



The Dells

By Harry Weinger

THE GREATEST HARMONY GROUP OF all time, the Dells thrilled audiences with their amazing vocal interplay, between the gruff, explosive voice of Marvin Junior and the keening high tenor of Johnny Carter, that sweet-home-Chicago blend mediated by Mickey McGill and Verne Allison, and the talking bass voice from Chuck Barksdale. Their style formed the template for every singing group that came after them. They've been recording and touring together for more than fifty years, with merely one lineup change: Carter, formerly of the Flamingos (2001 Hall of Fame inductees), replaced Johnny Funches in 1960.

Patience and camaraderie helped the Dells stay the course. Starting out in the Chicago suburb of Harvey, Illinois, in 1953, recording for Chess subsidiaries Checker and Cadet and then Vee-Jay, the Dells had attained Hall of Fame merit by the mid-sixties as a doo-wop group, with jewels like "Dreams of Content-

ment," "Pain in My Heart" and original versions of "Oh What a Nite" and "Stay in My Corner." After the Dells survived a nasty car accident in 1958, their perseverance became a trademark. During their early down periods, they carried on with innumerable gigs that connected the dots of postwar black American-music history: schooling from Harvey Fuqua, studio direction from Willie Dixon and Quincy Jones, singing backgrounds for Dinah Washington and Barbara Lewis ("Hello Stranger") and tours with Ray Charles.

A faithful Phil Chess helped the Dells reinvigorate their career in 1967. By the end of the sixties, they had enough classics on Cadet/Chess – including "There Is," "Always Together," "I Can Sing a Rainbow/Love Is Blue" and brilliant remakes of "Stay in My Corner" and "Oh, What a Night" (with a slight variation in its title) – to make them R&B chart legends. Their hits of the era, most produced by Bobby Miller, are tender and terrifying, the pinnacle of Chicago soul.

The Dells remained vital for decades more. Still on Chess in the early seventies, the group delivered "The Love We Had (Stays on My Mind)," a stunning ballad coproduced by Barksdale with Charles Stepney, the renowned Chess staffer who had been arranging the group's hits and would soon help transform Earth, Wind & Fire into a pop powerhouse. Following a couple of ambitious concept albums, the single "Give Your Baby a Standing Ovation," released



Left: Mickey McGill, Marvin Junior, Chuck Barksdale, Johnny Carter and Verne Allison (clockwise from top left)





Doo-wop legends and masters of the slow jam

in 1973, was their first certified million-seller. That same year, Harold Melvin and the BlueNotes, who had been together as long as the Dells, finally broke through with lead singer Teddy Pendergrass, a Philly soul version of Marvin Junior.

In the mid-seventies, the Dells dove into several genres. They moved to Mercury Records, another great Chicago label, where they hit with "We Got to Get Our Thing Together" and the disco-flavored "Our Love." On the ABC label, "Super Woman" was a minor hit; they also cut tracks with George



Rock and Roll Hall of Famer Dinah Washington with the Dells

Clinton and P-Funk. When ABC folded, the group slipped back into a Chicago comfort zone, working with Carl Davis and the Chi-Lites' Eugene Record, producing the modern classics "I Touched a Dream" and "Passionate Breezes," as well as a spectacular third version of "Stay in My Corner" for Chi-Sound/20th Century Records in the early 1980s. While not huge hits, they deserved to be: The singing is supple, the grooves mesmerizing, the sound sublime.

Yet after a few singles for Private I, the group was without a label in the mid- to late eighties. They'd survived longer than most of their contemporaries, but the silence stung. Then actor-director Robert Townsend came into their lives. In 1991, Townsend, hot with the satirical film *Hollywood Shuffle* and concert documentary *Eddie Murphy Raw*, was developing *The Five Heartbeats*, a fictional film about a classic soul-singing group. The Dells became Townsend's consultants and confidants and, ultimately, singers of the movie's theme song, "A Heart Is a House for Love." When the song stormed the charts—where it then sat next to Boyz II Men, heirs to their vocal throne—the Dells became the sole artists after James Brown to have hits in the fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties.

In the new millennium, the group embraced the Internet age, creating their own Web site, developing associations with cyber-businesses and starting their own label, Dells Way. They recorded a new album for the reactivated Volt in 2000. In 2001, the Dells established the Open Up Your Heart Foundation—its moniker inspired by the name of one of their cherished Chess hits—to assist families of the blue-collar workers killed in the terrorist attacks on 9/11.

