



## **The Pat Best Story**

**by Opal Louis Nations**

The Four Tunes vocal quartet is best remembered today for their two chart-topping hits of 1953 and 1954. The first of these was “Marie,” a song written as a waltz in 1928 by Irving Berlin. It was Tommy Dorsey who first gave “Marie” 4/4 signature in 1937, but the Four Tunes really swung with their cover which was originally rendered as a race recording by the Ravens in 1947. The Four Tunes’ second smash was a tender pop-sounding ballad called “I understand” (just how you feel) written and arranged by Pat Best, the main focus of this article.

William Henry “Pat” Best was born in Wilmington, N.C. on June 6, 1923. In 1924 the family moved to Harlem, New York. His father died before he ever got a chance to really get to know him. None of Best’s family had any musical experience or inclination. His mother was a solidly religious woman who would not allow music in the house unless it was in praise of God. The family radio was always tuned to religious music. It was only when young Best was left to himself that he got a chance to spin the dial. His favorite programming was movie soundtrack recordings from which Best learned to appreciate musical composition. Other tuneful experiences came from within the holy sanctum of the local Baptist church of a Sunday morning.

Best resented the fact that churchgoing was a weekly requirement. Mom sang spirituals around the house, and his sister teased him over his efforts at singing, although she could not sing a note herself. As his interest in music grew, young Best was pressured into surreptitiously acquiring his own “crystal set” with headphones. Attaching the set’s aerial to a radiator, Best was able to pull in one station. Mother died when Best was eleven years old. An aunt, Fannie Carter, took care of raising the

children. As a young teen Best and his buddies sat out on the front stoop harmonizing. For fun they started practicing gospel standards and a few popular tunes of the day. "We sounded terrible," says Best. "Then we got ourselves a singing gig down at a local bakery for cakes, so we'd sing down at the shop. The baker didn't think much of our singing either, so he'd reward us with stale cakes as hard as rocks. We ended up throwing them at each other for fun."

Best picked up an old well-used guitar and started teaching himself chords. A local bartender thought that Pat Best had a special talent. When he found out that Ivory "Deek" Watson was looking to put together another quartet after splitting with the Ink Spots, he recommended Best to him. When Best was told that Watson wanted to hear him sing and play, he just shrugged it off. Watson insisted a number of times. Best replied by saying he could not sing that well and could only make two chords on guitar. Finally, Best caved in when Watson told him he would teach him everything he needed to know from scratch.

Watson was born in Mounds, Illinois in 1909 but was raised in Indianapolis. In the early 1920s he played ragtime music in the Percolating Puppies, a group made up of guitars and coffeepots. He taught himself ukulele and tenor guitar. Coffeepot bands utilized harmonic singing and face distorting instrumental effects. He then organized the Four Riffs with "Hoppy" Jones before going solo. Moving to Cleveland, he formed the Swingin' Gale Bros. Who evolved into King, Jack & the Jester, the Jester being Watson. The trio landed a thrice a week spot on Cleveland's WHK. Due to a similarity in name to Paul Whiteman's singing group, "The King Jesters," the trio changed their moniker to the Ink Spots. The original Ink Spots were composed of tenor singer / guitarist Jerry Daniels, Charlie Fuqua, baritone, second tenor singer, banjo and guitar, "Deek" Watson, tenor singer and guitar plus Orville "Hoppy" Jones, tenor singer / bass and guitar.

By late 1944, the ethereal Bill Kenny and Bernie Mackey had replaced Daniels and Fuqua. Kenny and Watson never got along too well. Kenny was an ambitious, hotheaded fellow who considered Watson's burlesque view of quartet singing old hat. Watson was also a strong character with different ideas of his own, ideas he strong-armed over the will of the others. After Jones returned to the group following a short illness Watson quit and formed his own Ink Spots. But Watson did not get very far with his plan. After a court injunction, Watson was forced to rename his group the Brown Dots, a sobriquet not too dissimilar to the former. After Pat Best was persuaded to join Watson enlisted Joe King, baritone and guitar accompaniment, and bass singer Jimmy Gordan. Gordan was from Oklahoma and had studied voice at the Lamont Conservatory of Music in Denver. Gordan came aboard through Watson's direct contact with the Moe Gale Agency. Watson had spotted Gordan singing in the Broadway stage production of "Sing Our Sweet Lord." King was a last minute decision. Going out as "Deek" Watson (formerly of the Ink Spots) and the Brown Dots, the group, fully signed to the Moe Gale Agency, found plenty of work.

