

## Turntable Jr.

In August 2001, the last episode of the *Bozo's Circus* television show was aired on WGN in Chicago. Though the show had been a staple of local Chicago television for forty years and over seven thousand episodes, the final WGN broadcast received national press coverage that hailed Bozo as the longest-running children's television character in America, seen at one time on stations from coast to coast. Bozo's television debut had been in Los Angeles in 1949, and in his heyday there were Bozos on the air in most major American cities, as well as in Brazil, Mexico, Thailand, and Greece. Among the many performers who played Bozo on local TV stations were Muppets creator Jim Henson and NBC weatherman Willard Scott, who went on to be the first television Ronald McDonald—a figure who borrowed much of his visual style from Bozo.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, Bozo's reign as juggernaut of postwar children's television was coming to an end by the 1990s, the victim of competition from cable stations such as Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network. The last Bozo broadcast in Chicago marked the end of an era and drew a variety of local celebrities, including Smashing Pumpkins lead singer Billy Corgan, who performed a version of Bob Dylan's "Forever Young."

There was another music industry personality in the WGN studio that day, one who was probably not recognized by many in the audience: Alan Livingston, a former Capitol Records executive. Best known as the man who signed both Frank Sinatra and the Beatles to his label, Livingston had another legacy, one that inspired the *Saturday Evening*

*Post* to write in 1955 that he had “pioneered a branch of show business” that was earning twenty million dollars a year and had even influenced American educational theories. Livingston had managed this feat by conceptualizing and producing a children’s phonograph record called *Bozo at the Circus* in 1946: a disc that not only introduced Bozo the Clown to the world, but was at one time the best-selling album in phonograph history and the fountainhead of a postwar boom in children’s records. It was from Livingston’s record that the Bozo entertainment franchise sprang: the proliferation of regional television Bozos actually began at Capitol Records, where Bozo clown suits were kept in all of its regional offices for actors to play the famous clown at personal appearances.<sup>2</sup> That the longest-running children’s television character of the postwar era originated in the record industry is a telling indication of the largely unrecognized importance of the phonograph in children’s media culture.

Juliet B. Schor has described a contemporary American consumer culture in which children form the link between advertisers and the family purse and children’s tastes and opinions shape corporate strategies. Schor states that the centrality of children to the consumer marketplace is a relatively recent phenomenon and that not long ago children were merely “bit players” who were approached by marketers primarily through their mothers. Schor, like many other scholars, refers to the widespread introduction of television as an important turning point in the use of the media as a platform for marketing to children because of the way in which it allowed advertisers a more direct link to young audiences.<sup>3</sup> But the work of scholars such as Daniel Cook, Ellen Gruber Garvey, Lisa Jacobson, and William Leach has indicated that children were seen as more than bit players in home consumption decades before television and even radio. Jacobson argues that middle-class children became targets of advertising more than half a century before television and warns that identifying the 1950s as “the pivotal historical moment” in marketing to kids risks falling into a “technological and economic determinism” that can obscure “a host of earlier efforts to inculcate brand consciousness.”<sup>4</sup> The phonograph was one such earlier effort at marketing to children, despite being overlooked in examinations of early twentieth-century children’s media culture. Consider that in 1924, the Victor Phonograph Company could eagerly refer to the novel opportunities provided by reaching the “boundless and almost untouched children’s market.” Victor was embarking on a marketing campaign for one of the earliest lines of mass media products targeted

specifically at young children: Bubble Books, the first book and record hybrid for kids.<sup>5</sup>

The phonograph industry provides an important missing chapter in the history of the design and marketing of media products for children. Phonograph records have been largely absent from the scholarly history of children's media entertainment. Overviews of children's media typically move from discussions of dime novels to the nickelodeon film theater and from there to radio and television, without any mention of the phonograph industry.<sup>6</sup> In Norma Odom Pecora's overview of media industry output for children, she has this to say about the recording industry: "Teens have been central to the music industry since the 1950s and the advent of Rock and Roll, but the younger market has been ignored both in terms of product and technology."<sup>7</sup> As I will demonstrate, records for children were actively marketed to parents and children by the phonograph industry decades before Disney and television. Of particular interest in the pre-World War II era are the Bubble Books, which were released by Columbia Records (and later Victor) in the 1910s and 1920s. Advertising materials for Bubble Books reveal a lost phase in the development of influential approaches to marketing media products to children and index the anxieties that surrounded the arrival of such products into the home. Notably, children's records such as the Bubble Books did not provoke the kind of public controversy inspired by dime novels, early cinema, radio, and television, despite aggressive marketing by the record industry in popular magazines, department stores, and even in schools. The fact that children's phonograph records sparked such little public debate is certainly one of the reasons that children's records have been off the scholarly radar but also poses some significant questions concerning the study of children and the media: Why did children's records not inspire the same controversy as other forms of children's media? Why do some forms of new media for children provoke more cultural concern than others? The following analysis, then, is concerned not only with adding the phonograph industry to historical accounts of children's media and with documenting early strategies for marketing children's media products, but also with identifying aspects of that marketing that allowed these pioneering instances of home media products for children to be woven into the fabric of everyday American family life.

The Bubble Books provide a new perspective on the emergence of a children's market in American consumer culture and helped to set the stage for children's records of the 1940s and 1950s: the time of a

remarkable surge in what the trade press called the “Brat-wax,” “pee-wee platter,” or “kidisk” market. Postwar recordings such as *Rusty in Orchestraville*, *Sparky and the Magic Piano*, and *Genie the Magic Record* index debates about child-rearing and the role that media entertainment should play in children’s lives. Some of the best-selling children’s records of the 1940s and 1950s present a fascinating tension: marketed as home lessons in the appreciation of Western classical music, they trained children in modes of listening more in tune with genres of recorded popular music. In fact, experimentation with multi-track studio techniques on records made for baby boom children blazed a trail for the studio-based rock and roll of the 1950s and 1960s. From Bubble Books to Bozo, children’s records have much to tell us about the development of modern media texts that were thought to be good for children. When Alan Livingston discussed the development of his blockbuster Bozo records, he often noted the influence of records made for children in the early decades of the twentieth century. In order to understand developments in the postwar children’s record industry, it is necessary to first examine children’s records in the early years of the phonograph industry.

## JUVENILE RECORDS

It can be argued that the history of the children’s phonograph record begins with the history of recorded sound itself, since the oft-repeated “creation story” of the phonograph has Thomas Edison reciting the nursery rhyme “Mary Had a Little Lamb” into his tinfoil recording device. Phonograph historian Patrick Feaster has pointed out that this heart-warming anecdote is quite probably a rewrite of history: given Edison’s penchant for salty humor, the first test was likely to have been quite different. Nonetheless, from the very beginning, the phonograph was cast as a device with a certain affinity for children’s entertainment. In fact, one of Edison’s earliest intended uses for recorded sound was to make children’s dolls that could speak.<sup>8</sup> In 1890, Edison outfitted his West Orange, New Jersey, laboratory as a production line for dolls containing tiny phonograph players. The dolls did not sell well, and the company folded in 1891, by which time the market for entertainment phonograph cylinders had begun to take off.<sup>9</sup> Though the phonograph would not speak to American children through dolls, the major phonograph companies actively sought to develop a child market for phonograph players and records as early as the 1890s and 1900s.

Consider that the first Victor Talking Machine product to be nationally advertised was the Toy Gram-o-phone, which is shown in a December 1900 ad in *Munsey's Magazine*, with copy that reads, "The most wonderful Christmas gift ever offered for children."<sup>10</sup> In a November 1907 advertisement in *McClure's Magazine*, we see the image of two little girls amazed by the phonograph horn, while the copy proclaims, "The Edison Phonograph as a Christmas Present": "No single thing furnishes so much entertainment, amusement and enjoyment to a family, especially where there are children and young folks, as an Edison Phonograph."<sup>11</sup> Compelling evidence exists that the phonograph was indeed being given to children as a Christmas gift. On a rare amateur home recording circa 1899–1901, we hear a father or grandfather describing the gift of a graphophone (the Columbia Company cylinder player) to his children: "My children, when I heard you play the flute and the piano . . . it occurred to me that you would enjoy a graphophone immensely, and that perhaps it would be the most appropriate . . . [Christmas gift] I could possibly give you." The patriarch goes on to describe the gift as both a "source of enjoyment" and as an aid to more serious study.<sup>12</sup>

The phonograph industry continued to actively pursue the child market both indirectly through parents and through direct appeals to children, as is illustrated by the use of a Victor promotional brochure entitled *The Victor: For Every Day in the Week* (1907), which promoted the phonograph as a multipurpose form of children's entertainment. In the Victor trade journal *The Voice of Victor*, the company advised retailers on how to use the brochure: "This booklet can be used in conjunction with your window display . . . in some localities it may be better to distribute them upon dismissal of school."<sup>13</sup> In the brochure, we see the image of a phonograph player being delivered to a home, as copy proclaims, "There certainly is pleasure for us every day in the week with the Victor." A series of illustrations follow, depicting the various ways in which the phonograph could entertain children: on Monday, a group of youngsters wear military uniforms and march around the nursery to the sounds of John Philip Sousa; and on Tuesday, the children listen to Mother Goose stories on the phonograph player and put on a Punch and Judy show.

