

AN INTERVIEW WITH CARL GARDNER OF THE COASTERS

By
TOM PRESTOPNIK

I Met Carl Gardner and his wife Veta, about twenty years ago when I contacted him, told him that I was a big fan, and wanted to meet him. He had just returned home from the hospital after throat cancer surgery and was not feeling top of his game. Never the less, he invited me, and my brother who was visiting at the time, into his home in Port St. Lucie, South Florida. He met us in his bathrobe, and with a post-surgery raspy voice, proceeded to tell us stories of his past as the leader of The Coasters, The Clown Princes of Rock and Roll.

We maintained our friendship and a few years later, I was once again at his home and asked him if there were any upcoming concerts. He informed me that he was headed to The Turning Stone Casino and Resort in Oneida, New York to perform with the group. Checking times and dates, I realized that just by coincidence I would be visiting upstate New York at the same time, so I made a mental appointment to go to the concert. In the summer of 1995 we drove the forty miles from home to the casino. We met up with Carl and Veta prior to the concert and they sat with us at the lounge tables and again were both very gracious, entertaining us with more stories of the early days on the road and how they compared with the current days. My brother and I, who had great seats in the audience, were introduced by Carl as, “My very good friends visiting from

South Florida.” We stood up and as the spotlight shone on us we waved to the crowd like we were somebody important. It made us both laugh because we were just old rock ‘n’ roll fans and nobody special, but Carl made us feel like we were.

Back in Florida in 1999 we were being threatened, as usual, by a fierce hurricane season. By that time, Carl and Veta had moved to another house which was in the same neighborhood where I live. September 14th saw Hurricane Floyd headed straight toward Port St. Lucie, Florida. As a precaution, people boarded up their homes with hurricane shutters and headed to the neighborhood Morningside Elementary School, the designated hurricane shelter. Sitting in a shelter for hours on end can get very boring, so I decided to take a stroll to see what kind of trouble I could get into. All the hallways were crowded with people on their sleeping bags, blow-up mattresses, and folding chairs, some reading, some listening to the weather reports, other nervously chatting to new found friends, others eating their granola bars and snacks. It reminded me of photos that I have seen of the London Tube (Underground Subway) during World War II. If it weren’t for the seriousness of the approaching storm, it would have felt almost like a festive atmosphere. Walking the hallways, I spotted a familiar face. Carl Gardner was sitting on a small folding chair listening to the weather report. As I came up to him he recognized me and we struck up a conversation, naturally about rock ‘n’ roll. About half an hour into our conversation, the school principal came on the intercom and announced that we were all going to meet in the

school's activity room for a sing-a-long. I mentioned to Carl that we should go and he might just be asked to lead us in song. His response was a classic. He responded to me, "Hell no, I don't sing for free. They pay me to sing." It was such a great answer in a time of tension. The hurricane approached Florida and about twenty miles out into the Ocean, turned ninety degrees North and headed up the coast, bringing some wind and rain, but South Florida had been spared that time. In the early hours of the morning the storm headed north and some people packed up and went home, while others spent the night at the school.

For thirty three years I was a teacher, and the last twenty at South Fork High School in Stuart, Florida. My principal for a part of that time was Dan Noel, a very understanding and creative leader. During my summer break one year I attended a workshop at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, Ohio. I participated in a program through the Summer Teacher Institute entitled "So You Want To Be A Rock And Roll Teacher". It's set up for high school history and English teachers, but is open to others as well. Upon return to my school, I convinced my principal that I needed to teach a course "The History of Rock and Roll". He agreed and during the time I taught the course I had the opportunity to bring in guests to play and talk to my students. One of the featured guests was Carl. Prior to his visit I played The Coasters music and told the story of the early days of rock 'n' roll to my students. He was a wonderful guest speaker and told many stories of his

early years. It was heartwarming to see an elderly icon of the rock world giving back to the eager youth.

In the late fall of 2004, South Florida wasn't as lucky as it had been a few years previous. We got hit hard by two storms, Hurricane's Frances and Jeanne. At the time of Frances, Carl was in the hospital after suffering a minor stroke. It was after the recovery of this stroke that he retired from active singing with the Coasters and his son Carl Gardner, Jr., took over as the lead singer for the group.

On a recent visit to his home, I had the chance to talk to Carl and Veta about their recently published biography, Yakety Yak, I Fought Back, and the still-in-the-planning stages biopic of the tentative same name. Veta is the manager of the Coasters and the loving wife of Carl and talking to them I can see that they are a team. Answers and statements from both will be attributed to Carl for convenience.

