



The Sputniks

by Opal Louis Nations

The Sputniks were a fine polished singing group out of North Richmond, California who flowered briefly during the late Fifties, then sadly faded into undeserved obscurity like so many groups of the time. The Sputniks were best known for their infectious jump song “Hey Maryann” which became a regional success.

It all started with Curtis Stanton, born August 1, 1940 in Fresno. Stanton, a bright, handsome, resourceful young man, grew up listening to the sweet soulful harmonic sounds of the Windy City doo-wop aggregations and idolized groups like The Moonglows, Spaniels and Flamingos. Possessed with a peerless tenor voice, Stanton mimicked the love songs of street corner royalty. He got the idea of forming his own quartet in 1955 while still in his final year at Helm’s Junior High in Richmond, Ca. The young Stanton had moved with his family to Parchester Village in North Richmond because of the considerable availability of gainful employment that existed in the area at the time.

Stanton put the word out that he sought soldiers to form a quartet. To his surprise, between thirty and forty eager young wanna-bes showed up on his doorstep to audition. Most were eliminated by the fact that they could not pick up or fall into harmony. The final cut included George Peeples, tenor and aspiring song writer, Robert Beale, lead tenor, Lawrence Wydermayer, bass, plus Stanton, first tenor and lead. Calling themselves The Four Doves, the group rehearsed at each other’s homes, then as harmonies gelled at a rehearsal space in North Richmond shared at times with The Golden Tones lead by Joe Simon.

The group came to the attention of Joe Love who owned and operated The Joe Love Record Store at the end of Georgia Street in Vallejo. The guys, all now at Richmond High, found work singing at small auditoriums and recreation centers, gigs

sought by Love through contacts at his retail store. Love took the group under his wing and found them the occasional paying engagement. The group's smooth harmonies and professional ability pricked up ears, and soon they were playing venues like the 126 Club alongside Sugar Pie De Santo and Pee Wee Kingsley, on programs with the late L.C. "Good Rocking" Robinson and with various star acts that hit town.

At one time, Ray Dobard at Music City Records offered The Four Doves a recording contract. Aside from the fact that the group was under-age, they had heard from other artists who had recorded for Music City and had received less than a square deal. As a result, they turned the offer down.

The Four Doves were having problems with George Peeples' mother who wanted her son to quit hanging out with a no-good bunch of street singers. She wanted her son to concentrate on the more important rigors of schoolwork. The Four Doves were forced to replace Peeples with John Wesley Mitchell.

It was not long before the group caught the attention of Nathaniel "The Magnificent" Montague. Montague had worked as a deejay in Chicago at WAAF, had managed two or three sets of Magnificents (of "Up on the mountain" fame), had fallen out with the management at Vee Jay Records to whom his group was signed, and had split for the sunnier climes of San Francisco where he landed a job alongside "Jumpin'" George Oxford on KSAN. The narcissistically inclined Montague soon assumed management of The Four Doves and had them rehearse religiously at his house. "Montague had us rehearse every day except Sunday for eight months straight," says Stanton. "He would give us tall stacks of albums to go through to help find songs we could work with."

In October 1957, shortly after the Soviets had launched the Sputnik satellite, Montague called the group. "I'm going to change your name," he said. "From now on you're going to be known as The Sputniks." This did not seem to present any problems. The group believed in Montague's knowledge of the music business. Later, when The Sputniks were ready to record, Montague asked the fellows if they wanted to go with Class in L.A. or Vee Jay in Chicago. It seems that Montague had repaired his differences with his former friends in the Windy City. Opting to go with a California label to cut the inconvenience of having to travel halfway across the country to record, the group signed with Leon René whose son Googie assumed co-management.

Around Christmas of 1957, The Sputniks headed for Hollywood to record their first and only session for Class Records. On hand at the session, arranged jointly by Rene Hall and Plas Johnson, were guitarists Irving Ashby and Barney Kessell, among others. Plas Johnson wore two other hats: he served as leader and played sax on the breaks. Googie occasionally sat in on piano and wound up doing more arranging than he was given credit for.

Four songs were committed to tape. The first was "Hey Maryann," the chart, most popular and best remembered of the group's recordings. "Hey Maryann," a catchy jump of ethereal brightness and irresistible rhythm was originally lifted from a gospel album. Robert Beale sings lead. The song has a stone cool sax part at the bridge, unmistakably Plas in origin. Leon René is thought to have had a hand in constructing the melody which seemed akin to The Penguins' 1954 Dootone release of "Hey Senorita." "My love is gone" is a beautifully rendered ballad derived from "My own true love," a pop tune circa 1954 which itself was based on "Tara's Theme" from the 1939 movie sensation "Gone with the wind."

The song, lead by Stanton, was perfected on the third take. Montague, whose voice is heard on the tune's recitation, is remembered as having reprimanded Stanton for bad enunciation. Stanton recalls that Montague accused him of having a "mush-mouth." "My love is gone," with its lilting tenor nuances and basso punctuations, is a fine example of a beautiful ballad rendered in California doo-wop style.

