One Size Does Not Fit All: The Precarious Position of the African American Entrepreneur in Post-World War II American Popular Music

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One Size Does Not Fit All: The Precarious Position of the African American Entrepreneur in Post–World War II American Popular Music

Many narratives, some simple and some complex, can be constructed in order to tell the story of the American popular music industry. Certain of these narratives reflect the multicultural synthesis that is believed in some quarters to infuse and inform our national history. They conjure up the manner in which the demarcations between musical structures and genres as well as ethnic and racial constituencies never seem to be irrevocably fixed. As Ralph Ellison remarked more than forty years ago, "in the United States, when traditions are juxtaposed, they tend, regardless of what we do to prevent it, to merge." These narratives furthermore support the belief that the history of the nation, like the history of its music, recapitulates the triumph of assimilation over isolation, the porousness of purportedly impenetrable barriers of gender, race, and class. Other narratives, by contrast, propose that the polysemic web of identities and forms of expression that constitutes the contested terrain of American society and civilization invariably collides with a national predisposition for social and cultural homogeneity. They infer that social as well as artistic emancipation constitutes other forms of enslavement, thereby underscor-
ing George Lipsitz's observation that "the imperatives of adapting to dominant cultures while not being allowed full entry into them leads to complex and creative cultural negotiations that foreground marginal and alienated states of consciousness."²

While both narratives hold their portion of accuracy, the simple truth is that the truth is never simple. Neither individuals nor the forms of expression they employ to make sense of their lives (to themselves and to others) are ever as unfettered as some would utopianly propose, or as systematically constrained as others would denounce. Any productive or principled examination of American popular music and its industrial history requires our disavowal of the sedimented clichés and commonplaces that litter the public imagination and adoption of the "omniflexible" perspective that the African American essayist Albert Murray believes can lead to what he calls "exceterological wisdom."³

In the case of the contributions made to our national culture by black performers, writers, technicians, and businesspersons, we would be advised to keep in mind the impact of the conflict between assimilation and self-sufficiency that Nelson George observes to exist at the heart of African Americans' cultural enterprises as well as those individuals' existence as a part of a divisive and contentious nation.⁴ Loyalty to one's race and success in the marketplace would appear to be incompatible, and the market imperative to "cross over" onto the pop charts that both reflect and are dominated by the interests of the mainstream power structure parallels the widespread advocacy of social assimilation and abandonment of separatist sensibilities.

The fact that American society supports a limited variety of forms of success and an even more narrow set of criteria by which prosperity might be measured determines systematically the construction of narratives about national culture. One of the most pervasive and indomitable attributes attendant to the historiography of American popular music is what one might call a discourse of scale. It expresses itself in our reflexive tendency to quantify all behavior and is structurally observed in the volatile relationship between large corporate entities and small entrepreneur-driven organizations, wherein individual enterprise resists being engulfed and adulterated by the unquenchable appetites of the mainstream music industry. This discourse of scale, reflected in the ongoing struggle of autonomy against gigantism, is specifically illustrated, among other places, by the comments of Charlie Gillett in the introduction to the recently reissued The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll, first published in 1970: "The unabashed bias of The Sound of the City is in favor of the independent labels in their battles against the monolithic major companies—a bunch of little Davids against a few mythic Goliaths. There's an inference that the little guys are the good guys, and not much sym-
pathy for anyone who works for a major. Gillett’s noteworthy narrative was one of the first comprehensive histories of the American popular music industry that arose in the wake of World War II, and the rhetorical figures he employs, this biblical metaphor prominent among them, have dominated much of the writing about the subject ever since.

The very layout of Gillett’s work mirrors a struggle of unequal adversaries. At the bottom of many of the volume’s pages, one finds listed what must eventually amount to several dozen labels, their owners, and the principal artists they recorded. This catalog of careers, some stunted and others still flourishing, constitutes a kind of parallel narrative or backbeat to the book’s dominant record of the hegemony of a limited number of recording enterprises and the eradication or incorporation of countless less successful businesses. The title of Gillett’s subsequent work, Making Tracks, a history of Atlantic Records, reiterates the martial tone of his first publication, for both books eloquently bear testimony to the evanescent existence of most labels that record popular music in general, and African American performers in particular. By and large, such enterprises, Gillett argues, “started through a combination of accident, coincidence and opportunism,” and the only appropriate generalization that can be made about the men who ran them is “none of them were in business to soothe anybody’s feelings.”

The editorial organization of the late Arnold Shaw’s Honkers and Shouters: The Golden Years of Rhythm and Blues (1978) recapitulates Gillett’s work. Shaw’s interpolated oral histories—more than two dozen “grooves” (as he calls them)—contain first-person accounts of struggle, success, and co-optation. They also attest to the inequitable process of what Francis Davis refers to as “cultural gerrymandering,” whereby economic and ideological power lies all too often in the hands of those who profit from (rather than those who provide) the words and music of our national musical culture. While neither Gillett nor Shaw appears to have an ideological ax to grind—if anything they come across as transfixed by the unquenchable energies of the record executives whose behavior they implicitly and explicitly excoriate—their work nonetheless corroborates the polemical assertion of LeRoi Jones (a.k.a. Amiri Baraka) in Blues People: “The notable fact is that the only so-called popular music in this country of any real value is of African derivation.”

At the same time, the discourse of scale prevalent in these and virtually all other histories of American popular music constitutes one of those very narratives that oversimplifies the complex phenomenon we refer to as the American popular music industry. Gillett himself, in the aforementioned introduction, admits that the martial tone of
his narrative might have been otherwise had he spoken directly to more of those “Davids” and “Goliaths” whose careers he chronicled. He states, “In some ways, I was unfortunate never to have actually met anybody from either side when I wrote the first edition, because if I had, I might not have been so sure that small was good and big was bad.” The “Goliaths” he encountered during the course of his research for Making Tracks (in particular the charismatic heads of Atlantic Records, Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler) confirmed for him that corporate gigantism need not sully the character of the corporate executives or erode the vitality and substance of the music they produce. Peter Guralnick came to a similar conclusion (in part as a result of consorting with some of the same individuals, Jerry Wexler in particular) in the process of writing Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom in 1986. He began with “the common misconception that soul music was a phenomenon that existed outside of what we generally view as ‘the music business’ and in time discovered that the story I was telling was as much the story of a business as it was the story of a music.”

The experience of both Gillett and Guralnick (and others as well) validates the fact that separating the creators of musical forms from their marketers may satisfy for some of us a lingering predilection for the debatable notion that commerce inevitably sullies creativity. However, it enables us neither to construct a broad-minded analysis of national popular expression nor to understand the constraints within which all forms of culture, musical or otherwise, operate. If we think about it, Shaw’s comment, “the rise of small Rhythm & Blues companies during the ’40s and ’50s constitutes one of the most remarkable and fascinating chapters in the history not only of American music but of small business in this country,” applies equally well to other periods of time as well as other portions of the musical spectrum. It also should remind us that those corporate individuals included other than Caucasian individuals and that even though the racial homogeneity of corporate boardrooms and company rosters is indisputable, the fact remains that African Americans comprise a significant portion of the business culture in American popular music, past and present. As Nelson George states, “One of the things that defined the R&B world, one that separated it from most other American businesses, was the ability of blacks to form businesses and profit from a product their own people created.”

