



Dec.08 Cover - The Tragar/Note Story

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Too Beautiful To Be Gone New Compilation Uncovers Atlanta's Lost Soul

From the perspective of an ATL that rules the 21st century R&B and hip hop charts, it seems odd that no '60s era soul label thrived in a civil rights center like the City Too Busy To Hate. Just don't blame Jesse Jones for not laying it all on the line.

The helmsman for the Tragar and Note labels pumped out at least 40 sides between 1968 and 1978. At best, they made regional ripples and eventually landed in dusty obscurity. That is, until Atlanta DJ Brian Poust – creator of georgiasoul.com – discovered the labels and, with help from Chicago's Numero Group, compiled them into a double-CD set, the most recent release in Numero's Eccentric Soul series.

This first stab at exploring Atlanta's most prolific soul label exposes not only the songs – the 32 pages of mice-type liner notes detail a neglected history about struggling to score a hit record in a recording scene that required the infrastructure be built from the ground up. The comp also raises questions about why a homegrown soul scene didn't take hold in a city known for its viable black business community as well as for its tolerance toward civil rights.

"I'm very gratified that this compilation is out because it tells the truth about Jesse Jones and what I did in the record industry in Atlanta," offers Jones from his home in Los Angeles.

In 1948 the Tragar founder started out in the business touring with Jimmy Witherspoon. During the '50s he was the sax man in the Royal Peacock's house band. Hot stuff in a small pond, the native Atlantan trekked out to L.A. where he enjoyed only mixed success but gleaned an education in the record biz after working with both Specialty and Ebb Records. Upon his return to Atlanta in 1967, he saw a gap in the music scene and started a record company that he named after his wife Tracey and oldest son Gary.

Already the city was a choice stop for name acts as well as for chitlin circuit regulars. Over on Sweet Auburn the Ponciana Club and the Royal Peacock were packing 'em in. Later the Magnolia Room and then the Palladium joined the fray, all featuring headliners like Ray Charles, Hank Ballard, Sam Cooke, Jackie Wilson and Bettye LaVette. During Atlanta's remarkably peaceful civil rights movement, the black community not only supported its own nightclubs but also hotels, insurance companies, newspapers, banks, and radio stations. The community was separate and self-sufficient. Despite no traditional black music scene, Jones saw no reason why Atlanta couldn't support a soul label. His optimism wasn't enough to steer Tragar and later Note into scoring more than a regional hit during their ten years of operation.



"I kind of introduced and pioneered the record business in Atlanta," Jones supposes. "When I came back in '67 there wasn't any record business in town period. There was only a few small labels at that time," but not because of any lack of talent around town.

"Word had gone around that this guy from Los Angeles had opened up a record company, and he's looking for artists. I had people just running to my doors!" Jones marvels.

With very few exceptions, nearly all of the talent hailed from Georgia except for Mississippi's Tokay Lewis, whom Jones had known back in L.A., and Lonnie Russ, whose recording doesn't appear on the Numero comp. Despite getting "airplay like crazy" on black stations WAOK and WERD, nothing sold. The stresses of being a one-man operation with too little dough to fund tours beyond the state borders eventually undermined Jones' determination. Under the cloud of financial ruin and suspicions of cheating his unpaid artists, he and his family split for L.A. to start a new life.

After slipping into obscurity, record collector and DJ Brian Poust discovered the label during his hunts through junk shops and flea markets. Around 2001 his inquiries led him to Tragar artist Tee Fletcher, who Poust said was floored by the attention.

"I was the first person who cared about Tragar and Jesse Jones," says Poust. Knowing he held a sizable chunk of esoterica, he hooked up with Rob Sevier from Chicago's Numero Group label, with whom he co-wrote the comp's liner notes.

When the serious research kicked into high gear, Poust and Fletcher had assumed Jones had passed away, but Hal Lamar, a longtime Atlanta radio jock now with WCLK, handed Poust a recent recording by Jones himself, a CD called *Saxually Romantic*. It was Sevier who first approached Jones.

"I was shocked [anyone] wanted to put out a compilation!" Jones says. "It really is gratifying because like I say, it has turned a lot of people's heads around. I was shocked with what they came up with. They didn't get it from me. They researched and found it."

