



AT A 1965 FRIAR'S CLUB DINNER HONORING JACK WARNER, FRANK SINATRA PRAISED THE WARNER SIBLINGS FOR SHOWING THE WORLD "THE TRUE MEANING OF BROTHERHOOD." AS SINATRA EXPLAINED, THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF THE CONCEPT CAME TO THEM NATURALLY—AFTER ALL, "THEY WERE BROTHERS AND THEY WERE HOODS."

WARNER BROTHERHOOD

Like most good comedy, Sinatra's brand of humor worked in part because of its uncomfortable proximity to the truth. Jack Warner was a good movie executive. He knew how to move amongst the stars, always tan, always laughing when the cameras turned his way. But when business demanded it of him, he could take it to the streets. In fact, by the time he founded Warner Bros. Records, there were no brothers in Warner Bros. Blood had lost out to business. Through cunning and a willingness to force his way through the thicket of Warner family ties, Warner got himself into the seat of power and his brothers off the lot. In the pages of *Vanity Fair* the moment is described less gently: "Jack had fucked his brothers but good." It was a maneuver Shakespearean in its proportions. Afterwards, the Warner boys would never speak again. This was the Jack Warner who, in 1957, wanted a record label. **Stan Cornyn:** "Everybody seemed to call him 'Chief'. He was always well-shaved. I think he had his own barber downstairs. When you walked into his office you'd go down some steps, and then there's that desk: seven to eight feet wide and up on a pedestal—so Jack Warner was always a little higher than anybody else in the room."

As with most matters in the entertainment business, Warner's interest in starting a record company came down to money. He was more than a little displeased when one of his contracted actors, Tab Hunter, scored a major hit for Dot Records. Hunter's "Young Love" went to number one in 1957. A second version, recorded by Sonny James, was at number four. You couldn't escape the song. From Warner's perspective, his company had raised Tab Hunter's visibility, groomed the young star, and Dot came in from behind to make the money on him.

Making matters worse, on a promotional tour for the Warner Bros. film *The Spirit of St. Louis*, Tab Hunter spent more time talking about his hit song with Dot Records than he did the failing movie he made with Warner Bros. In his own defense, the actor elaborated: "Everyone knew the plane landed safely . . . so they kept saying, 'Tell us about your new record.'" *The Spirit of St. Louis*, directed by Billy Wilder at a cost of six million dollars, was considered a major loss. Needless to say, there were layers to Jack Warner's embarrassment.

And so, for all the wrong reasons, Warner Bros. Records was born. It was March of 1958. The company's address: 3701 Warner Boulevard, Burbank, California, a former machine shop on the Warner Bros. movie lot. Life in that building would never be a matter of great significance to Jack Warner, so long as money was being made. In the biographies written about him, Warner Bros. Records is typically left unmentioned. Warner's initial concern, Tab Hunter, though quickly signed to the new company, would never score another big hit. It may have looked simple when Dot Records sent "Young Love" to the top of the charts, but the birth of Warner Bros. Records was not going to be without labor pains.



◆ The four Warner brothers circa 1930, clockwise from top left: Harry, Jack, Sam, Albert.

◆ Ingrid Bergman sheds a tear on the cover of the first Warner Bros. LP, the soundtrack to *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ray Heindorf, 1958.

Opening spread: A 27-year-old Jack Warner breaking ground for the Warner Bros. Sunset lot in Hollywood, 1919.



OLD WOUNDS

To understand fully the launch of Warner Bros. Records, it's worth considering the prehistory of that event. Warner Bros. Records wasn't the Warner family's first foray into the music business. In 1930 the company bought Brunswick Records for eight million dollars. Brunswick had released songs from *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson and historically significant as the first feature-length "talkie," a film employing synchronized dialogue. While the film's success had helped to secure the movie company's future, the soundtrack did similar work for Brunswick. A few years later the Warner Bros. purchase of Brunswick brought the two companies' interests together. Included in the deal were Brunswick's record-pressing plant, the Vocalion label, and a number of other ventures in which Brunswick had a hand, including radios, bowling balls, and billiard tables. Not wanting to be in the recreation business, Warner Bros. sold off everything except the record-pressing machines and the record labels. But, over time, what originally looked like a smart move became a source of shame. The company would have been better off if they'd held onto the bowling balls.

