

INDUCTEES

Biographies by Michael Hill

The Supremes

THE GIRLS," AS THE SUPREMES WERE KNOWN AMONG THE MOTOWN family, were not considered a likely pick to click on the company roster when they first joined its ranks in 1961. But Berry Gordy Jr. believed in them more strongly and for longer than did anyone else, and the girls rewarded his ample attention by coming to embody his dream of the Sound of Young America. During the heat of the British Invasion in the summer of 1964, Motown released "Where Did Our Love Go?" and the hitherto commercially lukewarm trio of Diana Ross, Mary Wilson and Florence Ballard was launched on its streak of five consecutive Number One hits. And *that* was only the beginning.

What brought the Supremes seemingly overnight success was their rapport with another Motown trio, the in-house songwriting and producing team of Eddie Holland, Lamont Dozier and Brian Holland. The songs that Holland-Dozier-Holland hand-tailored for the Supremes were brilliantly simple evocations of young, quixotic love. Backed up with the light but rock-steady beat of bassist James Jamerson and drummer Benny Benjamin, they were the kind of dance-floor-ready songs that could turn from plaintive ("Where Did Our Love Go?") to rapturous ("I Hear a Symphony") in the space of a heartbeat.

Diana was the out-front ingénue, perpetually perplexed in all matters romantic, bolstered by her onstage confidantes, Mary and Flo. Diana's soulfulness was stylized: she had charm-school diction and was seductively shy. In the song "Back in My Arms Again" she made her travails sound as intimate as a phone conversation whispered with parents out of earshot: "How can Mary tell me what to do/When she's lost her love so true?/And Flo, she don't know/'Cause the boy she loves is a Romeo."

The Supremes were an offshoot of the Primettes, a larger vocal group formed in 1959 by Temptation-to-be Paul Williams, who wanted to create a sister act for his own Primes. The Primettes were a byproduct of musical and social connections in the Brewster projects of Detroit, where the girls lived. Florence was the first to accept Williams's offer; she brought along her school chum Mary. Together they recruited Diane Ross – the *a* would be added to her name much later – a fashionable local girl who worked after school in a Detroit department store, attended modeling classes, studied cosmetology and, as she put it in Gerri Hirshey's *Nonhere to Run*, dreamed of a career in which she could "sing and wear pretty clothes."

The Primettes' first, unsuccessful brush with Motown also came about through neighborhood connections. Diana knew a cousin of Smokey Robinson's who lived up the street from her; in the summer of 1960 he arranged an audition for the Primettes with Berry Gordy Jr. They didn't get the deal that time; Gordy suggested they finish high school.

The Primettes didn't let Motown forget them, though. Diana remembers the girls "making pests of ourselves" and eventually graduating from hanging out to providing hand claps in studio backup choruses (for \$2.50 a session).

After their initial rejection the Primettes turned to a smaller Detroit label, LuPine, for their big break. Though they got to make a single, it was never distributed. What officially brought them to Motown was yet another neighborhood connection. Freddy Gorman, an aspiring songwriter and a mailman whose route included the Primettes' homes, had a tune called "I Want a Guy," which he thought would be well suited to the girls. He brought them and the song to Berry Gordy Jr. early in 1961. This time Gordy liked what he heard. He placed the group on the Tamla label. (The Primettes were then a quartet; Barbara Martin left the group after recording "I Want a Guy.") Before their debut, Gordy suggested the girls change their group's name, and Florence selected the Supremes from a list they had compiled.

"I Want a Guy" was not a hit. A year

after the record's release, the Supremes were moved from Tamla to the Motown label, where they made a brief chart showing with "Let Me Go the Right Way." In 1963 they recorded the exuberant but only moderately successful Holland-Dozier-Holland tune "When the Lovelight Starts Shining Through His Eyes." "Run, Run," another disappointment, preceded "Where Did Our Love Go?" When that song finally started to climb the charts, the Supremes were on tour with Dick Clark's Caravan of Stars, where they held the humble opening slot. By the end of the tour, "Where Did Our Love Go?" was Number One – and the Supremes were closing the show.

Although the Supremes remained consistent chartmakers throughout their career, they were nothing less than a phenomenon from the summer of 1964 to the summer of 1965, coming out with the hits "Baby Love," "Come See About Me," "Stop! In the Name of Love" and "Back in My Arms Again." The irresistible groove of these H-D-H confections didn't so much change from song to song as it elaborated on what went on before – variations on the same winning theme. The Supremes were suddenly everywhere. They appeared at Murray the K's Brooklyn Fox extravaganzas; they showed up on *Hullabaloo*. They toured England for two weeks and, after meeting Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr, flew to Southern California to appear in what would turn out to be the definitive mid-Sixties pop showcase, the concert film of *The T.A.M.I. Show*. The girls capped off 1964 with the first of many appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

By the spring of '65 the Supremes had made the cover of *Time*. Having captivated Gordy's Young America, the Supremes that summer conquered an older generation with a much ballyhooed stint at the Copacabana, Manhattan's premier supper club. Rehearsed by Motown choreographer Cholly Atkins, creator of the girls' trademark hand movements, and vocal coach Maurice King, the Supremes made a smooth transition from shindig chic to supper-club swank. Diane became Diana. In early 1967, Motown announced that the girls would henceforth be known as Diana Ross and the Supremes, and the spotlight was unabashedly focused on Motown's future solo artist and movie star.

In April, Florence Ballard was replaced by Cindy Birdsong. In November 1969, after a string of singles that attempted to reflect the social consciousness of the period, Diana left the Supremes.

The end of an era was marked by the girls' final Number One song, "Someday We'll Be Together." Diana played a final series of shows with Mary and Cindy in Las Vegas as 1969 drew to a close, then Jean Terrell stepped in to front the trio for a successful string of singles marked by the sleeker Philadelphia sound of the early Seventies.

To use an apt cliché, if the story of the Supremes weren't real, someone would have had to invent it. Their rags-to-riches drama was played out at a time when the nation, not the charts, was divided by black and white. Diana Ross, using style as her ticket out of the Brewster projects, was transformed from ingénue to icon. Motown itself grew from Detroit's most famous cottage industry into a powerful Los Angeles conglomerate. The songs, however, have remained the same: forever fresh, forever young, the sound of the sweetest teenage torment. Artists from Vanilla Fudge to Phil Collins have covered the Supremes' work, but those songs will always belong to "the girls." ■

Diana Ross, born March 26th, 1944, Detroit, Michigan. Florence Ballard, born June 30th, 1943, Detroit, Michigan; died February 22nd, 1976, Detroit, Michigan. Mary Wilson, born March 6th, 1944, Detroit, Michigan.





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