

# MARK LUNDQUIST CONCERT PROMOTIONS

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## THE STORY OF The DRIFTERS

(COMPLETE VERSION – 5 PAGES)

**The Drifters** hold a unique place in popular music and their influence is phenomenal. Their place in history is as complex as their role in it, by virtue of their extraordinary longevity and the fact that their line up changed so frequently that they must hold the record for the highest number of musicians to pass through the ranks of any one band in pop history! They could also be regarded as the first "boy band", deliberately created by a record company chief with a specific audience in mind.

Their story began in early 1953, when **Clyde McPhatter**, a soaring high-tenor lead singer, left **The Dominoes**, a vocal quintet formed by **Billy Ward** three years earlier. The Dominoes were playing a scheduled gig at New York's **Birdland Club**, one of their first performances without McPhatter, when an audience member asked after the singer backstage. That fan was **Ahmet Ertegun**, a one-time record collector who had started **Atlantic Records** in the late '40s. As soon as he learned McPhatter had left the Dominoes, he contacted the singer and signed him to Atlantic.

It was Ertegun who gave McPhatter the impetus, as part of his contract, to start a group of his own. That group came to be called The Drifters. Although the people at Atlantic Records were not impressed with the name, Clyde McPhatter insisted. It proved to be prophetic, as band members over the years simply drifted in and out.

The main source of McPhatter's backing singers came from former members of the **Mount Lebanon Singers**, the gospel group with which McPhatter had sung in the '40s. He went through several attempts at assembling a group that would be acceptable to Ertegun and producer **Jerry Wexler**, auditioning over a dozen friends and acquaintances, a handful of whom actually made it to formal recording sessions. The initial line-up, featuring **William Anderson**, **David Baughan**, **David Baldwin** and **James Johnson**, recorded four songs on June 28, 1953, of which only "**Lucille**" (a McPhatter-penned song) was ever released. In August, McPhatter formed a second Drifters line-up. **Gerhart Thrasher** and **Andrew Thrasher**, two very experienced gospel singers on tenor and baritone respectively, were joined by bass singer **Willie Ferbee**. From the beginning, the group was unusual among R&B vocal ensembles in that a guitarist was part of their core line-up, with the electric guitar central to their arrangements. **Jimmy Oliver**, who would soon claim that spot as his own, also proved to be an important songwriter for The Drifters, especially for tenor Gerhart Thrasher. The new edition of the group recorded five numbers on August 9, 1953, one of which was "**Money Honey**," written by arranger/pianist **Jesse Stone**. Released within a few weeks, it hit the number one spot on the R&B chart by mid-autumn of the same year, and has often been cited as the first true rock 'n' roll record, even entering the repertory of **Elvis Presley**. The Drifters' career was quickly established and they became one of the most popular acts in the American charts and on the live stage.

This success did not prevent the regular line-up changes that would characterise The Drifters' career. By the time The Drifters were enjoying their breakthrough hit, bass vocalist **Bill Pinckney** and guitarist Jimmy Oliver had joined Gerhart Thrasher and Andrew Thrasher in a reconstituted line-up to cut another session. This new line up lasted into the following year and recorded "**Such a Night**," a No. 2 R&B hit, along with a second R&B chart-topper, "**Honey Love**," in early 1954. By that time, the charts and radio play, along with audience sensibilities, had opened up to black music and "Honey Love" also made No. 21 on the national pop charts in late spring. Not for the last time, it seemed as though The Drifters were heading for success together, until a key member developed other ideas by autumn of 1954.

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Although he had been assured of retaining a considerable amount of musical control, McPhatter found that producers Ertegun and Wexler were increasingly trying to push the group into directions of their own choosing. McPhatter did not begrudge them their efforts at finding new sounds that might sell records to white as well as black audiences, but he did not want to participate. His aim was to cross over to pop audiences as a balladeer and he saw himself as having the potential to become another **Nat "King" Cole**, or perhaps a black answer to **Frank Sinatra** or **Perry Como**. By October 1954, McPhatter had parted company with The Drifters in favour of a solo career that would make him successful for the rest of the 1950s.

