

Phonography

by George F. Paul

A Commercial Graphophone



In 1888, Jesse Lippincott, in possession of the exclusive sales rights for Edison's Phonograph and the Bell/Tainter Graphophone, formed the North American Phonograph Company. Being a businessman and investor, Lippincott's vision for the talking machine focused primarily on its utility as an office appliance capable of receiving and repeating dictation. The limitations of both machines, as well as North American's flawed "territorial" business model, contributed to their initial failure in the workplace. The wax cylinder talking machine survived its first fifteen years of life primarily as an entertainment device - - thanks to the Edison Class M.



Admittedly, the Edison Class M Phonograph was at first intended to be all things to all people. During the first half of the 1890s, businessmen were encouraged to use it in their offices, while its entertainment potential was touted to traveling exhibitors and wealthy homeowners. At the same time, the American Graphophone Company offered its Bell/Tainter designed machines in both treadle and "hand cabinet" versions (the latter being powered by electric motors as was the Class M). However, these earliest Graphophones were strictly business appliances, lacking the fidelity to reproduce musical records, and virtually no Bell/Tainter ozocerite cylinders had music recorded on them.¹ Not until 1893 were a few Bell/Tainter machines factory-converted to play Edison-style entertainment cylinders, and the following year the first entertainment-only Graphophone (the Type G "Baby Grand") made its appearance. By mid-1897, the supply of old Bell/Tainter machines was exhausted, and a powerful hybrid business/entertainment machine (the Type C "Universal") had appeared. (This combined business/entertainment application hearkened back to the early marketing of Edison's Class M.) Thus, the Graphophone started life as a dictation-only machine, yet by 1897 had become the premier entertainment brand of talking machine.



For many years, Edison offered no business machine other than the aging Class M. However, on July 1, 1905, after a year-long trial of 100 machines by several New York City firms, the new Edison Business Phonograph was announced to the public.² Unlike the earlier Class M, the new Business Phonograph recorded and played back at 150 lines per inch (as opposed to 100), featured the company's first six-

inch mandrel, and reverted to a separate recorder and reproducer arrangement mounted in a "spectacle" frame on the carriage (a design not seen since the 1888 Edison "Perfected" Phonograph). The new machine would not play entertainment cylinders; only blank dictation cylinders of six-inch length. Hereafter, this new business-only machine would be sold by an Edison subsidiary separate from the National Phonograph Company (which handled sales of Edison entertainment Phonographs). It was a rare example of Edison getting the jump on the Graphophone.

The Columbia Phonograph Company, still purveying the old Type C "Universal" Graphophone (using a 100 lines per inch feedscrew) as its business machine, was caught flat-footed. But just over a year later, the first Commercial Graphophones were announced.³ Thomas Macdonald's new design, like the Type C "Universal" available for the previous nine years (and the Bell/Tainter Graphophones





Thomas Macdonald's patented (No.874,973) combination recorder/reproducer. By manipulating a lever above the carriage, the assembly can be simultaneously moved slightly to the rear and the cutting stylus gently lowered into recording position. Moving the lever in the opposite direction will shift the assembly slightly toward the front and gently lower the playing stylus into position.

before that), employed a six-inch mandrel.⁴ In addition, the new Commercial Graphophone adopted the finer 150 lines per inch used by the Edison Business Phonograph. Columbia's new machine, marketed as the "1907 Model" was first exhibited at the Office Appliance and Business System Show in New York City's Madison Square Garden from October 27 through November 3, 1906. By March 1907, the new machine was being referred to as, "...the new CIB graphophone".⁵

In May 1907, the Jamestown Exposition opened to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the English settlement's founding in Virginia. Columbia exhibited its products there, "...including the up to date commercial graphophone..."⁶ In addition, the September 1907 issue of *The Columbia Record* alluded to an exposition "...recently held in Tokio." The Columbia Phonograph Company sponsored elaborate displays at both of these expositions, including its new Commercial Graphophone. With this background in mind, we can examine one particular example.

