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How I Became a Doo-Wop Fan 10 Years Too Late

BY RAANAN GEBERER

Was doo-wop, a largely urban style of rock and roll that hit its peak popularity between roughly 1954 and 1963, a folk art? In its latter years, doo-wop was roughly contemporary with the early '60s folk revival. The bohemian college kids

who listened to Dylan, Joan Baez, and Peter, Paul, and Mary would have laughed at such a question. To most of them, doo-wop groups (which at the time were called merely “singing groups”—the term doo-wop came later) were just commercial nonsense.

Yet, I would say that doo-wop, in a sense *was* a folk art. The music was created by the singers themselves on the street corner, in the playground, in the hallways. Those doo-wop groups that made records were mainly recorded by small regional record



The House of Oldies in Greenwich Village, my “mecca” for oldies in my mid-teens and still there. *All photos by Raanan Geberer.*



The small courtyard outside the community center in the Marble Hill Houses where it all began for me.

companies, not “the majors” like RCA Victor or Columbia. Most of the singers were under 21, and the doo-wop group was basically an extension of the high school crowd (or, in rougher neighborhoods, the gang). Most group singers came from inner city, working class or lower middle-class backgrounds. Groups made their reputations with appearances at community centers, high school dances, and small local clubs.

I should know—from the time I was 5-1/2 years old in 1957, when my family moved into the Marble Hill Houses in the West Bronx, until around 1966–67, I heard the “older guys” singing in the courtyard outside the community center every night—the same place I played punchball with the Cub Scouts. However, I didn’t get into popular music until I was almost 12, and it was the Beatles, the Dave Clark Five,

and Motown artists who inspired me, not the older ‘50s and early ‘60s music. The stuff those older teenagers were singing outside my window wasn’t interesting to me, and I thought their songs were slow, repetitious and draggy—*until...*

One night, when I was 13, I stayed up a little later than usual and chanced to listen to a half-hour “oldies” show on WABC, one of the big New York rock stations at the time. The first song the DJ played was “Peggy Sue” by Buddy Holly. It sounded weird, strange to me, with its bongos and its one verse seemingly repeated forever (since then, I’ve grown to appreciate Buddy Holly). The next song that the DJ played was Ritchie Valens’ “La Bamba,” which I liked. Then, he played the Five Satins’ “In the Still of the Night.” *BAM!* I was fascinated by this new (to me) sound.

When he followed it up with the Mello Kings’ “Tonight, Tonight,” I was hooked. The lead singers expressed exactly how I felt about the girls that I idolized across the classroom but was too frightened to approach, while the background singers sounded almost like a church choir. I was now a doo-wop fan, possibly the only one in my junior high school.

I began turning the radio dial, hoping to hear some more of this exciting, hard-to-find music, and what I came up with was Murray the K’s free-form radio show on WOR-FM. Murray divided his show into different “blocks”—hard rock, folk-rock, soul, Latin rock, and oldies. The oldies he played were at least 50 percent doo-wop. Every week, I discovered a new favorite. One week it was “My Juanita” by the Crests, the next week it was “Whispering

Bells” by the Del Vikings, and the week after that it was “I Wonder Why” by Dion and the Belmonts.

I remembered one song from my childhood that I now realized fit into the doo-wop mode, and I thought it was called “Angel Eyes.” I listened and waited for it, but when Murray finally played it, I found that it was “Pretty Little Angel Eyes” by Curtis Lee and the Halos. I didn’t know or care if the groups were black or white, whether they were from New York or from Chicago—I just knew what I liked. I developed all sorts of notions about the music, almost all of which were wrong. For example, I thought that Frankie Lyman, the high tenor lead singer who was 13 years old when he had a string of hits with the Teenagers, was a female.

