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## Fortune, Monique

Bronx African American History Project  
*Fordham University*

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**Monique Fortune:** So when did the first doo-wop groups arrive in the Bronx? We'd have to look at a timeline. When we talk about African-based music, Rhythm & Blues to hip-hop to anything, particularly doo-wop, we often look at its origins because everything really comes from something great. In the 40's we were able to look at harmony vocal groups like the Ink Spots, uh the Mills Brothers. Their harmony was very central; not so much melody but harmony was very key. And from the outgrowth of these vocal groups we then had what is called doo-wop, it is also called group harmony, it also called, uh vocal. It's lifeblood and its golden era is late 50's early 60's, 1957-1963. If you were to look at most books, encyclopedias, websites about doo-wop now in terms of origins <?> definitely the 60's late 50's. We looked at a range of fantastic African-American .... First and foremost we definitely have to think about Arlene Smith. Arlene Smith was a young, and I mean young, a young teenager. When she started up her group the Chantels and .... What's very important to understand is that this sister played the organ, played the piano, at St. Anthony's Church in the Bronx and got together with girls in the choir and put together the Chantels. Worked together with childhood friends, trained in classical music. So before we had the Shirrelles and the Supremes we had the Crystals, we had the Chantels. With major hits in 1956, 1957 with national significance such as "I Love You So", "He's Gone", and probably the most important national hit was "Maybe". It's been used for a lot of soundtracks in the 80's and 90's, movie soundtracks. That is probably one of our most awesome legacies in the Bronx because she has devoted herself to the Bronx. Because after her quote on quote "major era" in performance was done as a teenager she moved on and got her training as an elementary school teacher. She's still been teaching in the elementary education realm in the Bronx through the New York City school system. But she is still a major attraction, an important attraction in the revivals, doo-wop reviews and what have you. She's an important... she's still an important role. Ok? Number two- she had Lillian Leach. Very very legendary but not always given her props, as other doo-wop artists and rock and roll artists that came from the Bronx, like Dion and the Belmonts and other artists. Lillian is truly a living legend of doo-wop as she lives in the Bronx and worked in the Bronx. Somebody who is a significant organizer of the Bronx reunions in Crotona Park that they have in August. She is a master musician, composer, writer. And she put together a group, Lillian Leach and the Mellows, in the latter 50's. The wonderful song that they sang and I have to look it up because it's really an earmark song of theirs and I have to find it for you ... "How Sentimental Can I Be?" A very important record label that Lillian helped developed, helped founded, but definitely through her artistry helped make money, is a record company which you're going to hear a lot about R-E-L-I-C, in your journey in this research - very important, Bronx-based record company. The big hit that she did, "How Sentimental Can I Be?" Others from the Bronx experience who still have a .... do you know Bronx net?

**Mark Smith:** No.

**Monique:** Ok. Bronx net broadcasts out of Lehman College and it's public access television. And two young brothers that have come up in the Bronx and have spent a lot of time in the Bronx in terms of doo-wop: Eugene Tompkins, Arthur Crier C-R-I-E-R. They do, and I don't know if they still do it but you can always just call Bronx net at Lehman College and see if they

still do, the Bronx net doo-wop shop where they

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interview certain legends. They've had people like Frankie Lymon's brother, one of the original Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, Herman Santiago - who still is alive. And Dan Romanello I'm sure is gonna talk to you more about his legacy in terms of the connections between Latinos and African-Americans, in terms of group harmony connection. So those are also important names that come out of the Bronx. So I hope I gave you a good timeline of the era.

**Mark:** Urn, I guess the next question is, urn what neighborhoods did most of these people come out of? South Bronx or North Bronx or. .. ?

**Monique:** We had Arlene Smith coming to us from the South Bronx; we had Lillian Leach coming to us from the Crotona mid-Bronx section; and of course we had Eugene Tompkins and Arthur Crier. And Dan Romanello has to confirm on this, because I am no' sure the sections that Eugene and Arthur are from. And some of the other folks that they collaborated with were more on the Harlem scene like Speedo and the Cadillacs, uh Grover Cleveland, and all of those brothers. People like Little Anthony and what have you, he's from Brooklyn so that's a whole 'nother vibe, a whole 'nother energy.

