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ECHOES OF THE PAST



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Hub City Harmony: New Brunswick, NJ's Golden Bells and Contessas

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With contributions from Pamela Horner



The Golden Bells, 1957
Left to right: Joyce Walker, Bobby Brown,
William Walker, Richard Laws, Willie Brown.
Photo courtesy of Joyce Walker

In central New Jersey, on the southern banks of the Raritan River lies New Brunswick. Nicknamed the Hub City, New Brunswick is home to 50,000 people. Most urban centers with significant African American populations produced their share of R&B vocal groups during the 1950's and 1960's. New Brunswick would not be expected to be any different, yet comparatively few recordings can be traced to the city. Closer examination shows that New Brunswick did indeed have a thriving Rhythm & Blues scene that, like other central NJ cities Trenton, Plainfield and Asbury Park, was largely ignored by North Jersey and New York City record labels. There were notable exceptions of course. Plainfield had the Del Larks and Parliaments and Asbury Park had the Vibranaires, Broadways and Lenny Welch, but these acts were but a sampling of existing talent.

To be sure, New Brunswick's contributions to black music stretch from pioneer stride pianist James P. Johnson (born in the city in 1894) to current R&B/Hip Hop vocalist Jaheim. In fact Jaheim (last name Hoagland) is the grandson of Victor Hoagland, the New Brunswick 60's and 70's soul singer who sang as Hoagy Lands (*ABC-Paramount, Atlantic, MGM, Laurie* and *Spectrum* labels). Walter Vickers of the Essex ("Easier Said Than Done") also was from New Brunswick.

New Brunswick had a number of fine vocal harmony groups, both street corner and professional.

Groups often cited include the Variations and Realistics, though it's believed neither released a record. This article concerns two New Brunswick vocal groups that did record; the Golden Bells in the 1950's and the Contessas in the 1960's.

The Golden Bells

Joyce Stateman was born in Highland Park, NJ, across the river from New Brunswick. One of five children, Joyce was taught harmony by her mother. "My mother taught us how to sing," recalled Joyce. "She'd used to get us all together and give us our keys. She'd sing with us. We used to sing songs like 'When I Grow Too Old To Dream'. Beautiful old songs. That's how she taught me, my sisters Phyllis and Toni [Antoinette] and my brother, Neal. My other brother, Joe, never sang. My mother taught us all harmony. I used to sing in school in the choir. I always loved to sing."

Joyce had left high school at the age of 16 and married William "Billy" Walker of South River, NJ. Joyce and Billy Walker would sing together on occasion but not professionally. They were approached by an aspiring talent scout, Wallace Howard, who was trying to put a group together.

"Wallace Howard was from New Brunswick also," said Joyce. "He was a little older than me. He wanted to put together a group, and he already had Bobby Brown, Richard Laws and Willy Brown who were all still students at New Brunswick High School. Wallace Howard knew my husband and I could sing and he invited us to join the group. He wanted a girl in the group – not that I ever sang lead. We said yes and ended up joining the group. We ended up rehearsing and recording. We used to go out and sing – not a lot of places. It didn't last too long because I was pregnant. And nothing really happened with the group."

The group was the Golden Bells consisting of Robert Chauncey "Bobby" Brown (lead), Willie Brown (tenor), Joyce Stateman Walker (alto), Billy Walker (baritone) and Richard Laws (bass). Bobby and Willie Brown were cousins.

Before long, Wallace Howard had secured a recording opportunity for the Golden Bells at *Sure Records* in Linden, NJ. *Sure Records* was located at 20 East Elizabeth Avenue in Linden, a city located 16 miles northeast of New Brunswick. Linden holds a special place in R&B history for the wealth of records issued by companies located there. Brothers David and Jules Braun started the *DeLuxe Record* label in 1943 along with A&R man Joseph Leibowitz. The label specialized in Race (R&B) and Hillbilly records. Initially, *DeLuxe* was located at 1130 St. George Avenue in Linden but at



The Golden Bells' "Bells Are Ringing"

some point in the 1940's the Braun brothers probably relocated a mile and a half away to the 20 East Elizabeth Avenue location. In 1947, Sid Nathan of *King Records* purchased a majority interest in *DeLuxe* although it continued being operated from Linden by the Braun brothers until March 1949, when it was moved to Cincinnati. The Braun brothers then started the *Regal* label from 20 East Elizabeth Avenue in 1949 and by 1950 were distributing the *Roost* label from there.

