

## MARION ROEHL RECORDINGS - Some Reflections - Harvey Roehl

In 1980, when The Vestal Press was still going strong, Marion and I decided to have another sideline business of making recordings of some of our mechanical music machines. This was done completely independently of The Vestal Press, with the required capital coming from our own pockets. Why did we call it Marion Roehl Recordings? I don't know; we could have called it Osopeachy Productions or something cutesy like that, or maybe it was plain vanity. But that's what we did.

From the beginning, we decided to produce what we thought could be sold to the general public, and not necessarily to the hobbyists. Only by so doing would we be able to generate any volume of business, and we knew that that volume would have to come from the gift-shop and souvenir shop trade. We also knew that to meet the requirements of this trade, good artwork for the covers of the products was vital, so we paid plenty of money over the years for this. What do I mean by good artwork? I mean that whatever is on the cover that might catch the glimpse of the casual stroller down the aisle of a gift shop must instantly tell what the products is about, hopefully to the extent that he or she will be sufficiently attracted at least to walk over, pick it up and look at it.

We soon learned that the first thing this casual "looker" does is examine the tune list. If well-known titles aren't there, it goes right back on the rack! Never mind that some really terrific musical arrangements are present; if the prospect has never heard of the tune(s) chances are the gift shop or souvenir stand has lost a sale. The hobbyists don't care -- if word gets around that such-and-such a CD or cassette has some terrific stuff on it, they're going to buy it.

Hearing is believing. We became members of the Carnie's organization in order to be able to have a booth at their trade show, held each year in February in Gibsonton, Florida. We made sure we had simple equipment that would permit prospect-listening with a cheap headset, and this is the key. Listen to these and other recordings with a headset and you think you're in a studio! It was always fun to watch folk's expressions. More often than not, an "I'll believe it when I hear it" look on a person's face turned to a big smile and they'd suggest hubby or wife listen, too, and then the sale was made. A SONY Walkman and a headset work wonders. A "boom box" couldn't work that way. With its tiny speakers the impression can never be the same, and the folks in the neighboring booths wouldn't tolerate it for long, either.

Of course carnivals were never the source of much wholesale business; their stock in trade is cheap schlock. But the carnival managers and owners bought from us for their personal use, and every year many "regulars" would stop at our booth and ask "what's new?" Besides, it gave us an excuse to have a nice Florida trip each February when we desperately needed a couple of weeks of sunshine!

As for markets, we never did anything with recordings of reproducing pianos, on the theory that to the general public, the finest example of perfect reenactment of any artist is just so much more piano music. A market that took us by surprise were sales to the amateur clowns. When we brought out our recordings of calliope music, we figured that circus fans would be the source of great sales. It turned out that this never amounted to much, but sales to the amateur clowns were terrific. How come? There are a huge number of folks involved in amateur clowning for kid's parties, and they all want background music. There's a high-quality fancy magazine, *Laugh Makers*, devoted exclusively to amateur clowning. There are a number of catalog outfits that do nothing but supply this market, and once we got into one or two of these catalogs, the rest of them followed suit. A

smaller spin-off of this was magicians, who often want background music for what they do and some of our stuff seemed to appeal. Several catalog outfits cater to both groups. This leads to copyright matters. When we first started doing recordings, we didn't pay much attention to copyrights—but it was soon obvious that now that our materials were getting "out there" in some volume we'd better make sure we paid applicable royalties. What we

secured was the right to sell the product, and this in turn gave the buyer the rights to use the CD or cassette for personal, private use.

As far as was reasonably possible, we tried to use public domain material, and in the case of the amateur clown market this turned out to be important. What our royalty payments did not do, and over which we had no control anyway, was the right for the buyer to use the recordings for commercial purposes. About the last thing a lady doing amateur clowning for kid's parties needs is to be hassled by ASCAP for using copyrighted materials without paying a fee for so doing! So we made sure



Figure 1. A sampling of the CDs and cassette tapes produced by Marion Roehl Recordings.

our “Clown and Calliope” materials and most of the carousel music recordings were strictly public domain, and clearly labeled as such. This turned out to be a great sales help. Of course the flip side is that tunes most likely to be known by the public may not be available, but for party background music this isn't a factor.

On the other hand, a product like “Christmas Carousel Music” almost has to have tunes like *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* and *White Christmas* for which royalties are applicable. Without these one is stuck with mainly hymn-type material. And by the way, for those readers who are familiar with the product line, when Wayne Holton arranged *Ave Maria* for the Wurlitzer 150 carousel organ roll, I couldn't help but wonder if we'd aggravate the Romans amongst us! Turns out it was done so beautifully that we got tons of positive feedback on the selection, from everywhere.

