

# Dave's Sunburst Memories

## Producing for Rhino Records

By around 1986, Rhino Records and Home Video were bringing in a good bit of work, much of it simple promotional products that had to be creatively and quickly produced. Once a month, I put together a “themed” new-releases recording for record distributors that had to be funny, but also had to incorporate excerpts from that month’s releases. They decided to put me on retainer, so that I’d be available to do a near-constant stream of projects. The music-recording side of the company liked what I was sending out, and when they found out I had a film production degree, they began to get me to put together elaborate promotional videos for conventions like the NARM (National Association of Record Merchants) Show. These were great fun, and I got to write and film some wacky projects:

- When Rhino moved to their new, larger office building, I filmed a “tour” video which included footage of lab tests to see how long subjects could listen to William Shatner singing before their heads exploded. The Chef Boyardee spaghetti sauce we used looked perfect. I was also pleased that Edgar Winter was so easily talked into wearing a spandex space suit while playing saxophone in a closet with an alien.
- When Rhino merged with Warner Bros, we rented out an event venue and filmed faux wedding home video between a Rhino in a wedding dress and a tuxedoed Road Runner. All of the Rhino luminaries were there, and each got a spot in the video. Dr. Demento especially enjoyed his bit, giving some Warner executives in suits a hot-foot with real matches.
- One of my NARM promos was a black-and-white, starkly ridiculous parody of a Bergman-style art film (did I mention I went to film school?). My cameraman submitted it to The Bay Area film commission, and it ended up beating out the Lucasfilm entrant for the best-short promo “Joey” award.
- Richard Foos, Rhino’s co-director, had me put together a project called “Minute Movie Masterpieces,” which was like a super-compact “Cliff’s Notes” of classic films. I edited 30 milestone movies like “Birth of a Nation,” “The Third Man” and “Citizen Kane” down to one minute each, with the plots

explained by speed-talking narrators. It was silly, but it still won Stereo Review Magazine's "Best Instructional Video" award for 1988.

- Bob and I both worked (on different songs) for an album of songs sung entirely by wrestlers. Foos was a big wrestling fan, so we had Jesse Ventura in to do a song, as well as some other big names. A highlight for me was making a Cindy-Lauper-style arrangement of "Wrestlers Just Wanna Bust Heads" that featured a sampled, grunting-in-pain keyboard solo. Campos Burritos down the street supplied the nacho chips I used for bone breaking sounds. One of the nicest wrestlers was the Samoan, a positively huge man who—as it turned out—lived not far from me. He told me that his family always got together on Sundays at a neighborhood park in North Hollywood, and he invited me to come hang out. They were all really sweet, but that was the largest bunch of individuals I've ever met. At six feet/200 pounds, I was dwarfed by even his seven and eight-year-old cousins.

### Elvira, Mistress of the Dark

Besides the promo work, Rhino also had me producing some of their in-house projects. One of these was a double album of classic Halloween hits, featuring between-song banter by local TV personality Elvira "Mistress of the Dark." Her real name was Cassandra Peterson, and she was a redhead, not at all like her horror-vamp persona. "The whole character is the black wig and the push-up bra," she said. But in addition to recording the bumper bits, we had to recreate a few old hits that were either no longer available or were being offered only at licensing fees which put them beyond the album's budget. One of these was the theme from the film, "The Blob," a kitschy lounge-jazz tune we (the Big Daddy guys) recorded as "The Five Blobs." Another was a new recording of Bobby "Boris" Pickett re-creating his 1962 smash, "The Monster Mash"

### Bobby "Boris" Pickett

By the late 80's, the guy who'd recorded "The Monster Mash" was a truck driver in Seattle. We flew Pickett down from Washington to do the lead, and paid for his part in the project by simultaneously doing a Monster-Mashy jingle for the Sears Halloween shop. He was game for all of it, but hanging out with him was kind of sad; it was hard not to forget that this guy's life had peaked when he was 20. He seemed a little depressed out of nostalgia, standing in the studio, singing the song

again. We re-recorded the tracks as old-school as possible, and ended up with something nearly indistinguishable from the original. I remember putting together the sound effect montage at the beginning of the track (chains, bubbling lab equipment, creaking coffin door, etc.). I'd been snow-skiing the previous winter, and I still had snow chains in the trunk of my car, I made the lab bubbles by blowing into a Coke Slurpee from 7-11 down the street. And though we had a few vinyl "Sound Effects" albums, none of them had an appropriate creaking door. I was stymied, trying to duplicate the sound, until—while thinking—I leaned back in my studio chair, which produced the exact creak necessary.

