

# The Sammy Strain Story

## Part 4

### Little Anthony & the Imperials

by Charlie Horner  
with contributions  
from Pamela Horner



LITTLE ANTHONY AND THE IMPERIALS

**Claridge**  
Casino Hotel  
Because smaller is friendlier.

(Photo from the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)

Sammy Strain's remarkable lifework in music spanned almost 49 years. What started out as street corner singing with some friends in Brooklyn turned into a lifelong career as a professional entertainer.

Now retired, Sammy recently reflected on his life accomplishments. "I've been inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame twice (2005 with the O'Jays and 2009 with Little Anthony & the Imperials), the Vocal Group Hall of Fame (with both groups), the Pioneer R&B Hall of Fame (with Little Anthony & the Imperials) and the NAACP Hall of Fame (with the O'Jays). Not a day goes by when I don't hear one of the songs I recorded on the radio. I've been very, very, very blessed."

Over the past year, we've documented Sammy Strain's career with a series of articles on the Chips (*Echoes of the Past* #101), the Fantastics (*Echoes of the Past* #102) and the Imperials without Little Anthony (*Echoes of the Past* #103). Steven Kahn did a fine job researching Sammy's time with the Impacts (*Echoes of the Past* #103). The story of the O'Jays has recently been covered by Marc Taylor in *A Touch of Classic Soul* (Vol. 8, #1). Here in Part 4 is the story of Sammy Strain's incredible years with Little Anthony & the Imperials.

By the Fall of 1963, "Little Anthony" Gourdine's career as a soloist was stalling out. Likewise, the Imperials (Sammy Strain, Kenny Seymour, Clarence Collins and Ernest Wright), working without Anthony, were feeling uninspired. At this point, gigs were getting sparse and Sammy Strain had gotten married. With winter closing in, Sammy took a job in a yarn factory.

"I quit the group and married," recalled Sammy. "I needed a job and I'd been working for about a week. Clarence Collins and Ernest Wright came by my house and said that they had just left Ernie Martinelli's office and they were talking about getting back with Anthony."

Ernie Martinelli had booked Anthony in the past. He managed and booked the Chiffons, Fred Parrish' Five Satins and others. When Clarence Collins and Ernest Wright visited Martinelli, he told them that Anthony's contract with *Roulette* was running out and that Anthony was not really making it by himself. Martinelli told the two that if they could reunite Anthony and the Imperials, he could get them a lot of gigs. Ernest and Clarence called Sammy Strain with the news.

"Anthony wanted to get back with the group and Ernie Martinelli was going to be our manager and agent," said Sammy. "Ernie had a treasure trove of gigs for us if we got back together. So I talked it over with my wife at the time, and then said, 'Let's go for it.' The very next day, Anthony, Clarence and Ernest came over to my house. We had been working night clubs as the Imperials without Anthony so I knew we needed a night club act. I had just acquired an album called 'Sammy Davis Jr. Live at the Coconut Grove'. I just loved the album. So we went down into the basement, ate lunch, and listened to Sammy Davis Jr's show. And from that album, we modeled our night club act, even the one the group uses

today. The next day we went back to Ernie Martinelli and said we were back together. Our first gig was to be a week-long engagement at the Town Hill Supper Club, a place that I had once played with the Fantastics. We had two weeks before we opened. From the time we did that show at Town Hill, the group never stopped working."

The Town Hall Supper Club was a well known venue at Bedford Avenue and the Eastern Parkway in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. In its long history, the Town Hill Supper Club has featured such well known artists as Brook Benton, Della Reese, Sam Cooke, Jackie Wilson, Ray Charles and Lloyd Price. Entertainers did three shows a night there and Little Anthony & the Imperials were impressive in their first gig after being reunited.

From Town Hill, Little Anthony & the Imperials worked steady for about two months before being invited to join Murray The K's ten-day Christmas stage show at the Brooklyn Fox. Murray "The K" Kaufman was a popular New York City radio personality and rock & roll stage show producer. Having worked in the music promotion and radio business since the late 1940's, Murray rose to popularity on WINS-AM in 1958 as the successor to Alan Freed, who was forced off the air and indicted for tax evasion during the payola scandal. Throughout his New York radio career, Kaufman produced and emceed hugely popular rock & roll shows several times a year; during the Easter school break, the week before Labor Day, and between Christmas and New Years. In the mid-1960's, these shows were generally held at the Brooklyn Fox Theater. Murray the K's stage shows featured the current top performers as well as new acts that had their first hot records.

The December 1963 Murray the K's Christmas Show at the Brooklyn Fox featured Lloyd Price, the Miracles, Mary Wells, Little Anthony & the Imperials, Martha & the Vandellas, the Duprees, Tommy Hunt, Jay & the Americans, Ruby & the Romantics, Tommy Roe, Dale & Grace and the Vibrations. Little Anthony & the Imperials shared a dressing room with former Flamingos' lead, Tommy Hunt. Sammy Strain recalled that Murray The K's shows at the Brooklyn Fox would follow a pattern. With a large stage, the show would open with newer acts doing one song each – the song that they currently had on the charts. The established stars would be seated on chairs at tables toward the back of the stage, as if they were at a night club. After the first three or four new acts finished, the chairs and tables would be removed and the seasoned acts like the Imperials would come out and do two or three songs. As Little



**Little Anthony & Imperials with Lloyd Price (lower left)  
at the Brooklyn Fox, December 1963.  
(Photo courtesy of Sammy Strain)**

Anthony & the Imperials had not recorded in awhile, they began with their classic "Tears On My Pillow". The stage was completely dark as the Imperials entered singing with all that could be seen was their florescent white gloves and shoes. They'd close with a frantic "I'm Alright," complete with tightly choreographed dancing and splits. The stage shows would run for ten days with four or five shows a day. Lines to get into the Brooklyn Fox usually stretched around the block with some teenagers waiting in line at five o'clock in the morning to get the best seats. While the Imperials would eventually do five Murray The K Brooklyn Fox stage shows, they chose to retain that fourth spot in the line up, even when their hit records moved them up to much higher billing.

