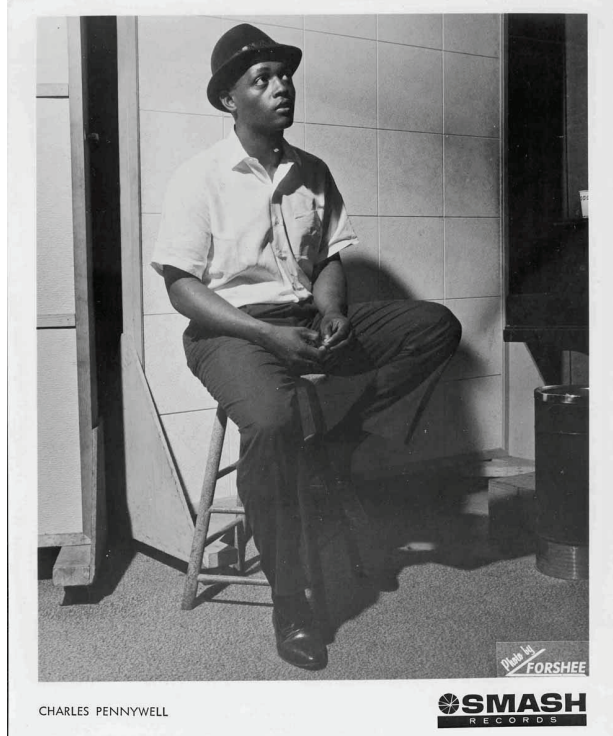


Charles Diamond Pennywell & the Fairlanes / Sunlover's Shreveport Doo Wop to West Coast Soul

By Charlie Horner
With Contributions from Pamela Horner



Transitioning between 1950's doo wop, sixties soul and seventies funk music is not easy. Most entertainers never made that transition, ending up cemented in one genre while the world of popular music passed them by. One exception is Charles Pennywell, who began as a teenager singing doo wop on the street corners of Shreveport, Louisiana.

Charles would go on to make three classic doo wop records as lead of the Fairlanes before moving on to Nashville soul and then relocating to California. In Los Angeles, he formed the Sunlovers, an incredibly talented soul harmony group. By the 1970's Charles was recording funk. Moving to Las Vegas, Charles sang with Bobby Day's Hollywood Flames, toured Australia and New Zealand with George Holmes' Ink Spots and Southeast Asia with a Platters group. Charles Pennywell, now using the stage name Charles Diamond, is still a fixture on the Las Vegas circuit, doing what he does best, entertain. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Charles Pennywell was born in Shreveport, Louisiana. Shreveport is Louisiana's third largest

city, next to New Orleans and Baton Rouge. It's always been an important music city, though it often doesn't get the recognition it deserves. At one time or another, the Shreveport area was the home to important singers and musicians of all genres, including blues (Lead Belly), gospel (Ever Ready Gospel Singers), country & western (Hank Williams, Johnny Horton, Jim Reeves) and rock-a-billy (Dale Hawkins), along with rhythm & blues, rock & roll and of course Cajun music. Shreveport's "Louisiana Hayride" broadcasts played a pivotal role in the music careers of both Hank Williams and Elvis Presley. Shreveport was the home of Stan Lewis's *Paula*, *Jewel* and *Ronn* record labels and the birthplace of Nashville music mogul Shelby Singleton. Shreveport was a major hub in black music's "Chitlin' Circuit". Still, precious little research has been done on Shreveport's 1950's African American music scene.

Charles Pennywell began singing at the age of ten but really began to take it seriously when he got to high school. Influenced by r&b vocal groups like the Spaniels, Dells, Five Royales and Five Satins, Charles and some friends formed a singing group of their own. "We were in high school



**The Fairlanes, ca. 1959. Left to right:
Charles Pennywell, Eddie Lejay,
Thomas Odom, Steve Ross.
(Courtesy of Charles Pennywell)**

around 1957," recalled Charles. "We got together and just started singing around school. There were so many high school groups singing in Shreveport. Everyone knew one another. We all started off singing on the street corners and luckily, our group took off."

None of the group members had a car at the time and while looking for a car they came across a Ford Fairlane. "We looked at that car with the Fairlane emblem on the side of it," said Charles. "We saw that and said, 'Hey! A Fairlane!' That's how the group's name came about. Groups were naming themselves after cars anyway [*Cadillacs, El Dorados, etc.*]."

The original members of the Fairlanes were Charles Pennywell (lead), Eddie Lejay (first tenor), Steve Ross (second tenor) and Thomas Odom (baritone & bass).

