

For some time, Seaman had been disgruntled over the slim margins to which he was contractually obligated, and had already been engaged with alternative suppliers (Levi Montross and the Burt Company) in an effort to reduce the cost of his merchandise.<sup>5</sup> With American Graphophone challenging the validity of Berliner's patents, Seaman now lacked only the manufacturing capability to enter the gramophone business on his own. Seaman set up the Universal Talking Machine Company in February 1898, and the National Gramophone Corporation in March 1899 to eventually produce and market his own gramophone. He called it the Zon-o-phone.<sup>6</sup> By October 1899, the new Zon-o-phone machines were ready for market, and Seaman ceased ordering the Johnson-made Improved Gramophone from Berliner. (See page 155 for more information concerning Seaman's Zon-o-phone records.)

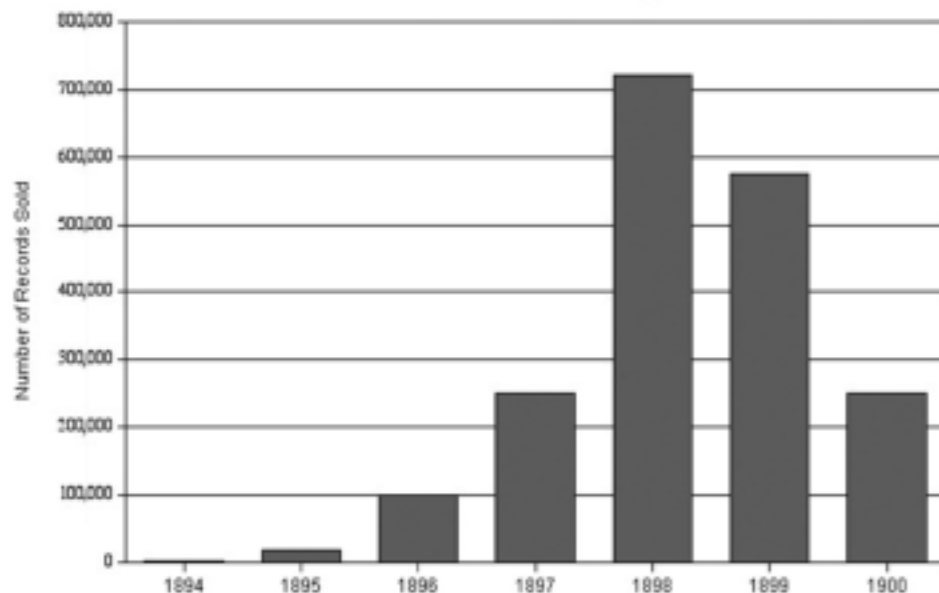
In May 1900, the National Gramophone Corporation consented to the injunction it had fought the previous year. In essence, Seaman accepted the claims of Mauro and the American Graphophone Company of patent infringement against Berliner, and joined with them in a patent pool designed to lock Berliner (and ultimately Johnson) out of the gramophone business. Berliner had continued to market his gramophone and records following Seaman's defection,<sup>7</sup> but on June 25, 1900, the American Graphophone Company obtained an injunction enjoining him from the further sale of discs and machines. Despite Berliner's immediate countersuit, Eldridge Johnson was left out in the cold. His sales outlet had been cut off, and he owned a factory filled with gramophones. His subsequent moves over the next year would transform the American recording industry.

That the 7-inch American Berliner record of the late 1890s is an exceedingly primitive affair is undeniable. It is, however, precisely that attribute which gives them much of their charm and appeal to collectors today. Their "handmade" quality clearly marks them, even to the layman, as true relics of recording's infancy and their almost delightful crudeness gives them the unmistakable stamp of a product of a very different era. In the following pages, the physical characteristics and the changes made to American Berliner discs during their brief six-year production will be examined in detail.

