

PHILIP NEWELL

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

"I absolutely loved your book – devoured every single word of it. Many congratulations."

(Richard Branson)*

**Gaining
My
Virginity**



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Philip Newell

Gaining My Virginity

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First published in 2024 by Dark Star
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Preface

The major part of this book describes my passage through a professional music-recording industry, the likes of which we may never see again. The 1970s was a golden era for music recording and it set the standards for more or less all that followed, but the 1970s, themselves, were launched on the back of a musical explosion in the 1960s. However, my story really begins in the 1950s, when my family circumstances already suggested that music could become a significant part of my life. As it turned out, by the early 1960s, music had grown in importance to me until it eventually dominated my school life, and soon led to an unexpected change in the future direction of my previously-presumed career.

I began working on this autobiography in 2006, after a small surgical operation, but my efforts became more serious in 2008, when my normal work began to slow down due to the global financial crisis. The subsequent reduction in activity meant that I could spend more time at my then home, in Spain, where I had ready access to all my shelves full of files of documents relating to the previous decades. I initially approached the work with a lot of optimism, full of great memories, but the files also contained some not-so-great memories, many of which I had long forgotten about (and probably *chosen* to forget). It has long been said by specialists in the subject that, for survival purposes, the memory can be very selective: sometimes actually *needing* to forget many unpleasant things – and I surely now know why!

Even the continuation of the writing after a hiatus was not always without its emotional upsets as files continued to be opened, but the unpleasant things were still all links in a chain of events that led me to where I eventually arrived. Without those bad things, therefore, many of the later good things would not have happened, and, in truth, if I had been offered this journey when I was in my teens, I would still have taken it. Painful memories can fade or be forgotten, but by contrast, most of the good ones have endured, and many have been priceless.

The idea to write the story down had been suggested to me by many people as time went on, but especially by those people who thought it could be interesting to a large number of people for whom music and music-recording are now important parts of their lives. The 21st Century has seen a huge increase in the number of people who make music recordings, although many of them will never have the chance to experience recording at the highly innovative and challenging professional level of the 1970s and 80s. At this time, there were many large studio complexes which effectively served like universities for the industry, often with two or three generations of staff members. These were also the times when the skills upon which so much of the modern recording world is now based were honed, so inevitably, this book has a fair amount of technical content (although this can easily be skimmed-over by those for whom the intricacies of the recording process are not so relevant).

Nevertheless, the descriptions outline the changes in the general recording environment, the equipment, and the corresponding changes in the working practices. The Virgin Records organisation, which I joined in 1971, features prominently in this story, and it soon found itself at the very forefront of many of the technological and operational advances as the 1970s unfolded. So, the story of Virgin's development is also a story from 'the sharp end' of music recording. Many of these processes led directly to the later musical styles which have evolved from those practices, but this book also reflects the business and cultural changes that took place during my career – as well as the 'political' ones. For example, the 'delights' of crossing the Iron Curtain with entire trucks of mobile recording equipment are no longer possible to 'enjoy' directly. (Thank goodness!)

There also seemed to be two approaches to the writing of this book. For the technically inclined, it could have been an in-depth review of the equipment and the ways of working, but this wouldn't even tell half of the story. Another approach would have been much more anecdotal, describing the people, places, and all their interactions, but this could have resulted in stories without context. Maybe there could have even been two different books, developed separately for two different types of readers, but it became very difficult to separate all the various aspects, because they were so intertwined. It was *all* about music and its recording, and by telling the combined story it also enabled the hopefully-fascinating description, from an inside viewpoint, of how Virgin gradually transformed itself from a cluster of small companies (sprouting from a magazine formed by some unusual but very creative characters) into a group of highly successful enterprises with worldwide recognition.

In the event, I hope I have found a readable balance between the technical and anecdotal aspects of the writing, but the 'work and play' aspects of this story, as well as the technical and artistic sides, all formed a part of one life, where for me – as well as for many of my colleagues – 'going to work' never really took place in the customary sense of the phrase. However, this wasn't 'workaholism' as we tend to think of it. My life was simply what I did, and because many of the opportunities that presented themselves were far too interesting to let pass by, they inevitably redirected my career as they were taken up. Consequently, the path that it took was rarely the result of any conscious career decisions, and at times, it was even somewhat more like an Alice in Wonderland trip.

Nevertheless, I carried a lot of responsibility for the tasks that I was asked to undertake, but an odd thing that occurred whilst writing this history was how, on looking back, my mind had confused the orders of some events. Things that I could have sworn occurred in a given sequence were shown, after carefully consulting files and recording-dates, to have been impossible to have done so in the order that I had 'remembered'. Especially with the aid of the Internet, it has recently been possible to also verify some dates that would have otherwise been confused, but it still seems strange how the mind can play so many tricks. Still, when discussing these things with my former colleagues, whilst fact-checking, many of them also reported facing the same problem. So, hours, days, and even weeks must have been spent trying to ensure that the dates and facts in this book are accurate, but if any of them can be proved to be otherwise, I can only apologise, and say that I am open to them being corrected.

