

Beyond the B Sides

A trove of vocal performances you probably—and shouldn't have—missed.

On his new Hightone album, *Unchained Maladies*, Musician contributing editor Rev. Billy C. Wirtz drags us through a minefield of musical memories that still hold a lot of meaning for boomers and those who hate them. But his knowledge of recordings stretches far beyond the Woodstock set list, so we decided to give him the last word in this special issue. The assignment was simple: Come up with a list of vocal performances that deserve at least as much recognition as, oh, I don't know, Dan Hill got for "Sometimes When We Touch." True to form, the good Rev. came through. For some truly amazing milestones in vocal history, check these out . . . if you dare.

The Louvin Brothers, "Knoxville Girl."

These guys defined close harmony. Most of their songs were either extremely religious or extremely dark and violent; they'd sing about death, ghosts, train wrecks, all that stuff. But this record is one of my all-time favorites: The guy meets the girl in Knoxville, they go for a walk by a river, and for no apparent reason he picks up a stick, hits her on the head, and pushes her into the water. And it goes downhill from there. But the way they sing it, it's so convincing. It's country without trying to appeal to a mass pop audience or become an ad for blue jeans.

Carl Butler, "Don't Let Me Cross Over." This is my second favorite country performance. You can just see a guy sitting at a redneck bar in Virginia, with his gut hanging out over his initialed buckle, a PBR in one hand and the pork rinds in the other, a tear in his eye, thinking about how this song defines his life.

Red Sovine, "Little Rosa." This was from the era of "Honey" and other songs about infanticide, so in that sense there's nothing

unusual here. But what it does feature is probably the worst Italian accent recorded in the history of music. Is it possible for a song about a little girl who gets run over by a train to be screamingly and unintentionally hilarious? Unfortunately, yes.

Screamin' Jay Hawkins, "Constipation Blues." It would be hard to top this one in the "weird" category.

Screamin' Jay graphically depicts a man in the throes of, as he calls it, "real pain." The whole song is him grunting and groaning in agony. It's helped me clear out parties and find new meaning to the phrase "wind beneath my wings."

The Skyliners, "This I Swear."

Phil Spector says this is the greatest teenage love ballad of all time. All I'll add is that Jimmy Beaumont, the pride of Pittsburgh, could sing!

O. V. Wright, "The Nickel and the Nail." Here we have one of the most neglected talents of the soul music era. This was a Willie Mitchell type of sound, predating Al Green. Oh, yeah—and it's the most bitter, tense soul song I've ever heard.

The Mighty Clouds of Joy, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

This is probably the most intense two-and-a-half minutes ever put on record. There's a guy doubling the lead part with a falsetto that'll drop your jaw.

Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers, "Jesus Gave Me Water." Absolute flawless perfection.

The Ramones, "Teenage Lobotomy." My favorite song for dealing with minor cases of road rage. When I'm driving down the road and people are going stupid all around me, I can turn this up and feel better about the world.

