

The Return of Reunion

By Charlie Horner



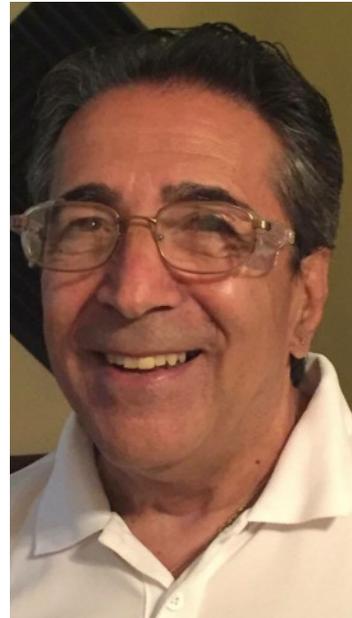
Reunion, 2017. Left to right: Ron Meyer ,
Pete Weiss, Frank Lafaro, Ken Blair

First formed in 1981, the New Jersey-based vocal quintet, Reunion, was long regarded as one of the area's finest, most respected R&B and Doo Wop acappella groups. For thirty years, Reunion rode a wave of popularity rarely seen in the acappella field. Area fans of acappella all recall the group's stellar recording of "Wonderful Tonight". Reunion's music career was essentially stilled with the untimely passing of their lead singer, Steve "Sharkey" Schmidt in 2011. Sharkey's voice was so distinctive, the group struggled to find a suitable new lead and eventually called it quits.

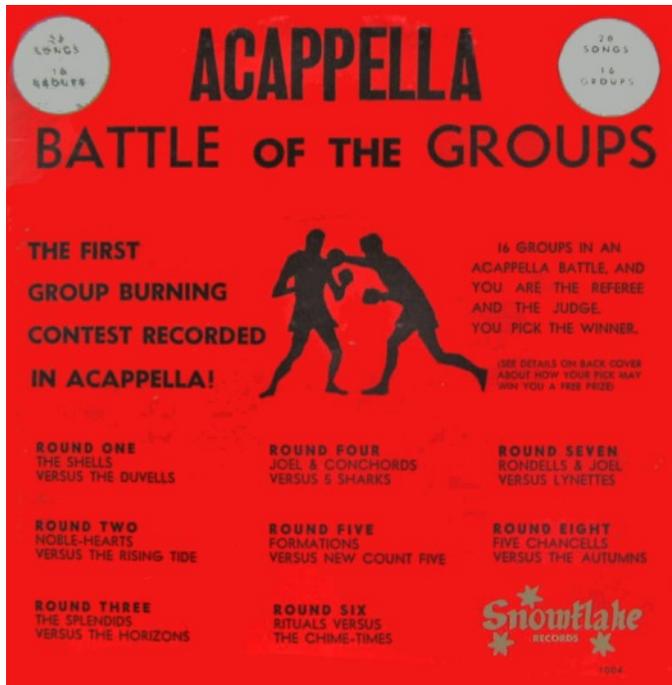
Classic Urban Harmony is thrilled to announce that Reunion is now back singing and sounding great! Taking over as Reunion's new lead singer, is Frank Lafaro, somewhat of an area Doo Wop and acappella legend, himself. Best known as the lead of Frankie & the Fashions, a group he will continue to sing with, Frank has been singing for more than 50 years. Frank is also a songwriter of some note, having composed over a hundred songs, including his signature song, "What Do I Have to Do". The combination of two great talents, Frankie Lafaro's gifted lead voice and Reunion's smooth harmony is pure magic.

Classic Urban Harmony has already booked Reunion into two events – Roxy & Dukes in Dunellen NJ on January 14, and our big "Extreme Doo Wop... Means Acappella" concert at The Uptown! Knauer PAC in West Chester, PA, on June 23, 2018. On both concerts, Reunion will be singing acappella.

But Reunion's history is a long one. Let's go back to the beginning...



Frank Lafaro



Though acappella was the music of the urban street corners in the 1950's, it was not until the 1960's that a number of East Coast independent record labels started recording and releasing doo wop records sung acappella. Prior to that, record companies would take these acappella street corner groups and add instrumentation during the recording sessions to make them "more commercial". One of the premier acappella labels of the 1960's was Wayne Stierle's *Snowflake* label. In 1968, an acappella group from Brick, NJ, called the Chime-Times was included on *Snowflake's* "Acappella Battle Of The Groups" album, singing one song – "What's Your Name". The Chime-Times included Steve "Sharkey" Schmidt (lead), Ron Meyer (second tenor), Dennis Chervenak (bass), Pete Horan (first tenor) and Don Graber (baritone). All but Graber would later sing with Reunion, though Horan's role would be fleeting.

