

I first met Ray Topping in South Woodford when the cockroaches were scurrying around under the floorboards in Hermitage Court, a rather dilapidated thirties block of flats. They seemed to have a free run throughout the ground floor of the whole block. Ray was living nearby in Woodford Green with his parents at the time. I either met Ray when he was a customer of my small import service, or at Transat Imports. The latter was an infamous haunt in the West End, which was the only place you could buy US vinyl LPs that had not been issued in the UK. MCPS had put a ban on imports for copyright reasons and the guy who ran Transat Imports either flouted this, or paid MCPS off in some way. It's probably for this reason he only stocked LPs so he could afford all the taxes, duties, rent, rates etc as well as the MCPS. I took up the slack by importing 45s from home, which regularly got held up in customs incurring massive taxes and duties. You really had to be dedicated back then to get your fix of this magical World of underground American music.

I was working at Ilford Films at the time in their Management Services department. My job involved feeding old punched tapes into a giant mainframe computer to see what the various programmes I had been given to test would do. My wife was modelling for flake ads and magazine covers at the time. Despite very different backgrounds, Ray and I shared a love of all kinds of 50s Rock 'n' Roll and Soul music, which kept us busy exchanging label discographies.

Thankfully the Ilford Films job only lasted about six months before I managed to get a job at EMI Records as a management trainee for £800 a year, and I've been in the record business ever since. Meanwhile my wife was earning enough money for us to be able to buy a small cottage in Hatfield Peverel in Essex, which hosted many new music business friends, but Ray was also a regular visitor there.

I eventually got a proper music business job as a label manager for Bell Records who had plans to set up office in the UK. One of the first LPs I released was an Elmore James compilation that Ray compiled for me. We kind of drifted apart when I moved on to work for the Rolling Stones and then Motown. After my marriage broke up I started selling most of my record collection to Rock On in Camden Town, after I had moved five times in one year and got fed up with lugging these records around everywhere. That's where I met Ted and Roger and Chiswick Records was born. I had to earn some money somewhere and I was fortunately offered a job in Germany at Polydor International, from where I advised Ted and Roger, and after about two years returned to help run Chiswick Records full time.

In the meantime, Ray went on to become the World expert on the Blues. Our paths met again when Ace Records was spun out of Chiswick Records and Ray was taken on as a consultant to compile a host of carefully researched albums, which cemented our reputation. Our friendship continued and Ray regularly spent Christmas with my second wife and me in Finchley. He always serenaded us with his blues licks on my Joe Pass guitar. If he had persevered, he could have become an accomplished musician. He was also a big fan of military equipment and we still have a wonderful painting of a tank, which Ray gave us. He was also a marvellous graphic artist and regularly contributed artwork for his Ace compilations. Although he could be quite irascible with some colleagues in later years I always managed to keep a cordial personal relationship with Ray. He will be greatly missed.

Trevor Churchill