

"That little old heartbreaker me" — The Bobby Freeman Story

by Opal Louis Nations

photos courtesy of Bobby Freeman and Randy Tamberg

Bobby Freeman is as active in the music business today as he ever was at the peak of his career during the 1960s when he cut some thirty singles for six record companies. "I put it down to eating right and regular exercise," says Bobby. "I don't drink or smoke. I eat meat but do plenty of exercise. This keeps me a trim 155 pounds," he brags. Bobby has a new seven-song collection available on MP3.com. He put it together in Pasadena, at Manhattan Transfer's old studio. You can download Bobby's new, bright and philosophical collection entitled "Lessons in Love" (produced by Bullets) and listen to an artist who finds it easy to reinvent himself, an artist of relevance, of substance. A survivor with something to say to the young folk in our modern world.

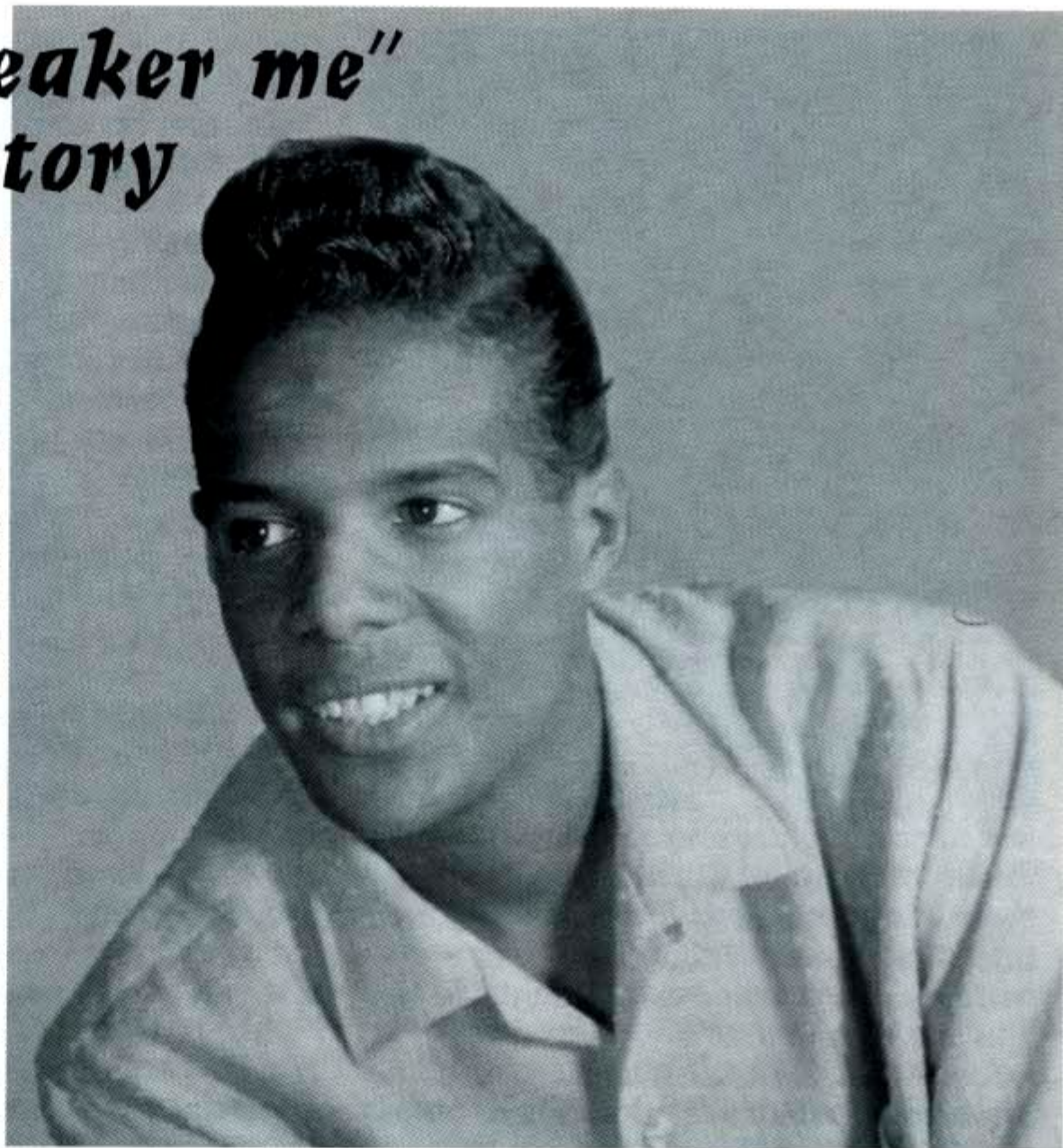
Bobby also has three currently available CD re-releases: a 1991 sample of some of his Josie sides on Collectables, *Do You Wanna Dance*, a good deal of his Josie material put out on the British Sequel label, plus the first-time release on Ace Records in England of songs cut by and with Sly Stewart for Autumn Records in the mid-Sixties. Amazingly, although Bobby had played in every state in the union except Alaska before age thirty, he still has never visited Europe. Now that Bobby has a large body of work out there for folks to enjoy, I hope someone will bring him to the EEC so that his many long-waiting fans can

at last see and hear him.

"I'd like to go," says Bobby, "cause I can still move like I used to move and give those guys as good a show as back in the days when we danced to rock 'n roll." Bobby continues to keep up a demanding performance schedule, working up crowds in Nevada casino showrooms with his high energy, hard driving performances. Bobby tells a story of a fan who came to the San Francisco Bay area from England just to see him. The fan caught an ad in a paper announcing a Bobby Freeman appearance. When the fan went to the show he found to his dismay that he had bought tickets to go see yet another Bobby Freeman, one who in no way masqueraded as the real thing but an artist with an original lounge act. The fan did get to see the real Bobby Freeman at Lake Tahoe, but, like a true believer, he expected little for his misadventure except the pleasure of getting an autograph from Bobby.

