VOCAL GROUPS

Vocal group singing was the most popular style of rhythm & blues in the early 1950's and was the first music to be called "rock & roll." Always a feature of popular styles—white and black, sacred and secular—vocal groups achieved their greatest popularity when they helped usher in the rock & roll era and then, as doo-wop, supplied it with some of its most memorable moments.

The Ink Spots

The broad pop appeal of Nat "King" Cole was pre-dated by and indebted to the success of the Ink Spots, who sang similarly soothing versions of familiar pop standards and tasteful new material with no discernible blues inflections. The broad popularity of an earlier black group, the Mills Brothers, in the 1930's inspired the Ink Spots and they, in turn, inspired countless other groups and established pop and ballad-oriented group singing as the best avenue for reaching white listeners.

The Ink Spots came together in 1934 in New York City and first recorded for Victor Records in 1935. They switched to another major label, Decca, the following year and had their first hit in 1939 with "If I Didn't Care," a romantic ballad that introduced the high, silky-smooth tenor of lead singer **Bill Kenny** and the group's beautifully blended overall sound. The record also introduced a favorite Ink Spots device—a "talking bass" soliloquy in the middle of the song by bass singer Orville "Hoppy" Jones that elaborated on the mood and feeling of intimacy. (Talking bass interludes became something of a cliché; Elvis Presley's "Are You Lonesome Tonight" is one of the more famous examples.) "If I Didn't Care" formed the blueprint for the Ink Spots ballads to come—"My Prayer," "Maybe," "We Three," "When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano"—and established the basic vocal group style for the secular groups that followed.

The Ink Spots proved that with a smooth, non-threatening sound and some well-chosen songs, success in the white world was *possible*. Their sentimental lyrics and pop and light-jazz sound owed much more to Tin Pan Alley than to dancehall R&B, and it was certainly *far* removed from the harsh realism of the blues. Although the timbre and emotion of Bill Kenny's voice pointed gently to the group's true color, the Ink Spots' appeal was largely based on their ability to sound "white." Nonetheless, their success in the popular mainstream was a source of great pride in an age when black artists too often seemed simply invisible to white America, and was an inspiration for countless young singers who began forming their own groups and emulating their heroes. Soul singer Jerry Butler: "The Ink Spots were the ultimate. They were the first of our race to achieve that kind of fame. To someone singing doo-wop on the corners or any place, the dream was to be and sound like the Ink Spots. Because of the name—the imagery of the black spots on white paper—the tonality of the tenor voice, the spoken words of the bass and the beauty of the harmony and guitar on their records, the Ink Spots were cherished by the black community with the same sort of pride that we had in Joe Louis being the heavyweight champion of the world. The Ink Spots were the heavyweight champions of quartet singing."[i]

The Ravens and The Orioles

The Ravens and the Orioles were important transitional groups of the late forties and early fifties—and the inspiration for a flood of other "bird groups": the Larks, Penguins, Pelicans, Sparrows, Crows, Wrens, Cardinals, Swallows, Robins, Falcons, Blue Jays, Meadowlarks, Flamingos...

In contrast to the crooning tenor of the Ink Spots' Bill Kenny, the Ravens featured the lead vocals of **Jimmy Ricks**, a deep-voiced singer who defined the booming "Mr. Bassman" style. Most of their recordings, like their 1947 hit version of "Old Man River," fell into the "café au lait" style of popular songs with just the faintest hint of color. More influential was the bluesier, dance-oriented material like 1950's "**Gotta Find My Baby**," which features Rick's basso profundo over a 12-bar blues, a strong dancebeat and propelled by a jazzy club blues accompaniment and wordless background vocals that mimic a riffing sax section. The Ravens' success was largely confined to the R&B market, but their uptempo R&B styles had a big influence on younger groups who wanted more excitement than the Ink Spots seemed to offer.

The Orioles focued mainly on ballads and took the smooth sound of the Ink Spots as their reference point, then peeled away some of the pop finesse for a more emotionally-direct feeling. Originally from Baltimore, the Orioles moved to New York and established themselves as show-stopping regulars at Harlem's Apollo Theater with lead singer lead singer **Sonny Til** up front. The group's first hit came in 1948 with "**It's Too Soon to Know**," an unadorned ballad with a plaintive lead and simple accompaniment that moved from the colorless pop croon of the Ink Spots to a more "untutored" and emotional R&B sound.

In contrast to the Ink Spots, the Orioles sounded unmistakably black, a fact that kept them from reaching a white audience—until, that is, the surprise success of their version of "**Crying in the Chapel**" in 1953. The stately and pious ballad song was actually a re-recording of a religious white *country* song—a typically confused history—and was a highly unlikely candidate for being a landmark in rock history. Had it confined itself to the R&B charts, where it was a #1 hit, it would merely have been another in a long line of great Orioles ballads. But "Crying in the Chapel" also hit #11 on the *pop* charts, the highest chart showing of any black act up to that point, confirming the trend toward an increased acceptance of black styles.

