

**A House on Fire:  
The Rise and Fall of  
Philadelphia Soul**

*John A. Jackson*

**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS**

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*For all those  
who helped to create  
the Sound of Philadelphia  
who are no longer with us*

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# Preface

**D**URING THE 1970S, KENNY GAMBLE, LEON HUFF, AND THOM BELL collectively produced at least twenty-eight gold- or platinum-certified record albums and thirty-one million-selling gold- or platinum-certified singles.<sup>1</sup> They have also written more than one thousand songs between them. In doing so, they made superstars out of Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, the O'Jays, Teddy Pendergrass, the Spinners and the Stylistics and injected new life into the career of Jerry Butler, among others. Among Gamble and Huff's biggest hits are "Back Stabbers," "Cowboys to Girls," "Drowning in the Sea of Love," "If You Don't Know Me by Now," "The Love I Lost," "Love Train," "Me and Mrs. Jones," and "You'll Never Find Another Love like Mine." Thom Bell has collaborated on, among others, "Betcha by Golly, Wow," "Didn't I (Blow Your Mind This Time)," "I'll Be Around," "I'm Stone in Love with You," "La-La Means I Love You," "The Rubberband Man," "You Are Everything," and "You Make Me Feel Brand New." Gamble and Huff produced most of their music for their own Philadelphia International record label, while Thom Bell worked mostly as an independent producer.

Philadelphia International Records was pop music's last great independent "hit factory." As such, it influenced not only the recording industry, but also American culture itself. Never again would such a provincial cadre of writer-producers wield power and authority as did Gamble, Huff, and Bell. They were the masters of Philadelphia soul, a multilayered, bottom-heavy brand of sophistication and glossy urban rhythm and blues, characterized by crisp, melodious harmonies backed by lush, string-laden orchestrations and a hard-driving rhythm section. For a brief period of time, Gamble, Huff, and Bell were able to overcome the country's racial divisions and make skin color irrelevant. One

of the most important messages conveyed by Philadelphia soul was that blacks and whites could get down with the very same music.

Gamble, Huff, and Bell were among the most influential and successful music producers of the early 1970s. They used their black inner-city neighborhood as a metaphor for the struggle for human dignity and developed a black-owned recording empire. For the better part of a decade, the City of Philadelphia became pop music's epicenter (as it had done a decade earlier, during the first era of Dick Clark's *American Bandstand*). Philadelphia soul also developed an international appeal to the extent that three decades later it is a revered genre around the globe.

Much of Philadelphia soul remains musically pertinent, and classic hits from its golden era continue to be reinterpreted. Such was the case with the blue-eyed soul singer Simply Red's 1989 version of Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes' "If You Don't Know Me by Now," which reached the top of *Billboard's* Hot 100 and earned a Grammy nomination for its composers, Gamble and Huff. In 2002, Patti Labelle's 1981 recording of "Love, Need and Want You," written by Gamble and Bunny Sigler, was sampled by the rapper Nelly in his song "Dilemma." Sung by female R&B vocalist Kelly Rowland (of Destiny's Child), "Dilemma" reached number one on *Billboard's* R&B charts that summer and remained at the top of the charts for ten weeks. "It was wonderful," Sigler told me in 2002, with the song still on the charts. "It's really exciting . . . to be [heard] on the stations that [play] songs that the kids listen to." Nelly's update combined "the old and the new, and it made it better than before," added Sigler, who made his first recordings in the early 1960s. "We dealin' with a new generation!"<sup>2</sup>

Sigler told me that Gamble, too, "was excited for the recognition" garnered from "Dilemma." Two years earlier, Gamble had waxed enthusiastically about how new artists "are taking a lot of our old stuff and recycling it and bringing it back in different forms. They can take four chords off of one of our songs and write a whole new song to it."<sup>3</sup> Now, said Sigler, Gamble appeared even more enthused than his writing partner. "He was so busy bein' excited, I had to put my excitement on hold!"

"I MUST CONFESS, I NEVER GET TIRED OF HEARING SONGS that my partner Leon Huff and I have written," said Gamble two years earlier to the delegates to the 2000 Republican National Convention, in Philadelphia. When it comes to *discussing* that music, however, Gamble can sing a different tune. "He'll never talk to you," Thom Bell adamantly told me during my research for this book. "Gamble will not talk to you."<sup>4</sup> Since I began working on this project five years ago, several people who knew and/or worked with Gamble told me essentially the same thing. Still, I

had reason for hope. While conducting research for my history of *American Bandstand* several years ago, I was assured by Dick Clark's own publicist, among others, that Clark would not speak with me. Clark surprised us all when he consented to be interviewed.

Through an intermediary who knew Gamble well, I sent him a letter of introduction and copies of my two previous books. Gamble could see for himself the style and quality of my writing. (Both books won literary awards.) Then, for a year or so, Weldon McDougal, who grew up with Gamble and at one time worked for Philadelphia International Records, pleaded my case directly to him. One day, McDougal enthusiastically informed me that Gamble had instructed him to give me Gamble's personal telephone number. When I called, Gamble said he would do the interview the following week. When that date passed and I did not hear from him, I called again. He told me he was sorry for not calling as promised, but he had misplaced my telephone number. Besides, added Gamble, he had changed his mind about doing the interview. He had talked things over with Leon Huff and the two of them decided against "giving away" their story. (Leon Huff's secretary subsequently told me over the telephone that Huff did not wish to speak with me.)

About a year later, during the winter of 2003, I met Gamble face-to-face at a function in Philadelphia. I introduced myself to him and told him that I hoped he would reconsider his decision and consent to do an interview. Without committing himself, Gamble wrote his number on a piece of paper, handed it to me, and told me to call him. My subsequent phone messages went unanswered. Thom Bell had been on the money from the start. He explained to me how Gamble derives satisfaction out of demonstrating to others that he is the one in control of a particular situation. "He just strings people along like that. I've seen him do that year in and year out." I did not have to be convinced.

IT WAS "DESTINY [THAT] PULLED US ALL TOGETHER," said Kenny Gamble (not to me), when asked how the success of him, Leon Huff, and Thom Bell came about. "The music just happened." To Gamble's way of thinking, the coming together of such a diverse and talented group of people could not have been planned. "It all fell into place, because it was meant to be. So much music was produced and created. You wonder how all that happened."<sup>5</sup> And how it all ended. By then I realized that another visit to Philadelphia was in order.

