



## **“My Soul Concerto” The Story of The Apollos**

**by Opal Louis Nations**

During the early 1960s, an ambitious number of San Francisco Bay Area hopeful harmonists were inspired by such leading female gospel luminaries of the day as the Caravans, Gospel Harmonettes and Stars of Faith to travel the church circuit. Among the best remembered were the Andrews Singers of Berkeley who were fortunate enough to record for Capitol Records, Odessa Perkins and the Lathanettes who waxed for John Reid of Reid’s Records, Wayne Stovall & The Valley Wonders who cut for Don Robey’s Song Bird imprint and a Golden Gate City group strongly rooted in the Post War vocal tradition known variously as the Appollos, Apollos, Lovejoys, Apollas and Love Salvation.

The Apollas (whose name was originally swiped from Bess Berman’s legendary Apollo diskery in New York), cut the “o” and switched it with an “a” to avoid confusion with other Apollo groups on a slew of minor labels. They sounded, at least early on, like a cross between the polished singing Sweet Inspirations (formerly the Drinkard Singers) and the sanctified, tough-throated Davis Sisters who smoked the church. The group started as gospel-gals, switched to soul-pop, then R & B, building their sound around the awe-inspiring pipes of the elegantly beautiful Leola Jiles.

The Apollas knocked-em-dead during the peak of their lifespan which, according to Ella Jamerson-Haynes, was the 1961 through 1964 period. To tell the Apollas’ story, I have chosen to dwell on the experiences of two of the pivotal members, Ella

Jamerson-Haynes, a contralto who rarely assumed lead but preferred the joys of being a background vocalist, and Leola Jiles, one of the Bay Area's finest, award-winning gospel, jazz, soul and classical music sopranos.

Ella Jamerson-Haynes was born November 13, 1931 in Rome, Georgia, ninety miles North-West of Atlanta. Ella's grandfather, Ernest Waddell, enjoyed syncopation and played alto and baritone saxophone in a locally known jazz combo. Her parents Ruth Waddell and Shropshire Hollins were a stable, loving couple fondly remembered by Ella. The nine-year-old Ella Hollins moved with her family to San Francisco's Daly City district in 1940. At first, Ella's parents were members of the Jerusalem Baptist Church of South Palo Alto, but later, after a move that landed them closer to the City, they transferred to Rev. Victor L. Medearis's Double Rock Baptist Church at 1595 Shafter Avenue in the Bay View-Hunter's Point constituency. The Double Rock was also the home and sanctuary to the Paramount Gospel Singers with whom Medearis sang and helped bring along.

Ella served time in the junior choir, then graduated to the senior choristers and onto a place in the Medearis Specials. The Specials were an exceptional bunch of hand-picked young ladies who performed regularly over the airwaves at KRE in Berkeley. KRE was one of the few Bay Area radio stations to feature local gospel talent on an ongoing, sponsored basis. Ella joined the Specials shortly after marrying E. Morris Kelly, co-founder and baritone singer with the Paramount Singers. The Paramounts had signed a contract with Coral, a Decca Record Company subsidiary who was making goodly sums of money at the time with sales of Erskine Hawkins records. Coral was signing "race artists" from various musical disciplines as fast as they could. When Ella warbled in the Medearis Specials, the group was composed of Augustine Jackson, Gloria Beverly, Shirley Brown and Ella herself. The outfit built their songbook around nationwide favorites made popular by aggregations like the Gertrude Ward Singers and Angelic Gospel Singers of Philadelphia.

Ella's marriage to Kelly lasted only a short while. Kelly was a career-focused person and was unwilling to devote enough time to family life. Temperamental by nature, Kelly lacked the wherewithal to devote himself to a lasting relationship. Ella believed that Ben Williams, the Paramounts' basso singer, was the one stable member whose input held the Paramounts together at this point. The Paramounts were on the threshold of gaining national recognition and would have improved their fortunes had they had the freedom to tour the country. Ella and Kelly divorced in 1957. Kelly later worked with Oakland blues singer Rodger Collins when Collins was under contract with Fantasy Records in Berkeley. Collins enjoyed a regional hit with "She's looking good" on Galaxy in 1967.

Some time during 1955, Ella joined the Angelairs, the group in which Linda Hopkins is rumored to have sung. The Angelairs were probably closely related to the Bay Area's own Gospel Tones (one of many groups of that name around the nation.) Ella remembers the Angelairs as being composed of Zan (Zanner) Franklin, Emma (Emily) "Tut" Franklin (the wife of Ermant Franklin Jnr. who served in the Mighty Clouds of Joy throughout the 1960s), and Jean Butler. Butler was confidante and co-gospel songwriter with Fairest Naomi Wagoner, founder of the Angelairs. Butler later formed a group called the Darlings who waxed for Jim Stewart's Volt label out of Memphis during the 1960s.