While the Imperials continued working, Ernie Martinielli connected the group with noted songwriter and producer, Teddy Randazzo. Randazzo began his music career with the Three Chuckles with whom he recorded his first Top-20 hit "Runaround" in 1954, before he was twenty-years-old. In the later 1950's, Randazzo sang in the movies "Rock, Rock, Rock," "Mr. Rock & Roll" and "The Girl Can't Help It". Randazzo continued singing as a soloist, but he excelled as a songwriter. Teddy began combining his songwriting talents with those of Bobby Weinstein, formerly of the Legends on the *Melba* label ("The Eyes Of An Angel / "I'll Never Fall In Love Again" and *Hull* label ("The Legend Of Love" / "Now I'm Telling You"). In late 1959, the songwriting duo had their first major hit with Steve Lawrence's "Pretty Blue Eyes". The song was produced by bandleader Don Costa for *ABC-Paramount Records*. The

Randazzo – Weinstein – Costa team would continue into the 1960's when the three left *ABC-Paramount* for *United Artists*.

Born Dominick P. Costa in Boston in 1925, Costa learned to play the guitar and moved to New York City in the late 1940's to become a studio musician. Asked to write arrangements for the vocal duet of Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme in the 1950's, Costa soon was hired by *ABC-Paramount* as head A&R man and leading arranger and producer. In 1960, Costa left *ABC* to become A&R director, arranger, producer and conductor at *United Artists Records*, taking Randazzo and Weinstein with him. During the early 1960's Costa also became arranger and conductor for Frank Sinatra.

As early as 1962, Costa and Randazzo had formed their own publishing company, *South Mountain Music*. By early 1964, Costa and Randazzo had expanded their partnership to include a new record label, *DCP* (standing for Don Costa Productions). While the label was initially intended for foreign product, they soon found themselves signing mostly American artists. Costa, Randazzo and Weinstein did not completely separate themselves from *United Artists*, as *UA* became the exclusive distributors of *DCP*.

Through Teddy Randazzo, Little Anthony & the Imperials signed with *DCP* in early 1964. Of course, Sammy Strain and the Imperials had known Teddy Randazzo for some time. "The very second gig that the Chips did at the State Theatre in Hartford, CT, included the Moonglows, the Five Keys and the Three Chuckles," said Sammy. "So I met Teddy Randazzo when he sang with the Chuckles. I was sixteen-years-old. Anthony and the other Imperials had met Teddy earlier during the Alan Freed shows. So Teddy was aware of and loved our group. It was a natural fit."

Meanwhile, Little Anthony & the Imperials were again asked to join Murray the K's next stage show at the end of March at the Brooklyn Fox. In addition to Little Anthony & the Imperials, "Murray the K Big Easter Show" featured Chuck Jackson, Ben E. King, the Shirelles, Johnny Tillotson, Dionne Warwick, the Tymes, the Chiffons, the Kingsmen, Dick & Dee Dee, Bobby Goldsboro, the Righteous Brothers and the Younger Brothers.

On April 22, 1964, Little Anthony & the Imperials were brought into the studio for their first *DCP* recording session. "When we did the Murray the K Shows we didn't have a



**Little Anthony & Imperials signing autographs at the Flamingo  
Hotel & Casino, Las Vegas, 1964.  
(Photo courtesy of Sammy Strain)**

record out,” said Sammy. “There was some talk about us going to *Motown* but before that could ever happen we were inside the studio and recording “I’m On The Outside (Looking In)”. It was almost immediate.”

Written by Teddy Randazzo and Bobby Weinstein, “I’m On The Outside (Looking In)” was a pretty ballad tailor-made for Anthony & the Imperials. The Imperials recorded a couple songs at the session, but *DCP* held up the release because the distribution deal with *United Artists* was not completed until late June. In early August, 1964, *DCP* released “I’m On The Outside (Looking In)”/“Please Go”. The record hit *Billboard*’s Hot-100 Chart on August 22, 1964 and remained on the charts for ten weeks, reaching #15 on October 10. [*Billboard* magazine did not have a separate R&B chart at the time. *Cashbox* magazine did and the record reached #8 on their R&B Chart.]

Now Little Anthony & the Imperials had not only name recognition, but a hot chart record. Called back on Murray The K’s next Brooklyn Fox show, the group had a different act, beginning with “I’m On The Outside (Looking In),” then “Shimmy, Shimmy, Ko-Ko Bop” (complete with sombreros, morocco’s and tambourines) and finally “I’m Alright” with dancing and splits. “Murray the K’s Big Holiday Show” took place the week leading up to Labor Day, 1964. Also on the show were Marvin Gaye, the Miracles, Martha & the Vandellas, the Supremes, the Contours, the Temptations, the Searchers, Dusty Springfield, Millie Small, Jay & the Americans, the Dovells, the Shangri-Las and the Ronettes.

With a record on the charts, *DCP* rushed the Imperials into the studio to begin work on an album. The album entitled “I’m on the Outside (Looking In)” featured the title song plus a re-cut “Tears On My Pillow” and some recent popular hits of the day including “Where Did Our Love Go”, “People,” “The Girl From Ipanema” [*the Imperials were going for a bossa nova sound*], “Walk On By” and “Funny”. Sammy Strain led “Walk On By”.

“When we did the single, ‘I’m On The Outside (Looking In),’ remembered Sammy, “I think we did maybe two to four tunes. Basically it was like the other recording sessions that I had done. But here’s where it took a different tone. Af-



**Little Anthony & Imperials rehearsing choreography at the Flamingo Hotel, 1965. Left to right: Sammy Strain, Ernest Wright, Clarence Collins, Anthony Gourdine. (Photo courtesy of Sammy Strain)**

ter ‘Outside Looking In’ was a hit, it was a new day in show business. You had the Beatles. You had the Motown sound. You had Dionne Warwick coming out of New York. Now, we had a record doing well on the charts. So we stopped by Teddy Randazzo’s office, and he said, ‘Now, guys, you know you’ve got to do an album for this hit single.’ We said, ‘Wow! We’re going to do an album.’ When we started doing the album, that’s when we realized this was a little different than the other sessions. This was a different approach. We were marketing this. It was a different day. It wasn’t as if we were going to record some songs and put them out there and see if they did anything because we already had a lead in. That was during the period where album sales really started to become big. We already had a selling point because the name of the album was ‘I’m On The Outside (Looking In)’”.

