DOO-WOP BALLADS

"Story Untold"

"Earth Angel" established lovelorn ballads as the first pure doo-wop style and the natural terrain for such a young and melodic music. **The Nutmegs**' "Story Untold" was 1955's great "ballad with a beat" successor to "Earth Angel," with a similar dreamy, longing feel and swaying beat articulated by the piano's "rock & roll triplets," the constant piano figures that provided an inner pulse for slow songs and served—to the point of monotony—as the standard accompaniment for fifties rock ballads. The doo-wop chord progression also returns, as does the pop (verse/bridge) song form. The lead melody of "Story Untold" has a greater range than most doo-wop songs, highlighted by the octave leap that opens each verse and the elegant downward descent that follows. Not that there is anything remotely sophisticated about the record: Leroy Griffin's unadorned lead singing is backed by a jumble of voices dominated by a classic "walrus bass," the distinctive feature of the most gloriously artless doo-wop songs. The feel is light and innocent as Griffin pours out his love for the girl who left him "standing in the cold," and left his love a "story untold."

"In the Still of the Night"

The memory of an unforgettable romantic evening fills the dreamy sound of **The Five Satins**' 1956 hit, "In the Still of the Night," one of the great, devotional doo-wop ballads—recorded, appropriately enough, in the basement of a church (it certainly *sounds* like it was recorded in a basement, which is part of its charm). Songwriter and lead singer Fred Parris' plaintive vocals recalls that "night in May" so vividly that the song seems a shared memory, palpably real to everyone who's ever been in love. Built around the familiar doo-wop chord progression and piano triplets, "In the Still of the Night" is as notable for its background vocals as for its lead: Parris is surrounded by a mesmerizing chorus of "shoo-doot-'n-shoo-be-doo," supplemented by a chant of "I'll remember" that repeats like a mantra during the bridge section. The feel of the song is complemented by a wistful sax solo and, finally, summed up by dreamy falsetto sighs as the song and that night fade into memory.

"In the Still of the Night" was filed away in the collective consciousness of an entire generation (the mere mention of the song can still bring a faraway look to people of the right age), but Parris was unable to follow-up on its success. He was in the army by the time the record was released, stationed in Japan while the remaining Satins and replacement lead Bill Baker toured America without a mention of Parris in their live shows or publicity packets. The group returned to the charts with "To the Aisle" in 1957, while Parris watched from a distance, unable to convince even his army friends that he had written and sung their favorite ballad. (When he tried to prove it, they even told him he was singing the wrong words!) He eventually regained his proper recognition, though none of the royalty money, for "In the Still of the Night" and built a marginal performing career around nightly renditions of his classic oldie, enduring a love-hate relationship—familiar to all "one-shots"—with the hit that kept him both in demand and chained to the past: "It never ceases to amaze me how popular the song has remained. Sometimes I get sick of it, but it beats digging a ditch."[i]

“Silhouettes”

The Rays' "Silhouettes," from 1957, was one of the first doo-wop songs to feature a relatively sophisticated production and song structure, hinting at the Uptown R&B to come. The song was recorded in high-tech style with a band arrangement that is an integral part of the song, not merely a backing for the voices. The voices abandon the doo-wop nonsense syllables in favor of more elaborate vocal trade-offs, while the backing band weaves among the voices and takes off on its own for a New Orleans-style interlude. The lyrics are rather "sophisticated" as well: the detailed and humorous plot follows a man who goes to visit his girlfriend but finds an embracing couple silhouetted against her window shade. The heartbroken hero pounds on the door, only to discover a pair of strangers—he's on the wrong block! As the band makes a dramatic modulation to a new key, he rushes to the right house and embraces his girl, leaving their own "silhouettes on the shade."

“For Your Precious Love”

"For Your Precious Love," from 1958, was the only hit for the original incarnation of the Chicago-based **Impressions**, which featured the talents of Curtis Mayfield and lead singer **Jerry Butler**. "For Your Precious Love" is a beautifully haunting, dirge-like pledge of love, highlighted by the eyes-lifted gospel feel of Butler's emotional baritone and an ethereal wordless falsetto that seems suspended above the song's hushed accompaniment and the snail's paced arpeggiated guitar chords. Butler left the group and began a long and successful solo career in 1960 with "He Will Break Your Heart," while the Impressions veered toward a gospel-based sound with Mayfield in the lead on a string of great sixties soul classics, including "Gypsy Woman," "It's All Right" and "People Get Ready."

“Ten Commandments of Love”

Arpeggiated triplets (played one note at a time rather than as full chords) became the ballad backing of choice toward the end of the fifties, lending a more dignified and soulful feel to the proceedings. The guitar pattern of "For Your Precious Love" was echoed later in 1958 in "Try Me," a gospel-edged ballad from newcomer James Brown, and in the arpeggiated piano of "Ten Commandments of Love," which brought the Moonglows back to the charts three years after their crossover success with "Sincerely." The group was now called **Harvey & the Moonglows** and included a young Marvin Gaye, who would follow leader Harvey Fuqua to Motown a few years later. With a spoken Preacher Voice reciting love's Ten Commandments ("Thou Shalt Never Love Another," "Stand By Me All the While"...) in a solemn call-and-response with Fuqua's lead vocal, "Ten Commandments of Love" sounds like a Bible School lesson in teenage love—the final chapter of the book of "Earth Angel."