Meanwhile, Joe Leibowitz left *DeLuxe* in 1947 and started the *Wallis Original* label out of his home at 4 Yale Terrace, Linden. By 1951, the *Wallis Original* label began listing its address at 100 North Wood Avenue, in very close proximity to the 20 East Elizabeth Avenue building. Joe Leibowitz would start the *Premium* label in 1955.

Late 1960's advertisements would list 20 East Elizabeth as housing the Linden Radio and Appliance Co. (established 1933). It is likely the *Sure* label was somehow connected to the Braun brothers family.

The Golden Bells' Bobby Brown had written two songs that were recorded and released as a single by *Sure Records*. Bobby sang lead on "Bells are Ringing" while "Pretty Girl" featured Willie Brown on lead. Both sides were published by Howard Music, presumably by Wallace Howard.

"We really didn't sing anywhere," said Joyce. "We sang in South River a couple times. I know I bought a gown, the first gown I ever had. In fact, I have a picture of me in the gown. I was 17."

In spite of trade magazines announcing *Sure* as a new label in May of 1959, Joyce places the record's release date at 1957. "There's a photo of me with the Golden Bells when I was pregnant," said Joyce. "My son was born in 1957."



News clipping of the Golden Bells holding their records. Left to right: Richard Laws, Robert Brown, Joyce Walker, William Walker, Willie Brown. Photo courtesy of Joyce Walker

The Contessas

Fast forward ten years and Joyce Stateman Walker would again find herself in a vocal group. While Joyce and her sisters Toni and Phyllis continued to harmonize together, they began looking for a lead singer. They only had to look as far as their best friend, Mary Bivins Perry [now Mary Cheek], whom they didn't even know could sing.

"They were practicing and they had this girl singing lead," said Mary. "When she left, I said, 'I can sing as good as she can.' They didn't know I could sing. That's how I got into the group. We went on and when we found we really had a group, we had to come up with a name. Phyllis came up with the name Barefoot Contessas [after the 1954 motion picture] and whenever we used to sing we used to take our shoes off! That didn't last too long because after that we never took our shoes off again. We were just the Contessas."

"I was born in Georgia and I came to New Jersey when I was nine," explained Mary. "I went to school in New Brunswick and then my parents moved to Metuchen. I had moved back to New Brunswick. That's when I met Joyce, Toni and Phyllis. We all became best friends. I could sing a little bit and they were looking for somebody to complete their group. From then on we were like sisters."

Mary was born in the central Georgia town of Ellaville, and grew up with a strong family gospel singing background. "My grandfather, James "Jim" Brown, had a quartet in central Georgia. They used to travel around. And his son (my uncle) and his daughter (my aunt) are both deceased now but way back in the day we all came from that gospel background. My grandfather managed two groups back in the late 1940's and early

1950's; the men's group with him and his son and a ladies' group. They were called the Brown Quartet and Quintet. They were on the radio every Sunday morning in Americus, GA. I remember Sam Cooke & the Soul Stirrers were on the road and they'd come by my grandfather's church because he was the biggest deacon of the church. My grandmother would cook dinner for them. Sam Cooke and the group were in my grandmother's house for dinner and Sam and my uncle Emory got in a little argument over some chicken. My grandmother was giving the guests the best part of the chicken and my uncle didn't like it. My family always talked about how my uncle and Sam Cooke got into this argument."

