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Rhythm and News THE ROVERS-OPAL LOUIS NAT

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THE ROVERS

Henry Swarn (top)
Oliver Stevenson
Jay Payton
Billy Ray WIlliams

STORY ON NEXT PAGE

OPAL LOUIS NATIONS PHOTO

"Five Guys in Duck-Water Suits"

THE ROVERS

By Opal Louis Nations

The Rovers' story is fraught with bitterness and regret, a sad tale so typical of many aspiring quartets of the 1950s. Their plight was compounded by the fact that the group could not only sing well and tight but had a stunning dance and stage routine second to none in Sacramento or, for that matter, the Greater San Francisco Bay Area. The fact was the group fell into the hands of an unscrupulous record company.

The Rovers were founded in early 1953 by Henry Swarn (whose name is sometimes misspelled as Swan and who in the 1960s became guitarist with Earl Grant) and lead tenor Oliver Stevenson (a.k.a. Stevens), born in Kansas City, Missouri January 25, 1937. The Stevensons moved to Sacramento in 1943. Stvenson's mother, Nancy Younger, was a homemaker while his father, Johnny Stevenson, served in the Army Air Corps. Stevenson had one sister, Dorothy, no sadly passed. The Stevensons owned and operated "The Live and Let Live Café" in Sacramento where they served tasty American fare.

Right from knee pants, Oliver got involved in playing football, basketball and competing in track events. In 1955, the year he graduated high school, he played in the All City basketball team and became lettered in sports. Oliver Stevenson and co-founder Henry Swarn first got acquainted at Del Paso Heights Elementary School. Both idolized the Clovers who had hits with "Fool, fool, fool," "One mint julep" and "Ting-a -ling," among others. The couple tried to mimic the songs, with Stevenson taking John "Buddy" Bailey's part. The name "Rovers" was chosen because it sounded similar to the Clovers. The clincher was catching their idols, the Clovers, (backed by the Lionel Hampton Orchestra) at the Memorial Auditorium in downtown Sacramento.

Through a friend, Carol Williams, Stevenson and Swarn were introduced to Williams' cousin, Jay Payton, who was a good deal older and had had some experience in the terpsichorean business. The Rovers with the exception of Ralph Helms, had their first photo taken at the fancy Meril's of Del Paso Heights, after having purchased monogrammed suits from Vonns of Sather Gate. Payton sang first and second tenor. Payton was a friend of bass singer Billy Ray Williams who was Payton's age. Williams, a tall, slender, athletic student, also played on the grant High School basketball team at an earlier time. Williams house (Carol Williams' family) on Grand Avenue but later switched to Billy Ray's place. In the beginning, the group, having shopped for wax at Tower Records on Sixteenth and Broadway, copied the songs of the Clovers, Drifters and Dominoes ("60-minute man" was a particular favorite), with both Swarn and Stevenson ironing out arrangements.

After working up a bunch of songs the Rovers played school assemblies at Grant High. By playing the "Turkey Hop" the group became local celebrities. The "Turkey Hop" was a dance held at various dance halls and clubs after the annual turkey bowl football playoff between Sacramento and McClatchy High schools. As both Payton and Billy Ray were old enough to patronized night clubs, the Rovers played the Momo Club at Sixth and Capitol Avenue where they built quite a sizable reputation. Payton was a highly skilled tap dancer and with Billy Ray Williams the pair worked up a series of neat dance routines and moves.

"We would make a stunning entrance onto the stage", says Williams. "What would happen is that I would run out first, leap in the air and end up in the splits. They would always send me out first to test the seams of our uniforms. Then the other members would come out one at a

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LEFT PHOTO:
(TOP-LEFT TO RIGHT)
JAY PAYTON
BILLY RAY WILLIAMS
OLIVER STEVENSON
(WITH GUITAR):
HENRY (HANK) SWARN

RIGHT:
THE ORIGINAL
MUSIC CITY WITH
THE CAPITOL
REISSUE.

time, each jumping over the guy who had proceeded him and had ended out in the splits. This always wowed the crowd, 'cause we'd do it slick and fast. We also had a Rovers theme that started with 'Hey everybody' which we lifted from Louis Jordan's 1946 Decca recording of 'Let the good times roll',", added Williams.

All this of course drew the attention of the young womenfolk who swooned over Stevenson's pompadour and most of all Henry Swarn's exceptional good looks. As early as 1954 the Rovers through radio show host Billy Race did a spot on Gene Nelson's program on Channel 40. With Stevenson and Payton crafting the harmonies, the Rovers cut a series of demos at the Terpsichord Recording Studios. Payton, who had heard of Ray Dobard and his Music City label at 1815 Alcatraz Avenue in Berkeley, brought the group to the label. Williams insists that the Rovers attended at least four half-day sessions, practice and otherwise, at Music City which leads one to suspect that Dobard taped many more songs than was commercially issued, a ploy he frequently practiced. It is rumored that Ray Dobard still to this day sits on multiple stacks of un-issued tapes by a good deal of the artists he entered into contractual arrangements with over the last fifty years.

