



Fortune Records Building at 3942 Third Ave. Detroit in May 1995. The building is now vacant.

Fortune Records

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In his autobiography, *To Be Loved*, Berry Gordy describes in dramatic style, the successful rise of one of this country's most prolific recording empires. There is no denying that the success of Motown Records was due to Berry's musical abilities, uncanny business sense and prophetic marketing insight. But Hitsville USA, (Motown's aka), which became synonymous with "The Detroit Sound," did not occur in a vacuum. Indeed, Mr. Gordy only makes passing references to those Motor City artists, independent companies and recording studios that pre-dated his enterprise by several years. (The exception is, of course, Jackie Wilson, due to Berry's own direct involvement with that singer's career).

He does pay homage to the city's thriving club scene and the many talented musicians both black and white that were spawned from this rich musical environment. Detroit, in many ways, mirrored what was going on with popular music in

the rest of the country in the late '40s and early '50s: the melding of delta blues with urban "jump" music which in turn fostered the growth of what became known as rhythm and blues, which by the mid-50s would blend with country and western styles to become the new "pop" music known as rock 'n' roll.

Detroit, in the 1950s, was home to a variety of independently owned record companies whose focus was primarily jazz, blues and this new "R&B" music, mainly due to the considerable size of the African-American community which had migrated north to work in the car factories. Staff, Blue Lake, JVB and Sensation were but a few of the labels of this period. Robert West would precede Berry Gordy, by two years, producing records for his own cadre of labels - Flick, Bumble Bee, Contour, Kudo and LuPine - and known primarily for hits by the Falcons, and the first recordings by the Primettes, later to become



known as the Supremes. But we are jumping ahead of ourselves.

One independent entity stood out above the rest in the early days of motor city music, primarily due to the devotion of its owners toward the artists, and their willingness to produce a variety of musical styles, particularly on the country side, as well as R&B. Many of the musicians who recorded there look back at Fortune Records as the place that gave them their start in the business that would become an integral part of their lives.

"Fortune" is defined in the dictionary as "a hypothetical force that governs events in one's life." As a starting point for several musical careers, Fortune would live up to its name. But the musical legacy really goes beyond that. In spite of the spartan facilities, the company would produce some of the best preMotown R&B to come out of the city. Some of the early sides produced at Hitsville would bear a direct influence from the Fortune catalogue.

Cub Koda, whose CD, *Abba Dabba Dabba*, on Schoolkids Records, features six Fortune songs, reverently describes his feelings: "Fortune Records is the great secret record company in the history of Detroit rock 'n' roll. They're the missing piece in the Detroit rock 'n' roll historical equation. Any discussion... without mentioning them is totally inaccurate and incomplete."

Jack Brown, an accountant, met his future wife Devora in the mid-forties. An accomplished pianist, Devora had periodically dabbled with poetry and song writing. Following their marriage, Jack encouraged her to submit her songs for publication. With an initial investment of \$3000 they eventually founded Fortune Records in the fall of 1947, as an avenue for her projects. After a series of false starts and trials, they experienced their first local success with "Jane (Sweet As Summer Rain)" by local pop singer, Russ Titus, with the Artie Fields Orchestra.

Many of Fortune's early records were done at United Sound Studios on Second Avenue, near Wayne State University. Following the Titus hit, Jack and Devora moved their business operation out of their Twelfth Street home to a rented office on Linwood Avenue across from Central High School - a move that would prove to be fortuitous as much of the city's young R&B talent had their origins in this very neighborhood - but more about that later.

Achievement on a national scale came in 1952, with the country song, "Jealous Love," by the Davis Sisters. Betty Jack Davis and Mary Frances Penick grew up together in rural Kentucky. Influenced by the Carter Family, both girls loved to sing and, as teen-agers formed a duo and began singing in small venues in Lexington. Mary changed her name to Skeeter Davis and the Davis Sisters were born. As was common in those days, they were asked to appear on a variety of radio programs throughout

the Midwest. One such program was "The Red Apple Club," on Detroit's WJR. It was during these visits that the girl's first records were produced at Fortune. In addition to the single, two albums were released: *Jealous Love* and *Hits With The Davis Sisters*.

Sadly, the act came to an end in 1953, when Betty Jack was killed in a head on collision just outside of Cincinnati. Skeeter was seriously injured, but after a lengthy recuperation, she continued as a solo act in 1955. Most rock and pop music fans remember Skeeter for her 1963, #2 cross over hit, "The End Of The World." (Covered by Herman's Hermits two years later). The first to prove the Fortune legacy, Skeeter would go on to have numerous pop and country hits for RCA, and release well over 30 albums for that label. She is internationally known on the country circuit, has attained numerous awards and Grammy nominations, network television appearances and is a permanent member of The Grand Ole Opry.

