



Forgotten Treasures by The Paradons

Opal Louis Nations

Bakersfield has for some while been considered the country music capitol of California, yet we tend to forget the significant African-American community which since the last world war has become an important part of the city's cultural fabric. Even when thinking in terms of popular black singing groups from Bakersfield, only the Colts, a City College quartet which enjoyed a measure of success with their original rendition of "Adorable" on Vita Records in 1955 and more recently the Perry (or Perri) Sisters, a pseudo-jazz / gospel-influenced soul outfit, spring to mind. Yet, back in the 50s, when nearly every black urban neighborhood had a vocal harmony group singing in some hallway somewhere, Bakersfield was no exception. From the land east of the Panorama Hills sprang the Paradons whose glorious, golden moment came with their rendering of "Diamonds And Pearls," a touching ballad which not only peaked at number 18 in Billboard's R & B charts during the summer of 1960, but became a prime example of what was later expressed as the LA. doo-wop sound, a phenomenon for the most part made up of songs and groups who had originated outside the greater L.A. metropolitan area.

The creation of the Paradons started with William Powers, born in Oakland, California, June 10, 1942. His father worked in Oakland's then booming shipyards. William and his family moved from Oakland to Bakersfield towards the end of World War II. Powell's father took on a job with a building firm as a bricklayer's hod carrier. William was a church-goer heavily influenced by Rev. James Cleveland and the Dixie Hummingbirds. During the summer of 1957, William and Bill Myers, an old buddy from

across the street, decided to form a quartet. The pair often fooled around singing just for kicks and had gained quite a reputation with the women in the neighborhood. When it came to dating, they bragged of being local Don Juans or a pair-of-dons, hence the later phonetic adaptation, the Paradons.

After discussion, West Tyler and Chuck Weldon were taken in to form a quartet. Edward Scott, who sang in the outfit later on, served as 'utility,' a spare tire kind of a person who filled in when a brother fell sick or could not make a gig. All were pals at Bakersfield High, where they rehearsed in random hallways, bathrooms and the school auditorium. Myers sang bass. Weldon served mostly as second tenor. Tyler took high tenor and Powers, aside from baritone, filled in on first and second tenor parts when the need arose. Powers also wrote all the group's material and doubled as voice coach. "Songs came to me in dreams," states Powers.

The Paradons initially sang gospel at local church services, but later, when they became a more close-knit unit, they took on pop, country, and R & B songs. The group was versatile and satisfied musical needs as occasion required. The rookie bunch of sixteen to eighteen-year-olds played local clubs, one such being the ultra select Maison Joeso's Supper Club where better-healed black and white patrons wined and dined into the wee hours. The club had at times showcased the talents of Ann Weldon, the Ink Spots and the Platters. Other early venues included a spot on Al Allen's radio show and a weekly slot on Cousin Herb's country show on Channel 29.

It was while singing in a country music club that they were discovered by the late (Levi) Werly Fairburn, a notable rockabilly artist who, aside from many other hick waxings, had etched three deserving country jump platters for Savoy in 1957 backed by the Delta Boys. In 1959, Fairburn and three partners started their own label, Milestone. In the beginning, business was conducted from Fairburn's home in Glendora, but later he became involved with the owners of the Audio Arts Recording Studio on Melrose Avenue in Hollywood for whom he cut a number of record deals for release on the Milestone label. Fairburn introduced the aspiring quartet to Jackson and Madelon Baker, proprietors of Audio Arts Studios. Jackson, an engineer at Lockheed, handled the technical side of making records, while Madelon, an accomplished actress and Hollywood producer, took an active role in working with the talent who recorded for them.

The Bakers had set up their Audio Arts label in 1960 and focused their attentions on the sweet soul-based vocal group sounds, whose origins dated back to the mid-fifties and the gospel pyrotechnics of Claude Jeter and the Swan Silvertones. Audio Arts featured black vocal groups from Compton and the South Central L.A. area. Later on, as styles changed, the label focused on soul and gospel music, the latter being Madelon's particular bias. (Fairburn, in partnership with the Bakers and others, would found Whirlybird in 1964.) Milestone's maiden release was Jack Hammer's (Fairburn under an alias) country rock novelty, "Black Widow Spider Woman" (prized by rockabilly cultists.) This was followed by one forgettable dance record by Bob Gaynor.

On January 23, 1960, the Paradons were ushered into the Audio Arts Studio for their first session. Powers, the group's main guiding light, wanted to record a song he had just written entitled "Diamonds And Pearls," but Madelon, in league with others in the group, was against recording it. After much argument and the switching of vocal parts, it was decided that the song would be cut. As West Tyler was the eldest member

in the group (he could pass for 21), he was ascribed song credits, although Powers insists he wrote all the group's songs (including those recorded after he left the group.) "We were told we needed to copyright our tunes with an adult," claims Powers, who feels that all kinds of crooked arrangements were made by lawyers on their behalf. "We were minors and had no legal person to look after our best interests," says Powers. This was a tale often told by others in the industry at the time.

