

The Dave Godin Column

IT WAS recently reported that each year in Britain, the record industry collectively loses an estimated £30,000,000 at the hands of home tape recorders, which, to make such figures more realistic, is almost £600,000 a week!

Of course it is difficult even to accept that figure as stopping there, and who's not to know that the reality is not in fact twice that estimate . . . or four times? Either way, moves are afoot to try and do something about it, but for once, the solution isn't going to be that simple.

Over ten years ago I remember arguing with a rather superior spokesperson at Philips when they introduced their hi-fi cassette deck (the first of its kind) which not only put cassette reproduction on a par with disc, but incorporated the home-recorder's answer to all his previous home-taping problems, in the form of the magic PAUSE button! With this the doors were opened for making tapes which sounded as smooth and uncluttered as an LP record, and the silent sequences between tracks became within everybody's reach.

Soon this feature had become incorporated into nearly every tape deck made, and it took the industry (with a few notable exceptions) almost ten years to realise what was going on. Sales of pre-recorded tapes remained just a fraction of the sales of LP discs, and small wonder when, for the cost of a blank tape you could borrow the LP (some libraries even advertise them as genuinely unplayed and factory fresh) and record it at home.

Better still, by doing it this way you could even cut off the duff tracks and the make-weights, and be left with just the cream of the album, and plenty of more blank tape left to put on some choice singles too (again, no need to waste time on B sides often written by the artist in order to garner extra revenue if the A side became a hit).

Now we all know that home-taping of records is illegal, but then so are lots of other activities which go on even in the most respectable of circles, and although MCPS grant licences to anyone who wants one to tape records that they themselves have already purchased, and solely for their own use, at the end of last year it was reported that only 5,075 people actually had one.

MCPS actually lose money in administering the system. (Total income of £8,526 to off-set the estimated loss of £30 million!)

Now that record sales have begun to feel the pinch of the economic recession this country has been weathering for some time, more and more industry voices are clamouring for something to be done! But what?

Well, so far the proposals range from increasing the MCPS license to £5 or £50 (which will mean even fewer recruits since so many baulk

Getting it taped

at the present £1.68); blank tapes carrying an extra levy making them about twice their present price, the balance being distributed in a way to compensate for estimated losses due to home taping (again how will this be done? Certainly any extension of the present PRS system would increase the criticism there has been of them of late, even getting as far as the House of Commons!) or a levy on the tape decks themselves (ditto above); tape that can only be recorded on once (which might be a blessing against accidental erasure for some!) an inaudible bleep on discs which would only be heard when transferring onto tape (which means manufacturers of an over-ride gadget would make £10 profit on every one sold); and probably others which as yet I've not heard of.

Well, none of these seem satisfactory to my mind, and since some would require the consent of Parliament to introduce, I'm very doubtful if (even if it were just a matter of sheer political expediency) any of the three major political parties would support it.

For one thing it is just the sort of issue that would lose votes, and for another, no one is in the mood to pass any legislation which is unenforceable. Although it has always been illegal to copy a record onto tape without the MCPS license, not one person has ever been prosecuted for so doing.

It's still illegal to tell fortunes, but there's no shortage of fortune-tellers is there?

What puzzles me most however, is the bland way in which the industry nearly always ignores the views of the consumer. One could be forgiven for thinking even that an actual state of war existed between them at times! Over the years I must have received thousands of letters from people complaining that they've written to a record company, enclosed a stamped addressed envelope and not heard another word from them (OK, I sometimes might do the same, but our circumstances are very different — I don't have a secretary!)

I can hardly think of any other business that could treat the public in such a cavalier way and get away with it. But don't think you're alone. Even letters from people like myself who are in a position to actually help generate sales sometimes get ignored, whilst some

people send you a single and expect the whole column to be devoted to it by way of repayment!

Now I estimate, that if you add up all these terrible public relations gestures over the years (and every record buyer I've ever met has got some tale to relate about the way he's been treated by a company at some time or other), then goodwill towards the industry is pretty thin on the ground. And if the problem of home-taping is ever going to be tackled in any meaningful way then public goodwill is going to be a pretty important factor.

Soul fans in particular will be very involved since the wealth of unissued material means that much Soul material does get taped and passed around, and whilst Soul fans' loyalty to Soul artists meant they were keen to support efforts to eradicate pirate-records, I can't see a similar enthusiasm coming for any system which is not seen to directly benefit black American (or Soul America) in practical and direct terms.

Already there is indifference towards illegal pressings — when somebody has written three letters to a record company requesting a certain side to be made available legally, and they've not even had the courtesy of a reply, is it really any wonder? They get the sound they want, and the money they wasted on postage trying to do it legit would have paid for half its cost.

WHAT THEN is the solution? Well, for what it's worth, my

personal view is that over the past ten years the industry has been doing things in exactly the reverse way to that which might have been an effective method of combatting home-taping. If, instead of progressively going up in price, discs had actually been progressively reduced in price, then I think sales of pre-recorded cassettes would have benefitted, and I think discs would be so easily acquired that the taping of them wouldn't be worth the time and trouble.

Unless people actually are tape fanatics, most people given the choice would prefer to own the actual record, but with the 80p single now a reality, and the £5 LP on the not-too-distant horizon, then I think it entirely logical (given our present mass unemployment and wage freezes) that home-taping is only just getting seriously underway, and the future will prove that we ain't seen nothin' YET!

I can see the problems the industry faces, and in the past I have always tried to present the industry viewpoint in a fair way, but on this issue I've neither the heart, the energy, nor the conviction to do so. The economic gloom is reaching such proportions within the business that some companies are even talking of cutting back on sending review copies to people like me!

So, who knows, if this carries on I shall have to start taping myself! Can't let my readers down! After all, they do come first!

Run-out groove

NOW THAT the lovely Trisha O'Keefe has left DJM Press office, I can give up the effort of trying to keep in her good books (she's really such a nice girl, I couldn't make her work any harder), and now openly confess to thinking that Johnny Guitar Watson must be about the most over-rated vocalist of last year! What a bore!

Was truly sorry to see The Emotions "Flowers" bubble just under the UK Top 50 only to drop out and not quite make it. That's our wonderful public broadcasting "service" for you! But the girls should take heart, their side was still better and more worthy than 99% of the other records currently on the elitist playlist. And their next one's a corker too! . . .

Regular readers of this column may have noticed (and may actually have written and enquired about it) that over the past three years since I returned to B&S, I've given almost exclusive coverage of UK releases. The reason for this is because I felt a rather misguided sense of loyalty to the UK industry for what they were doing, and because I felt people would rather

read about records that are easy to obtain than ones that are hard to find.

Since some UK companies are now cutting back on review copies, it is no longer a policy I can continue (I mean, I get rude letters from America asking me what so-and-so's done to upset me when the UK licensee hasn't even sent me the damn thing!) and so I will begin to incorporate more esoteric material again in future, which means of course, more and more imports . . .

Seems like there's a regular cottage industry out there in media-land these days of going through old "Dave Godin Columns" and rehashing them as original, new, contributions. I'm flattered . . .

Alas, the soppiest "libel" case of the year was called off. Pity, because we could have all had a good laugh over it! . . .

Donna Summer due soon to switch labels over here, and will in future be with Pye, probably on Casablanca . . .

Ian Levine very quiet these days. Don't know if that is a good or bad sign . . .

● Until next time then. Keep the faith — right on now!