

# South Side Harmony in the Windy City: The Calvae, Blenders & Accents Stories

by Charlie Horner

With contributions from Pamela Horner and Val Shively

## Group Harmony on Chicago's South Side

The exact boundaries of Chicago's South Side have changed over the years and vary slightly according to who you ask. In general, when someone talks about the South Side they're referring to the area of the city south of the Loop. During the first half of the Twentieth Century, hundreds of thousands of African-Americans migrated from the Deep South to Chicago, making the South Side their home. The South Side has been home to Blues, Gospel and plenty of great Jazz. It's been home to dozens of vocal groups, too, from the Soul Stirrers to the Chi-Lites. Of all the areas that have produced vocal groups, the Chicago's South Side rates among the highest. A list of 1950's groups from this fertile area would include the El Dorados, Five Chances, Five Echoes, Flamingos, Five Thrills, Orchids, Dukays, Sheppards, Pastels, Fortunes, Maples, Danderliers, Moroccos, Magnificents, Rip Chords, Calvae, Four Gents, Quintones, Debonairs, Nobles, Belvederes and countless others.

"Solly McElroy and the Moroccos, the Danderliers... They were all right here on the South Side," recalled Chicago vocalist Zeke Brown. "I knew the El Dorados. And the Five Chances. I grew up with these guys. We all used to meet and we'd be at shows. And Tommy Hunt of the Echoes. Tommy Hunt is the one who showed us how to do routines. The Echoes had real good choreography."

We won't try to cover the entire history of vocal harmony from the South Side, as others have already done that thoroughly.[5,6] We'll just taken a few of these groups and expanded upon their stories.

## James "Zeke" Brown

James Edward "Zeke" Brown was born in Memphis, TN, on July 7, 1939. When he was one-and-a-half years old his family moved northward, first to Steubenville, OH and then to Chicago's South Side when he was four (1943).

"The first music that I remember in my life was in the [late] forties when I started listening to WGES (1390 AM) radio," said Zeke Brown. The star personality on WGES at the time was "The Old Swingmaster," Al Benson. Benson (who's real name was Albert Leaner) joined WGES in 1945 and soon became Chicago's leading black disc jockey. "I was just a little boy when we came to Chicago, but my mother told me Al Benson had been a preacher before he was a disc jockey." recalled Zeke. "He was a preacher two or three times. Then he became a disc jockey. He did the mornings, most of the afternoons and he did the nights. Then Sam Evans used to come on at ten o'clock at night. But Al Benson had just about all of those slots, before the station started breaking [up the time slots]. On WGES, I heard songs by the Ravens and Sonny Til and the Orioles. They're the ones that inspired me. [Later] I heard Clyde McPhatter & the Dominoes, the Clovers and the Vocaleers. I just got into it."



**The Calvae: Left to Right, Top: James Williams (Sledge); James Bailey; Bottom: Donald Coles; James Zeke Brown; Paul Morgan. (Photo courtesy of Val Shively)**

Like many other singers, Zeke started harmonizing in church. "I sang at New Testament Baptist Church at 45<sup>th</sup> and Dearborn. I sang in the choir and we also had a little quintet. Just kids in the neighborhood. Besides me, there was Jerome Boatwright, Rufus Campbell, C. W. Tiner, and Leroy Jones. We would sing church songs – songs by the Soul Stirrers and Five Blind Boys. We used to just hear the songs and we would sing them. We were eleven or twelve years old. We didn't have a real name. We just called ourselves the Street Kids then. There was a little store front we used to rehearse around. But we never did sing at other churches besides our own. They put us on a program once. We weren't perfect. We were just singing for God then."

From spirituals the Street Kids moved into Rhythm & Blues. "I went to Hendricks Grammar School at 43<sup>rd</sup> & Princeton, in Chicago," stated Zeke. "There we started having talent shows. We used to sing at those little talent shows. It was the same kids. But now we were singing songs by the Ravens, Orioles, Dominoes and Clovers.

Zeke's first group lasted only until he entered high school. "I went to DuSable High School in 1953," said Zeke. "That's when we formed the Calvae."

## The Calvae

DuSable High is one of the most famous public schools in Chicago. Located at 4934 South Wabash, DuSable was Chicago's first high school for African-American children. It holds the distinction of schooling scores of famous entertainers including Nat King Cole, Redd Foxx, Dinah Washington, Don Cornelius and numerous R&B vocal groups, including all or some of the Five Chances, Five Thrills and Sheppards.

At DuSable, Zeke Brown resumed his interest in singing. "There was a choir teacher, Matilda Woodward. She ran the scale with me one day and said, 'Oh, you have a beautiful voice.' That's how I got into the choir at DuSable."

While at DuSable, Zeke Brown and his friend James "Shorty" Williams put a vocal group together. James Williams was also known as James Sledge. "That was his Air Force name," explained Zeke. "He was adopted. When we were in school his name was James Williams. When he went into the Air Force they had to have his real name, which was James Sledge."

Zeke and James Williams started auditioning other singers. From DuSable they added James Bailey. Two neighborhood singers were included; Paul Morgan who went to Englewood High and Donald Coles who went to Tilden Tech. The resulting vocal group was the Calvae – James "Zeke" Brown (lead/second tenor), James Williams (baritone), Paul Morgan (tenor), Donald Coles (tenor) and James Bailey (bass). Donald Coles sang lead on the upbeat songs while Zeke did lead on the ballads.

The Calvae rehearsed and soon were singing at DuSable. "DuSable had social center nights every other Friday," recalled Zeke. "They'd open the doors at about six o'clock and it was like a dance. Captain Walter Dyett's band would play and the Calvae would sing every social center night."

Captain Walter Henri Dyett is a remarkable figure in Chicago's public education system. The son of a black minister, Dyett taught music and directed bands at DuSable (and it's forerunner, Wendell Phillips High) from 1931 to the 1960's. He was one of the city's first public educators to instruct his students in Jazz, long before it was an accepted field to study. It's said that he trained more than 20,000 musicians in his career, including a long list of famous musicians like Gene Ammons. Dyett directed DuSables' beginners band, concert band, honors band, marching band and ROTC band but it was his Booster Band and Orchestra that played for the school dances.

