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## Chronicling the Recorded Legacy of Motown's Golden Era

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Lost Treasures and Legendary Hits from the Vaults of Hitsville, USA

--Scott Paton

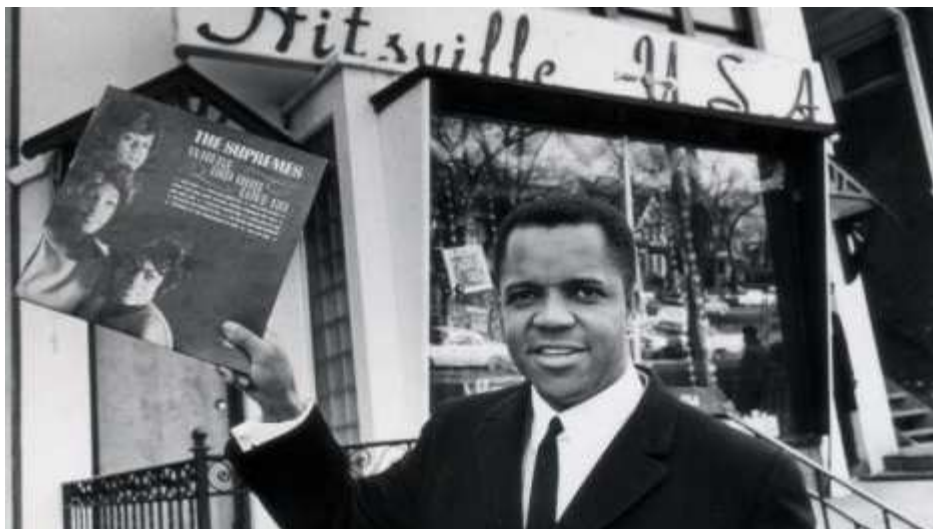


*April 8, 1964—Detroit, Michigan* It's getting late in the evening and producers Brian Holland and Lamont Dozier are attempting to coax a credible vocal take from the three very unhappy young ladies gathered around the microphone in Hitsville's Studio A. The Holland-Dozier team is eager to wrap things up this night. They have a session booked the next day with the First Lady of Motown, Mary Wells. Her current single, *My Guy*, had just debuted on the national charts at Number 50 the previous week—an out-of-the-box smash. And while her chief writer-producer, Smokey Robinson, has got dibs on the A-side of the follow-up, the flipside of a hit 45 will be just as lucrative for the B-team.

But tonight, the focus is on the “no-hit” Supremes, so dubbed by their Motown colleagues for a nearly unbroken string of chart flops. And in the opinion of Florence Ballard, Mary Wilson and Diana Ross, this latest song will do nothing to turn their fortunes around. Wilson: “To my ears it was a teenybopper song...and I couldn't imagine *anyone* liking it.” After all, if Motown's leading girl group, the Marvelettes, rejected the tune, how promising could it really be? And a rhythm track that featured studio personnel stomping on the wooden floor? This was not the sort of sound that made stars of their idols the Shirelles. Nevertheless, the tape of the backing track is cued to the top, and two measures of foot-pounding percussion cues Diana's breathy vocal intro, “Baby, baby. Baby don't leave me...”



Within three short months, *Where Did Our Love Go* topped both the Pop and R&B charts, marking the ascension of the Supremes as the most popular female recording group in history. And while the Marvelettes still had several hits ahead of them, their first right of refusal of Motown's "A" material would no longer be an option—their greatest success behind them. As for Mary Wells' session the following day? It would be one of the last for the then-reigning Queen of Hitsville. Within weeks she would wrestle free from the contract she had signed as a minor, lured by a sizable deal with another label. But the first bonafide superstar of Motown would see her career go into eclipse, free-falling into relative obscurity for the rest of her life.



Motown President Berry Gordy Jr. displays the breakthrough second album by the Supremes

## Hitsville Chronicle

Such are the vagaries of fame and fortune in the music business as brilliantly illustrated in a comprehensive series of reissues –from both sides of the Atlantic—chronicling Motown’s recorded legacy. The crown jewel in this ongoing campaign may be the most exhaustive project of the CD era. ***The Complete Motown Singles*** ([www.hiposelect.com](http://www.hiposelect.com)) – inaugurated in 2004, with an anticipated completion date of 2009—is a 12-volume series of multiple disc sets, reproducing the A & B-side of every Tamla/Motown-affiliated 45, from the label’s launch in 1959, through 1972, when the firm migrated west from Detroit to Hollywood.



