

IRVING MILLS - RECORD PRODUCER:

THE MASTER AND VARIETY RECORD LABELS

by Jim Prohaska

For lovers of dance bands, hot jazz, and especially hot swing music of the mid-30s, the Master and Variety labels have long been the source of desirability and fine listening for collectors. The Variety label in particular is the source of some of the hottest small group jazz of the period.

 Master Records, Inc., founded by Irving Mills, was the company which produced both the Master and Variety labels. The recording company and labels were a formal entity by late 1936 as reported in the December 1936 issue of *Variety* magazine. However, the project had probably been in the planning stages since the beginning of the year. Perhaps the biggest single catalyst in the events leading up to this venture took place mid-year in Chicago. The Duke Ellington Orchestra had been booked in to the Congress Hotel from May 8th until June 6th. Duke's band appeared each evening in the hotel's Joseph Urban Room. In addition, the band presented 30-minute broadcasts each night which were aired nationally over NBC. The Ellington band also played Sunday afternoon concerts sponsored by Chicago's Rhythm Club - a local jazz club headed by musician/collector "Squirrel" Ashcraft and writer Helen Oakley. Helen had been integral in bringing Duke's band to Chicago, and was personally responsible for arranging the Rhythm Club concerts. During the Duke's tenure at the Congress Hotel, Helen met Irving Mills. Mills, as Ellington's agent, had joined the band in Chicago for their stay. Mills shared his ideas on organizing a record company with Helen and was soliciting her for any input she might have. He seemed impressed with her ability to organize jazz talent and present sellout venues. After all, Miss Oakley had featured Benny Goodman's Orchestra at one of her club's Sunday afternoon concerts (heralded by some as the very first jazz concert ever presented in the United States) - and Goodman received a most welcome national boost through favorable reviews of the concert from both *Downbeat* and *Time* magazines. Fletcher Henderson's fine band soon followed - again to a packed house (variously reported to have been from 600 to 1000 people!). Benny Goodman and Gene Krupa even sat in to form a sextet rounded out with Roy Eldridge, Chu Berry, Fletcher, and John Kirby. The most historic Rhythm Club concert, however, came on Easter Sunday of 1936. Helen Oakley had arranged the first public performance of the Benny Goodman Trio which included Teddy Wilson.

Helen became a fast and long-term friend of the Duke's while the band was in Chicago. Mills also became enamored with her. After discussing his plans for a recording company, he insisted that Helen come back to New York with him. She agreed, as Irving had suggested that she should help arrange talent and organize recording sessions for him once the venture was finalized. He wanted her to visit his offices plus check out the music scene in New York first hand. Her short visit extended ultimately into a permanent stay. She initially assisted Mills in pleading his case during meetings with lawyers and investors. Once the legal issues were completed, and Master Records became a reality, Helen became a formal part of the company by the end of 1936.

Obviously, this venture was another possible outlet for Agent-Manager-Publisher Irving Mills to promote the talent under his direction through a medium over which he hoped to have absolute control and emphasis. Whatever particular repertoire Mills might want to capitalize on and promote for a certain band could now be regulated by him (including tunes copyrighted by Mills Music, Inc.). Unfortunately, other unforeseen factors would become major obstacles in the long-term success of the Master and Variety labels.

The Los Angeles-based *Tempo* magazine, in its November 1936 issue, proclaimed the headline: "Irving Mills to Invade Business". The news comes out of New York, and cites this venture as a subsidiary to Mills Artists, Inc., to be doing business starting January 1, 1937. "Mills says he will construct his own studios and install the latest stuff in equipment. Indications are that waxings will be of a type intended to capture a goodly hunk of the swing market." Mills was also opening an office in Dallas at this time, and had unofficially (at the time of publication)

opened an office in Hollywood. The article indicates that Mills himself was to be in Hollywood by the end of November to "handle a picture date for Duke Ellington." No doubt this was the Marx Brothers tour-de-force "A Day At The Races" where the ill-fated Ellington sequences ended up on the cutting room floor. The Ivie Anderson scene with Harpo Marx contains a number of black actors backed by a fine studio orchestra (rumored to contain Mannie Klein), but no Ellington bandsman are to be found on camera or on the soundtrack.



