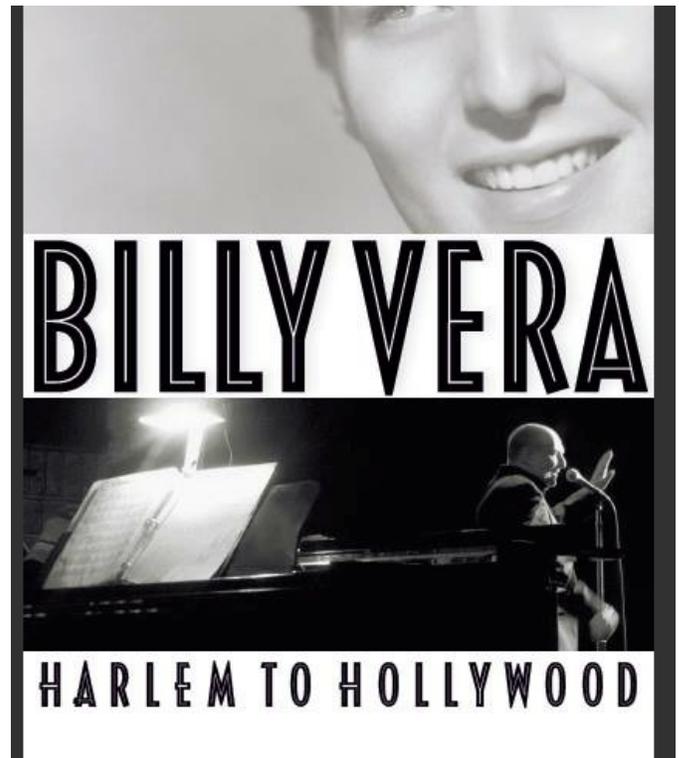


**“Harlem to Hollywood”**  
**Conversations with Billy Vera**  
**By Charlie Horner**  
**With Contributions from Pamela Horner**  
**(Reprinted from Echoes of the Past, #121 (2017))**

Ask people if they know the name Billy Vera, and if they do, they'll envision the performer, the actor and the recording artist who had the number one hit, "At This Moment" in 1987. To those of us who are consumed by early R&B, blues and doo wop music, Billy Vera is much more – he's one of us. We know Billy Vera as the music historian who produced and wrote liner notes for countless CD's and box sets that helped preserve the legacy of our music. We know Billy Vera as the record collector who frequented Slim Rose' Times Square Records and once bought a house for his records to reside in while he lived elsewhere. We know Billy Vera's band backed all the doo wop groups like the Harptones, Willows, Nutmegs, Clefones and Chantels at the Gus Gossert Academy of Music concerts during the oldies revival days of the 1970's. We know Billy for playing old Rhythm & Blues records on his WBAI radio show. And we know the Billy Vera who duetted with Judy Clay on the stage of NYC's famed Apollo Theatre.

While Billy Vera and I know many of the same people, I never actually met him until a few years ago when Pam and I went to see him perform at the Cutting Room in Manhattan. It was no surprise to see many mutual friends in the audience – Willie Winfield and Raoul Cita of the Harptones, Shelly Buchansky of Vito & the Salutations and some of the Willows. Billy was expecting us and with all the record collectors in the audience he didn't flinch when I pulled out my 45 of "My Heart Cries" by Billy Vera & the Contrasts for him to autograph.

So, when I heard about Billy Vera's autobiography, "Harlem To Hollywood," I expected it to be good. I just didn't know how good. I can now say "Harlem To Hollywood" is a thoroughly entertaining memoir of the career of a fascinating man. What follows here is not a retelling of "Harlem To Hollywood". You should, after all,



read the book if I peak your curiosity. What I did in an amazing hour and a half interview was ask Billy to give more insight into areas of particular interest to readers of *Echoes of the Past* magazine, starting with what prompted him to write this book.

