

“The housekeepers were buying two copies” The Specialty Records Story

By Billy Vera



Roy Milton's Solid Senders at The Downbeat Club, Tulsa, circa early 1950s. From the Dan Kochakian Collection.

BMG Books has inaugurated a new series dedicated to independent record companies, both old and new. The initial offerings were on Excello (see review in our March 2019 issue) and the Seattle, Washington grunge label, Sub Pop. Each book is published in a 7x7 inch format, the size of a 45rpm record, consists of around 50,000 words and roughly sixteen pages of photos.

A few months ago, I received an email from BMG's Scott Bomar, asking if I'd be interested in writing one on Specialty Records and its founder, Art Rupe. Scott had read and enjoyed my memoir, 'Harlem To Hollywood', and felt that, since I was once employed by Specialty and have remained friends with Art for some thirty years, I'd be the right guy to handle a project like this.

From my time of producing over fifty reissue CDs of Specialty material, I'd kept Xerox copies of various correspondence, union session contracts and other items valuable to researching such a book. In addition, Art Rupe — and his amazing memory — was never more than an email or phone call away. Even at age 102, his recall is as close to total as I've encountered in many a much younger person.

Born Arthur Nathan Goldberg, near Pittsburgh in western Pennsylvania, young Arthur was fascinated by show business, mainly the circus, and he would spend time working in a carnival. As a boy, he spent many a Sunday, sitting on the curb and listening to the music that came through the doors of the black Baptist church near his home. "It wasn't for the religion — I'm more of a Secular Humanist — it was the soul, the feeling of this music that moved me almost to tears," he recalled.

After university, he crossed the country to Los Angeles, hoping to find work in the motion picture business, but found that end of the business 'too clubby' and looked elsewhere. This was during World War II, and the shellac from which records were made was difficult to come by, as most of it came from China, and the Japanese occupied much of that country. Even the major labels were trimming their rosters, leaving mainly their best-selling Pop acts. "Basically," he said, "I was taking the crumbs off the majors' table."

After a short stint with Robert Scherman's Atlas label, "...where I learned how not to run a record company," in 1944 he found a partner, Al Middleman, and started a label he called Juke Box. "In those days, juke box venders served as *ad hoc* distributors and accounted for more than 50% of our business." His first release, 'Boogie No. 1' by the Sepia Tones, sold over 70,000 copies, providing working capital with which to continue.

His next step was 'to find more talent'. He signed three acts, Marion Abernathy, whom he named 'the Blues Woman'; veteran singer/pianist Roosevelt Sykes, renamed 'the Blues Man'; and Roy Milton & his Solid Senders. Two of these made hits, Abernathy, with 'Voot, Voot', and Milton, with 'Milton's Boogie' and 'R.M. Blues', which led to a decade's worth of top ten hits, with vocals by both Roy and his piano player, Camille Howard.

Suspensions of a low royalty count led Art to dissolve the partnership and, taking his masters, formed a new label, Specialty. Milton continued to be his biggest seller, with nineteen top ten hits over the next decade, but Rupe realised that to grow he must find more talent, which he did with Jimmy Liggins and Joe Lutcher. Lutcher didn't stay long but Jimmy did, charting several times.

A musicians' union recording ban came about on 1st January 1948. To work around his inability to hire union musicians for the strike's duration, Rupe recorded gospel groups, who sang a capella. The first of these to be successful was The Pilgrim Travelers. His other successful gospel acts included Brother Joe May, The Soul Stirrers and Sister Wynona Carr. To ensure that his gospel artists were paid for their concerts, Art formed Herald Attractions, run by Lillian Cumber. Unlike other agencies, Art took no percentage of their fees: "I just wanted to make sure they got paid."



Specialty promo photo of Jimmy Liggins from the Billy Vera Collection.



Specialty promo photo of Camille Howard from the Billy Vera Collection.

By now, he'd formed Venice Music, named after his company's address, 311 Venice Boulevard, to publish the songs he recorded. As other blues artists became available, Big Maceo, Smokey Hogg and Amos Easton (Bumble Bee Slim), he took a shot, hoping to sell a few.