Such Mother Goose stories, or juvenile records, were made by performers such as William F. Hooley, who identified himself as Uncle Will and began recitations of material such as *The Death of Cock Robin* by telling listeners: "Now, children, draw your little chairs nearer so that you can see the pretty pictures." Also consider pioneer recording artist

Len Spencer's Columbia 1899 recording of Cinderella, on which we hear Spencer say, "Now children, draw your little chairs around the Graphophone Grand, and Uncle John will tell you the story of Cinderella and the glass slipper." At the end of the tale, Spencer says, "There now, wasn't that a nice story? Run off to bed now little ones, kiss Uncle John 'good night.'" Gilbert Girard was the premiere vocal mimic of the early phonograph industry and frequently applied his talents to making records for children. On titles such as *A Trip to the Circus* (Victor 1901) and *Auction Sale of a Bird and Animal Store* (Edison 1902), Girard and Len Spencer presented animal mimicry, an auctioneer performance, and broad jokes: a range of offerings that could appeal to both children and adults. *A Trip to the Circus* is introduced as a "descriptive selection for the little folks," and then we hear Spencer announce, "Now children, hold tight to my hand, and don't get too near to the animals." "Oh, see the elephants," Spencer declares, and Girard provides a loud trumpeting sound. On Girard's later recording *Santa Claus Visits the Children* (Victor 1921), we hear Santa arrive on his sleigh and announce: "Come children, gather near. A few nice stories you shall hear." Girard goes on to recite Mother Goose verses interspersed with his impressive repertoire of sound effects. We find here an early model for children's records, wherein a rudimentary narrative framework structures a series of spectacular sound effects meant to capture the attention of young listeners. As we shall see, the calibration of these different types of sonic appeal became a recurring structural dynamic of children's records.

"Juvenile records" from the early decades of the twentieth century demonstrate that the phonograph industry was quick to recognize the importance of the child audience for home media entertainment. In fact, a major campaign to market children's records began in 1917, when Columbia Records formed a partnership with Harper and Brothers Books to manufacture 5½-inch diameter records and market them to children.<sup>14</sup> The Bubble Books were the brainchild of Ralph Mayhew, who in 1914 was working for Harper and Brothers on a children's book of verse in which he planned to have "a child sitting blowing bubbles which ascended and burst into the little pictures and nursery rhymes."<sup>15</sup> In a 1921 interview with *Printer's Ink* magazine, Mayhew described how he first conceived of combining children's books with phonograph records: "I had a habit," Mayhew stated, "of crawling out of bed occasionally of a Sunday morning, putting a record on the phonograph, slipping back into bed with pencil and paper and working on little verses for my Bubble Book. One Sunday morning, while thus engaged, the idea

suddenly occurred to me of incorporating small phonograph records in my Bubble Book, with appropriate music to accompany the nursery rhymes. I had never heard of putting a book and records together, and the idea rather struck my fancy.”<sup>16</sup> Mayhew was eventually able to convince Harper and Brothers and Columbia Records to back his idea, and the first edition of the Bubble Books was pressed in 1917. The first Bubble Book—which contained three single-sided 5½-inch records featuring musical versions of traditional children’s verses sung by Henry Burr and an accompanying package with illustrations by Rhoda Chase—met with immediate success: “Hardly had the salesmen gone out when the orders began to pour in,” *Printer’s Ink* noted, adding that nine thousand copies were sold in the month after it was released.<sup>17</sup> These initial strong sales figures continued over the next several years: according to one 1920 advertisement, more than one and a half million Bubble Books were sold between January and May of that year.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the Bubble Books sold well enough to inspire subsequent editions through the early 1930s, with the copyright and patents controlled by the Victor Company after 1924.<sup>19</sup> The Bubble Books were the first book and record hybrids marketed to children and so represent a pioneering instance of cross-media synergy between book publishing and the record industry. An examination of the ad campaign designed to sell Bubble Books reveals early strategies for developing a child audience for home media products and the kinds of media texts that were considered to be beneficial to children.

#### THE BOOKS THAT SING

At a time when American toy manufacturers were entering the mass market, Columbia and Harper and Brothers began advertising Bubble Books in both the popular and trade press.<sup>20</sup> In regards to the latter, Daniel Cook warns that the use of trade journals as evidence “demands circumspection,” since the “bald, forthright approach to markets” found in such discourse was intended for a very particular audience. Cook suggests that trade material should be considered as “providing an entrée into a historically situated semantic domain” and can provide insights into the process by which commercial portrayals of children and childhood are constructed.<sup>21</sup> Trade advertisements for Bubble Books in *Talking Machine World* were targeted to record store owners and reveal some of the motivations and assumptions behind influential strategies for marketing children’s media entertainment.

For example, retailers were encouraged to use children to reach adult consumers indirectly. *Printer's Ink* magazine claimed that phonograph dealers across the country were reporting that "they sell phonographs to many people who explain that they 'don't care for talking machines' themselves but that they must have one to play the Bubble Book records for their children. Naturally, having taken the machines into their homes, they overcome their first prejudice and buy other records as well, so that the Bubble Books have been a means of stimulating phonograph and phonograph record sales."<sup>22</sup> "The easiest way to win the good-will of customers is through their children," stated a 1923 *Talking Machine World* ad targeted to phonograph dealers: "You know how freely the most reticent mother will talk, if you get her started on the subject of her little boy or girl."<sup>23</sup> A 1924 Victor company publication noted that nothing ingratiated a merchant with the public as much as "being of service to children. Parents will feel more than ever well disposed toward you . . . for bringing a desirable thing to their children's hands."<sup>24</sup> Children were also thought to be able to influence their parents through what marketers have described as the "nag factor," or "pester power," in which children are encouraged to make purchase requests of their parents.<sup>25</sup> A 1921 *Talking Machine World* ad asked, "How many children are working for you? No, we don't mean in the store but outside, in your customers' homes. The dealer that sells Bubble Books has one or more persistent salesmen in every home in his town."<sup>26</sup>

Not only were children a means of reaching parents, but trade press ads also asserted that they were potentially "serial purchasers." That is, the importance of the child market lay in the fact that children were eager to purchase multiple items in a particular line, or as the Bubble Book ads bluntly stated, "When you sell one—you sell a habit!" Ralph Mayhew was not the first person to recognize the "serial" potential of the children's market. Ellen Gruber Garvey has described how children in the 1880s and 1890s collected advertising trade cards, which they arranged in scrapbooks: "No single trade card," Garvey writes, "was enough."<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, the idea of exploiting children's seemingly limitless appetites struck *Printer's Ink* as a novel aspect of Bubble Book marketing: it was Mayhew's "keen marketing imagination" that had perceived that a second Bubble Book could be sold to the same people "who had bought the first one. And they were right."<sup>28</sup> "With most kinds of merchandise the sale is the end of the transaction," stated the copy in a 1922 *Talking Machine World* ad, "but with Bubble Books it is another story. When you sell your first Bubble Book you have only just begun.



For there is one sure thing about Bubble Book buyers—they always come back for more.”<sup>29</sup> A Victor company trade journal described how one of the most “satisfying features” of selling records to children was the fact that “every sale sows the seeds” for an “endless chain” of future sales.<sup>30</sup> A 1919 ad visualizes the child as both a serial purchaser and as a link between the marketplace and the home: an illustration depicts a pied piper holding a portable gramophone, leading a line of dancing children from the city to “Ye Talking Machine Shoppe,” while the copy beneath reads, “Lure the children to your store with these enchanting little volumes, and they will take you right into the heart of the family. When the youngster has bought one he always comes for more.”<sup>31</sup> Bubble Books could thus create a serial market for records in a manner similar to film serials in the 1910s, which Terry Staples argues were designed to stimulate regular cinema-going in children.<sup>32</sup>

Trade press advertisements for Bubble Books demonstrate strategies for marketing children’s media products that have since become commonplace. The trade press ads I’ve been describing were, however, only one aspect of what was considered to be an unprecedented advertising campaign for children’s products. In fact, the use of a large-scale print advertising campaign was itself a notable aspect of the marketing of Bubble Books. A 1920 ad in *Talking Machine World* announced a “great national Bubble Book campaign” at a cost of \$75,000.<sup>33</sup> The trade journal the *Bookseller, Newsdealer and Stationer* stated that this would be “the largest advertising campaign ever devoted to books . . . the sum to be expended in the advertising campaign for them exceeds anything ever before spent on a single juvenile line.”<sup>34</sup> Advertisements in that campaign appeared in mass-circulation magazines such as *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Woman’s Home Companion* and provide a commercial discourse that ran parallel to the trade journals described above.

It will not come as a surprise that popular press ads for Bubble Books targeted women, since it was thought that they did the bulk of both the family’s consumer spending and child rearing. The growth of a market for both mass-produced toys and children’s records was tied to the emergence of new family roles that were in turn shaped by campaigns against child labor, the decreasing size of the middle-class family, and the introduction of scientific discourses of child rearing.<sup>35</sup> Ellen Seiter stresses that children’s consumption be placed in the context of the increasing demands placed on women’s time, demands that made “children’s goods appealing, even necessary for mothers.”<sup>36</sup> Seiter argues that it was the “increasing labor and time intensity” of middle-class mothers’ work

# The Bubble Books

## Irresistible Business Builders

THE Bubble Books are the quickest selling, most profitable novelty in the talking machine field. Lure the children to your store with these enchanting little volumes, and they will take you right into the heart of the family. When a youngster has bought one he always comes for more.

### Cash in on a Million Sales

We are helping you. A smashing advertising campaign in the leading journals of the home, beginning early in the Fall, will bring a live demand right to your counter—the children and their parents.

