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This Magazine is in two parts.
Part 2 is a report on the Home

A. & R. Man at Work—A record producer is a psychoanalyst with rhythm

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THE COVER—Tom Wilson is a top A. & R. man (i.e., "artist and repertory man," or producer) in rock 'n' roll biz. Here he shepherds Ellen McIlwaine, one of a group called "Fear Itself," through a recording session. His is a job that calls for knowledge of tomorrow's electronics and today's psychology —plus gambler's nerves: Page 32

Hard-hatted, tough-talking Tony Imperiale, organizer of Newark's North Ward Citizens' Committee, issues orders over his auto's two-way radio. His committee has mounted nightly patrols of the ward to guard against Negro "invasion," and Tony has embarked on a political career: Page 30.

A Record Producer Is a Psychoanalyst With Rhythm

By ANN GERACIMOS

HARD SELL—*Covers of four recent albums produced by Tom Wilson. An exotic in an exotic field, he is a good example of what a successful producer is and how he operates in the commercial market.*

AMONG the unannounced Presidential candidates for 1972 is a tall, slim Negro from Waco, Tex., named Tom Wilson. Wilson is a producer of rock 'n' roll records. His unofficial nominator is Frank Zappa, the musical father of The Mothers of Invention, one of the successful groups Wilson has discovered. Zappa figures that by 1972 the 50 per cent of the population who were weaned during formative years on civil rights and rock 'n' roll, will be ready to vote a Negro into the White House, especially a Harvard graduate who, simultaneously, can decipher The Wall Street Journal, do the boogaloo, and cut a record, all on two hours' sleep.

Zappa's youth-wave political machine is far from being organized, and Wilson is not likely to run for the Presidency, but the suggestion is worth noting simply to show how much attention a good record producer can get these days and how far his lot has changed in the years—roughly a decade—since rock 'n' roll became such a potent medium.

About $1,051,000,000 was spent on records in the United States last year. Accounting for 83 per cent of the sales, or $874-million, were long-playing records, the so-called albums. Of these, three-quarters of the retail sales were, according to the tally of Billboard, the weekly trade magazine, "pop, rock, psychedelic music, and comedy." Billboard doesn't break this category down, and exact figures are hard to find about strictly "rock" sales, but it seems safe to assume that "comedy" represents a negligible proportion of the total and few of these ever make the Top 100 charts, the weekly surveys based on air play and direct sales. However, 13.7 per cent of single rock 'n' roll records and 13.5 per cent of rhythm-and-blues singles released last year made the charts (compared with 8.5 per cent of "easy listening" records), as did 17.9 per cent of "teen beat" albums and 2.6 per cent rhythm-and-blues albums.

A phenomenon of today's music is that much of it can't be heard live, except by a few people, at least not

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the way it is heard on the records responsible for the music's success in the first place. The methods used to achieve the collection of sounds called rock 'n' roll (and/or psychedelic, jazz-oriented, baroque rock, whatever term you like; it's pretty fluid just now) are so complex that they often can't be reproduced outside the studio. Luckily, fans don't expect the same performance onstage of tunes they play on the phonograph.

A producer, whether independent or company-bred, chooses record artists, okays their music, and sees that it sells. Generally, he has the last word in the studio, although each man—there are practically no women in the business yet—functions differently. Basically he is a psychoanalyst with rhythm. And if he is lucky, he's rich. An independent producer usually owns a part of the artist, which gives him leverage. In a company, the established artist's word often counts more than the producer's; a company will back the artist and the producer has to swallow it.

Most of the successful producers, like Wilson, are independent. Record World, another trade publication, has estimated that 60 per cent of the hits on today's charts are the work of independents who have chosen to work out special distribution-and-promotion contracts with major record companies, the way many top movie producers and directors deal with the major Hollywood studios.

Until recently, a producer's influence was limited by the equipment available. He was a fairly anonymous person, unknown outside company walls, where he is usually called an A. & R. (Artist and Repertory) man. But with the increasing dependency of pop music on electronics, his importance soared.

