

RECORD REISSUES--AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE; AN

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN PFEIFFER, RCA RECORDS

Gray: How did you come to RCA; what was your background; how did you first start with the Company?

Pfeiffer: Well, it came thru a long series of events. My first interest was music and I started off to be a professional musician. I started off with the piano at four, then with the violin at 9, and then I developed into an oboist at about the age of 12. There just happened to be an oboe around the house and I got interested in making reeds. I think there was something fascinating about the whole process of making something that had a sound.

After making the reeds I decided I'd better learn how to play the instrument! So I sort of taught myself how to play it and got interested in high school band, orchestra, and played oboe throughout that period. Then when I went to college, majoring in music, I decided to specialize in woodwinds, primarily the oboe. This continued on for several years until a little thing like World War II came along which seemed to be interrupting the affair.

Besides music while I was in college I was interested in mathematics, taking all my electives in mathematics, which everyone thought was strange, but which fascinated me. A lot of people, I understand, do that. So when I got into the Navy during the war they looked into my background and saw all this music and decided that they didn't have much use for that but they did have a use for the mathematics. They asked me to go into electronics which I had had no previous experience in at all. But I thought it might be an interesting application. They sent me to school for a year in electronics.

When I came out I ended up in Washington doing radar work—some research and some development.

So after the war I was so fascinated by electronics I went back to the University of Arizona and took an electronics engineering degree. And it was for RCA that I was hired when I got my degree as a design and development engineer. They sent me to that beautiful place in Camden—right next to the Campbell Soup factory.

I went thru a period of indoctrination there for about three months working in various areas, but mostly in audio, since a lot of my activity in college had been slanted toward audio work. They put me into sound work doing IM analysis pickups, amplifiers, various things, until an opening came in the Record Division here in New York for a quality control engineer. They wanted somebody with a musical background, but also, basically, an engineer. And that idea sort of fascinated me. So I moved to New York and started working in the fall of 1949. I had come to RCA in July of 1949, moved to New York in October.

It was about that time that they were starting a whole new program for rerecording for 45 and LP. I met Richard Mohr, who was at that time the only A&R producer, and he was suddenly confronted with doing an enormous amount of rerecording; and when he found out about my musical background he asked me if I would join him in the A&R Department, where I've been ever since.

Gray: Your current responsibilities, as I understand them, are to produce current recordings, among those being records by Vladimir Horowitz, and also from time to time reissue material.

Pfeiffer: Yes; the primary task of an A&R producer is

to record mostly "live" music, work with the artists, set up the recording sessions, supervise them, edit the tapes after the session, transfer them, make sure that what's obtained on the record is as close as possible to the performer's intentions; but also with the view towards producing in the living room as close to a viable musical experience as possible. That has been our primary task. I've worked with various artists over these 27 years--currently I am working with Horowitz. I first started working with him in 1950, then worked exclusively with him until he left RCA in 1961, but maintained a relationship and friendship so that when he came back to the label last September I took over the responsibility for producing him again--which is inspiring! We're in the process of trying to get his first record ready for release this fall.

But in addition to that a number of reissues have luckily fallen into my hands, because over the years I have always been interested in some of the older recordings and with the heritage that RCA has. I've tried to encourage the company to make available some of the great recordings of the past that cannot be remade because of obvious reasons!

Gray: One of the most notable achievements of yours in the past few years has been the six-box set of the recordings of Jascha Heifetz from 1917 to 1955, a project which occupied you for about two years.

Pfeiffer: Yes--this was a project designed to make available everything that Heifetz had recorded that was not currently available in any other form, so that doesn't include any of his stereo records or some of the other mono recordings that are still available, or were available at that time.

Gray: What is the shape of the decision-making process when it's decided to do a project

like this--what decisions and people are involved?

Pfeiffer: Well, it's a joint decision between ourselves and our merchandising people, first of all, whether the project has sufficient artistic merit to justify all the time and expense. Reissues in general are less expensive to release than new recordings simply because one is involved only in collecting source, making transfers, packaging, and distribution. Recording costs are the single most expensive part of a recording project; but without those, reissues can often be justified with the expectation of a much lower sales potential.

