

by Tony Thomas

Tony Thomas is pictured here with Percy Faith and violinists Cecil Figelski and Hyman Goodman. This was taken during a recording session at A & M Studios in Hollywood.

It was a three-hour recording session, from seven until ten on a hot June evening in Hollywood. Forty-two musicians turned up, along with producer Ted Glasser and two technicians, at the A and M Studio on La Brea Avenue, near the corner of Sunset Boulevard. Several of the musicians point out—and nobody can resist pointing it out to visitors—that this was the studio built by Charlie Chaplin fifty years ago, and that the antique wooden clock on the wall of the lounge is one he picked up in Cirencester. It still keeps accurate time and as the hands reach seven Percy Faith quietly strolls in.

Strolled in quietly

Faith has reason to stroll quietly, and to seem perfectly relaxed. His musicians are the best in town, and the town is packed with top notch, greatly experienced players. Violinists are so plentiful that Faith can put his first-chair section together almost entirely from men who are, or have been, concert masters with major orchestras. In the third chair this evening sits Hyman Goodman, formerly the concert master of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. Goodman admits that to play at a Faith recording session is a constant stimulation and a challenge because to be anything less than perfect is to be out.

Four pieces are recorded at the session, for an album to be titled, possibly, "*Country Bouquet*." On the first piece Faith spends an hour and twenty minutes, but by the time it's over "I Don't See Me in Your Eyes Anymore" sounds like an adagio by Mahler. Much of the time is spent setting up sound positions and balances, no easy task when working with a sixteen-track recording apparatus and as many microphones.

Adjusts levels

After the first take Faith comes into the engineer's booth and as the tape plays back he starts adjusting the levels on the sixteen channels, on each of which they have stuck a white tab to indicate the instruments. Obviously Faith knows his sound as well as he knows the kind of performance he expects from his musicians. The engineer points out that the piano is a little out of tune in the bass. Faith smiles, "Where'd you get an ear like that?" They settle the matter by adjusting the balance, taking the piano down a little and bringing up the percussion.

With the first piece 'in the can' the others come a little faster. His arrangement of "El Paso" has the Latin beat that harks back to the splendid albums of Cuban and Mexican music he did a decade ago. Then a smooth and dreamy arrangement of "For the Good Times," and finally a theme from Jerry Goldsmith's new score for the movie *Chinatown*. The session ends right on the nose at ten. Sometimes they run into overtime but whether they do or not it's seldom a matter for concern. Columbia budgets a Percy Faith album at between thirty and thirty-five thousand dollars.

The album, like most of the others, is to be done in three sessions of three hours each. The cost is high because the musicians are the best anywhere. Says Faith, "These are men who earn fifty to a hundred thousand dollars a year." An engineer from a studio down the hall drops in for a while to listen to the playbacks. At A and M they record mostly contemporary pop music, a great deal of it Rock 'n Roll. He leaves with the comment, "First music I've heard in a year and a half."

Must be perfect

Faith, who must be one of the least temperamental musicians who ever lived, conducts with his pencil and makes small gestures. The men know his requirements so precisely he occasionally leaves the studio as they play to check what they sound like in the booth. Hyman Goodman explains why it all looks so easy, "He's an absolute perfectionist. He knows exactly what he wants and he can get the best people, and you don't have any difficulty understanding him." Goodman is happy to be playing with the best, "With all due respect to my colleagues back in Toronto . . . there you can sometimes get by playing a little under par. Here you can't." Goodman's violin is a point of pride, it was made in Milan in 1757, but it's not exceptional in this group and he points out one of the men whose instrument is valued at twenty thousand dollars.

Faith was hesitant about doing an album of country music and not at all sure that the country buffs will like what he has done. He admits it was a problem to find enough material, "Country music is strong on lyrics but the musical structure is limited." This also applies to so much of contemporary pop music and when Columbia nudged Faith into changing his image a few years back to move from middle-brow music into the newer market Faith was doubtful if he would make the grade. "Rock 'n Roll was mostly junk and the youngsters who were writing the pop stuff were twenty years away from writing anything good. But I went through about one hundred pieces of new music and picked out a dozen. Previously I'd written a 'Theme for Young Lovers' and we decided to use that as the lead item for the album. The word 'young'

on the cover is apparently a sales point and it ended up selling a quarter of a million albums, and still selling.

