

# the rise and fall of the record business

WRITTEN BY Alexandra Scott-Coulter

Sigma Sound Studios in Philadelphia.



I HAD THE PLEASURE OF MEETING WITH SOME LONG-TIME acquaintances from the music industry recently to talk about how the record business in Philadelphia has changed over the years: Joe Tarsia, owner and chief engineer of the legendary Sigma Sound Studios in Philadelphia and New York; Skip Drinkwater, producer of more than 70 albums, with artists such as Lee Ritenour, Taj Mahal, Herbie Hancock, and Moby; Phil Nicolo, engineer and producer for the likes of John Lennon, Bob Dylan, and Bon Jovi; and Rob Hyman and Eric Bazilian from the group The Hooters.

The group mused over how much music had influenced the lives of teenagers. Kids across the country were finding out what to wear, what to listen

to, and what to dance to from the popular teen music show *American Bandstand*, originally broadcast from Philadelphia from 1952 to 1964.

Joe Tarsia got his start as an assistant engineer at Cameo/Parkway Records. The record company was a segue for many acts that came through Philadelphia to

get on American Bandstand, such as Bobby Rydell, Dee Dee Sharp, and the Dovells.

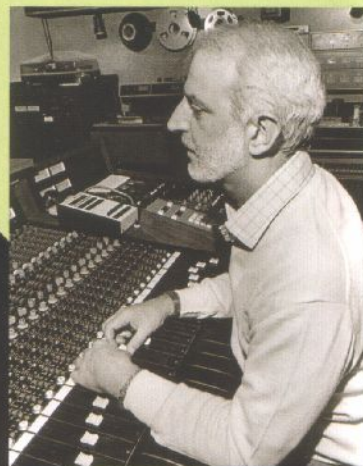
In those days, the record business revolved around the song and when the teenagers on Bandstand picked up on Hank Ballard's "Twist," Dick Clark, the host, sensing the phenomenon, tried to get Ballard to appear on the show ... to no avail.

Tarsia told the story: "The owner of a local poultry shop somehow convinced the people at Cameo/Parkway to try his employee, Ernest Evans, on a sound-alike track of the 'Twist.' The vocal was perfect and the finished recording was a dead ringer for the Hank Ballard original. When Dick Clark's wife got a look at Mr. Evans, she said, 'He looks like Fats Domino. Why don't you call him Chubby

Checker?' Chubby was happy to appear on Bandstand doing the Twist!" And so began the career of Ernest Evans as "Chubby Checker."

In 1968, Tarsia opened Sigma Sound Studios in Philadelphia with the latest 8-track recorder. Soon after, Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, with a passion for Philadelphia and an ear for talent, formed Philadelphia International Records.

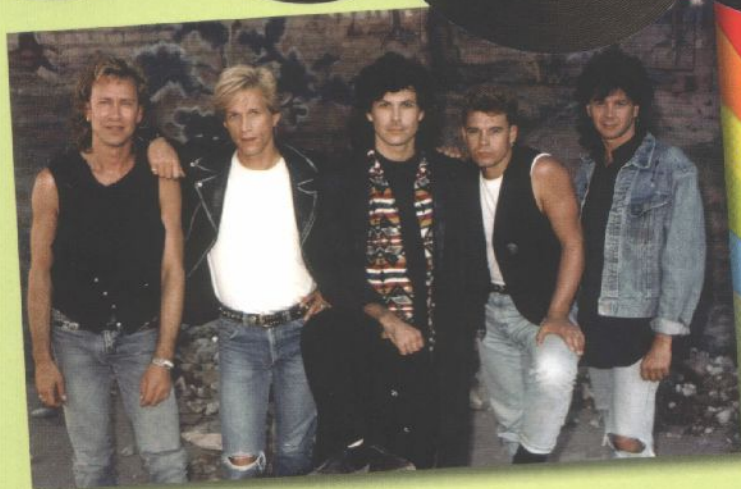
Joe Tarsia working at a custom MCI console.



Left to right: Andy Kravitz, Gary Busey, Ringo Starr, Jerry Williams, Taj Mahal, Nils Lofgren, and Skip Drinkwater, center front.



From left: John Lilley, Rob Hyman, Eric Bazilian, Dave Uosikkinen, and Fran Smith, Jr.





Top to bottom: Phil Nicolo with George Clinton of Parliament; Nicolo with sound mixer; Nicolo in his studio; Nicolo with Papa Roach.