Another acappella group of that time was the Memos. Though the Memos never got a chance to record, members included "Singing Eddie" Velasquez, Lou Spinelli and Steve D'Onofrio.

Sometime in late 1980 or early 1981, Dennis Chervenak and Ron Meyer were sitting around

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reminiscing about their teenage years harmonizing on the corner. They wondered if there were others who still wanted to sing, so they put a classified ad in the local paper for doo wop singers. The first call they got was from a guy who said he'd been the lead of the Chim-Times. Ron said, "Is this Steve Schmidt?" It was.

The next day they received more calls, including one from Eddie Velasquez of the Memos. This led to the Memos' Lou Spinelli and Steve D'Onofrio joining the group. With combination of former street corner singers, the name Reunion seemed appropriate.

At first, Reunion was a six-man group with Steve Schmidt and Steve D'Onofrio singing most of the leads. Initially, Reunion only wanted to sing for family and friends, but soon found themselves entering talent shows. Their first paying job was at a bowling alley bar in Union NJ, opening for two other acapella groups, Mixed Company and the Emery's. The emcee of that show was Ronnie I, president and founder of the United in Group Harmony Association (UGHA). Ronnie invited Reunion to sing at a UGHA meeting/show.

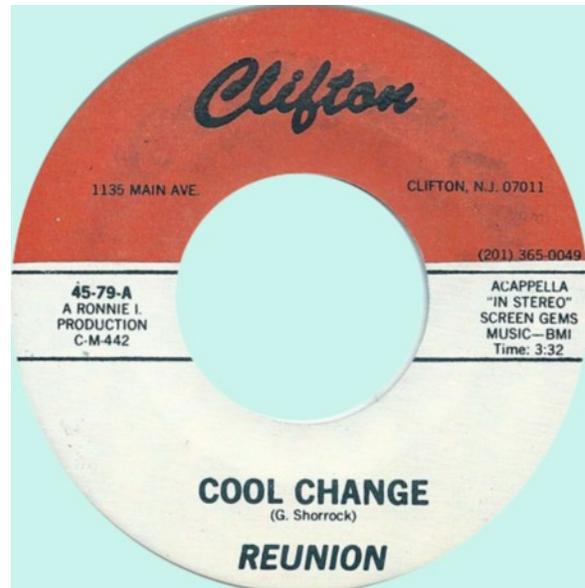
Reunion recalled their first UGHA appearance as being in the Fall of 1982, but a copy of the UGHA publication *Midnight Express* lists them singing in February 1981. Prior to the UGHA appearance, Steve D'Onofrio left the group. Being new to the organization, Reunion appeared last on the show and didn't get on stage until well after 11 PM. They sang six well received songs and were called back for an encore.

At a later UGHA show, Reunion was approached by Bob Kretchmar, owner of *Starlight Records*, who asked the group if they wanted to record. The result was two 45 RPM singles on *Starlight* – "Drift Away" b/w "Lean On Me" and "Heart Of Saturday Night" b/w "Slipping Into Darkness". Both singles were issued in December 1982. After the recording session, Eddie Velasquez left the group, replaced by



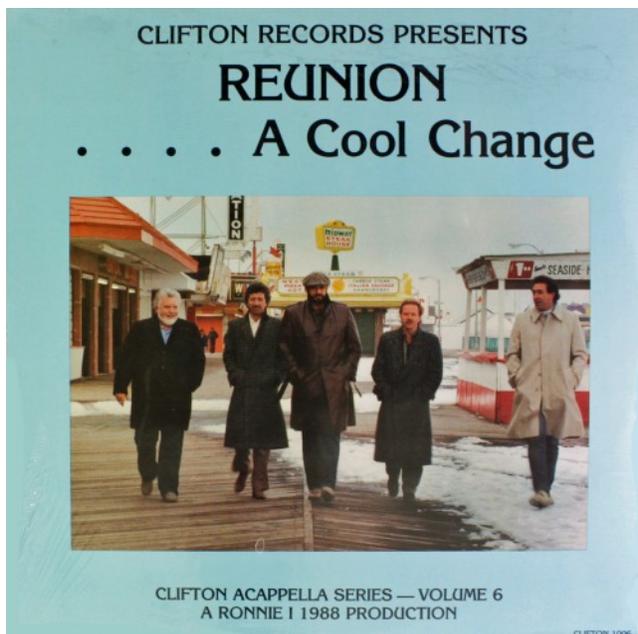
Frank Resola. From this point on, Reunion was very active, singing at local clubs, concerts and shows around New Jersey.

