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Siftin' Through The Pieces

BY WILLIAM RUHLMANN

"This new record is a chance to set the record straight," said Rusty Young, sitting in a conference room at RCA Records in New York on a hot August day in 1989. Young, who had spent most of his adult life as a member of the group Poco, and had, indeed, been its sole remaining original member since 1978, was in town with Jimmy Messina, another original member of the group, to discuss *Legacy*, Poco's first album in five years and its first album ever to feature the original quintet that first came together in Los Angeles in 1968. (As it turns out, *Legacy* is something less than the full-scale reunion it was originally billed to be, but we'll get to that.)

"It took 20 years to make this record," Furay said. For Poco, those were 20 years of musical accomplishment achieved in the face of commercial frustration and changes in personnel. The band grew out of the ashes of Buffalo Springfield, the seminal folk-rock group of the mid-'60s. By 1968, with band members Stephen Stills and Neil Young in search of other berths, guitarist Richie Furay and bassist Messina were left to piece together the band's final album, *Last Time Around*. One of the album's tracks was a Furay composition called "Kind Woman" that Furay thought needed extra instrumentation.

"We were looking for a steel guitar, and that's how I met Rusty," Furay explained in a September, 1989, interview. Furay took the recommendation of one of the band's assistants about a steel guitar player from Denver, Colorado. He was sufficiently impressed with the result to invite Young to join the post-Springfield outfit he and Messina were putting together. Young,

in turn, recommended drummer George Grantham, with whom he had played in Colorado. For the bass spot, the group auditioned any number of available musicians, among them Gram Parsons, Timothy B. Schmit, and Gregg Allman, before settling on Randy Meisner, a Nebraska-born musician who had made a name for himself throughout the West.

The intention, as Young put it, quoting Furay and Messina, was a band that was "a little more country than the Springfield is, and it's melodic and something real vocally oriented." The band played around the Los Angeles area before formally debuting at the Troubadour in the fall of 1968. Their showcase led to record company interest, and Poco signed to Epic Records in December.

The group went into the studio to record its debut album in January, 1969, with Messina as producer, but only a couple of weeks into recording, it was rocked by the departure of Meisner. The split wasn't explained at the time, but in 1989, with the original quintet reunited, Young and Messina were blaming "management" for a misunderstanding.

"It was purely a foolish thing," said Young. "He called down to the studio and wanted to come down and listen to a mix, and management at the time said, 'No, no, Jimmy's doing this all by himself, and he doesn't want to be disturbed.' Jimmy didn't know what happened with Randy until about six months ago [i.e., February, 1989]." "Randy has just really expressed those [reasons] to us, and still I'm not really sure exactly what had happened, but some difficulties with different persons involved with or around the band," was the way Furay

put it in September, 1989. As we shall see, this story changed.

The remaining members did not at first attempt to replace Meisner, and released their first album, *Pickin' Up The Pieces*, as a quartet in May, 1969. The album was a moderate success, selling a reported 100,000 copies. But Messina chafed against playing bass, and Furay wasn't comfortable as a lead guitarist, so in the summer, Timothy B. Schmit was added to the group on bass. This quintet made the second album, *Poco*, released in May, 1970. The album was again only a moderate success, but a change in management and an increase in road work seemed to augur well for the band when a personnel change rocked it again. Messina was coming into increasing conflict with Furay and decided to quit. Before he did, he groomed a successor, ex-Illinois Speed Press member Paul Cotton, and produced the next Poco album, the live *Deliverin'*, released in January, 1971.

The quintet of Furay, Young, Grantham, Schmit, and Cotton remained in place for the next two years, recording three albums before Furay, frustrated with the group's steady but limited success, quit in 1973. Though he had been Poco's nominal leader, the group soldiered on as a quartet without him, releasing another five LPs at roughly the same level of commercial success before Schmit decamped to take a place in the Eagles in September, 1977. He was followed by Grantham, who left in January, 1978.

Young and Cotton regrouped in 1978, adding Charlie Harrison and Steve Chapman and, remarkably, enjoyed their greatest commercial

success with the gold-selling *Legend* and its two Top 20 singles "Crazy Love" and "Heart Of The Night" in 1979. Subsequent albums failed to match this success, however, and by the mid-'80s, Young and Cotton were only doing occasional duet shows under the name Poco. Then came the idea of a reunion.