The Fairlanes were first discovered by a radio dee jay, remembered only as Omar. From there, the Fairlanes came in contact with local music industry entrepreneur, Dee Marais.

Dee Marais was born Harding Guyon DesMarais in Minnesota of French ancestry. He started in the music business as a songwriter, composing the hit country song "Poor Man's Riches" for Benny Barnes in 1956. Harding DesMarais took the professional name, Dee Marais as it was easier for people to pronounce. Throughout the mid-1950's, Marais, then based out of Shreveport, LA, worked record promotion throughout the South for independent labels like *Chess* and *Old Town*. In 1957, Dee Marais began a talent agency, managing rock-a-billy artist Wesley Fairburn (*Savoy* label) and country singer Margie Singleton, wife of future mu-



From Classic Urban Harmony Archives



Goldband Records, Lake Charles, LA.
Eddie Shuler, right foreground.
Photo Johnny Shuler. From John Broven

sic industry figure, Shelby Singleton. Marais helped Margie get her first record on *Starday Records*, closely associated with *Mercury Records*. The Singletons lived in Shreveport. Shelby Singleton worked at *The Louisiana Hayride* and thereafter owned a local record store. At some point, he started doing record promotion work for *Starday/Mercury*, probably as a result of his connections with Marais. The Marais - Singleton connection would play a future role in Charles Pennywell's music career.

In the late 1950's, Dee Marais purchased Shelby Singleton's Shreveport record store, Bayou Records, freeing the Singletons to move to Nashville where Shelby took on greater responsibilities with *Mercury Records*. Marais also started his own record labels, *Recco* and *Lucky Seven*. [He would later run the *Murco* label, along with subsidiaries *Hy-Sign*, *Hy-Tree*, *Hy-Rock* and *Peermont* in partnership with Dick Martin.]

In 1959, Dee Marais decided it was time to record the Fairlanes. The group rehearsed in the back of Marais' Bayou Records store but did not record there. Dee sent them to Eddie Shuler's recording studio in Lake Charles, LA. Eddie Shuler owned *Goldband Records*. Operating out of a white-painted wood building that doubled as a radio and TV shop, *Goldband* records was in the process of becoming one of the most important record labels for Louisiana music. Eddie Shuler's studio soon became a favorite destination for many local musicians and singers, including a 13-year old Dolly Parton who cut her first record there.

"We used to go to Lake Charles to Eddie Shuler's," recalled Charles. "He was a producer in Lake Charles and we used to go there off and on and just sit around the studio. We'd sit there with



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the piano player and go through lyrics, lyrics and more lyrics. We'd just start recording things while the machine was running. An idea would pop up and they'd stop and say, 'Let's work on this one.' And we'd work on that one and finish it and work on the next one and finish it. It's just a process that I enjoyed doing. But that's how this all came about."

One of the first songs worked on was an up tempo tune rocker called "Johnny Rhythm". "That was written by Gordon Elliott and the group," said Charles. "Gordon came up with the idea and we finished it together. There should be another name on the record as writer credit, Ron Baxley. I think he did the arrangements. Back in those days they gave everybody credit on the record."

The A-side of the Fairlanes first release, "Seventeen Steps," remains one of the most emotionally powerful recordings in R&B group harmony history. Between 1955 and 1958, thirteen men were executed by electrocution in Louisiana, all African Americans. In a haunting ballad, "Seventeen Steps" tells the feelings of a death row inmate watching fellow inmates, one by one, walk the seventeen steps from the holding cell to "...that death cold chair..." knowing he'll be walking them tomorrow.

"This is how that song came about," recalled Charles. "Dee Marais came up with the song idea first and then collaborated with Stan Lewis and Gordon Elliott. So we just started looking at the words and after about 20 or 30 minutes we came up with that. We all had input. The melody, I think we kind of came up with it. If you listen to it closely, some of the words don't rhyme but it's a story. The song was about this guy who was on death row.

And every day he'd see other guys on death row passing, making the seventeen steps to the chamber. So his time was coming to make that walk. I tried to rhyme it but I couldn't and still keep the story going. The guys would all put forth ideas. But when we were finished everybody was pleased with this song."

"Seventeen Steps" b/w "Johnny Rhythm" came out on Dee Marais' *Lucky Seven* label. It was distributed through Stan Lewis' Stan's Record Shop that operated as a one-stop and had developed a large mail order business throughout the Southeast. "We cut the record and then we started hearing our music on the radio stations," said Charles. "Then local night clubs started booking us."