The opposite was true of the former Ink Spots who were one man short. As it turned out, Watson found he could not get along with King so he sacked him and enlisted Jimmy Nabbie while performing in Tampa, Florida. Watson and King were a clash of egos. Nabbie was a classically trained singer from the Orange Blossom Quartet. Nabbie, like Kenny, possessed the necessary poise, grace, good looks and charm to fit the bill.

Best insists that he had to be schooled from the ground up. His knowledge and experience of quartet singing was strictly the amateur, hallway harmonist type. When

Hoppy died shortly after the Brown Dots had come together, Watson paid his respects by singing in tribute with the former Ink Spots one last time. According to Best, the Brown Dots went into intense rehearsal for two weeks after which they garnered a three-week residence at the Plantation in St. Louis. With help from Watson's booking agency, the Brown Dots secured a recording contract with Irving Berman's Manor Records in Newark. The group's first session of May 1945 produced the jive-talking "Satchelmouth Baby" written by Watson and sung by Watson and Best, the touchingly beautiful "For sentimental reasons" sung movingly by Nabbie and penned by Best, the haunting "Let's give love another chance" written by Harold Adamson and Jimmy McHugh back in 1937 and spotlighted by Best, Watson's wacky "Thirty-one miles for a nickel" a.k.a. "Subway serenade" written by a man called Tennyson and fronted by Watson himself, and the pretty "You're heaven sent" lead by Nabbie and probably co-conspired on paper by Nabbie and Watson.

The melody lines for the ballads are quite exquisite. Best indicates that most of his compositions come from a flash of inspiration, the spark from which is worked up in two or three minutes, either on the way to gigs in the back of a car or in dressing rooms. Sometimes, he says, he wakes in the middle of the night to jot down tunes. In any event, Best's ballad writing signifies an enormous talent.

The first time release of "Let's give love another chance" in May 1945 foretold what was to follow. The record sold well on the East Coast. But "For sentimental reasons," issued two months later, really took off and would have vaulted to the top of the Billboard best sellers charts had it not been for Nat King Cole and his trio who jumped on the song right away and took it to the number three spot on the Juke Box list. White artists leaped on the bandwagon. Big crossover covers included Eddy Howard on Majestic, Dinah Shore on Columbia and Jimmy Saunders on RCA.

In 1946 Ella Fitzgerald and the Delta Rhythm Boys chalked up a lot of sold copies with their cover for Decca. "For sentimental reasons" got the Brown Dots into the Royal in Baltimore, the Howard in Washington, D.C. and a two-week residence at the Apollo with the Erskine Hawkins band.

My personal favorite Brown Dots ballad is "You're heaven sent" (issued on the flipside of "For sentimental reasons.") The song's lilting charm and nod to the Ink Spots' formula should have spawned more covers than it did. For the Brown Dots' second session in November 1945, Best wrote three of the four recorded songs, "How can you say I don't care," "Is it right" and "You're a heartache to me." Only the beautiful "Just in case you change your mind" came from outside sources.

The Brown Dots went to work with heavyweight champion Joe Louis at the Rhumboogie Club in Chicago. The group would go on and do their set and have Joe Louis step up to take a bow, and perhaps crack a few jokes. Sometimes Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson would be asked up to do a little friendly sparring. The group's February 1946 session resulted in four released songs, all of them penned by or dug up by Watson who was becoming a problem. "He would goof up everything," says Best. After the July and November 1946 sessions for which Benny Benjamin and Geo David Weiss contributed a number of songs, the group was beginning to fall apart.