By 1952, word was getting out in the Detroit musical community that there was a record company in the city that not only was having success, they were willing to produce all kinds of music. In the racially divided 1950s, this would be especially appealing to blacks. Enter Sir John Lee Hooker!

Jack and Devora's son, Sheldon believes "The Hook" had recorded his first sides as early as 1948, when he travelled with Jack to Toledo and cut "Sadie Mae" and "609 Boogie" at Sweeney Sound Engineering. The former would be an album cut, while the latter was the flip side to his first Fortune 45. It would be almost ten years before either song was released.

The following year he hit with his classic, "Boogie Chillun." Originally produced by Bernie Besman, then owner of United Sound, for the local Sensation label - the song was licensed to Modern Records and became a #1 R&B favorite in February of that year. Other Modern/Sensation releases followed - notably: "Sally Mae," "Crawlin' King Snake," "Hobo Blues," "Huckle Up Baby" and "I'm In The Mood." (All of which can be heard on the excellent Rhino Records boxed set: *The Ultimate Collection: 1948-1990*).

Hooker had moved to Detroit in 1943 and gained notoriety playing house parties and clubs in Detroit's renowned Paradise Valley section up and down Hastings and Russell streets. (This area, unfortunately, no longer exists, having been replaced by the Chrysler Freeway and the Detroit Medical Center complex). Though he usually performed live with a band, his first records tended to feature just his open tuned electric guitar and foot stompin' plywood, dragging rhythms that evoked images of a man who meant what he said - or sang.

One of the most endearing aspects of John Lee's early career, was his cavalier attitude toward recording companies and their contracts. Besides Modern, he appeared on Riverside,



Gone, Chance, Regent, Staff, Deluxe, Swingtime, Gotham, Chess, Vee Jay and of course, Fortune. Why? Probably because it was there!

No matter what label he was on at the time, Hooker would always find time to record at Fortune, where he was also under contract. According to Sheldon, Hooker had a good relationship with his parents and was well liked. In spite of the agreement, his other activities were all but ignored. Jerry Plunk, former lead singer with the Flaming Embers, recalls, "You know, I was deep into the blues, all my life, and Jack knew how much I loved John Lee Hooker. (He) was always bragging about having Hooker on (the label). One day, I just walked in, and Hooker was there, and then after that I saw (him) a few more times. It was a gas, man."

Though not as successful as his earlier sides, three singles were released on Fortune: "Curl My Baby's Hair," "Cry Baby" and "Crazy About That Walk." (Fortune #'s 846, 853 and 855, respectively). One Fortune LP was released: Big Maceo Merriweather and John Lee Hooker, (#3002). The Browns also sold some 1952 sessions to Chess Records which appeared on 1960's House Of Blues and 1961's John Lee Hooker Plays and Sings the Blues. It remains an open question as to what may still be "in the can."

Today, John Lee Hooker is as popular as ever. He continued as a major concert attraction in the '60s and 70s, first on the college coffee house circuit as a folk blues idol, and later in several of the major rock venues and outdoor festivals. He continued to record for Vee Jay, Chess, Liberty and ABC Bluesway during this period. After a temporary lull in the '80s, he came back in a big way with 1989's The Healer, 1991's Mr Lucky and the just released Boom Boom. In January 1991, Hook was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Maybe not the initial springboard, but Fortune Records cannot be ignored as an important ingredient in the auspicious career of this legendary bluesman.

One of the most pivotal dates in Detroit musical history was in 1951, at the Paradise Theater - now Orchestra Hall, home of the Detroit Symphony - when record producer/ band leader Johnny Otis discovered and then promoted the careers of Jackie Wilson, Little Willie John and the Royals - later to become Hank Ballard and the Midnighters. This event was to lay the ground work of what was yet to come. The problem was that the real authority in terms of promotion and distribution existed elsewhere. In the case of the above three acts, it would be Cincinnati's King/Federal enterprise.

Inspired by the blossoming career of the Royals, Juan Guitierrez, Willie Hunter, Quentin Eubanks, Chico Edwards and Nolan Strong entered the Brown's Linwood Avenue office in late 1953 with the intention of cutting a demo, but the hope of getting a contract. The Diablos had been singing together since 1950, and all attended Central High School. It was only natural for them

to follow their dream directly across the street to Fortune Records. The fact that they didn't have the money to finance the record was a minor matter. When told this after the session, Jack was furious, but Devora was impressed by the smooth vocal arrangements and the unique lilting vocal talent of lead singer, Nolan Strong.

