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Cruisin' with the Whitetones

"A cappella! What is it? Starts with an A. Ends with an A..."
Jerry Lawson of the Persuasions

A cappella. Two decades ago it filled the streets of the cities. Four, maybe five singers on a street corner, their voices harmonizing on the latest rhythm and blues hits, not a musical instrument in sight.

Twenty years later it's hard to doo-wop to "My Sharona." A cappella rhythm and blues has lost its chic. But there's still life in them old bones.

A few a cappella groups, the Persuasions the most famous among them, still carry on the tradition. And Eugene has a doo-wop group of its own: the Whitetones.

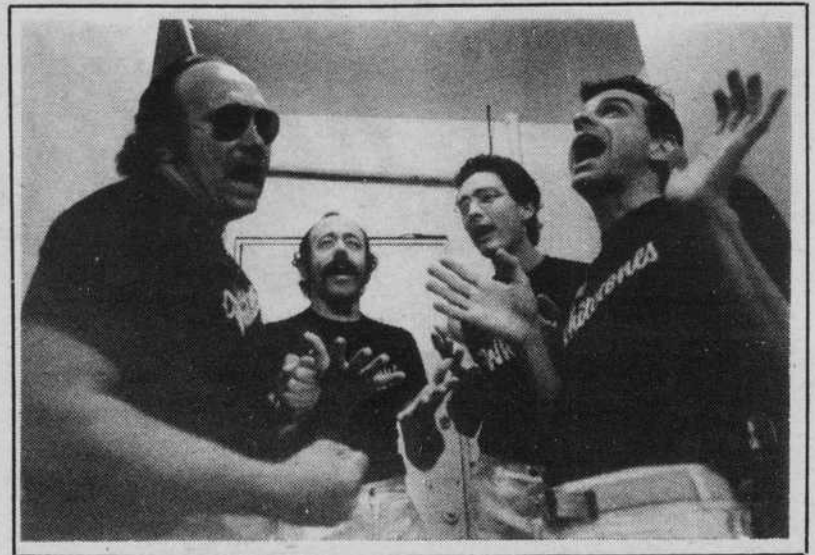
The Whitetones range in age from late 20's to late 30's. Of the group's four members, two grew up on the East Coast, two on the West Coast. All share a love for doo-wop and rhythm and blues music.

The lead singer of the Whitetones, Looney Lenny Goldberg, began his singing career at Brooklyn's New Utrecht High School with a group called Lincoln Chandler and the Lost Knights, and later sang with the Soul Stoppers. According to the Whitetones' official biography, the Soul Stoppers recorded a single called "Let's Sit Down," which "sold an amazing 31 copies."

After moving to the Bay Area in 1970, Goldberg ran a couple of collectors' record stores, and edited an oldies magazine called Stormy Weather. In his spare time he co-hosted "Cruisin'," an oldies radio program which can now be heard on Eugene's KLCC. In 1975, Lenny, his records, and "Cruisin'" moved to Oregon. The current version of his record store, Diana's, is scheduled to open in March, with the Whitetones singing at the grand opening.

When it comes to music, says first tenor Paul Friedlander, "Looney Lenny knows everything."

Friedlander, also known as Pablo Tone, is the Whitetones' other New Yorker. According to the bio, his first doo-wop group, the Chapters, "were a rage on the hospital-nursing home circuit, performing their music to the defenseless geriatrics." Friedlander left doo-wop to try his hand at bluegrass (performing onstage with folk-legend Phil Ochs in 1965). He recorded two albums with a group called Balderdash before moving to Oregon.



The Whitetones singing in a kitchen/dressing room: a cappella gold.

Second Tenor Bill "Guido" Chilla is a university voice major and candle maker when he's not singing with the Whitetones. His musical experience ranges from opera to summer stock to rock and roll, though he claims that his best performance to date has been as a starting guard for the Tacoma High School football team.

The Whitetones are anchored by the youngest member of the group, bassman Little Davey Diego. He began as a California folk musician, did a stint as a bass player for Hoe Down, and as lead guitarist and vocalist in Talk is Cheap. Diego recently cut the sleeves off his Whitetones T-shirt and announced plans to begin weight training.

Existing as a concept for several years, the Whitetones waited until last summer before Looney Lenny, Pablo, Guido, and Little Davey actually took to the stage.

In November, the Persuasions, who bill themselves as the "Kings of A Cappella," came to Eugene. The Whitetones, dubbing themselves "The Knaves of A Cappella," opened the show and later sang "What's Your Name" onstage with the Persuasions.

The Whitetones' most recent appearance came on Valentine's Night at B.J. Kelly's, singing between sets of a band called Slowtrain. The audience was the sort that appreciated Slowtrain's bland, middle-of-the-road dance music, and there was some question as to how they would react to a doo-wop group.

As the Whitetones began to warm up in a kitchen, which doubled as a dressing room, Lenny announced that he'd forgotten "all of the words to all of the songs." Asked if he thought the crowd would accept their music, Friedlander

said, "No. We'll have to make 'em go for it. I'm always scared when it's not an oldies crowd."

As the Whitetones opened with "In the Still of the Night," 150 B.J. Kelly's patrons looked up from their beers in disbelief. Their disbelief turned to applause as they realized that these guys could sing. As the 'tones started into the Del-Vikings' "Come Go With Me," the dance floor began to fill up.

Next was "Book of Love," and then it was Chilla's turn in "I Believe." As Lenny, Pablo, and Little Davey crooned behind him, Guido began his monologue: "People always come up to me after I sing this song, and they ask me, 'Guido, what do you really believe?' And I look at them, and I answer... 'Who the fuck cares, anyway?'" There was much laughter and applause as they went into the final verse.

The show was a qualified success. A portion of the crowd still has no idea what to make of them, but the Whitetones have managed to pull a positive reception from an audience that could have turned hostile.

The Whitetones plan to take some time off from performing to work up some new material. Long-range plans have them playing the Northwest college circuit, and possibly playing some shows in California, where a Whitetones' promotional tape has been heard on the syndicated "Cruisin'" show.

The Whitetones have no illusions of making it big, but as Lenny puts it, "That doesn't mean we aren't serious."

The Whitetones live for the day when you'll be able to walk down the street and hear four voices under a corner lamp post. A cappella.

By Phil Bernstein
Photos by Steve Dykes

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