ACMCD4038

Bob Geddins' IRMA Records Story

Featuring

Juke Boy Bonner
Jimmy McCracklin
Big Mama Thornton
Johnny Fuller
The Intervals
The Starlighters
and many more!

Bob Geddins' Irma Records Story

1 Juke Boy Bonner* - **Well Baby**
(Irma 111) ℗ 1957
(Weldon Bonner - Robert Geddins)
Bug Music Ltd (GB)

2 Juke Boy Bonner* -
Rock With Me Baby
(Irma 111) ℗ 1957
(Weldon Bonner - Robert Geddins)
Bug Music Ltd (GB)

3 Jimmy McCracklin & His Blues Blasters -
I Wanna Make Love To You
(Irma 102) ℗ 1956
(Robert Geddins) Bug Music Ltd (GB)

4 Jimmy McCracklin & His Blues Blasters -
You're The One
(Irma 102) ℗ 1956
(Jimmy McCracklin - Robert Geddins)
Bug Music Ltd (GB)

5 Jimmy McCracklin & His Blues Blasters -
Fare-Well
(Irma 103) ℗ 1956
(Jimmy McCracklin) Bug Music Ltd (GB)

6 Jimmy McCracklin & His Blues Blasters -
Savoy's Jump
(Irma 107) ℗ 1957
(Jimmy McCracklin) Bug Music Ltd (GB) /
EMI United Partnership Ltd

7 Jimmy McCracklin & His Blues Blasters -
I'm The One
(Irma 107) ℗ 1957
(Jimmy McCracklin)
EMI United Partnership Ltd

8 Jimmy McCracklin & His Blues Blasters -
Take A Chance
(Irma 103) ℗ 1956
(Jimmy McCracklin)
EMI United Partnership Ltd

9 Jimmy McCracklin & His Blues Blasters -
Beer Tavern Girl
(Irma 109) ℗ 1957
(Jimmy McCracklin)
Bug Music Ltd (GB)

10 Jimmy McCracklin & His Blues Blasters -
My Love For You
(Irma 109) ℗ 1957
(Jimmy McCracklin) Copyright Control

11 Big Mama Thornton & The Hi-Tones -
Don't Talk Back
(Irma 113) ℗ 1957
(Big Mama Thornton) Copyright Control

12 Big Mama Thornton & The Hi-Tones -
Big Mama's Coming Home
(Irma 113) ℗ 1957
(Big Mama Thornton) Copyright Control

13 Johnny Fuller - **Strange Land**
(Irma 106) ℗ 1957
(Robert Geddins) Bug Music Ltd (GB)

14 Johnny Fuller & The "Candyman" McGuirt
Band - **First Stage Of The Blues**
(Irma 110) ℗ 1957
(Johnny Fuller) Bug Music Ltd (GB)

15 Johnny Fuller & The "Candyman" McGuirt
Band - **No More-No More**
(Irma 110) ℗ 1957
(Johnny Fuller) Bug Music Ltd (GB)

16 Johnny Fuller - **Weeping and Mourning**
(Irma 106) ℗ 1957
(Johnny Fuller) Bug Music Ltd (GB)

17 Jimmy Wilson & His Blues Blasters -
Oh Red
(Irma 108) ℗ .1957
(Jimmy Wilson) Acuff-Rose Music Ltd

18 Jimmy Wilson & His Blues Blasters -
Blues In The Alley
(Irma 108) ℗ 1957
(Jimmy Wilson) Copyright Control

19 Geneva Vallier w/ Candyman McGuirt &
His Band - **He's A Friend (Vote For Adlai
Stevenson)**
(Irma 104) ℗ 1956
(Wiltz) Bug Music Ltd (GB)

20 Geneva Vallier w/ Candyman McGuirt &
His Band - **Sunny Day**
(Irma 104) ℗ 1956
(Unidentified) Copyright Control

21 The Intervals w/ Chick Morris Band -
Love Me Sweet
(Irma 820) ℗ 1957
(Chick Morris) Bug Music Ltd (GB)

22 The Starlighters - **Last Night**
(Irma 101) ℗ 1956
(Willard Candys) Copyright Control

23 The Starlighters - **Love Cry**
(Irma 101) ℗ 1956
(Willard Candys) Copyright Control

24 Al Smith & The Angels - **Leavin' You Baby**
(Irma 105) ℗ 1956
(Al King) Bug Music Ltd (GB)

25 Al Smith & The Angels - **Sha-Wa-Wa**
(Irma 105) ℗ 1956
(Al King - Beulah) Bug Music Ltd (GB)

26 The Golden Keys - **One Step**
(Irma 114) ℗ 1957
(Traditional) Bug Music Ltd (GB)

27 The Golden Keys -
Somebody Touched Me
(Irma 114) ℗ 1957
(Traditional) Bug Music Ltd (GB)

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* Juke Boy Bonner appears as "Juke Boy Bamer and Group" on the original Irma vinyl releases.

