

The Nation's Capital: Doo-wop From the Street Corner to the Stage



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Doo-wop and DC

When you think Memphis, you think blues. Nashville is known for country music. And Motown means Detroit. But these cities are not the only ones with a musical history.

The Nation's Capital: Doo-wop From The Street Corner To The Stage, is a history of the development of select popular vocal singing groups in Washington, D.C. from the late 1940s through the early 1960s. Let's learn about the vocal harmony tradition that is Doo-wop and how Washington, DC put its mark on this musical trend.

Defining Doo-Wop

WHAT IS DOO-WOP?

Vocal group harmony music, or "Doo-wop", is rooted in various forms of American music dating back to the 19th Century. African-American field hands and slaves sang spiritual, work, and camp songs before the nation's Civil War, giving life to what developed into traditional gospel and blues music.

Most of the earliest recorded vocal harmony performances, from the 1890s into the 1920s, consisted of spiritual and jazz-based sides. The blending of these sounds with the barbershop quartet harmonies of the early 20th Century, gave rise to the popular success of the Ink Spots and Mills Brothers, who thrived from the early 1930s into the early 1950s.

Early blues, jazz, gospel, and rhythm combo acts including the Cats and the Fiddle, the Golden Gate Quartet, and the Delta Rhythm Boys, were equally influential in the years dominated by the Swing Era orchestras. Together, they gave rise to the first wave of African-American vocal harmony units in the mid to late 1940s. The Ravens, formed in New York City, and Baltimore's Orioles, influenced teenagers nationwide into forming their own groups. From New York to Chicago to Los Angeles, literally thousands of acts sprung up in the years that followed.

The early 1950s produced dozens of influential and highly revered African-American groups including the Virginia-based Five Keys, Chicago's Flamingos and Moonglows, Washington D.C.'s Clovers, the Spaniels of Gary, Indiana, and New York City's Dominoes, Drifters and Harptones. Throughout the decade, dozens of self-taught groups scored national hits for small independent labels and toured the country for months at a time, often with little financial reward.

The term "doo wop", which came into prominence long after the genre's heyday, is derived from the often nonsense syllables sung by the background harmony voices behind the lead singer, primarily to make up for lack of instrumentation, and to keep a steady rhythm flowing. The style essentially features four or five voices singing individual notes ranging from high tenor to deep, resonant bass. During its peak years, the genre flourished in urban areas. From coast to coast, teens tried their best to mimic the smooth harmonies of Los Angeles' Platters and New York's Heartbeats, the fast, fancy steps of Harlem's Cadillacs, and the youthful, energetic spirit of Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers and the Cleftones.

Filled with reverence and appreciation, today's historians are dedicated to preserving the sights, sounds, and legacies of the pioneering artists of vocal group harmony "doo wop" music.

Todd Baptista

The DC Doo-wop Venue - The Howard Theatre



The Howard Theatre back in the day.



The Howard Theatre now.

Where do you go to see a famous entertainer perform? Nowadays, you may go to a huge venue like the Capital One Arena in downtown Washington. But years ago, the place to go was The Howard Theatre.

During the first half of the twentieth century, there were laws that prevented blacks from going to some public places where whites socialized or conducted business. As a result, blacks established their own places to socialize and shop. The Howard Theatre was one of those places. A black furniture store owner bought an open lot that had been used for carnivals and traveling tent shows. Even before the building went up, that location had already been a performance space. At the time that it opened, it was the largest concert hall in the country for African Americans.

The Howard Theatre is at 7th and T Streets NW, in an area called the U Street corridor of Washington. The neighborhood around U Street was once the cultural and social center of black Washington. That's where many African American businesses were located. Some of them are still in operation like Lee's Florist and Ben's Chili Bowl. It was where you went to go on a date, enjoy a good meal or have fun with your friends. Years ago, U Street was nicknamed 'Black Broadway' because so many black stars performed there at nightclubs and concert halls. But the premier venue was The Howard Theatre.