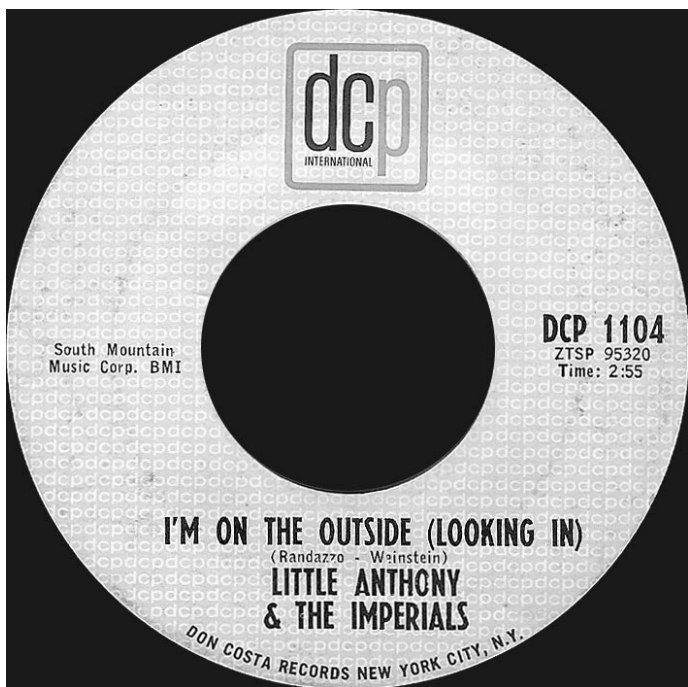
Before the Imperials first *DCP* album could be released in November 1964, the group was already on their way to their next hit single. *DCP* released “Goin’ Out Of My Head” b/w “Make It Easy On Yourself,” both Randazzo and Weinstein compositions. “Goin’ Out Of My Head” was reviewed by the trade magazines on October 31 and within a month was a “breakout” record for dj Georgie Woods in Philadelphia. A week later was among the Top 15 songs territorially in Los Angeles, Baltimore and Pittsburgh (thanks there to dj Porky Chedwick).

“Goin’ Out Of My Head” would spend fourteen weeks on *Billboard*’s Hot-100 Charts, peaking at #6. It was the Imperials’ biggest hit since “Tears On My Pillow” in 1958.

*DCP* closed out 1964 with solid sales, thanks to two huge hits by Little Anthony & the Imperials and decent selling records by Teddy Randazzo, the Don Costa Orchestra and the Crampton Sisters. This encouraged them to sign a bunch of other artists, including Sandy Stewart, June Valli, former Four Fellows’ Larry Banks and Pearlean Gray, though none would ever come close to matching the success of the Imperials.

In January 1965, *DCP* released a second album by the Imperials entitled “Goin’ Out of My Head”. In contained the title track plus their next single, “Hurt So Bad,” and several cuts that would later come out as singles – “Hurt,” “I Miss You So” and “Take Me Back”.

Wanting to keep the hits coming in a timely manner, Randazzo and Weinstein already had the next Imperials hit



**“I’m On The Outside (Looking In)”, 1964. (From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)**

# LITTLE ANTHONY and the imperials



## HURT SO BAD

B/W REPUTATION

DCP-1128



**“Hurt So Bad” Picture Sleeve, 1965.  
(From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)**

written and recorded – “Hurt So Bad”. This time they had the help of a third writing partner, Bobby Hart. Born Robert Harshman, Hart would later find fame as one half of the writing and recording duo, Boyce and Hart. Bobby Hart and Tommy Boyce would write most of the hits for the Monkees.

“Hurt So Bad” became another smash hit. It spent nine weeks on Billboard’s Hot-100 Charts in 1965, peaking at #10. By then *Billboard* had restarted their R&B Charts, where “Hurt So Bad” reached #3. It didn’t really matter, since by 1965, the line between black and white music charts had been blurred. No longer did it take a white cover of a black record to make the Pop Charts. *Motown* artists were being played on white and black radio station as soon as they were released.

“In 1965 there were the two big influences in the industry,” said Sammy Strain. “The English Sound and the Motown Sound. Prior to that we had Rock & Roll. Songs like ‘Earth Angel’ crossed over but there were relatively few. The McGuire Sisters covered the Moonglows’ ‘Sincerely’ to put it on the Pop Charts. But in 1965, with Motown, they were playing R&B music on pop radio. When we recorded ‘I’m On The Outside (Looking In)’ our records were played on WINS by Murray the K on the same day that Georgie Woods played it in Philadelphia on an R&B station. They played Dionne Warwick’s record on the pop stations as well as the R&B stations. So we didn’t have to cross over. If you were on a record label like *Scepter Records* that had worldwide distribution with the Shirelles and Chuck Jackson, Burt Bacharach and Hal David were writing Dionne Warwick’s records for young Americans – no color came into play. Top-40 played everything. It was a new day. The music industry busted open for Rock & Roll as well as R&B. It became Americas’ music – the soundtrack of America. Prior to that, only pop stars were played on Top-40 radio. In 1965, every one of those artists sold albums. So now, the companies knew what they were doing. If an artist recorded a single and the single was a smash, it was accompanied with an album. Or the album came out first and the single came off the album.”

The other factor changing the face of the music industry was television. New music shows like *Shindig*, *Hulla-*

*baloo* and *Where The Action Is* joined more established variety shows like *The Ed Sullivan Show* to spotlight the hottest singers of the day. On January 27, 1965, one month after the release of “Hurt So Bad,” Little Anthony & the Imperials sang the song on the TV show, *Shindig*.