Stand on Broad Street, about half a dozen blocks south of Penn Square and City Hall, and squint your eyes just enough to blur the images of six lanes of traffic whizzing by. It is easy to imagine the scene as it was three decades ago, when Philadelphia soul was at its apex. Although that particular section of Broad Street has been renamed the

Avenue of the Arts and the new home of the Philadelphia Orchestra—the gleaming \$265 million Kimmell Center for the Performing Arts—looms to the left, William Penn’s statue still stands preeminent astride City Hall’s rooftop. And a hard look to the right reveals the three-story Philadelphia International Building, its logo gracing the structure’s brick facade and its glass-paneled doors. The pulsating strains of Philadelphia soul classics such as “Ain’t No Stoppin’ Us Now,” “Back Stabbers,” “Only the Strong Survive,” “The Rubberband Man,” and “Then Came You” readily come to mind. But a closer look at the famous building brings the musical hit parade to an abrupt halt. Taped to the inside of Philadelphia International’s locked doors is a tiny handwritten notice stating that the only person inside the building is the company attorney. Warner-Chappell Music now owns the lucrative song-publishing catalog of Kenny Gamble, Leon Huff, and Thom Bell. The trio’s music is reissued by companies located in cities other than Philadelphia. The empty rooms that once housed Philadelphia International offer one of the last remaining vestiges of the vibrant musical empire that for a time surpassed Berry Gordy’s Motown as the leading black-owned recording company. Fortunately, the remembrances of those involved with making the music also remain.

Pioneering Philadelphia record producer Morris Bailey (who helped to start the career of Patti Labelle) thought that Gamble, Huff, and Bell “just put Philly back on the map. . . . The rest of us might not have been any less talented, but [they] took it to the top. If it wasn’t for Kenny Gamble we would be workin’ at Horn & Hardart’s, servin’ apple pie and milk!”<sup>6</sup> Along with Bailey, many others expressed a willingness to share their recollections of this particular slice of Philadelphia’s musical history. Some of those individuals are comfortably retired, while others, some down on their luck and nearly forgotten, continue to scratch out a living in and out of the music business. A growing number have passed on. Each of them recounted the part they played in the development of Philadelphia soul, as well as a desire to see that story documented. What I discovered is revealed in this book.

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# **A House on Fire**

Philadelphia was a one-horse town,  
and Gamble, Huff, and Bell were  
the horse.

—Carla Benson,  
the Sweethearts of Sigma Sound

# "I'll Get By"

(1942–1962)

**T**HE NIGHT OF AUGUST 29, 1964, was supposed to be a typical one at the Uptown Theater. Local radio personality Georgie Woods ("the guy with the goods") emceed a rhythm and blues stage show, just as he had done many times before at the crumbling, cavernous arena squatting in the heart of the North Philadelphia ghetto. Headliners that evening included B. B. King and Gladys Knight and the Pips. It was a "big show," recalled Woods, who was not only a popular disc jockey on one of the city's two black-oriented radio stations, but also a civil rights activist and a leading voice of the black community. Suddenly, a telephone call came in from the city's race-baiting chief of police, Frank Rizzo. Trouble was brewing a few blocks north of the Uptown, where a routine traffic stop was in the process of escalating into mob disorder. The police were rapidly losing control of the volatile situation. Rizzo, who nine months earlier had arrested Woods and threatened to run him out of town after the activist-deejay turned up in the midst of a racial disturbance, now begged for his assistance. Turning over command of the Uptown to his understudy, Woods disappeared into the night. "I was the only one in town who could talk to the people," he recalled. "They believed what I said."<sup>1</sup>

Friday nights in the city were routinely fraught with minor neighborhood incidences, but this time, said Woods, "the people nearby were in an uproar." By the time Woods arrived at the scene, in a car hastily outfitted with a portable p.a. system and a rooftop speaker, he recalled that "all hell was breakin' loose." It took Woods and other peacemakers three sleepless days and nights to quell the unruly masses. They could not envision that not only Philadelphia, but also all of America, was about to embark on a torturous journey of racial strife.

Four miles south on Broad Street, the city's major north-south artery, another denizen of Philadelphia's blighted ghetto could be found. But

twenty-one-year-old Kenny Gamble had things other than riot and mayhem on his mind. Gamble was an aspiring singer-songwriter who had recently become an apprentice to one of the city's pop music movers and shakers. He had just recorded an album for Columbia Records, and his prospects were so promising that visions of owning his own record company danced in his head.

It was easy to dismiss Gamble's dream as idealistic and naive. Berry Gordy's success at Motown notwithstanding, in the early 1960s, institutionalized (and in many areas, legalized) segregation was still the law of the land in America. Furthermore, since the beginning of the year, when Dick Clark opted for California cool over Philadelphia working-class grit and moved his televised *American Bandstand* west, the city had become a pop music wasteland. On top of that, the entire music industry was being ravaged by the Beatles-led British Invasion. Local writer-producer Morris Bailey told how a producer "couldn't get arrested with a Philadelphia record" back then. Bailey said that whenever he or one of his colleagues ventured to New York to promote a record, "they would actually laugh at you."

For Kenny Gamble to scale the heights he envisioned, he would need help. Faced with Philadelphia's low standing within the pop music business, as well as the bloody English rockers, Gamble already had two strikes against him. He was also hindered by his own shortcomings. Gamble, whose musical talents were sometimes exceeded by his ambition, was a fine singer and an improving songwriter. But his musical prowess was limited to the rudimentary strumming of three chords on a guitar. Nor could he read or write music. But Gamble also possessed a knack for turning daunting circumstances to his favor. He secured the technical assistance he lacked by forming alliances with the disparate piano players Leon Huff and Tommy Bell.

Leon ("Fingers") Huff could barely read music himself when he and Gamble met, but he could play a mean piano. It was Huff's musical passion that supplied the soul for the dissimilar trio. Tommy Bell, a classically trained pianist who could play eighteen other instruments as well, was its delineator. He could read and write music, talents developed out of a desire to preserve the precise melodies that constantly played in his head.

In the face of America's growing racial chasm, no one could foretell that the musical accomplishments of this unconfirmed trio of young inner-city blacks would someday exceed even their own fertile imaginations.

THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA comprises numerous small towns or, more precisely, a group of ethnic neighborhoods. When William Penn arrived

in 1682, to lay out his "great towne" on the shore of the Delaware River, just north of where the Schuylkill River empties into it, he was influenced by the long narrow tract of land available to him.<sup>2</sup> Rejecting the cramped patterns of European cities, Penn constructed a symmetrical grid centrally anchored by two-hundred-foot-wide streets: Broad, which runs north and south, and High (later renamed Market), which runs east and west from river to river. The surrounding area came to be known as Center City. By 1800, with most of Penn's large tracts already chopped up by a network of narrow alleys and tenement rows, Philadelphia was the largest city in the United States.

