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The Caribbeans & The Mighty Jupiters

ECHOES OF THE PAST



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The Vic Donna Story

by Charlie Horner

With contributions from Pamela Horner



VIC DONNA
ATLAS RECORDING ARTIST

MANAGEMENT
PHIL PERRY - MO 9-2608

Vic Donna was born Victor Bonadonna on April 16, 1942 in the South Brooklyn neighborhood known as Red Hook (now Cobble Hill). The Red Hook section of Brooklyn gave rise to a wealth of talented singers, including all the members of Cirino & the Bowties, two of the Three Chuckles, the Arrogants ("Canadian Sunset"), the Van Dykes ("The Bells Are Ringing") the Temptations on the *King* label ("Standing Alone") the Demolyrs ("Rain"), the Echoes ("Baby Blue"), some of the Cupids ("Brenda"), Passions' lead Jimmy Gallagher, a couple members of the Four Evers and later on, the Carribeans on *Amy* and the Compliments on *Congress*.

Vic Donna began singing at an early age. "I started actually singing whole songs when I was as young as twenty-four months," recalled Vic. "My mom and dad used to take me to the twenty-five cent recording booth. I still have the records. I used to sing songs like 'Until the End of Time' [Perry Como] and 'California Here I Come' [Al Jolson]. I was a big fan of Al Jolson and Frankie Laine. 'It's Been A Long Long Time (Kiss Me Once and Kiss Me Twice),' was a big favorite of mine."

Vic was not the only one in his family with musical talent. "My mom could pick out melodies on the piano. My dad had a good singing voice and later sang as a senior. He went to all the senior citizen places and became an entertainer. My brother Tony started to learn the guitar but never got past a few chords. He was eight years older than I and he was one of the original members of Cirino & the Bowties."

One of the earliest groups to come out of the Red Hook neighborhood was the Three Chuckles. The group was formed sometime around 1949 and originally consisted of Tommy Romano, Tommy "Russ" Gilberto and Phil Benti. The group was self-contained. In addition to singing, Romano

played guitar, Gilberto played bass and Benti played the accordion. After touring for a couple years, Benti left the group in 1953. He was replaced by a fifteen-year-old accordion player from Manhattan named Teddy Rendazzo.

The Three Chuckles might have remained in obscurity but for the songwriting talents of one of Vic Donna's neighbors, Cirino Colacrai. "I lived at Henry and Kane Streets," said Vic. "Cirino lived two doors on my right."

Cirino gave the Three Chuckles a song he'd written called "Runaround." The song became part of the Chuckles' repertoire but attracted little attention until one night while playing a bowling alley lounge in Detroit, the group was discovered by promotions manager Ray Gayhan and signed to the *Great Lakes* label. The Three Chuckles' first record was "Runaround" featuring Teddy Rendazzo on lead. The song became the first record on the label's *Boulevard* subsidiary, released in July 1954. It did so well in Detroit, the song and the Three Chuckles' recording contract were soon sold to the *X* label, a subsidiary of *RCA-Victor*. "Runaround" reached #20 on the national charts, making the Three Chuckles and songwriter Cirino Colacrai in big demand. "Runaround" had a distinct R&B flavor and was covered by the Orioles.

After giving a follow up song, "Foolishly," to the Three Chuckles, Cirino decided to form his own vocal group, Cirino & the Bowties. Initially, Cirino & the Bowties consisted of Red Hook neighborhood residents Cirino Colacrai, Vic's older brother Tony Bonadonna, Jimmy Piro and Andy Romeo. The Bowties and the Chuckles became good friends.

"One time I came home with the Orioles' record of 'Runaround' and I thought my brother was going to kill me," said Vic. "Because he was good friends with the Three Chuckles. But I liked the Orioles' version better."

By 1954, Vic Donna's musical tastes were already changing. "I was still into Perry Como and those guys, when Michael Yodice, one of my friends whom I'd known since kindergarten came knocking on my door. He said, 'Vic, you've got to come with me and hear this song.' He dragged me to this candy store where there was a juke box. He put a nickel in and we heard 'I' by the Velvets. I didn't know what to say. I was flabbergasted! It was so different to me that from then on I started to go through the radio stations trying to find where they were playing this music. I found WNJR in Newark, New Jersey, and that dial never moved. I started going to the store and asking for records. I knew the groups were named after cars and birds. I didn't know half the time what I was buying. I would see like, the Scarlets on *Red Robin*... I'd buy the record. I never heard it but I'd buy it. I knew it was by a black group. So Michael and I started sing-



Vic Donna backstage with the Three Chuckles. Taken at the Boulevard Nightclub in Queens where the Three Chuckles were appearing with Morey Amsterdam in 1954. Left to right: Russ Gilbert, Tommy Romano, 12-year-old Vic Donna, Teddy Rendazzo. (Photo courtesy of Vic Donna)

ing together. The first song that I ever sang in harmony was 'This Is My Story' (Gene & Eunice). We used to sing harmony in school in our music class. While the teacher was playing songs like 'Deep River, My Home Is Over Jordan' Mike and I would be singing in harmony. And the teacher would be looking to see who was singing in harmony. That's how I got into harmony."

