

Doo Wop and Soul in the Birthplace of Funk: The Story of Sammy & the Del Larks

by Charlie Horner

With contributions from Pamela Horner



Tyrone Ashley, aka Sammy Campbell
(photo courtesy of Sam Campbell)

In central New Jersey, halfway between Newark and New Brunswick, stands the city of Plainfield. Nicknamed the Queen City, Plainfield became known in the 1960's and 1970's for the talented musicians and singers who gave birth to P-Funk. But the R&B musical heritage of Plainfield goes back much further. Back to the early 1950's.

The story of the Del Larks revolves around the extensive music careers of two individuals; Sammy Campbell and Ron Taylor.

Sammy Campbell was born May 6, 1941 in Plainfield, NJ. The seventh of ten children, Sammy's parents were born in Virginia and migrated to Plainfield in the 1930's looking for work. "My father was a cook on a barge in Virginia, in the 1930's. Around '38 he came north. Before that he used to cook on that barge and play guitar, but I didn't know that until 1960. He'd gone up to West Orange or West Patterson for an interview with us. We were talking about music and my brother mentioned that my father used to play guitar and he was cool about it. He was excited about us but he never mentioned anything about what he did."

Sam Campbell's musical influences were rooted in

Gospel. "We sang in church," Sammy recalled. "I was more into listening than singing. Do you remember Lovelace Watkins? Well we went to his church, a little church in Plainfield on Liberty St. and 2nd called the Church of God in Christ. Watkins played guitar. Vivian played keyboard and they sang together. Lovelace Watkins began recording and going over to Europe. But before that, I used to sit there and listen to him sing and everybody would be clapping and feet moving. You had that excitement in the air."

Lovelace Watkins went on to international acclaim in Europe and South Africa as a jazz singer before returning to become a mainstay in Las Vegas. Watkins' gospel beginnings were preserved on at least one 78 RPM release on Newark's *Coleman* label.

Young Sam Campbell also had secular musical influences. "Ray Charles," Sam remembered, "Had 'Drowning in My Own Tears.' That was the only record I had. I used to listen to that song till the water would come out of the record. He was my favorite."

The original Del Larks started around 1953. The first group consisted of Sam Campbell (lead); his brother, David "Sonny" Campbell (first tenor); Allen Walker (baritone); Louie Dickerson (second tenor); and Harold Erby (bass). All were from Plainfield with the exception of Howard Erby who was from Scotch Plains, NJ.

Sam recalled his first group doing a lot of cover songs. While the later Del Larks were more polished, the first incarnation of the group still sounded good. "The harmony was still the same. We always had that

Right: —>
Lovelace
Watkins,
(Photo cour-
tesy of Molly
Norris)



<— Left: Early Gospel recording by Lovelace Watkins on the *Coleman* label out of Newark, NJ. *Coleman* was owned by the Coleman Bros. Gospel group.
(From CUH Archives)

rich harmony. Harold Erby was a deep bass."

Though young, the first Del Larks group did make appearances around northern New Jersey. In fact, the final appearance for the original Del Larks was to open for the Moonglows at Newark's Wideaway Ballroom.

The Del Larks' group that was to first to record, came together in Plainfield's Washington School. Washington ran from grammar school through the 8th grade. Sam Campbell (lead, 2nd tenor), Mert Matthews (baritone), Ronnie Taylor (2nd tenor), Jimmy Anderson (bass, baritone, 1st tenor, falsetto) and James "Jeff" Jeffers (1st tenor) made up the group.

Ron Taylor was born on July 6, 1939 in Plainfield, New Jersey. Both his parents were originally from Virginia. He first began singing in with a male gospel quartet in his mother's church, the Church of God, at the age of 13. The group was simply called "The Male Quartet". It consisting of Ron Taylor (baritone), Donald Walker (1st tenor), James Boyd (bass) and Albert Brown (2nd tenor). The Church of God didn't have any syncopated singing. The quartet did songs like "The Little Brown Church in the Wildwoods" and "I'll Never Touch It (Smoking and Drinking)."



Quartet of the Church of God: (l to r, top) James Boyd (bass); Donald Walker (1st tenor), Ron Taylor (baritone); Bottom; Albert Brown (1st tenor).

(Both photos courtesy of Ron Taylor.)



Ron's secular music influences included records by the Flamingos and Heartbeats, as well as the live singing of local groups. Plainfield in the early 1950's had a lively quartet scene. The one that made the biggest impression on Ron Taylor was the Cor-Wrens. In 7th Grade assembly in Washington School (1953), fellow students entertained their classmates. First up was Linwood Cathcart on saxophone, then Bernie Worrell on piano. Then a [vocal] group came on stage called the Cor-Wrens. There was John McNeil (lead and second tenor), Raymond Clark (bass), Marvin Waugh (lead, second tenor and first tenor), Corwin Price (first tenor), Donald Cassett (baritone and second tenor). "They had smooth harmony and sounded as good as any group we were hearing on the juke boxes and radio," remembered Ron.

The stage of Plainfield's Washington School hosted many of the R&B recording artists of the day. The shows being run by Bucky Taylor and George Lattimore brought acts to the school to preview and promote upcoming shows in Plainfield. In that way, Plainfield's young potential singers got to see the Heartbeats, Dells and many others.

"They used to have big shows on Saturday night at Washington School. The biggest recording groups of the day would come there, five or six acts at a time. I used to sneak out of the house to go to the school to see the shows. And I can remember one night being outside and Sammy and Mert and Jeff came to me and said, 'Let's sing.' And I was in the Del Larks." That was in the summer of 1954.

The Del Larks used to rehearse in the West End Gardens at the home of Mr. Charles Doyle, who acted as sort of an informal manager of the group. They also rehearsed in the home of Mr. Nat Kimble, a jazz organist. Kimble used to transpose the group's music for them and let them rehearse at his house. "And then we used to sing wherever we got an echo – bathrooms, tunnels, street corners – everywhere we went we were singing," said Ron.

