

Derek Green keeping the faith—even in the quietest moments

by JOHN HAYWARD

IF THERE is one strong thread that runs through the story of A&M Records over the past four years in Britain, it is the often expensive policy of investing in talent on a long-term basis, and then sticking by original a&r decisions until an act achieves star status — however long it takes.

To use a fashionable phrase, the A&M approach could be called keeping the faith, and is far enough removed from the often-quoted policies of some major record companies, who seem to release as many records as possible to see if a couple stick, to warrant investigation.

But the secret of A&M's success is not as easy to lay bare as might seem at first sight. For coupled with the obvious long-term policy and wealth of the company is the influence of British managing director Derek Green, whose complex background and personality is inextricably bound up with recent progress.

Green, a 32-year-old Londoner, has a grounding in the music industry that began when he was 16. His first real job was as a messenger for Carlin, and he recalls that he instantly related to an office where everybody was young and seemed to enjoy their work.

He went on to sell sheet music, and then got heavily involved in copyright, which still fascinates him. After typing 20,000 file cards there, he moved into promotion, starting out on the same day as Dave Most.

That was the time when the Light Programme was where it was all at. "Joe Loss was really important in those days," remembers Green. "To get him to do a band arrangement of a song was as heavy duty as seeing Robin Nash for a Top Of The Pops spot is now."

"In those days getting a hit was a relatively simple matter. If you got Saturday Club and Juke Box Jury on Saturday and then Easy Beat, Two-Way Family Favourites and Pick Of The Pops on Sunday and still didn't get a hit, then it wasn't in the grooves and you started work on the next record."

Selling covers came next, after which he left to get involved with Britain's second independent label, Strike Records, and had a hit with its first release by Neil Christian — "But I won't tell you how many of

those are still sitting at home," he confided.

Experience came thick and fast — with RCA's Sunbury Music, where he signed Harry Nilsson and sold the first 20 songs he delivered, and then as head of RCA's a&r department where he signed Clodagh Rogers.

He was around 23 at the time and in his own words: "Pop all the way through. I did not know that when you were in the record biz you went to see the acts. The name of the game was find a song, find a singer, promote it and get on Top Of The Pops."

His A&M connection came when he took over the establishment of the company's Rondor Publishing house in this country, after being turned down for the job twice. He entered his most successful publishing phase, signing Yes almost immediately, and spending every penny in the firm's bank account in the process.

"I had no doubts about doing that, but I signed them for England only. Then I met Albert Hammond, who played me all the songs he subsequently had hits with right there in my office one afternoon. I got him for the world outside America. I just didn't have the influence in those days."

Green headed up Rondor for eight years, and having just resigned from the post became involved with the record company at A&M four years ago. "It seemed like a ridiculous idea at the time," he confesses. "Jerry Moss said no at first, but I ended up talking myself into the job and by the time I got it I didn't even want it any more."

At the time A&M, although independent, was not selling its own stock. The whole pressing and distribution operation was looked after by Pye, and A&M was 12 people in a suite of offices in George Street.

"I was secure about my ability to get exposure for the acts, and it seemed like we had the right product — we just weren't getting hits," he recalled. "The only progressive act was the Strawbs."

The roster at the time was the Strawbs, Humble Pie, who were totally committed to America, Gallagher and Lyle who were a couple of folkies, Supertramp, which consisted of two guys living in different parts of the country and Stealers Wheel, whose first single was about to be released.

"Then there was a whole rash of about a dozen acts that had been signed in an attempt to build up a market presence here. I fired them immediately. They had no hope and no realistic chance of promotion. For instance, I just couldn't believe we had Freddy Starr on the label."

After pruning back the roster to just a few quality acts, Green's priority was to get involved in a&r, sit out the Pye contract, move offices to the Kings Road, staff up to 30-40 people and set up a house sales force — a series of tasks which took up the first six months of the job.



With this history in mind, it is not difficult to see how and why A&M has gone on its successful way. The company makes few signings, but has achieved a hits-to-signings ratio of better than one in two.

Green's initial signings seemed to depend heavily on song quality — no doubt a trend that stemmed from his publishing background. He learned what had hit potential, and at the same time had built up an encyclopaedic knowledge of how to promote and develop an artist.

"You have to go at the natural rate of the artist," he explained. "You can't go any faster than him, and you have to provide for him. But at the same time you have to take your chances and think big."

