

# High Fidelity

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EMORY COOK RECORDS THE LONG ISLAND SOUND

# High Fidelity

THE MAGAZINE FOR MUSIC LISTENERS

**The Cover.** Photographer Walter D. Bursten took the cover color-picture of Emory Cook, recording one of the quieter parts of *The Voice of the Sea*, on Shippan Point near Stamford, Conn. He'd rather have accompanied Cook to Mt. Washington, to shoot some thunderheads (see page 49) but the weatherman refused to encourage the deal. No storms.

**This Issue.** Approximately five inches down from here is an entry about which we are extraordinarily happy: Roland Gelatt, New York Editor. Mr. Gelatt, who left a position as feature editor of the *Saturday Review* to join us, has been busy through September finishing his history of the phonograph. As of October 1 he begins covering the vital Gotham area for us. You'll be noticing the results — among them, a Gelatt column on doings in musical and recording circles, title undecided — at the time of this writing.

**Next Issue.** A Stravinsky discography, by Alfred Frankenstein, will be occasion for our most striking cover to date. We expect to offer also Fred Grunfeld on the subject of the late Charles Ives, his music and its recordings; Irving Fried on the topic of turntables and pickups; and — definitely, this time — Peter Bartok on why records sound like records.

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**E**MORY COOK, a man whose name has become synonymous with the capture of extraordinary sound on records, says he is not an artist. This is reminiscent of Arturo Toscanini's well-known insistence that he is not a genius. Toscanini would reserve the title of genius to the man who creates, withholding it from the man who interprets. Cook, in turn, would reserve the title of artist to the man who interprets, withholding it from the man who perpetuates the interpretation on tape or disks. He is very firm about this.

"I have a theory," he explains, "that most recording engineers are frustrated musicians. They want to put themselves into the records they make, from behind a forest of microphones and a 17-channel mixer, to 'create' something they can identify later, with pride, and say 'This is me!'"

"It is better to resign yourself," he goes on, admonishing Emory Cook and his profession sternly, but with a touch of rue, "to having missed the boat. You're not an artist; you're a craftsman, a documentor, and that's all. The channel should add nothing to the content."

Although this is put forward with undoubted sincerity, it would be more convincing if it came from someone other than Emory Cook. No doubt Cook tries to maintain his non-contributive attitude when he is recording, say, the New Orchestral Society of Boston playing the Brahms First in Symphony Hall. However,

## Brahms, Thunderheads and Cachalot Courtship

by JOHN M. CONLY

photographs by WALTER D. BURSTEN



when he outlined his theory of the Self-Effacing Recordist, he was fresh from the slopes of Mt. Washington, in western Massachusetts, where he had spent several days recording thunderstorms. And his reasons for choosing this peak as the place to catch the voice of the storm (the record on which he was working, tentatively titled *The Voice of the Storm and the Sea*, has been scheduled for release sometime in October) are illuminating.

"For one thing," he says, "things happen there that don't happen elsewhere. There are continuous winds, and it's a spot where you can track a storm half around the horizon, using a microphone with a parabolic reflector.

"Then, too, there's a high-frequency component in the sound of a thunderbolt that you don't usually hear, unless it's too damn close to appreciate. Normally all you get is the bass reverberation. The high-pitched sound is absorbed by the terrain. But it's there, and from the mountain I could still pick it up at eight or 10 miles. Sounds like a frighteningly close storm, but with nicer acoustic perspective."

In other words, the thunder in *The Voice of the Storm* is not ordinary, down-in-the-valley thunder. It is special Emory Cook thunder, as heard by eagles, complete with high-frequency sizzle and tape-edited for maximum dramatic effect. "At right, maybe I do try to make it into a composition," he admits. "I just don't want to get too heady about it."

Cook, now 41, is a blue-eyed man who looks younger than he is. He is well set up, and his rather craggy, agreeable face usually is reddened slightly by wind and sun. "When you're after the sounds of the elements," he points out, "you sometimes have to go and camp out and stalk them." Commonly he does this alone, in a big, dark blue Cadillac loaded to the limit with sound-gear. He traveled 10,000 miles, over the past three years, collecting the endlessly varied *Voice of the Sea*. En route he picked up a rich miscellany of other sounds as well, ranging from gull-cries and backwoods Haitian drums to Southwest bar-room pianos, all due to make their appearance sooner or later on Cook Laboratories' "Sounds of Our Times" records. Many will be included in his forthcoming 11-record series "Road Recordings," a sort of traveler's sonic diary.