In fact, more than any other artist at Fortune, Nolan and the Diablos would benefit from Devora's songwriting and production attention. The latinesque, "Adios, My Desert Love" (#509), written by Devora, was the first single, and quickly established the group's credentials as regional hit makers in April, 1954. "The Wind" (#511), written by the group and Devora, became their signature song. Released in September, this beautiful ballad was further enhanced by Maurice King's artful arrangement. The record sold well in Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland and New York. Distribution problems, which would continue to plague Fortune throughout its history, prevented national chart entry for a song that deserved to be on both the pop and R&B listings.

Between 1954 and 1964, Nolan Strong and the Diablos would release some twenty singles, most all of which were regional chart toppers. Notable were "Daddy Rockin' Strong" (#516), "The Way You Dog Me Around" (#518) and "Mind Over Matter" (#546). Fortune would issue four LPs by the group including Fortune Of Hits, Volumes 1 & 2; Mind Over Matter and Daddy Rock. (LPs 8010, 8012, 8015 and 8017).

National attention would continue to be elusive for Nolan Strong, although "...Dog Me Around" did get to #12 on the R&B chart in 1956; He was becoming disillusioned. This was particularly true following the release of "Mind Over Matter" which was a giant smash in Detroit, but saw little action elsewhere.

The fact that he had previously turned down a Berry Gordy offer to come to Hitsville may have played a part in his attitude change. In addition to Motown, there were several independent companies vying for a piece of the Detroit market in 1964. Robert West's Lupine Records was still in operation. Tony Ewing's Chex label was having success with the Volumes. Ann Arbor's Ollie McLaughlin was making an impact on his Karen label, with soul songstress, Barbara Lewis. Ed Wingate had the Reflections, Edwin Starr and J.J. Barnes on Golden World and Ric-Tic. In fact, Berry Gordy's own in-laws, Robert and Hazel Coleman had launched their Thelma Records with lead artist, Emmanuel Laskey. Fortune was no longer the only game in town.

The influence that Nolan's material had on some early Motown productions is fairly obvious. It has been stated more than once that he was an idol of Smokey Robinson's. Cub Koda, whose appreciation knows no bounds, has stated, "Nolan Strong was the godfather of the whole Detroit R&B scene. There , would be no Smokey Robinson without a Nolan Strong. There would be no Michael Jackson without a Nolan Strong. His



arranging skills were second to none. What he was doing on records like 'Mind Over Matter' and 'If I (Oh I)' and 'The Wind' were like Motown Records years before there ever was such a thing."

Stylistic comparisons can be heard on the more sophisticated Motown sides such as Marv Johnson's "Come To Me," the Contours' "Just A Little Misunderstanding" and Mary Wells' "The One Who Really Loves You." One of the more humorous anecdotes involved Motown's attempt to get an elusive first hit on the Temptations. As the Cubmaster explains, "It's no mystery that the only time Berry Gordy ever tried to cover a Fortune record with the Temptations as the Pirates on Melody doing 'Mind Over Matter' - he bombed." This 1962 effort paled in comparison to Nolan's original.

For reasons still not entirely clear, Nolan was not picked up by another label following his departure from Fortune in the mid-sixties. He died of unknown causes on February 21, 1977 and is buried in Wayne, Michigan's Westlawn Cemetery not far from Jackie Wilson's final resting place. More than any other artist, his records have kept Fortune in business into the '90s as a reissue company for collectors. Nolan Strong and the Diablos will forever be remembered as one of the most innovative and influential recording talents to come out of Detroit in the pre-Motown fifties.

In 1955, the Brown's moved their center of operations to a slightly larger building at 3942 Third Avenue. There were several reasons for this, primarily financial. By purchasing this building, they would save on rent as well as have enough space in the front to maintain a record store where all the popular tunes of the day were available in addition to their own product. Thus the Hi-Q Record Mart joined forces with Fortune Records at the same location. Hi-Q would shortly become a recording subsidiary of Fortune Records and the Brown's Trianon Publications. Furthermore, the studio in the back saved on session costs, although some artists, not too surprisingly, continued to record at United Sound.

Detroit rockabilly singer, Johnny Powers, was one of the first to record at the new location: "From what I remember, part of the floor was a dirt floor and (only) one or two microphones (were) used. The machinery, I think it was a two track or mono machine... there was a little control room off to the side - small closet type. They only had the one machine in there. I think they had a dub machine in there, but I'm not sure. The studio was not big."

