

Ray Topping tribute: Nashville memories

By John Broven

Ray's most impressive qualities, to my mind, were his photographic memory and total commitment, which together gave him an ability to discuss any music research topic without recourse to notes or text books. It was an enviable facility.

Very much a one-off character, Ray preferred to plough his own furrow as the original Ace consultant. However, we teamed up to open negotiations for the elusive King Records licensing deal when we met Moe Lytle's right-hand man, Stephen Hawkins, at the Rose & Crown pub in Cuckfield, Sussex in January 1992. As a result, the first six King-Ace CDs saw the light of day: Ray compiled those by the Delmore Brothers, Brother Claude Ely, Wynonie Harris and Moon Mullican, while mine were the Roy Brown and Freddy King.

Our Nashville trips on Ace's behalf in 1992 and 1993 remain highlights. There, we started delving into the treasures of the King and Excello tape vaults.

We roomed at Shoney's Inn on Music Row, with Ray attracted to the all-you-can-eat Shoney's breakfast bar along with the rest of Nashville's good old boys. Goodness knows how many famous jean-clad writers and musicians shared the tables with us.

Naturally we took in the prime record shops, The Great Escape and fellow Brit. Mike Smythe's Phonoluxe Records, then vinyl heavens both. Ray was a master at sniffing out rare records; his discovery of a Jimmy DeBerry Sun acetate at the Madison branch of The Great Escape astonishes me still.

Nearby were the Starday recording studios, where Ray and I interviewed Don Pierce in May, 1992. We had first met this pioneering record man and wife Lari for tea at The Ritz, Piccadilly, London of all places. Don was always tickled by our background knowledge of his 4 Star and Starday-King enterprises.

Then it would be down the road apiece to see Shelby and John Singleton and Colonel Jim Wilson at Sun Records on Belmont Boulevard; or a visit to record man survivor Ted Jarrett near Woodland Studios (which housed the Excello-Nashboro tapes); or an interview with Excello artist Roscoe Shelton at his home (with Juke Blues' Richard Tapp in 1993).

While Ray, sadly, did not have a major discographical book published to crown his research endeavours, his many trendsetting Ace LP and CD compilations will ensure that his life's work will have continued resonance and relevance.