

MINNIE RIPERTON'S "LOVIN' YOU"

By Gary Eskow

Let's check out the formula: You grow up loving literature, pick up the guitar in college and then, while you and your young wife—whom you adore—are looking after the baby, noodle around until you find a melody, its lyric, and the simple chord changes that will turn your work into a monster hit that continues to attract listeners 30 years after its release.

Richard Rudolph offers no set of instructions to those who would follow in his footsteps, but more or less that's how he and his late wife, Minnie Riperton, came up with "Lovin' You," the chart-topping single that exploded off her solo LP *Perfect Angel* in 1975.

Rudolph and Riperton met back in the day while he was managing a rock ballroom in Chicago and she was performing with the Rotary Connection, a band signed to the Chess/Checker label produced by the legendary Charles Stepney. Featuring Riperton's stratospheric soprano weaving around and over a rhythm section, elements of the Rotary Connection sound would find their way into the production values Stepney brought to a subsequent set of recordings he made with the session drummer who played on those RC dates, Maurice White. Featuring songs they co-wrote, including "That's the Way of the World" and "Reasons," Stepney and White would later make their own history with Earth, Wind and Fire.

One of Rudolph's compositions, "Come to My Garden," caught Stepney's ear, and it became the title track of Riperton's first solo album, which Stepney produced for GRT, the label that purchased Chess Records. The pair would write a number of songs together before the Rudolphs moved to Florida. Rudolph picks up the story:

"I'd started messing around with 'Lovin' You' in 1971, when we were living in Chicago. We went to visit some friends in Cape Cod, and one of them, Bert Malatesta—who had a great influence on me musically—encouraged me to complete it. Minnie was pregnant with our daughter, Maya, at the time. [The couple also have a son, Marc.]

"After Maya was born, I'd play the song all the time at the little house we had in Gainesville. It was idyllic, with a duck pond, a hammock and a screened-in front porch. One day while Minnie was cooking, she started to hum along, and she came up with the final melody. Then I wrote the lyrics and developed the bridge. For a while though, the song remained within our Gainesville property.

"A couple of years later," he continues, "Don Ellis, who was head of A&R at Epic Records at the time, came down to Gainesville to meet us and signed us to their label. We moved to L.A. to record the album, and when Epic asked us who we wanted to produce it, Minnie told them Stevie Wonder. Why not? Not only is Stevie a genius, he was also at the peak of his popularity at the time.



"At the time, Stevie was practically living in the old Record Plant with his band, Wonderlove. We met someone who knew Stevie and was able to get him on the phone. As it turned out, Stevie was a huge fan of Minnie's, and he asked her what she was doing. A half-hour later, she's in the studio singing background on one of his tracks! Shortly after we met, he agreed to produce *Perfect Angel*, but there was a hitch: Stevie was signed to Motown back then and was afraid they wouldn't let him work on the project. The only way he'd consent to producing the record was if I agreed to co-produce it. Come on—me co-producing with Stevie Wonder? But my presence, along with the pseudonym we came up with for him—El Toro Negro—and the production company we created, Scorbu Productions, provided Stevie with some cover, so I agreed.

"What an experience working with him was! Every night we'd show up early at the Record Plant because you never knew when Stevie and his band—Ollie Brown, who shared drum duties with Stevie, Michael Sembello, [singers] Deniece Williams and Lani Groves, among them—would appear.

"We tracked 'Lovin' You' a couple of times but it didn't feel right, so Stevie asked to hear the original demo, which we had recorded down in Gainesville on a 2-track recorder. We actually made a loop of that demo that we played for Maya while she was in her Swing-o-Matic. It would make her think her mother was there while Minnie and I slipped off for some private time! The demo was just Minnie singing to my accompaniment on the guitar.

"Sembello, then a brilliant young guitarist [who would later enjoy pop success as a solo artist with "Maniac," a single that appeared in the film *Flashdance*], was recovering from surgery for carpal tunnel syndrome and experiencing a lot of wrist pain, so Stevie asked me to play the guitar part to a click track. Me, playing guitar on an album produced by Stevie Wonder? The idea seemed ridiculous, but they insisted that I do it, so I stepped into the booth and

put on a set of headphones. I was having a little trouble laying down a serviceable pass, and so in an effort to loosen me up, Stevie and Minnie started saying the most obscene things to me through the talkback mic! Eventually, we got a usable take on tape. Then Stevie added a pair of beautiful Rhodes parts, Minnie sang the track and we thought we were done.

"But Minnie felt that something was missing, and so went back and listened to the original demo again. Although we hadn't focused on it, a window had been left open while we were recording and the sound of a bird singing had made its way onto the tape. If you needed to add a bird song to a multitrack today, you'd just comb through production library CDs; there were LPs of natural sounds back then, but they weren't readily accessible. So Stevie, Minnie and I headed off to the UCLA botanical gardens with Stevie's Nagra. Minnie could sing like a bird, and she started to engage one. I can still remember Stevie sitting there with his headphones on pretending to be an engineer! Eventually, he captured the sound that we added to the track.

