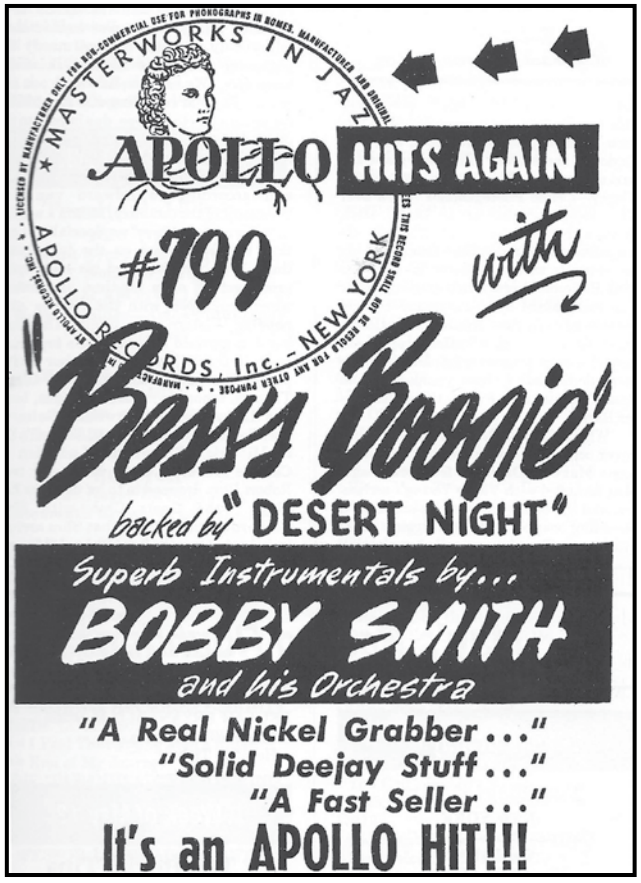
THE APOLLO RECORDS STORY

By Billy Vera



From the Billy Vera Collection.

In 1944, wartime shortages were causing the major record companies to cut back production, including lesser known acts and especially speciality genres, such as jazz, blues, hillbilly and other ethnic idioms. There was barely enough shellac to serve the labels' hit acts. Milt Gabler had to choose between cutting Louis Jordan or the King Cole Trio from Decca's roster.

The industry was just recovering from the first of two recording bans imposed by the ruthless and short-sighted James Caesar Petrillo, president of the musicians' union. Before the majors finally submitted to his demands, a number of small independent entrepreneurs made peace and opened up labels of their own.

In New York, these numbered, among others, Manor, Continental, National, Lenox and Apollo, the latter operated by Hy Siegel, Teddy Gotleib and Bess and Isaac 'Ike' Berman, all of the Rainbow Record Shop on 125th Street in Harlem. They named their label after the famous theatre down the street.

At the time, all stores on 125th Street were white-owned, mostly by Jewish people who had long lived in Central Harlem. Most employees were white as well. Harlem was ethnically diverse, but only in the sense that the different groups gravitated toward neighbourhoods where others like themselves lived. The Irish, to the west in Morningside Heights, the Italians in East Harlem, Cubans and Puerto Ricans south of 110th Street, the aforementioned Jewish community in the central lowlands above 125th Street with increasing numbers of blacks sprinkled about, moving the borders of the neighbourhoods into which they moved.

Bess Berman. From the B&R Archive.

'The Main Stem' as 125th was known, was a thriving retail hub, a place for Jewish merchant people to succeed – when they were unwelcome in many other businesses.

From the start, Apollo sought to become a full-line entity, releasing all types of music: pop, hillbilly, novelty, comedy, gospel, Latin and ethnic Jewish humour. All this, in addition to a vast array of black music styles.

Pop singers, like Dean Martin and Gordon McRae served their apprenticeships at Apollo before going on to major stardom elsewhere, while popular artists such as Connee Boswell, Ray Eberle and Martha Raye used the label as a holding pattern during slow periods of their careers. Billy Daniels, a black singer who starred at Jewish clubs and mountain resorts, recorded his signature hit, 'Old Black Magic', for Apollo.

Ike Berman. From the B&R Archive.

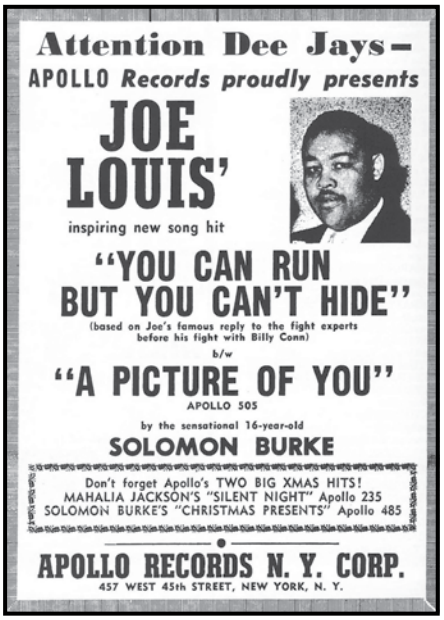
The company's hillbilly roster included the Oklahoma Roundup Gang, the Tennessee Mountain Boys and Johnny and Jack, while Yiddish performers Abe Schwartz, Cantor Wagner, Sam Levensen and Morey Amsterdam filled that side of the ledger.

