Music Just Part
Of New Boxed Set
On King Records

ONE OF THE BETTER and more educational historical compilations to land on our desk in recent weeks is the essential “The King R&B Box Set,” produced by GMI Inc.—the Nashville company that has owned the great King Records catalog since 1975—and distributed by Highland Music in Dearborn, Mich.

The talent contained on this 85-song collection is incomparable: During its heyday in the ’50s and ‘60s, the indie label released hits after hit by such storied R&B acts as Bull Moose Jackson, Roy Brown, Wynonie Harris, Eddie Vinson, Ivory Joe Hunter, the Dominoes (led by Clyde McPhatter), Dave Bartholomew, the “5” Royes, Little Willie Littlefield, Big Jay McNeely, Little Willie John, Bill Doggett, Hank Ballard, Freddy King, Johnny “Guitar” Watson, and, of course, James Brown.

But the boxed set also affords a remarkable fly-on-the-wall look at one of the most amazing indie label operators of the era, Syd Nathan. The fourth bonus disc includes three speeches by Nathan made to King personnel from 1951 to 1964. These tough, funny stories offer today’s indie an indication of how the business was different in the ’50s and how some things remain unchanged.

In an address to his sales staff, Nathan says that King “started off as a mistake” when country musicians who frequented Nathan’s Cincinnati store, Syd’s Record Shop, talked him into releasing their records. Retailing was tough, Nathan says: “[I] was just trying to sell big pianos [sic] out in the desert, but we done business ‘cause we knew how to do business.

Just how Nathan knew how to do business on the label side is explained in Colin Escott’s liner notes: “Nathan tried to fix [his] problems by not only establishing his own studio, his own pressing plant, and his own printing press, but also his own distribution system that, at one point, extended to 32 wholly owned branches that only sold King records. Later he had his own design studio for LP jackets, and even a line of record players. In other words, Nathan controlled the entire process from creating the song to promoting the song to playing it at home. Only the paper inner sleeves for LPs were brought in from outside.

Incredible. No independent label today can boast that kind of control. But certain verities of the ’70s held true in 1964, when Nathan assembled his A&R staff—which included such legendary figures as Ralph Bass, Henry Stone, and Henry Glover—for a pep talk.

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