VOCAL GROUPS AND DOO-WOP

For many fans, vocal group "doo-wop" *was* rock & roll: the soundtrack of the fifties and the purest of musical forms, shaped entirely by the human voice. Unlike other styles of rock & roll, doo-wop emphasized melody above rhythm and glorified the Song above the singer—a beautiful blending of voices above a sharply defined individual personality or style. And in contrast to the southern roots of other rock styles, doo-wop was predominantly northern and urban: the sound of the city streetcorner. The classic doo-wop tableau of a group of city kids singing sweet, a cappella harmonies on a hot summer night remains one of rock's great heart-tugging images.

Doo-wop reflected the increasing, though still limited, commercial possibilities for black music in the pop market. At a time when black solo artists still had to struggle for acceptance, the relatively anonymous and interchangeable doo-wop groups seemed less threatening and were better able to sidestep the racial issue. The lack of specific stars, the focus on the melody and the idyllic innocence of the lyrics helped to stave off criticism: white teens could sing along without any uncomfortable hint of worshipping the "wrong" heroes, and their parents could assure themselves that doo-wop was just harmless, idiotic fun.

The "doo-wop" label did not comer into use until the early 1970's—in its day, the music was simply called rock & roll or R&B. The term is now loosely applied to all of the vocal group styles of the rock & roll era, even though the "star" groups of the time—the Platters, Coasters and Drifters—had very little in common with the endearingly amateurish streetcorner groups. At the height of the music's popularity in the mid-to-late fifties, an untold number of doo-wop groups dotted the musical landscape of the East Coast and other urban centers, all hoping for their big break and a way out of the poverty of the inner city. Since no instruments or amplifiers were needed, doo-wop was accessible to anyone: all you needed was a voice, and even that was negotiable (if you couldn't carry a tune, you could at least groan out a bass line or sing the background "ooh-wah's," "shoo-be-doo's" and "doo-wops" that gave the music its name). Only a handful of the groups made it from the streetcorner to stardom, but a surprisingly large number managed to make a record and score at least one minor hit. While Elvis, Chuck Berry, Little Richard and the other major solo artists managed to sustain careers and create a self-defining body of work, doo-wop was largely the domain of the "one hit wonders"—a collectively created style with few giants but many enthusiastic contributors.

Background and Style Traits

Doo-wop grew out of the popular R&B vocal group styles of the early fifties, with the added emotive influence of gospel group singing. The success of the Mills Brothers and the Ink Spots in the 1930's and 1940's popularized the vocal group sound for the pre-rock era. The smooth sound of the Ink Spots, fronted by Bill Kenny's silky lead tenor, was particularly influential in establishing soft, romantic ballads as best avenue for appealing to a wide audience that was beyond the reach of more blues-based styles. The Ink Spots were the most successful black act of the 1940's (only Nat "King" Cole and Louis Jordan had a similarly wide-raging appeal), and their success inspired a flood of

younger groups who took the polished pop sound of the Ink Spots in a more R&B-oriented R&B direction.

The Orioles and the Ravens were two important transitional groups: the Orioles' 1948 ballad "It's Too Soon to Know" was the first vocal group recording to clearly cross the line from Ink Spots-style pop to rhythm & blues, while the Ravens' "Count Every Star" anticipated, in 1950, the sound and style of doo-wop, with a full-ranged vocal backing highlighted by the wordless vocal bass-lines and high "soaring falsetto" that constitute a virtual definition of "doo-wop." The Orioles were also the first to break through to a pop audience in a big way, when their smooth rendition of "Crying in the Chapel," hit #11 on the pop charts in 1953. A reverent ballad, "Crying in the Chapel" was, nonetheless, unmistakably black sounding: lead singer Sonny Til's emotional singing and the wordless falsetto and other backing vocals reflected the trend towards gospel vocal styles that several groups, most notably the Dominoes, were employing to give their music a greater passion and urgency. "Crying in the Chapel" opened the door for a flood of crossover hits promoted to a young white audience as "rock & roll" by Alan Freed and other pioneering disk jockeys.

The crossover success of more dance-oriented R&B vocal groups like the Dominoes, Drifters, Clovers, Five Royales and Midnighters marked the true dawn of the rock & roll era. The raucous sound and beat of vocal group R&B contained all the excitement and sensuality that was missing in the sanitized pop music of the early fifties and was the era's most popular and accessible form of rhythm & blues. As the teen market opened up, however, the music began to change and grow younger as well. The beat stayed strong and exciting on uptempo songs, but the general trend was toward more melodic ballads with idyllic love lyrics and instrumental backings that grew ever more modest as the traditional roles of the instruments were assumed by the singers.