Following the success of "For sentimental reasons" a year earlier, things looked in better shape. The record led 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" was a musical comedy with Tim Moore in drag and Slam Stewart and the International Jitterbugs laying on the jive juice. Watson, ironically, played a songwriter in the story.

Following this, the Brown Dots acquired two fifteen-minute radio shows on the American Broadcasting System, one on WJC, the other at WOR. The group was on Monday through Friday. They also sang along with Eugenie Beard, Paul Whiteman's band vocalist. On a coast to coast hook-up, the Brown Dots could be heard on Saturday mornings at 10:15 a.m. and on Sunday nights at 6:30 p.m. (Eastern Time.) The weekend programs folded after repeated but unsuccessful attempts to find an ongoing sponsor.

Things got so bad that by late November 1946, without Watson's knowledge, Best, Gordon and Nabbie cut a deal with Irving Berman whereby the three of them, with the addition of Danny Owens from the New York-based Coleman Brothers gospel quartet, would record under their own sobriquet, in this case as the Sentimentalists. Their third waxing, after two Yuletide releases, pitched the emotionally charged "I want to be loved" with the heartfelt ballad "Foolishly yours," both fronted by the great Savannah Churchill.

Sarah Valentine Churchill was born on August 21, 1920 in Colfax, Louisiana, a small town north west of New Orleans. In 1926 the family moved to Brooklyn and Savannah took up the violin. She sang in her high school choir but waited many years before auditioning for Benny Carter who took her on as band vocalist just prior to World War II. In April 1945 she signed as a solo with Manor Records. "I want to be loved" was her third waxing on Manor. However, according to Best, this was not the first time Savannah had sung with members of the group. She had appeared on the same program with the Brown Dots at the Apollo in Harlem with the Erskine Hawkins Band.

"We got along fine with Savannah right from the get go," says Best. "She laughed easily and was such a pleasure to work with. We became very close friends." As fate would have it, the Sentimentalists played no gigs. Watson at first was unaware of what was going on behind his back, but he did not have to wait too long to find out. Walter Winchell, on behalf of Tommy Dorsey, threatened to sue the fledgling group, as Dorsey's own vocal group contingent was also called the Sentimentalists. "I was up in Canada at the time," says Best, "but Watson, when he found out what was going on, sacked all of us. Then we changed our name to the Four Tunes because we only had four going for us at the time," adds Best.

In order to fulfill the remainder of the Brown Dots' Manor contract, Watson had to find and train a second group. But it was the original group who played in their second and final movie appearance directed by Arthur Leonard, a musical drama entitled "Sepia Cinderella." The show played in theaters during 1947. By some strange twist of fate, in the movie Best and Watson played minor roles as songwriting buddies.

Best insists that around this period, Manor recordings were being illegally copied to meet increasing demand. None of the bootlegs sounded of better quality than the poor fidelity Manor originals which were manufactured with reused shellac. The Four Tunes continued to make recordings with and without Churchill and toured as a package up and down the East Coast and into the Midwest. "We had our own bus," says Best, "which always seemed to give out on us at crucial times. The bus survived the battering of many storms and blizzards and when the vehicle needed major repair, the group simply abandoned it in favor of taking the train. "We worked from Florida into Texas, on a series of mostly one-nighters. If we stayed in a place for one night, we got paid twenty-five dollars each. If we stayed for a week, we'd make \$125 a piece."

The Four Tunes played mainly nightclubs but stayed out of the South, except to play one nighters. They never ventured as far west as the coast. In August 1947 Best wrote and recorded the lilting "Where is love" with the Four Tunes. They toured the

Carolinas often. With all the touring, their barely adequate tour bus frequently broke down. The situation was made worse by the fact that beginning December 31, 1947 the recording industry entered into a recording strike which only served to strengthen the market for bootleg product. Neither the record company nor the artist received financial remuneration for the bootleg products. The strike ended on December 14, 1948.

