



# The Ink Spots

By Dan Nooger

ONE OF THE YEAR'S most heralded events in record-collecting fandom was the discovery of the legendary first acetate recordings, made in 1953, by the very first inductee into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Elvis Presley. The songs, "My Happiness" and "That's When Your Heartaches Begin," were both popularized earlier by the Ink Spots. The Presley sides offer proof of the Ink Spots' profound influence on rock & roll. They are, to this day, considered the forerunners of R&B-group singing style.

In contrast to their contemporaries, such as the Mills Brothers, who vocally imitated the instruments of a jazz band, the Ink Spots' patterns of vocal harmony "established, if not introduced, what was to become a standard pattern for the majority of black vocal quartets," wrote Bill Millar in his book *The Drifters*. "The baritone, bass and second tenor would harmonize an accompaniment to the primary vocal line, which relied chiefly upon a tenor lead. . . . It was but one of the elements in black group singing which became known as rhythm & blues in the 1950s, and, more so than any other black group of the time, [the Ink Spots] initiated a stream of development which led in turn to the Ravens, the Orioles, the Dominoes and the Drifters."

Clyde McPhatter, former lead singer of both the Dominoes and the Drifters, was no doubt speaking for many of his contemporaries when he told author Charlie Gillett in 1969, "We patterned ourselves after the Ink Spots."

The Ink Spots' story begins in Indianapolis in the late 1920s, where Orville "Hoppy" Jones, Ivory "Deek" Watson, Charlie Fuqua and Jerry Daniels gained early experience with such amateur and semipro groups as the Peanut Boys, the Percolating Puppies, the Four Riff Brothers, the Swingin' Gate Brothers and King, Jack and the Jesters. During this time, Bill Kenny — who was to become the most famous Ink Spot of all — was gaining similar experience in his home town of Baltimore, Maryland. The music of these early groups was inspired by big-name jazz bands and old-time vaudeville acts. The members improvised harmony vocals, often simulating wind instruments with their voices, and played guitars, tipples and string basses (or cellos retuned to play as basses).

After Midwestern exposure via live radio appearances on WKBF (Indianapolis), WHK (Cleveland) and WLW (Cincinnati), the original Ink Spots lineup — Jones, Watson, Fuqua and Daniels — came to New York in the early Thirties. A legal conflict with bandleader Paul Whiteman, who already had a vocal group called the King's Jesters, led to a name change from King, Jack and the Jesters to the Ink Spots. The group won a regular radio spot on WJZ (New York City), made appearances at the Apollo, the Savoy Ballroom and the Roxy and even appeared in a movie short (*What a Business*) before signing with RCA in 1935.

At this time, the Ink Spots' music was still heavily based on

swing, jazz and jive styles. While none of the six recordings the group made for RCA sold well, they did manage to get the group its first tour of England and Europe.

In 1936 the Ink Spots signed with Decca Records, and Jerry Daniels was replaced by Bill Kenny. The swinging styles of their early days continued, with Deek Watson singing lead, but as Bill Kenny once recalled, "This style wasn't getting the group anywhere." Indeed, by 1939 the Ink Spots were on the verge of disbanding when songwriter Jack Lawrence brought them a ballad entitled "If I Didn't Care."

For the first time, the tenor of Bill Kenny was paired off with Hoppy Jones's "talking" bass. A million seller, "If I Didn't Care" inaugurated a stream of hit ballads in a similar vein, including "My Prayer" (successfully revived by the Platters in 1956), "Maybe," "We Three," "Whispering Grass," "The Gypsy," "To Each His Own" and "I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire." Worldwide touring, appearances with artists ranging from Lucky Millinder to Glenn Miller and roles in such movies as *The Great American Broadcast* kept the Ink Spots on top with both black and white audiences right up through the postwar years and the dawn of the 1950s.

