

HOOSIER WOMEN AT WORK

STUDIES IN INDIANA WOMEN'S HISTORY

Session 2

April 2018

Vivian Carter: The Woman Who Integrated Popular Music

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The entrepreneur plays an important role in the story of any art. Vivian Carter was an African-American disc jockey and record store owner in Gary, Indiana, turned successful record producer. Inspired by the rich variety of Black music styles she broadcast, and frustrated by their lack of commercial availability, Vivian created her own record label in 1953. From her daily contact with music-lovers of all races, Vivian knew there was no color line in musical tastes, despite the industry tradition of ghetto-izing "race records" into a separate category.

With her husband Jimmy McCracken, and her brother Calvin Carter, Vivian started Vee Jay Records in Gary, Indiana, on a shoestring. In 1953, Vee Jay Records released a local trio's first recordings, which reached number ten and number five positions in industry rankings for black recordings. However, when the trio's original song "Goodnite Sweetheart Goodnite" was picked up by a white trio, it became a mainstream million-seller.

From that experience, Vivian learned to combine black creativity with elements of mainstream music for a top-selling combination. As the company grew, Vee Jay Records presented best-selling black and white artists in several genres of music, finally including the white close-harmony quartet The Four Seasons, and an unknown guitar band from England called The Beatles.

However, Vivian's apparent success was also her downfall. When the Beatles hit it big, Capitol Records filed lawsuit after lawsuit against Vee Jay Records to get back the group, whom they had previously turned down. When Vivian and Jimmy went to fight the lawsuits, they found their bank account had been gambled away in Las Vegas by their General Manager, Ewart Abner. By 1966, as quickly as they had risen to the top ranks of their industry, Vivian and Jimmy lost all they had and went back to their simple lives in Gary, Indiana. Vivian often said Hollywood should make a movie of her life, an original American "rags to riches to rags" story.

But Vivian Carter's enduring success was her vision that white and black audiences could enjoy each other's music together. It has been argued that the integration of popular music was an important factor in the social integration and civil rights progress made by the generation of teenagers who first listened to Vee Jay records.

This paper will discuss Vivian Carter and Vee Jay Records' historic rise and fall, the role of the entrepreneur in the arts, Vivian's prescient refusal to be limited by racial categories, and the social impact of Vivian Carter's vision. Visual and audio illustrations will be included, if technology permits.

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