

Issue No. 128
 Still \$5.49

ECHOES OF THE PAST

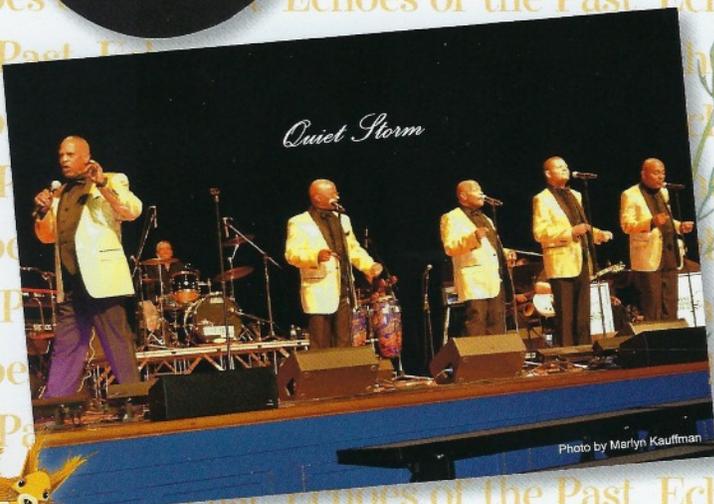
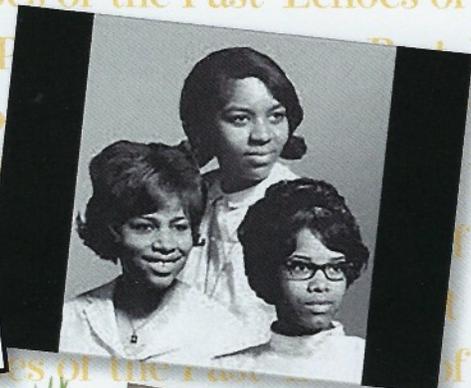
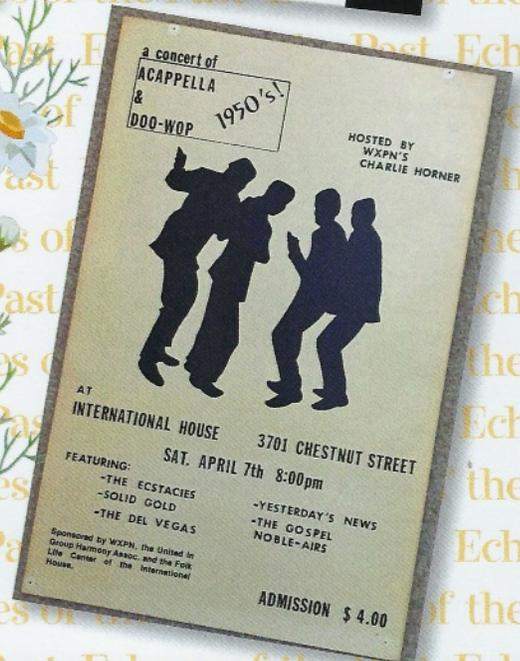


Photo by Marilyn Kauffman



<p>IN THIS ISSUE</p>	<p>CONTINETTES PAGE 4</p>	<p>How a 1979 Concert Brought A Cappella Back to Philly PAGE 10</p>	<p>QUIET STORM PAGE 18</p>	<p>STEVE PROPES NAY NASSAR LARRY STIDOM</p>
-----------------------------	--------------------------------------	--	---------------------------------------	--

