

MOTOWN, MARTIN & ME

Motown played an important role in the racial integration of popular music. It was the first record label owned by an African American to primarily feature African-American artists who achieved crossover success. In the 1960s, Motown and its soul-based subsidiaries created the elements of what came to be known as "*The Motown Sound*," a style of soul music with a distinct pop influence. For me, the Motown Sound was three girls known as the Supremes. Their names were Diana Ross, Mary Wilson and Florence Ballard. The Supremes style of Motown music would strongly impact my life.

There was not a radio station that did not play the music of Motown and the Supremes during the sixties. It is widely discussed the success of Motown music was in the fact that the music was perfectly suited for the radio transistors of the day. The handclaps, the tambourines and bass beats cut perfectly through the speakers and the songs allowed the listeners to sing along. My mother often caught me with the radio turned up and singing at the top of my lungs, *The Sound of Young America*. I was lost in my own world listening to the Supremes singing one of their top ten hits.

"Go on boy, get out of my life! Set me free why don't you baby, cause you don't really love me. You just keep me hanging on."

"Boy, what did I tell you 'bout singing like a girl? Don't no boy supposed to be trying to run 'round sounding like no girl. Now turn that shit down." My mother shouted from another room.

I turned the radio down, but never turned down my love for the three girls from Detroit. I began to collect records albums, posters, magazine articles and anything I could find related to the Supremes. Over forty years and through several personnel changes, I would remain a fan.

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Every place I lived, I would carry my growing collection of albums, video tapes, posters, post cards, magazine covers, articles, and even dolls.

Why was I drawn to the three singers discovered by Berry Gordy from the Detroit projects? I know part of it was the same feeling Oprah Winfrey shared when as a child, she used to holler from her back porch “Colored people on! Colored people on TV!” As a black kid growing up in the sixties, The Supremes were a symbol of success, an aspiration of what can happen if you have talent and drive. You can rise from the projects and one day be on the Ed Sullivan show. The Supremes came from the projects and had performed all over the world. They were three black girls who performed in previously white environments, with white stars and treated like equals.

I wasn't a singer. I did not live in the projects. I lived in an all-black middle class neighborhood in Portsmouth, Virginia. The community was called Cavalier Manor where every street was named after a famous black person. I lived on (Duke) Ellington Square. Behind me was (Billy) Ekstine Drive and across the way was (Count) Basie Crescent. There were three of us kids (just like the three girls from the Detroit projects) but I always stood out in activities, appearance and attitude, like *Diana*. I knew from the time I was a small child I had been given my name for a special reason. Why else would my parents have named me after those white people? (Dale Evans and Guy Madison western movie stars of the 50's) It was the late '50s when I was born. The civil rights movement was huge. Success was about crossover. That's what the Supremes did. They crossed over. They weren't just stars for the black community; they crossed color barriers. Even white kids knew their names. I wanted people to know my name, Dale Guy Madison. The name reminded me of the Hollywood star Edward G. Robinson. I wanted to cross over too.

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During the sixties, the buzz word was integration. I went to an all black elementary school. By the time I reached my junior high school year in the 7th grade, white kids were bused to our brand newly built schools. I attended school with white kids. I was exposed to their music and culture. Blacks no longer had to ride in the back of the bus. We could shop anywhere and eat in any restaurant. There was still racism. I saw it on television as the civil rights struggle played out in Atlanta with Martin Luther King Jr leading the struggle. I also saw the positive images Berry Gordy produced in his acts as they appeared on the leading television shows of the day (Hatton 13a). In 1968, after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, the Supremes performed the Stephen Sondheim/ Leonard Bernstein song, 'Somewhere' from *West Side Story* on the Motown produced television special "TCB" and dedicated the song to King's memory. I remember being mesmerized when Diana Ross stopped singing dramatically in the middle of the song to quote part of the MLK speech:

Yes there's a place for us
Somewhere a place for us
Yes there's a place for each of us
Where love is like a passion that burns like a fire
Let our efforts be as determined as that of Dr Martin Luther King
Who had a dream,
That all god's children,
Black men, white men Jews, Gentiles, Protestant and Catholics,
Could join hands and sign that spiritual of old,
Free at last, free at last
Thank god almighty, free at last!
Hold my hand and we're half way there
Hold my hand and I'll take you there
Somehow, Someday, Somewhere

There she was, standing in a shimmering white beaded gown in front of a mostly white audience pleading the message of integration. The memory of that song never left me in the years following his death. In her memoirs, Diana Ross recalls meeting Dr. King and feeling his

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dream of hope (Ross 148). Motown even released a special spoken word label called Black Forum with the recorded speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King (Gordy 248-249).

