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ECHOES OF THE PAST



THE TRANELLES



THE DRIVERS



REGALS WITH SONNY WRIGHT



THE TRENIERES

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The Drivers, the LIN Label And a Tale of Broken Dreams

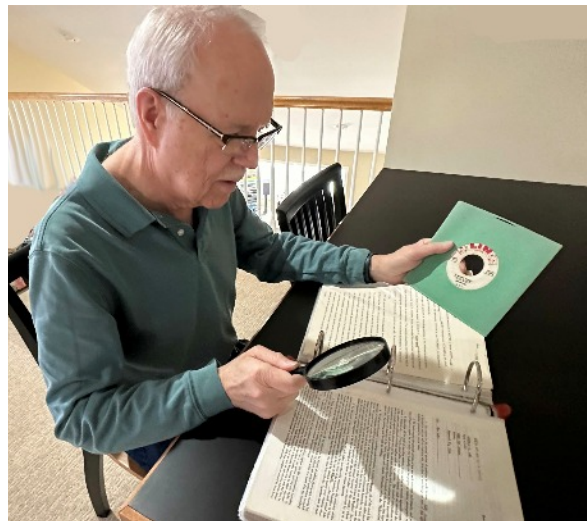
by Charlie Horner

with contributions from Pamela Horner and Colton Thomas

My fascination with the LIN label began several years ago when I purchased a copy of “A Man’s Glory” by the Drivers at a Detroit record convention. I already owned copies of the Drivers’ three DeLuxe singles and their rendition of “Blue Moon” on RCA Victor. The red and white LIN release purported to be from Rochester, New York, but I suspected it had some connection to the Drivers’ home town of Cincinnati.

Several months ago my friend and music archivist, Colton Thomas, contacted me about an acquisition he’d made a while back. Colton had somehow rescued the long lost files of the LIN label. Since Colton’s area of expertise was sixties and seventies soul music, he thought Pam’s and my Classic Urban Harmony Archives might be interested in the files. We were, and Colton arranged for them to be shipped here. In fact, Colton contributed the title of this article, “A Tale of Broken Dreams.”

The story of the LIN label began in Rochester, New York, with Ken Charles (born Ken Charles Pedalino). Ken Charles’ name first appeared in the newspapers in 1953, as a member of the new Opera Playhouse Association, formed to establish a community theater for opera and other musical attractions. Charles, described as a radio and TV producer, then presented a big dance at Rochester’s Knights of Columbus Ballroom to benefit the Muscular Dystrophy Fund Drive. By 1955, Charles



was operating his own Ken Charles Studios at 114 St. Paul Street. There, he encouraged budding Rochester vocalists, musicians, dancers, actors and announcers to come in for sound film footage of themselves to present to casting directors, producers and sponsors. Ken Charles was also producing an Italian American comedy show featuring the Marco Brothers over WVET Radio. At the same time, he was filming “The Ken Charles Review,” a film variety show series for distribution to TV stations.

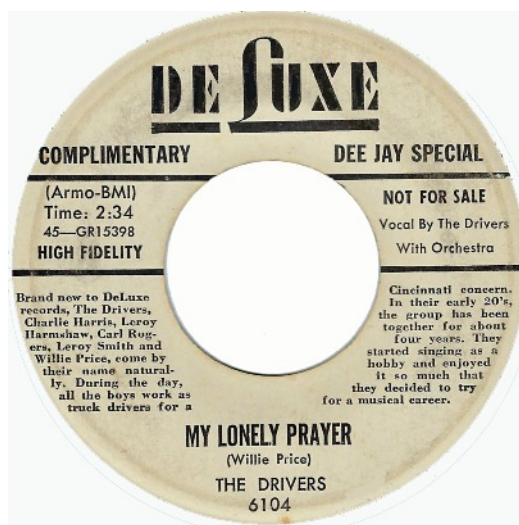
In January, 1957, Ken Charles started his own record label, Ken Records. *Billboard* magazine carried the announcement that the label had signed four acts: the Chuck Alaimo Quartet, Bernie George, the Four Echoes and the Len Hawley Orchestra. At about the same time, Ken Charles Productions signed an agreement with the American Federation of Musicians to only use union musicians. In July, Ken Records announced the signing of more acts, including Tommy Panto & his Marveleers, Don Hess, Frank DeRosa & his De-Mens, Two Kats & a Kitten, and the Playboys.