"Well, people have been bugging me to do so for years," said Billy, "And for the longest time I just couldn't come up with an angle. Then I just decided I was just going to tell the story. There was a lot of stuff I wanted to leave out because I didn't want to hurt peoples' feelings. Especially with the women. I think I say in the book, a lot of these actresses were wild girls in their twenties in the 1980's. Now they're in their fifties and their kids don't need to know what mommy was doing with a musician in 1984. In the end I just said, 'What would a gentleman do?' And that's what I tried to do."

Billy Vera was born William McCord in Riverside, California to parents in the entertainment business. His mother was a professional singer and his father a radio announcer. [Later in life, Bill would take the stage name, Billy Vera, at the prompting of his manager Jim Gribble – the same Jim Gribble who managed the careers of the Fiestas, Mystics, Passions, Elegants, Mellokings, Jarmels and others.] At the age of eight, Billy moved with his family to West Chester County, NY, near White Plains. There he first developed a strong interest in Rock & Roll.

In “Harlem To Hollywood,” Billy describes the “life-changing experience” of hearing Alan Freed on WINS radio one night in late 1955 or early 1956. But I was most interested in Billy Vera, the record collector.

### **Record Collecting**

“I started collecting when I was eleven or twelve,” recalled Billy. “I still remember the first three records I bought with my own money. I went to the record store and bought ‘Honky Tonk’ (Bill Doggett), ‘Blueberry Hill’ (Fats Domino) and ‘Pricilla’ by Eddie Cooley & the Dimples. A few weeks later I bought my first vocal group record, ‘Oh What A Night’ by the Dells. And soon after, I started getting favorite artists. All the guys my age in New York liked Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers. I found out there were earlier records by them than those I had. In White Plains, New York, there were about five stores and they all either had record



Billy Vera with Pam & Charlie Horner  
at NYC’s Cutting Room

players around the store where you could play the records before you bought them or they had a guy behind the counter who would play them for you. And they had bins. There’d be a Frankie Lymon bin. I’d look in there and say, “Oh my God. There are records that he made before ‘Baby Baby’”. I’d grab them, whenever I had enough lawn mowing money. Sometimes I would hitchhike rather than take the bus so I could save the quarters. Four bus rides would equal one record. Then, I discovered, down by the train station, there was a magazine store with several bins where they sold used juke box records, six for a dollar. So on my way home from school I would always stop there. By that time, I knew which labels I liked, so if I saw something on *Vee Jay* or *Atlantic* or *Chess*, I would take a chance on it if I didn’t know the record. I began to discover artists I wasn’t aware of. That’s also how I discovered jazz. Because they had tons of *Prestige* label 45’s in there, six for a dollar. I found that I loved Eddie ‘Lockjaw’ Davis, Gene Ammons and Shirley Scott. I didn’t have the money to buy albums so I didn’t buy jazz albums for years. My jazz enjoyment was from records that had Part 1 and Part 2.”

### **Talent Contest leads to Times Square Records**

One day in school I won the sophomore talent show with 296 out of 298 votes. Not because I was any good, but because we played rock & roll. The guy that should have won was Germano Romano, a wonderful classical piano player whose hands were insured, in high school, for \$100,000. I talked a kid into playing drums who’d never played a drum in his life. And I tuned a guitar for another other kid who was tone deaf, but he had an amp. The three of us got up there and played ‘Come Dance With Me’ by Eddie Quinteros and ‘Shout’. We had friends up in the spotlight booth who put purple and pink gels on us. We had on these white jackets and these shiny metallic black shirts that we found at the Army & Navy Store with white string ties like Chuck Berry had on the ‘One Dozen Berries’ album. Flash always wins.”

“As a result of this, the lunch table I sat at became the cool table. I sat at the head of the table and all the cool guys wanted to sit there.

