

# Kenny Gamble & Leon Huff



BY BILLY ALTMAN



**T**here's certainly a good ring – both literally and figuratively – to the story that Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff like to tell about meeting for the first time in a Schubert Building elevator on

Philadelphia's Broad Street in the summer of 1964. In those days, the Schubert was Philly's equivalent of New York's Brill Building, its office space filled by virtually all of the city's key music-business movers and shakers. They were there because each of these ambitious young African-American men – one (Gamble) a singer, the other (Huff) a piano player, and both aspiring songwriters – had gotten their feet in some newly opened doors of opportunity with established local writing/production companies hungry for a piece of the bubbling soul-music pie. A chance encounter, and before the ride is even over, talk of getting together to try and write together. That simple. That direct. That fast. That driven.

Upwardly mobile. Forwardly mobile. Side-to-side mobile. In just about any direction you can think of, the music that Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff would soon start writing, producing, and ultimately becoming world-famous for – TSOP, The Sound of Philadelphia – has come to symbolize the path, and the journey, of not just African-American pop music of the late 1960s and 1970s but African-American, and, ultimately, just plain American life, period. If that sounds like hyperbole, try these titles on for size: "Only the Strong Survive," "I Can't Stop Dancing," "(We'll Be) United," "Don't Let the Green Grass Fool You," "Back Stabbers," "Me and Mrs.

Jones," "Love Train," "For the Love of Money," "Wake Up Everybody," "Rich Get Richer," "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now," "Do It Anyway You Wanna." As they – they being Gamble and Huff themselves – would say: "The Message Is in the Music."

Anyone familiar with New Orleans cooking will tell you that regardless of where you want your dish to

finish, you'd better start with that Holy Trinity foundation of onions, celery, and bell peppers. Taste just about any Gamble and Huff musical pot-au-feu from the more than 1,000 entries in their songwriters' cookbook, and you'll invariably find in the recipe another Holy Trinity base: blues, gospel, and jazz. When, not long after that fateful elevator ride, Philadelphia homeboy Gamble

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(b. 1943) trekked across the Penn state line to see New Jersey native Huff (b. 1942) in his Camden digs to attempt to write together, these two distinctly different personalities quickly discovered in each other distinctly shared musical roots: an innate inner-city, tradition-rich rhythmic mix of church and street, harmony and groove. And once that pilot light was lit and the muse started heating up between them, it wasn't long before the hits came simmering up to a rolling boil.

In retrospect, it's fitting that Gamble and Huff's first major hit, the blue-eyed Soul Survivors' riff-driven "Expressway to Your Heart," was a 1967 smash(up) inspired by the newly opened, traffic-clogged highway running through Philadelphia's Center City area. And that the next one, the infectious "Cowboys to Girls," from local lads the Intruders, came out on their own Gamble label in early 1968. Listen to what's around you

**When Philadelphia went international: Songwriting/production team Leon Huff (left) and Kenny Gamble made their hometown an R&B mecca in the 1970s.**





Huff and Gamble in their Philadelphia headquarters



MFSB delivers TSOP: Philadelphia International's house band in 1974.



Huff, Clive Davis, and Gamble, c. 1971



Patti LaBelle signs with P.I. in the early 1980s.

to make your music, and know the business around you so you can make your money. Those were lessons in creativity and commerce that Gamble and Huff learned from the likes of such pioneers as Leiber and Stoller, and Spector and Gordy Jr. And the two dedicated students earned their master's degree in '68 with the recording of Jerry Butler's classic album *The Ice Man Cometh*, which spawned four Top Ten hits, including the chart toppers "Hey, Western Union Man" and, of course, '69's proud anthem of love and life "Only the Strong Survive."

