

AUSTIN'S SONOBEAT RECORDS:

the musical legacy of Bill Josey Sr. and Jr.

BY LISA WHEELER

In 1966, in what would be known some 30 years later as the "Live Music Capital of the World," Austin, Texas, was nothing more than a college town with a small but loyal local music following. Radio station KAZZ was a low-powered FM that attempted to carve a musical niche with a diverse format. "The station played a mixture of Sinatra and Mantovani-style pop, plus jazz, and folk music, and I added rock 'n' roll in the afternoons and on Saturdays," said Bill Josey Jr., known on the air as Rim Kelley. Aside from the alternative playlist, what set KAZZ apart from other stations was its dedication to live music. The station's weekend concert broadcasts allowed listeners to hear national and local acts, live, from the comfort of home. "The broadcasts ranged from the wonderful piano stylings of Ernie Mae Miller to the psychedelic rock of the 13th Floor Elevators at the New Orleans Club to the frat-rock of the Sweetarts at the Jade Room to the jazz of Don Dean and the Lee Arlano Trio at the Club Seville," Josey said.

The success of these concerts convinced Josey and his father, Bill Sr. (KAZZ's station manager) that they needed to expose Austin's talent to a broader audience. With absolutely no previous experience, the two decided to form a record label, Sonobeat. "I liked names like Polydor, Parlophone, Motown, Elektra, Fontana. Perhaps there's no real common thread running through these names, but I thought they conjured big images," said Josey Jr. "We considered names like Fonobeat and Phonosonic. Sonobeat eventually emerged as the winner."

To get started, the two borrowed recording equipment from KAZZ. To capture the live feel of the recording, nightclubs were originally used before and after hours as their studios. Armed with an Ampex 354 two-track tape recorder and a homemade portable stereo mixer (KAZZ's chief engineer, Bill Curtis, used field effect transistors, which were inexpensive, could be powered by batteries and were easy to assemble into microphone preamplifier circuits), Sonobeat began its search for the first act to record.

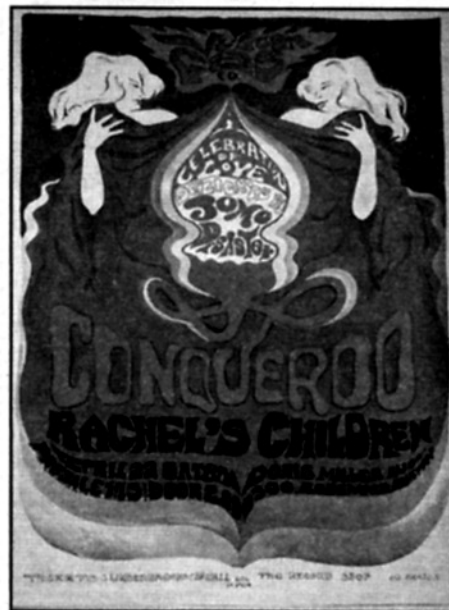
Leo and the Prophets were a popular local rock band who regularly played at Austin's Ozone Forest. In early 1967 the Joseys and the band set up shop at the nightclub and recorded three instrumental tracks, "Ozone Forest," "Prophecy of Love" and "Flowers on the Hill." Unfortunately, the quality of the freshman effort was disappointing. "The home-made mixer wasn't quite ready for prime

time. The recordings were distorted — a combination of mixer circuit overload and my lack of experience as a recording engineer," Josey Jr. said. The tapes were put away and never released. The Joseys went back to the drawing board and had already set up the next round of recording sessions — with another act.

The Lee Arlano Trio was a regular act on the jazz and dinner club circuit west of the Rockies. But on a rare stopover in Austin, Club Seville manager Don Dean suggested Sonobeat give recording another try with the threesome, who were scheduled to perform at his club. Bill Josey Sr. arranged to record the group at the club, before it opened, to retain the live "feel" of the performance. Armed with a newly revamped home-built mixing board, the recordings with Lee Arlano, his brother Andy, and Sam Poni turned out so much better than the first try with Leo and the Prophets, that Sonobeat signed the group as its first official act.