THESE days producers turn up anywhere. One man who has a record succession of 19 hits is an ex-model who can't read a note of music. Wilson, a former fledgling food-chain executive, is one of the best-known producers in the business. An exotic man in an exotic field, he is also a good example of what a successful producer is and how he operates in the commercial market.

Although he found and hired The Mothers of Invention, staking his reputation on the group at a time when progressive rock was hardly known at all, he has stayed in business in the past with wider-selling performers, such as the Animals, Bob Dylan and Simon and Garfunkel. As a result, he had eight albums in the Top 100 charts last year, five of them at one time. Not a bad average when you consider that barely six out of 500 record releases a month get any exposure at all.

Dylan was the first folk artist with enough depth and imagination to interest him, Wilson says. He worked with Dylan as an A. & R. man at Columbia; Wilson's boss introduced the two of them one day and then left the recording room, wishing them luck.

The two worked together for three and a half albums, including "Bringing It All Back Home," in which Wilson says he changed Dylan's style, putting him in his folk-rock phase, by adding electrically amplified instruments. The album, a gold record, brought in more than a million dollars. He also did Dylan's hit single, "Like a Rolling Stone." Later, he lifted Simon and Garfunkel's "Sounds of Silence" from an early album that, by some fluke, was selling well with Florida college kids, and made it a hit, while advising them to use their real names professionally. They thought the sound of Simon and Garfunkel wouldn't go.

In modest moments, Wilson suggests the performers would have thought up the same techniques themselves eventually, even though he himself can't explain exactly how new approaches occur to him. Sometimes he just closes his eyes and waits. It's intuition, he says, and knowing how to interpret demographic and sociological data, keeping one ear tuned to the music and the other to "the audience's proved responses."

Other artists he had recorded include Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor, Cannonball Adderley, John Coltrane, Herbie Mann, the Clancy Brothers, Pete Seeger, Connie Francis, Hugh Masekela and the Velvet Underground. Some are journeyman's albums, routine releases that may help build a producer's reputation if they make the charts; a few others, mostly

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A psychoanalyst with rhythm

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the avant-garde jazz, were done on his own Transition label, the record company he founded on a $900 loan in Cambridge soon after graduation from Harvard. (It folded, an artistic success but a financial drain.)

WILSON has worked full-time for five record companies over a period of 10 years, once winning a Grammy nomination, the record industry's top recognition prize, for special stereo effects on a record he did at Audio-Fidelity. January first this year he left M.G.M.-Records to set up his own Tom Wilson Organization, a general talent agency and recording office, which has its headquarters in a remodeled carriage house near Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn. (Since going independent, Wilson has set up five-year contracts with his performers; previously he worked with Dylan and others under performer contracts held by the record company that employed him.)

The day I met Wilson, he had nine groups ready for launching, like rockets poised on space pads, from Los Angeles to Sweden, for release through major labels as part of his Rasputin, Gunga Din and Lumumba Productions. Wilson has a flair for coy names. His two song-publishing companies are Terrible Tunes and Maudlin Melodies. They take care of copyrights and fees issued through Broadcast Music, Inc. (B.M.I.) and the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (A.S.C.A.P.), the agencies that handle payments for air play and record sales.

Directing this organization takes a great deal of Wilson's time—as do pacifying and entreating performers before, during and after daily recording sessions. Wilson is now doing two albums a month in an assembly-line style, with singles between. He is also at the moment carefully bringing along a California group called "The Fraternity of Man," which he expects to be the biggest money-maker he has handled.

The main source of Wilson's income is record sales. A producer usually gets from 8 to 10 per cent of the retail price of a record, Wilson says, then in turn pays the artist 4 or 5 per cent of that. The artist's percentage is raised annually, which is one way of encouraging him to stay with the Wilson organization and keep performances up to standard.

Wilson also benefits from a profit-sharing arrangement between the record companies and his production companies whereby net profits are divided equally. He has two major record-company contracts, one with A.B.C. Records and the other with M.G.M. If one of his groups in Rasputin Productions makes the Top 10, he says, their overflow profit could go as high as $500,000.

