

“A LOT OF MYSTIQUE

PLUS A LOT OF MONEY

EQUALS A LOT OF BULLSHIT”

Years ago in the Mojave Desert you could be a landowner by just going out there, building a structure and staying there. Now-a-days a lot of these homesteads are vacant and roofless. Maybe a decade ago Mark Olson left his band ‘The Jay Hawks’ and he and his wife Victoria Williams bought two adjacent buildings and moved in.

Dave Royer is another Mojave Homestead owner. He put a nickel into a slot machine and won, with his earnings he bought the place. Mark and Vic met him when he was developing his now famous ribbon microphones. They test drove early versions of his ribbon and tube mics, pre amps and compressors and ended up with many old homemade Dave Royer devices. I lived out there with Mark and Vic and was lucky enough to pick Dave’s brain. Dave and I would sit out in the Desert Moonlight drinking Budweiser, discussing Steinbeck’s Tortilla Flat and dual diaphragm phase cancellation.

Two years later, while on tour, Marks band, ‘The Original Harmony Ridge Creek Dippers’, cut his new record in Mississippi. Mark wanted to re-cut a couple of things so he asked me to come out to the Desert and finish the record.

I plugged in all the of Dave’s old stuff. Don Heffington, the great drummer, and my friend (me and Mista Weiss wanna know, “Why did you kill all those puppies?”) set up The Old Red Glitter Gretsch Drum Kit, I put one of Dave’s ribbon mics at head level above the kit. Mark came in, put on the bass, hit two or three bass notes then put more kindling on the fire. After a few minutes Vic waltzed in and we started tracking “Alta’s Song”, a song for the new record written about the late Mayor of Joshua Tree.

I set it up so they all played in the same room and everything bled into the drum and vocal tracks. Victoria smashed down on the Wah pedal and yanked and bent through her guitar solo. My levels weren’t right yet and the drums distorted but that was it. Mark re-sang the vocal. Don improvised the low “Be, Woppa Be Wop” vocal and Victoria “Oohhed” behind Mark. Vic wanted to re-cut her solo but we talked her out of it. I did a rough mix pushing up the faders of rejected Rhodes and harmonica tracks. Mark, Don and Vic listened and said it was done.

Mark and Victoria re-sang some of the other songs and did some different overdubs, (banjos and harmonicas, things like that). Mark asked me to re-mix the whole record, so I took all the tracks from Mississippi and started to sift through them. While listening back to the tracks I realized that all of Marks vocals were cut live with everything bleeding into the vocal mic, my heart swelled, his tracks were beautiful. One song at a time I would erase noise and clean up the over-dub tracks. I made sure to leave in Danny Frankels



Mark cutting ‘Alta’s Song’. He’s singing into an early, Dave Royer, homemade, Tube Mic.



Vic and Don after, "moaning back-grounds into the microphone".

out-bursts of "Oh Yeah" on the triangle track. I kept the mixes striped down with-out any effects except for here and there running Victoria's vocal "thru the ham" as Vic say's (a spring reverb the size of a small ice-box). I would play back the song a couple of times learning it while practicing my fader moves then record it to two track.

After each mix I'd walk out into the Desert and find Mark digging ditches for the irrigation pipes that send water to his apple, peach and pomegranate orchards. He'd come into the old building, sit in-between the speakers and listen to the whole mix, turn, look at me and say, "That sounds great. Done!".

About then Victoria would wander in and start boiling water for some "All Night Samba Tea" or some other crazy concoction of herbs and things that only Vic could dream up. She would then listen to the mix and say, "the back-ground vocals shouldn't come in until the second verse". Then Mark; "No Vic, it's fine I like the back-grounds!" Then maybe an argument, Mark would ask, "What do you think Charlie?" My response, "You know I think Vic's right I like hearing your voice alone for the first verse". Mark would OK, go back to ditch digging and I would do another mix and move on to the next song. Vic brushed the Burros. Using this process I mixed the entire album in the next day and a half.

After I finished with the mixing I walked to the front house to see if Mark or Vic had made any food. Victoria had some eggs boiling in her tea-kettle and Mark was talking to Buddy Miller trying to get him to master the

new mixes. Even though Buddy wanted to master it he's a busy guy and couldn't do it. I was in the bathroom taking a piss, Marks voice got loud like he was looking for me, "Charlie?, I need to talk to you!"

I sat down on the couch, Mark sat across from me in a chair. He looked down at his scribbling in his note book then pushed the palms of his hands up into his eye sockets, kind of moaned and forced his skin above his eye brows, ran his hands across his temples then down his neck. His elbows where on his knees and he was rubbing his hands together.

"Charlie, what do you know about mastering?"

I had been at many mastering sessions and mastered independent records myself but still I wasn't sure. I thought about it, then answered Mark, "All I know is there is a lot of mystique and it costs a bunch of money."

Mark's face was in his hands again and he rubbed and moaned and responded, "Anytime there is a lot of mystique and a lot of money involved there is a lot of Bullshit involved. I want *you* to master the record!"

I was flattered. I knew this wasn't a knock against Buddy Miller or Bernie Grundman or any other great mastering guy it was just a risk Mark was willing to take, I was with him and felt that I could do it because I Loved the record.

I agreed to master the record.

On my last trip out to The Mojave Desert the transmission in my five hundred dollar 1968 Plymouth Valiant shattered. I was broke and couldn't afford to fix it so my poor girlfriend Kristin was driving me around. Up in Half Moon Bay where she lives, she house-sits for a true Patron of the Arts, Eric Simon. I had recorded at his place before and I knew he had the stuff that I needed for the record mastering.

Again, my whole approach was to keep it simple. This record should not be about production it should be about Mark's great voice and songwriting. I just

wanted to get all the eq's and levels to match and have the overall level close to any other CD. I eq'ed it going into the recorder then matched the levels of each song. I then listened to it in mono to check phase. I tried to not over-do the compression, dynamics are very important. I compared the sound to contemporary records. Then I realized that Mark's record didn't sound like other contemporary records or people who are considered his peers. So I decided to put on records that I liked. Then it made sense, the dynamics and eq's were closer to classic (both old and new) records, and his record stood up to my favorites and I was happy.

I had the advantage of listening to the master on a few different systems. I would drive my gals car up and down the Central California Coast just enjoying the record. Neil Young has a Ranch around there so it seemed appropriate because "Harvest" was one of the records that I would A/B to Marks.

That was it. I was convinced that this new Mark Olson record was done right. It is a very important album and I am content with the mix and mastering. Finishing a recording like this makes me able to sleep at night, which is a task.

I put the CD masters in an envelope and Fed Ex'd them to Nashville (the Music Capitol of the World) then I drove to Salinas (the Lettuce Capitol of the World) and figured out how to rebuild my transmission.

Marks new record (December's Child) will be released by Dualtone in the United States and Glitterhouse in Europe.

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Under the cowboy hat is Vic's Neumann M49, sorry Dave about the 56 on the amp, I ran out of your ribbons.