

Get a Shot of Rhythm and Blues: The Arthur Alexander Story

Richard Younger

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Arthur Alexander may not be a household name, but it should be. Like many early African-American pioneers of popular music in the 1950s and 1960s he influenced virtually all of the major rock and roll artists of the era. His music, a fusion of R&B, soul, country and pop rose to the top of American music and his voice was considered to be one of the great instruments of his times. A glance at a list of artists who covered his songs includes country, blues, pop, new-swing and rockabilly artists. How good was he? Ponder this quote by Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones, "When the Beatles and the Rolling Stones got their first chance to record, one did 'Anna' and the other did 'You Better Move On.' That should tell you enough."

Arthur's story, excellently told by songwriter/author Younger is an abject lesson in the perils of stardom. A young African-American man, ambitious and talented, rises through the emerging soul scene in Muscle Shoals and Nashville. His music is recorded by the Beatles, The Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan. A flirtation with drugs leads to full-blown addiction, mental collapse and a loss of family and career. Racism and the vagaries of history, personality and dishonest accounting practices collude to push Arthur over the edge. By 1977 Arthur retreats to Cleveland to drive a bus and clean up his life, another faded soul legend. Arthur Alexander was not, however, through with music and his triumph and tragedy is a singular American story. His 1992 comeback album and his death three months later are truly tragic and yet in every sense redemptive.

Younger has created a compelling account of an artist whose life history is worth retelling and recreates the energy and passion of the American soul and country scene in the early sixties. Any reader interested in American pop music and the American tragedies that make up such a large thread in its story will be fascinated with this book.

PETER TERRY (May / June 2000)

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