Touring in good and bad times is the Dells' bread and butter. The second edition of "Stay in My Corner," their biggest hit, is based on the stage-show rendition of the original. Oddly, the guys have never recorded a live album. They're still on the road; maybe that, too, will come.

Doo-wop legends and masters of the slow jam, the Dells are survivors, with dignity and class. They are five bad brothers, now part of a select few who have long admired their gifts and followed their lead. Welcome to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

The Dells, live in Chicago, circa 1960

"A prime example of lasting power"

Jerry "the Geator" Blavat on the Dells' dedication, passion and unity

My introduction to the Dells was in 1958 when I was on tour with Irving Feld's Cavalcade of Stars, featuring R&B and rock & roll artists, going from city to city. And there I was in Chicago, where we had a layover. As it was in those days, if other artists were appearing in town, we jumped to catch them.

On the bill at the Windy City's Regal Theatre were the Moonglows, Dee Clark and the Cool Gents, the Dells and the Impressions. Jerry Butler at that time had just recorded "For Your Precious Love." The host for the evening was the Magnificent Montague, and I was backstage with some of the legends of the recording industry: Vivian Carter (who with her husband, James Bracken, owned Vee-Jay Records), along with her brother, Calvin Carter, and my dear friend Ewart Abner. Also stopping by was Leonard Chess, who knew Chicago backward, forward and upside down. In the early days, every one of the groups on the bill at one time or another recorded for either Vee-Jay or Chess.

What I observed backstage that night was a sense of family. Show business. Everyone knew everybody. Even though each group was vying to outdo the others, they were all part of that special show-business magic and camaraderie. When one group was onstage performing, harmonizing and steppin', the other groups were in the audience, watching and learning. As a matter of fact, many members of the groups who were there that night had at some point performed with other

groups. For a brief period in the fifties, Chuck Barksdale sang with the Moonglows and also with Otis Williams and the Charms. On the 1956 version of "Oh What a Nite," Chuck was not part of the Dells, with Calvin Carter singing on that classic recording. Johnny Carter, who up until 1960 was singing with the Flamingos, would later replace Johnny Funches in the Dells. But on the show that evening, the original guys – with their combination of gospel, soul and passionate harmony – tore the house down. Their harmony was as tight as five fingers belonging to one fist. Even though they had no real hits at that time, they were looked upon by other artists as the group to emulate. And whenever I was working a show at the Apollo or the Paramount theaters, other groups would always talk about the Dells and that unique harmony. I, too, was hooked on it.

In 1960, when I began in radio, disc jockeys had the

The original lineup, with Johnny Funches (far right)

freedom to play music from the heart, not from a research chart. And I made sure that everything the Dells were recording, along with songs from the early years, such as "Dry Your Eyes" and "Dreams of Contentment," were part of my show. My audience flipped.

In 1965, just as I was about to begin my TV show, *The Discophonic Scene*, Leonard sent me a dub on Chess of "Ooh I Love You," backed with "There Is." Leonard told me that the action in Chicago was on "Ooh I Love You." But because of my TV show's dancers, I went with "There Is." It busted wide open, with the Geator Gold Dancers creating a line dance to it. On my radio show, I played "Ooh I Love You." In Philly, the record became a two-sided hit – and it was the Dells' turning point in the sixties. The dynamic interplay of Marvin's lead baritone and Johnny's lead tenor, combined with the group's flawless harmonies, was like nothing anyone had ever heard. No matter what the

material, whether it be upbeat or a slow jam, they had the ability to capture any musical mood.

Throughout the years, what has impressed me most about these guys is that as musical trends and tastes come and go, the Dells have been able to change their harmonies to suit the times without sacrificing their power, their sound, their originality or that incredible presence.

Of all the legendary groups that came from the Windy City, the Dells are a prime example of lasting power. Through dedication, passion, unity, love and sacrifice, they exemplify what is so special about our industry. They have remained true to their craft and to each other. They never sold out. If you've ever caught them live and seen the audience's reaction, you know why they're an inspiration to every young performer who chooses to enter show business, and to every one of us who considers rock & roll and R&B our career and our home. □





Chicago's Rock

By Robert Pruter

In the 1950s, the labels Chess and Vee-Jay recorded blues and R&B artists whose music influenced the rock revolution of the 1960s

ROCK & ROLL AROSE IN THE MID-1950S OUT OF THE vernacular musical world of country & western, R&B, blues and gospel. In the South, such roots music came out of the cotton fields, honky-tonks and churches, and up North it was the music of big cities, much of it coming from the mean streets and rowdy taverns of the black neighborhoods. That takes us to Chicago, which – like two other significant postwar recording centers, New York and Los Angeles – became a major fount of early rock & roll, primarily because it had a population of some eight hundred thousand African-American residents, who over decades had built a rich musical tradi-



& Roll Roots

Above left: Chess artist Chuck Berry. Above right: The Flamingos, who found national stardom on Chess.

tion in the clubs and taverns and on the street corners of their neighborhoods.

