

Mark Stevens & the Charmers

By Charlie Horner
With Contributions from Pamela Horner



Ray Block singing with the Vic Donna Group at Charlie & Pam Horner's Doo Wop Explosion, 2016. Photo courtesy of Ray Block

Certain geographic areas, over certain time periods, have given rise to an extraordinarily high number of talented R&B vocal groups. The reasons for such a dense concentration of talent packed into small regions can be forever debated but the existence of vocal harmony "hotbeds" can't really be denied.

One such area in the 1960's was the Hudson County cities of Jersey City and Bayonne, NJ. The bordering cities are situated on a peninsula bounded by the Hackensack River and Newark Bay on the west and the Hudson River and Upper New York Bay to the east.

During the early to mid-1960's, this urban area produced groups like the Manhattans, Ronnie & the Hi-Lites, the Creators, the Ad Libs, the Duprees, the Royal Counts, Joann & the Heartaches and the Spellbinders. The influence of these vocal groups also spawned the creation of later area a cappella vocal groups like Vintage, Mixed Company, Patty & the Street Tones, the Attributes, Charm and Choice.

What better way to view what was happening in the Bayonne/Jersey City music scene than to look at it through the eyes of Raymond Block, who grew up in Bayonne, and sang with a dozen area

vocal groups to date. And we'll start with Ray's first vocal group, Mark Stevens & the Charmers.

Ray Block was born in Brooklyn in 1946, but moved with his family to Bayonne NJ at a young age. By the early 1960's Ray was listening to groups like Shep & the Limelites, the Flamingos and Ruby & the Romantics on NYC radio, while attending shows at the Brooklyn Paramount and Brooklyn Fox Theaters. Ray was attending Bayonne High School when he met a young Mark Stein. [Mark Stein would later go on to form the hugely successful rock group, Vanilla Fudge.]

Mark Stein, also born and raised in Bayonne, grew up in a musical family. He reportedly performed on the *Startime* TV show at the age of four. As he told interviewer Russell Tice, "My mom used to sing on the radio when she was a teenager, you know, when there was just radio. My mom was a singer and my dad used to play the piano and the violin. Yeah, I picked up this and that, it got me on that TV thing when I was a little kid. I used to remember going over to my uncle's house. He used to play piano, it was like, I was four years old and I used to start picking melodies out on the piano with one finger, and people just realized I had



Mark Stein at age two. From www.Mark-Stein.com

this natural ability so it started at a really young age."

Mark took lessons in playing the accordion but soon after taught himself to play guitar. "I guess I was in Grammar school, you know, getting into Rock'n'Roll," Mark relayed. "Actually I was playing rhythm guitar, and singing... My dad, he had a lot of push and he'd hustle me into these places in New York City where they had these Rock'n'Roll shows. I remember one time he heard about this thing... I must have been ten, eleven years old, and he got me this audition. It was this Rock'n'Roll show. I just remember going into this rehearsal hall and being scared, ten years old, and all these teenage Rock'n'Roll guys... I auditioned and I got the gig, and that's where I met Neil Bogart, who was an MC on the show. I think he must've been about seventeen at the time. So that's how we started getting to know each other then." *[Neil Bogart would later play a key role in Mark's first record.]*

"Mark Stein and I became friend around 1961," recalled Ray. "At that time I would have been a sophomore in high school and Mark would have been a freshman. Our first musical experience was Mark, myself and a fellow by the name of Barry Paston, who really couldn't sing very well. But the three of us got up on the stage at a Jewish Commu-



Mark Stein (with guitar) and Neil Bogart
From www.kissfaq.com

nity Center in Bayonne and sang "That's My Desire". The three of us, as a trio, sang one song. Was it good? Who remembers? But that was our first musical experience."

From there, Ray Block and Mark Stein decided to form a real vocal group.

"We were also very much influenced by some very, very, fine groups in Bayonne," remembered Ray. "We had groups like the Creators, the Ad Libs and the Atlantics. In Jersey City we had the Manhattans singing. We had Ronnie & the HiLites. The whole Hudson County scene was alive with music and singing. In the beginning, Mark and I spent almost every night of the week sitting in on rehearsals by the Creators, listening to their arrangements. John Taylor who wrote "The Boy From New York City" for the Ad Libs, also managed the Creators. And we would just listen to John Taylor's input. So Mark and I decide that we would try something."

