

Celebrating King Records and the roots of American music By Chelsea Davis

On Sunday, Cincinnati's King Records is being honored with the Celebrating King Records event at Washington Park, as part of the OTR Performs series and the Cincinnati Fringe Festival.

Founded by Syd Nathan in 1943 as an independent label, King Records became a staple in the early days of the American music industry.

"It's a treasure but it's unknown," said K.J. Sanchez, playwright and director. "Once you take a look at King Records, you immediately get hooked."

The event begins at 5 p.m. and provides workshops for kids, memorabilia for adults, a performance from King Record's, Philip Paul. The evening will end with the play "Cincinnati King" written by KJ Sanchez, in conjunction with Playhouse in the Park.

Sanchez, an associate artist with Playhouse, got involved with the King Records project when Blake Robinson, Playhouse's artistic director, wanted to introduce stories that are fundamentally Cincinnati. Sanchez began researching, and quickly realized the complexities of this story.

"It's a 'David and Goliath' story. (Nathan) was an outsider, and he built this thing from his own willpower and hutzpah," Sanchez said. "But he's also human — he's real, with real foibles."

Nathan not only cemented King Records as a viable player in the music industry, but became known for producing everything in-house, from recording to pressing and shipping the albums. As well, King Records, along with its sister labels Queen and Federal, broke boundaries for being a racially integrated workplace from its conception.

"[Nathan] didn't care about skin color, race or cultural heritage, just that you could do the jobs," Sanchez said. "He also hired a lot of women when women weren't very welcome in the workforce."

In a time when people wouldn't even consider bringing on an African-American artist, like James Brown, Nathan did. But there were also some issues concerning copyright and loyalties – he didn't always pay people what they were worth – in addition to Nathan's brash persona. This complicated and human element is what Sanchez hopes to showcase in her play, along with many memories and, of course, music.

"Part of my journey is figuring out, 'How does Syd Nathan go down in history?'" Sanchez said.

Sanchez's describes her play as a "theatrical album," with music from the King Record's catalogue playing as either an underscore or live singing. She sees this upcoming performance as a chance for feedback from the community that helped create the story, so the play can grow and be seen by other audiences.

"How does the rest of the country not know how cool Cincinnati is? It's the best kept secret," Sanchez said. "American music has roots here. This is an amazing story."