My principal aim therefore is to address a specific and underreported portion of the broad spectrum of the American music industry, the African American entrepreneurs and their activities in the post–World War II era. Too often (and yet with a great deal of empirical credence) the dominant narrative of the history of American popular music de-
picts a racially charged terrain wherein virtually all power lies in the hands of white businessmen who prey upon African Americans and gain prosperity at their expense. The attendant discourse of scale routinely places African Americans and other minorities in the subordinate position, ill-equipped even to conceive of themselves as eventually rising to the status of a “David” and therefore forever trapped as yet another victim of a corporate “Goliath.” The pernicious effect of this problematic form of discourse is that it reinforces wretchedness and solidifies what Murray called in 1971 the “Sambo Fallacy—the contention that the experience of slavery and oppression has reduced U. S. Negroes to a subspecies, consisting of a passel of emasculated, shuffling, driveling, head-scratching darkies.”13 While I would be loathe to impute more structural opportunities or systematic power to African Americans than the historical record permits one to assume, I wish, however, to make some brief comments about the opportunities taken and the power (however attenuated) exercised by African American participants in the music industry in the post–World War II era in order to reap economic rewards and gain credibility for themselves as well as other members of their race.

In effect, the skillful transformation by these individuals of disadvantage into self-advancement constitutes, one could argue, an economic and entrepreneurial manifestation of what Murray believes lies at the core of the blues tradition. Of that tradition, he writes, “Extemporizing in response to the exigencies of the situation in which he finds himself... [the bluesman] is confronting, acknowledging and contending with the internal absurdities and ever-impending frustrations inherent in the nature of all existence by playing with possibilities that are also there.”14 Those very “possibilities that are also there” are my focus: how pockets of individual African American private enterprise coexist within the entrenched hierarchy of the white-dominated music industry and permit the advancement of African American popular music and profit from it. If much of the current historiography of American culture and society in all its many forms has benefited from the practice of incorporating heretofore silenced voices, the “history from below” (as it has been called), then bringing to light the activities of African American entrepreneurs in the popular music industry will assist in giving voice to a silence within a silence.

To that end, I will first briefly point out some of the insufficiencies of the pervasive depiction of white record executives, specifically the owners of two labels dedicated to black popular music, as unrepentantly rapacious, and indicate some of the fugitive but genuine opportunities offered to African American executives, musicians, writers, and performers within the interstices of those very organizations.
Second, I will enumerate some of the very enterprises owned and operated by African Americans and discuss the seminal role they played in the history of American popular music. Finally, I will explore the concept that the discourse of scale most emphatically does not apply to the current disposition of the music industry and consider how we must reconceptualize our notion of corporate hierarchies if our historiography is to match empirical evidence.

The photograph that appears on page 277 of Arnold Shaw’s *Honkers and Shouters* constitutes a synecdoche of the history of the American popular music industry in general, and by implication, if not by a noteworthy absence, the limited presence of the African American entrepreneur in that business. Standing on either side of Carl Haverlin, then president of Broadcast Music Inc., are two bald and bespectacled elderly white men clad in tight-fitting tuxedos, their thick fingers clasped about substantial cigars. Each man could easily stand in for the kind of corpulent, thick-jowled individuals whom the Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein employed to represent capitalist degradation at its most rapacious. Their overripe physiognomies corporeally convey an unmediated embodiment of the inequities inherent in the capitalist system that results in profits for some at the expense of others. Moreover, equating a person’s moral temperament (or lack thereof) with his physical appearance—a practice that Eisenstein referred to as “typage”—permits certain forms of parody; reducing the complexity of a person’s life to a caricature risks succumbing not only to elitism but also ideological simple-mindedness.15 Furthermore, when the individuals are Jewish, as is the case here, the taint of anti-Semitism, whether intended or unintended, inevitably arises.

The two men in question are the chief executives respectively of King and Savoy Records, Syd Nathan (see fig. 1) and Herman Lubinsky.16 Each entered the music industry at roughly the same time, during the course of World War II, and acquired considerable expertise about consumer preferences while operating inner-city record stores (Nathan in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Lubinsky in Newark, New Jersey). Both men accurately assessed the tastes of those who migrated from the deep agricultural South and rural mountains to urban centers in search of factory employment that supported military effort. They realized that the major labels of the day failed to satisfy these individuals’ voracious appetites for certain forms of music and profited from their perspicacity. Nathan’s catalog encompassed the pop, r&b, country, and jazz genres, while Lubinsky targeted inner-city customers with rich contributions to the jazz, gospel, blues, and r&b canons.

Their personal behavior, however, remained less broad-minded than their musical tastes. Many of their employees and colleagues found Nathan and Lubinsky to be boorish at best and belligerently...
Figure 1. From left to right, King Records’ president Syd Nathan and Henry Glover, a multitalented producer, arranger, writer, publisher, and A&R man. Glover was one of the first African Americans to possess creative and economic power in the record industry. Courtesy BMI Archives Photo Collection.

racist at worst. According to Savoy producer Ozzie Cadena, Lubinsky “hated blacks. Hey, he wasn’t right for anybody, not even his kids. Even his family, you know, he treated ‘em all like shit.”17 Lubinsky prospered at the expense of others. He adopted the credo that Gillett reports in Making Tracks as having been stated by a veteran in the field to a Billboard reporter: “The way an indie survives, you don’t pay anybody.”18 Savoy producer Fred Mendelsohn reports that Lubinsky pinched pennies on principle and recouped costs whenever possible in order to pay the lowest possible royalties.19 At the same time, the number of successful artists signed by Savoy—among them the vocalists “Big Maybelle” Smith (ca. 1920–72), Varetta Dillard (1933–93), Nappy Brown (b. 1929), and Billy Wright (1932–91), in addition to the
vocal group the Ravens and some of the finest gospel artists of the
time, for example, Alex Bradford (1926–78), James Cleveland (1931–
91), and Clara Ward (1924–73), or the Selah Jubilee Singers—attest to
Lubinsky’s support and dependence upon his staff producers Ralph
Bass, Teddy Reig, Mendelsohn, and Cadena. The label’s owner may
not have possessed any soul, as Mendelsohn asserts, but those he
hired did.

While less virulently abusive than Lubinsky, Nathan nonetheless
possessed an incendiary temper, pinched pennies whenever possible,
and alienated some of his most successful performers by unregener-
ate obduracy. For example, he and James Brown (b. 1928), whose
music Nathan initially considered without substance or marketability,
quarreled routinely over what the performer believed to be un-
called-for expenses as well as his recurrent desire for artistic autono-
my. To Brown, Nathan was “Little Caesar—short, fat and smoked a
big cigar. He yelled all the time in a big, hoarse voice, and everybody
was afraid of him.”20 The executive refused to spend the necessary
$5,700 to record Brown’s landmark best-selling 1962 LP, Live at the
Apollo, and he disliked intensely the manner in which one track seg-
ued into the next on the finished product, thereby not allowing disk
jockeys to encounter each of the songs’ “hooks” within the initial 15–
20 seconds of the individual tracks. However, in his autobiography
Brown credits Nathan as being the one who “gave this poor country
boy from Georgia the vehicle to do everything he’d ever dreamed of
doing.”21 Despite Nathan’s gruff and intemperate public persona, the
hiring practices at his Ohio-based firm appear to have been unusual-
ly open-minded for the time. While other record executives gave lip
service at best to racial integration, if they thought about it at all,
Darren Blase’s research on King Records indicates that as early as the
late 1940s, the company’s staff, both on the work floor as well as in
the administrative offices, was multiracial.22 Nathan was quoted as
saying, “At King we pay for ability and that is what we get. Our peo-
ple get along fine together, and we aren’t fooling when we say we
don’t discriminate.”23 Should one assume Nathan’s pronouncements
to be merely corporate flack, they are corroborated by his personnel
manager, Jerry Siegel, who told a local newspaper reporter, “We pay
for ability and ability has no color, no race, no religion. Our hiring
policy is based only on the question of the individual’s capacity to
fill the job.”24