Wagoner played an integral part in the development of gospel music and singing in the Bay Area. Wagoner describes herself (in Volume One of her book, "Understanding Music - A Simplified Method to Mastering the Piano") as a third generation offspring of the founding fathers of the Church of God in Christ. After a formative period in the Oakland Unified School District through twelfth grade, she studied music in Arizona, then went on to earn a doctorate in divinity from Trinity Hall College and Seminary in Chicago. Wagoner labored on, training groups and choirs within the C.O.G.I.C denomination for fifty-three years. During the 1950s, under contract with both Peacock and Specialty Records, she composed gospel tunes for quartets such as the Soul Stirrers and Pilgrim Travelers.

Wagoner's most important contributions to gospel song, besides being generally regarded among the church community as Oakland's "Mother of Gospel Music," are "I'll be a witness" and the beautiful gospel ballad "Any day now" based on Douglas Furber's 1917 chestnut, "Bells of St. Mary." "Any day now" was supposedly co-written with Angelair member Jean Butler who first presented the song in concert. The song was initially recorded (with Fairdest at the piano) by Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers (who rehearsed the tune at Wagoner's home around the grand) in 1954 for Art Rupe's Specialty label and is currently available on Specialty CD 7004-2.

In 1961, Leola Jiles recorded the song at a church in Pittsburg, California under Wagoner's direction over a choral background made up of a hundred Pittsburg residents ranging in ages from thirteen to twenty-one. The record was cut for Wayne Farlow's San Francisco-based Orchestra Records at the Solomon Temple Missionary Baptist Church of Pittsburg. Orchestra, with its studio based in a Quonset hut out at Oakland Airport's Building 727, recorded jazz, soul, rock and gospel and cut Credence Clearwater Revival's first three singles under the Blue Velvets imprint. (Tragically, all the original Blue Velvets masters have been destroyed.)

Wagoner also took in pupils--Ola Jean Andrews of the Andrews Sisters was among the most notable. The Angelairs performed locally in the Bay Area and on weekends ventured out to engagements in Sacramento and as far away as Los Angeles. This is where Ruth Black-Castille entered the picture. Black is best remembered throughout California for her beautifully rendered 1947 Capitol Records version of Horatio Palmer's "Yield not to temptation," sumptuously backed by the St. Paul's Church Choir of Los Angeles under the direction of the legendary Prof. James Earl Hines. Her husband, Milton Castille, sang with Joseph L. Scott and the Sunlight Jubilees out of Oakland who recorded for Down Town in the early 1950s.

Black (who was both an ex-Angelair and close friend of Wagoner's) took, according to Ella, herself, Emma and Zan out of the Angelairs and formed the Inspirational Tones. With the robust Rita Blan and Black herself, the gals had a quintet. The history of the Inspirational Tones is given in the program guide to the outfit's Fourth Anniversary which was held at 3 p.m. on Sunday November 1, 1959 at the St. John Missionary Baptist Church on San Francisco's Newhall Street. The group started as "The Gospel Tones" in July 1955 and later changed names to the Inspirational Tones by Herman H. Harper. Original members included Ella, Emma, Zan, Ruth and Rochell (Joann) Forks with Ronnie Brown at the piano. In the summer of 1956, Ruth, Zan, and Rochell moved to Los Angeles and were replaced by Rita Lewis from Vallejo and Lorraine Strains of Forth Worth, Texas. Strains passed away in 1957.

In June 1959, Edna Turner was added to the group, and Zanner Franklin returned. Affiliated with the El Bethal Baptist Church with Rev. J.B. Willis as their pastor, the Inspirational Tones built quite a local reputation. They played at S.F.U. and at the First Annual Original Negro Spiritual Concert, sponsored by the Benjamin Franklin Jr. High School Dad's Club of San Francisco at the Opera House on April 22, 1960, six months after their fourth anniversary program at which the Trumpet Singers along with the Cavalets, Andrews Sisters and Paramounts sang as guests.

Ella recalls that the Inspirational Tones played all the major local church venues including the Rev. Carl Anderson's St. John's Baptist Church in Oakland and the Rev. George W. Killen's Mt. Calvary Baptist on Twenty-Third Avenue, also in Oakland. Ella sang in the Inspirational Tones until they split up in 1961. Ella then formed a duet with her old friend Joann Forks of the Tones. The pair sang secular music in nightclubs for awhile. Then Ella had the notion of forming a quartet to perform gospel in a nightclub setting with the help of Connie Wye, an agent with a studio on McAllister Street in San Francisco. Wye brought Hiram Walker up from Los Angeles, and for music and arrangement Ella brought in Ronnie Brown who had played piano with the Inspirational Souls. Now composed of two males and two females, the act rehearsed six days a week at Wye's studio. The quartet worked long and tirelessly.