How One Concert in 1979 Brought Acappella Doo Wop Singing Back to Philadelphia

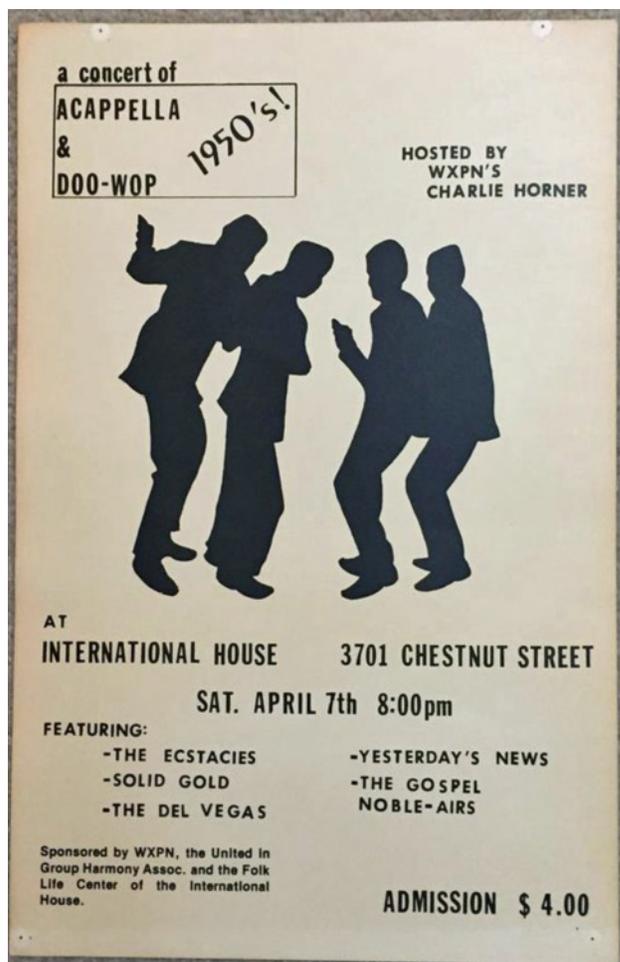
By Charlie Horner
with contributions by Pamela Horner

April 7, 2019, marked the 40th anniversary of a seminal music concert in the Philadelphia area. That now legendary concert is largely credited with bringing doo wop acappella singing back to Philadelphia after an absence of almost ten years. The resurgence that the concert started continues today. I'm not just saying that because I produced and emceed that concert. There are plenty of others who would back my words up. Nor am I writing about it because it was the first concert I ever produced, though it was. I'm writing this article because the full story needs to be told and I'm the only one who can tell it. Here's how it all happened, so many years ago.

Philadelphia was a hotbed of acappella singing in the mid- and late 1960's. Of course, it had its roots in the R&B and Doo Wop singing of the 1950's. But the 1960's were different. By then, Doo Wop had evolved into soul music in the mainstream. Still, doo wop acappella survived and even thrived in Philly, Jersey and New York. Through the sixties, there were numerous Philly area acappella groups including the Destinations, Durhams, Compulsions, Distinctions, Five Fortunes, Illusions, Potentials, Q Tones, Sands, Contenders (and related groups Lytations and Five Scripts) and many more.

By the 1970's, the acappella scene in Philly had largely died out. In 1970, I made my first appearance on FM radio (WKDU), doing a weekly radio program from Drexel University. My radio show consisted of obscure R&B and Doo Wop vocal harmony records, but was short-lived. By the end of 1972, I had graduated Drexel and moved on to graduate studies at University of Pennsylvania. No longer a student at Drexel, I didn't have first shot at the better time slots. I decided it was better to leave WKDU than to broadcast at an early morning weekday time slot.

In February 1975, I began a 20-year radio program on WXPN-FM out of the University of Pennsylvania. At the time I was still recovering from a laboratory explosion fourteen months earlier, that landed me in the ICU and nearly took my life. I spent much of that time legally blind and in need of a series of operations. Besides my family and friends and my belief that God had spared my life for some unknown reason, what got me through that time was my music and my desire to get back on the radio. Up until a week prior to my first WXPN on-air show, my jaw was wired shut from an operation. Had I been able to talk, I would have been on the air sooner.



The original poster for the 1979 International House acappella concert. From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives

In the early years, mine was the only on-air voice, though my friend Steve Applebaum assisted with the show's production. After a year, Steve left and I replaced him with Don Leins. My show, called "Rhythm & Blues" then, was an instant success. Playing obscure R&B group records, my show filled the vacancy left when the "Time Capsule Show" left Philly in 1972.

