

# Ray's Rudiments: Great Blues LP Series

by RAY TEMPLETON

## The Specialty Story

A tale of two series of the same name, one in the U.S.A. and one that went its own sweet way, in the U.K...



Specialty label boss Art Rupe, circa early 1950. Photo: Ace Records.

**T**his is no ordinary 'oldies' album. This is the most thoroughly researched documentary of the roots of rock ever assembled on record. Inside you will find fourteen dynamic tracks from the vaults of Specialty Records – among the most famous of the daring and resourceful independent record labels that created the rock sound in the 1950s – plus a profusely illustrated, comprehensive historical essay. **THIS IS HOW IT ALL BEGAN** was compiled by Barret Hansen, a prominent rock writer and researcher since 1958, and author of a master's thesis on the History of R&B. Mr Art Rupe, [who produced most of these historic sides, and thus was personally] involved in "how it all began", collaborated in many stages of this reissue project. <sup>(1)</sup>

It was an ambitious claim for a fourteen-track LP, but as a statement of intent, it was an impressive way to kick off a new series of albums, dedicated to reissuing music from one of the greatest of the labels which captured the African-American music of the immediate post-war decades. The story of Specialty Records has been well told elsewhere and there's no need to go into detail here, but a quick resumé seems appropriate.

The label was founded towards the end of the Second World War in Los Angeles by Art Rupe (born Greensburg, PA, 1917), who had previously been one of the partners in the Juke Box label. Specialty's very clear focus was on African-American music – jazz, R&B, gospel and blues, ranging from the thoroughly downhome to the thoroughly urbane. Rupe would make major R&B stars out of Roy Milton, Joe and Jimmy Liggins and Percy Mayfield, and he would break new ground with early rock'n'roll by Lloyd Price, Larry Williams and – most explosively of all – Little Richard. Along the way, he would cut outstanding blues by artists as varied as Frankie Lee Sims and Mercy Dee Walton, as well as zydeco with Clifton Chenier. Rupe's highly successful gospel recordings featured some of the finest quartets of the day, including the Soul Stirrers (before, during and after Sam Cooke's tenure with the group) and the Swan Silvertones, as well as singing preachers like Alex Bradford and Brother Joe May.

The label had issued a dozen or so albums between 1957 and 1960, mostly featuring their rock'n'roll stars, but by the end of the 1960s the potential for meeting the new, growing audience for a wider range of blues, R&B and gospel would have been increasingly apparent. What it needed was somebody who had a very solid understanding and knowledge of the music, and a good handle on the potential new audience.

The man to fill those shoes would be Barret Hansen (born Minneapolis, MN, 1941), who joined the staff of Specialty Records in 1968. Interviewed by Paul Vernon in the early 1980s, he described how he had come to work for the company:

"I wrote a thesis called 'The Evolution of Black Music From Blues to R&B Between 1945 And 1953' for my masters degree at UCLA. Art Rupe was a board member of UCLA and played an active part in the affairs of the University, and while looking through a list of papers he saw mine and arranged through the folklore department a meeting with me over lunch. That led to an invitation to write liner notes for the John Lee Hooker album which was originally being compiled by somebody else. However, two weeks later he called me up and said the other guy had been let go and offered me a full time job, so I took it and stayed for three years."<sup>(2)</sup>

'This Is How It All Began' (Specialty SPS-2117) was one of his first projects for the label, and the contents proved that the claim quoted at the top of this article was no idle boast. Rather than numbering the tracks, the sleeve of Volume 1 presented the titles in categories: Gospel, Country Blues, City Blues, Ballads and Jump and Boogie, which headings alone offer a neat summary of the African-American roots of rock'n'roll. From a capella quartets, through solo electric blues, to classy jump bands and close harmony, it was all here. Volume 2 (SPS-2118) moved things along with urban R&B, doo-wop and Specialty's celebrated early rock pioneers. Another early project was 'DooWop' (SPS-2114); I get the impression that Hansen was laying the foundations here for his later incarnation as Dr. Demento, as he mixes bona-fide vocal group tracks, by such as the Chimes and the Four Flames with real oddities like Bob Landers' 'Cherokee Dance' (with Willie Joe & his Unitar) and King Perry's 'Animal Song'. Much of it would probably not qualify as doo-wop as we now understand it, but from start to finish it's a thoroughly fun listen.