Pop-gospel (or nite-club gospel) was fast becoming a popular idiom in 1961. For the most part, pop-gospel was invented and hyped up by clever promotion management teams at Columbia Records in New York. Artists like the Herman Stevens Singers and the legendary Bessie Griffin and the Gospel Pearls, fresh out of their stage production of "Portraits in Bronze," played trendy pop-gospel venues like the Sweet Chariot in New York and the Bear in Chicago. The Bay Area's Hungry I Club was Northern California's equivalent showcase. The idea was to win white acceptance for black gospel music by placing the African American performers in a safe, pseudo-intellectual, white setting. The same was being done for popular black blues singers, although the idea was pioneered by the Dixie Hummingbirds who played white café society some seventy years ago. The torch was taken up by Clara Ward and Prof. Alex Bradford in white-run establishments throughout the 1950s.

Back at Connie Wye's studio, both Della Reece and Carmen McCrea dropped in at rehearsals to catch the group, now freshly labeled the Apollos. The outfit appeared on KTVU's Amateur Hour on Channel 2 in Oakland and through Wye's dealings with Norman Ashton, a wealthy philanthropist from Southern California, appeared at the Sugar Hill Nightery on Broadway in San Francisco. Ashton of course owned a large chunk of the Sugar Hill. Michael Wilsie wrote the group up in his Night Life column (Pink Section, Sunday Chronicle, December 10, 1961). He stated that the group's appearances at a night club "incur an unfavorable reaction within their community's churches."

A string of luminaries passed through the Sugar Hill Club, and the Apollos played with all of them: Tampa Red, T-Bone Walker, John Lee Hooker, Memphis Slim, Red Foxx, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, to name a few. The Sugar Hill Club at that time was being operated by Barbara Dane, the white blues & folk singer/guitarist/pianist, born Barbara Jean Spillman in Detroit. Dane had her own regular children's program, "Wake up and sing" on KPIX in San Francisco at the time.

The group's next extended engagement was at the Hungry I in San Francisco where they shared billing and backgrounded for Barbara Streisand. This was where

they were noticed by Saul Zaentz and Sol Weiss of Fantasy Records in Berkeley. In 1961, after a year dormancy period, Zaentz and Weiss decided to reactivate the Galaxy imprint which had primarily been a jazz label. In fact, the first five issues in the new 700 series were of jazz. It was decided to also put blues and gospel on Galaxy to cater to a broader market. The Apollos (now the Apollas) were the label's first and only venture into gospel, and this they achieved with pressings in green wax. Zaentz and Weiss used a live recording made at the Hungry I as an audition tape. (Strangely, this tape remains unissued to this day).

The Apollas cut for Fantasy one full year before Ray Sanklin took control of production and the label became a surprisingly successful soul and blues outlet for a host of local talent. The Apollas cut one four-song session, including "I can't believe it," a wild, frantic pop-gospelized version of a riff recorded in 1957 by Joe De Loatch and the Gospel Cleffs for Savoy Records featuring Ronnie Brown and "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child" with Ella Jamerson-Haynes showcasing Henry Thacker Burleigh's traditional spiritual. Ella gives the chart a lilting, modern arrangement in the style of Nina Simone.) "Lord, Lord, Lord," headed up by Hiram Walker, is given a sort of sanctified supper-club feel. "Lord, Lord, Lord" is a song Prof. Alex Bradford claims to have written in 1953, designed to awaken church members asleep on the benches. "Say a prayer," a tune that changes tempo midway, is the most interesting of the four. Given the Caravans' treatment, it zips along with much fervor and excitement, then comes to a point where a heavy backbeat takes over and transforms the tune into an alley blues.

None of the four offerings display any outstanding, ear-catching merit which might explain why the two singles releases sold poorly and the group as a unit never recorded for Fantasy again. The Apollas were clearly unhappy with the way they sounded and realized that changes would have to be made. Pianist Ronnie Brown was dropped as a vocalist and used only as musician on later live engagements. This arrangement lasted until 1965. Hiram Walker was let go and soon replaced by Leola Jiles. Ella heard Jiles singing "Any day now" backed by one hundred Pittsburg residents on the radio and knew immediately that her uniquely powerful voice was what was needed in the Apollas. Ella contacted Fairdest Wagoner and Wagoner brought Jiles into the group.

Meanwhile, Ella Jamerson-Haynes cut one record for Galaxy as a solo item. Maybe she thought the Apollas were doomed. At any rate, the session date must have come at a time when she thought the Apollas would never gel together the way she had imagined in her mind. Backed by the Vince Guaraldi Trio, Ella taped three songs. One of them, "When I fall in love," is a moody jazz-tinged, smoky soul version of the standard written by Victor Young in 1952 and charted by Doris Day. "Since I fell for you," a deep, muddy soul version with jazz and gospel slurs and drawn-out phrasings, is quite different from the Buddy and Ella Johnson 1945 Decca original. Ella's rendition captures the song in a perfect and unique way. To my mind, this was Ella Jamerson-Haynes' finest moment on wax. The third song, "Cast your fate to the wind" was written by Guaraldi's mother and held in the can. Mel Torme had chosen to record it, and Guaraldi did not want anyone to get in the way of an artist with a proven track record. Too bad, as I am sure Ella did a great job with the song. Torme's Atlantic version came out in 1963.

