



The Temptations

By Michael Hill

THE TEMPTATIONS are the quintessential Motown vocal group. With style to spare, drop-dead dance moves and voices that had been nurtured in the deep South and seasoned in the cities of the North, the Temptations captured in their work the pleasures of the street-corner serenade as well as the flash of the Sixties soul revue. Whether rendering Smokey Robinson's silky meditations on romance or executing the intricate vocal paces of Norman Whitfield's gritty funk, their voices suggested the story of the singers' lives.

Perhaps it all began in 1956, when Eddie Kendricks, possessed of a heartbreaker's falsetto, and Paul Williams, a rich baritone, decided to leave their Birmingham, Alabama, home to seek their fortune up North as rhythm & blues singers. The two ambitious seventeen-year-olds arrived in Detroit via Cleveland, where they had been spotted by a slick Detroit manager named Milton Jenkins. He convinced the pair that success awaited them in the Motor City, among the doo-wop groups scuffling around a lively, low-rent music scene.

Jenkins was right, although their breakthrough was several years and a couple of managers away. In fact, Kendricks almost didn't stick it out. He retreated to Birmingham during the leanest times, but Williams finally persuaded him to return and rejoin the Primes, a trio they'd formed with fellow Alabamian Kell Osborne. The Primes enjoyed a modicum of stardom; they became well known enough to warrant a sister group, the Primettes (which included Diane Ross, Florence Ballard and Mary Wilson), as an opening act at their low-pay, sometimes no-pay, gigs.

The Primes were the toughest combo to beat in the vocal duels that enlivened house parties and dances, something that Otis Williams, another baritone and future Temptation (but no relation to Paul Williams), learned the first time he set eyes — and ears — upon them.

Otis Williams, who had come to Detroit from Texas with his family, was also an up-and-coming singer, first with a group called the Siberians, then with the Distant. In his recent memoirs, *Temptations*, Williams recalled his initial encounter with the Primes: "Being proud and somewhat competitive, my group would go up against anyone in these little group shoot-outs, but once we heard the Primes, we had to admit there was no contest. We thought we were so hot doing our little doo-wop tunes . . . but it was kid stuff compared to what the Primes were doing. They were just a couple of years older than we were, but their three-part harmonies were heavenly."

Melvin Franklin, the future bass voice of the Temptations, had first impressed Otis Williams as a member of the Voice Masters, a group that had included David Ruffin and had recorded for Gwen Gordy's label Anna. When the Distant was finally offered a chance to record, they found themselves without a bass singer, so Williams hustled to find Franklin. Williams proceeded to the Franklin household for a conference with Melvin's mother. He tried to convince her that Franklin's joining the group wouldn't interfere with his studies. (Otis neglected to mention that he had already dropped out to pursue music full time.) With his family's blessing and the offer of a record deal to come, Franklin joined the Distant. The group's signature song, "Come On," was released locally on Northern Records and nationally on the New York-based Warwick label; it wasn't a success on vinyl, but it became a crowd pleaser at shows.

According to Otis, Berry Gordy even caught the Distant performing a spirited rendition of the song at a community-center dance he at-

tended with Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. Williams recounts running into Gordy in the men's room directly afterward. "I like what you guys do onstage, and I like your record," Gordy told him. "If you ever leave where you are, come see me, because I'm starting my own label." He handed Williams a card that simply read, TAMLA-MOTOWN.

By the time Gordy again took interest in Otis Williams and Melvin Franklin, the career of the Distant had run its course. It was 1961, and the future of the Primes was equally uncertain, prompting Eddie Kendricks and Paul Williams to get in touch with their former challengers. Williams, Kendricks, Franklin and Williams formed the Elgins, a combo that took its name from a brand of wristwatch. Rounding out the group was Eldridge Bryant, formerly the Distant's tenor. Gordy signed the Elgins to the Miracle label, a Motown affiliate, whose rather ill-conceived slogan was "If it's a hit, it's a Miracle."

The group soon discovered that another band had already laid claim to its moniker, so the band members settled on the Temptations, a name redolent, they felt, of the sex appeal they projected onstage. There were no miracles for the Temptations on Miracle, however. The band's two singles, "Oh Mother of Mine" and "Check Yourself," both released in 1961, fell short of the charts. By 1962 the Temps had been moved to Gordy Records and had become a part of the hard-working Motown family.

Like their fellow groups, the early Temptations put in time as background singers for other artists' sessions. They backed Eddie Holland (later part of the Eddie Holland-Lamont Dozier-Brian Holland hitmaking team) on tour when he had his own successful single, and they made their Apollo Theater debut backing Mary Wells. But a hit single eluded the Temptations, even as their reputations as live performers grew.