**Mark:** Out of all the young artists that you mentioned who do you think had the most effect nationally, in terms of representing the Bronx; can you think of any artists?

**Monique:** Urn ... well when you think of street-corner we had so many wonderful voices that never reached national prominence. And there was so much talent going on at that time in different genres, but in hip-hop, I mean doo-wop in the Bronx .... My personal opinion, because she took it national, she cultivated and developed a group of women who could sing, the Chantels. I'd have to say the Chantels for me personally. Many people in terms of Arlene Smith's vocals say "oh, she's too much of a shouter" or "oh you know, they were just a little 'girl group'" quote on quote. Uh uh. Before girl groups of the 60's, before the Ronnettes and all of that energy, you had the Chantels. Ane those breakthrough songs that I talked about, "He's Gone" and "Maybe", "I Love You So". To me they were the key group to take it from a Bronx origin and go national. Now some of my colleagues may have other opinions of that, that's my thought, that's just my thought.

**Mark:** Urn now when they performed what clubs, community centers, schools ... ?

**Monique:** I mentioned St. Anthony's which is down in the South Bronx, definitely all of the street corners, ha ha, a very important energy in terms of music and origin is definitely Banana Kelly. And I'm sure Dr. Naison has talked a lot about the origins of Banana Kelly. My family lived at 878 Kelly Street. And we have some wonderful artists from there. Ray Barretto is from that neighborhood, Willie Colon and others. But that's salsa, we're gonna stay with doo-wop. But understand the after-school centers were very important keeping people off the street; talent shows, athletic events .... P-A-L centers

were very key, whether it was on Trinity Ave. or up on Westchester Square. And also, really understand even though there were interracial beef and conflict somehow, somewhere people were able to get together with doo-wop and corroborate and have

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interracial doo-wop groups. So I would significantly say houses of worship, like St. Anthony's and the PAL centers, Police Athletic Leagues, were very important in terms of where they could hear it. Just like St. Stephen's; the way the Temptations and the Supremes in Detroit, when they were still known as the Primes and the Prime-ettes. They performed at St. Stephen's Community Center in Detroit first before they went to little clubs like the Red Rooster etcetera etcetera the same thing here in the Bronx.

**Mark:** Urn we were talking about some Latin groups. Did they work with you know, primary groups like the Chantels or urn you know Arlene Smith with music or were they basically in competition for an audience?

**Monique:** Always healthy competition, fun competition. Dan Romanello will definitely be able to talk to you more about the groups. But there is one important artist that must be talked about because he started with a Bronx group called the Personalities and his name is Milton Cardona, C-A-R-D-O-N-A. Now he's a singer and percussionist who emigrated with his family from Puerto Rico. But, he's legendarily known now to work as a percussionist for Celia Cruz, he's worked for people like Eddie Palmieri, Johnnie Palmieri, Johnnie Pacheco from the Dominican Republic the flutist, he's worked with Billy Valentin, the jazz flutist. But he here in the Bronx started as a doo-wop artist with the group the Personalities. And they collaborated and worked with many of the doo-wop groups that were around and about.

**Mark:** Urn, during this time period that we're talking about, I guess the 60's late 50's; urn I guess the atmosphere around the Bronx was a little bit different, especially in this area. Urn, how did Italian-Americans get exposed to it? Was it because they passed them on street corners like you were talking about? Because I'm not sure that the interaction at places like churches or Police Athletic Leagues was the same because of racial tensions back then. So, urn how did, urn you know you know the Italian population in the Bronx, which was pretty high back then, how were they exposed?