Philip Newell, north Wales, May 25th 2024

1 Early Influences

When corrected for latitude and British Summer Time, I was born around the stroke of noon on August 21st 1949, in Blackburn, Lancashire: a cotton-mill town in the north-west of England. My father and mother were Harry and Kathleen Newell, but up until that time, there had been no Philips in their families. However, my mother suffered what was probably a brain-haemorrhage in the weeks leading up to my birth, and our lives were saved by the then rare, specialist knowledge of a refugee from the Nazi take-over of Austria, Dr Philip Zimmerman. My other name is Richard, after my maternal grandfather. Like his father before him (yet another Richard) he was a professional footballer. Both had played for Blackburn Rovers, but my grandfather had also played for Blackpool, Clapton (Leyton) Orient and Stalybridge Celtic. He also played the harmonica and the spoons quite well, and my mother played piano. She was actually an Associate of the London College of Music, although that recognition was as an elocution teacher, and not for her musical prowess, but even so, she did play the piano acceptably well.

My father was half Irish, but I am not sure that he was aware of it at the time. Anyhow, that part of my father's history explains why he was brought up as a Roman Catholic. Conversely, the members of my mother's family were variously Church of England (C of E) and Methodist. My mother was actually C of E, but I was christened in the Methodist chapel that my maternal grandmother attended. In fact, of my parents and my mother's parents, who were all living in the same house, two voted for the Labour party, one voted Liberal, and the other voted Conservative. Taken all together, that was quite a mix of nationalities, religions, and political orientation in one household, but the political alliances didn't even tie up with either their religious or ethnic origins. Indeed, it was my father and his mother-in-law – the traditional flashpoint in such confined homes – who were politically-speaking the staunch Labour supporters. They actually got on very well, and both always voted for Barbara Castle. However, given such diversity in the family, by the age of ten I had become a devout Atheist, incapable of understanding their religious differences, yet loving them all equally. I have also never been an unconditional supporter of any one political party. Anyhow, despite all the differences of views and backgrounds, it was one of the most peaceful families that could ever have existed. Hardly a single cross word was ever heard in the house, and trouble was always left at 'the other side of the doorstep'.

Looking back, it was a very working-class home, situated close to the cotton mill for whose workers it had been built, and with the toilet at the far end of the back yard. With no bathroom, it would probably now be classified as 'unfit for human habitation', although it always seemed OK to me, and my mother's qualifications as an elocution teacher ensured that I spoke very correct English, with relatively little regional accent. My grandfather's local fame as an 'inside forward' for Blackburn Rovers contributed to the fact that we were generally a well-respected family within the wider community of the town. Although materially we didn't have much of anything, we also had no debts, as that was something that the family was always very strict about: no debts! Nevertheless, despite the lack of general wherewithal, as a child, my mother had received regular lessons in ballet-dancing and horse-riding (as well as her lessons in elocution and piano playing), all, presumably, largely received free of charge due to my grandfather's footballing kudos.

Anyhow, when I was about seven years old, my mother insisted that I should also begin to receive piano lessons. In my own opinion (at least then), this was a

total waste of time, because I was sure that when I grew up, I would be an engine driver, driving steam locomotives. (Photo 1.1 shows the budding railway-man, at the age of two, holding a toy engine alongside the real thing.) For young boys, this was *the* job in those days, controlling a mighty locomotive that loudly belched-forth smoke and steam. This was the epitome of excitement, whereas by the age of eight, practising the piano for half an hour each day seriously got in the way of train-spotting and playing football with my friends, but there was no escape from it. It seemed like a disaster!



Photo 1.1 – The author with his toy engine, at Blackburn station c. late 1951.

I am not sure quite why, but around the same time, my mother began to suspect that I had eye problems, and so I was taken to see an ‘ENT’ specialist, Dr Wishart, who also dealt with eyes. It transpired that I almost certainly also owed my existence to this man (as well as to Dr Zimmerman), as he had successfully operated on my father to remove a mastoid thrombosis in 1931, when the chances of survival were given as no more than 1 in 1000. Regarding my eyesight, it turned out that I had a somewhat weak (‘lazy’) left eye, so I had to wear glasses for the

next few years, to see if it could be corrected. I also had to wear a patch over my 'good' eye for an hour each day, to try to force the bad one to work better, but unfortunately, it never did.

At St James's C of E primary school, I was usually somewhere around the top of the class in those early days, and when I began to arrive wearing glasses, my form teacher, Mrs. Sandals, soon dubbed me 'The Professor', which was a nickname that stuck with me till I was at least 16 years old. During that time, I was even known to the families of many of my friends by no other name, and so 'How is The Professor?' was often the first question that a friend's mother would ask my own mother if they met whilst out shopping. In reality, I think that I also rather played up to it, as it certainly was not a disparaging nickname, and it did have a certain 'status' attached to it. Being top of the class in 'arithmetic' also reinforced it. (Yes, I still have my school reports.) Also in those days, there was a programme on BBC television called *Inventor's World* (I think), which my father usually watched, and from me watching this, I thought that being an *inventor* was a job – like being a carpenter or a postman would be. After a while, this seemed to be even more interesting than being an engine driver, so by the age of about ten I had changed my mind and decided that I wanted to be an inventor when I grew up.