During the late fall of 1954 the Rovers, composed of Oliver "Sunny" Stevenson, lead and first tenor, Jay Payton, lead and second tenor, Ralph Helms, tenor, Henry (Hank) C. Swarn, utility and guitar, and Billy Ray Williams, bass, recorded "Ichi-bon tami dachi" (My number one girl) -- which took eight or nine takes -- and "Why-ohh" (originally conceived as "Why did you lie to me") at Dobard's Berkeley studio, accompanied by the late Johnny Heartsman, bass and piano, Mel Davis, tenor sax, and Jimmy McCracklin's drummer, Ray Cotton. Both songs were written and arranged by Payton. "Ichi-bon tami dachi" comes from Payton's military experiences during the Korean War. The session was shared with the Four Deuces who were in the process of waxing their statewide smash "W.P.L.J." ("White port and lemon juice.")

During this same period, the Five Keys had recorded with promising results the novelty number "Ling ting tong" for Dave Cavanaugh at Capitol Records in Hollywood. When it seemed like "Ichi-bon tami dachi" might take off and vie for chart action against "Ling ting tong," Capitol looked to buy out the competition. "Ichi-bon tami dachi," although not strictly a novelty song, had some of the elements inherent in "Ling ting tong" like an Oriental feel and punchy lyrics and a somewhat exotic rhythm background. A deal was cut whereby the two Rovers songs and recording contract were sold to Capitol in exchange for Dobard having a piece of the sales action gleaned from the Capitol reissue. Capitol re-issued the record in April 1955. Promotion-wise, Dobard had high hopes at first. He had his Rovers release mentioned twice in the "R & B Beat" column of Billboard Magazine in December 1954.

"Dobard, who never gave us money or paid any royalties," says Billy Ray Williams, "did buy us a set of black uniforms. They were cheap threads we called "duck-water suits" because every time we cleaned them, they'd shrink. He told us once that he was going to send us out to play at a swank casino in Vegas. When we got there, we found we had to "walk the counter" in a cheap bar out in the ghetto. After the gig, the owner wouldn't give us money to buy gas to get us all home."

"When our record started to sell, Dobard promised us all sorts of things," says Stevenson. "I tuned down a basketball and track scholarship to Oregon University in favor of going out on a Rovers tour that Dobard said would take us through the South and up the East Coast." But Ray Dobard did nothing, and Stevenson lost his scholarship. It was at this point that Jay Payton tried to persuade the group to quit Music City and move to the Greater Bay Area where better opportunities flourished. "Although Jay was older and had a knowledge of the business, we just wouldn't listen," says Stevenson. Billy Ray Williams still regrets not siding with Payton and giving him support. The fact was they all had dreams, they all knew they had the talent and they all thought they could grab the golden ring. Jay Payton was not going to stop them. As it turned out, Capitol did little to promote "Ichi-bon tami dachi," and sales dried up. Payton asserts that Capitol already had a group called the Rovers and that this had something to do with the buy-out.

The flipside, "Why-ohh" (or as the group refers to it, "Why did you lie to me"), is a sweeping ballad in the grand quartet tradition of the time with its laid-back feel, prominent bass riff and wailing background on which both Oliver Stevenson and Jay Payton share the lead chores. The Music City 1954 release of "Ichi-bon tami dachi" surfaced on three different color pressings: green, blue and red. All currently fetch three figure amounts.

Just weeks before the sale of the Rovers' contract to Capitol, the group recorded one more session for Music City. Billy Ray Williams remembers going through many songs including "Destination moon," "Salute to Johnny Ace,," "Whole lot of love" and "Down to the sea." He does not recall (and most of the group members support this) ever recording "Change your mind," a mid-tempo, badly sung jumper in the Midnighters' vein issued on Music City as by "The 5 Rovers" in March 1956.

"Salute to Johnny Ace," released on Music City in July 1955, was an attempt to eulogize the fatal Christmas night in Houston when balladeer heartthrob Johnny Ace accidentally shot himself in the head while playing Russian roulette. The Rovers' tearful ballad tribute was one of many. The 5 Wings warbled "Johnny's still singing," Varetta Dillard bemoaned the fact that "Johnny has gone," and Marie Adams trilled the touching "In memory," to name just a few. "Salute to Johnny Ace," penned by the entire group, was issued with a Johnny Heartsman instrumental on the reverse. The tune is delicately lead by Stevenson's pleading , Ace-sounding tenor. The chart, supported by Swarn's tremolo guitar, was given an anguished reading and is most certainly the Rovers' most outstanding effort. The record, also pressed in three different colors, sold very well, but by now the Rovers, disillusioned and embittered by broken promises, were on the rocks.

"By September 1955," says Stevenson, "the group had broken up and I had moved to Los Angeles where in a dazed and confused state I tried to make it in the music business on my own. But because I didn't have a manager, I didn't get much work. I hooked up with Bobby Nunn of the Robins and Coasters in 1957, and we tried to form a group called the Dukes, but we never got beyond rehearsals."

