

Julius Wellner, 1869-1917

Selective Coin-Op Phonograph Pioneer

Julius Wellner was born on the 25th April 1869* in the village Pápa in the Veszprém province of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and his father was tailor Peter Wellner, and his mother was a woman's physician Katherine Wellner, born Swartz. There were thirteen children in the marriage, but only four survived a cholera epidemic, the oldest Rosa and Joseph, and the youngest Julius and Alexander. Julius Wellner started at the age of twelve in 1881 as an apprentice to learn watchmaking, and around 1885 he left the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy to find work as a clock repairman first in Germany, and the following years in London, England, and he claimed that he took part in the service of the Great Clock of Westminster (*Big Ben*) while he was there. Then he went by boat to India to service and repair the clocks at official and military buildings, and returned via Germany to London around 1889. He was ill with typhoid fever and hospitalized, and at the Middlesex Hospital he met the nurse Nellie Collyer, his future wife. Julius Wellner and his wife to be went to America and arrived in New York in 1894. Still not officially married they settled at 196 Bower Street in Jersey City Heights. The daughter Katherine Martha (*Kitty*) was born on the 14th February, 1895, and Julius Wellner and Nellie Collyer were then formally married, and they soon moved to 507 Hilton Avenue, Jersey City Heights.

After a short period as foreman at a machine workshop Julius Wellner established a small local facility manufacturing metal tune sheets, and he had ten to fifteen girls working the presses. This became the basis of the Perfection Music-Box Co., first located in 1897 at Columbia Avenue in Hoboken, but soon the factory moved to 17-19 Mulberry Street in Newark. In 1901 Julius Wellner had 32 employees at the factory, and the manufactured musical boxes were usually marked with number 6-29-1897 plus serial number. The first digits are the date his first patent 585,246 for 'felt dampers' was granted in the US, and the patented felt dampers were an important feature of the 'Perfection' musical boxes. Nellie Collyer Wellner was the company bookkeeper, but unfortunately she died in August, 1899, due to complications after an operation, blood poisoning, and Julius soon after moved from the latest address, 800 Broad Street in Newark, to Philadelphia, and opened a music store at 922 Walnut Street. Julius Wellner was still the principal of Perfection Music-Box Co., and in 1900-1901 he had three patents assigned to him and the Perfection Music-Box Co. by Joseph Natterer, and the brothers Charles C. and Alfred C. Clifford. In 1902 Julius Wellner had an additional patent assigned to him by Edward D. Gleason, and early in 1904 he rented factory facilities on 7th and Cherry Streets in Philadelphia, and started to work with two friends, cabinet maker August Philippsen and electrical engineer James A. Brennan, to develop an automatic device to change records on phonographs. This was based on patent 766,561 filed on the 14th August, 1903, which included an automatic needle changer.

In 1902 Julius Wellner met and soon married Maude May, a former stenographer at the Pennsylvania Railroad, and they lived at a few addresses in Philadelphia. In August, 1908, Julius Wellner boarded the SS Blücher of the Hamburg-American Line for Europe to visit his mother and relatives in Hungary. He was by then naturalized as American citizen, but he could not have visited them earlier as he could still have been drafted in the Hungarian Army until 39 years of age. On the 21st October, 1909, the son Charles Julius Wellner was born.

On the 24th June, 1910, The Auto Piano Co. was chartered in Philadelphia by Julius Wellner, Frank Curran, J. W. Hightown, and Thomas J. Curley, but Julius Wellner had by then for several years

due to possible patent infringements a good contact to the well reputed John Gabel of the Automatic Machine and Tool Co. in Chicago. It seems, since both Gabel and Wellner came from the same region in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and spoke the same German dialect, that they became friends personally and in business. When Gabel and Wellner met at a trade show to discuss patent infringements, Gabel immediately liked Wellner, - they were of like minds and souls, and Julius Wellner had some problems with the needle changer in his selective phonograph in the workshop. Therefore, no need to spend money on patent infringement cases, and as a result Julius Wellner became the most successful East Coast agent operating and selling John Gabel's "Automatic Entertainer" introduced in 1906. Also he was a successful agent for the J. P. Seeburg Co. in Chicago, and became a personal friend of the founder Justus P. Seeburg (*born Justinus Percival Sjöberg*). The most successful orchestration for moving picture parlors was the Seeburg Motion Picture Player trademarked as the Pipe Organ Orchestra, and the J. P. Seeburg Co. sold via agents like Wellner about 1,000 of the 'photoplayers' in the years from late 1913 until 1919. Julius Wellner was also the sole representative in Philadelphia of The Regina Co. of Rahway, New Jersey, a subsidiary of the Polyphon-Musikwerke AG in Leipzig, Germany, and manufacturer of the popular six-selection coin-op Hexaphone (*Models 101-104*) phonograph introduced in December 1908. From 1904/05 until around 1911 Julius Wellner also marketed the talking machines and records imported from the Homophon Co. G.m.b.H. in Berlin, a company founded by Hermann Eisner (1860-1927) born in Brieg in Silesia (*Brzeg in Poland today*). The Homophon record label changed in 1911 after patent infringements to Homokord, but the company name remained the same. The German company name Homophon in Berlin not to be confused with the Australian phonograph brand 'Homophone' used by Home Recreations Ltd. in Sydney.