“We knew that it was a new day,” said Sammy Strain. “We had struck gold because Teddy Randazzo and Don Costa had this label called *DCP* and we were basically the only artists on the label. We knew that we were going to get 100% concentration and promotion on our product. We knew that when the record came out, we were going to be able to do television. By 1966, they had opened up programs like *Shindig*, *Hullabaloo* and *Where The Action Is*. We also had Les Crane. We had Merv Griffin. We had Ed Sullivan. Prior to that, great artists like the Moonglows, the Flamingos and the Five Keys, didn’t have access to that. When the mid-1960’s came along, artists could cross over because they had a vehicle - television. They could be on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *Shindig*, *Hullabaloo*, *Where The Action Is*. We had tools to access that the groups that we admired – the Cadillacs, the Cletones, the Moonglows - didn’t have.”

On March 16, 1965, Little Anthony & the Imperials sang “Hurt So Bad” and “I’m Alright” on *Hullabaloo*. A week and a half later, on March 28, 1965, Little Anthony & the Imperials sang “Hurt So Bad” on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. It was the first of two appearances the Imperials would make on Ed Sullivan’s program. The first appearance was when the program was broadcast in black and white. By the time the program would return in 1970, the program would be broadcast in color. “Ed Sullivan was important,” said Sammy. “He had an audience of 8 to 12 million people.”

“We had great product,” recalled Sammy. “You had



**Little Anthony & the Imperials on the Ed Sullivan Show, 1965.  
Left to right: Ed Sullivan, Sammy Strain, Ernest Wright,  
Clarence Collins, Anthony Gourdine.  
(Photo courtesy of Sammy Strain)**

to have a good song. We were fortunate to have a tunesmith in Teddy Randazzo and Don Costa who wrote a lot of the arrangements and co-produced with Teddy. There was never a discussion about a session budget. Whatever Teddy felt that the song called for, that was what we had. Be it kettle drums, violins, harps, French horns. Whatever he felt the session needed, that's what was applied. I think it became a thing where everybody had that. I remember the first time I heard the Drifters with violins. When we went into the studio and I saw 40 musicians - I had never seen 40 musicians in one place in my life except in the pit at Radio City. So I knew it was a different day. We had that machine going for us. We also had the talent to 'back our wax' as we called it. Artists could have a great record but when you'd go to see them in person, you'd say, 'Gee, they sound nothing like that'. We had all those years of experience to get our personal appearances together so that we came off great on stage. Many people told us, 'You guys sound better in person than on record'. When we would dance and do splits or sing 'On The Outside (Looking In)' or 'Tears On My Pillow' people could actually feel it."

The Imperials closing song, "I'm Alright" was a show stopper. Originally written by Anthony and Sam Cooke backstage at the Howard Theatre, the Imperials had actually recorded it for *End Records* in 1959. But the 1960's version was speeded up and turned into a frantic number inspired by the Isley Brothers' "Shout". The choreography featured various members doing repeated splits. "All the choreography was put together by the Imperials," said Sammy. "I think the Flamingos had a lot to do with that because they had a record 'Jump Children' and they did almost the same type of format. Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers did something a little similar but they danced as a group. We did all our own choreography up until we put our second nightclub act together, when we started working the Copacabana and places like that."

Knowing how popular Little Anthony & the Imperials had been on his previous stage show, Murray The K was quick to add the group to his next Brooklyn Fox show, an Easter week affair in April 1965. It also starred the Del Satins, Rag Dolls, Cannibal & Headhunters, Marvellettes, Four Tops, Temptations, Martha & Vandellas, Miracles, Marvin Gaye, Gerry & Pacemakers and the Righteous Brothers.

About a month after the Murray the K show, *DCP* released "Take Me Back" from the second Imperials album.



**Little Anthony & Imperials on the Mike Douglas Show.**  
**Left to right: Sammy Strain, Arlene Dahl, Ernest Wright, Anthony Gourdine, Mike Douglas, Clarence Collins (behind Mike Douglas).** (Photo courtesy of Sammy Strain)



**Little Anthony & Imperials on the Joey Bishop Show.**  
**Left to right: Anthony Gourdine, Sammy Strain, Ernest Wright, Joey Bishop, Clarence Collins.**  
 (Photo courtesy of Sammy Strain)

Another hit for the group, "Take Me Back" spent eleven weeks on the Pop Charts, reaching #16. With four Top-20 hits in a row and two albums selling well, one would have expected the royalties to be rolling in. But by the summer of 1965, the Imperials began to question where the money was going.

"We had a lot of hit records but we hadn't received any royalties," said Sammy. "We protested and said we're not going into the studio anymore until we get an accounting. We didn't record for about eight or nine months. In the interim, Teddy Randazzo produced a girls group out of Baltimore called the Royalettes. He gave them a song called "It's Gonna Take a Miracle" which was written for Little Anthony & the Imperials. When it first came out, everybody thought it was us. He also produced Derek Martin who had a hit called "You Better Go". But we missed a million seller with "Gonna Take A Miracle" when we went on strike with the record company."

Though not recording, Little Anthony & the Imperials continued to work steady on the strength of their popularity and their recent string of hits. On August 14, 1965, the group made an appearance on the TV show, *Fanfare*, a summer replacement for the *Jackie Gleason Show* hosted by Al Hirt. They were on with Liza Minnelli and Johnny Tillotson and sang "Goin' Out Of My Head".

The Imperials refusal to record did not stop *DCP* from issuing new records by the group. In August, *DCP* issued the single "I Miss You So," taken from the group's second album. The song, previously recorded by the Cats & the Fiddle in the 1940's, was a rare Imperials recording not written by Teddy Randazzo and his partners. It charted but only went to #34. A follow up release, "Hurt," only reached #51. These would have been considered successes for most artists, but to the Imperials they were disappointing.

*DCP* repackaged many of the Imperials recordings into a third album called "The Best Of Little Anthony & The Imperials". It would eventually make *Billboard* magazine's Top-10 R&B LP's.