"Crying in the Chapel" was the first **crossover** song of real magnitude: the first R&B record to "cross over" to and climb that far up the pop charts. In other words, the first record by a black act, aimed at a black audience, to sell to white record buyers in sufficient numbers to place it a notch away from the Top Ten on the national charts. *Young* white record buyers, to be more exact: Sonny Til's emotional singing was an exciting revelation to young white listeners in 1953 (which was, once again, the year of "Doggie in the Window"). In fact, a large underground of hip white teenagers had already noticed that there was life beyond the Hit Parade. They had been listening to rhythm & blues for a long time before "Crying in the Chapel" broke, searching it out on jukeboxes and in record stores, and even finding it on the radio sometimes—beamed in from some distant station when the atmosphere was just right and then shared with a select group of like-minded friends in secret societies of white kids who had discovered the exciting, forbidden, sexy music called rhythm & blues.

Alan Freed and the Birth of "Rock & Roll"

Some white teens were luckier than others: some lived in cities with large enough black populations to justify rhythm & blues programming. The luckiest of all lived in Cleveland, where they didn't even have to eavesdrop on someone else's party to hear it, because disc jockey Alan Feed played rhythm & blues especially for *them* every night on his "Moondog Rock & Roll Party." Freed didn't call it "rhythm & blues," however: he called it "rock & roll." With the sensibilities of his young white audience (and their parents) in mind, Freed coined the "new" term in order to avoid the racial overtones attached to "rhythm & blues." Although Freed is rightly credited with giving "rock & roll" its specific musical association, the expression itself had been around for many years in the black community as a slang for sex in particular and for "partying" in general, and "rockin'" and "rollin'" had become commonly used phrases in R&B songs. With considerable irony, then, Freed lifted the risqué term from the music, then applied it *to* the music in order to avoid controversy(!) In any case, the most important point remains clear: "rock & roll" was, at first, just another name for rhythm & blues, plain and simple.

Freed was certainly not the first disc jockey to play R&B, but he was the most important and the most active and vocal in his support of the music and musicians. Freed was playing classical music(!) on Cleveland's WJW, a 50,000 watt clear-channel powerhouse, when he was first alerted to the existence of a network of white teen R&B fans by Leo Mintz, a record store owner who witnessed the phenomenon every day. Freed convinced the station to let him try an R&B show for his white audience, and officially launched his "Moondog Rock & Roll Party" in June of 1951.

Alan Freed was the original Wildman DJ, playing "drums" on his microphone and singing and shouting along with the records he played and launching into a high-energy jive-talking spiel between songs to keep the energy from slipping. Freed loved rhythm & blues, especially the vocal groups, and he hosted the first of his landmark live shows in 1952 in the Cleveland Arena with a bill that included the Orioles, Moonglows, Dominoes and other popular groups. The "Moondog Coronation Ball" attracted over 20,000 fans and a good deal of national attention, as did similar shows the following year which attracted equally large numbers and elicited gasps from newspaper readers around the country with pictures of Freed's racially mixed audiences dancing and cheeering their black heroes together.

Freed moved on to a bigger audience and bigger fame in 1954 when he signed on at WINS in New York City and began building a huge radio following and promoting his famous rock & roll package shows at Brooklyn's Paramount Theater. Freed quickly became the biggest star-maker of the music industry and would remain in power until the payola" scandal brought him down at the end of the decade for participating in (and refusing to lie about) the standard practice of accepting money for playing certain records. Freed was a flawed hero, to be sure, but he was a hero nonetheless. He truly loved rock & roll: no amount of money could make him play a record he didn't like, and nothing could keep him from crusading for the ones he loved. Most of all, he never forgot where the music came from and always championed the black originators over any white imposters. Alan Freed was the leading advocate for black music at a crucial time, and he probably opened more doors for black artists than any other single figure in rock's history. He waged many battles for the music he loved—and he won. As he was fond of

saying, "Anyone who says rock & roll is a passing fad or a flash in the pan has rocks in his head, dad!"

