

Art Rupe, Who Brought Rhythm and Blues to the Mainstream, Dies at 104

As the founder of the independent label Specialty Records, he helped set the table for the rock 'n' roll era by signing performers like Little Richard.

By William Grimes

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Art Rupe, the founder of Specialty Records, an innovative independent label based in Los Angeles that brought rhythm and blues into the mainstream and helped set the table for the rock 'n' roll era with singers like Little Richard and Lloyd Price, died on Friday at his home in Santa Barbara, Calif. He was 104.

His death was announced by his daughter, Beverly Rupe Schwarz.

Mr. Rupe created Specialty in 1946 with a niche audience in mind (hence the name). The major labels of the time, focused on mass-market pop hits, ignored the urbanized, blues-based music that appealed to Black audiences in the big cities. Mr. Rupe hoped to capitalize on this oversight by showcasing acts with “a big-band sound expressed in a churchy way,” as he put it to Arnold Shaw, the author of “Honkers and Shouters: The Golden Years of Rhythm and Blues” (1978).

In the late 1940s and early '50s, artists like Roy Milton, Percy Mayfield and Joe Liggins consistently put Specialty in the Top 10 of what were known as the “race record” charts until Billboard magazine began using the term “rhythm and blues” in 1949. In 1952, on a scouting trip to New Orleans, Mr. Rupe recorded Lloyd Price, then 19, singing his own composition, “Lawdy Miss Clawdy.” That record, which featured Fats Domino on piano, became the top-selling R&B record of the year and broke through to white listeners, too.



Mr. Rupe hit one of rock 'n' roll's mother lodes when he signed Richard Penniman, known professionally as Little Richard, on the strength of a scratchy audition tape. Specialty

Three years later, Mr. Rupe hit one of rock 'n' roll's mother lodes when he signed Richard Penniman, known professionally as Little Richard, on the strength of a scratchy audition tape. During a lunch break at a recording session in New Orleans, Little Richard sat down at the piano and shouted out a risqué song he used in his nightclub act: "Tutti Frutti." With hastily rewritten lyrics, the song became one of rock's early classics, and the first in a string of Little Richard hits that included "Long Tall Sally," "Slippin' and Slidin'," "Rip It Up," "Lucille," "Keep a-Knockin'" and "Good Golly, Miss Molly."

"Art Rupe had a tremendous impact on rock 'n' roll," said John Broven, the author of "Record Makers and Breakers" (2009), a history of early rock 'n' roll's independent record producers. "'Lawdy Miss Clawdy' was really the first record to cross over and reach a teenage white audience, and then came Little Richard with 'Tutti-Frutti' and 'Long Tall Sally.' These were monumental records that almost created rock 'n' roll in themselves."

Art Rupe was born Arthur Newton Goldberg on Sept. 5, 1917, in Greensburg, Pa., a suburb of Pittsburgh, and grew up in nearby McKeesport, where his father, David, was a salesman at a secondhand furniture store and his mother, Anna, was a music lover. After attending Virginia Polytechnic Institute and Miami University in Ohio, he moved to Los Angeles in 1939.

He enrolled in business courses at U.C.L.A. with the idea of entering the film business; he also changed his last name to Rupe after being told by a relative that it had been the family's original surname in Europe. After World War II broke out, he worked at a local shipyard on an engineering crew that tested Liberty ships.

The movie business, he found, was tough to enter, and he shifted his attention to the recording industry. Responding to a newspaper ad, he invested \$2,500 in a new label, Atlas Records, which lost most of his money and failed to produce hits by its two main artists, Nat King Cole and Frankie Laine.



Roy Milton and His Solid Senders in a publicity photo. Mr. Milton, standing, a jump-blues singer, recorded numerous Top 10 R&B hits for Specialty. Courtesy of Colin Escott

After selling his interest in Atlas for \$600, Mr. Rupe created his own company, Juke Box Records, in 1944. “I called it Juke Box because the jukebox was the medium then for plugging records,” he told Arnold Shaw. “If you got a record into the boxes, it was tantamount to getting it on the top stations today.”

Mr. Rupe was methodical. He bought \$200 worth of race records and, stopwatch in hand, began analyzing musical structure, tempo and even titles to identify the common characteristics of the best-selling releases. Since the word “boogie” appeared in a disproportionate number of hit songs, Juke Box’s first record, an instrumental by the Sepia Tones, was given the title “Boogie No. 1.” It sold a more than respectable 70,000 copies, and Mr. Rupe was on his way.

