



1-31-2019

## Girl Groups in the Bronx: Race Gender and the Pursuit of Respectability

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### Recommended Citation

Naison, Mark, "Girl Groups in the Bronx: Race Gender and the Pursuit of Respectability" (2019).  
*Occasional Essays*. 3.  
[https://fordham.bepress.com/baahp\\_essays/3](https://fordham.bepress.com/baahp_essays/3)

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## Girl Groups in the Bronx: Race Gender and the Pursuit of Respectability

As many historians of popular music have noted, Rock and Roll, when it first burst on the national scene, was an overwhelming male phenomenon, with stars like Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers and the Everly Brothers defining new ways of singing dancing and courting for a generation of American teenagers. Although the musical forms which were re-branded as Rock and Roll, rhythm and blues and country music, had strong female artists like Ruth Brown, Etta James and Patsy Kline whose stage presence was as commanding as any male Rock and Roll Star, none of these were pushed forward by the Radio DJ's, concert promoters, and owners of small record companies who engineered the Rock and Roll Revolution during its breakout years from 1954-1957. While Rock and Roll was -correctly- perceived as racially insurgent, breaking long established traditions of social separation of whites and blacks on stage and in theaters and dance halls, it did nothing to challenge post war gender norms which encouraged women to suppress their individuality, power and independence, to make them more acceptable marriage partners to men whose incomes would provide the basis for middle class life styles

When women did finally break into Rock and Roll, it was exclusively through the medium of the "girl groups"- harmonic singing ensembles whose songs glorified marriage, romance , and the reverential love women would have for men who had the wherewithal not only to support them but marry them, Physically attractive, meticulously well groomed, wearing dresses tight enough to inspire sexual fantasies, but proper enough to wear to church- the girl groups, whether black or white, helped define love and romance for a generation of American teenagers. While everyone loved the beautiful harmonies, there was a gender division.in how the music was received Young men responded to the flattery ( He's so fine") and the prospect of being cared for- young women saw their road map to middle class happiness, , which required holding back sexual favors to assure an offer of marriage, captured and romanticized in song.

Young Black women from the Bronx were major figures in the emergence of the girl groups. "Maybe," the first urban harmonic song from a female group to sell a million records when it came out in 1957, was sung by five young women from the Morrisania section of the Bronx who were 8th graders in St Anthony of Padua elementary school when "Maybe" appeared. The beautiful song they produced, covered by artists from Janis Joplin to Patti Austin, invoked a vision of female longing and dependence that would be staple of virtually every girl group that followed.

Maybe, if I pray every night  
You'll come back to me  
And Maybe, if I cry every day  
You'll come back to stay  
Oh, maybe  
Maybe, if I hold your hand  
you will understand

And maybe, if I kissed your lips  
I'll be at your command  
Oh, maybe

In the early 60's the Chiffons, a group who met at James Monroe in the Soundview section of the Bronx, produced no less than three million selling hits in which women confidently displayed their powers, not to carve out lives or careers of their own, but to persuade reluctant men to commit to lasting relationships. :

One fine day, you'll look at me  
And you will know our love was, meant to be  
One fine day, you're gonna want me for your girl  
The arms I long for, will open wide  
And you'll be proud to have me, right by your side  
One fine day, you're gonna want me for your girl  
Though I know you're the kind of boy  
Who only wants to run around  
I'll keep waiting, and, someday darling  
You'll come to me when you want to settle down,

One of the most prominent features of their songs, something emblematic of almost all of the Girl Groups, was flattery, a rhetorical device used to cement men into long term relationships.. which in an economy giving women limited access to high paying jobs, was the only trustworthy path to economic security. No better example of this was their song "He's So Fine" with a legendary beginning and chorus "Doo Da Lang Doo Da Lang" that adds an element of majesty and mystery to what the singer hopes will turn into a marriage contract

Do-lang, do-lang, do-lang  
Do-lang, do-lang  
He's so fine  
(Do-lang, do-lang, do-lang)  
Wish he were mine  
(Do-lang, do-lang, do-lang)  
That handsome boy over there  
(Do-lang, do-lang, do-lang)  
The one with the wavy hair  
(Do-lang, do-lang, do-lang)  
I don't know how, I'm gonna do it  
(Do-lang, do-lang, do-lang)  
But I'm gonna make him mine  
(Do-lang, do-lang, do-lang)  
He's the envy of all the girls

