



Rotary
Club of Jackson,
Mississippi



Rotagram

March 3, 2025

The Rotary Club of Jackson welcomed Tommy Couch, Jr., President and CEO of Malaco Records. **His presentation** was “Malaco Records: The Last Soul Company.”



L to R: HEAD TABLE: President Phillip Carpenter – Rotary President; Owner, Carpenter Properties; Maalik Miles, Digital Marketing at Malaco Records; Al Underwood – Owner, Franklin Eyewear®; Tommy Couch, Jr., President and CEO of Malaco Records; and David Raddin, Pastor at Still Water Church at the Waterford.

President Phillip Carpenter welcomed Rotarians and guests.

He also led the Club in the Four Way Test.

David Raddin delivered the Invocation.

Kenny Windham led the Pledge of Allegiance.

**Past President Selena Swartzfager
Presented Excellence In Education Awards.**



Elementary Network I - Jocelyn Smith (Center)
with Assistant Superintendent Kathleen Grigsby



Elementary Network II - Dr. Lynn Horton (center)
with Assistant Superintendent Dionne Jones Woody



Middle School Network - Terrance Hill (center)
with Assistant Superintendent Alvanette Buchanan



High School Network - Roderick Smith (center)
with Thea Faulkner - JPSPartner in Education Director
Assistant Superintendent Laketia Marshall Thomas (had to leave early)

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Congratulations to LeAnne Brewer and Jill Beneke, who were selected as two of the 2025 WOMEN IN ROTARY HONOREES & AWARD RECIPIENTS! They both exemplify Rotary's "Service Above Self" motto.

The Women in Rotary Celebration and Awards Luncheon, celebrating the leadership and accomplishments of Women in Rotary and the Smart Men who support them, was held on **March 5 at the Country Club of Jackson**.



L to R: Greg Campbell for the Golden Ladder Award, Pat Thomason for the Champion of Change Award. Dr. Martha Wells for the Heart of Rotary Award, Jill Beneke for the Champion of Change Award and LeAnne Brewer for the Champion of Change Award. District 6820 Governor Sharon Fields Moulder is on the right.

SAVE THE DATE: The Rotary District 6820 Foundation Gala will be held on March 21, 2025, at the Refuge Hotel & Resort in Flowood, MS. The theme is Magical Mardi Gras.

BIRTHDAYS:

Dent Anglin	March 1
Richard Wilbourn	March 6

Michael Boerner	March 9
Mike Pepper	March 14
Becky Redd	March 15

ROTARY JOIN DATES:

Mike Pepper	03/01/1999	26 years
Roger Venable	03/01/1984	41 years
Jack Blackburn	03/01/1996	29 years
Tara Clark	03/10/2008	17 years
Tom Johnson	03/10/2008	17 years

Monday, March 10, 2025 – NO MEETING IN OBSERVANCE OF SPRING BREAK.

AI Underwood will introduce Tommy Couch, Jr., President and CEO of Malaco Records.

Since 1968, Malaco Music Group has been a leader in the independent recording industry. Also known as the Last Soul Company, Malaco defines the state of contemporary southern R&B, soul, and gospel music and has contributed to the careers of several artists.

Malaco is home to many recording artists and songwriters and has a catalog of thousands of original recordings and song copyrights.

After over 30 years of making black music for black people, Malaco Records defines the state of contemporary southern rhythm, blues, soul, and gospel.

"The Last Soul Company" started as a pocket-change enterprise in the early 1960s with college students Tommy Couch and Wolf Stephenson booking bands for fraternity dances at the University of Mississippi.

After graduation, Tommy Couch opened a shop in Jackson, Mississippi, as Malaco Attractions with brother-in-law Mitchell Malouf (Malouf + Couch = Malaco). Wolf Stephenson joined them in promoting concerts by Herman's Hermits, the Who, the Animals, and others.

In 1967, the company opened a recording studio in a building that remains the home of Malaco Records. Experimenting with local songwriters and artists, the company began producing master recordings. Malaco needed to license its early recordings with

established labels for national distribution. Between 1968 and 1970, Capitol Records released six singles and a Grammy-nominated album by legendary bluesman Mississippi Fred McDowell. Deals for other artists were concluded with ABC, Mercury, and Bang.

