

God Bless Our Love : The Story of the BALLADS

by Opal Louis Nations



The Ballads were the smoothest, coolest, hippest and certainly most successful vocal singing group to come out of the San Francisco Bay Area during the Sixties. Their 1968 remake of their own 'God Bless Our Love', produced by Jesse Mason and Willie Hutch for Venture Records, shot up the 'Billboard' r&b charts in June, finally peaking at #8 after a twelve-week residency. The Ballads were also the first East Bay vocal quartet to play Harlem's famous Apollo Theatre. Ballads' recordings are sought after as frequently today by local followers, Japanese fans and British northern soul aficionados as in the past.

It all began in June 1961, when Bill Hollins, who had sung in the Fabulous Flames road group, alongside Johnny Terry, Snake Johnson and Louis Madison and had recorded for Brad Taylor's San Francisco-based Bay Tone Records a year earlier, approached Nathaniel (Nate) Romerson with the idea of starting a vocal group. Both Madison and Hollins were, at that point, members of the Flambeaus. To go back a ways for a moment, Hollins, Terry, and Madison - Madison also played organ and had initially written the melody lines to 'Try Me' and 'Please, Please, Please' for James Brown - started out as the Dominions, became James Brown's second set of Flames and were fired over a pay dispute in San Francisco in early 1961. Hollins moved to Portland and Madison continued to play organ with a string of small combos around the Bay Area clubs until the bottle brought him down.

To Hollins' friend, Romerson, the idea of forming a singing group was what he always wanted. Pretty soon, Rico Thompson was taken aboard. The boys then found Tank Johnson but, unfortunately, Johnson had sustained a leg injury in military combat and could not dance. Johnson then came up with his own replacement: Bobby Meade. With Hollins out and returning to Portland, the original recording group, comprising the newly-acquired lead tenor Les Palmer, Romerson, Thompson and Meade fell into place. The Ballads were schooled so that each member could sing the parts of the others; all that was needed was a good name. "It seemed that the group was very much into singing ballads," said Romerson. "One of the first songs we rehearsed was 'You're The One [a number the group recorded for Venture seven years down the line]. I looked up the Webster dictionary definition of 'ballad' and it read 'a slow romantic or sentimental song'. The description fit per-

fectly, so we adopted the name. I was also taken by the moves made by Hank Ballard and his Midnighters. They had a routine that was out of sight, so I decided we would adopt similar dance routines. I'd have four of us dancing as a unit, as opposed to having only three, as with Hank Ballard's group."

The guys rehearsed constantly, almost day and night, for two weeks. Then, having mastered a short list of tunes, they played their first club engagement, at Ross Christy's Rhumboogie Club. They then moved into the Time Out which, under Don Barksdale's management, became The Sportsman. After a stint at the Reno Club, the group started opening for major-league acts. Meanwhile, through Barksdale's connections with Bob Geddins, the

Ballads cut their first record for Veltone. The top-side bore the title 'Hope I Never Fall In Love Again', a tender doo-wop ballad written by ex-J.B. band member Nat Kendrick of '(Do The) Mashed Potatoes' fame and tough-singing Bay Area soulstress, Sugar Pie DeSanto. 'Do You Know', a Falcons-like dance vehicle with wild organ and nice sax riffs, constituted the flip-side. In today's

collector market, the scarce Ballads' Veltone single fetches a hefty sum. The Ballads' reputation as an exciting live act seemed to gain momentum. Lee Hildebrand, in a February 1983 interview and review of the Ballads' appearance at Mr. Gee's House Of Lee in Oakland, stated that John Foster told him that one of the first gigs he played with the group in 1964 was at Al's House of Smiles on East 14th Street in Oakland. "We owned one set of uniforms," said Foster "and we'd turn them inside out between acts."

After guesting at the Reno Club in 1963, the boys filled in for Little Junior Parker at the 53 Club. Following a successful opening for O.V. Wright at Don Barksdale's Sportsman's Club, Wright asked if the group would tour with him and do the same every night but Barksdale, who had invested time and money in the boys, made a better offer to keep them at The Sportsman. So, the Ballads' tenure there lasted an extremely successful nine months, after which they went out on their first road gig, an engagement at the Salinas County Fairgrounds with Bobby Bland. One day, baritone singer, Bobby Meade, upped and left for Texas and his place was taken by John Foster. Romerson

had caught Foster singing lead with the Holidays at the California Hotel and was much impressed. The Holidays started out of Roosevelt High in Oakland, in 1955. The 1957 line-up featured Stan Harris, second tenor lead, William Harrison, first tenor, Isaiah Brown, baritone, (Rev.) Elton Stevens, bass, plus founder and lead, Ken Pleasant, who went on to sing in the legendary Bay Area's Four Rivers. The Holidays were the 'hottest' group before the Ballads came along but they were never able to secure the right recording deal - Ray Dobard's Music City label had treated them shabbily.

