



## Wade Flemons

by Opal Louis Nations

Wade Flemons is perhaps one of the most overlooked African-American popular music recording artists of the late 1950s-early 1960s. Flemons in his heyday enjoyed three major selling records over a span of four years. These were "Here I stand," which hit Billboard's #19 spot in November 1958, "Easy Lovin'," which fared better in May 1960 and climbed to #10 after three weeks in the running, and his cover of Percy Mayfield's "Please send me someone to love" which peaked at #20 in September 1961.

You would think that after three charted records, the man could at least have enjoyed a retrospective CD reissue before now. But this writer has never seen or heard of any reissue compilation or published article centering on Wade Flemons' life and times in the music business, except for odd pieces of information in connection with the birth of Earth Wind & Fire. This is indeed a pity and a shame as on October 13, 1993 Wade Flemons died of cancer in his home town of Battle Creek, Michigan.

We can only piece together a profile of this shy, reserved, good-natured, unassuming singer from fragments of the one and only satisfactory obituary written by Robert Pruter and published in Juke Blues at the close of 1993.

Wade Herbert Flemons was born on September 25, 1940 in Coffeyville, Kansas along the Kansas/Oklahoma border. Raised to the west in Wichita, Flemons took to singing, first in his local church choir and later in various gospel groups. While putting together his own gospel quartet, he developed instrumental skills by becoming a competent violinist in his school orchestra. Flemons moved with his parents to Battle Creek, Michigan in 1955. While attending Battle Creek Central High, he formed a vocal group called The Shifters, for whom he composed material during a series of lessons he undertook on the piano. The Shifters were composed of Lou Wilson, James Kelly, Ed Horsley, and Lewis Grave. By June 1958, The Shifters were rehearsed and competent enough to travel west to Kalamazoo and cut a demonstration record.

The tune The Shifters had elected to record was "Here I stand," a song Flemons had authored himself. A copy was sent to James and Vivian Carter-Bracken at Vee Jay

Records who were currently riding high with bumper sales of Dee Clark and Jerry Butler sides on their Abner subsidiary plus sizable income from Jimmy Reed, Gene Allison and The Dells on the parent label. Vee Jay liked "Here I stand." Having the group change names to the less furtive Newcomers, they signed them up in July. Under A & R man Calvin Carter's supervision, Wade Flemons and the Newcomers cut "Here I stand," backed with "The (My) baby likes to rock," a good, mid-tempo toe-tapping, hand-clapping line dance ditty with solid piano arrangement.

"Here I stand" was a winner from the start with its infectious, soft, soothing, soulful lead and what Billy Vera describes as a cha-lypso rhythm -- the melody lingers in the mind until one finds oneself la-la'ing along on the chorus. Most fans' remembered vision of Flemons is seeing him perform "Here I stand" live on former Philly deejay Dick "Mr. Pepsodent Pop" Clark's American Bandstand on network TV.

By October 1958, "Here I stand" was ringing up large sales alongside Jimmy Reed's "Odds & ends" with which publicist Barbara J. Gardner plugged its potential. Vee Jay's General Manager Ewart Abner bragged to Billboard Magazine that his man Flemons was headed for the top. A tour of the Eastern seaboard (Flemons' first professional engagement) was set up to begin on Christmas Eve. Packed off to Pittsburgh to publicize his tour, Flemons hooked up with deejays who opened a mike and gave him a welcome spot on the air. "Here I stand" eventually climbed to #19 on the R & B charts. The Los Angeles hot-rod pops group, The Rip Chords, covered the song in 1963 and made it a hit again in March of that year.

Upon returning from his Eastern tour, Flemons was rushed into Chicago's Universal Recording Studios to cut Otis Blackwell's "Hold me close" and "You'll remain forever." Blackwell, among reams of credentials, first recorded with Bud Johnson on Victor in 1952 and wrote songs for Elvis Presley, among other luminaries. Influenced by singers like Nat Cole and Roy Hamilton, Flemons chose to sing in a smooth, infectious way, drifting into a more dramatic style only when the song demanded it. It seems that by now, The Newcomers, no longer newcomers, were gone although their presence could possibly be manifest on two songs from Flemons' album (Vee Jay 1011) released in early 1960, "Don't be careless" and "Purposely." But my ear could prove me wrong.

"Hold me close," like "Here I stand," is a haunting Latin-flavored melody, sung seductively against a sweeping, mixed chorus. "You'll remain forever" is another sweet, sappy ballad, polished with choral ornament and sparse rhythm accompaniment.

