

Opportunity Knocks Twice for Philly's Singing Sensations Part 2

by Charlie Horner
with contributions from Pamela Horner

The story of the Sensations didn't end with the breakup of the *Atco* group (covered in the last issue of *Echoes of the Past*). In fact, the group's biggest success was yet to come.

In April 1958, Alphonso Howell received a call from Kae Williams. Kae's other major vocal group, the Silhouettes, had the #1 record in the country with "Get A Job" and had been touring with Irving Feld's "Biggest Show Of The Stars". Kae Williams said Silhouettes' bass Raymond Edwards had to be replaced due to personal issues and he needed Alphonso to take over bassing during the tour.

"It was a great tour," exclaimed Alphonso. "You had so many stars on it: the Royal Teens, Paul Anka, Huey Smith and the Clowns, Clyde McPhatter, LaVern Baker, the Everly Brothers, Sam Cooke, Frankie Avalon, George Hamilton, the Silhouettes, the Crescendos, Jimmy Rodgers, Jimmy Reed, Jackie Wilson, the Playmates, Jimmy Dell and the Paul "Hucklebuck" Williams Band.

Alphonso told Kae he needed three days to think over the offer and then talked to Yvonne and the rest of the group. Alphonso joined the Irving Feld Tour in Dayton, Ohio. The Silhouettes ran through all of their songs with him.

"It was a learning experience," said Alphonso. "Because I hadn't been used to singing fast songs with dance routines. I had to learn their material - well basically, 'Get A Job' and 'Miss Thing'. Those two I really had to work on."

The tour ran into the summer months. It traveled all over the United States and even played sixteen one-nighters in Canada.

"We performed in Dayton, Youngstown, Minneapolis — St. Paul, Seattle, Spokane and Portland," recalled Alphonso. The whole tour traveled in two buses, except for Sam Cooke. Sam, by now a superstar, rode in his own white Cadillac.

Midway through the tour, the piano player took sick. His replacement was none other than former Sensations' pianist, Slim Howard. After the Sensations, Slim had linked up with the Silhouettes as their pianist and driver. On the tour,



Sensations, 1961. Left to right: George Minor, Alphonso Howell, Yvonne Baker, Richard Curtain. (Photo from the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)

he played for all the acts.

Being on the road, Alphonso was not aware of the release of the Sensations' final *Atco* record.

"We were in Seattle when I heard the Sensations' 'Romance In The Dark' [on the radio]. I said 'I'm going back to my own group!' But I finished out the tour. It was very rewarding."

Yvonne Baker, in the meantime, had begun recording solo for Kae Williams' *Junior* label. Kae had been pushing her to sing solo for some time and now that there was no Sensations group, she felt justified in doing so.

When the Silhouettes tour ended, Alphonso Howell returned to Philadelphia. Raymond Edwards rejoined the Silhouettes and Alphonso felt his career as an entertainer was over. He took a job at St. Luke's Hospital. Alphonso got married in 1960. He and his wife soon had a son, Alphonso Howell III.

One day at the hospital, Alphonso turned on the radio and heard one of Yvonne's solo records, "What A Difference Love Makes". The song had been written by Van McCoy and released on Kae William's *Junior* label. Hearing Yvonne's voice made Alphonso think of the days with the group. In the Fall of 1960, Alphonso and Yvonne met again by chance, while walking on 29th Street near Diamond. The two looked at each other and both blurted out simultaneously, "Let's start the group back up!"

"Yvonne said, 'Get the fellows'," recalled Alphonso, "But she didn't say who! I didn't want to get Tommy [Wicks] back because he was a lead singer and I wanted Yvonne to lead. I went over to Roe's [Roosevelt Simmons] house but by then he was with the Universals."

In fact, Alphonso met with two Universals that night, Roosevelt Simmons and John "Pancho" Christian. They suggested several singers for Alphonso to audition. One tenor who impressed Alphonso was Richard Curtain. Richard later



Alphonso Howell (second from left) singing with the Silhouettes, 1958. Photo courtesy of Todd Baptista.



