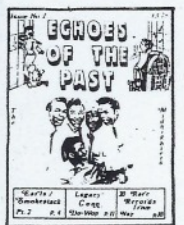
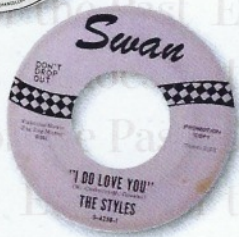
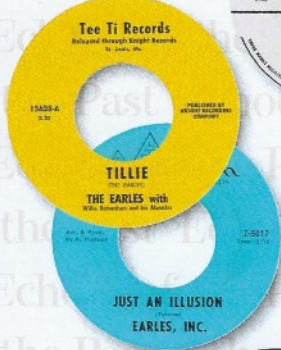
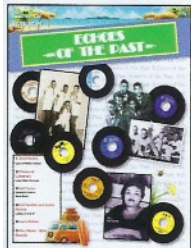
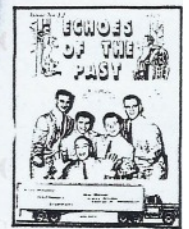
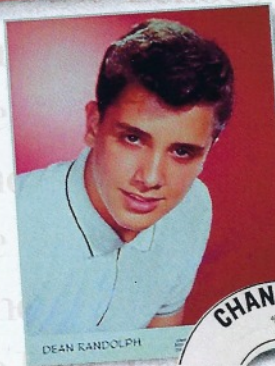
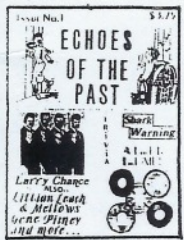


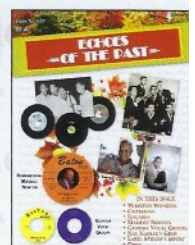
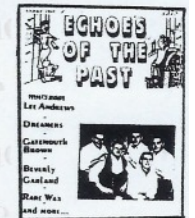
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ECHOES OF THE PAST



MAUREEN GRAY



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The Earles Inc: St. Louis Soul Harmony

by Charlie Horner

with contributions from Pamela Horner

(based in part on Bob Abrahamian's interview with Bobby Buchanan)

It's been more than 40 years since I used to make frequent business trips to St. Louis, MO. Working as a chemist in Northern New Jersey, I enjoyed my assignments in St. Louis, which became like a second home to me. Most of all, as a young, but dedicated, vintage R&B radio host and record collector, it gave me a chance to scour the Midwest city for obscure vocal group records. I've long forgotten the names of the used record stores and thrift shops I frequented. I do remember finding the address of an obscure black gospel label and knocking on the door of a private residence there. The label owners were very nice and gave me a gospel quartet record to play on the air. But that's another story.

Anyway, on my regular record hunting rounds, I started finding records on late 60s - early 70s St. Louis soul labels like Ballad, SaintMo and Zudan. One of the groups, whose records impressed me the most, was the Earles Inc. I admit I didn't know anything about the Earles at that time. The group's personnel and history stayed unknown to me until 2011, when my friend, the late soul music historian Bob Abrahamian, located and interviewed Bobby Buchanan on his Chicago radio program. That interview served as a starting point for this article.

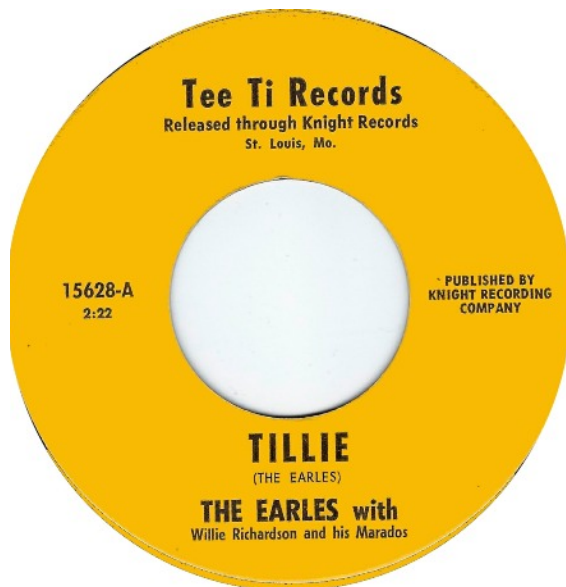
Bobby Buchanan was born in Mississippi but moved with his family to St. Louis when he was four. Bobby started singing in Soldan High School's Glee Club at the age of 14. Growing up in the doo wop era, Bobby's friends were, by then, standing on the corner singing songs by the Spaniels, Drifters and Dells. "That's what everybody did during that time," recalled Bobby. "I mean, after school, we would all just hang out [and sing] on the corner."



