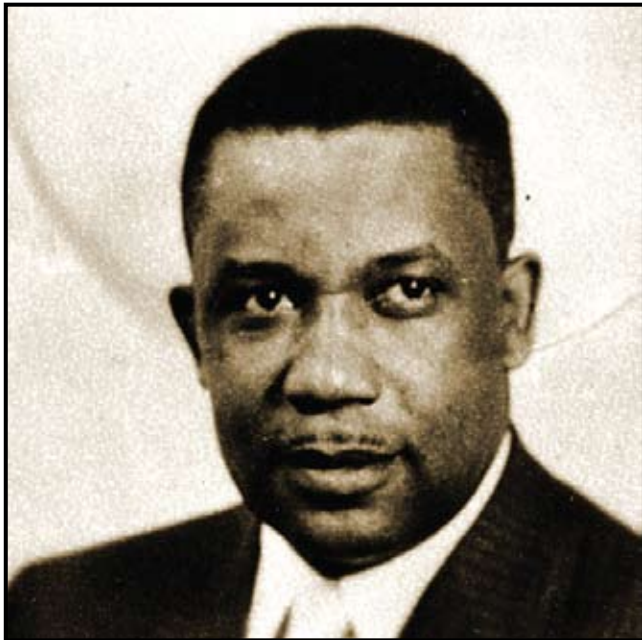


THE RU-JAC RECORDS STORY

Review by Tony Burke



Rufus E. Mitchell, Courtesy Omnivore Records.

For almost six decades, rhythm and blues and soul music's foundations were built on countless small indie labels, issuing 45s which have fascinated fans, collectors and discographers ever since. Some indie labels lasted for a handful of releases, some found national chart success, others kept going against all the odds, some made noise locally and scored hits on the regional charts and some gained 'legendary' and collector status with a niche following. One such label was Baltimore based Ru-Jac Records who were in business between 1963 and 1980.

Whilst national chart hits evaded them, Ru-Jac attained legendary status among r&b and soul fans (including those of the Northern variety) especially for releases by artists such as Winfield Parker, Gene and Eddie, Sir Joe, and others.

Ru-Jac had its roots in the workings of the 1950s music industry. The force behind the label was Rufus E. Mitchell, originally a tailor who ran a beach resort (known as Carr's Beach, a segregation-era beach for African-Americans) owned by a local businessman – Little Willie Adams, who 'assisted' local black businesses to get established.

Mitchell also owned a booking and promotions business, Ace Enterprises. By 1961 he had recognised there was money to be made from publishing songs and music - plus he had the advantage of being the brother of the jazz trumpet player 'Blue' Mitchell who at the time was recording for Riverside Records - so Rufus had lots of contacts.

Partnering with local businessman Jack Bennett, they initially published 'Low Brown' by pianist Joe Blair (aka Yusef Salim) which was recorded by saxman Leo Parker. By 1961, Mitchell began booking artists from Washington D.C. including Billy Stewart, The Four Jewels, the Kay Keys Band and singer and songwriter James Stewart (aka 'James Scotland' (sic)) of the vocal group Los Latinos, who also recorded under the name of 'Sherlock Holmes'. Mitchell extended his growing empire in a link up with Bob Lee at Washington DC label Start Records.

Mitchell helped Lee with the funding, promotion and the distribution of Start, but decided to get into the recording business himself turning Ru-Jac into a record label as well as a publisher and booking agency.

1962 saw Rufus open up rehearsal space at the back of his office in Laurens Street, Baltimore, and a year later the first Ru-Jac single, 'Please Don't Go', by Jesse Crawford – a local bus driver – backed by the Kay Keys Band, hit the streets. The disc was picked up by Juggy Murray's Sue label and released on his subsidiary label, Symbol. It failed to dent the charts – but Mitchell was encouraged enough to get a second release out by Little Sonny Daye with the Shydells Band.