Back to the Apollas' newest and youngest recruit, Leola Jiles. Mrs. Robert C. (Leola) Jiles of Pittsburg, California was born to Hilton and Harriet Davis around 1940 in Ferriday, La., just north of Natchez across the border in Mississippi. Her parents sang in a gospel group which broadcast on a regular fifteen minute slot from a station in Natchez. Young Leola who grew up quite the tomboy was encouraged by her mother to take up singing, but the gal hung back when she heard her mother in concert. "My mother had a voice that excelled mine by far," says Jiles. Moving out to Pittsburg, California in the 1950s, Jiles attended Pittsburg High where she entered talent shows and Diablo Valley College. Her musical adventures included solo folk, gospel and jazz performances in Ohio and Chicago. She sang at Cobo Hall in Detroit. Jiles made other unreleased recordings with the Pittsburg residents known otherwise as the American Singers Association, Local 13. Jiles is reported to have sung at Sugar Hill with the Apollas, probably as guest soloist.

At the close of the group's lengthy stay at the Hungry I, the Apollas were noticed by "Biddy" Woods (Damita Jo's second husband). Woods was sufficiently impressed to ask the Apollas to open at the Sweet Chariot Club in New York. At first the group took second billing with the Drinkard Singers, Dionne Warwick's cousins. When the Drinkards moved on, the Apollas replaced them.

In Lee Hildebrand's article on Leola Jiles in a September 1986 S.F. Chronicle / Examiner, he mentions a protest led by Mahalia Jackson and her supporters picketing outside the club. It seems that they were offended by the fact that gospel music was being performed at a venue where liquor was being served.

After a spell at Trudie Heller's, the Apollas ended up at the Eighth Wonder at 33 West Eighth Street. Sister Rosetta Tharpe topped the bill, and the Apollas took second billing over the Soul Riders plus Andy and the Bey Sisters. The Newark-born Bey Sisters, Salome and Geraldine with pianist brother Andy, were an interesting item inspired by Clara Ward. Choosing to sing pop and jazz, the Beys toured Europe, appeared in a number of movies and recorded for RCA. There are many similarities between the Beys and Apollas. They differed only by the fact that they were a duo and not a trio like the Apollas.

By now, Connie Wye had dropped out and the group was being managed (for a short time at least) by James Kerr. During the Apollas engagement at the Sweet Chariot, they were visited and given a glowing report by Dorothy Kilgallen who wrote them up in the New York Journal American. At Trudie Heller's Club in Greenwich Village, the Apollas were noticed by Joe Glasser who took the gals to Leiber and Stoller's fledgling Red Bird Records. Red Bird was set up with a third partner, George Goldner (who proprietored a number of record companies during the 1950s, including Gone with the Wind and End). Changing from the Apollas gospel group to Leola and the Lovejoys, an R & B manifestation, Ella, Leola, and Joann cut four sides on two, maybe three sessions resulting in two singles releases for the Red Bird subsidiary, Tiger Records. The second seven incher sold promisingly and was consequently reissued on the parent Red Bird label a year later.

It was the initial waxing that could have catapulted the group to stardom. One of the two songs on the first release was Eli Greenwich and Jeff Barry's "He ain't no angel," an upbeat pop-sounding vehicle with tight guitar chording and nice Ray Charles-like organ fills and the group wailing in unison. The other was "Wait 'round the corner," a song arranged by Garry Sherman, is a steamy ballad based on Willa A.

Townsend's beautiful gospel hymn, "Wade in the water." Leola gives the chart a sensual feel, while the backing gals fill in with round-mouthed gospel chants. "Wait 'round the corner" showed how soulful the group could become when given the right material.

Sales seemed pretty good for a first outing. The record started to take off, and on the strength of this the group was given an extra chance for success with the Tiger release of "It's mighty nice" recorded in New York and "Payin' (for the wrong I've done)" committed to tape in Oakland. "It's mighty nice," a ballad based on one of Rev. James Cleveland's message songs, is one of the group's strongest efforts with its tough, hard-edged, shouting lead and gospel backgrounding. "Payin' (for the wrong I've done)" is a sensational, spine-tingling soul ballad, with a church-rooted refrain sung with solid conviction supported by stinging guitar. Both sides were produced by Clint Ballard Jr., author of Betty Everett's "You're no good."