Rather than see the group in which they had invested considerable amounts of time and effort cease to exist with McPhatter's departure, Ertegun and Wexler decided to continue recording The Drifters. However, they soon discovered the group's internal business affairs were vastly different once McPhatter had left.

McPhatter had organised The Drifters under the auspices of his own business, **Drifters Incorporated**, which gave him a share of its earnings (something he had been denied in The Dominoes). His own willingness to share those earnings with the other Drifters' members has never been questioned. He was half-owner of the group with his manager, **George Treadwell**, a former jazz musician who had masterminded the solo career of his first wife, **Sarah Vaughan**. When McPhatter left the group, rather than make a provision for the other members and his eventual successor to get his share, he sold his interest in Drifters Incorporated to Treadwell. With hindsight, this condemned the group to a permanent revolving-door line-up and from that day on, all members of The Drifters became salaried employees, earning as little as \$100 a week. Even into the early '60s they received no share of royalties from record sales, or benefited from the concert fees they commanded. They certainly had no claim to the use of the name The Drifters if they left, no matter how successful the group became through their efforts. It became impossible for The Drifters to hold on to anyone with serious talent or aspirations for a long-term career in music. McPhatter later regretted his decision, recognising not only what he had cheated himself out of by not retaining his share of ownership but also what he had done to the musicians he left behind.

The immediate problem facing all concerned in 1954, however, was finding a replacement for Clyde McPhatter. David Baughan, who had sung with a very early version of The Drifters, came in as a temporary replacement, singing at one recording session and serving as lead vocalist for six months of live engagements (the main source of the group's income). Although Baughan's singing was fine, the group sounded like an imitation of the McPhatter era Drifters. Atlantic, keen to avoid any clash with McPhatter's solo releases (which were selling well) decided not to release The Drifters' sessions but were still faced with a dilemma: whether to invest in an entirely new sound or to find a replacement who sounded like the former lead singer, now a major R&B star in his own right. Baughan soon demonstrated an erratic personality, sufficiently unnerving to force Treadwell to recruit a second lead vocalist in **Bobby Hendricks**, previously with the **Five Crowns**. Attempts were made to record this new line-up, and even bass singer Bill Pinckney was cut doing a lead vocal, but none of the recordings saw the light of day.

Eventually, Baughan quit but the group continued playing to sell-out audiences drawn by the quality of their earlier recordings. In 1954, however, Treadwell auditioned a young man who approached the group after a show in Cleveland. **Johnny Moore** had been a member of **The Hornets**, a small group with barely more than a local reputation although they had been recorded. He sounded enough like McPhatter, with his pleasing high tenor, to be offered a job in The Drifters the very next day. It was an inspired decision as Moore would prove to be the mainstay of the group for five decades.

The Drifters resumed recording in September 1955, with **Nesuhi Ertegun** and songwriter **Jerry Leiber** producing and with Moore singing lead. The result was a number one R&B chart single, "**Adorable**," which helped establish their post-Clyde McPhatter reputation. However, the single was one of only a handful of chart successes they would enjoy during this era. The Drifters were still absent from the top of the pop charts, where huge sales figures (and the big money) lay. Drifters records during the late '50s were overlooked by most young white listeners, despite the presence of future rock 'n' roll standards such as "**Ruby Baby**" in their output.

The latter song was an important recording for The Drifters, marking their introduction to the outstanding talents of songwriters Jerry Leiber and **Mike Stoller**, who would later take over the job of producing the group. The group's line-up was also stabilised for the first time in over a year and The Drifters entered their "silver age" behind Moore's cool high tenor, ably supported by the bass singing (and occasional lead spot) from Bill Pinckney. "**I Gotta Get Myself a Woman**," written by Jesse Stone and recorded during the summer of 1956, brought them a number eleven R&B hit and the group's fortunes once again seemed to be on a consistent upswing.

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Unfortunately, the record-buying public were not prepared to fully embrace a new Drifters without McPhatter. Black audiences practically worshiped the singer, who commanded a passionate loyalty that anticipated the future success of **Sam Cooke**. Additionally, music in America was changing, with white teenagers now a much bigger part of the market than they had been in 1953-54 and Atlantic decided to concentrate on this potentially richer vein of listeners.