Brunswick's track record before the Warner Bros. purchase included a number of high points. The label had signed a young Bing Crosby, handled Jolson's recordings, and released Cab Calloway's classic, "Minnie the Moocher." But the Depression battered the record industry. Rather than await a change in fortunes, Warner Bros. got out, selling Brunswick for a major loss to American Record Company. For those Warner Bros. film executives still around a quarter century later, the Brunswick deal was reason enough to stay out of the record business—still. But, at the end of the day, it wasn't going to be their names on the label and it wasn't going to be their decision.

THE INDUSTRY IN 1958

Bob Krasnow: "The music business was going through a huge transition." Since the 1930s, the landscape of the recording industry had transformed. Among the changes that could be witnessed in 1958 were those brought about by the rise of rock & roll, a music belonging to post-War America and one of its native creatures, the teenager. Perhaps most significantly, when rock & roll first hit, the major labels kept their distance, waiting for this new phenomenon to pass. That gesture, born both of contempt and, possibly, ineptitude, gave the culture of indie labels a shot of adrenaline. Off on the margins, things heated up.

In the first years of rock & roll, entrepreneurship took many forms, visionaries and madmen mixing freely—often indistinguishably and to great effect. Labels like Atlantic, Imperial, King, Specialty, Red Bird, Modern, Sun, Chess, Roulette, and so many more operated with little regard for the comparatively sterile culture of the major labels. It was a Wild West of sorts. And in the immediate absence of laws, invention became a reflex. This spirit of invention wasn't, of course, just in the business—you could hear it in the music. There was something vital going



on. Art and commerce had a good thing going. There was no Elvis Presley without Sam Phillips. It was a remarkably productive exchange that would affect the industry for years to come.

But if the indie scene was vibrant, populated with characters—strange, wonderful, sometimes awful characters—that's not where Warner Bros. launched its first efforts. **Seymour Stein:** "You couldn't compare Warner Bros. Records to anything good. They were horrible. I looked at every Imperial label, every Vee-Jay label, every Specialty label, every Chess and Checker . . . I never looked at Warner Bros. because the bulk of their early releases were crap." But as others have pointed out, there's little reason to expect that a company like Warner Bros. might have slipped into the world of the indies and gotten off on the good foot. They were, after all, a publicly traded company, far from the margins that housed the finest among the rock & roll labels. **Bob Krasnow:** "Even if Warner Bros. Records had wanted to start in the margins, they probably wouldn't have understood where the margins were." In the history of important American record companies, the Warner Bros. story is not one in which greatness haunted the company from the beginning. As Krasnow suggests, it's not that Warner Bros. wasn't invited to the party, they simply didn't know that one was taking place.

To be fair, if Warner Bros. Records followed any example, it only made sense that it would be that of the other movie companies with music interests, including MGM and Paramount. And those labels operated in a different sphere than did Sun Records or Atlantic. Warner Bros. Records was not entering into the music business from a single, rented room in a rough part of town—the company was situated on the lot of a major movie company, the company known for *Casablanca*. If they didn't act like an indie, it was for obvious reasons. **Joe Smith:** "The Chess brothers and Vee-Jay: Those people owned their labels and could do anything they wanted. Warners was part of a big corporation on the New York Stock Exchange and had to be careful with what they did." And careful they were. So careful that few would know they were there at all.

ESTABLISHING AN IDENTITY

Jack Warner wanted two obvious things for his company: strong leadership and, without too much of a delay, financial autonomy. In his thinking, the former would bring about the latter. Recommended to him was Jim Conkling, a veteran of the recording industry. Conkling presented Warner Bros. executives with a business plan that looked sensible, and, in the process, he got the offer to become the first president of Warner Bros. Records.