The Fairlanes played Shreveport night spots like Club 66 (a favorite stop for B. B. King and James Brown) and the Cadillac Club, plus "a lot of little hole-in-the-wall places".

There's no way now to know how many copies the Fairlanes' first record sold, but it did well enough for Dee Marais to have the Fairlanes record again. November 1959 saw the release of another great Charles Pennywell led ballad "Just For Me," backed with "Bullseye".

"I wrote the song "Just For Me", along with members of the group," remembered Charles. "I was in my house one day working on it and the group came over and we took it from there. Then we went into the studio." "Just For Me" was placed with Pappy Dailey's *Dart* label out of Houston, TX. [Marais had previously placed a Margie Singleton record with *Dart Records*.] Pappa Dailey had earlier started the *Starday* label and would later start *Musicor*. The flip side, a Coasters-style up tempo side called "Bullseye," lists the writers as Margie and Shelby Singleton.

Initially the Fairlanes just played locally. But in 1960, R&B recording star, Rosco Gordon,



Rosco Gordon

caught one of their Shreveport performances and was impressed by what he heard. Gordon was from Memphis, TN, where he recorded much of his material at Sam Phillips' Sun Studios, including two massive hits – "Booted" and "No More Doggin'". When his contract with Phillips ran out in 1959, he moved to Shreveport. Upon hearing the Fairlanes, he invited the group to tour with him as his opening act.

"We started touring with Rosco Gordon," Charles stated. "We did shows with him, touring in Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, all the southern states. We did that for maybe one to two years. That was an experience. I enjoyed it. That's one of the reasons I like to travel."

Upon returning to Shreveport in 1961, the Fairlanes were back in the studio to record "You're Lonesome Now" and the up tempo flip, "Come Along With Me". This time they recorded directly for Eddie Shuler's *Tic-Toc* label, a subsidiary of *Goldband*. "You're Lonesome Now" was a soulful group ballad, again led by Charles Pennywell. Oddly, when the record came out there were two misprints on the label. First, the title was printed as "Your Lonesome Now" instead of "You're Lonesome Now". And second, the artist was listed as "Charles Perrywell" instead of "Charles Pennywell". Both sides list Fairlanes' Steve Ross as co-writer. One song from the session, "I Hear Someone," remained unreleased until years later when it came out on a best of *Goldband* CD. On all of the Fairlanes' recordings, the personnel remained the same.

By 1963, Shelby Singleton was well established in Nashville, as head of A&R for *Mercury*'s



Nashville Division. While segregation was still the rule in the South, Singleton was known for holding recording sessions using black and white musicians. Singleton had scored big, producing songs like Brook Benton's "The Boll Weevil Song" among others for *Mercury* and its sister label, *Smash*. While in Nashville, Singleton still kept in touch with Dee Marais, always searching for new talent and songs to produce.

"Shelby was interested in a song that a friend of mine had written, that I was singing," stated Charles. "So he wanted me to come in to Nashville and record that and some other songs that he had. But the group was still together. In fact, the rest of the Fairlanes went with me to Nashville because they wanted them to do background behind Billie Jean Horton." [Billy Jean, a singer herself, had been married to country singer Johnny Horton who was killed in an auto accident in 1960. The Shreveport native had previously been married to Hank Williams at the time of his 1953 passing.]

Charles Pennywell recorded as a soloist for Shelby Singleton since Singleton was not looking for a doo wop background but something with sopranos and more of a chorus. The Stephen Scott Singers, a combination of the Jordanares plus two lady singers and another guy were brought in to sing background. Boots Randolph played tenor sax on the record. On "Web Of Love," written by Charles' friend Donny Kite, Jerry Reed and Ray Stevens are singing in the background.

"They were in the studio collaborating with each other, throwing ideas around when I started singing," Charles recalled. "And after I started to record they just jumped in and added background vocals." The flip side, "It's So Funny I Could Cry," had only the Stephen Scott Singers on backup vo-



**The Sunlover's, ca. 1967.
Left to right: Eddie Lejay,
Charles Pennywell, Robert Tisby.
Photo courtesy of Charles Pennywell.**

cals. The record came out on the *Smash* label as by Charles Pennywell.

After that the Fairlanes became inactive. Eddie Lejay moved to California. About a year or two after that, Charles Pennywell joined him in Los Angeles. They thought about forming a group together there and were joined by Robert Tisby. Charles and Eddie had gone to school together with Robert Tisby in Shreveport. Tisby had moved to Los Angeles even before Eddie Lejay. This group became the Sunlover's in 1967.

