

R&B THE ATLANTIC YEARS

Sweet Soul Music

Atlantic's History of Rhythm & Blues

Do you like good music? (Yeah, Yeah!) Sweet soul music? Well all your dreams have been answered with the release of a mammoth compilation this month. *Atlantic Rhythm and Blues 1947-1974* is virtually a complete history of the genre; the 186 tracks range from the primitive blues beginnings of R&B to the sophisticated funk of the 70s. The 14-album set is also a history of one of the most innovative record labels in popular music: Atlantic Records, a company which started as a tiny independant perceptively plugging the gaps in the coverage of the major companies, and grew until, as a major company itself, it was swallowed by a communications conglomerate.

An important factor in Atlantic's success was that it was founded by a music fan who has continued to guide the company's direction — and has remained a music fan. It was in 1947 that Ahmet Ertegun started Atlantic with Herb Abramson. Ertegun was a jazz fan (with his brother Nesuhi he owned 15,000 jazz and blues 78s) who wanted to make a living while feeding his music obsession.

He saw that the major record companies, by concentrating on mainstream pop, were neglecting a "hot new music" called Rhythm and Blues. R&B was a loose term which encompassed many styles of black popular music: "black swing bands, jazz combos, cocktail lounge music, blues shouters, boogie woogie pianists, down-home guitarists, and vocal harmony groups." As these styles began to amalgamate after the Second World War, the music increased enormously in popularity. Atlantic began by signing up individual performers without recording contracts. Within five years the label dominated the hits on the R&B charts. Although some of these successes were with artists who'd had minor hits on other labels (such as Ray Charles and Chuck Willis), at Atlantic they developed distinctive new styles.

But as Atlantic achieved success in the R&B field by discovering formulas that were uncatered for, they found the mainstream companies making cover versions of their hits for the larger white pop audience. "Ironically," wrote historian Charlie Gillett, "the catchy song titles, nonsense choruses and lively rhythms with which Ertegun had hoped to draw the white audience's attention to his unknown singers were easily adopted by other producers. Atlantic was obliged to develop styles that were more personal and that relied less on the catchiness of the material."

The early Atlantic recordings were made under primitive conditions. Tom Dowd began as Atlantic's engineer in the late 40s while still in his teens; he recorded most of Atlantic's hits right up to the 70s, becoming the first star engineer of rock music. In 1975 he described the early set-up: "Atlantic had an office in a New York loft. There were two desks in the room and a miniature piano, so when people came to the office with a song, they could play it. And when it came time to record, they would pile one desk on top of the other, bring out some chairs for the band, and that's where Joe Turner recorded, Ray Charles, all those things in the early 50s." The stairwell was used as an echo chamber, the equipment was all one-track mono, and yet Dowd's recordings were famous for their clarity and feel. Under these conditions such classics as Joe Turner's 'Shake, Rattle and Roll' and Ray Charles's 'I Got a Woman' were put on tape.

The compilation of Atlantic's R&B classics was the pet project of Ahmet Ertegun; R&B expert Bob Porter helped him put it together, digitally remastering the recordings off old master tapes, tracking down

records of the few essential songs for which masters have been lost.

The result is seven beautiful double albums, with extensive, accurate liner notes ... and crisp new recordings of wonderful R&B classics. (An example to other record companies to treat their back catalogues with respect.) Earlier this year Porter told *Rolling Stone* about the difficult job of choosing tracks: "Where do you draw the line with Aretha Franklin or Wilson Pickett or Otis Redding? There are so many classics, you've got to prune to make it workable. Otherwise those artists will dominate to the point where it's virtually their record. We decided to stop in 1974 because



Joe Turner celebrates the release of 'Corina, Corina' with Atlantic's Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler.

that, in a sense, marked the end of an era. When you get into disco or rap music, you're really talking about something that's very different."

Our appreciation of today's — and tomorrow's — music can only be superficial without an understanding of where we've come from. It's a never-ending trail of discovery, however. Now, in one blow, Atlantic have saved years of searching for all the great songs in R&B you read so much about, but would never be able to find — and at a reasonable price (14 albums for \$99).

