

Nelson George, The Death of Rhythm & Blues

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T W O

DARK VOICES

IN THE

NIGHT

(1930-50)



blacks remained loyal to the Republican Party from the end of the Civil War until the presidential election of 1932, when they finally had to abandon the party of Lincoln, the Emancipation Proclamation, and Reconstruction. That romance, tested and found wanting through Jim Crow and the unremitting acts of physical and psychological terrorism against blacks, had finally ended with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. As the poorest of a troubled nation, blacks had the most to gain from the introduction of Social Security, a minimum wage, and public-works programs that created jobs and constructed pools, parks, and libraries in their communities. New Deal programs also gave many black artists a chance to develop their craft. Two of the most prominent writers of the postwar period, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, helped make ends meet by working for the Federal Writers Workshop.

The political shifts in black allegiances and the relief programs of the New Deal may have helped blacks in bread-and-butter ways, and cer-

tainly in the more rarefied world of art, but no one—not even the broad-minded Roosevelt—contemplated a more radical program to promote economic incentives *within* the black community, or to address the very fundamental disenfranchisement of blacks socially and politically. The president was no fan of sharecropping, but the notion that there could be a separate realm of black economic activity—even something as simple as aid to help blacks purchase their own land—challenged too many assumptions about the way things were supposed to operate, at least in the 1930s. Whites were unable to consider the idea that black productivity could actually benefit the broader economy, while the top priority for blacks remained getting full access to the white world.

Perhaps suspecting that this New Deal would mean much of the same for blacks, in 1934 W. E. B. Du Bois made a historic and, in light of his past battles with Booker T. Washington, a most amazing argument in the pages of *Crisis*: he advocated segregation. Feeling that the highest levels of the NAACP were dominated by whites and blacks too committed to an integrationist policy to aggressively pursue a truly black agenda, Du Bois had decided that only a black-directed organization, one that encouraged racial solidarity, could really create black power. The separate-but-equal implications of his essay shocked the NAACP leadership, who sent the sixty-six-year-old scholar from the *Crisis* to the presidency of Atlanta University—the organization's equivalent of a gold watch. His recognition of the inherent problems of an integrated organization fighting for black equality and his advocacy of self-sufficiency was a remarkable shift at the end of a life directed in other ways. It suggests that a person who truly analyzes the mechanisms of power in America will realize how confining unbridled assimilation can be for blacks.

The NAACP rejected its founder but not his assertion that some change of direction was necessary in the organization. Du Bois's outrage sparked an aggressive campaign of lawsuits against Jim Crow that would build momentum for major court decisions against discrimination and bolster the career of a young attorney named Thurgood Marshall. In 1935, when Marshall won a case allowing Donald Murray to attend the University of Maryland's law school, no one would have believed what this incipient legal campaign would achieve in just twenty years.

While civil-rights legal activism developed, those in the black music world found a way to operate within the confines of a segregated society. They helped build what would become the postwar R&B world, and in the process they also nurtured a sense of black community and pride

that would be essential to the civil-rights movement. Two crucial figures in laying this foundation were Dave Clark, a businessman with a hustler's guile, and Louis Jordan, a saxophonist with a unique vision. First on the scene was Clark.

DAVE CLARK

Dave Clark, thin, wiry, honey-colored, began his career as a utility man playing both reed and brass instruments in Jimmy Lunceford's big band after graduating in the mid-1930s from college in Jackson, Tennessee, with a music degree. The course of Clark's life was altered by Lunceford's road manager, Harold Oxley, who suggested that the young musician become an advance man, a job that required Clark to travel to cities ahead of the band and stir up enthusiasm for the performer by putting up posters, placing advertisements in the black press, and getting Lunceford's latest recording in the local jukeboxes. "This was before there was really any black radio," says Clark, "so this was the only way to expose your music. In fact, when the jukebox operators began putting them in every little joint in the city, it sparked the recording of more black acts, because if the boxes didn't have good swing or blues, blacks wouldn't play them." As an advance man Clark often introduced new records to a city. "Since it took so long for music to travel across the country, a hot record could be big for a year or two."

Clark's reputation grew quickly. Moe Gale and Joe Glaser, the rival owners of New York's two biggest booking agencies, both engaged him to do advance work, bringing Clark into contact with Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday, among others. Most of the acts Clark worked with recorded for Decca Records, a large company that had a monopoly on the big black stars of the swing era. One white Decca staffer offered Clark a job, realizing that his efforts were beneficial to Decca's bottom line. But the offer fell through, Clark says, because "the boss upstairs wasn't too keen on hiring blacks"—despite the many blacks who recorded for the company. So Clark was made a consultant, a 1930s version of what is now called an independent promotion man.

That is why one night in 1938 Clark walked into the lobby of a radio station in New York City wearing a chauffeur's uniform. Martin Block was doing his nightly broadcast of "Make Believe Ballroom," a show composed of recorded music. This was a revolutionary programming concept that had been introduced a few years before in Los Angeles,

but it was Block who made the format work. His embrace of recorded music over live performances would eventually lead to a shift in the role of records on radio. Block definitely had vision, but he wasn't a total visionary. His playlist included such tame white acts as Paul Whiteman, Tommy Dorsey, and Glenn Miller, but excluded Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Jimmy Lunceford, and the period's other magnificent black big bands. It was a condition Dave Clark wanted to correct.

He was carrying with him a 78 rpm recording of Lunceford's "St. Paul's Walking Through Heaven with You," a good but undistinguished swing tune. Blacks weren't allowed in WNEW's offices in 1938, but it wasn't unusual for a black chauffeur to drop off a message with the doorman. Clark explained that the station's owner had sent him over with a record for Block to play. He added menacingly that the boss would be home listening for it. The doorman "went right up there and [Block] played that record right off," says Clark proudly of his magic moment. Black music historian Portia Maultsby asserts that this makes Clark the record industry's first promotion man—the first person to entice a delay to play a record in an effort to sell more recordings. The relationship between recorded music and radio would be crucial for the evolution of rhythm & blues, since it was to be the first major American musical style to emerge through the playing of its records on the air. Clark, in the years to come, would play an active role in encouraging this symbiotic relationship.

Black radio in the 1930s had progressed little from its sponsored-show origins. There were still no stations aimed exclusively at blacks and no stations that specialized in forms of black music besides swing. There were, however, a growing number of black announcers, most notably Jack Cooper, whose career began in 1929. By 1935, through the sale of airtime to sponsors, he was heard a combined five and a half hours a day over several Chicago radio stations. He even called one of his daily broadcasts "The Negro Hour," though Cooper still went after white listeners and a middle-class black audience. While Cooper and his few peers utilized some black vernacular in their presentation, they worked hard to blend in with the blander white announcers. As Norman Spaulding, a black announcer of the era, observed, most black announcers then "were not Southern born, or left the South at an early age and had no trace of a Southern accent. With their race pride . . . [they] did not want to sound like Amos and Andy or Stepin Fetchit." This meant that while professing race pride, Cooper and company were motivated by a real snobishness against the rawer modes of black

expression, in music and in language. To a degree, this bias echoed the Southern-Northern subtext of the Washington-Du Bois conflict and would recur in different guises in the seemingly unending debates over black image versus black reality.

LOUIS JORDAN

One artist who was able to bridge this gap made his solo debut in 1938 on the same Decca label Clark toiled for. His name was Louis Jordan, a tenor saxophonist and singer with a sly, ingratiating approach who had played with Chick Webb's big band until the swing drummer's death earlier that year. Jordan immediately started up a band of his own, which originally consisted of eight players, later stripped down to six, before the addition of a guitarist brought the regular lineup to seven. So while his band became famous as the Tympany Five, Jordan never had a combo that small. The success of the Tympany Five standardized the size of the postwar black dance band—to seven. Fewer horns made the rhythm more pronounced, partly because there was more space in the arrangements and partly because of Jordan's lean, emphatic beat in 2/4 time that he dubbed the "shuffle boogie." In the years before World War II folks said Jordan was "jimpin' the blues," and the style was known for a time as "jump blues."

Like rural and classic blues, Jordan's material was steeped in black vernacular and the "hep-cat" slang of the day. But, in a significant step along the road from blues to rhythm & blues, the song selection was part of a formal marketing strategy. With considerable input from white staff producer Milt Gabler, Jordan's material was commissioned and then shaped into an urbane yet rootsy mold. It didn't necessarily express Jordan's experience but was thought to mirror that of big-city blacks often not one generation removed from life in the rural South. The titles "Beans and Cornbread," "Saturday Night Fishity," and "Ain't Nobody Here But Us Chickens" suggest country life, yet the subject of each is really a city scene. In "Chickens," for instance, the central image is of chickens in a coop having a party that's keeping the farmer from sleeping. But clearly the bird bash is just a metaphor for a black house party that the farmer—perhaps the landlord, maybe the police—wants to quiet. Jordan's vocal, sassy and spirited, spiced with funny spoken asides, is as buoyant as its shuffling groove. His flamboyant humor made some compare him to Cab Calloway, a swing-era bandleader known

for his baggy zoot suits, jive talk, and greasy hair, which he would fling around. But Jordan had just as much in common with Jack Beniny's sidekick Eddie (Rochester) Anderson, whose harried expression and gravelly voice made him a film and radio star in the 1930s and 1940s. He was an everyman, like Jordan, with black and white appeal.

Jordan was a natural crossover artist. He was so skilled an entertainer and so progressive a musician that his talent leaped over the walls of segregation. "I made just as much money off white people as I did colored," he boasted proudly. "I could play a white joint this week and a colored next." During his peak years, 1938 to 1946, Jordan enjoyed five million-selling 78s, due in some degree to his popularity on Nick-elo-deons—jukeboxes with a screen and tape loop—on which pre-MTV music shorts appeared. Clips of Jordan singing his like "Caledonia Boogie" perfectly captured the fun of his live shows, and sold records. (The clips, instigated by Jordan and Gabler, were also shown along with black independent films in black neighborhoods.) In differing ways Marshall, Clark, and Jordan would serve as links between the pre- and postwar black experience. Their innovations would develop with time. But for the next few years all that would be overshadowed by the war against Adolph Hitler to save the world for democracy and brotherhood. World War II was a time of heroism and pain. It was also a time of opportunity for blacks. The war, straining America's resources, meant its largely untapped supply of blacks (and white women) were given a chance to prove their loyalty to a nation that had discriminated against them for nearly three hundred years.

During the war years, most black soldiers and their families looked ahead to a new American reality, hoping that the call to arms would force this nation to begin to live up to the sentiments in the Constitution. For many, the start of the new era was symbolized by Marion Anderson's Easter Sunday concert in 1939, held in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. Seventy-five thousand Americans of every color and class attended the performance after the great classical diva was blocked from appearing at Constitution Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution. It was a triumph of dignity over racism and surely a harbinger of the future. A year later Richard Wright's *Native Son* was published to overwhelming critical acclaim, showing whites for one of the first times in print the violent reality of the everyday war at home.

In the early days of the war effort, the government tried to hold the line against black advancement, but often, due to political pressure and manpower shortages, it had to reverse itself. On October 9, 1940, this

White House announced that it was government policy not to "intermingle colored and white enlisted personnel in the same regimental organizations." Just seven days later, Benjamin O. Davis was named the first black general in the regular army. On January 15, 1941, Yancey Williams, fresh out of Howard University, went to federal court to get the secretary of war to consider his application for enlistment in the Army Air Corps as a flying cadet. A day later the War Department and the army announced the formation of a squadron for black cadets. By July the black air school was opened in Tuskegee under the watchful eye of Booker T. Washington's operation there, which, even after his death, wielded some clout in black affairs.

