

By all accounts, R&B legend Kenny Hamber should feel fulfilled by his many accomplishments. From very humble beginnings, he has become a historical figure in the annals of soul music, has won (and still keeps) the adulation of his hometown fans, has widely toured abroad, and has created a corporation (Hart & Soul Productions) which sponsors elaborate musical spectacles, most recently the well received (and well attended) 1st Baltimore All-Stars Soul Classic Reunion held at the 5th Regiment Armory this past May 31, but also Family Day at Keny Park, an annual, weekend Hartford, CT, extravaganza which has featured mega-groups such as the O'Jays, the Delfonics, Blue Magic, and the Temptations, line-ups which have regularly attracted 80,000 or more onlookers. Moreover, he still records quality albums at a nearby Manchester (now his home base), CT, 16-track facility run by his son-in-law and regularly commands four figures an outing at such prestigious venues as Foxwoods Casino (B.B.

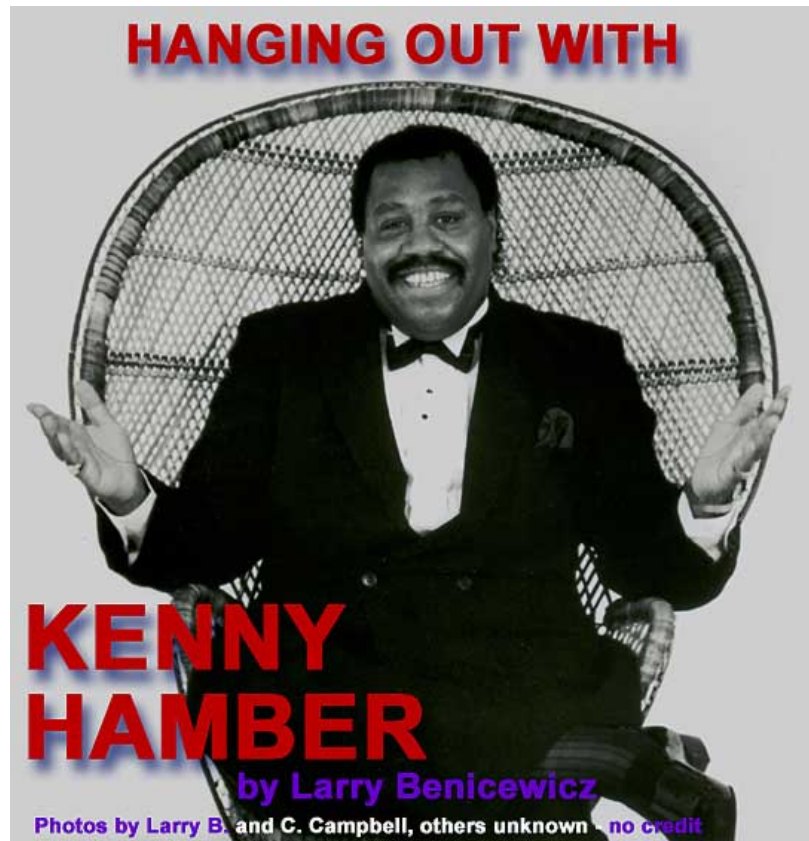
King's Club) in Ledyard, CT, run by the Pequot Indian tribe. And if that's not enough to keep him occupied, he also hosts a Sunday evening radio broadcast over WKND (1480 AM) in Windsor, CT, wherein he plays old school R&B and conducts interviews with giants of those bygone eras.

But yet when speaking with this gentle giant of a man, you get the sense that there's a hunger, a feeling that there's still a lot to be done. And, perhaps, that time is running out on him. With a little luck, his could have been a household name, like a Harold Melvin, Teddy Pendergrass, or a Luther Vandross, contemporaries with which he has rubbed elbows and even shared the same producers, but all of whom have gone on to fame and fortune. At least the former had always eluded Kenny.