“I saw Reunion sing at UGHA for the first time,” recalled Charlie Horner. “I was living in Piscataway NJ at the time and used to hang out at Rutgers University’s radio station, WR-SU, when Bill Swank had the ‘Big Beat Show’. Reunion came down and sang on Bill’s radio show. They sang “Heart Of Saturday Night” and a version of “Drift Away,” where they changed the words to ‘... give me the beat, Bill, and free my soul, I want to get lost in your Rock & Roll, and drift away’. I also recall Bill Swank, Pat Gainor and I going over to the local Howard Johnson’s restaurant with the group. I can’t recall if they were paid to sing there or not, but they ended up singing.”

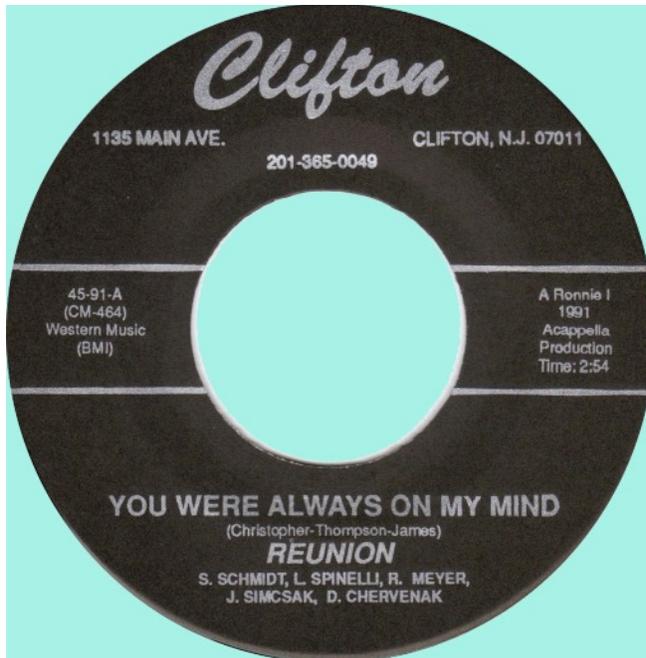


Ronnie I recorded Reunion singing “Wonderful Tonight” and “Cool Change” which came out as a *Clifton* label 45 RPM single in June of 1987. A *Clifton* label LP entitled “Cool Change” containing 16 cuts followed a year later. Frank Resola left while the album was being recorded and was replaced by Jack Simcsak. Frank can be heard on only four of the album cuts, “Cool Change,” “Wonderful Tonight,” “Man Oh Man” and “Don’t It Make You Wanna Go Home”.

“I was the first one to play ‘Wonderful Tonight’ on the air in Philadelphia,” Charlie Horner recalled. “Ronnie I asked me if he should send a copy to Philly radio giant, Jerry Blavat, and I told him, ‘Sure.’ Jerry Blavat (“The Geater with the Heater”) started playing it and soon it was a hit all over Philly. The record did so well, Ronnie had to make a second press, a rarity for 45’s on the *Clifton* label. The first presses were on a red and white label. Ronnie gave me a copy in red vinyl. The second presses were on a yellow *Clifton* label.



Jack Simcsak’s first public appearance with Reunion was at Harlem’s famed Apollo Theatre, where the group appeared on NBC’s “Showtime At The Apollo”. Reunion also represented the American Movie Classics channel at the second annual Cable TV convention in Atlantic City.



Over the next three years, Reunion won UGHA's coveted "Sonny Til Award" three times in a row (1989, 1990, 1991). The award was given to the veteran group most representative of UGHA goals to preserve our music. Reunion was the only group to ever win this award three times.

During this time, Lou Spinnelli left the group, being replaced for a short time by Pete Horan, a former first tenor for the Chime-Times. Pete was replaced temporarily by Glen Wilson of Toms River, NJ, and then permanently by Pete Weiss.