Soon, I started buying some of these oldies. The Music Makers store on Fordham Road, which I had known since childhood, had a wall of old records. The first two that I bought were the aforementioned “My Juanita” by the Crests and “Desiree” by the Charts. Somehow or other, I became aware of the House of Oldies in Greenwich Village, which was the last word in collecting. I sent away for the House of Oldies catalog, and I studied it for hours. I noticed that there were some songs that were done by many different groups—there were about eight groups that did “Sunday Kind of Love.” Looking at the names of the artists, one name stood out—“Little Richard.” I thought he might be some sort of novelty child performer, the kind who would appear on the “Lawrence Welk” television show. When I finally heard the *real* Little Richard, was I surprised!

Within a few weeks of listening to these group oldies, I made the connection between this music and the music that the older guys had been singing outside my window at night for all these years. I began listening to these singers, who were by now in their early 20s, more intently, and I recognized some of their songs. I still remember a great version of the Students’ “I’m So Young” that they did one night,

with a female vocalist singing the part of the original kiddie lead singer. One time, as I walked down the stairs of my building, I started singing “Sunday Kind of Love,” hoping one of them would hear me. They never did.

Murray the K’s free-form radio show went off the air in September 1967, but soon afterward I discovered the Time Capsule Show, hosted by two young guys on Fordham University’s noncommercial radio station, WFUV. Tom and Joe played some late ‘50s stuff, but they tended to concentrate on the “roots music” of doo-wop—the black groups of the early ‘50s who took the earlier sounds of the Ink Spots, the Delta Rhythm Boys, the Mills Brothers, and gospel groups to create what author Charlie Gillet called “The Sound of the City” (*The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll*, originally published 1970). These songs were slower, more intense, and used more “blue notes.” Instead of idealized teenage love, the lead singers often expressed the pain of rejection and other real feelings, in a passionate way. This music was a little harder for me to understand, but soon I came to like the Five Keys, Clyde McPhatter with the Dominoes, and the early Flamingos on the Chance label as much as I liked the Del Vikings, the Del Satins, and the Five Satins.

By this time, I heard the sound of doo-wop *a capella* singers outside my window less and less. Years later, I found out that they had a name—the Versailles—and they had made several records. Around 2003, one of the group members emailed me, saying that in his opinion, their type of music died partially because of the emergence of a new generation that liked a different type of rock music, but mainly because of the Vietnam draft. “The draft,” he wrote, “grabbed our guys from the street corners, the playgrounds, the subway stations.” Most of the overwhelmingly blue-collar doo-wop singers didn’t have the benefit of a college education that would have kept them out of the draft.

Because music changed so rapidly in the ‘60s, most of my high school classmates

saw not only doo-wop but any kind of pre-Beatles rock as something as ancient as the Napoleonic Wars. In 12th grade, I was on a committee that invited famous people to the school assembly. Once, the faculty advisor suggested that we invite a singer or musician and showed us a list of people who were available. Looking down the list, I nominated Chuck Berry, my favorite ‘50s solo artist. I was the only student who even knew who he was.

The next year, I entered the State University of New York at Binghamton as a freshman. My first week there, coming from the other end of my dormitory’s first-floor hallway, I heard the unmistakable sounds of Little Richard’s “Tutti Frutti.” The guy playing the record was short, about my age, with mid-length brown hair and wearing a brown leather jacket. I walked into his room. “You like that?” he asked with a smile. When the song ended, he put on Jerry Lee Lewis’ “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Going On,” another of my favorites. We started talking—his name was Danny Ellman, and he came from Far Rockaway. He’d been into oldies since high school. He then introduced me to his favorite up-tempo doo-wop song—Lee Andrews and the Hearts’ “The Clock,” the frantic flip side of one of Lee’s popular late ‘50s romantic ballads. What a great song, I thought. At last, I was home! ▼

Raanan Geberer is a semi-retired journalist who grew up in the Bronx and lives in Manhattan with his wife Rhea. He is the former managing editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, wrote a series of local history articles for the Straus News chain of weeklies, and wrote freelance articles for 15 years for a co-op and condo publication. His hobbies include anything to do with trains, history and politics, and music (he plays several instruments and has played in several bands). Photo courtesy of the author.



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