



second foundation

***Martyn and Ian's excellent
adventure - record a sequel to
their '82 Music of Quality and
Distinction album, mixing vintage
songs with '90s technology.***

Interview by Tim Goodyer.

TRADITIONALLY, WANNABE PRODUCERS HAD TO WANNABE engineers first. And to become engineers they had to wannabe tape ops. And to become tape ops they had to wannabe tea boys (or girls) before that. In those days - 15 or more years ago - it wasn't easy to become a producer, but it was a relatively straightforward career to pursue. That, of course, was before the hi-tech revolution tore up the rule book. Advancing technology made the previously exclusive power of the producer available to almost anyone who was prepared to take the recording of their music into their own hands rather than leaving it to established talents. Today there are almost as many routes to becoming a producer as there are producers themselves. Few, however, can be more unorthodox than that of Martyn Ware.

Breaking into the world of popular music in 1977 as part of the

PHOTOGRAPHY: TIM GOODYER

original Human League lineup, he and fellow Leaguer Ian Craig Marsh subsequently broke away to form Heaven 17 with singer Glenn Gregory. Peripheral to their work as Heaven 17, Ware and Craig Marsh also operated a production project they called the British Electric Foundation and in 1982 released an unprecedented LP entitled *Music of Quality and Distinction Volume One*. An oddity at the time, the album consisted entirely of (largely soul) cover versions sung by a variety of "featured artists" - from Gary Glitter and Sandie Shaw to Bernie Nolan and Paula Yates. It wasn't a great seller but pre-empted a major change of direction pop music was about to take.

Heaven 17 slipped quietly into pop history around two years ago. Dropped by Virgin records they began work on demos for EMI and ZTT but felt they were lacking in direction. The split was an amicable one; "We always said it would end with a phone call", says Ware, "and that's the way it was".

"I was in a studio in Germany and a friend who was distraught that we'd been dropped by Virgin said 'You know what you should do? You should do BEF 2'. I said 'Don't be ridiculous', because it was incredibly hard work last time and the business has become even more cynical since then. Then it occurred to me that I knew a lot more people so I'd got a larger pool of people to approach. Also my production work had been quite successful so that would make it easier to get people to do things. That was the theory, anyway. So I decided that was what I wanted to do."

It was a comparatively easy decision to make after dissolving the partnership which saw Ware through eight years and four LPs. The objective of the first BEF album, however, is more curious. Ware himself seems unsure of his motivation.

"It was just a wild idea", he says vaguely. "From what I remember, I was so excited at learning I could work with other people. The nearest analogy is learning to ride a bike, you just want to ride it everywhere, don't you?"

"It was the idea of just ringing people up and asking them to do things. You could invite them into the studio and they'd sing for you. Although the first album didn't sell too many copies, it's amazing how many people have since told me they really liked it. Where the bloody hell were they when I needed them? At that time it was 'What are these guys doing, are they mad?'."

"It was a way of establishing myself as a producer", he continues with more certainty, "although I didn't know what the hell I was doing in the studio. I wasn't arrogant, it was just uncharted territory. Actually when I listened to the first album recently, it wasn't as bad as I thought."

Music of Quality and Distinction Volume 2 comes over in an entirely different light to its forebear, however. Using a variety of vocalists is now commonplace and where the earlier choice of people and artists seemed arbitrary, *Volume 2* reads more like a list of great artists performing great songs. Two vocalists link *Music of Quality and Distinction Volume 2* to *Volume One* - Billy Mackenzie and Tina Turner.

"I recorded 'A Change is Gonna Come' with Tina about four years ago for her *Break Every Rule* album but it never got released", reveals Ware. "I really liked it and I know Tina really liked it because she used the same arrangement in her live show, so I rang her manager and said 'I'm planning to do another BEF album and this would be a nice link between the two albums, do you mind if it's on it?'. Also having Tina's name on it, it would complete a circle in that it gave her a bit of a leg-up at that time and this would give me a bit of a leg-up this time. And to their credit, they said yes."

"As soon as I'd got the rights to that track it all became a lot easier. I mean, it's good for her to be seen as a diverse artist and the soul side of her career has sort of atrophied slightly in the last few years because she become so directly obsessed with the pop market. People have asked me which of the tracks on the album I like the best and I genuinely think that Tina's got the best soul voice of all of them. The irony of it is that she doesn't even particularly like soul music,

it's just natural to her. She prefers white rock music. You always want what you haven't got."