Many 'scientific' experiments were to follow during the coming years, so I gradually became very comfortable with my pseudonym (albeit often abbreviated to Prof). However, inventing and train-spotting continued side-by-side for a few years more, although both were limited to some degree by that confounded piano practice for half an hour every day, seven days a week, and which was also *still* disrupting the available time to play football with my friends. From time to time (well; perhaps *occasionally*), I did make a great mental effort to work on my piano playing, but my heart still wasn't into it. And what is more, by the time that I was about ten, *girls* had begun to distract me from just about *everything* else (although I can't say I ever regretted *that*).

In mid 1960, when I was still only ten years old (due to my birthday being at the very end of the school year – meaning that I was always the youngest pupil in the class), we had our '11-plus' examinations – which most people took when they were eleven. These were in two parts, and their results would determine if, in the following September, we would go to grammar schools, from which universities could be the next step for some pupils, or to so-called Secondary Modern schools. At the latter, vocational-training was more the goal, and from where pupils were usually expected to leave at 15 years old, to find jobs, or to become apprentices. There was little doubt in anyone's mind that I would be in the grammar school group, and I duly complied with expectations, but taking the first part of the examination at the same time as me was a school chum, Neville Hounslow. Neville was not generally considered to be a grammar school candidate, as he did not do well in most of the examinations. I wouldn't say that he was a close friend at that time, but our houses lay in the same general direction from the school, so he was often in the same group that I set off walking home with. He was a likeable character, and although he didn't take part in any of our sports or games outside of school, I got on well with him.

Nonetheless, one morning, a week or so after the first part of our 11-plus examination, the results were announced. Quite sensationally, Neville had passed. He always had his dinners at school, whereas *I* always went home for dinner (known as *lunch* in other parts of the country) but I remember that at that dinner-time, I ran as fast as I could to his home, before going home myself. I wanted to break the news of Neville's success to his mother, as it was too urgent to be delayed! In the second part of the 11-plus examination, Neville was not so

fortunate, whereas I had passed, so we went to different senior schools from then on, and I didn't see him much for some years after that (but we will return to him later).

* * *

Looking back, the suppression of any mention in the family of my father's Irish roots was somewhat odd, but in the summer of 1960, just before my 11th birthday, and before going to grammar school, my parents took me on my first holiday – to the south of England. This involved driving down the newly opened first section of the M1 motorway, linking Birmingham with London, and on which there were (unbelievably) *no speed limits*. Once we were on the south coast, I noticed that many restaurants and guest houses had notices on the doors saying 'No dogs, no children' – the latter preventing us from entering as a family. I also noticed that many of the hotels had signs outside saying 'No Irish', although that didn't affect us because, even if my father *had* known about it, he spoke with a significant Lancashire (north-west England) accent. However, I do now realise why that side of things was kept very quiet by the family. I did ask my mother why they should say 'no Irish', but I don't remember ever getting a fully understandable reply, other than that 'they could sometimes be rowdy'.

My paternal grandmother had been brought up in Cumberland, in the far north-west of England, so despite being from the McQuillan (also spelt McQuillen on some certificates) and Blaney families, of County Antrim, in Ireland, she spoke with what always seemed to me to be a 'sort of strange' accent (Irish?). Whenever questioned, she said that the family was from Ayrshire, Scotland – which was close to both Cumberland *and* north-east Ireland – from where her accent was reasonably plausible, but in those days, Irishness wasn't something to mention if you could avoid it. It had been particularly unpopular in Blackburn because historically, the Irish fleeing famines in Ireland would work in the town's cotton mills for lower wages than the locals, and so were seen by them to be 'stealing their jobs'.

Oddly enough though, when I was a child, my father often used to tune 'the wireless' to Irish radio programmes, such as Radio Athlone, as he loved Irish music. My very English mother could never quite understand the reason for this, but as previously mentioned, I don't believe my father was entirely aware of his Irish/Yorkshire/East-Anglian descent, and neither would he have heard much Irish music with his mother, because a great cover-up had been accomplished. Looking back, I cannot help but think that certain things about music were definitely 'in my blood', but what is more, I am very proud to be 25% Irish, which renders me a genuine Anglo-Saxon Celt. Consequently, I only ever refer to my nationality as British (or Anglo-Irish).

* * *

At the age of eleven years and about two weeks, I began attending Blackburn Technical and Grammar School (later to become Billinge Grammar School). As had been the case at my junior school, the classes were mixed, with boys and girls studying together (which was somewhat unusual for *grammar* schools in those days), and with both male and female teachers. This meant that I never went to a single-sex school or college in all of my life, and I am really glad about that. This way, as my mother informed me, we would quickly learn to see girls as our equals, although in practice, we had no option *but* to learn to respect girls (because they could punch surprisingly hard, and there would be Hell to pay if we dared to hit them back – potentially resulting in them punching even harder!)

Anyhow, after a couple of years we were 'streamed' into different study groups for our senior years three to five, according to both our aptitudes and our own personal choices. These streams were referred to as S, L, T and P, (standing

for Science, Literature, Technical and Practical). The top academic prospects generally went into either the S or L streams, and hardly surprisingly therefore, 'The Professor' (and by now practicing *inventor*) went into the Science stream. Ironically, as it turned out, this was the only stream where music could *not* be chosen as an option, but despite my future career, it was really no loss to me as I was still studying the piano (and musical theory) via my infernal private tuition.