The only real personal problem Julius Wellner had in his business life came in 1913. On the 13th June he was indicted for possible violations of The Mann Act of 1910, but acquitted by the U.S. District Court in March, 1914. At the time he was a well known millionaire due to years of successful music box business and property investments, and also known as a kind, fair, and righteous man, but he could not avoid having his name and the indictment mentioned in the newspapers. However, in 1914/15 it was all forgotten, and after renting the ground floor since 1912 Julius Wellner purchased the Racquet Club Building at 923 Walnut Street in Philadelphia, and remodeled the whole building to be his modern business showroom, known as The Wellner Building. The address at Walnut Street is a car park facility today.

In June, 1917, after years of experiments and hard work by Julius Wellner, August Philippsen, and James A. Brennan, it could finally be announced that the "Wellner Marvel", a new 24 selection push-button phonograph was ready for the market, and attracted considerable attention in the showroom. This could be read on page 46 in the Talking Machine World magazine No. 7 published on the 15th July, 1917. The Wellner Marvel, or World Marvel as Julius would have preferred, was a machine in which twenty-four different records could be placed in position at one time and was placed upon the machine automatically by pushing of a button, without winding or inserting a new needle. Victor, Columbia, or any other record could be used. The ten-inch records were placed on one side and the twelve-inch records on the other. The editor has never seen a photo of the machine exhibited in the showroom on Walnut Street, but it seems it may have been a serious competitor to the self-operating "Gabel-Ola" introduced in December 1916 by the Gabel's Entertainer Co. in Chicago. Julius Wellner had at least 15 American and British patents to his name, and the last patent 1,491,252 for a 'Sound-Reproducing Machine' filed on the 10th April, 1917, and granted on the 22nd April, 1924, was sold to the patent trust RCA (Radio Corporation of America) founded in 1919. It is interesting, that the Julius Wellner patent for a 'Record-Changing Mechanism for Sound-

Reproducing Machines' filed in 1912 was mentioned in the patent listing on the first modern-style Gabel phonographs in the early 1930s. Finally, after Julius Wellner passed away the remaining agency activities were sold to the Lawson Piano Co. founded 1906 in New York by Charles B. Lawson (1855-1924), a former music box business associate, and his sons William W. and Arthur M. Lawson. The company manufactured player-pianos and the "Lawson Universal" phonograph series.

Unfortunately, Julius Wellner died much too young of pneumonia on the 15th November, 1917, in his home at 1929 North 22nd Street, Philadelphia, and he was buried on the 17th from St. Elizabeth's Catholic Church on 23rd and Berks Streets. His grave marker can be found at Holy Cross Cemetery (*Section 9, Range 11*), Baily Road, Yeadon in Delaware County, Pennsylvania. His widow Maude May Wellner married Otto Thorn in 1920, a man introduced to her by her brother Harry May. The editor has so far no data of widow Maude's or first wife Nellie's grave locations. The son Charles Julius Wellner married Jessica Jones in Hawaii on the 20th November, 1936, and he died on the 27th March, 1994. The grave marker of Charles Julius and his wife Jessica (1908-1986) can be found at the Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery, Point Loma near San Diego in California. The daughter Katherine Martha (*Kitty*) Wellner married Albert F. Volk, and she died on the 13th October, 1976. The grave marker of Katherine and her husband Albert (1892-1976) is the same as that of Julius Wellner at the Holy Cross Cemetery. Further information of course always appreciated.

Gert J. Almind

*Thanks to
Maria Volk McGuire, Clifton Heights, Pennsylvania*

* Year 1869 on grave marker is probably correct, but the year 1868 can be found in an unpublished story entitled "Julius' Life & Families".

UNITED STATES PATENT OFFICE.

JULIUS WELLNER, OF PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA.

RECORD-CHANGING MECHANISM FOR SOUND-REPRODUCING MACHINES.

1,000,000 1912.



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Holy Cross Cemetery, Yeadon
Section 9, Range 11