

Opportunity Knocks Twice for Philly's Singing Sensations

Part 1

by Charlie Horner
with contributions from Pamela Horner

In the world of popular music, precious few artists ever have one of their records reach the Top-20 charts. Even rarer is the R&B vocal group that charted big in one decade and returned to greater popularity years later with changes in personnel and style. The only ones that come to mind are the Dells, Platters, Blue Notes and Sensations. Of the Sensations, only Yvonne Mills Baker and Alphonso Howell were common to both the group that recorded "Yes Sir That's My Baby" in 1956 and the group that recorded "Let Me In" in the early 1960's. Part 1 covers the 1950's Sensations, leaving the "Let Me In" group for the next issue of *Echoes of the Past*. In both parts, the Sensations' career is seen from the viewpoint of Alphonso Howell, who related this story in great detail



Alphonso Howell, ca. 1950
(Photo courtesy of the Howell family)



1943 photo of Alphonso Howell (right),
at the age of seven, with his two sisters.
(Photo courtesy of the Howell family)

prior to his untimely passing in 1998.

Alphonso Howell, Jr. was born on September 4, 1936 in North Philadelphia, the eldest of three children. Alphonso had a musical family and there was always music in his home. When Alphonso's parents separated, he and his mother lived in his maternal grandmother's home until he was six years old. Alphonso's grandmother would bring home records of all genre; classical, gospel and popular music. The family Victrola first introduced him to songs by Louis Jordan and Louis Armstrong. Alphonso's mother, Bessie Dow Howell, and his Uncle Nathan had both sung professionally with the Nathaniel Dep Choral Ensemble and were always singing to him as a child. His Aunt Helen tried in vain to teach Alphonso how to read music, but as a youngster, he preferred being out in the street playing. Al's uncle Harold Dow, a sax and clarinet player, had his own band in North Philly. As a six-year-old, Alphonso would hide behind the living room curtain and watch his uncle's band rehearse. Another uncle, Morris Dow, who was only a year older than Alphonso, learned to play guitar and harmonica and later, in the 1961, joined organist Jimmy McGriff's Trio. That's Morris Dow playing guitar on Jimmy McGriff's "I Got A Woman" (*Jell and Sue* labels). Morris would later introduce Alphonso to jazz music by Nat King Cole, Johnny Smith and Django Reinhardt. Morris Dow currently sings and plays guitar with the Ink Spots group that also features former Swallows' Herman Denby, former Clovers' Harold Winley and Sonny Hatchett (formerly of Sonny & the Dukes).

Alphonso's life changed in 1943 when his mother hit the numbers and used the money to take her children away from the congestion of city life. The Howell family moved to the rural community of Apex, North Carolina, nine miles west of Raleigh. The open spaces and farm life made quite an impression on young Alphonso. On the radio, he listened intently to live broadcasts of gospel quartet singing, a common tradition in the Carolinas. Alphonso's country upbringing lasted only about a year. His family returned

to Philadelphia, moving first to the Elmwood section (87th Street and Tinicum Avenue) and then to the Packer Avenue area of South Philly when Alphonso was nine.

Officially called the Shipyard Homes, the Packer Avenue projects were built during the war to house some of the many workers from the nearby Philadelphia Naval Yard. The Shipyard Homes were classified by the locals as either the "flat tops" or the "steeple tops", named for their roofs. Steeple tops were originally built for whites, though after the war the neighborhood turned predominately black. The flat top homes down the street were nothing more than temporary "barracks" built mostly for black Naval Yard workers. Their cheap gypsum board construction led to the nickname, "Cardboard City". With the post-war housing shortage, these flat tops became permanent homes for many black families. Alphonso Howell lived in a steeple top row home at 1700 Packer Avenue, in the shadow of the old Philadelphia Naval Hospital.

Like many of his friends, Alphonso spent much of the late 1940's listening to the Orioles, Steve Gibson & the Red Caps and the Ravens on the radio. He didn't start singing R&B vocal harmony, however, until shortly after graduated Brey Elementary School and entering Vare Junior High. During a morning assembly at Vare in 1949, classmate Bernard Berkett stepped onto the auditorium stage and began singing the Orioles' tune, "Forgive And Forget". Bernard's imitation of the voice and stage mannerisms of Orioles' lead Sonny Til were captivating. As Bernard sang, the girls in the auditorium started to gasp and scream. The more Bernard mimicked Sonny, the louder the girls screamed. Alphonso could understand adoration for Sonny Til, one of the hottest entertainers in black America. But this wasn't Sonny Til singing. This was just Bernard singing Sonny Til's songs! Still the girls screamed hysterically. At that instant, Alphonso decided to take up singing.

Alphonso Howell first began singing out on Geary Street across from the recreation center, in the heart of the projects. His deep-voiced rendition of the Red Caps' 1949 standard "Blueberry Hill" drew an admiring crowd. All was well until a young tenor from the flat tops, Roosevelt Simmons, began singing Orioles' songs and Alphonso's audience soon deserted him for Roosevelt. "Roe" had the Sonny Til imitation down perfectly - the voice, the song styling and the emotion. He grasped an imaginary microphone and leaned into it the way Sonny did on stage. Alphonso countered with another song but quickly realized he couldn't compete with "Philly's version of Sonny Til". Before long, Alphonso and Roosevelt had worked out a truce by combined their talents and form their own "Orioles". Roosevelt and Alphonso were soon joined by two friends, Warren Sherrill from the flat tops and Robert "Tody" Mott from 16th & Mole Streets (the steeple tops). Even though the new group enjoyed harmonizing, Roe and Alphonso were at first more interested in playing baseball and football. This changed through the influence of Russell Carter. Russell was from the 7200 block of Saybrook Avenue in Elmwood section of the city. Russell lived to sing and he was a frequent visitor to Cardboard City. Knowing the foursome was capable of some pretty decent harmony, Russell would patiently watch them play ball but at every opportunity he'd plead with them to sing with him.

