

The "5" Royales in
1952 (clockwise from
top left): Obadiah
Carter, Johnny Tanner,
Lowman Pauling,
Eugene Tanner, and
James Moore.



The “5” Royales

BY JOE MCEWEN

These unsung heroes paved the way for soul music’s eruption in the 1960s while contributing some key rock & roll classics.

“WHEN IT COMES TO A SOUND THAT CANNOT BE copied by any other group, the ‘5’ Royales have it. Even though many have tried to copy the group, none have succeeded, as the group has an original sound and way of interpreting a song that no other vocalist can copy.” ❀ This bit of King Records hyperbole, a blurb accompanying the complimentary DJ 45-RPM release of “Women About to Make Me Go Crazy,” was absolutely true when the record was issued in 1955, and for the group the “5” Royales, even bigger things were just around the bend. Yet the “5” Royales would remain true voices in the shadows, a quintet whose fifteen-plus-year career was prodigious in scope and influence, but mostly out of sight to the general public. Induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame sheds a bright and overdue light onto the shadowland occupied by the glorious “5” Royales. ❀ They formed as a gospel group in 1951, calling themselves the Royal Sons Quintet in their hometown of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, soon becoming a regional favorite comprising Lowman Pauling, Johnny Tanner, Obadiah Carter, James Moore, and Otto Jeffries, who would be replaced by Eugene Tanner. (Pauling’s brother Clarence was also a founding member but left the group early on to join rival gospelaire Wings Over Jordan.) A demo made its way to New York City’s Apollo Records, an independent with tentacles in black gospel music. Two Royal Sons singles were released in 1951, but Apollo was looking for rhythm & blues: The Sons, seemingly without protest, made the switch. Thus the “5” Royales – changed from the mere Royals – were born. Within a year, the group had a smash: guitarist Pauling’s catchy stop/start

jump blues, "Baby Don't Do It." And off they went.

Beginning with the next recording session, a sound evolved and singles followed. Another Lowman Pauling original from 1953, "Help Me Somebody," featured the Royales' formidable tenor Johnny Tanner, a treasure of a vocalist who burrowed heart and soul into the gospel-drenched, world-weary plea, with the group draped around him in support. It's a seminal soul moment; in it, you can hear the voice to come of Atlantic-era Ray Charles. Of course, there was not necessarily a birth-of-soul sunburst moment – it came in bits and pieces from all over. But the "5" Royales were a cornerstone, their minor-key, intense laments a big jumping-off point for James Brown ("Please, Please, Please," "Try Me") and a cast of countless other artists.

In 1954, with their career cruising along at a steady hum, the "5" Royales switched labels to R&B powerhouse King Records. It's a move that should have catapulted the band to ever-loftier heights. But here the story stumbles. The hits didn't come. New York sessions, with studio ace Mickey Baker replacing Pauling on guitar, didn't click. And a steady output of singles yielded little magic.

THAT CHANGED IN FEBRUARY OF 1957, WHEN, *bang*, Lowman Pauling reemerged, his guitar thrust forward emphatically. Pauling's thick, rich bursts of obbligatos and penetrating solo blasts became the core of the new "5" Royales sound. "Think" was recorded that day, as well as doo-wop delight "Tears of Joy." In the months to follow, "Dedicated (To the One I Love)," "Say It," "Tell the Truth," "Slummer the Slum," and many more tumbled out. Yet with all this creative flowering and signature music being created, the music was rarely played on the radio, aside from the explosive "Think." By 1960, even with such transformative songs as "I'm With You" and "Wonder When You're Coming Home," the "5" Royales were slipping off the charts. Ironically, some of the group's greatest songs (composed by their all-everything, linchpin guitarist Lowman Pauling) are best known through the interpretations of others: "Dedicated (To the One I Love)" (a massive hit for both the Shirelles and the Mamas and the Papas), "Think" (twice a hit, in two different versions, for Royales acolyte James Brown), and "Tell the Truth," plucked by Ray Charles as an Atlantic side.

The 1960s saw the "5" Royales slide from record company to record company: Home of the Blues, Vee-Jay, Smash, Todd, and Hi, among others. Even the inspired production efforts of Willie Mitchell and James Brown came up bare. With soul music exploding, and young Stax guitarist Steve Cropper using Pauling's licks to shape an entire new tributary of Memphis R&B, the group, inexplicably, could find no beachhead. But its influence on Cropper (and others



to come) was profound. "I know when I saw Lowman Pauling onstage," Cropper recalled, "it changed my style and my life. He was a one-man show who played rhythm and stinging riffs when necessary . . . I owe a lot to Lowman."

On December 26, 1973, Lowman Pauling – then working as a janitor at a Brooklyn synagogue – passed away. Before he died, he'd no doubt heard James Brown's resurrection of "Think" on the radio. One wonders if, after all the years on the road, all the songs, and all the shows, the words to one of Pauling's songs might have passed through the "5" Royales guitarist's thoughts:

*"Think about the sacrifices that I made for you
Think of all the times that I spent with you
Think of all the good things that I done for you."*

The music, spirit, and soul of the "5" Royales live on forty-two years after Pauling's death. With their induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, this foundational quintet will join James Brown, Ray Charles, Steve Cropper, the Shirelles, the Mamas and the Papas, and others who have followed the group's musical path. ↪

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