



Little Anthony & the Imperials

BY JERRY BLAVAT



The story of Little Anthony & the Imperials is a story of the early days of rock & roll, when our music was new and breathtaking. It not only reached our ears but our hearts. It's also a story of chemistry – that special coming together of talent that makes magic happen in show business.

Let's begin in 1957, when Jerome Anthony Gourdine was singing with a group called the Duponts, and Clarence Collins, Ernest Wright, Tracy Lord, and Gloucester Nathaniel "Nate" Rogers formed a group called the Chesters. Anthony and Clarence had known each other as toddlers when their dads worked together at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. After the Duponts broke up, Anthony joined the Chesters. And I'll bet you didn't know that when the guys would be harmonizing in Brooklyn, a young girl by the name of Altovese Gore, a neighbor, would listen. Altovese would later become Mrs. Sammy Davis Jr.

While rehearsing one day, the Chesters were heard by Richard Barrett, formerly of the Valentines and then A&R director for George Goldner, one of the great champions of doo-wop and owner of the labels Gone, End, Gee, and Rama. Goldner had some of the most influential groups of the time – the Cleftones, the Crows, the Chantels, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers. Barrett auditioned the Chesters, loved what he heard, and immediately brought them to the attention of Goldner, who agreed they had a sound he liked. But he didn't like the name the Chesters. As the story goes, after seeing an ad on TV for Imperial margarine, Richard Barrett renamed the group the Imperials.

Into the studio Goldner took them, to record a song he liked called "Tears on My Pillow." As Anthony told

me, after the second take of "Tears," Goldner stopped the session, took Anthony aside, and said to him, "Don't sing the lyric; talk the lyric." The result was the unforgettable opening of the song: "You don't remember me – but I remember you." For the B side, Goldner selected a piece of material that was the Imperials' audition song and took them back to their roots, street-corner harmony: "Two People in the World," with Anthony's amazing falsetto leading the group. Released in 1958, the label said THE IMPERIALS and the recording was rushed immediately to Alan Freed.

When Freed got the disc, in his excitement over presenting it on the air, and remembering Anthony from an appearance with the Chesters, he announced, "Here's a record that's making a lot of noise . . . Little Anthony & the Imperials singing 'Tears on My Pillow.'" And the name stuck. Goldner had to re-press the record on the End label to read LITTLE ANTHONY & THE IMPERIALS. And both sides became smashes. Now they were playing every major rock & roll show in the country and touring. During the Goldner years, they put out numerous records on End, including another hit, "Shimmy, Shimmy, Ko-Ko-Bop."

When Goldner sold his labels, in the early sixties, it brought a lull to their career, as well as some personnel changes, with Anthony becoming a solo artist and the Imperials recording and touring on their own under the direction of Clarence. The year 1964 found the group together again, with Anthony, Clarence, Ernie, plus Sammy Strain, who joined after the departure of Tracy Lord and Nate Rogers.

A successful new era would begin for Little Anthony & the Imperials when Ernie met Teddy Randazzo. Teddy, who had recorded for the great arranger-conductor Don

The pride of Fort Greene, Brooklyn: Ernest Wright, Clarence Collins, "Little Anthony" Gourdine, Tracy Lord, and Nate Rogers (from left)



The original lineup: Little Anthony, Nate Rogers, Tracy Lord, Clarence Collins, and Ernest Wright (clockwise from top)

Costa at ABC Paramount, now was Don's partner in DCP Records. Both loved the Imperials' sound, and Costa decided to take them in a new direction.

Back into the studio they went. Teddy's compositions "I'm on the Outside (Looking In)" – one of the only U.S. records to chart during a time dominated by the British Invasion – plus "Goin' Out of My Head," "Hurt So Bad," "Take Me Back," "I Miss You So," "Get Out of My Life," and the lesser-known but equally potent "If I Remember to Forget" combined many powerful elements: the group's harmonies, Anthony's delivery, Teddy's music and lyrics (written at a time of personal torment in his life), and Costa's masterful arrangements. They were also sporting a new look: appearing onstage in tuxedos. Eventually, they would move on to other labels.

In the seventies, when musical tastes were in transition, the guys went in different directions. But they reunited in 1992 at Madison Square Garden, and the magic happened all over again. They have been together since then, with Harold Jenkins, a member from the seventies and also the group's choreographer, replacing Sammy Strain, who we honored in 2005 when he was inducted with the O'Jays.

We all must agree that Little Anthony & the Imperials have come a long way since their early days singing on street corners in their Brooklyn neighborhood. But their passion, showmanship, and extraordinary talent and chemistry take us all back to a time when our music was young and first began to captivate us. Every time I feature them, whether on TV or concerts we produce at the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia, they are as sensational and dynamic as when they first began.



Shimmy, shimmy, ko-ko-bop: Wowing the crowd in 1965



Making purple look good: Collins, Sammy Strain, Wright, and Gourdine (clockwise from left), circa 1964



Making tracks: Clarence Collins (left) and Little Anthony (seated, right) in the control room, mid-sixties



Meet and greet: Little Anthony with a fan, late 1965

The Imperials are also one of the few groups that has had the good fortune to work with three of the most creative talents in our industry—George Goldner, who early on helped them to perfect their street-corner harmony and make it utterly unique, and then Teddy Randazzo and Don Costa, who during the Imperials' amazing turnaround in the sixties, helped them to produce some of the most powerful and passionate love songs ever recorded.

So as the boys celebrate their fiftieth anniversary together, we also honor the visionaries and unsung heroes who helped take Little Anthony & the Imperials—Anthony Gourdine, Clarence Collins, Ernest Wright, Sammy Strain, Tracy Lord, and Nate Rogers—into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. ♪



Struttin' into the seventies: Clarence Collins, Kenny Seymour, Sammy Strain, and Anthony Gourdine (clockwise from left)