



AHMET ERTEGUN AWARD

# ART RUPE

[ BY PARKE PUTERBAUGH ]



AS FOUNDER of Specialty Records, one of the premier independent labels of the rock & roll era, Art Rupe signed and recorded numerous vanguard artists in the areas of rhythm & blues, gospel, and rock & roll. He was also an important figure in the postwar music industry, helming a label that helped bring a niche market (rhythm & blues) into the mainstream. Beyond that, Specialty played a role in igniting the rock & roll revolution by introducing the world to the incendiary music of Little Richard.

And Little Richard was just the tip of the iceberg. A short list of artists who shone at Specialty includes Roy Milton, Percy Mayfield, Lloyd Price, Larry Williams, and brothers Joe and Jimmy Lig-gins. Soul-music superstars Sam Cooke, Johnnie Taylor, and Lou Rawls first sang gospel for acts like the Soul Stirrers and the Chosen Gospel Singers, who recorded for Specialty. Professor Alex Bradford, Brother Joe May, Sister Wynona Carr, the Swan Silvertones, and the Pilgrim Travelers were among other gospel greats

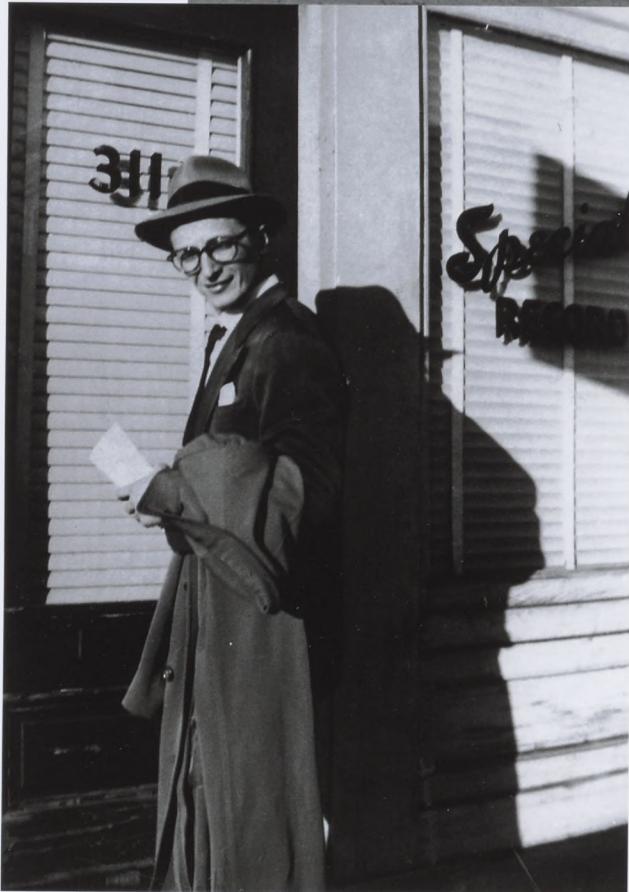
who cut for Specialty. And here's a fascinating fact: Ray Charles, before becoming a star at Atlantic, arranged, produced, and played piano (as "R.C. Robinson") on Guitar Slim's "The Things That I Used to Do," released on Specialty in 1954.

During its heyday, from its founding in 1946 through 1960, Specialty issued nearly 450 rhythm & blues and rock & roll singles, including such timeless classics as Joe Liggins's "Pink Champagne," Lloyd Price's "Lawdy Miss Clawdy," Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti," and Larry Williams's "Bony Moronie." The well of gospel music issued by Specialty is incomparably deep, too. Taken together, it is one amazing catalogue,

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and Rupe—while moving on to other areas and interests—has been involved with its preservation and reissue ever since. In fact, he is arguably the last label mogul from that era to maintain independence, holding out until 1990 before selling Specialty (to Fantasy Records).

How important was Specialty? Singer and music historian Billy Vera—who has compiled numerous Specialty reissues for Fantasy, including the five-disc box set *The Specialty Story*—put it like this:



**THIS PAGE** Specialty Records' New Orleans office, c. 1953; Rupe at Specialty HQ, Los Angeles, 1950s; retail display, Baltimore, 1951. **OPPOSITE PAGE** Specialty stars Little Richard (top) and Lloyd Price.



"In only a little over ten years of activity, Specialty Records' growth paralleled, and perhaps defined, the evolution of black popular music, from the 'race' music of the 1940s to the rock & roll of the 1950s. One might go so far as to say that Specialty became the quintessential rock & roll label, from its music right down to the crazy design of its yellow, black, and white label."

Without question, Art Rupe deserves inclusion in the Hall of Fame pantheon with fellow music-biz trailblazers like Sam Phillips, Leonard and Phil Chess, Ahmet Ertegun, Jerry Wexler, and Syd Nathan.

Art Rupe was born Arthur Goldberg in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, a small town east of Pittsburgh, in 1917. Growing up, Art was enchanted by the fervid gospel music he heard at a black Baptist church in his neighborhood. After attending Miami University (in Oxford, Ohio), he headed west in 1939 on a quixotic trip that involved a brief stint with a carnival. After enrolling at UCLA, he tried breaking into the movie business, then gravitated toward the music business, which proved easier for a novice to crack.

After a brief, unsatisfactory experience in 1944 as a partner in Atlas Records, Rupe launched his own label. In preparation, he spent \$200 buying "race records" and assiduously studied them to decode the factors that separated hits from flops. He concluded uptempos were preferred (he actually used a stopwatch); the word *boogie* frequently appeared in the titles of many hits; and jukebox operators were an important link in the chain of distribution. Therefore, he called his label Juke Box and titled its first single "Boogie #1." Cut by the Sepia Tones, it sold 70,000 copies.

