

The Best of Acappella

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IT USED to be that you could only find it in little, out of the way places. There was a cut on the first Captain Beefheart album, an Anglicized version by Them on their first effort, another on the Amboy Dukes' *Migration*. Or you might hear it in the midst of a jam session somewhere, flowing out amid laughter and shouts of hey-I-remember-*that*, a little I-IV-V progression and then into "Teen Angel." Frank Zappa once devoted an entire album to it (*Ruben and the Jets*), but fell prey to the too-easy temptation to parody.

But now the Rock and Roll revival is fully upon us. The music of the First Phase is all around; Chuck Berry is at the *Fillmore*, Fats Domino just recently had an almost-hit record, the Coasters are again recording and appearing. On another level, there was a Pachucho record hop at the *Family Dog* a while ago, Cat Mother is singing about Good Old Rock and Roll, and a group named Sha-Na-Na played oldies-but-goodies at the *Scene* to screaming crowds and rave reviews. We're almost back in 1958 again, with people starting to dig out their old 45's, immersing themselves in such as Dion and the Belmonts, the Big Bopper, the Earls and the Fascinations, doing the ol' hully-gully as they walk down the street.

It's nice to see rock nostalgia happening; more than that, it's nice to see something *past* nostalgia happening. The old values seem to be on their way back; as the decency rallies proliferate, we are slowly entering a new phase of the old outlaw days of rock and roll. The cycles are turning, my friend, around and around once more, and we're coming home at last. Goodbye, *Fillmore East*; hello, *Brooklyn Fox*.

But I don't really want to write a thing on late fifties/early sixties rock and roll: that topic deserves a book and (sadly) will probably get one in the near future. Rather, this is about a stream within a stream within a stream; a little thing that happened once a long time ago, something that began, went round in its own little circle, died after a time. Call it a movement if you will—art historians would like that

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term. Call it a sub-culture, or maybe a microcosm of a much larger rock society—sociologists would like that. Call it an “experiment with the polyphonic possibilities of the human voice within a set and limited structural framework”—musicologists would like that. Or call it a genre, or a style, or a fad. Anything your little heart desires.

But I call it Acappella music, which is what it was known as then, though all of us had to have the word explained at one time or another. “Hitting notes,” in the language of the street, and this is probably the most fitting title, since it was born on the street, on the corners of the small cities and large metropolises. Somebody tried to make it a Star once; they almost succeeded, but it ultimately toppled over from its own weight, coming back, in the end, to the very place where it was born, the place where it probably still remains today.

This, as they used to say in the movies, is its story.

The formula was very simple. You would be at a dance (or a party or just sitting around on somebody’s front stoop), and things were draggy so you would go in to the bathroom (or hallway or stay on the same old stoop) with four (or six or twenty) other guys and sing (and sing and sing). The songs were standards; there was “Gloria” (of course), and the lead singer’s voice always cracked when he reached for the falsetto part. There was “Diamonds and Pearls,” a must from the Paragons, then “Valerie” for the crying and melodrama, “What’s Your Name” ’cause it had a boss bass part, finally into “Stormy Weather,” that perennial old classic:

Don’t know why
(a-don’t know why)
There’s no sun up in the sky
It’s Stormy Weather
(Stormy wea-ther, wab-doo)...

Acappella, not to be confused with the classical *a capella*, means “without music.” We were told that on the first all-Acappella album ever released, called *The Best of Acappella, Vol. I*. (Relic 101). They weren’t quite right, as it turned out—there was very definitely music involved.

What they really meant to say was that there was no musical accompaniment, no background instrumentation. Acappella groups had to rely solely on their voices (helped a bit at times by an echo chamber) using them to provide all the different parts of a song. This tended to put a greater emphasis on the role of the back-up part of the group, pushing the lead singer into a slightly less prestigious position. There was none of this limp Supremes background humming that is so prevalent today—Acappella groups really had to work, nearly scat-singing their way through the highs and lows of a song.