**Monique:** Let's look at it just in the neighborhood we're sitting in right now in terms of Fordham University. In terms of Dion and the Belmonts, literally Dion who urn wrote ... John Robert and Martin, Martin John the song about 'did anybody here see my friend blah blah blah?' It's an old folk song written by Dion. But Dion and the Belmonts, they were a popular doo-wop group that started here in Little Italy in the Little Italy area and literally in Belmont, is named after Belmont Ave. Now Dion is one of the other artists, very clearly, who always says that it was his interest and he was motivated and influenced by African-American music, blues, Rhythm and Blues,

vocal harmony. He's someone who is very eclectic and very open in terms of his love for all music and all people. But let's be real, here in the 50's and in the 60's during that time we had significant gang tension. Ok, we have a mob now and we have Crips and the Bloods and other subsets and subsets here in the year 2003. But in the late 50's early 60's you had Irish-based groups like the Baldies. And you had, and I can't remember two of the names of the Italian gangs on 187<sup>th</sup> Street, where Little Italy is and what-have-you. But people had their territory. And there were Latino brothers that had their territories and AfricanAmerican brothers that had their territories, but there were some folks like the Arthur

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Criers, like the ... the groups like the Wrens, the Mellows, who understood 'wait a minute, wait a minute, we've got a way to get out' and there are some folks that said 'let's collaborate, let's work together, let's begin to see where music can take us.' It's odd, in many ways there were a lot of racial separations, but somehow, somehow, particularly in this area, music brought people together as well.

**Mark:** Were there any rhythm and blues artists that came out of the Bronx in the 40's? I know we talked about it in the 50's and 60's ....

**Monique:** Oh my goodness. I'm gonna sit back and try to think about this ... trying to think, again Dan Romanello would be the better person ... cause I'm stronger with 50's, 60's, and 70's and on. Umm but, someone important in theater but this is not... is Diane Carroll and she was born in the Bronx. Excuse me, because I really need to think. No cause most of the artists I'm thinking of were born in Harlem or Brooklyn. So Dan might be the better person to answer that.

**Mark:** Urn ok, then I'll move on to the next question then. We talked about Relic Records coming out of the Bronx, was that probably the most prominent label around? You know were there others?

**Monique:** Yes, basically you had your smaller labels. Uh, but one major was Relic. And I've given you some website information, and I'm gonna be giving you some information, where you can research it more. But Relic was probably the gem, because they understood the trend. Ok, you had people like Morris Levy and you had others who were downtown, in downtown Manhattan, doing their thing with people like Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers, ripping them off. Ok, taking song credits, publishing credits that many of our brothers and sisters are fighting for today, that that enrages me. But Relic, on many levels, always had the reputation of 'trying to work with their artists'. But the record business, the recording industry can be very vicious and not kind. But Relic helped moved certain artists like the Wrens, the Orioles, urn Grover Cleveland, Lillian Leach and the Mellows were all able to record under that label. And there's a website called *Roots and Rhythm* which is awesome. And you'll learn more about Relic through that website and I'm gonna give that information to you.

**Mark:** Were there like any famous promoters that came out of this era?

**Monique:** Well first and foremost during this era, as you know, we were also converging with the birth and development of rock and roll. Understanding that Little Richard sang <rock and roll?>. Rhythm and Blues had a baby - it was rock and roll. But doo-wop, in that focus of harmony, there were many who saw the financial potential of doo-wop and rock and roll. The most famous who did do work at some of the smaller movie houses in the Bronx, 163<sup>rd</sup> and Southern Boulevard. You had Alan Freed who was large who did work at the Brooklyn Paramount, who did work at the Apollo. Also don't forget the radio connection in terms of promoters. You used to have the WBNA which was a radio station here in the Bronx. And that radio station used to promote radio shows. Alright, so that connection between music, radio and records is very prominent, that's

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very important. The next thing is that you always have promoters-of-the-week, unfortunately that will set up shows at particular theaters, and then run with the money and not pay artists and not, uh make a promise on their event or their promotions. But that's something to remember, and a lot of people tend to forget, that we did have a Bronx-based commercial radio station, that was WBNA.

**Mark:** Urn, you mentioned Crotona Park and that happens every year in August?

**Monique:** Yes, that happens every year in August. And I'm also going to give you a website called *United In Group Harmony* because usually representatives from *United In Group Harmony*, and I know Lillian Leach and the Mellows, have sung at the Bronx reUllions.

**Mark:** Ok, can you remember any other doo-wop groups that sang there?

**Monique:** Usually, now I'm trying to think, I know Arlene Smith has made an appearance but I don't know if she's sung. Urn, I know Eugene Tompkins, Arthur Crier.. .. doo doo doo doo. I know, and I'm not sure if he's still alive, somebody who may know, Otis Span, is somebody Dan Romanello can talk more about tomorrow.

