

FADE IN:

EXT. SOUTH CENTRAL LOS ANGELES - DAY

SUPER: SUMMER 1941

An L.A.C.C. Camp bus makes its way through this black residential neighborhood.

INT. BUS

Inside, the KIDS are as chatty as any group but these mostly black boys and girls are from the Los Angeles Crippled Childrens' Camp. Crutches, leg braces and wheelchairs abound.

Black six-year-old RICHARD BERRY, JR. grabs his crutches as the bus stops outside his home on West 54th Street. His mom BERTHA eagerly waits for him.

EXT. BUS - CONTINUOUS

Bertha gives Richard a serious hug. He's not too old to appreciate it. As the bus pulls away:

CAMP COUNSELOR

See you next summer, Richard!

INT. BERRY HOME - KITCHEN - LATER

Modestly furnished but well-kept, Richard'S mom serves him a glass of milk and a couple of cookies.

RICHARD

Isn't it too close to dinner?

BERTHA

Today is different. You know that surgery we've been waiting on?

Richard pauses mid-cookie.

RICHARD

Yeah. My hip's gonna get fixed?

BERTHA

You guessed it. Isn't that great?

RICHARD

Wow. When?

BERTHA

Before school starts. The doctor says you won't need those crutches anymore. Ever.

Richard's smile is exactly what she wants to see.

BERTHA (CONT'D)

And that's not the only surprise.

She opens a cabinet door and removes a gift-wrapped box.

RICHARD

Is that for me?

BERTHA

(good-naturedly)

I don't see anyone else here, do you?

He promptly tears off the gift wrap revealing a plastic ukulele. Taking it in his hands, he correctly tunes it by ear and immediately picks out "We're Off to See The Wizard."

BERTHA (CONT'D)

How do you do that?

RICHARD

I just hear when it sounds right.

She can only marvel at her son's innate musical talent.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THOMAS JEFFERSON HIGH SCHOOL - SOUTH CENTRAL - DAY

SUPER: 1952

Bell rings and KIDS leave their classrooms. Among the mostly black student body is teen-aged Richard Berry, stylish and sporting a pompadour. The crutches are long gone but he still has a slight hitch in his gait. He's quickly met by classmates and fellow doo-wop singers the DEBONAIRES.

DEBONAIRES #1

We still rehearsing later?

With no prodding, Richard launches into the Dominoes' recent track, "Sixty Minute Man." The other guys join in. After only a few bars, kids gather round and applaud. Guys bow.

RICHARD

Depends how long our meeting with the Biharis goes. I've gotta check out this singer in our a cappella group, Darlene Wright.

DEBONAIRES #2

Check out or *check out*?

Richard laughs.

RICHARD

Strictly professional.
(MORE)

RICHARD (CONT'D)

But she is the whole package. Did Bihari say anything about a name change?

DEBONAIRES #3

Again?

DEBONAIRES #2

What's wrong with the Debonaires?

INT. JEFFERSON HIGH SCHOOL AUDITORIUM - BACKSTAGE - LATER

DARLENE WRIGHT is amazed Richard wants to talk.

DARLENE

Richard, I have to tell you. I have all your records.

RICHARD

Thanks. But do you listen to them?

Darlene laughs.

DARLENE

Oh, yeah.

RICHARD

You sounded great out there. I've got some good news and some bad news. The good news is I'll try to get you some session work.

She's stunned.

DARLENE

And the bad news?

RICHARD

It'll probably be for the Biharis.

INT. MODERN RECORDS OFFICES - CONFERENCE ROOM - LOS ANGELES

SUPER: 1955

Richard and his fellow Debonaires meet with owners the BIHARI BROTHERS, LESTER, JULES, SAUL AND JOE. The brothers enjoy bottles of Coke while the guys get paper cups of water.

SAUL

We're launching a new label, Flair Records.

LESTER

From now on, you boys are the Flairs.

RICHARD

What about our Debonaires fans? That's the seventh name change this year.

JOE

Eight if you count Flairs. Look, they didn't notice the change from when you were the Flamingoes. Trust me, they sure as Hell won't know this one either.

RICHARD

They'll recognize our voices.

JULES

Unlikely. Male doo-wop voices all sound the same, boychik. We want to keep things fresh.