What was it then? He always possessed the rich, strong, expressive baritone voice. And he always surrounds himself with the best supporting cast, including back-up singers, all tightly rehearsed and choreographed. Why wasn't he fed the best material when he was running in the same circles as these aforementioned soul superstars?

Nonetheless, you've got to give Kenny credit. He's not a whiner. Nor is he bitter. And though I'm sure that he's had his share of regrets, he doesn't complain about those past slights or missed opportunities. Instead, to use his own words, "he's thankful being where he is" and prefers to dwell on the future, still focusing upon furthering a career. And, in this regard, he doesn't pass up any chance to be "out there" - be it blues (he has a popular trio), soul, or even pop ballads. No, at 60, he's not ready to be put out to pasture, not by a long shot. He still has a fire in his belly and, like the Muddy Waters's tune, he just "can't be satisfied."

**Kenny Hamber** was born in east Baltimore, MD, on September 18, 1943 in the Lafayette housing projects and, as so many of the soul singers of that vintage, was first inspired by gospel music he first heard at the Weldon Baptist Church where he, himself, would later sing as lead male vocalist. In fact, his mother dated a gospel singer of note and thus Kenny grew up listening to the strains of Mahalia Jackson and Clara Ward.





**Kenny and Larry**  
Photo by C. Campbell

But it was his grandfather, a well-respected local actor, who once tried out for a role in the Amos 'N' Andy television series, who was most influential in introducing him to R&B. The Royal Theatre on Pennsylvania Avenue played host to a variety of entertainment genres, including plays, stand-up comedy, and R&B shows. Indeed, this sadly defunct institution was a regular whistle stop on the famed "Chitlin' Circuit" of touring caravans of Black artists, venues which included the Uptown on Broad St. in south Philadelphia, the Howard at 7th and T in downtown Washington, D.C., the Regal in south Chicago at 47th and South Parkway (now Martin Luther King Drive), and the mighty Apollo on 125th St in Harlem in New York City. Greasing the skids, so to speak, he got his young grandson, Kenny, in the door of this venerable R&B shrine and forever changed him.

"It was awesome," said Kenny commenting upon the show-stopping, electrifying pyrotechnics of Jackie Wilson, who by then had left Billy Ward & the Dominoes and was enjoying the success of a string of late 50s hits on Brunswick, such as "Lonely Teardrops," "Reet Petite," "That's Why," "To Be Loved," and "I'll Be Satisfied." "After seeing his performance, how he dazzled the crowd, I knew right then and there what I wanted to be," said Kenny.

Attending nearby Dunbar High School, it didn't take Kenny long to latch onto a vocal group composed mostly of his classmates, the Harris Brothers, which included Roy, Gene, and Tim, who were named after famous film cowboys of the era - Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, and Tim McCoy. "But, of course, we weren't singing C&W music. It was doo-whop and R&B," said Kenny with a hearty laugh. The latter brother, Tim Harris, still active in clubs in the city, actually won a talent contest at the aforementioned Apollo theatre, a crowd pleasing effort, which he parlayed into a recording contract for Deluxe and then Roulette records, as Tiny Tim and the Hits. Not long after, Kenny formed his own outfit, the Del Rios, and was beginning to make a name for himself; so much so, that Papa Lou Krefetz, who ran a record store on east Lexington St and managed area vocal groups, the Cardinals and Clovers (both huge hit makers for Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler's Atlantic records in Manhattan), recruited him for yet another quartet that he handled, the Enchanters. It was with them that he made his first recording in which he covered two Dells (of Vee-Jay of Chicago) originals - "Pain In My Heart" and "Time Marches On." But Kenny's recollection is a little fuzzy about this 45-year-old session and it didn't help to jog his memory when I reminded him of all the labels of at least eight such ensembles who went by the exact name and recorded during this same time frame, including the Enchanters on Coral (#61756) who issued the now-classic "True Love Gone" or another who sang "Spellbound By The Moon (Stardust #102)," a rarity which now commands over \$1000 on auction.

