

FERKO STRING BAND (Palda 101)

Dilly Dilly Polka—FT.
When You Wore a Tulip—FT.

This new label coming out of Philadelphia makes a strong local pitch in bringing to the platters the prize-winning Ferko String Band, which has copped the top honors at the Philadelphia New Year's Mummers' Parade for the past 10 years. And it's mummers marching music that the string band, which includes fiddles, saxes, accordion and bells as well as an abundance of banjo plunking, brings forth for the light and lively "Dilly Dilly Polka" and the "Tulip" standard. The entire ensemble rings out the melody, balance thrown to the winds with the bell overtones making the hammering sound like static.

Locations in the Philadelphia area.

The first reference in Billboard to Palda Records in Philadelphia was as a pressing plant. The Millers placed a general advertisement in the March 1, 1947, issue of the magazine indicating their availability to press records. "Palda" was a short form of "Paul-Albert-David," the Millers, who created the company. Albert Miller was the

father of Paul and David; the sons usually ran the company, and later on it would be Dave Miller whose name would be synonymous with the company. Their offices and plant were at 3208 S. 84th Street in Philadelphia.

In May and June, 1947, Palda released three records by the Ferko String Band: amateur musicians who had captured the hearts of Philadelphians by participating (and winning competitions) in the annual Mummers' Parade down 2 Street in Philly. Organized in 1922, by 1947 the band was already a local tradition. The band's first three singles – "Dilly Dilly Polka" (*Billboard* May 10, 1947), "Golden Slippers"/"Hello!" (6/21/47) and "Whispering" (5/10/47) – showcased their talent but did not attract national attention. With their sales, though, Palda attempted to gain a loyal following by offering a 100% return privilege – something that was difficult for the major labels to do (with 78's).

1948

January of the new year brought seven new singles by the Ferko String Band, including "Heartbreaker" – which was a strong seller. All of these were advertised in the *Billboard* issues of January 10 and January 17. Soon the ten singles were available as an album – a monumental undertaking for any label.



The musicians' strike brought on by the American Federation of Musicians lasted most of 1948, preventing labels from hiring (union) musicians to play on new records. The Millers soon realized that "amateur" musicians were not covered by the ban on recording, and they viewed this as an opportunity to expand into the national market.

Palda started up a new series with 1001 and would later introduce a series of "race" records (by African-American artists) beginning with 2001. The first of the new series of singles, "Juke Box Jenny" by the Kenmore Karavan, was mentioned in the February 21, 1948 issue of *Billboard*. Since the Ferko String Band were amateurs, they recorded "Lost April" (appropriately in April that year (4/17/48). Singles 1002 and 1004 were announced in the May 8th issue, and Palda 114 (Ferko) was announced a week later.

The Ferko band enjoyed a bit of notoriety, because "Hello!" (Palda 102) was chosen to be the song of the Republican National Committee for the 1948 campaign. In May also, just as Palda 1005 was coming out ("Tea Leaves"), Palda started up a new label imprint. Holiday Records would deal almost exclusively in Country and Western singles. Their first announced artist, Tom Dee McAn, released two singles almost immediately. "Drinking Gin"/ "That Country Over There"



(Holiday 102, 05/22/48) and “Mizpah”/ “The Ten Commandments” (Holiday 101, 06/19/48) did not sell well, however. This did not deter the Millers, whose Ferko releases were selling quite well now. By August (08/07/48), the Ferko line was up to number 117 – most of which were considered successes.

Meanwhile, Jack Howard and James E. Myers owned the local Cowboy label, which Howard founded in March, 1946. Despite what appears to have been conflated stories, I can find no involvement by Johnny Mercer in the founding of this Philadelphia label. Artists signed to the label included: The Sleepy Hollow Ranch (101-104); Shorty Long and the Santa Fe Rangers (201-203); Ray Whitley (301-303); Billy Wilson (401-402); and Willis Myers (501-502). Since Myers and Howard were working together on Cowboy, the original recording of “Dilly Dally Polka” (co-credited to Myers as “Jimmy DeKnight”) was by Monty Rossi with the Sleepy Hollow Ranch (Cowboy 104) – a song that was covered by the Ferko String Band the following year on Palda.

