

# Khouri, the pioneer nobody remembers

## UNSUNG MUSICAL HERO



■ Ken Khouri was like a godfather to many early Jamaican producers.

**T**ODAY, WHEN PEOPLE talk about the origins of the Jamaican popular music industry, they talk about everybody else—except Ken Khouri.

Retired and a homely man these days, it was Khouri's adventurism which gave birth to the record manufacturing sector. Starting with a second-hand recording machine he bought from a hustler in Miami, he went on to build Federal Records, which was later sold to the late Bob Marley and has since become Tuff Gong International.

"Nobody ever says thanks," a reluctant Khouri pointed out as we talked about his contribution. "People from abroad do and a few people who did business with me from the beginning like Prince Buster and Keith 'Matador' Daley, Ernie Smith and Pluto (Shervington) call me up sometimes, but otherwise nobody remembers," he pointed out.

Khouri, however, doesn't want to seem like somebody begging for recognition: "I would rather that you do not say it, but I am disappointed, especially with the Government for not recognising my contribution."

A native of St. Mary where he grew up in the Richmond/Highgate area, Khouri emigrated to Kingston as a young man and joined the firm of E.A. Issa and Brothers Limited, where he was eventually elevated to a managerial post handling incoming goods.

He went into the furniture business for two years after he left that job. Then, his Lebanese father took seriously ill: "He came to Jamaica when he was only 12 and died when he was 81," he told me.

### Influential

Khouri's father was quite an influential man, especially in political circles, so when he took ill and Ken didn't have a passport to take him to Miami for an operation not available in Jamaica, the younger Khouri decided to use up that influence.

"I decided to go to Drumblair to see Norman Manley. I woke him up at four o'clock in the morning. I knew him very well. He wasn't what you would call a personal friend, but we knew each other and I was desperate and this was the only way I could get temporary travel documents.

"I told him how seriously ill my father was, after I apologised, and that I needed help to take the plane with him to Miami. He got on the phone immediately and by the time came for the flight, all the necessary documents were ready and arrangements were already made for him to be taken by ambulance from the airport in Miami to the Jackson Memorial Hospital."

Khouri's father was suffering from a growth in his bladder, and Khouri had to visit him day and night.

He decided to rent a car to travel around, but the car's radio stopped working the first day he had it. He took back the car and while he was dealing with the problem, he heard a man talking to the owner of the rental agency:

*Says Khouri: 'I was the king of calypso. I started ska, reggae, rocksteady in my studio. Dodd has been given most of the credit, but I don't contradict...'*

"The fellow was saying that he was desperate, but the owner was telling him, 'I'm sorry, I can't help you' I turned to the fellow and asked, 'Is it something you're selling?' He told me that it was a disc recording machine and asked if I was interested. I asked him to wait until I had the car radio fixed."

### Down and out

Khouri drove the young man to his home: "His wife had just given birth to a child and they wanted some money to return to California. I told him to demonstrate how the machine worked. He recorded a disc from the radio right there. I asked him the price and he said he wanted (US) \$350, but I could give him (US) \$300. I gave him the whole (US) \$350 because I didn't want to take advantage of him. He was down and out and I didn't want to squeeze him. He gave me a box with 100 discs to go with the machine! I asked him how much they cost him. He said (US) 50 cents apiece. I gave him (US) \$50 more."

Two weeks later, Khouri's father had improved enough for them to return home.

As soon as he came back, he started cutting voice recordings on the machine: "People were so fascinated with it, I couldn't find enough time to do them."

Khouri was smart enough to come home with 500 discs, but they quickly ran out as people were crowding him for voiced discs from the machine. He had to send for another 1,000 discs, immediately.

The discs cost 50 shillings apiece and became so popular that even churches were begging him to take the machine to their functions to record fascinated people's voices.

Realising the commercial potential of the machine, Khouri started recording music, instead of just voices. He first started out at a club which was located at Red Gal Ring in St. Andrew, as well as at home.

With increasing commercial success, he decided to import the discs in bulk. Then he called Decca in London and agreed with them to make records from the discs for sale:

"They told me how to pack the discs and send them. I sent a lot. The first song I did was Lord Fléa's 'Naughty Little Flea.' I told them I wanted 500 in 45 rpms and they said it would cost me one shilling and sixpence. I ordered thousands more, although I didn't even have the money to pay for it."