Hansen again seemed to be in frantic DJ mode on the sleeve notes for his compilation of oldies by Don & Dewey (SPS-2131), as he signs off with "So hear the call, and have a ball with the Rockin' Rage from the Golden Age, that dynamite duo ...". Not that Hansen's productions were all rock'n'roll, by any means. He was soon putting together albums by several other key figures in the story. There was one by Percy Mayfield (SPS-2126), an important first step in restoring some of the greatest blues singing and song writing to the world. There were two terrific sets by John Lee Hooker (SPS-2125 and 2127), comprising early, mostly solo blues



From Galen Gart's First Pressings.

recorded in Detroit by Bernard Besman and leased to Specialty. There were albums by Guitar Slim (SPS-2120 – its cover bore the interesting strapline “A legendary Mississippi bluesman and his soul band”), Frankie Lee Sims (SPS-2124) and Clifton Chenier (SPS-2139), all of whom had produced blues hits for the label in the early 1950s.

In each of these three cases, the album offered a mix of issued and previously unissued material. Most of these (the Sims and the first Hooker, especially) had bold, contemporary-styled covers, a factor that would become a point of contention between producer and label owner. Because it was a small company, Hansen initially had responsibility for all aspects of his productions, but when some of them didn't sell as well as hoped, Rupe ‘... took a much tighter control of the reins, money and content wise... (he) was very tight with the pennies... basically Art would utilise the cheapest artist he could find’.

Of the many reissue albums that Hansen would produce for Specialty, around half were of gospel music. This would include albums by the Soul Stirrers, Alex Bradford, the Swan Silvertones, the Five Blind Boys Of Alabama, Dorothy Love Coates and the Original Gospel Harmonettes, Brother Joe May and the Pilgrim Travelers, as well as a number of anthologies/samplers. It seems likely that the main audience for these was very similar to that which had embraced these recordings first time round on 78s and 45s, although no doubt some among the new audience were also glad to have them.

They seem to have stayed in catalogue for some years, as I remember still being able to pick them up here, as imports, in the 1980s. Another ground-breaking set was ‘The Two Sides Of Sam Cooke’ (SPS-2119), side one presenting a selection of the highlights of Cooke's sacred work with the Soul Stirrers, and side two comprising some of his earliest secular cuts, Cooke as the proto-soul singer who would become internationally known through his recordings for other labels.

There wasn't much downhome blues among the releases that Hansen compiled, for the simple reason that there was little to be found in the Specialty archives: “not much was recorded by Art, as he didn't like it”, Hansen recalled <sup>(2)</sup>. However, he did get to compile one important anthology of this material, ‘Dark Muddy Bottom Blues’ (SPS-2149), as he recounted many years later: “‘Dark Muddy Bottom Blues’ was my last project for Specialty. I left before it was finished, but the selections are mine. Art Rupe was not fond of ‘country’ blues and didn't record much of it, but noting that his two LPs of Hookers leased from Bernie Besman had sold fairly well, as had the Frankie Lee Sims LP, he asked me to see what I could scrape together from my research in the vaults... I had by that time checked out every reel of tape and acetate that was in there. I never did find out for sure where the Lightnin' Hopkins tracks came from, or the Hookers. The latter were not from Besman or from his studio sessions for Specialty (which yielded just one mediocre coupling in the 1950s)... though they might have been unused demos for the latter. That's about all I know. Darryl Stolper was asked to do the notes after I left.”<sup>(3)</sup>

Among the material Hansen had discovered in the archives were the results of sessions cut in Shreveport in 1951-1952, with several downhome singers, including Big Joe Williams, Country Jim Bledsoe, Clarence London and Pete McKinley, almost none of which had been issued. It also included several recordings by an artist who was not named anywhere in the files. As Hansen explained many years later: “I confess: I named him Pine Bluff Pete, in 1970 when I was compiling the ‘Dark Muddy Bottom’ album for Specialty. This was found in the vaults with no info whatever attached to it, and I just thought he sounded somewhat Arkansan”.<sup>(3)</sup>

When Hansen parted company from Rupe, they had clashed on various aspects of production. In particular, the producer disagreed with the boss's approach to trying to find new hit artists: “he really believed that on a 1955 budget he could make Specialty a viable recording company in 1970”. Asked about what it was like to work for Rupe, he summed the experience up as: “Interesting, frustrating, enlightening and a wonderful task going through all the old material for reissue”.<sup>(2)</sup> The results of this enviable task were that Hansen's time with the label had produced no fewer than 35 reissue albums, of which around half were of gospel, and the remainder of blues, R&B and rock'n'roll. After his departure, the SPS-2000 album series continued for another dozen or so releases, and eventually petered out in the late 1970s (although a few other LPs would continue the same numerical later in the 1980s).<sup>(4)</sup>