"We got connected with a producer, Joey Jefferson, who recorded us singing "My Poor Heart," "This Love Of Ours" and some other tunes," said Charles. Joey Jefferson owned the *Breakthrough* and *Mutt & Jeff* labels in Los Angeles. Both "My Poor Heart" and "This Love Of Ours" are outstanding soul harmony songs led by Charles Pennywell. Charles sang "This Love Of Ours" in a higher falsetto voice typical of soul records of that time.

Joey Jefferson released both songs a number of ways on both *Breakthrough* and *Mutt & Jeff*, paring them together and with "I'll Tell The World," "You'll Never Make The Grade" and "I'll Treat You Right". [See the discography at the article's end for details.]

"This Love Of Ours" did well enough to keep the Sunlover's working in the many music clubs along the "Crenshaw Strip" and even the Olympic Auditorium.

A 1968 Sunlovers recording, "Main Street"

was placed with *Revue Records*, a division of *MCA*.

In 1973, Charles Pennywell recorded the funk recording "The Thought Of You" for *Playboy Records*. The song was produced by George Tobin who would later produce Top-Ten records for Kim Carnes, New Edition, Smokey Robinson and Tiffany. Charles met George Tobin through contacts with other musicians.

In 1977, Charles Pennywell was called into the studio by Joey Jefferson to record a new version of one of the rarest, most sought after Northern Soul records of all time - "No One Else Can Take Your Place" by the Inspirations on the *Breakthrough* label.

For those who are not soul music record collectors, let me address the term "Northern Soul". Though I know Northern Soul when I hear it, it's more difficult for me to define. So instead, I'll quote and paraphrase Wikipedia's definition: "**Northern Soul** is a music and dance movement that emerged independently in Northern England, Scotland and Wales in the late 1960s. Northern Soul mainly consists of a particular style of black American soul music based on the heavy beat and fast tempo similar to the mid-1960's *Motown* sound. The Northern Soul movement, however, generally eschews *Motown* recordings that had significant mainstream commercial success. The recordings most prized by enthusiasts of the genre are usually by lesser-known artists, released only in limited numbers, often by small regional American labels."

I've been told that only three or four copies of "No One Else Can Take Your Place" by the Inspirations are known to exist, all on one-sided 45's on



From Classic Urban Harmony Archives

Breakthrough # 1001. Northern Soul record collectors value copies of this 1967 record at \$6000+, though none have come up for sale in awhile.

As interest in the Inspirations' 45 began to grow, Joey Jefferson must have noticed and brought Charles Pennywell into the studio to record a new version of the song. Charles was NOT on the original Inspirations record but was asked to record a new version of it.

"I had nothing to do with the 1967 version of the song," Charles stated. "I was not singing background on that record. I never really listened to the 1967 version, I was given the song in 1977 to record. It was not an overdub." The record was released on the *Breakthrough* label as by "Charles Diamond and the Inspirations". Charles Diamond was and is Charles Pennywell's stage name.

The Sunlover's did release at least one 12" single on *Mutt & Jeff* in 1981, "I Want To Be Your Love".

After that Charles, now using the stage name Charles Diamond, moved to Las Vegas where there were more opportunities for entertainers. I worked all over Las Vegas," said Charles. "I became a part of Bobby Day's Hollywood Flames and we worked all around: Las Vegas; Utah; Reno NV; California; all the places on the West Coast. We toured with Donnie Brooks, Jewel Aikins and Al Wilson."

After Bobby Day's untimely passing in 1990, Charles and the group continued performing as the Hollywood Flames, playing the Las Vegas Flamingo Hilton and the Silver Supper Club. This



Bobby Day's Hollywood Flames shortly after Bobby Day's death in 1990.
Clockwise from top: Robert Epps, James Stephens, Pierre Thigpen, Charles Diamond.
Photo courtesy Charles Pennywell.



George Holmes' Ink Spots, ca. 1993

Left to right: Charles Diamond, Robert Draper, Booker Medlock and Dusty Brooks.

Photo courtesy of Charles Pennywell.

only lasted a short time, since now without Bobby Day, they were prevented from using the name Hollywood Flames. The group consisting of Charles Diamond, Robert Epps, James Stephens and Pierre T. then began performing as tribute groups. They did tributes to the Drifters, Crests, Temptations, Coasters and Platters. Bookings were handled by Donnie Brooks, Stan Mayo and Johnny Garcia.

