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Politically, the '70s saw the rise of Black Power and the Panther party. Musically, the decade found a bump-and-grind soundtrack in funk and disco. But the soul ballads of the era—emphasizing smooth vocal harmonies instead of pounding dance-floor rhythms and sweetly romantic themes instead of strident political messages—offered a subtler expression of black culture. In the polished production and highly emotive vocals of contemporary R&B, the influence of these classic love songs can still be heard today.

The Sound of Philadelphia, characterized by the sweeping orchestral arrangements of Kenny Gamble, Leon Huff and Thom Bell, defined early-'70s soul. The Intruders, who had been working with Gamble and Huff since the mid-'60s, were at the foundation of the Philly success story. Written by the two producers, I Wanna Know Your Name showcased the distinctive tenor of Samuel “Little Sonny” Brown against a backdrop of mellow French horns, delicate keyboards and gently rolling percussion. The song appeared on Save the Children, a concept album advocating family unity.

It was on the advice of the Intruders that the O'Jays came to work with Gamble and Huff. Although the O'Jays had been singing doo-wop since 1958, it wasn't until they signed with the producers' Philadelphia International label in 1972 that their career really took off. The group developed a reputation for driving message songs, but their talent was wide-ranging. The expressive delivery of lead singer Eddie Levert and

Teddy Pendergrass
tenor Walter Williams clicked on suave, sensuous ballads such as *Let Me Make Love to You*, which made the R&B Top 10 in 1975.

The Stylistics' label, Avco Embassy, hired Philly producer-arranger-songwriter Thom Bell to perfect the group's sound. It was Bell's idea to have Russell Thompkins Jr. lower his pure, soaring falsetto just a notch in order to improve his enunciation. Bell also co-wrote *Betcha by Golly, Wow*, the biggest hit of the Stylistics' career.

In 1973, Delfonics member Randy Cain brought in Ted “Wizard” Mills to do some writing for a session with Al Rubens, Steve Bernstein and Bruce Gable, producers for Philly's W.M.O.T. (We Men of Talent) label. Rubens noticed Mills's distinctive high tenor and got the idea to team him with a local group of singers, the Shades of Love. Soon the quintet was rehearsing songs by the Blue Notes and the O'Jays. Renamed Blue Magic, the act released their first three singles in 1973 and toured Europe opening for the Ike and Tina Turner Revue. By the spring of 1974, Blue Magic's third single, *Stop to Start*, had become their most successful release to date.

Norman Connors was another product of the Philly scene. According to legend, in his junior-high days the jazz drummer snuck into a nightclub to play with John Coltrane. After studying at
Juilliard, Connors did session work with Archie Shepp and toured with Pharoah Sanders. You Are My Starship, which features a lovely vocal by Michael Henderson, reached No. 4 on the R&B chart.

The Moments were heavily influenced by the Philadelphia sound brewing just south of their home in Hackensack, New Jersey. The group became known for romantic songs, starting with their 1970 hit, Love on a Two-Way Street. In 1975, they returned to the same vein for Look at Me (I'm in Love), which topped the R&B chart. The Moments' Al Goodman wrote the number when he learned that bandmate Harry Ray was getting married. They wound up performing it at both of their weddings, as well as that of bandmate Billy Brown.

Hailing from Cincinnati, Ohio, the Isley Brothers, like so many of their contemporaries, started out singing gospel music. Following a series of monster hits like Twist and Shout and It's Your Thing, the vocal trio revamped their lineup in 1969, adding two younger brothers and a brother-in-law. Since then, the group has placed 60 singles on the R&B chart. Don't Say Goodnight (It's Time for Love) (Parts 1 and 2) tied It's Your Thing as their biggest hit, holding the No. 1 spot for four weeks.

Detroit's Temptations, arguably the country's favorite soul group during the '60s, struggled through lineup changes and personal problems in the early '70s. Eddie Kendricks and Paul Williams left the group in 1971, to be replaced by Damon Harris and Richard Street. The revamped Tempts favored uptempo songs such as Papa Was a Rollin' Stone and Masterpiece but returned to the ballad form with Hey Girl (I Like Your Style). In a sad coincidence of timing, that single debuted the day after Williams was found dead from a self-inflicted gunshot.

As much as the Philly sound dominated soul in the first half of the '70s, the latter part of the decade belonged to Earth, Wind and Fire. EWF added funk, jazz and Afrocentric themes to the cauldron of soul and R&B to create their own flavorful stew. On simmering ballads like Love's Holiday, the group's high-pitched vocal harmonies owe much to the Temptations.

That's the Way of the World, a richly textured midtempo jam punctuated by EWF leader Maurice White's beloved
kalimba, was written as the theme song to a movie of the same title. Directed by Sig Shore of Superfly fame, the film was an inside look at the music business, featuring acting stints by members of EWF. Although the movie flopped, the title tune took the group, in the words of the song, “higher and higher.” The soundtrack album proved to be the EWF’s commercial breakthrough, producing double-platinum sales and Shining Star, the band’s only hit to top both pop and R&B charts.

Smokey Robinson’s prowess as a songwriter, producer and performer with the Miracles had already made him soul’s leading man when, in 1972, he left the group for a solo career (around the same time partner and mentor Berry Gordy moved Motown Records from Detroit to Los Angeles). Baby Come Close, from Robinson’s debut solo album, Smokey, became his first hit in 1974. Its cool, laid-back groove hinted at developments to come the following year on his influential album A Quiet Storm. The title itself became a catchphrase describing urban contemporary music in the ’80s.

The quiet-storm sound was epitomized by 1980’s Love T.K.O., a spare,
jazzy lament of love gone wrong crooned by R&B’s main sex symbol, Teddy Pendergrass. Pendergrass’s gruff baritone and dark good looks earned him a legion of adoring female fans. Two years after Love T.K.O. hit, Pendergrass was to serve as a different kind of inspiration, staging a dramatic comeback from an auto accident that left him partially paralyzed.

—Sue Cummings


*Indicates highest Billboard R&B chart position.
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