

# The Velvets

**The Velvets:** This vocal group, formed in Odessa, Texas, in 1958, was led by vocalist Virgil Johnson, born December 29, 1935, in Cameron, Texas. Other members included Robert Thursby (first tenor), Clarence Rigsby (tenor), William Solomon (baritone), and Mark Prince (bass).

Virgil Johnson, an English teacher at Blackshear Junior High School in Odessa, had his initial singing experience as a member of the youth choir at New Hope Baptist Church in Lubbock. Since there was no black radio station in Lubbock when Johnson was growing up, he listened to such popular groups as The Drifters and The Clovers on the local drugstore's jukebox. While a student at Lubbock's Dunbar High School, Johnson sang with a local group before going on to Bishop College in Marshall, Texas, where he performed with The Dynatones.

After graduating from Bishop College, Johnson took a job at Blackshear Junior High School in Odessa. It was there that Johnson decided to form The Velvets after he heard students Prince and Rigby performing as a duo. Johnson recruited Thursby and Solomon, and the group soon began performing at school and community functions, entertaining both black and white audiences. Roy Orbison from nearby Wink, Texas, heard The Velvets on an Odessa radio station and brought them to the attention of Fred Foster at Monument Records. Foster agreed to pay for the group to travel to Nashville to record at RCA studios. The first session produced four sides, including Johnson's "Tonight (Could Be the Night)," which reached Number 26 on the *Billboard* pop charts and became one of the first recorded examples of the "doo wop" style. The Velvets released several other hit tunes, including two Orbison-penned songs that did well on the pop charts both in the United States and abroad. The group went on to record some thirty songs, although seventeen remained unreleased until they were included on the 1996 album "The Complete Velvets."

Despite the band's success, they faced a variety of challenges. Although The Velvets were very popular among white audiences, some black audiences did not think the group sounded "black" enough. It also was difficult for an African-American band to perform for all-white audiences in the racially segregated South of the 1960s. In addition, the fact that several of the members were still students made it difficult for them to be on the road for long periods. By 1966, the group had disbanded, and members went their separate ways. Johnson returned to Lubbock to work as a teacher at Dunbar High School until he retired in 1993. He is currently a DJ on radio station KDAV in Lubbock. Rigsby died in an automobile accident in California in 1978. Robert Thursby still performs music in Hawaii, although Prince and Solomon are no longer in the music business.