A local radio program in the early years of R&B had a big impact on Philly's black teenagers. The *Parisian Tailor Kiddie Hour* launched the careers of dozens of area performers and influenced countless others. The *Kiddie Hour* was an amateur show for black children. It was broadcast live over WPEN every Sunday from South Street's Royal Theater. The program took its name from its sponsor, a local tailor shop. Auditions were held every Saturday at the O. V. Catto Hall. The *Kiddie Hour* was immensely popular among Philadelphia's black community and most black kids dreamed of per-



The Royal Theater on South Street (Philadelphia) was the home of the Parisian Tailor Kiddie Hour. (Photo from the Classic Urban Harmony Archives, taken in the 1990's)



Try-outs for the Parisian Tailor Kiddie Hour, taking place at the O.V. Catto Hall, the day before. This photo shows a youngster, Paul Williams (lower right) being registered in 1950. Paul Williams would later gain fame as soul singer, Billy Paul. (From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)

forming on it. For those growing up in Philly's housing projects and elsewhere, performing on the *Kiddie Hour* meant instant fame and respectability. For those musical or singing talent, getting on the *Kiddie Hour* was a very real opportunity.

To have a chance at a radio appearance, the young group needed a name. They picked the name Quantrells. Next the Quantrells went out and bought yellow shirts, with little press on "QT" insignias. The shirts looked sharp. They were similar to Eisenhower shirts with flaps over the two front pockets. Girls that followed the group were quick to point out the double meaning of the letters, QT. "Look. They're cuties."

The Quantrells rehearsed on the corners around Packer Avenue and at members' homes. Roosevelt Simmons was picked to lead the group because whenever he sang a Sonny Til number, he attracted a crowd. Tody Mott sang baritone. Russell Carter second tenor, Warren Sherrill first tenor and Alphonso Howell bass. In retrospect, the Quantrells personnel now looks like a who's who of later Philadelphia R&B. Before the 1950's ended, Roosevelt would sing with the Sensations and then become lead of the Universals. Tody would sing bass and play guitar with the Dreamers on *Grand*. Russell would lead the Cherokees on *Grand*. Warren would sing with the Del-Knights and Alphonso would bass for the Sensations and Silhouettes.

Russell first suggested the Quantrells tryout for the *Parisian Tailor Kiddie Hour* sometime in mid-1951. After the Quantrells had perfected their harmonies they headed to the O. V. Catto Hall to audition. There they met the other *Kiddie Hour* vocal groups: established groups like the Buccaneers who had an open invitation to appear regularly; frequent winners like Robert Reed & the Orients, Doris Brown & the Flamingoes (female group), the Baritones and Junior Barnes & the Kazelles. Through numerous appearances, these youngsters had already become local heroes. In addition, there were dozens of hopeful amateur groups, some quite good and some dreadfully off key. To the Quantrells' delight, they were picked to appear on the *Parisian Tailor Hour*. So the next day, with much of black Philadelphia listening, the Quantrells nervously stepped out onto the Royal's narrow stage and began their singing career. After a brief introduction by MC Jay Corbett, the Quantrells launched into their rendition of the Swallows' "Dearest", with Roosevelt singing lead. From the applause of the crowd and the smile on Mr. Corbett's face they knew they'd done well. The next day in school, the Quantrells were greeted with "Heard you on *Parisian Tailor*. The group sounds great!". Everywhere they went, classmates and friends implored the Quantrells to sing. And sing they did - in the hallways, on the fire escape, on the street corner. Roosevelt would do his Sonny Til voice and girls would swoon. For the members of the Quantrells, show business was now in their blood.

The Quantrells returned to the *Parisian Tailor Hour*, again and again. Each time, winning an appearance became easier since the group had gained a following. All told, the Quantrells made about six such radio appearances, singing songs like the Swallows' "Will You Be Mine" and Tommy Edwards' "Please Mr. Sun". Other *Parisian Tailor* groups began to accept Quantrells. The Ford Brothers, one of Philly's most respected groups and early forerunners of the Keystoners, used to visit Alphonso's home. John Ford, the area's premier bass singer, taught Alphonso a lot about bassing. In fact, John Ford is credited with teaching many of Philly's bass singers.

The Quantrells' repertoire consisted of a mix of the popular songs of the day along with some standards. Roosevelt led the Quantrells on the Orioles' tunes "When You're A Long Way From Home" and "Don't Tell Her What's Happened To Me," Jo Stafford's "You Belong To Me" and the Dominoes' "I Am With You". Roosevelt had seen the Swallows sing "When The Swallows Come Back To Capistrano" down at the Earle Theater and the Quantrells started doing the Swallows'



The Quantrells performing on the *Parisian Tailor Kiddie Hour*, 1951. Left to right: Fill-in for Robert Mott, Warren Sherrill, Roosevelt Simmons, Russell Carter, Alphonso Howell, MC Jay Corbett.

(Photo from Classic Urban Harmony Archives.)

(Taken by the Keystoners' Norman Smith.)



Penny arcade metal acetate of the Quantrells singing "Heavenly Father" with Reuben Taylor on piano.
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)

arrangement of that song long before the Dominoes put their version on vinyl. Warren led songs like "The Sunny Side Of The Street" and the Tony Bennett song, "Blue Velvet". Alphonso's bass voice led "Heart And Soul" with an arrangement he learned from the Ford Brothers.

Sometime in 1952, Roosevelt Simmons was "put out" of the group. His replacement was Tyrone Braxton, a friend of Russell's. Roosevelt still remained close to the group but Tyrone did the last couple of *Parisian Tailor* appearances and subsequent club dates.