One day this kid came over to talk records. He started mentioning this place called Times Square Records, in the subway in Manhattan. He said, 'Man, you've got to go there.' Before that we had been talking about records like Bobby Marchan's 'There's Something On Your Mind' and the cool records that were on the black stations. But he started naming these titles that were so fascinating to me like 'Over A Cup Of Coffee' (Castelles) and 'Hoping You'll Understand' (Strangers). By this time I was trying to peddle my songs after school, so the next time I was down there [Manhattan], I stopped off at Times Square Records before I went home. And all these guys were in there. It was all guys, not a woman or girl. They had a dollar table so I picked up records. This guy, Greasy Harold, who was behind the counter, would suggest things. I bought 'These Foolish Things' by the Dominoes and 'I Don't Stand A Ghost Of A Chance' by the Solitaires. Harold played me 'Golden Teardrops' by the Flamingoes (*Chance* label). It was on the wall in red plastic for like the high price of \$5 but I didn't have \$5 so I bought the reissue on *Vee Jay*. I didn't care too much about labels at that time. I just cared about the music. By this time I was making a little money working as a bus boy at this country club so I started buying albums. I got 'The Paragons Meet The Jesters' as a Christmas present. I went crazy for that one and then the 'Rumble' album was the same thing. I got 'Teenage Party' on *Gee* for my



birthday and the Five Satins' first album. It was cheaper to get albums than the 45's.

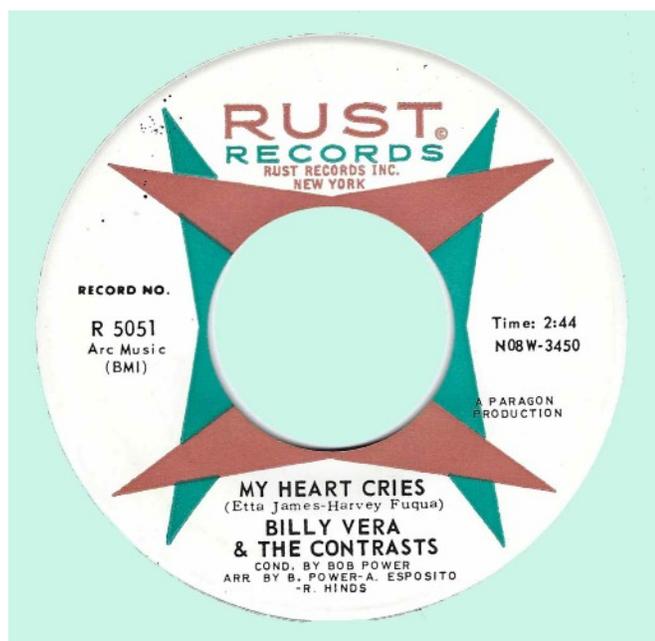
### Songwriter and Recording Artist

By the early 1960's Billy Vera was coming into his own as a performer, recording artist and songwriter. His first recording was "January 1st, 1962" which came out on Billy Mure's *Valentine* label. Under the direction of Jim Gribble associate, Stan Vincent, Billy sang lead, backed by a couple of Gribble's singers. Billy also overdubbed the bass and falsetto parts. The group was dubbed the Resolutions, but of course, there never was an actual "Resolutions" group.

Billy's second record was "My Heart Cries," an interpretation of the Etta & Harvey record backed with "All My Love," a Billy Vera composition. The record came out on the *Rust* label in 1962 as by Billy Vera and the Contrasts. The Contrasts were actually Billy's band, the Knight-Riders who were under contract to another label at the time.

More recordings followed, including "Shadow Of Your Love" b/w "Look Gently At The Rain" (another Billy Vera composition). Recorded for *Cameo* as "Blue-Eyed Soul featuring Billy Vera, the vocals behind Billy on "Shadow..." are actually the Cookies.

Meanwhile, Billy's composition, "Mean Old World," written with Dionne Warwick in mind, became a hit for Ricky Nelson in 1965. The same year, Billy teamed with Chip Taylor to





Atlantic recording stars,  
Billy Vera and Judy Clay

write “Make Me Belong To You” for Barbara Lewis. Vera and Taylor combined to write a male – female duet called “Storybook Children” which they then pitched to *Atlantic Records’* Jerry Wexler. This resulted in Wexler teaming up Billy Vera with Judy Clay on record and a huge hit. On the popularity of “Storybook Children” Billy Vera and Judy Clay were booked into Harlem’s famed Apollo Theatre.

