

A review of "The Constant Gardener" by John LeCarre, above, and other books. **F4 & F5**

# Arts & Books

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New CD reissues may help **Buffalo's masters of funk** gain the recognition they deserve



## lost soul

By **ELMER PLOETZ** / News Staff

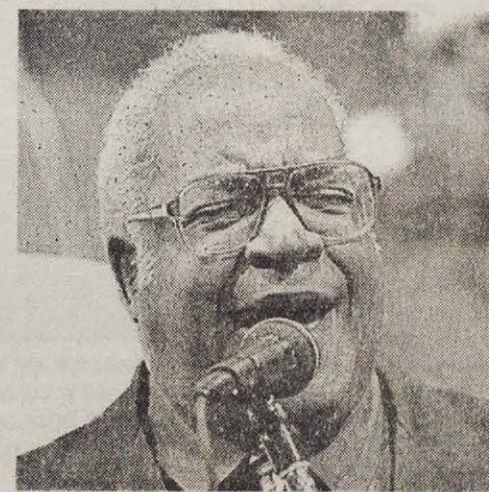
**D**onnie Elbert was one of the first soul rebels, fighting for control of his own music. Darrell Banks has what some people have called soul's finest voice. Frank Brunson had a voice that could overpower a Boeing 747. And Dyke & the Blazers made everybody's Broadway funky. They were all from Buffalo. They were all commercially successful enough to score multiple hits on the Billboard record charts. And none of them is in the Buffalo Music Hall of Fame.

You could call them Buffalo's lost soul, great singers and performers from an era before MTV, the Internet and the graphic violence of gangsta rap. The good news is that in the last few years they've all been the subject of CD reissues, which finally may help bring them some of the recognition they've been denied. Of course, for all but Brunson, that's a little late. Elbert, Banks and Arlester "Dyke" Christian are all dead. But they're all still remembered in Buffalo's black community and in the worldwide soul community. Of them all, Elbert's is probably the most intriguing, and certainly the strangest, career. He even provided

Banks with his biggest hit. Even if they've had a hit record, how many other guys from Buffalo can say they did it singing Diana Ross' part in a remake of a Supremes record? Or scored a "rocksteady" hit in Jamaica before most Americans had ever heard of reggae or ska? For all of that, Elbert's musical beginnings are cut straight from the '50s R&B prototype, right down to earning next to nothing for selling hundreds of thousands of records. He was born in Louisiana, but grew up on Buffalo's East Side on Sycamore Street. He began singing with the Vibraharp, a 1950s vocal harmony group, but never appeared on any of its records. Instead, a demo of one of his songs ended up in the hands of a scout for the legendary King Records, the company that recorded James Brown, the Dominoes and Hank Ballard's original version of "The Twist."

While "What Can I Do" was his biggest chart hit of a handful of singles he cut for King's Deluxe imprint, another one of his songs, "Have I Sinned," was the best, a simply stunning vocal record. The song, featuring Elbert's incredible falsetto, was a huge regional hit in Pittsburgh, where it was pushed by legendary DJ Porky Chedwick. "Donnie Elbert was maybe my No. 1 talent that I really believed in," Chedwick said recently in a phone interview. "Everything I ever heard of Donnie Elbert's, I played." Elbert played New York City's Apollo Theater and traveled the "Chitlin' Circuit" through the South. Little Joe Cook, a contemporary, recalls touring the South with Elbert, Screaming Jay Hawkins, Lee Dorsey and a host of others on a package tour. "We had to ride a 100 miles at a time because if we stopped, they wouldn't feed us," Cook said of the racial environment on the tour. "We had a white bus driver. He would go in and get us food." After Elbert's departure from King, his career began to turn strange. According to Canadian soul scholar Richard Pack, Elbert hit the skids at the company after his main "producer" left.

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ROBERT KIRKHAM/Bufallo News  
The 69-year-old Frank Brunson belts out a tune during Sunday services at St. John the Baptist Church.

