For Sentimental Reasons

THE BROWN DOTS *Collection*

1. Sentimental Reasons
2. Bow Wow Wow
3. You're Heaven Sent
4. Satchelmouth Baby
5. Let's Give Love Another Chance
6. Thirty One Miles For a Nickel
7. That's What She Gets
8. Esscuchame (Listen To Me)
9. Shout Brother Shout
10. At Our Fireplace
11. Dark Town Strutters Ball
12. Patience and Fortitude
13. Surrender
14. If I Can't Have You
15. I'm Loving You For You
16. Please Give a Broken Heart a Break
17. Well Natch
18. Rumors Are Flying
19. You Took All of My Love
20. I Don't Know From Nothin'
21. As Though You Don't Know
22. I'll Close My Eyes
23. Send Me a Dream
24. I Want To Be Loved

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FLY CD 65

For Sentimental Reasons - The Brown Dots Collection by Opal Louis Nations

At the height of their popularity in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Ink Spots, with a string of major-selling songs under their belts, were on top of the entertainment world. Then troubles among the members broke out and the end of the line soon came into view. The untimely death of basso and talking bridge master Orville "Hoppy" Jones from a massive epileptic seizure in October 1944 left the group in a leadership crisis. The working dynamics up to this point were such that Jones served as a stabilizing factor or wedge between two egos bigger than Bill Gates' bank account, namely those of lead tenor William "Bill" Kenny and tenor Ivory H. "Deek" (short for Deacon) Watson. Kenny wanted total control, Watson reminded Kenny that he did not hold title over the name of the group. Baritone Charlie Fuqua avoided the conflict by joining the Army. He was replaced by baritone / guitar player Bernie Mackey. Cliff Givens had stepped into "Hoppy's" shoes.

The situation was compounded by the fact that Watson, a significantly older original member, wanted to keep his vaudeville part of the Ink Spots act. Kenny, a balladeer, sought to be rid of the clowning, mugging and ad-lib remarks in favor of a more sophisticated approach. After a bitter quarrel, Watson quit and formed his own Ink Spots. With the threat of being sued over the use of the name, Watson was forced into dropping the cognomen. Seeking a phonetically similar name, he settled on the Brown Dots.

Watson was born in Mounds, Illinois in 1909. He was reared in Indianapolis and attended school there. In the early Twenties he played in

a "coffee pot band" (small teapot, medium and very large coffee pot and guitars) called the Percolating Puppies. He taught himself ukulele and tenor guitar. Coffee pot bands played the rags and syncopated jazz songs of the day. Such bands augmented their instrumental music with vocal harmonies. Like the popular gospel quartets, the Puppies simulated "wind" instruments, cupped their hands and pinched their noses to affect brass and rhythmic percussion. They even took up tipples and home-made bass fiddles. From here, Watson organized another street-swing and sing band called the Four Riff Brothers. Two of the Riffs had formerly performed on the Indianapolis streets as the Peanut Boys. The Riffs consisted of James Campbell, tipple, "Deek" Watson, guitar, "Hoppy" Jones, guitar and Slim Green, tipple.

Deek Watson

In 1931 Watson quit and went out as a solo. In Cleveland, Watson hooked up with a vaudeville duet named "Charlie & Jerry" (Charlie Fuqua, a shoeshine singer, and Jerry Daniels, another ex-coffee pot band string player.) The three hung out on Cleveland's street corners. Calling themselves the Swingin' Gate Bros., all three sang harmonies and played stringed instruments. After changing names to King, Jack and the Jester (Watson), the trio landed a fifteen minute, three-times-a-week slot on Cleveland's WHK. Following this in 1932, the trio moved to Cincinnati where on WLW they sang commercials. The boys then added ex-Riff member "Hoppy" Jones and became a

quartet. Going out as King, Jack & the Jesters, the jazzriff-based quartet built quite a following in the Midwest. Due to a similarity in name with Paul Whiteman's singing group, "the Kings Jesters," our quartet was forced to change names to the Ink Spots.

Under Moe Gale's management, the Ink Spots' initial break came with a fifteen minute, three-times-a-week show over WJZ, a communist station in New York. The group also did commercials on WJZ. From now on, the Ink Spots went out on the white as well as the chitlin theatre circuit where they built quite a following culminating in a recording contract with RCA in 1935.