In the words of *San Francisco Chronicle* music critic Joel Selvin, Bobby Freeman laid the foundation that put San Francisco rock on the map. Bobby was born in Oakland on June 13, 1940, to William and Gloria Freeman. William was a whiz at figures but a less than responsible father. Bobby and his mother moved to San Francisco soon after his birth. Bobby's grandmother was a dancer who worked the cruise ships. Living in Hawaii, she often entertained on the San Francisco to Honolulu round trip. Gloria was an accomplished tap dancer but never danced for a living. Bobby attended Pacific Heights Elementary and began listening to music. He was fond of mimicking the words to Judy Garland's Decca waxing of "The Trolley Song" and Lena Horne's RCA pressing of "Stormy Weather."

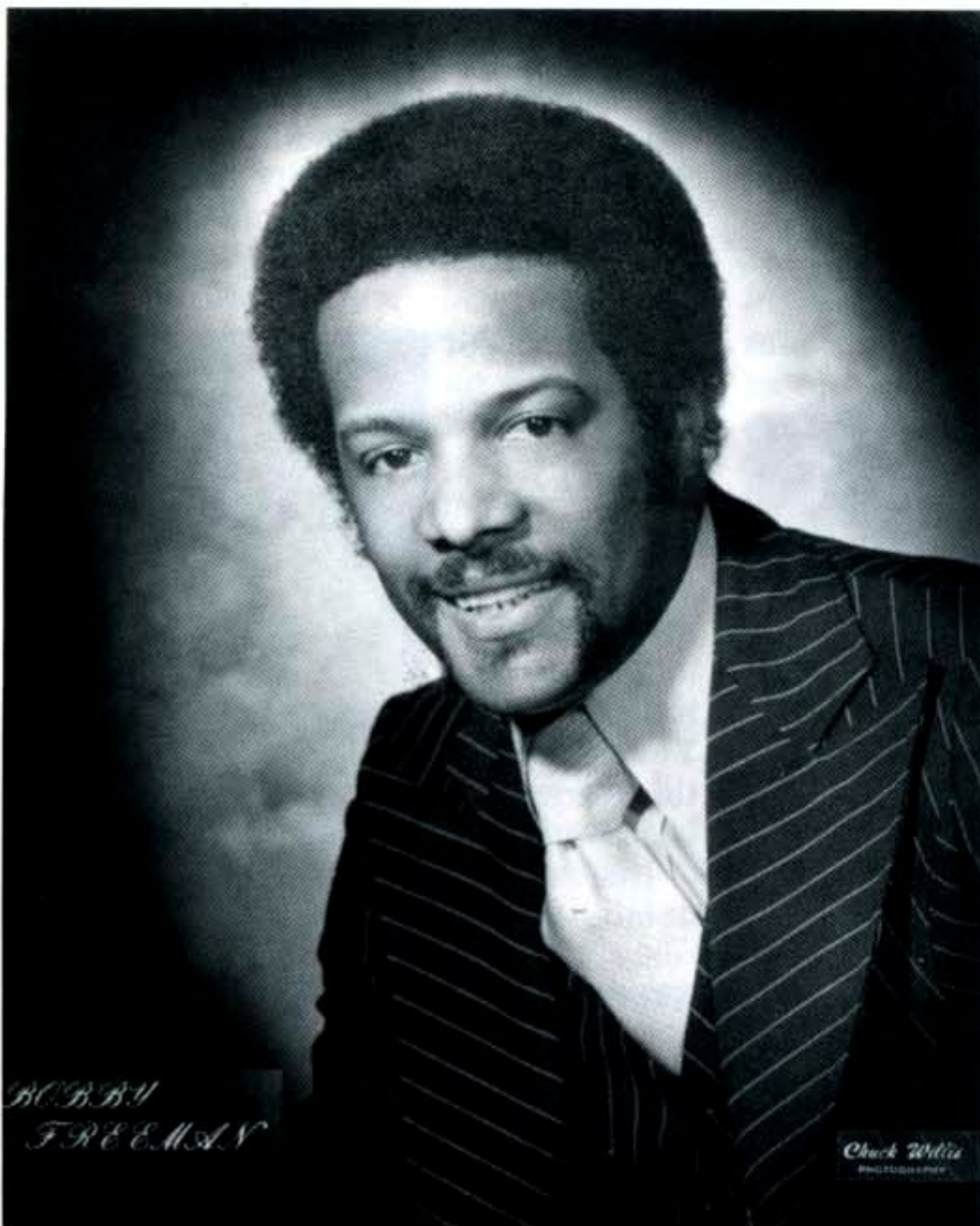
By the time Bobby had moved on to Roosevelt Jun-



ior High he had become an avid fan of Nat King Cole. "I remember singing Nat's 'Pretend' at Roosevelt, then doing vocal impersonations of 'Too Young,' and 'Nature Boy.' 'Nature Boy' was my favorite song of all," says Bobby. One of Bobby's neighborhood playmates was Alvin Thomas with whom he would perform a little later on. At Roosevelt, Bobby became a budding track and high jump contender. At this time, he also admired another budding track star and singer, Johnny Mathis, who was five years older than himself. Bobby and Johnny's families knew each other pretty well.

One of Bobby's first public appearances was for the music department's Miss Rankin who helped organize a talent show held at the Macedonia Baptist Church. Bobby had a buddy with whom he wanted to do a ventriloquist's act. Bobby's part was to stand behind a curtain and sing while his partner, seated on a stool under a spotlight, waved his arms and mimicked with mouth movements. But during audition Miss Rankin would have none of it and insisted that Bobby step out front and sing a solo just by himself.

At the Macedonia Baptist aspiring vocal groups and female soloists came out to do their act, but it was Bobby Freeman and his acappella rendition of the Penguins' 1954 hit "Earth Angel" that won first prize. Bobby Freeman was fourteen years old when he re-established contact with his childhood playmate Alvin Thomas. By this time, Alvin played piano, much to Bobby's envy. Later on, Bobby picked up a few pointers from Alvin and, by sight, was able to construct a few basic chords. Bobby used to go over to Alvin's place, and the pair would sing around the piano. Alvin also wanted to put together a vocal group. Thus Alvin recruited the origi-



nal Romancers. Enlistees included Alvin Thomas (lead), Bobby Freeman, Alvin's brother James, and Tyrone French.

