

MORE THAN WORDS CAN SAY

The Ink Spots and Their Music



MARV GOLDBERG

MORE THAN WORDS CAN SAY

The Ink Spots and
Their Music

MARV GOLDBERG

The Ink Spots were, without question, the most influential black vocal group of the 1940s. One of the earliest to sing "sweet ballads," they elevated the genre to an art form (although an increasingly formulaic one). When it was all over, they were one of the primary forces moving the formation and evolution of rhythm and blues vocal groups, which led directly to rock 'n' roll, and thus to the rock music of today. Marv Goldberg traces their career, from the "coffee pot bands" of Indianapolis street corner kids, through their early struggling recording career, to the first hits, out to Hollywood, and ultimately to the best vaudeville houses and clubs. *More Than Words Can Say* places the Ink Spots within the broader contexts of the entertainment industry, the music industry, and the recording industry.

The reader will learn about the internal troubles within the group and their constantly shifting personnel. The book includes reviews of most of their recordings, as well as many of their appearances. Some reviewers loved them, some hated them; both kinds of reviews are incorporated for balance. The book also includes a complete discography, covering all recordings made and all records released on Victor and Decca between 1935 and 1954.

Goldberg examines the phenomenon of "original" Ink Spots groups still performing today. (Of all the singers who were with the original

More Than Words Can Say

The Ink Spots and Their Music

Marv Goldberg



The Scarecrow Press, Inc.
Lanham, Md., & London
1998

SCARECROW PRESS, INC.

Published in the United States of America
by Scarecrow Press, Inc.
4720 Boston Way
Lanham, Maryland 20706

4 Pleydell Gardens
Kent CT20 2DN, England

Copyright © 1998 by Marv Goldberg

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Goldberg, Marv, 1944—

More than words can say : the Ink Spots and their music / Marv Goldberg.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8108-3568-1 (cloth) : alk. paper)

1. Ink Spots (musical group) 2. Singers—United States—Biography.

I. Title.

ML421.I53G65 1998

98-35748

782.42164'092'2

CIP

[B]—dc21

MN



The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.
Manufactured in the United States of America.

To Jerry Daniels, the last survivor.

To Jimmy McGowan, always an inspiration.

To the memory of my partner, Mike Redmond.

To Marcia, who put up with a lot.

To Danny.

If I didn't care
More than words can say . . .

Jack Lawrence

Contents

Foreword ~	vii
Acknowledgments ~	xi
Introduction ~	xiii
Prelude: The 1920s to 1931 ~	1
1932 ~	7
1933 ~	11
1934 ~	15
1935 ~	23
1936 ~	29
Intermezzo I: Jerry Daniels ~	35
1937 ~	39
1938 ~	45
1939 ~	49
1940 ~	59
Prelude to War: ASCAP vs BMI ~	71
1941 ~	75
1942 ~	89
Shellac: More Than You Ever Wanted to Know! ~	99
1943 ~	107
1944: We Were Winning the War, but Losing the Ink Spots ~	117
Intermezzo II: Hoppy Jones ~	133
1945 ~	135
Intermezzo III: The Brown Dots ~	147
1946 ~	157
1947 ~	169

