THE HARMONY BROTHERS
Musical Careers

SPRINGFIELDS FIRST ROCK AND ROLL BAND

By Chris Reynolds
Introduction to the Oral History of the Harmony Brothers Musical Careers & Bibliography
Introduction to the Oral History of the Harmony Brothers Musical Careers

“In 1956-62, the Harmony Boys lived the American dream by going from obscurity to teen fame, with girl fans screaming in a frenzy and mobbing the band offstage.” Will Howarth a high school classmate of Ben and Charlie Harmony provided that opening description of the Harmony brother’s band, that he remembers back in late 1950’s. Mr. Howarth, who is presently a professor at Princeton University, must also receive credit for the idea of doing an oral history on the brothers. His email to the University of Illinois at Springfield’s(UIS) Oral History Archives Administrator, suggesting them as prime candidates to be interviewed, got my attention. I had known Ben for years because he is in the upholstery business and had done several pieces of furniture in my house in Springfield. We chatted about antique guitars a few times, but I had no idea he was in Springfield’s first Rock and Roll Band.

I am a retired state employee who now does consulting and greatly enjoys reading and writing about history. So I take graduate level history classes for fun and enrichment. I am a graduate of UIS with a Masters of Public Administration. I have only lived in Springfield since the mid 1970’s. So the chance to research some of the cultural aspects of Springfield in the 1950’s and 1960’s, with oral history techniques was very appealing. I am a serious fan, with a huge record collection of Rock and Roll recordings and have attended hundreds of Rock and Roll concerts over the years. Being a child of the 1960’s, the Beatles, Beach Boys, Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, etc. have always been my first choice in music listening, along with Folk, Jazz and Blues. I have a tremendous reverence for the founding fathers of Rock and Roll and that first wave of creativity that created this music in the years 1954-1962. Researching the events related to Rock and Roll music during these years (see Timelines Research in the Appendix), gave me a greater appreciation of the Brother’s role in what was an exploding genre of the popular music industry. My job with the State of Illinois for many years was in the State’s Commerce Department, where I was a Research Economist. And as such, I must admit that the economics of the Rock and Roll business during these years was one of my interests while interviewing the Brothers.

My interest in the music industry did inform some of my questions to Ben and Charlie, but mostly I wanted to explore their musical careers. The Band’s history and their cultural impact on the Springfield community in the 1950’s and the 1960’s was also a main concern of my interviews. My
process for conducting the interviews started with the timelines research previously mentioned. Mr. Howarth had prepared a brief history of the brothers that was available on the Springfield High School (SHS) Website for the Class of 1958. He also directed me to a record collector’s website (Terry Gordon) who shares collected information on the brother’s recordings. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio has a terrific timelines website for doing research on Rock an Roll artists, which I used extensively. The Record Industry (RIAA) also has a searchable database website on recordings that have won Gold Records and I used that site for my research. Since the Harmony Brothers as a musical act sounded so similar to the Everly Brothers band, I also became interested in tracking their careers in comparison to the Harmony Brothers. So I used their official website for research.

I conducted initial interviews with Ben (Springfield) and Charlie (Ashland) to let them know about the project, what type of questioning to expect, and the logistics of the interviews (date, time, and place). Both brothers were tremendously generous in allowing me to pour through personal scrapbooks, photos, news clippings, personal mementos and recordings from their careers. These items became the most important sources of research for my interview questions. I decided to have two interviews, interviewing Ben and Charlie separately. I thought about interviewing them together, but decided from my research, that there were two unique musical careers to be explored. I wanted to hear about more then the years they were in the band together. So I wanted both brothers to have as much time as needed on their own, to talk about their careers. I prepared similar questions for both interviews and made lots of revisions to the questions on the second interview (Charlie). These revisions covered topics I missed in the first interview with Ben. The questions and my research notes are also available in the Appendix. I tried to organize my questions around time periods in their careers and Rock and Roll events. I decided to have the interviews videotaped professionally, thinking there might be a future use for these tapes. Throughout the process I became convinced that the brother’s stories would make an interesting documentary film, some day. As performers both brothers seemed to be very comfortable with the taping process.

Both interviews lasted about one and half to almost two hours. Charlie’s interview lasted longer, most likely because of my revisions of questions from Ben’s interview. I tried to get information on topics missed in Ben’s interview. The transcription was a major undertaking, but editing of the interviews was pretty straight forward. I removed many of the overused
phases, such as, “kind of”, “sort of”, “you know”, “everything else”, “all that kind of stuff” and the word “and” if over used. I also tried to removed incomplete thoughts. Both Ben and Charlie indicated that they did not want to review the transcripts.

