

TIPS ON ARRANGING

By ELO's Louis Clark

An arranger is very much a back-room boy. His name appears in the small print on the album sleeve, along with the engineer and co-producer. Yet although he may just be one element in the finished product, the touches he adds to a number can, especially in the case of a single, make or break it.

Louis Clark has been arranging the Electric Light Orchestra's music ever since 'Eldorado', their first album to go gold. After that auspicious start it was pretty obvious that a successful working and musical relationship had been found and the results can be heard on 'A New World Record', ELO's new album, and on their latest single, 'Livin' Thing'.

Credit

It's not easy to land a job as an arranger. You can't just get in touch with a band and say 'I want to arrange some numbers for you'. The reasons are obvious — recording time is expensive and has to be planned a long time in advance and any extra musicians or instruments have to be found, too. So people prefer sticking to arrangers they already know who can be trusted to meet deadlines and deliver the goods. One good way of getting into that side of the music business is by starting out as a musician yourself, arranging numbers for your own band and making sure you get a credit on the record sleeve so that your name gets around.

That was how Louis Clark launched himself into his present highly successful career.

"I come from the Birmingham area, like ELO, and we were all in bands in the same area. I joined Raymond Froggatt and played bass in his band for six years, but after ten singles I started getting a bit fed up, which is why I left the band five years ago.

"As far as arranging is



concerned, I was really thrown in the deep end. I'd studied music at school and could read it and knew a bit about harmony, but that didn't really prepare me for arranging music for a 60-piece orchestra! Froggatt was one of the first people ever to mix a rock band and an orchestra on stage way back in 1967. It was a novelty then, but people like the Moody Blues started doing it, too, and soon everyone was at it. We hired the City of Birmingham Orchestra for a concert — we paid them and had nothing left over for ourselves. There was nobody else who could arrange our rock numbers for an orchestra so I volunteered. I was terrified, because they were all classically trained and I wasn't, but it worked somehow, and after that it became accepted that I was the band's arranger. The first record I arranged was 'Red Balloon' which was a big hit for Froggatt so I did all the singles after that."

After his split with Froggatt, Louis decided to do what so many hopeful souls do, i.e. head for the place where the streets are paved with gold records — London. But after six months of nothing but promises, he plodded his disillusioned way back to Brum again and decided to go to college.

"I had no money, no job and a very understanding wife. I enrolled for a three year course in arranging at a music college in Leeds.

Although it was designed around dance bands and jazz, it still helped me a lot. By that time the Beatles had arrived on the scene and the course sort of filled the musical gap for me."

It's one thing to study arranging but finding someone to give you a job is something else! Fortunately for Louis, he and Froggatt had remained good friends and shortly before his course ended, he received a phone call asking him to arrange a musical which Froggatt had written about the life of Shakespeare, which manager/record company boss Don Arden had agreed to back. Unfortunately fate has a habit of offering you something with one hand and taking it away with the other. Louis arranged all fifteen numbers, they were put down on tape, everyone was pleased with them but, so far, the musical hasn't seen the light of stage or vinyl. However, in spite of this disappointment, it was working on the musical which brought Louis and ELO together.

Imagination

"While I was recording some sessions for it, Jeff Lynne of ELO was in the same studio doing some backing tracks for the 'Eldorado' album. He listened to what I was doing and phoned the next day and asked me to come and see him. So that's how I ended up doing all the arrangements on 'Eldorado' — and on all their records since."

The latest offering from ELO, 'A New World Record', is an album of new material which was finished last July and required the use of quite an army of strings.

"We used 24 violins, eight violas, eight cellos, three double basses and we also had a choir of 30 singers. We recorded the strings in three three-hour sessions," explained Louis.

It requires quite a lot of imagination and organisation

to get that lot together. How does Louis decide exactly what instruments to use on which track?

"If it's a track using lyrics, it all depends on the song. Never swamp a good lyric line. If you're given a song to arrange, you must find out what the writer had in mind because what you do can alter the whole intention of the song. It's vital to make the sounds match the words."

Although Louis went to music college, we asked him whether or not he thought such in-depth musical training was really necessary to somebody who wanted to be an arranger.

Sleeve

"You do need some kind of tuition," he replied. "You need a general musical background, otherwise where would you be if someone said, 'Arrange this and make it sound 1930-ish?' You'd have to know what instruments to use and how to use them."

"Another thing I think is necessary is to have a thorough knowledge of instruments, what key they play in, etc. Then, if you want a stringed instrument to play, say, the C below middle C, you'll know which instruments can do it. When I first started arranging I was always having to look up the keys but by now I know the character and capability of every brass and stringed instrument, and how far you can push them. For instance, you can get a nice effect sometimes by making an instrument play slightly out of its normal range."

"Another thing I did which I think is very useful, is to learn to play all the instruments you're likely to use. You don't have to play them well. If you just have a go on them all, you'll soon learn what you can get out of them."

"If you're really keen about wanting to arrange, do any job you can get, even if you don't get paid at first. A credit on an album sleeve matters almost more than a fee, because that means people can hear and judge what you've done and, if they like it, they'll find your name on the sleeve and offer you your next job!"