**Sensations' "Music Music Music"
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)**

came over Alphonso's house with a baritone, George Minor. Richard had previously sung with the Philly group, the Hide-A-Ways (*Ronnie* and *MGM* labels) but had more recently been singing in local clubs as a soloist.

"I explained what I expected of them.", stated Alphonso. "I told them if they thought they were going to sing lead they could forget it. We were going to have one lead [Yvonne] and that's it. They agreed."

The Sensations rehearsed until they felt they were ready to perform and record. At the time, the latest line up of Universals (Kent Peeler, Roosevelt Simmons, John "Pancho" Christian, and a fellow named Frank) were singing at the Northwest Club under the name, the Strangers. (After replacing Frank with Tommy Cook, the Strangers would later record "Darling" for Kae Williams, released on the *Checker* label). The Strangers helped get the new Sensations a couple of gigs at the Northwest club, to sharpen their skills. The Sensations then began looking for a recording company. After being rejected by several labels, including *Chancellor*, the Sensations ended up back with Kae Williams.

A recording session was held at RPL Studios in Camden mid- 1961. There they recorded their own interpretation of the standard "Music Music Music" and "A Part Of Me". "A Part Of Me" was an old Four Buddies' tune (originally titled "You're A Part Of Me") that the group was partial to. Alphonso put a lot of time into arranging the song until it was just the way he wanted. Kae Williams had other ideas. An argument ensued. In the studio, Alphonso won out. Kae knew, however, he'd have the final say. Later, when he mixed the song, he turned Alphonso's track down so low, that Alphonso could barely be heard! Ironically, it was the up-tempo "Music Music Music" that took off.

Kae Williams leased "Music Music Music" to *Argo* records and in August 1961 it broke into the R&B charts, the group's biggest hit since "Yes Sir That's My Baby". The song spent seven weeks on *Billboard's* R&B Charts reaching #12 and nine weeks on *Cashbox's* R&B charts reaching #22. Perhaps even more impressive, "Music..." crossed over to the bottom of the *Cashbox* Pop charts where it stayed for about seven weeks. The Sensations started appearing locally, at some of

the same locations that they had sung at in the 1950's.

The arrangement for "Music Music Music" came mainly from Yvonne's sister, Ernestine Eady. Ernestine didn't really like rock & roll or pop music. Her real love was Gospel music. She was there for most of the writing sessions, however, and would always contribute with "What if you do it this way?" or "Let's try this." And Ernestine's ideas always worked. While "Music..." was still high on the charts, Ernestine then came to Yvonne and Alphonso with a new song idea, "Let Me In". The three sat down at Yvonne's house and worked out the details of the song.

In early autumn of 1961, the Sensations recorded "Let Me In" in the Camden studio. The group had arranged and practiced the song with Alphonso doing a bass introduction. After numerous unsuccessful takes, the group took a break. Yvonne started joking around with a "Let Me In... Weee-Oooo" intro and the group began backing her with "Whoop Weee-Oooh". Kae Williams liked the hook and against Alphonso's objections, that's the way it was recorded.

Argo Records released the song in late November 1961. It was already starting to sell big before it was reviewed by the national trade magazines in January 1962.

Musicians on the "Music Music Music" and "Let Me In" sessions included Sam Reed (sax), Slim Howard (piano), Coatesville Harris (drums), Harry Pope (guitar) and Ralph Gaines? (bass). Alphonso credits Sam Reed's sax changes for helping to sell the records.

Working locally, the Sensations began preparing to tour again. Their first out of town gig was in Chicago in early November 1961. There they played a show with the Dells, the Clovers, the Vibrations, Piano Red, Mitsy Collier and starring Little Anthony. While in Chicago, Alphonso sought the constructive criticism of his group's act, from people he trusted.

"Your group is not [together]." Alphonso was told. "This guy does this and this guy does that. Your [actions] are different."