Tom Prestopnik: You start off the book talking about Jimi Hendrix, Paul McCartney, The Rolling Stones, Michael Jackson, and others. You said that Hendrix once backed up the Coasters. Do you have memories of that?

Carl & Veta Gardner: Hendrix was too long ago and far away to remember, but I do remember once when we had a conflict with a concert schedule, that Lou Rawls sang for me when I had to go on vacation. That was a one-time thing and he went on to other things after that.

TP: While talking backstage with McCartney at the Peppermint Lounge in Miami, he said that the Beatles were going to record some Coasters songs. Early in their career they sang “Three Cool Cats”. Did they ever sing any other Coasters songs, or did you ever sing any of their songs in your act? Are there any other comments about Sir Paul?

CG: I think that they sang “Riot in Cell Block #9”. But I’m not sure. We never sang any of the Beatles songs, just Coasters songs written by Leiber and Stoller. We were sitting on some speakers backstage and Paul asked me how much money I had made that day. I told him \$2000 for the show. He seemed disappointed that he was appearing on Ed Sullivan and making the big bucks and I was getting almost nothing. That’s how it is in the world of rock ‘n’ roll.

TP: Your dad came from a family of interracial heritage. Did you notice your audience changing from Black in the 50’s to White in the 80’s and 90’s.

CG: Mostly we played to White audiences. About the only places where we played to Black audiences were in the big cities like New York when we were at the Apollo. We weren’t known as a soul or in those days, a rhythm and blues act, but instead as a rock ‘n’ roll group, or a novelty rock ‘n’ roll act, so the audiences were mostly White. We still play at least three concerts a year in South Carolina, usually at the Alabama Theater in Myrtle Beach, and our audiences there are about 99% white.

TP: You're given credit for breaking the Color Bar in the Las Vegas casinos. Will you tell me about that experience?

CG: (Detailed in Chapter nine of the book). We were performing at the casinos in Vegas to White audiences, but because we were Black we couldn't stay at the hotel, or even have a dressing room there. Stars like Nat King Cole, Billy Eckstine and us had to drive across town to the other side of the railroad tracks to stay and change in a smaller cheaper hotel. After doing this for several days, I decided that I had had enough and was going to try and make a change. I told the rest of the guys that I was going to talk to the head man at the casino. I was a little country boy and didn't know anything about the mobster business, so didn't know any kind of fear. I told him that I was tired of traveling back and forth across town, and wanted to change in the hotel. I told him that we weren't interested in his White women, we were just there to put on a show and get our money. He laughed and said that we were now going to change at the hotel. After that other Colored acts also were able to change at the hotel, but we were the first.

TP: You left Tyler, Texas and joined the US Army when you were fifteen. When's the last time you were back there and did you see a lot of changes in the neighborhood?

CG: We lived in a little shotgun shack up on stilts, just like Elvis. Even though I never graduated, I was back for a high school reunion several years ago. Obviously it's changed a lot since I was a small boy there in the 1930's.

Both of my parents are buried there and that's where I expect to be buried, next to them.

TP: There's a funny story in the book about Big Mama Thornton threatening to "beat the shit out of you". Can you tell me about what you remember about her?

CG: She was a HUGE woman and very mean. She had a scar under her eye that made her look even meaner. We were in Houston, Texas at a nightclub where she was performing. She either wasn't there yet, or was in the dressing room. Anyway, she was not in sight, so I went up to the manager and begged him to let me sing one song so he could hear what I sounded like. He let me sing one song, so I sang a Billy Eckstine blues song. The manager liked me so much he offered me a singing job in his club right on the spot. Just about then Big Mama came out of the dressing room and told me to get the hell off her stage or she would beat the shit out of me. I ran out of there in a hurry and never went back.

TP: You describe yourself as having a wonderfully sweet voice as a teenager and young man. Do you have any recordings of you singing at that time?

CG: No, we didn't have tape players in those days and my young voice is just a memory now. In 1996, I released a solo album titled "One Cool Cat" and in that I sang some sweet songs especially "Moonlight in Vermont" and "Willow Weep For Me". Those two songs were bonus

tracks that I had recorded in the 60's. That's as close to hearing my voice when I was a young man.

TP: You sang lead on the song "Smokey Joe's Café" which has been turned into a Broadway Musical Review that is touring all around the country today. Were you at the Premier on Broadway?

CG: Yes, we were at the opening on Broadway. That was the only time that I've ever seen the production. It was playing locally last year and we didn't go to see it. I was told that they had Ben E. King from the Drifters up on stage during some of the performances in New York, but we were in the audience opening night and they didn't even invite me to go up on stage to take a bow. That really hurt.