When "Diamonds And Pearls" took off and became a major seller, particularly in California, the group's public bookings multiplied overnight. They guested the Wink Martindale Show, did "American Bandstand", played the Apollo for two weeks alongside Fats Domino who was allegedly upstaged by the group, did a stint at the Pike in Long Beach, played on the Johnny Otis roadshow with the Platters, and hit the Howard Theatre in Washington, D.C. and the Palladium in L.A.

The Dr. Pepper soft drink company sponsored the quartet by printing coupons with labels on their bottles stating "You too can own your own copy of 'Diamonds And Pearls' by mailing the attached coupon to ..." Even with many big-time engagements, the group reportedly made very little money. Powers has been fighting to receive royalties for his songs for the last thirty-two years. (It was just this June that he finally gained the song rights to "Diamonds And Pearls." "It was a long, tough battle, but we persisted and it paid off," says Powers.) Their agent, Joe Graydon, kept seventy-five percent of the take on all public appearances. The fellas were kept on a budget which amounted to a kind of pocket money agreement. All were under nineteen and, according to Powers, treated like children. Powers maintains that Graydon managed to make himself their legal guardian. "We had nothing to do with it," insists Powers. When it came time to record a follow-up, dissent among the ranks flared once more. The beautiful "Bells Ring," the song which eventually became their second and finest cleffing, was held up for months due to songwriting arguments. Powers claims to have written the song, but after the bickering it was decided that all group members,-- including Edward Scott who did not sing a note on the record--be given equal label song credit. "They claimed under-age as an excuse for that, too," says Powers.

"Diamonds And Pearls," a pretty ballad with its whoo-whoop harmonies and delicate guitar figures, differs from "Bells Ring" with its haunting four-part harmonies, simple chord progressions, and Tyler's sweet high tenor affectations barely perceived above the spooky sound of the group. "Bells Ring" is quite clearly the group's high benchmark.

Powers believes that "Bells Ring" did not meet with the kind of success garnered by their first release because of a rush release, mismatched vocal parts, and internal strife among members of the group. The third and final release cut for Milestone was "I Had A Dream" which, without label identification, could have been mistaken for a waxing by the Blue Jays, Milestone stablemates of similar harmonic complexions. Leon Peels and the Blue Jays with their hypnotic rendition of "Lovers' Island" in August of 1960, had almost enjoyed an equal measure of success on the heels of "Diamonds And Pearls."

"I Had A Dream," recorded in 1960 and shelved until release in 1962, went nowhere. By the end of 1960, the guys were signed very briefly to Warner Bros. where they encountered little success with the release of "Take All Of Me," an interesting mid-tempo ballad which tried to adopt a lighter vocal coloring in the realm of the Four Freshmen.

Powers quit the Paradons in early 1961. It was evident that the group was falling apart. Mis-matched vocal parts, bickering over song rights and royalties that failed to arrive finally had taken their toll.

When Powers left the Paradons, he worked for the City of Bakersfield, drifted into the culinary arts, becoming a noted chef and operated his own restaurant, A Sure Thing Barbeque, in Long Beach. He produced t.v. commercials, anchored his own cable t.v. program, and proprietored his own auto detail shop. (Currently, he sings as a solo artist, following his laryngeal performances with a culinary one when he takes off his tux and ties on his apron to cater to guests at parties, banquets, and weddings. Powers also owns and operates Diamonds and Pearls Publishing Company, located in Fair Oaks, California.

When Chuck Weldon left the group, he took up acting and appeared in Alex Haley's noted serials "Roots" and "Queen." Bill Myers became Little Richard's road manager and worked for Christine Jorgensen, the male to female gender-switcher. Myers died in 1992. West Tyler toured the clubs as an R & B entertainer up until his death in 1983.

Those who have seen the Paradons in performance remember their outrageous skits. Powers recalls the time when they toured with the James Brown Road Show in the Carolinas in 1960. James became so jealous of the Paradons each time they upstaged his Famous Flames that he instructed the band to play out of tune behind them. "That was o.k, with us," said Powers. "We just got them to quit and sang acappella."

Based on an interview with William Powers, April, 1993.

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Paradons Discography

Milestone 2003	Diamonds And Pearls / I Want Love	1960	
Milestone 2005	Bells Ring / Please Tell Me		1960
Milestone 2015	I Had A Dream / Never, Never, Never	1962	
Warner Bros. 5186	Take all Of Me / So Fine, So Fine, So Fine	1961	
Tuffest 102	Never Again / This Is Love	1961	
Robin 61824*	Anything Goes / My Song by Milton Allen & The Goldtones	?	

* "Anything Goes" may be by a different group

Trend-tones:

Superb 100	Never Again / This Is Love (same as Tuffest 102)	1961
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