By the end of 1955, the Bowties were recording for *Royal Roost*. But Vic's brother, Tony Bonadonna, had been drafted and was in Germany. Andy Romeo had also left the group. The personnel on the Bowties first record, "Rosemarie," was Cirino Colacrai, Johnny Granato, Vincent "Diddy" Sepaldo and Jimmy Piro. Both Cirino and the Bowties and the Three Chuckles would become favorites of deejay Alan Freed who not only put the groups on his stage shows but also in his 1956 film, *Rock Rock Rock*. Cirino also bought a luncheonette in Red Hook. While the Bowties were working Freed's show at the Brooklyn Paramount, many of the singers from the show would drop by Cirino's luncheonette, much to the joy of the neighborhood kids. [After their singing days, both Teddy Rendazzo and Cirino Colacrai (also known as Del Serino) had noted careers as songwriters and producers.]

By 1956, Vic Donna was fourteen-years-old and attending PS 29. Vic and Michael formed a vocal group with two other kids from the neighborhood and Vic's cousin, Tony Grasso, from next door. "Tony played the guitar and we formed a group called the Emeralds," said Vic. The Emeralds [spelled with an "a" to avoid a name conflict with another group] consisted of Vic Donna (lead), Michael Yodice, Frank Vaccarino, Ali Mased and Tony Grasso. Later Mickey Anderson replaced Mike Yodice. "We rehearsed songs like 'Story Untold,' 'Ookie Ook' and 'A Thousand Stars.' We did amateur talent shows in school and we were winning prizes. Another cousin of mine, Tony Ramos, thought he should take us kids under his wing and he went out and bought us jackets and ties. He had our photos taken and took us to the Apollo Theater on amateur night. We won third prize of twenty-five bucks. That was a big deal to us. Here were white kids winning third prize. I thought that was great."

Vic Donna's big break came when the Emeralds were picked to go on the *Ted Steele Bandstand Show* (WOR-TV, New York's Channel 9). "One day our school (PS 29) was picked to go on the *Ted Steele Bandstand Show*," said Vic. "Some of the girls that arranged it with Ted Steele told him about our little group. Ted said, 'Sure. Let them sing a



The Emeralds (1956)

(Back row, left to right: Frank Vaccarino, Ali Mased, Mickey Anderson; Front: Tony Grasso (with guitar), Vic Donna). (Photo courtesy of Vic Donna)



The Emeralds at the Ted Steele TV Show (1956).

(Left to right: Tony Grasso, Mickey Anderson, Ali Mased, Ted Steele, Frank Vaccarino, Vic Donna. (Courtesy of Vic Donna)

song.' It was the first time that anyone performed live on his television show. So that day we were up there dancing and Ted had us come out do 'Story Untold.' It went off pretty well, even though the guitar was out of tune. Later, a staff member brought me a note saying I'd gotten a telephone call. It turned out to be Phil Perry of *Atlas Records*.

Atlas was a black owned record label located at 271 West 125th Street, near Harlem's Apollo Theater. It was started in 1951 by Tommy Robinson. By 1953, *Atlas* had ventured into the world of R&B vocal groups with the signing of the Caverliers Quartet, forerunners of the Fi-Tones. The Caverliers were from the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn and, after one *Atlas* release, disbanded. Regrouping as the Fi-Tones, the group then consisted of Marlowe "Lowe" Murray, Cecil Holmes, Ron Anderson, Lloyd Davis and Gene Redd (previously of the Five Chimes on *Betta* and *Royal Roost*). The Fi-Tones scored two regional hits for *Atlas* with "Foolish Dreams" and "It Wasn't A Lie."

Atlas had several other vocal groups, including the Parakeets. The Parakeets were five young men from the neighboring cities of Newark and Elizabeth, New Jersey. All had experience singing in church and the roots of the group were a high school glee club. The Parakeets consisted of Leroy Williams (lead), James P. Martin (first tenor), William "Bob" Curry (baritone), Preston Fields (second tenor) and Gerald A. Highsmith (bass). The Parakeets' first record for *Atlas* was "Rain Starts To Fall" b/w "I Have A Love," released in May 1956. It was quickly followed by their second release, "Yvonne" b/w "My Heart Tells Me," in November 1956. All of the songs were written by James Martin.

"Phil Perry wrote some songs for the Fi-Tones," Vic Donna remembered. "He told me that he wanted to come to my house and talk to my parents about getting me a record deal because I was only fourteen at the time. And he did come to the house, a very nice man. At first I didn't want to go. I had my group. He didn't want the group, he only wanted me. That was an issue. The guys wanted to know, 'What happened? What happened?' I said, 'Forget about it. He didn't want the group, he only wanted one singer.' They said, 'Vic, you're crazy if you don't do it.' After some deliberation, I decided to look into it."

"*Atlas Records*, a previously all black label, was looking for another Frankie Avalon. So Phil Perry started rehearsing me on a song he'd written, 'Teenage Rose.' He was a songwriter who also played piano. Then Phil took me up to Harlem. We did it for Tommy Robinson of *Atlas Records* and he loved it. For a backup group Tommy wanted to



The Parakeets

Left to right: Preston Fields, Gerald Highsmith, Bob Curry, James Martin, Leroy Williams. (Photo courtesy of Vic Donna)

use the Parakeets. We rehearsed for a few months because Tommy Robinson was a very strict rehearsal guy. God bless him, I loved this man. You couldn't go into the studio unless you had everything perfect. You'd rehearse for months on a song. He did that with all the groups."

"Teenage Rose" was recorded in late 1956 and released in January of 1957 as *Atlas* #1071. The flip side was "Silly And Sappy" a Gene Redd tune that had previously been recorded and released by the Fi-Tones.