During the Duke's visit to Hollywood in December (he opened at Sebastian's Cotton Club on December 23), Mills had Duke's band do some test recordings for his new company. Besides the Duke, Irving Mills recorded tests of Dude Skiles And His Vine Street Boys, (Larry Lee) and The Five Jones Boys, and Ben Pollack's Band. These tests were in the L-0300 series and the B-4300 series. Specifically, the recordings all took place between December 17th through the 21st and were all later released (with one exception) on both Master and Variety. One orchestra title by the Duke ("Black Butterfly") was held and released on Brunswick 8044 in late September-early October of 1937. A medley of piano solos by Duke ("Mood Indigo/ Solitude" and

"Sophisticated Lady/In A Sentimental Mood" - four titles, two to a side), two titles under Rex Stewart's name, plus four titles under Barney Bigard's nominal leadership were released on Master (Duke only) and Variety (Stewart and Bigard). The matrix numbers all have that exotic West Coast script (see illustration) which also shows up on other Hollywood recordings pressed by the ARC/Vocalion plant in Los Angeles.

One of the titles recorded and later released by the Ben Pollack Band got the following review of its live performance in the January 1937 issue of *Tempo* (by Hal Holly, who caught the band at the Blue Room):  "...Much interested in Benny's (Pollack) account of how their new number, "Peckin", came into being ... It grew out of a number they played for a trio of entertainers while at the Cotton Club and was originally called "Buckin"..... The band had to follow the trio in a lot of ad lib business and gradually worked up a series of licks that sounded so good that at rehearsal they worked them up into an arrangement, and gave it a new title "Peckin"..... It was one of the test disks recorded for the new Mills company and may turn out to be another "Christopher Columbus"."

Mills returned to New York after the first of the year with these tests under his arm and the initial organization of his new sojourn under way. By mid-January, he had worked a deal out with Herbert Yates of the American Record Company (distributors of Columbia, Brunswick, and Vocalion). "Under the terms of the agreement, Mills will remain as managing director of the newly formed organization, which will bear the title of Master Records, Inc., and will release under two labels, Master Records at 75 cents and Variety Records at 35 cents." Mills was at the helm, Yates had a personal financial interest, and Helen Oakley was in charge of securing talent and arranging much of the day to day business (this, according to Marshall Stearns, *Tempo*, May, 1937).

In addition to the bands that he had under contract for Mills Artists, Inc., Irving Mills would have access to the large pool of talent from Consolidated Radio Artists (CRA), which was also controlled by Yates. One hand seemingly washed another here as some of the tunes found in musicals produced by Republic Films (and owned by Yates) would show up on Mills' new labels. This contract was not able to be finalized until a mutual booking arrangement had been agreed upon. This ultimately took place on January 11, 1937 as announced in *Variety* magazine in the January 13, 1937 issue. CRA would be in charge of all dance date bookings, while Mills would be responsible for recordings and theater dates. "New studios have been constructed, equipped and furnished at 1776 Broadway." (*Tempo*, March, 1937 issue). Mills' new concern would be a direct competitor of ARC, but ARC would benefit by pressing the recordings and being responsible for their distribution (a fact that would contribute heavily to the demise of the Master and Variety labels).



The record masters that Mills brought back from the coast were a start. Meanwhile, Miss Oakley had been very busy lining up talent and scheduling recording sessions - utilizing

the new studios to record the bands of Jack Denny, Mario Braggiotti, Barney Rapp, Emery Deutsch, and Jan Savitt - as well as "several hot and novelty combinations, represented by Raymond Scott, Jimmy Mundy, Frankie Newton, (and) Casper Reardon." (*Tempo*, March, 1937) The first recordings made in the new studios took place on February 11, by the Mills Blue Rhythm Band. Four titles were recorded: "Blue Rhythm Fantasy" (matrix M-1), "Prelude To A Stomp" (matrix M-2), "Rhythm Jam" (matrix M-3), and "Jungle Madness" (matrix M-4). Oddly enough, according to the ledger sheets, the second studio session was recorded on February 15, with the next assigned matrix number being M105 ("Yonkel Doodle Goes Shippin'" by Jan Savitt's Orchestra). Matrix numbers M-5 through M-104 seem to not have been allocated.

"The first release of Master and Variety records is scheduled for April 1st. There will be nearly 200 items in the new catalogue by this date, according to Mills." (ibid.) As of March 31, 1937, a total of 245 titles had been recorded and lay ready for issue (M-345 and M-346 were recorded by Dolly Dawn and Her Dawn Patrol on March 31). Although the goal of 200 records was certainly an aggressive one, in reality by the end of May a total of 85 records were released (55 on Variety, and 30 on Master).

