

Stage //

# HOLLYWOOD SOUTH

Before John Dolphin's murder, his store was the center of black music in L.A.  
Now there's a musical about his life

BY TANJA M. LADEN

Long before musicians toke up in Laurel Canyon or hair-metal bands prowled the Sunset Strip, L.A.'s African-American community fostered a vibrant music scene, concentrated in jazz clubs along Central Avenue in the 1930s and '40s. It set the stage for the success of John Dolphin, an African-American businessman, record label owner and music producer whose store, Dolphin's of Hollywood, became a nexus for R&B music and the early days of rock & roll.

But what exactly is Dolphin's legacy, and why hasn't it been recognized before now? A new musical opening this week called *Recorded in Hollywood*, co-written by Dolphin's grandson, seeks to answer those questions.

Dolphin, aka Lovin' John, was born in Alabama and raised in Oklahoma; he landed in Los Angeles by way of Detroit. In 1948, he opened Dolphin's of Hollywood in South Los Angeles, on Vernon near Central Avenue. Dolphin put "Hollywood" in the record store's name because laws would not allow a black individual to operate a business in Hollywood at the time. As Dolphin reasoned, if he couldn't bring his people to Hollywood, he would bring Hollywood to them.

The store was open 24 hours a day and often had DJs broadcasting behind a glass storefront window on KRKD, a local radio station. Artists including Billie Holiday, Little Richard, James Brown, B.B. King and Aretha Franklin would conduct on-air interviews there, attracting crowds inside.

Dolphin was known for highlighting the accomplishments of African-American artists who were casualties of "cross-over music," when white musicians would

The South L.A. record store Dolphin's of Hollywood in 1962



PHOTO COURTESY OF DOLPHIN FAMILY ESTATE

rerecord their songs, leaving the original artists little or no recognition. At the time, KRKD was a predominantly white radio station, but Dolphin bought airtime on it (and other white stations) in order to play music by black artists for white listening audiences. By broadcasting from his store, Dolphin popularized the black music format, bringing much-deserved attention to the original African-American artists years before Motown.

Dolphin started operating his own independent record labels in 1950. He sold his first label, Recorded in Hollywood, to Decca in 1954, then launched Lucky Records, which was followed by two more labels, Money and Cash. Dolphin urged all his artists to retain their own publishing rights. But that wasn't enough to

prevent a disgruntled artist, Percy Ivy, from marching into Dolphin's office in 1958 and shooting him to death.

Dolphin had done Ivy a favor by recording the singer's music, which never made any money. Ivy believed otherwise, and killed Dolphin for money that wasn't there.

After Dolphin's murder, his wife, Ruth, took over management of the store, which closed in 1989. Dolphin's cultural contributions all but vanished from the public eye. Thanks in part to the efforts of Dolphin's grandson, Jamelle Dolphin, that's finally changing.

Jamelle, who grew up in Santa Monica, works as a marketing director and real estate broker, and continues to run the record company Dolphin's of Hollywood

LLC with his brother and sister. In 2011, he published a book about his grandfather, *Recorded in Hollywood: The John Dolphin Story*.

"So much of the information about John Dolphin and Dolphin's of Hollywood was scattered," Jamelle tells *L.A. Weekly*. "It seemed as though there was never more than a paragraph or two in any one place." The research took two years, and he spent hours interviewing family and friends.

According to Jamelle, his grandfather paid for everything in cash, never borrowed money and was never in debt. He was also a consummate family man.

"There was so much more he was going to do and could have done for the community and society as a whole," Jamelle says. "He was only 10 years into his business before his death — basically, he was just getting started. What hurts is that the way he died made it easy for the media to paint him as some street hustler who had it coming, when [in] actuality it was quite the contrary."

Jamelle feels upset that his grandfather hasn't been recognized for his accomplishments, especially in Los Angeles. "He was such an important figure. But he was hated for challenging an overtly racist power structure that did not want this integrated scene, and they did their best to downplay him in the media and wherever they could. His murder was barely covered by the press."

Jamelle's book inspired the show about the store, *Recorded in Hollywood: The Musical*, which he co-wrote with TV writer Matt Donnelly. It features a live band onstage and an 18-member ensemble, performing 16 original songs by Andy Cooper as well as covers of hits that Dolphin helped champion, including "You Send Me" by Sam Cooke, "Earth Angel" by the Penguins and "The Wheel of Fortune" by the Hollywood Four Flames. His radio show and the store were among the first places where white audiences heard them.

Jamelle says, "Soon we will have his name on a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame, where it belongs."

**RECORDED IN HOLLYWOOD: THE MUSICAL**  
| Lillian Theatre, 1076 Lillian Way,  
Hollywood | Through May 17 | (323) 960-4443  
recordedinhollywood.com