Ever savvy, Mitchell set up a new publishing arm called Ditty Bop Music, and commissioned a new label design. Ru-Jac went on to release over fifty 45rpm discs between 1963 and around 1972 (with occasional releases through to 1980).

Omnivore Records, who now own the Ru-Jac tapes, records and publishing have just released four various artist compilations, having previously issued two single artists sets – Winfield Parker's 'Mr. Clean – Winfield Parker At Ru-Jac' and Gene And Eddie's 'Tough Enough – Gene And Eddie with Sir Joe At Ru-Jac'.

Volume One covers 1963 to 1964 and commences with the Lamont Esquires unissued track 'Fatback', a tough early 1960s r&b instrumental and Jesse Crawford's debut disc. There are also obscurities such as Jeannie Dee's blues cover of 'Everyday I Have The Blues'; Tiny Tim Harris, a balladeer who styled himself on Jackie Wilson; some fine gospel from the Fruitland Harmonizers; versatile singer Brenda Jones and class singer and saxman Winfield Parker previously of the group The Veejays; office manager/singer Charles Johnson and Marie Allen who had recorded with Chuck Brooker's Band for Triumph in 1959 and with Little Sonny Warner for Bee Bee Records.

Volume two covers 1964 to 1966 and marks a turning point, with Mitchell working for the first time with Washington's formidable Lillian Claiborne, owner of D.C. Records. Mrs. Claiborne was impressed by a group called The Neltones (who she saw at a talent competition). The Neltones wait their way through 'Come On Over' and deliver a pastiche of the early 1960s Drifters on 'Ces't La Vie'. Also included are tracks by Washington D.C. favourites Mask Man (Harmon Bethea) and The Cap-Tan's (or The Agents) and the wonderfully named 'Shirley Of The Soul Sisters and Brother' (a trio); David Randolph (aka Butch Cornell) who led a Jimmy Smith-styled Hammond organ trio; Bobby Sax and The Housekeepers who belt out two instrumentals – 'Get Right' and a cover of Etta James' 'At Last'. There are more sides by Brenda Jones (one a backing track for 'It Must Be Love') and for the first time we are introduced to the prodigious talent of an eighteen-years-old Arthur Conley who had moved north from Atlanta, hooked up with saxman Harold Holt and befriended both Winfield Parker and Otis Redding. Even on the demo of 'Whole Lot Of Woman' Conley's sweet soul vocals are distinctive.

Sleeve note writer Kevin Coombe says that by 1966 Ru-Jac had "just about gone into cardiac arrest". However, by 1967 it was back. Volume three (1966-1967) sees more sides from Winfield Parker, the label's best known artist demo-ing more songs and recording with the sometime house band The Shydells. Singer Rita Doryse cut sides with the Bob Craig Combo including the pop standard 'Goodie Goodie', (not sure why) and the first of a number of sides by soul duo Gene (Dorsett) And Eddie (Best). The duo were regularly supported by trumpet player, arranger, and songwriter 'Sir Joe' Quarterman and his band. Quarterman regularly worked as an arranger and bandleader at Ru-Jac while also working with

a band called the El Corols. Sir Joe missed out on his chance and a deal with Atlantic, when Lillian Claiborne refused to sign over the publishing rights to a song he had written for Gene and Eddie. Office receptionist and singer Kitty Lane (aka Kitty Karl and Kitty Love) was also a member of Otis Redding's touring band whilst Leon Gibson was introduced to Mitchell by Conley. Gibson cut the dance number, 'Do The Roller', in 1967 before starting his own label. He also tried his hand at politics and ran a TV and Stereo shop which was raided by the cops for selling stolen goods.

The final volume, covering 1967 to 1980, sees Winfield Parker trying his hand at being Wilson Pickett on 'She's So Pretty' (the backing



Winfield Parker. Courtesy Omnivore Records.