We know of only four singles released on the Ken label: one each by, Don Hess, Frank DeRosa & his De-Mens, Marie Madison & the Flips, and the Chuck Alaimo Quartet. Only one, a frantic honking





Original label for “Leap Frog” before MGM



Promo copy of the Drivers second record

sax instrumental by the Chuck Alaimo Quartet called “Leap Frog,” was successful. The Chuck Alaimo Quartet had been playing local clubs around Rochester like Dick’s 620 Club and Northside Teenage Ballroom. “Leap Frog” was so successful that Ken Charles was able to sign the group to MGM Records, who reissued the record on their own label. On MGM, “Leap Frog” reached #91 on the national charts, but it was very popular in a number of local markets.

From there the story moved to Cincinnati where Ken Charles had previously been a student at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music and later a producer for WCPO-TV, before moving back to Rochester.

A March 1958 Cincinnati newspaper reported that K&S Films Inc., an industrial and educational films producer, was opening a new division, K&S Recording Studio, for the production of popular and other musical records. They would use the LIN label of LIN Recording Co. Of New York. Ken Charles was appointed director (and later general manager). President of LIN Records was Frank Conklin, the 28-year-old former drummer for the aforementioned Rochester group, Two Cats & a Kitten. In April, 1958, the newly formed LIN label signed the Cincinnati R&B vocal group, the Drivers.

The Drivers

The Drivers centered around lead singer, Leroy Smith. Leroy was born on July 17, 1927, in Cincinnati. He grew up in the West End and Walnut

Hills neighborhoods and graduated from Woodward High School. Leroy Smith entered the army toward the end of World War II and served in Okinawa. After the Service, he returned to Cincinnati and took a job as a yard foreman and truck driver at the U.S. Waste Material Company, 6095 River Road, Cincinnati. There, in the early 1950’s he began harmonizing for fun with some of the other truck drivers. Then, they started singing in local night spots.

The Drivers consisted of Leroy Smith (lead), Charlie Harris (bass), Leroy Harmshaw, Willie C. Price, and Carl Rogers (first tenor). Carl L. Rogers (born ca. 1930) was also a resident of Cincinnati’s West End where he sang in the choir of Mount Olice Baptist Church.

A musician who worked at one of Cincinnati’s larger record store, heard the group singing at one of the clubs and told the store owner about the group. The store owner auditioned the group himself and was so impressed, he took the Drivers to Sydney Nathan, president of King Records. Nathan signed the group on the spot. On March 8, 1956, the Drivers recorded “Smooth Slow and Easy” and “Women,” two original songs written by Charlie Harris and Leroy Smith. The sides were released in April as a single on the King subsidiary label. DeLuxe (#6094). At the time, the Drivers were playing the Swing Bar (1338 Vine Street) with an instrumental group, the AristoCats. Four more sides were cut by the group on October 24, 1956. “My Lonely Prayer” and “Midnight Hours” were paired as DeLuxe #6104



The Drivers (RCA). From left: Carl Rogers, James Pate, Edison Thompson (top), Leroy Smith, Charles Harris, Paul McCoy.

and “Dangerous Lips” was paired with “Oh Miss Nellie” as DeLuxe #6117.

In August, 1957, trade magazines reported that “RCA Victor’s Brad McCuen is in Nashville this week to direct a recording session with the Drivers, a new group from Cincinnati, who were just signed to the label.”

Cincinnati newspapers listed the group members as Leroy Smith (lead voice), Charles Harris (bass), Paul McCoy (second tenor), Carl Rogers (first tenor), James Pate (baritone) and Edison Thompson (guitarist). Leroy Harmshaw had apparently left the Drivers. Willie C. Price stayed on with the Drivers as manager.

