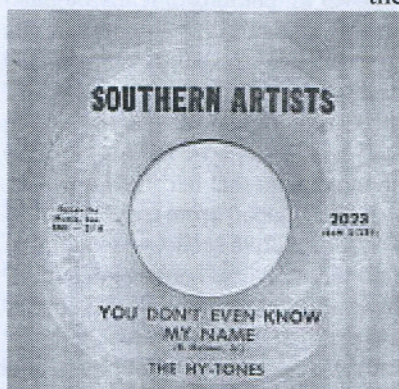


THE HY-TONES by Dan Collins

THERE aren't all that many obscure groups who can boast more than one genuine northern soul monster to their name: The Hy-Tones were one of them.



They may never grace a shrink-wrapped Tesco 'Legends of Soul' CD but who cares? They will always have a place in our hearts for their twin masterpieces, "You Don't Even Know My Name" and "Bigger And Better".



The former - Pat Brady's Lee Otis Valentine and the Lost Souls 'I Love You Just The Same' Stafford cover-up - was massive in the mid-1980s, and would have people fighting to get to the dance floor at the likes of Stafford and the 100 Club. It has remained a rare and highly sought-after piece ever since. Looking at play lists, it doesn't seem to get too many plays nowadays. I suspect because few DJs own a copy. It's to be found (if you look very hard and have deep pockets) on both the Nashville-based Southern Artists label and also on Bell; Southern Artists, as the local and therefore 'first' label, is just the more desirable for me, though it's very tough, too, on Bell - like Bernie Williams and others, it is another unlikely seeming rarity from such a major house. The northern pedigree of "Bigger and Better" is less clear, to me anyway. I posed the question of who first played it, when and where, on both Soul Source and the Rare Soul Forum and no-one could give me a definitive answer. However, Colin Dilnot remembered Nick Cowan playing it to him in 1976 so it was known then; it remained a tape-swappers favourite for years, though both Dave Flynn and Irish Greg played it at the Dome and it has, apparently, seen good dance floor response around the country whenever played in the last five to 10 years. That's not surprising, for this hard-to-find Abet outing has all the hallmarks of the other side: movingly soulful, harmony vocals, a danceable beat and a great tune - with good lyrics to boot.

But what of The Hy-Tones themselves?

They were a vocal group - formed in 1963, with **Freddie Waters** on lead, **Eddie Frierson** on baritone and **Arthur 'Skeet' Alsup** on tenor. The unofficial fourth member of the band was **Robert Lee Holmes**, their writer and the man behind the two tracks discussed above. He's sadly now dead, of heart failure, as are Freddie and Skeet (Skeet died in a hit and run incident in Detroit and Fred succumbed to cancer). But Eddie Frierson is alive and well, a sprightly 70-year-old running a barber shop in Nashville, which was where I caught up with him recently. Eddie was delighted and amazed to hear that two of his records were so sought-after in the UK - and launched straight into "You Don't Even Know My Name" as soon as I mentioned it. "I'll be damned," he said, "I never thought those records had done anything. But to hear that you guys over in England are interested, after all these years, it's incredible." Eddie, originally from Macon, MS, had moved with his mother to Nashville in 1955. "I met Skeet and Fred at Cameron High School," he said. "We got to be good buddies and we liked singing. Robert Holmes was a little older and a known guy around the city music scene. Me and Robert came up with the name and we started gigging in the early 60s. I always had a problem with the dance steps, that's my biggest memory. I could not learn those moves, so I kind of just stood at the microphone and rocked from side to side. Skeet would always burst his pants during a show, he was real energetic, and Fred would be getting to the front of the stage and singing to the ladies. Quite often, he'd fall clean off there and we'd just crack up. One time we were driving between shows, going to New Orleans from Arkansas and we got half way there and had to turn back because we forgot our outfits. Crazy days, but a lot of fun"

Racism back then was blatant, he says. "We were always getting stopped by the police in the South, everywhere we went. I remember one engagement where the stage was caged in with wire, whether that was to stop the audience from throwing bottles at us or to stop Fred falling off, I don't know. And I remember another time, the audience had thought the Hy-Tones were a white group and when they saw that we weren't, everyone started to leave. Well, we started singing anyway, and we tore the house down. And the thing I remember is, when you mentioned "You Don't Even Know My Name", that was the first song we sung and they were hooked straight away." Despite the excellence of the songs, recording success was minimal. "We cut a few little tunes - 'You Don't Even Know My Name' and 'Bigger And Better' were among them - but we never had much success as a band. We did a lot of backing work on Night Train and in the clubs and so on." The whole thing finally ended in the mid 70s, when Skeet quit the music business to work in the car plants in Michigan. "All good things come to an end, I guess," said Eddie. "But I still cut Skeet's grand kids' hair today and I keep in touch with Fred's sister and his son, Fred, Jr. I only wish Skeet, Fred and Robert were still alive to know that our music was appreciated - is still appreciated - if not here in the States."

The big question remained: did he have any copies of the records? Sadly, he just had one copy of YDEKMN, which now resides in the collection of a north Yorkshire DJ (and for which Eddie was very well paid).