"Payin'" is quite easily the girls' most impressive effort. When it came out in the late summer of 1963, it showed signs of doing as well as "He ain't no angel," which by now was denting a few local charts. All hopes were dashed however, when, on November 22nd, President John F. Kennedy was fatally wounded as he rode in a motorcade through downtown Dallas. The grief of millions cast a dark shadow over everything. "The deejays just didn't play "He ain't no angel" anymore," says Ella.

Severing ties to James Kerr and Garry Sherman and after guesting with Rosey (Rev.) Grier, the girls returned to California. Hooking up with Connie Wye once more, the Apollas played the TV. circuit appearing on Shiverree, the Joey Bishop Nite Show, the Mike Douglas Show, Lloyd Thaxton, at the Golden Bear Club and on Shindig, alternating with the Blossoms whose principal members eventually evolved into Bob B. Soxx & the Blue Jeans on Philles. Leola Jiles mentions that the group played at the Monterey Jazz Festival, the Troubadour in San Francisco and the Capri and Losers Club North on Almaden in Los Angeles. Sly & the Family Stone took second billing under the Apollas at the Losers North. Jiles asserts that the group did not appear on the Dinah Shore Show, but Ella Jamerson-Haynes insists that they did make a guest appearance. Perhaps they made the guest list at a later date.

The group's first brush with the program was when Shore's producer caught the Apollas' act in L.A. and wanted to audition them as featured guests. Auditions at NBC Hollywood studios came about. Taping was scheduled for the November 18 show. The Apollas' agent could not come up with an amiable deal with the network, and the whole thing fell through. "Our agent," says Jiles, "wanted too much so NBC dropped us. As it turned out, we would have gotten \$3,500 had we made our appearance." This is where Frankie Laine comes in, but let us skip ahead a bit first.

At the Losers North, the Apollas were backed by Mike Nesmith on guitar and Peter Tork on bass, two of the three original Monkees. The Monkees had just, or were about to, sign with Don Kirshner and his Aldon Music Company in New York. The Apollas toured with the Monkees, and the two groups worked together extremely well as a team. 1965 also saw the short but sweet tenure of Dorothy "Dottie" Ramsey who sang in place of Forks for a few months.

By mid-1964, the group had reached a point in their career where they came to be managed by the best in the business. Singer Frankie Laine held a party at Ye Little Club in June in Beverly Hills, and a multitude of recording industry people were invited. Connie Wye had passed away, and the Apollas were now seeking strong

representation. Salvation came in the form of Jackie Sheridan of Laine Enterprises (Coast Artists). Sheridan caught the Apollas' act at Ye Little Club and was bowled over. Laine had not had a charted record in almost two years and needed to revamp his career. Jamerson-Haynes, Jiles, Washington, Ronald Brown, and Frankie Laine entered into an employment agreement on August 27. The Apollas appeared with Laine for an eleven-day engagement at Club Safari in San Jose for \$600 a week. For this, the Apollas had to give twelve shows. "We also played John Astruga's, Nugget Casino in Reno, and the Dunes in Las Vegas," says Jamerson-Haynes.

The Plain Dealer of Ohio for Wednesday, March 10, 1965 reported that Frankie Laine introduced the Apollas to the audience at the Virginian Restaurant with the remarks "These gospel and jazz singers will swing you either to heaven or the hotter place, so don't blame them if their songs send you where you deserve to go." the November issue of Rhythm 'n' News detailed the gals as "A chic young trio presenting a well-rounded assortment of pop, rock and folk to an enthusiastic crowd." Backed by a driving piano, bass and drums, the lively trio rocked out.

The Apollas were topping the bill at the Ice House on S. Brand in Glendale, Ca. with Mason Williams. By now, the Apollas had just waxed their first single for Loma Records. Under Jackie Sheridan's promotion, both Motown and Warner Brothers offered to sign the Apollas as a popular, secular act. Folk, soul, and gospel singing were relegated to their live appearances. The Apollas wanted to go with Warner Bros. because they felt they needed the freedom to develop their own act which by now included both comedy and a set number of routines. The Apollas were not in need of Motor-town grooming.

At Warner, H.B. Barnum was put in charge of the group's A & R. If the outfit had gone with Motown, they probably would have shared a better choice of songwriters and been given stronger material to record. Barnum started out in the early 1950s with a vocal group conceived by himself and Dootsie Williams called the Dootones. He set himself to writing songs, then switched to R & B and crossing over into A & R, worked with the O'Jays on his own Little Star label. Added to the Warner Bros. Loma subsidiary, the Apollas, under Bob Krasnow's guidance, recorded their first single in the summer of 1965, "You're absolutely right" and "Lock me in your heart."