Tackled new music

Faith had been told by Columbia that either he tackled the new music or he'd go down. Most of the middle-brow maestros, including Mantovani and Kostelanetz, have ceased to be best sellers and Faith admits to his own market being about thirty per cent less than what it was in the late fifties and early sixties, but that still leaves his albums, three per year, selling more than a hundred thou-

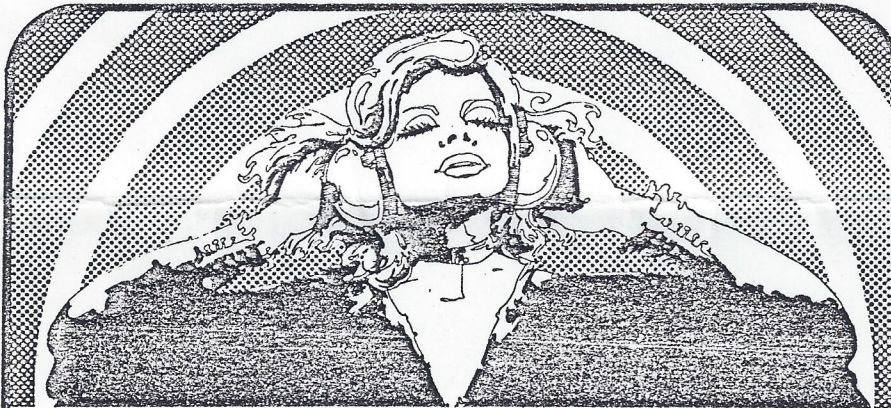
sand copies. This is still Big Business, to the amazement of Faith, who points out that the record industry comes close to being entirely youth-orientated, with classical music accounting for only three per cent of the market—a very sad fact of musical life.

Re-composes music

Few artists have been with a record company as long as Percy Faith has been with Columbia. It started in 1950 and there is no end in sight. He had grave doubts about eight years ago when it was no longer possible to do albums based

on Broadway shows because suddenly the shows ceased being made up of hits and all the song writers had been full covered. But, to his surprise, he made the transition and he assumes the young people like hearing their music put on a pedestal. What Faith does, of course, is not so much arranging as re-composing. He strips the melody to its bones and builds from there, using the basic concept of the classical string quartet—first violins, second violins, violas and cellos.

At the recording session for "Country Bouquet" thirty-six of his musicians were string players, with piano, bass, fender bass, drums and two guitars. To Faith his orchestra is an instrument and writing for it satisfies what he describes as a constant state of pregnancy. Hiring orchestral arrangers to do arranging for him, at his dictate, has not proved satisfying, "To give someone a sketch and tell them how you want it filled and then check it over later for changes takes longer than doing it myself. And when you hire a skilled arranger he naturally wants to get across some of his own points. To me the real pleasure of this business is being able to do it my way."



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Born in Toronto

Faith has been doing things his way for most of his musical life. He was born in Toronto in April of 1908 and was such a natural musician that study came easily to him. He was earning money, something like three dollars a night, at the age of eleven playing the piano in silent movie houses. At fifteen he made his debut as a pianist in Massey Hall and he recalls that it was exactly forty years ago, in the summer of 1934, that he joined the CBC as an arranger and conductor. He might have been a concert pianist but at eighteen he burned his hands severely and took instead to something else that intrigued him—the sound made by instruments in unison, of harmony and counterpoint.

Early radio shows

It was radio that enabled Faith to develop his style. His first major programme was "Gaiety and Romance" with the late Stanley Maxted as host. Then in 1937 came the weekly half hour known as "Music by Faith" and the start of a great career. The programme was carried in the US on the Mutual Network, as well as the CBC, and brought Faith the inevitable offers from the South.