Little Anthony & the Imperials had plenty of gigs and closed the year 1965 with a flurry of television shows including the *Merv Griffin Show* (Oct. 29), the *Mike Douglas Show*



**Little Anthony & Imperials joking with Murray the K (center) during the taping of his TV special. (Photo from the Classic Urban Harmony Archives)**

(Dec. 3) and three appearances on *Where The Action Is* (Oct. 18, Nov. 18 and Dec. 17). In February 1966, Little Anthony & the Imperials appeared on Murray The K's two-hour TV special for WNEW-TV in New York. Also on the show were the 4 Seasons, Jay & the Americans, the 4 Tops, the Ramsey Lewis Trio, the Shangri-Las, Joe Tex and the Byrds.

Then early in the year, Don Costa and Teddy Randazzo sold the *DCP* label to *United Artists* for their *Veep* label subsidiary. A trade magazine in April 1966 showed a photo of the Imperials signing with *Veep*, but by then the group had already started recording for *Veep*. As part of the deal, Teddy Randazzo continued to write and produce Little Anthony & the Imperials. *Veep* also obtained the rights to all the prior *DCP* recordings and promptly reissued all six Imperials *DCP* singles on *Veep*, along with a single from album cuts "Tears On My Pillow" and "Who's Sorry Now". The three Imperials albums on *DCP* were also reissued on *Veep*.

Meanwhile, *United Artists* gave the Imperials a full accounting of royalties due and rushed the group back into the studio. Little Anthony & the Imperials' first *Veep* release, "Better Use Your Head," was a moderate hit, reaching #54 on the Pop Charts. The only other single released by the group in 1966 was "It's Not The Same," which barely cracked the Top-100 at # 92. However, by the mid-1960's albums were selling much better than singles and *Veep* did issue a new album by the group, now calling themselves "Anthony & the Imperials". The *Paying Our Dues* album was released in November 1966.

"Hit singles would have been great, but things started to change," said Sammy. "We left Ernie Martinelli. Ron Sunshine and Frank Barcelona started an agency called Premier Talent. We went with them and they had all the English acts. When we came out with "Hurt So Bad" we were with Premier Talent. They piggybacked their artists so if you wanted the Rolling Stones, you had to take the Imperials and any other acts they were trying to promote. Once we left that agency and signed with William Morris Agency that was even bigger, they did the same thing. That's how the industry worked. We didn't really need the records, but they would have helped."

"We worked Miami Beach – the Fontainebleau and the Diplomat in Miami Beach, Las Vegas, Puerto Rico. We were working nightclub performances as well as the Catskills. We did all the colleges. Everybody was doing the colleges circuit then. We would do maybe a month in Las Vegas, two weeks in Puerto Rico, at the Flamboyant Hotel on the Strip in Old San Juan. Then we'd come back and do the college circuit. The colleges had some of the largest budgets in the country so

the college circuit had Doc Severinsen, Johnny Mathis, Sammy Davis Jr, the Supremes, the Four Tops, Dionne Warwick – everybody who was on the Pop Charts between 1964 and 1969. They had big bands like Duke Ellington and Count Basie."

The Imperials could work two or three colleges a week. One college gig at the State University of New York at New Paltz on May 13, 1966, included the Imperials, Dionne Warwick and the Isley Brothers. It drew an audience of 2,800.

"Along with that we did lots of television," said Sammy. "We'd go to our agent's office and he'd say, 'Here's your itinerary for June. First you're going to Florida for two weeks then you're going to do the *Ed Sullivan Show* and then... So we actually knew where we'd be for the next year. That's when our security came about. This really became our livelihood. We were really in show business. When we got off the plane in Las Vegas and looked at the lineup on the strip we saw we would be playing the original Flamingo Hotel. Across the street would be Red Skelton. Down the street would be Jimmy Durante. Dinah Washington would be playing the Thunderbird. We realized this was our livelihood now. This is how we're going to live for the rest of our lives. We had been accepted into this fraternity of show business. Our dream had come true. We worked all over the United States and Canada. We had an ongoing itinerary from those records. It gave new meaning to young people in show business because prior to that there was no certainty. I remember going to audition at record companies – that's what kids did at that time. You could get a hit record but there was no longevity. But by the mid-sixties, if you were fortunate enough to put together 5 to 10 records in a row that charted and your agency and management got you key dates, you could become an established entity in show business and you could make a living. The records don't last forever. A record act is no bigger than their last record. Entertainers live forever. When you make the transition from record artists to entertainer, then this becomes your livelihood. You must have great material. Then you must have a great management team and a great agent."

Interspersed with the club, casino and college dates were still the occasional stage shows. In April 1966, the Imperials did their final Murray the K Easter Show at the Brooklyn Fox. The ten-day show also featured Joe Tex, the Young Rascals, Mitch Ryder & the Detroit Wheels, Jay & the Americans, Deon Jackson, the Shangri-Las, Patti LaBelle & the Bluebells,



**Little Anthony & Imperials food shopping. Left to right: Anthony, Sammy, Clarence, Ernest. (Photo used for a magazine article. Courtesy of Sammy Strain)**

the Gentrys and the Royalettes. As the Imperials were kept busy on the road in 1967, the group continued doing television. They made appearances on the Mike Douglas Show (August 23), the Joey Bishop Show (August 14 and August 21) and the Merv Griffin Show (December 7).

Record wise, the group released six singles on the Veep label. Only one ("I'm Hypnotized") charted briefly and that was not until February 1968 (#98). That song was co-written by Teddy Randazzo and former Impacts' and Imperials' member, Kenny Seymour. Of more significance to the record buying public, Anthony & the Imperials did release two albums in 1967; "Reflections" and "Movie Grabbers". "Reflections" had Sammy Strain leading on "A Thousand Miles Away". "We were doing some older songs at the time," said Sammy. "We were honoring the groups we admired. The Heartbeats were one of my favorite groups of all time."

