

## “Both Sides Then”

# The Strange Origins of the Double-Sided Disc Record

by Allen Koenigsberg

It seems obvious to us today that disc records would always have two sides, but they didn't start out that way. The story behind such an apparently simple idea was fraught with the usual patent wars, false starts and stops, and the appearance of a bevy of talented, even tragic, inventors on three continents.

Many collectors first learned of this secret history in *APM*, in a 1975 landmark article by Tim Brooks. To everyone's surprise, three double-sided Berliner records had been recently found and an explanation sought for their existence (first hinted at by Jim Walsh back in 1968). Although marked as “Licensed for use only on the Berliner Gramophone,” they would of course have played on the machines of any legal, or illegal, competitor (but did contain spoken anti-piracy announcements). The three records in question were: A18 “Nancy” (rec. May 22, 1900), backed by A23 “I'd Like It” (rec. June 6, 1900), both sung by S. H. Dudley; A56 “Lincoln's Speech at Gettysburg” (rec. June 7, 1900) by Wm. Hooley was backed by A72 “War is a Bountiful Jade” (rec. Apr-May?) sung by Geo. Broderick; and A111 “Sweet and Low” (take 1), sung by the Haydn Qt, was backed by A111 “Sweet and Low” (but take 2), both rec. July 11, 1900). All were 7 inches in

diameter and made of black shellac. Additional research remains to be done on the small early metal double-sided discs of Wm. Hollingshead and Louis Rosenthal.



The three unique A-series recordings were made during a short period when Emile Berliner was beset by dire legal problems with Frank Seaman and the new catalog-numbering system appears started by Eldridge Johnson (just prior to the introduction of his paper labels). They also reflect Berliner's last attempt to sell his discs directly (in the US) without an official agent. But it does not seem likely that these particular records were intended to be sold in their novel double-sided format – some penciled notations (“good,” “keep,” & “destroy”) indicate that these discs were tests, to be used solely in the laboratory

(and perhaps ferreted off by the engineer in whose effects they were found). As a matter of fact, when Fred Gaisberg wrote on Dec. 21, 1903, that Berliner had already experimented with double-sided records, he claimed that this had occurred “six years ago” (in 1897) but did not specify the selections. And Paul Charosh reports the existence of a single, even earlier, 2-sided disc, with both sides originally recorded in Nov 1894: 365, “Punchinello,” sung by Grace McCulloch, and

902, “*The Sword of Bunker Hill*,” sung by Samuel Ross; it is not known however when these solitary artist’s selections were physically paired.

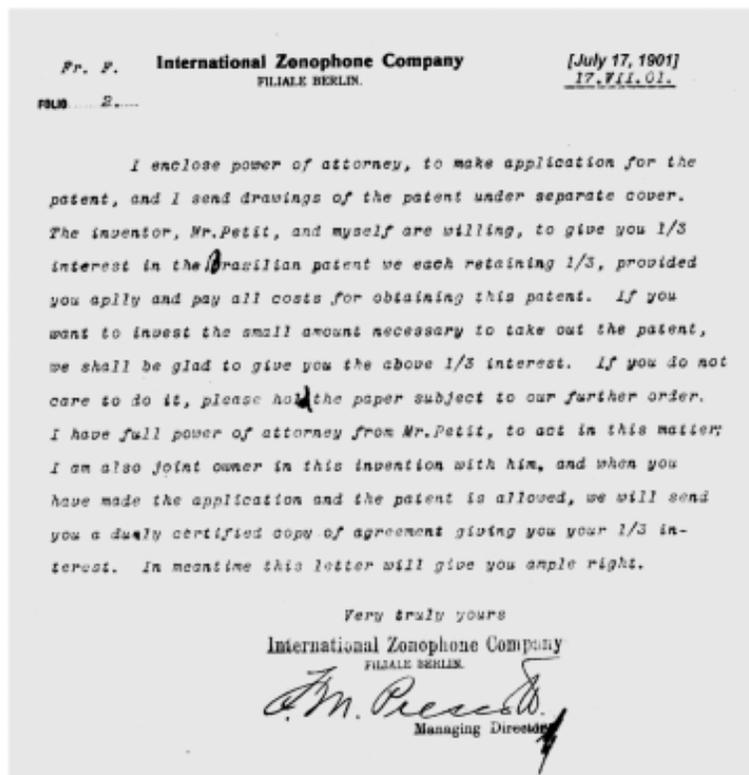
By the end of 1900, as Johnson struggled to establish his new Consolidated Talking Machine Company, he introduced the \$3 Toy (hand-wind) model, with one 7” record and 100 needles. The unwary customer was told only that the accompanying disc contained “six children selections” but not that it took 2 sides to do it (w/ paper labels on both)! This ‘packaged’ double-disc (A-490/491) was never shown in the catalogs or advertised separately. Several variations are known (‘Improved,’ ‘Victor,’ and ‘Victor Monarch’) and its limited production supposedly ran until June of 1902. It was truly a stealth record, and the industry (and the world’s adults) simply ignored it – for the moment.

