

Little Jimmy & The Tops

by Charlie Horner

Contributions from Pamela Horner

In one of the most fascinating stories in R&B harmony history, a group from Harlem recorded but two sides, only to have a regional hit record ninety miles away in Philadelphia. Their record was released six times in the space of three years, and their lead singer lip-synced the song on American Bandstand, yet the group was never called back for a second release. Such was the story of Little Jimmy & the Tops.

Four childhood friends began singing street corner harmony in the mid-1950's as the Young Lads. The original group, consisted of Vernon Rivers, his younger brother Jimmy Rivers, Eddie Bonelli and Louis Brown. Vernon and Jimmy Rivers were born in Bishopville, SC, a small town between Columbia and Florence. They moved to Harlem when Vernon was about 12 years old, Jimmy about 9. Their new home base was 126th Street at Morningside Avenue.

"That's where we grew up, started playing CYO (Catholic Youth Organization) basketball at Columbia University and started singing," recalled Vernon Rivers.

Eddie Bonelli was born in New York City in 1941 and raised on the East Side, 117th Street, until he was in the third grade. He too then moved with his family to 126th Street. "I've been singing all my life," Eddie reflected. "My mother taught me and my sister how to sing. My mother starred on the radio, singing with a gospel trio. When I was in elementary school, Vernon moved into our block and when he started school he was put into my 6th Grade class. I've known Vernon since the 6th Grade. He and his younger brother Jimmy lived on one end of the block and I lived on the other. Louis Brown lived around the corner, two blocks away from us. In our early teens, Vernon Rivers and I auditioned for the TV show, "Stars of Tomorrow," but we didn't make the cut. We were always singing. We sang in the park all the time. Then we decided to form a vocal group and called ourselves the Young Lads. "

Looking for a bass singer, Louis Brown introduced the group to his friend, Moses Groves. Moses was the one member who was not from 126th Street. "I was born in Charleston, SC, in 1941 and came to NYC at the age of six," said Moses. I first lived on 132nd Street off of 8th Avenue in Harlem. My first musical influences were from the radio – all the pop artists on "Your Hit Parade" and "The Arthur Godfrey Show". I remember Frankie Laine. He was on his way to becoming a big star and then along came Rhythm & Blues to knock him off the charts."

Moses Groves' first introduction to vocal harmony came while he was in the 5th Grade (1952). "I was living then in the James Weldon Johnson Houses on 112th Street between Park and Lexington," recalled Moses. "I heard a group called the Veltones [*possibly the Velvetones – ed*] sing in the community center.



Only known photo of Jimmy & the Tops' original group. Left to right, top: Sylvia Peterson, Moses Groves Eddie Bonelli, Vernon Rivers. Bottom: Little Jimmy Rivers. (Photo courtesy of Moses Groves.)

They had a record out. A year or two later, a group came walking through the neighborhood singing 'Gloria'. I'd never heard the song before but within the same year the record came out and was played on the radio, so it must have been the Cadillac's".

"A friend, James van Dyne and I went to Galvani Junior High School together," Moses continued. "He sang and had a tremendous voice. I was never a lead singer. I sang bass, baritone and second tenor. Then I moved to the Colonial Houses behind the Polo Grounds by 155th Street and 8th Avenue. That's when I entered Stitt Junior High School in the 9th Grade."

Stitt Junior High School is well known to music enthusiasts for its connection to Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers and numerous other vocal groups. But in the Autumn of 1955, the Teenagers had just been "discovered" by Richard Barrett and signed to *Gee Records*. They had yet to release their first record. Frankie Lymon had just started Stitt Junior High. The other Teenagers were older and were by then attending George Washington High.

"I happened to go to a talent show at Stitt," said Moses. "I saw these groups perform there. One guy sounded like Nat King Cole. Frankie Lymon was there with a group, before he recorded. At the talent show, Frankie and the group came out and there was all this screaming. I said, 'Who the heck are these guys?' They tore the house up. About six months later "Why Do Fools fall In Love" came on the radio."

"Shortly after that, a friend of mine, Louis Brown, was in this group called the Young Lads on 126th Street. He said, 'Moe, you have a deep voice. Why don't you come down and sing with us'. So I



P.S. 43 today is now Manhattanville Junior High School. Its auditorium once saw regular rehearsals by the Cadillacs and Little Jimmy & the Tops.

went down and they [eventually] chose me over him. I knew nothing about singing harmony. They taught me how to sing."