During the Forties, the group pioneered the breaking down of racial barriers by appearing in previously all-white Southern venues. When the Ink Spots appeared in 1948 at Miami's Monte Carlo club, headlining over several white acts, *Billboard* reported: "Format is a radical departure for this territory, for even if Jim Crow laws are largely unwritten and there is no law prohibiting Negro entertainers from working in white places or with white acts, no operator in the Deep South has ever had the nerve to try it."

By the late 1940s, however, the Ink Spots were beset by both musical and personal problems. The style that had once seemed so fresh had hardened into a rigid formula. Newer groups such as the Ravens and the Orioles had taken their inspiration from the Ink Spots and were now moving the music forward. Even *Billboard*, while still recognizing the quartet's success, had begun to call its style "old-fashioned."

The Ink Spots' lineup had begun to change due to illness (beginning with the sudden death of Hoppy Jones in October 1944) and internal conflicts until it seemed that, except for Bill Kenny, the group changed personnel as often as it changed shirts.

There began a series of legal proceedings in which Charlie Fuqua won the right to establish his own rival Ink Spots group. (Charlie Fuqua's cousin Harvey Fuqua fronted the Moonglows during the 1950s; he later became a top executive and producer at Motown Records.) By 1953 these upheavals had caused the original Ink Spots to disband, although scores of groups have continued to perform and record under the name. But the Ink Spots' tradition of romantic, bluesy ballads sung in perfect harmony continues to exert its timeless appeal, right up to the present day.

# ROCKIN' IN RHYTHM

1942-1954

By Nick Tosches

THE STUFF OF HISTORY is not as neat and orderly as historians would have us believe. The big and the small of it lie in darkness, beginnings and ends interwoven in shadows. We seek to discover exactly the moment and manner of the world's origin, but at the same time we do not even know for sure when or where, for example, the first baseball game was played. As it is with baseball and that older game of creation, so it is with rock & roll. Studying the various elements that comprise this century's music, it is no easier to discern the moment where rock & roll begins than it is to discern where blue becomes indigo in the spectrum.

The term itself, *rock & roll*, is little help in solving the mystery. The phrase, as an erotic metaphor, was augured in J. Berni Barbour's song "My Man Rocks Me (with One Steady Roll)," which the blues singer Trixie Smith recorded in the fall of 1922. But *rock* was also used in a like fashion by Shakespeare, in *Venus and Adonis*, back in the days before *Variety*. In the fall of 1934 – Gladys Presley of Tupelo, Mississippi, was pregnant that autumn – the Boswell Sisters, a pop act, had a hit with "Rock and Roll." But it didn't rock and it didn't roll. A few years before that, however, Duke Ellington, recording as the Jungle Band, cut an instrumental called "Rockin' in Rhythm." The record didn't sell very well but nevertheless became one of the windblown seeds of that soon-to-be music. By early 1942, when Cab Calloway proclaimed in song, "I Want to Rock," that seed in the wind, and countless others, had taken hold; and there was something growing, wild and lush.

Rhythm & blues, the golden dawn of rock & roll, blossomed in the middle of a war. As the hot summer of 1942 began, the recording industry's outlook was bleak. Records were made from shellac, and the Asian countries that were America's main source of shellac were blockaded. At the same time, the shipping and distribution of records was becoming more and more problematic as the Office of Defense Transportation commandeered every means of transport. On June 25th, James Caesar Petrillo, the president of the American Federation of Musicians and a proud enemy of "the menace of mechanical music," announced that all recording licenses would become null and void on August 1st. Furthermore, the licenses would not be renewed until certain excessive demands were met. The industry felt as if it had received the kiss of death. Since this

meant that no union musicians would be able to make records after July, companies rushed to lay in enough to last them through the strike.

