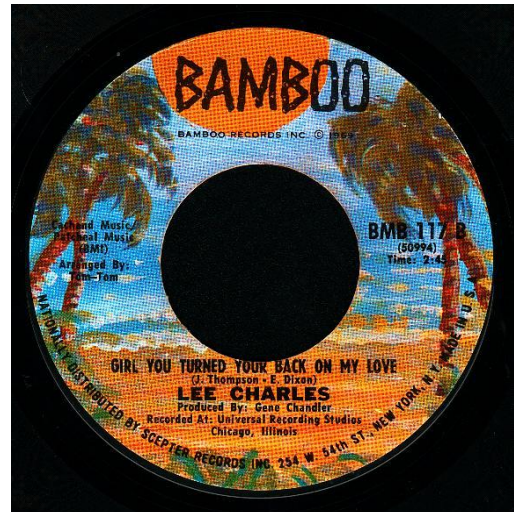


Not a lot is known about Lee Charles Nealy, except that he is dead, apparently he died at least a few years back, possibly in Arizona. **Gene Chandler** told me that he left a family behind, including some children. As a singer his recordings were consistently good in quality, to the point that he ranks as a favourite unknown rare soul singers, probably alongside The Masqueraders in terms of consistency. As a writer he is remembered primarily (and unfairly as you'll read) as a second stringer in Jerry Butler's short lived Chicago writers workshop in the early 70s. Suffice to say that whenever he was let loose with a pen (normally in conjunction with someone else), he came up trumps in the quality stakes.



In researching this article I encountered a lack of biographical information, except the briefest of mentions, and several mysteries. Firstly Internet searches reveal a Lee Charles to be on death row in Texas, though closer examination reveals this not our man. Next the BMI and ASCAP writer directories confused matters for me, not listing many sides that I knew Lee had co-penned, and also showing, under various spellings of his name, songs written by one Leon Bibb, who from what I can make out wrote blues songs. I still don't know the connection between Charles and Bibb, if there was one at all.

His solo career as far as I can ascertain started at Dakar in 1966, both as a recording artist and as a writer alongside another Chicago luminary Karl Tarleton. Read on to find out about all that I know about Lee Charles, the singer and the songwriter.

Lee Charles - The vinyl legacy

When I interviewed **Gene Chandler** on soul24-7 he told me that "*Lee was Carl's artist*". Lee's solo recording career certainly appears to have started at **Carl Davis'** fledgling Dakar set up in 1966. As an artist he had the second release on the label "*It's all over between us*" (Dakar 601) which is a gutsy rasping rough edged floater, probably featuring the Chi-Lites on background vocals. The flip "*Then would you love me*" has more of an uptempo dance feel to it, with twinkling piano and horn blasts, but is marred by a rather messy chorus.

This was followed by a series of other Dakar songs, which were leased out, initially to Revue Records in 1967 / 68. The first of these was the storming "*If that ain't loving you*" (11007) c/w "*Standing on the outside*" a far more relaxed affair – those Chicago strings and Lee's wonderful vocals combine to make this a top-drawer floater, and very strong side. This 45 was followed up by the pounding "*Wrong number*" (11022), which became a small time winner on the northern scene with it's backing borrowing from "*I get the sweetest feeling*". The B-side "*Someone somewhere*" is a glorious deep soul burner. "*Wrong number*" was picked up a year later and re-recorded for Brunswick 55401, this time with Carl Davis producing (Dakar had tied up with Brunswick by now). The Brunswick issue also came with a different flip was used, a powerful ballad "*I'll never ever love again*".

Lee next turns up on vinyl around 1969, signed as an artist to Gene Chandler's Bamboo label, where he was to become the second most recorded artist on the label behind hitmakers Mel & Tim.

Lee's initial release for the label was the pounding uptempo dance sound "*I never want to lose my sweet thing*", which Lee co-wrote with Karl Tarleton. This was issued twice on Bamboo 110 and 111. The first release was backed with the all time classic slowie "*Girl you turned your back on my love*" (110); the second release with the building "*Why do you have to go*" (on which Lee played piano).

His third release for Bamboo was "*You can't get away*", a pleasant enough sound, imitated the style of vocal delivery that Jerry Butler had made popular together with a reissue of "*Girl you turned your back on my love*". Finally for Bamboo he released "*You got to get it for yourself*". Again the B side sounds far better to these ears – "*I get high on my baby's love*" totally overshadows the official A side, and stands the test of time as a crossover gem on today's scene.