Blues and folk singer Josh White, who had recorded for Paramount Records in 1928 and recorded extensively during the 1930s and 1940s for labels such as Banner, Columbia, Musicraft, Keynote, Asch, and Decca, recorded a session for Apollo in 1947. There was also comedy by film stars Stepin Fetchit and Eddie 'Rochester' Anderson of the Jack Benny show.

During the 1940s there was a vogue on radio for black vocal groups, given the popularity among mainstream audiences of the Mills Brothers, the Golden Gate Quartet (who sang both religious and secular tunes) and the Ink Spots. The Charioteers and the Delta Rhythm Boys filled this need, as did the Four Vagabonds, who recorded often for Apollo.

The gospel field was quite lucrative for the company with stars like the Roberta Martin Singers, the Dixie Hummingbirds, Professor Alex Bradford, and early recordings by Reverend James Cleveland. But Apollo's best selling artist of all turned out to be Mahalia Jackson, whose sales would support the company in its later lean years. Her recording of 'Move On Up A Little Higher' was reputed to be a million seller in a field where sales of that magnitude were virtually non-existent.

But it is the field of 'race music' which is of interest here, and Apollo had this covered in abundance. Proximity to the Apollo Theater and the Savoy Ballroom, as well as nightclubs like Minton's, that incubator of be-bop, brought musicians and entertainers into the Rainbow shop where they could be lured into making records for the fledgling label.



From the Billy Vera Collection.

One of the earliest of these in 1944 was Coleman Hawkins, the original master of the tenor saxophone. He'd returned from Europe five years prior to record his masterpiece, 'Body And Soul', for Victor. It was said that one could walk for blocks and hear the record playing from

Rabon Tarrant circa late 1940s. From the Billy Vera Collection.

open windows anywhere in Harlem. Always keeping an ear to the ground for new sounds, Hawk recorded what is considered the first be-bop date for Apollo, with Dizzy Gillespie's 'Salt Peanuts', 'Woody'n You' and 'Rainbow Mist', a reworking of his Victor hit named after the label's store.

After breaking up his big band, Earl Hines recorded in a small band context for Apollo with Duke Ellington sidemen Johnny Hodges, Ray Nance and vocalist Betty Roche. Ellington drummer Sonny Greer and fellow Ellingtonians Rex Stewart, Lawrence Brown, Jimmy Hamilton and Harry Carney also recorded for the label.

On the West Coast, Sam Schneider handled company business, setting up dates for blues shouter Wynonie Harris, who had gained fame with 'Hurry Hurry' and 'Who Put The Whiskey In The Well' as vocalist for Lucky Millinder's band. Harris's 'Wynonie Blues' with Illinois Jacquet's band reached number three on the race charts for Apollo.

Dinah Washington had left her $75 a week gig with Lionel Hampton, where she made a name for herself with 'Evil Gal Blues' and 'Blow-Top Blues'. Tenor sax man Lucky Thompson, who had recently left Count Basie, led her Apollo dates with a young Charles Mingus on bass. Her star began its rise with Apollo sides like 'No Voot-No Boot'.

Still in 1945, Texas tenor Illinois Jacquet, famous for his groundbreaking solo with Lionel Hampton on 'Flying Home', made a series of 'little big band' sides for Apollo. His 'Robbins Nest', named for disc jockey Fred Robbins, became a jazz standard and was played for years as the theme for Robbins' show. Jacquet's honking and screaming style at Norman Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic concerts made him a major star.

Meanwhile in Los Angeles, tenor man Jack McVea brought in acts like blues shouter Duke Henderson and Rabon Tarrant, McVea's drummer, who sang as well.