"They thought having the Parakeets name on the record would help sell my record," said Vic, "Because the Parakeets already had two records out. The record was supposed to say 'Vic Donna backed by the Parakeets'. Instead, when it came out it read 'Vic Donna and the Parakeets'. So when the disc jockeys got it, that's what they were saying on the air. We had to go out as a group because that's how they wanted it. Of course the Parakeets weren't too happy about it. I wasn't too happy about it because if I wanted to be with a group I could have had my own group. But the Parakeets were so good, of course, I didn't mind. They were much better than my little group in Brooklyn. They all came from Gospel backgrounds; they all sang in church. And their harmony was impeccable. We became friends in spite of it all because they all knew it wasn't my fault and I knew they had nothing to do with the situation. And we went out gigging and we had a good time."

Throughout 1957, Vic Donna and the Parakeets continued rehearsing together as well as making personal appearances both together and separately to promote the record. Together Vic and the Parakeets sang on the Georgie Hudson stage shows at Convention Hall in Camden, NJ. Hudson, a popular black dee jay on Newark NJ's WNJR (1430 AM) also had Vic and the group appear on his TV show.

"The Parakeets and I also did the Tommy "Dr. Jive" Smalls stage shows at Newark's Adams Theater," recalled Vic. "Eddie Cochran was also on that show along with Mickey & Sylvia, the Dells, the Del Vikings, the Keytones, the Paragons and both Cadillacs groups." At an odd time in the Cadillacs' history, Earl "Speedo" Carroll had just broken away from the management of Ester Navarro. Navarro had recruited a new Cadillacs group lead by J. R. Bailey and not knowing who legally owned the name, *Josie Records* was recording both groups. "The group that recorded 'Please Be My Girlfriend' [J. R. Bailey's group] and the 'Speedo' group had to split the gig, two days a piece," remembered Vic. "They were in court at the time."

"We looked good," said Vic reflecting on the appearances he did with the Parakeets on the Dr. Jive Reviews. "The Parakeets were a little older and I was more or less the kid in the group so they taught me the choreography. My stage fright was already gone so I had no problem there. As far as uniforms, I wore something different than they did.



Vic Donna & Parakeets' "Teenage Rose"
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)

Get On The Bandwagon—
Cause It's Getting Bigger
and Bigger—Day by Day

"TEENAGE ROSE"
b/w
"SILLY AND SAPPY"

by
Vic Donna
and The Parakeets
Atlas Record # 1071

★
ATLAS RECORDS
271 W. 125 St.
N. Y. (MO 6-0420) N. Y.

They had set uniforms so I went out and bought a uniform. Eddie Cochran taught me how to put makeup on. He came into my dressing room and said, 'Kid, you're going to shine out there.' He got Max Factor #7 and he taught me how to put it on so that I wouldn't shine."

One of the most disturbing times that Vic had was as a white kid, touring the South with the Parakeets. "We went down South for a week doing record hops because we had the #6 record on one of the stations there. In Charleston, SC, and I found out that I couldn't stay with the group. I couldn't eat with them in the same restaurants. I told my manager, 'Get me out of here. I don't want to do this anymore.' The Parakeets were really surprised that I didn't know this. I may have lost some record sales by coming back, but I didn't care."

Vic Donna also did appearances without the Parakeets. He did an interview on *The Jocko Henderson Show* (WOR). He made another appearance on *Ted Steele's Band Stand TV Show* (February 6) and Joe Franklin's TV show

(February 18). He appeared on remote broadcasts with Lee Donahue on Long Island. [Lee Donahue originated *The Night Train Show* on Nassau County's WGBB before Alan Fredericks took it over.]

Sometimes appearances called for Vic Donna to sing at locations out on Long Island which were inconvenient for the New Jersey based Parakeets to attend. On those occasions, Vic would enlist the backup of his old Red Hook group, the Emeralds who had continued singing without him. By then, the group had Mike Yodice (the friend Vic first started singing with) and Tony Politti, replacing Mickey Anderson and Tony Grasso.

Vic Donna and the Parakeets were also rehearsing for their second release. Rehearsals were done in a two story building on Broadway at 51st Street. The second floor had a number of rehearsal rooms. The next record was "Love Is A Stranger" b/w "Count The Tears," released in April 1957. "Love Is A Stranger" was written by Fi-Tones baritone, Lloyd Davis. This time the label read, "Vic Donna with Backup by the Parakeets."

Vic's second release didn't do as well as the first but Vic and the Parakeets kept trying. Vic was entering his first year of high school and went to school in Manhattan. "I would get out of school and I would go right to Broadway and 51st Street. That's where I met all kinds of people like Frankie Lymon. After 'Love Is A Stranger' came out I recorded two more sides with the Parakeets that got shelved. Both sides were written by my manager Phil Perry. Apparently, he and the record company had a disagreement." The titles, "Dear God (Make My Dream Come True)" and "High School Ring" remain unreleased.

After the split with Phil Perry, *Atlas* began rehearsing Vic Donna with the Fi-Tones. The Fi-Tones themselves were going through some personnel changes. Lloyd Davis was in and out of the rehearsals due to health issues. Reggie Barnes was added. Gene Redd left the group to begin work-

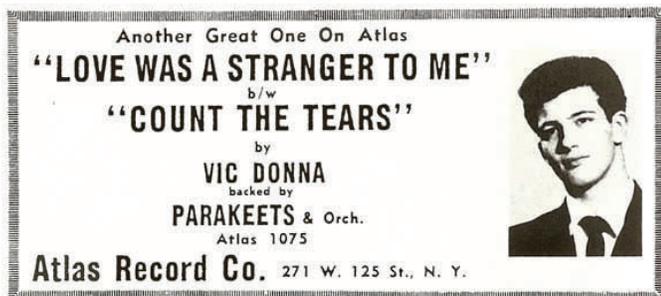


The Emeralds, ca. 1957

Left to right: Ali Massed, Mike Yodice, Vic Donna, Frank Vaccarino, Tony Politti. (Photo courtesy of Vic Donna)

ing with his own group, the Gene Redd Singers. Vic recalls Gene rehearsing them on "Walking My Baby Back Home." The Gene Redd Singers included fellow Fi-Tone Reggie Barnes and Renaldo Gamble from the Schoolboys. The Fi-Tones that began backing Vic Donna were Reggie Barnes, Lowe Murray, Cecil Holmes and Ron Anderson.