The Master catalogue seems to have concentrated more on "new" or ultra-modern types of jazz music from bands such as the Hudson-DeLange Orchestra, Casper Reardon and his Orchestra, the Raymond Scott Quintet, Mills' Swingphonic Orchestra, Cali and Gottuso (wonderful guitar duets), and others. Duke Ellington was responsible for seven issues including the aforementioned set of Duke's piano solos. The full orchestra only recorded for Master. According to Helen Oakley-Dance: "Master was his (Irving Mills) major concern. It featured the full Ellington Orchestra, which is what Irving wanted to showcase. I was given carte blanche with the Variety label. I could record pretty much what I wanted." Some of these sessions included dates under the names of Duke's star sidemen. Mills issued 27 titles (14 records) on his Variety label which were led by Barney Bigard, Johnny Hodges, Rex Stewart, Cootie Williams, and even Ivie Anderson. Hodges' initial recording date for Mills (recorded on May 20, 1937) is an oddity in that it was not recorded at Mills' studio, but at ARC's New York studios and evidently sold to Mills. This is the only instance I could find where non-Master studio recordings were used on a Master or Variety issue. The Ellington small group recordings made Duke himself very happy, as he was delighted that his sidemen could be given top billing on a record label, according to Oakley-Dance. The Duke and his men were fond of the small group settings, as was Helen. Ultimately, under her guidance, the Variety label would offer an abundance of small group swing masterpieces - something she was determined to exploit. With regard to the Ellington and Ellington small group sessions, Helen noted that, by union rules, she was required to be present at all Ellington recording sessions or face being fined (what a harsh job!)

Mills was very busy making ready for the public debut of his record labels. Besides building up an arsenal of recordings, he arranged two promotional feats that must have been sensational to have witnessed. With the aid of Helen Oakley, whose experience in organizing events for the Chicago Rhythm Club had been so successful, Mills arranged a housewarming party for his new studios on Friday, March 12, 1937. About 500 people from the music publishing business and the recording and entertainment industry were in attendance. Duke Ellington's band was present, doubtless among other bands from the Mills' coterie. Then, with the help of Marshall Stearns, John Hammond, Milt Gabler, Helen Oakley, plus *Life* magazine, Irving Mills enlisted the New York Hot Club to put on an all-star jam session at his new Master record studios on Sunday afternoon, March 14. Over 400 people crammed into the studios to listen to some of the finest jazz talent probably ever assembled in this type of venue.

The program (which, according to Helen Oakley-Dance, was actually an informally structured free-for-all) began with seven members of the Count Basie band. Photo No. 2 shows the Count, Lester Young (bottom right), Herschel Evans, Buck Clayton, Jo Jones, and Freddy Greene. The seven were then joined by Frankie Newton who "joined in with the boys for several choruses". (*Tempo*, April, 1937).

"Benny Goodman shot over, between shows at the Paramount theater, to jive with (Chick) Webb and (Joe) Bushkin."



Original 1937 caption: "(1)-On a recent Sunday afternoon some 400 persons jammed the studios of the new Master Record Company to attend a jam session sponsored by the N. Y. branch of the United Hot Clubs of America."

(ibid.) My, my, my - what a trio that must have been! After Goodman, Billy Kyle played piano while everyone was setting up for the next group to jam. Kyle was soon joined by Mezz Mezzrow, Frankie Newton, and George Wettling who ".....then gave several minutes of exciting jam, after which Joe Marsala's Chicagoans took the stand for another session of the "Chicago" style of tempology". (ibid.)

According to the reviewer, perhaps the high point of the session came when another trio took the spotlight. This one featured Chick Webb, Artie Shaw, and Duke Ellington. The response to the trio was so overwhelming that Phil Cohen, producer of CBS's Saturday Night Session, booked the three for a broadcast later in April. If you look closely at the photo of the Webb-Shaw-Ellington Trio (Photo No. 5), you can also see bandleader George Hall peering over Shaw's shoulder, saxophonist Teddy McRea standing directly to Helen Oakley's left, and reedman George James just behind McRea.



Original 1937 caption: "(3)-At jam sessions no race line exists. Trumpeter Frank Newton, assisted by two white stars, Drummer Frank Wettling and Clarinetist Milt Mezzrow, provided many a thrilling moment."

