

Phonography

by George F. Paul

Traces of Early Talking Machine Exhibitions



In the late 19th century, there was already a venerable tradition of traveling “shows” in Europe and America. Before the existence of mass media, such public entertainments were breathlessly anticipated, especially in the hinterlands where theaters and opera houses were few. Minstrel shows, circuses, medicine shows, lecturers, and even patent-medicine salesmen could be expected to draw a crowd of citizens hungry for entertainment. In this environment, there is little wonder that the newly-invented Talking Machine immediately went “on the road” to entertain the curious crowds waiting in every town. For a year or so in the late 1870s, and again for about fifteen years beginning around 1890, exhibitors of talking machines joined other peripatetic performers in search of an audience.



Alvah Roebuck, after selling out his interest in Sears, Roebuck, and Company in 1895, formed the Amusement Supply Company. This firm sold “Motion Picture Machines & Films, Stereopticons and Views, Grapho-Ampliphone Talking Machines, Records, and Advertising Posters”. A 1904 catalog from the firm shows an emphasis on Columbia Disc Graphophones, although still offering various cylinder Graphophones and records of standard and 5-inch sizes. Pictured is a poster sold by the company from 1901-02.

In the spring of 1878, the Edison Speaking Phonograph Company began selling tinfoil-playing Phonographs to elocutionists, lecturers, and others who were willing to pay for an exclusive territory where people waited to see and hear their first talking machine. An unfortunate tendency of inconsistent performance and marginal reproduction cut short this first wave of Phonograph exhibitions. The public was often unimpressed, and the machine's novelty quickly passed. By late 1879, the excitement had died out.¹



This exhibitor's case was capable of holding a dozen records, posters (18 original posters are shown), and extra reproducers, etc.



This image from an old stereoview shows what may be a Sunday-school being entertained by an Edison Concert Phonograph. The wicker horn basket can be seen, as well as the machine's lid. This stereoview originated in England, but the location is unknown. Perhaps a reader can identify the city. From the shadows it seems that this view is looking roughly north/northwest.

It wasn't until a dozen years later, when the Phonograph had been developed to a point where music and speech were consistently recognized, that another wave of talking machine exhibitors appeared. This time, with a variety of records to exhibit and longer programs possible, the public came in droves and kept coming back. Many talking machine exhibitors set up circuits through which they traveled every year with new records, and eventually supplemented² their shows with moving-picture films.

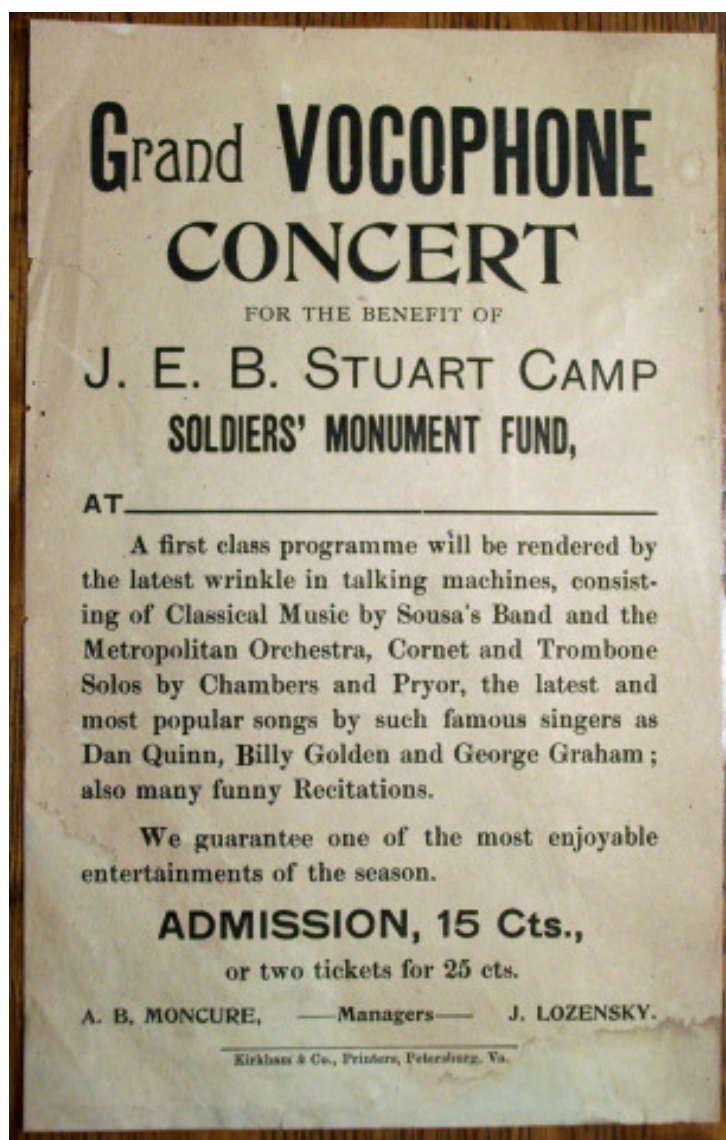
The talking machines used in these exhibitions were much improved over the old tinfoil models, and enabled everyone in a rented hall to hear what was being played. In addition, the professionally recorded songs and speeches sold by numerous firms were comparatively loud and clear. For those who had heard the old hand-driven tinfoil models, the difference must have been startling. For the others who had never heard a talking machine at all, it must have been a revelation. With professional singers,



