

# The Big Name Buttons

*by* Mandee Wright

The group? Well, I certainly don't mind divulging a few petty nuggets of truth.

Pay attention: our names were Bobby, Didi, Joanie, Mitch and Sam. It was popular in those days to wear big name buttons across your chest, and we'd line up side-by-side as we watched our reflections affix said buttons, anchoring them to our stiff lapels to keep them upright. A sixth member came and went—a part-timer, if you will—but he never got in on the button-trend. Remembering the guy's name was difficult since our brains were out of practice. At times, it seemed his sole duty was to wipe at our foreheads with a balled-up rag, then proceed to wring out all our sweat. He sang, sure—we all sang when it came down to it—when we needed to get by. But really, wasn't the point to keep all those words inside for that special someone?

Among all of us, Didi sang the most, and boy when she sang it was like you were being rattled to dust. Her voice got into every pore, every cell, and just expanded until you were tight within yourself. Sometimes when she sang, she liked to bump her knees together in some kind of clunky rhythm. I liked to watch her knees when she did that sorry little dance. We all liked to watch—Bobby, Mitch, Sam and even Joanie and the no-name guy.

At night, all we did was play our songs—we'd play on, Didi shuffling her feet along the carpet—we'd play, not stopping, until she was able to touch the metal door frame and grit her teeth from the electric shock.

Just as we had most of our routines down pat, a couple of our most gee-whiz songs showed up some charts; ganged up with others into some kind of revue, I guess—a compilation. A fellow, a small man

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with showboating features, ran the show. He gathered us close to him and made us feel like what we were doing was of some kind of importance. After that, he took us to the recording studio and made us sing, one by one, while facing the corner. He tilted my head up until my nose brushed against the pebbly whitewash and urged me to sing louder. We were paid in an unlimited amount of bubble gum and the man didn't seem afraid to nickel and dime us here and there for new cummerbunds and what not.

Our sound wasn't anything anyone hadn't heard before—a few rabble-rousing guitars, a pedestrian off-beat drum, our voices strained into a dissonant falsetto. Perhaps it was our choreographed routines that drew people to us. We all liked to do high kicks in our matching saddle shoes and throw our instruments to each other during the bridge. Mitch would keep on pounding his drum while we did this—tossing around guitars and clarinets and tambourines—and a spotlight was blazed upon his reddened face as if he were some kind of ringmaster. I think what the audiences truly appreciated, however, were our big name buttons. When we wore them, the audience could clearly make out our identities from far back in the room. To those spectators we became The Big Name Buttons. The name was cutesy and catchy and resonated with people.

The first few smash hits made us feel pretty darn special. Due to our sudden popularity, we appeared on some after school specials, bip-bopping around in our matching outfits and big name buttons. I expected to get some fans of the female persuasion, but the queerest thing happened—it was Didi and Joanie who had the admirers! After that, all the teeny boppers started curling their hair into one big S-shaped coiffure, a style Didi had become known for donning. Girls with cardigans draped lazily around their shoulders started haunting us everywhere we went, snuffing out their squeals of delight with the palms of their hands.

Because of the overnight success and the hair-pulling fans, Joanie and Didi understandably got all preeny over themselves and suddenly it felt like we should all be a bit more possessive about each other. I decided, since I had to decide, that I admired Didi the most, but then so did Mitch and Sam. There was nothing wrong with Joanie, mind you—she was a nice tomato, to use the term of the day—but Didi had that voice. The arrangement—me, Didi, Mitch and Sam—would have never worked out, so we agreed to go forth as separate entities—separate, but together since we still had to sing together. Still, however, Didi caught my eye in her twirling skirt and her knocking knees. I held my tongue and stayed put.

Then, the man who'd arranged us—the producer—had us return to the recording studio and again, the whole singing-in-the-corner-thing ensued. Didi's voice was especially harrowing that go-around. The queerest thing happened again, though! When those songs were played aloud to a group of studio shareholders, the whole lot of them got all glum. Not a one of them wanted the songs played on the jukebox if the fans were going to get depressed. We couldn't figure out why, exactly, the reaction was what it was—but in the end we decided it was Didi's voice. She sounded considerably sadder than before. We kept the songs from the public until we could figure it all out.

We asked Didi why she was so sad, and she couldn't figure it out, either. She admitted that she had been feeling a bit blue, but she hadn't realized the full scope of her sadness until she had heard her own lonely, pleading voice. She reckoned that she'd been eating too many persimmons. The persimmons, according to her, had always been a source of lifelong sadness. The producer urged her to get a tan instead, insisting that anyone with a healthy glow couldn't possibly be the slightest bit melancholy.

Didi went to the beach with Joanie, and they both came back with matching tans.