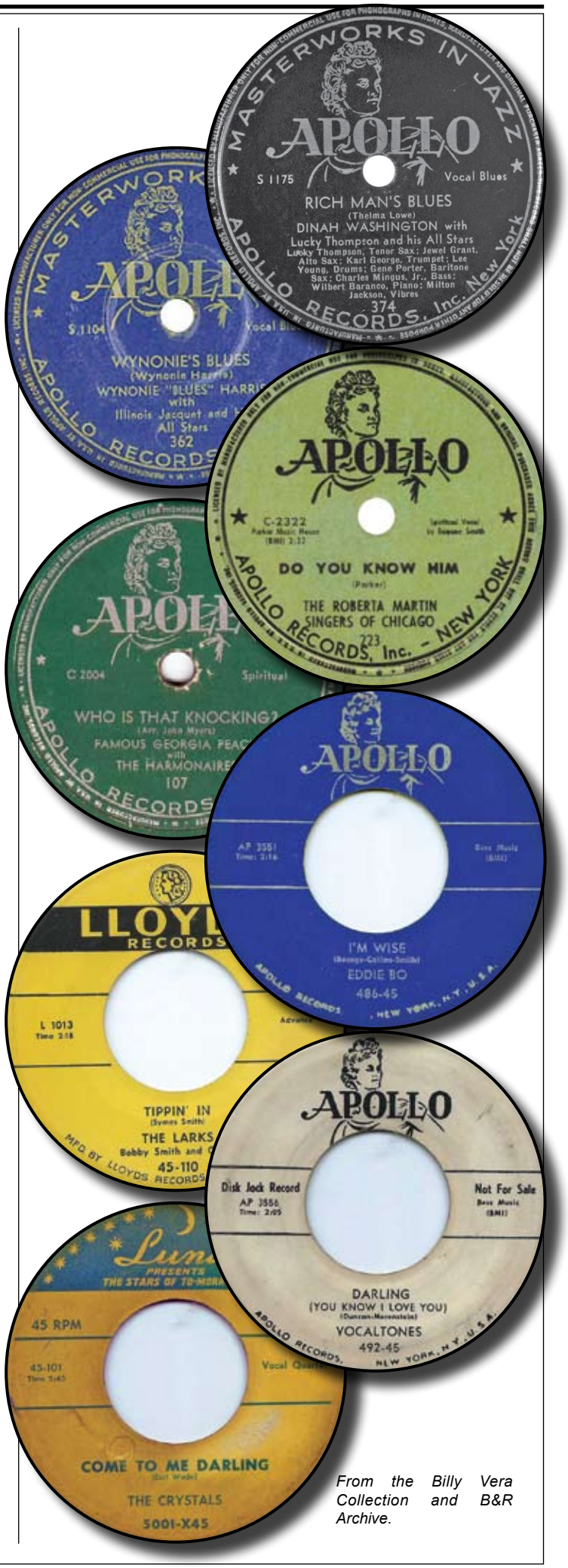
It seems every popular sax player of the time recorded for Apollo: Eddie 'Lockjaw' Davis, Georgie Auld, Arnett Cobb, who had replaced Jacquet in Hamp's band remaking 'Flying Home Number Two'. For Apollo, Cobb hit with 'When I Grow Too Old To Dream' and 'Walkin' With Sid', a 'Flying Home' knockoff dedicated to disc jockey Symphony Sid Torin.

After scoring on Mercury with Cootie Williams on 'Gatortail', Willis Jackson sought to repeat his feat for Apollo. He later allegedly 'married' Ruth Brown, becoming her bandleader and making his own records for Atlantic and Prestige until his passing years later.

After appearing in vaudeville with Bessie Smith and his partner Leonard Reed, Willie Bryant formed a big band in 1934, playing the Savoy Ballroom, later becoming a disc jockey and recording for Apollo in 1945, hitting with 'Blues Around The Clock'. One of the first black people to emcee a television show, by the 1950s he was the regular emcee at the Apollo Theater.

Pianist Sir Charles Thompson led groups on Apollo sessions in 1945- 1947, including one with Dexter Gordon and Charlie Parker, in which Bird plays some early bebop blues on '20th Century Blues' and 'The Street Beat'. A later Thompson session produced baritone sax man Leo Parker's signature tune, 'Mad Lad'.

From the Billy Vera Collection.



From the Billy Vera Collection and B&R Archive.

The Delroys, Apollo promotional photo from the Billy Vera Collection.

New York had its share of blues acts, including Champion Jack Dupree, Doc Pomus, Blue Lu & Danny Barker and Eddie Mack (aka Mack Edmondson) who sang with Cootie Williams, all recorded for Apollo in 1946. That year brought keyboard savant Erroll Garner, who seems to have recorded for everyone, and Charlie Barnett, a wealthy white sax man who was hugely popular among black audiences. Pianist/arranger Luis Russell, who had served as Louis Armstrong's bandleader made some race records for Apollo during this era.

By 1948, the year of the second American Federation of Musicians recording ban, Bess Berman was running the company, the first woman to play such a role. Her husband operated the plant that pressed their records.

A 1949 trip to Chicago resulted in recordings by Sunnyland Slim, whose home provided living quarters and rehearsal space for various musician friends including Apollo artists St. Louis Jimmy, Willie Mabon, and Jimmy Rogers, who made his first version of his standard, 'That's Alright', for Apollo.

