

Four Tops

It appeared too good to be true — two Motown vocal groups in one show in New Zealand. Yet it happened.

Irrespective of indifferent sound quality and dance restrictions at the Logan Concrete Centre, the nine vocalists, an eight-piece USA band and hired local horns communicate with their irrepressible energy.

In Auckland only three Tops performed but it mattered little that Duke Fakir was absent — the lead singer Levi Stubbs pushed even harder and a keyboard player sang Fakir's part. Stubbs' voice is the emotional essence of the Four Tops — his voice soars above the mix.

The irony of the soul revue is that such great singers could captivate with only a small band, yet invariably insist on the dynamics of a large band.

Due to sensory overload it's hard to review the tour in a conventional sense — so how about some tour awards:

Best Dressed: Four Tops in Wellington (white shoes and trousers, blue lounge jackets), Temptations in Palmerston North (all white).

Best Bass Singer: Temptations' Melvin Franklin, of course.

Best Dancer: Tops' bass vocalist Obie Benson — funky, humorous moves.

Worst Dressed: Tempts in Auckland (pale green).

Best Improvisation: Tempts' Richard Street in Wellington, worrying a line in Redding style on 'My Girl' and the Cooke and Redding tributes.

Best Version Of Somebody Else's Song: New Tempts' vocalist Ollie Woodson on 'I Wish It Would Rain' and 'Ain't Too Proud to Beg'.

Greatest Living Levi Stubbs Award: Levi Stubbs — his voice has lost none of its urgency.

It was surprising to find that the Tops and Tempts were not very interested in doing interviews — by Wellington the chances of a Levi Stubbs interview looked slim.

After waiting at the hotel for several hours, all that was possible was 10 minutes with the first member of each to appear — the Tempts in the hotel foyer and the Four Tops' Duke Fakir backstage at the Michael Fowler Centre, 45 minutes before the show was due to start.



Three Tops: Levi Stubbs, Obie Benson, Lawrence Payton.



Duke Fakir

Duke enjoys touring with the Temptations and compares the current tour to the early Motown roadshows.

"We used to do quite a few Motown Revue tours in the late 60s when Motown was just surfacing strong across the country. We used to tour with Marvin Gaye, the Supremes, the Temptations, the Vandellas and Junior Walker — all at once. It was a lot of fun."

The group performed with only three Tops in Auckland. Is this a first?

"No, we've had other occasions where one guy has missed for particular reasons. Once we were in England when Lawrence's mother passed away and he had to fly home and we did the show with three and once Obie had a death in the family and he had to leave. As much as we would like to be with our brothers at that particular time, you can't disappoint thousands of people. We carry on."

Why did you choose to return to Motown after chart success

with the Casablanca label?

"After we left Motown 10 years ago we had some success with other labels but we didn't really feel as comfortable as we felt with Motown. When we went into rehearsal for the Motown 25th Anniversary TV special, Berry Gordy, the president, was there. The first thing he asked us was if we wanted to come back. We sat there and made a deal. It was just like coming home."

How was it working with the Holland-Dozier-Holland team again?

"It was the first time they'd worked together since the 60s. They've had a lot of litigation. (Motown sued HDH when they left the label in 1968 and the Hollands themselves sued Lamont Dozier when he quit the partnership in 1972.) We've always kept in touch with them and to work with them again was very comfortable, just like sitting in your living room working with someone you enjoy being with."

How did Aretha Franklin come to sing on your new album?

"We grew up with Aretha in Detroit. We've always wanted to do some things together. Two albums ago she wanted us to do a song with her, which we did. In exchange we said would you do a song with us?"

"We always enjoy singing with Aretha — she's probably our favourite girl singer of all times."

Is it hard having to perform material you've been performing for two decades? Would

you prefer to perform new songs? (On the tour the Four Tops didn't perform any tracks from their current album.)