1948 ~ 181

1949 ~ 189

1950 ~ 199

1951 ~ 211

Intermezzo IV: Herb Kenny ~ 223

1952 ~ 227

Intermezzo V: Billy Bowen ~ 237

Intermezzo VI: Charlie Fuqua's Ink Spots ~ 239

Intermezzo VII: Deek Watson ~ 247

1953 ~ 253

Intermezzo VIII: Bill Kenny ~ 259

Da Capo: Buck Ram and the Platters ~ 267

Coda ~ 271

The Recordings: In Alphabetical Order ~ 275

The Recordings: Decca Albums (through 1959 only) ~ 287

The Recordings: Decca Extended Play Records (EPs) (issued in the
1950s) ~ 291

Notes ~ 293

Bibliography ~ 303

Index ~ 305

About the Author ~ 313

Foreword

by Peter A. Grendysa

What's in a name? Plenty, if the name is "Ink Spots." It's been more than fifty years since that foursome of dynamic and consummate performers first caught the public ear, and a very long time since that name appeared on a hit record. Yet, the mere mention of the name still evokes images of a silvery high tenor voice bending the notes of a romantic lyric. Over the intervening years, "Ink Spots" has very nearly become a generic term to the extent that impostors still find easy work in clubs, hotels, and resorts, playing to audiences who are blissfully unaware or uncaring that the last of the original hit group has long passed on to that grandstand in the sky.

This phenomenon of American music is almost unique in popular culture. It's the equivalent of having multiple formations of Mills Brothers, Rolling Stones, or Beach Boys roving the country and drawing good crowds everywhere they play. The lasting power of the Ink Spots, at least in name, is like the afterimage of a flashbulb—so brilliant, so intense was their popularity that they have transcended decades of change in music.

The foundations upon which the Ink Spots built their fame were an integral part of the black American experience. Singing in harmony was by no means an exclusively black innovation, but instead of singing in unison or harmonizing on the same note, the black quartets, sextets, and octets of the first two decades of the twentieth century developed a style distinct from their white counterparts. Bass voices accentuated the rhythm of the tunes,

while floating tenor/baritone harmonies provided a backdrop to the lead vocalist.

In the 1920s, hot jazz bands enjoyed a sudden rise in popularity among both blacks and whites while vocal groups continued to concentrate on spirituals, hymns, and traditional folk melodies. Every black college had a number of singing groups formed as fund-raising vehicles, and these choirs and quartets toured the country and the world, playing to sophisticates and the moneyed classes. The astounding popular success of the Mills Brothers, who increased their income tenfold during 1932, was accomplished by the simple trick of taking pop, show, and jazz tunes and adapting them to syncopated vocal arrangements with voices taking the place of instruments. Their fame was spread via radio, the entertainment choice of the masses during the Depression, and record sales and concert bookings followed.

By the end of 1932, it was estimated that the Mills Brothers, all of them under twenty-one years old, would earn \$125,000 a year. Suddenly the woods and city streets were full of black pop quartets. None of them could achieve the national breakthrough that had launched the Brothers. In an attempt to field a hit group to counter the Brothers on the CBS network, rival NBC gave a jive trio from Philadelphia, the Three Keys, a major promotional shove, but their supercharged combo versions of standards and current hits failed to excite the masses. The Ink Spots took a similar route with their raucous, jivey renditions of black jazz, and found even less acceptance.

The Ink Spots mugged like Fats Waller, cavorted on stage like Cab Calloway, and sang while they plucked out hot string band jazz. They gained only a toehold in big-time show business, and it took a radical change in style to bring them to the top ranks in American popular music. After ten years of struggle on the fringes, the deceptively simple Ink Spots "formula" was the key they needed. The times were right for dramatic love songs; the remarkable clear high tenor of their new lead singer had few traces of "blackness," and the spoken interludes by the bass voice injected gentle humor and pathos.

While the Mills Brothers were the group to follow in terms of financial and popular achievement, the Ink Spots set a whole new standard for black vocal group technique. Their singing transcended all that had come before and sparked hosts of imitators. No sooner had this revolution been set in motion, when the Ink Spots themselves began to change. Aside from the

lead singer and “formula” spoken bass parts, the rest of the group was relegated to nondescript humming in the background. With the exception of the talking bass, the Ink Spots essentially became a solo act.

The years of the Second World War were those of major changes in American society and music, and that short period marked both the rise and fall of the Ink Spots. The development of rhythm and blues was a return to earthy roots that the Ink Spots had left behind in their quest for mass market acceptance. The group’s recordings vanished from the R&B charts after 1948. The perception was that they sang “white.” Likewise the start of the Korean Conflict in 1950 produced a new cynicism in war-weary America, and sentimental songs of hope and hearth declined in popularity. The last Ink Spots hit record came in 1951.

