

R&B THE ATLANTIC YEARS

Atlantic Crossover

Making Tracks with Nesuhi Ertegun

By 1967 the Atlantic label's distinctive "soul sound" had achieved a fanatical following worldwide — Otis Redding was voted No 1 Male Vocalist in *Melody Maker*, England's leading music tabloid of the 60s. Even in New Zealand Wilson Pickett and Arthur Conley had hits and musos all hung out with their copy of *MM* and dropped hip names not heard on NZ radio — Otis Redding and Aretha Franklin.

Being a mere schoolboy I wasn't hip to *Melody Maker* (I could never find it), but avidly read *Record Mirror* (it had colour pictures), another soul-mad UK weekly. Sure, I had some Four Tops singles, but I longed to get into the heavy stuff.



Nesuhi Ertegun

The photos of soul artists in the music papers looked so earnest, real, faces taut with emotion. As a member of a very "earnest" generation I sought out the manic live

Otis Redding — gotta, gotta, gotta, Respect, Respect, Respect — and became an instant convert. I hurried to import more Otis Redding albums and join the *Uptight An Outasight* fan club, the London-based Atlantic Records Appreciation Society. A record company with a fan club? True.

Having been obsessed with Atlantic soul-mania in my youth it remained a daunting prospect meeting one of the legendary Ertegun brothers when Nesuhi visited New Zealand in 1984. He is now president of WEA International, running the international operations of the three labels that comprise the Warner Communications Group: Warner Bros, Elektra and Atlantic.

The Erteguns, whose father was once Turkish ambassador to the US, were described by *Time* magazine in July 1967 as the "Turkish tycoons of soul". The article noted that by mid-1967 Atlantic had 18 discs in the Top 100 best-selling singles. Nesuhi was not with the label from the beginning. Atlantic was founded by his younger brother Ahmet Ertegun and Herb Abramson in 1947. The records were essentially "race" or "rhythm and blues" records by black performers, 78s or singles selling to the black market. But by 1954 Atlantic had recorded two of the foundation recordings of rock and roll — Joe Turner's 'Shake, Rattle and Roll' and Ray Charles's 'I Got a Woman'.

When Herb Abramson left in 1953, Jerry Wexler joined the label. Like Ahmet he would actively write and produce for Atlantic's artists. In January 1955 Nesuhi Ertegun, a jazz enthusiast, moved from Los Angeles to New York to develop the long play (LP) record department. While Ahmet and Jerry concentrated on the "hit single", Nesuhi compiled albums for artists, recorded LP tracks and developed a roster of jazz artists.

This interview happened suddenly one day in 1984. Nesuhi was more willing to talk about the old days at Atlantic Records than this writer expected (or was prepared for). Nesuhi is an old-style record executive, a music maker, not a modern marketing whizz kid. He speaks with warmth about a subject he loves, because firstly, he's a music fan.

Why do you think Atlantic is remembered for a distinctive sound or style when you recorded a variety of artists?

But they were basically black artists. Atlantic was a black company for at least the first 10 years. From the time it was founded in 1947-48 until the late 50s, when we had Bobby Darin, who was our first white artist of any importance. It changed in the 60s with Sonny and Cher and later on with the Rolling Stones etc.

We recorded black music, what was then called rhythm and blues. The Drifters, the Coasters, the Clovers, Ben E King, Laverne Baker, Ruth Brown — there's a huge back catalogue there of great music. I think it's great anyway.

And of course there's a lot of jazz as well. I was basically a jazz producer, but I also did people like Ray Charles, the Drifters, Laverne Baker — more album orientated than singles. My brother Ahmet was more singles orientated. I recorded hundreds of jazz albums and also vocalists like Mel Torme, Carmen McCrae, Bobby Short ...

Do you think Atlantic reflected a regional sound, say New York, in the 60s, or did it draw its resources from the whole country?

It came from the whole country. I mean, most of the recording was done at our own studio in New York. But my brother found Ray Charles in Florida, I found Roberta Flack in Washington, we found artists in Los Angeles ... it was the whole country. It was the quality of the artists. We were not a New York label, even though the main office was there.

Many modern independent labels seem to be centred in New York, or Memphis, or whatever.

Yes. Nowadays it's much more localised, and also there are more companies and they're much smaller. Atlantic was small in those days compared to an RCA or a CBS but it was a fairly large company. We had a lot of artists under contract. It was a big independent — like Motown.

By the way, we had the first eight-track recording. We were a little ahead of both the independents and the majors — when they were recording on two-track stereo, we had an eight-track machine built for us by Ampex.

