



**Suzanna Celeste
de Passe, 1983**

SUZANNE DE PASSE

THIS MASTER CREATIVE STRATEGIST ALTERED
THE COURSE OF MUSIC HISTORY FROM GUITAR-BASED
ROCK TO BLACK-CENTERED, VOCALS-FIRST POP.

BY DANIEL SMITH

In the spring of 1968, Detroit was reeling from the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the uprisings that followed. Suzanne de Passe, a Harlem girl who'd eased out of Syracuse University to book acts at a New York City nightclub, was then staying at the Harlan House where a lot of Motown acts lived – Diana Ross had the penthouse. De Passe, already known for her “ear,” was friends with the Supremes’ Cindy Birdsong, who introduced her to Berry Gordy. After functioning for a short time as a Motown scout in New York, de Passe moved to the Motor City to become Gordy’s creative assistant. “All of the creative matters that came to his office, came to me,” de Passe recalled in a recent interview with Josh Flagg. She was then all of 21 years old.

It was the beginning of a career that would attain the highest levels, with singular artists creating some of the most culture-shifting music, television, and film of the past six decades. De Passe did it all quietly: Her milieu is the boardroom, the wings, and a billion backstages. She is the star-whisperer, the master strategist, the lonely screenwriter, and in most any creative situation, the de facto leader. On the way to launching her own genius company in 1992, she was the discreetly churning motor of all things Motown, the brand that changed everything.

At Harlan House, Bobby Taylor of Bobby Taylor & the Vancouvers introduced de Passe to young Jackie, Tito, Jermaine, Marlon, and Michael Jackson. The brothers sang

for her a cappella. De Passe called Gordy, saying Motown should sign them. His response: “Kids?! I don’t want any kid acts! Do you know how much trouble Stevie Wonder is?”

De Passe, of course, won the day. “Mr. Gordy put me in charge of everything having to do with [the Jackson 5] except the actual producing and writing of the records,” she told *Variety* in 2022. “The show, the wardrobe, the banter, the choreography – we did the choreography for ‘I Want You Back’ in my living room.”

In 1972, Motown decamped to Los Angeles, and de Passe was named head of West Coast A&R. “When I found the second act I wanted to sign – the Commodores with Lionel Richie – [Gordy] didn’t even have to see them, he just said, ‘Sign them,’” she recalled. With even just these two groups and their solo lead singers on her curriculum vitae, de Passe altered the course of American music history from white-centered, guitar-based rock to Black-centered, vocals-first pop. Along with Whitney Houston (signed to Arista Records by Clive Davis), Lionel Richie and Michael Jackson are the spine of post-1970s American music.

De Passe loved music, but it was bigger than albums and singles. She made it clear that she wanted more. In a synopsis that belies the complexities of being a woman in the wilderness of the 1970s music business, she told *Variety* that “[Mr. Gordy] handed me a script one day, ‘Can you read this and tell me what you think?’ I read it

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Inside Motown Recording Studios, Los Angeles, 1975; outside Motown's Los Angeles studio, 1975; with Diana Ross, 1990; on the set of *Return to Lonesome Dove*, 1993.



and told him. . . . And the next thing you know I'm co-writing *Lady Sings the Blues*."

Even considering all the music she oversaw as a record executive, de Passe's greatest accomplishment may have been that 1972 film and choosing Diana Ross to portray Billie Holiday. Not only did she maneuver the movie to completion through a still-segregated Hollywood system, she had to leap past the swelling juggernaut that was male-centered Blaxploitation. De Passe's script turned Louis McKay (portrayed by Billy Dee Williams) into a charmer that in real life he was not, but the film gave Black Americans a love story it craved, turning what could have been a basic biopic into a blockbuster, and providing Diana Ross with a vehicle that lived up to her own ambitions. In a review at the time, Roger Ebert wrote, "The opening scene is . . . Billie Holiday is locked into prison, destitute and nearly friendless, and desperately needing a fix of heroin. The high, lonely shriek which escapes from Ross in this scene is a call from the soul, and we know this isn't any 'screen debut' by a Top Forty star; this is acting."

The film closed the Cannes Film Festival, was the ninth most successful film of that year, and was nominated for five Oscars including for Best Original Screenplay. De Passe and company also returned Billie Holiday to the world – no small task in the 1970s when pop was prepping to let the blues and jazz fade to nothingness. As a cherry on top, the double-album soundtrack went to Number One.

De Passe was named president of Motown Productions in 1982. The job was, as she put it, to be a kind of "Swiss army knife." She was a problem solver. Fixed things – acts, shows, projects, departments – that were broken. When a Motown television retrospective was struggling to materialize, de Passe joined as executive producer and cowriter of what became *Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever*. The 1983 show was watched by 35 percent of the American population. It featured Marvin Gaye during the last part of his life. It reunited the Supremes. The Four Tops and the Temptations battled each other, hit for hit. Michael Jackson moonwalked his way toward the global icon he would become. The creative battles, logistical labyrinths, and management of long-established relationships required to conceive of and execute a program that lives on in the collective memory more than forty years later – this is the kind of feat for which de Passe is most known. *Motown 25* won the Emmy for Outstanding Variety, Music or Comedy Program, beating out the *Tony Awards*, *Kennedy Center Honors*, *Second City Television*, and *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*. It also placed Motown on its proper historical throne.

In 1989, after winning another Emmy for *Motown Returns to the Apollo*, de Passe produced the CBS mini-series *Lonesome Dove*, starring Robert Duvall and Tommy Lee Jones. The beloved show attracted record-setting audiences, won two Golden Globes, and garnered seven Emmys on eighteen nominations. Many people



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: In the office, 1987; with Lionel Richie, 2007; attending a pre-Grammy party with Berry Gordy, 2019.



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were surprised that Motown would be making a Western film, especially one with a mostly white cast. When pressed by the *Los Angeles Times* to account for this move, de Passe spoke for generations of Black creatives:

“I don’t think we’ve broken the Motown mold . . . we’ve expanded it. . . . People should be free to do and create anything that turns them on, and I think Motown Productions would be accomplishing a great deal if what our mold became was great entertainment. What I think is interesting . . . is why no one asks Carsey/Werner [the white producers of *The Cosby Show*] why they’re in business with Bill Cosby, and nobody asks Simpson and Bruckheimer [the white producers of the *Beverly Hills Cop* films] why they’re in business with Eddie Murphy. It’s very interesting that I have to answer for the Black company that does projects [starring white actors]. I guess it’s because the people who are asking me the questions are more fascinated with what appears to be

an encroachment on what has heretofore been pretty much their domain – rather than in any way to think they may have encroached on someone else’s domain.”

Suzanne de Passe may seem a ghost in the machine, but she is a towering presence in American culture, a hero of and advocate for Black music and culture, and importantly a Black woman who made the decision early on to believe in her talent, to bravely move across the country to chase her dreams, to deal with the competitiveness and creepiness of a male-dominated business, and then rise to the very, very top. The great Ahmet Ertegun once said, “I’d be happy if people said that I did a little bit to raise the . . . recognition of the greatness of African American music.” He has this in common with the great Suzanna Celeste de Passe — and they both did way, way more than a little bit.

Tonight, we welcome her into the Rock & Roll of Fame as the Ahmet Ertegun Award Inductee of 2024.