Philadelphia's black community is as old as the city itself and accounted for about 5 percent of the total population until World War I. Then, northern industrial employers facing a labor shortage opened their factory doors to thousands of unskilled Southern blacks. Between 1900 and 1920, Philadelphia's black population more than doubled. Thousands of additional blacks, seeking work in the city's shipyards and factories, arrived in the city during the 1940s. With a lack of low-rent housing in all of Philadelphia prior to 1952, blacks were forced to live in the most blighted neighborhoods. Strained beyond capacity, these bustling black enclaves spilled over into unsightly old red brick row houses in North and West Philadelphia and in southern sections of the city.<sup>3</sup>

It was in South Philadelphia that Kenny Gamble was born on August 11, 1943. Gamble's mother, Ruby, a religious woman, raised her three sons (Charles was older and Carl was younger) without a father. They lived in the rear of a first-floor row house on Christian Street until 1956, when Ruby Gamble moved her family to West Philadelphia. The Gambles' new neighborhood, which contained pockets of integrated housing in the otherwise mostly segregated city, defied America's entrenched pattern of residential isolation. But West Philadelphia was generally in worse shape than the area they had just vacated. It was in this ravaged neighborhood that Gamble would first express a compelling interest in music.

Music has traditionally played a formative role in America's black urban communities. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Philadelphia, with its rich musical heritage, was the cultural and intellectual center of black America. The city was home to the nation's first black concert singer, former slave Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, who was known professionally as "The Black Swan." Greenfield was largely responsible for making Philadelphia the leading venue of the black concert stage. During the early 1800s, Philadelphia was also the home of Frank Johnson, the first black musician to win wide acclaim in America and overseas. In several ways, Johnson was the antecedent to

Kenny Gamble, Leon Huff, and Tommy Bell. Like that talented triumvirate, Johnson was a prolific composer and arranger. The trumpet-playing “Black Master of Melody” was responsible for a remarkable string of ground-breaking accomplishments: Johnson was the first person to develop a school of black musicians, as well as the first black to appear with white musicians in integrated concerts. He also employed exotic instruments, including a harp and a bell harmonium, in his concerts. (This was a practice Tommy Bell would emulate some one hundred years later.) Johnson was also the first American—black or white—to take a musical ensemble to perform overseas. But, as Eileen Southern noted in *The Music of Black Americans*, Frank Johnson’s death “cut off a fascinating experiment in breaking through the rigid walls of segregation.”<sup>4</sup>

To cope with the city’s intensifying racism, Philadelphia’s blacks steeled themselves in various manners. One of the most universal was the pursuit of music. Racial segregation put an end to Frank Johnson’s pioneering musical efforts, but it had the opposite effect on another of Philadelphia’s musical resources, its black churches. Over the next two hundred years, a great deal of black social and cultural activity centered around their houses of worship, which became powerful institutions that sustained every socioeconomic level. In this setting, the gospel sounds and styles of the South, brought to Philadelphia by the two great black migrations, flourished. One prominent sound was that of the gospel quartet. Philadelphia was home to two of the most famous and innovative (and sometimes controversial) aggregations; the Clara Ward Singers and the Dixie Hummingbirds.

In a flight from the abject poverty and racism of the South, the Ward family arrived in Philadelphia in 1930. The following year, Clara’s mother formed the Ward Singers trio. (The group was soon expanded into a quartet.) Throughout the 1930s, the Ward Singers, who sang the latest religious compositions in an impassioned manner, routinely brought down the house in the city’s Baptist churches. By 1943, the quartet was nationally known and soon laid claim to the title of world’s greatest gospel group. The Ward Singers were the prototype of the forthcoming secular rhythm and blues groups in several ways: They were the first gospel group to forgo traditional robes for colorful sequined gowns. In addition, they performed in fancy, high-piled wigs and branched ornate jewelry. The Ward Singers’ flamboyant style ensured that the quartet was dogged by controversy. While purists hated their act, the group, which utilized four active vocals and a “switch-lead” tactic borrowed from the male shouting (as opposed to the softer, “sweet sounding”) quartets, literally took gospel out of the church and into the nightclubs.

The Dixie Hummingbirds were Philadelphia's most famous and exciting male gospel quartet.<sup>5</sup> Generally regarded as one of the finest groups in gospel history, the Hummingbirds, a leading force behind the evolution of the modern gospel quartet sound, were renowned for their imaginative arrangements, progressive harmonies, and general versatility. The group incorporated many traditional a cappella performance techniques into its act. Among them were the bending and stretching of individual notes, the use of counterpart harmony weaves, carrying the rhythm along in the bass voice, and, like the Ward Singers, switching leads.<sup>6</sup> One vocal convention popularized by the Hummingbirds—the use of dual tenor leads and soaring falsetto ornamentation—was to have a significant impact on the development of Philadelphia Soul.

Formed in South Carolina by James B. Davis in 1932, the group made its first recordings in 1939. Three years later the Hummingbirds moved to Philadelphia, where their popularity continued to grow. The group's star attraction was baritone phenom Ira Tucker Sr., who had been with the group since he was thirteen years old. Tucker, who originally joined the Hummingbirds as a baritone before assuming the lead tenor role, eschewed the traditional flat-footed stationary stage stance. In its place, Tucker adopted the mannerisms of a Southern preacher, running up and down the aisles, rocking as if in prayer, and even jumping off the stage as he sang. His emotion-drenched singing and dramatic stage presence never failed to wow audiences. "By the 1940s, rocking soulful gospel had spread west and north, becoming the prevailing fashion in both rural and urban congregations," wrote James Zolten in his history of soul gospel music.<sup>7</sup>

While the Clara Ward Singers and the Dixie Hummingbirds remained at the vanguard of gospel music, a parallel, secular sound began to develop in Philadelphia and in other cities with large black populations. Most early black secular vocal groups performed in a manner that suggested combinations of spirituals, blues, and the remnants of barber-shop harmony. This style would later be classified as pop, with its most famous practitioners being the Tin Pan Alley-styled Mills Brothers, whose smooth harmony sound attracted black and white audiences alike.

The first secular black group to have a major impact on the national development of rhythm and blues was the Ink Spots. About the same time that the Ward Singers were getting their start, the Ink Spots, led by Bill Kenny's soaring falsetto, had already developed a style that would be adapted by the seminal rhythm and blues "bird" groups (Ravens, Orioles, Swallows, et al.). The Baltimore-based Orioles, who specialized in love ballads, leaned toward a more blues-oriented sound rather than the style of the Ink Spots. In 1948, after their first hit, "It's Too Soon to Know," they became the most influential of all the early

rhythm and blues groups. Lead singer Sonny Til was widely regarded as the "black Sinatra." He became a sepi sex symbol by making every woman in the audience believe he was singing only to her. Aroused women in the audience inevitably sought to tear the clothing from the provocative singer's back. (This would also occur some thirty years later with Teddy Pendergrass, one of Gamble and Huff's recording artists.)