There was a solid rationale behind the selection. **Stan Cornyn:** "Jim was from the big school of the majors. That's what he was used to." Conkling had worked for both Capitol and Columbia Records. He had founded the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), an increasingly powerful advocacy organization for the music business. He played an important role in the birth of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS), the organization that gave out Grammy Awards. Finally, he was the man who had come up with the idea of "record clubs," a virtual profit machine that sent thousands of records to club members, whether they really wanted them or not. But despite his deep background and the company's visibility, Conkling was starting from scratch. **Jim Conkling:** "Here I was supposed to be starting a first-class record company. I had no secretary. I had no file cabinet . . . In fact,



- ◆ A Brunswick release from the period in which it was owned by Warner Bros. Studios, circa 1931. No matter the talent involved—in this case Bing Crosby—the Brunswick experience left the company wary of the record business.
- ◆◆ A dust sleeve used in the first LP releases, featuring Warner Bros.' motion picture studios lot. Used from 1958–1960.
- ◆ Tab Hunter's self-titled LP debut from 1958. It was Hunter on whom Jack Warner pinned his hopes for the label.
- ◆◆ Jim Conkling, the first president of Warner Bros. Records. The furrowed brow would stay with him for most of the two-year period during which he led the company.
- ◆◆ A brochure announcing the world premiere of Warner Bros. Records, *The First Name in Sound*, September 1958.



the only things in the office besides the desk and chair were one lead pencil and a yellow pad of paper. That was it. That was Warner Bros. Records, Incorporated."

Conkling's first decision would be the most meaningful: On what musical area would the label focus its efforts? Though Tab Hunter would be among the first artists signed to the Warner Bros. roster, Conkling decided to go in what seemed a safe direction: the adult pop market. Rather than emphasize singles, Conkling made the LP a Warner Bros. priority. The decision to do so was not arbitrary. During Conkling's tenure as the president of Columbia, he played a key role in establishing the LP as a format for popular music. In what some called the "battle of the speeds," Columbia and RCA fought for 33 1/3 rpm and 45 rpm respectively. Conkling went so far as to work with publishers in order to bring royalty rates down, making the long player a fiscal possibility. Perhaps his heart was still in that battle. Given the connection between the young audience of the day and the singles format, it's no surprise that Conkling's interest in the album led Warner Bros. away from the young audience and straight into the arms of an equally unmoved adult mainstream consumer. **Bob Merlis:** "It was an album-oriented company from the beginning. They had these *conceptual* albums."

Artists like Ira Ironstrings and Buddy Cole—not coincidentally, both brothers-in-law to Conkling—released album after album in this "conceptual" vein. *Music for People with \$3.98 (Plus Tax If Any)* by Ira Ironstrings, Cole's *Have Organ, Will Swing, Sousa in Stereo* by the Warner Bros. Military Band, *Waltzing Down Broadway* by Warren Barker, Irving Taylor's *Terribly Sophisticated Songs*. This selection, however small in relation to the enormous output of Warner Bros. Records' first years, captures the spirit of Warner Bros. Records in that era. **Lou Dennis:** "I was a disc jockey from 1953 until 1962 in Lewiston, Maine, and Waterbury, Connecticut. We started the whole rock & roll movement. Joe Smith was in Boston, and he was big time. I was in tertiary markets. I was playing the race records that would become rock & roll. Of course, I saw the Warner Bros. releases, Joe 'Fingers' Carr and so forth. I thought, 'What the hell is this?'"

Amidst the first year's many releases, there were surprisingly few soundtracks connected to Warner Bros. films. For whatever reason, Warner Bros. Records, different from MGM, was not quick to find a creative connection to its parent company. The releases seemed to hover in some odd space of the mainstream wherein they remained hidden from view and safe from the loud clang of the cash register.

THE VITAPHONIC ANSWER!