1954 was a pivotal year in the transition from R&B to the rock & roll version of vocal group music that was later dubbed "doo-wop" to distinguish it from the music of the earlier era and to acknowledge the riffing nonsense syllables, "blow harmonies," sung bass lines, wordless falsetto countermelodies, crooning "ooh-wee-ooh"'s and other vocal devices that gave the music its distinctive flavor and charm. Records by the Crows ("Gee"), the Chords ("Sh-Boom"), the Moonglows ("Sincerely"), the Spaniels ("Goodnight, Sweetheart, Goodnight"), the Charms ("Hearts of Stone") and other teen-oriented groups made the pop charts and presented the younger worldview of doo-wop and the lively vocal interplay between the singers that became the focus and great pleasure of the music (enhanced, in the live shows, by equally elaborate choreography and outfits). While the lead singers sang the praises of love or mourned its loss, the ever-resourceful supporting voices found new ways to make it through an entire song without ever singing a comprehensible word.

The intricacy of the vocal arrangements varied with the style and tempo of the song and the talents of the singers, but enthusiasm ultimately counted as much as talent. The singalong melodies rarely strayed beyond four or five notes, but they were clear and catchy and instantly memorable *because* of their simplicity. The melodies were usually supported by a simple, melodic chord progression (I-vi-IV(ii)-V) that became known as the "doo-wop progression" (though it was often used in popular songs of earlier eras, such as Hoagy Carmichael's "Heart and Soul"). Compared to the 12-bar blues progression favored by band-oriented R&B and most rock & roll, the doo-wop

progression moves more rapidly—with chord changes every two or four beats—and allows for a more melodic style of singing while retaining a similar feeling of inevitability that keeps its constant repetition from seeming tedious.

The structure of most doo-wop songs followed the melody-derived pop model (*aaba*) shaped by recurring verses and contrasting "bridge" sections. The candid innocence of doo-wop lyrics also reflected a shift toward pop sensibilities. The records spoke to and for teenagers in teenage terms, like a love poem written on the back of a homework assignment. The joys and heartaches of love formed doo-wop's emotional landscape, though not the earthy, sensual love of "Sixty Minute Man," "Work With Me Annie" or other scandalous R&B crossovers. Doo-wop was the domain of innocent teenage love: the Dream—longed for and usually unfulfilled—of idyllic love unfettered by adult concerns and realities (or actual experience). In other words, the dream of finding a little bit of Heaven right here on Earth.

"Earth Angel"

That vision of perfect love fueled **The Penguins**' "Earth Angel," the first "pure" doo-wop record and Our Song for countless couples. "Earth Angel" blended pop's melodicism and lyrical innocence with the emotional directness of gospel and R&B. A classic "ballad with a beat," the song is sung over swaying piano triplets and a gentle I-vi-IV-V-I chord progression fleshed out by a sparse instrumental backing ("Earth Angel" popularized both the triplets rhythm and the chord progression). The yearning lead vocals and the ragged but ever-so-earnest group of background voices create a glorious mess: lead singer Cleve Duncan seems more sure about his love than the melody he's singing, and the rest of the Penguins continually bump into him and each other with a clattering mix of vocalisms. The overall sound of the record is "amateurish" in the best sense, delightfully devoid of any pretension or self-conscious artiness. Sincere emotion triumphs, happily, over vocal technique and accuracy. (A comparison of the Penguin's original with the lifeless cover by the Crew Cuts serves as a painful illustration of what can happen when those priorities are reversed.)

Free of the complexities and adult sensibilities of rhythm & blues and sophisticated pop, "Earth Angel" seems more at home in Sunday School than in the nightclubs. The simple lyrics ("earth angel, will you be mine...") have an innocence that the untrained voices and "garage" sound only serve to heighten. ("Earth Angel" was, literally, recorded in a garage—that of Dootone Records owner Dootsie Williams!) The Penguins sound like what they, in fact, were: a group of high school students singing a song written for one of their girlfriends. The great message of "Earth Angel" was "That could be *ME*," a message taken to heart by other aspiring young singers who couldn't imagine crooning like Bill Kenny or fronting a hot jump blues band, but *could* imagine writing and singing a song just like "Earth Angel."

The Penguins' manager, **Buck Ram**, took the group from tiny Dootone to Mercury Records as part of a package deal that also included another of the groups Ram managed. The Penguins weren't able to recreate their "Earth Angel" success on the new label and faded quickly from the scene. The second group, on the other hand, became one of the most successful crossover acts of the 1950's, rivaled only by Fats Domino in terms of record sales and chart appearances: the Platters.