

Strong Quality Control At Columbia Plant

by John Mankiewicz

LOS ANGELES — This is the last installment of a three-part series about the problems and solutions for what is considered to be, at least in some circles, a major problem for retailers; defective records. **Cash Box** talked to Sam Berger, vice president of manufacturing for Columbia Records, which owns and operates three large pressing plants in the United States — in Terre Haute, Indiana; Santa Maria, California and Pitman, New Jersey. It is the largest pressing operation in this country, employing slightly over 4,500 workers.

Control and Assurance

"We have 250 people working in quality control and quality assurance," said Berger, talking from the Milford, Connecticut Columbia operations center. "Quality-control handles the product right from the start, when we get our raw materials. We conduct physical and chemical tests at that point. There are inspectors involved all through production, testing records on the basis of statistical sampling. If one record is defective in that sampling, then we check the whole batch."

The quality-assurance phase comes in after production, making sure that the steps taken during the actual plating and pressing were not in vain. The product is watched carefully, Berger pointed out, all the way down the line.

Apparently this strong quality control has been extremely successful for the company. "Our returns are very minimal," Sam Berger said, "four tenths of one percent of the total production."

Dealing with Shortage

Last week Jake Danible of the Los Angeles Monarch Record Manufacturers told **Cash Box** that he expects a vinyl shortage to hit the industry sometime in April. Csaba Hunyar, in the first installment of the series (**CB** 3/6), said that a shortage was expected to come around the Christmas season. What happens to a plant's operation in a situation like this? Can vinyl be bought at any price?

"It was almost impossible to get vinyl during the last shortage," Berger said. "Recycled vinyl can be used. Actually, some of its physical properties are enhanced when you do it right. It's got to be handled very carefully."

There are occasionally problems with the original acetate from the recording studio. These occur if the acetate used was not cured properly. "You can't play the acetate to find out if it's good," Berger said, "because the stylus would tear it up. It's got to be mastered."

Record Club Response

Columbia, through its record club, is in a unique position in that it receives direct consumer response. There is, in that operation, no middleman — records are mailed directly to the home, and feedback to the company about quality is just that much quicker. Columbia has a consumer complaint department, and has been getting good response from members of the record club.

Test pressing records is another method that Columbia incorporates into its quality control system. This is done at the client's request, and can be used to check the actual quality of the finished product, or can be used as a reference disk.

Columbia also manufactures blank tape. "This is an art and science," said Sam Berger, "you have to check constantly on the electrical properties of the tape." Retailers **Cash Box** talked to expressed no real concern about the quality-control with tapes, and had no

customer complaints in that department.

"We're very quality-oriented," Berger concluded. We try to make sure the consumer gets the best record possible."

Consumer Satisfaction

Consumer satisfaction is indeed the ultimate goal; the record buyer is the foundation of the business — it seems clear that one could not exist without the other. The problem, then, for the retailer, is to make sure that customers do not adopt the attitude that the individual store is responsible for the defective records.

In fact, no one is responsible; blame cannot be assigned, at least to human beings. Technology is certainly a factor in understanding this problem. Records are getting better all the time, the state of the art is constantly reaching higher plateaus. There are automatic pressers with astounding capabilities, and continuous research into different ways to improve and use materials. The volume of product, however, is so great that defective records are impossible to eliminate completely. Even if defectives were cut down, say, to half a percent, that's still five thousand records on a platinum shipment.

Aside from technology, the people who control quality in the plants and record companies, must care about putting out a piece of product with high standards. Each record must be made with the same high-quality level in mind. Everyone **Cash Box** talked to on the pressing level considered their work more than just a job — a certain feeling of integrity and pride was evident in their remarks.

Retailers should be careful, too, and display records flat so that warping does not occur in the store. Most important, their defective return policies should incorporate explanation; clerks should be informed about reasons for warps and surface noise. A store will not lose customers if the record is immediately replaced and if the buyer understands the problem when he leaves the store.

