

The Sound of *Follies*

It's a tricky proposition for a record producer – do you dare tamper with someone else's work? I've had to wrestle with this problem several times. Would I want someone tampering with my work? Not really. But it was different in the old days of cast albums. They were recorded in a day, mixed hurriedly in a day and out almost instantly on LP. When stereo came in, show albums in the late 1950s and through the mid-1960s were recorded on three-track tape. Eventually there were four tracks, then eight, then sixteen, then thirty-two, then forty-eight. But on three-track recordings everything was basically mixed and you had a little control over what was on each of those three tracks. If the engineers and producers were good at their jobs, the results were usually pretty terrific. One need only point to the classic Columbia albums produced by Goddard Lieberson. I would never have the chutzpah to touch a one of them. The cast albums of a smash hit like *Gypsy* or a huge flop like *Subways are for Sleeping* sound amazing even today. When I heard that a record producer had gone in and remixed *Gypsy* from the three-track album masters I scratched my head and thought, "Why? How dare you." And when I read his own notes about what he'd done, "fixing" a trumpet note that was apparently fine for composer Jule Styne and everyone else concerned (they certainly could have used the alternate take had they wanted to), and substituting one take of a line in a song sung by Merman for another unused take because he thought it had more emotion, well, I couldn't believe it really. Goddard Lieberson's work on *Gypsy* needed no fixing – it's one of the greatest cast albums ever made. It just needed a good remastering, which it never got. I wondered if that producer would like it if another producer came in and "fixed" some of his cast albums. I don't think so.

When I reissued *Subways are for Sleeping* on CD I refused to let anyone master it but my people. I persisted until Sony sent me the tapes. Not only did they send me the album masters, they sent me everything including the multi-tracks. I could have remixed them, but why? The original album was perfect. But there have been cast albums through the years that weren't well mixed, that had major flaws, where there was simply no technology or time to fix them. And that's where decisions come in. Do you tamper or don't you?

I first had that decision to make on *Promises, Promises*. It had had two CD releases, but suddenly the rights were available to me. I hated the sound of both the Ryko and Varese releases – forget the half-tone flat pitch problems of leading man Jerry Orbach and, to a lesser extent, Edward Winter and A. Larry Haines – the CDs just sounded dull and lifeless which is exactly what *Promises, Promises* should never sound like. I couldn't understand it really. The LP had some oomph and life (as well as the pitch problems, obviously) – in fact, it won a Grammy. But again, hastily mixed, with some occasional weird balance problems, the strings on the right, and a few other oddities. I saw no reason to simply reissue what had been out twice. But I had them send me the asset list and I saw they not only had the album masters, but the original eight-track edited session tapes, and one forty-eight track digital tape. The latter really piqued my interest, so I had all the tapes pulled, picked them up and began to do my homework.

It turned out that the original album masters for *Promises, Promises* had actually never been used. Ryko had done a remix from those eight-track session masters, but they'd done the remix based on matching the original, flaws and all, right down to strings on the right. To match the original mix, they had a cassette of the original LP on the forty-

eight track tapes, so they could go back and forth. A cassette! So, the first good news was that I would be able to issue the original album to CD for the very first time. But that wasn't what interested me. What interested me was going back to the eight-tracks and doing a new mix and, with today's technology, fixing the pitch problems and making that glorious band sound as good as it possibly could. The result was, I thought, pretty amazing, and thankfully everyone pretty much concurred. The singers were all on perfect pitch, but we hadn't just turned on a machine to do it – we did it with tender and loving care, doing only the notes that were off pitch and sometimes just syllables, always remaining true to the singer and never allowing it to sound processed. We put the strings back on the left, we were able to get much more clarity from the band and singers, and bring out bits of the orchestration that were muffled or buried. It was a wonderful experience, and I felt comfortable with it because we also included the album mix on a separate CD.

Then I did a remix of *Sugar*. This time the problems were much less but, for me, just as egregious. The enormous amount of washy Mitch Miller reverb (he was the producer), which made everything sound completely weird, and the band occasionally drowning out the singers. Again, the result was very pleasing and the album received great reviews.