After that, Charles joined George Holmes' Ink Spots, a group that also included Robert Draper and Dusty Brooks (former lead of the Four Tones who appeared in all the 1940's black westerns with Herb Jeffreys.

"I worked with George Holmes' Ink Spots for about two years," recalled Charles. "We went to Australia and New Zealand. Then George Holmes passed away (1993). They wanted us back in New Zealand so we got Booker Medlock to take George's place."

"Then I worked with Johnny Butler's Platters group," said Charles. [*Johnny Butler had been with Paul Robi's Platters in the late 1960's.*] "We toured Southeast Asia, Indonesia and Malaysia. It's been an interesting life."

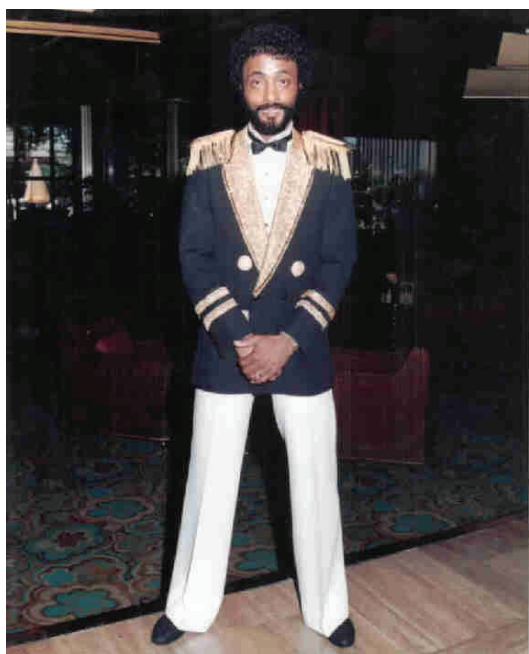
Since then Charles Diamond Pennywell has been a part of the Las Vegas entertainment scene, performing with Johnny Butler's Mighty Love, the Original Cornell Gunter Coasters, Charles Diamond & the Diamond Connection, Charles Diamond's Platters Review, and Charles Diamond and the Fairlanes Band.

With more than 55 years in show business, Charles Diamond Pennywell is working with four or five piece bands and still going strong in Las Vegas. What a talent and what a legacy!

Notes



1. Based on interviews with Charles Pennywell (April, 2016). Thanks also to Teresa Pennywell .
2. Thanks to Greg Centimore for Ink Spots info.
3. Info on Dee Marais from Kip Lornell & Tracey E. W. Laird, Ed., "Shreveport in Black And White ," University Press of MS (2008)
4. Some info on Eddie Shuler from John Brovin, "South To Louisiana," Pelican Publishing (1987).
5. Charles Perry on *Mutt & Jeff* label is NOT Charles Pennywell.
6. Visit Charles Diamond Pennywell's website, www.charlesdiamond.webs.com
7. For more info, photos, videos, events, etc. See www.classicurbanharmony.net



Charles Diamond Pennywell today.

Charles Pennywell Discography

As The Fairlanes

<i>Lucky Seven</i> # 102	Seventeen Steps Johnny Rhythm	1959
<i>Dart</i> # 109	Just For Me Bullseye	1959

As Charles Perrywell & The Fairlanes

<i>Tic-Tock</i> # 104	Your Lonesome Now Come Along With Me	1961
<i>Collectables</i> # 5088 [CD]	I Hear Someone	

As Charles Pennywell

<i>Smash</i> # 1794	Web Of Love It's So Funny I Could Cry	
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As The Sunlover's

<i>Breakthrough</i> # 1002	My Poor Heart This Love Of Ours	1967
<i>Mutt & Jeff</i> #17	My Poor Heart I'll Tell The World	1967
<i>Mutt & Jeff</i> #18	My Poor Heart This Love Of Ours	1967
<i>Mutt & Jeff</i> #18	This Love Of Ours You'll Never Make The Grade	1967
<i>Mutt & Jeff</i> #21	I'll Treat You Right This Love Of Ours	1967
<i>Revue</i> # 11045	Main Street [Instrumental]	1968

As Charles Pennywell

<i>Playboy</i> # 50044	The Thought Of You [same]	1973
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As Charles Diamond & Inspirations

<i>Breakthrough</i> # 81582	No One Can Take Your Place [Instrumental]	1977
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As The Sunlovers

<i>Mutt & Jeff</i> #5007	I Want To Be (Your Love) [same]	1988
<i>Mutt & Jeff</i> # ???	Love Me	