

THE “ONE-SHOTS”

The Platters' claim to the Ink Spots' legacy of pop success set them apart from most groups of the era, as did even the brief run of hits for Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers. Few doo-wop groups managed to make it onto the charts and airwaves at all; fewer still were able to sustain careers beyond a single hit, and only the Platters, Drifters and Coasters achieved the recognition and longevity of the established solo stars. Hundreds gave it their best shot, though, creating doo-wop's vast catalog of "one-shots," or "one hit wonders," who scored big and then sank without a trace.

Success was fleeting, to say the least, for the groups lucky enough to have a hit in the first place. Most, like the Penguins, spent a few frustrating years trying in vain to recapture the magic of their first hit, supporting themselves with live appearances that gradually dwindled as their hit receded further into their audience's memory. The groups quickly learned that, in the eyes of the music business, they were expendable: new groups were always in the wings and around the corner, just waiting for *their* chance.

The pop market is, by its very nature, always eager for new sounds and performers and just as eager to discard the old ones. The doo-wop groups' grip on fame was particularly tenuous. Solo stars—especially *white* solo stars—could develop an image and audience identification that guaranteed publicity and follow-up hits, but listeners rarely even knew the name of a group's *lead* singer, much less those in the background, and tended to remember doo-wop songs without giving much thought to who sang them. The very qualities that made doo-wop so successful as a "school" also made it difficult for the individual groups to distinguish themselves from all the rest, and made it difficult for them to reclaim the unspoiled innocence of their first hit even if they were lucky enough to have one.

Above all, the groups were victims of their own youth and inexperience. Nearly all were signed to small record labels that had no interest in or resources for cultivating careers. After a group "failed" a couple of times, or started questioning their royalty payments, it was simply cheaper to find a new group of kids who would gladly sign their lives away for their shot at the spotlight. The label owners knew that the naive young singers would sign contracts offering abysmally low royalties and would sign away the rights to their own songs without thinking twice if it meant that they would actually be on a record. Too often, and too late, the groups would discover that they weren't getting any money from their million-selling record or from any cover versions of their song—that they didn't even *own* the song they wrote and that it was all, technically, legal.

The songs outlived the singer in most cases, ingrained in the hearts of a generation and passed along to posterity. A complete list of great "one-shots" would be nearly endless, but several stand out as particularly good representatives of the spirit and styles that made doo-wop the soundtrack of an era (though it's still painful to neglect great songs like the Dells' "Oh What a Night," the Dubs' "Could This Be Magic," the Heartbeats' "A Thousand Miles Away," the El Dorados' "At My Front Door," the Mystics' "Hushabye" and so many others).