Vivian Perlis in her article “Oral History and Music”, talks about the oral history interview, “The act of interviewing resembles performance more than research. It requires two players who perform (and sometimes improvise) to create an artifact that did not exist previously” (Perlis, p 610). The interviews with Ben and Charlie were like performances, very enjoyable and entertaining for both the interviewer and narrators. We had a really good time. I think I had great rapport with both brothers and the interviews sound very conversational in nature. We covered the subject pretty completely. Both brothers when asked at the end of the interview, agreed with that statement. I think we did create an archive that did not exist before. We covered most of the territory in detail, that Mr. Howarth had outlined in his blog presentations on the SHS Class of 1958 website. In retrospect I talked too much and tried too hard to work in my timelines research findings. My initial questions were long, but they seemed to cover all the topics well. My follow-up questions provided the best conversational aspects of the interview.

The interviews provided lots of great stories and “telling performances” (Tucker, p 67). One I especially enjoyed involved Charlie at a night club in upstate New York. He was on a business trip and the band performing that night asked him to sing with them. “The audience was going absolutely nuts and they did things (the Band) they had never done before. I knew the songs but had never done them on stage and everything just clicked.” My favorite story from Ben was the night the bar burned down during a New Year’s performance. The interviews, I believe, were very successful at allowing the brothers to provide their perspectives on the music business. They reflected on their careers. They were able to comment on how they feel, they have impacted the cultural life of their community. My attempt, through my questions, to place their careers in the context of what was happening in the music business during those years, was less successful. Yes, they were influenced by the founding fathers of Rock and Roll. Elvis and the Everly Brothers clearly were big influences, once you hear their music. But they were doing their own thing, riding the Rock and Roll tide where ever it took them. And having a great time being local “Teen idols”. I got all my questions answered about the music business, during this period. Except for Elvis, no Rock and Roll stars were making big money on records. They made records to promote their live performances. They loved to and lived to
perform. Such was the case with the Harmony Brothers, they performed all over the Midwest. They performed all the time in Springfield and Central Illinois during these years. They loved every minute of it. They didn’t make a dollar selling records, but entertained thousands of people during this time period.

They got to meet and perform with some of the greatest Rock and Roll artists of the period. Their original songs recorded on Bobbin Records are collector’s items and they sound as good today as the songs of their contemporaries, in my opinion. They came close to being national Rock and Roll stars with the right breaks, it is conceivable that they might have been. They were stars in Springfield, Illinois and the first band to play Rock and Roll. Ben toward the end of his interview said, "You know, I’ll admit it. But it (music) has been one of greatest things in my life. You know probably if our records would have went and we’d have become popular, I don’t know that I’d still be married today. Wouldn’t have my family, my grandkids and it’s, I’m satisfied with it all."
Bibliography


### Rock And Roll Timelines

#### The First Wave

**The Harmony and Everly Brothers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951 to 1953</td>
<td>DJ Alan Freed starts playing “rollicking” R&amp;B on WJW in Cleveland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Harmony Bros. are doing a Country Comedy act in Central Illinois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Everly Bros. are appearing on the Family Radio Show in Iowa.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 1954 | Elvis records “That’s all Right Mamma” |
| | “Rock Around the Clock” hits #1 on the Charts- Bill Haley and the Comets |
| | The Harmony Bros. are doing Talent Shows and Live Radio in Central Illinois. |
| | Don Everly has a song recorded by Kitty Wells in Nashville. |

| 1955 | The Movie “Blackboard Jungle” released |
| | Chuck Berry releases “Maybelline” |
| | Bo Diddley releases “I’m a Man” |
| | The Harmony Bros appear on Live TV Shows in Decatur as Regulars |
| | The Everly Bros. Move to Nashville and are Discovered by Chet Adkins |
1956
- Elvis has five #1 Hits, appears on Ed Sullivan & Milton Berle's TV Shows
- Chuck Berry releases "Roll Over Beethoven"
- Buddy Holly & Jerry Lee Lewis have debut singles
- The Harmony Bros. Start Playing Rock and Roll Full Time in the Midwest
- The Everly Bros. Sign a Record Contract, Record 4 Songs- No Hits

