

Ben E. King
 Rudy Lewis
 Johnny Moore
 Bill Pinkney
 Clyde McPhatter
 Gerhart Thrasher
 Charlie Thomas



Ben E. King, born September 28th, 1938, Henderson, North Carolina

THE STORY OF THE DRIFTERS IS MORE THAN THE STORY OF A SINGLE group's success. It's also the story of the great rhythm and blues singers who claimed membership in the group at various times, of the equally great songwriters who created classic songs for the group and of the pioneering record executives who helped bring the Drifters' music to the attention of the world.

The Drifters saga begins in 1953, when Clyde McPhatter, the lead vocalist of the Dominoes and an innovator in secularizing gospel vocal style for the rhythm and blues market, decided to leave the strict regimen of his group and go it alone. As Atlantic producer Jerry Wexler explained to author Ted Fox in the book *In the Groove*, Atlantic chief Ahmet Ertegun went to hear the Dominoes at Birdland, in Manhattan, and discovered that McPhatter had left the group. Ertegun hurried backstage to see the Dominoes' manager, Billy Ward, who told him he had fired McPhatter. According to Wexler, "Ahmet went up-town like a shot, found Clyde McPhatter, and signed him up." McPhatter joined Atlantic as the lead singer of the Drifters, a group so named because, as an early press release put it, "the members had done a lot of drifting from one group to another." McPhatter received billing above the group — which also included Gerhart Thrasher and Bill Pinkney — even though the name Clyde McPhatter and the Drifters sounded to Wexler "like a cowboy group."

In 1953 the Drifters made it to Number One on the R&B chart with their first Atlantic single, "Money Honey," and followed it up with three Top Five R&B hits the next year: "Such a Night," the risqué "Honey Love" (which also topped the R&B charts) and, in seeming atonement for their more salacious numbers, a version of "White Christmas." McPhatter was drafted into the

army in 1954, and the first hitmaking period of the Drifters came to an end. (McPhatter successfully resumed a solo career with Atlantic in 1956.)

The Drifters became significant again in 1958. The group's manager, George Treadwell, had a contract for the Drifters to appear once a year at the Apollo Theatre, in Harlem; at that point, however, he didn't really have a group. So he persuaded another vocal combo, the Five Crowns, to assume the name and fulfill the Drifters' obligations, which included their recording contract with Atlantic.

In 1959 the born-again Drifters, with Ben E. King as lead vocalist, were assigned to work with the production team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, fresh from their success with the Coasters. Their first collaboration, "There Goes My Baby," not only gave the Drifters a distinctive sound and a radio identity but also represented a milestone in the infiltration of R&B into mainstream American pop. The song was distinguished by its unusual beat, derived by Leiber and Stoller from a Latin rhythmic style known as *baion*. The rhythm was bolstered by a string section, which lent a more formal quality to a loose and languid melody. The combination didn't initially sound like a formula for success.

"That was the time Jerry Wexler's tuna fish went all over the wall," Jerry Leiber told Ted Fox. "We played him the record while he was eating his lunch. He started screaming at us, 'What are you doing with my money!?' This is the dumbest — the craziest — this (censored) record is out of tune! Hey, Ahmet, isn't it out of tune?' Ahmet says, 'Hey, wait a minute! Stoller knows whether it's in tune or not! Is it out of tune?' Stoller says, 'Well, it's a little out of tune but I think it's kind of interesting.' 'Interesting! What



Bill Pinkney, born August 15th, 1925, Sumter, South Carolina



Rudy Lewis, born August 23rd, 1936; died 1964



Johnny Moore, born 1934, Selma, Alabama



Clyde McPhatter, born November 15th, 1933, Durham, North Carolina; died June 13th, 1972, Bronx, New York

kind of interesting? The (censored) timpani are out of tune, man! This is a rotten (censored) record! And I'm not going to put it . . . And the tuna fish sandwich was all over the wall."

"There Goes My Baby" reached Number One on the R&B chart and Number Two on the pop chart. (Leiber and Stoller, along with engineer and producer Tom Dowd, had tinkered with the song a bit prior to its release — but just a bit.)

The hits that followed, with Ben E. King at the helm, may have been more conventional in arrangement, but they mirrored "There Goes My Baby" in mood and content. They were songs of bittersweet romance, of uncertainty and longing, of a lover asking for reassurance, if not devotion. And this sense of yearning was made all the more palpable by King's heart-breaking, yet always dignified, delivery. The songwriting team of Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman provided the group with its first across-the-board Number One hit and million seller, "Save the Last Dance for Me," in 1960, as well as the rapturous "This Magic Moment." By the end of 1960, though, King had left the group to embark on a solo career with Atlantic (continuing his string of Latin-tinged smashes with the Leiber and Stoller production of "Spanish Harlem").

Rudy Lewis served as King's replacement and fronted the group for its third million seller, "Up on the Roof," in 1962. A wistful slice of city life, written by the Brill Building pair of Gerry Goffin and Carole King (who had already supplied the Drifters with "Some Kind of Wonderful"), it transcended its tenement specifics to strike a universal chord about the need to find the room, and the time, to dream. As the melody glides into the chorus,

Lewis imparts his secret, and the claustrophobic world he has so convincingly conjured up melts away before our ears: "On the roof's the only place I know/Where you just have to wish to make it so."

The Drifters best evoked New York as a place that contained, side by side, tremendous dreams and deep frustrations with "On Broadway," the follow-up to "Up on the Roof." Written by another celebrated Brill Building couple, Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, along with Leiber and Stoller, "On Broadway" was daringly theatrical; its simple, almost stark arrangement reflected the mood of the narrator, a down-on-his-luck musician with lots of ambition but only "one thin dime." He is simultaneously inspired and humbled by the glittering lights of the Great White Way.

Just as the Drifters were enjoying sustained success, Rudy Lewis died suddenly in 1964, and once again the group had lost a magical voice. Johnny Moore, who had sung with the Drifters for a time after Clyde McPhatter's departure, stepped in. Remarkably, the group immediately recorded the classic best seller "Under the Boardwalk."

The Drifters enjoyed more hits, including the sequel to their boardwalk antics, "I've Got Sand in My Shoes" (written by the "Boardwalk" team, Arthur Resnick and Kenny Young), and "Saturday Night at the Movies." But "Under the Boardwalk" marked the climax of their run of best sellers. Time has hardly made their work seem quaint; rather, their work has withstood the ravages of the years to become even more special, more knowing. Their songs have been covered through the last two decades of rock and roll by artists ranging from Jay and the Americans and Rickie Lee Jones to George Benson, Donna Summer and Marvin Gaye. ■