The group worked up a few songs and, gaining confidence, took the liberty of calling a few record companies. Figuring that Aladdin Records on West Pico Boulevard in Los Angeles was the best place to try first (after all, they had the extremely popular Five Keys), they decided to call the company's president. Eddie Mesner listened to the Romancers as they sung a selection of tunes for him over the phone. Mesner told them he liked them and would look them up when he visited the Bay Area in two weeks. To a bunch of young hopefuls raring to go, two weeks seemed like an eternity. So, they next called Dootsie Williams at Dootone Records on LA's South Central Avenue hoping to get a better deal. The Romancers also warbled a few stanzas for him over the phone. Dootsie also seemed enthusiastic and stated he would be up to see them in the Bay Area in a week's time. The Romancers decided that a week was not *too* long a time so they waited in anxious anticipation.

Up to this point the Romancers had only dreamed of public adulation. Their "thing" was to strut down Filmore Street from Sutter to Ellis (a total of four blocks) singing all the R&B hits of the day. "Sometimes we would do this," says Bobby, "and we would come up on other vocal groups. We would stop and hear them out, then try to out-sing them. We always did pretty good at that."

Dootsie Williams came up to the Bay Area and liked what he heard. He took the Romancers back to Ted Brinson's garage studio in back of 2190 West 30th Street in LA, the same location where the Penguins cut the original demo of "Earth Angel," the song Bobby sang to win his high school's talent show. With Alvin at the piano to keep the fellas in key, the group, now composed of Bobby, Tyrone, Woodrow Blake, and James A. Shelbourne,



huddled around one mike. They initially recorded four songs composed by Alvin. The first of these was the tear-stained ballad "I Still Remember," followed by the enormously catchy novelty "House Cat" which for some reason was relegated to the flip side of the group's first release. When one listens to "House Cat," the sax part sounds as if it were part of

the vocal session, but Bobby insists that bass, drums and saxophone were dubbed on to all their recordings at a later date.

The third recorded song was the tenderly soulful "This Is Goodbye," which finds Bobby singing pretty tag-lead on the verses. "Jump & Hop," the outfit's final endeavor, is a jazzy bouncer cut with dancers in mind. The first release, "I Still Remember" b/w "House Cat" (Dooto 381) hit the streets in January 1956. On the strength of promising sales, Dootsie issued "This Is Goodbye" b/w "Jump & Hop" (Dooto 404) nine months later. Nothing really clicked for either release, but back in the Bay Area, the group caught the attention of Brad Taylor at Bay Tone Records. Bay Tone was situated in the Romancers' old stomping ground on Filmore Street. Brad managed the group and had them change names briefly to the Bay Tones.

As the Bay Tones Bobby, Alvin, Woodrow, James, and James Thomas (who had returned to the group in Tyrone's place after a stint in the military service) played three public engagements. The first was at Slim Jenkins' Cosmopolitan Supper Club on the corner of Wood and Seventh Streets in Oakland where they wowed a large crowd with what was reported in the press as "stylish staccato jumping, singing and dancing." The second appearance was at a New Year's Eve gig down in San Diego. Bobby remembers Brad driving the group down from the Bay Area.

On Saturday January 26, 1957, the Romancers along with other vocal groups plus Roland Mitchell and his Tear Drops of Rhythm played a benefit Jazz Festival at the New Filmore, 1329 Filmore Street. Four personality deejays, including Don Barksdale of KWBR, hosted the proceedings.

Bobby then split from the quartet. The Romancers, Alvin and the surviving members cut one single to launch Brad Taylor's new Bay-Tone label in June 1958—"Baby I Love You So" b/w "You Don't Understand" (Bay-Tone 101). The single has since become a much coveted collectors' item. For one reason or another, a practice version of "You Don't Understand" wound up at Josie Records where it languished until the folks at the English Sequel label issued it as part of their Jubilee and Josie R&B vocal group series in 1996.

Meanwhile, Bobby, after a brief spell at Polytechnic High, moved on to Mission High where he formed his own quartet called the



Vocaleers. It was at the time when "Jumpin'" George Oxford, "Long Tall" Don Barksdale and "Bouncin'" Bill Doubleday ruled the R&B air waves from out of the KWBR (later KDIA) studios. Bobby picked four Mission High students whose names are now sadly forgotten to be in the Vocaleers. They did little more than sing for the school, backgrounding Bobby's lead vocals.

One day, the Vocaleers were picked to play for the school at Polytechnic High's football rally. At the rally the Vocaleers sang a neat cover version of the Coasters' 1957 Atco major seller "Idol With the Golden Head" and a cool copy of the Charts' Everlast ballad "Deserie" from the same year. The two songs were rendered well enough to impress Jim Hawthorne who stood in the crowd. Hawthorne was at that time KYA's number one disc jockey. He introduced himself to the Vocaleers and told them how impressed he was with their act. Jim invited the group to come down to Coast Records on Bush Street in downtown San Francisco to make tapes of a few of their songs. A little apprehensive and suspicious of the man's intentions, the group made excuses. Football and basketball practice took up most of the fellas' spare time. Jim approached the Vocaleers a second time, but again sports practice sessions were used as an excuse to get in the way of meeting with Jim Hawthorne to make tapes.

Finally, after a third try, Bobby alone caved in and reluctantly ventured down to Coast Records on Bush Street. During one of the tapings, Bobby came up with a song he had written on the piano two years earlier. The song had no lyrics at that time. Bobby ran through the tune on the piano, hamming and making up words as he went along. Jim Hawthorne saw the hit potential immediately, and "Do You Wanna Dance" was born. On the final release of the song you can hear a flat conga-like drumming sound. This was done by beating out a set of empty drum cases that just happened to be lying around the studio. Bobby says that when the song ends two thirds of the way through, that this was where he intended to end it but Jim, pointing to the drum case player (remembered only as "Fred"), had him start the intro over again. Then another three verses were added on.