An early image of an al fresco exhibition employing an Edison Class M Phonograph.



These miscellaneous handbills and admission tickets advertised unrelated exhibitors who all chose the Graphophone to exploit. The November 1898 handbill at the right is unusual in that it specifies the model Graphophone to be used; in this case an electric Type C.



For a brief period in late 1897 and early 1898, Berliner's distributor, Frank Seaman, experimented with different names for the Berliner Gramophone, which Seaman feared was being confused with the better-known cylinder Graphophone. This handbill advertises a Berliner Gramophone concert; the machine being called a "Vocophone." Seaman briefly tried calling the Berliner a "Zonophone," a name he would resurrect in 1899 for an entirely different machine.

musicians, and comedians on their records, and vastly improved machines to play them, the talking machine exhibitors of the mid- late 1890s often did very well in their profession. But these salad days were not to last long.

The improvement in talking machines and records, while materially aiding the exhibitors, also made these products attractive to private purchasers. As production increased, prices rapidly lowered, making talking machines and records available to families of modest means. Shortly before the turn of the 20th century, talking machine exhibitors found their patrons thinning out. More and more people were installing Phonographs, Graphophones, and Gramophones in their homes. There was no longer a need to pay a dime to hear a machine that sounded human. The talking machine had come home, and by 1905, exhibitions of them (without moving pictures) were becoming rare. Soon, they would flicker out entirely, as machines and records became commonplace in the home.³

Over a century has unfolded since the passing of the talking machine exhibitor. His traces can sometimes still be found in attics or in drawers. They are faded images of a lost world, where crowds would

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Grand — Concert



UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE
COLUMBIA GRAPHAPHONE CO.

THIS MAMMOTH MACHINE
STANDS FOR THE FARTHEST
ADVANCE MADE IN THE
TALKING MACHINE ART.



The Largest
Talking Machine
In the World.

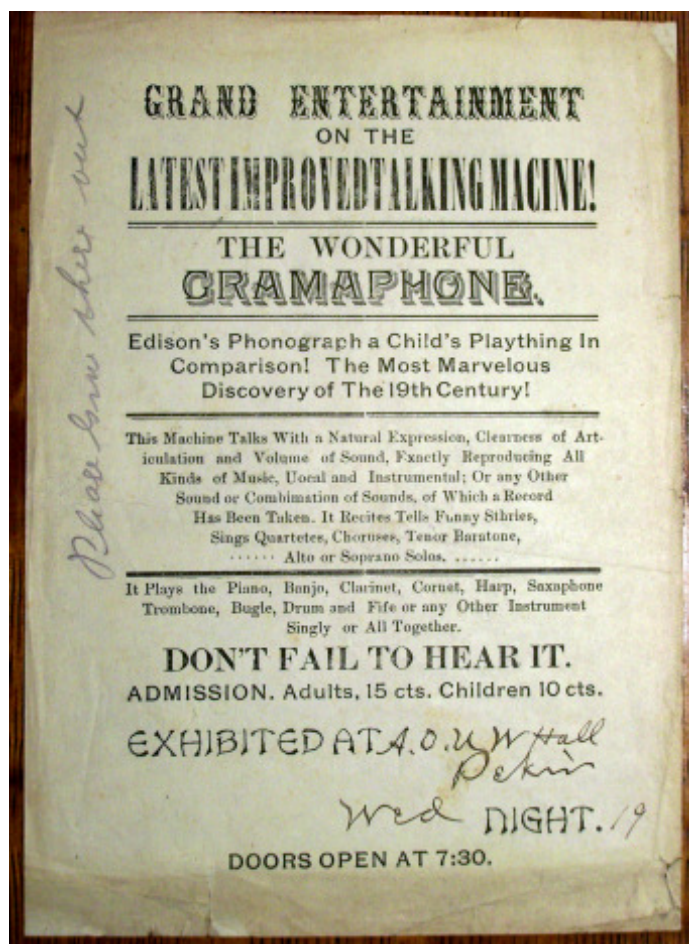
A large poster from A.W. Luce advertising his Graphophone Grand (Type GG) and the 9-foot brass horn he had specially made for him by Hawthorne & Sheble. It was most unusual (and expensive) to employ half-tone photographs on exhibition posters .

