

Along Came Al

The 'Al' Adolph Jacobs Story

By Opal Louis Nations

Most avid collectors of 1950s rock n roll would probably give their eye-teeth to have hung out at LA's Master Recorders studios during 1957 to witness The Coasters, under the direction of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, cut some of their classic chart-busting hits like 'Searchin' (peaking at No.1 in May 1957) and 'Young Blood' (peaking at No.2 a week before.)

Our man 'Al' Adolph Jacobs was highly gratified to have had the opportunity to play first or second guitar behind The Coasters on at least five sessions stretching from March 1957 through January 1959. Al has spent most of his life in music and is as humble and unassuming now as he was when he started out fifty-four years ago. Al was born on April 15th 1939 in Pineland, then a small, rural town in Sabine County, East Texas, not far from the Louisiana border. A feeling of optimism prevailed at the time as the World Trade Fair was about to open in New York. Louis Jacobs, Al's father, was an illiterate day labourer and handyman. Thelma McCraw, his mother, was a homemaker. Louis and Thelma were blessed with seven children, four boys and three girls, all named, by Louis, after illustrious men and women who had made their mark in life. He thought that if he gave his kids a celebrated name, they would get a good start in life. Only Al showed any propensity for music.

By the early 1940s, many of the Jacobs clan had moved to the San Francisco Bay Area. Al and his family followed suit around 1944, settling in the Campbell Village section of West Oakland at 875 Willow Street to be close to the Naval shipyards (now The Naval Supply Center) where the family had heard there was work to be had. Louis managed to secure a job in the shipyards, just a walk away from home. Other members of the Jacobs clan had signed up at the Port before them. Louis worked long hours so most of the child-raising was taken care of by Thelma and relatives.

Al attended Prescott Elementary and tuned into the black radio stations, KWBR in Oakland and Berkeley, and KDIA in Oakland. From radio listening he cultivated an all-round musical taste for blues, blues and rhythm and big band music. His musical interests later on spread to include songs of a Latin flavor. In 1952, Al moved to McClymonds High School where he befriended Robert Woods, a fledgling baritone singer and guitarist (also from Campbell Village) who encouraged Al to take up the six-stringed instrument.

THE 5 CAMPBELLS

In 1953, Al and Robert decided to form a vocal group out of friends in their neighbourhood. The determined five-member group named The 5 Campbells, of course, consisted of Robert Woods, lead guitar / baritone and second lead, Donald Alexander, tenor, George Ashford, first and second tenor lead, Marvin 'Toots' Hawkins, high tenor, and Al Jacobs, second guitar and vocals where needed. The group rehearsed and

sang for friends around Campbell Village. "Toots" was related to the Bay Area's first gospel family, the Hawkins Singers of 'Oh Happy Day' fame.

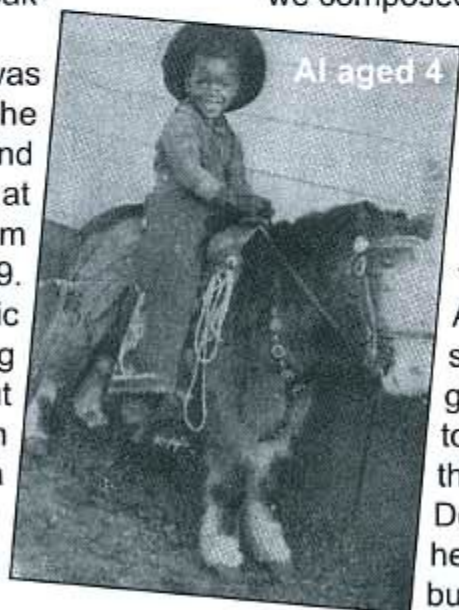
"Down in Campbell Village", says Al, "there was a beautiful girl called Morrine. She was so lovely every guy around was in love with her. So we composed a song and dedicated it to her. By the time she had reached seven-teen she had had seven children", he added jokingly.

