

Sire Records Expands Through Its Lengthy Involvement With The British Music Scene

by Seymour Stein

My teenage years were so consumed with rock 'n' roll music that I marked the passage of time with such events as Atlantic changing the color of its label from yellow to red, Bobby Lester being replaced by Harvey Fuqua in the Moonglows, and RCA purchasing Elvis' contract from Sun. Growing up in Brooklyn in the mid-1950s gave me easy access to the great live revues held periodically at that borough's premiere venues, the Fox and Paramount Theatres. The airwaves were full of great music: Alan Freed on WINS and Jocko Henderson and Jack Walker spearheading R&B on WOV, with WLIB, WWRL, WNJR and WHOM in hot pursuit.

The four-year period from 1954 to the end of 1957 was rock's first golden era, and the music turned itself inside out. There was the infusion of rhythm and blues into pop with the emergence of such immortals as Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Fats Domino, Bo Diddley, the Drifters, Ray Charles, The Flamingos and, later, Sam Cooke and the Isley Brothers. White-influenced rock, mostly country and rockabilly, broke through in 1956 with Elvis, followed by Gene Vincent, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly, Eddie Cochran and others. New York was the center of the music business and had its own special music "do-wop" with groups like the Heartbeats, Five Satins, Cletones and Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers and Dion and the Belmonts. By 1957, branches of this music had spread to all major black urban areas, but particularly Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and Los Angeles.

Then, toward the end of the fifties, a slick, more stylized form of rock, lacking the spontaneity of the music that preceded it, began to take hold in America. Although certain of these artists like Ricky Nelson, Gene Pitney and Bobby Vee were to make significant contributions to rock, most of it was too watered down for my tastes. It was during this first lull in rock and roll that I set my sights on England to expand my horizons.

Aside from the odd hit like "He's Got the Whole World In His Hand" by Laurie Lon-

don, my introduction to the British scene came from the record and sheet music charts of *New Musical Express* and *Melody Maker* that appeared in this country in *Cash Box* and *Billboard* each week and, later, from the magazines themselves. It was here that I first became aware of sub-publishing, noticing that many of the American hits were published by different companies I had never heard of, such as Lawrence Wright, Boosey and Hawkes, Campbell-Connelly, Keith Prowse, Feldmans, Francis, Day & Hunter, Macmelodies and Peter Maurice.

The record labels were different, too, with names like Parlophone, Pye Nixa, Oriole, Top Rank and Fontana. It was a great shock to learn that RCA's "Nipper" was actually the registered trademark of EMI's HMV label, as was the Columbia label and their "musical note" trademark. All American Decca records were released on either Coral or Brunswick, as the two Decca's, although distributed by the British company, were totally separate. Decca was then the most aggressive company in licensing U.S. repertoire, most of which appeared on its London American subsidiary. EMI's comparable label was Stateside, but it was a poor second. With material from Phil Spector's Phyllis label, Eddie Cochran and Johnny Burnette from Liberty, Fats Domino & Ricky Nelson from Imperial and Duane Eddy from Jamie, Little Richard from Specialty and many others all available on London/American, the young British record buyer must have eyed that label as the Two-Tone of that period.

While still in my final years of school, I secured a job working with Tom Noonan and Paul Ackerman at *Billboard*. This position made it easier to obtain copies of British releases. My favorites were "Picture of You" by Joe Brown, "Shakin' All Over" by Johnny Kidd and the Pirates, "What Do You Want" by Adam Faith, "Move It" by Cliff Richard, "Apache" by the Shadows, Marty Wilde's "Bad Boy," and, of course, Joe Meek's legendary instrumental, "Telstar" by the Tornados.

Moving on from *Billboard* to King Records, the Cincinnati-based home of James Brown and other R&B greats, I came

in contact with Len Wood, then managing director of EMI, King's U.K. licensee. At one meeting he and Syd Nathan, King's fiery founder, were heatedly debating King's attempt to secure an option on all EMI repertoire if it was passed on by Capitol. Nathan did not succeed, but it was not until several years later that I realized how important this option could have been.

