

Random Thoughts 103

Jukebox

Recently I saw a TV program that featured a father and son business that specializes in the repair of jukeboxes.¹ I was surprised to learn that in recent years there has been a growing demand for jukeboxes. Growing up in America they were a common sight, as I remember. Before the advent of fast-food chains, diners and hamburger joints were popular and invariably they would have a jukebox. Some even had remote consoles, called wallboxes, spaced on the counter which were connected to the main jukebox. From junior high school onwards (corresponding to about the same time we became interested in the opposite sex!) we would gather at these hamburger joints to listen to popular songs on the jukebox while enjoying a burger, shake and fries before going back home. Later, when we were able to go into taverns and bars (usually illegally) there would always be a jukebox playing popular songs.

The first jukeboxes made their appearance in the 1890s. Prior to that there were coin-operated music boxes and player pianos. These used paper rolls, metal disks, or cylinders to play a musical selection. The two most famous jukebox makers were Wurlitzer which began making them in 1890 and Seeburg which was set up in the late 1920s. A German immigrant named Rudolph Wurlitzer set up his company in Cincinnati in 1853 for the purpose of importing stringed, woodwind and brass instruments from Germany for sale in America. Seeburg immigrated to America from Sweden and began making jukeboxes from 1928.

The term “jukebox” was not used until 1940. Prior to that they were referred to automatic music players. At that time, they were found in “juke joints”. “Juke” was slang meaning “disorderly, rowdy, or wicked” and “joint” was slang for “place”, especially a place where more lively clientele frequented. From then on, these machines were called jukeboxes. In the early 1930s they were plain wooden boxes, but with the introduction of the Wurlitzer 850 Peacock in 1941 they became beautiful light shows with marbled plastic and color animation.

Until 1949 jukeboxes used 78 rpm records which limited the number of songs that could be played on a machine to only 10 to 24 selections. Then Seeburg introduced its model M100A which could play 50 records, front and back, for a total of 100 selections. In 1950 Seeburg introduced the first models that could play 45 rpm records and because these vinyl records were smaller and lighter all makers soon followed suit.

Though it is probably rare to see a jukebox these days, they are a nostalgic reminder for me of growing up in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. This was the dawn of rock and roll and subsequent rock bands, a time that was relatively peaceful until the protest movements of the 1960s began to polarize American society.

¹ たけしのニッポンのミカタ！