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JAMES M. SALEM

Death and the Rhythm-and-Bluesman: The Life and Recordings of Johnny Ace

Two months after Emmett Till's murder outraged black America, and less than three weeks before Rosa Parks's arrest on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus insured that Civil Rights and Martin Luther King would become household words, the music industry was so abuzz over the sudden commercial success of "rhythm and blues" (black music in black styles by black performers for a black audience—the "forerunner" of rock and roll) that *Billboard* declared 1955 "the year rhythm and blues virtually took over the pop field." In spite of cover versions by "top pop artists, more and more original versions of tunes by [r&b] artists are making it in all markets," *Billboard* observed, citing Fats Domino's "Ain't That a Shame," Joe Turner's "Shake, Rattle and Roll," and the current recordings of Etta James ("Wallflower"), LaVern Baker ("Tweedlee Dee"), and "every release" of Ray Charles. The Drifters were "First Vocal Group" and Chuck Berry ("Maybellene") "Most Promising Newer Artist." But the *big* award of the year, the one for "Most Played" r&b artist of 1955, went to Johnny Ace, a performer who has been nearly forgotten, in part because death had already ended his career. While Ace's "Pledging My Love" ("Forever my darling") was the "Most Played" r&b record of the year, *Billboard* found it puzzling that his Duke recordings would "continue to sell after his tragic accident."²

During 1954–55 two figures in the world of American entertainment died young and violently, only to gain posthumous fame greater than they had enjoyed during their lives. First Johnny Ace (1929–54) died

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in a game of Russian roulette; six months later James Dean (1931–55) was killed in a sports-car crash. The adult world seemed to be puzzled by such events. Staid and conservative *Ebony* waited almost seven months to do a feature on “The Strange Case of Johnny Ace,” under the slug line “Little known blues singer becomes nationwide record star after death.”³ But over the next thirty-five years living fast and dying young was not a deterrent to gross receipts.

In the transitional period of 1954–55, after which rock and roll would emerge from rhythm and blues, the death of Johnny Ace and the crossover success of his posthumous hit “Pledging My Love” was a harbinger of the change that was about to revolutionize popular music in America. The emerging audience for popular records differed from the previous audience in two significant ways: it was an adolescent audience, and it demanded a specific musical performance of a song—a unique and distinctive performance against which all subsequent performances would be ruthlessly judged. Johnny Ace’s “Pledging My Love,” was a leader in this trend: for the first time in the postwar era record buyers chose a ballad by a solo black male singer signed to an independent label as *the definitive performance*.⁴

Ace’s career represents a unique opportunity for the music historian. His output of twenty-one recorded sides is limited enough to analyze (see Appendix), his career of two and one-half years is short enough to chronicle, and his experience as a singer/songwriter signed to a black-owned, independent r&b label provides insight into the exploitation of black artists of the period. And as a musician associated with the first phase of the Memphis synthesis (a style Charles Keil in 1966 called “the foundation of today’s urban blues”⁵), Ace is ideally positioned to be the prism through which the extraordinary and radical shift in American popular music taste may be observed: Johnny Ace died a rhythm and blues star but was resurrected as a rock and roll legend. As a result of this transmutation, his music has been ignored and his life trivialized. Indeed, most accounts of his career are so flawed that they seem to be merely excuses to romanticize and sensationalize his death.⁶

Johnny Ace was born John Marshall Alexander, Jr., on June 9, 1929, in Memphis, Tennessee, the sixth child in a family of eleven children, ten of whom survived childhood. He was born at home. His family always called him “John Junior.” His father, John M. Alexander, a Baptist minister, was a commuting pastor for two churches in nearby Arkansas: Macedonia Baptist in Lansing and Mt. Zion Baptist in Parkin.⁷ Ace’s mother, Leslie Alexander, was well-respected in her community. The family house, at 899 Fisher Street (now called Ferry Court) still stands, in a part of town known as South Memphis. Published accounts of Ace’s childhood in the more economically depressed Binghampton area

of Memphis are inaccurate. While the Alexanders may have been poor, they certainly did not live in poverty; the father's professional status made the Alexanders, according to the Memphis photographer Ernest Withers, a "substance family."⁸

Ace's family was a large, extended family (both of Leslie Alexander's parents once lived at 899 Fisher), characterized by John, Jr.'s sister Norma Williams as "a devout Christian home." His maternal grandmother and his mother were members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, his grandfather belonged to the Church of Christ, and his father was a Baptist. Since Rev. Alexander had to commute to Arkansas in a model T Ford that couldn't carry the whole family, the children attended the Methodist church with their mother and grandmother. Leslie Alexander sang in the choir, as did John, Jr. The Alexander family, in fact, was the "backbone of the church." Ace's funeral in 1955 at Clayborn Temple African Methodist Episcopal Church in Memphis was certainly an appropriate place for his last rites (it was not symbolic of any feud with his Baptist father).⁹

John, Jr., and the other Alexander children attended LaRose Grammar School, where they received a strong, fundamental education. "Johnny Ace was a pretty good schoolboy," Ernest Withers says. "Literacy was his greater advantage over the rest of the boys [in the Memphis blues scene]."¹⁰ He was also a natural musician. There was always a piano at home, says his sister, "and he just had this raw talent—he just started when he was a small child, playing, he picked it up by ear." When the parents were home, the piano was used to play church hymns and Christian songs exclusively, but on the first of every month when Leslie Alexander left the children alone to go to town, "the house would be rockin' because we would really let our hair down and Johnny would be playing the blues. He couldn't do that when [our parents] were there."

At Booker T. Washington High School, John, Jr.'s musical talent was recognized by Nat D. Williams, a social science teacher and also something of a Memphis legend. Williams wrote a newspaper column, directed the festivities at the Cotton Jubilee, and emceed the Palace Theater Amateur Nights. After the war he was "Nat D.," the south's first "publicly promoted black man on the air as a disc jockey," heard on the all-black sound of Memphis station WDIA.¹¹ As Ace's sister remembers:

And because [John, Jr.] was the child that had all of this raw talent, he was not only gifted with the ear of playing music but he composed, he was a composer, and he was an artist—when the school noticed he had this gift of playing, Nat D. Williams talked with my mother, wanting to get him enrolled in music, and she

tried, but he didn't finish the first grade in music. He didn't want to study music; he just wanted to play. After she tried, and he didn't do anything with the music teacher, then Mr. Williams told her about his ability as an artist. He said, "He's an average child, but he's gifted, and when we're looking for him in science, he's somewhere in the music room playing the piano or he's over in the art building, drawing." So she sent off for this art course, but he wasn't interested in that. She ordered this course in the mail and he never completed the first lesson.

Nor did Ace complete high school: he dropped out of the eleventh grade to join the navy. "But the navy couldn't keep up with him," Norma Williams recalls. "They would look for him, and he would be in a small town somewhere, in a tavern or in one of those night spots playing." On several occasions, military police came to the Alexander household thinking that the family knew where he was. His navy service was brief (members of the family remember it in terms of weeks, not years), ending in an undesirable or dishonorable discharge in 1947. Accounts of Ace serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II are in error.¹² So is the story, reported by *Ebony*, of Ace serving on a Mississippi chain gang after the navy: no one in the Alexander family ever heard this tale, people involved in his musical career either in Memphis or Houston never heard it, nor did Lois Jean Palmer, whom Ace married on July 17, 1950.

Jean Alexander, the widow of Johnny Ace, met the singer when she was a ninth grader at Booker T. Washington High School and he was out of school and out of the navy. "He was at school," she says, "messing around with all the young girls, and he should have been working somewhere instead of messing with the young girls."¹³ He was fun, and shy, and "he was nice." At the time of the courtship, Johnny was "in and out" but not really living at home. Favorite places for the couple were the Ace Theater, the neighborhood movie theater at the corner of Walker and Mississippi streets, and the juke joint next door to it. According to Jean, Johnny's parents did not know they were dating until she got pregnant. The couple drove across the Mississippi River to get married in Arkansas, where they were not required to wait for the results of a blood test. John was twenty-one; Jean was only sixteen. As she remembers, he was wearing "wild clothes" and singing down on Beale Street at this time, but was not yet in a band. The groom, who had apparently never had a regular job in his life, moved his bride into the crowded Alexander home.

Their son Glenn was born in 1950 and a daughter, Janet, in 1952. By 1952 Ace had left his wife and was alienated from his family. Even before her second pregnancy, Jean realized he was never going to be

a husband. "But I loved him," she says. "He was our prodigal son," explains his sister Norma.

Leslie Alexander was the parent most "hurt" by Johnny's choice of a career as singer of secular music. Especially troublesome for her was his connection with rhythm and blues. She raised not only moral and religious objections to this music but class objections as well. Even Julian Bond, a member of a much later generation, remembers the extent to which r&b "was looked down on. It was low-class music, it was wild music, it was sexual music, it was 'dirty' music. So far as we were concerned, it was the most glamorous life in the world."¹⁴ "Our father was understanding because he was a man of the cloth," says Norma Williams. "But all mother would say is, 'He strayed from his training. I brought them up in the church—in the church choir—and he just drifted on out there in the world.'" It was the minister-father who defended Johnny (according to the family he defended everybody), who maintained that God had a job for John, Jr., a calling for him. Leslie Alexander was the strict parent with the children, some of whom believed at the time that they had "hung so much on the cross" that they would never go to church again if they "ever got grown." This attitude was especially true of the male children. Johnny and his brothers would "do anything to get out from under bondage. But they just drifted out too far," says Norma, "and they didn't come back." The man who lived next door to the Alexanders ("the one who used to tell on us all the time") is said to have observed that "when those boys got up to be adults they had been chained in the back yard so long they just went wild like a dog."

Memphis had been a blues town since the blues began. At the end of World War II, Memphis was a flourishing center of blues activity, second only to Chicago. This was partly because of Beale Street, but also because of station WDIA, which in the summer of 1949 changed its format to all-black music, serving the area's almost 46.9 percent black population, and becoming, finally, the "Mother Station of the Negroes." (By 1954 WDIA claimed to reach ten percent of blacks in America.)¹⁵ The story of B. B. King's "second bid for success in Memphis," told by Charles Sawyer, is a good example of how live music and WDIA airplay were synergistic: King booked his first gig in West Memphis by promising to plug the engagement on WDIA, and he developed a following in the "tri-state area" (Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi) by promoting his radio show wherever he played. His popularity grew, leading to his own radio show and opportunities for personal appearances, some of which required a band to back him up. One of the first Memphis musicians he hired was pianist John Alexander, Jr.¹⁶

The history of King's band, known variously as the Beale Street Blues

Boys, Bee Bee King's Original Band, Bee Bee's Jeebies, or the Beale Streeters, is unclear. In an interview with Arnold Shaw, King recalls that he first performed on WDIA alone, then added the pianist Johnny Ace and the drummer Earl Forest to make a radio trio; later the sax player Billy Duncan made the group a quartet.¹⁷ For live performances in clubs there was apparently no set lineup, only a loose confederation of musicians who came and went. Charles Sawyer posits one explanation for this irregularity: King was so musically crude at the time that many musicians found they were embarrassed to play with him in public.¹⁸

Nick Tosches suggests that by the end of 1949 the lineup included King on guitar, Ace on piano, Robert Calvin Bland ("Bobby 'Blue' Bland") on vocals, and Duncan on tenor sax.¹⁹ No bassist is mentioned in connection with the group, but it is generally agreed that Earl Forest was the regular drummer. Ernestine Mitchell, who with her husband Sunbeam ran the Mitchell Hotel and the Club Domino on Beale Street, remembers Rosco Gordon as a member of King's group (Bobby Bland was Gordon's chauffeur,²⁰ and Peter Grendysa also lists Gordon as one of the "loosely-knit bunch of musicians and singers called the Beale Streeters."²¹ Whatever the regular lineup, Tosches calls the Beale Streeters "the premier band of Memphis throughout 1950 and 1951."²² Ace's sister doesn't believe that Johnny ever got paid for playing music in the Beale Street clubs, but Bland recalls members of the band performing at Sunbeam Mitchell's Club Handy for "five dollars a night and all the chili they could eat,"²³ and Jean Alexander verifies that Johnny got paid for his efforts.

Louis Cantor recalls that WDIA could always count on a musical group that included B. B. King to perform at the popular WDIA Goodwill Revues during this period.²⁴ In November 1951, Kings' aggregation, with John Alexander probably on piano, was billed as Bee Bee's Jeebies, and the band's show "Calling Dr. King" was the hit of that year's Goodwill Revue: "Dr. King cures headaches, heartaches and backaches . . . corns, bunions and onions, give[s] sight to the blind . . . and at last nite's GOODWILL REVUE he was called on to raise the dead. He's the only doctor in the world who carries his pills in a guitar case and who operates wherever he finds the patient . . . Yes, Dr. King cures everything with his now world's famous . . . Bee Bee's Jeebies . . . on WDIA at 1 o'clock Mon. thru Fri."²⁵

While Ace was not yet known as a singer, he did play piano at recording sessions for other bandmembers. On one occasion in 1951, when the Bihari brothers set up a temporary studio at the Memphis YMCA, Ace played behind Rosco Gordon, Bobby Bland, and B. B. King.²⁶ This session is famous for producing King's "Three O'Clock Blues" (RPM 339) and Gordon's "No More Doggin'" (RPM 350). In



Figure 1. The Beale Streeters. Earl Forest (drums), Adolph "Billy" Duncan (sax), Bobby "Blue" Bland (vocals), Johnny Ace (piano) in a promotion photograph taken by Ernest Withers at the WDIA Studios in Memphis in 1951 or 1952. As a backup band for B. B. King this group was called "Bee Bee King's Original Band" or "Bee Bee's Jeebies." It was also known as "Billy Duncan's Band" and "The Beale Street Boys." Photo courtesy of Ernest C. Withers.

addition, Ace put down his first vocal track at this session—a smooth blues ballad, "Midnight Hours Journey," that was not released until 1953, when it was coupled with Earl Forest's "Trouble and Me" (Flair 1015).

B. B. King's "Three O'Clock Blues" hit *Billboard's* r&b record chart late in 1951. In early 1952, after signing a contract with United Artists, King left Memphis and WDIA to tour with the Tiny Bradshaw Band. With King gone, Ace essentially inherited the Beale Streeters band:

At that moment, the piano player, John Alexander, was showing great promise. He had a good voice which, as B. B.'s sideman, he had little opportunity to use, and his good looks left the girls

swooning. It was natural for B. B. to turn the band over to Alexander when he left Memphis for his first big gig in the real urban North at the Washington Howard. John Alexander put the opportunity to good advantage. He made live appearances on WDIA, where program director David James Mattis saw his potential and began promoting him, after coining a new name for him: "Johnny Ace," to suit his obvious glamour.²⁷

David James Mattis, the program director at WDIA and the founder of Duke Records, is the man generally credited with changing John Alexander's name to Johnny Ace and starting him on a recording career. Known in Memphis by his radio name, David James, Mattis claims he not only named the act ("Johnny" for Johnny Ray and "Ace" for the Four Aces) but the backup band as well ("I named them [the Beale Streeters] because I thought it'd look good on the label").²⁸ Ace got his opportunity to perform the vocal on Duke 102, the third release of newly formed Duke Records, through "an absolute accident"—as the result of Bobby Bland's inability to read. Mattis remembers that when he discovered Bland was illiterate and thus unable to learn the lyrics of the songs he was supposed to sing, he became furious, and in order to save the session at the WDIA studio he decided to record Alexander instead.

Alexander had been "diddlin' around" with the Ruth Brown hit "So Long" (Atlantic, 1949), an AABA ballad that sounded so good that Mattis wrote some new lyrics and Ace "faked out the melody." It was a fifteen minute job," Mattis says. "It was beautiful and you couldn't tell what [the original song] was."²⁹ The result, "My Song" (Duke 102, released in June 1952 and registered with BMI as a Mattis/Alexander collaboration), represents one of the few "A" sides for which Alexander would receive songwriter credit. The remainder of his career would pattern more after "Follow the Rule," the "B" side of Duke 102—a shuffle blues with a lyric written by Ace that was not registered for copyright or filed for BMI logging. The production on both sides of Duke 102 is rough, with an amateurish sound featuring drums, tenor sax, and an out-of-tune piano (Arnold Shaw says "it sounded and still sounds like a home recording").³⁰ Yet the record was an immediate hit with the limited audience that had access to it. In his attempt to meet the demand for Duke Records, Mattis learned what all small independent record labels of the period quickly discovered: the way to go broke in the music industry was to have a hit—to sink precious capital into the manufacture and supply of a product wholesaled to a distribution system that never intended to pay for it. "I've got five thousand dollars in this thing now and we're selling records," he told Bill Fitzgerald, "but nobody's paying. Either I'm going to go broke or I've gotta quit."³¹

Mattis went into the record business in the spring of 1952 (approximately the same time that Sam Phillips established Sun Records in Memphis) because there was an abundance of black musical talent in the Memphis area, and some of it was already being successfully exploited by other white recording entrepreneurs. Sam Phillips (Memphis Recording Service) had recorded B. B. King as early as 1950, leasing the masters to RPM, a Los Angeles label owned by Joe, Jules, and Saul Bihari; Phillips had also recorded Howlin' Wolf, Rosco Gordon, and other blues performers for Leonard and Phil Chess in Chicago.³² After a falling-out with Phillips, the Biharis regularly brought their portable Ampex tape machine to Memphis, recording every musician that the talent scout Ike Turner vouched for as commercially worthy, until a fourth Bihari brother, Lester, established Meteor Records in Memphis in 1952.