The Howard Theatre featured many popular black shows from 1910 until 1975. When there was a popular headliner, it wasn't unusual for a line of people to be wrapped around the corner, eagerly waiting to get in.

The Clovers, the Marquees, the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, The Four Jewels are just a few of the celebrities that appeared at The Howard. Chuck Brown used to shine shoes in front of The Howard. It was his dream to one day be on its stage and he achieved that dream. For many years, it was considered one of the most prestigious places in the country for African American entertainers to perform. Then it fell on hard times and closed in 1975. But there were people who felt The Howard Theatre was too valuable a part of history to lose. Other people thought it could still be a money-making business. As a result, the theatre re-opened in 2012. Since then, other important acts have performed there including Raheem DeVaughn, Chrisette Michele, Wanda Sykes, Kendrick Lamar, and Drake.

Other Musical Venues

The Howard wasn't the only place where people went to enjoy good music. A popular place at the corner of 11th and U Streets was known by multiple names: Club Caverns, Crystal Caverns, Bohemian Caverns. It hosted many hot acts including the Cap-tans, Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Shirley Horn, John Coltrane, Nina Simone and

Ramsey Lewis who recorded a critically and commercially successful album there. Jimmy McPhail's Gold Room in NE DC offered blues and jazz music. Benny's Tavern, also known as Benny's Rebel Room featured the Ink Spots and the Coasters. And before 815 V St NW became WUST or the current 9:30 Club, it was the Duke Ellington Nightclub.

Doo This: DIY Doo-wop History - How to conduct an Oral History

Reading about things that have happened in the past is interesting, but it becomes fascinating when you talk to people who have experience with the people, places or events that you are studying. Interviewing people about the past is called oral history. Ask some of the adults you know about Doo-wop music and the art and culture of that time. Here are some questions you might ask:

Have you ever attended a Doo-wop show? If so, describe the performance.

Why do you think Doo-wop was so popular?

Have you ever been to the Howard Theatre? Did you go recently or years ago? What show did you see and how did you enjoy it?

Tell me about the first live show you ever attended.

Who was your favorite entertainer when you were young? What excited you about the artist(s)?

What radio stations did you listen to as a teen? Where do you go now to hear music?

What artists from 'back in the day' are still making music? How has their music changed with the times? How has it remained the same?

The size of many venues today is much larger - how does the size of the space change the concert experience?

Doo This: Happy Harmonizing

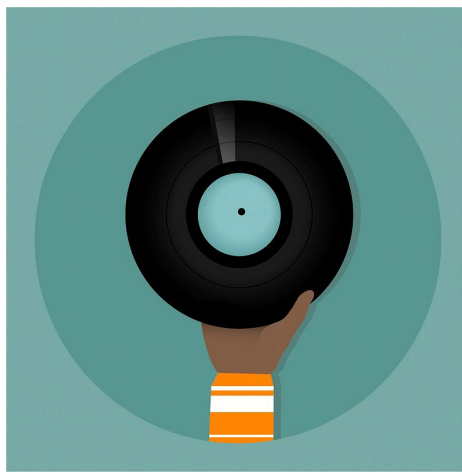
In the world of music, harmony is when several voices blend together using different notes but singing the same song. Singing in harmony yields a richer, fuller sound.

Tips for singing in harmony:

—Listen for the background vocals - when you practice, ignore the lead singer and listen - then sing along with the background vocals.

—Start slow and easy - begin trying harmony by singing songs with a simple structure like nursery rhymes or Christmas carols.

—Practice with a friend - experiment with another singer. Trade places singing harmony versus the melody.



Radio and Radio Announcers

Not every job in the music industry is that of musician. Someone else who is important in getting the music to listeners is the DJ. DJ is short for disc jockey. Disc refers to the hard vinyl records that have sound encoded into them. DJs played records on the radio. But the DJ did more than that. He would talk about the singers and musicians featured on a record, he'd read commercials and report informational items such as the current time and temperature, and would make entertaining remarks - called patter - in between songs. He was as much fun to listen to as the music.