Although getting Tina Turner's consent to use her cover of the Sam Cooke classic was an important point in the evolution of *Volume 2*, she wasn't the first artist Ware approached.

"The first person was John Lydon, strangely enough, because he'd always wanted to work with me. He's a big Heaven 17 fan - find it hard to believe? Well, it's true. He thinks 'Let Me Go' is one of the greatest songs ever recorded, which I constantly find hard to believe. I asked John what his favourite songs were and if there was anything he'd really like to do. He picked a couple of reggae tunes which subsequently didn't fit in with the rest of the stuff and consequently aren't on the album. They're extraordinary - can you imagine him singing reggae - electronic reggae at that? That's still in the can unmixed, but that's how it started."

"From there we drew up a list of all the people we'd like to work with - a wish list; a dream list. There were about 20 people on it, of which we ended up with three."

Although the success rate was low, the consenting artists came from near the top of the list.

"Chaka Khan was so near the top she wasn't even on the original list because I didn't think she'd do it. It just so happened that the week the idea occurred to us, my lawyer started representing her in this country. He put it to her and she agreed immediately, she loved the idea. For me it was a dream come true. She's a star in all senses of

the word. If I could read a true biography of just one of these people she'd be the one because she's been to hell and back and then back again. Now her singing is completely free from inhibitions. We did 14 live takes with her - completely live with the band playing and 'Someday We'll All be Free' is compiled from those takes. What astounded me was that each time she did it, it was different. She could do an endless number of interpretations of any lyric, I believe. When you're that free of inhibitions, it's an incredible talent."

When pushed for details of the Wish List, Ware resorts to his electronic Personal Organiser, protesting "God almighty, there's a lot of information associated with this project!"

From there he recites the names of David Bowie, Bryan Ferry, Isaac Hayes, Barry White, Kate Bush, Mick Jagger, Chrissie Hynde, Maxi Priest ("booked into the studio but he never turned up"), Luther Vandross, Dr John, Aaron Neville, Jimmy Ruffin, Ali Campbell, Sidney Youngblood and Neneh Cherry. Of these Kate Bush came closest to accepting.

"We selected a song by a band called Spirit called 'Nature's Way'", recalls Ware. "I've always had an inkling that she could cover things in a soul style because it's there in her work. She probably doesn't even recognise it herself. For my own pleasure I thought it would be nice to see how she works because she always works in her own studio and sometimes that means you can't see the wood for the trees. Also she's a very shy person and I don't think she likes putting herself into a different environment at random. She was the only one of these I managed to talk to directly, and she went away and thought about it and then politely came back and said 'I wish you the best of luck with the rest of the album but I don't think it's right for me'. You can't really argue with that."

Ware continues the story: "We started off with the people who were available. Billy Mackenzie was in town. Then we got Richard Darbyshire, who I've always admired; he's an incredibly underrated singer. I don't think Living in a Box exist any more because he's about to sign a solo deal."

"Then we went over to see Curtis Mayfield in Rotterdam and he agreed instantly to do it. And then a week before we were due to record with him he had an accident. That knocked the stuffing out of us quite a lot. When things like that happen you think maybe the project's just not meant to happen."

"Mavis Staples was on tour with Prince so I contacted her management and >

"Nobody can accuse me of being cynical about this project - the fact that I wasn't working for other people means that I was, and am, probably £50,000 down on what I could have earned last year."

they were very happy for her to do it. The funny thing is that I've now got this strange contact with Prince because I also did something with Jill Jones, who was in *Graffiti Bridge* - I did some tracks for that and they never got released because Paisley Park was in financial trouble at the time and weren't releasing anything. I heard from Jill and also from Mavis that Prince really likes what I've done a lot. But I've never met him.