Lavishly packaged in 8” x 7” binders resembling vintage 78 rpm albums, replete with historical photos and superb annotation, each set chronicles a single calendar year (the exception being ***Volume One: '59–'61***) in the evolution of the Motown Sound. Executive Producer for the series, Universal Music’s Harry Weinger, was pleasantly surprised to find the Hitsville’s master tape archives remarkably intact. “Despite the fact that the library has bounced around from Detroit to L.A. and back to New York, we found the masters for nearly every single release. The only exceptions are two dozen of the very earliest tracks from Volume One. In those cases, we made digital transfers from pristine 45s.” But let’s go back to the beginning, nearly 50 years ago, when that vinyl was hot off the stamper.

### “Let’s make our own records...”

After penning hits for LaVern Baker and Etta James, and a string of smashes for R&B superstar Jackie Wilson, songwriter and former boxer Berry Gordy, Jr. decided that the nominal royalty checks coming in for the million-selling tunes that he had written were tantamount to slave wages. Berry, armed with an \$800 loan from the Gordy Family savings fund, officially entered the record business on January 12, 1959.

Licensing his early recordings of Marv Johnson, Eddie Holland and the Miracles to major labels didn't prove much more lucrative. With the encouragement of his young songwriting protégé and budding artist, Smokey Robinson, Gordy was convinced to distribute his own product nationally. Smokey: "I said, 'Berry, we keep cutting great records; we work to make them local hits so we can sell them to the major companies, but we never get paid. You've got to become a salesman, too, so we can eliminate the middleman.' I think he knew that already, but the fact that I believed in him helped him along."

**Advertisement in the July 23, 1960 issue of *Cash Box* magazine touting the Miracles' *Way Over There*:**

*From out of the Midwest comes a new label destined to take its place among the leaders of the industry; Tamla, prexied by one of the young, driving geniuses of the music business today, Berry Gordy, Jr., who has given you such great hits as "You Got What it Takes", "Money (That's What I Want)", "I Love the Way You Love", and "All the Love I've Got", and who now brings to you a record that is soon to be numbered among his greatest successes...*

In his autobiography, Motown founder and president Berry Gordy acknowledged the lack of humility in his ad copy. "My sister said, 'Don't you think that sounds a little arrogant?' 'Who's gonna know I wrote it?' I said." But Gordy's bravado would prove to be quite prescient...eventually.

**Birth of the Motown Sound**

*The Complete Motown Singles, Volumes One* thru *Three* chronicles his early successes, a number of should-have-been hits that slipped through the cracks, and the occasional misstep. But up through 1963, even undeniable classics such as *Please Mr. Postman*, *Money (That's What I Want)* and *Shop Around* bear little of the stamp that's generally acknowledged as "the Motown Sound". And these standards only dot a vast musical landscape that include furtive stabs at teen pop, then-current dance crazes and even country music.



Despite numerous early Top 40 hits and a handful of chart-toppers, Berry Gordy has long cited Martha Reeves & the Vandellas' 1963 breakthrough smash as the first true totem of the soon-to-be legendary Hitsville signature sound. Co-writer/producer Lamont Dozier agrees, "I've always thought that the Motown Sound started with *Come and Get These Memories* because that one song had a mixture of all those musical elements—gospel, pop, country and jazz." The tune also embodied the hallmark traits of hundreds of classics to come—a driving 4/4 beat, propelled by bass and drums and multiple rhythm guitar parts, with classic horn arrangements adding to the urgency, even on mid-tempo numbers.

## The Funk Brothers

As documented in the award-winning 2002 documentary film *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, more than anything or anyone else, that "Sound" is rightly attributed to the somewhat fluid amalgam of musicians who made up the Motown house band—known in their inner circle as "the Funk Brothers". As Berry Gordy honed his management skills, the writers and producers perfected their craft, and the singers polished their performances, the Funk Brothers coalesced into one of the tightest musical units in recorded history.