A number of individuals also distinguished themselves, opening opportunities for other blacks. One example is Dr. Charles Drew. After organizing a pioneering blood-plasma bank in New York City in 1940, he was appointed medical director of Great Britain's blood-plasma project, creating a model for mass production of plasma that would be an essential tool of mercy on the shores of Europe over the next four years. Labor leader A. Philip Randolph, who organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and scared Roosevelt with talk of a march on Washington, agitated for more black jobs in defense plants. With men and women like Anderson, Davis, Drew, and Randolph, blacks made waves during the war.

This sense of pride, which in some black GIs manifested itself in justifiable impatience, led to many bloody confrontations. Black soldiers and white MPs in North Carolina shot it out in August 1941 after an argument over where blacks could sit in a military bus. A black private and white MP were killed. Racial confrontations between black fighting men and army security forces were so common that one could seriously question just whom the MPs were policing, all soldiers or just the dark ones.

After the war, black GIs came home with opened eyes and hearts full of pride. Those who had served in Europe had picked through the ruins of that continent's great nations, seen the respect and awe their skin inspired, and had proved, in ways they weren't allowed to in World War I, that blacks could fight for America as well as the next man. In Asia, battling against men with yellow skin, it was clear that one's complexion didn't determine one's ingenuity or bravery. It was also apparent to black soldiers that the racist taunts used by Americans to inflame emotion against the Japanese weren't very different from the curses shouted at them back home. Only a true Uncle Tom—and this

generation had its share—didn't see bigotry as a weapon of U.S. policy. It was also clear that if you really broke it down, whites didn't instinctively hate differently shaded humans; they were just as brainwashed as any kamikaze pilot. All that had to be done, some blacks thought, was to show whites what they were made of—and, yeah, be a credit to the race—and, God willing, they'd make it through.

It is crucial to the story that the practical examples of change cited here were ordered by the federal government. By executive order and changes of policy, Washington would, for the next twenty-five years, be increasingly sensitive to the desire of blacks for social change. Private industry, however, remained relatively immune to these decrees after the war, though tokenism flourished. And the idea of government support for black business was foreign then to whites as well as black leaders, who were blind to anything outside their integrationist goals.

Ironically, it was at this time, when the dream of an integrated postwar America began to flower, that the son of an Arkansas sharecropper founded a remarkable business based on serving the very special needs of segregated blacks. In 1942, John Johnson started a little magazine in Chicago, *Negro Digest*, that was well enough received to make him consider starting a black version of *Life*: a publication full of pictures that would present the many success stories in the national black community that whites found inconsequential. In November 1945, he inaugurated *Ebony*. The magazine sold for a quarter, and his black audience loved it. But advertisers were skeptical. The racist truism that blacks don't read was widely believed—as it is today by many editors in book publishing.

In *Ebony* lore, one key to the magazine's survival was a meeting between Johnson and Zenith president Eugene McDonald. The publisher sought the meeting after an informal survey of black Chicagoans, including his mother, revealed that most blacks who owned a radio had a Zenith. Johnson flattered McDonald with an autographed copy of a black explorer Matthew Henson's account of Admiral Robert Peary's journeys to the North Pole. He knew McDonald had traveled on one expedition with Peary. The ploy worked. At a crucial time in *Ebony*'s history, Johnson obtained ads from Zenith, both immediately enriching the magazine's bank account and stimulating other major advertisers to consider *Ebony* as a sales tool.

It could not have been more appropriate that radio ads started appearing in *Ebony* in the late 1940s. If you had electricity then—and a good many rural blacks didn't yet—a radio, Zenith or otherwise, was

the gateway to a world of rhythm & rhyme, blues and jokes, that had previously existed only in juke joints and barrelhouses, where local emcees and comics amused customers. Moreover, radio would be a catalyst for a major upheaval in the promotion, sales, and distribution of all popular music. Much was happening, all of it at the same time, all events affecting each other, all of it manifestations of the rhythm & blues world.

GOING THROUGH CHANGES

To see how the R&B world began, we need to double back a bit to the war years to see the profound effect they had on the record industry.

Following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the government halted the manufacture of record players, radios, and other consumer products requiring electronic components, as the war effort took priority. Shellac, the key ingredient in record manufacturing at the time, came from Japanese-controlled Singapore, so there wasn't much around. Yet the misery of the war increased Americans' desire to be entertained, and the music business, like the movie industry, boomed. In 1941, record sales were \$50 million. By 1945, they reached \$109 million, even though the quality of the pressings had deteriorated, since old records were being scrapped and then reused to satisfy the demand.

This rise was amazing in light of a deep philosophical and economic dispute in the industry. The American Federation of Musicians, the musicians' union, was rightfully fearful that the increasing use of records on radio would eventually put many members out of work, particularly since big bands relied on live broadcasts for so much of their revenue. On August 1, 1942, AFM president James C. Petrillo, in a desperate move, tried to stop progress. He ordered a recording ban, demanded that the record labels give musicians a royalty to compensate for lost revenues from recorded music, and pressured nightclubs to stop using jukeboxes. Records cut prior to the ban, plus some primarily vocal recordings and scattered boogie sessions (falsely said to have been recorded before the ban), made up the bulk of record releases during the next two years. Decca gave in first, signing a royalty agreement in 1943. Capitol settled soon after, but the big boys, Columbia and Victor (aka RCA), held out until 1944. So Petrillo won . . . sort of.

He could strike and get concessions. He couldn't, however, hold back the forces of economics and technology; nor could he channel audiences'

changing enthusiasms. The big-band era and the dominance of swing was over. For lonely GIs and equally lonely women at home, the sentimentality of Frank Sinatra, Peggy Lee, Perry Como, and Nat King Cole was preferred to the frantic rhythms of Gene Krupa and the blasting trumpets of Harry James. Tastes had changed. During the strike, the big-band singers rose to prominence, overshadowing the bandleaders who first exposed them and establishing string-laden vocal recordings as the sound of white pop in the 1950s.

The big bands ran into other economic barriers as well. After the war everything cost more: gasoline, buses, hotel accommodations, and musicians' salaries. And the musicians themselves were changing. During the war those who'd avoided the service grew comfortable, lazy, and, according to accounts from the period, sloppy. Together these factors conspired to make many big-band leaders call it quits in 1946, including Benny Goodman, Woody Herman, Benny Carter, Tommy Dorsey, Les Brown, and Jack Teagarden. Some would later come back in some form to join the remarkably stable organizations of Ellington and Basie as caretakers for the once-vibrant sound of swing.

Creativity in improvisational music had moved in another direction, one that ensured exciting experiments and, ironically, one that enabled rhythm & blues to become the dominant dance music of postwar America.

Like Louis Jordan, a number of ambitious young musicians, including trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, saxophonist Charlie Parker, and pianist Thelonious Monk, were all big-band refugees. Congregating at Harlem's Minton's Playhouse and other uptown after-hours spots for jam sessions, they were quite consciously creating a new music known, in hep-cat lingo, as bebop. In its purest form, bebop is a complex, rapidly shifting small-group music (two horns, bass, drum, piano) that turned pop melodies into slivers of chords and rhythmic phrases. The rhythm didn't ride on the tom-tom or snare drum, where even poor dancers could find it, but flowed through every instrument. Sure, the drummer kept time, but usually only with a tense, jingling pattern on the cymbals that was impossible for most dancers to follow. This sound made bebop as much a listeners' music as anything heard at Carnegie Hall. Bebop differed from swing and rhythm & blues not just musically but in the players' attitude toward their audience. Cool, self-assured, and, despite widespread drug use among its stars, often dignified in appearance, beboppers made it plain they really didn't care if people—black squares as well as white—understood what they were playing. This was mu-

sicians' music, first and foremost. Only those who pledged allegiance to the musicians' brilliance, mesmerized by daredevil improvisations, were welcome.

The most extroverted bebop pioneer was Gillespie, who, with his beret, goatee, constant hep talk, and puffed cheeks when blowing, cut a slyly comic figure. He often clowned onstage, but unlike another great trumpeter, Louis Armstrong, Gillespie escaped an Uncle Tom tag by his ability to simultaneously laugh at his jokes yet maintain his dignity. Despite his humor, Gillespie, like Parker, Monk, and the others, took his music seriously and considered it art as high-minded and elitist as the Western classical music he both envied and despised. The bebop attitude overrode any lingering connection to the black show-business tradition that turned any cultural expression into a potentially lucrative career (though eventually that would happen to the beboppers as well). At this juncture in bebop history, its adherents found it a higher calling than mere entertainment. These musicians were less secular stars than quasi-religious figures, and their fans often referred to them with godly reverence.

For the masses of blacks, after bebop's emergence, jazz was respected, but in times of leisure and relaxation they turned to Louis Jordan and a blend of blues, jump blues, ballads, gospel, and a slew of sex-led instruments and fading black swing orchestras. General black taste in the 1940s can be sampled in Broadcast Music Inc.'s rhythm & blues awards. Decca's Jordan far outdistanced the competition, with one song in 1943 ("Five Guys Named Joe"), one in 1944 ("GI Jive"), two in 1945 ("Caledonia Boogie," "Mop Hop"), six, at the height of his popularity, in 1946 ("Beware Brother Beware," "Buzz Me," "Choo Choo Ch Boogie," "Don't Worry 'Bout That Mule," "Let the Good Times Roll," and "Stone Cold Dead in the Market" with Ella Fitzgerald), and four in 1947 ("Ain't Nobody Here But Us Chickens," "Boogie Woogie Blue Plate," "Early in the Morning," "Jack You're Dead"). In 1943 and 1944, large black orchestras led by instrumentalists showed strength (vibraphonist Lionel Hampton, saxmen Erskine Hawkins and Buddy Johnson, trumpeter Cootie Williams), while Nat King Cole, a singer with a crooning big-band vocal style, debuted. Change was quite evident from 1945 to 1947. The orchestras disappeared, replaced first by the rough, gravelly rural voices of Arthur (Big Boy) Crudup and Roosevelt Sykes, then by bluesmen with followings among newly arrived big-city blacks, and finally by smooth, blues-influenced crooners like Private Cecil Gant, Charles Brown, and Ivory Joe Hunter, as well as the astin-

gent tone of Dinah Washington. To some degree that last group of male singers was the black equivalent of the white ex-big-band vocalists (Gant was promoted as "the sephia Sinatra"), though they drew much more overtly on the blues than their white counterparts.

But in 1948 and 1949, there were no white equivalents of Wynonie Harris's "Good Rockin' Tonight" and "All She Wants to Do Is Rock" on King, two churning, driving records on which Harris was as brash and ballsy as a horny bull. There was no white equivalent of the Ravens' "Bye Bye Baby Blues" on Savoy, with its harmonies and lead-to-chorus interplay that embraced gospel call-and-response in a way the Mills Brothers and Ink Spots, the black harmony stars of the swing era, rarely attempted. There was no white equivalent of the half-crazed shouts, unintelligible words, and stomping beat of John Lee Hooker's "Boogie Chillen" and "Crawling Kingsnake" on Modern. And there was no white equivalent of the honking, stuttering tenor-sax-led hits of Big Jay McNeely ("Deacon's Hop") and Paul Williams ("The Hucklebuck") on Savoy, or the honky-tonk piano-based hits of Amos Milburn on Aladdin (five made the BMI list in 1949, including the raunchy "Chicken Shack Boogie"). The words were bluesy in tone and subject matter, but the rhythms and voices were fresh and new.