(Although un-credited in the *Tempo* magazine article, Charlie Peterson was the photographer for this event). Rex Stewart then took Shaw's place in the trio, and Ella Fitzgerald sang four tunes with their accompaniment. The trio then finished out the certainly all-too-short afternoon of music. The April issue of *Tempo* reviews over 50 titles(!) that were to be released.

The recordings must have hit the record stores pretty much by their target date of April 1. In Marshall Stearns' record review columns, he states that he receives pre-release test pressings from Irving Mills to critique. "With the rest of the music business trying to make up its mind on the commercial value of swing, shrewd Irving Mills, who never pretended that he was going into the recording business for fun, literally 'went to town' on a large portion of his first month's waxings". (ibid.) The Master label's first issue was MA-101

by Duke Ellington and his Famous Orchestra: "I've Got To Be A Rug Cutter" coupled with "The New East St. Louis Toodle-Oo". Variety began at Variety 501 by Cab Calloway and his Orchestra: "Swing, Swing, Swing" backed with "That Man Is Here Again".



Original 1937 caption: "(5) Three of the few bandleaders who could perform at the jam session: Chick Webb (drums). Artie Shaw (clarinet), Duke Ellington (piano). To the right of Shaw are Irving Mills, Writer Helen Oakley, Milt Gabler (kneeling)."

At the beginning of the *Tempo* review, an interesting discographical note is made: "*Tempo* thanks Master Records, Inc., for cooperation extended in securing personnels of recording groups. Information contained in (the) following article will be of future aid to reviewers and collectors." (ibid.) In many cases, the personnel are listed with the particular records. These all match the personnel listed in *Rust*, with the slight exception to the March 17, 1937 Red McKenzie date where Jonah Jones is listed as the trumpet player. All the other players (Stoneburn, Rollini, McGrath, Hnida, McDonough, and Sydell) are definites (not questionable, as listed in *Rust*). Interestingly enough, George Hnida is not listed in the *Tempo* review. However, aurally he is indeed there. This personnel was correctly listed on Merrit (LP) No.



Original 1937 caption: "(2)-A combination of ace swingsters consisting of Count Basie and members of his band opened the program, setting a pace that inspired succeeding performers to extend themselves to the limit."



Original 1937 caption: "(4)-George Wettling stays at the drums as members of Joe Marsala's Chicagoans take the spotlight. Left to right: Wettling, Eddie Condon, Marsala, Joe Bushkin."



Original 1937 caption: "(6)-And the session was concluded by a trio comprised of Rex Stewart of the Ellington band, Ellington and Chick Webb. So ended the most notable informal swing concert to date. (See story, Page 1 of news section.)"

8 which contains the recording "Bugle Call Rag" made by the same group (minus McKenzie) under Rollini's name but never issued. "Singin' The Blues" from the same date has yet to be found and/or issued.

After the first month of releases, Marshall Stearns picked his top two hot records of the month as coming from the Master studios. The number one pick was "Stompy Jones" and "Caravan" by Barney Bigard's Orchestra on Variety 515, and "Minuet In Jazz" and "Twilight In Turkey" by the Raymond Scott Quintet on Master 108.

By the end of May, with 85 records already released, Mills was very happy with the early success of his venture. He was quoted as saying: "On receiving the first sales report, it was more than gratifying to learn that the total sales went much beyond expectations. In the best selling groups it was still more surprising to find that new names, who recorded new musical material on a new record label, spurred into favorites with record patrons, as in the cases of Raymond Scott, Barney Bigard, Cootie Williams, Billy Kyle, Midge Williams, Rex Stewart, Frank Newton, Jan Savitt, and Cappy Barra". (*Tempo*, June, 1937) In overall sales, the top five bands were (1) Duke Ellington, (2) the Hudson-DeLange Orchestra, (3) the Raymond Scott Quintet, (4) Mario Braggiotti's Orchestra, and (5) Cappy Barra's Swing (Harmonica) Ensemble.