Their years of playing in Detroit jazz clubs had developed their basic chops, but endless day and night sessions together in Motown's Studio A – "the Snake Pit"—allowed the Funk Brothers to develop an intuitive, almost telepathic, give-and-take that elevated the material placed before them. As drummer Uriel Jones has said, "We could play without even looking at each other." Recognizing their vital importance to Hitsville's success, Gordy guarded the Funk Brothers' services zealously. Moonlighting on outside sessions was forbidden. "They even had detectives following us," recalled Jones. "When we tried to deny it, they pulled out photos of us hauling our cases into a studio. We each had a three-hundred-dollar fine deducted from our checks."



As diverse as the Motown roster was –no one would confuse Little Stevie Wonder with the Marvelettes or Marvin Gaye—it was the magic and artistry of the Funk Brothers that provided a consistency throughout the label’s output, and elevated even the slightest material or performance to something greater than the collective ingredients of any particular record. So, if by 1963 the Motown Sound had come to first true fruition on *Come and Get These Memories*, Martha & the Vandellas’ next release, *(Love is Like a) Heat Wave*, is arguably the first bonafide standard with the trademark Hitsville stamp. And for the next several years, Motown’s chart success, and its insinuation into American pop culture would grow exponentially.

### **Friday Morning Shoot-Outs**

Over the decades, many parallels have been drawn between Berry Gordy’s enterprise and the major automakers, such as Ford and GM, that gave Detroit –“Motor City”—and Motown –a contraction of “Motor Town”—their famous monikers. While much has been made of a mythical “assembly line” approach to recording –build a track, drop in different artists till the right one fits—it was Berry Gordy’s almost maniacal attention to detail and his pursuit of perfection that resulted in an unprecedented ratio of chart hits-to-single releases.



Weekly production meetings would have writer/producers like Smokey Robinson, Norman Whitfield and Holland-Dozier-Holland seated at a conference table across from one another, engaged in virtual creative shoot-outs. Competing tapes and acetates of their latest studio confections would determine who got the A-side of the next Marvin Gaye, Supremes or Four Tops disc. A solid track record gave you first dibs on the artist you'd recently been producing. But you truly were only as good as your last hit, as Gordy recalled, "Smokey was more confident than ever; it looked like he couldn't lose. He had kept almost a complete hold on the Temps for nearly three years, but when *Get Ready* only made it to #29 on the pop chart, Norman Whitfield took them over with *Ain't Too Proud to Beg*." Imagine a creative environment so competitive that a classic like *Get Ready* could be perceived to be a flop.



As a result, producers would hedge their bets, often recording their latest tunes on two, three or *more* different artists—sometimes simply substituting vocals on the exact same instrumental track. These various renditions multiplied the odds of landing the A-side of an upcoming single, although from a cash money standpoint, the B-side was just as good—just a little less *prestige*. At the very least, you might have a filler track for an upcoming album. But so stringent were Motown's standards that virtually thousands of complete and unfinished masters were relegated to the vault for all eternity...or until the CD era, whichever came first.

## From the Vaults

Over the years, various Motown reissues, anthologies and boxed sets have provided a tantalizing peek into that dusty '60s vault by including a stray cut or two that had been shelved decades earlier. Well, that trickle has turned into a torrent thanks to a series of reissues, both here in the U.S. and in the UK. Compilations such as ***A Cellarful of Motown (Volume One, U.S.; Volume Two, UK only)*** and a variety of British imports provide a glimpse of Motown in a parallel universe, filled with "what might've beens" and new/old spins on

treasured classics. An updated, two-disc version of *Motown Sings Motown Treasures* ([www.hiposelect.com](http://www.hiposelect.com)) provides prime examples of both.

The repetitive ascending bass, clanging guitars and majestic strings of the intro portend the familiar vocals of Levi Stubbs on the Four Tops' classic *Ask the Lonely*, but wait, the voice is a little reedier, a little more echo laden. And the female voices of Motown's crack background vocal group, the Andantes, are absent. A quick check of the liner notes indicates that this was the intended original version of the song, as interpreted by Tommy Good, one of several white pop singers that Motown failed to catapult to stardom.