At this point Cowboy signed no new artists until 1948. Apparently they were signing artists that before the impending musicians’ union strike in order to release records during the strike. The February 14th (1948) *Billboard* notes that Cowboy recorded sides by Polly Jenkins (Cowboy 801, “I’m Gonna Straddle My Saddle”) in late 1947 just before the ban started. Cowboy 601 (“Mollie Darling” by Jesse Rogers and His Forty-Niners) and Cowboy 701 (“St. Louis Blues” by Bill Callahan and his Blue Mountain Boys) were both advertised in the July 10, 1948, issue of *Billboard*.



Cowboy 901 and Cowboy 1101 appear to have been held back for release in fall, 1948, but Rusty Keefer’s “Red Wing” (Cowboy 1001) came out in August. On August 14th, the most famous Cowboy release was announced in *Billboard*: “Too Many Parties and Too May Pals” by Bill Haley and the 4 Aces of Western Swing. Haley, on Cowboy, was now already associated with “Jimmy DeKnight.” The label would soon connect with Palda – making Haley’s eventual introduction to Essex an easy one. At this point in time that was still almost four years away.

As the musicians’ strike neared a close, Palda released singles 1012 (BB 10/23/48) and 1011 (BB 10/30/48) and an interesting collection of Christmas songs: a three-disc album styled as being on Noel Records (Noel 100). The 100 series reached number 119 by November 20th. A few more quick releases (through 1016) to close the year, and Palda had proven itself to be quite formidable during the recording ban.

1949

Cowboy 1202, “Tennessee Border,” was reviewed in the April 2 issue of *Billboard*. It came out a few months prior to the July 9th announcement that Palda was going to distribute Cowboy Records. By this time Palda’s 2000 series was being pressed, since the October 15th issue refers to their series of “race” records. Palda also announced (8/20/49) that they were going to start pressing long-play albums.



As Palda expanded its distribution deals, the people at Cowboy were annoyed that the company seemed to be spreading itself out so much. In October they asked to be released from their agreement to let Palda distribute them. The following week Wheeling Records (from West Virginia) announced that Palda would distribute their first single release.





Meanwhile Bill Haley had basically left Cowboy Records and was recording, with help from James Myers, for Center Records. “Loveless Blues” and “Stand Up and Be Counted” were released as Center C-102. This time, Haley thought that releasing a record under the name Johnny Clifton would get him noticed faster than using his given name. He was wrong, and the record went nowhere. John and Clifton were Haley’s middle names.

1950

The new year began with Palda working up two new labels: Gospel and Essex. For Gospel they had signed the Five Blind Boys from Alabama, an exceptional quintet whose name had been the Happy Land Jubilee Singers until a competition in 1948 against another group of “blind boys.” The Gospel label started with 120, as though it were continuing the old Palda numbering. The Five Blind Boys stayed with Gospel for about two years, while Gospel signed other artists, including Edna Gallmon Cooke and the Southland Singers.



Although Essex was to be an important name in the Palda history, at first it was very small. In 1950 Essex had two series, numbered the lucky 700’s and 1100’s. At this point, Essex served up a helping of blues in the 700 series, with artists like Clarence Green (who had released “Galveston” on Eddie’s Records in 1948) and Beulah Frazier. The 1100 series were by “hillbilly” artists. The label launch was heralded in the February 4th issue of *Billboard*, with at least the first four releases coming out within the next few weeks – along with Palda 124.

On March 18th, *Billboard* announced that Palda (Essex) was going to record ten songs by the Mystery Quartet; the following week’s announcement said that they had recorded just four. Shown as by the Mystery Quartette, only two singles (706 and 713) wound up being released, and Essex seemed to have trouble adequately promoting their singles. The first Essex label was silver and red.



As Essex was getting off the ground, Bill Haley signed a deal to record for Keystone Records. The April 8th *Billboard* announced the release of two singles with his new band, the Saddle Men. The A-sides, “Deal Me a Hand” (Keystone 5101) and “Susan van Dusan” (Keystone 5102), have begun to sound more like Haley’s later sound; they did not perform well.



Most of Palda's financial troubles for the remainder of 1950 were probably connected with their defense against a charge of selling obscene records in Denver. On December 14, 1949, the Supreme Court of the United States heard *US v. Alpers* (338 US 680); they decided the case on February 6, 1950. They determined that "Obscene phonograph records are within the prohibition of §245 of the Criminal Code, which forbids the interstate shipment of any obscene "book, pamphlet, picture, motion picture film, paper, letter, writing, print, or other matter of indecent character."" This decision opened record companies, pressing plants, and distribution centers to charges of obscenity. As *Billboard* reported (05/06/50), Palda supposedly shipped three hundred records from Philadelphia to one of their distributors in Denver. According to the charge, 100 of them were "lewd, obscene, and filthy." Since the records had crossed state lines, Palda was subject to the federal court system. On April 26th they were indicted.

