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ECHOES OF THE PAST

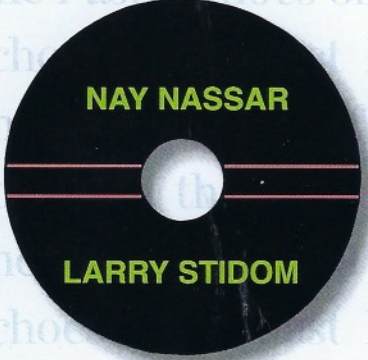


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Francis Garner of The Ordells



Sonny Edwards
Cevetone Records



Sippin' A Cup Of Coffee: The Ordells Story

by **Charlie Horner**
with Contributions from **Pamela Horner**

To paraphrase an old R&B record, "You can't keep a good song down." The song, "Sipping A Cup Of Coffee," was written and recorded by Lee Andrews & the Hearts but not released in 1956. The song, or at least one with the some of the same lyrics, re-emerged in 1967 as a soul harmony record by the Ordells. 1981 saw the Lee Andrews & the Hearts song released as a single. The Ordells' version of it resurfaced in the soundtrack of a 2021 blockbuster movie. But let's go back to the beginning.

The year was 1955. The Southwest Philadelphia vocal group, Lee Andrews & the Hearts were under a long-term contract with Philly deejay, Kae Williams. Having made three records for the Rainbow label, the Hearts expected to see some royalties, but none were forthcoming. Disheartened, the Hearts (Lee Andrews, Ted Weems, Butch Curry, Roy Calhoun and John Young) argued that their contract with Kae was invalid since they'd signed it as minors. They parted ways with Kae Williams and began looking for other opportunities. By then, all of the Hearts were out of high school.

Lee Andrews and Roy Calhoun took full-time jobs pressing records for Gotham Records, one of the few local labels recording black artists. "Roy and I decided to go down to Gotham to try to get jobs," Lee once told me. "And maybe by working down there, try to get an audition for the group." After close to a year of repeatedly asking their boss, Ivin Ballen, for an audition, Ballen auditioned the group and gave them permission to start rehearsing at Gotham Studios. In December 1955, the Hearts assigned some original tunes to Gotham's publishing company and on January 3, 1956, signed a six month contract with the label. Gotham's recording studio was at 16th and Federal Streets in Philadelphia. It had one large room and accommodated all



Francis Garner of the Ordells

the group members, band and recording equipment. Instrumentation on Gotham Recordings was usually minimal - just a piano, bass, drums and occasional sax. Gotham only released three records (six sides) by the Hearts.

Gotham 318 - Bluebird of Happiness / Show Me
The Merengue

Gotham 320 - Lonely Room / Leona
Gotham 321 - Just Suppose / It's Me

After that, Lee Andrews & the Hearts moved on.



Lee Andrews & the Hearts, 1956.
From left: John Young, Butch Curry,
Lee Andrews, Ted Weems, Roy Calhoun
From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives

Discovering the Lost Recordings

Back in the early 1980's, while doing my radio show on WXPN-FM, I became friends with Jerry Greene of Collectables Records. Jerry had just purchased Gotham Records, the legendary Philadelphia recording company that gave us those great R&B vocal group sides by the Capris, Lee Andrews & the Hearts, Whispers, Gazelles and many others. Knowing my passion for preserving R&B history, Jerry invited me and my co-host, Don Leins over to his home to look through Gotham's files of contracts and correspondences. The Gotham files contained a wealth of information and I was fully engrossed in copying down group personnel and bits of useful information. At one point, Jerry said, by the way, I also acquired some tapes from Gotham. He had a shelf full of boxes of reel-to-reel tapes. I started looking through the boxes and saw the names Capris, Lee Andrews & the Hearts, and others. I asked, "What is all this stuff?" Jerry said, "I don't know. I haven't had time yet to listened to any of it." I opened some of the boxes and saw titles I didn't recognize. I immediately got excited. I said, "It

looks like there are unreleased recordings on these reels." At that point, Jerry told me, "Well, if you want to take them over to the studio, I'll pay for studio time. You can produce an album or two and I'll put them out."

