

# “If I Didn’t Care”--The Ink Spots (1939)

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Essay by Andrew Hickey (guest post)\*



*Original label*

There are very few things that can be said about the Ink Spots that don't, in retrospect, smack of hyperbole. Their influence on the musics that would in later decades become known as rock and roll, rhythm and blues, doo-wop, and soul is very nearly incalculable--it's no exaggeration to say that every singer who sang a ballad in those genres in the 1950s and early sixties, and every vocal group in those genres, was influenced by the Ink Spots and their lead singer Bill Kenny, and “If I Didn’t Care” was the record that defined the sound that would become their trademark.

The Ink Spots had existed as a group for four years before hitting on their style, and the man who was responsible for it was a late addition. They had started out in 1934 as a group that sang comedy jive songs in the manner of Fats Waller, Cab Calloway, or Slim Gaillard, and when their original tenor singer Jerry Daniels left the group, his replacement Bill Kenny originally carried on performing the same repertoire, recording songs like “Your Feet’s Too Big” with the group. The group were very moderately successful, occasionally performing on the radio as a fill-in for the more popular group the Mills Brothers, whose style had inspired the group in those early years, and releasing records but with little success.

At this time, the group was mostly guided by the instincts of Deek Watson, one of the group’s four members, and the one who came up with the name. Watson, at least initially, felt that the group should perform in a style that was already going out of fashion in the 1930s, one that played up the group’s Blackness in a pseudo-minstrel fashion--when Watson formed another group in 1944, he initially named it “the Brown Dots,” and he talks in his autobiography about how when he initially suggested the name “the Ink Spots” to the group, they balked at the idea of emphasizing their race in that way.

Film footage of the group shows that Watson was a skilled comedian, but his comedy was in the style of performers like Steppin Fetchit, whose performances of white people’s caricatured attitudes of Black people were increasingly being found distasteful by other Black people, and had the group continued performing in the style that Watson wanted, it is likely that they would have faded from the public memory in the way that so many other acts of the 1930s did.

But slowly but surely, Bill Kenny started to take charge of the group, and to mold it into something rather different. Kenny envisioned a new style for the group, one where far from being the group’s leader, Deek Watson was the least important element, while Kenny was the undisputed leader.

Kenny had come up with a style of arrangement he called “top and bottom,” which was used almost without exception on the Ink Spots’ hit records. In this style, Charlie Fuqua, the group’s

guitarist, would play an intro--this intro was always the same, with Fuqua playing guitar arpeggios for three bars in a loping country rhythm, similar to that of "Tumbling Tumbleweeds," with the bass note going up by a semitone per bar while the rest of the notes in the chord remained the same, followed by a single strummed chord on the fourth bar. Then Kenny would sing through the full song in a high tenor, with the others providing backing vocals.

That high tenor vocal by Kenny would be one of the two keys to the group's success. His voice was notable both for his high range and for his exceptional clarity, and he sounded like no other singer of the time, in any genre. Kenny's vocals would be cited later as a huge influence on everyone from Elvis Presley (whose first ever recording was a performance of an Ink Spots song) to Sam Cooke (who used to try to sing like Bill Kenny as a teenager, and who shows a marked resemblance to Kenny on some of his vocals). It was a distinctive, beautiful, voice, and one that captivated listeners.

The other key to the group's success came with what happened after Kenny sang through the song. At that point, Hoppy Jones would take over the vocals. Jones, the group's bass singer, would speak-sing his way through the whole song, repeating the text that Kenny had sung, but with interjections like "Now listen, honey chile." While Kenny would sing in a rather accentless voice, with little indication of his race or class, Jones' vocals belonged almost to the minstrel stage, being caricatures of African-American Vernacular English, of the type common in the comedy of the period. There is a debate that could be had over to what extent Jones' use of this voice was a deliberate subversion of the caricature, and to what extent it was playing in to it--it was common at the time for Black performers to use such caricatures in ways that would read differently to different audiences. What is definitely true is that Jones' vocal style was almost as influential as that of Kenny--echoes of him can be heard in almost every doo-wop bass singer of the fifties, and whenever you hear Dub Jones' comedy voice on records like "Yakety Yak" by the Coasters or "Stranded in the Jungle" by the Cadets, you're hearing someone who is almost channeling the voice of Hoppy Jones.

After Jones' recitation, Kenny would sing another verse of the song, and then the record would end. This very strict formula, which the group kept to for almost a decade, gave them a string of hits, and made them arguably the most popular vocal group of the 1940s (an argument could also be made for the Andrews Sisters, who appealed to a very different market). It was a calling card for the group, and a structure within which they could perform all sorts of material.

"If I Didn't Care," the first example of this formula, was also the most successful. The song was written by Jack Lawrence, who usually wrote songs with collaborator Peter Tinturin. The two had written multiple songs for films, and they had also collaborated on songs for people like Fats Waller and the Mills Brothers. But in this case, Lawrence wrote the song on his own, and none of his musician friends were impressed--the general consensus among them was that it stank. Indeed Archie Bleyer, the McGuire Sisters' arranger, told him that the song would never be a success unless he rewrote the closing phrase, making it descend instead of ascend. Lawrence took Bleyer's advice, and sent the revised version of the song to his contact at Decca--who replied that the Ink Spots had recorded the original version already, and it looked like it was going to become a hit.

And so it was. The Ink Spots would dominate the charts for the late thirties and much of the forties, having a run of over 50 hit singles before deaths, lineup changes, and changing fashions in music caused the group to fall from the top. Their influence on vocal music in America is incalculable, and it started with "If I Didn't Care."

*Andrew Hickey is a writer and podcaster, who has written books on the Beach Boys, the Monkees, the Kinks and more. His current project, a podcast titled “A History of Rock Music in 500 Songs,” can be found at [500songs.com](http://500songs.com).*

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