UPTEMPO DOO-WOP

"Speedoo"

The uptempo, dance-driven "Speedoo," a 1955 hit for **The Cadillacs**, was the stylistic flipside of the doo-wop ballads, including the Cadillacs' own 1954 R&B hit "Gloria," which features lead singer Earl Carroll in a dramatically different and equally effective setting. (Once the bird names had been exhausted, cars became the inspiration of choice for group names, and the Cadillacs quickly grabbed the best.) Fronted by Carroll, the Cadillacs were actually closer to the older R&B group tradition than to "doo-wop," with sexier lyrics, a bluesier singing style, a more integrated mix of voices and instruments and a jazzier arrangement with a prominent saxophone solo. Urged on by a frantic backbeat and an elaborate vocal accompaniment, "Mr. Earl" brags of his exploits and his unfailing ability to get pretty women to "change their minds." (While Carroll struts in the spotlight, the record is really driven by an active and agile bass voice, doubled effectively by the string bass and piano.) The Cadillacs were one of the flashiest and most visually-oriented groups of the fifties, always dressed to kill and ready with a perfectly-synched dance routine. Although they never equaled the success of "Speedoo," and lost Earl Carroll to the Coasters in 1961, the group continued performing and recording into the sixties and was a major influence on the choreographed style of other groups, most notably the Temptations and their fellow Motown acts.

"Come and Go With Me"

Formed by group of servicemen when all were stationed in a Pittsburgh Air Force base, **The Dell-Vikings** were the first racially integrated doo-wop group to make the charts. After the group won a local talent contest in 1957, they recorded "Come and Go With Me" in a hotel room—with the singers standing in a closet(!) The song's lively party atmosphere captures the spirit of carefree fun at the core of fifties rock & roll: it's easy to imagine a group of singers and players crammed into a hotel room with a single microphone set up to record the festivities. "Come and Go With Me" captures the streetcorner feel of earlier doo-wop records, but the ever-so-earnest presentation of "Earth Angel" and the vocal virtuosity of Frankie Lymon is discarded in favor of a ragged but infectious singalong pop sound and a slightly tongue-in-cheek delivery that tosses off nonsense syllables and the song's lyrics with equal nonchalance. The Dell-Vikings followed "Come and Go With Me" with "Whispering Bells," another Top Ten hit which features a similarly memorable melody and a sparkling arrangement propelled by an appropriately bell-like guitar line. The group then moved up to the Mercury label, scored a hit with "Cool Shake" and promptly vanished into the rock's Bermuda Triangle, resurfacing years later with their fellow doo-wop ghosts at rock revival shows.

"Get a Job"

Two of the all-time great "streetcorner" one-shots were released in 1958: "Get a Job," a surprise #1 hit for **The Silhouettes** (a group name inspired by the Rays' hit song) and "Book of Love" by the Monotones—an apt name inspired by the groups' formidable lack of vocal talent. "Get a Job" details a man's exasperation with his nagging woman, who's always "preachin' and a-cryin'" about him finding a job. While the subject itself is

rather "adult," the record is pure artless rock: the lyrics are treated humorously and the lead vocals are surrounded and rendered all but incidental by great, whacked-out background "vocals"—"yip yip yip yip yip yip yip yip, bom bom bom bom bom bom get a job, *Sha*-na na na, *Sha*-na na-na nah..."—that render the title line and the woman's demands as nonsensical as the rest of the clatter. The backing band sounds as pleasantly drunk and ragged as the singers: they barely hang together through the sax solo and drop out altogether for the drums-and-voices break ("I better go back to the house...") that snaps the song back into focus before it starts to crumble into an inspired mess again. The Silhouettes followed "Get a Job" with "Heading for the Poor House" a minor and prophetic hit.

"Book of Love"

The Monotones' "Book of Love" has an aggravatingly catchy refrain that is repeated seven times in the course of the short song, interrupted every time by a thud that makes no sense and seems perfect. The memorable "thud" from the bass drum was actually the result of a happy accident: while the group was rehearsing the song, a kid playing outside threw a ball at the window of the rehearsal room at just the right moment. Monotone Charles Patrick: "That ball hit the window, 'BOOM,' and we played back the tape and we heard this here sound, so we kept it and wrote it in as the drum part. That's what sold the record!" Thus inspired, the group built the song around the refrain and a bridge section that uses drum beats as the sole accompaniment ("chapter one says you love her..."), both punctuated by stops and starts that are balanced in brief verses that let the band stretch out. The loose, wax-party feel of "Book of Love," highlighted by bass singer John Raynes' comically nasal voice, made it a fun and funny hit, and one of the last of the original breed of no-frills streetcorner doo-wop.