The ban went on for more than a year, but it didn't affect the industry the way most feared it would. Nineteen forty-three turned out to be the industry's most prosperous year in more than a decade. The problems of the shellac shortage, erratic distribution and the A.F.M. ban were more than offset by a record-buying public that wanted dearly to be distracted from the grim reality of war and had the money to pay for that distraction. The style and spirit of popular music were changing too; and change creates excitement. Big-band swing was still the rage. Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, the Dorseys, Harry James – these were the men whom music belonged to in the early 1940s. Goodman and James recorded for Columbia; Miller and Tommy Dorsey for Victor; Jimmy Dorsey for Decca. These three labels dominated the industry at the time of the A.F.M. ban.

In 1938, Decca, the least conservative of the three major companies, had signed a thirty-year-old singer and sax player named Louis Jordan. Originally from Arkansas, Jordan had come to New York and joined Chick Webb's band in 1936. Two years later, he had formed his own Harlem-based group. Jazz bands in New York at that time were being rent apart.

Those musicians who were not bending their sharkskin knees in fealty to the strange new strains that would later be-

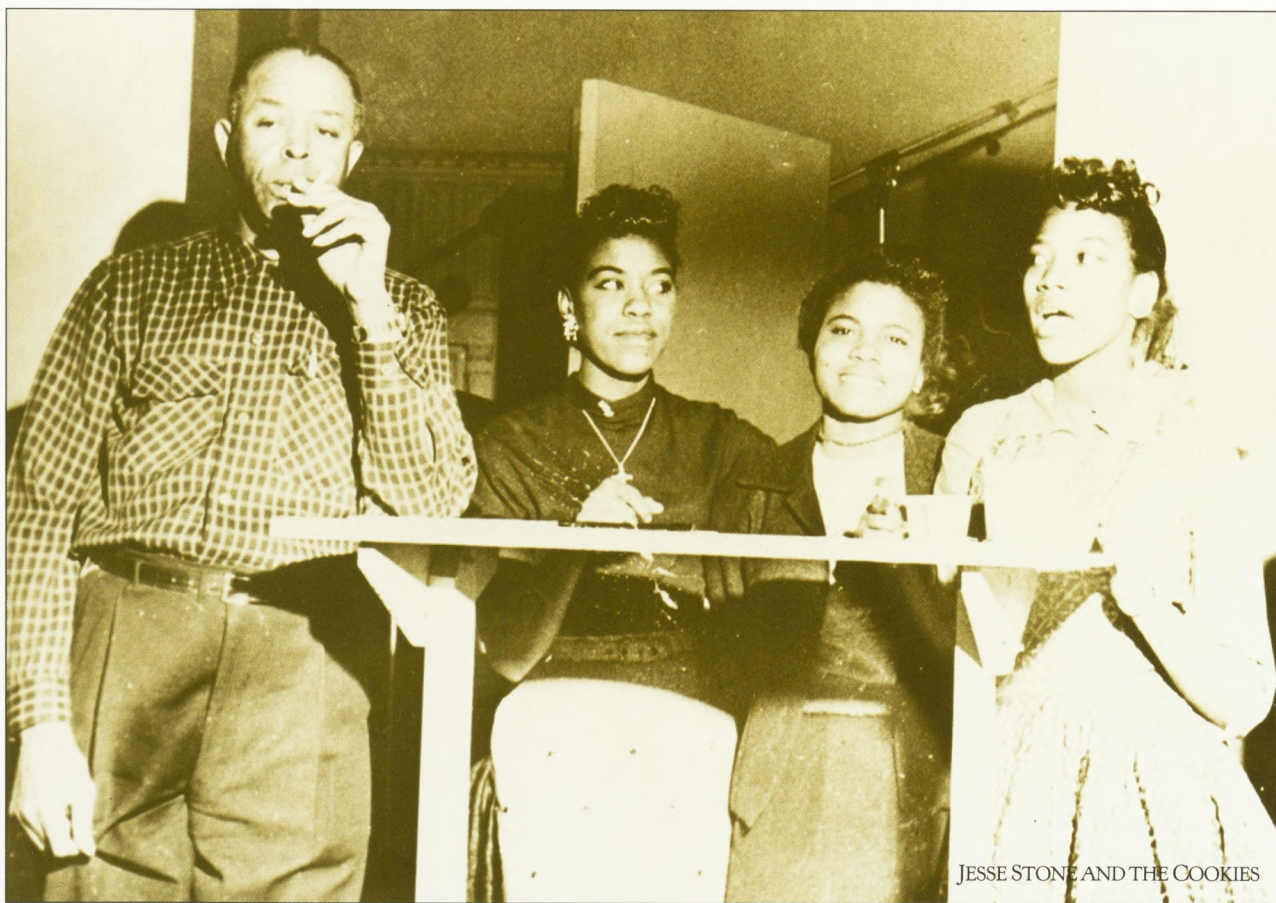
come be-bop were becoming involved with that other strange new music that would eventually be known as rhythm & blues. By the time he signed with Decca, Louis Jordan, whose music was growing wilder, louder and more audacious with every note, had all but been disowned by the jazz establishment. "It's a shame that crap like this is played by a jump band of this caliber," complained *Down Beat* in a 1941 review. But as usual the critics were less attuned than the public. Jordan's records began rising high on *Billboard*'s "Harlem Hit Parade" – the first to hit, "I'm Gonna Move to the Outskirts of Town," came in the fall of 1942 – and in 1944, with "Ration Blues" and "G.I. Jive," they began crossing over to the pop charts.