By then, Gamble and Huff were beginning to ensconce themselves in engineer Joe Tarsia's new Sigma Sound Studios, and it was there, as the seventies dawned, that the lush, layered, uptown-meets-downtown Sound of Philadelphia was born. It was a sound painstakingly forged by Gamble and Huff, with the considerable help of arrangers Bobby Martin and fellow writer/producer Thom Bell – and polished to perfection by guitarists Roland Chambers and Norman Harris, bassist Ronnie Baker, drummer Earl Young, vibist Vince Montana, saxophonist Zach Zachary, and the rest of the cream of Philadelphia's black, white, and Latino session musicians ultimately commemorated under the MFSB (Mother, Father, Sister, Brother) banner. At that point, all Gamble and Huff really needed was some organizational muscle to flex in the marketplace, which they finally got in 1971 when they struck a deal with Clive Davis to form the CBS-distributed Philadelphia International Records. And once Leon Huff's piano and the rest of that MF of an intro to the O'Jays' "Back Stabbers"

took listeners by the (spreading) lapels in the summer of 1972, TSOP was on its way to legendary status.

Gamble and Huff's musical soul/love train chugged along mightily throughout the 1970s, punching hit tickets for just about every performer who hopped on board. They ranged from old pros like Wilson Pickett, Joe Simon, and Billy Paul to young hopefuls like Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes' Teddy Pendergrass, whom Gamble and Huff transformed into a bona fide superstar by unleashing his inner preacher on songs like 1972's heartbreaking "If You Don't Know Me By Now" and 1973's pulsating "The Love I Lost."

That latter tune, propelled by Earl Young's incessant hi-hat, is generally acknowledged as the prime source of the disco beat, and, looking back, there's no denying that Gamble and Huff were the chief architects of the bridge between sixties soul and seventies disco. Lesser talents took what they could from their sound and eventually appropriated it for their own mirror-balled purposes. But in thinking about Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff's overall body of work and substantial legacy, which continues to influentially echo down through the ages and across generations via everything from *American Idol* repertoires to rap and hip-hop samples, it's hard not to defer to a fellow musician's wonderful description of their music during its heady-yet-ever-danceable heyday: "Funk – with a bow tie." Which seems fitting for these two new Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees. As their fellow Hall of Famer Curtis Mayfield would say, Move on up. ♪

**OPPOSITE:** Huff and Gamble feted at the Sony Club, November 27, 2007, in New York City







# The Great Record Stores

Nearly every music lover over the age of forty has a favorite record store that helped fuel their thirst for rock & roll. Here, a few of the great ones are fondly remembered.



BY ANDY SCHWARTZ

All things must pass," sang Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee George Harrison, and today it appears that the American record store is destined to become one of those things. In July 2006, the *New York Times* quoted a report from a California market-research firm, the Almighty Institute of Music Retail, estimating that 900 independent record stores had shut down since late 2003 – leaving about 2,700 stores in operation.

As someone who began his music industry career behind the counter of one such outlet, I see the entire saga of American record retail as having taken on the qualities of a vivid and slightly crazy dream. Nothing else in my life has ever replaced the record store as a locus of musical community, and probably nothing ever will. A great record store was a marketplace not only of music but of ideas and opinions – and of the innumerable schemes and scams that played out endlessly among retailers, labels, and distributors, from the inflation of *Billboard* sales reports to the wholesale counterfeiting of best-selling LPs.

## In the Beginning: Wallichs Music City and the Commodore Music Shop

Well into the 1950s, many – perhaps most – sales of recorded music took place either in department stores or through non-music retailers primarily engaged in the sale of appliances, furniture, or pharmaceuticals. One of the first important stand-alone record stores was Glenn Wallichs's Wallichs Music City, which opened in 1940 at the corner of Sunset and Vine in Hollywood and ran continuously for thirty-eight years. Wallichs was the first American retailer to "shrink wrap" records in cellophane, to display discs in custom-built

browsers, and to offer listening booths where patrons could preview their selections. In 1942, Glen Wallichs cofounded Capitol Records with songwriter Johnny Mercer and movie producer Buddy DeSylva.



In the mid-thirties, Hall of Fame inductee Milt Gabler's Commodore Music Shop on East 42nd Street in Manhattan became the prototype of the "enthusiast" record store – one driven more by its owner's musical passions than by any promise of ready profits. Milt Gabler "firsts" included the sale of records by mail order, the purchase of out-of-print discs for resale to collectors, and the licensing of early jazz recordings for rerelease (thus foretelling the entire field of reissues). Commodore, recalls Gabler's friend and customer Jerry Wexler, stocked "only the pure and sublime *Jazzus Americanus*: Louis Armstrong Hot Fives on Okeh, Jelly Roll on Victor, and Duke

on any label." Gabler's success did not go unnoticed by Samuel Gutowitz, a.k.a. Sam Goody: In 1951, he opened the first store in his eponymous New York-based chain.

