

# the Flamingos

By Jerry  
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T

HE FIFTIES: a time of musical change. The place: Chicago, home of the blues, gospel, jazz. Pulsating with rhythm and nightlife. No other city except perhaps New Orleans has that rhythm. The sounds

## performers

The original  
Flamingos:  
Johnny Carter,  
Paul Wilson, Jake  
Carey, Sollie  
McElroy, Zeke  
Carey (L to R)

from the independent labels - Chess, Checker, Chance, Parrot, United, Vee-Jay - are setting the pace. The groups - the Dells, the Spaniels, the El Dorados, the Moonglows - are creating the Chicago sound.





ENTER INTO THIS MIX a group called the Swallows, who must change their name because of an existing group. They call themselves El Flamingos and then the Flamingos. That year: 1952. The group is the brainchild of Zeke and Jake Carey, two cousins related through marriage to another set of cousins, Paul Wilson and Johnny Carter. These four form the core of the lineup.



They are black Jews. And the harmony they are about to create is born of their background: Hebraic singing, along with gospel, becomes the foundation of their unique sound. Clubs on the South Side of Chicago are hot, affording the new group opportunities to be seen and heard. But first they need a lead singer, and that is Sollie McElroy. They don't rely on him to carry lead, however. Each member can sing and harmonize flawlessly. And Martin's Corner, on the South Side, gives the group their first shot.

They win a talent contest and continue to

appear at Martin's Corner, and also at Club DeLisa, where LaVern Baker and Dinah Washington made their marks. In the audience one night: Ralph Leon, head of Kings Booking. He likes what he hears and sees, takes them to United Records for their first record audition. Not interested. He then takes them to Chance Records, owned by distributor Art Sheridan. They record the legendary "Golden Teardrops," along with classics from the Thirties and Forties, such as "That's My Desire" and "September Song," which begins the group's long romance with

pop standards. These early recordings set the stage for the sound that is to become the Flamingos' signature.

Hearing that sound: Chicago's popular DJ Al Benson, who has his own label, Parrot. Al convinces the group to move from Chance to Parrot, where they record "Dream of a Lifetime." Unfortunately, Benson, though a great producer, does not have the coverage needed to deliver a major hit, and the record is only moderately successful in Chicago. Realizing this, the group begins to negotiate with the Chess brothers, who have a net-

work of distributors throughout the country. Benson, aware of his limitations, releases the Flamingos with no hard feelings. Sollie, meanwhile, leaves the group to form one of his own, the Morocos, who record for United.

The Chess sessions begin with a new lead, Nate Nelson, who once appeared with the group at Martin's Corner. At Chess, they record "I'll Be Home," which has the memorable combination of Nelson's lead vocals ("I'll be home, my darling . . .") and Paul Wilson's heartfelt and dramatic spoken delivery ("Yes, my darling, I'll be home, please wait for me . . ."). The record, introduced by none other than Al Benson, is an instant Chicago hit.

Within three weeks of its release, the Flamingos are booked on Alan Freed's rock & roll show in New York, on a bill with Pat Boone. Lo and behold, two weeks later Boone covers "I'll Be Home," which climbs to Number Four on the pop chart. Meanwhile, the Flamingos' version hits Number Ten on the R&B chart, becoming the group's first national hit.

After the untimely death of Ralph Leon, and with a hit on their hands, the Flamingos sign with legendary Chicago manager and agent Joe Glaser. With Associated Booking, Glaser also manages Louis Armstrong. Because of his association with Satchmo, Glaser books the Flamingos to tour with Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton and Woody Herman, with whom they play the top nightclubs in the country: the Black Orchid in Chicago, the Moulin Rouge and the Flamingo in Las Vegas, the Flame in Minneapolis and the Riviera Club in St. Louis. By now, the Flamingos not only sing but also play their own instruments: Zeke on bass, Nate on drums, Paul Wilson on percussion.

Suddenly, while touring in the summer of 1956, Zeke Carey and Johnny Carter are drafted. Eventually returning from service, Carter joins the Dells (where he remains an integral part of their sound), while Zeke returns to the Flamingos and brings in Tommy Hunt, a former member of the Five Echoes who plays piano. Also joining is guitarist Terry Johnson, another black Jew who'd worked with the Flamingos in Baltimore. Now self-contained, the Flamingos are on their way, scoring successes at clubs up and down the East Coast and in Canada.

Deciding the group needs a stronger label, Zeke looks for one with national pop recognition. The group signs with Decca, though Zeke quickly becomes disenchanted when they are lost in the shuffle. During the summer of 1958, while performing in New York, Zeke meets George Goldner, who, remembering the group's early pop classics at



Chance, signs the Flamingos to his hot label, End. Goldner's brilliant plan begins with the group's recording "Lovers Never Say Goodbye," featuring Paul and Terry on lead. Then, instead of recording more 45s to establish a hit pattern, as most labels would do, Goldner takes the Flamingos into the studio and records an album of twelve standards - material by Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers. The songs: "But Not for Me," "Yours," "Where or When," "As Time Goes By" and, of course, the legendary "I Only Have Eyes for You," written by Harry Warren and Al Dubin and originally recorded by Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler for the 1934 Busby Berkley movie *Dames*.

The album, *Flamingos Serenade*, is a masterpiece, and Goldner releases 45 after 45. "I Only Have Eyes for You" becomes the Flamingos' signature, creating the immortal *doo-bop-she-bop* that today is considered doo-wop's trademark sound. Keep in mind, this is the first complete album during the rock & roll era by a black group featuring only standards. It leads the way for Bobby Darin, a year later, to record his legendary standards album, *That's All* (including "Mack the Knife"), and opens doors for other artists in the Sixties - the Tempta-

Opposite: The Flamingos take the stage in the 1959 Alan Freed vehicle, 'Go, Johnny, Go!'; Above: The Flamingos, ca. 1960

tions, the Four Tops and the Supremes, among others - to do the same.

After Goldner sold his labels to Roulette in 1962, Tommy Hunt left the Flamingos to record as a solo artist with Wand, Terry Johnson also departed, recording for Harold Logan and Lloyd Price, and Nate joined the Platters. Carrying on as the Flamingos were founders Zeke and Jake Carey, whose family members continue to perform today in the Flamingos tradition.

That tradition still holds up. The Flamingos' magic began with their ability to experiment with and perfect the extraordinary harmonies and rhythms of their religious influences. Their sound was gospel - Jewish gospel - and that innovative sound, combined with their love for the classics and their dynamic stage presence (including the choreographed moves and splits pioneered by the Treniers), made them exceptional and unforgettable. Tonight we honor them for paving the way for so many of the groups whom they now join as inductees in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. ●