Three months later, Vee Jay released Flemons' follow-up, Otis Blackwell's song "Slow motion" coupled with Una Mae Carlisle's "Walking by the river," a tune made popular by Savannah Churchill and The Striders on RCA in 1952. The infectious "Slow motion" is a jumper, incorporating bongos (Preston Epps' "Bongo rock" was extremely popular at the time) and a perky, almost soap-powder-commercial-like chorus. Flemons' soft and warm singing came as a tonic to those feeling down in the dumps. The executive officers at Vee Jay Records must have felt good, too, as after a short stay at 2129 South Michigan Avenue, the company moved to more spacious accommodations down the street at 1449. 1449 South Michigan was a two-story building. Vee Jay occupied both floors. Ewart G. Abner, the company's G.M., needed more room to expand his administrative staff.

Record vet Randall Wood, a light-skinned black who had served as sales manager at Kapp Records in New York, was sent out to Los Angeles as West Coast representative, and both Red Schwartz and Steve Clark were taken on to supervise business in Philadelphia and Atlanta. Meanwhile, A & R man Calvin Carter saw to the

making and release of Flemons' first album collection, simply titled "Wade Flemons." The collection included five previously released songs, two of which were lifted and put out at the same time on a single, plus "Too long will be too late," a pleasant, readily recalled ballad written by Otis Blackwell in the typical Flemons formula with bluesy chorus, the Brook Benton / Clyde Otis chart, "It's too much fun," a soulful ballad for the young and in love set, and "Don't be careless," based loosely on Roebuck Staple and The Staple Singers' megahit "Uncloudy day." The collection also included "Purposely," another slow song sung with soul and grace, and "The angels will tell you," a rock & roll ditty that sounds dangerously similar to Elvis Presley's "Teddy bear."

Carter certainly made a wise decision when he lifted "Easy lovin'" and "Woops now" from the album for a single release. Jesse Stone's "Easy lovin'" was a winner from the start with its bluesy, after hours, cheek-to-cheek mood and well rehearsed, close choral harmonies, unhampered by overproduced accompaniment. "Woops now," a song which fails to grab this writer, is a bouncy pop ballad with a cooing, monotonous, repetitious chorus. No matter. "Easy lovin'" sold in impressive quantities, landing itself the #10 spot in the R & B charts. "Woops now" tended to be the favorite side in some locations which helped the overall sales figures at the end of the day.

Flemons was at the peak of his career with a record company that could afford to give its artists the exposure they needed to keep them in the charts. Flemons toured the chitlin' circuit regularly, sharing venues with such headliners as Bo Diddley, Jackie Wilson, The Four Seasons, The Impressions, Jerry Butler, and The Dells. He became close and lasting friends with many of the acts he was fortunate enough to share a microphone with.

Late in 1960, Flemons took a stab at Jimmy Reed's "ain't that lovin' you baby," a somewhat jolly, upbeat, perky rendition with bootin' sax and drums played military fashion. The underside was pressed with "I'll come runnin'," a tender but driving ballad sung in multitrack form with tough sax and rippling guitar support. This was followed by "At the party" and "Devil in your soul," songs written, arranged, produced, and supported on guitar by firm friend Curtis Mayfield, backed by a mixed chorus.

"At the party" is a pretty Flemons-type signature melody augmented with Mayfield's delicate guitar fills and carefully arranged harmonic backgrounding. "Devil in your soul," on the other hand, is a moody, folk-based refrain with yet more flowery guitar and sparse accompaniment. "At the party" might have taken off, had it not been for the fact that grittier tunes by Ray Charles and the first wave of the Motown sounds were beginning to draw the public's attention. Countering this with a good, strong composition, Flemons came out with his cover of Percy Mayfield's "Please send me someone to love." He sang the chart sincerely and convincingly in his own inimitable style, and it paid off. "Please send me someone to love" sliced with "Keep on loving me," a pop ballad in the Dee Clark bag with swooshy strings and hypnotic refrain, climbed to the #20 position in the R & B charts. This was the only one of Flemons' three runaway hits not to cross over into the pop charts.

Toward the close of 1961, Flemons waxed "Half a love," keeping to the same winning formula -- easy, loping rhythm, busy string section and angelic chorus. The reverse, "Welcome stranger," is a captivating ballad with an unforgettable melody. For all this, the song failed to catch coin. In an attempt to revive Flemons' sales appeal, Carter hit upon the idea of having Nashville's finest work on Flemons' next release. Sax-man Boots Randolph, piano stylist Floyd Cramer, along with Alabama-born Bill Justice were hired on to do the job. Justice was given the task of arranging material. This was at a time when Ray Charles was enjoying enormous success with country

ballads "I can't stop loving you" and "Your cheatin' heart." The twist craze was thought to be a momentary fad, and Vee Jay Records, having scored their first million-selling success with Gene Chandler's "Duke of Earl," set up Dart Record Sales to handle increasing distribution. It was the year The Four Seasons signed on and consequently made the company a strong major independent.

