The Harptones: 48 Years of Magical Musical Memories

By Opal Louis Nations

The Harptones in 1953 (top) Willie Winfield, (middle l to r) William Dempsey James, Nicky Clark, Billy Brown and William "Dicey" Galloway (bottom) Raoul J. Cita

There are three factors that make up the magic of **The Harptones'** music: their catchy, infectious, sometimes haunting, melody lines; their easy, close harmonic confection, which is synonymous with the early Harlem vocal group sound; and the warm, soft and lilting tenor lead of **Willie Winfield** heard on their artistic compositions, many of which were composed by **Raoul J. Cita**. They are perhaps the most beloved, respected, and revered New York quintet and remain a beacon for most aspiring East Coast hallway harmonizers. Through the years they have always been a close knit group, with feelings of love and deep concern for one another. Every song they ever sang had a special meaning to them. This 48-year veteran R&B vocal ensemble recently embarked on a trip to Great Britian and headlined *Hembsy 27*, a four-day rock 'n' roll event.

Their story began in 1951 in the schoolyard of Wadleigh Junior High School, located at 115th St. between Seventh and Eighth Avenues in Harlem. **The Skylarks**, comprised of **William Dempsey James**, **Curtis Cherebin**, and **Freddy Taylor**, practiced there. Soon, they were joined by **Eugene "Sonny" Cooke** and a guy remembered only by his nickname, **"Skillum."** After many rehearsals, they entered the Amateur Talent Contest at the Apollo Theatre, singing "My Dear Dearest Darling," but were booed off the stage.

Another Manhattan-based group was comprised of the **Winfield** brothers - **Willie**, **Clyde**, and **Jimmy** - their brother-in-law **Johnny Bronson**, and **William "Dicey" Galloway**. They could be heard singing under the Manhattan or Brooklyn Bridge or wherever they found an echo.

Some of the members from both ensembles met with songwriter and piano player extraordinaire **Raoul J. Cita**. Eventually he brought both groups together and formed **The Harps**. The members initially included **Willie Winfield** (lead), **William Dempsey James** (first tenor), **Clyde Winfield** (second tenor and lead), **William "Dicey" Galloway** (baritone), **Curtis Cherebin** (bass), along with **Cita** (pianist and musical arranger).

In November 1953 **The Harps** walked off with first prize at The Apollo Theatre's Amateur Night for singing **Louis Prima's** 1946 golden nugget, "A Sunday Kind of Love." (The song was also recorded by **Jo Stafford**, **Ella Fitzgerald**, and **Frank Sinatra**.) At the show, **The Harps** were spotted by an MGM rep who liked their sound and wanted them to audition at 1650 Broadway. They took him up on his offer, and while waiting to audition, they rehearsed in the hallway. Their singing attracted the attention of **Morty Craft** and **Leo Rogers**, who immediately introduced them to **Monte Bruce**. The trio then decided to form Bruce Records so they would have a label on which to record them.

The Harps, who now consisted of **Willie Winfield** (lead), **Nicky Clark** (first tenor/ formerly of **The Five Crowns**), **William Dempsey James** (second tenor), **William "Dicey" Galloway** (baritone), **Billy Brown** (bass), and **Raoul J. Cita** (pianist and musical arranger), were whisked down to the studio and in spite of Willie's bad cold, recorded their first single for Bruce, the wistful "A Sunday Kind of Love" b/w "I'll Never Tell." Just before the record was released, Cita changed their name to **The Harptones** in order to avoid confusion with the gospel-singing **Harps of Music**. Their debut single sold very well on the East Coast and paved the way for performances at The Royal Theater in Baltimore and The Howard Theater in Washington.

Their follow-up was "My Memories of You" b/w "It Was Just For Laughs," which emerged in February 1954. Both sides were written by **Cita** and musically accompanied by him on piano along with **The Sonotones** - **Don Gardner** on drums, **Jimmy Smith** on the organ, and saxophonist, **Al Cass**. Their third single, "I Depended On You," showcased the versatility of **Nicky** on lead. Its flipside was "Mambo Boogie," written by **The Harptones** and led by "**Dicey**."

