

The Many Groups of Sammy Strain: Part 2

The Fantastics Story

by Charlie Horner

With contributions from Pamela Horner



1960 fan magazine article about the Fantastics, (From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)

To fully document the musical career Samuel "Sammy" Strain, Jr., we would need to write a book, and even then it might take several volumes. In Part 1 (*Echoes of the Past* Issue #101) we covered Sammy's childhood in Brooklyn through his time with the Chips of "Rubber Biscuit" fame. That took us to the summer of 1957. The Chips had disbanded due to lack of gigs and a complete absence of interest from *Josie Records*.

Sammy Strain & the Fantastics

"I was like a local celebrity, having sung at the Apollo," recalled "Sammy Strain. "So I would just sing with different guys. There were groups in every neighborhood. So I would just hang out on Gates Avenue (Brooklyn) and start harmonizing with the guys. Then I started harmonizing with guys in my own neighborhood. But at that point I didn't concentrate on show business. I'd played the Apollo and I wanted to be in show business but I didn't know how. I didn't know where to go."

Meanwhile, other Brooklyn vocal groups were gathering steam. One of the groups that Sammy got to know while rehearsing at Duke Baldwin's dance studio on Fulton Street was a group called the Pharoes [spelling confirmed by Ferdie Gonzalez].

The Pharoes consisted of William "Sonny" Forrest (lead), Bill Medley (first tenor), someone remembered only as JW (second tenor), Fred Warner (baritone) and Wilbert "Larry" Lawrence, Jr. (bass).

Larry Lawrence was born in Atlanta Georgia, but moved with his family to Brooklyn when he was a six months old. Larry's father and eleven brothers used to do sight reading and note reading so Larry was always exposed to music. In Brooklyn, Larry used to love to listen to Billy Eckstine and Sonny Til & the Orioles sing. "I'd listen to the Ink Spots but who I really loved was the Mills Brothers," said Larry. "When I was growing up, there was a singing group on every corner. We were the Pharoes and we were the best in the neighborhood."

"The Pharoes used to rehearse at Duke Baldwin's ballroom when I was with the Chips," said Sammy. "That's where I met them. I didn't know a lot about what they did. I know they used to sing "Rocket 88" and "Bye Bye Baby". "Bye Bye Baby" bears striking similarities to the Channels' "Bye Bye Baby," though the two songs are different. Similarly, Sonny Forrest had written a song for the Pharaohs

called "One Lonely Night" that the group would sing on the street corners and in the subways. According to Larry, the song was an inspiration for the Danleers' later recording, "One Summer Night". "A lot of groups would copy us. They just changed the words around but ['One Summer Night'] had the same melody."

Under Duke Baldwin's guidance, the Pharoes recorded "Rocket 88" and "Bye Bye Baby" for *Melba Records* on September 7, 1956 but it was not released. Discouraged, the Pharoes dropped Duke Baldwin and acquired James A. Daily as manager. Daily was already managing the Bobbettes ("Mr. Lee"), Eddie Jones and the Demons ("Take Me As I Am") and the Ospreys ("Do You Wanna Jump Children"). He would later manage the Desires ("Let It Please Be You") and other acts.

"James Daily had a piano player named Reggie Obrecht," recalled Larry. "We had to audition for Reggie Obrecht and James Daily. Of course they accepted us and we started rehearsing with Reggie Obrecht."