"The Ballads really got off the ground when we found Foster," said Romerson. "That's when things started to hang together." Another ex-Holiday was Wylie Trass, who later joined Freddie Hughes to become the Casanova II on Early Bird and Lonnie Hewitt entered the picture. Hewitt, who ran the Wee record company on 42nd Street in Oakland to promote himself and his friends, took the Ballads under his wing. (Hewitt's best remembered recording is the two-part 'Is It Me', a jerky, mid-tempo soul dirge overlaid with a cool rap reminiscent of the king of soft-soap radio, the Magnificent Montague.) At this point, membership and vocal parts ran as follows: Palmer, lead tenor and bass, Romerson, tenor, Thompson, tenor and baritone, and Foster, lead tenor and baritone. The group's first Wee outing was 'I Can't See Your Love (Parts 1 & 2)', a joint songwriting effort. The song, a standard soul-felt, mid-tempo ditty, is sweetly sung in the style of the day: screeching brass, Temptations-like harmonies and heavy grooves made this a solid contender for a place in the national charts. It became such a favourite among a growing legion of California fans that it was reissued months later and, through a deal made with Bill 'Bunky' Sheppard in Chicago, saw release on Vee-Jay Records. However, Vee-Jay was on the skids, having encountered financial problems. Had it not been for this,

the Ballads might have broken through and garnered national recognition for their talents.

Back home in San Francisco, the Ballads were asked to back-ground in place of the Dukays at the Cow Palace for Gene 'Duke of Earl' Chandler. Chandler, having arrived in San Francisco without backing singers, was riding high with a song written by Jerry Butler's brother, Billy, entitled 'Bless Our Love', produced by Carl Davis for Constellation Records. (Constellation had been set up by 'Bunky' Sheppard and Ewart Abner Jr., ex-president of Vee-Jay.) Chandler's recording of 'Bless Our Love' had done so well that it peaked at #4 on the 'Cashbox' r&b chart in the autumn of



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1964. ('Billboard', which had temporarily abandoned r&b listings at the time, saw it to #39 on the pop 'Hot 100'.) The Ballads did such a magnificent job behind the song when Chandler performed it at the Cow Palace that Jesse Mason Jr., the group's manager, musical producer and proprietor of Hit Records, set up the Bay View label in El Cerrito, on which to record their own version of the song. Their resultant, extended two-part, deep-soul version, recorded at Bob Da Sousa's Sierra Sound Studio on Alcatraz Avenue in Berkeley, went under the title 'God Bless Our Love (Parts 1 and 2)'. Following Chandler's musical arrangement, it finds Les Palmer weeping and cajoling on lead, while the Moonglow-like vocal support works the song like a muted brass section. Lloyd Gregory ably accompanies the group on guitar. The record did so well state-wide that Mason was forced into finding a label that could break it nationally and they settled on Venture Records, the recently-formed MGM subsidiary headed up by ex-Motown a&r man, William 'Mickey' Stevenson and whose history was documented by Greg Burgess in the last issue of 'In The Basement' (#40 - 'Mickey Stevenson & the Venture Enterprise'). Under the direction of Jesse Mason Jr., and Willie Hutch, the Ballads re-recorded 'God Bless Our Love' for Venture - later reissued on Good Old Gold. The slicker Venture version finds the Ballads' vocals in an updated vein, the lead testifies more, the tempo is increased strongly and the strings are abundantly intrusive. The Four Tops-like jumper on the flip, 'My Baby Knows How To Love Her Man', sounds like a clone of Stevie Wonder's 'Uptight (Everything's Alright)'.