Alphonso took note of the comments and remembered them when the group returned to Philly. The next show was a Georgie Woods production at Philadelphia's Uptown



**Sensations' "Let Me In"
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)**

Theater in late November or early December 1961. The Sensations replaced Timi Yuro on a show that also contained the Spinners, the Vibrations, Bobby Lewis, the Miracles, the Miller Sisters, Joe Tex and the Blue Notes. Bill Massey, piano player with the Uptown Band, quickly wrote out the sheet music arrangements to "Let Me In" and "Music Music Music". The Blue Notes at the time included Harold Melvin, Franklin Peaker, Roosevelt Brody and former Turban, Al Banks.

Again, Alphonso sought out criticism, this time from Spinners bass, Pervis Jackson as well as Harold Melvin and Al Banks. The advice was the same.

"This group's not together." Alphonso was told.

"We sang good but looked ugly [on stage]." recalled Yvonne.

"That's when I decided to get a choreographer." explained Alphonso. "We had to clean up our act. We had both records, "Music Music Music" and "Let Me In" going at that time."

Alphonso called on his friend and former member of the Universals/Strangers, Sterling "Tommy" Cook to help with the choreography. Alphonso had some routines already but needed to refine them. He proclaimed to the group that Tommy Cook would be working with them to clean up the routines. Anyone, including himself, who failed get the steps down would be gone. After working on the dance and stage routines, it became painfully obvious that George Minor didn't fit in.

Alphonso wanted Tommy Cook to join the group but he wasn't available at that time. Instead they got Sam Armstrong. Sam had studied drums in school but had performed with the Rays of "Silhouettes" fame when they sang at Philly's Uptown Theater. Sam became the Sensations new baritone.

In the meantime, "Let Me In" was rapidly climbing both the R&B and Pop charts. The song spent fifteen weeks on *Cashbox's* R&B charts, including two weeks at #1. Similarly it reached #2 in fourteen weeks on *Billboard's* R&B

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charts. "Let Me In" did almost as well on the Pop charts. It topped out at #3 on *Cashbox's* Pop singles chart in the middle of an eighteen week run. *Billboard* had the song at #4. The Sensations knew they were big because with each minor transgression, their manager, Kae Williams, would send them memos stating, "You're the #1 group in the country. Please act accordingly!"

During the week of February 16, 1962, the Sensations returned to New York's Apollo Theater as part of the Ralph Cooper Show. Actor, dee jay and promoter Ralph Cooper had made a name for himself at the Apollo but had not produced a show there in many years. His return featured singer Bobby Blue Bland and his band, who were hot at the time with "Turn On Your Love Light". Also on the show were the Corsairs, Angels, Crystals, Edsels and Aretha's sister, Irma Franklin.

From the Apollo, the Sensations, Bobby Blue Bland, Corsairs and Crystals moved on to the Royal Theater in Baltimore and the Howard Theater in Washington. They were joined in these two cities by Al "TNT" Braggs.

In March of 1962, the Sensations headed south on a thirty-one day stint with the Sam Cooke Tour. Besides Sam and the Sensations, the tour included Gladys Knight and the Pips, B. B. King, Barbara George and MC Bill Murray. Gladys Knight left the tour after the first few shows.

The Sam Cooke Tour was Alphonso's first excursion into the South as a performer since the original Sensations performed with the Cardinals at Richmond's Mosque Theater in 1956. The Sam Cooke Tour went all through the deep south - Alabama and Mississippi. Alphonso learned a lot about pre-Civil Rights Era America. Audiences everywhere were segregated. Most restaurants and hotels were off limits to black Americans, including entertainers. Occasionally a restaurant, seeing the profits in a bus load of customers, would serve the tour. Yet a few miles down the road, a gas station would not allow the female members of the tour access to their rest rooms.

Upon returning to Philadelphia, the Sensations began

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preparing for their next recording session. Kae Williams brought Andre Williams and Gino Parks into the Northwest Club and the Sensations watched the duo sing "That's My Desire". This was added to the Sensations' repertoire, and they recorded it in May of 1962. This was Sam Armstrong's last session with the group. He left the Sensations soon afterwards to spend time with his family. Tommy Cook, who was now available, was added to the Sensations' roster.