## Los Angeles: Rhino Records

Richard Foos and his partner, Harold Bronson, built the Rhino Records label into a hugely successful purveyor of pop culture products; the company was sold to Time Warner in a multimillion-dollar deal in 2001. But Rhino the label grew directly from Rhino the store – arguably the best-known indie record shop in America.

After graduating from USC, Foos – a passionate devotee of fifties and sixties rock & roll and R&B – began selling used LPs from one corner of a large surplus electronics store on the rundown, pre-gentrified Santa Monica Promenade. In October 1973, Foos opened Rhino Records in a 600-square-

INSET: Milt Gabler at the Commodore Record Shop, late 1930s





L. A.'s leading music retailer, Wallichs Music City . . .



and NYC's: Sam Goody's. That's Goody himself in fedora.

foot, \$140-per-month storefront on Westwood Boulevard in Los Angeles, in strategic proximity to the UCLA campus. Rhino's first full-time employee was Harold Bronson, who later became Foos's partner in all things Rhino.

Rhino Records carried "jazz, electronic music, European progressive rock, all the things you couldn't get at a Warehouse [chain] store," Foos recalls. With the advent of the punk/new wave explosion, "we were ahead of everybody. Like with Elvis Costello's *My Aim Is True* – we sold loads of imports for a good nine months before that album ever got a domestic release."

Just as crucial to Rhino's survival was its huge selection of used LPs. "Used records made the Rhino world go round, especially traded-in promo albums," asserts "Phast Phreddie" Patterson, a former Rhino employee (1984–1992) now with the Archive of Contemporary Music in New York. "Otherwise, we would not have been able to compete with the chain stores."

Foos affectionately describes his Rhino staff as "incredibly eccentric but [having] incredible music knowledge. I found experts, and I let them do their thing." At various times, the Rhino retail crew included future Warner Bros. Records



L.A. indies: Joey and Johnny Ramone flank Harold Bronson . . .



and the Damned outside Bomp! in 1977.





Minneapolis' Oar Folkjokeopus welcomes Talking Heads in 1977.



Jazz Record Mart keeps the music spinning in Chicago.

General Manager Jeff Gold, Wilco guitarist Nels Cline, KXLU DJ Stella (Voce), and authors Sid Griffin (*Million Dollar Bash: Bob Dylan, the Band, and the Basement Tapes*) and David Armstrong (*America and the Islamic Bomb: The Deadly Compromise*).

Rhino's profile and sales were boosted by countless off-the-wall promotional stunts. "For Mother's Day, we had the employees' mothers come in to work at the store," Richard Foos recalls. "We had 'C Student Day,' when we gave a free album to anyone who could prove himself or herself a 'C' student." Rhino sponsored "Redneck Day," "Hassle the Salesman Day," and "Polka Day," which featured "a guy in lederhosen playing accordion on Westwood Boulevard."

Increasingly engaged with the burgeoning Rhino label, in 1979 Foos sold Rhino Records to entrepreneur Steve Ferber. But in 1989, the two friends created a new partnership to jointly run the Westwood store and also open two new Rhino outlets in upstate New York. The Los Angeles emporium opened just before September 11.

"That was one of the major reasons for our demise," Foos ruefully acknowledges. "We just had no business for the first several months, in that key time period when people were making the adjustment from the old location to the new one." Two months later, San Francisco-based Amoeba Music opened a 30,000-square-foot store on Sunset Boulevard that dwarfed Rhino. "These two events together, plus the record business taking a big hit from downloading and all the other reasons – it was just too much for us."

In January 2006 – just weeks after the demise of another famed Los Angeles retailer, Aron's Records – Rhino Records closed its doors for good. It was "a very emotional decision," Foos told the *Los Angeles Times*. "Now [in Westwood] you have one of the largest colleges in the country and no independent record store. That says a lot."