In 1977, Don Leins, and I were introduced to Ronnie I's United in Group Harmony Association (UGHA) by Joe Grimaldi who listened to our show. We'd previously been

to Ronnie I's Clifton Music record store, but had not thought of going up to north Jersey for a concert. Don and I started going up to UGHA in East Rutherford, NJ with Joe and his friend Johnny Zampieri. I think the first UGHA show I attended was the first one in St. Joseph's hall, right after they left the Mercury Club. The UGHA meeting / shows featured vocal groups singing acappella. Joe Grimaldi had previously recorded with the doo wop group, the Ecstasies, back in the early 1960's and had restarted the group to sing acappella at UGHA. Unfortunately, there were little or no opportunities for the Ecstasies to sing acappella in their home town of Philadelphia.

The Ecstasies were looking for a bass singer at the time, so I put out word on my radio show for any bass singers to call me. Late one night, I got a phone call from someone with the deepest voice I've ever heard saying, "I hear you're looking for a bass singer." I said, "You'll do!" The voice belongs to David Richardson who'd previously sung



The Ecstasies, ca. 1979. Left to right: Dave Moore, Donny Ermold, Dave Alexander, Joe Grimaldi, David Richardson. Photo courtesy of Joe Grimaldi.

with the gospel group, the Wings Over Jordan. Dave joined the Ecstasies and they started making records for Ronnie I's UGHA label. Dave sang lead on their first record in 15 years, "Sixty Minute Man".

By the end of 1978, I started wondering if Philly would be receptive to acappella singing. I'd already built up quite a following playing 1950's R&B vocal groups and whenever I played an acappella record the response seemed enthusiastic. I talked to Ronnie I and he offered to bring down some UGHA acappella groups, along with a bus load of UGHA members for a concert. Ronnie intended to bring down Reality, the Sinclairs, the Computones and the Remaining Few. (He'd already brought Reality down to my radio show to sing live acappella over the air.) From Philly, we'd have the Ecstasies and I would ask my audience if there were any acappella groups out there who wanted to be on the concert. The concert was to be a benefit for the radio station's Fund Raiser so no groups



Charlie Horner spinning records at WXPB in the late 1980's. Yes, that's a copy of "Here's That Rainy Day" by the Intervals on the turntable with "Chain Around My Heart" by the Avalons up next.

would be paid. But the idea was that if we could make this concert a success, it would generate an interest in acappella in Philly and local venues would take notice.

Working with the staff at WXPB, we secured the auditorium at International House for an April 7, 1979 concert. International House was located at 37th & Chestnut Streets in West Philadelphia. Today International House houses a magnificent 360 seat theater but in 1979 it was much different. I recall a big empty auditorium in which we set up hundreds of folding chairs. At first, International House didn't believe we'd draw anybody to such an archaic art form as "doo wop acappella". They wanted to pull a big curtain divider across and just give us half of the room. Knowing better, I insisted that we open the whole room and set up as many chairs as we could. My feelings turned out right as we'd end up packing people in. The price of admission was a \$4 donation to WXPB.

On the radio, I started getting calls from groups that wanted to sing acappella on the concert. The first was a



**International House
3711 Chestnut Street, ca, 1970's.**



Solid Gold, 1979 by member Randy Speidel's '55 DeSoto. Photo from Solid Gold

band from Levittown, PA, called Sold Gold. The group also performed under the name of Lucky Vinnie & the Shoo Be Doos. They wanted to perform as a band, but I told them they could open the concert as a band, but then they'd have to sing some acappella. They agreed.

Next, I got a call from Ron Thorpe who sang with a soul harmony group from southwest Philly called Spontaneous Combustion. The group contained a member whose brother sang with the Futures, so I figured they'd be great. They were!