By now we are in 1970, and this last Bamboo side was also supposed to be on a Wand release, and as a major collector of that label, a Wand copy of this record has eluded me all these years. I do believe it exists and probably suffered from Wand's promotional methodology. Wand, when unsure of a song would only promote it in one city, say somewhere like Cleveland, to see how it went down, and then, based on reaction, would either issue it or not. Who knows maybe there's a promo man sitting out there in retirement with a hundred copies in his basement!

Lee had a second Wand release "*Let's play house*" (a side written by **Sidney Barnes** and also done by **Lee Sain** on Sunflower), which is a funky *wah wah* guitar driven number which for the record is a different song to the Tony Drake Musicor song of the same title. Not to everyone's taste, but perfectly encapsulating the feeling of the early 70's, it wouldn't sound out of place on a blaxploitation movie.

Sometime in 1972 Lee appears to have become involved with Jerry Butler's writers workshop and he next turns up on the aptly titled Hot Wax Records with sides leased in from the workshop. Mystery abounds here too, as he is supposed to have had two releases for the label. The first one, possibly not released, possibly only pressed as a promotional 45 "*Love ain't gonna run me away*" (Hot Wax 7209) sits as a gaping hole in my collection of an otherwise complete run of Hot Wax singles. Again I suspect copies exist, and this sides exclusion from my own collection is irritating. I believe this to be a version of the **Luther Ingram** KoKo ballad, which may have been pulled from release. If my hunch is correct, I, and I suspect you likewise are missing what surely must be a killer floater.

His second release for the label by contrast is easily obtainable subtle ballad "*I just want to be loved*" which was a minor R&B chart entry in the spring of 1973. (Hot Wax 7303). This side Lee co-wrote with a young **Lowrell Simon** (of Lost Generation and later "*Mellow mellow right on*" fame).

In 1974 when H-D-H were '*re-organising their affairs*', (and Hot Wax was canned temporarily), Lee popped up on an Invictus side "*Sitting on a time bomb*" (Invictus 1260) - sadly with a Holland- Dozier instrumental on the flip side. By now I believe Lee had actually signed with the label (rather than just having a side leased in) as the song was written by Invictus house-writers, and there is no sign of any Chicago writers workshop influence.

And that is the last 45 he appears to have made as a singer.

Lee Charles 45's in chronological order:

Dakar 601	It's all over between us (K.Tarleton -C.Davis) (2:37) Then would you love me (K.Tarleton - C.Davis - O.Cobbs) (1:58) Arr: Johnny Richardson. Prod: Gerald Sims
Revue 11007	Standing on the outside (K Tarleton - C David) (2:37) If that ain't loving you (G Sims - F.Smith) (2:33) Prod: Gerald Sims
Revue 11022	Wrong number (F Smith - G Sims - E Record) (2:28) Someone somewhere (C Davis - E Record) (2:51) Arr: Sonny Sanders. Prod: Gerald Sims
Brunswick 55401	I'll never ever love again (Eugene Record - Floyd Smith - Truman Thomas) (2:21) Wrong number (Eugene Record - Gerald Sims - Floyd Smith) (2:14) Arr: Sonny Sanders. Prod: Carl Davis.
Bamboo 110	Girl you turned your back on my love (J.Thompson - E.Dixon) (2:45) I never want to lose my sweet thing (K.Tarleton - C.Lee - E.Dixon) (2:55)
Bamboo 111	Why do you have to go (Allison, Abner) (2:57) I never want to lose my sweet thing (K.Tarleton - C.Lee - E.Dixon) (2:55)
Bamboo 117	You can't get away (B.Butler - L.Wade) (3:04) Girl you turned your back on my love (J.Thompson - E.Dixon) (2:45)
Bamboo 119 / Wand 11238?	You got to get it for yourself (Lee Charles - Eugene Dixon) (3:08) I get high on my baby's love (Sidney Barnes Jr) (2:55) All Bamboo 45's Arr: Tom Tom. Prod. by Gene Chandler
Wand 11242	When the deal goes down (D.Arnold - R.Simmons) (2:32) Let's play house (S.Barnes - R.L.Thurston) (3:27) Arr: Richard Evans. Prod: Gene Chandler
Hot Wax 7209? Hot Wax 7303	Love ain't gonna run me away Somebody's gonna hurt you like you hurt me (B.Williams / J.Brown) (3:05) I just want to be loved (L.Charles - L.Simon) (3:57) Arr: Tom Tom. Prod: Art Productions
Invictus 1260	Sittin' on a time bomb (Waiting for the hurt to come) (G.Johnson - G.Perry) (2:49) Get your house in order (R.Dunbar) (2:37) Invictus 1260 A: Produced by Greg Perry, B Prod: Ronald Dunbar.