B. B. King, whom Mattis had first known through his connection with WDIA, had already slipped through Mattis's fingers because Mattis was not yet in the record business. In addition, Mattis had financial obligations. When he suggested the idea of starting a record company to his wife he remembers her saying, "Well, the kids need their teeth straightened, so let's take a shot at it."³³ Although it is believed in Memphis that Mattis "made a fortune out of what those young black kids did" for Duke Records,³⁴ he treated Ace with remarkable generosity. We should remember that the r&b music business in the early fifties was exceptionally primitive, remembered at BMI as an era in which people didn't know "exactly what to do so they did anything they could."³⁵ "There never was an industry," Jerry Wexler, the a&r man at Atlantic Records at the time, asserts. "There was a collection of individual record companies run by individual people with different ethics, different morality, different needs, different greeds."³⁶

The man that Mattis found to bail him out by becoming a partner in Duke Records represented dramatically different needs and different greeds. While Don D. Robey (1903–75) was not the first black man to own his record company, he was a pioneer in the history of black music in America, and he may have been, as Galen Gart and Roy Ames suggest, "the first successful black entrepreneur to emerge in the music business after World War II."³⁷ Robey began his career in Houston as the owner of a string of black nightclubs. At first he merely promoted the black acts that played his clubs; then he founded the Buffalo Booking Agency, booking the black performers in other venues. In 1949 he started Peacock Records (named after his Bronze Peacock nightclub), initially to record Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown. The following year he recorded for the first time in their career the Original Five Blind Boys of Mississippi, and by 1952 he had recorded Floyd Dixon, Willie Mae ("Big Mama") Thornton, Memphis Slim, Marie Adams, the Dixie

Hummingbirds, and dozens of other acts. It was the acquisition of Duke Records, however, that "brought the Houston impresario his first full-fledged recording star in Johnny Ace."³⁸

Mattis controlled Duke Records for less than three months before Irving Marcus, the Peacock Records promotion man, arranged his partnership with Don Robey. Robey was interested in the whole Memphis scene³⁹ (he too believed that B. B. King, a client of his Buffalo Booking Agency, had slipped through his fingers), but the property that interested Robey most was Johnny Ace and his first single record "My Song" (Duke 102). Despite Mattis's belief that "Don Robey was a black man who didn't understand his people's music,"⁴⁰ it is clear that Robey, as a businessman, knew exactly what he was doing when he acquired the Duke masters and artist roster. Johnny Otis, whose band had produced several hits for Peacock Records, and who was to become the producer of most Ace sides, remembers the "charm" of "My Song" when Robey played it for him, probably in July 1952. "When I heard it I told [Robey] 'God, that's nice.' And he said 'I'm buying it, and I'm gonna put it out.'"⁴¹

The first thing Robey did was arrange for a full-page ad in *Billboard* announcing "Peacock Proudly Introduces Duke Records," and prominently featuring Ace's release ("Johnny Ace With the New Blues Sound").⁴² Within a week, Robey's connections, money, and music business expertise had promoted "My Song" into *Billboard's* top ten r&b records in stores, where it remained for twenty weeks, with nine weeks at number one.⁴³ In addition, Robey moved the entire Duke operation from Memphis to Houston (there were no more Memphis recording sessions), and apparently cut Mattis completely out of the action. In November 1952, when Mattis decided to exercise what he understood to be a legitimate partnership agreement with Robey, Robey pulled a gun out of his drawer. "He had no idea of what's right," Mattis says. "The only thing he could do was pull a big automatic pistol out and slam it on his desk. I settled with Robey for the whole share of [Duke Records] for ten thousand dollars, and I had about seven in it. He had about a couple hundred thousand on the books."⁴⁴

Meanwhile, Robey bought Ace some new clothes, and exploited him nationally—carefully cultivating the polished, uptown image that Berry Gordy would emulate at Motown. "When he came out here, he had an old pasteboard suitcase with a few sport shirts in it. I sent him to a tailor. In a week, he was sharp. I knew the value of the boy, even then," Robey told *Ebony*.⁴⁵ Robey's idea of signing the talent, cutting the records, copyrighting the songs, and then booking the recording artists in venues all over America made his overall operation (Duke/Peacock/Lion Publishing/Buffalo Booking) "the South's largest recording and talent enterprise of its kind."⁴⁶ Nelson George argues that

the geographical remoteness of Robey's organization was probably an asset.⁴⁷

We should remember that Don Robey was in the rhythm and blues business before it was called "Rhythm & Blues." The first records he produced for Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown (had they charted) would have been listed by *Billboard* as "Race Records"; *Billboard* didn't use the term "Rhythm & Blues" until June 1949. Moreover, the field of black popular music in black styles for a black audience was a widely diversified one, including country blues, jump bands, blues shouters, jazz, vocal groups, torch singers, novelty songs, and crooners. Though r&b is usually thought of as loud, up-tempo music, a tradition of commercially successful soft ballad singers (generally piano players as well) was almost twenty-five years old by 1952, established by LeRoy Carr (1905–35), "the father," according to Arnold Shaw, of the "murmuring, gentle *vibrato* ballad style."⁴⁸

Cecil Gant (1913–52), the "G.I. Sing-Sation," continued Carr's ballad style into the 1940s, becoming famous for "I Wonder" (Gilt Edge, 1944), a sad ballad sung by a soldier worrying about who his sweetheart is sleeping with back home. "I Wonder" was so successful crossing over to the pop market, according to Arnold Shaw, that it "promoted the rapid rise of small record companies on the west coast" and made Gant the first of the "Sepia Sinatras."⁴⁹ If Gant was the first, then Nat "King" Cole was surely the most successful, accounting for his career as an r&b act until his full emergence into pop music in 1948.

Charlie Gillett credits Nat Cole (1917–65) with helping originate the "club singing style," which he believes was not part of black musical tradition (Cole's race was "irrelevant to his style") but rather a development resulting from wartime racial mixing in California night-clubs.⁵⁰ Cole's music "embodied the sophistication and street-smart savoir faire that was burgeoning close to both sides of the tracks in New York and Los Angeles," says Nick Tosches. "Cole was the link between the old and the new, the dungarees and the sharkskin britches."⁵¹ When Cole left Los Angeles for a national audience, his place was taken by Charles Brown (b. 1922), the vocalist/piano player with Johnny Brown's Three Blazers. Charles Brown replaced Cole's relaxed self-confidence with sadness, exemplifying singers who "had become narcissistically preoccupied with the depths of their misery, seemingly unable to find a cause for hope or gladness."⁵²

All of Ace's r&b hits, beginning with "My Song," are ballads. The tone he employs—soft and relaxed—reflects the feeling of a Nat Cole song, but the mood he communicates—pain and sorrow—is in the tradition of LeRoy Carr, Cecil Gant, and Charles Brown. Perhaps this combination of tone and mood, a synthesis of the extremes of the black crooning style, accounts for what Mattis identified as "soft purple

sounds." "I just happened to recognize something that I hadn't heard before," he remembers. The industry credited "My Song" with beginning a new musical trend. "Ace's simple and unaffected style of singing, his evident sincerity and heart," *Billboard* reported after his death, "actually started the r.&b. field on a type of song that has come to be known as a 'heart ballad.'" ⁵³ Ace's first "heart ballad" (others called this blend of vocal performance, material, and attitude the "beat ballad" or the "blues ballad") generated increased activity in covering—the industry practice of recording "covers" (performances) of the same song by other artists. "This is the first r.&b. ditty that has spurred this many versions in a long time," noted *Billboard*.⁵⁴

The extraordinary success of "My Song" coming from an unknown artist on an unknown label, illustrates also the openness of the r&b market. As *Melody Maker* explained to British jazz fans in 1954, jazz styles consisted of traditional, modern, and rhythm and blues ("the type of record which the *present-day* Negro population of the U.S. likes and buys")—one field in which the small, independent labels, "have a big chance of a hit, as such records are inexpensive to make and the coloured trade is so unpredictable that almost anything can click. Many times an obscure artist has reached the best-seller lists with his first recording on an unknown label."⁵⁵

Independent r&b hits in the 1950s, however, lacked the distribution system of the major labels that permitted the simultaneous national rollout of a pop record. They were therefore especially vulnerable to competing cover versions. Particularly in r&b, in which small, independent operations were the lifeblood of the genre, a label was rarely able to work a song in all of the regional markets (*Billboard* called them "territories") simultaneously. "My Song," for example, broke first in Detroit and New York, then in Los Angeles, the D.C. area, Charlotte, and Philadelphia, and finally St. Louis; it never penetrated the charts in Atlanta, Chicago, Cincinnati, or New Orleans. In some places, Ace's original version was introduced to an audience already familiar with an alternate, or "cover," version. "Although the singing, the balance and the performance of the accompanying Beale Streeters are distinctly inferior to Dinah Washington's and other later performances," one trade review declared, "this is the [version] that started the whole thing."⁵⁶ Conversely, an r&b hit could have considerable longevity. An r&b hit might stay number one in the black community for five or six months, during which time a pop artist would have replaced an old hit with a new song. Pop hits were commodities; an r&b song, Johnny Otis says, "could become almost an anthem." Six months after the release of "My Song," its initial momentum had certainly faded, but the record continued to chart at number three in national sales and number five in

jukebox play; and it was still considered a hit in most of the regional markets.

To support his record sales around the country, Robey's Buffalo Booking Agency already had Ace on the road doing one-nighters in the secondary markets and playing longer engagements at the Orchard Room (Kansas City) and the Club Alabam (Los Angeles).⁵⁷ Robey had publicly vowed not to be rushed into a new Ace recording session until he found the "right material,"⁵⁸ but in fact he already had the material and had been sitting on it for months, waiting for "My Song" to play itself out. Soon after he acquired an interest in Duke Records—probably in August or early September 1952—he had arranged for the Beale Streeters to travel to Houston to record at Bill Holford's Audio Company of America (ACA) studio. Johnny Ace recorded four songs at this session, Bobby Bland four, Earl Forest four, and Rosco Gordon six. "I don't remember these particular sessions, because I cut so much stuff for [Robey]," Bill Holford says, "but they're in the [studio log] book, and that book hasn't been touched since it was written."⁵⁹

Immediately after "My Song" fell off the national r&b charts in December 1952, Robey released Ace's "Cross My Heart" (Duke 107), another AABA ballad. "Cross My Heart" was essentially the same song as "My Song" (Mattis/Alexander), but this time the song was credited to Mattis and Don Robey.⁶⁰ Over the years Don Robey acquired as much writer credit as he could on songs released by Duke, Peacock, and his other labels, since such credit placed him in a position to receive both the mechanical and performance royalties due to the writer of any recorded song. Robey rarely released records for which he could not claim writer credit. In regard to Ace's seven certified r&b hits after "My Song," Robey took writer credit on all but two.

The true extent of Ace's contribution as writer of the songs he recorded will forever remain a mystery. He was, however, known both in Memphis and Houston as a prolific songwriter. Mattis watched him "compose on the piano," and according to Jean Alexander, Ace wrote all the time. "Sometimes you would see him writing," she says. "I guess it was just coming in his head." "Johnny did writing, yeah," says Milton Hopkins, who had been a member of the Johnny Ace Band. "I don't know if he got credit for any of it, but you know how that was. That's where the money was. And wherever the money was, that's where Robey was."⁶¹ Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, for whom Robey established Peacock Records in 1949, is known to have suffered a similar fate as a songwriter. It wasn't, Brown says, that the artist deliberately had to give up his rights in order to record: "No one has to do anything, but what *can* happen—the man was a businessman and we're young kids and this is a flying life for us, so therefore what do we know about writer royalties? Let's say [Robey] was a great businessman,

okay?"⁶² Ace did, however, acquire half of writer with Mattis for "Angel," the "B" side of "Cross My Heart."

Duke 107 is the first Ace record to display some professionalism. The improved quality of the production of both sides is immediately discernible. Holford was an audio engineer who had been in the recording business since 1948. Though his ACA studio was "just a room," he knew how to engineer the sound, position the microphones (he used eight), and set the levels. With his Ampex 300 mono tape recorder there was no overdubbing, but he had an ear for quality. "We took things straight," he remembers, "and did them over until we got it right." Holford worked well with Robey, with whom he had a long and successful professional relationship and who certainly knew what *he* was doing. "Robey was always the producer," Holford says. "He was the one who was paying for the session, and he sat beside me and told me what he wanted and told the musicians what he wanted." The musical arrangement of Duke 107 represents a significant improvement as well: both songs feature two saxophones and a full rhythm section. On "Cross My Heart," Ace plays a Hammond organ "countered with lovely vibraphone work," according to Peter Grendysa, who calls the song "an R&B masterpiece."⁶³

There is some evidence that Robey could not initially decide which song should get the "A" side treatment on Duke 107 and that he let the industry choose, suggesting in the *Billboard* advertisement on January 3, 1953, that either side might represent the next Johnny Ace hit. A week later Duke 107 was one of the "New Records to Watch": "Both sides are slow-paced ballads with strong ork backing. 'Cross My Heart' likely side. It's cut from the same cloth as 'My Song.'" On January 17, "Cross My Heart" was one of "This Week's Territorial Best Sellers to Watch," because it broke in St. Louis and was selling strong in Philadelphia, New York, and markets in the south.⁶⁴ By January 31, the record entered *Billboard's* national r&b charts at number five (sales) and number ten (jukebox play). It peaked in mid-February at numbers four and three. The only territory where "Cross My Heart" was not a hit was Chicago, the home of Chess Records and one of the markets that "My Song" never penetrated. Robey later told the press that he lost thousands of dollars on Duke 107 because the songs on both sides of the record "hit with equal vigor," causing him to send out "two hits for the price of one."⁶⁵

"Angel" was never certified as a hit by the trade publications, though it apparently generated some radio airplay and jukebox action after "Cross My Heart" had played itself out. Robey's assertion that "Angel" *was* a hit reveals more about his interest in developing Ace's career than about any loss of income. Sometime between the first Duke recording session in Houston and the release of "Cross My Heart"/

“Angel,” Robey put together a band to back Ace for personal appearances. Performances were booked, of course, by Robey’s Buffalo Booking Agency. Not only did these appearances generate their own fees; they also supported record sales and maintained a system in which the artist was essentially responsible for earning his own living. One of the few ways for an r&b performer to see some actual money in the early 1950s was to make it on the road. (Mattis claims that when Robey took over Duke Records he reduced the artist royalty from two-and-one-half cents per record to one-half cent per record.)⁶⁶ If hit records didn’t make you rich they at least increased your personal performance fees—Ace received an estimated six hundred dollars per night.⁶⁷

Milton Hopkins remembers joining the Johnny Ace Band, which played four or five nights a week, in late 1952. The musical director was Johnny Board. Originally from Chicago, he had been a member of the Count Basie band and more recently a tenor and alto saxophone player with a road band backing vocalists signed to Robey’s Peacock label—essentially the Robey house band. This aggregation, billed as the Johnny Board Orchestra, occasionally received accompaniment credit for Johnny Ace sides on which the band never played. By accident or design, all of Ace’s records credit a single band as backup on both sides, and several performances credited to the Johnny Board Orchestra were actually by Johnny Otis.

According to Hopkins, who played guitar in the Johnny Board Orchestra, the other members of the group were Joe Scott (trumpet), Milton Bradford (baritone and tenor sax), C. C. Pinkston (drums and vibes), and Curtis Tillman (bass). Paul Monday (piano) was also a member of the band, which by March 1953 was backing not only Ace but Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton as well. Robey’s idea of hooking up Thornton with Ace turned out to be good business; there was considerably more box-office potential in their performing as a package. By the end of March, Thornton’s new release, “Hound Dog” (Peacock 1612), began its way to the top of the national r&b charts, establishing Peacock Records as a major independent label in r&b as well as gospel. Robey was also able to exploit the popularity of Ace by linking him with other acts represented by Buffalo Booking Agency. Ace “was so big,” Johnny Board remembers, “that the booking agent insisted that you buy B. B. King and Bobby Blue Bland as a package if you wanted Johnny Ace.”⁶⁸

Before “Cross My Heart” hit any *Billboard* r&b territorial chart, Robey had Ace’s third hit in the can. At a recording session in Houston at Bill Holford’s ACA studio on January 13, 1953, the Johnny Otis Band backed Ace on “The Clock,” an AABA ballad credited to Mattis in the copyright registration but reported to BMI as a Mattis-John Alexander

collaboration.⁶⁹ The lyric is lonesome and mournful, the progression borrowed from the Vincent Scotto standard "Two Loves Have I." Robey credited the Beale Streeters as the backup band on this record and did not take writer credit himself.

A possible reason for Robey's reluctance to take writer credit is that his partnership with Mattis was in litigation and close to being dissolved. Since Robey was about to own Duke Records outright for an amount in the \$10,000 to \$27,000 range (Mattis claims there had been over \$200,000 in collections alone but he was powerless to share in any of it), he could easily afford to be magnanimous with a single property.⁷⁰ Robey copyrighted "The Clock" as an unpublished song on April 9, 1953, with Mattis as sole author. He did not, however, explain to Mattis that in order to receive any of the performance rights money from the song he must register as an affiliated writer with BMI. Apparently, Robey never told Ace either, nor any of the songwriters with whom he "collaborated." Mattis claims he didn't know this until fifteen years later, when Aretha Franklin's remake of "My Song" became a hit. He discovered then that Robey had not only failed to pay him his mechanical rights money for record sales, but had not told him how to collect his royalties for the performance (mostly radio airplay) of his copyrights.

Ace himself never understood how the music business worked. "John didn't have no business sense, and the man [Robey] just got all he could, and that was everything," says Jean Alexander, who believes her husband may have written *all* of his hit songs.⁷¹

Robey had learned from his experience with Ace's second hit: he put a "B" side on "The Clock" that could not possibly complicate his promotion efforts. The song he chose, "Ace's Wild,"⁷² credited to John Alexander (instrumental blues with Ace playing boogie-woogie piano) had been recorded by the Beale Streeters at the first Houston session in the fall of 1952 and had originally been scheduled as the "B" side of "Angel." "Angel," we should remember, had become the "B" side of Duke 107 when Robey permitted the industry to choose "Cross My Heart" as the more commercially appealing song.