It had been around the time that I first went to grammar school that my father bought a *Regentone* transistor radio from his brother-in-law, who was a radio and TV repair engineer. It was small and light, but the two huge Ever Ready *PP1* batteries lasted a long time, which was quite different from the heavy, expensive, power-hungry, portable valve (tube) radios of the time. My father allowed me to take the radio to my bedroom at night, where I could listen to the latest 'single' releases on Radio Luxemburg, with its characteristically variable, fading in-and-out reception. From 1963 however, I could listen to the much better reception from the new pirate radio station, Radio Caroline North, based on a ship which was anchored off the north-west coast of England.

Ever since the arrival of the transistor radio, I had begun to notice that there were certain records that were affecting me emotionally. I wanted to hear them more often, and I would talk with my school friends about them. From these conversations, it soon became apparent that I was not the only person feeling such sensations, but it also became apparent that different music affected different friends in different ways. Sometimes, new friendships actually arose from discovering that I shared the same musical tastes as someone else: even with whom I had previously had nothing more than a casual conversation. Some nights, after bedtime (but still listening to the radio), if I heard a record that I really liked I would call to my mother, and ask what she thought of the song. She usually, simply, politely agreed, but I couldn't understand why she was not equally enthusiastic. Looking back, I suppose I still thought that the greatness of the songs was somehow in the record itself, as opposed to merely being in what it meant to me, but my mother optimistically thought that this new-found interest in music would stimulate my piano playing – although it didn't. I was still bored with it. So, finally, after about five years of lessons and a certificate or so from the Royal College of Music, I gave up learning the piano. I had become more interested in learning to play the guitar, and there was already an acoustic guitar in the house because my father had previously bought one for my mother – but she only ever dabbled with it, and largely stuck to playing the piano.

Probably the biggest musical influences on me in the very early 1960s were *The Shadows*, and Buddy Holly (originally with *The Crickets*). Despite the fact that he had died in a plane crash in 1959, new recordings were still being released from his archive material, some of which I thought were fantastic. [I must also admit to liking 'Mystery Girl', by Jess Conrad. His recordings – perhaps unfairly – have become a bit of a joke these days, but he finally did all right for himself because he got an OBE from The Queen, in 2011!] Anyhow, in about 1964, two of my cousins, Morag and Michael Chapman, gave me their old record player, and I became obsessed with trying to get every one of Buddy Holly's recorded songs, by fair means or foul (such as by taping them on my Grundig TK14 tape recorder).

Back in 1963, on Radio Luxemburg, I heard Buddy Holly's new single, called 'Bo Diddley'. I thought that it was absolutely great, and on the back of this record's success, the Pye Records company re-released the original version of the song in the UK – by the man himself – Bo Diddley! I had never heard *anything* like it before, with its 'coming and going' rhythm, as I didn't know anything about guitar amplifiers with tremolo (often called 'vibrato') in those days, so such things were all new to me. Buddy Holly also had a posthumous hit with 'Brown Eyed

Handsome Man', and this also led me to the music of its author, Chuck Berry. The so-called rhythm and blues (R & B) music scene was beginning to explode in the United Kingdom, and it felt like a whole avalanche of incredible music was coming down on me. It was almost as distracting as girls! (But as to whether these distractions would inevitably lead to my ruin, or not, read on!)

In fact, I was beginning to notice how the emotion from some of the music, somehow, seemed to have a strange connection with my feelings about girls. Then, one night, I heard on the radio a recording of Arthur Alexander's song, 'You Better Move On', by a relatively new group called *The Rolling Stones*. The new emotion that I felt about its sadness and beauty was something that I will never forget. Something was beginning to happen to me. I was 14 at the time! Soon, *The Rolling Stones* released their third single, 'Not Fade Away', a Buddy Holly song, and on their first LP, titled *The Rolling Stones*, there was the Bo Diddley song, 'Mona', as well as another Chuck Berry song, 'Carol'. Indeed, 'Come On', the first single of *The Rolling Stones*, had also been a Chuck Berry song, so a family of associated artistes was beginning to become apparent to me, and I was going crazy about this music. I was definitely getting hooked!

The music of *The Rolling Stones* also led to more knowledge about blues artistes, such as Jimmy Reed, Willie Dixon and Muddy Waters. Then, quite incredibly, Mr Dunn, the Music teacher at my school, and Miss Truman, the English teacher, organized a trip for their pupils to the American Folk Blues Festival at Manchester's Free Trade Hall, in 1964. It was astounding! On stage before us were Lightning Hopkins, Sonny Boy Williamson II, Sleepy John Estes, Big Mamma Thornton, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Willie Dixon, and a host of other blues legends. Their sounds were both unmistakable and beyond imitation. This was an enormous experience for me, and little did we know at the time that Mick Jagger and Keith Richards were also visiting that Blues Festival – as audience members. Two or three years later, I went with a former school friend, Paul Rogers, to the De Montfort Hall, in Leicester, to witness another such festival, with performances by artistes such as Buddy Guy, Otis Spann and Junior Wells. [We had to sleep on Leicester railway station that night, as the concert finished too late to get any trains back to Blackburn.] At these festivals, we were seeing the actual raw material that *The Rolling Stones* and other R & B groups were taking into different directions, and the possibilities seemed endless.

