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The Velvelettes: Motown's Unsung Heroes
By Julia Chan

Abstract

From the Supremes to the Jackson Five, Motown launched the careers of some of the biggest names in music history. While artists such as Diana Ross and Michael Jackson went on to become household names, most people have never heard of a little-known but important girl group called the Velvelettes. Their story has never been told in-depth on camera—until now.

Comprised of two sisters, two cousins, and one of their best friends, the Velvelettes got their name from their rich, distinctive harmony that sounded “smooth as velvet.” The group was formed in 1961 on the campus of Western Michigan University to enter a talent show. After the Velvelettes won the grand prize of \$25, a student in the audience recommended the group try out for his uncle's record company in Detroit. The student happened to be Berry Gordy's nephew, and after a chance encounter at Hitsville, U.S.A., the ladies were quickly signed to the Motown family.

In their few years at the label, the group released a handful of mildly successful singles such as “Needle in a Haystack” and “He Was Really Sayin' Somethin.” Even with their talent and work ethic, the Velvelettes found commercial success elusive. A pivotal moment in the group's history was their decision to pass on “Where Did Our Love Go?” The song went to another Motown group, shot up the charts to number-one, and launched the Supremes on the path to superstardom. Meanwhile, the Velvelettes, facing enormous pressure from their families, disbanded before they could get a full album released.

The Velvelettes have been left out of much of Motown history, but the legendary record company probably wouldn't have succeeded without the group. At one point, sales from “Needle in a Haystack” kept the label afloat, supplying Berry Gordy with enough cash to stave off bankruptcy. This happened before the Supremes hit it big, and had it not been for the Velvelettes, the Supremes and countless other artists wouldn't exist, or at least how we know them today.

The Velvelettes reunited in the mid-1980s and have been performing across the world ever since. Although Motown never released a Velvelettes album on vinyl, Universal released several compilation CDs of the Velvelettes' music in the late 1990s. 2012 marks their fiftieth anniversary of the Velvelettes being signed to Motown, and today they are the only Motown group still performing with original members.