Andre Verdin called the station and told me he sang with an acappella gospel group called the Gospel Nobleaires. I wasn't quite sure how a gospel group would go over on a doo wop concert, but when Andre told me his group sang songs by the Soul Stirrers and Sensational Nightingales, I added them to the concert. At the time, having a gospel quartet sing on an R&B show was pretty much unheard of. But, I've always been one to stretch the envelope well past its breaking point.

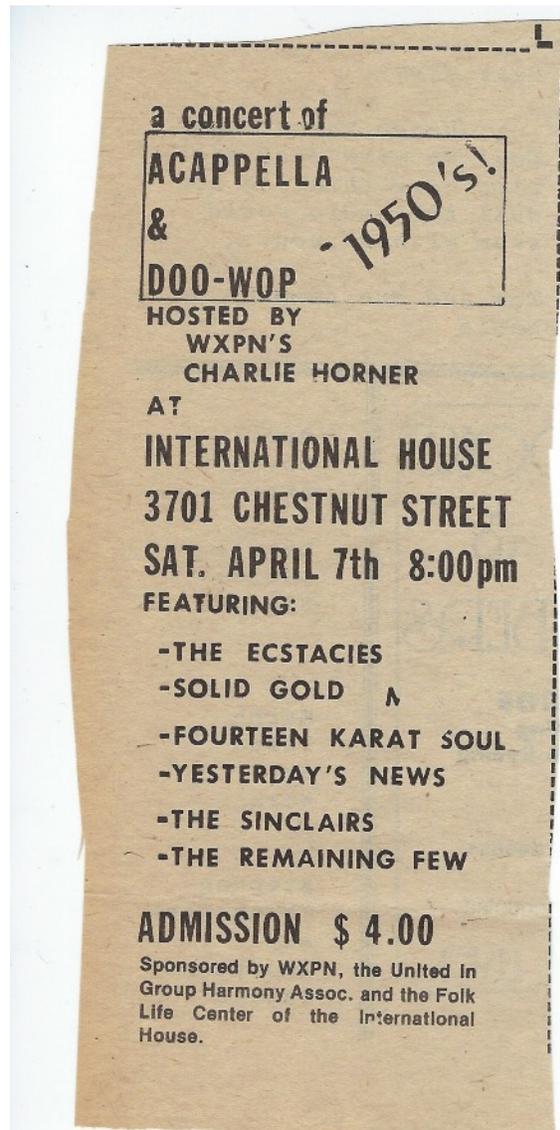
A late addition was a group calling themselves Street Corner Unity. They said they were from Bucks County (PA). I didn't realize it at the time but they were actually a well-established acappella group called the Variations. At this point I was concerned that if Ronnie I brought down four groups and I already had four, the concert would go on too long. But when I found out that Street Corner Unity had filmed singing acappella in the yet to be released movie "Rocky II," I couldn't pass this group up.

As it turned out, Reality, the Sinclairs, the Computones and the Remaining Few, all turned down Ronnie I's request to come to Philly. Either they were booked elsewhere or didn't want to make the trip, I'll never know. But Ronnie said, "No problem. I'll bring down Yesterday's News and 14 Karat Soul."

So, Don Leins and I designed a big poster, which the radio station had printed up. We began driving all over West

Philadelphia stapling posters on telegraph poles. That's what you had to do in the days before FaceBook.

The night of the show was exciting. We had to set up chairs. My WXPB colleagues set up the sound system, collected tickets and sold refreshments. Roberta Goren took photos. I'm so glad she did because those are the only concert photos I have. People kept streaming in. I don't recall how many people were there. It could have been 400 or 500. By then we knew that 14 Karat Soul and Yesterdays News would not make the concert. Ronnie I was instead bringing down the Emery's and the Del Vegas along with a bus full of UGHA'ers. The Emery's had already recorded 45's for Ronnie's Clifton label, including a version of "Good Old Acappella" that was popular on my radio program.



An early advertisement for the concert, listing groups that later canceled out.. From then on I began putting "Groups Subject to Change on advertisements.