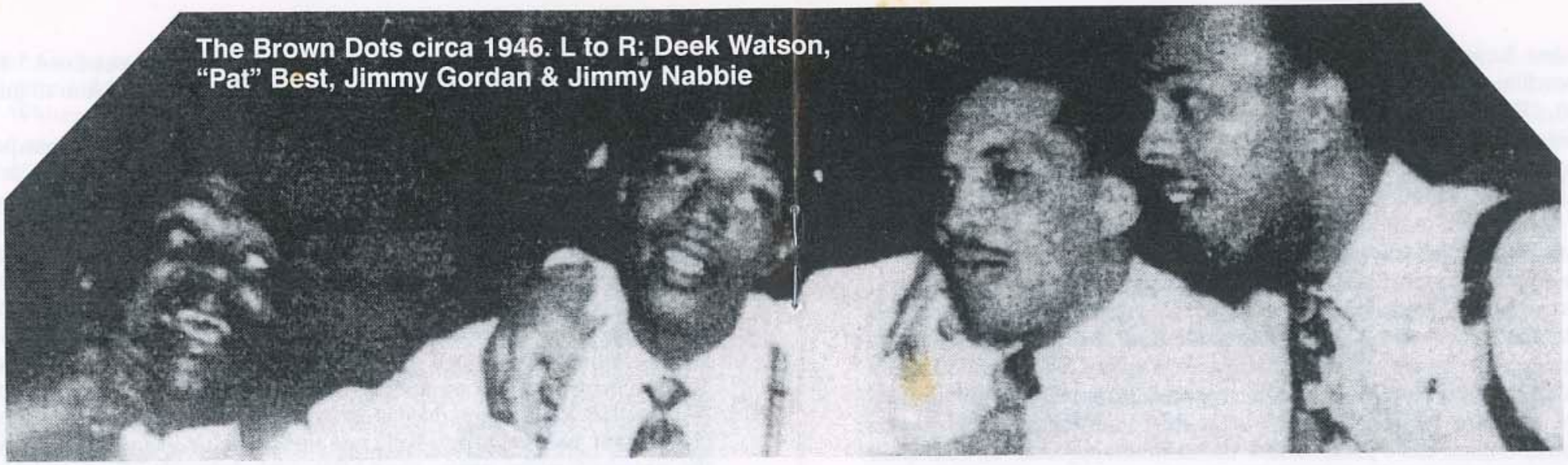
Over the years, the Ink Spots, now settled in at Decca Records with Bill Kenny in place of Jerry Daniels, cut impressive-selling charts like "Christopher Columbus" (1936), "If I didn't care" (1939), "We three (My echo, my shadow & me)" (1940), and "I'll never smile again" (1940). "If I didn't care" set the group on a straight arrow course headed for world-wide praise, popularity and celluloid stardom.

Watson's initial Ink Spots / Brown Dots quartet consisted of Watson, lead tenor Joe King, baritone and guitar accompanist William "Pat" Best, and bass singer Jimmy Gordan. Best hailed from Wilmington, North Carolina and was spotted by Watson at the USO Center in New York. Best's other main attraction was his songwriting skills. Jimmy Gordan was born in Oklahoma and studied voice at the Lamont Conservatory of Music in Denver. He had sung at the World's Fair in New York in 1939. His other accomplishments included a place in Eva Jessye's Choir. Jessye conducted the choir for the Langston Hughes musical play "Tambourines to Glory," a musical melodrama in 1957.) Gordan also warbled in the chorus of Paul Robeson's "John Henry." Other highlights include singing parts in

Broadway musicals "Carmen Jones" and "Sing Our Sweet Lord." It was while Gordan was singing in the latter that Watson invited him to join the Brown Dots.