Baltimore in its long musical history was never a blues capital. But it could hold its own with any city in the nation as far as vocal groups were concerned. In fact, besides the aforementioned Cardinals and Clovers, it was also the home base for the great grand daddy, the prototype of all such vocal ensembles, the Orioles, featuring Sonny Til, who prolifically recorded mellifluous, four-part harmonies



on Jubilee. But there were also the Magic Tones on King, the Persians on Goldisc, the Blendtones on Success, Bobby and Melvin on Groove (RCA's race label),

and the Kings with Bobby Hall on Jalo and Jax, the latter aggregate both mentored and managed by local DJ, Jack Gale.

And on this note, it would be a grave injustice not to include all the other jocks, all colorful characters in their own right, who spun the platters and promoted Charm City's R&B scene of the 50s and 60s. There were three major R&B stations in town – WEBB (1360 AM), WWIN (1400), and WSID (1010), which competed with Annapolis's WANN (1340), whose DJ, Hoppy Adams, had the advantage on Sunday afternoons of broadcasting live shows from Blacks-only Carr's Beach. To say the least, the DJs of this era were both fiercely independent and powerful, with the ability to make or break a record, and thus a career - Kelson "Chop Chop" Fisher, Lee Cross (who was actually Caucasian), and Maurice "Hot Rod" Holbert, whose popularity was such that famed honker Hal Singer, a Savoy session player, dedicated an instrumental (#1179) to him by the same name.



But few could compete one on one with WSID's Paul "Fat Daddy" Johnson, he of the rapid-fire, non-stop, jive delivery, whose signature motor mouth rapping is captured for posterity on Uptown (#2302) records' "Soul Downtown Pt I&II." To borrow bluesman Mose Allison's line, if talking were criminal, Fat Daddy would have led a life of crime. In fact, records were just an excuse for Fat Daddy to philosophize and hold court in his inimitable manner over the airwaves and even the white kids would clandestinely listen in hoping that their parents would not catch them tuning into this "menace to their moral fiber." In fact, the heavy one recorded an outrageous Christmas song (Jonny-A, #201) which went "I'm Fat Daddy from the North Pole, your Santa Claus with soul" which became a local underground cult classic and now is a much sought-after collector's item. Finally, the late Fat Daddy is the subject of one of the most enduring urban myths of all time here in Baltimore - that he was fired while on the air because he made a sexually explicit reference to the seductiveness of the Supremes' music.

And so it shouldn't come as a great revelation that Kenny Hamber, always hip to where the action was in town, started gravitating toward WSID and pestering the jocks there, including Billy Fox and Bill "Sparky" Mellon, the latter who overheard him singing and suggested that he record. "You see back then Baltimore just didn't have a decent recording studio. I did a session at the station using the old one-track method and the results were really disappointing, especially for the first record I could really call my own," said Kenny. The song was "Tears In My Eyes" bw dance number, "Do The Hully Gully," which was released in 1960 on Spar records (#101, named after Sparky) and, as far as I know, one of only three such issued on this label (which is not to be confused with Ted Jarrett's Nashville-headquartered logo). Backed by David Robertson's (who received one-half writer's credit) Combo, the record was an aural disaster. Not only was the guitar solo extremely sloppy, but the tape was mixed so poorly that the listener could not even ascertain whether a vocal back-up group was used (Kenny claims no). And thus being so crudely recorded, to no one's surprise, the disk flopped badly.