The Calvae were not the only vocal group to sing at DuSable's social center night. On occasion, older established groups like the Five Chances would come there and sing. Zeke recalled a DuSable group called Hunchie & the Hunchtones (no recordings) singing there too.

Long before they ever put out a record, the Calvae made a TV appearance. *Jim Lounsbury's Bandstand Matinee* debuted on Chicago's WGN-TV (Channel 9) in June 1954. The show was on every weekday from four to five PM. Lounsbury, a white disc jockey, is considered a pioneer in broadcasting Rock & Roll. *Bandstand Matinee* was a teen dance program similar to Philadelphia's *Bandstand*. Lounsbury is credited with exposing white teens to Rhythm & Blues. "*Bandstand Matinee* used to go around to different neighborhoods and people would go down and audition," said Zeke. "We did a song acappella, right there on the *Bandstand Matinee*.

Not an original, a cover of another group's song."

One of the places the Calvae would rehearse at was Fuller Park (West 45<sup>th</sup> Street & South Princeton Avenue). Fuller Park's field house was a complex of buildings with a central courtyard. It had a large auditorium and rooms for public use. The Calvae would sing at Thursday night dances in the auditorium and rehearse in one of the smaller rooms. "They'd give us a key to a room. It was upstairs over the library and we could get that echo sound there. We'd go down there and whoever was in charge, they'd know we were coming and they'd let us blow harmony there. Other groups rehearsed there too. Leon Arnold and the Rip Chords would have a room on one side and we would be on the other side."

The Rip Chords were also from the same South Side neighborhood and started as the Five Knights of Rhythm; Leon Arnold (lead), John Gillespie, George Vinyard, David Hargrove and Lester Martin.

"Leon Arnold used to live about four doors down from me on Wentworth Street," remembered Zeke. "But I think he went to Englewood High. He never sang with the Calvae, only the Rip Chords."

Early in 1955, the Rip Chords auditioned for *Vee Jay Records*. Leon Arnold, an exceptional songwriter, had written several original tunes for the Rip Chords. The Rip Chords sang a number of songs for *Vee Jay*, including "(I'll Be) Forever Loving You," "Lorrie," and "The Lights Are Low." *Vee Jay* recorded the Knights Of Rhythm on June 8, 1955 doing "Forever Loving You" and "Lorrie." In the studio that same day were the El Dorados recording "Now That You've Gone" and "What's Bugging You Baby." *Vee Jay* was obviously more impressed with Leon Arnold's songs than the Rip Chords. They gave "I'll Be Forever Loving You" to the El Dorados to record while leaving the Rip Chords sides in the can. "I'll Be Forever Loving You" peaked at #8 on the R&B Charts in early 1956. A couple years later, in November 1957, the second El Dorados group (Perkle Lee Moses with the Kool Gents) would record Arnold's "Lights Are Low."



From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives

Arnold was given writer credit both times, but the other Rip Chords were left in the cold.

"In fact, groups would go down to *Vee Jay Records* and they would steal the ideas and put the record out with their hottest group," lamented Zeke Brown. "Because Leon Arnold wrote both 'I'll Be Forever Loving You' and 'Lights Are Low' and the El Dorados ended up putting them on wax. The Rip Chords did 'Lights Are Low' first. Leon's gone on, but he was a pretty good writer at the time."

The Rip Chords were being managed by Ted Daniels, who also managed the Five Thrills and had close ties to the Sheppards and their manager, William "Bunky" Sheppard. Daniels took the Rip Chords to Eli Toscano who was forming a new record label.

### Cobra Records

Elias P. Toscano owned and operated the ABC TV and Repair Shop at 2854 West Roosevelt Road on Chicago's West Side. The area was home to many blues clubs and Eli soon started stocking records; turning his store into a small one-stop for black music. After about a year, Eli built a recording studio in back of the store to record some of the local blues artists. Joe Brown, the noted record entrepreneur invested in the new label, called *Abco* after Eli's A.B.'s One Stop, and sent Eli his first artist.

Recalled Howard Bedno, Toscano's other (silent) partner, "Joe Brown, a well known local talent scout with his own label called *J.O.B Records*, was instrumental in getting us started in the business. Joe brought [blues singer] Arbee Stidham to us, who was our first artist to get any attention. We recorded Arbee in the little studio behind the shop."<sup>[3]</sup>

Toscano's first record with Arbee Stidham didn't break national but did get some airplay around Chicago. It was enough to keep the *Abco* label going, at least for a few months. Ted Daniels brought the Rip Chords to Toscano, and the group had its first record.

"I remember when the Rip Chords made that record, 'I Love You The Most,' said Zeke Brown. "Leon Arnold wrote that song too." Leon Arnold introduced the Calvae's to Ted Daniels, who after a quick listen, agreed to manage them too. Ted Daniels then arranged for his new group, the Calvae's, to audition for Eli Toscano.

In the meantime, Toscano was ending his partnership with Joe Brown after less than six months of existence and only eight releases on the *Abco* label. He started a new label with Howard Bedno. The new label, formed in mid-1956, was named *Cobra*. For an arranger and talent scout, Toscano sought out blues legend Willie Dixon.

"Eli Toscano was the man who had the *Cobra* recording company," Dixon recalled in his autobiography. "He had one artist Arbee Stidham and one record out which wasn't raising hell but it was playing over there in the black neighborhoods of Chicago. We sat down and talked. He was telling me he was looking for some new artists because Arbee wasn't selling. I told Eli I could get him some new artists."<sup>[4]</sup> Dixon went on to play a major roll at *Cobra Records*, arranging songs and even supplying the musicians for the sessions.

"Eli Toscano and Howard Bedno owned *Cobra Records*," said Zeke Brown. "Our first recording session was done on the second floor of the Kimball Building downtown. It was overtop of a piano place. Willie Dixon and his band

were the ones that recorded behind us on 'Mambo Fiesta' and 'Fine Girl.' We just recorded those two songs at that session. I wrote and sang lead on 'Mambo Fiesta.' That was the first song that I wrote. The Latin sound was in at that time. I was about 16-years old then."