In 1991, I became a host on the QVC shopping network. I was keenly aware that there were no shows dedicated to the African–American buying audiences. At the time of my hire, I was one of three African-American hosts. I went to the executives at the network and presented my idea of home shopping integration to them. This would be the first time a home shopping show would dedicate prime time hours showcasing products created by and inspired from African images and culture. The eventual show I hosted and produced *African Marketplace/Destination: Africa*, became very successful for the network. It not only brought in new viewers, but made the company a lot of money. In the world of TV shopping, I *had* crossed over, like the Supremes. As a black man, I was reaching white and black shopping audiences with a show on black culture that all viewers found entertaining, informative and full of pride.

For the next four years people would know me as a TV shopping host. I imagined Berry Gordy would see me in an intense interview with Susan Lucci discussing the benefits of her hair product and he'd cast me in *Lady Sings More of the Blues*. Well, Berry never called, but I did *Reach Out and Touch Somebody's Hand*, the Diana Ross song penned by Nick Ashford and Valerie Simpson that sends the message of universal love and acceptance:

Reach out and touch
Somebody's hand
Make this world a better place,
If you can
Try a little kindness
And you'll see
It's something that comes very naturally

I tried to make the all-white world of home shopping a better place for all races. The letters I received from black and white viewers confirmed I achieved racial integration in home

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shopping. The success of the show spawned a career of doll designing. I met collectors from all over the country. I became an award winning nationally recognized doll designer. An article was written about me in a predominately white doll magazine. My dolls with black faces made from black cloth were talked about and written about to white doll collectors. For me it all related back to the Supremes and the impact they had on my life. The Supremes were on the core of black magazines like Jet and Ebony and the covers of Life and Post.

The Supremes appealed to a wider white audience. They weren't just Black stars. They were stars, period. They leaped over color barriers. White kids helped The Supremes bust the charts with more number one hits than anybody except The Beatles and Elvis Presley. My success in the world of home shopping had crossed color barriers. White collectors were buying my dolls.

I relate so much of my experience working at QVC to how I understood the workings of Motown. Motown had a main label and subsidiary labels for specialty acts. The main label at Motown was for the true cross-over acts. The other labels such as Soul, Gordy or Tamala were where the grittier or urban (more black sounding) acts recorded. QVC had a subsidiary channel called The Fashion Channel. This was where I where I was originally hired to do the majority of my work. I like to think of my four years at QVC as something like the seven years at Motown for Gladys Knight and the Pips—a talented singing group on the Soul label, who struggled for recognition, good songs, and producers while The Supremes were treated like royalty. I was a host on their new *QVC Fashion Channel* from 1991 to 1994—a small fish in a big shopping world struggling to be recognized. The main QVC hosts got better shows, better guests and more financial perks.

I had to prove myself in order to cross over to the main channel, which I did with

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Destination: Africa. The original show generated \$311, 000 in sales and added 221 new QVC members. This was considered very successful for a new show. QVC wanted to repeat our success as an annual Black History Month event, but I tried to convince them that black culture should be honored all year. I would host four more shows by the time I left QVC. The final show I hosted alone was a three-hour event and had a real African princess from Ghana as my special guest. The final sales were over a million dollars, and brought more than 2,000 new viewers to the shopping channel. I was featured in a national magazine, *Ebony Man*, an offshoot of the popular *Ebony* magazine. This was my shining moment: the fashion channel guy came over to the big channel and showed them his stuff. I basked in my “Gladys Knight” moment. This is what it must have felt like when *I Heard it through the Grapevine* became Motown’s biggest hit on the Soul label, even outselling all the Motown released songs. The second tier group didn’t do too shabby!

The cultural landscape of my life I can directly relate to the affect of the musical legacy Motown left a generation of the 60’s. I was the *Sound of Young America*. I *Danced in the Streets*. I was lost in *Cloud Nine*. I *Stopped in the Name of Love*. I lived to see the dream of racial equality of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It still is not a perfect equality, but it is better than what it was in 1968. Thirty years later, the music of Motown still holds the fingerprints of that era for me. It shaped who I am today and I owe part of that transformation to the music.

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