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Ronnie I. Tribute Dinner & Show (April 13, 2007)

By Pamela Horner

A large coterie of more than 600 people came together to honor and show love to Ronnie I on April 13th at the Cotillion in Garfield, New Jersey. In addition, another 150 were turned away for lack of space. Ronnie I, president and founder of the United in Group Harmony Association and owner of Clifton Records, has been a powerful leader in the field of vocal group harmony for over 35 years. It was only fitting that others gave back to Ronnie. Promoter Dennis Dorrity produced a dinner and concert to show appreciation to Ronnie. Lots of good will exuded from everyone. The room was set up to look like a 1950's party with centerpieces made from LP's and napkin rings fashioned from simulated 45's. Every lady was given a long stem rose. Each table was named for a famous vocal group. Ronnie had a table for the event surrounded by his family.

All of the groups donated their time and talents. Danny Begelman and the UGHA Band (formerly the Ambient Sound Band) opened the show and backed most of the groups. Former WCBS-FM dee jay, Don K. Reed, hosted the entire show. Vocal groups came in quick succession beginning with The Dimensions who sang "Over the Rainbow" and other songs. They were followed by Dick Italiano, who spoke about his brother Ronnie I. in a short but emotional speech. Ronnie then introduced his family. He had a microphone at his table and throughout the evening, people were allowed to come and give tributes to him. Among those giving testimonials were Bobby Jay, radio personality and current member of the Teenagers, Paul Ressler, K. J. O'Daugherty, Randy Bergen, Joe Grimaldi of The Ecstasies, and

Charlie Horner. Channels' lead Earl Lewis couldn't attend but sent a letter that was read. Just about all of the groups on stage spoke about Ronnie's importance to the music and all that he has done to promote vocal group harmony.

Choice, nattily dressed in different colored shirts and black Stetson hats with feathers, was the second group. My favorite songs by them were "Stormy Weather" and "That's Your Mistake." Singing acappella were Classic Sounds who performed "On the Streets of the Bronx" from the movie "A Bronx Tale." Milton Love & the Solitaires wearing dark blue suits were next. They performed "Blue Valentine," "I Wonder Why," and the foot stomper, "Walking Along." During a break in the singing, Ronnie I reminisced about UGHA's history from the early days thirty years ago to the present time. Next up were Joe "Speedo" Frazier & The Impalas, looking very sharp with their Stetson hats. They sang a rock & roll medley of "Chantilly Lace," "Bony Maronie," and "Good Golly Miss Molly," ending with their hit, "Sorry, I Ran All The Way Home." The Brooklyn group, The Hurricanes, was next wearing dark suits and western style hats. They did an excellent job on "Pistol Packing Mama," "Poor Little Dancing Girl," and "I'll Always Be in Love With You." The music continued with The Eternals from the Bronx, attired in black tuxes. Their choreography was as good as their harmony. A couple of notable songs were "Rockin' in the Jungle" and "Babalu's Wedding Day."

Jive Five lead Eugene Pitt was in the audience and asked to say a few words. Gene gave a nice speech about Ronnie and then sang "My True Story." Kenny Vance & The



Willie Winfield & Harptones performing at the Ronnie I. Tribute Dinner & Show (April 13, 2007).



Milton Love & Solitaires with Don Cruz (left) doing the lead.

Planotones performed next. They were sharply dressed in suits and signature hats, and ended their set with "Looking For an Echo." The Encounters sang "Zu Zu," "Now that You're Gone," and "Right By Your Side." The Devotions did a short set of "For Sentimental Reasons" and "Rip Van Winkle." Emil Stucchio & The Classics from Brooklyn sang "All of the Sudden My Heart Sings" and "Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me". Emil played to the entire crowd by coming to the edge of the stage to serenade people sitting on the side of the room.

After a short intermission we heard The Fidelities, singing as a trio. This was the author's first time seeing them perform and they were great! They sang "Captain of My Ship," "The Invitation," "Walk With the Wind," and "The Things I Love." They were perfection! Kid Kyle & His Kool Kats sang three numbers, ending with a dramatic version of "Share."

Ronnie I then took the microphone to address his health issues. He spoke about the difficulties in dealing with chemotherapy and his determination to return to a healthy and normal life. Mostly, however, Ronnie talked about how fortunate he was to be living a life that fulfilled his dreams; running Clifton Music and UGHA and giving recognition to the music he loves.

Next, The Cliftonaires performed. Joel Katz on lead did "The Way You Look Tonight" and "Chapel of Dreams". Cindy Taylor led the group in singing "Bewitched Bothered and Bewildered." The Fidelities were back on stage to back Dennis Dorrity Jr. singing "Peace of Mind" and "Sincerely." Those wonderful Chantels were in the spotlight wearing beautiful black and silver dresses. They mentioned how Richard Barrett once told them that he would make them big stars, and he certainly did. They sang their big songs closing with "Maybe." Willie Winfield & the Harptones were next with kind words for Ronnie from Vickie Burgess and Willie who fondly mentioned that he was UGHA's ambassador. The Harptones, wearing green jackets, sang their classic songs "That's the Way It Goes," "Sunday Kind Of Love," and "Life Is But A Dream." The show closed with Larry Chance & the Earls. singing "Acappella With My Friends" and "My Prayer" from their new CD.

Many notables were in attendance that night. At my table alone was Terry Stewart - President & CEO of The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Museum from Cleveland with his friend

Nick Amster, Joe Grimaldi of The Ecstasies and Charlie Horner. I also noticed Val Shively (R&B Records), Don Fileti, WRHU's Gordon Skadberg, Marty Shein (manager of The Chantels), George Lavitelli of the Bon-a-aires, Willie & Alice Winfield, WRSU's Lou Rallo, Buzzy Garland of Royal Blue, Eugene Pitt, Golden Oldies Forever's Andrea Siegel, Steve Applebaum, Carl Tancredi, Chris Buccola of Doo Wap Shoo Bop record store, WMTR's The Golden Gup, PGHA & WRDV's Mr. Lee, Dickie Harmon from the Teenagers, and Rob-Roys' lead Norman Fox. I'm sure many more people of note were in the audience but the room was so crowded I didn't get to see everyone.

It was a very fast moving night that was a special tribute to Ronnie I., who has given so much of himself for vocal group harmony. We thank you Ronnie and wish you many more years of success.

[Ed. Note: After a long battle with liver cancer, Ronnie I. passed away on March 3, 2008.]



The Fidelities