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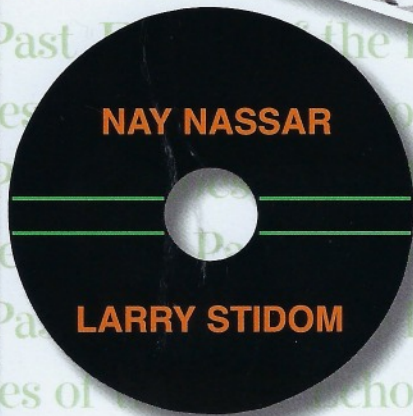
ECHOES OF THE PAST



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THE SINNERS

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The Equations

Music in their Hearts and Souls

by Charlie Horner
with contributions from Pamela Horner

On a frigid January night in 2019, Pam and I welcomed four members of the soul vocal group, the Equations, into the Asbury Park Museum's temporary home on the boardwalk. We'd met three of the singers earlier in the week when they came to see our exhibit and had invited them back for an interview. I'd been studying some of the photos we had on the walls and when they first entered the museum I said, "Excuse me. You guys look familiar. Are you members of the Equations?"

So here we were a few nights later, interviewing the group. With the outside temperature dipping below ten degrees and a 50 mile an hour wind rattling the glass picture windows, the heating system couldn't begin to keep up. We kept our coats on and turned on the recorder. Here's what we learned.

The Equations really started in the mid 1960's as an Asbury Park High School group called the Affections. Alphonso Covington first had the idea of starting the Affections with a few friends; Ernie Daniels, Sylvester Conquest and James Reed. Conquest and Reed weren't really interested in singing so Alphonso began looking elsewhere.

Alphonso Covington

"I was born in Greensboro, North Carolina," said Alphonso. "I moved to Asbury Park, New Jersey in 1963. I would say that I actually grew up here because I've been here ever since. I didn't sing in church but my interest in music goes back to when I was seven years old. I used to love the song "Shine On Harvest Moon" for some reason. It was just a great song. I started singing that song and I've been singing ever since."

Still trying to assemble a singing group, it was at Asbury Park High School that Alphonso met Richard "Blue" Witcher. "I met Blue sitting in gym in the bleachers one day, and we just started singing. I was looking for guys to sing with. When I met



The Affections / Equations / Special Occazzion
Left to right: Top, David Clayton, Richard "Blue" Witcher, Benjamin Dinkins.
Bottom: Ernest Daniels, Alphonso Covinton.
Photography by Madonna Carter Jackson 1981.

Blue it was heaven sent. I said, 'Wow, I've got a real singer here.'"

"Al was sitting with Ernie Daniels, singing in the bleachers," recalled Richard Witcher. "I said, 'Oh, man! Let me get over there and sing with him.'"

Richard "Blue" Witcher

Richard "Blue" Witcher was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey but moved to Asbury Park in November of 1964 because his father had a church on Springwood Avenue. "I sang in church,"



The Equations, Left to right: David Clayton, Ben Dinkins, Richard Witcher, Al Covington, Ernie Daniels. Photography by Madonna Carter Jackson 1981.

recalled Blue. “I sang everywhere. I’ve been singing most of my life.”

At the time that he met Al Covington, Blue was already singing with a group of friends. Blue’s group had gotten together in the high school’s second floor men’s room, a location that drew a lot of singers for the natural echo. Another member of Blue’s group, Phil Gunter was also persuaded to join the Affections.

The Affection now had four members and just needed one more voice. That addition to the group came quite by chance. Blue and Ernie were walking down the street one day singing when they ran into Ben Dinkins and started talking. Ben mentioned that he sang too, and they told him about Al and the Affections. Ben was soon added to the group.

Benjamin Dinkins

Benjamin Dinkins was born and raised in Asbury Park. He grew up on Elizabeth Avenue just off of Springwood Avenue, the main thoroughfare through Asbury Park’s West Side. When Ben was

nine-years-old he began singing in the choir of Good Hope Baptist Church along with his two sisters.

“Good Hope Baptist Church was on the corner of Springwood and Elizabeth Avenues and I lived on Elizabeth,” said Ben. “My mother was big in the church and she, my sisters and I all got in the choir. That’s what really kicked it off.”

At about the same time, Ben also sang in a gospel group called the Spiritual Wonders. The group mostly sang at Good Hope Baptist Church.

Ben’s musical interests were not solely in gospel. “I started listening to secular music,” recalled Ben. “I used to sneak out of my back bedroom window and go down along Springwood Avenue. That’s where all the [night]clubs were.”