By 1949, Specialty was a going concern. When Leon RenŽs Exclusive label went out of business, Rupe's distributors told him they could use as many copies of RenŽs Charles Brown and Joe Liggins hits as they could get. When Art and RenŽs creditors were unable to come to terms, Rupe simply signed Joe Liggins, promptly hitting with the top record of the year, 'Pink Champagne', as well as re-recording Joe's Exclusive hits, 'The Honeydripper' and 'Got A Right To Cry', for catalogue items. Unlike his brother Jimmy, Joe's songs were the kind that engendered cover versions, earning more money for all concerned.

That year also brought Percy Mayfield and his songwriting prowess to the company, hitting number one right off the bat with a standard-to-be, 'Please Send Me Someone To Love'. Like Joe Liggins, Percy's song was immediately covered, by artists ranging from Dinah Washington to Dale Evans, wife of cowboy star, Roy Rogers. Mayfield's songs have been sung and recorded to this day by everyone from Ray Charles to Nancy Wilson to Lou Rawls.

By 1952, things were slowing down, although Roy Milton was still charting regularly. Younger people were becoming attracted to rhythm & blues, even some white kids. Rupe made a talent scouting trip to New Orleans and found a youngster named Lloyd Price, resulting in a giant hit, 'Lawdy Miss Clawdy'. Art remembered: "My distributor down there told me that housekeepers were buying two copies, one for themselves and one for the teenagers of their employers. This was our first record to sell on the other side of the tracks."

After only a couple more hits, Lloyd was drafted, but another youthful act, Jesse and Marvin, did well with their creamy, proto doo-wop ballad, 'Dream Girl'. Jesse Belvin, the most respected singer in Los Angeles, would finally make his mark on Modern Records a few years hence, with his classic, 'Goodnight My Love'. When Jesse went in to the Army, Marvin Phillips formed Marvin & Johnny and charted again with 'Baby Doll'.

Specialty was now the top label in the gospel field, with The Swan Silvertones, Dorothy Love Coates and Alex Bradford, with his classic, 'Too Close To Heaven'.

Sales of the blues, while not in huge numbers, paid the rent while waiting for the next big hit. There was Mercy Dee, whose wonderful 'One Room Country Shack' became a standard when revived by Mose Allison. "Mercy cut that one in our little demo studio in the basement" said Art.

Things were busy enough for Art to hire an A&R man, Johnny Vincent, whose first act was Frankie Lee Sims. Sims' 'Lucy Mae Blues' did well in southern juke boxes. Not realising that H-Bomb Ferguson was under contract to Herman Lubinsky's Savoy Records, Vincent did a session with him which never came out until I released it on one of my compilations.

Rupe wasn't as lucky with Floyd Dixon, who'd had hits on Modern, Supreme and Peacock, but wasn't able to come up with one for Specialty, despite fine items like 'Hard Living Alone'. A session at bassist Ted Brinson's garage studio did better, with Gus Jenkins, under the name Little Temple, and Frank Patt as Honeyboy. They recorded two of the most vivid titles of the year, 'I Ate The Wrong Part' and 'Bloodstains On The Wall' respectively.

Johnny Vincent earned his paycheck with Guitar Slim's 'The Things That I Used To Do', a number one smash, arranged by Ray Charles, who also played piano. Vincent made a mess of his one date with John Lee Hooker, after which Rupe gave him the sack. Vincent took Guitar Slim soundalike Earl King with him and formed his own label, Ace Records.

The Soul Stirrers were selling well, thanks to the sound, and sex appeal, of Sam Cooke. Some of their sides, like 'One More River' and 'Touch The Hem Of His Garment' sold like secular hit records.

Vincent's replacement was Robert 'Bumps' Blackwell. He got off to a good start with a pair of nice but poorly selling records by Jesse Belvin. He did better with 'Nite Owl' by Tony Allen and the Champs, today recognised as a doo-wop classic. Blackwell cut other poorly selling vocal groups, including major league baseball star Arthur Lee Maye and the Crowns, and Vernon Green and the Phantoms, that are much beloved by group fans.

