

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



a new set of Famous Flames—J.W. Archer, Louis Madison, and Bill Hollings—it appeared his career had stalled, until “Try Me” became a Number One R&B hit in 1958. Reinvigorated, Brown got his first-ever booking at the Apollo Theatre in New York, where he knew he needed the tight vocal and visual support only a permanent set of Flames could deliver. Right under his nose were “Baby” Lloyd Stallworth, a young valet who could sing a bit, and Bobby Bennett, a roadie who showed promise as a dancer and could handle a cape routine during the finale. Johnny Terry, a cowriter with Brown on “Please, Please, Please,” was still around, too. What they needed was a coach. Brown told Brantley that only one man could handle the job: the originator, Bobby Byrd.

Byrd became more than the coach; he re-emerged as Brown’s musical collaborator, foil, and the most-recognizable co-lead singer for the next several years. Debuting on record with the October 1959 release “Good Good Lovin,’” the new unit—Bennett, Byrd, and Stallworth, with Terry acting as a stage sub and studio vocalist as needed—became the best-known incarnation of the Famous Flames, shimmying into Star Time right alongside Soul Brother Number One. You hear them providing the crucial backdrop to Brown’s incendiary performances on *Live at the Apollo* (Vols. 1 and 2); you see them on *The T.A.M.I Show*, *Ski Party*, and *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Their final appearance on record was “Maybe the Last Time,” the throwback flip side to “Out of Sight,” a 1964 single, although the Famous Flames remained onstage and their artist credit remained on record releases through the summer of 1968.

Byrd, who also issued several solo singles, stayed with the Brown entourage for years after. As cowriter and co-vocalist of Brown hits “Licking Stick-Licking Stick,” “Get Up (I Feel Like Being a) Sex Machine,” and “Get Up, Get Into It, Get Involved” and as the leader of his own 1970s releases, “I Know You Got Soul” and “I Need Help (I Can’t Do It Alone),” he is likely the second-most sampled voice in pop music history behind Brown. Byrd, who married Brown vocalist Vicki Anderson, died of cancer in 2007, at age 73. Baby Lloyd Stallworth had a couple of minor solo appearances; he died in 2001. Bobby Bennett also issued a solo single. Johnny Terry, seen with James on the cover of the live LP *Pure Dynamite*, remained with the show on and off in various capacities through the years.

H.W. WITH CLIFF WHITE



FROM TOP Sonny Woods, Henry Booth, Hank Ballard, guitarist Cal Green, and Lawson Smith (clockwise from top left), 1955; Ballard, Norman Thrasher, Booth, and Smith (dressed in white, from left), 1957.

THE MIDNIGHTERS

To see how vocal groups helped form the music that would come to be known as rock & roll, one need only look to Detroit’s the Midnighters. As the Four Falcons in late 1950/early 1951, the vocal group initially consisted of lead singers Henry Booth and Charles Sutton, harmony vocalists Lawson Smith and Sonny Woods, and guitarist Alonzo Tucker. A solid live act very similar to the silky-smooth Orioles, the group changed its name to the Royals and was signed to Federal Records in 1952 by Johnny Otis. It did not distinguish itself, however, until Hank Ballard replaced Smith in 1953.

Ballard, a 16-year-old assembly-line worker from Alabama, had the gumption to fuse raunchy lyrics with gospel harmonies and rhythms, bringing grit and edginess to the Royals’ slick presentation. His first composition for the group—the suggestive “Get It”—was banned by several stations, yet still went to Number Six on the *Billboard* R&B chart. To avoid confusion with another rising vocal group from North Carolina called the Royals, they renamed themselves the Midnighters. (And Carolina’s Royals became the “5” Royales.)

The peak year for the Midnighters was 1954. Ballard’s “Work With Me Annie” and sequels, “Annie Had a Baby”



Charles Sutton, Woods, Smith, Ballard, and Arthur Porter
(clockwise from top left), 1954

and "Annie's Aunt Fannie," charted high, despite all three being banned by the FCC. That same year, the hit "Sexy Ways" helped solidify their reputation as risk-takers, and they continued to tackle subject matter most of their contemporaries would not touch (at least not directly).