In their place in rhythm and blues came a multitude of vocal groups with strong leads, both tenor and bass, intricate harmony, and soulful delivery rooted in black gospel. The early instrumental imitations of the Mills Brothers lived on in the backing vocals, and reached their exaggerated culmination in doo-wop. The soaring, ethereal, high-tenor leads came from the Ink Spots, often augmented with floating, wordless vocal obbligatos from a second, even higher, tenor.

As an important vocal group, the Ink Spots had ceased to exist by the time their legacy was realized. Remnants and spin-offs of the group moved into the same venues that accepted the Mills Brothers—glitzy hotels and resorts—but without the benefit of familial continuity that the Brothers enjoyed. Still, it is the name “Ink Spots” that means black vocal group to many people, not the Mills Brothers. And it is the Ink Spots who are recognized as the progenitors of the rhythm and blues vocal groups, from the Ravens, Orioles, and Clovers, to the Moonglows, Flamingos, Miracles, Temptations, and Spinners.

Every legend has a basis in cold fact, and in the case of the Ink Spots, the truth of their beginning, rise to fame, and precipitous decline has been clouded with carefully contrived show business mummery and fluff. The truth, as always, is far more fascinating than the fiction, especially press agent pipe dreams.

The story of the Ink Spots is one of those rags-to-riches tales so beloved in American lore, and their success inspired countless hundreds to try for the gold at the end of the rainbow. More than that, they produced a musical

style and sound that has proven timeless in its appeal to listeners. Whatever the reality behind the glitter and bright lights of show business, the only lasting effect is that found in the hearts and minds of the audience, and in this most important way, the Ink Spots are here to stay.

Acknowledgments

Thanks are due to many people who helped me in my research. The original work was an extensive article in the rhythm and blues magazine *Yesterday's Memories* (Number 9, March 1977), written in the main by Pete Grendysa, George Moonoogian, and Rick Whitesell, with information provided by my interviews (augmented by their own research). The section on the Brown Dots is a synopsis of an article that I wrote with my friend and partner in *Yesterday's Memories*, Mike Redmond.

Most of the photographs of the Ink Spots used herein are from the collection of Paul Scriven, unless otherwise credited. Paul provided me with a carton full of photos and clippings, many of which were indispensable. Michael Ochs, of the Michael Ochs Archives/Venice, California, sent me loads of photostats of various Ink Spots groups that I used to attempt to sort out personnel changes over the years.

For more recent help, I have to thank Ray Funk, Galen Gart, Bob Pruter, Bill Proctor, Mike Caldarulo, and Andy McKaie and Barbara Kaufman (of MCA Records). Also, thanks to George Moonoogian and Dave Hinckley, for taking the time to read and critique the manuscript.

Thanks are also due to the following periodicals, whose publishers graciously granted me permission to quote from their publications: BPI Communications (the *Billboard*), *Variety*, the *Chicago Defender*, the *Afro-American Co. of Baltimore City* (T/A the *AFRO-AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS*—the *Baltimore Afro-American*), the *New York Post*, the *Boston Herald*, the *New York Amsterdam News*, the *Cleveland Call And Post*, *Down Beat*

magazine, and the *New York Times*. All direct quotes are copyrighted by these publications, on the dates given in the notes.

Quotes from Deek Watson's book *The Story Of The Ink Spots* were used by permission of Shirlita H. Watson (aka Lee Stephenson).

Finally, it's difficult to remember any project that I've worked on that didn't include thanks to Ferdie Gonzalez (or should have, if I left it out). His discographical work in rhythm and blues and rock and roll is beyond measure. Almost all the record listings appearing in this book were based on entries in the latest version of his book *Disco-File*.

Introduction

No matter what generation you're from, no matter what singers you've listened to, you've probably heard of the Ink Spots. Not the first crossover black group, but the most successful and most imitated. Most rhythm and blues groups of the '40s and '50s took their cue from the Ink Spots; the rock and roll groups of the '50s built on that (directly or indirectly); the soul groups of the '60s carried on a strong tradition; and even as I am writing this paragraph, there is, in all probability, an Ink Spots group somewhere that's within twelve hours, either way, of a performance.