During the Doo-wop era, radio was a highly popular medium the way social media is today. There were several radio stations prominent in Washington, DC among people who liked Rhythm and Blues (R&B) music. The first station in America to broadcast African-American music was WOOK-AM, in 1947. WOOK's DJ would spin records in the window of a record store, Waxie Maxie's, located at 7th & T Sts. NW. WOL's biggest

competition was WOL-AM which signed on in 1965. In addition to playing music, WOL also did public affairs programs.

WUST-AM also launched in 1947, the same year as WOOK. It broadcasted only during the daylight hours. Its call letters came from its address on 1120 U Street. WUST is no longer around, but that location is still known for music. It's now the site of the 9:30 Club. And WWDC was the first DC station to air R&B music as its mainstay. It was DC's first radio station to broadcast 24-hours a day. WWDC was known for the jazz music they played in the evenings.

DJ's were the influencers and radio stations compete to have talented people on the air. Sometimes a DJ could make or break a record by the way they talked about a song or by how often they played it. Good DJ's had to be skillful at ad-libbing, have good timing and be able to keep listeners tuned in by being amusing. Sometimes a DJ could make or break a record by the way they talked about a song or by how often they played it.

Here are some of the famous DC DJs:

- **Tex Gathings**, one of the first black DJs in Washington (jazz only), WOOK.
 - In the late 1940s, Gathings was the primary host of "the first television show ever produced from The Howard Theatre," called "Marvin's Howard Theatre Amateur Program." Gathings hosted the program alongside fellow DJ Harold "Hal" Jackson.
 - **Jackson Lowe**, WWDC-FM (as well as WUST, WOL and WINX). R&B enthusiast DJ - known as "Mayor of Connecticut Avenue" - who promoted local R&B at a time when it was difficult for black artists to find a broadcast outlet. He also hosted a weekly amateur talent show at the Republic Theatre, giving a boost to a number of local musicians, including Pearl Bailey and her husband, Louie Bellson. His talent-show discoveries included the Clovers, out of Armstrong High School, who would go on to record several hits, including "Devil or Angel," "Blue Velvet" and "Love Potion No. 9." Additionally, the Armstrong Four which included Jimmy McPhail. Lowe connected black artists to his friend Ahmet Ertegun, who often bought records at Waxie Maxie's record shop.
- **Hal Jackson**, barrier-breaking radio host
 - By the mid-1940's, he hosted *The House That Jack Built*, a program of jazz and blues on three DC/Maryland radio stations (WINX, WANN, WUST)

and WOOK). At WOOK, he spun “race records,” as songs by black artists were then known, during morning drive time on WOOK. (Hal Jackson had broken through the color barrier in radio in the DC area in the 1930s, becoming the first black to host a show on WINX in Maryland after initially being told that no black person would ever be on its airwaves. His show was called “*The Bronze Review*,” which featured entertainment, interviews and news. Unbeknownst to WINX management, “bronze” was then the classy term for “negro” in Washington’s black community.) In 1946 alongside fellow WOOK host Tex Gathings, Jackson co-hosted the first television show ever produced from The Howard Theatre" called "Marvin's Howard Theatre Amateur Program." In 1990, Jackson was the first minority inducted into the National Association of Broadcasters’ Hall of Fame. In 1995, he was the first African-American inducted into the National Radio Hall of Fame.

- **Felix Grant, WMAL**
 - Grant was recognized for his distinctive voice, sophisticated style, and personal connection to many of the 20th century's jazz greats. He was responsible for works connected to Duke Ellington, namely discovering and marking Ellington's birthplace at 2129 Ward Place, N.W.; renaming Western High School, Duke Ellington High School (now, the Duke Ellington School of the Arts), and for renaming the Calvert Street Bridge the Duke Ellington Bridge in 1974. Later, in 1985, "Felix Grant Day" was proclaimed; also, a music-radio library was named after him at the University of Jamaica.
- **Al “Big Boy” Jefferson, WOOK**
 - One-time host of Quality Music’s “goldfish bowl” studio on the sidewalk. Jefferson also had a popular Saturday show called *Teen-o-Rama* from 7-9pm, which he let young people host and share information about social events, like where the next sock hop would be. He was the co-creator of the “Teenarama Dance Party” which aired on WOOK-TV, the nation's first black television station.
- **Cliff Holland, WOOK**
 - Seminal black DJ who started in 1946 broadcasting every night and moved on to host his popular radio show “Afternoon Dance Party”. In later years he served as Music Director, Program Director and Public Affairs Director at WOOK.