While Mills' records were making an impressive entry into the American record market, Mills himself planned a trip to London to arrange for foreign distribution. "With the American recording industry still trying to catch its breath over the sudden and outstanding success of the new disc company, Master Records, Inc., Master's managing director Irving Mills embarked for England on June 23 via the S.S. Queen Mary to invade the foreign market by establishing his own company in London for the purpose of distributing Master and Variety records throughout the continent. Mills' surprise decision to enter the foreign market as an independent producer and distributor was undoubtedly influenced by the rapid success and unexpected selling power of Master and Variety labels in the U.S." (*Tempo*, July, 1937)

It seems that at the same time Mills was headed for Europe, another promotional feat under his direction was taking place. In late June, a film short (running time 5:15 minutes) was made entitled: "RECORD MAKING WITH DUKE ELLINGTON AND HIS ORCHESTRA". As reported in *Melody News* from July:

"Paramount Pictures Makes Movie Short in Master Studios"

"Last month, a crew of cameramen, electricians and technicians from the Paramount film company set up their paraphernalia in the

recording studios of Master Records, Inc. for the purpose of gathering "location" scenes for a movie short, now in production, showing how phonograph records are produced and manufactured. Duke Ellington and his orchestra was employed for the studio scenes, with Ivie Anderson doing the vocals."

Only a few minutes of the Ellington band is shown. The film opens with the Ellington band off-screen playing "Oh, Babe! Maybe Someday" and the announcer talking about the recording process, while a shellac disc is spinning on a turntable. The record stops, and we see an oversize Variety label with the word "Variety" in very large print. The issue number is Variety 7667, but in reality "Oh, Babe! Maybe Someday" was issued on Brunswick 7667. (Tommy Tompkins and His Orchestra had already recorded "Oh Babe! Maybe Someday" on February 18, 1937 and was released on Variety 610). The whole image should have caught the theatergoers' attention, and brought some attractive publicity to the Variety label. Alas, by the time the film was released in early September 1937, the decision to discontinue both the Variety and Master labels had already been made - more about that in a moment.

The announcer then tells the audience that they will see the Duke Ellington Orchestra during an actual recording session, and then the film fades from the label to the Ellington band rehearsing in the Master studios. Scenes of the band playing are interspersed with scenes from the Bridgeport, Connecticut plant showing lacquer cutting and trimming, master plating, and the actual pressing of shellac discs. It really is a fascinating look at what it took to make an actual record, and one of the few documentaries we have of this entire process.

It seems that Irving Mills left New York with the best of intentions and a certain amount of hope. Having arranged for the "Ellington Makes A Record" film while he was away, it seems clear that this novelty film was meant to catch the public's attention and help boost sales. Perhaps even the Variety label seen in the film was one that would have been made for European consumption, and the film was to have seen release overseas to herald Mills' new venture on the continent. However, the trip was a failure. Mills would have arrived back in the States by probably mid- to late July. There was enough recorded material to have been released in his absence. The recording ledgers show that the Master studios were in constant use. By the end of June 1937, 440 titles had been recorded (M-539-1 and M-540-1 were recorded by Billy Hicks and His Sizzling Six on June 24, 1937). But Mills returned with no solid hope of expanding his distribution in the overseas market. Stanley Dance conjectured that, knowing Irving Mills, "...he (Irving) probably pressured for release of the entire catalogue as opposed to selected performances..." (as was the case with ARC's agreement with the English Vocalion swing series). There was a lot of vocal material on both Master and Variety - much of which is non-descript. This "all or nothing at all" attitude is perhaps what led to the impasses Irving found while abroad. Because of this, virtually no Master or Variety recordings were issued overseas until they were first reissued by ARC on Brunswick or Vocalion after both the Master and Variety labels had been discontinued.

Unexpectedly, and without apparent notice to the music press, Mills stopped releasing recordings on the Master label as of July 16, 1937. Recordings on the Variety label continued to be released on a regular basis, however. By September 30, Frank Daily's Orchestra had recorded on matrix M-668, but almost the entire month of October would go by without any recording activity whatsoever. In the October 1937 issue of *Tempo*, Marshall Stearns writes a cryptic note: "Mills Music, Please Note: By some unfortunate circumstance, Master and Variety platters didn't arrive this month. They will be reviewed when and if they are received." Unfortunately, by October 15, the last Variety was released.

Perhaps John Hammond's insightful commentary in the November 1937 issue of *Downbeat* gives us the best perception of what really happened:

"A new record venture actually requires an enormous amount of capital, as well as recording originality, an aggressive sales force, and a couple of really big artists appealing both to the retail and automatic nickel phonograph trade. Mills was forced to depend on the sales organization of the American-Brunswick-Columbia combination for sales, which was having a difficult enough time selling its own competing Brunswick and Vocalion lines in a field where there is unheard of competition already from the two RCA-Victor and the highly potent Decca products. Outside of the Raymond Scott unit, Mills introduced no new bands to the trade with sufficient originality to appeal to record buyers, and of his own artists only Duke Ellington has much of a record following and Duke's is so expensive a band that it is often difficult to clear expenses with him on discs."