For over a year, Rupe had been pestered by phone calls from this annoying guy, claiming that he was the greatest thing since sliced bread. Neither Art nor Bumps heard anything special in his demo, just another blues singer of the type that came across the transom every day. But his persistence paid off and Art decided to give him a session, actually two, morning and afternoon, dispatching Bumps to Cosimo Matassa's J&M Music in New Orleans to meet one Little Richard and see if something might come of it.

After a morning of mediocrity, a lunch break was in order. Richard, ever the ham, hopped up on the piano at the Dew Drop Inn and began singing one of the dirty songs he regularly performed for drunken white college boys at fraternity house parties, 'Tutti Frutti, Good Booty'. Finally, Bumps, who feared for his job, heard something that he felt might sell. He asked local songwriter Dorothy LaBostrie if she might clean up the lyrics. Back in the studio, lightning struck. A hit and a career were born. That same week, Blackwell also recorded Ernest Kador, who'd hit several years later, as Ernie K-Doe, with 'Mother-in-Law' for another label, and Li'l Millet and his Creoles' with the marvelous 'Rich Woman', revived as a Grammy winner decades in the future by Robert Plant and Alison Kraus.

Little Richard today remains Specialty's best-known star, although Art says: "Roy Milton sold far more than Richard." Yet, Richard's hits have become rock'n'roll standards, recorded by Elvis Presley, Bill Haley, Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers and many more.

Back in Hollywood, Art recorded the great Clifton Chenier's zydeco classic, 'Eh Tete Fee', while Bumps made some excellent items like guitarist Roy Montrell's '(Every Time I Hear That) Mellow Saxophone', Big Boy Myles' 'Just To Hold My Hand' and Art Neville's 'Oooh-Whew Baby', in New Orleans.

Lloyd Price had returned from the Army and honoured his contract by doing a few more sessions, but they were in his older style and couldn't compete with what Richard was putting out. His contract expired and he moved to Washington, D.C. and started his own label, KRC, with a song called 'Just Because'. His cousin, Larry Williams, asked if

The Enjoyable RECORD SHOP No. 2
Presents:
THE RECORDING ARTISTS
ROY MILTON
&
Camille Howard
IN PERSON
Tuesday April 6, 1948
At 8:15 P.M.
1101 Laurens Street
They will Have an Autographed Picture For You. We Now Have all Their Latest Records In Stock Plan to Attend Bring your Freinds

Specialty flyer for personal appearance by Camille Howard. From the Billy Vera Collection.



Poster for 22nd July 1955, Gospel concert at Los Angeles's Shrine Auditorium featuring an all Specialty line up. From the B&R Archive.

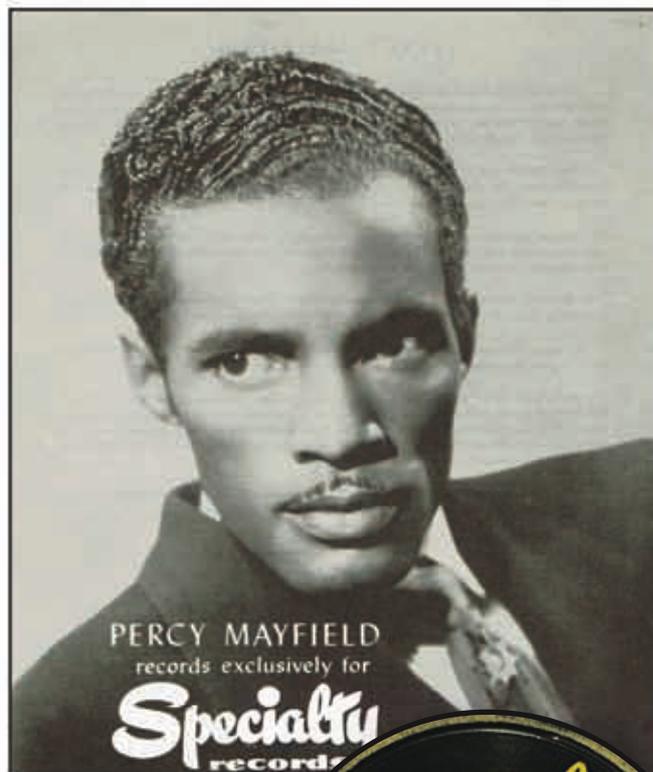
he could sing it. When Lloyd refused, Williams went to Art Rupe and showed it to him. Recognising a hit song, he rushed Larry into the studio and came out with a number eleven hit. Lloyd sold his master to ABC Paramount, whose better distribution and connection with the ABC television network helped get it on Dick Clark's American Bandstand, outselling Larry's version.