The Commercial Graphophone pictured here is serial No.2383. A round brass tag on the side is stamped "Model 558" and an aluminum plate mounted to the bedplate reads, "Property of the Laboratory of the American Graphophone Co., Bridgeport, Conn. USA Exhibit No.309." This machine, with its stamped exhibit number, may have been exhibited at Jamestown and/or Tokyo during 1907. The "Milan 1906" Grand Prize label on the rear of the cabinet rules out an earlier date, and the fact that the Commercial Graphophone was re-named "The Dictaphone" in May 1908⁷ suggests the latest possible date for this particular machine.

Equipped with all of Macdonald's latest improvements of 1907, this rather large, heavy machine is powered by a 110 volt DC motor. For all its bulk and quaint gilt pin striping, this Commercial Graphophone represented, for the moment, the cutting edge of modern office equipment.

Indeed, these machines eventually proved their worth, as Dictaphones remained in use for many decades and outlived the entertainment cylinder record. But before the Dictaphone, for a brief 18 months, there was the Commercial Graphophone. And as unlikely as it may seem, this particular example might have been the first Commercial Graphophone seen by progressive businessmen of the Occident and the Orient.

NOTES:

- 1) In *The Music Goes Round*, Fred Gaisberg recalled helping Charles Sumner Tainter prepare a number of Bell/Tainter machines converted to coin operation for the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Further details are sketchy at best, and there is some doubt as to whether the installation was completed or if the machines remained in use through the run of the Exposition. See also U.S. Patent No.523,748.
- 2) *The Edison Phonograph Monthly*, August 1905, P.3.
- 3) *The Columbia Record*, November 1906.
- 4) For an account of the Graphophone's early use of six-inch cylinder records, see the essay, *Opportunity Lost: The American Graphophone Company and Its Six-Inch Cylinders*, found on page 33 of *The Columbia Phonograph Companion Volume I, Hazeltorn's Guide to the Columbia Cylinder Graphophone*.
- 5) *The Columbia Record*, March 1907. News items in the previous issue were still calling the machine "The Commercial Graphophone." The meaning of "CIB" in subsequent issues was not explained, although since the machine's motor was 110 volt (with a choice of DC or AC), the new nomenclature might have meant "Commercial Incandescent Business" or "Commercial Incandescent [type] B." On March 27, 1907, Thomas Macdonald had filed a patent application (No.874,973) for a new combination recorder/reproducer. Models equipped with this new design may have been designated "B."
- 6) *The Columbia Record*, May 1907 and October 1907.
- 7) *The Columbia Record*, June 1908.

One Collector's Perspective

by George Paul

I'm a bit worried about this installment of One Collector's Perspective. In the past, my admiration for certain machines has been across the board, and not limited to a single example. I like all Eagle Graphophones, early Amberolas, and Victrola XIIIs. However, like the majority of antique phonograph and record collectors, I have limited interest in Ediphones or Dictaphones. Earlier wooden-cased Edison Business Phonographs and Commercial Graphophones are far more appealing, but they still lack the romance of the "Amusement" Phonographs and Graphophones that entertained people in their homes. Even so, I've owned an early Edison Business Phonograph for years - - more as a curiosity than anything else - - and had no real desire to obtain a Commercial Graphophone, despite their scarcity. Then I accidentally encountered this one.

The empty cabinet had just been listed on eBay when I happened upon it early one morning. "Too bad," I thought, lamenting the practice of separating cabinets and mechanisms. A few moments later I saw the mechanism in a separate listing; offered by the same seller. One glance at the "Property of the Laboratory of the American Graphophone Co." plate prompted me to contact the seller, make an offer on the two lots, and come to terms. It turns out that this machine was found in a Bridgeport Connecticut basement, the property of a long-deceased ex-employee of the American Graphophone Company.

It's still only a business appliance; one cannot play entertainment cylinders on it. The machine cannot be conveniently run since I've neglected to have 110 volt DC wired into our house. But for all that, this example of the unloved "Dictaphone" (as it was soon re-named) was a company advertisement. It was seen by many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people interested in improving their office efficiency. Then, after some brief months of noise, activity, and sunlight, it was boxed up and deposited in the company archive; spending several decades entombed in silence and darkness. Somehow, it found its way to someone who appreciated it. I guess that's enough romance for me - - even if I can't play music on it.

