CENTRAL AVENUE BLUES: THE MAKING OF LOS ANGELES RHYTHM AND BLUES, 1942–1947

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During the 1940s the South Central Avenue area of Los Angeles was home to a dense cluster of nightclubs, after-hours "breakfast" clubs, bars, and theaters that were supported by the influx of Afro-American workers who found employment in the southern California war industries. As the big band era waned, West Coast musicians were fusing the sounds of bebop, the southwestern jazz traditions, and Louis Jordan's jump combo with those of newly transplanted Oklahoma and Texas boogie-woogie and blues singer-pianists into a hybrid that resulted in two distinct styles of rhythm-and-blues music: "club" blues and "jump blues." The former was based on the "cool," detached, piano-guitar pairing of the King Cole Trio, while the latter was patterned on the "hot," aggressive horn sound of the Tympany Five. While it is difficult to determine precisely where the first synthesis of the musics that became rhythm and blues occurred, the distinctive sound of musicians working on the West Coast and specifically in Los Angeles had the first major national impact. This paper will examine key reasons for this phenomenon.

The war's end and the return to normality made 1945 a transitional year in American social history. The big band era was over. Arnold Shaw (1978, 65) notes that all the essential ingredients (shout-styled vocal blues, boggie-woogie and shuffle rhythms, and tenor-sax-led jump combos) were in place by the end of World War II for the conversion of blues into rhythm and blues. Ralph Bass, known for his work with King and Chess Records, began his career in Los Angeles and insists that "the big, first surge of R & B was on the West Coast in LA, not in New York" (Shaw 1978, 245).

Nelson George (1988, 26) suggests that in 1949 when *Billboard* chose the term "rhythm and blues" as a new, less derogatory euphemism to

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describe the music of black musicians, it had simply appropriated a phrase already current in the independent recording industry. While *Billboard* used the term in a non-specific fashion to refer to the entire range of black vernacular and popular musics, the phrase was originally coined to describe a post-war, urban, black ghetto style of rhythmic dance music played by small bands, frequently featuring electrified instruments and/or "honking" tenor saxophones. Its first solo vocalists shouted in a fusion of blues and boogie-woogie styles (McCutcheon 1971, 73). As rhythm and blues developed, distinct regional differences emerged. The West Coast is best known for its up-tempo "jump" rhythm-and-blues style.

> [It] is largely a three-component hybrid form. It combines the boogie woogie with the driving eight-to-the-bar top-hat cymbal pattern, a heavy two and four back beat on the snare drum, a driving solo tenor saxophone, a three-and-four-note rhythmic horn riff pattern, and group singing—all characteristic of the Southwest Black swing-band style of performance. The Texas blues piano stylings (triplet figures and the rolling octaves) complete the musical tripod that made up the West Coast up-tempo combo style (Maultsby 1986, 8).

While several cities had concentrations of young musicians experimenting with new sounds, Los Angeles was unique in that it was also home to several hardy entrepreneurs who formed small companies to record and promote this new music. The reason is obvious: there was money to be made in the record business. In 1941 American record sales amounted to $50 million, and in spite of shellac rationings, the figure had risen to $109 million by 1945 (George 1988, 23). From 1945 to 1946 total record sales in the United States doubled to $200 million (Broven 1985, 19). Further, major record companies continued to ignore the Afro-American record-buying public whom they had first slighted by cutting back their "race" music catalogs during the Depression. By the end of the war, independent record company owners realized that this public represented a vital, untapped, and—most importantly—uncontested market. This growing nucleus of young record companies further enhanced the live music scene by attracting to the city new talent in search of recording contracts.

Lee Young reminisced about mid-forties musical activity on Central Avenue, the commercial and entertainment hub of the Afro-American community.

> It was like a west coast Fifty-second Street, but you never really heard of Los Angeles that much, then, where music was concerned. Everybody

> thought all the jazz and all the better jazz musicians came from the east. The writers from *Metronome* and *downbeat* used to segregate it. They had what they called "West Coast Jazz"; they thought it would be different (Pepper and Pepper 1979, 46).

