

**Masters of Music:**

**The Victor Talking Machine Company and the Transformation of the Recording Industry**

**1901-1918**

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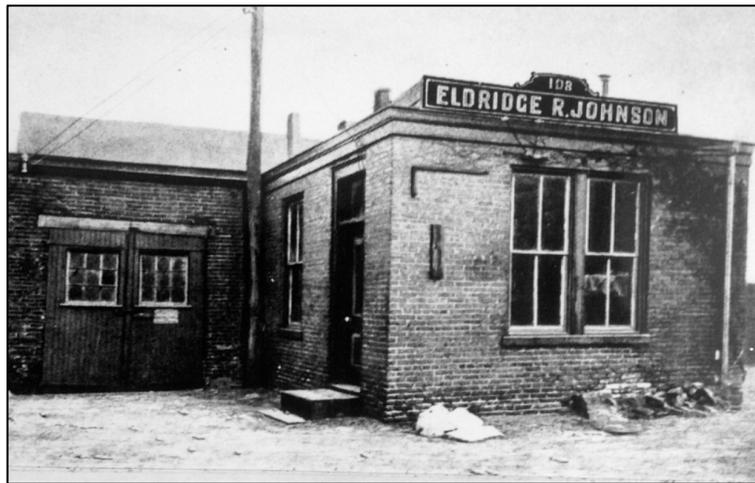
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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>I: Historical Background.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>II: Strategy and Ideology.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>III: Operations.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>IV: Public Image.....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>51</b>

## Introduction

In 1894, a young machinist named Eldridge Reeves Johnson took control of a small yet successful shop in Camden, New Jersey. Johnson was clearly ambitious - after all, he had gone from being an apprentice to a business owner in less than a decade - but there was little else to distinguish him from the slew of other machinists servicing the city's bookbinders and struggling inventors.<sup>1</sup> It was only when he was given the fateful task of working on Emile Berliner's Gramophone - the first talking machine to utilize rotating discs as opposed to spinning cylinders - that he discovered his true calling. The machine "sounded much like a partially-educated parrot with a sore throat and a cold in the head," he later recalled, "but the little wheezy instrument caught my attention and held it fast and hard. I became interested in it as I had never been interested in anything before. It was exactly what I was looking for."<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 1: Johnson's Original Machine Shop in Camden, NJ<sup>3</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> E.R. Johnson Memoirs p.4, n.d., Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)  
<sup>2</sup> E.R. Johnson Memoirs p.4, n.d., Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)  
<sup>3</sup> Johnson Shop Photograph Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

Less than a decade after that initial encounter, Johnson was at the helm of a musical empire bringing in 1.5 million dollars a year. As founder and president of the Victor Talking Machine Company, Eldridge Johnson had earned the talking machine a spot in millions of homes, had signed many of the worlds greatest living musicians to exclusive contracts, and had paved the way for the acceptance of recorded sound as both an artistic medium and a viable product. Not only had he surpassed Emile Berliner, but he had begun to inspire blatant imitation from both Edison and Columbia, the two biggest names in the record business. With such success it's no wonder that the vice president of Lyon & Healy, one of the period's most prestigious music retailers, said in a 1905 interview that "what the Victor people have accomplished deserves credit in large degree for popularizing the talking machine among people of genuine culture."<sup>4</sup>

While Victor continued to be a household name until well after its 1929 acquisition by RCA (The Radio Corporation of America), much of the groundwork for its later success was laid before the First World War. From its incorporation in 1901 until the industrial decline of 1918, Victor established precedents for much of what the music industry now takes for granted. The idea of "selling" an artist through their records, the idea that a culture could be created around their consumption, and the idea that anticipation was often as important as the record itself; were all novel at the time that Victor introduced them. Likewise, the concept that a wide array of entertainment could be passively consumed on a single household device - something which led directly to the radio, the television, and in many ways the personal computer - was not a gradual development of the twentieth century, but was instead a conscious marketing strategy employed by Eldridge Johnson. While other companies sold the public machines, Johnson was selling

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<sup>4</sup> Suisman, David. *Selling Sounds the Commercial Revolution in American Music*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009. Loc 1339 of 430.

them an entirely new category of household entertainment - one that was closer to the bookshelf or the piano than the telephone or the typewriter.

The recognition of Victor's significance to the recording industry is nothing new. In their 1979 book *From Tin Foil to Stereo*, Walter Welch and Leah Burt credit Victor with running "one of the most successful and continuous advertising campaigns of all time."<sup>5</sup> Likewise, in his 2009 book, *Perfecting Sound Forever*, journalist Greg Milner credits the Victrola with being the "first talking machine to really capture the fancy of the public," and discusses how "Victrola" soon "became a colloquial term for talking machines, including Edison's phonograph, a development he found profoundly irritating."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most fascinating work done on this subject is by David Suisman, who with his book *Selling Sounds* manages to place Victor's success within the long-term development of the commercial music industry.

If Victor's status is firmly established in the historical record, however, the means by which they achieved this status are not. Too often, the rise of Victor is viewed as a mere corollary to the rise of American consumerism - a phenomenon which scholars like William Leach and Roland Marchand attribute to the advent of culturally driven advertising<sup>7</sup> and the increasing importance of "desire" in American society.<sup>8</sup> While this scholarship is certainly relevant, treating Victor as a mere outgrowth ignores the question of why Johnson was able to successfully capitalize on these trends when his competitors couldn't. Yes, cultural advertising was increasingly used to sell domestic products, but how did recorded sound manage to become a

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<sup>5</sup> Welch, Walter L., and Leah Brodbeck Stenzel Burt. *From Tinfoil to Stereo the Acoustic Years of the Recording Industry, 1877-1929*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994. 113.

<sup>6</sup> Milner, Greg. *Perfecting Sound Forever: An Aural History of Recorded Music*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2009. 38.

<sup>7</sup> Marchand, Roland. *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

<sup>8</sup> Leach, William. *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1993.

domestic product when it had always been a technological marvel? Desire may have increasingly surpassed logic or “need” as the primary reason for purchase, but how did Victor stake a bigger claim to this desire than Edison, the country’s most revered innovator? As well as failing to answer these questions, relying too heavily on the broader narrative fails to account for why Victor’s success predates the 1920s – a decade that both Marchand and Leach suggest was crucial for the development of mass consumerism.

To truly understand the cultural impact of Eldridge Johnson and the Victor Talking Machine Company, one must delve deep into the specific practices that made it successful. This needs to take into account not only the individual decisions made by Johnson and other members of Victor’s management, but also the external factors which both allowed such decisions to be made and responded to them once they were acted upon. As today’s music industry enters a similarly transitional period, I hope that such an analysis - while not being directly applicable to current decision-making - will provide an interesting basis for discussion.

Victor’s success, therefore, was not a mere accident of history, but was instead the result of a conscious effort to absorb the music industry’s best qualities into a system of tight and centralized control. Much like the machines they created, The Victor Talking Machine Company figured out how to capture a complex phenomenon in a way that was both organized and scalable - reducing its complexity without reducing its value to the public.

The following paper examines such practices by taking an in depth look at three key areas of the Victor organization. The first is the company’s top down ideology, which while not solely responsible for their success, was a necessary precondition for much of it. By analyzing the actions and statements of both Johnson and his general manager Leon Douglass, this section reveals the company’s early decision to emphasize their product’s cultural capital rather than its

technical perfection. The second area of focus is the company's daily operations, which involved the successful and often creative translation of such ideologies into tangible realities. This section takes a look at Victor's tightly controlled distribution system, which allowed them to dramatically increase their customer base without sacrificing either their cultural capital or reputation for quality. The third and final area of focus is the way in which Victor used branding and advertising to communicate their ideology to the American public. This section focuses on Victor's use of different images to create cultural narratives, but also discusses the importance visual consistency, especially with regards to their trademark.

Before delving into these areas of business, however, it is necessary to look at the world Johnson was confronting when he incorporated the Victor Talking Machine Company in the fall of 1901. What were the dominant forces in the music industry? What did music mean to the working class majority and the educated minority? What place did recorded sound occupy in American culture? It is only by attempting to answer these questions that the true nature of Victor's revolutionary practices can begin to take shape.

## I: Historical Background

The idea that music can be commodified and sold in large quantities is often taken for granted, but it is actually a relatively recent phenomenon. For most of human history music existed only on a localized level; created either by amateur folk artists, religious figures, or servants of the court. Even after the bourgeois revolution of the eighteenth century, the pace of commercialization was gradual - slowed by a sense of tradition that had hardened after hundreds of years with little to no change in the music world. There were of course exceptions - such as Haydn's decision to leave his royal benefactors or Liszt's sensationalist performances throughout Europe - but even pioneers such as these two remained largely beholden to longstanding traditions and notions of what music should and could be.

It was into this tradition dwelling world that popular music began to emerge as a large-scale industry. In *Selling Sounds*, David Suisman describes how “the business of popular song grew up in the shadow of musical ‘uplift’ - the nineteenth-century idea of music as a means to elevate the mind, body, and character of individuals.” While this notion spread rapidly from the European elites to the American masses, it was always “grounded in... the respectability of European art music.”<sup>9</sup> Songs written specifically for profit were in many ways seen to contradict this philosophy, and therefore sharp distinctions began to arise between *popular* and *serious* music.