The new group took the name "Mark Stevens & the Charmers," with Mark Stevens being the stage name for Mark Stein.

The first incarnation of Mark Stevens & the Charmers consisted of Mark Stein (lead), Ray Block (first tenor), Walter Thompson (second tenor) and Nat Schenker (baritone). Mark and Ray were still in Bayonne High School. Nat Schenker and Walter were a little older and were actually out of school at that point. They had previously attended school in Jersey City.

"The four of us got together and started singing," said Ray. "Mark's father, Irving Stein, was a driving influence in all of this. He took us everywhere we needed to go and he kept on pushing Mark. The group was the Charmers. However, Mark's father made it clear that when a record came out, it would say, 'Mark Stevens & the Charmers'. He wanted Mark to be recognized ahead of the group. So the four of us got together and sang."

It wasn't long before Mark Stevens and the Charmers were in the studio recording.

"Mark's father took us to the CBS Studios [now the Ed Sullivan Theatre, 1697 Broadway, NYC] to see Al Greiner," said Ray. [Al Greiner was a well known figure in the music industry and had a hand in the careers of the likes of Bobby Darin & Connie Francis]. "We took the elevator that day to see Al, and in the elevator singing were members of the Jarmels. Their harmony and professionalism just singing in the elevator not only scared me but excited me. I knew we weren't of their caliber. But we went into the studio and sat down with Al Greiner. Mark had written a song called 'Maxine'. It was a very casual, light, song about a lady and the seashore and it was his original song. Al Greiner said, 'Let's do a demo of that'. And we got in there and arranged ourselves. I was singing the top tenor and Nat Schenker was singing the baritone. Dur-

ing the course of the studio session, we reversed roles. I became the baritone and Nat became the first tenor. It stayed that way forever after that. Walter Thompson was the second tenor. There was no bass. Only four of us."

Mark Stevens & the Charmers recorded an acetate of "Maxine". The record was never released but Ray at one time had a copy. Over the years, the record was lost and it's doubtful any other copies still exist. The original Mark Stevens & the Charmers did return later in 1961 and record two more sides for Al Greiner, "Danny Boy" and "Portrait Of Love". Mark Stein again led both sides. Again, these sides were not released at the time but did find their way to a bootleg 45 EP in 1991, probably taken from a copy of an acetate.

"We were friends," Ray continued. "We went to the shore together. We sang on street corners. We enjoyed each other's company but that's basically where it began and ended for that particular configuration of Mark Stevens & the Charmers. Mark and I decided that Walter Thompson was not a strong voice. Great guy, but not a great second tenor and Nat had other considerations. We began to look for other people. We found two people to join us. The first was Larry Morreale, who was in my high school class. He was my age. And then we got Percy Fair. Percy was a young black man who had a very high falsetto. He was a good singer so Percy was the first tenor, Larry was the second. I was the baritone, Mark was the lead."

Racially integrated vocal groups in 1962 may have been unusual for some areas but in the Bayonne - Jersey City area, you did find them on the street corners. In fact, Jersey City's early Duprees, with Michael Kelly, were an integrated group.

"Being an integrated group allowed us access into the black community," stated Ray. "We were accepted by the black community. Whereas previously, that avenue was kind of segregated in its own way."

As the new Mark Stevens & the Charmers fine tuned their sound, they were invited to sing at a Bayonne High School function.