However, it is evident from *Billboard*'s list of sources for its weekly "Harlem Hit Parade Best Selling Records" column of the same era that the myopia extended into other forms of "race" music as well. None of the record shops it polled were located west of the Mississippi, and the preponderance was in New York City and its environs ("Sources" 1945, 18). Given these long-standing eastern prejudices against the West Coast, it must have been a surprise when a catchy dance number called "The Honeydripper" emerged from the Los Angeles club scene to become the most popular song in the country during the summer and fall of 1945.

The Venues

Major white Los Angeles nightclubs did not hire black performers until Nat "King" Cole, the major star to emerge from the black Los Angeles music scene during the war years, led the Cole Trio (Nat Cole, piano; Oscar Moore, guitar; and Johnny Miller, bass) to broad local cross-over popularity with white audiences. Because of the success of the Trio's June 1944 appearance in the cocktail room of the Sunset Strip's Trocadero, the club wanted to rehire the Trio to counter a Duke Ellington booking at neighboring Ciro's ("Cole Trio" 1945, 31). Ellington's April 1945 appearance was to be the first such by a black band in a Sunset Strip club's main room. Cole insisted that the Trocadero hire his entire touring package—the Benny Carter Orchestra, Savannah Churchill, and comic Timmie Rogers—before he would perform. It was the first "all-colored" show in the club's history ("All-Colored Show Due" 1945, 18), and it didn't run smoothly. The Trocadero management fired the Carter band after the first week because they allegedly played too loud on the "boogie-beat side" ("Notes" 1945, 20) and "didn't play enough L.A. music" to please the customers whom the management claimed expected Latin music ("Troc Fired Carter" 1945, 11). Carter found work for his band at Culver City's Casa Mañana, an integrated ballroom on the Westside, and the entire show package was reunited at downtown Los Angeles's Orpheum Theater for a week in June (*Los Angeles Tribune* June 18, 1945, 19). It wasn't until later in the year that *downbeat* observed, "Roy Milton's combo took over at Hollywood's Susy-Q (Looks like those attempts to keep the local 767 [Los Angeles's black local of the

segregated American Federation of Musicians] boys out of Hollywood finally washed out. Three cheers!)" (Holly 1945, 6). Although the color barrier against black performers in uptown nightclubs was finally broken, many still continued to exclude black patrons.

Several nightclubs sprang up to serve blacks along the many major thoroughfares that passed the several miles across Los Angeles county between downtown's Chinatown and rural Watts, but the greatest concentration of clubs was close to the heart of the city in the South Central area. They catered to the newly arrived black workers who had discretionary monies, provided by the war industries, to spend for entertainment. Many of these nightclubs produced their own elaborate stage shows and dances that featured a mix of well-known black entertainers and bands as well as a new generation of local performers.

> The early forties at the Club Alabam were exciting and eventful. They were days of full-scale floor shows with top acts, chorus girls, extravagant productions. Producer Patsy Hunter presented shows built around stars like the Peters Sisters, Jackie "Moms" Mabely [*sic*], the Archie Savage Group, the Norma Miller Dancers, Wynonie Harris, and Marion Abernathy. All the top stars in Negro show business and many of the Hollywood greats would drop in regularly (Otis 1968, 87).

Several membership "breakfast" clubs served the after-hours crowd and were open until dawn. Most successful bands doubled in these clubs after the closing of their regular gigs entertaining either in South Central or, later, in Hollywood nightclubs. The breakfast clubs provided musicians with work and afforded them the opportunity for open-all-night jam sessions.

The Lincoln Theater was another major venue for performers on South Central Avenue in that it hosted stage shows that alternated with film presentations. In January 1943 Jimmy Marshall, formerly the manager of New York's Apollo Theater, assumed the management of the Lincoln. "I'd like to make an Apollo of the West Coast out of the Lincoln. With so many big name bands and artists moving westward, that should not be too difficult" ("Ex-Apollo Manager" 1943, 2B). However, the Lincoln stage-show policy succumbed to management claims of poor box office, and Marshall returned to the East.