Before they recorded, the group appeared locally. Though they were still teenagers, they performed at hard core nightclubs. Recalled Ron, "Sammy, our leader, would approach a club owner with the story, 'We're a group from Florida, up North for a deal that has fallen through. We'd like to get some work in the club.' Most of the time we'd find out that there was a talent night, usually on a Thursday. The winner of more than one 'Talent Night' would earn a weekend as a paid act. The Del Larks played all over New Jersey."

"We never did many school functions," recalled Sammy. "When I was promoting the group we did the Sonic Hall, the Tyler, these were all adult clubs. We were young but the kind of songs we were doing were adult songs. We'd go in and perform but then we had to go out. We couldn't hang around the bar. We were doing Ray Charles stuff. We were doing all the older stuff like 'Red Sails In The Sunset'. The kind of songs that older people were listening to... Ray Charles' 'What'd I Say'."

"We were always working," said Ron. "We were working in Somerville (Tyler's), Linden, Freehold, Perth Amboy. We shouldn't even have been in those clubs."

"Back then, the Del Larks did a lot of cover songs," said Sam. "Whenever we did a club, we'd ask someone in the audience to give us three words to compose a title. That was always fun for us. Because, when you ask someone in the audience to give us a phrase, we'd turn that into a song. We'd go into a football huddle and make up a song on the spot. The band didn't even know it. But we'd give them a key and from there just go through the song."

Reflecting on the Del Lark's personnel, Ron Taylor explained, "Jimmy Anderson was a baritone who served as bass on some of our original songs like, 'Lady Love,' and 'Remember The Night.' Jimmy could also sing second tenor, first tenor and he had a beautiful falsetto voice. Mert Matthews was our baritone. I (Ron Taylor) was a second tenor with a reach to first tenor. James Jeffers was a delicate but smooth first tenor. Sammy Campbell sang lead baritone and second tenor. We really wowed the audiences we played for. None of us played instruments so we jammed off whatever house band the club had."

Plainfield in the mid to late 1950's was awash with good vocal groups. Besides the Del Larks there were United Soul, the Boyce Brothers (Admirations), Nonchalants, Wonders, Cor-Wrens and Belaires.

Perhaps the best known of the Plainfield groups, George Clinton's Parliaments, originated in Newark, not Plainfield. George Clinton began singing at the age of 14, in 1956. The original Parliaments were George Clinton, Charles Butch Davis, Gene Boykins, Herbie Jenkins, and Glen Carlos. Clinton's main influence was Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers. "I used to skip school and go to the Apollo Theater," George said. "I left out of the eleventh grade. Cocky as hell. 'I'm not even going back to school.' That's how much I knew I was going to sing." Meanwhile, George Clinton started working in a barbershop. "At the Uptown Tonsorial Parlor, all of us were cutting hair, doing hair. That was in Newark. I was fresh out of school, the Parliaments been playing around town forever. So at the Uptown, we were singing with the Gospel Clefs, Sensational Six, all the gospel groups. We all rehearsed in the same barbershop. The Monotones ('Book of Love'), the Fiestas ('So Fine'), I sang with all of them." [2]



Early publicity photo of the Parliaments



Parliaments' first release on APT. From CUH Archives.

At the Uptown Tonsorial Parlor, George reformed the Parliaments with fellow barbershop worker Grady Thomas along with Charles Davis, Danny Mitchell and Robert Lambert. In late 1957 or early 1958, the Parliaments recorded their first record, "Poor Willie" b/w "Party Boys". The songs were cut for Bea Kaslin's Hull label but not released on Hull. The masters were leased or sold to ABC-Paramount's APT label who put the record out in 1958. Ron Taylor met George Clinton sometime in 1957 and the two became friends. The Parliaments often played gigs in Plainfield, competing in talent contests with the Del Larks.

While the Del Larks were finding plenty of work locally, they lacked one thing that could give them national acclaim, a record. That was about to change.

Ron recalled, "In the summer of 1957, there was talk in Plainfield of a large talent show. The show was held at Seidlers Field in the East End of Plainfield. All the local groups were invited. Seidlers Field was packed the night of the show. United Soul, the Nonchalants, the Boyce Brothers (Admirations), the Wonders, the Parliaments, the Del Larks and more groups battled it out from early evening long into the night. The winner was finally announced and first place went to the Del Larks! After the show, a little older white lady approached us and introduced herself as Mrs. Yolanda Gregory. She said she was very impressed and interested in our group. She gave us her card or phone number. A couple of days later we had some communication from her saying she wanted to come meet us and take her to her home which was in the Watchung Range which stood above Plainfield. She told us she had industry connections and she wanted to manage us."

Yolanda Gregory was married to Waylande Gregory the famous artist, known for his ceramic sculptures. "Mrs. Gregory came and we piled into her station wagon and went up to her home," Ron continued. "When we got there we were impressed. Her hus-

band, Waylande Gregory had the whole place filled with large cartoon characters seemingly made of stone. He was working on a "Sesame Street"-type children's program for TV. Mrs. Gregory had a tape recorder set up. We sang for her and her husband. We did our own songs, 'Remember The Night' and 'Lady Love.' Mrs. Gregory also had a friend there named Herb, who'd written a couple of songs called 'Bubble Gum Doll' and 'Can't Believe You're Mine Tonight.' She began to talk about making records and going to New York, to real recording studios, to make demos that she could take to people.

The Del Larks were still covered other groups' songs at this point but also did a lot of original tunes. Songs that the Del Larks covered in their performances included the Monotones' "Book Of Love" and Jackie & the Starlites' "Valerie" (Sammy did a great version). Of their original tunes, "Lady Love" was a song that really got the crowd up dancing when ever they did performed it.

At the time there was discussion within the group about taking on a new manager. There was no formal contract with Charles Doyle but he felt he was the group's manager. But Doyle wasn't really getting the Del Larks much work so the decision was easy.

Yolanda Gregory took the group into New York City where they cut some demos. She then took the them to *Atlantic Records* in March of 1958, where they were signed to record. "We sat down with Ahmet Ertegun, his brother and Jerry Wexler," Ron recalled. "They welcomed us to the *Atlantic* family. At the time they had Ruth Brown. Joe Turner and all those artists. The Bobbettes had just scored with 'Mr. Lee.' We went in and recorded the same day that the Coasters recorded 'Yakety Yak,' 'Zing Went The Strings Of My Heart' and 'Three Cool Cats.' We came in and did 'Lady Love' and 'Remember the Night.' The group also

recorded "Bubble Gum Doll" and "Can't Believe You're Mine Tonight." The band was the *Atlantic* house band, with Panama Francis and King Curtis.

