

The Coasters

The foursome was created September 28, 1955 from the nucleus of the Los Angeles, California based vocal sextet the Robins, originally recording since 1949 with Bobby Nunn - born September 20, 1925 in Birmingham, Alabama - as bass/lead singer. It was the young producing-composing team of Jerry Leiber & Mike Stoller, who with manager-salesman Lester Sill persuaded Bobby Nunn and Carl Gardner, lead tenor vocalist with the Robins from 1954 on Leiber-Stoller's tiny Spark label in L.A., to leave that group and launch the Coasters. Gardner - born April 29, 1928 in Tyler, Texas - is still the Coasters' spokesman and coach today (and sang lead with the group for 50 years). The Robins' West Coast hits from Spark were later issued on Coasters compilations (a.o. **RIOT IN CELL BLOCK #9** and **SMOKEY JOE'S CAFE**).

Attracted by the success of **SMOKEY JOE'S CAFE** with Gardner on lead vocal, Atlantic Records signed an independent producer-composer contract with Leiber & Stoller on September 28, 1955. Two hand-chosen Californians, Billy Guy (a young, slick baritone, born June 20, 1936 in Itasca, Texas) from the duo Bip & Bop, and Leon Hughes (born August 26, 1932 in Los Angeles County), completed the original Coasters line-up. They were contracted to Atlantic's new subsidiary Atco Records. Through the Coasters Leiber-Stoller launched some of the most entertaining songs of the '50s. The first Coasters' recording was **DOWN IN MEXICO** from January 11, 1956. The record became a "sleeper" R&B hit - followed by the minor Pop hit **ONE KISS LED TO ANOTHER**. The group now hit the road for national promotion and produced R&B's most famous double-sided smash in 1957 (with Gardner and Guy lead singers on one side each). **YOUNG BLOOD** (the original A-side) hit the national R&B Best Seller Chart #1 on June 3 and the week after its flip, **SEARCHIN'**, occupied that same spot for a further 12 weeks and also went to #1 on the R&B Disc Jockey and Juke Box Charts (with **YOUNG BLOOD** at # 2). Both titles also became national Pop Top Ten hits, staying on the charts for half a year. This success stands as a rather unique achievement in American music history. After three less successful, but exciting issues, (a.o. **IDOL WITH THE GOLDEN HEAD**) the Coasters reformed and - with Jerry & Mike - moved from the West Coast to New York. Bobby Nunn and Leon Hughes stayed in California, where Nunn later launched his own "The Coasters, Mark II". Nunn died of heart failure on November 5, 1986 in Los Angeles. His group, now led by Billy Richards Jr, continued to tour as "Billy Richards' Coasters", and Hughes also started his own off-shoot Coasters group, "The World Famous Coasters" aka "The Original Coasters".

Two new group members were recruited by the Coasters' prolific manager Lester Sill and shared leads on the first New York Coasters Atco effort, **ZING! WENT THE STRINGS OF MY HEART** (a beach music classic today). Both new-comers were former L.A. experienced group singers - Will "Dub" Jones, successful bass lead with the Cadets, born in Shreveport, Louisiana on May 14, 1928; and Cornell Gunter, lead with the Flairs, born November 14, 1936 in Coffeyville, Kansas. The two joined Gardner and Guy to establish the classic New York quartet that recorded all the other famous Coasters' golden million sellers: **YAKETY YAK** (a #1 Pop and R&B hit in 1958, which received a Grammy Hall of Fame Award in 1999), **CHARLIE BROWN** (Pop and R&B #2) and **ALONG CAME**

JONES (Pop #9) in 1959 and the double-sider **POISON IVY** (R&B # 1, Pop #7) b/w **I'M A HOG FOR YOU**. The classic Coasters had a fifth member in guitarist Adolph Jacobs, born April 15, 1939 Sabine, East Texas, who was succeeded by a Coasters employee, Sonny Forriest, on **WHAT ABOUT US** b/w **RUN RED RUN**, which was the last single of the highly successful year of 1959.

The productions of the Coasters' Atco recordings were far superior to any contemporary group efforts (using the best musicians available, especially Texan King Curtis' fruity sax breaks) with the lyrics neatly deriding aspects of teenage and/or black ghetto life. The group also worked out hilarious stage routines and became the most professional act in late '50s Rhythm & Blues and early '60s International Pop.

In 1960 the Coasters hit with **WAKE ME, SHAKE ME** and waxed one of their all-time greatest recordings, **SHOPPIN' FOR CLOTHES** (with Guy and Jones sharing lead vocals). That year they also released their under-rated, but qualitative "**One By One**" LP. In 1961 they hit with **WAIT A MINUTE** (recorded in 1957). After the group's last U.S. Pop Top 30 hit entry, **LITTLE EGYPT (Ying-Yang)**, Cornell Gunter left the group in June, 1961. He formed his own "Fabulous Coasters" a couple of years later. Gunter died in his car by a gun shot from an unknown in Las Vegas on January 26, 1990. Remnants of his group tour as "The Original Cornell Gunter Coasters".

