

Observations on Alabama Musicians and Singers of Rock ‘n’ Roll, Rhythm & Blues, and Related Music Genres

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Some of you reading this know I am an enthusiast for American popular music, specifically, rock ‘n’ roll, rhythm and blues, and related music including blues, country, and gospel, primarily for the period 1945-1963. (Yes, the Beatles are too “modern” for me). Here I would like to share some observations concerning Alabama musicians and singers in these genres. Our state has produced a wealth of artists in these genres, so I can only mention a few of my favorites.

How might this relate to libraries? If your library collects popular music, I strongly recommend you consider acquiring music by these wonderful Alabama artists. I know technology has changed drastically: I still collect records and compact disks but most libraries, I assume, will want to (if interested) collect works by these artists via electronic databases or some sort of streaming service. Of course, there is also a lot available for free via *Youtube* but sometimes it’s not always easy to find what you are looking for and, also, you usually have to sit through some advertising.

Let me begin with a few artists who predate my main area of interest since these artists are significant in the history of American popular music.

Lucille Bogan (1897-1948), from Birmingham, who also recorded under the name Bessie Jackson, was an excellent blues singer who made a number of recordings from the late 1920's through mid-1930's. Best known for some rather suggestive records (the unreleased version of her 1935 Shave 'Em Dry" is hilariously obscene), she recorded the original version of "Black Angel Blues" in 1930. This somewhat suggestive but mainly romantic, blues was redone with slightly revised lyrics by Mississippi blues greats Robert Nighthawk (Robert McCollum, 1909-1967) in 1949 and, most notably, by B.B. (Riley) King (1925-2015) in 1956 as "Sweet Little Angel."

Boogie woogie piano is an important blues genre that clearly points the way to rock 'n' roll. Some of you may know I can play that style of piano myself. Clarence "Pinetop" Smith (1904-1929), born in Troy, recorded the very influential "Pinetop's Boogie Woogie" in late 1928. It was released in 1929 and was soon covered by a number of other artists. The song consists of Smith's lively boogie piano with its rolling bass patterns over which he provides spoken dance instructions. Important remakes include Cleo Brown (c. 1907-1995), an outstanding pianist and singer from Mississippi, whose version came out in 1935 and pianist and singer Joe Willie "Pinetop" Perkins (1913-2011), also from Mississippi, who, essentially, made a career out of his lively 1953 remake of Pinetop Smith's classic. I was fortunate enough to see Pinetop Perkins in person in the mid- 1990's at one of those fantastic annual Birmingham Jam festivals they used to host at Sloss Furnaces. Pinetop Smith, sadly, died as a result of being accidentally shot during a dance hall brawl in Chicago.

Alabama has produced a seemingly endless stream of gospel artists. One of the most influential was the Famous Blue Jay Singers of Birmingham, an important male vocal group, who sang mostly a cappella (*i.e.*, without instruments), who recorded on and off between 1932 and 1950. They helped pioneer what is known as the "hard gospel" style of singing which, in turn, was one of the roots of the soul music that emerged in the 1960's. A good example of their style is "I'm Bound for Canaan Land" from 1947: it starts out as a slow stately number with a slow burn increasing intensity and then, suddenly, a minute or so in, the group goes up tempo and the singing becomes raw and exciting.

The Jewell Gospel Trio is now an obscure group but during the 1950's proved to be very popular on the gospel circuit. The group started out in Hanceville singing in local churches before being

sponsored by the Church of the Living God Jewell Dominion Pentecostal denomination to enroll in a Christian academy in Nashville. The teenage girls recorded some wonderful examples of African American gospel between 1953 and 1958. Their joyful “Many Little Angels in the Band” (1955) became something of a theme song for the group. Perhaps the most famous member of the group was Canzietta Staton, better known as Candi Staton, who hit big in later decades as a secular R. & B. and pop artist but who has returned in recent years to gospel music.

Alabama, of course, has been the home of many a country artist since at least the 1930’s. The duo of Wiley (Walker, 1911-1966), from Andalusia, and Gene (Sullivan, 1914-1984) from near Birmingham, wrote and recorded the sweet ballad, “When my Blue Moon Turns to Gold Again,” and recorded it in 1941. Fifteen years later, Mississippi native Elvis Presley (1935-1977) turned it into an exciting rock ‘n’ roll number.

Hank Williams (1923-1953) is, perhaps, the single most famous country singer and songwriter of all time. He grew up in Georgiana, Greenville, and Montgomery and after a few unsuccessful singles had his first hit in 1947 with the lively “Move It on Over.” Starting with the massive success of “Lovesick Blues” in 1949, Williams placed, literally, sixty-six records on the country charts, some of which also made it onto the general (and more lucrative) pop music charts over the next few years. Many of his songs remain classics to this day and have been redone by many other artists, for example, “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” “Cold, Cold Heart,” and “Jambalaya (on the Bayou),” to name only a few. Sadly, he died young, due to poor general health, severe alcoholism, exhaustion, and being grossly overprescribed with pain-killing medication by his quack doctor (shades of Elvis Presley in 1977 and Michael Jackson in 2008!). Ironically, one of Hank Williams’s last recordings, made in Fall 1952, was the aptly titled “I’ll Never Get Out of this World Alive.” Despite the title, this driving bluesy number actually has some quite humorous lyrics.

I have just barely touched the surface of the incredible well of musical talent that originated here in Alabama. Libraries interested in collecting music performed, and often composed, by Alabama artists have no lack of choices. As another Alabama artist, soul singer Arthur Alexander (1940- 1993, from Sheffield) sang in 1963, “Give me a shot of rhythm and blues with just a little rock and roll on the side.”

Author note

Tim Dodge has worked at the Ralph Brown Draughon Library at Auburn University since July 1992. He currently serves as History, Political Science, and Theatre and Dance Librarian. Previously, Tim had worked at academic libraries in New Hampshire and Florida between 1980 and 1992. Tim has served in various library associations including terms as President of the Alabama Library Association (2004-2005); the Southeastern Library Association (2019-2020, two full years); and the Alabama Association of College and Research Libraries (2000-2001 and 2008-2009).

Fun fact: Tim has continuously hosted the Golden Oldies program featuring 1950's Rock 'n' Roll/Rhythm & Blues on WEGL – Auburn FM 91.1 since 1998 Tuesday nights, 7 – 9 p.m. (<https://www.weglfm.com/page/listen-live>) and he plays boogie woogie piano.