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A conversation with the architects of the Philly Sound, Kenny Gamble & Leon Huff

Scott Paton

A step into the lobby at 309 S. Broadway in Philadelphia is a step back into time. The gilded, gated doors close as the elevator operator punches the button for the second floor. Moments later, the pulleys and cable come to a stop, and the doors open on to a lobby and offices that seem frozen in time, some 30-odd years ago. To the casual observer, a professional makeover might be in order. But to a fan of early-'60s pop or '70s soul music, the surroundings are resplendent in their untouched glory, a virtual shrine to two creative, indelible eras in recorded history.

The home of Cameo-Parkway Records from 1956 to 1967, this building drew aspiring songwriters, from near and far, hoping to pitch their tunes to the likes of Chubby Checker, Bobby Rydell and the Orlons. Among those young hopefuls were poet/lyricist Kenneth Gamble and keyboardist extraordinaire Leon Huff, and while their early attempts to "storm the castle" were often thwarted, they ultimately ascended to become the preeminent writer/producers on the local scene, and the most important force in R&B/Soul music since the heyday of Motown Records. In 1972, they purchased the building for their *own* enterprise, Philadelphia International Records.

As architects of "the Philly Sound", Gamble & Huff crafted sophisticated funk classics for the O'Jays, Harold Melvin & the Blues, Teddy Pendergrass, the Intruders, Lou Rawls and others that ushered in the Disco Era, setting a standard for dance-friendly, yet lyrical songcraft, that remains unmatched. But after 25 years as hit record makers and entrepreneurs, Gamble & Huff pulled back from the music scene, devoting their energies to more personal endeavors and community outreach and urban redevelopment projects in their beloved hometown.

In 2008, however, their illustrious past came calling. A CD and vinyl compilation of obscure 45s, “Conquer the World: The Lost Soul of Philadelphia International Records”, whetted the appetite of devotees hungering for hidden Gamble & Huff treasures. And a new distribution deal with Sony/BMG has resulted in an ongoing campaign of reissued classics and comprehensive anthologies of legendary Philly International artists, culminating with “Love Train: The Sound of Philadelphia”, a four-disc box set and G&H career overview. In perfect synchronicity, this past year also heralded Kenneth Gamble & Leon Huff’s induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

Kenny Gamble & Leon Huff at the board, 309 S. Broadway

Our interview with Kenny and Huff took place in the second floor studio of Philadelphia International, the site, not only, of many of their own storied accomplishments, but the precise spot –as Huff pointed out—where Chubby Checker had recorded “The Twist” nearly 50 years ago. 65 and 66, respectively, Kenny and Leon both look about ten years younger. And while photographs over the decades typically portray the duo as stern and steely in countenance, in person they are quick to smile and laugh as they reminisce.

Hall-of-Fame inductions and career retrospectives lend themselves to nostalgia and reflection, and both gentlemen liberally name-checked mentors, musicians and friends who had contributed to their success. Their joy was evident as they conjured up memories of their many musical triumphs. By the end of a scheduled, 30-minute interview that had stretched to two-plus hours, I felt that I was not so much in the presence of two American music legends, but two really cool cats who enjoyed nothing more than the thrill of coming up with a great new song.

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Leon Huff & Kenny Gamble hoist their Rock Hall of Fame statuettes for the press

Scott Paton: Congratulations on your induction in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

Kenny Gamble: Thrill of a lifetime.

SP: And perhaps overdue.

Leon Huff: That's what everybody says.

SP: What does this honor mean to you? You've been celebrated and received countless awards—what does this one in particular mean to you?

KG: It's like the icing on the cake. You know, it's special in many ways because, first of all, it's just great just to be inducted in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, but it's even more special because we're the first-time recipients of the Ahmet Ertegun Award (*formerly the "Non-Performer" category, reserved for writers/producers/label founders, etc.*) and that makes it different, makes it more special, because of the history of Ahmet Ertegun (*founder, Atlantic Records, d. 2006*) and his contribution to the industry. We have a lot of respect for him.

SP: And you did some good work for him years ago, too.

KG: Yeah, we worked with Atlantic and we knew Ahmet and Neshui Ertegun, Tommy Dowd (*Atlantic engineer, d. 2002*) and we worked really close with Jerry Wexler (*Atlantic producer, d. 2008*).

SP: It's also an exciting time because in your new deal with Sony, you've sort of gone back home with the outfit that had distributed Philly International back in the 70s and, for once, your whole catalog is under one roof and it really opens up opportunities to put things together and provide a complete history of the label.

KG: We had left CBS and went to EMI for distribution, and we were there for quite some time—had a good relationship with them. A certain portion of the catalog came back to us in 1989, so we decided to go back and put it all together. Now CBS is Sony/BMG, you know, and we have so much product that is unreleased and things like that. It gives an opportunity to do a variety of creative things with the catalog that we haven't done, so I think this is where we're gonna be. This'll be it. We won't be moving around anymore, we'll stay there for the duration.

SP: I want to jump back to the early days of the Philadelphia scene-- I know you were a huge Dells fan, Kenny, and Leon, on your end of it, who was exciting you? As a keyboard player were you big into Fats Domino, Jerry Lee Lewis and things like that?

LH: Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, basically Little Richard. When I was young I listened to him because he had a hell of a band called the Upsetters and Little Richard was rockin' and rolling. So I really liked to watch him.

Little Richard & the Upsetters circa 1957

SP: Philly had a big doo-wop scene. A lot of local bands emerged nationally from here-- the Turbans (*"When You Dance", #33, 1955*) were the first to crack the scene. Leon, you were across the river in Camden. Did you have to cross the bridge over to Philly or was there a pretty good local scene there, too?

LH: Oh yeah. Camden had a nice music program through the school system and I played in the marching bands. I was the drummer all through elementary school and junior high school. After I graduated in 1960, I started going to Philadelphia, hanging out in the clubs, in and out of jazz clubs. The whole Delaware Valley was on fire with music, the whole area, so you basically got to pick and choose. But fortunately, I met Gamble, so that was when I started hanging in Philadelphia playing on record gigs. I was a studio musician.

SP: Kenny, your ambition at that time was really to be a singer, a crooner. You cut quite a few sides yourself. Did that really precede any ambition to be a songwriter?

KG: Really, I was just trying to get in the business any way I could. We had a lot of different groups that I was a part of. Even in high school I used to sing. I was always looking for a way to figure out how to get into the music industry because Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers, Little Anthony & the Imperials, the Dells, the Spaniels—all those groups, they were like my inspiration when I was growing up. Everyone wanted to be like Little Anthony and Frankie Lymon. They were like the Jackson 5 of my era.

Template for the Jackson 5—Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers

But you know I never really did like singing that much. I like writing the songs. Singing onstage wasn't really something I think I was that good at, but we had a great band. Our band was good and that was a joy, to work with the band. In fact, I believe that if we had concentrated on that band and recorded it more we could've gotten ahead because we were really good onstage. We were really performers.

LH: Especially when we did those frat parties.

KG: Yeah, for colleges and stuff.

KG: We did the circuit with Little Anthony.

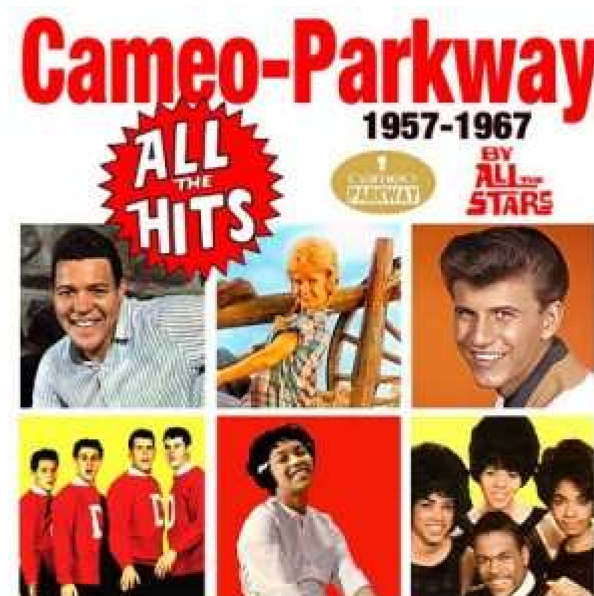
LH: Chubby Checker, we worked with Chubby Checker. Worked with Lloyd Price. But Gamble was the one that had the best band and the most exciting show on the whole circuit, and I had to get in that band. Tommy (*aka songwriter/producer Thom Bell*) was the original keyboard player.

SP: Was this the Romeos?

LH: Yeah. And during that time, with my own confidence as a musician, I was ready to get in someone's band and it just so happened at that time. Timing was perfect.