Shortly after joining the glee club, a friend of Bobby's wanted to form a group, so they put a little four-part harmony quartet. That group was called the Wanderers and Bobby sang second tenor.

After high school, Bobby had a friend in Chuck Tillman's Combo and when they needed a male vocalist, Bobby was invited to join them. Cornelius "Chuck" Tillman was a well-known St. Louis-based jazz saxophone player. Besides playing in and around St. Louis, the Chuck Tillman Combo played the college circuit and toured throughout the Midwest. In the early 1960s, the combo played a mix of jazz and R&B. Bobby Buchanan stayed with them for about three years. Around 1964, Chuck Tillman left the entertainment scene to tend to family issues and the combo dissolved.

Bobby Buchanan didn't look for a new group right away. He took a job working for Chrysler but kept his voice in shape by rehearsing at the house of a friend who played keyboards. About that time, Bobby met Joseph Williams. Joe heard Bobby singing and asked him if he wanted to form a vocal group. Bobby said yes and the two began auditioning other singers. That was the beginning of the Earles. They soon added Ambrose Harris and



Alvin Young. Bobby Chambers was singing with another local group and was also persuaded to join the Earles. At first the Earles just stuck to rehearsing but soon they were competing in local talent shows. These would be events produced by local radio dee jays at community centers and even at the Kiel Auditoriums. The Earles competed against groups who would soon make up the core of St. Louis' soul record industry - the Montclairs, Caesars, Voice Masters and others.

Meanwhile, the Earles caught the ear of a Mr. McClure [most likely St. Louis R&B singer, Bobby McClure] who wanted to record them on a new record label he was starting - Tee-Ti Records. The friend with the keyboard whose home Bobby rehearsed at, was a minister. He knew another minister who had a recording studio in a church.

When Mr. McClure took the group to the church recording studio in November 1965, they didn't have any original songs. Once in the studio, the Earles composed the songs "Tillie" and "I Love You Too." [The song copyrights list Joe Williams and Alvin Young but also credit Russell E. Wright and Gerald Reese or Reeves, possibly with the band, Willie Richardson & the Marados.]

The doo wop infused "Tillie" garnered some local radio play but the label lacked distribution elsewhere. Alvin Young sang lead on "Tillie," Bobby Buchanan second tenor, Joe Williams bass, Ambrose Harris first tenor, and Bobby Chambers baritone.

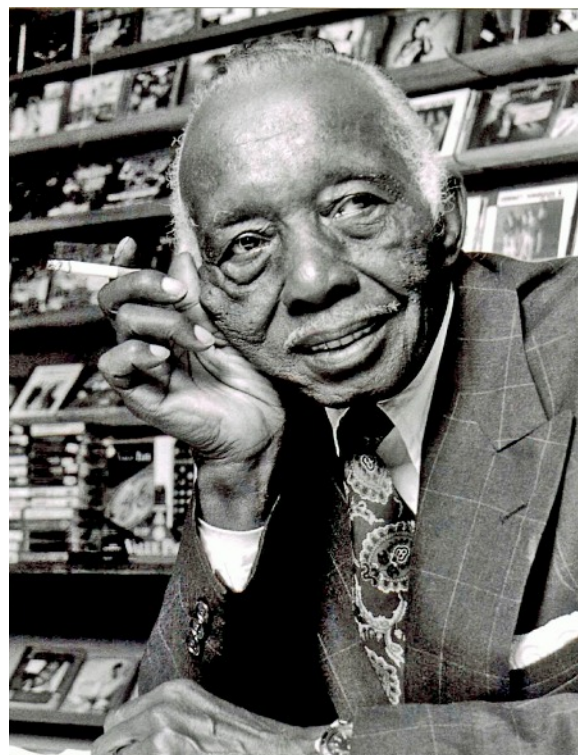
With a record to their credit, the Earles began playing many of the local clubs. As their reputation grew, the Earles were discovered by St. Louis blues king, Albert King, who took them on the road. As part of the Albert King Review, the Earles toured as far away as Idaho.