This evidence, on the one hand, recapitulates the persistent depic-
tion of the music industry as a recalcitrant hierarchy immune to the
entreaties of its performers or even its employees. On the other hand,
it illustrates how, time and again, the volatility and porousness of
corporate entities allowed alternate forms of behavior to coexist with
unexamined practices. The routine recurrence of racism within the record industry, then and now, blinds us to the fact that co-optation never amounts to a foolproof system. As Keith Negus argues, "While the production-consumption of popular music may be experienced in terms of a conflict between commerce and creativity, it more frequently involves struggles over what is creative and what it is to be commercial." Hierarchical enterprises more often than not bear apertures through which individuals are able to exercise a degree of autonomy, however constricting the overall system may be. Ignoring those loopholes, one might argue, satisfies our ideological predilections but simplifies, if not falsifies, the history of a complex and contradictory industrial system.

Two brief examples of this form of limited but very tangible autonomy involve African Americans: one took on an active administrative role in the direction of a white-owned business, while the other acted as a stylistic intermediary by conducting and arranging the music that emanated from a system that employed him on a piece-meal basis. The first, Henry Glover (1921–91), acted as one of King Records' principal A&R men (see fig. 1 above), producing as well as writing material recorded by both white and black artists, often featuring racially mixed bands that frequently performed the same material in generically different formats. Not only was Glover one of the intermediaries through which some of the finest American popular music was produced, but he also possessed a substantial and rewarded administrative and creative role in its production. He can likely be credited as being only the second record executive with an independent record label, the first being Paramount Records' J. Mayo Williams (1894–1980) in the 1920s. A trumpeter by profession, and member of the popular Lucky Millinder Orchestra, Glover came to King Records shortly after it opened and served as a jack-of-all-trades. He not only designed the company's echo chamber but also wrote, produced, and arranged some of the label's most popular recordings, including Bill Doggett’s "Honky Tonk" (1956), "Little Willie" John's "Fever" (1956), Moon Mulligan's "I'll Sail My Ship Alone" (1949), the Delmore Brothers' "Blues Stay Away from Me" (1949), and Wayne Raney's "Why Don't You Haul Off and Love Me" (1949). As these titles and their performers indicate, Glover worked with artists of both races as well as any number of genres, from blues to r&b, country, bluegrass, hillbilly, boogie woogie, jazz, and rock and roll. Furthermore, inasmuch as Syd Nathan wished to maximize the profitability of his Lois Music copyrights, he directed Glover (and other producers) to rerecord songs in a variety of stylistic formats, such as the r&b shouter Wynonie Harris's rendition of country singer Hank Penny's "Bloodshot Eyes" (1949, 1951) and the Stanley Brothers' bluegrass
version of the Hank Ballard r&b hit, “Finger Poppin’ Time” (1960). Nathan and Glover eventually did have a falling out in 1959, but prior to that rupture, Glover’s stake in the company exceeded that of merely a salaried employee. Nathan permitted Glover to own 50 percent of one of the company’s publishing firms, Jay & Cee Music, which included some of the writer’s most lucrative copyrights.

The other example, Maxwell Davis (1916–70), a Los Angeles-based saxophonist, bandleader, and arranger, worked extensively through the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s for various labels, including Aladdin, Capitol, Black & White, 4 Star, Exclusive, Modern, Specialty, and Kent, among others. Jerry Leiber, coauthor with Mike Stoller of many r&b hits and a long-time figure in the Los Angeles scene, described Davis as “a major unsung hero. He really was Mr. Rhythm and Blues in L. A.”28 To him we owe, in part as an arranger and soloist, the unique sound that emanates from such major sides as Amos Milburn’s “Chicken Shack Boogie” (1948), Percy Mayfield’s “Please Send Me Somebody to Love” (1951), B. B. King’s “Sweet Little Angel” (1956), and Lowell Fulson’s “Tramp” (1966). I would posit that if we can credit, as many do, the rhythmic underpinning of the majority of post–World War II American popular music to two arrangers—Jesse Stone (b. 1901) of New York City, who worked for Atlantic Records, and Dave Bartholemew (b. 1920) of New Orleans, who worked for Imperial and other labels—then we can now add a third name, Maxwell Davis. Unfortunately, Davis died before anyone could interview him. Therefore Davis’s presence, like that of many other African Americans in the Los Angeles music community and elsewhere, remains criminally unacknowledged in most popular music histories. What little we know of him comes from his peers and family. This consummate professional reaped few financial rewards for his labors; in fact, the day he died he had returned just a few hours before from one of the many hundreds (perhaps thousands) of sessions that constitute the record of his career. His achievements pale only if we employ an economy of scale that prizes money over the kind of extension and elaboration of a society’s rhythms that Maxwell Davis helped to perpetuate.

Let us next focus briefly upon those African American entrepreneurs who ran their own labels and profited from creating recordings that rose out of their communities of origin and appealed to them. These labels can be distinguished in the most elementary manner on the basis of size and degree of success. Foremost among them, and the most successful African American entrepreneurial enterprise in the entertainment industry to date, is Berry Gordy’s Motown Records (fig. 2).29 Its achievements are widely known, but let it simply be said that the records Gordy (b. 1929) put out sold in greater numbers and crossed over to the mass market pop charts more often than those of any oth-
er black-owned firm. The degree of that mass market, not race-specific appeal, has led some to observe of Motown that it uniquely embodied that national tendency of which Ralph Ellison spoke which merges the disparate strands of our heterogeneous culture and society. According to Gerald Early, "Motown was important because it helped to crystallize the formation, not of a black audience (that had existed before), but of a black public taste that was taken seriously as an expression of a general aesthetic among a broad class of Americans."³⁰

At the same time, much of the company’s symbolic power, its cultural capital so to speak, arose from the manner in which Gordy conceived and promoted Motown as a family with the executive taking the guise of a benign paterfamilias in charge of a unified and cohesive social body. Even the finishing programs in dress, movement, and the social graces he instituted to prepare his performers for the public arena reveal a kind of fussy paternalistic autocracy, the desire on the part of a strong-minded individual to present a uniform and unvarnished image before the mass public. Time has underscored, if not exposed, the fissures in that facade, as the revelations of cross-collaboration of royalties and an impenetrable hierarchical management system revealed the possible dysfunction behind the placidity. It also brought to light the questionable practice on the part of Gordy, and
many other African Americans, of seamlessly linking together race, community, and family without problematizing those very powerful and complicated forces in public life. As Paul Gilroy observes, our definitions of authenticity "are disproportionately defined by ideas about nurturance, about family, about fixed gender roles, and generational responsibilities." Motown's fragile history, and the degree to which Gordy and others have protected their version of it, illustrates how uneasily family values and the reality of corporate capitalism coexist.