Flyer for an event in November, 2017 in, Baltimore on the "music of Ru-Jac Records and the story of Rufus Mitchell". Courtesy Creative Alliance.

track appears as by The Upsetters); some fine up-tempo soul sides by the Fred Martin Revue. They also tried their hand at James Brown-styled funk on 'Sugar' and jazzy r&b on 'Contagious'. The Dynamic Corvettes had originally formed in 1959, on 'Keep Of The Grass' they warn kids to avoid smoking dope while 'It's A Trap' warns about working for 'the man' and could be from a 'blaxploitation' movie. There is wah wah soul from Saturday and a bewildering instrumental by Utopian Concept which sounds like B-movie incidental music, and a vocal track of the take by Francine Long. Singer Willie Mason had been round the block and in 1972 he was backed by the Fred Martin Revue on his sides here as part of a deal where Mrs. Claiborne supplied unissued instrumentals as backing tracks. The Jimmy Dotson included here is not the famous Louisiana-Houston bluesman and is backed on tracks issued in 1980 supported by 'Rhythm By Inner Light Band'.

Across the four volumes there are plenty of unissued and alternate takes, plus demos, instrumentals, ballads, and stompers by unknown artists who didn't even get their names in the recording log book.

By the late 1960s Joe Quarterman and Gene and Eddie had parted company and funk began to dominate black music. Winfield Parker moved on to record successfully in Philly. Mitchell got re-married and launched a valet formal wear shop. He also faced a lawsuit from Arthur Conley and he wound down the record business, turned Carr's Beach into a family resort and 'gifted' the Ru-Jac masters to Winfield Parker for safekeeping. Mitchell died in 2003 but the files, sheet music, paperwork and images laid locked up and untouched for a decade.

Omnivore co-producers Cheryl Pawelski and sleeve-note writer Kevin Coombe, have done a superb job on this reissue series. Each digi-pack volume comes complete with a well-produced booklet, detailed notes and artist biographies, rare photos, label shots and discographies telling the amazing story of a small record company who started out in the early 1960s r&b era, moved onto 1960s and 1970s soul, but eventually ran out of steam as tastes changed and the music had no more room for them. Absolutely fascinating stuff!



Label shots from the B&R Archive.

THE RU-JAC RECORDS STORY: Volume One 1963-1964

Something Got A Hold On Me
Omnivore OMCD 254 (67:30)
LAMONT EQUIRES: Fatback (take 1 prev. unissued); JESSE CRAWFORD WITH THE KEY KEYS BAND: Please Don't Go/ I Love You So; LITTLE SONNY DAYE WITH THE SHYDELLS BAND: A Woman Like You/ I'm Through With You; JEANNE DEE: Everyday I Have The Blues (prev. unissued); MR. T (TINY TIM): Saving All My Loving/ It's Everything To Me; CELESTINE: I Want To Be Sure/ You Won; FLATTOP BOBBY AND THE SOUL TWISTERS: Cross Track (take 2, prev. unissued); WINFIELD PARKER: When I'm Alone/ One Of These Mornings (take 3, prev. unissued); BRENDA JONES: Can't You See/ Lets Go Back To School/ That's All I Have To Do; CHARLES JOHNSON: Put A Light In The Window; FRUITLAND HARMONIZERS: My Father Watches Over Me/ Take Care Of Me; UNKNOWN ARTIST: Something Got A Hold On Me (prev. unissued); UNKNOWN ARTIST: Trash Can (prev. unissued); THE TEARDROPS BAND FEATURING MARIE ALLEN; All Over Again/ Crying Won't Help You; ROCKIN' ROBIN: Don't Bit Mo (prev. unissued); JAMES HILL: Foolish To Try; THE JOLLY JAX: Meadow Of Love/ The Monkey Cha Cha/ Joe (take 5, prev. unissued)