Springwood Avenue in the 1950’s and 1960’s was awash with music venues including the Tu-dor, the Turf Club and many more.

“When I was ten years old,” said Ben. “I used to go down along Springwood Avenue and the older guys would say, ‘What are you doing here?’ I’d say, ‘I just want to hear the music, then I’m going back home.’ They used to let me stay. They’d

watch out for me and make sure I really did go home afterwards. I started hearing different singers coming to Springwood Avenue. Jackie Wilson stayed at the hotel on DeWitt Avenue by the West Side Community Center when he performed here. But I really didn't get into vocal group singing until I joined the Affections."

At one point, Phil Gunter decided he'd rather play guitar than sing. "Phil learned to play guitar in two months," recalled Ben. "I used to go by his house all the time. His mother would be saying, 'You need to get him out of here because he's driving me crazy with this guitar.' And his singing didn't quite mesh with us vocally. He could blend his voice because he knew harmony, but his vibrato was a problem. Phil realized he wanted to play guitar and not sing and he became great at it."

Phil Gunter continued with the group as a guitarist but the Affections were in need of a new singer. That's when they found David Clayton.

David Clayton

Born in 1951 in Asbury Park, David Clayton was a couple years younger than the members of the Affections. He attended Bangs Avenue Elementary School, the Bond Street Middle School and Asbury Park High School.

"I grew up listening to doo wop music," remembered David. "I used to listen to the Del Vikings when I was really young. I liked the song 'Come Go With Me.' I thought, 'Oh, wow! This was meant for me.' I wasn't singing at the time but I had music in my heart and in my soul. But I didn't discover the talent I had until I got with some guys in school."

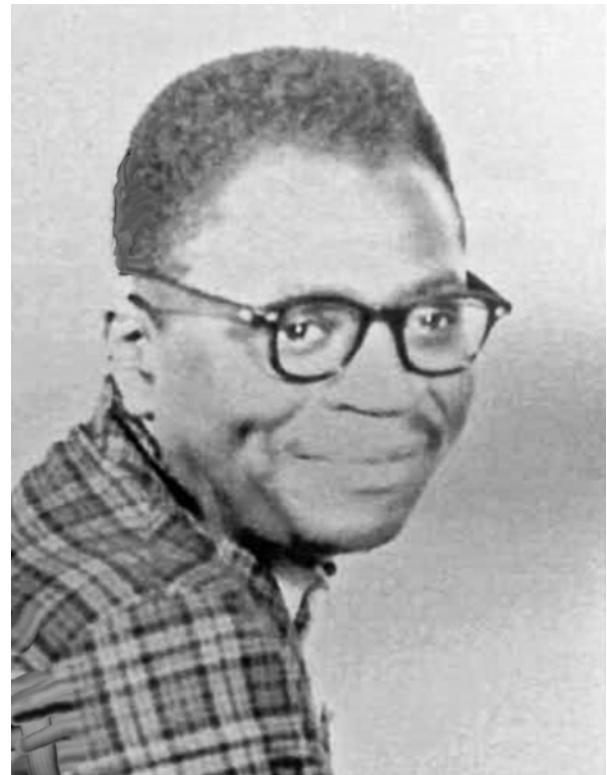
While still in grammar school, David Clayton started singing with a group called the Delaires. Besides David Clayton, the group included Ronnie Casey, T. Roy Willis, Bernard Williams and Johnny "Bubbles" Zel. Respected Asbury Park singer Bobby Young (Vibranares, V-Eights, Orioles) taught the Delaires how to sing harmony from a piano he used to have in his apartment.

Another person who gave guidance to the Delaires and later to the Affections, was songwriter, singer and radio disc jockey, Kenneth Wilson. An avid fan of group harmony, Wilson had been helping young Asbury Park vocal groups since the mid 1950's when he was writing songs for Lenny Welch and the Markeys. His song "My One Sincere" was recorded by Lenny upon reaching New York City.

Wilson was the male voice on the Endeavors' 1962 J&S label recording of "Suffering With My Heart," a song he also wrote. In the late 1960's Kenneth used to sit in on rehearsals by the Asbury Park soul group, the Broadways and wrote some songs for them. In 1970 he hosted "The Gospel Train" on radio station WJKL.

"Kenneth Wilson. We called him Ken Bot," recalled David. "He wrote several songs for us and we did them pretty well. He even recorded a few things with us."