The flipside, "Fine Girl" is credited to Howard Bedno on the label. "No, he did not write that but that's the way they did it back then," reflected Zeke. "They would get the credit for writing. It was actually written by the group. Donald Coles did the lead on 'Fine Girl'".

The recording session that day was likely the first recording session for *Cobra Records*. Besides Toscano, Bedno, Dixon and the Calvae's, Zeke also recalled the Clouds and Otis Rush being present. The Clouds (Sherrard Jones, Al Butler, William English and Bobby Walker [5]) were there to record "I Do" and "Rock And Roll Boogie," released on *Cobra #5001* at about the same time as the Calvae's record.

"Mambo Fiesta" (*Cobra #5003*) wasn't reviewed in *Billboard* until the week of September 29, 1956, but the record became known around Chicago long before that. In what has been a tradition since 1929, every year on the second Saturday of August, African-Americans on Chicago's South Side celebrate a day of togetherness and fun with the Bud Billekin Parade and Picnic. The parade, which runs down the South Parkway (now Martin Luther King Jr. Drive) was started by the *Chicago Defender* newspaper and is now the largest annual parade in the United States. Zeke Brown remembered the Calvae's first record first getting air play the night before the Billekin Parade in 1956 on August 11. The disc jockey first playing the Calvae's was Sam Evans. His "Jam With Sam Program" on WGES usually featured R&B vocal group recordings from 10-11 PM.

*Cobra* was primarily a blues label and early success with Otis Rush's first record reinforced this. A quick glance at the trade magazines showed that Eli was promoting his blues acts more than his vocal groups. This may account for the fact that the Calvae's record only did well in Chicago. "Eli To-



From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives

scano had Willie Dixon, Koko Taylor, Otis Rush,” said Zeke Brown. “He was a blues man, but he was interested in us once he heard us.”

“Mambo Fiesta” did open up a lot of opportunities for the Calvae locally. “The record got plenty of airplay,” said Zeke. “We started gigging around locally.”

On September 1, 1956, the Calvae performed on a major show at the Trianon Ballroom (Cottage Grove and 62<sup>nd</sup> Street). The show was produced by Sam Evans and featured Ray Charles and his Orchestra, Chuck Willis, J. B. Lenore, Jimmy Binkley and Nate Nelson of the Flamingos.[8] “We made third billing,” Zeke recalled. “Right behind Ray Charles and Chuck Willis. Nate Nelson of the Flamingos was also there. He was doing solo while the other Flamingos were in the service at the time.”

“We also did a big show with the Rip Chords at Hyde Park High School Auditorium,” said Zeke. “The Flamingos were on the bill as well as Jerry Butler & the Impressions, the Moroccos, the Danderliers... there were so many acts. Most of the Flamingos were in the service then and even had their uniforms on backstage. It was a school and we were changing clothes in different classrooms. Herb Kent sponsored that show.”

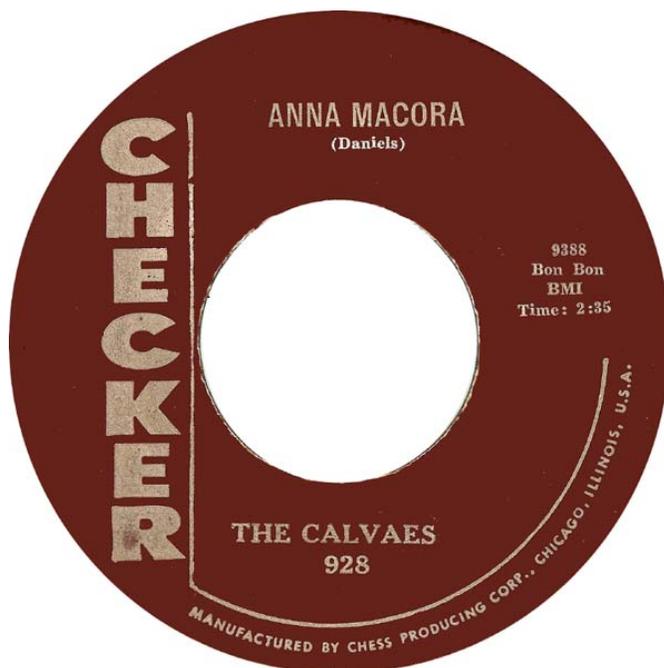
For Thanksgiving, the Calvae were back at the Trianon Ballroom along with the Magnificents, the Kool Gents, the Clouds, Otis Rush, the Echoes, Hal Barrage, Shakey Horton, Dot Dash, the Lightfoot Brothers, George Crockett, Lil “Upstairs” Mason, Thelma Watkins and Johnny Griffin. The show also featured a “Battle of Swing” between the *Chess/Checker* studio band led by Willie Dixon and *Vee Jay’s* studio band led by Al Smith. The show was produced by WOPA disc jockeys McKie Fitzhugh and Big Bill Hill.[7]

“We went to Gary, IN and played Barbara’s Playhouse [a large ballroom with major names in entertainment]” said Zeke. “It snowed like mad that night, and I mean *a lot* of snow, but we made it. Gary was about thirty to forty miles from us and at that time they didn’t have all of these expressways. A fellow that we knew named John Wright drove us up there through the snow. It took us awhile but we left early and we were right there and the band was right there. It was very successful. There were still quite a few people there in all the snow. There were other acts there too. We did three songs. We did ‘Mambo Fiesta’ and ‘Fine Girl’ and we sang one of the Dells’ numbers, ‘Dreams of Contentment.’”

In February 1957, the Calvae appeared on a midnight show at the Central Park Theatre along with Andre Williams, Jimmy Rodgers, John Lee Hooker, the Kool Gents, Otis Rush and the Al Smith Orchestra.[9]

Early in 1957, the Calvae entered the studio to record “Born With Rhythm” and “Lonely Lonely Village.” The record was reviewed in *Billboard* during the week of July 22, 1957. The Calvae’s second record didn’t do as well as “Mambo Fiesta.” “It was released a long time after ‘Mambo Fiesta’ and really didn’t connect like ‘Mambo Fiesta’ did,” said Zeke. The group’s manager, Ted Daniels was listed as writer of both sides. “He used to do the same thing as the record companies,” said Zeke. “He’d add a word here and there and the next thing you know, he wrote the song. ‘Lonely Lonely Village’ and ‘Born With Rhythm’ were written by the Calvae.”

