

Asbury Park, NJ, Revisited: The Endeavors Story

by Charlie Horner
With contributions from Pamela Horner

In past issues, we've written about the music legacy of Asbury Park's West Side, a ten block long predominately African American section of the New Jersey shore city that produced a staggering number of talented singers and musicians. We've recently intensified our research in this area to produce a huge exhibit of West Side photographs and memorabilia. By the time you read this article, the exhibit will have completed a ten-day run in Asbury Park's Heaven Gallery and a month-long run at Monmouth University's Polak Gallery in West Long Branch, NJ. The exhibit has drawn major coverage from area newspapers and rave reviews from all who have seen it. We are working on plans to have the exhibit move to another prestigious museum. But the more we delve into Asbury's West Side history, the more information becomes available to us. We'll now tell the story of Asbury Park's R&B vocal group, the Endeavors, and their connection to other previously mentioned area vocal groups like Lenny Welch & the Mar-Keys and the Ray Dots.

As with most urban areas, Asbury Park's R&B vocal group scene started in 1948, when radio stations broadcast the Orioles' groundbreaking recording of "It's Too Soon To Know". In Asbury, a young dee jay named Georgie Hudson began playing R&B on radio station WCAP. Hudson would sometimes broadcast live from the Palm Garden, a popular night spot on Springwood Avenue. Among the teenagers influenced



The Mar-Keys, ca. 1954. Clockwise from top left: William Penha, Raymond Morris, Joe Major, Lenny Welch (Courtesy of the Asbury Park Historical Society)

by the Orioles was Bobby Thomas, who formed the Vibranaires (later called the Vibes), the city's first recording R&B vocal group.

Georgie Hudson also did a Sunday gospel program on WCAP called "The Gospel Train". When WCAP was reorganized to form WJLK in 1950, Georgie Hudson left for station WNJR in Newark where he would find greater fame, leaving his gospel show in the hands of Arthur Morris. Arthur Morris was the lead singer in the popular gospel group, the Golden Harmonaires. Morris would continue the gospel show for the next decade and a half, becoming a major figure in Asbury Park's gospel field as well as a promoter of gospel and secular concerts.

By 1954, R&B vocal groups were becoming more common in Asbury Park's West Side. Bobby Thomas' Vibranaires/Vibes were recording "Doll Face" and "Stop Torturing Me," while a young group at Asbury Park High School called the Mar-Keys was building a reputation as a group to be reckoned with.

The Mar-Keys were formed by Joe Major and at first included Raymond Morris (no relation to any other Morris in this story), William Penha and Leon "Lenny" Welch.

"There was this fellow [Joe Major] that wanted to start a group," Lenny told interviewer Gary James. "I



A later photo of Lenny Welch (Photo from the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)



**Arthur Morris on WJLK Radio.
(Photo courtesy of Caleb Morris)**

didn't know him at the time. He used to see me walk down the main street there. One day he stopped me and said 'Hey, I'm going to start a singing group. I want you to be in it.' I said, 'Yeah.' I didn't tell him I'm not into it. I thought, 'Is he crazy? How does he even know that I can even sing?' I never sang anywhere. The only thing I can think of is maybe he heard me singing by myself walking up the street. I'd duck behind a building because I knew he was gonna ask me to sing and I wasn't interested."

Things changed when Lenny saw Joe Major and some others singing and drawing a crowd in the high school gymnasium.

"I went over and joined the crowd and then Joe motioned me to join in," Lenny recently told Don Stine. "And I did. He held auditions at his house that night and me, William Penha, who was my best buddy from high school, and Raymond Morris made the group. We were all high school pals around 1954 to 1956."

Soon, Leroy Brown was added to the group as a fifth member.

The group, called the Mar-Keys, never made any recordings but sang at school proms and variety shows and even appeared at the Savoy Theatre on Asbury Park's Mattison Avenue along with Little Richard and the Cadillacs. Arthur Morris helped the Mar-Keys with their harmony and got them some bookings. As Arthur Morris produced concerts around Asbury Park with major stars, he often used local groups like the Vibranaires and Mar-Keys as opening acts.