In the intervening years, Furay had become a Christian and the pastor of a church in Colorado. Meisner and Schmit had maintained solo careers, as had Messina after the breakup of the successful Loggins and Messina duo in the '70s. "Jimmy and I are soul brothers, and we've always talked about doing a project together, but never had the time," Young said. "Last time I talked to him, it was the right time for him and the right time for me, and then it just so happened I saw Richie, and Richie said, 'You know, it would really be fun to do something in this day and age, make a record.'"

"Rusty and Paul came to Denver and did a concert, and they called up and said, 'Hey, would you like to come down and sing a few songs with us?'" Furay recalled, "and I said, 'Of course.' I'd done it before. But after the concert that day, Rusty said, 'What would you think about just getting together and let's just make an album with no real commitment.' I talked to him about the parameters that I felt I could work within, being a pastor, but I said I really liked the idea. We didn't really talk about who would be in the band."

"The first concept was, let's have everybody," said Young, "and somebody pointed out that you can't have a record with seven songwriters on it and seven lead singers, which is true. Plus, Tim is not interested. Jimmy, or Jimmy and Richie in combination, said, 'Listen, let's make it the original five guys. It would really be fun to see what we sound like 20 years later, so that's the way it went. It put me in a position where I had to go to Paul and say, 'I'm sorry, but the concept for the record is it's gonna be the original five guys.' He went out and got a solo record deal." (Cotton's first solo album, *Changing Horses*, was released in 1990.)

"It actually for me began at the point when we decided to all work as the genuine original group," said Messina. "We all got together and spent four days to determine that we could work together. Once we got together and played and got a chance to meet each other, I realized that the potential was very strong and the desire was definitely there, but we had to make certain agreements to assure each other that that could happen, one of which was to agree that this particular group was not a soap box for any kind of religious or political beliefs to be aired or promoted. In that discussion, we agreed that the music would be secular and that we were a rock 'n' roll band, and if that was acceptable to everybody, we could move on."

The statement, of course, is directed at Furay, who had made Christian albums during the '80s. "As far as a secular record, I understand that," Furay said when asked to comment on Messina's remarks, "and that's why we did it, though, even within the bounds of it being a secular record, there were certain parameters, if I was going to be a part of it, there would have to be some consideration, because I'm not gonna compromise who I am. I'm not going to be on a record to dictate or legislate morality, but I'm not gonna compromise my own. It is a secular project, but it still remains within certain bounds, and they understand that, and they work with me on it, and I really appreciate that."

With agreement on the project's secular nature, Messina continued, "We were asked to write songs and submit them, and that there would be other songs submitted by other people outside of us that we felt, or that they felt that the record company could respect and appreciate, and based on the material that was submitted, RCA said that they would be willing to record the album. I'm glad I didn't produce it. I didn't want to do that. I wanted to be an artist."

Poco signed to Left Bank Management, which also handles pop-rock star Richard Marx. *Legacy* was produced by Marx's co-producer, David Cole, and one of its tracks, "Nothin' To Hide," was co-written and produced by Marx himself. Though the album was billed as a full-scale reunion, Young later admitted this wasn't quite the case, stating flatly during an August, 1990, interview that drummer George Grantham did not play on the sessions. Richie Furay's participation too seems to have been limited, extending only to the vocals on the two songs he co-wrote.

Released in August, 1989, *Legacy* was a resounding success. It was certified gold, and two of its singles, "Call It Love" and "Nothin' To Hide," reached the Top 40. The band toured in early 1990 opening for Richard Marx, and did headlining dates on its own during the summer.

By then, however, the group's harmony had begun to fray once again. The focus of problems was a conflict between Furay and the others. This was revealed at first in a change in the story about Meisner's original departure back in 1969. Whereas in 1989, Young had said "management" had barred Meisner from the recording studio, in 1990, Messina corrected this. "It wasn't the management that he talked to," he said. "It was specifically Furay." When this reporter noted that Furay hadn't mentioned that, Messina suggested he talk to "the horse's mouth instead of the horse's rear end."