“After the two records, everybody just got disgusted and



#### From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives.

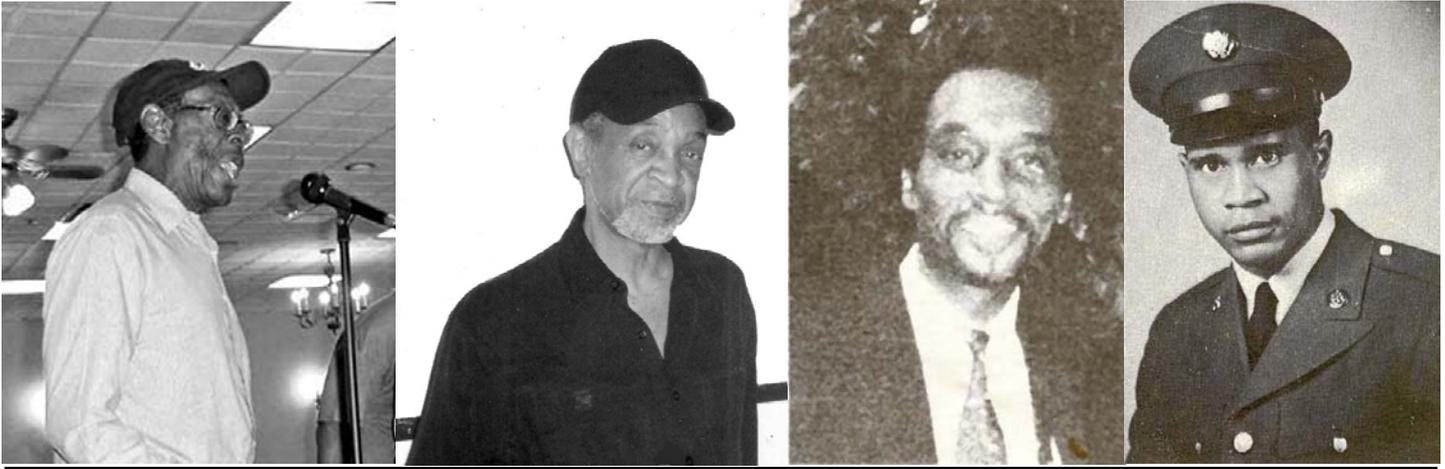
it seems like things just fell apart,” reflected Zeke. “In those days, groups would do one or two records and then they were history. I was moving around and I got an audition with the Blenders and that was it.”

Zeke believed the Calvae’s story ended there but one more recording surfaced. In 1958, *Checker Records* released “Anna Macora” by the Calvae backed by “So Bad” by Oscar Boyd with the Calvae. Zeke was not on either side but recalled “Anna Macora” as a tune the Calvae were toying with when he was with them. After listening to the record in 2009, Zeke identified the lead as the Calvae’s Donald Coles and the bass as James Bailey. Writer credits list the Calvae’s manager, Ted Daniels. The flip, “So Bad,” features former South Side singer Oscar Boyd, formerly of the Sheppards, with the group. The writers of “So Bad” credit Boyd, Sheppards’ manager Bill Sheppard, and Nick Jovan, a writer associated with Bill Sheppard.

#### Curtis Campbell

Curtis Campbell was born March 6, 1942 in Portageville, Missouri and came to Chicago when he was four years old, moving with his family into the same South Side neighborhood as the Calvae. A couple years younger than the Calvae, Curtis looked up to the group. “James Sledge, a member of the Calvae, was my cousin,” recalled Curtis. “I saw him with the Calvae and I wanted to sing too.”

Curtis Campbell first started singing while he was in grammar school. “I went to St. Cecilia Catholic School,” said Curtis. “I didn’t sing in church but I had friends that did. And I knew harmony before I actually knew what harmony was. I ran into a couple of guys and they knew harmony and we started blending our voices together. Parnell Shaw was going to Hendricks Grammar School. I can’t remember where Donald Taylor was going to grammar school. We sang for two or three years, every day when we were off.. We were always together. Then I went to DuSable High School and Parnell Shaw and Donald Taylor went to Englewood



**The Blenders (Left to Right): James Brown, Curtis Campbell, Parnell Shaw, Donald Taylor**

High School. Eventually I transferred to Englewood just so we could stay close. Because, these were my guys. We did everything together.”

### The Blenders

Parnell David Shaw was born on April 29, 1943 in Camden, NC. The eighth of nine children, Parnell moved with his family to Chicago when he was nine years old. Parnell first started singing tenor in the choir of Calvary Temple Baptist Church at 44th and Princeton Avenue.

Donald “Duck” Taylor was born March 17, 1942 in Chicago. Like Parnell Shaw, Donald belonged to Calvary Temple Baptist Church where he played piano and also sang in the choir.

Curtis Campbell, Parnell Shaw, Donald Taylor and Willie Jones formed a singing group called the Blenders when they were in 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade. “The name Blenders came about from us just trying to think of different names,” remembered Curtis. “We had pretty much a perfect blend. We sang whenever we got together. We did little else besides singing. We all lived in close proximity to Fuller Park. That’s where we attended dances. They had a field house and we used to sing in there for the acoustics. It had a nice echo and you could hear everything. We’d go there and we’d sing for hours in that place. It was our calling and we had a talent to do it.”

At that time, the Blenders were singing songs like the Dells’ “Why Did You Have to Go,” and “Oh What A Night,” the Danderleers’ “Chop Chop Boom,” the El Dorados’ “At My Front Door,” “There In The Night” and “A Rose For My Darling,” the Spaniels’ “Peace Of Mind,” the Robins’ “Smokey Joe’s Café” as well as tunes by the Moroccos. “We had a lead, Willie Jones,” said Curtis. “Sound-wise, he was as close to Pookie Hudson as you can get and so we did a lot of stuff by the Spaniels. We could do it all.”