At this point the story shifts to Virginia Davis, who would eventually become the lead singer of the Endeavors. Virginia was born in Fitkin Hospital (now the Jersey Shore Medical Center) in 1936. Virginia was not part of the Asbury Park High School scene since she went to a boarding school in Bordentown, NJ. There she sang in a large choir that sang all over the state of New Jersey.

When Virginia graduated in the summer of 1955, she returned to Asbury Park. Someone told the Mar-Keys about Virginia's singing experience in the choir and she was invited to join the group. At this point, Joe Major, preferring an all male group, left the Mar-Keys. The Mar-Keys now consisted of Lenny Welch, Leroy Brown, Virginia Davis, Raymond Morris and William Penha.

"The group just sang at local places because all of us were young," recalled Virginia. We sang at a couple of dances they had around here. I think Arthur Morris had us open for bigger groups at some of the dances. I wasn't in the group a real long time."

At this point Virginia and Leroy announced to the group that they were getting married. According to Virginia, this didn't sit well with some members of the Mar-Keys. "They felt that since we were getting married, what would happen to the group if I got pregnant?" remembered Virginia. The dissention started around the time Arthur Morris got the Mar-Keys booked to compete on the Apollo Theatre's Wednesday night Amateur Contest.

Convinced they could win the amateur contest and would move on from there, the Mar-Keys decided to compete with just the four men.

"Arthur Morris said, 'Now you've been singing with her awhile and all of you are used to singing with her. Don't talk about putting her out of the group.' But they decided as a group to sing without me," said Virginia.

The Mar-Keys went to the Apollo but finished second. The Mar-Keys career as a singing group didn't last much longer. Leroy Brown and Virginia Davis



The Mar-Keys, ca. 1955. Left to right: Raymond Morris, Leroy Brown, Virginia Davis, Lenny Welch, William Penha. (Photo courtesy of Virginia Davis Brown)



These two rare photos surfaced after this article ran in *Echoes of the Past*. (Above) The Endeavors (courtesy of Caleb Morris and (Below) the Ray Dots (courtesy of Betty Ann Shorter).



were married in 1957. By then, Lenny Welch, Joe Major and William Penha were singing with Bobby Thomas as the [new] Vibes.

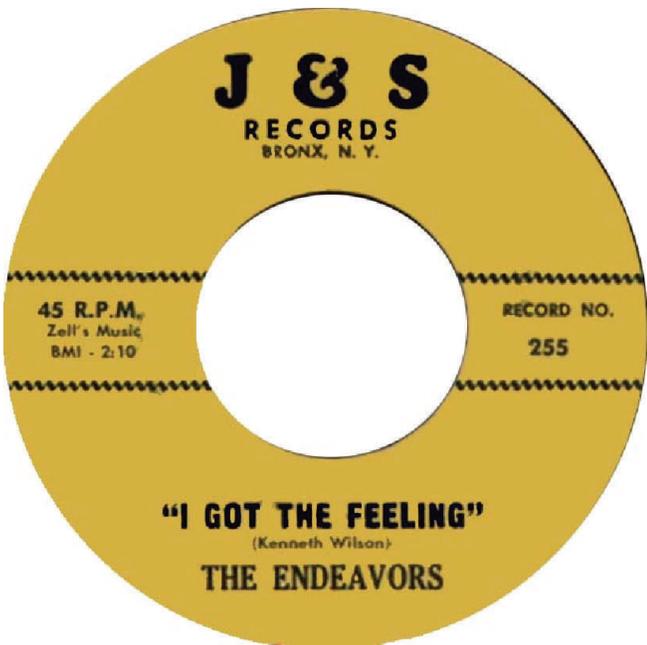
Virginia Davis Brown now started singing with Arthur Morris' two daughters, Eleanor and Constance Morris. "Arthur Morris' family only lived about a block from me," recalled Virginia. "My sister-n-law was a friend to the younger lady in the group, Eleanor. The older girl, Constance and I became friends. This group became the Endeavors. Rounding out the Endeavors was Kenneth Wilson, a former disc jockey on WJLK radio. Wilson was also a songwriter and the group soon was singing many of his songs. The group would often rehearse at the Morris family home and quickly drew the attention of Arthur Morris. Arthur booked the Hearts ("Lonely Nights") into Asbury Park's Convention Hall in the late 1950's and introduced the Endeavors to the Hearts' manager, Zelma "Zell" Saunders.