The movement began sometime in late 1962 or '63 with a group called the Zircons. The original Zircons (for there was a second, less creative group later) were probably together for about five days, at least long enough to cut a record which ultimately became the first big Acappella single. It was called “Lonely Way” (Mellomood GS-1000A), and sold somewhere above 3,000 records. In these days of the Big Huge, 3,000 really doesn't sound like much, but for an Acappella record, appealing to a limited audience in a limited area, the number was quite substantial. There had been a few other groups who preceded the Zircons (notably the Nutmegs who had made a lot of practice tapes in the style), but it was they who broke the initial ice, receiving some air play on AM stations and promptly breaking up over it.

“Lonely Way” was, and still remains, one of the finest Acappella songs produced throughout the entire history of the style. Many of the later productions had a tendency to be hollow; there were holes in the arrangements and you really missed the presence of the back-up music. Not so with “Lonely Way”—the harmonies were full and vibrant, the arrangement tight and tasteful, everything working together towards a melodious whole. I had the record for two weeks before I even realized they were singing alone.

After the Zircons, the Acappella movement went into full swing. In what surely must be a famous first, the style was not fostered by radio air play, by record companies, or even through personal appearances by the groups themselves. Instead, the driving forces behind Acappella, those who promoted, financed, and ultimately pushed it, were by and

large *record stores*. And to fully understand this (though it occasionally will happen down South among specialty blues labels), we must do up a little background history.

Rock in the fifties, though it followed somewhat-national trends, was basically regional in nature. Southern California birthed a peculiar brand of pachucho-rock; Tex-Mex had the Buddys—Holly and Knox; Philadelphia gave the world dances, American Bandstand and Fabian; and New York had the groups. The groups, together for a day or a year, often recording under a variety of names, springing up at record hops or teen variety shows, here today and gone tomorrow. As a conservative estimate, I would say that close to 10,000 records by fly-by-night groups on similar fly-by-night labels were released in the late fifties and early sixties. And slowly, again mostly around New York, there grew up a little fandom around these groups, calling itself by various names—“old-ies fans,” “R ’n B lovers,” etc.—who became really involved with the kind of music these groups were producing. In time, as the Top-40 began to play less and less of these combinations, the movement was pushed underground; groups like the Ravens, the Moonglows, the Five Satins, the Paragons slowly became the chief proponents of the older music. At a time when most radio stations were slowly sinking into the morass of Bobby Vee and Tony Orlando, groups like the Cadillacs and the Diablos were busily keeping the faith alive.

This fascination with groups has carried over to present-day rock and I’ve always been at a loss to figure out why. Even today, a group stands a better chance of being listened to than does a single artist; there is more glamour, more . . . well, *something* about a group that calls forth stronger loyalties. Whatever, this rock and roll underground, though it had no connection with the radical movements of the day and indeed was probably very hostile toward all outre forms of behavior, resembled very much the early days of progressive rock. There was the same sense of boosting involved, the same constant grumblings that the *radio* played *shit* and if *only* they would program some *good* groups . . . And if you can remember turning people on to the Airplane (or even grass)

for the first time, you might be able to imagine what it was to turn someone on to Acappella records. (“Now here’s this fine group,” arm around shoulder, slowly leading toward the record player, a weird glint in the eye . . .) You were simply doing missionary work—taking care of God’s business here on earth, and you just *knew* that He looked down and that He saw it was good.

In the true spirit of supply and demand, this group-oriented underground spawned record shops designed to meet their needs. Even at the height of their popularity, there were still only a few maybe one or two per city, sparsely spread in a ragged line from New York to Philadelphia. In New York there was Times Square records, later followed by the House of Oldies and Village Oldies on Bleecker St. In Hackensack, New Jersey (soon to be a major center of Acappella—no foolin’) was the Relic Rack. Newark boasted Park Records, which gave away free coupons so that you stood to gain one record for every ten, and Plainfield had Brooks records, a store which had the dubious honor of having the dumbest salesgirls in existence. There were also a few in South Jersey, mostly around Trenton, one in Philadelphia whose name I can’t remember, and maybe two or three others. The Acappella underground was not exactly a mass movement.