However, the Four Tunes did manage to record three of Best's songs before the ban. One of these was the major-selling "I understand (just how you feel)" based on the melody to "Auld Lang Syne" which sold in large quantities in 1961 when it was covered by the G-Clefs and then again in 1965 when the British pop group Freddie & the Dreamers revived it. The other two songs recorded were "All my dreams" plus the aching beautiful "Is it too late," fronted on mike by Churchill.

During the ban, Churchill and the group continued working. A June 1948 Billboard announced a week's residency at Emerson's Rainbow Room in Philadelphia. In October the group enjoyed a two-page spread in "Our World" magazine. Engagements did not always run smoothly. One night at a dance club in Virginia Beach, Va., a fight broke out. Savannah Churchill fled to her dressing room, barricading herself in with tables and chairs. Best chased after her. Banging on her door, he tried to get her to open up and let him in. No way was Churchill ready to open the door for anyone. Luckily, Best found a safe place somewhere else. The fight was pretty bad. It all started when somebody stepped on someone's shoes.

Scary events happened on the highways, too, in the South. Once Savannah Churchill and the Four Tunes were in Jackson, Mississippi for a one-nighter. Best and Johnny (a bass player) were unloading the tour bus when a sheriff's car pulled up. The sheriff had seen the lovely Savannah Churchill in the bus and wanted very much to meet her. He then passed a racist remark to Best who, being green and not having encountered much racial behavior before, raised his arm and swiped the sheriff a swift back-hand. Luckily, because the officer wanted most to meet Churchill, the blow was forgiven and the entourage was escorted to a safe blacks only place to eat.

During the recording ban, Savannah Churchill and the Four Tunes enjoyed two singles releases on the Columbia label. Churchill sang lead on two sides, and the group had two. Four Tunes songs included Best's "(I wonder) where is my love." "Manor leased some material to Columbia, and that's how we got our songs out there during the ban when many others couldn't," recalls Best.

In January 1949 Manor issued Best's "My Muchacha," one of his favorite novelty songs. This coincided with the Chubbys' gig in North Collingwood, N.J. where Churchill, now siding with the King Odom Quartet, appeared with the Four Tunes on the same bill. At just about the time Manor Records issued the group's version of Ted Snyder's "Sheik of Araby," a label switch to RCA came about. The Jolly Joyce Agency, with whom the Four Tunes enjoyed good management, had undergone negotiations with Jack Hallstrom, one of RCA's A & R directors. A two-year agreement was drawn up whereby the group would cut twelve sides a year plus options for yearly extensions.

Manor had not paid the group royalties. Under the new contract, the Four Tunes were eligible to receive royalty payments. As it turned out, the group was never paid royalties, just a flat sessions fee. "Our royalties were always cancelled out by breakages," says Best. "And that cut into profits, the company told us." In any event, a switch to a major label seemed a good idea at the time. Manor threatened to sue for breach of contract (more on that later.)

On RCA, the foursome became a fivesome with the addition of singer/pianist/arranger Ace Harris who RCA thought would add a little more polish and anchor the group into the popular mainstream. Churchill also cut a separate deal with RCA. Ace Harris garnered considerable notoriety with his instrumental cover of Avery Parrish's "After hours" on Hub in 1946 and did an impressive warbling job on Lucky Millinder's "Shorty's got to go," cutting into Millinder's sales at the time.

Manor continued to release material on both the Four Tunes and Savannah Churchill into August 1950. Churchill had to wait until September 1951 before RCA could legally release any of her material. Between times she waxed for Arco (where the Four Tunes "guested" as quartet background) and with the Striders on Regal, before joining up legally once more with the Four Tunes on RCA with gems like "It's no sin," otherwise known as "Sin." "Sin" sold in large quantities both for Churchill and for Eddy Howard on Mercury.

While on RCA, the Four Tunes got to record with actress/singer Juanita Hall who started out waxing with her own choir for Hit and Decca Records in 1942-1943. Hall then went on to star as Bloody Mary in the stage and screen production of "South Pacific." In 1961 she appeared in Henry Koster's movie interpretation of the "Flower Drum Song."