Other black-owned record companies have come and gone in the fifty or more years since World War II, when a porous marketplace provided the opportunity for African American businesspersons to enter the music industry. Few were accorded the long-term track record of Motown, but several achieved a substantial number of hits both on the r&b and pop charts. Principal among them is the Chicago-based Vee-Jay label (1953–66), operated by the husband-wife team of James Bracken (1909–72) and Vivian Carter Bracken (1920–89), with brother-in-law Calvin Carter. The start of the company preceded Motown by several years but eventually fell prey to fiscal overextension, a barrage of lawsuits, and a fickle market. Its roster of artists included close harmony ensembles (e.g., the Dells, El Dorados, and Spaniels), some of the major exponents of Chicago r&b (Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions, Jerry Butler, Dee Clark, and Betty Everett), noteworthy blues artists (John Lee Hooker, Memphis Slim, and Jimmy Reed), gospel performers (such as the Original Blind Boys, Alex Bradford, the Sallie Martin Singers, and the Swan Silvertones), and top-drawer jazz instrumentalists (Wynton Kelly, Lee Morgan, and Wayne Shorter). The label also crossed over to the pop charts by signing up acts with wide, not-race-specific appeal, specifically the Four Seasons, and thereafter scored a major coup by acquiring the rights to the initial recordings by the Beatles. However, it lost its contractual rights to the group to Capitol Records soon thereafter when the financially strapped company was unable to mount a court challenge against the imposing major label.

Equal in stature and possessed of an even more noteworthy discography is Don D. Robey's Dallas-based Duke/Peacock Records, which operated from 1949 to 1973. Robey (1903–75) ran a substantial fiefdom, although he developed fewer genres than did Vee-Jay and made less effort to cross over to the mainstream charts. In addition to the record labels, his company included a talent management agency, tour-booking service, record manufacturing plant, publishing companies, and one of the largest showrooms in all the Southwest, the Bronze Peacock Club. Robey himself had a colorful reputation as a ruthless businessman and was suspected of all manner of illegal
activities, ranging from gambling to prostitution. One of his engineers told Rolling Stone, "He was just like a character out of Guys and Dolls. He'd have a bunch of heavy guards around him all the time, carrying pistols and that kind of stuff, like a czar of the Negro underworld." Nonetheless, while other individuals have corroborated this engineer's portrait of Robey, it remains incontestable that he surmounted circumstances in a manner few of his race managed to achieve.

Robey's catalog amounts to one of the most substantial and successful in the history of African American popular music, with such names as Johnny Ace (1929–54), Bobby "Blue" Bland (b. 1930), "Little Junior" Parker (1927–71), and "Big Mama" Thornton (1926–84), as well as such gospel pioneers as the Dixie Hummingbirds, the Original Five Blind Boys, and the Mighty Clouds of Joy prominent in a substantial roster. In addition, Robey furthered the careers of other African Americans who played crucial roles in the elaboration and extension of the nation's music, primary among them the arranger Joe Scott (the intelligence behind Bobby "Blue" Bland's major records and the equal, in terms of the influence, of Dave Bartholomew, Maxwell Davis, and Jesse Stone) and the record promoter Dave Clark (credited by many as the first African American in that profession). The public perception of Robey, whatever its accuracy, reminds one of the common image of many current black record executives (particularly those in the rap field) as unseemly and unethical, a point to which I shall return. Nonetheless, he set standards for self-determination that few in his race could equal and to which many continue to aspire.

According to George, other labels experienced less success than Vee-Jay and Duke-Peacock but, like both companies, illustrate how much the history of black-owned record companies is marked by "frustration, cynicism, and unfulfilled potential." Some of these labels possessed a strong regional base but never managed to receive proper national distribution, except in the rare instances when the success of an individual recording led to the licensing of the master to an organization better equipped to reach a broad public. These entities include the Bob Geddis (1913–91) Oakland-based series of West Coast labels (Art-Tone, Big Town, Cavatone, Down Town, Plaid & Rhythm); the Fire and Fury labels owned by Harlem record-store owner and entrepreneur Bobby Robinson; the Class and Rendezvous labels owned by the songwriter Leon René (1902–82), author of such classics as Louis Armstrong's theme song, "When It's Sleepytime Down South," and "When the Swallows Return to Capistrano," and whose major hits included Bobby Day's "Rockin' Robin"; Los Angeles-based Walter "Dootsie" Williams and his Duotone Records, which helped
establish the r&b market with “Earth Angel,” the chart-topping hit of the Penguins in 1954; and the nefarious John Dolphin of Los Angeles’s Central Avenue, whose high-handed and less than honest treatment of virtually all who crossed his path and his label, Dolphin Records, led to his murder by a disgruntled songwriter in 1958.\textsuperscript{37}

The degree to which most popular music historiography privileges one portion of the national landscape over another as the sole or principal outlet for a particular genre of music affects the study of African American material as much, or perhaps more, than any other portion of our national repertory. For far too long the musical histories of Detroit, Memphis, New York, and New Orleans have been singled out and documented to the exclusion of other locations. One city in particular that tends to be associated with a single genre of music and a single race, by and large musical practitioners, is Nashville, Tennessee, “Country Music U.S.A., the home of the ‘white man’s blues.”\textsuperscript{38} Not only has Nashville been a thriving center for the playing of a wide range of African American musical forms over the public airwaves—principally through the disc jockeys Gene Nobles and John Richbourg (John R.) of the Nashville radio station WLAC and Bill “Hoss” Allen of the Gallatin (Tennessee) station WHIN—but the local clubs and performance sites located along Jefferson Street in the city’s North Side also provided ample opportunities for both local and national performers to appear before an audience of their peers.\textsuperscript{39} Daniel Cooper writes that “most of the world thought Nashville was The Real McCoys embodied. Though you won’t learn it from rock ‘n’ roll history books, the Athens of the South was shaken nightly by North Nashville rhythm when the country music industry was just getting settled here. . . . Indeed, in the 1940s and ’50s, the Athens of the South was like an open city, its nightlife fueled by illegal whiskey and further quickened by the soft clatter of tumbling dice.”\textsuperscript{40} This vital community would be eradicated by the “blessings” of urban renewal and civic boosterism, the so-called red-light district of the North Side being forced to give way to the plans of reform-minded politicians who saw decay and decadence rather than cultural vitality and racial self-affirmation.\textsuperscript{41}

One of the historically unacknowledged players in the Nashville r&b community, and a still-in-business African American entrepreneur, is Ted Jarrett (b. 1925). According to Daniel Cooper, “Perhaps more than any individual, Ted Jarrett personifies the scuffling and striving and fortune and failure of the city’s r&b industry.”\textsuperscript{42} A piano student at Chicago’s American Conservatory, and the holder of a degree in composition from Fisk University, Jarrett played keyboards with various local Nashville ensembles, but he made his mark as an independent producer, writer, and arranger, leasing his masters to a
number of independent labels "so obscure," as Daniel Cooper observes, "as to make a successful r&b label like Chess look like Time/ Warner"; these labels included the Tennessee/Republic (for whom he was the staff A&R man), Calvert, Cherokee, and Champion. He has also run his own consortium of labels (namely, Poncello/Valdot and Ref-O-Ree) and played a major role in the careers of such prominent Nashville r&b artists as Roscoe Shelton (b. 1931), Christine Kittrell (b. 1929), and Earl Gaines (b. 1935). His most successful song was Gene Allison's "You Can Make It If You Try" (1958), which made it to no. 36 and no. 3 respectively on Billboard's pop and r&b charts; it was later covered by the Rolling Stones in 1964 and was more recently featured on a German BMW commercial. Acknowledging Jarrett's career, and those of the artists with whom he worked, must not be dismissed as the case study of an individual known only to the cognoscenti. Acquaintance with the recordings he produced not only amplifies our sense of the regional diversity of African American music, but it also corrects our racially exclusive sense of who recorded what material in "Music City U.S.A."