Back in St. Louis, the Earles began looking for a band. Bobby Buchanan lived upstairs from a musician who played guitar with a gospel group. The guitarist's brother played drums and a friend played bass. They became the Earles band.

By then the Earles were performing four nights a week and all the members quit their day jobs to dedicate time to entertaining. Eventually their contract with Tee-Ti Records expired and they began looking for a new record label. Ambrose Harris knew local record distributor, record store and label owner, Ted Hudson. The group ended up on Ted's Zudan label.

Ted Hudson

Theophilis "Ted" Hudson grew up in the Ville section of St. Louis. After serving in the Navy in World War II, Ted returned to St, Louis and started a trucking company. From there he diversified into



Ted Hudson

Photo courtesy of *Lift Every Voice and Sing: St. Louis African Americans in the Twentieth Century*

the furniture and appliance business. Recognizing the popularity of the music industry and its potential for growth, Ted Hudson ventured into the record business, starting his own Hudson label to record the Dusters / Belvederes ("Don't Leave Me Here To Cry"). He opened his first retail record store, "Hudson's Embassy Records" around 1960 at 5014 Easton Avenue (now Dr. Martin Luther King Avenue). In 1965, Hudson opened one of the first African-American owned record distribution companies serving approximately 100 independent record labels and artists with distributions along the Eastern seaboard, Midwest and Southeast. This was expanded in 1968 to Ted's One Stop. a wholesale operation servicing local and regional retail record stores. After that, Ted opened an advertising / promotional agency, a recording studio for independent record labels and artists and an electronics wholesale business. He was a founding member of the National Association of Television and Radio Announcers (NATRA) and the Black Music Association (BMA).

Zudan Records

Zudan Records was started in November 1967 by Ted Hudson and his family. The company's offices were in the Hudson Embassy Record Store building, 5014 Easton Avenue. Ted's son, Randy Hudson, did much of the recording arranging and production for Zudan Records. Prior to recording the Earles, Zudan had release a couple of nice soul and funk records by the Delwands and Sid Sidney Wallace & The Belairs. By then, the Earles had changes their name to the Earles Inc. Joe Williams had originally come up with the group's name and suggested it be expanded to include the Earles' band. The Earles Inc's first record for Zudan was a great medium-tempo soul harmony side called "Just an Illusion." The song was written by the Earles' guitar player, Tyrone. The flip side was an instrumental called "Afro-Work." That side was written by Randy Hudson who arranged and produced both sides.

The recording session was done at Technisonic Studios. Technisonic was St. Louis' largest and oldest recording studios, having first opened in 1929. It was a favorite recording studio of Ike & Tina Turner and Chuck Berry.



Though not credited on the label, a young Luther Ingram helped produce "Just an Illusion." "We worked with Luther quite a bit," recalled Bobby Buchanan. "When we went to the studio, [Luther] went with us. He was supposed to help us produce it, which he did." Luther Ingram, formerly of the local R&B vocal group, the Gardenias (Federal label), was still a couple years away from making it big with the hit, "(If Loving You Is Wrong) I Don't Want to Be Right."