But by Jan. 1901, a sometime employee of Thomas Edison, Ademor Napoleon Petit, filed specifically for a U.S. patent, and succeeded in obtaining it three years later: 749,092. Half was originally assigned to the ubiquitous Frederick M. Prescott (1869-1923), a one-time Edison dealer/jobber himself. Petit came from a machining background, born on March 13, 1866 in Québec to Leon R. Petit and Délia Bousquet. His father would long work at the Lamb Manufacturing Co. in Chicopee, Massachusetts, since he moved the family to the US between 1874-76 and they all became American citizens. Unfortunately, Ademor (Adhemar) – at the age of 11 – lost his mother in 1877 when she was only 34 years old (as a result of childbirth, another daughter). Leon’s remarriage the following year (with a large blended family) was probably not a happy one, if one can judge by the eventual result.

But in the meantime, the family seemed productive, and Ademor’s older brother Albert applied for, and was granted, a US patent for a “Bicycle Brace” (359,629). And by 1892, A. N. had moved to New

York City and obtained his own first patent (482,317), for an improved “Type-writing Machine” (1892). And soon, perhaps as a result of his employment by Edison, he obtained patents in several countries for improvements in film projection: US 560,367; Great Britain 10,778/1896; and France 256.446. Another two years, and with his brothers Albert and Arthur, he opened the Edisonia Co. in Newark, NJ (corner of New & Halsey Sts.) by 1898 – they were among the first to sell ‘Edison-branded’ brown wax cylinders and some of the oldest record catalogs and alphabetical announcements bear their name. And despite TAE’s standard dislike of others making commercial use of his name, the busy brothers retained it with his apparent blessing for the life of their company – probably through 1912.

By the time that Petit’s two-sided record patent was issued in the U.S. (Jan. 5, 1904), the idea itself was becoming somewhat popular. He had already obtained patents in a number of countries, probably with Prescott’s financial aid: Switzerland, 23496; Austria, 11.365; Brazil, 3465; Italy, 40/18940; Great Britain, 1294; Belgium, 155.104;



Canada, 75705; Spain, 27399; and Germany, 148.105. It is not entirely clear how Yukon resident Colin McKenzie managed to get a similar patent (under his own name) in Canada in Dec. 1904, i.e. 90485. Yet even in the U.S., Joseph E. Wassenich obtained a patent (505,910) for a recording tablet years before “with one or both sides” mentioned briefly in the Description, if not the Claims.

The concept was a hit around the world, except for the United States, where only one company showed any real interest. In the Souvenir Booklet for the 1904 World’s Fair at St. Louis, it was announced: “*The latest talking machine novelty to be introduced by the Columbia Phonograph Company is a ten-inch-disc record with a selection on each side.*” The back-to-back labels on just 9 releases were mostly a continuation of the usual black and silver designs but there it languished for three years (first at \$1.50 ea.), despite an occasional half-hearted mention (“Reversible Disc Record”) in the company literature.