We will run large space in such dominating magazines as Ladies' Home Journal, Good Housekeeping, Vogue, Vanity Fair, Life, St. Nicholas, Red Book, Harper's, Scribner's, Century, Review of Reviews, John Martin's Book.

**NINE BOOKS NOW READY—NEW  
ISSUES ALMOST EVERY MONTH**

Retail \$1.00 each

Write for discounts, terms and circular matter, and order through your regular channels or direct from us—**HARPER & BROTHERS,**  
Franklin Square, New York.



**HARPER & BROTHERS**  
*Publishers*  
**FRANKLIN SQ. NEW YORK**  
Established 1817

FIGURE 1. Bubble Book advertisement: Bubble Books take the phonograph industry right into the heart of the family. Courtesy of Merle Sprinzen, private collection.

that “set the stage for the proliferation of children’s consumer goods”: “In order for the volume of toy sales to have increased, families had to move to houses with space to keep the toys and children had to have mothers who were so busy that they needed new ways to keep children entertained.”<sup>37</sup> Daniel Cook also points to the importance of mothers for the marketing of children’s goods and describes the emerging belief among marketers in the 1920s and 1930s that “mothers are like no other class of trade because they will forego their own happiness to provide for their children, a circumstance favorable to selling better grades of merchandise.”<sup>38</sup> During this same period, advertisers were fashioning contemporary theories of child guidance into a “cogent merchandising strategy,” and advertisements often encouraged middle-class women both to “invest more emotional energy in their role as mothers” and to “recognize that they would be judged more heavily than ever by their successes or failures in this role.”<sup>39</sup> Bubble Book ads targeted to retailers sometimes made explicit reference to new regimes of parenting. A 1924 *Talking Machine World* ad noted that parents were making a “study of their children these days”: “They have learned from child psychologists that the first six years of life are the most important. Impressions gathered during these—the formative years—are lasting. That’s why they want the best of everything for their children.”<sup>40</sup> The rhetoric found in this ad corroborates Nicholas Sammond’s claim that an increasingly important part of a mother’s parental responsibilities at this time came to be the regulation of her child’s consumption of brand goods.<sup>41</sup>

In their appeal to mothers, marketers downplayed the Bubble Books’ status as a sound recording and described them instead as a unique hybrid of toy and book. Popular press advertisements suggested that children would be captivated by Bubble Books as though by a toy: “When they’re tired of balls and tops and blocks and marbles and dolls, here’s something new.”<sup>42</sup> Bubble Books’ quasi-toy status was also encouraged by innovative packaging, with one edition featuring cut-out toys to accompany listening: “Make the little people in the Bubble Books dance to the music of their own songs,” an ad urged. Children could place cutout figures in the center of their Bubble Book records as they played, so that the “little Bubble Book friends go round and round—just as though they were dancing,” the ad copy suggested. “Then you can work out little plays and have the Bubble Book people do the things that the records sing about.”<sup>43</sup> We might see these cutouts as an early example of what Schor calls “trans-toying,” whereby everyday objects such as toothbrushes are turned into playthings.<sup>44</sup> Here the

July 7, 1925.

1,544,645

B. JOHNSON

CUT OUT TOY

Filed Oct. 8, 1921

2 Sheets-Sheet 1.

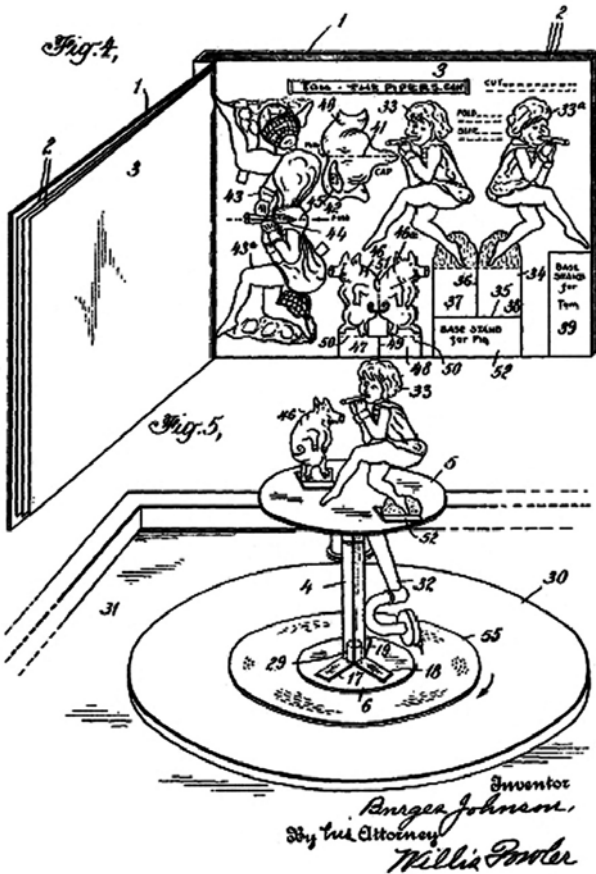


FIGURE 2. The spinning phonograph becomes a toy: Bubble Book cutout figures. Accessed at <http://www.google.com/patents>.

spinning phonograph record itself becomes a toy, further blurring the line between plaything, record, and book.

Though ads suggested that children would enjoy Bubble Books as they would a toy, parents were also urged to see their booklike qualities. As their name and slogan (“the books that sing”) indicated, they were to be regarded as a type of book. Parents were urged, for example, to start a Bubble Book “library.” A 1919 ad in *Ladies’ Home Journal* stated that “the Bubble Books are not play things for the moment only. They are

books of permanent value that will train your children's taste for poetry and rhythm and beauty of color."<sup>45</sup> The Bubble Books' hybrid status was offered to mothers as the vehicle for guilt-free relaxation, since children would be educated by their booklike qualities at the same time that they would be captivated as though by a toy. In a section entitled "Long Hours of Peace and Quiet," ad copy stated that "mother can sit quietly by sewing or reading, for she knows the children will be entertained for hours together, and at the same time they are learning."<sup>46</sup> In an ad entitled "It Keeps Them Happy on Rainy Days," a mother explained that "rainy days used to be the bane of my life. . . . The children used to drive me to distraction asking me for something to do. . . . But now, since I got them some Bubble Books, they just wish for the rainy days because it means real joy for them. They are busy and happy the live-long day . . . and the best part of it is that while they are playing with these magic wonder books they are learning something worth while."<sup>47</sup>

It is safe to assume that the success of the Bubble Books owed much to the powerful appeal of ads such as these, wherein a female voice addressed mothers busy with new kinds of housework and parental expectations. Phonograph records, it was suggested, could benefit mothers and children as a hybrid of book and toy that offered mothers time for relaxation and educated children at the same time. We find here an approach to selling children's records that is similar to Ellen Seiter's discussion of the "Toys That Teach" articles that appeared in *Parents* magazine in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>48</sup> Seiter argues that this rhetorical strategy was meant in part to balance "conflicting feelings toward consumption and its hedonistic and emulative aspects" and adds that such educational claims were "usually limited to desks, toy typewriters, or chalkboards and to specialized educational toy manufacturers such as Playskool."<sup>49</sup> Bubble Book ads reveal a similar approach being used for media products beginning in the 1910s.

The use of a "toys that teach" strategy for the Bubble Books can be placed in the context of larger record industry initiatives to market their products in American schools. In a 1924 discussion of "the school field," the trade journal the *Voice of Victor* asked, "Do you know that there are over 24,000,000 children in the schools of America? Imagine the effect on Victor prestige if *all* of them were hearing the Victrola daily in their classrooms, learning of its quality and the joy it brings. . . . The importance of reaching [children] in school, while their tastes are being formed, cannot be over-emphasized."<sup>50</sup> Later that year, the *Voice of Victor* cheered the "steady, constant, upwards climb of the line of Victors

placed in schools in every state in the Union” and noted that the number of cities whose schools had adopted the Victrola as part of their curriculum was up from 4 in 1911 to 13,000 in 1924.<sup>51</sup> Phonographs were included in school curricula in a variety of ways, the most common of which was as part of music appreciation programs: a topic to which I will return later in the chapter. For now, note that one way in which record companies incorporated their products into school music appreciation activities was by sponsoring music memory contests. These served to “concentrate the attention of children, parents and teachers on a certain number of selections of good music for a given period each year, culminating in a final contest between competitive teams”: “These teams hear a given number of the selections from the total number heard during the period of preparation, the team recognizing the greatest number being adjudged the winner.” Memory contests were a boon to the industry since they required an ongoing regime of repetitive study, in which records furnished “the repeated hearings necessary for memorizing.”<sup>52</sup> Music memory competitions resemble the contests found in children’s magazines that sought to promote child readers’ engagement with advertisements.<sup>53</sup> Record industry initiatives in the school field were also symptomatic of an era in which marketers were supplying schools with “enrichment materials” such as “commercially sponsored toothbrush drills and Lifebuoy wash-up charts.”<sup>54</sup> Though I have found little direct evidence of Bubble Books being used in these kind of school initiatives, the toys that teach marketing rhetoric of the Bubble Book campaign was one component in a larger record company strategy for marketing to children via discourses of education, both at home and in schools.