Gray: With the Heifetz, you decided to include what was released before, but not currently available?

Pfeiffer: Yes, the idea was to reissue everything that had been issued at one time--that is, all the approved recordings that he had made--but which now were not available. These included all his acoustic recordings made between 1917 and 1924, plus all of his early electricals, all of his EMI material which we licensed from them which was not available on Seraphim.

Gray: In the case of reissue projects in which you are not going to release everything that exists, what decisions go into making the selection of the material? Are they artistic, technical, or both?

Pfeiffer: Well--they're mostly artistic, simply because the basis for deciding is whether or not there is demand in the marketplace for particular records; and those are usually based on the musician himself or on the particular repertoire that has never been reissued before or never recorded by anyone else; or there was a unique perfor-

mance by a particular artist. The whole decision is basically artistic. Then we start to worry about the technical aspects of it—whether we can find sufficiently good source to prepare these performances in the proper technical condition for release.

Gray: You mentioned source, which brings us to the stage of producing a tape, a final tape. You mention that there are often problems in finding good original sources. Could you discuss a few of the problems you encounter there—metal parts, vinyl pressings, or shellac pressings?

Pfeiffer: The first records we expect to reissue are those that belong to us today; so our first course is to examine the vault which contains copies, presumably, of all the recordings RCA ever issued. These are primarily in metal form—that is, metal masters or metal molds—sometimes called the metal mothers. These are positive metal records that can be played, and they usually form the best source possible, because they are closest to the original master.

A search is made in our vault for either metal molds or metal masters from which vinyl pressings can be made, or original test pressings that may be in the vault also. That is the first step.

Very often parts are not available—they can't be found or they are damaged, in which case we must go to other sources—primarily outside collectors who specialize in collecting good, mint copies of the shellac pressings. Sometimes several of these have to be surveyed before we find one that's acceptable for transfer. It's a matter of getting the best possible 78 rpm source, correcting the speed, because, particularly in the acoustic recording days the recording speeds were not constant—they didn't record then at 78 rpm. So it's necessary to have a variable speed play-

back machine which can duplicate the original speed at which the master was recorded. This is sometimes touch and go, because even the tuning standards in the days those records were made are not the same as we have today.

So it's a matter of estimating by quality of voice or going back to an arrangement or a piece of sheet music and trying to duplicate as closely as possible the original speed, because there were no records made of the actual speed at which a recording was made. Sometimes in the old recording pages we find entries about the type of horn that was used in the acoustic records and its dimensions or character; but they never describe anything about the speed of the recording.

Gray: Do you have any troubles in playing shellacs, metal mothers, or vinyls, in finding the correct equalization curve or in determining the correct stylus size?

Pfeiffer: Yes, we have a whole series of styli tip diameters that we generally try out when confronted with a particular recording, one that will track the best, because if it tracks the groove the best we can assume that the dimensions of the tip are consistent with the dimensions of the groove. Also, the weight of the pickup in the groove is important, because if it's too heavy it will ride too far down in the groove or if it's too light it will ride too high up where it won't track properly. So to get the proper tracking the proper tip diameter and tip pressure are necessary. Sometimes it's necessary to change the pressure as the tone arm goes from the outside to the inside of the disc. We have a little device that we can put on the head of the pickup and then lift off as it moves towards the center.

Gray: You work with Ed Begley as your engineer,

and after a time you both develop a feel for what sounds the best and develop procedures for reducing some of the trial and error that always goes into making transfers.

Pfeiffer: Well, we know for example that records made in a certain period or a certain year generally have certain characteristics. We also know that if recordings came from the same recording session that the speeds will always be the same because the machinery was set up at the beginning of the session and they generally ran at the same speed throughout the whole session. Also, the tip diameters are consistent and pressures are the same in order to get the best tracking. It's from knowing that that we can save a little time. If we know that a recording was made on a certain date we can set up the conditions that we know are acceptable for that date and they generally will be acceptable for that particular recording.

