

“Lincoln Mayorga and Distinguished Colleagues”-- Lincoln Mayorga (1968)

Added to the National Registry: 2014

Essay by A.M. Thompson (guest post)*



Lincoln Mayorga

Lincoln Mayorga’s range as a musician is matched only by his commitment to advancing recording technology. Mayorga, together with childhood friend Doug Sax and his brother Sherwood, cofounded Sheffield Lab. “Lincoln Mayorga and Distinguished Colleagues” marked a pivotal achievement in the advancement of direct-to-disc recording, bringing the technology into the audiophile era.

Mayorga’s musical contributions as a pianist, arranger, and composer range from classical to pop and rock and roll. He helped arrange and play accompanying piano parts for former Hollywood High School friends the Four Preps in the 1950s, played as a session musician for Phil Ochs, Sam Cooke, and Barbra Streisand (among others) throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and returned to his roots as a concert pianist in the late 1970s. This entire history comes into play on his 1968 release “Lincoln Mayorga and Distinguished Colleagues.” The record features Mayorga’s own compositions “Grand Boulevard” and “Learning to Be Kind,” as well as jazz arrangements of hit songs of the era, including The Beach Boys’ “Good Vibrations,” The Beatles’ “She’s Leaving Home,” and Bob Dylan’s “Don’t Think Twice.”

Until “Distinguished Colleagues,” LP records were typically pressed from original masters onto magnetic tape, unlike 78 RPM records that were pressed from original disc masters without transfers. As an experienced recording engineer, Sherwood Sax noted that tape could potentially introduce phase shifts, which may be inaudible to most but detectable by more perceptive listeners. Tests by Mayorga and the Sax brothers in 1959 using technology from the 1920s-1940s showed that direct-to-disc recording technology still offered impressive fidelity on 78 RPM records, and they endeavored to bring the technology into the high fidelity LP era with modern equipment.

Using a Westrex stereo cutter, a Scully lathe, and a Telefunken condenser microphone, Mayorga and Doug Sax booked the Radio Recorders studio in Los Angeles, but their initial efforts to adapt lathe-cut records to vinyl LP were unsuccessful, plagued by background noise and distortion on the recordings. Mayorga and Sax decided they’d have to build their own studio and

together, with Sherwood, they founded The Mastering Lab, the first mastering room in the United States. As they began producing direct-to-disc audiophile LP recordings, they labeled them under the Sheffield-Laboratory Series, which became Sheffield Lab.

Recording direct-to-disc requires an advanced skillset from start to finish. Musicians must be adept enough to play a piece in one take. Recording engineers have to master the recording in real time, ensuring the right balance of levels prior to the lathe cutting the disc. Sometimes, in the process of recording “Distinguished Colleagues,” a mistake might happen 20 minutes into the recording, and the entire session would have to be scrapped and restarted from the top. Mayorga recorded the record with an entire orchestra, which meant there could be some pretty grueling sessions. These challenges, though, were worth the risk to Mayorga and the Sax brothers, and “Lincoln Mayorga and Distinguished Colleagues” represented the apotheosis of a decade-long pursuit.

“Distinguished Colleagues” blended the best of 1960s pop with the timeless skill of classically trained musicians. Its contributions launched Sheffield Lab into decades of unique success that continues to spotlight the integrity of analog direct-to-disc stereo recordings.

Andrew M. Thompson is an MLIS student at UCLA who is interested in description and access issues for published research and archives. He’s also had experience working in publishing, radio, and oral history.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.