Their next platter was the lovely "Why Should I Love You." Unfortunately, it was covered note-for-note by **The Four Lads** on Columbia, who happened to be down the hall while **The Harptones** were rehearsing. It was the B-side of **The Lads'** "Skokkian." It was profitable for Bruce Records because they owned the publishing rights.

"Since I Fell For You," released in the fall of 1954, featured the smooth velvety voice of **Willie** and the high-weaving vocals of **The Harptones**. At the session, **Cita** filled in for "**Dicey**" who had been drafted into the service. They performed "Since I Fell For You" at The Apollo Theatre and were musically backed by the **Buddy Johnson Orchestra**. Ironically, **Buddy** had originally written and recorded the song with his sister **Ella** in 1948. It did well in the Tri-State area, but it was becoming quite obvious that Bruce Records had great difficulty in promoting their songs on a national level.

They appeared on **Alan Freed's** first live NY show, *The Rock 'n' Roll Jubilee Ball*, which was held at the St. Nicholas Arena on January 14-15, 1955. Some of the other acts included **Fats Domino**, **Big Joe Turner**, **The Clovers**, and **The Moonglows**. **The Harptones** finished out the month at the Howard Theater, performing with **LaVern Baker**, **The Counts**, and **The Illnois Jacquet Combo**.

Backed by **Sam "The Man" Taylor** and **Mickey "Guitar" Baker**, **The Harptones** recorded **Ivory Joe Hunter's** tearstained classic, "I Almost Lost My Mind" b/w the **Winfield** led rocker, "Ou Wee Baby." Both songs were re-released on a Bruce EP, along with "A Sunday Kind of Love" and "Forever Mine." A second EP, released around April 1955, contained three previously issued songs plus the stomping "High Flyin' Baby."

When Bruce Records declared bankruptcy the partnership dissolved. **Leo Rogers** took **The Harptones** to **Hy Weiss**, owner of Old Town Records, who enlisted them to kick off his new subsidiary label, Paradise. Their May/June 1955 session netted another **Cita** penned masterpiece, the hauntingly beautiful "Life Is But A Dream." The B-side was the rocker, "You Know You're Doing Me Wrong," also written by **Cita** and fronted by **Bernard "Jimmy" Beckum**, who had previously recorded with **The Majors** on the Derby label. He became "**Dicey's**" replacement. Although **Weiss** had better distribution than Bruce Records, he did little in the way of promoting "Life Is But A Dream" on a national level. However, it did reach #4 in New York and Billboard picked it as its Territorial Tip on July 23.

The Harptones appeared on **Alan Freed's** *Labor Day First Anniversary Show*, which was held at The Brooklyn Paramount. It ran for a week and the groups did six shows a day. In November 1955, they were back at The Apollo Theatre performing with such greats as **The Heartbeats**, **The Flamingos**, **Etta James**, and **Bill Doggett**. In the same month, their second single on Paradise was released - the gospel inspired ballad "My Success (It All Depends on You)" sliced with the jumping "I've Got A Notion."

While with **Weiss**, they did background vocals for **Ruth McFadden**, who with the help of **Cita**, recorded "Loving A Boy Like You," also referred to as "Schoolboy." Recorded in October 1955, it was finally released a year later.

By December 1955, **The Harptones** left **Weiss** and recorded for Andrea Records, which was started by **Leo Rogers** and **Sid Arky**. In April 1956, their only release on that label was the chorally engulfed "What Is Your Decision" with the additional harmony of **The Joytones** (**Vickie Burgess**, **Margaret Moore**, and **Lynne Middleton**) b/w the finger-popping "Gimme Some."

Because of **Cita's** prior association with **George Goldner** (Rama/Tico/Gee), **The Harptones**

signed with this veteran record entrepreneur. The first of their Rama releases, a **Harptones'** favorite, was the delicately pleasing "That's The Way It Goes" (accompanied by **The Royale Cita Chorus**) b/w the superb ballad "Three Wishes" (the A-side). The members on that recording session were **Willie**, "**Dicey**," **Billy**, **Nicky**, **Cita**, **Harriet "Toni" Williams Brown** (a singer and dancer who had performed with **The Norman Miller Dancers**), and **Dempsey**. On August 29, they appeared on **Alan Freed's** ten-day *Second Anniversary Labor Day Show* at the Brooklyn Paramount with **Frankie Lymon & The Teenagers**, **The Cleftones**, **Mabel King**, **Fats Domino** and others. Their live performances were something to behold, filled with splits, high kicks, and spins. **Cita** pumped up the volume on the piano and at times, tickled the ivories while sitting on the floor!