"You're absolutely right" is a joyful, upbeat pop-gospel song heralded with a loud brass section and throbbing beat. "Lock me in your heart" is a moodier chart that tries to mimic the old Tina & the Ikettes sound on Sue Records. Based on Tina's "I'm just a fool in love," Leola gets down to some pretty heavy soul work. Yet it was the less fiery "You're absolutely right" that seemed to grab the attention of disc jockeys. The group also recorded the unreleased "Crawlin' back." It was held in the can as it was thought to lack commercial potential.

Switching to a mellower mood, the Apollas sung backgrounds on Frankie Laine's Capitol release "House of laughter" ("Go on with your dancing.") However, this did not reactivate Laine's slumping record sales. The Apollas added background tracks on two more sessions. The first is believed to be the Marketts' version of the novel "Batman theme" on Warner, and the second, a session more in keeping with the trio's dynamic track record, behind child prodigy Little Dion on his RCA remake of Jackie Wilson's "Lonely teardrops." (The 'B' side was "Ten feet tall.") "Lonely teardrops" earned the little guy the nickname "Jackie Wilson Junior." The record made quite a bit of noise.



The Apollas' second release on Loma was the upbeat, bouncy "Just can't get enough of you" which gives the listener the impression Barnum must have thought more orchestration was good orchestration. The song's flip was "Nobody's baby am I," a guitar-driven ballad with fat brass embellishment. Maniacally possessed songwriting and Spector-like orchestration seemed to be the key recipe of the day on girl-group recordings, although it did not work very well with the Apollas who were never given a chance to work their own magic.

Things worsened with the trio's third Loma release produced by Gene Page, "Pretty red balloons," a trivial mid-tempo pop vehicle with trite lyrics and "You'll always have me," a light, airy pop ballad with thin, ethereal, high harmonies. Trite material continued with the last Loma single in 1966, "My soul concerto," another upbeat, pop disco dirge of little lasting merit. Billy Vera's "Sorry mama," the reverse, repeats the droll, dead-end formula with its beat-based repetition and sweeping vocal backgrounds.

The Apollas made their debut on Art Linkletter's Hollywood Talent Scouts TV. show and were well received. 1967 saw the switch from Loma to the Warner Bros. parent imprint, and the coming aboard of Billy Barnum (H.B.'s sister) in place of Joann Forks. The group's first Warner release was the lavishly produced pop dance-hall pleaser, "Mr. Creator" backed with "All sold out," an imaginative (the lyrics anyway) ballad centering on the auction of one's affections for the total sum of a million teardrops.

As was usually the case, the song was swamped with cascading strings. Warner either had a lot of faith in the Apollas' coming through with a hit (written by superstars Ashford & Simpson) or someone had an in with someone at the firm. The Apollas were given three more chances at grabbing the gold. Under the label billing of Leola Jiles, the Apollas cut "Why was I born," a mid-tempo ballad in the cabaret, jazz-diva bag supported in grand fashion with bold orchestral arrangements, a foretaste of the direction Jiles was to take a little ways down the line and "Keep it coming," a song unfamiliar to these ears. The group's follow-up was "Jive Cat," a pop-jump novelty sung with such gusto one would imagine their lives depended on it (and indeed it might have done.) The underside was a slow tune called "I'm under the influence." You could swear you were listening to Diana Ross and the Supremes, yet a second clue as to how Jiles' career evolved in the not so distant future.

The trio's last chance came with "Who would want me now," a touching, sophisticated soul ballad lead by Leola that sounds every bit as good as a Garnett Mimms classic. The group in a last ditch attempt was obviously given a chance to be themselves as the singing and sanctification here is quite stunning. "Who would want me now" is their best effort on Warner and far surpasses the passion on any of the other releases. "You'll always have me," the Ashford & Simpson-penned B-side, is a rehash of the song on the group's third Loma single.

Between the flurry of Loma and Warner recordings the gals, now signed to the mighty William Morris Booking Agency in New York, toured the nation extensively and later found time to concertize in Japan, the Philippines, Honolulu, Okinawa, Taiwan, Guam, Bangkok, Sydney and New Zealand (as part of three Asian tours that ran from 1969 through 1971). In concert, the Apollas favored lots of ballads, songs such as Sinatra's "That's life," the Beatles' "And I love him," Aretha's "Ain't no way," Little Anthony's "I think I'm going out of my head" and a jazzy version of Hammerstein &

Kerns' "Ole man river," to name just a few. The gals shared concert billings with Little Anthony, Roy Head and Billy Ecstine.

Shortly after the fulfillment of the group's Warner contract, Mary Wilson, who had heard Jiles sing, offered her the opportunity to audition for Jean Terrell's place at the head of the Supremes. Terrell had sung in Diane Ross's spot for two years. Dick Glasser, who still had Jiles under contract, promised to let her go. Berry Gordy directly managed the Supremes' affairs and was not the sort of person easily hustled into a less than lucrative deal. Preliminary negotiation was set up between Glasser and Jiles and Motown executives Marvin Gaye, Smokey Robinson and president Ewart Abner. Jiles learned all the Supremes hit songs and could sing a carbon copy of each and every one of their gold and platinum recordings. But Glasser would not let Jiles go for less than a ten percent cut of the Motown deal plus a share in production. Gordy flatly turned it down. Jiles was devastated and buried herself in legal secretarial work for awhile.