In addition to films and intermittent stage shows, the Lincoln sponsored weekly amateur contests that were broadcast locally. Like those begun at the Apollo in 1935, the Lincoln Theater's amateur contests provided a showcase for young or newly arrived Los Angeles talent. Charles Brown credits a contest victory for ultimately bringing him to the attention of Johnny Moore.

> I had heard about an amateur show down at the Lincoln Theatre [*sic*] on Central Avenue. I went down there and won first prize. Then I turned around and played the "Warsaw Concerto" and they didn't expect that. You know, here's this guy from Texas, and they gave me a week's work at the Lincoln Theatre. So, that was the start of Charles Brown, in the pit band at the Lincoln Theatre (Mazzolini 1976, 20).

The recollection also suggests the range and sophistication of Brown's abilities.

The Musicians

Many musicians who figured prominently in post-war Los Angeles's performing and recording activity were employed in South Central clubs even before America entered World War II. Few, if any, were natives of the city. So many had come west from Texas and Oklahoma that Johnny Otis, a Los Angeles bandleader and talent scout, stresses that it was the southwestern tradition upon which these musicians drew that made their rhythm-and-blues synthesis distinct from that of musicians working in Chicago, Memphis, or Detroit (Welding 1969).

Aaron "T-Bone" Walker, the Texas pioneer of the electric blues guitar, was a Los Angeles resident and a popular regular in local clubs (*California Eagle* July 7, 1942, 2B). Joe Liggins, a transplanted Oklahoman who was to have the national hit "The Honeydripper, Parts 1 & 2," joined Sammy Franklin and His California Rhythm Rascals as a pianist in 1939 (Ellison 1985, 4). Walter "Dootsie" Williams (a bandleader, arranger, and trumpet player who remained active for years in the Los Angeles music scene as a songwriter, performer, session player, and record-company owner) fronted several big bands (*California Eagle* December 18, 1941, 10), one of which, The Harlem Dukes, had Jack McVea, of "Open the Door, Richard!" fame, as a member. McVea also played with Lorenzo Flennoy before joining the Lionel Hampton band (Drust ca. 1985), and by 1943 he was back in Los Angeles with his own "Kings of Rhythm" (*Los Angeles Tribune* October 11, 1943, 17). Johnny Moore emerged from The Four Blazes to form his own highly successful group, The Three Blazers, around star pianist Charles Brown, a Texan. Roy Milton, another Oklahoma native, whose 1947 "R. M. Blues" solidified West Coast rhythm-and-blues style, appeared with an early version of his Solid Senders ("Swingtime in H'Wood" 1942, 2B). Wynonie Harris, an Omaha native influential to the West Coast shouting-blues style, was a popular performer in Central Avenue's clubs ("Last Three Days" 1942, 2B). Kansas City's Joe Turner, another great blues shouter, performed regularly in the city (*California Eagle* October 22, 1942, 2B).

Other artists were drawn to the fecund Los Angeles music scene during the war. Cecil Gant played the area clubs while still in the military (*Los Angeles Tribune* May 1, 1944, 15), and in 1944 Gant, the "G. I. Sing-Sation," recorded Los Angeles's first major "race" market hit, the wartime ballad "I Wonder" (Gilt-Edge 501). It was the success of this record that called attention to the potential for independent record companies on the West Coast.

Gene Phillips, an important local session man and bandleader, came west with the Ink Spots in 1942 and left them in 1943 to replace Lucky Enois as guitarist with The Flennoy Trio (Dawson 1986). Lloyd Glenn was a regular pianist at Mike's Waikiki Inn on South Western Avenue (*Los Angeles Tribune* September 6, 1943, 19). Slim Gaillard, out of the army in 1944, returned to the Los Angeles clubs to considerable success with his "vooto-reenie" (Holly 1944, 6). Johnny Otis arrived in Los Angeles from Berkeley in 1943 (*Los Angeles Tribune* September 6, 1943, 15) and soon led the Club Alabam's house band.

Otis remembers that the city's new musical style of "jump" blues emerged from the necessities of the era. Los Angeles musicians came out of the big bands and wanted a "sound" that they could no longer afford. They chose to play in a swing/jump style and retain the brass and reed sections while adding a lead electric blues guitarist in place of a rhythm guitarist, a boogie-woogie piano player, and a drummer who kept only a simple dance beat (Stolder 1988, 44).