The Concert



Concession tables sold juice at \$0.30 to raise more funds for the station. On right, Brother Walter McNeil autographs photos of the Gospel Nobleaires. Photo by Roberta Goren

Solid Gold

By starting time, the UGHA bus had not arrived. Unknown to us, the bus driver got lost and could not find West Philadelphia. I couldn't understand it. GPS's had not yet been invented but all he had to do was drive down to Philly and make a right. 37th and Chestnut was on every map of Philly. At it turned out, the bus would not arrive until the first half intermission.

I took to the stage and welcomed the audience. It was my first shot at emceeing a major concert. Solid Gold opened the show with their band. They quickly had everyone in



The Gospel Nobleaires singing at the 1979 concert. Photo by Roberta Goren.

a fifties doo wop mood with "Stormy Weather," "Deserie" and "Speedo". Then they put down their instruments and starting singing acappella. They sang several great numbers including "So In Love," "Two Kinds Of People" and "Man From The Moon". No doubt about it. Acappella had returned to Philadelphia.

The Gospel Nobleaires

The Gospel Nobleaires came on next and showed the common link between great gospel and R&B music is harmony. Members Andre Verdin, Freddy Barrett, Virgil Jones and Walter McNeil opened with an incredible version of the Swan Silvertones' "Only Believe" and followed it with the Sensational Nightingales' "Brightly Beams (Our Father's Mercy)". They had the audience mesmerized. From there they had the crowd clapping along to the Dixie Hummingbirds' "Christian Automobile". Bass singer, Walter McNeil, launched into the Dominoes' "Little Black Train," which of course is really a gospel song. But



Brother Walter McNeil singing the Dominoes' "Little Black Train". Photo by Roberta Goren.

the gospel quartet really brought the house down with Virgil Jones sounding like Sam Cooke on the Soul Stirrers' "Touch The Hem Of His Garment". All done in splendid acappella.

Spontaneous Combustion

Spontaneous Combustion stepped on stage wearing tuxes and looking the part of a seventy's soul harmony group. They looked sharp and their stage presence and singing was superb. They sang a mix of sixties and seventies soul harmony with choreography that would make the Temptations proud! Announcing they were from Southwest Philly, they acknowledged members of the Futures who were seated in the audience. Spontaneous Combustion gave acappella renditions of "With These Hands," "You Beat Me To The Punch" and the soulful "Another Night With The Boys". Taking a cue from the Persuasions, they



**Spontaneous Combustion singing
on the 1979 concert.
Photo by Roberta Goren**

left the audience spellbound with their version of "Looking For An Echo".

The Ecstasies

Following a group like Spontaneous Combustion would not be easy, but the Ecstasies were up to the task. Joe Grimaldi, Dave Moore, David Alexander, Dave Richardson and Donny Ermold were already familiar to my radio



**The Ecstasies singing on the 1979 Concert.
Photo by Roberta Goren.**

audience as I'd been playing their UGHA recordings. They began with magnificent acappella versions of two Harptones' standards ("That's The Way It Goes" (Donny Ermold) and "I'll Never tell" (Dave Moore). Bass, David Richardson, led "I Don't Know Why" and "Sixty Minute Man". But what really brought the audience to their feet was when Donny led the group on "In The Chapel In The Moonlight". It was then time for intermission and the bus loaded with UGHA people had just arrived.

The Emery's

After intermission, the second half of the concert began. The first of the two UGHA groups, the Emery's took the stage. I'd been playing the Emery's' Clifton label records on the air, so everybody seemed to know the group. The Emery's were a six-man vocal group from North Jersey,

led by Serfino Robles, who everyone called Pineapple. Also in the group were Pineapple's older brother Tony Robles, Mark Giannullo, Jimmy Erwin, Jimmy Charles and a bass singer remembered as Sal. Rumor was that Jimmy Charles was the same Jimmy Charles who recorded "A Million To One". I never knew if that was true or not, since he never sang "A Million To One" on stage. It didn't matter. He had a great voice and always gave the audience a nice version of "Gloria". As only two UGHA groups came to perform, the Emery's did two sets. They were outstanding, singing "I'm So Young," "Sunday Kind Of Love," "Traveling Stranger," "Blue Moon," and of course their signature songs, "Good Old Acappella".