Strangely, even as late as 1972, the Apollas' Loma and Warner sides were still being played in parts of the country. On the strength of their 1966 release "Just can't get enough of you," the Apollas played on a bill with Esther Phillips in Houston. In 1971, Forks was again temporarily replaced by Wonza Faraka (a.k.a. "Blondell Breed") who served for a short while. A year later, with a name change to Love Salvation, Jamerson-Haynes, Forks and Jiles recorded Ma Rainey's drag-em-down blues "Cee Cee Rider" and "I believe," a commercial-sounding, upbeat composition with repetitious lyrics and Northern Soul pretensions.

"Cee Cee Rider" was given a solid gospel feel and has a funky James Brown edge. Good, rough singing and a hard rhythmic drive peak in the excitement sector. The song was given an irresistible deep soul treatment quite retro for its time. Contracted to Larry Uttal's Bell Records, the gals possibly stood a fighting chance of getting across their firebrand form of good-time music. Uttal, once president of Monument Music, ran the Madison label during the late 1950s. Dover Records, his first proprietorship, catered to the rock and R & B crowd. The man had experience with impressive black talent. But the deal turned into a one-shot try, and the Apollas never cut for Uttal again.

Perhaps because, by now after constant touring, the despair of never getting a record off the ground and disagreements among members, the Apollas were on the verge of breaking up. The split did finally come about in 1973. Jiles, under separate contract with Glassner Productions, decided to give the music business one more try and go it alone. She recorded "To make a long story short," a song written by Van McCoy who had produced the Shirelles and Drifters and arranged by Ernie Freeman, prominent pianist and arranger on Frank Sinatra recordings, for A & M Records.

"To make a long story short" is a pretty mid-tempo ballad with sweet changes, sung in the Dionne Warwick tradition. Legend has it that the record caught on in a big way with the Northern Soul crowd who grabbed every single copy thus making it near impossible to find. Northern Soul is neither "northern" or strictly "soul." The genre came about in London during the mid-sixties. Dave Godin and friends ran a record store, focusing on danceable black pop music, and the trend snowballed from there. The word "soul" came into use because, in many cases, pioneer soul artists such as Wilson Pickett and Otis Redding frequently issued danceable "filler" or "throw-away" B-sides on the backs of their great seven-inch deep-soul gems. The Northern dance club crowd

latched onto these catchy songs. When the boogie-vinyl addicts had discovered Jiles, they started digging and turning up older material. Many of the Apollas' Loma and Warner pop singles became hot items once more. Five selections were made available on two Warner CD collections (see discography).

After the breakup of the Apollas, Ruth Black-Castille switched churches to the Tabernacle of Faith Missionary Baptist on Valencia in 1971 where she attends to this day. Ron Brown retired and now lives in Vallejo, Ca., but his wife, Gloria, sang in the Chevelles. The Chevelles were used as a background unit behind Freddie Hughes and can be heard singing behind "Will you be here" and "You got the power" (Happy Fox 504, 1971) as well as "I've got my own mind" and "I just found out" (Janus 196, 1972).

Joann Forks also retired from music and moved to the Santa Rosa Area. In 1985, Forks was caught up in a domestic dispute with a male lover brandishing a knife. Stabbed twenty-seven times, Forks is now without sight. She did, however, appear fleetingly with the Johnny Otis Band during the 1990s. Hiram Walker lives quietly in Los Angeles.

In 1974, a woman in a shoe store introduced Ella Jamerson-Haynes to her son, a dramatist by the name of Danny Duncan. Duncan was involved in producing a play entitled "Blackbirds." "Blackbirds" centered on a theme which involved great African-American performers and their appearances at Harlem's Apollo theatre on 125th Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. Jamerson-Haynes begged to be tried out for the part based on the life of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the gospel singer/guitarist from Cotton Plant, Arkansas. She auditioned and won the part. The play, which opened at the original San Francisco Opera House, ran for six months and met with considerable success. Jamerson-Haynes stayed in theatre and was awarded the part of family matriarch in "Generations" which ran on San Francisco's Bush Street.

Leola Jiles also played in "Generations." For her part in "Generations," Jamerson-Haynes was awarded the S.F. Drama Critics' best supporting actress award, a considerable feat for a thespian of her experience. From there, she was given a part as gossiping woman in "Amen Corner" which ran at the Western Addition Cultural Center on Fulton Street. Her next part, which also ran out of the Fulton Street Cultural Center, was that of Billie Holliday's mother in the drama "Billie's Song." For her part, Jamerson-Haynes was bestowed a best supporting actress award by the Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle. Her last significant role came as one similar to that portrayed in "Amen Corner." The play was called "One Sunday Morning" and it also opened at The Western Addition.