Sonny Til's sexual appeal was universal, but for some reason, his lofty lead had its greatest concentrated effect on the development of secular rhythm and blues in the Philadelphia area. Most likely, that city's embracement of the falsetto lead stems from the large number of black gospel groups that called Philadelphia home in the early 1940s. Because of the city's large and expanding black population, Philadelphia radio stations began to regularly broadcast Sunday morning programs of black gospel music. Initially, such programs were broadcast on a network and heard in cities such as Philadelphia on the network's local affiliate. The success of these nationally syndicated black gospel radio shows eventually created a market in Philadelphia and other cities for programs of local origin. Philadelphia thus became the *de facto* capital of black gospel. More so than before, the prominent falsetto melodies of the genre were widely heard in all quarters of the city.

By the time Kenny Gamble arrived in West Philadelphia, young black vocal groups throughout the city were approximating Sonny Til's crying first tenor lead. Such vocal flattery developed into a harmony so peculiar to the area that it became known as the "Philly Sound." Its origin is credited to a West Philadelphia vocal group known as the Castelles (and specifically to lead singer George Grant). The Castelles' complex five-part harmony, which blended a falsetto lead with equally high first and second tenors, borrowed extensively from the Dixie Hummingbirds' dual tenor lead. The Castelles' exaggerated emphasis on the wavering lead tenor made their sound, which was usually supported by minimal instrumentation, a top-heavy one. Other local practitioners of the Philly Sound included the Buccaneers, the Capris, the Dreams, the Dreamers, and the Marquees. Each of them helped the distinct falsetto sound spread quickly throughout the city's black neighborhoods.

Most of Philadelphia's singing groups were associated with neighborhood recreation centers, where they performed at dances and other functions. Numerous group members attended West Philadelphia High, where, between classes, makeshift sets were formed in the hallways. For instance, it was not unusual to see and hear George Grant, George Tindley (lead voice of the Dreams), and Weldon McDougal (bass for the Larks) improvising together. Each neighborhood had its own favorite group. In what amounted to a cutthroat "battle of the groups" competi-

tion, some of them were invited to perform at other recreation centers throughout the city. During those years, scores of recordings sung in the parochial Philly style were made for several local labels. A few of the falsetto-led ballads even appeared on the city's rhythm and blues charts.<sup>8</sup>

Kenny Gamble's early musical stirrings may have been most influenced by a local rhythm and blues group called the Turbans, who were formed in Gamble's old South Philadelphia neighborhood in the spring of 1955. None of the Philadelphia groups adhered strictly to the high-tenor sound. For variety, they opted to record straight ballads or up-tempo rhythm and blues numbers. Other groups, most notably the Turbans, incorporated a touch of the Philly falsetto into particular songs. In doing so, they managed to surpass their local predecessors in terms of national success. That fall, the group's rendition of "When You Dance," a mambo novelty that featured Al Banks's intermittent falsetto, counterbalanced by a vocal bass hook, became the first record by a Philadelphia rhythm and blues group to make the Top 100 singles chart of *Billboard* (the industry's leading music trade publication).<sup>9</sup>

The national success of the hometown Turbans intensified the notion that singing in a vocal group conferred the ultimate form of prestige. This was especially true for someone raised on unforgiving inner-city streets, such as Billy Jackson. Jackson was a senior at West Philadelphia High in 1955 and a member of the popular North Philadelphia group, the Re-Vels. Because of his presence in the Re-Vels, Jackson, who would gain international status in the 1960s as producer of the Tymes vocal group, was regarded as a neighborhood hero. Lee Andrews (of Lee Andrews and the Hearts), who attended John Bartram High, in the southwest section of the city, was similarly acclaimed by his peers for being in a popular vocal group. Doing so was a heady experience, said Andrews. As a high school youth, "what else could you possibly do?" Of course, besides ego massaging, there were more practical reasons for a ghetto youth to join a singing group. With inner-city turf parceled out by local gangs, it was risky for a young male to venture outside his home territory. (West Philadelphia remained an integrated neighborhood at that time, and a preponderance of its gangs was formed along racial lines.) But a member of a singing group was granted a sort of neutrality. "As long as I was in a singing group I could go to North Philly, South Philly, everywhere," said Weldon McDougal.<sup>10</sup>

By 1956, Kenny Gamble was smitten by the desire to sing. But he was more enamored by the Chicago-based Dells, who scored a national hit that year with the ballad "Oh What a Nite," than he was with any Philly falsetto. (A decade later, Gamble would try in vain to sign the Dells to his own record label.) The thirteen-year-old, who enjoyed "singing in the

bathroom" at Sayre Junior High, according to one of his classmates there, dedicated himself to learning all he could about the music business. This was mostly accomplished through silent observation, a technique that Gamble would employ throughout his career. His first professional study was with Cincinnati native Robert L. "Bobby" Martin, a veteran musician and music arranger, who had settled in Philadelphia a few years earlier. By 1956, Martin was a well-traveled vibraphonist with the Lynn Hope Quintet jazz combo, which he joined in the late 1940s. (Martin can be heard on Hope's 1950 R&B Top 10 hit, "Tenderly.") When not on the road, Martin spent much of his time writing musical charts and songs for promising young talent. "Groups came to my house and I was always rehearsin' them, trying to get something going," he explained. Martin's house thus became a popular haunt for various would-be singers and musicians. The traffic sometimes grew so thick that he was unaware of the wannabes lurking about. Yet the ubiquitousness of one silent thirteen-year-old did eventually draw the musician's attention. The youngster was a frequent visitor to Martin's house, but because he always appeared to be with a group of people, Martin never addressed him. But after the youth continued to show up on a regular basis, Martin finally asked, "Who is that guy who's always listening?" The name Kenny Gamble meant nothing to Martin, and it quickly passed from his mind.<sup>11</sup> But Gamble did not forget Bobby Martin, who was to play an important role in the development of Philadelphia Soul.

GAMBLE'S FRIEND, TOMMY BELL, was born in Kingston, Jamaica, on January 27, 1943. When he was four years old, Bell's parents and their ten children moved to West Philadelphia. There, the industrious immigrant couple was determined to provide their offspring with a sound, practical upbringing. In the process, Bell's father, who worked in a local fish store while studying to be an accountant, instilled a healthy work ethic in his children. In addition, the Bell clan was taught civility, politeness, and correct, distinctive speech—Jamaican patois notwithstanding. Music was always a very important part of the Bell family's activities. Tommy's mother was an accomplished classical pianist. Her son has stated that until he was a teenager, classical music was the only form of music he was familiar with. Tommy's father, who played the pedal steel guitar and accordion, also became a rhythm and blues devotee in the mid-1950s. Tommy, who routinely observed his mother and father playing music around the house, soon joined in. "Everybody played, and I played right along with the rest of them," he recalled.