What follows is a summary of some of the highlights on the seven double albums, and an attempt to put the music in its historical context. The liner notes, while exhaustive and biographical, could have been more musical instead of listing all the chart information, however. The selection of tracks for the albums looks as definitive as is possible; every era of R&B has been fairly represented. It's wonderful to have the classic Joe Turner and Drifters records available; if you want more Otis and Aretha, they're not too hard to find.

1: 1947-1952

The first volume reflects the gap Atlantic saw in the record market. Rhythm & Blues was still developing, so the early tracks show the heavy jazz and blues influence on what was then termed "race" music. Joe Morris, Tiny Grimes and Frank Cully lean towards jazz, while "Stick" McGhee's legendary 'Drinkin' Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee' is folk-blues. Professor Longhair, the father of contemporary New Orleans music, is represented with his idiosyncratic rhythms and inimitable vocals on the classic 'Mardi Gras in New Orleans' ('Tipitina' is on the second volume; grit your teeth to that voice!).

Harry Van Walls ('Tee Nah Nah' solo, and backing many other artists) is an obscure but influential pianist, being Atlantic's No 1 session player throughout the early years. Joe Turner was the label's first big star; although he started singing blues in Kansas City in the 30s, his 1954 hit 'Shake, Rattle and Roll' became an anthem of rock and roll — yet he'd had the basic sound for 10 years. Turner continued to sing the way he'd always done. "If it's not broke, don't fix it," he said. "If they want to call me a rock and roll singer, that's alright with me." The Clovers were one of the most popular of the hundreds of vocal groups in the early 50s; they typify doo-wop with their faceless image but irresistible material ('One Mint Julep', 'Ting a Ling').

2: 1952-1955

Atlantic, while still small, was now a leader in the R&B field; and the

genre was beginning to affect the pop market, which looked to R&B as a source of material for their mainstream acts to cover. Ruth Brown was Atlantic's first foray into Southern soul. She was a great influence on Aretha Franklin, and her 1953 hit 'Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean' is still the most-requested number when Brown performs today.

Ray Charles was far from a mature, individual musician when he signed to Atlantic, but quickly developed into the R&B dynamo, with songs like the Ahmet Ertegun-composed boogie woogie 'Mess Around' and the pivotal gospel shuffle 'I Got a Woman', which blatantly mixed sex with religion. Big Bill Broonzy was outraged: "He's crying, sanctified. He's mixing blues with the spirituals. He should be singing in church!"

Among the crowded history of R&B vocal groups, the Drifters stand tallest, led by the high tenor of Clyde McPhatter, whose voice stretched from early gospel to the eroticism of Elvis — a pupil, along with Smokey Robinson and Al Green. 'Honey Love' was banned, while 'Such a Night' was covered by Johnny Ray for the white audience. The Chords' irresistible 'Sh-Boom' suffered the same fate; the Crew Cuts inferior version is regarded as the first rock and roll hit.

3: 1955-1958

As R&B became rock and roll and Atlantic grew, the Ertegun brothers and Jerry Wexler looked to outside producers to help them move into the pop market. Leiber and Stoller composed and produced some of rock's greatest songs for Atlantic, including 'Searchin'', 'Youngblood' and 'Yakety Yak' for the Coasters — three minute playlets with soulful melodies and witty lyrics ('It's gonna take an ocean ... of calamine lotion').

As Ray Charles was given a free hand with his material, band and production, his music developed further to 'Down in My Own Tears' and 'Hallelujah, I Love Her So'. "It wasn't simply Charles's mastery that allowed him to define soul music before it was named," wrote Greil Marcus, "it was also his warmth." Chuck Willis managed to make the pop charts as a rock and roll singer despite his blues style. 'What Am I Livin' For?' he sang with the saddest voice of R&B; by the time the exuberant '(I Don't Want To) Hang Up My Rock and Roll Shoes' became a hit, he was in his grave.

Lack of space means this summary must pass over many artists in the set, both major (eg: Laverne Baker) and forgotten (the Cookies, Tommy Ridgley). But the obscure Bobbettes must be remembered. Their infectious hit 'Mr Lee' crashed



Clyde McPhatter and Ben E. King, the two legendary Drifters lead vocalists.

through the male-dominated world of R&B vocal groups. It was unstoppable: a song about a school-teacher written by four girls under 13, which reached No 2 in 1957. Three years later they charted again ... with the confessional 'I Shot Mr Lee'.