## From funk to the choir

By **ELMER PLOETZ**  
News Staff Reviewer

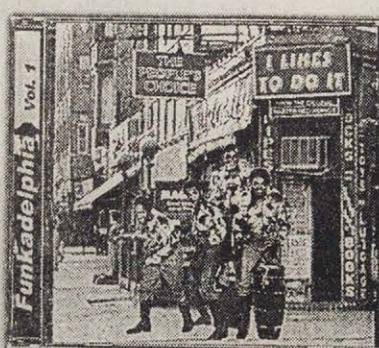
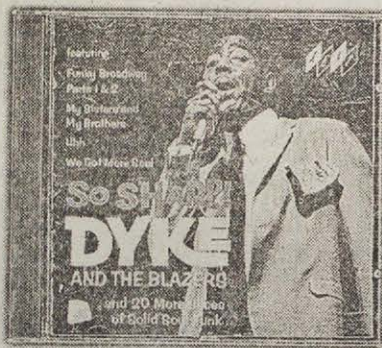
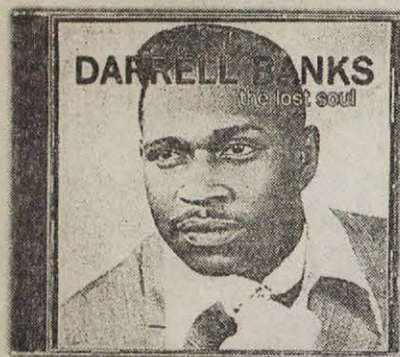
**F**rank Brunson walked into St. John the Baptist Church on a Saturday 10 years ago to ask about joining the choir at the Michigan Street church. "Can you sing?" Music Director Gregory Treadwell asked him. "A little," said the short, then 59-year-old man with graying hair. Before Brunson left that day Treadwell had asked him to sing on the next day - without even practicing with the choir. He hadn't known Brunson came with a history. Brunson may have started his career in the early days of rock 'n' roll as Little Frankie because of his stature, but he also picked up the nickname "Big Daddy" thanks to a voice more powerful than a locomotive, one that's still able to pile drive the congregation on Michigan Street. The son of a local preacher, Brunson graduated from Hutchinson High School before scoring a minor hit in the mid-'50s with a song called "Charmaine." He then signed with Jackie Wilson's manager and cut an album of classic R&B called "Big Daddy's Blues." One of his songs, "I Believe in You," was recorded by Jerry Lee Lewis in 1965 and became a standard part of the "Killer's" live show.

**"From the first time he sang here, he changed the structure of music here."** Gregory Treadwell, music director at St. John the Baptist Church

But his biggest commercial success came in the 1970s with his group, People's Choice, which put 10 funk and disco songs onto Billboard's R&B singles charts, the industry standard. The group's success came about after producer Bill Perry heard Brunson scatting over a funk groove with the touring lounge act. He dropped the singers and took the band into the studio in Philadelphia. They recooked it live on tape and . . . overnight a song called "I Likes to Do It" was rolling over the nation's R&B airwaves.

The band took the name People's Choice and put out three more singles on Phil-LA of Soul Records before joining producers Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff at Philadelphia International, where they scored a No. 1 soul hit with the disco-funk song "Do It Any Way You Wanna." The band broke up in 1984, when Brunson

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## The road to the hall of fame

**W**hile it might be easy to draw hasty conclusions on why soul stars Donnie Elbert, Darrell Banks, Dyke & the Blazers and Frank Brunson have never been inducted into the Buffalo Music Hall of Fame, some of the hall's organizers say the issue is far from simple. Three of the four artists named above are dead, which means some-

one else will have to plead their case for inclusion into the hall. And Brunson has kept an extremely low profile outside of his performances during services at St. John the Baptist Church. The hall, started in 1983, has changed the process and its criteria for inductions through the years. In the past five years, the hall has made progress toward diversity through ex-

panded selection committees and with the induction of artists such as Grover Washington Jr., Joe Madison, Count Rabbit and Lucky Peterson. In an effort to standardize the process, the hall is now seeking increased documentation - i.e., a press kit or bio. "Just something that explains what that individual did," said Rick Falkowski, who helped start the hall.

Nick Veltri, president of the hall, says there's a wealth of performers who haven't been inducted yet, mentioning Joe Guercio, Elvis Presley's long-time bandleader and a Buffalo native, as an example. And it wouldn't make sense to have all of the deserving candidates go in at once, diluting each individual's moment in the spotlight. "The process has to be fair and extremely even-handed," Veltri said. "But there is a process by which people are selected for nomination or confirmed to go into the hall of fame."

- Elmer Ploetz



# Soul: Elbert refused to play by the record companies' rules

Continued from Page F1

Elbert had been running his own show in the studio, and the next producer he was assigned didn't want to work that way. The relationship deteriorated until Elbert left. After that, he always did things his way — even if it meant missed opportunities.

Along the way he recorded for virtually every R&B independent record company — from Chess-Checker to a Vee Jay spinoff to Atlantic's Atco division but rarely signing for more than a record. At times, he even worked as a record promoter and in the mailroom at Cameo/Parkway when the company was selling millions of Chubby Checker records.