Cancellation of the *Parisian Tailor Kiddie Hour* by WPEN in 1952 hurt, but did not kill, the thriving Philly vocal group scene. A generation of quartets and quintets spawned by the *Kiddie Hour* had now matured and these groups were now looking to record. With few record labels in Philly, recording opportunities were scarce. Just to hear their own voices played back, groups would often head for one of the two the penny arcade studios in center city. There, for a buck or two, they had access to a microphone and a machine that would direct-cut a single copy of a metal acetate demo record for the group. The penny arcade on the south side of Market Street, between 12th and 13th Streets, even had a piano. Supplementing the group's sound with a piano seemed like a good idea to the Quantrells so they would sometimes bring their friend Reuben Taylor with them as pianist. Group demos were not limited to the group's formal personnel. Whenever four or five neighborhood singers got together there was an opportunity for a penny arcade dub. Literally thousands of these metal acetates were cut by aspiring young Philly vocal groups, though very few exist today.

In post-*Kiddie Hour* days, the Quantrells started making club appearances. They had always performed in school and in talent shows but now they were becoming professional. At first the group would just drop by clubs. Warren and Tyrone, who were older, would get the group in the door and they'd just get up and sing. When they realized they could get paid for appearing, they added "Darby" Bill Walker as a pianist. Walker later became a recording member of the Ray-O-Vacs. The Quantrells performed in places like the Township Tavern on Sharon Road in nearby Sharon Hill, Pennsylvania.

As in most urban areas, the Philadelphia groups often traded members, leading to the cross hybridization of styles and the formation of new groups. Russell Carter left the Quantrells first, becoming the lead of the Cherokees.

For an ever so short time, the Quantrells disbanded. By then, Alphonso Howell was attending South Philadelphia High School (often referred to as Southern High). Southern High has quite a list of Philadelphia singers as alumni, including Al Alberts, Marian Anderson, Frankie Avalon, Chubby Checker, James Darin, Fabian, Eddie Fisher, Buddy Greco, Mario Lanza, Al Martino and many more. At Southern, Alphonso restarted the Quantrells. These new Quantrells reunited Alphonso with Roosevelt Simmons and added classmates George Savior, Enoch Savior (cousin to George) as well as a friend, Leonard Moore. This group was only together a short time but appeared on Southern High's auditorium stage and elsewhere. After graduating high school, the Quantrells changed personnel (and possibly name) again. This time the group consisted of Roosevelt Simmons, Alphonso Howell, baritone Roland Upshaw, and tenor Joe Cross. This group sang spirituals and in several area churches.

All the while, Warren Sherrill and Tody Mott remained close to the group and filled in when they could. In 1953, four of the original five Quantrells (Alphonso, Roosevelt, Warren, and Tody) reunited as a vocal group. Warren, however, had joined the Air Force and was only around when on leave. While singing on the street corner one day, the group

met Tommy Wicks. Tommy had been singing lead with another group containing tenor and high school track star Claude Ferguson, a baritone remembered only as Teddy and a bass named John. When that group broke up, Tommy began looking for a new singing group to join.

Tommy Wicks soon joined Roosevelt Simmons, Warren Sherrill, Tody Mott and Alphonso Howell. The new group was called the Cavaliers. The name "Cavaliers" was a take-off of Cabineers, whose song "Each Time" was one of the group's favorites. Before long, Tody, who had moved to 11th and Norris Streets, got into a dispute with the others and was "put out" of the group. Tody (now using the first name Tony and his stepfather's last name, Hodges) joined a group in his new neighborhood. This group became the Dreamers on *Grand*. With Warren Sherrill in the Air Force and unable to make rehearsals, it became obvious he would have to be replaced. While rehearsing at Tommy Wick's house on Geary Street in South Philadelphia, the group met Tommy's girlfriend, Yvonne Mills.

Yvonne Mills had begun singing as a child in church. Her family belonged to a Pentecostal church where her father was minister. Yvonne and her sister Ernestine used to sing duets in church as little girls. As they got older the two sisters joined the church choir. The both sisters had beautiful voices. Ernestine later recorded as Ernestine Eady.

Yvonne admired singer Dinah Washington and could sing very much like her. Still, she had no thoughts of singing with a vocal group, especially a male group.

"They [the Cavaliers] were singing.", recalled Yvonne, "And I would insert little high notes just to blend. I think Warren had to go into the service so they said, 'Well you can fill in until he comes back.'". "That's right.", remembered Alphonso. "Warren went back to camp. We actually talked Yvonne into taking Warren's place. She didn't want to do it and it took a little persuading. But she knew she could sing."

Though Warren Sherrill remained a close friends with Alphonso, Tommy and Roosevelt, he never sang with them again. When he eventually left the service, Warren Sherrill began singing and recording with the Del-Knights.

Even with Yvonne in the group, Tommy Wicks was still the Cavaliers' lead. Tommy was also the main spokesperson for the group. He had connections in almost every night club, bar and speakeasy in the area. One such South Philly speakeasy, on Webster Street just off of Broad, was owned by Herman Gillespie.

Herman Gillespie was a key figure in Philadelphia black music. Gillespie, also known as "Piney", was a song writer and record producer. He eventually worked with and managed several groups including the Keystoners and Turbans. Piney was not the Cavaliers manager, but he helped the group quite a bit. The Cavaliers would drink corn liquor and rehearse at Piney's home and he would give them songs he'd written. The Cavaliers began singing several of Piney's songs included "When You Dance" and "Sister Sookie". While the Cavaliers weren't thrilled with either of those songs, they did like two other Gillespie songs, "Merry Christmas My Love" and "Woman". Piney knew Joe Morris, the band leader for *Herald Records*. So, in October 1953, the Cavaliers headed for Washington, DC, to record the two songs for *Herald*. Joe Morris' band was playing a two week engagement at Washington's Howard Theater, along with singers Faye Adams and Al Savage. Adams and Morris were riding high on the charts with "Shake A Hand" and were about to record the follow up. The Cavaliers caught the show at the Howard and hung around to record later that night. The Joe Morris troupe recorded several numbers including "I'll Be True" featuring Faye Adams. At the end of the session, the Cavaliers recorded "Merry Christmas My Love" and "Woman" backed by Joe

Morris' band. The Cavaliers were excited at the prospect of having a record out. They returned to Philadelphia and waited. Herald asked to the group to re-cut "Merry Christmas My Love" with some overdubbing, which they did. Again they waited. Christmas day 1953 came and went with no Cavaliers record released. In fact, the songs were never released and to this day remain lost in the *Herald* vaults.

