

"How Do You Like Me Now?" - Earl Lewis & The Channels

By Opal Louis Nations



The Channels in 1956

(top to bottom): Clifton Wright, Larry Hampden, Billy Morris, Earl Lewis, and Edward Doulphin

The strangest thing about **Earl Lewis** is that before he became a born-again Christian, he never listened to or was in any way influenced by gospel music. His group, **The Channels**, was basically a secular ballad singing outfit whose best songs to me, evoked the same feeling as those of their gospel counterparts. **Earl's** principal influences were **The Four Tunes**, **The Orioles**, **The Five Keys**, and the R&B groups his sister **Shirley** took him to see when he was a kid at The Apollo Theatre.

Earl Michael Lewis was born in Manhattan on February 11. At the age of ten, he was writing lyrics and forming melodies to tunes that popped into his head. Many of those songs came while he was delivering newspapers in the wee hours of the morning, a paper route that he had until he was 15 years old.

During the fall of 1955, **Larry Hampden** (first tenor), **William "Billy" Morris** (second tenor), **Edward Doulphin** (baritone), their lead singer who is remembered only as **Rico**, and **Joe** (bass) formed a quintet they christened **The Channels**. They came from the area of West 112th and 116th Streets between 7th and 8th Avenues. After **Rico** and **Joe** quit the group, **Doulphin** and **Hampden** heard **Earl Lewis** and **Clifton Wright** singing with **The Lotharios** at P.S. 179's Community Center. **Earl** became **The Channels'** new lead and **Clifton** was now their bass.

A few days later, **The Channels** captured first

place at P.S. 113's talent contest singing **The Flamingos'** ballad, "I'll Be Home." About a week later, they repeated their **Flamingo** performance on Amateur Night At The Apollo and won second place. The group headed over to **Bobby Robinson's** record store, which was located at 301 W. 125th Street, and auditioned for the record entrepreneur right on the spot. **Robinson** liked what he heard and signed them to a one-year contract.

In August 1956, **Robinson** issued **The Channels'** touching ballad, "The Closer You Are" b/w the uptempo "Now You Know" on his freshly created Whirlin' Disc label. (**The Channels** had recorded those cuts at Beltone Studios in Manhattan on June 29 of that year.) **Earl's** classic high tenor and falsetto signatures were thus set in wax. **Jack Walker**, "The Pear-Shaped Talker," broke the disc during his morning radio show on WOV. This led to many live performances, most notably New York's famed Apollo Theatre and the Howard Theatre in Washington, DC. The record would have cracked the national charts had it not been for faltering distribution. **Jerry Blaine**, who **Robinson** was in partnership with on Whirlin' Disc, had suffered a heart attack. Therefore, **Robinson** alone was unable to handle national distribution due to limited finances. In October, the stunning "Gleam In Your Eyes" b/w the bouncy "Stars In The Sky" were released and garnered much New York airplay. Managerial wrangling and

remembers as **Ralph**. During the winter of 1959, **Earl Clifton**, and **The Starlites**, now the revamped **Channels**, recorded the pretty "My Love Will Never Die" b/w the spirited "Bye Bye Baby" for **Robinson's** Fury label. The record turned out to be **The Channels'** best seller up to that point.

However, it probably would have charted nationally had **Robinson** not been totally involved in promoting **Wilbert Harrison's** "Kansas City," a song recorded on the Fury label as well. ("Kansas City" reached the #1 spot in the country during the week of May 18, which was quite an amazing accomplishment for a small independent record company.)

Their follow-up, "The Girl Next Door" b/w "My Heart Is Sad" was issued on **Robinson's** sister label Fire in August 1959, but it was poorly promoted and failed to catch on. **The Starlites** went on to record with **Jackie Rue**, scoring a hit with "Valerie" in 1960. **The Channels** now consisted of **Lewis**, **Billy Montgomery** (first tenor and an original member of **The Cellos**), **Billy Morris** (second tenor), and a friend **Earl** remembers as **Mel** (bass). This ensemble lasted for a short time. They split up in 1960 and **Earl** went to work as a training technician for the Post Office.

The early 60's marked the first "Oldies Revival" and **Bobby Robinson**, in partnership with **Jerry Blaine**, reissued four initial Whirlin' Disc singles on the fledgling Port label, a subsidiary of **Blaine's** Jubilee label. Impressive reissue sales led to the re-release of "My Love Will Never Die," again on Fury. Seeing how well **The Channels** records were now selling, founding member **Larry Hampden** decided to form a new group around lead singer **Tony Williams** (not of **The Platters**), **Gene Williams** (second tenor), and **Revo Hodge** (baritone and bass). At this time, **Earl** was not interested in this reformation. Their first release, "You Hurt Me (Over Again)," came out in February, 1963 on Hit Records based in New Jersey.