The “education” that Bubble Books provided consisted of a repackaged oral tradition of children’s nursery rhymes and songs. *Printer’s Ink* described how the Bubble Book staff engaged in “an elaborate study of nursery songs and stories”: “Mr. Mayhew haunts second-hand book shops and sends all over the world for the different versions of famous old nursery rhymes and tunes. Sometimes as many as twenty-five different versions of one song are collected, and as many different versions of the words. From these [the Bubble Book] editorial board painstakingly works out what it believes to be the best authenticated version of both words and music. As it sees its task, it is not the mere manufacturing of ingenious little books; it is training child minds, teaching music, rhythm and English, and nothing is too much trouble to get things right.”<sup>55</sup> Short forms of children’s entertainment like nursery rhymes were well-suited to the time limitations of early records: with only approximately



four minutes of recording time per side, it was difficult to develop longer narrative forms. But nursery rhymes also helped to associate these mass-produced records with oral traditions of parenting. Consider the following ad from a 1920 issue of *St. Nicholas Magazine*:

When your grandmother was a child, she loved those songs, and she, in turn, rocked your mother's wooden cradle gently to the same quaint, old nursery rhymes. And your mother loved them and sang them, just as you love them. Only you don't have to sing them to your children. They can listen to them to their hearts' content as they are sung by the BUBBLE BOOKS. For the pictures in the BUBBLE BOOKS are new and charming—lovelier than any you could get when you were a little girl . . . the songs themselves . . . are not only the songs your grandmother sang—not only the ones your mother knew and you loved—but *all* the dear, familiar rhymes and melodies that all children have loved from time immemorial and will go on loving to the end of time.<sup>56</sup>

The rhetoric of this ad connects Bubble Books to a timeless matrilineal oral tradition and at the same time attempts to upstage that tradition by arguing for the supremacy of the modern media: records could stockpile and reproduce *all* the dear, familiar rhymes, and with accompanying pictures lovelier than anything available in the past. Further, while the ad portrays the mother as the vehicle of a beloved tradition, it imagines a future in which her role was replaced by the phonograph. Note how a 1918 ad in *Ladies' Home Journal* presents “Tom the piper's son,” who asked mothers, “Let me sing to your child . . . I've always wanted to tell those children of yours my story, and to sing them a song—and now at last I can do it.”<sup>57</sup>

Also consider a fictional sales scenario found in the *Voice of Victor* trade journal, in which “a little mother drops into the store on her way home from the sewing club to buy a few records for her three small daughters.” The mother explains that she is looking for records of songs that would help her little girls in learning to sing, since her own voice “is not good any more, and not at all the sort I should want them to imitate.” The salesman replies, “Yes, indeed, we have many beautiful little songs recorded especially for children; and they have been made, too, with just such a situation as yours in mind. Very careful attention has been given to enunciation, voice quality, thought-content, rhythm, melody, and instrumentation.” At one point, the salesman asks whether the girls were familiar with “old Mother Goose.” “Surely,” replies the mother, “she is a much-loved member of our household!” “Then, let me play for you these ‘Mother Goose Songs’” returns the salesman. The mother is impressed: “These are wonderful! I know I shall enjoy them

quite as much as the children. And what a delight for them to meet their dear little story friends in these songs.”<sup>58</sup>

We might identify this sales pitch as what Cook calls the “storybook strategy” in 1920s discourse on marketing to children: the attempt to “associate products with children’s characters and imagery” that made commercial appeals “invisible or at least innocuous to parents.”<sup>59</sup> But we also find here a vivid dramatization of some of the same themes found in the *St. Nicholas* ad cited above: the substitution of the phonograph for the mother’s voice and a tradition of oral nursery rhymes. In his examination of trade press for children’s clothing in the first decades of the twentieth century, Cook found that the mother came to stand as “a gatekeeper at the interface between home and market, between the sacred and profane, who must arbitrate between these spheres”: “As the middle term between market and child, the mother as consumer in a sense purifies economic exchange by imbuing commodities with sentiment.”<sup>60</sup> Bubble Book ads like the one described above were aimed at mothers as the “middle term” in the chain of family consumption but implied that the phonograph could “cut out the middleman” between oral tradition and the child; the middleman being the mother, who was reminded of her parental responsibilities even as her role was threatened. Bubble Book ads took part in a larger tendency of advertising copy of this era to address feelings of regret at the loss of earlier traditions and to offer consumer goods to assuage anxieties about the passage to a culture of mass consumption. Such ads suggested that the modern consumer could simultaneously enjoy both the modern and the traditional via the product, and so, in Roland Marchand’s words, civilization could be “redeemed.”<sup>61</sup>

Bubble Book ads claiming that traditional characters like Tom the piper’s son wanted to speak directly to children may have made their media products more innocuous to parents, but that rhetoric also reveals some of the underlying anxieties that parents were feeling concerning their children’s consumption of mass-produced media. It was, of course, the record companies and Harper and Brothers, not Tom the piper’s son, that were looking for new ways to speak directly to children. Bubble Book marketers explored several avenues for such a direct link to the child audience, one of which was through the use of radio.

#### BUBBLE BOOK BROADCASTING

Phonograph retailers were urged to start a Bubble Book Hour both on local radio stations and in their stores. A 1923 *Talking Machine World*



ad declared, “Children love to hear their favorite nursery rhymes and games. And the radio ‘powers that be’ know that the best way to interest parents in their radio is to please children. That’s why the songs and stories of the Bubble Books are broadcast from every radio station.”<sup>62</sup> In another ad, Harper and Brothers wrote, “More than 1,000 letters are being received every week by us as a result of the broadcasting by radio of the Bubble Books.”<sup>63</sup> Retailers were also urged to play the records in their stores at a regularly scheduled time: “Announce the fact that one afternoon a week . . . you will give a recital of the ‘books that sing.’ Such a weekly event will draw to your store the parents as well as the children. You can see how a Bubble Book Hour will stimulate sales in all other departments of your store.”<sup>64</sup> It is hard to know how many retailers engaged in either form of “broadcasting,” but the *New York Times* radio programming schedule indicates that station WJZ in Newark, New Jersey, regularly featured “The Bubble Book That Sings” at 6:30 P.M. in 1922. The *Christian Science Monitor* listed “Bubble Book Stories” at 6 P.M. on New York station WJY in 1923.<sup>65</sup>

Another form of Bubble Book broadcasting involved promotional parties held in department stores across the United States. *Printer’s Ink* noted that “so remarkably have the Bubble Books fitted into the life of the children of America that Bubble Book parties have now become quite the rage in the tiny tots’ social world.”<sup>66</sup> I have found evidence of such events taking place in 1921 and 1922 in Wisconsin, Iowa, Indiana, California, and Connecticut. The *Appleton [WI] Post-Crescent* reported in 1921 on a “Tippy Toe Bubble Book” party at the Appleton Theatre that featured games, pantomime, elaborate scenery and costumes, and appearances onstage by Mother Goose, characters from the Bubble Books, and “many little girls from Appleton.”<sup>67</sup> Bubble Book parties were well-suited to a contemporary marketing scene in which department stores in major American cities were establishing year-round toy departments that were “not simply selling spaces but fantasy places, juvenile dream worlds.”<sup>68</sup> William Leach notes that strategies for enticing children to such spaces included parades and “little fairy-tale playlets for children in makeshift theaters in toy departments or in store auditoriums.”<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Miriam Formanek-Brunell describes how doll retailers and manufacturers sponsored doll’s tea parties, doll carriage contests, and parades in department stores during the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>70</sup> Bubble Book parties should be added to historical accounts of toy departments as spaces of both marketing and spectacle, but they also stand as precursors to marketing techniques made famous by Walt

Disney. Disney connected his animated creations to the spaces and experiences of shopping: note that Mickey Mouse became a “fixture in department stores across the country” after Disney sold the licensing rights for Mickey merchandise in 1929.<sup>71</sup> Also consider that the Mickey Mouse Club, whose members numbered one million by 1932, took part in “collective rituals” with child peer-groups in addition to cinema-going: children saluted the American flag, joined in community singing, and took part in activities such as “picnics, competitions, prizes and fund-raising.”<sup>72</sup> Bubble Book marketing explored similar kinds of collective rituals in department stores across the country.

The comparison with Disney can allow us to return to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter: why is it that some children’s media become more controversial than others? Sammond has argued that Disney succeeded where other producers of children’s films failed because he was most able to profit from concern about children’s cinema-going, exemplified by the Payne Fund Studies of the mid-1930s, that fostered a desire for products thought to be beneficial to the development of the child audience. The Disney company managed to offer itself as the solution to anxieties about “movie-made children” by providing parents with a trusted brand “that did not require assessment of individual products.”<sup>73</sup> The record industry followed some of the same marketing strategies as Disney and also succeeded in marketing its media products in ways that did not provoke controversy.