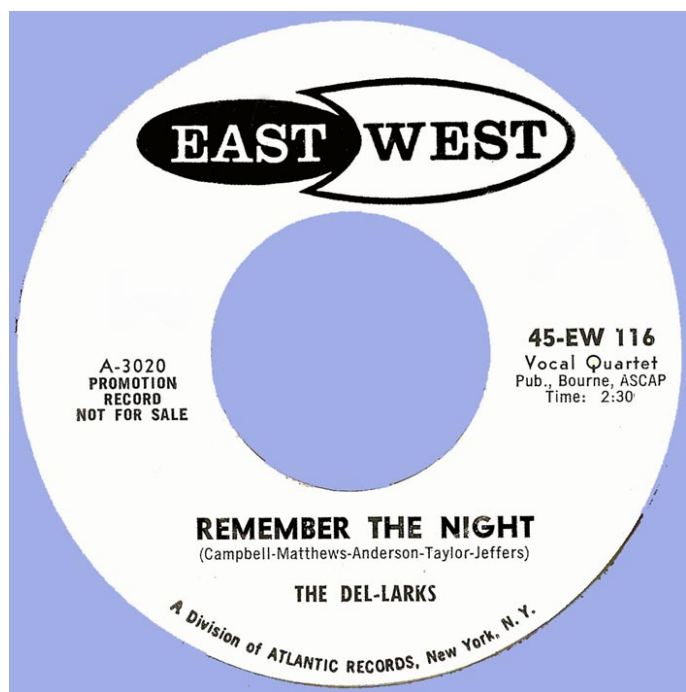
Mrs. Gregory got the Del Larks bookings in order to promote the soon to be released *Atlantic* recording. She took the group to sing at Palisades Park. When they sang "Book of Love," everyone thought they were the Monotones and wanted their autographs. Yolanda also got the Del Larks on a show on Atlantic City's Steel Pier with the Channels, the Crests and other groups. Another memorable show took place at the High Street Community Center in Newark. Also on the bill were the Isley Brothers, Little Anthony & the Imperials, the Wheels, Channels, Paragons, Jesters and Heartbeats. The show was produced by Clinton Miller.

Next Mrs. Gregory worked to get the Del Larks TV exposure in advance of their record. She got the group on *Joe Franklin's* TV show out of New York. Joe briefed the group on what to say before hand. Then they lip synched "Lady Love" and "Remember The Night." Before "Remember the Night," the group was instructed to ad lib a commercial for Colonna Cheddar Cheese. Each member of the group was asked to "remember a special night". When it came Ron Taylor's turn, he had to say he remembered the night his mother first fed him a Colonna Cheddar Cheese sandwich!!!!

After that the Del Larks appeared on *Jocko Henderson's Rocket Ship* TV show in Philadelphia. Yolanda then tried to arrange national TV exposure for the Del Larks on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. However, an argument was brewing within the group. "We had this big thing, because at the time she wanted to manage the group," said Sam. "But she wanted 50%. And 50% just did not jive. The guys, especially Jimmy, were angry with me because I didn't want to sign the contract. 60:40? We'd have argued that point but I might have gone along with it. We were at the Ed Sullivan rehearsal, in his office. Ed Sullivan had come in to hear the group. Whatever connections she had – she knew the people."

Yolanda left the Del Larks in the rehearsal studio for The Ed Sullivan Show while she went uptown to try to line up a gig at the Apollo for them. In the meantime the group began arguing about whether or not to give Mrs. Gregory a 50:50 cut. The argument got rather heated and the group's language reverted back to that used on the streets of Plainfield. What the Del Larks didn't know was that the mikes were open and their "private" conversation was being transmitted to another room where Ed Sullivan was listening. Sullivan was shocked by what he heard.

"I don't remember if it was Jimmy or Jeff got to cursing," said Sam. "And Mr. Sullivan said to Mrs. Gregory, 'Take the boys back and teach them some manners.' She was hot! Because she had left us there and gone up to the Apollo. She came back and he told her that. Oh, she was fired up. And we were a little upset too because it was before "Remember the Night" came out. We had recorded it. We were signed with Atlantic. Yolanda was getting all the wheels turning. At that time there were very few black acts on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. To get into that position at that time would have been advantageous



Promo copy of "Remember the Night".
(From Classic urban Harmony Archives)



From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives.

for us. Mrs. Gregory was a Hungarian, a little, short woman. She had a heart of gold but she was a cold hearted business woman. Hey, listen, doors were opening, but the guys just couldn't leave that ghetto for long enough to do the audition."

As a result, *The Ed Sullivan Show* appearance never happened. Mrs. Gregory would have nothing further to do with the group. Instead of having a record on the parent label, *Atlantic* relegated the release to their *East West* subsidiary. The songs got some airplay, but *Atlantic* never really got behind it. No further Del Larks releases on *Atlantic* were forthcoming.

The Del Larks went back to Plainfield and kept performing. Meanwhile, their friends, the Parliaments were beginning to get more attention. George Clinton had moved his barbershop operation to Plainfield, doing business in the Silk Palace. The Silk Palace was originally located on 3rd Street, at the site of the former Capitol Bakery. George began working there and soon became part owner. He was doing everyone's processes there. The Silk Palace also became the new hangout for all the local singers and musicians. The Parliaments next recording was "Lonely Island" b/w "You Make Me Wanna Cry" on the Flipp label out of Patterson, NJ. A friend of Ron Taylor's, Johnny Murray did the lead on "Lonely Island." The other members included George Clinton, Grady Thomas, Calvin Simon and possibly either Charles Davis or Larry Fisher.