#### Meanwhile, across the Atlantic...

Over in the U.K., around about the time Barret Hansen was leaving his job at Specialty, Sonet Records was launching its own series under the rubric of The Specialty Story. Rod Buckle's account of the European company's involvement with Specialty appeared in this magazine just a few years ago (B&R 287-289), and is well worth seeking out if you haven't already (back issues available at the time of writing).<sup>(5)</sup>

The UK series would include reissues of some 1950s LPs, and several of the Hansen-compiled albums, repackaged, but also many more which were unique to Sonet's own series. It kicked off with two sets by Little Richard, released in 1968 and 1969, the first, ‘All Time Hits’, Specialty SNTF 5000, consisting of side one of the very first U.S. Specialty LP from 1957, ‘Here's Little Richard’. Specialty SP-100, paired with side two of the 1959 compilation, ‘The Fabulous Little Richard’, Specialty SP-2103. This was followed by ‘Rock Hard Rock Heavy’, Specialty SNTF 5001, which seems to have been a new compilation of 1950s sides from Richard.



From Galen Gart's First pressings.



From the B&R Archive.

Sonet also put out a small catalogue of Specialty 45s, mostly of rock'n'roll hits (such as Little Richard, Larry Williams), but also including some jump blues and R&B (Jimmy Liggins, Percy Mayfield) and even blues (Frankie Lee Sims).

Next up were the two volumes of 'This Is How It All Began', identical in content to the U.S. versions, but with new cover designs, based on a coloured frame round the sleeve edges. The designer was Plastic Dog Graphics of Bristol and this basic theme, suitably adapted and with colour variations, would be used on most subsequent LPs in the series. For the first volume, a photo of Little Richard was incorporated into a brightly-coloured psychedelic design; for the second, it was the same photo, reversed.

Whereas the U.S. Specialty Story had included several gospel albums, the U.K. Story would not. The four tracks on 'This Is How It All Began' Volume 1, plus half of 'The Two Sides Of Sam Cooke' (see above), would be the only tracks in that idiom in the Sonet series. If in retrospect, this seems like an opportunity missed, at least for gospel quartet fans, no doubt it was just sound commercial reasoning; there probably wasn't much evidence of a market for those kinds of records in the U.K. in the early 1970s.

The series continued with selected albums that Hansen had compiled and produced in the U.S., all in appealing new covers in the series style: John Lee Hooker, Frankie Lee Sims, Don & Dewey, Sam Cooke, Percy Mayfield and Clifton Chenier. In the case of Mayfield and Sims, these were the first full albums to be released in this country by these artists; for Chenier it was only the second. For the next couple in the series, Sonet reached back further to the early days of the Specialty catalogue again, with albums by Lloyd Price (a straight reissue of his self-titled album, SP 2105) and Larry Williams (reissue of 'Here's ...', SP 2109), both from 1959, and another Little Richard set, this time (I think) an original compilation, appropriately titled 'The Original...'.

The U.K. Specialty series never released Barret Hansen's celebrated downhome compilation, 'Dark Muddy Bottom Blues'. Instead, three new compilations were produced by Sam Charters, drawing on the material that Hansen had researched and unearthed in the Specialty archives, resulting in a far more detailed look at what was in there, a real treat for fans of downhome blues and the rougher, tougher end of the urban variety. 'Hooker, Hopkins & Hogg' (SNTF 5013), offered a full side of outstanding John Lee Hooker cuts (including the two on 'Dark Muddy Bottom Blues'), three tracks by Lightnin' Hopkins – powerful doomy stuff (again including the two from the U.S. compilation) – and four by Smokey Hogg (the only ones on the album which had actually been released by the company – three on Specialty, one on Fidelity). It's a fine set representing three of the most popular downhome blues artists of the era. 'Country Blues' (SNTF 5014) took all but two of the remainder of the tracks from 'Dark Muddy Bottom Blues', added three previously unheard by Pete McKinley, two more unissued Big Joe Williams, two more by the mysterious Pinebluff Pete, and another by Clarence London. The result was a feast for lovers of the obscure and the rough and ready. 'City Blues' (SNTF 5015) was a real mixture, with Frankie Lee Sims and Mercy Dee rubbing shoulders with Big Joe Turner and Bumble Bee Slim. Among its many highlights were rare and powerful tracks by Honeyboy Frank Patt and Gus Jenkins – quality downhome sounds captured on the West Coast. Maybe Barret Hansen would have got round to all this eventually, or maybe Art Rupe's suspicions about downhome blues would have kept a lid on it.