Camden's a small place, word of mouth gets around if something exciting happens. Who's this Kenny Gamble? I ain't never seen him, never heard of him in my life. But all I kept hearing was, "You gotta go this weekend and catch Kenny Gamble and the Romeos. That's all I heard. So I was working up at the hospital, and I got off early one Sunday and I hitchhiked a ride with one of my friends down there, and I'm pulling up to this club that had lines around the block. Buses in the parking lot; I said, "Who are they?" (*laughs*) "Somebody's gotta be exciting in there!" And they was in there ripping it up, so I had to get in there. It took me about a half an hour to get inside the place. So later on, after I met Gamble and I eventually got in that band, my musicianship stepped up when I met these Philly guys.

KG: I guess I always wrote songs, though. Always wrote poetry, lyrics, and stuff like that. I didn't know what it was at first, then when I started to come downtown, me and Tommy Bell— we recorded as a duet, Kenny and Tommy. There was a songwriter/producer named Jerry Ross (*Spanky & Our Gang, Keith, Bobby Hebb, Jay & the Techniques, et al*) who worked in the Shubert Building, which was right around the corner from Jefferson Medical College where I was working, and I used to come down there after work and on weekends and Jerry basically showed me a lot of things about writing songs. He said, "Okay, this is how the format goes." Once I'd seen those formats, I just picked it up real quick, and I played guitar a little bit. So I used to come down there to the Shubert Building every day to learn.



Clockwise – *Chubby Checker, JoAnn Campbell, Bobby Rydell, the Orlons, Dee Dee Sharp, the Dovells*

Now across the street, in *this* building, was Cameo Parkway Records, and I used to try to get in here. They were on fire with Chubby Checker, the Orlons, DeeDee

Sharp, Bobby Rydell and the Dovells. They were a tremendous force in the music industry, so all along I'm trying to figure out how do you get into music business; how do you make a living in music business so you can do it all the time? That was my major thing. So I made a few records, and another guy that was instrumental was a guy named Herb Johnson (*"Guilty", Len Records, 1960— did not chart*) who really showed me how to play the guitar. He didn't know how to play too many chords, but whatever chords he taught me I was able to write songs with. I knew about six or eight chords.

SP: That's five more than you need.

KG: (*laughs*) That's all I needed. I used to write songs with him; he was recording at that time. Herb was a real good friend of mine. He had a tremendous voice. And you meet people along the way that help you. Like a guy named Jimmy Bishop was a big help because he had a record label with Barbara Mason and the Volcanoes, who eventually became the Trammps, and Bishop afforded me the opportunity to get into the studio. Huff used to play on the sessions. We'd be in the studio all night. We'd come out of that studio at seven, eight o' clock in the morning. But the beauty of it was that Bishop afforded me a chance. He told me to work the board (recording console). I didn't know anything about the board but he gave me the opportunity to learn.

SP: And the Shubert Building was the Philly equivalent of New York's famed Brill Building.

KG: Yeah, me and Huff, we started out with one office and we wound up with the whole floor. Sixth floor of the Shubert Building— one office, a piano and a desk.

LH: With three legs. (*laughter*)

KG: Let me tell you something. See this building here? They used to kick me out of this building. Kal Mann, Bernie Lowe (*co-founders of Cameo-Parkway Records*) – Bernie was my friend—but they told the secretaries, "Don't let Kenny up here," 'cause I was trying to hustle my tunes. They said "Kenny's in the building. "Kenny's in the building." Listen, there was a secretary who used to come after me and put her finger in my face. I said, "Who you talking to?" But she was just doing her job. But they didn't want me in the building, and the irony of the whole thing is that we wound up buying the building and continuing on with the sound of Philadelphia. So you never know who's coming in around you 'cause I didn't wanna hurt nobody, I just wanted to get in the music business.

LH: They had their little nucleus and didn't want no outsiders.

KG: But there was one guy who used to come here, he was African American. Nate McCalla, who had a label called Calla Records (*"But It's Alright", J.J. Jackson, 1966; "I Love You For All Seasons", The Fuzz, 1971*). He was from New York, and so when I

saw him one day, I was outside the building trying to get in and he came by. I said, "Who that guy?" They said, "Nate McCalla, he's got a record company." I said, "That's the guy I need to talk to." So when I saw him again, I came over to him and said, "Listen, I gotta talk to you but they won't let me up in the building." So he brought me up here, put me in his office for maybe half an hour, forty-five minutes. I said, "Look, I know how to write songs." I said, "I gotta figure out how to make some money. How do you make some money in the music business?" And he took out a legal pad. I wish I had that paper today. And he wrote it out—the whole thing. He said, "This is how much you pay to get a record pressed, this is how much the artist gets, this is how much the publisher gets, this is how much the producer gets…" He wrote everything down, and that's the first time somebody had explained it to me that way, and from that one little sheet of paper that's how I figured out the whole record business.

LH: And how important publishing was.

KG: Because nobody would give us information. "Well, what about publishing?" "Don't worry about publishing, we'll take care of it." Like it's some great big mystery. It's not a big mystery.

SP: Sure they'll take care of it; you'll never see a dime!

KG: (*laughs*) Well, not only that you'll never see a dime, but the thing of it is the sharing of information and that's how we were able to break people in with us.

There are people you meet along the way—they add something to your life. At moments like this you have the time to reflect and talk about those people who gave you advice. There have been a lot of people during the course of this journey that we've been on that helped make Gamble and Huff what we are. Guys like John Madara & Dave White *("At The Hop," {Danny & the Juniors}, "The Fly" {Chubby Checker}, "1-2-3" {Len Barry} and "You Don't Own Me" {Lesley Gore}*), Leroy Lovett (*Patty & the Emblems, the Intruders, Cindy Scott)* and Jerry Ross. And we appreciate them.

But once we were able to make a few dollars and wake up every morning and all we had to do was music, boy, that was a tremendous blessing, and a lot of it happened because of the information we got. If you don't know how to make money or make a living in the industry, somebody's gotta tell you 'cause there was no information out there available.

SP: And they weren't writing books about how to succeed in the music industry back then.

KG: Especially African-Americans, 'cause you know the history of African people in this business. They just ripped them off, took all their music, took their songs, gave them a hundred dollars, and there was no help. So I thank Nate McCalla and all

these guys for sharing that information 'cause if it hadn't been for him to show me how to make money out in the industry…

LH: You wouldn't have gotten no publishing if you didn't know the game.

KG: No, if you didn't know the game. And getting paid…not only your royalties, but also getting paid to do the work, to be a producer and owning your masters. This is all the kind of information he gave me, which was great.

Leon & Kenny mining some early gold, circa 1967

SP: Do you remember specifically the first moment that *you* two guys met? Do you remember the occasion?

KG: Me and Huff? Oh yeah.

LH: Coming in and out of the Shubert Building, it was just a coincidence we both ended up in that elevator on this particular date. That's where the first introduction was. We introduced ourselves and it grew from there. Then Gamble came over to my house in Camden.

KG: He had a piano there.

LH: It was just a matter of time before I met a person who thinks as quickly as me, and Gamble was that person. And these two brains connected. One day, the first time me and Gamble really got to feel each other out was when he hired me to play on one of his record sessions. And it was a big hit.

KG: "The 81". Candy & the Kisses. (*Cameo 336, #51, 1964*)

LH: And the session was swinging.

KG: Yeah it was.

LH: And only certain musicians could play that groove that Gamble was trying to get out of us as musicians, and we rocked it.

KG: That record was on Cameo Parkway, and Candy and the Kisses were really good, you know—three young, beautiful girls from Brooklyn. And so I told Jerry Ross, "Get Huff—he's gotta play the piano." But Jerry knew Huff through Johnny Madara; we all kind of knew each other because the Shubert was small and me and Huff were the only African-Americans in the building.

When we first got together, Huff and I wrote six, seven songs in two or three hours, the first time we sat down. So we knew something was up. I'm talking about finished songs. This was like, "Hey, we gotta do this again." Huff and I used to write every day. Some days we'd write ten songs, some days three songs. We just wrote songs all the time.

SP: How much of those early efforts was discipline versus inspiration? I know the old Brill Building ethic when the writers at Aldon or one of those other New York publishing companies at 1650 Broadway had to sit in a cubicle and pound it out, but obviously you didn't have anybody telling you to do that.

KG: Our stuff was project based—we didn't just write to be writing, were writing for (specific) artists and sessions.

SP: What was the first thing that you guys wrote that got cut? I know you did something on Freddy Cannon.

KG: Freddy Cannon. What was that song? Monkey something…"Do the Monkey?" (*"Everybody Monkey", #52, 1963*) And then we had another song, "All I Wanna Be Is Your Boom Forever." Jerry Ross came up with that title. That was with Swan Records.