Tommy Cook's first performance with the Sensations was a gig in Chicago with Gene Chandler and the Dukays.

During the week of May 25, the Sensations appeared with the James Brown Show at the Apollo. The show featured James and his Famous Flames, Olantunji and his troupe of drummers, dancers and singers, singer Yvonne Fair, Texas blues guitarist Curley Mays and comedians Pigmeat, Chuck Thompson and Edna Mae Harris.

Meanwhile, the follow up to "Let Me In," "That's My Desire" made #24 on *Cashbox's* R&B charts. During May and June 1962, "...Desire" rode the *Cashbox* Pop charts but only reached #85.

In New York, the Sensations made what would turn out to be their final appearance at the Apollo. During the week of July 6, 1962, the Sensations shared the stage with Chuck Jackson, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, the Corsairs, the Chantels and the Parkettes. The backup band belonged to Reuben Phillips.

The Sensations' fourth *Argo* release, "Party Across The Hall" was an obvious answer to "Let Me In". It received good reviews from the trade magazines. *Billboard* magazine stated on August 25, "'Party Across The Hall' is a swinger in medium tempo groove. The side features good vocal by the lads [lass?] with the group and accompanying combo adding to the sound". They rated it **** meaning "strong sales potential". "Party..." received some air play but failed to chart and didn't match the success of the previous three releases. The flip was the beautiful ballad, "No Changes". In what would turn out to be the Sensations' last out of town gig, the group traveled to Chicago in November 1962. There they performed



The Sensations Argo LP, 1963.
Clockwise from left: Tommy Cook, Alphonso Howell, Richard Curtain, Yvonne Baker. (From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)

at the Regal Theater with Bobby Blue Bland, Aretha Franklin, Roy Hamilton, Ruth Brown and the Tams. The Sensations were booked up until January throughout the mid-west but the these gigs were cancelled due to exceptionally bad winter weather.

Argo seized the opportunity to issue an album by the Sensations and release it to the record stores before Christmas 1962. The group was not pleased with the material used in the album nor the rush to record it.

The group could not get into songs like "XYZ". They didn't like the song and gave it a somewhat less than enthusiastic performance, hoping Kae and the *Argo* management would scrap it. They didn't! One song the group did like was a tune Slim Howard wrote called "Twistin' Blues". In the final mix, however, Kae boosted Yvonne's voice above the rest so you couldn't hear the harmony. Even worse was *Argo's* rush to have the entire album recorded in one day!

"To me," recalled Alphonso bitterly, "The album was junk! Thrown together. You don't do a whole album in a day. I didn't like the liner notes either. They should have talked about the history of the group starting with the first Sensations group. I did like the photo on the cover though."

Despite its flaws, the Sensations' album sold fairly well.

All the while, the Sensations were under contract to Kae Williams, not to *Chess/Argo*. Kae recorded the group and sold some songs to *Argo*, keeping others for his own *Junior* label. Most of the Sensations' recordings during this period were backed with the Red Prysock band.

The group's next release, "You Made A Fool Of Me" backed with "That's What You've Gotta Do" first came out on *Junior* in January 1963. "You Made A Fool Of Me" was essentially written by Ernestine, though Yvonne and the group also contributed to the song. Distributed locally, the record was on



Sensations' "You Made A Fool Of Me"
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)

WIBG's Top 100 charts for three weeks, reaching #61. This earned the Sensations an appearance on Grady and Hurst's Steel Pier (Atlantic City) television show. When the record started selling around Philly, Kae leased or sold it to *Vee Jay Records* where it came out on their *Tollie* label in 1964.

