

# MELOTONE MYTHOLOGY:

## ROBERT JOHNSON'S DIME STORE ISSUES

By Roger Misiewicz and Helge Thygesen



Have you ever wondered why you never see Robert Johnson's records on Melotone? Maybe not, but if you have you will find the answer in this article where we present documentation for all of his records released on the dime store labels.

### The Dime Store labels

When several of Robert Johnson's records were released on the dime store labels in 1937, the dime store labels had been active in the record business for quite some time. The labels we name the 'dime store labels,' as far as this exercise is concerned, are Banner, Melotone, Oriole, Perfect and Romeo, all products of the American Record Corporation stable of labels. At the time we are considering, all of these labels had exactly the same catalogue number system. Let's take as an example Robert Johnson's famous *Come On In My Kitchen*. The record was released on Vocalion 03563, but it was also released on the dime store labels. In discographies you will see it listed as ARC 7-07-57. ARC is short for American Record Company - the owner of Vocalion and the dime store labels at the time. Most discographical books assume that this record was released on all of the dime store labels ie. Melotone 7-07-57, Perfect 7-07-57 etc, but in actuality that was not so.

The American Record Corporation was a United States based record company. It resulted from the merger in July 1929 of Regal Records, Cameo Records, Banner Records, the American branch of Pathé Records, plus the Scranton Button Company, the parent company of Emerson Records.

Louis G. Sylvester, who had been the former head of the Scranton Button Company, became president of the new company located at 1776 Broadway in Manhattan, New York

City. In October 1929, Herbert Yates, head of Consolidated Film Company, took control of ARC. In the following years, the company was a major player in a depressed record industry, buying failing labels at bargain prices to exploit their catalogues.

In September 1935 the ARC special number system began. The first blues record - a Walter Roland record - was released with catalogue number 350912. In October the first blues record (a Buddy Moss record) was numbered 35-10-15, but in November the system found its final form as e.g. 5-11-58 (also a Buddy Moss record). The first digit denotes the year (1935), the next block denotes the month of the release and the last block denotes the serial number of the country, blues or gospel records released in the month. If a certain record has the serial number 58 it was the eighth release in that month. Race and country records started their serial numbering at 51, so the first country or race record released in December 1935 would carry a number like 5-12-51 (it is in fact a blues record by Pinewood Tom). The popular material released on the dime store labels had serial numbers beginning with 01. The catalogue number system lasted until April 1938 when production of the dime store labels was abandoned. Throughout the entire period the records sold at 25 cents.

Melotone and Perfect were the major labels among the dime store group of labels. Both had retail distribution and Melotone was also a juke box label. Romeo was manufactured to be sold exclusively at the S. H. Kress & Co. department store chain. The Oriole label was sold exclusively at the McCrory chain of stores. Banner was a common label in the 1920's with a wide-ranging musical repertoire, but by the time we are considering, it seems to have been issuing only popular records. So far we have not seen any of the ARC blues and gospel records from September 1935 and onwards released on Banner, but we have seen popular Banner records from late 1936, so they may still have been in business in 1937. Banner records sold at S. S. Kresge's chain stores.

### Robert Johnson's records on the Dime Store labels

Robert Johnson had no fewer than 8 records released on the dime store labels. Most of them are very scarce and blues collectors trace them as if they were jewels. All of these records were also released on Vocalion and three were also issued on Conqueror. If you collect his records you will know that although they might be tough to acquire on Vocalion, they are at least much easier to find on Vocalion than on any of the dime store labels.

All of the dime store labels in question might have released his records, but apparently they did not. How can we be sure? By examining the Label Copy Notice of Coupling and Assignment sheets. As can be seen from the following example, ARC 7-03-56 was manufactured only for release on Perfect and Oriole.