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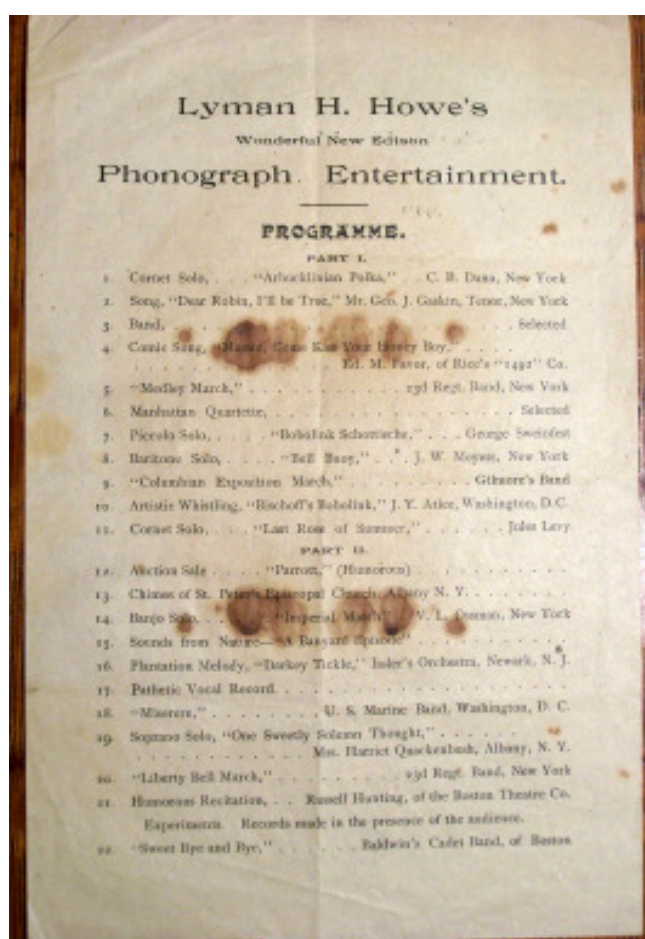
stand in line with coins in their hands for the chance to hear a machine that talks. There are crumbling handbills and posters, proclaiming the coming attraction and urging the curious to attend. There are even occasional machines and the records they played, the tools of a vanished vocation, still capable of conjuring the sounds that entertained a society that no longer exists.

Notes:

- 1) "Traces of Tinfoil: Edison's Phonograph Comes to the Genesee Valley", *The Sound Box*, September 2008, pp.24-30. The experiences of exhibitor J.S. Vale in the spring/summer of 1878 as examined in this article were no doubt typical.
- 2) *High-Class Moving Pictures; Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of Traveling Exhibition, 1880-1920*, Charles Musser & Carol Nelson, 1991, Princeton University Press. Howe, a well-known exhibitor in the northeast United States, added motion pictures to his shows in 1896, and ceased advertising the Phonograph as part of his show by early 1898, using it only for sound effects. By mid-1898, the Phonograph had been dispensed with entirely with the advent of live sound effects and voices from behind the screen.
- 3) Despite the falling off of revenues from talking machine exhibitions in the late 1890s, catalog houses such as Montgomery-Ward and Sears, Roebuck continued to claim an "excellent business" was available to men equipped with a talking machine and an assortment of interesting records. These claims continued until at least 1906. In its catalog of that year (No.116), Sears, Roebuck, and Company advised, "For public exhibition work the disc machine is the only machine that should ever be used..."



A rare handbill advertising a late 1890s exhibition of Berliner's Gramophone (here misspelled). A long ago penciled inscription directed someone to "Please give these out."



A handbill from a Lyman Howe exhibition, hand-dated on the back to November 1894.