

# From Rockaway to Rock 'N' Roll Fame

Kenny Vance gives Doo-Wop pioneers their props

By Daniel Offner

Kenny Vance lived in Belle Harbor for nearly four decades until Hurricane Sandy tore through his home in 2012, destroying nearly everything except for a box of DVDs containing interview footage he recorded with legendary doo-wop and R&B artist.

"I came back to what was left of my house," he said. "There were remnants of my bathroom and my kitchen." Directly above the kitchen was the floor to his office. "I wound up borrowing a ladder and went up through the floor of the room, which had no walls or ceiling," he recalled.

It was there, tucked away inside of a desk that was built into the wall of his house, where he found the box.

"You could let an episode like that destroy you," he said, "or you could just say, 'Okay, you know, maybe the reason this footage is here is to make a movie out of it.'"

The recovered footage would lay the foundation for his 2021 documentary filmmaking debut, "Heart & Soul: A Love Story," which explores the roots of early rock and roll through firsthand accounts from Black and Latino artists who shaped music and youth culture in the 1950s and '60s.

More than a decade in the making, the film was a deeply personal experience for Vance, who grew up enamored by the early rock and roll music that disc jockeys like Alan Freed helped make famous.

"It was a different world," Vance said, recalling how he used to take the green bus to the Brooklyn Paramount, at the corner of Flatbush and Nostrand Avenues. "You felt like you were on the total pulse," he added, recalling how he used to hang out with Jackie Wilson and Frankie Lymon.

Vance spent his formative years hanging out around the Brill Build-

ing, which was considered the epicenter of the music industry at the time. He formed his first vocal group, the Harbor Lites, when he was 25.

The group went from imitating songs they heard on the radio to practicing a cappella in school bathrooms and on street corners, before landing their first big break on WINS thanks to legendary radio personality Cousin Brucie.

As one of the co-founding members of the iconic rock group Jay and the Americans, Vance had the opportunity to open for both The Beatles and The Rolling Stones during their first U.S. performances.

He also worked closely with Walter Becker and Donald Fagen — the songwriting duo behind Steely Dan — before the release of their critically acclaimed debut, *Can't Buy a Thrill*, in 1972.

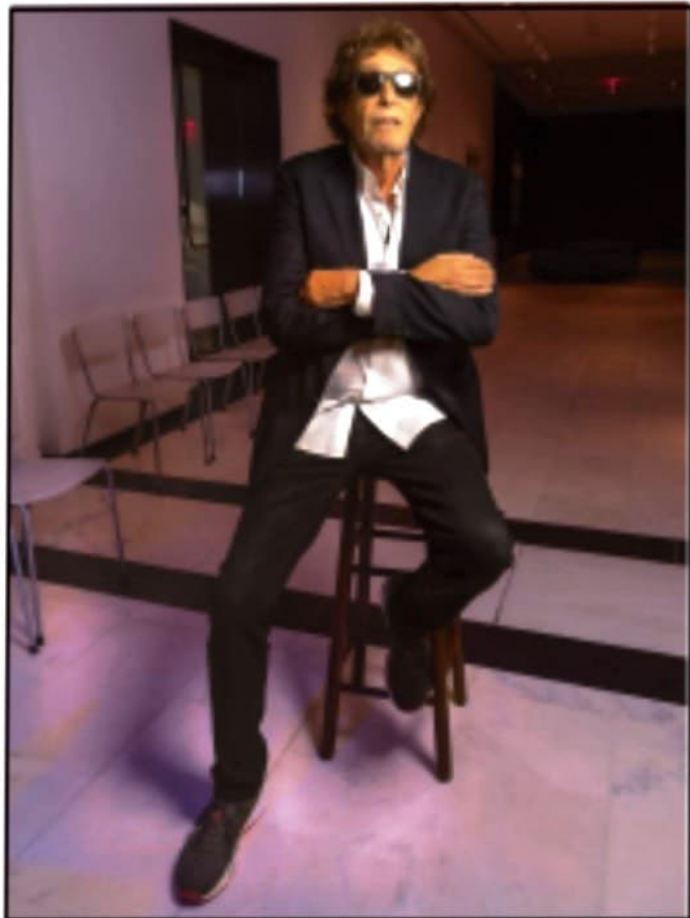
Jay and the Americans went on to release eight studio albums, including such chart-topping hits as "Come a Little Bit Closer," "This Magic Moment," and "She Cried," before officially breaking up in 1975.

Vance would later do session work, producing albums for Toni Basil, Danny O'Keefe and actress Diane Keaton. In 1975, he released his first solo album, "Vance 302," on Atlantic Records.

He later served a brief stint as music director for "Saturday Night Live," and worked as the music supervisor on a number of films including "Animal House," "Hair-spray," "Eddie and the Cruisers," and "The Warriors."

"I never realized the impact that movie had," Vance said, reflecting on the 1979 film about a street gang from Coney Island trying to make it back home from the Bronx.

Unfortunately, he said, two people were shot during the opening weekend of the movie, which prompted



Kenny Vance, 81, attends the July 10 screening of his documentary film, "Heart and Soul: A Love Story," at the Museum of the City of New York.

Paramount to pull the movie from certain theaters.

"But over all these years it became a cult classic and it's bigger now than ever before," Vance said.

Vance, now 81, was inducted into the Vocal Group Hall of Fame in Sharon, Pennsylvania, in 2000, and was later inducted into the Long Island Music Hall of Fame in 2005.

He continues to perform with his group, The Phantoms — a doo-wop revival act that he originally introduced in the 1978 film "American Hot Wax."

Recovering the footage sparked a decade-long journey through hours of personal interviews featuring members of The Chantels, The Heartbeats, The Flamingos, The Dubs, Little Anthony and the Imperials, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, The Five Five, The Monogones and others who helped shape rock music.

"Sitting there, talking to them, we were buddies," Vance said. "We were on a similar trip — all of us. We would go on buses together and we would go to each other's homes, so when I interviewed them, it was more like having a conversation with them and you can feel that warmth. There really is no separation. There is a brotherhood and a

brooding between all of us."

The documentary has really resonated with audiences. "Heart & Soul" premiered at the Grammy Museum in June 2021 as part of its Black Music Month program. It later won the Erasmus "Mazzy" Berlings Award for best feature-length documentary at the Garden State Film Festival.

Featured screenings of the film have been hosted by the Smithsonian Institution, and most recently at the Museum of the City of New York on July 10, which was followed by an audience Q&A and a live musical performance by Kenny Vance and the Phantoms.

"There's not one word in the movie that isn't true," Vance reiterated.

Although he no longer calls Rockaway home, he said there is something magical about living "where the sky meets the sand meets the ocean."

"There's something special about it," he said. "You don't realize it until you cross the Marine Parkway or Cross Bay Bridge — it has its own beautiful smell. It stimulates you and captures your imagination."

To learn more about Kenny Vance and any upcoming events or screenings of the film, visit [HeartAndSoulTheMovie.com](http://HeartAndSoulTheMovie.com).



Following the screening, attendees were invited to join Kenny Vance and the Phantoms for a special performance in the museum's grand entrance. During the performance, he was joined by Renee Minus White of The Chantels.

Photos by Ingrid Johnson