I have not been able to determine the nature of the charges against Palda, but if the statute was applied they may have been fined up to \$5000 for their offense. I am unable to locate links between Palda and any so-called "blue records." It would be interesting if an R&B single were considered "obscene."

On the Haley front, having found no success at Keystone, Haley released one single for Atlantic, "I Gonna Dry Ev'ry Tear With a Kiss." Again he was receiving assistance from Myers, but again the record went nowhere. The single was released in October, and he went back to Cowboy to record.

Cowboy 1701 was an interesting "gimmick." Although the record is shown as by Reno Browne and her Buckaroos, basically this was Bill Haley and his Saddle Men recording under her name. Reno Browne was an actress, but she actually had little to do with this record – other than having her photo on the sheet music. Supposedly this was the last Cowboy record. It was reviewed in *BB* in the December 2, 1950, issue.

1951

By this time the Palda line was defunct. Dave Miller resurrected Holiday Records – signing a frustrated Bill Haley, who by this time had put out quite a few records but no hits. Apparently released in July, Haley's performance of an R&B song marked the A-side of "Rocket 88"/ "Tearstains on My Heart" (Holiday 105). Haley had begun somewhat formally reaching across the color gap to sing music that was not usually pitched to white audiences. This was an excellent strategy, but for now they were too early. Holiday 105 was moderately successful, but it did not start a trend. Still, Palda/Holiday had faith in Haley signing him up for more singles.



Holiday 108, "Green Tree Boogie"/ "Down Deep in My Heart" by Bill Haley and the Saddlemen, was given mostly positive reviews in *Billboard* (09/15/51), but it still failed to break out nationally. Haley's releases later in the year ["I'm Crying"/ "Pretty Baby" by Bill (Haley) and Loretta (Glendenning), Holiday 110, and "I Don't Want to Be Alone for Christmas"/ "Years Ago This Christmas" by Bill Haley and the Saddlemen, Holiday 111] were interesting records (both appearing in the 12/8 *Billboard*), but the Saddlemen had not yet established their sound. Palda was more successful pressing and distributing records by the Four Aces on the Victoria label. "Sin," Victoria 101, did quite well (*BB* 09/15/51), and "There's a Christmas Tree in Heaven" (Victoria 102) was at least interesting, but Palda was going to get into trouble on account of these records.

1952

A lawsuit announced on February 9th contended that Palda and the Four Aces were about to be “blacklisted” by the American Federation of Musicians – because Palda was not in good standing with the union. The complainants further claimed that Palda was underreporting sales, and that the quality of the pressing was poor. Palda pressed a third Four Aces single in February as Flash 103 (“Whose to Blame” [spelling as on the record]). Palda still got to press and distribute the fourth single by the Aces – this time on the Merion label (“Wanted”/ “Too Much in Love,” Merion 104), but none of them were as successful as “Sin” had been, and the Four Aces had moved on to Decca.



At the same time as the legal problems, Bill Haley released his last single for Holiday, “Juke Box Cannon Ball”/ “Sundown Boogie” (Holiday 113). Haley was about to in a new two-year deal with Dave Miller’s latest label: Essex. Essex had been around for two years, but it was about to get a major overhaul with the introduction of a new series of singles. The new Essex was also going to release EP’s and LP’s – bringing them into line with the major labels. The 300 series was to contain their best-known singles.

Essex 301 was given advance notice on February 16th; Essex 302 was reviewed on April 5th. These records weren’t even a hint of what was to come. In the April 26th issue, *Billboard* reviewed “Rock the Joint” and “Icy Heart” by Bill Haley and the Saddlemen. The A-side was a local hit, proving that an R&B song could sell well in a C&W market. Dave Miller had signed Haley for two more years, clearly believing that the Saddlemen would succeed.



Another disc that Palda manufactured and distributed became a **big** hit at the same time. Al Martino’s “Here in My Heart” (BBS 101, BB 05/10/52) leapt up the charts, causing Capitol Records to offer a contract to Martino. Palda was certainly showing that they could compete with other labels.

