

# Vanity Fair Celebrates the 50th anniversary of Motown Records

NEW YORK, N.Y.â€”Vanity Fair celebrates the 50th anniversary of Motown with an oral history and portfolio, presenting stories and images from Hitsville, USA told by people who were there. Stevie Wonder, Berry Gordy Jr., Lionel Richie, Martha Reeves, Otis Williams (the lone surviving original member of the Temptations), Abdul â€œDukeâ€ Fakir (the lone surviving member of the Four Tops), Suzanne de Passe (former creative assistant to Berry Gordy, Oscar nominee for screenplay for Lady Sings the Blues, Emmy winner for Motown 25) and others separate myth from reality, and discuss the Jackson 5 and Michael Jackson, the inaccuracies in Dreamgirls, racism, life on the road, what inspired Gordy, the Motown family, and how their music changed the world.

Highlights of the article include:

## MICHAEL AND THE JACKSON 5:

Smokey Robinson says heâ€™s known Michael since he was 10 or 11. â€œHe is the best who ever did it. The singing and the dancing and the recordsâ€”the whole package. But somewhere â€¦ he just got lost. Itâ€™s easy to do,â€ says Robinson.

De Passe, who suggested to Gordy that he sign the Jackson 5 after she watched them perform in 1968 in Bobby Taylorâ€™s living room, says that Gordy at first said no because he didnâ€™t want to work with children. â€œHe said, â€˜Kids? I donâ€™t want any kids. You know how much trouble it is with Stevie Wonder and the teachers, and when youâ€™re a minor you have to have a special chaperone â€¦ it is a problem.â€™ I had to really muster up all my courage and go back to him,â€ says de Passe. â€œFinally he agreed to see them.â€

At first Richie didn't believe that Jackson was actually a child. "This little kid did everything in the first song. I kept waiting for Suzanne [de Passe] to tell me what the real secret was, that Michael was a midget, because it couldn't be anything else," Richie says. "Then I realized, that's a real 12-year-old kid. I would watch him play with water balloons backstage, anything that kids do, and then he'd walk onstage and turn into this full-grown entertaining monster."

#### GORDY AND REEVES ON DREAMGIRLS:

"When Dreamgirls was on Broadway, I didn't know about it or care much about it." I never saw it. I think the main person they were attacking on that was Diana [Ross], but when they came out with the film, a whole lot of stuff was changed. It was all based on Motown and based on me. I was the central character; it was all untrue. There were no redeeming factors for [the person based on me]"how can you relate to somebody who has built all these superstars?"

"Berry Gordy

"I thought Dreamgirls was a good story but it had nothing to do with Motown. We played horrible places on the chitlin circuit, not that dreamland they show in that movie."

"Martha Reeves

#### REEVES, WONDER, GORDY, AND WILLIAMS ON RACISM:

Segregation and blatant racism were facts of life for all the stars of Motown. "There was a time when guards stood in front of the stages with clubs, and whether it was a white person or a black person, if they got up to intermingle in the audience, they'd club them," recalls Reeves. "Then Smokey Robinson, who would open the show, said, "Wait a minute"I want you guards to stand back. This is good music, it's dance music, and people are going to get excited, but

theyâ€™re not going to fight or cause any harm to one another. So donâ€™t hit another person with those sticks.â€” He stood up for us, and I love him forever for that.â€”

â€œI was eager when I was told that Iâ€™d go out on tour, but the excitement was sort of cut short by the fact that there was a performance in Alabama and the [groups] were on the busâ€”canâ€™t remember who it wasâ€”and I heard that [someone] shot at the bus. It scared me. It was a scary situation.â€”

â€”Stevie Wonder

â€œWhen I was 11 years old I was taking black newspapers into white neighborhoods to sell them, because I liked those newspapers, so I thought other people would like them, too. The first week I sold a lot of papers because I was cute. I took my brother the next week and didnâ€™t sell any. One black kid was cute. Twoâ€”a threat to the neighborhood.â€”

â€”Berry Gordy

â€œThe Four Tops and us had to watch each other; when the Tops was on, the Temps would stand on the side of the stage with bats or whatever. I didnâ€™t take guns with me, but some of the Tops did.â€”

â€”Otis Williams

REEVES ON LIFE ON THE ROAD:

â€œWe played some places that had horse stables in the back with straw on the floor, places where you had to put fire in the wastebasket to keep warm. At the Apollo Theater, when it was raggedy and dingy and dark, before it was renovated, we were in there cooking hot dogs on the lightbulbs. We would eat popcorn and sardines, and drink a lot of water to try to feel full.â€”

â€œWe took our baths and showers mostly in Greyhound bus stations and train stations. Thatâ€™s how we kept clean. But

[later on] when we got to the venues and we started singing, people would change, attitudes would change. Once we got in there and sang the music, people would turn into warm human beings, as opposed to people putting the dogs on you and chasing you around with billy clubs.â€

â€”Martha Reeves

WHAT INSPIRED GORDY:

Gordy, a somewhat successful featherweight boxer, never forgot his joy when he saw Joe Louis beat Max Schmeling for the heavyweight championship of the world. â€œHe was black like me,â€” Gordy says. â€œI saw the faces of my mother and father and the people in the street, and later I thought, What can I do in my life to make people that happy?â€

RICHIE ON GORDY AS TRAILBLAZER:

â€œIn the creative world there were a lot of [black] singers. There werenâ€™t a lot of [black] owners. This guy owned the company. Imagine, this is not happening in the 90s. This is happening during the civil-rights movement, during the 1960sâ€”not exactly the greatest land of opportunity for a black businessman. To be a [black] businessman in America then, hereâ€™s political correctness: â€˜Yes, sir, no, sir. Yes, maâ€™am, no, maâ€™am.â€™ So hereâ€™s somebody whoâ€™s saying, â€˜Go to hell.â€™ This man took no shit.â€

â€”Lionel Richie

ROBINSON ON HIS CHILDHOOD NEIGHBORHOOD:

â€œThere were so many talented kids in our neighborhood: Diana lived four doors down from me; Aretha Franklin lived around the cornerâ€”Iâ€™ve known her since Iâ€™m six years old. The Temptations lived across the avenue. Diana and I dated for awhile â€”long before she got with Berry â€”I love her. I know her since she was 10 or 11, so she doesnâ€™t diva me. We love each other.â€

â€”Smokey Robinson

The December issue of Vanity Fair hits newsstands in New York and Los Angeles on November 5 and nationally on November 11.