"In the 1950's and early 1960's, groups had routines and rich harmonies and dressed," recalled Sam. "We had our own suits made. We designed most of our own clothes. We had this tailor, Luigi, down on Washington Ave and 2nd Street. We told him what we wanted and gave him an idea of the style. He made the suits for us. As far as the harmony, we always had that rich. Back then when you compared the two groups (the Del Larks and the Parliaments) with the songs we were singing – the styles were good because George and them were wild – they're outrageous now

-- but before the Funkadelics – they had a lot of steps. We were more Temptation-ish. But I give George credit, Their style was different then. Our style was smooth and pretty – theirs was gutsy and funky."

Between recording contracts the Del Larks kept busy. "I was handling the bookings in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania," said Sammy. "In Jersey we played a club called the Melody Inn on Route 10. We played the week after Little Richard. Little Anthony was there the week before. We played the Paradise Club in Easton, PA. We did the Caboose. We did a little place in Hellertown (PA). In New York we did Friday and Saturdays. Then we did a lot of dances in between. There was a place in Trenton – Towers. It had a lot of big acts. James Brown used to go in there back then. Majors Lounge in Keyport. We weren't making the kind of money we would have if we'd had a booking agent, but we were working. We tried to do the songs that people wanted to hear – especially older people. We were doing standards. We were doing originals. There weren't too many groups doing old standards. It opened a lot of doors for us, because we were young."

But without a recording contract, personnel changes occurred. First the group got a great new bass singer – Ray Davis.

"I had a sister in Plainfield," Ray Davis recalled. I used to come over from Brooklyn every Friday. I had moved there from down south; I'm from South Carolina. Being that I'm from down the way, Plainfield was a lot like what I was used to, it was a little bit country, so I felt at home there. That's when I met Sammy Campbell and them, the Del Larks. This would have been around '59." [2]

Ray Davis was also impressed with the activities at the Silk Palace. "Every Friday, that's where I would be. When I'd hit town, the barbershop was the first place I'd go. That's where I met George and the Parliaments. We were always harmonizing, either in the barbershop or on the street corner. I wasn't looking to get with a group, I was just the new guy around.



**Del Larks: (l to r) Ray Davis, Jimmy Cunningham, Sam Campbell, Ron Taylor, Jimmy Anderson
(Photo courtesy of the Del Larks)**



Label courtesy of George Frunzi.

Sammy and them were getting their group together and asked me if I wanted to join. I said, 'Sure, why not?' [2]

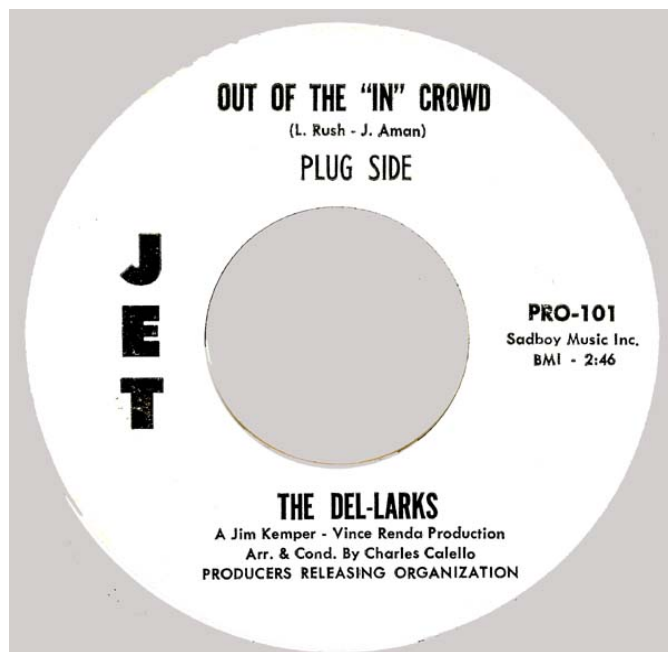
"Jimmy Anderson was our bass," recalled Ron Taylor. "And then Sammy said a new guy had just moved here who had a dynamite bass voice. He brought Ray to rehearsal and he was in the Del Larks. Jimmy moved up to baritone.

Mert and Jeff were the first to leave the group. At this time, Plainfield native, Jerry Cunningham, was brought in, making the group a quintet again.

Around 1960-61, the Del Larks made their second record. The group was approached by label owners George Eastman and his partner Flipp (last name forgotten) to record for their *Ea-Jay* label. Ron and



The Del Larks: left to right; Booby Myers, Jimmy Anderson, Ray Davis, Ron Taylor, Sam Campbell.
(Photo courtesy of the Del Larks)



Label photo courtesy of Greg Surek

Sammy believed the owners of *Ea-Jay* were connected to the *Flipp* label that recorded the Parliaments.

"I Never Will Forget" b/w "Baby Come On" came out on *Ea-Jay* 100/101. "I Never Will Forget" was a soulful fifties-style ballad lead by Sammy Campbell. The flip, "Baby Come On" was up tempo. The record did well locally, but failed to break nationally.

Shortly after the *Ea-Jay* record, Jerry Cunningham was replaced by Boobie Myers from Linden, NJ.

One record by the Del Larks is hard to date. Sometime in the 1960's the Del Larks came out with a record called "Out of the In Crowd" on the *Jet* label. This time Ray Davis did the lead with Sammy Campbell doing the bridge and the ending. It's easy to suspect that this is an answer to Dobie Gray's "The In Crowd," except the Dobie Gray record came out in 1965 and Ray Davis left the Del Larks in 1963. In addition Ron Taylor said he remembered singing the song and he left the Del Larks in 1961. While the Del Larks recalled the song, they were not aware it ever came out. It's possible the Del Larks' song, which they didn't write, was shopped to Dobie Gray a few years later and changed into "The In Crowd."

Sammy Campbell also recalled recording four sides with *MGM Records*, one of which being a good up-tempo song called "Mix It Up," though none of these appear to have been released.

