



Doo Wop Groups of the '50s and '60s Say 'Enough!' to Bogus Bands

Bands From the '50s and '60s Lose Money and Gigs to Fake Bands

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The doo wop era of the 1950s and '60s gave us so many memorable songs and famous groups. Like "Charlie Brown" and "Yakety Yak" by the Coasters, "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" and "The Great Pretender" by the Platters, and "Under the Boardwalk" and "On Broadway" by the Drifters.

"20/20" attended an outdoor concert in New York City a few months ago by the Elsbeary Hobbs Drifters. They sang the Drifters' hits, but the singers appeared young. They didn't look old enough to have bought the records, let alone to have recorded them. Well, one older guy maybe, but not the others. What's going on here?

Jon "Bowzer" Bauman, ex-leader of Sha Na Na, calls it a "sophisticated form of identity theft."

Bauman, now of [Bowzer's Rock 'N' Roll Party](#) travels with America lobbying politicians, because he's mad that groups with no members of the original band that recorded the hits profit from the work of musicians who were the real Platters, Coasters and Drifters.

Bowzer said promoters come up with as many of these groups as are needed on any given night.

"If you were to call the source of these groups -- and let's say it's New Year's Eve and they already have 15 dates -- and you were to say, 'I want it for my party' & a 16th group would suddenly form," Bowzer said.

Going Without Pay, Then and Now

"They are the three most valuable group names of the Doo Wop era," Bowzer said of the Coasters, Drifters and Platters. "It's no accident that those are the victims, because how many hit records did those three groups have, in aggregate? Well, over 100 hit records between the three groups."

Many of the original Drifters, Coasters and Platters have died, but others like [Charlie Thomas](#) and [Ben E. King](#) of the Drifters still perform their great hits like "There Goes My Baby" and "This Magic Moment."

King and Thomas say with so many fake Drifters performing, they lose jobs because the phonies perform for less. Despite having had such huge hits, these singers are anything but rich.

"I wish I could find the money," Thomas said. "I guess it's spread out amongst the phonies ... And [Ben]

and I should have a yacht and be in Acapulco someplace, laying back up under a coconut tree."

In the 1950s, many singers, due to their youth and lack of business savvy, were paid little. Sometimes promoters gave them nothing, claiming their expenses were more than their salary.

King said that months after recording a Top 10 hit, "they'll send you a statement, and tell you, 'You owe me now \$50,000' ... They add on all the expenses and before you know it, you are in debt."

Singers had to tour to make money and King and Thomas now try to get back what they didn't get then by continuing to perform well into their 60s and 70s.

The impostors get away with pretending to be the Drifters because few people know what the real musicians look like, according to Maxine Porter, longtime manager of the original Drifters [Bill Pinkney](#). If you saw the movie "Home Alone," you've heard Pinkney's lead voice on the Drifters' classic "White Christmas." Sadly, Pinkney died in July while working with "20/20" on this story.

"These are artists without faces to the public, because in the '50s their pictures were not on album covers," said Porter. "This was preintegration. And there was a nice scene on the cover. You didn't see black faces on album covers in the 1950s."

Porter said that was because promoters "knew it wouldn't sell, not just that they thought it wouldn't sell. Remember, that was 1950s America."

She explained you often see one older singer at these bogus concerts. "So the audience can say, 'Ah, that's gotta be the original guy. He is the real one.'"

But often, he's a fake, too.

Saying 'Enough' to Fake Bands

Bowzer, chair of the Truth in Music Committee of the [Vocal Group Hall of Fame](#), has persuaded 18 states to require groups that call themselves a famous group to have at least one member who actually sang on the original records. Bowzer would like to see the fakes advertise themselves as "tribute" groups instead of implying they're the real deal.

"Tribute shows, as long as they are upfront about the fact that they are tribute shows and not trying to deceive anybody & are perfectly valid," he said.

The promoter, Charles Mehlich and his business associate Larry Marshak, wouldn't talk to "20/20" about this, so their lawyer, William Charron, did. He's helping them fight the court ban that prevents the promoters from using the Drifters' name.

Charron also claims that the Truth in Music laws are unconstitutional and unnecessary.

"You can't go out and legislate popularity," he told "20/20."

"The public is not paying to see 70- and 80-year-old guys onstage. They're paying to see some fun entertainment," Charron said. "They're not called the Drifters. They're called the Elsbeary Hobbs Drifters."

But Elsbeary Hobbs, who did sing with the Drifters, was not on the stage that night. Hobbs died more than a decade ago.

When asked if real musicians can't make as much money because of the phonies, Charron maintained, "Nobody's stopping them from working."

People in the audience don't think they're seeing the original artists, according to Charron.

"There's absolutely no showing of anybody being misled, or deceived, or fooled, or tricked," he said.

Like Thomas and King of the Drifters, Carl Gardner, founder of the Coasters, believes he's earned less money because of the many Coasters' groups performing. He writes about it in a new book with his wife Veta titled, "[Yakety Yak, I Fought Back](#)."

The fight continues against the bogus groups. In September a federal judge ordered Marshak and his associates to "immediately cancel all performances by the Elsbeary Hobbs Drifters, or any group which identifies itself by a name which includes the word 'Drifters,' and shall book no future performances of the group."

Charron is still working to challenge that decision. He's filed a motion for reconsideration.

But Thomas and other advocates say they have had enough of the fakes. Fans should demand the real deal when they spend their entertainment dollar.

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