The Young Lads began rehearsing in P.S. 43. P.S. 43 (it's no longer called that) was a junior high school at 509 W. 129th Street (at Amsterdam Avenue) whose building is now another landmark in vocal harmony history. In the mid-1950's the auditorium was used as a rehearsal hall by the Cadillacs.

"We watched the Cadillacs rehearse quite a few times," said Vernon. "They used to have the auditorium reserved for a certain amount of time and then we'd come in and take up the rest of the time when they were finished." "Wow! I never heard a sound like that in my life," recalled Moses when thinking of the Cadillacs. "Incredible! The records didn't do the Cadillacs justice."

"We'd rehearse at P.S. 43 a minimum of three days a week," added Moses. "I would get on the bus and come down to 126th Street. We'd close the doors in the auditorium when we'd sing but when we'd get ready to leave we'd notice people getting up from under the seats and running out the door. They were sneaking in to hear us sing."

One key figure in the group's story was singer, songwriter, Ronald Mack. Mack, whose nickname was Rocco, had previously recorded as a member of the Marquis. His group made one record, "Bohemian Daddy," which came out on the *Onyx* label. The Marquis were from Harlem and personnel had included June Bateman (lead), Ronald Mack, William Earl "Babe" Stowers, Lloyd Lomelino and a guy remembered only as Charlie. As a songwriter, Mack had co-written both sides of the *Onyx* record and was beginning to assemble a large number of other songs he'd written.

After the *Onyx* record, the Marquis broke up. June Bateman married bandleader Noble "Thin Man" Watts and began a solo career. William Stowers be-

gan singing with the Pearls (*Onyx* label). Ronald Mack formed a new group with some of the former Marquis, called the Highlights (recordings unknown). Replacing June Bateman in the new group was a young lady named Joyce Peterson, who'd also recorded with Baby Washington and the Hearts in 1957.

Ronald Mack had originally lived in Harlem (in the 130's between Amsterdam and Broadway) but by the time he met the Young Lads he had moved to the Bronx River Houses in the Bronx. "Rocco (Ronald Mack) still hung around our Harlem neighborhood," said Eddie Bonelli. That's how we ended up knowing each other. When he moved to the Bronx we used to go up to his house on Sundays."

"A whole lot of people would come up to Rocco's house in the Bronx," remembered Vernon. "We'd be watching sports and eventually we'd start singing. Sometimes we'd just go up there on Sundays and rehearse there. Eventually Rocco wrote some songs for us and we started singing them."

Ronald "Rocco" Mack began working with the Young Lads, teaching them harmony and giving them some of the songs he'd written. When the group rehearsed at P.S. 43, Rocco played piano for them. Trying to enhance the group's sound (and perhaps mold them in the style of the Marquis/Highlights) Rocco suggested they add a girl to the group. He introduced them to Sylvia Patterson, younger sister of Joyce Patterson of the Highlights.

"Rocco introduced Sylvia to us," said Eddie Bonelli. "Rocco knew her whole family. Rocco knew everybody. Sylvia sang for us and we added her to the group." "Sylvia lived in the Grant Houses at 125th Street," said Moses.



The Marquis' "Bohemian Daddy" was Ronald Mack's first record. Copies of this 45 are very scarce today. (Photo courtesy of Val Shively, R&B Records.)

Sylvia was a few years younger than most of the group (except for Jimmy). The other three guys were in high school. With the addition of a female, the name Young Lads had to go. The new name of the group became Four Bees and a Gee (for 4 boys and a girl).

"We sang at a lot of talent shows," recalled Moses. "We did one talent show on 145th Street between Amsterdam and Broadway. One of the groups competing later became the Ronettes. Our group got there late after they'd supposedly picked the Ronettes to win. We begged to go on and eventually won. I know they were hurt by it."

The Four Bees and a Gee performed twice on the Apollo Theatre's Wednesday Amateur Night. "We sang the Harptones' song, 'That's The Way It Goes'," said Moses. "We used that a lot in talent shows. This time we tied with a young girl about six years old. We were tied, so the MC at the Apollo said 'Let's give it to the young girl!'"