When **Revo Hodge** departed from the **den** and both **Williams** (they weren't



related) went out as a trio. They returned to **Robinson** and waxed "Sad Song" and "My Love" for his Enjoy imprint. **Earl's** absence from the group (according to **Robinson**) was partly responsible for the record's poor sales figures. Through songwriter **Edna Lewis** (no relation to **Earl**), **The Channels'** trio, via A&R man **Joe Rene**, was introduced to **Ray Clark** at RCA's reactivated Groove subsidiary. In late 1964, the trio put out the first of two Groove releases, "I've Got My Eyes On You" b/w "Anything You Do." An attempt was made to make the public believe that **Earl** was on the record, but record buyers were not fooled and the release failed to garner airplay. "You Can Count On Me," the follow-up, suffered a similar fate.

In 1965, **Earl** and postal buddy **John Felix** (bass) then formed **The Earl Jades** and brought in first tenor **Henry Fernandez** and second tenor/baritone **Gilbert Valentino**. This ensemble made demos but never acquired a recording contract.

In 1970, with church singing co-worker **Jack Brown** (who replaced **Valentino**), the quartet, with a name change to **Earl Lewis & The Channels**, performed on Rock Magazine's *Second Original Rock & Roll Show* held at The Academy of Music on 14th Street in Manhattan. In the audience that night was **Andy Leonetti**, who was impressed with their performance and had them record **Neil Sedaka's** "Breaking Up Is Hard To Do" on his Rare

Bird label. **Lewis** and his partner **Sal Salzano**, then set up Channel Records and recorded two albums and six singles, including a rendition of "Gloria," the first song that the original **Channels** planned to release. After regular appearances on Rock Magazine's oldies shows, **The Channels** again split up.

In the mid 70's, **Earl** reformed the group by picking up **Cecil Wiley** (first tenor), **Lloyd "Butch" Phillips** (second tenor), **Joe Odom** (baritone), and **Bernard "BJ" Jones** (bass). All were former **Heartspinners** and had recorded for the Bim Bam Boom label. Three releases emerged for **The Channels** on the King Tut label during the course of 1978. (King Tut was affiliated with the Pyramid label, which surreptitiously issued **The Channels** singing "Bye Bye Baby" b/w "Now You Know" in 1975.) Jones quit the group to join **The Drifters**. Then, he became the bass for **Cleveland Stills & The Dubs** and performs with them today. Around 1983, **Wesley Neil** replaced "Butch," who went on to sing with "Sweet" **Lou Velez's Del-Vikings**.

Between 1972 and 1999, approximately nine reissue albums and three reissue CDs came to light. "Royalties were starting to trickle in," according to **Earl**.

In 1987, **Earl Lewis & Channel III**, composed of **Lewis, Odom, Wiley, and Neil** cut an updated ver-



Earl Lewis & The Channels (1972)
(l to r) Cecil Wiley, Glenn Tompkins, Bernard Jones, Joe Odom, Earl Lewis, and Lloyd "Butch" Phillips



Earl Lewis & The Channels (1980)
(top) Joe Odom and Cecil Wiley (bottom) Wesley Neil and Earl Lewis

sion of "The Closer You Are" for **Ronnie Italiano's** New Jersey based Soul Jam label. After this, **Earl** reunited with **Jack Brown**, who took the baritone spot vacated by **Odom**. **Cecil Wiley** passed away in 1990 and was replaced by **Salahuddin Aziz**, formerly of **The Attributes**. Shortly thereafter, **Earl** approached **Bruce Patch** and the late **Dr. David Antrell** of Classic Artists Recordings, based in Studio City, CA. Classic was a label dedicated to recreating the vocal sounds of the golden era of rock 'n' roll, and issued "You Promised Me Love," coupled with "Do What Lovers Do" in 1990.

On April 25, 1992, **The Channels** were inducted into UGHA's Hall of Fame. In August 1995, **The Channels**, composed of **Lewis**, **Brown**, **Aziz**, plus tenors **Luther Hudson** and **Joe Rivera**, recorded "What Are You Doing New Year's Eve?" for a Lanford Record's album project. (**Hudson** took the place of **Wesley Neil** who passed away in May 1992; **Rivera** had served on and off as a substitute and was called upon to perform at certain shows and for recordings, thus filling in for **Odom** who had passed away in 1994.