"Green was somebody I'd wanted to work with for a long time. Having worked with him on the two singles he's just done and the BEF cover of Stevie Wonder's 'I Don't Know Why I Love You', I think he's as close to a musical genius as anybody I've ever worked with. But he's very self deprecating in terms of how low he keeps his voice in a mix and I thought it would be a good thing to get him to sing a song that demanded some performance instead of something that ambled along at one pace. He's got a beautiful voice, an incredible voice. He's a genuine lover of music and he's given me help on other tracks on the album without demanding payment or even thanks. He's got so many brilliant ideas. The man is a pop Mozart, really. I'd love to do an album with him but it would probably take two years of my life, and I don't think I've got time. We did three versions of 'I Don't Know Why I Love You' and it was the slowest stuff we did. We calculated it took 28 studio days to do the one track for the single, the others took seven or eight - and he said it was about four times faster than he's ever worked before.

"One particular problem he's got is that he spends so much money on recording that he's got to sell *vast* quantities of records to recoup the money it cost to record the bloody things. But what an honour to work with him."

CHOOSING THE ARTISTS WAS ONLY HALF OF CONSTRUCTING

Music of Quality and Distinction Volume 2 - each of the artists needed a song to sing. . .

"Again, we had a list of songs that we'd made from our private record collections", Ware explains. "There were about 50 songs - and I think we ended up using about three of those as well.

"I selected 'I Want You' for Tashan, but he agreed with that anyway. I also chose 'A Change is Gonna Come' for Tina and she loves Sam Cook because he was an early influence on her. Billy Mackenzie selected 'Free' and I said 'What? Do you know what key this is in?' but he sang it beautifully. It's probably the best soul performance he's ever given. I selected the track for Richard (the Gap Band's 'Early in the Morning') because I felt he should be singing stuff that was heavier funk than Living in a Box. The Chaka Khan one was my suggestion because I was obsessed with Donny Hathaway at the time. He'd always been in the back of my mind but I'd bought this Donny Hathaway compilation and it was a revelation to me. We ended up using 'Someday We'll All Be Free' for Chaka Khan and 'A Song For You', which is a Leon Russell song but Donny Hathaway's is my favourite version, for Mavis Staples.

"Halfway through the album we realised that there were certain advantages to asking the artists what they would like to record. A lot of artists have constrictions according to marketing necessity, or they don't like to put cover versions on their albums or even that there might be a private song that they'd love to do. That's the way it worked with Billy Preston. Obviously he'd worked with the Beatles for some time so I asked him what his favourite Beatles song was and he said 'In My Life' and we did a tremendous version of that that will probably be on the b-side of one of the singles."

Only one major problem appears to have arisen throughout the process of pairing songs and artists. Having decided to include a version of Sly Stone's 'Family Affair', the BEF couldn't find a suitable artist to sing it.

"I saw her album on a desk at Virgin records", recalls Ware of Lalah Hathaway. "I thought 'we've got two Donny Hathaway tracks, Lalah's Donny's daughter and she's got a great voice. . .' But we were really riding on our shirt tails there because I'd never met her and she'd never even heard of me. We paid for her to come over. She'd got no idea of how to perform the song at all - which worried me because we'd only got two days to record it in. She came over, took a copy of the backing track away and did the vocal arrangement. Then we did the entire vocal in about four hours.

"I asked her what she listens to at home because I couldn't understand where ➤

➤ she was coming from and she said 'Oh, 'Trane, Bird. . .' She's just come out of Berklee Jazz College and she's still only 21. She's also a wonderful Rhodes player - I've got one of the new electronic Rhodes and she was coming out with all this incredible stuff on it and saying 'Oh, ignore this, it's just something I'm working on' and I'm going 'Oh, my God'. I said 'Have you got a Rhodes at home?' and she said 'Well I've got my dad's Rhodes but nobody knows how to repair them any more'. That's Donny Hathaway's Rhodes - I'd pay thousands for that! Anyway, she's incredibly talented and almost unknown but she's *got* to be huge."

With the song that was to reintroduce the public to the BEF in the can, the project was almost complete. Three aspects of an album of cover versions with major artists in a major London studio remain undiscussed, however: finance, commerciality and technology. Leaving the technology until later, let's talk cash. Surely the major record companies would be falling over themselves to have such a project on their release schedules. . .