By 1954, it seemed everyone had records out but the Cavaliers. Russell Carter's new group, the Cherokees was riding high with their *Grand* recording of "Rainbow Of Love". They were signed to *Grand* after a spectacular performance on a city wide talent contest at the Uptown Theater in mid 1953.. On the show, the Cherokees' performance of "Please Tell Her So" blew away all competition including the Cavaliers, Castelles, and about a dozen other Philly quartets.

Tody and his group the Dreamers were also recording for *Grand*. They released "Tears In My Eyes". Piney, meanwhile, while not ignoring the Cavaliers, had begun working with a new South Philly group called the Turbans. Word was, he had given them "When You Dance" and "Sister Sookie". Discouraged, the Cavaliers rehearsed less and less in 1954 and gradually became inactive. Gillespie promptly gave "Woman" to the Keystoners. (They too recorded the song, but their version also remains unreleased.)

Wanting to keep singing, Tommy Wicks joined Richard Barrett's group, the Royal Angels. The Royal Angels were from the 25th and Diamond Streets area of North Philadelphia and often sang at the Morlan Recreation Center. The original group consisted of Richard Barrett (pre-Valentines), Wilbur Crawford, Leon Booker and Otha Francis, who played piano and sang tenor. The group sang locally until one day when they headed to New York to enter the talent contest at the famed Apollo Theater. They won, attracting the attention of numerous people who promised the group opportunities in New York. After the Royal Angels returned to Philadelphia, Otha Francis decided to leave the group. Tommy Wicks was picked to replace him as tenor. A short time later, Richard Barrett and Tommy Wicks headed back to New York to follow up leads for singing engagements. The leads did not pan out. Times were tough for the two singers in NYC. Tired of scrounging for food and a place to stay, Tommy Wicks quickly became discouraged. One night, while feeling depressed, Tommy picked up a pen and started to write a song. The words seemed to flow from his mind to the pen and onto the page "...All I get is sympathy..." .

Tommy Wicks returned to Philadelphia. Richard Barrett decided to "gut it out" and stay in New York. He took odd jobs to support himself while pursuing his singing career and at times found himself sleeping on roof tops. Eventually Richard joined the Valentines. Richard Barrett's decision to remain in New York was paramount to the development of Rhythm & Blues/Rock & Roll. Without Richard's involvement we would never have had so many great recordings by Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers, Little Anthony & the Imperials, the Chantels, the Flamingos, the Dubs, the Isley Brothers and hundreds more.

Back in Philly without a vocal group, Tommy Wicks considered singing solo. Early in 1955, he entered a talent contest. The contest, held at a club called the Wishing Well at 15th and Fairmount in North Philadelphia, was judged by *Atlantic Records* president Herb Abramson and singing star Clyde McPhatter. Tommy won! Unknown to Tommy Wicks, Abramson had just returned to Atlantic after a stint in the service and was anxious to reassert his influence with the label. He told Tommy he was looking for talent but especially wanted a vocal group. Thinking quick, Tommy told Abramson he also sang with a vocal group, the Cavaliers. Tommy was quick to gather the old group and discuss the opportunity.

By now, the flat top projects of South Philly were be-

ing torn down to make room for the access roads to the new Walt Whitman Bridge. Most of the Cavaliers had relocated to North Philadelphia. Another talent show was approaching and Tommy wanted the Cavaliers to compete in it. Despite having recorded, the Cavaliers as a group had not made many appearances. With the exception of the Capris, there were no other predominately male groups in Philly with a female member and Yvonne felt funny about appearing with them.

"I wasn't going to sing with a bunch of boys," protested Yvonne. "It would look so stupid. But they said, 'Come on. Come on,' so I went and we won."

This talent show, held at the Cabana Club on Market street, was produced by popular Philadelphia dee jay, Kae Williams. Kae's radio program, "The Snap Club" was broadcast every Monday through Saturday from 6-9 AM on WHAT-AM. Kae's morning "drive time" show included raps like "Get out of that bed and get that bread!" By coincidence, Kae was also a distant cousin of Alphonso Howell. Kae Williams was so impressed with the group that he became their manager.

"The Sensations came to me on a talent show" Kae Williams told the audience of Charlie Horner's radio program in 1982. "This Tommy Wicks was a hell of a singer. He wrote a song called 'Sympathy'. They won that round of the contest. But Yvonne, when she stepped out and started singing - there was something special in her voice. She was like a substitute, pinch hitting for one of the boys. The next week, when they came back for the semi-finals, she was missing. I told Tommy, 'Go back and get the girl, man.' I said, 'You keep the girl and you've got a contract with me! I have no money but I have confidence in you.'"

Tommy told Kae that *Atlantic* might be interested in the group and Kae arranged an audition. At that time, the Cavaliers were doing an arrangement of "Yes Sir, That's My Baby" that they had "borrowed" from the Clovers. As usual, Roosevelt did the lead.



Radio personality, Kae Williams
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)

"I was living in the 1800 block of Diamond Street," said Kae. "I had a good tape recorder. I recorded them on tape. At that time tape recorders weighted about fifty pounds. I lugged that thing all the way to New York City to Herb Abramson. I said, 'Herb, I've got something. Listen!'"

