

The Dukays

**Never credited Chicago Vocal Group
recorded a million seller**



The Dukays circa 1964. Left to right: Claude McCrae, James Lowe, Earl Edwards, Richard Dixon.

The Dukays are a well-respected Chicago vocal group of the early 1960s, known for a few moderate rhythm and blues hits, but few collectors realise they also recorded one of the most famous early soul records of all time. The record sold more than a million copies and became the number one song in the country, yet the Dukays, to their everlasting misfortune, were never credited on the record.

By now some astute readers have caught on that the record was 'Duke Of Earl', made famous by Gene Chandler, or Eugene Dixon to use his birth name. He was the Dukays' first lead singer and as lead he recorded the song with the group, but a marketing decision resulted in the turn of events that had him alone credited on the record. Chandler became the 'Duke of Earl' and went on to national fame, and in the process made and lost a fortune, while the rest of the group continued on a few more years with only intermittent success.

The Dukays are worthy of interest, however, because artistically, they helped bridge the earlier doowop era with the emerging soul era by creating a music that partook of both styles. The Dukays helped pioneer soul.

At the time of the Dukays' first record in May 1961, the group consisted of lead Eugene Dixon, baritone Earl Edwards, second tenor James Lowe, bass Ben Broyles and Shirley Johnson, who sang the male part of first tenor. The group had been around for some time before in various aggregations, and were thoroughly a product of the doowop era when the cities were alive with the sounds of harmonising street corner groups, each in vigorous competition with one another. The first collection of Dukays came out of the Englewood neighbourhood on the city's South Side and got together when they were high schoolers about 1957.

Edwards – the Dukays' spokesman, leader, founder and self-confessed daddy of the group – tells of its formation: "I met one of the fellows when

he was robbing a bus, Ben Broyles. I decided I would be a good guy and make a nice guy out of him. I found out that he liked to sing, so every chance I got I had him come around to sing to keep him out of trouble. That's the way I got started with him.

"With the other fellows, we used to get together on the corner, 59th and May, and sing and choose sides. Then, nobody wanted to choose me because I was new in Chicago, and they didn't think I could sing. I had to take what was left, and it turned out that the fellows I chose were better than any of those other guys.

"A man had a barber shop in the neighbourhood and his name was Cooper. He picked the name for us, and said he was going to call us the 'Dukays'. We would go into his shop and rehearse and have little contests. That's the way Gene Chandler joined my group. We had about four guys. He liked the way we did things, so he decided to leave his group, the Gay Tones, and sing with us."

Dixon left the Dukays in about 1957 to go into the Army, but while he was gone the group continued to stay together and sing in the neighbourhood. Dixon got out in 1960, and upon his return immediately reclaimed his place in the group. He also brought along his cousin, Shirley Johnson, whom the group felt would be a novel attraction since it was not all that common for females to be in male groups. The group in early 1961 consisted of Eugene Dixon, Benjamin Broyles, Shirley Johnson, Earl Edwards and Motee Thurston, but soon James Lowe was brought in to replace Thurston. This aggregation of Dukays was at the point in their singing where they were ready to go beyond street corner harmonising to actually making records, but they were weak on original material and sought the help of Bernice Williams, a Chicago songwriter.

Williams worked with the group, polished their act, and developed some songs for them, and after some months the Dukays were ready for the recording studio. Their producer was Carl Davis, a brilliant young man

who was new to producing. Davis was assisted by one of the town's veteran record men, Bill 'Bunky' Sheppard. The sessions resulted in the following songs: 'The Big Lie', 'Festival Of Love', 'Kissin' In The Kitchen', 'The Girl's A Devil', 'Nite Owl' and 'Duke Of Earl' (this session as it turned out, established Davis as a remarkable producing talent and he later went on to become the city's leading rhythm and blues record producer).

Most of the songs were typical of the period - partly in the group harmony tradition and partly in the soul style. The full panoply of vocal parts were allowed to assert themselves well in front of the few instruments employed in the mix, but despite this 1950s complexion, there is a subtle soul element in the hard-edged vocals.

'The Girl's A Devil' was first released on the Nat label, in the Spring of 1961. Sheppard and Davis jointly owned Nat, but the record was distributed by Lesgal Productions. After the record entered Billboard's pop Top Hundred on 15th May, 1961, it lasted a relatively long thirteen weeks on the chart, going as high as 64.

The song, written by Williams, has a terrific urban flavour, well conveyed by Dixon's soulful and perfectly enunciated delivery (Chandler's unique singing style is worth a whole separate article). The flip, 'The Big Lie', was a pure 1950s doowop ballad, a strong performance.

The follow-up to 'The Girl's A Devil' was the equally masterful 'Nite Owl', another Williams composition, thoroughly evocative of the rough streets of Chicago. Its flip, 'Festival Of Love', is an emerging doowop ballad and underrated. 'Nite Owl' broke into the Billboard Top Hundred chart on 20th January, 1962, slipped off the chart on 24th February, but returned for one more week on 31st March, lasting six weeks and going to position 73. Billboard had a terrible rhythm and blues chart during the early 1960s, and showed no activity for any Dukays records, The Cash Box rhythm and blues chart, however, while not showing activity for 'The Girl's A Devil', shows for 'Nite Owl', a nine week run the highest position at 15.