For the most part, popular song publishing began and made its home in Manhattan's Tin Pan Alley, located on 28th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenue. It was here that publishing houses, songwriters, song pluggers, artists, and everybody in between battled ferociously for the

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<sup>9</sup> Suisman, David. *Selling Sounds the Commercial Revolution in American Music*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009. Loc 232 of 4303.

public's dollar - with little interest in the cultural "uplift" that resulted. "What distinguished Tin Pan Alley from other modes of making music," Suisman tells us, "was that the *primary* motivation for writing a song was to sell it, not to express some inherently human feeling or musical impulse."<sup>10</sup> In other words, American popular music was not necessarily an aesthetic backlash to European music, but was instead a ruthless attempt to follow the money wherever it lead.

In stark contrast to the commercialism of Tin Pan Alley, proponents of *serious* music took a highly defensive stance - continuously proselytizing both the innate and societal value of the classical tradition. "Serious music," Suisman writes, "was 'sacralized' as a genteel accouterment of the bourgeois social order" whereas popular music was described by critics with terms like "ephemeral," "trivial," and "of little or no musical value."<sup>11</sup> Unlike *popular* music, which had a clear profit motive, *serious* music was in the position of having to constantly justify its superiority - relying on a vague sense of stability, nostalgia, and emotionality to do so.

The need to preserve European art music became a central theme in music publications such as Theodore Presser's *The Etude*, which he started in 1884. Containing both lengthy essays and practical music instruction, *The Etude* hoped to not only make the case for *serious* music, but to actively facilitate its preservation and development. In any one issue, for example, a reader could have found articles on the "Royal Academy of Music," "Music-Clubs and Their Pitfalls," "How The Voice Looks," and a "Phrasing."<sup>12</sup>

A typical essay from this period was Edward Baxter Perry's "Moral Influence of Music," which originally appeared in *The Etude* in December, 1897. Dismissing the notion that *all* music

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<sup>10</sup> Suisman, David. *Selling Sounds the Commercial Revolution in American Music*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009. Loc 263 of 4303.

<sup>11</sup> Suisman, David. *Selling Sounds the Commercial Revolution in American Music*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009. Loc 232 of 4303.

<sup>12</sup> "The Etude" Music Magazine Selected Content. September 1902. Accessed January 25, 2015. <http://etudemagazine.com/etude/archives.html>.

was either moral or immoral, he made the case for a careful distinction between specific works - one made not merely by the morality of the composer, but by the qualities found in the music itself. "The direct influence of music," Perry argued, was "neither moral or immoral, any more than literature. All depends on the kind we select and the use we make of it. Some of the most infamous sentiments, as well as nearly all of the most exalted, have been embodied in verse; but shall we for this reason forbid poetry to ourselves and others?"<sup>13</sup> While this view in a way argued for freedom of expression, it also put the burden of proof on the individual musician to show that his piece was morally worthy of consumption. "Let us not blame art for what is only the fault of poor humanity," he said, "which, alas, when weighed in the balance is always found wanting, in high places and in low."<sup>14</sup>

This distinction between worthy and unworthy forms of art is discussed at length in Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, which traces both the origins and the evolution of America's cultural divide. While focusing mainly on theater and live performance, he raises some interesting points about music on the whole – shedding light on the development of both the Tin Pan Alley song-pluggers and the *Etude* essayists. The "sacralization" of music, he argues, stemming from its long association with the church and court, had "increased the distance between amateur and professional...More and more it was asserted that it was only the highly trained professional who had the knowledge, the skill, and the will to understand and carry out the intentions of the creators of the divine art."<sup>15</sup> The notion of music as something that had to be professionally created, in other words, drove people to opposite ends of a previously fluid spectrum. One either had to embrace their lack of skill and give in to the *frivolous*

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<sup>13</sup> Perry, Edward Baxter. "The Moral Influence of Music." "The Etude" Music Magazine Selected Content. December 1, 1897. Accessed January 25, 2015. <http://etudemagazine.com/etude/archives.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Perry, Edward Baxter. "The Moral Influence of Music." "The Etude" Music Magazine Selected Content. December 1, 1897. Accessed January 25, 2015. <http://etudemagazine.com/etude/archives.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988. 139.

enjoyment of Tin Pan Alley, or make sure that their skill would be acknowledged and received by the public.

It is within this intellectual framework that the increasing commodification of music must be viewed. The need to aggressively sell one's creations did not stay limited to Tin Pan Alley, and *serious* musicians soon found themselves in situations that were foreign to their moralistic worldview. This can be seen in *The Etude's* 1898 article on "The Value and Practice of Advertising Among Professional Musicians," which was in the strange position of having to convince musicians not to shun the business world. "There is nothing in business to be ashamed of," it argued "The day has passed that found the man of talent a serf to a titled house, and it is the democracy of business that has freed him from his thralldom [sic]. I have no sympathy for the fancy-struck fools who spurn business on general principles, as if music was dependent upon penury. We all must live."<sup>16</sup> The article then went on to give practical advice regarding "business principles," "reputation," and "personality," but the very fact that such a preamble was necessary shows just how foreign the capitalist market was to the majority of musicians during this time.

The Victor Talking Machine therefore, came into being in the midst of a serious rift between mass produced *popular* music and tasteful *serious* music, and at a time when business and promotion was still largely shunned by those espousing the latter. What place in society, then, did the earlier models of the phonograph occupy? How did they navigate the complex convergence of art and capitalism?

While the first phonograph was invented by Thomas Edison in 1877, it is worth noting that the device remained highly impractical for years. Its early history, therefore, was not one of

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<sup>16</sup> "The Value and Practice of Advertising Among Professional Musicians." "The Etude" Music Magazine Selected Content. July 1, 1898. Accessed January 25, 2015. <http://etudemagazine.com/etude/1898/07/the-value-and-practice-of-advertising-among-professional-musicians.html>.

musical exploration and mass commercialization, but one of mechanics and complex patent battles. This early history is chronicled in Robert Welch and Leah Burt's *From Tin Foil To Stereo*, as well as in Greg Milner's *Perfecting Sound Forever*, but the details are not as relevant as what they reveal about the early recording industry. The fact that the industry was shaped by its patents and not by its marketing, shows both the revolutionary nature of Victor's strategy as well as the ruthless environment they initially had to contend with.

Edison himself first saw his creation not as a vehicle for selling content but as a business dictation device. "The main utility of the phonograph being for the purpose of letter-writing and other forms of dictation," Edison wrote in 1878, "the design is made with a view to its utility for that purpose."<sup>17</sup> He then went on to describe practically how "a sheet of foil is placed in the phonograph, the clock-work set in motion, and the matter dictated into the mouth-piece without other effort than when dictating to a stenographer. It is then removed, placed in a suitable form of envelope, and sent through the ordinary channels to the correspondent for whom it was designed."<sup>18</sup> While this fascination might seem absurd to us today, it helps to explain why early emphasis was put on controlling the technology rather than the machine's less tangible qualities. After all, without an interest in selling recorded content, the machine itself is the totality of your business.

Eventually, and only after competitors managed to work around Edison's patent, did a market begin to develop for commercial recordings of music. While these were not mass-produced, most of them tended towards the *popular* rather than the *serious* aesthetic. One of the nineteenth century's most successful applications of recorded music was the coin-slot

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<sup>17</sup> Edison, Thomas. "The Phonograph and Its Future." *The North American Rev* 126, no. 262 (1878): 531. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25110210>.

<sup>18</sup> Edison, Thomas. "The Phonograph and Its Future." *The North American Rev* 126, no. 262 (1878): 532. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25110210>.

phonograph. Originally developed by Albert Keller for Edison in 1887, the machines were placed in a variety of public spaces and met with unprecedented success. As the Cincinnati Commercial Gazette pointed out in 1890, “When a man can hear the 7th Regiment Band of New York play the Boulanger March, a Cornet solo by Levy, or the famous song, The Old Oaken Bucket, for five cents, he has little desire to pay five cents to ascertain his weight or test the strength of his grip.”<sup>19</sup> While these were more in the tradition of public amusements than large-scale content consumption, they were still an important step in establishing the phonograph as an instrument of entertainment.

This precedent was fully established by the turn of the century, when Johnson was getting ready to incorporate the Victor Talking Machine Company. Edison and Columbia Records had emerged as the industry’s two major players, and both were marketing musical cylinders on a national level. Placing ads in publications such as *The Cosmopolitan*, *The New York Times*, *The Boston Daily Globe*, and *The Christian Observer*, both companies stressed quality, pricing, and amusement. “If you are making money this year,” implored one Columbia advertisement, “treat your family to a Graphophone...If you are losing you need it to make you forget your troubles.”<sup>20</sup> “The Edison Phonograph,” another ad stated, is “sustained by its reputation. The only perfect reproductions of sound are obtained by using Edison Records on the Edison Phonograph.”<sup>21</sup>

While these ads were not uniform, the majority of them were centered on large pictures of the machine itself - its horn angled enticingly up at the reader. The machine’s price - or price range in many cases - was also frequently located within this space. Occasionally some text at the bottom would reveal the existence of a cylinder catalogue, but in no circumstances was the

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<sup>19</sup>Welch, Walter L., and Leah Brodbeck Stenzel Burt. *From Tinfoil to Stereo the Acoustic Years of the Recording Industry, 1877-1929*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994. 113.