THE RU-JAC RECORDS STORY: Volume Two 1964-1966

Get Right
Omnivore OMCD 255 (59:17)
BRENDA JONES: It Must Be Love/ I'm So Afraid/ So Alone (take 3, prev. unissued)/ It Must Be Love (backing track, prev. unissued); SHIRLEY OF THE SOUL SISTERS & BROTHER: What More? (Can Anyone Want)/ You Don't Really Care; BUTCH CORNELL'S TRIO: Goose Pimples/ Here 'Tis Now/ Goose Pimples (alt.version, prev. unissued); HAROLD HOLT: Where You Lead Me/ I'm A Stranger/ Where You Lead Me (alt. version 2, prev. unissued)/ ARTHUR CONLEY: Whole Lotta Woman (demo, prev. unissued)/ Hiding Out In Blue Shadows (demo, prev. unissued); BOBBY SAX AND HIS HOUSEKEEPERS: Get Right/ Soul At Last; THE NELLTONES: Come On Over/ C'est La Vie (That's Life); WINFIELD PARKER: I Love You Just The Same (demo, prev. unissued); WINFIELD PARKER AND THE SHYDELLS BAND: I Love You Just The Same; (version 1, take 5, prev. unissued); THE MASK MAN & THE CAP-TANS: Love Can Do Wonders/ Chicken Wings.

THE RU-JAC RECORDS STORY: Volume Three 1966-1967

Finally Together
Omnivore OMCD 256 (63:47)
RITA DORYSE (THE SYDELLS BAND): Wait Til Then/ When I'm Alone; RITA DORYSE & THE BOB CRAIG TRIO: Please Let Me Love You/ Goodie Goodie; RITA DORYSE: Born To Be Loved (prev. unissued); KITTY LANE: It's Love I need/ Sweetheart/ The Feeling Is Gone (prev. unissued); UNKNOWN ARTIST: Finally Together (prev. unissued)/ Searching (prev. unissued); WINFIELD PARKER: Go Away Playgirl (take 5, prev. unissued); GENE & EDDIE: I Would Cry/ I Tell You; UNKNOWN ARTIST: Sweet Little Girl (prev. unissued)/ WINFIELD PARKER WITH THE SHYDELLS BAND: Sweet Little Girl; WINFIELD PARKER: My Love (demo with background vocals, prev. unissued)/ She's My Girl (demo prev. unissued); THE SHYDELLS: Lightning (Part 1) (prev. unissued)/ Ooby Gooby (prev. unissued); UNKNOWN ARTIST: Never Never Leave Me (prev. unissued); LEON GIBSON: Do The Roller/ Working Hard; SIR JOE: Nobody Beats My Love; THE CARESSORS: I Can't Stay Away/ Who Can It Be.

THE RU-JAC RECORDS STORY: Volume Four 1967-1980

Changes
Omnivore OMCD 257 (68:07)
WINFIELD PARKER: She's So Pretty/ Nothing (prev. unissued); THE UPSETTERS: She's So Pretty (backing track, prev. unissued); UNKNOWN ARTIST: Tighten Up; GENE & EDDIE: Sweet Little Girl/ Le Me Go Easy (alt. version); FRED MARTIN REVUE: I'm The One Who Loves You/ Take Me Back Again/ I Know It's Going To Happen/ Contagious; FRED MARTIN JNR. & THE EXCITERS: Love Don't Leave Me Now; FRED MARTIN & REVUE: Sugar/ When I'm Alone; SATURDAY: Changes Part 1; DYNAMIC CORVETTES: Keep Of The Grass/ It's A Trap; FRANCINE LONG: Days May Come, Days May Go; UTOPIAN CONCEPT: Days May Come, Days May Go; WILLIE MASON AND THE FRED MARTIN REVUE: I loved Yu Once/ Go On Back; JIMMY DOTSON & RHYTHM BY INNER LIGHT BAND: Think Of Me As Your Soldier/ To Be Your Lover.

B&R reviewed the Winfield Parker set (written by Mike Atherton) and the Gene & Eddie set (written by Norman Darwen) in B&R's 309 and 313. A further set of Arthur Conley 'Sweet Soul Demos' will be available soon.