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The Record Marconi Didn't Invent

The True Story of the Marconi Velvet Tone Record



By Allan Sutton

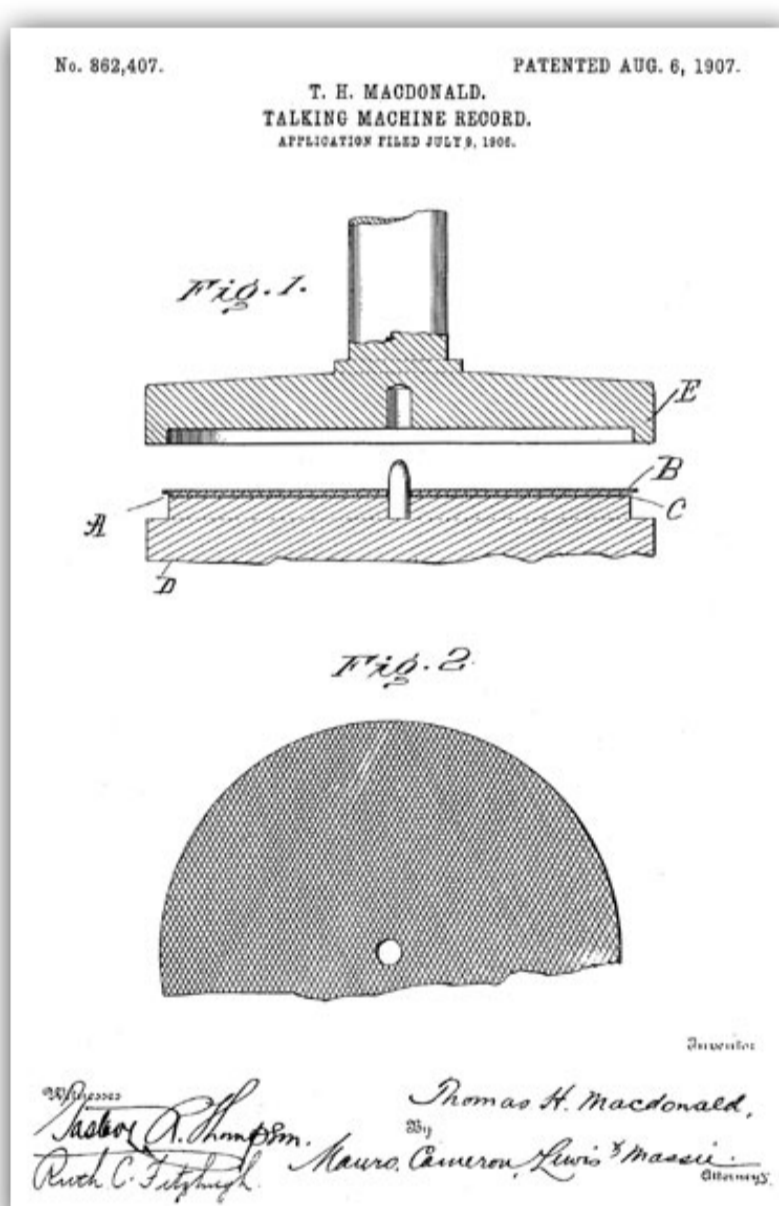
Excerpted from [A Phonograph in Every Home](#)

By 1905 the lateral-cut disc record had assumed the basic form it would take for the next four decades. Shellac-based thermoplastic compounds — basically unchanged since their first use in Berliner's discs in the 1890s — remained the standard pressing material. The notable exception was the Marconi Velvet Tone disc, a semiflexible laminated celluloid disc produced by the American Graphophone Company (Columbia).

Capitalizing on Guglielmo Marconi's reputation as the inventor of radio, Columbia offered him a position as "consulting physicist" in 1906. On August 16 of that year, the *New York Times* reported that Marconi had sailed for the United States in connection with his new duties. Upon arrival, the inventor was given a whirlwind tour of Columbia's Bridgeport plant, then was shuttled to a banquet at New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel as Columbia's guest of honor. Edward Easton, [Victor Emerson](#), and other Columbia executives spoke briefly, all vaguely alluding to Marconi's experimental work without mentioning how it might possibly relate to phonograph records. ¹

Marconi boarded a ship back to Italy the next day, after telling a reporter for *The Music Trade Review* that he had not yet given the matter sufficient study to announce any new ideas. Little more was heard of the alliance until February 1907, when Columbia dealers received advance copies of the first Marconi Velvet Tone Record catalog. The records, bearing Marconi's portrait and facsimile signature, were advertised as "Wonderful as Wireless."

Marconi, however, apparently had no hand in developing the discs that bore his name. Searches of U.S. and Italian patents have consistently failed to reveal any filings by Marconi that might relate to these discs. But on July 9, 1906 — nearly six weeks before Marconi sailed for the United States — Columbia engineer Thomas H. Macdonald filed a patent application on a flexible, lightweight laminated disc with a celluloid playing surface. ²



Thomas Macdonald's patent on the "Marconi" disc even specified the embossed pattern that is found on the reverse sides. There is no reference to Guglielmo Marconi anywhere in the patent filing. (*U.S. Patent & Trademark Office*)

Macdonald's patent specifications were exactly those that would come to be embodied in the "Marconi" discs. Macdonald specified a flexible paper or cardboard core laminated between two thin sheets of celluloid — one to receive the impression of the sound recording, and the other to receive either a second sound recording or "a roughened surface...covered by fine lines close together and crossing at right angles." Columbia addressed Macdonald's claim that needles need not be changed after each playing by marketing semi-permanent gold-plated needles for use with the records.

The surface quality of the celluloid Marconi Velvet Tone Record was indeed exceptional. Columbia was soon manufacturing the records for export as well as domestic sales, and even produced some double-sided pressings. Sales lagged, however. The records were more expensive than the ordinary Columbia pressings they duplicated, and the surfaces could be badly damaged if played with ordinary steel needles. They tended to slip on the turntable despite the textured reverse side, the purpose of which was largely defeated by the application of a smooth, oversized patent-warning label.

Production was discontinued in 1908, and by 1910 the discs were being remaindered by a New York department store for 17¢ each, with the special gold-plated needles given free with each purchase.

¹ "Marconi's Visit to the United States." *Music Trade Review* (September 15, 1906), p. 40.

² Macdonald, T. H. "Talking Machine Record." U.S. Pat. #862,407 (filed July 9, 1906; issued August 6, 1907). The application was witnessed by Phillip Mauro, Columbia's legal counsel, and members of his firm. Macdonald adapted the basic principles of his "Marconi" disc for use with in Columbia's laminated shellac pressings, which were introduced in 1907.

Discographical details on the Marconi Velvet Tone records can be found in [Tim Brooks](#) *Columbia Master Book Discography, Volume I* (Greenwood Press, 1999).

Further historical details, including information on Marconi export versions and anomalous issues, will be found in the expanded edition of *American Records Labels and Companies* ([Sutton & Nauck](#), Mainspring Press), scheduled to be released in Summer 2011.