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EMMYLOU HARRIS AND BRIAN AHERN By Rick Clark Mix, Jul 1, 2002

During the 1970s, the Warner Bros. family of labels was known for having an integrity-artist roster. Performers such as Randy Newman, Jackson Browne, Joni Mitchell, Captain Beefheart, Little Feat, Ry Cooder and James Taylor weren't selling zillions of records for the company, but they made consistently strong albums and showed real musical growth from album to album — back in the day when there was actually something called “artist development.” In the mid-'70s, Warners also signed Emmylou Harris who, along with her mentor Gram Parsons (another Warners artist; he died in late 1973), was at the forefront of a movement of performers who gravitated toward traditional country and roots music, but were invigorated by the dramatic changes in popular music of the '60s and early '70s.

Beginning with her promising 1975 Warners debut, *Pieces of the Sky*, Harris and her producer/husband Brian Ahern enjoyed considerable success by gathering an eclectic range of material from both inside and outside the normal boundaries of what was considered “country,” creating a fresh, emotionally resonant amalgam that won over traditional music lovers, as well as a whole new generation of fans. Besides inventive song choices and arrangements, Ahern's productions of Harris' albums (as well as his work with the likes of Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison, George Jones, Jesse Winchester and others) were notable for displaying a sophisticated articulation of spatial placement of instrumentation and vocals.

With the recent advent of surround audio, it was a natural move for Ahern to explore the format's potential for his past work. Along the way, he hooked up with Rhino Records and began working on a DVD-Audio "Producer's Choice" collection of Harris' work that he felt would be best served by this new ambient setting. For the surround collection, Ahern chose about 40 songs and baked the 2-inch masters in a convection oven. Ahern's engineer, Donivan Cowart, then transferred the tracks from a Studer analog 24-track through a computer to a quad hard drive array.

"We transfer eight tracks at a time, so as to focus and get them right," states Ahern. "Back then, we usually recorded with Dolby 361s, and at one point, moved from one tape stock to another. The levels are understandably erratic, not to mention [having] 25 years of tape high-frequency 'sag.' Sometimes, we bring up the playback level of individual tracks to overtake the Dolby decoders properly, or to exaggerate ambience to create a sense of place."

After evaluating various speakers, Ahern decided on five Mackie HR-824 powered monitors. "With all the onboard tweaks, they are perfect for a painless 5.1 surround setup," remarks Ahern. "Most of the DVD-Audio product I've been listening to is unnaturally bright to my ears, so I keep the high-frequency switches at -2 dB and roll-off the low end at 47 Hz. My 750-watt Velodyne subwoofer kicks in at just above 40Hz. Right now, I use it to analyze rogue low-frequency problems. I'm still deciding whether this device should summarize the other five channels or be a free-standing 'special-event' reproducer. I sometimes study the 5.1 work of others by turning off the stereo speakers and listening to what's left in the mix.

"To help me choose from 11 albums and numerous duets and film tracks, I use an old Technics receiver with synthetic quad surround to evaluate the amount of, and usefulness of, ambient [surround] material in the original stereo. We also made a 6-track ADAT test tape of a George Jones/Mark Knopfler song that we'll play back in Denny Purcell's mastering room [Georgetown Masters] to get our bearings and keep us grounded.

"I'm committed to the surround sound movement, which is deeper and more emotional than the leap from mono to stereo or vinyl to CD. I will spend the rest of my career in this fascinating new world."

Besides the 'Producer's Cut' DVD, Ahern has also teamed up with Rhino to put out a remastered and expanded version of Harris' classic 1980 bluegrass and roots music album, *Roses In the Snow* [1980]. The idea to re-visit the critically acclaimed effort came about while Harris was on the road as part of the *Down From the Mountain* tour, which featured the music from the multi-Platinum "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" soundtrack.

I was discussing the 'Producer's Cut' surround project with Emmy on the phone," he recalls. "She was in Washington, D.C., and said, 'You know, we just played for 18,000 people last night and it was all bluegrass. There is a hunger out there for it.' I paused for a moment and said, 'Wait a minute! Why don't we reissue *Roses In the Snow*?' She said, 'That's a great idea!' I called Robin Hurley at Rhino and he agreed to get *Roses In the Snow* reissued, provided I could find some previously unreleased songs contemporary to the original sessions."

In his search, Ahern uncovered a 1979 version of an old Hank Williams song called "You're Gonna Change (Or I'm Gonna Leave)" that featured Ricky Skaggs on fiddle and singing live in the studio. "I remember I had just bought a vintage Fender six-string bass that I was really excited about and wanted a project to try it in the studio," says Ahern. "I came up with a bass part for 'You're Gonna Change (Or I'm Gonna Leave),' which Emmy had been singing around the house. I took it into the studio, and I got Emory Gordy to write it out and play it on my acoustic Ernie Ball bass in unison with me. We threw in a couple of 6/4 bars to make the dancers fall down.

