

DVDs

YELLOWJACKETS The Paris Concert MIKE STERN BAND The Paris Concert INAKUSTIK BLU-RAY

The German label Inakustik has issued blu-ray versions of recent concert releases and the technical upgrade undeniably enhances the “live” performance ambience of these two solid club-date performances.

The fusion superstar Yellowjackets seem more about “straight” jazz on their disc with tasty moments delivered by all four. While keyboardist and founding member Russell Ferrante melds swing with sophistication throughout the set, drummer Marcus Baylor takes his swing in an old-school direction far beyond his years on several feature spots. When not working on a solid straight-ahead foundation, electric bassist (and also a founder) Jimmy Haslip functions almost as a pseudo-guitar on his six-string axe. Sax man Bob Mintzer eventually gets around to his electronic horn, the EWI, but the crossover fare follows a goodly stretch of the “pure” stuff.

Guitarist Stern’s set is also a mix, in this case his high-energy fusion encases a set of high-quality crossover fare. His frequent fire is matched by that of his rhythm cast- Tom Kennedy, bass and Dave Weckl, drums- and saxophonist Bob Franceschini provides complementary calm.

The step-up to blu-ray (and, ideally, a large flat-screen), matched with the understated visual direction employed, makes for a surprisingly intimate atmosphere and enjoyable partaking of two fine outfits. *Duane Verh*

books

KING OF THE QUEEN CITY: THE STORY OF KING RECORDS

Jon Hartley Fox
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS
(280 PAGES, 23 PHOTOGRAPHS)

This writer has long been a fan of many of rhythm’n’blues artists that recorded for the King family of labels. These include Roy Brown, Wyonnie Harris, Ivory Joe Hunter, Hank Ballard & the Midnighters, Johnny ‘Guitar’ Watson, Freddie King, Little Willie John, Esther Phillips, The Five Royales, Billy Ward & the Dominoes and James Brown, to name a small part of the musical legacy of Syd Nathan’s Cincinnati based group of labels that included Queen and Federal. King was a pioneering label in more ways than one as this very welcome history of the label and overview of the extensive recordings that were made for it makes clear.

“King of the Queen City” expands upon a public ra-

dio series of the same title that Fox did in 1986 and is a history of the label that Syd Nathan launched in 1943, which became a company that Fox observes was “one of the most, important successful and influential record companies in history. During the almost twenty-five years Nathan was at the helm, King recorded — and introduced to the American public — a stunning array of musical giants, from country stars Merle Travis and Grandpa Jones and bluegrass greats Don Reno and Red Smiley to blues guitarist Freddie King and R&B and soul stars Hank Ballard and James Brown.” Furthermore, while one of hundreds of independent labels to emerge during the forties, none of these matched “King for variety, innovation, depth of catalog and sheer moxie.” It changed not only how music was recorded but also the music itself and whereas almost all other independent labels concentrated on one type of music, King was active in virtually all genres of American vernacular music and did not simply dabble in these styles but had many top stars and some of the biggest records in these styles. It was music and records for “the little man,” as Nathan often put it.

King did more than simply pioneer in the music it recorded and issued. King Records under Syd Nathan pioneered in other ways. It was a record company that had an integrated staff, in what really was a southern city at the time. Nathan started the record company during the middle of World War II when there was a shellac shortage and during the first Petrillo recording ban, may not have been what one might have been instructed in business school. Despite these circumstances, Syd Nathan developed King into pioneering record company. He recorded his artists in his studios, manufactured his records (which entailed learning how to master and manufacture records) and used a national promotion force under his control. Other companies may have had their own studio, or perhaps manufacturing plant, but they would not also have their own promotion staff, rather relying on regionally based independent promotion people. And one cannot emphasize enough his pioneering in hiring individuals on merit, not on the basis of race or other matters.

King also pioneered in having his R&B acts record songs penned by his country stars and vice versa (such as Wyonnie Harris “Bloodshot Eyes”), therefore enabling the exploitation of the songs in the music catalog the label cultivated and owned in addition to the recordings. Overseeing many of the sessions (whether country or R&B) was Henry Glover, Nathan’s first Artist & Repertoire Director. Glover was probably only the second black man to hold an executive position with a United States record label and helped produce some of the label’s early hits like those by Bull Moose Jackson and Harris. Fox, in telling the story of King Records, notes the unheralded and pioneering role that Glover, and also Ralph Bass played in the development of American music of the past 65 years, and notes how few of these have received the recognition they deserve.

Nathan had a strong personality and could get into intense arguments with his staff. The book recounts the legendary story of Nathan’s reaction to James Brown & the Famous Flames’ “Please, Please, Please,” that Ralph Bass recorded, spewing “This is the worse piece of shit I’ve ever heard in my life. ...” The earliest acts on King