The end of 1956 saw the release of the first album by the group, entitled "**Clyde McPhatter & The Drifters**". Such was McPhatter's popularity at the time, tracks that he had recorded with The Drifters over a year after his exit from the line up, were included on the LP in a deliberate attempt to sell the music once more to his fans.

In retrospect, Atlantic was very forward looking as few labels in 1956 were releasing LPs aimed at black R&B listeners. Elvis Presley aside, very little white rock 'n' roll made an impression on the album charts.

Late 1956 also saw the consequences of The Drifters' business affairs catch up with the group. Their recent hits had led to more bookings than at any time since 1954, which was good for Treadwell and his partners, but difficult for the members, who were still working on straight salaries - and by Bill Pinckney's estimation, very low salaries. He approached Treadwell for a new arrangement, or at least more money for the group members, but was fired. His dismissal drove fellow founding member Andrew Thrasher out of the line-up as well... and out of music altogether.

In August 1956, The Drifters were joined by bass singer **Tommy Evans**, late of The Dominoes, and baritone **Charlie Hughes**. In November, the group's fortunes took a new turn as Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller began producing their sessions. Unfortunately, Johnny Moore received his draft notice in early 1957, so Bobby Hendricks was brought back and **Jimmy Millinder** took over on baritone. Subsequent recording sessions proved unfruitful. With Moore absent, it seemed as though Atlantic was trying to turn The Drifters into another version of **The Coasters** by having them perform light-hearted versions of pop standards. In a way, this was understandable - black listeners held this era's Drifters at arm's length, while white teenagers' tastes were dominating the pop charts. As this young audience seemed potentially open to new musical horizons, Atlantic decided to cater to them, hoping for a breakthrough.

By May 1958, Hendricks had announced his exit, and even guitarist Jimmy Oliver, who had managed to get several of his songs recorded during his four years with the group and was an unheralded mainstay of The Drifters' sound, finally quit. The remaining members were working as hard as ever and wanted more money. When Treadwell refused their request, they all walked out (or were fired en masse).

Treadwell was now without a group but was committed to important engagements at New York's prestigious Apollo Theatre. He spotted a possible solution further down on the concert bill that The Drifters were headlining. **The Crowns** had been a fixture in Harlem for most of the 1950's, pre-dating The Drifters without ever making a mark as a recording act and enjoying precious little reputation as performers. Treadwell approached their manager, **Lover Patterson**, explaining that he was disbanding the existing Drifters and needed a new group to fulfil their performing obligations. Patterson and the band agreed, and all of the individual contracts (except for one of the group's baritones) were sold to George Treadwell.

The new Drifters line-up consisted of **Charlie Thomas** as lead, baritone **Benjamin Earl Nelson**, (more popularly known as **Ben E. King**) **Dock Green**, baritone, and **Elsbeary Hobbs** singing bass. They did as they were required under the agreement and for ten months, fulfilled Treadwell's outstanding live engagements. Atlantic still hoped to profit from the group and a second Drifters LP, "**Rockin' & Driftin'**", was released in October 1958, comprised entirely of single tracks recorded by the 1955-58 line-up. Ironically, in all their 19-year history with Atlantic Records, The Drifters, in any incarnation, never recorded an actual "album" session; every one of their LPs was compiled from existing single tracks and B-sides and all have a mix-and-match feel due to the inclusion of different line-ups and singers.

The Drifters continued to hold a recording contract with Atlantic Records and the label decided to try once more for a hit with the new line-up. On March 6, 1959, they went into a New York studio with Leiber and Stoller to cut four songs. Charlie Thomas was supposed to sing lead but developed "mic-fright" in the studio, so Ben E. King took the lead on "**There Goes My Baby**," which he had also co-written, along with "**Hey Senorita**," and "**Oh My Love**." "There Goes My Baby," co-written by King and orchestrated by **Stan Applebaum**, was as much a landmark in the history of R&B and soul as "Money Honey" had been six years earlier. At the time, nobody present at the recording was sure of what they had because it sounded so chaotic, strange, and complicated - no

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one had ever used a string section, much less recorded one so prominently as this on an R&B record. No R&B record up until this point had ever dared sound so complex, overlaying Latin percussion, violins, and a fiercely passionate performance by the singer. Not only was the sound totally different to anything The Drifters had done previously, but it was unlike anything ever heard before on a commercial recording!