Times Square records, located in the 42nd St. subway arcade, was the biggest and best. It was run by Slim, a tall, gangling man who knew everything that there was to know about rock and roll, assisted by Harold, who knew nearly as much. Slim was a strange character, looking for all the world like a Midwestern con man, always ready to show you this or that little goodie which he had just gotten in. He used to write for some of the little hectographed magazines that sprang up around the movement, little rambling columns that talked about the health value of Benson and Hedges, his ex-wife, all the new records Times Square was going to find and sell at outrageous prices. In a sample column, from *Rhythm and Blues Train* # 5, he covered tapes that you could have made from the Times Square files, the fact that no one brought in “Saki-Laki-Waki” by the Viscounts on Vega label so that the cash price they would pay was now \$200.00, a few upcoming inventions of

his (including air-conditioned streets), and finally finished with a joke about the best thief in the world, who stole a tire off one of the wheels of his car when he was doing fifty.

Slim really came into his own when he had an FM radio show which appeared in odd corners of the dial on occasional Sunday afternoons. He used to play some fine music, new Acappella releases, also rarer records from the Times Square stock. "And now," he would say, "here's 'Sunday Kind of Love' by the Medievals, worth ten dollars at Times Square records." And then, "pop," there it would be, probably the first time it had ever been on a radio station, rescued from some dusty old file of DJ records. (This is all past now; Slim died a while ago, and maybe this could serve as a belated goodbye from at least one of his old fans.)

But if Slim was a world in himself, his store was a veritable universe. Records lined the walls, sparkling in all manners of color. One of the sneakier ways to make a record rare in those days was to release a limited amount in a red (or green, or yellow) plastic edition. Times Square had them all, Drifters 45s in purple, a copy of the long sought-after "Stormy Weather" by the Five Sharks in a full 5-color deluxe edition, others in varying hues and shades. Alongside the rows of hanging records were huge lists, detailing the prices Times Square would pay for rare records. Elvis Presley efforts on the Sun label went for ten dollars; "Darling, I'm Sorry" by the Ambassadors would bring the bearer a princely \$200.00. The rarest record of all, which Slim never actually succeeded in obtaining, was the old 78 version of "Stormy Weather" by the Five Sharps, complete with sound effects of thunderstorms and rain. (In the end, he was forced to gather together a collection of drunks and name them the Five Sharks in order to re-cut re-release the record.) If you had the Five Sharps version, you could have made yourself an easy five hundred dollars.

The nicest thing about Times Square records, or any of the shops for that matter, was that they never minded if you just hung around the store, listening to records, rapping, trading and buying on your own. The clerks loved to talk, loved to show you obscure oldies, loved to find out if you could teach them anything in return. After a while,

the stores became regular meeting halls, places where the groups hung out, where the kids brought their demos, where you could hear any number of versions of “Gloria,” or “Pennies From Heaven,” or “Ten Commandments of Love.” It was a big club, and you could join if you had ever even remotely heard of Sonny Till and the Orioles.

But though Times Square was the headquarters, the Relic Rack actually started the whole thing off. Hackensack, New Jersey, is an unlikely spot for anything resembling a music center. It’s dumpy, stodgily middle-class, right on the outskirts of the pleasant pastoral spots of Secaucus and Jersey City. Yet its one asset was that it had a fine record shop, one where you could find nearly anything you were looking for and one which had the same set of vibes as Times Square records.

The Rack, in the person of Eddie Gries, had experimented for a time with bringing out re-releases of some of their rare oldies on their own label, Relic. They had some success and so nearly simultaneously Times Square followed suit. After a time, there was an assortment of things out on these private labels, some Acappella and some not, all managing to do moderately well. The important thing here, though, was not so much in the labels themselves, but in the fact that when the Zircons proved Acappella could actually *sell*, at least in a limited circle, the labels were already in existence to push and provide a vehicle for the music. Which brings us, finally, to the Star itself.