"It was the failure to find an outlet in Europe for the records that caused the abandonment of the project. But

although it is Irving's prestige that is the main sufferer, it is Herbert J. Yates, the big boss of Consolidated Film and the American Record Company whose pocket book was most severely damaged, for his companies paid the artists on Variety and Master. I suspect that in the long run he did not fare too badly, however, for the factories in Bridgeport and Los Angeles did all the pressing of the records, and at a good fee."

By October 22, an agreement had been finalized between Mills and ARC to pull all the Variety and Master labels from the market. Although the formal transition was to take place on November 1, 1937, many of the items in the Variety catalogue were re-released on the 35 cent Vocalion label starting on October 25, while some of the Master material would start to be released on the 75 cent Brunswick label beginning November 13. To differentiate the recordings originating from the Master studios, the credit line 'Produced by Master Records, Inc.' would be printed on both the Vocalion and Brunswick issues. With the re-introduction of the Columbia label in September of 1939 (and the eventual phase out of the Brunswick label) this credit line would also appear on the appropriate Columbia issues. The Master label, having had a much shorter existence, issued about 40 recordings. Variety, on the other hand, issued about 170 records.

Although the Master and Variety labels were discontinued, Master Records, Inc. remained very active. Helen Oakley's duties remained intact, and she continued to arrange and produce recording sessions for Mills - now for release on ARC products. New recordings done after November 1 by the Master studios were released on both the Vocalion and Brunswick labels. The "M" matrix series in place from the beginning of the New York recordings and was used until the March 2, 1939 recording session of Dolly Dawn and Her Dawn Patrol (matrixes M-988 and M-989). Starting with the March 8, 1939 session by Duke Ellington, the prefix "W" was added (i.e. WM-990 and WM-991). According to the recording files, this matrix series was then used until WM-1150 (by the Adrian Rollini Trio) and discontinued.

Master Records, Inc. produced marvelous recordings which included some of the best jazz artists of the day. These included: Billy Kyle, Wilber de Paris, Harry Edison, Charlie Shavers, Tab Smith, Jimmy Mundy, Edmond Hall, Sidney Bechet, Pete Brown, Cecil Scott, Frankie Newton, Cozy Cole, Omer Simeon, Trummy Young, Chick Webb, Walter Fuller, Johnny Williams, Phil Napoleon, Red Nichols, Charlie Spivak, Joe Marsala, Marty Marsala, Jack Jenney, Babe Russin, Eddie Condon, Claude Thornhill, George Brunis, Jimmy Lytell, Artie Bernstein, Chauncey Morehouse, George Wettling, Frank Froeba, Art Shapiro, Sandy Williams, Bernard Addison, Hot Lips Page, Horace Henderson, Lawrence Lucie, Israel Crosby, Chu Berry, Irving Randolph, Keg Johnson, Milt Hinton, Henry Goodwin, Joe Garland, Johnny Mintz, Jonah Jones, Joe Bushkin, Danny Alvin, Harry James, Irving Fazola, Glenn Miller, Freddie Slack, Dave Matthews, and the orchestras of Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Charlie Barnet, among others. The recordings by Bechet with Noble Sissle's Orchestra catch the master at his prime, and catch the Bechet during a period where he was not much-recorded. The Frankie Newton Uptown Serenaders titles are extraordinary - featuring the sorely underrated trumpeter at his finest. The Johnny Williams Swing Sextette and the Chauncey Morehouse Swing Six titles are all exhilarating not to mention the Dude Skiles Hollywood recordings. These performances are absolute classics. Chick Webb's small group (combining some of his bandsmen with that of the Ellington orchestra) named "Gotham Stompers" are a beautiful blend of the talents from both organizations and the date (recorded March 25, 1937) probably arose from Mills' debut party held a week and a half prior. Likewise, the Jimmy Mundy date showcases the arrangers' talents in a small group setting with members from Earl Hines' band substituting Billy Kyle for Fatha Hines, and Chick Webb taking the drum chair. Other aggregations, such as Jesse Stone's Orchestra, Joe Sodja's Swingtette, Billy Hicks and His Sizzling Six, Joe Horse and The Milkmen all made one set of fine recordings and then no more (although Stone recorded in the 20s and then later in the 40s and 50s). It is indeed fortunate that the Mills' studios preserved a portion of the New York jazz scene of this era. It was truly an exciting time for jazz music - a combination of great musicians and wonderful tunes with the opportunity to get together and record in an encouraging atmosphere.