Jim cut basic demos of four songs with only Bobby playing piano accompaniment—"Do You Wanna Dance," "Big Fat Woman,"





“Follow the Rainbow,” and “My Guardian Angel.” These he sent via Morty Palitz (who had heard Bobby’s demos at KYA) to Jerry Blaine of Josie Records at 1721 Broadway in New York. Jerry Blaine saw the potential in Bobby’s work and immediately signed him up. Adding over-dubs to “Do You Wanna Dance” and “Big Fat Woman,” Blaine issued Bobby’s first solo single in March 1958 (Josie 835). “Do You Wanna Dance,” an infectious foot-warming workout with jungle rhythms, simplistic lyrics and irresistible charm, was given a three star rating in the March 1958 issue of *Billboard*.

After that, things happened quickly. Bobby and Jim Hawthorne (now temporarily Bobby’s manager) flew to Los Angeles to appear on Red Blanchard’s KPOP remote from the Park Record Shop. By April “Do You Wanna Dance” was breaking as a national hit. By mid-May it had become Hunter Hancock’s number one pick of the month on KPOP. June 27th saw Bobby’s first appearance at Harlem’s Apollo Theatre alongside Kitty Lester, Roy Hamilton and the Clovers. This was followed by a date at the Howard Theater in Washington. Plans were being drawn up by Jubilee A&R man Morty Palitz to cut a Bobby Freeman album. Bobby put in an appearance on Alan Freed’s New York based WABD-TV show.

In July Bobby signed up for his first G.A.C. (General Artists Corporation) National Club Tour. That same month he headlined at the Apollo. By then, Walt Somers had replaced Jim Hawthorne as Bobby’s manager. August found Bobby on Alan Freed’s twenty-three act package extravaganza at the Brooklyn Fox. Other artists included Bill Haley and his Comets, the Danleers, Larry Williams and the Elegants. In September Bobby played Jolly Joyce’s R&B show with La Vern Baker, the Moonglows and others in Charlotte, NC. November was marked as being the month Bobby signed with the prestigious Milt Shaw Agency. In the words of researcher Alec Palao, Bobby’s “Do You Wanna Dance” pioneered a melodic template that was to contribute immensely to the shape rock and pop music took

in the 1960s.

“Big Fat Woman,” the reverse of “Do You Wanna Dance,” is no slouch either with its wailing vocal and distinct rockabilly feel that led listeners to suspect that Bobby was Caucasian and not “of color.” One thing for sure is that “Do You Wanna Dance” easily crossed over from black R&B to white pop. By May 1958 “Do You Wanna Dance” had hit the #2 spot in the *Billboard* R&B charts. Jerry Blaine’s follow-up release of “Betty Lou Got a New Pair of Shoes” b/w “Starlight” (Josie 841) in July 1958 took off like a rocket. By the end of August “Betty Lou” had raced up the charts but stalled at the #20 spot. “Betty Lou Got a New Pair of Shoes” is a stompin’ rocker in the frenzied Larry Williams tradition and puts over a much busier sound while clinging to the usual stinging guitar and pounding piano. (Bobby played piano on all his Josie sides.)

“Starlight,” on the other hand, is a tender ballad set to tremolo guitar. Bobby’s sweeping, wistful vocal treatment is reminiscent of Smokey Robinson’s early work. It would be fair to say that Sammy Davis Jr., whose act Bobby caught in New York, impressed him greatly. Sammy’s all-round methodology led Bobby into working up his own choreographed, drum-playing and impersonation routines. What really came to the fore was Bobby’s ability to invent dance steps. Meanwhile, Josie hooked Bobby up with Walt Cohen who handled many of his East Coast bookings.

“Betty Lou,” over the course of the last forty years, has been covered by the fictional Eddie and the Cruisers in the movie of the same name and by Neil Young who included it on his 1983 *Everybody’s Rockin’* album, plus a spin-off by Bob Seger entitled “Betty Lou’s Gettin’ Out Tonight.” It has also been honored as musical background for a TV commercial for slippers. Josie issued the hauntingly beautiful “Need Your Love” coupled with the “Do You Wanna Dance” clone, “Shame on You, Miss Johnson,” in September 1958 (Josie 855). “Need Your Love” is probably Bobby’s finest deep soul offering, with its anguish and tear-stained pleas for



love. The song broke into the charts at the #29 slot in November 1958 but after only one week sadly dropped out of sight. This was Bobby’s last chart breaker on Josie.

“A Love to Last a Lifetime” coupled with Louis Armstrong’s old 1928 Mark Fisher camped up nugget “When You’re Smiling” came out in January 1959 (Josie 855). Whenever Bobby was asked to cover standards like “When You’re Smiling,” he thought of Dinah Washington and how she would render the song. Although the record proved that Bobby had versatility, it failed to generate interest. This was followed by the rocking “Love Me” with white choral background backed by the widely popular “Mary Ann Thomas” (Josie 863) “Mary Ann Thomas” was a catchy bouncer annoyingly supported by an overbearing white, mainly female chorus. It was obvious, from the song’s arrangement, that in order to stay in the mainstream, Bobby was being steered in a safe, schmaltzy, bubblegum direction by his handlers.

Next came the short-lived “My Guardian Angel” sandwiched with “Where Did My Baby Go” (Josie 867). During October 1959 (eight months after Bobby graduated from high school), Josie issued Bobby’s version of harpist Robert Maxwell’s 1953 soaring standard “Ebb Tide.” “Ebb Tide” is one of Bobby’s fondest remembered Josie recordings. “There were three versions of the song being played at the same time on the air,” remembers Bobby. “Mine, Earl Grant’s and the Platters’.” Of all the many covers only three impressive versions charted: Roy Hamilton’s 1954 version, Lenny Welch’s reading from 1964 and the Righteous Brothers’ hammed-up rendition of 1966. Bobby’s cover, although schmaltzy, is throaty, controlled and mature, and even if one dislikes the saccharine content of the lyrics, one can still admire Bobby’s impressive vocal mastery of the standard.