The famous former lead of the Cadillacs, Earl "Speedo" Carroll, born November 2, 1937 in New York City, became new second tenor in the qualitative line-up of the Coasters, which continued to record for Atco through early 1966, with a.o. the live recording of **T'AIN'T NOTHIN' TO ME** (originally issued on a various-artists "Apollo Saturday Night" LP - hitting the Cash Box R&B Chart #20 in March, 1964); and the original recording of **LET'S GO GET STONED**. Leiber-Stoller had left Atco/Atlantic in 1963, but the vocal quartet renewed their collaboration with the team in late 1966, recording for the CBS subsidiary Date Records, for which the Coasters waxed **DOWN HOME GIRL**, and in 1967 **SHE CAN** (later reissued as **TALKIN' 'BOUT A WOMAN**), also the wonderful original of **D.W. WASHBURN** (released in 1968 and reissued on King Records in the '70s).

In the years of the Coasters' first revival Will Jones had left for new tasks (in New York and later California), replaced by Ronnie Bright, born October 18, 1938 in New York City and original bass singer in Harlem's early '50s group the Valentines. Billy Guy, the great comedian of the group, had started his attempts as a solo artist back in 1962 (still recording and performing with the group up to 1973), sometimes substituted first by Vernon Harrell and later by the hard-working soul veteran Jimmy Norman - born August 12, 1937 in Nashville, Tennessee. He had sung with Jesse Belvin's Chargers and became a regular Coaster in the revival line-up of the '70s. The group performed all over U.S. and toured Europe several times. They even made a brief come-back on the U.S. Hot 100 Chart with a re-rendition of the Clovers' classic **LOVE POTION NUMBER NINE** (for King Records in the winter of 1971/72 with Carl Gardner as happy lead vocal) and issued a great album produced by Leiber-Stoller on King, titled "**The Coasters On Broadway**". The group continued to make records - although the hits came dry. With Gardner,

Speedo, Bright and Guy they had recorded for Lloyd Price's Turntable in 1969 (**ACT RIGHT** and **THE WORLD IS CHANGING**, produced by Jimmy Norman). Later Ronnie Bright sang lead on **CHECK MR. POPEYE**, and the group, now with Guy definitely out, did a single for Wilson Pickett's Wicked label (**HUSH DON'T TALK ABOUT IT**).

By the early '80s Carroll had left to reform his Cadillacs, and Guy and Jones sporadically acted with a special "World Famous Coasters" in California. Will "Dub" Jones died in Long Beach, California on January 16, 2000 at the age of 71 after several years of semi-retirement. Billy Guy died in his sleep at home in Las Vegas, Nevada on November 5, 2002. In 1987 the Coasters (Gardner, Guy, Jones, and Gunter individually) were inducted into the **Rock and Roll Hall of Fame** - the first vocal group receiving that honor. The true Coasters by-then touring lineup, still fronted by Carl Gardner, included Norman, Bright, and veteran guitarist Thomas Palmer - born in El Paso, Texas on August 15, 1929, who had joined the group already in early 1962 (debuting on the notorious **THE CLIMB**). This became the longest lasting lineup, touring for 18 years. At times more than ten different "Coasters" sang the hits on stage. Former Coasters Mark II members Grady Chapman and Bobby Sheen (of the late Robins) had a Coasters group (and even Randy Jones, who had sung with Gunter's and Nunn's groups, had one). In the late '90s "Billy Guy's Coasters" emerged on the scene, semi-coached by Billy Guy - that group (managed by Larry Marshak) nowadays tours in several versions as "The Cornell Gunter Coasters". Carl Gardner and his Coasters have - despite the competition from bogus and off-spring Coasters groups - been heavily engaged in live bookings during the late '80s and the whole of the '90s into the new millennium (even performing at the Carnegie Hall). Carl Gardner has been up-front all the time (leading a super-funky live version of **SMOKEY JOE'S CAFE** - the title which was used for the famous Leiber-Stoller musical).

In early 1998 the true Coasters were a singing quartet again (with Palmer still on guitar). Alvin Morse (born in February, 1951) had joined the group - and in time for Gardner's 70th birthday Carl Gardner Jr (petnamed Mickey - born April 29, 1955) replaced Jimmy Norman, who had left to start a new reggae career. By the end of July, 2001 Joe Lance Williams (aka J. W. Lance, who had sung with Marshak's Coasters), born June 16, 1949, started to substitute for Gardner Jr. In November, 2004 Carl Jr returned to his father's group and Lance stayed. On November 5, 2005 Carl Gardner Jr officially took over lead vocals from his father, who semi-retired (but still coaches the group). The Coasters are probably America's most exciting veteran vocal group of today. We truly haven't heard the last from them yet!

All of the Coasters' Atco recordings are available on a Rhino Handmade 4CD-box (with 113 tracks) issued on December 11, 2007, titled "**The Coasters On Atco - There's A Riot Goin' On**". Rhino's "**The Very Best of The Coasters**" is their most worthwhile 1CD-anthology. U.S. Rhino have also issued a terrific double CD titled "**50 Coasters' Classics**" (although out of catalogue nowadays). A 30-track 2CD-set, titled "**The Definitive Soul Collection**" is planned (featuring all their pop hits). The Coasters' fine

Date/King sides are to be found on a recommended Varese Vintage CD, "**Down Home**", issued late August 2007.