The Contessas ranged in age from 27 to 30 when they formed the group in 1967. All the group members lived in the Robeson Village section of New Brunswick, off of Route 27. The Contessas did most of their singing locally. Traveling long distances for gigs was not an option, as all of the members had children. The three sisters' mother would often look after all the kids while the group was singing. But there were plenty of places to sing around New Brunswick. First of all, New Brunswick had a vibrant night club scene. Route 27 had the Sportsman Lounge and Nessie's. The Elks Lodge at 150 Baldwin Street was another favorite spot and the Contessas sang there. Other local clubs included After Five, the Washington Bar and the Esquire Lounge. Later in the 1970's, Del Lark's Sam Campbell ran a popular night club called the Funk Factory.

Besides clubs, the Contessas sang on the campuses of a number of nearby colleges including Rutgers University in New Brunswick, Princeton University, Rider College and Lehigh College (in Pennsylvania). They also did outdoor concerts.

The Stateman sisters' brother, Neal Stateman by then had become an accomplished guitarist. "Neal was very talented," said his sister, Joyce. "Some guy gave

him a guitar when he was around 15. He taught himself how to play. He was amazing. He was a big guy and he had a beautiful voice. He used to help us with our harmony. When we used to sing as a family, he'd lead."

Neal's band would sometimes back the Contessas in shows but he did not sing with the group. Neal did sing and play guitar with another local group called the Variations. The Variations became quite popular locally, singing hits by the Temptations and Dells. [There are several recordings by soul groups called the Variations but as far as we know, Neal's group did not record.] Sam Campbell of Plainfield NJ's Del Larks recalled a concert at a packed Major's Lounge in Keyport NJ, when a big fight broke out in the audience that soon engulfed the performers. The concert featured Sammy & the Del Larks, George Clinton & the Parliaments and Neal Stateman's Variations. Neal Stateman would later play behind Sam Campbell at the Apollo Theatre when Sam was recording as Tyrone Ashley. Neal would also on occasion play behind Timothy Wilson, James Brown and the O'Jays. The Variations ended up changing their name to the Teachers Plus Three. One former member of the Variations was Jasper Stevens, who was Sam Campbell's partner in *Black Rock Records* in the 1970's, the New Brunswick record label that gave us the female vocal group, Black Velvet.

While the Contessas had their own sound, they liked the records by the Shirelles, Sweet Inspirations, Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight, Martha Reeves & the Vandellas and the Supremes.

At some point, the Contessas got to know songwriter Ronnie Jay (real name Ronald Jennings), a Florida, native who had relocated to New Brunswick four years earlier. Ronnie Jay, 27 at the time, could play the trumpet, piano, organ and drums and had been in a band in Miami. Ronnie wrote several songs for the Contessas including a song called "Just Love Me" and introduced them to Geno Viscione who owned the *WGW* la-



**The Brown Quartet, ca. late 1940's.
Mary's grandfather is seated.
(Photo courtesy of Mary Cheek)**



**The Contessas. Left to right: Mary, Phyllis, Joyce, Toni.
Photo courtesy of Mary Cheek**



Recording on
W. G. W. RECORDS

THE CONTESSAS

Personal Manager: GENO VISCIONE
(201) 722-0604 - (201) 722-5070

**The (Barefoot) Contessas, 1968. Left to right: Phyllis, Joyce, Mary, Toni.
Photo courtesy of Mary Cheek.**

bel out of Somerville, NJ.

Eugene "Geno" Viscione was born in New Brunswick NJ on February 4, 1934. He was a barber and hair stylist at Geno's in nearby Manville, NJ, and also had a music studio in Manville's Rustic Mall. Geno was a songwriter, producer and entertainer who had appeared in motion pictures and on television. Gino signed the Contessas to his *WGW* record label. Besides the Contessas, *WGW*'s main interest seems to have been in white garage bands and rock-a-billy artists.

"We met Geno Viscione through Ronnie Jay," said Mary. "Ronnie was the one who wrote 'Just Love Me' and a couple other songs. He introduced us to Gino and Gino would actually come over and pick us up. He paid the babysitter sometimes. He was nice to us."

Geno Viscione began managing the Contessas as well as recording them. Recording sessions were done at Geno's studio in Manville, NJ. The instrumentation was supplied by the Time Masheen who were the *WGW* house

band. According to recently discovered session tapes the Contessas recorded "You Don't Know My Name," "Broken Heart," "I Like Your Walk," "Give Me What You Got," "I'm Not A Toy," "Just Love Me" and "It's Time For Crying".