Larry's next record, produced by Blackwell, became a big hit, 'Short Fat Fannie', but Bumps would not remain at Specialty much longer. He and Sam Cooke were plotting, hoping to get Sam signed to a major label. Blackwell heard in Sam a modern version of the 1930s Irish tenor, Morton Downey. Art instructed him to try a second session with Sam and chose the songs, which included one called 'You Send Me'. Arriving at the studio to check on things, Art noticed two male and two female white background singers and blew his top. He felt Sam's thin voice needed the warm sound of black male voices to bring it out.

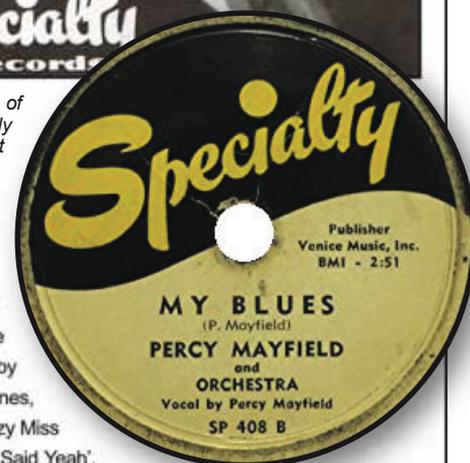
He agreed to give the session to Bumps and Sam in lieu of future royalties. After being turned down by every big label in town, Bumps wound up at the fledgling Keen label, where 'You Send Me' became a monster smash. Not to be outdone, Rupe took one of Sam's demos and added the same background and had himself a number eleven hit with 'I'll Come Running Back To You'.



Billy Vera left with Art Rupe, at Art's 100th birthday, 5th September 2017, Santa Barbara. From the Billy Vera Collection.



Specialty promo photo of Percy Mayfield from the Billy Vera Collection. Label shot from the B&R Archive.



Larry Williams had one more hit, this time produced by Art, 'Bony Moronie', and wrote some fine songs, later recorded by the Beatles and Rolling Stones, including 'Slow Down', 'Dizzy Miss Lizzy', 'Bad Boy' and 'She Said Yeah', but nothing sold in Larry's versions. Rupe's aversion to payola may have had something to do with this.

Art found a duo who had terrific songs, Don & Dewey. The boys never charted, but their songs, published by Venice Music, 'Justine', 'Koko Joe' (written by new A&R man, Sonny Bono), 'Farmer John', 'Big Boy Pete' and 'Leavin' It All Up To You', which reached number one Pop twice, all became hits when covered by other artists. To run his New Orleans office, Art hired Harold Battiste, who did some of the Don & Dewey records plus Art Neville and others, before moving on to A.F.O. Records and a job with his Specialty co-worker, Sonny Bono, as Sonny & Cher's musical director.

Here and there were a couple of poorly selling sides today considered rock'n'roll classics, like Jerry Byrne's 'Lights Out', co-written by his cousin, Mac 'Dr. John' Rebennack, and 'Haunted House', by Johnny Fuller, performed onstage each Halloween to this day by Bruce Springsteen.

Tired and repulsed by the growing corruption in the music business, Art wound down Specialty, preferring to concentrate on his more reliable oil business. In 1963, Little Richard called to say he'd found this group in Germany "who could copy anybody, even me," and asked if Art would sign them. Rupe declined and lost the Beatles, but told Richard he'd love to record him again. With Don & Dewey among the backing band, they resulted in one final Specialty chart record, 'Bama Lama Bama Loo', and that was the end.

Specialty continued, servicing oldies customers, eventually selling off Venice Music and later, the label he founded, to Fantasy Records. Today, he runs the Arthur N. Rupe Foundation for philanthropic purposes.

Billy Vera's 'Rip It Up - The Specialty Records Story' is published this month by BMG Books. A full review will appear in the next issue of B&R.