4: 1958-1962

As R&B progressed in the late 50s, it found new directions. One was the "beat concerto", first displayed on the Drifters' 'There Goes My Baby': slick production by Leiber and Stoller, with sophisticated yet tough string arrangements given to the Brill Building pop songs. This new Drifters introduced the romantic voice of Ben E King (whose ur-

ban soul epics 'Stand By Me' and 'Spanish Harlem' are on this volume) — and a young apprentice producer to the studio: Phil Spector.

Contrasting the smoother R&B was the harder-edged, gospel-drenched sound called SOUL. Introduced by Ray Charles on 'The Right Time', the R&B audiences loved it, but it was too much for the pop crowd — until 'What'd I Say', the six-and-a-half minute hard funk jam which defines *rhythm* and *Ray Charles*; it topped the R&B charts and broke through the pop Top 10 barrier.

Meanwhile out of the South came a grittier soul sound. The distinctive music from the Stax studios in Memphis became its own R&B sub-genre; however it would dominate the music through the 60s. Carla Thomas ('Gee Whizz') and William Bell ('You Don't Miss Your Water') typify the Stax sound. But Solomon Burke's countryfied 'Just Out Of Reach' is regarded as the first soul hit. His follow-up was the gorgeous 'Cry To Me', which influenced everyone from Otis to Mick Jagger with its 'cry cry cry cry-cry-cry, cry to me.'

In Memphis, the definitive soul back-up group was formed, the Mar-Keys, out of which came Booker T. and the MGs; economic guitar from Steve Cropper, loping bass-lines from 'Duck' Dunn, simple organ riffs from Booker T. Jones and metronomic drumming from Al Jackson ... their slinky instrumental 'Green Onions' had to be an instant hit.

5: 1962-1966

As pop music was swept by the British Invasion, R&B at Atlantic diversified through a series of distribution deals with regional labels



The Memphis Soul Crew, Booker T & the MGs, Stax/Volt Revue, 1967: (L-R) Booker T, Donald "Duck" Dunn, Al Jackson, Steve Cropper.

such as Stax in Memphis, Dial in Nashville and Fame in Muscle Shoals, Alabama. The main competition came from Motown in Detroit, but soul began to explode.

The success of the Drifters continued with a "New York trilogy" of R&B pop: 'Up on the Roof', 'On Broadway' (with blues guitar by Phil Spector) and 'Under the Boardwalk'. The day 'Boardwalk' was to be recorded, their lead singer died suddenly; it was to be their last Top 10 hit.

The importance of Atlantic's New York studios declined as the regional sounds took over and the soul heavyweights emerged. Atlantic started to experiment by taking their artists to other studios to make use of their unique sounds. Joe Tex ('Hold on to What You've Got' and 'Show Me') recorded at Muscle Shoals; Sam and Dave's successes at Stax ('You Don't Know Like I Know', 'Hold On! I'm Coming') made the label a firm rival to Motown.

The first great success of this idea was when Jerry Wexler took Wilson Pickett to Stax, and produced one of soul music's biggest hits, 'In The Midnight Hour'. The horns are the meanest to come out of Memphis, and the bassline is dancing dynamite — Jerry Wexler, always a "feel" producer, danced out of the control room to say, "Accent it on the off-beat!" and a classic rhythm was born.

A song by a then-unknown singer recorded at Muscle Shoals is

another from the essential soul bible. 'When a Man Loves a Woman' was unstoppable, instantly a huge



"He was an extraordinary man. He was like a brother he was so close to us." — Nesuhi Ertegun on Otis Redding.

crossover hit. Percy Sledge never topped it; no one could have.

The impact of Otis Redding on soul music was phenomenal. His early music was heavily influenced by Little Richard, but he became the most distinctive male soul singer of all. While other soul acts had brief careers, his lasted four years of sustained, superb quality. 'These Arms of Mine', 'Mr Pitiful', 'I've Been Loving You Too Long' and 'Respect' were just the beginning ... the great era of soul was underway.