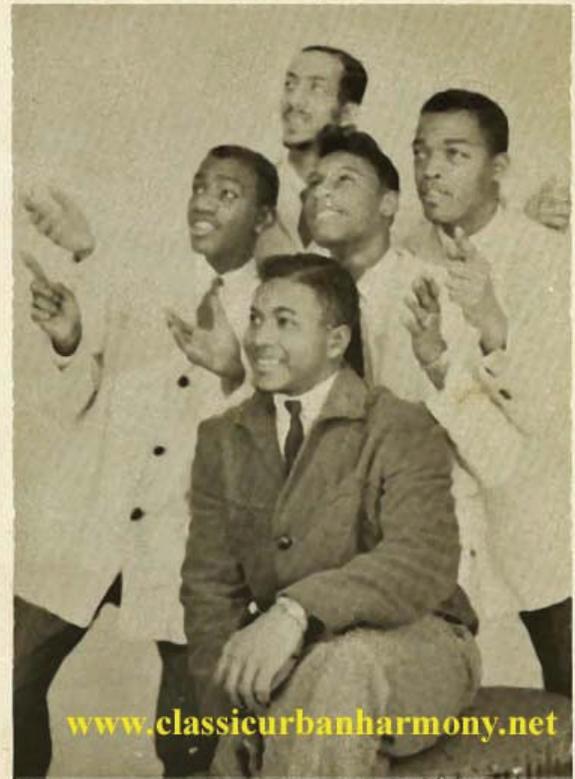
Daily had an open door policy and many of his acts rehearsed at his house on 96th Street in Manhattan. One of his acts was Stu & Oscar, a ventriloquist act featuring Stuart Gillum, a young and talented black comedian from Detroit. Gillum would later find fame as a stand up comic and actor. "The Pharaohs would tell me James Daily had a guy Stu, who had a dummy," Sammy recalled. "But by the time I joined their group, they were no longer with Mr. Daily."

After leaving James Daily's guidance, the Pharaohs underwent some personnel changes. JW left the group and was replaced by James "Billy" Sutton. "We were having a rehearsal," recalled Larry. "And nobody knew where JW was. Not even his family or friends knew where he was. He just disappeared."

"Billy Medley's voice was too loud and uncontrolled," said Larry. "When we rehearsed at my apartment at 90 Downing Street, Apartment #35 top floor, in Brooklyn, we had to put Billy Medley out in the hallway so he could blend in with our harmony."

"James Sutton and Fred Warner approached me about singing with them," said Sammy. "And I went to a rehearsal. Then Billy Medley started missing rehearsals so I took Billy's place. I went to rehearsal and I fit right in. We would sing anything. We would sing Spaniels' stuff. I was making up new ways to sing 'Peace Of Mind'. When we would sing something like 'Sunday Kind Of Love' I would always put my little spin on it."

In addition to personnel changes, the group toyed with different names. They were the Holidays for a short time and then became the Passions. By this time, the Passions had become connected with famous pianist, record producer, songwriter and label owner, Al Browne. The group had apparently been rehearsing at Al Browne's office for a short while



PASSION'S VOCAL GROUP
 WILLIAM FORREST LEAD - LARRY LAWRENCE BASS
 FRED WARNER BARITONE
 BILLY SUTTON 2ND TENOR
 SAMUEL STRAND FIRST TENOR

**Rare Postcard of the Passions.
 Upfront in dark jacket, Sonny Forrest.
 Across the top from left, James Sutton, Larry
 Lawrence, Sammy Strain and Fred Warner.
 (Courtesy of Sammy Strain)**

when Sammy Strain joined the group. Al Browne had written a song called "Tom Tom Love" and given it to the group. The song soon took on the name "Drum Beat".

"Al Browne had an office on Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn," said Sammy. "We went up there to record 'Drum Beat' and I think another side. All we did at Al Browne's was go up there and record. When we did 'Drum Beat' we were the Passions."

While Al Browne undoubtedly intended to release "Drum Beat," for some reason, that never happened.

At the time, Larry Lawrence was working downtown at Tru-Built Cabinets, a company that made custom-made high end furniture. One of the employees had a friend who managed the Malibu Beach Club on Lido Beach, Long Island. After hearing the Passions sing, the employee set up an audition for the group at the Malibu Beach Club. "We just



The Fantastics, 1959, Top, Sammy Strain. Middle row from left, Fred Warner, James Sutton, Larry Lawrence. Bottom, Sonny Forrest. (Photo courtesy of Sammy Strain).

thought we were going to audition for the manager,” said Larry, “But he had called Mickey Harmon and Helen Gershon and had them sitting out in the audience.”

Mickey Harmon and Helen Gershon were two women who owned a booking agency in Westbury. Harmon & Gershon regularly booked acts into the Malibu Beach Club and numerous other establishments.