Powers recorded his first single at Fortune, "Honey Let's Go (To A Rock and Roll Show)" b/w "Your Love." (#199) What was the session like? "Everything was done all at once... just me and (my band) the Rockets... (Not to be confused with 70s Detroit band of the same name), and on background vocals on 'Honey...' was a black male group." He is not certain but agrees that it could have been the Diablos.

The experience was a positive one for the aspiring country rocker. "During that time it was the only visible label in Michigan.... The name was around, and you learned from conversations... as I was playing country music, they had the Davis Sisters and Roy Hall. They did bluegrass, country, pop, blues... just about everything."

Born John Pavlik, he credits Devora Brown with giving him his professional name. "She said your going to have to change your name and I hadn't thought about what I wanted to change it to. I was eating a Power House candy bar. She was talking to me from behind the counter, and she says, 'How about Johnny Powers?' And I said, 'sounds good.'"

Johnny would go on to record for Sun Records in Memphis, and become one of the first white singers to sign with Motown. By the mid-sixties, he was experiencing success producing other non-Motown acts in Detroit, including Tim Tarn's "Wait A Minute," on Palmer; and the Precision's "If This Is Love," for Drew Records. He remains popular in his hometown and is something of a cult hero in Europe, making appearances there on a regular basis. Schoolkids Records released the critically acclaimed New Spark For An Old Flame just last year. (See Elmer Ploetz's fine profile in the January, 1995, Discoveries).

Another country musician who created an impact in the early days is Dell Vaughan. He retains fond memories of his days at Fortune: "In retrospect it was a rich blessing. It was good training ground you might say. The very first record was 'Cure For Love' and 'Rock The Universe.' I cut that back in August of '58, and released it in September. 'Valley Of Broken Hearts' and 'Let Me Be Loved' (Hi-Q 5034), was recorded in '64. I've got an old 'one stop' chart they used, that I got from Devora Brown. It did quite well regionally. It even out sold George Jones' 'White Lightning' on their country chart. 'I Need You' and 'Garden Of Love' was recorded in 1980. It was one of the last (records) for the company.

"The first record I did was in the old record store on Third Avenue. They had an old upright piano and the four cinder block walls. There was a little room on the side where she could look through the glass to see you. Devora and Jack were in the room running the board. They had brought in the backing group off the street. They were called the Fortunaires. The guy who played the upright piano on 'Rock The Universe' was quite a player. Typical honky tonk! It was pretty unsophisticated. People were coming in the front door, buying records, and we were in the back recording.

"'Valley Of Broken Hearts' was recorded at United Sound and what a difference a day makes. You know United has put out some really good stuff. You can tell the difference between the two records."



Dell has continued to enjoy success as a popular country artist in his home state and in 1994 was inducted into the Michigan Country Music Hall Of Fame. He is in his seventh year as co-producer of the PBS television series "Michigan Magazine" and has written and recorded the show's theme song, "Soar Like An Eagle."

Back on the rhythm and blues side, Fortune would enjoy its greatest national chart successes with Andre Williams, and later, Nathaniel Mayer. Originally from Chicago, Williams moved to Detroit and began singing with the Five Dollars, who would also become a local favorite on Fortune. Eleven singles would be released on Andre, the most popular being "Bacon Fat," (#831), "Jail Bait," (#837) and "Greasy Chicken."

Known for his intense and dramatic song delivery in the Jackie Wilson style, Williams could plant tongue firmly in cheek with his novelty tunes, co-written with Devora. "Bacon Fat" would go to #9, on the Billboard R&B chart in February 1957. He left Fortune in 1960 and went on to write and record for Ed Wingate's family of labels, which was rapidly becoming Motown's primary competition for talent. Following the Motown buy out in 1966, Andre would return to Chicago and continue to record for a variety of labels. In 1984, Fortune released Jailbait, a twelve-song retrospective of his best material.

Of all the artists on the Fortune roster, Nathaniel Mayer would have the greatest national exposure with the release of "Village Of Love" (#545), in May of 1962. The song went to #16 on the R&B chart, and remained on the pop chart for 12 weeks, peaking at #22. This doo-wop classic was the highest charting pop single in Fortune's history. Billed as Nathaniel Mayer and the Fabulous Twilights, (though there never was a permanent group of Twilights), Nathaniel would release a total of nine singles along with the LP, Going Back To The Village Of Love.