"I work mostly with writers and as long as they keep coming up with songs, and the material keeps at the same high standard or improves, then I'm there. It's true that I know about writers — that's my thing, and it's maybe why I don't do so well in other areas."

A measure of A&M's famous total commitment is Green's incredible revelation that he never does a deal for anything less than ten albums.

"Never less than ten albums, or at least only on very rare occasions less than that," said Green. "I just won't bend on that point. We are the worst deal in town, but I think we have a great track record. If you sign here it means you have a better than one in two chance of happening, and that is an important consideration."

"We can't pay out a big royalty, but we want people who want to happen, and then we work how much money they are going to make. It can all be divided up differently at the end, but to begin with we have a very strict contract. This philosophy comes from the American company, but I would say I am even more inflexible than them."

According to Green the other important ingredient in the A&M recipe for success is the choice of producer. "The producers we use are almost as important as the artists we sign," he said.

We work only with the best, and those producers will work with us who would not work with other companies. Glyn Johns is a good example, Elliot Mazer is another."

This determination to use certain producers has caused its fair share of problems. Green cites the case of Andy Fairweather-Low, who was one of his first signings after joining A&M.

"I signed him as soon as I took the job because I loved his material, which he had never given any exposure. Then I wouldn't let him go into the studios for 18 months, and he and I just fell out because it was my fault, I just couldn't find him a producer."

"But when he eventually went in, it was with Elliot Mazer on the West Coast. I never had to think about it. There's no issue here about 'Can I afford to send him to America?'. I just picked up the phone to Jerry Moss and said 'Can you please look after Andy while he is there?'"

Green is philosophical about falling out with his artists, and even believes it prompts the act's best work, as in the case of Gallagher and Lyle's Breakaway.

"We went through three albums together and on to Breakaway, — a record born out of pure anger between us, because they thought they were going nowhere. We were beginning to hate each other and that's always a great circumstance because you get a positive reaction."

"I can only be really friendly with my artists until they become hits. After that you are natural enemies, but that's not true about publishing

because you are on the same side and can stay close."

The quest for a producer for Joan Armatrading was a real epic too. She had been signed by Jerry Moss at a time when Green was not convinced of her potential, and the American company had put up the money. Then Green was able to get involved and appreciate her songs — which he now describes as "magic" — and begin building her career in the classic manner.

"We put her on tour here, not to sell the first album, because it was never going to be a hit album, but toured her with Nils Lofgren, Supertramp and the Ozark Mountain Daredevils, just for the pure experience. She had to grow up."

"The next thing was to get her a producer. I got Joan a couple of

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Green and the Sex Pistols

FOUR MONTHS after the sensational signing and sacking of the Sex Pistols by A&M, Derek Green has decided to make his first comments on why the decision was made — a move that cost the company more than £60,000.

"The Sex Pistols were the quickest success I ever had. They played me eight songs which really knocked me out and I signed them pig-headedly."

"The contract was terminated because I changed my mind. It was as simple as that, and was nothing to do with pressure from any other quarter. I just didn't want to be involved in what they were involved in outside their music."

"I went to Brighton the day before I terminated the contract and thought about it, and I decided that I didn't want to work with them. It would not have made me happy, and I suppose I have got to that stage of life where I am able to make the sort of move which is not really business-like. The industry has a right, in a sense, to know how all this came about."

"Jerry Moss's position was absolutely clear. I suggested very strongly that the Sex Pistols were a good business. I did not want to continue working with them, which gave him the choice."

"I've been through a lot of mad scenes. I've witnessed a few with

Joe Cocker, thrown buns at waitresses, flown across the Atlantic with George Harrison and dropped dry ice into swimming pools with Harry Nilsson. That's not how I want to earn my living."

"The Pistols are determined, quite rightly, that their record company has to be closely involved with them, because there are a lot of side issues that are very important. When they were with EMI they had to work with Leslie Hill. They now have to work with Richard Branson and the person in that position has to be responsible for them."

"Their label has to make a commitment to do the right things for them, and it has to be honourable to that pledge. Well, I realised that I was not going to be able to honour my pledge to them and so the best thing to do was to say 'I'm sorry, but I think we should part company.'"

"I don't begrudge their success with Virgin, but I don't wish we had them either."

Taking out a copy of God Save The Queen on the A&M label from his desk drawer Green added: "We got this far."

"It was just so exciting. I would have been very sad if they had not come through for Virgin. From what I met of them, I liked them as individuals."