While this study is organized by year, it should be understood that Berliner records underwent no "annual model change." The new year brought neither a new etched label design nor a new style of presenting the title and artist information. As a consequence, it is important to keep in mind that this discussion attempts to describe the typical labeling style appearing on discs recorded during a particular year. Changes often took place randomly, and by no means in a uniform manner. It is quite possible to find a record with a later recording date displaying an earlier style and vice versa. Variation is also found between the discs recorded at the three different recording locations; Washington, D.C., Philadelphia and New York. The progression should be viewed as evolutionary, with no strict cutoff dates for changes in labels or the style of listing the title and artist information.

According to court records, slightly fewer than two million Berliner Records were sold in the U.S. between 1894 and 1900; about 95% of these after 1896. It is probably safe to assume that only around 1% of the original issue survives, and many of the surviving examples are now in institutions, archives and libraries. Discs of 1894 are extremely rare, and seen quite infrequently. Issues from 1895 are also quite scarce, and most of the examples that have been seen are from the late fall or early winter of that year. Recordings dated 1896 and 1897 show up occasionally, and while hardly common, can be found without much difficulty. Most of the extant Berliner records bear recording dates of 1898 and 1899. While records made in early 1900 are available, recordings made after March 1900 are very rare and most are presently not known to exist.

Berliner Record Sales by Year



Source: Wile, Raymond. "Berliner Sales Figures," *ARSC Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 2/3, 1979. Keep in mind that records sold in a particular year would have included recordings from prior years.

## Physical Characteristics and Label Iconography of the 7-inch American Berliner Record

### 1894 The United States Gramophone Co.

The disc records (or "plates") marketed by Berliner's United States Gramophone Company (Washington, D.C.) starting in the fall of 1894 measured 6 7/8" (17.5 cm) in diameter and were approximately 1.5 mm thick. These records were so thin that the impression made by the engraved label can often be seen on the reverse (blank) side. They were pressed from a black, hard rubber material, and their weight varied from around 35 to 38 grams (about 1.25 oz). The surfaces were smooth and relatively quiet and the records were slightly flexible, making them difficult (though not impossible) to accidentally break. Unfortunately, the hard steel needles, non-compliant reproducers and heavy tracking weight wore these discs quickly, forcing Berliner to continue his search for a harder and more durable pressing material.

#### Type A. Two patent dates are listed.

The discs are titled "E. BERLINER'S GRAMOPHONE" (all caps) in a large sans-serif typeface. Centered beneath the title appears the line "PAT'D NOV. 8, 1887" in a sans-serif type and beneath that, "MAY 15TH 1888," in a serif type. The two patent dates are followed by the line "other Patents applied for" in a sans-serif type. All these lines appear above the spindle hole (Figure B-4).

Beneath the spindle hole, in handwritten script, appears the selection's title and either the performer or the instrumentation. All titles, artist information and recording dates were handwritten on the zinc master by either Fred Gaisberg, formerly an accompanist and talent scout for the Columbia Phonograph Co., Joseph Sanders, W. Sinkler Darby or Emile Berliner himself. The instrumental artists were usually not listed by name, though vocal performers such as the Brilliant Quartette, David C. Bangs and George Gaskin were occasionally credited.

A handwritten recording date typically (but not always) appears, and its placement varies widely. On the 1894 recordings, the date is usually written with a three-letter month abbreviation, numeric day of the month followed by a slash, then the digits "94" [e.g. Sep 8/ 94]. The few recordings that date from 1892 display anomalies in the style of writing the date. Some spell out the month of the recording [e.g. June 20/ 92] (#205), while others substitute the number of the month [e.g. 6/12/92] (#300, #311).

The three-digit record number was punched in at the bottom, one digit at a time. The digits are seldom properly aligned, and considerable vertical shift in the position of the digits is the rule rather than the exception. No recording location is mentioned, and all recordings are believed to have been made at the studio in Washington, D.C.

An interesting variant of the Type A label, believed to have been prepared for those recordings pressed in the initial production run in the early fall of 1894, features an error in the printing of the word "Patents," reading "Parents" instead. This label has been found on pressings of three recordings (#211, #256, #300), all believed to date from 1892. On these labels a comma appears after the word "GRAMOPHONE" at the top (Figure B-5).



Figure B-4. 1894 Berliner record – Type A label.



Figure B-5. Early pressing of recording made in 1892.