In 1964 and '65, along with some of my friends, I avidly read *The Rolling Stones Book*, a monthly magazine about the group, which also explained much about their origins, hopes and inspirations. (I actually still have the first ten magazines.) *The Rolling Stones* also featured songs by the more 'soul' style artistes, such as Solomon Burke, Sam Cooke and Don Covay, which then led me to the music of Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett and Smokey Robinson; to name but a few. All of this music was giving rise to a totally unexpected degree of emotional involvement, and I wanted to spend my life immersed in music like this. I knew where I wanted to go, and it was not to university.

The first 45 rpm single that I ever bought was 'Hey Good Lookin'', by Bo Diddley, and I also still have it. My Uncle Jim Slater, a brother-in-law of my father, had previously offered to teach me to play the guitar. As mentioned previously, my mother had an acoustic guitar that she rarely played, but by then I wanted an *electric* guitar. However, I was 15 years old and I had no money, but listening to the music that I liked was becoming not only just something that I was interested in, it was something that I also wanted to be more a part of. Soon after this, my school results began to nose-dive, and the train-spotting, which had been such a great hobby for 8 or 9 years, stopped almost from one month to the next. I still have many photos of steam locomotives that I took in early 1964, yet

I have almost none taken after the Easter of that year. Evidently, with what little money I had, I was probably buying records, so the train-spotting trips would no longer have been affordable (and they didn't impress girls, either).

Given my impecunious state, I decided that the only solution to the electric guitar problem would be to *build* one, so I set about working on the task. The oak frame from an old bed of my grandmother's was used to make a rather thick neck, and the body was almost rectangular: Bo Diddley style. It was not a comfortable instrument to play, and it was very heavy, but it actually did work (to the astonishment of my friends). I had saved up money to buy an electric pick-up for it, which I seem to remember cost just under one pound from the local record shop, Reidy's, in Penny Street (Blackburn). This street had given its name to the group *The Four Pennies*, who had a number one hit with the song 'Juliet', and who were managed by Reidy's, so with guys from my own town topping the charts, I then *absolutely* had to get a guitar amplifier; but how?

I went to Blackburn public library and found a set of six books, published by Focal Press, in a series called 'The Technique of Sound Reproduction'. One book was *Loudspeakers*, by E. J. Jordan, and another was called *Amplifiers*, by H. Lewis York – the latter of which I only recently managed to get my own copy of, and what memories it brought back! These two books were continually with me, as the renewals of the library loans were taking place every two weeks unless somebody else had reserved them, but whenever I had to hand them back, I was lost until I could re-borrow them. From studying these books, I soon knew that I could probably make a guitar amplifier if I had the bits, but the cost of the components was prohibitive.

* * *

Back at the age of 12, 'The Professor' had begun to study chemistry, which he (I, that is) found fascinating. At night, the kitchen of my home would frequently become a laboratory, with Bunsen burners, retorts, filters, gas jars – you name it. I was making very strangely-coloured compounds, which I wanted to keep visible in glass jars, and I decided that what I needed was a lot of small coffee jars. So, at weekends I would go to the municipal rubbish tips to find small, empty Maxwell House coffee jars (much to the displeasure of my mother), which were just the right size and shape.

My uncle Walter (my father's eldest half-brother) had lent me an already-old copy of *Mellor's Modern Inorganic Chemistry* (Longmans, Green and Co, London, 1939 edition) with which I would read myself to sleep, night after night. The acquired knowledge led to many explosions, bad smells, and the occasional damage to the kitchen table, but it was all in the name of science, and it did result in me being top of the school in Chemistry (and a GCE O-level Grade 1). This latter fact made the family proud, and it was widely presumed that I would go to university and become an industrial chemist, especially as Chemistry became the one subject that still held my interest at school after the music had taken a hold of me.

Around that time, and quite by chance, I bumped into my old chum from junior school, Neville Hounslow (referred to earlier), and we spoke about things in general. He was still the same old Neville, but he told me that he was interested in radio electronics. This did not really seem to fit, because Neville had never seemed to be one of the most technically-minded pupils in the class, but anyhow, he offered to take me to his 'den', on the upper floor of an out-house at the back of his parents' garden. It could only be reached by a fragile ladder, and once up there, it looked like a bomb had exploded in it, but amongst the chaos I could see that he did have a soldering iron, some wiring tools, and a lot of old television sets that he was dismantling for components. What is more, I soon discovered

that he actually *did* know something about electronics. *Quite* a bit, in fact.

For the next couple of years, Neville and I spent a lot of time together scouring many local municipal refuse dumps at weekends – the same tips at which I had previously been searching for coffee jars, but this time we were looking for anything with electronic components that could be salvaged. Neville actually taught me a lot, and we used to buy and share monthly magazines such as *Practical Wireless*, *Wireless World* and *Practical Electronics*. I also began paying a lot more attention to the teacher during some of the Physics lessons, because two of the four divisions of physics that we studied (along with Heat and Light), were Sound and Electricity. With this new information, and Neville's help, we collected old transformers, valves, switches, resistors and capacitors, and actually built quite a lot of amplifiers of various sizes. Neville was also quite good at doing the metalwork to make the chassis, and a few years later, he qualified as an electrician, so my friend from junior school, despite not having been very 'academic' in his early years, actually got himself a good technical profession. This was great, because he was always a thoroughly nice guy, and what is more, when I last heard of him, in the late 1980s, he was a volunteer fireman of steam locomotives on a heritage railway in Wales. To be able to do that had been one of my own dreams!