Of course, like any formulaic sound, the Ink Spots' style became ritualized, which is why for decades, groups have both imitated and parodied them. But the formula worked: Herb Kenny has said of his brother Bill's lead singing: "Bill painted a picture with every phrase. Some of his high notes would take your breath away."¹

Although it's been over fifty-five years since "If I Didn't Care" became a huge hit, their records *still* sell today (MCA has released their greatest hits on a compact disc). And though all of the original members have passed away (the last one in late 1995), there are still numerous "Ink Spots" groups appearing today—this, above all, shows the strength of their appeal.

Their first hit (although their thirteenth record), "If I Didn't Care," featured a soaring tenor paired with a bass "talking bridge," and the combination went over so well (too well?) with the public that ensuing recordings seemed to be little more than carbon copies of that initial success. The Ink Spots found their niche and carved it so deep that it ended up becoming a rut.

When the Ink Spots became famous, their origins became enshrouded in the mists of fiction—a fiction created by the press agents of their manager and their own recording company. The most common account, something out of a Hollywood “B” movie, is found on liner notes that Decca Records trotted out on more than one occasion (this particular variant was taken from the liner notes of a 45 sleeve):

“We struggled along for five years doing jive arrangements,” they confessed, “but nothing happened. We were on the verge of disbanding because we couldn’t get work. As a matter of fact, we were working. It was at the New York Paramount Theatre, but we were not out in front as singers—we were backstage as porters and the only singing we did was between pushes with brooms and mops! It was a good thing we did keep practicing as a group, though, because an artist-representative happened to hear us one night. We were signed to contracts and next thing we knew we had recorded ‘If I Didn’t Care’ for Decca.”²

Many years later, Decca issued “The Best Of The Ink Spots” two-record set. The liner notes not only repeated that story, but finally acknowledged it to be a myth (without admitting, of course, that it was Decca itself that had originally reported and repeatedly perpetuated that myth).

Decca also wrote, as part of the myths:

Contrary to belief, the Ink Spots did not get their name because of their dusky complexions. The actual fact is both more casual and more surprising. The four young men and their manager were sitting in an office trying to think up a likely name for the quartette. They had rejected such trite characterizations as “Harmony Four,” “Rhythm Quartet,” “Jazz Melodeers,” and a score of others, when their manager idly glanced at the blotter on which he was doodling with his pen. The pen had gone dry and he shook it impatiently. Four blots appeared. “The Ink Spots!” he shouted, and the Ink Spots they were and still are.³

Because press agents have had a free hand, and because literally dozens of singers have claimed (and still claim) to be “original” members, an exhaustive history of the Ink Spots is needed.

Just to get it out of the way here and now, there are only *five* singers who can claim to be original members of the Ink Spots: Jerry Daniels, Deek Watson, Charlie Fuqua, Orville “Hoppy” Jones, and Bill Kenny (who was not there from the beginning, but was the most famous member nevertheless)—and all are dead! Of course there were others who sang with the Victor/Decca group (the only legitimate Ink Spots group as far as this history is concerned): Bernie Mackey, Cliff Givens, Billy Bowen, Huey Long, Herb Kenny, Adriel McDonald, Teddy Williams, Ernie Brown, and Jimmy Kennedy. There were also the pianist/arrangers: Bob Benson, Ace Harris, Bill Doggett, Ray Tunia, and Harold Francis. This list comprises nineteen people; there just *weren't* any others!

Of those nineteen, I interviewed the following members for this history: Jerry Daniels, Herb Kenny, Bernie Mackey, Ray Tunia, Adriel McDonald, Billy Bowen, Bill Doggett, and Huey Long. I cannot overstate the thrill of having had the opportunity to speak with them, and to relive their memories of a Golden Era.