And it just happened that as soon as me and Huff got together, it seemed like the magic happened. It started with the Intruders. Huff had worked with the Intruders with producer Leroy Lovett. I always loved the Intruders, they were my favorite group when I was growing up, even in high school. They were performing at a place in west Philly at 40th and Gerard, which was a bad neighborhood at that time for a guy from South Philly, and I snuck out there to go see them.

And I said, "Boy, these guys…" I used to love their sound. And then when Huff and I got together, he was rehearsing them one day and there was a great song that he did— "You Belong To Me". That's a great song. So the Intruders came along with me and Huff, and then when we started rehearsing them over in Jersey, we used to go to Huff's house and his wife, Anita, made chicken for us. It was a beautiful family kind of environment where we rehearsed the Intruders and then came up with

songs like "United", "Gonna Be Strong" and "Together"—all of these were regional kind of hits.

But they showed Huff and I the potential of our collaboration and then, all of a sudden, you know, we jump up with "Cowboys to Girls" (*#1, 1968*) that enabled us to stay in the studio.

SP: But the first one you guys really hit out of the park was the Soul Survivors' "Expressway to Your Heart". One of the classic, classic blue-eyed soul records. They were unknown, nationally, at the time; they had just gotten together shortly before that. How did you two hook up with them and have that deal come about?

KG: They were a very popular group here in Philly and New Jersey, and Jerry Blavat (*one of the top Philly deejays*), who also was a tremendous help to us, said, "Come on, write something for the Soul Survivors." Me and Huff came up with that song, and it was the Soul Survivors' band on that track; they could play. We cut that song right up here in Cameo Parkway's studio.

And I think that song was different. It was unique because the expressway or freeway or whatever you call it –they called it "expressway" in this area—I was on that one time. I was going over to this girl's house and I had never been on the expressway before, but I said I'll go because it's faster, but it was so crowded (*sings chorus*). I was banging on the dashboard. "Expressway to Your Heart". That's how that came about. I called Huff, we put that bass line in there, and we got with the Soul Survivors, and one thing led to another. Richie and Charlie, who were the singers—these guys were like the Rascals; they were like the Righteous Brothers. They were great, plus they were great onstage because people didn't know what nationality they were (black or white), and they really didn't care. And that's the way we try to do our music. We try to do great music so it'll appeal to all people.

LH: It set a precedent, too. Being black producers getting hit records with a white group at that time. Nobody was doing it 'til we came along.

KG: But that was a shock for this whole city. That kind of opened the door for us because it was like a flood happened after that. Because not long after that, the Intruders, "Cowboys to Girls", then we had Jerry Butler, Joe Simon, Nancy Wilson, Wilson Pickett. It just went crazy; we were just popping them out like it was popcorn (*laughs*). It was beautiful.

SP: Jerry Butler—those two albums you did with him were like greatest hits albums.

KG: When we recorded Jerry Butler, the "Ice Man Cometh" and "Ice On Ice", those two albums right there, those were masterpieces. They really were; I felt it. It was Gamble and Huff and Butler. I learned a lot from Jerry Butler. He was an excellent writer. You give him a good idea and you kinda coax him a little. Huff on the piano; give him a melody. He was not only a great writer but a great artist.

LH: Yeah, he was a thrill to work with.

SP: And as legendary as some of his early VJ stuff was –the stuff you guys did together—that's his crowing achievement as a recording artist.

KG: And even today when I listen to those albums, there are songs in there right now that were never released, because we did some great songs in those albums, and they need to be done again in some kind of way. Maybe one day somebody will go in there, pull 'em out and do them.

LH: (*sings*) "Never Gonna Give You Up…"

KG: "Hey, Western Union Man." We just had a flurry of hits with him. And to top it off "Only the Strong" came out and that was like, "Wow." That was really the statement.

SP: That wasn't slated as a single originally, was it?

LH: No, it wasn't.

KG: I'm not even sure, but I know it was so different the way we cut it with that arrangement. It was unique. I can't even remember back that far, that's gotta be '69. You're talking about forty some years ago. Almost.

LH: It caught Elvis' attention.

KG: Yeah, Elvis recorded it. We tried to get BMG to put that back out with Elvis, do a remix on it.

SP: He did a nice version on that.

KG: Yeah. He did it just like we did it. "Only the Strong Survive". And the beautiful part of it is, is if that song fit anybody, it fits Elvis Presley. He really needs that to come out, too. Put a little plug in there!

SP: On that track in particular, I've really thought that what is now called the "Gamble-Huff Sound", that's where that first truly kind of emerged—on those Butler sessions and on "Only the Strong Survive". It's that sophisticated urban sound that you guys are famous for…and that great little guitar lick that sounded like a southern guitar lick.

KG: Norman Harris played that.

LH: (*Sings guitar licks*)

KG: (*Sings song*) I think the musicians—the growth of the musicians was really the key to a lot of it because a lot of the musicians we started out with couldn't even read music, but they taught themselves. And Roland Chambers (rhythm guitarist) was instrumental in helping a lot of the musicians learn about music because he knew chords and arrangements. And these guys not only became better musicians, but they became producers themselves, songwriters and arrangers which was really, really good.

LH: I was listening to a CD with DeeDee Warwick's version of "I'm Gonna Make You Love Me" on it—that CD with all the earlier stuff on it? I listened to that because that was the beginning of the growth of the producing skills. I listen to those old tracks and listen to the growth.

KG: "I'll Be Better Off Without You". I forgot all about those songs.

LH: (*sings it*) Listen to the growth of the tracks. The song quality just kept getting better and better.

KG: Musicians got better, studios got better. Because we started off with two tracks, then it was four tracks, then eight tracks, then sixteen, then twenty-four. And then they had all kinds of different echo chambers. Technology keeps changing. I think the sound of digital—digital is a total different thing than analog and I think they're still perfecting digital.

SP: The big argument that the vinyl purists had about the CD is why didn't they pick a better sampling rate? Why didn't you have digital sample more of the frequency of the music because they could've made it higher, it could've been higher resolution. There will always be people that swear by vinyl. And none of us could've imagined digital and the compact disc when you're cutting something in '67, and by the same token, we certainly can't imagine what they'll have twenty years from now.

LH: Everything's changing—TV, it's high definition. Same thing.

SP: Well I was noticing—talking about sonic quality and improvement—in fairly short order, I was listening to the Intruders compilation on the drive up yesterday, and just the leap in sonic quality after "Together" to "Cowboys and Girls" and some of the later stuff was just breathtaking. The clarity of the tracks improved with the technology.

Leon Huff, Philadelphia International artist Jean Carne, Kenny Gamble and engineer, Joe Tarsia

LH: The genius of Joe Tarsia. (*Famed engineer and owner of Sigma Sound studios, where virtually all of the classic Philadelphia International hits were cut.)*

SP: After the Butler sessions you guys were the hot gunslingers in the industry, and that's when people were coming to you.

KG: Oh yeah, it was starting to jump then.

SP: You mentioned DeeDee Warwick, and while "I'm Gonna Make You Love Me" was a small hit for her, once it got up to Motown in Detroit….

LH: That song was just waiting.

KG: Yeah, I just found out Nick Ashford produced that. Valerie Simpson and Nick Ashford. (*Ashford & Simpson, as New York session singers, had sung the background vocals on DeeDee Warwick's original.)* So I tell him all the time, thank you. He picked that song and he produced that on the Temptations and the Supremes. I had to pull over to the side of the highway when I heard that record 'cause that was my favorite group, the Temptations. They were the best ever. They reminded me of the Flamingos who were my favorite group when I was growing up, they were great.

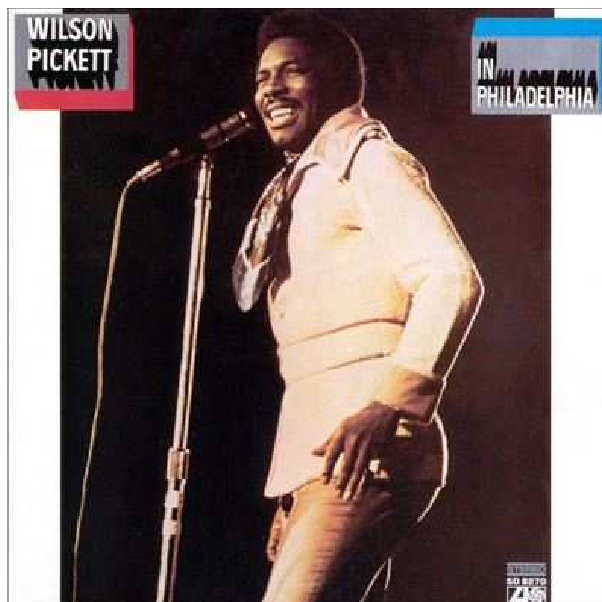
But then the Temptations come along and they took it up a notch, they were just unbelievable.