Gray: In the Heifetz set and in two recent Victrola records you worked from tape originals. What things do you look for when you work with a tape original?

Pfeiffer: There the primary consideration is the playback characteristic—that is, what recording curve was used in the original recording. Sometimes on those original tapes there were frequency tones recorded, but it's necessary to go back to the actual session tapes—the original tapes—and try to find a frequency run that existed so that we can duplicate the frequency conditions or the playback characteristics that are necessary to get the right sound. Of course, tape machine mechanics are a little bit different today than then. Many of these recordings were made on machines that were actually made by RCA—hand-crafted, hand-made machines by our own mechanics—and the transport mechanisms today are more solid, more consistent. We've found that sometimes

the pitch changed from the beginning of a tape to the end, and it's necessary sometimes to vary the speed of the tape machine when you're going thru to compensate for that pitch change. If they're transferred without any pitch change then at the side joins the pitch changes, which is not very good.

Gray: I presume from what you've said about 78's and about tape that you attempt at all times to work from original source material.

Pfeiffer: Yes, it's generally the most desirable. When transfers were made some years ago certain technical conditions existed. We now feel that technical conditions are better. So what we try to do is go back to the original rather than take something that was transferred under less-than-current state-of-the-art conditions and lift them up to the current state-of-the-art.

Gray: How long does it take you to produce 30 minutes of music in a reissue situation?

Pfeiffer: There's a wide variation in the amount of time. You can spend a whole day on a 78 rpm side just trying to get the best conditions, or taking several different copies. Sometimes one copy of a 78 will be good in certain places but not good in others. It might have some distortion or bad surface noise, so it's sometimes necessary to take several copies, transfer them all, and then splice out the bad parts using current editing procedures to splice between various copies of the original source.

Generally 78's take longer than tape sources, although you can run into difficulties with tape which also require time.

Generally to produce, say, one complete LP of reissue material one can spend five working days.

Gray: With studio time at \$40.00 an hour.

Pfeiffer: Yes, that's right.

Gray: How much does it cost to produce a tape--taking into account studio time, your time, and time required to search source?

Peiffer: This is something I think no one could tell you. The only record we keep, based on a particular album, is the studio time. The album production costs--that is, the master tape, the lacquer mastering, test pressings, cover, liner--are assigned under a job number. My time is never include in that, or secretary's time, or the time it takes to do the research or the discussion time that you spend on it. I really would have no idea, for instance, about how much the Heifetz project cost. No idea. There were 24 LP's and it could have cost anywhere from \$50,000 to \$100,000 just for the production costs. Of course, the quality started improving so the time needed to transfer them was less as we went through various years. If you consider that with 24 LPs--just a production cost, album cover, liner--\$2,000 per LP is not so bad. In fact, it's very small. So I would think that it would come to around \$3,000 or \$4,000 per LP. Maybe not that much, I don't know.

Gray: We're moving now into what happens after you've gotten your final tape and into that whole production process before a record gets to the public. For instance, the Heifetz was accompanied by a very elaborate booklet which examined his career and had a discography of the records.

Pfeiffer: Yes--just preparing the booklet was a combined effort by our Editorial Dept.--

Nancy Swift and Jane Brier, who worked very conscientiously and very long just to get the discography in shape which I also worked on for a couple of years. Actually, I got help from outside collectors and outside discographers. A very knowledgeable man by the name of Maltese and his son helped to a great extent. Because of their interest they also provided some of the source that I couldn't find anywhere. They had mint copies of everything that Heifetz had ever recorded. So I was able to tap their collection in order to find copies of things I wasn't able to find elsewhere.

Gray: Is the thinking that goes into the packaging different from the thinking that goes into the original idea?