In February 1956, Music City put out the fabulous "Tell me darling" by the Gaylarks of San Francisco. On the reverse side, Dobard had issued the ballad "Whole lot of love" by the Rovers. "Whole lot of love," from the early 1955 session, is lead by high tenor Ralph Helms (who sings like Johnny Wyatt of the Candles) and Jay Payton who fills in on the bridge. "Whole lot of love," although interesting, proved little more than 'filler' for the Gaylarks' well-remembered "Tell me darling."

A full year after the Capitol signing, Music City issued the fabulous "Down to the sea," a spooky, atmospheric ballad by lofty tenor Ralph Helms with Henry Swarn unfolding the sad tale of jilted love, a classic weeper in the fashionably macabre idiom. The reverse, "Change your mind," was not recorded by the original Rovers, according to most members in the group, but Ralph E. Helms remembers that the original members did indeed cut the record. The 45, which now fetches a princely sum, is ascribed on the label as being by "The 5 Rovers." It would not be beyond Dobard's ubiquitous scheming to hire a group of singers and have them record as someone else. We may never know for sure.

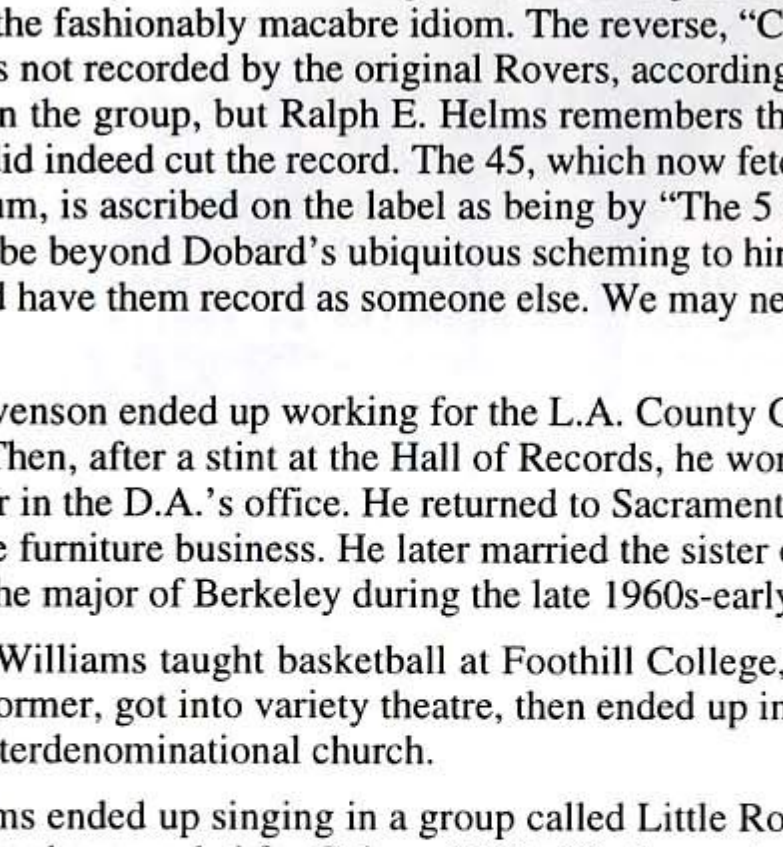
Oliver Stevenson ended up working for the L.A. County General Hospital. Then, after a stint at the Hall of Records, he worked as a storekeeper in the D.A.'s office. He returned to Sacramento in 1970 and got into the furniture business. He later married the sister of Warren Widener, the major of Berkeley during the late 1960s-early 1970s.

Billy Ray Williams taught basketball at Foothill College, went out as a solo performer, got into variety theatre, then ended up in the choir of his local interdenominational church.

Ralph Helms ended up singing in a group called Little Ronnie & the Chromatics who recorded for Galaxy (1965-66), then onto the Chocolate Chips in 1972-73 on H.L.S.

Henry C. Swarn went to play with Wes Montgomery who packed him off to get guitar lessons. He later headed for Portland where he played the Cotton Club. He befriended drummer Mel Brown, and the two often played together. After Brown left to join Earl Grant in Las Vegas, he sent for Swarn to join the Earl Grant Combo. The group played the Fremont club in Las Vegas. Swarn returned to Portland after seven years and is currently playing and singing in a recent configuration of the Ink Spots. Swarn says he is indebted to Jay Payton who taught him the ways of the music world.

Jay Payton, after hosting a t.v. talent show on cable during the 1970s, joined the management staff at Sweet Jimmy's entertainment complex on San Pablo Avenue in San Pablo where he currently hosts a regular weekly music and dance showcase along with his many friends in the showbiz industry.



DISCOGRAPHY

750 Ichi-Bon Tami Dachi/Why-Ohh
780 Salute to Johnny Ace/ (n/a)
792 Whole Lot of Love/ (n/a)
798 Down to the Sea/Change your Mind