In 1991, *Clifton Records* released the second Reunion 45 RPM single, "You Were Always On My Mind" b/w "Where Are

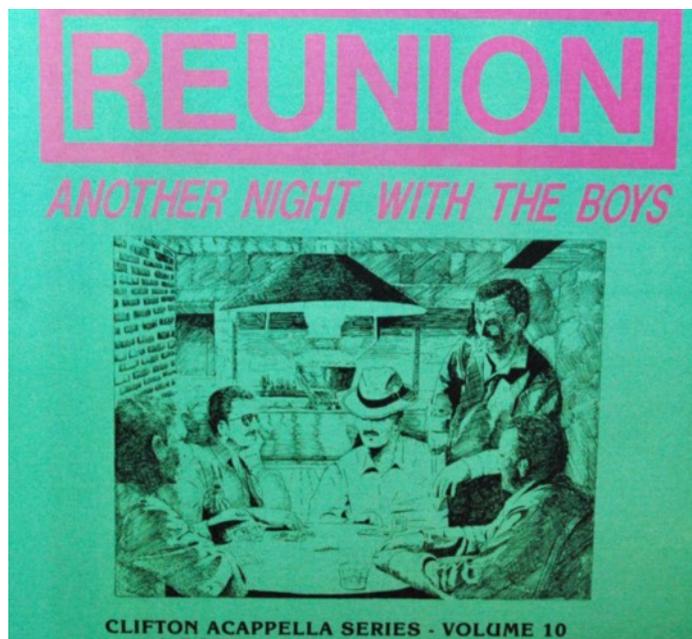
You Tonight". It was quickly followed by the group's second LP, "Another Night With The Boys". The album gave the public another 16 Reunion songs.

As Reunion's fame began to spread, they began making numerous appearances on Randy "Mr. Acappella" Bergen's shows at Molloy College in Rockville Center, NY. The group's popularity in Philly led to several appearances on WOGL dj Harvey Holiday's "Superbowl of Acappella shows.

On March 14, 1994, Reunion was one of several acappella groups performing at Symphony Space, NYC as part of Ronnie I's "Acappella Comes To Broadway" concert. The concert was taped and released as a CD. Reunion can be heard singing four cuts on the CD.

About that time, Ronnie I informed the group that *Collectables Records* in Philadelphia was planning a series of acappella CD's and was interested in Reunion. Ronnie advised the group to sign with Collectables for greater exposure and promotion.

Collectables' first CD with Reunion, released in 1994, was entitled, "Street Corner Singers" and included 18 songs. It was followed a year later with a second CD called "So Much In



Love”. That CD also featured a special guest singer. Legendary Harptones lead, “Willie Winfield, led Reunion on acappella renditions of five Harptones songs. Reunion also appeared with Willie Winfield on Harvey Holiday’s radio show and that year’s “Superbowl of Acappella” concert.

In March of 1995, Reunion appeared at the opening of the musical “Smokey Joe’s Café” on Broadway, along with Cousin Brucie Morrow. Reunion also participated in a 1995 Collectables label Christmas CD, “Acappella Christmas,” on which they sang four holiday songs.

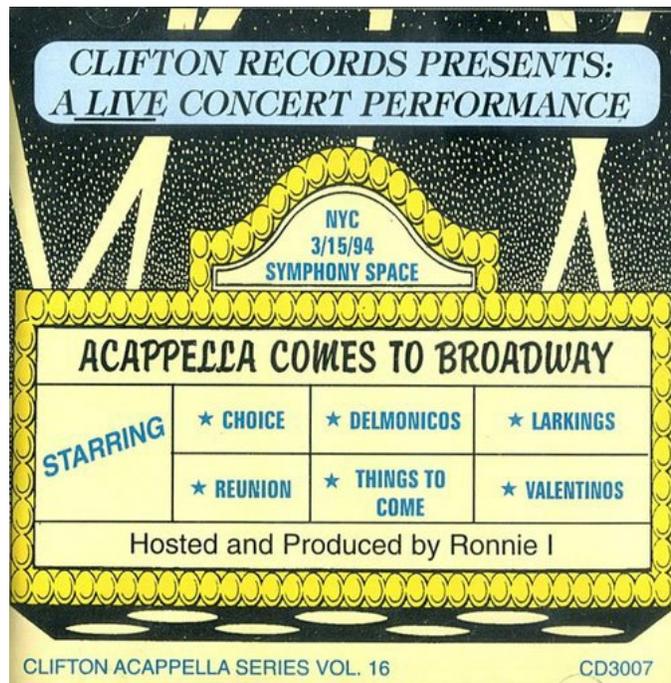
By the mid-1990’s, Reunion’s personnel began changing. Jack Simcsak left briefly, replaced by Marty Zaid. Jack was back in the group by 1996, but in September of that year Ron Meyer and Dennis Chervenak left. They were replaced by Ray Block and Marty Reed. When Marty and Jack quit Reunion in 1999, it looked like the end of the group.

