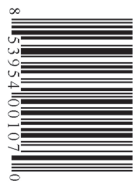


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Antique Week

THE WEEKLY ANTIQUE AUCTION & COLLECTING NEWSPAPER

VOL. 56 ISSUE No. 2880

WWW.ANTIQUEWEEK.COM

JANUARY 14, 2025

Collectors spring into action to restore vintage phonographs

BY BARBARA MILLER BEEM

Never mind the questionable sound quality, the cracks and pops. The sometimes cumbersome equipment and having to change a needle after every play. Not to mention the limitations of a personal record library. At a time when an internet connection is all that's needed for access to a wide variety of streamed music, there are those who prefer not to rely on modern technology for their listening pleasure. Because, at the intersection of art and science, antique phonographs continue to delight collectors by providing original music without electricity, wires, or tubes.

The invention of the phonograph was an evolving process, with twists and turns along the way. In 1877, Thomas Edison, to his great astonishment, successfully recorded (and played back) his recitation of "Mary had a little lamb" using a tinfoil-coated cylinder. A patent for his machine, which was intended not for musical enjoyment but for recording business dictation, was granted in 1878. Several hundred experimental machines were produced before Edison turned his attention back to his work on the light bulb.

And then there was Chichester Bell, working in a laboratory set up by his cousin, Alexander Graham Bell. Along with Charles Sumner Tainter, Chichester improved on Edison's cylinder and, in 1886, developed a machine sold by the



Above: A Kalamazoo Duplex phonograph. Available by mail order, this rare machine operated with a single reproducer using two horns.

American Gramophone Company. Upon learning of this success, Edison revisited his earlier project and refined his machine, marketing it through the North American Phonograph Company (and later, the National Phonograph Company).

In the meantime, Emile Berliner, a German immigrant living in America, was at work building upon what Edison had begun. Finding cylinders cumbersome to store, Berliner set about designing a machine that would use flat discs. Success came in 1887. But there was a problem with the disc-playing machine. Berliner considered the ideal rotational speed for reproducing the human voice to be 78 revolutions per minute. However, this could only be achieved by the constant turning of a key. This issue was resolved with his subsequent collaboration with Eldridge Reeves Johnson, who designed and built a spring-loaded motor with stored energy. Continual turning of the key was no longer required to keep the music playing.

Berliner was not to enjoy his successes for long. Discouraged by legal disputes concerning infringements on his patents, Berliner emigrated to Montreal and ceded his American rights to Johnson. It didn't hurt that Johnson was a marketing genius. Think "Nipper." Thus was formed the Victor Talking Machine Company.

What ensued was something of a format war. At a time when there was little standardization among the early offerings, consumers were challenged to select between differing technologies, according to John Cleveland, an antique dealer who specializes in big-horn phonographs. Perhaps

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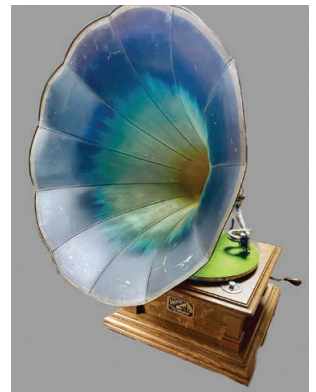
Right: An early Berliner flat record, dated 1895.

Left: An early Victor 78 rpm record. Note the famed (and collectable) logo that features Nipper the dog.



Above: Examples of some of the various types of cylinder records that are on the market. Images courtesy of 4-4Time.com

Below: This stunning Victor V phonograph boasts an exquisite morning glory horn.



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Vintage Phonograph

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complicating the issue, as Cleveland noted, was Edison's reluctance to shift from his original format, wax cylinders, to flat discs. He did relent, but only on his own terms. Focused on delivering the best sound possible, Edison held firm to his belief that this was achieved with large records that were played at 80 revolutions per minute.

Victrola machines, on the other hand, played at 78 revolutions per minute. Accommodating the faster speed needed to play Edison's records was the fact that the speed of a Victrola machine was adjustable. Varying spindle sizes were another nonconformity, one circumvented with changeable parts or by drilling a larger hole in a shellac record. You work with what you have.

Regardless of the pluses and minuses, Cleveland said, it was then, as it is now, a matter of personal preference. With a wide price range, from a few hundred dollars to several thousand dollars for rare models, there is an antique phonograph for every budget.

But why buy an antique phonograph? For many, it is a fascination with the mechanics of the old machines. Such was the case with Cleveland, who lives in Florence, Alabama. While working on watch and clock repair on the side, he was asked by his brother to do some repair work on phonographs in his collection. "Working on these machines is similar to working on clocks," Cleveland explained. And when his brother gave him his first machine, a collection and an avocation were put into motion.

The workings of a cordless machine intrigue many collectors, Cleveland conceded, as they enjoy the process of restoring a machine that is in less than perfect condition. For himself, he conceded that he likes "the challenge of bringing something back to life." Because there really is no rush, he suggested that hobbyists often enjoy the process as well as the finished product.

But a fascination with the mechanics is just one path into a collection. Sometimes, it's the aesthetic appeal of an old phonograph that draws in new collectors, he said. The combination of wood and metal can be alluring. As he noted, not only do old phonographs sound great, they also look beautiful. While there are "purists," who insist that every part be original, "some people are not particular about the original condition and just want a machine to play for their enjoyment."

Sometimes, it's simply a love of



Above: This early Columbia "N" model was produced in the 1890s. Despite its significant price at the time, approximately \$40 (equivalent to a month's wages), it was intended for family use.

music. A fan of the Big Band era? This might lead to the purchase of a machine on which to play original 78 rpm recordings. A Victrola stand-up in good condition can be purchased for as little as several hundred dollars, he noted.

But for himself, Cleveland is particularly drawn to the charms of cylinder records. Although thousands of them were produced, "they are fragile and, over time, they disintegrate." While Cleveland enjoys country music, he is intrigued with cylinders featuring comics from the turn of the last century. And he appreciates the historical importance of hearing the voice of President Theodore Roosevelt, as well as Thomas Edison's discourse on World War I.

Old phonographs come in a variety of shapes and sizes, from suitcase models, designed for outdoor use, to larger models with oversized horns, originally intended for display in a parlor. To keep an old phonograph operating properly, Cleveland said that the best thing to do is to play it regularly. "Like any machine, it likes to be exercised." He recommends winding the machine up and then letting it wind down completely. To protect records, change needles, inexpensive and available online, after every play.

Cleveland is the proprietor of 4-4 Time, selling both in person and online. A member of the Antique Phonograph Society, he speaks to students enrolled

Right: An Edison cylinder record. Edison came to realize the potential for increased profits when marketing cylinder players for home use.



Above: The Victor "M," launched in 1901, was a top-tier, high-performance model that originally retailed for \$35 (today's equivalent is \$1,250). It boasted a large 10-inch turntable and a powerful two-spring motor.

in music classes at the nearby University of North Alabama, in hopes of "spark[ing] interest" in young people.



Above: This Edison "Fireside" phonograph could play both two- and four-minute wax cylinders.

To be sure, listening to the old songs is nostalgic, lulling listeners back in time. And for audiophiles, there is nothing like having an original physical recording in hand, regardless of the inconveniences. In the end, nothing compares with the opportunity to enjoy what might otherwise be lost. 4-4time.com



Below: A rare Edison "Polyphone" phonograph. A short-lived model, it featured two reproducers, which were intended to improve sound quality.

Below: An early Berliner phonograph. Emile Berliner transformed the recording industry with his use of flat discs instead of wax cylinders.