In February 1956, Robert Woods took The 5 Campbells over to Ray Dobard's Music City Records at 1815 Alcatraz Avenue in Berkeley. After a brief audition, Ray Dobard signed the group but because the guys were all under-age, they had to get their parents to co-sign for them. Al's mother filled the bill. Ray Dobard would record anyone who he thought could make him a buck but paid the group nothing except the car-fare to get them to gigs on promotion tours.

With Johnny Heartsman on bass guitar and piano, Ray Cotton on drums and both Robert and Al on guitars, The 5 Campbells recorded 'Morrine', a slow, dragging dirge or love ballad sung in soldierly fashion, sandwiched with the perky 'Hey Baby', a dance ditty in the Mid-nighters' vein. "On the instrumental bridge I played the theme to 'Davy Crockett' which seemed to go quite well. I also played it again on the bridge to 'Lil' Dream Girl' by The Gay-larks. I was roped in on the session 'cause it was being recorded on the same day," remembers Al.

THE 'NEW' MEDALLIONS

'Morrine' garnered a lot of play in the Greater Bay Area which helped the guys find work on programmes with other young teen groups on weekends. At one point, the group played for their school, McClymonds High, and right there in the audience sat the very young Chris James who would later go on to lead The Natural Four.



Al with The Medallions



Being too young to play clubs, The 5 Campbells were restricted to parties and socials. By now, having listened to the work of B.B. King, Al had developed the makings of a blues guitar style. With nothing much happening with The 5 Campbells after the record fizzed out, Al went with the local Robert Ward Band as lead guitarist. The 5 Campbells soon disbanded. While playing in Vallejo with the Robert Ward Band, Al was noticed by Jimmy Green of LA's "new" Medallions group who were recording for Dootsie Williams' Dootone label. Al was enlisted as The Medallions' guitar player.

By late 1955, original lead singer Vernon Green (Jimmy's brother) had quit The Medallions to form The Phantoms and the original Medallions had broken up. The "new" Medallions now consisted of Jimmy Green, lead, Charles Gardner, tenor, Albert Johnson, tenor, and Otis Scott, baritone and bass. By April 1956, however, this quartet had also disbanded. In order to keep The Medallions in survival mode, The Dootones were enlisted to temporarily masquerade as The Medallions on record. The young seventeen-year-old Al Jacobs bussed himself down to LA on the Greyhound to play guitar for the "new" Medallions on weekends at live engagements. Al says that while he played in Jimmy Green's group, Vernon would occasionally show up for gigs. Al and The Medallions played Art Leboe's shows at the El Monte Legion Stadium and for Johnny Otis at the New Life Club in West L.A. He also travelled with them to Vancouver, British Columbia to appear at Isys and at The Cave Supper Club.

THE COASTERS

The Medallions were included on programmes with The Coasters, and this led to a friendship with Billy Guy, The Coasters' lead baritone. Guy enrolled Al to play the part of lead guitar in The Coasters in early 1957 when he was still only seventeen years old. In February 1957, The Coasters were made up of Carl Gardner, Billy Guy, Obediah Jessie and Bobby Nunn. On the group's February 15th 1957 session, Al was eased into the mix as second guitar with Barney Kessell. "Barney would play a lick and he would have me do something that would be complementary", recalls Al. As always on a Leiber & Stoller session, Mike just played piano while Jerry took control of the actual session, handing out little slips of lyrics and keeping the atmosphere

businesslike and fixed on the work at hand.

The Coasters were given no time to goof around. The February 15th session was conducted at Master Recorders in LA and yielded the now universally recognized 'Searchin' and 'Young Blood'. As always, Abe 'Bunny' Robyn engineered on the LA sessions. While the group was on tour they recorded at the Chess Studios in Chicago with either Willie Dixon or Louis Myers on bass, Fred Below on drums and Floyd McDaniels on guitar. This July 24th 1957 session conducted by Leiber & Stoller netted the comic parable 'Idol With The Golden Head', '(When She Wants Good Lovin') My Baby Comes To Me' and the Billy Guy-led 'What Is The Secret Of Your Success?' Leon Hughes had replaced Obediah Jessie in the group, Gil Bernal was not around to add his searing tenor sax, and Al was left to himself to lay down the guitar parts.

