



Nashville Publishers: Creative Forces

1,000 Firms Build a Bubbling Cauldron of Copyrights

By Bill Williams

NASHVILLE, in its 30-year commercial music history, has grown from one to 1,000 in the number of publishers which have made it one of the great recording centers of the world.

In this special issue, the story of some of the major companies is told, and a listing of all of the country publishers whose works have appeared in the Billboard country chart in the past year.

With its publishers, and thousands of writers, it today is perhaps the greatest source of song material in the world.

There's a story which has made the rounds in Nashville for many years about how the first country publishing company was started by \$25,000 placed in a paper sack. A great story, but simply not true. Not that a paper sack would have changed anything, really, because the principals involved were the same, in a sense at least.

Virtually everyone knows the story of Fred Rose. The onetime popular music composer and entertainer made his way to Nashville and, on Oct. 13, 1942, reluctantly began what was to become one of the greatest publishing firms in the world. It was the first exclusively country music company ever formed.

Fred Rose, while on the West Coast, had written a number of country songs for Gene Autry—"Tweedle O Twill," "Be Honest With Me," "Tears on My Pillow"—28 of them in all. They were in Autry's publishing firm, which had a collection of everything. He later, when in Nashville, wrote songs for Roy Acuff, published by Southern.

Acuff was one of several people who tried to persuade Fred Rose to form a publishing company exclusively for country writers. Rose turned down each suggestion on the grounds that he was a composer, not a businessman. But Acuff was persistent. Finally, almost as to brush him off, Rose told Acuff: "I'll put up my songs if you put up \$25,000." At this point Acuff did not go to the bank and withdraw the cash.

Instead, his beautiful and business-minded wife, Mildred, wrote out a check for \$25,000 at Roy's request, and a partnership was formed. Technically, the partnership for Acuff-Rose was between Fred Rose and Mildred Acuff, not Roy, and today, nearly 30 years later, Mrs. Acuff still acts as treasurer of the company.

The initial catalog of 16 songs, all written by Fred Rose, constituted the makeup of the partnership at first. They included "Pins and Needles" and "Fireball Mail," which is not a bad way to begin. The first office was at 2403 Kirkman Street in Nashville, which was Fred's home, and all of his files were kept under his bed. Later, when the bedroom became too crowded, he rented an office at 220 Capitol Boulevard, where Fred Rose wrote songs, administered the company, and sold songbooks of Acuff tunes. At that time, all sheet music for Acuff-Rose was handled by Forster Music of Chicago. (When Wesley Rose joined the firm in December of 1945, the sheet music sales were shifted to Nashville, and have come from there since.)

Mel Foree became the first employee of the company, and began writing with Rose.

Even though Rose had been an ASCAP writer, Acuff-Rose was formed as a BMI company because, at the time, there was a greater opportunity to form a BMI catalog for a country writer. A few months later an ASCAP company also was formed—Milene. This name was taken from the first three letters of Mildred Acuff and the last three of Lorene Rose, Fred's wife.

Fred Rose wrote so many songs in those initial days that he adopted a penname (Floyd Jenkins) so as to appear he was not the only writer with the company.

Roy Acuff also was writing hit songs, and Rose got some early tunes from Pee Wee King. The big one wasn't to come until later.

When Wesley Rose joined Acuff-Rose as general manager, Fred Rose was freed to do nothing but write. He then had moved to Rainbow Trail, the site of his "attic studio" which contained an old Victrola chassis with an acetate cutter inside for doing demos. He then moved some of his equipment into a garage, with an extension chord running from the attic, and some of the early master sessions were done. The early acetates also were taken on the road to teach new songs to artists who were performing. Some of the earliest Acuff-Rose songs were cut by Jimmy Newman, Al Terry and Bill Carlisle.

It was November, 1946, when the Roses began looking for a "female Roy Acuff." They discovered Molly O'Day. Fred Rose had been producing her for Columbia with Art Satherly, and she was later destined to record the first songs written by the late Hank Williams.

Fred and Wesley Rose were playing a game of ping-pong (then and now Wesley's favorite diversion) in the lobby of WSM in the National Life and Accident Insurance Building in downtown Nashville (Fred was still a pianist there, composing songs on the air) when they met Hank and Audrey Williams. Audrey asked Fred Rose if he would listen to her husband's songs. They walked into a nearby studio, and Hank, with his guitar, played a few. The four of them went immediately to their downtown publishing office, and they cut some acetates, which were songs for Molly O'Day. Hank, at the time, was interested only in writing. It was about this time that A.E. Middleman started a label called Sterling, called Fred Rose, and told him he wanted some recording both "western type and hillbilly type." Fred called Hank, asked him if he would make a record, and Williams agreed. The other sides were cut by the Oklahoma Wranglers (now the Willis Brothers), who also provided the backup for the Hank Williams songs. Williams and the Wranglers each cut four sides, receiving a flat \$250 payment for their efforts. This was, according to Wesley Rose, the first series of Nashville Sound records, with just head arrangements.

