

## OCCA Presentation, September 25, 2005

by Buddy Weaver, producer of Blue Star Records

Up-dated on December 10, 2010 with additional comments highlighted

### Square Dance Music Today

Our Square Dance recording industry, which by definition are the companies that pay to have music orchestrated for sale to the public (more on this later), well, this industry sells in only three formats: 45 RPM vinyl, Compact Disc and on-line MP3 downloads.

Since the early 1960's our traditional format has been 45-RPM vinyl. Even when it seemed that many callers were turning to Mini-Discs or Laptops – by last sales statistics provided by Hanhurst's, vinyl records represent 90% of new release sales. For every new release, vinyl = 90% of sales, CDs = 8% of sales, Mp3 = 2% of sales.

You may think that 45 RPM are a thing of the past but outside of Square Dance recordings, vinyl records are in demand especially with DJs and clubs; in Japan vinyl records are a billion dollar per year retail market.

The companies the make vinyl records, the pressing plants, have significantly decreased in number. The most recent plant to close is Universal Music in Gloversville, N.Y. – a plant that pressed vinyl going back to 78-RPM records. That plant was the biggest job provider in the area, and when they closed, employees who'd been there more than 25 years lost their local job. Universal outsource their records now.

The number of square dance record producers has also decreased. Many labels that were big, independent names are now under one owner – Chaparral, TNT, Hi Hat Rounds are owned by Tom and Pam Dillander, Tracy Brown, a traditional caller from Kentucky owns – Square Tunes, Big Mac, Thunderbird, Pioneer, Scope, Square L, Mustang, and other lesser known, formerly independent labels.

Blue Star, Hi Hat, Dance Ranch, Bogan, Lore, B-Sharp, Petticoat Patter, Swinging Square, Rockin A, EZ, Bob Cat, Blue Ribbon, and DJ – now fly under my Blue Star flag. Square dance vinyl sales are also down. According to Hanhurst’s Tape and Record Service, over a five-year period, vinyl sales dropped 37% since 1998. Bill Heyman believes the decline is much steeper especially when you consider a #1 “best seller” sells 15% of what it did in 1998.

In vinyl record production, a “first press” is the quantity of vinyl records manufactured for a new release when it’s first ordered. That first press has gone from 1200 records in 1980 to 150 today. Standing orders are half of what they were a few years ago; in fact a big seller today is equal to a standing order when I started, three years ago. This is a big problems for producers, because a constant number of records must be sold to pay for the orchestra, studio time, mastering and making of vinyl records; if the number is not met, you are in the red and I don’t know any producers who will stay in at a steady loss.

In 2010, an average first press of vinyl is 50-75 records and a best seller with Hanhurst’s Tape and Record Service is around sixty total units (vinyl, CD, & MP3). Most square dance producers are pressing vinyl only with Hanhurst’s, opting for a “press as needed” plan instead of standing orders. Due to the increased up-front cost associated with this

plan and low vinyl sales, most record companies do not make records. Further changing the landscape is the announcement that record turntables made for square dance use, will no longer be built.

Why the drop in sales??

1) Fewer callers today.

2) The loss of “home record players” – the dancers represented as much as 40% of my buyers fifteen years ago. The dancers won’t buy records, since they can’t play them.

3) Illegal copying of music also known as copyright violation. There are so many callers that record their records to MD or laptop and then sell the records at a discount. It’s illegal and it’s killing what little is left of our market.

Callerlab has added to its Code of Ethics, the following:

*“I will only perform music which has been obtained in a manner which properly and completely compensates the artist and producers responsible for it’s creation. I will not enable others to use copies of my music while I retain my ownership.”*

Sadly, Roundalab’s board has voted NOT to adapt the same policy and instead leaves it to each individual dance writer to address ethics.

Five years later, Roundalab still has not adapted a clear anti-piracy policy. Many cuers continue to be confused when it comes to music copyright laws.

A handout written by Bill Heyman a few years back for Hanhurst’s and Dosado.com stated that illegal music copying is done primarily by folks who don’t realize that what their doing is wrong and harmful to the record industry. There are others who continue to

make illegal copies fully aware of the foulness of their act. I've heard arguments that say, "Well, the technology is there to make copies and sell them or sell my original, so why not?" Friends, just because you can – it doesn't make it right!!

