A & M
Making Music

Peter Herring talks to Mike Todd about A&M's UK operation

A & M is something of an aristocrat among record labels. Although no major, it has an enviable record in spotting and nurturing talented artists both sides of the Atlantic. The result, after some 25 years in the business, is an impressive roster of names and consistent success in both album and singles charts.

If A&M has an overriding philosophy, explains head of production, Mike Todd, it is that, "We're very much a music company: that's why it was started and that's why it continues to exist."

The label was founded by musicians — in the proverbial garage, it's said — in the summer of 1962 by trumpeter Herb Alpert and his colleague Jerry Moss (the 'A' and 'M'). Essentially a vehicle for Alpert and his Tijuana Brass, it soon expanded from that limited base, becoming one of the first US labels to recognise and cultivate British talent. It signed, among others, Status Quo, Nazareth, Peter Frampton, Humble Pie, Joe Cocker and 'electric folkies' Fairport Convention. Such was the UK commitment that a subsidiary was established in London in 1972, primarily as a talent base. Artists taken on in the UK would ultimately be signed worldwide, and in the Seventies came Supertramp, The Strawbs, Rick Wakeman (his solo spell) and a brilliant singer-songwriter from Birmingham called Joan Armatrading.

At the same time, the US operation had scooped the pool with a clean-cut brother and sister duo called The Carpenters. It was during this burgeoning period in the label's history that Mike Todd joined the production team. He reflects that the one band which, although enjoying UK success, didn't make it in the States was Stealer's Wheel, but goes on to point out the global success of the Police.

"The UK is still very much a talent base," he confirms. "Look at Black: he broke in the

UK in 1987, then Europe and is expanding. We've broken American acts here before they've made it in the US — Suzanne Vega is a prime example. Now Brenda Russell is breaking in the US and here."

He cites Brenda Russell as evidence of the way A&M, always more of an album-oriented company than a singles-based one, stands by its artists: her first album was released as long ago as 1980-1. Then there was Chris de Burgh who took 12 years to break into the singles charts, despite a run of high-selling LP's.

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Todd adds: "A&M was one of the first labels to look at artists in the long-term and we still stick to that philosophy. We don't believe in short-term signings."

Smiling, he goes on to comment, "The fact that we have to have records manufactured is secondary. Manufacture is an evil necessity!"

However, as any student of record quality would affirm, whatever the type of music, the one thing A&M releases have had in common over the years has been a consistently high standard of production, mastering and manufacture, in whatever format. It's only necessary to recall Glyn Johns' work with Joan Armatrading, or the state of the art Supertramp productions as irrefutable evidence of the high standards in the initial production stages.

I asked Todd how that was carried over into the manufacturing side; and if performers such as these, who obviously took a lot of trouble over the recorded sound, were concerned with quality after the master had left the recording studio?

"All of A&M's artists — and most recording artists for that matter — take a great deal of pride in the finished sound. Our philosophy is that the finished product will be the best possible, and we go to a lot of trouble to get that, whatever the sound carrier. Otherwise we would be letting our artists down. A&M set the quality standards."

As with its artists, A&M likes a long-term stability with its suppliers: a manufacturing and distribution deal with Polygram is about to be re-signed. Polygram's manufacturing commitment is to supply A&M with its vinyl

RECORD COMPANY VIEWPOINT

Cassette singles

product and, since the recent closure of Phonogram's UK pressing plant at Walthamstow that's meant sub-contracting to EMI. Could that be problematical, I asked?

"As far as we're concerned," replied Todd, "our manufacturing is with Polygram. Where they source it from is up to them. Providing they can meet the standards we require, we're happy to go along with that."

But with so much vinyl manufacture now being concentrated at EMI . . .

"It's up to Polygram to ensure that the quality of pressings meets both their standards and A&M's. It's as simple as that."

Cassette and CDs are both sourced independently. MCs come from Ablex, on BASF chrome. "And," he adds, "we've no reason to change at the moment. There are various arguments about higher quality ferric tape, but for the time being we're continuing with chrome."

That prompted me to ask if the switch to EMI for vinyl also meant a change to DMM mastering. As the move to EMI had been so recent, it was a question Todd couldn't answer fully — discussions were still going on. The theory, he thought, was fine, not only technically but in terms of time-saving during the making of the metal parts.

"But we can't blithely go on to DMM. We need to see what happens in practice. DMM-mastered records can give tracking problems to some of the midi-system turntables that are on the market and we must consider that. DMM is not a cure-all, but if an artist requests it, we'll use it."

The majority of A&M's compact discs are still sourced at Nimbus, with whom the label has built up a good relationship since moving into the format. However, some orders were now being placed with Disctronics in Southwater, Sussex and with the PDO plant in Blackburn, Lancashire.

"We get good back-up from Nimbus," emphasises Todd, "and they will remain our majority supplier."

The reason for 'spreading the load' a little, he argues, is simply a matter of not wanting to put all of A&M's eggs into one basket. Pricing played a part, but a degree of diversity was the principal motivation.