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club dates in Washington, and asked Glyn Johns to fly up from Texas to see her. Glyn saw her, but said 'no thanks, it doesn't turn me on.' For six months I wrote him a note every day telling him he was wrong and that he had to work with her.

"And then he gave it his full attention and agreed, and they went out and cut that magnificent album. As soon as we had the product we could go out and promote it. I believe you can only establish an artist through hard work. It's no longer really possible to hype an artist, although some companies still try. But if you do that, there's no real substance to the act and there's too much at stake to do it wrong."

"Joan Armatrading did four tours of the States. Her album is currently 67 there, and we released it on June 4 last year. We're still promoting it."

Possibly the biggest gamble A&M has taken under Green's helm was Supertramp. As previously noted, at the time Green took over the company, Supertramp was two songwriters without a band. Two albums had been recorded on a very small budget and had not sold well not even securing a foreign release.

Then Green put them in touch with Dave Margerson and some demos were cut which turned out to be the basis of the *Crime Of The Century* album — the most expensive album A&M has ever produced.

"That album must have cost us 200,000 dollars in the end, even in those days. We didn't know at the time or we would never have done it. And that was for a band that had never even done a gig."

"It was pure experimentation in the studio. They would come to us and ask for a full orchestra, and then come back a month later and ask if they could take the orchestra out again. But they were Dave's passion and we really believed in them."

"Before they went on the road, Supertramp went into us for £200,000 and that's a lot of speculative money, but I didn't mind because the songs were good, and it always has to come back to the songs."

The hand went on to headline a show put on at the King's Road theatre as part of the A&M International conference, and seized the chance to impress foreign licensees. Green then put the band on the road under total record company control, spurning the usual route of using agents and promoters, but booking the dates through the record company and putting up all the risk money. Supertramp topped the bill, with Gallagher and Lyle and Chris De Burgh supporting, and Green said he had no doubts about the success of the tour because it was good value for money.

Next the campaign rolled through Europe and on to headline a debut American tour, which everybody said was impossible at the time.

"We took full page ads in the trades that November saying 'November '74. *Crime Of The*

Century Goes Gold, that's how ballsy we were," he said. In the same year the band went to Canada, Australia and Japan.

But not every campaign works out as smoothly as Supertramp's. Green remembers *Stealers Wheel* as a great act that failed to fit in with the company's philosophy and was subsequently dropped.

"*Stealers Wheel* hit big with their first single and went on the road, but would not take direction," he said. "They were not prepared to meet the commercial world at all. Their show was awful and we just ran into each

consistently under attack, and that's why we don't have as many artists as we might like. You can get trapped by your own philosophy, and we have been put under further pressure by the massive decline in the economy coupled with the devaluation of the pound."

"Touring Gallagher and Lyle in the States can now cost \$200,000 where it might have cost less than \$50,000 a few years ago."

Which brings up the subject of the British company's relationship with its parent in Los Angeles. Already, Green has mentioned his solid

approved for two and a half years by the audiences. It was like putting the material through a sieve, with only the good bits being left at the end."

Green says he gets involved in the total strategy of building an artist with the record company holding on to the overriding right to determine how to market, promote and sell the product and the artist retaining the final say about what goes into his record.

And signings have hardly come thick and fast in the last couple of years. Tarney and Spencer have just been contracted, and last year's sole

building a power base.

Now Green agrees it is time to beef up on talent, but although he has dabbled in the new wave (the infamous Sex Pistols signing) and thinks it is a strong movement, he is adamant that A&M will continue to go for outstanding talent from other areas of music, whose basis is strong songwriting ability.

"Last year was bland. I don't like disco music or that kind of sound at all, it is everything the new wave is accusing it of being. However, I don't think they have anything to replace it with."



other head on over it.

"I think Gerry Rafferty is in the top ten most talented people I have ever worked with, but he just didn't want to work it our way. I respected him for that — as long as he was true to what he was saying — and we gave him a release. He was an artist I would have stuck with for ever, but his attitude precluded that."

"Keeping the faith is OK as long as they are keeping the faith with you too, and are willing to meet the commercial world. That's an important thing for me. When I sign an act I say 'We are ready to go all the way with you' but I need those human promises right from the start. We are together and committed, and we sign a contract for a lot of years."