Around 1961, Ron Taylor left the Del Larks. His replacement was Leroy "Brother" Wheeler Jr. Born February 13, 1943 in Sumter, SC, Brother moved with his family to Linden, NJ when he was in high school. Brother Wheeler first sang with a group called the Novatones, then George Kerr's Serenaders, and then with the Magnificent Four. Brother Wheeler was at a concert in Newark when the Del Larks announced from



This torn photo shows part of the Del Larks; (l to r): Brother Wheeler, Ray Davis, Sam Campbell. Jimmy Anderson and Booby Myers are missing. (Photo courtesy of Sam Campbell)



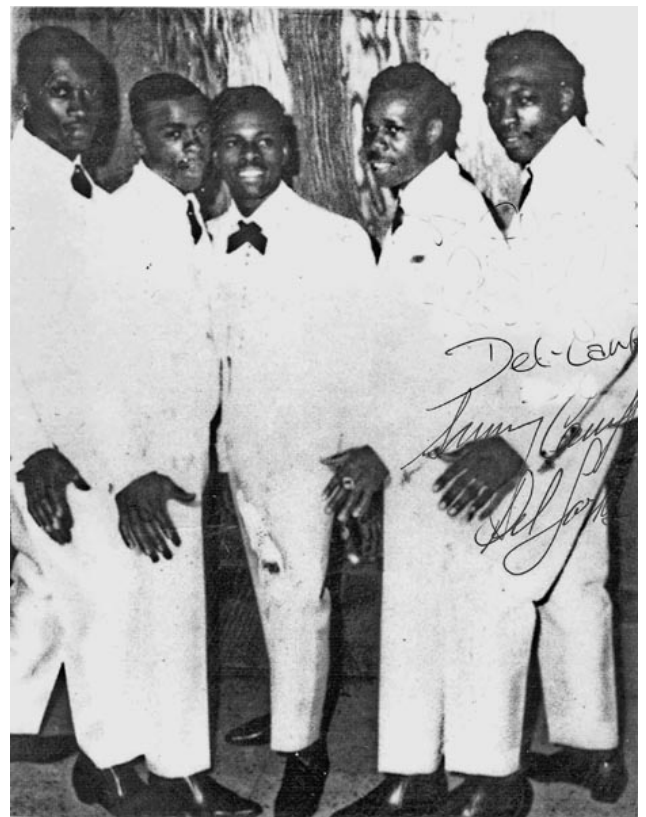
Brother Wheeler (second from right) with Jackie & the Perigents. This is believed to be the group that recorded for the Maltese label in the mid- 1960's. (Photo courtesy of Sam Campbell)

the stage "Is there anyone here who can sing first tenor?" Brother was quick to answer the call. (Earlier, Brother had also sung with Boobie Myers.)

The newly reorganized Del Larks (Sam Campbell, Jimmy Anderson, Ray Davis, Brother Wheeler and Boobie Myers) continued singing locally. They made a second appearance on Joe Franklin's TV show, lip syncing "I Never Will Forget." At this point, Sammy handled most of the bookings.

After a year or two, Brother Wheeler left the Del Larks. His replacement was Jerry Timmons. Brother Wheeler actually brought Jerry Timmons into the Del Larks before he left. Wheeler later went on record with Jackie & the Perigents (*Maltese* label), produced by George Kerr. Pearl McKinnon and her group did background vocals on the Perigents records. Brother Wheeler also recorded two singles for Butch Hartman (label unknown) under the name, Shahees Wheeler.

Just after that, Ray Davis left the Del Larks to join the Parliaments. The two groups were long time friends as well as competitors. Often doing shows together, the groups would also trade members on occasion. Ron Taylor did shows as a Parliament when an extra voice was needed. In fact, Ron's brother Daron, a twenty year member of the Parliaments, would go on in 1967 to co-write "(I Wanna) Testify" with George Clinton, their first big hit. Ron's sister-in-law was (Vivian) Tamela Lewis, whose record "You Won't Say Nothing" on *Marlton* was produced by George Clinton and is now a Northern Soul standard.



Del Larks: (l to r): Jimmy Anderson, Boobie Myers, Sam Campbell, Jerry Timmons, Ray Davis (Photo courtesy of Sam Campbell)



Poster from the Queen City Review, featuring the Del-Larks, Del-La Flores, The Wonders, Little Sammy Campbell, Gwen Harris, the Monorations, the Originals and the Parla Production Dancers. (Courtesy of Sam Campbell)

Vivian was a member of the Parliaments' female backup group, the Parlettes.

"The Del Larks and the Parliaments were totally different," said Sammy. The Parliaments had two cats that were very spontaneous. That was Clarence Fuzzy Haskins and George Clinton. These two cats were wild. That's what made these two groups so beautiful – the contrast. We were doing the ballads, the Moon-glows' and Temptations' kind of stuff, rich harmony. We had our choreography down pat. The Parliaments had that wild, spontaneous thing."

"A Parliament quit and I said, 'Here's my chance,'" said Ray Davis. Grady Thomas and Calvin Simon came over to talk to me one afternoon and I said, 'Do you want me to join the group?' The Del Larks were always going down to four guys. The Parliaments had five guys. I like singing five-part harmony. I told Sammy I was going to go. He said, 'No problem. If you think it's going to be good for you, go on.'" [1]

Through the mid-1960's, the Del Larks became less active and Sammy Campbell began to get more into writing and producing shows with other acts. Sammy put together the Queen City Review, managing and booking local acts like the Wonders, the Del-La Flores and Gwen Harris. The Wonders were a Plain-field vocal group consisting of Richard Sizer, Allan Walker, Sam Hurlind and a fellow remembered only as

Gary. Gwen Harris was a fabulous singer from Linden and the Del-La Flores were a nice female group from Linden. Sam also had the Del Larks on the Queen City Review as well as himself as a solo act.

"I started my own record label," Sammy recalled. "Queen City was always my label. I remember the first time I went into a professional studio. I had a little note pad and I was looking at the board to see how many track they had. Because knowing how many tracks they had meant I could go home and calculate how many things I could put on those tracks. Background singers and those sort of things. I'd write on my little track sheet and go home and come back.

Sammy wrote a song called "SOS For Love" and felt it had hit potential. "SOS" was the first release on Queen City. The song was a solo effort for Sammy Campbell. "'SOS' was good. I was giving that record away at the dances. And I felt the record was good but I needed a label that was established to put it out. That's when I ran into George Blackwell and heard about *Smoke Records*."