The four Cavaliers (Tommy Wicks, lead and baritone; Yvonne Mills, soprano; Roosevelt Simmons, lead and first tenor; Alphonso Howell, bass) went to New York with six numbers. On three songs, Tommy was doing lead and the rest Roosevelt led. At the audition, however, they only got to sing four tunes, "Sympathy", "My Heart Cries For You", a song called "Bye Bye Baby" and "Yes Sir That's My Baby" (with Roosevelt doing the lead). *Atlantic* execs Herb Abramson, Ahmed Ertegun and Jerry Wexler listened to the group's songs and then left the room to discuss what they'd heard. When they returned five minutes later, Jerry Wexler said, "Let the girl sing lead."

Yvonne and Roosevelt switched parts and the Sensations were born. Alphonso recalled the name Sensations as being Tommy's idea. *Atlantic* wouldn't let the group use the name Cavaliers with a lady in the group.

The Cavaliers/Sensations signed with *Atlantic* on July 13, 1955. A week later, *Atlantic* announced the creation of a new subsidiary label, *Atlas*. The *Atlas* label was to have its own recording artists and even its own set of distributors, distinct from the parent label. *Atlantic* was scrambling to sign new talent for its subsidiary. They quickly signed the Royal Jokers from Detroit, singer Pauline Rogers and New Orleans blues singer Billy Nightingale. They then purchased the contract of the west coast group, the Robins, along with the rights to their record, "Smokey Joe's Cafe", currently breaking national on the *Spark* label. The Cavaliers were in the right place at the right time. Their first recording session for *Atlantic* was on July 29, 1955. Before the week was out, *Atlantic* realized there already was an *Atlas* label and changed the disk's moniker to *Atco*.



The Sensations' first release on Atco, "Yes Sir That's My Baby". (From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)



The Sensations on *Atco* Records. Left to right: Alphonso Howell, Yvonne Mills, Roosevelt Simmons, Tommy Wicks.
(Courtesy of Alphonso Howell)

At the Sensations' first *Atco* recording session, the group recorded "My Heart Cries For You", "Right Or Wrong", "Yes Sir That's My Baby" and the Tommy Wicks composition, "Sympathy". From these, *Atco* selected "Yes Sir..." and "Sympathy" for the first release. "Yes Sir..." featured Yvonne on lead and was intended to be the "A" side. "Sympathy" featured Tommy. *Atco* had picked former Ravens producer, Howard Biggs, to do the arrangements for all the Sensations' songs. All of the standard *Atlantic* musicians, including guitarist Mickey Baker and sax player Sam "The Man" Taylor were on the session. The Sensations brought a couple bottles of wine to the recording session to "loosen up" between songs. Being new to the big business aspects of the music field, they couldn't understand why *Atco* was spurning their breaks between songs and rushing them through the session. They didn't realize until later that *Atco* was paying each musician about \$65 an hour.

The Sensations first record was released on November 5, 1955. Trade magazines rated it as nothing special, but within three weeks, *Atco* ads were proclaiming it a hit. This was based on immediate strong action in the Philadelphia market. Kae Williams was pushing the record on his radio show and it was beginning to take off. By November 30, *Billboard Magazine's* R&B Territorial Best Sellers survey had it at #4 in Philadelphia. In New York "Yes Sir..." was equally popular, making *Cashbox's* New York "Hot" ten list on December 2 and reaching #2 before the year was over.

With the release of their first record, manager Kae Williams had the Sensations work locally for about three or four weeks to get their act together before accepting a tour. Kae produced cabaret shows at the O. V. Catto Hall and Town Hall. The Sensations worked there with singers Slender Manning and Nicky Lee.

On November 17, Kae Williams had the Sensations open up for Ray Charles at Philadelphia's Town Hall. The band was to be Rollie McGill and his Whippoorwills, riding high with their 1955 hit, "There Goes That Train". Rollie had first recorded the song for Herman Gillespie's *Piney* label but it soon found its way to *Mercury*. Rollie found his way to Kae Williams's management.

Town Hall was divided into two sections; the theater

and the cabaret. The Ray Charles show was scheduled for the cabaret. Excited about appearing with a major star like Charles, the Sensations settled into their dressing room and began preparing for the show. All of the sudden, the dressing room door burst open and Ray Charles entered with his entourage including band members David "Fathead" Newman, Jay Dennis, James Sheffield, William Peoples, John Willis, Joseph Bridgewater, Tommy Brown and vocalist Mary Ann Fisher. The Ray Charles band informed the Sensations that this was to be their dressing room and the Sensations must leave. While somewhat in awe of Ray Charles, the Sensations would not back down and give up their dressing room. They were Kae Williams' group and Kae was producing and MC'ing the show. If Kae wanted them to have the dressing room, they were staying put! In the middle of the ensuing argument, Kae Williams walked in.

"You don't understand, I'm Ray Charles!" the famous entertainer proclaimed.

Kae Williams had broken into radio a decade before, at a time when blacks were not welcomed in the business. His feisty nature had allowed him to fight back at prejudice and discrimination in the entertainment field. Where weaker men had been driven from radio, Kae had a reputation for not taking crap from anyone.

