

Okeh Records

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Okeh Records began as an independent [record label](#) based in the [United States of America](#) in 1918; from the late [1920s](#) on was a subsidiary of [Columbia Records](#).

Okeh was founded by [Otto Heinemann](#) (1877-1965), a German-American manager for the U.S. branch of [German](#) owned [Odeon Records](#). As [World War I](#) raged in Europe, Heinemann thought it best to have an American based company. He incorporated the *Otto Heinemann Phonograph Corporation* in [1916](#), set up his own [recording studio](#) and [gramophone record](#) pressing plant in [New York City](#), and introduced the company's line of records for public sale in September of [1918](#). Heinemann formed the name of the record label "Okeh", from his initials; early disc labels rendered the name as **OkeH**. The first discs were vertical cut. In [1919](#) Okeh switched to the lateral cut method of [sound recording](#), more usual for disc records. That same year the name of the label's owning company was changed to the *General Phonograph Corporation*.



Corporation. The name on the labels was changed to **OKEH**. The common 10 inch discs retailed for 75 [cents](#) each; the 12 inch discs for \$1.25. The company's musical director was Fred Hager, who also appeared under the pseudonym of "Milo Rega" (Hager's middle name and his surname reversed).

Okeh began by issuing popular songs, dance numbers, and vaudeville skits similar to the fare of other labels, but Heineman also wished to experiment with music for audiences neglected by the larger record companies. Okeh produced lines of recordings in German, Czech, Polish, Swedish, and [Yiddish](#) for the USA's immigrant communities. Some were pressed from masters leased from European labels, others were recorded by Okeh in New York.

In [1920](#), [Ralph Peer](#)'s recordings by [African-American blues](#) singer [Mamie Smith](#) were a surprise smash hit for Okeh. The company perceived the significant little tapped market for blues and [jazz](#) by [African American](#) artists. In [1922](#) Okeh hired [Clarence Williams](#) to act as director of "Race" (African American) recordings for Okeh's New York studios, in addition to making recordings under his own name. Okeh

then opened a recording studio in [Chicago, Illinois](#), the center of jazz in the [1920s](#), where [Richard M. Jones](#) served as "Race" recordings director. Many classic jazz performances by the likes of [King Oliver](#), [Sidney Bechet](#), and [Louis Armstrong](#) were recorded by Okeh.

Okeh Records pioneered the practice of "location recording" in 1922. Starting in [1924](#) Okeh also sent mobile recording trucks to tour other parts of the country to record performers not heard in New York or Chicago. Regular return trips were made once or twice a year to [New Orleans, Louisiana](#), [Atlanta, Georgia](#), [San Antonio, Texas](#), [Saint Louis, Missouri](#), [Kansas City, Missouri](#), and [Detroit, Michigan](#), recording a wealth of jazz and early [country music](#) artists.

In [1926](#) Okeh switched to the electric [microphone](#) system of [audio recording](#). On [November 11](#) of that year, controlling interest in Okeh was purchased by Columbia Records. The Okeh label was continued until [1935](#). Columbia again revived the label in [1940](#) after they lost the rights to the Vocalion name (by dropping the Brunswick label) and pressed it until [1946](#); it was revived in the 1950's and used sporadically through the [1990s](#).



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