The 'God Bless Our Love' remake took off like a lightning bolt and upgraded the group's public venues into the bargain. They now started appearing with such luminaries as Gladys Knight & the Pips, the Temptations, Stevie Wonder, Ohio Players, Moms Mabley, Aretha Franklin and James

Love', given a hip slant, 'Hey Diddle Diddle' - a cover of the Marvin Gaye release from 1966 - the Impressions-penned delicate ballad, 'Gift Of Love' (on which Clarence Paul and Mickey Stevenson claimed sole authorship), plus '(I) Wish I Knew', all hit the record racks. The Venture production team gathered most of these and, along with four from the vaults, put out an album entitled 'The Gift Of Love'. On the strength of album sales, the Ballads toured the country, appearing at the Apollo in Harlem, the Paramount and Mark IV in Washington DC., the Twenty Grand in Detroit, the Uptown in Philadelphia and other major venues. The 'Gift Of Love' album sold well regionally and was snapped up by avid soul record collectors in both Europe and Japan, where, in 1982, Vivid Sound leased the album from John Foster at Balja Records - Foster had gained control of the material - and put it out again.

Heartbreak and disappointment followed upon the Ballads' return to the Bay Area from touring. The once lucrative Venture deal came to an end and they wound up holding the change. Jesse Mason Jr., made a fortune out of his stake in the partnership but the group ended up with twenty thousand dollars split between them. On top of this, the Whispers had moved from Los Angeles to Oakland and were making noises with chart-toppers like 'Time Will Come' and 'Seems Like I Gotta Do Wrong'

Brown. (Their 'cover' is rumoured to have outsold Gene Chandler's 1964 version, although chart-wise they had to settle for r&b peaks of #8 'Billboard', #16 'Cashbox'.) More Venture releases followed for the group... The Spiders' hit ballad 'You're The One', Willie Hutch(inson)'s multi-layered 'I Love You Yeah', again laden with beautiful, sweeping harmonies, Jesse Belvin's hypnotic 'Goodnight My

on Soul Clock records. The Ballads and Whispers ended up sharing club dates and quartet battles. In Lee Hildebrand's article, Foster states that, when confronted with the fact that the Whispers won the popularity vote, it was like comparing apples with oranges. "We were hard-driving," he explained, "while [the Whispers] were just balladeers." It seems ironic that the Ballads, having started out as balladeers, had ended up, with the help of local hoofer/choreographer, Jay Payton, a cute-moves band, as opposed to one renowned for sweet sounds and cool harmonies.

In 1972, the Ballads, composed of Nate Harris, lead tenor, Rico Thompson, tenor and baritone, John John, tenor and baritone, and Arthur Creggett, second lead tenor, entered upon a one-off deal for Kimberly Records on Telegraph Avenue in Oakland. Their Kimberly single, 'Baby, I'm For Real', an up-close-with-the-lights-down-low, after-hours ballad, sung with feeling and passion, coupled with the equally romantic 'Dizzy World', met with much enthusiasm from their fans. Skillfully arranged by Rene Hall, the tunes had special appeal. Having learned their lesson from the Whispers, the Ballads had returned to the music they did best - ballad singing - and their Kimberly release sounded in every way as good as any cut so far by Gordy Harmon and the Whispers.

On tour, the Ballads were caught in performance at Denver's Sound Track night club by the city's 'Weekly News' journalist Curtis Palmer... "The audience was small, opening night," reported Palmer, "but, by Saturday, word must have gotten around as, amidst sweat and cheers, the Ballads left the stage after having stepped up the pace which was fast and furious, while the audience fanned the flames. The band was the California Soul Explosion, as funky as chitterling grease." Other acts included Joe Eldridge and Nitro. On the group's



pictures show the Ballads in action, 1967

return, they were invited to appear on Jay Payton's 25th Anniversary Show at the Berkeley Marriott, alongside Freddie Hughes and Irma Thomas. Payton, a choreographer who, during the 1950's had taught the Rovers a few tricks, hosted a local TV show called 'Soul Is'. The following year, the Ballads played a cameo role in Michael Campus' violent 'blaxploitation' movie, 'The Mack', starring Richard Pryor. The mundane plot centred on the exploits of a black pimp in Oakland. The Ballads were seen in the movie singing 'Dizzy World' on the 'Showcase Club' stage during the annual Players (Pimps) Convention, while group member, John Foster, also played the part of a pimp.

After the Kimberly release, Les Palmer, who was not in the outfit in 1972, returned to the group, upping membership to five. They travelled throughout the South, playing at night clubs and concert halls but the '72 tour did not turn out so well. Dissent ensued and both John John and Les Palmer quit. The disgruntled pair took a trip to Los Angeles and picked up Travis 'Buddy' Johnson, who was a member of the Buddy & Stacy brother duet. (Stacy Johnson had toured and recorded with the Ike & Tine Turner Review and later waxed for Modern.) Meanwhile, another group sprang up calling themselves the Ballads. This set of Ballads recorded for KLIK records and were in no way connected with the Bay Area group. John John, Les Palmer and Travis Johnson sang as the Ballads for a short while but, by 1975, membership had changed again with Arthur Creggett, second lead tenor returning to the line-up, joining Palmer, lead tenor, John, tenor and

baritone, and Johnson, tenor.

