

Motown Profiles

THE SUPREMES

Although the Supremes were Motown's most successful chart act they were not among the label's first hitmakers and nine singles had failed before the Holland-Dozier-Holland composition 'Where Did Our Love Go' went to Number One in 1964. It was the first of 10 Number One singles penned by the team for the Supremes.

As the pinnacle of Motown commercial achievement, the Supremes were particularly vulnerable to the dictates of the Motown machine. In late 1964 and 1965 their label released seven albums (*A Bit of Liverpool*, *Where Did Our Love Go*, *Country Western and Pop*, *More Hits*, *We Remember Sam Cooke*, *At the Copa*, and *Merry Christmas*). These albums were recorded by various producers while the HDH team worked on the singles.

Florence Ballard left the group in 1967 and was replaced by Cindy Birdsong. A year later they were known as "Diana Ross and the Supremes" as Berry Gordy groomed Ross for MOR superstardom.

Following Ross' departure in 1969, lead singers included Jean Terrell and Sherrie Payne. (The latter excelled on NZ tour mid-70). Original member Mary Wilson continued well after Cindy Birdsong's departure in 1970. Two albums with the Hollands producing in 1976 proved uneventful yet in 1978 Motown compiled an acceptable post-Diana Ross *Supremes At Their Best* collection of recordings spanning 1972-1978. MC

FOUR TOPS

A Detroit act which has managed to keep the same lineup since debuting as the Four Aims in 1954. Although they were a successful nightclub act and had a contract with Chess Records from 1956, success had to wait



Four Tops: At rear, Levi Stubbs and Obie Benson. Foreground, Lawrence Payton, Duke Fakir.

until 1964.

They joined Motown in 1962 and recorded an unsuccessful LP of jazz standards. The Holland-Dozier-Holland team wrote the Tops first hit 'Baby I Need Your Loving' and the many classics that followed. When the HDH team left in 1968 the Tops worked with several producers, without repeating their earlier success. (By the way, they toured NZ in 1970. Fab show — did the Funky-Chicken too.)

In 1972 they signed to ABC Records and returned to the charts with Lambert and Potter compositions 'Are You Man Enough' and 'One Chain Don't Make No Prison'.

Subsequently they tried different vocal styles (Philly, etc.) yet it wasn't until Levi Stubbs was back out the front with 'She Used to Be

My Girl' (1981) that they achieved further success, creating fine LP *Tonight* (NZ release, Casablanca).

In 1983 they were reunited with HDH on the Motown LP (NZ release) *Back Where I Belong*. Best tracks are the funky 'Make Yourself Right At Home', 'What We Have to Lose' (with Aretha Franklin) and 'Hang' with the Temptations. MC

MARVIN GAYE

In the 60s, during the Beatles invasion, Marvin Gaye was the biggest-selling popular male vocalist. He worked with Motown's finest writers, adding to their tracks his invariably excellent vocal.

Gaye was brought to Detroit by fellow ex-Moon-glow Harvey Fuqua. He joined Motown in 1961 and later married Berry Gordy's sister, Anna.

By the end of the 60s, Gaye retreated from the Motown hit machine, returning with his self-composed/produced LP *What's Going On* in 1971. It was an album Motown didn't want to release, yet it rendered three hit singles.

With 'Let's Get It On' (1973) Gaye enunciated a more physical gospel. It is a work echoed in his recent writing.

He returned to the stage in 1974, his 60s material almost forgotten. On the live LP that followed he described the 60s songs as "the fossil medley."

Gaye's remaining years at Motown were not productive. His marriage to Anna Gordy broke up and he failed to direct his own career, yet Motown's attempts to motivate him were counter-productive.

Gaye left Motown in late 1981, returning to form in 1983 with the selfwritten, played and produced *Midnight Love* LP for CBS, featuring the single 'Sexual Healing'.

Gaye still captivates as he enters his third decade as one of soul's greatest. MC

THE TEMPTATIONS

Two Detroit vocal groups, the Primes and the Distant, merged, David Ruffin was then added and the Temptations, Motown's Cadillac of the genre, were complete.

Group members were Melvin Franklin (bass vocalist) and Otis Williams — both in the current lineup — and David Ruffin (baritone lead, went solo in 1968), Eddie Kendricks (tenor lead, went solo in 1971) and the late Paul Williams (left 1971). The other present members are Dennis Edwards (ex Contours, since 1969), Richard Street (ex Monitors, since 1971) and Glenn Leonard (since 1975).

The group's initial breakthrough (1964 to 1966) was with Smokey Robinson com-



The Supremes (L-R): Diana Ross, Mary Wilson, Florence Ballard. Circa 1965.



The 'Reunion Temptations' (1982): At rear, Dennis Edwards, Eddi Kendricks, David Ruffin, Melvin Franklin and Otis Williams. Foreground, Richard Street, Glenn Leonard.



Martha and the Vandellas (L-R): Martha Reeves, Lois Reeves, Sandra Tilley. 1969.

positions as diverse as 'My Girl' (1964) and 'Get Ready' (1966).

From 1966 the group worked with producer Norman Whitfield. They enjoyed consistent chart success into the 70s although Whitfield's later explorations ranged from the sublime to the absurd.

The Temptations left Motown in 1977, to return in 1980. Two years later Ruffin and Kendricks returned for a *Reunion* LP, the highlight of which is funk workout with Rick James' 'Standing on the Top'.

Whitfield produced one side of their 1983 album *Back to Basics*. MC

ISLEY BROTHERS

An innovative and skillful vocal group, brothers Ronald (lead), Rudolph and Kelly enjoyed four of Motown's finest 60s albums.

In 1957 the Isleys left spiritual singing and home in Cincinnati, Ohio, for New York clubs and recording. In 1959 they had their first hit on RCA with 'Shout' (RCA). Singles with Leiber and Stoller producing on Atlantic failed. Their next hit was the 1962 landmark 'Twist and Shout' — an inspiration to the Beatles and to Berry Gordy who then wrote 'Do You Love Me' for the Contours.

In 1966 they joined the now flourishing Motown label and recorded with top writers, Holland-Dozier-Holland. Several hits followed — most notably 'This Old Heart of Mine' and 'Behind a Painted Smile' — and several fine albums, but they never reached the sales heights of the label's biggest acts.

In 1969 they left Motown to form their own T-Neck label, through Buddah Records until 1973 when they moved it to CBS for the hit album *3+3*. After the departure from Motown they abandoned the traditional vocal group format and added three players.

The Isley's most recent chart success was 1983 LP *Between The Sheets*. MC

RICK JAMES

Although James has been Motown's resident funk freak since 1978 appearances can be misleading — this man was once in a band with Neil Young, Toronto's Mynah Birds.

A disciple of both Bootsy Collins and Berry Gordy, CONTINUED PAGE 22