The "Movie Grabbers" album has its own fascinating story. "Teddy Randazzo wrote a lot of the music for movies that came out in the sixties," recalled Sammy. "He and Don Costa were trying to get us the sound track to the James Bond movie, 'You Only Live Twice' [which was in production]. It was just about set. So Teddy said not only were we going to do 'You Only Live Twice,' but we're going to do a whole album of movie themes. We did everything from 'Born Free' to the theme from 'A Fist Full Of Dollars'. When it came time to select the artist to do 'You Only Live Twice', Frank Sinatra had more pull than Teddy Randazzo or Don Costa. His daughter, Nancy, had just come off of a hit with 'These Boots Are Made

For Walking' so they gave her the title cut to the movie 'You Only Live Twice', even though we recorded it and we had the better version. Now we were on Veep Records which was still part of United Artists, but it started to go down hill record wise from that point."

1968 brought three more Veep singles, most notably "The Flesh Failsures (Let The Sunshine In)," from the musical "Hair". The Imperials began working the song into their live act. At one point members of the 5th Dimension attended an Imperials performance. A short time later the 5th Dimension included "Let The Sunshine In" in their hit "Aquarius".

1968 also saw the release of the Veep LP, "The Best of Anthony & the Imperials Volume 2". Television wise, the Imperials played the Joey Bishop Show (January 17), the Merv Griffin Show (February 26), the Kraft Music Hall (September 4) and the Mike Douglas Show (October 8).

In 1969, Ernest Wright left the Imperials. His replacement was Kenny Seymour. Kenny had sung with Sammy Strain in the Impacts and the Imperials (before Anthony returned). The Imperials again played the Flambouyan Hotel in Puerto Rico in July 1969, in preparation for one of their most memorable gigs, New York City's Copacabana.

The Copacabana, 10 East 60<sup>th</sup> Street, was one of the world's most recognized nightclubs. It opened in 1940 and soon became one of the hottest places for big name entertainers to play. It was owned by Jules Podell. In the 1960's, the Copa began booking big name Rock & Roll entertainers like Sam Cooke, the Supremes, Temptations, Jackie Wilson and Marvin Gaye. Playing the Copa was prestigious and the Imperials took it very seriously. They work on a new nightclub act for the occasion.

Booked through the William Morris Agency, the Copacabana appearance began on July 24, 1969, and ran for two weeks. Billed again as "Little Anthony & the Imperials," the group did two shows nightly with three shows on Saturday night. The Imperials used their own eight member band, led by their now regular conductor and arranger, Harold Jenkins. Jenkins had previously been a member of the Kodaks and later the Impacts (with Kenny Seymour). It was Kenny Seymour who recommended Harold for the position with the Imperials. In the band were Mickey Tucker (piano), John Adelson (guitar), Julio Cruz (bongo), Alva McCain (sax), Dave Burns (trumpet), E. V. Perry (trumpet) and Pat Sherrod (drums). Pat Sherrod was the son of famous dancer and choreographer, Cholly Adkins. Comedian Bobby Shields opened for the group.

The Imperials must have done very well at the Copa, for on August 5, 1969, they received the following letter from club owner Jules Podell.

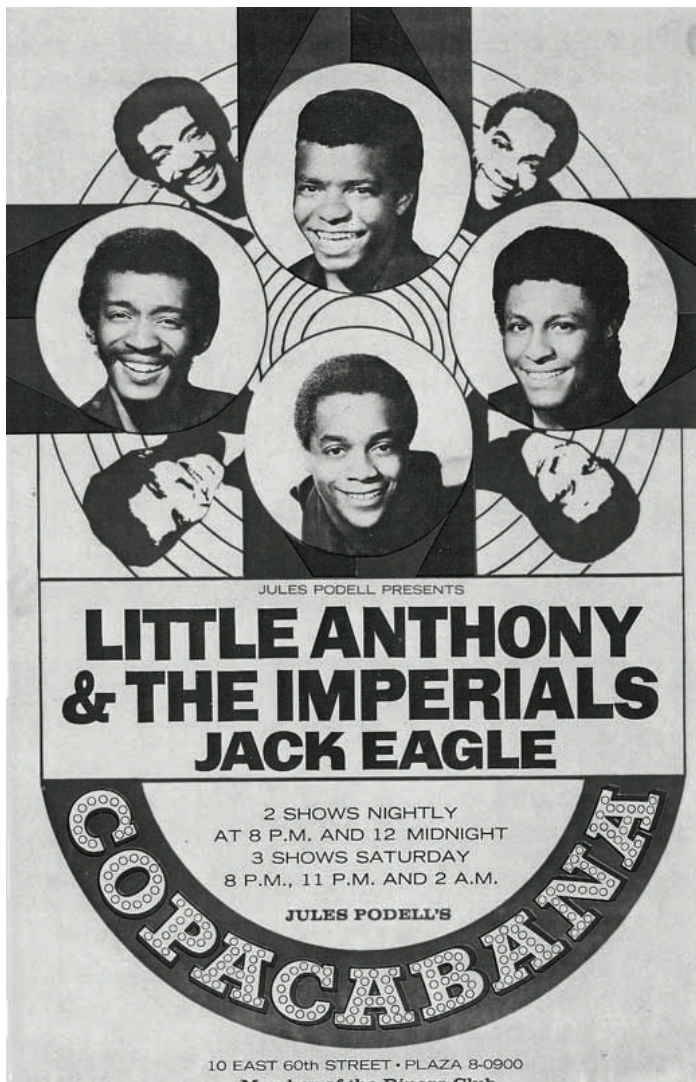
*Dear Anthony & Imperials: I would like you to know how pleased we were with your two-week headline debut July 24 - August 6 at the Copacabana. It was impressive. Our audience, who are acclaimed to be a most critical audience, enjoyed your performance very much. I look forward to your playing a return date at the Copacabana in the near future. Cordially, Jules Podell.*

The Imperials did indeed return to the Copacabana on January 8 through January 21, 1970.