By the summer of 1946 *Billboard* noted a move away from big band bookings in favor of "smaller units." The trade magazine suggested that it cost venues less to book small combos as their "break-even point" was much lower than for big bands, that record sales and radio play effectively promoted small combos, and that, because the small band phenomenon was new, the young musicians worked especially hard to deliver quality shows ("The Boys" 1946, 39).

As national popularity claimed the first wave of Los Angeles performers, the concentration of clubs and independent record companies drew other young performers. While Ivory Joe Hunter, Pee Wee Crayton, Saunders King, Lowell Fulson, and Jimmy McCracklin began their recording careers in the San Francisco/Oakland area, their records were soon released by larger, Los Angeles-based companies.

The Independent Record Companies

With the end of wartime shellac rationing in sight, several independent record labels sprang up in Los Angeles to record and market the new sound. Major record companies were interested only in established

black big bands with a national following, not this emerging form of "race" music. Otis suggests that an additional reason for the major record companies' reticence to record the new sound was that it didn't fit neatly into any of their predetermined categories: it was neither country blues nor Ellington or Basie (Stolder 1988, 44). So the music was left to the independent record companies to develop and exploit.

One of the first influential companies in the development of Los Angeles rhythm and blues, The Exclusive Record Company, was a black-owned concern formed in 1941 by Leon René. He and his brother Otis had been active in Los Angeles for years, working as songwriters and recording artists. The immediate success of René's efforts in penetrating the market is reflected by a June 1945 *Billboard* article that polled students at four hundred high schools about their recognition of record companies. While virtually all students recognized the major record companies (Columbia, Decca, Victor, 100%; Bluebird, 99%; Capitol, 97%; Okeh, 96%), the degree of recognition they afforded the new Los Angeles independent labels is remarkable: Exclusive, 11%; Criterion, 10%; ARA, 9%; Juke Box, 5%; Preview, 5%; and Gilt-Edge, 4% ("Bobby-sox Tab Disk" 1945, 20).

A major reason for Exclusive's relatively high rate of recognition was that, on March 26, 1945, René recorded a six-piece combo, Joe Liggins and His Honeydrippers (Joe Liggins, vocals and piano; Little Willie Jackson, alto and baritone saxophone; James Jackson, tenor saxophone; Frank Pasley, guitar; Eddie Davis, bass; "Peppy" Prince, drums). "The Honeydripper" (Exclusive 207), a catchy, shuffling dance tune, had been a popular staple of the band's live act. The recording was an immediate success in the black community, and it entered the national "Billboard Most Played Race Juke Box Chart" at No. 2 in the August 4 issue ("Most-played" 1945a, 25). Apparently the term "rhythm and blues" had not been coined at this time because, when a contemporary writer pressed Liggins to name his new sound, all the bandleader could volunteer was the following: "breakdown, it's the jump, jive, and jam of it all" ("Honeydrippers Score" 1946, 17).

In 1943 Wynonie "Mr. Blues" Harris left Los Angeles briefly for Chicago and Kansas City, where he was signed as a vocalist with the Lucky Millinder band. Harris's shouted blues singing style, perfected in South Central Avenue clubs and theaters, contributed to the other major "race" hit of the summer of 1945, "Who Threw the Whiskey in the Well" (Decca 18674). By August 25 "Who Threw the Whiskey in the Well" and "The Honeydripper" held the top two positions in *Billboard*'s Race Charts ("Most-played" 1945b, 22). They continued to alternate in the top

three positions with Louis Jordan's "Caldonia Boogie" (Decca 8670) for the balance of the year.

While these two performances differ from the rhythm and blues of the decade's end, it is important to note that Los Angeles-based musicians were holding their own in popularity alongside the man whose style inspired so much West Coast experimentation. Moreover, by registering on the national charts, "The Honeydripper" was the first indication of regional activity distinct from the big band or blues tradition.