Throughout the Forties, as he developed and defined the course of rhythm & blues and helped deliver rock & roll, Louis Jordan produced some of the biggest and the best hits of the era: "Caledonia"



NAT KING COLE





JESSE STONE AND THE COOKIES

(1945); "Beware" (1946); "Choo Choo Ch' Boogie" (1946), from which Chuck Berry later lifted the guitar riff for "Johnny B. Goode"; "Let the Good Times Roll" (1946); "Saturday Night Fish Fry" (1949); and scores of others through 1951. He was the best-selling black artist of the Forties, and to this day only four other rhythm & blues acts – James Brown, Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles and the Temptations – have had more hits or sold more records than Louis Jordan did way back when. And while recording technology since then has advanced immeasurably, the brilliance captured in those old shellac grooves left little room for advancement and has rarely been equaled.

Another Decca artist who, like Jordan, first hit the charts in the early Forties was Nathaniel Adams Coles, who went by the name Nat King Cole. Born in Montgomery, Alabama, and raised on the South Side of Chicago, where his father was a Baptist pastor, Cole had been making records since 1936; but it was not until late 1940 that he began to sing as well as play piano on record. (According to one story, Cole reluctantly became a singer at the Swanee Inn in Los Angeles, at the drunken insistence of a group of hecklers.) Though Cole is remembered mainly for the sophisticated romantic ballads and immense pop hits that brought him fame and fortune – "Nature Boy," "Mona Lisa," "Too Young" – he was in his way, like Jordan in his, one of the seminal forces in rhythm & blues.

Johnny Mercer's new Capitol label had barely gotten off the ground when Petrillo's warning came. Yet Capitol not only survived, it thrived. Part of the reason was Nat King Cole, who soon after "That Ain't Right," his only Decca hit, became Capitol's first black singer. With Oscar Moore on guitar and Wesley Prince on bass (Moore would leave in 1947 to join his brother's band, Johnny Moore's Three Blazers; Prince would be replaced by Johnny Miller), the King Cole Trio, with such hits as "Straighten Up and Fly Right," "Gee, Baby, Ain't I Good to You?" and "(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66," created a sound that popular music, black and white, has built on ever since.

Cole did not merely electrify the blues (though Moore played an amplified guitar); he transformed them. Drawing from jazz, he remade the blues into a thing of his own time and place. While aglow with all the ineffable forlorn wisdom of the old blues, Cole's music embodied the sophistication and street-smart savoir-faire that was burgeoning on both sides of the tracks in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago as the war ended.