Bob Geddins

Bob Geddins, born near Marlin, Texas in 1913, is credited with being the founder of the post-war San Francisco East Bay blues sound which encompassed Oakland and Richmond. As a songwriter, producer, self-appointed talent scout and record company owner, he gave focus to the East Bay's fledging blues community made up of would-be musicians from Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Mississippi. Many of these artists, such as Lowell Fulson, Jimmy McCracklin, Sugar Pie De Santo and Big Mama Thornton, went on to become established West Coast blues performers.

Geddins' love of country blues dated back to his childhood cotton-picking days in Texas. He moved to Los Angeles in 1933 and set up a record store in South Central L.A., right next door to his grandmother's garage. Stock was made up of blues and gospel records to serve the needs of blacks who had moved to Southern California from the South to find better economic opportunities. Geddins moved up the coast to Oakland at his mother's invitation in 1943. Recognizing the need to fulfill the musical tastes of blue collar workers from the Southlands like himself, he began making recordings in 1944 of the Rising Star Gospel Singers at Berkeley's KSJO's radio studios. By 1945, Geddins, with the assistance of Jack Gutshall, had built a pressing plant on Oakland's Eighth Street and was putting out Rising Star recordings on his new Big Town record label. Big Town gave us at least fifty-eight releases over a period of fourteen or fifteen years. Most of these were urban blues and gospel quartet (see Acrobat ACTRCD9012 *"Bob Geddins' Big Town Records Story"* for the music and for further information.)

Months later, Geddins set up **Down Town Records** from an address on Cypress Street in Oakland. Down Town gave us at least twenty releases over a period of four years. Many of these sides were later leased to **Modern Records**. Here again output was restricted to gospel and blues. **Cava-Tone** was established around the same time and lasted about as long as Down Town but product included not only blues and gospel but jump & jive. There were at least fifteen Cava-Tone releases (see Acrobat ACMCD4037 *"Bob Geddins' Cava-Tone Records Story"*). Irma was a partnership with Issac Neal Jnr, set up in 1956 with offices at 1483 Twenty-Third Avenue in Oakland. Irma fielded blues, gospel, R&B and vocal group music. In all likelihood, Neal bankrolled the enterprise while Geddins produced and marketed the recordings.

Irma Records was named after Geddins' wife, Irma Dyer. Irma's first release is thought to have been a recording by the Golden Four, a.k.a. **The Golden Keys**, of "Let's Vote For Tom Berkley." This was a two-sided promotional release for an extremely successful black Oakland lawyer, newspaper publisher, builder and developer who was running for a place on the Oakland City Council. Berkley won his campaign and sat on the council while setting up his newspaper empire. He was the first black council member. As this record was made as a promotional tool, most copies were destroyed after his election to the council. Consequently,

The Golden Keys

we have been unable to turn up a copy. Interestingly, a similar record was made shortly thereafter by Geneva Vallier in support of Adlai Stevenson which is included here - more about this later.

The second Irma release featured Oakland's **Starlighters** (not Van McCoy's group) singing *"Love Cry" / "Last Night."* The Starlighters' release (only ever issued with a black on red label in 78 format) fetches upwards of $500 on the vocal group collectors' market. The group was led by Willard Candys, brother of Louis Candys who recorded with the Pipes on Dootone and the Fidelatones gospel quartet. *"Love Cry"* is a tear-stained ballad sung slightly off key, while *"Last Night,"* an upbeat wailer and comes off much better. They were previously discovered by Jake Porter while playing at Slim Jenkins' supper club on West Seventh in Oakland. He subsequently recorded the group in early 1955 singing the tender *"Arline"* for his Combo imprint backed by The Reginald "Jonesy" Jones Combo.

Jimmy McCracklin's music history is well documented elsewhere on other Acrobat Bob Geddins label collections (see the Trilon and Cava-Tone compilations plus our McCracklin CD). McCracklin appeared on Irma shortly after Geddins and Neal set up the short-lived Premium label to help promote Geddins-related product through Ralph's Record Sales in Gardena, California. On *"You're The One" / "I Wanna Make Love To You"* McCracklin was supported by **His Blues Blasters** composed of Raymond Boyd, alto sax, Johnny Parker and Willie Cowart, tenor sax, Horace Hall, bass, Lafayette Thomas, guitar, Ray Cotton, drums plus an unidentified baritone sax (possibly Willie Cowart doubling on instruments.) *"You're The One"* was announced in the early August 1956 Billboard as the disc that "opens up the shop for Irma" and was given a miserly two-star rating in the September 1st new releases column.