* * *

Perhaps not surprisingly, my interest in electronics soon took over from my interest in chemistry, although the demise of the latter was also precipitated by other occurrences. In 1965, as part of a school 'careers' visit, my class, 5S (fifth form, Science stream) went to the Springfields nuclear fuels plant, near Preston, Lancashire. It was a different world in those days to the one that we live in now – before all the Health and Safety nonsense had set in to strangle all of us. A guide showed us round the plant, and he also showed us some cylindrical blocks of unprocessed uranium. If I recall correctly, they were about 20 cm in diameter and about 30 cm long, (although I was smaller, then, so things seemed bigger than they do now). Part of this demonstration was to show how uranium was a very benign material, and that atomic energy was clean and safe, so the guide allowed us to get close, and even touch one of the uranium blocks. They were immensely heavy, but rather rough cast, and a clinkery piece actually 'came off in the hand of' one of my classmates, Christopher Openshaw. He showed it to a few of us on the bus as we travelled back to school, and I eventually offered him a pound (£1) for it, which was a lot of money to us in those days. So, a few days later, after handing over the money, I got possession of the uranium, but I needed to test it to be sure that I had got good value for my pound.

Mellor's Modern Inorganic Chemistry again became invaluable, and after reading up on the chemistry of uranium, I went to a local chemist (Holt's, in Regent Street, Blackburn – which also sold 'laboratory supplies') and I bought some concentrated nitric acid – yes; over the counter – as a schoolboy could do in those days! The aim was to make uranyl nitrate, which should glow in the dark under ultra-violet light. It subsequently did! What I had at home was definitely uranium, but although some rumours spread at school about this, they were usually dismissed as nonsense. (Just as well!)

Concurrently with this, I also went into the production of cyanide. In another old text-book on science, I read about a way of making cyanide salts from nothing more than a caustic alkali, iron filings, and waste products from a butcher's shop; all of which were easily accessible and affordable to me. I basically made some (at least the sodium version) just to prove to myself that I could do it, although a few years later, my by-then wife, Eileen, somehow managed to 'get rid of it' before our son, Julius, began toddling. This may all seem reckless nowadays, but the

book in question, published in 1914, was actually intended as a *school text book* on Chemistry. It also explained how to make hydrogen cyanide in the school chemistry laboratory, and I quote from the actual text of the book: '*Pure hydrogen cyanide is one of the most deadly poisons known, and hence great care must be taken in experiments with the gas, and indeed with cyanides generally.*' '*It is not probable that the teacher will allow a young student to make this acid or gas.*' Still, is the implication here that older students *could* be allowed to make it? It certainly *seems* to be the case.

In 1965, my parents and I moved into a different house, a little further down the street from where we had lived until then, and whilst it was being renovated, before moving in, I set up another laboratory. I had just entered the 'sixth form' at grammar school, which was intended to prepare me for GCE A-level examinations, and perhaps onwards to university. For my final two years, I had initially chosen to study Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics and General Studies (the latter, essentially, being current affairs and politics), but one day, I turned up at school with a phial of potassium nitrosoferrocyanide crystals. Seth Thompson (the deputy head of the school, and senior chemistry master) discovered this, and also that I had made it. Although it was not dangerous in itself, he knew that a by-product of its manufacture would have been likely to have been the dreaded aforementioned hydrogen cyanide; the gas that was used in the USA for executions in the gas chambers. This, along with the continued rumours about the uranium compound, began to cause pressure to be brought to bear on my parents to close down my laboratory – but as we soon moved into the house, it got shut down anyway.

However, the real 'killer blow' to my chemistry studies was probably more related to homework. About a month after beginning the sixth form studies, it was announced that the chemistry homework for the next few weeks was to copy a very long text into our notebooks. This was not like previous school work, and was probably to prepare us for a university-type of studying, but I was, and still am, a slow writer (well, at least if the handwriting is to appear legible to others, that is). Consequently, the homework would have occupied almost all of my early-autumn evenings for the next few weeks, and virtually precluded much time for electronics, listening to music, or even the occasional game of football that I still enjoyed.

So, in order to avoid the impending tedious homework, I decided to go to the headmaster, Mr Griffin (Skinhead, as we called him – because he was bald) with a cock-and-bull story about having chosen the wrong subjects for my A-levels due to not having been given sufficient warning about them when the choices had to be made, during the previous term. (And, in all fairness, there was actually *not* much prior discussion with us about what subjects we would choose at A level. It therefore did come as a bit of a shock when I had to decide on the first day of the new term.) Both the headmaster and the head of the chemistry department (i.e., Skinhead and Seth) were very opposed to the change, because I was the only one of the three students who had gained 'Grade 1' at the Chemistry 'O-levels' that remained studying it at the school. One had left to begin work as an apprentice in a local, Government-owned explosives factory (The Royal Ordnance Factory), and the other had opted to study Physics, Mathematics and Further Mathematics. However, I explained that I too, wanted to swap Chemistry for Further Mathematics, because my new interest was electronics. So; very reluctantly, the headmaster agreed to my change of course, although I really hadn't a clue about what Further Mathematics entailed. (Oh, woe!) Still; I had escaped the tedious Chemistry homework!

