

Jerry Wexler, producer of Aretha Franklin and Ray Charles, dead at 91

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Jerry Wexler, the legendary music producer of Atlantic Records, died of congestive heart failure on August 15 at his home in Sarasota, Florida. He was 91.

Wexler was a significant and influential figure in American popular music. During his long career he produced and shaped the sounds of some of the most important R&B musicians of the period between the 1950s and the 1970s, including Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett and Donny Hathaway. Wexler is credited with coining the very term “Rhythm and Blues.”

The future producer was born in the Bronx, New York on January 10, 1917. He was raised in the mostly immigrant neighborhoods of Washington Heights in Manhattan. His father, a Polish immigrant, worked as a window washer. His mother, Elsa, was a socialist and sold copies of the *Daily Worker* in Harlem.

Elsa Wexler insisted that her son be cultured and have a richer life than she and her husband had known. Hoping the young boy would become a writer, she bought Jerry works of Shakespeare, Moliere and Theodore Dreiser to read. Jerry, however, would take a different path, soon embarking on various cultural pursuits of his own.

Wexler cut classes as a teenager and spent time hustling in poolrooms. After his 1932 graduation from high school, he attended, briefly, City College of New York, but dropped out. Around this time he developed a love for jazz music and constantly searched for old records in various thrift stores throughout the city.

When his mother tried to put him once more on a more studious path by sending him in 1936 to Kansas State College of Agriculture and Applied Science, her plan backfired. The school was only 100 miles from Kansas City, with its thriving jazz and blues scene, including, perhaps most famously, the great Count Basie orchestra. The move only intensified her son’s love for the music.

After two years at Kansas State, Wexler moved back to New York, where he worked for a time alongside his

father washing windows. He was drafted during the Second World War and stationed in Texas and Florida. Following his stint in the military he returned to Kansas State and earned a degree in journalism. He then returned to New York in hopes of finding a job at one of the big newspapers. Instead, he got a job with *Billboard* magazine.

It was at *Billboard* that Wexler coined the term “Rhythm and Blues.” The editors had asked their writers to come up with a new name for the black music charts which had, up until that time, still been called “race music.” Wexler casually suggested the title be changed to “Rhythm and Blues” and it stuck.

During his time as a music journalist with *Billboard*, Wexler established ties with performers and industry figures, eventually developing a friendship with Ahmet Ertegun and Herb Abramson, the co-founders of the independent Atlantic Records label.

Asked to come work for the label, Wexler insisted he be made a full partner. While Ertegun first considered this an outlandish proposal, when Abramson went into the army in the early 1950s Wexler finally was brought on as a partner. It was in his role as music producer with Atlantic that Wexler made his greatest contribution to the art form he loved.

Wexler oversaw the recording sessions of a truly remarkable collection of musicians. His credits include work on songs and albums by the likes of Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Big Joe Turner (including “Shake, Rattle and Roll”), Ruth Brown, the Drifters, Solomon Burke, Wilson Pickett (including “In the Midnight Hour”), Percy Sledge, Betty Carter, King Curtis, and many others. There is no shortage of classics attached to his name.

But it is his work with Charles and Franklin for which he is perhaps best remembered today. Wexler produced Charles’s first No. 1 R&B single, “I Got a Woman,” and a string of others, including “A Fool For You,” “Drown

In My Own Tears,” and “What’d I Say.”

Wexler and engineer Tom Dowd, another of the incredibly influential and creative voices at Atlantic, gave Charles and his band room to breathe on these recordings, and the natural chemistry of the group comes through brilliantly. “I just loved it,” Charles would say in later years, “because they just let me do what I wanted to do.”

It was important to Wexler that his role be one of enhancement and support when working with artists. While his productions certainly bore his familiar fingerprint, they did not bear his signature, figuratively speaking. He was not the star producer-as-*auteur* in the way that a Phil Spector was. Wexler certainly knew when to take a guiding role, but he also knew when to lay out and let the artist be the artist.

In the case of Aretha Franklin, Wexler played a more significant role of shaping, or reshaping, her work and persona. Prior to signing with Atlantic, Franklin was on the roster of Columbia Records. There she sang in a more popular, cabaret style.

Wexler helped her return to a more southern, gospel and blues-rooted music. It was the music made after this important change in course that earned Franklin her iconic status.

Her Atlantic debut, the album *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You* (1967), was for both Franklin and Wexler a masterpiece. This was the album that featured now legendary tracks such as “Respect” and the great Dan Penn composition “Do Right Woman, Do Right Man.”

The album epitomizes the Atlantic R&B sound. There is the stomping backbeat, with a full-bodied snare drum (in contrast to the “popcorn” snare of James Brown’s funk music) snapping down hard on the 2 and 4 of the beat. The bass guitar is given a prominent role in the front of the mix. Franklin’s piano, played loud and heavy, finishes off the rhythm section, making very clear the gospel influence that was such an intimate part of her sound as well as Wexler’s. Horn sections, on this and all the great Atlantic recordings, are never recorded with undue brightness or gloss, but are allowed to retain a “dryness” and a growl, not unlike the sound of the Kansas City shout blues groups Wexler must have heard in the late 1930s.

The album is mesmerizing and justly remembered as one of the all-time great R&B classics. By no means their only memorable collaboration, Wexler produced no less than 16 of Franklin’s albums for the label.

During his Atlantic career, Wexler also fell in love with southern soul, the Stax records and Muscle Shoals sound.

He worked with numerous musicians who came out of that scene. And when the great British pop and R&B singer Dusty Springfield signed with Atlantic, Wexler took her to record in Memphis. The result was another masterpiece, *Dusty in Memphis*. Here, Wexler’s production and his assembling of a stellar band of R&B musicians—the Memphis Cats—inspired Springfield and brought a performance out of the singer that surpassed anything she had done previously.

Apart from Wexler’s duties as music producer at Atlantic Records, he was, of course, also a businessman. While details have been hard to come by in recent tributes, perhaps for fear of speaking ill of the dead, there have been more than a few descriptions of his business practices as being “sharklike” or “ruthless.” He was certainly no stranger to “payola,” the practice of bribing radio stations and disc jockeys to play a record.

There is no need to sentimentalize the past, particularly with regards to the music industry, or to make Wexler out to be a “pure” figure in a mercenary industry. Nevertheless, one can say that while Wexler was in business, he was first and foremost in the *music* business. That is, he had a genuine passion for the art form and, above all, good taste. He was actively involved in the creative process. He was not an executive who was in business in a general sense, and who happened to own a music property or two. Music was Wexler’s life.

As Ray Charles once said, when contrasting a Jerry Wexler or an Ahmet Ertegun with the typical music executive of today: “There are people in the record industry today—that control it—that can not keep time to a march!” Wexler and Ertegun, he said, “were truly into the music itself. They could *feel* it.”

There is no doubt, in tributes following Wexler’s death, that artists and fans alike are mourning not only the man, but also the absence of a similar creative and artistic atmosphere in today’s music industry. To take note of Wexler’s contributions is also to take note of the sharp decline of the music industry and overall cultural life in the United States, which, already to be seen in Wexler’s heyday, is at such a pronounced level today.



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