<sup>20</sup>*Hardware Dealers' Magazine (1898-1929)*; Nov 1, 1901; 16, 5; American Periodicals. 718

<sup>21</sup>*The Chautauquan; A Weekly Newsmagazine (1880-1914)*; Jan 1900; 30, 4; American Periodicals. 447

content of such a catalogue revealed in the ad. Both Columbia and Edison were leading with the quality of their machines rather than the quality of their content – refusing to put themselves in the complicated crosshairs of a debate on musical taste.

They could not avoid the *highbrow* versus *lowbrow* debate altogether, however, as the mere fact that they were selling manufactured, mechanical objects carried its own associations. As Levine tells us, “the emerging distinction between high and low culture was based in part on an evaluation of the difference between unique and mass-produced objects...anything that produced a group atmosphere, a mass ethos, was culturally suspect.”<sup>22</sup> While the technology itself wasn’t necessarily lowbrow, therefore, the implication that there might eventually be an identical phonograph in every office, home, or parlor, was. When Victor formed in 1901, it not only had to navigate the musical divide, but also had to find a way to escape the misconceptions that plagued the manufacturing industry.

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<sup>22</sup> Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988. 169.

## II: Strategy and Ideology

When Johnson founded the Victor Talking Machine Company in the fall of 1901, he had the unique challenge of being a late arrival to the industry. His major competitors, Columbia and Edison, had spent over fifteen years developing broad distribution networks, creating public goodwill, and establishing the cylinder as the industry standard for recorded sound. Johnson may have had a superior product, but he was in many ways still fighting an uphill battle - one that depended on a tight strategy, a clearly defined point of difference, and the re-education of the American consumer. In addition, Johnson also faced the logistical challenge of building these elements into a functioning and scalable business. His success, therefore, depended not only Victor's corporate ideology, but also on the processes put in place to ensure that it could be continuously carried out.



**Figure 2: Eldridge Reeves Johnson<sup>23</sup>**

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<sup>23</sup> "Photo of E.R. Johnson." David Sarnoff Library. Accessed April 1, 2015.  
[http://www.davidsarnoff.org/vtm/fg09\\_pg30.jpg](http://www.davidsarnoff.org/vtm/fg09_pg30.jpg).

Most of what we know about Victor's early history comes to us through the efforts of Benjamin L. Aldridge, who worked at Victor from 1918 to 1959, and spent his later years as the company's amateur historian.<sup>24</sup> His eventual book - *The Victor Talking Machine Company* - provides a useful glimpse into the company's chronological narrative, and his collected files contain everything from sales figures and licensing agreements to newspapers and correspondences. Of particular interest regarding corporate ideology are the excerpts contained from the memoirs of Eldridge Johnson and Vice-President Leon Forrest Douglass. While they should certainly be taken with a healthy dose of skepticism, they provide an invaluable look into the mindset of Victor's key decision makers, and cross referenced with Aldridge's own writings they provide a fairly intricate look at the founding ideology and strategic vision of Victor's first few years.

According to Aldridge, it wasn't long after incorporation that "a pattern, or program, of operations developed which lasted with comparatively little change over the years."<sup>25</sup> In what would turn out to be a pivotal decision, this program did not focus on *proving* Victor's superiority, but instead on justifying the *need* for a superior product. After all, if the product was truly superior, people would hear it - but only if Victor could get them in the door. It was for this reason, Aldridge tells us, that while the quality of the product was still Victor's top priority, "eye-value was an important secondary consideration." It was not enough for the product to

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<sup>24</sup> "Hagley Museum and Library: RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III Collection (2069) -- Manuscripts and Archives Department." Hagley Museum and Library: RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III Collection (2069) -- Manuscripts and Archives Department. Accessed January 25, 2015.

<sup>25</sup>B.L. Aldridge: *A History of The Victor Talking Machine Company* p.47, n.d., Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

simply “be made of the best obtainable materials and workmanship” - it was equally important that the product, as Aldridge put it, “*look quality*.”<sup>26</sup>

To help facilitate this, Victor decided to eschew traditional advertising in favor of a more psychological approach. “As against the ‘card’ or ‘price’ type of advertising which most competition was using,” Aldridge tells us, “Victor assumed a constructive position almost from the start, and ran copy which was calculated to create desire for the product.”<sup>27</sup> Victor’s advertising will be discussed in more detail later on, but for now it is important to note that a deliberate and early choice was made to go after the consumer’s emotions and tastes rather than their wallets. Advertisements stressed elements such as “the pleasure and advantages (entertainment and education) of ownership,” the “availability of the world’s best artists,” and the idea of a Victor as “the Gift That Keeps on Giving,” rather than the specifics of its *mechanics and price*.<sup>28</sup> As a result, Victor was able to place their product in a world of abstractions that positioned it not as an *alternative* to the Columbia or the Edison, but in its own distinct category. While the other companies fought over the realm of machines, Victor attempted to gain a foothold in the complex world of music and culture.

It is worth noting that this is not simply my interpretation of Victor’s early strategy, but the significance that Johnson himself would later give to it. In a magazine interview with Robert Frothingham, Johnson discussed the way in which “the typical American family has in its equipment both a library and a piano. The books may be few and the piano indifferent, but the

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<sup>26</sup>B.L. Aldridge: A History of The Victor Talking Machine Company p.47, n.d., Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>27</sup>B.L. Aldridge: A History of The Victor Talking Machine Company p.47, n.d., Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>28</sup>B.L. Aldridge: A History of The Victor Talking Machine Company p.47, n.d., Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

average family realized the need for both.” In a similar way, he proposed, “the family also needs a good automatic instrument for reproducing the world's best music,” and therefore “the public must be educated, month after month, year after year, to know what the Victor can do and to desire it as an essential of culture and pleasure in every home.”<sup>29</sup> From this statement we can see that Johnson was not only stressing the value of his own machine, but also attempting to make the talking machine a *cultural need* as basic as both the piano and the bookshelf. He was of course not neutral about his own product however, stating that the Victor was “as different from the old squawker as an organ from a jew's-harp.”<sup>30</sup> Again, one of these items has cultural capital - the organ - and the other does not. By convincing the public that phonographs *should* be more cultural, and then illustrating to them how they currently weren't, Johnson put himself in the unique position of offering a product for which there was no equal.

While it is difficult to trace the genesis of an idea, the concept of a musically focused machine seems to have had its roots well before the incorporation of Victor. “My great hope in the beginning was in musical reproductions,” Johnson recalled in his memoirs, “so I searched for a process of recording that would give the true tone. It cost me \$50,000 and two and one-half years of desperately hard work, but the Company's factory is a standing testimonial that justifies the cost.”<sup>31</sup> The fact that Johnson had musical ambitions from the beginning put him in a much better position to fulfill them than competitors like Edison, who as we already discussed originally conceived of his machine as a letter writing tool, and Columbia founder Edward

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<sup>29</sup> Little Advertising Stories: Robert Frothingham p.80g, n.d., Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>30</sup> Little Advertising Stories: Robert Frothingham p.8g, n.d., Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>31</sup> E.R. Johnson Memoirs p.50, n.d., Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

Easton, who developed his machine to aid stenographers on Capital Hill.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, his early emphasis on domestic entertainment led him to the 1906 creation of the Victrola - the first talking machine that not only concealed its metallic horn, but also doubled as a tasteful piece of furniture. While both of these trends eventually caught on among their competitors, Victor's early ideology allowed them to get there considerably faster.

Victor's strategy, like its ideology, also relied on the construction of a new paradigm. After all, Johnson's assertions of his cultural superiority would not have lasted very long had he failed to impress those who eventually bought his machines. To this end, Aldridge tells us, Victor employed two overarching, long-term strategies - the rigorous pursuit of getting high quality, well known talent to sign exclusive recording contracts, and the reinvestment of nearly all Victor's profits into their continued growth. "There is perhaps no better way to put the spotlight on the skill with which the company was financed," Aldridge writes, "than to point out that, whereas the company paid cash dividends totaling 10% from 1902 to 1922, only 54% had been paid up to the end of 1910. Profits had been plowed back from 1901 to 1910 so that undivided profits at the end of 1910 stood at \$4,250,195.71."<sup>33</sup> Johnson himself explained these numbers as part of a fairly simple philosophy, saying, "I have always made it a rule to never pay dividends or spend money when it was needed in the business."<sup>34</sup>

Just as important as the philosophy of reinvestment, however, is the way in which that reinvestment was prioritized. While Victor's daily operations will be discussed later, it is worth

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<sup>32</sup>B.L. Aldridge: A History of The Victor Talking Machine Company p.47, n.d., Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>33</sup>B.L. Aldridge: A History of The Victor Talking Machine Company p.51, n.d., Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>34</sup>B.L. Aldridge: A History of The Victor Talking Machine Company p.51, n.d., Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

noting that of all his expenditures, Johnson himself placed the highest value on those pertaining to experimentation. “The Victor Company is now in possession of many patents and secret processes,” he writes in his memoir, “but our greatest secret process is this: We seek to improve everything we do every day.”<sup>35</sup> As such, he said, “The Victor Company depends very largely on its experimental departments for the future of its business... As a whole, they are intended to entirely cover the field of research from which the future improvements on talking machine manufacturing may be dug.”<sup>36</sup> The fact that Johnson, who emphasized “culture” publicly, would take such a technocratic approach in private may seem somewhat incongruous. It makes sense, however, when one considers the standard of perfection he was constantly trumpeting to journalists like Frothingham. In seeking to create a consumer-experience based purely on entertainment, his technical process had to remain so flawless that it never became the object of public attention. If the listener was focused on poor machine performance, they would fail to be truly captivated by the song that serenaded them, and therefore technical perfection was a necessary precondition for the peddling of cultural relevance.

