

frankie lymon and the teenagers

Ronnie Spector, in her autobiography, *Be My Baby*, wrote, "A lot of entertainers can't or won't tell you where they got their style from. But I know exactly where I got my voice. Frankie Lymon . . . I was twelve when I first heard Frankie and the Teenagers sing 'Why Do Fools Fall in Love?'. Frankie had the greatest voice I'd ever heard."

Diana Ross has said that she started out trying to emulate Lymon's high-pitched, crystalline voice, his enunciation and whip-crack timing. Marvin Gaye, upon first witnessing his Motown labelmate Michael Jackson in action, commented, "It was Frankie Lymon all over again."

The object of this admiration, it should be noted, was all of 13 years old when he recorded his first and most beloved hit. For the next 18 months, he and his group had it all. And then it was over as quickly as it had begun, except for the legacy.

Frankie Lymon was the first black teenage pop star, setting the stage for the likes of Stevie Wonder and Michael Jackson. Born September 30, 1942, in New York, Lymon was working in a grocery store in 1954 when he met the Premiers, the group that would become the Teenagers. By the end of the year he'd joined them.

A scene out of doo-wop heaven: In an echoey stairwell during the spring of 1955 five kids huddle and harmonize. Tenor Jimmy Merchant, baritone Joe Negroni, bass Sherman Garnes, soprano Lymon and lead Herman Santiago sing the melody to "Why Do Birds Sing So Gay?". Soon after an audition is arranged.

With Lymon taking over the lead and the song transformed into "Why Do Fools Fall in Love?" they record their song for Gee Records in November. By February 1956, it's Number One on the R&B charts, Number Six pop. By the summer, it's Number One in England.

Vocal harmony groups were as common as street corners in mid-Fifties New York City, but the Teenagers were something special. Lymon captivated the nascent

rock & roll audience with talent and charisma that belied his years. With his cool, assured trill he performed vocal acrobatics an untrained 13-year-old should not have been able to execute. Barely settled into junior high, Frankie Lymon was a star and an idol.

Fame found Frankie and the Teenagers living life in a way they could only have imagined months ago. They starred in Alan Freed's package shows and movies, did Sullivan and *Bandstand*, traveled America and flew to London, where they performed at the Palladium. By the end of 1956, one of the most popular groups in the world consisted of five black teenage R&B singers from New York City.

In retrospect, what happened was perhaps inevitable. Maybe it had all come way too fast. While the group was on its second tour of England, Lymon, his career in the hands of his elders, was recorded solo, with orchestra. "Goody Goody," one of those tracks, was released (on Roulette Records) and made the Top 20. All concerned must have felt that Frankie Lymon was headed for superstardom on his own, but it was not to be.

Lymon, his voice having changed, continued to make records, as did the group, but neither Lymon's nor the Teenagers' career ever regained consciousness after the split. On February 28, 1968, having just re-signed with Roulette, 25-year-old Frankie Lymon was found dead of a heroin overdose. Negroni and Garnes passed away in the Seventies, while Santiago and Merchant carried on the Teenagers' name with new members.

Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers didn't leave behind an enormous body of music, but that handful of hits still represents the best of the golden era of rock & roll. "Why Do Fools Fall in Love?", in particular, has attained classic status. Frankie Lymon enjoyed his celebrity for only a fleeting instant, but in his absence he continues to serve as an inspiration for many. - JEFF TAMARKIN

THE TEENAGERS

