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THEY SAY

Raiders of the Lost Casinos

Art Tedeschi

No, this is not an article chronicling Hunter Thompson's adventures in Las Vegas. The *Casinos* I'm referring to are copies of the soundtrack of the 007 spoof, *Casino Royale*. Ever since the early issues of *The Absolute Sound*, Harry Pearson has heartlessly teased us with this record. Repeatedly referring to it in his reviews, HP managed single-handedly to create a demand for this record in the used-record market unprecedented in the annals of audiophiledom. Talk about tantalizing! Issue after issue, this record appears in the "Super Disc" listings and more recently in "HP's Baker's Dozen" listings of his very best reference discs. HP's unrelentless ravings on the 18-year-old out-of-print record have provoked unknowable suffering and frustration among his readership (I am certainly not alone). To see Dusty Springfield's "The Look of Love" vocal on *Casino* described in such provocative terms, only to read further that the last copy heard of sold several months ago at a New York used-record shop for a sizable amount, is pure torture. I can easily envision countless lonely and frustrated audiophiles fruitlessly rummaging through record bin after record bin, clinging to the belief that if they persist, some day they will be rewarded with a sealed stereo copy of *Casino Royale*. I know this happens. I've been there. Some of the sicker ones even ask their families (including their children) to search the bins for the white cover with the naked lady on it. Harry, how low can you go?

A few years ago, while on The Quest, I asked a shopkeeper if he had ever seen *Casino* come through his doors (they usually say, "What's that?" or "Not very often"). This particular owner mentioned he did have some soundtracks in the back, and that he would be glad to look through them for me. When I saw him pull the record out of the box, my heart dropped. Obviously, I attempted to maintain my composure; I knew my reaction would be a sure tip-off that the record was rare and price-no-object. Yes, finally I had it in my hot little hands. I scanned the cover and sank into the depths of depression as I read the catalogue number: COMO 5005. COMO stands for "Colgems MONO!" Oh no, I finally found the damned thing and it was the mono copy, nearly worthless.

Well, I paid the ten bucks and bought the thing anyway. Who knows, I thought, maybe I'd get one small glimpse of the magic of the stereo *Casino*.

No way. After suffering through the awful scratches and flat soundstage I decided to file this away for posterity. After all, I did own a copy of *Casino Royale*, didn't I? Although I

would never offer to play it for anyone. (Are you beginning to understand the depths of the depravity here?)

Then, in 1984, a small glimmer of hope emerged when Peter Moncrieff of International Audio Review mentioned that a British record dealer had bought the master tape of *Casino* and was planning to reissue the record. Readers were encouraged to send their \$17 or so to the prospective distributor in order to assure themselves a copy. I hesitated to send the money. I felt that if the record were reissued, they wouldn't stop pressing it until everyone who wanted a copy had one. I found out earlier this year in *The Absolute Sound* that IAR's information was not only premature but probably false. The prospective distributor sent all monies back and indicated that the possibility of re-releasing the record had been extremely tentative. So the search continues.

Meanwhile—HP himself didn't do much to help matters. A few issues back, he placed a classified ad in his own magazine offering a sizable chunk of cash for as many copies of *Casino* as he could lay his hands on. Don't get me wrong here; I don't blame HP one bit for establishing insurance copies of this record. I have done the same with several of the records I cherish. It just makes it all the more difficult for the rest of us to get a copy.

This morning (September 28, 1985) I left the house and attended the Annual Rocky Mountain Record Swap at the Regency Hotel. As I entered the room, I was encouraged by the number of vendors and bin boxes there were to forage through. Surely I would find some RCA "Shaded Dog" pressings or Mercury Living Presence discs. Though the great majority of the offerings were of Elvis, the Beatles, and early fifties stuff, I did manage to uncover a few Reiners: Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* (RCA LSC-2340), Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 2* (LSC-2601), a German pressing of the same record, Brahms *Violin Concerto* with Heifetz (LSC-1903), a couple of Mercury Jan August piano recordings; Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (LSC 2085), Offenbach's *Gaite Parisienne* (LSC 2267), and a couple of pop records on Harry's list: *Chet Atkins in Hollywood* and *Zachariah*. Then I spied a box of records labeled "soundtracks". Naturally, I asked the vendor if *Casino* was in the box. Well, he didn't know, but the fellow standing next to me said he had seen it in there. I draped my entire body over that box—and found it! I grabbed the record and looked at its number: COSO COSO—I could barely believe it, was this really happening to me or just some wild dream? I checked the pressing: it looked clean as a whistle, I expressed sadness at having to pay \$30, so the vendor lowered his price to \$25. Naturally, I offered him \$20. He expressed a mild reluctance. To hell with haggling, I thought, and paid him the \$25 and left the Regency clutching my precious booty, instinctively scrutinizing the parking lot for HP who might be, I thought, lurking somewhere in a corner to prey on anyone leaving with this record.

This evening, I finally had the courage to place the record on the turntable and play it ... I gingerly brushed the record clean with my Decca brush and sat back to (at last) listen to Dusty sing her tune. As the stylus touched the groove, I was relieved to hear only a very slight amount of surface noise. Ah, the record had been hardly ever played—a mint copy! I sat and bathed myself in the sound. The saxophone solo at the end of the cut complemented Dusty's voice magnificently.

Was it worth it? Well, obviously Casino had been recorded in a studio, so you won't hear much of a hall sound or a natural placement of instruments, but Dusty is definitely there in the room with you! Most of the instruments move to the front of the soundstage; but Dusty, the sax, and the bass are deep in the center stage with an almost eerie palpability. The music is dynamic, bass is deep and thunderous at times, and the highs are surprisingly extended (though not as extended as on the best contemporary discs). The record is everything Harry says it (as are most all of his recommended recordings). Was all the time, trouble, and frustration worth it?

Sure. Hey, nobody ever said being an audiophile would be easy!

—Art Tedeschi

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