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Number One With a Bulleit

Although he didn't live to see it, Jim Bulleit '32 is finally getting his due for helping turn Nashville into a recording empire.

Story by Amelia Benner '09



“When you’re hot, everyone is your friend,” Bulleit (above) wistfully told British author Martin Hawkins. “I couldn’t buy a meal in New York — everybody wanted to buy my dinner.” (Photo courtesy of *The Tennessean*)

as manager of a theater group. He also dug wells in Wyoming, taught music in Alabama, and even wandered penniless through New Mexico before finding his way to radio station WSM in Nashville.

For over half a century Nashville has reveled in its status as the cradle of American music, capital city of country, gospel, and rhythm and blues. But the city’s success can be traced to a group of largely forgotten entrepreneurs, including an Illinois Wesleyan alumnus whose small record label helped shape the Nashville sound during the 1940s. With the publication of a new book, however, Jim Bulleit '32 is finally getting some long-overdue recognition.

In *A Shot in the Dark: Making Records in Nashville, 1945–1955*, British music historian and author Martin Hawkins profiles the artists and businessmen who laid the groundwork for Nashville’s recording empire — including Bulleit, whom Hawkins interviewed extensively during the 1970s.

Bulleit, who grew up in the tiny, southern Indiana town of Corydon, told Hawkins that until he came to Illinois Wesleyan University as a music major, “nothing worth mentioning happened in my life.” From that moment on, he said, “I seemed not to miss a single item in the business of living.”

Although Bulleit’s classical music training at IWU gave him his start in life, the years that followed his graduation revealed a restless, daring spirit who had yet to find his niche. For a time, Bulleit traveled the country

“I think he stumbled into the music business,” Hawkins says. “He was a trained vocalist who became a radio announcer and promoter. I think he didn’t really connect his own musical abilities with what became his job.”

Working for WSM introduced Bulleit to local musicians and eventually to a second job finding bookings for country groups on the Grand Ole Opry. In 1946 Bulleit and several associates founded Bullet Records, billing it as “Hillbilly records from the home of Grand Ole Opry” and issuing recordings by future household names such as Minnie Pearl and Chet Atkins. Soon, however, Bulleit began to look beyond country music, producing records for Nashville gospel groups like the Fairfield Four.

Bulleit didn’t always see the appeal of the music he produced, but he quickly grasped its money-making potential. “It wasn’t my music,” he told Hawkins. “I was used to big bands and orchestral music.” Not everyone shared Bulleit’s personal taste, however, and Bullet Records found an eager audience for such down-home tunes as “Zeb’s Mountain Boogie,” “Heading for the Pearly Gates,” and “Lightning Struck the Poor House.”

Nashville blues musicians like Cecil Gant also recorded for Bullet and became some of the label’s most popular artists. Rhythm and blues recordings were classified as “race music” by the industry, and Bulleit marketed his black performers as “sepia stars.” These records sold well in urban areas, a market Bulleit found even more profitable than his rural “hillbilly” audiences.

“Jim was a confident man with clear views on business,” Hawkins says. “He also had an eye for self-promotion. He made you well aware of when he thought he had done something good, but at the same time he was pretty open about the mistakes he had made.”