I enjoy saying that I never owned a microphone. We could have invested in recording equipment and learned how to use it properly, but we elected to bring in professional recording persons to do that work. We'd get the instrument all ready, have our music all set to go, and then let a properly qualified person “do his thing.” This way we always had the benefit of “state of the art” knowledge and equipment; our time was better spent on the instruments themselves and the preparation of the music. The actual production of the recordings, based on the master tapes our recording man would provide, was done by a huge Time-Warner plant, located about 60 miles south of Vestal. We never got beyond the shipping dock so never did see the inside of the place, but we were told they had the capacity of producing a million CDs every 24 hours! And it's easy to believe, based on the number of 18-wheelers lined up ready to take away products. We'd squeeze Marion's minivan between them, pick up maybe 1,000 or 2,000 items, and be on our way.

One day a stranger to us, Larry Kilmer, sent us some 78 rpm records we'd never seen or known of before, records made by the Herschell-Spillman Company. They were all carousel music, and we soon found out that they were made by that firm to be used with their “Merry-Org”—a jukebox-looking device that was really a sound system played from a record player. Apparently the idea was for the operator being able to get away from having to maintain a band organ. The man doing our “sound work” at the time said he could “clean them up” considerably (they had plenty of scratch and wear) so we went ahead and produced *Historic Carousel Music*. Later we learned that Dick Bowker had a complete set of the originals that he had purchased when in high school.

Dick loaned his like-new 78's to us, with the stipulation that we hand-pick-them-up and hand-return them, which we were delighted to do even though it meant two all-day trips to Pittsburgh. We eventually produced a CD from these. We never did find out what the organ was that had been used for the recording, but the rolls were obviously Wurlitzer 165. Maybe a reader can fill in this mystery for us!

All sorts of interesting little sidelights turn up in every business. As car buff, I was quite intrigued by the little-known exis-

tence of the *Dodge Brothers March*, of which I acquired a copy of the sheet music, written by Victor Herbert in 1920. The fact that Herbert was the writer instead of Joe Schmoie led me to dig into the story. It seems that Horace Dodge, one of the two Dodge Brothers of automotive fame, was by the early 'teens a very wealthy man and he was a patron of the arts in Detroit. Whether he was paid to write the March or did it out of good will I don't know, but in any event the tune is “dedicated to Horace Dodge!” A lady associated with the archives of the Dodge mansion was very helpful; she was able to get for me from Chrysler's files Xerox copies of some internal dealer newsletters of the day. The march was first performed at a big Dodge dealer's convention in New York City in 1920; some 1,000 dealers from all over were there. Herbert himself conducted the Dodge Brothers band, made up on Dodge employees. Neither John or Horace Dodge heard it; they both died earlier that same year.

Each dealer received copies of the march, as well as some 78-rpm records, and it was predicted that soon everyone in America would be whistling the tune “to the benefit of everyone in the Dodge business”—whereupon it was promptly forgotten. Until, that is, when we engaged Tom Meijer of the Netherlands to arrange it for us for our 57-key Gavioli, for a production to be titled *Fair Organ Follies*. This, together with the other gems prepared for us by this wizard noter made probably the best production we did. And you know what? We went to the factory to get our order and the next day the new owner came and took them away so we really never had the fun of promoting it ourselves, though it has done very well.

We did all our marketing via telephone, though had we been 20 years younger we'd have gone to gift shows. We developed all the business we wanted, operating out of our home with little or no overhead costs, but to build up good volume in the gift shop and tourist souvenir trade one really should get to these shows. In spite of this, we developed a very good relationship with many gift shop owners and managers; folks we never met in person and probably never will. To do business with a prospect, I had to make “cold calls” and I'm pleased to report that not one person ever slammed the receiver on me. Maybe one in 4 or 5 was willing to accept some samples, and maybe 1 in 3 of these eventually became a customer. One big frustration was turnover of shop managers in the bigger outlets—often we'd develop a nice relationship with a shop manager, only to have him or her leave and the replacement wouldn't give us the time of day. Others, on the other hand, were more or less permanent and welcomed our calls. We could tell from our files about when the time was ripe to give them a call.

If the business was so neat and profitable, why did we sell it? Very simple. It ties one down, and we couldn't travel as much as we would like to have. We developed several fine prospects to take it over, but for one reason or another they had to back off - and for very logical reasons other than the nature of what we had to offer. We eventually sold it to Dave Miner in Iowa, and he reports that they're doing well with it and that's good news for both of us! Try his web site; [www.minermfgco.com](http://www.minermfgco.com) Click on Recordings and you'll see the whole list!

Harvey and Marion Roehl have succeeded in collecting a great all-around selection of mechanical musical instruments; founded and headed the Vestal Press; and provided carousel music via Marion Roehl Recordings.