

The History of Nipper and His Master's Voice

By Erik Østergaard

Nipper and His Master's Voice - What is the story?

Nipper the dog was born in Bristol in Gloucester, England in 1884 and so named because of his tendency to nip the backs of visitors' legs. When his first master Mark Barraud died destitute in Bristol in 1887, Nipper was taken to Liverpool in Lancashire, England by Mark's younger brother Francis, a painter.

In Liverpool Nipper discovered the Phonograph, a cylinder recording and playing machine and Francis Barraud "often noticed how puzzled he was to make out where the voice came from". This scene must have been indelibly printed in Barraud's brain, for it was three years after Nipper died that he committed it to canvas.

Nipper died in September 1895, having returned from Liverpool to live with Mark Barraud's widow in Kingston-upon-Thames in Surrey, England. Though not a thoroughbred, Nipper had plenty of bull terrier in him; he never hesitated to take on another dog in a fight, loved chasing rats and had a fondness for the pheasants in Richmond Park!

In 1898 Barraud completed the painting and registered it on 11 February 1899 as "Dog looking at and listening to a Phonograph".



"Dog looking at and listening to a Phonograph"

Barraud then decided to rename the painting "His Master's Voice" and tried to exhibit it at the Royal Academy, but was turned down. He had no more luck trying to offer it for reproduction in magazines. "No one would know what the dog was doing" was given as the reason!

Next on Barraud's list was The Edison Bell Company, leading manufacturer of the cylinder phonograph, but again without success. "Dogs don't listen to phonographs," the company said.

Barraud was given the advice to repaint the horn from black to gold, as this might better his opportunity for a sale. With this in mind, in the summer of 1899 he visited 31 Maiden Lane, home of the newly formed Gramophone Company, with a photograph of his painting and a request to borrow a brass horn.

As Barraud later wrote in an article for The Strand magazine: "The manager, Mr. Barry Owen asked me if the picture was for sale and if I could introduce a machine of their own make, a Gramophone, instead of the one in the picture. I replied that the picture was for sale and that I could make the alteration if they would let me have an instrument to paint from."



Barraud painting "His Master's Voice"

On 15 September 1899, The Gramophone Company sent Barraud a letter making him a formal offer for the picture, which he immediately accepted. He was paid £50 for the painting and a further £50 for the full copyright. The deal was finally confirmed on 4 October 1899 when a representative from The Gramophone Company saw the amended painting for the first time.



"His Master's Voice"

This painting made its first public appearance on The Gramophone Company's advertising literature in January 1900, and later on some novelty promotional items. However, "His Master's Voice" did not feature on the Company's British letter headings until 1907. The painting and title were finally registered as a trademark in 1910.

It was also in 1900 that a seemingly innocuous request led to the eventual disappearance of "His Master's Voice" as a label trademark. Emile Berliner (1851 - 1928), U.S. inventor of the gramophone, born in Germany, asked Barry Owen to assign him the copyright of "His Master's Voice" for America. Owen agreed, as he did in 1904 to a similar request from Japan. Some eighty years later, when the arrival of the Compact Disc prompted record companies to start manufacturing centrally for the world, EMI paid the price of losing its rights in these two vital territories--and EMI Classics was created as a successor to "His Master's Voice".

Meanwhile Francis Barraud spent much of the rest of his working life painting 24 replicas of his original, as commissioned by The Gramophone Company. Following his death in 1924 other artists carried on the tradition until the end of the decade.

During its long active life, the "His Master's Voice" label has enjoyed a unique reputation with both the music business and the public. Over the years a healthy market has developed in collecting the vast array of items produced in its image. A Collectors' Guide, originally published in 1984, has been now updated for publication in 1997.



A rare "His Master's Voice" labeled LP

Though only used by EMI today as the marketing identity for HMV Shops in the UK and Europe, the "His Master's Voice" trademark is still instantly recognized and sits proudly and firmly in the Top 10 of "Famous Brands of the 20th Century".

Nipper Facts:

Did you know that:

- The "His Master's Voice" painting is now displayed at EMI Music's Gloucester Place headquarters and when viewed in the right light, the original phonograph can still be seen underneath the second layer of paint.
- When asked if EMI could place a commemorative plaque on the wall of Nipper's house in Bristol, the owner's reply was "Yes, if you buy the house!"
- Nipper the dog was buried in Kingston upon Thames, in an area that is now the rear car park of Lloyds Bank in Clarence Street. As one enters the bank there is a plaque on the wall stating this.
- The British naval officer and Antarctic explorer Captain Robert Falcon Scott (1868 - 1912) during his exploration to the South Pole (1910 - 1912), capturing one of the huskies looking at the HMV gramophone presented to him by The Gramophone Company.
- There have been false rumors that the original painting had Nipper sitting on a coffin listening to a recording of his dead master's voice.
- In 1980 HMV Shops found a Nipper look-alike called Toby for in-store personal appearances but Toby didn't make many friends and in 1984 he was banned from entering the Crufts dog show.
- By 1900, 5,000 printed copies of the painting had been produced and sold to dealers for 2s6d (12.5p) each.
- The first souvenirs featuring the Dog & Trumpet were a "handsome paperweight - an exact reproduction in bronze with onyx mount of our well-known picture His Master's Voice." (2s6d/12.5p) and "a handsome mahogany stand with fittings all nickelled, for cigars, cigarettes and match and well as a frosted crystal ash disc.

- The whole is surmounted with well finished group, representing the well-known subject His Master's Voice." (10s/50p).
- In 1900 the German Branch of The Gramophone Company produced a mutoscope film of a Nipper look-alike. The drum of this film remains in the EMI Music Archives.
 - In 2006 it is said by Heather Readman, Surrey, B.C., Canada that it wasn't the painter who wanted to change the name of the painting to "His Master's Voice". It was in fact Heather Readman's great grandfather, William Graham, who was living in Scotland at the time the Gramophone was being marketed. He entered a contest to put a slogan to the picture and he came up with "His Master's Voice". He was to win a "prize" which Heather Readman can only assume was possibly a gramophone, and in order to claim his prize, he had to purchase a specific quantity of merchandise from RCA. He had no money, so he couldn't ever claim his prize, but the claim to fame in Heather Readman's family is that it was, in fact, Billy Graham, of the Kingdom of Fife, Scotland, who named the picture "His Master's Voice", which was later shortened to "HMV".