“We sang ‘September Song,’ and blew them away!” said Larry. “We sang it acappella. We used to rehearse that song a lot. So right away they wanted us to sign contracts. We signed about five different contracts.”

Harmon and Gershon became the Passion’s managers. They also connected the group with Ira Oaken, a well established booking agent for GAC.

Through Oaken, Harmon and Gershon, the Passions auditioned for a number of record companies.. Auditioning for *RCA-Victor* producer Charlie Grean, the Passions eventually signed with *RCA-Victor Records* around May, 1959. The group went into the studio and recorded four songs on May 21, 1959: “Drum Beat” (*RCA* purchased the rights from Al Browne); “There Goes My Love” (an original compo-

sition by Sonny Forrest); “This Is My Wedding Day” (another original composition by Sonny Forrest); and “Millionaire Hobo” (a song given to the group by *RCA*). Sonny Forrest sang lead on all four sides. Charles Grean produced the session.

“We had those big kettle drums for “Drum Beat,” said Larry Lawrence. “King Curtis was on sax. The *RCA* studio was on East 14th Street near South Park Avenue and had multiple studios. Xavier Cugat was in the studio next to us and he had a full orchestra. He came and listened to our playbacks.”

The recording group personnel was William “Sonny” Forrest (lead), Sammy Strain (first tenor), Larry Lawrence (bass), Billy Sutton (second tenor) and Freddy Warner (baritone). Larry was the choreographer of the group. It’s important to note that each member of the group was capable of singing lead. Most leads, however went to Sonny Forrest because he wrote the songs.

Just prior to the release of “There Goes My Love,” *RCA-Victor* got wind of another group called the Passions, and forced their group to find a new name. The other Passions were probably the white Passions group that was about to score with “Just To Be With You”.

“I picked out the name, the Fantastics,” said Larry Lawrence. “We had a meeting at one of the rehearsals in my apartment to decide on a new name. We all put suggestions into a hat and picked out the name Fantastics.”

“There Goes My Love” took off in several local markets. It never cracked the national charts but was big in NYC, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore-Washington and Pittsburgh.

“We went to Pittsburgh,” recalled Sammy



From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives

Strain. “We were so big in Pittsburgh. And in the Boston area. We did a lot of television shows. There were a lot of local and regional bandstands. In just about every city they had a television dance show and we did them all. We did television shows with the Fireflies. We did television shows with Phil Phillips of ‘Sea Of Love’ fame. We did a show in Pittsburgh with the guys that had ‘Harlem Nocturne’ out at the time [The Viscounts]. Every city we went to, we went to radio stations and they were playing ‘There Goes My Love’. It was a smash.”

“Mickey Harmon and Helen Gershon used to book groups at the Malibu Beach Club on Long Island,” Sammy continued. “There was a whole bunch of clubs there in the summer. You’d see the Tito Puente Orchestra as the house band [at the Malibu] and there’d be Tito Rodriquez [at the Sands]. One summer we were playing there and they got us on the gig with Frankie Avalon. Frankie Avalon was the star and there was another group. I never saw so many chicks in my life. We pantomimed ‘There Goes My Love’ and the big flood lights hit the top of this hill and Frankie Avalon came over the hill singing ‘Venus’ and the chicks were going crazy. And Ira Oaken got us gigs at the Howard Theatre in Washington, DC. We played gigs in Boston with the Crests. We worked.”

The Fantastics were called back into the RCA studios on October 20, 1959 for a second recording session. They recorded “I Got A Zero,” “Angie Lee,” “My Girls,” and “Believe In Me”. Sammy Strain led “Believe In Me,” the first recording he led. Fred Warner led “My Girls”. All the other songs were led by Sonny Forrest.

RCA-Victor released “This Is My Wedding Day” from the previous session backed with “I Got A Zero”. The record also got a lot of air play but did not



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reach the success of “There Goes My Love”.

All the other songs remained unreleased until the late 1980’s and early 1990’s.