In addition, part of the expenses provided for in the five-year $250,000 contract between Rasputin Productions and A.B.C., for example ($100,000 to $150,000 for recording costs; $50,000 to $75,000 for promotion, and $30,000 for artist tours), is a $25,000 personal advance for Wilson. (On paper, it may look like an easy cushion to ride—in actual fact, no one is quite sure what makes the public buy which records when and why.)

"Wilson says his is the only profession he knows in which it is legally possible to make a million in a relatively short time."

As a talent manager, Wilson also gets an average of 15 per cent of his performers' gate in public appearances. (He handles this through Reluctant Management, a wing of Rasputin Productions.) He also shares with the artists he has under contract in the revenue paid for jukebox play. Before Wilson turned independent in January, he reportedly was making $60,000 annually. He is now earning at the rate of $100,000 yearly.

SOMETIMES producers seem to do nothing more than play at a giant game of computerized craps. The Top 100 charts are the gambling tables, and the dice keep shifting hands, between talent, producer and buyer. It is a big enough fight for a producer to get a record mentioned in "pick-of-the-week" ratings in the trade magazines. To stay in the running, he should expect to land two out of eight albums on the charts, where an album can earn anywhere from $800,000 to $1-million on original costs of $25,000 to $80,000. Fourteen-year-old girls buy most of the singles; 18-year-old boys and girls share the majority of the album market. Far more singles are sold

ROOMER AT THE TOP—*Like most successful A. & R. (Artist and Repertory) men in the record business, Wilson (who earns $100,000 a year) is an independent producer. Here he discusses an album cover with an aide.*

METHOD—*It's all, says Wilson (here listening to a playback of a recording session) "in knowing demographic and sociological data, keeping one ear tuned to the music, the other to the audience's proved reactions."*

—it costs about $5,000 to produce a single record—but the albums build a reputation. Any producer who doesn't score within 34 of the Top 100 in a 12-month period is in trouble.

Wilson has several ways of insuring that luck alone won't run his life. One is travel and exposure. He was in London 11 times last year, and thinks nothing of going to California for the day. If such dedication is exhausting, it was also convincing the day I observed him in a recording studio, nine floors above Times Square. Wilson strolls in wearing his work-a-day special: antelope suede jacket, lightweight white candy twill bell-bottom trousers, purple crepe shirt. He is 6 feet 4 inches but he looms larger, and is decorated effectively with mustache and goatee. His sleepy brown eyes are about as slow to react as a hungry alligator's jaws. After slapping palms all around in a fraternal welcoming gesture, soul-brother style, he sits down to chat as though he has nothing else to do. The Bagatelle are there from Boston to record their first single.

The recording engineer, the only man in the room wearing a tie, asks how many channels to open on the board. Wilson, finishing a conversation that has switched from astrology (he is Aries, with Taurus rising) to his plans for directing films (he has in mind a plot about a white newspaper reporter sent to Harlem during the riots who is discovered by the Negroes to have the key for taking over the world, whereupon he is crowned emperor, etc.), moves up to his place beside the console and begins the day's work. He is surrounded by blinking lights, twitching needles, over 150 dials and a wall full of plugs, called patches, that allow him to combine the sound tracks on either monaural or stereo tape later.

CUTTING a record is routine; editing is the real challenge. A perfectionist like Wilson can take days to edit a four-minute single. Editing gives a record color. The producer paints on layers of technique, deciding in the process the type of echo to use, the number of tracks to put on the final tape, and the choice of overdubbing and equalizing devices (softening strident parts and bringing up others).

Wilson is only interested in self-contained groups, like the Bagatelle, who can write their own material, the ones who have "woodshedded" —played together for a period to develop some style and maturity—but only one out of every 20 he hears have any talent, he says. (When they hit, a good group can earn $1-million annually in personal appearance fees alone.) In addition to a strong beat and recognizable lyrics, he likes them to build on popularly proved sounds. The lead singer in the Ill Wind, another of his groups, he calls a harder rock version of Joan Baez. Simon and Garfunkel he calls "Urban Dylan . . . Manhattan, the Bronx, Franny and Zooey."

Eight tracks are being used to record the Bagatelle: horns (trumpet and sax), rhythm guitar, bass (an electric guitar-shaped instrument), drums, conga, two for voice, and an extra to mix in, all separated by partitions to isolate the sound.

