

P E R F O R M E R S

## THE MOONGLOWS

BY JERRY  
"THE GEATOR"  
BLAVAT



LET ME TAKE YOU back to a different time, a time when we were all kids listening to music different from our parents'. It was harmony, it was soul, it was rhythm & blues. When I was a kid in South Philadelphia, even before realizing that one day I would become the Geator, that sound haunted me. It was a magical, almost ethereal, harmony. And the one group that blew me away was the Moonglows: Harvey Fuqua, Prentiss Barnes, Alexander "Pete" Graves, Bobby Lester and guitarist Billy Johnson. I never dreamed then that one day I would work with the Moonglows, play their music, have them perform on my TV show. Having had the pleasure of knowing all the wonderful harmony groups from the Fifties and Sixties, I hold the Moonglows in a special place in my heart. With their amazing talent and dedication, they represent a great tradition of what show business was like







back then, as well as reminding us of the original excitement in the early days of rock & roll.

The man responsible for the group was Harvey Fuqua, who you might say was born into show business: His uncle was the late, great Charlie Fuqua, guitarist and singer of the Ink Spots. In 1950 Harvey formed a trio with Prentiss Barnes and Pete Graves called the Crazy Sounds. First based in Louisville, Kentucky, they worked on the road with bandleader Ed Wiley and moved on to Cleveland, where Harvey realized that their sound, though fine, was not commercial enough. He remembered an old high school buddy, Bobby Lester, with whom he used to sing duets, and summoned him to Cleveland. With Bobby, they refined their sound and met the man who was to have a decisive role in their career – Alan Freed.

Introduced to the Crazy Sounds by Cleveland maestro Fats Thomas, Freed liked what he heard. At the time, in addition to spinning rhythm & blues records, Alan had his own label – Champagne Records – with Lew Platt. Freed recorded Harvey and company's first and only Champagne release, 1952's "I Just Can't Tell No Lie," at Cleveland's WJW studios,



where Alan did his immensely popular "Moondog Rock & Roll Party" radio show. The release had little success, even with Freed's airplay, but it was still a major milestone because on the record Alan changed the group's name to the Moonglows, capitalizing on the name of his show.

Next stop: Art Sheridan's Chance label in Chicago, where the Moonglows perfected their sound, with Harvey and Bobby alternating on leads, Pete Graves doing tenor and Prentiss Barnes singing bass. Their groundbreaking style made it hard to imagine that the vocals' four-part harmony was not five or six. Bobby Lester's masterful lead and the mind-blowing falsetto harmony kicking off the group's cover of "Secret Love," brought them their first moderate hit. Nevertheless, like so many other small labels of the era, Chance folded.

Enter the Chess brothers, Leonard and Phil, who, before their move into the record business, owned bars and clubs in Chicago. They had formed their own labels, Chess and Checker, set up national distribution and were having great success with Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf. They signed the Moonglows, who then recorded their first major hit, "Sincerely." Number Twenty in 1955, "Sincerely" exemplified their signature "blow" harmony – the soft, breathy, percussive background inspired by earlier vocal groups but polished and perfected by the Moonglows.

From 1955 to 1958 the Moonglows placed four singles on the *Billboard* pop charts and five on the R&B charts. It was the only group ever to have two different records charting at the same time under two different names: as the Moonglows on Chess, with beauties like "Sincerely," "Most of All," "We Go Together," "See Saw," "Please Send Me Someone to Love," "I'll Stop Wanting You" and "In My Diary"; and as the Moon-

PREVIOUS:  
BARNES, LESTER,  
GUITARIST PETE  
JOHNSON,  
GRAVES, FUQUA

lighters on Checker, with "So All Alone" and "Shoo Doo Be Doo." They also added backup harmony to some Bo Diddley sessions, including "I'm Sorry." Their success on stage, on the road and on screen was further enhanced by their choreography, developed by Cholly Atkins, who later would go on to choreograph some of the great Motown acts.