Providing the necessary balance to Johnson’s experimental obsession was his senior vice-president and co-founder, Leon Forrest Douglass. Douglass was an industry veteran who had previously worked with the competition, and therefore knew exactly how difficult it was to turn a product into a cultural phenomenon. While Victor started out with \$5,000 in cash (\$60,000 was tied up in Johnson’s factory), one of Douglass’s first decisions as vice-president was to spend “\$2,500 on...advertisements in McClure’s, Cosmopolitan, and Munsey’s magazines.” Johnson reportedly responded by exclaiming, “My God Douglass, what will you do next month, there

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<sup>35</sup>E.R. Johnson Memoirs p.6, n.d., Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>36</sup>E.R. Johnson Memoirs p.7, n.d., Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

goes half of our money,” to which Douglass responded that they would simply “have to earn something.”<sup>37</sup> Contrary to Johnson’s assertions that the machine’s quality and appearance would convince the public of its superiority, Douglass tells us that they were actually “sometime in proving it to all the dealers” and therefore advertising had to be one of Victor’s top priorities.<sup>38</sup>



Figure 3: Mr. and Mrs. Leon Forrest Douglass<sup>39</sup>

In addition to pioneering Victor’s sustained advertising blitz, Douglass was responsible for one of the most revolutionary decisions in the history of the record industry - the signing of world famous artists to exclusive, long-term contracts. After all, if the Victor was going to live up to its claims of being as culturally necessary as the bookshelf or the piano, it was going to

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<sup>37</sup>Leon Forrest Douglass Memoirs p.1, n.d., Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>38</sup>Leon Forrest Douglass Memoirs p.1, n.d., Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>39</sup>Leon Forrest Douglass Portrait, n.d., Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

have to offer the undisputed best in terms of content. With the aid of formidable talent scouts and equally formidable sums of money, Victor slowly but surely began to build the most impressive and stable roster the recording industry had ever known. This stood in stark contrast to their competition's use of easily accessible yet lesser-known talent – and while it came with a high price tag, it rendered the old strategy forever inadequate.

Of particular importance was Victor's early pursuit of European opera stars, who at the turn of the century were in the rare position of being considered both *popular* and *serious*. As Levine notes in *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, the rising tide of German and Italian immigrants meant that opera “was attended both by large numbers of people who...experienced it in the context of their normal everyday culture, *and* by smaller socially and economically elite groups who derived both pleasure and social confirmation from it.”<sup>40</sup> Opera, in other words, had managed to temporarily bridge America's widening culture gap – and therefore it presented the perfect opportunity for Victor to achieve both mass popularity and the appearance of cultural uplift.

While Victor continued to market records of all genres – from Tin Pan Alley hits to the marches of John Philip Sousa - it was their opera records which did the most to raise the status of both the company and recorded music as a whole. Known as the “Red Seal Series,” these records were imported through Victor's European affiliate until 1903, when their growing popularity allowed Victor to begin domestic production. Bearing both a royal crimson label and a slightly higher price point, “Red Seal” records were able to instill awe and respect into the consumer even before they were placed under the needle. The price increase – which in 1906 would have brought a 10-inch record from \$.60 to \$1.00 - was not enough to alienate the average

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<sup>40</sup> Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988. 86.

consumer but *was definitely* enough to let them know that they were getting the absolute best product available.<sup>41</sup>

The pinnacle of Victor's grand opera strategy was their signing of Enrico Caruso – the rising star of Milan's *La Scala* – to an exclusive five-year contract in 1903. The popularity of both the singer and his records exploded, beginning a long and mutually beneficial relationship between Caruso and the company that lasted until his death in 1921.

In his memoirs, Douglass recalls the initial negotiations with Caruso:

In 1903 Enrico Caruso, the greatest of all tenors, came to America. I told Childs [Victor's director of artists and repertoire] to see him and ask what he would charge to sing ten arias. Caruso's reply was four thousand dollars. I agreed to the price if Caruso would give us an exclusive contract for five years... The Caruso records were a great success, both in the volume of sales and the standard to which they raised the talking machine... Caruso was clever, the next year when he came back I told him we would like ten more songs, and he replied that for ten more songs he wanted ten thousand dollars. But I said: 'Your contract calls for four thousand dollars for ten songs.' He said: 'Yes, but the contract only calls for ten and it doesn't say I have to sing any more at that price.'... Until he made his first record for us we had never paid more than one hundred dollars for a record, and for most of them only five or ten dollars... I told Caruso that he could not sing for else for five years, and he admitted that it was true and he would not do so, but also that he did not have to sing any more for us. I saw we were stuck and paid him ten thousand dollars for the second ten records, with the understanding the records must be subject to our approval or he was to make them over.<sup>42</sup>

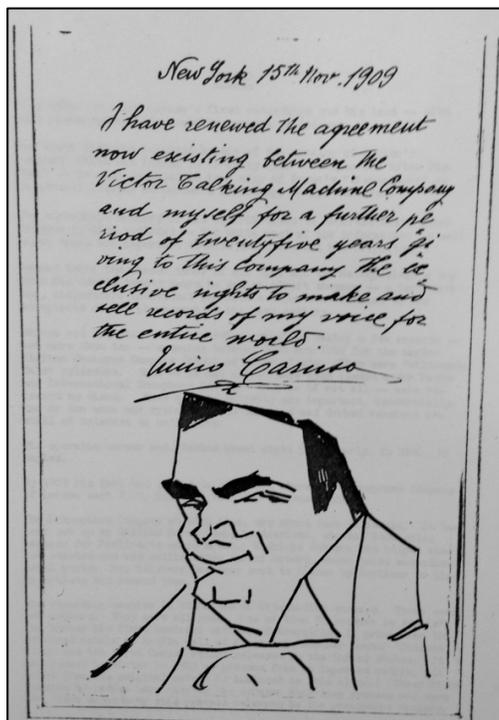
While Douglass recounted this story as if it were unusual, it is worth noting that both Caruso's outrageous demands and Douglas's desire for increased control were indicative of trends that would come to dominate the record industry. Even Johnson, who reacted to the initial

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<sup>41</sup>1906 Licensing Contract, 1906, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>42</sup>Leon Forrest Douglass Memoirs p.4, n.d., Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

deal by saying, “My God, Douglass, you will break us paying that price,” eventually understood the value of maintaining a good relationship with Caruso. The ability to build a roster of top talent was crucial to proving Victor’s superiority, and therefore it was worth whatever short-term strain it caused on Victor’s finances.



**Figure 4: A hand drawn caricature and note from Caruso to the Victor Talking Machine Company. The message is an affirmation of Caruso’s decision to renew his contract in 1909.<sup>43</sup>**

While not explicitly mentioned by Johnson, Douglass, or Aldridge, it is necessary to address one more component of Victor’s early ideology - their ruthless and relentless pursuit of opportunity. As previously stated, Victor’s success depended on their ability to bring the best of both the music and recording industries into their tightly managed system of control, a process which frequently involved some sort of direct struggle. Even the 1901 incorporation of Victor

<sup>43</sup> 1909 Caruso Caricature, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

was the result of a tenuous legal battle between Eldridge Johnson and Emile Berliner - the inventor of the Gramophone and the man who had originally hired Johnson as a machinist. True to form, Johnson had drastically improved Berliner's machine, patented his own improvements, and went into business for himself.<sup>44</sup> Only after his success had far surpassed that of Berliner's did Johnson agree to a legal compromise in which the two companies would merge their interests, leading Johnson to come out firmly on top.<sup>45</sup> It seems that this decision was made not purely out of goodwill, but because - as Johnson said in a redacted portion of his memoir - "it is a bad plan to fight a patent unless you are perfectly sure that you are in the right."<sup>46</sup>

This relentless opportunism can also be seen in Victor's early competition with Columbia. Impressed by Victor's product, Columbia released a blatant imitation called the "Columbia Disc Graphophone." While some might simply take imitation as a sign of their own superiority, Victor immediately went to work looking for evidence of patent infringement, and ended up suing Columbia accordingly. "This led," Aldridge recounted, "to the cross-licensing agreement of December 8, 1903 between the American Graphophone Company (Columbia) and Victor. Under this agreement, Columbia got what they needed from the Berliner patent, and Victor got what they needed from the Jones patent [Columbia's original patent]."<sup>47</sup> Not only, in other words, did Victor go head to head with a much more established company, but they also ended up with additional patent rights in the process. This allowed them to further perfect their

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<sup>44</sup>B.L. Aldridge: A History of The Victor Talking Machine Company p.41, n.d., Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>45</sup>B.L. Aldridge: A History of The Victor Talking Machine Company p.41, n.d., Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>46</sup>E.R. Johnson Memoirs p.5, n.d., Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>47</sup>B.L. Aldridge: A History of The Victor Talking Machine Company p.47, n.d., Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

product, which in turn allowed them to double down on their assertions that there was a societal need for the perfected talking machine.