"The Clock" b/w "Ace's Wild," was released in May 1953 as Duke 112, a few weeks after "Cross My Heart" dropped off all *Billboard* r&b charts. There was no ambiguity in the marketing: "The Clock" was specifically advertised as the upcoming Ace hit in the June 20, 1953, *Billboard*. The next week it was a "Best Buy" and a breaking record in New Orleans. The *Billboard* reviewer thought it looked like "a real smash. It's another heart ballad, sung by the warbler in his own meaningful style, over a moody ork backing. Tune is melodic, and the clock ticks gimmicks should help it, too. A solid coin-grabber." "Wild instrumental effort," *Billboard* called the flip side, that "should also cull

some juke loot."⁷³ By July 4 "The Clock" was on the national r&b charts for record sales; by July 18 it was the number one r&b record. At the end of July the song was number one or two in every one of the eleven r&b territories.

According to Bill Holford's log books, "The Clock" was mastered as a 78-rpm record only, consistent with the sales patterns of the r&b market at the time. Black consumers, primarily adult, were the last to switch to the 45-rpm player—the hardware of choice for white adolescents. Since Robey pressed records all over the country, several sets of masters were cut to accommodate the demand for this hit record. Its sales were supported by heavy bookings of personal appearances in the south, west coast, midwest, and east.

In Los Angeles, Ace and Willie Mae Thornton, "broke attendance records" at Billy Berg's 5-4 Ballroom and helped headline Gene Norman's "Fourth Annual Rhythm and Blues Jubilee."⁷⁴ Robey joined the group in Los Angeles to organize a recording session at Radio Recorders studio, where he again used the arranging talent of Johnny Otis, with the Otis band backing Ace on three solo cuts plus an Ace/Willie Mae Thornton duet. The complete Robey operation was not only unique at this point but also important in the field of r&b. Ace's third hit clearly established him as a star with staying power. Together with Thornton's "Hound Dog" (the *Cash Box* r&b record of the year), "The Clock" would boost Robey's estimated 1953 record sales to 1,500,000 units for secular music; the "spiritual catalog," he said, would account for another 500,000 units.⁷⁵ In addition, Robey had signed a number of new artists, including "Little Richard" Penniman and Johnny Otis (Peacock) and "Little Junior" Parker and Joseph August (Duke), established a new label called Progressive Jazz, and enlarged his Houston facilities to include a rehearsal studio and a record pressing and processing plant.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, the Buffalo Booking Agency kept the Ace/Thornton package, to which Robey had now added Junior Parker and the Blue Flames, busy with appearances across the country, culminating in Apollo Theater performances in late October.

To take advantage of Ace's national reputation, the Bihari brothers released the only Ace song they had, a mournful, well-produced blues number called "Midnight Hours Journey," recorded at the Memphis YMCA in 1951, and backed it with fellow Beale Streeter Earl Forest's "Trouble and Me" (*Flair* 1015). Without Robey's promotional efforts the record did not succeed.

Variety reviewed Ace's first Apollo Theater performance in October 1953 not as part of a package but as a single performer in an eleven-minute set representing a "New Act." The reviewer liked his voice ("he impresses with a smooth baritone") but found fault with his "song salesmanship." Visually, he appeared "too stiff and wooden," *Variety*

reported, advising him to use his eyes to address the audience more and the microphone less.⁷⁷ Ace is known to have delivered his vocals from his piano seat, swaying “back and forth, kind of like Ray Charles,”⁷⁸ and his shyness is well-documented. It is surprising, however, to find these symptoms of awkwardness after a full year of almost continuous live performances.

On Thanksgiving Day 1953, B. B. King joined the Ace touring unit in Houston for a “giant holiday show,” followed by Ace’s first appearances in the south since July.⁷⁹ The south, of course, included Memphis. When Ace played his hometown he seems not to have notified his wife and family—probably to avoid facing either his wife or his mother. When in Memphis for performances he roomed at the Mitchell Hotel on Beale Street (Ernestine Mitchell kept his clothes for years after his death)⁸⁰ and stayed away from the “home house” at 899 Fisher. Once, his wife found out he was in town and went with her brother to see him perform at a club. “He was there with this lady,” Jean Alexander remembers. “And he really didn’t want to hurt me. He was trying to get me out of there.” She stayed for one set. On another occasion in 1953, Ace’s sisters Norma and Mamie came out of their workplace at the Universal Life Insurance building in Memphis, and happened to see the Johnny Ace Band van drive by. They shouted for him to stop. He would come back to Memphis, Norma Williams remembers,

but he knew we were all engaged in church activities and so he wouldn’t even come by the house. But [that day] we stopped him, and my sister Mamie told him, “You should be ashamed! You should go by the house and see mother and talk to her and Lois Jean.” . . . And he went by there, and he knew what was going to come when he got there, because mother got on his case—she was a very firm person. And she got on him about Lois Jean and the children, how he should send her something, and he just gave her two or three hundred dollars.

“The Clock” (of the eight certified Ace hits, older black Americans are most apt to recall this song) stayed on the national r&b charts until October and did not fall completely off the territorial charts until late November. On December 5, Robey introduced Ace’s next record, “Saving My Love For You” b/w “Yes, Baby” (Duke 128)—two songs recorded in Los Angeles a few months earlier. *Billboard* designated this as one of the “New Records to Watch” on December 12. “Saving My Love For You,” *Billboard* said, “is in the normal Ace tradition, a fine ‘Heart’ ballad with a powerful reading. Flip is an up-tempo blues which also has good possibilities.”⁸¹ The next week the record was a “Best Buy,” reporting “strong action” in New York, Philadelphia, Buffalo,

Nashville, St. Louis, and Dallas. By December 26, it had entered the national r&b chart for jukebox play; it became a "National Best Seller" on January 23. Robey was quick to declare Duke 118 "another double hit" because of "Yes, Baby," the blues shouting duet with Willie Mae Thornton. According to Robey's inflated account, Ace's four single records had now generated six hits.

Some of Ace's early success can be attributed to the emerging interest in black music on the part of white America, primarily white youth. Although it had not yet become a discernible trend, sales of r&b product were going up, market share of r&b was increasing, and the industry was beginning to note early in 1954 that careers in r&b were becoming more stable. Both retail and jukebox action on the part of new artists like Johnny Ace, "repeat performers" with five or six hits, reported *Billboard*, "have put to rest a lot of the clichés about one-record artists." On February 20, *Billboard* noted, "It is evident that once the r.&b. customer okays a new artist today, he'll come back for disks by the same artist again, as long as the disk is a good one. And it is also evident that the diskeries, as a whole, once they break thru a new artist, do their best to find the right material to keep the artist up there."⁸² Certainly Don Robey was doing his best to keep Ace at the top of the charts and to keep his name current in both the trade publications and the black newspapers. When Robey interrupted the tour of "the phenomenal young Duke recording artist" for a recording engagement in Houston he wanted black America to know that Ace left Columbia, South Carolina, for a "waxing session" and then "flew via TWA to rejoin his unit in Pensacola, Fla."⁸³ Ace was a major star, Robey was insisting, and Duke Records represented not only big business but a class act.

The timing of the January 27, 1954, recording session at the ACA studio was essential. Robey wanted the Johnny Otis Band to back Ace again, and the Otis Revue was on a tour of its own, coming into Houston from a date in Dallas. "The Johnny Otis Orchestra," as Robey called the backing group, was not only a good band and a popular one at the time, but it had the respect of professional musicians as well. "Anywhere you were in earshot of Johnny Otis," Milton Hopkins remembers, "that's the band that was going to do the session." Otis arranged the four songs cut at this session, most of which, like "Pledging My Love," featured Ace on piano and vocals, Pete Lewis on guitar, James Von Streeter on tenor sax, Albert Winston on bass, Leard Bell on drums, and Otis on vibes.⁸⁴ In typical Robey fashion, the material Ace recorded was in the can well in advance of the release dates. In fact, "Saving My Love For You" would not peak on the *Billboard* r&b charts until the week of February 6, and neither of the next two hits for Ace would even be from this session. What no one knew at the

time was that this January date would produce both of Ace's post-humous hits.

"Saving My Love for You" must have been something of a disappointment to both Ace and Robey, since the hit's upward momentum took longer than the previous releases: it played itself out sooner and never reached the top of the r&b charts. Not only did the record fail to hit in all of the *Billboard* territories, but its life was considerably longer on the jukeboxes than in the stores.⁸⁵ Robey's contention that "Saving My Love For You" b/w "Yes, Baby" was a two-sided hit may have been his attempt to allay any impression that Ace's career had stalled. In fact, evidence from early 1954 suggests that Johnny Ace may have taken black crooning to a new level of popularity with black audiences, as his name began to appear regularly in the trade magazines and black newspapers. According to one story, when Hollywood radio station KRKD asked listeners to phone in their favorite Ace recording, one vote came in via a ship-to-shore hookup from a sailor in the mid-Pacific.⁸⁶ In addition, the trades tracked the Ace/Thornton unit from its appearance at Pep's Musical Bar in Philadelphia, through a series of one-nighters in Michigan and Ohio, to a week's engagement at the Apollo in New York beginning April 23, where "the smashing package consisting of Duke Records' sensational Johnny Ace and Peacock's belting lady killer of the blues Willie Mae Thornton . . . hit town with such an impact that [it] caused the whole of 125th and vicinity to just 'shake, rattle and roll' with the same blazing fire as did Joe Turner's latest Atlantic sizzler."⁸⁷ The "reigning 'king and queen of blues,'" as the *New York Age-Defender* called Ace and Thornton,⁸⁸ represented the smash hit on this Apollo bill. The pair closed the show, according to *Variety*, and started it "rolling" and "pulling the overlong layout out of the doldrums": "Miss Thornton and Ace split the vocalistics with support from a driving seven-man combo (four rhythm, two reed and a brass). Femme is a heavy rhythm & blues thrush while Ace is a mellow crooner. The contrast is effective and sustains interest and excitement all the way." For Ace, whom the reviewer describes as "a new disk fave in the r&b field," it was his second, and last, appearance at the Apollo.⁸⁹

During this period *Billboard* acknowledged in a special section on r&b and in a front-page story that this formerly "Negro market" music had now "blossomed into one of the fastest growing areas of the entire record business."⁹⁰ In this regard, Robey's direction of Ace's career—the deliberate development of Ace as an artist—was unusually perceptive. Three weeks after "Saving My Love For You" fell from the charts, Duke released Ace's "Please Forgive Me" b/w "You've Been Gone So Long" (Duke 128), claiming sales of 100,000 units in only two days. *Billboard* "spotlight" reviewed it immediately: "Johnny Ace

should do it again with this fine new release and keep his lengthy string of hits unbroken. 'Forgive Me' is a tuneful ballad which he sings with soul; the flip is a bouncy item and is handled brightly. Potent wax for operators and dealers."⁹¹

Before *Billboard* could make "Please Forgive Me" one of "This Week's Best Buys," the recording had to show up on one of the territorial charts, which it did June 5 (number eight in Cincinnati). In addition, the song was "reportedly strong in Dallas, Houston, New Orleans, Durham, Nashville, Los Angeles, St. Louis, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh."⁹² Robey promoted the record vigorously in the following week's display ads, but could show only one additional territorial success—St. Louis (number five). "Please Forgive Me" appeared on the retail sales chart at number ten for two weeks in June and on the jukebox chart (reaching number six) for another two week period in July. It was the second Ace record in a row to falter, "a hit," according to Nick Tosches, "but not of the magnitude of those that had come before it."⁹³ Sad and mournful Ace ballads may have been wearing a bit thin with the r&b audience, a market that seemed to have no interest at all in Ace as a blues shouter.

The "B" side of Duke 128, "You've Been Gone So Long," a shuffle blues written by Ace and featuring a Chuck Berry-like guitar solo (well over a year before Berry's first record), represents a side of Ace ("hard-punching" and "credible," according to Peter Grendysa) that patterns after early regional rock and roll styles. There is no evidence that this kind of "jump" side had any particular appeal to the contemporary black audience, who clearly preferred his "weeper" material.⁹⁴

The Ace publicity machine rolled on in the summer of 1954, claiming that the success of "Please Forgive Me" was "helping to pull in the standing room crowds" for a string of Carolina one-nighters and causing Ace fans in Houston to maul him in adoration: five hundred members of his fan club supposedly "stampeded and ripped his suit to pieces" when Ace "started handing out autographed pictures to the necessary demons."⁹⁵

Six weeks after "Please Forgive Me" fell off the national charts, Robey released "Never Let Me Go" b/w "Burley Cutie" (Duke 132)—another sad and slow AABA ballad with a throw-away instrumental blues "B" side, recorded at the first Houston session and not even protected by copyright. For Colin Escott, "Never Let Me Go" represents what Ace did best: "to instill some meaning and genuine feeling into some fairly maudlin and mediocre material."⁹⁶ *Billboard* continued to review Ace favorably for essentially the same reasons. "Johnny Ace sings the new ballad with his usual sincerity," it reported, "and the record has a chance for the big time,"⁹⁷ In early October, the magazine made "Never Let Me Go" one of "This Week's Best Buys," noting that

Ace, like Atlantic's Joe Turner, was an "artist who appears to be maintaining his high batting average" with a "strong seller in Philadelphia, Upstate New York, Atlanta, Nashville, Durham, Dallas, St. Louis, Richmond, Detroit, and Chicago."⁹⁸ In fact, Cincinnati was the only territory in which the record flourished; "Never Let Me Go" did not penetrate the national r&b sales charts and barely made the charts for jukebox play (number nine). The momentum of Ace's career had stalled in the fall of 1954: for the first time, an Ace release was not a hit. "By then," Nick Tosches points out, "another Memphis boy, Elvis Presley, who had listened to the Beale Streeters during his high school years, was on his way to becoming the new rage."⁹⁹

Johnny Ace, however, would become "the new rage" slightly earlier. On December 25, *Billboard* featured a quarter-page Duke Records ad that wished deejays and (jukebox) operators a "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year" and announced the forthcoming Johnny Ace release, "Pledging My Love" b/w "No Money" (Duke 136).¹⁰⁰ Ironically, the day the ad appeared was the last day of Ace's life.

The Johnny Ace/Willie Mae Thornton unit did not sell out City Auditorium in Houston for a "Negro Christmas dance" that night, but it did draw a respectable crowd of approximately thirty-five hundred people. At intermission, Ace was backstage, drinking vodka and snapping a .22 caliber Harrington & Richardson revolver at himself and his friends. The most complete account of what happened shortly after 11:00 P.M. is from a deposition given to the authorities by Willie Mae Thornton two hours later. Thornton's deposition, in its exact wording, follows:

We arrived at the City Auditorium at around 7:20 P.M. and the dance started about eight o'clock. I did not sing until about nine o'clock when I sing five numbers. The band played several numbers before Johnny Ace came on to sing. He sing several numbers and he and I sing a duet on the song "Yes, Baby." The band played two more numbers. I then went to the dressing room to change clothes but I got busy signing autographs and I did not get to change clothes. Johnny Ace came to the dressing room and he signed some autographs. He started to leave out the door when some people stopped to talk to him. About that time, Olivia, Johnny Ace's girl friend walked up and Johnny and Olivia came into the dressing room. Johnny sit on a dresser in the dressing room and Olivia sit on his lap. Shortly after he sit down, two more people who were in the dressing room, Mary Carter and Joe Hamilton, began running around. I looked over at Johnny and noticed he had a pistol in his hand. It was a pistol that he bought somewhere in Florida. It was a .22 cal. revolver. Johnny was pointing this

pistol at Mary Carter and Joe Hamilton. He was kind of waving it around. I asked Johnny to let me see the gun. He gave it to me and when I turned the chamber a .22 cal bullet fell out in my hand. Johnny told me to put it back in w[h]ere it wouldn't fall out. I put it back and gave it to him. I told him not to snap it at nobody. After he got the pistol back, Johnny pointed the pistol at Mary Carter and pulled the trigger. It snapped. Olivia was still sitting on his lap. I told Johnny again not to snap the pistol at anybody. Johnny then put the pistol to Olivia's head and pulled the trigger. It snapped. Johnny said 'I'll show you that it won't shoot.' He held the pistol up and looked at it first and then put it to his head. I started toward the door and I heard the pistol go off. I turned around and saw Johnny falling to the floor. I saw that he was shot and I run on stage and told the people in the band about it. I stayed there until the officers arrived.¹⁰¹

According to the *Inquest Proceedings*, homicide detectives found Ace's body, fully clothed in a gray suit, lying on a dressing room floor cluttered with whiskey and vodka bottles. (The whole auditorium was described as cluttered with half-pint bottles.) Justice of the Peace Walter Reagan, whose precinct included City Auditorium at 600 Louisiana Street, was called to the scene and determined the cause of death to be "Playing Russian Roulette—Bullet wound in right temple—self inflicted," with entrance of the bullet about 1 [inch] above & 2 [inches] to right of right eye. No exit." The inventory of "Personal effects" includes a three-stone diamond ring, Lucerne watch, tie clip, key chain with five keys, lighter, and twenty-three dollars in currency. In parentheses detectives noted "no billfold or credentials."¹⁰² A policeman at the scene said, "That's all she wrote," as he rolled Ace over, *Ebony* reported, but he "could not have been more wrong. Johnny Ace, the man, was dead—but Johnny Ace, the legend, had just been born."¹⁰³

Legends took longer to create in the 1950s than they do today. In the season of 1954–55, television had not yet become the instrument that penetrated every household; nor had it brought disparate sectors of American society together—much less the world—as part of what Marshall McLuhan called the Global Village. Johnny Ace was merely an r&b star at the end of 1954—a black singer from Memphis performing music for a black audience, signed to a black-owned Houston record label. Unlike Nat Cole, who recorded for a major label aiming its product at a general audience, and whose records succeeded or failed in the basically white field of pop music, Ace was a *black* black star, not widely known outside the black community. And in 1954 the white press (especially the southern white press) did not ordinarily cover "Negro" news at all. It was purely accidental that Johnny Ace

received big-time coverage when the *New York Times* buried on page twenty-one the wire story report of his death:

HOUSTON, Tex., Dec. 26 (UP)

A Memphis, Tenn. bandleader was shot to death playing Russian roulette last night while holding a pretty girl on his lap during a dressing room party. The police said John Alexander, 26 years old, leader and featured singer of Johnny Ace's band, died at the height of a big Christmas night dance in the city auditorium.¹⁰⁴

From the *Times* story it is not clear that Ace and Alexander were, in fact, the same person. The compilers of the 1954 *New York Times Annual Index* revealed what was most important about this story to mainstream Americans: they indexed it under neither "Alexander, John" nor "Ace, Johnny," but only under "Russian roulette."