Understated and subtle, but never simple or coy, his small-group sound became the standard of cool. He was the Apollo to Louis Jordan's raucous Dionysus. And plainly he was the major influence on those younger and wilder singing piano players who led the first great wave of West Coast rhythm & blues: Cecil Gant, whose wartime lost-love lament, "I Wonder," was one of the biggest R&B hits of 1944-45; Charles Brown, whose "Drifting Blues," recorded with Johnny Moore's Three Blazers in early 1946, brought success in one cool gust to himself, Moore's band and Leo Mesner's new Philo Records; Ivory Joe Hunter, who also had his first hit, "Blues at Sunrise" (1945), with the Three Blazers; Amos Milburn, who revolutionized both dance and drinking music with such hits as "Chicken Shack Boogie" (1948) and "Bad, Bad Whiskey" (1950); Floyd Dixon, yet another displaced Texan like Brown, Hunter and Milburn, who made his mark on the Coast; and Ray Charles, whose trio broke in the spring of 1949 with "Confession Blues." Though their names would forever be more closely associated with the history of rock & roll than Nat King Cole's, the fact remains that his music fathered theirs.

Out of the Midwest came three of the greatest figures of early rock & roll. Wynonie Harris, born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1915, had been singing and dancing for more than a decade when, in 1944, "Hurry, Hurry," his first record, became a minor hit. He had recorded it as a vocalist with Lucky Millinder and His Orchestra, but the following year he went out on his own. After making records on Leo Mesner's Philo and Aladdin labels in Los Angeles, Jim Bulleit's Bullet in Nashville, Ike and



Bess Berman's Apollo and Lionel Hampton's short-lived Hamp-Tone in New York, he signed, in December 1947, with Syd Nathan's King Records in Cincinnati. His second King release was one of the recordings without which the story of rock & roll wouldn't have been quite the same.

Roy Brown (1925-81), who wrote "Good Rockin' Tonight," had himself recorded the song, for DeLuxe, in 1947. But that record, unlike many of his later recordings – hits such as "Long About Midnight" (1948), "Rockin' at Midnight" (1949) and "Hard Luck Blues" (1950) – went all but unnoticed. Harris cut a version of "Good Rockin' Tonight" for King three days after Christmas 1947, and he breathed fire into it, and it shook like nothing the world had ever heard. It hit the R&B charts in May of 1948 – Elvis was thirteen – and it stayed on the charts for almost six months, rising to Number One.

Shouting and howling and swooning, drawing from the horns and saxophones and drums and guitars behind him the most salacious and audacious licks and cries and chords to ride, Wynonie Harris was the first great pure rock & roll stylist. With such songs as "Lolly Pop Mama" (1948), "Grandma Plays the Numbers" (1949), "All She Wants to Do Is Rock" (1949), "Sittin' on It All the Time" (1950), "I Like My Baby's Pudding" (1950), "Good Morning Judge" (1950), "Bloodshot Eyes" (1951), Harris was the sum of all that came before and the infusing spirit of all that came after.

The only singer who Harris thought was better than he was Big Joe Turner (1911-85), from Kansas City. Big Joe surely predated the classic rhythm & blues era. He had performed professionally since 1929, the year he teamed up with pianist Pete Johnson, and he had been making records since 1938; but by the end of the war his was one of the patriarchal voices of the new sound. By 1950, when he signed with Atlantic Records in New York, he had released more than fifty records on a variety of labels. His first Atlantic single, "Chains of Love," hit the charts in 1951, and after that the hits just kept coming: "Sweet Sixteen" (1952), "Honey Hush" (1953), "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" (1954) and others just as fine.

