

# “Earth Angel (Will You Be Mine)”—The Penguins (1954)

Added to the National Registry: 2004  
Essay by Lawrence Pitilli (guest post)\*



*The Penguins*



*Original 45 label*

At first, it might be the appeal of the lead singer’s voice accompanied by three back up vocalists singing baritone, second tenor, and first tenor parts. You then might be enticed to listen more closely to a pianist rolling out triplicate chords in the right hand and bass patterns in the left. And somewhere in the faintest of distances you just might hear a brushed snare drum that prompts you to tap your foot to a steady backbeat. We’re talking recording minimalism here as we listen to the Penguins singing their one and only 1954 doo-wop hit song, “Earth Angel.”

Yes, it was a hit and remains indelibly etched into the American musical consciousness...but how? The four-chord structure is literally identical with the chord structure of thousands of other doo-wop ballads recorded in a 15 to 20-year period. The prerequisite flow of harmonies is more than pleasant to the ear but so are those of the other thousand-plus songs of the same genre. The song was also recorded in a garage in South Central Los Angeles--not exactly the doo-wop hub of America as were the boroughs of New York City and a couple of New Jersey towns situated over the state line. In fact, the song’s origins in terms of authorship are questionable, replete with many a legal battle in the years following its release. There were also other subsequent versions by the Crew-Cuts, Tiny Tim, and Johnny Tillotson. But how did this song, particularly the Penguins’ version, reach such legendary status? One does wonder.

Perhaps taking a closer look we might fathom how this, can we say “miracle,” happened? Let’s begin with that ubiquitous chord progression which, incidentally, is arranged in the key of A flat. When one thinks of a garage as a recording studio and the “session musicians” as a pianist and some snare drum player, we might assume the simpler key to record in would be C or G. Yet, someone, perhaps the producer Dootsie Williams, took the time to find this very specific key to accommodate the vocal range of lead singer, Cleveland Duncan. The vocal harmonies have a weave and flow very reminiscent of the Mills Brothers and the Ink Spots, not too shabby in terms of harmonic role models. And speaking of the piano arrangement, the rhythm of the song is held together with the bass patterns of the pianist’s left-hand accompaniment. Yes, there was a definite thought process directing the creative energies in that garage. One may counter by stating that those other hit songs of the genre, including their B-sides, had a similar thought process in their production. Okay then perhaps what might have catapulted the recording into the hit song limelight was the vocal group’s name. From the late 1940s to the early 60s there was a proliferation of vocal groups named after birds such as the Ravens, the Orioles, the Flamingos, the Wrens, and the Penguins, amongst others. Being part of a specifically referenced collective may have given the group a promotional status otherwise not implemented or achieved.

Then again, those other “bird” groups had successful records so we’re still left with the big “why” as to the renown bestowed upon “Earth Angel.” So maybe, just maybe, we’re talking about the song capturing the zeitgeist of the early 1950s or, even more specifically, 1954. In fact, we just might conjecture that “Earth Angel” didn’t so much as define 1954 but rather the events of 1954 defined the song. Consider the following: the fairy tale wedding of Marilyn Monroe and baseball great Joe Di Maggio took place in 1954. No offense to Mr. DiMaggio but the one in the desired position atop the pedestal wasn’t Joe. So, think... *“Earth Angel...will you be mine...love you forever...I’m just a fool, a fool in love with you.”* If any guy back in ’54 couldn’t have Marilyn, then maybe the girl next door was a more realistic choice...and what a great line for a wedding proposal!

The year 1954 also saw the words “under God” added to the Pledge of Allegiance. Now, we could place a pretty safe bet that the writers of “Earth Angel” weren’t conspiratorial with anyone in government when they titled the song with a clear reference to a Creator and inhabitants of the heavenly realm. It suffices to say that, at the very least, it is an interesting, if not meaningful, coincidence. And speaking of earthly angels--desired earthly angels--they have been a part of American popular culture in the form of beauty contests and pageantry for many previous decades. And so, coincidentally, it was the 1954 Miss America Pageant that was broadcast on television for the first time, in all its visual splendor in homes, across the nation. Again...think... *“I fell for you, and I knew, the vision of your love’s loveliness / I hope and pray, I’ll be the vision...of your happiness.”* What an opportunity of hope for hopeless romantics!

Maybe, at the end of the day, this connecting of the dots can be applied to any song and a combination of yearly events--a sort of doo-wop six degrees of separation. Let’s face it, the Penguins were a good group but not a great group. There wasn’t a formidable lead singer as in Little Anthony, Johnny Maestro, or Bill Kenny. And the vocal harmonies? Yes, on point, but not exactly the Flamingos. And minimalism in the arts is certainly to be respected but a piano and a snare drum? The orchestral arrangements and polished production of some of the Drifters’ hit songs alone obscures any notion of instrumental simplicity being heralded as esteemed aesthetics. Well then, perhaps timing is everything and along with the aforementioned events of 1954, this was still post World War II America in need of healing. So what better way to heal than with music, especially when the song is titled “Earth Angel”? It is said that music is the bridge between heaven and earth and here we have that lyrical bridge in the form of two specific words--earth and angel. In the final analysis, maybe we really don’t need to search for the why and the where-for of any song’s commercial or artistic prowess and longevity. So why don’t we all just sing along with the Penguins... *“Earth Angel, Earth Angel, will you be mine”*... and hope and dream while we’re at it.

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