“Our neighborhood was like a small conglomerate where every street corner had a different group and we used to sing against each other,” said Curtis. “We had a little competition thing to impress the girls.”

While the Blenders perfected their harmony, troubles within the group started to surface. As good as a singer as he was, Willie Jones was a guy who “was always in trouble” and “just kind of self-destructed.” Curtis Campbell, Parnell Shaw and Donald Taylor made up the core of the group, and started

looking for a new lead singer.

“We met James Brown who was a member of the Calvaes. He was dissatisfied with his arrangement with his group and we had a guy who was always in trouble,” said Curtis. “James Brown came over to our group.”

The Blenders had been together for two or three years before Zeke Brown joined them. “We were all over at Fuller Park at 45<sup>th</sup> & Princeton,” recalled Zeke. “Curtis Campbell of the Blenders asked me, ‘What are you doing now? Are you still with the Calvaes?’ I said, ‘Well, now we’re not doing anything. The Blenders were singing modern harmony. It was modern harmony combined with Rock & Roll. Donald Taylor, Curtis Campbell and Parnell Shaw were already established and they liked the way I could just fall right into what they were doing at that time. I had a good ear for music.”

The Blenders became James “Zeke” Brown, Donald Taylor, Curtis Campbell and Parnell Shaw. “The Blenders were just singing at the Park,” said Zeke. “They weren’t gigging or anything. They were just getting a group together. They were three or four years younger than I was. They kind of looked up to me because I already had a record out.”

“When we got together we ran into Carl Davis,” remembered Curtis. “At that time he was working for a pretty powerful disc jockey here in Chicago named Al Benson. And we were on the street. We would sing on the El. We would sing everywhere. We walked into Al Benson’s office and Carl Davis took the time to ask ‘What have you guys got?’ So he let us sing for him and he liked us. He called Bill Sheppard and they became partners in promoting us. Carl promised, ‘In thirty days I’ll have a record cut on you and you’ll be hearing it on the radio.’ The only thing, I found out later, was we had to give them the song. So that’s what happened. We created the song ‘Two Loves’ and we got our record deal.”

Carl Davis and Bill “Bunky” Sheppard would later become legendary figures in the Chicago R&B music field. But in 1958 they were still on the way up. Carl Davis was working for Al Benson, putting together “hit sheets” for the powerful dee jay. Sheppard was managing local vocal groups. The two met when Sheppard visited Benson’s studio to promote his group the Bel Aires, forerunners to the second Sheppards group. The two became friends and started producing and promoting acts together.[6]



Courtesy of Val Shively



From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives.

“Bill Sheppard was showing Carl Davis the things that he knew about the music business because he was in it before,” said Zeke. “Carl Davis was like a greenhorn. At that time he didn’t know too much about it but it didn’t take him long to learn. We went to Bill Sheppard’s house one night and Carl Davis was with us. That’s before we recorded.”

The Blenders put together two songs to record, “Two Loves” and “Soda Shop.”

“I remember that we recorded those two songs at Universal Studios, down on East Walton Street,” said Curtis.

Bill Putnam’s Universal Recording Company was the dominant recording studio in Chicago. Over the years, Universal pioneered many concepts in recording such as the use of artificial reverberation (echo), isolated vocal booths and multiple overdubs of a single voice. The studio was used extensively by artists like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Nat King Cole, Oscar Peterson, Sarah Vaughn, Dinah Washington, Lena Horne, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, B.B. King and Jackie Wilson.

“It kind of blew us away,” said Curtis. “That was the first time I had ever been in a studio. We walked in and we saw all that equipment, the lights, pictures on the wall of famous people like Frank Sinatra, Count Basie, Mel Torme, all these guys who were legends. We saw them hanging on the wall so we figured that at one time or another they had recorded at that studio. I can’t describe the feeling other than euphoria.”

Of the musicians, Chicago session legend Lefty Bates played guitar and Carl Davis’ brother, Cliff Davis played lead saxophone on the recordings.

Zeke Brown sang lead on “Two Loves,” which was selected as the plug side. Donald Taylor led on “Soda Shop.” Carl Davis got the record released on the *Aladdin* label out of California. When the record came out it was getting radio play from Herb Kent (“The Kool Gent”) and E. Rodney Jones and of course, Al Benson. “We were getting plenty of airplay right here in the city,” said Zeke. “Carl Davis was seeing to

that.”

“We were on cloud nine the first time we heard the record played on the air,” remembered Curtis. “And the popularity that came along with being played on the radio. At that time we were still students and it was phenomenal.”

After the record came out, Carl Davis used to take the Blenders to different lounges. “We were only fifteen or sixteen but Carl would get special permission since they were serving alcohol. I guess he knew the owners of the clubs and they would let us come in and sing a few songs. We would sing at different social centers for the youngsters. We did skating rink parties, every place we could. Most of jobs we did were in Chicago,” said Curtis.

Jim Lounsbury also took a strong interest in the Blenders. Though they never appeared on his *Bandstand Matinee* TV show, Lounsbury had the Blenders sing at numerous record hops. He would pick the group up and take them to sing at a lot of local dances he was sponsoring. By the late 1950’s, Lounsbury was hosting record hops six nights a week in addition to his TV show. “The only times we got out of the city limits were when Jim Lounsbury would take us places,” said Curtis. “He would take us to the northern suburbs; he’d take us top the far south suburbs.”

The Blenders association with Jim Lounsbury led to their second recording. Lounsbury was married to singer Reba Jeanette Smith who’d previously recorded as Penny Smith and was now using the stage name Debbie Stevens. In December 1958, Stevens was scheduled to record for the *ABC-Paramount* subsidiary, *APT*. The “A” side was to be a rocker, “If You Can’t Rock Me,” but the flip called for a ballad with vocal group backing. Lounsbury had initially lined up a white doo wop group from Chicago’s West Side, the Deltones to back Stevens on that side. Lounsbury was managing the Deltones (Sammy Basile, Tommy Burton, Ronnie Howard and Ron Buonauro) and had recorded their first record, “Early Morning Rock,” which he’d gotten released on *Vee Jay*.<sup>[10]</sup>

For some reason, Lounsbury brought the Blenders into

the studio at the same time as the Deltones. “Jim knew that we had excellent harmony,” said Curtis Campbell. “But he also had this other group. Debbie was supposed to cut this record ‘What Will I Tell My Heart.’ Lounsbury already had a group in place to do the background vocals for her but somehow we wound up in the studio at the same time. Jim tried to consider these guys feelings so he said, let’s try to use everybody. We had eight guys recording the background for Debbie. That didn’t work out. So he let the Deltones record it first and then he said, ‘OK, you guys try it.’ We did it in one or two takes.”