"Just an Illusion" received a lot of airplay on St. Louis radio. By then, the Earles were doing a lot of club work. "There was a hot nightclub scene in St. Louis at the time," Bobby Buchanan remembered. "Artists like Fontella Bass, Chuck Berry, the Five Du-tones of "Shake a Tail Feather" - all of those entertainers were playing St. Louis during that time." The Earles Inc. played venues like the Club Highlanders (Easton & Taylor Avenues), Club 54 (2543 North Grand Boulevard) and the Kiel Auditorium to name a few. "We were pretty familiar with all of the radio disc jockeys and they used to get us a lot of work," said Bobby. "We were [managed by] the distributor Ted Hudson and he was president of the local disc jockey club. So most all of the disc jocks used to have us working for them. There were quite a few clubs around. We played mostly clubs in the city and East St. Louis." The Earles Inc also played benefits like the Metropolitan Tenant Organization's benefit concert to combat lead poisoning among children in July 1970. That



concert also included performances by the Voice Masters, Symphonic Four, and Richard Davis.

The Earles' second record for Zudan turned out to be their biggest. "Does Your Mother Know" and its B-side, "Close to You," were recorded by radio disc jockey Robert BQ Burris at his studio. Robert BQ was the morning disc jockey and program director at KATZ, St. Louis' premier Black radio station. He hired and supervised some of the station's most popular personalities, gaining a national reputation for KATZ as a power in Black radio. Presumably, Robert BQ's recording studio was located at station KATZ and he is listed on the Zudan record as co-producer.

"Does Your Mother Know" was played extensively on St. Louis radio along with stations in Kansas City, Memphis, Arkansas, Des Moines and quite a few other places. Indeed, the trade magazine *Record World* showed the record on KATZ' playlist in July, 1970. At the time, some larger nationally known labels - Scepter and Jewel - were interested picking up the record by the Earles' management could not come to an agreement with them. Discouraged, the Earles Inc. waited for their contract with Ted Hudson to expire.

At about that time, the Earles got a call from James "Bull" Parks. Bull was the lead of the East St. Louis group, Bull & the Matadors who had just had the Top-10 R&B chart record "The Funky Judge." Bull

had just written an answer song to the Earles' "Does Your Mother Know," called "What Would Your Daddy Say" and wanted the Earles to hear it. Bull brought the group the song and they took it to Robert BQ's studio where the disc jockey was equally impressed. There they cut a demo of the record.

The Earles met with civic leader and business entrepreneur Kim Tucci who was teaching college at St. Louis University. Tucci would later co-found the chain of Pasta House Co. restaurants. Tucci liked the song and assembled some business partners who agreed to fund the recording.

Tucci and partners didn't have a record label. As fate would have it, the owner of Tee-Ti Records, where the Earles first recorded, no longer had use for the label and gave the Earles Inc. the rights to the name. With financial backing, the Earles Inc. restarted the Tee-Ti Record label as their own. At that point, or more likely earlier, the Earles Inc. crossed paths with another of St. Louis' R&B music icons, Oliver Sain.

Oliver Sain

Oliver Sain, the band leader, musician, and record producer that Solomon Burke once called "the Quincy Jones of St. Louis," grew up in a musical family in Mississippi. He played trumpet and drums in his teens and took up the saxophone after returning from the Korean War. After a stint in Chicago where he played with the Chess blues legends, Oliver Sain to St. Louis: came to East St. Louis in 1959 to play a weekend with Little Milton and made St. Louis his new home. Sain became



Oliver Sain in Archway Studios.



Milton's musical director, wrote and produced numerous records on the Bobbin label and discovered Fontella Bass and Bobby McClure. He formed his own band, The Oliver Sain Soul Revue and opened his Archway Recording Studios in 1965. Archway Studios, located at 4521 Natural Bridge Avenue in the Penrose Park neighborhood of St. Louis, soon became the go-to recording studio in the city. Critical to the operation was renowned bass player Jimmy Hinds, who was Sain's co-producer. In the studio, Jimmy Hinds was the musical director. Both he and Sain acted as engineers and musicians with members of the Oliver Sain Band filling in as needed.

The Earles Inc. recorded "What Would Your Daddy Say" and "Let's Try Again" at Archway Studios. Jimmy Hinds arranged both sides and wrote "Let's Try Again" for the group. Alvin Young sang lead on "What Would Your Daddy Say" along with harmony from Bobby Buchanan, Bobby Chambers, Joe Williams and Ambrose Harris. Also singing with the group is Michael Robinson and Lenard Hinds, brother of Jimmy Hinds. The Hinds brothers had sung together earlier in a family doo wop group called the Concepts.