In looking at the recording files, some extremely interesting titles never made it to issue. These include: "Memphis Blues" and "My Melancholy Baby" by Willard Robison's Deep River Orch.; "Farewell Blues" by Lew White's Orch.; "Dinah" by Ray Bloch's Orch.; "The Juba" and "Shine" by Rose Marie and Her Orch. (who was in this band?); "Jammin'" and "The Vamp" by Mitchell Ayres' Fashions In Music; "Margie"/"Mary

Lou"/"Bright Eyes" by The Community Swing Band (again, who the heck was in this band?); "Clarinet Marmalade" and "Tiger Rag" by Stan Meyers' Swing Trio; "Lullaby To A Lamp Post" (M-591 - Frankie Newton - Trumpet Solo") by Charlie Barnet's Orch.; "Bagpipe Stomp" and "Adam's Apple" by Buck Ram and Orch.; and "Public Melody No. 1" and "Sizzling Man" by Rudy Bundy Orch., among others.

In retrospect, it is hard to believe that such a rich selection of music on a set of labels which showed such promise and originality could have arisen and fallen within such a short period of time. Although Master Records, Inc. continued to record artists until 1940, the diversity shown during the first 9 months in business was replaced with a more conservative choice of artists and venues - not taking any big risks that might provide a huge hit, but not losing a lot of money for "bombs", either. Considering how the labels were received, one would think that some semblance of longevity might have been insured. However, from the vantage point of hindsight, the music business and popular tastes were changing at dizzying speeds. The Number One record for a given month could be by Duke Ellington, then the next month show Sammy Kaye in the top slot. To be sure, the "Ickys" had their say in popular music. Even the reviews of some of the Duke Ellington small group recordings (as an example) ranged from high praise to bewilderment. We can look back at these recordings and find little fault with any of them. However, the listening public had so much material available to them on record, as well as what was to be found in live music and on the radio, that it probably was easy to dismiss a lot of material as just something novel. It seems to have always been the recording industry's hopes that a novelty would turn into a trend and provide a string of hits. Irving Mills had this in the Raymond Scott Quintet. But alas, one trend does not a successful record label make.

Fortunately, many of the bands featured on Variety continued to record for Master Records and were released on Vocalion and Brunswick. The Ellington Band and small group recordings continued to provide steady sales. Duke's Orchestra recorded 90 titles for Master Records before switching to Victor in March of 1940. This number does not include the small group recordings. Johnny Hodges alone recorded over 40 titles under his name - which says something about his popularity! Cab Calloway's Orchestra also stayed affiliated with Mills' studios, and recorded 56 more titles after moving from Variety to Vocalion.

As for the material released during the short nine month existence for both labels, the recordings selected by Irving Mills and Helen Oakley allow us a wonderful glance at some of the finest jazz musicians of the period. I daresay that without Mills foresight and Oakley's sense for quality talent, some great music would have been lost. Make no mistake about it - this was a commercial business venture. All sorts of bands were recorded - some of which were pretty abysmal. Master Records Inc. was trying to satisfy a wide variety of tastes with its product. In looking through the old music magazines from the period, I am constantly amazed in the topsy turvy rankings of top records for a given month. One month the charts may be dominated by good hot jazz recordings. The next month might be dominated by sweet band recordings.

For the jazz fan, however, it was fortunate indeed that Mills' recording concern brought so many musicians from different

bands together to record in an informal or "natural" manner. A lot of the musicians who recorded were between bands, filling in at club dates, or just doing radio work at the time. Without the benefit of especially the Variety label, this would have probably been a period of recording void for a number of the musicians who appear on these discs. Although short-lived, Irving Mills' record label provided a musically rewarding glimpse into one of the most inspiring periods of American music and into the bristling jazz scene that was so much a part of the popular music of the day.

If you are interested in copies of the matrix listing (M-1 to M1150), please send \$7.50 for addresses inside the U.S. or \$13.50 for addresses outside the U.S. to: Jim Prohaska, 1479 Rockway Ave., Lakewood, Ohio 44107. The listing is approximately 50 pages in length and lists 1.) the matrix number and take(s) recorded, 2.) the date of the recording, 3.) song title, and 4.) artist.



REFERENCES

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