It is impossible to say exactly why Victor came up with the ideology and strategy that they did, but it likely stemmed from their initial need to prove themselves against much more established competitors. While we can see from Columbia's mimicry that Victor in many ways had a superior product, this alone would have never been enough for them to rise to the top. Only by creating the cultural necessity for their product through clever branding, sustained marketing efforts, and the availability of high quality content was Victor able to change the entire conversation surrounding recorded sound.

### **III: Operations**

As any businessperson can attest, it is one thing to conceptualize a solid strategy but it's another thing entirely to successfully carry it out. Neither Johnson's decision to inject his product with cultural capital, nor Douglass's decision to spend whatever money necessary, would have succeeded had the company not found clever ways of continuously allowing for both. While Aldridge's narrative speaks only minimally of Victor's day-to-day practices, this is once again a topic where his private notes and collected files contain a wealth of information.

During their first couple of years, Victor grew at a truly astonishing rate - quadrupling their sales from 1902 to 1906.<sup>48</sup> While this was certainly good news, it meant that their distribution increasingly relied on a large network of middlemen and dealers, a reality which if left to its own device could have threatened the appearance of both cultural elevation and domestic intimacy. As previously mentioned, turn-of-the-century America was still skeptical about mixing mass-market capitalism with "serious" music, and therefore the two had developed somewhat oppositional associations. If Victor was to retain both its growth in popularity and its cultural capital it would have find clever ways of bridging the gap.

In addition to the problem of perception, Victor began to face the ever-growing problem of rampant price competition among dealers. "To get trade," Douglass tells us, one dealer "would offer a customer a Victor at less than retail price, and the other dealer would cut under the first dealer, so a price war would be on and they would cut prices so near cost that there would be no profit left. In disgust they would both throw out the Victor, as the instruments were

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<sup>48</sup> Haddon Notebook 1901-1921, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

all alike and one dealer could not claim his were any better than the others.”<sup>49</sup> Victor’s products, in other words, were of such uniform quality that a dealer’s only point of difference was his pricing, and therefore he had no choice but to lower it. The resulting *race to the bottom* not only damaged the perceived value of the product, but also made it increasingly hard to retain high quality dealers.

Victor’s solution to both these issues was, surprisingly, not less standardization but quite a bit more. Just as they had managed to do in the world of patents, Victor began to exercise complete control over their pricing, creating a complex licensing agreement affecting all dealers and distributors. Douglass later recalled that “when the government gave you a patent they gave you a monopoly on the instrument...and the patent law says you can sell or license for use only. I suggested that we place a notice on each Victor, ‘ licensed for use only’ when sold for thirty dollars or whatever the price of the instrument happened to be.”<sup>50</sup> In a sense, this possibility eliminated all the more troubling aspects of having a middleman - allowing Victor to retain complete ownership of their product until the moment it arrived in the customer's hands. This would not only give them control over pricing, but would also allow them to successfully scale their branding to as many dealers as their growth required.

The result of Douglass’s epiphany was a carefully crafted licensing contract, one that required the signature of any dealer or distributor who wished to handle Victor’s products. While such agreements in and of themselves were fairly commonplace, Victor took this one to new heights - not only setting non-negotiable retail prices for all of their products, but also granting themselves “access at all reasonable hours to...machines in the possession of any of its

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<sup>49</sup>Leon Forrest Douglass Memoirs p.4, n.d., Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>50</sup>Leon Forrest Douglass Memoirs p.1, n.d., Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

licensees.”<sup>51</sup> This basic structure remained in place from 1902 until 1917, when the “United States Supreme Court rendered a decision to the effect that the notices applied to the product were ‘in part unenforceable,’” and required that a disclaimer reading, “‘not binding on the Trade’” appear next to all suggested prices.<sup>52</sup> Up until 1917 the only real change to this agreement was the call for exclusive distribution in 1910 and the subsequent decision to drop the requirement in 1913. While we can’t say exactly why Victor abandoned this provision, it was likely made necessary by the increasing improvements being made among Victor’s competitors.

The essential structure of Victor’s licensing agreement involved both a price chart - containing not only the mandatory retail prices but also standardized dealer and distributor discounts - and a long list of terms and conditions. In exchange for their compliance, dealers and distributors were given consistent discounts of 40% and 55% respectively.<sup>53</sup> These were fairly standard margins, but by locking them into place across all of their product lines, Victor was able to ensure the loyalty of both their customers and their dealers. Dealers could then focus on their own sales rather than worrying about their competitor down the street, and customers could have complete confidence that their dealer was giving them the best possible price. For Victor, fixed pricing meant that they could count on a large team of reliable foot soldiers that they didn’t have to pay, but who, relatively immune to the dangers of local competition, stood to make a very decent profit. While Victor was certainly exercising tight control, it should not be viewed as a one sided power-grab but rather a disciplined arrangement which frequently benefited both parties involved.

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<sup>51</sup>1906 Licensing Contract, 1906, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>52</sup>Notes on Licensing Royalty, n.d., Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>53</sup> 1906 Licensing Contract, 1906, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

Because the dealers benefited from these new pricing controls, Victor had a fair amount of leeway with what stipulations they could add to their contract. Flipping over the agreement's first page of straightforward price lists to see an essay of fine print must have taken a few dealers aback; but Victor's product was in high demand, and with such consistent pricing there was little reason not to sign on. In addition, most of these conditions were simply aimed at ensuring the sale of authentic and undamaged merchandise, which was crucial not only in maintaining Victor's brand, but also in maintaining the status of being an authorized Victor dealer.

One of the benefits of issuing a "use license" was that it actually didn't expire at the point of purchase, but rather, lasted as long as the product's patent is enforceable. Victor's licensing agreement, therefore, was not limited to the sale of the product but extended their control far into the world of discontinued models, second-hand machines, and product repairs. One such provision reads:

No license or permission is granted for the sale of shop worn, damaged or second-hand Victor talking machines, records or supplies at reduced prices.... If, however, the dealer wishes to sell a legitimate second-hand or an out-of-date, old style Victor machine, and will inform the factory in writing of that intention, together with the serial number of the machine and question, and this number machine proves the machine to have been sold by the factory a year previously, then a special license in writing will be issued by the Victor Talking Machine Company to that dealer permitting the sale at a reduced price, if the necessary facts are established to the satisfaction of the Victor Company.<sup>54</sup>

Extremely important to this provision is the way in which Victor created an open-ended capacity for control. Not only did they require the issuance of a "special license," but they also require that all "necessary facts are established to the satisfaction of the Victor Company."

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<sup>54</sup>1906 Licensing Contract, 1906, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

These were not specified in the contract but rather were left up to the complete discretion of whoever was in charge - creating an operational flexibility that was often lacking in such intricate arrangements.

Even when the product passed this rigorous test, Victor required that a notice “be affixed to the bottom of the machine, showing at the time of the sale that this machine is second-hand, and is licensed to be sold at the reduced price.”<sup>55</sup> Similar to the *certified pre-owned* cars offered by many dealerships today, Victor’s policy ensured that faulty machines would never make their way into the customer’s hands, and that even perfectly preserved older models - which could only be outdated by one year - were clearly demarcated as such. The result of this policy was that Victor could consistently improve their product’s quality, performance, and style without ever leaving a physical trail of its past inadequacies. Their marketing efforts, therefore, could continually focus on the company's future rather than its accumulated past.

Another important element to Victor’s licensing agreement, though not fully implemented until 1906, was the introduction of mandatory release dates for all Victor recordings. The contract from January of that year read, “no distributor shall sell, either at wholesale or retail, or offer for sale, or deliver, or give away, any Victor records of any new monthly issue of records or any supplements or circulars advertising the same, before the 28th day of the month preceding. The 28th day of each month must be the simultaneous opening sales day for new records, except when falling on Sunday when the succeeding Monday becomes opening day.”<sup>56</sup> Replacing the haphazard release schedules that had become commonplace with a centralized system of monthly releases not only ensured that all dealers and distributors were on

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<sup>55</sup>1906 Licensing Contract, 1906, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>56</sup>1906 Licensing Contract, 1906, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

equal footing, but also created a heightened sense of anticipation among consumers. In many ways it simulated the experience of waiting for a concert, and in doing so helped to preserve some cultural continuity between the high-class world of live music and Victor's world of mass market production and distribution. Equally important to the buildup of anticipation, was the fact that samples could still be "forwarded to the distributor on the first of the preceding month," as well as "shown to the dealer."<sup>57</sup> This gave both distributors and dealers advance knowledge of new content, allowing them to present themselves as *knowledgeable experts* and giving the records a quality of exclusivity that no doubt aided their cultural capital.