There’s been some question as to whether the Fantastics backed Dave Rich on “I Thought It Over” (RCA-Victor 7141). Listening to the record, Sammy Strain said it was not the Fantastics and not Larry Lawrence singing bass. Larry Lawrence said it’s possible he’d moved up to baritone for the song but could not say one way or the other. He did recall backing one artist but this record seems too early. For now, we’ll say there’s no conclusive proof that the Fantastics are on the record.

Another Fantastics record, “Dancing Doll” backed with “I Told You Once” is also somewhat of a mystery. The record came out on *United Artists 309* in May 1961, though it was most likely recorded in 1960. Billy Sutton leads “Dancing Doll,” a song reminiscent of the Hurricanes’ “Poor Little Dancing Girl” while Sonny Forrest leads “I Told You Once”. Sammy Strain does not recall recording for *United Artists* and feels the songs may have been sold to *United Artists* by RCA-Victor. Larry Lawrence, however, believes the Fantastics may very well have recorded them for *United Artists* after RCA-Victor. Ferdie Gonzalez has found evidence that *United Artists* purchased the sides on November 7, 1960.

As to why the Fantastics left RCA-Victor, Larry explained, “I believe our producer, Charlie Grean, left the company and the group was assigned to Hugo & Luigi who didn’t really connect with us.”

At that point, the Fantastics began working with famed producer Richard Barrett.

“I’d long been aware of Richard Barrett because I was a big fan of the Valentines,” said Sammy



**The Fantastics at the Howard Theatre,
Washington, DC, February, 1960.
From left: Sonny Forrest, Larry Lawrence,
Fred Warner, Sammy Strain, James Sutton.
(Photo courtesy of Sammy Strain)**

Strain. “Before I ever started singing, the first week I was out of school, I got a little job in Rego Park, Queens, working for the Associated Food Market as a stock boy. I worked there for about a week. I started on a Monday and that Saturday, my brother who was playing drums with Jesse Powell at the time asked what I was doing. I told him I had to work. He said, ‘I’ll pay you for the day. I need you to take my tubs out to the Alden Theatre in Jamaica Queens. I’m doing a Rock & Roll show there.’ So I helped him take his drums on the subway. We got to the theatre and I was sitting in the audience looking up at the stage and there was Screaming Jay Hawkins, there was the Heartbeats and there was this guy on stage. He was sharp. This guy had a chocolate brown shirt with a mint suit and a tie. He had all this personality. He was talking to the conductor and he had this cane in his hand. They were doing ‘Woo Woo Train’ and he was doing some of the steps. I said, ‘This guy’s a star!’. He just stood out. And someone said, ‘Hey Richard’. That’s how I realized that he was Richard Barrett. That’s the first time I saw Richard. Later, I was singing with the Chips and we had a gig at a ballroom on Nostrum Avenue in Brooklyn and the stars of the show are the Valentines. We had to share the dressing room with the Valentines. The Chips loved it and the Valentines were looking at us like why are these guys coming in here. I was thinking, ‘There’s Richard Barrett and there’s Ronnie Bright, the bass’.”

“Some time later I was with the Fantastics,” Sammy continued. “I knew that Richard Barrett had discovered Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers and was no longer singing with the Valentines. He was managing the Chantels and Little Anthony & the Imperials. I was aware of him so we went over to 1650 Broadway, We had heard that George Goldner was starting a new label and giving it to Richard - a label

called *Princeton Records*. We went over and auditioned. Richard liked the group and he brought out the tune, ‘Buddy’s Girl,’ which James Sutton got to lead.”

“Buddy’s Girl” was written and produced by Richard Barrett and recorded by the Fantastics. Barrett already had a couple releases on the Princeton label, including one by the Veneers, featuring Annette Smith, his pick as the next lead of the Chantels. [See *Echoes of the Past #80*, “The Musical Legacy of Richard Barrett – Part 3 for the Veneers’ story. – ed.]

Richard Barrett would shortly thereafter sever his business relationship with George Goldner, ending the *Princeton* label. Recorded at Bell Sound, “Buddy’s Girl” was not released until it found its way to a CD some years later. This, however did not end Sammy Strain’s association with Richard Barrett.

