

# Steve Berkowitz and Mark Wilder Interview

## “Bob Dylan The Original Mono Recordings” Box Set

Interview Conducted by Roger Ford, October 14, 2010

*Steve Berkowitz was the reissue producer and Mark Wilder was the mastering engineer for the Dylan Mono Box Set project.*

*Steve Berkowitz is Senior Vice President of Sony Music’s Legacy Records. A multi Grammy and Handy Award winning producer, he has worked at Columbia Records/CBS/Sony for more than twenty years in music marketing and A&R.*

*Mark Wilder is a multi Grammy Award winning engineer also for Sony Music.*



**RF** Steve, could you say a little bit about how the mono box set project came about, and how you came to be involved in it?

**SB** There had been ongoing discussions about possible Bob Dylan catalogue projects and obviously with the great success of The Beatles’ box sets, especially the mono, this became a pretty clear and attractive idea. As a person who loves this music – I mean The Beatles and Bob – I just kept thinking, “I gotta have the Bob mono box next to my Beatles mono box, they’re supposed to live next to each other”! But in all seriousness, the key thing that I’m going to say over and over is the fact that this music was presented, recorded and produced predominantly in mono, and that was the way that people heard it. And there is a difference between the mono and the stereo, and I think it should be interesting to all music people, certainly all Dylan fans and collectors; and people who are maybe just getting into Bob Dylan for the first time, they’ll go, “Hey, this is what it sounded like in the sixties, this is great!”

So, it became an idea discussed basically between Legacy, Sony, Columbia and the Bob Dylan office, that this production would be undertaken.

**RF** And what brief were you given for the project?

**SB** It was basically me and Adam Block at Legacy together with Jeff Rosen and the Dylan camp discussing “What do you think we should do? What is there? How are the tapes?” And then research is done on the tapes, the tapes are listened to, and then you come back and say “Well, this is what we have, this is what can be done. What do you guys

want to do?” So I don’t think we were given a *brief*, I think that through a group of people and the reality of the tapes, a decision got made as to “You know what, this would be a good box to do, let’s go.”

**RF** What studio did you do the remastering work in, and over roughly what period was the work done?

**SB** We did it at Sony’s Battery Studios here in New York, the former site of the historic Record Plant studios, on West 44<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan. We started talking about the project in December, January, and we started gathering tapes in March and April.

**MW** We started mastering at the end of May and it lasted until August. We didn’t work at it every day; not only were there other records for other people I was doing at the same time, we also did the Witmarks in the same period.

**RF** Tell me about the tape research process.

**SB** There’s a guy who’s both our friend and co-worker, a long-time producer and researcher, who knows a tremendous amount about the Sony/CBS/BMG tapes vault – Didier Deutsch. And so when we started to talk about it I said “All right, Didier, go” – let’s first look up all the paperwork, see what’s in the computer that says what we have, and then order in all the tapes. So the tapes all come in, we lay them all out here in the studio . . .

**MW** . . . and then we go through the process of actually looking at the physical condition of the tape and listening to it and determining how good a source it is for that particular album.

**SB** We also collect at the same time pressings of the albums from around the world and look at them, look at the numbers inscribed on them. Hopefully you’ll find a 1A pressing, and in the 1A pressing there would also be an XLP number, and hopefully we then have the matching tape that goes with it.



1A pressing of Columbia CL 2389, Highway 61 Revisited

**RF** Presumably some of the tapes might be safety copies of the originals – is it easy to tell one from the other?

**SB** Yes, it's not only easy to tell by looking at them, it's easy when you listen to them. And we did lots of that – it's not mechanics, it's human ears, and feel, hopefully understanding the feel and the intention of the original production.

**RF** Were there any instances where the tape that was the best *sounding* wasn't the one that was in the best condition, and therefore you had to reach some sort of compromise?

**SB** Well, there's a lot of answers to that. CBS and Sony are not the Library of Congress. It's a music company, a production and manufacturing company, and the harsh reality is that at some point these tapes are manufacturing parts, they're not at that point the great classics of our time, they're objects that are manufacturing parts. They get worn, they get used. You know, this is a tender medium, that doesn't last forever in its original state.

