

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Mary Wilson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Wilson, Mary, 1944-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Mary Wilson,
Dates:	November 24, 2013
Bulk Dates:	2013
Physical Description:	9 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:18:46).
Abstract:	Singer Mary Wilson (1944 - 2021) , an original member of The Supremes, was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1988. Wilson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 24, 2013, in Henderson, Nevada. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2013_323
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Motown recording artist Mary Wilson was born in Greenville, Mississippi to Sam Wilson, a butcher, and Johnnie Mae Wilson, a homemaker, on March 6, 1944. At age three, Wilson's parents sent her to live in Detroit, Michigan with her aunt, I.V. Pippin, and uncle, John L. Pippin. In 1952, Wilson moved to Detroit's Brewster-Douglass Housing Projects. She was bused from the projects to Algiers elementary school in 1956 when integration of public schools began. Wilson went on to graduate from Northeastern high school in 1962.

In 1959, Wilson joined a local singing group, Primettes, which also included Florence Ballard, Diana Ross and Betty McGlown. The Primettes performed at the 1960 Detroit-Windsor Freedom Festival amateur talent contest and won first place. In 1961, the group, which now included Barbara Martin, signed with Motown Records and changed their name to the Supremes. After Martin left the group in 1962 the Supremes permanently became a trio and traveled that year with "The Motortown Revue," a showcase of Motown artists including the Temptations, Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye.

In 1963, the Supremes teamed up with writer-producers Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier and Eddie Holland (HDH). A few of their records received national airplay. Having recorded the Supremes, who had shared the lead singing for three years without a hit record, Gordy rearranged the group with Wilson and Ballard as background singers. The Supremes scored their first hit in 1963 with the song, "When the Lovelight Starts Shining Through His Eyes." The group reached #1 on U.S. pop charts for the first time in 1964 with the hit record and single, *Where Did Our Love Go*.

In 1964, the Supremes became one of the first Motown acts to perform outside of the United States when they played at the Clay House Inn in Bermuda. The Supremes also began European tours starting with Great Britain and later toured elsewhere, including the Far East. *Where Did Our Love Go* was followed by four consecutive singles that reached #1 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 charts: "Baby Love," which was also a #1 hit in the UK; "Come See About Me"; "Stop! In the Name of Love"; and "Back in My Arms Again." "Baby Love" was nominated for the

1965 Grammy Award for Best R&B Song.

The Supremes became the first black pop group of the sixties to play New York City's Copacabana, and the first pop group to play New York's Philharmonic Hall in Lincoln Center in 1965. Wilson began a solo career after the group disbanded in 1977. As a solo performer, Wilson toured the world, recorded, acted on stage and television, and participated in celebrity charity events. Wilson wrote about her career with Motown and the Supremes in *Dreamgirls: My Life as a Supreme* (1986) and *Supreme Faith: Someday We'll Be Together* (1990).

The Supremes received the NAACP Image Award for Best Female Group in 1972, and they were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1988. Wilson was honored in 1973 with a Mary Wilson Day in Detroit.

Mary Wilson Was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 19, 2013.

Wilson passed away on February 8, 2021.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Mary Wilson was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on November 24, 2013, in Henderson, Nevada, and was recorded on 9 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Singer Mary Wilson (1944 - 2021) , an original member of The Supremes, was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1988.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Wilson, Mary, 1944-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Wilson, Mary, 1944---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

R & B Singer

HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Mary Wilson, November 24, 2013. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Wilson, Section A2013_323_001_001, TRT: 1:32:00 ?

Mary Wilson was born on March 6, 1944 in Greenville, Mississippi to Johnnie Lewis Wilson and Sam Wilson. Wilson's mother was born in Greenwood, Mississippi, where she grew up working on her family's cotton farm. She met Wilson's birth father in Mississippi, where he worked on a riverboat casino. After starting their family, they migrated north and settled in Chicago, Illinois. Eventually, they decided to send Wilson to live with her maternal aunt and uncle, I.V. Lewis Pippin and John L. Pippin, in Detroit, Michigan. They became Wilson's adoptive parents, and raised her in a suburban area of southwest Detroit. There, a neighbor told Wilson about her birth parents when she was ten years old. Around that time, Wilson's mother separated from her birth father, and relocated to Detroit to live with Wilson and her adoptive parents. Wilson later moved into the Brewster-Douglass Housing Projects in Detroit with her mother and two siblings.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Wilson, Section A2013_323_001_002, TRT: 2:31:26 ?

Mary Wilson lived in the Brewster-Douglass Housing Projects of Detroit, Michigan with her birth mother, Johnnie Lewis Wilson, and younger siblings, Roosevelt Wilson and Cathy Wilson. Her family attended the nearby New Bethel Baptist Church, which was led by Reverend C.L. Franklin. There, Wilson joined the choir and met the reverend's daughters, Aretha Franklin and Carolyn Franklin, who invited her to join a singing group. Wilson and Carolyn Franklin were classmates at Alger Elementary School for a time, until Wilson transferred to Bishop Elementary School, which was closer to her home. There, Wilson met Florence Ballard at a talent show, and the two became close friends. Later, Ballard and Wilson auditioned for a vocal group called The Primettes, where they were joined by their neighbor, Diana Ross. Wilson was thirteen years old when she joined The Primettes. They initially performed with The Primes, an all-male group, at music venues and community events in Detroit.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Wilson, Section A2013_323_001_003, TRT: 3:31:34 ?