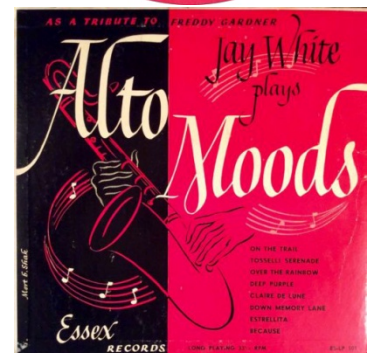
Summer gave us “Dance With a Dolly” (Essex 305, by Bill Haley), but their next big hit would come in 1953. Throughout the rest of ’52, Essex released singles steadily and promoted them reasonably well.

1953

Bill Haley’s next single, Essex 310 (announced on January 24th) was interesting enough that Essex took out an ad in the February 7th issue to promote it – and Haley.

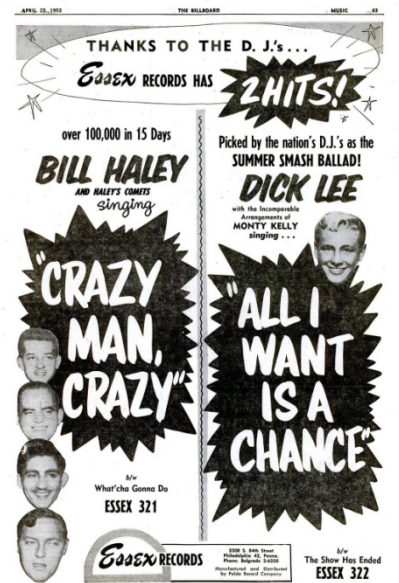


Essex 313, also released in late January, was a single by Jay White that comes from ES-LP-101 – the first Essex album. Although other dates have been reported, it is likely that **ESLP-101** was released in January, 1953. EXP-101 (the associated EP) originally came out in January as well. Both the EP and the LP have dark red labels.



When “Crazy Man, Crazy” hit in April, Essex jumped on the gravy train. This was the first rock-and-roll record to hit the national charts. In October, the rock-and-roll movement got a boost from CBS television as “Crazy Man, Crazy” was featured in an episode of their Omnibus series. Broadcast on 10/04/53, the program also starred James Dean.

Meanwhile Monty Kelly, who had performed on the Al Martino single and who was with Dick Lee on the highly-rated “All I Want is a Chance” (Essex 322) signed a deal to record 32 songs for the company, according to the June 6th issue of *Billboard*. That same article proves just how silent Essex had been in its early days by stating that the label started up “about two years ago.” Not only was the author unaware of Essex’s history, but also he was off by a year. This time, though, everyone was taking notice of the Philly label.



At around the same time many other labels were entering the Extended Play market for the first time, Essex jumped back into that market with five EP’s. EP-102 through EP-106 were probably released in fall, 1953. First pressings list the six available Essex EP’s on the back cover. Of the five new EP’s the strongest seller was clearly *Bill Haley’s Dance Party* (EP-102). After Bill Haley left Essex for Decca, the EP was reissued. Those reissues list EP-117 and EP-118 on the back cover. The remainder of the year saw Essex in print in the trade magazines somewhat frequently.

1954

Dave Miller seems to have been searching for a worthy successor to the Ferko String Band. He had big plans for Essex to release series of “easy listening” records and was working on recording songs with Val Anthony. When Miller contracted orchestras, he went overseas because the costs were lower; in late February he sent Anthony to London to record two singles, while he stayed behind to promote “Crazy Mixed-Up Song” by Peter and Mary.

By this time Dave Miller and James Myers were in the midst of a falling-out. Haley (promoted by Myers) wanted to record “Rock Around the Clock,” but Dave Miller refused to record it. Whether it was intentional on Miller’s part or not, there was little to no promotion for the two Haley singles of early 1954: “I’ll Be True” and “Straight Jacket,” even though the latter received a very favorable review in *Billboard* (03/20/54). Bill Haley later stated that he thought his career had peaked and that he might have to retire from the business. On April 1st, Haley and Myers met with executives from Decca Records – with the understanding that Dave Miller had not renewed his contract with Haley but would let that contract expire in early April. Bill Haley signed with Decca immediately and was in the studio in a week recording his next single.

