



The Rise and Fall of Paramount Records

A Great Migration Story, 1917–1932

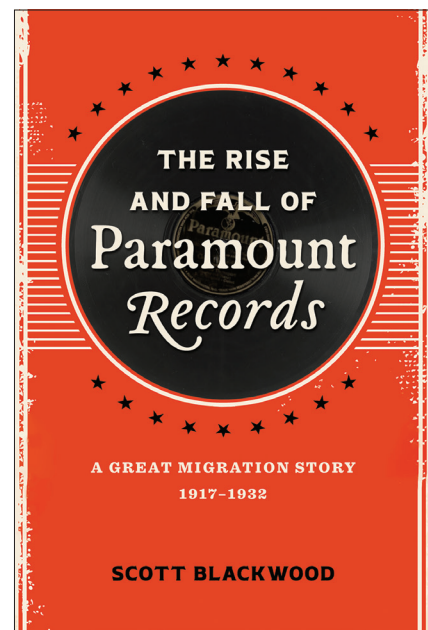
SCOTT BLACKWOOD

Founded in 1917, Paramount Records incongruously was one of several homegrown record labels of a Wisconsin chair-making company. The company pinned no outsized hopes on Paramount. Its founders knew nothing of the music business, and they had arrived at the scheme of producing records only to drive sales of the expensive phonograph cabinets they had recently begun manufacturing.

Lacking the resources and the interest to compete for top talent, Paramount's earliest recordings gained little foothold with the listening public. On the threshold of bankruptcy, the label embarked on a new business plan: selling the music of Black artists to Black audiences. It was a wildly successful move, with Paramount eventually garnering many of the biggest-selling titles in the "race records" era. Inadvertently, the label accomplished what others could not, making blues, jazz, and folk music performed by Black artists a popular and profitable genre. Paramount featured a deep roster of legendary performers, including Louis Armstrong, Charley Patton, Ethel Waters, Son House, Fletcher Henderson, Skip James, Alberta Hunter, Blind Blake, King Oliver, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Ma Rainey, Johnny Dodds, Papa Charlie Jackson, and Jelly Roll Morton.

Scott Blackwood's *The Rise and Fall of Paramount Records* is the story of happenstance. But it is also a tale about the sheer force of the Great Migration and the legacy of the music etched into the shellacked grooves of a 78 rpm record. With Paramount Records, Black America found its voice. Through creative nonfiction, Blackwood brings to life the gifted artists and record producers who used Paramount to revolutionize American music. Felled by the Great Depression, the label stopped recording in 1932, leaving a legacy of sound pressed into cheap 78s that is among the most treasured and influential in American history.

SCOTT BLACKWOOD is Distinguished Professor of Creative Writing at Hollins University and author of the award-winning novel *See How Small*. His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Callaloo*, *New England Review*, *New Madrid*, *Arcturus*, *Austin Chronicle*, *Chicago Magazine*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Boston Review*, and *Southwestern Review*.



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