

A BRIEF HISTORY OF VINTAGE CHILDREN'S RECORDS

WHAT IS A VINTAGE "KIDDIE" RECORD?

This book is all about children's 78-rpm records. If you are old enough, you probably remember listening to 78-rpm "kiddie" records when you were growing up. Or maybe your parents did. Being a child of the late 1940s and 1950s, I do. It is the fond memories of warm and fuzzy times and the nostalgia for them that started me off on a collection in uncharted waters — vintage children's records.

A majority of baby boomers reading this article who grew up in the post-World War II years had collections of children's records. It is surprising, therefore, in this current era of nostalgia craze in which anything is collectible that the hobby of collecting old kiddie records has not yet been established. No comprehensive book on the subject has been published — until now!

This book will make a significant contribution to the hobby. The record listings probably will never be completed, as most of the companies that produced the records are long since out of business and left no information behind. In my collection I currently have more than 11,000 vintage children's records on more than 450 labels and label variations. In addition, I show listings of more than 3,000 additional records. And who knows how many more are yet to be discovered? Most of the labels in my discography were marketed exclusively for children, or were from a subsidiary label just for children. As much information as I have gathered so far, there is certainly more to uncover. This is something that I am pursuing with a passion. I have the honor of the Library of Congress acquiring a significant part of my collection for its archives as well as the Smithsonian Institute expressing an interest.



HOW OLD IS OLD?

The history of sound recording began with Edison's invention of the "talking machine," or phonograph, in 1877. He began his experiments by using paraffin paper tape, and eventually a sheet of tinfoil wrapped around a metal cylinder. His first recording was the nursery rhyme "Mary Had a Little Lamb." The announcement of this invention created an instant sensation — albeit a brief one. The machine was a novelty whose charm quickly wore off. Once the initial public curiosity was satisfied, the technology languished for almost a decade.

In 1886 a patent was granted for a new development in cylinder technology: a cylinder made of cardboard coated with wax on to which the audio track was engraved. The first machines designed to play these types of "records" were called "graphophones." Because wax cylinders provided a sharper, better defined recording than tinfoil cylinders, they became the standard for home entertainment. This lasted for only for a short time, however.

A new development in the late 1880s would prove to cut off the cylinder phonograph at its height of popularity. A German immigrant by the name of Emile Berliner developed a new medium: the record disc. Frank Andrews, in his article on the website of the City of London (UK) Phonograph and Gramophone Society, notes that "the 5-inch Emile Berliner's Gramophone plates (as they were known), made in Germany circa 1890, were the first gramophone records to be offered commercially." Berliner's "records" were offered as alternatives to cylinders. In 1894, 7" discs began to be made in the USA. The formation of the National Gramophone Co. in 1896 promoted the Gramophone and its records and within a few years led to a new international industry, with various companies making 7" and 10" discs. 12" records followed in 1903.

These so-called 78 rpms (some actually played at 80 rpm) were usually pressed in shellac. Diana Tillson, a noted children's music collector, provides more detail on the earliest "flat" records, specifically children's records. In the *Ephemera Journal* (vol. 6, 1993) she states that "the earliest children's recorded discs are 5" celluloid composition discs with nursery rhyme lyrics glued to the back which were included with toy phonographs made in Germany in the early 1890s." It should be noted here that, with a few two-sided experimental exceptions, all the records made for approximately the first 20 years of production were playable on one side only. It was not until early 1908 that Columbia introduced the two-sided record. Victor reluctantly, but quickly, followed suit later in the year.

William Paley, head of Columbia records and CBS-TV, introduced the long-play microgroove 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm (LP) in July 1948. NBC's (RCA Victor) David Sarnoff responded with the 45-rpm (EP) record in January 1949. During the late 1950s, the production of 78s phased out in favor of 33s and 45s. By 1955, general adult-market 45s outsold 78s in the US; however, children's 78s remained strong longer than nonchildren's records. The latest American 78-rpm in my collection is dated 1968, although I own some British 78s made in 1984! Most American record companies, in fact, did not make 78s after 1960.