While the white press missed the personal dimension of the Johnny Ace story entirely, the black press certainly did not. Ace had performed in black clubs all over the country. Black America *knew* Ace, not in the abstract but in the flesh, and part of the power necessary to establish Ace as a legend in the black community turned out to be his previous accessibility. In Cleveland, for example, news of his death was dramatically presented in the context of accounts from local "play girls" who had attended his Cleveland "wild champagne and liquor parties in which he insisted on proving his skill with a revolver." Ace was an "incurable egotist and showoff," Ralph Matthews reported in the *Cleveland Call and Post*, who "took delight in sending chills down the backs of his friends" and who left a number of Cleveland girls "trembling in their boots at the terrifying thought that they barely missed being a party to and possible victim of his penchant for playing 'Russian Roulette.'" ¹⁰⁵

That Ace *was* made a legend was partly due to the expertise of Don Robey, who took special care to manage the death of his most commercially popular artist in a way that would impact the most favorably on the sales of Duke Records. "Don Robey and them gave me and some fellas a little money and we filed some stories and sent some pictures to a collection of a few papers," Ernest Withers says about the "cutline story" that was accompanied by photographs of Ace's funeral and sent airmail the night of January 3, 1955, to twelve of the most important black newspapers. Withers billed Robey sixty dollars for this service, citing the emphasis he placed "on crowd, your personal interest, and possible new man to front the band." Robey paid the bill promptly: "I must say that the welcome, the complete coverage, and the cooperation, cannot be beaten, and again, we Thank You."¹⁰⁶ While Robey was in Memphis for the funeral he visited the Alexander family. "He came out to the house," Norma Williams remembers, "and he told us

he was doing wonders with this child [Ace] because whenever he wanted something he advanced him." (Norma thought Robey was a white man until B. B. King told her otherwise.)

Contemporary accounts from the black press record the shipment of Ace's body by rail from Houston to Memphis for a funeral on Sunday, January 2, 1955, at the two-thousand seat Clayborn Temple AME Church. "Out-of-towners," whose presence at the funeral enhanced the reputation of the deceased, included such "notables" as Duke Records owner Don. D. Robey and Buffalo Booking Agency "owner" Evelyn Johnson. An estimated 4,500 to 5,000 people attempted to attend the funeral, "one of the largest crowds in the history of this historic city of song."¹⁰⁷ Only the notorious Memphis (political) Boss Crump's final rites in October had been bigger, the *Memphis World* reported.¹⁰⁸ (The white Memphis newspapers made no mention of the Ace funeral.) Little Jr. Parker, Rosco Gordon, and Harold Conner were pallbearers; Don Robey, B. B. King, and Willie Mae Thornton were honorary pallbearers; and Rev. Gatemouth Moore of Birmingham, Alabama—the former blues singer turned radio preacher—was on the program. Coverage of the funeral and Ace's interment at New Park Cemetery was respectful but not sentimental.¹⁰⁹ When Memphis radio station WDIA attempted to honor Johnny Ace after the funeral by playing his records, his mother called the station to protest. "She stopped it," Jean Alexander says. "She didn't want him in it [secular music] and she didn't want them to be playing it."¹¹⁰

The stories on Ace in the black newspapers, while mourning his passing, do not romanticize or glamorize his death. The Memphis *Tri-State Defender* reprinted an article describing Ace as "a performer covered with vanity," and a man whose "despondent and down-hearted moods" would suddenly soar "to the saturation point of a happy-go-lucky fellow."¹¹¹ The *Cleveland Call and Post* reported that Ace "died as he lived amid a riot of gals, guns and gaiety." A sidebar explains Ace's death in unsentimental and unromantic terms: "he blew out his own brains."¹¹²

Ebony, the most important general-circulation black periodical, had difficulty dealing with Ace's lifestyle and death. *Jet*, its gossipy sister publication, did publish a matter-of-fact one-paragraph story in an early January issue,¹¹³ but *Ebony* waited six months to print "The Strange Case of Johnny Ace." (Four years earlier Paul Robeson had also been a "strange case" to *Ebony*.¹¹⁴) When the *Ebony* article appeared, it was more notable for its moralizing than for its accuracy. The magazine erroneously reported that Ace quit school in the tenth grade, fell in with the wrong crowd, served time in a Mississippi jail, and was estranged from his parents and his wife and children. In his climb to the top of the r&b charts, *Ebony* observed, "Johnny picked up some

40 pounds, a process hairdo, goatee, mustache. Friends said he drank heavily in months before death." The story quoted his girlfriend ("He could be all alone in a crowd"), his personal manager ("He had known great sadness somewhere"), and Mattis ("Too many women, too much money, too much food"). Nevertheless, *Ebony* acknowledged that Ace had become nationally known *after* his death and that the Duke recording star had "begun to symbolize the ultimate in love" to bobbysoxers, college girls, and even mature women.¹¹⁵

The demand for Ace's "Pledging My Love," another slow "heart" ballad with an AABA structure, was immediately felt in the marketplace. This demand was fueled by Robey's public relations skills. Robey deliberately moved the Christmas night death back twenty-four hours to the more sentimentally perfect setting of Christmas Eve. As Galen Gart and Roy Ames point out, "the 'official' Duke version of the Ace shooting has been repeated so often through the years that December 24th is almost always the date cited in music histories dealing with the incident."¹¹⁶ *Billboard* made "Pledging My Love" a "Best Buy" on January 15, describing it as "spiraling upwards at dazzling speed" and "almost as popular with pop customers as with r.&b."¹¹⁷ By the next week it entered both r&b retail sales and radio airplay charts.

The pace of the record's popularity as a jukebox hit was slowed only by the manufacturer's inability to satisfy the demand for 45-rpm copies of the record. Bill Holford had cut masters for both 45- and 78-rpm versions of Duke 136 early in December, but "Pledging My Love" was the first Duke record to attract a large pop audience (primarily white teens) and therefore sell, from the beginning, more 45s than 78s. In later years "Pledging My Love" remained the benchmark for "big records" at Duke/Peacock.

On February 5, the record showed up on all three r&b charts, and two weeks later began to cross over into pop. It made its first appearance on the pop "Best Sellers in Stores" chart on February 19, one of the pop "Territorial Best Sellers" in New Orleans (number nine) and Cleveland (number three). By February 26 it made *Billboard's* "Honor Roll of Hits" ("the nation's top tunes according to record and sheet sales, disk jockey and jukebox performances"), and the first of the cover versions of "Pledging My Love" became a pop "Best Buy." Teresa Brewer's "pop-styled version of Johnny Ace's great r.&b. hit" (Coral 61362) was doing extremely well, reported *Billboard*, with "the exception of those territories where the Ace record is firmly entrenched and pop customers will have no substitute."¹¹⁸

On March 5, "Pledging My Love" won *Billboard's* Triple Crown—the number one r&b hit in sales, radio airplay, and jukebox play. It was number one in all r&b territories except Cincinnati (number two) and Chicago (absent), and overall the number twenty-one best-selling

pop record in America. No ballad by a single black male performer signed to an independent r&b label had ever had such popular success in the postwar era.¹¹⁹

Certainly no artist's death had ever produced so many recorded eulogies. Johnny Moore's "Johnny Ace's Last Letter" (Hollywood 1031) had charted as an r&b jukebox hit by March 5, 1955. In the world of r&b, where the romantic legend of the late Johnny Ace was central to the marketing of "Pledging My Love," the only way to capture some of the Ace mystique was to release tributes: "Johnny Ace's Last Letter" had its own cover version. Other tribute songs were "Johnny Has Gone," "Why, Johnny, Why," "Salute to Johnny Ace," "In Memory," and "Johnny's Still Singing."¹²⁰ Fred Mendelsohn of Savoy Records told Arnold Shaw that in order to help sales of "Johnny Has Gone," he spread the story that the singer, Varetta Dillard, "was Johnny's girlfriend, which she wasn't." Johnny Fuller, who claimed to have sold a million copies of his version of "Johnny Ace's Last Letter," told Shaw that in 1955 r&b club owners "asked him not to perform the song because of the tears and hysterical reactions it brought from female customers. There was a Johnny Ace cult," Shaw concludes, "as there was a James Dean cult."¹²¹

On March 26, Duke Records placed a half-page ad in *Billboard* patterned after a thank-you note. Personalized from Robey and his sales manager, Irving Marcus, the ad thanked the trade papers, trade magazines, Duke Record distributors, r&b disc jockeys, pop disc jockeys, and jukebox operators "for making 'Pledging My Love' The Biggest Combination Record R&B and Pop." Naturally, Robey's reference was to "the original version by the Late Johnny Ace."¹²² Though the white radio stations played mostly the Teresa Brewer cover, the Ace original was still in the Top 20 in pop retail sales and was Triple Crown r&b for the fourth straight week. The song stayed on the pop charts for another four weeks and r&b charts for an additional six. In Detroit, the record was strong enough to be "battling it out with 'The Ballad of Davy Crockett' for number one pop position."¹²³ The complex copyright history of "Pledging My Love" is discussed in the discography at the end of this article. Here I should note that, though the song is generally conceded to have been written by Ferdinand "Fats" Washington, Robey gave himself half-credit for the song on the record label and full credit on two of the four copyright deposits.

On February 4, according to *Billboard*, the publishing firm of E. H. Morris took over "selling rights" to the song, with industry rumors that a legal hassle might result, since publisher George Weiner had been "acting in the capacity of selling agent."¹²⁴ Actually, George Weiner, whose Wemar Music had been co-owner of the first published copyright in the song, had already completed his work, arranging on Robey's

behalf the first wave of cover versions of "Pledging My Love" by Teresa Brewer (Coral), The Four Lads (Columbia), and Tommy Mara (MGM) before Ace's "Pledging My Love" broke nationally. Thus Robey had sought the cover versions himself, giving up action in the property for a percentage of the larger volume sales the covers would bring, acting not as the manufacturer of Duke Records but as the owner of Lion Publishing, the publisher of "Pledging My Love."

During the mid-1950s the covering of r&b hits by white pop singers was often seen as a ruthless and racist business practice designed by the large white record labels to exploit smaller, black-owned companies.¹²⁵ We should remember that the independent record companies that survived the transition from r&b to r&r in the 1950s (Atlantic is an even better example than Duke/Peacock) did so on the strength of their publishing subsidiaries. It is true that covering worked to the disadvantage of r&b performers who did not generate their own material—the practice denied them the artist royalties their r&b records might otherwise have earned. For the r&b writer/performer, however, the case was different: Pat Boone's cover versions of Fats Domino's r&b records only made Domino richer.

Don Robey was ahead of the rest in acting more like a publisher than a manufacturer in January 1955, and it would take another year for the industry to observe and discuss any conflict of interest. In February 1956, after "Pledging My Love" and fifteen other r&b-derived tunes had constituted most of BMI's total awards for 1955 radio airplay, *Billboard* acknowledged that "the indie diskery with a hot tune is sometimes more eager to promote the ditty than the platter," essentially cutting the independent r&b record distributor out of the action.¹²⁶ Robey would have seen nothing wrong with exploiting musical properties as opposed to specialty records. Since he almost never recorded any material he did not own, he was in an ideal position to take advantage of the business opportunities provided by the demand for r&b material. He was also in a position to exploit the legend of "the late, great Johnny Ace" (Paul Simon), "the coloured James Dean" (Mike Leadbitter), "the Ace of Duke" (Peter Grendysa), "the first fallen angel" (Nick Tosches), and "the first Rock 'n' Roll casualty" (Colin Escott).¹²⁷

The timing was ideal for Robey, especially when his own Duke Records version of "Pledging My Love" turned out to be the new white record buyer's choice as the definitive performance of the song. Major record companies had hoped that the pop audience would be satisfied with the black songs without the black singers, but, as Charlie Gillett points out, by the end of 1954 the "audience was determined to have the real thing, not a synthetic version of the original."¹²⁸ To the chagrin of the music industry, white teens were obviously associating the performance of "Pledging My Love" with the personality of Johnny Ace.

Cover artists Teresa Brewer, the Four Lads, and Tommy Mara may have performed the same song, but they had not killed themselves playing Russian roulette, validated the myth of black primitivism, or dared to explore the ultimate in rebelliousness. Only Johnny Ace had lived the fast and dangerous lifestyle all the way to an early and tragic death.

Unfortunately for Robey, when Ace died he left only six unreleased tracks, and Robey had writer credit on just one of them. The timing may have been right to launch Ace to a new level, but the available product was slim. Robey attempted to meet the challenge by repackaging Ace's previous releases, signing Ace's brother (St. Clair Alexander) to a recording contract as "Buddy Ace,"¹²⁹ and spreading out release of the previously unreleased sides over the next eighteen months—a time period almost as long as Ace's entire career.

In March 1955, Robey may have released as many as four albums of Ace's previously recorded material, including the first Duke 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ -rpm product—a ten-inch LP titled *Memorial Album for Johnny Ace* (DLP 70) with lush liner notes by a Duke employee, Dzondria Lalsac. No single adjective can describe the greatness of the Ace singing style, Lalsac proclaims, not only "because it is surrounded by invisible bars of fragile superfluity," but it "cannot clearly picture the the sentimental suavity and exuberant richness, the nostalgic warmth, the blue-note and the slight but perceptible 'tear'-beat that pervaded his effervescent style. . . . His was a message of love and he gave it to the people! His personality and versatility were projected into and mirrored in every quatrain, paired couplet and poetic and emotional metaphor of every song he sang. And there was always that strong 'blue' undercurrent, infectiously permeating his performances, whether on record or during a one night stand at a nightclub."¹³⁰ For the 45-rpm crowd, Robey released two extended-play albums—EP 80 and EP 81, both titled *Johnny Ace*—that together covered the eight songs that Robey insisted were Ace's hits. In addition, Robey issued an unusual six-song extended-play album called *Johnny Ace* (EP 71), ostensibly for jukeboxes only.¹³¹ Meanwhile, the staff at Duke/Peacock found itself "swamped with requests for photos of Johnny Ace" from teens all over the country.¹³²

It was not until mid-July that Robey released the first posthumous single, "Anymore" b/w "How Can You Be So Mean?" (Duke 144). The "A" side, "Anymore," features Ace in his standard mournful I-vii-V AABA ballad—in virtually the same arrangement as "Pledging My Love" (the songs were cut at the same session and used the same members of the Johnny Otis band). For the "B" side, Robey chose an up-tempo blues-rocker written by Ace called "How Can You Be So Mean?," with the big band sound of the Ace road band (the label credits the "Johnny Board Orchestra") and some exciting guitar work by Milton Hopkins. This cut was recorded in Houston in July 1954—the last Ace

recording session.¹³³ While Robey seems to have considered all of the Ace blues contributions as "B" side/throwaway material, it is clear that he had high expectations for "Anymore," a Fats Washington sad ballad like "Pledging My Love." Robey, who had copyrighted "Anymore" as an unpublished song for Lion Publishing on June 7, 1954 (words and music by himself), took out another copyright on February 18, 1955, crediting words and music to Don Deadric Robey and Ferdinand Washington. "It is a real sad one," Robey told *Ebony* immediately before its release. "He sings it like a man who knows he's going to die."¹³⁴

"Anymore" could be the special song Ace's "tremendous following" has been waiting for, reported *Billboard* in its review of Duke 144, calling it "a potent ballad similar in mood to his last, long-enduring smash, 'Pledging My Love.'" The magazine's prejudice against Ace's up-tempo material is revealed in the description of "How Can You Be So Mean?": "The flip is a rhythm opus from farther down the barrel."¹³⁵ The next week, the record was a "Best Buy" on the strength of "enthusiastic sales reports" from Philadelphia, New York, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Nashville, Durham, Atlanta, and St. Louis. "The late Johnny Ace," proclaimed *Billboard*, "still exerts a powerful hold on the imagination of the national r&b. market, considering the widespread acceptance of this disk within its first week of sale."¹³⁶ Half-page ads in *Billboard* and *Cash Box* for July 23 feature Johnny Ace's hits in a stairway-to-heaven motif, beginning with "My Song" and, in progressively larger and larger print, "Cross My Heart," "Angel," "The Clock," "Please Forgive Me," "Saving My Love for You," "Never Let Me Go," "Pledging My Love," and "ANYMORE!" which "is destined to be the greatest." Robey claimed in the ad that the new record had sold 300,000 copies before its release date.¹³⁷

There is little external evidence that the market was so hungry. "Anymore" turned up on its first r&b territorial chart on July 30 (Philadelphia) and on the first national r&b charts on August 6 (number nine in retail sales and number thirteen in radio airplay). It peaked the week of August 20, when it made the jukebox-play chart for the first time (number eight) and kept its other ratings as well. On August 27, Robey advertised "Anymore" as "going pop," urging the industry not to overlook the flip side, "How Can You Be So Mean?," which was "going strong."¹³⁸ However, by mid-September the record fell off all r&b charts. Technically a hit (Ace's last), "Anymore" behaved on the charts more like "Never Let Me Go" than "Pledging My Love," even though Robey claimed in a small display ad in the October 8 *Billboard* that the record was Ace's "biggest one" and a "Triple Crown Award Winner."¹³⁹ From this point on, in fact, the marketing of Johnny Ace would prove to be an uphill struggle and a losing proposition, a reality temporarily delayed by all of the publicity generated by the industry's

"MY SONG"
 "CROSS MY HEART"
 "ANGEL"
 "THE CLOCK"
 "PLEASE FORGIVE ME"
 "SAVING MY LOVE FOR YOU"
 "NEVER LET ME GO"
 "PLEDGING MY LOVE"
"ANYMORE"
 by Johnny Ace [DUKE 144]

"ANYMORE" IS DESTINED TO BE THE GREATEST—SOLD 300,000 COPIES BEFORE RELEASE DATE

LATEST & GREATEST SPIRITUALS	NEW R & B RELEASES (TERRIFIC)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "TAKE CARE OF ME" "IT MUST HAVE BEEN THE LORD THAT TOUCHED ME" THE DIXIE HUMMING BIRDS • "MY MIND ON JESUS" "I'M GOING ON IN HIS NAME" THE SOUTHERN TONES • "HOME IN THE SKY" "STANDING BY THE BEDSIDE" THE SPIRIT OF MEMPHIS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "MY DESTINATION" "THE SHAPE I'M IN" MARIE ADAMS • "THE QUESTION" "BAD LUCK, HEARTACHES AND TROUBLE" BILLY WRIGHT

DUKE RECORDS, Inc.
 2809 Eastus Street
 Houston 26, Texas

PEACOCK RECORDS, Inc.
 2809 Eastus Street
 Houston 26, Texas

"It's What's in THE CASH BOX That Counts"

Figure 2. Advertisement for Duke 144, Johnny Ace singing "Anymore," in *The Cash Box*, 16, no. 44 (July 23, 1955): 38. Note that other recordings at the bottom include releases by major gospel groups the Dixie Hummingbirds and the Spirit of Memphis. Courtesy of the Music Division, Library of Congress.