"Wait a little while," a church-sounding jump song, is of gospel origin and yet another tune with a root source somewhere in Montague's record album collection. Lead again by Robert Beale, "Wait a little while" is remembered by Stanton as having a very awkward guitar part. It took a number of run-throughs for Kessell to master the rapid strokes required for the lick.

"Johnny's little lamb," a nursery rhyme song adapted from the spiritual "Sit down children," was concocted and spliced by ex-Dove George Peeples. It is yet another dance vehicle with Beale on lead and Plas blasting on the break. Googie is thought to have played piano on this one. The particular arrangement of "Sit down children" was recorded for Peacock Records in 1957 by The Gospelaires of Dayton, Ohio. All four songs were mixed and mastered at the Capitol Studios at Hollywood and Vine.

"Hey Maryann," sandwiched with "My love is gone," was issued on Class in January 1958. When Montague saw that the sales of "Hey Maryann" / "My love is gone" looked promising, he leased the rights to a Canadian record company called Phonodisc which issued it on their Delta imprint. When "Hey Maryann" hit the streets," says Stanton, "Montague plugged the devil out of it by playing both sides consecutively for a solid two hours on his radio show at KSAN. In those days, deejays had the power to do things like that," Stanton added.

"Hey Maryann" is reported to have sold over 355,000 copies. Apart from selling well in California, it did nicely in Detroit and St. Louis as well. Striking while the iron was hot, René and Montague issued "Johnny's little lamb" backed with "Wait a little while" in March that same year. The second release did not do as well as the first, but the group did enjoy third billing on the B.B. King Show alongside Dee Clark and La Vern Baker who taught the guys a few professional pointers. With B.B. King, The Sputnicks played venues in San Francisco, Fresno and Los Angeles. Stanton remembers sharing a bill with The Fleetwoods of "Come softly to me" fame.

A short time before The Fleetwoods engagement, The Sputnicks earned a little cash taping songs for other artists at The Gold Star Studios in Studio B. "We'd be down there rehearsing tunes with other groups from the Bay Area," says Stanton. "We did two songs for The Hollywood Flames on Ebb and a bunch that wound up with Don Barksdale at Rhythm Records in San Francisco." Masquerading as The Greats, The Sputnicks cut a session at Ebb Records with a fiddle player believed to be the legendary Ginger Smock. The topside featured Smock on a ditty called "Fiddler's Rock." The b-side gave us a disappointing novelty opus entitled "Marching Elvis." The single surfaced in April 1958. Stanton recalls seeing Fats Domino and Rick Nelson over in Studio A.

As far as royalties from the two singles releases were concerned, Montague told the boys that they owed him money. Their Class session cost \$450 alone, and on top of this, they owed traveling expenses, according to Montague. The Magnificent One, as was the custom in those days, of course got away with it. It was a big thing for The Sputnicks just to cut records. They thought little of earning royalties and song rights.

The Sputniks must have cut twenty or twenty-five songs at the Gold Star studios. Most of the songwriting credits went to N. Nathan (Montague) and J. Vikki (Googie René.) Stanton remembers a solo session at Dot Records alongside Art and Dotty Todd and Plas Johnson. Songs were taped, but Stanton thinks nothing was ever released. Shortly before The Sputniks disbanded they cut two songs at Sierra Sound in Berkeley for the L.A.-based Pam Mar record company. The topside was a remake of "My love is gone." For the underside they chose a dance vehicle entitled "My baby twist."

When the group decided to call it quits, Stanton signed up for barber school. Beale took up typewriter repair, Mitchell got a job at Chevron, and Wydermayer ended up working for the BART subway system. Stanton then took up with The El Domingos of "Evening bells" fame on the Kappa Rex label. This was a short while after they had recorded and work was still plentiful. The El Domingos line-up at this juncture was Jay Vernon, lead, guitar and songwriter (Vernon wrote "I'm not kidding you," the Kappa Rex B-side), Robert Troutt, baritone, Lawrence Thompson, lead, first and second tenor, Curtis Stanton, lead and tenor, plus a bass singer, a country boy remembered only as "Turk."

The El Domingos played all over the Bay Area, including The 54 Club. Stanton remembers gigs in Merced and Modesto as well. In 1962, Stanton quit The El Domingos and joined a jazzy trio with Artis Johnson and his old buddy, Robert Beale. This unnamed combo sang jazz standards and was able to find sufficient employment. On one occasion, they opened for June Christy and held forth with two fifteen-minute sets. Just before he was drafted into the service in 1963, Stanton and the trio played on a bill with The Coasters at the Sheraton Palace on Market Street in San Francisco. Stanton returned to the trio after service, but the group fell apart following Johnson's demise.

In 1970, Stanton joined "Chain Reaction," the soul funk outfit who recorded "Lady in Red" / "Nurse your nerves" for a tiny San Francisco label called Oshowleo. "I toured all over with them for three or four years," says Stanton. "In 1976, after three releases on the Fish label, I quit to take up barbering full time." Both Beale and Mitchell have passed.

You can still see a gleam in Stanton's eye whenever you mention the good old doo-wopping days. It would not take too much to get him out there singing again with a fresh set of Sputniks. Let us keep our fingers crossed.

— Opal Louis Nations

With assistance from Steve Propes
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