

WHAT? NO ANNETTE?

Ringo, Herb Alpert, James Taylor, Tom Waits, Branford Marsalis and Nilsson jazz up Uncle Walt's greatest hits

By Tom Nolan

Hal Willner looked like a stunned fish out of water.

Pale, balding, scraggly-bearded, wearing a navy blue poncho and gray slacks, the 31-year-old Manhattan-based record producer slumped in a chair in front of the control board in the booth of a Burbank recording studio and gazed warily at the scene before him.

Beyond the glass, a 45-piece orchestra—flutes, oboes, bassoons, celesta—was tuning up under the baton of veteran session conductor Lennie Niehaus. A contingent of beehived female vocalists did warm-up harmonics in a glassed-in room to the left. Van Dyke Parks, coproducer for this day's session, wearing faded overalls with a shirt and tie, scurried between studio and control booth, a bundle of droll wit and West Coast energy. Singer-songwriter Harry Nilsson, portly and natty in a double-breasted suit, sat in the booth near Willner.

A few other famous folk were in attendance, including humorist Terry Southern. And in the studio, tuning up with the orchestra, was guest trumpet player Herb Alpert, the "A" of A&M Records.

The cause of all this activity was the seminal session for Willner's latest A&M project, *Stay Awake*, a tribute album of music from the films of Walt Disney. This would be the fourth such LP Willner had produced. Earlier records devoted to the works of Nino Rota, Thelonious Monk and Kurt Weill won rave reviews and respectable sales in the U.S. and Europe.

But those earlier efforts were modest



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affairs compared with today's extravaganza. Willner was used to small, artful groups of players in intimate, low-key, New York type situations—not a costly in-house symphony, music copyists, a union rep, legendary L.A. session pros, Southern California eccentrics and celebrity walk-ins. Not to mention the imminent arrival of vocalist Ringo Starr.

The orchestra was tuned and ready. The tape was set to roll.

"Piece of cake, Hal," an engineer assured the producer.

"Yeah?" Willner said skeptically.

"Tribute to Disney, take one," cued the engineer.

In the studio, Niehaus gave the downbeat—and 45 musicians started off in three different directions.

"Whoops," said the engineer. "Take two."

Willner sank his forehead onto the vinyl ledge of the control board.

But the snafu was quickly sorted out, and a moment later Willner was smiling with pleasure as Niehaus' arrangement of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" came to life like an animated forest. Later, Nilsson's vocal would be added to this track.

"There is a lot of pressure," Willner admitted during a break. "I've never done anything this big before. Lot of musi-

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be more outrageous. I mean, if I'd made all of 'em consistent with the Rota album, I guess I could have gotten a big Yuppa audience by now, had my own Willner Hill label or something.

His projects are produced for "not much more than \$100,000," according to Willner. "And even then, I have to watch every dime." Artists are paid from a pooled budget. Sometimes a fee is involved, sometimes not. "I mean, what am I gonna give a Ringo, \$2,000? At the same time, you have arrangers, and this is how they make their living—of course you're gonna give *them* a fee. Basically, I say to everyone, 'Here's my budget, here's what I need to do. How much do you want?' There's no hard negotiations."

Willner has had no trouble getting other labels to permit their artists to do his LPs. "They see this as a feather in their artists' caps. Now, if one of these records ever really *sells*, then we'll have problems."

If ever a Willner project seemed in danger of creating such problems, it was this one. Ringo singing "When You Wish Upon a Star" with a full orchestra and spotlight solo by solid-gold trumpeter Herb Albert—what commercial-minded producer could come up with a more likely hit formula?

With the stage thus properly set, and with the orchestra dismissed for the day, Ringo himself arrived, wearing sunglasses and a blue satin '84 L.A. Olympics jacket. He was accompanied by his wife, actress Barbara Bach. His old friend Nilsson got up to greet him. Ringo obliged an A&M photographer by taking off his shades and posing. The preliminaries over, Ringo went into the now-empty studio and listened to his song's backing track. "Absolutely delightful!" he said.

Ringo prepared for his vocal with an iced Pepsi and a cigarette. In the control booth, producer Willner was getting some last-minute pointers from Nilsson on how to handle his star vocalist. "I think the trick is—yeah, dim the lights, that's good, but when he reaches for that one high note, just let him *talk* it, let him *whisper* it."

"Okay, gentlemen," Van Dyke Parks urged, "let's get the man's voice on tape. We don't want to get *past* the state of nervousness." On the intercom to the studio, he said: "Mr. Starkey, let's try this once for Walt."

Over the mike, the engineer said: "This is a run-through." To his assistant, he murmured, "Record this one."

Ringo sang the lyric with his inimitable charm. Parks smiled broadly. And at the

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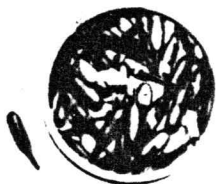
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end of the take, Willner said, "Oh, we're not throwin' that one out, not under any circumstances."

Once that first day's tracks were in the can, though, Willner apparently had some second and third thoughts about the artistic direction his latest project was taking.

"What we did at first was very Disneyesque," he explained much later, a few days after finally completing the oft-postponed LP. "In a way, that first session went down so opposite from what I intended. I thought we should sort of change gears, go a little *stranger*." He put the album aside for four months, Willner said. When he returned to it, not even Ringo's track was sacrosanct. "With Ringo's thing, we added four guitars—you know Bill Frisell?—and gave it a little *twist*. For the Nilsson track, we added guys from Ambitious Lovers, kinda made it a little 'I Am the Walrus'-y. We sorta just made everything very beautiful and unique-sounding."

Among the other artists Willner then got to participate were James Taylor (doing "The Second Star to the Right," from *Peter Pan*, with Branford Marsalis), Los Lobos ("I Wan'na Be Like You (The Monkey Song)" from *The Jungle Book*), Tom Waits ("Heigh-Ho," from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*) and Sun Ra (*Dumbo's* "Pink Elephants on Parade").

Some artists weren't available until the last minute, and the project went right down to the wire. In order for the LP to make A&M's Christmas-oriented release, its parts had to be at the factory by the second week of August. Willner and associates worked two days and nights in the mixing room to meet the deadline.

Had Willner run into any budget problems in his tortoise-and-hare race to that August finish line? "It's hard to keep hold of a budget on these records, once you actually commit to do tracks," Willner conceded. "It's like you're Ben-Hur, trying to hold the chariot horses *back*. But what are you gonna do, not finish it correctly?" Still, even with its 23 recording sessions, Willner guessed his Disney LP "probably cost less than the new Wang Chung record."

In any case, Willner said A&M had already given him the go-ahead for his next project: A Charles Mingus tribute. The label was pleased with the Disney record, it seemed.

"Well," the producer admitted, "there are probably four or five radio-type pieces on the album. I mean, I couldn't help that." ■