“Richard started coming to Brooklyn and we started hanging together,” said Sammy. “I was like his little brother and I was always in awe of him. He was a ‘star maker’”.

In late 1960, Sammy Strain left the Fantastics to hang out with Richard Barrett and sing with the Impacts. The Impacts were another Brooklyn vocal group that Sammy Strain was well acquainted with. They had previously recorded for *Watts* and *RCA-Victor* and were best known for their 1959 recording of “Canadian Sunset”. [The Impacts/Blue Chips story will be covered by Steven Kahn in the next issue of *Echoes of the Past*. – ed.]

The Fantastics without Sammy Strain

The Fantastics continued singing after Sammy Strain left the group. They acquired a new first tenor named Nick Nicholson. They continued singing as the Fantastics for the next couple years, playing the Borscht Belt in the Catskill Mountains (upstate, NY) and the Pocono Mountains (PA). In the Catskills the Fantastics played Brown’s, the Laurels and the Pines resorts.

In 1963, Sonny Forrest was working part time at a record store on Fulton Street at Franklin (Brooklyn) when he told the owner that he sang in a vocal group. After auditioning at the record store acappella, the owner had the group audition for a relative at *A-1 Record Distributors* on 11th Avenue in NYC. There, they caught the attention of Eric Bernay the owner of *A-1 Records*. Eric decided to rename the group the Keynoters and record them on his *Keynote* label. *Keynote* had been an important indie label for jazz folk and Gospel music in the 1940’s Sold by Bernay in 1948, *Keynote* had been reactivated as a side line for Bernay’s thriving *A-1* one-stop record distributorship. [Oddly, Bernay had used the name Keynoters before, back in 1946, when he gave it to an instrumental group made up of Willie Smith on sax, Red Callender on bass, Nat King Cole on piano, and Jackie Mills on drums.]

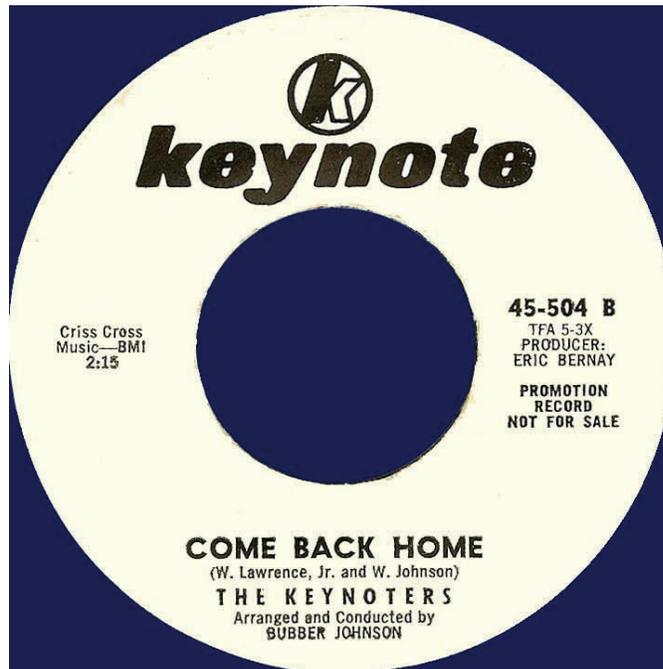
The Keynoters recorded “I Wanna Know Who” (written by Fred Warner) backed with “Come

Back Home” (written by Larry Lawrence) for *Keynote Records*. “I Wanna Know Who” initially had Fred Warner on lead but Bernay overdubbed the lead voice of a singer known as Cherry Pie onto the record. The songs were arranged and conducted by Bubber Johnson. The Keynoters made only one or two appearances with Cherry Pie. The group soon went back to being the Fantastics. Billy Sutton left the group and was replaced for a short time by Danny Hicks of the Continentals.

In 1964, Larry Lawrence, Fred Warner and Nick Nicholson formed the V.I.P.’s, along with Horace Brooks from the Impacts and Blue Chips and a female singer, Jackie Carter. Paul Fulton of the Chips and Blue Chips also reported being in the group. They used to rehearse at the Brill Building on Broadway and the producer’s name was Bill Giant who lived in Matawan, New Jersey. The V.I.P.’s recorded three records for *Bigtop Records*, the best selling one being “You Pulled A Fast One”.