“Ebb Tide” (Josie 872) was issued with “Sinbad,” an infectious rocker with wailing female choruses and “Do You Wanna Dance” rhythm breaks. Altogether it is Bobby’s most weirdly arranged recording as the legend of Sinbad is recalled against a hammering per-

cussive backdrop. Over the 1959 Christmas season Josie issued "I Need Someone" backed with "First Day of Spring" (Josie 879), but the offering failed to click, due in part to the overwhelming success of the Drifters' "Dance With Me" release featuring the achingly awesome pipes of Ben E. King.

Weeks later came "Miss You So" paired with the wildly frantic "Baby, What Would You Do" (Josie 886), a kind of "What'd I Say" sound-alike with heavy choruses supplied by the Blossoms and a wailing sax. Bobby's next release was the Watusi-rhythmed "The Mess Around," an infectious dance ditty with solid accompaniment that became extremely popular around the clubs. "The Mess Around" (Josie 887) was backed by the Shirelles who just happened to be at the studio and had just completed their own session. It was coupled with "So Much to Do." "Put You Down" (Josie 889) came next, flipped with "She Said She Wants to Dance," a sort of updated incarnation of "Do You Wanna Dance." It was obvious by now that Josie Records was trying every desperate measure to get Bobby back on the charts but was failing to come up with the right formula.

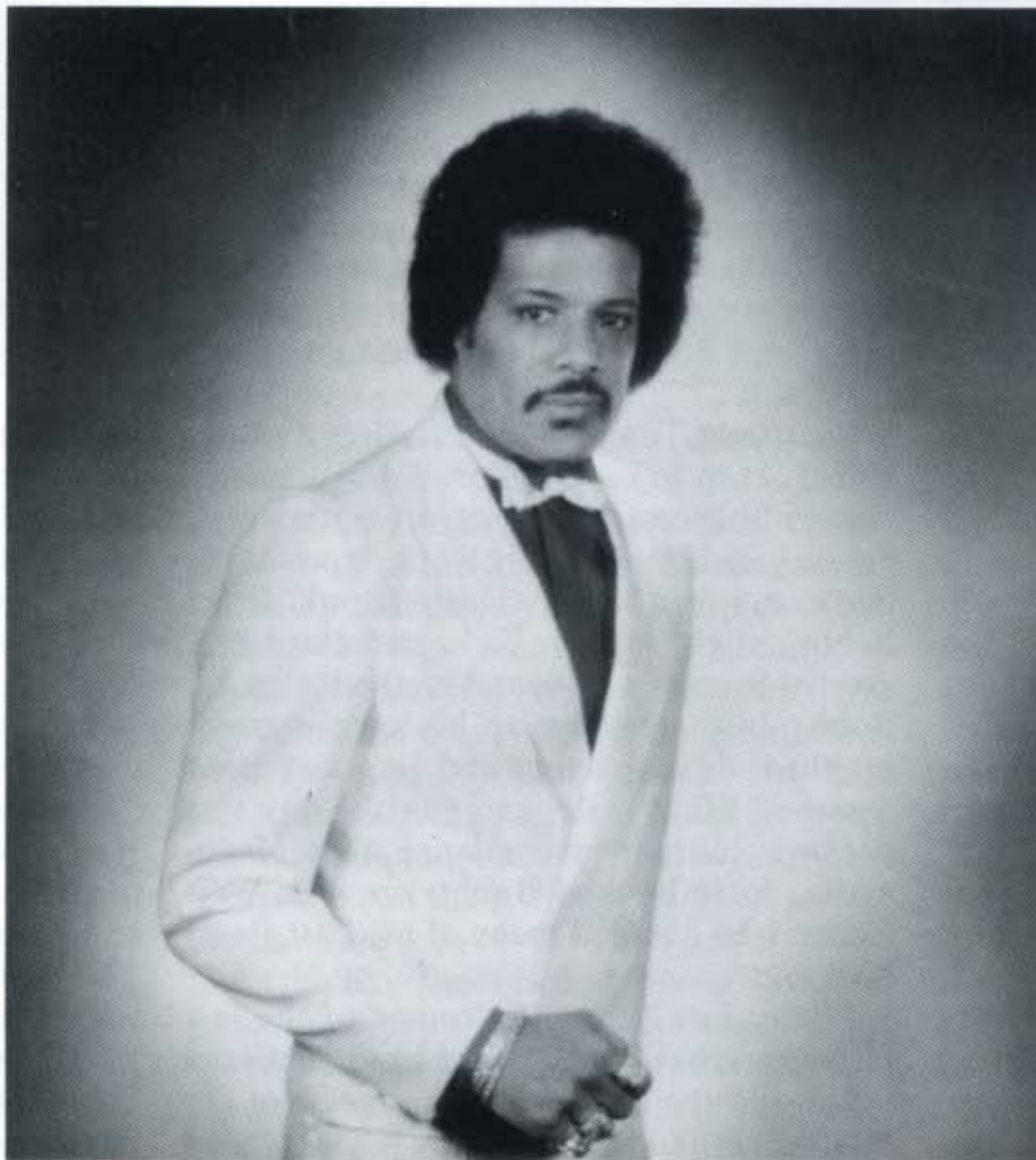
Jerry Blaine made two final tries. The first was the reissue of "Love Me" matched with the solid bopping "Little Girl Don't You Understand" (Josie 896), one of Bobby's strongest rocking Josie releases with its tough guitar and irresistible beat. But, nothing happened. Bobby's final Josie single was released five years after his departure from the label. In fact, Bobby's last five singles were all put out as desperate measures after he had moved on to other labels. The reissue of "The Mess Around" backed with "Little Girl Don't You Understand" (Josie 928) was a ploy to grab a little action away from the success of Bobby's later hit records on the Autumn label.

Bobby's treatment of standards and ballads helped him find work at New York venues like The Town & Country and The Copacabana. Over the course of six years, Josie and its parent label, Jubilee, issued a total of three Bobby Freeman albums, *Do You Wanna Dance* (Jubilee 1086, 1959), *Twist with Bobby Freeman* (Jubilee 5010, 1962) and *Get in the Swim with Bobby Freeman* (Josie 4007, 1965). The stereo version of Jubilee 1086 easily fetches a five figure amount on the collectors' market.

