

The Marvelettes

Starting out 1961 as a quintet in rural Inkster, Michigan, the Marvelettes were leads Gladys Horton and Georgia Dobbins with Georgeanna Tillman, Juanita Cowart, and Katherine Anderson. Not confident in their singing abilities they called themselves the Casinyets which stood for can't sing yet.

While attending Inkster High, the five seventeen year olds entered the school's talent show where the first three prizes were auditions at Detroit's Motown Records. The girls then called the Marvels finished fourth (though in a 1980 interview Horton said they came in first), but their teacher, Mrs. Shirley Sharpley, convinced the principal Anita Cox to let them go on the audition. It was Sharpley that prevailed upon Jon O'Den (Berry Gordy'd driver and bodyguard) to listen to the Casinyets.

The Marvelettes' early influences were the Chantels and the Shirelles, so it was no surprise when they auditioned with "He's Gone" and "I Met Him On A Sunday." The girls passed their April 1961 audition for Brian Holland and Robert Bateman with flying colors, but sent them home telling them they had to come up with an original song. Having never written anything, Dobbins asked William Garnett, a songwriting friend, if he had anything. He showed her a blues song entitled "Please Mr. Postman." In turn for writing credit she then rewrote it keeping the title and theme. She then gave it to Horton to learn and then dropped out of the group to take care of her sick mother. The group then added Wanda Young, an Inkster graduate, and went back to Motown

Gordy renamed them the Marvelettes and "Please Mr. Postman" on the Tamla label was released in the summer of 1961, around four months after the first single by Motown's other girl group, The Supremes.

On September fourth the song entered the Billboard charts and the R&B charts one week later. Slowly moving up the charts "Please Mr. Postman" it took fourteen weeks for it to finally reach the top spot.

An immediate rivalry arose between the Supremes and the country girls from Inkster.

The Marvelettes' next song "Twistin' Mr. Postman had an heavily accented blues beat. It would ultimately reach number thirty-four Pop and number

thirteen R&B. The group was becoming popular on tour, but underlying tensions and internal competition was taking their toll. The Marvelettes' next record "Playboy" was a hit reaching number seven Pop and number three R&B on June 23. The Supremes were still three weeks away with their first Pop charter "Your Heart Belongs To Me."

Next what was to become their most phone number in the country, Beachwood 4-5789 in the summer of 1962 (#17 Pop, #7 R&B). Then "Strange I know" reached number forty-one Pop and number ten R&B in early 1963., but the rest of the year was a disappointment with "Locking Up My Heart" doing the best (#44 Pop, #25 R&B).

By 1965 the group was having hits again with "Too Many Fish In the Sea" (#25 Pop, #15 R&B), "I'll Keep Holding On" (#34 Pop, #11 R&B), and "Don't Mess With Bill" (#7 Pop, #3 R&B), written by Smokey Robinson and with Wanda on lead.

The Marvelettes than made what turned out to be a major mistake by passing on a song brought to them in 1964 by Holland-Dozier-Holland. The writers then took "Baby Love" to the Supremes, giving them their second number one record in a row.

In 1965 Juanita left the group reportedly following a nervous breakdown. When Georgeanna fell ill with leukemia and lupus soon after and had to leave the touring, the group continued as a trio.

In 1967 The Marvelettes had three hits in a row with "The Hunter Gets Captured by the Game" (#13 pop, #2 R&B), "When Your Young and in Love" (#23 Pop, #9 R&B), and "My Baby Must Be a Magician" (#17 Pop, #8 R&B).

Horton then left the group to get married and Anne Bogan joined.

Their last chart record came in late 1968 with "Destination: Anywhere" (#63 Pop, # 28 R&B).

In 1969 Young decided to stay in Detroit when Motown moved to Los Angeles. That was the end of the group, but four more singles were issued through 1971, the last being "Breathtaking Guy."

In the mid-80s with children grown up Gladys Horton decided to reform the group. She approached Katherine and Wanda with this in mind, but neither was interested. She then found Echo Johnson and Jean McClain and the group signed with Motorcity Records. After their first Motorcity release "Holding On With Both Hands" Johnson and McClain were replaced by Jackie and Regina Holleman.

Georgeanna Tillman married Billy Gordon of the Contours and died of sickle cell anemia in 1980. Wanda Young married Bobby Rogers of the Miracles, Katherine Anderson married Joe Schaffner, road manager for the Temptations. Gladys Horton is single and lives in Los Angeles where she cares for her handicapped son

The Marvelettes had shot to fame with their first record and were a good live act; so why hadn't Berry Gordy promoted them? In retrospect it, it seems that Gordy had found the Marvelettes a little too rough and ready, a little too ordinary, to really push them beyond that of a touring group with the occasional hit. The Marvelettes had an earthy, mature way of singing, which mixed with their youthful romanticism, gave the group an unique appeal. Yet though the group's appeal has proved to be more durable than many of their contemporaries, one can see why for the upwardly mobile Berry Gordy of the '60s, the Marvelettes weren't quite "uptown enough. The mixture was not quite right; there was too much Detroit R&B in there, and not enough New York pop.