Flemons and the Nashville contingent came up with Jimmy Day's "I hope, I think, I wish," a pretty Willie Nelson-type tune colored with Cramer's down-home piano and heavenly chorus, sandwiched with Flemons' own composition entitled "Ain't these tears," a typical Nashville stomper with searing harmonica, Randolph's stuttering sax, solid rhythm foundation, and the usual hallowed chorus. The record, although blessed with top-notch production values, failed to catch on. Mississippi-born rock & country singer Conway Twitty recorded "I hope, I think, I wish" the same year and enjoyed a greater measure of success. Flemons did not quite fit the music city country idiom.

In 1963, Flemons recorded his best 45 release. One listen to the single convinces you that Flemons put his heart and soul into the making of "That time of year" and "I came running," backed by The Dells (Marvin Jnr., lead tenor, Johnny Carter, first tenor, Vern Allison, second tenor, Mike McGill, baritone, and Chuck Barksdale, bass). "That time of year" is an infectious, romantic ballad of spring and fond remembrance. Flemons stretches his voice like never before. "I came running" is a powerfully sung jumper with just the right orchestral support. Flemons gives the tune one hundred and one percent.

In 1964, Vee Jay, now relocated to plush offices on Santa Monica Boulevard in Los Angeles, was doing fifteen million dollars' worth of business. But as fast as the money came in, the money went out again. Gambling sprees, lavish parties, bad decision-making and poor management started to take their toll on the assets of the company. With a no-win contractual lawsuit looming over their heads, Vee Jay had to relinquish to Capitol the rights to The Beatles. During all this turmoil, Flemons enjoyed two more single releases. The first coupling finds The Four Seasons, Frankie Valli, lead tenor, Bob Gaudio, tenor, Tom DeVito, tenor, and Nick Massi, bass, on the session. By this point, it looked as if The Four Seasons had given up making seven inch records in favor of albums which seemed to work better, sales wise, for all concerned.

"Watch over her," the top side penned by two of The Four Seasons, is clearly a pop chart with a strong pulse and catchy hook. "When it rains, it pours," a Flemons pop composition, has pleasing Drifters-like harmonies and an outro so pretty one wishes it went on a while longer. The second and last release finds Flemons alongside The Dells with Joe South's "I knew you when," a cool, soulfully rendered ballad with gospel-like harmonies, attractive melody, solid beat, and occasional heavy orchestral thrust. The flip is Clint Ballard Jnr's "That other place," a pop ballad of minimal interest, except for The Dells cooing from the far reaches of the studio.

"I knew you when" met with a stronger public response when it was done over by Billy Joe Royal for Columbia that same year. It is likely that The Dells offered their backgrounding services free of charge in return for "Stay in my corner," a song Flemons wrote for The Dells. If he had recorded "Stay in my corner" with The Dells, things might have turned out differently.

In 1965, Flemons was inducted into the Army but remained under contract with Vee Jay, as the company valued Flemons' song-writing abilities and would stick with him, even if his records failed to chart. In fact, Flemons stayed with Vee Jay into the fall of 1966. It seems that during his military service, Flemons cut one last session for

Vee Jay. So far, only one song has emerged from this date, the self-penned "I can't get away from your love," a cheerful, lively number with copious strings and chirpy choruses.

When Flemons got out of the service in 1967, he teamed up with Maurice White. White, a doctor's son, born in Memphis on December 19, 1941, spent his childhood singing in gospel groups. In 1957, White moved to Chicago and was able to find a place at The Conservatory of Music. He began hanging out at the Vee Jay offices and befriended a few people there. In 1963, he was taken on as sessions drummer, beginning with the Betty Everett date that produced the hit-selling "You're no good." White went on to play drums on records by Fontella Bass, Chuck Berry, Howlin Wolf, and Wade Flemons as well as numerous others. White played drums on most all of Flemons' releases, and during this time they became firm friends. A series of events shaped White's musical career, beginning with a subbing job for Elvin Jones in John Coltrane's group and a trip to Egypt as Red Holt's replacement with The Ramsey Lewis Trio. Lewis introduced White to metaphysical philosophy and an interest in playing the kalimba, a hand-held African thumb piano.

In 1969, White formed The Salty Peppers Trio with Wade Flemons who sang, composed, and played keyboards, and Don Whitehead. The trio wrote songs and commercials, then decided to form a recording group after securing a contract with Capitol Records. The Salty Peppers cut two singles and were strictly a studio unit. The band moved to Los Angeles in 1970. Lifting three elements from his astrology chart, White renamed the group Earth Wind & Fire, then hired on his younger brother, Verdine, to fill in on bass. In no time at all the band grew to include Sherry Scott, vocals, Michael Beal, guitar and harmonica, Yackov Ben Israel, conga and percussion, Chet Washington, tenor sax, and Alex Thomas on trombone.

