in January 1890, and supplementary lists were being issued at least as early as June, 1890. ibid., p. 134.
7. An undated, but c.1893 letter titled "Cash Paid For Worn-Out Musical or Other Records" refers to "the old style, short cylinders (3 inches)". Even earlier, a Nov. 18, 1891 letter from E.D. Easton to subscriber Thomas Hughes of Baltimore referred to the shorter cylinders as the "old" style.
8. At least one Bell-Tainter style musical cylinder has turned up, but

it is not known whether this was commercially recorded, home recorded or simply an experiment. In any event the cardboard-based Bell-Tainter cylinder was clearly inferior to the Edison tapered design, and even the 1890 Annual Report of the American Graphophone Co. obliquely admits that Edison's phonograph was dominating the musical cylinder trade. Nevertheless, Tainter made a last, unsuccessful effort to adapt his design for coin-in-slot use at the World's Fair of 1893.

9. The first known nickel-in-the-slot phonograph was installed in the Palais Royal saloon in San Francisco by the Pacific Phonograph Co., on Nov. 23, 1889. This was reported by Louis Glass, inventor of the device and General Manager of the Pacific company, during the May 1890 convention of local phonograph companies. (See Proceedings of the 1890 Convention of Local Phonograph Companies, reprinted by the Country Music Foundation Press, Nashville, 1974, p. 163). Columbia and other local companies began to pick the idea up in 1890.
10. Letter from E.D. Easton dated Nov. 10, 1890, published in The Phonogram, January 1891, p. 24; ibid., April 1891, p. 88; news item, ibid., November/December 1891, p. 242. At first Columbia itself operated the coin-in-slot machines, placing them only in city locations. By late 1892 or early 1893 it was offering to rent (for \$150 per year) or sell outright (for \$250) coin-in-slot outfits to store owners in smaller towns in its territory, with the owner/renter to keep all profits. See undated (but c.1892-93) form letter at New York Public Library, signed by E.D. Easton, which specifies, incidentally, that the machines are "Edison Motor Phonographs."
11. "A Noted Record Maker", The Phonogram, Aug/Sept. 1892, p. 191.
12. ibid., April 1891, Columbia advertisement in back section.
13. "Bottled Music", ibid., January 1891, p. 12.
14. "Phonograph Records by the U.S. Marine Band", ibid., Oct. 1891, p. 226.
15. ibid.; this picture has been reprinted in James R. Smart, The Sousa Band, A Discography (Washington: Library of Congress, 1970), p. 3; also in Cynthia A. Hoover, Music Machines--American Style (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971), p. 73, mislabelled "Sousa's Band".
16. Roland Gelatt, in The Fabulous Phonograph (New York: Appleton-Century, 1954), p. 49, estimates 300-500 per day.
17. The Phonogram, June/July 1891, p. 144.
18. They are also mentioned in Columbia's advertisement in the October 1891 Phonogram (p. 210), which refers to "a new catalog just out."

This might be a missing number.

19. The Phonogram, April 1891, Columbia advertisement in back section.
20. E.D. Easton testimonial letter dated Sept. 24, 1891, in Rosenthal promotional flyer, at New York Public Library. Easton states that he obtained the cylinders in January 1891, which may mark the date of their first availability.
21. The Phonogram, May 1891, Columbia advertisement in back section.
22. "A Noted Record Maker, Dan Kelly of Cincinnati, O.", ibid., March/April 1893, p. 363.
23. "A Noted Record Maker," ibid., Aug/Sept. 1892, p. 191, which does not, however, give specific dates. Earlier, an advertisement in the front section of the October 1891 Phonogram states that the New York Phonograph Co. would make a specialty of the Casey cylinders by Hunting. The New England company did not begin advertising itself as the "sole proprietors" of Hunting's Casey series until 1892.
24. ibid., August 1891, p. 168.
25. Fred Gaisberg, The Music Goes Round (New York: MacMillan, 1943), p. 7.
26. News item, The Phonogram, March 1892, p. 71.
27. Read and Welch, From Tin Foil to Stereo, p. 55.
28. Frank Dorian, "Along the Memory Trail," Music Lovers Guide, February 1934, pp. 167-168.
29. The April 1894 catalog (p. 6) claimed that all Marine Band cylinders were originals; but an undated, c. 1891-92 form letter at the New York Public Library states that they can be had either as originals or duplicates.
30. Columbia Phonograph Co. vs. George E. Tewkesbury, Leonard Garfield Spencer, and the North American Phonograph Co.; Supreme Court of the District of Columbia, No. 14580. Complaint filed March 9, 1893, decision March 21, 1893. (The recordings had been made on March 9-10, 1893).
31. A company licensed by Berliner had sold small discs for a toy gramophone in Germany, c.1889, but discs were not introduced in the United States until a few years later. Ray Wile has located court documents which indicate that Berliner was selling his wares here as early as 1894, disposing of approximately 1000 hand driven machines and 25,000 "plates" (discs) during the fall of that year. The earliest known catalog of discs for sale in the U.S. is a "List of Plates" dated January 1895, and issued by Berliner's United States Gramophone Co.

of Washington, D.C. (Reproduced in Hoover, Music Machines American Style, p. 47).

32. Edison had used a permanent numbering system as early as 1892 for his recordings made for the North American company. See chart in Koenigsberg, Edison Cylinder Records, p. 136.
33. Smart, The Sousa Band, p. 6.
34. If true, this would suggest that Sousa had recorded for the New Jersey company prior to March 1893, and not again until his March 1895 session with Columbia.
35. In the picture in the October 1891 Phonogram (p. 226), 16 band members are in evidence.
36. In a second flyer this had been reduced to only six.
37. Glenn Bridges, Pioneers In Brass (Detroit: Sherwood Publications, 1965), p. 59.
38. Koenigsberg, Edison Cylinder Records, p. 139. Levy's titles then included the "Edison Phonograph Polka".
39. For the complete story of this colorful criminal and his recording, see Tim Brooks, "The Last Words of Harry Hayward", Antique Phonograph Monthly, June/July 1973, pp. 1 ff.
40. This is the author's estimate based on known production figures for Edison (approximately 88,000) and Berliner (250,000), and includes cylinders used for dictation as well as musical recordings. Production data for Columbia, alas, does not appear to have survived.
41. Columbia advertisement, The Phonoscope, May 1897, p. 2. (The Phonoscope was sometimes published two to three months after the nominal cover date, and so cannot be used for exact dating).
42. From examples in the collection of the author.
43. Date approximate, established from a trade paper reference of mid 1898, which stated that Emerson was then "nearly two years" in the job. "Gallery of Talent Employed In Making Records", Phonoscope, July 1898, p. 12. Emerson is also mentioned in Columbia promotional literature of late 1896 and early 1897.
44. The Phonoscope, May 1897, p. 2.
45. Like "blues" and "jazz", this term was loosely applied to all sorts of songs, many of which would not really qualify, in musical terms, as ragtime.

46. He had recorded as early as July 1897 for Berliner, and possibly a bit earlier for Edison, who is supposed to have discovered him. See John A. Petty, "Cal Stewart--The Acoustic King of Comedy", The New Amberola Graphic, No. 11 (Fall 1974), p. 1 ff.
47. The Phonoscope, January 1899, p. 11.
48. ibid., Aug. 1898, p. 11; Sept. 1898, p. 9.