Guitarist, Edison “Big Ed” Thompson’s stay with the Drivers would be a short one. Born in Bethlehem, Georgia, he moved with his family to the Lincoln Heights section of Cincinnati in 1948, at the age of 13. As a teenager, he played guitar in churches with a gospel group called the Gospellers. His first paying job was playing blues for \$ 11 a night at Hamilton’s Big Brother Bar in Lincoln Heights. After leaving the Drivers, Thompson would join renowned Cincinnati blues artist H-Bomb Ferguson. In the 1960s, Thompson would tour the country backing up B.B. King and the Shirelles. In his career, Thompson played with Jimmy Reed and Etta James.

On July 24, 1957, the Drivers recorded four songs for RCA Victor: “Blue Moon,” “Walk Away From Me,” “I Get Weak” and “Get Away.” The session was arranged by Bob Miketta, who had written

songs for Gene Krupa, Freddy Martin, Louis Prima, Ted Weems, Imogene Coca and Jerry Lewis. He was staff arranger for radio station WLW in Cincinnati for eleven years.

RCA Victor wanted the Drivers to record Bob Miketta’s calypso arrangement of “Blue Moon.” While rehearsing for the recording session, the group realized they needed another song. “Everyone was tired,” recalled Willie Price. “And someone mentioned feeling weak.” Willie C. Price and Bob Miketta’s wife, Jo Gulino Miketta, turned the idea into the song, “I Get Weak.”

“I Get Weak” turned out to be a regional hit for the Drivers. It stayed in the Top-10 of Cincinnati pop radio for at least six weeks, peaking at #1 in October, 1957. It was finally knocked out of the top spot by Elvis Presley’s “Jailhouse Rock.”

Meanwhile, the Drivers were in great demand. On Sunday afternoon, October 16, the Drivers appeared on a special “Sunday Swing Dance” for teenagers at Cincinnati’s Castle Farm. Castle Farm was a huge building that could seat 4,000 people, with dance space for 6,000. Besides the Drivers, special guests that day included Don Cornell, Something Smith & the Redheads, Carl Dobkins Jr, Buddy Roger and the 4 Guests. Admission was only 90 cents and over 600 teenagers attended.

As 1958 began, it was reported that the Drivers worked so many club dates over the holidays that two members had collapsed on stage and had to be taken to the hospital. One of the two was Chester



The Drivers on LIN

Woods, a new member of the Drivers and the only group member that didn't work as a truck driver. Still, the Drivers pressed on, appearing with H-Bomb Ferguson & his Mad-Lads at the Dude Ranch Nite Club in Hamilton in February.

In spite of newspapers hinting a second Drivers RCA-Victor release was imminent, none ever materialized. The reason may be explained by a *Billboard* magazine announcement in mid-April, 1958, that LIN Records had just signed the Drivers, Janet Shaw, the Key Notes, Kitty Debnar and the Harmony Kings. Six weeks later, the same trade magazine stated that LIN Records had signed Robert Miketta as its musical director. The two announcements were close enough that Bob Miketta may have brought the Drivers to LIN with him. Also, reported was the signing by LIN Records of Pauline Deters, the Piano Lounge Trio, Ray Cormier's HarManiacs and the Enchanters. Lee Allman was also signed as an arranger.

The first four releases by LIN Records were "Tuff-E-Nuff Baby" b/w "Pyramid" (LIN # 1001) by the Key Notes, "A Man's Glory" b/w "Teeter Totter" (LIN # 1002) by the Drivers, "At The Sock Hop" b/w "Summer Rain" by Janet Shay (LIN #1003), and "Lucky Day" b/w "I Knew" (LIN #1004) by Clay Munday.

The Key Notes were a talented rock-a-billy group, led by Woodward High School junior, Mike Altherr. When performing, the Key Notes specialized in songs by Jerry Lee Lewis.

Clay Munday (a stage name for Bill Black) had previously been a vocalist with Gene Krupa and had just returned to Cincinnati after six weeks of appearances in Beverly Hills, California.