"We use manufacturers that meet our requirements in all respects — quality, supply and reliability. There's no more to be said. We want the best and we always strive for that."

Current manufacturing percentages on the three formats tended to vary with the type of music. CD could be as high as 15%, cassette 50 to 55%, yet vinyl was still commanding up to a 45% share.

"Vinyl," explains Todd, "in terms of albums, is very resilient. There are still many record players around. People have a lot of records and they're generally conservative about changing. They also like the 12-by-12 package.

"I don't think CD will necessarily displace cassette. There's an extremely high penetration of cassette hardware and the penetration of CD hardware particularly in-car, is nowhere near the level it should be."

"Nevertheless, albums are slowly declining, if a lot slower than singles. We don't forecast when A&M will cease producing vinyl albums. We'll stop when it reaches the point where we consider it to be uneconomical. But at the moment it's still quite economic."

He accepts, though, that CD will succeed vinyl in the long-term and, because of that, the new carrier was already very important to A&M. But he goes on to say: "I don't think CD will necessarily displace cassette. There's an extremely high penetration of cassette hardware and the penetration of CD hardware, particularly in-car, is nowhere near the level it should be.

"CD will have its niche and so will cassette." And Todd echoes many others in the record industry by adding, "That infamous *'Sunday Times'* article did a lot of damage, you know."

CD's take-off these past three years, he believes, has been very successful compared to that for video at the same stage in its development.

Did he feel any loyalty to vinyl? Whereas some labels with a history of execrable pressing would no doubt be delighted to get rid of the system. A&M were held in high repute by record buyers who might hope the flow of vinyl would continue.

"A&M manufacture sound carriers which are the most suitable. We don't lead, nor do we knock a trend and, yes, the trend is that people are still buying vinyl. If people want music on vinyl, who are we to say they can't have it? We are not the kind of specialist label who can afford to ditch vinyl — the classical companies whose take-up on CD has been far higher than pop or M-O-R. If enough people want vinyl, we'll supply it — and it'll be the best quality vinyl."

Getting the right response to such trends, and getting it quickly, was the motivation behind the move of A&M's previously divided production department, some 4-5 years ago, into the label's headquarters building in London's New King's Road. They wanted the closest possible liaison between production and sales departments, a relationship Todd feels is still fairly rare in the industry.

"It was a logical step; we wanted to get rid of that 'them-and-us' attitude. I and my staff work very closely with the sales director in terms of initial manufacturing requirements. The reasoning is that, because we both work in the same office, information in terms of proposed campaigns from retailers and so forth, and information from the production side is immediate. Both sides know about it straightaway, and I think that's relatively unusual."

Meetings are kept to a minimum: there's an informal one every morning to go over the 'hot list' — the current best-selling albums and singles — and to look at stock levels and sales information from wholesalers. Instantaneous decisions are based on that.

"It's the advantage of being a small company," argues Todd. "We don't pretend to be a major. If we have a problem, we pick up a phone and discuss it."

What sort of problems did he get from his suppliers?

"Occasionally you hear of a poor quality pressing. If an artist — anyone for that matter — expresses dissatisfaction, we'll take it up. But Polygram do random checks for us both at the pressing and distribution stages, and we have our own procedures here. So there are three stages of checks. If a rogue pressing gets out, we do an immediate batch check and try to trace the source of the problem."

At A&M, all promotional samples are checked, as are any replacement 'promo'

copies supplied. Adds Todd:

"We insist on test cassette samples, too, before they go into manufacture. It's just to make sure the sound — given the limitations of both mediums — is as near equal to the vinyl as possible."

With vinyl, there was the occasional warpage, but, "You have to keep it in proportion, given the volume actually manufactured of any item. You may get 10 or 25 that are warped, in which case we immediately call Polygram and they will do a check. We like to have double-checks all through the system, particularly with vinyl."

Thanks to the procedure of not only listening to test MCs, but pre-production samples as well, the number of cassette failures is few and far between. CD rejects were even fewer.

I mentioned to Mike Todd that just about every record company production manager we'd spoken to had loudly cursed the CD jewel box packaging as unworthy of the product. Todd, though, was more circumspect:

"The reality you have to face with the packaging on compact discs is that the jewel box is here to stay. It's rather like the cassette library case: everyone can pick holes in it. It's been around since 1965: the Americans have tried to change it; we've tried to change it. There was a brilliant system from, I think, BASF called the 'C-Box': spring-loaded, clipped together beautifully, but it was too expensive and too late.

"The fact is that the jewel box in all its present forms — conventional and slimline — is here to stay, simply because mass-production makes it relatively economical. Any successor would have to overcome that barrier. You're talking about new packaging machinery at the manufacturing plants, new racking in the shops. To make that sort of change, you'd have to make a huge financial commitment.

There have been a lot of ideas to improve on the jewel box, but as yet nothing concrete has come anywhere near challenging it."