However, revenue from record releases was minimal, and Malaco survived doing jingles, booking bands, promoting concerts, and renting the studio for custom projects.

In May 1970, a bespectacled producer-arranger changed the struggling company's fortune. Wardell Quezergue made his mark with New Orleans stalwarts Fats Domino, Professor Longhair, and others. In return, he offered to supply Malaco with artists for studio time and session musicians. With very little money left, Malaco knew this might be their last shot at making something happen.

Mitchell brought five artists to Jackson in a borrowed school bus for a marathon session that yielded two mega-hits – King Floyd's "Groove Me" and Jean Knight's "Mr. Big Stuff." However, the tracks were rejected when submitted to Stax and Atlantic Records for distribution. Frustrated, Malaco released the King Floyd tracks on its own Chimneyville label. When "Groove Me" started a wildfire of radio play and sales, Atlantic picked the record up for distribution, giving Malaco a label deal for future Chimneyville products. "Groove Me" entered the national charts in October, going to #1 R&B and #6 pop. 1971 Chimneyville scored again with King Floyd's "Baby Let Me Kiss You" (#5 R&B and #29 Pop). Meanwhile, Stax decided to take a chance on "Mr. Big Stuff," selling over two million copies on the way to #1 on the R&B charts and #2 pop.

The Malaco Touch in Demand

Malaco's studio and session musicians were now in demand. Atlantic sent the Pointer Sisters, among others, for the Malaco touch; Stax sent Rufus Thomas and others. In January 1973, Paul Simon recorded material for his *There Goes Rhymin' Simon* album.

Later that year, Malaco released its first gospel record, "Gospel Train" by the Golden Nuggets. Also in 1973, King Floyd's "Woman Don't Go Astray" made #5 R&B.

By 1974, however, studio bookings had dwindled, Atlantic had dropped its distribution option, King Floyd had become challenging to work with, and Wardell Quezergue had lost his magic touch. As cash flow dried up, a disenchanting Mitchell Malouf left the company.

When Dorothy Moore recorded "Misty Blue" in 1973, Malaco received stacks of rejection slips when trying to sell the master to other labels. In 1975, Malaco was broke and desperate for something to sell. With just enough cash to press and mail the record, "Misty Blue" was released on the Malaco label just before Thanksgiving. Luckily, it took off the moment it hit radio turntables.

"Misty Blue" earned gold records worldwide, peaking at #2 R&B and #3 pop in the USA and #5 in England. This was followed by thirteen chart records and five Grammy nominations for Moore by 1980.

Another Gamble Pays Off

Another Malaco gamble in late 1975 targeted the gospel market again with the Jackson Southernaires. The gamble paid off, and other premium gospel artists signed on, including the Soul Stirrers, The Sensational Nightingales, The Williams Brothers, The Truthettes, and The Angelic Gospel Singers, to name a few. The Southernaires's Frank Williams became Malaco's Director of Gospel Operations, producing virtually every Malaco gospel release until his untimely death in 1993.

By 1977, songwriters, artists, and producers from the defunct Stax Records were knocking on Malaco's doors, including Eddie Floyd, Frederick Knight, the Fiestas, and David Porter. Other Malaco signings included McKinley Mitchell.

Stewart Madison also joined the company as a partner, assuming much of the business management functions while Wolf and Tommy concentrated on the creative end.

Malaco made several attempts at the disco market, but its main contribution to the era was providing the studio and session musicians for Anita Ward's "Ring My Bell."

Frederick Knight produced "Ring My Bell" for his Juana label, which, like Malaco, was distributed by T.K. Records in Miami. In the summer of 1979, "Ring My Bell" was omnipresent, going to #1 on both Pop and R&B charts and selling an estimated 10 million copies worldwide.

A key player working on "Ring My Bell" was T.K.'s venerable promotion man, Dave Clark. Then, in his seventies, Clark was the undisputed dean of promotion men. He also broke a Malaco track called "Get Up and Dance" by Freedom on New York's club scene in 1979. Starting with Grandmaster Flash, the track became one of the most sampled all-time records.