In 1958 the group disbanded due to personal differences, with its members going their separate ways. Bobby Lester pursued a solo career and later returned to Louisville to open a nightclub. Harvey continued with a new set of Moonglows, including Marvin Gaye, whom Harvey had first heard at a

HARVEY FUQUA,  
BOBBY LESTER,  
PETE GRAVES  
AND PRENTISS  
BARNES (L TO R)

high school talent show performing with the Marquees, and Chuck Barksdale, who had sung bass with the Dells. As Harvey and the Moonglows, the group recorded their biggest hit, "Ten Commandments of Love," in 1958 and three other singles

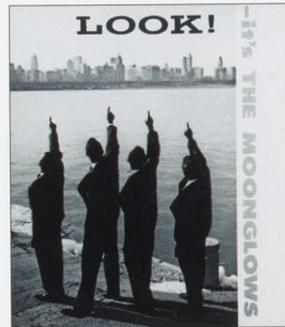
on Chess, including "Twelve Months of the Year."

Eventually Chess's A&R director, Harvey signed the great Etta James in 1960, writing and recording with her a pair of nationally charted records, "My Heart Cries" (a duet) and "If I Can't Have You." At Chess, Harvey met Gwendolyn Gordy, who, with her brother Berry and Billy Davis, had written the Etta James classic "All I Could Do Was Cry." Harvey married Gwendolyn, and along with Marvin Gaye, they moved to Detroit, where Marvin married Berry's other sister, Anna. There, Harvey formed the Tri-Phi and Harvey labels, both of

which became part of Motown, where he signed, cowrote and/or produced such groups as the Temptations, the Supremes, Edwin Starr, the Elgins and the Spinners, the last of whom were formed from the second-generation Moonglows.

In the Seventies Harvey discovered disco pioneer Sylvester and reunited with Lester and Graves to rerecord "Sincerely." He collaborated with Marvin Gaye in 1982 to produce *Midnight Love*, with its Grammy Award-winning smash single "Sexual Healing."

Harvey and the Moonglows continue to showcase their incredible sound and superb showmanship at venues across the country and just released *The Moonglows 2000*. The group has influenced performers as diverse as Bob Marley, the Dells, the Spinners, New Birth, Boyz II Men and countless others who owe their success in part to what the Moonglows created - exquisite harmonies, soul, style and showmanship. The group remains an inspiration to aspiring songwriters, producers and singers everywhere. They are still one of my most requested groups, and no matter how many times I play the Moonglows' music on the air, neither I nor my audience ever tire of that beautiful sound.





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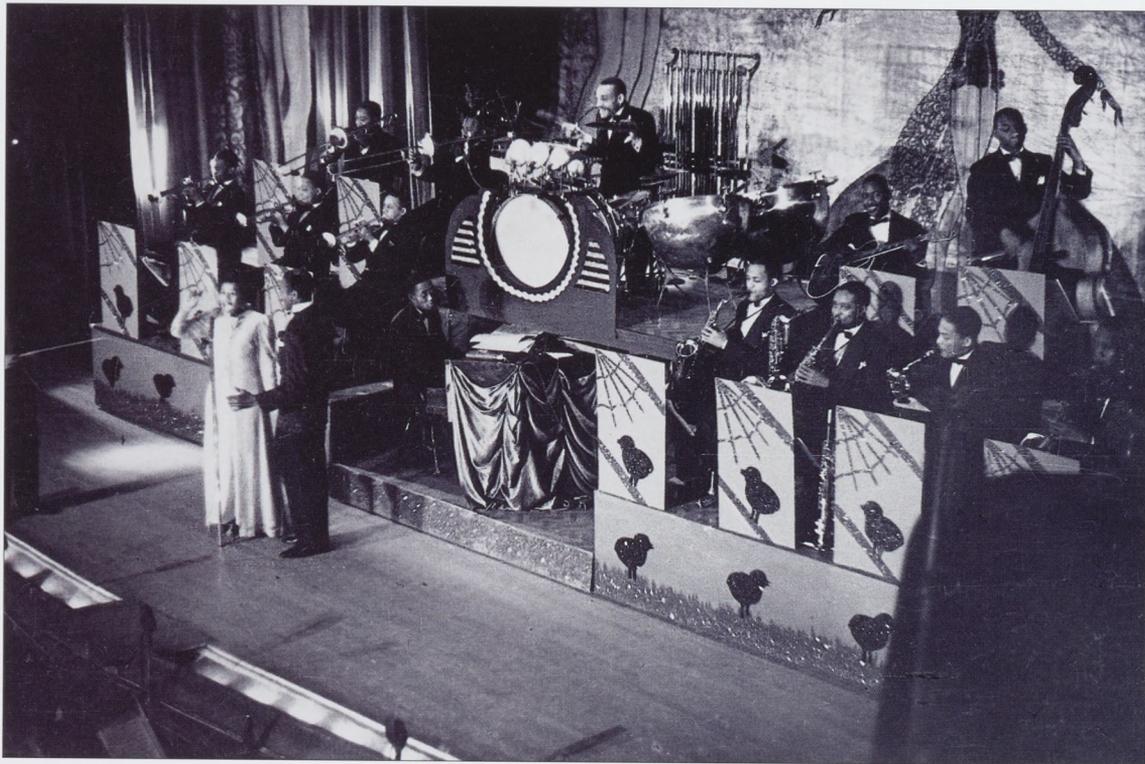
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JESSE & JAMES