"There Goes My Baby" peaked at No. 2, The Drifters' biggest hit to date on the pop charts and their biggest seller, winning over both R&B and pop audiences alike. The single transformed the group and its image and importantly, marked The Drifters' first impact on audiences overseas. The earlier Drifters, for all their influence on rock 'n' roll, never had a record released in Europe, but this new group and their sound would soon find a very important mass audience in England. They had cut other songs at that same session, but the strings-percussion-echo timbres of "There Goes My Baby," hung around long melodic lines, became The Drifters' trademark sound for the ten years that followed.

The success gave the group a new lease of life, but with it came more problems owing to the way The Drifters were organised as a business. Ben E. King was not happy working for \$100 a week; there were hundreds of miles of travel between some shows, with as many as six shows a week. He was so poor working for the group, that he felt compelled to sell his share of the songwriting on "There Goes My Baby". Accounts differ as to precisely what happened - some say he sold the share to Treadwell and his accountant, while Jerry Wexler claims that he accepted a document from the singer assigning him the copyright in exchange for \$200. Wexler held the document but gave it back to King once the song was a hit so he could tear it up.

After approaching Treadwell for more money and being refused, King realised there was no future as a member of The Drifters and announced his departure almost as soon as it was time to cut a follow-up single. Lover Patterson then played his trump card and produced a separate contract that he had signed with the singer, as a solo artist, dated before Treadwell's offer. It could all have ended up in court but fortunately, King remained with Atlantic Records on their **Atco** subsidiary as a solo artist, and agreed to record with The Drifters until a suitable replacement could be found, singing on "**Dance With Me,**" "**This Magic Moment,**" "**I Count the Tears,**" and "**Save the Last Dance for Me,**" the latter becoming a No. 1 hit.

The post-1959 Drifters are usually thought of as the "Ben E. King Drifters," but the reality was he had gone from the group as a member by mid-1960. King's successor was **Rudy Lewis**, an ex-member of the **Clara Ward Singers**. Lewis was lead singer on "**Some Kind of Wonderful,**" "**Up on the Roof**" (a top five hit), "**Please Stay,**" "**What to Do,**" and "**On Broadway**" (a Top Ten hit), among numerous other classic tracks by the group. Lewis, tragically, was not the longest serving of the group's lead vocalists but his time with The Drifters, following King's, arguably constituted the second golden age in their history.

The group was once more at a peak of influence during those years. "There Goes My Baby" anticipated the shift to a more pop-oriented brand of soul music, embraced by Sam Cooke and, even more so, by **Berry Gordy** at his fledgling Motown label. Indeed, the sound of "There Goes My Baby" was practically the prototype for Smokey Robinson & The Miracles' landmark single "**Way Over There.**" Others also learned from The Drifters, most notably a young producer named **Phil Spector**, who was working at Atlantic as a session guitarist in the early '60s. Influenced by the sound he heard in Stan Applebaum's arrangements, Spector expanded it, creating a new, distinctive style and turning it into his own trademark which he imprinted on later productions for his many hit recordings. It was during the recording of his own "**Please Stay**" by The Drifters that **Burt Bacharach** first encountered a vocalist named **Dionne Warwick**, who was part of the backing trio for The Drifters, which of course, led to an amazing musical partnership spawning very many classic records.

Between 1960 and 1964, The Drifters achieved a level of stability that was unprecedented in their history, and it was matched by their success. Luck was with them even as essential personnel around them moved on. In late 1963, as Leiber and Stoller shifted their attention to their own record label, **Red Bird**, The Drifters found a new producer in **Bert Berns**, a songwriter with a feel for commercial soul music. "**Vaya Con Dios,**" from their first session together (which reflected his love of Latin themes) was a welcome pop chart hit. In spring 1964, the group was offered a new song by composers **Artie Resnick** and **Kenny Young**, called "**Under The Boardwalk.**" It was scheduled for recording on May 21, 1964. Tragically, on the night of May 20, just hours before the recording session began, Rudy Lewis was found dead in his apartment under circumstances that are still in dispute. Without any time to reschedule the session, Johnny Moore, who had rejoined the group as second tenor in early 1963, stepped into the breach. Moore, who had previously led the late '50s Drifters, achieved a special magnificence at that session singing "Under The Boardwalk," which became yet another Top Ten hit in 1964, peaking at No. 4. He

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became the longest serving member of The Drifters and their most prolific lead singer, staying until his untimely death at the age of 64.