Working with Tarsia since the early '60s, they decided to record their acts at Sigma Sound. Sigma was home to many top artists of "The Sound of Philadelphia," such as The O'Jays, Lou Rawls, Grover Washington, Jr., and Teddy Pendergrass.

Tarsia kept Sigma (in Philly and New York) state of the art with the latest recording innovations. This, combined with his technique of using the sound of the room to create an open, ambient quality, made The Sound of Philadelphia distinctive. "It wasn't unusual," Tarsia said, "to hear guitars in the piano microphones and drums in the strings. It was all part of the sound."



Skip Drinkwater began his career in the early '60s while still in high school. One of his friends played the guitar and Drinkwater said to him and some other friends, "Why don't we get into the record business?" The answer was, "Sure." They wrote a couple of songs and recorded them.

When it came time to get a recording contract, Drinkwater looked in the Yellow Pages. A phone call got Drinkwater a meeting at Jamie Records and, within weeks, they were in the record business. Many young musicians began that way. Daryl Hall and John Oates, friends of Drinkwater, responded favorably to his suggestion that they write songs together. That started their long and successful career together.

Phil Nicolo was still in high school and enamored with the technology. He and his brother set up a recording studio in their parents' basement. Nicolo learned his trade through the '70s, hanging out at the famous Power Station Recording Studio in New York City. It wasn't long before Nicolo opened a studio in



Radnor, and then, in 1980, opened Studio 4 Recording in Philadelphia, producing acts from around the country.

With 16 and 24 tracks the norm in those days, there were a lot of people involved in the recording process. A producer was essential. Arranging studio time, hiring arrangers and studio musicians, and keeping track of the huge budget was only the beginning. A good record producer would leave his creative stamp on the end product.

Tarsia has known a lot of producers in his time and commented, "A producer needed a sense of where things belonged, to create a feeling of warmth in your face from the music." Nicolo chimed in, "You just know when it's right when the drums feel punchy, the bass is kicking, the guitar is rocking, the vocal is right there in the mix!"

After the Beatles broke, the artist became more important than the song in the record business. In the '70s, FM radio was coming into its own. People were tuning in to hear the shows of a favorite disc jockey. Album-oriented rock (AOR) allowed the DJ to play more cuts from the album. Kids were rushing in droves to Korvette's Department Store to buy albums. This new album business went from 300 million in revenue in the mid-'60s into the billions by the end of the decade.

In the '70s, most young people were crazy about music, including Rob Hyman and Eric Bazilian. "Music was more important to us than eating," Bazilian said.

Hyman added, "As musicians, you got the bug. You saw people doing it; you heard them on the radio. You said, 'I can do

that.' And you dreamed about making a record and getting a big record label."

When Bazilian and Hyman finally got the recording contract with a band called Baby Grand, they made two records that didn't sell. Bazilian and Hyman were surprised to find themselves broke. They lined up gigs so they could make the money to produce another record.

As the '80s dawned, they chose Nicolo's new professionally designed Studio 4 Recording in Philadelphia. Hyman remembers that playing gigs and recording all night was "fruitful and wonderful." They released the record on an independent label. This launched their career as The Hooters.

**“ MTV came on the scene and turned the record business into more of an entertainment business. You could do a good video of a bad song.”**

As the '80s moved on, MTV came on the scene. It helped build the momentum of The Hooters, but it turned the record business into more of an entertainment business. Now, Hyman said, "you could do a good video of a bad song."

When the technology improved again, smaller and cheaper, everyone could make records. However, they all agreed that just because you could make a record didn't

mean you should. In any event, the new technology closed the doors of many recording studios. The advent of the Internet and downloadable music shut down most record stores. DJs have been replaced by uninterrupted satellite music. Bands today can make their own record, post it for sale on the Internet, or bring the CDs to gigs to sell.

Record labels have become generally irrelevant, and most of the independent labels have folded.

Though the record business model no longer exists, there's still money to be made in music. Joe Tarsia runs Sigma Noise Consulting where he advises on products and design services. Skip Drinkwater is always on the lookout for new talent and does artist and repertoire consulting. Phil Nicolo maintains a recording studio in Conshohocken where he works a brisk schedule. Rob Hyman and Eric Bazilian have had lucrative careers writing memorable songs for others and they continue to tour with The Hooters.

In the end this is a story of people, and as long as there are those with passion and creativity in their hearts, there will always be music. "When the rhythm section locks the groove, the hair on the back of my head stands up," Tarsia said.

Nicolo added, "Pick up a guitar and feel the power. There's nothing like getting musicians in the room, playing." ❦

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