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 eluded 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 trumpeter ‘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 Scottland’). The Neltones (who she saw at a talent competition). The Neltones wail 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 Bethel) 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.

Stevie 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
Flyer for an event in the story 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 Tha 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 Uptopian 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 instrumental 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!