

Now It Can Be Told:
Uncovering the History of
Little Wonder Records (and
Bubble Books)

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Imagine the year 1914

-  World War I begins
-  Panama Canal opens
-  First scheduled airline flight
-  Henry Ford introduces the assembly line
-  Charlie Chaplin debuts “The Tramp”
-  Recorded music controlled by Edison, Victor and Columbia

Along come Little Wonder Records

- 🎵 Most records played for 2 to 3 minutes – 10”
 - Little Wonders played for 1½ to 2 minutes
- 🎵 Most records listed the performers – 5½”
 - Almost no performers were mentioned
- 🎵 Most records were recorded at high quality
 - Sound quality was not particularly good
- 🎵 Most records cost \$.75 to \$1.00
 - Little Wonders were priced at 10¢

Market impact was enormous

- 🎵 Sold through non-traditional retailers
 - 5- and 10-cent stores
 - Mail order catalogs
- 🎵 Millions and millions were sold
 - 20 million in the first 10 months (total industry production was 40-60 million per year)
 - Woolworths couldn't keep them in stock
- 🎵 Recorded music was democratized

The music



War



Ethnic



Sound “experiments”



Cross genre



Not PC



Artists

The big mystery

Where did they come from?

Imagine the year 1999

-  Euro is established
-  SpongeBob SquarePants debuts
-  Napster debuts
-  The Panama Canal is turned over to Panama
-  My serious collecting of Little Wonder begins
-  Tim Brooks publishes the first Little Wonder discography

What we knew in 1999

- 🎵 Monopoly controlled by Edison, Victor and Columbia
- 🎵 Distributed by Henry Waterson, at least initially
- 🎵 Roughly 1300 recordings released (sometimes in multiple takes for a single number)
- 🎵 Waterson successfully sued by Victor Emerson who claimed a share of the profits but verdict was overturned on appeal

The existence of court papers

- 🎵 Serendipity in action – what friends know
- 🎵 Making new friends
- 🎵 More than \$100 – 25¢ at a time
- 🎵 The “mother lode”
 - The “smoking gun”
 - Little Wonder accounting and relationships
 - Etc., etc.

Some of what we now know

- 🎵 Emerson invented the record
- 🎵 Waterson was the sole distributor August 1914 through around June 1916, but stays “involved”
- 🎵 The terms of the contract were to be secret
- 🎵 Waterson’s accounting showed a \$72,546 loss, but \$190,405 in royalties was paid to Waterson-controlled companies
- 🎵 Artists were paid for their recordings

Some of what we now know

- 🎵 Paper labels show up as Columbia takes over
- 🎵 Roughly 1500 recordings released (sometimes in multiple takes for a single number)
- 🎵 More artists have been identified (including instrumentals)

Columbia expands the “franchise”

- 🎵 Manufactures the records for Harper & Bros. Bubble Books, and millions were sold
- 🎵 Provides records to Rust Craft for record packages
- 🎵 At the end, manufactured “personal” records

Some of what we still don't know

-  Who are the artists?
-  Which records were produced and how many of each were sold?
-  What were the circumstances for Waterson giving the distribution back to Columbia?

The mystery continues...