

THE TWO WOMEN OF CAEDMON

By Helen Roach

In 1924 Sylvia Beach, the Paris bookseller of Shakespeare Incorporated, went to the Paris office of H.M.V. to arrange for a recording of James Joyce. She was told there was no money in spoken word records and settled for 30 copies to be paid for on delivery, confirming the fact that ever since Edison's invention, music recordings had dominated the marketplace.

On February 22, 1952, Barbara Holdridge and Marianne Mantell, two Hunter College Phi Beta Kappas, Class of 1950, impatient with minor jobs in publishing and in small recording companies, pooled their \$1,800 to establish the house of Caedmon, publishers of books and spoken word recordings. By 1954, after having issued two books and some 40 recordings, and convinced that there were enough publishers of books, the two women of Caedmon decided to systematically document "the great living authors, recording their work in order to capture the author's own interpretation and recreation of the emotions felt when the work was first set down." No one up to that time, furthermore, had undertaken to record the great literature of the past, and it became Caedmon's role to release such literature from its preservative entrapment in print. The music recording studio of Peter Bartok on West 57th Street, New York City, suited their purpose.

First to be recorded was Lawrence Olivier who, while in New York, delivered The Eulogy on the Death of George VI at the Little Church Around the Corner. Then came Dylan Thomas, the Welsh poet, who at the time was giving public readings of his poetry in America and attracting large, young audiences, ready listeners for repeat performances on recordings. Holdridge and Mantell ingeniously reached Thomas on the phone at 5:00 a.m. at his Chelsea Hotel suite. An appointment was made for lunch at the nearby Little Shrimp, where Thomas ultimately agreed to record his poetry for Caedmon. Within 18 months, four recordings, together with the narrative A Child's Christmas in Wales, had reached many parts of the world and netted \$42,000.

Other living writers followed: Thomas Mann, the Sitwells, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, e. e. cummings, Robert Frost, W. H. Auden, Archibald MacLeish, Marianne Moore, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, Colette, Camus, Tennessee Williams, and William Faulkner (including his Nobel Prize acceptance speech). Each author was reached in a different way. Through the letter of a German professor, arrangements were made to record Mann in California. In trying to obtain a date for recording Colette, the two women of Caedmon met persistent delays; they were finally cabled by her husband, who also served as her agent, the advice that "If you want Colette, you had better hurry." With the help of a Paris

engineer, who hauled heavy equipment up flights of stairs, the recording of Colette was made six weeks before her death.

The Caedmon method for recording authors was not to direct writers who knew what they meant, but rather to act as interested listeners at the taping sessions. Of this approach, W. H. Auden said, "It made me do my best." For recordings involving literature of the past, Caedmon hired directors who had experiences working with skilled readers and actors. In the early years, this always occurred on an affordable, piecework basis. One such employee was the poet/playwright Howard Sackler, who was well in tune with the Caedmon vision.

The great literature program began with the two-volume Hearing Poetry, a spoken anthology of best-loved English poetry from Chaucer to Milton, read by Hurd Hatfield, Jo Van Fleet, and Frank Silvera, with notes by Mark Van Doren and an accompanying text. Then followed the four volume Monuments of Early English Drama, from beginnings in Church ritual through the drama and farce of medieval plays; included were The Deluge, Everyman, The Second Shepherd's Play, Gammer Gurton's Needle, Ralph Roister Boister, and Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, all with accompanying texts.

The systematic recording of the classics ensued: Chaucer's Prologue to the Legend of Good Women and The Wife of Bath, the poetry of Blake, G. M. Hopkins, Tennyson, Browning, Milton, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Hardy, Yeats, Burns, and Hughes, together with DeFoe, Boswell, Dickens, Proust, O'Connor, and P. G. Wodehouse. Among the readers were Cyril Cusack, Anthony Quayle, Judith Anderson, Dame Peggy Ashcroft, Sir Ralph Richardson, Siobhan McKenna, Robert Speaght, Alfred Drake, Paul Scofield, and James Mason. The table of contents in early catalogues listed: 1. Author's Own Readings, 2. Classics of the English Language, 3. Children's Literature, 4. Religious Recordings, and 5. Documentaries.

In the small office at 460 Fourth Avenue, the two partners worked alone, except for the occasional help of friends, answering the telephone, arranging for recordings, deciding what was to be included, checking the final disks for technical imperfections, designing covers, wrapping and mailing, promoting sales, and meeting the exigencies involved in any business dealing. They were lean years of hard work. There was much climbing of stairs trying to convince unwilling book sellers to stock spoken word records. Occasionally, a salesman understood what Caedmon was doing, and successfully pushed sales: at Brentano's the wonder of a three-dimensional window display was allotted to Caedmon's recordings.