"I actually had to finance the recording of this myself" reveals the producer. "It took 12 months and over the first nine I'd invested £60,000 of my own money in it. I can categorically say that nobody can accuse me of being cynical about this project. I mean, the fact that I wasn't working for other people during that period means that I was - and still am - probably £50,000 down on

***"Are you going to sit and watch
the sequencer screen or are you
going to put it on tape and know
that the part is there? To me it
makes no sense to sequence
things live unless you have to."***

them?

"Unfortunately there was a glut of cover versions last year", Ware agrees, "and it looks like a bit of bandwagon jumping. I'd like to think that what we've done doesn't relate directly to other peoples' covers. It's not like we're a band who usually do our own material and then 'Oh dear, we're not in the charts so we'll do a cover version'. This is a repetition of a specific formula that we established ten years ago as a gathering of unique talents. If I'd have been cynical about it I'd have written songs for everybody and pocketed the publishing royalties. But that wasn't the concept. It's also a daunting prospect to write for someone like Chaka Khan. She was saying 'Write some songs for me, Martin', but where would I start? But then I've heard the demos for her next album and I think I could knock out some stuff that's better than that.

"I'd say the large part of the blame for the present lack of original material lies with the lack of imagination of the creative staff at the record companies. It's ➤

what I could have earned last year. I hope it will reap rewards in terms of future work, of course. I suppose it's like a 'special offer' because it gives these people the opportunity to be on the album and to see how we work - and I'd love to do an album with Chaka Khan or Mavis Staples or any of these people. We had a great time - expensive, but great."

Then what of the prospect of launching a LP of covers into a market already drowning in

> a much more cut-throat business now than when we started. The Human League had two albums out which sold bigger all. Nowadays if you have one album that sells bigger all you're dropped. So whatever talent we had wouldn't emerge today. The record companies are out for the quick kill, I'm afraid. Unless you have a hit single, they will regard an album as a dead duck in the water before it's even released.

"Ironically it's nothing to do with profit, because the record companies lose money on singles, but as a way of bringing attention to the artists. There's not a great premium placed on original-sounding material. It's just a particularly conservative time in music at the moment."

TIME TO TALK TECH. ALONGSIDE THE PRODUCTION AND programming efforts of Ware and Craig Marsh, the British Electric Foundation has drawn on the talents of a collective of musicians and technicians to realise its aims. The names of guitarists Phil Spalding and Tim Cansfield crop up regularly in the credits as does that of programmer and bass player Randy Hope-Taylor. There's also a modicum of real drumming from Chuck Sabo, keyboards from Nick Plytas, piano from Adrian Reid and various percussion and brass credits. So how much of the music is men and how much of it the machines?

"It's a complete synthesis of the two technologies", claims Marsh from behind the expansive SSL desk at Red Bus Studios, "which, when Fairlights first came out, is how I envisaged they should be used. But technology's turned out a giant mutant child of samplers, sequencers and what have you. It's OK because it means more people can be creative, but it's diluted the original concept a bit."

"I think there are very few people who use sampling technology and programming as a tool rather than something to give music a modern edge. The music is more important than that to me. There are certain things you can't do with technology no matter what equipment you've got. No, it's probably possible to do just about anything, but I think you really have to marry the two techniques together and get something that doesn't sound either synthetic or man-made."

"Some of the tracks, like 'A Song For You' and 'Free', for example, were all electronic. I wanted specifically for them to sound electronic because the originals were all live and I wanted them to be heard from a different angle."

"Most of the tracks were started off with a live backing track and overlaid with any sequences afterwards. They were all recorded to a click for that reason. One of the tracks is specifically sample-and-loop orientated, that's the Lalah Hathaway one, but that's also got a live drummer playing on it. That was quite interesting because we had to use a MIDI-controlled gate to make sure that there were no flams between the loop and the drums. The interesting thing was that we actually moved the loop to the drums so it sounds like a real drummer playing but it's still got a synthetic feel. It's quite difficult to explain."

Getting more specific, it's reassuring to discover that Ware's early intimacy with music technology hasn't been undermined by his metamorphosis into sought-after producer. It has, however, ensured a musical sensibility keeps it in perspective.