1957
- The Movie "Jailhouse Rock" released
- American Bandstand starts in Philly
- Chuck Berry releases "Johnny B. Goode"
- Jerry Lee Lewis releases "Whole Lotta Shakin Go'in On" & "Great Balls of Fire"
- Buddy Holly releases "That Will be the Day" & "Peggy Sue"
- The Harmony Bros. start playing Rock Clubs like Teenage Rage, The Hop throughout the Midwest
- The Everly Bros. are Regulars on TV Shows like Teenage Rage, The Hop throughout the Midwest
- The Everly Bros. have two million selling hits "Bye Bye Love" & "Wake up Little Susie"

1958
- DJ Allan Freed is indicted in Boston for inciting a riot at a Rock Show
- Elvis is drafted into the Army
- The First Rock & Roll Gold Record goes to Elvis ($1 million in sales)
- The Harmony Bros. are Regulars on TV Shows like Teenage Rage, The Hop throughout the Midwest
- They Win The Battle of the Rock Bands at the Abe Lincoln Hotel in Springfield
- Fabian "Teen idol" Helps Them Get a Recording Contract
- The Everly Bros. Have One #1 Hit and Release 3 other Records

1959
- Buddy Holly's plane goes down, "The Day the Music Died"
- Chuck Berry goes to Jail
- Jerry Lee Lewis involved in a Scandal
- No Rock & Roll Gold Records
- The Harmony Bros. sign a record contract with Bobbin Records in St. Louis
- They Record 4 Original Songs and Release "Baby Tonight" & "You Don't Care"  
- They Become Opening Act for the Shower of Stars Concert Series With Many of The Big Stars of the Era.  
1960-1963

- Elvis Returns From the Army and Has 3 more Gold Records
- The Second Wave of Rock Begins with Motown, Surf Music & Teen Idols
- George Harrison visits Ill. and a Beatles Record is Played on a Benton Radio Station—The British invasion is Near
- The Harmony Bros. Release Two More Records.
- They Get Offers From Other Record Companies But Stay with Bobbin.
- Charlie is Drafted into the Army, Ben Continues the Band
- The Everly Bros have their Last Hits and Don't hit the Charts again until 1967
Interview with Ben Harmony on Tues., Oct. 17 2006 at Ben's Home in Springfield, Ill for an Oral History on the Harmony Brothers musically careers. interviewed by Chris Reynolds, Vid. taping by Dean Williams

Pre 1956

1 Does your Family have a musically backround?

2 What were the kind of music related activities, that pre dated the rock and roll band, that got you started in the music business?

- Guitar Lessons
- Talent shows
- Country Comedy act - parody C&W tunes
- Sq Dances, Schools, churchs, etc

*Item 1: International Music League awards, Balwin-wallance college 1953 Benner Ohio*

3 What was your first Big Show Business Break? 1955
Uncle Tom’s Barn Dance/Stairway to Stars Decatur TV

1956 to 1962

4 When the band really got going in 1956, were you known as the Harmony Boys and is there any significance to the varies names you used for the band:

- Harmony Boys
- Harmony Brothers
- Harmony Brothers & Harmonitones
- Harmony Brothers & Rock a Beats

5 Talk about the importance of the exposure and the experiences of the band on the local versions of American Bandstand type TV programs you appeared on and radio shows?

- Teenage Rage channel 20 springfield
- The Hop Channel 3 Champaign
- Stairway to the Stars channel 13 Decatur
- Radio stations; Spdfs, Decatur, Champaign, Taylorville others.

*Item 2: Picture of TV appearance*

6 Let’s talk about the Artists that may have influenced the music of the Band?

1954 Rock Around the Clock number1 on charts Bill Haley and the Comets
Elvis Presley records "that’s all right Mama" at Sun in Memphis

1955 Bo Diddleys releases :"I"m a Man"
Movie BlackBoard Jungle

1956 Elvis has Five number 1 hits Milton Berle/Ed Sullivan TV shows

1957 American Bandstand in Philly
Everly Brothers have two big hits Bye Bye Love/Wake up little Susie

1958 Alan Freed arrested for inciding a riot in Boston
Jerry Lee Lewis scandal, married under age cousin

1959 Bobby Holly Died (Ritchie Valens,Big Bopper) Winter Dance Tour
the day the music died-- American Pie D.mclean
Motown records started

1960 Elvis in the Army

1961-1964 second wave teen idols- Motown-surf music-Beatles-British invasion

other artists: Chuck Berry, Little Richard,Fats Domino
local artists : Bill Evans, Jules Blatter, Louis Harmony?,Eddie Snow, Roy Williams.
Marvin Jackson, John Crips, Lester Davesport

7 How about the musical styles that influenced the Band and the changing line up of band members and how it affected your sound, style and the composing of your songs?