November and December "roundup" articles. All the stories about the breakthrough and success of r&b in 1955 highlighted Ace in general and "Pledging My Love," the most played r&b song of the year, in particular.

On January 7, 1956, Robey tried again: he ran an ad in *Billboard* claiming that before "that fatal Christmas night in 1954 JOHNNY ACE had just finished a record session. From that session came this record release": "So Lonely" b/w "I'm Crazy Baby" (Duke 148).¹⁴⁰ In fact there had been no such dramatic last session. "So Lonely" had been recorded in January 1954, along with "Pledging My Love." "I'm Crazy Baby" did come from Ace's last recording session, but that was in July—hardly a session Ace had "just finished" before killing himself. About the only thing the songs had in common was that Robey could claim no writer credit for either property. As it turned out, "So Lonely," an Ace blues about depression (Ace's voice even has a vulnerable lisp to it) with a Johnny Otis arrangement dripping with pathos, was not the "A" side of Duke 148. Robey may have changed his mind or, as he had done early in Ace's career, may have let the trade magazines decide. At any rate, *Billboard* chose "I'm Crazy Baby" as the song to

watch: "The late great Johnny Ace lives on as the label brings out two fine sides cut shortly before his death. On top is an exciting emotion-packed love ballad. The flip contains some wonderful blues sounds in the typical Johnny Ace style. These are two classy efforts with loads of commercial appeal."¹⁴¹ "I'm Crazy Baby" is the only Ace cut in which he performs in the style of a big band singer. His vocal phrasing is in the style of Sammy Davis, Jr., and for the first time he employs the lower register of his voice. The Basie-like arrangement emphasizes horns, with Ace's tinkling piano high in the mix. The AABA song is more musically sophisticated than any other Ace side, with his standard I-vi-ii-V progression serving merely as the turnaround between sections. Ace's road band does the backing (which is credited to the Johnny Board orchestra), and Christopher Columbus Pinkston gets full writer credit on the copyright. Since the song did not successfully penetrate any of the r&b territories, it never became a *Billboard* "Best Buy," nor did it ever register as a hit on the r&b charts. Duke Records bought a quarter-page ad in the February 4 *Billboard* to reprint the flattering "Spotlight" review from two weeks before, but no one paid attention.¹⁴² Ace's momentum had unmistakably stalled.

In April Robey informed *Billboard* that he was planning another Johnny Ace release, to "be followed by some sides by Buddy Ace," though he waited until July to do it. Then, in an announcement/advertisement to "Dealers, Distributors, Jockeys, and The Trade," Duke Records presented the Ace brothers as a kind of matched set. The "LAST RECORD ON THE IMMORTAL JOHNNY ACE" was now available to "complete your collection" ("Still Love You So" b/w "Don't You Know," Duke 154) along with the "FIRST RECORD ON THE VERSATILE BUDDY ACE" to "start your collection" ("Back Home" b/w "What Can I Do," Duke 155). The Johnny Ace record, the ad promised, would surpass even "Pledging My Love."¹⁴³ Robey planned to promote the release himself at an industry convention in New York in early August 1956 to make the "scene personally to lay down the jive," as *Billboard* put it.¹⁴⁴ (This was the same National Association of Music Merchandisers whose gathering Robey had attended four years earlier, when he had first showcased Duke 102 and the charm of "My Song" by the newly discovered Johnny Ace. He had then promoted the side so heavily that he created a hit even before he went into production with the record. As the *Pittsburgh Courier* noted, the song "sold 53,000 copies before it was released."¹⁴⁵) At this point, however, even *Billboard* resisted buying into the marketing of Johnny Ace. When the magazine reviewed ten new r&b records on August 18, it gave the Johnny Ace sides the lowest ratings of any of the twenty sides evaluated. "Another blues job by the late great Johnny Ace comes out of the can," the magazine said of "Don't You Know," and though "the loyal frater-

nity may want the disk, it's not up to the previous top efforts." As for "Still Loves You So," the impression was the same for "a very slow, melancholy, minor-key heartbreak-type blues." *Billboard* even found the Buddy Ace sides stronger than those of his brother.¹⁴⁶ St. Clair Alexander cut only these two sides for Robey as "Buddy Ace," moving to Chicago and changing his name to "St. Clair Ace"; Robey later signed the Texas musician Jimmy Lee Land to a Duke Records contract and made *him* Johnny's "brother," "Buddy Ace."¹⁴⁷

There was no reason for *Billboard* to attempt to resuscitate the career of Johnny Ace—especially when the Ace market was so flat and limited: perhaps this accounts for its cavalier rejection of both sides of Duke 154. A quarter of a century later, the "B" side of this record appears noteworthy. On "Don't You Know," words and music credited to John Alexander, Ace performs as a blues shouter in the manner of Big Joe Turner. The big band arrangement by Johnny Board, complete with recurring "Night Train" quotes, is the perfect background to showcase Ace's best performance at blues piano. It is his most interesting overall piano work as well: Ace's gospel turnaround at the end of the instrumental break is straight out of church, representing an impressive and early appearance of gospel sounds in r&b. "Still Love You So" is much less interesting. Written by (or at least credited to) Sherman Johnson, this AABA ballad had been recorded at a session in Los Angeles with the Johnny Otis Band almost three years before. It had been copyrighted with the other songs done at the Radio Recorders studio, but apparently Robey had never before considered putting it on a record. Bill Holford mastered this "outside tape" in Houston, assigning it an ACA number that was almost four hundred sides *after* Ace's last entry in the ACA logbook.¹⁴⁸ This release was the bottom of the Johnny Ace barrel for Robey.

Since Duke record releases did not represent the direction r&b was taking in early fall 1956, neither Johnny Ace nor Buddy Ace appeared in the national or territorial charts. At this time, the only Memphis musician to appear consistently on such charts was Elvis Presley, whose pop songs were not only crossing over to country and western but to r&b as well. Ace is mentioned in *Billboard* only once more in 1956, as a result of the death of James Dean. Varetta Dillard, whose tribute to Ace, "Johnny Has Gone," had constituted her last r&b hit, became the first artist to celebrate Dean ("I Miss You, Jimmy," Groove 167), with "other dirges to Dean" reportedly underway on various labels. "Any a.&r. men currently seen in a state of acute melancholia," observed *Billboard's* r&b columnist, "can be safely predicted to have a Dean disk under wraps."¹⁴⁹ Since none of the tributes to Dean succeeded in the r&b market, it is clear that while some of the world may have considered

Johnny Ace the “coloured James Dean,” devotees of r&b did not consider Dean to be the white Johnny Ace.

In July 1957 Robey told *Billboard* that *Johnny Ace Memorial Album Number Two* (a 12-inch LP) would contain “a number of never-before-released items along with some of the late singer’s biggest hit sides.”¹⁵⁰ In fact, all of the twelve songs included had been previously released. Most of them were “A” sides, with every single represented except Duke 128.¹⁵¹

Finally, in December 1958—four years after his death—Ace was brought to life for the last time when Robey reissued “Pledging My Love” in a remastered form, recoupled with the only posthumous song Robey had writer credit on: “Anymore.” “Pledging My Love” b/w “Anymore” is especially challenging to the discographer, since Robey cataloged it as Duke 136, the same number as the 1954 original (“Pledging My Love” b/w “No Money”). The half-page ad in *Billboard* promised:

The same *voice*, the same *artist*, again sings the once-in-a-lifetime smashes. TWO powerhouses, destined to create a new sensation in all markets, have been completely *re-mastered* and brought up-to-date via choral backdrop and modern instrumentation. But only this has been added . . . NOTHING taken away! It is JOHNNY who sings . . . and the strange “blue” undercurrent, the nostalgic warmth, the exuberant richness that so infectiously permeated his performances and made him and his songs eternally *great* are still there! So it will be, always! The most sensational singer of our times . . . the immortal JOHNNY ACE And The World Famous JORDANAIRE.¹⁵²

Bill Holford insists that he had nothing to do with the engineering of this infamous remastering of “Pledging My Love,” and Johnny Otis never forgave Robey for putting “those goddamn soprano eunuchs on there.”¹⁵³ Nor is the other song, “Anymore,” improved by adding a doo-wop chorus: while it may be less offensive than “Pledging” it is certainly sillier. “The original Johnny Ace recording gets an updated, souped-up backing to go with the vocal,” said *Billboard*, which went on to review the original flip side of “Pledging” (“No Money”) as the “B” side of the release—revealing that the actual record did not even exist at the time.¹⁵⁴ As it turned out, the record was a complete flop. It was the last attempt by Robey to resuscitate Ace as a recording artist.

The 1960s must have been a disappointment to Don Robey. Though he was able to exploit other Memphis musicians, notably Junior Walker and Bobby “Blue” Bland, he never again attained the crossover success of Johnny Ace, even though he signed and developed white musicians. As r&b became more popular (*Billboard* suspended publication of a

separate r&b chart between November 30, 1963, and January 23, 1965) Robey's importance as an independent entrepreneur in the field of black secular music began to diminish. He could not compete with the promotion and distribution efforts of relative newcomers Stax and Motown, despite his creation of additional subsidiary labels (Songbird, Backbeat, Sure-Shot). After losing a costly lawsuit against Chess Records, Robey sold his entire music business interests to ABC/Dunhill in 1973 for a reported one million dollars. By this time Robey's Lion and Don Publishing companies controlled 2,700 copyrights, and his various record labels had one hundred contracted artists (\$250,000 of unrecouped advanced royalties on active contracts) with approximately two thousand unreleased masters.¹⁵⁵

Don D. Robey died of a heart attack on June 16, 1975, at age seventy-one. *Living Blues* praised the r&b pioneer "whose business ventures brought employment, popularity, and fame to many blacks,"¹⁵⁶ but the *Rolling Stone* obituary doubted that he had written the songs credited to him and quoted the audio engineer Walter Andrus: "He was just like a character out of *Guys and Dolls*. You had to see him to believe him. He'd have a bunch of heavy guys around him all the time, carrying pistols and that kind of stuff, like a czar of the Negro underworld."¹⁵⁷

This unflattering profile did not surprise the Alexander family in Memphis. Twenty years earlier, immediately after Ace's funeral, Leslie Alexander had sent her daughter Norma to Houston to see Robey and arrange for some kind of payment to Johnny's widow and children. The family believed that Johnny had made a fortune in the music business. They had seen him driving expensive cars, they knew that he always carried large amounts of cash, and they were led to believe that he always had everything he needed. Evelyn Johnson, who ran Robey's Buffalo Booking Agency and was considered Ace's manager, knew his itinerary, Norma was told, "and if he's at the Apollo Theater in New York and he was out of funds they'd just wire him four or five hundred dollars—anything he needed." In addition, accounts of his death by the black press in Houston mentioned a new 1955 Oldsmobile he had just purchased and was about to pick up.¹⁵⁸ In Houston, Norma met with Don Robey and Evelyn Johnson. Johnny had no money coming, they told her, and the Oldsmobile mentioned in the newspapers did not belong to him. In fact, the singer owed the company money in royalties and expenses advanced to him before his death. The family engaged the services of a lawyer in Dallas, who later advised that Robey was too powerful and had too many friends in Texas for them to launch a successful suit.

Twenty years later, however, Jean Alexander filed a \$50,000 suit in federal court on behalf of her and the children against ABC Records, ABC/Dunhill Music, Duke Records, Peacock Records, Buffalo Booking

Agency, Lion Publishing Company, Evelyn Johnson, and Don D. Robey. "Johnny 'Ace' Alexander, in the year 1952," the suit alleged, "being in his early twenties, uneducated, having no business experience, placed himself, as an entertainer, artist and composer, into the hands of Don D. Robey, an experienced, mature businessman of Houston Texas, with long experience in the music field."¹⁵⁹ He worked "night and day" for Robey and Johnson, "his trusted managers and advisers," the suit charged, but "they gave him only spending money, furnished automobiles, transportation," and after his death "fraudulently concealed their obligations to the lawful heirs of the deceased."

Robey was already dead by this time, and Buffalo Booking Agency had been dissolved in 1968. Jean Alexander flatly refused to settle for \$5,000, but her lawyers advised her to accept the \$10,000 offered by Lion Publishing to keep the case from being removed to Houston, where the settlement might be withdrawn or reduced. Jean Alexander took \$3,333.34 of this amount in 1976, with shares to Glenn and Janet of \$3,333.33. The law firm received an additional \$3,750.

Johnny Ace's *Memorial Album Number II* was reissued in 1970 and reviewed enthusiastically by Bob Kirsch in *Rolling Stone*. Ace was "a master of early rock," Kirsch said, and his music is "a perfect example of rock in its earliest stages." He admitted that Ace's "kind of music is rarely heard these days. Our rock revival (Lewis, Haley, etc.) is actually a reactivation of rock's second wave. Johnny was the first." His album (Kirsch called it *Again . . . Johnny Sings* due to the huge slug line on the back cover) "is a masterpiece for what it is: a first step in the evolution of rock."¹⁶⁰ But by 1979, Johnny Ace was so forgotten a figure that Sheldon Harris did not see fit to include him in his giant biographical dictionary of blues singers, *Blues Who's Who*.¹⁶¹

In the 1980s Ace became a romantic figure for a new breed of rock historians, who projected their own post-Watergate conspiracy theories on his death. One theory—the "sinister" explanation—was that somebody slipped a bullet into Ace's gun while he was on stage and then suckered him into pointing it at his own head.¹⁶² Another "rumor" was that an assassin hired by the owner of Duke Records squeezed through a bathroom window, grabbed Ace from behind, stuck a gun in his mouth, blew his brains out, and then confidently walked away even though he was known to everyone in the room.¹⁶³ An even lower depth of falsification comes from the No-one-really-knows-what-happened-that-night-but-maybe-it-went-something-like-this school of writing, where the "historian" invents outrageous dialogue for the events backstage at Houston's City Auditorium.¹⁶⁴

Ace's musical career was also distorted in the decade of the 1980s by extensive revisionism, clearly aimed at the huge market represented by r&b record collectors. In 1986 Colin Escott told readers of *Goldmine*

that in 1972 he and Martin Hawkins, while cataloging tapes recorded at Sun Studio in Memphis, had discovered two songs "probably recorded by Johnny Ace." These songs ("Remember I Love You" and "I Cried [Last Night]") were in an unmarked box of tape that "disappeared" over the next ten years, he explained, before they could be given another hearing for inclusion in the *Sun Blues Box*.¹⁶⁵ One of these songs, however, emerged in 1989 as "the last unreleased Johnny Ace title" in the Various Artists album *The Original Memphis Blues Brothers* (Ace CHAD 265). Ray Topping, who wrote the jacket notes, claimed to have found, in an unmarked box "hidden away in a dusty corner" at the Modern Records tape archives, a reel of tape with only one song on it: the master for "I Cried" by Johnny Ace. Topping provides no evidence that the vocalist of "I Cried" is Johnny Ace, and, indeed, no one familiar with Ace's voice could make such a preposterous claim. Even worse for Ace's biographer, the album notes invented nonexistent documents to suggest that the annotator had done his research. The most completely fraudulent is a concocted telegram ("YOUR SON JOHNNY SHOT AND KILLED HIMSELF TONIGHT") from Evelyn Johnson to Leslie Alexander, reporting Ace's death *almost twenty-two hours before he died*.¹⁶⁶

Bob Kirsch pointed out in 1970 how "enigmatic" Ace and his recordings were: "Though he won virtually every blues award available, his voice was much smoother and his delivery more sedate than that which we commonly associate with 'soul' music." According to Kirsch, Ace's last recorded performances captured him in transition. "It's almost a compromise music, not black enough, yet not white enough."¹⁶⁷ Johnny Otis sees a pattern of discrimination against *all* of the r&b figures like Ace "who were not raw Mississippi blues singers" but were in the tradition of the sophisticated club act with "a little more musicality." These were the black performers who were "really ignored and almost put down by the white writers," he says:

You see, that's a form of arrogance, white arrogance, and I'll tell you what I mean by that. In other words, black people are not the best judge of what was the best art to come out of the community, but the white writers are. This is African-American art, and what you have to do is take your cue from the people of the community. They know better than you what they like and what is black artistry. And if you give it a chance you'll get so finally you begin to understand. Johnny Ace is a good example. He was too smooth for the white critics and the white writers for a long time.¹⁶⁸

Johnny Otis, the first of a breed of what Nelson George called "these new Negrophiles,"¹⁶⁹ arranged and produced most of the Johnny Ace

sides. Otis is a more modern extension of the white, rebellious jazz musician of the 1920s that Neil Leonard treats in *Jazz and the White Americans*, a figure like Mezz Mezzrow, who loved black music and whose "rejection of traditional standards was so vehement that he self-consciously gave up his ties with the white world and moved into a Negro community."¹⁷⁰

Like jazz in the post-World War I era, rhythm and blues in the post-World War II period was appropriated by a generation of young white Americans. Virtually every explanation Neil Leonard posits for the appeal of jazz in the 1920s is true for r&b in the 1950s, though what he calls the "acceptance phase" was never so thorough for r&b as it was for jazz. We can place the moment of transition, the point at which a previously self-contained African-American musical idiom entered the consciousness of the majority culture, in the posthumous success of the mainstream pop market of "Pledging My Love." Perhaps this song would have crossed over even without Ace's death; perhaps his death caused this first breakthrough of the idiom into the white charts. Whichever may be true, Johnny Ace stands as the protomartyr of rock and roll, the first of many figures who lived fast and died young. Like many later r&b/r&r deaths, his death deprived us of a talent that was maturing beyond its early roots; like his later cohorts, he left us a legacy of recorded performances that will be enjoyed as long as people continue to listen to rhythm and blues.