The third of the Midwestern triumvirate was Jesse Stone, born in Atchison, Kansas, in 1901, and raised musically in Kansas City. Though Stone, who had been making records since 1927, was an accomplished musician, it was through his songwriting that he changed the course of American music. He was, with founder Ahmet Ertegun and Herb Abramson, one of the creative forces behind Atlantic Records, which began as a small independent label in 1947, developed into the premier R&B label of the Fifties and into one of the major companies of today. It was Stone who, under his own name and the pen name Charles Calhoun, wrote many of Atlantic's biggest hits: "Money Honey," recorded by the Drifters in 1953, "Your Cash Ain't Nothin' but Trash," recorded by the Clovers in 1954, "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" (1954), "Flip, Flop and Fly" (1955) and "Lipstick, Powder and Paint" (1956), by Big Joe Turner. As Ahmet Ertegun once said, "Jesse Stone did more to develop the basic rock & roll sound than anybody else."

And from the street corners of the East came doo-wop. The young

black vocal groups that ascended in New York, Detroit and Washington, D.C., were descended musically from the Mills Brothers and the Ink Spots – groups that had been recording since the early 1930s – and from urban gospel groups that flourished during the war years, like the Swan Silvertone Singers ("Jesus Hits Like the Atom Bomb"). They delivered the final defining tone to R&B. After them, the mongrel of rhythm & blues would be ready to sire the bastard of rock & roll.

First came the Ravens, the quartet organized by Jimmy Ricks in the spring of 1946. They made their debut at the Club Baron, in Harlem, and their first records, for Hub, that same spring. Next came the Orioles, who cut their first record in the summer of 1948, for It's a Natural (which after this release became Jubilee Records). These earliest of the R&B vocal groups were conservative in both their style of singing and their choice of material. (The first Ravens record, for example, was a version of the ersatz Yiddish ditty "Mahzel.")

Then came the Clovers. In the beginning the Clovers were not much more daring than the Ravens or the Orioles, whose material, along with that of the older Charioteers, formed a large part of the group's early repertoire. By the end of the decade, however, the Clovers had begun to rasp the glossy polish from their music's edge and to perform in a less refined, more vulgar manner. They became the first of the tradition-borne vocal groups to make the leap across the Jordan to the chicken shack that transcends all knowing. Coming to New York from Washington, D.C., the Clovers – lead singer John "Buddy" Bailey, tenor Matthew McQuarter, baritone Harold Lucas, bass Harold Winley and guitarist Bill Harris – signed with Atlantic during Christmastide 1950. On February 22nd, 1951, they went into the Apex studio in midtown Manhattan, and they came out with one of the biggest R&B hits of the year: "Don't You Know I Love You." The rest is history: "Fool, Fool, Fool" (1951), "One Mint Julep" (1952), "Good Lovin'" (1953), "Lovey Dovey" (1954), "Your Cash Ain't Nothin' but Trash" (1954), straight on through to "Love Potion No. 9" in postdiluvial 1959.

The Midnighters began in Detroit as the Royals. Signed to King Records by talent scout Johnny Otis, the Royals began recording for King's sister R&B label, Federal, in January 1952. Success did not come. Then, in the summer of 1953, another Detroit boy, sixteen-year-old Hank Ballard, took over Charles Sutton's role as lead singer. His style was much less tamed, his voice more powerful. "Get It," the first record the group cut with Ballard, hit the charts that July. During the 1953-54 holiday season, Ballard wrote a song he called "Sock It to Me, Mary." In the studio that January, producer Ralph Bass told Ballard the title was "too strong." While Ballard was trying to amend the song, King engineer Eddie Smith's pregnant wife, Annie, strolled into the control room. Within a few minutes, "Work with Me, Annie" came into being. Though it was denounced as "smut" by *Variety*, *Down Beat* and others, it hit the R&B charts in April, rose to Number One and emerged as one of the biggest hits of the year. At that point, to avoid confusion with the "5" Royals, the successful Apollo group that had been signed by King, the Royals became the Midnighters.