We do have the original three- and four-tracks for these productions. So fortunately the really true original document is intact, and fortunately, I'm happy to say, in 24-bit / 96KHz digital format as well, should anything ever happen – and stuff *does* happen to the analogue tapes, on some of them the oxide is falling off, just because they're forty, fifty years old. Others got used a lot of times and got worn out, others I have no idea what happened to them. They may have broken, they may have been shipped to another studio and didn't come back, they could have been stolen, any number of things. And though there are records for these things, records aren't perfect, it's not a science project.

In the case of "*Highway 61*" we looked, and we just didn't have a mono tape in the United States. However, we found through the Sony Music archive in Germany a tape made in 1965 for manufacture in France of the album "*Highway 61 Revisited*". And it is the best mono "*Highway 61*" . . .

**MW** They cut records in 1965 from that tape, and then it really wasn't used since, and it really *popped* out of the speakers. It was really great, that first playback for us.

**RF** Were there any other albums where you had difficulty finding the original tapes?



1A pressing of Columbia CL 2105, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*

**SB** Yeah, "*The Times They Are A-Changin'*". There was no mono tape anywhere that we could find, period. We tried all over the world, we tried collectors, we tried bootleggers, we tried everything. So we mixed it from the original three-track, and enslaved ourselves to matching a 1A pressing. I would do blind comparisons, trying just

to listen to the sound and the frequencies, and the sound of the guitar and the space around it – does the reverb go on as long, does the sound of the EQ of the echo match, and so on.

And with "*Blonde On Blonde*" we had to go through a whole bunch of different tapes, and we found a 1960s mono mix of it that sounded terrific and fresh. I don't think it was the first generation mono master mix, but it sure was an early one. It is the original mono mix.

**RF** I spoke to Bob Irwin some years ago about his mono reissues on the Sundazed label, and he had obviously gone through that research, the process of finding the best mono tapes to use for each album. It sounds as though you went back to first principles and did your own research . . .

**SB** I can't compare the journey of the two separate productions. I know Bob Irwin, I've worked with him – as has Mark – and have great respect for Bob and Sundazed. I know that a lot of people liked his records a lot. In this case we chose to go back to the 1A pressings, worked as hard as we could to find the best tapes to replicate that original production, and that's what we did.

**RF** For any of these albums, would there have been both an original mix-down tape and a cutting master that had been adjusted for the disc cutting process?

**MW** Well, for this period of time, for the most part the *mixes* were used for cutting; there was no intermediate tape that was made for cutting. The tape went from the mix room to an editor, who would put the A and B side together, putting a standard 4 or 5 second leader between the songs. And then it would go to a cutting room – and there were no EQs in the cutting rooms during this period of time at Columbia. It was a union studio; these guys had a very rote way of doing things. The guy who recorded it was not the guy who mixed it, who was not the guy who edited it. It was very much like a factory, in a way.

If the producer listened to the album down and there was a problem with a song, it wasn't an adjustment in mastering that was done – they went back and remixed that tune, and inserted it.

So the cutting master thing did not apply. Also these tapes did not get used a huge amount, so that you had no copies made in the '80s to refer to – these were all original mixes. The only time we had issues of choice like that would be where we had what we call a -1, which is an original, or a -2 tape, which is a tape that's been modified in some way. It could be the original mixes, with just a sequence change . . .

**SB** . . . On some of the original albums, you could try to search for a 1A pressing, but there may not be a 1A – they may have done a -1 tape, made changes and then made a -2. The -2 tape is the first tape used for the initial manufacturing of the record.

**RF** In the United States, I don't think there were any 1A pressings of "*Blonde On Blonde*" . . .

**MW** That could very well be.

**SB** I don't remember, but in that particular case, co-producer and friend Bruce Dickinson loaned us a really mint condition white label promo mono of "*Blonde On Blonde*", and that was our guide.