APT released the take with the Blenders backing Debbie Stevens. The song was reviewed in *Billboard* magazine on January 26, 1959. Two days earlier, Lounsbury had booked the Winter Dance Party tour, consisting of Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, the Big Bopper, Dion & the Belmonts and Frankie Sardo into the Eagles Ballroom in Kenosha, WI, and added his wife, Debbie Stevens to the bill. Richie Valens and the Big Bopper appeared on Lounsbury’s TV show and Debbie Stevens sang “‘If You Can’t Rock Me” on the Kenosha stage show with Holly, Valens and the Big Bopper. Lounsbury also got the Deltones on that show. Six days later, Buddy Holly, Richie Valens and the Big Bopper were killed in a plane crash in Clear Lake, IA. Debbie Stevens would go on to record as Debbie Dean for *Motown Records* in the early 1960’s.

Uncredited on the Debbie Stevens record and not invited to sing with Buddy Holly and Richie Valens, the Blenders were content to let their fortunes ride on “Two Loves” and *Aladdin Records*. *Aladdin* at one time had been a huge label, featuring artists like the Five Keys and Shirley & Lee. But by 1959, the label was in decline.

“The *Aladdin* thing was a one record deal,” lamented Zeke Brown. “We were still rehearsing and everything. I don’t know. Jim Lounsbury had us going places and doing things and all of the sudden the bottom just fell out.”

“Carl Davis got airplay in Chicago but what hurt us was *Aladdin’s* distribution was poor,” added Curtis Campbell. “At DuSable High School people told us they heard the record on the radio and went to the record store to purchase it but the stores didn’t have it. That killed it. Radio stations played it for about three weeks straight, but after that they didn’t play it anymore.” The Blenders continued singing a while longer and then broke up.. Parnell Shaw decided to get



Zeke Brown, Carl Davis & Curtis Campbell at Chicago Soul Trip USA, 2009. (Photo by Pamela Horner)

married. Curtis Campbell went into the service and when he came out he got married. When Curtis got out of the service, the Blenders did get together briefly and even cut a couple sides at Chess studios. The sides were never released and the Blenders broke up for good.

### The Accents

James Zeke Brown wasn’t involved in music again until 1963, when he decided to try again.

“I was on 71<sup>st</sup> & State Street and a guy named Donald Motley remembered me from the Calvaees and Blenders and he asked me would I like to audition with Bernice Williams for a South Side group called the Ascots.”

Bernice Williams was a songwriter living at West 61<sup>st</sup> and South Loomis Streets in the Englewood (South Side) section of Chicago. Bernice managed several groups, helping them with arrangements and harmony. Her biggest success was with Gene Chandler and his group, the Dukays. Bernice co-wrote “The Duke of Earl” with the group. She was also responsible for taking them to Carl Davis and Bill Sheppard, who recorded the song. Donald Motley knew Bernice Williams well and probably took the Ascots to her.

“I went by Bernice’s house and we had a couple of rehearsals,” said Zeke. “They were almost ready for the recording session. For some reason, I always fit right in.”

The members of the Ascots when Zeke joined them were Donald Motley, Bobby Hill, Jimmy Short, Oliver Jackson and Creadel Jones.

Creadel “Red” Jones had previously recorded with the Desideros (Marshall Thompson, Creadel Jones, Del Brown, Robert Goley, Joe Manual and Eddie Sullivan). The South Side group had recorded “I Pledge My Love” for Leo Austell’s *Renee* label. After singing with the Ascots a short time, Creadel Jones abruptly left the group to rejoin Marshall Thompson who had gotten together with former members of the Chaunteurs (Eugene Record, Robert Lester and Clarence Johnson) to form the Hi-Lites. The Hi-Lites would eventually add a “C” to their name and become the Chi-Lites. [11]

“Creadel Jones quit us just as we were going to the recording session,” recalled Zeke. “We had to turn some things around right quick.”

Before recording, the group changed their name. “The name Ascots didn’t ring a bell, so Bernice said, ‘Let’s go with the Accents.’ We voted on it.”

Between Bernice Williams and the group, the Accents assembled a number of original songs. “As a song writer, Bernice was pretty good,” said Zeke. “She was not a melody person but she was pretty good with lyrics. Bernice and I would put our heads together and put lyrics to songs.” One original tune was “Enchanted Garden.”

“I liked the way Bernice put the lyrics to ‘Enchanted Garden’, said Zeke. “Someone else wrote that melody but we couldn’t do that with his lyrics. It was about two weeks before recording. But she turned it around. We rehearsed and rehearsed. And this guy, Riley Hampton orchestrated it.” The other side “Tell Me Now” lists Bernice Williams and James Brown as writers. “I really wrote it but she put her name on it,” said Zeke. “I wrote that at work, about two to three o’clock in the morning. I was working the midnight shift at the steel mill at the time. Bernice and Riley Hampton got us on *Mercury Records*. Riley had a little pull, too.”



From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives



From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives

Riley Hampton was a well known figure in the Chicago music scene. A veteran alto saxophonist for Red Saunders Orchestra, by the 1960's Hampton had become known as one of the better arrangers in Chicago. He was particularly known for his use of lush strings in his arrangements, as witnessed by his work on Etta James' "At Last."

On May 10, 1963, James "Zeke" Brown, Donald Motley, Bobby Hill, Jimmy Short and Oliver Jackson went into the recording studio and cut four songs; "Enchanted Garden," "Tell Me Now," "Pig Huntin'" and "I Ain't Ready To Go." Only the first two sides were released. David Carroll produced the *Mercury* record.