Pfeiffer: Well, yes, something like this which is of great historical value and deals with one of the monumental figures in music and probably one of the longest careers in recording of any musician. Doing a project of this scope necessitates various authors writing: first of all, an appreciation of Heifetz—Joseph Wechsler, who is a very fine writer and a very knowledgeable man as far as the violin is concerned, wrote an article full of insight and perception as far as Heifetz himself was concerned. Then we wanted also someone to write an article about his recorded output who was familiar with all of the recordings and also was a fine writer. We asked Irving Kolodin to do that. He surveyed Heifetz's recording career. Then the discography itself, which is a complete discography of all the records issued—all of the approved records. Of course, there were a lot of unapproved records available thru various sources, but we couldn't very well include those. We found a few records which had never been issued but which had been approved, but

for one reason or another had been overlooked. So we included those in the collection.

Some records we found which he had made but not approved. We questioned him about the possibility of including those in the collection, but not with any success. He merely said that if they were no good in 1934 they were no good in 1976! At any rate, there are a number of recordings artists make that they haven't approved and he's no exception.

Getting that discography of all his approved records with the proper serial numbers and the proper arrangers, and, because many of his records were transcriptions of selections originally composed for other instruments was a great research job. Recording dates, matrix numbers, and the proper titles, and so on. We wanted it to be a definitive discography—we have found a few mistakes—but not serious ones.

Gray: You mentioned before that the decisions for reissuing records are made jointly between the artistic dept. and the Merchandising Dept. Does the Merchandising Dept. exercise a veto or do they suggest repertoire?

Pfeiffer: No, they don't generally suggest repertoire. They're confronted with a concept of an album and then they exercise their judgment in judging what kind of sale such an album will have based on their contact with the market and the conditions they know prevail out in the market. We, basically, are confronted with the conditions that prevail as far as the artistic values and virtues of a reissue are concerned. They are primarily concerned with whether or not there is sufficient number of people out there to justify reissuing it. So between those two points of view we try to come to

a conclusion as to whether or not a certain project, even if it is aesthetically desirable, will be commercially desirable.

Gray: So then there are many projects which are considered, but few which make it thru the entire process?

Pfeiffer: Yes, there are undoubtedly any number of artistically virtuous projects that we would like to do, but if our merchandising people feel that there are only a few people who would be interested in such a project then there's no point in putting it out, because it would be in the catalog maybe a few months and then disappear. We don't like to do that--once something is made available a certain number of people count on it--at least, they tell their friends they have gotten this album. Their friends go to the store maybe a couple of months later and it's no longer available--it's been cut out. That doesn't create very good will.

Gray: So besides the purely artistic merits of a project there is always the marketplace.

Pfeiffer: Well--it's understandable. There's no point in putting something out if no one's interested in buying it.

Gray: What happens during the final merchandising part of the release process. We've talked already some about how the artistic and merchandising ideas are merged in an album. How does merchandising enter into the final process?

Pfeiffer: As the producer of the album we have to submit all the paperwork which puts this whole album into a cycle--that is, it tells the art dept. what we plan to release

and any suggestions about what kind of concept we have. It's put on a schedule for a certain month of release and this is instigated by what we call the cover copy--that is, we put all the information about the album, its projected title and suggestions about who should write the liner notes and the concept of the cover so that the art concept coincides with the album. Very often, of course, the cover has a picture of the artist; otherwise it's an art concept that has to do with the music or with something cultural around the music. So then it's necessary to approve all those various things as they come in--the art, the notes--make up a sequence sheet to determine the various sequence of the various selections in the album with all the labeling information, get exact timings for everything; and that's about the extent of that. Then, of course, the various departments take over in production, the cover is printed, the liner is printed, and then collated and sent to the factory where they're put together in the album. The only other approvals that are necessary are listening to the assurance pressings--the masters are sent to the factory, are plated and pressed and then assurance pressings are sent to us for final approval so that we can make sure that what is going out to the public coincides with what we approved on a reference acetate. Then we sort of sit back and hold our breath and see what will happen in the marketplace.

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Transcribed from an interview in New York City, April 1976.