If we consider the various aspects of the Bubble Book marketing campaign described previously, we find that common sources of adult anxiety about children’s media were avoided or defused. Children’s media consumption has often caused adult concern because of the ways in which it threatened established notions of childhood and child rearing. Children’s media products often served as an introduction into a world of commodities, a problematic prospect, since “the sacralization of childhood fostered expectations that children should be shielded from commercial exploitation of any kind.”<sup>74</sup> Class hierarchies have frequently been a subtext for struggles over children’s entertainments: debates about children’s reading of dime novels, for example, became “intertwined with larger class tensions, as Protestant reformers sought to fortify their waning cultural authority.”<sup>75</sup> The spaces of media exhibition were often felt to erode distinctions between public and private recreation, either by drawing child audiences to public amusements or by bringing urban, working-class entertainments into middle-class homes.<sup>76</sup> Media entertainment could also cause a troubling blurring of the boundaries between

childhood and adulthood. In his study of the child cinema audience in the 1920s, Richard deCordova observes that “many children seemed to prefer the films aimed at their parents to the films made for them”: an upsetting development for adult reformers since it “called into question the difference between adult and child desire.”<sup>77</sup> The nickelodeon movie theater could also disrupt systems of family control, since children went to the cinema without parents and were outside the purview of adult supervision.<sup>78</sup> Many debates about children and television have hinged on the question of parental authority: Spigel states, “The bulk of discussions about children and television were offered in the context of mastery.”<sup>79</sup> Finally, adult concern about children and media has frequently manifested in discourses of child passivity and metaphors of addiction.<sup>80</sup>

By laying out these recurring areas of adult concern about children’s media consumption, we can see how ably the Bubble Books managed to circumvent them. The Bubble Books’ “authentic” nursery rhymes were clearly age appropriate and represented a traditional form of middle-class children’s culture; phonograph records were safely consumed in the home, under the aegis of parental supervision; the small-scale 5½-inch format of the Bubble Books and children’s toy phonograph players were distinct from larger adult records and Victrolas; with the phonograph, unlike with radio, parents had control over content brought into the home; and finally, children arguably took an active role in the playing of records on their own phonograph players, as well as in activities associated with the Bubble Books such as play with cutout dolls, records made to accompany dances and games, and local Bubble Book parties. The fact that Bubble Books managed to sidestep many criticisms of children’s media allowed them to be marketed across various platforms and without significant controversy. Jacobson claims that early-twentieth-century children’s advertisers were able to avoid organized opposition by aligning themselves with the “very institutions of early-twentieth-century childhood that sought to sequester childhood as a wholesome, play-centered stage of life”: they secured the cooperation of the public schools; romanced the “companionate family”; and associated their products with “children’s developmental needs and mothers’ quests for more leisure.”<sup>81</sup> The marketing strategies used by the record industry followed a similar pattern with similar results, enabling records such as the Bubble Books to proliferate in middle-class homes and schools, on the radio, and in department stores without major opposition.

Though they certainly did not match Mickey Mouse in terms of cultural impact, the Bubble Books were a significant part of pre-World War

II children's media culture. The phonograph has a unique position in the history of the cultural industries as the first form of prerecorded media entertainment consumed in the home. The market in children's records trailblazed by the Bubble Books exploded in the 1940s and helped to fuel a postwar resurgence in the phonograph industry. An important catalyst in that postwar explosion was Alan Livingston's *Bozo at the Circus* (Capitol 1946). Livingston's Bozo record was a hybrid of book and record on the model of the Bubble Books, albeit with one major innovation: Livingston devised a system to closely synchronize book and record such that, when Bozo blew his whistle on the record, the listener was to turn the page of the book. This simple device was one factor in the surprising success of the first Bozo record, which had made five million dollars by 1955, with eight more Bozo albums following, all bestsellers. Like the Bubble Books, the Bozo series involved a major promotional campaign, including newspaper and magazine advertising as well as window displays and radio performances. If the Bubble Books represented an early example of media industry synergy, Bozo became a full-fledged multimedia franchise along the lines of Mickey Mouse: two million dollars worth of Bozo tie-in merchandise had been sold by 1952, including coloring books, balloons, decals, puppets, blocks, comic books, tablecloths and napkins, paper plates and cups, picture puzzle books, lamps, and dolls.<sup>82</sup> In 1956 a critic in the *New York Times* could look back on the Bozo book-record format and declare that it had given "the whole field a tremendous spurt."<sup>83</sup> Though certainly innovative, the Bozo records were only one factor in a surge of interest in children's records after World War II, when kidisks spoke to a new set of cultural concerns about children's media entertainment.

#### BRAT-WAX

The Bubble Books' success story just described occurred during a particularly robust period for the phonograph industry. By the end of the 1920s, however, the market had taken a nosedive. The record industry was particularly hard hit by the stock market crash: the Edison Company ceased record production altogether, and RCA Victor issued no catalog in 1931.<sup>84</sup> In the wake of the economic crisis, many American families opted for the free entertainment of the radio networks as opposed to phonograph records. As one 1955 article put it: "Most phonographs went to the attic when radio came in. The depression finished off many record companies, and the survivors quit trying to sell children's records."<sup>85</sup> By

the early 1940s, the record industry had managed a recovery via several strategies: increasing degrees of conglomeration with the radio and film industry; promoting cheap records (techniques associated with Jack Kapp at Decca Records); and capitalizing on the rise of the jukebox market and the success of swing records.<sup>86</sup> The record market had substantially returned to form by the early 1940s: in January 1942 a *New York Times* article stated that the industry was “bigger and better than ever,” noting that 1941 had seen the most sales yet, with about 110 million records sold, 10 million more than the previous high-water mark of 1921. The article went on to describe a general increase in phonograph culture: “Where collectors of records were numbered in the thousands a few years ago, they are now in the hundreds of thousands. Where records had a special vogue as Christmas gifts, they are now purchased steadily throughout the year. Record clubs have taken root, and books and magazines devoted to the field appear in increasing numbers.” The *Times* noted that it was not just music records that were spurring sales, but also records devoted to poetry, drama, and dance and language lessons and, notably, children’s records.<sup>87</sup>

The year 1946 was an annus mirabilis of the children’s record industry. That year *Variety* declared in a front-page headline that the production of “kiddie disks” had become “big business.”<sup>88</sup> “Outside of a few pioneers,” the article stated, “few diskeries had ever capitalized on the moppet market until last year, when some 9 million kiddie platters were sold during December alone. Close to 20 million were sold during all of 1945.” In light of this, the major record companies were planning to allocate between 17 and 25 percent of their total output to the children’s market, and an estimated 30 percent of all records sold during the Christmas rush would be “for the moppets.”<sup>89</sup> That same year, the *Los Angeles Times* described the “rapidly growing children’s department” at Victor Records: “Five years ago, [the department] couldn’t find space in a closet for such platters. All other major companies have had an equal expansion of their kids’ corner, and independent outfits are popping up every day.” The article went on to state that although less than 2 million children’s records were sold in 1941, more than 27 million were to be pressed in 1946, and even that number wouldn’t be enough to meet the demand.<sup>90</sup> Sales of children’s records continued to skyrocket during the mid-1940s, up to 50 million in 1947, at which point children’s records accounted for approximately 15 percent of the entire record business. By 1948 there were “more than 600 different titles on the market, six times as many as in 1944.”<sup>91</sup> The “kidisk Klondike” continued over the

next fifteen years. In 1951 *Variety* wrote that the children's market had hit a new high, racking up an estimated 15 million dollars in sales, enough to put kidisks "neck and neck" with the sale of classical music recordings.<sup>92</sup> *Harper's Magazine* stated in 1951 that kidisks, previously considered to be "a stepchild of the record industry," now accounted for "50 per cent of the total sales of records at Gimbel's at Christmas time and around 25 per cent during the rest of the year."<sup>93</sup> Sales remained strong through the 1950s, and by 1960, *Variety* estimated the kidisk market was worth \$50 million.<sup>94</sup> As a point of comparison with the film industry, United Artists had total revenues of \$19.6 million in 1951 (kidisks: \$15 million), and Universal Studios had total revenues of \$58.4 million in 1960 (kidisks: \$50 million).<sup>95</sup>

There are many ways to explain the massive growth in the children's record market in the late 1940s. Besides the general revival of record sales, children were increasingly able to get hold of records in venues besides record stores and listen to them in places other than the home. *Variety* claimed that an important factor fueling the kidisk Klondike was the fact that chain stores were beginning to stock a wider range of kids' records.<sup>96</sup> *Billboard* wrote that "peewee platters" had given the record industry an entrance into the larger department stores, noting that "department stores, as a whole, have welcomed kidisks, with some of them going into big merchandizing campaigns."<sup>97</sup> Children were also getting the record habit from public libraries. The Washington Public Library added a music collection of symphonic recordings to its collection in January 1940, and the following year the New York public libraries extended their services to lending phonograph records.<sup>98</sup> Libraries such as these would eventually carry a range of children's records. By 1960 the *Library Journal* would have a special edition on the use of phonograph records in libraries.

Children were also listening to records in schools. As we have seen, record companies had been developing strategies for reaching the school market since the 1910s. Popular press coverage indicates that the industry continued to pursue that project in the postwar era. Consider that, in 1945, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the children's divisions of record companies were being bombarded with requests from educators for records on music history and dramatizations of American history.<sup>99</sup> *Variety* noted in 1946 that educators were becoming "more interested in the moppet field because they feel that entertainment is the ideal medium for teaching, since pupils' minds are relaxed and open."<sup>100</sup> By

1954 the New York Board of Education had even started a program to bring the sound equipment in the New York City public schools up to “high-fidelity standards,” arguing that the phonograph had become as much of a “basic teaching tool” as the blackboard and textbook. The article went on to state that most instruction in “history, literature, foreign languages, social studies, health and physical education, typing and shorthand” was supplemented by “specially devised disk and tape recordings. Even ‘behavior’ problems are sometimes handled by means of carefully selected records.”<sup>101</sup>

The market for educational records was part of a larger postwar obsession with education. Parents increasingly saw children’s leisure time as a crucial aspect of preparation for the job market: Sammond writes that, as children were removed from labor markets, their leisure time increasingly became taken up with “productive activity”: “In an increasingly rationalized and competitive labor market, the productivity of one’s childhood consumption is imagined as providing the potential edge necessary to marginally differentiate one’s self over one’s competitors.”<sup>102</sup> Or, in the words of a record label executive quoted by the *Wall Street Journal* in 1962: “Parents realize how tough it is going to be for their kids to get into college . . . they want to give their children a head start. This gives them an impetus to buy educational records as they never have before.”<sup>103</sup>