Acappella music grew out of the fifties rock underground, which coalesced around an assortment of loosely-termed R ’n B groups all held together by this series of specialty record shops. The music itself was primarily more a style than anything else, using basically interchangeable words and phrasing. Like blues, the thing was not in what you did, but rather how you did it. To generalize, we can divide the output into two main types, notably, the Fast song and the Slow song. The Fast song was up-tempo, lots of sharp vocal work in the background, heavy emphasis on the bass, lead singer on top merely filling up the rest of the balance. In the context of Acappella music, it had more of a tendency to fall apart since even the most spirited singing

could not usually make up for the loss of rhythm instruments. In these fast songs, all the holes could never really be filled adequately and the result, except in selected instances, was usually choppy, sounding weak and thin. Its good feature, however, was that it usually provided the most freaky vocal effects then present on record. In their push to clean up the loose ends, back-up vocalists were really hard pressed to find suitable accompaniment. Some of the results are like the Del-Stars' "Zoop Bop" (Mellomood GS-1001B), a song which is easily five years ahead of its time. Consisting of little more than a collection of indecipherable syllables, rhythmic effects and skillful use of the echo chamber, the record comes off as one of the first psychedelic golden oldies.

The Acappella form truly found itself however, in the Slow song. Essentially a ballad, it was soft, the background singers filling out the lead vocal, coming in over, under and through it at various times. When successful, the effect could be literally haunting in its starkness and purity. The Vi-Tones once made a record called "The Storm" (Times Square 105A) which is nothing less than unearthly, minor in mood, creating feelings I know I could never put down on paper. Acappella was really a true return to essentials, finding the emotions that could be represented by simple harmonies, using only the human voice as its instrument. When it was done well (something that often eluded the dozens of groups who relied on showy vocal pyrotechnics), it could be incredibly gripping and powerful.

We could get really hung up in drawing analogies to present-day rock here, but it's much too tempting to find any number of parallels in the rise and fall of Acappella and compare them with what has been happening over a like period of time in rock. Acappella began with a handful of groups, all highly polished in a crude sort of way, proud of their craft and creating a superior collection of recordings and performances. Then, as the movement's sense of self increased (much as in the curse of Marcuse's One-dimensional Man), the quality began regressing. It began to be self-conscious of what had formerly been unconscious and the contrived results were hardly listenable. Pale imitations sprang up, filled with sloppy singing and off-key harmonies. Strangely, all this

happened at a time when Acappella was actually increasing in popularity; the amount of good stuff simply decreased in a kind of inverse ratio. And Acappella, not having the numerical power nor the resiliency of rock, could not afford to have its strength so diluted—it literally *had* to keep being produced at a high level in order to survive. But once the downfall started, there was no stopping it. When Acappella finally died, there were few left around to mourn it.

But all that is much nearer the end of the story. Acappella's Great Groups come well at the beginning, and most managed to retain their high positions until the whole thing began to fade out of sight. We've already spoken about the Zircons; the newer group that sprang up to take their name was not nearly so good, producing one fine song ("Silver Bells," Cool Sound CS 1030A), and then concentrating on shlock versions of "Stormy Weather" and the like. This newer group actually got around to producing an album (on Cat-Time label), but it was significant only in the negative.

But the other large groups of Acappella managed to stay together, and several of them kept on producing more and better stuff. The Youngones, who became popular almost at the same time as the Zircons, were probably almost as well known, maintaining a high quality in their records (with resultant rise in reputation). The group was from Brooklyn, ranged in ages from 18 to 20 and managed to coalesce one of the truly unique sounds in Acappella, thanks to a lead singer who had the capacity to sound nearly *castrato* at certain times. Their first record, on the Yussels label, was called "Marie," a near-standard stereotypical Slow song:

He made the mountains
He made a tree
And He made a girl
When He made Marie . . .

