

Repeated Tunes on Wurlitzer and B.A.B. Rolls

By

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Both B.A.B. band organ rolls and Wurlitzer rolls sometimes repeated tunes from roll to roll, but for very different reasons, based entirely on operational considerations in each case.

Original B.A.B. rolls never repeated tunes, as far as I know, except for one 66-key roll issued late in the game, when because of apparent production/arranging delays, the company met its timetable by issuing a roll made up entirely of tunes previously used on earlier rolls.

In the late 1950's Ozzie Wurdeman took over the B.A.B. roll business and a large part of the roll masters. He made up custom rolls, numbering them consecutively without regard to key-size (roll size), beginning with roll no. 300 and going up to the 500s. Any customer willing to pay a premium price for the privilege could order any combination of tunes from the masters Ozzie had access to (some masters remained with Senator Bovey in Virginia City, Montana). Ozzie then sold off the surplus copies to others at a reduced price.

The result of this "let the customer make up the program" practice was a huge amount of repetition of tunes from roll to roll and rather bad musical programs on some rolls, since the customer often wasn't knowledgeable enough about the music to choose tunes that went together well.

Wurlitzer, to its credit, never issued a custom roll to my knowledge and tightly controlled the program of each roll. Style 125 and 150 rolls had little actual repetition except for the occasional appearance of clearly labelled "special review rolls," containing tunes of a given type selected from earlier rolls.

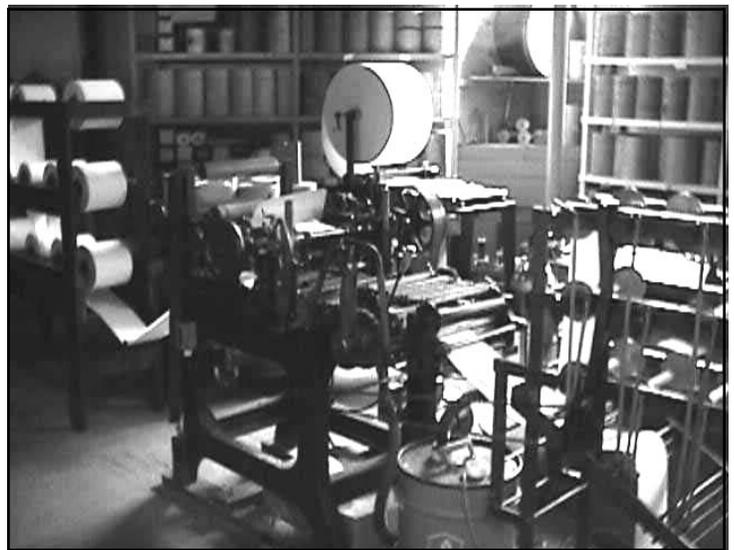
Between October 1913 and August 1925, style 125 and 150 rolls did see "repetition" of a sort. During those years Wurlitzer was issuing 125 rolls and 150 rolls in two formats: 4-tune rolls for the small tracker frame the company originally came out with, and 10-tune rolls for its "long roll tracker frame," which was apparently introduced in 1913 and gradually supplanted the smaller frame. Nevertheless, it wasn't until September 1925 that Wurlitzer ceased offering the shorter 4-tune roll for sale. Wurlitzer's practice was to issue concurrently the same 20 tunes that it put on two new 10-tune rolls or five 4-tune rolls. Fortunately, the company used discrete numberings for the 4-tune and the 10-tune series. The 4-tune style 125 rolls were numbered in the 1xxx's (with the last one being roll 1413) and the 10-tuners in the 3xxx's. Four-tune style 150 rolls were numbered in the 10xxx's (with the last one being roll 10380) and 10-tuners in the 13xxx's.

When it comes to style 165 rolls, there was considerable duplication. While the reason for the duplication is now obvious and Wurlitzer's marketing strategy is now understood, Wurlitzer roll historians were baffled until enough pieces of the puzzle were in place to see the whole picture. What emerges is a very systematic, yet confusing numbering system, wherein the first 37 roll numbers (6501 to 6537) were each used twice for two series of rolls of differing character.

Since all organs playing the 165 roll were equipped with the long roll tracker frame, there was no need for 4-tune rolls, although a few such rolls were issued, numbered right along with the normal 10-tune rolls in the 65xx's. But from the start (around 1914) the typical style 165 roll contained 10 tunes, all new tunes at the height of their popularity. One or two of the 10 might be an old standard waltz or march from bygone days, but the majority were "hot hits" of the moment. Wurlitzer did not keep these popular-tune rolls in stock very long after their popularity waned: Wurlitzer periodically advertised roll clearance sales in their roll bulletins. The company encouraged rapid roll turnover and the regular purchase of the latest hits.