Juke Box next released singles by the Blues Man (Roosevelt Sykes), the Blues Woman (Marion Abernathy), and Roy Milton and His Solid Senders. Vocalist, bandleader, and drummer Milton scored a major R&B hit with "R.M. Blues." More important, he became a key figure in the success of Rupe's next label, Specialty Records. After Rupe parted ways with his partners at Juke Box, losing the label but retaining the masters in a court settlement, he vowed to do things his way, without partners, at Specialty—so named because it was targeting the "specialty" black-adult R&B market.

Combining an analytical mind for business with a visceral passion for music, he turned Specialty into one of the premier labels of the forties and fifties. He understood that music was about feeling, and that feeling trumped perfection when it came to capturing a strong performance in the studio. Although not a religious man, he could be moved to tears by the pure emotionality of gospel singers.

On the other hand, his inquiring, organizational mind allowed him to fine-tune Specialty on the business side when it came to the marketing, distribution, and even the manufacturing of discs. Early in the label's history, he researched the principles of hydraulics and production at the library and then oversaw the construction and operation of a pressing plant. Art Rupe was, both literally and figuratively, a hands-on record man.

All of those necessary extramusical tasks were nonetheless of secondary interest to Rupe, whose ultimate goal was “to just be a creative and effective record producer,” as he told writer John Broven. “The sales and distribution part of the business didn’t appeal to me.” Yet he set up an effective network of regional independent distributors that allowed Specialty and other upstart indie labels to compete with the established majors as rhythm & blues and rock & roll were rising to the fore—a notable achievement in itself, quite apart from the artist roster and record catalogue he was building.

As a producer, Rupe had a solid ear for music, and as a busy label boss who needed additional help on the creative side, he had an eye for A&R men, too, hiring such estimable talents as Robert “Bumps” Blackwell and Harold Battiste, and a prefame Sonny Bono. Specialty initially headquartered itself on West 7th Street in Los Angeles before settling down at 311 Venice Boulevard in 1947, with Rupe naming his song-publishing company Venice Music.

Specialty quickly established itself as a force in gospel and rhythm & blues. On the R&B side, Roy Milton racked up nineteen Top Ten hits at Juke Box and Specialty. More smash records came from Joe Liggins (whose 1950 hit “Pink Champagne” topped the *Billboard* R&B chart longer than any other song) and his ex-boxer brother, Jimmy Liggins (whose “Cadillac Boogie” was a virtual blueprint for Jackie Brenston’s “Rocket 88”). Percy Mayfield, the lyrically eloquent “poet of the blues,” was another of Specialty’s standouts.

Based on his admiration for Fats Domino’s records, Rupe’s restless muse took him to New Orleans: Specialty established another beachhead there, quickly striking pay dirt with 1952’s “Lawdy Miss Clawdy,” the debut release by 19-year-old Lloyd Price and an arguable “first rock & roll song” candidate. New Orleans notables Art Neville (of the Neville Brothers), Ernest Kador Jr. (a.k.a. Ernie K-Doe, of “Mother-in-Law” fame), zydeco king Clifton Chenier, and Earl King all recorded for Specialty, too.

Picking up the mantle from Roy Milton as Specialty’s foremost hitmaker, Little Richard hit the scene like an atom bomb with “Tutti Frutti” in 1955. It was the first of a pile of hits for that freewheeling era’s most untamed star, whom Rupe called “the most talented, yet undisciplined, artist I ever met. He had more raw talent. . . .”

Indeed, the classic tunes cut by Little Richard and Larry Williams while at Specialty proved irresistible to fellow and future rock & rollers. Elvis Presley, the Beatles, the Kinks, and countless others—yes, even Pat Boone—covered Little Richard’s “Long Tall Sally.” Numerous other rock icons, including Buddy Holly, Bill Haley, and the Everly Brothers, dipped into his song bag, as well. The Beatles recorded three of Larry Williams’s songs—“Dizzy Miss Lizzy,” “Slow Down,” and “Bad Boy” (only Carl Perkins could make the same claim)—and the Rolling Stones covered “She Said Yeah.” Beyond all the income from the originals, these and other high-profile cover versions generated considerable revenue for Rupe’s Venice Music publishing company.

As the first phase of rock & roll hit a bumpy patch in the late fifties due to various factors, Specialty’s fortunes began waning as



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well. The label had its last Top Ten hit in 1958 with Little Richard’s “Good Golly, Miss Molly,” a vault item from the repentant rocker-turned-preacher. Rupe essentially folded his tent in 1960, and with the exception of a brief flurry of singles in 1964 (notably “Bama Lama Bama Loo,” from preacher-turned-rocker Little Richard), he largely exempted himself from further adventures in contemporary music.

Among other things, he’d grown disgusted with the industry practice of payola. (If anything, Rupe reasoned, DJs should be paying record labels for the product that made their profession possible.) And so he nurtured successful investments in the oil and real estate fields and established a charitable foundation. Among other things, the Arthur N. Rupe Foundation has funded educational research in the area of media and mass communication.

At age 93, Rupe is appreciative that he’s lived long enough to finally see himself inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. “I am honored to be recognized for the achievements of the very talented performers and songwriters whose creativity I was privileged to record,” Rupe says. “They were notable for being among the pioneers of the music we call rock & roll.” ❀