**LABEL COPY**  
**NOTICE OF COUPLING AND ASSIGNMENT**

Assign to American Supplement COMBINATION No. 7-03-56  
Release Date January 4, 1937 Block Series \_\_\_\_\_  
Labels—Kind and color not indicated above \_\_\_\_\_  
Size 10" Price 25¢ Class RACE (Blues) Bridgeport Hollywood  
Mfg. Ord. Perf 900-Oriole 75  
Add. Supply \_\_\_\_\_

The following information is to appear on label as laid out:

SA 2580

Vocal Blues with Guitar  
Accompaniment

KIND HEARTED WOMAN BLUES  
-Robert Johnson-

ROBERT JOHNSON

7-03-56 A

Oriole

Perfect

The following information is the status of this selection and is not to appear on label:

Is this a W Recording? <u>NO</u>	Country of Origin of Composition? <u>USA</u>
Publisher <u>NO</u>	Recorded by what Company? <u>Vocalion</u>
Date of Copyright _____	Recorded in what Country? <u>USA</u>
Royalty Artist <u>NO</u>	Is a Pressing Fee to be paid? <u>Yes</u>

The following information is to appear on label as laid out:

SA 2586

Vocal Blues with Guitar  
Accompaniment

TERRAPLANE BLUES  
-Robert Johnson-

ROBERT JOHNSON

7-03-56 B

Oriole

Perfect

The following information is the status of this selection and is not to appear on label:

Is this a W Recording? <u>NO</u>	Country of Origin of Composition? <u>USA</u>
Publisher <u>NO</u>	Recorded by what Company? <u>Vocalion</u>
Date of Copyright _____	Recorded in what Country? <u>USA</u>
Royalty Artist <u>NO</u>	Is a Pressing Fee to be paid? <u>Yes</u>

Signed C. REDDY  
Date 2-21-36

FR - Trans from Vocalion

Note also that only 900 copies were manufactured of Perfect 7-03-56 and even fewer, only 75, were manufactured for release in the McCrory chain stores on the Oriole label.

The label copy notice says: „Trans from Vocalion“ and that can only be an instruction to the factory to press the record from a Vocalion master plate they already had used.

That particular Robert Johnson record was also released on Vocalion 03416. Quite surprisingly ARC had an anticipated sale of only 900 Perfects and 75 Orioles, although it was Robert Johnson's best selling record on Vocalion. You can see from the label copy notice that the record was transferred from Vocalion.

The label copy notice for this particular Robert Johnson record was kept by Larry Cohn, who rescued the card from being destroyed. Larry did in fact rescue all of the Robert Johnson label copy notices and we can now reveal all of the interesting details.

**Perfect 7-03-56, Oriole 7-03-56**

**KIND HEARTED WOMAN BLUES** (Robert Johnson)

**TERRAPLANE BLUES** (Robert Johnson)

900 copies were pressed of Perfect 7-03-56 and 75 copies were pressed of Oriole 7-03-56.

"Transf from Vocalion." The release date is given as January 4th 1937.

**ROBERT JOHNSON**

Vocal Blues with Guitar Accompaniment

**Perfect 7-04-60, Oriole 7-04-60**

**32-20 BLUES** (Robert Johnson)

**LAST FAIR DRAL GONE DOWN** (Robert Johnson)

900 copies were pressed of Perfect 7-04-60 and 75 copies were pressed of Oriole 7-04-60.

"Transf from the Vocalion 03445." The release date is given as February 10th 1937.

**ROBERT JOHNSON**

Vocal Blues with Guitar Accompaniment

**Perfect 7-04-81, Romeo 7-04-81**

**DEAD SHRIMP BLUES** (Robt. Johnson)

**I BELIEVE I'LL DUST MY BROOM** (Robt. Johnson)

800 copies were pressed of Perfect 7-04-81 and 100 copies were pressed of Romeo 7-04-81.

"Transf from Vocalion 03475." The release date is given as March 10th 1937.

**ROBERT JOHNSON**

Vocal Blues with Guitar Accompaniment

**Perfect 7-05-81, Romeo 7-05-81**

**CROSS ROAD BLUES** (Robert Johnson)

**RAMBLIN' ON MY MIND** (Robert Johnson)

800 copies were pressed of Perfect 7-05-81 and 100 copies were pressed of Romeo 7-05-81.

"Transf from Vocalion 03519." The release date is given as April 20th 1937.

**ROBERT JOHNSON**

Vocal Blues with Guitar Accompaniment

**Perfect 7-07-57, Romeo 7-07-57**

**THEY'RE RED HOT** (Robert Johnson)

**COME ON IN MY KITCHEN** (Robert Johnson)

500 copies were pressed of Perfect 7-07-57 and 100 copies were pressed of Romeo 7-07-57.