- **Jon Massey, WOOK & WWDC**
 - hosted daily “Uptown Special” Monday-Friday 6-10am and Sundays 6am-12noon on WOOK, 26 hours per week)
 -
- **Paul Chapman** (unsure of station); played The Cap-Tans
 - The Cap-Tans appeared on the radio show of deejay Paul Chapman, joining him in a rendition of "Coo-Coo Jug-Jug (That's the Sound of the Birds)". Chapman was so impressed with the broadcast that he enlisted the group in a recording of the song, backed by his composition "You'll Always Be My Sweetheart", which was released on DC Records in June 1949.
- **John “Lord Fauntleroy” Bandy** - WUST’s most famous DJ in the mid-50s - was one of the first people to introduce R&B to the city of Washington. D.C. native Harold Bell said Bandy played music by The Orioles, The Flamingos, and The Spaniels (“You Gave Me Peace of Mind”). Fans on the street would watch Bandy broadcast from the window and dance to the music. *(The native Jamaican was known for broadcasting with a faux British accent.)*



Doo This: Can You Do What a Radio Announcer Does?

- One of the skills of a good radio personality is skill in public speaking, especially the ability to ad-lib or to speak on a topic without previous preparation. Join a friend and test each other’s ability to speak off the cuff for one of these situations:
 - The master of ceremonies got sick and you’ve been asked to give an introduction of the Mayor.
 - Your team just won and you’ve been asked to say a few words of congratulations.

- You go to a restaurant, and the owner says she'll give you a free meal if you talk about why you like their food.

- There's a reporter at the concert of your favorite performer. You're told that you'll be given a backstage pass if you can describe what makes this performer's music so outstanding.

- Traditional DJ's introduce the records they play on the air. Make a playlist. Before each song begins, say a few words about the song and its artists.
- Do you have a favorite DJ? What makes him or her entertaining?

SOUND TECHNOLOGY HISTORY



Sound Technology History

Just as the music and popular dances have changed, so has the technology for producing sound and music. Let's look at few trailblazers in sound technology.

What's your favorite jam? Chances are, the first time you heard it was on the radio. The person given credit for inventing the radio is **Gugilelmo Marconi**, an Italian engineer (1874 - 1937), although his work was a continuation of the work started by others. Marconi conducted experiments in ways to send signals without the use of wires. At first, messages were sent as Morse code. Later, spoken messages were able to be transmitted. In 1909, Marconi was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics for his work in radio communications.

For many years, all music was recorded on wax or vinyl records. Records were played on a machine called a record player or a phonograph. The phonograph was invented by **Thomas A. Edison** in 1877. He invented many other devices including the light bulb and a movie camera. His phonograph made sounds by using a piece of tinfoil wrapped around a tube with grooves in it. The vibrations of the sounds etched grooves into a rotating tube or cylinder. A special needle called a stylus made the grooves in the foil. If you look at a record, you will see grooves in its surface.

Have you ever seen the old-timey microphones used during the early days of radio? They were huge and clunky-looking. Nowadays, microphones are small enough to fit into a handheld cellphone or on a rapper's ear piece. These tiny microphones were developed through the work of an African American man from Prince William County, VA named **Dr. James A. West**. Nearly all microphones found in today's sound and musical recording equipment were developed by Dr. West and his partner Gerhard Sessler while they worked for Bell Laboratories.