Saunders had formed her own record label, *J&S Records*, and signed the Endeavors to record. "She [Zell Saunders] was the one who gave us a chance," said Virginia. We did a couple of local gigs that she got us and we had the record."

Previous speculation that the Endeavors were somehow part of the Hearts or Jaynetts is just not true. "If Zell Saunders was grooming us to be the next Hearts group, I didn't now anything about it," said Virginia.

The Endeavors recorded "Suffering With My Hearts" backed with "I Got The Feeling" (*J&S* # 254/255) in 1959. Virginia sang lead. Both sides were written by Kenneth Wilson.

"Suffering With My Heart" was a powerful emotion-filled ballad that is now highly prized by group harmony record collectors. Even so, the Endeavors' first record was their last. It failed to chart and the group did not record again.



The Endeavors' *J&S* record.



Bobby Thomas' Vibes, ca. 1956. Left to right, Bobby Thomas, Lenny Welch, Joe Major, William Penha. (From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)

The Endeavors did continue singing for a while, opening for big name acts at Asbury Park's Convention Hall, including the Miracles. "After the record, we did a little singing and then just kind of broke up," recalled Virginia.

Meanwhile, Virginia's husband, Leroy Brown had joined a newly formed Asbury Park group called the Ray Dots. The group consisted of Leroy Brown, Tony Maples, Frank Hosendove, Delmar "Kirby" Goggins and former *Vibranares'* member, Roosevelt McDuffie. Maples had recently returned home from the service. While in the Air Force and stationed in Pittsburgh, he'd sung briefly with the *Del Vikings*.

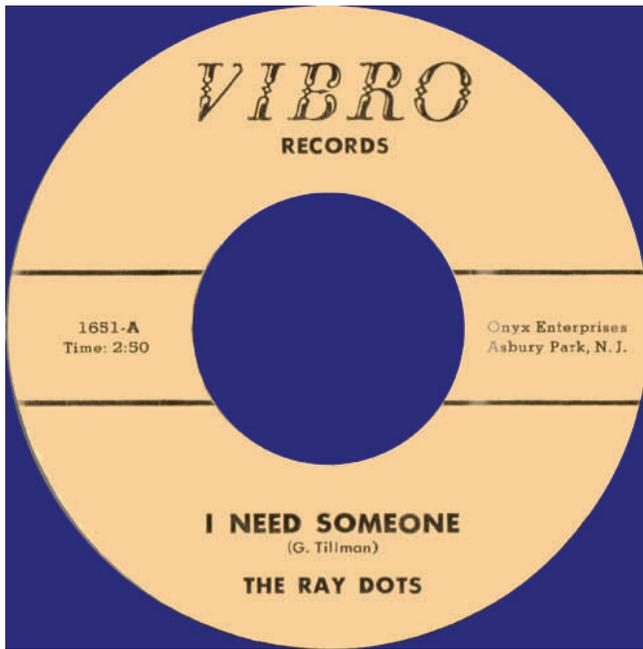
Belmar NJ songwriter Gervis "Gus" Tillman decided to manage and write songs for the Ray Dots. He also started his own record label, *Vibro*, to record the group and had the group rehearse at his home. By the late 1950's, the Ray Dots had their first record released, "I Need Someone" and "Lu La," both Gervis Tillman compositions.

The Ray Dots would change their name to the V-Eights and begin rehearsing a couple of new songs, a ballad called "My Heart" and a Coasters-style song, "Papa's Yellow Tie". Leroy Brown left the group and was replaced by Bobby Thomas, who got out of the army in the Spring of 1960 and returned to Asbury Park.

[The (Asbury Park) V-Eights were never the V-8's on the *Most* label.]

Arthur Morris and his daughters Eleanor and Constance were not the only talented singers in the Morris family. Arthur's son, Caleb, had his own R&B vocal group, the *Juveniles* (no recordings) whose story is detailed in *Echoes of the Past* # 99.

