

Andre Millard

TALKS ON...

EDISON'S TONE TESTS AND
THE IDEAL OF PERFECT
REPRODUCTION

Competing for the Perfect Sound

"Edison always stayed by the cylinder because that was the original format he used when he invented the phonograph. But Berliner comes along and patents the revolving disc. So there's this cylinder vs. disc competition. It was like Beta vs. VHS, but with a lot more differentiation between the products. Beta's just a little smaller than VHS. But there was a real difference between cylinder and disc. For one thing, rather than a three-minute cylinder, you've got two four-minute sides on a disc.

"Also, cylinders have a couple of problems: they're hard to store, whereas discs can be just piled on top of one another; as people began to get libraries of recordings, the difficulties of storing cylinders became more. And they're a little harder to put on the machine -- a disc you just put it on the turntable and then you put the needle at the edge -- cylinders were a little harder to do. If you mess this up, of course, you hurt the recording and you can hear your mistake.

"But Edison had absolutely no interest in handling discs. We're looking at a piece of technology here. Why are the customers bitching and whining and complaining about putting on a cylinder, locking it down and putting a needle on it? Everyone in my lab is a master mechanic/machinist. They can all thread needles with wire -- they can all do this stuff. It's like 'hell, they should just learn how to do it.'

"But of course... he's forced to develop a disc. Edison, being the inventor, the originator, had to have the best sound, and the truest reproduction, because he was Edison. Working for Edison would be very difficult; he only wanted the best, and anything short of the best, he'd throw it back at you. The workmanship had to be the best. If an edge hadn't been sanded and buffed, he'd throw the whole thing back. And we think about it now, there's kind of a "good enough" element. But with Edison, there's his pride in what he was doing, and maybe his vanity. Thus the Edison Diamond Disc."