

# Nate McCoy and Sotoplay Records

BY STEVE PROPES

The independent West Coast label, Sotoplay Records has fascinated record collectors for many years. An amalgam of straight blues and vocal group recordings, some of the label's issues are fairly common, but others are hard to find and impossibly rare! Like many other labels its release schedule was haphazard. Trying to make sense of the history of the label, Steve Propes interviewed Sotoplay's founder Nate McCoy last year.



Nate McCoy, courtesy Steve Propes.

**N**athaniel McCoy was born in Jacksonville, Florida on 28th March, 1935, where he attended Gilbert High School. He told me: "I had two sisters, Betty and Carolyn. I was shining shoes, and a guy said 'I'm going to teach you how to cut hair,' and I got chance to take the test at age fifteen. I was the youngest barber in Jacksonville. It seemed like I got a girl pregnant, so I said: 'I'm out of here.' I joined the Navy at age nineteen, when I went to boot camp in San Diego, I was next to the highest guy in charge in training camp. I stayed at Mira Mar for two years, then we left there aboard the Hornet, an aircraft carrier."

While assigned to the Hornet, Nate created The Hornets vocal group: "They were Charles Patterson, who might have become Willie Pollard, plus Charles McKeever, John Richardson, Bryant, Murray, bass. I was on the flight deck. All of us were on the flight deck. Bryant was a Marine on the ship. We were the ones who removed the blocks from the airplanes and got them ready to fly off. One guy had a yellow uniform and another one had a blue uniform, depending on the individual task. I spent two years on the Mira Mar and two years on the Hornet."

The Hornets' 'Crying Over You' and 'Tango Moon' were recorded at Austin McCoy's (no relation) studios in South Los Angeles: "I let Flash Records hear it and they liked it, that's what happened. Part of the Hornets became the Note Makers. Willie Pollard was lead of Hornets when they did 'Crying Over You', Murray (either first or last name) was on 'Crying Over You'. I remember disc jockey Hunter Hancock playing 'Tango Moon' and saying: 'I don't know how it got there'."

In 1958, after I left the Navy, I lived in Los Angeles then went home to Jacksonville for three months, before returning to LA, where I lived until 1963. I worked at Ameron Steel in Downey, then I moved to Fontana where I was in steel until 1972, then in board and care. I left Fontana about eight years ago and went to Beaumont. My wife was sick, then she passed. I was working at a nursing home. I had two board and care homes for awhile.

In the mid 1950s I was kind of trying to do a little singing, writing and stuff, and producing The Raindrops. They consisted of Henry Houston, Johnny Butler, Raymond Davidson, Moses Walker, Elroy Coleman (who apparently also recorded for John Dolphin as The Sunrisers, though nothing was ever released). I cut the songs 'Behold A Dream' and 'Soft Soft Lips' under that name. I carried it to Dolphin and he flipped over it. He wanted writer's credit, I wouldn't go for it, so he didn't release it.

Nick Thierry and I got together, I wrote songs but I didn't get any money. Nick Thierry owned the Spin-It label, and I did most of their writing and stuff. When I got out of the service, I went back to Jacksonville. The Heartburners lived in Jacksonville. The first thing I did on my own label was 'Honey Baby Darling' and 'Twinkle Twackle



George Smith circa 1970s. Photo from the B&R Archives.





Label shots courtesy of Victor Pearlín and Steve Propes.

'Twickle', by The Heartburners on SotoPlay Records." Nate has no recollection of why he chose that name for his label or why he started the numbering system at 005! "SotoPlay is something that came to me, it was more or less a record label. 'Honey Baby Darling' was done when I was working with The Raindrops. I got with a dee-jay and played that stuff. We made a recording of it down there, then we sent it back to California and put music on it."

Another McCoy group was The Webs: "Basically they were interchangeable with The Raindrops. The Webs and The Note Makers did the same song, 'Do I Have A Chance'. The Webs brought in George Smith to blow harmonica on 'Do I Have A Chance', on the other side The Webs were The Note Makers, with a saxophone."

The next act Nate recorded was The Cousins: "Joe Pinkney and Marvin Murphy. The Cousins was a black group." On 'Twickle Twackle Twickle' they sounded like a bad variation of the Everly Brothers meet Travis and Bob: "They were out of Los Angeles where I met them. They did a song called 'The Picture Was Crying'. They pressed up a bunch of records on it, but they had that black thing and white sound. On The Cousins, I did 'Run Spot Run' and 'The Picture Was Crying'. John Gus pressed up 5,000 from the jump on another label. I turned it over to John Gus and let him do it, but he couldn't get the Cousins to go. Then it went into Record Merchandising, but they didn't market it. Any time, anything was out there, I thought I could sound like anybody. I would do stuff and I would lease the master to different people, and they would use the record label. Basically, I ran the label out of LA, while I was living on 135 E. 35th St. More. I would just press up some records, carry them to Record Merchandising, maybe 100 or so and see if something happened. The distributor wouldn't get behind the stuff. I used two or three pressing plants. I couldn't sell it if it wasn't played."

I didn't go by no rules. We done a thing where I leased some records over to John Gus, in Gardena. He had done a lot of pressing for me, it was more or less his idea - he had orders and stuff. He just did the blues stuff - George Smith and Big Mama Thornton - but none of the group stuff. When George Smith went to Europe, he found our records all over Europe. I also leased stuff to Record Merchandising. They leased Willie Mae Thornton's 'Yes I Cried', 'Summertime', 'The Truth' and 'Mercy' to Record Merchandising. Gus leased about or four or five George Smith (as George Allen) records, including two which he considered his best releases 'Sometimes You Win' and 'Times May Be Hard'.

