

# PAUL ACKERMAN

**E**DITOR'S NOTE: *One of the most revered music-industry figures of the mid-20th century, Paul Ackerman was the music editor of "Billboard" magazine from 1943 to 1973. His tenure in this powerful post coincided, of course, with the tumultuous birth of rock & roll; and via his formidable intellect and his reputation as a scholar of European and American civilization, he was first among the journalists who made the new music a form to be taken very seriously indeed, inside the business and out.*

*Paul Ackerman was the recipient of dozens of awards in the fields of musical journalism and scholarship. His induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame crowns, albeit posthumously, the honors gathered by this remarkable man.*

*He was born in New York City in 1908 and educated at the College of William and Mary and at Columbia University. He spent 47 of his 69 years working at "Billboard," retired in 1973 and died on Dec. 31, 1977.*

*Among the great men to whom the flame was passed was a protégé at "Billboard," Jerry Wexler, a partner in Atlantic Records and himself an inductee into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. The following tribute is excerpted from his eulogy of Paul Ackerman, delivered at the Riverside Chapel, in New York City.*

PAUL ACKERMAN WAS a saint. In Jewish lore the hope of the world rests in every generation on 10 pure souls, *tsadikim*, without whom the universe would fragment. If ever there was a *tsadik*, Paul was just such a being — an incarnation of decency and inner beauty and boundless humanity.

Music filled him with wonderment. "Music is the most important of our arts," he would say, "because it cuts through every facet of the show business." When Paul would say, "the show business," it would have an endearing, archaic ring, suggesting stately entertainments and vast enterprises: vaudeville chains, great dance halls, carnivals and the classic days of burlesque. He loved them all. He covered them all.

And he spanned the eras of the show business from the Cotton Club to the Fillmore, always with a boundless love of music — especially the blues and primal country music. His personal involvement with country music came late in his life, and it proved a special benefice, giving him a new focus and group of new friends from another place and culture.

But his greatest concern, his vocation, his avocation, his profession — and it was a profession in both senses of the word — was *Billboard*. Paul was very serious about the publication. It was almost a surrogate family for him. If Paul had any bias in him, it was toward *Billboard*. The competition he accepted on sufferance; he had many friends on the other papers, but he looked upon those papers with a certain jaundice, a kind of irritable impatience, a studied astigmatism.

Nothing could offend him more than to be asked to print verbatim the handouts of the record companies. He drew a very distinct line between puffery and news. He was not averse to helping a friend out with a harmless plug now and then, but his kindness was leavened

with a righteous intolerance. He had no toleration for liars, con men or sweet talkers who tried to swindle him out of the precious column inches he held dear. He believed that there was a genuine place for real editorial content in the trade paper — that it was not just an appendage to the sales charts.

He was a deadly reporter and superb writer. With his master's degree in English, with his specialization in the romantic poets, he had reverence for the mother tongue, and he used it well. He had a perfectly balanced sense of news, and he knew how to apportion space. He knew what rated a three-column head and what was better consigned to the eternal limbo of overset.

In Paul's musical iconography, two came before all the others: Ralph Peer and Frank Walker. They went with the portable equipment to the Smokies and the Delta and the savanna and the Piedmont and cotton bottoms, and they found Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith and Jimmie Rodgers and Robert Johnson and Hank Williams. This was the music Paul loved the most, because it was the true beginning, the early strain.

Always with Paul, it came back to Jimmie Rodgers and Hank Williams. Theirs was the music of the crucible, of the Great Depression, of the deprived, the homeless, the knights of the road, the tenant farmers, the sharecroppers, the circuit riders, the easy riders — but not the nightriders. Like Studs Terkel, Paul had a great sense of America of the '20s and the '30s and the music of the times.

He identified with the pioneers who started the independent blues and country labels, the corsairs like Herman Lubinsky and Syd Nathan, great infighters who knew a singer when they heard one — and a commercial song. For them and Leonard Chess and Saul Bihari, he had great admiration, because they broke the barriers of the great pop-record companies and brought the essential music of America into the light.

But in the stretch run, nobody was closer to Paul than Sam Phillips. When it began, it wasn't all honeysuckle and the scent of magnolias that came drifting over the Mason-Dixon line. For when Paul's greatest enthusiasm, the historic Sun Records stable, burst out with the amazing front line of Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis and Charlie Rich, the dragons in Nashville who appointed themselves the guardians of the purity of country music made ominous sounds. Elvis? Paul had better not put "that type" of songs into the country charts. You can imagine Paul's retort — in words and deed — to these gentlemen.

I learned so much from Paul. My son Paul was named for him.

Yes, Paul left his mark on all of us. He would improve us with his quotations from Browning and Hopkins and Keats and, perhaps most often, from Tennyson:

*Twilight and evening bell,*

*And after that the dark!*

*And may there be no sadness of farewell,*

*When I embark.*

*Paul Ackerman (left) and Jerry Wexler, circa 1954*