Fred Prescott, having broken with Edison in 1898, was determined to make disc records the wave of the future. In 1901, almost out of the blue, he wrote to the largest phonograph dealer in Rio de Janeiro, Fred Figner, offering him one third of Petit’s double-sided patent if he would assist in obtaining the Brazilian equivalent. This arrangement would lead to the first regular 2-sided disc records being put on sale anywhere. Figner was only 15 years old when he had emigrated alone from Czechoslovakia to the U.S. (in May 1882); there he lived and worked (as a traveling salesman), mainly around San Antonio, Texas. By 1891, he seems to have passed through San Francisco, where he was amazed at the quality of the latest Class M (battery operated) phonographs. He would recall that he bought one from the Pacific Phonograph Co. for \$175 and took it with him to Brazil, giving traveling exhibitions in many cities. It is not known why he picked Brazil, given his own Bohemian background, but he also obtained US citizenship in May of 1893.

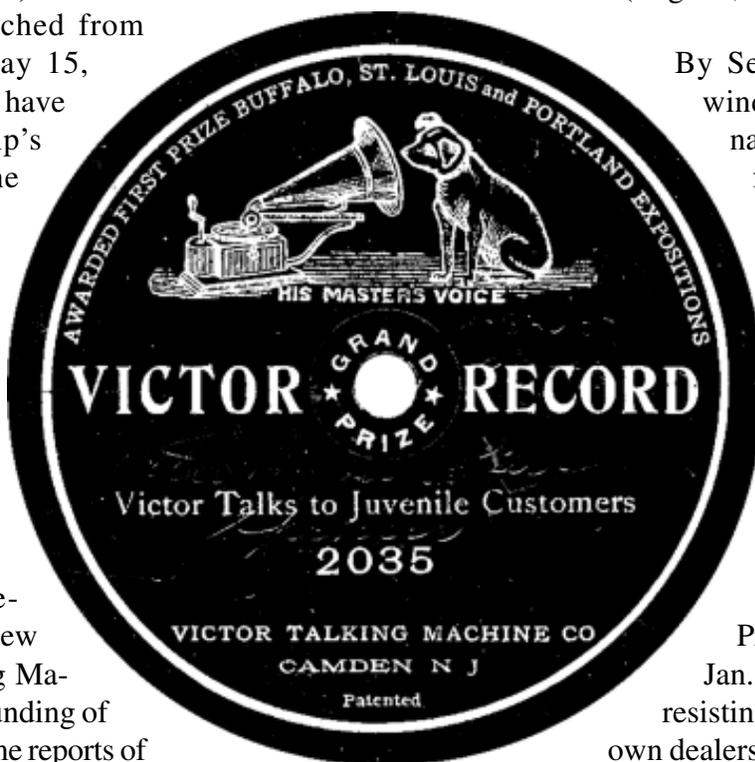
Brazil had long been interested in the newly-discovered wonders of recorded sound, and as early as 1878-1879, working displays of the tinfoil phonograph were already being publicized. As a matter of fact, when the Pennsylvania shipbuilder John Roach launched his new steamer (‘The City of Rio de Janeiro’) on May 4, 1878, he specifically obtained one of the first models, and pre-recorded a personal message for the Emperor of Brazil. The headlines read, “Dom Pedro will grind out Mr. Roach’s compliments and congratulations.” But when the ship successfully arrived, and the Emperor boarded the vessel some three weeks later, no newspaper revealed the contents of the recording. One can only wonder if the machine worked properly, even though Dom Pedro had been a long-time supporter of new technologies, once visiting Philadelphia during the American Centennial in 1876, and giving Bell some helpful publicity for his primitive telephone.