Libraries and schools helped make phonograph records a ubiquitous part of many postwar American children’s lives. Children’s records were primarily consumed in the home, however, where they appealed to many postwar parents because they seemed to provide an alternative to television. Aniko Bodroghkozy has argued that television was discursively linked to children from its inception: “Television, a postwar technological phenomenon, and the baby boom, a postwar demographic phenomenon, both led to profound political, social, and cultural changes in the landscape of American life. Arriving in U.S. homes at about the same time in the late 1940s and 1950s, these electronic and anthropoid new members of the family circle seemed allied in fomenting social revolution.”<sup>104</sup> Indeed, many critics feared that the new medium had usurped parental control and authority, becoming a “threatening force” that circulated “forbidden secrets to children” in ways that parents could not fully control.<sup>105</sup> Critics writing about children’s records during the 1950s and 1960s often expressed concern about television’s influence on children. Consider, for example, how records were often praised

for their lack of advertising. A *New York Times* critic wrote in 1956 that there was growing demand from parents for “educational records without the sponsor’s jingles.”<sup>106</sup> What is more, records were thought to provide children and parents with more agency in their media consumption than television. Whereas watching television was often thought to make children into passive, media-addicted “telegeyes,” the phonograph was seen by some critics as a more interactive form of children’s media entertainment. Consider a *New York Times* article from 1955 that told parents who were concerned about their children’s excessive television viewing to counterbalance such entertainment by “providing a new stock of well-selected records.” Foremost among the “pleasurable stimulation of good recordings” mentioned by the article was the way in which the child enjoyed “personally choosing a record from his own collection; he holds it in his hand; he sets it in motion, playing his favorites over and over at will. The freedom of choice and action affords pleasure and satisfaction.”<sup>107</sup>

As the previous quote suggests, critics prized record consumption for the ways in which it allowed the child to physically engage with the low-priced record players that the industry had recently made available to children. *Variety* reported that virtually every manufacturer had phonograph players that retailed for under \$20.<sup>108</sup> In 1958 the *New York Times* suggested that “the child is able to manipulate a simple record player (one speed) at about two years of age, and a three speed at about age 3 . . . a child can have his own good machine at 4 or 5.”<sup>109</sup> One writer argued that such basic phonograph players allowed children to “master the simple technique of starting the player and putting a record on” even before they had acquired the ability to read.<sup>110</sup> The presumed benefits of such hands-on record consumption were detailed in a *New York Times* article from 1957:

From an early enough age when a child has the manipulation skill to put on his own records, it is wise to have him enjoy and experiment with his own record player. It does not need tweeters and woofers; every last glockenspiel note is unimportant. It should be a good machine so that he can manhandle it without breaking the family budget on repairs but not so good that it is going to cause constant cautioning remarks about taking care . . . the musical accomplishments belong to him because he has gone through the satisfying physical act of putting on his player and hearing music come out with the same cocked headful of surprise as Victor’s dog listening to His Master’s Voice. The records will be scratched and the tone arm will have the wires out half the time, but this is child’s work. Any adult can place the arm gently or put on a record without gouging it, but it takes a child to disconnect the arm



and run the needle over the ridges with skill. And still the child listens and gains affection for his battered records and record player.<sup>111</sup>

The child's operation of the record player is again characterized as a "satisfying physical act" in and of itself, a form of "child's work" that is implicitly opposed to passive television viewing.

We should note the slippage in this article from a generic child to an explicitly male one, which is not surprising given how closely the vision of the child record consumer presented here resembles the predominantly male hi-fi hobbyist, with his hand-made stereo console, cherished for the functionality of its design (see chapter 3). For example, a 1954 article in *High Fidelity* entitled "Raise Your Own Audiophiles" features a photo of "Tom Jr." and "Tom Sr." having a tinkering session on a 45-rpm record player.<sup>112</sup> Like the toy trains, chemistry sets, and cameras described by historian of children's culture Gary Cross, the phonograph was a child's consumer product that was used to teach boys to "admire the technologies of the future" and "imagine themselves in control of modern power."<sup>113</sup> The author of the 1957 *Times* piece cited previously even concluded by arguing that a child's record listening would encourage individual expression and nonconformity: "Milk, not children, can be homogenized."<sup>114</sup> The child's record player was thus thought to provide valuable lessons in an active male practice that was a beneficial alternative to television, an inoculation against postwar conformity, and a safe entry point into children's consumer culture.

What becomes clear is that the success of children's records in the late 1940s and 1950s was overdetermined: fueled by the general resurgence of the record industry; the baby boom; new avenues of record reception; and the rhetorical importance of records in debates about mass culture. The content of the records themselves was shaped by postwar discourses of child rearing, and an examination of some best-selling and critically acclaimed kidisks can tell us about the role that recorded entertainment was meant to play in the lives of postwar children. A 1951 *House Beautiful* article entitled "Robby's First Records" was one of many advice columns for parents that recommended those children's records that combined narrative with lessons in the appreciation of orchestral music. As an outstanding example of such a record, the article suggested *Rusty in Orchestraville* (Capitol 1946), written by Bozo-creator Alan Livingston. That record, along with another Livingston creation entitled *Sparky's Magic Piano* (Capitol 1948), reveal the influence of one more factor in the postwar rise of children's records: the music appreciation movement.

## INSTRUMENTS THAT TALK

The *New York Times* estimated that in 1954, pupils in New York schools spent at least two hours a week listening to recordings in music appreciation classes.<sup>115</sup> In fact, the music appreciation movement was an important factor in the rise of the children's record market and shaped the form of some of the best-selling children's records of the immediate postwar era. The origins of music appreciation can be found in the early decades of the 1900s, the time of what Mark Katz describes as a "revolution in American music education": "In the nineteenth century the primary goal was to teach students how to *make* music, particularly through singing. In the twentieth century, however, the focus began shifting from the practical to the aesthetic. The ideal became known as appreciation—generally understood as the intelligent enjoyment of music, typically classical music, as a *listener*." "The goal of appreciation," Katz continues, was to develop in students an understanding of music "beyond their own ability to perform," and the phonograph was valued for its ability to demonstrate the "good music" that even music teachers could not perform. Record companies such as Victor and Columbia even printed the first American music appreciation textbooks in the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>116</sup>

The Victor Company trade journal, the *Voice of the Victor*, featured numerous articles on the importance of the school audience throughout the 1920s and described the company's national program of music appreciation, spearheaded by Mrs. Frances E. Clark, who gave the address "Music Appreciation of the Future" at the National Supervisors' Conference in Cincinnati in 1924, which was attended by over twelve hundred supervisors of public school music from across the United States. Mrs. Clark stated, "We devote no end of time and money, public and private, to training people to be unintelligent performers, when what we *ought* to do is train them to be intelligent listeners."<sup>117</sup>

The music appreciation movement continued to play an important role in American cultural life through the 1930s, influencing a range of media practices.<sup>118</sup> Between the years 1928 and 1942, the NBC radio network broadcast the *NBC Music Appreciation Hour*, which featured Walter Damrosch, the conductor of the New York Symphony Orchestra and a "musical counsel" to NBC. Frank Biocca describes Damrosch's program as part of an "ambitious national project involving the coordination of numerous school systems in every part of the country, every major phonograph company in the nation, and the production of

a music text.”<sup>119</sup> For Biocca, Damrosch’s broadcasts demonstrated the larger hopes held by “music elites” that radio would transform the tastes of the American public. This initial excitement about the educational potential of radio was inspired in part by the conviction that, given adequate airtime, the inherent superiority of classical music would stem the growing popularity of vernacular forms of music such as jazz.<sup>120</sup> William J. Bogan, the superintendent of Chicago schools, expressed this sentiment at a 1930 music educators conference on the pros and cons of radio, at which he stated his belief that “if people could be educated to enjoy music they would turn from jazz immediately.”<sup>121</sup>

It eventually became clear, however, that American network radio would not function to educate the masses in the way in which the music elites had hoped.<sup>122</sup> As radio broadcasting turned increasingly to sponsored entertainment and later to recordings of popular music, children’s records provided an alternative medium for the lessons of music appreciation: *Harper’s Magazine* wrote that many postwar parents who were buying children’s records were “thinking in terms of musical education.”<sup>123</sup> Some of the best-selling postwar children’s records reflect the influence of the music appreciation movement. The liner notes to Capitol Records’ *Rusty in Orchestraville* proclaim the record to be “the most refreshing and painless course in music appreciation ever offered to youngsters who are studying, or will someday study music,” adding that it “fills the need for a sugar-coated musical appreciation course for juveniles.” These notes were addressed to parents, who are called “the legion of perplexed and fretting moms and dads who entertain high hopes for their children’s mastery of music.” The narrative heard on the record develops the theme of “fretting parents” concerned about their child’s “mastery” of music.

The record begins with the following narration: “Once there was a little fellow named Rusty, just about your age. His mother wanted him to be a musician, and once a week she would take him to Miss Spear the piano teacher to study. Everyday at home Rusty would have to sit at the piano and practice the scales.” “Scales,” we hear Rusty complain, “they’re no fun! If I could play a real piece maybe, but just plain old scales. I don’t think I like this old piano anyway. Mom isn’t home so I’ll just sit in this big old chair, she’ll think I’ve been practicing all the time.” Rusty falls asleep and wakes up in Orchestraville, where he meets the Conductor, who claims to rule over all the instruments. The Conductor introduces Rusty to various talking instruments in the orchestra, and Rusty gets to play each one. The Conductor explains that in

Orchestraville, “any little boy can play any instrument he wants” without any practice. “Gee, that was fun!” Rusty exclaims after playing Vera the Violin. These encounters with the instruments motivate exposing the listener to some of the classical repertoire.