Along the way, Elbert became so infatuated with the then-new Motown sound he decided to emulate it.

Cook says that Elbert learned to do it all himself.

"He worked alone," Cook said. "What he used to do was head arrangements. He could play piano and guitar, and he would show guitar players what he wanted."

According to Pack, when Elbert recorded "A Little Piece of Leather," a perfect Motown sound-alike, he was invited to make a deal with Motown, but he turned it down after running into Harvey Fuqua, another veteran of the '50s R&B years. Fuqua told Elbert that Motown wanted to get him out of the way and would never support him.

Consequently, the record was released on the little Gateway label and stiffed. At least in the United States.

A division of Island Records

picked it up in Britain, and it became a huge dance floor hit in the United Kingdom's "northern soul" scene. That scene still exists today, and the record has been anthologized countless times as one of its greatest hits.

Encouraged by that success, Elbert moved to Britain in the mid-1960s.

But Elbert's eccentricities and suspiciousness were also serving to undercut his career. He was already recycling backing tracks and re-releasing or re-recording older songs to the point that trying to trace his career turns into an exercise in futility.

While in England, Elbert released "Without You," a "rock-steady beat" — or early reggae — song that wound up as a chart hit in Jamaica.

Eventually Elbert left Britain to return to the States, leaving behind his wife and two children.

## Banking on it

Elbert's involvement with Banks was also controversial.

Banks, another product of Buffalo's East Side, was working with Doc Murphy, a Buffalo dentist and music fan, in the mid-'60s when he ran into Elbert. Elbert offered to write a song for him, he told Pack, and came up with "Open the Door to Your Heart."

When Elbert went back on the road, Banks and Murphy recorded the song for Revilot Records, a Detroit company, and it took off — with Bank's name on the writing credit.

According to Jesse Butler, a Buffalo soul singer and friend of

Elbert's, "What happened was Darryl changed it a little bit on him from the way Donnie had it, speeded it up a little and whatever... But it was still his song, and Darryl put his name on it."

The song, Revilot's first release, went to No. 2 on the soul charts. It's recognized as a classic today, earning inclusion on Rhino Records' "Beg, Shout and Scream" definitive anthology of soul music and also earning legendary status in England's northern scene.

Elbert took the issue to BMI, the music publishing agency, and got co-writer credit on the song, but Banks got the hit, and recognition as one of soul music's finest voices.

Banks had one more minor hit in 1966 with "Somebody (Somewhere) Needs You," but never struck it big again, even though the bigger Atlantic Records picked up his contract and released some singles. He released a second album on Stax Records in 1969, the fall before he was killed in an altercation with an off-duty policeman in Detroit.

Banks' voice still evokes raves, though.

"Unlike so many Motor City singers, Banks had a gritty, raw approach to his vocals — miles away from the smooth tones of artists like Marvin Gaye," Ridley says.

## Playing hardball

Banks' career — and life — corresponded with Buffalonian Arlester "Dyke" Christian's, although Dyke had more commercial success.

The story of Dyke & the Blazers has been documented more thor-

oughly than those of the others, but they would be remembered for "Funky Broadway" if nothing else.

The song, which was rooted in Buffalo streets, was one of the cornerstones of early funk and kicked off a string of R&B hits for the band before Christian was shot and killed in a street altercation in Phoenix in 1971.

But as Banks' and Christian's lives were ending, Elbert's career was finally taking off with — what else — covers of Motown hits from a decade earlier. While his falsetto had thinned some since his younger days, he could still rise to take the lead on "Where Did Our Love Go," his biggest hit.

Working with the ultra-cheap All-Platinum label, though, he never really managed to build on the Top 20 pop hit (No. 15 pop, No. 15 R&B on Billboard's charts, to be specific). Since All-Platinum had signed him for only one album, he tried to jump to the even cheaper Avco Records but was unable to finish an album on the \$15,000 advance he received. Avco leased the demos to barely-more-than-bootleg Trip Records, which put it out.

He wound up with Avco and All-Platinum releasing singles barely a month apart, with both hitting the charts. But the momentum was lost.

According to Butler, Elbert was hurt because he refused to play the game by the companies' rules.

"Donnie was playing ball," Butler said. "He knew too much. He knew everything about everything, about the business, marketing, everything. It was hard for people to really beat him, so they wouldn't mess with him."

# Brunson: Recalling a proud moment

Continued from Page F1

had a minor heart blockage. He returned to Buffalo a few years later to make up for some lost time.