So were the labels that recorded, promoted, and distributed these records. Jordan, Cole, and the big bands recorded for large, nationally distributed companies such as Decca, Victor, and Capitol. However, all the new artists were signed to independent labels that began appearing during the war and would proliferate in the next seven years. While the majors had problems identifying the new music—MGM called it "ebony," Decca and Capitol preferred "sephia"—the new labels were rhythm & blues from the start, though bebop, country, electric blues, and gospel were all recorded by the new labels. In 1949, when *Billboard* changed the name of its black pop-music chart from "race" to "rhythm & blues," it wasn't setting a trend, but responding to a phrase and a feeling the independent labels had already made part of the vocabulary.

The biggest surprise on the indies list (see pp. 27–28) is that Los Angeles produced the largest number of significant R&B labels. Of the thirty companies, nine called Los Angeles home, including all those inaugurated in 1945. This resulted from an influx of blacks in Southern California, as GIs just back from Asia stayed on and Southern blacks, particularly those from Louisiana, Texas, and Oklahoma, found in sunny California a climate, both atmospherically and socially, more temperate than existed back home. In total about half a million blacks moved to

LABEL	OWNER	CITY
1942		
Savoy	Herman Lubinsky	Newark
Excelsior (became Exclusive in 1944)	Leon and Otis Rene	Los Angeles
1943		
Apollo	Ike and Bess Berman	New York
1944		
National	Al Greene	New York
Gulf-Gold Star	Bill Quinn	Houston
King	Syd Nathan	Cincinnati
1945		
Modern	Jules, Joe, and Saul Bihari	Los Angeles
Philco-Aladdin	Ed and Leo Mesner	Los Angeles
Bronze	Leroy Hurte	Los Angeles
Four Star	Richard Nelson	Los Angeles
Super Disc	Irving Feld, Viola Marsham	Los Angeles
1946		
Bulleit	Jim Bulleit	Nashville
Specialty	Art Rupe	Los Angeles
Mercury	Irving Green (president)	Chicago
1947		
Atlantic	Herb Abramson, Ahmet Ertegun	New York
Aristocrat-Chess	Leonard and Phil Chess	Chicago
1949		
Freedom	Saul Kaul	Houston
Macy's	Macy Lela Wood	Houston
Peacock	Don Robey	Houston
Imperial	Lew Chudd	Los Angeles

1950			
Trumpet	Willard and Lillian McMurry	Jackson, Mississippi	
1951			
Dor	Randy Wood, Gene Nobles	Gallatin, Tennessee	
Red Robin	Bobby Robinson	New York	
Nashboro-Ernie Y	Ernie Young	Nashville	
1952			
Duke	James Matias	Memphis	
Sun	Sam Phillips	Memphis	
Meteor	Lester Bihari	Los Angeles-Memphis	
Vee-Jay	James and Vivian Bracken, Calvin Carter	Chicago-Gary, Indiana	

Los Angeles and adjacent cities like Compton during the war years. Their presence made the area a rhythm & blues hot spot, though much of the music released on the Los Angeles indies came from those fertile musical tributaries, New Orleans and Memphis.

I wish it were surprising—but it isn't—that only one of the two Harlem-based labels, Bobby Robinson's Red Robin, was black-owned. Most indies were started by whites, many of them Jewish; blacks weren't the only people kept out of the American business mainstream by discrimination. Unwelcomed on Wall Street, many Jewish businessmen looked for places where there were fewer barriers to entrepreneurship. They often turned to black neighborhoods—in some ways paralleling blacks' discovery that their avenues for advancement were less barred in the world of entertainment. Only two of the black labels on my list, Don Robey's Peacock and family-owned Vee-Jay, would be major forces in the black market, and Vee-Jay was the only one to have a significant impact on the white market.

None of these companies would have had any impact whatsoever without the maturation of black radio. In St. Louis (KXLW), Atlanta (WERD), Louisville (WLOU), Memphis (WDIA), Los Angeles (KKRD), New Orleans (WYLD), Miami (WMBM), and Nashville

(WLAC), stations that programmed rhythm & blues, with additional shows catering to blues, gospel, and jazz depending on where they were located, began broadcasting. In addition, there were many programs in the late 1940s still being broadcast on the purchase deals of the past, with powerful deejays still working on two or three stations in a market, though that practice was fading. What was growing, however, was the impact of the deejays, some of whom were as exciting as the performers they promoted. As with the R&B labels, the overwhelming majority of black-oriented stations were white-owned (Atlanta's WERD was one important exception), but the deejays, not the owners, defined the stations and made them profitable. As we'll see, they were paid little relative to the revenues generated, and so they developed a host of hustles, from concert promotion to talent management to payola (pay-for-play). In the rhythm & blues world payola was as common as tacking posters to telephone poles to announce upcoming shows.

What was also accepted, and quite enthusiastically, was the presence of white deejays. Integration would have many unexpected side effects, one of which was the development of a group of whites who, like many in the Jazz Age, were fascinated with black music and black style. Unlike the contemporaries of Fitzgerald, these new Negrophiles embraced black culture to the point that they became "honorary" blacks and, in some cases, subject to the same discrimination as their dark role models. Johnny Otis, a Los Angeles resident of Greek descent, was one of the first of this breed. As a bandleader, songwriter, and talent scout, Otis was a real force in the Los Angeles scene. And in terms of promoting rhythm & blues, these black voices behind white faces would be more important than any single musician.

What follows are detailed discussions of the independent rhythm & blues labels, the black radio stations and the voices that made them, along with the mom-and-pop retail stores and live shows that combined to form the core of the rhythm & blues world.

R&B INDIES

Willard and Lillian McMurry were selling furniture in the late 1940s when Willard bought out a rival store in their hometown of Jackson, Mississippi. He asked his wife to sell off the merchandise while he decided what to do with the storefront. Inside she found a record player and some old 78s. One of them was by Wynonie Harris. Lillian decided

to give it a listen. "It had a great beat and the vocal was the most unusual, sincere, solid sound I'd ever heard," she told *Living Blues* years later. Selling Harris's jump blues, and spirituals by Mahalia Jackson and Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Lillian found the records went quickly and that her customers were asking for more.

On a tip to New Orleans she bought three hundred country, spiritual, and rhythm & blues recordings and they also sold out quickly. Admittedly bitten by the "phonorecord bug," Lillian got her husband to let her turn the storefront into a combination furniture store and record shop called Record Mart. Her father built shelves down one side of the store, and she began ordering from distributors in New Orleans and Memphis. Then she bought three hours of radio time a day on WRBC radio with "Ole Hep Cat," which was evidently the most listened-to show in Jackson. "We advertised the package deals, played the records, had guest artists, and sent out catalogues of records in our shop." The McMurrays also purchased time and provided free records to delays on WSL, WJXN, and WOKJ, all around Jackson. As a result, "mail orders [and] our over-the-counter business were booming and sometimes our helpers needed a pair of skates to wait on customers."

Eventually the McMurrays moved from selling music to recording it, and again, Lillian's curiosity led the way. One day she became fascinated by the sound of a black teen harmonizing in the listening booth along with a record by a vocal group. That was the beginning of Trumpet Records, a label that existed from only 1950 to 1955 but was the home of Elmore James's original version of the blues classic "Dust My Broom," and Sonny Boy Williamson's first recordings. Though Lillian expresses exasperation with the record industry—primarily because of the bootlegs from her catalogue that appeared around the world—the company's reputation for honest accounting and the fact that it continues to pay royalties to artists' heirs makes it one of the few indies whose integrity isn't questioned today.

The McMurrays and their contemporaries, men and women who often moved into music by accident, are part of the mythology of the industry. Their bright ideas and bad judgments are the standards by which the record industry still rates its progress and practices. The McMurrays dropped out early. Most of the other R&B indie founders of the early forties and fifties kept their hand in at least until the seventies, when the industry was reshaped by larger hands. Still, the music they commissioned and distributed would eventually change what America thought popular music should sound like.

The relationship between the artists and these capitalists was as complicated as any love affair between a couple of different color and class. The artists, who could be characterized as naïve country types or smart-ass city kids, saw in these embryonic record-makers a way to escape the "line syndrome" that confined black dreams: assembly line, picket line or unemployment line. There was no question in their minds that making records was the ticket to red Cadillacs, long, tall ladies (or lean, cool gents), and diamond pinky rings—the symbols of the ghetto hustler.

Blacks who knew better were rarely involved in show business and certainly with nothing as rough and uncultivated as the bluesy shouters, street-corner singers, and chugging rhythm sections of R&B. And the record-company owners knew better than to let on that things like song publishing or record royalties could produce long-term earnings. At first some owners didn't know it themselves. And who knew then that these songs "by niggers for niggers" would come to have a catalogue value as great as those of the Tin Pan Alley tunesmiths, that the refurbished blues and gospel music of the 1950s would live on and generate money decades into the future?

What they found out in the short term was that controlling the publishing rights of a song generated lots of money if white groups covered black hits. (This formula worked increasingly well as the decade went on; Pat Boone's Little Richard covers are only the most notorious. Neither label owners nor the artists had any sense of the future. All they knew was that a black market existed, and if you had the right singer and the right arranger and got it to the right delay, you couldn't lose. It didn't have to last. It probably wouldn't. No one cared about longevity. All it had to do was sell. Most of these record men were white, but in no way all. 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. Of course, not all of them were on the level, and even Booker T. Washington would have admitted that some black businessmen were dishonest or even incompetent. The stories of two very different black record men are representative of the period's attitude toward artists, music, and the business.

In his autobiography, Little Richard recalls complaining to Don Robey, the black founder and president of Duke-Peacock Records, about some unsatisfactorily small royalty payments. Instead of receiving a pack of lies—the usual answer from record men—he claims that Robey, a big, burly, light-skinned bear of a man, reared back and punched him in

the chest so hard Richard sustained a hernia. Even in the world of rhythm & blues, it was highly unusual for a label owner to attack a performer. Yet no one who knew the man disputes that Robey might well have knocked down the self-proclaimed king of rock & roll.

Robey wouldn't have struck him because of the thievery accusation but because the singer cursed him. Don Robey was not a man you cursed in person. In fact, most folks avoided disputes with him. Suspected of all manner of wrongdoing (prostitution, numbers-running, gambling), Robey's reputation usually preceded him. "He was just like a character out of *Gyps and Dolls*," an engineer told *Rolling Stone*. "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."

Gangster or not, Robey was a major presence in the world of black Houston. He ran a taxi company, owned the Bronze Peacock Club, which boasted one of the largest showrooms in the Southwest, and as a result, got involved in talent management, tour-bookings, and record-manufacturing. A decade before Berry Gordy's ascendance in Detroit, Robey was a successful black record executive, though his road to success was quite different.

