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The Platters Biography

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The Platters were one of the top vocal groups of the Fifties, delivering smooth, stylized renditions of pop standards. Like the Ink Spots a decade earlier, they were the most popular black group of their time, achieving success in a crooning, middle-of-the-road style that put a soulful coat of uptown polish on pop-oriented, harmony-rich material. Their lengthy string of hits began in 1955 with "Only You" and continued until the end of the decade, including four singles that reached Number One: "The Great Pretender," "My Prayer," "Twilight Time" and "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." The secret of the Platters' success had to do with their choice of material: adult ballads and standards that predated the rock and roll era and delivered with crisp, impeccable harmonies framed by string-laden arrangements. Much of the credit is due to Buck Ram, the group's producer, manager and guiding light, who had worked with acts like the Ink Spots in the Forties.

The group got its start in Los Angeles in 1952. The original lineup included Alex Hodge, Cornell Gunter, David Lynch, Joe Jefferson, Gaynel Hodge and Herb Reed. Reed is credited with creating the group's name. In June 1953, Gunter was replaced by Tony Williams, and Jefferson was no longer in the group. The Platters then signed with Federal Records. They released two singles, but had little success. More changes came, as they added female singer Zola Taylor to the lineup, and Hodge was replaced by Paul Robi. They recorded more songs for Federal and managed to score some regional hits on the West Coast. They also became a profitable touring group.

Then, in 1954, the Platters moved to Mercury Records, where they remained until the mid-Sixties. "Only You," a remake of a song they had released on Federal, took nearly five months to reach the charts, but it finally peaked at Number One. They also had four Number One hits: "The Great Pretender," "My Prayer," "Twilight Time" and "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." Another single, "The Magic Touch," made it to Number Four. The group's popularity extended to England and Australia, where virtually all of these songs were hits.

The Platters' sound was crisp and clear and, above all, understandable. They specialized in adult ballads and soulful renditions of pre-rock standards. During the latter half of the Fifties, the Platters were a global sensation, touring the world as "international ambassadors of musical goodwill" (per their record label). They also appeared in numerous rock-and-roll-themed movies, including *Rock Around the Clock*, *The Girl Can't Help It*, *Carnival Rock* and *Girl's Town*.

In 1960, lead vocalist Williams left to pursue a solo career. But the group continued to enjoy chart success. "Harbor Lights" made it to the Top 10, and several other singles, including "If I Didn't Care" reached the Top 40. Taylor left the group in 1964, while Lynch and Robi left the following year. Still, in 1966, the group scored its biggest hit of the decade, "With This Ring."

Even after their high profile waned on the national scene, the Platters remained popular along the Southeast coast, where they rank among the foremost exemplars of the "beach music" sound. Elsewhere, they're fondly remembered as a throwback to a golden era when pop, rhythm & blues and rock and roll flowed together in perfect harmony. The Platters were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1990. They were inducted into the Vocal Group Hall of Fame in 1998.

Herb Reed, the only member of the group to have appeared on all of its recordings, died on June 4, 2012, after a period of declining health.



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