SP: Tell me about your stint writing and producing for Atlantic Records, because after the Butler sessions, as I say, you were the hottest team going in the business and everybody was wanting you to put the magic on their stuff. The first thing for Atlantic, was that Archie Bell?

KG: Archie Bell & the Drells, yeah. A friend of ours, Kal Rudman, was a writer for Record World and he knew Jerry Wexler at Atlantic real good. So I was talking to Kal one night and I said, "Archie Bell, he's got a unique sound," and I asked, "Do they have a follow up for him?" He said, "Well, call Wexler up," so he gave me Wexler's number. I called him and he said, "Nah, I don't have a follow up with this guy, it's hard, we don't know what to do with him." I said, "Let me and Huff do something with him," and he did, he let us. So we took all our people up to Atlantic studios in New York; we took our musicians there –we did the background on that—got with Archie and came up with "I Can't Stop Dancing." That was a big one, too. And they were impressed, because it's a great song number one and…

LH: And "Showdown."

KG: And then we come back with "It's Gonna Be a Showdown," and that was clever. And Archie, he was in between being in the service at that time, so we would have to record when he came home for leave or whatever. Even when we were at Philly International, Archie was part of Philly International. He's a good artist.



SP: From Archie you got to work with Wilson Pickett.

LH: The Wicked Pickett. Yeah, that was fun.

KG: It was great. Wilson Pickett, yeah. After we got that big hit with Archie and got another hit with him, it wasn't just a one hit wonder. I think Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun said, well, (give Gamble & Huff) a package. We had Wilson Pickett, Dusty Springfield and the Sweet Inspirations. We cut albums on all three of them. Wilson Pickett, got a big record on him— "Don't Let the Green Grass Fool You". Dusty Springfield got a big record on "Brand New Me" which we had cut with Jerry Butler. We tried to tell Mercury, "You gotta turn that record over because 'Brand New Me' is taking off," and they wouldn't do it. They wanted to put out another record. So we recorded it with Dusty Springfield, and it became a big worldwide hit on Dusty.

Dusty Springfield scores a 'brand new' hit with a Jerry Butler B-side

SP: Wexler always said about Dusty, because he worked with her on the album (*Dusty In Memphis*) that preceded the one you guys did with her, he said she was one of the most talented singers he ever worked with, but was also one of the most hopelessly insecure. He said it was like a nightmare getting her to accept that she was doing a good job.

KG: Yeah, that's true.

SP: Did you experience that too?

KG: Well, we had a lot of fun with her. We just encouraged her. I wish we could've cut her again because the first time we cut her, we did good; we had a lot of good songs on that album. I wish we could've cut her again because I think we captured her on "Brand New Me." Because she was one of those kind of artists who sang soft, but her voice cut like a razor.

SP: She sounded like she rolled right out of bed when she cut that song.

KG: Yeah, she's like this girl Corrine Bailey Rae who sings soft, but her voice records well. Like Nat King Cole, he sang soft, but his voice just had that magnetism. He didn't have to really push too hard, his voice just recorded well.

SP: Yeah, if you've got that resonance you don't have to belt.

KG: Yeah, Dusty had it. Like on "The Look of Love", listen to how she's singing on that. She's barely opening her mouth on that but her voice is big as a house.

SP: Other than the one-off thing she did in the '80s with the Pet Shop Boys, her work with you was really her last commercial success. It's amazing to think she was around for another twenty years. What an incredible talent.

KG: And the Sweet Inspirations, I thought, that was a great session, but we didn't get a big hit with them. That album has a lot of great songs.

SP: Their stuff is really cherished. They never had that big breakthrough hit, they had the one minor single. But the four of them were brilliant.

KG: Yeah, the "Sweet Inspiration" song was the big record they had.

LH: They went on the road with Elvis after that.

KG: (Group member) Cissy Houston—she was great. Somebody told me that Cissy used to bring her daughter Whitney down to the sessions. Do you remember that, Huff? I don't remember that stuff. There's a song on the Sweet Inspirations album called "I Gotta Find a Brand New Lover" and I think Cissy sounds more like Whitney, or Whitney sounds like *Cissy* on that particular song. I enjoyed working with them.

Cissy & Whitney Houston in the studio at one of Mom's recording sessions

After a string of hits as an independent songwriting/production team, Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff donned their entrepreneurial hats and formed their own record company, signing with the legendary Chess Records for national distribution.

SP: On the heels of all the stuff you were doing for other companies, and probably based on that sheet of paper you said you got from Nate McCalla, you decided to launch your own label. What were the inherent challenges of getting that started? I know you started out as Excel Records, and that turned into Gamble Records and then Neptune. Why the various imprints?

KG: When we tried to register the name Excel, somebody already had it, so we said, "Let's make it Gamble Records." The benefits of having your own label and the benefits of being able to make your own decisions—we didn't have to consult with anybody else on whether or not our product was good. And the music industry back then was a lot different than it is today because you had a lot of independent radio stations, disc jockeys were independent, you had a lot of independent distributors. You had a lot of record stores, mom and pop stores.

So you could get a record started, and looking back in hindsight, I think the major record companies couldn't outrun a small label like Motown or Chess. They couldn't outrun these people because these people were on the road, they were selling records out there in their station wagons. So the major companies then were not

any more sophisticated than the small labels because they were using independent distributors, too.

That was gonna be great too, 'cause Leonard Chess and his brother Phil—they knew the industry. They knew R&B records. They had just made a deal with GRT—General Recording Tape—and that's when the 8-track format came out. So we made a deal with them, and we created Neptune records. We had the O'Jays, we had Three Degrees and Billy Paul and one other act…

LH: New Direction.

KG: New Direction—a jazz kind of group. That started off good because we had "One Night Affair" with the O'Jays. That was the first record we put out. But Leonard Chess unfortunately passed away and it became kind of complicated. That's who we were in contact with, Leonard. He had wanted us to move to Chicago, which could've happened, though.

SP: Oh, that would've been bad. Just think of all the stuff that wouldn't have happened if you'd left Philly.

KG: Yeah, it's like destiny takes care of itself, but they had everything in Chicago. They had studios, they had radio stations, they had distribution, they had everything. So he recognized the talent in me and Huff, in our ability.

SP: With his passing and the GRT deal, I remember seeing Chuck Berry albums in the cut-out bins a few months later. It was over, just like that.

KG: Unbelievable. I think the whole industry changed when the major companies came together and bought out all those independent distributors. Then there was no place for a Gamble and Huff, young entrepreneurs, to go and take five hundred dollars –a thousand dollars—make a record, go to the radio station, and get it all distributed in that town. There were no independent distributors after a certain time, and so we had no choice but to try and become an associated label because the major companies became distribution companies and financial institutions.

Once we got out of the Chess situation, we contacted Clive Davis (*then president of Columbia Records*) and that was it. I think for us it was better, in a way, because as creative people, when we got with Columbia/CBS, you're talking about a worldwide organization that specializes in marketing, promotion and distribution, and we had the other end of the cycle of the business, which was creating the product. So it was much better for us and we had a long run with these people and a very successful run with them.

"I'm a little bit country, we're a little bit rhythm & soul." CBS Records President Clive Davis, Kenny Gamble, Tammy Wynette and Leon Huff circa 1971.

SP: Sly and the Family Stone notwithstanding, and a couple others—CBS had never really done much of a job penetrating the black music market at all, and I know you talked to Atlantic at some point because you had a track record with them. But did Clive Davis call you or did you contact CBS?

KG: Well, we contacted Clive and that was it. Clive took a shot with us, and I think that we brought—not only the music to CBS – we brought the whole African American community with us because that's what our demographic was. We brought black radio, black artists…everybody started coming to Columbia Records when we got there. They became the biggest label in black music.

SP: Maurice White (*Earth, Wind & Fire*)—everybody he worked with came over.

KG: The Isley Brothers, Barry White, everybody you could think of, and they had a heck of a run. They had an entree into the black music world because we carved out the road for them.

SP: Columbia, of all of the majors, was the last one to get into the Rock & Roll, and they were the last one to get into R&B. As part of that deal, you actually re-signed the O'Jays to Philly International. That wasn't a carry over from Neptune?

KG: No, it wasn't. In fact, we had to let the O'Jays go because we didn't have the distribution. The Three Degrees stayed with us and Billy Paul was with us. And when we got the deal with CBS, we called the O'Jays up, and I'm glad they came back. We had a group called the Ebonys from Camden. We had a big hit with them called "You're the Reason Why."