Others interviewed included Jimmie Nabbie (of the Brown Dots and lead of a later Ink Spots group), Leonard Puzey (of the Ravens, who was with a “spin-off” Ink Spots in the mid-1950s), and Richard Lanham (of the Tempo-Tones, who was with a 1960s Spots incarnation).

As well as exploring the origins and activities of the Ink Spots, we'll delve into the workings of the music business of their time. The Spots didn't exist in a vacuum; what went on around them affected their recordings and performances. We'll take a look at the ASCAP/BMI War, the Petrillo strikes (of the American Federation of Musicians), shellac shortages, gas rationing, the War of the Record Speeds, vinyl shortages, and lawsuits (most definitely lawsuits). Some of these may seem tangential to the story, but they'll all fit in.

A note on the reviews: most of the record reviews were taken from *Billboard*, which tended to give favored-singer status to the Ink Spots (although there are times when the sameness of the style seems to grate on them, too). It's important to keep in mind that these reviews weren't meant for the general public, but for jukebox operators. (An “operator” was the person who actually owned the boxes, sometimes hundreds, and placed them in juke joints, bars, drug stores, even railway stations. The operator was constantly on the road

servicing his machines and trying to guess which records would make the public part with their nickels—the reviews were his guide.) These reviews were also meant for retail store buyers (especially chain stores). Fortunately, I've managed to find reviews for most of the Spots' tunes. The earliest charts in *Billboard* listed up-and-coming songs; but it was the song itself that got the review, not the artist/song combination. Other charts listed a song's popularity by how many times it was heard on the radio that week (which mostly reflected how well the song pluggers, not the artists, were doing their job). Only in the early '40s were positional charts started; prior to then, it's difficult to gauge what a Number 1 song was. There were reviewers who disliked the Ink Spots intensely; their reviews are included for balance.

Similarly, the theater reviews were not meant for the general public, but were there to help theater owners book acts that would appeal to their clientele. These reviews show that the Ink Spots kept their performance appeal long after their records stopped being hits.

One caveat must be mentioned. In several places I have used Deek Watson's autobiography, *The Story Of The Ink Spots*, as a source. Unfortunately, it's an uneven document. The chronology bounces forward and backward from one year to another in no particular order (nor is the reader always aware of where, in time, the story is). Also, Watson does not mention his departure from the Ink Spots in 1944, his formation of the Brown Dots, or the personality clashes between himself and Bill Kenny. The book is, however, fascinating for Watson's anecdotes (although I'm never sure if they're true). Part of the problem is that Deek and Bill Kenny didn't get along (except that they both loved to gamble), and some of what Deek writes may just be sour grapes.

I've had a great deal of fun working on this book; I hope it's as much fun for you to read.

Long Island, New York
January 1998

Prelude: The 1920s to 1931

World War I has just ended; the world begins to slide inexorably into the next conflict. U.S. Senate refuses to ratify League of Nations Covenant. Prohibition experiment begins. Women get the vote. Civil war rages in Ireland. Byrd and Amundsen fly over North Pole in separate flights; Byrd flies over South Pole. Kellogg-Briand Pact renounces aggressive war. Washington Disarmament Pact. Japan seizes Manchuria. Saudi Arabian, Iraqi and Transjordanian monarchies established. Chiang Kai-shek suppresses the Chinese warlords. Turkey becomes a republic. Art deco begins. "Teapot Dome" scandal. Scopes "monkey trial." Sacco and Vanzetti found guilty, later executed. Joseph Stalin assumes power on the death of Lenin. Congress declares Native Americans to be citizens. Lindbergh solos the Atlantic. Empire State Building opens. "Lost Generation" writers express the aimlessness of life. "Talkies" come to the movies. Stock market crashes and the world is in the grip of a depression. But all is not lost: in 1920, the first licensed radio broadcasts begin.

Where to begin with the story of the Ink Spots?