The Four Tunes were RCA's first R&B quartet, followed closely by the Cats & the Fiddle, the Deep River Boys and Steve Gibson's Red Caps. Sadly, RCA tried to mold the Four Tunes into a catchall group and even had them recording country songs like "Cool water" and "The last roundup." Nevertheless, their pop-sounding sides sold well and kept the group working in theatres and clubs in the Eastern U.S. and Canada. "Cool water" ended up on the Cashbox Top Ten in New York in May of 1951. In November 1949, the Irving Berman / Four Tunes lawsuit took a turn when the quartet launched a counter suit against Berman who charged that the group was responsible for his losing his AFM (American Federation of Musicians) recording license as a result of their move to RCA.

According to Best, the group had gone to James C. Petrillo, president of AFM to ask if the move might present problems. Petrillo gave them the green light, says Best. Berman, who was suing the group for \$100,000, was charged by the quartet's lawyer Leo Weiner with contract violations. He stated that Manor Records had failed to pay the group royalties, particularly for those songs written by Best. In December 1947, Harry Fox, publisher's agent and trustee, obtained a judgement against Manor Records for non-payment of royalties. For some reason, the money was never collected. In the end, RCA paid Manor the sum of \$7,000 for the release of the Four Tunes. The money was then used to pay publishers to whom Manor owed royalties.

In March 1950, Manor issued the group's "Don't cry darling," a winning Best composition. RCA's control was such that Best was only able to record two of his songs during the group's less than three year tenure. The first of these was "How can you say that I don't care," issued in November 1950, and the hauntingly beautiful "Let's give love another chance," released in October 1952, almost a year after they had quit the label. Although the Four Tunes' RCA sides sold well, the advance of a lustier-sounding rhythm and blues-based music was taking the country by storm. By December 1951 songs like Jackie Brenston's "Rocket 88" and the Dominoes' "Sixty Minute Man" had torn up the jukebox charts. The Four Tunes were forced either to adopt an earthier, more sanctified sound or to cross over into the pop mainstream. The outfit chose the latter, more sanitized approach.

The group settled into long engagements at the Maroon Club in Montreal, the Royal in Baltimore and Blue Mirror in Washington, D.C. This was followed by a summer-long stint at Club Harlem in Atlantic City. By now, the Four Tunes had become a crowd-pleasing supper club act who had built a devotedly loyal legion of fans. The group fellas themselves even further removed from the loud, uninhibited, raw, sexually explicit sounds of cutting-edge African American popular music. They never needed to worry about trends of whether their material was hip.

A September 1950 billboard write-up mentioned the Four Tunes playing the swank Chesapeake Lounge in Cottage City, Maryland for an eight-week straight booking. The article went on to sing the group's praises by describing them as a group with such distinction that they had appeared as featured act at such notable venues as the Park Avenue Café in New York and the Showboat nightery in Philadelphia. Also in September 1950 RCA reported that sales of the group's August release of "Do I worry" backed with "Say when" were expected to top the half million mark.

By the end of 1950, the group was back in Canada at Toronto's Barclay Hotel for a fourteen-day stint. The following June the group was booked into the prestigious Club 421 in Philadelphia with Billy Williams and the Charioteers. In 1952, the Four Tunes returned to the Maroon Club in Canada. It seems that the Jolly Joyce Agency was able to have their popular acts traveling annually around the same circuit year after year. By the summer, the group was back at Club Harlem in Atlantic City. The following year a fresh venue was added to the Joyce Agency circuit—the Martinique Café in Philadelphia where the Four Tunes enjoyed an extended stay.

By July 1953 the Four Tunes had signed with Jerry Blaine's Jubilee Records on New York's Tenth Avenue. Founded in 1946 by Blaine and Herb Abramson, Jubilee was the right fit for the Four Tunes, the label having inked such similar talent as the Orioles, Marylanders and Ray-O-Vacs, all of whom had enjoyed some measure of success on the label. Furthermore, Jubilee had the wherewithal to easily keep the Four Tunes in the realms of the more lucrative white pop music market, something they were determined to do.