Next the Conductor tells Rusty that the composer Joseph Haydn had “practiced his music lessons very diligently” when he was a little boy and so grew up to become a “great musician.” The Conductor explains that Haydn’s *Surprise Symphony* was written with a sudden crescendo to rouse those in the audience who might have fallen asleep. The orchestra plays the piece, and when the surprise occurs, Rusty laughs. “Shhh! Quiet Rusty!” the Conductor quickly scolds. After the performance, Rusty finally gets a chance to play Peter the Piano, who had been avoiding him because of the “unpleasant things” Rusty had said about practicing his piano. As Rusty becomes lost in pleasure playing Chopin’s *Minute Waltz*, he awakes from his dream. His mother tells him to “get right back to practicing,” to which Rusty eagerly responds: “Oh yes, Mother. I’ll practice hard. I’m going to be a great musician.” The record ends with Rusty dutifully practicing his scales. It is hard to miss the lessons of music appreciation beneath the sugar coating of the narrative and sound effects: the sampling of the classical repertoire; demonstrations of the instruments in the orchestra; information about the lives of the “great composers”; and even concert-going etiquette when the Conductor harshly silences Rusty for giggling during the *Surprise Symphony*.

Similar lessons can be found on another record made by Capitol entitled *Sparky’s Magic Piano*. A narrator tells us that Sparky was “a little boy just about your age” who had been taking piano lessons for a year. One day, his piano teacher (again named Miss Spear) arrives at his house for his lesson. She starts a metronome as Sparky plays his piece, which serves to underscore his hesitant and uncertain performance. When he makes a mistake, Miss Spear cries out, “No, no, Sparky!” He finishes and asks, “Was that all right Miss Spear?” “Well, not too bad for the first week, but you need more practice, much more practice.” “More practice,” Sparky complains, “I’ve been practicing every day for a whole year. I can’t even learn a piece in a week. When will I be able to play real good? How long does it take? Sometimes I don’t know if it’s worth it. I don’t get to play outside as much as other kids.” Before leaving, Miss Spear wonders aloud, “I wish there was some way I could show you how wonderful it is to play well. If only I could some way let you see what it’s like.” Miss Spear demonstrates the importance of

records to the music appreciation movement when she decides to play a recording of the Chopin Waltz in E Minor for Sparky: "Someday you'll be able to play like that, if you keep at it. Listen to the whole thing Sparky. Maybe you'll appreciate the piano more."

As he drifts off to sleep, Sparky wonders what it would be like to play as well as the recording. Like Rusty, Sparky finds himself in a dream world in which musical instruments talk and he can play the Western classical repertoire without practicing. He is startled when his piano says to him, "I'm going to show you what it's like to play the piano well. Sit down on my stool, put your fingers on my keys, run your hand over my keys." "Why, I'm playing just like my teacher," Sparky exclaims. As was the case with Rusty, the record tries to convey the visceral pleasure of this experience: Sparky laughs and says, "This is fun!" Unlike on the Rusty record, Sparky's mother appears in the dream, rushing into the room when she hears him playing the piano so well. "Sparky, I can't believe it!" she gushes, and quickly calls Miss Spear to come over. To demonstrate his newfound piano prowess, Sparky plays *Flight of the Bumblebee* at top speed—a studio effect achieved by speeding up the tape. "Sparky," Miss Spear announces matter-of-factly, "you're the greatest pianist in the world."

After this impressive debut, Sparky's mother immediately puts him on a nationwide concert tour. At his first concert, Sparky confesses that he is scared by all the people but goes on with a successful performance. What follows is a kind of audio montage where we hear a selection of classical pieces performed at different prestigious concert halls across the country: at Symphony Hall in Boston, Sparky plays Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody no. 2; at the National Mall in Washington, he plays Chopin's Waltz in C-sharp Minor; at the Civic Opera House in Chicago, he plays Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*; and finally at New York's Carnegie Hall, Sparky plays the Prelude in C-sharp Minor by Rachmaninoff. After his New York appearance, Sparky finishes to great applause and walks off stage. His mother hisses: "Sparky, why did you walk off the stage? Go back and play an encore. They want to hear another piece." "All right," he says in a resigned tone of voice, "one more piece." Sparky tells the crowd that he will play "the *Spinning Song* by Mendelssohn" but is shocked when the piano announces, "Oh, no, you won't!" "What do you mean, I won't?" Sparky asks in a whisper. "Your time is up," the piano mockingly replies, "I will no longer play for you!" Sparky begins to panic in front of the packed house: "Oh please, don't stop now. Just one more piece." From the wings, his mother calls out: "Sparky, play!

Everyone is watching!” Next we hear the murmuring of the audience: “Why doesn’t he play? What’s the matter with him? He seems to be talking to himself.” “Piano, you must play for me, you must,” Sparky begs as he pounds on the keys, “Play piano, play for me; it won’t play!” Sparky awakes from the dream to find himself with his mother. “I dreamed I could play the piano better than my teacher, better than anybody,” he tells his mother. “Don’t worry Sparky,” she replies, “you’ll be able to play the piano well someday, if you keep up your practicing.” “I will,” he says, “I’ll practice my piece right now, and I won’t give up until I can play as good as I did in my dream. Well, anyway, as good as my teacher.” The record ends as we hear Sparky practicing his piece.

Both the Rusty and Sparky records use the motif of a dream world of talking instruments to show children the pleasures of music making within a tradition of Western classical music. The fact that the description of such pleasures is transposed into the realm of fantasy reveals the need to mystify the necessary drudgery that is required to produce performers in that tradition. In Christopher Small’s bleak assessment, such musical training works to “take children away from day-to-day contact with the infinite variability of the human race and place them in an educational monoculture where their only contact is with contemporaries of similar background and interests” and so deprives them of “an essential dimension of the experience of growing up.”<sup>124</sup> Both the Rusty and Sparky records hint at the price of success on these terms: the boys cannot play outside; they move through a world populated only by adults; and they must endure hours of dreary practice only to someday face a nonstop succession of stressful concert performances. The ideal of concert performance takes on an absurd and vaguely sinister light on the Sparky record: note the ease with which Sparky’s mother pushes him into a life of public performance and her insensitivity to the stresses of that life; the incongruous image of a small boy mastering the dense, sensual Romantic musical repertoire; the rather forced moments when Sparky testifies to the pleasures of musical performance; and Sparky’s painful public humiliation in front of a callous audience. In fact, the record provides a vivid picture of concert hall performance as—to quote pianist Glenn Gould, himself a child prodigy who would have known more about Sparky’s plight than most—the “last blood sport.”<sup>125</sup>

The element of absurdity in these successful records did not go entirely unnoticed. In fact, their narrative structure, tone, and message were satirized by a man whom Henry Jenkins has called the poet laureate of postwar permissive child rearing: Dr. Seuss (Theodor Geisel).

Seuss's only live-action Hollywood film project, *The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T* (1953), is the story of Bartholomew Collins (Tommy Rettig), a young boy who, like Rusty and Sparky, finds himself forced to practice the piano by his mother, a fate that he escapes by entering a dream. Though he uses the same narrative tropes as the Capitol music appreciation records, Seuss systematically subverts their message: where Rusty meets a kindly Conductor, Bart encounters Dr. Terwilliker (Hans Conried), a cruel megalomaniac; instead of meeting a happy community of orchestra instruments, Bart finds them locked in Dr. T's dungeon; instead of a dream world where musical performance is effortless and pleasurable, Bart is trapped in a nightmarish musical internment camp; and crucially, instead of waking from the dream with a renewed determination to practice until he is a "great musician," Bart wakes up and runs out of the house to play baseball with his dog.

It is not surprising that Seuss would reject the message of Capitol's music appreciation records. Henry Jenkins argues that Seuss was an important figure in a postwar shift in attitude toward permissive child rearing that saw "the explicit display of parental authority as thwarting their offsprings' independence and free will."<sup>126</sup> Jenkins describes the differences between prewar and postwar models of child rearing as follows:

The prewar paradigm saw the relations between parents and children primarily in terms of discipline and authority; the postwar model saw parent-child relations increasingly in terms of pleasure and play. The prewar paradigm, grounded in behaviorism, stressed the importance of forming habits of behaviour necessary for productive life; the postwar paradigm, grounded in Freudianism and most often labelled "permissiveness," sought to limit inhibitions upon basic impulses and desires . . . the prewar model prepared children for the workplace within a society of scarcity, the postwar model prepared them to become pleasure-seeking consumers within a prosperous new economy.<sup>127</sup>

Capitol's music appreciation records and Seuss's film emerge as sites in which such changes in parenting were contested. We might see this struggle in terms of Raymond Williams's idea of residual and emergent forms of culture.<sup>128</sup> That is, Rusty and Sparky represent a residual prewar paradigm, with their stress on the formation of productive behavior, that is, piano practice. That rhetoric made the Capitol discs an easy target for Seuss's satire, with Seuss representing an emergent, "permissive" paradigm.