But for whatever reason, the Youngones took this song and really did a Job on it, creating out of it one of the most moving records of the

whole period. Though “Marie” contained some musical background, the Youngones soon moved over to Slim and the Times Square label and began producing Acappella records.

While there, they came up with several passable songs and two truly Great ones. The first of these was easily the finest version of “Gloria” (Times Square 28A) yet available, a tremendous reading of a song which had been done over and over and over, sometimes nearly to death, by some huge amount of groups. But even better than that was their Acappella version of “Sweeter Than” (Times Square 36A), a remake of the Passions’ oldie of “This Is My Love.” From the opening note to the final, bell-like harmonic rise at the end, the song had Classic written all over it.

If the Youngones represented some of the best that Acappella had to offer, the Camelots certainly showed the versatility of the style. For one, they produced the best up-tempo song, “Don’t Leave Me Baby” (Aanko 1001), a record that featured a bottom line any present-day bass guitarist would be happy to make his own. The Camelots’ success was mainly due to their incredibly rich harmony, a sound which brooked no faltering or loose moments; they were on top of their material at all times. Of all the groups, they made the best effort to go commercial, recording for both Laurie and Ember records, but, like the others, they have long since disappeared.

Underneath this top layer of groups were three or four secondary combinations, all of which had varying moments of excitement to them. I have a warm spot in my heart for the Savoys, hailing from Newark, who came out with some fine material on the Catamount label. They and a group called the Five Fashions were the literal stars of the best Acappella album ever put out. *I Dig Acappella* (Cat-Time LP 201A), featuring a cover photo of a plump girl in a bathing suit overseeing gravestones with the names of the groups on them (*I Dig* . . . get it?), contained some twenty cuts of sheer Acappella proficiency. There were the inevitable bummers, of course (“She Cried” by the Rue-Teens, the Zircons’ “Unchained Melody”), but on the whole, it was the finest

statement that the Acappella movement had yet made. It still *is*, by the way, and I can think of no better way to introduce anybody to music “without music” than to play them any one of half-a-dozen cuts from the album.

It would be nice to report that the other albums that came out were as consistent as *I Dig Acappella*. *The Best of Acappella* series on Relic only lived up to its name with the first volume and continued downward from there. Except for selected groups (The Citadels, a revival of the old Quotations, a few others), the series degenerated into a collection of poor imitations, flat harmonies and gimmick groups. They would feature Joey and the Majesties—“A twelve-year-old lead singer!”—songs done in barber shop harmony, the first Acappella song done in a foreign language, any number of other superficial hypes. My personal favorite from all of these winners was a group called Ginger and the Adorables, who appeared on the cover of Vol. IV, five chicks who really looked as if they could roll your back until it began to break. Unfortunately, they couldn’t sing worth a damn. In the liner notes, we were told that

Ginger and the Adorables (also known as the Lynettes) are from West Orange, New Jersey. They were discovered by Wayne Stierle while singing outside a local candy store. Lead singer is Ginger Scalione, 16; 1st tenor is Jill Tordell, 16; 2nd tenor is Gail Haberman, 14 . . .

The period of decadence was about to set in.

A group that was beyond decadence, though, indeed was beyond just about *anything* one could name, was a combination from New Jersey called the Velvet Angels. They released a few singles, had a few cuts on some of the anthologies, and were always rumored to be the pseudonym for a famous group currently slumming it. Whatever, the Angels’ biggest claim to fame, aside from having the deepest bass in existence, was that their records always carried the notation that they were recorded in a Jersey City hotel room. It would say: “This Acappella recording was made in a Jersey City hotel room,” and you would

listen and say, yup, it sure sounded like it. But they were good, one of the better, and so above any sort of this petty teasing.