"I'm a big baffle bug," Wilson says. "If I had my way they would all be in individual studios and played back on their own tracks." He presses the inter-com button connecting him with the studio behind the glass wall in front of him. "Hey, you cats ready out there?"

He operates on several levels at once. While listening to the group and directing the engineer, he takes a call from another of his groups, the Perhaps of Sweden, asking when they are due to come to America.

At "Take three . . . Roll," Wilson slouches back in his chair, sips orange juice, picks up a photography magazine and looks briefly at a section on "Non-nude Nudes." "What's good usually happens in the first 10 or 12 takes," he says. "When you go as high as 67, you lose the spontaneity, and probably your mind."

After the seventh take, the Bagatelle stop long enough to hear a playback and Wilson goes out to listen from the studio, striding across layers of microphone wires strewn like black spaghetti over the linoleum floor. "I don't think of this in terms of finished sound, but *they* do, psychologically. . . . Actually, the real test of a producer is to get the same sound no matter where he is. I did a hit single of the Animals in a hotel room in Nassau because that's where they were and no studio was available."

A SHORT dark-haired man with ruddy face and sideburns above a gold brocade rajah jacket comes in. He is Mark Joseph, who runs Wilson's Reluctant Management. Mike Goldstein, who heads a public relations agency and who has conducted "La Bohème" in a workshop in Tanglewood in poorer days, drops by in a blue pin-striped suit. Goldstein calls himself a hippie hyper, and he handles as many as 12 rock groups at a time. The Wilson Organization is supposed to be signing with Goldstein's company, but they have been having some friendly arguments about the fee. Wilson isn't sure yet of his contracts with his major backers.

Wilson argues on the telephone with a record executive over the company's objection to paying extra to photograph a 10th man soon to be added to the Bagatelle. "Hell, man, if you're in the record business, be in the record business," he yells. "You're talking about $100. Everybody I know carries that much around in his pocket. Here I am trying to put out great music for seven or eight thousand when everyone else is spending 40 thousand. . . ." He

Record makers find it hard to dig the record buyer

Wilson describes himself as "Bantu-Irish-Cherokee"

slams his fist down on the table and hangs up. "You got to show some grip with these cats. He bit off the wrong piece of chocolate." A higher-up executive calls him back and they agree to a meeting the next day.

"Hey, let's get the vocal here. I got to go to the radio station. Got to do the stock market on WLIB [a Harlem radio station]: 'Molasses up one point today. . . .'" Everybody cracks up. Jokes come and go like marathon vaudeville. Wilson exerts a subtle form of control with his rhetoric—he's the man with the best quip, the last word—as though his authority derived solely from his imagination, which it does in a way. He is always genial, graceful, witty, and gives the impression, on the surface, of being entirely relaxed. That makes the musicians relax and give *their* best. He entertains them and they return with all they've got. All the same, he was making regular trips to the dentist to repair damage he did grinding his teeth in his sleep at night.

GETTING to Wilson isn't difficult —he leads a predictably subterranean existence moving between a select number of recording studios and music clubs. His favorite studio is an ambitious new outfit called The Record Plant, which a friend of his started this spring with plans to introduce as many as 24 separate recording tracks, which means a producer will be able to put 24 different sounds on tape at once and "mix," or edit, the results later. (Wilson's friends are what he calls "functional, creative people," among whom he lists his car mechanic. The Record Plant director is an engineering-and-physics graduate from Nebraska who was on his way to the Sorbonne when he stopped by a New York recording studio, got a job, and stayed.)

Getting to know Wilson is another matter. He is a master dissembler. However talented he is at spewing charming quips and opinions, he is less willing to give himself away. In a preliminary telephone conversation he described himself as "Bantu-Irish-Cherokee," his music style as "early Gothic" (whatever that means), and his goal as "being original and staying in the forefront." In this business, if you don't type yourself, nobody e'se probably will. The fast talk and jargon is simply a means of keeping in the running, of assuring the talker that he is, indeed, still alive, regardless of who stabbed him in the back last week.