In October 1956, **The Harptones** appeared in an all-black rhythm and blues motion picture, *Rockin' The Blues*. They sang three uptempo songs, none of which were any of their well-known hits. **The Wanderers**, **Linda Hopkins**, **The Hurricanes**, **The Miller Sisters**, **Mantan Moreland** (who was featured in several **Charlie Chan** movies), disc jockey **Hal Jackson** and others were also in the movie.

Their next release on Rama once again showcased their incredible harmonies - "On Sunday Afternoon" coupled with "The Masquerade Is Over." In Feb. 1957, they cut their third Rama single, "The Shrine of St. Cecilia," a ballad with one of the most beautiful introductions b/w "Ou Wee Baby." It was the last single that featured 20-year old bass **Billy Brown**. His untimely death in the spring of that year had a devastating effect on **The Harptones**.

In April, with **Curtis Cherebin** having replaced **Billy Brown**, they performed on **Alan**

Freed's *Easter Jubilee of Stars* at the Brooklyn Paramount and on **Jocko's Henderson's** ten-day Labor Day show at the Apollo.

In October, they waxed the weepy "Cry Like I Cried" b/w "So Good, So Fine" for **Goldner's** new Gee label. Present at that session were **Willie**, "**Dicey**," **Dempsey**, **Harriet**, and **Curtis**.

Several of the Rama/Gee recordings were supported by **The Royale Cita Chorus**, which included members of **The Harptones**, **The Joytones** and **The Lyrics**. They are heard on **Mabel King's** "Second Hand Love" b/w "Symbol of Love."

After the final Gee session, "**Dicey**" quit and was temporarily replaced by **Solitaires'** lead **Milton Love**. The combination did not work out so well, and the group disbanded with many of the members taking day jobs.

Morty Craft launched his new Warwick label early in 1959, and persuaded **The Harptones** (**Willie**, **Dempsey**, **Nicky, Curtis**, and **Cita**) to regroup. They recorded three singles over a span of two years - "Laughing On The Outside" b/w "I Remember," "Love Me Completely" b/w "Hep Teenager," and "No Greater Miracle" b/w "What Kind of Fool." (**Nicky** had left and was replaced by **Five Crowns'** alternate lead **Wilbur "Yonkie" Paul** who was featured on "What Kind of Fool.")

Songwriter **Billy Dawn Smith** signed **The**

Harptones to **George Paxton's** Coed label where they cut one single featuring two uptempo tunes, "Rain Down Kisses" b/w "Answer Me My Love" released in Nov. 1960. **Smith** then switched the group to his Companion subsidiary in 1961. Their first single, "All In Your Mind" was backed with "Last Dance," a song that was written and fronted by **Hank "Pompi" Jernigan**, who had replaced "**Yonkie**." Their next release, "What Will I tell My Heart," just nipped the lower end of the national charts at #96. **The Harptones** finally had a song that made the Top 100! Its flip-side, "Foolish Me," was written by **Smith** and features **Willie's** spontaneous call of his wife **Alice's** name.

Later that same year, they moved to Cub Records, a subsidiary of MGM. Prolific songwriter **Otis Blackwell** wrote the ballad "Devil In Velvet," which was backed with the catchy "Your Love Is A Good Love." That single marked the return of **Jimmy Beckum**.

