

**This interview with
LINCOLN MAYORGA
was conducted by the Library of Congress on
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Lincoln Mayorga

LOC: In an online narrative you wrote about the creation of Sheffield Lab, you mention that “one afternoon in 1959” you and Doug Sax went to Electrovox studios. Had you done research and scoped out that facility prior to your visit?

LM: I had been there before in 1955 with a singer for some demos so I was aware of the place. It looked like an old-time radio studio—which is what it was. Equipment from the 1930s and 40s. It had had the same ownership since 1931.

We [LM and Doug Sax] had been speculating about what went on with tape recording. It occurred to us that if one went direct to disc we could bypass the negative qualities of tape. And that dawned on me one day when we were in the neighborhood.

The studio had not changed in decades. We went in, they were not busy, they were delighted to talk to us. We asked them if they would let us cut a demo disc but NOT the way they normally would, but record directly to their cutting system.

Their equipment was amazingly well preserved, though antique. The microphones were RCA ribbon microphones, one-time broadcast standard. Their lathe was from the age of early talking pictures, around 1929.

So, without much ado, we cut a disc.

When we were done, I didn’t want to play it on their equipment. I thought their tone arm was too heavy and I didn’t want to do damage to the disc. So, we went back to my place and played the disc on my system. And I was astonished! How natural, how present, the sound was.

And from that, we drew a lot of wrong conclusions.

LOC: “Wrong conclusions”?

LM: We assumed that modern equipment would work better. But a lot of LA studios were not necessarily well-maintained. We cut some Chopin pieces and the cutting lathe had a low rumble, a 60-cycle hum.

Some of these things could not be heard, then when we exposed it, to get the best dynamic range, you'd hear faults.

We needed our own studio, our own equipment. And we thought, "There might be a business there...something the industry can use."

We built a mastering room. Sherwood Sax [brother of Doug] built it for us. We purchased equipment from different sources, some used, some at auction. Sherwood designed the all-tube electronics. And we worked with so many artists: The Who, Harry Nilsson, Streisand, George Harrison, Elton John, Three Dog Night.

They brought their tapes and we would cut them their LP master and then enhance it with a flexibility that the major studios did not have. They could not make the modifications like we could.

We became quite a business and it was up until last April when Doug passed away.

LOC: You also say that the early results of direct-to-disc "literally" knocked you to the floor. Is that true?

LM: Yeah, when we brought the test disc to my place, I plugged it and I couldn't hear anything. I thought I had disconnected something; there was nothing but silence. Then all of a sudden, the Steinway Grand came on and it was pure music! So beautiful, so magical. Not a single sound until the music started.

Don't worry, I didn't hurt myself [Laughs].

LOC: After those initial recordings, how did you refine the process of DTD recording?

LM: We learned to book a good studio, it would be that simple. There were many problems with area studios. We spent some money and had success.

All cutting systems are not equal. At that time, Americans mostly use the Western Electric system but, in Germany and England, they used a Neumann cutting head, which was far superior.

I discovered the Neumann via British Decca recordings; they sounded a hell of a lot better. It's a different design of the cutter, and it's far more accurate in regard to what was on the tape.

When we went to equip our own masters, Doug's older brother, Sherwood, designed the electronics for the console for the mastering lab. His electronics: all you can say is that there was a transparency to the sound. To this day, people still compare Doug's mastering lab and the sound of that room with others around the country....

I brought in a lot of clients since I was a concert pianist and was employed by the motion picture studios as a pianist. Some of the artists I knew, and I would bring them in. We got the business going.

LOC: How did you decide on the morning glory logo for Sheffield Lab?

LM: I started recording classical music in mid-60s and had a little company I called Sheffield and its logo was a picture of the town tower of Sheffield, England.

Later, people assumed that all Sheffield recordings were direct-to-disc but they weren't and there was a lot of confusion, so I renamed the direct-to-disc company in the mid-70s. It became Sheffield Lab.

A friend of mine was a photographer and she took a picture of a morning glory. And the popular design of early Edison record players had what they called the "morning glory horn." It was a 1910-1920 fancy-horn style.

So, that became our new trademark for Sheffield Lab and I changed the name of the conventional record company to TownHall.