In 1949 Robey opened Peacock Records to record Clarence (Gate-mouth) Brown, a blues singer and guitarist; after Robey objected to contract terms offered by the Los Angeles-based Aladdin label. In 1952, Robey bought Duke Records from Memphis deejay James Mattias. Together the combined labels would be important homes for gospel and rhythm & blues into the 1970s, recording the Five Blind Boys and Dixie Hummingbirds for churchgoers and seminal R&B stars Willie Mae (Big Mama) Thornton, Johnny Ace, and Bobby (Blue) Bland for sinners. Through his affiliation with Buffalo Booking Agency, he would also become a potent booking agent as well, dominating the business in the Southwest.

To Dave Clark, who'd worked for Robey as a staff promotion man in 1952, he was someone to be idolized. Robey, after all, bought Clark his first \$500 suit. "He was one of the greatest black record manufacturers who ever lived," says Clark. "A lot of black companies went out of business, a lot of label presidents ended up poor. Don Robey ended his life a very rich man."

Given the tales of rip-offs by rhythm & blues entrepreneurs, white and black, some might consider Dave's comments more condemnation than praise. Robey was a pioneer who gave black talent a shot, a black surviving in a racist industry. Robey, like the Chess Brothers in Chicago,

Herman Lubinsky at Savoy, and others, took the economic risks. They took the gamble. They deserved to benefit. No question.

But did they benefit to the detriment of their artists? Clark's comments about artists reflect an attitude held by Robey and many other label owners. "Some of the artists didn't tend to be too smart; some of them were so smart they outsmarted themselves. Back in those days a guy would go out and make him a record. First thing you know he wanted a Cadillac. Don Robey said, 'All right, I'll get the Cadillac, but you got to pay me just like you got to pay the Man.' And when royalty time came, you ain't made enough money out of the record to pay for your Cadillac. Guys would come get \$4,000 to \$5,000 at a time. You see, all the artists wanted to be big shots. They all wanted big cars. They all wanted fine clothes and everything that went with it."

No one ever accused Robey's operation of sentiment. After Johnny Ace's death by Russian roulette backstage at a Dallas auditorium in 1954, Robey, in a practice standard in the industry, released a number of posthumous singles, including the million-selling "Pledging My Love." The last of these, "Still Love You So," was advertised in the trade press in 1956 with the debut of a singer named, quite suspiciously, Buddy Ace. The ad copy read, "Complete your collection with his last record of the late great Johnny Ace. Start your collection with the first record release of this up and coming artist." Clearly the artist was some poor guy Robey had cajoled into recording as "Buddy Ace" to exploit Johnny Ace's continuing popularity. Under the name of Deadric Malone, Robey "wrote" hundreds of songs, recorded by his artists, though it is more likely Robey purchased the songs. His creativity lay more in finance than melody. "Shit, Robey didn't write any of them," Bobby Bland told Peter Guralnick in *Lost Highway*. "He got them from—well, there used to be a lot of writers who went through there. No, he didn't steal them! They always got what they asked for"—probably small cash advances.

Despite an unsavory reputation, Robey was a businessman of considerable foresight. Dave Clark was a crucial cog in his operation. So was musical director Joe Scott, who supervised Bland's great recordings. His chief lieutenant at Duke-Peacock, however, was a black woman named Evelyn Johnson. Their agency, Buffalo Booking, was registered with the American Federation of Musicians in her name, and when it came to day-to-day operations at the offices, it was Johnson, not Robey, who made decisions. She'd had to pass on her ambition to become an X-ray technician when Texas state officials refused to let her take the

state boards. Instead she became a jack-of-all-trades. She supervised the building of one of Houston's first recording studios and one of the nation's first black-owned record-pressing plants. Throughout the next two decades, she ran Buffalo Booking, organizing national tours for its clients. With the combination of Robey, Johnson, and Clark, whose expertise in this area was extensive, if you even smelled like a hit, Buffalo Booking would get to work. From St. Louis over to Atlanta, down the coast to Miami and New Orleans again, and then back over to Houston, Buffalo Booking dominated the Southern wing of the chitlin circuit. Consistent sellers like Bland and B. B. King easily did over three hundred dates a year.

Robey's domain extended deeply into gospel. In the early fifties, Peacock's recording of the Five Blind Boys' "Our Father" was one of the first gospel recordings to find its way onto jukeboxes. In a 1973 *Record* interview Robey took credit for "putting the beat in religious records. I was highly criticized when I started it, but I put in the first drum into it. Then a guitar, then a trombone." Whether or not you believe Robey's claim, it is true that his label released records that led gospel music closer to its secular cousins.

Don Robey built an empire worth millions in a city far removed from the main line of entertainment. Yet his geographical location worked in his favor. Robey was a big fish in a pond that hadn't held any that big before. He released music—bluesy rhythm & blues (Ace, Bland) and gospel (Blind Boys, Inez Andrews)—that had its strongest following in the states nearest his operations, while his holdings in records, clubs, and booking fed off each other, insuring a steady cash flow.

Meanwhile Harlem, home of the Apollo Theater and so many young creative talents, the magnet for Afro-America's brightest talents, never had a black-owned operation of comparable stature, though one man might have built one. Bobby Robinson was Harlem's best-known record-store owner, as well as musical entrepreneur. A small man with sad, sleepy eyes and a slippery way with English, at one time or another he had Gladys Knight and the Pips and King Curtis under contract, a fruitful relationship with New Orleans's greatest writer-producer, Allen Toussaint, involvement with several number-one pop and black hits as a producer-writer, and the respect of so many of his competitors that a pilgrimage to his Harlem record store were almost mandatory for any trip to New York. Yet one can't help but view Robinson as a man who

missed opportunities. Disliking the Little Richard-style vocal of young Otis Redding, Robinson passed on "Shout Bamalama." A year later Redding was a star. In the eighties, Robinson recorded Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five before the breakthrough his "Freedom" and "The Message" on Sugar Hill.

Despite his Harlem location and hyperactive career, expectation outstripped his accomplishments. Central to Robinson's story is his role as a record-store owner. In 1946 he opened Bobby's Records, on 125th Street near the corner of St. Nicholas Avenue, a location that put him between the Apollo and the entertainment-business hangout Frank's Place. His store quickly became the place entertainers and record executives stopped in to monitor sales and get an early hearing of competing cuts. In 1951 he formed his first label, Red Robin, and over the next ten years it would be joined by Enjoy, Everlast, Fire, and Fury. Wilbert Harrison's "Kansas City" in 1959, Lee Dorsey's "Ya Ya," and Gladys Knight and the Pips' "Every Beat of My Heart" were Robinson's best-known releases.

Perhaps most emblematic of what Robinson tried to accomplish were his doo-wop recordings, beginning in 1951. "I gathered what little information I could and began producing doo-wop groups," he told David Toop. "There were a couple of groups out there at the time—the Orioles and the Ravens. The Ravens were a jump-type rhythm & blues thing. They were the forerunners of the doo wops. I got some groups together. We didn't have anyplace to rehearse, so what I did was close the record store early, at 11 AM, lock the door, and rehearse right inside. The first group was the Mellow Moods—a standard tune, 'Where Are You Now That I Need You.' I started to get very good success immediately. Once you start, everybody starts to run to you, so then followed the Vocaleers, the Scarlets, the Teenchords. Altogether I introduced about thirteen or fourteen groups in that category."

There are few more romantic images in popular culture than that of a group of young black teenagers, gathered on a corner under a streetlight, in the hallway of a tenement building, or in the entrance to a subway, working on sugary harmonies balanced by a low strident bass. Then, after a tryout in the office of a neighborhood record company, they slide nervously into a studio to make a record. . . . Like the frenzied rhythms of bebop and the rambling, rapid-fire exhortations of the R&B deejays, doo wop was a unique outgrowth of postwar black America. But without the arrogance of the jazzmen or the salesmanship of the announcers, doo wop represented a form of innovative innocence. There

were flashes of urban anger in it—sometimes the sweet tenor lead and the rumbling bass support bounced off each other in sardonic commentary on the sentimentality of the music's ultraromantic lyrics. But by and large doo wop projected the warmth and optimism of its young singers. To this day the sound of a doo-wop record from this period, be it an acknowledged classic or some obscure oldie, connotes vivid and remarkably unsullied images of urban adolescence.

Just think of the names. As Britain's *New Music Express* remarked, "The bird groups multiplied like rabbits, soon to be joined by insects, flowers, and automobiles." Penguins, Flamingos, Crows, Ravens, Orioles, Clovers, and Gladiolas met Cadillacs, El Dorados, Edsels, Impalas, Fleetwoods, Cardinals; tons more made records as memorable as your first kiss and then disappeared from the scene.

The Vocaleers, signed to Robinson's Red Robin label, are a typical doo-wop tale of here and gone. They came from 145th Street between Lenox and Seventh avenues, had a number-eight rhythm & blues hit with "Is It a Dream?" in 1953, and cut a doo-wop collector's favorite called "Be True." Robinson first heard the Vocaleers when they came in second at the Apollo amateur night. Street-corner historians say the group was as popular in Harlem then as Jackie Robinson and Willie Mays. Yet not a year after their hit the Vocaleers were no more—split up over ego problems and lead-vocal duties, whatever magic they possessed gleaned today only from dusty 45s and the memories (or myths) of doo-wop fanatics.

Neither Robinson nor any of the doo-wop capitalists, such as George Goldner in New York, Rainbow's Eddie Heller in Washington, or Dootone's Dootsie Williams in Los Angeles, considered artist development. All they thought about was capturing the moment. They recorded singers at a pace that suggested the market was going to evaporate the next day. For Robinson this inability—or was it unwillingness?—to invest in an artist for the long term dogged his career. No enduring stars did their best work under any of his logos. It was sad, but certainly typical for R&B business people. Robinson simply didn't realize the durability of his products. This failure is a reason one man who once asked him for advice came to overshadow Robinson on his own turf.

INNOVATIVE ATLANTIC

Ahmet Ertegun, originally with Herb and Miriam Abramson, brother Nesuhi, and later Jerry Wexler, made Atlantic Records one of the class acts of rhythm & blues. They paid royalties, though offering notoriously low advances. They were loyal. (For example, after Ruth Brown signed with them in 1949 she was seriously injured in an auto accident and was unable to record anything for almost a year. Yet wisely their interest in her didn't fade.)

By and large, during its years as one of R&B's most important labels (roughly from 1950 into the mid-1970s), Atlantic was extremely sensitive to shifts in black musical taste. In fact, this white-owned company was often on the cutting edge of new directions. The owners, particularly Ertegun in the 1950s and Wexler in the 1960s, would be given—and readily accepted—credit for the creative vision behind Atlantic's sound and success. Yet it was never that simple there or at any of the other prominent black-oriented indies. Leonard Chess of Chess Records could claim he knew everything about the blues, but it was bassist Willie Dixon whose musical judgments would be crucial to the recordings of Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, and Muddy Waters. At Duke-Peacock, Don Robey, one way or another, supplied the material, but if you ask Bland, it was trombonist and house arranger Joe Scott who gave his music its haunting pathos. At King Records in Cincinnati, everybody knew about Syd Nathan and his cigars but few recognized that arranger Henry Glover was critical to actually making the music happen in the studio.

