

# Early Philly Rhythm & Blues: Johnny Stiles and the Medallions and Manhattans

by Charlie Horner

With Contributions from Pamela Horner

Reprinted with permission from *Echoes of the Past*, Issue No. 91 (Spring 2010)

During the late 1940's and early 1950's, Philadelphia was a center of musical innovation and change, especially black music. Disregarding any separation in musical styles, black musicians in the City of Brotherly Love knew only that they were entertainers. Small post war combos led by musicians like Jimmy Preston, Doc Bagby, Harry Crafton and Chris Powell, during a night's performance would swing from jazz to jump blues, from instrumentals to vocals, from Be Bop to Rhythm & Blues. It was this environment that led to both black and white musicians frequenting the city's black clubs to monitor new music styles. This undoubtedly contributed to white country swing groups like Bill Haley & the Saddlemen recording black tunes like Doc Bagby's "Rock the Joint" for small local record labels like *Essex*.

To black teenagers growing up in West Philadelphia the line between Rhythm & Blues and Jazz was also blurred. At first, the influence of Sonny Til & the Orioles swayed youngsters into vocal harmony. But anyone who also could play an instrument found themselves doubly in demand to play at local dances.

It was this atmosphere that eventually led to the evolution of the "Sound of Philadelphia" in the late 1960's/early 1970's. Yet long before *Philadelphia International Records*, a musical foundation was laid down by the Johnny Stiles, Luther Randolph and Weldon McDougal's *Harthon Productions*. Many, if not most, of the musicians that made up the core of TSOP came directly from *Harthon*. While the geniuses of Stiles, Randolph and McDougal's sixties soul endeavors have been covered elsewhere, little has been written on their early musical careers. In this article we'll cover Johnny Stiles.

Johnny Stiles was born at Philadelphia's Women's Hospital on June 24, 1936. John grew up on 56<sup>th</sup> Street between Arch and Race Streets in the West Philly neighborhood they called "The Top." The third of four children, John Stiles came from a musical family. Both his mother and father sang in church choirs. In fact, his mother sang in the same choir as Marion Anderson. John's brother would go on to play the pipe organ in church.

At the age of six, John Stiles started studying violin. "When I first started, my teacher lived on 53<sup>rd</sup> Street," John recalled. "He taught me a song called 'Zu Zu.' That's all I could play and I thought I was great." With practice, Johnny Stiles developed extraordinary talent. "I tried out for the New York Philharmonic, but they weren't hiring black people much then."

While John's first musical influences were classical, he soon was pulled in the direction of his classmates. "I went to Bartrum High School," said John. "It was not in my area but at that time you were allowed to pick the school you



John Stiles  
(Photo courtesy of Weldon McDougal)

wanted to go to and I wanted to go to Bartrum because they had a good music department."

By the early 1950's R&B vocal groups were popular and the temptation to try to sing like the Orioles, Clovers and Five Keys was ever present. "In high school we kids started singing around the halls and stuff," said Johnny. "A couple of guys played instruments too, but we sang pretty good so we used to entertain the kids in the hallways." Among the crowd that John hung out with were future members of groups like the Capris and Lee Andrews' Hearts. "Lee Andrews & the Hearts," John recalled. "They all went to the same school we did [Bartrum]. They had their little group and we had ours. In fact, a couple of our guys started singing with the Hearts first but they liked our group better so they started singing with us. Then Lee Andrews started cutting records and he did pretty good."

John Stiles' group picked the name, the Medallions. The group consisted of John Bell (lead), James Poe (tenor), Harrison Scott (tenor), Johnny Stiles (baritone) and Herman Carter (bass). Actually, the first bass of the group was a fellow named John who was also a star basketball player for

Bartrum High. He left the group to pursue basketball and Herman Carter, really a baritone, was brought in to sing bass. Harrison Scott also ended up recording with the Capris when they cut records for *Gotham Records* ("God Only Know"). "You've got to understand the times," John said. "All of us hung together. So when the Capris decided to record, Scott sang with them, that's all. But he was still with us. There was another guy named Burgess Jones. He played sax with us in the early days. But all those people... George Tinley & the Dreams, the Capris, the Hearts... all of us hung around together. When we hung out on the street corners, we sang. There was no fighting and that kind of stuff. We enjoyed each others' company and we had a lot of fun singing."