1969 also saw the Imperials move from Veep to the parent label, United Artists. They recorded the album "Out Of Sight Out Of Mind" which included some remakes of older tunes as well as some new songs. Released as a single, "Out Of Sight Out Of Mind," a remake of the Five Keys song, landed them back on the charts, peaking at #52. "The Ten Commandments Of Love," the Moonglows tune, also charted as a single at #82. "Out of Sight Out Of Mind" and "Ten Commandments of Love" were songs that we loved and admired when we were teenagers and we just wanted to put them on the album," said Sammy. "They hadn't been done in years and we thought we'd



**Little Anthony & Imperials, 1969.**  
**Clockwise from top: Kenny Seymour, Sammy Strain,**  
**Anthony Gourdine, Clarence Collins.**  
**(Photo courtesy of Sammy Strain)**



Program from the Imperials' 1970 Copacabana show.  
(Photo courtesy of Sammy Strain)

put our little spin on them and it worked.”

Little Anthony & the Imperials started 1970 with their second appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* (January 25). They performed a medley of “Goin’ Out Of My Head,” “Don’t Get Close,” Shimmy Shimmy Ko-Ko Bop,” “Tears On My Pillow” and “Hurt So Bad”. They also appeared on the television show *Get It Together* on June 13.

In August 1970, the Imperials recorded “Help Me Find A Way (To Say I Love You)”. The song was written by upcoming writing duo out of Philadelphia of Thom Bell and Linda Creed. It was recorded at Philadelphia’s Sigma Sounds Studio. Linda Creed and pop singer Connie Stevens added their voices to the background.

“Thom Bell and Linda Creed were great fans of Little Anthony & the Imperials,” said Sammy. “And they admired Teddy Randazzo. Thom Bell wrote a bunch of songs that he thought would fit Little Anthony & the Imperials. Our executive producer at *United Artists* was Bob Skaff. He was Paul Anka’s cousin. He hooked us up with Thom Bell. The songs were tailor made for us and we had a hit with ‘Help Me Find A Way’. He had about twelve other songs but something happened at that time. Kenny wanted to write and produce. Anthony wanted to write and produce. I said this guy’s got the magic touch but it didn’t come about because we didn’t go in that direction. So Thom Bell gave the string of hit records to a

group called the Stylistics and the rest is history. All their records were written for us except ‘Betcha By Golly Wow’ which was written for Connie Stevens. Her record company told her this record was stupid and it would never be a hit, so Connie Stevens didn’t get a chance to record it. Thom Bell also gave that one to the Stylistics and that was their first hit record.”

Meanwhile, promoter Richard Nader had begun putting together huge “oldies” spectacular concerts at Madison Square Gardens in NYC. Little Anthony & the Imperials performed on the 4<sup>th</sup> Nader concert on Friday, October 30, 1970. Also on the bill were Chuck Berry, Jackie Wilson, the Five Satins, the Drifters, the Skyliners, the Coasters, the Shirelles, Hank Ballard & the Midnighters and Joey Dee.

In 1971, Little Anthony & the Imperials left *United Artists* and signed with *Janus Records*. This time, Teddy Randazzo did not go with them. The Imperials promoted their first release, “Father Father” by singing it on the David Frost Show (August 19, 1971). “Father Father” was written by Anthony Gourdine and Kenny Seymour. It was arranged by Horace Ott. The Imperials did a second record for *Janus* called “Universe” but the group members were moving in different directions and Sammy Strain left the Imperials in 1972. He was not on later *Janus* singles nor the Imperials’ records on *Avco*. Contrary to previous reports, Sammy did not leave the Imperials to immediately join the O’Jays.

“When I left the group, Anthony was getting ready to go on his own. I left the group first and I had already moved to Los Angeles. There, I opened up a steak house in North Hollywood with Dionne Warwick and Red Fox. It was next to Universal City Studios, the only restaurant next to the studio in 1972. I was going to be a restaurateur and open five restaurants and franchise the rest. We did 70% of our business off Universal so I would walk in at lunch time and I would see everybody from Telly Savalas to Barbra Streisand. It was called the Meat Rack. I was still thinking about singing because I also had a group with Mel Carter [“Hold Me Thrill Me Kiss Me”] and Frankie Karl [Chevrons on *Philtown*; Dreams on *DC*; 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue Aviators on *Congress*] who was in a version of ‘Hair’ that was playing in Las Vegas. We had a little group for a minute but nothing really materialized. And I sang background on a couple of Mel Carter records. Then the next thing I knew, I was in the O’Jays.”

Actually, Sammy Strain joined the O’Jays in January 1976, replacing William Powell who left the group for health reasons. Sammy had been recommended to the O’Jays by a lot of people including the Temptations’ conductor Cornelius Grant, Smokey Robinson and Cholly Adkins. [Because of space limitations, we’ll leave the O’Jays story to Marc Taylor who covered them in *A Touch Of Classic Soul*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2013). We’ll now skip forward to 1992.]

“In 1992, I was singing with the O’Jays and we were off for two weeks when someone contacted our manager Shelly Berger. They said they were doing a reunion of Little Anthony & the Imperials in Madison Square Garden and wondered if I was available. I happened to be off and the O’Jays said go ahead and do it. I flew into New York. We hadn’t been together in 20 years. We rented a room to rehearse for a couple of hours and Anthony’s conductor played piano. When we started singing, his eyes teared up. When we sang these songs it was as if we’d just sung them on stage the night before. When he started playing the intro to “Outside looking In” we sang the song from beginning to end the way we recorded it. The same with the other songs. I knew that when we did the show at Madison Square Garden, it was going to be magic. I coordinated the clothes. We rented some eggshell white tuxedos and I said, ‘Guys, lets not wear any ties’. Each guy wore a different color pastel shirt and matching hanky and I said ‘I’m going to get the gloves and white shoes and we’re going to glow



in the dark like we did at the Brooklyn Fox on the Murray the K Show.' When we hit the stage there were 22,000 people - standing room only, sold out. Cousin Brucie said, 'Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you the triumphant return of New York's own, Little Anthony & the Imperials.' You'd have thought the Beatles had gotten back together. All we heard was this roar. I can't explain the feeling. We came out on the stage at the Madison Square Garden - two from each side - and we were in the big arena. All people saw were four sets of gloves and shoes glowing in the dark and they went crazy. We sang 'Tears On My Pillow' and in the middle of the song, during the bridge, the lights came on and they saw us for the first time. The show just stopped. Then we did "I'm Alright" that we had closed the show with for years. And we did splits. It stopped the show. Cousin Brucie stopped. The people were going crazy. And we said, "Do you think we'll ever see this again?" And we looked at each other and said, "You never know". Well, six months later we'd get back together and we'd be together for the next twelve years."