The Emery's (left to right) Sal, Jimmy Charles, Mark Giannullo, Pineapple Robles, Jimmy Erwin, Tony Robles. Photo by Mike Caldarulo, now in the Classic Urban Harmony Archives..

The Del Vegas

Up next, the Del Vegas were an acappella quartet from Staten Island. I was always amazed by the songs selected by the Del Vegas. They tended to pick very obscure collectors' songs. On this concert they sang "Somewhere In This World" (Gaylarks), Venus (Squires), Counting My Teardrops" (Jayhawks) and "There Is Time" (Heartbreakers).



The Del Vegas. Photo by Mike Caldarulo.

Street Corner Unity



**Street Corner Unity (The Variations)
appearing in "Rocky II"**

Street Corner Unity arrived late and they closed the concert. They sang a mix of doo wop and soul music, from "Tonight" to "Don't Look Back" One of the highlights of the evening was their rendition of "Lover's Island". They announced to the audience that they had just cut a scene for the soon to be released movie, "Rocky II" singing acappella with Sylvester Stallone's brother Frank. They then launched into the song they taped for the movie, beginning with "Na na na na na..." . Doo wop enthusiasts recognized the song as "My Only Love" recorded by the Falcons and C-Quins. Sure enough, when "Rocky II" came out two months later, there were those singers gathered around a fire in a trash can with Frank Stallone singing the same song. I later realized that members of the group Street Corner Unity were actually the Variations (Charles Cole, Jimmy Zazzarino, Bob Kondyra and Doug Flor).

Reverberations

The concert ran from 8 to Midnight. I was helping put chairs away and cleaning up until after 1 AM but when I walked outside, I couldn't believe what I saw. It seemed like no one wanted to leave. There were people all over, standing on the street corners singing! The Philly groups who'd just performed were there singing with members of the audiences. They had divided up into super groups of 10 or 12 guys and were all singing acappella.

"I have great memories of that night," Ecstasies' Joe Grimaldi recently corresponded. "No one wanted to go home. There were groups singing outside till four in the morning." Randy Speidel of Solid Gold likewise recalled groups swapping members and continuing to sing for hours.

People tell me that concert re-ignited acappella singing in Philadelphia, a resurgence that continues today. I can believe it. At the concert, I was approached by a gentleman who said he'd heard my on-air requests for acappella groups to sing on this concert and had started rehearsing

with one. He said they weren't able to be ready for this concert but would contact me shortly when they ready. I asked him if his group had a name and he said, "Yes. Neighbors Complaint". And people who attended that concert were inspired right then to form acappella groups.

Legendary Philadelphia bass singer, Peter Siciliano, recently recalled that night and how it led to the formation of the great acappella group, Nostalgia 5. Pete had earlier sung with the Illusions and other groups but by 1979 had stopped singing. Pete wrote, "Charlie you can say that you are the reason Nostalgia 5 was formed back in April 1979. Myself and Al Lancellotti from The Illusions (1953 to 64) went to the show and stayed for the whole performance of all the groups. We were so impressed by everyone, that when the show was over, we went outside and sang with many different people. That is when we grabbed Jack Albright and added him to the group. He became our third member of Nostalgia 5. I was 39 years old at that time and Al was 47. My last two groups before that were the Leisure Lads (1967-69) and the Graduates (1964-67). At that time, I had not sung in a group for at least 10 years. You can say that you made me come back to Music. Thank you."