Also hot that summer, Fern Kinney's electronic remake of "Groove Me" entered the R&B and disco charts in August. The follow-up, "Together We Are Beautiful," reached #1 on the British pop charts in 1980.

Malaco relied extensively on Dave Clark's promotional efforts at T.K. So when T.K. shuttered in 1980, Malaco hired Clark. His unrivaled access to radio and credibility with artists soon paid off with his recruitment of Z.Z. Hill.

Malaco has now stopped trying to compete with mainstream labels. It fell back on what it did so well – down-home black music. More prominent labels dismissed the genre as an unprofitable relic of the past. However, Malaco could make a tidy profit selling

25,000 – 50,000 units. Starting with Z.Z Hill, Malaco became the center of the universe for old-time blues and soul.

Since blues supposedly no longer sold, everyone was shocked when Hill's second album, *Down Home Blues*, sold 500,000 copies. It was the most successful blues album, revealing a core audience for quality blues records. It also became an anthem for R&B singers struggling against disco and the emergence of rap.

Denise LaSalle charted fourteen times in the 1970s. However, during the disco era, her R&B style was called blues, and significant labels were no longer interested. At Dave Clark's suggestion, she wrote "Someone Else is Steppin' In" for Z.Z. Hill.

It was a Southern blues radio staple that racked up substantial sales but never appeared on national charts. This became the rule. Malaco's undisputed sales successes could never be measured by Billboard chart positions during the 1980s.

Like Denise LaSalle, Benny Latimore's 13 R&B chart hits of the 1970s were meaningless by 1981 when Dave Clark steered him to Malaco. Denise resurrected her artist career at Malaco, starting in 1983 with an album called *Lady in the Street*.

Malaco Becomes Dominant Southern R&B Label in the Country

By now, Malaco had found its niche and was the dominant southern R&B label in the country. It also developed an identifiable sound via a core group of session musicians and songwriters.

The house band was anchored by Carson Whitsett on keyboards, Larry Addison on the second keyboard, James Robertson on drums, Ray Griffin on bass, and Dino Zimmerman on guitar. Key songwriters such as George Jackson, Larry Addison, Rich Cason, and Jimmy Lewis provided a steady stream of strong material.

After 29 chart entries for other labels, blues guitarist Little Milton Campbell signed with Malaco in 1984. Little Milton's first Malaco single, "The Blues is Alright," reestablished his presence as a major blues artist and solidified Malaco's reputation as the contemporary southern blues company.

Z.Z. Hill had become a blues superstar when he suddenly passed away in 1984. His funeral was attended by a who's who of southern blues culture. Hearing Johnnie Taylor sing at the service, Tommy Couch invited Taylor to become Malaco's new flagship artist.

Johnnie had earned 20 hits starting in 1968. But, like other future Malaco artists, mainstream labels considered him a relic in 1984.

Despite the soulful grooves generated by Malaco's stars in the 1980s, they were pigeonholed as blues artists by radio programmers and trade journals. In the 1970s,

mainstream stars like Denise LaSalle, Latimore, Little Milton, and Johnnie Taylor sold 500,000+ copies of their hits. Now, they were consigned to the industry margins, selling 100,000 units at best.

Soul was reclassified as blues because of an aging demographic. To most radio programmers, older black people listened to the blues. So, when Johnnie Taylor's fans grew older, he was a "blues artist." The music hadn't changed, but how it was understood, marketed, and consumed had shifted significantly.

A Blues Legend Signs With Malaco

In 1985, Malaco signed Bobby Blue Bland. The blues legend had notched up 62 Billboard R&B chart records in 25 years, though few made an impression on pop radio.

That summer, Tommy Couch, Wolf Stephenson, and Stewart Madison purchased the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, a label and publishing company. The studio and its fabled rhythm section (Jimmy Johnson, David Hood, Roger Hawkins, and Barry Beckett) are credited with gold records by the Staple Singers, Paul Simon, Aretha Franklin, Bob Seger, Rod Stewart, and Wilson Pickett, to name a few. Even more valuable was their publishing company, which had moneymakers like "Old Time Rock and Roll" and "Torn Between Two Lovers."