But the geography of black Chicago was more than the traditional black settlement areas on the city's south and west sides. The city was the center of a vast metropolitan area that extended into African-American communities in the suburbs to the south (Harvey and Chicago Heights), the west (Maywood and LaGrange) and the north (Evanston and Waukegan), and across the state line into Indiana (Gary and Hammond).

Thus, during the post-World War II era, Chicago became a key rhythm & blues recording center. Dozens of small labels arose at this time – United, Vee-Jay, Chess, Mercury,

Chance and Parrot, among others. Chance founder Art Sheridan led the way in recording doo-wop, cutting sides with the Flamingos and the Moonglows. Originally an indie, Mercury, run by the colorful Irving Green, signed influential doo-wop group the Platters, as well as such white vocal harmony outfits as the Diamonds (“Li'l Darlin'”) and the Crew Cuts (“Sh-Boom”).

The two leading labels, though, were Chess and Vee-Jay, which grabbed the bulk of the city's R&B market, recording two basic kinds of performers: the newly electrified and urbanized country-blues singers and the street-corner doo-wop groups.



Chicago was a key R&B and blues recording center

Chess Records

Chess Records was founded as Aristocrat in 1947, and in 1950, after Leonard and Phil Chess took it over, it became Chess. The label was built on recording the blues, notably Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, but in 1955 Chess introduced two of the decade's major rock & rollers: a former black hairdresser from St. Louis called Chuck Berry and a Chicago-bred street performer named Bo Diddley.

Berry's music, in particular, virtually defined rock & roll: It was uptempo rhythm & blues influenced by both country &

western and the blues. He developed his music in the clubs of St. Louis and across the Mississippi in East St. Louis and its environs. Berry knew he needed to travel to Chicago to find a label. He made contact with Muddy Waters, and the bluesman directed him to Chess, a million-dollar referral if there ever was one. With his unaccented, clear diction (read "white") and teen-oriented lyrics on such hits as "Maybellene," "School Day" and "Johnny B. Goode," Berry became one of the most popular rock & roll stars to come out of rhythm & blues. From 1955 to 1964, Berry was Chess Records' biggest hitmaker.

Bo Diddley started out as a street musician on Forty-seventh Street—the main commercial drag of the city's South Side—and didn't get into the clubs until he signed with Chess in 1955. Compared to Berry, Diddley brought a deeper blues sensibility to his form of rhythm & blues. He was best known as the disseminator of the ferocious beat featured on his signature tune, "Bo Diddley," and on "Who Do You Love?," "Mona" and a host of other classics. But from his street-musician days, Bo Diddley

Vee-Jay recording artists the Spaniels, who produced the label's first hit

developed a cornucopia of sounds, recording everything from downhome blues ("I'm a Man") to doo-wop ("I'm Sorry").

Vee-Jay artist
Jimmy Reed

The Flamingos were the last Chicago vocal group to emerge from the city's vibrant club scene. They weren't a street-corner group, and from their beginnings in 1951, they performed in the city's nightclubs. Except for lead singers Sollie McElroy and later Nate Nelson, the group – cousins Ezekial (Zeke) Carey and Jacob (Jake) Carey and cousins Johnny Carter and Paul Wilson – were all related and were all black Jews. With stays at Chance and then at Parrot, the Flamingos produced some of the best vocal harmony of the postwar rhythm & blues era. The Flamingos were itching to achieve prominence as national rock & roll stars, a status they felt they merited. It would happen at Chess, with "I'll Be Home," released on the company's Checker subsidiary in 1956. The record became the Flamingos' biggest hit up to that time, lifting them from just another bird-group R&B act to internationally famous entertainers. As pioneering rock & roll stars, they appeared in two of DJ Alan Freed's quickie movies, *Rock Rock Rock* (1956) and *Go Johnny Go* (1958). The Flamingos later recorded for End in New York with much greater success – who can forget "I Only Have Eyes for You"? – but it was in Chicago and at Chess that they became nationally known.

