

SAR RECORDS

When Sam Cooke co-founded SAR Records in 1959, he was in an unusual position within the American music industry. In 1957, Cooke had become one of the first gospel stars to transition into pop music with the #1 hit “You Send Me.” The move caused objections from his gospel fans and a split from his record label at the time, Specialty. But with the success of “You Send Me,” and several Top 40 hits that followed, he established himself as a prominent pop artist and proved that his musical style could reach both black and white audiences.

Cooke was increasingly engaged with the business as well as the creative aspects of the music industry. In 1958, he established a publishing company, Kags Music, with business partners J. W. Alexander and Roy Crain in order to control more of the rights to his music—and therefore receive more of the royalties. It was one of the first publishing companies under African American ownership. The partners created SAR Records the following year. SAR and its sister label, Derby—which Alexander created in 1962—produced records for about two dozen artists between 1959 and 1964, releasing more than seventy records. At the helm of these operations, Cooke’s level of influence was exceptional for any performer, but was particularly rare for a black artist in an era when the Civil Rights Movement was just taking hold in the United States.

Both J. W. Alexander and Cooke, who became the sole owners of SAR in 1960, had backgrounds as gospel singers. Their experience as performers shaped the operations of SAR Records: the label’s goals included providing high-quality production for black music and widening the audience for gospel and gospel-influenced artists. J. W. Alexander told Sam Cooke biographer Peter Guralnick: “We wanted to give young black artists the benefit of as good a production as they could get with a major company. . . . We thought of it as an opportunity to contribute something back to the community.” This meant using the best recording studios and hiring top personnel to write, arrange, accompany, and engineer each record.

Cooke did not release his own records on SAR. Instead, SAR promoted music by up-and-coming singers—artists Cooke and Alexander felt would benefit from the attention they could

provide. Cooke’s musical authority was nonetheless strong at the label. Many of the artists he signed followed his lead and switched from gospel to pop music, or they added pop elements to their gospel arrangements. When he signed the Valentinos, a then relatively unknown family gospel group from Cleveland, for example, he agreed to cut gospel tunes with them—but on the condition that they would then record pop songs if they didn’t have a hit. The group cracked the Top 100 three times for SAR with pop records.

Cooke also wrote songs for many of SAR’s artists, and he frequently acted as producer. “Soothe Me,” which Cooke both wrote and produced, put the Sims Twins—a duo J. R. Alexander had discovered playing in a nightclub—on the charts in 1961. Johnnie Morissette had a hit with Cooke’s “Meet Me at The Twisting Place” (1962), which took advantage of both Cooke’s knack for writing catchy pop songs and the current popularity of the Twist dance. Cooke attempted to create his own dance craze with “The Wobble” in 1963. It didn’t chart, but his brother, L. C.—who recorded the song for SAR—recalled that during the studio session, everyone in the room was doing the dance.

SAR Records shut down following Cooke’s death in 1964. Many of the artists SAR nurtured went on to have successful careers in music: Bobby Womack, for example, sang on SAR with the Valentinos; he went on to record Top 10 R&B hits as a solo singer and to write songs that were covered by artists like Wilson Pickett, Aretha Franklin, and the Rolling Stones. Johnnie Taylor moved to Stax Records, where he had a string of Top 100 hits. Billy Preston, who debuted at sixteen on Derby, later performed with the Beatles and sold millions of solo albums.

Critic Nelson George argues that Sam Cooke “used his money and free time to reach back and give other young blacks an opportunity to share in his rewards.” Because of this, and despite the fact that SAR Records was only in business for five years, Cooke’s impact as a businessman and producer is an important part of his legacy.