Cook is the perfect traveler. Although his prime interest is in sounds, he savors gratefully everything about the areas he traverses—the architecture, the philosophy, the old wives' tales and children's games, the night life and particularly the food, wines and liquors. Apparently he always has had this vigorous appetite for color and



*Thunder-hunt. A lightning bolt that missed Cook by 50 feet last year is heard in his new storm-disk.*

variety, but until recent years he had little chance to satisfy it. He was born in Albany, N. Y., a quiet, middle-sized city tediously obsessed with state politics. Boarding school was hardly more stimulating. Then he was admitted to Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and life at once brightened dazzlingly. People who think of Cambridge, Mass., as an unexciting place simply do not see it through the eyes of a college freshman who has been bored for 18 years. Cook began an untiring round of bull-sessions and beer, dances and dates, which lasted through what he recalls as one of the most splendid years of his life. At its end, the authorities ungraciously suggested that he continue his education elsewhere.

"Elsewhere," in this instance, turned out to be Cornell. Sated for the nonce with living it up,

Emory buckled down briskly to the business of acquiring a degree (Electrical Engineering, with Communications option), which he won without trouble. He emerged into the depression-within-a-depression of the late 1930s and, for lack of a job, briefly attended Columbia graduate school. Thereafter he worked at the Pleasant Valley substation of the Niagara-Hudson System, world's largest power substation, and for CBS in New York, neither for very long.

When the war began, he went into radar work at Western Electric, where his bent for tinkering came to the fore and he distinguished himself by inventing what is known as the Mark I Fire-Control Radar Trainer, a device similar to the famous Link Trainer for airplane pilots. Throughout the war he worked with the Navy on radar-operator training in the field, meaning at sea. He calculates that he shipped on more than 300 different naval vessels, mostly destroyers.

At intervals ashore, in the New York suburbs, he relaxed with music, in a radio-engineer's way. That is to say, he took to recording concerts off the air, particularly the Toscanini NBC Symphony broadcasts. A new urgency, born of annoyance, began to possess him. He could not find any recording equipment that was not wildly erratic and prone to distortion. He bought and tried some commercial records, and detected evidence of the same shortcomings there. It became obvious to him that the world needed a better record-cutting head, if homes were to have good music. A design took form in his mind.

In 1945 he left Western Electric, licensed under A. T. & T. patents ("Before you can hang a wire on a vacuum tube, you have to have a license!") to begin manufacture of the Cook Cutter, in which distortion was to be mini-

mized by the application of negative feedback to the circuit driving the cutting head. Somewhat oversimplified, this means that any mechanical motion of the cutting stylus that did not follow exactly the electronic signal would create a correction signal which, when fed back into the amplifier, would limit the spurious movement and leave the electronic-musical signal undistorted. It is harder than it sounds, but Cook was sure he could make it work, and that the world would soon bear a path to his door in Floral Park, Long Island.

Instead, as he says, it turned out to be an elaborate way of going broke. He had his amplifiers made by Langvin, a leading manufacturer, and his cutter-parts made by a local machine shop. He assembled them in his basement. They worked and, though expensive, they sold (about 75 were sold, and all are still in operation). But something unforeseen had happened. Tape had appeared, out of nowhere—actually out of conquered Germany, of course—and initial recording was no longer being done on disks. This cut Cook's potential customers to firms doing last-stage processing, which were rather few. And even these, he discovered in the course of making installations, needed something more than new cutting-heads alone to turn out truly good records. "A man with a roomful of junk would buy one," Cook recalls, "as if in the hope that a spoonful of cider would sweeten a jug of vinegar." Even the best microphones then, he recalls, were noisy, and the best amplifiers unreliable, which made maintenance and balancing vital, yet no one seemed to devote much attention to this, or not enough for Cook's taste. He decided that a broader reform was needed, reaching from microphone to disk, and to spark it he made some records himself.

These were vinylite microgroove 78 rpm's, and he made only enough to take to the 1949 Audio Fair in New York, where he hung up a sign which read simply: COOK 20,000-CYCLE RECORDS. The idea was to sell recording equipment, but most visitors wanted to buy the records, which put another idea in Cook's weary but unbowed head. "Not 78s, though," he explains. "The long-play idea was compulsive. Besides, if you use a lightweight pickup, the slightest warp in a 78 rpm record tosses it up in the air." He began delving for some LP source material he could use, since he had no money to pay musicians, and came up with an idea by Christmas—old-fashioned music boxes playing Christmas carols. He didn't know where any old-fashioned music boxes were to be found, but fortunately the American Museum of Natural History did. A curator gave him

the names of George and Madeline Brown, of Chatham, N. J. Cook went down to see the Browns, listened to their vast collection, and quickly won their support in the project. The first Cook record, *The Christmas Music Box*, came out just in time for the Yuletide rush, and sold very well. It still sells very well, in fact; almost 50,000 copies of it are now in American homes.

Cook thinks there are many things more important than money. However, the taste of profit stayed with him. In 1951, he showed up at the Audio Fair with an LP disk which was to make hi-fi history. This was, of course, Version I of the famous train-noise record, *Rail Dynamics*. For three days, the hall outside his exhibit room in the Hotel New Yorker was jammed solid with fevered audiomaniaacs, blenching with ecstasy at the tremendous whooshes and roars of Cook's locomotives. The records sold out as fast as they could be pressed!

