

Tom Dowd, 77, an Innovator In the Art of Recording Music

By JON PARELES

Tom Dowd, an innovative recording engineer and producer who made noted albums with John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Otis Redding, Eric Clapton, the Allman Brothers and many other musicians, died on Sunday in Aventura, Fla., near Miami. He was 77 and had lived until recently in Miami.

The cause was emphysema, said his daughter, Dana Dowd.

Mr. Dowd was a pioneer of stereo and multitrack tape recording. But as a producer he was renowned for recordings that sounded natural, making the listener feel he was in the same room as the performer. As the engineer or producer for Coltrane's "Giant Steps," Ray Charles's "What'd I Say," Ben E. King's "Stand By Me," Aretha Franklin's "Respect" and Derek and the Dominoes' "Layla," his signature was a self-effacing clarity and warmth.

"There is no one who better epitomizes the ideal marriage of technical excellence and true creativity," said Ahmet Ertegun, the chairman of Atlantic Records, in a 1999 speech. Mr. Dowd was a staff engineer at Atlantic for 25 years.

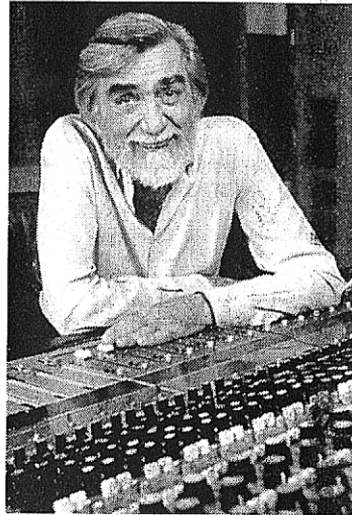
Mr. Dowd grew up in Manhattan. His father was a theater producer, and his mother was trained as an opera singer. He studied piano and violin, and after he graduated from Stuyvesant High School at 16, he attended Columbia University. Working in the physics department, he operated the cyclotron, a particle accelerator. When he enlisted at 18, the Army sent him back to Columbia to work on the Manhattan Project, which produced the atomic bomb.

After World War II, he worked for the Voice of America and became a freelance recording engineer until he was hired full time by Atlantic, then a fledgling independent label.

Mr. Dowd's clear, forceful recordings — he captured drums and bass playing at full volume without distortion — helped make Atlantic singles stand out. At Atlantic in the early 1950's, he suggested that the company build a control room in its Midtown offices, which doubled as a studio for nearly a decade; the stairwell was used as an echo chamber. He pushed the label to switch from recording on acetate discs to using tape, and he made some of the first commercial stereo recordings: binaural recordings, with a separate needle playing each channel.

"We were recording everything in stereo long before there was any significant market for it," Mr. Ertegun said.

Mr. Dowd also had Atlantic buy



Associated Press

Tom Dowd in 1994.

the second eight-track multitrack recorder ever made; Les Paul had the first one. Mr. Dowd designed and built Atlantic's first stereo and eight-track consoles.

He recorded Atlantic's jazz roster, which included the Modern Jazz Quartet, Charles Mingus, Freddie Hubbard, Mr. Coleman and Coltrane; he also recorded pop and rhythm-and-blues hits for Bobby Darin, Ruth Brown, Solomon Burke, the Clovers and the Drifters. In the 1960's he recorded Cream, Ms. Franklin, Dusty Springfield and many other rock and jazz musicians, eventually earning credit as producer as well as engineer.

He left Atlantic in the late 1960's to work as a freelance producer. In 1967 Mr. Dowd moved to Miami, where he worked mostly at Criteria Sound Studios. But he continued to make albums in London, New York, Los Angeles, the Bahamas and elsewhere.

Musicians like Eric Clapton came to depend on his advice as well as his technical skill. Mr. Dowd shaped the sound of Southern rock as the producer for Lynyrd Skynyrd and in a long association with the Allman Brothers Band. He continued to make albums until earlier this year.

In addition to his daughter, of Miami, he is survived by his wife, Cheryl Dowd of Dearborn, Mich.; two sons, Todd, of Miami Beach, and Steven, of Denver; and a grandson.

In 2002 he received a lifetime achievement award from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, the Grammy organization. A documentary, "Tom Dowd and the Language of Music," is scheduled for release early next year.