When she recorded for LIN Records, Janet Shay was a 13-year-old in her freshman class at Norwood High School. Her recording "At The Sock Hop" was cowritten by Drivers' manager Willie Price and there is no doubt in my mind that the Drivers are backing Janet on both sides of her LIN record. While this was Janet Shaw's earliest recording, she would go on to record for Pelpal and Alcar labels.

As far as R&B ballads go, "A Man's Glory" is a masterpiece. It was written by Willie Price and Bob Miketta, who arranged both sides. Still, it was the up-tempo side, "Teeter Totter" that was pushed by LIN Records.

Meanwhile, LIN Records went on a citywide search for undiscovered talent. The company opened their doors for auditions every Tuesday night. Ken Charles made it known that he'd "listen to anyone" and was aiming to make LIN a "one-stop service for show business" offering a recording contract, management and coaching." Charles, who once opened a studio to give free music lessons to underprivileged children, told a local newspaper he was not in it for the buck "although the buck will come." He also stated that he was not solely interested in Rock & Roll. "We want variety," said Charles, "Including spirituals, progressive jazz, vocalists, classical music and even big bands."

Ken Charles did run into a problem getting records played - payola. "Two or three local disc jockeys implied to me that they would play LIN records for a gratuity," said Charles. "That makes me mad. If the DJs don't like the platters or the public doesn't take to them, I don't even want them to play the records." Still, all indications are that the Drivers' "Tetter Totter" did well locally.

In June, 1958, Ken Charles held a Friday night "Spotlight in LIN" dance at Castle Farm. For admission of \$ 1.20 per person, attendees could hear performances by twelve new LIN recording artists including the Drivers, Janet Shay, the Piano Lounge Trio, Don Stevens, the Swinging Rocks, Paulene Deters, the Key Notes, June McClain, Cormier's HarManiacs, Johnny Allen, the Enchanters and the Harmony Kings. Last minute additions to the program were Joe Thompson and the Delyrians. There was also dancing to guest D.J.s. In spite of the line-up, attendance was disappointingly small at about 250 music fans. Still, the publicity was enough to boost the auditions of local wanna-be recording artists to a point that LIN Records had to add another audition night.

All the while, LIN Records was signing up local talent to contracts and submitting the contracts to the American Federation of Musicians for approval. Each contract called for LIN to record a minimum of eight sides per artist. Unfortunately, other than the four artists whose records we already mentioned, none would ever see their name on a LIN record. A

SEE

SPOTLIGHT ON LIN

HEAR

★ 12 NEW RECORDING ARTISTS ★
FRIDAY, JUNE 20th, 1958

★ THE DRIVERS ★ JANET SHAY ★ PIANO LOUNGE TRIO ★ DON STEVENS ★ SWINGING ROCKS ★ PAULINE DETERS	★ THE KEY NOTES ★ JUNE McCLAIN ★ CORMIER'S HARMANIACS ★ JOHNNY ALLEN ★ THE ENCHANTERS ★ HARMONY KINGS
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★ GUEST . . . D.J.'s . . . DANCING ★

9 P. M. 'TIL 1:00 A. M.—ADM. \$1.20 TAX Incl.

few would move on to record elsewhere. Most, who looked forward to exciting recording careers, had their dreams crushed in the reality of a heartless recording industry. For their more than thirty LIN contracted artists, there'd be months of anticipation turned to frustration. I know, because I've read their correspondences. So, who were some of these talented artists, whose chance for stardom came and went?

The Enchanters

The Enchanters were an R&B singing group made up of friends from Cincinnati's Withrow High School. Their LIN contract was signed by Thomas McCracken Jr on April 3, 1958, but the group was known to contain Kenny Smith as second tenor. Smith would go on to fame as a soul singer, musician, songwriter, and producer. Kenny Smith was one of the talents that LIN Records let slip away. Kenny was discovered while singing at a Castle Farm concert (possibly the LIN Showcase concert) and signed to Fraternity Records after the LIN contract ran out.

The Delyrians

The Delyrians were a vocal quintet of 15-year-olds who began harmonizing on the streetcorner after



The Delyrians: From left: Reginald Jenkins, Richard Rolands, Darrell Graham, Donald Swain, Richard Hargrove.



