



Gerry Lacoursiere, vice-president of A&M Records of Canada Ltd., has taken his Canadian operation from a small, middle of the road oriented label, grossing \$1 million to one of the leading independent labels heavily into the singles field covering every aspect of the music scene. He bowed the Canadian operation in October of 1971 with this year 1973 showing indications of being a \$4 million year.

Born in Sturgeon Falls, Ontario, Lacoursiere moved to Windsor at an early age, living under the shadow of the giant Detroit market, one that beckoned him in later years. He made his first move into the record business as a stock clerk with Decca Records, working out of Detroit. Being a part of the Detroit record scene, one of the major markets in North America, was almost a necessary baptismal for this "aggressive young Canadian". Lacoursiere was quick to pick up on American know-how, moving up into management and covering almost every major market in the U.S.

When A&M's Jerry Moss and Dave Hubert looked to Canada as a possible independent operation, their first choice to head up this company was Gerry Lacoursiere. After satisfying themselves that the Canadian market was ready for an independent operation Moss and Hubert gave the reins to Lacoursiere, leaving it entirely up to himself as to whether he should continue to operate under a distribution set-up or go it alone as an independent.

"When I first opened, I discovered the sales curve was downward. It was thought that perhaps too much was oriented at pushing merchandise out to the retail outlet rather than coming up with some kind of program to move it out of the stores. I spent the next three months travelling Canada, talking to various people, retailers, radio station personnel, rack jobbers and others - trying to find out who was doing what, and who was doing a good job. I also met with various company heads here in Toronto, talking to their field men to find out if their philosophies were the same at the bottom as they were at the top. A lot of times you'll talk to the head of a company and his philosophy is this . . . but when you talk to the local salesman and promotion man, it's one hundred and eighty degrees the other way."

What A&M artists were known to Canada at that time?

The only artists were Sergio Mendes, The

An interview with

GERRY LACOURSIERE

Interviewed by Walt Grealis

Baja Marimba Band and the Tijuana Brass. Claudine Longet also had some success. Probably the biggest name was Lucille Starr. At that time it was kind of a transitional period. A&M had gone through two years that were kind of quiet. After the Monterey thing A&M had gone out and signed a lot of groups, probably more than they could handle - fourteen or fifteen groups - too many acts. They couldn't really work them, so they sat back and analyzed the situation - like where are we going? Are we really gaining anything by going out and having so many groups? The answer was no. So at that point they started cutting down on the roster, trying to spend more time with each act and to regain the A&M philosophy they had originally - by going out with three or four different artists and doing a job with them and then adding as they could.

You really didn't have too much to go on when you opened in Canada?

Not really. Our first releases were a "Greatest Hits" of Herb Alpert and The Tijuana Brass, "Greatest Hits" of the Baja Marimba, "Greatest Hits" of The Sandpipers, "Greatest Hits" of Wes Montgomery, and a kind of put-on album, "Greatest Hits" of Phil Ochs, who we never had a hit with. That was our gangbuster release, you might say, and that was what we splashed into the Canadian market with.

Don't you think you were taking a big gamble at that time?

No, I thought we had everything to work with. I had seen the figures of another company, but I really had nothing to compare

it with. I thought, well here's a catalogue that's very tight and a name that's very well respected in the States. I didn't realize the lack of impact A&M had in Canada, I think because of the fact that a licensee is not interested in creating a label image, so everything was Tijuana Brass and Sergio Mendes - not A&M Records. They were promoting the artist - not the label.

So you were stuck with a downward sales curve of 7%. What was the goal you set for yourself?

Well, I sat down and looked at the financial figures from the previous year, the last year the licensee had it, and I made a projection which basically was almost doubling everything across the board. Usually when you open up you have your own people in a given area and you should do better because they are concentrating on one thing, whereas Quality, as good as they were as a licensee, had thirty or forty various labels to work on. But if we only had A&M, we could put out our thirteen albums a year and work them properly, and do a good promotion job.

What kind of staff did you pick up in the beginning?

One of the first people I hired was David Brodeur, who was a former promotion man in Quebec for Quality Records. He was one of the top people in the field. He didn't wait for a record to be a hit someplace else. If he believed in the product, he went out to prove his point. So, I thought if we could

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surround ourselves with that kind of personnel, which is my own belief as well, to make something happen, we could then roll our own ball.