SP: That was really the first Philly International hit, wasn't it?

KG: That was the first record that we put out—the Ebonys. They were great.

SP: You were CBS' first foray into really making a commitment to R&B/soul/black music, and there's a lot of stuff that kind of fell through the cracks that first year because they didn't know how to promote it. Your recent compilation, "Conquer the World," collects some of those great sides that kind of got lost in the shuffle. So a year or so into it, you guys ended up taking over promotion of your own product, and that's really when things exploded. And, also, in doing that, that's when Philadelphia International really became a full-service record company. That must've been just a tremendous task and burden when you're trying to write and produce records, too, having to oversee the business aspects as well.

KG: Yeah, it was a lot, but you know, it was better because with the help of CBS, we made a good marriage between us and them, and it was good to know that when we made our records that we had promotion inside that could get these records played. Because that's the key to everything, it's being able to get the airplay and stay aware of what's going on in the black radio community, the black music community. We were involved in every aspect of the African-American community, and so that's what brought that attention to our music.

SP: The big breakthrough on the O'Jays, "Backstabbers", they told me years ago that they resisted that one at first. They weren't sure about that the first time you guys played that for them.

LH: No, they didn't like it at all until Gamble convinced them to put their voices on the track that we had recorded. They oughta be glad they did it.

KG: They should be glad, but you know artists don't really…that's why they need producers. They say, "Nah, that ain't our sound." You got no sound.

LH: That's what they were saying.

SP: They came to love it.

KG: (*laughs*) Yeah, they love it now. In fact, the whole world loves it. It was a little different, "Backstabbers". The music, the groove, and it was McFadden, Whitehead and Huff ..as soon as I heard it I said, "Wow, that's great." Just the introduction was great. And the (concept of the) backstabbers—that's happening everyday. Even more today than back then.

SP: When you signed Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes…I don't know if this is urban myth or legend, but I remember hearing at the time that they kind of didn't realize that their drummer was such a great singer. When you signed Harold & the Blue Notes was Teddy Pendergrass a big part of the selling point for you?

KG: Not really, 'cause they were with us before Teddy. Huff was the one who rehearsed Teddy Pendergrass and pulled him out, and then I came in and he told me, "Man, you gotta listen to this guy, their drummer." When I heard him I said,"Wow, what a voice." And that was it, 'cause Harold always had a nice mellow voice and he was a good singer, but you needed that voice that could kind of like rock the house…

LH: Take it over the top.

Harold Melvin, far right; Teddy Pendergrass, center; and the Blue Notes

KG: Teddy had that kinda voice that could rock the house like Eddie Levert (*O'Jays*). Once he comes on he's taking charge of the audience, and Teddy had that same kind of fire and inspiration in his voice, and so the Blue Notes were probably one of the best performing groups that we had—they were excellent. The Blue Notes had been around since 1958 and they kept growing. Harold was in that group and he kept it going 'cause the other guys came and went. But the key of it was that Harold Melvin could take four or five guys –he was the choreographer—he could put four of five guys together and create the Blue Notes out of just about anybody if they could sing. First they were just known as the Blue Notes, then I said make it Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes. And when Teddy started singing Harold said, "everyone thinks he's Harold Melvin." So then it became Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes featuring Teddy Pendergrass and then sometimes it was Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes featuring Teddy Pendergrass and Sharon Paige.

SP: (*laughs*) It's hard to fit all that on a record label!

KG: But we did it! And everybody got credit, and it was like a tremendous group show, and the hit with Sharon Paige was "Hope That We Can Be Together Soon". Harold had a lot of talent. He was singing it, and then he brought it to me and I said, "Harold, let's put Teddy and Sharon on it and make it just a little bit more interesting because Sharon Paige had a great sound. That's still one of their biggest songs today whenever you go see the Blue Notes. (*Founder Harold Melvin passed away in 1997.*)

SP: Teddy said that he initially had trouble learning how to sing in the studio as opposed to singing live; he said you guys helped coach him into being a studio singer. You did a good job.

KG: I don't know, I think Teddy was just a natural.

LH: He just needed somebody to spot him and bring it out.

SP: We talked about the Intruders earlier—what a unique group. Lead singer Little Sonny. There's nobody that ever sounded anything like him. Vulnerable, and it's as if he was talking to you when he was singing, it was like conversation.

LH: Just one of those unique voices again.

SP: The tone of his voice, the pitch…it's like, is he going to slide off the note there? But he always pulled it out.

LH: It was raw, man. That's what it was. Uncoached, just raw. And that's the way he projected it. Smokey Robinson said Little Sonny's one of his favorite singers.

SP: "I'll Always Love My Mama.", what a unique record with a bunch of guys sitting around talking in the middle of a record. It didn't sound staged, it didn't sound rehearsed.

LH: It wasn't scripted. It was like off the top of your head. Spontaneous. Greazy greens.

KG: The way the music came back in, it was almost perfect.

SP: Despite all the success they had I think they're truly one of the unheralded groups—wonderful, wonderful records.

LH: They could sing, you know. They knew harmonies; it wasn't like pulling teeth with those guys, they could sing anything you wanted 'em to sing. 'Cause if a group didn't, me and Gamble would go get Tommy (Thom) Bell and we'd be the Blue Notes. (laughs)

SP: You guys did a lot of that, you sang on a lot of your records. You guys sang on Barbara Mason's stuff?

LH: Gamble did.

KG: Barbara Mason, "Yes I'm Ready." Huff and I and Bunny Sigler, we did "If You Don't Know Me By Now," we're doing the background on that, and lot of Archie Bell stuff and Stylistics stuff, we're singing on that. The Jerry Butler sides, most of that.

“Drowning in the Sea of Love,” there were some high notes on there, but we did background and we did what we had to do.

SP: Well, you got to continually fulfill your ambition to be a singer.

KG: Yeah, secretly. (*laughs*)

Paralleling the legendary Funk Brothers, whose jazz-rooted musicianship underpinned every legendary Motown hit during the Detroit label’s first 15 years, Philadelphia International’s house band was a fluid group of session musicians known as ***MFSB*** *(**M**other, **F**ather, **S**ister, **B**rother). Along with the sophisticated arrangements provided by Bobby Martin, Thom Bell and Richard Rome, their role as a cornerstone of the Gamble-Huff Sound cannot be underestimated.*

SP: I saw many of the alumni of MFSB went out and did stuff on their own that was tremendously successful.

KG: They’re real good, like Vince Montana (vibraphonist); he did real good with the Salsoul Orchestra.

LH: But this is where the school was.

KG: A lot of people came to Philadelphia—Davie Bowie, Elton John. Everybody tried to get a piece of this sound, and a lot of them did good. But the difference was Gamble and Huff, it was the songs that we were writing and the way we work with the musicians in the studio that was totally different than somebody else would work in the studio.

MFSB, the Philadelphia International house band

LH: Everybody was using the same musicians, but nobody was using them the way Gamble and Huff was using them. We were doing a different thing. The best thing about our session was—that’s another highlight for me as a musician— I had the good fortune of *playing* that music, which is a total different blessing than writing it. That’s a musician’s dream. All those songs and all those sessions, and the musicians

had the freedom to improvise. That was the greatest thing that they loved, because you're sort of pigeonholed if you can't play nothing else but what's on this sheet. That's all and well and good, but we allowed them to improvise and be creative.

Phil Spector sessions were like that. Phil let the musicians improvise.   If you had an idea Phil would go, "I like that idea, put that in." So that was sort of like our approach to it 'cause Roland Chambers on the guitar was phenomenal, coming up with different figures. Gamble would like that.   Then the musicians were talented enough to play what we dictated to them, like we'd hum something to them and they'd play it. We had about four different kind of guitar players: T.J. Tindall, Bobby Eli, Roland and Norman Harris, and we would use different mixtures of them for different songs. The bass players we had were Ronny Baker and "Sugar Bear" (Michael Foreman), and the drummers were Carl Chambers, Earl Young and Charles Collins who also really added something. We knew what we needed from different musicians.

LH: And we had the best B-3 organ player you would want to listen to, Lenny Pakula.

KG: Yeah, he was excellent on the organ.

LH: He knew that organ inside and out.