### The Midwest: Oar Folkjokeopus

Oar Folkjokeopus of Minneapolis, where I worked from 1975 to 1977, typified the hundreds of freestanding, single-owner "enthusiast" shops that sprang up throughout the country beginning in the late sixties. Squeezed by the chains and often given short shrift by the major labels, these indie retailers were hugely influential in propagating successive waves of innovative pop music, from psychedelia to punk rock to hip-hop.

In January 1973, former air traffic controller Vern Sanden bought a South Minneapolis store called North Country Music and changed its name to Oar Folkjokeopus (after two of his favorite "cult" albums, by Skip Spence and Roy Harper, respectively). In April, Sanden hired a young sales clerk named Peter Jesperson; promoted to store manager in 1975, he worked at Oar Folk for more than a decade.

It was, in Jesperson's words, "a place run by people who absolutely lived and breathed music, and we became known for it. We stocked things that almost no other local stores had, like all the U.K. Beatles albums – which, at that time, not only had different track listings from the U.S. versions but were vastly superior in sound quality." In an era dominated by twelve-inch LPs, Peter convinced his cautious boss to begin stocking seven-inch singles. A small counter box with a handful of imported Beatles 45s mushroomed into a stock of several thousand singles – everything from Larry Williams on Specialty to Patti Smith's vinyl debut, "Piss Factory" b/w "Hey Joe."

Oar Folk's early and fervent support for the punk/new wave movement made it the obvious choice for in-store appearances by the Ramones, Graham Parker, Robert Gordon, Talking Heads, and David Johansen. Meanwhile, the enthusiasms and eccentricities of the staff were matched by those of the clientele. Mike bought anything connected to Dutch hard rock band Golden Earring. Beatlemaniac Wayne changed his middle name to Apple and had it printed on his checks. Chuck was crazy for jazz trumpeter Maynard Ferguson. Dustin collected Roger Dean covers (for example, Yes's *Fragile* or *The Magician's Birthday*, by Uriah Heep).

Jesperson went on to cofound the Twin/Tone label, to manage the Replacements, and to become the senior vice president of A&R for New West Records. In 2000, Sanden sold his store to former Oar Folk employee Mark Trehus, who also bought the building that housed the shop. It reopened on April 1, 2001, as Treehouse Records. Remarkably, it is still in business today.

"It certainly helps to own the building," Trehus wrote in an e-mail interview. "We sell some collectibles on eBay, we have a nice flow of used vinyl, and we carry a lot of independent label recordings of interest to a small but devoted coterie of music lovers."

"I still love what I do, and fortunately I've made other more profitable investments that have enabled me to keep Treehouse Records open. It might sound corny or conceited, but I honestly feel that it's an important and noble cause."



# Philadelphia: The Record Museum

BY JERRY "THE GEATOR" BLAVAT



**D**id you ever stop to wonder where our industry would have been without those marvelous little mom-and-pop record stores in every neighborhood in every city? As a matter of fact, many of the record companies of the forties and fifties began as record stores, including Capitol Records, which started as Wallichs Music City on Vine Street in Los Angeles, Vee-Jay Records in Chicago, and Le Grand in Norfolk, Virginia, to name just a few.

As a kid growing up in South Philly listening to the black disc jockeys playing R&B, where would I go to buy? It was Paramount, Treegoobs on South Street, and Slotkin's One Stop. There, I would spend hours going through the record bins looking for obscure labels. Back then, before you bought your record you were able to listen to it on a 45-rpm record player. And you'd meet promotion men, record-label owners, songwriters, and artists – all there in the store, all doing the same thing that you were doing.

In those days, when a record company couldn't get airplay on a new product, it would give the discs on consignment to independent record shops and hope the tune would catch on when played over and over through the speakers outside the storefront. When I began my career in radio, playing both new releases and oldies, kids would call in to ask where they could buy the records I played. In November 1961, taking a cue from Slim Rose's Times Square Records in New York, Jerry Greene,

Jared Weinstein, and I opened the first Record Museum store at 1005 Chestnut Street in Philadelphia. At its peak, with help from my manager Nat Segal, the Record Museum chain comprised twenty-three stores, including outlets in Wilmington, Atlantic City, and Trenton; the Broadway Record Museum, in Camden, was run by the late "Broadway Eddie" Warhoftig.

