

the manhattans



Leo Graham in the studio.

Producer Leo Graham's Key to Hit Records Is Grounded In Teamwork

For Leo Graham, the songwriter/producer responsible for The Manhattans' singles "Shining Star," "Girl Of My Dream" and the current release, "I'll Never Find Another (Find Another Like You)," the key to successful recordings is a team effort. As he observes, "I work with good people; it's impossible to do it all by yourself. There's my associate producer and arranger, James Mack, my writing partner, Paul Richmond, my engineer, Stu Walder, and the people I work with at Universal Studios —

Travelling In Comfort With Bus Associates

When The Manhattans are on the road in the U.S., their transportation service is Bus Assoc., a company set up by Jack Bart, who is also the president of the group's booking agency, Universal Attractions.

Bus Assoc. was formed 5½ years ago, Bart says, "because many artists booked by Universal and other agencies couldn't afford the regular charter companies' rates and had to cancel jobs that were already booked because it was too expensive to get there. I felt we could form a bus leasing company that could provide transport at a livable price because we didn't have the high overhead and large staff other charter companies have. We're not competing with companies offering very fancy equipment like the buses with videotapes that supergroups use. You might say we're like the low-cost airline that flies to Europe — it gets you there, but we have no frills. We currently have five buses on the road, and for the past 5½ years, we've had a perfect safety record. We haven't once had an artist come late or miss a date. Our customers have included Bill Curtis & the Fatback Band, Ray, Goodman & Brown, the Stylistics, Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes, Instant Funk, BT Express, Wilson Pickett and The Manhattans, who have used the service for a year and now have a permanent lease on one of our big sleeper buses."

Bart stresses that Bus Assoc. is not limited to Universal Attractions artists. "It's two separate companies, and we don't give a preferential rate. However, Universal artists are given preference if there are two acts and only one bus available.

it's like home. The Manhattans feel comfortable there; they trust my judgement, and with the help of Columbia, how can we lose?" He singles out Columbia's vice president of national A&R, Mickey Eichner. "Mickey is stern and strict in the way he selects material. He and his staff pick out what they think is best for an act. He takes the time to listen closely, and he gets involved. It's not just a guy doing a job."

Graham himself is no stranger to musical success. After early experience in Chicago singing with a couple of vocal groups and leading his own band, he got involved in songwriting for Tyrone Davis at Dakar. His hits included "Was I Just A Fool," "Was It Just A Feeling," "Your Love Keeps Haunting Me," "Without You In My Life," "There It Is" and "Could I Forget You" (the latter three made the pop charts). In 1976, he scored with his first production on Davis' "Turning Point." When Davis moved to Columbia late in the year, Graham continued producing him and came up with "Give It Up (Turn It Loose)," "Love And Touch" and the later "In The Mood." His work with Davis caught the ear of Joe McEwen of Eichner's staff while The Manhattans were involved in cutting "After Midnight." A meeting was arranged that led to Graham co-writing and producing the album's singles, "Shining Star" and "Girl Of My Dream."

"I thought 'Shining Star' had potential," he recalls, "although I didn't think it would be as big a success as it was. I think it had a little taste of the country flavor, and that enhanced it a bit. After it was recorded, we knew and felt it was a hit; but how big a hit, we didn't know."

Since then, Graham has cut the two new tracks included on The Manhattans' "Greatest Hits" — "I'll Never Find Another (Find Another Like You)" and "Do You Really Mean Goodbye?" He has also nearly completed the next Manhattans album, which will be released early in 1981.

"The Manhattans are lovable guys to work with," he says, "very nice guys. They write songs and have great ideas themselves. When you've got creative minds working together, sometimes there's a conflict, but it also helps make the whole project a success."

A PERSONAL COMMENT

Longtime Friend Bob Riley Looks Back On A Long Career

The Manhattans were very much into what I commonly refer to as "my kind of music," the ballad — filled with that old street corner churchy harmony. I had listened to them for years on Jo Evans' Carnival Records. But in 1972, there we were, face-to-face in the Starday-King Record's office in Nashville, Tenn.

My normal function with King had been strictly national R&B promotion. That particular morning, Hal Neely, the president, had requested that I make certain I was in the city for I was to meet with The Manhattans and their manager, Hermi Hanlin.

I walked in expecting to meet another cocky group with a manager full of "why nots" and "how comes." My notes were ready to cover the last single release, "A Million To One," the "why nots" and "how comes." Instead, here sat five guys smiling and an oval-faced, jovial female who immediately said, "okay Bob Riley, when do we start cutting our first hit record?" It was a challenge — more in jest. Although I had produced some Joe Henderson, Joe Tex and a couple of Midnigher sides along the way, I thought what kind of joke is this? Me, Bob Riley, producing The Manhattans!

But this is what Hal and Hermi had agreed on prior to my arrival. Immediately, it was a warm and open thing which seemed to flow among the seven of us — the five Manhattans, Hermi and myself. We actually forgot Hal was there for a few minutes as we talked about many things, mostly outside the realm of music.

It was agreed that I was to take the group down to Macon, Ga. to King's other studio which was handled by Bobby Smith, the actual discoverer of Otis Redding. The session became a team effort with the greater position of the input flowing around through Blue, Hermi and myself. This session produced a good album, out of which came one hit song, "One Life To Live."

As we prepared to leave, Hermi said, "partner, I think we got one." I took the partner to be just an expression. But in true Hermineese, she said, "Shit Head, we are going to be a helluva team" — and the looks and hugs from the fellows sealed the team.

We became one family with everybody dedicated to the success of The Manhattans. I became the out-front guy, staying on top of the stations, the small clubs, newspapers and whatever. My contribution was promotion.

Like all families, we sometimes went in different directions; but all the while working toward the ultimate goal — making The Manhattans. The times were rough! I took them into some little back woods club in the middle of corn fields, way out in the middle of nowhere. Blue and the fellows often wanted to strangle me, but we always found something comical about the situation — like as many people sometimes looking through cracks in the walls as there were paying people inside. There has always been something warm enough and strong enough between us to carry us through the most difficult situations.

Strange Experiences

Perhaps the two things that stand out in my mind most vividly from The Manhattan yesteryears are the night in Chattanooga when things had been going so bad, so terribly bad — places with just a few people — and even when there was a good house, staying on the heels of the promoter trying to get some money. This particular night, Gerald seemed to be at the bottom. We were playing the Riverside Club and Gerald said, "Bob, I'm going to leave in the morning. I can't handle it anymore." I put my arm around him and we walked out of the club and walked down by the riverside. I told him, you are too close. You finally have the record, "Kiss and Say Goodbye." We talked again the next morning without the rest of the group. Some kind of way he believed me. I guess because I really believed myself, and for one memorable time I was right. "Kiss and Say Goodbye" is history. The other time was the night Richard Taylor stepped to the microphone as the fellows always did as Blue introduced them one-by-one and Richard suddenly, to the amazement of the other four guys and myself, plus the audience, simply stated, "This will be the last time you'll be seeing me as a Manhattan." I have never really gotten an answer to this one.

Being a member of The Manhattan Family is one of the warmest and most rewarding experiences of my life. It was the support of The Manhattan Family and my wonderful family that helped me in so many unforgettable ways toward pulling through three heart attacks in a 24 hour period. I am thankful to the Master above I am alive and able to see them receive this hard earned and well deserved recognition.

Bob Riley



The Manhattans with Herb Rickman, NYC Mayor's special assistant.