### Playing the Apollo

For anyone steeped in the history of black music, playing the Apollo had to be a thrill. Yet here were Billy and Judy were going out on stage there, singing love songs as an interracial duet. I asked Billy if he was nervous about how he’d be received?

“Strangely enough, I was not nervous at all,” said Billy. “Remember, we’d been the house band for a top club in the area for years. We played every weekend behind one act on Friday and one act on Saturday and in another club on Thursdays and Sundays. So I knew a lot of the acts already. When I said I was going to the Apollo, other acts said, ‘Oh man, that’s scary.’ I’d been a customer there, too, and it was my dream to play there. For some reason, I was not nervous or afraid. And this was only a month after Martin Luther King got killed. There were riots going on across the river in Newark. When [the Apollo management] found out I was white, they were nervous. But the record was already a hit in Harlem so they wanted us, because the record was so popular. When they saw me, they switched the billing and put Judy’s name first. But Honey Coles, was an old veteran tap dancer and he was the

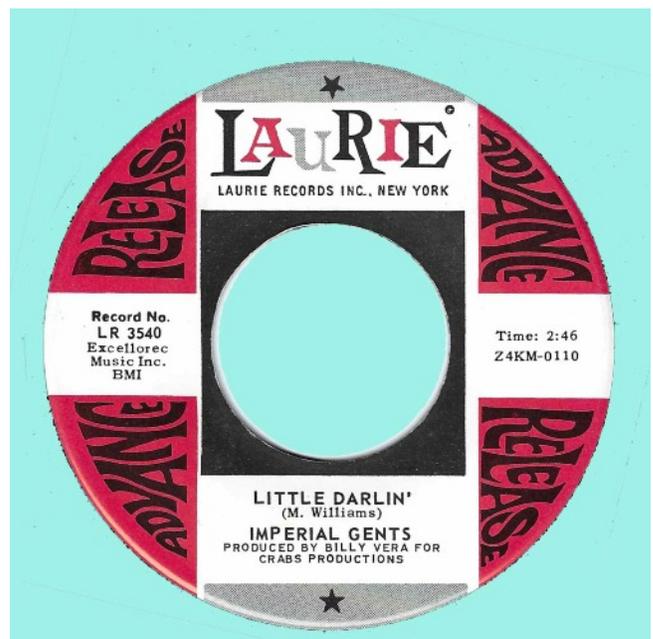
stage manager. He said, ‘Harlem hasn’t seen you yet, so what I want you to do is wait over here in the wings on stage left. Judy will enter from stage right. You let her take three steps out.’

“They saw her first and when they saw me step out, they would gasp. That skinny little white boy is Billy Vera? But, you know, by the time we finished ‘Storybook Children,’ they were clapping and standing and screaming. They loved us! And after the first show, we’d gone over so well, that Honey came up to the dressing room and said, ‘Listen, I’m going to put you on right before the star. Because ain’t nobody going to follow you two MF’ers.’”

“The second time we played the Apollo, Wilson Pickett didn’t like it. One time we came off the stage after we’d gotten a standing ovation. They weren’t going to stop clapping. Honey said go out and take it from letter B, and we had to go out and sing half the song over again. They finally let us off. I was walking back to my dressing room and I heard Pickett yelling to his band, ‘Get out and play an instrumental! How the f\*\*\* am I supposed to follow that s\*\*\*.’ He was so insecure he thought he couldn’t follow little old us.”

### The Imperial Gents

“Throughout the 1970’s, my career wasn’t doing very well,” said Billy. “I worked six nights a week with my little band in local New



York, New Jersey and Connecticut clubs but it just brought me close.”

