

## DO-IT-YOURSELF RECORDS REVISITED

Keith Cunningham  
 Department of English  
 Northern Arizona University

ABSTRACT -- The making of records is not without problems and difficulties. \$500 is required as a basic investment, performers have to be informed well in advance what is expected of them, both verbally and in writing, and the music recorded should be registered. In composing a master copy various combinations of songs should be tried. The manufacturer will handle the technicalities. Notes should be accurate and scholarly but also interesting to the non-folklorist. Eventually 300 copies should be made.

Way back in September of 1968 Vol. I, No. 3 of Folklore Forum carried an article of mine entitled "Do-It-Yourself Records." That article needs updating for several reasons: 1) the record market has changed a great deal in the past few years; 2) I have produced two records for Arizona Friends of Folklore since then and have learned a lot about what not to do or expect; and 3) the original article was, because of ignorance and the severe space limitations of the time (issue No. 3 was only nine pages long), much too general to be a real guide to its subject. In this article I would like to outline some of the same problems I briefly noted before, plus some I hadn't even considered, and suggest some possible solutions.

The first thing I tried to do in the 1968 article was offer a justification for limited edition record albums produced by trained folklorists. I would now add "Amen!" but with some qualifications. I have learned definite reasons not to attempt record production, and it is only fair to share them. First of all, any attempt to make a record to make money is probably doomed to disappointment. The record market has changed drastically in the past few years, and a realistic hope now is to simply make enough from one record to do another. Do-it-yourself record production is not a way to get rich quick -- or slow. Secondly, don't expect to build a reputation as a folklorist by producing records. The whole business of making a record involves as much time and effort as a major article, and a record series easily equals a book in the expenditure of energy and creativity involved. But articles are discussed and books are reviewed, praised, and damned in folklore journals; records are noted, usually briefly. (A notable exception is the Forum, which occasionally actually reviews records.) I feel that a good folk music record is as important as a good collection of folktales and as deserving of critical comment. I would even suggest that the I.U. Archive of Traditional Music of JEMF offer an award for the best folk music album of the year, but the most a record producer can now expect is a note in JAF listing the songs (by Laws and Child numbers), commenting on the texts, and ignoring performance, liner notes, and production.

Negatives duly noted, let me hasten to add that I still firmly believe in the opportunity and need for folklorists to be involved in record production for one basic reason -- our field needs good, authentic recordings of folk music, folk song, and folk ballad for teaching and as basic data

for folklore study. It seems to me that the old controversy between those who deal with ballad as text and those who insist on including music misses the point entirely that folk music is, basically, performance and should be studied as such. Though a recording is admittedly somewhat removed from a natural performance situation, it is still much more natural and "real" than a printed text with or without music, and is the best way (short of video tape) to capture the essence of the genres for study. Someday we are going to develop the interest and techniques to deal with folklore as performance, and when we do our most valuable data is going to be old records.

The first major problem I faced in my old article was the matter of the business problems of record production. I simply pointed out some serious problems and referred the reader to the Billboard publication, The Business of Music. I would still recommend the same book as basic reading, but I can now give much more specific suggestions to anyone facing the problems of financing, royalties, and registration of music.

First of all, take five hundred dollars. Or more basically, first of all get the five hundred which is the minimum needed to produce a record. I have three suggestions. If you can get fifty of your fellow students, or fellow faculty, or fellow folklore club members to kick in ten dollars apiece in return for two copies of the finished product, you are in business. The second and easiest way to finance your record is to get a grant from somewhere. This may not be easy, but it is certainly worth a try. The only other possibility I see is to approach record production in the same insane spirit required for buying an antique Indian motorcycle or a fine shotgun and put up the money yourself as an investment in a fascinating hobby.

Assuming that you get five hundred dollars somewhere, you are now ready to face the other business problems. The Business of Music has full information about royalties and registration and even includes sample contract forms; however, I discovered that I couldn't understand them without the help of a lawyer and that most traditional performers **were frightened** by them. My suggestion is that you make a verbal agreement and then send a follow-up letter stating the terms in plain English. Furthermore, I have arrived at a simple set of terms which seems satisfactory and which I can recommend to you. After carefully explaining that the record is a non-profit venture and that only 300 copies will be made and sold, and that all returns will be used to make other records; I offer the performer \$5.00 for each song used on a record with \$25.00 (the fee for five songs) paid in advance at the time of recording. This does not amount to much money, but is about twice the industry average for performers' royalties per album, and I find that most traditional performers are as anxious to make records and preserve their music as I am and readily accept the offer.