One of the standout tracks is Gladys Knight & the Pips' *Good Lovin Ain't Easy to Come By*. Virtually a certain smash if it hadn't been shelved in 1966, it was revived to great success two years later by Marvin Gaye & Tammi Terrell. The Temptations' reworking of the now largely-forgotten Spinners' hit *Truly Yours* eclipses the original and deserves its rightful place on any comprehensive Temps anthology.



Of course not every alternate version or take will erase one's memory of a familiar favorite. Some of these dusty outtakes were rightfully consigned to the archives. But a vast majority of these unearthed treasures stand up to repeated listenings, and the interpretations by Motown's, arguably, finest vocalists—Marvin Gaye, David Ruffin and Gladys Knight—almost always rival or eclipse the better-known versions. On rare occasions, two separate renditions of the same song merited release as singles and managed to chart. Jr. Walker & the All-Stars' takes on Marvin Gaye's *How Sweet It Is* and the Supremes' *Come See About Me* were major hits for the group.





But Motown's greatest one-two punch started out as a Smokey Robinson & the Miracles cut that was relegated to the can. Written and produced by Smokey's frequent creative rival, Norman Whitfield, *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* was first tracked by the Miracles in the summer of '66. Though shelved, the basic melody served as template when Whitfield produced a version on Marvin Gaye a few months later. Rejected a second time by Motown's Quality Control Department, Whitfield revamped the melody and tempo to cut it with Gladys Knight & the Pips who were still looking for a breakthrough smash.



The third time proved to be the proverbial charm as Gladys & Co. hit the Number Two spot on the pop charts in '67 with a bonafide classic. Marvin's earlier version was subsequently assigned as a track on his next album. Just a little over a year after the Pips' had crested with the song, a deejay began stumbled upon the track on Marvin's *In the Groove* LP and began spinning it on the air.

The menacing sound of the electric piano, the sinister strains of the horn and string arrangement, and slithering snake-like rattle of Funk Brother Jack Ashford's tambourine evoked something akin to a primordial soundtrack to the Original Sin. The fact that Marvin was straining at the top of his natural vocal register only added to the tension, creating what is truly one of the few perfect pop records. Initially ignored by Motown, demand for its release as a single was so great that they began pressing it as a 45 and watched it become the biggest hit in the label's history, topping the chart for nearly two months.

This unanticipated smash was great news for everyone but the Pips. "We finally landed a big hit –it gave us an identity—and Marvin came along and just took it away from us," recalled Gladys Knight. "We did a TV show together and the producer had us do a duet of *Grapevine*. Of course, we had to do *his* version. That hurt." For sheer drama and unbridled competition, the present-day *American Idol* has nothing on Motown in its heyday.

## Sixties Stride

As chronicled in the fifth and sixth volumes of *The Complete Motown Singles*, by 1965/66, the creative stride of Berry Gordy and his extended troupe of writers, producers, musicians and artists had hit its peak. '65 saw virtually half of the nearly 80 singles released that year hit the Top 40, while three-quarters of their output in '66 registered on the charts. No other major record label in history has ever approached that ratio of success. But Motown was

not simply a corporate entity; it was a living, evolving artist unto itself. Only Memphis' Stax-Volt label ever remotely approximated Hitsville's achievement in creating a musical identity that surpassed even those of its greatest artists.

And Motown's stamp on the nation's collective consciousness cannot be measured on its musical merits alone. It was shaped by, and in turn, shaped its *own* place and time in American history. With the emergent, turbulent Civil Rights movement swirling as a backdrop, the significance of a major black-owned enterprise cannot be underestimated, not only as a source of pride for the African-American community, but as a clarion call to corporate America that the times were a' changing.



Due in no small part to television's explosive penetration into 1960's culture, programs like *American Bandstand*, *the Ed Sullivan Show*, *Shindig* and countless others, Motown artists were among the first black performers to be beamed into America's living rooms on a regular basis. The Supremes, the Temptations, Stevie Wonder and their labelmates became fixtures in teen magazines that had previously been the exclusive province of white pop stars. Racism's potent mix of ignorance and fear was not likely to be perpetuated as virulently by a new generation of white Americans that had pin-ups of the Jackson 5 and posters from the *Supremes' Greatest Hits* LP taped to their bedroom walls.



As Berry Gordy was often quoted, “Motown is the Sound of Young America, not black or white America.” Nearly 50 years after the launch of his fabled enterprise, his words and achievements seem all the more profound.