"What Would Your Daddy Say" got air play in St. Louis, Kansas City, Des Moines, and all the surrounding area. The Earles Inc. were flying high. In addition to playing clubs three or four nights a week they were also making regular appearances on local TV dance programs. "We would tape an appearance and they would air it every Saturday.

There were a couple TV shows that we would tape and do every week. And then we also did telethons for the PBS station."

On July 8, 1972, Earles Inc. lead singer Alvin Young was killed in an automobile accident. Alvin lost control of his car and struck a concrete divider at an entrance to Interstate 70. The car rolled three times and Alvin was taken to Homer G. Phillips Hospital with a head injury. He died the next day. He was only 28. Not long after that, Ambrose Harris also died.

The loss of two members took a lot out of the Earles. Michael Robinson left and the three remaining members tried some other singers but nothing really worked out. After a while, Bobby Buchanan, Joe Williams and Bobby Chambers went to get some advice from Oliver Sain. Sain told them they could just come and use the studio and use his band. "He didn't really charge us that much for the use of the studio," Bobby Buchanan recalled. "Oliver Sain was a pretty nice guy. He'd let us come in when he wasn't doing anything and, you know, do some recording. His guys would be sitting around and he was always willing to help us because everybody was trying to make it back then." So, one day, the group went to Sain's studio as a trio and recorded "Everybody's Got Somebody" (a Joe Williams composition) and "Someday Baby." Joe Williams sang lead. The record was released on their Tee-Ti label and was the last to carry the name Earles Inc. The Earles Inc. continued to work as a vocal trio, though they didn't have as many gigs as before.



Bobby Buchanan was always a fan of Curtis Mayfield and was able to arrange the group's harmony for three parts like the Impressions.

In the late-1970s, songwriter, Russ Lewis, known for composing the Mel & Tim and later Gene Chandler hit "Groovy Situation," came to the group with a song called "I Gotta Make You Believe in Me." Meanwhile, the group knew Kent Washburn who had just finished producing the hit song "You Can't Turn Me Off" and accompanying album for the Motown group High Energy. Kent was also from St. Louis and he'd always wanted to produce the Earles. Knowing the Earles were again having management issues, Washburn suggested they just change their name and record.

Back in the studio, the group recorded "I Gotta Make You Believe in Me." By then they'd added a fourth singer, Robert Pendleton. Kent Washburn suggested the name B.J.B for the group - named after Bobby [Buchanan], Joe [Williams] and Bobby [Chambers]. Ok, there were actually three "Bobs" on the record but B.J.B sounded better.

The record got a fair amount of airplay locally and had interest from other larger labels like Jewel and Spring, but nothing ever happened.

B.J.B continued singing for a while but Robert Pendleton had to leave the group for medical problems so Bobby Buchanan, Joe Williams and

Bobby Chambers continued singing as a trio until Joe Williams died in 2002.

Prior to Joe William's passing, the group made some new recordings at Oliver Sain's studio. These were lost when Oliver Sain died in 2003.

Notes

1. The core of this information was taken from Bob Abrahamain's 2011 interview with Bobby Buchanan. The interview can be heard in its entirety at <http://sittinginthepark.com/interviews/earles-6-5-2011.mp3>
2. Special thanks to Carlton Thomas for his help
3. Regretfully, no photos of the Earles Inc. could be located. Surely publicity photos were taken. We'll keep searching.

Earles Discography

As the Earles with Willie Richardson and his Marados

Tee Ti 15628	Tillie I Love You Too	1965
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As Earles Inc.

Zudan 5017	Just An Illusion Afro-Works [instr.]	1970
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Zudan 5018	Does Your Mother Know Close To You	1970
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Tee-Ti 802	What Would Your Daddy Say Let's Try Again	ca. 1972
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Tee-Ti 11264/5	Someday Baby Everybody's Got Somebody	ca. 1973
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As B.J.B.

Tee-Ti 803	I Gotta Make You Believe In Me Know What To Do	ca. 1978
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- Thanks, Charlie & Pamela Horner