When you have the money raised and have worked out an agreement to record your performers, you still have one major problem to face -- the question of registering your music. BMI or ASCAP? That is the question. My solution has been to release only songs I am reasonably sure are public domain and ignore the whole problem. It has worked -- so far, at least.

After I gave a brief justification for do-it-yourself records and outlined business problems, I went on at some length in the 1968 article to discuss the actual process of recording the tape for a record; and most of what I wrote then was wrong or is now outdated. At the time I recommended rent-

ing equipment and going to the performers' homes, and the fact that I followed my own advice accounts for the rather poor sound quality of the first record I produced, Stone County Singing. I have a new recommendation, based on my successful experience with Cowboy Songs and Cowboy Songs, Vol. II. I borrow professional equipment, a studio or reasonable substitute, and an engineer. One of the chief reasons for the success of the Cowboy records is Mr. Don Wolf, a fellow Northern Arizona University faculty member, who lent us his expertise and volunteered the N.A.U. Music Department equipment and recording room. Most folklorists today are connected with a university, and most universities have a music department, or a speech and theater department, or radio and television department that has professional quality recording equipment and people who know how to operate it and that would be willing to help with a worthwhile project. My advice is to find them and let them help you. Having the performers come to you rather than you going to them is somewhat inconvenient, but I feel that improved sound quality makes it worth it. I would also add a warning to recording in stereo; the record market has changed in such a way that it is almost impossible to sell mono recordings.

The old article next discussed, again in very general terms, making the master from the raw tapes. This slight treatment was unfortunate because mastering is one of the most important steps in record production. The aesthetic appeal and thus the "sellability" of a record depends to a large extent upon the way the tapes are put together. The time consideration I mentioned in the first article, 12-18 per side, depending upon the presser's requirements, is only one of the many factors to be considered. I would suggest that you record a great many more selections that you can use, put them on individual reels, make copies, and experiment with different combinations until you find the ones that are within the time limits and most pleasing to you. You might first listen to some authentic folk albums you particularly like and try to analyze what makes them pleasing and what principles or organization you want to apply to your record. If all this sounds like work to you, you are right; but it is this work that constitutes the greatest creative challenge of record production to me, and I recommend you consider it carefully and thoughtfully.

Pressing, the next topic covered in the '68 article, is largely a question of how many and who. I would not recommend pressing more than 300 copies, and the yellow pages of the nearest large city will usually lead to a record manufacturer who can take your master and copy and give you a finished product. He will supply you with prices and information about timing, leaders, etc. I have worked with one-color covers because of the cost of color, but I think of this limitation as more of a challenge than a liability. The AFF records have included a brochure printed by the University which allows more space for notes than the back of the cover and at a lower cost. The notes present the same challenge as the rest of the record; they need to be scholarly, accurate, and at the same time understandable and of interest to the non-folklorist. I personally like transcription of the words of the songs (and of the music, if you can do it) and brief biographies of the performers in addition to notes about the songs and the performance.

The last problem, now as in 1968, is distribution. Again, I have learned some things not to do. Placing copies out on consignment doesn't seem to work too well. Places change hands and you are just out some copies. Most distributors handle too few copies to make it worth your while to write to them.

How then can you sell the things? Start with friends and fellow folklorists. (Count me in.) Send news releases with information about ordering to all the local papers around where your performers live. Give them order blanks to give to friends and relatives. Get yourself invited to Rotary and PTA to talk about the folk music of your area and plug your record in your talk. Twist arms; every copy you sell at full price is an excellent return on your cost.

In addition to selling records to everybody you know or can meet, there are at least two distributors who are worth contacting: David Freeman of County Record Sales, 309 East 37th Street, New York, New York 10016, will take 50 to 100 if he likes the record (if not, you'll never hear from him); and E. E. Pierce of Jack's Record Cellar, 254 Scott Street, San Francisco, California 94117, will take a like quantity if he thinks he can sell them. By all means send them sample copies. Wholesalers usually pay 25¢ to 50¢ less than  $\frac{1}{2}$  retail price, but it certainly is a good feeling to ship a hundred, and you still make a good profit per copy.

The first article I wrote ended at this point with the statement "Good Luck." I will reaffirm that wish and add an offer. If anyone out there is really interested in producing a record and wants further advice or actual help, let me know; I enjoy the whole business and will be glad to aid with any part of the process (except raising more than ten bucks of the five hundred needed).