The group cut their initial unreleased demos for Jubilee in August. Their first commercial record came about in October with the release of "Marie." "Marie," an old Irving Berlin chestnut penned in 1928, was first made into a million seller on Victor by the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra in 1937. The song was also featured in the movie musical "There's no business like show business" in 1954. The Four Tunes' rendition peaked at number two on Billboard's R&B charts after a stay of twenty weeks. Best asserts that although Jubilee paid a princely sum of \$10,000 to the group for the song, heavy sales figures did not seem to generate more cash or work for the singers. They programmed at the same network of clubs and toured from New York down into Corpus Christi, Texas and through the South into Alabama and Georgia.

By December they were noted in Billboard as playing a two-weeker at the Brown Derby Club in Toronto. The Four Tunes had become as popular in Canada as they were in the Eastern and Southern United States. Commercially viable black R&B was now split into two definable markets. There were those who dug the hard-core sounds of the Five Royales and Drifters and those who favored the softer pop warblings of the Four Tunes and Orioles. Both "Crying in the chapel" by the Orioles and "Marie" by the Four Tunes climbed high on the white pop music charts. Heavy record sales of "Marie" spurred Decca to reissue the Mills Brothers' version. Let us not forget the Ravens who, as mentioned earlier, recorded "Marie" back in 1947 and had to wait almost five years

before seeing its release on Rendition in 1951. It seems that the Ravens' version sold poorly. This may be due in part to the group's problems with label litigation at the time.

Having a hit record pushed up the asking price for the outfit. This meant that the group's handlers got rich at the expense of the singers' good fortune. The Four Tunes played Chicago's Crown Propeller Lounge followed by a week at the Yankee Inn in Toledo. In January 1954 Jubilee released the Four Tunes' "I understand (just how you feel)," backed with "Sugar lump." The group first performed "I understand" at the Howard Theatre in Washington, next at the Twin Coaches in Pittsburg, Gleason's Café in Cleveland, followed by a seven-day gig at the Yankee Inn in Akron, a month at New York's Café Society, and, to please the ever-loyal Canadian fans, a four-week return to Toronto's Brown Derby.

To capitalize on the success of "Marie," Jubilee also released "Do do do do do do do it again" close on the heels of "I understand." But "I understand," although off to a slow start, picked up and climbed steadily to the number seven spot on Billboard's R&B charts after a seven week entry in June 1954. In March the group enjoyed an appearance on the first music and drama festival sponsored by WLIB at New York's Savoy Ballroom along with such luminaries as the Harptones, Larks and Slim Gaillard, then onto return appearances at Club Trinidad in Washington and the Brown Derby Club across the northern border.

The success of "I understand" took the Four Tunes to Chicago's prestigious Trianon Ballroom and would have brought them even greater fame and fortune had not June Valli recorded the song for RCA. Valli even stole the thunder from under the Four Tunes' label-mates—the Orioles when she covered their "Crying in the chapel" in July 1953.

To cap this, Jubilee had mistakenly credited the penmanship of "I understand" to Mabel Wayne and Kim Gannon. Best fought for the copyright to the song and won after a tough battle. In 1961, the G Clefs recorded the song and took it to the number nine spot on the pop charts.

In July 1954 the Four Tunes played Gene Norman's Fifth Annual Blues Jubilee at the Hollywood Shrine Auditorium. The concert made a profit of \$14,500 and as many as 1,300 people were turned away at the box office. Co-stars included the Chords, Clovers, Robins and the Hollywood Flames. The Blues Jubilee tour took in Bakersfield, San José, Pismo Beach, Fresno, Salinas, then back to the Riverside Rancho in Hollywood.