"Sam Campbell and his friend Eddie Hazel were hired as staff writers for George Blackwell's *Smoke* label in a house at 310 Chadwick Avenue in Newark. *Smoke Records* in 1966-67 had a stable of artists like the Exsaveyons and the Herbs.

"I wrote most of the songs at *Smoke Records*," Sammy lamented. Eddie did most of the music. There was another guy, I think he was the bass player with the Herbs. I didn't know the other guys. They were from George Blackwell's little stable over there. They'd do the music. George had so many groups coming in and out of there. They'd pay for the session. We had to provide the music and the songs. I didn't go there to be a writer for somebody else. I wanted George to put out 'SOS'. I ended up there almost a year and my record still never came out."

"I was promoting a concert at the Cotton Club, with both the Del Larks and the Parliaments," remembered Sammy. "I borrowed \$350 from George Blackwell and his wife to put the show on. The club was packed and seeing this, the Blackwells approached me and demanded half of the profits. I told them I'd settle up with them afterwards. After the show, Mrs.



Label photo courtesy of Sam Campbell.

Blackwell approached me back stage with this angry look in her eyes and pointed a loaded pistol at my head, demanding 'her' money. Fortunately, my brothers came in at that point and they drew their guns. I told the Blackwells they'd get their money back at my house. At the house, I counted out their \$350 and then counted out \$200 more, which I didn't have to give them. I told George I was through with him. I'd worked for him for almost a year. He had two of my masters and refused to put them out."

Sammy decided to stick with his own label and began promoting "SOS For Love" on *Queen City*. Unknown to him, George Blackwell then released Sammy's "SOS For Love" on his own *Vision* label to compete with it.

Undeterred, Sam Campbell began working on his next *Queen City* release. First he reformed the Del Larks, with Ron Taylor rejoining Jimmy Anderson and Jimmy Cunningham. For a fifth member they added Mel Robinson, a former member of the Plainfield group, the Nonchalants. Sammy and Ron had written a song called "Job Opening," that was destined to become a "Northern Soul" classic.

"Ronnie and I were going someplace and I started writing 'Job Opening,'" remembered Sammy.

"As I walked along the lonely street I was almost hypnotized... And I began to feel the loneliness for the first time in my life..."

"Ronnie never wrote much, but he started throwing in the lines and we completed it. And there was a group that used to play the Cotton Club, I forgot the girls' names. I paid them to go into Apostolic [Studios]. We recorded it on 10th Street in the Village. Tony Camillo and Anthony Bonjovi owned that studio."

Released on *Queen City*, "Job Opening" should have been a success. But he only had enough cash to press 500 copies. Sammy believed George Blackwell used his influence to limit its airplay. The record had

only local success at the time.

Meanwhile, the Parliaments had enlarged to include many of the young musicians in Plainfield, calling their band the Funkadelics. As Parliament/Funkadelic grew in popularity, Sammy Campbell began looking in other directions.

"I wrote a song called 'Hey La Ya La,'" said Sam. It was a bluesy song. The Del Larks did a demo of it with me. A friend had connections in California and he mailed a copy out there for me, to *Galaxy Records*." *Galaxy Records* flew Sammy out to San Francisco.

"*Galaxy* was losing Johnny Taylor at the time and was looking to replace him, but I didn't know that," said Sam. The label was fantastic. They gave me three good advances before I left. I got on salary as soon as I got there. They paid my expenses. I really didn't know what they expected of me. They wanted blues songs but never told me that. I'd been there thirty days and all we'd done were the two songs, 'Hey La Ya La' and '(Don't Take Away My) Right To Love.' One weekend my producer went to L.A. I was out there by myself. All I heard about was the coming earthquake and protest marches and things. So I called the airport and asked them if they had a seat on a plane back to Newark. And I went home."

"I called my producer on Monday and he said 'Where are you?' I told him New Jersey and he was pissed. I told him I'd written a song on the plane on the way home called 'Let Me Be Your Man' and I sent it to him." *Galaxy* didn't think the record was what they were looking for, and Sammy's relationship with *Galaxy* ended. They did release the record as by Sam Campbell and the Bystanders.

"I never met the Bystanders," said Sam. *Galaxy* put the background vocals on after I left. They sound a lot like the Del Larks. But the record they put out was different than the demo (with the Del Larks). A little better arrangement. They just basically kept the sound of the background very similar to the demo. I don't know who the Bystanders were but they



Dutch pressing of "Right to Love" with Picture sleeve.
(from the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)



(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)



Promo copy of the second Tyrone Ashley record.
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)



Black Velvet's record produced by Sam Campbell.
Label photo courtesy of Sam Campbell.

sounded good."

When *Galaxy* didn't want "Let Me Be your Man," he decided to shop it around. *Cadet* in Chicago wanted it as did *Phil-L.A. of Soul* in Philadelphia. "I thought, well, *Phil-L.A. of Soul*, that's only an hour away. We recorded 'Let Me Be Your Man' in Princeton. When they got it in Philadelphia, Larry Cohen, the head PR man jumped right on it. He made a call to California (*Galaxy*) and asked them to let me out of the contract and they did. Two weeks later the record was out. Three weeks later, it was hitting the charts."

Singing backup on the record were Betty Jean Taylor (Ron's wife), her sister Tamela Lewis and Terry Lane from Perth Amboy. The first two women were members of the Parlettes, the Parliaments' female singers.

The new record listed the artist as "Tyrone Ashley & the Funky Music Machine" rather than Sam Campbell! "I needed a change," explained Sam. I had a record that I knew in my heart was hot, and I wanted a new name. Me and my girl sat down and went over some names and we came up with Tyrone Ashley. I wanted to use the new name in California, but they wanted Sammy Campbell. When I got to Philadelphia, Herb Lipshitz of *Jamie-Guyden* let me do what I wanted. I could have put it on *Queen City*, but I felt *Phil-L.A. of Soul* was better known. It worked.

Tyrone Ashley played the Apollo Theater along with Al Green and Wilson Pickett. "I came out, and my mother was sitting there," said Sam. "And the MC said, 'Ladies and gentlemen... Tyrone Ashley' and here comes Sammy Campbell walking out! And she was really upset. Here this boy was Sammy Campbell all those years and who the devil is Tyrone Ashley?"