At the end of July, Dave Miller’s direction for Essex became clear. He took out a two-page ad in the trade magazines promoting a six-album set called *I Love*. These were individual records that followed a single theme: buy one or buy them all. They were numbered as ESLP-102 through 107 and EXP-107 through 112, and Miller was banking on their success. They sold reasonably well, but had Essex banked on rock-and-roll music instead, well....

Essex released a four-record set of easy-listening albums, collectively themed *Far Away Places*, but these were only partly successful. Like the previous six EP's and LP's, he promoted these records with photographs of attractive women on the front covers. Jay White, Monty Kelly, Billy Butterfield, and the Ray Charles Chorus contributed the music.



1955

With enough capital to start a new venture and with the future of Essex Records being somewhat uncertain, Miller started a new label, Media, began signing new artists to Essex, and released four albums of Billy Butterfield playing on college campuses around the northeast: Princeton; NYC; Amherst; and Rutgers. (ESLP-401 to 404) Media is just outside Philadelphia, PA.



The Media label released singles in rapid succession in spring. One of them was "Majorca," a hit in twenty-two-year-old Petula Clark's native country (England). With no promotion at all, Media 1007 was a failure in the United States. Other acts like the Guitars Two (Media 1006) remained obscure.



Media scored with one more disc, "Alabama Jubilee" (Media 1010, BB 05/21/55) by the Ferko String Band and promptly issued an album of their songs (Media LP-1001), containing that song and seven of their earlier hits. The label generated some excitement with later singles (Media 1011, 06/18/55) but remained known as a local label.

Meanwhile, Essex signed the Mulcays to a two-year contract in June. At this point Essex switched from the ten-inch LP format to pressing twelve-inchers. July and August saw the release of five albums of material that was mainly recycled from earlier releases.



A few corresponding singles from the albums all came out at the same time. Essex 399 from ESLP-202 is mentioned in the 7/23/55 *Billboard* (along with #398 and #400).

After that, Bill Haley sued Essex (BB 8/13/55, p. 20) for reissuing his earlier records. This was not a suit that Haley was going to win, because he did not own the rights to press and distribute his own records. Palda/Essex owned those rights, and the records would continue to come out. However, a lawsuit certainly did nothing to help the label that was now faltering. Although they were still lurching around through the rest of 1955 and the start of 1956, they had no big successes – although the Mulcays'

records seemed to do well. In December, Bel Canto bought the tape rights for Essex/Media records with reel-to-reel tapes to come out early the following year.

1956

This was a year of endings and beginnings for Dave Miller. The last Essex single, Essex 412 by Joyce Romero, came out in February, 1956, and was announced in the February 4th issue of *Billboard*. It is hardly a coincidence that in the same issue was an article indicating that Palda Records announced in late January that they were \$200,000 in debt. Miller International (essentially Dave Miller) bought Essex and set up Trans-World Records in June, 1956. This is mentioned in the 7/7/56 issue of *Billboard* (p. 18). That issue mentions singles (apparently June) and releases of albums (in June). This says that he is recording samplers through July. (TWS-100 and TWS-200 were the only samplers, but the material on those samplers was already out.) This may have been TWLP-201, which seems to contain two previously unreleased tracks.

All of the Essex LP's (and four new albums, numbered 206 through 209) were issued onto the Trans-World label at the same time in **July-August, 1956**, on a WHITE or GRAY label. All nine albums are probably known on that label. I have verified 201 – 206, 208, and 209 on the white label with orange logo. We can be sure that they came out at the same time because the other eight are listed on the back of the Haley album. All nine are also listed on the back of the Ray Charles Chorus album (204), and most of the others.



TWLP-100, *Mood Music Sampler*, has a 98c price tag graphic on the front cover.

It contains material from TWLP 203 through 207. It exists on a red label.

TWS-200, the *College Jazz Sampler*, also has a 98c price tag graphic on the front cover.

It contains material from the Essex Jazz "college series." The LP exists with either a red label or a white label.

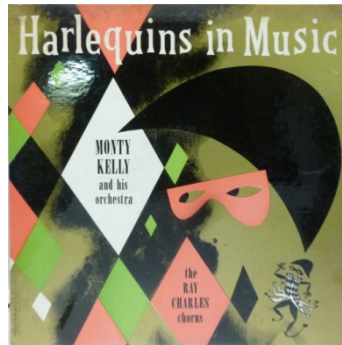
The red label seems to have been used exclusively for 45's/78's/EP's and for the two sampler albums (100 and 200).

