

(( SYDNEY NATHAN ))

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HEN I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL, between 1957 and 1961, both my life and career began to take shape under the tutelage of legendary *Billboard* music editor Paul Ackerman and then-chart editor Tom Noonan, who first opened the magazine's doors to a fifteen-year-old kid. At that time, *Billboard* was certainly the communications center of the music industry, and what I learned and saw and heard there has indeed served me well over the years. Far and away the monumental event – and one of the most important moments in my life – was meeting Syd Nathan at a *Billboard* record-review session one drizzly Wednesday night in March or April 1958. ♪ ALTHOUGH I HAD A FRENCH TEST coming up, Paul urged me to stay by saying, “This guy is one of the great indie record men –

a real character. He can't see very well and wears these thick, Coca-Cola-bottle glasses, has a big ring on his finger and talks with a deep, raspy voice due to previous illnesses, but you just must meet him. He'll be overwhelmed by your knowledge of C&W and R&B, and you will understand and love him and see what he is all about.” Paul was right: That meeting changed my life and destiny and is probably the reason I am able to write a few words today about my Great Mentor, Sydney Nathan.

Although that night was nearly forty years ago, it is ever fresh in my mind. Syd took everyone on *Billboard's* record-review panel (Bob Rolontz, Ren Grevatt, June Bundy and Howard Cook, as well as Paul and myself) out for a bite. (In those days, a strong *Billboard* review could guarantee upwards of fifty thousand singles sold right off the bat.) It was customary to listen to a visting label head's records at the end of dinner. As the session dragged on, a reviewer said, “All we have left are these few records on Jubilee. That company is in so much trouble, who knows if they

will be around. We'll listen to those next week. Syd, let's have your records.” Syd got up and threw his records – fortunately, unbreakable 45s – on the floor and said, “You don't step on a man when he's down. Listen to Jerry Blaine's records, and you can save mine for next week.” Needless to say, *all* the records were reviewed, including ones by Little Willie John on Syd's label King and the Cadillacs on Josie. I mentioned to Syd how fortunate Jubilee president Jerry Blaine was to have a friend like him, to which Syd promptly responded, “Friend! I'm in court with that son-of-a-bitch right now!” Later, when Bob Rolontz questioned Syd as to whether his songwriting abilities were indeed genuine, Syd dared him to pick any item off the table and, before our eyes, composed a song about a bottle of Dr. Brown's Cream Soda.

Sydney Nathan was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, on April 27, 1904. Beset by both poor eyesight and asthma, Syd spent his early adult years involved in such business pursuits as real estate, property development, photo finishing, pawn shops, a jewelry



store and even wrestling-match promotion, all with little or no success. There are many stories about how Syd got into the record business. He told me that in the late Fifties he was running a radio and phonograph store with his sister and brother-in-law, Dorothy and Saul Halper, in downtown Cincinnati. One night, when he ran into a man who'd owed him a six-dollar gambling debt for a long time, Syd blew up and so embarrassed him that the next day the guy came into the store with boxes of used records to pay off the debt. They sold so well that Syd eventually opened Syd's Record Shop, turning it into one of Cincinnati's most important music stores.

During the World War II shellac shortage, Syd suspected that certain West Coast retailers got preferential treatment in receiving scarce 78s by making payoffs to record companies. A trip to Indiana's RCA and Columbia pressing plants, where he saw large quantities of records being pressed, confirmed his suspicions. Syd swore never again to be dependent upon the major labels and that he would start his own company.

In 1943-44, with financial assistance from family and friends, Syd Nathan started King Records with the release of a series of country records, mostly by local artists, like Cowboy Copas and Grandpa Jones, recruited from local radio shows like WLW's Boone County Jamboree. The earliest King records were made at a very crude pressing plant in nearby Louisville, Kentucky. Their quality was so bad that Syd vowed to build King into America's first totally freestanding independent record company. Within five years, Nathan owned a pressing plant, recording studio and printing and plating facility at King's company headquarters at 1540 Brewster Avenue. More impressive still, King Records were wholesaled nationally by thirty-two factory-owned branches in cities as small as Birmingham, Alabama - where even the majors did not have distribution facilities. Many of these were one-man operations, with orders being taken over the phone by an answering service while the salesman-branch manager was out soliciting orders from the bigger accounts and visiting radio stations.