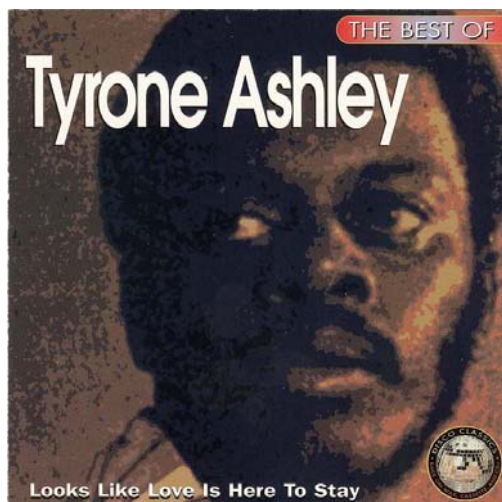
For a follow up single, *Phil-L.A. of Soul*, released "Sing Your Song Sister" b/w Love Sweet Love." Sam had recorded enough for an album and wanted the

label to release his version of the Ed Townsend song, "For Your Love." *Phil-L.A. of Soul* didn't want to release that side, Sammy believed, because he didn't write it and they would not have gotten publishing royalties. "So I walked away," Sam said. The rest of the album, including Sam's stirring vocal of "For Your Love" would eventually come out as a CD in 2007.

Sam Campbell's next venture in the early 1970's was a new label, *Black Top Records (BTR)*. He formed this with a partner. *BTR's* offices were in New Brunswick overtop a sandwich shop near the train station. *Black Top Records* had two main acts, a female vocal group called Black Velvet and a group from Plainfield called the Riots. Sam went on the road to promote the first single by Black Velvet ("Is It Me You Really Love") and took a demo of a Riots album he'd re-



"Little" Sammy Campbell promo photo. Courtesy of Sam Campbell.



**Tyrone Ashley U.K. album, now available as a CD.
From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives.**

corded with him. During his absence, he asked his partner to get the Riots under contract. Everywhere he went, dee jays told him that Black Velvet was good, but they really wanted to make the Riots' album their 'sure shot' pick.

Upon returning to New Brunswick, Sam found that his partner had failed to get the group under contract. The group was under legal age and the group's father had second thought about signing a contract. At that point, Sam lost interest in *BTR*.

Sam's next musical project was a group he formed called Sagittarian Fire, a group that contained Sam and several local musicians.

By 1975, "Job Opening" was discovered by "Northern Soul" fans in the U.K. and had hit new heights of popularity. Original copies of the record on *Queen City* were commanding prices of thousands of dollars and copies were being bootlegged and reissued. Sam Campbell was flown to Great Britain to do an album with Ian Levine. The London Philharmonic filled in the horns and Donna Summers' rhythm section was also on the album. "That week we were laying down tracks, doing vocals. I had a cold the whole week and I wanted to see a doctor but Ian didn't want that. He liked the rough edge the cold gave my voice. But he was paying for this. Most of the songs were geared for the British-European market.

From the time that Sam Campbell left for California, the other Del Larks kept active. Changing their name to the New Testament, the group continued singing. Contrary to the name, the New Testament sang secular music. Sammy had introduced Ron Taylor to Bobby Shivers, the former lead of the Spellbinders. Shivers was from Jersey City, but actually lived in Plainfield for a short time, having his hair cut by George Clinton. In fact, Shivers actually sang with the Del Larks briefly. With Sammy gone, the New Testament became, Ron Taylor, Bobby Shivers, Jimmy Anderson, and a young bass player from Plainfield, Butch Ewing.

"We were working," remembered Ron. "And then we heard of a lady named Bunny Jones who had a

group called New Testament that she was getting ready to record for *Scepter Records*. There was a notice in *Billboard* on it with a phone number. So I called her up. She said her group was a band and they rehearsed in a studio at Park Avenue and 103rd Street. We were staying in a hotel in Newark and working in Patterson. So we went over to New York to see Bunny Jones. She had the Main Ingredient and we sang all day with them. We got the number of New Testament in Brooklyn and we went to see them. They had a whole house – three floors and we combined the two groups under the same name. We recorded a couple sides for *Scepter*, but don't think they ever came out. We kept performing all over New York City. We performed in the Village, we did the college circuit, we did night clubs in Brooklyn. We were supposed to go to Jamaica, but the tour fell through. Then we were supposed to go on a USO Tour but that never happened. We went at it for a couple years and then disbanded."

"Sting-Ray" Davis spent many years with George Clinton. In 1997 he was inducted along with fifteen other members of Parliament/Funkadelic into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. He also briefly joined the Temptations after the death of original bass singer Melvin Franklin, appearing on the 1995 album "For Lovers Only." Davis left the group after being diagnosed with throat cancer. Davis died on July 5, 2005.

In April of 2006, Sam Campbell and Ron Taylor of the Del Larks reunited to perform "Job Opening" for Soul Trip USA. Four hundred UK fans made the trip to East Brunswick, NJ, for seven nights of Northern Soul music. They were joined by another two hundred American soul fans. Music enthusiasts got to meet many of their favorite area soul artists, including members of the Del Larks, Spellbinders, Escorts, Persuaders, Tymes, Orlons, Ad-Libs and too many more to mention. Many artists performed, including the Del Larks, who were truly one of the week's highlights. Sam and Ron carried the performance with a third member, Sam's brother Milton filling in.

After meeting Sam and Ron at Soul Trip USA, Charlie & Pam Horner left with autographed photos but no way to contact them. Some other contacts got Sam to call, and the Horners were on their way to convincing the Del Larks to reunite for the United in Group Harmony Associations' 30th Anniversary.

Sam Campbell and Ron Taylor contacted Brother Wheeler and the group added Billy Johnson (formerly of the Admirations). For a bass voice, the ever available Joel Katz already knew the bass runs to "Remember The Night" and "Lady Love". In November 2006, the Del Larks made their true comeback in Clifton, NJ, singing "Lady Love," "Remember the Night," and "I Never Will Forget." The crowd went wild.