"The four of us sang very well," said Ray. "We really liked the harmony - the sound of the group. We actually were asked to appear at the Bayonne High School to do two songs. We decide we were going to do "Magic Rose" and "Peace Of Mind". The year before, the Bayonne High School administration had a group come and sing and they did a fast song. They did the Spaniels' 'Tina' and they did one other song and they got the audience so excited that the kids in the high school were totally unruly as a result of it. We were told, 'You can sing two songs but if you sing anything fast we're going to take you right off the stage'. So we listened



"Danny Boy" and "Portrait Of Love," recorded as an acetate by the original Mark Stevens & the Charmers, was eventually released on a yellow vinyl EP in 1991. From Classic Urban Harmony Archives

to Mr. Alexander O'Connor, who was the principal at the time and we started with 'Magic Rose'. That was our trademark song. People knew us with that song. Well Mark was extremely nervous. He came over and said to us, 'We're gonna sing 'Peace Of Mind' now. We're gonna start it in this key'. Then he went up to the mike and he looked at the audience and started in a much higher key. He raised it two keys. Well, we sang the song but we had to tighten our belts and let everything out that we could, because we were all singing in our natural voices. But we got through it and the audience didn't care because they were there to have a good time. Everybody enjoyed it but it was just so funny. Something you just never forget."

Yet Mark Stevens & the Charmers were always trying to improve their sound.

"We knew we needed a bass singer," said Ray. "We used to sit in and listen, whenever possible, to a black group in Jersey City called the Valitors. There were five members and they were so good. They sang all of the Little Anthony & the Imperials' songs."

The Valitors had already built quite a reputation in Jersey City as an outstanding vocal group. Their lead was Ron Thomas.

"Ron Thomas was a fabulous lead singer," said Ray. "A little singer who could get out there and do the Frankie Lyman stuff. Who could get there and do the Little Anthony stuff. He was just so, so good!"

Another member of the group, Paul Kaiser,



Early version of "Magic Rose" by the Valitors on a metal acetate. From Classic Urban Harmony Archives

would later go on to produce over thirty hit records including songs by Robby Lawson, the Superlatives, Jimmy Briscoe, the Superbs, the Soul Generation and many others. Paul recently posted to an internet message board that his first production was when he was in Snyder High School in Jersey City with his group the Valitors. The song was "My Heart Cries For You" and the flip side, "My Love For You". [No Valitors' records were ever released, though collector Dennis Ostrom at one time had access to a copy of this acetate.] Paul also recently revealed that he wrote "Make Up My Mind" for the Valitors and later taught it to the Royal Counts.

"The Valitors were so good you could listen to them sing all night," recalled Ray. "They just lit up the room. But then they broke up. They had a bass in that group by the name of MacArthur Munford. And we approached MacArthur Munford on the street and we told him we have four guys in our group including Percy Fair and he looked at us. He knew what he'd had in the other group and we had three white guys and Percy but he said, 'Let's give it a try.' And the five of us melded together and became the [new] Valitors. We took their name. Rightly or wrongly, without permission, but we did it. But we sang as the Valitors and that group was absolutely fantastic. Everything about our group was good. MacArthur Munford was the "real McCoy". He was a bass. He knew music. He had a presence. And the group really sounded great. [MacArthur Munford was born (1943) and raised in Jersey City. He had joined the Valitors in 1960. He would later become the bass of the Spellbind-

ers.]

Around this time, the Valitors / Mark Stevens & the Charmers made another trip to record for Al Greiner. Two songs were recorded to an acetate, rescued from obscurity by this author and now safely housed in the Classic Urban Harmony Archives. [For the full story of the discovery of this acetate, see the inset box at the end of this article.] The acetate lists the artists as the Valitors, with members Mark Stein, Percy Fair, Ray Block and Larry Morreale (misspelled on the typed label as Morralle). Why MacArthur Munford was not on the recording is puzzling - either he missed the recording session or the group had taken the name Valitors prior to his joining.

One side of the record is "Magic Rose," a song that Mark Stein wrote. The song was obviously inspired by the Solitaires' "Magic Rose," as both songs begin with the line "Tell me, tell me, magic rose. Where is the girl that..." After that the two songs are quite different. The other side is "Come Back To My Heart," an original up tempo tune with a vocal background similar to "Zoom" by the Cadillacs. Both songs were later recorded and released by Mark Steven & the Charmers, though these early renditions have much less instrumentation and in the case of "Come Back To My Heart," done at a much slower tempo.