Of those mentioned in this article, Lenny Welch moved to NYC and achieved star status as a soloist. Lenny Welch's first record was a nice vocal group side, "My One Sincere" (*Decca* label). The song



was

**Ray Dots on *Vibro*, c. 1958
(Photo courtesy of Don Leins)**

**Some Related Asbury Park West Side
Vocal Group Recordings**

Golden Harmonaires (Arthur Morris):
Decca (unreleased) I Needed The Lord 1953
 When The Roll Is Called

Vibranares (Bobby Thomas):
After Hours 103 Doll Face 1954
 Ooh It Feels So Good
Chariot 103 Doll Face 1954
 Ooh It Feels So Good

Vibes (Bobby Thomas):
Chariot 105 Stop Torturing Me 1954
 Stop Jibing Baby

Mar-Keys:
(No known recordings)

Vibes (Bobby Thomas & Lenny Welch, Joe Major & William Penha of the Mar-Keys)
*(unreleased acetate)** Crying In The Chapel 1957
 Peace Of Mind

** A single scratchy 78 RPM metal acetate of this record now rests safely in the vaults of a well known but non-disclosed group harmony archive.*

Endeavors:
J&S 254/255 Suffering With My Heart 1959
 I Got The Feeling

Ray Dots:
Vibro 1651 I Need Someone ca. 1958-9
 Lu La

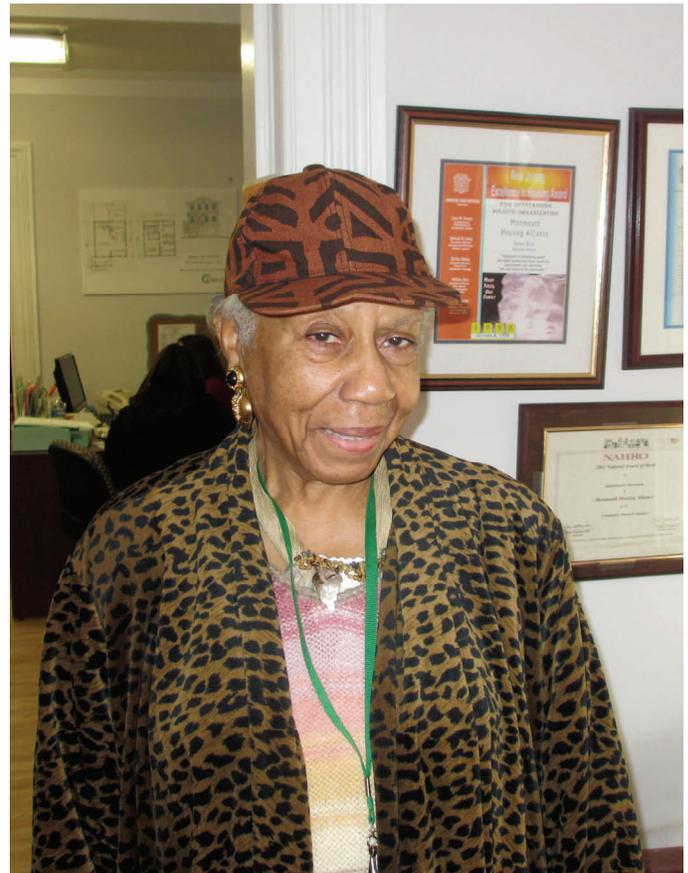
written by Kenneth Wilson of the Endeavors. Bobby Thomas went on to sing with the Orioles. Constance Morris Martin, Eleanor Morris Mitchell and Kenneth Wilson have all passed on, as have Leroy Brown, Arthur Morris, Joe Major, Raymond Morris, William Penha, Bobby Thomas and Gervis Tillman. Arthur Morris, Bobby Thomas, Joe Major and Gervis Tillman were recently inducted into the Asbury Angels, an honor bestowed upon major figures in Asbury Park's music scene who have now passed on. Each was awarded a plaque on one of the benches on Asbury Park's "Boardwalk of Fame".

NOTES

1. Based on the author's interviews, conversations and correspondences with Virginia Brown, Caleb Morris, Bobby Thomas, Frank Hosendove, Lenny Welch, Stoney Jackson and the families of Joe Major and Gervis Tillman.
2. Special thanks to Don Stine of the Asbury Park Historical Society and Ron Coleman of the Broadways.
3. For more information on Asbury Park's West Side vocal groups, see *Echoes of the Past* # 99 and 100.
4. For more group profiles, photos, concert reviews and all things group harmony, visit our website. New features added frequently...

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**Virginia Brown, 2015
(Photo from the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)**