(Do-lang, do-lang, do-lang)  
It's just a matter of time  
(Do-lang, do-lang)  
.....  
He's so fine  
(Oh yeah)  
Gotta be mine  
(Oh yeah)  
Sooner or later  
(Oh yeah)  
I hope it's not later  
(Oh yeah)  
We gotta get together  
(Oh yeah)  
The sooner the better  
(Oh yeah)  
I just can't wait, I just can't wait  
To be held in his arms  
If I were a queen  
(Do-lang, do-lang, do-lang)  
And he asked me to leave my throne  
(Do-lang, do-lang, do-lang)  
I'll do anything that he asked  
(Do-lang, do-lang, do-lang)  
Anything to make him my own  
(Do-lang, do-lang, do-lang)

Looked at with the wisdom of hindsight, these songs seem impossibly archaic. How could young Black women from the Bronx, clearly possessed of talent and beauty, not only accept such subservient gender roles, but romanticize them in ways that made virtually all of their peers hum their melodies, sing their lyrics and, on the dance floor and real life, try to act them out? Was this all a fake, an elaborate and cynical charade designed to attract popular audiences, or did it reflect lived realities in the Bronx communities they singers grew up in?

Based on the scores of oral histories I did with Black men and women who grew up in the Bronx during the 1940's, 1950's and 1960's, I would come down, with appropriate words of caution, on the "lived reality" side of the equation. During the 1940's and 1950's, the Morrisania community, and the newly built public housing projects built all over the Bronx starting in 1950- several of which were located in Soundview where James Monroe was the local school, contained tens of thousands of upwardly mobile Black families who hoped that economic security, and middle class respectability, was within their reach. For young women brought up in such families, the path to that security went squarely through marriage, and for a while, they tried to live according to the script for such a goal laid out by the Girl Groups

The oral histories of Victoria Archibald Good and Andrea Ramsey, two brilliant, attractive young women who came of age in the Bronx in the 1950's, one in the Patterson Projects, the other in Morrisania, provide a window into a time when racial optimism, the hope of prosperity, and extremely rigid gender roles had a defining impact on their worldview. Both Victoria Archibald and Andrea Ramsey were attractive, popular and academically successful women whose goal, like many of their neighborhood friends, was to get married shortly after they graduated from high school and then pursue whatever careers marriage allowed. College and a profession were not on their horizon in the 1950's; they would only move in that direction after the drug epidemics, the Vietnam War, the Civil rights Movement and Women's Liberation, would shake their world to its foundations.

Their social life reflected the combination of romance and respectability which upwardly mobile families in their community felt. During their middle school and high school years, both women created social clubs which sponsored parties, outings, and charitable activities which were not only places where women friends from the neighborhood could bond, but where they could meet eligible men. The parties sponsored by the clubs highlighted the great music of the era, much of it produced by Bronx based groups. A good number of the songs were slow dancers where men and women pushed one another to the edge of sexual excitement- one local variant of slow dancing was called "The Slow Grind." But though the lights were turned down as the parties wound down, and the breathing got hot and heavy, couples didn't pair off in empty rooms to have sex. These parties were chaperoned, with adults there to make sure nothing happened that would lead to unwanted pregnancies. The ultimate goal was marriage, something the sound track of the music, and the social arrangements behind the parties, kept foremost in every young woman's minds.

As it turned out, the economic and political stability of the late 50's and early 60's turned out to be illusory, as the Bronx, and the nation, plunged into crisis after crisis. Many of the early marriages collapsed, as men lost their cachet as providers in the context of drug epidemics, war, and the disappearance of high paying blue collar jobs, and women started finding new opportunities to attend college and pursue once male professions. Both Andrea Ramsey and Victoria Archibald became successful professionals whose no longer depended on male incomes to support themselves and their families.

But neither forgot the excitement and optimism of their early years, when great music filled the streets of the Bronx, and the hallways of its apartment buildings, and young women from their neighborhood put the hopes and dreams of young women all over the country into musical form.