The Moonglows – Bobby Lester (lead and tenor), Harvey Fuqua (lead and baritone), Pete Graves (tenor) and Prentiss Barnes (bass) – were formed in Cleveland in 1950 and came under the aegis of Freed. If any vocal group signaled the birth of rock & roll – whereby rhythm & blues emerged from black subculture into mainstream teen culture – it was the Moonglows. The group appeared in the first rhythm & blues concerts sponsored by Freed in Cleveland and later performed in Freed's rock & roll movies during the height of the DJ's fame and impact. Freed took them to Chicago and Chance Records in late 1953. The first Chess disc for the Moonglows was their outstanding and best-known ballad, "Sincerely," released in December 1954. The record shot to the Number One position on *Billboard's* R&B chart and lasted an outstanding twenty weeks there. It was the Moonglows' first national hit. The Moonglows quickly became Chess' biggest doo-wop group, recording such hits as "Most of All" (1955), "We Go Together" (1956) and "Ten Commandments of Love" (1958).

Vee-Jay Records

Vee-Jay was founded by Jimmy Bracken and Vivian Carter in the spring of 1953. The couple, who later married, had been operating a record store in Gary, Indiana, for several years and



Reed was the biggest crossover act of the 1950s

decided to expand their operation into a label. Shortly afterward, two extraordinary acts, the Spaniels and Jimmy Reed, walked into the record shop inquiring about recording opportunities, and the label was launched. Within months, Vee-Jay moved to Chicago. Other principals of Vee-Jay were Vivian's brother, Calvin Carter, who served as the company's A&R director and producer, and Ewart Abner Jr., who joined the company as its chief administrator. Recording a variety of jazz, blues, doo-wop, soul, rock & roll and gospel, Vee-Jay eventually became the biggest black-owned company in the country (prior to Motown). Vee-Jay initially established itself as a recording-industry powerhouse with blues – primarily Jimmy Reed and John Lee Hooker – and doo-wop groups, notably the Spaniels, the El Dorados, the Magnificents, the Kool Gents and the Dells.

Jimmy Reed, with his famous laid-back drawling delivery accompanied by his harmonica blowing and rudimentary guitar strumming, was Vee-Jay's first signing. Reed soon emerged not only as one of the biggest blues acts in the country but also as the biggest crossover blues act of the 1950s, making him a bona fide rock & roll hitmaker, with such classic numbers as "You Don't Have to Go" (1955), "Ain't That Lovin' You Baby" (1956), "You've Got Me Dizzy" (1956), "Honest I Do" (1957), "Baby What You Want Me to Do" (1960) and "Bright Lights Big City" (1961). With the rock & roll teenyboppers, Reed was bigger than such titans as B.B. King, Muddy Waters and Joe Turner.

The Spaniels came out of the street-corner doo-wop tradition, and all hailed from Roosevelt High in Gary. The group produced Vee-Jay's first hit, "Baby, It's You," in September 1953. The following year, the Spaniels crossed over into the rock & roll market with their signature ballad, "Goodnite Sweetheart, Goodnite," and a steady succession of hits followed. The group has become universally recognized as one of the great doo-wop groups of the 1950s, harmonizing with superb tightness and expertise. Unlike many fifties groups, the Spaniels

received fine, crisp production from their record company. The group's lead vocalist, Bo Diddley James "Pookie" Hudson, with his smooth tenor



In 1952, doo-wop was becoming all the rage

and use of just a touch of vibrato, ranks as one of the outstanding voices of the 1950s, as does the Spaniels' terrific bass, Gerald Gregory, whose low-register vocalizing out front mimicked magnificently the sounds of the saxophone and provided a solid bottom to the vocal harmony.

Another of Vee-Jay's most significant groups was the El Dorados, who created a genuine folk art by blending their voices with a special understanding of the role of timbre in harmony and by composing songs that were in tune with the rock & roll revolution. As in any R&B form, the presumed audience was a black one, but in the early days of rock & roll, the music was of such popularity – including that of the El Dorados – that it transcended ethnic categories and touched base with all youth. The El Dorados began on the South Side, at Englewood High School, in late 1952. At that time, doo-wop was becoming all the rage, and the impact was felt in the black high schools of the city as kids began forming groups to practice in hallways, parks and street corners. By mid-1954, the El Dorados – at this point consisting of lead Pirkle Lee Moses, plus Jewel Jones, Richard Nickens, Arthur Basset and James Maddox – had developed a considerable reputation in the city. They had already won one talent contest, after being organized by Chicago's premier DJ, Al Benson, when they were invited to participate in a competition at the Park City Skating Rink, conducted by Vivian Carter.