DEBONAIRES #1

What about song writing credits?

SAUL

We'll share. Like always.

RICHARD

But I wrote those songs myself. Arranged most of 'em.

JOE

Our house. Our rules. You're always welcome to go elsewhere.

RICHARD

So you've told us.

EXT. MODERN RECORDS OFFICES - LATE AFTERNOON

The guys wait for the Red Car.

DEBONAIRES #2

Is there anything they're not cheating us on? They're building that new Culver City studio on your back.

RICHARD

At least we have our gigs. That money is all ours. We're clearing more money than our parents.

FELLOW DEVONAIRES

Damn right. Hell, yeah.

Modern Records music director and Richard's mentor, MAX DAVIS, pulls up in his new roadster.

RICHARD

Damn, Max, what is *this*?

DAVIS

A Nash-Healey. First U.S. sports car since the war ended. Hop in.

RICHARD

Guys, I'll see ya later. Is it fast?

INT. NASH-HEALEY

Max takes off, pinning Richard back in his seat.

EXT. RICHARD'S HOME - LATER

When they finally come to a stop:

DAVIS

Was that fast enough for you?

Richard nods as R&B plays on the radio.

DAVIS (CONT'D)

You know who also owns one of these?

Richard doesn't.

DAVIS (CONT'D)

George Reeves. Even used it on TV.

RICHARD

It must be cool if Superman has one.

DAVIS

I have to tell you again. You did great work on "Riot in Cell Block #9." Just don't let the Biharis catch you violating your contract. They have lawyers. Lots of them.

RICHARD

That's why I made sure I wasn't credited. I know the rest of the Robins didn't mind but is Bobby Nunn still pissed at me for singing his bass parts?

DAVIS

He'll get over it. What matters is Lieber and Stoller loved your work on "She Wants To Rock" and knew your voice was a more menacing, better fit for "Riot." If it wasn't for lousy distribution, it could have gone national. That's just between us.

RICHARD

I know you're tired of hearing it Max, but I gotta thank you for taking me under your wing. I'd never have gotten this far without you.

DAVIS

You've got the goods, Richard. And the doo-wop cred. It's just getting the right people to discover that. Kick things up a notch or two.

RICHARD

Or ten. Thanks, Max. I've been thinking more and more that the Biharis aren't exactly the "right people." We're releasing songs every two months. That doesn't even include the tracks we've done as the Chimes, the Rams, the Howlers or the Five Hearts.

INT. CENTRAL AVE CLUB - NIGHT

Richard and the newly-named Flairs have everybody up and dancing with a cover of Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti."

INT. JOHNNY OTIS' BARRELHOUSE CLUB - ANOTHER NIGHT

Richard's got the crowd right where he wants them.

RICHARD

This one goes out to someone who didn't always get the credit he deserved - the late, great Jesse Belvin.

WOMEN swoon when Richard launches into "Earth Angel."

BACKSTAGE - LATER THAT NIGHT

The PROMOTER counts out tens to each of the Flairs.

FLAIRS #1

You coming to graduation tomorrow?

RICHARD

Only because my mom'll kill me if I don't.

INT. SOUTH CENTRAL HOUSE - GRADUATION NIGHT

Graduation party is in full swing. Richard heads out when:

FLAIRS #1

Hey man, you leaving already? Things are just getting started.

(MORE)

FLAIRS #1 (CONT'D)
 (checking out the
 women)
 And hot.

RICHARD
 I'm working with Etta tonight on her
 new single.

Flairs #2 whistles. Richard laughs, shaking his head.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
 It's all professional with her. I'm
 with Dorothy Adams, remember?

FLAIRS #1
 Any title yet?

RICHARD
 The "safe" version for white radio
 is "The Wallflower." For the rest of
 us, it's "Roll With Me, Henry."

They both share a knowing laugh over that.

INT. MODERN RECORDS STUDIOS - NIGHT

Richard and ETTA JAMES listen to the playback of the last
 few bars of "Roll With Me, Henry."

ETTA
 Richard, I love your arrangement.
 It's perfect. With that voice, there's
 nothing you can't sing.

Richard humbly accepts her compliments.

RICHARD
 We'll have to do this again real
 soon.

ETTA
 Oh, we will. And promise me you'll
 think about stepping out on your
 own.