While record sizes (diameters) range from 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ " to 12", most kiddie records are 6", 7", or 10". It is important to note that "78 rpm" refers to the speed at which the record revolves on the turntable — not the

A BRIEF HISTORY OF VINTAGE CHILDREN'S RECORDS

diameter (size of the record). This is a common misunderstanding among the noninitiated. If you are not sure of the speed of a particular record you own, find a 78-rpm phonograph and play the record. If it sounds like the Chipmunks, you probably are playing a 45- or 33¹/₃-rpm disc. Or alternatively, if you only have access to a long-playing (LP) record turntable, play the record on that machine, and if it sounds way too slow, it is a 78.



A BRIEF SURVEY OF EARLY KIDDIE RECORD SERIES

For the purpose of this survey, the early years of kiddie record series comprise, more or less, the period from the beginning of WWI to the end of WWII (1914 to 1945). Although the few record companies in existence prior to WWI issued many single children's records, no series or runs of children's titles were made.

The first known exclusively children's series of records (and one of the most well known) was the Bubble Books series produced by Harper-Columbia between 1917 and 1922. Each of the 14 books with records consisted of sleeves for three small (5¹/₂") single-sided records bound into a small book. Each record sleeve included beautiful line drawings in full color, along with several pages devoted to the story and lyrics. These "books with records" are highly collectible by both record and antiquarian book collectors. Other record manufacturers of the era making children's records, either exclusively or as part of their catalogs, included Little Tots, Cameo Kids, Youngster Grey Gull, Lindstrom, Emerson, Talkie-Jektor, Durotone, NIC, LaVelle and Gilbert Bobolink, Little Pal, Talking Books, Kiddie Rekords, and Pictorial Records (the first "picture discs"). Some of these series (e.g., Talkie-Jektor, NIC, and Durotone) came with toy projectors and filmstrips, which were synchronized with the record being played.

A popular series called Little Wonder was founded in 1914 by Henry Waterson and manufactured by Columbia Graphophone Company. The series included over 1,500 small (5¹/₂") one-sided records produced during the next nine years. The records were sold for 10¢ in Woolworth's and other five-and-dime stores, and through Sears, Roebuck catalogs. Despite appearances (as miniature records), Little Wonders were not primarily meant for children. With the exception of about 40 records of nursery rhymes and

folk songs, they were intended for adults, as the titles show. This series was the first to place recorded music within reach of most people, and millions upon millions of these records were sold.

Many of the listed series are quite uncommon, but because there is no established collector's market for them, the costs are not high — usually about \$4.00 to \$6.00 for a single record, and up to \$100.00 or more for complete books with matching records in very nice condition. One of the most unusual and beautiful series was the Talking Books series (1918 – 1919). With a few exceptions, they are not actually books, but 4¹/₈" records that are riveted to the face of die-cut cards that are several inches larger than the records. The term "phonographic tablet" occasionally appeared in the literature. The backing is a cutout shape, roughly in the form of the subject of the record, usually an animal or generic children's doll theme. Some of the titles are "I Am a Parrot," "The Mocking Bird," and "The Fox." There are also some WWI subjects, a Mother Goose, and a tired baby. Unlike most generic kiddie records, this series commands high prices in sales and at auctions, often reaching \$75.00 to \$300.00 and more in excellent condition.

The end of this period saw the introduction of extended kiddie series (a.k.a. "youth," "juvenile") by some of the major labels. Columbia's Playtime, a long running series of 6" and 7" records (originally 70 titles, then reissued in a series of 113 titles) began in the late 1930s and continued up to 1954. RCA's budget line, Bluebird, issued its first large kiddie series from 1937 to 1942. It consisted of 119 records in 52 sets. Each set came in an illustrated "envelope" and/or box. Decca (beginning 1939), Columbia's 10" series (1939), and RCA Victor (1944) turned out significant children's series, which continued into the mid-to-late 1950s as 78 rpms. These series continued to be issued as 45s and LPs throughout the 1960s into the 1970s. It should be noted that prior to the launching of the youth series mentioned above, all of the major record companies and many minor ones issued single children's records that were part of their general catalogs. Many were for school music appreciation classes.