Although initially active solely in C&W, King was the first independent company to achieve equal if not greater success in R&B - the two most significant musical influences on rock & roll (and the "alternative music" of their day). King's country roster included, in addition to Copas and Jones, Moon Mullican, the Delmore Brothers, Wayne Raney, Jimmie Osborne, the Stanley Brothers, Don Reno, Hawkshaw Hawkins and Hank Penny, among others. The acquisition of the 4-Star Records catalogue in the late Fifties added major artists and hit songs by such notables as Hank Locklin, the Maddox Brothers and Rose, Webb Pierce and Jimmy Dean.

Although Syd liked being based in Cincinnati - as he put it, "not contaminated by New York, Los Angeles or Chicago" - he was equally determined not to suffer being out of the loop. Therefore, he sought out the best A&R men available, sometimes giving them their own label with a profit share and a joint-publishing company, as an inducement to sign new artists and writers. That's how he lured away talents like Henry Glover, who oversaw the King label; Ralph Bass,



Sonny Thompson and Johnny Otis, who at various times held sway over Federal; and Dave Bartholomew and Henry Stone, each of whom at one time headed A&R at DeLuxe (after Syd bought the label). Sydney, whose ear for hits was equally matched by his ability as a deal maker, and his A&R men brought to the combined label rosters such R&B greats as Bull Moose Jackson, Earl Bostic, Lucky Millinder, Ivory Joe Hunter, Lonnie Johnson, Wynonie Harris, Roy Brown, Tiny Bradshaw, Little Esther Phillips and Eddie "Cleanhead"

Vinson. They also signed strong vocal groups such as Billy Ward and the Dominoes (featuring Clyde McPhatter and then Jackie Wilson), Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, Otis Williams and the Charms, and doo-wop legends the Chanters and

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Right: Nathan with King recording artist Hank Ballard



the King Pins. In addition, they had Bill Doggett, who gave King its biggest hit with the instrumental "Honky Tonk"; the incomparable golden voice of Little Willie John; guitarists Freddy King and Johnny "Guitar" Watson; and King's greatest artist - arguably the greatest star in rhythm & blues history - James Brown.

Syd's strategy also helped build Lois Music and its subsidiaries into a powerful publishing group, certainly one of BMI's biggest during the Forties and Fifties, with major copyrights like "Fever," "Kansas City," "Dedicated to the One I Love" and countless others among their over 7,500 titles. Syd also tried his hand at songwriting, including such country classics as "Signed, Sealed and Delivered," "I'll Sail My Ship Alone" and "Sweeter Than the Flowers."

During my years with King, I developed close friendships with Hank Ballard and James Brown, both of which endure to this day, and with Little Willie John, who, sadly, passed away in 1968. Syd was extremely close with these artists on a personal basis, advising them on matters far outside the realm of the music industry. I know from numerous discussions with Hank and James that both cherish their relationships with Syd, have only fond memories of him and, like myself, learned much from his wisdom, experience and plain common sense.

For as long as I knew him and for many years before, Syd never enjoyed good health. Heart problems caused him to make frequent trips to Miami, where after long periods of recuperation under the care of his doctor brother David, he could return to Cincinnati and King. By the time I started Sire Records with Richard Gottetler in 1966, Syd's health was really bad, but he was always there to help us. King had already closed its New York A&R office, so he rented us the space, ideally located in a brownstone at 146 West 54th Street, five huge rooms for just \$225 a month. I promptly rented out the largest of these for \$200 so, thanks to Syd, the fledgling Sire Records was in business almost rent free. I don't know if we could have survived those first few years without Syd's help.

Sadly, on March 5, 1968, Sydney passed away. There's never been another one like him: Syd Nathan was an original. With his singular vision and unflagging determination, he helped spread the sounds of C&W, R&B and, ultimately, rock & roll across the nation. ◀