White label promo copy of *Blonde On Blonde*

**RF** Is it true that originally, the mono and stereo mixes would have been done by different engineers?

**MW** True, for the most part. Without having the studio logs in front of me I can't say for sure, but standard practice during this period of time was that the producer sat in with the mixer of their choice, and they mixed the mono record. And then that three-track, or four-track would go to a night engineer or an engineer who didn't have that much to do the next day, and they'd be told "OK, you have a day, mix this album in stereo". So you often have someone doing the stereo who wasn't as involved in the process as those doing the mono. So that's why you have these great differences in feel, in everything, in stereo.

**SB** When we did the SACD for "*Blonde On Blonde*", we realised that we didn't actually have a quality 2-track stereo tape. So we were asked by the Dylan camp to mix it, and at that time I mixed it with Michael Brauer from the original four-track – which by the way has oxide falling off the tape – it was not an easy job by any means, it took several weeks to mix it. And then Al Kooper and Robbie Robertson sat in my office and I said "So what do you think? Is it all right?" And they approved it, and then just by chance Bob Johnston was in the building, and I said "you gotta come in and hear this, I gotta ask you about this. And I'd have to check my details, but I think I said, "Let me ask you this question: how come, in '*Just Like a Woman*', the acoustic guitar in the second verse is to the left of centre?" And Johnston goes "Shit man, I don't know. We mixed that mono probably for three or four days, then I said 'Oh shit, man, we gotta do stereo.' So me and a coupla guys put our hands on the board, we mixed that son of a bitch in about four hours! I musta just done it with the knob to the left of centre, man, I don't know why!" So my point is, it took a long time to do the mono, and then it was, "Oh, yeah, we gotta do stereo".

**RF** And the mono vinyl edition – did you use exactly the same source tapes for both the digital mastering and for cutting the vinyl?

**SB** Yes. Mark made sure that we sent the exact same tapes. We sent them to George Marino, one of the great analogue cutters. His Sterling Sound studio is just wonderful now, and it literally goes straight from the tape recorder to the lathe, there's no EQ in the middle.

**MW** Yeah, he's a true craftsman . . .

**SB** And the reason, by the way, that the vinyl is not coming out at the same time as the CDs is that it's just not that easy to make quality vinyl any more. It's hard, the number of craftsmen is fewer than there were at the peak of vinyl-making. So, George did a good job, we went back and forth with some of those lacquers, maybe with the EQ on Bob's harmonica . . . And doing it live like that, and trying to go right from the tape to the lathe, that's difficult to do, because I didn't want to do a lot of EQing, I didn't want to get a lot of board involved – I wanted them to be as much a '60s LP as possible. And we would get a test pressing, more test pressings – we've laboured for months trying to get the vinyl really, really right. I think that we've done as great a job as could be done – I think the records sound magnificent.

**MW** To give you an idea, I mastered the CDs first, and once everyone heard the references and we were confident about the CD work, then those same tapes went from Battery to Sterling.

**SB** And we used the same 1A pressings as examples, and Mark's new CD masters, just to add scope and the feel of how the production sounds. The records do sound a bit different, they sound a bit different because they are different. In some cases I like how the CDs sound better, and sometimes I like the records better.

**RF** When you were mastering the CDs, were there any adjustments that you felt it necessary to apply in order to reproduce the original vinyl sound of your 1A pressings?

**MW** My process of mastering involved analogue – I don't generally do any digital processing, so I'm not using any digital EQ or digital compressor or anything. So all my manipulation is carrying on analogue custom equalisers, compressors, things like that. On almost every album I did *something* . . .

**SB** You know, I think they did a very good job with the mono Beatles, but if you want to analyse them, each album is different from one another, and some of the digital versions *do* sound a little different from my Beatles mono records from the '60s. But that's because each record is different, and each tape's different, each converter is different. And I think the same thing happened here with the Dylan monos.

**RF** How did you determine the pitch of playback, the speed of the tape? I've found that 1960s pressings tended to vary a bit in that respect.