The advanced knowledge granted to Victor's dealers was not merely a beneficial byproduct of the licensing contract, but was in fact something that was actively facilitated and built upon. In 1906 - the same year that this policy was implemented in full - Victor began running a trade publication called *Voice of the Victor*. This was aimed not only at communicating their brand to the industry, but also on giving dealers the ammunition needed to make the case for both Victor and their growing roster of famous artists. Article's included straightforward titles such as "Sales Arguments," "Talking Points on Individual Records," and "Are You Selling Music or Mechanisms?" but also included more subtle marketing messages such as "The Victrola Brings 'Broadway' to 'Main Street,'" "What Are The Children To Do This Summer," and "Look Under The Lid."<sup>58</sup>

Some of the most interesting articles were those devoted entirely to specific recordings - encouraging dealers to develop a knowledge of the company's talent and their material. In a sense this tactic was an early version of the archetypical record store clerk, who was not only a salesman but also a confidant and an arbiter of taste. One such article from 1907 touted Victor's

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<sup>57</sup>*Talking Machine World*, January 1, 1906.

<sup>58</sup>Voice of The Victor Titles, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

ability to get Enrico Caruso, Bessie Abott, Louise Homer and Antonio Scotti together for a recording of *Rigoletto* as the “greatest triumph in the art of record making.” It began by describing the composition in detail, calling it “undoubtedly the most brilliant and musicianly of all Verdi’s concerted pieces,” and praising the way its “contrasting emotions - the tender addresses and coquetry on the one side, and the heart-broken sobs of Gilda and the cries for vengeance of her father on the other - are pictured with the hand of a genius.”<sup>59</sup> It then goes on to describe the details of the specific performance, using language that was no doubt more eloquent than some of the period’s opera critics:

The four singers who consented to record this great number are all noted for their artistic interpretations of the characters represented. Caruso’s *Duke*, with its glorious outpouring of luscious voice in the lovely airs; Abott’s girlish and brilliantly sung *Gilda*; Homer’s *Maddalena*, which is fascinating enough to attract any Duke, and whose one vocal opportunity occurs here; Scotti’s truly wonderful and superbly sung *Jester*, one of the most powerful impersonations on the operatic stage - all these are familiar and admired portrayals... The blending of the four voices is marvelous in its smoothness, and the manner in which every syllable and every note of the difficult music is brought out, is most remarkable. At the risk of being considered lacking in modesty, and of using language that is stereotyped, we must describe this record as ‘an unparalleled achievement in the recording of concerted work, and the most remarkable reproduction in the history of sound recording.’<sup>60</sup>

Clearly the quality of the performance was of equal importance to the record itself, and while Victor’s trademark was featured in the article’s header, the four portraits of Caruso, Abott, Homer, and Scotti attracted just as much attention. Only at the very end of the article did Victor make its argument to dealer’s explicit, telling them that they “will comprehend the great value of

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<sup>59</sup> Voice of the Victor, 1907, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>60</sup> Voice of the Victor, 1907, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

this record from an advertising as well as an artistic standpoint, appreciating at the same time the great leverage it will be in making machine and record sales.”<sup>61</sup> By publishing such vivid descriptive pieces in trade publications, Victor was able to maintain their cultural and artistic capital while spreading their messaging to all corners of the marketplace.

Somewhat surprisingly, Victor’s standardization of sales and messaging was coupled with an increasingly diverse product line. In 1901, Victor sold only three models - the Monarch, listed at \$35; the Monarch Jr, listed at \$25; and the Monarch Special, listed at \$45. By 1911, however, they were selling 19 models, ranging in price from \$10 to \$500. The least expensive model was the Victor Jr, which sold from 1906 to 1919, and the most expensive was the Auxetophone, which sold from 1906 all the way until 1924. Rather than an inconsistency, this seemed to merely be the broad end of Victor’s larger funnel of centralization. By introducing products with a wide price range, Victor was able to attract a large customer base that they could then bring into to their tightly controlled ecosystem. This allowed them grow in multiple directions at once while maintaining their unique and singular place in American culture.

The most successful of these diversifications was the introduction of the first Victrola in 1906. Although initially priced at a relatively high \$200, the Victrola hid its amplifying horn inside an elegant wooden case - allowing it to function as a piece of furniture as well as a home entertainment system. While it remained less popular than the cheaper models at the point of its release, the Victrola gave Victor access to the luxury market and proved the perfect compliment to its growing roster of European opera stars. The power this had over the public’s imagination cannot be overstated, for by 1911 Victor had expanded the line to include over 10 models ranging in price from \$15 to \$250. Like the expansion of their overall product line overall, the

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<sup>61</sup> Voice of the Victor, 1907, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

growth of the Victrola created a new and highly successful route by which customers could be brought into the world of both Victor Talking Machines and Victor Records.



Figure 5: Johnson's instrument line prior to Victor's launch, ranging in price from \$3 to \$12.<sup>62</sup>



Figure 6: Victor's traditional and Victrola models in 1911, ranging in price from \$10 to \$200<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> 1900 Product Line, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>63</sup> Little Advertising Stories, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

In many ways the Victrola was the operational fulfillment of Johnson's early assertion that he would make "the talking machine a *cultural need* as basic as both the piano and the bookshelf."<sup>64</sup> For years to come, both the Victrola name and image would in many ways come to represent the entirety of early recorded music. While much of this mythologizing postdates the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that Victor's competitors were fairly quick to realize the product's significance. As early as 1907, Columbia had created its own internal-horn machine - the Grafonola - while Edison released his own machine - the Amberola - in 1909. Both of these products were powerful symbols of the way in which Victor had managed to shape the conversation around the talking machine. Whichever product managed to sell more, all major players were now firmly committed to Victor's concept of a culturally elevated and domestically centered machine.

Victor's array of machines, however, would have meant very little had the company not been able to make stellar recordings of the world's greatest artists. While the smart *selection* of artists and repertoire was of course a necessary precondition, we can infer from the memoirs of Harry and Raymond Sooy – two of the company's longtime sound engineers – that the recording process itself also played a crucial role. According to Raymond, "a good recorder... must get the confidence of the artist with whom he has to work, whether they be good, bad or indifferent" and "must not show any signs of disappointment whether the voice he is recording be good or bad." It is only after this is accomplished, he wrote, that a recorder must "try under all circumstances to get the best record possible."<sup>65</sup> While it may seem fairly standard in today's record industry, the notion that a "recorder" would treat the talent with such delicacy was by no means inevitable.

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<sup>64</sup>Little Advertising Stories, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>65</sup>"Memoirs of My Recording and Traveling Experiences for the Victor Talking Machine Company." Memoirs of My Recording and Traveling Experiences for the Victor Talking Machine Company. Accessed March 31, 2015. <http://www.davidsarnoff.org/soo-maintext.html>.

The fact the Sooy gave gaining the “confidence of the artist” a higher priority than the need to “get the best record possible,” suggests that Victor’s relationship with their artists was paramount to their operation - even when the quality of a single record was jeopardized. This was much more aligned with the nineteenth century ideal of musical performance than it was with twentieth century ideal of mass production, and it likely played a key role in helping Victor bridge the gap between temperamental artistry and the mechanical world of recording.

This trust building can be seen in the way Harry Sooy, Raymond’s brother and fellow recorder, dealt with one of the Victor orchestra’s difficult musicians:

A short time after Levy [the orchestra’s clarinetist] had arrived the piano tuner came to my office with his overcoat and hat on - I said ‘Hello, finished already?’ His reply was ‘No, I refuse to tune the piano.’ I asked him what the trouble was and he said ‘the clarinet player assaulted me.’ Well, I could not see how this could be from Abe Levy, so I said to Wreckenveg [the tuner] ‘Come back to the room with me and we will see what this is all about.’... It simmered down to this. – Wreckenveg, the tuner, would not accept the pitch from Levy, saying he had tuned pianos before Levy was born, and Levy replied “You’re one of those damned, thick-headed Dutchmen without reason.” After this remark the piano tuner picked up a chair in the room and started for Levy, and Levy punched him straight on the jaw, knocking him in a heap under the piano... Even at this late date, I was finally successful in getting another tuner, and had everything in readiness for the date.<sup>66</sup>

Rather than take any sort of punitive measure on the clarinetist, who was not even one of the company's biggest stars, Sooy opted simply to fire the assaulted piano tuner and move on with the session. Again, while this sort of tolerance seems commonplace in today’s music

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<sup>66</sup>Memoirs of My Recording and Traveling Experiences for the Victor Talking Machine Company." Memoirs of My Recording and Traveling Experiences for the Victor Talking Machine Company. Accessed March 31, 2015. <http://www.davidsarnoff.org/soo-maintext.html>.

industry, it ran counter to the elaborate hierarchies and regulations of the early manufacturing world.

