

Beach Music:

Is it coming or going?

By CHIP WILSON

Beach Music—the Rhythm and Blues of Sand in Shoes—appears to be making a comeback.

Across the two Carolinas, beach music alternates with Top-40 tunes on radio stations, beach clubs are cropping up and vocal groups who perform the mellow tunes of surf, simple love and Spo-dee-o-dee now command top dollars.

Not bad for music that was once prohibited from play over most Southern radio stations. But the original bans probably did more to boost Beach Music, since young people could only listen to it at one place—the beach.

"At the time when Rhythm And Blues first appeared, the beach was the place for young people to go," said Chris Beachley, a Charlotte record store owner and editor of *It Will Stand*, a beach music magazine. "It was a place for kids to get away from their parents, who didn't want them to listen to any of that 'sinful Negro music.'"

The music was considered sinful, more because of the lyrics of the songs than the race of the singers, Beachley said.

"When *Sixty Minute Man* was first released, many black-operated radio stations didn't play it, because the words were so controversial."

The lyrics from "*Sixty Minute Man*," typified the risqué element in early rhythm and blues:

*"There'll be fifteen minutes of squeezin'
Then you'll holler please don't stop.
There'll be fifteen minutes of teasin'
Fifteen minutes of squeezin' and
Fifteen minutes of blowin' my top."*

It wasn't just the song or its suggestive words that blew the top off of popular music. It was the falsetto-voiced Clyde McPhatter, who crooned in the background when "*Sixty Minute Man*" was released by Billy Ward and the Dominoes.

McPhatter, a Durham-born gospel singer, joined the Dominoes at 17. He blended the call-and-response style of black religious music with more worldly lyrics. This form was emulated by many black and white vocal groups who followed, including The Beatles.

McPhatter is best known for forming The Drifters, which today still exist as the most popular beach music group, for songs like "Under The Boardwalk," "Up On The Roof," and "I've Got The Sand In My Shoes." The lyrics to these tunes were considerably milder than those of songs like "Drinking Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee" by Sticks McGhee. But they remained popular nevertheless.

In fact, The Drifters have maintained a consistent following of fans, despite three major membership changes in their 18-year history.

The group disbanded in 1956, after releasing such hits as "Money Money" and "Have Mercy Baby," when McPhatter was drafted. But Ben E. King brought the group back to life and to the peak of its career, only to see them fall apart again. The Drifters were later reformed by Bill Pinkey and released such current beach favorites as "(You're More Than A Number In) My Little Red Book," and "Kissing In The Back Row."

Such simplicity appears in newer beach tunes by groups like Chairman of the Board, The Embers and The Catalinas. The newer tunes like "Myrtle Beach Days," "Summertime's Calling Me" and "On The Beach" aim directly toward a beach audience, unlike the earlier, more cosmopolitan tunes which were adapted by coastal visitors.

New and old songs alike have been selling very well, said Joe Deese, manager of the Record Bar on Franklin Street.

"There has always been a group of people here in Chapel Hill who have been buying beach music," said Deese. "But in the past year we have been selling a lot of beach singles. It has been a real surge."

Deese attributes increased beach music sales to efforts to distribute many hard-to-find beach singles by placing them on albums.

"One company, Ripete Records released a series of *Beach Beat* albums which contain many of the popular songs that were originally released on smaller record labels," Deese said. "They have also pressed a number of singles of older songs. But many beach music fans would rather have the original record."

The only time any of our brothers will listen to it is when we get really drunk. Then we might dance to it. But we never listen or dance to it when we're sober.

— Terry Kellagher, Social Chairman
Alpha Tau Omega

Other signs point to the increasing popularity of beach music, said Mike Lewis, a Chapel Hill record collector and associate editor of *It Will Stand*.

"Beach Music is not limited to Chapel Hill or the Carolinas anymore," Lewis said. "There are clubs playing the music in Denver, Houston, Dallas/Ft. Worth and West Virginia."

"It's at the highest point that it has ever been."

Lewis said beach fans were in full force recently when S.O.S. (Society of Stranders) had its annual meeting at North Myrtle Beach, S.C. "The S.O.S. convention is a big party started last year for people who have been going to the beach on a regular basis," he said. "This year, they tied a big yellow ribbon around the 15-story hotel where we were staying."

Another gauge which Lewis said indicates a new popularity of Beach Music is the number of dance contests.

"They're popping up everywhere," Lewis said. "In Charleston, S.C. last month, the winning couple in the Shagging contest there won \$5000."

Lewis also said "the death of Disco" is another reason for the Beach Music's new-found following. "Right now, there is a general resurgence in Rhythm and Blues music. This can be seen in the popularity of Delbert McClinton and Gary U.S. Bonds.

"It's music about good times. That's all I can really say. It's good, no-pressure, drinking music that reminds people of the beach," Lewis said.

"It also ties in with the new Preppy trend. That's one place where the South and the North meet."

One irony Lewis noted is the lack of interest blacks have in Beach Music, though most all of the groups that perform it are black.

"I've been listening to Beach Music for 15 years, but never have seen any blacks at any clubs where they were playing Beach Music," Lewis said. "It's one carry-over from the days of the earlier South."

Deese said the biggest fans of Beach Music are affiliated with Greek organizations: "Usually the people who come in here and buy beach music in any large quantity are wearing fraternity or sorority shirts. They usually got them to play in their jukeboxes."

A survey undertaken by the *Daily Tar Heel* in 1975 showed that Beach Music comprised half of the ten favorite songs of fraternity houses. But love of Beach Music among fraternities is not universal.

"The only time any of our brothers listen to it is when we get really drunk," said Terry Kellagher, social chairman of Alpha Tau Omega's UNC-CH Chapter. "Then we might dance to it. But we never listen to it or dance to it when we're sober."

Despite the lack of enthusiasm for beach music among some Carolina students, Deese said it accounted for 25 percent of sales at the Chapel Hill Record Bar.

"It sells as well as our New Wave records, but not as well as our Top 40 records," Deese said. "Beach Music definitely sells a lot better than Disco." [5]

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