The Capitol records, however, offered somewhat contradictory messages about the child's ideal role in consumer culture. Note that the

Rusty and Sparky records trained children to be consumers of records as much as performers of music. In fact, one of the ironies of these records is that the great majority of Rustys and Sparkys would never experience the pleasure of concert performance, no matter how much they practiced. Small reminds us that few children would ever become performers of classical music: the majority of students were instead to be “told *about* music rather than being involved in its creation.”<sup>129</sup> This majority, who were “considered not to have the ability to take an active part in a musical performance,” would be trained instead as musical consumers: “They are fated to be no more than consumers of the music that is produced for them by professionals. They pay for the commodity, music, but they have no more say in what is produced than do consumers of any other commodity; they have only the choice of either buying or not buying.”<sup>130</sup> As one example of this approach to education, consider Robert L. Garretson’s 1966 music education manual, *Music in Childhood Education*, which stated that the great majority of students would “ultimately join the vast army of consumers of music,” who were of great importance, since “it is upon this segment of the American people that the future growth of music in America depends.” The book even contains instructions for teaching children to listen to records: “The teacher should assume a position generally somewhere near the record player,” Garretson advises, “and assume an attitude of thoughtful attention.”<sup>131</sup> The children who listened to Rusty’s and Sparky’s adventures were learning to appreciate the products of the modern record industry, an important aspect of which was to enjoy the novel sounds made possible by new techniques of studio production.

That is, though the stated purpose of these records was to instill the desire to play the piano, the attention and imagination of child listeners was captured through the use of studio effects. Before examining the use of sound technology on the Capitol kidisks, note how the piano is opposed to studio effects in the climactic scenes of *The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T*. Dr. T’s army of reluctant piano students arrive to play his musical composition on a giant, surreal piano, but Bart sabotages the event through the use of a strange concoction called the MusicFix, which takes music out of the air. Bart removes the sound of the piano during the concert, and in its place we hear sound effects created through the manipulation of magnetic tape: Dr. T’s words are looped and sped up. On the soundtrack, then, the generational battle is played out between technologies of music making: the piano versus the tape recorder. The



exploitation of new magnetic tape sound technology can also be heard on many postwar children's records.<sup>132</sup>

#### GENIE THE MAGIC RECORD

The Capitol children's records sought to teach children about orchestral music, but they did so through the use of cutting-edge studio techniques. Alan Livingston may have been selling music appreciation, but his interest in records had to do with the creation of novel sounds. Livingston recounted how his own childhood record consumption had been focused around the enjoyment of "peculiar noises": "When [Livingston] grew old enough to monkey with the phonograph, he spun records slow or fast with his finger, to hear how strange they sounded. A little later he ruined many of the family's records by boring off-center spindle holes in them. Played this way, they produced unearthly noises."<sup>133</sup> Indeed, it was the recognition that "a kid record should have queer, humorous sounds" that shaped the creation of the first Bozo record, which used studio technology to alter the voices of circus animals: a lion's voice is drenched in reverberation to suggest his vast size; the hippo's is lowered by slowing the playback of magnetic tape; and the hyena's is similarly sped up. After successfully making animals talk on the Bozo records, Livingston decided to make musical instruments talk on the Rusty and Sparky records, an effect he achieved by acquiring the license to use a device called the Sonovox. The Sonovox worked by playing a recording through two specially designed hand-held speakers that were placed on each side of the throat. Whatever sounds were on the recording were transmitted to the larynx, so that the sound came out of the throat as if it was produced there and could then be shaped into speech by silently mouthing the desired words. Sounds could thus be made to speak, or as a 1939 *Time* magazine article put it: "A grunting pig, relayed through the human voice-box, can be made to observe: 'It's a wise pig who knows his own fodder.'"<sup>134</sup> Sparky's talking piano and the instruments Rusty meets in Orchestraville were created using this device, which provided an arresting means of personifying orchestral instruments in a manner similar to other popular postwar children's records such as *Peter and the Wolf* or *Tubby the Tuba*.

Of course, Livingston's work at Capitol was only one part of the kidisk industry, and another striking example of studio effects can be heard on a record made by the actor who played the plumber Zabladowski in

*The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T*: Peter Lind Hayes. Though Zabladowski was Hayes's only significant film role, he enjoyed a career as a television and nightclub performer in the 1950s, frequently with his wife Mary Healy, who plays Bart's mother, Heloise, in Dr. Seuss's film. Hayes also created one of the most popular postwar children's records, one that made the phonograph disc, not musical instruments, talk. *Genie the Magic Record* (Decca 1949) begins with a laugh by Hayes, who identifies himself as the eponymous Genie. Hayes speaks as the phonograph record and announces that he can do anything: "Alaka-zoot I'm a whistle; alaka-zing I'm a telephone," after which we hear those respective sound effects. Genie goes on to become barnyard animals, a glass of milk, and a circus, at which point we meet the "smallest man in the world," whose voice is sped up, and the "tallest man in the world," whose voice is drenched in reverb. "I bet I can sing 'Farmer in the Dell' faster than you can," Genie announces, and we hear a loop of Hayes's voice that gradually speeds up. There are even moments of overt reflexivity, as when the record says on the start of side two, "Ouch! Whoops, be careful with that needle, it scratches. I'm sure glad you turned me over; that fuzz on the phonograph tickles." Though the record ends with Genie turning into a violin, oboe, and piccolo, musical instruments are not given priority over the myriad other sounds that came before, and so the listener's attention is directed less toward learning the components of the orchestra than toward the phonograph's infinite capacity to represent sound. On another children's record Haynes made with Decca, *The Little Tune That Ran Away* (1949), not only do the instruments share the sonic stage with other sounds, the orchestra even becomes the vaguely sinister antagonist of the narrative: the eponymous "little tune" runs away from the orchestra because it plays him so badly. What follows is a desperate chase, in which the tune is played by a car horn, a police whistle, cats, dogs, farm animals, and a train whistle. The record thus feels like a parable wherein sound is liberated by the phonograph from the confines of orchestra instruments into a broader sonic world. Through the use of such studio techniques, Hayes's records, like Livingston's Bozo discs, directs the listener's attention to "peculiar sounds" and to the record as a medium.

Part of the appeal of such spectacular sound effects was their efficacy in encouraging children to listen to phonograph records multiple times. In 1951, *House Beautiful* described records as "a unique form of entertainment" in that they were "based on repetition": "A television show generally is seen once—the same with radio and movies. But a

child will listen to a phonograph record he likes a hundred times, and still not be satisfied. What a tremendous impression such records must make on a child's young mind! He hasn't just seen or heard a story or piece of music—he has memorized it.” The author continued by stating that the child's “demand for repetition” made “suspense and dramatic story plot . . . the least of our considerations.” “Bozo at the Circus,” the author noted, had “practically no plot at all”: “Yet I know of children who have worn out as many as nine albums, and still wanted the same album instead of another. The reason for this is that certain ideas properly depicted on a phonograph record will create in a child's mind imaginative situations which are so pleasing to him that he wants to relive these situations many times over. Certain sounds, both vocal and musical, will be so appealing or humorous to a child that he will almost never tire of hearing them.”<sup>135</sup>

The connection between studio effects and repetition has been closely associated with genres of recorded popular music, particularly rock and roll. Theodore Gracyk argues that rock production exploited the limited human perception and memory of timbre, creating complex, studio-based sounds that encouraged audiences to listen to structurally simple works again and again: “As with memories of pitch and color, memories of timbres ‘fade’ after a moment, becoming more imprecise with the passage of time,” Gracyk writes, and “when timbre is the basis for expressive qualities of a work—and it seems to be very important for recorded rock—it will have an expressive impact in direct experience that will be absent in our memories of it. Hence listening to it will be important in a way that remembering it is not.”<sup>136</sup> Gracyk, like other rock critics, sees the 1950s as a watershed in studio technique: recordings being made by independent companies such as Sun Studios in Memphis or Chess Studios in Chicago signaled the birth of a form of studio-based musical creation that would reach its cultural apotheosis in the mid-1960s multitrack recordings of the Beatles and the Beach Boys: both of whom were on the roster at Capitol Records. As we have seen, this kind of sonic experimentation for a postwar audience had begun a decade before Elvis with the children's records of the 1940s.<sup>137</sup>

Livingston's Rusty and Sparky records thus can be seen as a complex compromise: they are an introduction to the repertoire and performance practice of classical music, but children's attention was held through the use of studio-produced novelty sounds more akin to recorded popular music. Postwar child record listeners, you might say, were being trained to appreciate *Dark Side of the Moon* as much as the *Surprise Symphony*

and to associate the phonograph more with the creation of fantastic sonic worlds than the faithful reproduction of concert hall performance.<sup>138</sup> What is certain is that the market for children's records that was established by the Bubble Books became a central part of children's media consumption in the decades after World War II. Postwar children's records emerge as an important site of contestation concerning shifting ideas about child rearing and the place of children's media consumption. Like the Bubble Books of the 1920s, postwar kidisks were taken into American homes under a banner of education and with the help of marketing techniques that avoided significant opposition from parents. The postwar kidisk boom also forged ties between a generation of Americans and the record industry. Indeed, the press often framed the discussion of "brat wax" in terms of the industry's attempts to secure a future market: "Aside from big royalties," *Variety* wrote, record companies felt that through kidisks, they could "build future fans and build a record conscious group of youngsters."<sup>139</sup> Similarly, *Harper's Magazine* wrote, "The record manufacturers are at least as interested in making future customers for their wares as they are in just selling to children."<sup>140</sup> The baby boom children who wore out their Bozo records would continue to have a particularly close relationship with the phonograph over the next three decades.