

The Mills Brothers: A Pop Vocal Group

The Mills Brothers were a quartet of singing siblings from Piqua, Ohio: Herbert, Harry, Donald, and John. The group started performing in the 1920s and continued through the 1970s. When John died in 1935, his father—who was both a barber and a barbershop singer—took his place in the group.

Early on, the Mills Brothers sang accompanied by only a guitar. They became famous for imitating the sounds of other instruments with their voices. Listening to the Mills Brothers sing on the radio, you might think that you were hearing a trumpet, trombone, or bass.



The Mills Brothers in the 1950s

In 1930, the group moved from Ohio to New York, where they performed in theaters and clubs. They had many hit records over the next two decades, both nationally and internationally. Their 1943 song “Paper Doll” was #1 in the United States for twelve weeks. In an era when racial segregation was still legal and common in the United States, the Mills Brothers became one of the first African-American vocal groups to be popular with both black and white audiences.

In the group’s later years, they stopped imitating instruments and started performing with bands, but they continued to sing harmony together. They remained active through the early Rock and Roll era and inspired many younger vocal groups.

In the video:

You will watch the Mills Brothers performing their instrumental imitations in the song “I Ain’t Got Nobody.”