Another caliber of company is those owned and operated by recording artists or industry employees themselves. Their collective number resists calculation, for if the obstacles before such large-scale operations as those just discussed proved more often than not to be intractable, then the barriers faced by single-person enterprises led most to disappear virtually overnight. Popular African American performers such as Syl Johnson (b. 1936) and Lloyd Price (b. 1933) managed their own companies (Shama Records and Double L Records respectively), as did executives like Henry Glover (Glover Records) and Johnny Otis (b. 1921), whose Dig label allowed the Los Angeles–based singer, songwriter, and bandleader to release forty-two singles and three LPs between 1955 and 1957. In addition, Ray Charles (b. 1930) must be considered one of the most noteworthy African American entrepreneurs (fig. 3). When he left Atlantic Records in 1962 and signed with ABC-Paramount, the contract stipulated that his work (and that of those he produced) would appear on his own-owned Tangerine label, which ABC-Paramount would distribute. He remained with the company for twelve years before returning in 1974 to Atlantic, with whom he released several records on the Crossover label. George observes that Ray Charles's artistic and economic self-determination underscores "just how much he was a musical prototype at this time" and mirrors the growing desire in the black community to take its fate into its own hands.

As significant as Ray Charles's achievements are, one of the most noteworthy and potentially most influential of the artist-owned and operated labels is Sam Cooke's SAR Records (fig. 4). Cooke (1935–64)
founded the label's publishing arm, Kags Music (now ABKCO Music, Inc.) in 1958 with Roy Crain and J. W. Alexander, and the record label the following year. Cooke appears to have been one of the few members of his generation both to appreciate and to act upon the ownership and protection of copyrights. He furthermore was one of the few prominent black artists in a position to control his or her own career and to use that power to maximize the prosperity of fellow African Americans, assisting other black musicians and performers to achieve visibility before a mass public. SAR Records remained in operation between 1959 and 1965, its history eclipsed by Cooke's sudden and unexpected death by what appears to have been foul means.
The label acted as a catalyst in the careers of Johnnie Taylor (b. 1938), Bobby Womack (b. 1944), Billy Preston (b. 1946), and others, thereby validating George’s claim that Cooke’s widespread business activities, tragically short though they might have been, uniquely blended elements of assimilation and autonomy. According to George, “Pure pop tunesmith on one hand, soul record pioneer on the other, Cooke tried to embrace mainstream success as defined by Sammy Davis, Jr., and yet retain his roots as well. This balancing act between his instinct for integration and love for undiluted black expression—then very much the music of a segregated people—allowed him to fashion a career that spectacularly navigated the dual tracks of black life in the 1960s.”

Two final examples of heroic individual enterprise bear mentioning. Both are, for the most part, footnotes at best in the history of American popular music. Yet they embody the kind of rare but meaningful instance where one of those intermittent openings, to return to military metaphors, appears in the entrenched phalanx that comprises the mainstream music industry. Their obscurity is, in many ways, the source of their significance. The first example is that of an African American entrepreneur who initially discerned the value of

Figure 4. Sam Cooke, whose SAR label has been called the first full-fledged soul record company by Nelson George. Although SAR Records lasted a short time (1959–65), it illustrated that individual enterprise and racial self-expression could be successfully combined. Courtesy BMI Archives Photo Collection.
Cecil Gant (1913–51) and Joe Liggins (1916–87)—two artists who rank among the very earliest black performers to penetrate the national pop charts and inaugurate the ascendance of African American popular music into the national mass market—and made their primary recordings. Their recordings were the seminal singles “I Wonder” (1944) and “The Honeydripper” (1945); their discoverer was Leroy E. Hurte (b. 1915), owner of Bronze Records of Los Angeles. Hurte waxed these songs before they achieved public success on the Gilt-Edge and Exclusive labels respectively. While he recorded, pressed, and distributed his own product, he was unable to capitalize on the unique sounds produced by these two African American pioneers. Should one resort to a discourse of scale, Hurte’s historical role remains insignificant, a matter of ephemeral importance, familiar only to the cognoscenti. However, should one acknowledge that it was Hurte who first recognized the existence of a style of performance that would radically transform the rhythmic and vocal complexity of American popular music, let alone the manner in which that music is produced, performed, marketed, and distributed, then this information becomes a different matter altogether.

The other example, Harold Battiste, is an equally recondite instance of black self-empowerment and self-improvement. Battiste, a New Orleans–based session musician and arranger, experienced considerable success in the late 1950s as a producer and talent scout for Art Rupe’s Specialty Records, but he felt frustrated by the lack of an established black-owned infrastructure that would allow musicians, arrangers in particular, to be more than hired hands, with no stake in their work beyond session fees. He also wished to use the money made from popular music recordings to leverage financial support for and public interest in contemporary New Orleans jazz performers. Other musicians in the city were drawn to Battiste’s plans, and the All For One (AFO) label was founded in 1961. The black-owned Louisiana Weekly quoted the officers of AFO as stating, “Negroes create and write the music, Negroes sing and perform, but never reap the financial benefits of the industry. We had been thinking about this venture quite some time, and have finally gone into the business.” While other individuals had pursued similar ends, they have rarely stated the reasons for their pursuits so bluntly and effectively. As Jason Berry, Jonathon Foose, and Tad Jones observe in their history of New Orleans popular music,

AFO was a simple enough idea, but the economic and political implications were staggering in light of the times. In a way, the concept is still visionary. Battiste developed a plan whereby profits would be shared among company members. For years,
whites had controlled local recording. Battiste explained, “See, that is what we needed to do. They say we can sing and dance. Let’s own it! Why should some cat up in the Shaw Booking Agency sit on his ass, on the phone, and run Ray Charles around the country, and he gets rich? Or take a cat like Art Rupe. Why should he sit on his ass, can’t even keep time to the music, and he becomes a wealthy man—and all of us are beggin’ for rent money? Just own it yourself. And the only hitch was how to satisfy the union.”51

Battiste found in trumpeter Melvin Lastie a fellow African American who could smooth the way with the union. However, he and the AFO were unable to chart an untroubled course through the seas as an independent company. Ironically, one of the principal impediments to their game plan was another black entrepreneur, Henry “Juggy Murray” Jones, owner of the New York-based Sue Records.52 AFO Records’ first hit, and the most successful song they produced, was Barbara George’s “I Know,” which reached no. 3 on the pop charts in 1961. Soon after its release, AFO and Sue Records negotiated a distribution deal. Like a corporate magpie, Jones lured Barbara George to his own label and severed relations with AFO after only six releases. Proof that chicanery observes no racial barriers, the loss of distribution by Sue also certified how accurate Nelson George’s assertion was that the African American independent record business is governed by “frustration, cynicism and unfulfilled potential.” Murray had, in fact, enticed Battiste by appealing to his nationalist sensibilities, the New Orleans native being a Black Muslim. He observed, in retrospect, “I was blinded by this, I mean he was just a black cat and Juggy, smart cat, sensed immediately what role to play. The brother this, the brother that, yeah baby.”53 This and other factors led to the AFO’s demise in 1963. Ironically, so short was the company’s tenure that many of the fine tracks on the three Ace CDs that document the history of AFO had never appeared before the public.54 Self-determination and self-interest collided. Not only was the public the loser, missing out on the caliber of music that AFO produced, but also African Americans, who came across as devouring one another in the quest for cash above community.

