

Don D. Robey, The Original King of Black Music: ‘They Call Me ‘Mister Robey’’

Written by Forward Times Staff
Sunday, 17 June 2012 20:43



In Houston, Texas where he was born in 1903 in the historic Fifth Ward district to an African-American middle-class multi-racial family, Don ‘Deadric’ Robey was by all accounts destined for business greatness. Although his parents and family had merely assumed that he’d be a great lawyer or doctor or an educator, Don had other ideas. In spite of his early academic gifts, he dropped out of school as a teenager and began a quest to make his own way as an entrepreneur.

By his early twenties, he’d displayed a knack and acumen for starting small successful businesses. And in most instances, combined with an innate set of ‘street smarts’, he was mostly successful in every venture he attempted.

After a brief three-year stint in Los Angeles successfully managing his own nightclub, the ‘Harlem Grill’ in LA’s rapidly expanding black entertainment district along Central Avenue, he not only prospered but cultivated many business ties that would serve him well in later years. It was an incredible time as all the greats from Louis Armstrong to Duke Ellington to Jelly Roll Morton to Dizzy Gillespie to Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Billie Holiday, Redd Foxx and countless others were exciting huge crowds on LA’s famed black owned entertainment clubs on Central Avenue. Robey was soaking the whole atmosphere up. It surely made an incredible impression on the young Don Robey. He returned to Houston and opened a taxicab company that with 17 vehicles or so serviced the fast growing mostly black neighborhoods.

Often mistaken for white, Robey instead chose to flout his true blackness like a proud Peacock. In fact, he would forever be identified with the brand name ‘Peacock’ on his various ventures. In 1945, he opened the “Bronze Peacock Supper Club” in Houston. With his long time assistant

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Evelyn Johnson, Robey opened a series of record stores and established an artist booking and personal management firm, “Buffalo Booking Agency.” In doing so, his client list in the emerging ‘booking and management’ field would prove impressive. Among the artists Robey established were soon to be world famous, Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown, ‘Memphis Slim,’ and ‘Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton’ among others.



In 1949, he founded the Peacock Record label. By his death in 1975, Don Robey had built a recording musical empire that for three decades beginning in 1945, until he opted to sell his vast musical catalogue and brands in 1974 to African American legendary record executive Otis Smith then President of ABC-Dunhill Records, which had been one of the most successful black owned companies in America. Some historians insist that Robey’s vast musical empire was the most successful black owned company in America during its time. Indeed, Robey laid the extraordinary groundwork that many black owned recording companies such as Vee-Jay (of Chicago), Motown, Stax, Philadelphia International, and Solar Records, et al., would successfully utilize as a business model years later.

Only “Black Swan Records” which was owned by Harry Pace during the emergence of the ‘Harlem Renaissance’ in New York in 1921 with a recording label line-up that included black Opera singer, ‘Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield’ and jazz pioneer, ‘Fletcher Henderson’ and other ground breaking performers predated the musical recording epics that Robey would unleash from his operating base in Houston in 1949 and later Memphis until his death in 1975. The scope of Robey’s success would rival that of mostly white owned recording labels such as Chess and Roulette by the late 40s and early 50s.

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