The jump-blues singer Roy Milton and his band, the Solid Senders, gave Juke Box its first big hit: “R.M. Blues,” released in 1945, which was said to have sold a million copies. Mr. Milton went on to record nearly 20 Top 10 R&B hits after following Mr. Rupe to Specialty, which he founded the next year after breaking with his Juke Box partners.

In 1950 the pianist and bandleader Joe Liggins gave Specialty its first No. 1 hit, “Pink Champagne,” which became the top-selling R&B record of the year. Percy Mayfield, a singer and songwriter with a relaxed, swinging style who would later contribute “Hit the Road, Jack” and other songs to Ray Charles’s repertoire, topped the charts a year later with “Please Send Me Someone to Love.” Guitar Slim gave the label yet another No. 1 hit in 1954 with “The Things That I Used to Do,” one of the earliest records to put the electric guitar front and center.

“Specialty was a little like the Blue Note label in jazz,” said the singer and music historian Billy Vera, who produced “The Specialty Story,” a boxed set of the label’s best sides released in 1994, and wrote “Rip It Up: The Specialty Records Story,” published in 2019. “Art was dollar conscious, but he did not let that stop him from going into the better studios and taking the time to rehearse. He took great pride and care to make quality records with quality musicians.”

Specialty exerted a powerful influence on the British invasion bands of the 1960s, and even its second-tier acts had a ripple effect. Larry Williams, a New Orleans singer groomed by Specialty to fill the void when Little Richard left the music business in 1957, had solid hits with “Short Fat Fannie” and “Bony Moronie,” but even his lesser singles made an impression overseas. His single “She Said Yeah” was covered by the Rolling Stones and the Animals. The Beatles recorded three of his songs: “Bad Boy,” “Dizzy Miss Lizzy” and “Slow Down.” Don and Dewey, another Specialty act, never had a hit, but their sound greatly influenced the Righteous Brothers and Sam and Dave.

Mr. Rupe, a longtime fan of gospel music, quickly made Specialty’s gospel division an industry leader, signing the Pilgrim Travelers, the Swan Silvertones, Alex Bradford, Brother Joe May and Sister Wynona Carr. Two of the label’s most famous gospel groups generated crossover stars for other labels: Sam Cooke became a pop star after leaving the Soul Stirrers, as did Lou Rawls, who recorded with the Chosen Gospel Singers.

Mr. Cooke was the one that got away. In 1956, he recorded a pop tune, “Lovable,” produced by Specialty’s Bumps Blackwell with a lush background chorus and released with the singer’s name thinly disguised as Dale Cook. Mr. Rupe disliked the smooth pop treatment and let Mr. Blackwell and Mr. Cooke leave the label with the other recordings from that session in hand. One song, “You Send Me,” became a chart-topping hit and ignited Mr. Cooke’s remarkable career.

“In all candor, I did not think ‘You Send Me’ was that great,” Mr. Rupe told an interviewer for the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2011. “I never dreamed it would be a multimillion seller.”

Mr. Rupe in 2019. He sold Specialty’s catalog in 1990 and created the Arthur N. Rupe Foundation in 1991.
Rauh Jewish Archives, Heinz History Center

By 1960, Mr. Rupe was growing disenchanted with the record business, particularly with the widespread system of payola, which required record companies to pay off disc jockeys and distributors to get their records heard.

Increasingly, he let assistants like Harold Battiste, in New Orleans, and Sonny Bono, in Los Angeles, produce and market the label's records. In 1990, he sold Specialty's catalog to Fantasy Records.

While still at Specialty, Mr. Rupe invested successfully in oil and real estate and started his own oil company. In 1991 he created the Arthur N. Rupe Foundation, whose stated goals include "achieving positive social change by shining the light of truth on critical and controversial issues" and providing support for caregivers of people with dementia.

In addition to his daughter — from the second of his three marriages, to Lee Apostoleris, which ended in divorce — Mr. Rupe is survived by a granddaughter; a step-grandson; and two step-great-granddaughters. His third wife, Dorothy Rupe, and three siblings died before him.

In 2011, the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame gave Mr. Rupe the Ahmet Ertegun Award for Lifetime Achievement, an honor given to record-company executives.

"When I got into the business, few white people fooled around with this kind of music," Mr. Rupe told Arnold Shaw. "I had no idea that it would ever appeal to so many white people."