

# American MASTERS

**thirteen**  
WNET NEW YORK

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## press information



AMERICAN MASTERS  
is produced for PBS  
by Thirteen/WNET  
New York

THIRTEEN/WNET NEW YORK'S *AMERICAN MASTERS* TUNES IN TO *ATLANTIC RECORDS: THE HOUSE THAT AHMET BUILT*, AN HOMAGE TO AHMET ERTEGUN, A MUSIC MOGUL WHOSE REVOLUTIONARY "ATLANTIC SOUND" CHANGED THE COURSE OF R&B, JAZZ AND ROCK AND ROLL, PREMIERING IN MAY ON PBS

Features Interviews With Solomon Burke, Chris Blackwell, Ray Charles, Eric Clapton, Phil Collins, Aretha Franklin, David Geffen, Taylor Hackford, Mick Jagger, Mick Jones, Ben E. King, Leiber And Stoller, Wynton Marsalis, Bette Midler, Paolo Nutini, Jimmy Page, Robert Plant, Kid Rock, Jann Wenner, Jerry Wexler And Wife Mica Ertegun

Includes 1938 Ertegun Family Home Movies And Performance Clips From The 2006 Montreux Jazz Festival's Tribute To Atlantic Records And Ahmet Ertegun

Singer/Actress Bette Midler Narrates

Ahmet Ertegun, a young Turk – literally – with an immigrant's passion for the African-American music he heard in the rigidly segregated Washington, D.C. nightclubs of the 1940s, recognized that "all popular music stems from black music, be it jazz or rock n' roll or rap." He exported these unique sounds to England, where they merged with the European sensibility, and then imported that fusion back across the ocean. "The Atlantic Sound," which sprang from the small record label Ertegun co-founded in 1947, was a revolutionary new genre, single-handedly influencing the future direction of contemporary music. Ertegun wrote music, produced music, defined careers and changed lives. "He found Ray Charles, he introduced Eric Clapton to Aretha Franklin, he fell asleep on Mick Jagger," says *Rolling Stone* founder Jann Wenner in *AMERICAN MASTERS Atlantic Records: The House That Ahmet Built*.

For the last half-century, Ahmet Ertegun was hip-deep in R&B and rock and roll. *Atlantic*

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*Records: The House That Ahmet Built* follows Ertegun's remarkable career and its impact on the evolution of the world's most popular musical genre while offering an insider's look at the recording industry, from its infancy to today. The two-hour film, produced by Thirteen/WNET New York and Warner Music Group, premieres Wednesday, May 2 at 9 p.m. (ET) on PBS. *The House That Ahmet Built* features rare, private and classic clips, performances and studio sessions of Atlantic recording artists. The film is narrated by award-winning singer/actress Bette Midler.

Ertegun recorded hours of interviews for the film, over a period of four years. He suffered what would be a terminal injury, falling backstage at a private Rolling Stones concert in October, and died December 14, 2006 at age 83.

Once asked by the online magazine *Slate* what he wanted for his legacy, Ertegun responded: "I'd be happy if people said that I did a little bit to raise the dignity and recognition of the greatness of African-American music."

"Ahmet Ertegun is someone I greatly admired and held dear. His indisputable influence, combined with a passionate love of music and a unique aesthetic, altered our cultural landscape," said Susan Lacy, creator and executive producer of *AMERICAN MASTERS*, a five-time winner of the Emmy Award for Outstanding Primetime Non-Fiction Series. "We'll never forget him because we'll never stop listening to the music he introduced to the world. He was a true American Master."

Since Ertegun was such a prized raconteur, writer/director Susan Steinberg structured the film around a series of specially filmed conversations between Ertegun and some of the greatest names in rock, blues and jazz, including Robert Plant, Aretha Franklin, Bette Midler and the late Ray Charles. Artists who were also close personal friends, such as Mick Jagger, relived significant events from their mutual experiences for the film.

"The program is conceived as both a tribute to Atlantic Records – perhaps the most influential independent music company of our time – and to the man himself," said Steinberg.

“When we began this film four years ago, none of us could have anticipated that Mr. Ertegun’s sudden and tragic death would cause the program to stand as an epitaph to a man whose energy, passion, good taste, and love of music so enriched the world.”

From the time he trudged through a Delta swamp in search of Professor Longhair to his recording of contemporary artists like Kid Rock and young unknown Paolo Nutini, Ertegun never lost the character and integrity he inherited from his father, the Turkish ambassador to the U.S. His older brother Nesuhi – an intellectual who hung out at the Hot Club in Paris with jazz greats Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grappelli – introduced Ertegun to jazz. Once in Washington, D.C., the teenagers would spend countless hours digging through old vinyl in Waxie Maxie’s Quality Music Shop and scouring the black neighborhoods for obscure records. Eventually, they acquired 25,000 records, the largest collection of jazz and blues in the world.

