

“Earth Angel (Will You Be Mine)”—The Penguins (1954)

Added to the National Registry: 2004

Essay by Cary O’Dell



The Penguins



Original 45 label

It is, perhaps, the quintessential doo-wop song.

Though it was not the first song in the genre, nor its first “hit,” “Earth Angel (Will You Be Mine)” by the Penguins (DooTone 348; 1954), certainly defines the musical style as much as anything before or since.

Doo-wop has been defined as: “a subcategory of vocal group harmony that includes the following musical qualities: group harmony, a wide range of vocal parts, nonsense syllables, a simple beat, light instrumentation, and simple music and lyrics.”

Like most codified musical styles, “doo-wop” has its origins in a variety of other genres. Certainly it has its origins in rhythm and blues and black gospel. Traces of doo-wop can also be heard in the music of the Ink Spots and the Mills Brothers, whose heydays were during the Big Band era of the 1930s and ‘40s. And, of course, there’s a “scat” element to doo-wop as well, indicating a strong jazz influence.

Doo-wop was born in city ghettos among black youths, who practiced their vocal art in gymnasiums and on street corners, communally using their voices to take the place of musical instruments they either couldn’t afford or didn’t know how to play. The emphasis on vocal dynamics has remained doo-wop’s one consistent factor.

The era of doo-wop is usually considered to be from 1953 to 1963 and was filled with records recorded by groups often with one-word names like the Orioles, the Miracles, the Chordettes as well as dozens of others usually named after musical terms, birds or automobiles (the Monotones, the Swallows and the Fleetwoods, et.al.).

The Penguins, who scored their biggest hit with “Earth Angel,” though did not draw their inspiration from the arctic animal but, instead, from the then mascot for Kool Cigarettes, a puffing penguin who was the Joe Camel of its day.

The Penguins, formed in Los Angeles in 1954, and originally consisted of Cleveland Duncan (lead vocalist), Dexter Tisby, Bruce Tate and Curtis Williams. All were in their teens when they met and began to sing together eventually gaining a local following in the LA area. When Williams formed the group with the others he brought with him a tune called “Earth Angel.”

“Earth Angel” would be one of the first songs the group cut for DooTone records and producer Dootsie Williams after they were signed to the label in late 1954. “Earth Angel” however would not be the group’s first single. “Angel” was actually the “B” side of a more up-tempo number by

the group titled “Hey Senorita.” But radio DJs, after giving the B side a spin, liked it better—as did their listeners. And so it was “Earth Angel” that became the group’s hit.

The authorship of “Earth Angel” has long been in dispute. Some sources list Penguins member Williams as its solo writer, while others credit vocalist Jesse Belvin and still others cite both men as co-writers. But in 1956, singer/songwriter Gaynel Hodge claimed he wrote the song and took the matter to court. Eventually he won the right to be acknowledged as a co-composer. Pressings of the song, when examined today, are likely to list any and all combinations of the three as writers as the issue over the years has become so muddled. It’s quite possible, of course, that all three had a hand in the formulating the final song: the melody provided by one, the doo-wop effects from another, the lyrics perhaps from a third.

In any event, the result has been worth it. “Earth Angel” has the distinction of being the first independent label R&B song to hit “Billboard’s” pop chart.

The week of December 25, 1954, after 15 weeks on the charts, the single reached number eight. Some statisticians consider “Earth Angel” to be the most successful R&B hit of all time based upon its constant airplay and frequent revival.

Interestingly, almost immediately after The Penguins’ version of the song, another group, The Crew Cuts, recorded their version (a common practice in the music industry in those days). It was released in 1955 and, surprisingly, also made the charts, rising all the way up to number three. Also in 1955, Gloria Mann recorded it as well; her version peaked at #18. Later covers include those by Bobby Vinton, New Edition and even Blink-182. “Earth Angel” has also been used to great effect in a variety of TV series and feature films over the years including, perhaps most memorably, in 1985’s “Back to the Future.”

“Earth Angel” has all the tenets of classic doo-wop. It’s the voices that take precedent. Behind them is only the twinkling of piano chords and a few restrained drums. While Cleveland Duncan’s trembling tenor handles the lead, Tisby, Tate and Williams provide the “wahhhhs” and “ooohhhs” that were part-and-parcel for the genre. Throughout the song, Duncan does some goose-pimpling “runs” with his voice, soaring up the scale on some of the songs lyrics:

*Earth angel, earth angel
Will you be mine
My darling dear
Love you all the time
I'm just a fool
A fool in love with you*

*Earth angel, earth angel
The one I adore
Love you forever and ever more
I'm just a fool
A fool in love with you*

“Earth Angel” concludes with a lovely four-part harmony that manages to eek out a smile and, maybe, even a tear from a listener.

Like many doo-wop groups and solo artists, the Penguins never had another top 40 hit though they did continue to record for a few more years for both Mercury and Atlantic records. Later membership changes impacted the group before they eventually disbanded in 1962.

Lead singer Cleveland Duncan has reconvened the group at various times, with alternating and new members. In 1963, Duncan, again under the name The Penguins, sang the Frank Zappa/Ray Collins song “Memories of El Monte.” It was a tried-and-true doo-wop song that seemed to

close out the doo-wop era. It even samples, vocally, some of “Earth Angel.” Zappa and Collins would later found the Mothers of Invention together, producing, among other works, “We’re Only In It for the Money” in 1968.

“Memories of El Monte” was the last original music created under the Penguins’ name though Duncan and the group—or some facsimile of—would occasionally regroup for nostalgia concerts or other events. For instance, “The Penguins” performed on the acclaimed PBS special “Doo Wop 50” in 2001.

Of course, it wouldn’t take any reunion or pseudo-reunion to keep “Earth Angel” on radio or on people’s minds. As mentioned, “Earth Angel” has been a play-list favorite since its debut over 50 years ago--whether it’s at a high school dance or a high school reunion or at a latter day “sock hop.”

“Earth Angel” is even that one “ambient” song streamed into grocery stores and elevators that you actually don’t mind listening to. The airy seemingly effortlessness of great doo-wop continues to rest as lightly on the mind as it does on the ear.

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