

# The Jean Thomas Story - Part 1

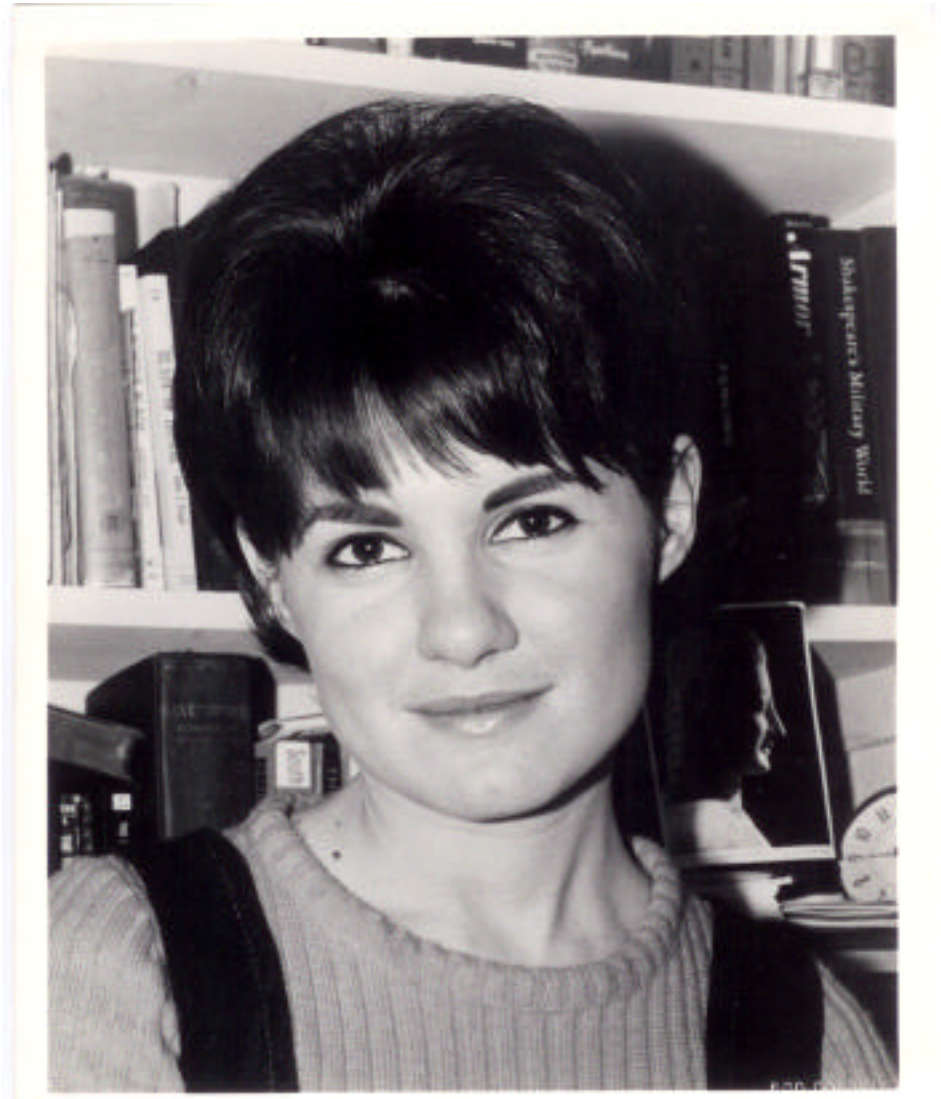
The sound of the female voice in harmony was best captured for a fleeting moment in time in the 1960's. It has been described as.... "Providing the soundtrack to a generation of young lovers, good-bad rebels, the candy store crowd and soulful swingers were artists with names like the Shirelles, the Ronettes, the Crystals, the Shangri-las, the Supremes, the Chiffons, the Pixies Three, the Toys, the Cookies, the Rag Dolls - and hundreds more whose time in the spotlight was as brief as a kiss on the cheek.

