

“Let’s Go Out to the Programs”--The Dixie Hummingbirds (1953)

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Essay by Jerry Zolten (guest post)*



The Dixie Hummingbirds



Original label

American pop music in 1953 was in exciting malleable flux. All kinds of previously isolated regional and ethnic music were in the air, spread around by records and the broad reach of radio. In the cross-pollination, new genres were emerging and taking shape.

The mainstream was still dominated by pop music released on major corporate record labels. Best-selling artists that year included Frankie Laine, Patti Page, Les Paul & Mary Ford, Perry Como, Kay Starr, Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, and Tony Bennett. Country music was going strong, though fans mourned Hank Williams, dead in the backseat of a Cadillac on his way north to repair a career damaged by alcoholism.

Rock ‘n’ roll was just beginning to kick up sand. Elvis Presley was about to cut his first records in Memphis while Bill Haley and the Comets made noise along the East Coast with “Crazy Man, Crazy,” a hybrid of country swing and rhythm & blues that defied existing pop music categories.

“Rhythm & blues” was “Billboard” magazine’s designation for the music of black America, a niche market served by small independent labels that had been cropping up across the nation. The top R&B hit of the year was Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton’s “Hound Dog” from Peacock Records, an independent started a few years earlier in Houston, Texas, by local entrepreneur Don Robey. The record’s success opened the door to airplay for other artists on the label...including the Dixie Hummingbirds, an African-American gospel group from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The Hummingbirds’ first two Peacock singles had been released a year prior with moderate success. Now the group was ready to move on up within the gospel pantheon. There was no chart that ranked gospel record sales, but a reader’s poll conducted by the nation’s leading African-American newspaper “The Pittsburgh Courier” listed among the top spiritual entertainers of that year Clara Ward and the Ward Singers, Mahalia Jackson, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the Pilgrim Travelers, the Soul Stirrers, and the Original Five Blind Boys of Mississippi.

Gospel “programs” were all the rage within the African-American community. According to the “Courier,” these programs drew crowds ranging from three to 12,000. The biggest names teamed up, touring town-to-town in stellar showcases, the singing groups competing, trying to outperform each

other to see whom could most “get over” with the audience. The Dixie Hummingbirds--Ira Tucker, James Davis, Beachey Thompson, William Bobo, and Howard Carroll-- took the competition to a new level by challenging their rivals through a phonograph recording.

Lead singer Ira Tucker had emerged as the group’s primary songwriter. While in Chicago waiting to do a live radio broadcast, he heard the station air “New Juke Box Saturday Night,” an updated version by the Modernaires of their earlier hit in which they imitated pop music favorites. Tucker thought he’d like to try that...but in the gospel idiom.

With the versatility of his fellow Hummingbirds in mind, Tucker wrote “Let’s Go Out to the Programs” in one sitting. The group rehearsed, recorded, and released it as a single on Peacock a few weeks later in November 1953....

Oh, preachers and friends,
If you want to hear singing,
Good old gospel singing,
Go out to the programs,
Whenever they’re in your town.

As the recording unfolded, Tucker emceed as if on a gospel program, introducing a handful of the top groups in the land--the Blind Boys, the Pilgrim Travelers, the Bells of Joy, and the Soul Stirrers. Then, the Hummingbirds took on each group’s style, nailing them one-by-one before capping the mini-three-minute program with a sample from their own recording from the year before, “Trouble In My Way.”

The Hummingbirds got over with the audacity of “Let’s Go Out to the Programs,” a brilliant mix of spirituality, tribute, and good humor. Soul pioneer Jerry Butler of the Impressions remembered it well: “I must have been 12, 13 years old when I heard that [record]. Now, Archie Brownlee [of the Blind Boys] was one of the greatest singers of all time, and nobody sounded like Archie Brownlee. And then there was Sam Cooke [of the Soul Stirrers]. And then here comes Ira Tucker and the Dixie Hummingbirds saying, ‘I’m good enough to sing like that guy!’ They say imitation is the greatest form of flattery, so, here they were imitating the giants!”

“Let’s Go Out to the Programs” sold in excess of a half a million copies, an exceptional tally in any genre at that time. The song effectively launched the Dixie Hummingbirds into the upper echelons of gospel, a stature that the group enjoyed over the duration of their decades long career. Said James Davis, founder of the group, “We showed people we could sing like anybody,” but in the end, the Dixie Hummingbirds sang like nobody, soaring into rare air with a style distinctly their own.

Jerry Zolten is the author of “Great God A’Mighty! The Dixie Hummingbirds: Celebrating the Rise of Soul Gospel Music” (Oxford University Press, 2003) from which all above quotes were extracted.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.