By 1963 the band's rigorous schedule had taken its toll on Bryant, who often found himself at odds with his fellow singers. Before he could depart or be dismissed, though, an obvious successor made his presence known in a rather unforgettable way. According to Otis Williams, a galvanic local singer named David Ruffin, a former Mississippian with a gospel shouter's intensity, "leapt onstage" with the Temps during one gig. "The minute Ruffin got up and did his thing," Williams remembers, "with throwing his microphone up in the air, catching it and doing full splits, plus singing like a man possessed, that was it." Ruffin had previously recorded for Anna Records, alone and with the Voice Masters; by the time he joined the Temptations, he had already created a buzz around Detroit with a pair of songs, "Mr. Bus Driver Hurry" and "Action Speaks Louder Than Words."

The Temptations finally became a priority after Motown's annual Detroit Christmas show in 1963. According to Nelson George in *Where Did Our Love Go?*, Berry Gordy polled members of the audience in the Fox Theater lobby after the show, asking which performers they enjoyed the most; by far, the Temptations were audience favorites, beating out some of the label's best sellers. A month later, the Temptations had their first Top Twenty hit with Smokey Robinson's slyly sexy song "The Way You Do the Things You Do," on which Kendricks sang lead.

Although a Norman Whitfield-Eddie Holland follow-up, "Girl (Why You Wanna Make Me Blue)," put the Temps in the Top Thirty, they didn't surpass their initial hit until a year later, when Robinson tailored a song for the unique talents of David Ruffin. "My Girl" represented Robinson at his most effortlessly lyrical and became a signature for the



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Temptations. It also became their first Number One pop hit.

"My Girl" established Ruffin as a vocalist of extraordinary character. Ruffin testifies with religious fervor about the many wonders his romance brings; his fellow Temptations harmonize grandiloquently behind him, echoing the song title hauntingly on the chorus. On the strength of "My Girl," the Temptations traveled to England with the Motown Revue, which, predictably, caused a sensation there. They were a featured act during one of Murray the K's summer spectaculars at Brooklyn's Fox Theater, and toward the end of 1965 they made their first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. The Temptations relied on Smokey Robinson's material until the next year, when they recorded "Get Ready," an atypically aggressive and very funky number from Robinson, highlighted by Kendrick's teasing falsetto.

"Get Ready" reached Number One on the R&B chart but barely brushed the pop Top Thirty. So for the Temps' next single, Motown chose "Ain't Too Proud to Beg," a side that had been cut at the same time as "Get Ready" but had been passed over in favor of the hit-worthy Smokey tune. The song had been written by Norman Whitfield and Eddie Holland and produced by Whitfield, who was eager for another chance to work with the Temptations, having enjoyed his first major success with the Marvelettes' "Too Many Fish in the Sea" (also written with Holland). "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" was another R&B smash, reaching Number Thirteen on *Billboard's* pop chart. It also signaled a change in direction for the Temptations, away from Robinson's sleek pop soul, toward Whitfield's more overt rhythm & blues sound, which made the most of Ruffin's gospel-inflected delivery. Subsequent Whitfield productions, "Beauty's Only Skin Deep" and the dramatic and oft-covered "(I Know) I'm Losing You," were Top Ten pop smashes.

By this time, the Temptations were far removed from the combo that wowed the locals at clubs and dances; the steps that Paul Williams had devised had been replaced by the Temptations Walk, which was choreographed by Motown's dancer-in-residence, Cholly Atkins. Their streetwise wardrobe and look had been replaced by slicker threads and a hipper style that would be equally acceptable at the Copacabana and the Apollo. Even their microphone setup had changed: the four Temptations who sang backup on any individual tune were grouped around a specially designed four-pronged mike that allowed them the room to execute their moves freely while they harmonized.

During 1966 the quintet also began to team up with the Supremes, their old friends from the scuffling days, for concert and television appearances that emphasized the playful, familial side of Motown and underscored the heady status of both groups in the company hierarchy.

In December 1967, Motown released the Temptations' "I Wish It Would Rain," another Top Ten Whitfield production that would be the last achingly romantic ballad the group would record for some time. Although its message was timeless, the song had a melancholy mood that somehow suited the moment. It was a period of change and unrest – racial, political, musical.

There were troubles within the Temptations as well: David Ruffin, the group's unofficial star, wanted to strike out on his own – or at least get preferential billing, which didn't sit well with a band that had always sold itself as "five lead vocalists." By late 1968, Ruffin was gone; within a year he had resumed a solo career with Motown, scoring a Top Ten pop hit with "My Whole World Ended (the Moment You Left Me)."