JOHN "JOHNNY ACE" ALEXANDER:
AN ANNOTATED DISCOGRAPHY OF THE TWENTY-ONE
RECORDED SIDES

1951, *Memphis YMCA*, Memphis. Johnny Ace, vocal and piano; Earl Forest, drums; M. T. Murphy (?), guitar; Tuff Green (?), bass; Adolph "Billy" Duncan (?), sax; unknown vibes player.¹⁷¹

1. (FL-133) "Midnight Hours Journey" (Flair 1015): A single side recorded with portable equipment by Jules and Joe Bihari when Ace still recorded as John Alexander. Smooth, cleanly arranged slow blues credited to "Josea." Not copyrighted. Released Sept. 1953, after Ace was an established Duke Records star, as the "A" side of Flair 1015 (Earl Forest's "Trouble and Me" is the flip side). No chart action. "Midnight Hours Journey" is the most difficult Johnny Ace single to acquire.

Spring 1952, WDIA studios, Memphis. Johnny Ace, vocal and piano; Earl Forest, drums; Adolph "Billy" Duncan, sax; unknown guitarist on "Follow the Rule."

2. (R-102-A) "My Song" (Duke 102): Recorded with the Beale Streeters by David James Mattis's Tri-State Recording Co. An AABA ballad (I-vi-ii-V⁷) credited to "James" on the record label but copyrighted (unpublished) as a David James Mattis/John L. [sic] Alexander collaboration, July 11, 1952 (EU280969). Released June 1952 by Tri-State Recording Co. (first pressings specify Tri-State Recording Co., Memphis, Tenn.). Subsequent pressings, administered by Don D. Robey, substitute, below the

Duke logo, "PEACOCK RECORDS AFFILIATE—Houston, Texas." Debuted on *Billboard's* r&b charts Aug. 9, 1952—a number one song for nine weeks and the record that started Ace's career.

3. (R-102-B) "Follow the Rule" (Duke 102): Backup group billed as the Beale Streeters. A blues composition credited to "Ace." Not copyrighted. Released June 1952 as the "B" side of "My Song."

August or September 1952, Audio Company of America, Houston. Johnny Ace, vocal and piano (organ on "Cross My Heart"); Earl Forest, drums; George Joyner, bass; unknown tenor sax; unknown alto sax; unknown vibes player on "Cross My Heart" and "Burlie Cutie."

4. (ACA 2268) "Angel" (Duke 107): With the Beale Streeters. An AABA ballad (with the plagal formula I-vi-IV-[iv]-I) credited to David James Mattis and John Alexander, copyrighted (unpublished) Dec. 1, 1952 (EU295783). Released Dec. 1952 as the "B" side of "Cross My Heart." Robey insisted it was the second hit song of Duke 107, but it never appeared on the *Billboard* charts.

5. (ACA 2271) "Aces Wild" ["Ace's Wild"] (Duke 112): With the Beale Streeters. Instrumental blues credited to John Alexander, featuring Ace's piano. Copyrighted (unpublished) by Lion Musical Pub. Co. as "Ace's Wild," July 20, 1953 (EU311271). Planned as the flip side of "Angel," it was released May 1953 as the "B" side of "The Clock."

6. (ACA 2285) "Cross My Heart" (Duke 107): With the Beale Streeters, featuring Ace playing a Hammond organ that was in the ACA studio for another project. An AABA ballad (I-vi-ii-V⁷) credited to Don Deadric Robey and David James Mattis, copyrighted (unpublished) Sept. 25, 1952 (EU289157). Released Dec. 1952, debuting on *Billboard's* r&b charts Jan. 31, 1953—Ace's second straight hit, peaking at number three.

7. (ACA 2288) "Burlie Cutie" (Duke 132): With the Beale Streeters but credited on the label to "Johnny Board and His Orchestra." An instrumental blues composed, according to the record label, by "John Alexander." Not copyrighted. Held for more than two years before being released Oct. 1954 as the "B" side of "Never Let Me Go."

January 13, 1953, Audio Company of America, Houston. Johnny Ace, vocal and piano; Earl Forest, drums; Fats Theus (?) or Bill Fort (?) sax; George Joyner, bass; unknown guitarist; Johnny Otis, percussion. Otis remembers playing the tick of the clock with a drumstick hitting the rim of the bass drum.

8. (ACA 2463) "The Clock" (Duke 112): Accompaniment wrongly credited on the label to the Beale Streeters. The only song recorded at this session. An AABA ballad (I-I-V⁷-I A sections with IV-I-V of V-V bridge). BMI lists David James Mattis and John Alexander as writers; copyrighted (unpublished) by Lion Musical Pub. Co. with only Mattis credited as writer, Apr. 9, 1953 (EU311272). Released May 1953, debuting on *Billboard's* r&b charts July 4, 1953—Ace's third straight hit and a number one song for five weeks.

August 28, 1953, Radio Recorders, Los Angeles. Johnny Ace, vocal and piano (organ on "Please Forgive Me"); Don Johnson, trumpet; George Washington, trombone; James Von Street, tenor sax; Fred Ford, baritone sax; Pete Lewis, guitar; Albert Winston, bass; Leard Bell, drums; Johnny Otis, vibes; Willie Mae Thornton, vocal on "Yes Baby."

9. (RR-109-11) "Please Forgive Me" (Duke 128): With the Johnny Otis Orchestra. An AABA ballad (I-V⁷ of IV-[iv]-I-vi-ii-V⁷) credited to Joseph August and Don Deadric Robey, copyrighted (unpublished) by Lion Pub. Co., Nov. 2, 1953 (EU336479).

Released Apr. 1954, debuting on *Billboard's* r&b charts June 19, 1954, peaking at number six and representing Ace's fifth consecutive hit.

10. (RR-110-1) "Saving My Love For You" (Duke 118): An arrangement featuring Otis on vibes. An AABA ballad (I-iii-IV-[iv]-I-vi-ii-V⁷) credited to Sherman "Blues" Johnson on the label and copyrighted (unpublished), words and music by Sherman Johnson as an employee for hire of Diamond Record Co., Inc., Oct. 15, 1951 (EU253097). Additionally copyrighted (unpublished) by Lion Pub. Co., words and music by Don Deadric Robey, Nov. 2, 1953 (EU336478). Released Dec. 1953, debuting on *Billboard's* r&b charts Dec. 26, 1953, climbing to number two. Ace's fourth consecutive hit.

11. (RR-111-1) "Yes, Baby" (Duke 118): An uptempo blues duet with Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton, with solos for tenor sax and guitar. Credited on the label to "J. Ace" but copyrighted (unpublished) by Lion Pub. Co., words and music by Don Deadric Robey, Nov. 2, 1953 (EU336477). Released Dec. 1953 as the "B" side of "Saving My Love For You." Robey claimed it was a hit single on its own. "Yes Baby" was the last song sung by Johnny Ace. After performing it with Thornton at Houston's City Auditorium on Christmas Night, 1954, to close the first set, Ace killed himself backstage during intermission.

12. (ACA 3336; RR matrix unknown) "Still Love You So" (Duke 154): Not mastered until Apr. 1956 at the Audio Company of America studio in Houston. ACA owner Bill Holford's logbooks indicate the song was "an outside tape." An AABA ballad (V⁷ of IV-[iv]-I-vi-ii-V) credited to Sherman Johnson and copyrighted (unpublished) by Lion Pub. Co., Nov. 2, 1953 (EU336476). Released June 1956 with no chart action.

January 17, 1954. *Audio Company of America, Houston*. Johnny Ace, vocal and piano; James Von Streeter, sax; Pete Lewis, guitar; Albert Winston, bass; Leard Bell, drums; Johnny Otis, vibes; George Washington (?), trombone on "You've Been Gone So Long."

13. (ACA 2798) "Anymore" (Duke 144): Accompaniment wrongly credited on the label to the Johnny Board Orchestra. Arrangement features Otis's vibes and a tenor sax solo. An AABA ballad (I-vi-ii-V) credited on the label to "D. Robey-Fats Washington" and copyrighted (unpublished) by Lion Pub. Co. twice—on June 7, 1954 with Robey as sole author (EU360289) and on Feb. 18, 1955 as a collaboration between Don Deadric Robey and Ferdinand Washington (EU387067). Released June 1955, entering the *Billboard* r&b charts Aug. 6, 1955 and reaching number eight (the only Ace hit *released* posthumously). Note: the *original* release of this side is backed with the Ace blues composition "How Can You Be So Mean?" Three-and-a-half years later, "Anymore" was remastered with a vocal track by the Jordanares, becoming the "B" side of a remastered version of "Pledging My Love," and released Dec. 1958 as Duke 136 (originally Duke 136 was "Pledging My Love" b/w "No Money"). This latter version sold poorly and is rare today.

14. (ACA 2799) "So Lonely" (Duke 148): Accompaniment wrongly credited on the label to the Johnny Board Orchestra. Ace's vocal is mournful and vulnerable—his Charles Brown side. A blues composition credited to John Alexander and copyrighted (unpublished) by Lion Pub. Co., Mar. 15, 1954 (EU351078). Released Jan. 1956 as the "B" side of "I'm Crazy Baby."

15. (ACA 2800) "You've Been Gone (So Long)" (Duke 128): A tightly arranged shuffle blues. Composition credited to "Johnny Ace" on the label and copyrighted (unpublished) by Lion Pub. Co., words and music by John Alexander, Mar. 15, 1954 (EU351079). Wrongly credited at BMI to "Johnny Acea." Arrangement features

an electric guitar solo by Pete Lewis in a style Chuck Berry later made famous. Released Apr. 1954 as the "B" side of "Please Forgive Me."

16. (ACA 2801) "Pledging My Love" (Duke 136): Accompaniment wrongly credited on the label to the Johnny Board Orchestra—the vibe work on the record is clearly by Johnny Otis. An AABA ballad (I-ii⁷-V⁷-ii⁷-V⁷-I) credited to "Washington-Robey" on the label.

The song was copyrighted twice as an unpublished work by Lion Pub. Co., with Don Deadric Robey as sole author (Mar. 15, 1954 [EU351083]; Jan. 26, 1955 [EU384205]). It was also copyrighted twice as a published song: on Jan. 27, 1955 (EP86776) by "Wemar Music Corp. & Lion Musical Pub. Co.," with authors given as Don D. Robey and F. Washington, and on Feb. 9, 1955 (EP88950), with the same authors, by Lion. On Jan. 21, 1955 BMI listed the song as a 50/50 collaboration between Robey and Washington for the purpose of income from performance rights.

The first published copyright of "Pledging My Love" is a lead sheet, designed for the use of performers; the second is full-fledged sheet music for voice and piano, the arrangement credited to Stanley Applebaum; Meridian Music Corporation is listed as sole selling agent for Lion. "Pledging My Love" is the only Johnny Ace song to be copyrighted as a published work.

Released Dec. 1954, the side debuted on *Billboard's* r&b charts Jan. 22, 1955, was number one for ten weeks, and won *Billboard's* r&b Triple Crown award (first in sales, radio airplay, and jukebox play). It entered the pop charts Feb. 19, 1955 (reaching number seventeen) and made the "Honor Roll of Hits" list a week later. A BMI Millionaire Song, logging over a million performances, *Billboard's* Most Played R&B Record of 1955, and the first Duke or Peacock record to sell initially more 45-rpm units than 78s.

Note: the *original* release of this side was backed with the Ace blues "No Money." Four years later it was remastered with a vocal track by the Jordanaires, recoupled with a remastered "Anymore," and released again as Duke 136. This version sold poorly and is rare today.

July 22, 1954. Audio Company of America, Houston. Johnny Ace, vocal and piano; Johnny Board, tenor and alto sax; Milton Bradford, baritone and tenor sax; Joe Scott, trumpet; Milton Hopkins, guitar; Curtis Tillman, bass; C. C. Pinkston, drums and vibes.

17. (ACA 2934) "Never Let Me Go" (Duke 132): With the Johnny Board Band. Ace's vocal is soft and relaxed—his Nat Cole side. An AABA ballad (I-vi-ii-V, but employing more extended contemporary harmonies: major 7ths, 9ths and 13ths.) Credited to Joe Scott, copyrighted (unpublished) by Lion Pub. Co., Aug. 9, 1954 (EU367000). Released Oct. 1954, debuting on *Billboard's* r&b charts Oct. 23, 1954 reaching number nine on the jukebox play chart. Ace's sixth straight hit but the most marginal.

18. (ACA 2935) "Don't You Know" (Duke 154): Backed by the Johnny Board Band. Big Band shuffle blues, Tommy Dorsey style, featuring Ace's piano, complete with a gospel turnaround, and vocal as close to blues shouting as Ace ever gets. Composition credited to him and copyrighted (unpublished) by Lion Pub. Co., Aug. 9, 1954 (EU367004). Released June 1956 as the last Ace record. No chart action.

19. (ACA 2936) "No Money" (Duke 136): Backed by the Johnny Board Band. Big band blues (Nick Tosches thinks this is Ace's best), featuring excellent tenor sax work. Composition credited to "John Alexander" and copyrighted (unpublished) by Lion Pub. Co., Aug. 9, 1954 (EU367003). Wrongly credited at BMI to "James Alexander." Released Dec. 1954 as the "B" side of "Pledging My Love."

20. (ACA 2937) "How Can You Be So Mean?" (Duke 144): Backed by the Johnny Board Band. Big band blues composition credited to "John Alexander" and copyrighted (unpublished) by Lion Pub. Co., Aug. 9, 1954 (EU367002). Released June 1955 as the "B" side of "Anymore."

21. (ACA 2938) "I'm Crazy Baby" (Duke 148): The last side recorded at the last Ace session. Backed by the Johnny Board Band. Ace is a big band crooner here, for the first time employing his lower register and angular, Sammy Davis, Jr. phrasing. Showcases Ace's tinkling piano, high in the mix. The arrangement is in the style of Count Basie, and the most musically sophisticated of any of Ace's sides. An AABA ballad in A^b (most of Ace's music is in the key of C) with the following progression: A^b-A⁷-A^b-D⁷-D^b-D^b-A^b/E^b-F⁷-B^{b7}-E^{b7}-A^b with a I-vi-ii-V turnaround. Credited to Christopher Columbus Pinkston and copyrighted (unpublished) by Lion Pub. Co., Sept. 3, 1954 (EU369673). Released Jan. 1956. No chart action.

NOTES

Material for this article first appeared in two papers read at consecutive annual meetings of the American Culture Association: "Johnny Ace" (Toronto, 1990) and "Pledging My Love: The Biography of a Song" (San Antonio, 1991). In addition, some sections in an altered format are included in "Johnny Ace: A Case Study in the Diffusion and Transformation of Minority Culture," *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Scholarship* 17 (1992): 209–39.

1. For a mainstream history of American music that makes this claim, see chap. 27, "Everywhere the Blues," in Gilbert Chase, *America's Music from the Pilgrims to the Present*, rev. 3d ed., (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 489–505.

2. "1955: The Year R&B Took Over Pop Field," *Billboard*, Nov. 12, 1955, 126.

3. "Strange Case of Johnny Ace," *Ebony*, July 1955, 63–68. Hereafter referred to as *Ebony*.

4. Near the end of World War II, Private Cecil Gant's "I Wonder" (Gilt-Edge 500) entered the pop charts as number twenty for one week on Mar. 17, 1945, after five months of r&b success.

5. Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 61. Appendix C ("Blues Styles: An Annotated Outline"), 217–24, includes the three phases of the Memphis synthesis.

6. Jim Salem, "Johnny Ace: His Death and How It Played in America," *Goldmine*, Oct. 5, 1990.

7. Norma (Alexander) Williams, sister of Johnny Ace, telephone interview with author, Feb. 8, 1991, and in-person interview, June 9, 1992. Born in 1928, Norma is older than John, Jr., but since "he told everybody we were twins" she is sometimes referred to as his twin sister Norma. Unless otherwise noted, family information and quotations attributed to Ace's sister Norma are from these interviews.

8. Ernest Withers, telephone interview with the author, Feb. 23, 1990, and in-person interview, Oct. 18, 1990. The photographer Ernest C. Withers, "The Dean of Beale Street," took the early publicity photographs of Johnny Ace and arranged Ace's Memphis funeral at Clayborn Temple.

9. There is understandable speculation concerning the relationship between John Alexander, Jr., and his father. Nick Tosches (*Unsung Heroes of Rock 'n Roll* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984]), claims that "it was understood from the beginning" that the Alexander surname was not to be used on Johnny's records "so that his father, the Reverend, might be saved from any shame" (134). According to the family, Rev. Alexander never felt shamed, and father and son were never estranged.