Tommy began to play the drums almost as soon as he arrived in the States. This musical expression stemmed from more than a childhood desire to bang on his mother's pots and pans. For as long as Bell can

remember, he had heard music in his head, which seemed like a perfectly normal occurrence in the music-friendly environment he grew up in. But at five years of age, Tommy learned that outsiders did not share his musical gift. His first-grade teacher was in the middle of a lesson one day when she noticed Tommy was not paying attention. Recalling that day, Bell explained how he was "hearing music and I was humming what I heard." The teacher decided to make an example of her inattentive student. She questioned Tommy about something she had just told the class. When he did not know the answers, the teacher asked him why. Tommy innocently replied that he had been listening to music. He quickly realized he had made a big mistake in being so honest. The teacher then asked him to stand up and sing to the class whatever it was that he had heard in his head. Tommy rose dutifully, and proceeded to sing it all, "the violas and the cellos . . . the violins . . . the percussion," he recalled. The flustered teacher then sent Tommy to the school psychologist, who arranged a conference with the boy's mother. When informed of her son's transgressions, Mrs. Bell calmly asked the teacher whether her son had sung to her any of the music he claimed to have heard in his head. She said he had. Tommy's mother then said to the startled educator, "Well, then that's what he heard. Case dismissed!"

Not a day goes by during which Tommy Bell does not hear music in his head. And once he hears it, he does not forget it. Bell also does not forget the painfully embarrassing first-grade lesson about subjecting himself to the ridicule of others. "What a jackass I was," he lamented. "Too stupid to keep my mouth shut!"

Another tenet of the Bell family was that each of the children took piano lessons. Bell said his mother believed that "if you learned piano the correct way, then you could play any instrument." Accordingly, when Tommy turned six, his mother informed him that it was his turn to begin piano lessons. Tommy, who was content to bang on his drums, wanted no part of the daunting keyed instrument. At that point, the family piano teacher turned psychologist and informed Tommy that he would have the privilege of being the only pupil of the instructor to have a "double major" of drums *and* piano. The young lad bought it. Tommy began to practice vigorously on the family piano. "I was ready to jump, Jack," he recalled. "Tell Miles Davis and the boys to move over, here I come!"

Despite Bell's musical enthusiasm and talent, it did not occur to his parents—or to Tommy, for that matter—that music was a viable career choice. In 1956, at the insistence of his parents, Tommy enrolled at North Philadelphia's Dobbins Technical Vocational High School to study lithography. In any event, Dobbins was ill equipped to contribute to Bell's extraordinary musical talents. Wendell Pritchett, who began teaching music at Dobbins in 1957, said that the school lacked "the kind of

emphasis in music" for which he had hoped. For one, there was no "formal program instrumentally," explained Pritchett. The only musical requirement for graduation from Dobbins was a student's participation during the senior year in what Pritchett described as an informal "choral group" of about four hundred. The group, which was open to students in all grades, met at seven each morning, before regular classes began. "Some of the students were conscientious, but it was hard for kids to really get up that much earlier," said Pritchett. "Tommy, to my knowledge, was there." Pritchett, however, could offer no other recollection of the participation of his now-famous student. "Tommy was on his own in terms of the formal courses offered there."

Bell was "on his own" musically and still strictly attuned to the classics, but he recalled how those interests were beginning to change. This was not as a result of anything Bell learned from Wendell Pritchett or the wanting music program at Dobbins Vocational, but because of Bell's classmates. It was they who provided the unsuspecting Bell with his first dose of rhythm and blues music. Bell said he found artists such as Fats Domino and Little Richard interesting, but the rudimentary, "preschool chords" of the classic vocal harmony groups left him cold. Only a few groups, such as the Platters, the Flamingos, and Little Anthony and the Imperials ("all the ones that went past the standard three-chord songs"), aroused his interest.

Tommy Bell made another important musical discovery while attending Dobbins. He learned that his budding musical prowess could be used as a source of income. Bell's epiphany occurred as he played piano for his sister Barbara's ballet recitals. Before long, other dance pupils began to request his services. Bell was soon earning a nickel per dancer for a thirty-minute performance. Now a teenager, Bell "was as happy as a termite in a lumberyard! Right then and there, I became an entrepreneur."

It was obvious to Tommy Bell's ghetto peers that the polite, well-spoken youth who studied classical piano was not their typical neighbor. Weldon McDougal, who saw him frequently around the neighborhood, recalled how Tommy "was very studious. Tommy was like a square. Every time I'd see him he had a book with him." Bell may have appeared square to his peers, but he was simply living up to the immigrant credo instilled by his parents: "You're different. In order to succeed, you're going to have to work ten times harder than the black man and a hundred times harder than the white man."

DURING THE SUMMER OF 1957, Philadelphia's pop music business was the benefactor of an unimaginable occurrence, one that would have repercussions—both positive and negative—on the local and national

pop music landscapes for years to come. It began when the American Broadcasting Company, looking for some cheap programming to flesh out its barren afternoon television time slot each weekday afternoon, began to broadcast a Philadelphia-based teenage dance show called *American Bandstand*. Hosted by the congenial and sharp-looking Dick Clark, the program's format was simple: Clark spun the latest rock and roll records and a flock of teenagers danced in front of the cameras. To everyone's surprise (except Clark's), *American Bandstand* was an instant success that drew millions of viewers to ABC each afternoon. As host of the only nationally televised disc jockey show in the country, Clark wielded unprecedented clout in the record business. In the past it had taken weeks—if not months—of promotion in various test-market ("breakout") cities around the country to build a hit record. Dick Clark could now accomplish that feat in a single afternoon. Overnight, Philadelphia's unassuming pop music trade became the lodestar of the national industry. It also inspired the hopes and dreams of every street-corner singer in the city.

The Holy Grail was a nationally televised appearance on *American Bandstand*, which originated in a cavernous West Philadelphia warehouse studio that stood starkly in the shadows of the Market Street elevated train line. One of the first local benefactors of Clark's show was Lee Andrews and the Hearts. Beginning in 1954, Andrews and his group had recorded half a dozen ballads for several small labels, but they had little to show for their efforts. Then their next release, "Long Lonely Nights," happened to coincide with the debut of *American Bandstand*. Boosted by a late-summer promotional appearance on the trend-setting show, the Hearts' plaintive ballad became a national pop hit. *American Bandstand* helped to transform the hometown heroes into national celebrities, and the sky became the limit for all of Philadelphia's young singers. Later that year, Little Joe and the Thrillers' recording of "Peanuts" introduced those who had missed Al Banks's 1955 rendition of "When You Dance" to the Philly falsetto. Then Andrews and the Hearts surpassed "Long Lonely Nights" with the release of "Teardrops," a similarly styled ballad. As 1958 began, the City of Brotherly Love scored an unprecedented pop music exalta. Two *Bandstand*-driven hits, Danny and the Juniors' "At the Hop" and the Silhouettes' "Get a Job," reached number one on the pop charts.

In spite of *American Bandstand*'s "Happy Days" aura, the show generated a more sinister quality, one that went unnoticed to viewers outside the Philadelphia area. It was no chance occurrence that during *American Bandstand*'s early years an overwhelming majority of its "regular" dancers were Italian-Americans from South Philadelphia.