At Atlantic, the man to remember during the 1950s was Jesse Stone, together with a great house band that gave the green, red, and white label its first aural identity. Stone was no kid seeking a break when he began working with Atlantic in 1947, but a seasoned show-biz veteran. At age four Stone had put on a dog act; he sang and played violin and the dogs jumped around his feet. The teenaged Stone hung around the wide-open Kansas City of corrupt Democratic boss Tom Pendergast in the 1920s, an era that spawned the swinging Southwest big bands. As a pianist and vocalist, he organized a band backed by a female vocal group, the Rhythm Debs. At a Detroit gig, Duke Ellington took a liking to Stone and got him booked at the Cotton Club. Hanging around New York, Stone landed a \$15-a-week job as a musical handyman at the Apollo, helping Pigmeat Markum add songs and on occasion even jokes to his routine, while updating the house band's book of arrangements.

He cut some swing sides in the 1930s, and then met Cole Porter just before the war. The famous songwriter advised him to purchase a rhyming dictionary, noting, "If you're gonna dig a ditch, you use a shovel, don't you?" Stone, a good friend of Louis Jordan, was one of those who encouraged him to form his own band, even before Chick Webb's death in 1938.

In 1942 Stone's composition "Idaho" became a national hit when Benny Goodman recorded it for Columbia. With Herb Abramson, Stone worked for Al Greene's National Records in 1945. Both felt Greene didn't understand blacks or their music enough to market it properly. So they left to start their own label. However, it wasn't until they ran into Ertegun and his money that they were able to realize their ambitions. (Or at least Abramson did, since he was made a partner, while Stone was put on salary.)

In fact, the music needed Stone or someone like him to understand its innovations and give it form. The crucial period for Stone and Atlantic was apparently a 1947 trip down South by Ertegun, Abramson, and Stone to study the taste their previous New York-created recordings weren't reaching. It was a trip that established the tradition of Atlantic looking to the South for talent and direction. "The kids were looking for something to dance to," Stone told Nick Tosches. "I listened to the stuff that was being done by those thrown-together bands in the joints, what was missin' from the stuff we were recording was the rhythm. All we needed was a bass line." Stone's "doo, da-doo, dum, doo, da-doo, dum" became associated with Atlantic and rocking rhythm blues. Moreover, Stone's observation that bass lines were key in changing the face of black music ties in with the coming of electric bass guitars.

In the hands of master swing bassists such as Oscar Pettiford or Count Basie's Walter Page, the bass line was a gentle stream that flowed well under the ensemble brass and reed lines that dominated the big-band style. But when Leo Fender gave Monk Montgomery a prototype for his bass guitar in 1953, he more than improved the basic sound. The electric bass forever altered the relationship between the rhythm section, the horns, and other melodic instruments. To Quincy Jones, who at the time was splitting his arranging skills between big band, jazz, and pop, "It really changed the sound of music because it ate up so much space. Its sound was so imposing in comparison to the upright bass, so it couldn't have the same function. You couldn't just have it playing 4/4 lines because it had too much personality. Before the electric bass and the electric guitar, the rhythm section was the support section, backing

up the horns and piano. But when they were introduced, everything upstairs had to take a back seat. The rhythm section became the stars. All because of this technological development. The old style didn't work anymore and it created a new language"—a language first spoken by a bassist in a black dance band.

When Lionel Hampton's rocking band played, a raunchy aggregation like Jordan's Tympany Five, they jumped the blues into a frenzy. The electric bass had a punchy, dynamic range that would become identified with rhythm & blues. Moreover R&B musicians' willingness to integrate new technology into their vision would make their sound, despite its many detractors, as consistently innovative as any genre of American music in the coming years. The patterns of Stone and others, in conjunction with the increased use of the electric bass in the fifties, would turn this country's ears around.

The first artist Stone cites as recording with the new rhythm pattern was saxophonist Frank Culley, on a tune called "Cole Slaw" (Stone claims it was actually an adaptation of his 1942 composition "Sorghum Switch"). Culley's instrumental version didn't hit, but Louis Jordan, after adding some suitably humorous lyrics, made "Cole Slaw" a hit in 1949. Stone even cut a version himself for RCA/Victor. Culley, saxophonist Sam (the Man) Taylor, and, later, King Curtis, along with pianist Harry Van Walls and drummer Panama Francis (both of whom played on "Cole Slaw"), would become the backbone of Atlantic's house band. Under Ertegun's guidance and Stone's intimate direction, these players appeared on the label's first series of rhythm & blues hits. The Drifters' "Money Honey," the Clovers' "Your Cash Ain't Nothin' But Trash," Joe Turner's "Shake, Rattle and Roll"—some of the best were Stone compositions. Ertegun and company deserve the acclaim they've received for surviving into the corporate era. But the men in the studios always need to be given the utmost respect for the ideas and spirit they injected into the grooves.

BLACK RADIO

In 1950, for keeping the Arabs and Jews from killing each other in Palestine, Ralph Bunche won the Nobel Prize, the first black so honored. That same year poet Gwendolyn Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize for her collection *Annie Allen*, the first time that award was given to a black writer. It seemed like the word "Negro" couldn't be used in the news

without the word "first" being attached to it. Blacks were making strides in quieter ways as well. The research of black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier revealed that in 1953 blacks owned one-third of their dwellings—an increase of two-thirds over 1940, while 74,526 blacks attended universities, up from 17,880 in 1930. Tuskegee Institute reported that 1952 was the first time in seventy-one years of tabulation that there were no lynchings.

Yet behind the positive news items were reports that showed racial violence had hardly disappeared. Illinois governor Adlai Stevenson called out the National Guard to the Chicago suburb of Cicero, where 3,500 or so blazing rednecks tried to stop (and lynch?) a black family with the guns to believe they could live anywhere they pleased. It wasn't called lynching when Harry T. Moore of the Florida NAACP was killed and his wife injured after someone left a bomb in their home—but damned if he wasn't still dead. It didn't make headlines in the white press or the news breaks of black radio, but the old evils of sharecropping, Jim Crow, and dependency on whites were giving way in the postwar years to new ones: welfare, drug addiction, and urban police brutality. This demographic shift to the cities brought one more big change, which would become essential to the development of R&B. Now Negroes, the people once invisible to white America as so artfully depicted in Ralph Ellison's 1952 masterpiece, *Invisible Man*, became objects of attention and, in the eyes of manufacturers, a market worth exploiting.

In the mid-1950s, *Harper's* ran an article on "Negro radio," cowritten by a then-unknown black writer named Alex Haley, that bought black radio's impact, culturally and economically, into focus. The future bestselling author made four points: radio helped black as well as white businesses reach potential buyers; helped blacks know where they could shop without fear of harassment; provided prestigious jobs for blacks; and provided outlets for community service announcements by civic and church groups. Points one and two can be illustrated by sampling trade advertising from the period.

Coinciding with the emergence of a vast number of indie labels was the growth of black radio. "Serving and selling 328,000 Negroes in the St. Louis area since 1947," proclaimed WXLW in the early 1950s. At the same time, WOKJ of Jackson, Mississippi, let everybody know: "The ONLY way to the 107,000 Negroes" of that community was the "nation's highest Hooper-rated Negro station." The sales staff of Memphis's

powerful 50,000-watt WDIA weren't shy about the fact that they reached 1,237,686 Negroes (10 percent of all black Americans) and that Negroes constitute 40 percent of the Memphis market.

In December 1947, *Ebony* found only sixteen blacks employed as deejays out of an estimated three thousand around the country. "Most of the sepiia spielers who operate on twenty-one stations from coast to coast are relative neophytes, catching the crest of a boom that has skyrocketed the chatter chaps to a new peak," the magazine reported. "Hired in recent months because they're good business, colored jockeys have been catching on fast, drawing flocks of fan mail and getting better sponsors. They have been as popular as the records they play—and no small number are by Negro artists." Eight had a show-business background, and nine were college graduates. *Ebony* made it a point to note that few can be "identified as Negro on the air, even getting anti-Negro notes assuming them to be white. . . . Discovery that a voice has no color has opened new vistas to Negroes in radio." Following the model of Jack Cooper, these announcers passing for whites tended to be conservative in their programming choices, leaning as heavily on Count Basie and Sarah Vaughan as on their vowels.

One man *Ebony* mentioned, but only in passing, would become one of the most influential black deejays of all time. But it shouldn't be surprising that *Ebony* made little note of Al Benson's style, since he was just the sort of character any self-respecting upwardly mobile black would view as a discredit to the race. "His distressing grappling with words over two syllables once brought laughs of derision from many, but they could not laugh away his ability to reach out across the air and win vast audiences of listening Negro women and teenage girls," wrote one black publication in the fifties. "Even today one of the big questions in Chicago radio circles is: 'How does that Al Benson continue to get away with it?'"

At his peak Benson, aka the Midnight Gambler, hosted five shows and twenty hours of programming a week, earning as much as \$100,000 a year in the process. Eddie O'Jay, a young deejay in the early fifties in Milwaukee, recalls, "Benson killed the King's English and I don't know if he did it on purpose or not. Everybody had to see Al if they wanted to sell to the black market in Chicago, whether it was beer or rugs or Nu Nile hair cream. . . . He wasn't pretending to be white. He sounded black. They knew he was and most of us were proud of the fact. 'Here's a black voice coming out of my little radio and we know it's him.'"

The lessons Benson taught about the appeal and profitability of his "black everyman" style were adopted all over the country, ushering in the era of the "personality deejays."

By 1955 there were over five hundred of Benson's children floating across the country on transistorized clouds, hawking records from far-away stores, along with stuff to make your wife two or three shades lighter, even if she looked good to you already. The ads never distracted listeners from the music but could sound as wild and greasy and cool as the platters played alongside. From Mexico to Canada, on little stations that went off at dusk to 50,000-wattars, these cats rocked right through the static.

A listener up on his black history might have realized that these nighttime motor mouths were very much the inheritors of the black oral tradition that spawned Br'er Rabbit, Mr. Mojo, and the other rural tricksters created by Afro-Americans during their forced vacation in the "New World." Yet for all the cornpone some laid on listeners, they were often as urban as the corner of Lenox and 125th Street. With music as their inspiration, personas and rhymes were concocted with a smile and endless ingenuity. For many, bebop, because of its rhythmic instinct and rebellious style, was a verbal starting point.

Lavada Dust, who surely with great happiness called himself Dr. Hep Cat while at Austin's KVVET, made the bebop-deejay connection with this couplet:

If you want to hip to the tip and bop to the top,
You get some made threads that just won't stop.

As I said earlier, it became clear early on that bebop wasn't a dancing (or mass-radio listening) style, yet there are many examples of deejays who played lots of rhythm & blues embracing its polysyllabic beauty. For example, New York's Jocko Henderson, aka the Ace from Space, often referred to bebop during on-air raps on his "1260 Rocket" broadcast:

*Be bebop
This is your Jock
Back on the scene
With a record machine,
Saying "Hoo-popsie-doo, How do you do?"
When you up, you up,*

*And when you down, you down
And when you mess with Jock,
You upside down.*

Coining phrases was an integral part of the mystique of the rhythm & blues deejays. The resourceful Henderson came up with, "Great gunga mugga shooga booga," which became part of New York slang.

