

THE ROY MILTON & MILTONE LABELS





Roy Milton circa late 1940s. From the Dan Kochakian Collection..

The Roy Milton and Miltone Record Labels

by Opal Louis Nations

The Roy Milton and Miltone labels were a diskery co-owned by one of California's rhythm and blues innovators – Roy Milton. Not only are the recordings of significance, but many of the hip and handsome labels themselves – designed by New York cartoonist William 'Alex' Alexander – are a record collector's joy. These Roy Milton/Miltone discs were filled with blues, jump blues and r&b righteousness, featuring Roy's band, the Solid Senders, his pianist Camille Howard, singers Effie Smith, Jimmy Grissom, bluesmen Jesse Thomas and Goree Carter (as Little T. Bone), Little Miss Cornshucks, Jesse Price, Roy Brown, Paul Gayten, Chubby Newsome among others.

The Roy Milton/Miltone business was owned by three major shareholders: Roy Milton; local Los Angeles deejay, record store owner and pressing plant chief, Forrest 'War' Perkins and Roy Milton's manager and booking agent, Ben Waller of Ben Waller Enterprises.

Roy Milton was born in Wynnewood, Garvin County, Oklahoma on 31st July, 1907. Part Cherokee, part Afro-American, Roy moved with his family to Tulsa in 1910. In 1931, Milton enrolled in Sam Houston College in Austin, Texas with the intention of studying physical education. Some sources state that he entered college on a football scholarship. During college, Milton became increasingly drawn to the music of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington and by 1929, he had formed his own small combo and played local dates in the Tulsa area. In 1931 Milton took his first professional job with the Ernie Fields big band in Tulsa. Milton crooned popular ballads and doubled on drums with the Fields band for two years. Working with a tough but young member territory band was a strong learning experience for Milton.

In 1935, drawn by the glitz and glamour of Southern California, Milton moved to Los Angeles and formed the original Solid Senders. Members

included Roy Randall, from Tulsa, on piano and 'Bubba' on trumpet. Later on membership evolved into Betty Hall Jones, piano; Little Joe Walker, alto sax; Fred Mason, trumpet and Milton at the drums. To keep the family in food and clothing, Milton worked during the week for the Works Projects Administration (W.P.A.).

On weekends, his band played a little cellar dive in San Pedro called, variously, Slims Place or 'Bucket Of Blood'. Band members were paid two dollars each, plus tips. Milton got \$2.50.

Moving up market to downtown, Milton played at Louis' Café on Pico Boulevard. He remained there for four years and acquired the soubriquet 'Pico Roy'. From here, Milton moved down on First Street to the Cobra Room. Things really got in the groove and in addition Milton found himself playing popular standards to a white crowd during early evening gigs on the Sunset Strip.

The First Street gig was where the group boogied and woogied. Milton did so well, he opened his own club called Roy's Night Spot. He was also fortunate enough to appear as an extra in several Hollywood movies, plus three soundies with ex-Andy Kirk vocalist, June Richmond. Along the way he picked up the key members of what was to become his famous Solid Senders combo – Camille Howard on piano, Hosea Sapp on trumpet and Dave Robinson on bass.

In September 1945, The Roy Milton Sextet, composed of Milton, Sapp, Howard and Robinson, plus Jimmy Nottingham on second trumpet and Lorenzo 'Buddy' Floyd on tenor sax, cut four sides for Lionel and Gladys Hampton's Hamp-Tone label, based in New York.

Because of shellac shortages, Milton's first two singles did not hit the streets until June and July 1946, which put them in direct competition with sides cut later on his own 'Roy Milton' imprint. Anyway, the Hamp-Tone sides did little to strengthen Milton's career.

In September 1949, before taking on other artists, the Hamptons sold Hamp-Tone to Sammy Lane. This is where Art Rupe enters the picture. Rupe was born Arthur Goldberg in Greensburg, Pennsylvania on 5th September, 1917. In 1942, Rupe drove out to Southern California with





the idea of becoming a movie scriptwriter. In 1944, fascinated with the business of making race recordings for a burgeoning market, Rupe partnered up with Robert Scherman and founded Atlas Records at 8848 Sunset. A little over one year and approximately forty releases later, the partnership dissolved and Rupe purchased his own company, Juke Box Records, situated at 2304 West Seventh Street. Co-partners were Eli Oberstein and A.E. Middleman.

This gave Rupe a stake in Middleman's Sterling label, a reasonably successful race indie with offices in New York. In November 1945, Rupe encountered Milton at Roy's Night Spot and signed him to a contract. Four songs were recorded in Los Angeles on 11th December, 1945, but none were released. This date was probably an audition.

Members of the Solid Senders included Milton, Sapp, Floyd, Howard and Robinson, plus Earl Sims on alto sax. On 22nd December, 1945, the same four songs were recorded again. Two songs were issued in January 1946 on Juke Box. The first release was 'Milton's Boogie', backed with 'Groovy Blues' (sung by Camille Howard), and the second was 'R.M. Blues', backed with 'Rhythm Cocktail'.

'R.M. Blues' certainly put Milton and the label squarely on the map. The tune became a national hit and stuck around at the top of the race record charts for 26 weeks.

In Rupe's words, 'R.M. Blues' became the biggest urban black hit up to that time. Milton had taken the swing riffs usually associated with big band brass arrangements and translated them into small combo rhythmic patterns, giving old swing new bounce and a sound that would eventually evolve into r&b. Milton, along with Joe Liggins and Johnny Otis, were creating hot, frantic riffs, a strong rhythmic drive and a new teenage beat. Rupe was so filled with ambition, he decided then and there to go it alone.