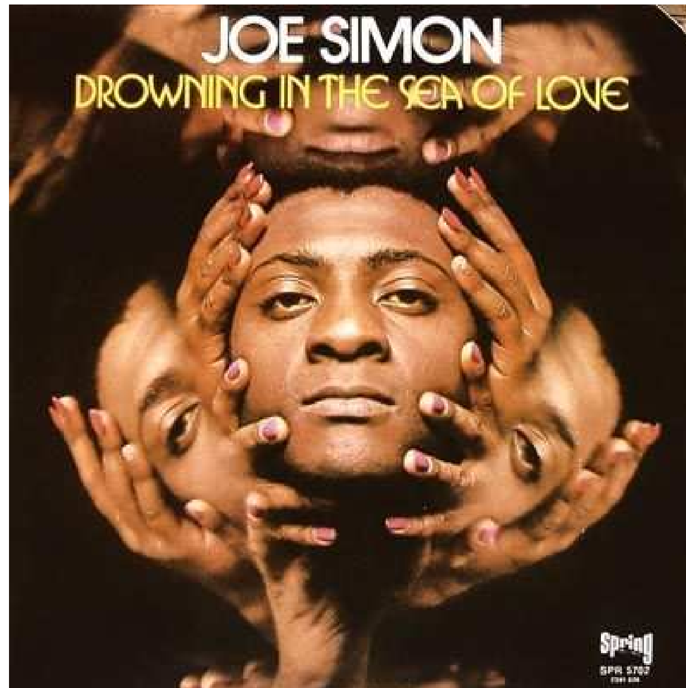
SP: If you couldn't have Jimmy Smith then, Lenny, he's the guy.

KG: Well, Lenny was great. Plus he was an arranger, too, he became an arranger. Plus Larry Washington was on the congas and Vince Montana was percussion. He was great.

SP: Huge part of your sound, ultimately, Vince on vibes.

KG: Vibes and the piano and guitars. The sound we had was a little bit of jazz like that George Shearing sound with Huff and Vince and Norman mostly would play figures together and that would give that kind of jazz sound, then you had Roland who was an excellent rhythm guitar player, and Huff played the grand piano and electric piano and harpsichord and any other keyboards that had to do with our music.

LH: You know what record I love, Gamble? Especially with the Wurlitzer sound—"Drowning in the Sea of Love", Joe Simon. That electric sound.



KG: See, the octaves on that guitar like on "Drowning in the Sea of Love", (*sings*) that's like Wes Montgomery, so we infused Wes Montgomery, we infused George Shearing, we infused Lionel Hampton, you know, all those sounds and the jazz and the real thing was that undertow of the drums and the sock symbol, the constant movement of that sock symbol. We used to get tired of it, sometimes it would be, "No, we don't wanna do that no more," but that really was our sound, and many times we didn't wanna do it, but we would wind up doing it because it became like a signature for us. That sock symbol, eventually it became the whole thing for disco music they just took it.

SP: Bass and the high hats.
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KG: Yeah, that's what it was, the sock symbol.

SP: The best quote I've ever read from anyone about the "Gamble-Huff Sound" was Fred Wesley's comment, I'm sure you remember…

KG: "Funk with a bow tie!"

LH: Yeah, that was a good one.

SP: I read that and just cracked up.

KG: Yeah, me too, you can't forget that one.

SP: I always thought the juxtaposition of the rhythm section and then the sweetening on top was a dichotomy, 'cause you had this powerful rhythm section, and the strings and the horns might be this really kind of languid arrangement on top of it, so you've got that kind of ease in that and yet the whole thing's kicking underneath—there was never another sound like that.

KG: But you know, (arrangers) Bobby Martin and Thom Bell and Jack Faith, Richie Rome—all these guys were like the sweeteners, and we had some of the best string players and horn players because the string players were mostly retired Philadelphia Orchestra players, so this was like a second career for them. They loved it and they were in the studio just about every day overdubbing. And then we had some great horn players, people from the Uptown Theatre with Sam Reed and Zack Zachary, who was on alto sax. He was an integral part of MFSB, he was the sound of MFSB. A lot of good musicians. They played their part, they really did in sustaining the sound, 'cause you just can't be good one time, you gotta be good every time.

SP: Whenever something works, like the two of you meeting in the elevator, there's a certain bit of serendipity involved.

KG: It was destiny.

SP: For you to be here in this place in this city with those musicians, arrangers, Joe Tarsia and Sigma Sound…

KG: It wasn't just Gamble and Huff. We had a lot of great people up here that was competing with us, like Tommy Bell and Linda Creed, who were two fantastic writers who had their own thing (*The Stylistics, the Spinners, Johnny Mathis, Elton John*). But we all worked together. You had (songwriters) McFadden and Whitehead, who were fantastic. You had Bunny Sigler, Phil Hurtt, Sherman Marshall, Dexter Wansel. Vinny Barrett and Bobby Martin… all these guys worked together and we were able to really make a living together and make the music our livelihood, which everyone wanted to do. 'Cause me and Huff had jobs before we started out in the business 'cause you have to be responsible. So you gotta work, and it's hard to be consistent and real productive if you gotta work eight hours-a-day and then do music.

SP: We talk about the Philly sound, but there was a Memphis sound. Chicago. Motown. And there was Muscle Shoals. We've kind of lost those regional centers around the country—little pockets of music creativity. And now, the parallel I make are the box stores around the country and the chain restaurants. You can go to any city in America and be in a shopping center and not know what city you're in based on where you're shopping or eating. Do you think that we've lost something by having the music industry so homogenized? We don't have these regional centers making the same kind of impact that New York, L.A. or Nashville do now.

KG: I think that the music has changed. The whole industry has changed. There used to be a record shop every couple of blocks because buying records and music was spontaneous. I used to have a record shop on Broad and South, and people used to come in, "Hey, you got that new record by the Temptations?" The record shop owner had to be on top of that stuff. 'Cause I was into the music, I always knew what the people wanted. So they might hear it on the radio and ten minutes later they're going to wanna go buy that record. Today you can't do that. Radio has changed and distribution has changed. So it's more competitive today.

The music industry is totally different, but it's always been about songs with us. That's why our music has lasted so long 'cause when we were writing songs, we used to tell each other, "Come on, let's write standards." That was our intention and thank God we were able to write songs that were able to stand the test of time. People have done them over and over again. But I think the Internet and the new industry is going through a transition. I think it's gonna be bigger, don't you?

SP: You think?

KG: Sure, I mean there always will be. Something's coming. This industry is getting ready to explode with the new technology and everything. I mean, look at *American Idol*. That's the biggest show on television and so the power of songs…see, American Idol is about songs by the young people. We recently had a couple of songs that they sang on *American Idol*. They sang "Don't Leave Me This Way" and "Me and Mrs. Jones." These kids weren't even born when these songs came out, so they introduced them to a whole new audience.

SP: And I believe it was done as "Me and *Mr.* Jones" that night.

KG: It might've been yeah, but I don't think Simon appreciated them messing that song up like that (*laughs*). He said, "That's one of my favorite songs, you can't mess up them songs." I like Simon. We were on *American Idol,* which was a tremendous night for us to be a part of that excitement. It was great.

Leon Huff and Kenny Gamble on the bandstand

SP: It's amazing what that show, the reach it has. It's unbelievable.

KG: It is unbelievable. So far they've created a couple of good superstars with Carrie Underwood and Fantasia, just to mention two. They're fantastic artists.

LH: You know what else it shows you, too? How many people want to sing.

KG: They wanna sing, don't they.

SP: Most of them can't, but… (*laughter*)

KG: Yeah but they try, man! But Simon is hard on them he's a good A&R man, I respect his opinion.

SP: An album I have to mention because it's one of the best you guys every did is "Ship Ahoy." (*Concept album based on the slave trade of early North America*.) That's the apex of the O'Jays' career.

KG: In fact, we just did an edit on "Ship Ahoy." It was almost nine minutes long, so we edited it down to about four minutes. But you know the funny part about that record? It's almost like I don't even remember writing that song because it just came. It tells the story of the time when the only real way for African-American people to communicate was through the music, through the drums and so forth, the message in the music. You gotta find ways to communicate, and the African-American community is still doing that through music. But that record, "Ship Ahoy", if you put it on, and just sit back and close your eyes, you feel like you're on that slave ship. And the sound effects, the story… I agree with you, I think it's one of the

most important records that we made –that whole album—'cause that album also had "For The Love of Money" on it. And that was an absolute monster.

SP: What I think is amazing is how the singles that came from that album stood on their own outside the theme of the album and yet, on the record, it's all a seamless part of the story.

KG: It was a concept album, so all the albums pretty much that we were doing at that point were concept albums. These were albums like "War of the Gods" (*Billy Paul*). It talked about different issues, how people got all these different names for God and they're fighting each other and it's still happening today, it's a mess. I think it's beneath human consciousness, especially today, to be at war, physical war with each other. Taking young people, eighteen years old, it's beyond the consciousness of the human being in my view. We had a song called "Man of War" with the Jacksons that really spoke to that. Michael Jackson loved that song.