Two other sides, "Feel It With Your Heart" and "Ecstasy" exist on the same tapes. These last two feature a male voice with strong female harmony back up. It is believed the harmony is provided by Joyce, Toni and Phyllis. Mary was not present for that session. The lead singer and band may possibly be the garage band, the Werps, who also recorded for *WGW*.

Of the songs recorded, only "Just Love Me" and "It's Time For Crying" were issued as *WGW* 18704. The group is currently looking to have the other songs released.

The Ronnie Jay penned "Just Love Me" was the A-side. The flip side, "It's Time For Crying," was written by James Charles Petrillo. Petrillo was a 21-year-old local songwriter who was attending Seton Hall University at

that time. He also could play numerous musical instruments and sang lead in his own group. "It's Time For Crying" was Petrillo's first published song, though he'd go on to write and publish almost 30 other songs, many for Geno Viscione's publishing company.

On the record, Mary led both sides. Mary did most of the leads because as a family group, the three sisters had a closeness of harmony. "When we sang it would give us chills," said Joyce. "That's how close we were. We could feel the vibrations. We knew whether we were going to go up or down and could follow. Phyllis led a couple songs and Mary was OK with that." With Mary singing lead, Toni sang soprano, Phyllis sang alto and Joyce sang contralto.

"Just Love Me" generated only local attention, getting some air play on New Brunswick's WCTC radio and local juke boxes. Without wider distribution, the record never charted. The group feels that Geno was young like they were and was still feeling his way along.

Still, the Contessas enjoyed some brief popularity in the central Jersey area. Playing clubs, they got to meet many of the entertainers that came through New Brunswick's night club scene.

"There were groups out of Philly that would come to New Brunswick," said Joyce. "We would end up singing with them."

"Bobby Eli came to New Brunswick," recalled Mary, "With a group from Philadelphia called Tommy Cook & the Fascinations [*Possibly Tommy Cook & the Fantastics (Priority label)*]. I remember we were all practicing in my living room when I lived at 13 Gatling Court and Bobby was trying to teach us this song. I still remember the song, 'Nothing Takes The Place Of Love'. He taught it to us but nothing ever came of it. But that's how I remember Bobby Eli. He came with the band.

They were called the Fascinations and they were out of Philadelphia. Tommy Cook, his brother Billy Cook, Johnny Sullivan, Jimmy Grant, Roosevelt Simmons, someone named Kenny and John "Pancho" Christian. Johnny Sullivan was the drummer when Billy Cook was sick. Jimmy Grant was a guitar player. We knew all of them. We went to Philadelphia a few times and saw them. They were always in New Brunswick because they were doing shows there." Tommy Cook had previously sung with the Sensations. Roosevelt Simmons had sung with the Sensations and Universals. Pancho Christian had sung with the Universals, Cameos and Turbans.

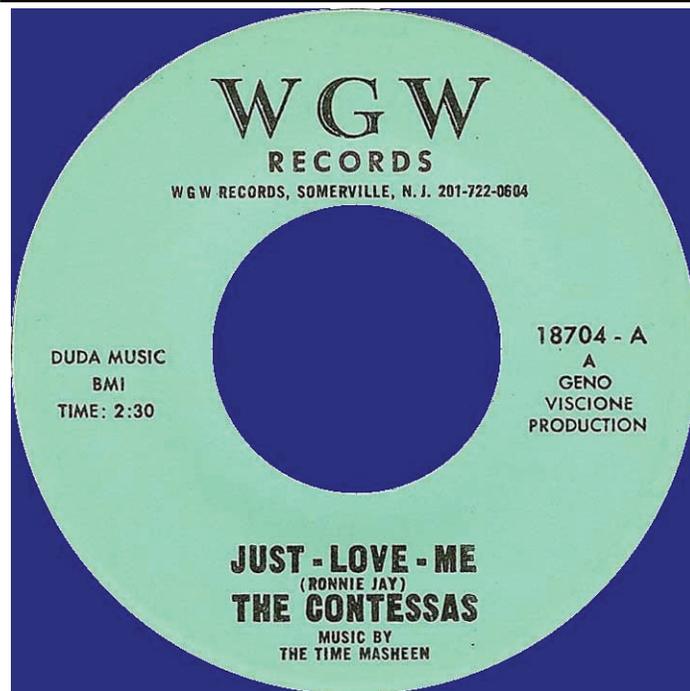
For the record collectors among us, there are two different pressings of the Contessas' record on WGW. The first appears to be a dark blue label which group members were given when the record came out. It is similar to earlier releases on WGW.

