



# The O'Jays

*By Jerry Blavat*



**W**hen thinking of the O'Jays—the whiz kids of Ohio whom we honor tonight—one usually pictures the group in the 1970s. After all, beginning in 1972, the O'Jays had gold and platinum records every year of the decade, including the hits “Back Stabbers,” “Love Train,” and “I Love Music (Part 1),” as well as three Grammy nominations for Best R&B Vocal Group. What many people don't realize, though, is that the group's roots go back to 1957.

As with most of the soul groups inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, it all began with gospel. At St. Mark's Baptist Church, in Canton, Ohio, the head of the congregation was John Williams, whose son Walter, along with Eddie Levert, William Powell, Bobby Massey, and Bill Isles, had formed a quintet called the Triumphs. John Williams taught the young men the harmonies that would form the foundation of their style. In 1960, when the fledgling singers discovered there was already a group called the Triumphs, they changed their name to the Mascots.

Back in those days, for new groups and artists, the DJ was the link for local talent to the record company. While singing at local record hops, the Mascots were spotted by one such disc jockey, Cleveland legend Eddie O'Jay from WABQ. He liked what he heard and saw, so when Bob Skaff from Imperial Records came to town on a promotion trip, O'Jay told him about the Mascots. Skaff, too, liked the group, gave them an audition, and signed them to Imperial. Soon after, Eddie called me while I was doing my radio show on WCAM in Camden, New Jersey, and told me about the group's Imperial debut, “Lonely Drifter.” I asked him, “What's the name of the group?” He said, “The O'Jays.” They had changed their name to honor Eddie, who had opened doors for them. While the O'Jays were under contract to Imperial, the label's A&R director, H.B. Barnum, liked their harmonies so much that he had the group moonlighting, doing session work in L.A. for Jimmy Norman, Nat King Cole, and even Phil Spector, who used them on some of the early Ronettes sessions.

But it was not until 1968 that the O'Jays' luck really changed. They were now a quartet, as Billy Isles had left the group in 1965. While appearing at Harlem's

The original O'Jays: William Powell, Bobby Massey, Eddie Levert, and Walter Williams (clockwise from top left), circa 1968 ▶



Apollo Theater with the Intruders, the O'Jays met two young songwriter/producers, Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, who already had a hit record with the Soul Survivors' "Expressway (to Your Heart)," released on the independent Crimson label. Gamble and Huff had recently formed their own labels, including Gamble (the Intruders' label) and Neptune, distributed by the Chess brothers in Chicago. Once the O'Jays' Imperial contract expired, Gamble and Huff took them into the studio to record for Neptune. Soon, they were garnering minor R&B hits with "One Night Affair" and "Looky Looky."

Even though the O'Jays began enjoying moderate success on the pop charts and scoring big on the R&B surveys, Gamble and Huff expected even bigger things: In 1972, they, along with some of Philadelphia's finest young musicians and songwriters, including Thommie Bell, Bunny Sigler, and (Gene) McFadden and (John) Whitehead, along with Lou Rawls, Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, the Three Degrees, and others, would create the legendary Philadelphia International label. With the departure of Bobby Massey, who decided to become a producer, the O'Jays had become a trio, comprising Levert, Powell, and Williams. Into the studio they went with Gamble and Huff for the newly formed Philly International label. And *bam!*

The O'Jays' first release on Philly International was "Back

Stabbers," the title track of their first album on the new label. Written by Huff, McFadden, and Whitehead and arranged by Thommie Bell, the song featured Levert's powerful lead along with Powell's smooth, harmonic counterpoint. Electrifying and unforgettable, the sound was reminiscent of the give-and-take dynamics of the great groups who'd come before them – Rudy

West and Maryland Pierce of the Five Keys, Marvin Junior and Johnny Carter of the Dells, and Levi Stubbs and the Four Tops. "When Will I See You Again," the O'Jays' remake of the Three Degrees hit; "Darlin' Darlin' Baby (Sweet, Tender Love)"; "Used Ta Be My Girl": These songs and others would gain international fame, not only for the O'Jays but for the Philly International label and TSOP – the Sound of Philadelphia. It was a perfect marriage.

The Gamble and Huff machine and the O'Jays went on to produce some of the greatest hits in R&B history and, in the seventies, helped do for Philly International what Berry Gordy did for Motown in the sixties. No one can dispute the power and the message in songs like "Love Train," "Livin' for the Weekend," "For the Love of Money," and "I Love Music (Part 1)," which still get continuous airplay on major radio stations around the world ("For the Love of Money" recently had a resurgence as the theme song of the hit TV show *The Apprentice*).

Sadly, in 1977, William Powell passed away. He was replaced by Sammy Strain, an original member of Little Anthony

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▼ The O'Jays – Walter Williams, William Powell, and Eddie Levert (from left) – are renowned for their spectacular choreographed stage show.



and the Imperials, one of the early groups that the O'Jays idolized. Strain would eventually rejoin the Imperials and his place in the O'Jays would be taken by Nathaniel Best and then Eric Grant, who has been with the group since 1995. Today, Williams and Levert, who have been friends since early childhood, along with Grant, continue to create the unmistakable sound of the O'Jays.

Through years of sacrifice and dedication, the O'Jays carry on in the great tradition of groups like the Moonglows, the Dells, the Spaniels, and the Flamingos, who led the way for other artists of their generation and beyond, as do the O'Jays today. From the beginning, the O'Jays have never forgotten where they came from: gospel, soul, rhythm & blues, and pop.

Their longevity as vocal artists and performers inspires countless others. Just watch them onstage – not only their sound but their steps and their moves, taught to them years ago by the legendary choreographer Cholly Atkins – and you'll see what showmanship is all about. They're at the top of their game, whether recording or touring, not just because of their talent but because of their love of the music and their respect for the audience that has supported them through a career that has seen six decades. Eddie Levert has passed that love and respect on to his son Gerald, who continues the tradition with his band Levert, and, yes, Eddie will occasionally join him onstage or in a recording session.

We happily welcome into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame the O'Jays. It's a joy for me and my colleagues to play this great group's music and to be a part of this wonderful industry. The message truly is in their music.



▲ Walter Williams, William Powell, and Eddie Levert (from left), 1975



▲ Eddie Levert, Sammy Strain, and Walter Williams (from left), circa 1978



▲ The O'Jays, known for the hit "Back Stabbers" – and back bends



▲ The O'Jays during one of their many 'Soul Train' appearances