Clearly, the dominant contemporary southern blues label, Malaco, purchased the gospel division of Savoy Records in 1986. Now, it was also the preeminent black gospel company in North America. The Savoy acquisition brought a vast catalog of classic recordings dating back decades, including albums by Shirley Caesar, Rev. James Cleveland, Albertina Walker, The Caravans, Inez Andrews, The Georgia Mass Choir, and The Florida Mass Choir. In further expansion moves that year, Malaco entered the world of telemarketing.

1989 saw the Malaco debut of Former Stax star Shirley Brown, and Bobby Blue Bland's *Midnight Run* LP remained on Billboard's Top Black album charts for more than 52 weeks. But this was also the year Dave Clark finally came off the road.

Clark often softened up program directors, saying the current record he was working was his very last. At Malaco, he had at least a dozen "last records," claiming he was retiring or dying or too old to be on the road anymore. Malaco hired Clark as a driver but had to pull him off the road in 1989. Thereafter, he was driven to the office occasionally to hang out, hold court, and doze off, finally passing away in 1995.

As Clark retired, a new generation prepared to become part of Malaco's future. In 1965, Tommy Couch Jr. followed in his father's footsteps, starting a booking agency to mine fraternity bookings on southern campuses.

After earning a marketing degree, Couch Jr. started Waldoxy Records to focus on alternative rock and white blues bands. This marketing strategy had mixed results.

After issuing a successful anthology of McKinley Mitchell's Malaco recordings, Waldoxy's subsequent signing was blues comedian Joe Poonanny.

From then on, Waldoxy targeted the same southern soul/blues market traditionally supporting Malaco, signing Bobby Rush, Artie "Blues Boy" White, and others. According to Tommy Jr., the difference is that Waldoxy has hotter buzz artists. But that means Waldoxy has to build artist name brands rather than sell songs by older, established artists.

Malaco's Gospel Labels Earned Multiple Honors

Meanwhile, Malaco's gospel labels under Jerry Mannery and Savoy Records under Milton Biggham earned multiple honors, including Billboard designations as Top Gospel Label and Top Gospel Distributor, while the artists received numerous awards (Grammy, Stellar, Soul Train, and Gospel Music Workshop), as well as Billboard Top Gospel Artist of the Year designations. The company also dominated Billboard Gospel charts, achieving #1 rankings by Keith Pringle, Walter Hawkins, Rev. James Moore, Mississippi Mass Choir, Rev. Clay Evans, Dorothy Norwood, and the Rev. James Cleveland.

Malaco's market focus widened dramatically in 1995. Songwriter/producer Rich Cason cut "Good Love" on Johnnie Taylor with a contemporary L.A. Jeep beat, enabling the artist to reach a new, younger audience. Combining contemporary tracks with old-school material like "Last Two Dollars," the Good Love album soared to #1 on Billboard's blues charts and #15 R&B, becoming the most significant record in Malaco's history.

In the late nineties, Malaco signed veteran Chicago soul great Tyrone Davis, whose credits include 42 R&B chart records. The company also continued its steady, prudent expansion, purchasing half of the Memphis-based distributor Select-O-Hits and making inroads into the urban contemporary, jazz, and contemporary Christian markets.

The launch of Freedom Records, with contemporary Christian artists such as The Kry and Hokus Pick, evolved into Nashville-based Malaco Christian Distribution, concentrating on the growing Christian and gospel markets.

Malaco Jazz Records is issuing a series of vintage live European recordings by Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Lionel Hampton, Cannonball Adderly, Thelonious Monk, and others. Malaco Jazz also distributes several upcoming independent jazz labels.

The new urban contemporary label, J-Town, scored a Top 40 R&B single, "I've Been Having an Affair" by Tonya.

Even as the company continues expanding its artistic and commercial horizons, it's a good bet that Malaco will still be the last soul company for years. Stay tuned!

Excerpted from The Malaco Story by Rob Bowman, award-winning author of Soulsville U.S.A.: The Story of Stax Records published by Schirmer Books.

MORE PHOTOS