In 1962, the Valitors had the opportunity to be recorded by Neil Bogart. Neil Bogart was born in Brooklyn on February 3, 1943 and grew up in the Glenwood Houses housing projects in the Flatlands section of Brooklyn. Neil attended the High School of Performing Arts in NYC and began his show business career as an actor at the age of fourteen.



Neil Bogart later went on to form Casa-blanca Records, releasing records by KISS, Donna Summer, the Village People and George Clinton & Parliament.



"Magic Rose" by Mark Stevens & the Charmers on the Allison label. From Classic Urban Harmony Archives

He appeared in off-Broadway shows and the film "Crazy Rock" with Al "Jazzbo" Collins. Under the guidance of Al Greiner, who was his vocal coach, Neil entered the recording industry as a singer, using the name Neil Scott. In 1961, he scored with a Top-100 hit, "Bobby," recorded for the *Portrait* label. [Neil would later go on to bigger fame as the head of *Buddah* and *Casablanca* Records.]

"Mark's father had known Neil from some relationship," recalled Ray Block. "And he wanted us to get together with Neil Bogart to do this session, so we did. We went into this studio. I don't even know where the studio was but I think it was somewhere in NYC. Neil was there in the studio. Now we'd been singing 'Magic Rose' for some time and 'Come Back To My Heart,' we always used. We had a certain tempo for "Come Back To My Heart". Neil had a live band there by the name of the Darts. They already had the song [charts]. They had the music. We'd never rehearsed with the band before. We went into the studio, unrehearsed with the band, and did this. So Neil said, 'The band has your music. They're going to play and you just sing as normal.' The background sang together on one mike and Mark sang on a separate mike. We did 'Magic Rose' and it was reasonably close, maybe a little bit faster than the way we always did it. But when they started 'Come Back To My Heart,' I just couldn't believe it. They had a lot of horns in the band. It was a nice band. Six or seven guys with a couple of horns. But the drummer was on fire and started that song very fast. Originally when we sang that song the tempo was maybe 60% of what they

were doing. They really cranked it up."

MacArthur Munford was not at the session. The four voices on the record were Mark Stein, Ray Block, Percy Fair and Larry Morreale. "Magic Rose" and "Come Back To My Heart" came out on the Allison label as by "Mark Stevens & the Charmers". It was the third record on Allison, the first label owned by Neil Bogart. Actually the record label lists "Alcot Productions," a acronym of AL greiner and neil sCOTt. The record got some radio play in NYC by Cousin Brucie and others but never broke nationally.

With the record now out, Mark Stevens and the Charmers mostly continued singing locally.

"There really weren't many places that we played," said Ray. "We did appear at the Bayonne Roller Skating Rink in 1962. That was a big show. The Creators were singing that day. I think Ronnie & the Hi-Lites were there. We sang under the name Mark Stevens & the Charmers. There were a lot of local groups and it was jam packed. The skating rink was right on the city line between Bayonne and Jersey City. Mark's father took us to a number of places in that Brooklyn area where we did dances. We also played the Glenwood Jewish Center in Brooklyn in 1962, along with Vito & the Salutations and Tex & the Chex. All on that one night in this little Jewish Center in Brooklyn. There were only the four of us that time. MacArthur Munford was not a part of it."

Throughout this time, the group really had



MacArthur Munford (on left) later sang bass with the Spellbinders (seen here).



Mark Stein's first album with Vanilla Fudge became the first LP to reach the Top-10 without the release of a single.

two names: the Valitors and Mark Stevens & the Charmers, but really only used one name when singing in public.

"Well we liked the name the Valitors because it sounded more street wise," Ray recalled. "But Mark's father liked Mark Stevens & the Charmers and he said that's the name we're going to use when we appear. So the Valitors was our 'in-house' name but Mark Stevens & the Charmers was the name we used whenever we got out to the public."

Ray Block recalled that in 1962, Mark Stevens & the Charmers were asked to appear on Dick Clark's American Bandstand TV program. "Mark's father drove them down to Philadelphia for the Dick Clark's show which they did. It was just done with Mark & Percy. Larry and I did not go. Mark's father was furious. He was livid. He said he was not cancelling it. But it was funny. Mark told me he lip-synced the lead and Percy, by himself on a microphone, lip-synced the entire background. Why we weren't there I don't know." At the time, plans were also being made to have the group sing on one of Cousin Brucie's stage shows.

