

## ATLANTIC RECORDS

Atlantic Records was the premier R&B label of the 1950's and continued its preeminence in black music as the great soul music label the 1960's. Headed by Ahmet Ertegun, Atlantic set the standard for all other indies: they actually paid their performers fairly and took the time to craft creative, polished and well-recorded productions, drawing on the talents of a pool of seasoned New York session players and an inspired staff that included producers Jerry Wexler, engineer Tom Dowd and arranger Jesse Stone. Atlantic turned out some of the best R&B of the 1950's: Leiber & Stoller's productions for the Coasters and the Drifters and the seminal recordings of Ray Charles were only the most successful of the label's deep and talented roster.

### Chuck Willis

Chuck Willis recorded several R&B hits for Okeh Records in the early fifties before signing with Atlantic Records in 1956. Willis' first Atlantic session yielded "**It's Too Late**," a slow, lost-love blues written by Willis and later covered by Buddy Holly, Derek & the Dominos and many others. The almost painfully personal lyrics read like a tormented blues but are set to a typically creative Atlantic arrangement featuring female background vocals and the surprise appearance of a celesta that adds an aura of childlike sincerity. (The backing vocals were supplied by an Atlantic group called the Cookies, who later, as the "Raeletts," became an integral part of Ray Charles' sound; the celesta on "It's Too Late" inspired Buddy Holly's better-known use of the instrument on "Everyday.")

Willis' 1957 reworking of the blues standard "**C. C. Rider**" earned him the "King of the Stroll" title, since the song happened to be paced just right for the new dance. The record opens with a marimba melody then floats into a gentle boogie pattern embellished by constant piano triplets, a chorus of background voices chanting the title refrain, and a plaintive tenor saxophone that forms a duet with Willis' vocals. "C.C. Rider" was followed by a similar update of a blues standard called "Betty and Dupree." Willis then returned to original songs for a final pair of hits that were released together on a single in 1958: "What Am I Living For" and "(I Don't Want to) Hang Up My Rock & Roll Shoes." He died during emergency abdominal surgery before the songs reached the charts, giving a sadly ironic twist to their titles.

### LaVern Baker

LaVern Baker was a consistent pop chartmaker, scoring seven Top Forty hits for Atlantic in addition to her string of R&B hits. After singing in her teens as "Little Miss Sharecropper," dressed in demeaning rags and "backwoods" sack dresses, Baker became a featured soloist with the Todd Rhodes Orchestra in the post-swing days of touring R&B troupes. Baker signed with Atlantic in 1953, late enough to have her music aimed at the teenage crossover market that eluded labelmate Ruth Brown. Her first Atlantic hit, 1954's "**Twedlee Dee**," was a clever pop song with a samba beat and a classy Atlantic production (even though it was actually recorded in an office rather than a studio). The song one of the big hits of the crossover era, though in keeping with the pattern of the times, it was outsold by Georgia Gibbs' saccharine cover, which drained the energy of the original and rendered the song merely "cute."

"Tweedlee Dee" inspired similar follow-ups like "Bop-Ting-A-Ling," "Fee-Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum" and "Tra La La." She broke away from the nursery rhyme model, fortunately, with "**Jim Dandy**," a 1956 hit that set Baker's growling blues voice against a gentle boogie bass and playful pop-style arrangement similar to the sound of "Don't Be Cruel" and other Elvis Presley hits for RCA. Baker's biggest pop hit, the 1958 torch-ballad "I Cried a Tear," employed a more subdued, soulful sound highlighted by a plaintive call-and-response between Baker and saxophonist King Curtis. Baker's "Saved," from 1961, is an upbeat gospel-pop celebration of redemption sung with a worldwide wink ("I used to smoke, I used to drink... now I'm saved"). Her last pop chart appearance came in 1963 with "See See Rider," her version of the blues standard popularized by Chuck Willis.

### **Ivory Joe Hunter**

Ivory Joe Hunter was forty-two years old and a well-established performer when he landed on the pop charts in 1956 with "**Since I Met You Baby**." Hunter was one of the first black artists to adapt elements of country music, foreshadowing Ray Charles' celebrated C&W recordings and the country-soul of Solomon Burke. The country flavor of "Since I Met You Baby" mixes easily with club blues and pop shadings, creating a broad appeal that inspired cover versions by a range of disparate artists, including Freddy Fender, B. B. King and Dean Martin. Hunter's "Empty Arms" evoked a similar mood and achieved a similar success in all three—Pop, C&W and R&B—markets. Although his songs continued to be widely covered (Elvis Presley and Pat Boone both covered his songs), Hunter was unable to sustain his own recording success. He joined the Grand Ole Opry in the late sixties, and was attempting a comeback when he died of lung cancer in 1974.

**Other Atlantic artists** who achieved a significant measure of pop success included white pop idol Bobby Darin and two ex-Drifters—original lead singer Clyde McPhatter and Ben E. King. Blues legend Joe Turner helped launch rock & roll with "Shake, Rattle & Roll," but his own style remained a bit too raw for the pop market. While Turner looked back to the era of the great blues shouters, another big, burly singer named Solomon Burke looked forward with the country-soul of 1960's "Just Out of Reach (Of My Two Empty Arms)" and the emotional gospel delivery of "Cry to Me," a landmark 1962 release that reflected a shift to a new, southern style of R&B that was beginning to be called "soul."