

## Miles Copeland Explains I.R.S.' Philosophy

By SAMUEL GRAHAM

■ *If the prolonged industry slump has any positive after-effects, the most important of them may be that some record companies — long notorious for their profligate, wasteful approaches to doing business — may at last streamline their operations to a more practical size and scope. That, at least, is the view of Miles Copeland III, whose International Record Syndicate (I.R.S.), distributed by A&M, is an indication that the man practices what he preaches. In this week's Dialogue, the very contentious and self-assured (some would label him merely cocky) Copeland talks about his label: how it differs from most others, its conservative policies of artist development and finance, its artists (who include the Cramps, Wall of Voodoo, Suburban Lawns, Skafish, the all-girl Go-Go's, the infamous Dead Kennedys and others), its rise to success and its influence on others. If any company whose principal activity is purveying rock 'n' roll music can be said to be "important," then I.R.S. fits the bill — even if its acts, as the Wall Street Journal noted not long ago, "range from the deranged to the effete."*

**Record World:** In a recent magazine article about your label, you were quoted to the effect that I.R.S. has succeeded on its own terms. What is your measure of success?

**Miles Copeland:** Our measure of success is different from a major label's, initially; (but) at the end of the day, it will be the same. If we can make a record and put it out, and get attention for a group creatively, and if they can actually make some money out of it, so that they're living and are therefore a reasonable business, we've accomplished something for them. And if we (the label) can put out a record and make a return on it which covers the cost of making that record and promoting it, what we've accomplished is starting the group on their career without having made a loss for the record company; we may not have made much of a profit, but we have gotten the group to first base, which means we are then capable of taking them to second base, third base and then home.

Other labels will start off and spend money, and they will not succeed in getting a return and (then) drop the group. This happens in most cases; the average group gets signed and makes one record and gets dropped. From our standpoint, success is based on what we spend and what we get back. We think it takes at least three albums to make a group successful. They have to learn the workings of a studio, the workings of the business, they have to educate themselves. And the market has to learn about them; they have to build a following. We consider ourselves a very conservative record company, in that we gear ourselves to make money on every record, but we gear ourselves also so the groups make money on every record. We bring all our costs down to a point of reason. We try to make what we call a reasonable business deal, so we will get to second base and so on.

**RW:** Does that deal include minimal recording advances?

**Copeland:** In some cases. We don't have a particular rule we apply to any group. Every one is treated in a different way, and it (the deal) is determined by what the group wants to do, what they're capable of doing, and what we're capable of doing.

We've had a reputation of being a tight-fisted label, working on minimum figures. That isn't really our philosophy. Our philosophy is to spend when it's worthwhile, and spend a lot when it's worthwhile, but don't spend when it's not. We're not trying to impress people. I do not think it's impressive for a new band to spend \$150,000 making a record, and then sell 10,000 copies. The only people who are impressed by that are the recording studio that made the money and the lawyer that made the record deal.

**RW:** Has your philosophy ever caused you to lose a band to another label, do you think?

**Copeland:** We will not compete on the open market with five other companies; we won't get into bidding wars. If a group wants to go and sign with another company only because they're offering them more money, as far as we're concerned the group's a stupid group and we shouldn't be involved with them. With two of the latest signings that we had (the Go-Go's and Suburban Lawns), there were other companies offering more money than we offered, but the groups decided to come with us because we are more attuned to their music; they actually could talk to people in the company, and not just me but the press guys, the radio guys and everyone else. So here they're getting less money maybe, because we are a bit more conservative financially, but they're getting much more attention, and we think in the long run they're gonna sell more records and make a lot more money.

**RW:** You mention that a group needs three albums to really get itself together. Is that a timetable that can be realistically applied to every act?

**Copeland:** If we applied a timetable to (all of) our artists, we would be making a very great mistake. Take REO Speedwagon. If they had been given a timetable



of three albums, they never would have made this big album ("Hi Infidelity") they just made; same with Fleetwood Mac. By the same token, if the advances they've been taking out of the record company were \$1 million an album, they would never have been able to make the tenth album. So the philosophy that is applied to an REO Speedwagon is very similar to our philosophy, really. With the Go-Go's, it looks like their first record's going to be very successful. Other groups may take three albums or five albums. The secret is, if we can stick with a group, eventually we'll come through. The only time element we do have is our deals with the acts; each record is more expensive than the previous one, and if we ever get to a point with an artist where we have an advance so far in excess of what we think we can earn back, then, of course, we've run out of time.