An indication of how quickly national success came to the young Los Angeles-based musicians can be found in the December 15, 1945, issue of *Billboard*. The "Race Juke Box" chart showed Joe Liggins and his Honeydrippers' "The Honeydripper" in first place. Jimmy Lunceford's and Roosevelt Sykes's versions of the same song were tied for second position (Decca 23451 and Bluebird 34-0737, respectively). Tied in third place were "Left a Good Deal in Mobile" (Exclusive 208) by Herb Jeffries (a former singer with the Ellington band who was accompanied for this recording by the Honeydrippers), Louis Jordan's "Caldonia Boogie" (Decca 8670), Ivory Joe Hunter's "Blues at Sunrise" (Exclusive 209), and Helen Humes's "Be-Baba-Leba" (Philo 106) ("Most-played" 1945c, 27). Within four months a distinctly regional music by Afro-American artists in Los Angeles consolidated the gains made over the summer and swept into the national consciousness.

Leo and Edward Mesner began the company that became Aladdin Records in their Philharmonic Music Shop in 1945. In the summer of that year they began recording local talent. One of their earliest sessions was with the recently returned Wynonie Harris backed by Johnny Otis's All Stars, a combination that was successfully playing at the Club Alabam. The Mesners were the first to record Johnny Moore's Three Blazers (Charles Brown, piano and vocals; Johnny Moore, guitar; Eddie Williams, bass). As Nat Cole became less prominent on the "race" charts, artists who were influenced by him (Charles Brown, the Lorenzo Flennoy Trio, and later, Amos Milburn, Floyd Dixon, Little Willie Littlefield, and Ray Charles) and who evidenced greater blues tradition in their performances began to shape distinctively rhythm-and-blues performances. The Blazers were the first such "club" blues group to become popular. While Charles Brown had consciously patterned himself on Cole, he was also influenced by big-band crooning styles, especially that of Pha Terrell, vocalist with Andy Kirk's band: "I was more a blues ballad singer, not a blues singer. 'Drifting Blues' was blues, but it was kind of a ballad blues" (Notini 1978).

The Mesners' September 1945 recording session yielded "Drifting

Blues" (Philo 112) which, by early 1946, joined "Be-Baba-Leba" in the top five of *Billboard*'s "Race Juke Box" chart ("Most-played" 1946, 187) and eventually stayed in that chart for twenty-three weeks. On the strength of "Drifting Blues" the Blazers finished behind the Ink Spots but ahead of the King Cole Trio in *Billboard*'s "Top Singing and Instrumental Groups on Race Records on the Nation's Juke Boxes" poll for 1946 ("Top Singing" 1947, 4). They also won a *Cashbox* award for most-played recording artists in race juke box locations for 1946 ("Three Blazers" 1947, 20). The success of the Blazers' records required them, like the other newly famous Los Angeles-based bands, to tour extensively as the regional sound found national acceptance. When the original Three Blazers broke up acrimoniously in 1948, Moore held the rights to the group's name, which forced Charles Brown, the "star" of the group, to pursue a solo career. Oscar Moore and Johnny Miller, late of the Cole Trio, joined the group (Cumber 1948, 14), and the new Blazers went on to record unsuccessfully for RCA Victor.

Ivory Joe Hunter, a Bay area singer, came to Los Angeles in 1945 and recorded "Blues at Sunrise" (Exclusive 209) backed by the Three Blazers, who recorded for René's label as well (Jepsen 1969, 407). Charlie Gillett (1983, 145) describes Hunter, whose smooth melodic vocal style was influenced by Charles Brown, as having had a commercial knack for writing memorable songs that attracted the white audience and yet stayed near enough to the blues for the Negro audience to care about him. Hunter performed regularly in both the Bay area and Los Angeles with a band that included Pee Wee Crayton before Hunter signed with King Records, another powerful independent record company based in Cincinnati.

Later in the decade, Aladdin recorded a series of hits by the Texas boogie-woogie piano sensation, Amos Milburn. Milburn topped the *Billboard* charts for the top rhythm-and-blues artist based on retail sales and also on juke box plays for 1949. "Bewildered" (Aladdin 3018), "Chicken Shack Boogie" (Aladdin 3014), "Hold Me Baby" (Aladdin 3023), "In the Middle of the Night" (Aladdin 3026), and "Rooming House Boogie" (Aladdin 3032) all placed in the top thirty best-selling rhythm-and-blues singles of the year ("Top Rhythm and Blues Artists According to Juke Box Plays" 1950, 17; "Top Rhythm and Blues Artists According to Retail Sales" 1950, 17; "Top Rhythm and Blues Records" 1950, 16).