Since that time, the group has been making public appearances and spending time in New York doing studio work. Sam has finally issued the album meant for release by Jamie-Guyden with the version of "For Your Love," that all vocal harmony fans will enjoy.



**Del Larks at UGHA's 30th Anniversary,
November 2006, Clifton NJ**

**Top and Middle Left photos: (l to r) Sam Campbell,
Brother Wheeler, Ron Taylor, Billy Johnson
and Joel Katz.
(Photos by Pamela Horner)**

**Middle Right photo: (l to r): Brother Wheeler,
Billy Johnson, Ron Taylor, Sam Campbell.
(Photo by Pamela Horner)**

**Bottom Left photo: Billy Johnson, Sam Campbell
Pam Horner, Charlie Horner,
Brother Wheeler, Ron Taylor
(Photo by Solitaires' Milton Love)**



In the meantime, a record company has been busy issuing for the first time, unreleased sides from Sammy Campbell's vault of unreleased tapes from the 1960's and 1970's. *Truth & Soul Records* has released many sides from the 1960's by Sam Campbell with and without the Del Larks in a CD called "Tyrone Ashley's Funky Music Machine: Let Me Be Your Man." They've also rejuvenated *Black Top Records* to release some cuts as 45's by the Funky Music Machine.

"They came here and went through reels and reels of unreleased songs and picked some for release," Sammy commented. "I gave them permission to release them on vinyl only so they're out as 45's."

A Brooklyn firm has also been issuing new vinyl 45's of songs by Sammy Campbell on the *Hollygrove* label. These include new songs written by Sam Campbell and Billy Spruill and mixed at Joel Katz' recording studio.

In February 2008, Sammy and Ron were invited to perform "Job Opening" at Prestatyn (Wales) Northern and Modern Soul Weekender.



Ron Taylor and Sammy Campbell in "The Hut," 2008
(Photo by Pamela Horner)



Leroy "Brother" Wheeler and Ron Taylor, 2007
(Photo by Pamela Horner)

On a sad note, Leroy "Brother" Wheeler, Jr. passed away on September 14, 2008. We conducted a preliminary interview with Brother before he became ill, but there's so much more we'd love to ask him. At least we've begun to preserve his musical legacy here.

Brother's place in the Del Larks has now been filled by Billy Spruill. The Del Larks have not given up. And on any given day, Sammy Campbell can be found in his self-built recording studio, the Hut, a building out behind his home in Plainfield, New Jersey, complete with a wood burning stove, two TV's, a computer, mixing boards, keyboards and stacks of tape reels and records. Around the studio, the walls are covered with photos of singers that Sammy worked with over the years. Having had fame just slip through their grasp several times, Sam Campbell and Ron Taylor know what it takes to make it big. Their next hit could be just around the corner.

Notes & References

1. Numerous interviews by Charlie & Pamela Horner of Sam Campbell, Ron Taylor and Brother Wheeler (2006-2008).
2. Dave Marsh, ed., *George Clinton and P-Funk, An Oral History*, Avon Books, NY: 1998.
3. This article is dedicated to the memory of Leroy "Brother" Wheeler.
4. For more group profiles, photos, concert reviews and all things group harmony, visit our website. New features added frequently...

www.ClassicUrbanHarmony.net

Pioneer groups, R&B, Doo Wop, Gospel and Soul Harmony

Through the eyes of Charlie & Pam Horner

When it comes to Group Harmony, our net catches it all!!!



"LITTLE" SAMMY CAMPBELL

Little Sammy Campbell, ca. 1960's
Courtesy of Sam Campbell



Ron Taylor & Sam Campbell, 2008
Courtesy of Sam Campbell

Del Larks Singles Discography

As the Del Larks:

<i>East West</i> 116	Remember The Night	58
	Lady Love	
<i>Jet</i> 101	Out Of The In Crowd	ca. 61
	[flip not by Del Larks]	
<i>Queen City</i> 2004	Job Opening—Pt. 1	ca. 67
	Job Opening—Pt. 2 [Instr.]	
<i>Park Ave.</i> 8	Bubble Gum Doll [demo]	92
	Remember the Night [demo]	

As Sammy & the Del Larks:

<i>Ea-Jay</i> 100/101	I Never Will Forget	ca. 60
	Come On	

As Sam Campbell:

<i>Queen City</i> 1601	SOS For Love	ca. 66
	I Never Thought	

<i>Vision</i> 607	SOS For Love	ca. 66
	Listen To My Radio	

As Sam Campbell & Bystanders:

<i>Galaxy</i> 772	Hey La Ya La	69
	Right To Love	

As Tyrone Ashley & Funky Music Machine:

<i>Phil-L.A. of Soul</i> 342	Let Me Be Your Man	70
	I Want My Baby Back	

<i>Phil-L.A. of Soul</i> 348	Sing Your Song Sister	71
	Love Sweet Love	

As Tyrone Ashley: (U.K. Releases)

<i>UA</i> 33851	Looks Like Love Is here to Stay	75
	Surround Me	
<i>UA</i> 36431	Don't Stop Dancing	
	Put Your Finger On The Trigger	
<i>Pye</i> 7N25704	Feet Start Moving	
	Just Another Rumor	
<i>Pye</i> 7N25710	Nothing Short of a Miracle	
	Miracle Worker	

As The Funky Music Machine:

<i>BTR</i> 009	Gotta Clean Up The World	2006
	Gotta Clean Up The World—Pt 2	
<i>BTR</i> 011	I Can't Help Myself	2006
	Love Me A Little While Longer	

As Sammy Campbell:

<i>Hollygrove</i> 004	Suga Would Ya	2008
	Crazy About You	
<i>Hollygrove</i> 005	Hold On Till Tomorrow	2008
	Only For The Love Of You	

CD's containing non 45 cuts

Crystal Ball 55062 - Can't Believe You're Mine Tonight (demo)

Record Shack HTCD 68 Has the 1975 UK cuts

Truth & Soul CD - Tyrone Ashley's Funky Music Machine - Released and unreleased sides from 1967-1971. Del Larks are on "For Your Love," "Come on Home," and "I Can't Help Myself."