Above photo: The Faith Increasers
 Photo on right: The Swinging Rocks



The Swinging Rocks

school. Described as Cincinnati's answer to Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers, the Delyrians consisted of Richard Hargrove, Donald Swain, Darryl Graham, Reginald Jenkins and Richard Rawlins [or Rolands]. Overheard by Hargrove's mother, Mrs. Sarah Hargrove began coaching the youngsters. After an audition, the group was quickly signed to LIN Records where they decided on the name, the Delyrians. An appearance on local TV followed. Unlike many other LIN artists, the Delyrians are believed to have recorded a couple sides, "I Believe" and "I Love You So." While the group members waited patiently for their record to be released, they mastered the tenor sax, clarinet, trumpet and drums. To the best of our knowledge, their record was never released.

The Faith Increasers

The Faith Increasers were a gospel vocal sextet from Cincinnati. They were only singing a short time when they signed with LIN Records on July 1, 1958. The group is most likely the Mighty Faith Increasers who record for Cincinnati's King Records five years later, although the name on the LIN contract, Ambrose Brooks, does not match any of the group members of 1963. He might have been the group's manager. The Faith Increasers had gone through a number of names before exiting the church one Sunday, when an elderly woman told they they'd "increased her faith." The name stuck. The Faith Increasers never had any LIN recordings but were one of the few LIN artists to keep singing after 1958.

The Swinging Rocks were a Cincinnati-based band consisting of five members: Harold A. Willingham (piano, vocals, leader), Landon Cox (alto sax), Rufus Irby (tenor sax, vocalist), Paul Murrell (drums), and John McGue (guitar). They were well known around Cincinnati nightclubs, often backing the Drivers, but they'd also backed Chuck Willis, Joyce Bryant, Big Maybelle, Otis Williams & the Charms, the Five Keys, Bubber Johnson and many others. LIN signed the Swinging Rocks on July 3 and scheduled their first recording session for July 31, 1958. We don't know if that session took place or not.

The LIN files are littered with letters from different artists wondering when they would be recorded. However, a December 11, 1958, newspaper article indicated the record label was in trouble.

"The LIN record company, which debuted here with a large splash this summer, is finding the going difficult. The Musicians Union has revoked the recording license of Ken Charles who heads the LIN operation. At least two artists - the Drivers and Clay Munday - have threatened court action to disassociate themselves from LIN and Charles this week was sued for \$ 10,591 by Mrs. Irma Deeters for money she loaned Charles."

We will probably never know what went wrong at LIN Records. No doubt Ken Charles wanted his

label to be successful and we'll take him at his word that he genuinely wanted help his artists. But the music field was then, and still is, a brutal industry where only a select few survive.

Ken Charles returned to Rochester, New York, where he opened the Ken Charles Music Center, selling musical instruments and records and providing music lessons for piano, accordion and guitar students. In 1960, he also began managing the 17-year-old Rock & Roll singer and teen idol, Dick Rogers (real name Dick Tosti). Rogers had already made a couple records for Dave Castle's Da-Mar label in 1959. Ken Charles produced the next two Dick Rogers records on DA-MAR (produced by "Pedalino," Ken Charles' real name)." After that, Ken Charles started a new record label, Peddy Records, where he recorded Dick Tosti (now using his real name), Freddy Anthony, Johnny Barnes and others. This time, Ken Charles' Peddy label lasted into the 1970s. Ken Charles Pedalino passed away in Sarasota, Florida on March 7, 1979.

The Driver, Post-LIN label

Meanwhile, the Drivers continued playing Cincinnati nightspots like the Touchez Club through 1961. One great, but confusing Drivers recording is "No One For Me" b/w "Stutterin' John" on Drive #101. Drive is obviously the group's own label, custom-pressed by King Records' Royal Plastics Corporation. The account number in the dead wax is 926, indicating a 1961 pressing. However. The



The Drivers - "No One For Me"



The Drivers - "Mr. Astronaut"

writer credits of Harris - Smith - Gulino and the publisher, Shalimar Music match their 1957 RCA Victor record, "I Get Weak." I'm convinced the two Drive sides were recorded in 1957 and released by the group in 1961.