Green's long-term view of the industry is surprising, considering his background in the instant hit pop world, and yet he has a love of songs and a publishing expertise that goes deeper. It enables him to assess an artist via material and then follow through until the songs are hits. To achieve hit status within two years is comparatively swift for an A&M act.

Explained Green: "I can't understand the attitude of some record companies who decide they will make some records and see if they happen. I mean, what do they do for the rest of the day?"

"You have to help yourself in life, and what you have to do is actually prejudice the odds in your favour. I always try to make a strong contingency plan to cover failure. I always have to be with them, giving them things to do when they are not happening, things will ultimately pay off, instead of just letting them sit at home. Getting one hit is not enough, because we are working towards the second and third the whole time."

"The cost of doing this is

working basis with Jerry Moss, and he amplified this when he revealed that he spends almost three months in every year in the US.

"When we go into the States with one of our artists, the English company is picking up the bill and underwriting the promotional expenses," he said.

"The reverse happens when an artist like Nils Lofgren comes over here, because the American company firmly believes that Britain is a very important territory."

"It is an interesting fact that the only real speculative money in this business is coming from a Warner Brothers or an A&M. The Americans will always take a roll on the dice to hit big, which is what I really love about them."

The American connection has certainly helped A&M to stay in the black throughout three bleak economic years, but according to Green the British company has always made a profit since he has been involved.

Peter Frampton's breakthrough came via the combined management talents of Dee Anthony, Frampton's strong songs and close co-operation on either side of the Atlantic between the two companies.

"When Peter decided to leave *Humble Pie* it was a great shock to everybody, but Jerry thought he was fabulous and opted to continue with him. Peter worked on the road for two and a half years, making albums the whole time and refusing to give up."

"Some of the songs he had written in his early career were the ones that eventually gave him success on the live album. They had improved in the best possible way, with the audience acting as a sounding board instead of a producer or arranger sitting in an office."

"So the live album, which is like a greatest hits collection, has been

signed was Bryn Haworth, who has just been despatched to Nashville to record with Audie Ashworth."

Elkie Brooks came in a package with a producer, was allowed to make her first album the way she wanted, and has now hit with her second after working in New York with Leiber and Stoller.

Budgie, an over-exposed rock band, has been flown out to live in Toronto, where they are currently

"I'm not a record fan. I am really unexposed. I don't listen to other people's records or the radio and I don't watch tv unless the Test Match is on. If you went through the charts now I wouldn't know 90 per cent of the records."

"The one thing I never want to do as a singer is to cause a record to be made just because it sounds like the last record I heard that was a hit."

The A&M roster: progress report

Joe Cocker: *Mad Dogs And Englishmen* went silver — no hit singles. **Humble Pie:** Have disbanded. Peter Frampton still records as a solo artist, with great recent success. Steve Marriott is also a solo artist, although he records with Small Faces with another label. **Strawbs:** The band was dropped from A&M, although Rick Wakeman remained as a soloist and has made several big hits since releasing his *Six Wives of Henry VIII* state. **Stealers Wheel:** Disbanded and left the label. **Gallagher & Lyle:** Fourth album *The Last Cowboy* went silver. **Breakaway** went gold and latest *Love On The Airwaves* has made it to silver status. **I Wanna Stay With You, Heart On My Sleeve, Breakaway, and Every Little Teardrop** have all been hit singles. **Esperanto:** Disbanded. Andy Fairweather-Low; *La Booga Rooga* and *Be Bop'n Holla*, his second and third albums both went silver. **Reggae Time** from the first *Spider Living* album was a hit, as was *Wide*

Eyed and Legless, and Champagne Melody from the second LP. **Supertramp:** *Crime Of The Century* and *Crisis?* What *Crisis?* both went gold and *Even In The Quietest Moments* has just gone silver. **Dremer, from Crisis and Lady From Crisis** were hits. **Nitz:** Made three albums for A&M and are currently touring America. Yet to make an impact. **Chris De Burgh:** Has found success in Canada and South Africa. New album on the way, and two previous singles were near hits. **Budgie:** Heavy rock band now resident in Toronto and about to record a new record. **Joan Armatrading:** Her second album *Joan Armatrading* went gold. **Love And Affection** was a hit single. **Elkie Brooks:** After two albums with the label, *Rich Man's Woman* and *Two Days Away*, she has hit with *Pearl's A Singer* and hit with the current LP *Two Days Away*. **Hummingbird:** Studio band of good pedigree which has just finished its third album.