Sonet's advantage was that in licensing the material for a different territory, they seem to have had much more of a free hand – it was their risk, not Specialty's – and U.K. fans were the beneficiaries. I'll confess a particular interest here; the latter two LPs were key factors in my own blues education, my first encounter with major figures like Sims, Walton and Turner – all sorts, from obscure country blues to R&B shouting.

Next along was Hansen's 'Doo Wop' compilation (more info above – the U.K. version came in a very different sleeve, using comic strip panels), then there was a Little Richard twenty-tracker, apparently aimed at the bargain end of the market, followed by a full album by Smokey Hogg. There has long been a certain resistance to Hogg in this country, but this is a decent enough selection of his work, taken from Specialty sessions between 1949 and 1952. Mike Leadbitter's notes assured us that it was 'guaranteed to please blues enthusiasts everywhere'.

If fans of jump blues (and by the mid-1970s, they were growing in number) were feeling frustrated by the absence of very much to satisfy their needs in the series so far, things were about to improve. To begin with, there was the first U.K. album release of material by Roy Milton & His Solid Senders, very similar to, but not the same as the one issued around the same time in the U.S. Then there was one by Joe and Jimmy Liggins, consisting of half of the U.S. album by Joe and his Honeydrippers on one side, and a selection by brother Jimmy on the other.

Both of these albums, which represented the first real opportunity for listeners in the U.K. to get a handle on the work of these important R&B artists, were compiled by John Broven, who recounted his experience of working with Specialty in this magazine (and also expressed his dismay at the fact that the albums were issued in re-processed stereo, the reasons for which were explained in the Sonet article)<sup>(6)</sup>. He acknowledges his



involvement with Sonet on these albums as a key factor in getting him involved in 'the nascent commercial reissue business', so we have even more to be thankful for. Interestingly, Broven was not working from masters retrieved from the vaults by Barret Hansen, as Charters had been, but from the company's library of original 78s in Los Angeles. Thus all the material on these albums was previously issued. Indeed, Hansen had stated in his interview that the reason he hadn't compiled very much un-reissued jump blues material was that: "... most of it wasn't suitable for reissue because Art did have a good ear and most, if not all, the good material was actually issued at the time."<sup>(2)</sup>

Following its success with Little Richard, Lloyd Price and Larry Williams, Specialty had built an important legacy of music from New Orleans, taking in key players such as Earl King, Guitar Slim and Art Neville, as well as fascinating minor characters like Lil Millet and Edgar Blanchard. Not enough of this was familiar to listeners in this country, so the anthology 'Going Back To New Orleans' filled an important gap and added to the growing documentation of the Crescent City's distinctive R&B sounds.

The sounds of that city also cropped up in the more general anthology, 'Rock 'n' Roll Dance Party', with tracks by Big Boy Myles, Lloyd Price and Lloyd Lambert, alongside various R&B artists in rocking mode. A further foray into Specialty's jump blues heritage came with the anthology, 'Urban Blues', a terrific selection of swinging and rocking R&B, including Joe Lutch, Lester Williams, Floyd Dixon and others. These kinds of sounds were still little represented in U.K. reissue catalogues, partly because of an assumption that blues tastes in this country were still firmly with downhome sounds. This assumption was reflected in a famously sour review in *Blues Unlimited*, credited to the (I think) non-existent William Bentley, which scornfully dismissed the music contained in 'Urban Blues': "Pop would be a better title"<sup>(7)</sup>. In the following issue, there was an irate, but robust, defence of the album<sup>(8)</sup>, representing the growing contingent of fans with a broader take on the blues. The tide was turning. Following on from 'Urban Blues' was 'Downhome Blues'. Presumably by this time, only a couple of years on, the 'City Blues' and 'Country Blues' sets were out of print, as this anthology repeated tracks by Frankie Lee Sims, Pete McKinley and Mercy Dee (to the irritation of *Blues Unlimited* reviewer Bez Turner). But it also offered more by Big Maceo, Bumble Bee Slim and Gus Jenkins, an excellent compilation in its own right, even if nobody seemed sure why the cover featured a drawing of Li'l Son Jackson, who was not on the LP.

That release effectively marked the end of The Specialty Story series, although it briefly revived towards the end of the decade with a Larry Williams album, 'Slow Down'. This was identical to the U.S. Specialty release from about the same time entitled 'The Missing And Unissued Sides' (SP-2225), which neatly describes its contents. A couple of reissues of 1950s Little Richard LPs followed sporadically, then as late as 1983, there was 'Legendary Specialty Missing Masters', a varied compilation of R&B, rock'n'roll, and doo-wop.