For the reverse side of the 'What Is The Secret Of Your Success?' release, Leiber & Stoller reached back to the February 15th session for the very personalized version of 'Sweet Georgia Brown' with a lead vocal shared between Carl Gardner, Billy Guy and Bobby Nunn. Work was coming in thick and fast by this point and The Coasters played all the major venues in Los Angeles and Las Vegas plus a multitude of Hiltons, Travelodges and civic auditoriums. Next came the session of all sessions: the first conducted at the Atlantic Studios in New York and, as usual, under Leiber & Stoller's supervision. This time Cornell Gunter had replaced Leon Hughes and Will 'Dub' Jones came in for Bobby Nunn. This March 17th 1958 session, of course, was the legendary 'Yakety Yak' date. "Right from the start", says Al, "King Curtis, who was elected to play tenor in place of Gil Bernal, had become the principal focus around which 'Yakety Yak' was conceived. As soon as we heard his knockout stuttering sax licks we knew where we had to go."

Alan Hanlon assisted Al on guitar on this one alongside the great Clifton 'Skeeter' Best. This was Tom Dowd's first of many sessions with The Coasters. 'Yakety Yak' spent fourteen weeks on

Al with The Coasters



the Billboard R&B chart, residing at number one for half that length of time. The sudden rush of success took The Coasters to the Apollo Theatre in New York, the Uptown in Philadelphia, the Howard in Washington, D.C., the Royal in Baltimore plus Dick Clark's 'American Bandstand' and a host of other venues at home and abroad too numerous to mention.

'Dub' Jones assumed the spotlight on 'Zing! Went The Strings Of My Heart', the second song from the March 17th session. The vocally perfect 'Three Cool Cats', the session's third song, was released later in January 1959. Al insists that he played guitar on 'Poison Ivy', but the session logs tell us that 'Poison Ivy' was recorded in New York on July 16th 1959, half a year after Al quit Coasters sessions. The session sheets show that Sonny Forriest and Alan Hanlon played guitar on the recording date. Could this mean that 'Poison Ivy' was tried out at an earlier session and then re-recorded later?

The August 8th 1958 New York session gave us the scary 'The Shadow Knows', again featuring King Curtis with Al and Alan Hanlon sharing guitar licks. King Curtis is sadly absent from the session's second number, 'Sorry But I'm Gonna Have To Pass', a ditty led by 'Dub' Jones who by this point had made himself a major lead soloist in the group. Al had been paid musicians' scale for all his recording work, receiving \$40.00 - \$50.00 per side on singles and \$200 for a full album.

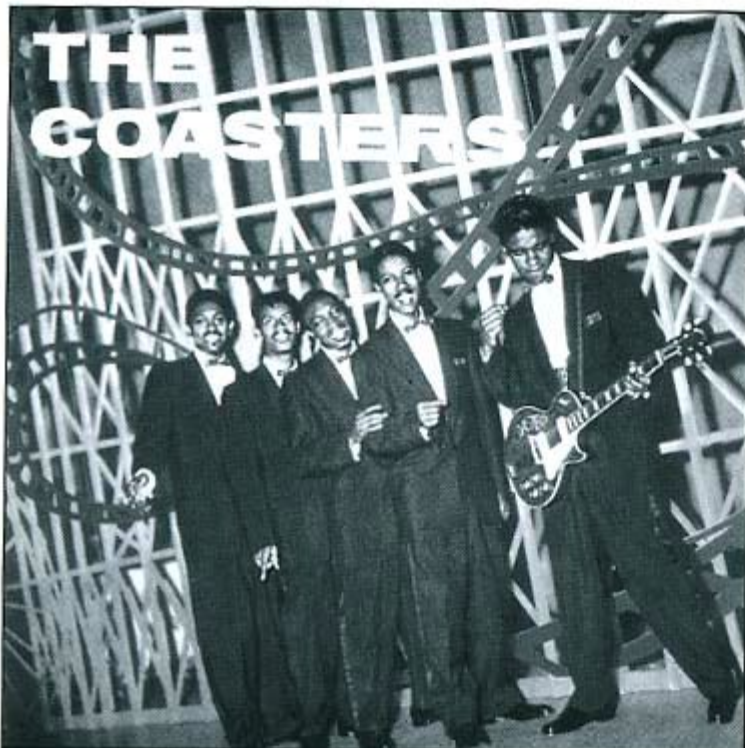
Al's last session with The Coasters on December 11th 1958 gave us 'Hey Sexy', which remained unissued until 1992, plus the unstoppable 'Charlie Brown' which peaked at No.2 in Billboard's February 1959 bestsellers chart, having stayed on the listing for twelve weeks. I asked Al why he stayed with The Coasters for as long as he did and he said: "It was because of the girls." (*Don't you just love an honest answer!* - Ed)