By the early 1970’s the second oldies (think doo wop) revival was in full swing. Playing the clubs, when things got dull at the end of the night, Billy’s band conserved energy by playing “the old doo wop rock-a-ballad chord changes and played ‘stump the band’ having the audience request fifties classics, like ‘In the Still Of The Night’ and ‘Earth Angel’.” Gradually the audience increased until the clubs were packed.

One of the strangest of Billy Vera’s records came out of that period, “Little Darling” by the Imperial Gents (*Laurie* label). The record is a parody of the Gladiolas song (actually a parody of the Diamonds’ version of the Gladiolas song). The song ended with Billy’s comical dark humor recitation about his “little darling” jumping on her motorcycle and running into a banana truck.

“I was doing that parody in the clubs, just for a goof,” said Billy. “I had three or four sets to fill. And oldies were starting to catch on around that time. Somebody had the idea, ‘Why don’t we record that? It’s a funny song.’ So somebody got *Laurie* to pay for some studio time, we made the record and we jammed on the other side. Nothing happened with it, of course. I named it the Imperial Gents because that sounded like a fifties name.”

### Backing Pioneer Vocal Groups

Playing local clubs during the doo wop revival, gave Billy and his band a lot of work backing many of the pioneer R&B and doo wop groups from the 1950’s. Then Larry Marshak of *Rock Magazine* booked the Billy Vera Band to back the various artists on his doo wop shows at the Academy of Music in New York City. All told, there were thirteen such shows at the Academy of Music, and Billy Vera led the house orchestra on all of them. The shows featured so many of the groups that are now household names among vocal group enthusiasts – the Harptones, Nutmegs, Channels, Chantels, Moonglows, Flamingos and many more.

“Before he died,” recalled Billy Vera, “Raoul Cita of the Harptones told me that the first time he worked with us was the first gig they’d done since the fifties. That was thrilling, because, Willie [Winfield] is one of the greatest



Flyer from a 1980 Doo Wop concert at Madison Square Garden featuring Billy Vera & his Rock & Roll Band. (From the Classic Urban Harmony Archive)

ad singers that ever lived. The Skyliners were pretty amazing. Pookie Hudson [Spaniels] was a unique singer. There’s no antecedent for him. You can’t listen to Pookie and say he got that from so and so. He’s a true, true, original and that’s so rare.”

Billy reflected further on some of the talent he’d backed on the Academy of Music concerts. “The Coasters were the greatest comedy act. I got all my own comedy timing from playing behind them. I played behind them plenty of times. Speedo [Cadillacs lead, by the 1970’s was performing with the Coasters] was one of the last of the great clowns and I mean that in a good sense. That rubber face – that timing. And, Billy Guy – if you ever saw

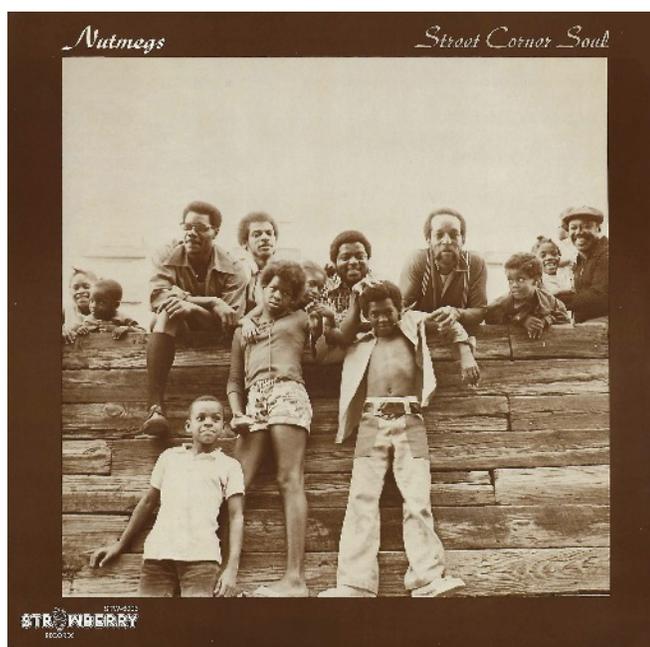
them do “T’aint Nothing To Me”. I must have seen them do that twenty times, from behind them. It’s one of the great comedy routines I’ve ever seen in my life. It’s brilliant comedy.”

