

THE ORIOLES

THE RISE OF SONNY TIL AND THE ORIOLES in the late '40s and early '50s signaled a major change in American popular music taste, a change that had actually started to take shape in the years just after World War II. Until that time, the charts were dominated by the vocalists and the big bands of the day – the Dorseys, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Perry Como, Dinah Shore, Bing Crosby and Dick Haymes. But by the last years of the '40s, even before Alan Freed realized that kids were rocking and rolling, a new sound – but one as old as the blues – was catching on with the American public. It was street-corner harmony.

Today, because people like to label things, it's called doo-wop. Back in 1947, it was just young kids from the neighborhoods harmonizing on street corners and in back alleys. It was different from the group sounds of the Mills Brothers or the Ink Spots, who used orchestration and arrangements in addition to unison harmony. And into this scenario entered a group from Baltimore known as the Vibranaires, headed up by Earlington "Sonny" Tilghman, along with George Nelson, Alexander Sharp, Johnny Reed and Tommy Gaither. They featured not one lead singer but two: Sonny Til (he wisely simplified his name as fame loomed) as lead tenor and George Nelson as second tenor, with the other members harmonizing. The only accompaniment in the early days was the solo guitar of Tommy Gaither. Their style: sweet harmony.

Add to this mix Deborah Chessler, who fell in love with the group's harmony and realized that the Vibranaires had something different. She became their manager and got them into the Apollo Theater, where their new sound brought down the house and led to a booking on *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts* show. They lost to a very young George Shearing, but Godfrey was so impressed that he invited them back to be a part of his daytime radio program. At the same time the Vibranaires became the Orioles – easier to remember and to spell and the name of Maryland's state bird as well. The streamlining process continued with Til dropping his first name and calling himself Sonny out of admiration for Al Jolson and his hit "Sonny Boy."

In 1948, Deborah Chessler introduced the group to Jerry Blaine of Natural Records, who agreed to record a song with them that Chessler had written. It was "It's Too Soon to Know," backed with "Barbara Lee." Within one week of its release, the record became a smash, selling 30,000 units, with cover versions by Ella Fitzgerald and Dinah Washington soon to follow. The Orioles were on their way to stardom.

The Orioles went on to record 121 songs for Natural Records (which became Jubilee) from 1948 through 1954, including "What

Are You Doing New Year's Eve?" in 1949; the classic "I Need You So," written by Ivory Joe Hunter, in 1950; "Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me," which was a tremendous hit for Karen Chandler in 1952, again in the '60s for Mel Carter and recently for Gloria Estefan; "You Belong to Me," the Jo Stafford version of which went to No. 1 in 1952; and "Crying in the Chapel," originally recorded by Darrell Glenn, turned into a pop hit by June Valli and, later, a hit for Elvis Presley. The Orioles, you see, made it time and time again to No. 1 on the R&B charts, but only the cover versions of their songs made it to the top of the popular charts. The difference was that in place of the melodic harmonies sung by the Orioles, the pop versions had elaborate orchestrations and one lead vocalist with studio backup singers.

The Orioles attained tremendous popularity by the early '50s and prompted a slew of groups to emulate not only their sound but their name. The flock included the Penguins, the Meadowlarks, the Flamingos, the Falcons, the Robins and the Cardinals. (Yes, it's true that Jimmy Ricks had started the Ravens before the Orioles renamed themselves, but the Orioles' instant success eclipsed the Ravens definitively.)

In the midst of all this good fortune, tragedy struck the Orioles in 1950 when Tommy Gaither was killed in an automobile accident that also badly injured George Nelson and bassist Johnny Reed. Ralph Williams became the newest member of the Orioles, replacing Gaither on guitar. As a tribute to Gaither, the group made what many think is its finest record, "I Need You So."

The Orioles disbanded after their 1954 release of "If You Believe." George Nelson died in 1959, and Alexander Sharp died of a heart attack 10 years later, a member at the time of one of the many Ink Spots groups. Sonny Til formed several Oriole groups with different members during the next 25 years and also recorded as a solo artist. He died of a heart attack at 56 in December 1981. Though partly crippled by diabetes, he had continued performing, sometimes on crutches, until the very end. It was not until the early '70s, when Til appeared on my radio and TV shows, that I became aware of the tremendous impact he and the Orioles had had on our industry. He was the epitome of show business, the dedicated performer: never late, ready and dressed at the half, always aware of the responsibility he and his group had to their audience, onstage and off.

The Orioles were the forerunners of the group sound. Their combination of gospel and R&B paved the way for such groups as the Four Tops, the Temptations, the Impressions, the Chi-Lites, the Mad Lads and Boyz II Men. And what the Orioles were doing close to a half-century ago was revolutionary in their time. The Orioles helped structure the history not only of R&B and street-corner harmony but the American music scene as we know it today. — JERRY BLAVAT

The Orioles, circa 1950: Til, Reed, Gaither, Sharp, Nelson (clockwise from top right)