That same month, Jubilee Records issued a Best composition entitled "Lonesome," a jive ditty with hand clapping in the hip style of the Treniers. But "Lonesome" failed to hit the spot and the group was forced to play cheaper gigs for disc jockeys in order to get their releases heard. One such jock was Dick "Huggy Boy" Hugg of KRKD. By the end of the year, according to the trades, the Four Tunes had put together an instrumental album for Jubilee. The collection, called "Harmonizing Quartet," was set up in such a way as to make it easy for aspiring tenors, baritones, altos and basses to pick up their parts. The group was reported to have covered the popular tunes of the day, and the package was thought to be the hit play item at parties where novice singers could do their best to sing along. But Best insists that all this was pure publicity hype—the Four Tunes never worked on the project.

In January 1955 the group appeared along with popular organist Luis Rivera at the 5-4 Ballroom in L.A. While the group appeared with Chicago-born, white torch singer Joni James in April, Jimmie Nabbie (who needed cash) sold her one of his



songs, “You are my love.” After she recorded it for MGM it became James’ seventh heavy-selling pop success.

During the summer months, Jerry Blaine, president of Jubilee Records, cut a deal whereby the label was sold to a syndicate. Blaine, who had suffered much flack from fellow record making businessmen for wielding too much power, i.e. the total control over manufacture and distribution of his and other dealers’ products, elected to sell his manufacturing assets and simply stick to A & R and distribution.

In October Jubilee released Pat Best’s “Don’t cry darling,” a haunting ballad with sweet changes and bluesy piano chordings. The Four Tunes did a magnificent job, topped off by Nabbie’s striking high tenor embellishments. The record sold poorly, and the group returned to their accustomed supper club circuit. In February 1956 the Four Tunes were fortunate enough to get themselves on the three-day Rock ‘N Rollarama extravaganza in Detroit at the Fox Theatre hosted by Mickey Shaw of WJBK and Robin Seymour of WKMH. This packed-to-capacity stage show exhibited the talents of the Cleftones, Della Reece, Royal Jokers, Cadillacs, Four Tunes and others. According to newspaper reports, extra shows were added to fill ticket demand. Sadly, this was the Four Tunes’ last rock & roll concert. The group returned to the well-worn, solidly reliable supper club circuit.

During the summer of 1956, Jubilee issued a best of R & B album. Four vocal groups were featured. The Four Tunes sang three songs, including both their million sellers. A little earlier, Jubilee had issued a single by the Four Tunes called “The ballad of James Dean,” an homage to the late actor who died tragically in a car crash. The tribute record did not sell. “Around the time we finished making records for Jubilee,” says Best, “we learned of Savannah Churchill’s tragic accident.” While appearing at the Midford Club in Brooklyn with her vocal group, a drunk lurched and fell from an overhead balcony just as Churchill was coming from her dressing room. She suffered multiple injuries, including a broken hip and pelvic bone, and was confined to a hospital bed for several months.

“Hal Rosen of the Washington Post told me about the accident,” says Best, “so I rushed over to her place on Quincy Street. She was crying, in a terrible way, and confined to a wheelchair. It broke my heart to see her. We were very close friends,” he added. Savannah Churchill was never able to make more than a few appearances a year after that. Subsequent to the group’s nearly year-long departure from the label, Jubilee Records issued a Four Tunes’ album called “12 x 4.” The collection included hits and novelties. Jubilee continued to release Four Tunes singles into 1957.

When the original group split up in 1956, replacement members kept the group going into the 1980s. It is thought that the Four Tunes returned for a final session at the Jubilee studios during the summer of 1962. Three songs are known to have been recorded. These were left in the can until 1992 when Sequel issued them on their Four Tunes Jubilee sessions two CD set (Sequel CD 229/2, 1992) along with the five aforementioned unissued songs from the August 1953 demo date.

The old supper club circuit always welcomed the Four Tunes back time and time again. “We never did comic skits, vaudeville stuff, routines and fancy dance steps. We did what our fans wanted most—we just came on, sang the old songs and made our own moves,” says Best. If you find a working formula, never try to change it.

— Opal Louis Nations

With invaluable help and patience from Pat Best

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