Withal, you could feel Acappella slowly fading away. It was losing steam, fighting a weighted battle against a nearly overwhelming onslaught of crap. But in November of 1965, as the whole thing was entering its twilight, Acappella had its finest moment. The occasion was the first Acappella show, sponsored by the Relic Rack, featuring all the groups that we had heard but never seen, people like the Savoys, the Five Sharks, the (new) Zircons. It was to be quite an Event; except within a small home-town radius, Acappella groups almost never appeared anywhere. They were simply much too esoteric and obscure. As the night drew closer, it seemed as if a huge party was about to take place; good feelings were spread all around.

As it would, the night was fated: the entire East Coast was struck by the Great Blackout. But Hackensack, for some unknown reason, was one of the few remaining pockets of light. And it was exciting to be at the theatre; a kind of community existed between the people who came, a spiritual bond which said that there is one thing that binds us all together—one thing that we have that the Others outside don't even know about. There was a sense of belonging, of participation in a small convention of your own personal friends. We were all together.

Now I suppose that it would be logical to describe a pseudo-mystical experience at this point, complete with stars and flashing red lights. It would bring things to a dramatic finale, tie together all the differing streams of narrative we've started up and left hanging, round everything off in a nice, warm ball. But I can't do that simply because it just didn't happen. The groups came out; I remember seeing the Five Sharks, a new group called the Meadowbrooks who did a few nice things, maybe a couple of others, but the air was never charged with the feeling that something Wonderful was taking place. The music was good, we all liked it and applauded like mad, but the Magic simply wasn't there.

The reason that nothing like that could happen was because the people on the stage were essentially no different than us. There was no charismatic distance between us down here and them up there, no

feeling of the performer and his relation to the audience. These people weren't professionals; they were only doing the same things that we had been doing all along, leaning up against the wall, laughing a lot, trying to sing. They might have done it a little better than we could, but that was irrelevant.

It was fun. Like a sing-along, or a hootenanny. Like being in one of those 1890's rag-time places where people get drunk and sing the old songs. Like being home. And so, when it was over, we left and said it was fine, 'cause it was, especially when that big bass hit that riff, *damn* he had a low voice (trying it) *bah-doo bah-doo* and what about the falsetto from the Sharks *oo-whee-ee-oo-oo* yeah but remember . . .

There was another concert somewhere along the line, a lot more records, more groups, more everything. But toward the end, no one really cared very much. Acappella died because the confines of its own small world could not contain it when it became too large; it simply could not keep up enough quality per record. Toward its final days, when people like Stierle were producing Acappella's brand of bubble-gum music, when groups like the Autumns recorded limp versions of "Exodus," when it became nearly impossible to separate the good from the bad, many of the old fans began drifting away. And I was one of them, picking up on the Beatles, the Stones, on newer things with the vitality that Acappella once had, but somehow lost.

But because I still remembered, I went down to Times Square records the other day, just to check it out, to have some sides played, to find out what had happened in the years I had been away.

There was a sign on the door, saying the store was to be closed soon. It had moved from the old large location to a smaller, very cramped hole in the wall. Slim was gone, of course, and skinny little Harold was gone also. All that remained was a pale junkie behind the cash register who would doze off each time I would ask for a record. I wandered around inside, feeling fairly lost, remembering how things once were and irrationally wishing they might return again.

I asked the guy at the store what had happened. "Nobody likes the

old music anymore,” he told me. I said that was sad. He shrugged and dozed off again.

I left a little while after that. He was right, of course. Even the rock and roll revival will probably pass right over Acappella music, over the Five Satins, over the Orioles, even over the rainbow. Which is really too bad. In passing over all of them, it’ll miss the heart of the whole thing, avoiding the meat and picking up some of the filler, bypassing a lot that might be nice to have in these days of giant festivals and supergroups.

Acappella was not the stuff of which you could make mountains. It was simple music, perhaps the simplest, easy to understand, easier to relate to, and so maybe it’s not so bad that Acappella will be passed over after all. It would be lost at the *Fillmore* or the huge stadiums, swamped by the electrical energy that is so much a part of the contemporary scene. Acappella is meant to be personal, music for street corners and bathrooms, for happy memories and good times.

A stream within a stream within a stream. Folk music of a very special kind.