"Nothing's been written on this before," Poust says. When asked why Tragar's worth reissuing, he explains, "The number of releases is certainly a factor, but it's also the quality of the stuff, too. A lot of them are extremely good considering the tiny budget."



In 1967 Jones situated his offices in the West End at 799 Hunter St. (now Martin Luther King Jr. Dr.) Flanked by the historically black colleges Morris Brown, Morehouse, Spelman and Clark, he banked on the cultural hub of Black Atlanta to provide talent, but he'd have to stop the flight of musicians to cities like New York or Los Angeles or even regional black music capitols like New Orleans and Memphis for their big break.



"Going back to the '50s, the musicians from Atlanta left," explains Poust. "They knew there wasn't anything going on for them except for the nightclub scene. They went elsewhere. There just wasn't much opportunity." Georgians like Otis Redding went to Stax in Memphis, Little Richard recorded for RCA, James Brown to King in Cincinnati.

"For some reason, as big as the African-American population was in Atlanta was even then, no one ever put any money into getting a record label started," says Poust. That truth often restricted Jones to scratching the bottom of the barrel for funds to promote his releases.

"We never had a major hit record because we could never promote it," Jones says. "I didn't have the finances to venture out into Texas or Florida. I couldn't afford it. We'd go out for a Saturday night, for a Friday night, 100 miles out of town to Columbus or Macon or Augusta, then be back in town the next day.

"We worked the chitlin circuit on door percentages, very few or no guarantees of money." Transportation, food, and lodging expenses ate up the gig money. "Not much left over for the artists," he laments.



"One of the things I really like about Tragar and Note," Poust points out, "was that Jesse was the guy [in Atlanta] who took a chance and used local talent."

Tragar's biggest celeb was the former fourth Pip Langston George. In the '50s he played in the Overalls who backed up the Mighty Hannibal, himself the subject of a compilation out on Norton Records. Han split for greener pastures in New York, and George joined the Pips in '61 and saw much of the country during the year he toured with Gladys Knight. With more music in his system, he teamed up with Charles French in 1968 to record the local hit "Let's Get Funky" under the moniker Langston and French.

Eula Cooper's arrival to Tragar was more in keeping with how Jones scored talent. The 14-year-old was trying on clothes in the clothing store below the Hunter St. offices when the shop keeper suggested she visit the record label upstairs. Jones was impressed with the girl's spunky good pipes, and to this day calls her "a natural singer." She ran home to get her mother's permission, and the teenager would end up making eight 45s, by far the most of any artist who recorded for Tragar and Note. She even laid down two sides for the very short-lived Super Sound label between the Tragar and Note imprints.

None of the other artists ever recorded more than two records for Jones, but every recording session had to pulled together from scratch. "They didn't use the same studio for every record," Poust explains. "They didn't use the same musicians as the backing band for each singer. There's a lot of random pieces that went into it."

It wasn't that Atlanta lacked a music business infrastructure. It was just that Bill Lowery dominated the Atlanta music biz with his publishing company Bill Lowery Music, Master Sound Studios, his NRC label, as well as his record pressing plant. His operation simply wasn't investing money in R&B and soul, and neither was anybody else. Of course, if anybody else had ponied up, it was likely they'd also have to pony up for at least one of Lowery's services, eating into the bottom line.

"Bill Lowery wasn't interested in those little black artists on Auburn Avenue," Jones maintains. "I never felt prejudice in Atlanta, but it was definitely a separated city. I had a white friend who used to come down to the clubs down there on Sweet Auburn, but it was brazen! They had a lot of nerve!"

Not being able to tap into something like the Lowery recording empire meant that each session was set up from scratch and involved its own set of logistical issues. On top of that, the invariably tight budget and thus tight studio time made each record a challenge to pull together. Those weekday recording expenses saddled with Jones' weekend outlay for each excursion out into the woods to some dirt-floor stop on the chitlin circuit whittled down what money he could pay his artists. They began to suspect he was cheating them, in particular, the family of Eula Cooper.