Technology had been good to Jack Warner. The so-called Vitaphone process had been part of Warner Bros. movie-making culture since 1926 when the silent film *Don Juan*, starring John Barrymore, would include a sound element, though not yet dialogue. If only as a name, "Vitaphone" would be used again in relation to Warner Bros. animation and yet again with

the record company. Warner, together with Conkling, felt that technology could impact the fortunes of the new record company. In a 1958 letter to stockholders, Warner made his case, explaining that the music business had "more than doubled in size since 1955" and the "advent of stereophonic records for the home is expected to increase the market further." And so Vitaphonic Hi-Fi and Vitaphonic Stereo records were released, touted to distributors. **Stan Cornyn:** "Jim Conkling would turn to people he knew and say, 'There's no square dancing in stereo album.' So there it was, we'd see something like *Square Dance in Stereo*. I do suppose stereo was somewhat novel in those days, certainly in Wyoming." For years this technological angle would be promoted. By 1959 Warner Bros. would even release an album simply entitled *Vitaphonic Stereo*, as if that calling card was enough in itself, with no mention of the artists in the title. **Joe Smith:** "Support for the Vitaphonic idea came from Conkling, and after that, from Mike Maitland [Conkling's successor]. I remember when we took it out on the road to play for our distributors. To me, it sounded like the old records. So I would have the guy jack up the volume, and I'd say, 'Woo, that sounds a lot different!'"

Emphasizing adult pop albums and new technologies, shipping tremendous amounts of product without the support of airplay, Warner Bros. Records hobbled its first year. Tab Hunter's single, "Jealous Heart" only made it to number 62 on the *Billboard* charts in 1958. Still, it was the one Warner Bros. single that did make the charts that year. Rather than establish an A&R philosophy and go after new talent, they attempted to look within the Warner Bros. ranks for artists who might help to establish the recording division and sell a few copies in the process. And, frankly, it was still a better idea than to drift aimlessly in the adult pop area.

Stan Cornyn: "Conkling's other source for recordings came from across the street at the television studios." In late 1958, Warner Bros. television had a hit with *77 Sunset Strip*, an hour long, LA-based private detective series. *77 Sunset Strip* starred Efreim Zimbalist, Jr., Roger Smith, and Edd Byrnes, whose character, "Kookie," had his own hip vocabulary and greased hair that he always seemed to be combing. Kookie wasn't a private eye like the characters Zimbalist and Smith played. Instead, he was the parking attendant at Dino's Lodge. However, he quickly became *77 Sunset Strip*'s biggest attraction, especially with young people who yearned to be as smooth as Kookie. During the show Byrnes would talk "Kookie talk." He was the "ginchiest" (coolest) actor on the show, attracting a tremendous fan base as he "stabled the horses" (parked the cars) to earn a "Washington" (a dollar) or two. As a result, Kookie got more than two thousand fan letters a week for the next year.

Jim Conkling and his head of A&R, George Avakian, decided to sign Edd "Kookie" Byrnes to a recording contract. Despite his limitations as a singer, Byrnes went into the studio and cut a song called "Kookie, Kookie (Lend Me Your Comb)." To support him, Warner Bros. used yet another in-house teen personality, Connie Stevens. On record, Stevens begged, "Kookie, Kookie, lend me your comb," and implored the parking lot attendant to "stop combing your hair and kiss me. You're the maximum utmost."

"Kookie, Kookie (Lend Me Your Comb)" went to the number four slot on *Billboard*'s pop charts in 1959. It was Warner Bros. Records' first big hit single. **Lou Dennis:** "As a deejay, I could play 'Kookie, Kookie (Lend Me Your Comb)', but not the other stuff. My job was to get to the young people in town, so we played music that actually appealed to them." The follow-up album, *77 Sunset Strip*, went to number three on the album charts. With little time for subtle maneuvers, Conkling kept at it. "Kookie" Byrnes quickly went back into the studio and recorded "Like I Love You," which peaked at number forty-two. And then it was fellow actor Roger Smith's turn; he recorded "Beach Time." Smith, however, wasn't in possession of the Kookie magic; the single didn't make the Top Forty, stalling at number sixty-two. Conkling and Avakian tried to score another Warner Bros. hit single, this time with Connie Stevens, who now had a part on the *77 Sunset Strip* copy series, *Hawaiian Eye*, as well as more from Tab Hunter, but to no avail. Warner Bros. even had Clint Walker, the new star of the TV series *Cheyenne*, record an album of sacred music. Now they were really reaching.

