

NEW YORK MUSIC INDUSTRY

A Historical Perspective

By SEYMOUR STEIN

Even as Thomas Edison experimented with the phonograph in Menlo Park, New Jersey, not far away in New York, there existed a thriving music publishing industry. Harry Von Tilzer, Charles K. Harris and others through the popularity of their songs had established on West 28th Street, the original "tin pan alley."

As the phonograph took hold and record sales eclipsed sheet music, New York had earned undisputed right to the title "Music Capital of the World."

In the 1930s, the three major record companies, RCA Victor, Columbia, and Decca, with virtual control of the industry, were all based in New York. ASCAP, then the sole performing rights society, was controlled by the "tin pan alley" writers, with almost 50 percent of the popular songs coming from Broadway shows and revues. The vast majority of national radio shows featured music emanating from New York as well.

With the advent of sound in motion pictures, many songwriters were lured to California to work on films. Among them was Johnny Mercer, who along with record retailer Glenn Wallichs, founded Capitol, L.A.'s first major record company, in the early 1940s.

Tin Pan Alley

Another tin pan alley writer, Fred Rose, was among those intrigued by country music and settled in Nashville where together with singer Roy Acuff he built the Acuff-Rose Music publishing dynasty. Perhaps their greatest accomplishment was the discovery of country music's greatest talent, Hank Williams.

The formation of BMI in 1941, although it was based in New York, did much to open doors to writers around the rest of the United States, particularly those in the country and western and rhythm and blues fields. It was the popularity of these fields of

music and the eventual birth of the hybrid rock 'n' roll that was to give New York one of its most colorful periods during the mid '50s through the early 1960s.

The emergence of rock 'n' roll and rhythm and blues was paralleled by the growth of independent record companies. This was a national trend with indie companies lining the areas around South Michigan Avenue in Chicago, North Broad Street in Philadelphia, throughout Hollywood and with pockets in San Francisco, Detroit, Cincinnati and Houston. Nowhere, however, was this movement stronger than in New York.

Atlantic, as their old slogan read, "led the field in rhythm & blues," with companies like Apollo, Old Town, Savoy (across the Hudson in Newark), Herald/Ember, Scepter, Sue, Fire/Fury, Gone/End all in hot pursuit. On the more "pop" side of rock were companies like Roulette, Laurie, Kapp, Cadence, Red Bird, Bong, Musicor, Carlton, Coed, Warwick and Bell, forerunner to the present Arista label. The roots of folk rock trace the development to New York based indies Elektra and Vanguard, while the first jazz label Blue Note was also New York born and based during its first 25 years of operation.

Brill Building

During this period, the area around the Brill Building and 1650 Broadway were teeming with excitement. Much of the business was done on street corners or in the restaurant hangouts like the Turf at 49th & Broadway. This was a favorite watering hole for many struggling songwriters, and one could spend many hours at the counter nursing one drink or sipping a cold cup of coffee. Next door was Jack Dempsey's and further up Broadway were Lindy's and Al & Dicks. Those with a slightly more exotic palate could satisfy that urge at Ruby Foos or the House of Chan, the only survivor of this era. Almost any Thursday afternoon at Gus and Andy's bistro on West 47th Street you could find Billboard's crusading music editor Paul Ackerman prying a story out of Steve Sholes or Goddard Lieberson or getting the latest ASCAP lowdown from songwriter Edgar Leslie.

They're all gone, as are legends like Alan Freed, rock's pioneering disc-jockey, Martin Block, whose "Make Believe Ballroom" revolutionized pre-rock radio, George Goldner, certainly early rock's most colorful executive and the driving force behind classics like "Gee" by the Crows and "Why Do Fools Fall In Love" by the

Teenagers; songwriter-producer Bert Berns, who founded the Bang label, indie distributing pioneer Jerry Blaine and Dave Kapp, an early believer in the future of country music and the first to foresee the dark days of "profitless prosperity" that could lie ahead for our industry.

Many others from that period remain very active today including Ahmet and Nesuhi Ertegun, Jerry Wexler, Jerry Lieber, Mike Stoller, John Hammond, Morris Levy, Don Kirshner, Maynard Solomon, Jac Holzman, Hymie and Sam Weiss, Henry Glover, Herb Abramson, Bobby Robinson, George Pincus, Mitch Miller, Florence Greenberg, Freddy Bienstock, Gene Goodman, Hal Fine, Sal Chiantia, Al Gallico, Lou Levy, Morty Craft, Phil Kahl, Archie Bleyer, Harry Apostoleris and Marv Schlachter to name but a few.

The late sixties right on through much of the 1970s saw New York diminish somewhat with the growth of creative music centers in Nashville, Memphis, Detroit, San Francisco and Los Angeles. In Los Angeles A&M and Warner Brothers, helmed by New York expatriates Jerry Moss and Mo Ostin, joined Capitol as major west coast forces.

Elektra, with the appointment of David Geffen as chairman and MCA when Mike Maitland was brought in both pulled roots and resettled in Los Angeles. Bringing the mountain to Mohammed did not always bring favorable results. MGM, ABC and UA also abandoned New York when west coast presidents were chosen to run these companies. Two of these companies—MGM and ABC—have ceased to exist.

With the rebirth of rock 'n' roll, the tide is once again turning

back toward New York. Gotham over the past three years has once again become a major spawning ground for talent with clubs like Hurrah, the Mudd Club, and Club 57 taking up where pioneer showcases like CBGB's and Max's left off.

Disco has also put the dance spotlight back on New York as it last did during the twist craze of the early 1960s.

Much of the new rock coming from the U.K. is on independent labels. Stiff and Virgin, two of the prime movers, have recently established U.S. offices in New York, as has Hansa, the Berlin-based leader in Euro-disco.

Recent amalgamations in the industry best illustrate New York's re-emergence as the music capital of the world. The Ariola acquisition of Arista will give this newest of the multinational majors an important east coast base. EMI's scuttled merger with New York-based conglomerate Gulf & Western may still mean more of a New York presence for its American subsidiary Capitol. RCA, CBS, Polygram and Atlantic are already based here as is WCI, parent company of the Warner-Elektra-Atlantic group.

Not since the early days of rock has New York been so dominant domestically. With three of the seven majors based in Europe and a continuing flow of great music across the Atlantic, the travel will serve to strengthen New York's position internationally.

Music and the music business both have deeply rooted ties to New York. We as New Yorkers can feel justifiably proud of the role this city has played in the growth of our industry, and the future looks bright ahead.



The Lafayette Theatre, abandoned in 1948.