Richard likes the sound of that but he's unsure.

ETTA (CONT'D)
 I know, I know. Being out front is
 scary. Frightening even. But you've
 got the voice, the looks and the
 swagger.

Richard knows she's right, but he's not ready; at least not
 yet. He does enjoy her flirting though.

EXT. LOCAL PARK - DAY

Richard and girlfriend DOROTHY ADAMS enjoy a summer day.

DOROTHY

Etta's right. It's time to make that move. Especially if we're going to get married. Why not get the lion's share instead of splitting it?

RICHARD

I *have* been thinking about it. A lot.

DOROTHY

Then do it. Your deal with Modern is up soon. Max Feirtag at Flip records won't stay interested forever.

RICHARD

I don't want to disappoint the guys, leaving them like that.

DOROTHY

I sure hope you're talking about the guys you sing *with* and not the guys you sing *for*. Baby, it's show *business*. Time to take care of your own. Ain't nothing lasts forever.

INT. FLIP RECORDS - DAY

Richard shakes hands with company owner MAX FEIRTAG in his postage stamp-sized office.

FEIRTAG

You being involved in over half of Modern's releases, I want us to build on that and make our own hits.

RICHARD

Absolutely. Working with the Pharaohs is a great start.

FEIRTAG

You guys knew each other in high school, right?

RICHARD

Almost. They were just starting at Jefferson when I was finishing.

FEIRTAG

What about Ricky Rillera and the Rhythm Rockers? You know them, too?

RICHARD

Mutual friends. They're a great band.

FEIRTAG

I don't envy your drive to Anaheim.

RICHARD

With the new Santa Ana freeway, it's a whole lot better than it used to be. Those thirty-eight miles will fly by, especially on a Sunday night. Besides, singing with them is worth it. A gig is a gig, right?

EXT. HARMONY PARK BALLROOM - ANAHEIM - NIGHT

The parking lot is packed outside this barn-like structure. Hundreds of PEOPLE are eager to get inside and with music filtering from the venue, some dance while waiting in line.

INT. HARMONY PARK BALLROOM - DRESSING ROOM

It's small, cramped and muggy. Richard does his best to stay cool, wiping sweat off even though he's just waiting to go on. Through the walls, he can hear and feel the Rhythm Rockers pounding out a strong cha-cha beat with a powerful bass line of 'duh, duh, duh, duh, duh.' Knowing the muse waits for no one, he frantically looks for something to write on. Grabbing a roll of toilet paper, he hurriedly scribbles down a few lines with a pencil until he hears his introduction.

RILLERA (O.S.)

Please welcome back to the Harmony Park stage the man whose voice you know so well. From the Flairs to Etta James's 'Henry,' Richard Berry!

Crowd applauds. Richard bows in thanks to their warm welcome. As the guys tune up, Richard leans over to Ricky Rillera.

RICHARD

What was that last song you played?
The one with the piano/bass intro.

RILLERA

Rene Touzet's "El Loco Cha Cha."

Richard's never heard of him.

RILLERA (CONT'D)

Cuban bandleader. It's a ten note tumbao.

Richard's never heard that term either.

RILLERA (CONT'D)

It's African-Caribbean. Got several meanings. But the one you need to know? 'An indescribable sexiness or swing.'

Richard steps toward the mic when Rillera grabs him.

RILLERA (CONT'D)

It's also used to describe a girl's
behind. Like, 'Damn. That girl has a
fine tumbao.'

Richard laughs and counts down the intro to The Platters'
current hit ballad "My Prayer."

RICHARD

*"When the twilight is gone and no
songbirds are singing, you come into
my heart and here in my heart, you
will stay while I pray..."*

COUPLES slow dance. Richard has single women entranced.

INT. RICHARD AND DOROTHY'S APARTMENT - NEXT DAY

Rene Touzet's album is on his record player but Richard
hesitates in dropping the tone arm.

DOROTHY

You waiting for divine intervention?

RICHARD

I just want it to be what I think it
is. What it can be. For us.

DOROTHY

Then get to it. That record won't
play itself.

The needle hits the vinyl and there's an intro we immediately
recognize - before trumpets blare and the elements of a
traditional cha-cha kick in. Richard sits back, writing down
additional thoughts. The track ends.