Bess brought Bobby Smith, a fine alto player with the Erskine Hawkins band, into the company to oversee record dates and make records of his own. Smith supervised sessions by the Selah Jubilee Singers, who had recorded for various labels under a variety of names. As the Larks, they reached number five with 'Eyesight To The Blind'. Lead singer Eugene Mumford had done time in prison after being falsely accused of raping a white woman and wrote 'When I Leave These Prison Walls' to celebrate his pardon.

The group also did well with the old Larry Clinton standard, 'My Reverie'. Group member Allen Bunn, later known as Tarheel Slim, recorded blues and rhythm and blues. The Larks appeared on the Perry Como and Arthur Godfrey television shows.

In June, 1953 Apollo launched the Lloyds label as a subsidiary. Among Lloyds releases were sides by The Larks with former Erskine Hawkins saxman Bobby Smith. This was a group consisting of Gene Mumford, Orville Brooks, David Bowers and Isiah Bing (the latter two who had recorded with the King Odum Quartet). The company's best-selling artist, Mahalia Jackson, covered the quasi-religious pop hit 'I Believe' for the new label as well.

Another gospel group, the Royal Sons, morphed into the 5 Royales and hit in 1953 with 'Baby Don't Do It', to start off a successful career before moving on to King Records. The following year, Atlantic Records ace piano man Van Walls formed the Night Riders with singer Melvin Smith, doing two dates for Apollo, including a tribute to baseball hero Willie Mays, 'Say Hey'.

By 1953 vocal groups were hot among urban black youngsters. Seemingly, every street corner was home to one such aggregation. Original partner Hy Siegel formed an offshoot label called Timely, still connected to Apollo. His records by The Ambassadors, The Gaytunes and The Charmers failed in the marketplace, but two other acts he signed, Ann Cole and Jalacy (Screamin' Jay) Hawkins, later hit for Baton and OKeh, respectively.

Eddie Bo, Apollo promotional photograph. From the Billy Vera Collection.

The following year, Bess picked up for distribution a record on Charles Lopez's East Harlem label Luna by The Crystals called 'Come To Me Darling'. The other two songs from their session came out on Apollo proper as by The Opals. This started Apollo in the business of doo-wop and rock'n'roll with some excellent street corner groups like The Keynotes, The Vocaltones, The Del Roys - who cut a bit of nonsense called 'Bermuda Shorts' and The Cellos, who made a hit out of 'Rang Tang Ding Dong'. Tenor saxophonist Jimmy Wright, who played blasting solos on songs by The Cleftones, the Valentines, and Frankie Lymon and The Teenagers for George Goldner, also appears on a few Apollo vocal group dates.

The Chesters, with Anthony Gourdine on lead vocal, evolved into Little Anthony and The Imperials when they moved to End Records and the Sparks Of Rhythm's 'Handy Man', with a bit of altering by songwriter Otis Blackwell, became a huge hit when revived by the Sparks' Jimmy Jones a few years later.

In 1956, New Orleans piano playing singer Eddie Bo recorded 'I'm Wise', his take on Al Collins's Ace side, 'I Got The Blues For You', later reworked by Little Richard as 'Slippin' And Slidin''. Eddie made several more for Apollo that sold poorly.

Solomon Burke made his recording debut with a number of mediocre records that barely hinted at the great success he would find years later at Atlantic as a major soul star.

When finances dictated that Mahalia Jackson's contract be sold to Columbia, Apollo released albums to capitalise on her growing fame. George Avakian, who was in charge of LPs for Columbia, tried in vain to cross her over into the pop market through the CBS connections, arranging for appearances on Ed Sullivan and other television shows. The Bermans were unable to compete with the Atlantics and Chesses, who were doing their own promotion instead of relying on distributors as the indies had previously done. Bess Berman tried to exploit the album market by reissuing items from Apollo's past but there was little interest in her catalogue, so she closed the doors in 1962.

The company was acquired by its accountant, George Alpert, who also bought the trade magazine, *The Cash Box*. Apollo was briefly administered by Alpert's son Mel and then went through a series of owners, finally ending up with Bob Koester at Delmark purchasing the label's jazz catalogue, which included the Dinah Washington and Wynonie Harris items, and Malaco owning the rest, including the rock'n'roll and doo-wop masters. A number of Apollo gospel albums were released on the Kenwood label, which Bess Berman may have had some involvement in.

Ike and Bess Berman finished up their careers turning over their plating business, Long Wear Plating and Stamping to their son, Jack, making parts for many of the New York record manufacturers.

Before there was a Florence Greenburg or a Vivian Carter, there was Bess Berman. One thing which led to the downfall of Apollo and other 1940s and early 1950s labels like Aladdin and Specialty was the fact that, in their day, promotion was largely done by distributors. Once this practice ended, it was left to the labels themselves, most of which were unable to make the transition.