Let's go back to Indianapolis, Indiana, at the start of the Roaring Twenties. Let's begin with Orville "Hoppy" Jones and Mifflin "Miff" Campbell, meeting in an ice cream parlor where Campbell was a waiter and Jones made ice cream. Finding a mutual interest in dancing (the nickname "Hoppy" seems

to have come from his dancing moves), they formed an act called “Jones and Campbell,” playing in small-time vaudeville, carnivals, and clubs.¹

By 1928, Leonard Reed had been added, and “Jones and Campbell” had become “The Peanut Boys.” Reed can be seen in the group’s photo holding a tipple. Jones danced and played the “bass fiddle.” Actually, Hoppy would do *anything* to avoid the clumsiness of a stand-up bass; in the beginning, he used a guitar, held upright and supported by the shaft of a cane (this can be seen in some of the photos); later he switched to a cello, tuned to sound like a bass.



Jones and Campbell (ca. 1925): “Miff” Campbell (left) and “Hoppy” Jones.

At the same time, Ivory "Deacon" (usually shortened to "Deek") Watson was also making music. He began in Indianapolis in the mid-1920s with a "coffee-pot band" known as the "Percolating Puppies," and it was there that Deek learned to play the ukulele and the four-string tenor guitar. Basically, coffee-pot bands consisted of teenagers performing the music of their contemporary heroes, such as Duke Ellington, Cliff "Ukulele Ike" Edwards, Barney Rapp and the New Englanders, and the idolized McKinney's Cotton Pickers. In order to re-create band material, these groups had to be skillful at improvising a sound based on harmony vocals, often simulating wind, brass, and reed instruments with their voices, as well as "playing the strings," such as tipples, ukuleles, guitars, tenor guitars, banjos, and bass fiddles. A tittle, once a common instrument, was a little larger than a ukulele and had ten strings. A tenor guitar was a regular guitar with the low E and A strings removed; it was really an extension of a ukulele, capable of playing more octaves.

The coffee pot was used as an echo chamber for a kazoo; by blowing kazoos into the pots, you could simulate a whole reed section. Jerry Daniels said that "the larger the coffee pot, the more resonant the tone."² Therefore, the bands had various sizes of them. Many of the bands also had dancers—true self-contained entertainment units. And they weren't only trios, quartets, and quintets; some of these units could have as many as fifteen members (probably only the extremely good ones, otherwise it wouldn't have been financially feasible).

What was a coffee-pot band like? According to Deek Watson:

I had a group called the "Percolating Puppies." We played a small tea pot, a medium sized coffee pot, and a very large coffee pot, plus guitars. The sounds we were able to make were fantastic. We played on the streets. At the end of each such performance we passed the largest of the pots among the audience. The toughest thing about this way of making money was the fact that all of us had to keep our eyes on the cat who passed the collection for the evening, or else some of the money found its way from the pot to his pocket before dividing time arrived.³

Around 1929 Leonard Reed left the Peanut Boys; he would have subsequent careers as a dancer, comedian, straight man (for Joe Louis' stage

act), producer, and songwriter. As of the early 1990s, he was still active in show business. Deek Watson was then recruited to join Hoppy Jones and Miff Campbell as Reed's replacement. Another new member was Oliver "Slim" Green (whose name is sometimes spelled "Greene"). He was a musician, singer, and dancer, who had been part of a dancing act with Marion "Taps" Miller. Once again there was a name change, this time to the "Four Riff Brothers." The "Riffs" got the chance to do a fifteen-minute radio program on WLW in Cincinnati (about a hundred miles from Indianapolis), replacing the departing Mills Brothers. This group was together until 1931, when both Watson and Green left to do solo acts. (Green had at least four releases on Decca's Sepia series in 1935. Despite later stories about his death in the '30s, Slim lived on until around 1960, when he died of pneumonia in Detroit.)⁴



The Peanut Boys (1928): Miff Campbell, Leonard Reed, Hoppy Jones. (Courtesy of Jerry Daniels.)