In May 1992, Dick Clark celebrated the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Bandstand and invited Little Anthony & the Imperials to join him on the TV special. "Dick heard about the show at Madison Square Garden," said Sammy. "I went back on the road with the O'Jays, Anthony and the Imperials went back to what they were doing. Dick Clark contacted Ernie Martinelli and they contacted me again. They asked Ernest to come back from Europe and we did the 40<sup>th</sup> Bandstand Special. And the day after we did it, the reviews said we sounded better than we did before. We had been apart for 20 years and each of us brought back 20 years of experience. So we had 80 more years experience that we had grown individually. So when we came back together as a unit, we could only be better than we had been before. When we got back together, Ernie Martinelli had no problem again selling this act. The only difference was that now we were instant headliners. One of the first dates after we got back together was Merv Griffin's Resorts Casino in Atlantic City, NJ. Little did we know that the people who were about to buy Resorts also had started Mohican Sun (in CT) and they wanted us to headline there. We signed a multi-engagement contract with them along with other casinos. It was a new day as now they had casinos everywhere. So now we worked these casinos all over the country as well as our regular gigs. We also started doing cruises."

Sammy Strain left the O'Jays and returned to the Imperials. For the next twelve years Little Anthony & the Imperials worked every casino that they had previously worked, only now they were headlining in the main rooms instead of working the lounges. They played Madison Square Garden and all the venues that they always did. In addition, they now played county fairs and state fairs.

Little Anthony & the Imperials released two memorable CD's from during this period, "Pure Acappella" and a live recording called "Up Close & Personal". On "Pure Acappella" the group returns to its roots with 14 acappella renditions of 1950's vocal group classics. Sammy Strain sang lead on "A Thousand Miles Away".

In 2004 the Imperials wanted to sign with new management and relocate to Las Vegas. Sammy Strain didn't want to move to Las Vegas and felt it was time to retire. He'd been in show business for almost 49 years and felt he'd just about seen and done it all. "I think I've had the best of times and the worst of times," reflected Sammy. "It was over for hit records and I thought I should start enjoying what's left of my life with my best friend, my wife DeBorah. I decided to hang up my rock & roll shoes. I came to realize that it was really time."

### **Special Thanks**

1. Taken from the authors' interviews and conversations with Sammy Strain over the past 15 months. Special thanks to Frank Chile, Lou Rallo, Jim Bakay and Steve Kahn.
2. For more group profiles, photos, concert reviews and all things group harmony, visit our website. New features added often ...

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**Little Anthony & Imperials at the Whiskey A-Go-Go, 1965. Left to right: Sammy Strain, Ernest Wright, Clarence Collins, Anthony Gourdine. (Photo courtesy of Sammy Strain)**

### **Sammy Strain with**

#### **Little Anthony & Imperials: Singles Discography**

- DCP 1104 - I'm On The Outside (Looking In) / Please Go - 1964
- DCP 1119 - Goin' Out Of My Head / Make It Easy On Yourself - 1964
- DCP 1128 - Hurt So Bad / Reputation - 1965
- DCP 1136 - Take Me Back / Our Song - 1965
- DCP 1149 - I Miss You So / Get Out Of My Life - 1965
- DCP 1154 - Hurt / Never Again - 1965
- Veep 1228 - Better Use Your Head/ The Wonder Of It All - 1966
- Veep 1233 - Gonna Fix You Good / You Better Take It Easy Baby - 1966
- Veep 1239 - Tears On My Pillow / Who's Sorry Now - 1966
- Veep 1240 - I'm On The Outside Looking In / Please Go - 1966
- Veep 1241 - Goin' Out Of My Head / Make It Easy On Yourself - 1966
- Veep 1242 - Hurt So Bad / Reputation - 1966
- Veep 1243 - Our Song / Take Me Back - 1966
- Veep 1244 - I Miss You So / Get Out Of My Life - 1966
- Veep 1245 - Hurt / Never Again - 1966
- Veep 1248 - It's Not The Same / Down On Love - 1966
- Veep 1255 - Where There's A Will There's A Way To Forget You / Don't Tie Me Down - 1967
- Veep 1262 - Hold On To Someone / Lost In Love - 1967
- Veep 1269 - You Only Live Twice / My Love Is A Rainbow - 1967
- Veep 1275 - If I Remember To Forget / Beautiful People - 1967
- Veep 1278 - I'm Hypnotized / Hungry Heart - 1967
- Veep 1283 - What Greater Love / In The Back Of My Heart - 1968.
- Veep 1285 - Yesterday Has Gone / My Love Is A Rainbow - 1968
- Veep 1293 - The Gentle Rain / The Flesh Failures - 1968
- Veep 1303 - Anthem (Grow Grow Grow) / Goodbye Goodtimes - 1969
- UA 50552 - Out Of Sight, Out Of Mind / Summer's Comin' In - 1969
- UA 50598 - The Ten Commandments Of Love / The Flesh Failures (Let The Sunshine In) - 1969
- UA 50625 - It'll Never Be The Same Again / Don't Get Close - 1970
- UA 50677 - World Of Darkness / The Change - 1970
- UA 50720 - Help Me Find A Way / If I Love You - 1970
- Janus 160 - Father, Father / Each One, Teach One - 1971
- Janus 166 - Madeline / Universe - 1971