A similar outcome occurred the next time the group competed at the Apollo. This time they came in second to a little boy. "It would have been alright except for little kids," exclaimed Eddie. "We never won the top prize because the songs we sang were a little too sophisticated," added Vernon. "At the Apollo you have to have the appropriate songs to win. You have to catch the right audience at the right time."



Moses Groves, 2011.
(Courtesy of Moses groves)



Eddie Bonelli, 2011.
(Courtesy of Eddie Bonelli)

Moses had a different possible explanation for their second place finishes at the Apollo. "At the Apollo, all the girls sat in the front row and if they didn't like you, you were in trouble. Sylvia was a very fair skinned African American girl with red hair. Where ever we went, the other girls were jealous of Sylvia because she was so pretty."

"We were too young to sing in clubs," said Moses. "We did the Rockland Palace (155th & 8th Avenue). We also did the Audubon Ballroom (Broadway at 165th). No pay. We mostly sang at junior high schools. One time we sang at Lebanon Hospital (The Bronx), for the patients. The whole group didn't go, just me, Rocco and one other member." This was unusual because except for that time, Rocco did not sing with the group.

By now, Rocco had given the group a number of original songs to work on. These included "Love Bells" and "Gee Oh Gee How I Love You" (led by Eddie). Jimmy Rivers also wrote a song called "Pearly Pearl" but the group never had a chance to record any of these.

Ronald Mack also wrote an up tempo song called "Puppy Love" that Jimmy Rivers led in a Frankie Lymon style. Moses added some of the lyrics to "Puppy Love" but never received writer credit. One Ronald Mack composed ballad, "Say You Love Me," featured the dual lead of Sylvia Peterson and Jimmy Rivers.

At the suggestion of Ronald Mack, the Four Bees and a Gee went down to 1650 Broadway to try to find someone who would record them. There were ten to twenty groups outside waiting to audition that



Rare first pressing of "Puppy Love". Note the absence of writer credits and the group's listing as The Tops. Later pressings would say "Little Jimmy & The Tops". (Photo courtesy of Val Shively, R&B Records)

day. Somehow, the group got to George Goldner's offices of *Gone* and *End Records* where they ran into Richard Barrett, mentor to the Teenagers, Chantels, Imperials and dozens of other artists.

"Rocco encouraged us to go there because that's where everything was happening," said Eddie. "He said go there and see if you can audition so we went to see a lot of people. But we got to Richard Barrett and somebody else who I can't remember [George Goldner? - ed.] and they told us to come back.

"Richard Barrett was there," remembered Moses, "And I said, 'Hey, I remember you from singing with the Valentines in the Projects before you made it big!' Richard made a little joke about it. So we sang 'Puppy Love' and something else for him." Richard Barrett conferred with some other executives and said, "We'll call you."

True to his word, Richard Barrett did call the group back. Richard had the group come down and sing for him a number of times. "A lot of times Richard would have someone else there to listen to us," said Eddie. "There was always someone different that he would have listen to us. When we were there with Richard Barrett, we met Little Anthony & the Imperials and Arlene and the Chantels. Bobby Darin came in and wanted us to back him on "Splish Splash" but it never materialized. That's where we met Len Caldwell, at Richard Barrett's. But we didn't know at that time that we'd be recording for him."

Richard Barrett renamed the group the Tops and eventually made arrangements for them to record. "All I remember is we got into a car and they took us to mid-town, on the East Side," said Moses. We got into the studio to record and here come the

musicians. One was Dave 'Baby' Cortez (David Clowney). He did the organ instrumental part of 'Puppy Love'.

Richard Barrett seems to have produced the session. The Tops only recorded two songs at the session, "Puppy Love" and "Say You Love Me". By all accounts the final recordings did not come easy. "We had to do one song 37 times," recalled Eddie. "And the other took longer than that!"

At this point the business aspects of the record "Puppy Love" become so confusing we can only speculate on what actually happened.

What is known is that "Puppy Love" b/w "Say You Love Me" first came out in late 1958 or early 1959 on the *V-Tone* label with the artist listed as "The Tops". There are no writer credits on either side. This pressing is very rare and much sought after by record collectors.