These records proved to be quite successful, and Miller was on to something hiring musicians outside the USA to record his albums. By the end of the year Trans-World was preparing to record a grouping of new records.

1957

During the next fifteen months Trans-World released four more records in the 200 series. They were also working on a set of albums that would be available for sale or distributed free with the purchase of a new record player. These were numbered 100, 200, 300, and so on – instead of by the usual convention.

The label change from **white** to **yellow** probably came with the release of the "new" LP's in February, 1957. All of the earlier albums became available on the yellow label. TWLP-210 and 211 were announced in the 2/16/57 issue of *Billboard*.



These albums were new and indicate the direction in which Dave Miller was taking his company. The back covers list all eleven albums that were currently available through Trans-World.

Later in the year, Edmond DeLuca's *Safari* made its debut on record as TWLP-212. It was recorded using a stereophonic process so that it could later be released by Bel

Canto on stereo tape – something that was accomplished in early 1958.

In late November, 1957, Dave Miller began to announce the new releases from Trans-World as being on the Somerset label. Although Trans-World continued until April of the following year, Somerset was the new moniker, and it would be Somerset that pressed in stereo as Stereo-Fidelity. All prior recordings had been released in mono only. Information in *Billboard* about the 101 Strings claims that their first records came out in November, 1957. These albums are listed as being on Somerset, but they first came out on Trans-World. This is when the transition to Somerset occurred. The original pressings were actually the last of the Trans-World albums -- with new Somerset prefixing. Clearly the change in numbering system was intended to be transitional to Somerset.

1958

In March, 1958, Miller International was put on the "unfair list" by AFTRA, but the company was evolving rapidly. The release of Trans-World album TWLP-213, *Symphony for Tommy*, was announced in the 4/7/58 *Billboard*. The back cover to this last Trans-World album in the 200 series lists twelve of the thirteen albums on the back cover. The record was later folded into the new series as P-5700. At the same time, most of the earlier records were assigned new numbers in the P-**00 series.

According to the back cover to P-1300, the albums in the P-**00 series were available free with the purchase of a Philco record player. Perhaps for its part, Philco named one of its transistor radio models the “Trans-World” in 1957. Albums that are known to exist on Trans-World before the name change include numbers between 100 and 6000 – but not necessarily all of them. Somerset P-4600 was announced as a new release in the 3/31/58 issue of *Billboard*.

In April, 1958, Miller announced the opening of Stereo-Fidelity Records. (*Billboard* 4/28/58). Being way ahead of the curve as far as introducing stereo albums, Somerset became introducing Stereo-Fidelity releases began on 5/20/1958, as indicated in a full-page ad in the 4/28/1958 issue of *Billboard*. On 4/20/59, they announced that the Somerset monophonic line (at \$1.98) would only be used for select releases from then on, although mono albums continued to be pressed (by Somerset) until the end of 1967. In the 9/21/59 issue *Billboard* ran a profile of Miller International.



Pressings of *Rock With Bill Haley and the Comets*:

1. Essex ESLP-202; orange label. Front and back covers list ESLP-202A and B side contents. Back cover lists Essex albums 401 through 404. Some (most?) copies have a short horizontal line at the bottom of the side-one label.
2. Trans-World TWLP-202; white label with orange logo. Front cover has ESLP-202 side contents, as above. Back cover lists eight other Trans-World albums. Cover printed and manufactured by Crown Album Corp. of Philadelphia. Forward fold. Crown also printed for Swan, Cameo-Parkway, and Fantasy.
3. Trans-World TWLP-202; yellow label with black print. Cover has reverse fold and does not state that it was made by Crown.
4. Somerset P-4600; yellow label with black print. Front cover has had the matrix number information removed. Back cover redesigned to list a bunch of Somerset albums. Bottom line indicates that Triumph Phono Record Sales made the packaging. Triumph was incorporated in Pennsylvania in February, 1956. They experienced a “change of registered office” in March, 1958; that was when production on Somerset records likely began. Then Triumph merged with another company in December, 1958.
5. Somerset label as above, and cover is still “reverse” folded, but back cover no longer mentions Triumph. Early 1959?
6. Somerset P-4600; multicolored label. Cover is “forward” folded and does not mention triumph. C. 1959-61?

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