

Recording Industry - Part 3: Independent Labels Find Success ^[1]

Recording Industry

by Michael L. Wells, 2006

See also: [Bluegrass Music](#) ^[2]; [Blues](#) ^[3]; [Country Music](#) ^[4]; [Gospel Music](#) ^[5]; [Old-Time String Band Music](#) ^[6]; [Rock Music](#) ^[7].

[Recording Industry - Part 1: Introduction](#) ^[8]; [Recording Industry - Part 2: North Carolina Recording Pioneers](#) ^[9]; [Recording Industry - Part 3: Independent Labels Find Success](#); [Recording Industry - Part 4: Record Production since the 1970s](#) ^[10]; [Recording Industry - Part 5: References](#) ^[11]

Independent Labels Find Success

[World War II](#) ^[12] and the 1940s brought many changes to the recording industry. Early in 1942 the government restricted the use of shellac needed for 78 rpm record production. That July J. C. Petrillo, president of the [American Federation of Musicians](#) ^[13], announced a ban on all recording and closed down the studios for two years. The major labels, after resuming recording activities, gave up the field trips and temporary recording locations and concentrated their work in three major cities: New York, Los Angeles, and Nashville. Their lack of interest in regional musical styles opened the door for independent record production, which began in North Carolina in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The rural [string band](#) ^[6] tradition underwent some changes in the 1940s with the development of [bluegrass music](#) ^[2] by Bill Monroe and his original Blue Grass Boys band. This style of music, as well as the older string band styles, gained popularity in certain regions of North Carolina. Blue Ridge Records, run by Drusilla Adams of North Wilkesboro, was an early independent label to feature this style of acoustic music in the state. The label recorded its acts locally, on several occasions using the facilities at [radio](#) ^[14] station [WPAQ](#) ^[15] in Mount Airy. "[Missing in Action](#)" ^[16] by "Smilin" Jim Eanes was a big seller for Blue Ridge Records, reportedly moving over 400,000 units.

Colonial Records of Chapel Hill was undoubtedly the most successful of the independent record companies in North Carolina. Its owner, Orville Campbell, kept the label in business from 1948 to 1965, releasing a wide variety of recordings from bluegrass and [country](#) ^[4] to pop, novelty, comedy, [folk](#) ^[17], and early [rock 'n' roll](#) ^[7]. Colonial launched the careers of several personalities who later prospered in the entertainment field, including [Andy Griffith](#) ^[18], [John D. Loudermilk](#) ^[19], [George Hamilton IV](#) ^[20], and Billy "Crash" Craddock. As with Blue Ridge Records, Colonial usually recorded its acts locally using existing facilities after school hours—in this case, the recording lab of the [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#) ^[21] (UNC) located in Swain Hall.

Most of the early Colonial releases were novelty affairs, including a version of "Wabash Cannonball" by renowned ex-pitcher-sports announcer Dizzy Dean. In 1953 Campbell produced a live recording by "Deacon" Andy Griffith, a down-home comedy monologue titled "[What It Was Was Football](#)" ^[22]. This release by the then-unknown North Carolina high school teacher became so popular that Campbell could not distribute the record properly, so he sold the master to [Capitol Records](#) ^[23] in Los Angeles. Wisely, he kept the publishing rights to the performance, thus exposing Griffith to national prominence and gaining wealth for his own small recording operation. Colonial continued to make records covering a wide variety of musical styles until 1965, but it never regained the success it had enjoyed during the mid- to late 1950s.

A similar North Carolina label was Brooke Records from Asheboro. Brooke, like Colonial, presented a variety of musical styles—including pop, country, and rock 'n' roll—and shared the same recording facilities on the UNC campus. "[I Don't Know What It Is](#)" ^[24] by the Bluenotes (who also recorded on Colonial) became popular regionally and gained some national exposure through a deal with a midwestern distributor.

Renown Records based out of [Durham](#) ^[25] seems to have been a vehicle for artists associated with Jim Thornton from [Johnston County](#) ^[26]. Thornton was a colorful country music performer and businessman whose musical career began in the 1940s when he performed with the Johnston County Ramblers over radio station [WPTF](#) ^[27] in Raleigh. His late-night TV program *Saturday Night Country Style* reached many viewers and featured Thornton, usually barefooted and dressed in overalls, with local country music guests. The most successful Renown releases, however, were by Wayne Handy, a rock 'n' roller who performed both up-tempo numbers and Elvis-type ballads. His initial single, "[Say Yeah](#)" ^[28], was popular regionally, but subsequent records ("[Betcha Didn't Know](#)" ^[29] and "[Seminole Rock 'n' Roll](#)" ^[30]) gained national exposure after they were leased to the more established Trend label after showing signs of promise locally. Handy was last heard on the Parkway label out of Philadelphia, which brought the world "The Twist" by Chubby Checker.

With the increased number of recording studios in North Carolina in the 1960s, the average performer had greater opportunities to have a record released. A practice that seemed to flourish was the manufacture of custom releases in which the musician paid for studio time and record production expenses to secure copies for self-distribution. Many gospel acts, country groups, and fledgling rock bands chose this route, with the Arthur Smith studios in [Charlotte](#) ^[31] providing guidance for independent record production. Many groups found a manager who was willing to assist with

investments and promotion through established connections in the

entertainment field. The most affordable form was 45 rpm singles, but custom long-playing albums were seen more frequently and were produced by acts with a larger budget.

Beach music and its attendant shag dancing [32] was long a staple of North Carolina culture. This good-time, horn-driven dance music, based on 1950s black rhythm and blues, developed a regional cult following with the Carolina beaches as a focal point. The Embers, the premier North Carolina beach band, began its career in the 1960s. Its early releases were produced by Jimmy Capps, a popular Raleigh disc jockey who operated his own JCP record label. The band later switched to self-production, scoring big in 1979 with "I Love Beach Music [33]" (Ripete EEE 1001)-regarded by many as the anthem of the beach music scene. In 1968 the O'Kaysions of Kenly recorded a single at the Pitt Sound studio in Greenville that reached the national top ten that year after being sold to ABC Paramount Records in New York. "Girl Watcher [34]" brought national attention to the Carolina beach sound and reportedly sold over a million copies. Other regional best sellers included "Hey I Know You [35]" by the Monzas, "If I Didn't Have a Dime [36]" by Bob Collins and the Fabulous Five, "Summertime's Calling Me [37]" by the Catalinas, and "Myrtle Beach Days [38]" by the Fantastic Shakers. Doug Clark and the Hot Nuts gained a reputation on college campuses along the East Coast with their racy fraternity house shows featuring adults-only humor. The group ran its own label, Gross Records, out of Chapel Hill, recording six albums during the 1960s. Unlike most other North Carolina beach bands, the Hot Nuts was an all-black unit that performed for mainly white audiences.

Keep reading >>Recording Industry - Part 4: Record Production since the 1970s[10]  [10]

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"*I'm A Girl Watcher*" *The O'Kaysons* 1960s. YouTube video, 2:39, posted by lucyhuto, December 3, 2006, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=raJWuz7qQVc> [34].

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