"Enchanted Garden," a pretty transition ballad containing a mix of doo wop and soul harmonies was picked for the "A" side. Still, the producers though it needed more of a hook.

"I did the lead on 'Enchanted Garden,'" said Zeke. "I did it one day, and then I was asked to put some more flavor in it. So I thought, in 'Enchanted Garden' I'm singing in a garden. I said, well, I can whistle pretty well. So we overdubbed me doing the bird whistles and it came out pretty good."

Released in July of 1963, airplay for "Enchanted Garden" in Chicago was substantial. Herb Kent played it a lot. The Accents started doing a lot of shows for him. The group also got some jobs in Cleveland on the song. "Enchanted Garden" took them quite a few places.

While the Accents thought their career was really taking off with a big company like *Mercury Records*, other factors were at work. For one thing, Donald Motley left the group after the Mercury recording, making the group a quartet.

"One day Bernice said, 'Well fellows, we're going to have an audition with *One-Derful Records*,'" said Zeke. "I asked her, 'What happened to *Mercury Records*?' and she just threw up her hands. I said, 'Oh my God. It looks like we're going backwards.' I didn't even know of George Leaner at the time but right after 'Enchanted Garden' Bernice was taking us down to Michigan Avenue to *One-Derful Records*.

*One-Derful Records* (and its subsidiary labels, *Midas*, *M-*

*Pac*, *Mar-V-Lus* and *Halo*) were run by George and Ernie Leaner. The Leaner brothers were nephews of radio personality George Benson (real name Albert Leaner). Since 1950, they had been running *United Record Distributors* in Chicago but formed the *One-Derful* label in 1962 to record soul artist McKinley Mitchell.

"The next thing I knew we were doing 'New Girl (In The Neighborhood)' and Herb Kent and them, they just fell in love with it," said Zeke.

"New Girl" was a song written by Bernice Williams and the Accents' Bobby Hill. Bobby Hill sang lead on the song with Jimmy Short doing the second lead. Bobby Hill's voice had that rough edge to it that was popular with hard R&B at the time. "They called it 'the raggedy throat,'" said Zeke. "They called it 'Soul'."

"New Girl" was released on *One-Derful Records*' subsidiary, *M-Pac* in July 1964.

With airplay from Herb Kent at WVON-AM, "New Girl" reached #5 on the Chicago radio stations' weekly survey. WVON was Chicago's extremely popular soul music station, owned by Leonard and Phil Chess. But even Chicago's Top-40 radio station, WLS, carried "New Girl" on their weekly "Silver Dollar Survey" for five straight weeks, reaching as high as #28.

Some copies of "New Girl" have turned up with the label calling the song "Spring Song." Where this name came from is uncertain because Zeke reports that the song always had the title "New Girl."

With "New Girl" such a hit in Chicago, it's surprising it did not chart nationally, but it didn't. That the song *did* get some airplay elsewhere is evident in the fact that the Accents were able to tour on the record's strength. Besides playing the Regal Theater in Chicago, the Accents played Cleveland, the Fox Theater and Twenty Grand in Detroit, the Uptown Theater in Philadelphia and in Canada.

Around this time the Accents were taken to the studio to record background vocals for Barbara Lewis.



**From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives**

Lewis was born and raised in Ann Arbor, MI. At the age of twenty-three she was brought to Chicago's *Chess Recording Studios* in January 1963 by her manager, Ollie McLaughlin. There she recorded "Hello Stranger" backed by the Dells, who were used to back many of Lewis' songs. How the Accents came to replace the Dells for one session is unclear, but perhaps it was through Riley Hampton who arranged some of Lewis' sessions.

Zeke remembered the Accents backing Lewis on four numbers, but the titles, if released, remain unknown. [14] He recalled Barbara Lewis having a soft voice and the recording studio having to boost her volume to be heard over the group.

In 1965 George Leaner released the Accents' next record, this time on the parent *One-Derful* label. "You Better Think Again" featured Bobby Hill on lead with Jimmy Short doing

the second lead. The record got little promotion and faded quickly. It's now a much sought after "Northern Soul" record in the U.K.

In spite of the local success of "New Girl," *One-Derful* sent the group royalty statements, when, after subtracting "expenses" claimed the Accents owed the label money!

"It was really a rough ride," reflected Zeke Brown. "We had plenty of airplay, but do you know, after the two records we all got letters that we were about \$25,000 in the red. And that just upset everybody." Disgusted, the Accents disbanded.

Jimmy Short went on to sing with Ralph Johnson (formerly of the DeBonairs on *Ping*) and Wayne Readus in the Original Breed (*Karol* label). When Johnson died, Short and Readus added Paul Barnes and Lamar Greer to form People's Choice (*Veroneeca* label).[15] In 1972, Jimmy Short then joined the Artistics (a group that earlier had shared the stage with the Accents on a Herb Kent show), in time for their last two *Brunswick* label singles as well as their "Look Out" album.[12] Short died of a brain aneurism in the 1980's. It's not known if the other Accents continued in music or not..

James Zeke Brown retired from singing until October 4, 2008, when he was brought out of retirement by Mark del Costello to perform Calvaes' songs at the Black Swan Concert in Ewing, New Jersey. Backed by some members of the New Jersey vocal group the Sheps (Johnny Barlow, Richie Comacho, Charles Coleman, and Tommy Lockhart), Brown performed "Born with Rhythm," "Fine Girl" and "Lonely Lonely Village".[16]

Of the singers discussed in this article, the Calvaes' James Williams, Paul Morgan, Donald Coles and James Bailey have all left this world as have the Blenders' Parnell Shaw and Donald Taylor. Of the Accents, Creadel Jones and Jimmy Short are deceased. The whereabouts of Bobby Hill, Donald Motley and Oliver Jackson are unknown. Curtis Campbell now performs around Chicago with his four-piece band, the Chicago Rhythm Blues Band. He and Zeke Brown still get together and write songs.