By August 1946, *Billboard* magazine announced that Rupe had sold his interest in Juke Box/Sterling to Middleman and Oberstein on the understanding that he could take possession of some of the masters.

It must be remembered that through Rupe's efforts, Juke Box had been a success, first with the initial release of 'Boogie #1' by the Sepia Tones (Trio) in January 1945, then with Roy Milton's 'R.M. Blues'. In late 1946, Rupe moved from West Seventh to new offices at 311 Venice Boulevard to set up Specialty Records and Venice Publishing (named after the street, of course).

Forrest 'War' (Ward) Perkins

Nothing much is known about the early life of 'War' Perkins, as he could not be located anywhere in the census. Add this to the tale of his mysterious disappearance and supposed demise in the Philippines in early 1951, and we have an intriguing story, yet to be told. Shortly after Juke Box's closure in April, 1947, Perkins, Milton and Ben Waller ventured into the recording business at 3938 Sixth Avenue. They set up the Roy Milton label in mid-1946 to promote Milton's own recordings, and Cleartone, a short-lived subsidiary that lasted just long enough to see two Gene Morris releases. (Cleartone was replaced by the company's Foto imprint in 1948, yet another short-lived subsidiary)

The trio also had access to Perkins' own record pressing plant. By 1947, Perkins was involved with at least four labels. These were Miltone, the label into which the Roy Milton label had evolved, beginning in July 1947 – I suspect that Roy Milton himself had given over his share at this point; Special, on which only one Roy Milton release appeared (this was because Perkins had ripped off Art Rupe's original Specialty label design down to the last star and was threatened with a lawsuit); Ace, thought to have been proprietored by Milton, Perkins and Sherman Williams (only two releases ever appeared on Ace) and Sacred, his gospel imprint, which ran from July 1947 up to the time Perkins skipped the country.

All of Perkins' labels were pressed at his plant at 709 East Twenty-Ninth Street, along with John Dolphin's Recorded-In-Hollywood catalogue. Confusion lies in the fact that some Roy Milton sides were later reissued on Miltone.

In May 1948, Perkins added his Metro label to the list. Metro was an urban 'blues and rhythm' label which lasted through the same period of time as Sacred. It is my belief that Perkins (who also served as a local deejay) was being paid to play product from diskeries in which he held a part share.

These were short-lived labels he was fortunate enough to press at his plant. Despite Rupe having re-signed Roy Milton to his new Specialty label in March, 1947, Perkins and company continued to cut and release Milton's 1946 product on Miltone throughout 1947 and 1948.

Collector Jonas 'Mr. R&B' Bernholm believes that Perkins and Milton sold Miltone masters to Specialty as Rupe's reissue of the Miltone songs sounded no different from the Specialty ones. This, of course, refers to Specialty releases 511 through 515, covering early 1947 through late spring of that same year.

In July 1948, Perkins set up a deal whereby both Miltone and Jules Braun's New Jersey based DeLuxe Records could share the cost of pressing their releases by jointly sharing their catalogues. This would



Roy Milton circa late 1940s from the Billy Vera Collection.

save long distance calls and freight charges. Perkins also owned Los Angeles's oldest black owned record shop, Mosby & Spikes, at 4011 South Central Avenue. Perkins sold the shop in 1948 to one of his customers, John Dolphin, who transformed the property into his first Dolphin's of Hollywood location.

Perkins then dealt directly with Dolphin, who used him as his primary distributor. However things were beginning to unravel for Perkins. Roy Milton had filed charges against Perkins and his partner William Reed as far back as January 1948 for not paying him for radio broadcasts Perkins had recorded onto commercial discs without Milton's permission, off the air. Milton was seeking an injunction that would restrain Perkins from ever pressing and distributing these recordings. Perkins then grabbed all the Roy Milton masters he could find and split for the Philippines to set up a disc pressing plant there.

Two news items appeared in the June 1950 issue of *Billboard* magazine. One ran that Ivan Ballen of Gotham Records had purchased three hundred Miltone masters. These included some of Prof. J. Earle Hines' sacred sides, twelve Roy Miltons, including the second version of 'R.M. Blues', unissued Clara Ward Singers, plus items by Little Miss Cornshucks, Camille Howard and Jimmy Grissom. This was Ballen's first major master purchase since buying Gotham from Sam Goody. The second item, this time in the 'R&B Beat' column, mentioned Perkins stopping off in Hong Kong before settling for good in Manila.

Billboard's 'R&B Beat' column of November 1950 again mentioned Perkins. It reported that he had settled in Manila and had set up Perkins and Javier Enterprises. His business dealt in everything from recordings of Filipino blues balladeers to kitchen gadgets.

In February 1951, it was announced that Syd Nathan of King Records had purchased the De Luxe catalogue from the Braun brothers. Syd was already the label's distributor at the time of purchase.

The acquired masters included many of the New Orleans sides that appeared on the Miltone imprint by Roy Brown, Paul Gayten, Chubby Newsome and others, plus De Luxe sides by Prof. J. Earle Hines. Perkins had also traded many of his masters to De Luxe during the life of his label. The last we hear of Perkins is from a *Billboard* column printed in a March 1951 issue.

It was rumoured that 'War' Perkins, a local manufacturer some years back, 'passed away a few weeks ago from unknown causes'.

Label shots: Opal Louis Nations, Bob Bell, Victor Pearlin, B&R Archive.

If any reader has any Miltone cartoon labels that we haven't included in this feature we would appreciate an electronic copy for future publication. Full credits given. Please email them to Tony Burke.