So Meisner himself was asked. "When we were working on the album," he said, "I had called down to the studio, and I think Jimmy was mixing, and Richie. I wanted to come down to hear the mixes, and Richie answered the phone. He says, nobody comes down while we're mixing. I thought about it for a few minutes, and I said, 'We're not a group if I can't come down and listen to our stuff.' It was just a flat no, and so at that point it's just as simple as this, I just said, 'If I can't come down, then I'm gonna leave the group, and Richie said, 'Okay,' and then I left."

By the summer of 1990, however, it was Furay who wasn't playing in Poco anymore. According to Young, a problem arose in the way the band's audiences responded to them. "When we were out on the Richard Marx tour with Richie," he said, "there were some things that just didn't work as well as you would've thought. 'Pickin' Up The Pieces,' 'Good Feelin' To Know,' songs that were from the late '60s, early '70s, pretty much it's been too long. That music is music of a certain era, and it carries with it that whole feeling, but unfortunately, in an audience in 1990, there aren't a lot of people who are familiar with that music."

In addition to Poco songs, the group was performing tunes associated with other bands the members had been in, songs that were, in some cases, bigger hits than the Poco songs. "The crowds that we were drawing were more familiar with [the Eagles'] 'Take It To The Limit,'

[Loggins and Messina's] 'Your Mama Don't Dance,' 'Crazy Love,' 'Call It Love,' 'Rose Of Cimarron,' that era of Poco and Randy and Jimmy music," Young said.

The songs that weren't working, of course, were songs of Furay's. "Richie's songs didn't go down big," Young said, "and I think it got to Richie, and so when it came to the summer tour, even though he'd committed to doing it, he said, 'I'll do half of it, how's that?' and we said, 'Richie, we'll go ahead and do the tour, and why don't you go ahead and take care of your church commitment.'"

"We probably never would have done that except for the fact that Randy, Jimmy, and I had been out working, promoting the record, for eight months ahead of that. The record was made by the three of us. It wasn't made with George and Richie, so it was not a big stretch to just carry on without George and Richie, and actually, I feel, personally, more focused when it's the three of us. We are the most equal contributors to the band. This chemistry works. The chemistry with the five of us didn't always work."

Obviously, the split between Furay and the rest of the band put the future of what was now a newly popular group in doubt. As the summer tour neared a close, Young was asked about the band's plans. "Randy, Jimmy, and Rusty want to make another record," he said. "When we started this, we had two things that were important to us: we wanted to have a record people liked, a record that sold, that actually had some impact in the business, a gold record; and if we did it, and we had fun and enjoyed it, liked working together, then we'd talk about doing another record. Well, the record went gold, that part came true. Jimmy and Randy and I have had a great time working together, we're really having a lot of fun on tour. So both those things have come true, so we're saying, well, let's do another one. There's no reason not to do another one, see if we can't do a better record than the last one."

As of August, 1990, Young was unsure who would be on that record, suggesting that it might feature Furay if the record company insisted. By early 1991, that record company was no longer RCA. In February, Left Bank Management announced the formation of Impact Records, a joint-venture label with MCA. Poco was listed on the new label's roster.

Meanwhile, the band's personnel seemed to be shifting again. On December 15, 1990, a cover of Buddy Holly's "Learning The Game" by a group called Black Tie had entered the *Billboard* magazine "Hot Country Singles & Tracks" chart, and in its feature "New On The Charts" on January 19, 1991, *Billboard* writer Debbie Holley identified the group as including "Randy Meisner, ex-member of Poco" And a record industry source suggested to this writer that George Grantham was also out of the band again.

All of which would seem to mean that the Poco now preparing its Impact Records debut consists of Jimmy Messina and Rusty Young, which is only to say that the volatility, which has been as much a part of Poco's history as its great music, is still present. Perhaps that's inevitable. "Any time you get five real talented guys in a band, you're looking for trouble," Young said. "They need to grow, and when they need to grow, they have to leave a band. So it has a built-in lifespan." Nevertheless, it looks as though Poco's life as a group will continue. ■

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