

“THE LAST DANCE”

I know that practically all of the old neighborhood people who read the Judson Journal remember the dances at St. Mary of the Eternal. The dance was not only known to those of us from North Philly, but was usually frequented by a multitude of kids from all over Philly. The “Crystal Ballroom” as it was known was a famous place from the late 40’s to the early 60’s. In the 2007 edition of the nostalgic calendars, (still available for \$6.50 each), there are priceless pictures giving us a glimpse of what it was like to be at those dances. I don’t recall why and exactly when we danced to the final spin of the 45 RPM of “Goodnight My Love”, but it left a tremendous void in the social life of the Neighborhood. Until one quiet Sunday morning I had the audacity to ask my Uncle Cosmo to intercede for me with Bill Festa, President of the local Sons of Italy on Toronto Street. To my surprise my wish was granted and I was given permission to have a dance at their hall.

Friday February circa 1960:

“Arona, you maeka sure you no a disgrace a me!

“Don’t worry Tsi Cos! I will make sure that everything is good!” Santo Minghenelli, who drove BG and me to the hall directly after our eighth period classes at Cardinal Dougherty, reassures my Uncle that everything will be okay. The three of us spend about an hour putting the finishing touches on the set up of the hall and the stage and return to our homes to get changed and plan to meet at the hall at 6pm. Walking home I could feel the excitement in the air, after all, this is a momentous occasion in the life of our teenage population in the neighborhood. Passing by Cats Club, I was tempted to stop in to shoot a short game of points, but I do not have the time. When I get in front of King Bedding I hear Yoc. I turn around and Yoc, Mike Piccione and Joe Grosso tell me that they will see me at 7pm for the big dance. At the corner of

Croskey and Indiana, Carol Costello, Alberta Spraga, Anita Saulino and Lucille “Olive Oil” DeSantis in their Hallahan uniforms relay to me that they can’t wait until 7pm. At the corner of J&I Petchy, Horn and Balloons ask me at what time will the chicks start arriving? I let them know, “7pm sharp!”

At 6pm Santo, BG and myself meet at the hall and it is a good thing, because, many of the musicians and singing groups that we invited from around the city are waiting outside. Joe Festa who is in charge of the daily operations for the Sons of Italy is at the door collecting fifty cents from each of us. I begin to spin the records about 6:45, because the hall is almost completely filled with teenagers. The first record is the Peppermint Twist. The record collection has been accumulated from all the kids in the neighborhood who gave them to me as they entered the hall. I have a terrific view from the stage and see Marylou, Gloria Ditano, Vi Crupi and Sheila Cutillo shaking to the twist. On the other side of the hall I see Umberto, Lavanga and No-Neck talking to Teddy DiGatano and his chick Gloria and Billy Ryan and his date Pat McGrath, all of them except Pat are from outside our neighborhood. “Can I please have your attention? The first performers of the night our Tony DeMichael, Brother Prozillo Vinnie Lyons and Joe Cordona a singing group from Germantown to sing their acappella version of “In The Still of the Night!” I take this opportunity to dance with my chick Pat Gallagher. The song ends and the applause is deafening. After a few more of their songs I spin about 30 more records non stop and introduce the next group that include Anson Kenny on the base and Albert Oriente on the piano, Ray Antonelli on alto sax and Petchy on the clarinet. The place is rocking and for a few fleeting moments I have thoughts that this will go on forever.

I look at my watch in my vest pocket and I am thrust back to reality, because there is only one hour left till 10pm. After their most impressive performance I quickly spin a few more fast songs to keep the party going. I disappear into the bathroom and change into my gold suit jacket without a lapel and tie my maroon ascot around my neck and within seconds Santo, Walt “Boom Boom” Cannon, Petchy, and BG are in the bathroom with me in similar outfits. I can hear Ray Antonelli introducing Joe Commentucci to play drums with their trio as Eddie One Ear, Ritchie Massamateo and Johnny Abel harmonize a few songs. The moment finally arrives when Ray asks Joe for a drum roll and Franky Sciarra introduces us. “Directly from the Village in Ardsley and The Venus Lounge, performing their new record “Hey Little Girl”, “Santo and The Sultans”! With a big round of applause we enter the hall from the bathroom and begin singing! What a night! Immediately after we sing we have an impromptu finale singing “Teardrops” by Lee Andrew and the Hearts with two negro boys Solemn Fuller, Ron Phillips and Ray Patterson from Tulpehocken Street who showed up with a few of their Negro friends from Cardinal Dougherty. This just made the goodnight song even harder to spin but it had to be!

That night so many years ago went off without a hitch and we carried on the singing at the Hot Shoppe parking lot until we were told to leave by the Cops around 1:30 am. At least that is what I thought until Sunday morning when I went to thank the men of the Sons of Italy. That’s when my high was reduced to a low. I was told that we could have more dances, but no more people from outside the neighborhood were allowed to attend the dance. It was never said, but I understood. We crossed the line with the black boys.