

Nathaniel Mayer Part 1 (Excerpt):

From the thumping primitivism of John Lee Hooker's trance-inducing guitar to Iggy and the Stooges' desperate wail from the gutter, Detroit, Michigan has always been a city of musical extremes. Dead center between "Boogie Chillun" and "TV Eye" lies the musical netherworld of Fortune Records, the city's only label with any staying power prior to Motown. Fortune – along with its subsidiaries Hi-Q and Strate-8 – was an extreme among extremes, as was its most successful artist, Nathaniel "Nay Dog" Mayer. Crazy, funny, irreverent and stunningly talented, Mayer scored the label its biggest hit with his 1962 blockbuster "Village Of Love."

His six years with the label, beginning with 1961's impassioned "My Last Dance With You" and ending with 1966's proto-funk "(I Want) Love And Affection (Not The House of Correction)," resulted in twenty-one slices of musical brilliance that were unique even in the fertile musical breeding ground from whence they came. Here were records that demanded immediate involvement and total immersion; music so frenetic that it was impossible to take sitting down. A Mayer disc was an instant party.

The fact that he recorded for Fortune – an iconic independent label petrified to license their records for wider distribution – certainly kept him from becoming a household name. Then again, Mayer's over-the-top approach might have been lost on another imprint. Like Andre Williams before him, in Fortune Mayer found a place where he could wreak his sonic havoc, unrestrained.

Founded in 1946 by Jack and Dorothy "Devora" Brown as an outlet for Devora's considerable pop songwriting skills, Fortune quickly developed into an aural microcosm of the city's cultural diversity, producing recorded snapshots of every musical sound and stripe. From polka, pop, hillbilly and bluegrass to gospel, blues, R&B and soul, the ingredients and spirit of Motor City rock 'n' roll were present on every Fortune record; the pounding reverberation of the automobile assembly lines imprinted in every groove.

In a time and place celebrated for its musical iconoclasm, when mixing board mad scientists like Sam Phillips were hitting on all pistons, the Browns seemed take it all a step further, embracing instrumental weirdness, warped vocalizing and raw, unorthodox recording concepts, unintentionally establishing a sound and aesthetic that would rank as one of the most identifiable and eccentric in all of recorded music.

It was almost as if merely passing through the door of their cinderblock, dirt-floored studio at 3942 Third Avenue (or their previous location at 11629 Linwood) turned the key to some musical Pandora's box that held the double-entendre western swing of Tommy Odum and the wisecracking doo-wop of the Royal Jokers; the gutbucket blues of Doctor Ross and Eddie Kirkland; the black-and-white boogie of Roy Hall and Big Maceo Merriweather. For these artists, Fortune was just a stop along the route—all of them recorded for other concerns both before and after their visits to the Motor City. But somehow their Fortune sides stand alone; charged with an electricity that owed as much to their own inherent talents as it did to the Browns' innate intuitiveness of how to draw those talents out of them. More often than not, Jack and Devora were the divining rods that encouraged, perhaps even cajoled, their artists into uncharted territory.

When the Browns met their match in the bizarre, arguments often ensued—Andre Williams recalls having to fight tooth and nail to get them to release the lurid prison laments “Jailbait” and “Pulling Time”—but titles like Johnny Buckett’s “Griddle Greasin’ Daddy,” Rufus Shoffner’s “At The Burlesque Show” and Roy Hall’s “Bed Spring Motel” (as well as the release of the LP *Skeets McDonald’s Tattooed Lady Plus Eleven Other Sizzlers*) indicate that the Browns were no prudes. For over two decades they simply recorded it all; the exotic doo-wop of the Diablos, the sleazy R&B of Andre Williams, the rockabilly lunacy of Dell Vaughn, the reckless juke-joint anarchy of the Richard Brothers, the sanctified gospel chants of the Detroit Songbirds and the teen melodrama of the Utopias.

Devora’s songs — which focused on the exotic world of fortune tellers, magic lamps, gypsies, crystal balls, the Orient and various Latin scenarios — often dovetailed perfectly with her artists’ visions. She engineered many of the sessions herself, in the 18-by-40-foot back room, which was heated only by a wood-burning stove. Sheets were draped from the ceiling for sound isolation, while a homemade mixing board and an Ampex 350 one-track tape recorder captured the magic.

“It looked like a dirty garage, you didn’t want to go back there,” says Mayer of the room that gave his records their gritty edge. “Egg cartons around the walls for the sound, big old door on the back. They had a bunch of microphones, a couple of pianos and a big old organ. Garage material. It was junky, that’s what was happening. But folks could get in there, a band could get in there, and you could have a party in there.”

Indeed, if Gordy's Motown was the Sound of Young America, Fortune was the din of the winos whooping it up in the alley. But even the Browns didn't know what to do with the 15-year-old dynamo who pedaled his bicycle into their cradle of creativity one day in 1959. He didn't possess the genteel, understated manner of a Nolan Strong and he wasn't an obvious hustler like Andre Williams. Instead, he was a charismatic teenager whose likeable personality masked the soul of a determined musical revolutionary. And his timing couldn't have been better.