It was the deejays' roles as trendsetters and salesmen, both of themselves and of the music, that made them essential to the growth of rhythm & blues. Gary Byrd, a current radio and television announcer, remembers watching veteran deejay Wild Bill Curtis as he pushed a now-forgotten Drifters' single, "We Gotta Sing," Byrd says:

First he'd be playing the music and he'd slow everything down and start talking. And he'd tell the story of how this record came into his hands. And he would go into a story about these guys who he had met sometime ago back in the days they were unknown and the guys turned out to be the Drifters and . . . blah, blah, blah, their new record and boom, boom, boom, first in the world to play their record. The record would come on. Well, as the record is playing, he'd be punctuating it with an "Ohh" at all the critical points where the excitement was. Then when he'd finish it, he'd go into this whole thing of "It's so bad, it's so bad. Oh, I just don't believe it." While he's talking he's recuing the record. At the end when he's finished he says, "And then one more time." Ironically it was kind of like a forerunner of the whole idea of extending the record which occurred later, on the disco trip. He was just extending the groove. And then the phones would start lighting up and people were saying, "What is that record? Can I get it?" And the record stores would be calling because people are calling them asking, "Do they have this record that was just played on WUFO by the Drifters?"

A bunch of these flashy pioneers dubbed themselves the Original 13, forming the core of an old-boy network capable of making or breaking hits. Jockey Jack Gibson, Jack (the Bell Boy) Lorenz, Larry Dean, Ed Cook, Bill Powell, Ken Knight, Gene Potts, Hot Rod Hubert, John (Honey Boy) Hardy, Jimmy Woods, Hal Jackson, Tommy (Dr. Jive) Smalls, and Spider Burke are usually remembered as the charter members, though Ed Castleberry's name is sometimes included. While the original lineup grows more elusive with time, these men, black and

white, constituted the core of the first wave of great rhythm & blues decays to follow Benson.

By looking at the career of one, Jack Gibson, we'll get a flavor of the attitude and life-style of these men. Light-skinned, quick-witted, and strong-willed, Gibson was the son of a Chicago physician and, as such, benefited from a quality education and stable family background. Gibson's introduction to radio came at all-black Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, where, at his father's urging, he was preparing for a degree in medicine. Gibson thought he wanted to be a gynecologist.

Then he met a clever classmate who'd devised a small transmitter capable of broadcasting to the Lincoln dorms. He asked the outgoing Gibson if he wanted to be an announcer. When Gibson quickly realized how much he enjoyed life behind the microphone (and the attention it generated), his medical ambitions faded. Upon graduation in 1944, he moved back to Chicago, seeking work as an actor. Radio dramas then still dominated the American imagination and offered black actors a unique opportunity to work in a medium where color was not an obstacle. Gibson landed steady work on pre-TV soap operas like "Young Widow Brown" and "Ma Perkins," as well as "Here Comes Tomorrow," a radio drama about the black Redmon family that was a liberal attempt to humanize blacks for white listeners. Looking back Gibson says, "I played a postman one day, a teacher the next, or maybe a bank clerk. Whatever the author wrote and sometimes things he did not." He was a natural ad-libber, a gift that troubled his superiors but would be the key to his future. A representative of Auto Dealers Outlet, a Chicago used-car operation and regular advertiser on the Windy City's CBS affiliate, WBBM, was in the studio's green room and happened to hear Gibson satirically imitating the commercial pitch of another announcer over an open mike. The auto dealer was keen on reaching South Side blacks, and in Gibson he heard an effective pitchman. Between two later stars of television, Gary Moore and Dave Garroway, Gibson hosted an hour long program for \$65 a week, playing swing, jump blues, and bebop when not pushing "no money down, pay later" specials.

Jack's work in Chicago led a group of black Atlanta businessmen to contact him in 1949 when they raised the money to start WERD, the country's first black-owned radio station. He boasts, "I'm proud to have been the jock who flipped the switch at 6 AM on a brisk October morning in 1949 and greeted the day with a hearty 'Good morning, Atlanta! We are here! . . . We are here! . . . We really didn't know what the hell

we were doing, but we were doing it! I would plunk down my nickel every day for the Atlanta *Daily World*, the black newspaper there, and during our newsmagazine at noon, I would read all of the stories that pertained to Atlanta. We had no format, so to speak, and we would listen to a white station in Atlanta and copy their format. Whatever they did on Monday we did, in our own soulful way, on Tuesday, and so on and so on. We even had a Sunday afternoon symphony. I hosted it because I was the only one who could pronounce the names of most of the classical artists that we played."

Jack moved to Louisville's WLOU in 1951, and there he made his contribution to R&B decay lore. Inspired by his proximity to the Kentucky Derby and the city's devotion to horse racing, Gibson had the jockey outfitter Giuseppe make him some custom jockey silks. Working alone or occasionally with a female jock known as Louisville Lou, Gibson gained a national reputation and a loyal local listenership. He signed on with a bugle blast while shouting, "My father wasn't a jockey, but he sure taught me how to ride. He said in the middle, then from side to side. Ride, Jockey Jack, ride." His sign-off was: "The white rug is down and I'm getting ready to split. You be cool till I get back in with you tigers tomorrow." Then he'd growl.

In 1952 Gibson moved up the ladder and farther South when he was named program director of Miami's new WMBM. He was elated by the title, the extra money it meant, and the opportunity it offered to hang around the pool at the Lord Calvert Hotel—the only class hotel in town to register blacks—interviewing visiting stars like Nat King Cole, Billie Holiday, and Sammy Davis, Jr. He recalled gleefully to Lee Ivory, "I would interview stars who fed me drinks until I couldn't see the hand in front of my face. I ad-libbed most of the commercials because there was no way that I could read the copy."

"I had a chance to make an extra \$25 a week promoting a beer product in the days when you could give away anything on radio. Balantine Ale distributors had dropped off ten cases of the stuff at the station and I was on the air rapping to beat Billy about what joyous partying would be available if you came and picked up an absolutely free case of Balantine, the three-ring beer that's right for you. Man, the causeway was jammed in both directions. People of all races and ethnic origins in cars and trucks of every make you can imagine were clogging arterial streets in an effort to get to the WMBM office to pick up their ale. It took the police almost an hour to get from the main highway to the station door

where in less than ten minutes they were handcuffing me and WMBM's station manager, who was white, and taking our asses to the slammer for creating a public disturbance. Busted my ass right on the air."

Gibson was lured back to WERD in 1954 as program director, where, with the approval of the station's management, he became a community activist. "In Atlanta I was so involved that I became close friends with the chief of police," he says. "Anytime they had a disturbance in the ghetto he would call me. I would get on the air and tell them to stop or sure as hell the police would come in to whip some heads. Soon as my airtime was over I'd come into the neighborhood and act as a mediator to help settle the problem. As I went through the neighborhood a woman might holler out, 'I got your favorite meal, butter beans.' I'd go on up there and break bread with her family. Any of the personality jocks could have done the same thing in their community. If you're going to be successful in black radio you must belong to the community. You couldn't stay hidden. You couldn't be just a voice."

During Gibson's second stint in Atlanta, until 1958, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., emerged out of the shadows of his father at the Ebenezer Baptist Church to become a national leader. The offices of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were located downstairs from WERD and, according to Gibson, King "would holler upstairs to me when he had an important or timely announcement to make. I would lower the microphone out of my window and down to his office so he could make his statement. Afterward I'd pull the mike back upstairs, add my two-cents worth of commentary to the importance of Dr. King's work, then return to my programming."

Because of the delays' visibility, young musicians also flocked to Gibson and company. The delays' willingness to search out new talent—for financial remuneration, of course—was an essential part of their contribution to the music. Zenas (Daddy) Sears, the popular white rhythm & blues deejay on Atlanta's WGST, started a series of weekly talent contests in 1946 in conjunction with his broadcast. A soft-spoken, hard-drinking local singer-songwriter named Chuck Willis emerged as the star of these shows. The deejay, along with a local record-store owner, brought Willis to Columbia's black-oriented Okeh subsidiary, where he would record forty sides over the next five years. During that time Sears acted as Willis's manager and, through his broadcast connections, got the singer his own television show in Atlanta where, according to Sears, "we did little dramatic things. I would write the show with a little story and Chuck would do five or six numbers every

week." At the suggestion of the flamboyant Screamin' Jay Hawkins, who often started his show by leaping out of a coffin, Willis wore a turban on stage, adding a touch of flash to a prematurely balding entertainer who Sears admits was a better songwriter than performer. "Don't Deceive Me," "I Feel So Bad," "It's Too Late," and "Hang Up My Rock & Roll Shoes" are among his best-known compositions, songs that Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, Otis Redding, the Band, and Charlie Rich have since recorded. However, Sears's discovery didn't enjoy his biggest hit until he'd left the deejay's management, signed with Atlantic, and recorded the old Ma Rainey blues standard "C. C. Rider" in 1957. That year on "American Bandstand," Dick Clark used Willis's recording to spotlight a new dance called the stroll. Instantly he became the king of the stroll. A year later Willis was killed in a car crash just outside Atlanta.

Roy Hamilton, a big-voiced baritone, became a popular rhythm & blues crooner when he convinced black Newark deejay Bill Cook to handle his career. In 1953 Cook broadcast nightly over WAAT from 10 PM to 1 AM from a night spot called the Caravan Club. In *Soul Survivor* magazine, Cook gave a colorful account of their first meeting. It shows how self-important the delays became and how, when monetarily motivated, they utilized their clout:

One night, sitting there in the Caravan Club with a bunch of ladies, both black and white, and trying to be impressive—sometimes you get to play the big shot when you become number one in your field—I saw this big tall boy come walking in, with his off-color shoes, off-color tie, suspenders that buttoned on the outside of his pants—a peculiar thing to behold. But he was handsome and very broad shouldered. He stood there for a long time and I asked him what he wanted. He said he was a singer and he'd like to do a song for me. The ladies were looking at his big broad shoulders, he was so young and full of vinegar. I asked him what kind of songs he knew and he said he knew some popular songs. Believe it or not, he only had two or three songs he knew other than spirituals.

Hamilton did know a pop standard called "You'll Never Walk Alone," but it wasn't until the ladies kept paying attention to him and "he wouldn't go away" that Cook got the house band to back him. Hamilton opened his mouth and, Cook recalls, "it was a libido thrill. So exciting.

He didn't need a band, his voice was so booming big that he had to move away from the microphone."

Duly impressed, Cook used some favors owed him to get Epic Records, a Columbia sister label, to sign Hamilton with the stipulation that he, not the label, would pick the release date for the first single. Cook chose January 4, 1954, eleven days before the traditional influx of records to start a new year. Tapping into his radio contacts Cook was able to create real excitement for "You'll Never Walk Alone" in the New York area. He told *Soul Survivor*:

WNHR in Union, New Jersey, had just come into being, and I went out there and asked the program director, George Hudson, if he would agree to interview Roy Hamilton and play the record every hour on the hour. He heard it and agreed, and the fellows out there played Roy Hamilton every hour on the hour. When they went off the air in the evening, I picked it up on my program. I played it every half hour and interviewed him. Then, on WHOM in New York, Willie Bryant agreed to pick it up on his "Willie and Ray Show" at two in the morning, and we rushed over there by car so that we could go on during their last hour, from two to three. Finally, there was this station WOY that broadcast from the Palm Cafe with Sugar Ray Robinson's sister on a show called "Daybreak" and she played him every half hour until daybreak."

It is not surprising then that Hamilton's first single was a hit, establishing him as a recording artist and starting a career that lasted into the sixties.