“We had a good lead with Jackie Carter,” Larry remembered. “But for some reason we never charted. We always had regional hits. And again we went to Pittsburgh and Baltimore. In Baltimore we did a show at the Royal Theater with Curtis Mayfield & the Impressions.” After being together for about a year, the V.I.P.’s broke up. Some time shortly after that, Jackie Carter was found dead.

In the 1970’s Larry Lawrence and Fred Warner sang with the Tradewinds on the *Avco Embassy* label. The lead was Tony Hughes from Brooklyn’s Fort Greene Projects. “Tony Hughes wrote all the songs, arranged all the voices and arranged the music,” said Larry. “He did it all in his apartment in the Fort Greene Projects. He used to overdub his instruments from a couple of tape recorders, and a rhythm



From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives

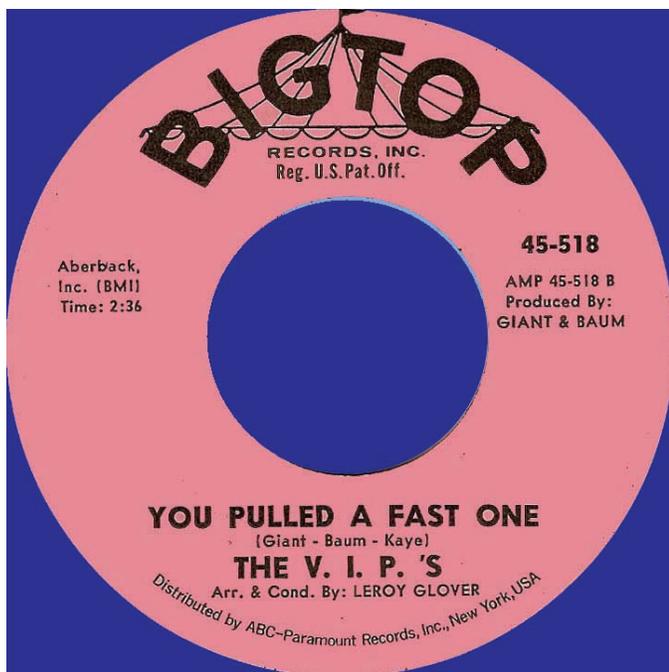
machine. He played guitar. He was a very talented guy. We had at least 20 of his original songs rehearsed and on tape.”

The Tradewinds signed with *Avco Embassy Records* for two releases. *Avco Embassy 4624*, “God Knows I Love You” backed with “Mr. Guitar Man” received little promotion. The group’s second release “It’s Not The Spotlight” got some airplay but both releases were largely ignored by the trade magazines. “Spotlight” was led by Kenny Bacotes and was later recorded by Rod Stewart. The flip side, “Come To Me, I’ve Got It” was led by Tony Hughes. Personnel in the Tradewinds changed often as guys would be kicked out of the group for missing rehearsal. For a time there were also two female singers in the group. With little success, the Tradewinds broke up. Larry reported that Tony Hughes was eventually found murdered.

In 1990’s the Fantastics including all original members except Sammy Strain (who was in the O’Jays at the time), got back together. “Fred Bohn of Pittsburgh got us back together,” said Larry, “Because he said he had shows that he could get us on. One of the guys in the neighborhood did the leads on a lot of the songs. His name was Jay McKnight. After us he sang with Richard Bandon’s Dubs. Jay from our Brooklyn neighborhood. One thing about groups from Brooklyn, they all used to integrate. If one guy was missing another guy would fill in.”

The Fantastics, (Sonny Forrest, Fred Warner, Larry Lawrence, Billy Sutton and by this time, John B. Good) appeared at Ronnie I.’s UGHA Collectors Concert # 5 in North Bergen, NJ on October 6, 1990. The group made numerous other appearances at UGHA shows, even one time in Trevoise, PA, calling Sammy Strain from the audience to sing with them.