And so, I did. Don and I took several boxes of tapes marked Capris and Lee Andrews & the Hearts to Disc Makers. Disc Makers assigned us a technician to play each reel and transfer the recordings to a new reel as the old originals were becoming quite brittle. There were all kinds of treasures on those tapes. We ended up selecting enough cuts for two vinyl albums, one by the Capris and one by Lee Andrews & the Hearts. [There were no CD's back then.] The reels of tape each had multiple takes from different songs, complete with false takes that stopped in the middle of the songs. We wanted to make each LP a complete story of the groups' short stays with Gotham Records, so we tried to include the released sides as well as some unreleased takes and previously unheard songs. I must say, it was quite a thrill to hear songs by the two groups that had not been heard by anyone since 1956. We were only disappointed a few times by the occasional tape breaking due to brittleness. In most cases, there was often a different but similar take of the same song we could use. Oh, we did happen upon one reel by the Capris that just disintegrated before our eyes (and ears). Those songs are now gone forever.



1981 release of "Sippin' A Cup Of Coffee"

We found tapes of a number of previously unreleased tunes. Some were early versions of songs the Hearts would later record for other labels. Why Gotham never released such future hits like "Long Lonely Nights," "Why Do I," and "Try The Impossible," we'll never know. Hearts members, Lee Andrews and Ted Weems told me they thought Gotham was more interested in pushing their gospel recordings than R&B. But among the reels of Hearts tapes were a number of unreleased gems including "Abide By The Golden Rule" "Strollin' Woman" and others.

Shortly after we produced the "Lee Andrews & the Hearts: The Gotham Sessions" LP, Jerry Greene found some additional Lee Andrews & the Hearts tapes. I'm not sure if they were from Gotham or the Mainline label that the Hearts joined after leaving Gotham. Jerry issued these sides for the first time as 45 RPM singles on the Gotham label, which he now owned. One was a song called "Sipping A Cup Of Coffee" (Gotham 323).

"Sipping A Cup Of Coffee"

The first time I heard "Sipping A Cup Of Coffee" by Lee Andrews & the Hearts, I knew I'd heard some of those lyrics before. It turned out I was thinking about a great soul harmony version by another Philly group, the Ordells. But the Ordells record came out on the Dionn label in 1967. I wondered, "How in the world did the Ordells get the lyrics to "Sippin' A Cup Of Coffee?" When I looked at my copy of the record, I saw the writer credits included Lee Andrews. Still, my curiosity at where the Ordells got the song "Sippin' A Cup of Coffee" was not satisfied until a few months ago. While listening to Jim Bakay's "Sound Of The City" radio show, I heard Jim say that a listener, Frank Garner, had been a member of the Ordells.

The Ordells

Francis "Frank" Garner was born and raised in the Eastwick section of Southwest Philadelphia, near the Philadelphia International Airport. The area was called Elmwood, back then. Elmwood was home to many future local R&B stars including Eddie Custis & the Superiors and Patti LaBelle & the Blue Belles. Lee Andrews lived in West Philadelphia, a short distance away at 49th Street and Woodland Avenue.



The only surviving posed photo of the Ordells. Unfortunately the top of the picture is cut off. Top left: Tommy Matthews, Archie Moore (face cut off), Tommy Elibay (face cut off), Frank Garner, Clifford Lackey (Front}

Frank's early introduction to music came from the church. Frank sang with a couple of gospel groups at the People's Baptist Church and Beulah Baptist Church in Elmwood. Frank and his friend Clifford Lackey, who was also from Elmwood, sang in a local R&B group called the Fairlanes. By the 1960's, Clifford was singing with a group called the Ordells. The group had been singing for a couple years but found themselves in need of a bass singer. So, Frank asked Clifford to bring him into the group. The Ordells then consisted of Clifford Lackey (first and second tenor), Archie Moore (second tenor), Tommy Matthews (baritone and tenor), Tommy Elibay (first and second tenor) and Frank Garner (bass and baritone). Group members took turns singing lead. Moore, Matthews and Elibay were from West Philadelphia, around 52nd Street and Cedar Avenue.

The group already had the name Ordells before Frank joined them. He was told the name was inspired by the Dells. It was a shortened version of "Our Dells." The Ordells began appearing locally, singing a mix of popular tunes from the Heartbeats and Moonglows to the Temptations.

In the beginning, the Ordells struggled under the wrong managers. "I remember when we would do a show," Frank recalled. "And when the show was over and it was time for us to get paid, our manager was gone. We asked club owner and he said, 'Well, your manager left, man. He said he'll take care of you guys later.' So, when we got with our manager, he said, 'Well, they didn't give me all the money so here's a little something. When I get the rest of the money, I'll pay you.'"

