

A&M's New York Office Gives Company Strong East Coast Base

By JOSEPH IANELLO

■ NEW YORK — Ever since its inception over 17 years ago, A&M Records has been known as an "L.A. record company." With the strong encouragement of A&M president Gil Friesen, A&M's New York office has in the last year carved a substantial role for itself in both the company and the record industry as a whole. A&M is certainly now a national record company with a strong, visible and active presence in the east.

"When you have talented people and they're breaking records for you, they definitely act as a stimulus or catalyst for the entire organization and that's what's happening with our New York office," said Friesen. "We're very

excited about the job they're doing and it's great to be excited at a time when everyone else in the business is depressed."

The New York market is a stronghold for the two genres of music that the new acts broken by A&M represent: the black-

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oriented disco of Bell and James and the new wave rock of Joe Jackson and the Police. The predisposition of the crucial New York market to these two kinds of music was used to maximum advantage to break these acts nationally.

The Bell and James single predictably was first in heavy rotation on black stations when first released in September. "It didn't explode immediately but instead simmered for a long time and actually lost some emphasis from the rest of the company," said Michael Leon, director of east coast operations. "It wasn't until December when WABC became the first pop station to add it. In the meantime, it started to get played in clubs and then it started to sell. Our accounts began feeding us with information that said we had a smash."

Personnel Turnover

Boo Frazier, A&M director of east coast special projects for r&b, remembered how he played the record first in small retail stores to gauge reaction and on their recommendation, hit all the big black radio stations in New York. "They played it for six months before it popped wide open," he recalled, "then it spread around the country." The Bell and James single, "Livin' It Up (Friday Night)" went on to become a Top 20 hit.

Over the last year and a half there has been a marked turnover in personnel in New York. One exception is five-year veteran Rich Totoian, national director of album promotion. "Department by department," he said, "we now have the best record company in New York." He fully admitted the organizational problems that hampered operations in the past but asserted that they

are definitely solved. "We went through some pretty bad periods with morale," said Totoian. "There was no cohesiveness. Now there is a tremendous spirit de corps in the office. The best thing that ever happened to it is Michael Leon. His energy is just incredible."

Leon joined A&M in 1977 as its local promotion man in New York. Previously he held a similar position with Arista Records. In June of 1978, he was brought to Los Angeles as executive assistant to the president. After only seven months at that position, he was tapped to return to New York and head the company's east coast operations. An irrepressible booster of the Big Apple, Leon is quietly proud of his office's success. "I'm not a particularly visible record company executive," he said. "The way to raise the profile of this office is not by making scenes but by breaking records."

He saw the role of A&M New York expand within the company as the importance of New York expanded in the industry in recent years. "The emergence of disco and new wave as crucially important forms began in New York and both still have their greatest popular base here," he observed. "This had led to a resurgence of New York within the industry and it was important that A&M keep pace."

"The Police were a first for us in terms of a record company. We were educated by their management to some different techniques for merchandising and marketing a band. The rise of new wave music in the past year is a relatively new phenomenon in terms of marketing concepts for record companies. We weren't used to going to the small cult

clubs where these groups (the Police, Joe Jackson, etc.) played so we were educated there."

Because of the immediate reaction to radio airplay of the Jem import, A&M was forced to release the Police LP while they were going through a transitional period with their distribution system. "All our January releases were being held until February when our RCA distribution deal was complete," said Leon. "We were afraid we'd lose the momentum and sales started by the radio reaction to the import. There was real street level support for the band thanks to their manager, Miles Copeland, working them at small venues." "Roxanne," the Police single, went Top 40 while the album is approaching gold status.

New York Staff

Jackson, whose hit single from the LP "Look Sharp," "Is She Really Going Out With Him" is currently at #18 on the RW Top 100 chart with an add this week at WABC, started playing unannounced shows in New York to work out some loose ends before a national tour. On successive weeks he played the Mudd Club and Hurrah and immediately there was an incredible amount of interest among the rock press and those who attended the shows. "We had a meeting in the office and planned the sequence of events that would eventually lead to the Joe Jackson success story," said Leon. "Unfortunately, after a successful weekend at the Bottom Line which was broadcast live on WNEW-FM and a limited tour, Jackson came down with a severe case of laryngitis and had to cancel his return to New York at the Palladium. That's been rescheduled for September 29 and a new album will follow shortly thereafter."

The key members of the New York team are Totoian, Mark Spector in A&R, Gail Davis in artist development, Kathy Schenker in publicity, Rick Stone in promotion, Irv Brusso, director of east coast sales; and Mike Van Orsdale, east coast regional promotion director. The New York office is the nerve center of A&M's east coast regional operations and Van Orsdale and Brusso are based there.

Mark Spector moved to New York from Los Angeles early this year and Leon called his position "one of primary importance. The future of the company is in the music brought into it. Spector has found New York to have a high concentration of music's sophistication. It's logical and

long overdue for A&M to not only have a strong A&R presence here but also a presence with the ability to make a commitment."

Associate director of artist development Gail Davis started her career booking bands at the University of Maryland. She has strong contacts with the managers and agencies in New York and the concentration of concerts and club dates in the region makes her post one of crucial importance. Moreover, artist development vice president Martin Kirkup has delegated national responsibility to her for tours as important as those of Peter Frampton and Tim Curry.

Kathy Schenker, east coast director of publicity, says her present position "has afforded me a unique opportunity. This is an office where you are encouraged to participate and are given an overview. I don't have to blunder around in the dark." Schenker came to A&M after spending a year as personal publicist for Foreigner. Leon commented that Kathy's contribution and subsequent recognition has been the most immediate of anyone's here. The superlatives can't come quick enough. If they don't know she's the best, they must be sleeping."

"Rick Stone and Richie Gallo," Mich Leon said, "are the prototype of the radio/retail promotion team that should exist everywhere. Being close personal friends only makes that pair much more effective."

Big First Half

"I'm the street guy and Rick's the diplomat," says Gallo. Their success at translating radio play into sales and sales into radio play are the keystone of the success A&M had in New York with its rookie product this year.

"Marketing and promotion need to be a one/two punch," said Stone. "It started with Michael Leon and I and it has continued when I moved into Michael's job and Richie moved into my old one."

A&M's New York office passed the acid test in the first half of 1979. Not only did they play major roles in breaking Joe Jackson, the Police and Bell and James, they gave Supertramp a sellout in their first appearance ever in Madison Square Garden; they oversaw a precedent setting triple play live radio broadcast of three A&M acts playing live in three different venues; and they are now in the forefront of breaking Herb Alpert's current single "Rise."

"This is an office that really cooks," said Totoian. "We're as close to an ideal as you can get in this business."