However promising, the career of Mark Stevens & the Charmers came to a tragic end in the Fall of 1962.

As Ray remembered, "In either October or November of 1962, Percy Fair & MacArthur Munnford went for a ride in an automobile that belonged to MacArthur's aunt. They took two young ladies from Bayonne, the Oliver sisters from 20th Street, and went over the Lincoln Highway Bridge on Route 1 & 9 toward Newark. It was a very stormy

night, extremely bad weather, and they had a horribly bad accident. Percy and the two young ladies were all killed. MacArthur was in extremely critical condition for a very long time. That was the end of Mark Stevens & the Charmers. That was the end of singing for me until I started singing again with Vintage some years later."

Epilogue

Mark Stein went on in 1966 to form the world famous rock band, Vanilla Fudge, a group in which he was lead vocalist, keyboardist, composer, and arranger. Vanilla Fudge's unique style of music set the stage for development of the heavy metal genre. The group's first album, the self-entitled *Vanilla Fudge*, became the first album to reach the Top-10 on Billboard's charts *without* a hit single. Vanilla Fudge's arrangement of "You Keep Me Hangin' On," taken from the album, then reached #6 in 1967. Mark Stein is still touring with Vanilla Fudge, today.

Ray Block quit singing for several years after Mark & the Charmers. He graduated from Rutgers Newark and went into banking and brokerage. In the 1970's he sang as a member of the vocal group, Vintage, who recorded for Stan Krause's *Catamount* label. From 1974 to 1986 Ray didn't sing a single note. He concentrated building a career in NY. Then in the mid-1980's, he got a call from George Lavatelli asking him to join the Bon-Aires. Ray Block stayed with the Bon-Aires for a few years, and then joined the Ad Libs. Ray is on the records the Ad Libs recorded for John Taylor's *Johnnie Boy* label. From the Ad Libs, Ray sang with a group called East River Drive, and then joined the acapella group, Reunion, for about five years. After



**Ray Block (on right) singing with the Vic Donna Group at Charlie & Pam Horner's Doo Wop Explosion, 2016.
Photo by Tina Colella**

Reunion, Ray sang with RB Express which became Jersey Jukebox. Ray Block now sings with the Vic Donna Group and Jersey Jukebox. In addition, he enjoys filling in with local vocal groups when needed. He recently got the call to perform with Re-MemberThen and the True Devines. Ray's been married for 46 years, has two grown children and three grandsons.

MacArthur J. Munford recovered from his injuries and joined Bobby Shivers, James Wright, Ben Grant and Eller Weas Pennington, to form the Jersey City soul group, the Spellbinders. In 1965, the Spellbinders signed with *Columbia Records* and under the guidance of producer Van McCoy, produced the Top-25 R&B hit, "For You". They also released several other singles and an LP. The group toured extensively with Jackie Wilson, Joe Tex and Wilson Pickett. When the Spellbinders broke up in 1969, MacArthur joined Ray Block in the group, Vintage. MacArthur died of cancer in 2006. He was sixty-three.

Percy Fair, as stated, died in the automobile accident in the Fall of 1962.

Larry Morreale now lives in Florida.

Nat Schenker now lives in Las Vegas.

Walter Thompson's whereabouts is unknown.

Neil Bogart went on to have the greatest success of all. Abandoning his career as a singer, Neil gained fame as a record producer and music executive. After his short-lived *Allison* label, Neil ran the Michigan offices of *Cameo-Parkway Records*. Fol-



Ray Block (second from the left), singing with the AdLibs on WFUV Radio, 1988. Photo from Ray Block.

lowing that, in 1968, he became an executive at *Buddah Records* and was instrumental in the rise of bubblegum pop music. In 1973, Neil Bogart started the *Casablanca* label, where he signed KISS and later disco artists Donna Summer and the Village People. He also signed and released records by Cher and George Clinton's Parliament. In the early 1980's, Neil Bogart founded *Boardwalk Records* and signed Joan Jett and Harry Chapin. Neil Bogart died in 1982 of cancer at the age of thirty-nine.