As far as I know, the Elvira-album version of Monster Mash was the one you heard on the radio on Halloween for years, since it was the only version out on CD at the time.

### Mamie Van Doren

One of the other "make-it-sound-like-the-original" projects was an album of 50's movie songs by former screen-scorcher starlet Mamie Van Doren, who was kind of third-chair Hollywood bombshell behind Marilyn Monroe and Jane Mansfield. The album ("The Girl Who Invented Rock and Roll") only contained songs from her old movies, and I'm pretty sure Rhino was only able to talk her into coming in and singing them by simultaneously offering her a chance to put out an album of new music. At the time, Tina Turner's "What's Love Got to Do With It" was everywhere, and I think Mamie was fantasizing about a comeback along similar lines. So we did both projects at once, a low-fi batch of 50's jazzy musical numbers, and a hi-tech, slick EP of 80's pop. Both turned out swell, for what they were, but she was no Tina Turner.

### The Turtles

Harold Bronson, Rhino's other co-director, was close friends with Howard Kaylan and Mark Volman ("Flo and Eddie"), and wanted to produce a documentary about their 60's band, the Turtles, which he had me help direct. Those guys had great stories, and we got to interview lots of other rock luminaires for the project, among them Graham Nash and Steven Stills, and Ray Manzarek, the keyboard player from the Doors (who had toured with the Turtles when they were still called "Rick and Ravens"). I lived in Burbank at the time, and the nearest movie theater to my house was a popular ticket-handout location for pre-release audience test-market

screenings of films in progress. The night before I interviewed Manzarek, I was given a couple of test-screening tickets for later in the week to see the first cut of Oliver Stone's "Doors" movie, and was told that Stone himself would be there to take live feedback from the audience after the screening. So the next day, I asked Manzarek if he'd been involved at all in the project. "Oh, yeah, they brought me on as a technical advisor from the beginning, but when I saw all the ridiculously over-mythologized crap about Jim's life Stone was packing the film with, I walked. It's a total croc." So I told him about my screening tickets, and he literally shouted, "You've gotta give me those tickets! I'll disguise myself, and when Stone asks for feedback, I'm gonna ask him how he can sleep at night, telling so many out-and-out lies about a good man's life." When I laughed, he said, "and when Stone asks, 'how do you know they're lies?' I'll stand up and take off my hat and say, 'BECAUSE I WAS IN THE DOORS!'" So yeah, I gave him the tickets, on the condition that someday he'd tell me how it went. I never heard back from him, but I like to think that it happened.

### Other Odd Sessions

One of my clients was an old Lithuanian man who'd written a song about his homeland called "I Miss You." It was an Eastern-European dirge: "I miss you when it starts to snow/I miss you when the breezes blow/I miss you when the sun does shine/or when is cloudy all the time..." You get the idea. He was an overweight, grim, sweaty man who never smiled, and every time he sat down, he'd grimace in pain until he pushed some kind of button on top of his thigh (I could see the impression of it in his cheap dress pants). When he did that, his leg would make a mechanical hissing sound while he rolled his eyes and sighed with pleasure. I have no idea what was going on there. The band he brought in were all over 80, lending to the, um, "leisurely" pace of the recording, which was sort of the Baltic musical version of being dragged across a pile of discarded dentures. The sax player was over 100, and was the great-grandfather of the Music Department Chair at Cal State Northridge. He told me that I might be interested to know that he'd been playing professionally for 96 years; his family band had been a popular vaudeville act. He said that though I'd probably be his last recording engineer, the first engineer who'd ever recorded him was Thomas Edison, who'd had them play into a giant horn onto a wax cylinder. I'll cap off that legacy any day!