Ertegun moved to New York and together with Herb Abramson started Atlantic Records in 1947 with a \$10,000 loan from his dentist. By the mid 1950s, Atlantic had become the country’s preeminent R&B label, producing hits by such artists as Ray Charles, Ruth Brown, Big Joe Turner, LaVern Baker, and the Drifters. The “Atlantic Sound” – a boogie-based, sax-led band arrangement that became an integral part of rhythm and blues – grew into a phenomenon that swept across the nation and the world. In England, young musicians would buy records just because the Atlantic label was on the sleeve. They would grow up to become members of groups like the Rolling Stones, Cream, Led Zeppelin, and Genesis.

The Ertegun brothers and their partner, Jerry Wexler (Herb Abramson left Atlantic in 1958), sold the Atlantic label to Warner Brothers-Seven Arts in 1967 for \$17 million. Ertegun retained control of the company, but enjoyed the financial backing of a huge corporation.

Throughout his career, Ertegun earned a reputation for respecting artistic individuality, vigilantly nurturing careers and turning performers like Bobby Darin into chart-topping stars. At the same time, he earned the admiration of the young British blues musicians who were the rage.

The emerging artists were attracted to Ertegun because he knew more than anyone else about black music, and he could party with the best of them.

“I think Ahmet had this feeling for music and never got in the way of the music, never, at no point from start to finish,” says Ray Charles in the film. “As opposed to most record execs, Ahmet is different. He knows his music.”

In the early days of Atlantic, unable to find great R&B material for his emerging artists, Ertegun took pen in hand and wrote songs himself. Often writing under the pseudonym Nugetre (Ertegun spelled backwards), he penned more than 66 songs, many of them hits, including the Clovers’ “Fool, Fool, Fool” (also covered by Elvis Presley) and “Lovey Dovey,” Big Joe Turner’s “Chains of Love,” Ben E. King’s “Don’t Play That Song (You Lied),” and Ray Charles’s “Mess Around,” later featured in the Academy Award-winning movie *Ray*. In the mid 1950s, he attracted the groundbreaking producing and songwriting talents of the team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, who created many hits for the Coasters and the Drifters.

In the 1960s and early ’70s, wise to the enormous potential of the exploding British rock scene, Ertegun became one of the only independent American record producers who opened offices in London. “He was known to have access to a black style from the streets and to a white style from somewhere beyond Bendel’s,” said Bette Midler.

By the time he was 47, Ertegun was the greatest rock and roll mogul in the world. He had turned a small record label into a major record company, applying his own aesthetic to the music and musicians in a way that influenced the entire creative field.

After Jerry Wexler left Atlantic in 1975, Ahmet, along with his brother, kept the company thriving. Over the years, Atlantic’s roster included everyone from Ruth Brown to Bette Midler, Chic, Steve Winwood & Blind Faith, Genesis, Phil Collins, Solomon Burke, Roberta Flack, John Coltrane, Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, Foreigner and Kid Rock to Buffalo Springfield, Crosby Stills Nash & Young, Sonny & Cher, Stevie Nicks, The Manhattan Transfer, Bobby Short, Charles

Mingus, Tori Amos, Jewel, and Rob Thomas.

*AMERICAN MASTERS Atlantic Records: The House That Ahmet Built* is written, directed and co-produced by Susan Steinberg. Phil Carson is the producer. Susan Lacy is executive producer of *AMERICAN MASTERS*.

To take *AMERICAN MASTERS* beyond the television broadcast and further explore the themes, stories, and personalities of masters past and present, the companion Web site ([www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters)), created by Thirteen/WNET New York, offers interviews, essays, photographs, outtakes, and other resources.

*AMERICAN MASTERS* is produced for PBS by Thirteen/WNET New York. This acclaimed series, now celebrating its 21<sup>st</sup> season, has become a cultural legacy in its own right. The *AMERICAN MASTERS* film library is one of the most highly honored in television history with profiles of more than 140 artistic giants. In addition to eight Peabodys, an Oscar, a duPont-Columbia and two Grammys, *AMERICAN MASTERS* has won 17 Emmys, including Outstanding Primetime Non-Fiction Series for 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, and 2004.

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Thirteen/WNET New York is one of the key program providers for public television, bringing such acclaimed series as *Nature*, *Great Performances*, *American Masters*, *Charlie Rose*, *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, *Wide Angle*, *Secrets of the Dead*, *NOW With David Brancaccio*, and *Cyberchase* - as well as the work of Bill Moyers - to audiences nationwide. As the flagship public broadcaster in the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut metro area, Thirteen reaches millions

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