In 1967, the Ordells acquired a new manager, Gilda Woods, wife of popular WDAS radio personality, Georgie Woods. Gilda had previously discovered the soul group, Brenda & the Tabulations and taken them to Jamie/Guyden Records who recorded them on the newly formed Dionn label. The Tabulations were riding high on their record, "Dry Your Eyes." Under the direction of producer Bob Finiz and with arrangements by Richard Rome, the Ordells recorded one song - "Sippin' A Cup Of Coffee."

The opening words to "Sippin' A Cup Of Coffee" came right out of the Lee Andrews & the Hearts song of eleven years earlier.

Sippin' a cup of coffee
 Wondering why love didn't last
 Sipping a cup of coffee
 Reminiscing about the past.



The Ordells performing in Delaware. From left: Frank Garner (front), Clifford Lackey, Tommy Matthews, Archie Moore, Tommy Elibay
 Photo courtesy of Frank Garner



"Sippin' A Cup Of Coffee" by the Ordells
 From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives

Beyond that the words change. Writer credits are listed as "Andrews - Mason - Howard." Lee Andrews mid-1960's Hearts group contained Richard Mason and Robert Howard, so it seems logical that the Hearts reworked the melody and later lyrics to Lee's fifties song to give it a modern touch. Frank Garner said that Lee gave the Ordells the song, possibly through Gilda Woods. "Sippin' A Cup Of Coffee" came out on the Dionn label. The flip side was an instrumental by the Sigma Sound house band and had nothing to do with the Ordells. "Sippin'..." was given air play in Philadelphia by Georgie Woods and others. It also got air play in Pittsburgh and elsewhere though it did not chart.

Still, having a record out opened doors for live performances by the Ordells. The group was mostly playing clubs around Philadelphia but also traveled to New York City and down into Delaware. "One night when we performed on a show with Kenny Gamble & the Romeos," Frank remembered. That was at the old Adelphi Theatre on N. 52nd Street near Media Street. After the theatre closed in 1965, it became a ballroom and catering hall and that's where Kenny Gamble was performing. Another place the Ordells played was the Imperial Ballroom on 60th Street. They were on shows with the Delfonics before they got really big. The Ordells also played a recreation center in Delaware where the photos here were taken.



The Ordells. (from left) Tom Mathews, Archie Moore, Clifford Lachey (unseen), Tom Elibay, Frank Garner
Photo courtesy of Frank Garner

The Ordells never made another record. Eventually Frank Garner left the group. "Four of those guys stayed together until they eventually dissolved the group," Frank said. "I was the one who was married and had kids at the time. A lot of people don't realize that when you are singing, it's like a job. You have to have time when you rehearse just the vocals. You have to rehearse with a band. And it's work. It's work. I don't know if that's what caused the group to dissolve. But doing a lot of rehearsals and things and not getting anywhere must have become frustrating to them."

"Sippin' A Cup Of Coffee" by the Ordells has been sampled by at least three hip hop artists that we know of over the years. In 2021, the song appeared in soundtrack of the Oscar nominated movie, "Judas & the Black Messiah," the story of Fred Hampton of the Black Panthers. I don't believe the song made it into the released album soundtrack. Still, a new generation of music fans are discovering the song that had its roots back in the mid-1950's.

Notes

This article is based on my conversations with Francis "Frank" Garner of the Ordells along with long ago conversations with, the now late Lee Andrews and Ted Weems of the Hearts. My thanks to Jerry Greene of Collectables Records.

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Have you made plans yet to attend the **2022 East Coast Music Hall Of Fame Awards Gala** at Harrah's in Atlantic City, June 6 - 7? In addition to the main awards ceremony and numerous other activities, there will be a program honoring the Pioneer R&B Vocal Groups, the Ravens, Clovers, Dominoes and Five Keys. You'll see vintage film clips of the four groups and hear **Clovers' original bass singer, Harold Winley** tell stories of his years on the road to a panel of music historians and celebrities. Harold and the Clovers will be honored on the main awards gala, where the Clovers will sing "Blue Velvet" acappella. Charlie & Pamela Horner's Museum & Memorabilia Committee will be curating an exhibit of rare photos, artifacts and uniform jackets from some of the great R&B and doo wop vocal groups honored by the ECMHOF. Charlie will give his multimedia presentation "Under The Streetlamp: Tales From The Doo Wop Era" and there'll be screenings of movies like "Joey" (1985) and "Streetlight Harmonies" (2017). All will be accessible with an ECMHOF wristband.

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