

Chapter 6

“Now I am a Pro!”

“You Make Me Feel Brand New”

There was one night I spent with Thom and Don (I think Linda was there too) working on a Stylistics song that was worth relating. That night Thom wanted to re-record a few words on the lead vocals of one song and then mix it. There we were all set up for a vocal overdub and in walked both of the lead singers from the Stylistics, Russell B. Thompson Jr. and Airrion Love whom I had seen earlier that month doing vocals on other songs. This song needed a line or two replaced on each of their parts as Thom thought that it could be sung more in pitch. So Airrion went first. It was a lesson in consistency and professionalism in that Don could in a very short time get the microphone, the board gain structure and the limiter/compressor that we regularly used on lead vocals set right back to where it was a week ago or so when they originally recorded the vocals. Airrion was able to sound exactly like he did a week earlier and Thom got him to re-sing his part. Don re-recorded only the specific lines in the verses by punching in just those words and not erasing the rest of the performance. This was commonplace. We did that all the time yet I was impressed with Don's ability to get it right back to where it was so quickly. He was able to do that I was told later because he always used the same type of mic and the same limiter set almost exactly the same way all the time. That was a good lesson.

However the next thing that happened was really impressive. Russell had been walking around drinking tea and had been taking cold medicine because he was suffering from a bad head cold. I thought, “Ok just how do you get around this?” He had a bad head cold! His voice could never sound like normal, without a cold could it? I looked at Don as if to say, “Show me the magic”. I was asking, “Ok big shot engineer how do make a sick singer not sound sick anymore?” He just smiled as Russell went out to the mic and started singing along. As we always did in such cases he told Russell to sing whether he heard himself or the tape playing back as Don was going to be switching back and forth between the two. They did that and there was the voice with the sinuses all stuffed and the next second the original recording. When Don was sure that the gain structure and the compression matched he turned on the mid range frequency of the equalizer and boosted a lot of extra mid range. Then he selected the associated knob that selected which mid range frequency. He dialed back and forth across the range of frequencies it could affect and he settled on the one that emphasized the very sound of the nasal stuffiness the most. Once he selected that frequency he turned the dial that was boosting that sound and rolled it back until it no longer over accentuated that tone but instead very accurately reduced that very nasal sound until the match between the tape and the new live vocal were almost imperceptible. Russell re-sang the few phrases Thom wanted redone and when he was finished he said, “I hope you don’t mind me not sticking around I simply want to go home to bed”, which he did.

The song in question was last big Stylistics hit that Thom produced of that early string, he did do a song or two for them when they signed with PIR some 10 years later that I recorded with Thom. The song we were doing that night however was maybe my

favorite Thom Bell & Linda Creed classic, “You Make Feel Brand New”. I defy you to listen to it and tell which words were re-sung by either lead singer. I was there and I can’t tell.

That night was not yet finished with lessons for me. After Russell left and Linda too I think, Thom said “Ok, let’s mix it.” So now I was about to be part of mixing what I have often referred to as “a song even a deaf person could recognize as a hit”. As Don got to work he got sounds on Earl Young’s drums and Ronnie Baker’s bass guitar and as he was balancing the grand piano and Fender Rhodes electric pianos he was switching one on and then the other and then both to hear how they were laying in the track and with each other. Suddenly Thom said, “wait a minute, I like that”. He went on later in the final version to mute the grand at the downbeat of the 1st verse and had Don ride the Rhodes up. If you know the song, you know how well that worked in the final version. Thom had actually played both pianos through the whole song. That rearranging of the track, not even considered until just before the final version that we all have heard now many, many times, was made at the last minute. It was fascinating to watch them work together. As we worked more on it Don had arranged the console so that the faders controlling the strings and horns were on the left near the producer’s chair that Thom “rode”. The rhythm tracks were in the middle of the console that Don rode and muted as just described for example and all the vocal tracks, both leads and the background track of the Stylistics themselves and the background tracks of Carla, Barbara and Yvette, the three women who graced almost ever Philly record made from “Me and Mrs. Jones” (the first time Gamble used them) until many years later when Barbara passed away.

So there I am riding the vocals of “You Make Me Feel Brand New” with Thom Bell and Don Murray making the final version of what as I have said was very apparently their next big hit. That was thrill in itself. But what happen next is of interest in that after many passes of the song rehearsing the many mutes and rides of the 16 different faders (no computer existed in a recording studio yet) we were ready to record the mix. I had previously set up and aligned the stereo and mono ¼ inch tape recorders that we mixed down to and they were ready to go. Thom said, “Let’s try one”. We ran through it and “printed” or recorded a few versions. Some takes would have a mistake in it and we would stop and simply start another leaving that incomplete take on the ¼“ reels and doing the next take. After each complete one we would sometimes listen to it or Thom would immediately say “Let’s do another one now” and record another one we would. At a certain point as with every mix you do all the things you wanted to do and you think you might have it just as you want the final version to be, so the producer plays it back and listens as critically as perhaps they ever do and decides if it is finished. In the case of Thom he would make that final call after first listening in the large control room speakers but then he would say “Reds, (that was my nickname from him, he gave everyone a nickname) roll back that take on the mono and let me hear it in the radio.” In every Sigma control room there was a tabletop radio with a single little 6” speaker in it. The room was wired to be able to listen through it for just that reason. This way the producer had a good idea how it would sound to the general public when they heard it for the very first time in their car or on an AM radio in their home, as I had first heard some of the Sound of Philadelphia records at work. I rolled it back switched to the radio and Thom sat as transfixed as he got, no one spoke at all. And he would listen all the way through and

after that last final intense scrutiny he said “Ok Reds, leader it up.’ That meant it was finished.

Well that was my cue to go over to the two 1/4 “ tape recorders and slice a length of white paper leader tape into the reel at the very beginning of the song and just after the final sound of the fade in order to separate out that one and only final take from all the rest so we could insert it in the album with all the other “A” takes later. That was how we knew which takes to assemble that would become the phonograph records, either the single on a disc cut and manufactured on a 45 RPM format with another song on the back or as part of the album with 4 or 5 songs on each side made to play at 33 & 1/3 RPM. This was Standard Operating Procedure. I had been trained and had done it before. However, I stepped up to the machine, rewound the stereo tape to the beginning of that last take and rocked the tape back and forth across the heads between the word “Three” spoken by Thom as he counted off the band to play the song and the next sound which was the downbeat of the first note of the introduction. Once you had determined this spot on the tape you marked it on the tape backing with a white grease pencil and lifted the tape out of the machine and placed it in an editing block over some 1/4” leader tape. Then you took a razor blade, that you had to be sure was not accidentally magnetized, and cut the tape and leader at the same time at the proper angle and then sliced the other end of the few feet of leader tape so its angle matched the tape of song too. Then you placed adhesive tape over the splices having inserted leader both in front of, and then, after repeating the process, behind the master take. If you cut in the wrong place or if the blade somehow had become magnetized or if you did anything wrong at all with this process you could essentially ruin the master. I stopped for a moment with the one and only copy

of the final one and only mix in existence (it had not been duplicated even once yet) of what was surely going to be at least a 1 million copy selling record laying in my hand. I stop thought about how that little piece of tape was worth: literally millions of dollars and I was about to cut it with a razor blade. There were no computer recalls or instant saving of data or similar protection of product at the time. In fact, there was not even a copy of it yet. I took a deep breath and I did it. Saying to my self in my head, "Well, Jim, today you are a professional." I remember it as if it were today, to me it was, at that moment, a rite of passage if you will, that took me from a wide eyed young man who was a fan of the music to a well trained, competent professional grateful for his new lot in life.