By 1900, Figner had married Esther Reyes (in Brazil, 1897), and started a family, eventually siring 6 children. His business name in Rio at first was only his name (his first name ‘Fritz’ had long since been changed to Fred). But by late 1901, he decided to call his shop at 107 Rua Ouvidor, “Casa Edison,” and extended his activities further (with the same name) through his younger brother Gustav in Sao Paulo. He placed enough orders with the National Phonograph Co. in W. Orange to qualify as the largest Brazilian purchaser of such products. Nonetheless, the previous animosity between Edison and Prescott spilled over and Figner soon received a harsh letter from TAE’s attorney, Howard W. Hayes: “I shall certainly bring suit against the *Casa Edison* in Rio de Janeiro if they insist on using the name of Edison....” Figner, revealing some of the skills and diplomacy that would one day make him a millionaire, actually out-argued Hayes and retained his chosen trade name until his store closed in 1932. Figner had cleverly pointed out that the goods he was being sent from Edison’s factory in New Jersey actually had ‘Casa Edison’ broadly stenciled on the shipping crates and that he was well within Brazilian law.

Figner, much sooner than Edison, realized that he would have to switch to discs (despite the wide popularity of his previous ‘Graphophone Clubs’), and he indeed helped Prescott obtain Brazilian Patent 3465. Henry Hagen, an pioneer recording expert, was soon sent to Rio and the resulting wax masters shipped back to Germany. There they were manufactured as two-sided discs, with one containing a domestic Brazilian selection arranged by Figner, and the other a record from the usual stock of the International Zonophone Co. According to Bayly and Kinnear, the first shipment (646 ten-inch and 83 seven-inch) of double-sided records was dispatched from Paris to Rio on May 15, 1902, but as yet we have not verified the ship’s name. By May-June 1903, trademark designs for double-sided discs were being filed in France by Charles & Jacques Ullmann (the newly deputed agents) and by December, the labels reflected the change-over to Prescott’s new International Talking Machine Co. and the founding of Odeon. There are some reports of (IZ) Zonophone 376/377 (2<sup>nd</sup> Garde Regiment) being doubled in late 1901 as a seven-inch disc in Europe, but this seems an anomaly.

Victor dipped its toes into the maelstrom of claims and counter-claims when it made (on Nov. 3, 1905), for internal use only, a double-sided ten-inch record entitled, “*Hints to Victor Salesmen*” (2036), backed by “*Victor Talks to Juvenile Customers*” (2035). However, Len Spencer’s invigorating words were sent only to official dealers and the disc is rather rare today . Around the same time, the Austrian version of Petit’s patent (11.365) was challenged by Favorite Schallplatten Fabrik and

they effectively invalidated it (in Europe) on Jan. 4, 1906. Even Nicole Freres had begun issuing two-sided discs in Nov. 1905. Odeon masters had been supplied even earlier (Oct. 1904) to the American Record Co. (Hawthorn/Sheble/John Prescott) of Springfield, Mass. where the distinctive Indian-label blue 27cm double-sided discs (“Music hath Charms”) were pressed by the Dickinson Rubber Co. Fred Prescott’s brother (John) also tried to sell a new 2-sided disc called ‘Champion Record’ in Feb. 1908, but none have been found with the fearsome gladiator and trident (Reg. 69,967).



By September, 1908, the winds of change had finally arrived. Columbia finally made their biggest push in advertising double-sided records (65 cents for 10” and \$1 for 12”), after a short experience with importing some similar *Fonotipias* in March, and perhaps to respond more strongly to Prescott’s initial suit of Jan. 9, 1906. Victor, still resisting to the end, told their own dealers: “We deplore the ad-