Cook himself had no special interest in train noises to begin with. However, he thought they had nostalgia-appeal, and he wanted a demonstration-record for the Fair. There has been speculation that the New York Central inspired the recording, but it didn't. In fact, the railroad needed some coaxing to cooperate, and even made Cook buy a ticket from Harmon to Poughkeepsie and back when he wanted to record *en voiture*. He lugged his Cook-modified Magnecorder, battery and generator around Harmon and Peekskill, the shunt-and-junction areas, through several summer nights, stumbling over tracks and ducking destruction.

Version I carried, on the reverse of the disk, a summer thunderstorm. Cook withdrew this later (it was a common, Connecticut valley storm; no high frequencies except a cricket) and substituted more train-sounds. These he picked up in a tunnel near Garrison, N. Y., without the railroad's permission. "It was pretty precarious," he concedes, "the clearance wasn't much."

In the process of switching business-emphasis from cutter-heads to recordings (he still makes cutters), Cook had moved from Long Island to Stamford, Conn., where he operates today. His plant occupies 5,000 feet of floor space, and he employs 15 people, though he does all the technical work himself, often by night.

"Our equipment does things," says Cook modestly, "that most engineers wouldn't believe. It can take, let's see, 33 times the maximum usable signal without overloading. It reaches too low for oscillators to follow; under 16 cycles per second. I'm sure it goes down to 8. It goes up to 50,000 cycles with distortion too small for present equipment to measure. We also have a new



*With undampened spirits, Emory braves briny deep.*

process of making records quieter than ever; we're reprocessing most of our catalog with it now. It involves a form of bias, and infra-red treatment. I can't say any more about it."

Cook Laboratories sold about 100,000 records last year. The single best-seller has been *Rail Dynamics*, but a surprising quota of the gross was furnished by straight symphonic music, performed by a group called the New Orchestral Society of Boston. The NOSB's conductor is a young man named Willis Page, who (in the Koussevitzky tradition) is a first-desk bassplayer in the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Other strong items in the catalog are the theater-organ records of Reginald Foort and a multi-percussion disk called *Speed the Parting Guest, or, Hi-Fi Bull in a Chime Shop*. The latter title, by Cook, displays another of his business (and general human) assets, an almost pixyish sense of humor. One pair of his records, featuring Red Camp, a Texas pianist, bear the subtitles "Fugitive Piano Smasher from 52nd Street" and "Old Webfoot Strikes Again." Reginald Foort, long a featured organist of the BBC, is obviously a kindred spirit. His five Cook recordings of the giant Wurlitzer at the Richmond (Va.) Mosque Theater contain some of the most horrendous noises ever wilfully contrived, and his treatment on one of them (Percussion and Pedal, Cook 1052) of "Old Soldiers Never Die" constitutes one of the funniest moments in recorded music(?). Cook hopes loudly that he will never have to make another organ record, but admits under pressure that two Foort-items are in the works.

There is less unanimous critical acclaim for his orchestral records, where he gets into territory already well-trodden, and has to stake young Willis Page against Toscanini, Beecham, Ansermet and other fairly well-entrenched contenders. However, even here Cook enjoys a kind of mo-

nopoly, for he is the only large-scale maker of binaural recordings, and nearly his whole catalog is available in binaural form. These disks, in case anyone doesn't know, have twin groove bands, to be played by special, double-headed pickup arms (Cook makes an adapter for ordinary, single-head arms), and require two amplifiers and two loudspeakers, separated by 10 feet or so, for playback. The product is genuine aural 3-D. In such records as his forthcoming disk of excerpts from Richard Strauss's *Salome*, featuring Phyllis Curtin, who created a sensation in the role at New York's Center Theater last winter, the binaural effect is literally breathtaking.

Thunder heads and crashing breakers benefit less, of course, from binaural recording, though the difference can be heard. And tridimensionality is completely irrelevant to Emory Cook's latest recording enthusiasm, which is probably an inevitable development in a man who travels as widely and intently as he. He has begun collecting some strictly non-high-fidelity material—reminiscences of old timers in places he visits. There's a New York State geologist who is a walking repository of cave-lore and cave-stories. There is Matt Richards, mate of the sea-borne Connecticut Marine Museum, who is a *floating* repository of shipwreck stories. There may—just possibly—be Grandma Moses. There are the surviving members of the Master Mariners' Association of Gloucester, Mass., all iron men from the days of wooden ships. And there's the nonogenarian New Bedford whaling captain who, in the South Atlantic ("up south," he calls it) used to watch the sperm-whales, or cachalots, go through the massive flirtations preliminary to mating, and act consummated many dark fathoms down. For some reason, Cook eyes take on a dreamy look when he talks of this. And, of course, he *has* been investigating underwater microphones.