The second person I hired was a bookkeeper, an inventory control girl and then a girl for the switchboard which, at that time, had two lines coming into the office. About six weeks later, Liam Mullan, who was again the type of personality I was looking for, was the next promotion person I hired. We were beginning to roll and it wasn't three months before we had the first record to be broken out of Canada. It wasn't a Canadian record, it was "Song Of Joy" by Miguel Rios. They said it couldn't be done, but we sold 85,000 singles, and since January of this year we have sold another 2,500, which makes it one of the most consistent items in our catalogue. That gave us a kind of an aggressive image, as far as the industry was concerned.

Was that a national or regional hit?

It was national. It started out of Toronto because of CFRB, CKFM, CKFH and CHUM-FM.

With that taste of success did it give you an idea for more expansion into the market?

No, it just kind of verified the belief that you have to have strong promotion. If you look and analyze our company today, you'll find that we have more promotion people than we have sales people. You don't need as many sales people to cover the market adequately because of the growth of the rack jobber.

The name of A&M's game then is promotion?

That's where it all starts. But we have to have good merchandise. When I was at Decca back in 1957-58, they used to have the philosophy that if we had a hit record, it would break out of one of their forty-three branches, but you can give me a hit record, and if it's never played, I don't care if you have sixty branches, you'll never know you have a hit record. You could have a million seller, but if it never gets played, forget it.

So your big thing has to be promotion. You need that hit single to create a saleable item. A Keith Hampshire or a Lorence Hud. From there your merchandising takes over. You put out a good album, you merchandise it properly, advertise and promote it properly, and if the album has it, you have a hit album. For example, a "Tapestry" that will sell over a quarter of a million in Canada.

Your entry into the Canadian content market was somewhat cautious. Did you have any bad feelings or misconceptions about the CRTC 30% ruling?

Definitely not.

How about with Canadian content itself?

Again - definitely not. I think every artist we have, has international potential; we try to build it. The first Hud album, we sold a little over 12,000 albums. It could have been a lot more - it could have been a lot less, but we gained momentum for the next album which is being recorded this month in Nashville. On this one we expect to see even more than that. The third one, the same thing, and we think that in the third or fourth year of the

contract with Hud, we'll be in the money. The same thing with Keith Hampshire, although with Hampshire we were very lucky the first time out. We had a hit single - a top five single. His second release became a number one hit. We were fortunate, but we're not counting on that kind of luck. We're trying to build an act completely.

Can you make money on a Canadian act?

No - not if you count on Canadian sales alone. That's why we are looking for the type of artist that we can sell to the world. If we have a hit internationally - that Canadian act more than pays for himself and gives us a profit that allows us to produce more recorded product.

The singles market is supposedly suffering. The U.S. singles market, according to latest figures is about 11% with Canada's singles sales now down to 7%. What's wrong with the market and is the racker to blame?

Well, I have to take issue with you over the singles market. We are still selling a hell of a lot of singles, when they're hits. Our policy with rackers is a 100% guarantee. We don't want to see a rack jobber or retailer left holding the bag. If we think we have a hit single, we'll ship and guarantee accordingly. We think that singles can still be sold in this country. Promotion, airplay and dealer/racker cooperation are the factors involved.

What would you classify as a good Canadian single sales figure?

Anything above 30,000 units.

You are releasing a good percentage of the progressive product (recorded). Do you think this will be the trend?

I don't see it as trend, the only trend in the past several years has been a lack of one.

What future do you see for acts like the Carpenters and others of that soft rock delivery?

Acts with the soft rock sound will always be around and those picking the right material will continue to sell well.

Do you see a Canadian act breaking into the world market?

Yes.

If you've got a talented Canadian act - you get his record played on the important stations and all of a sudden the act goes sour. What do you think is the problem?

Usually, it's the material that they are recording.

What's your candid opinion about managers and producers?

Producers have really progressed in the past two years but it is very hard to find a good manager; there are only a few.

A&M have been quite vocal in their criticism of the RPM charts. What, in your opinion would make a chart credible and acceptable to everyone across Canada?

A closer relationship of the chart number to the sales especially in the Top 50.

HO! HO! HO! Watch for it!