Meanwhile, in 1928, guitarist Charlie Fuqua started out with an aggregation called the Patent Leather Kids, which included Sid Ballantine, Fred Wisdom, Slick Helm, and Paul George. In the following year, he left them and teamed up with Jerry Daniels (whom he knew from the neighborhood, although they lived on different sides of a canal that ran through town). The third member of this unnamed coffee-pot band was Bernie Mackey. Charlie ran a shoeshine stand across from the Stutz Bearcat automobile factory, and he and his pals got together to serenade the workers.⁵ They all sang and played guitar, with Jerry doubling on the ukulele. Fuqua (sometimes known as "Satchelmouth") had an uncle, Chauncey Lee, who was a classical guitarist and Fuqua's inspiration. (Note that Harvey Fuqua of the famous '50s vocal group the Moon-glows is a nephew of Charlie's—a musical family indeed! Interestingly, Charlie pronounced his name "Foo-kway," whereas Harvey pronounces it "Foo-qua.")

Around 1930, Charlie and Jerry decided to "turn pro" and left Bernie Mackey behind (we'll meet him again later, though). The duet was called, after a lot of thought perhaps, "Charlie and Jerry." With Jerry's tenor voice, ukulele, and tenor guitar, and Charlie's baritone/tenor voice, guitar, and tenor banjo, the two appeared in vaudeville and were also stars of a radio show on WKBF (Indianapolis).



Charlie and Jerry (ca. 1930): Charlie Fuqua (left) and Jerry Daniels. (Courtesy of Jerry Daniels.)



The Four Riff Brothers (ca. 1929): Miff Campbell (with tiple), Deek Watson (tenor guitar), Hoppy Jones (with a tenor guitar that he's playing as a bass—he's cut down a cane to make a support for it!), Slim Green (tiple). (Courtesy of Jerry Daniels.)

1932

Twelve million jobless in the United States. Severe famine in Russia. Lindbergh baby kidnapped, later found dead. World War I veterans stage Bonus March on Washington, D.C. Polaroid process invented by Edwin Land.

The year 1932 found Charlie and Jerry touring the Midwest with the Whitman Sisters vaudeville show, one of the most popular programs in TOBA (the Theatre Owners Booking Agency), the main booking agency for black theaters. By July, the show having disbanded for the summer, the pair found themselves on vacation in Cleveland. It was here that they ran into Deek Watson, performing as a single. These three alumni of the Indianapolis street corners decided to form a trio.¹

First calling themselves the "Swingin' Gate Brothers," they became the "King, Jack, and Jester" about the time they landed a job on WHK (Cleveland); Deek was the "King," Charlie the "Jack," and Jerry the "Jester." Like many other acts of the day, they did a sustaining fifteen-minute show three times a week. A "sustaining" show was one with no sponsor; you were an employee of the station itself, which paid for the show. At this time, commercial radio was still in its infancy, and anything and everything was being broadcast to determine listeners' tastes (the same thing was to happen in the early days of television).

Later that year they moved to WLW (Cincinnati), where they did commercials for the Crosley Broadcasting Company; Red Barber, future sportscaster for the Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Yankees, was their announcer. Then, to add a final touch to the group, Watson recruited his former "Riff Brother," Orville "Hoppy" Jones, as a fourth member. Without giving the matter too much thought, they changed their name to the "King, Jack, and the Jesters."²

Hoppy was the grand old man of the group, turning twenty-seven in 1932. That year the others would have been: Jerry (seventeen), Deek (nineteen), and Charlie (twenty-one).

Throughout 1932-33, they built up a following among midwestern listeners. Although there were many black vocal groups around, few got much recognition. Two who did were the extremely popular Mills Brothers (who had a 1931 smash with "Tiger Rag"), and the Three Keys. Jerry Daniels pointed out that the sound of his group was quite unlike the more polished style of these contemporaries. The style of the King, Jack and the Jesters (and also of the early Ink Spots) was "swing," derived from the big-name jazz bands, vaudeville acts, and the coffee-pot street-corner bands of Indianapolis.³



The King, Jack, and Jester (ca. 1932) at WHK (Cleveland): Jerry Daniels, Deek Watson, Charlie Fuqua. (Courtesy of Jerry Daniels.)