By late 1964, Berns was moving on to other projects including the early releases on his new independent label, **Bang Records**, and the group found itself working with noted producer **Tom Dowd**. They still had many live bookings and enough hits behind them to remain a secure and established act, but by that time, the whole notion of soul music was changing around them. This was due in some measure to a vast array of other acts associated with Atlantic Records, including **Wilson Pickett**, Otis Redding, **Sam & Dave** and **Don Covay**. The Drifters were never able to make the jump comfortably to this harder brand of soul music and the loss of Berns as a producer after 1965 seemed to have an adverse effect. Their own sessions began to show a lack of urgency and organisation, exemplified by the fact that one of the very best tracks of the Moore era, "**In the Park**," was left unfinished (the other group members had not been recorded) and in the can for years. The death of George Treadwell in 1967 proved to be yet another stumbling block for The Drifters' continuation as a going concern.

However, they continued recording for Atlantic with a succession of producers until 1972. Johnny Moore still sang lead, but there were no more hits with Atlantic after the mid-'60s. They tried altering their sound to mainstream adult pop, cutting old-style standards in an effort to capture older listeners. As the hits dried up in America, the group splintered yet again - only Johnny Moore remained as the genuine face and sound of The Drifters.

The 1970s saw a proliferation of acts trading on The Drifters name as the rock 'n' roll revival suddenly made the group's classic repertoire profitable again but only Johnny Moore kept the authorised group working under the auspices of Treadwell's widow, **Faye**.

In 1971, Johnny brought The Drifters to England, where they enjoyed an upturn in their fortunes and massive chart success. In 1973, they signed to **Bell Records** and hit the Top Ten with "**Like Sister and Brother**". Aided by the British songwriting team of **Roger Cook** and **Roger Greenaway**, half a dozen big hits followed, before the band moved to **Arista** for their final chart placing, "**You're More Than A Number In My Little Red Book**". The Drifters became a dance-disco outfit for a time during the late '70s, focussing on stage presentation and fabulous showmanship and eventually developed their act to cover all eras of their glittering career. Thereafter, the band earned a reputation as one of the finest live acts in the world and even Ben E. King returned to the line-up for a tour in the late '80s.

In 1990, Johnny Moore was joined by **Peter Lamarr** and **Roy Hemmings** and shortly afterward, **Rohan Delano Turney**. Peters' production and filming commitments took him back to the USA and so **Patrick Allan** was asked to join the group and a fine working relationship was established. In the mid 1990's, The Drifters were invited to perform at the **White House** for the President of the USA, **Bill Clinton**. So successful was their visit that he asked them back! The Drifters became the band to have at massive corporate parties and a name which was welcomed to support many world charity events and recordings. The Drifters last recording to date was a charity record for the **Cause For Hope Appeal for Lung Cancer**, instigated by **Roy Castle**. The recording was made at the legendary **Abbey Road Studios** in 1994 with a variety of famous names such as **Rick Wakeman**, **Kenny Ball** and **Sir John Mills**. The Drifters line up for this recording was Johnny Moore, Roy Hemmings, Rohan Delano Turney and **Joe Cofie**.

The sad and unexpected death of Johnny Moore in 1998 closed one door of The Drifters' fine history but also opened another as the remaining members decided to continue in honour of his memory. The current line up of The Drifters in their 50th anniversary year is Peter Lamarr, Patrick Allan, Rohan Delano Turney plus new recruit, **Victor Bynoe**. It is these outstanding singers who will continue the legacy of the greatest vocal group of all time!

**Contact Mark Lundquist for interviews, guest list & review requests**

*Press kit, all text & 300 dpi photos available for download:*

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