The girl group's sound was one of the most popular rock & roll genres in the early '60s. The sound drew from earlier and much rawer 50s rock & roll and rhythm & blues records, but the girl group sound had far more polish and sheen than its predecessors, mainly because it was a product of professional record producers and Brill Building songwriters who commandeered the groups and tailored their repertoire." The Girl Groups website (<http://www.spectropop.com/gg/hgirgroups.html>)

The voices that led this sound are timeless and etched in the annals of pop music. Lesley Gore, Ronnie Spector, Judie Craig and with the Motown sound Martha Reeves and Diana Ross are just some of the better known songstresses but there are some no lesser voices that never sought the lime-light but loved the profession of being a writer and singer and left their mark on its body of work.

One such voice is that of Jean Thomas, whose vocal work, though little known, made an outstanding contribution, not only with her own tracks, but to so many other artist's vocal tracks in the first half of the decade

Jean was born in Weymouth, Massachusetts but grew up in Sarasota, Florida. "I was raised



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and went to school in Sarasota, Florida and spent summers in Nantasket Beach, Massachusetts, where my father and mother owned a summer business", Jean told us. In High School, Jean was heavily involved in music and school projects. She was a major part of the Sarasota Youth Center Radio Show and Youth Center Director, Bill Blackburn, who loved music, nurtured Jean's talent. At 15, she and five classmates started a vocal group they named "Preacher John and The Five Saints". "At the time we were considered 'really cool' and became popular around

Sarasota and the state singing songs like 'Come Go With Me' and 'Get A Job' said Jean.

In 1959 -1960, Jean took a break from her musical ambitions to attend Florida State University in Tallahassee Florida. Meanwhile, brother Don, a junior in high school, became interested in guitar and amazingly learned to play in six months. He and three classmates started a group called "The Merryman" which had a Kingston trio style. When Coca Cola sponsored the "Talentsville USA Contest" to find the most talented musicians in the country, "The Merryman" won not only their local, state and regional heats, but became National Champions in the pop category with their mixture of good and funny folk songs. The winning artists were placed on a major label (Cadence Records - Archie Bleyer), a tour with Chubby Checker, Brenda Lee, Frankie Avalon and Fabian, and then, on the Ed Sullivan Show.



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Amazingly, the parents of two of "The Merryman" 'pulled the plug' by saying their sons had to go on to college and the group broke up.

Jean and Don decided it was the right time to go to New York and pursue their dreams through the contacts Don had made while with "The Merryman". In preparation, they began writing songs together to take with them. Their first meeting was with Paul Anka's publishing company, Spanka Music, and they were signed to an exclusive writing contract. They began making contacts in the close knit world of New York music scene of

the 1960's. The world they dropped into was unique.

**"Even though rock and roll made popular music a much bigger business, in the late Fifties and early Sixties it was still a network of cottage industries. Because the major labels had mostly missed the boat at the outset, a host of smaller outfits quickly moved in to feed a teenage market that grew by the year. Mass culture was undeniably getting more corporate all the time but rock was far from a monolithic machine; market research consisted of putting out a record and seeing what happened when it got played on the radio, with or without some greasing of the wheels by record promoters. By comparison with what was to come it was almost pastoral, if your idea of pastoral allows room for a good number of gangsters and con men to ply their trade. One of the fascinations of the Brill Building era is that the scale was still small enough and the relevant technologies still**



sufficiently rudimentary that one can survey, in retrospect, the whole process of how songs entered the culture as if it were happening in the backyard"

**('Will You Love Me Tomorrow' By Geoffrey O'Brien)**

One of the most respected men of that time was Archie Bleyer of Cadence Records ("The Merryman's" former label) and Jean's voice was noticed by Bleyer at an audition. This was October of 1961 and he told her if she came back in January of 1962 he would record her. Besides the importance of his own work, as an orchestra leader during the 1940's, Bleyer's influence was to become felt through the efforts of his most important follower, Phil Spector. Spector held Cadence as a model for his own Philles label and followed Bleyer's credo of quality, not quantity. Bleyer brought an engineer's precision and a musician's feel to his productions. Cadence never had a large roster of artists, and it put out records judiciously so that each one could be worked to achieve its full potential. Bleyer spent as long as it took to find the right material for his artists, and even then would not hesitate to dump a session that didn't meet his standards. Jean was in good company at Cadence with The Everly Brothers, Johnny Tillotson, Lenny Welch, The Cordettes and Julius La Rosa.