But everyone involved still believed in the song; so it was back to the drawing board. This time, a studio was used in New York and sidemen included the late great Atlantic records' King Curtis on sax. And a back-up group was carefully selected to complement one of the best vocalists available, Jimmy Bailey, erstwhile of the heralded doo-whop group, the Cadillacs ("Gloria," "Speedo," "Zoom," and "Betty My Love," all on Jerry Blaine's New York-based Josie label). Prior to this session, Bailey had also recorded for both Wynne and Time records as Jimmy Lane and the Sugartones before ending his singing career in the mid-60s on a major label, Columbia, after which he composed tunes such as "Everybody Plays The Fool" for the Main Ingredient. In short, with this upgrade both in personnel and technology, the new recording, released as Zenette 101 (named after Sparky's oldest daughter), was a vast improvement over the former and this refinement of "Tears In My Eyes" was duly reflected in its sales. In all honesty, it wasn't the national blockbuster that Kenny had hoped for, but it put him on the map. And people were beginning to stand up and take notice of this up-and-coming singing sensation in the territory.

There's nothing like a sure-fire hit record to rescue one from obscurity and soon Kenny, the new kid on the block, began accepting engagements all over town. And he was crossing paths with other budding stars of the mid-Atlantic, like Nella Dodds, who hailed from Havre de Grace, MD, and who recorded for Wand records (the same label as Chuck Jackson, Maxine Brown, and the Isley Brothers) and also Beverly Ann Gibson from the Harrisburg, PA, area, who recorded for Jubilee, Lew Chudd's Imperial, and Syd Nathan's King and scored with "Love's Burning Fire" on Deb (506) in 1959. And Kenny looks back fondly to that juncture of his life when there seemed to be no shortage of native ability and, for certain, no shortage of where to display it.

One club in particular, the Black Jack, held a special significance to Kenny. The Black Jack, itself, was one of the jewels in slew of restaurants, movie houses, and lounges which composed the then vibrant neighborhood just north of Penn Station in Baltimore. Among the more memorable theatres (which also presented live entertainment) were the Charles, 5 West, and 7 East. Then there was the celebrated upscale eatery, the Chesapeake, which also could serve up a small combo or two upon occasion. Big rooms included the Carousel and on Sunday nights there was the Famous Ballroom which could, under the auspices of Left Bank Jazz Society, accommodate the biggest of the bebop demigods and their hordes of devotees. But few could match, pound for pound, the talent that regularly came through the doors of the Black Jack on W. Lanvale. And during the 60s, for Afro-Americans, it was simply the place to both see and be seen. And if Baltimore had an "in crowd," the Black Jack was where they congregated.

"I can remember off the top of my head seeing some of the greats of that time - the Manhattans, Marvin Gaye, the Contours, Washington's Billy Stewart, the Temptations, Gladys Knight & the Pips, James and Bobby Purify, and Charlie and Inez Foxx. And I want to add that Lee Cross would be doing a lot of the emceeing during that period," said Kenny. And this hopping establishment became Kenny's second home, either opening for such big-name acts or executing his own gigs. But moreover, at the close of the decade, the Black Jack would also play a major role in shaping Kenny's future.

About 1964, around the time that Kenny was in a short-lived R&B group, the Shindells, Fat Daddy approached him about recording a song to capitalize upon all the dance crazes that were so characteristic of the first half of the decade (read: popeye, swim, mashed potatoes, hully gully, fish, pony, and, of course, the twist, just to name a few). He was summarily sent to New York and, as a result, "Show Me Your Monkey" was released on DE JAC (#1254). Although the hot number never charted, it was notable in that it was distributed by Atlantic and overseen by the highly regarded producer, Bert Berns, who, after his tenure with Wexler's label expired, was soon to head Bang records (Neil Diamond, the Strangeloves, the McCoys, and Van Morrison) and its sister label, Shout, which could boast of R&B stars like Erma Franklin, Donald Height, the Exciters, Jackie Moore, and Freddie "Are You Lonely For Me Baby" Scott.

Even if such records like Kenny's were only regional hits, they did serve to keep his name out there and by the mid-60s he was a man very much in demand. "I can recall playing at Carr's Beach in Annapolis, which was run by (the recently late) Rufus Mitchell, and also Wilmer's Park near Washington, D.C.," said Kenny.

