

## XMAS SET STEAMROLLS CHART FOR AMERICAN GRAMAPHONE

(Continued from page 1)

es, massage oil, clothing, and other goodies.

All of that supplements the estimated 28 million music units American Gramophone has sold since its formation in 1974. It ties in to what Davis calls his "connect the dots" theory of marketing.

### THE SAGA OF 'CONVOY'

The "Convoy" saga came about when Davis was an ad man at the Bozell Jacobs agency in Omaha. He and fellow ad exec Bill Fries wrote jingles together; their most successful series was for Old Home Bread. The series centered on a bread-truck driver named C.W. McCall and won a Clio Award.

MGM Records asked the duo to consider doing a McCall single. The result, 1974's "Old Home Filler-Up An' Keep On-A-Truckin' Cafe," went to No. 19 on Billboard's singles chart.

In late 1975, Davis and Fries recorded a McCall album for MGM, "Black Bear Road," and "Convoy," the fifth single from that release, exploded, selling millions and inspiring a movie of the same name.

Davis calls what he and Fries were doing "techno country," with its French horns and big backup vocal groups. Fries, the group's singer, went on the road as C.W. McCall and toured and recorded successfully for

years. He was later elected mayor of Ouray, Colo.

Davis continued writing country songs in partnership with Fries but returned to his true love, which he calls "18th-century classical rock."

In the mid-'70s, Davis was music director at a studio in Omaha and worked at night recording his synthesizer and harpsichord-charged blend of classical and rock. He cut an album he called "Fresh Aire By Chip Davis" and hauled it around to every record company he could find.

"Everyone loved it," says Davis, whose publisher is SESAC. "Then I'd get a letter after the third meeting saying, 'We really like it, but there's no way to sell it. But I'd like to buy 50 copies for myself.' I was selling to label presidents and their secretaries."

### 'YOU GOTTA HAVE A NAME'

Shortly thereafter came his conceptual breakthrough, Davis says. "It's funny, looking back now, that both C.W. McCall and Mannheim Steamroller were totally made up, but they needed some sort of name. They're both driven from an art base, but you can't sell it without a name. Some of the record guys were saying, 'You gotta have a name. What's this group's name?' This was around the time of Iron Butterfly and so on, so I named my 'group'

Mannheim Steamroller, which is the colloquial joke name for a crescendo from the 18th century."

Despairing of commercial success, Davis decided to try self-marketing and formed his own record label, choosing the name American Gramophone in an attempt to emulate posh label Deutsche Gramophone. His logo designer, though, misspelled the second word and the company remains "American Gramophone."

Davis peddled his albums in stereo showrooms, and the label became an audiophile hit in the U.S., Japan, and Germany. He began building his mailing list and recording and peddling subsequent Fresh Aire albums, all thematic in intent: the sounds of summer, winter, or of Johannes Kepler's mythical trip to the moon. He had found his new age or baby-boomer audience, although he won't call it anything but music.

In 1984, Davis, who admits to being an incurable romantic, decided to record a really traditional Christmas album. He recalls only skeptics before the album and only avid supporters after. The second Christmas album came in 1988. He was not eager to do yearly follow-ups, he says.

"I almost didn't do this one this year," he says. "I'd been sidetracked for years with other projects."

Among Davis' projects was last year's invitation by TBS to contribute music for the Goodwill Games in St. Petersburg, Russia. The result was the Mannheim Steamroller album "To Russia With Love," recorded in St. Petersburg's Philharmonia Hall.

Other projects included the Steamroller soundtrack for the 1986 PBS series "Saving The Wildlife" and the 1989 22-concert benefit series for Yellowstone National Park, after the fire there.

"I knew I would do another Christmas album sometime, and I knew the fans wanted one," he says. "But there's a certain part of me inside that I don't want to be so commercial as to just shove them out. That's not the reason I make these. On the other hand, I do realize that if you leave something alone, it sits there and builds its own base."

### A RETURN TO CHRISTMAS PAST

Davis says that his Christmas albums take the listener back to the time of the songs' origins. "A lot of the Christmas carols we know here in America are from the 14th and 15th centuries in Europe," he says. "Ironically, I'm discovering, as I spend a lot of time in Europe recording, that a lot of the time the people there don't necessarily know their own Christmas carols."

Davis is democratic in the selection of songs he offers on his Christmas albums. He solicits votes for song choices among the 500,000 people who receive his catalog. This year, 2,600 people responded with their choices. Davis published their names in his catalog and sent an advance cassette to each prior to the album's release.

Ironically, Davis says, people won't select common carols, because they feel they should be eclectic. He has overruled his voters only once, picking "Jingle Bells" for the current album.

One of his challenges, Davis says, is presenting a convincing, warm, and fuzzy Christmas on stage with a multilayered computerized sound

and dozens of orchestra players and antique instruments.

"I started with three trucks and 20 people," he says of this year's Christmas tour, which played Salt Lake City Nov. 15-Sunday (19), Los Angeles Friday (24)-Nov. 26, Denver Nov. 30-Dec. 3, Dallas Dec. 7-10, Chicago Dec. 14-17, and Omaha Dec. 26-31.

Davis says he gets the best audio equipment available and uses six live musicians on stage playing the Mannheim Steamroller parts, such as rhythm and harpsichord.

"We all play all of the ancient instruments," says Davis. "They're all classically trained; two of the guys were in the McCall country project."