TP: You mentioned that Richard Berry was the lead singer on the song "Riot In Cell Block # 9", one of the Robins' first hits. Was that the same Richard Berry that wrote and sang the original "Louie, Louie"?

CG: Bobby Nunn was supposed to sing lead on that one, but he felt that his voice just wasn't quite right for the song and he didn't want to sing lead on it, so we brought in Richard Berry. I think that he was the same person who wrote "Louie, Louie", but I'm not sure.

TP: Another similar question. Will "Dub" Jones joined the Coasters from the group The Cadets of "Stranded In The Jungle" fame. I understand that the Cadets sang back-up on recordings for teen heart throb Paul Anka when they

were both recording for RPM Records. That sounds like an odd mixture. What can you tell me about that?

CG: It was common in those days for one act to sing on another's record. People on the same label did it a lot. We were the back up group on LaVern Baker's song "Jim Dandy". Listen closely and you can recognize the Coasters.

TP: There's a very interesting story about Aretha Franklin in the book. You mentioned that today she pretends that she doesn't know you, yet you performed on the same stage and were close friends in the early years. Why does she feel this way today?

CG: A lot of stars feel that once they get to the top that they want to forget all the other people that they passed going up the ladder. They forget that they'll be meeting them again on their way down the ladder. In the early days we were on the stage with Diana Ross and she was very sweet. She would joke with all the boys in the Coasters. Once she made it to the top and we were not having hits, but were an oldies act, she wouldn't even look at us anymore. It's sad when success goes to people's heads like that.

TP: The Coasters were the first Rock and Roll group inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. That night in January 1987, when you were inducted in the Hall along with Roy Orbison, B.B. King, Aretha Franklin, Muddy

Waters, Bo Diddley, Marvin Gaye, Ricky Nelson and many more, that must have been an exciting night for you.

CG: Aretha Franklin didn't show up that night. I think everybody else was there. It was a large class of inductees. There were fifteen instead of the regular ten. I remember that it was at the Waldorf Astoria in New York City and the food was a small piece of meatloaf and some carrots for \$1000 a plate. Since I was being inducted, I didn't have to pay, but I can tell you that it wasn't worth \$1000. The weather was bitter cold and as our limousine pulled up to the sidewalk there was a large crowd of people all wanting to get an autograph or a photograph. Everybody was pushing and Veta and I were freezing because of the winter weather. I told the security guards that I had to pee real bad and they hustled us past the crowd into the warm hotel ballroom. We are also members of the Vocal Group Hall of Fame in Sharon, Pennsylvania.

TP: In March of 1999 you and others met with Congressmen Dennis Kucinich (D. Ohio) and Charlie Norwood (R. Georgia) and asked them to pass legislation protecting entertainers from trademark infringement. Has that bill been passed into law?

CG: No it never was passed. The time we spent in Washington was very costly and stressful, even though the congressmen and everybody were very gracious to us. We finally were able to get our bill attached to the Consumer Fraud Law and that was passed. This law protects the singing acts of the past from unscrupulous promoters such

as Larry Marshak. These dishonest promoters might have several Coasters, Drifters, Platters, or Marvellettes groups out there at any time, and none of them have anything to do with the original group or any of their members. After spending a lot of time and money fighting Marshak, he just starts up another company using another name and if we want to go after him, we have to start all over again fighting a new company. One of his current representatives is Capitol International that is promoting the “FAKE” Coasters. I hope my fans know the difference and don’t go to those concerts performed by the “FAKE” Coasters.

TP: Tell me about the current Coasters.

CG: They’re still performing all over the United States. We’ve had recent requests to play in Russia and Germany. The Coasters are more popular in Europe than they are in the USA right now. As of 2004, after my stroke, I felt that I couldn’t give my best performances as I did in the past, so I have passed down the crown to my son Carl Gardner Jr. Our guitar man Curley, has been with us since 1962. Ronnie Bright has been in the group since 1968. Joe Williams has been with us since 1998, and our newest member, Primotivo Candelara has been with us for a year.

TP: I understand that a motion picture is being scripted from your biography. What is the status of the movie and when can we expect to see it in the theaters?

CG: The production company has just finished a movie about Black poet and author Zora Hurston and now will

turn all of their attention towards our project. They're working on a script to follow closely with the biography Yakety Yak, I Fought Back.

TP: Thank you very much Carl and Veta Gardner. I wish you continued success with the Coasters and good health.

CG: Thank you Tom. God Bless.

For purchase of the Carl Gardner and the Coasters biography Yakety Yak, I Fought Back by Veta Gardner, please contact www.authorhouse.com. For autographed copies of the biography please contact Veta Gardner at thecoasters@bellsouth.net or call at 772-380-9607. Also find out more at www.thecoasters.com.