"Released on Vocalion 03563." The release date is given as June 1st 1937.

**ROBERT JOHNSON**

Vocal Blues with Guitar Accompaniment

**Perfect 7-09-56, Romeo 7-09-56**

**FROM FOUR UNTIL LATE** (Robert Johnson)

**HELLHOUND ON MY TRAIL** (Robert Johnson)

400 copies were pressed of Perfect 7-09-56 and 75 copies were pressed of Romeo 7-09-56.

There is no composer credit mentioned for the A-side on the label copy notice, but we assume that the labels show composer credit as shown. There is no reference to a Vocalion co-issue on this particular release copy notice. The release date is given as August 1st 1937.

**ROBERT JOHNSON**

Vocal Blues with Guitar Accompaniment

**Perfect 7-10-65, Romeo 7-10-65**

**MILKCOW'S CALF BLUES** (Robert Johnson)

**MALTED MILK** (Robert Johnson)

400 copies were pressed of Perfect 7-10-65 and 50 copies were pressed of Romeo 7-10-65.

There is no reference to co-issues on this particular release copy notice. The release date is given as September 15th 1937.

**ROBERT JOHNSON**

Blues Singing with Guitar Acc.

**Perfect 7-12-67**

**STONES IN MY PASSWAY** (Robert Johnson)

**I'M A STEADY ROLLIN' MAN** (Robert Johnson)

300 copies were pressed of Perfect 7-12-67.

"Released on Vocalion record #03723." The release date is given as November 15th 1937.

**ROBERT JOHNSON**

Blues Singing with Guitar Acc.

Now you have the answer to our question. None of the Robert Johnson records were pressed with a Melotone label. All of his dime store labels were released on Perfect. Two were released on Oriole and five on Romeo. If you look at

Perfect and Melotone flyers of late 1937 you will see his records listed in the Perfect flyers and catalogues but you will see none in the Melotone flyers and catalogues.

Two of Robert Johnson's Perfect records are listed in this clip from a late 1937 catalogue.

One may wonder why it is so - were the chain stores ordering records from mainly the Vocalion catalogue for release on their own store labels? Did ARC press only what the stores wanted? It looks very much as though that is the case. Of course there were dime store releases that never appeared on Vocalion, and some may have been recorded exclusively for the dime store labels. We will probably never get the absolute answer to these questions.

If you compare the number of records with known pressing figures of late Columbia race records or sales figures for Victor 23250 series you get an idea that the dime store labels were indeed a very limited niche of the ARC Company. It is hard to believe that so few records were pressed in the mid 1930's and it is even more unusual that they carried on for so long, but in April 1938 it came to an end. All of the