James "Zeke" Brown (left) and his Calvaes group rehearsing Oct. 3, 2008 for the Black Swan Concert .  
(Photo by Pamela Horner)



James Brown (left) and his Calvaes performing on the 2008 Black Swan Concert, Ewing, NJ, Oct. 4, 2008.  
(Photo by Pamela Horner)

**Update, March 2009**

On March 9, 2009, while at Soul Trip USA in Chicago, Pam and Charlie Horner heard that record icon Carl Davis would be stopping by the event to meet fans of "Northern Soul" music. Pam and Charlie quickly arranged for Zeke Brown and Curtis Campbell to also attend the event. In a surprise reunion between Carl Davis and the first vocal group he ever produced, Charlie brought out Blenders' Zeke Brown and Curtis Campbell. Carl had not seen them since 1959!!!



**Curtis Campbell, Charlie Horner, James Brown  
(Photo by Pamela Horner)**



**Curtis Campbell, Pamela Horner, James Brown  
(Photo by Charlie Horner)**



**Carl Davis & Blenders Reunion, Soul Trip USA 2009  
Left to right: Carl Davis, Zeke Brown, Curtis Campbell,  
Charlie Horner. (Photo by Pamela Horner)**



**Carl Davis and Charlie Horner  
at Chicago Soul Trip USA, 2009  
(Photo by Pamela Horner)**



**Millard Edwards (Sheppards) and Zeke Brown, 2009  
(Photo by Pamela Horner)**

## Notes and References

1. Based on Charlie & Pamela Horner's interviews and numerous conversations with James "Zeke" Brown and Curtis Campbell.
2. Thanks to Mark del Costello and Richard Murray for helping with vital contacts.
3. Liner notes to the CD Box Set, "The Cobra Record Story," *Capricorn Records* 9-42012 (1993).
4. Willie Dixon and Don Snowden, *I Am The Blues: The Willie Dixon Story*, (Da Capo Press, Inc., 1989).
5. Robert Pruter, *Dooop: The Chicago Scene*, Univ. of Illionis Press, 1996).
6. Robert Pruter, *Chicago Soul*, Univ. of Illionis Press, 1991).
7. Galen Gart, ed., *First Pressings: The History of Rhythm & Blues Vol. 6: 1956*, (Big Nickel Publications, 1991).
8. Robert Pruter, "The James 'Zeke' Brown, The Calvaes and Accents Story," *Blues & Rhythm*, No. 218 (Apr 2007), pp. 10-11.
9. Galen Gart, ed., *First Pressings: The History of Rhythm & Blues Vol. 7: 1957*, (Big Nickel Publications, 1993).
10. Sammy Basile, Correspondence to "Vee-Jay Album Discography, Part 12: Correspondence, Corrections, Updates," <http://www.bsnpubs.com/veejay/veejaymail.html>
11. Marc Taylor, "You Got to Give More Power to The Chi-

## Calvaes, Blenders & Accents Discography

### The Calvaes

(James Brown, James Williams, Paul Morgan, Donald Coles, James Bailey, vocals; Willie Dixon Band; Chicago; Spr. 1956)  
U 3242 Mambo Fiesta [JB] *Cobra* 5003 Rel. 8/10/56  
U 3243 Fine Girl [DC] *Cobra* 5003 -

(James Brown, James Williams, Paul Morgan, Donald Coles, James Bailey, vocals; probably Willie Dixon Band; Chicago; Spring 1957)  
C 1016 Born With Rhythm [JB] *Cobra* 5014 Rel. 7/22/57  
C 1017 Lonely Lonely Village [JB] *Cobra* 5014 -

(Oscar Boyd, Donald Coles, James Bailey and prob. James Williams, Paul Morgan, voc.; Unkn. musicians; Chicago; ca. 1958)  
9388 Anna Macora [DC] *Checker* 928 Rel. 6/59  
9389 So Bad\* [OB] *Checker* 928 -

### The Blenders

(James Brown, Curtis Campbell, Parnell Shaw, Donald Taylor, vocals; Lefty Bates (g), Clifford Davis (ts); others; Universal Recording Studios, Chicago; ca. Dec. 1958)  
CHI 3073 Two Loves [JB] *Aladdin* 3449 Rel. 1/59  
CHI 3074 Soda Shop [DT] *Aladdin* 3449 -

### As Debbie Stevens (Uncredited backup by the Blenders)

(Debbie Stevens, James Brown, Curtis Campbell, Parnell Shaw, Donald Taylor, vocals; Unknown musicians; Chicago; ca. Dec. 1958)  
15056 What Will I Tell My Heart [DS] *APT* 25027 Rel. 1/59

### The Accents

(James "Zeke" Brown, Donald Motley, Bobby Hill, Jimmy Short, Oliver Jackson, vocals; Riley Hampton Orchestra; Chicago; May 10, 1963)  
28550 Enchanted Garden [JB] *Mercury* 72154 Rel. 7/26/63  
28551 Pig Huntin' unreleased  
28552 Tell Me Now *Mercury* 72154 Rel. 7/26/63  
28553 I Ain't Ready To Go unreleased

(James "Zeke" Brown, Bobby Hill, Jimmy Short, Oliver Jackson, vocals; Unknown musicians; Chicago; Spring 1964)  
3073 New Girl\*[BH] *M-Pac* 7216 Rel. 6/64  
3074 Do You Need A Good Man [BH] *M-Pac* 7216 -

### As Barbara Lewis (Uncredited backup by the Accents)

(Barbara Lewis, James "Zeke" Brown, Bobby Hill, Jimmy Short, Oliver Jackson, voc; Unkn. musicians; Chicago; ca. 1964)  
*Atlantic Records* [Unknown titles]

### The Accents

(James "Zeke" Brown, Bobby Hill, Jimmy Short, Oliver Jackson, vocals; Unknown musicians; Chicago; Spring 1965)  
3100 You Better Think Again [BH] *One-Derful* 4833 Rel. 65  
3101 Who You Gonna Love? [BH] *One-Derful* 4833 -

\* As "Oscar Boyd with the Calvaes

\*\*Some pressings read "Spring Song"

Leads: (JB) – James "Zeke" Brown; (DC) – Donald Coles (OB)– Oscar Boyd; (DT) – Donald Taylor; (DS) – Debbie Stevens; (BH) – Bobby Hill

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