Motown were quite up on their technology too, weren't they?

Yes, but frankly, Atlantic was three or four years ahead of everybody else. Because we had one chief engineer, Tom Dowd, who was very forward thinking and he got all those things.

What was the basis for Atlantic's survival, bearing in mind that so many independent have disappeared over the years.

That's hard for me to answer. If I may say so, a certain amount of skill and a certain amount of luck. We were lucky but we were also very conscious of the importance of artists. We were a small company in those days but we were attracting many artists, because they knew we had a much more per-

sonal involvement. It was a company that was not run by lawyers and accountants and business people, but by music people. Artists came to us in preference to going to a bigger company where possibly they could have gotten much more money.

Do you feel labels have lost much with the demise of the in-house style of producing?

In my opinion, yes. In the days when I was a producer, we made our own records. At Atlantic there were three producers — there was Ahmet, Jerry Wexler and me. There were rare exceptions — Phil Spector made a few records for us, as did Leiber and Stoller — but basically, 80 or 90 per cent was produced by us. We owned the company and we made the records and we had our style. We signed the artists and we worked with them. Today, that's lost and I think that's unfortunate. There was a definite Atlantic image, like there was a Motown image.

One of the other changes today is the advent of 24 track studios. Do you like the sounds being achieved?

The answer is no — I don't. I don't because it's not always intelligently used. It's an excuse for laziness. When we made our records we knew exactly what we wanted. There was a fair amount of rehearsal and preparation, but the recording itself went fairly fast. I could make an album in three sessions. In 10 or 12 hours of recording, an LP was done, normally. But today it takes two or three months.

I have a lot of friends who are famous producers — they do maybe four projects a year. In one year I did 80 albums and now they do four. Now I'm not saying I'm right and they're wrong, but I think the artists aren't really prepared. They start to write the songs in the studio. They don't know whether they want French horns or strings, so they try it both ways — then they decide that's no good, so they get four cellos or four trombones and try that. We never recorded that way.

That's why you spend up to \$400,000 an album — which to me is outrageous, there's no need for that. I'm rather critical of 24 and 32 track recording, there are some projects where it's essential, but many recordings can be done better with four track or eight track. But it's become a toy and they abuse it. [Nesuhi stated that the only production method he would consider doing now would be digital, direct-to-disc.]

At one stage Atlantic produced jazz albums that would have sold only a few thousand copies. Do you think there's enough room now in a big company for the artist who will only sell a few thousand?

Yes, and it would be a great shame if that was lost. It's a duty, an obligation for a company, to

make some recordings that don't make much money. You might not break even, you might even lose, but if it's an important enough project musically, it has to be done, and we've always done that. I recorded unknown people who I knew would only sell three or four thousand records, but who I thought were extremely important and had to be heard and remembered. Companies like Atlantic are still doing this — they just recorded Freddie Hubbard a couple of months ago.

Elektra recently ventured into contemporary jazz with the *Musicalian* label, founded by Bruce Lundvall. How did that go?

It seems that in America, people go to jazz clubs and concerts, but somehow they don't buy jazz records. It's not a typical record buying following, that's why jazz records don't sell. You can go to a jazz festival and there are up to 15,000 people there. Those people will pay \$20 to buy a ticket but not \$10 for a record by the same artist. It's paradoxical. I get the feeling that many of those people don't like to go to record shops. They don't like the ambience, the atmosphere of the contemporary record shop and they stay away. To reach those people, you try mail order, you try advertising in specialised magazines.

During your years in the jazz field, did you have any favourite artists you worked with?

I must have done something like 20 LPs with the Modern Jazz Quartet — I practically lived with them at times. I toured with them, recording them live in Europe and at the Carnegie Hall. So I was practically a fifth member of the MJQ for many years and we're still very friendly. I may even produce their next record.

Charlie Mingus was a very close friend. I worked with him for more than 15 years. From 1955 until Mingus died, most of his recordings were done under my supervision. He's one of the greatest people I've known in my life. I'm proud to have known people like that — John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Lenny Christano, Lee Hubbard, Les McCann, Eddie Harris, these are all people I worked with.

Do you have much involvement in A&R and production these days?

No. I miss greatly my involvement with artists and recording, the time I used to spend in the studio. Now, except for a few big artists, I'm not involved in releasing schedules, that's done country by country. I don't miss that, but I do miss actually producing something in the studio.

However distant Nesuhi may be from the creative whirl of his studio role of the 60s, some things don't change.

Firstly, he's a music fan. **Murray Cammick**

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