The sorry story of AFO Records reinforces what many commentators on the popular music industry perceive as a lack of support (in “Juggy Murray” Jones’s case, virtually wholesale abandonment) on the part of black executives for the artists who were, like them, African Americans. No wonder, then, that the history of African American music is littered with so many “one-hit wonders” rather than a body of well-established and continuous careers. (Barbara George, for
example, never had a commercially successful song after "I Know.""

However, when one considers the obstacles these companies and their owners faced (e.g., the failure of the record charts to track black-produced material adequately, an insubstantial album market, patchy national distribution systems, the "ghettoization" of black performers on racially segregated vaudeville circuits with little access to integrated venues), it remains a wonder that they accomplished as much as they did for so long a period of time. Therefore, if we apply a discourse of scale, each of these organizations would necessarily be judged in descending order of consequence with only Motown, Vee-Jay, and Duke-Peacock as genuine contenders in the public arena. However, if we examine them instead as, among other things, cultural manifestations of racial self-sufficiency as well as capitalist transmitters of social culture, then each label and its owners possesses a different manner of value. Collectively they inform and validate George's argument that "a more committed effort at self-sufficiency in politics and economics, could have given (and still might give) blacks a better base from which to work for integration and political power."55

In the 1990s the hegemony of corporate systems that has kept the vast majority of African American entrepreneurs from achieving the kind of success they desire has begun to abate, or at least encountered obstacles to its dominance of the economic and cultural marketplace.56 As recently as ten years ago, the "Big 6" major labels and their corporate owners—WEA (Time Warner), Sony, Polygram (Phillips Electronics), BMG (Bertelsman), CEMA (Thorn EMI), and UNI (Seagram's)—controlled 95 percent of the recordings released globally: currently they corner only 80.7 percent of those markets, while their share of foreign sales has fallen precipitously, from a third to an estimated 20 percent by the year 2000.57 Sales figures for 1996 gave the record industry little reason to feel any security about its prospects. Purchases rose so little (1.2 percent) as to appear virtually negligible. Other figures prove to be even more dire.58 Overall purchase of CDs fell 25 percent, and sales of rap music, statistically the most profitable sector in African American music for most of the 1990s, evidenced an indisputable decline from 9.2 percent of all music purchases in 1993 to 6.7 percent in 1995.59 Even the acquisition of reissues of older material, long a mainstay in the music industry's balance sheets and the source of much of the material discussed here, declined by 25 percent.60 Some sectors of African American popular music, however, continue to prosper, inasmuch as interest in what is generically referred to as "urban contemporary" (a marketing category that includes r&b and dance music) has risen. Nonetheless, the denizens of
corporate boardrooms appear recalcitrant to accommodate their practices to the fact that the public interest in any single artist, song, or even genre appears to be so evanescent as to elude virtually all efforts to claim it over the long term. Whatever cultural capital once was attached to the purchase and consumption of popular music now amounts to a temporary and tenuous investment.

There are many more independent labels in the late 1990s than there were twenty years ago, and there are many more opportunities for individuals to take their fate into their own hands and to opt out of the dominant economic structure. One can point to such recent enterprises as Sylvia and Joe Robinson’s Sugar Hill Records, Dick Griffey’s Solar Records, or Paisley Park Records, owned by the Artist Formerly Known As Prince (Prince Rogers Nelson, b. 1958)—all, with the exception of Solar Records, are no longer labels in the commercial spotlight but are companies nonetheless that illustrate that African American entrepreneurs existed throughout the 1970s and 1980s into the 1990s. These entrepreneurs have been succeeded by any number of individuals: for example, Russell Simmons of Rush Communications; Andre Harrell of Uptown Records, now CEO of Motown Records; Doctor Dre (Andre Young, b. 1965), founder of Death Row Records and the newly established Aftermath Entertainment; and Sean “Puffy” Combs of Bad Boy Entertainment. Each of them has a distribution agreement with a larger company but retains control over the content of their recordings as well as a substantial share of their profits. No guarantees exist that these individuals or their organizations will continue to succeed over the long term. As much as anything, they face the obstacle endemic to a system in which African Americans possess limited economic opportunities: trying to achieve ownership of one’s own material rather than the “fake control” (as Andre Harrell calls it) that comes from an absence of rights in the control of master recordings and their subsidiary rights. Tired of the fact, as Combs states, that “we create the pie and get to keep the crust,” these individuals no longer attach the majority of their interest or their financial resources to music alone. In an age of mass media and cross-media tie-ins, we may have reached a point where music no longer possesses the kind of cultural and economic cachet it once did. Therefore African American entrepreneurs of the future will have to look to other forms of communication as business opportunities and not place their principal resources in the pursuit of successful recordings.

One must add as well that the public at large currently possesses a largely negative view of the African American participation in the music industry by virtue of the recent murders of rap performers Tu-
pac Shakur (1971–96) and Notorious B.I.G. (a.k.a. Christopher Small, 1972–97). Even if entertainment mogul David Geffen might assert that “it’s a wide-open business, color-blind. The music business does not care about who’s delivering hits,” the killings have permitted many members of the public to care a great deal who delivers those hits and even to suggest that, at least, the companies who release them consider doing otherwise and, at worst, that the government intervene to censor or limit their performers’ means of expression. These killings, the conviction of Death Row Records’ president and chief executive officer Suge Knight for parole violation in February 1997, and the widespread reports of strong-arm tactics on Knight’s part and those of his associates creates an impression in the public consciousness that permits the escapades of a “Juggy Murray” Jones to seem like little more than child’s play to the average record consumer. A significant majority of the American public as a result has come to associate the whole of African American popular music mistakenly with rap music alone, gangsta rap more specifically, assuming in the process that the violence in the grooves of a CD parallels actual aggression on the part of its creators on the streets. As a consequence, a form of music that has permitted disenfranchised individuals to express their problematic position in the dominant society may be considered little more than an expression of violence for violence’s sake. This permits individuals like C. Delores Tucker of the National Political Congress of Black Women to posture that “racism and greed are the sustaining forces behind gangsta rap,” when it can be argued that it is just those forces gangsta rap is working to critique and combat.

In conclusion, the forces allied against the African American entrepreneur in the popular music industry are as formidable in the late 1990s as they ever were. At the same time, one cannot deny that the unsettled forces at work in the mass media continue to offer opportunities for individual initiative. Despite the fact that power always seems to lie in the hands of the few, hegemony never becomes a permanent state in a perpetually volatile marketplace and multicultural society. Instead, as Reebee Garofalo observes, “At its most effective [hegemony] remains an ‘unstable equilibrium.’ It must be constantly re-established in the face of social upheaval and the realignment of class alliances” (one must also add racial alliances). The African American entrepreneur continues to surmount overwhelming obstacles, and the success of any one person or company in no way guarantees the advancement or enhancement of the race as a whole. For every Harold Battiste, there is a John Dolphin or a “Juggy Murray” Jones. Music may not in and of itself transform society. It may not even transform individuals. As Gina Arnold concedes, it does appear at times that “the best we can hope for is a world with a slightly bet-
ter soundtrack."67 Yet, with our ears cocked in the air, attending to the subtle transformations in our acoustic environment, we can still hope, along with one of the most prominent African American entrepreneurs, Sam Cooke, that someday “a change is gonna come.”