**Mark:** Are you in contact with any of these people?

**Monique:** No, cause if I saw certain people we'd know each other but Dan is connected, he's known them for years. I don't know when you want me to do this but I'm also going to refer you to other radio personalities that might be able to really answer some questions.

**Mark:** Urn, besides the street corners and I guess we're not talking about Crotona Park right now, were there any outdoor venues that occurred like what happened in Crotona Park? Where doo-wop groups, where there were battles of like doo-wop groups?

**Monique:** That thing about it is that in hip-hop culture they may talk about toast and boast, they may always talk about you know the Wheels of Steel battles, you following what I'm saying? At the Quarry, you know, there used to be a club

where I remember ... before the Disco Fever, before the 371 club, a lot of places that I used to go to in terms of hip-hop culture; that's nothing new. In terms of emcees battling, deejays battling; doo-' wop groups battled. Ok and you would always, on the marquee a particular radio personality would be prominent first. Radio station WWRL also promoted certain doowop shows. They were quote on quote "one of the most important" soul/R&B radio stations in the 50's and promoted doo-wop groups as well. So when they had their events in the park, WWRL used to have a van, used to have a gentleman named Rocky Bridges who was their promotions manager. And he used to travel with the van with people like Jocko Henderson and people like Eddie OJ. And that was the years when performers and radio announcers had real relationships. Not like today where you have to have an agent, a manger, and then a public relations person to connect before the performer and the radio personality connect. So that's one way how that happened in the summertime.

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There the WWRL van would just travel all around the Bronx; Van Cortland, Crotona. And there was a place here in the Bronx which is now Co-Op City which was called Freedom Land. That brought almost every prominent musical performer of the day. And that's were these battles would've met, because that was what was fun. Who would get the most applause? The Wrens, the Flamingos or ... I'm just using these as an example none of these are Bronx groups per-se, the Crests, the Deltones. Who would get the most response ... the Cadillacs ... from the audience? You know what I'm saying? So Freedom Land was an important place that many people forget because it was like an amusement park, it's kind oflike a precursor to what we have in terms of Six Flags today. The entertainment, the electricity ... As a little little girl I was able to appreciate the tale end of it before they started building Co-Op City in the early 70's.

**Mark:** Were there any housing projects back then that had, urn you know, a majority of doo-wop groups come out of them?

**Monique:** Yea, cause I can compare hip-hop to doo-wop in terms of you know Bronx River. People like Andre Harrell came out of Bronx River. Then you had brothers coming out of Claremont Houses, people like Grandmaster Flash and what-have-you. But during the doo-wop era you had people coming out of the Trinity Houses, St. Mary's, but also don't forget you also had those tenement walk-ups on streets like Fox, Kelly, Tiffany you follow what I'm saying? So also you see that 163<sup>rd</sup> Street strip right before you get to Third Ave. where you see a lot ofthe projects? Not like that in the latter 40's into the early 50's; you still had private homes there. Now don't forget that many of these Bronx musicians went to public high schools like Morris High School, MOlio High School. And they formed and developed groups at schools, at their particular neighborhood, or their particular project.

**Mark:** Ok, um other than the Chantels, were there any other women doo-wop groups? I know they weren't on the national level like the Chantels were but that were pretty well known in the Bronx?

**Monique:** I mentioned the name but Lillian sang with men, you know that she was the headliner but then she sang with men. Again Dan Romanello would be clear on that

**Mark:** Were there any interracial doo-wop groups in the Bronx?

**Monique:** Yes. You definitely had that. But I can't remember whether if the Wrens or the ... another groups that I can't remember. .. let me look it up ...

**Mark:** And that was Monique Fortune, from Fordham University. Professor of Communications she also works for WFUV. On the Other side of this Tape is Dan Romanello, New York's last doo-wop deejay. Who keeps the 50's vocal classics on the air at WFUV with the show called the Group Harmony Review. It's over 40 years old and Dan will get more in depth with doo-wop and its effects on the Bronx. Stay tuned. This is Mark Smith reporting.