V-Tone was a Philadelphia-based record label owned and operated by Venton L. (for Len) "Buddy" Caldwell. Caldwell had previously started the *Len* label from his upholstery shop on North Philadelphia's busy Ridge Avenue. Caldwell would later have local success with such Philadelphia area artists as the Dreamlovers, Bobby Peterson Quintet, Cruisers, and several others.

How the Tops record got to Caldwell is open to speculation. The Tops believed they were signing with Richard Barrett and/or *End* records. In fact, there is disagreement among the group as to whether or not Len Caldwell was even at the recording session!

Since Richard Barrett had grown up in North Philadelphia before moving to New York City and joining the Valentines, it is possible he knew Len Caldwell from Philadelphia and may have owed him a favor.



Issuing of "Puppy Love" b/w "Say You Love Me" on the (yellow) *Len* label, ca. 1960. Later pressings were on an orange *Len* label. (Photo courtesy of Moses Groves).

The publishing companies listed on the initial pressings are *Richwell Music* for "Puppy Love" and *Vanderbuilt Music* for "Say You Love Me". *Richwell* may well be RICHard Barrett and Len CaldWELL. *Vanderbuilt Music* was owned by Al Lewis, an on-again, off-again, friend of Barrett's who wrote "Tears On My Pillow" which Barrett gave to Little Anthony & the Imperials.

Before "Puppy Love" could gather any airplay, the record was repressed with the artist listed as "Little Jimmy & The Tops". This may have been done to avoid any conflict with the Philadelphia R&B vocal group, the Tops, who had recently recorded "An Innocent Kiss" for Artie Singer's *Singular* label. There is no connection between the two groups. On this second issuing, the V-Tone label lacks the word "Philadelphia" under V-Tone.

This second pressing appears to have been released in March of 1959, as *Billboard Magazine* reported on April 20, 1959, "'Puppy Love' by Little Jimmy & the Tops on V-Tone looks like a winner."

From the beginning, "Puppy Love" was a hit in Philadelphia, probably since Len Caldwell was in Philly to promote it. The Tops were asked to make two separate trips to Philadelphia to promote the record. Richard Barrett assigned the father of Chantels' Arlene Smith to be the Tops road manager and he drove the group to Philly. Both times the Tops stayed overnight at Len Caldwell's house. One appearance was at a record hop at a skating rink and the other either at another skating rink or possibly at the Uptown Theater, as group members' memories conflict. The latter appearance was along side of Wilson Pickett & the Falcons and Johnny Maestro & the Crests. The Philly appearances were done as favors to Philly dee jays

Georgie Woods and Jocko Henderson.

While "Puppy Love" was barking up a storm in Philly, in New York City the record behaved like a real a dog. Of course it wasn't, but it just couldn't get much airplay in the Big Apple. The reasons for this are unclear, especially since Jocko was playing the record on his Philly radio program but not on his NYC show.

Some of the Tops believe the record was intentionally squashed in NYC, though it's not clear why. The Tops were scheduled to make a promotional appearance in Baltimore, but that was cancelled at the last minute. From that point on, Len Caldwell had little contact with the group and they were never asked to make a second recording.

While the Tops were left in New York wondering what happened to their music careers, "Puppy Love" was still gathering attention in Philadelphia. In 1960, Len Caldwell issued "Puppy Love" again on his *Len* label (#1011, yellow label), this time with the publisher of "Puppy Love" as *Vanderbuilt Music*.

The Tops continued singing during this period, altering their style to close harmony, more like the Four Freshmen or Hi-Los. Eddie Bonelli left the group to get married and moved to Phoenix, AZ, in 1960. Sylvia Peterson also left the group.. She was replaced by Pat Smith, niece of famed saxophonist Red Prysock. Pat stayed with the Tops for about a year.

Meanwhile, "Puppy Love" was again gaining steam in Philadelphia. A young radio personality, Jerry Blavat (The Geater With The Heater), was building a huge following on WCAM playing older doo wop songs. One of his favorites seemed to be "Puppy Love". This spurred more airplay by other Philly area radio stations. Len Caldwell leased "Puppy Love" to Philadelphia's *Swan Record* label (though he also seemed to re-release it on *V-Tone* for the third time (with Philadelphia under V-Tone on the label) and *Len* (orange label) for the second time.

