

Streetlight Harmonies—The “doo-wop” era in popular music

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Directed by Brent Wilson; written by Wilson and George Bellias

Streetlight Harmonies, directed by Brent Wilson, is a documentary film about a popular music genre of the 1950s, “doo-wop,” which featured group harmony and a wide range of vocal parts. “Doo-wop” itself is a nonsense expression, and the use of such expressions is another feature of the genre.

Director-producer Wilson has made two documentaries. The other, released in 2020, was *Brian Wilson: Long Promised Road*. The filmmaker (no relation) became smitten with the music of the Beach Boys as a youth. He recognized in their vocal harmonies a reaching back in part to the treasury of doo-wop music and made the decision to make a film about that earlier period.

Streetlight Harmonies will resonate with every popular music fan. Through the stories of many of the people who created the music of that era, one can’t help but appreciate the historical roots of American popular music and its embodiment of the innate striving of the population to embrace human commonality. In the 1950s, old traditions were broken. Through music in part, racial divisions began to dissipate.

Wilson’s documentary was first screened publicly in 2017 (after three years of production), but only became widely available when it was released for streaming in March 2020.

The content of *Streetlight Harmonies* runs counter to the identity politics promoted aggressively by the Democratic Party establishment, including through the efforts to re-interpret American history exclusively through the prism of race and racial conflict. Regardless of how conscious Wilson was of this reality when he made the film, there is an objective significance to the appearance of such antidote-documentaries.

The term “doo-wop” isn’t embraced by all the vocal harmony groups, but *Streetlight Harmonies* asserts in its opening that such groups in the early days of rock and roll were active in “one of the most disregarded and misunderstood eras in American music history.”

The prelude opens with the ambient sounds of an urban setting. Coins drop into a jukebox. “Everything has to begin somewhere. Everything,” says Jimmy Merchant, a member of the famed doo-wop group Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers. Sammy Strain from Little Anthony and the Imperials (and later

the O’Jays) adds: “No matter where you went in 1956, no matter what neighborhood, what project, there was a group ... doo-wopping. They were singing. Making harmony. You heard harmony every place you went.”

The hallmark doo-wop hit “Come and Go with Me,” by the Del-Vikings (a racially mixed group from Pittsburgh), provides the infectious background for musings by Willie Winfield of the Harptones, music historian Dr. Charlie Horner, Wally Roker of the Heartbeats, Charlie Thomas of the Drifters and Fred Parris of the Five Satins.

Tony Butala of the Lettermen, Barbara Jean English of the Cockettes, Motown songwriter and producer Lamont Dozier, Terry Johnson of the Flamingos, Anthony “Little Anthony” Gourdine, Lois Powell of the Chantels, Dolores “La La” Brooks of the Crystals, Vito Piccone of the Elegants and others speak to the lasting and influential quality of the music initially sung on urban street corners and in the housing projects.

The interviews rapidly define the community and inclusivity of the “street corner” music scene. The story is told entirely by the artists. Strain is the most enthusiastic when he calls the epoch “the beginning of a revolution that has never ended.”

According to songwriter/producer Jeff Barry, “Before the ‘50s, no one was writing songs for kids. They didn’t have money. But in the ‘50s, Eisenhower was president. Things were good. And the kids literally had a buck to spend ... on a record. In the late ‘50s, young people started writing songs for kids. It was kids writing songs for kids, now.”

Streetlight Harmonies no doubt oversimplifies the evolution of popular music, partly due to the anecdotal character of the commentary, but there is much to appreciate in the viewpoints of the musicians who participated in the making of that history. It was not accidental that during the postwar economic boom, the inner cities became the incubators of new music. Young people, who could not afford instruments, found they could make music with their voices and, with luck and perseverance, have careers in music.

Generally, it began with boys, who found that the girls were attracted to their harmonies, but then girls created their own groups. And audiences grew, crossing racial barriers to embrace this new sound. It was romantic, expressing the sentiments from lives that teens lived. It was relatively

innocent, playful and hopeful, expressing the common experiences of all teenagers, no matter what the color of their skin.