[For the record, the voices on the Capris' *Gotham* recordings were Rene Hinton, Ruben Wright (piano and vocals), Harrison Scott, Eddie Warner and Bobby Smart (guitar and vocals). Group members came from the same West Philly neighborhood of 58th & Race Street to 62nd and Vine Street. Prior to Rene taking the place of Charlie Stroud, the Capris had been an all male group. See photo, upper right.—ed.]

Sometime in 1954, Johnny Stiles' Medallions made their first record for *Essex Records*.

*Essex Records* grew out of *Palda Records*, a Philadelphia label and distribution company that was started in 1947 by Albert Miller and his two sons, Paul and David (hence the name **Paul-ALbert-DAvid**). *Palda* began recording Philadelphia string bands, but soon branched out into other music styles. In 1952 Dave and Paul bought their father out. By the early 1950's *Palda* and its subsidiaries *Essex* and *BBC* were scoring hits with Philadelphia area artists like Al Martino and Bill Haley. The Medallions were not the first black vocal groups to record for *Palda/Essex*. During the late 1940's and early 1950's the Millers had recorded Gospel groups like the Five Blind Boys of Alabama and Gate City Singers as well as the integrated vocal group, the Mystery Quartet. In the 1953 *Essex* recorded the Harptones backing white artist Bunny



## The Capris

Exclusive  Recordings

Original promotional card of the Capris.  
Harrison Scott is on the far left.  
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)

Paul. *Palda* also owned its own record pressing plant at 3208 South 84<sup>th</sup> Street in southwest Philadelphia.

"*Essex* had a recording studio out in Eastwick (southwest Philadelphia) which was Elmwood to us," remembered John Stiles. Somebody turned us on to David Miller and we auditioned for him in his office. He liked us and recorded us."

The Medallions recorded two sides for *Essex*, a R&B ballad called "I Know" led by John Bell and an up-tempo tune, "Laki-Lani" led by James Poe. Both songs were written by the Medallions though no writer credit at all appeared in the label. "I Know" starts out with an organ, but none of the Medallions played instruments on the record. "He [Dave Miller] hired some musicians," John Stiles remembered. "We were not playing instruments on that record. We were trying to be the greatest singing group of all." John remembers the musicians being black; one possibly being Doc Bagby.

The record did get air play locally. "Then this group from California started calling themselves the Medallions," lamented John. "They had a song called 'The Letter.' Their record was much bigger than ours."

Released in August 1954, "The Letter" by the Los Angeles vocal group the Medallions soon eclipsed the record by the Philadelphia group. "[Philadelphia dee jay] Georgie Woods was saying on the air, 'This is the medallions from California; this is the Medallions from Philadelphia,'" recalled John. "We didn't like that."

Not long after the name conflict with the *Dootone* label Medallions, the Philadelphia Medallions changed their name to the Manhattans. At about the same time, since most of the group played instruments, they began developing as a band. Remaining from the Medallions were Johnny Stiles, Harrison Scott and Herman Carter. Johnny Stiles violin but by this time had also taught himself to play guitar. Harrison Scott played saxophone. Herman Carter played bass. Rounding out the group were two new members, Jay "Cabby" Dixon (vibes) and Ronnie Brown. Ronnie Brown was initially brought into the group as a singer. "Ronnie had a beautiful



"I Know" by the Medallions on Essex  
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)



**One of two Manhattans Records on Piney.  
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)**

voice,” recalled John. “He sang just like Johnny Mathis. He was our first drummer but in the beginning he didn’t play drums. We bought him a set of drums and a couple guys taught him how to play.”

The next record for the group was done for Herman Gillespie’s *Piney* label. Gillespie, whose nickname was “Piney,” was a small Philly record producer and talent agent who at one time managed both the Turbans and Keystoneers as well as working with Rollee McGill, Little Joe Cook, and Fay Simmons.