Billboard Magazine announced on November 27, 1961, that in Philadelphia "There is spot action reported on James Brown's next side, 'Lost Someone,' the Sensations' 'Let Me In' and 'Puppy Love' by Little Jimmy Rivers. They were obviously referring to the *Swan* release, since its label listed "Little Jimmy Rivers" in larger print with "and the Tops" almost as an after thought. A *Billboard Magazine* ad by *Swan* on January 1962, pushed "Puppy Love" by Jimmy Rivers with no mention of the Tops.

At about the same time "Puppy Love" came out on *Swan* (late 1961), Len Caldwell called. "Len called us up and said, 'I want you to do the Dick Clark Show. The record's really big.'", remembered Moses. "So we said OK, but Len only wanted Jimmy." Dick Clark wanted Little Jimmy Rivers to appear on *Bandstand* to lip-sync the song.

Dick Clark had been a part owner of *Swan Records* but as a result of the payola investigations had sold his interests in the label a year earlier. He still retained a close friendship with the owners of *Swan*, however.

The other Tops were obviously upset that they were not invited, only Jimmy. However, believing an



**"Puppy Love" on the Swan label, late 1961.
Note the credit to "Little Jimmy Rivers And The Tops"
and the change to Caldwell Music.
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)**



**The Chiffons, ca. 1966. Sylvia Peterson on the right.
(Photo courtesy of John Clemente)**

appearance on *Bandstand* would open more doors for the group, they gave Jimmy the go ahead. Little Jimmy Rivers made an appearance on *Bandstand*, but that was the last the group heard from anyone associated with the record.

The Tops continued rehearsing, doing four part harmony with Eddie Bonelli's sister, Eleanor Carter replacing Pat Smith. The group signed with a recording company but nothing happened. In November 1963, Moses Groves was drafted and Vernon Rivers was drafted in early 1964. Jimmy Rivers began performing on his own as well as teaching voice. The Tops had effectively broken up.

Meanwhile Ronald Mack was still active. Living in the Bronx, he heard a trio of local girls who sang for fun at James Monroe High School. Judy Craig, Barbara Lee and Pat Bennett would evolve into the Chiffons. Rocco was writing songs for all the area groups but he was particularly impressed by the Chiffons. He first brought Sylvia Peterson into the Chiffons, much as he had brought her into the Tops a few years earlier. Then he gave the group a song he had written for the Tops; a tune they had worked with but never perfected. The song was "She's So Fine," written about Sylvia Peterson. The words were changed to "He's So Fine" for the Chiffons to sing. Judy Craig sang lead. Rocco shopped the song around and it was picked up by *Bright Tune Productions*, a company owned by the Tokens of "The Lion Sleeps Tonight"

fame. Recorded and released on the *Laurie* label in late 1962, "He's So Fine" reached Number One on the Pop Charts in February 1963. The song spent 15 weeks on the charts. Rocco Mack finally had the success he'd worked for all of his life. Unfortunately, he never got to enjoy it. While "He's So Fine" climbed the charts, Ronald "Rocco" Mack died of Hodgkin's disease at the age of 23.

"We never really got to perfect 'She's So Fine' because Rocco was still writing it when he was with us," said Moses. "When it came out by the Chiffons it was a big hit. I saw the Chiffons sing it at the Apollo. Ronald Mack finally got paid. He and his mother bought a car. Then all of the sudden the record made the charts and Ronald got sick. He was so young."

After getting out of the service, Moses Groves, Vernon Rivers got back together with Jimmy Rivers and Eleanor Carter as a group in 1966. They began calling the group the Extroads and recorded a couple of demos on a song they'd written called "The Verge". The song has a strong Northern Soul sound and may soon be released in the UK.

Jimmy Rivers now spends much of his time in Germany teaching voice. Among his many career accomplishments, he has trained singers there for the show, "The Lion King".

Moses Groves has given up singing and is now an artist. He studied at the Arts Students League and at New York University. Moses uses oils, acrylics, pastels and charcoal to create portraits, still life, abstracts and figures. He also teaches art every Tuesday in Co-op City, Bronx, NY, with the Baychester Visual Arts Association.

Vernon Rivers and Eddie Bonelli are both active in the Church and still sing there. Sylvia Peterson continued with the Chiffons for some time but has now retired from singing.