From there, Billy Vera was hired as the conductor and guitarist for the Shirelles. When the Shirelles were not touring, he still had time to play with his own band. In 1972, the Billy Vera Band was hired to back Richard Nader’s Madison Square Garden concert that reunited Dion with the Belmonts. Having Billy’s band back them was one of both Dion’s and the Belmonts’ demands to do the show. These are but a few of the groups that the Billy Vera Band played behind.

### **The Nutmegs “Street Corner Soul” LP**

In 1972, while playing on an Academy of Music concert, Billy Vera met the Nutmegs. Billy thought the group was the finest acappella group he’d ever heard and wanted to record them. After persuading a record producer friend, Randy Irwin, to go in with him on the project, Billy took the Nutmegs (Harold Jaynes, Leroy McNeil, James “Sonny” Washburn, James “Sonny” Griffin and James Tyson) into a New Haven, CT, studio and cut the Nutmegs acappella – “rough, raw, street corner singing, unencumbered by a band”.

“It’s a stretch to say I ‘produced’ that album,” said Billy. “I sat there and said, ‘That’s a good take!’”



Not able to find a record company interested in releasing the album, it sat in the vaults for the next four years. In 1976, the album was picked up by *Strawberry Records*, owned by a New York distributing company. The cover photo featured the Nutmegs surrounded by young kids from the projects. The album is now considered a classic among acappella fans.

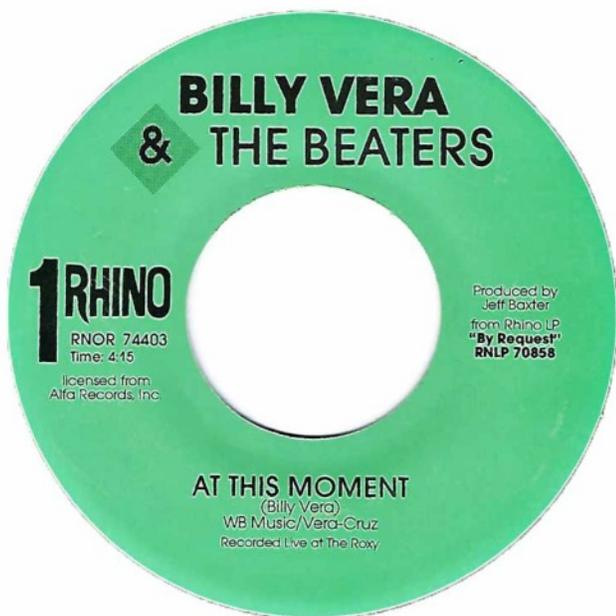
Two more *Strawberry* label albums followed by Shirelles’ lead, Shirley Alston. One entitled, “Lady Rose,” contained several Billy Vera compositions. “They didn’t have much money,” Billy recalled. They used just me and my bass player and drummer. We did the best we could”.

The Billy Vera Band also backed Earl Lewis and the Channels on their “Take One” and “Take Two” albums on the *Channel* label.

### **Continuing to Collect**

“Once my career started taking off, the collecting dropped away,” recalled Billy. “A lot of the other guys who went to Times would go on road trips. They’d find radio stations or record stores out in [remote areas]. I wasn’t able to do that until later when I was with the Shirelles, but that wasn’t until the early 70’s. Whenever we’d get into a town, if I had a couple of extra hours before show time or rehearsal, I’d go through the yellow pages and find the oldest record store in town. Then I’d ask them if they had any old records in their attic or basement. And inevitably they’d say, “Oh, Peter Wolf was here before you (from the J. Geils Band) or Bob Hite from Canned Heat. Either one of them would almost always beat me to the store and get the hard stuff. I still did OK. Then by 1971, my career was down the toilet again, so the collecting began to reemerge. I started buying from Val Shively. And I found out you could buy records by mail in auctions so I started collecting more seriously again. [I bought] what I could afford. But the *Chance* [label] records and the Five Keys on *Aladdin* type records escaped me because I simply didn’t have the money.”

