

Billy Paul Wins \$500K in Dispute With Gamble & Huff

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According to Eurweb and Soul Patrol, Grammy winning singer Billy Paul has scored a major legal victory against the legendary songwriting and production team of Gamble & Huff and Philadelphia International Records. Paul was awarded \$500,000 by a Los Angeles jury for unpaid royalties on his classic recording 1971 of "Me and Mrs. Jones," written produced by G&H, from between 1994-2002.

"This case firmly establishes the rights of singers signed to small production companies to receive 50% of the money earned by the major labels that distribute the records. There is no question that Billy Paul's royalties had been improperly calculated for many years," said Seymour Straus, expert witness.

Gamble & Huff and Sony are expected to appeal the decision.

I am sorry to hear of this dispute, but I'm happy for Billy Paul, who doubtless can use the money more the G&H. I interviewed Leon Huff for a profile a couple of years ago.

Songwriters, producers, entrepreneurs - Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff were the focal point of the urbane soul of the "Philly Sound" from the mid '60s through the early '80s. Their Philadelphia International Records was to the '70s what Motown was to the '60s: the preeminent black-owned entertainment enterprise in America and the conveyance of the finest soul music to the world.

The pair's work with the Intruders, Archie Bell and the Drells, Jerry Butler and Wilson Pickett is classic; but their innovations with the O'Jays, Harold Melvin and the Bluenotes, and their house band, MFSB, helped lay the foundations for both funk and disco and generated some of the '70s most enduring music.

Visionary/lyricist Gamble and pianist/composer Huff gathered a street-tough rhythm section of Philadelphia road and studio veterans - Earl Young (also of The Trammps) on drums, Ronnie Baker on bass, Roland Chambers and Norman Harris on guitar, Vincent Montana Jr. (founder of the Salsoul Orchestra) on vibes, multi-instrumentalist Bunny Sigler, Huff on keyboards - and melded this rhythmic muscle with horns and strings from the Philadelphia Orchestra to create a fine tuned machine that consumed and reconciled racial, sonic and thematic contradictions to generate a transcendent, melodic groove.

Kenny Gamble was born August 11, 1943 in Philadelphia, PA and grew up in the same neighborhood as songwriter/producer Thom Bell. Gamble and Bell wrote songs together as teens and recorded a duet, "Someday," for the Heritage label in 1959. They also formed a band, the Romeos, which played around the area in the early-to-mid-'60s, backed up black acts on the local Cameo-Parkway label (Chubby Checker, the Orlons, Dee Dee Sharp - later Mrs. Kenny Gamble for a time), and toured with Chubby Checker and Little Anthony and the Imperials.

Leon Huff was born April 8, 1942 in Camden, NJ and grew up in the Centerville section of town where he played piano at home and drums in the school band. An eclectic music lover from the beginning, Huff listened to doo wop, jazz, country and classical on the radio; as well as his father's blues guitar and mother's gospel piano.

Huff perennially made the Camden All-City Orchestra on drums, and accompanied many of the local street corner vocal groups on piano; the latter led Huff into local recording studios after he graduated from high school in 1960. Huff's eclecticism and accompanying abilities led him to New York and the Brill Building which housed, per Huff, "musical gods Burt Bacharach, Leiber and Stoller, Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich, and Phil Spector."

Huff became a favored studio pianist for Spector in particular, playing on hits for the Ronettes, Darlene Love and many others in the early '60s. Huff gravitated to Philadelphia's (Brill-equivalent) Shubert Building in 1964, and played on "The 81" for Candy and the Kisses, co-written by one Kenny Gamble.

One day in 1964 the pair shared the Shubert Building elevator; the outgoing Gamble asked the reticent piano-wiz Huff if he wrote songs. Recalls Huff, "I said 'Yeah, why don't you come over to my house.' I lived in the projects in Camden. That's when it really started. He came over to my house that night, and we sat down in my little music room and it sounded good from the beginning. We just started writing songs every day after that."

The first song they wrote together, "I'm Sorry Baby," was the B-side of the Sapphires hit "Who Do You Love" for Swan in '64, and then Huff joined Gamble in the Romeos, hitting the road for Checker and Little Anthony tours.

Writing together in earnest and tired of the road, Gamble and Huff formed a writing/production company and had their first hit with Soul Survivors' "Expressway to Your Heart" - a confident, soul-rock workout of indeterminate racial origin (the band was white) which set the tone for things to come by hitting the Top 5 on both the R&B and pop charts in 1967. The flawless production evokes the Rascals with a stomping bass/piano rhythm line, an organ interlude, sound effects, driving drum break, and clever lyrics drawing upon the twin urban concerns of traffic and love.