From the same session, Kae Williams also released "Foolishly Yours" b/w "There's No You" on *Junior*. Alphonso did all the vocal arrangements on "Foolishly Yours". He had been trying to get Yvonne to record the Savannah Churchill tune for some time and was proud of the result. The entire Sensations group was on the recording. When the record came out, however, label credit was given solely to Yvonne Baker. Kae Williams was trying to push Yvonne as a soloist. Alphonso wished Yvonne success but was upset that the group was not given credit. He also feared what effect such a move would have on the Sensations. Meanwhile, Yvonne's earlier solo release, "What A Difference Love Makes," was sold by Kae to *Jamie Records*, who issued it again..

Early in 1963, the Sensations did three different shows for dee jay Jocko Henderson, all at the State Theater at 52nd and Walnut Streets in Philadelphia. The first was done with Sam Hawkins, the second with James "Pookie" Hudson (solo), Jackie "Moms" Mabley and Etta James. On the third appearance, the Sensations entered the stage one by one to the music of "Tara's Theme", complete with introductions. It was probably the sharpest they ever looked.

In April 1963, the Sensations recorded "Father Dear" for *Argo*. While previous sessions had always been held in New Jersey, the group went to Chicago for this one. Bobby Lester, former lead of the Moonglows was at the studio when the side was cut and helped with the arrangement. In fact Bobby's voice can be heard on the record, adding some harmony. The group (along with Bobby Lester) also recorded "When Lover Comes Marching Home", a Viet Nam war related take off on "When Johnny Comes Marching Home", written by Ernestine. They also did a number called "Pick Up", which remains unreleased. "Father Dear" did not sell and it was the group's last *Argo* release.

Around this time, the group also recorded "It's Good Enough For Me" b/w "We Were Meant To Be". It was released



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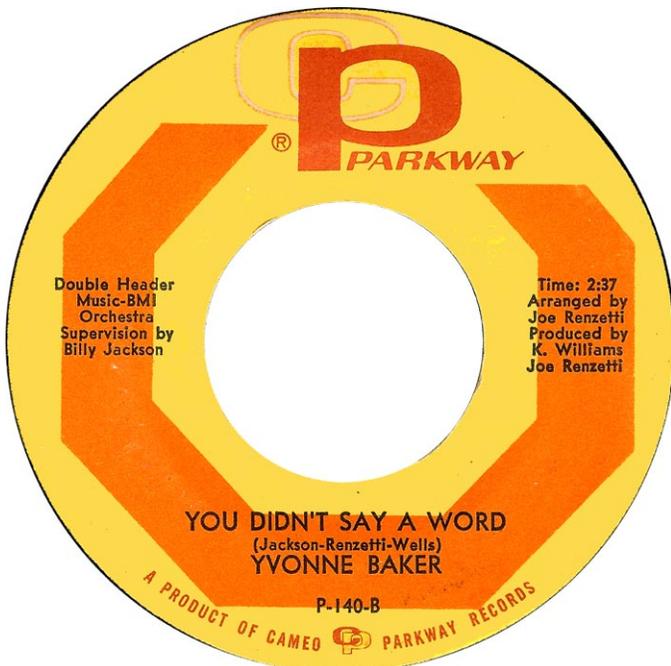
Tommy Cook (top) with the Sounds Of The Platters Show. (From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)

on *Junior* and received only local attention.