Unique Position

In the course of many conversations, **Cash Box** heard a lot of stories about defectives — wrong records in sleeves, every record in a shipment of twenty coming in warped, three hundred pieces so badly bowed that they couldn't be stacked, the same scratch in fifty records, and every kind of mistake you could think of — all the way to plain mislabeling on the inner sleeve. (Some are actually collectors' items. For instance, some of the first shipments of Dylan's "Blood On The Tracks" were just fine on one side, but the flip was a side of **The Buckingham**s.)

The magnitude of the problem is different, depending on whom you're talking to. It makes sense, because the people involved are working from radically different perspectives. Consider the small independent retail operation. Working on a limited budget, they do their buying very carefully. The five records come in, and customers bring them back as defectives. It's clear that the problem is a lot more visible to that particular store than it is to the pressing plant that produced two hundred thousand copies of that same record. If the plant keeps the defectives down to one fourth of one percent (the lowest figure quoted to **Cash Box**), then they are, rightfully, pleased. That small percentage slips out and winds up hurting the independent; it makes more work.

POINTS WEST — Members of **Led Zeppelin** were voted — individually — "world's greatest" at each of their instruments by fans responding to a **Hot Licks Magazine** rock poll in New Zealand. In addition both **Jimmy Page** and **Robert Plant** were elected number one writers down there . . . just so we know which consciousness has touched down where . . . **TWO-STEP STEPS OUT** — **Rex Fowler** and **Neil Shulman**, the two musicians who make up RCA's **Aztec Two-Step**, stepped up to the **CB** offices last week to talk about "**Second Step**," their new LP. Fowler is from a small town in Maine, Shulman from New York City. They have attracted an almost cult following in New England and are just now exposing their music to the west . . . **Jimmie Haskell** is a busy man at the moment. Between commitments to two motion pictures, a **Bobby Goldsboro** session for **Denny Diante** and a rush request from **Joe Layton** to finish a special arrangements for alleged Italian pop star **Fred Bongusto**. That invite at the request of co-producers **Christen DeWald** and **Bobby Hart** . . . **Tommy James** is up north at **Fantasy** recording studios in Berkeley finishing his new LP. No title has been set yet, so **Fantasy**, in conjunction with radio **KYA** is having a contest whereby listeners submit titles. The lucky winner will spend a tantalizing night on the town in San Francisco with Tommy . . . **THE TUBE** (singular) is going to be commanding lots of attention March 29, specifically the **ABC-TV** network which has lined up what may best be termed the giant pairing of "**John Denver And Friend**," "friend" being **Frank Sinatra**. This in direct response to the overwhelming success which met the duo last August when they appeared together at **Harrah's Tahoe**. Whereas a limited number of high rollers caught that showcase, the nation is invited to turn onto this one . . . **Anson Williams** is one of the stars of the top-rated TV series "**Happy Days**." When he's not before the cameras Anson has been touring the country in a singing way, opening shows for **Tanya Tucker** and lately appearing on the **Dinah Shore** show, again, singing "**Hooked On A Feeling**." We also know Anson is a solid fixture throughout the pages of the teen-oriented magazines. So why hasn't a label picked him up? . . . **REO Speedwagon** is at the **Record Plant** cutting its fifth LP for **Epic**. While their last album sold better than the earlier ones, this midwest band has yet to break forth with a solid commercial hit. Maybe this time. Produced and engineered by **John Stronach** . . . **NOT SO DANDY** — **Black Oak Arkansas** has been forced to postpone three scheduled concerts on account of their lead singer having hurt (of all things) his foot . . . **Lynyrd Skynyrd** literally threw a surprise party for **Peter Dudge's** 30 birthday in San Francisco March 6. The party, which drew guests from all over the globe including half the masthead of **Rolling Stone**, really didn't get underway until 3:45 a.m. when everybody got hit in the face with cake before calling it a night fifteen minutes later . . . Those of us who have been holding our collective breath for the next **Stevie Wonder** LP rumored to be hitting the streets "any day" for the past month, will be relieved to know we can break into a pant and drool awhile longer. Latest release date is set for May . . . **Joe Cocker** is alive and . . . well, alive anyway and apparently still has a voice. He's touring now and encoring for fans after sets upward of twenty songs . . . **Boz Scaggs** has signed with **Irving Azoff** and **Front Line Management**.