Notes

1. This article is largely based on the author's interview and numerous conversations with Raymond Block.
2. Thanks to Shelly Buchansky of Vito & the salutations for additional information.
3. Thanks also to Dennis Ostrom for supplying tapes of the Valitors singing "My Heart Cries For You" and "My Love For You".
4. Some quotes taken from Russell Tice's interview with Mark Stein, found on www.Mark-Stein.com.

Discography

As by Mark Stevens & Charmers

Unreleased - Maxine (No known copies) rec 1961

Allison 921 Magic Rose 1962
Come Back To My Heart

Allison EP 921 Magic Rose Rel. 1991
Come back To My Heart
Danny Boy Rec. 1961
Portrate (sic) Of Love

As by the Valitors

Unreleased Magic Rose * Rec. 1962
Come Back To My Heart *

(* earlier versions)
(One known copy)

Charlie & Pam Horner are active proponents of preserving the legacy of R&B, Doo Wop, Gospel and Soul vocal harmony. Among other activities, they bring doo wop acappella groups into Roxy & Dukes Roadhouse in Dunellen, NJ, one Sunday each month. Check out their website, ClassicUrbanHarmony.net for event details as well as articles, photos and the latest news .

Finding the Valitors' / Mark Stevens & the Charmers' Acetate

By Charlie Horner

In the strange world of record collecting, sometimes things happen that seem to be something more than coincidental. Now, I'm not a big believer in "fate". I like to think that people make their own fate. As a record collector, I think that most of the great "finds" I've made were due to my persistence and drive to keep digging. But I must admit, when I enter a flea market or thrift store, I seem to automatically go right to where the good records are. I often joke that "the records are calling out to me".

Back in 1973, I used to frequent a flea market in Northeast Philly. A fellow there had a stand selling records, mostly all 45's. It was there that I found a copy of the Valitors metal acetate of "Magic Rose" b/w "Come Back To My Heart". It sounded good and the price was very reasonable (probably around \$5) so I bought it. Shortly after that I realized it was an early version of the Mark Stevens & the Charmers record on *Allison*. All the group members were typed on the label and I surmised that Mark Stein must be Mark Stevens. But there was no internet then and I didn't know that Mark Stein was also the lead vocalist for Vanilla Fudge. At that point, I filed the record away in my collection and largely forgot about it.

A few weeks ago, I was asked by Tom Harford and Tony O to spin records at a monthly collectors get together in South Hackensack, NJ, called the *TNT North Jersey R&B and Doo Wop Party*. Not ready to be shown up by the collectors that attend TNT, many of whom have been collecting longer and have better collections than I do, I began flipping through the Classic Urban Harmony Archives for great, little known, group harmony sides. That's when I pulled out the Valitors acetate and saw the name Ray Block on it.

Now Ray Block and I have been friends for quite a few years. I knew Ray had sung with Vintage, the Bonaires, the Ad Libs, East River Drive, Reunion, RB Express and Jersey Jukebox. And recently Ray had performed at Roxy & Dukes and other venues for Pam & me, singing with Re-MemberThen, the Vic Donna Group and the True Devines. But Ray had never mentioned to me that he'd recorded with Mark Stevens & the Charmers and I just thought there must be two Ray Block's. Besides, I'd always thought Ray Stevens & the Charmers were from NYC, not New Jersey.

When I posted a photo of the acetate on FaceBook to invite people to hear me play records at TNT, Ray saw the post and wrote back that he *was* the Ray Block on the demo. And that's how this article came about.

Now tell me, what are the odds that the only surviving copy of this record would find its way to me from a flea market and that 43 years later I would pick that record to post on FaceBook where it would be seen by a member of the group? And what are the odds that the group member would be someone I knew very well? Or that I would be a music historian and writer who would have an outlet like *Echoes of the Past* to immortalize this story? OK, so maybe there is something to this "fate" thing, after all. You'll have to excuse me now. I think I hear some rare records calling out to me.

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