With increased demands came personnel shifts: Lawson Smith returned, replacing the departing Sutton; Norman Thrasher took over for Woods; and guitarist Cal Green replaced Arthur Porter, who'd earlier replaced Alonzo Tucker.

The late fifties saw a lull in chart action for the Midnighters, but they never stopped honing their intense, lusty live show, which incorporated tight, gospel-influenced harmony with synchronized moves, call-and-response, and audience participation. Fellow Federal Records act James Brown was watching closely: The Hardest Working Man in Show Business would later acknowledge a deep debt to the Midnighters.

The band hit again in 1959 with "Teardrops on Your Letter," backed with "The Twist." The B side, of course, would go on to be covered by Chubby Checker, inspiring a dance craze and a reprieve from obscurity for the Midnighters, who would release several more hits, including the 1960 classic "Finger Poppin' Time" and its followup, "The Hoochi Coochi Coo."

Until their breakup in 1965, as members came and went, the Midnighters consistently brought to their fans great tunes, soulful playing, and a fearlessness that has since become a hallmark of rock & roll.

R . B . W .

THE MIRACLES

In the beginning, there were the Miracles. They were Berry Gordy's first group, before he started Motown Records. They were his anchor and his talent scouts, the softly urgent choir behind his—and their—ambitions. William "Smokey" Robinson was the Miracles' lead singer, their chief songwriter, and eventually their producer. With him, behind him—his "partners," Smokey called them—were Warren "Pete" Moore, a bass singer whom Smokey had known around their Detroit neighborhood since they were 13; Ronald "Ronnie" White, a baritone, a harmony whiz, and intellectual nicknamed "Mr. Exact," who introduced the group to modern jazz; Robert "Bobby" Rogers, the suave second tenor, lover of life, and their choreographer; and Claudette Rogers, Bobby's younger cousin, a soprano/first tenor/alto, smart, cute, their den mother and secretary—and future Mrs. Robinson.

Formed in 1957, when they were teenagers barely out of high school, they were a product of Detroit's rich musical atmosphere—thick with pop and jazz harmonies and doo-wop swirling on every corner. At first they were the Five Chimes, with other members who didn't get a chance to record; then, with White, and Rogers and his cousin Emerson "Sonny" Rogers, they were the sharp-suited Matadors with a matching girl group, the Matador-ettes. But as an important audition with Jackie Wilson's manager and creative team loomed, Sonny Rogers jumped to the Army, forcing Robinson to find a replacement from the Matador-ettes: Sonny Rogers' sister, Claudette. Already in love, she and Robinson were a vocal match, too.

The audition was a flop. But sitting anonymously in that room was Jackie Wilson's songwriter, Berry Gordy Jr. A full decade older than the members of the group, Gordy grabbed them up, pored over the lead singer's notebook of lyrics, requested the Matadors change their name, and saw his future. He produced the Miracles' first record, "Got a Job," in late 1958. He cut a few more, all leased to other labels, including one, "Bad Girl," which had first been issued locally on his own Motown Records. When it got national attention but no income, Robinson told Gordy to stop leasing and put out the records himself. The Miracles became the star group on the company's Tamla label.

Motown's first national Number One, the Miracles' "Shop Around," with its incisive "*shop!*" on the harmonies, hit in late 1960. New in the Miracles' mix was a guitarist and songwriter, Marvin Tarplin, whom Smokey had heard at an audition for a girl group that later became the Supremes. Though not a part of the vocal group, he was a Miracle and the cowriter of the group's hits "The Tracks of My Tears," "Going to a Go-Go," "The Love I Saw in You Was Just a Mirage," and others, including two hits produced and cowritten with Robinson for Marvin Gaye, "Ain't That Peculiar" and "I'll Be Doggone."

Other Miracles were songwriters, too. Pete Moore collaborated with Robinson and Tarplin on the group's hits