1951: The Clovers and Five Keys

Freed's rock & roll debut pointed to—was made possible by—the growing number of white teenagers who were bored with the popular music of the time and eager for more exciting sounds and styles. Vocal groups remained the most accessible of R&B forms, due to the immediacy of the voices and sentiment, and were the music of choice for the teens and disc jockeys. 1951 saw a wave of new groups following the lead of the Ravens and Orioles, including the Larks ("My Reverie"), the Cardinals ("Shouldn't I Know") and the Swallows ("Will You Be Mine"). More significant was the arrival of **The Clovers**, who launched their career with a pair of hits written by Ahmet Ertegun, "Don't You Know I Love You So" and "Fool, Fool, Fool," that presented a new, rhythmically-oriented style of vocal backing woven into the jazz-based Atlantic production sound. **The Five Keys**' recording of "The Glory of Love" was similarly progressive on the ballad side, taking the Orioles model in a still-more plaintive and emotional direction. The record's close-miked intimacy and even vocal blend—with the background singers more evenly matched with the lead—influenced the sound of the vocal group ballads that followed (such as the Harp-Tones' 1953 hit "A Sunday Kind of Love"). The most striking new sound of the new decade, however, came from Billy Ward & The Dominoes, who shocked the music world and then, with everyone's attention diverted, reinvented the sound of vocal group R&B.

Billy Ward & His Dominoes

The Orioles' breakthrough into the pop charts was surprising and threatening only because the group was black and recorded for a small indie label, thereby collecting profits that "rightfully" belonged to the major labels. Another record, released two years earlier on the King/Federal label out of Cincinnati, caused more consternation: Billy Ward & The Dominoes' "**Sixty Minute Man**" was downright *shocking*, all the more so because it made it up to #23 on the pop charts—the first significant showing of the new era and clearly all due to sales to teenagers. "Sixty Minute Man" was a textbook example of all the reasons parents did *not* want their children listening to rhythm & blues, or "that music." The sheer sound of Bill Brown's deep "Mr. Bassman" vocal (an echo of the Raven's Jimmy Ricks) seemed brash and vulgar, and was balanced at the top end by a leering guitar obbligato and a moaning high voice that both seemed altogether too suggestive. But the lyrics and intentions of the song went well beyond being merely "suggestive":

> Look-ee hear girls I'm telling you now
> They call me Lovin' Dan
> I rock 'em, roll 'em all night long
> I'm a sixty minute man!
>
> If you don't believe I'm all I say
> Come up and take my hand
> When I let you go you'll cry,

"Oh yes, he's a sixty minute man!"

Clearly the references to "rock" and "roll" in "Sixty Minute Man" hearkened back to the earlier meaning of the term... (Alan Freed began using the term a month later, and was probably inspired most directly by this song.) Civic groups and PTA's around the country had a field day with "Sixty Minute Man," holding it up as an example of the type of "smut" that would surely lead to a nation of juvenile delinquents. The Dominoes were the 2 Live Crew of 1951, caught in a swirl of controversy and free publicity that only drew more attention to their song, while "respectable" citizens expressed moral outrage that only thinly disguised the scarier *racial* fear that lay just beneath it. The Dominoes' producer, Ralph Bass, recalls the furor: "I was being lambasted for dirty lyrics on 'Sixty Minute Man'... The problem was that white kids were listening to those things for the first time. It was all right so long as blacks were listening, but as soon as the whites started listening, it was no good. Then it became a big political thing."[ii]

"Sixty Minute Man" had an open and unapologetic sexuality presented by "uncultured" voices over a "dangerously strong" beat that would inevitably drive impressionable young people to move parts of their bodies that they shouldn't even be aware of... In short, "Sixty Minute Man" was a threat to everything America held dear, or seemed that way for a few weeks, anyway. Ultimately it was viewed as a fluke and a novelty and the real threat of the crossovers was delayed for a few more years. But the seeds and fears were sown, and the reaction took shape in expressions like these, published in various papers throughout the Land of the Free:

STOP!
Help Save the Youth of America
DON'T BUY NEGRO RECORDS!

If you don't want to serve Negroes in *your* place of business,
then do not have negro records on your juke box
or listen to negro records on the radio.

The screaming idiotic words, and savage music of these records
are undermining the morals of our white youth in America.

Call the advertisers of radio stations
that play this type of music and complain to them!
Don't Let Your Children Buy Or Listen To These Negro Records!

America in 1951 was a deeply divided country, on the verge of hysteria about "communists" and digging more deeply into the national wellspring of racial mistrust and hatred. Rosa Parks wouldn't demand her seat on the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, for four more years, and it would be three more before the Supreme Court even went on record against segregated schools, and three more after that before the National Guard was required to simply put that decision into effect in Little Rock, Arkansas. Against this backdrop, it is easy to see how threatening the image of nice white children listening to "that negro music" could be to adults, and how exciting listening to "that negro music" could be to the adventurous kids looking for something beyond the stifling conformity their parents seemed to offer. Rock & roll did not free its followers from prejudice: the rock community has always been full of fans who are devoted to black music yet still

unable to see a connection between the music they love and the people they hate. Still, rock & roll *did* bring the races together on the dancefloor and in a shared passion that went a long way toward easing the fear and mistrust on both sides. The Supreme Court itself could not have mandated such a sweeping change, but crusaders like Alan Freed made it happen.

---

[i] *Rolling Stone* magazine, February 1989, #545
[ii] Shaw, p. 243.