**Little Jimmy & the Tops, 1966.
Left to right: Eleanor Carter, Jimmy Rivers (at piano),
Vernon River, Moses Groves.
(Photo courtesy of Moses Groves)**

Swingin
into
"62"



**Freddy
Cannon's**

**"TEEN
QUEEN
OF THE
WEEK"**

S-4096

Jimmy Rivers

**"PUPPY LOVE"
"PUPPY LOVE"
"PUPPY LOVE"**

S-4091

**Danny and
the Juniors**

**"TWISTIN'
ALL NIGHT LONG"**

S-4092

**SWAN
RECORDS**

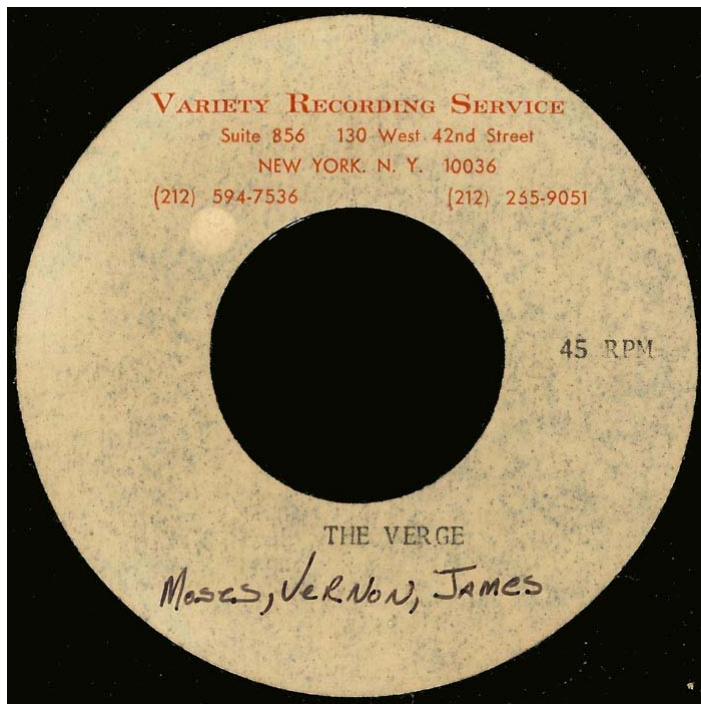
1703 Jackson Street

Philadelphia Penna

PHONE HOWARD 5-3700

Notes:

1. Based in interviews with Moses Groves, Eddie Bonelli and Vernon Rivers, October 2011.
2. Special thanks to Pam Nardella for the initial contacts that made this article possible.
3. Special thanks also to Val Shively, John Clemente and Donn Fileti for supplying photos, label scans and information.
4. For the story of the Chiffons, see John Clemente's *Girl Groups*, Krause Publications, Iola, WI (2000), pp.52—55.
5. The stories of Len Caldwell's *V-Tone* and *Len Records* can be found in Donn Fileti's excellent liner notes in *Relic* CD's #7104 and 7106.



**1966 unreleased acetate by the Tops
while they were called themselves the Extroads**

Discography of Tops related 45's

The Marquis

Onyx 505 Bohemian Daddy / Hope He's True 1956

The Tops

V-Tone 102 Puppy Love / Say You Love Me 1959

Little Jimmy & The Tops

V-Tone 102 Puppy Love / Say You Love Me 1959
(no Philadelphia under V-Tone)

Little Jimmy & The Tops

Len 1011 Puppy Love / Say You Love Me 1960
(yellow label)

Little Jimmy & The Tops

V-Tone 102 Puppy Love / Say You Love Me 1961
(Philadelphia under V-Tone)

Little Jimmy & The Tops

Len 1011 Puppy Love / Say You Love Me ca. 1961
(orange label)

Little Jimmy Rivers & The Tops

Swan 4091 Puppy Love / Say You Love Me 1961

The Extroads

Unreleased acetates

The Verge / Can't Get Over You 1966
Out Of My Mind (The Verge) / - 1966

For more articles,
news, concert listings and
reviews on vocal group
harmony,

visit Charlie & Pam Horner's

www.classicurbanharmony.net

Classic Urban Harmony, LLC



"We Take You Back In The Day"