Jimmy McCracklin

"You're The One" is a slow, dragging blues, the first of many set in a similar style. McCracklin re-recorded the song for Imperial in 1959 but they failed to issue it. Most of McCracklin's Irma, Premium, Art Tone and Gedinson releases wound up on Imperial. "I Wanna Make Love To You" is a jump centering on an affair with a short woman. Rug-cutting sounds, including Thomas' sadly short solo, shine on this one. Geddins and Neal waited only weeks to rush out a follow-up, *"Fare-Well,"* a solid, mid tempo goodbye to a gal who quit loving him, and *"Take-A-Chance (No Good),"* an upbeat opus about a gal out of her head which allowed Thomas, Parker and Cowart a chance to stretch out in the vocal breaks. Again, Billboard gave the follow-up a Scrooge-like rating over the Christmas holiday season.

A third and more promising comment came with the April 1957 Billboard mention of *"I'm The One" / "Savoy's Jump"* which was awarded the territorial tip under the San Francisco heading. In May 1957, a month later, Billboard gave the record a

poor showing on the new R&B releases. Billboard also proclaimed that business was picking up with the distribution of McCracklin's first Irma release of *"I Wanna Make Love To You,"* seemingly a late starter. But the hype soon fizzled out.

"Savoy's Jump" is McCracklin's instrumental homage to Club Savoy in North Richmond, Calif. McCracklin started his career at Club Savoy, owned and operated by his sister-in-law Granny Johnson. Lowell Fulson also got his start there. The black inhabitants of North Richmond came from areas where McCracklin and Fulson were raised up so to hear their music made them feel nostalgic. Club Savoy eventually became a store front church named The Green Pastures C.O.G.I.C. pastored by Elder F.A. Combs. *"I'm The One,"* the topside of *"Savoy's Jump,"* is a reworking of *"You're The One"* with the same feel but was improved by an added back beat.

McCracklin's fourth and final Irma release gives us *"(My) Love For You,"* an alley blues with cool one-note piano rambles and dirty sax. The reverse, *"Beer Tavern Girl,"* is a Latin-flavored jumper with comic lyrics about certain physical types of women, McCracklin's usual subject matter. Thomas' guitar break and Cowart's honking are outstanding. This time, Billboard awarded a generous three-star rating to *"Beer Tavern Girl"* around Christmas 1957. But McCracklin did not need to worry—by January 1958 he was signed to Chess Records where his dance craze opus *"The Walk"* was about to be unleashed on the unsuspecting public. Two months later, *"The Walk"* had shot to the number five spot on Billboard's top R&B chart and the world celebrated the down-home blues style of Jimmy McCracklin.

Candyman McGuirt

Candyman McGuirt, born January 25th, 1925, played piano in the Chuck Phillips Band in 1944 with alto sax player Marvin Sutter who went on to wail in Lionel Hampton's band. Described as a happy-go-lucky guy, the Oklahoma-born McGuirt (like Lowell Fulson) had Indian blood in his ancestral heritage. His father was a cop who worked with the armed squad who killed "Pretty Boy" Floyd. McGuirt came out to work in Oakland's Kaiser Shipyards in 1942 and a year or so later joined the Navy and labored as a cook out in the Pacific. When Fulson got his start out at Club Savoy, McGuirt played piano for him. Candyman was one of the first black musicians to break the color bar by playing white night clubs.

The Candyman enjoyed two releases on Irma, one under his own name, *"He's A Friend" / "Sunny Day"* behind vocalist Geneva Vallier and the other behind Johnny Fuller, *"First Stage Of The Blues" / "No More-No More." "He's A Friend (Vote For Adlai Stevenson)"* was Geddins' and Neal's second singing attempt to make money selling records by supporting political candidates. Stevenson was the Democratic leader, diplomat and Illinois governor who campaigned against Eisenhower in the 1956 presidential election. He lost by a substantial margin. Vallier's politically

charged lyrics sound ridiculously out of place on this R&B attempt to get blacks out to vote for Stevenson.

"Sunny day" is a jazzy nightclub jumper you would expect someone like Dakota Staton to have sung. Johnny Fuller's *"First Stage of the Blues"* is a rockabilly-like rendering of a dance rocker. Fuller's Elvis Presley imitation and rocking guitar licks make this an interesting oddity. *"No More-No More"* is equally interesting with its jumping rockabilly arrangements, Bo Diddley-like lyrics and wild guitar licks.