10. According to Withers, neither B. B. King nor Bobby "Blue" Bland could read or write at the beginning of their careers. When King first went on the road he took an elementary teacher named Wilson with him. "I don't know who taught Bobby Bland," Withers says, "but [he] had to learn to read and had to do it quick, because there was a great big void that had to be filled when Ace died."

11. Louis Cantor, *Wheelin' on Beale* (New York: Pharos Books, 1992), 12. Cantor calls Nat D. the "Jackie Robinson of radio" (25). For additional information on Williams, see Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall, *Beale Black & Blue: Life and Music on Black America's Main Street* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

12. Virtually all encyclopedias and dictionaries make John Alexander a WW II vet. See, for example, the entries in *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), and *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll* (New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1983).

13. Lois Jean Alexander, widow of Johnny Ace, interview with author. June 10, 1992. Subsequent quotes by Jean Alexander are from this interview.

14. Quoted in Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 5.

15. Cantor, *Wheelin'*, 21. The term "Mother Station" was applied later, after the WDIA format had been studied, copied, and imitated by many other radio stations (170).

16. Charles Sawyer, *The Arrival of B. B. King: The Authorized Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 58–63. Sawyer names Richard Sanders (sax), Earl Forest and Solomon Hardy (drums), "Junior" Lockwood (guitar), and Ford Nelson and John Alexander (piano) as the first generation of bandmembers. Encyclopedias sometimes include Junior Parker and the sax player Willie Nix in the list of musicians.

17. Quoted in Arnold Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters: The Golden Years of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 225.

18. Sawyer, *B. B. King*, 63.

19. Nick Tosches, *Unsung Heroes of Rock 'n Roll* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984), 133.

20. Ernestine Mitchell, interview with author. Memphis, Tenn., Oct. 18, 1990.

21. Peter Grendysa, "Johnny Ace, The 'Ace' of Duke," *Goldmine*, Sept. 25, 1987, 28.

22. Tosches, *Unsung Heroes*, 133. Keil, who tried to sort this material out in the mid-1960s, admits in *Urban Blues* that although he interviewed B. B. King, Bobby Bland, and Junior Parker specifically about developments in Memphis during this period he was still confused. Keil blamed it on the reluctance of the musicians to reexamine the "wild oats" phases of their careers (66).

23. Quoted in McKee and Chisenhall, *Beale Black & Blue*, 248.

24. Cantor, *Wheelin'*, 205.

25. "Moohah" [A. C. Williams], "What's Happening in the Big 'M,'" *Memphis Tri-State Defender*, Nov. 24, 1951, 10. Quotation presented in its original spelling and punctuation.

26. Shaw, *Honkers*, 204.

27. Sawyer, *B. B. King*, 67.

28. George A. Moonigan and Roger Meeden, "Duke Records—the Early Years: An Interview with David J. Mattis," *Whiskey, Women, and . . .*, June 1984, 20–21. While virtually all accounts of the early Duke years rely on this 1984 interview, Mattis's memory of events some thirty years before may be flawed, and certainly is influenced by the unsatisfactory conclusion to the struggle with Don Robey over the ownership of Duke Records. Robert Palmer suggests that the name "Beale Streeters" was given to the group by people who observed "their taste for the high life of black Memphis's main thoroughfare" (*Deep Blues* [New York: Viking Press, 1981; rpt., New York: Penguin Books, 1988], 230).

29. David James Mattis, telephone interview with author. Nov. 3, 1992. Unless otherwise noted, quotations attributed to Mattis are from this interview.

30. Arnold Shaw, *The Rockin' '50s* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1974), 93.

31. Moonigan and Meeden, "Mattis Interview," 19. The first Duke release, *The Gospel Travelers' "God's Chariot, Parts 1 and 2,"* was numbered G-1 (a gospel recording); the second release, Rosco Gordon's "Hey Fat Girl" b/w "Tell Daddy," was numbered R-1 (an r&b record), changed in later pressings to R-101. Duke 102 is therefore the third record released.

32. Colin Escott with Martin Hawkins, *Good Rockin' Tonight: Sun Records and the Birth of Rock 'N' Roll* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 22.

33. Moonigan and Meeden, "Mattis Interview," 18.

34. Withers, telephone interview. The black community believes that white recording company owners regularly make fortunes on black talent, but it is not always true. Mattis, in particular, was the fairest operator Ace dealt with in the music business.

35. Pat Baird, telephone interviews with author. July 25, 1990, and Dec. 10, 1991. Baird is Senior Director, National Publicity, for BMI.

36. "That Rhythm . . . Those Blues," *The American Experience*, George T. Nierenberg (producer), 1988.

37. Galen Gart and Roy C. Ames, *Duke/Peacock Records: An Illustrated History with Discography* (Milford, N.H.: Big Nickel, 1990), 3.

38. *Ibid.*, 51.

39. See Cantor, *Wheelin'*, 183. Cantor cites the gospel historian Kip Lornell's estimate that in the 1950s Robey's Peacock label and Buffalo Booking Agency recorded and booked fifty-two of the ninety Memphis gospel groups.

40. Moonigan and Meeden, "Mattis Interview," 22.

41. Johnny Otis, telephone interview with author. Nov. 7, 1989. Johnny Otis, who produced most of the Ace sides, is an important figure in the transformation of r&b to rock and roll. His "Barrel House Stomp" (1949), "Rockin' Blues" (1950), and "Rock Me Baby" (1953), are r&b tunes often mentioned as early r&r records. In 1958, he had a Top 10 record for Capitol called "Willie and the Hand Jive." Unless otherwise noted, quotations attributed to Johnny Otis are from this interview.

42. *Billboard*, Aug. 2, 1952, 105. Mattis had been given a tour of the Houston operation in the summer of 1952, though he had not met Robey personally, and probably signed partnership papers in July. Mattis remembers signing the papers in the fall, when he met Robey at a New York convention (Moonigan and Meeden, "Mattis Interview," 19), but Robey was clearly running the operation well before then.

43. Chart positions in this article have been taken from rhythm and blues charts of dated issues of *Billboard* as noted. For summaries of the various race and rhythm and blues charts as published by *Billboard*, beginning with the World War II "Harlem Hit Parade," see *Joel Whitburn's Top R&B Singles, 1942-1988* (Menomonee Falls, Wis.: Record Research, 1988).

44. Mattis, telephone interview.

45. *Ebony*, 65.

46. Gart and Ames, *Duke/Peacock Records*, 3.

47. Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm & Blues* (New York: Plume Books, 1988), 34.

48. Shaw, *Honkers*, 92. LeRoy Carr was born in Nashville, raised in Indianapolis, and made his reputation with "How Long, How Long Blues" (Vocalion, 1928), a song he co-wrote, and "In the Evening When the Sun Goes Down," for which he was both author and composer. According to Shaw, Carr's "great forte was in creating a mood, especially of longing and loneliness." His death in 1935 is "shrouded in mystery" (6-7).

49. *Ibid.*, 89. Black artists in this tradition, contemporary with Ace, include Lowell Fulson, Percy Mayfield, Amos Milburn, Jesse Belvin, Ivory Joe Hunter, and the pre-gospel Ray Charles. In an earlier work (*The World of Soul* [New York: Paperback Library, 1971]), Shaw calls such black crooners "the Oreo singers." "Although it is doubtless a pejorative term," he explains, "I am using it merely as a descriptive one" (105). Arnold Shaw was involved with postwar r&b from 1945, when as director of publicity for Leeds Music Corporation (MCA) he promoted Cecil Gant's "I Wonder," through the period of the 1950s when r&b became rock and roll. As the general professional manager for Hill & Range Songs in spring 1954, for example, he arranged for his mainstream publishing powerhouse to buy half of "Sh-Boom," the song that started the frantic activity of white performers covering black artists in the 1954–55 season.

50. Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll*, rev. and expanded ed., (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 143.

51. Tosches, *Unsung Heroes*, 26.

52. Gillett, *Sound*, 143. Brown's first hit was "Drifting Blues" (Aladdin, 1945), a song performed "tear-stained with self-pity" (Shaw, *Honkers*, 230).

53. "Talent Corner," *Billboard*, Jan. 29, 1955, 34.

54. Bob Rolontz, "Rhythm & Blues Notes," *Billboard*, Aug. 23, 1952, 35. Contemporary cover versions of "My Song" were released by Dinah Washington (Mercury), Hadda Brooks (Okeh), and Marie Adams (Peacock), in which final case Robey was in effect covering his own song. In *Duke/Peacock Records*, Gant and Ames quote from a *Cash Box* item that Irving Marcus was seeing "that the lid he nailed on the 'My Song' bootleggers" stayed shut (32), an additional indicator of the song's popularity. Seven weeks after breaking into the top ten in retail sales, "My Song" listed number five on jukebox play (Sept. 20, 1952). For the entire year it placed number six (retail) and number seven (jukebox) according to *Billboard*, Dec. 27, 1952, 19.

55. "Will the '53 Bubble Become The '54 Boiler?," *Melody Maker*, Jan. 2, 1954, 3.

56. Reproduced without attribution in Moonigan and Meeden, "Mattis Interview," 21, but believed to be a *Cash Box* item. "It's a simple melody," the short review points out, "constructed melodically and harmonically just like *So Long*."

57. Bob Rolontz, "Rhythm & Blues Notes," *Billboard*, Nov. 8, 1952, 48.

58. "Rhythm & Blues Ramblings," *Cash Box*, 14, no. 16 (Jan. 10, 1953): 16, reprinted in Galen Gant, ed., *First Pressings: The History of Rhythm & Blues*, vol. 3, 1953 (Milford, N.H.: Big Nickel, 1989), 7.

59. Bill Holford, interview with author. Houston, Texas, Mar. 8, 1991. It is generally believed that these sides by Ace, Bland, Forest, and Gordon were recorded in Memphis at the WDIA studio. The standard discography in the postwar blues field (Mike Leadbitter and Neil Slaven, *Blues Records, 1943–1987: A Selective Discography* [London: Record Information Services, 1987]) lists Memphis as the recording location, and Mattis specifically remembers cutting "Cross My Heart" and "Angel." Bill Holford, however, kept meticulous studio logbooks not only of songs that he recorded but "outside material" that he mastered for pressing as well. I have seen the originals of these logbooks, which suggest that the only Ace songs recorded and released from Memphis were "Midnight Hours Journey," "My Song," and "Follow the Rule." The ACA log numbers for the Ace sides are 2268 ("Angel"), 2271 ("Aces Wild"), 2285 ("Cross My Heart"), and 2288 ("Burlie Cutie"). See Gant and Ames, *Duke/Peacock Records*, for a reproduction of the ACA logs (205–23). Additional quotations attributed to Holford are from this interview.

60. "Cross My Heart" (EU289157) was registered for copyright as an unpublished song by Robey's Lion Publishing Company on Sept. 15, 1952, with words and music by Don Deadric Robey and David James Mattis.

61. Milton Hopkins, interview with author, Houston, Texas, Mar. 8, 1991. Hopkins, the cousin of the legendary blues guitarist Lightnin' Hopkins, joined the Johnny Ace

band in late 1952. Though it is doubtful that Don Robey was ever an author or composer, he ended up with approximately 1,200 song copyrights—"more songs than Holland-Dozier-Holland and Harlan Howard put together" (Baird, telephone interview). In the first half of 1954, Robey's songwriter credit ranged from "Baby, What's Your Pants Doing Wet" to "Love of Jesus."

62. Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, interview with author. Birmingham, Ala. Oct. 10, 1990.

63. Grendysa, "Johnny Ace," 28.

64. *Billboard*, Jan. 3, 1953, 29; Jan. 10, 1953, 24; Jan. 17, 1953, 42, 44, 52.

65. "Odd But True! Hit Disc May Lose Money," *New York Age-Defender*, June 12, 1954, p. 9. Robey told this story in connection with Duke 118 ("Saving My Love For You" b/w "Yes, Baby"), the second record he claimed was a two-sided hit.

66. Moonigan and Meeden, "Mattis Interview," 22. Mattis came up with his notion of a fair artist royalty rate, he says, when he was told that Nat Cole received five cents a record.

67. *Ebony*, 67.

68. Quoted in Dempsey J. Travis, *An Autobiography of Black Jazz* (Chicago: Urban Research Institute, 1983), 214, 216. On the Ace recordings, orchestra credits ("We were all working for Johnny Ace," Hopkins says) are attributed to the "Johnny Board Band," the "Johnny Board Orchestra," or "Johnny Board & His Orchestra," sometimes misattributing the group.

69. Mattis remembers cutting this song in Memphis and sending the tape to Houston, but both Holford and Johnny Otis insist on the Houston location for the setting. I have not been able to verify the Memphis story, but I do not doubt that the song was *created* the way Mattis remembers: "There was this melody called 'Two Loves Have I' and I told [Ace] to fake it. And that's what came out. I had the lyrics for him, so he got the music and I took the lyrics. I thought that was fair, but nobody else thought so. Everybody thought I was stupid."

70. Moonigan and Meeden, "Mattis Interview," 22. The date of the dissolution of the partnership has been established by a letter recently discovered by Galen Gart. The letter, written by Earl F. Walborg, a Houston accountant, is dated Aug. 14, 1953, but sets Apr. 15, 1953, as the date that "Mr. Don Robey purchased the [Duke Records] partnership interest of Mr. David J. Mattis." (Gart and Ames, *Duke/Peacock Records*, 35.)

71. Gart and Ames, *Duke/Peacock Records*, 24. John Alexander was never registered as a BMI writer. In 1990, BMI records revealed that the Alexander performance rights money for "My Song," "The Clock," and other copyrights was being sent to England, since the author was believed to be affiliated with the United Kingdom's Performing Rights Society. Lois Jean Alexander, Ace's widow and the heir to his musical properties, had been receiving mechanical rights money for Ace's compositions from MCA Records, but first heard of the existence of BMI from me (telephone interview, Oct. 1, 1991). In June 1992 the attorneys for BMI agreed to change their records and affiliate John "Johnny Ace" Alexander as a BMI writer posthumously as soon as the necessary legal documents could be processed.

72. The title of this song is spelled both with and without the apostrophe. I prefer the title as filed with the copyright office, "Ace's Wild," which expresses an important aspect of the artist's personality.

73. "Reviews of This Week's New Records," *Billboard*, June 27, 1953, 26. The "B" side of a record, which was not often played on the radio and didn't sell records, could still be successful as a jukebox selection, especially an instrumental side that provided good background music.

74. Gart and Ames, *Duke/Peacock Records*, 56.

75. "Peacock, Duke to Houston," *Billboard*, Jan. 30, 1954, 22.

76. Gart and Ames, *Duke/Peacock Records*, 58–60. One of Robey's new artists, the singer/songwriter Joseph "Google Eyes" August, recorded two songs at this session with the Johnny Otis band (released as Duke 117) and furnished Ace with one of his future hits, "Please Forgive Me," the writer credit of which August would have to split with Robey. Little Richard was too wild for Robey's taste; his records were not successful until Bumps Blackwell produced him in New Orleans for Art Rupe's Specialty label (Charles White, *The Life and Times of Little Richard* [New York: Harmony Books, 1984]).
77. Review of Johnny Ace, Apollo, New York, *Variety*, Oct. 28, 1953, 55.
78. Dave Hoekstra, "Brother Sings Hits of the Late Johnny Ace," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Dec. 24, 1986, p. 42. The description of Ace's performance style is by St. Clair Alexander, known professionally as Buddy Ace and later as St. Clair Ace, who saw his brother perform at Milwaukee's Riverview Ballroom in Jan. 1953.
79. Bob Rolontz, "Rhythm and Blues Notes," *Billboard*, Dec. 5, 1953, 38.
80. Mitchell, interview.
81. "New Records to Watch," *Billboard*, Dec. 12, 1953, 32.
82. "Rhythm and Blues Notes," *Billboard*, Feb. 20, 1954, 43. Quotation presented in its original spelling.
83. "Johnny Ace Discs Hits [sic]," *New York Age-Defender*, Feb. 13, 1954, p. 9.
84. Leadbitter and Slaven, *Blues Records*, 12.
85. "Saving My Love for You" was on the top ten retail sales list for only nine of its nineteen weeks on the charts. It appeared as a Chicago territorial hit (number nine) only in its last week, and never charted at all in New Orleans or Baltimore/Washington. Later, it became clear that jukebox operators had been ahead of record dealers in supplying young, white Americans with the black music they so obviously favored, and that jukebox play was perhaps a more reliable indicator of popularity for r&b than record sales.
86. "Station Demonstrates Its Listening Power," reprinted without attribution in Galen Gart, ed., *First Pressings: The History of Rhythm & Blues, Volume 4, 1954*, (Milford, N.H.: Big Nickel, 1990), 25.
87. Reprinted in Gart, ed., *First Pressings: 1954*, 41.
88. "Blues 'Royalty' On Apollo Stage," *New York Age-Defender*, Apr. 24, 1954, p. 6.
89. Review of Johnny Ace and Willie Mae Thornton, Apollo, New York, *Variety*, Apr. 28, 1954, 53.
90. Bob Rolontz and Joel Friedman, "Teen-Agers Demand Music With a Beat, Spur Rhythm-Blues," *Billboard*, Apr. 24, 1954, 1.
91. "Review Spotlight on . . . Johnny Ace," *Billboard*, May 22, 1954, 59.
92. "This Week's Best Buys," *Billboard*, June 5, 1954, 44.
93. Tosches, *Unsung Heroes*, 136.
94. Grendysa, "Johnny Ace," 28. The guitar player for the Johnny Otis Band, which backed Ace on "You've Been Gone So Long," was Pete Lewis. "Chuck Berry was the innovator of a lot of things," Johnny Otis says, "but we all borrowed from something. Chuck Berry borrowed from Pete Lewis, and [Lewis] borrowed from T-Bone Walker, heavily."
95. "Talent Topics," reprinted in Gart, ed., *First Pressings: 1954*, 61, 72.
96. Colin Escott, "Johnny Ace: The First Rock 'n' Roll Casualty," *Goldmine*, Nov. 21, 1986, 16.
97. "Review Spotlight on . . . Johnny Ace," *Billboard*, Sept. 18, 1954, 38.
98. "This Week's Best Buys," *Billboard*, Oct. 2, 1954, 44.
99. Tosches, *Unsung Heroes*, 136.
100. Display ad, *Billboard*, Dec. 25, 1954, 38.
101. Willie Mae Thornton, Deposition, State of Texas, County of Harris (Dec. 26, 1954).