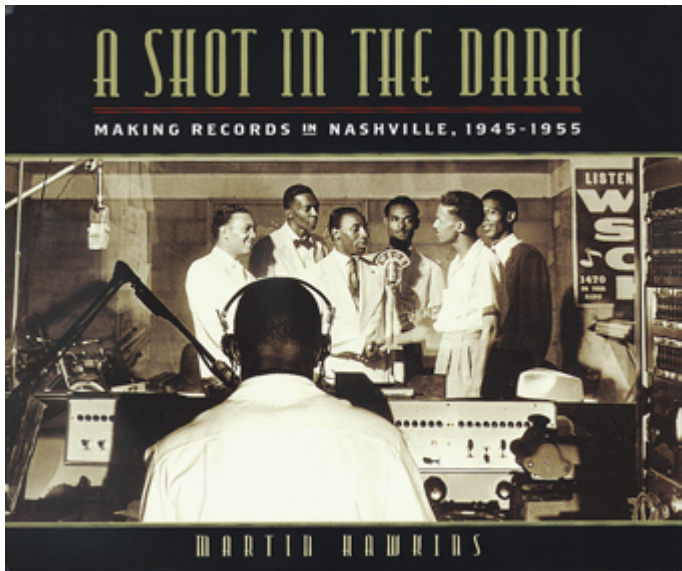
In 1947, Bullet Records scored a landmark success with “Near You,” a tune by bandleader Francis Craig that became a jukebox favorite among teenagers and was the first Nashville record to sell over a million copies. For Bulleit, recording “Near You” had been a gamble that paid off. Because popular tunes required the expense of hiring a full orchestra, Bulleit’s partners were wary of adding pop artists to the label. But the success of “Near You” convinced Bulleit to expand his business into the pop market.

“When you’re hot, everyone is your friend,” Bulleit wistfully told Hawkins. “I couldn’t buy a meal in New York — everybody wanted to buy my dinner.”

The success of the small Nashville labels meant that major national record companies, most of which weren’t based in the South, “had to make a decision on whether they wanted to make Nashville their base or not,” Hawkins says. “Because of the existence of Jim Bulleit and Bullet Records, labels like RCA and Decca decided that they had to move into Nashville or risk losing the Southern talent.”



Cecil Gant (shown far right) was featured on piano and vocals at several Bullet recording sessions. Said Jim Bulleit, Gant “never did record a thing that didn’t sell and make money,” including the tune “Nashville Jumps.” (Photo courtesy of Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum)



“It’s like he’s the least famous famous person to graduate from Wesleyan,” said Betsy Phillips ’96 of Jim Bulleit. As an editorial coordinator at Vanderbilt University Press, Phillips helped shepherd the book *A Shot in the Dark* (shown above) through production.

painted [Bulleit] and the other early local record men out of the picture over the years,” Hawkins says.

Betsy Phillips ’96 — an editorial coordinator at Vanderbilt University Press, publisher of *A Shot in the Dark* — had no idea that Bulleit was an Illinois Wesleyan alumnus when she was given the assignment to “shepherd” the book through production.

“When I was reading through the manuscript for the first time, I was surprised to see mention of IWU,” Phillips says. “It’s like he’s the least famous famous person to graduate from Wesleyan.”

Bulleit tried several times to revive his record label, but the specter of bankruptcy ultimately forced him out of the music business. He promoted one “big idea” after another for the next few decades, from cemetery developments to selling candy, bringing fresh enthusiasm and optimism to each new project. He died in 1988, but his legacy is still evident in Nashville today, where the economic impact of the music industry was estimated to be \$6.38 billion in 2006, with 9,437 jobs directly related to music production.

“Jim Bulleit was the catalyst who turned Nashville’s potential to become a recording center, post-World War II, into a reality,” Hawkins says. “It wasn’t his idea — he took the notion up when it was proposed by others — but he ran with it wholeheartedly.”

But Bulleit soon found that success was short-lived. His attempts to find another pop hit drained the company’s resources and strained his relationship with his business partners.

“After ‘Near You’ we recorded a lot of big names,” Bulleit said. “We had several good sellers, but we were inexperienced...we just thought wrong in some cases. Of course, you can’t prepick a hit.”

In early 1949 Bulleit left Bullet Records. He founded Bulleit Enterprises, which included the Delta and Village record labels. Mindful of his pop fiasco at Bullet, he focused on gospel, country, and blues. But after only a year, Bulleit Enterprises was struggling, forcing Bulleit to return to his roots as a promoter and radio announcer.

As the years passed, large record companies like RCA, Decca, and Sun swallowed the smaller labels or drove them out of business. “The music machine in Nashville