ON THE HISTORIC STAGES OF THE APOLLO, THE REGAL AND OTHER GREAT THEATERS PRESENTING BLACK ENTERTAINERS, A MESSAGE OF INTEGRATION AND RESPECT ACCOMPANIED DECADES OF GROUNDBREAKING MUSIC.



WITHIN AFRICAN-AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE, THEY were the highest musical peaks an entertainer could attain. They towered above all else, Olympian in reputation and influence, and they brought forth gods and legends. Their names still resonate with mythic and imperial import. For over a half century, these theaters united



black America, providing a cultural lifeline in an age when all was separated geographically and segregated racially. They were home to generations of brilliant performers and haven to the most demanding – and appreciative – audiences. In

CHICK WEBB  
BAND AND ELLA  
FITZGERALD,  
1937; APOLLO  
CHORUS, 1938

New York City, that haven was the Apollo Theatre; in Chicago, the Regal, and in Washington, D.C., the Howard. Baltimore had the Royal, in Detroit it was the Paradise. Philadelphians went to the Earle, and later, the Uptown; Watts residents frequented the

Lincoln, and Memphis music fans convened at the Daisy.

While Jim Crow reigned outside, Cab Calloway – or Big Joe Turner or Isaac Hayes – trucked, rocked and funkied inside. With an uncommon freedom, black audiences could cheer and jeer, scream and laugh at the vast variety of talent: Swinging big bands and small-group jazz musicians; southern soul singers and Motown's finest; Chicago bluesmen and

New York doo-wop groups; gospel choirs and theatrical troupes; tap dancers and comedians.

That same license of expression extended to the performers. Sam Cooke gently swinging, "Bill Bailey won't you please go home?" for a white, supper-club audience at the Copa was one thing. James Brown belting out "Please, please, please, please, please . . ." while falling on his knees at the Apollo? Now that was a chorus of a different color.

The litany of names that drew the crowds to these fabled halls is staggering in terms of magnitude and importance: Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Louis Jordan, Dinah Washington, Nat King Cole, Muddy Waters, Ruth Brown, Ray Charles, the Drifters, the Supremes, the Miracles, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding, Sam and Dave, the Jackson 5, the O'Jays, Al Green and the list goes on. In the end, with the music these acts engendered and the generations of

musicians they influenced, they proved to be so much more than names on historic marquees. To black and white America alike, they became our lives, our shared cultural bloodstream and our common musical history.

That cultural timeline began down South. TOBA (Theatre Owners' Booking Association, or alternatively, Tough On Black Asses) had evolved from a loose collection of traveling minstrel shows at the turn of the (last) century. TOBA led black artists out of a rough beginning of tent shows and into the theaters and dance-halls of larger, Northern cities.

White – and black – showbiz men woke up to the lucrative possibilities of establishing venues that staged black enter-





tainment; box-office revenue started to flow, as black – and white – patrons began pouring through the doors of these first experiments in social integration. In Harlem, for example, the white habit of “slumming” uptown reached its zenith during the Twenties, creating small fortunes for the owners of the Cotton Club, Small’s Paradise and the Apollo’s progenitor, the Lafayette Theatre. But there was economic safety in numbers, which led to the push for 1,500-seat (like the Apollo and the Royal) to 3,500-seat (the Regal) houses and a grander, more elegant chain of theaters presenting bigger and better

known stars. By the 1930s, almost every city with a healthy middle-class black community boasted a high-quality venue presenting the top tier of national talent in a safe and race-friendly environment. The grand old man of the black theater circuit was – and still is – New York’s Apollo Theatre.