"They had me rehearsing with the Fi-Tones with two songs that I wrote because I told them I really didn't like what Phil Perry was writing for me," said Vic. "So I started writing for myself and they liked the two songs that I wrote, 'My Life Is In Your Hands' and 'The Pair Of Heart And Soul.' I began rehearsing with the Fi-Tones but I didn't like what the Fi-Tones were doing in the background of 'My Life...,' that cha-cha background." Neither side was issued by *Atlas*, but were eventually released thanks to the *Relic* label Fi-Tones CD in 1996. The Fi-Tones moved on to the *Old Town* label, recording "My Faith," a tune Vic remembers them rehearsing at *Atlas*.



The Fi-Tones, ca. 1957

Top: Ron Anderson; Middle Row, Left to right: Gene Redd Cecil Holmes, Lowe Murray; Bottom: Reggie Barnes. (From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)



Vic Donna harmonizing at his 16th Birthday Party, 1958
 Left to right: Vic Donna, Johnny Dazzo, Mike Yodice, Fi-Tones' Reggie Barnes, Roland Martinez (Cadillacs, Vocaltones, Solitaires)
 (Photo courtesy of Vic Donna)

Becoming increasingly discouraged with *Atlas Records*, Vic Donna began networking with all the music people he met on Broadway's Tin Pan Alley. "I was hanging out with Frankie Sardo and I told him I was not happy with what was going on up at *Atlas*," said Vic. "He said, 'You know, you should meet my managers. I'm recording a song in a couple days. Why don't you come to the session?' I went and they were doing a song called 'Fake Out' but they weren't happy with it. The producers said, 'There's something missing on this record.' So I said, 'I have an idea. I think on certain parts there should be a little harmony.' So I went into the studio and got on the mike, and they loved it."

Frankie Sardo and his brother John had been recording under the name Frankie & Johnny with little success until John wrote the song "Fake Out." Recorded for *ABC-Paramount* in 1958, Frankie Sardo's "Fake Out" (with Vic Donna's uncredited harmony part) did well enough to gain Frankie Sardo a spot opening up for Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, the Big Bopper and Dion & the Belmonts on that fateful Winter Dance Party Tour of 1959.

Frankie Sardo's manager asked Vic if he'd like to record. After hearing that Vic was dissatisfied with *Atlas*, he asked if Vic had any original material. "I made an appointment with him and I went up a few days later with a guitar and sang him a couple of songs. He loved them. And he said, 'Kid, get your release and we'll have you recording in a couple of weeks.' So I went home and I had to talk to mom and dad because I was still a minor and they had to sign for me. My mom said, 'Well, if you're not really happy, we'll stand behind you.' They weren't really stage moms and dads. They knew nothing about the business. As a matter of fact, after 'Teenage Rose,' my manager came to the house to deliver a check for \$250 - my royalties. And he gave my mom a sob story about how the record company really didn't make all that much money and it would be a good gesture if she signed the check over to them. My mom signed the check back to the record company."

Vic's two sides were released on *Carlton Records* in October 1958. "My Life Is In Your Hands," the song originally recorded with the Fi-Tones but not released, was given new treatment with the Ray Charles Singers [pop choral

group]. "They had a pretty good production, a little more than I was getting from *Atlas*," said Vic. The other side was "Dream Girl."

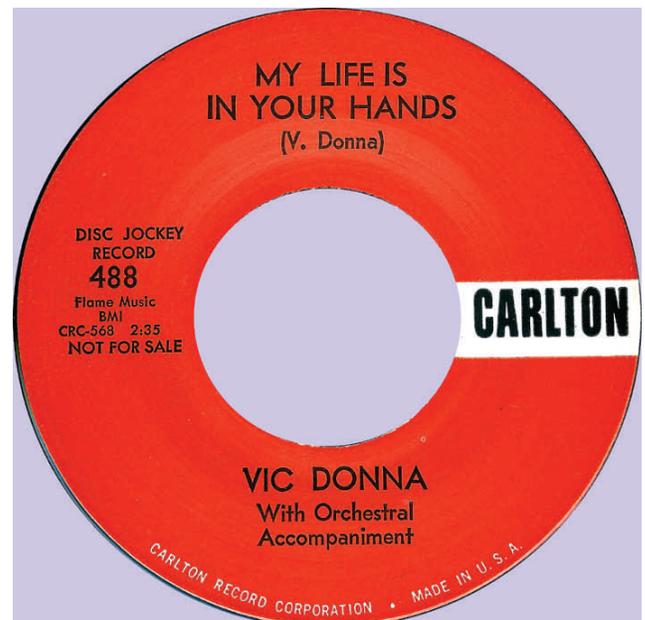
For next record Vic's management hooked him up with Morty Craft on the *Lido Label*. Originally, Vic was supposed to record the Ink Spots' song, "We Three" but that was nixed when *Cashbox's* "Pick of the Week" was someone else's version of the song. Vic suggested recording another Ink Spots' tune, "The Gypsy."