1933

Hitler comes to power in Germany. Japan occupies Inner Mongolia. FDR takes office, then closes the banks. United States off the gold standard. Prohibition ends. Tennessee Valley Authority established. Walt Disney wins an Oscar for The Three Little Pigs.

In 1933 Grace Raines, pianist and vocal director at WLW, decided to relocate to New York and she asked the group to join her. This was too good of an offer to pass up; Indianapolis, Cleveland, and Cincinnati were good for exposure and fine-tuning, but New York was one of the entertainment capitals of the country.

However, don't think that WLW was small-time radio. Known as "The Nation's Station," WLW advertised (in September 1938) that it had a staff of fifty radio voices and fifty-three musicians. In 1934, WLW, located at 700 on the AM dial, had started using an experimental 500,000-watt transmitter (by comparison, big stations today use about one-tenth of that wattage). With that much power, they were probably heard in most parts of the country. But the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) deemed this wattage excessive and unsuccessfully took the station to court to try to force it back to 50,000 watts. The station continued to transmit at 500,000 watts until March 1939, when the FCC finally won the battle and made it

settle down to a more respectable 50,000 watts (even though crediting the station with materially contributing to radio knowledge).

When the King, Jack, and the Jesters got to New York late in 1933, they faced stiff competition within the entertainment world, as well as a problem over their name. Orchestra leader Paul Whiteman already had a vocal group within his band called the "King's Jesters," and when a conflict arose, it was not difficult to figure out who would yield. The newcomers from the Midwest renamed themselves the "Riff Brothers" for a while, and then the "Four Ink Spots."

Many fanciful stories have been told about the origin of this name. The truth, however, is rather dull: their manager simply sat down and decided on it. It's a little harder to determine just *who* this manager was: Jerry Daniels said that the name came from Moe Gale; Deek Watson said it was a Mr. Heffman (their first manager when they got to New York; he also managed bandleader Ozzie Nelson and comedian Joe Penner). They had gone through a couple of managers before ending up with Gale, owner of Harlem's Savoy Ballroom, but it isn't clear exactly when he took them over.

Nor were they the first to use "Ink Spots." When they came to New York, that name was being used by a small-time dance group, which was going nowhere. Somehow their manager (whoever he may have been) got involved, and decided to let the Riff Brothers try the name, which was tailor-made for a black group.¹

There was a "Christmas-card" ad in the January 2, 1934, *Variety* from the Gale agency that listed his acts: Don Hall Trio, Southern Singers, Phantom Strings, Morton Bowe, and Helen Gordon. The Ink Spots are conspicuous by their absence. Either Gale wasn't yet managing the Spots, or he didn't yet consider them to be of headline quality (since the ad stated that they all had shows on NBC).

The Spots were lucky to hook up with Moe Gale, who not only managed many of the black acts of the day, but also owned the Savoy Ballroom on Lenox Avenue and 140th Street (the most popular nightclub in Harlem in the '30s, with the largest dance floor, nicknamed "The Track").

Probably Gale's most important act was the orchestra of drummer William Henry "Chick" Webb, the Savoy's unofficial house band. Edgar Sampson, one of Webb's arrangers, wrote the tune "Stomping At The Savoy," later recorded by the Ink Spots, as well as by Webb, Benny Goodman, and Ozzie Nelson, among many others. In 1935 Webb hired neophyte singer Ella Fitzger-

ald. This was the first big break for “Miss Ella” (who had really wanted to be a dancer). Later in our story we’ll meet her again.



The Ink Spots (1933): Jerry Daniels, Deek Watson, Hoppy Jones, Charlie Fuqua. (Jerry and Deek have four-string tenor guitars, and Hoppy has his trademark cello.) (Courtesy of Jerry Daniels.)