Watson did not get along with Joe King and he was consequently replaced by Tampa-born Jimmy Nabbie, an opera singer of considerable credentials. Nabbie, a graduate of the Bethune-Cookman College at Daytona Beach, Florida and a student of classical voice coach T. Torn Taylor of Chicago, aspired to be an operatic tenor. As blacks were not being hired by the Met in 1939, Nabbie first sang in the Payne Jubilee Singers, then formed the Orange Blossom Ouartet. The group split up when Nabbie joined the Army in 1941. Discharged in 1944, he auditioned for the Jimmy Lunceford Orchestra but lost out to the irrepressible Trenier Twins who had an unbeatable comedy routine. A friend had told Nabbie that Watson was having trouble with Joe King. Within months, Nabbie was auditioned and King was fired. Nabbie, like Kenny, possessed the necessary poise, grace, good looks and charm and fit right into that slot.

According to Peter Grendysa in his thorough notes to the Four Tunes, "The Complete Jubilee Sessions," (Sequel double CD NED 229, 1992), Watson's name brought the Brown Dots lucrative bookings earning two thousand dollars a week, a sum less substantial than their parent group, the Ink Spots. With the termination of the second A.F.M. recording ban and the almost overnight proliferation of small, independent record labels, many record companies no longer saw the need to refuse unsold shellac in their production of 78 rpm recordings. One exception was Irving Berman's Manor / Regis / Arco label conglomerate on Pomona Avenue in Newark, New Jersey. Berman cut corners wherever he could. Consequently his product, made of reconstituted shellac, suffered from a



The Brown Dots circa 1946. L to R: Deek Watson, "Pat" Best, Jimmy Gordan & Jimmy Nabbie

standard of fidelity best likened to listening to 78s played on a Singer sewing machine.

It is unfortunate that Watson and the Brown Dots only ever recorded for Manor Records (discounting the one release issued by Majestic plus the one as listed by The Four Dots on Castle in the early 1950s — this may be a different outfit.) A Manor contract was signed in the spring of 1945. The Brown Dots' first release with Pat Best at the helm was the touching "Let's give love another chance" which, along with a limited selection of Brown Dots sides, can be sampled over doowop.bayside.net, the vocal harmony group website. Two other notable songs from the group's initial sessions were the beautiful "You're heaven sent," a heartsung ballad that

sold promisingly, led by both Best and Nabbie, and the fabulously luscious "Sentimental reasons" which really put the group on the map.

"Sentimental reasons" was extremely popular and sparked a whole string of covers by Nat King Cole (who made the most coin), (1946), Ella Fitzgerald (1946), the Rivileers (1954), Smiley Lewis (1954), Sam Cooke (1958), Jesse Belvin (1959), The 5 Voices (1959), Original Charmers (1959), etcetera, plus a slew of white covers headed up by Eddie Howard and Dinah Shore. One interesting note is that "Sentimental reasons" was issued twice. The later version, featuring the same leads and personnel, sounds tighter, cleaner and more together. The second release has Best along with Watson's name as a writer, the first mentions only Watson.

The popularity of "Sentimental reasons" lead to the group appearing

in Arthur Leonard's "Boy, what a girl," produced by the tiny Herald Pictures film factory, a comedy with an all-black cast (except for Gene Krupa), "Boy, what a girl" is a musical comedy with Tim Moore in drag and Slam Stewart and the International Jitterbugs laying on the jive. Watson played a songwriter in the movie. Leonard Maltin awards the flick three stars for "wonderful entertainment." The Brown Dots were also given two fifteen-minute radio spots on the American Broadcasting System. These coast-to-coast hook-ups took place Saturday mornings at 10:15 a.m. and Sunday night at 6:30 (Eastern time.)

Once again, dissension fell among the ranks. Watson, who was considerably older than the other members in the group, insisted on keeping the "jive songs" in the act. The fact was that Watson's outmoded routines were being met with a cold response from the Post-war public. Watson was now being upstaged by Pat Best and Jimmie Nabbie who presented a much more professional and refined approach. To add insult to injury (asserts Peter Grendysa in his Four Tunes liner notes for Sequel), the Ink Spots with Billy Bowen in Watson's place, were riding high with their biggest hit so far, "The Gypsy."