By 1954, the Dylan Thomas windfall was spent and over \$10,000 in unpaid bills had piled up. Holdridge and Mantell turned to Ted Silbert, a financier accustomed to taking over accounts receivable, and with his \$10,000 check, they were able to pay all Caedmon's debts. A friend's accountant, Harry Cohan,

whom they soon asked to handle their books, wisely counseled, "If you're going to go bankrupt, don't do it for \$10,000; wait for \$100,000." With the shrewd financial help of Cohan and Silbert, Caedmon was out of the red in thirteen months.

In 1957, Holdridge and Mantell moved to larger quarters at 277 Fifth Avenue, and one year later welcome recognition of the Caedmon faith in spoken word records came when the British Council assigned to them the Cambridge Treasury of English Prose for distribution in America. It was a course followed by others needing Caedmon's market. Columbia's Sir John Gielgud's Ages of Man eventually entered their lists as well. U. S. Government Titles I, II, and III, allotting funds for purposes of enhancing educational curricula with recording hardware, found the extensive Caedmon list of spoken word recordings well ahead of other ventures in the field; an avalanche of orders from schools resulted. It meant financial security at last.

The two women of Caedmon could now look forward to the realization of a long-held dream, the recording of all of Shakespeare. Early in 1960, with the 1964 Shakespeare Quatercentenary in mind, they set in action this project under the direction of Howard Sackler and Peter Wood. It was to be done on English soil where there could be found a vast pool of ready talent, actors who had matured in a Shakespeare-centered theatre world, and who had heard verse spoken on the stage most of their lives. Developments in stereophonic recording made it possible to present not only readings before one microphone but also full dramas in which actors could be spread across a "stage" of five microphones and two speakers. Shakespeare had his Richard Burbage, William Kemp, John Heminge, Henry Condell, and others of The King's Men on a bare stage uttering the most beautiful music in the English language. The two women of Caedmon had John Gielgud, Flora Robeson, Donald Wolfit, Ralph Richardson, Claire Bloom, Michael Redgrave, Vanessa Redgrave, Anthony Quayle, Edith Evans, Richard Burton, and Diane Wynward. Meeting the challenge of isolated sound, they spoke onto records all of Shakespeare's poetry--which was, after all, created to be heard.

The Edinburgh Review complained of this American invasion, and backed by the Marlowe Society of Cambridge, George Rylands began also using professionals to record Shakespeare's plays for Argo Records. Two monumental sets of all of the Bard's dramas were en route to celebrate the 400th anniversary, a great art form and a unique contribution to the history of listening in our time. For the American market, Caedmon successfully launched The Shakespeare Recording Society, which operated something like The Book of the Month Club.

It was inevitable that after 18 years, and with an international market for its catalog of over 500 spoken word titles, Caedmon would be wooed by the larger record companies. Holdridge and Mantell sold their company in 1970; in 1987, Harper & Row

acquired the Caedmon catalog.

But no one could have paid for the work which had gone into the forging of this important cultural partnership. A new genre of recording was chartered, one that has spread to ever widening frontiers. This achievement included the recording of several books of Richard Lattimore's translations of The Iliad and The Odyssey, J. P. R. Tolkien's Songs of Middle Earth, the Old Testament Psalms, Boris Karloff reading Kipling's Just So Stories, and innumerable modern poets reading from their work. Great theatre recordings were issued: Greek Tragedy in modern Greek acted by Katina Paxinou and Alexis Minotis and their company; The Noh Plays, Shaw's Saint Joan, Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie, and T. S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral. Just before her death at age 34, Lorraine Hansberry taped for Caedmon Lorraine Hansberry Speaks Out: Art and the Black Revolution.

Marianne Mantell went on to work with Films for the Humanities at Princeton University and Barbara Holdridge, returning to an early love for producing beautiful books, emerged in 1975 as president of Stemmer House Publishing Company. One part of Stemmer House's program is concerned with the production of books for the young with accompanying cassettes: poems of Robert Frost, a tape by Clifton Fadiman, Under the Greenwood, and Shakespeare for young people with a cassette by Claire Bloom and Derek Jacobi and music by the Folger Consort. The two women of Caedmon thus continue to make an extraordinary contribution to the history of recorded sound.