At the same time G&H began a ten-year association with Philly R&B group the Intruders, who were fronted by their engagingly pitch-challenged lead singer "Little Sonny" Brown. Brown's voice and a firm rhythm section (which evolved into MFSB) gave the group their edge, which the group's smooth harmonies and Bobby Martin's string-and-horn arrangements simultaneously mitigated and emphasized. G&H and the Intruders had a minor hit with "(We'll Be) United" in mid '66, but hit the big time in '68 with "Cowboys to Girls," a sweet coming of age tale living precariously at the end of Brown's upper register.

Itinerant writers and producers still, G&H whipped up hits for Archie Bell and the Drells (the infectious, choogling "I Can't Stop Dancing") and Wilson Pickett (the rousing "Engine Number 9" and "Don't Let the Green Grass Fool You") for the Atlantic label, deep soul classics for Jerry Butler ("Never Give You Up," "Hey, Western Union Man," "Only the Strong Survive") for Mercury, and more soul for Joe Simon ("Drowning In the Sea of Love") for Spring.

By '71 G&H were tired of moving their tent from label to label and approached CBS president Clive Davis about a deal for an imprint of their own, to be distributed by CBS. Recalls Huff, "Clive was blown away by our talent, and it was a great move for us and them. Our company [Philadelphia International] really took off after we signed the O'Jays.

"I remember flying into Cleveland - a disc jockey had called to say 'Man there's a group in Cleveland that's raising hell' - so we took a flight out to Cleveland and went to see them at a club. They had lines around the corner. Those guys were tearing that club up. We stayed in Cleveland until we signed them. We took them back to Philadelphia and recorded and recorded and recorded."

With the O'Jays, and Harold Melvin and the Bluenotes, the world of Gamble and Huff came together. In the '70s G&H scored ten No. 1 R&B and nine Top 40 pop hits with the O'Jays; four No. 1 R&B and four Top 20 hits with Harold Melvin and the Bluenotes. But more importantly, all the disparate elements of

the G&H sound coalesced into something new: music with the aforementioned rhythmic muscle, melodic sophistication and orchestral leavening, combined with a newfound social and interpersonal awareness, all funneled through the great pipes of the O'Jays' Eddie Levert and the Bluesnotes' Teddy Pendergrass.

Recorded at G&H's Sigma Sound with engineer Joe Tarsia, the roll began with the O'Jays' "Backstabbers," a remarkable combination of shimmering strings, Latin percussion, post-modern paranoia and a palpable sense of "This is it - there is nothing any of us could or should be doing other than making this music." G&H weren't following Motown (where Norman Whitfield was making parallel strides) or anyone else (Curtis Mayfield and Isaac Hayes were independently exploring some of the same terrain): they were leading.

In addition to making hits, G&H allowed MFSB to stretch out in the grooves of the songs, laying a funky foundation for the extended disco remixes of the later-'70s. Album cuts of such uptempo masterworks as the Bluesnotes' "Bad Luck" and "The Love I Lost"; MFSB's "TSOP" (The Soul Train theme song) and "Love Is the Message"; and the O'Jays' "992 Arguments," "I Love Music" and (best) "For the Love of Money" reached lengths of up to 10-minutes of dance floor ecstasy.

"Money" is Huff's all-time favorite "for the [anti-greed] message and for the song [ironic now, eh?]. I used to go the O'Jays concerts and they would drive people insane when they would close the show with that song," he says.

Of course G&H were also writing and producing great ballads for the Bluesnotes ("If You Don't Know Me By Now," "I Miss You," "Yesterday I Had the Blues"), Billy Paul ("Me and Mrs. Jones"), the Three Degrees ("When Will I See You Again") and many others.

The roll continued through the '70s and into the early '80s when hip-hop, hard funk and electronic dance styles rendered soul and disco (temporarily) obsolete, and an industry-wide slump soured everyone's milk. When Teddy Pendergrass had his paralyzing car accident in 1982, G&H decided to take a little break from making music.

Most of the songs mentioned herein are available on various collections in Legacy's Rhythm and Soul Series; most notably compilation producer Leo Sacks' exceptional *The Philly Sound*: a three-CD extravaganza with photos, copious liner notes and commentary from a small army of notables, putting G&H's accomplishments in musical, political and cultural perspective and arousing the envy of fellow compilers from Philadelphia to the Philippines.