Kenneth Wilson worked at the West Side Community Center, a main congregation place for Asbury Park's West Side youth. Some of the activities there were weekly dances and talent contests. Held every Saturday night, the contests would draw as many as 250 to 300 teenagers. Some of the groups that competed there besides the Delaires and the Affections were Daryl Stewart & the Squires, the Blenders, Harry Ray and the Valtairs from Long Branch and the Trinkets. The Trinkets consisted of Dee Holmes, Lynn Smith and Barbara Dinkins (Ben Dinkins' sister). Barbara Dinkins and Dee Holmes would go on to sing with the Bruce Springsteen Band in the summer of 1971.



Kenneth Wilson
From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives

The Group Comes Together

Needing a new singer for the Affections, Blue went to the West Side Community Center talent contest where he saw David Clayton singing with the Delaires. Impressed with David's singing, he brought Ben back to get a second opinion. Though David was younger and not as polished, they thought David could fit in well with the Affections.

"I always admired the Affections because they were very professional and just so good," recalled David. "They were a lot different than the group I was singing with at the time. We were just young and wet behind the ears. I never thought that I'd end up singing with them."

"We hijacked David out of his group," laughed Ben. "His group was very mad at us."

At that point, the Affections were all set. Al Covington sang lead, second tenor, baritone and occasionally first tenor. Ben Dinkins sang lead, second tenor and baritone. Blue Witcher sang second tenor. David sang lead, second tenor and baritone. Ernie Daniels sang bass.

Initially the Affections performed locally. Besides singing at the West Side Community Center, they were doing school dances and proms as they were not old enough to get into nightclubs. Still, word was getting around about how good they were. At the time their repertoire consisted of songs by the Temptations, Smokey Robinson, the O'Jays and any groups that were on Billboard Magazine's R&B Charts.

The Affections first real break came on July 24, 1968 when they opened up for a star-studded R&B line up at Asbury Park's Convention Hall. Called the Soul Festival, the concert was a benefit for the Asbury Park Neptune Youth Council. It starred the Magnificent Men, the Intruders, the Vibrations, the Dells, Brenda & the Tabulations and Benny Gordon & the Soul Brothers Band. The show also spotlighted local attractions including the Affections, the Trinkets, the Montereys and the Madisons.

The Affections came out looking sharp dressed in powder blue suits, white shirts, black pants and black patent leather shoes. Their harmony was tight and their choreography was spot on.

"We opened up with one of the Intruders songs, "Check Yourself" and we sang it so good," remembered David. The Intruders came on later and when they sang the same song, some people booed because they thought it was the Affections' song.

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Next the Affections sang the O'Jays' "Look Over Your Shoulder." The Affections also sang the Brenda & the Tabulations' song "When You're Gone." While not always a good idea to try to "cut" professional groups you're performing with, the Affections were young and trying to prove themselves.

Throughout the end of 1968 and into 1969, the Affections continued rehearsing and performing locally. An audition with *Philadelphia International Records* failed to get them a contract. They were playing the Springwood Avenue clubs like the Orchid Lounge, the Turf Club and Big Bill's. One of the Asbury Park groups the Affections looked up to was the Broadways. The Broadways were a few years older than the Affections and had released "Going Going Gone" on the *MGM* label a couple years earlier. "The Broadways were the number one group in Asbury Park," said Blue. "We always used to check them out. They were sharp!" In fact, the

Affections shared the stage with the Broadways on occasion.

Early in 1969, Broadways' lead singer Billy Brown left to sign with *All Platinum Records*. He would soon thereafter lead the Moments with hits like "Love On A One Way Street." Coincidentally, the Affections signed with *All Platinum* at about the same time.

All Platinum Records was formed in the late 1960's by Joe and Sylvia Robinson. Sylvia had previously been half of the 1956 "Love Is Strange" duo of Micky and Sylvia.

"Kenneth Wilson gave us a hot lead that the Robinsons were looking for artists," remembered Al. "We went there and auditioned for Joe and Sylvia and got signed." The contract called for the group to record 15 songs including two album releases.

Before the Affections could record, the record company made them change their name to the Equations, a name that Robinsons then acquired ownership of.