Earl Lewis, The Channels, and their band (1992)
Back Row (l to r) John Eve, Sam Leon, Angel Zambrana, Tom Eve, and Luther Hudson
Front Row (l to r) Earl Lewis, Salahuddin Aziz, David Camacho, and Jack Brown

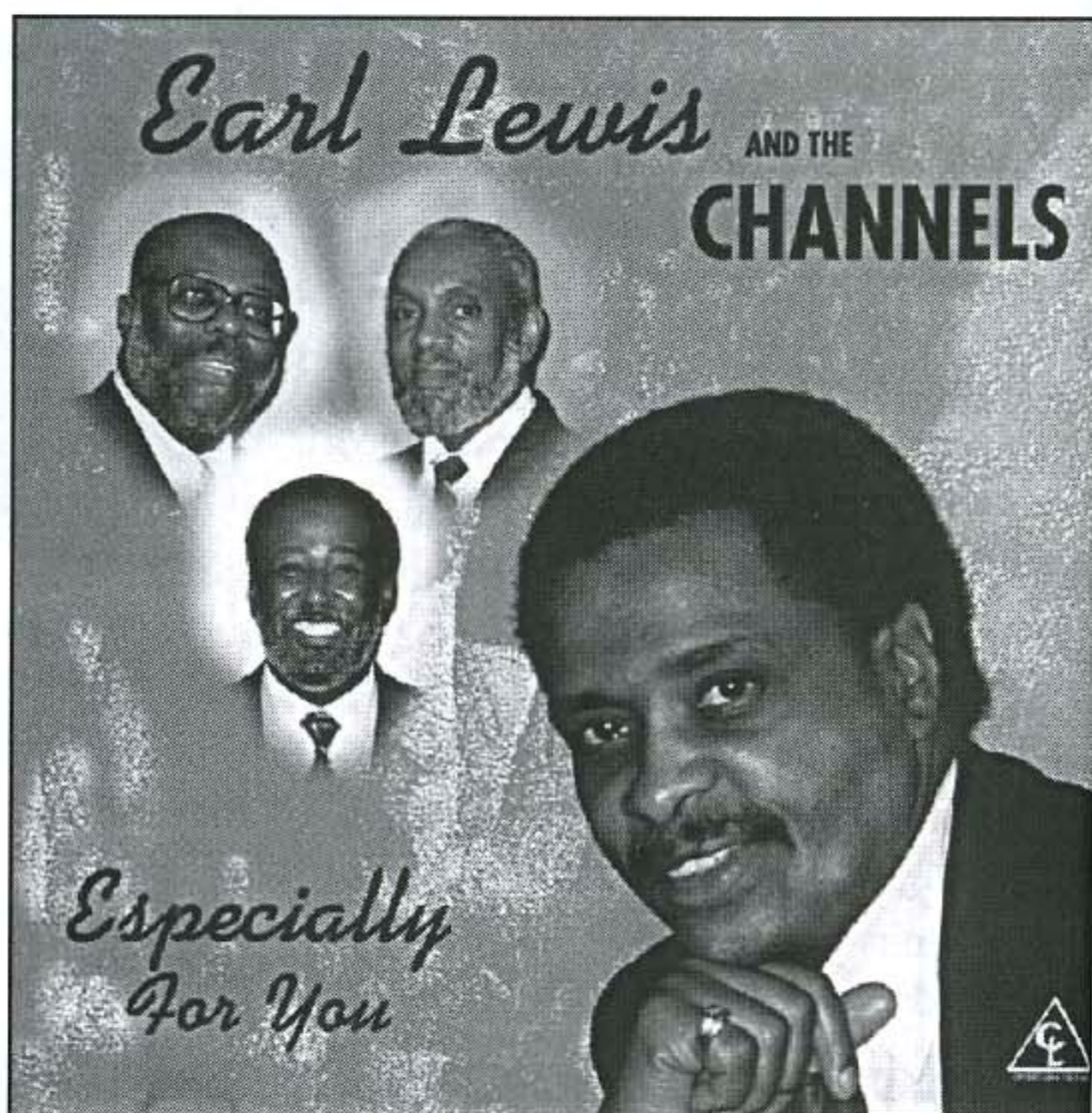
Salahuddin retired in 1998 and **Stewart Morgan** became his replacement.)

In 1996-1997, **Earl Lewis & The Channels** recorded the CD, *Especially For You*, which includes covers, contemporary material, and Spanish language songs for **Sam Leon's** Canaan Lake Records album project. In August 1999, Early Bird released *Earl Lewis and The Channels - The Best of Take One & Take Two*, a 19 track CD from the original label masters. In that same year, they appeared on the PBS-TV special, *Doo Wop 50*.

The Channels continue to appear regularly on oldies shows, thrilling and electrifying their fans at

each and every performance. And when you see **Earl** on stage working the audience, he will use the expression, "How do you like me now?" "My fans are very important," says **Earl**, "and I just want to know how I'm coming across to them." Oddly enough, "How do you like me now" was a pet expression used by deejay **Jack Walker**, who broke their first ballad in 1956 - the unforgettable, "The Closer You Are."

Earl retired from the Post Office in 1996 and lives in upstate NY. He teaches Sunday School and adult Bible classes at The Fordham Manor Reformed Church in the Bronx, a non-denominational congregation.



Earl Lewis & The Channels (2000)
(l to r) Joseph Rivera, Stuart Morgan, Jack Brown, and Earl Lewis (front)

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