Country, R&B, Blues
Instruments used : guitars, drums, bass, keyboards, sax
How you wrote your songs? you and Charlies other band members

Item 3: Two photos of a Guitar player

- Ray Dippel
- Gordon Jones
- Bill Waldmire
- Tom Blasko
- Gary Turley
- Jerry Black
- Mike Brokamp

8 What are your memories of the places you played and the artists you performed with as an opening act?

places
Virgil & Betty's
The Derby
Big Earls Hop
Buckhorn
Grandview, Girard,Taylorville
Elks Club
Teenland(controversy closed for time)
Rec center in Cabbage Patch Area
Battle of Bands Abe Lincoln Hotel
Shower of Stars State Armory
Pekin Theater
The Orpheum
County & the state fairs

Artists you may have played with:
Jerry Lee Lewis
Freddy Cannon
Fabian
Chuck Berry
Frankie Avalon
Buddy Holly/Waylon Jenning
Dion and the Belmonts
pictures with Dianna Ross, Louis Armstrong
9 Let's talk about the Bobbin Records years and recording at the Premier recording studios in St Louis 1959-1962?

- How many sessions
- How many songs / covers vs own songs
- Musicians used in sessions
- Who produced the recordings
- R&B focus / play on white stations
- Did you ever know how many copies were sold, royalties, radio stations that played the records
- Group management/offers from other record companies

**Item 4: The letter from Bob Lyons June 1962, Release of Rember me Acceptance of Bobbin in pop field**

**Item 5: Webb Pierce, Decca record picture**

- Fan club fund raisers for recording copyrights fees

**mid 60-70s**

10 **How did the band end?**

- Record company closed 1965
- Charlie to army then Nashville, solo career
- Changes in Rock & Roll Motown/British invasion(Beatles)
- Demands of Family, making a living

11 **Let’s talk about your Bands?**

- Ben Harmony Combo
- Ben Harmony & Rock A Beats

**Item 6: Picture of band with Helen??**

**80's to present**

12 **What has been your involvement with music in the last few years and the success of your current business with your wife Helen?**

- 1998 reunion feeling—songs who decided—20 years since performed with Charlie
- Everly Bros: Bye Bye Love, Ebony Eyes, Let it be me, All I have to do is Dream
- Harmony Bros: Baby Tonight, Lock on the old back door
- Susie Q-CCR- opening with Hank Williams I am so Lonesome

- 2005 Girard performance
- Gospel performances
- Involvement with Family
- Current Business
Interview with Charlie Harmony on Thursday, Nov. 9. 2006 at Dean Williams Studio in Springfield, Ill. for an Oral History on the Harmony Brothers musically careers. interviewed by Chris Reynolds, Vid. taping by Dean Williams

Pre 1956

1. Let's talk about your family? Number of brother and sister? Just you and Ben musically inclined?

2. Before the Rock & Roll Band got started, what got you started in the music business?

- Guitar Lessons
- Talent shows
- Country Comedy act - parody C&W tunes
- Sq Dances, Schools, churches, etc

*Item 1: Morris B. Sachs Amateur Hour Materials*

3. What do you consider your first Big Show Business Break that got the Band well known? 1955

Uncle Tom's Barn Dance/Stairway to Stars Decatur TV

1956 to 1962

4. What are your memories of the Band's TV and Radio appearances?

American Bandstand type TV programs 1957

- Teenage Rage channel 20 springfield
- The Hop Channel 3 Champaign
- Stairway to the Stars channel 13 Decatur
- Radio stations; Spfd, Decatur, Champaign, Taylorvilee others.
- Jim Austin DJ
- Jim McKinney DJ
- Russ Carter St Louis Hop
- Harry King, DJ

5. How about the Artists that may have influenced the music of the Band?

- 1954 Rock Arround the Clock number1 on charts Bill Haley and the Comets
- Elvis Presley records "thats all right Mama" at Sun in Memplis
- 1955 Bo Diddleys releases :"I'm a Man"
- Movie BlackBoard Jungle
- 1956 Elvis has Five number 1 hits Milton Berle/Ed Sullivan TV shows