In the meantime, the Temptations, guided by the forward-thinking Whitfield, had come up with "Cloud Nine," a galvanizing ensemble tune with a startlingly stripped-down arrangement and rather controversial lyrics alluding to drug use. Whitfield had discarded the tried-and-true Motown formula for a more expansive approach that favored repetitive, short-on-frills dance rhythms under layers of chanted vocals. The result was as striking as – and owed a notable debt to – Sly and the Family Stone's feverish dance tracks. "Cloud Nine" was also the debut of vocalist Dennis Edwards, late of another Motown group, the Contours.

The old Motown showbiz style hadn't entirely disappeared, however. In early 1969 the Temptations and the Supremes scored a major

hit with "I'm Gonna Make You Love Me," a song that was part of an album the two groups were working on together. A tandem appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* prompted NBC to offer the two groups their own variety special, *TCB* ("taking care of business"), a coup for these black artists in the conservative climate of television. It was a popular success and a memorable artistic achievement.

Dennis Edwards continued to be featured on the tunes that Whitfield was then writing with Barrett Strong, which constituted, in Otis Williams's words, the group's "psychedelic phase": "Runaway Child, Running Wild," "Don't Let the Joneses Get You Down," "I Can't Get Next to You" (which showcased all five vocalists in rapid-fire, round-robin fashion), "Psychedelic Shack" and "Ball of Confusion (That's What the World Is Today)," which featured deadpan delivery of tongue-twisting lyrics cataloging modern ills over an insistent beat. These tracks couldn't be contained in the compact structure of singles; listeners who wanted to appreciate the full-length groove had to turn to Temptations albums like *Cloud Nine*, *Puzzle People* and *Psychedelic Shack*.

By 1971 the Temptations were facing the loss of another member, Eddie Kendricks, who, like David Ruffin before him, yearned for solo success. (Within a few years, Kendricks cut very contemporary and seductive tracks, like "Keep On Truckin'" and "Boogie Down," which had the trancelike qualities of Marvin Gaye's work and foreshadowed disco rhythms.) Before Kendricks left, though, he cut the lead vocal on a Whitfield-Strong number that remains a Temptations classic, on a par with "My Girl" and "I Wish It Would Rain": "Just My Imagination (Running Away with Me)," a gorgeous, bittersweet ballad featuring swirling strings and an utterly masterful performance from Kendricks. It proved a graceful conclusion to Kendricks's lengthy tenure with the group.

Upon Kendricks's departure, unfortunately, problems worsened for Paul Williams, who had succumbed to a fast-lane lifestyle that would ultimately force him to leave the group late in 1971. Although Williams worked behind the scenes with the Temps, supported by Motown, he never overcame his personal troubles. In August 1973, Paul Williams was found dead in a parked car only a short distance from Motown's Hitsville studio. Police ruled his death a suicide.

Whitfield's tenure as writer-producer for the Temptations climaxed in 1972 with the group's last Number One pop hit, "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone," a durable piece of lean funk that employed all the Temptations' vocal skills to bring to life a fresh-off-the-streets tale of an abandoned family. The song remains a striking example of how far the Temptations-Whitfield collaboration had evolved, musically and thematically.

On board were two new singers: Richard Street, a former member of Otis Williams's Distant, who has been with the Temps ever since, and Damon Harris, who put in a four-year stint. Dennis Edwards twice parted company with the group (the first time was in 1977, when the Temptations left Motown for a brief stint with Atlantic). Throughout the Seventies, though, Otis Williams and Melvin Franklin kept alive the Temptations' legacy, onstage and in the studio, taking their sound literally around the world.

In 1982 the original Temptations reassembled at Motown for the *Reunion* album, which featured "Standing on the Top," composed especially for them by one of the more *outré* members of Motown's new generation, Rick James. A major reunion tour followed.

In May 1983, during Motown's twenty-fifth-anniversary television extravaganza, an inspired Dennis Edwards engaged Levi Stubbs of the Four Tops in a vocal duel, in which they traded off classic bits of each others' hits. It was among the most exciting and spontaneous segments in the show. For a moment, the Temps and the Tops harked back to their beginnings, when singers vied with each other to bring down the house, no matter how humble.

The current Temptations – Williams, Franklin, Edwards, Street and Ron Tyson – renewed their contract with Motown in 1987; they immediately scored two Top Ten rhythm & blues hits, "I Wonder Who She's Seeing Now," featuring Stevie Wonder on harmonica, and "Look What You've Started."

The Temptations are still taking care of business.