After that, I really didn't think about doing anything else. The ones I'd really want to do all belonged to one label that I knew would never allow it. But about a year ago, I began to think about *Follies*. I'd seen the original production and it was the single most brilliant piece of musical theater I'd ever seen – and that hasn't changed to this day. I'd been licensing a bunch of soundtracks from Capitol and had a really good relationship there. I asked if they'd ever consider licensing *Follies* to me even though the CD had never been out of print. About six months went by without any answer, so I asked again. This time three months went by without an answer, so I asked again. Two days later I got my answer – yes. Of course, I had no idea what their inventory would be and I wasn't going anywhere near it if they didn't have the original multi-track tapes. It took a while to get the inventory list but the news was good: The album masters were there, a couple of digital copies of the album masters were there, and the original eight-track edited session masters were there. We were a go and I had the eight-tracks transferred into a Pro Tools session.

I alerted Stephen Sondheim as to my intentions and he seemed pleased that we were going to try and make *Follies* sound better. I had no idea if we could or couldn't. For years the general thought was that the recording itself was terrible – the session had been extremely long (four three-hour sessions), no one was happy about the cuts being made to the score, and everything was just rushed. The album was mixed in a day and sounded like it, with odd mixing choices and blends, vocals sometimes too low in the mix, brass suddenly blaring out of nowhere and everything sounding indistinct and muddy. If it was a badly engineered recording, what could we really do? So, I had my engineer, John Adams, do a mix of the opening number, "Prologue/Beautiful Girls." He sent it to me in an e-mail, along with one sentence: "I think we can really help this." I listened and the minute I heard the tympani roll into those first two glorious chords I knew we were going to be able to work some real wonders. Suddenly everything was clear and crisp and clean. I heard details in the orchestrations I'd never heard before. Then the vocals began and it was again so crisp and clean and clear and when the ensemble came in I just got all choked up. It was

amazing-sounding. We compared it to the original and the difference was, to my ears at least, astounding. Hearing the original was like having your sinuses clogged up. Hearing the new mix was like suddenly being able to breathe clearly.

As is our custom, John would then do four mixes at a time and send them to me. Each one was like hearing the song for the first time. I gave some notes and he made the adjustments. When that process was through, we then spent one long session finessing everything down to the last detail, getting it all to sound as good as we possibly could. We made fun discoveries along the way, like finding there was a piano part in "Losing My Mind" that was not used in the mix of the original LP at all – it simply wasn't there. Finally having it, as minor as it was, really helped. But there was one piece of the puzzle still to come.

The original eight-track edited tapes didn't have "One More Kiss" because it wasn't included on the original LP. The point of editing the multi-tracks (cutting off the slates, doing any edits for pick-ups and such and getting rid of all the false starts) was so that the mix to two-track was already edited and the two-track would need no further editing and could go right to LP mastering. For the CD release, "One More Kiss" had been found and included. I am still not sure if someone actually mixed it from the eight-track original or if there had been a rough mix done at the time – whatever it was, it sounded like the rest of the album: Not great. But we didn't have it. And I was petrified we would have to use what was used on the previous CD, which would not sound so hot next to our new mixes.

The next day, I asked Capitol to please do one more search to try and find "One More Kiss." They agreed. And they found it – one small box of the unedited eight-track session master for that song. It was mislabeled as a "soundtrack." We had that transferred. Interestingly, that one song had the slates, a few false starts, one take that only got about thirty seconds in and broke down, then the keeper take, along with a pick-up at the end. There's some fun stuff on the talkback with producer Dick Jones – it's pretty clear it was the end of the long four-session day and he didn't even want to record it and everyone sounds very tense. We mixed it and it came out really well.

At the end of the day, we knew we'd done right by the recording and Sondheim's brilliant score. It was, for me at least, a complete revelation. And imagine after forty years finding out that Andy Wiswel's engineering was first-rate and the problems had all been in the hurriedly done mix and the album's original muddy and unfocused EQ. For anyone who wants the original, it's easily available. For those who are open to a new take on a favorite score in a recording that's always had a love/hate relationship with its fans, we're hoping you're as pleased with the result as we were. It was a true labor of love and I've now got the *Follies* album I always wanted the *Follies* album to be.

Bruce Kimmel
Los Angeles, CA
July 18, 2012