"Then we moved on to the rest of the album, and when it was finished [we] went out on the road to tour behind it. Plans called for me to stay with the kids, not perform, but there were a few problems with the band that I had to straighten out and I ended up in the middle of things playing guitar and a little flute. We found ourselves performing in Portland one night during a huge blizzard. We look around and see that people are putting their arms around each other and having a great time as we're playing 'Lovin' You.' We told the label that they had to release it as a single, but they resisted, saying that it would compromise their strategy of marketing her as an R&B singer. But we told them she was a singer, period, and insisted.

"Then we went back into the studio with Gary Starr, a friend of ours who we initially met when we were all living in Chicago and he was an in-demand engineer. Odell Brown, a brilliant musician, also from Chicago, was in our band, and he brought his ARP String Ensemble into Village Recorder one night and Gary tracked him."

Though Rudolph's memory is that "Lovin' You" was finally mixed at the Record Plant, Robert Margouleff, who mixed it with his partner during that era, Malcolm Cecil, recalls that in fact it was finished "at Tom Hidley's place, which was called Westlake Audio. He had a demo room in the back with an API console in it that had some of the early automation on it, so we

went there. Some of the other songs were mixed at the Plant, but not that one," Margouleff says.

Asked whether he was surprised that "Lovin' You" became such a big hit, Margouleff says, "Not at all. There was a space of about three or four years there when it seemed like Malcolm and I could do no wrong. Everything we touched turned to gold. I can't explain it; it wasn't a conscious thing. We were just at the right place at the right time with the right ideas, I guess."

As for the division of labor on their mixes for Riperton (and for Wonder, as well—it was Margouleff and Cecil who brought him to the Record Plant initially), "we both liked

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to do everything," Margouleff says with a laugh, "but you could say that he tended more toward the mechanical—moving the faders and such—and I focused a little more on EQs and blends. I would often do the basic setup and then Malcolm would do the moves. But we didn't have any set way of working."

"The mix sounds simple," Rudolph adds, "but it required some thinking, particularly regarding the way Stevie's Rhodes parts were handled. These parts are harmonically advanced and work perfectly together as a pair, but the Rhodes has pulsing overtones that can overwhelm a mix, particularly when it's as exposed as it was on this record. Eventually, we got things right, and the single was released in short order."

"Lovin' You" skyrocketed to the top of the pop charts and became a Number One hit across the globe. "We're still licensing the song all over the world," says Rudolph. In fact, the day we spoke, Rudolph had capped a deal with a Romanian production company to use the song.

Dreams tumble, though, and the Rudolphs' perfect flight hit hard winds in 1976 when Riperton was diagnosed with breast cancer, which claimed her life in 1979 at just 31. Rudolph went on to become a successful producer in L.A., where he still lives, and is currently the chief creative executive of Music Sales West/Rudolph Productions.

Thirty-plus years later, mixer Margouleff says of Riperton's classic, "It's a beautiful record. Steve and Dickie [Rudolph] did *such* a nice job on it. It's very sensitive, beautifully performed and it deserves to last. And it has. I hear it everywhere. When something sticks to the wall, it's because it's good writing. And that's also why Minnie could embrace it, too." ■

JOE JACKSON

FROM PAGE 112

tape, you really have to be precise and know exactly what you are going to do before you punch in, which can be difficult when dropping in on drums and grand piano. Joe is one of the few artists who still likes using tape, which, without doubt, does sound great."

The tracking setup at Planet Roc began with Jackson and his grand piano. Bassist Maby stood to his left, and drummer Houghton and his kit were situated next to a wall, in front of Jackson. Gardner captured the rhythm tracks first, with Jackson playing along on an electric keyboard and singing a guide vocal. Later, she would record the final piano and lead vocal tracks, and backing vocals. She says she experimented with Jackson's vocal mic on *Volume 4* and again on *Rain*, and both times decided a Neumann U87 was best for his voice.

"For the piano sound, I used a AKG solid tube large-diaphragm mic down the bottom of the piano," she recalls. She also placed two Schoeps CMC 5s with MK2G capsules at the front, above the hammers, and one Schoeps SMC 5 above the highest strings.

Gardner was also creative with capturing natural reverb: "The studio in its heyday was used for Foley," she explains, "so besides there being different surfaces on floors and different types of acoustics and props in rooms, behind where we had the grand piano in the main room was a large staircase. Underneath the stairs was a cellar, so I left the door open and put a microphone in there, which I faced toward the wall. The room sounded like a chamber, which I recorded and used as an effect. I also used a Neumann SM69 stereo microphone, positioned high in front of the drums in the

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