"Little Darlin'"

The Diamonds, from Toronto, were the first successful all-white doo-wop group. They recorded for a major label, Mercury Records, and followed the established major label pattern of covering black artists. In contrast to earlier cover artists, though, the Diamonds remained faithful to the music and spirit of the originals and added their own happy, slightly loopy enthusiasm. Their good-natured refusal to take themselves or their music too seriously put them squarely in the best of doo-wop tradition. Their first successful venture was a cover of "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" in 1956, but the following year's cover of The Gladiolas' "Little Darling" was their biggest and most enduring hit.

"Little Darlin'" cashed in on a craze for Caribbean-flavored **calypso** music that swept the nation in 1957, to the delight of music industry heads who saw it as a long-overdue replacement for the more unwieldy rock & roll "fad." Popularized by Harry Belafonte's "Banana Boat (Day-O)," calypso never managed to replace rock & roll, though it did echo in the "islands" feel of songs like Mickey & Sylvia's "Love is Strange," Chuck Berry's "Havana Moon," Bo Diddley's comic "Cracking Up" and the Diamonds' "Little Darling."

"Little Darlin'" was written by 15-year-old Maurice Williams and recorded by his group, the Gladiolas, with chopped lyrics, castanets, cowbells and a rhumba beat, all

aimed at cashing in on the calypso boom. The Diamonds' playful, self-mocking cover plays up the calypso beat and exaggerates the melodrama of the lyrics and spoken bass soliloquy to disarmingly comic effect—poking fun, it seems, at the very notion of a white group singing doo-wop. The record also exaggerated and popularized the shrill falsetto style that would dominate early sixties pop. (Maurice Williams & the Gladiolas, renamed the "Zodiacs," popularized it still further with "Stay," a #1 hit in 1960.)

"At the Hop"

In contrast to the fun, winking approach of the Diamonds, the music of the other leading white group of 1957-58, **Danny & the Juniors**, sounds a bit glossy and contrived. The Philadelphia natives were at the top of the charts as 1957 ended with "At the Hop," a spirited but formulized version of doo-wop that was carefully crafted in the studio and written with self-consciously "teen" lyrics. The record helped establish the style of pre-processed pop that made Philadelphia the "teen idol" capitol of the music industry. Originally entitled "Do the Bop," after a local dance step, the title was changed at the suggestion of Dick Clark, who received partial songwriting credits (and royalties) for his efforts. Not surprisingly, Clark plugged the record and booked Danny & the Juniors on his Philadelphia-based *American Bandstand* television show, virtually guaranteeing that it would be a hit. The group hit again in 1958 with "Rock & Roll Is Here to Stay," a curiously flat celebration of rock & roll (and an ironic one at that, since it came from the Philadelphia pop production line that would nearly kill the music off in the early sixties). Danny & the Juniors continued performing and recording into the early sixties, then regrouped a decade later on the revival circuit. Lead singer Danny Rapp committed suicide in 1983. The group's saxophonist, Lenny Baker, was a founding member of Sha Na Na, the cartoonish group formed in the late sixties that was based on the Danny & the Juniors style and did much to advance the unfortunate stereotype of fifties rock & roll as mindless "greaser" music.

"Teenager in Love"

The best of the white groups retained rock & roll's spirited directness, if not its hard beat and rebellious tone. **Dion & the Belmonts**, the premier white group of the late fifties, emerged from the Bronx and launched their career in 1958 with "**I Wonder Why**," a blast of pure streetcorner bliss that presents a full-ranged layer of voices—walrus bass to falsetto shriek—officially claiming doo-wop for the Italian-American neighborhoods. The group hit full stride the following year with "Teenager in Love," written by the prolific team of Doc Pomus and Mort Schuman and brought to life by Dion Demucci's distinctive, piercing voice. The midtempo teen-love lament was originally conceived as "It's Great To Be Young and in Love." Pomus and Schuman changed the title and lyrics to better reflect the true experience of a love-struck teenager ("Why must I be a teenager in love...?"), and achieved an effective balance between melodrama and streetcorner realism. The balance shifted away from the streets in Dion & the Belmonts' next hit, "Where or When," and in their further travels down the old chestnut road in their renditions of "When You Wish Upon a Star" and the Five Satins' "In the Still of the Night" (now an "old chestnut" itself). Dion left the Belmonts and revived his rock & roll

energies in 1960, though "Runaround Sue," "The Wanderer" and "Lovers Who Wander" and his other solo hits remained rooted in the streetcorner group style.