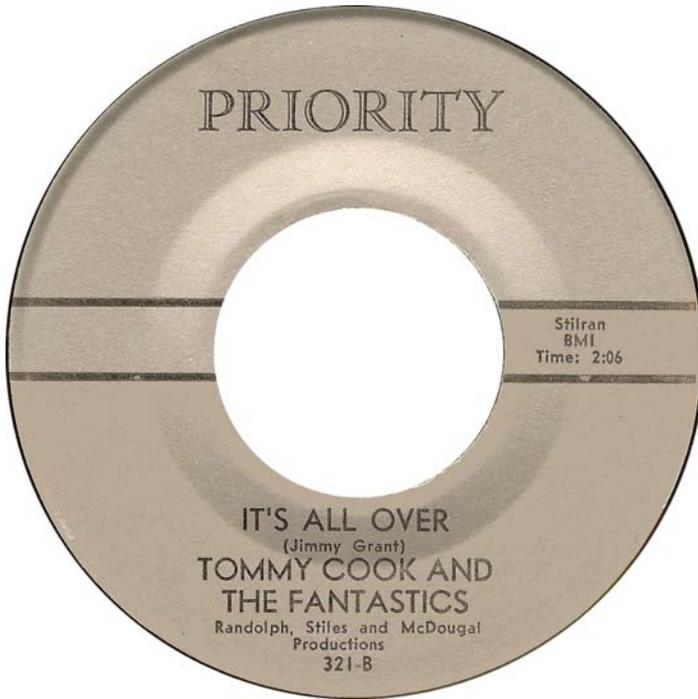
Gradually, the Sensations fell into inactivity. Tommy Cook left and when the group was called to appear on Kae William's 1965 Twenty-fifth Anniversary On Radio concert with B. B. King at the Cadillac Club, they had to reinstate Sam Armstrong. The Sensations did continued recording. "Baby" b/w "Love Love Love", produced by Richard Barrett, was issued on *Junior*. As musical styles changed with the times, the Sensations evolved into a soul group. For their last session with *Junior*, the Sensations even imported musicians from Detroit to give the songs more of a *Motown* flavor. This was ironic because *Motown Record* execs Ewart Abner and Smokey Robinson had each tried to lure the Sensations to *Motown* in times past. The group cut "I Can't Change" and "Mend The Torn Pieces".

Though artistically they had the "sound", the Sensations were never really accepted by the public as a soul group. Perhaps they never got the needed promotion or maybe it was the emergence of the "British invasion". Some groups made the transition from fifties harmonies to soul. Most didn't. The reasons remain one of the great mysteries of urban harmony history.

Yvonne Baker went home to spend more time with her husband and little girl. She continued to make solo recordings, including "You Didn't Say A Word" b/w "To Prove My Love Is True" which was leased to *Parkway Records*. "You Didn't Say A Word" became a much sought after *Northern Soul* record. Yvonne also recorded "Woman Needs A Man" b/w "My Baby Needs Me" which was leased to *Modern Records*. Yvonne later recorded a duet with Kae Williams. The recording, mostly spoken, was issued as "The Eleven Commandments Of Woman" by



Yvonne Baker's "You Didn't Say A Word" (From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)



**Tommy Cook & the Fantastics
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)**

Daddy Kae & Yvonne on the *Cameo-Parkway* subsidiary label, *Fairmount*. Yvonne now sings only in church. Alphonso took a job at Jefferson Hospital. He died suddenly on May 15, 1998.

Only Tommy Cook stayed in the business. In 1970's he sang with Roosevelt Simmons, John "Pancho" Christian and an unknown female vocalist. This quartet recorded as Tommy Cook and the Fantastics for Weldon McDougal's *Priority* label before going out on the road as "The Sounds Of The Platters". In 1980, a court injunction stopped him from using the Platters name.

Alphonso Howell, Tommy Wicks, Roosevelt Simmons, Warren Sherrill, Ernestine Eady, Frank Baker, Slim Howard, Herman Gillespie, Tommy Cook, Richard Curtain and Kae Williams have all left this world. Russell Carter is still with us. The rest of the group, Tody, Tyrone, Reuben, Darby Bill, George and Sam have not been heard from in years but their music will always be with us. The glory days for the Sensations may be gone but songs like "Let Me In" will always be popular. Someday, historians will write a book on Philadelphia vocal harmony and when they do they should reserve a chapter for the Sensations.

Acknowledgments:

This two-part article grew out of the author's twenty year friendship with Alphonso Howell which ended with his passing in 1998. During that time Alphonso and I had hundreds of conversations about his music career. This article is also taken from my interviews and conversations with Yvonne Baker, Russell Carter, Tommy Cook, Richard Barrett, Billy Taylor, Weldon McDougal and Kae Williams. We also acknowledge Alphonso Howell's sister, Helen Marlene Howell Wilkinson, who was most helpful, and author Todd Baptista. Some recording dates in the discography are courtesy of Fernando L. Gonzalez *Disc-File*.