During the summer of 1960, Bobby's handlers were looking for a more promising recording contract. Their first stop was Mercury Records in Chicago. At Mercury, Bobby cut a number of tunes, including Chris Smith's old 1913 vaudeville song "Ballin the Jack," but no contract was ever signed and nothing was put out. They then tried Syd Nathan at King Records based in Cincinnati. Bobby Cut four singles and one album for King. These

were released spasmodically over the course of five years.

By now, according to Alec Palao, Bobby drew less on his original compositions and used tunes by his musical director Bill Massey and others. Around July of 1960 King issued "(Do the) Shimmy Shimmy" and "You don't Understand Me" (King 5953). Massey and Albert Shubert shared song-writing credits whilst Bobby hung onto the publishing rights. "(Do the) Shimmy Shimmy" is a rapid dance



vehicle that cashes in on the craze begun by the Olympics doing "Shimmy Like Kate" and Little Anthony going through the motions of the "Shimmy, Shimmy Ko-Ko-Bop." "You Don't Understand Me" is, to my mind, one of Bobby's better moments.

Although Michel Ruppli in his King discography asserts that Bobby's first King session might really be a date taped at Cameo Records in Philadelphia in January 1960, Bobby recalls that he traveled to Cincinnati to record for King in their downstairs studio. Although "(Do the) Shimmy Shimmy" did quite well for Bobby, King waited four years before following with his second release. By then, as with Josie's later output, Bobby was with Sly Stone at Autumn Records.

Bobby remained popular enough to keep employed, particularly in his native Bay Area, according to Alec Palao. Working through local agencies, he now began to manage his own career. Earlier on, he had gigged with the Rockateers, an instrumental ensemble featuring guitarist Eddie Quinteros of "Come Dance with Me" fame on Brent Records circa 1960 and Ronny Molleen who recorded "Rockin Up" on King that same year. Whether Molleen's connection with King had any bearing on Bobby's tenure is mere speculation. Later on, again according to Palao, Bobby worked with Richmond's Untouchables band

out at Walnut Creek at the Walnut Creek Hall. The Untouchables recorded the moody "Bondaru" for Dot Records in 1962.

In 1961, when Josie issued "The Mess Around," Bobby caught the attention of San Francisco super-jocks Tom Donahue and Bob Mitchell on KYA. Both men were originally from Philadelphia. Donahue had worked at Philly's WIBG radio. His teen-oriented program had competed with Bob Horn's "Bandstand" for ad revenue, back when Dick Clark was still wet behind the ears. Escaping accusations of payola back East, Donahue and Mitchell set up Tempo Productions in San Francisco to promote live sock hops. Tempo artists would be offered free air-play in return for live, non-paying promotional dance party exposure. The couple also set up the Cougar Production Company to make masters of its artists for leasing to major labels. The eager young Sylvester Stewart (soon to be Sly Stone) from Vallejo was put in charge of A&R and production.

Dallas-born Sly had made his recording debut at age ten, in 1955, accompanied by his siblings, the Stewart Family. On the Church of God in Christ label, Sly recorded an impressively mature reading of the traditional gospel standard "I'm on the Battlefield (for the Lord)." When Bobby first met Sly he was with a vocal group called the Viscaynes who had recorded for Tropo in 1958 and VPM in 1961. On VPM Sly recorded the hauntingly beautiful "Yellow Moon" which drew Bobby Freeman's attention. Donahue and Mitchell sent their Freeman demos to their old pal Bernie Lowe at Cameo/Parkway in Philadelphia who in turn flew Bobby out to their studios. The A&R man at Cameo wanted to make Bobby into a smooth-sounding, but somewhat raspy, James Brown as Brown was hot and high on the charts with his "Mashed Potatoes USA" workout at the time.

"They had me sing in a key I wasn't comfortable in," says Bobby, "and I almost lost my voice." However, the subsequent release of "She's a Hippy" paired with "Whip It Up Baby" (Parkway 835) turned out to be little more than a mildly enthusiastic one-off deal. Through Sly's successful productions and sales of product to Warner Brothers (which eventually lead to the founding of the Loma/Warner subsidiary in 1964), Donahue and Mitchell took the plunge and formed their own label - Autumn Records. Autumn would showcase Bay Area talent including Freeman, whose first release, "Come to Me" b/w "Let's Surf Again" (Autumn 1), emerged in August 1963. "Come to Me," a tender ballad sung with finesse to a basic rhythm track and girlie chorus was a reprise of the same opus first recorded by Freeman at King Records in February 1961 but not put on the streets until 1965.

"Let's Surf Again" is a fine, uncluttered

jumper based on Chubby Checker's "Let's Twist Again" with a roll-call of recording stars thrown in to add color. At least partial backing on the Autumn sides was probably provided by Freddie Stewart (Sly's guitar-playing brother) and the original Stone Souls Band with Danny Williams on tenor sax, Ronnie Crawford on alto, Sly himself on drums, plus bass and perhaps second tenor. As with all the Josie sides, Bobby also played piano on "Come to Me."

Bobby recalls first singing "Let's Surf Again" at the Cow Palace in San Francisco in September 1963. The show, labeled "Surf Party," co-starred the Ronettes, Betty Harris, Freddy Cannon, Dionne Warwick and the Righteous Brothers, plus George & Teddy, a local Sims Twins-type act from San Francisco. The proceedings were recorded by Reice Hamel and put out the same year as Autumn LP 101, KYA's "Memories of the Cow Palace". This was Donahue and Mitchell's third shindig at the Cow Palace which followed headliner Chubby Checker's January 1962 "Twist Party" and sell-out "Limbo Party" of March 1963. Bobby appeared on all three occasions, but it was his dance routine on the "Surf Party" that got the teens dancing wildly in the aisles in the fall of '63.

