

Atlantic Records founder shaped U.S. music scene

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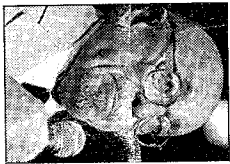
BY RICHARD HARRINGTON
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Ahmet Ertegun was as much an icon as any rock, soul or jazz legend who ever passed through Atlantic Records, the label he co-founded in 1947 and turned into one of the most influential in history.

The owlish executive always seemed the brightest luminary in any space he inhabited, backstage at Madison Square Garden or the back bar of a smoky club, surrounded by famed musicians or nervous newcomers to the business.

It was telling that Mr. Ertegun, who died Thursday at 83 after having been in a coma since Oct. 29, was hospitalized after taking a tumble backstage at a New York concert by his old pals The Rolling Stones.

In 1970, when the British superstars were shopping for a label to distribute their indepen-



Ahmet Ertegun's roster included Aretha Franklin, Led Zeppelin and Ray Charles.

dent records, Mr. Ertegun conducted negotiations with Mick Jagger and signed the group despite other labels offering the band much more money.

Mr. Ertegun's jet-setting lifestyle may have sealed the deal, but it probably didn't hurt that Jagger was a rhythm-and-blues fanatic who knew that in the '50s, Atlantic was the cornerstone label of the R&B movement.

Jagger also knew that if you looked at R&B standards such as "Chains of Love," "Sweet Sixteen" and "Mess Around," you'd find them credited to A. Nugette — a backward spelling of Ertegun — who didn't want

to embarrass his well-to-do family. That's also him singing on the chorus of Joe Turner's seminal "Shake, Rattle and Roll."

Mr. Ertegun was the longest-standing record-label founder still at the helm of his company almost 60 years on. He built a track record at Atlantic no other label matched, with a roster including Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Led Zeppelin, Cream and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young.

The Turkish-born mogul came to the United States as a boy in the '30s when his father, Mehmet Munit Ertegun, became Turkey's ambassador to the United States.

Mr. Ertegun was probably the last label lord with hands-on involvement in everything from talent scouting and production to pressing, distribution and promotion.

Mr. Ertegun was born in Istanbul, but his father's ambassadorial sprints took him and

brother Nesuhi to such capitals as Bern, Switzerland; Geneva; Paris; and London, where the youngsters fell in love with the great black jazz bands of the '30s. He recalled hearing, as a 9-year-old, the Cab Calloway Orchestra and savoring "the rhythm and the excitement of the music."

In Washington, then a segregated city, the Ertegun brothers haunted local jazz and blues clubs. The Crystal Caverns is where, in 1947, he discovered Ruth Brown, Atlantic's first hitmaker.

On Sundays, the Erteguns turned the Turkish Embassy into an open-house brunch for visiting jazz musicians, with informal — and integrated — jam sessions that began enduring friendships.

When their father died in 1944, Ahmet and Nesuhi remained in the United States and decided to go into the music business. The brothers launched two

local labels but both failed in 1946. The next year, with a \$10,000 investment from the Ertegun family dentist, they formed Atlantic in New York.

Ahmet, studying medieval philosophy at Georgetown University in the capital, joked that "I slept more hours on the train between Washington and New York than I did in my own bed."

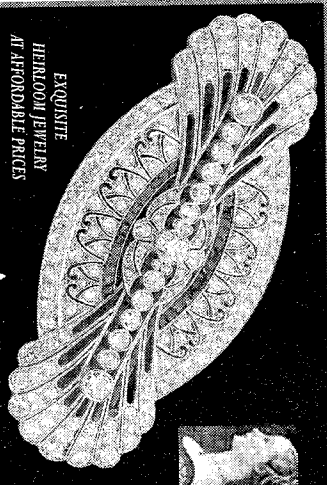
New York would win out as a headquarters, but Mr. Ertegun's Washington connection

would remain evident, from Ruth Brown and the Clovers in the '50s, to Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway in the '70s, and Stacy Lattisaw and Johnny Gill in the '80s.

Mr. Ertegun's brother died in 1989. He is survived by his wife, Mica, and a sister.

Mr. Ertegun will be buried in a private ceremony in his native Turkey, said Bob Kaus, a spokesman for Atlantic Records. A memorial service will be held in New York next year.

Material from The Associated Press is included in this report.



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