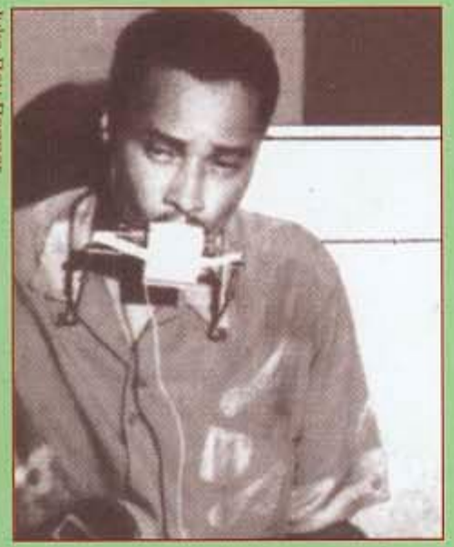
Less than a year later, Fuller scored big with *"Haunted House,"* a song written by Geddins, or so he claimed. **Al (or Alvin) Smith** was the great Oakland soul blues singer Al King whose history is a long and complicated one. Born in Monroe, Louisiana on August 8th, 1926, Alvin Smith recorded with bandleader and tenor sax-man Que Martin and His Clouds of Rhythm for the Recorded-in-Hollywood label in 1951. In 1954 he waxed for Ray Dobard's fledgling Music City label in Berkeley. After this he was back in L.A. singing with Brother Woodman and the Savoys, Jack McVea and Louise Beatty for Jake Porter's Combo label (three records in all.) On his return to the Bay Area he formed the Angels, a female vocal group, and signed with Geddins' Irma imprint. Both the hypnotic *"Leaving You Baby"* and the upbeat *"Sha-Wa-Wa"* are sung in ensemble fashion by the female group only, which leads me to suspect that Al Smith simply managed the group and added his name to the label. It might be that the Angels were the Jets, the same group who backed up Ray Agee on his recording of *"I Wanna Know Why"* for Shirley Records, in which case the Angels were composed of Ella Thomas and Gracie and Gloria Johnson.

In 1962, Al Smith hitched up with a gal named Nettie and the pair recorded in duet mode for Geddins' Gedinson's and Art Tone labels. After a couple more tries for other small Indies, Al (or Alvin) Smith switched names to Al King and built a reputable blues career.

Much has been said about **Johnny Fuller** in our liner notes to the Bob Geddins Rhythm (ACMCD 4039) and Jaxyson (ACMCD 4263) collections. His *"Strange Land"* is a sultry blues that may have been originally cut for Imperial Records in Los Angels with musicians lead by Que Martin. *"Weeping And Mourning,"* the record's underside is reminiscent of Elvis Presley's arrangement of *"Mystery Train."* The singing and guitar playing are outstanding and the song drives along famously.

We have discussed **Jimmy Wilson**'s career to an extent in our liner notes to both the Cava-Tone (ACMCD 4037) and Big Town (ACTRCD 9012) collections. Supported by the Blues Blasters, Wilson sang Piano Red's bouncer *"Oh Red"* (see our Big Town collection) and the weeping and moaning *"Blues In The Alley,"* supported by Que Martin, tenor sax, King Solomon, organ, Lafayette Thomas, guitar, Johnny Heartsman, bass, plus others.

Juke Boy Bonner was born Weldon H. Phillip Bonner in Belleville, Texas on March 22nd, 1932. He died in the same state in 1978. Going out as a one-man band, Bonner played guitar, drums, harmonica and other percussive instruments. He was given the tag "Juke Boy" as he warbled along to the jukebox as a child. He sang gospel quartet at school and drifted into the blues in his teens. In 1948 he won a talent contest and began appearing on Houston's KLEE radio station.



Juke Boy Bonner

Bonner played local blues joints and house parties. He moved out to the Bay Area in 1954 where he was discovered by Bob Geddins who recorded one session on him for Irma Records. This resulted in one release, the excellent rocker *"Rock With Me Baby"* and the equally magnificent *"Well Baby,"* sung and played in the Jimmy Reed tradition.

The Bonner sides constitute the best release on Irma. One would only wish that Geddins had followed up with the two unissued sides, *"It's A Dirty Deal"* and *"I'm Hep To It"*. Two years later, Bonner moved to the Lake Charles, Louisiana area and re-recorded *"(Life) It's A Dirty Deal"* for the Jan & Dil label.