The Equations were soon recording at Soul Sound Studios in Englewood, New Jersey. The two songs recorded that day were "Oh You Sweet Darling" and "Have Faith". The session was produced by Larry Roberts. Roberts had previously recorded with Larry & the Standards (*Laurie* label) but was primarily known as a songwriter and producer. He had previously co-written "Look Over Your Shoulder" with George Kerr for the O'Jays and was credited with co-writing the Moments' "Not On The Outside," a song said to have been inspired by George Kerr. At the time, Larry was suffering from



The Equations at Asbury Park's Convention Hall. From left: David Clayton, Al Covington, Benjamin Dinkins, Ernest Daniels, Richard Witcher
Photography by Madonna Carter Jackson 1981.



From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives

ckle cell anemia which would take his life in the early 1970's.

The musicians backing the Equations on their recordings were Willie and the Mighty Magnificents. Willie Feaster led the band and played bass. The main standout musician that the Equations remembered was Tyrone Johnson who the group called "T."

"T played sax but he also cut a lot of instruments on the tracks," said Ben. "He could play anything. He even played violin."

"Oh You Sweet Darling" was a magnificent high tenor led soul ballad and was picked as the A-side. The Equations first heard their song played over the radio while driving home from a subsequent recording session.

"We were on the New Jersey Turnpike coming home from *All Platinum*," recalled Blue. "We were ecstatic," said David. "I couldn't believe it. Wow! Our record was on the radio. I was seeing dollar signs!"

"Oh You Sweet Darling" got airplay locally on WNJR, WWRL and WLIB. Released in April of 1969, it came out just as the Moments' first record with Billy Brown and Al Goodman, "Sunday," was entering the national R&B Charts. *All Platinum's* promotion may have been going to the Moments along with Micky & Sylvia (with Al Goodman playing the roll of Mickey Baker who was in Europe).

The Equations actually had several recording sessions at *All Platinum*. But it was not until July of

1970 that the label released their second single. That recording session was produced by Nate Edmonds, possibly because of Larry Roberts' health situation. Nate was a keyboardist and staff producer with *All Platinum* who was also producing songs with the Moments. The funk influenced "You Were No Good (From The Git-Go)" was issued with "Have Faith" released on the flip. "Git Go" got a nice review from Cashbox magazine which compared it to the Temptations' "Cloud Nine." Why *All Platinum* chose to rerelease "Have Faith" is a mystery as the group had several other songs in the can. The Equations specifically remember a song they recorded called "Today Is Another Day". Initially, Nate Edmonds thought of just using the music track to "Git Go" as the flip side and calling it "The Equations Swahili." But that didn't happen either.

Meanwhile, the Equations continued working. They played the Boston Road Ballroom in the Bronx and a club in Newark with the Emotions (backed by Sammy Gordon & the Hip Huggers).

By the end of 1970, *All Platinum* appeared to be dragging their heels with issuing other Equations releases and the group got discouraged.

In addition, the group saw a show advertisement with another group pretending to be the Equations. They wondered if their record company was behind it.

As the Equations broke away from *All Platinum*, they realized that the record company owned the rights to their name. In order to keep performing, the group changed their name to Special Occazzion. [A similar situation would cause the Moments to later change their name to Ray Goodman & Brown when they left the label.]

Special Occazzion was very popular and the group had no difficulty finding gigs. They usually performed with a talented band that at times included Phil Gunter (guitar), J. B. Williams, Kevin Kirkwood (guitar), and Ray Chew on drums. Ray would later play with Ashford & Simpson. As Special Occazzion, the group played Connecticut, New York, North Jersey and Washington DC. Special Occazzion would keep performing for the next 15 years.

By the mid 1970's, Special Occazzion had evolved into a complete musical review. Al Covington left the group and was replaced by Jake Jones. Jacob Jones grew up in a family of gospel singers. As a youngster he sang in the Union Gospel Singers for a number of years, dropping singing in the mid-



From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives

1960's to concentrate on basketball. After excelling at basketball at Neptune High School and Assumption College, Jake went on to play professional basketball with the Philadelphia 76ers and Cincinnati Royals in the 1971-1972 season. Jake returned to the Shore area to teach and coach basketball. But he missed singing and after a few years also began singing with Special Occazzion.

A 1976 newspaper article lists the group members as Ernie Daniels, David Clayton, Jake Jones, Ben Dinkins and Richard Witcher. It also mentions Jake's brother, Bennie Jones, as a vocalist. Musicians at that time included Gary Carter (rhythm guitar), Sam Carpenter (lead guitar), Robert Lee (bass guitar) and Al "Peanuts" Tomes (drums).

On May 28, 1982, Special Occazzion opened for Ray Goodman & Brown (formerly the Moments) and Blue Magic at Asbury Park's Convention Hall. During that time, Special Occazzion played Asbury Park's Cosmic Lounge and Turf Club along with South Belmar's Wellington Lounge and numerous high school and college proms.