Most people feel that their best song of the 60's was "Sunset," a pretty ballad on which **Willie** and **Jimmy** share lead vocals. The song also marked the return of **Nicky**. It was issued on **Warren Troob's** KT label in 1964. (**Troob** was **Alan Freed's** lawyer and his son **Ted** wrote this ballad.) After "Sunset" was released, **Willie** left the group to take a full time job. **The Harptones** renamed themselves **The Soothers** and made one final stab at the golden ring. In July 1964, they waxed the **Johnny Ray** hit, "The Little White Cloud That Cried," which featured **Nicky** on lead. It was released on **Jerry Blaine's** Port label, a subsidiary of Jubilee. Its flip was "I Believe In You." Shortly after this, **The Soothers** disbanded and the members (**Dempsey**, **Curtis**, **Freddy**, and **Cita**) found day time jobs. **Nicky** moved to Buffalo and died several years later while still in his 30's.

In 1969, **Cita** received a phone call from **David Zaan**, and was told there was a renewed interest in this music. Would **The Harptones** be interested in reforming? And so, **Willie**, **Cita**, **Dempsey**, **Beckum**, and **Cherebin** (occasionally **Freddy Taylor** performed with them) regrouped and appeared on Rock Magazine's *First Original Rock and Roll Revival Show* held at New York's Academy of Music on April 18, 1970, as well as their Sept. 1970 and April 1971 shows. They worked regularly on the weekends, doing gigs on the East Coast and stayed together until the latter part of 1972. **Dempsey**, **Beckum**, **Cherebin**, and **Taylor** departed because they had difficulty combining their day jobs with their live performances. **Willie** and **Cita** then recruited veteran singer **Marlowe "Lowe" Murray**, formerly with **The Cavaliers Quartet** and **The Fi-Tones**, and **Linda Champion**. By 1974, **The Harptones** had appeared for the sixth time on Rock Magazine concert series.

In November 1981, they recorded a landmark LP, *Love Needs The Harptones* for **Marty Pekar's** Ambient Sound. It was released the following year and featured a contemporary piece and some originals which blended yesterday's sound with today's recording technology. Six of the songs on the album were written by **Cita** and **Mabel King**.

In the 1990, **Lynn "Sugah" Middleton Grier** (**The Joytones**) replaced **Linda Champion**. Unfortunately, **Lynn** passed away in 1994 and **Linda** returned to the group. Recently, **Linda** was replaced by **Vickie Burgess**, who was the lead singer of **The Charmers** and **The Joytones**. (**Vickie** and **The Joytones** sang background vocals on many of **The Harptones'** Andrea, Tip Top, Rama, Gee, and Warwick sessions).

The Harptones were inducted into UGHA's Hall of Fame in its inaugural year, March 1991. In 1998, they were the recipients of the Rhythm and Blues Foundation Pioneer Award. The following year, they performed on *Doo Wop 50*, which was televised across the country on most PBS stations.

The Harptones - Willie Winfield, **Raoul J. Cita**, **William Dempsey James**, **Marlowe Murray**, and **Vickie Burgess** - continue to perform and thrill audiences all over the world. These musical pioneers have had a significant influence and major impact on many other vocal groups. They have contributed great-

ly to the growth of rock 'n' roll and have given the world a musical legacy that is second to none. Their credentials speak for themselves. They unquestionably deserve to be nominated and inducted into The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. I think you would all agree!

My thanks to **Vickie Burgess**, **Raoul J. Cita**, **Marv Goldberg**, **Phil Groia**, and **Robert D. Ferlingere** for their help.

Editor's Note: ***Freddy Taylor*** *and* ***Jimmy Beckum*** *passed away in 1974 and 2000 respectively.*

The photos in this article were provided by ***Raoul J. Cita***, ***Marlowe Murray***, *and* ***Val Shively*** *of R&B Records.* ***Val*** *also supplied the vintage record labels.*

The Harptones (l to r) Willie Winfield, Linda Champion, and Marlowe Murray (bottom) Raoul J. Cita (circa 1974)

The Harptones (l to r) Raoul J. Cita, Lynn "Sugah" Middleton Grier, Marlowe Murray, and Willie Winfield (circa 1990)

The Harptones (l to r) Willie Winfield, Linda Champion, Marlowe Murray (bottom) William Dempsey James and Raoul J. Cita (circa 1994)

The Harptones Today (l to r) William Dempsey James, Willie Winfield, Vickie Burgess, Marlowe Murray, and Raoul J. Cita