These style 165 rolls were probably numbered from 6501 upwards. The earliest known roll is 6505, issued in 1914 or early 1915; this fact, combined with the fact that extant information about several other Wurlitzer roll series leaves a blank for the first four rolls in a given series, suggests that the company may have, for some still unknown reason, have begun numbering from the fifth number up from zero. Thus the word "probably" in predicating the existence of an original roll 6501, 6502, 6503, and 6504. Rolls 6505 and upwards did exist (many still do), and they were stocked until their popularity waned.

About 1920 Wurlitzer realized the advantage of creating a group of rolls having lasting appeal that they could permanently stock and offer for sale year in and year out. So the company culled the best of its previously issued tunes from the stock of masters and re-issued them on new 10-tune rolls numbered from 6501 to 6537, re-using old numbers for new rolls with no inkling of the problem that would cause decades later.



One of two remaining Wurlitzer perforators now in use at the Herschell Carrousel Factory Museum in North Tonawanda, NY.

In 1920 Wurlitzer's 165 popular roll series numbering stood at about roll 6568; its re-use of obsolete roll numbers 6501 to 6537 caused no problem for the company or its customers -- only immense confusion for us later guys trying to figure out by inference alone what was going on at Wurlitzer. (This *IS* inference, though very sound inference, based on considerable study).

Whereas Wurlitzer's ephemeral popular-tune rolls were advertised in its "Monthly Roll Bulletins," the contents of these new "evergreen" rolls 6501 to 6537 were published in a special permanent Wurlitzer roll catalog, a copy of which, bound in bright red paper, was once owned by the late Ross R. Davis, though it has since disappeared. Proof that these rolls were kept in stock by Wurlitzer over the decades is the fact that it was still possible to buy them at the end of Wurlitzer's band organ operation in 1945. Many of the 37 rolls are found today in roll collections, and many of the masters still survive as part of the Herschell Carousel Factory Museum's holdings, unlike the masters for the popular rolls, which were destroyed or sold off at some point, possibly to C.W. Parker, of Leavenworth, Kansas.

Today it is impossible to know precisely how many of the tunes in the "evergreen" 6501-6537 series were repeats of earlier tunes and how many were especially arranged for the series. That will be possible only if and when we find information on every style 165 roll from the original 6501 to roll 6568; right now there are too many gaps in the sequence. But almost every time a new discovery of an old roll is made, the roll turns out to contain one or more of the tunes on the "evergreen" rolls. For example, when collector Bill Black unearthed the earliest known style 165 roll, roll 6505 (1914 or early 1915), it was found to contain "Hands Across The Sea," "King Of The Air," and "Zaraida," tunes re-issued later on rolls 6501, 6502, and 6522 respectively and believed until then to be unique to those rolls.

Similarly, the 1920's evergreen roll 6519, titled "Old Favorites" (the familiar "Little Annie Rooney" roll found in almost every 165 roll collection), for years believed to be the original issue of that roll, is now known to have originally been issued note-for-note in April 1919 as roll 6551, titled "Old-Time Familiar Songs."

The practice of repeating style 165 tunes ceased when Wurlitzer got to the 6600 series shortly after 1920. The fox-trots and waltzes of that later period were virtually all unique. The one exception that comes to mind is "Peggy O'Neil," which is found on two different rolls, but in two completely different arrangements separated by two decades in time, the first appearing in August 1921 and the second in February 1941. Did someone at Wurlitzer, distracted by the war in Europe, forget to check?

When Ralph Tussing took over the Wurlitzer roll business in the 1940s, he did re-issue the old "evergreen" masters as 6-tune rolls concurrently with his own new 6-tune rolls. The numbering of Ralph's new rolls continued, at 6692, Wurlitzer's roll numbering, which ceased at 6691 (a roll actually issued by the Allan Herschell Company, which briefly succeeded Wurlitzer in 1946). Those new rolls typically contained 5 current rock-and-roll tunes and one old, moldy march out of his personal sheet music library from Tussing's days as a bandmaster. For the re-issue of the old Wurlitzer masters in 6-tune format Ralph chose to re-use roll numbers 6668 to 6676, numbers previously used by Wurlitzer for other rolls issued between 1932 and 1937. It is not clear from examination of known data why he chose do do this and why he chose those particular numbers.

For some questions we may never have sure answers!

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An A. Ruth factory worker by the name of Mr. Haberstroh punching Style 33 Ruth book music (information from Wolfgang Brommer).