The Roses felt that Hank Williams, at the time, was sounding too much like Acuff, and they worked on changing that. It was Acuff who decided that Williams should record his own, as himself. The Roses went to Art Satherly, but he said he had too many acts. He also was turned down by the late Paul Cohen for Decca. But Frank Walker, who had just left RCA Victor to start his own label, asked Rose to hold up a couple of months until MGM had been established as a record company. Williams then was signed as the first MGM artist. When his "Move It on Over" went to number one, MGM purchased all of the old Sterling masters.

Meanwhile, back at the publishing company, Rose signed Jennie Lou Carson as a writer. Miss Carson, sister of Red Foley's first wife, turned out "Jealous Heart," "You Two Timed Me One Time Too Often" and others. Rose had met her when she sang as one of the "Milk Maids" at WLS in Chicago. Acuff-Rose also published the first Bob Atcher songbooks. Fred Rose also signed Marty Robbins as an exclusive writer, despite warnings that Robbins would never move to Nashville. (Marty met Fred at the airport in Phoenix and signed on the spot.)

The Roses were friends of Pee Wee King and Redd Stewart, and they began writing for their publishing company. Clyde Moody was signed, and he turned out the "Shenandoah Waltz." When Pee Wee and Redd wrote the "Tennessee Waltz," it was Wesley Rose who was

instrumental in getting the "big cuts." First done by Cowboy Copas for King in Cincinnati, it then was cut by Pee Wee King in Chicago. Wesley pushed Mitch Miller to cut it instrumentally, and he also got a Wayne King instrumental. This was a massive breakthrough for country music. Eventually, Miss Patti Page cut it, with a little urging from Jerry Wexler (then with Billboard). That was in 1950, and it led to Wesley Rose becoming a full partner in the publishing firm on Jan. 1, 1952. Not only did the record take off, but it sold 1¼ million copies of sheet music, the largest such sale since the depression. It later became the official Tennessee state song.

The list of Acuff-Rose writers became almost legendary. They included Charlie and Ira Louvin, Martha Carson, Johnny Wright and Jack Anglin, Boudleaux and Felice Bryant, Don Gibson, Roy Orbison, the Everly Brothers, John D. Loudermilk, Joe Melson, Ernie Ashworth, the Blackwells, Wilma Lee and Stony Cooper, Mickey Newberry, Jimmy Work, Stu Phillips, Mark Sharon and Gene Thomas.

Thus Acuff-Rose has grown into the single most powerful and prolific country music publishing company in the world. With its early success, it was inevitable there would be others.

King

Syd Nathan of King formed Lois Music in 1945 in Cincinnati, and over the years this firm and its affiliates have had 107 award-winning songs. Its catalog, in the country field, now includes such companies as Tannen, King, J&C, Briarcliff, Lonat, Arnel, Mar-Kay, Armo, Cheyenne, Del Monica and You and Me. In 1952, Starday Music was started in Beaumont, Tex., by Pappy Daley and Starnes, and, under the direction of Don Pierce, brought the company to Nashville in 1957. In 1969 all of the publishing companies were put under the umbrella of Starday-King, and, in 1972, under Fort Knox Music, run in New York by Freddie Bienstock and in Nashville by Merle Kilgore.

The catalog is a strong one, including such standards as "Satisfied Mind," "I'll Sail My Ship Alone," "Blues, Stay Away From Me," "Alabam," "Giddy-up Go," "Y'all Come" and "Johnny Reb." There are more than 35,000 copyrights in all, some 15,000 of them country.

Tree

Jack Stapp was the program director of WSM when he first got involved in publishing. In fact, Stapp was far more than that and is responsible today for bringing in more of the Nashville talent (in all areas) than anyone in the country music community. It was he who produced the early network shows from Nashville, and who added his creative talents in many ways to the growth of the music community. It then was natural that he should become involved in publishing, and aid in the pioneer movement.

The home office of Tree International is now a three-story Spanish structure located on music row in Nashville. It once was a small room in the Masonic Building in the downtown area.

Stapp founded his company in 1951, not in Nashville, but in New York, in partnership with Louis Cowan (whose wife gave the company its name). In 1957, Stapp bought out Cowan and made the permanent move of the firm to Nashville. Almost from the beginning, there were hit songs. One of the earliest of these was "Heartbreak Hotel," recorded by Elvis Presley. The Tree catalog in itself is immense, but acquisitions have made it even more formidable. The company took over the great Green Grass Music catalog, with Curly Putman. Hank Cochran came along when Pamper Music was acquired from Hal Smith.

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