To present the music, Davis relies on multimedia. "I shot a film in England of a 15th-century Christmas feast, where we see how the 15th-century carols would have been performed, on the instruments they would have been performed on, and it's all songs from the album."

In concert, the film is projected on a scrim 60 feet wide on the side walls and on a rear-projection screen behind the band, which allows band members to appear as if they are playing among the ancient musicians, says Davis.

"There are seven Light Cannons going on simultaneously, projecting different peripheral views, with speakers that create the exact sound of that feast hall in England, down to its echo content. So we end up playing live to the film. It's like doing a film score backward."

### CATALOG SALES

The folksy, 26-page, full-color American Gramophone catalog begins with a low-key letter from

Davis, complete with bad jokes and some hints about new product lines.

The first pages offer the three Christmas albums, cinnamon hot chocolate, and Steamroller pull-overs, as well as a special offer: the three albums and the hot chocolate in a Steamroller-inscribed wooden CD crate.

The catalog also offers sections devoted to his Dayparts series albums. (These consist of music for different parts of the day; the "Sunday Morning Coffee" album spawned Davis' very successful gourmet coffee line.)

Also offered are framed rare scores, regular scores for bands and instrumentalists, desserts and dessert music, massage music and massage oil, Steamroller polo shirts, and "high-end yummys."

Available too is music from other artists on the label, including the veteran pop group America, Mike Post's TV scores, and John Rutter & the Cambridge Singers.

Although his direct-mail business is strong, Davis' Christmas releases are big sellers at music retail chains (see story, this page).

As far as future projects go, Davis says he is working on a Christmas movie and an adventure series called "Seven Wonders Of The Natural World," for which he recently climbed and camped on Mt. McKinley for 10 days, capturing images and sounds.

The label itself, he said, will stay pretty much as it is. "We're not actively recruiting artists. If the right one comes along, yes. The goal of our company is not to become the biggest record company in the world. Our goal is, like, to be the grooviest."

## AG's Mannheim Steamroller Sales Are Anything But Flat

BY DON JEFFREY

NEW YORK—Music retailers say that strong consumer anticipation and successful in-store promotions have resulted in a surprisingly strong early sales performance for Mannheim Steamroller's latest Christmas album.

The title, "Christmas In The Aire," is No. 15 this week in its ninth week on The Billboard 200 album chart. The American Gramophone release is independently distributed.

Tony Jamie, buyer for 150-store National Record Mart, says, "It's impressive this early to be selling that high up in the charts."

The album has been in NRM's top 10, and sales are increasing weekly. Last week it sold 1,100 units; the week before, 680.

"It's our No. 1 selling title this week. It beat all the pop, beat everything," says Brian McClemens, buyer for 116-store Borders Books & Music. "We put it out early and exposed it to our customers."

He adds, "This will break my initial sales chart that I worked out in August, which was pretty aggressive. I expected to break 10,000 units. Now I expect to do much better."

Susan Peterson, senior buyer for music at the 673-store Target chain, notes that "Christmas In The Aire" is among Target's top 20 and that her chain accounts for more than 20% of the title's nationwide sales. "We do a very high percentage of the business," she says. "It has a very strong following. It fits our demographic."

Consumer expectations have

been high for the release. The first two Christmas albums by Mannheim came out in 1984 and 1988, and many fans were expecting a third in 1992.

"They've got a great track record," says McClemens. "It's been a few years, and people have been kind of waiting for a new one, because it's such a familiar sound. This has become the new series of albums associated with Christmas."

The album has been placed in Borders' "super listening posts," which are located by the front door of the store. "It's merchandised so everybody coming into the store sees it," says McClemens.

Borders has the title sale-priced at \$11.99. Some competitors in Borders' markets have been selling the album for as much as \$19.

NRM has also been promoting the release heavily. "We had two full-sized display merchandisers available to us, and we utilized them in about 80% of our stores," says Jamie. "One holds 300 units and lights up. It incorporates all three titles."

Target's Peterson adds, "We give it a lot of endcap exposure."

Although it is a Christmas album, some retailers believe the release may have staying power after the holidays because of the act's popularity.

"We'll probably retain it year-round just to have a piece in the store," says NRM's Jamie.

Although most of the sales are on CD, Borders reports that the cassette version has also been moving well. "It's easier to toss it in the car," says McClemens.

## EUROPEAN SOCIETIES OPPOSE EMI AGENCY

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efficiency of the existing societies or the discounts they're offering. It's all to do with EMI and the short-term bottom line, with a possible buyer of Thorn EMI's music division in mind."

For its part, EMI says it has received letters from all of Europe's collecting societies and has conducted meetings with many of them. However, the company declines to reveal the content of the meetings.

### SINGLE-MARKET PHENOMENON

Central licensing itself is a relatively new phenomenon produced by the single European market. Historically, Europe's record companies handled royalty payments on a purely domestic basis. They secured their pressing licenses from—and paid their mechanicals to—the sole collecting society in their country.

Under this system, each collecting society enjoyed a monopoly in its own market, and a multinational record company had to do individual deals for each country in which it operated.

However, the open market across the 15-nation European Union means that record companies can now buy one pan-European license from any collecting society within the Union.

The competition between the societies for such vast amounts of business has been fierce, and each vies with the others to produce agree-

ments that are attractive to record companies.

EMI feels, though, that this process has gone too far, arguing that the concessions and discounts that have been given to record companies are detrimental to publishers' and writers' interests.

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