HOW (NOT) TO SUCCEED IN BUSINESS

Conkling and Avakian enjoyed a moment of success with "Kookie, Kookie (Lend Me Your Comb)." Without that reprieve, the label's troubled beginnings might have led to a quick finish. But, at the same time, the single might have made it to the coveted number one position on the charts had Warner Bros. taken full advantage of its considerable if fleeting popularity. If Warner's A&R instincts were weak, their promotional efforts were even less developed.

Still a deejay up in Boston at that point, Joe Smith didn't think much of "Kookie, Kookie (Lend Me Your Comb)." But his teen radio audience liked the song, so he played it. Assuming that any label would welcome promotional help from a key radio station in a major market. Smith promised his friend, Cardinal Cushing of Boston, the leader of the city's large catholic community, that he could get Kookie Byrnes to appear at a major Catholic Youth Organization (CVO) event. He set it up.



... and you'll swing with these hits from Warner Bros.

"I DROP MY STITCHES OVER KOOKIE!"

"LIKE I LOVE YOU"
"KOOKIE'S MAD PAD"
Edd Byrnes #5087

NOW AVAILABLE
"TEEN BEAT"
Don Rolke #5104

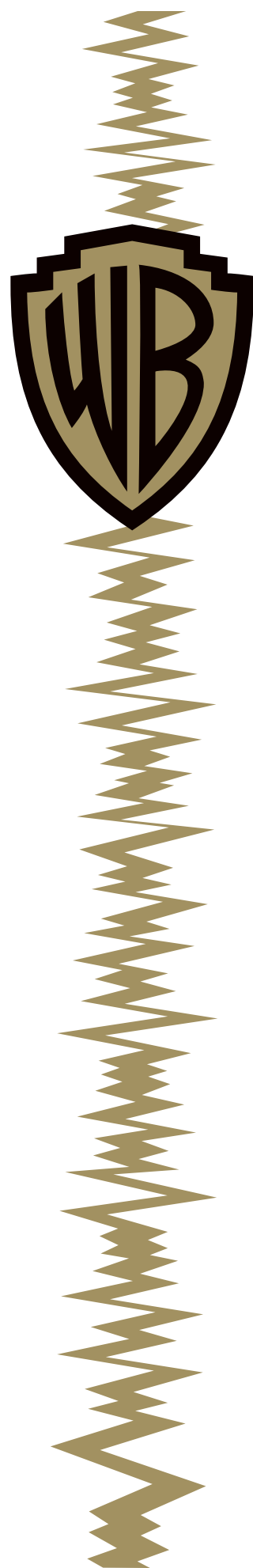
"SWEET SOMEONE"
Eddie & Betty Cole#5054
"WAITING FOR FALL"
"OUR LOVE"
Tab Hunter#5093
"WHY DO I CRY FOR JOEY"
"APOLLO"
Connie Stevens#5092
"BRASSMAN'S HOLIDAY"
"PINEAPPLE ROCK"
Claude Gordon Orch.#5091
"ROOM 43"
Ken Jones Orch.#5078
"CLASS OF 59—"
"MY BABY WALKS ALL OVER ME"
Bob Lumen#5081
"FOUR WHEELS"
Billy Lind#5083

WRITE • WIRE • PHONE
Order from your nearest distributor

The First Name in Sound
WARNER BROS. RECORDS
Berkeley, California

◆ The original Warner Bros. Records logo illustrated how closely it was allied with its motion picture studio, 1958.
◆ Vitaphonic Stereo: *Extra Sensory Perception in Sound*. Released in 1959, this album reveals the degree to which the company promoted "hi-fi" sounds in its first years. Who needs artists when you've got Vitaphonic Stereo!