Its story is representative of that once-vibrant family.

Born at the tail end of the Harlem Renaissance, the Apollo has remained a monument on 125th Street since it first opened on January 26, 1934. Formerly Hurtig and Seamon’s Music Hall, the Apollo drew its name from a nearby burlesque house, which referenced the Greek god of music in an effort to pose striptease as a respectable, “artistic” pursuit. Seeking a new, full-family approach, the Apollo Theatre’s opening night sparkled with multimedia promise. There was a jazz lineup (Benny Carter and seven other acts), a feature film (*Criminal at Large*), the debut of a new P.A. system from RCA and the pledge of establishing “an entertainment edifice that Harlem will take pride in showing off to neighborhood communities.”

But the “Uptown Met” – as it was soon dubbed – was born into hard times. Founded by a real-estate man with little flair for showbiz in the midst of the Depression, the Apollo was bought out within a year by a white Jewish family who ran it with an all-black crew, one of the first theaters to do so.

With a creative booking policy and tight box-office control that would have schooled even Bill Graham, Frank Schiffman – and later his son Bobby – ensured that the Apollo rose above all competition. By 1935, “the Apollo changed its billing to ‘the Only Stage Show in Harlem’ . . . after Schiffman vanquished the other black theaters,” historian Ted Fox pointed out in his book *Showtime at the Apollo*.

Schiffman juggled headliners with savvy and timing, allowing their respective audiences to gather the financial means for the next big show. Smooth, sepia-toned crooner Billy Eckstine would headline one week, drawing one type of crowd, followed by R&B queen Dinah Washington, bringing in her own followers. Then the Soul Stirrers would arrive, filling the seats with a more sanctified audience than either singer would ever pull.

The Apollo – with a winning formula in hand – soon reached out to its sister venues in other cities in developing an A-level of black entertainment. “From the TOBA circuit, black performers moved up to the big league in black entertainment,” noted Fox, “which included . . . the Royal Theatre in Baltimore, the Howard in Washington, D.C., and the Earle in Philadelphia.” But there was only one theater leading the pack, as singer Ernestine Allen recalled: “You could make it at the Howard or the Royal, but you never, never, never really made it until you made it at the Apollo.”

Years flew by and musical fashions changed. The Apollo chorus line shuffled offstage never to return. Swing and big bands segued into boogie-woogie and bebop. Jump and jive

TOP: THE 1941  
APOLLO CHORUS;  
LEFT: BILLIE HOLIDAY  
ENTHRALLS  
THE APOLLO, 1937

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"I Don't Need You Anymore"

"It's Funny"

"All In My Mind" **MAXINE BROWN**

**MILLER SISTERS**

**BLUE NOTES**

**DOC BAGBY AND BAND**

**Irwin C. WATSON**

bands later yielded to a legion of doo-wop, R&B and soul groups. But a thematic, multi-act philosophy never fell out of favor on 125th Street. As late as the Sixties, it was possible to catch a jazz-filled evening with Nancy Wilson, Cannonball Adderley, Slappy

White and Ramsey Lewis, or wait for a multicultural night featuring Miriam Makeba, Mongo Santamaria, Willie Bobo and Richard Pryor.

At the Apollo, it was never just about music. All-around entertainers like Sammy Davis Jr. saw to that.

Vaudeville acts like Pigmeat Markham and the toothless Moms Mabley served up down-home humor with biting social commentary, paving the way for newcomers like Redd Foxx, Dick Gregory and Bill Cosby. Such hoofers as Bill

"Bojangles" Robinson, Cholly Atkins and Honi Coles introduced new steps and styles to the African-American dance vocabulary. Even boxing legends Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson developed stage routines and brought them to Apollo audiences.