TownHall remains with catalog of chamber music.

LOC: Can you walk me through the song selection process for the "Colleagues" album?

LM: We wanted to reflect the era and use songs that were of fine quality, not songs that would be forgotten, ones that would be around. The Beatles, Joni Mitchell. Music that would endure. I think we made the right decision—all those tunes indeed have lived. The program that was was interesting and had the quality of permanence.

LOC: Here's a tough and very unfair question: do you have a favorite track on "Colleagues"?

LM: Well...most fun was "Limehouse Blues." It was a mix of '20s and rock and roll.

Beyond that, I can't really say. I'm fond of that whole project.

LOC: In the sessions for "Colleagues," there must have been a few heartbreaking moments when an otherwise wonderful take was ruined and had to be discarded. Were there?

LM: Somethings fell apart sometimes, obviously toward end of the disc. You'd get a strong take, 20-odd minutes, and, then,...it would have to be thrown out.

I remember once with the Los Angeles Philharmonic.... When you are working 100 musicians, the whole process is a little frightening. And they are all nervous.

Once we were doing "Afternoon of the Faun," and flute player didn't come in. I don't know why, or what happened, if she misread her charts.... No one was angry but an over 20-minute duration had to be scrapped. The next take was fine.

I remember once walking into a session and one of the musicians saying to me, "Do we have to do this?"

You know, as a group you kind of pull together. In jazz, in swing with Harry James, in the rock things, on my albums, instead of being careful or cautious, the musicians took chances, swung out, improvised. By and large, they put out, they didn't hold back or pussy foot.

Interestingly, the most nervous are usually the string players, their bows can shake a little, and they aren't in control of their sound. One of the sides on "Vol. 2," on one of the Beatles songs with a string quartet, the violinist and cellist played timidly and they just didn't have the feeling.

And we knew we were going to have to do that over, it was going to cost us, we were going to have to go to our own wallets for that one.

Once, there was a producer who listened to a [timid] track and said to me, “You should have had So-and-so to play it.”

I said, “That is So-and-so!”

LOC: Did I read at one time that you had negative feelings about digital recordings? How do you feel about this now “norm”?

LM: Yeah, though I have to say the digital technology has improved. There are a lot of people who are philosophically opposed to storing and reconstituting sound. To them, it’s not an appealing concept. But, as the technology improves, I can be fooled. And they will play me something and I won’t know.

But I do know this: when I’m at home and I put on a record, the ones I like, the ones I think are good quality, are always analog LPs....of course, that may also be because they are all by old friends.

LOC: Direct-to-disc is still not common despite its superior sound. Is this only due to the cost involved?

LM: Yes, and the limitations of the quantity you can reproduce because your masters wear out.

I’m skeptical of long-playing LPs and people who say the sound is better. I think one of the things they love is handling the record, the ritual of pulling it out and putting it on a turntable. It’s almost like going to church, there’s a religious aspect to it.

Most engineers prefer digital. Of course, many long-playing records today are all made from digital masters anyway—we are fooling ourselves.

LOC: Who would you love to hear recorded direct-to-disc that you haven’t recorded or crossed paths with yet?

LM: I love symphony orchestras, of course. The Chicago Symphony was our favorite. I’m pleased with the LA Symphony recordings we did. I’m happy with the Moscow recordings we did.

I have spoken with Joni Mitchell before about recording with us but it never came to pass. Busy, busy, busy. Lionel Richie expressed interest once and I spoke with his manager but he said, “If you saw his schedule....”

LOC: Can you tell me a little bit about Doug Sax?

LM: Doug Sax was a very colorful character. He had a wacky sense of humor, so silly. But he knew how to master records. He had great ears, even in his late 70s. A great mastering engineer. There’s a difference between if it’s mastered very well or just well. He didn’t do it dramatically, he just knew how to tweak things to get the best possible sounds.

I knew him since we were 12. We had lots of fights and disagreements but... We schemed and dreamed when we were in college, “Wouldn’t it be great....”

If there was something good happening, we'd say "Start the lathe!" Or if something bad happened, we'd say "Stop the lathe!" [Laughs].