"I had the Ray Charles Singers [pop choral group] and I had strings," said Vic. "'The Gypsy' is a pretty song so we went into the studio and did that. Howard Biggs [legendary arranger and pianist for the Ravens, Dinah Washington, the Silhouettes, Coasters and scores of others] did the arrangement. He did a great job. In fact, 'The Gypsy' to this day is probably the best record I ever did."

"I introduced 'The Gypsy' on Alan Freed's Big Beat Show on Channel Five and it was the 'Pick Hit Of The Week' on *Cashbox*," recalled Vic. [Also on the show were the Laddins and Charlie Gracie.] "For two weeks in a row it was 'Pick Hit Of The Week' on WMCA, but after the second week I didn't hear it anymore. I went to my managers and said, 'What happened to 'The Gypsy'?' They said, 'Don't worry about it, kid. You're going to have another record out soon.' So a few weeks later we were back in the studio recording 'I'll Always Be In Love With You.'" [the Ray-O-Vacs tune]. It never got released. I knew Morty Craft liked me so I didn't know what the story was."

Now just out of high school, Vic joined the Army Reserve. After his six months stint in the Army, he returned to Manhattan but his managers had vanished. Frustrated he visited Morty Craft's office. Morty told Vic an unconfirmed, yet plausible story of how his managers had blown an opportunity to promote "The Gypsy" and offered him another chance to record. Vic recorded "What Happened To My Little Girl" and Morty got it released on *ABC-Paramount* in 1961. "What Happened To My Little Girl" was written by Herbert Bernstein and done by Vic in a style reminiscent of Neil Sedaka. "Bernstein was a young guy, very talented guy," said Vic. "He did the whole arrangement and everything. But by this time we were recording the vocals separately from the music so I didn't even see the band on that record. I did the harmony on myself."

By now Vic was nineteen years old and married for the first time. A musician friend told him there was a group



From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives



From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives

looking for a singer to front a band. Vito Trulio had a little band called the Sharps. The group had a xylophone, drums, saxophone and guitar player but lacked an upright bass player and singer. Vito told Vic, "We'll rent you a big upright bass and you can make believe you're playing bass but what we need you for is singing."

"He taught me a few things on the bass," said Vic. "I was fooling around with it and singing for about six months. Then Vito said, 'I know you've had records out. I would really like to record something with you. I know Ernie Maresca and he can get a record out for us.'"

Ernie Maresca was born in the Bronx and began singing with the Regents (of "Barbara Ann" fame). He soon turned songwriter, authoring songs for Dion like "No One Knows," "The Wanderer," "Lovers Who Wander," and "Donna The Prima Donna." In 1961, Ernie had yet to established himself as a singer with "Shout Shout (Knock Yourself Out)".

Vic agreed to record, thinking of the arrangement of the Ink Spots' "We Three" that he never got to record. Vic taught the guys in the band the background and they started



Vic Donna singing "The Gypsy" at his high school, 1959
(Photo courtesy of Vic Donna)



Label courtesy of Vic Donna

rehearsing it. Vic had another side ready for the flip, "Teenage Girl," a tune that he'd written with John Raccuglia, a guy from neighborhood some years earlier.

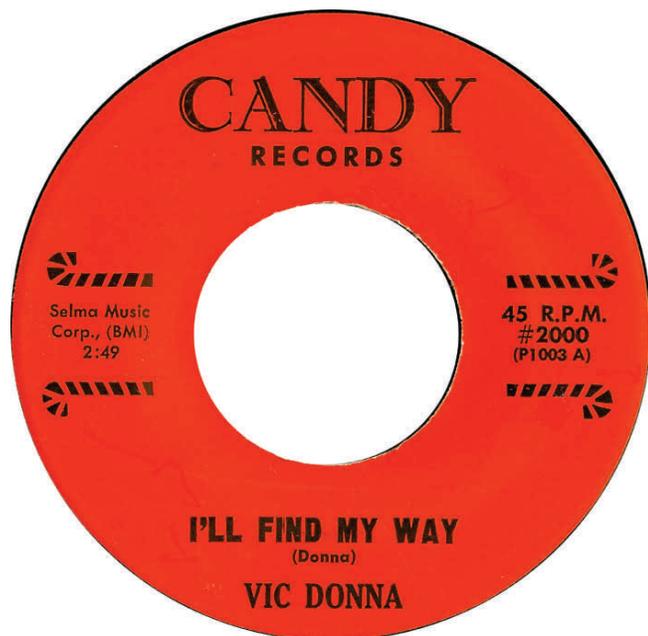
"Just before we were going to record it," said Vic, "Vito came to me and said, 'The guys in the group are getting scared. They don't want to do the record.' One guy's wife was afraid that if it was a hit he would have to go on the road. Another guy worked with his father in the jewelry business and didn't want to leave. Everybody was getting nervous. Now the studio was booked. The musicians were booked. Ernie Maresca said, 'What am I going to do now?' I said, 'If you want, Vito and I will do all the voices.' So Vito did the tenor and I did all the rest of the voices and after we did it he said, 'Something is missing.' And I said, 'A bass.' It was the first time I'd ever attempted to sing bass but I put a little bass line in and he said, 'Perfect!'"

A chance meeting with Morty Craft on the street one day led to another Vic Donna recording. After having lunch together at Jack Dempsey's Restaurant, Morty decided to record Vic one more time. At this time Morty had only a little "hole in the wall" office and the *Candy Label*, named after his secretary. "I'll Find My Way" b/w "She's My Girl" were released on *Candy* with the backing of the female group, the Angels. Vic wrote both sides. "I never heard it on the radio, but it was a good record."