Specialty Records began as Jukebox Records primarily to service juke boxes. The company became an important factor in national music circles in January of 1946 when it released "R. M. Blues" (Jukebox 504) by Roy Milton and His Solid Senders (Roy Milton, drums and vocals;

Hosea Sapp, trumpet; Couchie Roberts, alto saxophone; Buddy Floyd, tenor saxophone; Camille Howard, piano and vocals; and Dave Robinson, bass) (Jepsen 1969, 191). Milton's rhythmic innovations, described by Arnold Shaw as the superimposition of an accented afterbeat on the boogie rhythm of dotted-eighth and sixteenth notes, decisively shaped the sound of Los Angeles rhythm and blues (Shaw 1978, 103). Milton's rhythm-and-blues style fell between the relatively sophisticated arrangements of jazz and the "head" arrangements that had typified most blues recordings; Milton and company-owner Art Rupe worked out a simple arrangement and thoroughly rehearsed it before the sessions (Gillett 1983, 135; Hanson 1982). "R. M. Blues" remained on the *Billboard* chart for twenty-four weeks ending on November 23, 1946.

The enormous impact of the new music from Los Angeles was evidenced by *Billboard*'s year-end "Honor Roll of Hits" on the nation's "race" juke boxes. In the "Top Bands" category, Roy Milton placed third behind Louis Jordan and Lionel Hampton, both artists signed to Decca, a major record company ("Top Bands on Race Records" 1947, 4), and as mentioned, the Blazers also finished well in their category. Milton continued to be a very popular performer, touring and recording throughout the rest of the decade, although he never again matched the success of "R. M. Blues."

Modern Music, also formed in 1945 by Saul and Jules Bihari, had its first national hit with Hadda Brooks applying a boogie-woogie piano treatment to a classical theme, "Polonaise"/"Polonaise Boogie" (Modern Music 123). Apparently, the Biharis missed or could not hold the first major Los Angeles acts. It wasn't until later in the decade that Modern recorded a second generation of performers including Little Willie Jackson (of the Honeydrippers), Gene Phillips and his Rhythm Aces, Jimmy Witherspoon, Pee Wee Crayton, Floyd Dixon, and Little Willie Littlefield. In the meantime, the Biharis leased sides by rural southern bluesmen Lightnin' Hopkins, Smokey Hogg, and John Lee Hooker and strengthened their presence in the Southeast. By the 1950s these contacts would yield Memphis sessions by Elmore James, B. B. King, and Howlin' Wolf.

The Independent Radio Stations

As early as 1943 small local Los Angeles radio stations began to play black band music on the air for an hour or two a week, usually in late night or weekend afternoon time spots in the hopes of attracting audiences to increase their advertising revenues. This new access to the air waves was important to the development of rhythm-and-blues music in

Los Angeles as it provided musicians and, soon, record companies with a way to promote their music and build local audiences. Roy Milton and his Madcap Swingsters performed a half-hour live show nightly on KPAS for a time in 1945 ("Roy Milton Moves" 1945, 18). The then nationally famous Honeydrippers were featured every night at midnight over KXLA in early 1946 ("Honey Drippers Wow" 1946, 13). "An ever increasing flow of fan mail from whites as well as Negroes attests to his ability, personality, and knowledge of music and musicians," the *California Eagle* proudly noted of the success of KFWB's black disc jockey Joe Adams ("Joe Adams' KFWB Program" 1945, 14). This is an indication that radio indeed helped rhythm and blues to reach not only an Afro-American audience but a white one as well.

Despite James Petrillo's best efforts to the contrary, economic constraints forced small radio stations to move away from live studio bands. On-air personalities needed records to produce shows economically, and that fitted neatly with the fledgling record companies' need for radio to expose their new releases. In August of 1946 Aladdin Records began sponsoring a fifteen-minute section of "Make Believe Ballroom" to promote its own records ("Buys Air" 1946, 7). This symbiotic relationship between radio stations and record companies continues to the present.