The Early Sixties and "Neo-Doo-Wop"

Although classic doo-wop, like classic rock & roll, disappeared with the 1950's, vocal group styles continued to play a large role in shaping popular music in the new decade. Many new groups, like the Impressions and the Isley Brothers ("Shout," "Twist & Shout"), infused their sound with a heavy dose of gospel styles that linked them to the "soul" movement that was shaping a new era in black popular music. In Detroit, Motown Records perfected a pop-oriented brand of soul built largely around the vocal group interaction, while on the West Coast Phil Spector perfected his pop vision and turned girl group rock—a doo-wop sibling — into one of the high points of the pre-Beatles era. White pop-rock styles of the early sixties continued to incorporate many doo-wop elements as well: the Beach Boys, Jan & Dean and other "surf" rockers layered elaborate group harmonies on top of Chuck Berry guitar rock, while the Four Seasons, Del Shannon, Neil Sedaka, Dion, Jay & the Americans and other early sixties stars built on doo-wop vocal styles—particularly falsetto singing—to create their own brand of streetcorner pop. Even the Beatles could count doo-wop among their many influences: they performed three Coasters songs at their first recording audition and often looked to fifties vocal groups and early sixties girl groups as models for utilizing several voices rather than a single lead singer.

While the influence of group styles was helping to shape a new era, the early sixties also saw a "neo-doo-wop" revival of the sound of the Good Old Days. **Little Caesar & the Romans** tapped into rock's first nostalgia craze with 1961's "**Those Oldies but Goodies (Remind Me of You)**," a sentimental ballad with a deliberately "fifties" sound invoked by the doo-wop chord progression, piano triplets and doo-wop vocal styles, complete with a spoken interlude, walrus bass and falsetto ending. The wistful lyrics summon up the innocence of those younger, "simpler" times and forever link the special songs—now "oldies"—with the memory of that special Girl.

Most neo-doo-wop was uptempo and fun, paralleling the dance crazes launched by the "The Twist." **The Marcels** hit the top of the charts in 1961 with a rapid-fire assault on "**Blue Moon**" that would have left composers Rodgers & Hart gasping in disbelief. ("Bom-baba-bom, da-Dang-a-dang-dang, da-Ding-a-dong-ding Blue Moon, Blue Moon, Blue Moon, dip-a-doot-a-doo..."), while **The Tokens** followed the same year with "**The Lion Sleeps Tonight**," a rewrite of a South African folk song, "Wimoweh," that had been popularized by the folk group the Weavers. The record's lilting falsetto lead appealed to pop listeners while the romanticized "native" sound and lyrics tapped into folk music's resurgent popularity and a fad for "exotic" music reminiscent of the Calypso boom.

Other "neo-doo-wop" highlights included Maurice Williams & the Zodiacs' "Stay," the Edsels' "Rama Lama Ding Dong," the Dovells' "Bristol Stomp," the Cleftones' version of "Heart and Soul," the Jive Five's "My True Story," the cartoon character novelty number "Alley-Oop" by the Hollywood Argyles, and "Denise" by Randy & the Romantics, the most mindlessly irresistible love pledge of the era. Brill Building writer Barry Mann recorded his own tribute to romantic power of doo-wop in "Who Put the Bomp (in the Bomp, Bomp, Bomp)," and the Regents' "Barbara Ann" replaced Buddy

Holly's Peggy Sue as the ideal rock & roll woman. The elegant Gene Chandler, working with Chicago producer Carl Davis, proclaimed himself the "Duke of Earl" in a inspired mixture of fifties doo-wop and sixties pop, while the Rivingtons brought nonsense syllables to breathtakingly absurd heights in "Papa-Oom-Mow-Mow," "Mama-Oom-Mow-Mow" and "The Bird's the Word."

The Trashmen, a landlocked surf band from Minneapolis, combined all of the Rivingtons' hits and came up with the wonderfully outrageous "Surfin' Bird." Released at the end of 1963, "Surfin' Bird" peaked at #4 on the charts on February 2, 1964. The number one spot that week was held down by "I Want to Hold Your Hand," the first American hit for an entirely new type of "group." A new era had begun, and doo-wop, like nearly all else that had gone before, was officially pronounced dead, though the best of the records and many of the musical aspects of the style lived on and influenced later artists. Periodic "revival" concerts began in the late sixties and continue to bring old and new fans together to celebrate the joys of the music where human voices reigned supreme, and to give many of the old—but ageless—"one-shots" another brief moment in the spotlight.