Pulling together all these strains of rhythm & blues radio—its flamboyance, ability to make hits, and community involvement—was Memphis's WDIA, one of the seminal postwar black broadcast outlets. It came on the air in 1948, after a year-old country station failed on the same frequency. Apparently at 250 watts the country station didn't have the reach to compete with the powerful clear-channel country broadcasters out of Nashville. But when WDIA was starting up, there were no comparable rhythm & blues stations in the city, just bluesman Sonny Boy Williamson, who did a daily fifteen-minute blues broadcast on West Memphis's otherwise white KWEM, sponsored by Hadacol tonic. So white businessmen Bert Ferguson and John R. Pepper decided to tap the city's burgeoning black community, and they hit an unexpected jackpot. Within four years, WDIA would be known throughout the South as the "Mother Station of the Negroes."

The new format was inaugurated October 25, 1948, by Professor Nat D. Williams, aka Nat Dee, a former history teacher at Booker T. Washington High School, who until 1940 had hosted the Palace Theater's amateur night. Williams's late afternoon broadcast, "Tan Town Jam-boree," and his sunrise show, "Tan Town Coffee," became the building blocks of WDIA. Legend has it that when the engineer cued him for that first broadcast, the otherwise loquacious Williams went blank. He started laughing at his sudden stage fright, and that laugh—not a line of five—became Nat Dee's trademark. And that was only fitting. College-educated and schooled in black culture, Williams's more urbane style was characteristic of many of the early black deejays.

In total contrast to Williams was Maurice (Hot Rod) Hulbert, known for his fast talk and jive phrasing. Hulbert worked several shifts a day, displaying a remarkable versatility in the process. Mornings he became Maurice Hulbert, Jr., host of the gospel program "Tan Town Jubilee," where he read scripture and played music in his role as secular minister. Then at 10 am he took off his minister's robes—figuratively speaking—and slipped into a silk suit, becoming Maurice the Mood Man for "Sweet Talkin' Time," a program aimed at black housewives that emphasized mellow talk and sexy ballads. The remarkable aspect of Hulbert's morning metamorphosis was that many in Memphis didn't realize that the soul-stirring deejay and the love man were the same person.

After a well-deserved rest Hulbert returned in the evenings as Hot Rod, head cheerleader of the "Sepia Swing Club." A classic joke has it that Hulbert talked so fast one day he struck himself in the eye with his tongue. Like a bebop saxophonist, Hulbert played with the melody of real words, turning them into a new rhythmic language, as in his creation of the phrase, "O-ble-doo-ba-blah-blah-doo-lay-a-way," which was his artful mispronunciation of an ad for the E-Z Credit Layaway Company.

A number of these deejays, clearly as entertaining as the music they played, also harbored musical ambitions. The classic example is Riley B. King, sometime deejay and blues guitarist, better known as B. B. King. He had walked into the lobby of WDIA, spotted Nat Dee, and began playing. It wasn't unusual for itinerant musicians to walk into a radio station and begin jamming in hopes of attracting attention. The technique had worked for King at KWEM, where he'd so impressed Sonny Boy Williamson that the blues vet asked the rookie to fill in for him at some local club dates.

King won again, this time because WDIA co-owner Ferguson hap-

pened to be walking by at the time and saw in him the perfect vehicle for a new program being sponsored by an all-purpose tonic called Pepiticon. The fifteen-minute daily broadcast was designed to compete with Williamson's Hadacol show, and Ferguson signed King on as host. So before he was B. B., Riley King was known around Memphis as the Pepiticon Boy, who sang the following jingle on WDIA and on the back of flabbed trucks around Memphis:

*Pepiticon, Pepiticon, sure is good,
You can get it anywhere in your neighborhood.*

And that's how legends are made.

Though WDIA pocketed the Pepiticon money, King was allowed to advertise his local appearances—not that King was making any big money. Despite his regular club gigs, King still performed at the Palace Theater on amateur nights, treasuring the \$1 every contestant received. This was even after he began hosting the mighty Heebie Jeebies show on WDIA, another indication of the low salaries paid to black deejays. Luckily for King, his reputation as a musician grew, and the station's management nicknamed him Beale Street Boy—an echo of his Pepiticon title—which became B. B.

In 1950 King's local appeal led to the formation of the singer-deejay's first band, which included a fine vocalist-pianist named James Alexander. They recorded several local hits, often right in WDIA's studios. The key record was the 1951 "3 O'Clock Blues," a national hit that led King to sign with the New York-based agency Universal Attractions for appearances at the jewels of the chitlin circuit: the Howard in Washington, the Royal in Baltimore, and the Apollo in New York, all backed by the Tiny Bradshaw Band. Three things happened as a result, each having an impact on the history of R&B. First, King began the initial leg of his professional musical career as a star exclusively for black audiences. Second, Alexander would take over King's crack local band and record with them under the flashy stage name Johnny Ace. Third, and most important for Memphis radio, King's spot on WDIA was filled by another deejay with a flair for music, Rufus Thomas.

Thomas's colorful history began years before with the tent shows that traveled the South bringing entertainment to rural areas. As a teenager, Rufus was a tap dancer during the summers with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels and the Royal Americans, playing one-night stands in little towns where blacks and whites sat show after show separated by a narrow

aisle. For Rufus this was a crash course in race relations and show business. He learned that the laughter generated by his steps and stage patter could charm the reddest neck.

In 1940 Thomas replaced Nai Dee at the Palace amateur night, and when King left WDIA, Nai Dee brought Thomas on board. Between working a textile plant and cutting the occasional 45—his "Bear Cat" on Sam Phillips's local Sun label was the thematic antecedent of his sixties Stax Records hits "Walking the Dog" and "Funky Chicken"—Thomas hosted the "Hoot 'n' Holler" show from 9:30 to 11 pm. He filled the Memphis night with wonderfully dirty rhymes, such as:

*I'm young and loose and full of juice,
I got the goose, so what's the use?
We're bright and gay but we ain't got a dollar!
Rufus is here, so let's hoot 'n' holler!*

With Nai Dee, Hot Rod Hulbert, and Rufus building listenership, Ferguson and Pepper plowed money into the station, buying a 50,000-watt transmitter that reached all of Tennessee and parts of Arkansas and Mississippi. With that additional power, WDIA became a twenty-four-hour station in 1954. For promotion Ferguson had some 40,000 flyers distributed to mailboxes in black Memphis, the kind of aggressive image-development never before seen on behalf of a station catering to blacks. However, the station's best promotion was its interplay with the city's black residents. WDIA became a verbal bulletin board: announcements for lost relatives, children, and pets were slipped in among the ads, the music, and the platter chatter. Anything happening in black Memphis, be it a big charity dance or a flophouse fire, reached WDIA's airwaves. Each institution of black Memphis—the Palace and Handy theaters, Lansky Brothers Clothes on Beale Street, the local black churches—had a business or social relationship with the station and its staff. The deejays often appeared at important functions as hosts or even promoters. The station, through its deejays, came to symbolize and help stimulate the segregated economy of Memphis.

It was a phenomenon that didn't go unnoticed by local white businessmen. White station owners faced with sagging advertising schedules or saddled with weak positions on the far right end of the AM dial moved into R&B radio after the pioneers had proved its viability. Significantly, many of these stations leaned on white deejays to capture the black audience. Memphis's chief exponent of broadcast blackface

was Dewey Phillips of WHBG. Starting in 1950, Phillips's mix of raunchy blues and spirited rhythm & blues, along with his manic personality, made him a Memphis institution. He was so well established with young white fans of rhythm & blues, as well as with blacks, that Sam Phillips had Dewey debut Elvis Presley's first single. Dewey Phillips is interesting not just because he played black music but also because he had more intimate public contact with blacks than was generally accepted by Southern whites at the time. Even if, as music historians have reported, his on-air raps carried some veiled contempt for blacks, Phillips's deejaying made him as much a part of the rhythm & blues world as Nat Dee, B. B. King, or Rufus Thomas. To some of the unsympathetic souls who knew Phillips was white playing black music, the man was surely a "nigger lover."

White deejays' desire to sound black resulted in some bizarre situations. Case in point was the twisted tale of a black announcer named Vernon Winslow. After graduating from Chicago's Art Institute with a degree in design, Winslow traveled to New Orleans to teach at Dillard University. For ten years he lived in the city, listening to jazz on the radio and compiling an impressive record collection. One day Winslow called his favorite station, WJBL, to compliment an announcer on his knowledge of jazz. The announcer, a white man who in reality knew very little about blacks, asked to meet him. During the meeting, Winslow had to field some surprisingly stupid questions, such as, "Why do blacks wear zoot suits and talk jive?" He began to realize just how much he knew, and began to think about being an announcer himself.

A year later Winslow, tired of teaching, decided to give announcing a try, and he wrote letters to several local stations. One replied that black programming was still years away for them. But WJMR did respond, "See they didn't know if I was white or black, but they assumed I was white from talking to me on the phone, because I didn't sound like most blacks in New Orleans." Winslow told Jeff Hannusch, WJMR's offices were in the Jung Hotel, a place blacks usually were not welcome, but Winslow's olive skin and straight hair got him past the front desk and, for a while, befuddled his interviewer. Finally he asked Winslow, "By the way, are you a nigger?"

Winslow was then told that there was no way they could let a black man on the air. Instead they offered him another position: training a white deejay to sound black. This was blackface broadcasting in the extreme. Winslow wrote, chose the records, and gave the deejay a name, Poppa Stoppa, based on local slang. Phrases like "Look at the gold tooth,

Ruth," and "Wham, bam, thank you, ma'am," flowed from the lips of a white deejay to whom Winslow constantly fed the latest trends in black speech. For a few months the charade worked (and the show was a smash). Then, one night when his white surrogate left the studio, Winslow read part of his own script on the air. He was fired on the spot. Winslow went back to Dillard while WJMR kept the Poppa Stoppa name and continued using white announcers in the role.

Six months after his dismissal from WJMR, Winslow received a telegram from an advertising agency offering the writer of the Poppa Stoppa show a job as an advertising consultant. As Winslow told Hannusch, "It just blew my mind! Apparently the Fitzgerald Advertising firm and the Jackson Brewing Company had heard the Poppa Stoppa show and it was just what they were looking for. They had completed a study about the black population's market potential and they just went wild." They asked Winslow to write some more scripts and come up with another name. As he recalled, "'Doc' was a name you called everybody then—'Hey, doc, you got a match?' 'Hey, doc, can I buy you a drink?' Then the term came out 'Daddy-O.' I'd heard Louis Jordan use it at the auditorium. I put the two together and they went for it."

Vernon Winslow was now Dr. Daddy-O with a radio show called "Jivin' with Jax," broadcast from the New Orleans Hotel every Sunday and sponsored by Jax Beer. But the ride wasn't so smooth for Dr. Daddy-O. He was, after all, still black. To get to his broadcast location he was forced to take the freight elevator. He then moved his operation to New Orleans's famous J&M Studios, first sending tapes over to the hotel for broadcast and later broadcasting live from the studio with Dave Bartholomew's house band providing background music. A real black man talking real black slang excited the city, and Dr. Daddy-O became a ubiquitous presence either in the voices of his many colorfully named local imitators (Ernie the Whip, Jack the Cat, Okey-Dokey, Momma Stoppa) or in his weekly column in the black Louisiana *Weekly* paid for by Jax Beer.