LH: Didn't he try to buy it or something?

KG: Yeah, in fact, his brothers called me up and they wanted to record it over again. I said, "Go ahead, do it again." 'Cause it's relative to today. You have these war mongers, these certain people think they gotta settle issues by violence. Violence breeds violence, like the quote: "You live by the sword, you die by the sword."

So through music, I think we've been able to say a lot of things. Lyrically, I just try to write about everything. "Darling, Darling Baby" (*O'Jays*) to "Man of War". (*laughs*) You know, love songs, "Close the Door" (*Teddy Pendergrass*), everything.

SP: By the way, the track on "For the Love of Money"— never anything like it before or since.

LH: That's a strange monster, there. Anthony Jackson on bass. (*sings bass lick*)

The mighty O'Jays—William Powell, Walter Williams, Eddie Levert

SP: And that really was kind of when FM radio was reaching its sort of creative zenith there, and that was a great FM staple too, aside from just being an AM hit.

KG: That's what helped our music sound in Philadelphia—FM. Because AM radio was mono, and it's like people compare us to Motown, and Motown was our inspiration, that was the blueprint we used. And I believe Motown was the best record company there ever was because we utilized that same format, and that format was competitive songwriters, producers working with some of the greatest artists they could think of, coming up with classic music. So when Motown was out there, they was all AM radio pretty much, and 45s.

When the sound of Philadelphia comes along –Gamble-Huff—stereo came into play, and not only did the economics of the industry change with the transition of AM to FM radio, but with AM radio, we used to beg the pop stations to play our music. They'd say, "Nah, we can't hear it," even though they eventually would wind up playing it 'cause the records would get so big. Maybe a record took off on an AM station that had a signal of a thousand watts or maybe fifteen-hundred watts. So FM radio comes in—fifty-thousand watts, non-directional, stereo, and they were playing albums. So that's what we fed into, the album market and stereo. And it helped us, 'cause we didn't need those pop stations that much anymore. Now today shows that America is changing from a lot of its old habits. You can't even tell which station is which because everybody's playing everything. You can hear black artists on just about every station you can think of. So that's a good thing, it's a good thing for the industry.

SP: I know it's an oft-told tale, so I apologize for asking you to tell it again, but I'd be doing a poor job without asking you about Billy Paul's "Me and Mrs. Jones." I've seen you two discuss the writing of that song and the inspiration.

KG: A story that unfolded right before our eyes.

LH: That's exactly how it was. There was a restaurant right underneath the Shubert building where me and Gamble used to eat every morning before we started working. We used to see this couple come in. Same table, same time, every day. They'd eat, she'd get in the cab, go her way. So that's how the story developed, and we had kind of a vision. We put that story together, come up with the right name, and it's a real story. I guess that's why it related to a lot of people 'cause that story hooked 'em. Got a thing going on. So that was a real story.

SP: So you saw this older gentleman and this younger lady in the restaurant?

LH: It unfolded right in front of your face like a movie director sitting and he sees the scenes in his mind that he wants to take to the silver screen. Same thing, only we put it on a record.

SP: Did you ever see that couple again after the record hit?

LH: No. Not really. I knew the guy though, he's from Camden. (*laughs*)

SP: So he was bringing it over to this side of the river.

LH: I knew that wasn't his wife.

KG: That's an everyday thing, cheating in the world. And you just imagine when you're a songwriter, you imagine things, and your tentacles are out for just anything. Something somebody might say, it just clicks. You say, "Oh, that's a good title." It's like "Family Reunion" (*O'Jays*), where somebody in the office one day was talking

about coming back from a family reunion and, boom, that was it. I go back in the office, me and Huff sat down and wrote "Family Reunion" in about twenty minutes. 'Cause it's inspiration—you're feeding off everything that's around you. So "Me and Mrs. Jones," that was a good one.

LH: But it was fun, too, picking a name 'cause we had "Smith," "Johnson". We had all kinds of names.

KG: That's one of the classics, though. That's one of the standards. Michael Buble, I think, he just did a new version of it. Did he get a Grammy for that?

LH: I'm not sure.

KG: I think he was up for a Grammy for that. So thirty-something years later, it's still relevant, and that's the real test for a song. 30 years later—look at all the people sampling our music: Jay-Z, Kanye West, Tupac—everybody you can think of. It's just a blessing to even be a part of the new scene; that they would even go back and sample our stuff, it just shows the impact that the music has made.

SP: Did your artists ever get competitive? Did they come to you and say, "Huff, Kenny, what did you give them that song for? I could've nailed that."

KG: Oh yeah, we used to hear that sometimes. "Man, gimme one of those songs you gave Teddy Pendergrass." We used to tailor-make the songs, though.

LH: Yeah, we knew better.

KG: We tailor-made the songs for each artist.

SP: I was always curious why "Don't Leave Me This Way" on Harold and the Blue Notes wasn't a single, because, obviously, Motown jumped on that. I knew the song from the "Wake Up, Everybody" album, and I always thought that was an homage to Levi Stubbs and the Four Tops. It had that "Reach Out, I'll Be There" kind of excitement to it, and you guys cut a smash hit, you just didn't pull it as a single.

KG: What happened was "Wake Up, Everybody" was such a big hit, and that album was on fire. And we were right in the middle of "Wake Up, Everybody." We thought about it, getting into that rat race with Motown and the Thelma Houston cover, but she did an excellent job on that song, and we had so many hits. Plus, the group did, too. That was when Teddy was getting ready to go as a solo artist. "Wake Up, Everybody" was his last album with Harold and the Blue Notes. So we had more concentration on that. Thelma made it a classic. Plus, we also got a lot of airplay with Teddy and Harold, but it never was a single.

SP: How difficult was that transition period when Teddy was chaffing at the bit and went out on his own? That had to be tough on you as bosses of the label.

KG: It was rough because Harold Melvin was a friend, and it's tough when people break up, period, after they've been together. But it happens, so we didn't wanna be put in a position where we had to choose, and that's what Teddy wanted—to stay with us. So it was phenomenal, me and Huff decided to work with him, and Harold wanted to go, I think. He left and went to MCA. He did pretty good, but Teddy—me and Huff, we just continued to write for him, and we wrote a little different for him by himself because we were able to stretch out a little bit with him. Like, "I Don't Love You Anymore" was the first record we came out with on him. That was a powerful, powerful record, and I remember the first time we saw him in California. What was the name of that place?

LH: It wasn't the Roxy was it?

KG: Unbelievable.

Teddy Pendergrass onstage

LH: Teddy came out on the stage; he didn't even open his mouth and the females melted.

KG: That's where we kinda geared him, to that female audience.

SP: Well, that whole "Teddy Bear" thing—he was the reigning sex symbol, and boy, that made Marvin Gaye jealous.

KG: Well, Marvin Gaye had his own thing. Two different markets.

SP: Apples and oranges.

KG: Marvin Gaye, he got one of the greatest albums ever made. "What's Goin' On."

SP: One of the greatest singers.

KG: That's the greatest album going on out there. Marvin Gaye, "What's Goin' On." That album is like an inspiration or something prophetic. 'Cause everything on that album is happening. There'll come a time where the birds won't be singing and I'll say, "Wow, that sounded far-fetched back then," but today this is actually really happening.

SP: I always kind of wondered, because there was such a mass exodus at Motown. Artists finally moving on, and there were some of them that I'd always kind of hoped would've paid you guys a visit. I would've loved to have heard the work you would've done with a lot of them.

KG: Well, at that particular time, we were pretty busy. And I think when the artists started to leave, that's because the major companies started giving out a lot of money to these artists. You had artists that the major companies were wining and dining them and offering a lot of money—money that we could not offer because we offered something that was worth more than money, though we paid reasonably well, and that was talent. A lot of people left us and went other places, and their careers went right down the tubes. Then they try and come back, but once you break the circle, you can't mend it again.

SP: Isn't it funny how success is like a groove in the studio. You just get in that zone there for awhile, and it's like a self-perpetuating thing where you're firing on all cylinders.

KG: Yeah, it's hard to mend something that's been broken, 'cause you always have that scar there. Whether you wanna realize it or not. It's best to try to remain friends and be glad for what you had.

SP: Throughout your career you did an amazing job of reviving people's careers when things had been a little fallow for them. Acts that had cut before, but needed a boost. You did that with the Jackson's over at Epic. Was there ever any talk of them actually being on the Philly International imprint as opposed to CBS?

KG: Well they were. The first records they put out—they had two logos on it, Epic and Philly International, and really, they *should've* been with us. But CBS eventually became our competitor, and that was the sad thing about the whole thing, is that they did not bring us into the workings of the whole expansion that they were doing. They looked at us as a competitor which, in my view, was not the case.