Years before *Star Search* or *The Gong Show*, emcee Ralph Cooper developed and hosted the Apollo's Amateur Night, certainly the theater's longest running and perhaps best-known tradition. It was an evening that either broke hearts or launched new stars such as Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Ruth Brown, Jackie Wilson, Little Willie John, Roy Hamilton and Dionne Warwick. During the theater's heyday, every Wednesday night featured comic "executioners" ready to exit the less talented wanna-be's, a live radio broadcast and the promise of discovering new talent: Agents regularly flocked from their midtown offices with blank contracts and pens in hand.

By the Sixties, audio technology and the uncommon confidence of one R&B singer converged to make live recordings at the Apollo possible and profitable. James Brown recalled in his autobiography: "I wound up paying for recording *Live at the Apollo* out of my own pocket. We had opened on the nineteenth and were building up to recording on the twenty-fourth, a Wednesday, which meant amateur night. I wanted that wild amateur night crowd because I knew they'd do plenty of hollering." Recorded in 1962, the album climbed the LP charts to Number Two and became the best-selling album of Brown's career, setting off a run of live recordings from black theaters. Also taped at the Apollo, *The Motor Town Revue, Volume 1* appeared a year later and featured the Miracles, Supremes,





Contours, Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder.

As usual, other theaters followed the Apollo pattern. Recorded live at Chicago's Regal Theater in 1963, Little Stevie himself first pounced up the charts with the exuberant "Fingertips (Part 2)." The Regal similarly provided a launch point for Gene Chandler's plaintive "Rainbow '65," as well as B.B. King's legendary *Live at the Regal* album of the same year. Brown chose Baltimore's Royal as his 1963 Apollo followup, *Pure Dynamite!* A decade and a half later, in 1978, the Brides of Funkenstein opted to record the landing of the Mothership at Washington, D.C.'s Howard Theater.

The days of disco were not kind to the black theater circuit. "The Apollo is, of course, the crown jewel of the chitlin' circuit," Teddy Pendergrass recalled in his memoir, *Truly Blessed*, but added: "By the early 1970s, the Apollo's better days were long behind it." There were a number of reasons: Economic devastation in the inner cities reduced a once-proud urban middle class. Box offices were hard hit, and decreasing interest in older musical styles only added to the injury. With the advent of TV's *Soul Train* and the ascent of disco, fewer people wanted to pay for live entertainment.

Only a handful of the great black theaters survived the Seventies. Though it hit bankruptcy in '79 (after a brief incarnation as a movie house) and continues to be embroiled in financial controversies, today the refurbished Apollo reaches for its past glory under new ownership, with Amateur Night still inviting tomorrow's stars to the stage on Wednesday nights.

As for the other theaters, Chicago's original Regal was torn down, its name adorning a smaller, 2,300-seat replacement since '87. Detroit's Paradise was remodeled and renamed Orchestra Hall. The Daisy in Memphis has been reopened to

Beale Street tourists and a new generation of audiences. Baltimore's Royal and Philadelphia's Uptown are both history, with a small plaque marking the former's past triumphs. But when these great theaters were in operation – selling out shows nightly – they fulfilled an essential role in the creation of modern-day rock & roll.

Ted Fox opened *Showtime at the Apollo* with a prophetic moment: It was 1955, and the theater's marquee promised a panoply of R&B

talent on one bill – Bo Diddley, Bill Doggett, Etta James, Dakota Staton, Willis Jackson, the Flamingos, the Harptones, the Four Jacks and Howlin' Wolf. Elvis Presley, recently signed to RCA and seeing New York City for the first time, made the pilgrimage to 125th Street by taxi. "He drew little notice from the predominantly black crowd hanging around . . . there were plenty of other white youngsters about, and even his perfectly sculpted, slicked-back pompadour, black pants and pink shirt did not set him apart." One can almost see him, slightly nervous, buying his ticket, finding a seat and then settling in for a joyous ride. As did Presley, so did white America – slowly, eventually, proverbially – take that trip uptown to embrace and draw inspiration from a rich African-American heritage. On the Apollo stage, a message of integration and respect accompanied the decades of great, timeless music that flowed forth. Today, in the culture-hopping, genre-defying, post-modern maelstrom that finds room on the same stages for Lauryn Hill, Lenny Kravitz and Eminem, that truth remains self-evident: Anyone can get a front row seat and any deserving performer can get top billing.

FANS SURROUND  
CLYDE MCPHAT-  
TER AND BILLY  
WARD OF THE  
DOMINOES, 1952