In the late 1980's, Special Occazzion split into two groups, Pizazz and Nu Eara, each going their separate ways.

Pizazz

Blue Witcher, Ernie Daniels and David Clayton were joined by Blue's brother, Kevin Witcher. They also added a female singer, Janet Clarke Gra-



Pizazz. Front: Ernest Daniels.
Top. Left to right: Kevin Witcher,
Dave Clayton, Richard Witcher.



ham, and took the name Pizazz. Winfred “Blue” Lovett, bass of the Manhattans, began working with the group in the studio.

“Blue Lovett and I had been friends for a while,” said Richard. “I met him at a concert at Essex County Collage. We got to talking and we just became friends.”

Pizazz opened for the Manhattans at an outdoor festival in Baltimore. Blue Lovett and Richard Witcher produced recordings of Pizazz for Lovett’s *Blue* label. The funk song “How Ya Gonna Get Down (If You Don’t Get Up)” was issued as a 12” single. The song was written by Ernie Daniels.

Pizazz also recorded a soul ballad penned by Ray Dahrouge called “Lady I’ve Been Waiting For.” While Pizazz’s version of the song never came out, the song does appear on an album by the Manhattans. In listening to it, the group believes the background vocal track on the song is actually Pizazz.

“We did quite a few gigs as Pizazz,” Richards recalled. “We stayed quite busy.”

Nu Eara

Meanwhile, Al Covington, Ben Dinkins and Jake Jones continued on as a trio called Nu Eara for the next twenty years. In the 1990’s, Nu Eara started performing at the West End Classic Car Cruise Nights in Long Branch, New Jersey. This became a regular gig and through 2006, Nu Eara shared the stage there with Johnny Maestro & Brooklyn Bridge, Bowser of Sha Na, Ben E. King, the Duprees, Charlie Thomas’ Drifters, Little Anthony & the Imperials, Dennis Edwards & the Temptations Review, Tommy James & the Shondells, Gary Puckett, the Tokens and many others.

Eventually Jake Jones retired from singing and was replaced by Geirge Durden and then Thomas Penn. On November 12, 2011, Nu Eara joined an all-star cast of Asbury Park West Side singers for the huge Soul Of Asbury Park concert at the Paramount Theatre. They sang three songs on a concert that also starred Lenny Welch, Nicky Addeo, the Broadways, Ray Goodman & Brown, Bobby Thomas and others. For a short while, Richard Witcher also joined Nu Eara but the group eventually settled back into a trio.

Nu Eara is still singing today, appearing recently at an outdoor concert at Asbury Park’s Springwood Park and McLoone’s Restaurant on the boardwalk. David Clayton is also doing some songwriting in the gospel field. In 2015, he wrote and



Nu Eara today: Front to back: Al Covington, Tom Penn, Ben Dinkins

recorded the song “Oh Father” which is available on most streaming services.

While the Equations story is unique, it is but one of many we have explored as we document the singers and musicians from the ten-block long area of Asbury Park, New Jersey called the West Side. “Springwood Avenue Harmony: The Unique Musical Legacy of Asbury Park’s West Side Volume 1, 1871–1945” is available now through Amazon.com. It covers Asbury Park’s contributions to Spirituals, Ragtime, Stride Piano, Jazz, Black Vaudeville, Blues, Big Bands, Gospel and Pop music. Volume 2, due out later this year, will cover Asbury Park’s Rhythm & Blues, Doo Wop, Jazz, Gospel and Soul Music from the post-WW2 years through the 1970’s. The Equations story is excerpted from Volume 2. For more information email CUH@att.net or visit ClassicUrbanHarmony.net.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on the authors’ extensive interview with the Equations’ David Clayton, Alphonso Covington, Ben Dinkins and Richard Witcher plus conversations with the Broadways’ Ron Coleman, George Kerr and Madonna Carter Jackkson. We are grateful to Madonna Carter Jackson for the use of her photos of Special Occazzion. We also thank the Asbury Park African American Music Project for additional information drawn from their interviews.

Discography

As by The Equations:

- All Platinum 2311 - “Oh You Sweet Darling”
 - “Have Faith”
 All Platinum 2317 - “You Were No Good (from the Git-Go)”
 - “Have Faith”

As by Pazazz:

- Blue 10007 - “How Ya Gonna Get Down (If You Don’t Get Up)”