“Pancho Villa turned us on to Piney,” said John. Gillespie had that little record company and we did that song and put it in Pancho Villa’s publishing company because at that time we didn’t know anything about publishing.” Pancho Villa had a small combo that played around Philadelphia. He also had his hands in a lot of other aspects of the music scene.

The Manhattans recorded two records for *Piney*. “Live It Up” was a lively instrumental while the flip, “Go Baby Go” was a blues vocal written by Johnny Stiles and sung solo by Herman Carter. The release was quickly followed by a second manhattans record, “Crazy Love” b/w “The Hawk and the Crow.”

After the *Piney* records, Freddie Simmons joined the group as pianist. “If Freddie heard a record he could play it on a piano,” Johnny recalled. “With him in the group, we did a lot of jazz things.”

Throughout the late 1950’s the Manhattans did quite a bit of touring. “We played everywhere,” said Johnny. “We played all over Canada – Quebec City, Montreal, Toronto. By that time our group was great. We could play anything.” With the extended touring, drummer Ronnie Brown was replaced by Darryl Smallwood. Hollis Floyd joined as organist in place of Freddie Simmons who wouldn’t travel and Bobby Gregory was added as vocalist. Eventually Carter and Dixon dropped out.

“We were playing a club in Buffalo, NY, and James Brown sat in with us,” John said. Brown was playing another little club in Buffalo at the time. He sang a song about a deck

of cards or something. He was a great performer, even then. He told me he was leaving Buffalo the following week to go to Cincinnati and record at *King Records*. He said if we ever got out that way to contact Sid Nathan and he gave me the guy’s number. He said to tell the guy that James Brown said this was a great group that he should listen to.

The Manhattans continued touring on their own and also found work backing other artists. “We did a couple of gigs backing singer Tommy Edwards,” Johnny recalled. “And we traveled with Sonny Til as the Orioles for awhile.”

The Manhattans became Sonny Til’s live backup band, probably around mid-1959 and at some point even became the Orioles, supplying the vocals on stage to songs like “Crying In The Chapel.” While playing behind Sonny Til in Columbus, Ohio, the Manhattans got their next opportunity to record.

“We were doing a gig with Sonny Til in Columbus, Ohio, and we called the guy. He came out and heard us and said, ‘Look, can you bring the group in to the studio?’”

At about the same time, the Manhattans crossed paths with Morris Wade and his Four Pharaohs group.

“Sonny Til and the Manhattans were working at a club in Columbus,” remembered Morris Wade. The group’s manager Howard Ransom was getting ready to record the Four Pharaohs doing “It Was A Night Like This” and “Is It Too Late” and had already booked studio time at *King Recording Studio* in Cincinnati. After catching Sonny Til and the Manhattans’ performance, both Morris Wade and Howard Ransom wanted the Manhattans to back the Four Pharaohs on their next recording. “What impressed me with the group was the electric violin,” said Morris. “I’d never seen one before. I like violins and I loved the electric violin. I liked the sound the first time I heard it and asked for it.”

The Manhattans traveled to Cincinnati’s *King Recording Studios* and recorded backing Morris Wade’s Pharaohs as well as on their own.



**Morris Wade with uncredited Four Pharaohs  
backed by the Manhattans  
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)**

**Morris Wade  
Performing  
at the 2008  
Black Swan  
Concert**

**(Photo by  
Pamela Horner)**



“It Was A Night Like This” was originally a Turbans’ song and Howard Ransom had traveled to New York City to get permission to cover it. Morris and the Pharaohs had been doing it on stage for quite a while. At the session, the Four Pharaohs (Morris Wade, Ronald Wilson, George Smith, Robert Lowry) did all the vocals while the Manhattans backed them instrumentally. “Sonny Til was standing right beside me during the whole thing,” said Morris. “It was beautiful. It was all cut live, not on different tracks like they do today. And it was outstanding.” *King* label owner Sid Nathan watched from the control room and Little Willie John, on the premises for his own session, even watched for a few minutes.