"I don't care who the @!*# ***you are!***", snapped the fiery dee jay defiantly. "***I'm Kae Williams!***"

The argument continued for a short while with much shouting. Ray Charles and his band succeeded in getting Kae and his group out of the dressing room and locked the door. Alphonso and the group watched as Kae Williams went to the hallway pay phone and made a call. Shortly thereafter, another commotion ensued. A team of Philadelphia police officers were banging on the door to Ray Charles' dressing room, looking for drugs. People in the entertainment field knew that members of Ray Charles' group had at times indulged in the use of illegal substances. But then, drug use was rampant in the business. According to the *Philadelphia Tribune*, the police found a burnt spoon, a needle and syringe, and a small quantity of marijuana in the dressing room. In addition, Charles and three of the band members were reported to have fresh needle marks in their arms. Ray and his band members were promptly placed under arrest. Fearing a riot, the police consented to allow the show to go on. But through the entire show, the stage was encircled with cops. After the show, Ray and his entire band were taken downtown and arraigned. Ray Charles made the \$2000 bail. The rest were jailed overnight. The Sensations, who had only wine in their possession, were not arrested. Ray Charles, who recalled the incident in his autobiography, *Brother Ray*, denied the reefer even belonged to his band. The newspapers promptly ran the headlines, "Disc Jockey Had Own Dance Raided For Dope". After going through a lengthy legal process, the charges were finally dropped. Ray Charles vowed never again to perform in Philadelphia. But Kae Williams further enhanced his reputation that night as a person not to be messed with. And this Kae loved.

After the Town Hall incident made all of the newspapers, the Sensations were sure their careers were over before they even started. Manager Kae Williams was not worried. He believed that, for a relatively unknown singing group, "all publicity is good publicity". He was right. Both the press and the public lined up behind Kae Williams.

Kae arranged another Town Hall show in time for Christmas, including the Sensations, Lee Andrews and the Hearts, Ruth Brown, the Gazelles and Screaming Jay Hawkins. By now the Sensations had their own piano player, James Orlando Howard. "We called him Slim," recalled Alphonso, because he was [thin and] six foot seven".

Slim Howard had been born during the World War I era and had considerable experience playing with numerous bands including Jimmy Gorham's band. He had previously been a member of the Four Blues. Slim's piano playing for the Sensations marked the beginning of his long association with Kae Williams - a relationship which would eventually include playing piano on the Silhouettes' recording of "Get A Job" and touring with the Silhouettes. Slim also had a talent for songwriting. Some of his songs would eventually be recorded by the Ray-O-Vacs and Flamingoes.

Early in 1956 Kae arranged the Sensations' first tour, a twenty-one day junket that included three one-week-long stops; the Royal Theater in Baltimore, the Howard Theater in Washington, and the Apollo Theater in Harlem. On the Baltimore-Washington leg of the tour were Roy Hamilton, Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis and his band, featuring organist and pianist Shirley Scott, and comedian George Kirby. During the first week, Roy Hamilton began to develop throat problems. Being a gutsy performer, Roy stuck it out through most of the second week. Toward the end of the week at the Howard though, Hamilton's voice was getting hoarser and hoarser. Finally,



The Sensations performing at the Apollo.
Photos courtesy of Alphonso Howell

with only a couple days to go, Roy's doctor, fearing permanent damage, ordered him into temporary retirement. The M.C., Bill Cook, after explaining the situation to the audience, had to fill in Roy's time slot by telling jokes. *Jet Magazine* was on hand to get the story and ran a photo of Yvonne and Shirley holding a big spray pump to Roy's throat. According to news sources, Roy was diagnosed as having pneumonia and the early stages of tuberculosis. He eventually made a full recovery and returned to singing.

At the end of the Howard engagement, the Sensations headed for Harlem's famed Apollo Theater. The Apollo show also featured George Kirby, the Cleftones and Della Reese. The band for the Apollo show was led by the sometimes temperamental Illinois Jacquet. Jacquet took an immediate disliking to the Sensations.

"We went into rehearsals with only the nine pieces of sheet music from our recording sessions", recalled Alphonso. "Jacquet didn't like that. His band was going to play with twelve pieces! But one of his musicians was nice and said he could get musical arrangements together by the end of the show. I remember looking at the [position] we were to go on. We were opening the show after Jacquet's opening number. So we went out there and sang a fast song to open it. Then I pointed to Slim, our piano player, to play the arpeggio for "Sympathy". We did "Sympathy" and it tore the house down. We took our bow, came back with another number, and then, after another arpeggio, I picked up "Yes Sir That's My Baby" with the bass intro. Before I finished it, I heard the women screaming! Then Yvonne came in and I heard the men screaming! Before the song was over, everybody was singing the song with us. We tried to leave the stage but they wouldn't let us off. They called us back and we had to do "Yes Sir..." all over again. By the second show that day, we were closing."

For several weeks, the Sensations' record was a genuine hit in several regional markets but could not crack the national charts. A *Billboard* article used the record as an example of the growing trend toward sectionalism that was plaguing the R&B field. As more and more independent labels entered the record business, territorial hits were becoming common. Finally, on February 18, 1956, "Yes Sir That's My Baby" broke national, landing the #15 spot on the rhythm & blues best sellers list. At the same time, *Atlantic* reported its two biggest sales months in the history of the company.

Locally, the Sensations were popular enough to record a radio commercial for Wilen wine. The commercial was a take off on "Sympathy" ("All we buy is Wilen wine..."). The group's commercial became so popular, their fans started requesting it during live performances. The group was paid \$100 and a couple of cases of wine for doing it. In spite of being a wine connoisseur at that time, Alphonso stood out on the corner at 23rd and Diamond Street and gave away the bottles. "It was the nastiest wine you ever tasted!", he later recalled.

In the meantime, the Sensations had been back to the recording studio. On February 4, they cut "Ain't He Sweet", "Cry Baby Cry", "Please Mr. Disc Jockey" and "Please Believe Me". "Ain't He Sweet" b/w "Please Mr. Disc Jockey" was released in late March. *Atco* intended "Ain't He Sweet" as the "A" side and trade magazines rated it higher than the flip. It was "Please Mr. Disc Jockey", however, that began to take off. The ballad, led by Yvonne, was written for the group by William Miller. Miller, songwriter, producer, and father of the singing group the Miller Sisters, had aided the success of several New York groups including the Heartbeats, Sunbeams and Tempotones. [The Miller Sisters later recorded their own version of "Please Mr. Disc Jockey".]