At one point, during a time of marital discord, and afraid his soon-to-be ex-wife would harm his records, Billy bought a house and moved the records in there for safe keeping.



“I was afraid my wife would go crazy,” said Billy. “She was an actress so she had a little sense of drama in her and it could get a little out of control. She had already broken a door in the house, so I could just see her wanting to get revenge on me by breaking my records. She knew how much they meant to me so I got this house. The records are safe now.”

### Number One At Last

In 1987, Billy Vera achieved what had eluded him all his career, a #1 Chart record. Oddly, his self-penned “At This Moment” had been released before, back in 1981, on the *Alfa* label where it charted at #79 before falling into obscurity. Then in 1986, the song was used in an episode of the popular TV show, “Family Ties,” and it shot to #1 on the Pop Charts. By then, “At This Moment” by Billy Vera and the Beaters had been leased to *Rhino Records* who scrambled to keep up with the demand. And while the song “At This Moment,” is probably what Billy Vera is best known for, he deserves much respect for another of his activities.

### The Reissue Box Sets

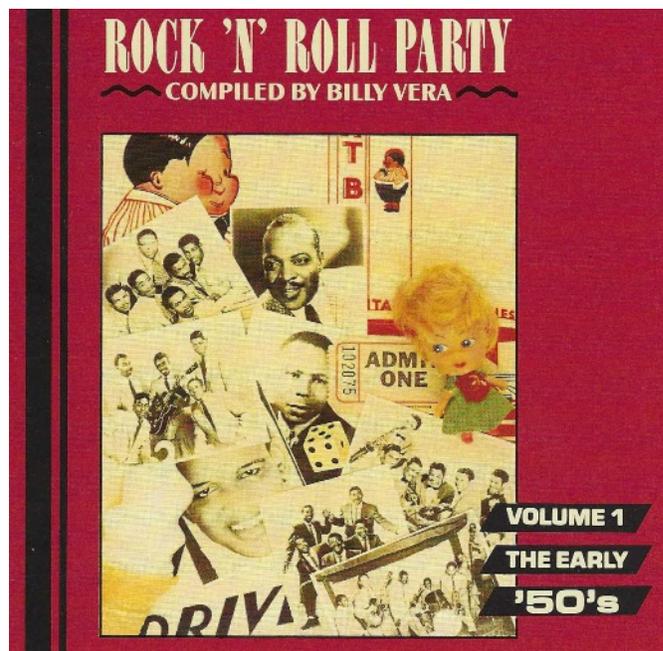
As a music historian, Bill Vera was one of the first, if not *the* first, to produce historical reissue CD box sets of long forgotten (and sometimes previously unreleased) recorded gems in the R&B field. What’s more, Billy took

the art of reissued collections of R&B music to new heights. By digging through the vaults of major record companies, Billy produced box sets with recording dates, session personnel (including musicians), photos and extensive liner notes. Only in the field of jazz music had this been done to that extent, before.

“That’s where I stole it from,” said Billy. “I stole it from jazz. Because I felt that people treated Rock & Roll and R&B as this bastard child, not really worthy of anything but cheap nostalgia. And I said that there’s more to this music than that and it deserves to be chronicled. Why shouldn’t I treat it the way jazz is treated. Maybe someday the world will see there is some value to this music other than just cheap nostalgia. So that’s why I started doing that. I don’t think anybody was doing that before me. I could be wrong. At least not in America was anybody doing that.”

“[Donn Filetti] did a good job, but he didn’t have access to who the session players were. Because the doo wop guys didn’t care who the musicians were. They just cared who the second tenor was. But to me, was it Sam “The Man” Taylor or Big Al Sears? Who was playing that sax solo?”