The key to the Record Museum's phenomenal success was that it was the only store that carried not only the current bestsellers but also *everything* I played on the air and that nobody else was playing – including the original independent-label versions of songs by R&B artists that were later covered by the

popular artists of the day, along with the regular hits.

The last Record Museum store closed in 1980, but many of those wonderful 45s now are available on CD compilations from the Collectables label – founded in 1981 by my Record Museum partner Jerry Greene and his wife, Nina (a former patron of our store). Those heady record-dealing days of the sixties and seventies are gone, unfortunately, and with them have passed such Philly names as the Listening Booth, Sound Odyssey, Franklin Music, Platters Ltd., Webb's, Sound of Market Street, Third Street Jazz, and Funkomart. A few hardy independents still remain, however, led by Val Shively's R&B Records in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, which proclaims "Over 4,000,000 Oldies in Stock" and attracts collectors, fans, and DJs from around the world. ●



INSET: Val Shively's R&B Records spells it out in Pennsylvania. ABOVE: Jerry and Nina Greene, Jared and Dorothy Weinstein and a poster of Jerry Blavat at the Record Museum, 1962.



### New York: Bleecker Bob's Records

CBGB, Max's Kansas City, Tower Records . . . all have faded into legend and memory. But in a crowded storefront on West Third Street, just off MacDougal Street, rock & roll is alive and well at Bleecker Bob's Records.

In 2007, "Bleecker Bob" Plotnik celebrated his fortieth year of selling rare, collectible, and underground records in Greenwich Village; his store is open seven days per week and until 3:00 a.m. on weekends. With its walls festooned with posters, photographs, and rare LPs and the sound system blasting anything from deep soul to death metal, a visit to Bleecker Bob's Records is a genuine rock & roll experience, even if you don't buy anything.

Although trained as a lawyer, Plotnik had a doo-wop fanaticism that led him to open a second-floor record store called Village Oldies on Bleecker Street in 1967. "One of the reasons he opened a store in the first place was that he thought he could get these doo-wop records cheaper if he had a store," John DeSalvo notes. Both DeSalvo and coworker Chris Wiedener have been with the store for more than thirty years—an incredible feat, given Bob's famously gruff demeanor and barbed tongue. Patti Smith Group guitarist Lenny Kaye, ex-New York Dolls roadie and substitute bassist Peter Jordan, Clash tour DJ Barry "Scratchy" Myers, and the late Chris Kelly all manned Bob's register at one time or another.

"Bob *can* be very caustic," DeSalvo admits. "But he's not the ogre that a lot of people have taken him to be. There are a lot of things he's done for musicians, friends, even total strangers that people don't know about because that's not the face he likes to show to the world."



Bleecker Bob in his Greenwich Village store



The good ole days: A typical vinyl emporium at the birth of the Hi-Fi era



Punk rock made Bleecker Bob's a household name among fans and collectors. His close relationships with overseas distributors such as Rough Trade allowed him to stock new U.K. singles within a day or two of release. From rare rockabilly to break-beat funk, for decades Bleecker Bob has shown an uncanny ability to (in DeSalvo's words) "hit the niche market, whatever that niche happened to be. He could meet the demand of the moment in a way that other people weren't doing at the time."

Shortly before September 11, 2001, Plotnik suffered a severe stroke and was in a coma for several months. Combined with the downturn in retail after the World Trade Center attacks, it nearly put him out of business. But the customers came back, and eventually so did Plotnik. Although confined

to a wheelchair, he still comes in once a week on average. "We can tell he's feeling better," DeSalvo says with a chuckle, "whenever he starts complaining!"

"We have regular customers from the neighborhood, from the city, from New Jersey, and Connecticut. There are European buyers who come in three or four times each year and tourists who've read about Bleecker Bob's on the Internet. We managed to hold on through 9/11 and through Bob's illness, and we're still holding on. Right now, things are okay." ♣

*Thanks to John DeSalvo, Richard Foos, Peter Jespersen, Phast Phreddie Patterson, Jay Schwartz, Seymour Stein, Mark Trehus, and Jerry Wexler.*



Today's grim reality: One of New York's Tower Records outlets in late 2006