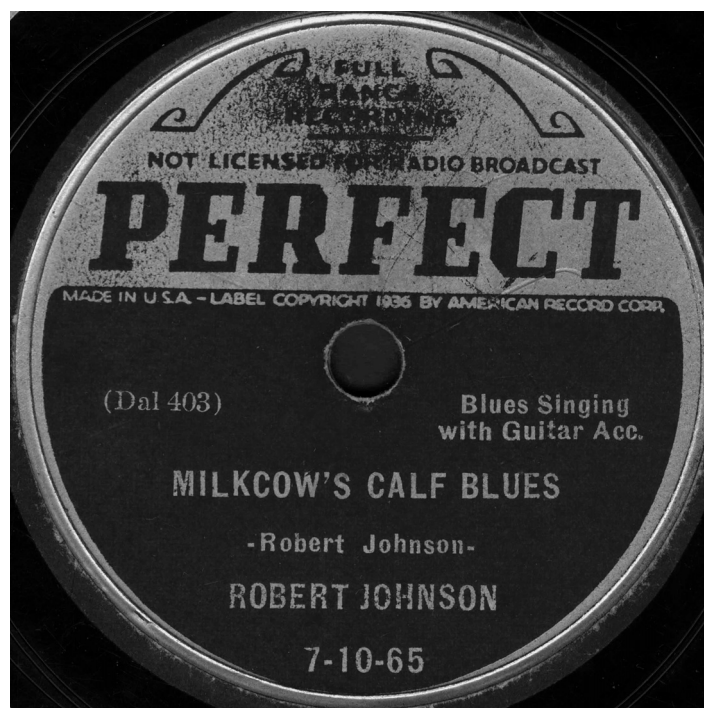
PERFECT RECORDS — SELE		
RACE (Vocal Blues & Hot Dance)—Cont.		
0318	D. B. A. Blues	Pinewood Tom
0247	Dead Cats on the Line	Tampa Red & Georgia Tom
7-04-81	Dead Shrimp Blues	Robert Johnson
7-03-73	Dirty Dozen No. 2, The	Tampa Red
35-10-31	Dirty No Gooder	Big Bill
6-10-55	Don't Tear My Clothes	Washboard Sam Four
7-04-65	Don't Tear My Clothes No. 2	Chl. Black Swans
7-07-70	Don't Want You No More	Tommy Settles
0325	Dough Rolling Papa	Buddy Moss
3-10-31	Dying Day Blues	Big Bill
0312	Early in the Morning No. 2	Walter Roland
7-09-65	Eighth Avenue Blues	Peanut, The Kidnapper
7-06-67	Everything Is Rhythm Now	Bogan's Birmingham's Busters
7-10-66	Evil Hearted Me	Big Bill
7-09-58	Evil Hearted Woman	Georgia Slim
6-05-64	Evil Hearted Woman	Blind Boy Fuller
6-12-59	Falling Rain	Big Bill
0289	Forty-Five Hundred Blues	Bessie Jackson
7-07-66	Froggie Blues	Peetie Wheatstraw
7-09-56	From Four Until Late	Robert Johnson
7-05-80	Gang of Trouble, A	John D. Twitty

dime store labels were deleted. But was it a sudden death for all of the labels? We doubt it. It looks as if Oriole was dropped in April 1937 (a year earlier than the final death of the dime store labels in general). Romeo is much more difficult to ascertain. ARC seems to have continued production of the Romeo label until January 1938 and they might have continued right to the end. When we look at the known releases from 1938 the records found on Perfect far outnumber the records found on Melotone, so even Melotone may have been abandoned earlier.

We think that we ought to be more specific when writing blues and gospel discographies. It is too general just to list a record as ARC 7-03-56. The writers of the discographies should be much more precise with respect to the labels used. This Robert Johnson discographical research is part of broader research to find out exactly what labels were used for each blues and gospel release in the time span September 1935 until April 1938 and we need all the help we can get from collectors.

If you would like to contribute with information from your collection, company flyer or other source, we would very much like to hear from you. In particular if you have any of these records on Oriole or Romeo we are desperately looking for information. We also need to fill in details of records released in 1938.

Please do not hesitate to write even if you think we may already have the information - a draft of the information we already have is available for everyone who would like to check their record collection for missing records. You can contact either of the authors at: romis78@gmail.com or patton@mail.dk



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## For the Record...

### *VJM's Letters to the editor section.*

In 2009 Geoffrey Wheeler, the President of the International Association of Jazz Record Collectors, published his "Collectors Guide to Jazz on Bootleg and Reissue 78 rpm records 1932 – 1952". Headed "Definitive Edition" the work contains much valuable information as well as some unrelated material with listings of some 60 labels. However it omits any listing of many British, European, and other "bootleg" reissues such as Tempo, Jazz Collector, Jazz Society, AFCDJ, English Vocalion V-series, Swiss HMV, Ampersand, etc., to mention a few. A listing of these and other labels omitted from Geoffrey Wheeler's book would, I believe, be useful to Collectors. Apart from English Vocalion, I possess no listings or catalogues, if indeed the latter exists, but would be willing to collate any information available if collectors would send such information as they have to me at the following address:- John Capes, 5 Abbotts Crescent, Enfield, London, EN2 8BJ, England. Tel: 0208 366 4064  
Email: jc015a7274@blueyonder.co.uk

I have an addition to the Victor Blues Records article in VJM 159: Eddie Hunter's Victor 19154 is accompanied by a white studio orchestra under the direction of Rosario Bourdon, so it is unlikely to be of interest to VJM readers.

Björn Englund, Solna, Sweden

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