“It Was A Night Like This” b/w “Is It Too Late” was issued on the *Ransom* label. The label read “Introducing Morris Wade with Music by the Manhattans.” without mentioning the Four Pharaohs.

As for the Manhattans, they were also signed to a contract with *King Records*. “We cut four sides that same day, said Johnny Stiles. “‘Like Saying Something’ and ‘Sugar Tooth’ were songs that I wrote and Bobby Gregory and I sang together. ‘Ebb Tide – Parts 1 and 2’ had me playing violin. *King* released “Ebb Tide” in July of 1959. The second record came out shortly there after.

Upon returning to Philadelphia, the Manhattans added Barbara Prince as a female vocalist. “We had a lot of fun,” recalled Johnny. “Back in the day we weren’t worried about making a lot of money. We just had a good time.”

Playing in Philadelphia, Johnny and the Manhattans could not help running into fellow musician Luther Randolph’s group. The two ensembles competed for gigs initially. “We used to be competitors,” said Johnny. “Luther’s group worked the same clubs we worked. Luther’s group liked the way we played and we liked the way they played so we’d go to their gigs and they’d come to ours. Luther and I have been friends ever since.” Eventually Luther Randolph

**The Manhattans, ca. late 1950’s  
(Left to right: Harrison Scott, Darrell Smallwood,  
Johnny Stiles, Hollis Floyd).  
(Photo courtesy of Weldon McDougal)**



**The Manhattans: (Top, l to r): Johnny Stiles, Harrison Scott, Darrell Smallwood, Hollis Floyd; Barbara Prince.  
(Photo courtesy of Johnny Stiles)**

joined Johnny Stiles’ group. Together with drummer Norman Conners they formed the *Harthon* record label. Within a short time, Conners was replaced by Johnny Stiles’ friend since childhood, Weldon McDougal. The three of them, Stiles, Randolph and McDougal, would soon play a major role in shaping the sound of Philadelphia soul music.



**One of two Manhattans Records on King.  
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)**

**Notes**

1. Based on interviews and conversations with Johnny Stiles, Weldon McDougal and Morris Wade as well as the Capris’ Rene Hinton, Charlie Stroud and Eddie Warner.
2. Many thanks to our good friend Weldon McDougal for photographs, contacts and insight.
3. For details on Johnny Stiles’, Luther Randolph’s and Weldon McDougal’s later career producing records for

Harthon and Dyno-Dynamics, see Dave Moore's outstanding article "Harthon Records Story: A Dynodynamic Tale," *There's That Beat!*, Issue 4 (June 2007), pp. 14-26.

4. Apparently, the late 1950's Medallions who recorded for the Philadelphia label, *Singular*, are not connected with the *Essex* group. After listening to the *Singular* record, Johnny Stiles could not identify any voices.
5. Thanks to Dave Brown for additions to the discography.
6. For more vocal group articles visit our website, [www.classicurbanharmony.net](http://www.classicurbanharmony.net)

### Medallions & Manhattans Discography

#### As the Medallions

*Essex* 901 I Know / Laki-Lani 1954

#### As the Manhattans

*Piney* 107 Go Baby Go / Live It Up ca.1956

*Piney* 108 Crazy Love / The Hawk And The Crow ca.1956

#### As Morris Wade with Music by the Manhattans

*Ransom* 102 It Was A Night Like This / Is It Too Late  
1959

#### As the Manhattans

*Boss* 404 Far East Rock / At Daybreak

*Coman* 60 Saturday Night Fish Fry / Barbara Lee



**Weldon McDougal III**  
(Photo by Pamela Horner)



**Johnny Stiles, Norman Connors, Luther Randolph**  
(Photo courtesy of Weldon McDougal)



**Manhattans, ca. late 1950's**  
Left to right: Harrison Scott, Darrell Smallwood,  
Johnny Stiles, Hollis Floyd.  
(Photo courtesy of Weldon McDougal)