“Come Softly to Me”

The Fleetwoods created some of the most memorable slow-dance records of the fifties—records that seem forever suspended in the high school gym on Prom night. The

white trio from Olympia, Washington, hit the charts in 1959 with "Come Softly to Me" and "Mr. Blue," featuring lead singer Gary Troxel backed by two angelic female voices. The self-penned "Come Softly to Me" begins with Troxel's clear-voiced tenor singing an impossibly polite set of doo-wop nonsense syllables, quickly joined by the sweetly chanted angelic refrain. The close-miked intimacy and tame but catchy rhythmic backing create an unpretentious charm that eluded the more contrived efforts of the "teen idol" era. "Mr. Blue" and other Fleetwoods efforts, such as "Graduation's Here" and "He's the Great Imposter," have a similar innocent sincerity that tempers the sickly-sweet wholesomeness of the voices and lyrics.

"16 Candles"

More and more white groups embraced the doo-wop sound and turned the music in a more pop direction at the end of the fifties. Most came from Philadelphia or the New York area and most were of Italian-American descent: Danny & the Juniors, Dion & the Belmonts, the Four Seasons and other "Italo-American" rockers kept the streetcorner alive in the early sixties in both their ballad and uptempo styles. **The Crests'** "16 Candles," a hit in 1958, speaks directly to the era's longing innocence and has been one of the more durable and oft-revived ballads of the doo-wop era. The Crests' were an integrated group of New Yorkers— blacks and Puerto Ricans—fronted by lead singer Johnny Maestro (Mastrangelo). Maestro led the Crests through another hit, "Step By Step," in 1960, and later fronted the Brooklyn Bridge on their 1969 hit, "The Worst That Could Happen."

"Where or When"

While "16 Candles" retained the freshness and immediacy of doo-wop, other recordings by both white and black artists were leaving the streetcorner behind and moving in a more mainstream direction. After a string of great uptempo hits, **Dion & the Belmonts** had the biggest hit of their career in 1960 with an earnest reading of Rodgers & Hart's "Where or When," one of many pop ballads of the late fifties that didn't seem far removed from the type of music rock & roll had originally rebelled against. Others included the Platters' "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" and "Twilight Time," and Tommy Edwards' "It's All in the Game," which was originally recorded in 1951. That a pop song from 1951 could become a "rock & roll" hit seven years later says much about the direction rock was heading as the 1960's approached. As the "threat" of rock & roll receded, old songs were revived and most new ones were cleansed of the sensuality that had been the undercurrent of doo-wop's romantic yearning. Songs like the Tempos' "See You in September" wouldn't raise your parents' eyebrows, much less ire, though they surely made old Little Richard fans reel in horror.

"Since I Don't Have You"

While some pop ballads looked backward for inspiration, others reacted to the changing times and tastes with a forward-looking sophistication that moved away from the amateurism of early doo-wop without sacrificing its heart and vitality. Little Anthony & the Imperials' 1958 hit, "Tears on My Pillow," was a signpost of the new direction, but it was **The Skyliners**, a group of white teenagers from Pittsburgh, who officially ushered

in a new era in 1959 with "Since I Don't Have You," which featured the first orchestral arrangement on a "doo-wop" record (if that term could still apply to a record this lush). "Since I Don't Have You" also featured one of the blackest sounding records to come from a white group: lead singer Jimmy Beaumont turned in a nicely polished version of a streetcorner lead that soars into falsetto for the final verse and avoids the vibratoed crooning style one might have expected over such a glossy arrangement. Written by the group, the song is drenched in echo and embellished with soaring string and woodwind lines that play against the piano triplets and walrus bass and manage, somehow, to sound entirely appropriate.

"I Only Have Eyes for You"

The Flamingos' version of "I Only Have Eyes for You," a timelessly romantic pop standard, was an even more advanced production. A lush, heavily-echoed vocal arrangement and a smoky nightclub accompaniment heightens the sensual urgency of the song's lyrics and achingly slow tempo. Even the piano triplets and the rapid-fire "doowopshabop"'s from the background singers sound classy in this context. The familiar tune and Nate Nelson's silky-smooth lead singing helped to make the unmistakably "black" recording accessible to pop ears in a manner reminiscent of the Orioles' "Crying in the Chapel." "I Only Have Eyes for You" was a hauntingly romantic masterpiece for the car radio that, in 1959, seemed both rooted in a pop's past and stunningly modern. (The Flamingos actually had a history of eerie productions dating back to their first R&B hit, "I'll Be Home," which was a strange mix of pop, R&B and country blended with a dramatically reverberated lead vocal. The record was covered by Pat Boone, who didn't sound strange at all.)

"I Only Have Eyes for You" was produced by Richard Barrett for George Goldner's End label. The Goldner/Barrett team was directly responsible for many of the seminal doo-wop hits of the fifties, including hits by the Crows, Harptones, Cleftones, Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers, the Dubs, Little Anthony & the Imperials, the Flamingos, and the Chantels—records that helped usher in, define and finally expand doo-wop's boundaries. With the Chantels' "Maybe," they helped lay the foundations for "girl group" pop, while "Tears on My Pillow" and "I Only Have Eyes for You" looked ahead to "Uptown R&B"—the sophisticated doo-wop offshoot, perfected in Leiber & Stoller's Drifters productions, that reshaped rhythm & blues and formed a bridge between fifties R&B and sixties soul.

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[i] Shannon and Javna, "Behind the Hits," (New York: Warner, 1986), p. 168.