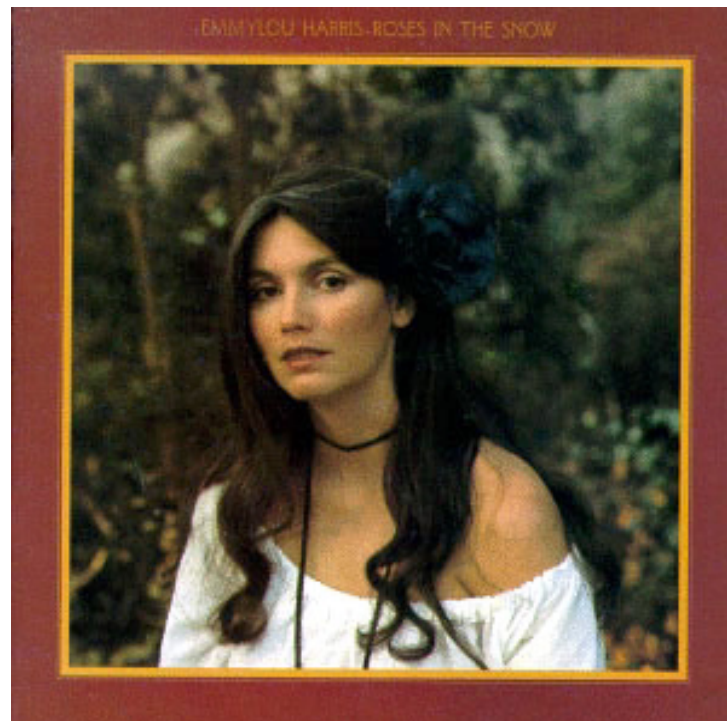
"I also found a very cursory performance of a 1975 Celtic waltz called 'Root Like a Rose.' We only did one take. I edited quite a bit out with computer technology, which made a previously rejected track possible to use. Emmy re-sang it, because she had messed up the lyrics on the original recording. I also added some penny whistles, recorders and bagpipes that I had intended for the song."

During 1979, Harris and Ahern recorded nearly three albums' worth of material using Ahern's Enactron Truck Studio in Beverly Hills. Though a typically wide range of different song styles were cut, as the recording progressed, the duo elected to focus on assembling an album that would have a fairly strict adherence to bluegrass and acoustic roots music.

"Most of the albums we did had some little rule that would serve to set it apart from the other records," says Ahern. "In this case, it was a big rule: No drums or electric bass. The 'drummer' was my big Gibson Arch Top Super 400 guitar."

The initial record label reaction to the concept of *Roses In the Snow* was less than enthusiastic — Warners viewed the album as some left-of-center folk collection, and they made no secret of their desire to see Harris continue mining the successful formula of wide-ranging song choices and more electrified country-rock flavorings.

"It would've been easier back then to have done our usual eclectic mix of songs, which is what the record company really wanted," Harris says. "They basically wanted 'Son of Elite Hotel' [her successful second album]," says Harris. "We really had to stick to our creative guns, and Brian was really the one who manned the guns, more than I did," she adds with a laugh. "I started saying, 'Well, maybe we should put something in there like [James Taylor's] 'Millworker,' which was also cut during the *Roses In the Snow* sessions. I had braced myself for what the record company was initially convinced was going to be a commercial disaster. But Brian really held his ground and he was right all the way."



"I spoke to Brian earlier today," she continues, "and told him that at that point of my life and career and my youth, I was arrogant enough to think that I could sustain a commercial disaster. I felt positive that it was going to be an artistic success. It was in the air everywhere. All of my compadres were into traditional music and I had been doing it a lot. We had been doing bluegrass at shows, even before Ricky [Skaggs] was in the band. There had always been a thread and we had hinted at it certainly with *Blue Kentucky Girl*, so that it was moving in that direction."

“Like most record companies, courage was not on their agenda,” muses Ahern. “When we started doing this bluegrass/acoustic project, marketing and management started to worry about the lack of commercial potential it would have. I stayed adamant and stubborn about it, and this economical acoustic album went as high on the pop charts as Emmy’s most successful records.” Eventually, the album would go Gold and become a Top 20 hit on the Billboard album chart. It also generated two country chart hits with “Wayfaring Stranger” and a version of Simon & Garfunkel’s “The Boxer.” The album served as a strong reminder in the age of the Urban Cowboy that there was still a sizable audience for honest, emotive acoustic roots music. “We just knew in our hearts that we were right, but I think we were surprised at how successful it was,” Harris says. “I will say that the record company did come onboard when it was finally seen that they couldn’t talk us out of it. Ultimately, it became a great collaboration between the producer, the artist and the record company. It shows you what a record company can do when they believe in the integrity and passion of an artist for a particular project.”

Harris is particularly pleased with the Ahern’s new refinement of Roses. “I never put on a CD of my music and listen. After I’ve listened to the records, as they are being made, over and over and over again, I just have to leave them and move on. I remember them,” she laughs. “But when I put on Roses In the Snow [recently], I was pulled in by the beauty and emotional impact of the songs and what everybody played. There were a lot of live vocals and playing on there. I think that Brian did an extraordinary job.

“It couldn’t be a better time for Roses In the Snow to come out, because 20-plus years later, this is being discovered as this almost new exotic form of music. A lot of people have never had a chance to hear music like this on commercial radio. That has really been gratifying. I think there are a lot of people who have been surprised and delighted to find something that touches them and has such an emotional resonance.”