NOTES

An earlier version of this essay was read in 1996 at the tenth anniversary Crossroads Conference at the Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University (Murfreesboro). I thank Paul Wells, director of the center, for inviting me to speak on that occasion. I likewise thank Darren Blase for making his research on King Records available to me; John Hartney Fox for providing copies of his “King of the Queen City” radio series; John Broven of Ace Records for making recordings released by that label available to me as well as for his documentation of the history of American popular music; Daniel Cooper for sharing his essay on the r&b community in Nashville; and Rebee Garofalo for his continuing dialogue about American popular music.

4. See Nelson George’s The Death of Rhythm and Blues (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), in which he posits that the collision between these two points of view, personified by the personalities and philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, has led to the irresolution of the economic as well as social position of African Americans in the United States. In the end, according to George, “black America has to acknowledge that racial pride is as worthy a goal as equality under the law, and, moreover, that the two agendas go hand in hand” (201).
9. Gillett, Sound of the City, xiv.
11. Shaw, Honkers and Shouters, xviii.
12. George, Death of Rhythm and Blues, 31.
13. Murray, South to a Very Old Place, 197.
16. For information on the career of Nathan and the label he founded, consult Shaw’s Honkers and Shouters, 275–88, and Michel Ruppli with assistance of Bill Daniel, The King Label: A Discography, 2 vols. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985); in the case of

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Lubinsky see Shaw, Honkers and Shouters, 343–52, as well as the interpolated interviews with the producers Fred Mendelsohn and Lee Negrid, 353–70.


18. Gillett, Making Tracks, 28. “Indie,” an abbreviation for independent, is a music industry neologism for those record companies that exist alongside the major labels and, most crucially, own or otherwise control their own means for the manufacture and distribution of recordings.


21. Darren Blase, “The King Records Story,” senior honors thesis, University of Cincinnati, 1995. Following the completion of his B.A. degree, Darren Blase has started his own label, Shake It Records, operated, like King Records, in Cincinnati. Its releases include a tribute disc to the performers on the “Midwestern Hayride” and “Boone County Jamboree,” two regional country-music radio programs, among whose performers were a number of the key country artists recorded on King (e.g., Grandpa Jones, Merle Travis, Hank Penny, Reno & Smiley, and the Stanley Brothers).


24. Jerry Ransohoff, “Record Firm Here Smashes Jim Crow,” Cincinnati Post, Mar. 21, 1949, 6. The same article indicates that in addition to a significant number of Japanese workers who had moved to Cincinnati from relocation camps in Arkansas and individuals of Chinese descent, “the musical director, assistant office manager, foreman of the mill room, set up man on the production line, assistant promotion director, legal secretary, a dozen stenographers, and twenty percent of the factory workers are Negroes.”


26. Details about Glover’s career can be found in Shaw, Honkers and Shouters, 275–79, and in Steven C. Tracy, Going to Cincinnati: A History of the Blues in the Queen City, Greater Cincinnati Bicentennial History series (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 114–53. John Rumble of the Country Music Foundation conducted the most lengthy interview with Glover (“The Roots of Rock & Roll: Henry Glover of King Records,” Journal of Country Music 14, no. 2 [1992]: 30–42). John Hartney Fox, formerly of Mo Lytle’s GML Inc. (the current owners of the King catalog), produced a four-hour radio documentary on the label, entitled “King of the Queen City.” Only a small portion of the work Glover and others produced for the label is currently available on LP or CD. Rhino, the English reissue labels Ace and Charly, and the German-based Bear Family have released recordings that focus on groups or artists associated with the company, but the vault of master tapes, housed in Nashville, remains an untapped national resource. The King R&B Box Set, KBSCD-7002, a four-CD compilation issued in 1995, only whets one’s appetite, Darren Blase estimates that less than 40 percent of the label’s catalog has been reissued or leased to other companies (“King Records Story,” 48) The majority of the company’s bluegrass and country sessions, in particular, lie unheard in the company vaults, which can only lead one to assert to the company’s owners to let their masters go.

27. While the activities of J. Mayo Williams fall outside the chronological compass of this essay, it should be stressed that the history of African American entrepreneurship in the music industry prior to World War II is considerable and largely unknown. Ted Vincent’s fascinating study, Keep Cool: The Black Activists Who Built the Jazz Age (East Haven, Conn.: Pluto Press, 1995), chronicles the manner in which the discovery of jazz
by the mass public and the music industry in the 1920s was preceded by (and was concurrent with) an impressive and substantial infrastructure within the black community that supported and encouraged the development of indigenous black music. According to Vincent, “The truth of the matter was that the Jazz Age conquistadors found a Black ‘civilization’ that had already provided its musicians with the necessary guidance and institutional support of booking agencies, theater managers, night-club operators, music reviewers, sheet-music companies, trade unions, and training schools. This musical civilization was less than a decade old at the time of ‘discovery.’ . . . It was African-Americans working among themselves, or in concert with Whites yet to flee to the suburbs, who organized the Jazz Age” (1).

The weight and breadth of Vincent’s empirical proof of these assertions permits one not merely to make a rhetorical argument that the mainstream music industry abandoned with jazz but to support one’s righteous anger with an impressive array of facts.

28. Quoted in Barney Hoskyns, Waiting for the Sun: Strange Days, Weird Scenes, and the Sound of Los Angeles (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 29. Leiber compared Davis’s career to that of the better-known Phil Spector: “I think Phil made some good records, but I know a lot of people who made better records and more of them, and no one knows who they are” (liner notes to Maxwell Davis: Father of West Coast R&B, Ace CHAD 239 [1988], the sole LP of Davis’s appearances under his own name, which is now out of print).


30. Early, One Nation under a Groove, 25.


32. Information on the history of Vee-Jay Records can be found in George, Death of Rhythm and Blues, 82–85; Shaw, Honkers and Shouters, 315–26; and Robert Pruter, Chicago Soul, Music in American Life (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 24–47. A compendium of some of the label’s most notable recordings can be heard on the three-CD set The Vee-Jay Story: 1953–1993, NV52–3–400 (1993).

33. Details on the colorful career of Robey and the distinguished artists he recorded can be found in George, Death of Rhythm and Blues, 31–34; Shaw, Honkers and Shouters, 479–89; and the indispensable volume written by Galen Gart and Roy C. Ames (with contributions by Ray Funk, Rob Bowman, and David Booth), Duke/Peacock Records: An Illustrated History with Discography (Milford, N.H.: Big Nickel Publ., 1990). No single CD set illustrates the range of Robey’s legacy; however, MCA, the controller of his master recordings, has issued a number of compilations by individual artists, including Bland, Parker, and Thornton.

34. George, Death of Rhythm and Blues, 32.

35. Anecdotes about the imperious executive proliferate, among them the time he concluded a contentious discussion with Little Richard by punching the flamboyant pianist so hard in the chest that, Little Richard reports, he suffered a hernia (George, Death of Rhythm and Blues, 52).