Another puzzling record is King #5238 by Charlie Harris ("Won't You Come Back" b/w "Because Of My Love For You") in 1958. Is this the same Charlie Harris of the Drivers?

On February 20, 1962, John Glenn, on Mercury-Atlas 6, became the first American in orbit. Shortly after that, the Drivers recorded "Mr. Astronaut" b/w "Dry Bones Twist" for King Records (#5645). We're not sure of the personnel of this Drivers group, although we believe Leroy Smith and Willie Price were still associated with the Drivers then. Both side were written by Rudy Toombs, the legendary R&B song writer who earlier had written for Ruth Brown, the Clovers and hundreds more. Rudy Toombs was brutally murdered in the hallway of his Harlem apartment, November 1962, just a few months after this record was released.

The Drivers continued singing around Cincinnati and by the mid-1960s had morphed into a soul vocal group called Leroy & the Drivers. Leroy Smith was still in the group and Willie C. Price was still associated with them as either a singer or manager. One new singer was Leroy Jones. Born ca. 1933, Jones might be the vocalist who sang with the Nelson Burton Band in 1960. After singing with Leroy & the Drivers, Jones would run a series of



Leroy & the Drivers - "L-O-V-E"

local night clubs and then started his own successful bail bond company.

In 1966, Leroy & the Drivers played the Sportsman's Club in Newport, Kentucky, with Accident label recording artist, Zenobia Bonner. That led Leroy and the Drivers to sign with Accident Records (*If it's a Hit, It's By Accident*). Accident produced six recorded sides by the group, with two singles issued on the Coral label in 1967.

"L-O-V-E" (Coral #62515) was a nice soul harmony ballad written by Leroy Smith and arranged by the Drivers' old friend from the Enchanters, Kenny Smith. The flip, "Blow Wind" was written by Willie Price. A second release (Coral #62544), "Don't Ever Leave Me" b/w "You Picked The Wrong Time" came out later in 1967. Leroy & the Drivers are said to have opened for the Drifters, Isley Brothers, Aretha Franklin and James Brown.

They are said to also be connected to the Leroy & the Drivers who recorded the high price Chicago funk record. "Sad Chicken" b/w "Rainy Night in Georgia" (Duo #7458) but both sides are instrumentals and the band members (Randy "Butch" Yates, Mike Chappell, Reggie Cavinaugh, Jimmy Valdez, Jimmy Welch) are not names I recognize.

Leroy Smith's obit stated that the Drivers had recorded for RCA, King and another Cincinnati record label, Finch. I actively collect the Finch label

Drivers Discography

- DeLuxe 6094 Smooth Slow And Easy Women
- DeLuxe 6104 My Lonely Prayer
Midnight Hours
- DeLuxe 6117 Dangerous Lips
Oh Miss Nellie
- RCA Victor 47-7023 Blue Moon
I Get Weak
- LIN 1002 A Man's Glory
Teeter Totter
- Drive 101 No One For Me
Stutterin' Johnny

By Leroy & the Drivers

- Coral 62515 L-O-V-E
Blow Wind
- Coral 62544 Don't Ever Leave Me
You Picked The Time
- Duo 7458 Sad Chicken
Rainy Night In Georgia

LIN Discography

- LIN 1001 - Key Notes - Tuff-Enuff Baby
- Pyramid
- LIN 1002 - Drivers - A Man's Glory
- Teeter Totter
- LIN 1003 - Janet Shay - Summer Rain
- At The Sock Hop
- LIN 1004 - Clay Munday - Lucky Day
- I Knew

but have never seen a record by the Drivers on Finch. Anybody know of one?

Of the Drivers: Carl Rogers died in 1987. Edison Thompson died in 1993. Leroy Smith died in 2001. Willie C. Price died in 2006. The fate of the other Drivers is not known to us.

Notes

In addition to the LIN files, numerous sources were used to assemble this article, including newspaper clippings from the *Rochester Democrat & Chronicle*, the *Cincinnati Post*, the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, *Billboard* and *Cashbox* magazines.

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