

Bobbie Gentry's Mercurial Rise Typifies Capitol's Operation



Bobbie Gentry

From obscurity to number one in four weeks was the phenomenal success story written around 23-year-old Bobbie Gentry, the Chickasaw County, Mississippi, miss.

Her mercurial rise typifies how Capitol as a major company operates. Consider:

That Jim Mackrell of Larry Shane's publishing company sent over some dubs of Bobbie to a&r man Kelly Gordon in February, shortly after Gordon joined the company. Gordon brought Bobbie into the studio on April 3 and cut the attractive vocalist with just her guitar accompaniment. "We cut some 'wood shedding' tunes," Gordon recalls. He had been talking with free-lance arranger Jimmy Haskell and on May 24 brought Haskell into the studio to overdub some strings to give one of the tunes, "Ode to Billy Joe," a lush motion picture type arrangement. Bobbie was signed as an artist on June 13.

The single, which ran four minutes, was released nationally July 10. It began to receive immediate disk jockey reaction. A&r decided to cut an album, which Gordon began on July 27-28.

Brown Meggs' merchandising department, which normally holds product planning meetings 90 days before an LP is released, rushed into action. An LP marketing plan and promotion junket were quickly created on Aug. 9 to capitalize on the fantastic public sales acceptance for the sad, reflective song about a suicide which ended a young love affair.

An 11-city personal appearance junket was devised and Ken Mansfield was assigned to accompany Miss Gentry. Capitol brought Miss Gentry to the attention of Jess Rand, manager of the Lettermen, who was naturally pleased to add her to his artist roster. Meggs hired an outside public relations firm, Ivor Associates

for 90 days, with another 90-day option. The PR specialists helped land her in Newsweek's Aug. 21 issue.

Capitol's own press chief, Joe Price, set to work writing a bio, news releases and a press bit covering the company's new sensation.

Manufacturing began rush priority for the LP, with the first allocation of 500,000 copies being frantically "swallowed" by CRDC branches.

Don Doughty began preparing trade and consumer ads for the LP. Allen Davis set to work preparing slide films for the sales force and voice tracks for DJ's. Fred Rice began designing store displays. Jack Schnyder worked on a special mailing of the LP to all broadcasting stations. CRDC president Stan Gortikov prepared a personal letter to selected sub-distributors. Rocky Catena telegraphed the field staff that the LP would be available Aug. 21.

Lew Marchese sent special promotion kits of posters, displays, press kits to Hawaii to support her appearance at a Beach Boys concert, Aug. 25-26. PR man, Christie Barter, began pitching the vocalist to major magazines and TV producers in New York. She landed an Aug. 18 "Tonight" show airing and a guesting on Perry Como's special airing Nov. 30.

"Bobbie Gentry," Meggs said, "typifies what the record business is all about. It's like she was born fully developed artistically. It looks like she'll have a gold LP on her first release. With the exception of the Beatles, it's never happened before with an unknown artist." Miss Gentry validates the industry's system of turnover: the one blockbuster new hit makes up for all the flops by unknowns. Reflects Meggs: "She'll make \$1 million from all her activities in the next 12 months. It just shows you that a 'long record' won't make it."

Fred Rice --- His Ideas Stimulate Sales and Affect the Industry

There are some people who have the knack or skill, call it whatever you will, for inventing things. Sometimes their ideas have the potency to affect other people's lives.

Fred Rice falls into this category. The 21-year Capitol employee, whose specialty is creating merchandising aids, which boogie, oogle, wave, twist, turn and shout is the inventor of the browser box, a commonplace item today, but a revolutionary piece of ingenuity when he first unveiled it in 1947.

As merchandising development manager, Rice developed in addition to the browser box:

- The LP inner sleeve (in 1954) to substitute for green stock envelopes into which 78 recordings were placed when they came off the presses;
- The first use of a polyethylene sleeve on the "Study In High Fidelity" series which came out in 1953;
- The use of information about an artist's LP catalog on an album sleeve in 1955;
- The advertising of multi-artist product on an album sleeve in 1955;
- The Starline Series of albums featuring top hits culled from artist catalogs in 1959.