stephen fuchs

EAST COASTINGS — The **Jefferson Starship** went into **Wally Heider's** in San Francisco at the beginning of this month to begin work on their next album (which was until recently to be called "Pocket Rocket"). Highlighting the disk, which is set for a late spring release to be followed by summer touring, are at least two compositions by **Marty Balin**, "Baby Don't You Shoot Me Down," which they performed on their last tour, and "Cruisin' In My Car." Other titles are "Switchblade" and "Big City," the latter authored by drummer **John Barbata**. This is the group's last album for RCA under the terms of their present contract . . . Another album set for late spring is the new **Alice Cooper** collection. The basic tracks were done at the **Record Plant** located in Times Square, with **Bob Ezrin** again at the helm. The material was all written by **Cooper**, **Erzin** and guitarist **Dick Wagner**, who appears on the album along with axe cohort **Steve Hunter**. Other musicians on the album include well-known studio men **Jim Maclean** handling percussion, **Allen Schwartzberg** on drums, **Tony Levin** on bass and **John Tropea** on guitar. Some additional work has been done at **Nimbus Nine Studios** in Toronto and the album will be mixed in L.A. and followed by a tour . . . **IT'S LONELY AT THE TOP DEPT.**: **Eric Carmen** received a telegram from one **Elton John** congratulating him on reaching number one with "All By Myself." Carmen will be appearing at the **Bottom Line** on April 2-4 . . . **Janis Ian** has begun work on another album for Columbia. The Grammy winner is shooting for an October release . . . Island recording artist **Robert Palmer** has just embarked on his first tour as a solo artist, during which he will play 17 cities, mostly clubs, in six weeks. A truly revitalized **Jake & The Family Jewels** will be appearing March 17-21 at the **Other End**. **Jake** and the band have been recording at the **Record Plant** and are looking for a label.

WINTER HARVEST — **Barclay James Harvest**, playing selections from "Time Honored Ghosts," their first on their new **Polydor** label, opened here at the **Bottom Line** last week to a fine reception. The appearance was part of a nationwide tour that bassist **Les Holroyd** says will bring the group to smaller clubs exclusively. **Barclay James** are happy with their new producer **Elliot Mazer**, at whose **His Master's Wheels** studio in San Francisco they recorded the album, and will be recording another in June.

JAZZERS' ROCK — The **Billy Cobham/George Duke Band** (also named **Spectrum**) plays one night, Mar. 18, at the **Bottom Line** with **John Scofield** on guitar and a formidable new bassist, ex-**Weather Report** **Alphonso Johnson** . . . **John McLaughlin** has scheduled a Mar. 28 **Bottom Line** appearance with his new acoustic group **Shakti**. . . **Leon Thomas**, once the featured vocalist with **Pharoah Sanders**, has a single out on **Don Records** that will surprise those acquainted with his old style. He's just taped an upcoming spot on **Soul Train**.

EXTRA — Two Australian groups out on **Mercury** in the U.S., **Sebastian Hardie** and **Skyhooks**, are recipients of first place record awards in their native land . . . **Motown** artist **Jerry Butler** conducts his second annual distribution of free food in Chicago this Good Friday . . . **Ike & Tina** open ten days at the **Waldorf** Mar. 16 . . . **Epic** artist **Rupert Holmes** in the studio . . . Aired on **Don Kirshner's Rock Concert** Mar. 20 will be **Gladys Knight & The Pips**, **Doug Kershaw**, **The Crusaders** and vintage **Murray The K** footage featuring the **Beatles**, the **Doors**, **Otis Redding** and **Aretha Franklin** singing "Respect" . . . The **Midnight Special**, hosted by **Helen Reddy** March 19, will salute **Johnny Rivers** with guests **Jimmie Walker**, **Melissa Manchester**, **Peter Frampton** and **Rufus** featuring **Chaka Khan**.

RETRACTION — Last week's claim that **Pye's McKendree Spring** had broken up was an inaccurate rumor, possibly germinated by drummer **Carson Michaels'** trip to the coast for strictly personal reasons. Once he's back the group will return to business as usual.

eric rudolph/phil dimauro