He was a perennial favorite on the Detroit club circuit in the sixties. United Sound producer, Frankie Garcia, played with Leonard King and the Soul Messengers who backed numerous artists in the city at the time: "With Nathaniel Mayer, Emmanuel Lasky and Silky Hargreaves - we had the most exciting times, as far as local artists were concerned. Anytime any one of them would step out on the stage, it was Just like you would see... how the girls did for the Beatles. It was the same kind of hysteria. It was right on the verge of being physically dangerous to the safety of the artist and the bigger the place was, the more it was that way."

Mayor's follow up to "Village..." was "Leave Me Alone," which made some noise, but did not hit in spite of national distribution by United Artists. Nathaniel has kept a low profile in recent years but still plays the occasional oldies show in the Detroit area.

The Fortune group that best exemplified the merging of musical styles was undoubtedly the Flaming Embers. The band formed in early 1964, when Detroiters Mike Jackson (bass) and Joe Sladich (guitar), joined forces with Jerry Plunk (drums, lead vocals) and Bill Ellis (keyboards). All four had played in several other bands which had evolved into the current unit. Both Plunk and Ellis were from Tennessee, where their exposure to country music had been a strong influence.

The group's later success would largely be due to Plunk's distinctive vocal phrasing and his love for rhythm and blues. In fact, people who heard but never saw the group would automatically assume they were black.

The Embers, who were named after a popular Detroit restaurant, cut their first two singles for Fortune - "You Can Count On Me"/"Gone, Gone Gone" (#869) and "Woe Is Me"/"Rain Go Away" (#870). Both sides of both records were written by Plunk.

Jerry is enthusiastic about those early days: "We decided to take a week off and record some things on our own. So we went down to Specialty Recordings on Grande Boulevard... and cut six things and hawked them ourselves. We thought, 'Let's try Fortune.' So we went down to Fortune and talked to Jack and Devora... I didn't live too far away and used to get my hair cut right by Fortune. I used to see a lot of groups going in and coming out. I was always into R&B, Hooker and Dr. Ross, (the Harmonica Boss). There were two or three other blues singers [that] had records on Fortune. I thought, 'What the hell, they're local, they're down the street, let's give it a try'"

Since the band had already recorded the demos at Specialty, it was agreed that Fortune would distribute two of the sides, "You Can Count On Me" and "Gone, Gone, Gone." The second record, with Ray Kimble singing lead on the A side, was produced in the Fortune studio.

Bassman, Mike Jackson recalls the experience, "I think it was a four-track, if I remember correctly. It was all done at the same time. No voice-over or anything. That's how it worked. Usually, through some other recording experiences I would have in later years, the amplifiers are plugged right into the board. Fortune was not like that. The microphones were set right in front of the amplifiers."

Jerry agrees, "It was a make-shift place. They had egg crates for sound-proofing. It was a real tinny sound. In my opinion, it was a place for people to start. A lot of good people went through there."

Both of the Embers' Fortune releases were minor local hits and received a significant amount of airplay on all three of Detroit's major rock stations at the time. Two years later the group would go on to sign with Ed Wingate's Ric-Tic label where six singles would be issued, notably "Hey Mama," written by George Clinton, and "Bless You (My Love)." When the company folded in 1968, Plunk took the group over to

Holland-Dozier-Holland's new Hot Wax Records where they experienced their greatest achievements with three records in the national Top 40: "Mind, Body and Soul," "Westbound #9" and "I'm Not My Brother's Keeper."

To be more in tune with the "hip" times, the Embers dropped the 's' from their name to imply a more unified entity. They would produce two albums for the label, Westbound #9 and Sunshine in addition to releasing a total of seven singles before disbanding in 1972. Jerry Plunk and Bill Ellis have returned to their home state of Tennessee and continue to write and record. Mike Jackson remains in Michigan and has also kept active in the music business, playing for a variety of local groups in Detroit including the Laredos and the Reflections.

Other Fortune artists who would enjoy later successes include country singer, Roy Hall;

bluesman, Eddie Kirkland; orchestra leader, Choker Campbell, who later worked at Motown; and the Royal Jokers.

Sheldon Brown continues to operate Fortune Records as a reissue business and plans are being finalized to release the Nolan Strong catalogue on CD. Additional product is available on vinyl. Sheldon can be reached by writing: Fortune Records, P.O. Box 904, Royal Oak, Michigan, 48068; or calling 810-545-2146.

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Nolan Strong and the Diablos



The Flaming Embers, 1964. From Left: Jerry Plunk, Joe Sladich, Mike Jackson and Bill Ellis,.