6: 1966-1969

What is Soul? George Clinton might answer "the ring around your bathtub", but to get the best idea, you'd have to go no further than this double album. It's a succinct compilation of the classic years of soul, when the Atlantic artists became nationwide stars and accepted by a wide crossover audience. For a brief



Mr Midnight Hour: the "wicked" Wilson Pickett.

period, mainly because of the surge of interest in soul after the arrival of Aretha Franklin to Atlantic, the company began to pass the highly



Mr Midnight Hour: the "wicked" Wilson Pickett.

successful Motown.

In 1966 Wilson Pickett was on the crest of a wave, with hits like 'Land of a 1000 Dances', 'Mustang Sally' and 'Funky Broadway', all recorded at the Fame studios at Muscle Shoals, with the other great backing band of soul, the Muscle Shoals rhythm section of Chips Moman (guitar), Tommy Cogbill (bass), Spooner Oldham (piano) and Roger Hawkins (drums). Curiously, the session musicians who created this fundamental sound of Southern R&B were mostly white.

The Muscle Shoals band were the key that brought Aretha Franklin to her full potential after a desultory start to her career at CBS singing jazz. Wexler's idea was to "put

her back into the church", and he took here to Muscle Shoals to regain her gospel flavour and mix it with R&B. The result, 'I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Loved You)', was a sensation; the follow-up, 'Respect', made Aretha the Superstar of Soul. Hit after hit followed, and they're all here: 'Baby I Love You', '(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman', 'Do Right Woman—Do Right Man' and 'Chain of Fools'. What'd she want? Baby, she got it — RESPECT!

Otis, meanwhile, was firing off all cylinders. At Monterey Pop he'd finally broken through to the white audience, and he had hits with 'Try a Little Tenderness' (I've even heard Bet Lynch quote it on *Corrie*) and 'Tramp'. When the plane crash occurred in December 1967, he was at the peak of his career. 'Dock of the Bay' was his only No 1; as with Sam Cooke's and Chuck Willis's posthumous hits ('A Change is Gonna Come' and '(I Don't Want To) Hang



"Do you feel the spirit?": Aretha at the Fillmore, 1971.

Up My Rock 'n' Roll Shoes), the ironies were profound.

Other classics in this volume include Eddie Floyd's 'Knock On Wood', Clarence Carter's 'Slip Away', Sam and Dave's 'Soul Man' and Arthur Conley's 'Sweet Soul Music' ... but the great era of soul was over by the end of the 60s.

7: 1969-1974

Atlantic was sold by the Erteguns and Wexler in 1968, but they remained to run the company, which continued its practice of releasing R&B from around the country. In the early 70s Miami and Philadelphia emerged as leading centres of R&B, and a softer, more sophisticated style also gained popularity. Aretha, after one of her periodic slumps, came back strongly when she recorded *Spirit in the Dark* in Miami. 'Don't Play That Song (You Lied)' hit No 1, but perhaps the title track would have been a more appropriate choice, or another track from her sublime *Young, Gifted and Black* to accompany 'Rock Steady'. The queen of the Miami sound was Betty Wright however, with her gutsy hit 'Clean Up Woman'.

Philadelphia was producing slick dance music, as perfected by the Spinners on 'I'll Be Around', 'Could it Be I'm Falling in Love' and 'Mighty Love'; they were the Drifters brought forward to the 70s. Vocal groups were still a major part of R&B, with a modernised, smoother sound as on the Persuaders' 'Thin Line Between Love and Hate'; the same elegance was a feature of solo artists such as Tyrone Davis ('Turn Back the Hands of Time').

Traditional Southern soul is represented by King Floyd's 'Gimme Me' and Clarence Carter's 'Patches', a countryfied 'Papa Was a Rolling Stone' parable. But the major sound at Atlantic in the early 70s was the sophisticated jazz-pop of Roberta Flack: refined, genteel, but ultimately indulgent and feather-light. She did, however, strreetch the conventional boundaries of soul.

The set also includes the light jazz of Les McCann and Eddie Harris and the Latin groove of 'Funky Nassau', the only hit of the Bahamas group Beginning of the End. The end, however, had arrived for the Rhythm and Blues era at Atlantic. The genre, which had started as an amalgamation of many forms of black pop music, dissolved as the components took their separate paths.

Chris Bourke