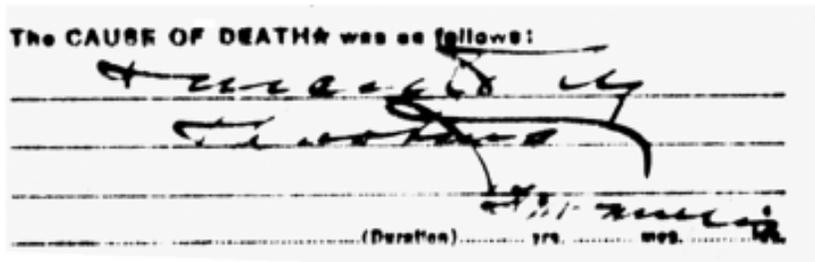
vent of the double-faced records at any price.” The VTMCo., although issuing (for November) 100 doubled 10-inch discs (16,000 series, 75 cents ea.) and 25 12-inch (35,000 series, \$1.25 ea.), then bought up Petit’s patent from Prescott on Jan. 26, 1909 and sued Columbia (AGCo), whose lawyer cleverly responded: “If we are to be restricted to one side of the record, which shall it be?” Victor’s Red Seal discs however were maintained as single-sided until Sept. 1923 (for prestige and royalty reasons). Ironically, it would be John Kearsing’s patent for 2-sided medallions (317,143) that would be cited in the Court decision, as his pressing company (originally for nov-

elties) was re-named the *Duranoid M'f'g Co.* on Jan. 14, 1892. Second Circuit Court Judge John R. Hazel would rule, on June 26, 1911, that Petit's original 1901-1904 US patent was invalid because of "prior conception," but a subsequent appeal by Victor, and a private settlement between the two companies, kept Petit's patent still technically alive.

In the interim, Ademor Petit became interested in cylinders again, including those of celluloid, and left with his wife and daughter for England, arriving there on May 17, 1902. He helped Fred Prescott establish the new International Phonograph & Indestructible Record Co. Ltd. of Liverpool and for a while some black celluloid cylinders (marked as made with "Petit's patents") were put on the market with plaster cores. They were sued (unsuccessfully) by the Lambert Co. but poor celluloid quality was more likely the culprit of their demise. By March of 1905 (apparently on his birthday), Petit and his family returned to the U.S. after living also in Berlin, and he soon set up an extensive phonograph shop in Baltimore, Maryland. He was active there for five years, returning to the West Orange area in late 1910, where he set up a home laboratory (in a barn on Wheeler St.) and still maintained close ties with Edison. According to his passport application, he was five feet three inches tall. By Jan. 2, 1913, he became interested in pull-chain electric fixtures and filed for a patent that became US 1,100,253. Then in February 1914, his mind turned back to disc record production, and he applied for two more, both of which his brother Albert would eventually have to see through (1,246,651/652). *The Patent History of the Phonograph* placed him among the top 10 of all phonograph inventors, with some 25 to his credit.

The morning of June 15, 1914 seemed like any other, and Petit was observed picking some cherries on his property. He was apparently preoccupied and did not come in from his lab for lunch at his daughter's usual whistle. When Aurora Petit

went out to report the receipt of a slightly delayed letter from his patent attorneys in Manhattan, she found him resting in a chair, with a .32 caliber pistol at his side and a suicide note addressed to his wife ("I go to nothing"). The doctor would say that he had been dead for several hours, and the almost indecipherable excerpt from his Death Certificate is shown here ("deceased by gunshot"). It is not known what later became of his wife Flora



and his young daughter (b. 1889) and the disposition of his ashes is unknown. His eagerly awaited patent was officially issued the next day, but newspaper reports claiming a new process of making chewing gum were oddly misguided.

Fred Figner stayed in Brazil the rest of his life, accumulating a small fortune through his business acumen and was long active in local philanthropy – he acquired Brazilian citizenship in 1921. He had developed an interest in the Spirit World of 'Allan Kardec' and practiced Psychography (unconscious writing) for many years; after his own death in 1947, he supposedly came back to pen a Memoir in Portuguese ('*Voltei: The Return*'). His elegant mansion, built in 1912 and subsequently restored, still exists today and is a popular attraction in Rio. There are probably not many who recall his pivotal role in establishing the prevalence of the two-sided record.

*Thanks to Todd Mills, Carlos Palombini, the books of Humberto Franceschi, Kurt Nauck, Frank Andrews, Michael Sherman, Hugo Strotbaum, and the Edison Papers Project for their kind assistance. Allen maintains a phonographic history website at: [www.phonobooks.com](http://www.phonobooks.com) and always welcomes correspondence: [allenamet@aol.com](mailto:allenamet@aol.com).*