Upon returning to New York, Jean began her career as a solo recording artist and here's where the story of her sound really begins.

At Cadence, Jean's first single was **'Moon River b/w My Ideal' (Cadence 1419)**, The "A" side was the well known song from "Breakfast at Tiffany's", written by Henry Mancini and Johnny Mercer, and a hit a few months before the release of Jean's version. Archie Bleyer chose this song because he had his concept of how it should have been recorded



and never was. He felt that the simplicity of Audrey Hepburn's version in the film had never been captured and that Jean's voice could do just that. Bleyer's was to be a very 'stark' arrangement best described by John Clemente in his book "Girl Groups":- **"Exercising perfect diction, Jean's alto stands alone, save for guitar and harmonica, appropriating a fanciful mood for this splendid version."**

This was not typical of the female vocal pop style but the voice showed exceptional talent and the recording rose to the top 5 on the record chart in New England and throughout the East coast of the USA in the spring of 1962. Jean says, **"This was my very first professional recording. The producer/arranger, Archie Bleyer, was an incredibly talented man. It's such a beautiful song and I loved his arrangement. He was formerly the bandleader for The Arthur Godfrey Show and was the gentleman of gentlemen. I had the greatest respect for this man. Every day I used to rehearse the song in his office in preparation for when we could record it. One day he said**



**"OK, we're ready" and we just did it. It was planned to perfection".** The "B" side was **"My Ideal"**, a Robin/Whiting/Chase composition that was also a strong performance, again allowing the purity and innocence Archie Bleyer saw in Jean's voice to shine through on a similarly harmonica and guitar backing. The success brought Jean some personal appearances to promote the record touring with Jay and The Americans, Brian Hyland and Del Shannon. Jean and Don found themselves living with their cousin, Joyce Fisher, in Levittown, New York writing for Spanka Music and recording for Cadence. With only a small salary from Spanka Music it was hard to

make ends meet and their parents moved up from Florida to work and financially help them build their careers.

Jean's second single moved more toward the "girl sound" of the day becoming a distinctive genre with **"He's So Near" backed with "Seven Roses." (Cadence 1435).**

**"He's So Near"** was a chance for Jean and brother Don to showcase their writing talents on a song set to appeal to young girls in love with the boy next door. Arranged with a rolling rhythm track and support vocals, Jean sings the track with enthusiasm and style.

**"Seven Roses"** was a Marcel Stellman/Heinz Alisch composition and is sung in a Connie Francis choral style with strong backing vocals, but again displays the plaintive voice of Jean, on a very melodic song.

In a short period of time Jean and Don became well known enough to be offered higher salaried positions at publishers Shapiro-Bernstein and their parents were able to move back to Florida.

Gloria Shane helped Jean immensely during this period. She introduced her to all the key publishers and took Jean under her wing, promoting her skills around the business and helped to establish her as one of New York's main demo session singers, a coveted position in those days. Gloria was a songwriter and studio musician and wrote the famous, "Do You Hear What I Hear".

Jean moved to an apartment in New York City and shared it with two friends from Sarasota, Florida, one of which was Mikie Harris, who became part of the session backup threesome, Ellie Greenwich, Mikie Harris and Jean.

Don began to work as a key session guitarist and he shared an apartment in New York City with two young men in the music business, one of whom was a young and ambitious Denny Randell, a connection that would



prove of key importance as Jean's career developed.