It is also important to note that Victor's artist relations were highly beneficial not only to the company, but also to the artists themselves. Enrico Caruso may have been a rising star in Milan when he first signed to Victor, but it was only his records that turned him into an international phenomenon. Fred Gaisberg, who had recorded Caruso while working for Victor's European affiliate in 1902, recalled the way in which his first recordings directly contributed to his contract with the Metropolitan Opera. "The record 'E Lucevan le Stelle' from *Tosca* was regarded as sensational," he tells us. "Mr. Conried, who was then manager of the New York Metropolitan Opera, heard it in Mr. Alfred Clark's office in Paris and carried the record to New York to play for his directors. As a result of their impressions, Caruso was cabled a contract immediately."<sup>67</sup> By 1917, Caruso was earning as much for two months in South America as he was from six months of his recording royalties - something which would have been impossible had his records not created a sensation around the globe.<sup>68</sup> In this sense Victor both legitimated and was legitimated by its impressive roster of celebrity talent.

By exercising both flexibility in their production and control over their distribution, Victor was able to scale their strategy without compromising it. The diversification of their product line allowed them to win over multiple new customer bases, while their patience with temperamental artists allowed them to forge mutually beneficial relationships and ensure a consistent stream of quality content. By maintaining a strict yet supportive relationship with dealers they were then able to ensure that these key points of difference never became lost or watered down.

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<sup>67</sup>Gaisberg, Frederick William. *The Music Goes Round*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1942. 48.

<sup>68</sup>Leon Forrest Douglass Memoirs, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

#### IV: Victor's Public Image

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of Victor's success - and in turn their transformation of the recording industry - was the way in which their strategy manifested itself to the general public. Just as Victor's operations made their strategy come to life, it was their consistent branding and ability to captivate that ensured its longevity. After all, competitors could copy Victor's products, but it was much harder to copy the intricate way in which they had seeped into the public consciousness.

One of Victor's earliest branding moves, and perhaps its most beneficial, was the acquisition of a painting by the little known British artist Francis Barraud. The painting, known as *His Master's Voice*, featured Barraud's dog Nipper standing against a solid background and staring quizzically at a phonograph. While the painting's message was powerful, Barraud was unsatisfied with the appearance of his phonograph's horn, and therefore called the English affiliate of Berliner's Gramophone Company for help. They liked his painting so much that they ended up buying it from him, but due to his request that they "not make it an obvious advertisement by putting their name across the background," the company was unable to use it as their trademark.<sup>69</sup> It was only in 1901, when Johnson acquired Berliner's interests that "he successfully negotiated...for the trademark rights to the Nipper painting in the Western Hemisphere." While "in those days, Johnson had little cash capital," Aldridge tells us, "he counted among his assets two priceless items - his disc-type talking machine and the captivating Nipper trademark."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>From Wags to Riches p2, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

<sup>70</sup>From Wags to Riches p2, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)



**Figure 7: Barraud's Victor Trademark Featuring Nipper**<sup>71</sup>

While it may not seem like much, the acquisition of such a powerful and instantly recognizable trademark was crucial to Victor's strategy. When placed on every Victor product - which it was - the trademark served to visually reinforce the company's unity of purpose and quality. Like the modern day Nike swoosh or the McDonalds golden arches, customers could see Nipper and know immediately what they were getting. Likewise, they could see a passing reference to "The Victor Talking Machine Company" and immediately conjure up an image to go along with it. Neither Columbia nor Edison had such a recognizable trademark, and as a result their ability to successfully brand themselves suffered. Intelligently, Johnson continuously decided against subsequent attempts to modify or expand the company trademark, such as the

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<sup>71</sup>His Masters Voice Magazine Insert, Box 1, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

suggested substitutions of Nipper with, at various times, a chimpanzee, an elegant Victorian woman, and a traditionally dressed Chinese man.<sup>72</sup>

It didn't hurt, of course, that Barraud's painting also happened to perfectly encapsulate Victor's corporate ideology. The presence of a pet gave it the appearance of domesticity, the fact that it was an oil painting gave it the cultural capital of a formal portrait, and Nipper's quizzical expression acknowledged the product's relative newness. While Johnson deserved credit for recognizing both the need for a unified trademark and the power of Barraud's image, the fact that the original painting so perfectly aligned with Victor's strategy cannot be explained as anything other than a fortune of circumstance.

In a similar way, Victor's print advertisements managed not only to communicate the company's key values, but also to visually encapsulate them. Douglass may have spent far more than his competitors on advertising, but quantity alone was not enough to form and sustain a brand. No matter how many advertisement's Victor ran, Columbia would always have a fifteen-year head start, and Edison would always be America's most beloved inventor. If Victor was to truly change the conversation around the talking machine, they would need to establish their worth in the current market before creating a new one.

Up until the point of Victor's incorporation, Columbia and Edison had been running fairly similar copy. Both tended to feature a large, centered picture of the product - placed at a three quarter angle to showcase the horn - and to include some sort of quality based tagline. Below the tagline would be a more direct description of the machine's sound quality paired with a call to action - usually a suggestion to write for the company catalogue. One of Columbia's ads in the *Christian Observer*, for example, told readers that "Columbia Graphophones Stand On

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<sup>72</sup>1903-04 Patents, Box 3, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

Merit,” before describing their sound as the “loudest, smoothest, clearest” and “sweetest” and urging us to “write for catalogue No. 67.”<sup>73</sup> An Edison ad from the same year displayed a header reading, “The Edison Phonograph - Sustained By Its Reputation,” before claiming that they boasted “the only perfect reproductions of sound” and letting readers know that they could get “catalogues from all Phonograph dealers.”<sup>74</sup>

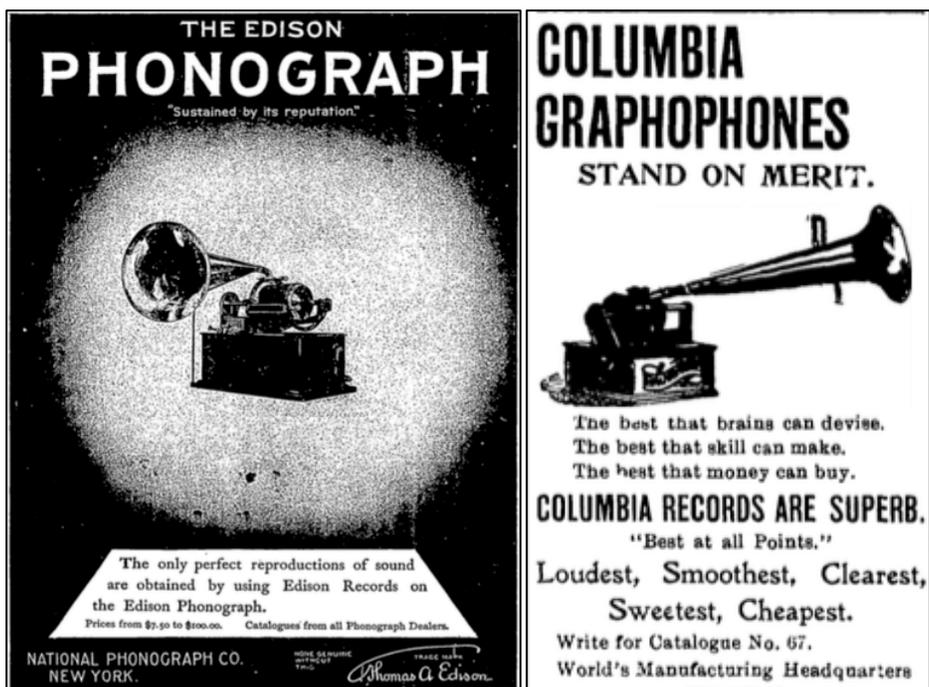


Figure 8: Typical Edison<sup>75</sup> and Columbia<sup>76</sup> Advertisements from 1900.