And Billy Vera was able to do this with major labels. Billy produced historical reissue box sets for *RCA*, *Specialty*, *Vee Jay*, *Capitol*, *Savoy*, *Atlantic* and many other labels.



“I was lucky to get in there. The first historical reissues I did were at *RCA Victor*. I had a radio show at the time and it was called “Billy Vera’s Rock & Roll Party”. After I had my big hit, this guy at *RCA* wanted to sign me to the label, and I knew I’d get lost there. But to entice me, he let me do the Billy Vera’s Rock & Roll Party CD’s. They were a good start.”

“Rock ‘N’ Roll Party: Compiled by Billy Vera Volume 1” (there was also a Volume 2) was groundbreaking. Coming out in 1989, it listed artist, song, label number, and session musicians and A&R director for twenty recordings culled from the *RCA* vaults. For the first time, the Five Keys’ two unissued *Groove* label recordings were made available.

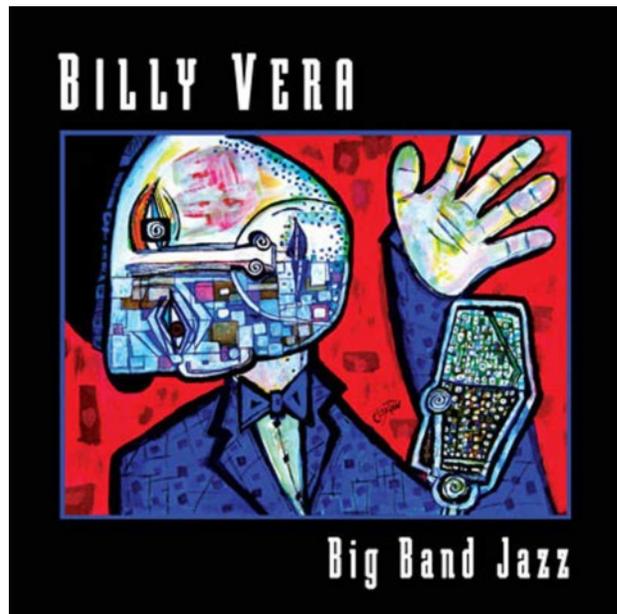
Many Billy Vera historical compilations followed. And they were innovative. For instance, the CD box set covering forty years of *Vee Jay* hits contains not only 75 titles on three compact discs plus a 24-page full size booklet, but also a collector’s edition red vinyl 45 of “Goodnite Sweetheart Goodnite” by the Spaniels on *Vee Jay*.

Billy Vera eventually won a Grammy in 2013 for Best Album Notes on the Ray Charles box set “Singular Genius: The Complete ABC Singles”. He’d previously been nominated for Grammy’s for Best Historical Album (1995) for “The R&B Box: 30 Years of Rhythm And Blues” and (1997) for “Ray Charles Genius And Soul: The 50th Anniversary Collection”.

### Billy Vera Today

If you think, by now, that Billy Vera has done everything in the entertainment business, please know this article just scratches the surface. You need to read the book. Did I mention Billy has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame?

Pam and I recently caught Billy with his own jazz big band at the Cutting Room in NYC. The evening was exceptional with Billy and band performing tunes from “The Great Black American Songbook”. Many of those songs are on Billy latest CD, “Big Band Jazz,” available on Amazon. A number of other of his albums, including “The Best of Billy Vera and the Beaters” are also available. Check out Billy’s website, [billyvera.com](http://billyvera.com).



I asked Billy Vera what’s next in his career? He told me he still has one more Rock & Roll album in him, that he’s working on. He’s also just completed a film documentary based on the book. It will feature appearances by Mike Stoller, Dolly Parton, Dionne Warwick, Mable John, Joey Dee and others as well as rare film footage of Billy and Judy Clay performing at the Apollo.

“Harlem to Hollywood” is available at Amazon and most book stores.

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