*(Sidebar)*

### **Interview with Universal/Motown’s Harry Weinger**

**SP:** You’ve indicated that the Motown master tapes archive is in pretty good shape, especially considering that it’s bounced around over the years.

**HW:** Yeah, the Motown tape library was originally stored in Smokey Robinson’s basement! Then it was kept at Hitsville in Detroit till the company moved to Los Angeles in the 1970s. Now we have it in a climate-controlled vault here in New York.

**SP:** The ***Complete Motown Singles*** project is quite remarkable in its scope. How far do you envision it reaching in the label’s evolution?

**HW:** Well, the first ten years would be a nice cap, but in our original announcement, we said that it would extend up through 1972, when Motown moved west. As it stands right now, the very last song on the final volume would be Gladys Knight & the Pips’ *Neither One of Us (Wants to Be the First to Say Goodbye)*, which is kind of poetic! Do we go beyond that? It remains to be seen.

**SP:** Over the years, there have been odd little variations in the mixes on certain tracks, resulting in slightly different versions of the same songs on different compilations. How did you ensure the accuracy of the masters when assembling the ***Complete Motown Singles*** volumes?

**HW:** When Motown got really hot in the mid-'60s, the pressing plants were working overtime. So sometimes, if they needed to contract with additional plants to meet the demand, rather than simply duplicate a master that was being used elsewhere, they'd create another two-track mix from the three-track or eight-track multi-track tapes. I'm not a deep collector myself, which is why I'm working with many other people who are experts on this stuff, and together we manage to come up with the official versions of the tracks. There are a lot of people, both inside and outside Universal who collaborate on making these projects come to life.

**SP:** So many of the most exciting Motown reissues are now being retailed almost exclusively online. What was behind that decision?

**HW:** Record stores, like the Tower chain, are disappearing. And these days, in the retail market, in general, there's not a lot of room for vintage catalog and straight reissues on the shelves, except for compilations—greatest hits packages. So we decided, "Why not create interesting releases for a targeted audience that's really looking for it."

**SP:** What about so many of the original '60s Motown albums that are now out of print? Some of the titles that are getting crazy money on eBay?

**HW:** We hope to maybe issue some of them as "two-fers" with bonus tracks, or maybe in box sets as we've recently done with David Ruffin and Eddie Kendricks' original LPs.

**SP:** Speaking of Ruffin, the unreleased album you issued through the Motown Select program was a huge hit, selling out very quickly. How 'bout that? I know your stated policy is "once they're gone, they're gone." But is there any chance that will become available again?

**HW:** What can I say? I wish we'd made more. But on the other hand, when they sell out, it means we did something right. Almost all of the Motown Select tracks can be purchased on iTunes, though.

**SP:** There's so much rare and unreleased stuff available over in the UK. Why is the criteria so different over there as to what gets reissued?

**HW:** It's a smaller country and there's such a dedicated fan base there that has a higher awareness of much of the obscure stuff. And things that just wouldn't sell over here can do enough business in the UK.

**SP:** So can you give us a sneak peek at what's coming up in the Motown Select program?

**HW:** Well, this spring we'll be releasing a deluxe two-disc edition of Marvin Gaye's *In Our Lifetime* LP, with lots of alternate versions and mixes. And then we're tackling his divorce settlement album, *Here, My Dear*. We're hoping to do a Supremes *Lost & Found* collection, featuring all previously unreleased tracks. When it comes to live recordings, there are dozens of live shows; Motown recorded lots of concerts, whether they were intended for release, or simply as a way to critique an act's performance. So if we can clear the rights, some of that might come out. There's always something new in the works.

**SP:** While the Motown vault appears bottomless at times, of course, it can't be. Is every tape that still exists documented, and how much more can we expect to see excavated and issued?

**HW:** Yes, every tape has been entered into a database. Do we know exactly what's on every one of those tens of thousands of tapes? No. Sometimes master tapes are mislabeled. Sometimes what's indicated isn't actually there on the reel. Sometimes it's just a demo or an unfinished track. But sometimes we get lucky and find something we had no idea existed; you're never really sure till you listen to the whole tape. So when does the well run dry? Only time will tell.

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