"They turned suspicious of me," Jones says, "thinking that I was taking money from her, because that was what every record company was doing back then to black artists. She was out there on that chitlin circuit...and didn't make any money, out there giving her heart and *trying* to make money, *trying* to make a hit record, but she didn't. It's only now that Eula's realizing that I didn't make any money in Atlanta. That was what Brian and them asked, why did I keep going when I never had a seller. I was just determined to keep going. I lost three homes doing my record business. I moved back to [Los Angeles] with no money, lived in [my wife's] sister's backyard in a trailer until we could rent a home."



The liner notes in the CD have also gone a long way toward healing an old rift between Jones and his favored singer.

"They [Poust and Sevier] are writing the truth! I think when Eula read that..." Jones pauses. "Eula's actually apologized to me after seeing what was written."

"He was a musician," Poust says about Jones, "not a businessman. He tried..."

When time came to locate the Tragar and Note artists for the reissue, turned out Cooper was also the hardest to track down, with nothing but a phone number in a 20-year-old address book. They found her, alright. She recently performed her first ever show in New York City at the Five Spot Soul Food Supper Club, presented by Dig Deeper. "What she's making Saturday night in New York," Jones laughs, "is more money than she made in our whole years of recording in Atlanta!"



Poust also credits the longtime radio DJ Hal Lamar with helping him discover Sonia Ross and her plaintive ballad "Let Me Be Free." "I don't know if [Lamar] has a sense for my appreciation for the role he played in this. Without him, we wouldn't have turned up Sonia Ross." Her copy of the 45 was the only one known to exist.

They have yet to find some of the musicians from the Tragar and Note rosters – Frankie and Robert, Sandy Gaye, Francine Thomas. That last gap is a real loss. Thomas's beachy deep soul track "Too Beautiful To Be Good" is one of the strongest tracks on the comp.

As esoteric as Tragar and Note appear, nothing else in Atlanta even approached their 40 releases. Hunter and Hunton, which shared owners, put out nine singles in 1961-62, one of which the first 45 by Gladys Knight and the Pips, "Every Beat of My Heart." Quadran – started by a grant from the Butler St. YMCA to encourage entrepreneurship among high school students – only racked up two releases in 1970. Other labels coughed up one release before they were never heard from again.

Although the liner notes are chock full of details, they are curiously devoid of analysis. Perhaps it's another case of that common gaff to mistake information for insight, but considering that these liners were cobbled from primary sources like conversations after tedious searches sifting through high school yearbooks, volumes of the *Atlanta Daily World*, and other such ephemera, perhaps this collection functions best as a jumping off point for more research into why Atlanta's black community shelled out to feed a hopping nightclub scene but didn't spend their dollars on the local record label.

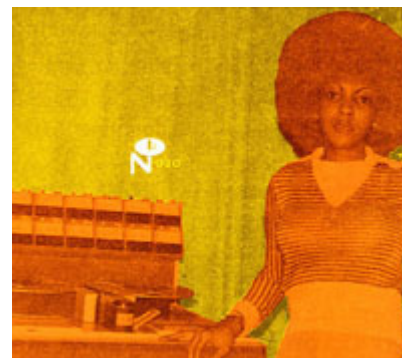
"It's a bit of a mystery to me. There was no shortage of African-American entrepreneurs," Poust says, referring to possible investors. "Seems to me like the civil rights movement could've fed the music industry, and the music industry could've fed them at the same time."

As proud as Poust is of pulling together this collection of these two largely unknown soul labels, he admits, "There's a piece of me upset because people in Atlanta, by and large, don't seem to care. I'd expected it to pique the interest of more people locally than it has."

"But at the same time, it's been a really exciting project to work on. To finally have the CD in my hands... *That* still brings out a lot of really good feelings."

For Jones, the reissue is a signal of better things to come. He only dabbled in the record business after his return to L.A., earning a living making ceramics with his wife. Nowadays he records himself on sax, although he has spoken about another shot at recording Cooper.

The optimism bred by the comp is contagious among the old players. As Hal Lamar wrote to Jones, "Maybe now you're going to get the recognition you should've gotten 30 years ago." Says an emotional Jones, "Maybe so. I hope so. I paid a big price... a – a *big* price!"



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