**SB** That's a tough one. We did the best we could based off of the 1A pressings that we had – and 1A



pressings may be different, depending on whether they come from the East Coast or the West Coast! When we were doing the stereos, when we were doing **“Bringing It All Back Home”**, it was *maddening*. Not only did the pitch and speed vary from record to record, or it wouldn't vary on Side A but it would on Side B, or it would match except for the second track on Side B, and you'd be listening to the records and thinking, “How the hell did that happen?”! So we had to use our best judgement. I will also say that in the very next room is a guitar and a tuner, and I play that thing, and try to figure it out according to the harmonica, which *should* be in pitch – unless, of course, they sped it up or slowed it down. And in some cases there's notes to that and other times there's no notes. So sometimes we just don't know how or why it happened.

**RF** Did you leave all the fade-outs and the gaps between the tracks unchanged?

**MW** Sure, I gapped according to how the master was set, and verified that against the reference pressing we were using – when they cut that LP the gaps should be the same. What I would do is I would play through the fade or the ending, through the leader to the beginning of the next song, and that's when I would stop my digital record. Then I had a reference for the gap. And then on the computer I would line them up and use that leader I recorded to be the measuring stick, and edit in an equivalent gap. And then the only other thing that I did was to cap the ends of the tunes – I didn't put on fades, I just gently brought the very end of the song down to digital zero. I didn't leave the sound of the leader because quite often, if you leave the leader in digitally, you can hear a thump. So I just sort of eliminated that thump, I allowed the endings of each of the tunes to reflect what was done on their console at the time, and just capped the ending.

**RF** Which album presented the most difficulty in the overall process? What sort of problems arose and how did you overcome them?

**SB** **“John Wesley Harding”**, right?

**MW** Yeah.

**RF** That was the case with the stereo remaster as well, wasn't it?

**SB** Yeah. It's a wonderful record, and the record for the most part is very what I call internal, quiet – but not the mixes. The master mixes are pretty wild, and there was a lot of *extreme* mastering that went on in those original productions. So in a way, *taming* the original mixes into the sound that became the sound of that released album, takes a lot of work.

**MW** Something about the harmonica on that album . . .

**SB** The high end of the harmonica is just *lethal* . . .

**MW** Yeah, lethal. I don't really use many digital tools, but on that I would take a pass for the harmonica and a pass for the vocal, and intercut them. So when Bob is singing I'm using the vocal pass, and when he's playing harmonica there's a very tight edit made, and it goes to the harmonica pass, the harmonica

EQ. Now for me, that was easy because it's accepted practice in the CD world; but for George Marino this is probably the hardest record he ever cut in his life.

**SB** We have a history of this, going back years now, of having various people take a shot at this record, and it's simply the way the harmonica that Dylan played was *received* into the microphone and accepted on tape. It's just that there's a lot of high end, there's a lot of high notes, and it's piercing and it's loud. And often, when Dylan would play it seems that when he sang, he would sort of rock back a little bit, but when he played harmonica he would hunch back closer in. And so every time the harmonica comes, it's like, “Look out, here it comes again!”. And I said to George Marino when he was cutting the vinyl edition, “Aim lower. Aim lower, because if you get this precise, you're hurting people.”

**RF** So how did the vinyl pressings that you found of **“John Wesley Harding”** sound?



Original John Wesley Harding Mono release

**SB** The masters of the original mixes are really, really squashed so that they were acceptable. From what I hear, the record got recorded pretty simply – it's just a trio, for the most part, playing live, and they recorded it. Then they mixed it, and I don't know what they heard when they were mixing it, but what they mixed and then what they mastered, they had to really squash and compress it to get it to sound kinda quiet and muffled as the original production does, in stereo *and* mono. And so this is what we had to keep going at, and I know it goes completely against the grain of what Mark usually does, which is to maximise the original sound, because if you do that here, it's painful!

**RF** Just as a postscript, it's nice that you managed to find a way of putting out the mono mix of **‘Positively 4th Street’** via the sampler CD . . .

**SB** For some people that first **“Greatest Hits”** album is an album rather than a Greatest Hits, if you know what I mean, and **‘Positively 4th Street’** is on there, so a lot of people hoped that there would be a way to get it out during this time period – so it's on **“The Best Of The Mono”**. We did have the original mono mix of that, I'm happy to say, and it was in tip-top shape.

**RF** Thank you very much. I'll look forward to hearing the records when they're out next week.