Although extreme frankness is one of his strong characteristics, he is reluctant to talk about some of his extra-curricular activities (any drug-taking experiences, for example), because of what people back in Waco might think. "Just don't say anything that might hurt my family," he says. He has a wife and two children who live in Cambridge; he commutes weekends to see them. The pressures of the profession evidently lead him to seek diversion in a number of unorthodox ways. Rock 'n' roll music, of course, is not all sound. It refers to a certain style as well, which Wilson, in trying to court extremes and the happy middle simultaneously, represents perfectly.

The public side of Wilson is responsible and pragmatic. In his earnest reaching for money and the masses, he is an energetic gambler —he says his is the only profession he knows in which it is legally possible to make a million in a relatively short period of time—and spares no part of himself to achieve the success he wants so much. "You know why I went independent? Because I got tired of making money for a millionaire who didn't even bother to send me a Christmas card. I discovered if you are honest, you get a lot further. A guy's not going to respect you if you don't fight for what you think you are worth."

The whole of his success Wilson explains airily as being largely the result of using adventuresome material, having several superstars, and knowing Clarence Avant. Avant is an independently wealthy promoter, whom Wilson identifies as a power broker. Avant walked in on Wilson one day while he was employed by one of the leading record companies, asked him how much he was making, and, upon hearing the figure, told him he was foolish, that he should be making thus-and-so. Whereupon Avant saw to it that Wilson did make thus-and-so and moved to another company to boot. Avant is now a partner in the Wilson organization.

THE private, darker side of Wilson (as he might refer to it, feeling, as he does, that he is composed of at least two separate personalities) is as consistent as a boomerang. He says he leads a life most men would envy. He dresses imaginatively, mainly clothes by Bill Pickard of De-Voss of Hollywood, with $2,000 in bills outstanding not unusual. So convincing is Wilson as a model that Pickard lets him wear samples from his latest line free. His natural charm apparently isn't lost on women, either. One 20-year-old fan I talked to said he changed her life overnight. He manages to outdo Playboy at its own image without looking silly in the attempt.

He drives a 1960 blue Aston Martin DB4, which he sometimes gets up in the middle of the night to exercise, going to parties at 4 A.M. The décor in his Brooklyn house is as eclectic as his wardrobe: magenta walls, blueprint paper on the ceiling, fur carpeting and a vermilion lacquer bed in the bedroom; green-felt walls and German helmet lamps in the living room, for example. He goes after change and sensation, almost by instinct, as though experience was always its own reward.

Wilson's motivation in all this isn't difficult to discern. He doesn't want to feel left out of life. He needs to experiment to get ahead, to feel everything for the first time; after all, in his words, what else is life for? He puts up with such torture, he says, "so that I can sit back in old age in my stuffed leather chair, dressed in gray by the best tailors in the world—gray worsted, the finest gray silk tie—remembering how little I missed."

WILSON'S earliest music memories were of the jam sessions he attended Saturday afternoons in his grandfather's rug laundry in Waco. His late father was in the insurance business; his mother is a librarian in Waco. His great-aunt, he says, was a slave — "domestic, not a field nigger." Following a year at Fisk University in Nashville and two years flat on his back with tuberculosis, Wilson entered Harvard, graduating *cum laude* in economics in 1954. Fourteen years ago rock 'n' roll hadn't exploded yet, and the idea that he might spend his middle years recording at profitable rates such three-minute numbers as "Plastic Rat" and "Professor Feelgood" would have seemed as silly to him as his saying then, the way he does now, that jazz is dead, that rock absorbs musical influences the way jazz once did.

"Wilson has a knack of building up whatever talent a group or an artist has, by sitting back and letting things happen, guiding them offhandedly."

He couldn't know it at the time, but the combination of a love of music and a taste for business was the sanest prerequisite for his future career. He got into producing for the companies from a Boys Club job he had taken when Transition was losing money. "I was told if I kept up the good work, I would have a club of my own, but then I thought, 'Whoa, Wilson, what are you doing with your life?'" so he came to New York and pounded the pavements.