"Well, we perform some new songs we've recorded at ABC or Casablanca. But we know the people want the big hits the Four Tops had in the 60s. We're here to entertain, we're not the type of group to push things on people. We're like servants of the people."

What goes through your mind as you sing 'Reach Out, I'll Be There' every night?

"We have a feeling for all those tunes, simply because the people feel it. When we get to the old songs they really go at it. They give us a feeling of appreciation."

The Four Tops all live in Detroit, though don't record there often. They still work with some of the original Motown musicians.

"There's one of them there, Eddie Willis, who was one of the 'Funk Brothers' at Motown. Sometimes in Detroit, when we need a piano player, Earl van Dyke (the leader of Motown's 60s session band) will come out with us."

"When we're in California Robert White does a lot of things with us on sessions and other engagements. But Eddie is with us for keeps, until he retires."

"Gil Askey (musical director) has been with us on and off for about 20 years. We've known Gil since pre-Motown days — he used to do all our arrangements in nightclubs when we couldn't afford to pay an

arranger."

Did Askey participate in the Motown Revues?

"Yes, he was a part of all that. He was the first conductor that went out with the Supremes. He wrote their first big stage act when they started having hits."

Your pre-Motown Chess recording was very different. What was the crucial factor that caused you to find your mid-60s sound?

"Holland-Dozier-Holland was the crucial turning point. At that time we were young kids — we could sing any kind of song, we didn't have a definite sound. We had a good sound but it wasn't a defined sound. They helped us develop that for recording and for the mass audience."

Will the vocal group tradition continue with a new generation of singers? (Norman Whitfield's and James Jamerson's sons appear on new Motown albums.)

"We do have kids who are capable of doing that but we're pressing them to stay in school and get a college degree. We all have a lot of kids — Lawrence has a boy and girl who sing and write, I have a boy who sings and a girl who acts. We could have a choir actually (laughs)."

Would you prefer them not to go into music?

"Exactly — I'd prefer them not to. We were very fortunate. The music business is a lot harder than it was then. At least get a degree under their belt and then give it a shot."

So what is the basis for your working in music so long?

"We love what we do. It's an integral part of us, we totally enjoy it. It's my whole thing. The music world could get along without me, but I couldn't get along without the music."

Is it easier to find good songs now?

"It's harder to find good songs. No doubt about it. If we could find them as easy as we did then, we'd constantly be in the Top 10."

Eddie Willis

Well, time must be about up — it's near to 8.30. Neither group is in stage clothes yet. I thank Duke and then ask if Motown guitarist Eddie Willis is free to do a brief interview.

Willis nods a yes.

"If you've got questions."

Were you with Motown from the beginning?

"Yep, with the original band, the Funk Brothers, about seven

of us. We were strictly in the studio — we didn't have time for the road."

Did you stay in Detroit when Motown moved to Los Angeles?

"I moved to LA and stayed there three months, then went back to Detroit. LA, it's kinda a rat race out there for musicians."

Willis has been on the road with the Four Tops for seven years but prefers studio work.

"I love being at home but there's not a lot of sessions in Detroit. I'm not there that much but if there's a session and I'm home, I do one."

Did you record live with the Motown artists?

"We did the band tracks first, then overdubbed the voice later."

Did you know which artist would record it?

"Yes, but it had been changed before. It didn't matter if we did tracks for one artist and it ended up with someone else doing it."

Did you work with a particular producer?

"No. All the producers worked with the one band."

By the late 60s there would surely have been a need for more than one band?

"There was a need. But all the guys in Detroit went from studio to studio all day."

What hours did you record?

"Nine to five, nine to 10 ... we had them at 7am, 4am ... the time didn't really matter."

Are there particular sessions that stand out?

"The tracks I did with Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, or the Temptations or the Tops. They all were at the time. There was something new happening — so they were great to me."

Were the songs presented to you finished, in written form, by the producers?

"No. That's where the band didn't get enough credit. No, they came to us with a chord sheet, the chords were written on a piece of paper. We made the feels up as we went — the band really made the track. We just had a guide with some chords on it."