Father/manager Joe Jackson cements his sons' recording deal with Philadelphia International Records in a soul shake with Kenny Gamble as Tito, Randy, Michael, Leon Huff, Marlon and Jackie look on.

But the reason they signed the Jacksons through us is because we could pretty much produce them. They didn't have a producer, they needed a producer for Michael and Tito. They were going through a transition because Jermaine didn't come with them, so they were going through some emotional stuff. It was brand new leaving Motown. Me and Huff provided stability for them, and we were able to let them be creative themselves which they said they hadn't been able to do before. We let 'em produce, do whatever they wanted to do.

I think the outcome was we produced two great albums with them, and they were able to go on and produce themselves. I used to tell Michael he could produce himself. Because he had so many ideas and he had so many concepts about how he wanted to sound and so we helped him along, and I think that was a good collaboration. We could have done a lot more with them because, that "Man of War," I wanted that to be in the direction we took. But CBS was a little afraid of controversy with the Jacksons, so we lightened everything up and cut "Enjoy Yourself" with them.

SP: Like "Show You the Way to Go." That's a lost classic.

KG: That's a good one, "Show You the Way to Go." In fact, that was the Jacksons' first number one record in London.

SP: And really, working with you was the first time they got to write anything that was cut.

KG: Yeah, they were in on the process. They were there every day.

SP: And not just Michael, but the other guys—they only did a few more albums after they worked with you—but several guys in the Jacksons wrote some good stuff. Jermaine, I know you didn't work with him on that, but he's an underrated writer.

KG: Yeah, he's good. All of them are great. The whole family's talented—Janet, all of them.

SP: Again—legend, urban myth, I don't know, but the surprise hit for everybody was McFadden and Whitehead's "Ain't No Stopping Us Now". One of the big records of all time. I remember hearing at the time that they'd just been pestering you guys. "Let us make a record, too." Obviously one of your top songwriting teams. You finally just said, "Alright, guys. Go do it," to appease them. Is that true?

KG: This is what I felt when I heard it. I loved it, but I thought, "Let the O'Jays do it," because they were performing. But they wanted to do it, I said, "Well, go ahead. Do it." I'm glad that it happened like that now because it becomes their legacy. God bless them, these were some ultra-talented people. (*John Whitehead, d. 2004; Gene McFadden, d. 2006*) Unbelievably talented and happy people.

Me and Huff, we were fortunate enough that we had an outlet where we were able to take other people with us. We shared that outlet with a lot of people, but we just didn't share with 'em because we *wanted* to share with 'em. They brought something to the table. They were excellent. They wrote some masterpieces and they were good competition for me and Huff. We helped teach each other; they learned how to produce. They were part of our family. I'm glad they did that song. That's one of those anthems. You hear it today, it's everywhere. It's almost like Kool and the Gang's "Celebration".

SP: Good comparison.

KG: Every time there's a world series they put on "Celebration." When somebody's winning and you give people encouragement, "Ain't No Stopping Us Now". I was

listening to Barack Obama the other day, and he was playing "Give the People What They Want". (*laughs*) 'Cause it fits right in. I said, "Boy, that's a great one."

SP: I'd be remiss in not mentioning the late Lou Rawls. One of the great talents of all time. You guys gave him a whole second act of his career that lasted him to the end of his life. "You'll Never Find a Love Like Mine"—what a perfect record.

LH: Classic. That's another example I use to see the growth in our production and writing skills. Lou Rawls stepped our skills up another notch when he came through here 'cause Lou was one of my favorite voices before I even got a chance to be in the studio with him. So when that time happened, we had a voice that was a challenge. We struck the first shot out the box with Lou Rawls. Blues singer, you know.

SP: Biggest record of his career by far.

LH: Every time I listen to that track I say, "Yeah, that's one of the classic ones."

SP: Is that you playing piano on that?

LH: Mmhmm.

SP: Because the rest of the record, you guys had the MFSB sound going on there, but your piano on that tied together his kind of night club-type thing, too. It had that sort of other era kind of feel to it that I just thought was the perfect segue. It brought Lou from where he was right up to date. Brilliant piano work on that.

LH: I liked his records when he was singing about "The Hawk" and "Tobacco Road". I was into Lou's voice then.

SP: "Dead End Street", "Natural Man", all that great stuff. But he had stopped being a contemporary recording artist. He was doing albums with covers and focusing on performing. Always successful as a live performer.

Lou Rawls

KG: I just liked Lou Rawls and all these people. They needed producers. 'Cause when they were out on the road, me and Huff was back here in this office planning their recording career. When Lou Rawls or any of these artists used to come in here, me and Huff might have fifteen, twenty songs for 'em. McFadden and Whitehead might have ten or twelve. They might spend a whole week maybe listening to thirty, forty songs. So they didn't have to worry about it. That's why I always look at great artists and say they need a great producer.

Somebody that's always searching for that song. Like Clive Davis, he's a guy a lot of people give credit to 'cause he's always looking for that song. So when the artists say, "Okay, Clive, what you got for me?" he's searched every great songwriter that there is, and that's the same thing me and Huff used to do. But we had our own team here. We would work with them, we'd go in offices with them on a daily basis and say, "Listen, Lou's coming in. What you got?" And we'd listen, say, "I don't like that one, we like this one. Work on that one. What else you got?" By the time Lou comes in we'd already sifted through these songs for him. That's why we were able to have... how many albums did we do with him, about five?

LH: Something like that.

KG: Five albums we did with Lou. Four or five. All of them were great.

LH: "Lady Love" and all that stuff.

KG: "Lady Love," "See You When I Get There". Our first album was the classic, though. We got him the first record, and that's not easy to do, to get a person on their first record, to get a multi-million selling album with them. Same thing with the Jones Girls with Diana Ross. She brought the Jones Girls to us. First record, "You're Gonna Make Me Love Somebody Else". In the beginning, we started to call our publishing company "Tailor-Made Music" because we were looking at an artist as if we were tailors. We'd tailor-make a song for that artist, for the sound that's in their voice. To bring that sound out, to bring that uniqueness out.

SP: A couple of your associates here today said, "Definitely ask them…" I know you have a lot of things going; community service has been a huge part of your life. You've done wonderful things in Philadelphia and music-related type things, but everybody wants to know what's going to excite the two of you enough to hand-pick a project and cut a record on somebody, just the two of you, like you did?

KG: It's coming, I guess. (*laughs*) Something that can excite us, I guess. Give us a challenge.

LH: See if we still got it.

KG: We could do it. I mean the music is really starting to come around. I think music—jazz, rhythm and blues, great songs are coming back. I think we're gonna…it's coming. It'll come when it's supposed to come.

SP: Leon, Sony's reissuing your first album, "Here to Create Music". The original CD's been selling for a fortune. People couldn't get it. That was a great record. And you're working on some new stuff of your own.

LH: Yeah, preparing to put out some instrumental stuff.

SP: Is there one creation, one thing you guys did over the course of your forty-five years together that sums up your spirit or your approach to your life and your work?

LH: I'm glad I had a chance to take my creative talents to the highest level, had a chance to do that. I'm glad I had an opportunity to do that, just blow it all out and survive and land on my feet when the smoke cleared. (*laughs*) That's basically it. 'Cause now I'm getting a chance to listen to my music after all these years and it still sound great. And seeing the music in all these movies, TV shows, commercials.

KG: And our songs, basically, were like anthems. They were not just records, not just music, these were songs that inspired a whole nation of people with regard to civil rights and whatever messages that we had in our music. And these songs were not just any old kind of records, these were songs that inspired a generation of people.

And getting into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, that's pretty good.

SP: Not bad.

KG: Not bad at all. (*laughs*) The Songwriters' Hall of Fame, the Dance Music Hall of Fame, Grammy Lifetime Achievement, Trustees' Awards. God, all kinds of awards that we've gotten, and now the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is an honor. The only thing that can happen after this is that we win an Oscar. That'll be our next challenge is to win an Oscar. I don't know what else. You just be thankful for every day, that's all.

SP: I was thinking one of your best songs, and one of the simplest in its message, maybe said it best for you guys: "I Love Music."

KG: Yeah that's just how that song came up, too, man. Sitting around one day writing, "Man, I love it." Boom, just like that.

LH: (*Sings*)

KG: That's how it happened! (*laughs*)

SP: Leon and Kenny, thank you very much. It's been a pleasure.

LH: Beat goes on, baby.

KG: Beat goes on. That was good, man.

Thanks to Karen Sundell, Chuck Gamble, Craig White, LeeAnn Eckard, Sarah Janiszewski, Matt Wolf and Leroy Glenn...and to Kenny and Huff—it was worth the 30-year wait.

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