Once signed to Ray Dobard's Music City label on Alcatraz Avenue in Berkeley, the Ballads fell in with three reasonably reliable producers: Wally Cox of Reflections Productions, who had himself sung and recorded with some measure of success in the Bay Area as an r&b soloist during the 1950's and 1960's, George L. Smith, and Leroy Jackson.

The Ballads had recorded

an album's worth of material for Music City. In fact,

press releases at the time indicated that an album was imminent but, as before, both in 1967 - when Jesse Mason Jr, had promised the album release of 'Here We Are' - and later, in 1971 - when it looked like their own Soul-Trip imprint would get off the ground - nothing created any impact, except two consecutive Music

City singles releases. The first was the upbeat, irresistible 'Loving You Isn't Enough', backed with 'I'm Gonna Show You (How To Do The Bump)' by the Ballads, supported by the Chosen Few. 'I'm Gonna Show You' was an almost instrumental version of 'Loving You Isn't Enough', the difference being that the 'bump' side featured a few more musicians. The second 45 matched 'Butterfly', a similar multi-layered northern soul opus with the Lonnie Hewitt-like sweet soul rap, 'Confessing The Feeling'. ('Butterfly' and 'Confessing The Feeling' had been introduced to a

live audience for the first time at Marvin Gaye's 'Save The Children' concert.) 'Confessing...' grew extremely popular around the Bay Area and did as well among soul folk in Europe and Japan. Lee Hildebrand advises in his 1983 'East Bay

Express' article that the Ballads started getting fan mail from Japan, where Ray Dobard, without the group's knowledge, had issued the recording.

Song rights to the Music City releases were owned by Balja, who produced the masters. Balja's publishing company, Baljon, was an amalgam of John Foster and the Ballads.

The Ballads embarked on yet another lengthy tour across the US. They were

signed for a three-month engagement at the Tropicana Hotel Blue Room Lounge in Las Vegas where they enjoyed many sell-out performances. Some time around 1976, the group's personnel underwent a shake-up and a new line-up emerged which featured John Foster, Stan Harris, Les Palmer and Rico Thompson, plus the addition of female songstress, Pamela Harris. 'Confessing A Feeling', backed with 'Butterfly' [sic] recorded at the Jackson Five Studio in L.A., appeared on a Balja single at about the same time, which also announced a mooted album: 'Ballads From The Ground Up'. Vivid Sound in Tokyo had leased Balja masters and did issue, for the Japanese market, an album of songs, some of which had already appeared as releases on Kimberly and Music City. Two selections from the Vivid Sound album: 'Don't Touch That Dial', a funky dirge with a sweet refrain, and 'Treat Me Like A Woman', an ethereal ballad featuring Pamela Harris and Les Palmer as principal soloists, were issued on Chuck Johnson's Soul Beat label out of Oakland. (The Ballads guested regularly on Johnson's 'Soul Beat', a somewhat amateurish Channel 9 cable tv talent show.)

In 1982, the Ballads played the Oakland Festival of The Arts, followed by a gig in Sacramento with Millie Jackson. After-hours sets were also performed on weekends at Mom's Rainbow Lounge in Oakland. One of the last great performances given by the Ballads as a five-member crew was at a weekend concert at the Oakland Convention Centre with the Whispers and the Numonics, in October 1983. J. Poet in his article for the 'East Bay Express' wrote: "When the Ballads went into the à cappella introduction to the Moonglows' 'I'll Never Stop Wanting You', things suddenly quieted town. The next few moments brought chills to my spine as the Ballads crooned in classic street-corner fashion against a subdued instrumental backing. The bass rumbled, the tenors blended into a silky heartbroken wail and the high yearning harmonies reached out to tweak the ears of the angels. At the end of the song, the whole room sighed and shouted 'Amen'."

A live rendition of 'Three Times (Part 1)'



'Fabulous Ballads' publicity shot

was issued on Balja, sandwiched with 'Your Love'. 'Your Love' is yet another smoky ballad, infused with the same late-late, just-before-sun-up sophistication one comes to associate with the group. 'Three Times (Part 1)' takes you live to front-centre stage, where the Ballads are working the audience and going through their moves. This pulsating dance ditty puts you through the steps. In 1985, the Ballads cut what they thought was their last recording on Balja, 'Angel Baby', a ballad with all the same romantic table-for-two ingredients that had become the Ballads' signature. The flip, 'For Phil', is the same tune, featuring keyboardist, Chris Page, who squeezes every last vestige of soul out of his instrument during its four minute-20 duration. After a road gig to Atlanta with Bobby Bland, ironically the same artist with whom they started out, the Ballads hung up their hats.