Unknown to Watson, Best, Gordan and Nabbie cut a deal with Irving Berman whereby they, with the addition of Danny Owens from the Coleman Brothers, would record under their own imprint, in this case as the Sentimentalists. The Coleman Brothers, Russell, Landers, Everette, Wallace and Melvin with the addition of Newark, N.J. native Danny Owens, were one of New York's leading gospel quartets who proprietored their own record label from out of the basement of their own hotel. The Five Blind Boys of Mississippi and Alabama, Harmonizing 4 of Richmond, Virginia and the Colemans all recorded excellent work for the label in the

late 1940s. While recording as the Sentimentalists, Best, Gordan and Nabbie without Owens recorded with Watson as the Brown Dots. The Sentimentalists cut one November 1946 Christmas song session behind Watson's back. Songs included "White Christmas" and "Silent Night." The trio was reluctant to make a clean break without feeling able to make a go of it for themselves. In addition, the trio recorded "Wrapped up in a dream" without Watson.

The Brown Dots recorded such gems as the wistful "Just in case you change your mind," the gospel-inflected "Shout brother shout" copped from Sister Rosetta Tharpe's "Shout sister shout" of late 1930s vintage (lead by Watson), and Jimmie Nabie's "How can you say I don't care." After "It's a pity to say goodnight," Watson sacked the group for moonlighting in secret. With a new outfit composed of instrumentalists, he recorded for Majestic the impressive "Pray for the lights to go out" coupled with "I've got the situation well in hand." The session netted two other singularly interesting songs, "The devil was beatin' his wife" and "Give it up," later issued on the Varsity subsidiary.

The Brown Dots' second and final movie appearance was in Arthur Leonard's musical drama "Sepia Cinderella," another Herald Productions endeavor. "Sepia Cinderella" (1947) is an updated retelling of the classic Ninth Century fairy tale featuring an all-black cast. The Cinders in this case was played by Rubble Blakely, a man. The character portrays a songwriter forced to choose between a high society debutante and a "regular" girl. Deek Watson and William Best played minor roles as songwriting buddies.

Meanwhile, the Sentimentalists cut one outstanding nugget with the Colfax, Louisiana-born Savannah Valentine, a.k.a. Churchill. The two

issued songs were the sexy, sultry "I wanna be loved" and the unforgettable and brilliant "Foolishly yours." Both excel as being some of Churchill's finest moments on Manor. The Sentimentalists recorded two worthwhile releases in 1948, before switching names to the Four Tunes.

Watson's second Brown Dots quartet returned to Manor Records in January 1949. Marv Goldberg believes that the latter-day Brown Dots were principally musicians who might have sung harmonies behind Watson when the need arose. These included pianist Donald Reuben Jay "Junie" Cole (Cozy Cole's brother), born in East Orange, New Jersey. Cole had also accompanied Newark-born Viola Wells, a.k.a. "Miss Rhapsody" on her July 1944 session for Savoy Records. Watson also enlisted the services of a drummer from Newark by the name of Daniel "Danny" Gibson. Manor issued four separate platters. One side of one release, the haunting "If I could be with you one hour tonight," was fronted by torch singer Gwen Bell. Others included the romping Shelton Brook's ragtime classic "Darktown Strutters Ball" and the dreamily romantic "At our fireplace." None really clicked and by 1951 Watson and the Brown Dots had called it quits. The Four Tunes continued on with at least two original members well into the 1970s. Bill Kenny's Ink Spots lasted into 1953, when Kenny ventured out on his own and Charlie Fuqua set up his own set of Spots. A proliferation of bogus Ink Spots groups have reared their heads since.

In Watson's confusing fairy tale history of the Ink Spots published in 1967 ("The Story of The Ink Spots" by Deek Watson, ghosted by Lee Stephenson, Vantage Press), he tells of a call he received from a friend in Washington, D.C. during the early 1960s. Watson's buddy reported that a group masquerading as the Ink Spots was playing a small club in

Maryland. His attorney, Peter L. Flangas, was put on the case. It was discovered that the interlopers were a rock & roll band whose repertoire was strictly instrumental.

Opal Louis Nations, November 1999
with initial remastering by Randy Tamberg

Trade ad and 1946 Brown Dots photo courtesy of Marv Goldberg. Sheet music shots are from Charlie Horner. Thanks to Victor Pearlin, Charlie Horner and Jay Bruder for copies of the original recordings.

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