The Dukays' next big song, 'Duke Of Earl', was recorded the same time as 'Nite Owl'. The story of why 'Gene Chandler' appeared on the record instead of the group name is explained by Edwards: "Both records were sent to New York and our distributor, Lesgal, had to pick which one he wanted. He didn't particularly like 'Duke Of Earl', so he picked 'Nite Owl'. And this is the one he put out. In the meantime, Vee Jay wanted to put out whatever record we had left, which was 'Duke Of Earl'. Therefore, we had two records out at the same time. Now you got to have two different artists."

The marketing strategy was to put the name of an individual on the record because the song was written from the point of view of an individual ('I'm the Duke of Earl...'). Edwards, in fact, helped write and originally conceived the song from his personal point of view, so one could say that Edwards was the original Duke of Earl.

When it looked as if 'Duke Of Earl' was going to be a hit, Davis and Sheppard began looking for an artist to be 'Gene Chandler' to tour. At that time, 'Perk' Perkins - a member of the Sheppards, which was another Sheppard managed group - was attending a show in Gary, Indiana, where a young singer by the name of Charles Davis was performing. Davis had been singing for some years, having earlier been in a high school vocal group called the Trinidads, which had recorded two awful records for Formal. Charles Davis related: "Perk heard me sing and said: 'Sheppard needs a singer; you're a single artist and I liked the show so come on down'. So I met with Bill Sheppard and Carl Davis and auditioned. It was just about all set and I was going to be Gene Chandler."

Edwards, however, had different ideas on this matter and approached Sheppard and Davis. He explained: "I told them that the Dukays sang the songs and it would be wrong to take somebody off the street. I said let Eugene Dixon be Gene Chandler and Charles Davis lead for the Dukays. I told Eugene: "Look man, you should be Gene Chandler, because if this song makes it, I'd rather it be you because you led the song for the Dukays. Now if the song doesn't make it, you can come right back with the Dukays."

"A lot of people dislike Gene Chandler for leaving the group, but he just didn't leave. This was a mutual understanding between me and him, because I was the leader of the group. I told him that the song wasn't going to make it. This is what I thought, you know. I told him, "you make your couple of bucks and come right on back to the Dukays." It didn't work out that way."

That is the way Edwards remembered it, but it is more likely that Davis and Sheppard all along were going to pull Eugene Dixon out of the group. Carl Davis, when he first heard the Dukays practising the song, while on a session to record 'Nite Owl', he heard 'Duke Of Earl' immediately as a potential pop hit.

The group claimed they were not ready to record the song yet, as it was not completely written. He told them to go back to Bernice Williams and get the song finished. The next day they went into the studio and recorded it. As testimony to how Chicago was quickly developing as a soul music centre, 'Duke Of Earl' was an incredible production and arrangement. Davis was a fan of movie star Jeff Chandler, and as Gene Chandler told me in a semi-conspiratorial voice, they thought it was 'sort of a white name', which would be good on a record that they felt would go pop.

The 'Duke Of Earl', beginning on 13th January, went on to stay fifteen weeks on Billboard's pop chart, including three weeks in the number one position.

Vee Jay claimed the record as a million seller and Dixon went on to fame as Chandler and the Dukays were left with no credit and no glory. But with Charles Davis as their new lead, they did have a contract with Vee Jay, and were able to continue to reap rewards on their past hits as well as on their more modest later successes. Before the first Vee Jay session dates, however, Shirley Johnson left the group and was replaced with Margaret 'Cookie' Stone.

The first record for the Davis led Dukays was 'Please Help', a novelty number, backed with 'I'm Gonna Love You So', a ballad. Both songs got a lot of play in the Spring of 1962 on a regional basis, in Chicago, Philadelphia and Indianapolis, but did virtually nothing nationally. 'Please Help' even went pop in Chicago on the powerful WLS station.

The next record, 'I Feel Good All Over' b/w 'I Never Knew', came out later in the year and was much less a commercial success... 'I Never Knew', an emotionally sung but quiet ballad, deserved a better reception because it ranks as one of the Dukays' best sides.

About this time the Dukays made a tour on the black theater circuit. The touring group consisted of Earl Edwards, James Lowe, Richard Dixon (who had been with the Tangiers, an unrecorded group) and James Brown. Dixon mentioned some of the songs they performed: 'Please Help' was like a novelty number that got the audience up. 'I'm Gonna Love You So' was like a rest number - we did it slower than the recording. We were still putting all our prestige off on 'Duke Of Earl'. We would go with 'Duke Of Earl' and 'Nite Owl'. Once in awhile we would do 'Girl's A Devil', but the audience would prefer 'Nite Owl', 'Curfew Time' they would call it.

The Dukays did two more sides for Vee Jay, 'Combination' b/w 'Every Step', which were released in January, 1963. The record, to put it mildly, bombed. Davis, Broyles and Cookie then left the group. Davis tells what happened: "We fell into a lull. I always relate it back to the money the group got from 'Duke Of Earl'."