Not so long ago, telephones were only used for talking. Nowadays, because people do so many things on their phones, it's hard to remember when phones were much more limited. One of the people who expanded what telephones could do was an African American woman, **Dr. Shirley Jackson**. As a girl, Shirley Jackson enjoyed math and science projects. She graduated as valedictorian from Roosevelt High School here in DC. As an adult, Dr. Jackson worked for Bell Laboratories where she did the scientific research that is the foundation for the touch tone telephone, caller ID and call waiting.

One of the few black people to win multiple Academy Awards is not an actor or a director but a sound engineer. **Russell Williams, II**, a native Washingtonian, has worked on over fifty movies. He won Academy Awards for Best Sound for two movies, *Dances With Wolves* and *Glory*, starring Denzel Washington. After working in Hollywood for many

years, he returned to DC to teach young people about the movie business. He is now a professor at The American University.

Glossary

Doo-wop and Other Musical Terms

ad-lib - to speak or perform without advance preparation

ballad - a slow usually romantic song sung in the blues style

beat - the tempo of a musical piece.

bop - a partnered dance to slow or mid-tempo R&B music in Washington D.C. dance circles; a term used to describe swing-dancing in other cities.

bridge - a passage of music that provides contrast between different parts of a song but also connects those sections of the song.

chitlin' circuit - a performance tour at the theatres and nightclubs that catered to black audiences.

choreography - the practice of arranging a dance; designing the movement and steps.

burn - to outdo or show-off on the dance floor.

cut in - when someone interrupts a dance team to replace one of the partners.

doo-wop - rock and roll singing featuring four or five voices in harmony, which was most popular during the 1950's.

follow - to order one's steps according to the pattern set by one's partner.

hand dancing - a partnered dance to upbeat R&B music; also known as swing dancing in other parts of the country.

harmony - singing or playing more than one tone at the same time.

lead - to direct the pattern of the dance; it can also mean the singer in a group who sings the main melody.

lyrics - the words to a song.

oldies but goodies - songs from the past that continue to be popular.

rhythm and blues (R&B) - a form of African American popular music that mixes in the style and feeling of jazz and the blues.

sample - to take a line from one record and use in another one. Many hip hop artists sample R&B records in their songs.

soul music - a style of pop music created by African-Americans. It grew out of gospel and blues music and is often performed with deep feeling.

syncopation - a musical rhythm made by accenting or varying the weak beat.

swing dancing - a general term used for partnered dancing to uptempo big band or R&B music.

Doo This: Word Scramble

Unscramble the letters from words taken from the Glossary.

1. iyslrc _____
2. idbgr _____
3. teba _____
4. luso imcus _____
5. eoisl _____
6. alblda _____
7. bilda _____
8. oarmnyh _____

Doo This: DOO-WOP Trivia Quiz

What have you learned about Doo-Wop music? Here are a few questions to test your knowledge.

1. What was the first radio station in Washington, DC to play black music?
A. National Public Radio **B.** WOOK- AM **C.** WOL **D.** WUST

2. All of these are Doo-wop groups associated with the Washington, DC area **except**:
A. The Orioles **B.** The Drifters **C.** The Clovers **D.** The Four Jewels

3. Who did the scientific research that makes caller ID possible on telephones?
A. Dr. Shirley Jackson **B.** Thomas Edison **C.** Russell Williams **D.** Gugilelmo Marconi

4. What does 'DJ' stand for?
A. Disc journey **B.** Doo-wop Jazz **C.** Disc Jockey **D.** Dumb Jock

5. How many voices are typically used when singing Doo-wop?
A. a choir of 20 or more **B.** four or five voices **C.** two soloists taking turns

6. Name the most prestigious place in DC for black musicians to perform during the Doo-wop era.
A. The Howard Theatre **B.** WUST Music Hall **C.** Constitution Hall **D.** The Republic Theatre

Answers:

Word Scramble

1. lyrics
2. bridge
3. beat
4. soul music
5. oldies
6. ballad
7. ad-lib
8. harmony

Trivia Quiz

1. WOOK-AM
2. The Drifters
3. Dr. Shirley Jackson
4. Disc jockey
5. Four or five voices
6. The Howard Theatre