**RW:** How do you suppose I.R.S.' outlook is affecting the way others are doing business?

**Copeland:** Because of labels like my label, people have discovered that there are other ways (of attaining success). I think that's healthy, because the more ways there are, you get more people being creative, and then you get a very healthy music business. The problem with the American music business has been that it had gotten fairly stagnant, where a wide range of artists were available to be signed but only a particular segment were being signed, because the perception of the record companies was that that's what's going to get played on the radio. Now they've discovered a whole new market — the club scene, the dance music scene and so on — so other groups are getting signed. That way the whole industry enriches itself.

**RW:** You've mentioned the Go-Go's a couple of times, and certainly they're happening much faster than any I.R.S. act has happened before. To my ears, that's due to their being more accessible than other label acts; and as a result, they've immediately received lots of airplay, which is the standard ingredient that leads to good sales. Will this have any effect on the types of acts you sign in the future?

**Copeland:** When I listen to a tape, I don't think, "Boy, I can just see the dollars." I think, "That's a good record, and I'd like to be associated with that." I'm putting out records that I like; I actually play my records, and I can sing you all the songs. Most A&R people today can't, because they've got to prove themselves to the accountant who happens to run the company. Now, the Go-Go's are good for us. I'd say that the I.R.S. is probably the most looked-at label in the country, but we're looked at by people who say, "Boy, I really like what

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those guys are doing," but they're not willing to copy us yet because they're not sure there's any real money in it. When the Go-Go's explode and sell half a million records on their first album, they're gonna say, "Wow, this guy is really on to something," and we will have shown what we've always believed: there is a very large market in our music, and some of these groups will rise to be successful by anybody's criteria. Some of the acts do not want to bend what they're doing to be ready to play on every AM radio station across the country. The Go-Go's haven't bent any of what they're doing, either; it just so happens that for today, their music fits. Five years from now, with one of the other groups that today we think is a bit obscure, there may be so many radio stations that are playing that kind of music that they will be very acceptable right off.

**RW:** So you honestly think that groups like the Cramps or Wall of Voodoo, who right now are demonstrably less accessible or commercial than the Police or the Go-Go's, can catch on to the extent that those two have?

**Copeland:** I think the Cramps could be another Kiss. And Wall of Voodoo will be in the top ten major acts of this country; I think they're the most impressive, intellectually stimulating act in the United States today, and I have no doubt — I'll put my reputation on it — that Wall of Voodoo will be one of the biggest acts in this country.

A lot of the success of an act depends very much on what the act wants. As long as we can make money from an act, and they can make a living from it, I don't really care if they never sell millions. If I was in it just to make money, I don't think we'd be a very good label. I don't think most labels are in it just to make money — I think people do enjoy music. Even the CBS's of this world, I mean, there's still some enjoyment in there. I cannot stand here and say that the Cramps in the next album will sell a million records; I believe the potential for them to do it is always there, but it may take a little time. The Stray Cats in England are playing a sort of rockabilly music, very influenced by the Cramps, and have just had a couple of top-ten singles. The Cramps do it, too; and maybe as they get more successful their sound does change slightly, because they mature more, and maybe the perception that the audience has of that sort of group changes as well — you know, they're not so weird after all. But the Cramps don't come in and need \$250,000 to make their albums; they can make them on a much lower budget, they have a lot of fans, and they make good money on the road.

**RW:** The Cramps are very big in France, you've said, and you have other acts that do well abroad. But isn't America still regarded as the ultimate market to conquer?

**Copeland:** Well, I think Americans tend to be over-insular and think that this is the big market. I don't personally think this is the big market anymore. I can make double the money in Europe, with less sales, than I can in America. Publishing here is a joke, the record prices are Mickey Mouse low — people talk about how high the record prices are, but (you should) go to Europe. We make double on a record sale in Germany than we do here, and we make money faster. We don't have all these return policies, and these reserves, and all this crap (abroad). America may be a big record market, but Europe is where the money is. Look at ABBA: that's the richest group there is, and they don't need America. They can sell 500,000 albums in Mexico.

**RW:** In an April issue of the Wall Street Journal, an article about your label described I.R.S. as a sort of farm team, developing bands until they had enough of a following to get to "the big leagues." Do you still regard yourselves that way?

**Copeland:** No. When we started out we were looked upon as a farm team, because we weren't financed. And when we had an act that required a very large amount of money beyond our reach, like Oingo Boingo — they have eight or nine people in the group, they had lots of debts and they really needed an injection of cash — I then had to go to A&M and say, "Look, this is an important group, they require far beyond what I can be involved with, would you be interested in helping me?" Well obviously, if I'm going to Jerry Moss for his money, I have to give something — so I put them on his label. Now at the moment, we happen to be doing very well, and we don't foresee that happening again. The Go-Go's want to be on I.R.S.; they do not want to be on any other label. Same goes for every one of our other acts. In the beginning, yeah, we were looked upon as a farm team, but now everyone looks at I.R.S. as a legit, real label. I can judge the success of I.R.S. when I can see that I can take acts away from major labels and offer them less. That means I can compete on a stronger basis than a major can. I mean, (David) Geffen can sign anybody, because he's got millions of dollars behind him. I don't find that challenging; I find that exceedingly boring. Our label gets acts because we are good, and we don't just bring out the old checkbook and say, "Right."