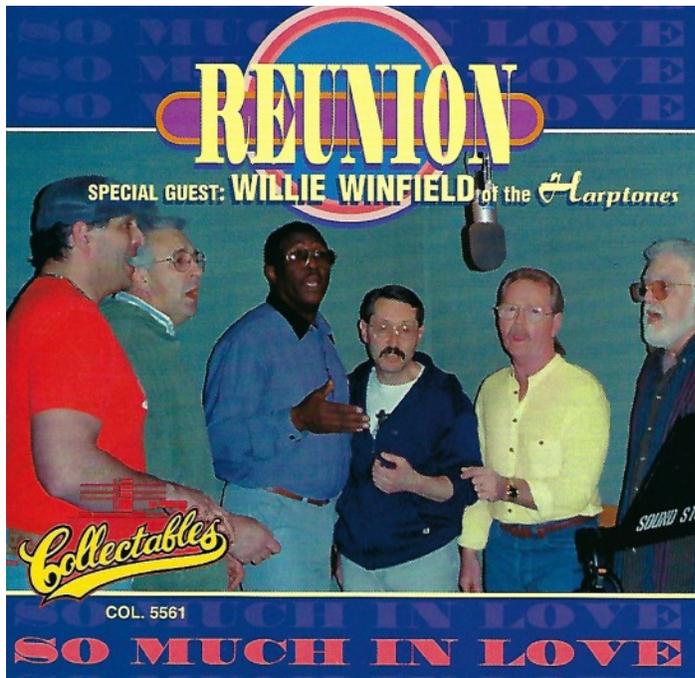
“In the Spring of 2000,” said Ron Meyer, “Ronnie I called me and said he was putting out a ‘Very Best Of Reunion’ CD. [The CD set contained 25 songs.] He asked if we would get back together for the release and sing at UGHA again. Well, after a few phone calls, Dennis, Lou, Frank, Steve and I had a rehearsal, then went out and sang for an audience again. It was great fun and it sort of relit the candle for Dennis and I”.



Lou Spinnelli and Frank Resola were singing with other groups so the reunited Reunion became Steve Schmidt, Ron Meyer, Dennis Chervenak, Pete Weiss and Ray Block. Ray left the group in 2005 and Jack Simcsak came back in.

One of the highlights of Reunion’s career was when they were asked to perform for the PBS special, “Doo Wop Cavalcade, produced and hosted by T. J. Lubinsky. The show was taped at the





Sands Casino in Atlantic City in March 2005. Reunion had a short clip on the nationwide telecast and their two songs were included in the video of the show.

In 2006, Reunion sang at the Opening Day of the Freehold (NJ) Raceway. In 2007 the group opened for the Delaware State fair Doo Wop Show and also performed on the first ever, Philadelphia Doo Wop Festival on Penn's Landing.

Steve "Sharkey" Schmidt died of a stroke in 2011 at the age of 62. In 2016, *Collectable Records* released a CD called *Reunion: The Lost Album*". It contained twelve previously unreleased cuts by Reunion.



Reunion performing at the 2007 Philadelphia Doo Wop Festival on Penn's Landing.
Photo by Pamela Horner

Reunion now consists of Frank Lafaro, Ron Meyer, Pete Weiss and Ken Blair. At times, original member Dennis Chervenak will also be joining the group. You can catch Reunion singing acappella at:

January 14, 2018 – Roxy & Dukes, 745 Bound Brook Rd, Dunellen NJ. REUNION and STREET CORNER 5. Doors open at 7 PM, Show at 8. Email CUH@att.net for info or reservations.

June 23, 2018 – Uptown! Knauer Performing Arts Center, 226 North High Street, West Chester, PA. “Extreme Doo Wop... Means Acappella” concert with REUNION, DE’SEAN DOOLEY, QUIET STORM, JOEL & DYNAMICS, A PERFECT BLEND, the COPIANS. Tickets on sale soon.



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