I believe square dance vinyl is on borrowed time. Like anything on it's way out, we begin to see "downsizing"; we are down to one record player manufacturer, Hilton Audio; we are down to one record wholesaler, Palomino Records, who is also the only vinyl pressing plant in the country to press small quantities regularly. I believe there will always be vinyl, but not square dance vinyl. Can we slow its demise?? Maybe, that depends on the integrity of our buying public's adherence to copyrights; it's through spreading the word, that we educate our buying public – callers.

Vinyl is viable right now and Blue Star-Hi Hat records are committed to pressing vinyl records. We will continue to be committed for the foreseeable future.

Blue Star continues to be pressed in vinyl, but with rare exceptions, Hi Hat is available as CD or MP3 only.

Moving away from vinyl lets look at digital formats, the most popular of which is CDs.

In 2001 there were 11 square dance companies producing CD singles; in 2005 there are 40 CD labels.

In all of 2001 there were 41 CD single releases; in first six months of 2005 there were 121.

In 2010, there are about 30 labels releasing music – every new release selling through dealers is done in CD format. Most “new” releases are digital re-masters of music formerly available only in vinyl; brand new music represents about 10% of every month’s total releases.

Historically, in 1962 the square dance recording industry began bringing many of it’s old hits from the 1950’s, that were on 78 RPM, back and releasing them as 45 RPM – history repeats itself as music from 45 RPM vinyl now becomes available on CD. Some songs have been done by many labels and producers know that sales of that song will be much less than an exclusive release; vinyl pressings by their minimum costs and anticipated limited sales are cost prohibitive, so the song will be done on CD. CDs are not only cost effective, but they hold 74 minutes of audio compared to a maximum 8 minutes on vinyl, for callers this is a bargain since both are the same price.

Another difference is audio quality. Vinyl records are studio recordings cut into lacquer then made into a “father” then made into a stamper; the process is like taking a photo, Xeroxing it, then making a copy of the copy, and so on. You lose a little with every generation. Bass for example, too much of it narrows the groove and will cause the needle to jump or skip – many of you know about that and have tried coins on the tone arm to correct that. By comparison, my CDs are straight from studio masters and can play every sound without adjustment for vinyl idiosyncrasies.

Other reasons CDs are the way to go:

- 1.They are lighter, smaller and stronger than records

- 2.They are inexpensive
- 3.They are now easy to adjust for speed, with so many players at or under \$100 that is easy to use for older fellows like myself.
- 4.They are playable in your home, your office, and your car, which makes it easier to practice. This convenience, has lead dancers to embrace CDs as their format of choice – in all overseas markets, CDs have replaced cassettes.

For every new release done in vinyl, CD, and MP3, CD sales represent 8% of total sales, but sales have remained steady over the past three years while vinyl has dropped. Dance Ranch CDs have seen an 80% increase in re-orders of CDs, which indicates that more callers are starting to use CDs and as they begin to do so, they look through existing releases to fill their case. Dance Ranch CDs put out 24 singing call/ extended hoedown combinations every year. On average, Blue Star and Hi Hat – both vinyl-producing labels – release 36 CDs in a year.

In 2010, there are two to three new CDs released each month from Blue Star, Hi Hat, and other sister labels – collectively. Twenty new CDs from my family of labels per year would be average.

Another digital format – MP3 have held steady in sales over the past three years. While more labels are beginning offer MP3 downloads, there is only one retail outlet. That fact alone may be why square dance MP3 has not and probably will not be a mainstream commodity; if that one retail outlet ceases so too will s/d MP3 sales. As a producer, I would not sell MP3 direct because quite frankly, sales of MP3 are so small. I passed on

the opportunity to sell MP3 direct. CDs are the digital format of choice for Blue Star, Dance Ranch, and Hi Hat.

In 2010, some producers have abandoned traditional dealers to sell their music directly to the caller as MP3 files delivered through the Internet or as a subscription service, where subscribers pay an up-front fee for music exclusive to members.

My original presentation continued with a talk on music showmanship. That has been omitted as it is now a larger topic discussion elsewhere.

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