New York was a unique place at this time as described by **Theodore Dreiser, The Colors of a Great City .....** **"In Twenty-seventh or Twenty-eighth Street, or anywhere along Broadway from Madison to Greeley Squares, are the parlors of a score of publishers, gentlemen who coordinate this divided world for song publishing purposes. There is an office and a reception-room; a music-chamber, where songs are tried, and a stock room.... A salaried pianist or two wait to run over pieces which the singer may desire to hear. Arrangers wait to make orchestrations or take down newly schemed out melodies which the popular composer himself cannot play."**

Jean and Don did studio work while writing songs and creating demo's. This was where they learned their trade. The world of demo records was a tale of unsung musical hero's and heroines. They had to write or learn a new tune, arrange it musically, find suitable musicians, lay down the backing vocals, record the lead, put the whole thing together in an afternoon, so it would 'sell' to the record companies and artists. **"The demo studios were mainly two track studios, so we had to make sure we made the most of each track."** The

skills needed to succeed in the world of 'demos' are described by **Geoffrey O'Brien**: "The distinctions between writing a song, arranging it, producing it, and performing it were often blurred at these sessions where the hits were coaxed into being. What it came down to was the capacity to focus all that skill, energy, and intuition on perhaps two minutes and forty seconds worth of monophonic sound. The singer Tony Orlando's description of how these sessions tended to be run now seems an echo of a simpler age: "Everyone was singing live. No overdubs. One, two, three takes, and that's it. No fixing. You better be in key, and you better be singing from the heart, 'cause this is a live show, baby!"

And as John Clemente tells us .... "Many demos were cut at Associated, Dick Charles, or Bell Sound. Everyone on the circuit used these studios for their demo work and constantly crossed paths. Once on the network, Jean met other songwriters and producers and began collaborating on more and more compositions."

Jean's voice was perfect for such work and she and Don could arrange and produce good quality demos. Meanwhile, Chip Taylor heard Jean's version of "Moon River" and liked her voice so much he asked her to do his demos at MGM. This was timely as Archie Bleyer was retiring from Cadence and a new direction beckoned Jean

Jean's final single at Cadence was "The Boy That I Want Doesn't Want Me" backed with "He's So Near" (Cadence 1438). The "A" side is was an up tempo catchy song written by Peggy Farina of the Angels and Jean Thomas and as the title suggests Jean was out of luck again with the boys. The Angels, like Jean and Don were part of the mix of artists meeting regularly at sessions as musicians and backing vocalists

The BMI database shows that Jean Louise Thomas wrote over 80 songs and what we have of her singles is only a small sample of the many demos of her own and others compositions that she and Don did.

One of Jean's best pieces of demo work that she recalls was for the Elvis Presley 1964 movie "Viva Las Vegas." Jean said, "I did the demo of the Bernie Wayne ("There She Is,

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**Miss America" composer) song, "Appreciation", for Ann-Margaret to sing in the movie and the final version is an exact copy of my demo. I also did "My Rival", which was also a Bernie Wayne composition.** At this time these demos were still to come, but in 1963 Jean was continuing to find plenty of work as a session singer doing backing vocals. Producers were finding her voice perfect for 'sweetening' the harmonies of groups they were quickly assembling for one project or another.

Jean's demo work at MGM was to lead to another solo release. "My MGM records were produced by Chip Taylor, who also wrote the songs. He is best known for having written "Angel Of The Morning" and "Wild Thing." The sessions produced a single, "I Don't Miss You At All" backed with "Don't Make Me Fall In Love With You" (MGM 13263). The "A" side, co-written by Jean and Chip Taylor, again uses Jean's plaintive voice with spoken sections to explain how she is getting over her ex-



boyfriend in a very unconvincing way. The "B" side returns to Jean's innocent vocal as she resists the seductive attempts of her boyfriend on a Chip Taylor composition.

This was to be the last of the sweet and innocent style vocals that had been Jean's solo trademark to date. The work in her backing sessions and on harmonies in 1963 was to take her on a path that would allow the true potential of her vocal skills to mature.

### END OF PART ONE

**Compiled by Ken Charmer and Jean Thomas with special thanks to John Clemente. Photos courtesy of Jean and John.**

*In the next part we will see how Jean's demos were so good one was released and topped the charts and how her emerging work with the girl groups was to lead her back into the charts with the Rag Dolls thanks to Denny Randell and Bob Crewe*