We are interrupted — time for the band to move to the stage and for the stars to get dressed.

I quickly show Eddie Willis his listing in the March *Rip It Up* 'Motown Who's Who'. His pleasure at seeing his contribution acknowledged is obvious.

But for now there's a job to do.

Murray Cammick

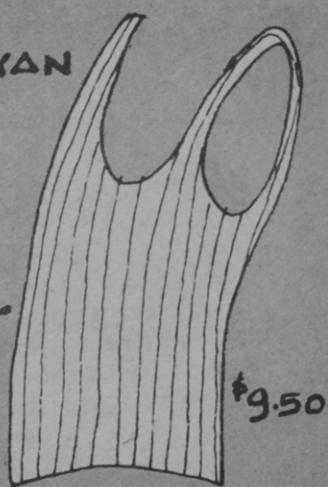
RIBBED LATTAN/RAYAN VESTS

—ideal for winter

from Strangely Normal

160 Hobson St
11-3 Daily
ph. 778-681

Wholesale Enquiries Welcome



\$9.50

Also: CHINESE COTTON T-SHIRTS AS PREVIOUSLY ADVERTISED

MAIL ORDER FORM

YES, PLEASE SEND ME SOME OF YOUR FANTASTICALLY COMFORTABLE CHINESE T-SHIRTS.

I HAVE ADDED \$1.00 P&P FOR EACH SHIRT.

INDICATE HOW MANY: S ☐ M ☐ L ☐

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

TOTAL AMOUNT \$ _____ CHEQUE ☐ B/CARD ☐ VISA ☐

CREDIT CARD NO: _____

SIGNATURE _____ EXPIRY DATE _____

POST TO, STRANGELY NORMAL, 160 HOBSON ST, AUCKLAND.

FREE POSTAGE FOR 3 OR MORE

All over the world...

We've played guitar with the best. Sit in with us at your next session. Bronze, Wound, or Phosphor Bronze—Ask for us at your favorite music store. We're available in a gauge to meet your special needs.

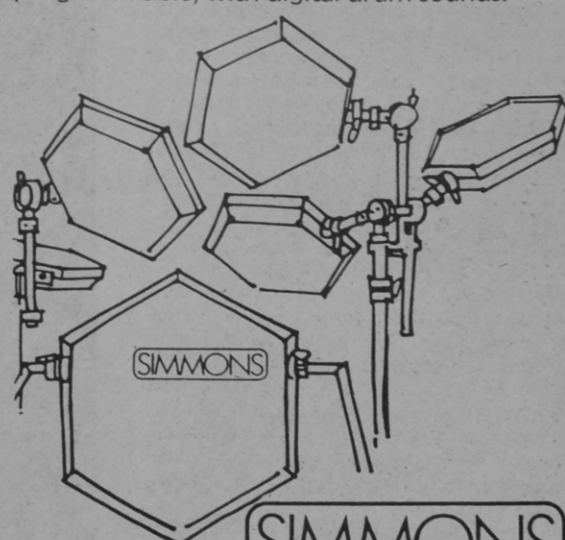
THE MARTIN GUITAR COMPANY NAZARETH, PA 18064 U.S.A.



Sole NZ Distributor: Lyn McAllister Music Ltd
PO Box 39-143, Auckland West.
Phone (09) 34-936

NEW SIMMONS

SIMMONS have now produced the SDS8, a 5 piece electronic drum kit with built in stereo mixer, featuring the same sounds as the famous SDS5, for around half the price. Also available shortly the new SDS7 fully programmable, with digital drum sounds.



SIMMONS
electronic drums

For further information on the drums with today's sound, write or call NZ distributor and service agent.

Live Sound Ltd, Box 68-216, Newton, Auckland
Phone: 789-125

AVAILABLE FROM: Kingsley Smiths, Auckland
Shand Miller Musical Supplies, Wgtn. CJs Music Store, Chch.