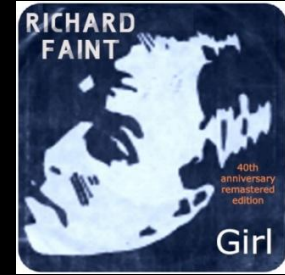


Recording in the 80's

It's now been 40 years since the recording of Richard Faint's classic 45 'Girl' (b/w Hurt Again) so I thought it would be worthwhile engaging in a little bit of nostalgic reflection on the process.



"The year was 1980 and I was a musician living in South London – having moved there from Scotland to follow my dreams of songwriting success. I had demoed many songs in small studios around Clapman, Lambeth and Lavender Hill and taking these around the various publishers and record companies in the West End - as you did in those days – and getting told that 'demos had to be almost like masters' to get record company attention. I wanted to move up the quality ladder so when I went back to Scotland for a break I thought I would record several tracks there, eg hire a good studio with good musicians and spend the budget and time as well as I could.

I had heard that a well-known local musician called Dougie Campbell had opened a studio called Heavenly Sounds (in a converted church obviously) in Greenock and was doing a good job producing local talent. I knew Dougie from playing on the local pub circuit (I think he was once in a band called 'the Marksmen') and remembered that he was an ace guitarist so was sure he would do a good job at production. He had established a partnership with a bass player called Alan Mackie whom I also knew, and both were playing in a well-known band called Panache at that time. So it looked promising.

I played some tapes to them and together we chose two slightly contrasting songs to record using their network of musicians. I can't remember all their names (I remember Davey Watson as the drummer and Dougie played guitar) but I struck it lucky that they chose the best local guys for the session with Alan opting to engineer/produce the initial backing tracks.

They had already made some useful inputs to the song arrangements of the two tracks. 'Girl' had started out five years earlier and had been worked up into a sort of light disco track with an instrumental break (for what would turn out to be an epic sax solo) and 'Hurt Again' was a new wave rocker that would feature a great guitar solo of Dougie's.

The backing tracks were recorded live (drums, bass, Fender Rhodes and guitar) over a four-hour session on a Saturday afternoon onto the TEAC four track, mixed through an old Canary desk. This primitive desk has now gained legendary status as it had a wonderful warmth about it that glued things together without much eq or compression. This was then bounced down to a Revox two track and that tape was then put back on the TEAC for the overdubs (the stereo tracks aligned with the four track heads of the TEAC) for the synth/organ/string machine and the vocals. The instrumental section was going to be key to the song and Dougie asked me 'What do you want to put in this bit? A guitar solo?' Luckily, I had obtained the services of a friend of mine - the great Glasgow sax player Micky Deans and he came in and nailed it on the third pass – with no edits. 'Hurt Again' was completed in much the same way and the tracks were ready to mix over the next weekend.

It's maybe worth dwelling on the equipment we had back then. Compared to today when we have more processing power in a laptop than a good 24 track studio would have had.

Then, we had just one reverb unit and one delay (echo) which I think was built into an amp. No compressors or limiters. The monitor speakers were Tannoy dual concentric so they were very good but everything else was primitive including the desk which really was designed for live use and not for recording.

They say that Sergeant Pepper was recorded on 4 track— though I believe that it was actually two top quality Ampex four tracks that Abbey Road used - as well as lots of time (and talent) to create that masterpiece. My two songs cost £40 for the recording time, £60 for musicians plus £10 for tapes and other incidentals. All done over three half days.

Hearing it now – it's of course a bit dated as songs recorded on four track sound a certain way as it highlights the compression caused by the 'bounces' - but also there is a character and certain quality that still rewards a listen.

On completion the songs took a life of their own – in fact several lives! To describe this fully would require an article in its own right on the ups and downs, broken promises, optimism, ambitions and let downs of the record biz. Usually the opportunities originated from ads in the trade press which was the Melody Maker in those days. There were agreements with many publishers in London, Holland and Berlin and interest in selling the tapes on to record companies in the US and later even the possibility that Julio Iglesias and Brian Ferry would cover the songs! However, the first concrete offer came from a start up record label in Wales, called Tadpole, which pressed 1,000 copies of the '45 and thus it became my first vinyl release record. Over the years many of these were sold, though some were given away as gifts and promos. Also, the songs were licensed to Rediffusion who then operated a background music system that was used in shops and airports round the world. It was a thrill hearing the song on local radio too – Radio Clyde featured it quite heavily in their night time slots“

Now 40 years on these songs are still a feature on some 80's streaming playlists and apparently recently have been played all over China. Collectors can buy the few copies still available from specialist stores on the web.. It's a piece of living history of the indy music and record making in the 80's.

Richard Faint