The Moonglows were one of the first hot doo-wop groups, recording for Chance and Chess, signaling the birth of rock & roll

She had rented the rink and invited groups to challenge the Spaniels, her only doo-wop signing at the time. The El Dorados won, but their first releases for Vee-Jay failed to find an audience outside the city limits.

The El Dorados achieved a spectacular breakthrough in the fall of 1955, when "At My Front Door" became an explosive hit. The record's appeal was based on equal parts the El Dorados and the backing band. The El Dorados, with natural ease and swing, pushed their energetic vocals through the song with great rock & roll verve, especially in Moses' fine lead work and tenor squalling. The backing band led by Al Smith created one of the most memorable opening riffs in rock & roll, and without Vernel Fournier's propulsive drumming and the great sax



break by Red Holloway, the song would have been far less.

"At My Front Door," a Number One R&B hit, introduced

the El Dorados to the rock & roll revolution. The year 1955 was the heaviest year for pop covers of R&B hits, and Dot Records rushed out a version of the song with its preeminent cover singer, Pat Boone. His version reached Number Seven on the *Billboard* pop chart, while the El Dorados' original peaked at Number Seventeen, which was no small shakes. As a result, the El Dorados were invited to make a memorable appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

The El Dorados' next record, "I'll Be Forever Loving You," backed with one of their greatest ballads, "I Began to Realize," was released in December 1955 and proved to be the group's only other national chart record.

Vee-Jay's other significant group of the 1950s was the Dells, who at the time consisted of Johnny Funches (tenor lead), Marvin Junior (baritone lead), Verne Allison (tenor), Mickey McGill (baritone) and Chuck Barksdale (bass). The group was formed in 1953 in its hometown of Harvey, one of Chicago's south suburbs. After a brief stay at Chess, recording a mediocre record as the El Rays, the Dells signed with Vee-Jay in 1955. They established themselves locally in early 1956 with a beautiful ballad, "Dreams of Contentment," and then broke out as a national act with their signature ballad, "Oh What a Nite." The song went to Number Four on the *Billboard* R&B survey and appeared on so many regional pop charts that it emerged as a standard rock & roll ballad.

The Legacy of Chess and Vee-Jay

What Chess and Vee-Jay established in the 1950s laid the foundation for what the two labels accomplished during the 1960s soul era. In 1958, Vee-Jay recorded what is now recog-

The El Dorados scored a big hit for Vee-Jay in 1955 with "At My Front Door"

An early promo pic of 2004 Hall of Fame inductees the Dells, with their original lead tenor vocalist Johnny Funches (center)



After a brief stay at Chess, the Dells signed to Vee-Jay

nized as Chicago's first soul record, "For Your Precious Love," by Jerry Butler and the Impressions. This seminal group included not only supreme soul balladeer Jerry Butler but also the great talent Curtis Mayfield, whose songwriting and influential guitar style for the Impressions, as well as innumerable other Chicago acts, established the city as a center of soul music. After getting its first million-seller in 1962, with the last great song of the doo-wop era, Gene Chandler's "Duke of Earl," Vee-Jay built a new legacy in soul music with such acts as Jerry Butler, Betty Everett and Joe Simon, as well as Chandler.

The producer of "Duke of Earl," Carl Davis, went on to become the city's biggest producer of soul hits, first for Okeh (Major Lance, Walter Jackson, Artistics, Billy Butler) and then for Brunswick (Chi-Lites, Tyrone Davis, Barbara Acklin, Jackie Wilson).

Capitalizing on its success with Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley and doo-wop groups, Chess revitalized itself in the early 1960s with new R&B artists and back-room producing and writing talent and established itself as primarily a soul label. Its soul stable included such acts as a reorganized Dells, Etta James, Billy Stewart, the Radiants and Fontella Bass.

At the same time, the music that Chess and Vee-Jay had created in the 1950s – by such bluesmen as Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Jimmy Reed and John Lee Hooker, and by seminal rock & rollers Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley – became one of the crucial musical streams that fed into the rock revolution. The music of these artists influenced and inspired myriad bands practicing in the garages of the city's suburbs – such as Shadows of Knight, the Buckinghams and American Breed – and well beyond Chicago's environs: Its legacy could be seen in the work of the Beach Boys, the Allman Brothers Band, such British Invasion groups as the Animals, the Rolling Stones, the Beatles and the Yardbirds, and later Led Zeppelin. Little did the founders of Vee-Jay and Chess realize that when they started up their family-run enterprises, they would be creating a body of music that would spread worldwide and survive into the next millennium. □