*American Bandstand* was guilty of propagating a quasi-de facto

discrimination that was designed to exclude most blacks. The show originated in 1952 and was called *Bandstand*. It was shown only in the Philadelphia area, and featured white pop music and an audience to match. (Most of the young dancers attended a nearby Catholic high school.)<sup>12</sup> “And,” said Tommy Bell, “they made sure to keep it that way.” Over the years, as rhythm and blues and rock and roll gained popularity among teenagers, *Bandstand*’s music reflected that change. But at the behest of the show’s sponsors and station management, both of whom were reluctant to slay their televised golden goose by attaching a black face to its sponsor’s wares, *Bandstand*’s teenage dance contingent remained almost lily-white.

Kenny Gamble and Tommy Bell lived only blocks from *Bandstand*’s studio. To them, Clark’s show provided bitter evidence of the kind of treatment a black youth who dared to venture beyond the ghetto could expect. Gamble watched *American Bandstand* each day on television—all the better to scrutinize the singers, who lip-synched to their latest records. He recalled going, along with some of his black friends, to the *Bandstand* studio several times, where he discovered that “they wouldn’t let too many black kids” on the show. Bell occasionally witnessed racial violence outside the *Bandstand* studio, “something the papers kept quiet all the time,” he maintained. Viewers may have occasionally spotted a black male and female dancing together on the show, but “you’d never see him dancing with a white girl, oh no!” said Bell. Mostly, blacks were not seen at all. Weldon McDougal, who informally tended the *Bandstand* entrance door during the show’s early years, claimed the show’s producers “kinda kept the camera away” from any blacks who managed to make it to the dance floor. Such tactics were successful to the extent that when *American Bandstand* made its debut in August 1957, viewers around the country had no inkling that any blacks at all lived in Philadelphia.<sup>13</sup>

The exclusionary measures of *American Bandstand* were most likely not Gamble and Bell’s first brush with racism. But occurring so close to home, they struck a particularly personal chord and helped to steel the two black youths to the racism they would encounter beyond the ghetto, particularly in the music business. Gamble and Bell’s musical interests also provided them with a unique opportunity. By the time the two were teenagers, black stars such as Fats Domino, Joe Turner, and Ruth Brown, who were previously known only to predominantly black audiences, were idolized by millions of white adolescents.

KENNY GAMBLE ENTERED THE NINTH GRADE at West Philadelphia High in the fall of 1957, just as *American Bandstand* began to dominate afternoon television. According to music instructor Wendell Pritchett, who

transferred from Dobbins Vocational to West Philadelphia High in 1959, Gamble displayed more interest in his school's formal music instruction than did Tommy Bell at Dobbins. At West Philadelphia High, Pritchett was in charge of a jazz band that, of course, was of no interest to Gamble, who could not read a musical note. But Pritchett also conducted a "specialized choral group, a choir." Gamble was not part of that, either. But Pritchett maintained that the choral group "did a tour one year [in which] Kenny participated." Mostly, recalled Pritchett, like Tommy Bell, Gamble "was doing his own thing" musically.

Georgie Woods remembered how Gamble "always had a thing for music." Ensnared in the familiar surroundings of the ghetto, Gamble tried his callow hand at creating songs and dreamed of crossover stardom as a singer. Woods told of how the earnest teenager used to hang around the WDAS studio to "run errands for us, get us sandwiches and things." Woods chuckled as he recalled how Gamble naively brought the Philadelphia radio personality records he had made at a penny arcade, in hopes that Woods would play them on the air.

Gamble showed signs of lyrical deftness in his songwriting, but his musical limitations continued to hold him back. Recognizing the need to work with someone that could read and write music, Gamble set out to find such an individual. Stephen Kelly, who lived just around the corner from Gamble, was the type of person Gamble was searching for. Kelly, who was instrumental in forming the Volcanos singing group in the 1960s, recalled those high school days, when Gamble's love of music "was just boomin.' Kenny knew my love for music, so he used to come around my house and bang on my mother's piano and say, 'Stephen, listen to this!' And he sang these songs he had written. I would say, 'Kenny, Kenny, Kenny, I'm not interested. I don't want to be a songwriter!' Dumb me!" he recalled with a laugh, some forty years later.<sup>14</sup>

Gamble was energized, yet all the more frustrated, by the neighborhood talent he continued to see crack the big time. (The latest to do so was West Philadelphia's own Billy Scott, who appeared on *American Bandstand* early in 1958, to promote his hit recording, "You're the Greatest.") Patsy Holt was a friend from the neighborhood, who would one day garner her own share of fame and fortune as Patti Labelle. She recalled how, back then, neither she nor Gamble "had a clue what the future might hold."<sup>15</sup> Gamble's future, at least, was about to be shaped by the formation of a consequential, lifelong friendship. Unbeknownst to Gamble, this individual lived almost as close to him as did Stephen Kelly.

NOT LONG AFTER GAMBLE ENTERED THE ELEVENTH GRADE at West Philadelphia High, his head was turned by an attractive young classmate named Barbara, who happened to be Tommy Bell's younger sister.

(The Bell family had recently moved to a new West Philadelphia location, closer to where Gamble lived.) Over the next few months, Kenny and Barbara's interest in each other blossomed. Tommy continued to work in his father's market and tend to his studies at Dobbins. Then one day in early 1960, Gamble paid a visit to Barbara's house, purportedly to seek help with his homework. As he entered, he was taken aback to see a young man about his own age, practicing the piano. Barbara introduced the two, and almost at once Gamble's attention shifted from her to Tommy. "So you're a piano player, huh?" queried Gamble. "I'm a songwriter. Maybe some day we'll get together." "It'll be my pleasure," replied Tommy, who had never written a song in his life. "Gambs found somebody who could play that piano," said Bell as he recalled that serendipitous meeting.

About two months after the two met, they began writing together. They spent a lot of time at Gamble's house, writing songs and talking about music. Bell recalled how Ruby Gamble ("Miss G") came home every day from her job as an x-ray technician and fixed dinner for them. "We would be over there singing and playing the piano and stuff," he said. "She would fix us sandwiches and things. Whatever little food she had, she would share. She took really good care of us." Although it is difficult for a musician to work with a nonmusician, Bell said he and Gamble "just clicked." Bell's ground rules were simple. "Don't tell me how to play this piano and I won't tell you how to write your lyrics," he instructed Gamble. "'Cause I can't write lyrics and you can't play the piano!"

