



milt gabler

Suppose a fellow was the principal record producer of Louis Jordan, Bill Haley and Lionel Hampton — arguably the three major founders of rock & roll — you would have to agree that anybody with credits that heavy would be a lock for the R & R H of F.

But suppose on top of all of that the guy turns out to be the producer of Billie Holiday, Peggy Lee, Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald, Pearl Bailey, Jimmie Lunceford, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the Weavers AND LOUIS ARMSTRONG, would you say, hey y'all, what took so long?

Say hello to Milt Gabler.

Reverse the tape to 1926. Young Milton goes to work in his dad's radio shop on East 42nd St. across the way from the Commodore Hotel. Also called the Commodore, the store purveys not only Atwater Kent Super Hetrodynes and Majestics but such cultural artifacts as sneeze powder, whoopee cushions and exploding cigars. With the radio running throughout the day, Milt is inspired to put a loudspeaker through the transom, and 42nd St. begins to resonate to the sugary strains of the bands of Rudy Vallee, Paul Specht, and their ilk — hardly unalloyed jazz by anyone's reckoning, but somewhat redeemed by an occasional hot solo by sidemen like Manny Klein, Charlie Margolies and Red Nichols.

A double helix ensues: Lured by the music, civilians straggle into the store in search of records. Milton himself contracts the Boogie Disease. He persuades Pop to put in a line of generic type phonograph records. Before long, however, a winnowing occurs in young Gabler's sensibility, and he stocks only the pure and sublime — Jazzus Americanus: Louis Armstrong Hot Fives on Okeh, Jelly Roll on Victor, and Duke on any label — and henceforth he cannot be turned around. But the major record companies Milt was dealing with found it inconvenient to continue pressing up the sides he was ordering, because except for Commodore, the demand for antiquarian classics was, to put it generously, exiguous to a fault.

And so, *faute de mieux*, Milt went into the manufacturing business, leasing selected masters for release under his

own imprint, "The United Hot Clubs of America." Thus was bred the first real indie record operation.

At 75¢ a copy, the reissues sold modestly, but in quantities sufficient to get the attention of the biggies, and Columbia in particular, under the stewardship of the peerless John Hammond, began to disgorge specimens from its vaults at 50¢ per, in effect cutting Milt's water off.

Undaunted, Milt did the next "logical" thing. He assembled an array of jazz stalwarts under the direction of the doughty Eddie Condon and began to produce his own historic records under the Commodore label. These Commodores were superb then and are great today *sub specie aeternitas*, not just in my own skewed opinion, but in posterity's verdict. Fact is that they are still alive and kicking, repackaged (for the nth time) this time on the Mosaic label in a multi-disc compilation. And selling.

But records alone couldn't feed Milt's jazz jones, and in 1940 he initiated a weekly jam session at Jimmy Ryan's on 52nd St., employing wonderful players like Pee Wee Russell, Red Allen, Fats Waller and Zutty Singleton — and dozens of others of the best and brightest. If you were fortunate enough to have attended, you were a witness to sublime performances by the artists of jazz's Periclean age.

Also in 1941, Milt went to work for Decca. In no time at all he escalated to the top and became chief of A&R, where he remained until 1971.

Helping out at Ryan's sessions as well as serving behind the counter in the shop was Milt's brother-in-law. His name was Jack Crystal, and his son William, commonly called Billy, was raised in this effervescent environment. Could he have been exposed to the mordant Condon humor, the machine gun repartee of Wild Bill, the slapstick antics of George Brunies?

Nowadays Milt stays busy with the workings of his precious catalog. He has been accorded gold records, Grammys, lifetime awards, BMI honors — his music den can barely accommodate the hardware. He is rumored to be writing his memoirs.

I can't wait.

- JERRY WEXLER