Big Mama Thornton was born Willie Mae Thornton on December 11th, 1926 in Montgomery, Alabama and died during July 1984 in Los Angeles. Thornton was a fiercely rugged blues belter in the Big Maybelle tradition and was an out and out solidly grounded blues stylist, although towards the close of her career her recordings had become a little more "commercially" palatable. Despite being raised in a religious household (her father was a minister and her mother a church singer), she developed the strength to resist all enticements to become a gospel diva and opted instead for "the devil's music." In 1941, she joined the Georgia-based Hot Harlem Revue with whom she toured the South for seven years.

After moving to Houston in 1948, she worked up a solo act which included singing while drumming and blowing harmonica. She taught herself both instruments. Thornton was noticed by Don Robey of Peacock Records who signed her up in 1951. She enjoyed two recordings sessions in 1951, one each with both The Joe Scott and Bill Harvey Orchestras, culminating in three singles releases and *"Cotton Picking Blues"* which appeared on the back of the second release made at the first Johnny Otis Band session of August 1952. The first Johnny Otis-supported release was the enormously successful "Hound Dog" which spawned dozens of covers in both the R&B and pop markets.

After one single cut for Brad Taylor's Bay-Tone label, Thornton hooked up with Geddins and cut one session with him for Irma in 1957. The results were the hypnotic *"Don't Talk Back"* and the tough-edged belter *"Big Mama's Coming Home."* *"Don't Talk Back"* was supported by the Hi-Tones vocal group. The Hi-Tones were in fact the Famous Flames, James Brown's second bunch of Flames who were sacked after a dispute over the fairness of pay (or the lack thereof) during a trip to the Bay Area.

Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton

The Golden Keys, a.k.a. the Golden Four, were first assembled as the Keys of Harmony around 1949. In 1950, half the group went into the Army. This left Clarence Van Hook, Alec Bernstein and Talmadge Emerson. Talmadge Emerson, who owned a record store and managed the group, kept bringing new members into the outfit when needed over the years. Talmadge formed the Golden Keys, taking Hook, Bernstein and himself over to a second group called the Golden Eagles, most members of which had remained in place.

The make-up of the Irma Golden Keys group differs from the group or groups who waxed for Specialty, Hollywood and the outfit that recorded live at the Olympic Auditorium in 1951. The Golden Keys who recorded for H & H in 1955 and Irma in 1957 were composed of James Black, first lead tenor, Sam Wells, second lead tenor, Clarence McGhee, tenor, J.B. Martin, baritone, Leroy Watkins, bass and Leroy Leonard, guitar. The group sang at various church venues, Christmas parties in Alameda and even at a bar in San Francisco. As things came along, they would travel weekends to gospel programs in Fresno, Modesto, Madera, Bakersfield, Tulare and Los Angeles. Later still they appeared on venues in Oregon (Portland) and Texas.

"One Step" or *"Don't Wonder 'Bout Him"* is a finely sung chanter in the prevailing quartet tradition. The church-wrecking *"Somebody Touched Me"* is in every way as fiery as the Gospelaires' version from which the group took their arrangement.

Many of Geddins' artists made their living playing in Richmond where a large black community sprang up during the War to work in four converted-to-wartime shipyards that created 100,000 new jobs. Some residents were not exactly happy with the new temporary housing units that were built to accommodate the new workers or the influx of immigrants who were black. Some hotel owners placed signs in their windows that read "Negro patrons not wanted." One local hospital would not treat blacks.

As the new North Richmond residents wanted to hear the blues they were accustomed to hearing back home in the Southlands, juke joints and nighteries sprang up on every corner. Besides the already discussed Savoy, there was the 31, the Brown Derby, Tapper's Inn, Dew Drop Inn, Down Beat, Sam's Place, the Pink Kitchen and others. When Ollie Freeman opened his Jazzland Records Store in 1951 blacks gathered to spend their hard-earned cash on the latest releases from the Bob Geddins catalog.

- Opal Louis Nations, June 2008

With assistance from **Lee Hildebrand**, **Victor Pearlin**, **Frank McCowen**, **Kirk Roberts**, **Bob Geddins Jnr**, **Louis Candys** and **James Black**. Label scans courtesy **Opal Nations**

Photo credits:
Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton - 1960 - Bay Tone promo photo - courtesy Evette Monachino
Weldon "Juke Boy" Bonner - photo by Roy C. Ames
The Golden Keys - courtesy James Black
Candyman McGuirt (piano) & **The Charlie Walker Band** - Walker's Club, Oakland, Ca. Circa 1944 - courtesy Frank McCowen
The Intervals - courtesy Frank McCowen
Juke Boy Bonner - Irma label shots - courtesy Opal Nations
Bob Geddins - family photos - Pat Monaco