37. For information about Geddins, see Shaw’s Honkers and Shouters, 248, which states, “the story of Oakland blues is the story of Bob Geddins.” Geddins’s recordings prove to be as elusive as information about this ambitious individual; no single CD
collects a sample of his work, and one must track down individual tracks. Bobby Robinson’s Fire/Fury Records is represented by a two-CD compilation released as The Fire/Fury Records Story, Capricorn Records 9 42009–2 (1993). Information on the Harlem businessman can be found in Shaw’s Honkers and Shouters, 436–39, and in George’s Death of Rhythm and Blues, 34–35. Some of the major sides released by Leon René (e.g., Bobby Day’s “Little Bitty Pretty One” [1957] and “Rockin’ Robin” [1958] and “In the Mood” by the Ernie Fields Orchestra [1959]) can be found on The Class and Rendezvous Story, Ace CDCHD 461 (1993). Dootsie Williams’s history proves more elusive. A selection of works, including the groundbreaking “Earth Angel,” is on the London-based Ace label, The Duotone Story, CDCHD 242 (1992); and brief passages in Shaw’s Honkers and Shouters, 266, and George’s Death of Rhythm and Blues, 36, tell the tale. John Dolphin’s exploits are discussed in Shaw’s Honkers and Shouters, 196, 258, 508, and 519; also in Hoskyns’s Waiting for the Sun, 32, 34, and 229. Yet another of the peculiar ironies in the history of popular music, two young white songwriters were present, eager to try their wares on the notorious businessman, when Dolphin was shot: Bruce Johnston, later to be a member of the Beach Boys, and Sandy Nelson, percussionist and performer on a series of hit instrumentals, most notably “Teen Beat” (1959) and “Let There Be Drums” (1961) [see Hoskyns, Waiting for the Sun, 34]. Sweden’s Earth Angel label released one Dolphin LP, The Doo Wop Sessions, JD-906 (1989), and Specialty Records put out two individual CDs, entitled Doo Wop from Dolphin’s of Hollywood, SPC 2173—SPC 2174 (1991).

38. The manner in which the history and ideology of country music remains a matter not of cultural essence but conscious construction on the part of its practitioners and marketers is stressed in my essay, “Blue Moon of Kentucky Rising over the Mystery Train: The Complex Construction of Country Music,” South Atlantic Quarterly 94, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 29–56. I argue that the record of the interfusion of African American and white music and cultural traditions in country music possesses a long and substantial history, one which is asserted to be predominantly Caucasian only on the basis of selective acquaintance with the field and a predisposition to racial separation.

39. For references to WLAC, see Shaw’s Honkers and Shouters, 489 and 508, and George’s Death of Rhythm and Blues, 29, 54, 62, 86, and 126. For information about “Hoss” Allen, also see George, Death of Rhythm and Blues, 54 and 126. John Richbourg, a white DJ, was a close ally (and financial beneficiary) of many African American entrepreneurs and helped launch the careers of a number of artists, primary among them Otis Redding (ibid., 86–87). Richbourg later supervised a local label, Sound Stage 7, that released some splendid r&b sides. Like other independent labels, Sound Stage 7’s catalog has been reissued, over the course of a body of artist-focused LPs, by England’s Charly Records, but all those albums are out of print at the present time. Beverley Keel (Middle Tennessee State University) contributed an informative discussion of the racial complexity of radio formatting on these stations in her talk “A Hoss of a Different Color: Rock Radio before Alan Freed,” delivered at Duke University’s conference, “Representing Rock” (Apr. 1997). The principal sponsor of Gene Noble’s show on WLAC radio was Randy Wood, owner of Randy’s Record Mart in Gallatin, Tennessee. Wood advertised the purchase of 78–rpm blues records on Noble’s show and founded Dot Records in 1951 with the profits generated by those sales. Dot Records would go on to be one of the noteworthy labels for the “covering” of African American material by white artists, most notably Pat Boone; it was associated in the minds of music connoisseurs as one of the principal agents in the defiling of popular music. As Nelson George asserts in Death of Rhythm and Blues, “Randy Wood’s record shop remained more important to r&b than his record company, for it stimulated the opening of more stores catering to this music” (55).

41. For a discussion of the series of dislocations and outright erasure of the North Side of Nashville, see ibid., 37–38.

42. Ibid., 33.


44. Pruter discusses in *Chicago Soul* the Chicago-based Shama, 257–60, and 299–300. Finding the recordings themselves is another matter, as is the sad case with Double L Records or Glover Records, or most, if not all, the owner-operated labels. Fortunately, Otis’sDig label is well represented by Ace Records’ four CDs of samples from the company’s catalog: *Creepin’ with the Cats: The Legendary Dig Masters*, vol. 1, CHD 325 (1991); *Dig These Blues*, vol. 2, CHD 334 (1992); *Dapper Cats, Groovy Tunes, & Hot Guitars*, vol. 3, CHD 351 (1992), and *Shoo-Be-Doo-Be*, vol. 4, *The Vocal Groups*, CHD 569 (1994). Otis’s recent autobiography, *Upside Your Head! Rhythm and Blues on Central Avenue* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1993), provides information on the label as well as rich insights into the African American musical community in Los Angeles.

45. George, *Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 71. Ray Charles maintains ownership of the Tangerine masters to this day. In 1996 he signed an agreement with Rhino Records, one of the preeminent reissue labels, to bring this worthy catalog to the public once again. One hopes that among the releases will be the several albums by Percy Mayfield (1920–84) released by Tangerine. Mayfield was one of r&b’s most noteworthy songwriters and the composer of Ray Charles’s no. 1 pop recording, “Hit the Road Jack,” ABC-Paramount ABC-415 (1961).

46. The significance of SAR Records to the history of African American participation in the music industry is cogently argued by Nelson George in *Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 79–82. *You Send Me: The Life and Times of Sam Cooke*, the recent biography of the artist by Daniel Wolff with S. R. Crain, Clifton White, and G. David Tenenbaum (New York: William Morrow, 1995), amplifies George’s account. The label’s achievements are featured on the two-CD set *Sam Cooke’s SAR Records Story*, 1959–65, ABKCO 2231–2 (1994). Peter Guralnick’s booklet that accompanies the CDs argues as well the degree to which the label was simultaneously an aesthetic and a racial triumph.

47. Wolff et al., *You Send Me*, 1–6, 319–47.

48. George, *Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 81.


50. Quoted in the liner notes to *Gumbo Stew. Original New Orleans R&B*, Ace CHD 450 (1993), the first of three reissues of AFO materials by the British label; the others are *More Gumbo Stew*, CHD 462 (1993), and *Still Spicy Gumbo Stew*, CDH 520 (1994).


52. *The Sue Records Story: The Sound of Soul*, four CDs reissued in 1994 by EMI Records, EMI 7243 8 28093 2 6. Interestingly, the liner notes to the box set do not mention the chicanery that so angered Harold Battiste; in fact, they infer that “Juggy Murray” Jones bankrolled AFO Records altogether. To the outsider, this episode must come across as yet another of those *Rashomon*-like narratives that litter the history of the popular music business.
53. Quote appears in the liner notes to Gumbo Stew.
54. See reference to the AFO reissues in n. 50.
55. George, Death of Rhythm and Blues, 199.
61. The Sugar Hill catalog and its seminal relationship to the development of rap music is amply documented in The Sugar Hill Records Story, Rhino R2 72449 (1997), a four-CD compilation. No comparable single collection exists to represent the heyday of Solar Records, although individual compilations by some of the label’s principal artists have been reissued (e.g., the Whispers, Shalamar, Dynasty, and Lakeside). The Paisley Park label was a short-lived enterprise, part of the now clearly unsuccessful effort by Time-Warner to keep the Artist Formerly Known as Prince under contract; in addition to Prince’s work, the label issued material by Mavis Staples (b. 1941) and George Clinton (b. 1941) of the Parliament-Funkadelic empire.
63. Ibid., 50.
64. Ibid., 54.