"You go out three, four weeks, come back two or three days, then go out again, that makes it hard to maintain a relationship," he said.

"I had lost track of my children

for a long time," he said. "They were here, but they had thought that I wasn't ready to be with them, which was wrong because I used to come back to try to find them. And I did find them."

And he's found a home at St. John the Baptist, where Treadwell still calls him "uncanny and unsurpassable!"

"From the very first time he sang here, he has changed the structure of the music here," Treadwell says. "His talent supercedes his height."

Brunson recently needed to have a pacemaker implanted and had to sit out from singing at St. John the Baptist.

## Finding Buffalo's soul

When it comes to CD reissues of great Buffalo soul artists, fans have a choice today. The big question is where to start.

Darrell Banks' *The Lost Soul* (Goldmine GSCD 109) is one place you can't go wrong. It contains almost everything Banks recorded, from his hits "Open the Door to Your Heart" and "Somebody, Somewhere (Needs You)" to killer versions of songs like "I Will Fear No Evil" and "I'm the One Who Loves You." Banks simply had a great voice that will make you wish he had recorded more. As far as talent went, there was probably no greater Buffalo soul singer.

There is also a British budget collection available (*The Best of, Connoisseur Collection VSOP CD 284*), but it doesn't have as many songs and will cost you just about the same.

Peoples Choice's "I Likes to Do It" (Jamie 4012) is a subjective pick over the group's "Golden Classics" (Collectables COL 5818) simply because it seems like a little more coherent set, capturing the moment

of some early '70s soul funk.

You will need to get the Collectables CD, with only a few of the group's chart hits, or a good Philly soul collection if you want the group's biggest hit, "Do It Any Way You Wanna."

Thanks to Frank Brunson's powerhouse roar of a voice the group was never really overwhelmed by Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff's smooth soul assembly line, so you can't go wrong with either disk.

Dyke & the Blazers' "So Sharp" (Kent CDKEND 004), like the Banks disk, contains virtually every worthwhile piece Arlester "Dyke" Christian and crew ever recorded. It's worth noting that after hitting with the original "Funky Broadway" (before Wilson Pickett made it an even bigger hit), Dyke recorded most of these with what are now legendary L.A. R&B sidemen like drummer James Gadson. The sound is so loose it seems almost sloppy, but that's really just an illusion created by an incredibly tight group of players. In terms of influ-

ence, this is probably the most essential of these CDs.

Donnie Elbert offers the most difficult choices. As writer John Ridley says, "(Elbert's) profile isn't as high as it should be these days, mainly as there hasn't been a proper retrospective of his career on CD. He cut for so many labels that getting it all together in one place would be impossible."

With that as a given, Elbert's "The Greatest Hits" (Collectables COL 5816) is a good place to start though. It captures the singer's early heyday on the King/Deluxe label with a few subsequent early '60s recordings. It's worth it just for the classic "Have I Sinned" alone.

Elbert's second commercially successful era is caught on "R&B Maverick" (Sequel NEDCD 288), a two-disk set that covers several labels. It even includes the proto-reggae "Without You" and obscure gems such as "Along Came Pride" alongside hits like "Where Did Our Love Go?" The set could easily have been reduced to one disk though.

More problematic is Elbert's middle period of the mid-1960s. While "The Roots of Donnie Elbert" (Ember EMBCD 3421) contains some of his best faux Motown songs ("Do Wha-Cha Wanna Do," "Your Red Wagon"), the sound is muddy and the 10-song selection is padded out with instrumental filler.

While both of the latter collections include one of Elbert's signature pieces, "A Little Piece of Leather," the definitive version is on the poorer CD, "Roots."

For the best CD version of the song listeners are probably better off searching out "Rhythm & Blues Beat 1964-69" (Island 314-524 394-2), a various artists collection, to hear the song as it was heard in UK clubs in the 1960s, and even today.

The Banks, Dyke & the Blazers and three of the four Elbert sets are all on English labels, but are relatively easy to order at specialty stores like New World Records or through the Internet.

— Elmer Plötz

Elbert eventually went back to All-Platinum and cut weaker and weaker material, even releasing a cover of the Bee Gees' "You Should Be Dancing" that wasn't necessarily bad — just pointless.

Details on Elbert's activities into the 1980s are sketchy, but he was reported to be working in

A&R for a Canadian company. He remarried and wound up living in the Philadelphia area, where he suffered a stroke Jan. 17, 1989.

Two weeks later he died in a Philadelphia hospital. He was buried in Buffalo.

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