102. *Inquest Proceedings: John Alexander known as Johnnie [sic] Ace*. State of Texas, County of Harris (Dec. 26, 1954). It was appropriate for a Justice of the Peace to rule on the cause of death in Texas before the state's Medical Examiner Law was established in 1958.

103. *Ebony*, 63.

104. "Bandleader Killed in 'Roulette,'" *New York Times*, Dec. 27, 1954, p. 21.

105. Ralph Matthews, "He Gambled with Death and Lost: Johnny Ace Lived on Borrowed Time," *Cleveland Call and Post*, Jan. 15, 1955, city ed. Although this is the most complete newspaper account of Ace's career, it erroneously reports that the singer was brought up in Birmingham, probably a corruption of "Binghampton"—a section of Memphis.

106. Ernest Withers, handwritten draft of a letter to "Mr. Robey" requesting payment [n.d.]. Don D. Robey, letter to "Mr. Ernest C. Withers, Photographer," Jan. 17, 1955, in response to Withers's "letter of January 5." The newspapers serviced are listed on another handwritten page: *Miami Times*, *San Antonio Register*, *Dallas Star-Post*, *Houston Informer*, *St. Louis Argus*, *Oklahoma Eagle*, *Florida Star*, *The Carolina*, *Cleveland Call and Post*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Afro-American*, and the *Defender* chain. Business files of Ernest C. Withers.

107. "Johnny Ace Is Buried," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Jan. 15, 1955, p. 1.

108. "Final Notes Sound for Johnny Ace," *Memphis World*, Jan. 7, 1955, p. 1.

109. For additional newspaper coverage of Ace's funeral, see "Body of Johnny Ace Will Be Shipped to Memphis," *Houston Informer*, Jan. 1, 1955, p. 1; "Famous Blues Singer of 'My Song' and 'The Clock' Buried," *Birmingham World*, Jan. 7, 1955, p. 1; "Final Note," *Chicago Defender*, Jan. 15, 1955, nat. ed., p. 5; "5,000 Jam the Last Rites of 'Johnny Ace,'" *Houston Informer*, Jan. 8, 1955, p. 1; "Johnny Ace Rites Attended By Famous Show Business Notables: Famous Blues Singer of 'My Song' and 'The Clock' Buried," *Memphis World*, Jan. 4, 1955, p. 1; "Singer Johnny Ace Will Be Buried Sunday," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Dec. 30, 1954, p. 2.

110. Like many black radio stations of the time, WDIA alternated secular and gospel programming. Louis Cantor, the author of *Wheelin' On Beale* who worked at WDIA at the time, does not doubt that a gospel-music-only listener as well placed in the community as Leslie Alexander could have been this powerful in early 1955. (Louis Cantor, telephone interview with author. July 15, 1992.)

111. "Death Spun the Cylinder for Johnny Ace—But for What Reason," *Tri-State Defender*, Mar. 5, 1955, p. 14, "(Reprint from the *Louisville Defender*)."

112. Matthews, "He Gambled," 1.

113. "Singer Johnny Ace Killed Playing Russian Roulette," *Jet*, Jan. 6, 1955, 59.

114. Walter White, "The Strange Case of Paul Robeson," *Ebony*, Feb. 1951. *Ebony* could not validate Robeson's communism any more than it could sanction the high-flying life of Ace's that led to his self-inflicted death, but the popularity of Robeson and Ace within the black community could not be denied.

115. *Ebony*, 63–68. While it is unlikely that Ace spent time in a Mississippi jail, and though essays in *Ebony* are not scholarly, they do have high informational value, photographs, and "contemporaneous documentation of aspects of American social history" (Kimberly R. Vann, *Black Music in Ebony: An Annotated Guide to the Articles on Music in Ebony Magazine, 1945–1985* [Chicago: Columbia College Chicago Center for Black Music Research, 1990; CBMR Monographs, no. 2], v).

116. Gart and Ames, *Duke/Peacock Records*, 77.

117. "This Week's Best Buys," *Billboard*, Jan. 15, 1955, 60.

118. *Ibid.*, Feb. 26, 1955, 46.

119. After Ace's "Pledging My Love," Fats Domino's "Ain't That A Shame" (Imperial 5348) would cross over on July 16, 1955, eventually reaching the number ten pop position. See n. 4 for an example of crossover during the final days of World War II.

120. In "Johnny Ace's Last Letter" (Johnny Moore, Hollywood 1031 and Johnny Fuller, Aladdin 3278), a lonely figure apologizes to the audience for his inability to function any longer; "Johnny Has Gone" (Varetta Dillard, Savoy 1153), which charted as an r&b hit from late February through the middle of April, lists Ace hits in the lyric and suggests that his "Pledging My Love" was so tender a rendition that an angel zapped Ace into heaven on the spot; in "Why, Johnny, Why" (Linda Hayes, Hollywood 1031) the singer thanks Ace for his gift of song and promises to join him soon in heaven; "Salute to Johnny Ace" (The Rovers, Music City [number unknown]) eulogizes the fatal night in Houston; "Johnny's Still Singing" (The Five Wings, King 4778) assures us that "Johnny's still singing to the angels above"; "In Memory" (Marie Adams/Johnny Otis Band, Peacock 1649) is primarily a catalog of Ace's Duke records. There may be other tribute records unknown to me.

121. Shaw, *Honkers*, 254, 358.

122. *Billboard*, Mar. 26, 1955, 139.

123. "Notes from the R.&B. Beat," *Cash Box*, Mar. 1955, reprinted in Galen Gart, ed., *First Pressings: The History of Rhythm & Blues*, vol. 5, 1955 (Milford, N.H.: Big Nickel, 1990), 38.

124. "Morris Grabs 'Pledging' Tune," *Billboard*, Feb. 12, 1955, 26.

125. The problem of covering in the 1954–55 season was not so much legal as political. Invariably the original performer was black and the initiating record company small and independent. The "white" version by a major label was not so much a cover as a *copy* or *duplication* of the musical voicing and rhythmic quality of the arrangement and of the singer's distinctive vocal style as well. The most dramatic and publicized charges of racism and greed involved cover versions by Georgia Gibbs. LaVern Baker, whose r&b hit "Tweedlee Dee" (Atlantic 1047) was covered by Gibbs (Mercury 70517), threatened a plagiarism suit and publicly appealed to the new black Congressman Charles Diggs of Michigan to introduce legislation to make it illegal for one singer to duplicate another's work ("Lavern Baker Seeks Bill to Halt Arrangement 'Thefts,'" *Billboard*, Mar. 5, 1955, 13). Two months later, Etta James's "The Wallflower [Roll with Me, Henry]" (Modern 947) was covered by Gibbs's "Dance with Me, Henry [Wallflower]" (Mercury 70572), and Etta James threatened to sue ("Coast Girl Asks \$10,000: Thinks Tune Was Born Of Her Hit The 'Wallflower,'" *Chicago Defender*, June 4, 1955, p. 18). Langston Hughes editorialized against "Highway Robbery Across the Color Line in Rhythm and Blues" in the *New York Age-Defender*, July 2, 1955, p. 10. For additional information on covering during this period, see James M. Salem, "Johnny Ace: A Case Study in the Diffusion and Transformation of Minority Culture," *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 17 (1992): 211–14.

126. Is Horowitz, "New Horizons for R&B Exploitation Upset Old Guard," *Billboard*, Feb. 4, 1956, 55. Other r&b songs mentioned include "Maybellene," "Sincerely," "Seventeen," "Tweedlee Dee," "Earth Angel," "Ain't That a Shame," "I Hear You Knockin'," and "Dance With Me, Henry."

127. In Simon's song "The Late Great Johnny Ace," a young musician hears of Ace's death in 1954 and sends away for his photograph. "It came all the way from Texas, with a sad and simple face / And they signed it on the bottom from the late great Johnny Ace" (Paul Simon, *Hearts and Bones* [WBR CD 2-23942]). It is a British notion that Ace was the "coloured James Dean" (Mike Leadbitter, ed., *Nothing But the Blues* [London: Hanover Books, 1971], 183). Grendysa, "Johnny Ace," 28; Tosches, *Unsung Heroes*, 133; and Escott, "Johnny Ace," 16, have been previously cited.

128. Gillett, *Sound*, 38.

129. Bob Rolontz, "Rhythm & Blues Notes," *Billboard*, Feb. 19, 1955, 28. According to Rolontz, Duke Records signed Buddy Ace just as he "finished a stint in the Armed Forces. From what we hear his voice bears a close resemblance to his brother's."

130. Dzondria Lalsac, jacket notes, *Johnny Ace: Memorial Album*, MCA-27014, 1973. Quotations are presented in their original spelling. These liner notes first appeared with the ten-inch LP and have been reprinted as part of every version of the Memorial Album, including Duke DLP-71, a twelve-inch LP, originally released in 1957 and sometimes called "Memorial Album Number II" to distinguish it from the shorter ten-inch version. MCA acquired the Johnny Ace catalog from ABC/Dunhill, which purchased Duke/Peacock from Don Robey. MCA-27014 is a reissue of DLP-71.

131. EP 80 contains "Pledging My Love," "Saving My Love for You," "Angel," and "Please Forgive Me." EP 81 contains "The Clock," "Never Let Me Go," "Cross My Heart," and "My Song." EP 71 is said to include "Pledging My Love," "Never Let Me Go," "Saving My Love for You," "The Clock," "Cross My Heart," and the previously unreleased "So Lonely." Gart and Ames believe this EP was issued later than 1955 (*Duke/Peacock Records*, 201). The ten-inch DLP 70 contains the eight songs that made up EP 80 and EP 81.

132. "Notes from the R.&B. Beat," *Cash Box*, Apr. 1955, reprinted in Galen Gart, ed., *First Pressings: 1955*, 48. Perhaps one of these requests came from fourteen-year-old Paul Simon of Queens.

133. Five cuts were recorded at this Houston session, on or about July 22, 1954, with ACA log numbers 2934–38. ACA 2934, "Never Let Me Go," had been released in Oct. 1954 as the "A" side of Duke 132; ACA 2936, "No Money," had been the "B" side of "Pledging My Love" (Duke 136). Bill Holford's records identify "How Can You Be So Mean?" as number 2937.

134. *Ebony*, 68. The magazine erroneously refers to the song as "No More."

135. "Review Spotlight on . . .," *Billboard*, July 16, 1955, 45.

136. "This Week's Best Buys," *Billboard*, July 23, 1955, 89.

137. *Billboard*, July 23, 1955, 92.

138. *Ibid.*, Aug. 27, 1955, 61.

139. *Ibid.*, Oct. 8, 1955, 53.

140. *Ibid.*, Jan. 7, 1956, 47. In addition, the ad claimed that Duke had yet another Ace release "in our record library."

141. "Review Spotlight on . . .," *Billboard*, Jan. 21, 1955, 52.

142. *Billboard*, Feb. 4, 1956, 60.

143. Quotations are presented with their original spelling and usage. Bill Simon, "Rhythm & Blues Notes," *Billboard*, Apr. 28, 1956, 61; *Ibid.*, July 28, 1956, 78.

144. *Ibid.*, Aug. 4, 1956, 79.

145. "Johnny Ace is Buried," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Jan. 15, 1955, 8.

146. "Reviews of New R&B Records," *Billboard*, Aug. 18, 1956, 70. The Johnny Ace sides were rated 71 and 70 respectively, with the "Buddy Ace Band" sides both rated at 72. The comments on both sides of Buddy Ace (Duke 155) were the same: "The warbler sings with feeling and warmth on a moving ballad with a solid beat."

147. Gart and Ames, *Duke/Peacock Records*, 83. Jimmie Lee Land, from Jasper, Texas, had two r&b hits in the late sixties using the professional name "Buddy Ace": "Nothing in the World Can Hurt Me" (Duke 397, 1966) and "Hold On" (Duke 414, 1967). He is *not* the "Buddy Ace" who performed on Duke 155, even though encyclopedias and other music reference books commonly allude to his career as starting with this 1955 release.

148. "I'm Crazy Baby" (July 1954) was logged in as ACA 2938. "Still Love You So," two years later, as ACA 3336.

149. Gary Kramer, "Rhythm-Blues Notes," *Billboard*, Sept. 8, 1956, 55.

150. Ren Grevati, "On the Beat: Rhythm & Blues—Rock & Roll," *Billboard*, July 22, 1957, 54. The Feb. 23, 1957, *Billboard* merged r&r with r&b in its notes column. In the June 24, 1957 issue, the magazine discontinued listing the ten most played r&b records

in jukeboxes and on Oct. 20, 1958, discontinued all "multiple charts," since r&b was pop music.

151. The album programs songs in this order: "Pledging My Love," "Don't You Know," "Never Let Me Go," "So Lonely," "I'm Crazy Baby," "My Song," "Saving My Love For You," "The Clock," "How Can You Be So Mean?," "Still Love You So," "Cross My Heart," and "Anymore."

152. *Billboard*, Dec. 1, 1958, 10. The spelling "exuberant" is probably the work of Duke copywriter Dzondria LaIsac, who wrote the liner notes for the Memorial Album.

153. Johnny Otis, telephone interview.

154. "Rhythm & Blues," *Billboard*, Dec. 1, 1958, 48. The reissued Duke 136 is rare since demand for the records was so slight that few were pressed.

155. Gart and Ames, *Duke/Peacock Records*, 126–27. Stax, a Memphis label, was distributed by Atlantic Records. Motown, a Detroit operation, was a completely independent operation much like Robey's.

156. Mike Paul, "Don Robey," *Living Blues* no. 23 (Sept.–Oct. 1975): 5.

157. Joe Nick Patoski, "Don D. Robey, R&B Pioneer, Dead at 71," *Rolling Stone*, July 31, 1975, 22.

158. "Body of Johnny Ace Will Be Shipped to Memphis." *Houston Informer*, Jan. 1, 1955, p. 8.

159. *Alexander v. ABC Records*, C75–213, Western District of Tennessee, U.S. District Court (1976).

160. Bob Kirsch, review of *Again . . . Johnny Sings* [sic], by Johnny Ace (Duke LP71), *Rolling Stone*, Mar. 19, 1970, 52.

161. Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1979), 50, 407. Harris refers to the "Johnny Ace Revue" in both the Bobby Bland and Junior Parker entries, and in the B. B. King entry lists Ace, Bland, and King working together as the Beale Streeters in 1947–48 (a date entirely too early).

162. Escott, "Johnny Ace," 16.

163. Ed Ward, Geoffrey Stokes, and Ken Tucker, *Rock of Ages: The Rolling Stone History of Rock & Roll* (New York: Summit Books, 1986), 99.

164. In Robert Duncan's *Only the Good Die Young* (New York: Harmony Books, 1986), the backstage men's bathroom door flies open and half of Ace's band stumbles out "enveloped in a cloud of marijuana smoke." Ace, spinning the chamber of his gun and pointing at his temple calls out "through the haze" to his band: "Say! What do you got says I can?" "Shee-it," says Slugger, the bass player, who throws down a "Ben Franklin." (According to Duncan the band had won a bet like this on another occasion, when Ace chickened out, saying "I oughta just *take* your damn money for you being such a dumb buncha niggers thinkin' I'd do somethin' so stupid to a sweet young thing like me.") This time around Slugger says, "I'll take your hundred bucks. C'mon, Johnny Ace, let's play." When the gun goes off, everyone hits the floor except Slugger, who stands "frozen beside a card table with a piece of Johnny Ace's brain on his hand." All of this happens on Christmas Eve, Duncan says. "It makes a great story" (13–15).

165. Escott, "Johnny Ace," 17.

166. Ray Topping, jacket notes, *The Original Memphis Blues Brothers*, Ace-CHAD 265, 1989. The "Memphis Blues Brothers" are said to be Little Junior Parker, Earl Forest, Bobby "Blue" Bland, and Johnny Ace. The phony telegram is dated to correspond with Topping's assertion that Ace shot himself on Christmas Eve.

167. Kirsch, review of *Again*, 52.

168. Johnny Otis, telephone interview.

169. George, *Death of Rhythm & Blues*, 29.

170. Neil Leonard, *Jazz and the White Americans* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 55. Actually, Johnny Otis passed for black, at least with the white

men he encountered in the music business. The Johnny Otis Show (billed as “The Rhythm and Blues Caravan”) was one of the last of the great r&b touring bands of the 1950s (Little Esther and Big Mama Thornton were among the featured vocalists)—known and loved in black communities all over America. Born of Greek parents in 1921, Otis grew up in Berkeley, Cal. in an integrated neighborhood that became a total Negro community. His friends were black, the high school sweetheart he married was black, the music he loved was black. In his book about the Watts riots (*Listen to the Lambs* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1968]) Otis explains how he became “black by choice.”

171. This discography does not include sides in which Johnny Ace is merely the pianist in a backup group for Bobby Bland, Earl Forest, or other featured performers. Citations rely upon Leadbitter and Slaven’s *Blues Records, 1943–1987* for the identification of musicians, and Bill Holford’s ACA studio logbooks (Gart and Ames, *Duke/Peacock Records*, 205–23). I have also used relevant information from interviews with Holford, Otis, Hopkins, and Mattis where appropriate. For assistance with the musical analysis I am indebted to my colleague Steve Sample, Director of Jazz Ensembles and Professor of Music, School of Music, University of Alabama.

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