By 1956, rhythm & blues package tours were becoming quite profitable, creating work for black artists. Early in the year, dee jay Ramon Bruce organized a tour to capitalize

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on his growing North Jersey audience. Bruce had started out on Philadelphia's WHAT in the late 1940's. When WHAT let Bruce go in the mid-fifties, he joined station WAAT in Newark, New Jersey, where he became an instant success. Through the first half of 1956, Ramon Bruce toured theaters throughout New Jersey with a package that, at one time or another, included the Heartbeats, Cadillacs, Valentines, Gloria Mann, the Avalons, the Spiders, Varetta Dillard, LaVern Baker, the Clovers, the El Dorados, Joe Morris' Band and many others. As the show moved from city to city, acts would drop out and others would come on board. For awhile, the Sensations toured with the Ramon Bruce Show, appearing at theaters throughout New Jersey, southeast Pennsylvania and Staten Island. Engagements included the Stanley Warner Theater (Camden, April 8) and a show in Chester, PA, with Little Richard.



Sensations' "Cry Baby Cry"
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)

By May 19, 1956, "Please Mr. Disc Jockey" had climbed to the #13 position on *Billboard's* national R&B charts. "Yes Sir That's My Baby" was still selling well at the time, especially on the east coast.

The Sensations took advantage of their tremendous popularity to tour the country by way of the Chitlin Circuit. Most tours were strings of one-nighters, arrived at by bus and car. During the next year, the Sensations toured the east coast, the mid-west and the south.

"I remember one thirty-one day tour," cringed Yvonne. "Those were the hard ones." added Yvonne. "Little did we know when we started, the hard work that would be involved... and the long hours." "We played the Regal Theater in Chicago," reflected Alphonso. "I think I liked Chicago and New York the best because we were so well received there."

On June 19, 1956, the Sensations moved back into New York's Apollo Theater as part of the Tommy Smalls (Dr. Jive) Show. In between tours the Sensations worked in and around Philadelphia. Kae Williams' favorite clubs to bring entertainment to in Philly were the Northwest Club and the VPA. Many shows were done in South Jersey at places like Chubby's and Jim Toomer's Tippin' Inn in Berlin. Many of these shows were done with B. B. King, a favorite and close friend of Kae Williams. Kae loved the blues and used to bring blues singers to Philadelphia to perform. He was the first to bring Elmore James to Philly. At different times he also brought in Junior Parker, Bobby Bland, Little Willie John and Jimmy Scott. The Sensations played all of these clubs and would often be paired with artists Kae was sponsoring.

The Sensations also played Philadelphia's Liberty Theater at 15th and Columbia twice in 1956 and once in 1957. The first show also featured Jimmy Rushing and Larry Darnell. Larry was trying to promote his latest record, "Ramblin' Man", but to please his legions of fans he also had to sing his early fifties' hits, "I'll Get Along Somehow" and "For You My Love".

On their return to the Liberty later in 1956, the Sensations shared the stage with the Lovenotes who were hot with the song "United" and rock & roll icon, Little Richard.

Kae Williams had built quite a stable of entertainers. Besides the Sensations, he was managing the gospel group the Soul Satisfiers (*Apollo Records*), Jimmy Young (*Ember Records*), Rollie McGill (*Mercury*), and Nicky Lee (on the *K&M* label, named for owners Kae Williams and his cousin, Mitch Thomas) and fifteen year old Solomon Burke (*Apollo*). Kae had already lost Lee Andrews and the Hearts to *Gotham Records* but would soon start the *Junior* label and sign the Silhouettes.

Kae always felt that the best harmony groups came out of Philadelphia. In typical Kae Williams style, he once commented, "The only groups that I can say I actually dug in those days, for harmony, stage presence and originality... were the ones I trained and the ones that I managed and produced!" Of those, his favorite was the Sensations.

"That was my pet group!" remarked Kae. In spite of the fact that he would sometimes use a BX microphone in the studio to give her voice more depth, Kae was enthralled with Yvonne's lead singing. "Yvonne... I wouldn't have traded her for all the money in the world. She has a fantastic voice and she's a fantastic person. Of the group, Kae stated, "I insisted on [great] harmony, and Alphonso was able to bring that out."

Kae's cousin, Mitch Thomas hosted a local television show on Channel 12 out of Wilmington, Delaware that featured live appearances by Philadelphia area R&B artists. The Sensations had appeared on the show late in 1955, lip sinc'ing "Yes Sir That's My Baby". They were well received and invited back in 1956.

In mid- 1956, Atco released "Cry Baby Cry" b/w "My Heart Cries For You". The record received some air play but didn't sell nearly as well as the previous two releases. *Atco* quickly brought the Sensations back to the studio for another recording date in July 1956. From that session, "Little Wallflower" b/w "Such A Love" was released later in the year. Both songs were given to the group by *Atlantic*. Howard Biggs did most of the music and vocal arrangements, with some ideas provided by Alphonso. "Such A Love" required some overdubbing prior to its release.



Sensations' "Little Wallflower"
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)

By late 1956, changes were going on in the Sensations. Yvonne Mills and Tommy Wicks had broken up as a couple. This presented some awkward situations at first, but the group learned to deal with it and kept going. Yvonne met Frank Baker and the two were married. Frank was also brought on as the group's road manager.

Early in 1957, Roosevelt Simmons was drafted. He was replaced by Eddie Green for stage appearances only. Roosevelt continued to record with the Sensations, while on leave. Roosevelt's absence from the Sensations' tours gave him a chance to reflect on where his career as an entertainer was going. He considered himself a lead singer and was growing impatient with Atco's insistence that Yvonne do all the leads. Roosevelt made it known that when he got out of the service he was going with a different group. He eventually became lead of the Universals and can be heard leading their *Ascot* recording of "Dear Ruth".