Most (but not quite all) of the music that featured in The Specialty Story would be reissued on CD by Ace Records in the U.K. (and under the original label name, by now part of Fantasy Records, in the U.S.).

This would also see much more from the label's catalogue reissued, and quite a lot of further unissued material saw the light of day in the process. There were full CDs by Frankie Lee Sims and Mercy Dee Walton and

plenty by Smokey Hogg and John Lee Hooker (some of his finest work). The compilation, 'Bloodstains On The Wall', Ace CDCHD 576 for example, pulled together many of the downhome sides and added several previously unheard.

A Japanese double-CD, 'Dark Muddy Bottom Blues', PVine PCD 1832/3, offered even more of the same. The core of the original Specialty catalogue, though, names like Roy Milton,



Jimmy Liggins, Specialty promotional photo. From the B&R Archive.

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SON 5006 Don & Dewey

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SON 5011 Lights Out / Honey Baby

SON 5012 Jerry Byrne

SON 5012 Cherokee Dance / Bob Landers / Drunk-Jimmy Liggins

SONET SINGLES

SONET 2032 Shepherds Bush Comets "Dixie"

SON 2032 Stardust "Golden Oldie Show"

SON 2036

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Advert from 'Let It Rock', 1973. Courtesy Tony Burke.

the Liggins brothers, Percy Mayfield, the Soul Stirrers etc. would now be more comprehensively issued in digital format. These had, perhaps, still been rather under appreciated in the 1970s, but the process whereby they are now recognised in this country for their rich, influential and often brilliant legacies really started with The Specialty Story, making it one of the most significant of its day.

#### NOTES

1. From the back sleeve of 'This Is How It All Began', Vol.1. The words in square brackets were omitted from the U.K. release, which instead carried the following erroneous footnote: 'original recordings produced by Bernard Besman'. Only the John Lee Hooker track was a Besman production.
2. 'Custodian Of The Bizarre', Barret Hansen interview with Paul Vernon, *Sailor's Delight* No.12, circa May 1982, pp.3-5.
3. Comment on the Real Blues Forum, Facebook group, 20th April 2014.
4. There's a full listing of U.S. Specialty LPs on the 'Both Sides Now' website: <http://www.bsnpubs.com/specialty/specialty2100.html>
5. B&R 288 April 2014: Hasse Andreasson and Hans Schweitz, 'The Sonet Records Story Part 2', pp.8, 9, 11-15, based on recollections by Rod Buckle.
6. B&R as above, John Broven, 'The Specialty Connection', p.10
7. *Blues Unlimited* No.127, November-December 1977, p.32
8. Letter from Fred Goulding, *BU* No.128, January/February 1978, p.14

#### The Specialty Story (U.K.)

All issues are on Sonet, with SNTF prefix.

- 5000: Little Richard – *All Time Hits*
- 5001: Little Richard – *Rock Hard Rock Heavy*
- 5002: Various – *This Is How It All Began 1*
- 5003: Various – *This Is How It All Began 2*
- 5004: Frankie Lee Sims – *Lucy Mae Blues*
- 5005: John Lee Hooker – *Alone*
- 5006: Don & Dewey
- 5007: Lloyd Price – *Original Hits*
- 5008: Larry Williams – *Original Hits*
- 5009: Sam Cooke – *The Two Sides Of*
- 5010: Percy Mayfield – *The Incredible* (1972)
- 5011: Little Richard – *The Original*
- 5012: Clifton Chenier – *Bayou Blues*
- 5013: Various – *Hooker, Hopkins & Hogg*
- 5014: Various – *Country Blues*
- 5015: Various – *City Blues*
- 5016: Various – *Doo Wop*
- 5017: Little Richard – *Original Hits*
- 5018: Smokey Hogg – *U Better Watch That Jive* (1974)
- 5019: Roy Milton & His Solid Senders
- 5020: Joe Liggins & Jimmy Liggins – *Saturday Night Boogie Woogie Man*
- 5021: Various – *Going Back To New Orleans*
- 5022: Various – *Rock & Roll Dance Party Of The 50's*
- 5023: Various – *Urban Blues*
- 5024: Various – *Downhome Blues*
- 5025: Larry Williams – *Slow Down* (1977)
- 5026: Little Richard And His Band
- 5027: Little Richard: *The Fabulous*
- 5028: Little Richard: *His Biggest Hits*
- 5029: Various – *Legendary Specialty Missing Masters* (1983)