There were many others, of course, who were inspired by that concert. I started playing more acappella on the radio and groups started dropping by the station to sing. A whole class of acappella Philly groups followed. Besides Neighbors Complaint and Nostalgia 5, there came Frankie & the Fashions, Omega 5 Maestros, the Keystones, A Moment's Pleasure, the Balladeers, (Philly) Charm, Five Grand, the Zip Codes, Foundation, Reminisce, Cornerstone, Royal Blue and many others. Some older big-name recording groups like the Keystoners, (Philly) Students, Turbans, Cherokees, Destinations and Rick & the Masters, reunited to sing acappella. I helped get acappella groups into clubs like the Little Bourse Café. Neighbor's Complaint went on to get a 7-page spread in the Philadelphia Inquirer's Weekend Magazine and signed with Collectables Records. One cut from their



**The original line up for Nostalgia 5, 1979.
The group traces it's beginnings to the 1979
acappella concert at International House.**



Charlie Horner and Don Leins being presented with our Neighbors Complaint jackets by Bob Murphy, 1982.

album, "Peace Of Mind" made WDAS-FM's play list. I was made an honorary non-singing member of the group. I still have my Neighbor's Complaint jacket. Of course, Nostalgia 5 is still one of the premiere acappella groups around.

Though not every Philly group that came after the 1979 concert has a direct connection to it, but the lineage is there. The Ecstasies went through numerous personnel changes over the years. But alumni of that group would go on to form the nuclei of later Philly doo wop groups like Quiet Storm, the Balladeers, Royal Blue, Junior & the Four Seniors, Mid Life Crisis and Blue Velvet.

Members of Neighbor's Complaint later found themselves in A Moment's Pleasure, Cornerstone, the Norristones, the Copians and even Nostalgia 5.

A long time has now passed. To the best of my knowledge all the members of the Gospel Nobleaires have gone on. Emery's lead Pineapple Robles died in an auto accident in 1986. Ecstasies lead Donny Ermold passed away in 2006. We lost Ronnie I in 2008. Joe Grimaldi sings with a recording only group, Blue Champagne. Dave Moore sings with Blue Velvet. I've recently gotten back in touch with Solid Gold's Randy Speidel.

I don't know the whereabouts of Spontaneous Combustion, the Del Vegas or any of the other singers on that concert. I hope they're alive and doing well.

As for me, now with the help of Pamela Horner, I'm still producing acappella concerts after 40 years. Sometime this summer we'll produce my 100th acappella show. Aside from Ronnie I, I can't think of anyone who's done that many acappella concerts. Maybe I'm still trying to recapture the excitement of that first concert. Or maybe

I'm just trying to preserve a rapidly disappearing art form that's under siege from modern technology that substitutes computer generated tracks for live vocals and instruments.

Pam and I still try to bring a doo wop acappella to Roxy & Dukes Roadhouse, 745 Bound Brook Rd, in Dunellen NJ, every second month. We produced larger multi-group acappella concerts a few times a year. Our next is Saturday night June 22, 2019, at the Uptown! Knauer Performing Arts Center in West Chester Pennsylvania. That one will star Quiet Storm, Joel Katz & the Dynamics, Nostalgia 5, and the "New" Re-MemberThen, with a guest appearance from the Quin-Tones Quartet close harmony acappella group. Other surprises are planned. See the flyer below or visit www.ClassicUrbanHarmony.net for details. All seats are \$45. Purchase tickets at UptownWestChester.org or 610-356-2787.

UPTOWN! | KNAUER PERFORMING ARTS CENTER | **SAT JUN 22**
 226 N. High St, West Chester, PA
ALL ACAPPELLA
DOO WOP EXPLOSION 4

QUIET STORM | **NOSTALGIA 5**

Produced and MC'd by Classic Urban Harmony's Pamela & Charlie Horner | **JOEL KATZ & DYNAMICS** | **Showtime 7 PM**

The New RE-MEMBERTHEN | **Quin-Tones Qrt**
 Special guests, young close harmony singing sensations

Tickets \$45 | 610-356-2787 or www.UptownWestChester.org

For those who loved reading about R&B and Doo Wop vocal harmony, "How D'Ya Like Me Now" The Story of Earl Lewis & the Channels" is now available on Amazon.com for \$25. Check it out!