On the printing side of the 'packaging' operation, A&M source and supply their own paper parts. Suppliers include CMCS and Sleeveprint, with record labels from Hannibal's and TRL, and cassette inlays from the latter, too. CD booklets come from Ecran, with whom A&M have had a long working history.

"Our printing has to be spread around, explains Todd. "You can give your printer too many reprint jobs, too many new releases, and suddenly he's only got so much capacity. So we spread the load. Then, if an item takes off, if it becomes chart material, we can go to someone who's well able to cope."

Could he rely on getting the right response to sudden 'take-off' from all his suppliers?

"There are constraints on the manufacturing side. In the record industry, the take-up on initial orders is probably one of the fastest there is. We — and they — have

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to react on a Monday to a chart position. They also have to take these sort of things into account, but our relationship with our suppliers is very much based on mutual trust, plus some give and take. If there's a problem, we sit and talk it out with them."

On the subject of on-time deliveries, he simply adds:

"Our suppliers are our suppliers because they meet our deadlines. We tend to stay with them for a long time because we build up a long-term relationship with them. They get to know the way we deal, and if they don't meet our requirements, then they're no longer an accredited A&M supplier.

"They have to be responsive to our urgent requirements: that applies to any record company. If they fail to deliver for any period of time, then inevitably we'll have to look at the position.

"When we sign a manufacturing and distribution deal, we rely on that company to produce product to the highest quality possible. We tell them of any lapses, but by-and-large we don't have major problems."

Apart from the day-to-day production role, it is also Mike Todd's job to keep an eye on future trends, although — again emphasising A&M's function as a music company — he comments:

"We are not necessarily innovators. We will go with the sound carrier that meets the public demand. That might seem a very blithe, catch-all phrase, but it sums it all up. If, in 20 or 25 years time, we are still producing music, then it will be on the relevant sound carrier, be it CD, MC, CD-Video, or even DAT."

How important were the last two formats to A&M now?

"From my point-of-view, I await CDV with interest. Should it take off, should the demand be there, we'll meet it.

"But before we dive into CDV, we really have to make sure that we're committing in the right way. If CDV is to take off, then it has to be with the concensus of the whole industry. And there has to be an industry back-up for it — that also goes for the hardware. There has to be promotion and consumer acceptance.

"But, at the moment, the industry is confused and the public know very little about the system."

He counters any suggestion that Polygram might put pressure on A&M to dive into CDV, adding:

"Our philosophy is that when we're ready to go into CDV, we will approach them and not before then. If we're not ready, there's no point in them coming to us.

"I think we have to wait until CDV is launched and the hardware is in the shops to support it. Then the industry can look at CDV and start making plans."

And on DAT, Todd is also prepared to wait until the opposing factions resolve their well-publicised differences. He confirms that A&M have yet to conduct any trials with the medium.

However, of considerable current interest to the label is the CD single — and the cassette single. Todd believes the former is now ". . . at the crossroads".

He elaborates: "You have the 5 inch single and you have the 3 inch, and if you look at the way the pendulum is swinging, a concerted effort is being made to promote the 3 inch CD single. Philips — not unnaturally — want the 5 inch to succeed and we're watching developments very closely. We did a 'flyer' when we test-marketed a 3 inch in October of last year — the Sting single — and it was very successful.

"The hurdle to be overcome is making sure the adaptor is readily available. It isn't so far, but Sony are putting quite a bit of push behind it. We haven't released any further 3 inch singles; they've all been 5 inch, and we don't have any problems selling them.

"But the real test is yet to come: CD singles aren't exactly a novelty now, but at the same time there isn't the same pressure on them as there is on the 7 inch single, whose demise I think we are witnessing for all sorts of reasons."

Todd believes the proliferation of 7 and 12 inch singles, remixes and, now, CD singles is too confusing. A process of natural selection is taking place and eventually the 7 inch will die, although he wouldn't like to estimate when:

"It's slowing down considerably, but there are a lot of other factors to be taken into consideration. The CD single is an alternative, but then so may be the cassette single, which is beginning to gain ground in America."

He adds, darkly, "Possibly another effort will be made to launch it in the UK."

Considering the packaging and the 'clockworks' involved, could the cassette single really be viable, given the price that would have to be charged?

"You have to look at it in its own right. It's not merely a question of putting a C-0 in a conventional library case — I think that was the first mistake everybody made. You have to make the cassette single *look* like a single, and I think we actually managed that.

"If you're looking for an alternative to replace the 7 inch, what has the highest penetration of household in Britain? Cassette players.

"In general, we look at all the new ideas on the market, and when we see there is sufficient take-up, then we'll respond to them. It's my job to make sure we've the suppliers who can deal with the demands we place on them. Whatever the sound carriers, A&M's intention is to carry on as we have over the past 25 years, releasing what we consider to be good music. That's what's given us our pedigree, and that's the reason why we continue to operate and succeed." ■