

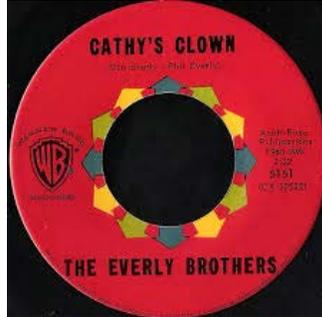
“Cathy's Clown”—The Everly Brothers (1960)

Named to the National Registry: 2013

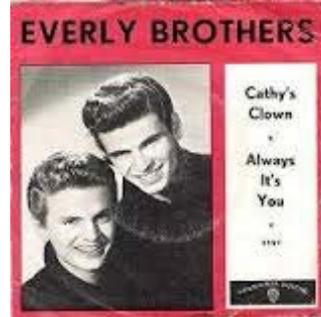
Essay by Daniel J. Levitin (guest post)*



The Everly Brothers



Original label



Original 45 sleeve

The Everly Brothers, Phil and Don, were child prodigy singers who began performing when they were six and eight. Within a year from their start, they were regulars on regional radio in Iowa. They were signed to Cadence Records when they were 18 and 20, and between 1957 and 1967, they had 26 hit records, 15 of which were in the Top 10. From 1957–1960, they averaged a Top Ten hit every four months, including four #1's.

The sound of their vocal harmonies is distinctive, and its influence on later musicians is incalculable. The Beatles, The Mamas and the Papas, Simon & Garfunkel, The Carpenters, The Byrds, and the Beach Boys all drew inspiration for their harmonies from those of the Everlys. John Lennon and Paul McCartney even toyed with calling themselves The Foreverly Brothers before they settled on The Beatles. The Beatles's harmonies in their own “Please Please Me” can be traced directly back to those in “Cathy's Clown.”

“Cathy's Clown” was the first hit that the Everly Brothers had after signing with Warner Bros. Records (for one of the biggest deals in record industry history up to that point) AND it was the best-selling single of their careers, with over eight million copies sold. The song held the #1 position on the Billboard Charts for five weeks in 1960. They recorded it early in 1960 with no overdubs; the two brother singing into a single microphone.

“Cathy's Clown” did not represent a major departure for the duo. Their tight, seamless, fraternal harmonies are still the song's most distinguishing feature. The song is catchy and an important part of early rock music's heritage. It begins as a three-cord tune in D Major but an E minor chord is added for the third line of the verse. “Cathy's Clown” begins on the verse, followed by a bridge (there is no chorus). But far more distinctive than the song itself is this recording of it because “Cathy's Clown” sounds like no other record before or since. Along with only a handful of other recordings—Johnny Cash's “I Walk the Line” (1956) and Elvis Presley's “Heartbreak Hotel” (1956), for instance—”Cathy's Clown” established a line of demarcation for the increasingly important role that timbre (tonal color) would play in 20th and 21st century popular music. In the selection

of a particular vocalist or instrumentalist, composers, musical arrangers, and conductors understood the importance of an individual's own sound, a notion that traces back to Mozart and before that to the ancient Greeks. But the idea that timbre could overshadow melody and rhythm and become the dominant, identifying attribute of a piece of music was probably first shown by Ravel in “Boléro” (1928). What the Everlys, and their producer Wesley Rose, did with this idea for “Cathy's Clown” influenced music for the next several decades.

It is the *sound* of “Cathy's Clown” that is so gripping. Like “I Walk the Line” and “Heartbreak Hotel,” it features voices that are instantly recognizable, and an overall sonic profile that puts the record in a class by itself. The plate reverberator was a new sound in 1960 and the entire track is drenched in it, thick as the hot, humid Kentucky summer. The song opens with bass, drums, electric guitar and piano. The kick drum, bass and piano come in on the downbeat, playing a I–V root motion that sounds vaguely Celtic; the bass (Floyd Chance) slides into the I at the top of the second measure contributing the drone-like qualities of a bagpipe. The snare drum (Buddy Harman) plays a standard rock backbeat on the second beat of the measure, and then rolls into the backbeat in a kind of march cadence for the fourth beat, propelling the song inevitably forward. The guitars play crisp, punctuated I and V chords on beats two and four, emphasizing the backbeat while drenched in thick, liquid reverb.

At six seconds, the band stops completely after the downbeat of measure 4. Then, on the second beat of the fourth measure, Phil and Don enter, singing in unison “Don't want your love.” The word “love” starts on the downbeat of measure 5 and then something miraculous happens. They stretch the word “love” out for six beats, and beginning on the third of those beats, Don diverges from the unison, putting a harmony underneath brother Phil's high, single held note. This splitting and spreading of the melody into two parts gives the vocals on this song its distinctive sound.

It's not just a musically pleasing maneuver, it's textually brilliant. As the unity of the relationship starts to fall apart and the couple separates, the word “love” splits and descends harmonically into two distinct parts, settling on their famous open thirds harmony for the lyrics “any more.” They repeat this for the second line of the verse, “Don't want your kisses, that's for sure.” On the next line, “I die each time,” they introduce a four note guitar arpeggio call, followed by a four note guitar arpeggio response on “I hear this sound.” The final line's hook, “Here he co-o-o-o-omes, that's Cathy's clown,” follows that beautifully separating-and-descending vocal line, with each of the brothers adding a vocal scoop as they elongate the word “comes,” underlining the narrator's long walk of embarrassment and shame.

In the verse, the drummer switches to the ride cymbal and pianist Floyd Cramer (it was he who played those noodly fills and shuffle rhythm on “Heartbreak Hotel”) appears, playing a part slightly reminiscent of the one he played on “(Til I Kissed You” a year earlier--slightly behind the beat, giving it a relaxed, laid-back feel.

That distinctive drum sound in the verse was created by engineer Bill Porter (who also engineered Roy Orbison's "Only the Lonely"). He says:

If you listen closely, the drums sound like two drummers playing. I had gotten a tape loop from RCA New York that ran 60 ips, and there were four different playback heads which you could switch in and out and then move them around the tape path. So I heard this rhythm pattern and I thought, 'God, this would be great for this song,' so I asked [producer] Wesley Rose if I could use the tape loop on the drums. He said, 'I don't care.' So I hooked it up, fed it back into the console and got the balance, and then I switched it off on the verse and on during the bridge. I just did it manually with a switch. It's right in tempo and right in sync, so it gave the effect of two totally different drum sounds. That became the biggest record they ever had.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.