

June 4, 1984
Los Angeles Herald Examiner

Family's ministudio keeps everyone on the books

By: James Bacon

I stopped off late one night at the Palomino, as is often my wont, arriving in a limousine and wearing a black tie, which is not my usual dress for the world's most famous country and western honky-tonk.

Out on the dance floor I spotted an exceptionally fine dancer. In the dim light, I admired her professional grace. Then she came over to my table and she turned out to be an old friend – Terry Taylor, publicist, dancer and actress.

She asked me to stay for the midnight show to catch her client Bonnie Paul, a 20-year old country and western singer from New York City. I had never met a country and western singer from Manhattan before, so I stayed. The girl sounded as if she had come from Nashville instead of the Big Apple – and she's very pretty too.

Later, I found out she is part of a remarkable family that came out here 11 years ago from New York and now operates a ministudio on the Sunset Strip – The S. Paul Company.

I had lunch with them the other day at the Old World restaurant, where I had a cheeseburger from cattle without hormone injections. Very tasty. After lunch, I toured their nearby ministudio and was amazed at the pictures they have made, notably "Falling In Love Again." Starring Elliott Gould and Susannah York, and "Slapstick," starring Jerry Lewis, Madeline Kahn, Jim Backus and the late Marty Feldman – with screenplay by Kurt Vonnegut based on his own novel.

An next on the slate is "Melissa," which will team Alan Jay Lerner and composer Michel Legrand for the first time on the book and score. Those are two fancy names – Lerner is the lyricist of "My Fair Lady," "Camelot," "Gigi" and "An American in Paris," to name a few. Legrand is an Oscar winner with such credits as "The Umbrellas of Cherbourg," "Summer of '42" and "Brian's Song."

The big common denominator in all these films is Steven Paul as producer and director and often writer and actor. What's even more amazing is that Steven, even now, is only 23 years old. Papa Hank, a one-time investments counselor, is executive producer and handles the money; Mama Dorothy is casting director; Bonnie, the country and western singer, also doubles as an actress; and a younger son, Stuart, is an actor.

Steve and Stuart, as actors, will be among the stars of "Melissa." "We are the Jewish Osmonds." Says Steve, except they are about five or six kids short of the famous Utah Mormon family of entertainers.

Dorothy started off the whole family enterprise when she took Steve to a commercial audition – and he got it. For a while, the family stayed in New York where Steve did 80 commercials, four Broadway plays and numerous TV shows. Mother and father decided to pack up and head west where the movie business is.

When Steven was 17, he wrote, produced and directed his first Hollywood film – “Memories Are Not Enough.” No wonder he has an office with a big desk at 23. I asked Dorothy how she mothered a country and western singer with all this urban, sophisticated New York and Hollywood background. “We used to vacation in Florida every winter and Bonnie, as a little kid, listened to all the country music while we drove through the Carolinas, Georgia and Florida. She just took to it.”

When we lunched the other day, Steve had just returned from a trip to Europe that took him to more major cities than a tour guide. He was lining up foreign distributors for “Slapstick” and other films. The Pauls also distribute their own movies, by-passing the unprofitable big studio tie-up.

I had heard about Steve from my friend, Jim Backus, who played the president of the United States in “Slapstick.” Steve knew that Backus was right for the part and was going to cast him without seeing him. Then he decided to visit Backus at his home in Bel-Air.

What Steve didn’t know was that Jim was just recovering from a serious illness that had been misdiagnosed as Parkinson’s disease. It wasn’t, but it had many of the same symptoms. “Jim got up to walk and I noticed that he didn’t walk too well,” recalls Steve. I wondered whether he could do the picture; then I thought to myself, I could do terrible harm to this man if I rejected him when he is trying so hard to get back on his feet.”

“I decided to cast him. I would overcome his problems by the way I staged his scenes. He is marvelous in the role.” Imagine that. A producer with heart.