“Little Anthony” Gourdine presents his conception of the music’s evolution: “Spiritual music gave birth to blues. Blues gave birth to rhythm and blues. Rhythm and blues gave birth to rock and roll. Rock and roll gave birth to hip hop. No doo-wop. I don’t know where that is. It doesn’t fit in the category.”

Whatever one calls it, something was invented on the street corners of cities like New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. In the late 1940s, a group called the Orioles under the management of Deborah Chessler, a talented Jewish songwriter, emerged and with the silky voice of its lead, Sonny Til, became known as “the soul of Baltimore.” The group became a major influence for those who would later form vocal harmony groups.

The musicians describe other influences such as the Mills Brothers and the Ink Spots, as well as the Four Lads and the Hi-Lo’s, who were not black. The influence of gospel music was undeniable. Its harmonies informed the street music that became doo-wop. Diz Russell, who became a member of the Orioles explained, “Pretty soon I got so I say ‘I’m tired of going to church singing. I gotta make some money.’”

The year 1956 saw the appearance on the *Frankie Laine Time* television show of Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers. The appearance helped make the group famous and drove the explosive proliferation of street corner singing groups. Merchant describes the phenomenon: “I believe that Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers were put together to become the Jackie Robinson [the first African American in major league baseball] of doo-wop.”

Vito Piccone was raised in Staten Island, New York. He describes how, as a teenager of Italian descent, he would buy, as a matter of principle, only records by black vocal groups. Inspired by them, he formed his own group, the Elegants. The legendary Brill Building, on Broadway in midtown Manhattan, housed numerous small record companies. Piccone describes how the group found a producer: “We followed the address on the label and started knocking on doors—every door in that building—until somebody said okay.”

Economic and demographic conditions had changed the US, undermining racial bigotry and the Jim Crow system in the South. It is an exaggeration or a misunderstanding to suggest, as Brent Wilson does, that popular music brought young people of all races together. However, it no doubt played a role.

Merchant asserts, “This music is for everyone.” Strain says it very clearly: “Music has no color. This is about love. It’s for the love of the music.” In an interview on the *Sea Hear* podcast. Wilson makes the point that many teenagers who were fans of doo-wop later volunteered for voter registration in the Southern states. He suggests that many young white people had “no exposure to black culture until it came through their radios.”

The various interviewees also describe their experience in the segregated South. Lois Powell of the Chantels relates, “During 1959 we did a six-week tour of one-nighters in the South and that was a mind boggling and eye-opening experience for all of us.” At the peak of the Civil Rights strife, a busload of musicians performed in Birmingham, Alabama—in the state where Gov. George Wallace would proclaim, “Segregation now, segregation forever!” Terry Johnson of the Flamingos explains: “It was hard to believe—being hated on one side, and on the other side, these kids are loving us. It was strange.” It was courageous of the performers. Audiences that were forcibly divided racially eventually gave way to mixed crowds.

The era was short-lived. Its end musically was announced by the arrival of the Beatles in New York in February 1964. Jon Bauman of Sha Na Na explains the context. “The world had changed so rapidly in the ‘60s … the most turbulent decade of any of our lives who have lived that long. Turbulent in every possible way … the innocence by the end of the ‘60s was kaput!”

“When Sha Na Na started doing this—[in the] very late 60s, early 70s—it’s very hard to describe if you weren’t there, but it [already] seemed like a thousand years ago that this music had happened. It was a reclamation of what seemed like our youthful innocence.”

Streetlight Harmonies pays moving tribute to that era. It was created not a moment too soon as demonstrated by the tragic deaths of Wally Roker in December 2015 and Diz Russell in November 2016—before the film’s premiere in 2017. It is available for streaming on Vimeo, Apple Movies and Amazon Prime.



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