Alec Palao remarks that "Let's Surf Again" was recorded at Ray Dobard's Alcatraz Avenue Studio in Berkeley. Bobby thinks that a threatened lawsuit against Autumn from Karl Mann and Dave Appell at Cameo who were concerned with the song's closeness to "Let's Twist Again," might have put the damper on things, in spite the fact that Hank Ballard wrote "The Twist" based on a riff by Joseph Wallace of the Sensational Nightingales.

The Swim dance phenomenon probably dates back to 1958 with Bobby Darin's recording of a song he wrote with Jean Murray called "Splish Splash (I was taking a bath)". In 1962 ace guitar wizard Robert Ward and the Falcons modified the riff with Wilson Pickett singing lead and recorded their arrangement called "Swim" (issued on the reverse of Pickett's "I Found a Love") for Bob West's Lupine imprint. The Casinos then recorded the song for Itzy Records before Sly

Stewart and Tom Donahue (alias Tom Coman) thought of capitalizing on the Swim craze by composing "C'mon and Swim." According to Alec Palao, Bobby first introduced the Swim dance step at the Cow Palace during the Chubby Checker-headlined "Limbo Party" of March 1963. When Chubby Checker came on stage to do the twist, Bobby followed with his own improvisations on the Twist dance, using a fabulous one-legged shuffle and moves Bobby called the "Tennis" and "Baseball" Twist. All this so-called friendly rivalry evolved into The Swim.

Next Bobby introduced the dance at the

Galaxie Club in San Francisco's North Beach. Following this, Bobby left to introduce the new dance in Hawaii. Meanwhile, a young go-go dancer at the Galaxie by the name of Judy Mac started copying the dance and began taking all the credit for it. The decision to record "C'mon and Swim" (Autumn 2) was then made so that Bobby could galvanize its authenticity. Other dance crazes consisted of one or two basic body movements. The Swim, however, involved the coordination of a number of body movements made at once. Palao goes on to state that the Swim appealed to the disco crowd as well as the radio listener.

Tom Donahue said at the time that 90% of the nightlife action, including most of the world-famous restaurants, could be found concentrated in the North Beach area neatly divided by Broadway. At the corner of Broadway and Columbus stood the facade of the Condor Club, dressed in fancy colored lights and image of the upper torso of Carol Doda, the topless dancer of rather large, well-rounded attributes. Doda danced and shook nightly to the rhythms of the Swim and Watusi. Crowds flocked into the Barbary Coast's Condor to watch Gino Del Prete and Pete Matrioli introduce Tom Donahue-managed artists George (Hamilton) & Teddy (Brown), the soul-singing duet backed by the Jokers Three. With Doda's help, "C'mon and Swim" — parts 1 and 2 — climbed to the #5 slot on *Billboard's* R&B chart during the fall of 1964 having taken almost three months to arrive. Part 1 outlines the basic steps against an ur-



gent backwash of brass and fast-fretted guitar, while part 2 delivers more of the same as Bobby howls a whole gamut of dance fads one must have surely mastered up to this apex of terpsichoreanship.

Bobby's "S-W-I-M" sandwiched with "That Little Old Heartbreaker Me" (Autumn 5) was released as a single in August 1964. "S-W-I-M" (which was an obvious "C'mon & Swim" spin-off) was pressed with a fuller sound, strong, thundering bass elements and more extravagant guitar fills. "That Little Old Heartbreaker Me" is a mid-tempo "bragging" record with a strong melody, impressive fret-

work and Sly's deep-voiced introductory remarks. Unlike its predecessor, "S-W-I-M" quickly sank after reaching at #56 in October 1964.

In the words of Alex Palao, sessions were quickly booked at Coast Recorders, with an eye not only to a follow-up but also a full album. A collection entitled *C'mon & Swim* (Autumn LP 102) in monaural sound only, came into being. Sly, who had worked with Phil Spector at the Cow Palace gigs, appreciated Spector's shear wall of sound effect and worked along similar lines by doubling up on instrumentation. Sly himself played on every song as did some of the seminal members of the future Family Stone.

A review of the Autumn album cuts gave us (apart from the inclusion of the Bobby's two Swim singles) the multi-vocal and brass interpretation of Major Lance's "(Do the) Monkey;" a rave version of Danny Taylor's "Good Lovin'"; a party style reading of Lee Dorsey's "Ya Ya"; a having-a-ball run-through of "Speedo (The Monkey Man)" with a nod to Bobby Bland's "Turn on Your Lovelight"; Sly's "I'll Never Fall in Love Again" which, with all its good intentions, never really goes anywhere; a fine, funky version of Rufus Thomas's "Walkin' the Dog"; a rock-out rendering of Nat Adderley's "Work Song"; plus an ostentatiously orchestrated interpretation of Barrett Strong's chart-topper "Money (That's What I Want)" with heavy beach party atmosphere. "Work Song" and "Money" were culled from Bobby's stage set.

The CD reissue of this album on ACE in England includes the first-time release of eight tunes, the rhythmically complex "Dance All Night" with its country-sounding harp-playing edge; the funky, heavy-handed version of Jimmy Reed's "Ain't That Lovin' You Baby"; the shake & shimmy rendering of Sly's "Every Dog Has Its Day"; a "Pretty Woman"-like arrangement of Little Richard's "Lucille" which seems to lack the energy of either of the originals; the vibe-driven "Swing Me," which should have seen previous release because of its sheer excitement and originality; the weird "Honest" with its nod to Tom Jones; plus alternates of "S-W-I-M" and the narcissistic "Little Old Heartbreaker Me."

Around the time of the Autumn album release, King Records issued two singles that were worlds away from the pace and style Bobby and Sly were trying to put over on Autumn in San Francisco. The first of these (King 573) was a hard-driving version of John Davenport and Eddie Cooley's 1956 Little Willie John smash, "Fever," sliced with Donnie Elbert's weeper of 1957, "What Could I Do," done up soulfully and respectfully. "Fever" was culled from the February 1961 session whilst "What Could I Do" was drawn

from a date held a month later. King's second release (King 5953) gave us "Somebody, Somewhere" and "Be my Little Chick-a-dee," the latter being merely a good-time, finger-popper of little distinction. "Somebody, Somewhere" was from the March 1961 session and "Chick-a-dee" from the June 1960 date.