Historians of New Orleans's fertile music scene credit Dr. Daddy-O with leading local radio away from swing jazz to the rocking sound of rhythm & blues that became in the fifties, along with gumbo, the city's most popular local delicacy. The breakthrough record was local singer Roy Brown's "Good Rockin' Tonight" in 1947. Dr. Daddy-O played it "loud and long," occasionally as often as three times in twenty minutes. This play was crucial in making it a national hit by the next year, opening the gates for a music community that would spawn Lloyd Price, Fats

Domino, Little Richard, Smiley Lewis, Allen Toussaint, and a slew of other singers and musicians.

Despite the parodistic elements in Dewey Phillips and the racism behind the white Poppa Stoppas, the majority of white R&B deejays loved the life-style that working with black audiences afforded them. One of the best loved white deejays of this period was Bill (Hoss) Allen, a gentle, deep-voiced man who, with slicked-back hair and pencil-thin mustache, could have passed for a light-skinned black. After serving in the army in the war, he attended Vanderbilt, that bastion of Southern education, before venturing up to Massachusetts, where he worked as an acting apprentice at the Priscilla Beach Theater, a move that displeased his family ("My mother didn't like playacting"). In 1948 he moved back South to his hometown of Gallatin, Tennessee, and landed an announcing job at WHIN, a new 1,000-watt station there, where from 3 pm to evening sign-off he hosted a jazz show called "Harlem Hop." Through letters and phone calls, listeners began asking for Bull Moose Jackson, Cecil Gant, Wynonie Harris, and the whole new generation of postwar entertainers.

In September of that year, in a move crucial to the growth of rhythm & blues, Gallatin record-store owner Randy Wood decided to sponsor Gene Nobles's program on Nashville's nearby WLAC, which had a powerful 50,000-watt, clear-channel transmitter. That fall Allen auditioned at WLAC and was given a noon spot on which Wood bought a minute of airtime. At WLAC Allen found again that his listeners craved the new sounds. Returning GIs were particularly demanding, often bringing records to the station for Allen and Nobles to play. As a result of this new music, letters would arrive at WLAC and, equally important, Wood would receive orders. What no one at the station knew was that WLAC was heard clear from border to border as well as in the Caribbean and, via shortwave radio, in Europe and northern Africa too.

This positive response encouraged Wood to experiment. He had about two thousand ten- and twelve-inch 78 rpm blues records in his store-room. Buying time on Nobles's show at the rate of \$6 a minute, Wood offered four records for \$2.49 through the mail. For two weeks there was no response. Week three two huge sacks of mail arrived at WLAC. Wood borrowed money from a Gallatin bank to purchase fifteen minutes of time on Nobles's show. Soon the record shop sponsored both Nobles and Allen. Ernie's Record Mart in Memphis sponsored John (R.) Richbourg, and Herman Gritzard worked with Buckley's in Nashville. Wood founded Dot Records in 1951, eventually taking the money generated

by black music and its fans to create a pop-oriented label with signees like Gale Storm, Tab Hunter, Lawrence Welk, and that reluctant pseudo-rock & roller Pat Boone. Randy Wood's record shop remained more important to R&B than his record company, however, for it stimulated the opening of more stores catering to this music.

One other key aspect of the radio-record relationship is payola. In the eighties it is still the source of as much controversy as it was in the late fifties. But you will not be able to understand its role in black radio in that early epoch or even today unless you realize that Al Benson's \$100,000 salary was an anomaly and that most black deejays worked long hours and were grossly underpaid. Well into the late fifties \$50 for broadcasting six-hour-plus shifts six to seven days a week was thought to be good money. "Union" was a dirty word. There were no contracts, no health insurance, and little opportunity for promotion into management. A black could be a program director—though that position didn't have the power it does now—but not an advertising or station manager. Deejays were told regularly by white management that the black janitor could be brought into the studio to replace them at a moment's notice. Their rapid-fire bravado masked economic and social insecurities. They were expected to solicit their own advertising, which encouraged the deejays to be hustlers as much as rappers, and then management took 90 percent. Most got no cut of national advertising that came in through the station's advertising staff, though the advertising was placed on their show due to their popularity.

These conditions created payola, the practice of deejays getting paid by record companies to play their product. Today payola is largely a tool major labels use to control the playlist of pop radio, spending small labels off the air. But for the deejays of rhythm & blues radio, it was a way to get a piece of the pie, a pie made sweet by their talents.

Dave Clark, who back in 1938 inaugurated the black radio-record connection, loved these deejays and will, with prodding, admit to having paid plenty of payola in his time. Before joining Duke-Peacock in 1954 Clark worked for Savoy, Apollo, King, United, Atlantic, and Chess records, usually for two or more at a time. "Unless you were a top jock, [you weren't] making no money," he asserts. "Hadin' been for payola they couldn't have survived. We wanted to help the men who reached the audience and knew the music. This wasn't evil. They knew who to collect from and who not to. They [the deejays] collected from the folks that made the money. Some people didn't make anything off [a label] because they knew that company had nothing to give them."

Not every record was promoted with payola, according to Clark. "When you got a record that you thought was going to do something, you put money behind it, just like you do today. Some of the deejays were so big and so strong they commanded a whole lot of money. Guys could get as much as \$1,000 or more for playing one record. Some jocks, who were important but not earning much, you might give a little something every week, almost like salary. Not just to play any particular record but to alert you to new talent, let you know how your records were doing in the area, and listen to advances to let you know if a record was worth pushing. It was like an investment."

Money wasn't the only item traded for airplay. Plane tickets, groceries, clothes, and other nonmonetary "gifts" were part of the game as well. One Southern deejay remembers asking a New York label for money to help pay off his insurance. Instead the label offered to start a song publishing company in his name and give him a piece of the royalties on some of their records. Foolishly the deejay opted for cash, a one-time deal he still regrets. But other jocks of the period, notably white announcer Alan Freed, took money regularly. And, yes, these deals were usually made without the artists' permission or even knowledge.

I don't mean to whitewash payola in black radio, but unless one deals with the environment that spawned it, the one-sided conclusions of numerous payola investigations since the fifties define the discussion. Even Dave Clark would admit payola had its dark side. A veteran black deejay recalls that Clark, trying to woo a deejay who wouldn't play his records, bought the air personality a much-needed pair of shoes. "But still got no answer," the old record executive recalls. "Dave went up to that guy's station and finds the cat asleep in the studio with his feet on the control board with Dave's shoes right there. Dave snatched the shoes off the guy's feet. Well, as you can imagine, the deejay woke up. Dave says, 'I hope you'll play my records now.'"

So, on and off the level, R&B labels and black radio grew through the war and in the ten or so years after to become institutions and examples of "natural integration"—that is, the mix of whites and blacks it created shared genuine interests economically and musically. Moreover, if you consider these deejays as entrepreneurs—as I do—and not merely as employees, then in the midst of this integration (but not assimilation) it is clear the era produced a wealth of Washingtonian figures. They benefited by the power to entertain, and from the exploitation of black music, and were crucial to its growth. You might not like all their methods—Robey's "songwriting" is particularly objection-

able. Still, as urban models for balancing black capitalism with the realities of a white-dominated society (whites of course even owned most of the black labels and stations), this "rhythm & blues world" had real merit.

A FORGOTTEN OMEN

During these same years another model passed, one that hasn't come close to being replaced and whose demise was a sad omen for the shapers of the rhythm & blues world. Jackie Robinson's signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1945 and his donning of their blue and white uniform in 1947 is hailed, quite rightly, as a major event in the integration of America. It now lies at the heart of this nation's popular culture. Unfortunately, not too many people cared that it meant the end of Negro baseball and the demise of a "naturally integrated" black institution. Ask an older black man about it and you'll be told sagely, "That is the price you have to pay for entry into the game. Look at the number of black players who dominate Major League Baseball, making millions and becoming role models for the nation." Yet if, following the advice of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's *Deep Throat*, we follow the money, we see that this trade-off, while on the surface great for blacks, was in reality an economic steal for baseball's owners.

The Negro Leagues didn't die without flair. In the late forties the Cleveland Buckeyes, competing with the newly integrated Cleveland Indians, introduced simultaneous television and radio broadcast that predated the Major League by a few years. In 1953 the Indianapolis Clowns signed a woman for second base named Toni Stone, making her one of the first female athletes ever to compete professionally against men. But by 1953 only four Negro League teams remained in existence, and by 1960 they were gone, the players dispersed, and many of the black business people associated with the game henceforth ignored by the chiefs of Major League Baseball. The leagues and their many participants ultimately reappeared on occasion as inductees into a special wing of the baseball Hall of Fame and as answers in black trivia games.

Robinson's arrival in Brooklyn forced this nation to take its Constitution seriously, a shattering event for many white Americans. But a look at the baseball business today shows that only a few steps in the journey to real integration have been taken. While there are black scouts in most organizations, there have only been three black managers since

52 THE DEATH OF RHYTHM & BLUES

1947—Frank Robinson, Maury Wills, and Larry Doby—and none has lasted in the job more than two years. There has never been a black general manager, though Henry Aaron has been director of player personnel for the Atlanta Braves for many years. This only raises the question: "Is it necessary to break Babe Ruth's career home run record to qualify for top front-office jobs in baseball?" Answer: "It is if you're black."

Since the death of the Negro Leagues, there has only been one black owner on any level—fittingly, a radio-station owner who purchased a low-level St. Louis Cardinal farm team in Savannah, Georgia, in 1985 (and sold it in 1987). The major decision-making and crucial economic roles in baseball—positions that determine not just player selection but use of independent vendors and contractors—clearly exclude blacks. In the Negro Leagues there were black league presidents such as Rube Foster, who started and ran the Negro National League in the 1920s; team owners such as Robert A. Cole and Horace G. Hall, who owned the Chicago American Giants in the thirties, and Gus Greenlee, a team owner and league president from the thirties into the forties. In contrast it would take the National and American leagues, at the rate they are currently advancing black management, at least two more generations to produce black figures of equal stature.

Furthermore, precisely because of the struggles they endured, the black players had a wonderful spirit and little willingness to believe in their inferiority. As veteran sportswriter Robert Lipsyte wrote in 1983, "The Negro Leaguers were never as bitter about their exclusion from mainstream baseball as one might imagine; they lived better than most black men of their time, and the only difference between them and their heroes, the white Major Leaguers, was degree. They had thrilling games, money, an adoring public, and ladies in the lobby."

Since Robinson's debut, blacks have done the same thing in Major League Baseball that they have done in popular music: entertain, make large salaries, and generate money for businesses that funnel precious little of it back into black communities. They feed the dream machine that tells black youths that entertaining—on a stage or a ball field—is the surest way to leap racial barriers. But without access to power, blacks lost more than they gained economically from integrating Major League Baseball.

T H R U

THE

NEW NEGRO

(1950-65)



here was a "new Negro" in America after World War II, one who was pushing against the barricades of racism and winning victories large and small. Evidence could now be found as readily in the courtroom as at the ballpark. Yes, the Supreme Court had spoken again. "With all deliberate speed," the justices had said in 1954, a phrase that echoed like a hymn or a fearful cry, depending on how you heard it. Many blacks felt some discomfort about the juxtaposition of "deliberate" and "speed," as if the nine wise men were themselves a little frightened at the social revolution their ruling was sure to accelerate.

But it was too late to turn back, and a healthy part of white America, albeit grudgingly, was starting to agree. Of course this was not without some prodding by Thurgood Marshall, who argued the NAACP's historic case for school desegregation before the High Court; by Representative Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., of Harlem, a former minister whose rapidly increasing seniority was as chilling to his more reactionary Democratic