

PERFORMERS
THE LEGENDARY GROUPS




THE BLUE CAPS • THE COMETS
THE CRICKETS • THE FAMOUS FLAMES
THE MIDNIGHTERS • THE MIRACLES



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FROM POWERFUL HARMONIZERS
TO TREND-SETTING INSTRUMENTALISTS,
THESE **INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS** BLAZED
THE ROCK & ROLL TRAIL



Fran Beecher first came to the Comets in 1954, after the untimely death of Danny Cedrone. It did not take long for Beecher to pare down his fluid jazz style into the country and rhythm & blues hybrid then called rockabilly. He remained onboard as a Comet throughout the glory years, performing, writing songs for Haley, and recording with the group into the sixties.

R. B. W.

THE CRICKETS

There are few bands whose moniker is surrounded by more apocrypha than the Crickets. Contrary to the hit 1978 movie *The Buddy Holly Story*, they were not christened by a crazed DJ. Nor did they take the name from an uninvited cricket chirping in the studio as the tape rolled. The truth, for once, is actually an interesting story.

Producer and manager Norman Petty knew he had a smash with "That'll Be the Day," a tune by singer-guitarist Buddy Holly and drummer Jerry "J.I." Allison, but Holly was under contract to Decca. The label had lost interest in Holly yet prevented him from recording his songs elsewhere for five years. It was Petty's idea to market Holly's material as a group effort, thereby circumnavigating this limitation. Holly was a fan of R&B group the Spiders, so he and Allison, along with fellow Lubbock youngsters Joe B. Mauldin (on bass) and Niki Sullivan (on guitar) went through a list of bugs, settling on the Crickets. (They almost called themselves the Beetles.) This allowed Petty to shop their material without Holly's name on it. Independent label Brunswick bit, and the Crickets' "That'll Be the Day" hit big in 1957.

The Crickets burst onto a plate-shifting terrain that was thick with solo artists—Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, Chuck Berry—but short on bands composed of young white kids who wrote their own songs. Although it began as a ruse to distract the suits (eventually Decca caught on, and everyone made nice), the presentation of the Crickets as a gang of barnstorming pals soon became a source of fascination for teens everywhere, from America to the U.K. In Liverpool, Paul McCartney and John Lennon, then in the

Quarrymen, caught the Crickets on the TV show *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* in 1958, and took inspiration from the "specky git" and his friends.

Allison's drumming—not to mention songwriting input—stands out as a major asset to the Crickets' unique sound. The most notable track is "Peggy Sue," which—like many Crickets singles recorded in the eighteen months prior to Holly's death—sounds like nothing else. Rather than hew to the traditional kick-and-snare template, Allison played paradiddles—drum rolls—throughout the track. And on "Not

Fade Away" (later covered by the Rolling Stones and the Grateful Dead), Allison eschewed his kit for a cardboard box, delivering a famously funky take on the "Bo Diddley" beat.

Mauldin's solid stand-up bass often took a percussive role in the Crickets, as Allison's more



FROM TOP Buddy Holly (left) and Sonny Curtis, live in Lubbock, Texas, 1956; Joe B. Mauldin, Holly, Jerry Allison (holding Holly's guitar), and Niki Sullivan (from left), 1957.

experimental touches, encouraged and sometimes initiated by Norman Petty, carried the drums away from traditional time-keeping. As for live performances, Mauldin was a rock & roll showman. Guitarist Niki Sullivan's presence in the Crickets was short-lived but important, as it gave Holly room to develop his distinctive lead-guitar work and occasional "lead rhythm" approach. Sullivan's bespectacled face and loose-limbed moves, documented on the group's first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, helped ingrain the image of rock &

roll abandon in the minds of awkward teens everywhere.

Guitarist Sonny Curtis had recorded with Holly and Allison on the unsuccessful Decca sessions, and after Holly's death in 1959, Curtis returned to the group as lead singer-guitarist for a time. The ensuing decades would see him become a hugely successful songwriter, penning greats from "I Fought the Law" (covered by the Bobby Fuller Four and the Clash, among others) to Keith Whitley's smash "I'm No Stranger to the Rain" (1987's CMA Single of the Year) to the theme from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. He still gigs on occasion with Mauldin and Allison, as a Cricket.

R . B . W .

THE FAMOUS FLAMES

James Brown is forever linked with the sound and image of the Famous Flames vocal/dancing group. They backed him on record from 1956 through 1964, and supported him onstage and on the King Records label credits (whether they sang on the recording or not) through 1968. He worked with a rotating cast of Flames in the 1950s until settling on the most famous trio in 1959, as the group became his security blanket, sounding board, and launching pad.

Brown met group founder Bobby Byrd in 1952, when the upstanding Byrd family helped secure Brown's parole from reform school in Toccoa, Georgia. After his release, Brown sang in church with Sarah Byrd and joined her brother Bobby's group the Gospel Starlighters, who were not quite



FROM TOP Bobby Bennett, "Baby" Lloyd Stallworth, Bobby Byrd, and James Brown (from left), on *The T.A.M.I. Show*, 1964; Johnny Terry, Bennett, Byrd, and Brown (from left), the Apollo Theatre, 1963.

as sanctified during the week as they were on Sundays. Apart from a sideline venture running bootleg liquor from the Carolinas into Georgia, they began playing secular gigs under various aliases.

By 1955, the group was calling itself the Flames and consisted of Brown, Byrd, and Sylvester Keels taking turns singing lead and playing piano and drums. Johnny Terry (whom Brown had met in juvenile detention), Nashpendle Knox, and Nafloyd Scott sang and danced, with Scott also playing guitar. With Brown emerging as the frontman, the Flames stirred up a flurry on the circuit with a repertoire of reinterpreted R&B hits: Their show-stopper was a fervent, gospelized gutting of the Orioles' 1952 hit "Baby, Please Don't Go"—in turn an adaptation of an earlier country blues song generally ascribed to Big Joe Williams—that the group called "Please, Please, Please." With Little Richard's manager, Clint Brantley, in their corner, the Flames cut a demo of the song in late 1955, sending it out to several independent labels.

First on the scene was producer and talent scout Ralph Bass, then in charge of his own imprint, Federal, for King Records. Signing the group, he summoned them to Cincinnati for their first King recording session in February 1956, cutting four songs. But Bass, impressed with the audacious lead singer, renamed the group on the label of its debut single, "Please, Please, Please"—"JAMES BROWN With the Famous Flames"—surprising the rest of the members and imprinting the name for the ages.

"Please" slowly became a nationwide R&B hit. But nine followup singles on Federal were flops, and the original Flames became disillusioned and resigned in March 1957. Though Brown subsequently recruited