In 1979, Ella Jamerson-Haynes, along with Geri Johnson, Biana Oden, Verlin Sanders, Ola Marie Tyler and Carey Williams, performed behind Taj Mahal and his International Rhythm Band on the Live & Direct album, issued on Crystal Clear Records (5011). From 1980 through 1985, Jamerson-Haynes appeared in musical stage productions for Danny Duncan who earns his living teaching drama in the San Francisco school system.

Leola Jiles' post-Apollas career is also studded with exceptional achievement. Unlike Jamerson-Haynes, Jiles was beset by many trials and tribulations and ended up as celebrity on the night club circuit. Jiles performed twice alongside Jamerson-Haynes in the theatre. In the play "Generations" (a household family comedy), she played Katherine. For this, she won the Drama-Logue critics award. In "Amen Corner," she played Sister Margaret and was nominated for the Bay Area Critics Circle Award. Then

came a near-fatal auto accident in which she sustained severe neck and back injuries. After a regimen of jogging and water aerobics, she returned to the theatre in a major role. Jiles played Mary Magdalene in Ted Neely's production of "Jesus Christ, Superstar" at the Concord Pavilion. When the musical folded, she enrolled at U.C. Berkeley and received a B.A. in Dramatic Arts. She resumed singing and as featured vocalist headed the U.C. jazz Ensemble and toured with the band in Europe.

Jiles was invited to sing the national anthem at a Giants game in Candlestick Park. Her performance sparked controversy. A small minority criticized Jiles for making a mockery out of "The Star Spangled Banner" by singing it in her own inimitable cabaret-like fashion. But after a flood of supporting letters to Glenn Dickey's S.F. Chronicle column, Jiles was invited back three more times to sing the anthem in her own way.

On the local cabaret circuit, Jiles played the Cat, Plush Room and 1177 with her trio of musicians. She performed a solo encore benefit for the Mobilization Against AIDS organization. For her club work she was awarded both the Eighth Annual Cabaret Gold Award and the Jazz & Blues Entertainer of the Year Award in 1985. She also sang on an album recording with The U.C. Jazz Ensemble under the direction of Dr. David Tucker. In 1986 she won the Jazz and Blues Entertainer of the Year Award for the second time. The following year she played Salomé beside Plácido Domingo at San Francisco's Opera House during their annual gala Fol de Sol celebration. This was also the year she starred in Sammy Cahn's stage show "Words & Music" which toured Washington, Atlantic City and London, England.

Her next big break came in 1990 when she starred in and sang the theme to José Antonio Zorrilla's Spanish, French and Portuguese production of the movie "Winter in Lisbon." The film featured Dizzy Gillespie and centered around an exiled American jazz pianist in Paris. The movie is of little special interest except for Gillespie's part in it. In Europe, Jiles performed with Gillespie and did guest spots alongside B.B. King and Woody Herman. After performing with Gillespie at Kimball's East in Emeryville, Ca., she starred in a tribute to George Gershwin with The California Symphony at Concord Pavilion. In 1994, she was suspected of having breast cancer and underwent a lumpectomy. A further double dose of severe suffering and pain came after the death of her husband Robert from cancer and the discovery that she had developed a blood clot in her cranium. A craniotomy saved her life.

In 1994 she was well enough to sing in Support of breast cancer month for the Brookside Hospital in San Pablo, Ca. Jiles never was a quitter. Her career in cabaret continued with a tour of China in 1997 with her trio (Scott Steed, bass, Joe Barnett, piano, and Gaylord Birch, drums). Leola Jiles is an awesome talent as a singer of mesmerizing ballads, down home blues, superb renditions of jazz, pop, show tunes and electrifying gospel. The world has not heard the end of Leola Jiles.

-- Opal Louis Nations  
February 2005

With thanks to Ella Jamerson-Haynes, Leola Jiles, and Lee Hildebrand for their invaluable help.

## DISCOGRAPHY

### SINGLES

as by the (original) Apollos (Appollos):

Galaxy 707 I Can't Believe It / Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child  
(1961)

Galaxy 708 Lord, Lord, Lord / Say A Prayer (1961)

as by Ella Jamerson (Haynes) & the Vince Guaraldi Trio:

Galaxy 724 When I Fall In Love / Since I Fell For You (1962)  
Cast Your Fate To The Wind (Unissued)

as by Leola Jiles & the American Singers Association Local 13:

Orchestra OA 6254 Any Day Now / Rain, Rain, Rain (1962)

as by Leola (Jiles) & the Lovejoys:

Tiger 101 He Ain't No Angel / Wait 'Round The Corner (1963)