

THE PLATTERS

The Platters were at the other end of the spectrum from the garage ambiance and amateurism of the Penguins. They were the Ink Spots of the rock era, modeled on their predecessors' polished, romantic sound and their presentation of familiar pop standards alongside equally soothing new material (no 12-bar blues or blaring saxophones for the Platters). Buck Ram had been a songwriter for the Ink Spots and often declared his intention to make the Platters the "New Ink Spots," a goal he achieved partly by having the Platters record several convincing remakes of old Ink Spots hits, including "My Prayer." Ram helped to shape a group sound that could appeal to an older audience while retaining enough of a dance beat and doo-wop vocal flavor to be called "rock & roll." Between 1955 and 1960, the group placed eighteen entries in the Top Forty, including four #1 pop hits. "The Great Pretender" and "My Prayer" both hit #1 in 1956, the first-ever pop chart-toppers for a black act. They were followed in 1958 by "Twilight Time" and "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," making the Platters responsible for half of the small total of eight recordings by black acts that managed to make it to #1 on the pop charts before 1959. (The other black #1's from this period were Johnny Mathis' "Chances Are," Sam Cooke's "You Send Me," the Silhouettes' "Get a Job," and Tommy Edwards' "It's All in the Game." With the exception of the comic doo-wop novelty number, "Get a Job," all were unthreatening ballads. Despite the greater acceptance of black music that rock & roll represented, the "rules" for success on the highest level hadn't really changed: as with the 1940's popularity of the Ink Spots, Nat "King" Cole and Louis Jordan, black artists were most successful when they were crooning like whites or being funny.)

Buck Ram met the struggling Platters in 1954 in Los Angeles, where they were working as parking lot attendants. Ram signed the group and added a female voice, that of 15-year-old Zola Taylor, to the line-up to further soften their sound. The Platters recorded "**Only You**" for Mercury in 1955 and promptly scored a Top Five hit that linked them to the exploding rock & roll movement. A sentimental ballad, written by Buck Ram in classic Ink Spots style, "Only You" was a showcase for lead singer **Tony Williams**, who built upon Bill Kenny's delicate inflections and added his own virtuosic falsetto sweeps and a choked, pleading delivery that became his trademark.

The Platters followed "Only You" with another Ram composition, "**The Great Pretender**," a rock-a-ballad with a graceful melody and an elegant set of lyrics that presents the love of "Only You" as a heartbreaking memory—alive only in a make-believe world carefully hidden under the singer's happy mask of a face. The song is driven gently by a polite New Orleans-style arrangement dominated by piano triplets, gently swinging background riffs and crisp drum backbeats. "The Great Pretender" was released in December 1955 and hit #1 on the pop charts early in 1956, making it only the second rock & roll record to reach the top spot (after Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock").

The remainder of the Platters' #1 hits—"My Prayer," "Twilight Time" and "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes"—were pop standards that reflected the increasingly mainstream, supperclub direction of their music. The Platters' career was nearly ruined in 1959 when the four male group members were arrested in Cincinnati for soliciting prostitutes and drug possession. The dubious charges were eventually dismissed, but the group never regained its popularity. They managed one last appearance on the Top Ten in 1960 with "Harbor Lights," a song popularized decades earlier by Rudy Vallee. Tony

Williams left for an unsuccessful solo career in 1961, and was replaced by Sonny Turner, who led the group through many years of nightclub and "oldies" shows.