Flemons found himself with his role in the aggregation reduced to harmony vocals. Over the three-year course of cutting two studio albums and one soundtrack collection for Warner Brothers, Flemons found that his musical input and role as decision-maker had been drastically reduced. White had chosen a path that lead to a funky mix of bold, eclectic musical mysticism and theatrical spectacle. When White reformed and expanded the band in late 1973, Flemons was not picked out as part of it. He retired from music and, according to Jerry Butler in conversation with Randy Tamberg, moved to Detroit with his wife, Brenda Rose, who later bore him three sons and a daughter.

In retrospect, Wade Flemons was dealt a bad hand. He certainly possessed an extraordinary talent. His shy, reserved, unassuming manner made him seem almost invisible at times, and certainly vulnerable, a trait that probably did not help much in an aggressive, ego-maniacal profession. Flemons sang soothingly and was possessed with a unique voice that conveyed warmth and depth of feeling. His songs were of a kind that stayed in the mind and for many lifted the spirit. This CD is a celebration of that fact.

-- Opal Louis Nations,  
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with invaluable assistance from Randy Tamberg, Robert Pruter, Lee Hildebrand, and Brian Wade Flemons

## Wade Flemons Discography

### With The Newcomers:

58-961 Here I stand (8/58) Vee Jay 295; LP 1011 (1960)  
58-962 (The) My baby likes to rock (8/58) Vee Jay 295; LP 1011 (1960)

### Wade Flemons & Mixed Chorus:

59-1087 Hold me close (3/59) Vee Jay 309  
59-1089 You'll remain forever (3/59) Vee Jay 309

### Wade Flemons & Mixed Chorus:

59-1088 Slow motion (6/59) Vee Jay 321; LP 1011 (1960)  
59-1091 Walking by the river (6/59) Vee Jay 321

### Wade Flemons & Mixed Chorus:

59-1290 What's happening (12/59) Vee Jay 335; LP 1011 (1960)  
59-1277 Goodnight, it's time to go (12/59) Vee Jay 335; LP 1011 (1960)

### Wade Flemons & Female Chorus (1); Male Chorus (2):

60-1341 Too long will be too late (1) (3/60) LP 1011 (1960)  
60-1341 It's so much fun (1) (3/60) LP 1011 (1960)  
60-1342 \*Don't be careless (1 & 2) (3/60) LP 1011 (1960)  
60-1342 \*Purposely (1 & 2) (3/60) LP 1011 (1960)  
60-1342 The angels will tell you (1) (3/60) LP 1011 (1960)  
\* might be the Newcomers

### Wade Flemons & Female Chorus:

60-1349 Easy lovin' (3/60) Vee Jay 344; LP 1011 (1960)  
60-1348 Woops now (3/60) Vee Jay 344; LP 1011 (1960)

### Wade Flemons & Female Chorus (1):

60-1616 Ain't that lovin' you baby (1) (1960) Vee Jay 368  
60-1618 I'll come runnin' (1960) Vee Jay 368

### Wade Flemons with Curtis Mayfield (1) & Mixed Chorus (2):

61-1752 At the party (1 & 2) (1961) Vee Jay 377  
61-1756 Devil in your soul (1) (1961) Vee Jay 377

### Wade Flemons:

61-1941 Please send me someone to love ('61) Vee Jay 389  
61-1940 Keep on loving me (1961) Vee Jay 389

### Wade Flemons & Female Chorus:

61-2252 Half a love (1961) Vee Jay 427

61-2251 Welcome stranger (1961) Vee Jay 427

**Wade Flemons with Floyd Cramer (1) / Boots Randolph (2):**

62-2663 I hope, I think, I wish (1) (1962) Vee Jay 471

62-2664 Ain't these tears (2) (1962) Vee Jay 471

**Wade Flemons with The Dells:**

63-3162 That time of year (1963) Vee Jay 533

63-3157 I came running (1963) Vee Jay 533

**Wade Flemons with The Four Seasons:**

64-3926 Watch over her (1964) Vee Jay 578

64-3925 When it rains, it pours (1964) Vee Jay 578

**Wade Flemons & The Dells:**

64-4249 I knew you when (1964) Vee Jay 614

64-4250 That other place (1964) Vee Jay 614

**Unreleased sides:**

I can't get away from your love (1965)

"A Taste of Soul", Vol. 1 (unreleased) Vee Jay CD 710 (1993)

**Note:**

Flemons' contract with Vee Jay ran until the fall of 1966