BY THE SPRING OF 1960, Bell, who then supported himself by working in the family fish store and by gigging at night with various bands, realized that studying lithography was "a waste of time." He dropped out of high school to pursue his budding musical aspirations. Kenny Gamble remained in high school. He also began a paid internship at nights and on Saturdays in the cancer research program at South Philadelphia's Jefferson Medical Tech, where he was in charge of administering injections into laboratory rats and caring for the animals. Bell, who often assisted his buddy there, laughed as he thought back to those days. Gamble "was studying to clean out rat cages!" he exclaimed. "Most of the time he didn't go to work, man. He paid somebody to do the job for him while we rehearsed."

Wendell Pritchett spoke of the "creative forces" that drove Gamble and Bell as teenagers. "Both of them were very talented and they were both very active in music." Indeed, the musical fires burned brighter than ever for Gamble and Bell, in what was a heady time for most blacks in America. Aided by overwhelming minority support, John F. Kennedy

had just been elected president. Under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the civil rights movement was about to enter a gratifying era of demonstrations and civil disobedience. In *One Nation under a Groove: Motown and American Culture*, Gerald Early observed that "at no time in their history did blacks feel more optimistic about the future. . . . [I]t was quite possible, at least, to think of entering the world of whites without going through the back door of the culture."<sup>16</sup>

It may have been possible to *think* that, but as Tommy Bell was about to learn, the "back door" was still very much in existence in the risky, cutthroat business to which they aspired. Bell, who still took piano lessons to improve his talent, aspired to be a musical conductor who worked with such pop luminaries as Sammy Davis Jr., Lena Horne, Judy Garland, and Billy Eckstine. "I was gonna be on Broadway!" he ruefully recalled. In 1961, Bell ventured to New York to take a music conductor's test. He breezed through the exam, only to be told there was no work available for "his kind." Dumbfounded in his naïveté, Bell demanded a fuller explanation for his rejection. He was then bluntly informed that they did not hire "colored" people to work on Broadway. That "cooled my nose real quick," he recalled. Bell was steered uptown to Harlem's storied Apollo Theater, where he dejectedly took a job playing the piano. Bell soon decided that if he were destined to be a pianist in a black theater combo, he could just as soon fulfill that destiny in his hometown. Bell returned to Philadelphia that summer and took a similar job with the Uptown Theater's house band.

Fortunately, another opportunity for Tommy Bell to advance himself soon arose. Luther Dixon, a New York writer/producer, most notably for the Shirelles, a female R&B quartet, was constantly on the lookout for studio musicians who could read and write music. During one of Dixon's occasional trips through Philadelphia, he happened on one of Bell's gigs. Bell's prowess on the Wurlitzer electric piano, then a relatively new instrument, drew Dixon's attention. When he found out that Bell could read and write music, Dixon offered to take the talented keyboard player under his wing and show him the music business. Bell jumped at the offer. He returned to New York and proceeded to follow Dixon on his usual rounds throughout the city. In doing so, Bell said he learned a number of things, including the true meaning of R&B ("rhythm and *business*") and the evils of drugs ("the first time could be your last time"). Bell wrote some songs with Dixon, and he also struck up a professional relationship with Dixon's musical contractor, legendary saxophonist King Curtis.

By 1962, Bell was well schooled in the ways of the music business. He returned to Philadelphia, where he gigged with a local band while he looked for steady work. Told that Cameo-Parkway Records, then the

country's hottest independent label, was looking for studio musicians, Bell sought them out, only to find that the doors (literally) were not open to a black man. "They stopped me at the front door, man," he recalled.

After this latest racial snub Bell began to look to his friend Kenny Gamble, who had graduated from high school the previous June, for career assistance. Gamble and Bell not only resumed writing songs together, they began singing together. Bell recalled that the two "blended well as singers," so Gamble suggested they form a vocal duet. Bell had no interest in becoming a singer, but he "went along with the program" simply to please his friend. A singing duet known as Don and Juan was then riding high on the charts with a popular ballad called "What's Your Name." Gamble and Bell became Kenny and Tommy. With Bell's rejection by Cameo-Parkway fresh in mind, they headed instead to Swan Records. It was a sweltering summer day, and temperatures in the city rose to well over 100 degrees. The air-conditioning at Swan worked overtime, but not to the benefit of Kenny and Tommy, who were kept waiting outside on the sidewalk for several hours. Ultimately, the duo realized that things at Swan and Cameo-Parkway were pretty much the same. Kenny and Tommy did not even get an audition. After this latest encounter with closed doors, Gamble and Bell felt as if they were on a treadmill to nowhere. Several months earlier, Gamble had met Jerry Ross, a white man and one of Philadelphia's budding pop music mavens. It was time for Gamble to cash in on his acquaintance with Ross.

Twenty-eight years old and a graduate of Philadelphia's Olney High, Jerry Ross learned what he termed the disc jockey's "tricks of the trade" from managing an Armed Forces radio station in Alaska. After Ross was discharged from the Air Force in 1956, he became an announcer for WFIL radio and television in his home city. One of Ross's assignments was manning the announcer's booth of the newly minted *American Bandstand*. After he faced the fact that "there was already a Dick Clark," the affable and assiduous Ross eyed a career change. Ross diligently observed the nation's top record promoters strive to convince Clark of the hit potential of their platters, and he decided that he could do their job better than they could.<sup>17</sup> Ross left the broadcast booth in 1958 to promote records for a local distributor. Two years later, he became an independent promoter/producer and rented office space in the Schubert Theater Building.

If the Brill Building was the major league of America's pop music business, the Schubert Building, strategically located on Broad Street, about a quarter-mile south of City Hall, was its Triple-A echelon. The building's first two floors accommodated a theater, while the third to the sixth floors housed the marrow of the city's pop music industry:

talent agents, managers, voice coaches, songwriters, music publishers, record companies, and promoters. Ross Associates—Jerry Ross and his talented piano-playing songwriting partner Murray Wecht—was located on the sixth floor.

KENNY GAMBLE HAD HIS TICKET TO JERRY ROSS punched by Weldon McDougal. The amiable bass man of the Larks had formed the group in 1954, while still in high school. When he graduated the following year, the Larks were put on hold while McDougal spent three years in the Marine Corps. When he returned from the service, McDougal reformed the Larks. In 1961, the group auditioned one of their crowd-pleasing ballads, the haunting "It's Unbelievable," for Jerry Ross and Murray Wecht, who recorded the number on their own label. Ross also arranged for the group to lip-synch "It's Unbelievable" on *American Bandstand*. As the song developed into a national hit, the Larks soared, particularly in their West Philadelphia stomping grounds. Everywhere McDougal went, people wanted to know with whom he did business. It was then that McDougal ran into Kenny Gamble. "Hey man," queried Gamble, "How'd you cut that record? Who put it out?" McDougal told him about Jerry Ross.<sup>18</sup>

At a time when Tommy Bell was in New York, Gamble appeared at Jerry Ross's door and told him that "he wanted to write and he wanted to sing." Ross, who had heard similar words countless times from starry-eyed novices, promised Gamble an audition at a later date, when he was not so busy. But Gamble persisted. He began hanging around Ross's office "all the time," said the producer. "And every time I saw him he would say, 'I can sing! I can sing!'"

