

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Harry Pace & Black Swan Records

(January 6, 1884 – July 19, 1943)

“Owner of the First Major Black-Owned Record Company”



Harry Herbert Pace was born on January 6, 1884, in Covington, Georgia. Harry was raised by his mother Nancy, after his father died when Harry was just an infant. By the age of twelve, Harry had completed elementary school. He attended Atlanta University and studied under W.E.B. Du Bois. He graduated as valedictorian at the age of 19. After graduation, Harry worked at a printing company and in the banking and insurance industry in Atlanta.



After moving from Atlanta to Memphis in 1912, Harry met W.C. Handy, who was a songwriter, American composer and musician, who referred to himself as the **Father of the Blues**. W.C. Handy had written the first commercially successful blues song called "Memphis Blues." W.C. was also a popular bandleader in the famous clubs of Beale Street. Harry and W.C. began writing songs together and later formed the Pace and Handy Music Company. The company was one of the earliest black-owned sheet music publishing companies and an industry leader of the Harlem Renaissance. In 1918 the pair moved the company to New York. By the end of the year their catalog included The Memphis Blues, Beale Street Blues and The St. Louis Blues. In 1917, Harry worked with James Weldon Johnson, Dr. Charles Johnson, Dr. Louis Wright, and Walter White to charter the Atlanta branch of the NAACP.



Following the example of the Broome Special Phonograph Records Company, the very first black-owned and operated music company, Harry founded Pace Phonograph Corporation Inc., in March, 1921 using \$30,000 in borrowed capital. The Pace Phonograph Corporation allowed more creative liberties with their artists, where Broome published only black classical music. Black Swan Records, so named to pay homage to Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, a famous 19th Century entertainer known as the "Black Swan" for her singing, focused on the sultrier sounds of Jazz and the Blues. Very few white-owned record labels, such as Columbia, Victor, Aeolian, Edison and Paramount, recorded Black artists at the time. When they did, it was often limited to novelty songs and minstrelsy. Harry announced the new Pace/Black Swan label with ads in Black newspapers across the country with the slogan "The Only Records Using Exclusively Negro Voices and Musicians".



In May of 1921, Harry invited jazz, gospel and blues singer Ethel Waters, to his studio on 138th Street in Harlem to record the iconic, "Down Home Blues". When the record came out, it sold over 100,000 copies in the first six months, which was remarkable at the time. With the success of "Down Home Blues", Ethel Waters and the Black Swan Troubadours went on tour, travelling to 53 cities, including towns in the deep South which was dangerous for a Black band at that time. Throughout 1921, Black Swan Records released 78-rpm records of jazz, blues, gospel, arias, and spirituals. It put out the first ever recording of the song that would soon become the Black national anthem: "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing", co-written by James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson. By the summer of 1922, the company had a staff of 30 employees, including its own 8-man orchestra, seven district managers in major cities, and over 1,000 record dealers.

From 1921 to 1923, the company released 180 records - a record in itself that wouldn't be topped by a black-owned record company for another 30 years. Harry and Black Swan Records managed to turn the initial \$30,000 investment into a \$100,000 profit.



But, almost as soon as the company began to find financial success, the popularity of radio changed course. The popularity of radio, coupled with white-owned record companies paying artists more money, struck a crippling blow to Black Swan Records. By December 1923, Black Swan Records filed for bankruptcy and their catalog was sold off. In March 1924, Paramount Records, a white-owned company, purchased the Black Swan label, but discontinued it shortly thereafter.

Harry moved to Chicago in 1925 and opened the Northwestern Life Insurance Company, one of the largest black-owned businesses in the North in the 1930's. He received a Law Degree from Chicago-Kent College of Law in 1933 and began working to challenge Chicago's discriminatory covenants, which barred black people from living in the Washington Park Subdivision of Chicago's Woodlawn neighborhood. In 1940, Harry was part of the legal team that brought **Hansberry v. Lee** to the U.S. Supreme Court. His testimony in the case was crucial to putting an end to redlining in Chicago and other cities. The case inspired playwright Lorraine Hansberry to write, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Her father, Carl Hansberry, was the plaintiff in the case.



On July 19, 1943, Harry Herbert Pace died at the age of 54. He was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery, in the Bronx, NY, before many of his friends knew he was gone.