1957 American Bandstand in Philly
Everly Brothers have two big hits Bye Bye Love/Wake up little Susie

- 1958 Alan Freed arrested for inciding a riot in Boston
- Jerry Lee Lewis scandal, married under age cousin

- 1959 Buddy Holly Died (Ritchie Valens,Big Bopper) Winter Dance Tour
the day the music died-- American Pie D.mclean
Motown records started

- 1960 Elvis in the Army

1961-1964 second wave teen idols- Motown-surf music-Beatles-British invasion

other artists: Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Fats Domino
local artists: Hobbie Henson, Bill Evans, Jules Blatter, Louis Harmony?, Eddie Snow, Roy Williams.
Marvin Jackson, John Crips, Lester Davesport
Tieken Brothers from Quincy
5 How about the musical styles that influenced the Band and the changing line up of band members and how it affected your sound, style and the composing of your songs?

- stage outfits?
- Country, R&B, Blues
- Instruments used: guitars, drums, bass, keyboards, sax
- How you wrote your songs? Ben and you, other band members

- Ray Dippel (guitar)
- Gordon Jones (drums)
- Bill Waldmire (drums)
- Tom Blasko (keyboards)
- Gary Turley (drums)
- Jerry Black (sax)
- Mike Brokamp (keyboards)
- Rich Hopper (bass)

6 What are your memories of the places you played?
(1959, 87 appearances, was this a peak year for the Band)

- places
  - Virgil & Betty's
  - The Derby
  - Big Earl's Hop
  - Buckhorn
  - Grandview, Girard, Taylorville
  - Elks Club
  - Teenland (controversy closed for time)
  - Rec center in Cabbage Patch Area
  - Battle of Bands Abe Lincoln Hotel
  - Shower of Stars State Armory
  - Pekin Theater
  - The Orpheum
  - County & the state fairs
  - Midwest locations: Iowa, Mo

7 Artists you may have played with:
- Jerry Lee Lewis
- Freddy Cannon
- Fabian
- Chuck Berry
- Frankie Avalon
- Buddy Holly/Waylon Jenning
- Dion and the Belmonts

pictures with Dianna Ross, Louis Armstrong

*Folder of Pictures of other Performers*

8 Let's talk about the Bobbin Records years and recording at the Premier recording studios in St Louis 1959-1962?

- Fabian's role in signing
- How many sessions
- How many songs / covers vs own songs
- 1959 June

1960 Feb

1962 Aug

- musicians used in sessions
- who produced the recordings
- R&B focus / play on white stations
- Did you ever know how many copies were sold, royalties, radio stations that played the records
group management/offers from other record companies
Availability of Bobbin recording on Internet, sold to British Co.

Item 3: The letter from Bob Lyons June 1962, Release of Remember me
Acceptance of Bobbin in pop field

9 What do you remember about your Band's Fan club hear in Town?

fund raisers for recording copyrights fees: Orme, Painter, Robinson
Business Sponsors: Bob Reed TV, Pegawell Pete

Item 4: Fan Club Photos

mid 60-70s

10 How did the band end?

Record company closed 1965
army, Nashville, solo career, other Bands
Changes in Rock & Roll Motown/British invasion (Beatles)

11 Let's talk about your Nashville experience and the Bands you played with during this period?

The Accents
rejoins Band 1966
The Razors Edge
Golden Voice Recording Studio in Pekin Demos
Cecil Null
Cedar Publishing
Mercury Records
The Blue Eyed Soul
New Salem Country Opry
Tom Blasko Bands
2nd Time Around

Country Soul

Item 5: Single on JEB

Item 6: pages of songs

Item 7: Folder of Pictures of Charlie

80's to present

12 What has been your involvement with music in the last few years and other activities?

Music Therapy-McFarland
Ceramics Shop in Ashland
Sangamon County-political involvement
1996 reunion feeling--songs who decided--20 years since performed with Charlie
Everly Bros: Bye Bye Love, Ebony Eyes, Let it be me, All I have to do is Dream
Harmony Bros: Baby Tonight, Lock on the old back door
Susie Q-CCR- opening with Hank Williams I am so Lonesome
JB comment on $150 Bobbin records in England
Hadn't sung with Ben for 20 years
Health issues

Item 8: SJR article: A donor saved Charlie's life