**RW:** Suppose one of your acts breaks earlier than you expect it to, now that you're more than a farm team. Isn't there then a tendency to rush things, say, to put out the next album sooner than might be practical?

**Copeland:** I hope not. I've been burned enough times, and I've seen the lack of wisdom in trying for too much too soon. I'm always preaching caution. Take, for example, a label like Infinity Records — a glaring example of how to blow a record situation. They spent a fortune — full-page ads in the trades, week after week after week, until everybody knew, "Yeah, Infinity exists." A year later, they're bankrupt, and they started having hit records then. If they'd taken it a little easier, and started spending a year later, they would have been a successful label. What is it, some big ego trip to have everybody in the business know that

you've got Infinity Records? Bullshit! I'll wait for the ego trip of having a hit act. Those full-page ads may be a great jerk-off for the moment, but what about a year down the line? And what about your acts? When people sign with me, I have a responsibility to those people; I'm taking people's lives in my hands. It means that I sometimes have to tell them things they don't want to hear — and I'm real honest with the groups — but at the end of the day, hopefully they'll respect my opinion.

It's very easy in this business to let success go to your head. You see it every day: a guy gets successful, he turns into a raving idiot, and the next day he's out of business and wondering what happened. That isn't going to happen to my acts.

**RW:** How important is touring for your acts?

**Copeland:** We put a lot of effort into tours. That's one area that other record companies are backing off of but we're increasing. We're lucky that I have my brother (Ian Copeland of Frontier Booking International) as an agent; I know more about what's going on in the field of booking than any other executive at a record company, because my brother runs the biggest agency involved in the new music, so I can see what the market value of an act is, how effective the tours can be.

**RW:** Are most of your tours label-supported?

**Copeland:** Yes and no. They are supported by backing up, making sure there are time buys in the marketplace. We've even had to get into ticket buys, much to my regret. Traveling expenses for the bands themselves — yes, in some instances; when it seems to make sense, we'll support the group. Most of our tours make money, and the groups make money that way; we don't like tour support in principle, but we set ourselves up so that we have the tours but we don't have the tour support. If we had to deal like a major label, and every act that went on the road we had to give 'em \$50,000, we'd be pretty much against tours, too. But because we're smart enough, we don't need tour support. We've been a bit more careful about it, and our acts are a bit smarter than the other groups. The Go-Go's, on their current tour, will be making enough to cover the tour.

**RW:** You've been pretty critical of rock radio for some time; what would you do to make it better?

**Copeland:** I'm very gratified that KROQ (Los Angeles) and various other stations intersperse new wave stuff with old wave stuff, telling themselves that this gives exposure — all the heavy metal kids will be able to hear the Dead Kennedys while they're listening to REO Speedwagon or whatever it is. That's all very well, but I'm a firm believer that if you took a station in New York City that had a zero rating, and that station programmed 100 percent new wave — anything from the Police to the Dead Kennedys, and everything in between — in a sensible format, the station would immediately jump to a .1 or whatever; a year later it'd be a .2, a year later .3, and so on. Once that happens, radio will look upon "new wave" as a format, instead of trying to incorporate our music into other music. We have to show that we have a viable format; we're not given much of an opportunity to try it out, that's the problem. If we could get one station — and it has to be a station at the bottom — to go 100 percent new wave, they will get 100 percent, or at least 80 percent, of the new wave audience, which has to be substantial. And if they're clever enough, pull in advertisers to keep the station going, they will eventually build a market for themselves.

## Karla DeVito To ASCAP

■ NEW YORK—Epic recording artist Karla DeVito, whose debut solo album, "Is This A Cool World Or What?," ships next week, has become a member of the American Society of Composers Authors and Publishers

(ASCAP). DeVito, who has just completed a four month stint in a lead role in "Pirates of Penzance" on Broadway, wrote or co-wrote half the songs on her new album and is currently writing a rock opera based on one of the album tracks, "Bloody Bess."

## Ullanda Plays the Savoy



Atlantic recording artist Ullanda recently made her first concert appearance at the Savoy, in New York City. The vocalist's debut album for the label, "Ullanda McCullough," was released this past March. Shown at The Savoy in New York are, from left: Record Logic president Tom Cossie, Atlantic local promotion rep Clarence Bullard, Ullanda, Ullanda's manager Maye James, and Atlantic/Cotillion A&R director of R&B product, Bill Cureton.