Mary Wilson attended Northeastern High School in Detroit, Michigan with Florence Ballard, who was a fellow member of The Primettes. The school was known for its strong music department, where Wilson belonged to the glee club, choir and ensemble. Wilson and Ballard were both encouraged by their music teachers to pursue classical voice training; but, due to the early success of The Primettes, they decided to seek a recording contract with Motown Records instead. The third member of the trio was Diana Ross, who lived in the same neighborhood as Smokey Robinson. With his help, The Primettes secured an audition at Motown Records. They were rejected because of their young age, but also met Motown songwriter Richard Morris, who helped them secure a contract with Lu Pine Records. They recorded their first single, 'Tears of Sorrow,' and were eventually given the opportunity to sing backup vocals for Motown artists. In 1961, The Primettes signed with Motown Records and became known as The Supremes.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Wilson, Section A2013_323_001_004, TRT: 4:30:10 ?

Mary Wilson was a senior at Northeastern High School in Detroit, Michigan in 1961, when The Supremes signed a contract with Motown Records. After graduating in 1962, the group began touring the United States with the

‘Motortown Revue,’ where they performed with acts like Stevie Wonder, The Temptations, The Marvelettes and Mary Wells. The tour was chaperoned by members of Berry Gordy’s family, as well as Diana Ross’ mother, Ernestine Moten Ross. After the release of The Supremes’ first hit song, ‘Where Did Our Love Go,’ they were invited to join Dick Clark’s Caravan of Stars tour. They were performing with the tour in 1964, when the song reached number one on the Billboard charts. The Supremes immediately returned to Detroit to start work on public relations and promotional materials. Wilson also remembers working with the songwriting team of Holland-Dozier-Holland, who wrote ‘Where Did Our Love Go’ and many other Motown hits.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Wilson, Section A2013_323_001_005, TRT: 5:30:21 ?

Mary Wilson and The Supremes left Dick Clark’s Caravan of Stars in 1964, when their single, ‘Where Did Our Love Go,’ became a number one hit. Shortly afterwards, the head of sales at Motown Records, Barney Ales, decided to introduce The Supremes to the British market. After releasing another number one hit, ‘Baby Love,’ The Supremes embarked on a tour of the United Kingdom with the ‘Motortown Revue.’ However, due to poor promotion, the tour was not well attended. Upon returning to Detroit, Michigan, The Supremes began working with etiquette coach Maxine Powell and choreographer Cholly Atkins, who helped develop their live performance routine. The Supremes booked their first show at New York City’s Copacabana nightclub in 1965. They were increasingly successful, and received a Grammy Award nomination that year. During this time, The Supremes’ friendship waned. Florence Ballard was troubled by her relegation to backup vocals, while Diana Ross was distracted by her romantic relationship with Berry Gordy.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Wilson, Section A2013_323_001_006, TRT: 6:29:19 ?

Mary Wilson and The Supremes headlined at the Copacabana in New York City in 1965. They were among the first black musicians to perform at the all-white club, where they followed acts like Lena Horne and Sammy Davis, Jr. Their first live album, ‘The Supremes at the Copa,’ sold over 1 million copies, and was ranked at number eleven on the U.S. Billboard charts. The Supremes went through a difficult period in 1967, when Florence Ballard was forced to leave the group because of problems with substance abuse. Ballard was replaced by Cindy Birdsong, who was a former member of Patti LaBelle and the Bluebelles. Birdsong was chosen because she looked similar to Ballard, and the transition was never formally announced. At this point in the interview, Wilson talks about the friendship between The Supremes, and remembers the pressure that accompanied their success. She also lists her favorite songs in The Supremes’ repertoire, including ‘Reflections,’ ‘I Hear a Symphony’ and ‘Where Did Our Love Go.’

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Wilson, Section A2013_323_001_007, TRT: 7:28:12 ?

Mary Wilson and Diana Ross were joined by Cindy Birdsong after Florence Ballard was forced to leave The Supremes in 1967. They toured the United States and Europe, and continued to record and appear on television. At the end of 1968, Ross announced her intention to leave the group in the coming year. Diana Ross and the Supremes made their final appearance on ‘The Ed Sullivan Show’ in 1969, and recorded ‘Farewell’ at the Last Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada in 1970. In the next decade, The Supremes went through a number of personnel changes. Ross was replaced by Jean Terrell, and Cindy Birdsong was replaced by Lynda Laurence. Both new recruits eventually left, and Wilson hired Scherrie Payne and Susaye Greene to take their places. The Supremes gave their final performance at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane in London, England, and

then disbanded in 1977. At this point, Wilson remembers meeting and marrying Pedro Ferrer. She also talks about the death of her friend and former Supreme, Florence Ballard.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Wilson, Section A2013_323_001_008, TRT: 8:28:59 ?

Mary Wilson and Diana Ross attended the funeral of their friend and former Supreme, Florence Ballard, in 1976. The following year, The Supremes disbanded, and Wilson began her career as a solo musician. In 1981, she divorced her husband, and continued managing her career while raising her three children. In 1983, Wilson reunited with The Supremes members Diana Ross and Cindy Birdsong for the 'Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever' television special, where they performed 'Someday We'll Be Together.' In 1986, Wilson published her first memoir, 'Dreamgirl: My Life as a Supreme,' which became a New York Times bestseller. Four years later, she released her second memoir, 'Supreme Faith: Someday We'll Be Together,' which focused more on her personal journey and life after The Supremes disbanded. Wilson concludes this part of the interview by reflecting upon her life. She also remembers her son, Rafael Ferrer, who passed away in 1994.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Wilson, Section A2013_323_001_009, TRT: 9:16:45 ?

Mary Wilson reflects upon her legacy, and talks about her plans for the future. She also describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community. Wilson concludes the interview by reflecting upon her memories of Motown Records, and how she would like to be remembered.