

Background Music Co. Sells Its Customers 'Atmosphere'

By NICK BIRO

CHICAGO — Through the years, coin machine operators have turned more and more to various forms of diversification to expand their base of operation. Perhaps the two most popular moves in this direction have been background music and vending. Both seem to fit into the coin machine operator's traditional pattern of doing business. In an effort to bring new

light on one of these—background music—Billboard presents here a case study of one of the nation's leading manufacturers of this type of equipment. The look into Tape-Athon's doors contains not just a study of the firm itself, but a detailed analysis of background music—how, why and what makes it click.

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — If

you were to ask George Anthony, president of Tape-Athon Corporation, what his firm produces and sells, he would tell you simply—"atmosphere." Although the Tape-Athon organization is one of the largest background music companies, it prefers to describe its product in such off-beat terms because, as Anthony puts it, "background music today just isn't what it should be. Some of the sounds

now being used or sold for background purpose would be better off attenuated a couple hundred db's."

Only 10 years old, Tape-Athon has grown today to one of the most respected names in the music business. The equipment it now provides is a series of professional-type reel-to-reel tape transports and the music that's used with them. Engineered for the "long haul" installation, these tape transports are rugged right down to the name-plates. Realizing that in many cases the machine will be located on the ultimate customer's premises, their designers have made it as fully automatic and as durable as materials and processes will allow.

The firm deploys its systems through a number of national reps and from these to several hundred distributors and dealers. The music end of the business itself has grown so large that it must now be operated as a separate entity, Tape-Athon Music, Inc. This firm is equipped with one of the largest and most costly tape duplicating facilities on the West Coast.

Tape-Athon, as the name implies, provides music on tape for background play, but it goes into a truly scientific study to select just what music is used. The company's philosophy is to provide background music on a custom basis—each user receiving a specific program for his establishment. What this boils down to is Tape-Athon's well-founded belief that no two businesses need exactly the same kind of background. Here are just a few of the considerations made when selecting music for a particular location.

- Type (department store, motel, cocktail lounge, etc.).
- Geographical area.
- Ethnic origin of customers.
- Time of day in operation.
- Image desired.

What evolves from all this study is a program for an establishment that provides an atmosphere, designed to influence the patrons by attracting or retaining them. This "correct" atmosphere has been shown to be many times more effective than run-of-the-mill background music. At the same time, the Tape-Athon organization is able to produce these programs and tape players and sell through distributors and dealers at prices competitive to other sources.

The process of developing these programs to meet the firm's requirements is lengthy, as can be imagined. The music is strictly instrumental since vocals tend to make the patron "listen." This is objectionable

for true background atmosphere. Sources for musical numbers are international, necessitating frequent trips to foreign music centers, most notably, Europe.

Literally thousands of musical numbers and arrangements are auditioned annually at Tape-Athon's facility in Inglewood. Only 10 per cent of the total music submitted is finally selected for use in the various programs. And what music the firm can't find already recorded it will procure by having original recordings made. All music is thoroughly studied by Tape-Athon's three-man auditioning staff, representing over 100 years of aggregate musical experience. Once a number has been approved by the auditioning staff, it is recorded on a special master tape and becomes part of the firm's library." Actually, three masters are made simultaneously; one dual track duplicating the original, a second identical to the first for "andby or safety, and a third four-track for stereo. These original tapes are kept on individual reels, cataloged, and stored in a controlled-atmosphere room. This cataloging operation itself is extremely comprehensive, providing coded data on every aspect of the music, simplifying selections for program matching.

The next step in producing a salable "atmosphere" is to combine 200 to 400 such recordings into a single, continuous program. Here is where the techniques of psychology as well as musical knowledge are prime qualifications for editing. The man who masterminds this function is Max Urban, well-known composer, arranger, and conductor. Urban must not only select the proper numbers but must sequence them in the most desirable and efficient order, provide proper breaks between them, time the entire program, and compensate for variations in amplitude so the finished work has a constant volume level.

Using this program master as an original recording, the firm then produces one or more duplicates, as required, in its extensive and well-equipped duplicating department. All recordings are made on 1-mil. mylar for true reproduction and maximum durability.

Thus, the customer receives a taped program that is not only unique but one designed to fit his business like a glove. It is intended to realistically reduce employee absenteeism, improve production, attract new customers, put patrons in buying mood, or do whatever the occasion demands. Usually, this music is
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AUDIO ENGINEER JIM JERRARD records a master tape for the Tape-Athon library from one of the many new numbers the firm receives from music publishers all over the world.



THE DUPLICATING ROOM where 10 custom-built Ampex duplicators handle the high volume of taped programs sent to thousands of customers throughout the world.



ANOTHER MASTER TAPE is added to the music library. Tape-Athon has one of the largest such collections in the world and is continually increasing its scope and size.



MAESTRO MAX URBAN in Tape-Athon's master control room checks the quality and duration of a musical selection to become part of a finished program.



OPERATORS AT TAPE-ATHON manually check condition of returned tapes prior to re-recording.

Recent

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for Music Operators

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THE BEATLES—The Beatles' Second Album...Capitol
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Pop Instrumental

"BIG" TINY LITTLE—Honky Tonk Hootenanny...Coral
LEON McAULIFF—The Dancin'est Band AroundCapitol

All titles listed are custom 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ stereo singles packaged for the juke box operator. Other packagers or record companies may get weekly listings of their product by sending releases to Juke Box Reviews, Billboard, 165 W. 46th Street, New York, N. Y. 10036.