When I heard the Beatles' first Parlophone record, "Love Me Do," I was not overly impressed. Their followup, "Please, Please Me," was one of the most exciting records I had heard during the early part of 1963. It was really surprised, months later, to see the record released on Vee-Jay, as I felt certain Capitol would see the potential for America, especially since by that time, "From Me To You" and "She Loves You" had followed it to #1 in Britain.

It was only Vee-Jay's subsequent bankruptcy and EMI's wisdom in licensing "She Loves You" to Swan Records as a one-off that eventually secured the Beatles for Capitol. But Capitol was to continue passing on acts even after the Beatle breakthrough. They basically released those artists from the Brian Epstein stable like Cilla Black and Peter and Gordon, allowing the Dave Clark Five, Herman's Hermits, the Hollies, and the Animals to go elsewhere. Decca, having virtual control of its American company, saw to it that London released product by the Rolling Stones, Zombies, Moody Blues and the remainder of its roster. Pye, having no U.S. company of their own, would send their releases each week to the various labels they represented. At that time (1964), I was working with George Goldner, Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller at Red Bird, and I remember their scrambling with Warner Brothers for rights to Petula Clark's "Downtown." Pye also had the Kinks, the Searchers and Donovan.

In 1966, when Richard Gottelher and I started Sire Records, almost immediately we began looking toward Britain as a talent source. This was more out of necessity than design. Clive Davis had recently taken over at CBS and was determined to bring that company rock credibility at any cost. The deals he negotiated, followed by the other majors who were keeping pace, ushered in the modern recording contracts and big advances of today. As a fledgling company, Sire could not hope to compete.

On one of my first trips to England, I met Mike Vernon, a staff producer at Decca and pioneer in that country's blues revival.



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Among the acts he produced were John Mayall's Blues Breakers, Ten Years After and Savoy Brown. Mike was about to break away and devote himself full-time to operating his little blues label, Blue Horizon. I offered him some help in getting the company started and, after several months, was approached about becoming more involved. Sire bought a 50% share in Blue Horizon, and, during the early years of the company's success with Fleetwood Mac and Chicken Shack, I spent months at a time in London.

Mike had total control of A&R, and this left me free, by mutual agreement, to sign on behalf of Sire. My first signing — perhaps prophetically — was the Deviants in 1968, who many credit as being Britain's original punk aggregation. This was followed by Barclay James Harvest, Climax Blues Band and Renaissance. Britain's close proximity to the continent put me in contact with the music scenes in Holland, Germany and France and led to Sire's signing of Focus.

Awareness of the various European markets and the importing of product into the States brought Sire into a relationship with JEM Records soon after that company was established. Together, we formed Passport Records and enjoyed much success during the mid-1970's. The label is still owned and operated by JEM.

Over years of constant visits, I developed somewhat of a British instinct and attitude. When the "new wave" scene started to emerge in New York, I knew this music would find immediate acceptance in England. The Ramones and Talking Heads were among the first bands to tour the U.K. Legend has it, in fact, that it was while watching the Ramones (opening for the Flamin' Groovies) on July 4, 1976 at the Roundhouse that both the Clash and Sex Pistols decided to turn professional. The interplay of bands during that period saw both the Stranglers and Boomtown Rats open for the Ramones, while Dire Straits' first tour was as support to Talking Heads. Richard Hell did an early Clash tour, while the Dead Boys toured as special guests of the Damned.

Early in 1978, we began to seriously eye new British rock bands. The first to be signed were the Rezillos, who, after two hit albums and several singles split into two separate units, the Revillos, now on Din-disc, and Shake, who remained with Sire. Shake are currently in the studio with producer Richard Hartley, recording a follow-up to their current "Invasion of the Gamma Men."

Later that year, at the suggestion of Sire's label manager, Paul McNally, we decided to explore the possibility of recording a contemporary album with the Searchers.



The Undertones

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