Lee Charles – The songwriter

I have checked all my records on a myriad of Chicago based labels, from Mar-V-Lus / M-Pac to Mercury, O'Keh to Brunswick, Dakar to Duo, and from Curtom to Chess! I have also checked out all my records on Jerry Butler affiliated labels such as Fountain and Memphis. Lee Charles' name appears all too infrequently, and in most cases not at all.

He appears to have started songwriting in the mid 60s. At Dakar he co-wrote two sides for **Shirley Karol**, the rocking "*Just to make you happy*" (1449) and her follow up "*Faith*" (606).

Around 1968 Lee co-wrote two sides for **Bull & The Matadors**, along with Karl Tarleton and Larry Hanks. "*I can't forget*" and "*Move with the groove*" came out on Toddlin Town 116.

Lee next appears as a writer (again with Karl Tarleton) on **Sylvia Thomas** wonderfully under-rated "*At last*" (Bamboo 101). **Gene Chandler** acquired Bamboo after it had fallen onto hard times. Though most people associate it with Chicago, it was originally out of St Louis, though was run initially by **Andre Williams**. From the Sylvia Thomas side it would seem Lee's involvement pre-dated the Gene Chandler take over. When Gene got involved he beefed up the roster, and shored up by a million seller hit in Mel & Tim's "*Backfield in motion*" he was able to put out some 20 releases, including four by Lee Charles.

Other sides Lee was to co-write with Karl Tarleton in the late 60's included:

"*Call on the one who needs you*", "*Boy this is my prayer*" and "*It's not that easy*".

It was in the early 70's that Lee switched from Gene Chandler's base to **Jerry Butler's** Chicago writers workshop. He wasn't one of the original team that surrounded Butler, but appears to have joined them around 1972. That being said his affiliation with Butler came earlier in 1971 when he was credited as the Tambourine player (!) on Jerry Butler & Gene Chandler's "*One on one*" album for Mercury. He also wasn't one of the first team writers either – and his appearances on writer credits is comparatively sporadic when compared to others in the workshop such as **Terry Callier, Larry Wade, Marvin Yancy, Chuck Jackson, Jimmy Jones, James Blumenberg**, and **Billy Butler**. In the words of one of his songs, Lee almost seemed to be "*Standing on the outside*" of the writers workshop.

There are only a few sides that I have identified him being involved with while at the Chicago writers workshop:

For the 1973 **Jerry Butler & Brenda Lee Eager** LP "*The love we had*" Lee co-wrote two sides "*How long will it last*" and "*I like your loving*".

For 1974's "*Sweet sixteen*" album by Jerry himself, Lee co-wrote (this time with James Blumenberg) the side "*Start living it up*". Lee was also credited as a background singer on this album.

Charles and Blumenberg did write several other songs together. Two of these were later to be recorded by **Jackie Ross** and released on both her Golden Ear LP with Little Milton, and back to back as a 45 – the sides in question were "*I like your loving*", previously recorded by Brenda Lee Eager and "*No matter where you go*".

Other songs attributed to Lee include:

- "*Sara*" and "*Staring me in the face*" (co-penned by Jessie Emmett Bolian),
- "*Matthew 27 & John 19*" (co-penned with **Ella Washington**), and
- "*Love comes around only once*" and "*Let me make love to you*" (not the Gene Chandler song) co-penned with Luther Dixon and Inez Foxx.

Finally Lee last turns up as writer on a couple of later songs. Firstly **Jackie Wilson's** 1975 Brunswick side "*I've learned about life*" (Brunswick 55536 and "*Nobody but you*" LP). This is one of several sides he co-wrote with Elbert.I.Hunter. Other co-penned sides with Hunter included "*Double your love*", "*Witness of a broken heart*" and a song called "*The rap*". Secondly "*Nothing can take you from me*", a song (co-written with James Blumenberg and Yvonne Smith) recorded by **Garland Green** and released as a B side on Spring (twice!).

From there he seems to have just vanished into thin air. And that's all I can tell you about the late Lee Charles Nealy. His legacy comprises twelve solo releases, all worthy of a place in

your collection, a couple of mystery 45's that probably don't exist (there always are!), and a host of co-writer credits.