Vic's next record was written by the famous songwriting duo of Ellie Greenwich and Jeff Barry. "While I was still married to my first wife, her father came to me and said, 'I work with this guy in the machine shop and his daughter is Ellie Greenwich who works for Leiber and Stoller. Maybe I can talk to them about you.' So he arranged a meeting. When I went up and met Ellie Greenwich and her husband, Jeff Barry, at first they weren't interested. But then when they heard about my background they realized I was established. Being a pro, they didn't have to work with me that much. They had two songs ready for me and we went in and we did them. 'I Won't Be Me Anymore' b/w 'Dance Marie' came out on *Tiger Records*. Unfortunately, *Tiger Records* had very poor distribution. If that record had been on their other label, *Daisy*, I might have had the hit that I deserved."

By 1964, Vic Donna was divorced from his first wife, living with his parents in Brooklyn and working in a bank in Manhattan. He was depressed and demoralized.

"One day I got off the subway in Brooklyn and Johnny Lagana and Dennis Ferrigno were waiting for me. I



Label courtesy of Vic Donna

knew them as kids from singing on the street corners in the neighborhood. I said, 'What are you guys doing here?' and they said, 'We came to meet you.' We walked and talked. They told me that they were working professionally as a group, the Compliments."

The Compliments had previously recorded "Angels Of Mercy" b/w "Nobody Knows" for the *Shell* label with Michael Zara doing the lead. But Zara was in the hospital and the Compliments were looking for a new lead singer.

"I said OK before we got to my house and that was six blocks away," remembered Vic. "I went back to work the next day, I told my boss, and a week later I was working with the Compliments at the Peppermint Lounge and some clubs in Manhattan and Staten Island. They were pretty good. I think I made them a little better. I started working on songs that weren't quite right and I started giving them some original material."

The Compliments now consisted of seven guys; Vic Donna, Jack Dina, Dennis Ferrigno, Leopold Gonzales, Bernie Lee Goode, Johnny Lagana and Jon Prano.

"The Compliments were very good on stage," said Vic. "Johnny Lagana and Leopold 'Bundy' were professional dancers. We were working for about two years and a lawyer spotted us at one of the clubs. He said he knew this management group that he wanted to take us to. He thought we were great because we could put on a nice little show. There were four guys up front on two different mikes like the old days at the Paramount. That's how we worked. We didn't work on individual mikes. And the band was great. Bernie Lee Goode was an excellent singer and organ and piano player. He couldn't read a note of music but he'd play anything you wanted. Jack Dina was an excellent guitar player for a young kid. He was the youngest in the group. And Jon Prano was a good drummer. So we had it real good. And Jack would switch from bass to guitar. When he played bass Bernie played piano. When he played guitar, Bernie went on the Hammond organ. It was a real good group. The harmony was great. We got this appointment to go see these people. It turned out to be Martin Kommer Associates, LTD."

"Martin Kommer put us into the Copa Cabana in NYC where we worked in the Lounge for two weeks with Erskine Hawkins and his big band. He got us other jobs like at the Americana Hotel. They didn't get us on *Congress Records*. They got us with a guy named Wes Farrell, a producer, who recorded us on a song called 'James Is The Name' (about

James Bond) and another song, 'Let's Get Married in Maryland'. We recorded both songs as demos. And when it came to "Let's Get Married in Maryland" they were afraid of it because it was about two sixteen-year-old kids running away to get married in Maryland. It was taboo. Anyway, something happened between Martin Kommer and the lawyer and they dropped us."

"Right about that time, we were working in a club in Manhattan and a guy from Florida showed up and flashed a bunch of money in front of us," said Vic. "He said, 'I want you guys to come to Florida.' Now I was married for the second time and my wife was pregnant and I was in a car going to Florida. We got to Miami and in his office he had our picture on the wall. The whole wall was us! Before we left New York he got us to record for *Congress Records*. When we got to Florida that's all we heard on the radio was our record, announcing that we were going to be appearing here and working there. We had our own show at the Eden Roc Hotel. It was 'Around The World A-Go-Go, Starring the Compliments.' We had dancing girls come out while we were doing certain songs. We did different ethnic songs from around the world. It was great. People came to see us like Ann Margaret and her husband, and Liberace came out to see us."

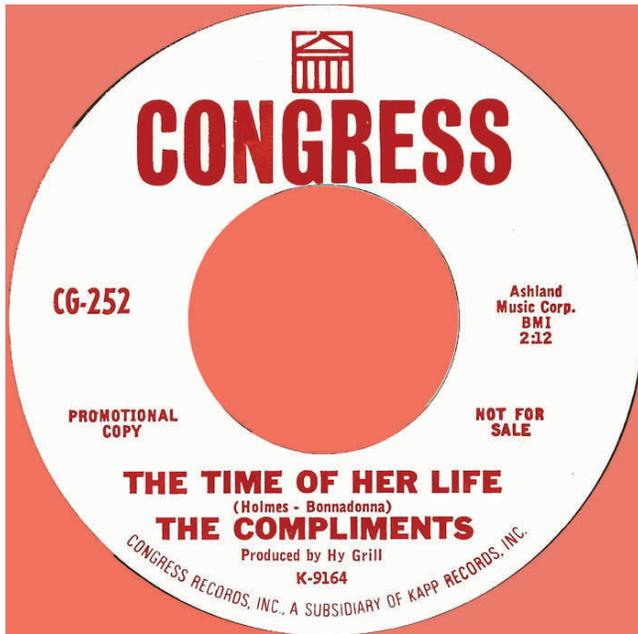
The two records on *Congress* were fine examples of soul group harmony. Bernie Lee Goode led "You Are My Sunshine" and "Everybody Loves a Lover" (the Shirelles tune). Vic Donna led on a couple of his own compositions; "Shake It Up Shake It Down" and "The Time Of Her Life," the latter song attracting interest among Northern Soul enthusiasts.

