

Sunny and the Sunliners

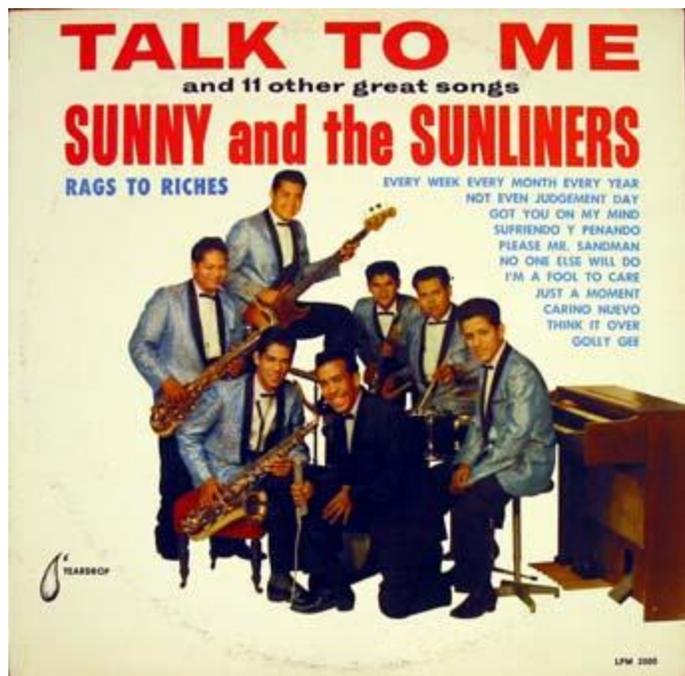
Sunny and the Sunliners: formed in 1963 by Sunny Ozuna, Sunny and the Sunliners produced several regional hits during the 1960s but is best remembered for its 1963 Number 11 *Billboard* hit “Talk to Me.” Sunny Ozuna, born Ildelfonso Fraga Ozuna in San Antonio, Texas, on September 8, 1943, was the third child in a family of eleven children. Ozuna’s father passed away early on, so, Sunny was raised by his mother, Isabel Fraga, and step-father, Juan Rodríguez. Like many Mexican Americans growing up in the *barrios* during the 1940s, Ozuna lived a life of poverty. As he once described his early life, “We had the john out in the backyard, and we used a Sears and Roebuck catalogue for toilet paper.”

While attending San Antonio’s Burbank High School in 1958, Ozuna and a friend, Rudy Guerra, formed the band Sunny and the Sunlows, which consisted of two Mexican Americans, two Anglo Americans, and one African American. The five teenagers, Norwood Perry (bass), Al Condy (guitar), George Strickland (drums), Rudy Guerra (saxophone), and Sunny Ozuna (vocals), preferred such popular musical styles as doo-woop, soul, and rock and roll, rather than the more traditional Mexican folk music Ozuna had been exposed to as a child.

Much like many other American youngsters in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Sunny and the Sunlows idolized such rock and roll musicians as Bill Haley, Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Ritchie Valens, Little Richard, Fats Domino, and the Beatles. In an effort to fit more readily into the pop music mainstream, Sunny and the Sunlows sang mostly in English and performed at school talent shows, carnivals, and military bases around San Antonio, including Lackland Airforce Base. Occasionally, they played as far away as Houston.

In 1959, Sunny and the Sunlows released their first local hit entitled, “Just a Moment.” Although the band members loved rock and roll, they still were influenced by such Texas-Mexican musicians as Isidro López, and they did record some Spanish-language tunes, including “Pa, Todo El Año.” Early in the summer of 1963, Sunny and the Sunlows recorded “Talk to Me,” their biggest regional hit up to that point. However, within a few months, Ozuna had left the Sunlows and formed a new group known as Sunny and the Sunliners. In the meantime, “Talk to Me” had become a national hit, eventually reaching Number 11 on the *Billboard* charts and selling nearly 250,000 records.

The record’s success earned Sunny and the Sunliners an appearance on Dick Clark’s popular television show, *American Bandstand*, in 1963. Ozuna went on to record several other songs, including “Rags to Riches,” “Out of Sight, Out of Mind,” and “Peanuts,” but he could not maintain the level of national success he had achieved with “Talk to Me.” Nevertheless, Ozuna



went on to have a very successful career in the Spanish-language market and won a Grammy in 2000 for his work with Augustin Ramírez, Carlos Guzmán, and Freddie Martínez, Jr., in a group known as The Legends.

Ray Cano, Jr.