It was 1962 by the time Ross auditioned Gamble. When he did, Gamble's smooth baritone brought to mind Brook Benton (then a noted pop-oriented rhythm and blues singer). Gamble "was singing the kind of lyric and the kind of song that attracted my attention," he said. Ross was "very much impressed" and wanted to sign the novice singer as a solo act. But Tommy Bell was the only person who could play what Gamble sang, and Gamble would not sing without him—which was precisely how Kenny and Tommy came to record "I'll Get By," a straight rhythm and blues ballad written by the duo.<sup>19</sup> Kenny and Tommy made no subsequent recordings, perhaps because "I'll Get By," which was too derivative of Don and Juan's "What's Your Name," turned out to be a colossal flop.

Murray Wecht's departure from Ross Associates set the stage for an alliance between Jerry Ross and Gamble. (The circumstances of the Ross-Wecht split are uncertain. When queried about Wecht, who died several years ago, Ross was uncharacteristically taciturn.) The piano-

playing Wecht had been what Bell described as the “music man” of the songwriting team. His departure put Ross in a bind. Meanwhile, Gamble, who still harbored singing ambitions, spent more and more time with Ross. “When he’d finish his gig at Jefferson, which was just down the street from me, he’d be at my office,” said the producer. It was then that Ross discovered that Gamble “not only could sing, he could write.” Ross signed the aspiring singer to a songwriting contract. Still, songwriting remained incidental to Gamble’s singing. “In the back of his mind,” said Bell, “a songwriter was not what he wanted to be. He wanted to be a singer. And, oh yes, he *can* sing!”

Gamble and Bell continued to frequent Ross Associates on a daily basis, where they wrote and sang together. Meanwhile, Gamble and Ross began to write together more frequently. (That, said Bell, is “what Jerry really wanted.”) “Lo and behold,” said Ross, “I discovered that Kenny had the ability to take poetry and make it sing.”

It was crunch time for Tommy Bell, who was then twenty-three years old and newly married. His bride was not particularly enamored of his nomadic and unpredictable life as a studio musician and struggling composer. Bell vowed to her that if he did not make it in the music business by the time he was twenty-five, he would find another profession. Gamble’s flowering association with Jerry Ross made it clear that if Bell were to fulfill his musical ambitions within his self-imposed time frame, he would have to do so without his friend.

Looking back on that pivotal event, Bell explained how there are people in life “who just don’t fit you.” In Bell’s eyes, “something just was not quite right” about Jerry Ross. “But for Gambs, he was just right. Jerry was gonna teach him the whole thing.”

Bell told Gamble about his inability to work with Ross and was not surprised when his friend replied that he had already cast his lot with the writer/producer. In recalling the difficult split, Bell waxed philosophical. “In your coming up you add and you take away until you finally come up with the right combination,” he explained. At that particular time, he and Gamble “were taking away.” In effect, Jerry Ross substituted Kenny Gamble for Murray Wecht, leaving Tommy Bell as the odd man out. But Ross and Gamble had a fundamental problem to solve; they lacked a piano player. “And,” said Tommy Bell, “that’s where Leon Huff came into the picture.”

WHEN YOU LEAVE CENTER CITY TRAVELING EAST over the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, headed for the morass of urban mismanagement, decay, and corruption known as Camden, New Jersey, the first building of significance to the left that you see is Riverfront State Prison. Riverfront is an apt metaphor for Camden, itself a prison to the overwhelming

majority of poor blacks and other minorities who live there. Leon Huff, who formed the third angle of the Gamble-Huff-Bell triumvirate, was one of those fated Camden residents. But Huff, aided and abetted by his musical talent and determination, successfully made it over the wall.

Camden was already perched on the precipice of decline when Leon A. Huff was born there on April 8, 1942. The son of a local barber, Huff grew up in one of the city's austere and foreboding housing projects, in its Centerville section. Huff told writer Eric Olsen that his father played blues guitar and his mother gospel piano, but his own musical style seems to have evolved from the rough street corners of Camden and Philadelphia. In 1976, Huff told writer Tony Cummings, that when he was about ten or eleven years old there was a teenager in Camden, called Sugar Cane Robinson, who "played a thing called the boogie-woogie" at the Earl Theater in Philadelphia. Whenever Sugar Cane played the Earl, Huff was in the audience. By observing Harris and listening to music on the radio and from records, Huff developed a rudimentary musical understanding. From that, he taught himself how to play the piano, later pointing out that there "wasn't really no schooling involved."<sup>20</sup>

According to Eric Olsen, Huff played drums in the Camden High band, and perennially made the All-City Orchestra, before graduating in 1960. By his own admission, Huff said he was not "thinkin' about no record business then."<sup>21</sup> But Huff's ambitions grew after he began work at a neighborhood clothier, where he met Dickie Burch. Jules "J.J." Johnson, who recorded for Polydor Records in the early 1970s, attended Camden High when Huff was there. Johnson said that besides selling clothing, Burch was "into workin' with vocal groups" in the area, many of whom were accompanied by Huff's piano.<sup>22</sup> Most likely it was Burch who got Huff thinking about the music business. Huff, who played piano for the 19th Street Baptist Church choir, but could cut a mean boogie-woogie on the keys, gravitated to the Schubert Building, in hopes that somebody was in need of a session pianist. One such person was Weldon McDougal, who, while singing with the Larks, had also begun to produce music. Whenever McDougal asked whether the enterprising sideman wanted to play on a particular session, Huff said yes. But no matter how many sessions Huff worked, he always seemed to be short on cash. Unable to secure enough work in Philadelphia to sustain him, Huff rode a Greyhound up the New Jersey Turnpike to New York and headed for the Brill Building. He began frequenting the offices of various production and talent heads there until they agreed to listen to him play. Huff finally landed some session work, and he began to acquire a reputation around town as a crack rhythm and blues pianist.

But Leon Huff's destiny did not lie in any New York recording

studio. Rather, it was back in Philadelphia, in the Schubert Building. As Huff shuttled between sessions in New York and Philadelphia, he signed on for additional studio work with Ross Associates, just about the same time that Kenny Gamble was beginning to write with Jerry Ross. In one particular session for Ross in 1962, Huff fronted a Camden group called the Lavenders, during which he pounded the keys for an up-tempo dance number called "The Slide." Huff "banged that piano like it was coming out of the wall!" exclaimed Ross. "They had to tune it three different times during the session." "The Slide," which was typical of the dance fad genre so popular during that era, was a commercial failure, but it is a fine anticipatory example of Huff's rollicking, staccato-like boogie-woogie piano groove.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, "The Slide" demonstrated Leon Huff's musical potential to the receptive Kenny Gamble.