HANK BALLARD AND THE MIDNIGHTERS

"Work with Me, Annie" was the Number One R&B hit when, in May, Federal released the Midnighters' "Sexy Ways." Opening with Alonzo Tucker's rough-blaring electric chords, which would become the most commonly copied riff in rock & roll, "Sexy Ways" – which made "Work with Me, Annie" sound like a nursery lullaby – entered the charts while "Work with Me, Annie" was still riding high. As that summer neared its end, the Midnighters had three of the Top Ten R&B hits, with their latest, "Annie Had a Baby," in the Number One position. They had taken the vocal-group sound as far from its roots as their hearts allowed.

The Clovers and the Midnighters ruled the alley. But the Dominoes were perhaps the classiest and most brilliant of the vocal groups. Their mastery of rhythm and meter, their subtle interweaving of the coarse and the sublime, their lyrics, which seemed never to rhyme for the sake of rhyme alone – these were the rare qualities that set them apart. The founder and leader of the Dominoes was Billy Ward. Born in Los Angeles in 1921, Ward was a classically trained child soprano. He studied piano, organ and harmony and began composing as a teenager, not long before becoming a Golden Gloves champion (and a soldier, a journalist and a Carnegie Hall voice coach).

It was in New York, in 1950, that Ward formed the Dominoes, recruiting tenor Charlie White, baritone Joe Lamont, bass Billy Brown and a high-placed gospel tenor from North Carolina, eighteen-year-old Clyde McPhatter. Making worldly music with sanctified fervency, the Dominoes began recording for Federal in late 1950, and the best of those records – "Sixty-Minute Man" (1951), "Have Mercy, Baby" (1952) and others – represent a sort of visceral poetic sensibility that rock & roll since has rarely surpassed. Of equal historic importance is the fact that "Sixty-Minute Man" crossed over to the mainstream pop charts a little less than three months after it hit the R&B charts, becoming the first record by a hardcore R&B group to do so. It set the precedent for things to come.

Over the next few years other black groups would cross over – in

1953 the Orioles, with "Crying in the Chapel"; in 1954 the Crows, with "Gee," the Chords, with "Sh-Boom," the Charms, with "Hearts of Stone" and the Five Keys, with "Ling, Ting, Tong" – but none of these ensuing crossover hits had either the potency or the excitement of the one that broke open the floodgate. Clyde McPhatter left the Dominoes in June 1953, to form the Drifters, whose records on Atlantic – "Money Honey" (1953), "Honey Love" (1954) and the rest – did as much to further R&B as the Dominoes' had just a few short years before.

Nineteen fifty-four. There was thunder in the air. Rhythm & blues was everywhere, like heat, like fire. Louis Jordan, Wynonie Harris, Amos Milburn and the other R&B warhorses were mostly forgotten now, it was true; and Nat King Cole had long ago moved on. But those who had come in their wake were making the thunder. Fats Domino in New Orleans, Ruth Brown in New York, Little Richard down in Macon. There was thunder everywhere. That summer, "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" and "Sexy Ways" blared from wherever neon glowed, thunder upon thunder. It was the beginning of something, and it was the end of something, too. On July 5th, an unknown nineteen-year-old boy named Elvis Presley went into the Sun studio in Memphis, took that thunder and shook it down.

Beginning and end, end and beginning.

Only one more thing remains to be said here, in the way of truth and tribute. As Jesse Stone observed and the Drifters sang, it's "Money, Honey" that moves this world. It's what every business, and certainly the music business, is all about. But that thing called respect is not without its worth, either. Louis Jordan, who was the biggest black star of the 1940s and who did much to create rock & roll, got barely a mention when he passed away in 1975. Wynonie Harris got less when he went, in June of 1969. Amos Milburn died forgotten in a Houston housing project nine years ago this month. If the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame serves any real purpose, it is to supply that more elusive commodity, respect, which so often gets lost or trampled in the marketplace.