In 1940 he accepted a contract to be the musical director of "The Carnation Hour," which came from Chicago and seven years later he moved to New York for Coca Cola's popular "The Pause That

Refreshes" programme. Both programmes allowed Faith unlimited and unrestricted opportunities for semi-symphonic presentation of popular music. From all this grew a reputation as one of the most talented orchestrators in the world of music, a distinction he shared with another Canadian and ex-CBC man, Robert Farnon. With Faith in the States and Farnon, as of 1940, in England, Canada lost two very distinctive musical talents.

Switched to records

The decline of radio due to the rise of television was no problem for Faith, who simply carried on in much the same mode by joining Columbia Records. The switch from 78 RPM shellac recording to microgroove vinyl grooves was comparable to the transition of silent movies to sound, and with that switch came a rapid expansion of the recording industry, moving it into the realm of massive big business. Faith, along with Mitch Miller, was very much a part of that ascension. As a Columbia music director he was responsible for the selection of material and artists, and he helped such people as Rosemary Clooney, Guy Mitchell, Johnny Mathis and Tony Bennett to find

the way to fame. It was Faith's own song, "My Heart Cries for You" that registered Mitchell with the public. Several singers won gold citations with Faith in accompaniment, and his recordings of "The Song from Moulin Rouge" and "The Theme from Summer Place" became two of the biggest selling records in the business.

Plays concerts too

Doing three albums a year accounts for about half of Faith's work programme.

The rest is devoted to concerts, sometimes as a guest conductor and sometimes as the head of his own touring group, and to occasional jobs for the movies and television. He has scored half a dozen pictures and his theme for the TV series "The Virginian" helped swell the Faith coffers.

Percy Faith is a musician with the Midas touch. So far—at the moment he is a young and healthy sixty-six—there have been few ripples or offbeats in his career. If he has a problem it would appear to be an abundance of success. "I sometimes wish the Columbia people would say 'You're through, nobody's buying you anymore,' and then perhaps I could get on with writing some serious

music. Years ago I thought I would quit when I was fifty and take to composing but here it is in 1974 and it looks like this record business is never going to end. But even if it did come to an end I would need a commitment in order to write anything. Just writing for the sake of writing has never appealed to me. Inspiration was never a factor. The only thing that has got me to work is an assignment and a deadline."

Strong musical force

No one survives in the record business for a long period of time without intelligence and tenacity to back up the talent. The detractors like to knock Faith as a master of schmaltzy mood music but in point of fact all the other such conductors have slipped into near oblivion. That Faith is still a force in music can only be attributed to a unique and powerful talent, and a particular ability for orchestration. It might sometimes be a matter of making silk purses out of sow's ears but the skill employed almost defies criticism. Only a bitterly envious musician could raise an objection—or the writer of magazine articles such as this, who sits and wonders why maybe just a little of the Faith talent couldn't have come his way. ♦

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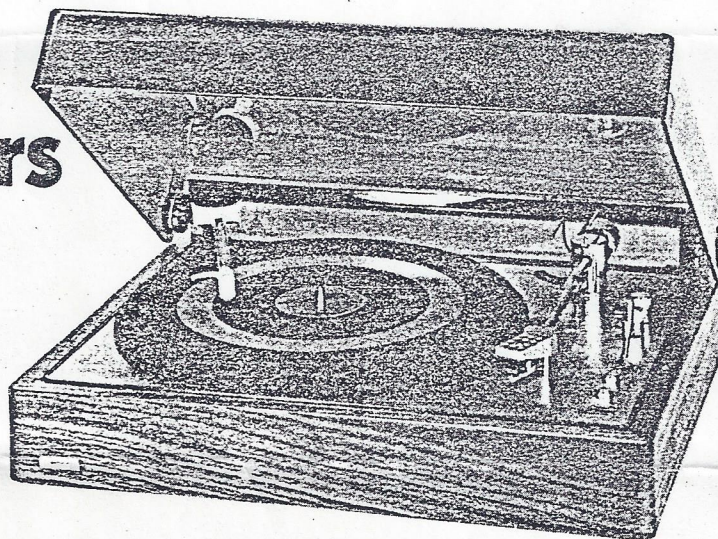
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