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Doo Wop

By Mary Ann Apostol

Most people think of Doo Wop only as oldies songs, but in truth the style stands as an important

phase in the history of American popular music. Doo Wop came directly out of rhythm and blues, but it was also rooted in gospel, jazz and other American styles. How did it happen? How does anything happen on a city street corner when a few guys get it into their heads to start singing? That's how Doo Wop was born. It began in Philadelphia, but it spread to New York, and across the country faster than a radio wave.

The essence of Doo Wop is vocals. Though often there's a little back-up instrumentation added on in the recording studio, or up on a concert stage, these are songs that can still be reproduced by those guys on the street corner. There was plenty of that going on in the neighborhoods of the 1950s, and it was in the second half that decade that the music jumped from the street onto the airwaves. It dominated the Top 40 charts from right after Elvis to the eve of the Beatles. Since then it's kept a loyal following, and there have been several revivals.

Doo Wop didn't worry too much about the words. Instead, at its core were melodic syllables, often nonsensical, but always smooth, and perfectly blended. It depended on vocal harmonies. When those street corner guys opened their mouths and started singing they automatically searched among themselves for a bass, a tenor, a baritone, and they were certainly hoping for a convincing falsetto. With one voice in the lead, the others would find the right harmonies for backing him up. The result was a style of music that could be sung anywhere, and always sounded cool and easy.

Some of the most popular Doo-Wop songs are: "When You Dance" by the Turbans, "In the Still of the Night" by the Five Satins, "Glory of Love" by the Five Keys, "Blue Moon" by the Marcels, "Little Girl of Mine" by the Cleftones, and "I Wonder Why" by Dion & the Belmonts. That last one has been described as Doo Wop's national anthem.

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The Sweet Sounds Of The Oldie Girl Groups

By Mary Ann Apostol

Like the men, the girl groups in Doo Wop relied on harmonies, but they were also a step or two further into the recording studio. These groups came later in the Doo Wop Era, and were concentrated mainly in the period of the early 1960s. By the same token, the girls remained on the charts later, still having a strong presence for a year or two after the Beatles and all the other British groups began filling our air waves. Girl groups were a force on the charts by 1962, and were still hanging in there in 1965.

Just as the guys had sung about girls, the girls' songs were mainly about guys. These young women mixed standard pop with rock n' roll sass, while usually conveying a feeling of innocence. They had more instruments backing them up, but their harmonies were firmly based in the Doo Wop tradition. The lyrics in these songs were simple, but heartfelt. They dealt with teenaged problems of getting together, breaking apart, and a kid's standing within the group. They were a girl's version of high school set to music.

How could any girl (or guy) of the early `60s not know what was going on when the Angels sang "My Boyfriend's Back"? When the Chiffons sang "Don't Say Nothin' Bad About My Baby" everyone in the audience knew exactly what was going on. These songs used the now-classic Doo Wop harmonies to communicate old feelings in a new way. They've been speaking to teenagers and former teenagers ever since, and it's hard for anyone who's ever grown up not to get the message.

Some other truly great oldies by the most popular girl groups at that time included: "Sweet Talkin' Guy" by the Chiffons, "I Met Him on a Sunday" by the Shirelles, "Easier Said Than Done" by the Essex, "I Love How You Love Me" by the Paris Sisters, and "He's a Rebel" by the Crystals.

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