"Our manager had a great big house out on Treasure Island and he had us stay with him to save money. Things started out good but didn't stay that way. We finished our job at the Eden Roc and we were waiting for something else and the musicians union got on us. They fined us \$1000 because according to their rules, if a traveling band doesn't have another job lined up they're supposed to go back to their place of origin. We didn't know that. We promised them we'd go back and our manager paid the fine. But a couple of the guys couldn't stay in the hotel. They went out on the town and were seen by the union again - another \$1000 fine. Then we did a local TV show. We went on the *Rick Shaw Show* in Miami and we were singing our record. The union came in and said, 'Traveling bands can't do local television. You're taking work away from our local musicians.' - boom, another \$1000 fine. It was so demoralizing. Dennis left first and went back to New York. I was next be-



The Compliments, 1965

Left to right, back: Leopold Gonzales, Johnny Lagana, Vic Donna, Dennis Ferrigno, Jon Prano; Front: Bernie Lee Goode (piano), Jack Dina (guitar). (Photo courtesy of Vic Donna)



From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives

cause my wife had just had a baby that I wasn't there to welcome. I came back to New York. It just fell apart there. We'd been together about four years. I took the remnants of the Compliments which included Jack Dina on guitar, Jon Prano on the drums, Bernie Lee Goode, another guy who played bass, Stuart Wasserman, who later recorded with the group Brethren, and myself. The five of us went out as a five piece band with me in front. The music was changing then so we did different types of music. With the Compliments we were doing more soul stuff but now we were doing the English stuff. Of course, we were doing it with our own flavor. Mostly we were doing things by the Four Tops and stuff."

By 1966, Vic Donna was doing occasional gigs with the remnants of the Compliments and paying visits to his old friend Cirino Colacrai, who was now in charge of development of talent and new songs for *Bourne Music*.

Cirino offered Vic the opportunity to record two songs, one of which, "Take a Chance," was going to be in a movie. "Before we could do those," Vic recalled, "One of J. R. Bailey's Cadillacs came in with another project. The song was 'I'm So Lost.' For the other side we had 'Union Station,' written by Richard Ahlert, the famous songwriter. He played the melody himself on the piano. I really didn't care for that side but I liked 'I'm So Lost' and I liked the idea that the Cadillacs were going to do the background. It was going to be quicker than the movie record so we ended up doing that thing first. So Cirino said, 'It's going to come out on *Murbo Records* the publishing company's label. But I don't want you to use the name Vic Donna. You sound black so I'll give you a name.' When I saw the label - 'Victor Lincoln', I said, 'Couldn't you have told me about this?'"

"And Cirino said, 'I needed a name for the group and they kept saying, 'Stop Breaking My Toys.' You know, instead of the other word... to soften it up. So how about the Toybreakers?' After Victor Lincoln I didn't care. So that came out and it went. I don't know where it went. I never heard it. But I liked what I did with it."

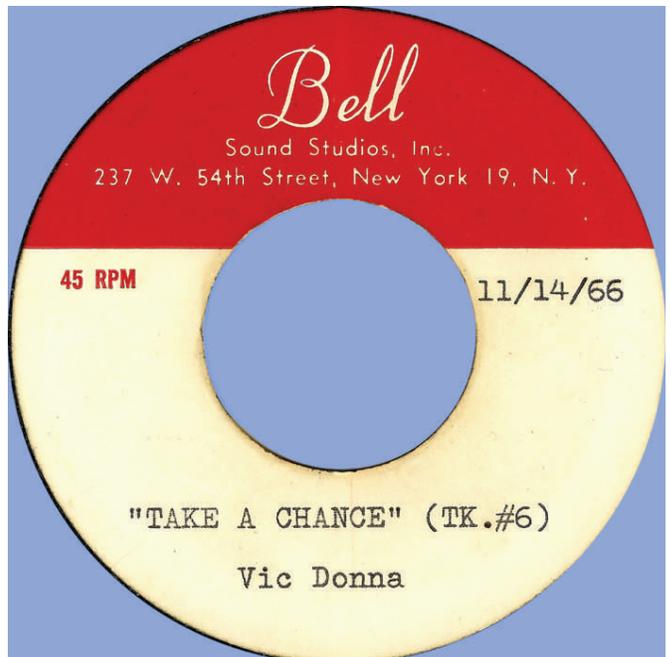
For the movie record, Vic Donna recorded "Take A Chance" and "What A Girl" on November 14, 1966. "They were doing the movie, *Grand Prix*, starring James Garner. It was a big production Cinerama with an international cast. The song was supposed to be in the sound track. It went all the way up to the director, John Frankenheimer. The movie was supposed to be three hours long but it turned out to be



Label courtesy of Vic Donna

four hours long and they have to make cuts. My song is cut. Of course, the record never came out." Years later when the film was released as a DVD, some of the cut scenes were reinserted. Part of Vic's song, "Take A Chance," can now be heard in the DVD. The two unreleased sides, in their entirety, exist only as metal acetates in the Classic Urban Harmony Archives!