Over the 1958 Christmas season, Al and The Coasters were returning to New York from Texas at the end of a tour when suddenly their limousine was struck by lightning. Although no one was hurt, the strike scared the heck out of them. Being unable to travel further, they pulled off the road and stayed overnight at a roadside motel.

Although Al quit doing Coasters



Al on stage at the Apollo Theatre with The Coasters



THE COASTERS' GREATEST HITS THE COASTERS' GREATEST HITS THE COASTERS' GREATEST HITS



Al appeared on the cover of The Coasters' debut LP in 1957 (Atco LP 33-101) as well as the group's 1959 'Greatest Hits' album (Atco LP 33-111)

sessions (Tony Motolla took his place) he continued to play live gigs with them, the last being a Dick Clark tour in 1960. By this time Al felt he was making little progress and wanted a career change.

AFTER THE COASTERS

He found a job working in LA with the Lala Wilson Band, which was contracted to both the Carl Peterson and Manny Schwartz booking agencies. Whenever a major artist needed a professional pick-up band to meet engagements, the Lala Wilson Band filled the bill. The outfit was composed of Lala on electric bass, Al on guitar, Ron Sillaco on drums and the great Maurice Simon (an old Illinois Jacquet stalwart) played tenor sax. Membership was fluid. Elliot Shavers sometimes sat in on tenor as did trumpeter Jake Porter. The band played behind such notables as Sam Cooke, Lowell Fulson,

Percy Mayfield, Jimmy Witherspoon and T-Bone Walker. Al had known Manny Schwartz a long while as he often booked The Coasters. Carl Peterson handled all of Sam Cooke's one-nighters.

In the mid-'60s, Al took up singing to get more work and make more money. (By now he had made LA his permanent home.) To help in this he formed his first combo, Speed Limit, in 1968, the group becoming a regular feature at LA's Grand Prix club. Group members were Al on guitar and vocals, Gerald Mathis on organ and Lode Murchison on drums. Motown songs were the order of the day and Speed Limit dished them up. As a studio guitarist and back-up singer, Al played on many successful recordings for several major labels,



including Decca, Mercury and Motown. Now and again, when required, he worked with The Drifters and The Platters. He also stayed a while in the Little Richard touring band; Jimi Hendrix took on lead while Al played rhythm.

In the 1970s, Al formed The Adolph Jacobs Trio with Andrew Heard on sax, Clarence Blue on drums and himself on guitar. Bob Brown sometimes filled in on vocals. Ex-football star Woodley Lewis opened the Sportsman's Bowl & Night Club in South LA and Al's Trio became the resident combo. Al worked for Lewis right up until 1990. He then took his outfit to Oahu and played in Honolulu at the Blaisdell Arena, out at Pearl Harbour, and at Waimea Falls. He claims to have been the first African American musician to play on Oahu (despite the fact that black musicians have played on the Naval bases for decades). Al also played swank parties on the Queen Mary docked at Long Beach.

In recent times, Al has gone out as a solo at senior retirement centres in LA. His songbook includes standards from the 1930s and 1940s as well as oldies and big band charts.

He has self-produced a CD of all this as well as a collection of Latin standards. He also holds forth at Spanish-speaking elder-care centers. "I can sing the lyrics but cannot speak the language", he says. Both are available through his website, www.aljacobs10.com. He is all gung-ho about working and touring in Europe. Those interested in taking him on should contact him at aljacobs10@verizon.net

(Compiled from conversations with Al Jacobs. All photos supplied by him too!)