A more common pressing is on a light blue label that also lists "Music by The Time Masheen" in small print under the Contessas name (see label scans on the previous page). WGW released a different record by the Time Masheen and this alternate pressing may be tied to the Time Masheen release.

The Contessas' music career lasted for a while. Eventually the group called it quits.

What they are worth.

- Clean copies of the Golden Bells record on *Sure* list for \$3000 a piece. Be careful as bootleg copies abound.
- Light blue WGW label copies of the Contessas record are seen for \$20—a bargain for such a great record.
- Dark blue WGW label copies of the Contessas record rarely ever come up.



True first pressing of the Contessas' record on a dark blue label. Label scan courtesy of Mary Cheek

Alternate pressing of the Contessas' record on a light blue label. Courtesy of P. J. Noce.



Left: Toni, Mary and Joyce in 2007. Right: Phyllis. Photos courtesy of Mary Cheek.

Mary worked for radio station WCTC from 1970 to 1975. She moved back to Georgia in 1983. There she began singing with the Amey Gospel Singers, a group founded by her aunt, Odessa Amey. Mary's aunt and uncle Emory Brown also sang with the group. They sang in many churches around Atlanta. Mary's son-in-law, Anthony Matthews sang with the soul vocal group Change Of Pace (*Stone Lady* label).

Joyce Stateman Walker still lives in New Brunswick. She sings in the church choir at Tabernacle Baptist Church in New Brunswick and even wrote one of the songs they sing. Joyce is also very talented at writing spiritual poetry.

Of Joyce's sisters, Phyllis Stateman Holmes died in March of 2001 and Toni Stateman Voorhees Black died in April of 2012. Joyce's husband Billy Walker has also passed away, as has Neal Stateman.

Geno Viscione died in September 2009. Ronny Jay moved back to Florida some time ago. Of the Golden Bells, Bobby Brown is believed to be living in Georgia. Whereabouts of the others is unknown.

Over the past few years we've begun documenting the history of R&B vocal groups from central New Jersey here in *Echoes of the Past* (see Notes & References). This work has really just begun.



**The Odessa Amey Singers.
Mary is in the middle.
(Photo courtesy of Mary Cheek)**

Notes and References

1. Based on interviews and numerous correspondences with Joyce Walker and Mary Cheek (2013).
2. Our sincere thanks to P. J. Noce for initial contacts, photos and recordings. It was P. J.'s early research that made this article possible.
3. Thanks also to Sam Campbell (Del Larks), Donn Feleti and George Frunzi for most helpful input.
4. For more articles on central NJ vocal groups see our articles "Doo Wop & Soul In The Birthplace Of Funk: The Sammy & The Del Larks Story" (*Echoes of the Past* #86; 2008); "Asbury Park's West Side Vocal Groups—Part 1" (*Echoes of the Past* #99; 2012); "Asbury Park's West Side Vocal Groups—Part 2" (*Echoes of the Past* #100; 2012);

Related Discography

The Golden Bells:

Sure 1001/1002 Bells Are Ringing 1957
Pretty Girl

The Contessas:

WGW 18704 Just Love Me Apr 1968
It's Time For Crying

The Contessas (unreleased)

You Don't Know My Name 1968
Broken Heart
I Like Your Walk
Give Me What You Got
I'm Not A Toy

The Contessas (unreleased backup vocals)

Feel It With Your Heart 1968
Ecstasy

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