Wilson's rock and roll "track record" developed in a relatively

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short time. He has the knack of building up whatever talent a group or an artist has, by sitting back and letting things happen, guiding them offhandedly. Even with the help of a man like Wilson, it can take a group months, possibly years, to get back anything for the sacrifices they may have made to get into a fickle music business; only about one out of every 100 groups that tries succeeds.

The leader and songwriter of the Ill Wind, a young man from California with a ceramic medallion around his neck and bells on his shoes, said he came to Wilson on the advice of the record agent at the William Morris Agency after several efforts to record on their own without luck. He liked the records Wilson had put out in the past. The fourth day of their album session, however, tempers were frayed. There were arguments about whether the singer could sing or not, about what numbers to do and which studio to do them in. Wilson watched with one eye and read a newspaper with the other, waiting for the right moment to intervene. The singer suggested doing a difficult number that hadn't quite jelled at rehearsals. Then the leader-songwriter exploded:

"We're trying to sell records. We don't want to be avant-garde. We want to be rich." The road manager was sent out for chili and Cokes to cool the scene.

Producing isn't a profession to build a man's confidence, if he doesn't bring it with him. Arrogance, the ability to manipulate people, the courage of one's convictions (however strange they may be)—all are useful, if not absolutely essential. Wilson, who seldom gives the impression of being anything but confident, and never of being anonymous, considers himself "an enlightened fool." He says he tries to get everybody's attention in the first four bars of a record and prays from there.

IRONICALLY, for a man in the music business, a gift of gab is one of his biggest assets. (He plays the trombone because it's the instrument that most nearly resembles the human voice, he says.) Goddard Lieberson, a former A. & R. man who now heads C.B.S.-Columbia Group, heard him speak before a meeting of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences and was impressed enough to hire him on the spot for the Columbia staff. Wilson was with Columbia from 1963 to 1965, when he joined M.G.M. "His story is the key to the A. & R. business and how strange it is," Lieberson told me. "It's unlikely that someone [in the business] is a graduate of Harvard, but it never hurts to be intelligent."

INTERLUDE—*Wilson, here kibitzing with friends in a control room while phoning, knows how to keep performers relaxed. He also sees his dentist regularly to repair damage done when he grinds his teeth in his sleep.*

"I want to remember how little I missed"

Wilson's admirers include a vice president of M.G.M., for whom Wilson does a radio interview program called "The Music Factory" syndicated to college stations across the country. He calls Wilson "one of the top five producers in the business, 'the Mitch Miller of tomorrow.' . . . He has a flair, a loose quality, without being totally funky." A girl who does a lot of public relations for rock groups said "the thing about Tom is his pose as such an easygoing guy, so you never know where he is at. Actually, he's the sharpest guy around."

"TOM plays at being a spade," a sympathetic observer commented. "Actually he's more white, and some of the Negroes in the business don't like him." Wilson plays both "roles" well, but there is no doubt about the one he prefers. He probably was the first Negro A. & R. man to be put in charge of white performers in a major company, at Columbia. "Some men of selfish goodwill were sharp enough to see where most of today's music was coming from," he explains. "But I only think in terms of race when I come out of a meeting with some of the major miracles of American industry and maybe they've acted on what I've said, then some guy making $30 a week in the stockroom gets the cab that won't stop for me."

"If there's a race war, I might join It depends where I am at the time." This isn't anti-white animosity (his wife is white), but what he calls a long history of getting kicked in the teeth and being fed up by it.

Turning the corner onto the Avenue of the Americas in his car late one night, he sees a lighted cab ahead of him deliberately speed up past a stocky Negro who had signaled plainly under the street lamp. A block away Wilson cuts off the cab in midtraffic, gets out with the motor still running, and accosts the cabbie, who rolls down his window and tries to look tough.

"Why didn't you stop for that colored fellow back there?" Wilson yells. "What's wrong with you? These guys are fighting and dying in Vietnam. What for? So that back home they can get passed up by jerks like you?" The cabbie moves his mouth ineffectually. A police car draws up; two men in blue stare coldly through the glass. "If you smash my car, I'll kill you," Wilson says. He finishes by cuffing the cabbie lightly on the side of the face and climbs back into the driver's seat.

"That'll shake him a little," he says, calmly, smiling. ■