Unbeknownst to the group (who did not find out until the early '80s) Happy Fox, in 1973, put out a deejay promotion sample of an unmixed version of 'Wait', a song they had remixed and re-recorded in 1976 for Balja and, to their knowledge, had only been released on the Japanese Vivid Sound album in 1980. 'Wait', a sweet ballad with all the soulful touches that should have made it a charted item, continued to remind the group that, with their smooth singing and soulful approach, they had what it took to carry on and that they would never fade into memory. With that in mind, Foster, Romerson, and Creggett got together and, on their own Bay Pop label, issued a cd containing sixteen of the Ballads' former nuggets from the 1960's and 1970's. Many of the tracks were re-mastered at Richmond's Poorman Studios. With the group composed of Foster, Creggett, Romerson, Thompson and Don 'Dusty' Phelps, they returned to the Poorman Studios to produce a cd single entitled 'Time For Love', a pretty song reminiscent of all the cool sounds the Ballads had always produced and the good feelings they customarily invoked. The Ballads have stayed as slick and sophisticated as any outfit around today. Strong material and a few breaks would be all it takes to put the group back on top.

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Nate Romerson, Rico Thompson, Arthur Creggett,
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Photos courtesy of Opal Louis Nations
Label scans: Steve Guarnori*



BALLADS : U.S. DISCOGRAPHY

SINGLES

Top R&B Chart positions in brackets. (BB = 'Billboard', CB = 'Cashbox'. N.B. No 'Billboard' R&B Chart published between 30/11/63 and 23/1/65.)

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|--|-----------------------------|
| (A) I Hope I Never Fall In Love Again/Do You Know | Velton 1738, 1961 |
| (B) I Can't See Your Love (For The Years In Your Eyes)/part 2 | Wee 106, 1965/Wee 714, 1966 |
| (B) I Can't See Your Love (For The Years In Your Eyes)/part 2 | Vee-Jay 714, 1966 |
| (B) God Bless Our Love/part 2 (as the Fabulous Ballads) | Bay View 11426, 1967 |
| (B) Right Track/part 2 (as the Fabulous Ballads) | Soul Trip 10844, 1967 |
| (B) God Bless Our Love (BB 8, CB 18)/My Baby Knows How To Love Her Man | Venture 615, 1968 |
| (B) You're The One/I Love You Yeah | Venture 625, 1968 |
| (B) Goodnight My Love/Hey Diddle Diddle | Venture 630, 1969 |
| (B) The Gift Of Love/I Wish I Knew | Venture 637, 1969 |
| (C) Baby I'm For Real/Dizzy World | Kimberly 105, 1972 |
| (C) Wait/Your Love | Happy Fox 503, 1973 |
| (D) Loving You Isn't Enough/I'm Gonna Show You How To Do The Bump | Music City 896, 1975 |
| (D) Confessing A Feeling/Butterfly | Music City 897, 1975 |
| (E) Confessing A Feeling/Butterfli [sic] | Balja 1001, 1976 |
| (E) Wait/Your Love | Balja 1002, 1976 |
| (E) Treat Me Like Your Woman/Don't Touch That Dial | Soul Beat 003, 1982 |
| (E) Three Times/Your Love | Balja 1777, 1984 |
| (E) Angel Baby/For Phil (featuring Chris Page) | Balja 101, 1985 |
| (B) God Bless Our Love/Holy One (flip by Jerry Glenn) | Good Old Gold 66, ? |

ALBUMS

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| (B) Here We Are : The Fabulous Ballads | Bay View lp 1967, 1967 |
| (B) The Gift Of Love | Venture lp 4004, 1969 |

Line-up details...

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| (A) Les Palmer, Nate Romerson, Rico Thompson, Bobby Meade |
| (B) Les Palmer, Nate Romerson, Rico Thompson, John Foster |
| (C) Rico Thompson, Nate Harris, John John, Arthur Creggett |
| (D) Les Palmer, John John, Arthur Creggett, Travis 'Buddy' Johnson |
| (E) Les Palmer, Rico Thompson, John Foster, Stan Harris, Pamela Harris |