

# DECCA'S R&B RESURGENCE

By Aaron Sternfield

"The record company that mails singles to r&b disk jockeys and expect to get air play is whistling 'Dixie.' I know about 500 r&b deejays by name—and I know the names of about 300 of their wives. When I want play on a record I visit the deejay or call him up, ask about the family, chew the fat a while, and relax. More often than not, he'll ask me what looks like it might happen."

The speaker is Joe Medlin, national r&b promotion manager for Decca-Coral-Brunswick. Medlin, who was a recording artist not too many years ago, and more recently was with Atlantic Records, was hired by Lenny Salidor, D-C-B promotion head, to beef up the Decca r&b effort. Also hired during the last year was Jack Gibson as a regional promotion representative for r&b. Gibson is past president and one of the founders of the National Association of Radio Announcers, the Negro disk jockey organization.

Both moves are an attempt on the part of Decca to recapture the dominant position the label had in the r&b world in the 1940's.

At that time, recalls Milt Gabler, a&r vice-president, the Negro dance band and the band singer constituted the commercial side of Negro music. R&b, as it is understood today, did not exist.

Big bands of the era included Cab Calloway, Erskine Hawkins, Buddy Johnson and Andy Kirk. They were big on college campuses, and live appearances meant a lot more then than they do today.

Promotion, when Gabler joined Decca in 1941, was a fairly simple matter. A few radio stations in the South, aimed at Negro audiences, played what at that time was known as "race" music. Jukeboxes in rib joints were important outlets. At that time, jukebox play was prime exposure, and the countermen at the distributors talked up the records to the operators. That was before the days of one-stops.

There weren't too many labels in the business at that time. R&b radio had not yet spawned the hot independents, and the majors were getting the lion's share of the business.

Promotion was aimed at the dance promoter and the handful of radio stations. But, Gabler recalls, there really wasn't any great need to promote. The acts made enough live appearances so that their records had automatic sales.

When Gabler joined Decca, J. Mayo Williams was the r&b producer. One of Gabler's jobs was to check the lyrics to make sure they weren't too blue for air play.

It was at this time that Buddy Johnson, with his 16-piece band, began recording the first records which fall in today's r&b bag—with the back beat and similar

techniques. One of Gabler's first accomplishments was to hire top sidemen for the recording sessions and thereby instill a professionalism which had been lacking at times.

The big break in r&b music and promotion came during World War II. With Negroes earning decent salaries in defense plants, their spending power became a factor that sellers of goods began to reckon with. Hence the proliferation of Negro radio stations, programming r&b music. The early advertisers were rib joints and hair grease manufacturers.

As the Negro purchasing power increased in the 1950's, these r&b stations began attracting the same type of advertisers who spend their money with pop stations, and the stations grew fatter, and their influence in determining record sales grew proportionately.

It was in the 1950's that the majors lost their hold on this market, and the specialized independent labels moved in.

Decca's decision to move back into the r&b market in a big way was prompted, of course, by its recognition of the size of the market (Negroes spent \$28,000,000 last year), and the realization that the line of demarcation between r&b and pop is narrowing.

Medlin feels that while the Northern r&b stations are important, an r&b record can make it and later go pop on the basis of an initial Southern breakout. He maintains that pop stations will often turn down r&b product initially, then after the disk has been getting heavy play on r&b stations, jump on the record.

"You can force r&b on a pop station," said Medlin, but you can't force pop on an r&b station." He pointed out that while r&b stations will program white acts such as Tom Jones and the Rolling Stones, the r&b disk jockey will not play a lot of the material regularly scheduled on Top 40 format stations.

The r&b disk jockey, said Medlin, has more of a say in programming than does the pop deejay, who usually must follow the dictates of the program director, although this say is becoming less and less.

And while r&b stations generally stay with colored performers, they will program white artists if the disk jockey feels the artist has soul. Medlin cites the country-gospel artist Red Foley, who has hit the top country and r&b charts with the same record.

Under the new regime, Decca-Coral-Brunswick has an open door policy for artists and independent producers. Under contract are Jackie Wilson, Gene Chandler, the Artistics, the Young Holt Trio, the Wildare Trio and Billy Butler, all on Brunswick; Jackie Verdell, Gladys Tyler and Ray Pollard, on Decca, and Patty Austin on Coral. And, of course, Louis Armstrong has returned to the Decca fold.