Sly Stone, who wrote a goodly number of the Autumn releases, made no pretensions about borrowing from other current top-selling songs. His way of using parts of them to create his own work is extremely interesting and sometimes verges on musical parody. Sly Stone's major strength was in being able to change with the times. When the Beatles became the darlings of the young record buying public, Sly and Bobby wasted no time in keeping up by appearing in public wearing Beatle mop wigs.

Meanwhile, King Records dug deep in their vaults and issued one more single and one album on Bobby. The single release pits the original February 1961 version of "Come To Me" with "There's Gonna Be a Change" from the June 1960 recording date (King 5962).

King also kept some songs in the can. These included Bobby's cover of the Spaniels' "Goodnight, Sweetheart, Goodnight" and Larry Williams' "Bony Moronie" from the February 1961 date, "Please Stay by Me" and "Turnabout" from the two March 1961 sessions plus "Miss You So," the cover of Lillian Offit's opus and, lastly, "Baby, Baby, Baby" from the final October 1963 date. In 1965 King issued their monaural *Lovable Style of Bobby Freeman* album with material that included "Love Struck," the original version of "Please Give My Heart a Break," "Good Good Lovin'," "Please, Please, Please" and the four previously issued singles releases.

Bobby insists he wrote all the songs on the King album except, of course, James Brown's "Please, Please, Please" and "What Could I Do." He also does not remember (and seems to be unaware of) the last two King single releases from 1964-65. Syd Nathan, owner of King Records, obviously tried to avoid having to pay out any kind of royalty. Bobby cut two more singles for Autumn under Sly Stone's stewardship. These were an alternate to the remake of "I'll Never Fall in Love Again," which sounds aurally close to Dave Clark's "Bits & Pieces"; the loping "Friends" with its tricky vocal timing; the complex "Cross my Heart" (a.k.a. "Devil") with its busy brass and cooing chorus; plus Bobby's cover of Jackie Lee's hand-and foot-warmer, "The Duck," recorded rather hurriedly to cash in on the new dance craze at Golden State Records on Harrison Street in San Francisco. For other examples of Sly's work on Autumn Records see the *Precious Stone, In the Studio with Sly Stone* CD on Ace which also includes

three Bobby Freeman songs.

Bobby played on Dick Clark's Caravan of Stars cross country tours twice during the early 1960s and continued to find work in Hawaii, Nevada and around the San Francisco Bay. By the close of 1965, Donahue and Mitchell had begun to lose interest in Autumn Records. Most of the day-to-day running of the discery was left to Sly who had to deal with distributors who were notorious for being late in paying their bills. The company's cash-flow crisis was steadily getting worse. Bobby never received royalties from sales of "The Swim" but to an extent made up for this



by insisting on being paid for live personal appearances. Bobby felt himself in a helpless situation—if he complained he feared he would lose recording opportunities.

In the end, when Autumn finally folded in March 1966, both Donahue and Mitchell walked away with a considerable amount of cash. Autumn's artist roster, which included Bobby, was farmed out to Warner Bros. Bobby now found himself on Warner's Loma subsidiary. Loma Records principally handled Warner's black R&B, soul and funk contingent with releases by such luminaries as the Enchanters, Ike & Tina Turner, the Olympics and Lonnie Youngblood. According to Alec Palao, Sly continued to work with Bobby on cutting funk-based charts until he was whisked away to New York to record under the able supervision of Jerry Ragavoy. Ragavoy's magic masterpieces included the writing of "Ain't Nobody Home" for Howard Tate, "I'll Take

Good Care of You" for Garnett Mimms, "Piece of my Heart" for Erma Franklin and "Time Is on My Side" for Irma Thomas (and later a hit with the Rolling Stones). Ragavoy and oft-times co-writer Bert Berns were the masters of the deep-soul anthem. Bobby knew he was in good company and quite often insists that the two singles he cut for Loma were some of his best waxings.

Bobby's voice was as good as it would ever get. As pointed out by Alec Palao, Bobby's first Loma outing, "Shadow of Your Love" (backed by the Blossoms) and "Soulful Sound of Music," sadly did nothing commercially. The follow-up "I Got a Good Thing" and "Lies" fared only a little better. "I was with Jerry Ragavoy for two weeks," says Bobby, "and they were two of the most memorable weeks of my life." In April 1969, Bobby signed with Hal Winn's Double Shot label out of Los Angeles. Under Hooven and Rodgers' direction, plus the dynamic promotional drive of label owner Irwin Zucker, Bobby cut four funk-formulated singles for Double Shot. Although many of the eight issued tunes seemed musically stalled in a funky groove, most of the lyrics were politically relevant, intelligent and sometimes insightful. One of the strongest of these was "Everybody's Got a Hang Up," the top side of Bobby's first 1969 release.

In 1971, Bobby returned to his old stompin' grounds by signing a twelve-month contract with the Condor Club, a gig which was to run for the next five and a half years. He continued to record one-off deals with labels like Touch and Lakeside. Bobby's live club and resort engagements continued to be lucrative, exciting and endowed with boundless energy.

"One of my strongest songs is the Righteous Brothers hit "You've Got That Lovin' Feelin'," says Bobby. "But unlike Bobby Hatfield and Bill Medley, I sing both parts simultaneously." Many of Bobby's 1980s appearances were made without a full band as he would often go on with just piano accompaniment. No matter what, 'til hell freezes over, Bobby Freeman's name will always be synonymous with "Do You Wanna Dance," the song which helped shape rock and R&B in the San Francisco Bay Area. "I'm aware of about fifty versions," says Bobby. Among these are such notables as John Lennon, the Mamas & the Papas, the Beach Boys, the Ramones, Bette Midler, David Lindley, Dave Edmonds, Barbie & the Barbie Dolls, Cliff Richard, Del Shannon and a multitude of college marching bands who belt it out during college football games.

From interviews with Bobby Freeman conducted by Opal Nations and Alec Palao. Special thanks go to Randy Tamberg for his images and insights.