**The Sensations' "Love, Love, Love"
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)**

SENSATIONS DISCOGRAPHY

Quantrells

Penny Arcade Dubs (*Many penny arcade dubs were made by the Quantrells. Only one is known to exist today. It's in the Classic Urban Harmony Archives*)

Presto --- (1953)
Heavenly Father (as by Roosevelt Simmons)
After Hours (piano solo by Reuban Taylor)

Cavaliers

Herald (Unreleased) (Recorded October 1953)
Merry Christmas My Love
Woman

Sensations

Atco 6056 (Oct. 1955)
Yes Sir That's My Baby (Rec. July 29, 1955)
Sympathy (Rec. July 29, 1955)

Atco 6067 (Mar. 1956)
Ain't He Sweet (Rec. Feb. 4, 1956)
Please Mr. Disc Jockey (Rec. Feb. 4, 1956)

Atco 6075 (July 1956)
Cry Baby Cry (Rec. Feb. 4, 1956)
My Heart Cries For You (Rec. July 29, 1955)

Atco 6083 (Nov. 1956)
Little Wallflower (Rec. July 9, 1956)
Such A Love (Rec. July 9, 1956)

Atco 6090 (Apr. 1957)
You Made Me Love You (Rec. Mar 26, 1957)
My Debut To Love (Rec. Mar 26, 1957)

Atco 6115 (Apr. 1958)
Romance In The Dark (Rec. July 22, 1957)
Kiddie Car Lover (Rec. Feb. 13, 1958)

Atco (Unreleased)
Right Or Wrong (Rec. July 29, 1955)
Please Believe Me (Rec. Feb. 4, 1956)
I Wanna Be Loved (Rec. July 22, 1957)

Yvonne Baker (solo)

Junior 1001
Funny What Time Can Do
What A Difference Love Makes

Sensations

Argo 5391 (June 1961)
Music Music Music (Rec. Summer 1961)
A Part Of Me (Rec. Summer 1961)

Argo 5405 (Nov. 1961)
Let Me In (Rec. Autumn 1961)
Oh Yes I'll Be True (Rec. Autumn 1961)

Argo 5412 (Mar. 1962)
That's My Desire
Eyes

Junior 1002
It's Good Enough For Me
We Were Meant To Be

Yvonne Baker (solo)

Junior 987 (Nov. 1962)
Foolishly Yours
There's No You

Jamie 1290 (2nd label of Junior 1001) (Nov. 1964)
Funny What Time Can Do
What A Difference Love Makes

Sensations

Argo 5420 (August 1962)
Party Across The Hall
No Changes

Junior 988 (January 1963)
That's What You've Gotta Do
You Made A Fool Of Me

Tollie 9009 [Second label of Junior 988] (1964)
That's What You've Gotta Do
You Made A Fool Of Me

Argo 5446 (June 1963)
Father Dear (Rec. April 24, 1963)
When My Lover Comes Home (Apr 24, 63)

Junior 1006
Baby
Love Love Love

Junior 1010
I Can't Change
Mend The Torn Pieces

Argo LP 4022 (***) (Rec. Dec. 1962)
Let Me In
(Oh Yes) I'll Be True
That's My Desire
Eyes
No Changes
Twisting The Blues***
Music Music Music
Lollipop Baby***
Party Across The Hall
A Part Of Me
Yes Sir That's My Baby***
XYZ***

Yvonne Baker (solo)

Modern 1053 (1968)
My Baby Needs Me
A Woman Needs A Man

Parkway 140
To Prove My Love Is True
You Didn't Say A Word

Daddy Kae & Yvonne (Yvonne Baker & Kae Williams)

Fairmount 1019
Eleven Commandments Of Woman
Shug [Instrumental by Daddy Kae Trio]