And, he's also been designing retail stores gratis for people around the country since 1947.

"Dealers are my stimulus for ideas," he explains as a counter display of Stan Freberg waving an American flag ticks-tocks back and forth behind him. "Most of the gripes from dealers, whether about a divider card or lack of space, turn into suggestions. If you can turn a gripe into a plus . . ."

Before Rice invented his browser box, retailers used to stack their albums up on their end. Music City in Hollywood was the first store using the browser, Rice says. "The browser helped Capitol become a major source of material for the dealer. We used it as a dealer loader. We would give a browser with a certain amount of stock and this really helped expose product. We told dealers to put their albums out on the counter. It



FRED RICE, CAPITOL'S MERLIN of merchandising aids, poses in his workshop surrounded by a current crop of sales stimulants.

seems so ridiculous today to think that all records used to be behind the counter."

Today, Rice is thinking of ways to stimulate the sale of singles. He firmly believes in color sleeves for singles. "The a&r guys feel that merchandising doesn't count in singles. I disagree. A colored sleeve has great impact. If packaging doesn't add something, then why are we doing it to albums?"

"Since most singles are bought by teen-agers, this is what I want to do." He holds up a single with a photo of a vocalist printed on the vinyl.

Rice has worked on label logos and it was he who created the four color "Spectrum of Sound" design when stereo was introduced and the company sought to associate its product with the "full range of tones and colors" available in the new recording technique.

Rice's versatility is so broad that he is able to spread himself over a multitude of projects all designed to stimulate the sale of product. He has written manuals on how to self-serve a store, including how to place stock, where to place it and how to get the most out of new releases.

He moved into designing displays while working on Capitol's famed children's disk line. In fact, his little toy train merchandiser won a silver award as a point of purchase display from a trade association.

Rice's displays are brightly colored and often combine motion with a message. He has one outgrowth of a rotating LP display case which combines cartridge music with an LP jacket presentation. The machine is called the "Record Center" and is a moving display for 58 LP's. An 8-track player is hooked to a switch under a mat. When a customer steps on the mat, the rotating LP display stops, and the tape goes on, offering a stereo taste of the LP the customer is staring at.

"I get around five requests a week from people who want to open a record store. A lot of times I don't dissuade them, but I do tell them the facts about

opening a new business, like never go into a new shopping mall or near a new community. People here are mostly concerned with household items. Your best bet is going to a community which is at least ten years old. Then you know there are bound to be kids there and they are your record buyers."

Every two months Rice designs a merchandising campaign of some sort. He does not do it all alone. "I buy creativity," he admits. "Here, let me show you something." And he's off again into his display room filled with hundreds of cardboard signs, shapes and slogans. "I buy ideas." Pulling down a hanging mobile of Lou Rawls LP's, Rice explains. "Some guy came in with an idea for a mobile. See how it lays flat? When you hold it up it joins into this position." The four LP covers, all compressed one on top of each other, suddenly formed a geometric shape.

Despite his attractive surfer displays, Frankenstein ghouls with purple faces and jolly St. Nicks, Rice contends his browser is the most interesting thing he's ever designed.

"We're all caught up in economy. One of my biggest jobs is how to do things cheaper." Rice holds up a new lightweight plastic, with which he hopes to mold LP jackets instead of using cardboard. The artwork would be affixed to the plastic. "Feel how much lighter it is. This would be a great saving with so much product now going air freight."

Rice believes that if a new release is to reach best seller status, it has to happen within the first three months of its release. New releases, both singles and LP's, account for approximately 70 per cent of all record sales. That first 90 days accounts for 80 per cent of the total record's sales.

Rice's mind is loaded with facts and figures about motivation and sales stimulus. Perhaps that's why he is working on his third book, appropriately called "How to Sell Music."