In fact, as well as the Grade 1 in Chemistry, I had another in General Studies,

and a Grade 2 in English Language – which was not unexpected considering my mother’s elocution qualifications. I also got three, ‘total-failure’ Grade 9s – the lowest possible rating – in Latin, French, and Religious Education. Six was the lowest pass grade, and 1s were quite rare in those days, but I even failed Latin at a second attempt – albeit with an improvement to Grade 8! The other five subjects that I passed (Physics, Geology, Geography, Mathematics, and Biology) were gained with grades which generally represented how interested I was in the lessons, but for any student to get two Grade 1s and three Grade 9s represented an almost unheard-of spread of marks in my school. The teachers were in despair, which reflected in my contradictory school reports, but I was basically only either interested in a subject – or not.

As mentioned earlier, the Physics course had been composed of four parts: Heat, Light, Sound and Electricity, but I was passing the examinations by getting almost full marks on the Electricity and Sound questions, whilst almost ignoring those on (the somewhat-boring) Light and Heat. This could be done because it was obligatory to choose to answer only any six questions out of eight or nine, so good scores in four of them would get me through. Mathematics was also divided into parts: Applied and Pure. I think that the best mark that I ever achieved for Pure Mathematics was 7%, as I wasn’t particularly interested in such abstract concepts, but I managed to scrape through the examinations by getting a high score for the ‘Applied’ questions – which were the ones that made sense to me – such as ballistics. Consequently, although I was by no means a model student, I *was* actually getting what I needed from school (at least from my own point of view).

* * *

By the beginning of 1966, when I was then 16 years old, the Tamla Motown record-label was producing hit after hit. *The Rolling Stones* were also still going strong, but the *Stax* and *Atlantic* labels were releasing music that was simply stunning me. Elsewhere, Ike and Tina Turner had recorded ‘River Deep Mountain High’ (which my mother referred to as ‘that noisy record’ [what a Philistine!]), and Jimi Hendrix had recorded ‘Hey Joe’. Under this barrage of music, school was losing *all* of its relevance to me, and I was already almost two years over the age when I was legally-permitted to leave.

In the spring of 1966, feeling uneasy about school, I made tentative enquiries to the Universities of Salford, Southampton, and Surrey about the entry requirements for music-recording-related studies. These were the only universities in England offering any courses which even *vaguely* related to sound at the time, but the subjects that I was studying at school did not seem to coincide with the requirements for the university courses. Furthermore, there were also likely to be about 50 applicants for every available place. This did not bode well for a ‘part-time’ studier like me, with too many outside interests, and my guitar playing was not going very well, either. I probably lacked the dedication to practising, but I also believed that I just did not seem to have the necessary manual dexterity. The physical control of my fingers was just not there, and I had already discovered from my piano-lessons days that playing hemi-demi-semi-quaver had never even been on my horizon. I had even looked on in awe at ladies typing 75 words a minute. How was it humanly possible? I don’t think that my brain-to-body connection was ever very fast. (But on the other hand, was it *all* simply due to lack of persistent practice?)

It was also beginning to become obvious that if I *was* going to go to university, it would not be to study what I *wanted* to study, so two months before my 17th birthday I tentatively decided to leave school. I will never forget sitting in my bedroom before my final day, playing *The Rolling Stones* single, ‘The Last

Time', over and over again. What a great performance and recording it was. Unlike most other groups of that era, *The Rolling Stones* frequently credited on their album sleeves the names of any additional musicians who played with them on the recordings, along with the names of the recording engineers and the studios in which the songs were recorded. I used to read the names of people such as Dave Hassinger and Ron Malo, and wondered what it must be like to witness such musical creations. What was it like to capture such magic moments in the studio? I wanted to *know* what it was like to be a recording engineer, and to work with such talented musicians. In early 1966, I had tried to convert my bedroom into a recording studio, to record my friends, but I soon realised that it was just a toy. I needed to get my hands on the real thing, but unlike nowadays, serious home-studios were simply not feasible at the time.

Then during the summer holidays – and quite by chance – I saw an advertisement in a local newspaper. The main shop selling hi-fi equipment in Blackburn needed an apprentice in the sales and maintenance department, and I also knew that Terry Yeadon worked there. He called himself Terry Dawson, professionally, and was a well-known local 'soul music' DJ, so I went for an interview and got the job. I then had to formally leave school, and I started work the week after England won the football World Cup. [And I must also give full credit to my parents here, who supported my decision to leave school if it was what I wanted to do, despite all the wider pressures for me to stay on.]

The company that I was working for required me to attend Blackburn Technical College one day a week, to do a course on radio and television servicing. As with the universities, there were no courses that dealt specifically with audio at the Technical College, so this was the closest course to the work that I was doing. Nevertheless, even though I had no interest whatsoever in radio or television, the basic electronics theory was the same, so I was still keen to do it. After my initial interview at the college, they decided that, given my already extensive knowledge of electronics and my year of A-level Physics at grammar school, the first year of the course could be skipped, so I could enter at the second year. And so it was that my first *formal* electronics tuition began.