By 1967, Fat Daddy called again and this time hooked him up with Arctic records of Philadelphia, a company headed by singer Jimmy Bishop and that was no stranger to Baltimore soul artists. In fact, though its releases were dominated by chanteuse Barbara "Yes I'm Ready (105)" Mason, the Volcanoes (later to become the Trammps), and Honey & the Bees, the aforementioned **Rufus Mitchell** succeeded in placing protégé Winfield Parker on its roster, but only after he had recorded for Mitchell's home-grown Ru-Jac. Bishop also benefited by another singer in his stable, Kenny Gamble (with partner Leon Huff), who doubled as producers for him before forming their own Gamble label (the Intruders) in 1967 and becoming the architects of "The Sound of Philadelphia" in the 70s with artists such as Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes, the O'Jays, Billy Paul, Teddy Pendergrass, and the Three Degrees on their Philadelphia International label, which was distributed by CBS. Kenny's first release, "Ain't Gonna Cry (#131)," profited immensely by their expertise, as did his second, a remake of Otis Redding's "These Arms Of Mine" and the Valentinos' "Lookin' For A Love (#139)" in 1968. However, unfortunately for Kenny, these efforts never received the proper attention as far as advertising and distribution were concerned. Nor did his reworking of Freddie Scott's "Hey Girl," which remained in the vaults, as the label, on the verge of bankruptcy, was about to fold. By then Jimmy

was in the process of jumping ship to become a promotion man/scout for Spring records (Joe Simon, Millie Jackson, and the Fatback Band) of New York. Since Kenny was under contract for three singles for the label, Bishop handed him over to Jesse James, whose major claim to fame was composing the huge instrumental hit, "The Horse," for Cliff Nobles on Harold Lipsius's Phil-L.A of Soul label (#313), a trademark which also was responsible for the monster "Boogaloo Down Broadway (#305)" by Fantastic Johnny C. This latter item, "Camel Walk," was released on Mean records (#200) in 1969 and is so scarce today that even Kenny does not possess a copy. As far as Kenny's Arctic experience went, it was simply a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But things were definitely looking up on the home front. Kenny was still knocking them dead at the Black Jack, replacing Denny, the lead singer for the Hitchikers. When the bassist left the band, he called upon his old colleague from the Shindells, James Gilyard, to take his place. Kenny now would be headlining with J.G. & the Hitchikers, which also occasionally featured a female lead, Kitty Karl. And to say the least, they were the darlings of the local R&B circuit. Now booked by the premier agent for Black artists on the East Coast, Rufus Mitchell, they would often open for big-time acts at the old Baltimore Civic Center (now the 1st Mariner Arena), as well as forge names for themselves on the aforementioned "Chitlin' Circuit."

Indeed, the road became a powerful draw. Kenny found opportunities to be more plentiful with a new home base, Providence, RI, and, in particular, the Osborne Club, another R&B Mecca, which was owned and operated by the mother of soul singer, Jeffrey Osborne, formerly of L.T.D. (Love, Togetherness, and Devotion). Kenny would remain in Providence for nearly 20 years altogether before moving to the Hartford, CT, area in the mid-80s.

However, about 1973, the original **Hitchikers**, appearing in Boston at the Sugar Shack, decided to join forces with Cornell Gunther of the Coasters ("Yakety Yak," "Charlie Brown," "Searchin'," "Poison Ivy," "Along Came Jones," etc.) and hit the road as an oldies show. But after this split, accompanied by a brief hiatus from touring, Kenny, himself, reformed this group and went his own way. After being "discovered" in a club, veteran A&R man Clyde Otis signed Kenny to ABC Dunhill, which at the time had John Lee Hooker, B.B. King, and the Four Tops ("Keeper of the Castle" and "Ain't No Woman [Like the One I've Got]") under contract - not too shabby company. And, in addition, well reputed producers like Paul Leka ("Green Tambourine" by the Lemon Pipers and "Cat's in the Cradle" by Harry Chapin) were handling the full scale arrangements. From the eponymous album, the Hitchikers (ABCD 973), came a solitary single, "You're Making A Big Mistake," which failed to capture the imagination of the buying public, probably because the major label, about to go belly up, refused to get "behind it" financially. In all truth, the once mighty giant in the industry, ABC Paramount, was never quite able to make the transition from soul music to disco, unlike the aforementioned Philadelphia International. Despite creating yet another collector's item, as far as Kenny was concerned, it was of little consolation. And similarly to his encounter with Artic records in the late 60s, he must have felt like it was "déjà vu all over again."