George Smith was one of the greatest harmonica players in the world. My first record with George would be 'Times Won't Be Hard'. Jimmy Nolen was on break, and he said 'I want to do some things.' They played and played it on KGFJ, but I don't know if they got it out in the stores. It was a pick hit on the station; he hid that under the name of George Allen. I told him: 'don't use no more names but your own,' from then on, we would use George Smith. Might have picked the Allen up from some Allen Car Dealership."

At this point, McCoy gave the group sound one more shot: "Randy was in the Style Kings. I know that the Style Kings, Henry Houston was leader of The Raindrops, and he also sang with the Style Kings, they recorded under the name of the Cuff Links on Dootone, but they was the Raindrops. Moe Walker was also in the Style Kings and the Raindrops."

While in the midst of his blues period, Nate released an oddball group number, credited to The Raindrops, the title was 'I Still Love You', which owed a debt to 'I Found A Love' by the Falcons.

"Through George Smith, I hooked up with Big Mama Thornton. They was tight, and I was a writer and a lot of people thought I was a good writer. Big Mama said: 'I'll let you write for me.' She was the greatest blues singer ever and I got along with her great. She'd tell people: 'This is my song writer'" Nate says with some pride, "but I don't know how much she drank totally."

Nate recalled that 'The Clap Around', by George and Gene, was written by Henry Houston and that other guy, the singer, who later became Round Robin was George Nair, he was likely the 'George' in the duet.

Of the Jimmy Thomas disc, Nate said: "I wrote 'Pocket Change' for Jimmy Thomas. I was out there in the field with George and heard him sing, he had a B.B. King sound, I said I have a 'Pocket Change' song for you, Jimmy."

Around 1966, McCoy founded the Carolyn label, named after his sister, with George Smith being the only artist to appear on the label.

**As always any comments, additions or corrections to this feature and the label listing are very welcome. Thanks to Darryl Stolper and Jerry Diez for their help.**



Label shots courtesy of Victor Pearlín and Chris Bentley



# SOTOPLAY AND CAROLYN LABEL LISTING



Nate McCoy courtesy Steve Propes.

## SOTOPLAY RECORDS

- |   |      |
|---|------|
| <b>005 Heartburners</b><br>Honey Baby Darling/ Twickle, Twackle, Twickle  | 1958 |
| <b>006 The Webs</b><br>Do I Have A Chance/ Let Me Take You Home   | 1958 |
| <b>007 The Note Makers</b><br>It Hurts To Wonder/ Do I Have A Chance  | 1958 |
| <b>007 The Cousins</b><br>Twickle, Twackle, Twickle/ Where the Green Grass Grows  | 1958 |
| <b>0010 George Smith (as George Allen)</b><br>Times Won't Be Hard Always*/ Tight Dress<br><i>NB: * Also issued on Sotoplay 0031</i> | 1960 |
| <b>0011 The Style Kings</b><br>Under The Tropical Sky/ Kissing Behind The Moon  | 1961 |
| <b>0012 George Allen</b><br>Loose Screws/ The Will To Go On   |      |
| <b>0014 The Style Kings</b><br>Never Happen/ House Party  | 1962 |
| <b>0018 George And Gene</b><br>Teenage Love/ Clap Around  |      |
| <b>0018/ 9 George Allen</b><br>Until You Come Home/ I Want A Woman  | 1961 |
| <b>0019/ 20 Ronnie Dru</b><br>Start Of a New Love/ Never Ever To Die  |      |
| <b>0021/ 22 George Allen</b><br>Sometimes You Win When You Lose/ Come On Home   |      |
| <b>0023/ 24 George Smith with The Jimmy Nolen Band</b><br>Rope That Twist/ You Can't Undo What's Been Done                          |      |

**0025/ 26 Jimmy Thomas**  
Pocket Change/ Everyday (I Wake Up Crying)

**00027/ 28 The Raindrops**  
I Still Love You/ ?

**0029/ 30 George Smith and His Harmonica**  
West Helena Blues/ Go Ahead On Woman  
*NB: Also issued on J&M 001/ 2*

**0031 George Allen with The Jimmy Nolen Band**  
I Must Be Crazy/ Times Won't Be Hard Always 1965

**0033/ 34 Willie Mae Thornton**  
Summertime/ The Truth'll Come To The Light

**0039 Willie Mae Thornton**  
Tomcat/ Monkey In The Barn (not by Thornton)

**0050 Willie Mae Thornton**  
Yes I Cried/Mercy 1965

**0051 George Smith**  
Brown Mule / Good Things 1966

## CAROLYN

**1420 George Smith**  
As Long As I Live/Nobody Knows 1957

**005 George Smith**  
Blowing The Blues/ Yes Baby 1966  
*NB: With Jimmy Nolen on 'Yes Baby'. Another Carolyn 005 may also have been issued with 'The Avalon Boogie' replacing 'Yes Baby'.*

**005 Little Willie Pollard**  
The City/ If Ever We Meet Again

**006 Willie Mae Thornton**  
Mercy/ Yes I Cried

**007 George Smith**  
Trap Meat/ I Must Be Crazy 1966

**600 George Smith**  
Summertime/The Avalon Boogaloo 1966  
*NB: Nat McCoy also says he recorded a disc called 'Soul' on Dobre.*

This label listing has been compiled from various sources including Steve Propes, 'Blues Records', discographical information from 'Blowing The Blues' El Segundo CD and information from John Broven, Chris Bentley, Bob McGrath's 'R&B Indies' and Opal Louis Nations.



Label shots courtesy of Victor Pearlman and Chris Bentley