

# Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Mildred Arbor

PERSON

Arbor, Mildred, 1941-

**Alternative Names:** Mildred Arbor;

**Life Dates:** October 15, 1941-

**Place of Birth:** Brandon, Mississippi, USA

**Residence:** Flint, MI

**Occupations:** Singer

## Biographical Note

Singer and performer Mildred Arbor was born in Mississippi to Dora and Reverend Willie Gill, Sr. In the early 1940s, when Arbor was still a child, her family moved from Mississippi to Kalamazoo, Michigan. She was raised in Kalamazoo and attended Western Michigan University.

At Western Michigan University, Arbor met Bertha McNeal and they formed a singing group in 1961 called the Velvelettes, which included Arbor's younger sister, Carol Street, McNeal's cousin, Norma Fairhurst, and Street's friend, Betty Kelley. After the quintet won an Alpha Phi Alpha talent contest at the University, fellow student and nephew of Berry Gordy, Robert Bullock, suggested they audition for Gordy's Motown Records. The Velvelettes signed to Motown in late 1962 and started recording in January of 1963. They recorded two singles in 1963: "There He Goes" and "That's The Reason Why." In 1964, the Velvelettes recorded and released the single "Needle In A Haystack" on Motown's VIP Records, which peaked at #45 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100. The group then recorded "He Was Really Sayin' Somethin'," which peaked at #64 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 and at #21 on the Billboard R&B Singles chart.

In September of 1964, Betty Kelley left the Velvelettes to join Martha and the Vandellas. The remaining four Velvelettes continued to perform and released the singles "Lonely Lonely Girl Am I" and "A Bird in the Hand (Is Worth Two in the Bush)" in 1965, and "These Things Will Keep Me Loving You," in 1966, which later became a hit in the United Kingdom peaking at #34 on the UK Singles Chart. The Velvelettes also performed on the Dick Clark Caravan of Stars tours, and the "chitlin circuit" that consisted of the Apollo Theatre in Harlem, New York; the Howard Theatre in Washington, D.C.; the Uptown Theatre in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; the Royal Theatre in Baltimore, Maryland; the Regal Theatre in Chicago, Illinois; and the Fox

Theatre in Detroit, Michigan.

In the late 1960s, Arbor, Fairhurst and McNeal left the group and were replaced by Sandra Tilley and Annette Rogers-McMillan. Then, in 1969, Street married and disbanded the Velvelettes. Arbor went on to become a registered nurse at McLaren Hospital in Flint, Michigan, where she worked for over thirty years. She also retired from the Flint Board of Education Health Occupations as a program coordinator/instructor.

In 1984, four of the original Velvelettes, Arbor, Fairhurst, McNeal and Street, reunited. In 1990, the group re-recorded their original hits and new songs for the album One Door Closes for Motorcity Records. Motown Records then released The Very Best of the Velvelettes in 1999, The Velvelettes: The Best Of in 2001, and The Velvelettes: The Motown Anthology in 2004. The Velvelettes are the only Motown group of the classic era still performing with the “original” line-up.

Arbor has one daughter, two sons, and two granddaughters.

Mildred Arbor was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on June 25, 2014.

## Related Entries

**Western Michigan University** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Lincoln International Studies School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Kalamazoo Central High School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Western Michigan University** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**McLaren Hospital** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Registered Nurse**

**Flint Board of Education Health Occupations** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Program Coordinator/Instructor**

**Motown Records** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 1962 to 1967]

**Member, "The Velvelettes"**

**Motorcity Records** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 1990 to ?]

**Member, "The Velvelettes"**

[MEMBEROF]

[from 1961 to 1967]

**The Velvelettes** [MEMBEROF]

[from 1984 to ?]

**Member**