The Sensations were still very much in demand for personal appearances, even if their latest records weren't selling the way Atco wanted. Atco thought the answer was more remakes of old standards like "Yes Sir That's My Baby". (Never mind the fact that "Ain't He Sweet", "Cry Baby Cry" and "My Heart Cries For You" didn't click.)

At a March 26, 1957, recording date, Atco had the Sensations record the standard "You Made Me Love You". The song was given top billing over the flip, "My Debut To Love" when the record was released in May. *Billboard* magazine disagreed, rating "...Debut..." higher. After an early favorable response to "You Made Me Love You", the dee jays began flipping the record over. The record buying public also seemed to agree with *Billboard*. "My Debut To Love", while not exactly a monster hit, sold respectably. On each song, Alphonso sang both the bass and baritone parts.

During the week of April 17, the Sensations played dj Al Benson's stage show at Chicago's Regal Theater. Al Benson was another "take no prisoners" style black dee jay, in the Kae Williams' mold. In fact he and Kae were good friends. Benson made his stage entrance on a chariot pulled by six of the most vivacious women in Chicago. He was dressed in a white tux



Sensations' "My Debut To Love"
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)

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and tails and looked sharp! On the show were Nappy Brown, the Spaniels, Big Maybelle, Little Esther, the Dells, Solomon Burke, Screaming Jay Hawkins, Junior Parker, Bobby Blue Bland, Annie Laurie and Al Smith's Orchestra. Annie Laurie's songs required vocal group backup to sound like the records. Members of the Dells (and sometimes members of the Sensations or Spaniels) provided the needed enhancement from backstage behind the curtain. Coincidentally, Screaming Jay also had a version of "You Made Me Love You" out at that time. To avoid two versions of the song on the same show, the Sensations needed to talk Hawkins out of doing his rendition. Screaming Jay was not that easy to dissuade from doing something, but he may have remembered Alphonso Howell's assistance at a Philadelphia stage show some months before.

Whenever R&B shows came to Philly, Alphonso used to hang backstage, playing cards and talking to other entertainers. One such show at the Uptown Theater had featured Screaming Jay Hawkins and the Harptones. While Alphonso and the other entertainers looked on from backstage, Screaming Jay Hawkins began his performance. Screaming Jay was known to have one of the wildest acts around. As the band played, Screaming Jay arose from a coffin and pranced around the stage singing. Setting off smoke bombs and small explosions, Hawkins' performances were a clever blend of mysticism, magic and music, culminating in his unique rendition of "I Put A Spell On You". On this particular night, however, Screaming Jay got too close to his exploding box when it detonated. The force of the explosion sent Jay flying backwards, his face singed and his eyes temporarily blinded. Realizing he was in trouble, several of the backstage entertainers decided to rush Jay to nearby Temple Hospital. Alphonso helped Jay into the Harptones' 1949 Chevy station wagon and calmed him down while Willie Winfield drove to the hospital. Fortunately, by the time they arrived at Temple Hospital, Screaming Jay's vision had returned. Inside he became his normal crazy self, dancing around the hospital, entertaining the nurses and yelling for cocoa butter for the burns on his face. Screaming Jay Hawkins was regarded as either the ultimate showman or very psychotic, depending on who you asked.



Sensations' "Romance In The Dark"
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)



Charlie Horner, Yvonne Baker, Alphonso Howell, ca. 1981

On June 28, 1957, the Sensations returned to the Apollo Theater joining Dr. Jive's Review which included Donnie Elbert, Ann Cole, the Velours, the Heartbeats, Charlie and Ray, the Charts, the Jesters and Roy Brown and his band. At the time of the Apollo show, Yvonne was five months pregnant. Upon seeing this, Tommy "Dr. Jive" Smalls tried to kick the Sensations off the show before they ever performed. Infuriated, Tommy Wicks confronted Smalls, telling him, "You want us off the show? Just pay us our money and we'll leave!"

Dr. Jive reluctantly consented to let the Sensations go on, but positioned them immediately after Ann Cole, who's final number, "In The Chapel" turned the place out.

After the Apollo performance, the Sensations began curtailing their live appearances. A July 22 recording date produced more standards like "I Cried For You," "I Wanna Be Loved" (not the Savannah Churchill song), and Lil Green's "Romance In the Dark". Only "Romance..." was ever released, and that was not until 1958.

The Sensations did make a few more appearances in the summer of 1957. They performed with the Flamingoes in Baltimore and then returned to Philadelphia's Liberty Theater with the Spaniels and Annie Laurie. Between shows at the Liberty, Sam Cooke, who was in the audience, came back stage. Alphonso had met Sam once before in 1952, when Sam had sang at the Met on Broad Street with the Soul Stirrers. Now Sam was recording R&B numbers as a soloist. They talked briefly and Alphonso wished Sam well with his new career. Their paths would cross again.

Yvonne was now ready to leave the group to devote time to her family. Little LaVern Baker was born in November 1957 and the rest of the Sensations became godfathers. The group decided that rather than replace Yvonne, they'd called it quits. The Sensations were also upset with some the material *Atco* was giving them to record. A February 1958 recording session found the group recording an up-tempo Herman Gillespie tune called "Kiddie Car Lover". The group hated the song! They were now in their twenties and *Atco* had stuck them with a tune with children's lyrics and a teenage beat. The May release of "Kiddie Car Lover" (backed with "Romance In The Dark") turned out to be the group's last for *Atco*.

The first stage of the Sensations' career had ended. Little did Alphonso and Yvonne realize that their biggest musical successes would come later. We'll pick up the story again in Part 2 along with a complete discography.

Notes & References

1. Based on Charlie Horner's many interviews over the years with Alphonso Howell, Yvonne Baker, Kae Williams, Richard Barrett and Russell Carter.
2. Visit www.classicurbanharmony.net for vocal group articles, news and concert reviews.