"We've opted to use what we thought is the most elegant and intuitive sequencer around, which is Master Tracks Pro4. There's no doubt that there are some great sequencers around but provided there's no technical restriction - and they've ironed out 99.9% of the bugs in this program - it's all you need. Pro4 hasn't got a cluttered screen like Performer, it doesn't have thousands of dialogue boxes coming up all the time, it's just a simple recording medium. And that's all I require. You can teach anyone to use it in 20 minutes, which means you can get musicians to look at it without getting fazed by the technological aspects of it. They can then participate in the sequencing."

"I regard it as a major mistake to run things live off a sequencer, though, so we put everything to tape. It's too fraught with inconceivable problems - imagine you've got 48 tracks of stuff running and you've got something that's going 'tick... tick' every ten seconds at the back of the mix. It's not a very significant part of the mix but it's an essential part of the song. Are you going to sit and watch the sequencer screen or solo it all the time to make sure it's there? Or are you going to put it on tape and *know* it's there? It makes no sense to sequence things live unless you have to."

"Also, you're dealing in microseconds of feel, especially for rhythm tracks."

Say the sequencer approximates a slight error in the timing - say every four bars it moves 1mS. It's happened to us and it took us ages to find out why something was feeling just slightly odd every so often. It was a very tiny bug that normally you would never spot. I'd just prefer to have something down on tape where I *know* it's going to play in time every time. Then it's something you don't have to worry about and you can get on with the rest of the song."

"We do run the sequencer live with the multitrack though, so that we can use it for visual cues and so that if we want to change anything we can change it on the sequencer and then put it onto tape. That way you've got the best of both worlds. We use the sequencer display as a scrolling manuscript of the music."

As the visual display of the SSL beneath Ware's elbows suggests, the final mix is heavily assisted by the desk's automation system.

"Mixing is not an approximate science as far as I'm concerned", he announces. "The more you know about it, the bigger pain in the arse it becomes because you know how you want it to sound and you know how to achieve it, it just takes longer. That's the way it is. By the end of a three-day mix you hate the track but you know it's going to be good when you listen to it in a week's time."

Ware's presence at Red Bus is explained partly by Music Technology's request to photograph him in the natural habitat of the record producer and partly by his current involvement in Tashan's forthcoming LP. But not all his recent work has involved fresh recordings of old material - some of it's involved *old* recordings of old material. . .

"We've done a new version of 'Ball of Confusion' using the recording from the last album", he explains. "What happened was that no-one could find the multitrack so, because the recording was so bright and brittle, there's all this room at the bottom of the mix, so we laid a new bassline and rhythm loop under it, Deee Lite style. It sounds as contemporary as all the shit that's going on now, I can tell you that. And that's done from a piece of Ampex quarter-inch tape with the oxide falling off each time we played it. We're hoping to get permission from Tina to release that."

"The story behind this is that in the early '80s Ampex had this major problem where they were experimenting with a new binding. Now they say that if you have any master tapes you want to use you have to send them back and they have to bake them. Then you can play them once to put them onto DAT and that's it - they're fucked. Can you believe that?"

"I have to confess to a certain amount of worry about DAT because that is a thin, delicate piece of tape and if they haven't got the formulation right. . . I don't give a shit if they think it's a throw-away medium - because that's obviously the way they're going to market it in future, in much the same way as they market Walkmans now. You don't expect a Walkman to work much after nine months, do you? Even my Sony Professional Walkman packed up after a year. If they're regarding DAT as that sort of medium, it makes you wonder. Who's going to answer for these things five years, ten years down the line?"

If, as is the case with much pop music, five to ten years is enough to see it happily forgotten, there will be no case to answer. It will come as a relief to many, though, that *Music of Quality and Distinction Volume 2* is more safely archived on Sony PCM masters. That way it should continue to live up to both halves of the promise in its title. ■

EQUIPMENT LIST

Akai S100 Sampler
BSS DPR9101 Dynamic EQ
E-mu Emulator III
(with optical disk)
E-mu Emulator II
GML 8200 Parametric EQ
Korg M1R Synth Module
Macintosh II Computer
Passport Master Tracks 4
Sequencing Software

Roland Rhodes Piano
Roland Juno (unidentified) Synth
Roland Super Jupiter Module
Roland R8M
Human Rhythm Composer
Yamaha REV7 Reverb

RED BUS STUDIO

SSL SL6000E Mixing Desk
Neil Grant Boxer II Monitors
Yamaha NS10 Monitors
Hired outboard