



# Vivian Carter

(1921 - 1989)

#### Sources:

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Vivian Carter was an African American record company executive who founded Vee-Jay Records with her future husband, Jimmy Bracken.

Carter was born on March 25, 1921, in Tunica, Mississippi, and moved with her parents to Gary, Indiana, when she was a child. She graduated from Gary's Roosevelt High School in 1939 where she excelled at public speaking, theater, and chorus. After graduation, she took classes at a business college before becoming a clerical worker for the U.S. Army's Quartermaster Corps during World War II. After a year in Washington, D.C., she transferred to Chicago to be closer to family and friends. In 1944 Carter met Jimmy Bracken, who became her business partner, and then married him on December 16, 1953.

In 1948 Carter won a talent contest conducted at Chicago's WGES radio station. The prize was an opportunity to host a fifteen-minute segment, which launched her radio career. After three months, she returned to Gary to work in a local millinery shop until she landed a job at WJOB (AM) in Hammond, Indiana.

In 1950 Carter and Bracken opened Vivian's Record Shop at 1640 Broadway in Gary's Midtown district and in 1953 Carter and Bracken borrowed \$500 to establish a new record company, Vee-Jay Records, taking its name from the initials of their first names. During the 1950s and early 1960s, under Carter's and Bracken's ownership, Vee-Jay became a major independent record label with acts including The Spaniels, Jimmy Reed, the El Dorados, John Lee Hooker, Gene Chandler, Jerry Butler, Dee Clark, The Staple Singers, and The Four Seasons, among others. Vee Jay secured the American distribution rights to The Beatles in 1963, but contract loopholes and lawsuits caused the company to lose them to Capitol Records and by 1966, it ceased record production in 1966.

By the mid-1980s Carter's health began to fail from high blood pressure, diabetes, and strokes. Partially paralyzed, she died in a nursing home on June 12, 1989.



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