By 1945 Al Jarvis, a white disc jockey, was the first of the major Los Angeles on-air personalities to become associated with black music. His version of "Make Believe Ballroom" was the most influential radio program playing black music until the arrival of Hunter Hancock. Hancock, a more flamboyant white disc jockey from Texas, soon had the city's most popular "race" radio show, "Harlem Matinee," which aired over KFVD every afternoon at four o'clock ("Jimmy Witherspoon" 1948, 18). Hancock's promotion of dances and concerts featuring black artists was instrumental in exposing local white audiences to rhythm and blues.

By the end of the decade Los Angeles-based musicians were firmly entrenched on the national rhythm-and-blues charts ("Top Selling Rhythm and Blues Artists" 1949, 94). Charles Brown was a best-selling single artist. Amos Milburn, Ray Charles, Floyd Dixon, and Little Willie Littlefield had migrated to the city while Jimmie Liggins, Joe Lutcher, "Big" Jay McNeely, the Trenier Twins, the Robins, Percy Mayfield, and Mel Walker and the Blenders had emerged from the California club scene. On the distaff side, Little Esther, Camille Howard, Nellie Lutcher, Hadda Brooks, and Mabel Scott were making names for themselves.

While popularity charts in trade magazines like *Billboard* or *Cashbox* do not adequately reflect the breadth of music produced at a given time

and rarely provide a sense of new experimentation, they do indicate which material succeeded nationally. Between June 1949—when *Billboard* changed the name of its black popular music charts from "race" to "rhythm and blues"—and the end of 1952, these charts featured nine hits by Charles Brown; eleven each by Amos Milburn and Johnny Otis's band or his featured singers; nine by Louis Jordan; seven each by Ivory Joe Hunter, Roy Milton, and Wynonie Harris; five each by Lowell Fulson, Percy Mayfield, and Jimmy Witherspoon; and three by Ray Charles (Shurman and O'Neal 1975, 20).

In July 1949 when *Billboard* listed thirty-two of the most successful independent rhythm-and-blues record companies, nine were located in Los Angeles. Aladdin topped the list; Modern placed fifth; Specialty, fourteenth; Downbeat, fifteenth; and Exclusive, twentieth ("Top-Selling Company Labels" 1949, 96). Their success had been so enormous that in 1948 several West Coast independent record companies were forced to band together to fight illegal nationwide counterfeiting of their increasingly valuable rhythm-and-blues product ("3 Coast Indies" 1948, 16).

The supremacy of the West Coast rhythm-and-blues style was finally challenged in late 1947 with the success of "Old Man River" (National 9035) by the Ravens, an East Coast vocal group. The Ravens' bass-lead up-tempo quartet singing style with simple rhythm accompaniment was derived from groups like the Delta Rhythm Boys and the Mills Brothers. They in turn served as a model for a number of successful fifties rhythm-and-blues groups, including the Orioles, Billy Ward's Dominoes, and the Drifters. The increased popularity of the quartet style within the labile rhythm-and-blues market was evident when the Orioles, a Baltimore vocal group, finished in first place ahead of the Ravens in *Billboard*'s 1948 "Top Race Group" poll with "It's Too Soon to Know" (Natural 5000) ("Top Singing" 1949, 67). While both groups recorded for New York City independent record labels, their records sold well on the West Coast and they each had successful West Coast tours.

Nonetheless, all kinds of rhythm and blues remained popular on the national level. As late as 1949 Leon René estimated that between 60 and 75 percent of Exclusive Records' sales were in the East ("Indie Diskers" 1949, 15), and Aladdin, Modern, and other Los Angeles independent companies had established distribution offices in New York City to handle the business. The fact that quartet and "doo wop" singing styles became the more popular as public taste for "club" and "jump" blues diminished has served to obscure the enormous contributions of Los Angeles musicians who achieved their own unique and popular musical

synthesis in the city's black nightclubs during the closing days of World War II.

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