"You can't just look at the total amount of recordings and think that I was inactive after that LP," asserted Kenny. "I didn't retire." After his move to the Hartford area in 1986, he did cover Eddie Floyd's Stax release, "Never Found a Girl," on Million Dollar records, a twelve inch single which found its way and sold extensively in Europe and which undoubtedly helped to smooth the path for his many U.S.O-sponsored tours abroad which commenced in 1991. Since then he has averaged about two such junkets a year. "But not since 9/11," he reminded me. Besides Europe (Germany, England, Belgium, Hungary, and Holland), he's traveled to the Middle East (Saudi Arabia and Bahrain), and Iceland. And he's also entertained troops in far flung outposts such as Greenland and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. "I can say with all honesty that I had some adventures along the way. In fact, I was there in Kuwait City performing the very night the Iraqis began bombing," he added.

Nowadays, although still quite busy on the home front (he was a drive-time DJ as recently as five years ago, a "stressful gig" he had to give up) or on the go, he has managed to cut two fine CDs, both of which appear on his own MCK records of Jewel Studios in Hartford. The first, released in 1996 was the warmly received This Is R&B and the second, In A Romantic Mood, was cut just last year.

Above all else, Kenny, being the seasoned veteran in the business that he is, is a realist. He understands that the music industry of today is a very youth-oriented market and accepts the fact

that major labels aren't going to throw a lot of money at artists of "limited" appeal, like himself, when hip-hop is where the megabucks can be found. But on the other hand, don't expect a perfectionist like Kenny to hastily slap together a shoddy project to act as a calling card just because the majors are ignoring him. A case in point is *In A Romantic Mood*.

Yes, it's a vanity label. But Kenny has spared neither time nor expense to see it to its completion. He's gotten some of the best in the writers in the business, including Gamble & Huff, to provide fresh compositions. There are soaring strings and back-up singers galore. In short, the CD has received the full professional treatment, with elegant arrangements worthy of Barry White. It is an undertaking that frankly for its species, soul mood music, is every bit as refined as anything out there today, including Luther Vandross. *In A Romantic Mood* is simply a masterpiece and Kenny should be justifiably proud to be associated with it. Why some record exec hasn't picked up on this gem is beyond me. But what amazes me most is how far Kenny has come - from his first roughly hewn recording, almost an embarrassment, to this slick production number.

I had been bombarding Kenny with questions all week and as the deadline for this article approached, I suppose I annoyed him mercilessly about minute details or factoids about his personal history. And don't get me wrong. He was pleased that I was writing his story. But Kenny is always in a hurry. He always has an agenda. Preferring to look ahead rather than dwell on his past, he already envisions a new CD, which, according to him, might be in the offing sooner than expected. Everything else, right now, is water under the bridge.

"One more (question). Gotta go. The Spinners are in town tonight," said Kenny.

And I know that he'll be down there at some event schmoozing, pressing flesh, and networking to the nth degree. Mark my words. He'll make it back to the hit parade. If only through the sheer force of his will. For if there is a man alive who believes in himself, it is Kenny Hamber.

**Larry Benicewicz**

Posted by Blues Art Studio, Austria.

<http://www.bluesartstudio.at/index.html>