

# The Charts Are Alive with the Sound of Dayton

By NELSON GEORGE

■ NEW YORK—Black popular music has been blessed by the Memphis sound, the Philly sound, the Chicago sound, the New Orleans sound, and, of course, "the sound of young America" presented by Motown in its Detroit period.

Now there is another city sound of import in black pop music, one that has been an unrecognized commercial force since the early 1970s. It is the sound of Dayton, Ohio.

Dayton, Ohio?

Surprisingly, that medium-sized midwestern town has spawned an impressive number of recording artists. Beginning with the Ohio Players' signing with Westbound and their subsequent success on Mercury Records, the following groups have leaped from roots in Dayton to major labels: Heatwave (Epic), Lakeside (Solar), Slave (Cotillion) Junie Morrison (Columbia), Zapp (Warner Bros.), Roger (Uncle Jam), Sun (Capitol), Dayton (Liberty), Shadow (Elektra), and Fazo (formerly on Cotillion). Not to forget that the re-structured Ohio Players are now on Boardwalk.

That's a lot of musical talent to be found in such a relatively small area. In comparison to other cities that have developed a community of commercial and creative performers, Dayton is a rather nondescript locale. What accounts for all this music?

Ask Slave's Mark Adams and he says "I've been thinking on that myself and I really don't know." Heatwave leader Johnny Wilder and Sun's founder Byron Byrd say the same thing.

It seems there were two key factors in creating so many bands. The first, and most important, was the influence of the Ohio Players in musical terms and in alerting companies to the talent in Dayton. The second was the presence of many colleges in the middle Ohio area.

Before we go any further, a brief description of Dayton by Wilder seems in order: "Dayton is a nice, quiet city. The biggest economic force in the area is Dwight Patterson Air Force Base, and there are several large factories in the area. All the major acts play the city at a local arena. There are a few rehearsal facilities in town, but the only real studio is Cyber-Techniques, which just recently converted to 24 tracks. Cincinnati has the Fifth Floor recording studio, and that seems to be the most popular recording site for local musicians. Also, our black station WDAO and its program director Kirk Logan are very supportive of the music made by Dayton natives."

The origins of these Dayton groups go back to the mid-to-late '60s when area musicians remember three bands of note—the Imperials, the Ohio Majestics, and the Untouchables, who later became the Ohio Players.

The Imperials, according to Ohio Player Marvin Pierce, "were a great jamming band made up of mostly older guys" that never made a national impact, though some members are now in Liberty's Dayton.

The Ohio Majestics started at "the many talent shows on the west or black side of town," remembers Byron Byrd. "We then got a recording contract with Chess and changed our name to Overnight Low. Three of the guys in Dayton now, as well as several members of the Players, were in the band then. We released one single on Chess produced by Henry Glover (a legendary R&B producer) but that didn't work out. For a time I worked as road manager for the Commodores.

"Then our group decided to get serious about this and in 1976 we started Sun and have had hits with 'Flick My Bic' and some other tunes." Capitol just released Sun's "Force of Nature" LP. Byrd owns a rehearsal hall in Dayton that he plans to make a 24-track studio. His Royal Gentlemen productions is assisting two new Dayton bands, Mid-Town and Click.

The most important of these early Dayton groups was the Untouchables. Pierce remembers that they were originally known as Robert Ward and the Untouchables and had a hit in the '60s under the Untouchables name with Wilson Pickett's "I've Found A Love." "We later became the Players, but when we found there was already a group with that name we added the Ohio." Pierce

joined the Ohio Players while attending college in 1970, when the band was seeking to strengthen its horn section.

On their own Top Hat records they released "Pain," garnering a regional hit that attracted the attention of Westbound Records. "Pain" was released on Westbound, but it was "Funky Worm," a record that helped pioneer the use of ARP synthesizer in black pop music, that made their first national impression.

Walter "Junie" Morrison was the musical architect of that record. The current Columbia artist left the band soon after that to pursue an idiosyncratic solo career. From 1973 to 1977 Morrison released three records on Westbound, later working with George Clinton's P-Funk organization. He co-wrote the hit single "One Nation Under A Groove" for Funkadelic.

At Columbia, with his debut "Bread Alone" LP and upcoming "Five," Morrison has remained a solo performer, the only non-band member of note to emerge from Dayton. He records at Cincinnati's Fifth Floor studio and remains, like the majority of these musicians, based in the Dayton area.

The Players went on to record classic funk albums like "Skin Tight," "Fire," and "Honey" on Mercury Records, becoming the musical inspiration of their descendants. Slave's Mark Adams, whose group's "Stone Jam" album just went gold, says that "for all the groups the Players were the most important inspiration. They gave everyone the push to go forward and reach outside Dayton."

Pierce says "we had a tremendous amount of drive in this period and it motivated others.

Our sound was unique at that time and was widely imitated.

"We've been through hard times since. But we're very optimistic about our 'Tenderness' album, the re-structured band, and Boardwalk Records."

Shadow, which records for Elektra, is composed of several ex-Ohio Players and is currently recording its third album in Los Angeles.

With the success of the Ohio Players, Byrd says, "the interest of record companies began to snowball and different acts were picked up by labels all across the board. In the early 1970s the colleges in the area, places like Ohio State and Xavier, formed a circuit where bands could make a living.

"Also, since everyone knew everyone else, there were plenty of connections to be used. Somebody would introduce someone to a record company and things would happen."

While Dayton lacks a central musicians' hangout, there is considerable interaction in this musical community. The Ohio Players played behind Lakeside's Thomas Selby on some early recording dates. Keith Harrison, formerly of Fazo, now plays keyboards in Heatwave. Wilder adds, "a lot of musicians here are relatives either by birth or marriage."

The Dayton music scene is currently marked by ferment, with many musicians planning to establish recording facilities and talent acquisition services to exploit the area's still-fertile musical turf. "Because of the talent scattered over numerous labels there will probably never be a Motown or Stax-type operation here," Wilder says.

"But let me tell you, there are some groups out there that can cut some of the guys with recording contracts. I just saw a high school group that was hot."

## Revelation at the Ritz



Backstage at the Ritz in New York after Revelation's recent New York club debut, Handshake Records president Ron Alexenburg congratulates the group. From left: group members Phillip Ballou, Kevin Owens and Morris Gray, Alexenburg group leader Bennie Diggs, manager Sid Seidenberg, and attorney Kendall Minter.

## Tony D'Amato Named Audiofidelity A&R VP

■ NEW YORK — Dan Pugliese, chairman of Audiofidelity Records, has announced the appointment of Tony D'Amato as vice president of A&R for contemporary/easy listening and classical music.

D'Amato, who produced Mantovani, Ronnie Aldrich, Leopold Stokowski, Benny Goodman, Frank Chacksfield and others during his tenure as a division manager with London Records in charge of the Phase 4 Label, has been given "a large recording budget" and is "actively seeking name artists who fit our contemporary/easy listening format," Pugliese said.