“We also did an interview in 1991 with Don K.



From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives



1991 Fantastics: Fully autographed photo. (From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)



A reunion of all five Fantastics (1989). From left: Larry Lawrence; James Sutton; Sammy Strain; Sonny Forrest; Fred Warner (Photo courtesy of Sammy Strain)

Notes and References

1. For Part 1 of the Sammy Strain story (The Chips), see *Echoes of the Past*, Issue #101.
2. Based on the author's interviews with Sammy Strain and Larry Lawrence (2012).
3. Lou Rallo's Radio Interview with Sammy Strain, WRSU's *Big Beat Show*, 12 May, 2011.
4. Lou Rallo's Radio Interview with Sammy Strain, WRSU's *Big Beat Show*, 19 May, 2011.
5. Jim Bakay's Radio Interview with Sammy Strain, WRD.V's *Night Train Show*, 11 Feb, 1912.
6. Special thanks to Frank Chille, Lou Rallo, Jim Bakay, Ferdie Gonzales, Steven Kahn and Bobby Diskin for their assistance and knowledge.
7. For more info on vocal group harmony, visit Charlie & Pam Horner's website...

www.classicurbanharmony.net

Reed on his Sunday night doo wop show on WCBS," recalled Larry. "We had a group picture up there in his studio in WCBS-FM. And John B. Good was on that."

The Fantastics continued singing off and on at doo wop shows. Eventually Bill Cody replaced John B. Good. The last appearance by the Fantastics appears to have been on February 13, 1999, on a show at Boys & Girls high School in Brooklyn. Also on the show were the Harptones and Bobbettes.

Beginning in 1989, a lot of previously unissued material on the Fantastics started becoming available. *BMG/RCA* issued a CD called "Rock 'N' Roll Party - Vol. 2" that contained "Angie Lee". Collector's label, *Park Avenue* issued "Drum Beat" b/w "Angie Lee" and "Believe In Me" b/w "My Girls" on yellow vinyl 45's. A CD called "The Fantastics Fabulous Memories" on the *NY Monalisa* label combined the already released Fantastics sides with acetates by the Pharaohs, other increased sides and some live cuts from the 1990's Fantastics.

Sonny Forrest passed away in Florida in 2003. Fred Warner is also deceased. Larry Lawrence, Billy Sutton and Sammy Strain have retired from singing. Sammy Strain's career with the Imperials will be covered in the next issue of *Echoes of the Past*.

Discography

Pharoes

Melba (unrel) Rocket 88 recorded Sept 7, 1956
 Bye Bye Baby
Both cuts later released on NY Monalisa CD 1001

Passions

unreleased Drum Beat ca. 1958

Fantastics

RCA-Victor 47-7572 There Goes My Love 1959

I Wanna Be A Millionaire Hobo

RCA-Victor 47-7664 This Is My Wedding Day 1959

I Got A Zero

Unreleased RCA-Victor songs:

Drum Beat (later rel. on *Park Ave.* 2)

Angie Lee (later rel. on *Park Ave.* 2)

My Girls (later rel. on *Park Ave.* 3)

Believe In Me (later rel. on *Park Ave.* 3)

United Artists 309 Dancing Doll 1960

I Told You Once

Unreleased Princeton song: My Buddy's Girl ca. 1960

Later released on NY Monalisa CD 1001

Keynoters

Keynote 504 Come Back Home 1962
 I Wanna Know Who

V.I.P.'s

Bigtop 518 Flashback 1964

You Pulled A Fast One

Bigtop 521 If He Wants Me 1964

I'm On To You Baby

Bigtop 100 Don't Pass Me By 1966

You Ain't Good For Nothing

Tradewinds

Avco Embassy 4624 Mr. Guitar Man 1974

God Knows I Love You

Avco Embassy 4643 It's Not The Spotlight 1974

Come To Me, I've Got It



**Fantastics singing "Millionaire Hobo" at UGHA Collectors Show on March 14, 1972.
 Larry Lawrence (second from right) dressed as a hobo.
 (Photo by Pamela Horner)**