“Is it better?” we asked her. She looked at the ceiling and gauged her emotions. The whites of her eyes looked especially white in contrast to her honey-colored skin.

“Not terribly,” she said.

Meanwhile, things were looking to be going to the dogs. We hadn't released a smash hit in a while, and the commons—especially the shouting scores of teen girls—were getting riled up and impatient.

The local news ran a segment on a particularly upset young lady from just West of town where the roads suddenly started running diagonally instead of just straight up and down. The camera focused in on her blemished face as she clutched a few of our records to her pubescent bosom.

“If The Big Name Buttons don't release a smash hit soon,” she warbled, “I will positively die.” She actually sounded quite serious, as if she'd been diagnosed with such a disorder from a schooled doctor. I got the band back together so we could further investigate Didi's melancholia.

We were all stumped. Out of options, we looked to the persimmons as the cause of all our troubles. Didi loved those things and their little green hats. She always waited until they were wrinkled and fragile before she ate them, though. I thought they smelled like garbage, personally, but she got understandably a little upset when I tried to pry one from her hand. “Why so persistent?” I asked, in a soothing, medicinal voice.

“I just like them,” she insisted. “I know they're no good—I know I am lowering myself to their level by keeping them around all the time.”

We all read between the lines a little bit on that one; especially Mitch, Sam and myself, since we all had a particular fondness for

Didi. Mitch and I got a little shouty and defensive and started prying for more details. “Are you talking about us or the persimmons?” Mitch demanded. I huffed and made a few brutish noises. Sam had become kind of a beatnik over the past few weeks and he was above getting overly emotional. He waved his hand as if nothing else mattered.

“Hey; stay cool, daddy-o,” he said to Mitch.

Didi blinked and swayed and tried to stay standing on her knocked-knees. “No,” she gasped. “Just the persimmons—not the group, not you at all.” She defiantly palmed a persimmon up to her face and sunk her teeth in, a rogue spritz of juice making its way on the lenses of my glasses. She looked at the thing after she took a bite and went cross-eyed. “Purse-immon,” she whispered.

Mitch, Sam, Joanie, the no-name guy and myself shared a glance of concern.

“Try singing,” I suggested.

We brought in the producer before Didi sang. She bunched up her skirt around her knees, got to swinging them in her usual fashion, and let loose an echoey progression of aye-aye's and whoops. The sounds were maddening—primal, somehow. We thought for sure the music was too strange to be sad.

“Still sad,” Joanie said, frowning and looking down at her saddle shoes.

We looked to the producer to make the final judgment.

“Not too sad,” he disagreed.

Not convinced, he decided to make us perform in another one of his famous revues. The teenagers would wait no longer, it seemed. They'd rather be sad than not have smash hits, the producer insisted. Right before we were to go on stage, we stood in stony silence as Didi twirled in a circle. She shuffled her feet on the carpet, working up a charge and knocking her knees all the while. We figured it would be a good omen—an homage to the good old days.

She stuck her finger to my forearm and sent a jolt up my skin. It was a blessing of sorts, I guess.

"Let's be good out there," she said, suddenly brightening.

It gave us some momentary hope that maybe things were about to turn around!

When we paraded out to the stage, the teens erupted into hoots and hollers. The girls in their coiffures screamed until their faces looked like wrinkled persimmons. When Didi stood on stage, mere feet from where they shrieked and screeched, they reached out to try and grab at her saddle shoes.

Didi poised a tambourine by her face and spoke into the microphone. "Hello, we're The Big Name Buttons," she said. Her voice sounded light and confident. We were going to make it!

When we erupted into our jangly chords, the screams intensified. Before she sang, Didi shook her tambourine and tossed it to me like a bride heaving her bouquet to a crowd of eager bridesmaids. We started bip-bopping. I hit the tambourine against my thigh and gurgled some yeah-yeahs into the microphone.

However, when Didi sang, we knew we were in for it. Her voice was unmistakably sad. Sadder than sad. She was unaware, however, and

continued bleating away. The teens looked around at each other, confused and stunned. Eventually, to our shock and awe, the teens started crying! Rubbing fists against their mascared eyelids and wiping their noses on their cardigans!

We were done for, surely.

The end went like this:

The producer issued refunds.

The local news ran another segment on the same pubescent girl who'd threatened death. She'd died, it seemed. The public was outraged.

There was a press conference. Didi leaned against a podium, a score of microphones obscuring her face. "This is the last of it," she told a stern-faced audience. She began unpinning her big name button then let it clang to the pavement.

Without her big name button, she seemed hardly there. I couldn't remember the sound of her voice. Her knocking knees seemed like something we'd imagined.

After that—we kept our eyes open; afraid to blink, afraid to sing.