When Victor first launched they faced the dilemma of needing to both compete with and distance themselves from such advertisements. It would have been hard to cut through the noise

<sup>73</sup>Christian Observer (1840-1910); Aug 29, 1900; 88, 35; American Periodicals. 19

<sup>74</sup>The Chautauquan; A Weekly Newsmagazine (1880-1914); Jan 1900; 30, 4; American Periodicals. 447

<sup>75</sup>The Chautauquan; A Weekly Newsmagazine (1880-1914); Jan 1900; 30, 4; American Periodicals. 44

<sup>76</sup>Christian Observer (1840-1910); Aug 29, 1900; 88, 35; American Periodicals. 19

if they hadn't strayed from the format, but at the same time they faced a public that had come to expect that format as a sign of quality. It was therefore in a brilliant act of compromise, that Victor's earliest ads kept the basic layout but substituted the plain machine image with their newly acquired trademark.<sup>77</sup> The presence of a dog certainly caused more than a few double takes, but its central position assured customers that Victor was keenly aware of paradigm that they were challenging. Similarly, the ever changing tag lines used by Columbia and Edison were replaced with the consistent use of "His Master's Voice" - a line that was vague enough to provoke some thought, but still suggested a sense of authority and reliability.<sup>78</sup>



Figure 9: A Victor Talking Machine at from 1901.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>77</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*; Nov 24, 1901; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1990).14

<sup>78</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*; Nov 24, 1901; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1990).14

<sup>79</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*; Nov 24, 1901; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1990) pg. 14

Equally as important, in terms of differentiation, was Victor's replacement of the statement on sound quality with one that focused on the quality of Victor's content. The Victor Talking Machine, the ads read, "sings everything...plays everything" and places "all of the great bands, orchestras, singers and story-tellers at your elbow." Rather than simply being described, superior sound quality could be illustrated if customers would only follow the ad's passionate plea to "come and hear it!"<sup>80</sup>

Sticking to the industry's standard format allowed Victor to establish themselves as a viable competitor, but it was their copy's slight but meaningful differences that helped to pave the way for much more dramatic differences. By the end of 1902, Victor was running ads that relegated their trademark to a small section of the header, and were instead centered on a long list of artists. "Read this list," one ad told the consumer. "We are pleased to advise our friends and customers that the Victor Talking Machine Co. has secured the exclusive services of the following celebrated artists."<sup>81</sup> The ad then went on to list 18 names including that of Sousa's Band, the Haydn Quartet and the Georgia Minstrels, before telling us that "this gives the Victor Machines exclusive control of the most important musical record makers in the world."<sup>82</sup>

By 1905 and 1906 we see a dramatic reversal of emphasis, in which the advertisements focused not on Victor or on Victor's diverse roster, but on the presence of specific artists. "Sousa's Band," read the bold header of one ad, before the type became smaller and finished "as reproduced by the Victor Talking Machine can be heard at any and all times."<sup>83</sup> Likewise another

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<sup>80</sup>*Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*; Nov 24, 1901; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1990).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>81</sup>*San Francisco Chronicle (1869-Current File)*; Nov 12, 1902; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: San Francisco Chronicle (1865-1922).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>82</sup>*San Francisco Chronicle (1869-Current File)*; Nov 12, 1902; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: San Francisco Chronicle (1865-1922).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>83</sup>*The Washington Post (1877-1922)*; Nov 14, 1906;

ad revealed straightforwardly that, “Caruso records are to be had if you own a Victor Talking Machine. Think of having the voice of this wonderful tenor at your call at all times. Three dollars each.”<sup>84</sup> While this copy may not have been as artful as some of Victor’s earlier ads, it suggested the overwhelming success of Victor’s artist focused approach. It was also a stark contrast to the ads that Columbia and Edison were running at this time, most of which still followed the original standard format.

Victor’s most brilliant campaigns occurred when they figured out how to mix the artful presentation of their earlier ads with the sensationalist artist-worship of their later ads. One such ad, published in 1909, perfectly encapsulated both the company’s respect for artists and the Victor’s almost mystical ability to capture the public imagination. It contained a full-page illustration of Ole Bull, the famous Norwegian violinist, and read:

The fame of Ole Bull, the greatest violinist of his day, still lives, though he has been dead for a generation. His picture and autograph remain, but his masterful music is only a memory – he lived before the time of the *Victor*. *The Victor* can’t bring you the sweet music of Ole Bull, but it did bring to you the art of that famous Russian violinist, Mischa Elman, nearly three years before he ever appeared in America. More marvelous still, the *Victor* brings you the living voice of the late Tamagno. His was the first of the famous artists’ voices the *Victor* saved from the grave. And not only can you hear his magnificent and powerful voice, but generations to come will enjoy it – just as they will hear and enjoy the world’s best music and song rendered by the greatest artists of the present day. Truly the *Victor* is a wonderful musical instrument – just how wonderful you can’t realize until you hear it.<sup>85</sup>

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ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1997).3

<sup>84</sup>*San Francisco Chronicle (1869-Current File)*; Apr 9, 1905;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: San Francisco Chronicle (1865-1922)

<sup>85</sup> Ole Bull Advertisement, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

The Victor Talking Machine, this ad claimed, did not merely provide the best entertainment and the best sound quality, but was also capable of saving musicians from the grave. By selling the immortality of music, rather than the machine itself, this ad provided a dramatic way of creating an intimate and cultural demand for a *superior* talking machine. After all, why should any expense be spared when the promise was one of immortality?



Figure 10: The image used in Victor's 1909 Ole Bull Ad.<sup>86</sup>

What's particularly interesting about this ad, aside from its power, is that it foreshadowed what would become a key advertising trend in the 1920s – the replacement of specific claims with vague and emotionally evocative text and images. Nowhere in the ad did Victor mention why *their* talking machine was superior, and nowhere did they disparage the quality of their competitors. Instead, they presented a fundamental human problem – death – and presented the

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<sup>86</sup> Ole Bull Advertisement, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

Victor Talking Machine as the only possible remedy. This strategy is detailed at length in Roland Marchand's *Advertising the American Dream*, but is linked expressly with later developments such as the "mobility, greater generational separation, and modern complexities" of the 1920s.<sup>87</sup> Using "scare copy," he tells us, these advertisers "posited a universe in which the fate of each consumer lay in the hands of external disinterested forces" but in which the advertised brand was "solicitous and caring, a friend in need."<sup>88</sup> The presence of such a strategy in 1909 not only shows just how forward thinking Victor was, but also calls into question Marchand's insistence on the strategy as a symptom of the 1920s. More likely, it seems, this type of advertising was gradually imposed by companies such as Victor, who sought to distinguish themselves in a highly competitive space.

While the Ole Bull ad shows that Victor remained a step ahead of their competitors, Columbia and Edison *had* begun to copy some of Victor's earlier breakthroughs – particularly their emphasis on the joy of listening rather than sound quality. Columbia's 1905 ad featuring the Sphinx smiling at the Graphophone, for instance, was clearly an attempt to both evoke Victor's trademark and tap into some of their cultural evocations. "Unmoved for ages sat the Sphinx of stone," the copy reads, "till waked to music by the Graphophone."<sup>89</sup> Likewise, an Edison ad from 1906 stresses the kind of choices offered by Victor all the way back in 1901. "Rag-time or grand opera? – hear *your* music with Edison Records."<sup>90</sup> By building off of and then fundamentally changing the industry's method of advertising, Victor had managed to shape the conversation around recorded sound. Guided by Johnson's initial vision, the Victor had

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<sup>87</sup> Marchand, Roland. *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. 14.

<sup>88</sup> Marchand, Roland. *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

<sup>89</sup> *The American Amateur Photographer* (1889-1906); Jun 1, 1905; 17, 6; *American Periodicals*. 311

<sup>90</sup> *The Irish Times* (1874-1920); Nov 2, 1906;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The Irish Times* (1859-2012) and *The Weekly Irish Times* (1876-1958). 9

successfully positioned itself as a distinct category of domestic entertainment - one which the competitors were now flocking to join.



Figure 11: Columbia's "Sphinx" Ad from 1905.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup>*The American Amateur Photographer (1889-1906)*; Jun 1, 1905; 17, 6; American Periodicals. 311

## Conclusion

Like all manufacturing, the record industry suffered a slight decline during America's World War I involvement. While the industry rebounded - Victor more quickly than its competitors - it soon began to take on a much different shape. Edison's heavy investment in the cylinder had proved fatal – leading to dwindling sales throughout the 1920s and the eventual dissolution of Edison Records in 1929. Columbia, meanwhile, had continued to learn from Victor's example – gradually narrowing the gap between the two companies both in terms of their content quality and cultural relevance. The 1920s also saw the emergence of specialty labels like Okeh Records, which paved the way for the acceptance blues and country music, and ended up getting acquired by Columbia in 1926. In many ways it was a completely different industry, yet it continued to be dominated by the music and artist-centric ethos that Victor had pioneered.

In 1929, Johnson sold his company to the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) – a move that signaled not the end of Victor, but the beginning an exciting new chapter. RCA Victor would go on to make the radio even more popular than the Victrola once was, leading to the development of an entirely new industry known as network broadcasting. The development of this industry placed the burden of content on others and led to a change in both the company's strategy and their status as America's key musical tastemaker. Their legacy, however, as well as their trademark and impressive catalogue, would remain for almost a century.

It is extremely important, in this regard, to view Victor's story not merely as one of a successful strategy or of determined individuals, but as one in which private actions and public forces intertwined to create a complex cultural phenomenon. Victor may have played an important role in unleashing that phenomenon - but they in no way continued to own it

indefinitely. Their strategy was designed to make the company money, and once that strategy became widely adopted, they could no longer rely on it.

This paper, therefore, should not be taken as an analysis or evaluation of corporate strategies, but rather an attempt to ponder a very singular question: *How did Victor's vision for recorded music come to dominate the industry so quickly?* The answer of course is tied up in their successful corporate strategies, but it is equally beholden to the unique historical and cultural position in which they were situated.



**Figure 12: An early company portrait at taken at an unknown date outside of Victor's Camden Plant<sup>92</sup>**

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<sup>92</sup>Early Photograph of The Victor Talking Machine Company, Box 2, B.L. Aldridge 1897-1980, RCA Victor Camden/Frederick O. Barnum III collection (Accession 2069), Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, DE)

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