

FRANKIE LYMON & THE TEENAGERS

Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers were the vocal group flipside of the Platters: pure streetcorner doo-wop with all eyes on the teenagers and no reverent looks backward to anything that the adults might call "music." They were the doo-wop sensation of 1956, running up a quick succession of hits powered by child star Frankie's amazing voice. Their first hit, "**Why Do Fools Fall in Love**," is the quintessential uptempo doo-wop song: the first to fully incorporate the vocal devices, the doo-wop chord progression, and the direct, unadorned sentiment of the doo-wop ballads (such as "Earth Angel"). The Teenagers' self-penned "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" opens with a famous wordless vocal-bass intro, followed by a group chant ("ooh-wah, ooh-wah") and the title refrain. From there on it's the Frankie Lymon show: the 13-year-old sings the simple melody with an exuberant grace that seems far beyond his years, climaxing in the "tell me why"s that float out of the bridge section and glide above the background singers in one of early rock's most majestic moments.

"Why Do Fools Fall in Love" also benefits from a good and unusually prominent band arrangement, featuring a saxophone solo that suddenly veers into jump band R&B until the voices return to reclaim the song. The lyrics express the childlike wonderment of first discovering the mysteries and heartaches of love. Coming from the mouth of an authentic "child," they sound wholly convincing.

Young Frankie was a perfect "hook" for the Teenagers, who wore high school letter-sweaters to further sanitize their image. They followed "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" with "I Want You to Be My Girl," "I Promise to Remember," "The ABC's of Love" and other teen love songs that followed a similar, melodically-focused design highlighted by Frankie's boy soprano. (At the other end of the vocal range, bass singer Sherman Garnes also deserves special mention for kicking songs off with immortal beat setters like "ooly poppa cow, poppa cow, poppa cow-cow," "comb-a laddie-sadie boom" and "doo-bopsie doo, bumba bum-bum-bum.")

None of the follow-ups matched the inspired musical heights or sales figures of "Why Do Fools Fall in Love," but all sold well enough in both the pop and R&B markets to keep Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers entrenched as the country's hottest vocal group. Their wholesome image helped them land spots on the big package tours and appearances on television and in early "rocksploitation" movies like *Rock, Rock Rock*, which featured the group singing "I'm Not a Juvenile Delinquent." Angelic Frankie was perfectly convincing with the sentiment on film, but the reality was somewhat different, as he was already involved with drugs and prostitutes and succumbing to bad career advice that fed his ballooning ego and led him to leave the group in 1957 to pursue a solo career in the pop mainstream.

Lymon's first solo recording, "Goody Goody," sold well but the stifling big band arrangement and glossy pop production of the record lacked any trace of the streetcorner charm of his Teenagers recordings. After "Goody Goody," Lymon's career went into a steep, rapid decline—his voice changed, and much of his remaining appeal disappeared along with his bell-like voice. His repeated comeback attempts proved as futile as efforts to hit the high notes of his old songs. To make matters worse, the huge "trust fund" that was supposedly waiting for him on his 21st birthday turned up empty.ⁱ Lymon resurfaced in the press in 1967 after a well-publicized arrest on drug charges, and became a symbol of the vagaries of the music business and the pitfalls of fleeting fame.

In 1969, a young singing sensation hit the charts fronting an updated version of Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers. But the original "boy wonder" didn't live to see Michael Jackson and the Jackson Five. 25-year-old Frankie Lymon died a junkie in Harlem in 1968.

ⁱLymon's shoddy treatment continued long after his death as well. It took a quarter century for the surviving group members to receive any songwriting royalties for "Why Do Fools Fall in Love."