

## The Platters

*The Platters were one of the top vocal groups of the 1950's, selling 53 million records and being among the first doo-wop groups to be inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall of Fame in 1990.*

The original members were; Tony Williams, the lead vocalist (Tony died in 1992), David Lynch, tenor (David died in 1981), Alex Hodge, baritone, who was soon replaced by Paul Robi (Paul died in 1989), Herb Reed, bass, and Zola Taylor. Their manager and producer Buck Ram (Buck died in 1991). Here is their story:

The group was formed in Los Angeles in 1953. The original members were lead singer Tony Williams, bass Herb Reed, tenor David Lynch, and Alex Hodge. They were under the direction of music entrepreneur Ralph Bass for a time before management of the group was taken over by Buck Ram. Buck Ram had been born Samuel Ram in Chicago in 1907. Although he had graduated from law school, he never practiced law and instead went into the music and entertainment business.

Buck worked as an arranger for Mills Music. He wrote songs, gave voice lessons, toured with some bands, and managed his own group, the Three Suns. In 1954 he formed a talent agency in Los Angeles and began to work with a group of high school students who called themselves the Penguins. Early in 1955 the Penguins became one of the first black acts to crack the top ten on the pop charts with Earth Angel [Will You Be Mine]. Buck took over the Platters from Ralph Bass and made some changes to the group, replacing Hodge with baritone Paul Robi.

He also moved a female singer from another act that he was promoting, Shirley Gunther and the Queens, into the Platters. She was Los Angeles native Zola Taylor. Ram then took a song that he had written called Only You [And You Alone] and had the revised lineup record it on the Mercury label. It was a song that the old group had recorded on Federal, but Federal had chosen not to use it.

Buck also brought the Penguins to Mercury. Although the Penguins had already had a major hit on DooTone with Earth Angel, they would never again place a song in the top forty.

For the Platters, however, it was a different story. The recording of Only You made by the revised group on the Mercury label entered the charts in October, 1955. This was an era in which it was a common occurrence for R&B songs to be covered by white acts, and the cover would usually be the one that got air time by disc jockeys. Only You was quickly covered by such a group, the Hilltoppers, which had been formed at Western Kentucky College. The Hilltoppers' version on Dot entered the charts about six weeks after the version done by the Platters for Mercury, and it went to number eight. But the Platters did even better ... their recording shot up to number one on the R&B chart and crossed over to the pop chart, where it reached number five.

The Platters followed it up almost immediately with another song that had been written by Buck Ram, this time with even more success. The Great Pretender was the first number one pop song for the Platters. A very popular song in 1956, it was satirized by Stan Freberg. In the 80's it was covered by Lester Bowie and by Freddie Mercury and Queen, who had a big hit with it in the UK. In the 1956 film Rock Around The Clock, Alan Freed included performances by the Platters of both Only You and The Great Pretender.

The group was somewhat different from others that had gone before it, and featured some innovations that gave the group a great appeal in the 50's. Lead singer Tony Williams had trained by singing in Church gospel groups, and his voice was resonant. The group was often accompanied by strings, and having a woman as part of the assembly was not common in a doo-wop group at the time. Their songs were popular at parties when it came time to play a slow dance number. The first black act of the rock era to reach number one on the pop chart, the Platters helped to break the monopoly that the white acts had on covers of some very good R&B songs. After their initial success, the group went on to record 33 more pop hits on Mercury by 1962.

***In 1956 they reached the top ten again with [You've Got] The Magic Touch.***

Buck brought in Sammy Lowe to arrange a song that had been made popular previously by Vera Lynn and Sammy Kaye, My Prayer. It became the group's second number one pop song. The Platters revived some old songs from the 30's and 40's. A song for which Buck had written the lyrics in 1938 and which had been done by Buck's group, the Three Suns, was recorded by

the Platters and Twilight Time topped the charts in 1958. An old classic by Jerome Kern, Smoke Gets In Your Eyes, was revived and went to number one. Harbor Lights, a hit for Sammy Kaye in 1950, was issued and reached the top ten. More old standards were released: If I Didn't Care [the Ink Spots], I'll Never Smile Again [Tommy Dorsey], Red Sails In The Sunset [Bing Crosby, Tab Hunter, Guy Lombardo], and others.

Inevitably, changes within the group began to occur. Some members of the Platters were arraigned on vice charges in 1959 and later acquitted, and the group managed to retain its clean-cut image. Tony Williams left to go solo in 1961, and was replaced by Sonny Turner. Zola Taylor was replaced by Sandra Dawn. Paul Robi left the group. Nate Nelson, a former member of the Flamingos, joined the Platters in 1966. The group had some success with a few songs on which Sonny Turner sang lead, including I Love You 1000 Times and With This Ring, both of which had been co-written by Luther Dixon and released on the Musicor label. Some of the members of the Platters began to have a falling out. In 1956 Buck Ram had tried to avert these kind of troubles after he had seen what had happened with the Ink Spots. He had established The Five Platters Inc. and had issued shares to the members, with the provision that none could use the group name after leaving the Platters. It didn't work.

Other competing groups began to appear, including one led by Herb Reed. Lawsuits were filed and injunctions were issued. The Platters' final top forty song, With This Ring, left the charts in 1967. David Lynch and Paul Robi both died of cancer, in 1981 and 1989, Buck Ram died at the age of 83. Some compilations of the Platters' songs are not originals. The best sources for original recordings are those issued by Mercury or a two-disc Anthology issued by Rhino. There are several groups still touring as the Platters, although some do not have even a remote connection to the original group.

The only surviving member Of Paul Robi's group, that toured New Zealand that I (Joh) met is Elmer Hopper. He was a member of the Robi's group for 21 years and worked with Paul Robi for 15 years till his death from Cancer back in 1989. He stayed on with the group another 6 years with hope to keep the name The Platters from being trashed by people that will use any group name and profit from the hard work of original members. Elmer was the only guy that Tony Williams said sounded good singing the hits that he made famous.