Josey Sr. loved jazz and Big Band music, but he was still a businessman and knew that Top 40 pop and rock would be money-makers for his new label. "We tried to sign the 13th Floor Elevators, because Roky [Erickson] was a high school friend," said Josey Jr. "He had brought me a test-pressing of 'You're Gonna Miss Me' that I played on KAZZ, but they were locked up with International Artists in Houston." But Bill Jr. was also playing another record from a local band called The Sweetarts. The popular fraternity-oriented rock band, led by singer and songwriter Ernie Gammage, often played on KAZZ's live concert broadcasts. The group already had a record on the Dallas-based Vandan label ("So Many Times"/"You Don't Have To Hurt Me" #609V-8195), but the Joseys saw bigger things for the band and signed them to Sonobeat and scheduled a recording session.

"The session was held in a night club that was big and empty, said Gammage. "We set up on the floor and played the songs until we got what we wanted. The atmosphere was a stinky bar in the day-



time, but because it was large it sounded good." The instrumental tracks recorded at the club were then mixed with vocal tracks recorded at KAZZ, albeit untraditionally. "I remember someone being in the bathroom singing and playing the tambourine and having mic cords run down the hall to where the recording gear was," Gammage said.

With the master tapes in hand for two acts, the Joseys were set to make records. To call attention to the recordings, they decided, from the beginning, that Sonobeat's 45 rpm singles would be recorded, mastered and released in stereo. "The motivation was primarily to establish Sonobeat as distinctive and to give it a gimmick to attract radio stations, reviewers and consumers alike to the recordings of a tiny Central Texas label that otherwise would be easily overlooked or ignored," said Josey Jr.

Although stereo singles had been released before, Sonobeat was widely credited with launching the mono-compatible stereo 45 format. "When we began researching mastering and pressing plants, we learned that it was very difficult — but not impossible — to make a

stereo pressing compatible with monaural record players. We followed the basic rules: Mix all bass to the center, limit high frequencies, master the lacquers at half speed and press on tough virgin vinyl," Josey Jr. said. Bill Sr. chose Houston Records Company to master and press the records and drove almost three hours to hand-deliver the Lee Arlano Trio and Sweetarts recordings.

Later that year The Sweetarts became the first act to have a record released by Sonobeat, "A Picture of Me"/"Without You" (Sonobeat R-s101). The mono-compatible stereo recording was also set apart from other singles of the time with the addition of a picture sleeve of the band. The Joseys hand-delivered the discs to record stores throughout Austin and the surrounding area, enlisted the help of a local distributor to get the record in stores throughout Dallas and Houston and began a marketing campaign in *Billboard* and *Cashbox*. Within a year, Sonobeat began to receive national attention. The men continued to record a variety of acts, including swing performer Don Dean as well as Vulcan Gas Company favorites South Canadian Overflow, Lavender Hill Express, The Conqueror, The Thingies, and Shiva's Headband. But everything was about to change.

In January 1968 KAZZ was sold to a competing station that decided block-programmed radio wasn't a viable format in Austin. Both men became unemployed. Although they had no steady income and no accessible studio to mix their product, they refused to throw in the towel. Josey Sr. moved into an expansive split-level home, complete with an area perfect for a home studio, and the two picked up where they left off. Sonobeat began investing in new recording equipment. Father and son designed and built a new portable 10-input mixer and a steel-plate reverb, as well as a drum and vocal isolation booth extending from the mini-studio into the garage.

In 1968, Johnny Winter was a 24-year-old blues guitar phenom. During a Sonobeat recording session with The Conqueror at the Vulcan Gas Company, Winter arrived to rehearse for a performance there that night. The Joseys were blown away with what they saw, and since Winter didn't have a recording contact they signed him on the spot. To capture his raw sound, they recorded him in the center of the Vulcan stage with half a dozen dynamic and condenser microphones to capture the feel of his live surroundings (even though the performance



Courtesy of Dennis Heagy



was not recorded in front of an audience). They then returned to the Josey family home to record two acoustic tracks for what would become Winter's 1969 release *The Progressive Blues Experiment*. Sonobeat quickly released the single "Rolling and Tumbling"/"Mean Town Blues," (R-s 107) as well as a limited, non-commercial advance-pressing of the album (R-s 1002). About that time Winter was spotlighted in *Rolling Stone*, and the album from the little label in Austin was in demand. The recording was sold to Liberty Records, and Sonobeat ceased distribution of the single.