Vic's last recording came with the backing of the legendary collectors' vocal group, the Sparrows Quartet in 1975. "I was working in Brooklyn in one of the catering halls," said Vic. "I was married for a long time then and I was working in the house band. One of the guys I was working with was Jerry Vance, husband of Marsha Vance. Of course I knew Marsha too. Anyway, Jerry was a very talented guy.; a songwriter and musician. He said, 'Lets go in the studio and record something. I've got the Sparrows - you know Sal Mondrone and the guys. We'll do the song our-



From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives



Sparrows Quartet at the 2008 Black Swan Concert
 Left to right: Bob Friedman, Vic Donna, Dom D'Elia, Sal Mondrone
 (Photo by Pamela Horner)

selves, we'll use the Sparrows for background and you'll do the lead.' Vic had gone to high school with Sal Mondrone.

The song was "Rock & Roll Kings" which came out on a *Juke Box* label LP box set. "Sal insists that I did the song with them in the studio but I don't remember that," said Vic. "I remember the vocals and the track being already done when I did my vocals. They weren't even in the studio. But I could be wrong. It was a long time ago."

Vic continued in the music business throughout the late 1970's, making recordings in Canada that went unreleased. In 1979 he moved to California where the only thing he did music wise was to give voice lessons to actor Scott Bao. After that he moved to Las Vegas for thirteen years where he performed in clubs and hotels with the groups the Nitekings and his own group, After Dark. Returning to the East Coast, Vic also sang with the Cascades, a group that backed him in one UGHA appearance as the "Parakeets."

On October 4, 2008, Vic Donna was reunited with the Sparrows Quartet on stage at the Black Swan Concert in Ewing, NJ. Filling in for the late Billy D'Elia, Vic was at first a little nervous about doing the obscure material in the Sparrows' repertoire. "I listened to Billy sing on tape and I just felt like I wanted to do him justice. So I tried to do everything just exactly the way he did it and it came out great. Now we're talking about doing a CD together."

Vic Donna's latest recording project brings him back to his roots. He's taken songs that he remembered singing with the Emeralds, Parakeets, Fi-Tones and various neighborhood groups during the fifties and recorded them acappella with Vic doing all the voices. This is a fabulous CD and has our highest recommendation. On it are original songs Vic sang with the Emeralds like "Little Angel," "Say That You Love Me" and "Baby Pretty Baby" as well as tunes written for Vic and the Parakeets but never issued like "Bad Girl" and "Dear God." Also on the CD are his songs with the Parakeets and Fi-Tones. The Vic Donna story continues.

Notes

- Based on Charlie & Pamela Horner's detailed interviews and numerous conversations with Vic Donna (2009).
- Special thanks to Bob Diskin for sharing his knowledge of Brooklyn groups with us.
- Thanks to *Relic Records* for their LP's/CD's and liner notes on the Fi-Tones and *Atlas Records*.
- For Vic's new CD see www.widetracksound.com
- For more info on vocal group harmony, visit Charlie & Pam's website, www.classicurbanharmony.net

Vic Donna Discography

As Vic Donna & The Parakeets:

<i>Atlas</i> 1071	Teenage Rose	1/57
	Silly & Sappy	
<i>Atlas</i> 1075	Love Was A Stranger to Me	4/57
	Count The Tears	
<i>Atlas</i> (unreleased)	High School Ring	
	Dear God (Make My Dream Come True)	

As The Fi-Tones (*Vic is lead*):

<i>Atlas</i> (unreleased - later on Relic CD 7119)	My Life Is In Your Hands	
	The Pair Of Heart And Soul	

As Frankie Sardo (*Vic does harmony part*):

<i>ABC-Paramount</i> 9963	Fake Out	10/58
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As Vic Donna

<i>Carlton</i> 488	My Life Is In Your Hands	10/58
	Dream Girl	
<i>Lido</i> 601	The Gypsy	6/59
	Young Princess	
<i>Lido</i> (unreleased)	I'll Always Be In Love With You	59
<i>ABC-Paramount</i> 10382	Everytime	61
	What Happened To My Little Girl	

As The Sharps

<i>Win</i> 702	We Three	61
	Teen Age Girl	

As Vic Donna (*uncredited backup by The Angels*)

<i>Candy</i> 2000	I'll Find My Way	62
	She's My Girl	

As Vic Donna

<i>Tiger</i> 106	I Won't Be Me Anymore	63
	Dance Marie	

As the Compliments

<i>Congress</i> 243	Shake It Up Shake It Down	7/65
	You Are My Sunshine	
<i>Congress</i> 252	The Time Of Her Life	10/ 65
	Everybody Loves A Lover	

As Victor Lincoln & Toybreakers (*backup The Cadillacs)**

<i>Murbo</i> 1009	I'm So Lost*	66
	Union Station	

As Vic Donna (unreleased)

<i>Bell Sound</i> (acetate)	Take a Chance (Take 6)	11/14/66
<i>Bell Sound</i> (acetate)	What A Girl (Take 1)	11/14/66

As Vic Donna (*uncredited backup by The Sparrows*)

<i>Juke Box</i> LP95141	Rock 'N' Roll Kings	75
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As Vic Donna

CD (only new cuts listed)	Bad Girl	2009
	Walking My Baby Back Home	
	Ride Along	
	I Don't Know Why	
	Say That You Love Me	
	Big Night For Love	
	Little Angel	
	Don't Make It Too Late	
	Dear God	
	You	
	Starlight Star Bright	
	Rosemarie	
	Baby Pretty Baby	