It seemed as if the group kind of lost its enthusiasm at that time. The record was a top record and the Dukays never got that much credit for it. Locally, everybody knew the group did the record, but from a national standpoint, nothing. They received substantial royalties from the record, and when that happened, I think Ben Broyles was the first to kind of drift away. They received close to seven grand apiece all at one time. Earl was always the stabilising force - he really kind of kept it together - but then after he bought a building, the group started drifting away and stopped rehearsing. They just sort of lost motivation.

Charles Davis went on to become a member of the Artistics for a few months, and then recorded by himself as Nolan Chance, coming up with some local hits, notably 'She's Gone' and 'Just Like The Weather', in 1965.

The group, or what was left of it, brought in Claude McCrae as the new lead and Richard Dixon as a permanent addition. They went over to George Leaner's One-Der-Ful records, but the company failed to come up with a release for them. A backing track from Motown had somehow been obtained, illegally as it turned out, but the group recorded a song on it. The company, after some internal bickering on whether to release the song or not, decided to shelve it, perhaps wisely. The group then moved to Chess, but Edwards says they "didn't do anything there, mostly hung around."

Jerry T. Murray (Jerrio), who was writing and arranging for One-Der-Ful at the time, finally gave the group a chance to record again in 1964, on his own Jerry-O label. Murray had them do two songs, 'The Jerk' and 'Mellow-Feznecky'. 'The Jerk', released in November 1964, preceded the Larks' considerably different song by the same name and had substantial sales in Chicago.

The record was initially released with an instrumental flip ('Mo' Jerk'), but a second release had as flip a dance song, 'Say You Love Me', as by the Dukays, but the artist is actually Willie Logan and the Plaids. 'The Jerk' also made considerable noise in Philadelphia and in Cleveland, where it was number one for two weeks. However, after the Larks' 'The Jerk' came out, the Dukays' effort died as far as national success was concerned. The group was able to parlay a tour off the song, however. 'Mellow-Feznecky',



Gene Chandler - the 'Duke Of Earl' - 1962 promo photograph.

PROVEN HIT SINGLES ON Vee Jay!

<p>"DANCE ROMEO DANCE" by THE ROMEDOS <i>(Formerly THE KING PINZ)</i> Vee Jay #494</p>	<p>DEE CLARK'S COMPILOT "I'M A SOLDIER BOY" or "SHOOK UP OVER YOU" Vee Jay #487</p>
<p>"HIS AND HERS" by TONY DOUGLAS Vee Jay #481</p>	<p><i>(Selling well everywhere)</i> "EVERY STEP" by THE DUKAYS Vee Jay #491</p>
<p>"ENDLESS NIGHT" by JIMMY CLANTON ACE #8906</p>	<p>"MY BABE" by THE RED WEST COMBO SANTO #9006</p>

From the B&R Archive.



The Dukays 1961. From the top: Eugene Dixon, Benjamin Broyles, James Lowe, Earl Edwards and Shirley Johnson.



The Dukays 1961. Eugene Dixon, Benjamin Broyles, Earl Edwards, Shirley Johnson.

released in 1965, was inspired by the term a local deejay, Herb Kent, coined for attractive girls. The group made all the Kent record hops to push the record, but the song never made it, except for a few local sales. The Dukays broke up at that point.

For the most part, the various members of the Dukays did not remain in music after they had left the group. Aside from Gene Chandler, the notable exception, Charles Davis was able to continue in a part-time capacity under the name of Nolan Chance.

Richard Dixon joined a new aggregation of the Magnificents, whose other members were Ray Ramsey of the original group, James Pleasant and Clarence Jasper. Dixon says that he made more money playing nightclubs as a member of the Magnificents than he ever did touring with the Dukays.



After the Magnificents association, Dixon tried to continue in the business for a while as a single artist, without making any headway. Edwards never gave up his love for music either, continuing his interest within the church, directing a choir at Mt. Olive Missionary Baptist Church, which broadcast weekly on local radio in Chicago.

Discography

Nat

- 4001 The Girl's A Devil/The Big Lie 5/1961
- 4002 Nite Owl/Festival Of Love 11/1961
- 4003 Duke Of Earl/Kissin' In The Kitchen
Although listed in Dukays discographies, there is no evidence that 4003 was ever released. 12/1961

Vee-Jay

- 416 Duke Of Earl/Kissin' In the Kitchen
Released as by Gene Chandler 1/1962
- 430 Nite Owl/Festival Of Love 1962
- 442 Please Help/I'm Gonna Love You So 5/1962
- 460 I Feel Good All Over/I Never Knew 9/1962
- 491 Combination/Every Step 1/1963

Jerry-O

- 105 The Jerk/Mo' Jerk (inst.) 11/1964
- 105 The Jerk/Say You Love Me
- 'Say' is actually by Willie Logan and the Plaids 1964
- 106 Mellow-Feznecky/Sho Nuf M. F. (inst.) 1965