"There were no regrets. It was a major door opener," said Bill Josey Jr. It made it possible to sell a second album — *Wali and the Afro-Caravan* — to Liberty/UA and to be considered a "player," albeit a minor-league player. However, we had hoped we would be attached as producers of his Columbia albums, but that was not what Columbia had in mind."

Sonobeat continued to record acts including James Polk and the Brothers, Plymouth Rock, and Ohio Express (ready for a change after "Yummy, Yummy, Yummy"), while attempting to produce the next supergroup, Mariani (with a 16-year-old guitar slinger named Eric Johnson). A promo, advance-pressing of the album *Perpetuum Mobile* (HEC 411/412), which was recorded in an open field on a 100-acre ranch outside of Austin, received some interest from United Artists and Columbia; however, negotiations stalled, and a commercial release of the album never happened. In fall 1970 Josey Jr. left to attend law school, and his father continued hunting for musical acts.

In spring 1971, Josey Sr. reunited with the Sweetarts. The group, still fronted by Gammage and including 13th Floor Elevators bass Danny Galindo, was now known as Fast Cotton. Josey Sr. produced five tracks from the band and was set to establish them as the next supergroup. However, Fast Cotton broke up before the master tape could be sent to the pressing plant. It wouldn't be the last time national success would stop just short for Sonobeat.

The psychedelic group Amethyst had come to Josey's attention in 1971. Leader Bill Miller had recently renamed his band, The Daily Planet, and Josey sensed the

group would pick up where the 13th Floor Elevators left off. However, in the middle of production, he divorced and was forced from his home (and studio). He found rental space on the ground floor of another local radio station, where he finished recording the album, *Cold Sun*. Josey again found interest at Columbia, but after months of discussions the deal fell through. The breakthrough album would stay on his shelves.

Between 1973-74, Josey began remodeling an abandoned stone church, located outside of Austin, into Sonobeat's new recording studio. He was soon back in business recording the first live performance for the label (The Country Nu-Notes at the Broken Spoke) since the Afro-Caravan 1968 single "Comin' Home Baby," which was recorded at the San Antonio HemisFair.

In 1975, Josey Sr. was diagnosed with cancer. That year country singer Jeannine Hoke recorded the last single issued by the label, "Your Touch Is Like a Whisper"/"Let's Get to Houston Today" (PS-122). In September 1976, Josey Sr. lost his fight with lymphocarcinoma.

In nine short years, Sonobeat released 24 singles, two commercial albums and seven noncommercial promotional/demo albums. While some of Sonobeat's previously unreleased recordings have surfaced officially by the artists (the *Cold Sun* and Mariani albums), most of the master tapes are upward of 40 years old, and many have deteriorated and are unplayable. "Still, there are a lot of gems in the unreleased catalog for which the master tapes may be in good enough condition to master and release," said Josey. "One, for example, is the second Afro-Caravan album that Dad was unable to get Liberty/UA to buy. We're continuing to assess the condition of all these master tapes and may find that eventually we can put together some retrospective albums."

Sonobeat records continue to be some of the most coveted and sought-after recordings by Texas music collectors, although at the time Bill Josey Sr. probably never expected the label's lasting impact. "We had no thoughts of creating a legacy, so it's gratifying that collectors now seek out Sonobeat recordings," said Bill Josey Jr. "If Dad were here today, he'd be very proud of the unexpected legacy he and Sonobeat left."

In 2005, Bill Josey Jr. along with his brother Jack unveiled www.sonobeatrecords.com. The Web site is packed with the history of the label, the artists who recorded for it and a complete discography of all released and unreleased recordings, as well as exclusive audio clips. "We decided that the music was more important than making the site a tribute to our father," said site designer Jack Josey. "Dad followed his heart and did what he pleased in life. I believe we're fortunate his heart happened to be in producing music in Austin, Texas." ●