◆ Trying to understand the teenage market: Granny appears in an ad for "Kookie" Byrnes' second single, "Like I Love You," 1959.
◆◆ The stars of *77 Sunset Strip* from the back cover of the hit LP named after the series.



FIRST NAME IN SOUND

Vitaphonic High Fidelity, the optimum in quality sound reproduction, is an expression of the meticulous care and engineering skill that go into the making of all Warner Bros. records.



A new recording is about to begin! The conductor carefully makes final preparations before the sound is recorded on tape.



The sound from the studio is carried to magnetic tape recorders which reproduce sound impressions on tape.



Music from the tapes are re-recorded on acetate discs. Fine microgrooves are cut in the lacquer master, and studiously inspected by microscope.



A newly recorded acetate disc is given a thin coating of silver and immersed in a plating tank to make a metal master. A metal mother, and later a stamper will be made.



The stamper is mounted in an automatic hydraulic press, labels are affixed and a hot "biscuit" inserted to produce the finished recording.



Careful visual inspection of each record for molding defects in the manufacturing process is a prime requisite.



Records are packed for shipping to record stores throughout the country.



A satisfied customer has purchased the recording from your neighborhood music dealer.

WARNER BROS. RECORDS, INC.

Vitaphonic High Fidelity... *the first name in sound!*

Joe Smith: "They stiffed me. I didn't believe a record company could be as stupid as Warner Bros. I had Byrnes making an appearance at Fenway Park, with people like Cardinal Cushing and Senator Jack Kennedy involved in the event, and they couldn't get him up to Boston. We were all waiting for Byrnes to appear and the Cardinal leans over and says to me, 'So, what about this here creep with the comb. Is he gonna show?' Well, he never did. I just couldn't believe it."

So angered was Smith by Warner Bros. Records' "complete lack of professionalism," that he fired off a letter to the label's brass, condemning the company and vowing never again to deal with its music or artists. **Joe Smith:** "I didn't think the label would make it. Nobody there seemed to know anything about the music business. They all just seemed to exist in a world that wasn't even close to reality. It was just a pitiful situation. Anybody who worked for that company was in the wrong place."

That's just what Jack Warner and the rest of the Warner Bros.' film and studio executives began to think about the fledgling record company. When 1959's fourth quarter numbers came in, there was, putting it gently, concern. A year into the music business venture, Warner Bros. Records was already in debt. More than three million dollars in debt, with nothing to show for it except "Kookie, Kookie (Lend Me Your Comb)" and one hit album, *77 Sunset Strip*, which only happened because of its connection to a hit tv series. The ghost of Brunswick Records began to walk the halls at the company. From where Jack Warner stood, it looked as if the only smart thing to do was to kill the label while the losses weren't completely debilitating. Conkling urged patience; Warner's advisors pulled in the opposite direction. **Joe Smith:** "They wanted to shut down that company."

For the moment, Conkling was allowed to carry on. Company finances, however, were under new scrutiny. Every move had to be approved through the New York offices of Warner Bros. movie division. Herman Starr, a formidable money manager, pulled the reins on Jim Conkling. And life in the machine shop in Burbank changed. **Stan Cornyn:** "I was having the time of my life. I reported to Joel Friedman and was writing liner notes, some of them terrible and a couple getting good. One day—I think it was on a Friday—Joel's secretary said, 'Can you come see Joel?' I walked twenty feet down the hall, and he said, 'I have some bad news.' Soon, I woke up to the fact that all down the hallway people were putting things in boxes. The company really shrank."



♣ From the studio to the store: The Vitaphonic record-making process is pictured on a 1958 Warner Bros. dust sleeve.

♣ The idyllic "Palm Tree" label was inspired by art from a 1920s orange crate.