This was when Khouri turned to another and more successful

local businessman, Alec Durie of Times Store in Downtown Kingston, for support.

"I made a proposition to him that I wanted him to become the sole distributor of the records. He was excited and we started the Times Record label. I told him to just sell them and give me the difference." He agreed.

Their first attempt was a real gamble, but it paid off handsomely. Durie advertised the sale of the records on their Times Records label in the newspapers for the Saturday:

"When I got to King Street the Saturday, I saw a line two blocks long. People had lined up to buy the records. We sold out in less than two weeks. I ordered 5,000 more records and we sold them for between four and five shillings each."

People with gramphones at

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# Khouri, the pioneer

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home and no local records to play were snapping up the Times Records' 45 rpms like hot cakes.

This encouraged Khouri to start manufacturing the records himself, instead of sending them to Decca in London. He called a factory in California, who agreed to send him the machinery as well as an expert who would spend three months there teaching him the technique.

Khouri said that in two weeks he had learnt enough. They set up shop at a place owned by Durie at 129 King Street, between Charles and North Street: "I rented a large room, set up a press with boiler and so on." Then Khouri encountered his first problem - the disc wouldn't come off the die.

The records were sticking to the stamper (the metallic form from which the records are pressed). He tried using a penknife, there were some nicks but, at least, they could play.

## Godfather

More problems were to develop. Khouri imported five tons of vinyl (the material on which the record is pressed) which turned out to be useless. The man from California called his office there, asked them to send 50 pounds of their vinyl, on condition that if it worked, he would start buying from them. It worked, but the London company refused to take back the five tons he had on his hands, which he had to throw away and order another five tons from California.

"From there on it was easy street," Khouri said.

He started pressing records for Mercury under a franchise including songs like "She Boom" and "The Little Shoemaker." Then another problem arose. The records started flying off the spindle prematurely and even lodged pieces in his left thumb. It took him two days to correct the problem, which was simply an untightened spindle.

He couldn't meet the demand for his records and had to order another press from California - A racine hydraulic system. He eventually expanded to three presses and into two more out-rooms at King Street.

Khouri continued expanding, eventually opening a studio there using as engineer Radio Jamaica's (RJR) Graeme Goodall who stayed with him for 15 years.

In 1961, he set up a studio and factory at Marcus Garvey Drive which became Federal Records Manufacturing Company Limited.

One of Khouri's earliest associates was Opposition Leader Edward Seaga, himself a record producer and label owner who had the franchise for Columbia Records in Jamaica: "I manufactured and sold his business to Byron Lee and it has now become Dynamic Sounds Limited.

Khouri remembers Chris Blackwell from those early days: "He begged me to join him in London when he went there (to start Island Records)."

Khouri was like a godfather to many early Jamaican producers, including Clement 'Coxsone' Dodd, Arthur "Duke" Reid, Prince Buster and Lloyd "Matador" Daley.

"I was the king of calypso. I started ska, reggae, rocksteady in my studio. Dodd has been given most of the credit, but I don't contradict people. Byron Lee was recording for me. I heard his band, got interested and decided to record him."

Khouri credits Prince Buster with being the most grateful of those he had worked with.

"I liked him. He was a Federal man: Loyal. Nobody could say anything bad about him to me. I did a lot for Coxsone and King Edwards, Edwards eventually cursed me..

Khouri emigrated to the United States with his wife in the 1970s in the height of the socialism debate, leaving his sons in charge of the business. He lived in Miami from 1977 to 1980 when he returned to get the company out of debts. However, he was too ill to handle the tough job and decided to sell in 1981. He says that, up to today, he has not received a cent from the sale of Federal: "I haven't gotten a penny and I was so fed up I didn't do a thing about it.

"My wife worked and paid off the debts. I was comfortable so it didn't bother me."

Khouri still looks quite fit and trim and swims the full-length of his home pool several times, daily.

His only regret, that he has never been really recognised for his contribution to what could very well become the biggest Jamaican export industry: "I wouldn't deserve anything less than a O.J. now for what I did," he remarked.

**-BALFORD HENRY**