Terry Yeadon's older brother, Ken, a part-time fireman, was temporarily standing in doing the light and sound at the local Mecca ballroom in Blackburn, the *Locarno*, where Terry was a regular DJ. This was the venue where I had gone to concerts earlier that year, whilst still at school, to see bands such as *The Who*. (They played without Keith Moon on that occasion, as he was unable to travel, but I can't recall who deputised for him.) Photo 1.2 shows the flyer from the concert. It was about two or three months after that concert that I began work in the shop, and only a couple of months later, Terry told me that Ken's temporary post at the Locarno was getting too much for him, on top of his full-time job and his fire-fighting, and asked me if I would like the job at the Locarno. This was a very interesting offer, as it involved doing the 'out-front sound' for not only the resident 'palais' (public ballroom – 'palais de danse') bands, but also the visiting 'pop' groups. The thought was inspiring, so I went for the interview after being recommended by Terry, and I got the job. It was five nights a week, but the hours allowed just enough time for me to finish my day job, go home, have 'tea', and get changed, before setting off for the Locarno ballroom.

Unfortunately (or perhaps not), a few months after I began doing the sound and lights, the owners of the shop where I worked during the daytime found out that I was working on Sunday evenings. They explained that this was very much against their beliefs, as they belonged to a branch of Christianity that was strongly opposed to Sunday working, so if I did not stop working on Sundays at once, they could not continue employing me. I was therefore left with no option other than

to make a choice about which job to do, but although it was only my working on Sundays that they objected to, it was the Sunday and Monday nights when the 'big' visiting groups played. For me, this made them the most exciting nights for me to work, so I asked the assistant-manager of the ballroom, Mr Bird, if I could do any extra hours, and he offered me the post of relief night-watchman, twice a week. With this extra work, it meant that I could earn enough money to survive from the ballroom alone, so I told the shop that I would leave. My new post meant working seven nights a week, with very few holidays, but giving up the Sunday nights was not an option for me, because it was the best job that I could imagine at the time, and it was what I *wanted* to do!



Photo 1.2 – The publicity flyer for *The Who* at Blackburn Locarno, in 1966

The leaders of the two resident bands at the Locarno were also great with me, as they felt they had someone 'in the control box' who truly cared about their sound. They were very experienced professionals, and they taught me a lot about what the musicians, themselves, needed for their live sound. Furthermore,

during our long conversations after work, they introduced me to Indian food, although this was principally due to the fact that the Indo-Pak Restaurant was the only restaurant still open in Blackburn after we had packed up – usually after midnight or 1 a.m. depending on the night.

By the spring of 1967, I was spending a lot of time with the musicians – often at their homes – getting to know them even better, and learning *a lot more* about music. In fact, it was particularly easy to converse with them because of my musical training, so despite me having loathed my piano lessons, I had to admit that they were beginning to come in useful. Also, the Technical College administration had agreed that I could still continue with my electronics course for that year, even after leaving the shop that had sponsored me, and they decided that at the end of the first year (in reality taking the second-year course) I could actually sit the third-year examination due to my continuing work experience. It was a big leap of faith by them, but I passed, so after a three-year course done in one year – during which I had many of my daytimes free to study at home – I had the UCLI Radio and Television Servicing ‘Intermediate’ certificate.

So, even though I was still only seventeen, I was already a half-qualified electronics engineer, I had a full-time job as a live sound and lighting engineer, and had also done front-of-house sound for bands such as *Family*, and *Eddie Cave and The Fyx* (big news in those days). In addition, I had my certificate in piano-playing, and I was learning ever more from the professional musicians that I was working with.

Things were actually going very well. I was rolling!

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This is the in-depth story of twenty golden years of the recording industry, revealing vivid insight into the founding and inner workings of Virgin in its fledgling years.



Philip Newell is the former technical director of Virgin Records. Now an international consultant on acoustic design, he is a Fellow of the Institute of Acoustics and a Member of both the Audio Engineering Society and the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers. He is also the author of a large number of publications, including eight books for Focal Press, and has been involved in the design of many hundreds of studios for music, cinema and television, as well as live performance venues.

The 1970s was a golden era for music recording and it set the standards for more or less all that followed. These were the times when the skills, upon which so much of the modern recording world is now based, were honed.

Having worked at the forefront of studio engineering from early in his career, a chance reply to Philip's advert selling surplus equipment in Exchange & Mart led to a life-changing role to develop the now legendary Manor Studios for Virgin. The Manor created a stage to perform on, and the whole environment provided a sense of worth. It was all about uplifting musicians and supporting their morale in a way that would bring out their creativity.

Philip's career right at the very heart of the Virgin Empire has taken a fascinating path, recounted here in intricate detail, including the stories of building The Town House and The Pink Museum studios, music production for many varied artists, touring with Mike Oldfield and getting arrested in Wyoming.

**Richard Branson read an advanced draft and also commented: "For me it was fascinating seeing the early days of Virgin and the studios through someone else's lens. Your memory I certainly envy! And your writing skills! I laughed out loud on many occasions (your trip to Germany was hilarious)."*