

Motor City Roots

Volume One of “Motor City Roots” (Jasmine CD JASCD 527) concentrated on the activities of Berry Gordy and his song-writing partner Roquel ‘Billy’ Davis composing hits and producing records for much of Detroit’s emerging R&B talent. In 1959 Billy began a serious relationship with Berry’s sister Gwen Gordy that led to the formation of Anna Records named after Berry’s other sister. Initially Gwen and Billy wanted Berry as a partner but he was so determined to go his own way and with a loan from the close knit Gordy family he set up Tamla Records around the same time.

Billy had a close relationship with Leonard Chess owner of Chess Records in Chicago who had used many of his songs on their recordings. Leonard agreed to distribute the new Anna label, which would sign local Detroit talent, many of whom would eventually make their way to Motown either as artists, writers and producers during the 1960s. We’ve selected a few of the Anna releases issued between its beginning in 1959 and eventual closure in 1962. Billy and Gwen also had another label through Chess, Checkmate which featured many of the same artists found on Anna.

In 1961 Billy Davis split with Gwen and moved to Chicago to work directly for Chess Records as A&R director where he was responsible for Chess’ major move into soul music during the mid to late sixties. He was responsible for hits like “Rescue Me” by Fontella Bass and many others. Eventually he was enticed to New York to work as a jingle writer for advertising agency McCann Erickson and rose to the position of senior vice president and music director. His most famous and indeed lucrative jingle was for Coca Cola – “I’d like to Teach the World to Sing”. He died in 2004.

Around the time of Billy’s departure Leonard Chess despatched Harvey Fuqua to Detroit. Fuqua was the founder of The Moonglows, one of the Chess label’s most successful acts during the 50s (see Jasmine CD JASCD 591) and had recently folded his second version of The Moonglows. That group had consisted of a Washington DC based outfit, The Marquees. Fuqua was mentoring one of the ex-members of the group, Marvin Gaye and took him along to Detroit. Marvin was a talented drummer and is certainly playing drums on a good proportion of these 57 titles.

When Anna Records folded Gwen and Harvey formed the Harvey and Tri Phi labels which soon became established alongside Berry’s ever growing Tamla Motown labels. Most of these productions were recorded at Motown’s new studios and so when in 1963 the labels folded and were purchased by Berry most of the recordings just stayed put. Harvey and many of the acts like Johnny Bristol, Junior Walker, Shorty Long, and The Spinners became important and internationally famous, Motown artists. Marvin Gaye of course was already at Motown by this point.

Shortly after arriving in Detroit Harvey and Gwen Gordy were married and so was Marvin Gaye, to Gwen’s sister, Anna Gordy. Many of the later Tri Phi singles display all of the elements that would make Motown the world’s most famous record label. Pay particular attention to the last two cuts by Bobby Smith & The Spinners, as the backing on these tracks is almost certainly Motown’s legendary house band, The Funk Brothers.

The third and final volume of Motor City Roots will concentrate on Motown itself, its first two compilation albums and the arrival of acts that are still universally popular today.

THE VOICEMASTERS

TY HUNTER

This vocal group consisted of Crathman ‘CP’ Spencer, Walter Gaines and Henry ‘Hank’ Gibson and had been recording since the mid fifties. We met them on Volume One as The Five Stars and they had been recording Gordy co-writes for some years. Their Anna singles meant little sales wise but when they provided backing vocals for other acts it was a different story. Ty Hunter had been a member of another doowop outfit, The Romeos alongside another Anna solo act, Lamont Anthony. Hunter’s “Everything About You” was a good-sized R&B hit and is sung in the encroaching soul style to great effect. The three original members went on to form The Originals along with Freddie Gorman and sign to Motown where they had several major hits produced by Marvin Gaye. Hunter joined the group later and then left to join The Glasshouse another hit making group on Invictus Records, the label formed by Brian Holland, Eddie Holland and Lamont Dozier after they too left Motown.

PAUL GAYTEN/LARRY DARNELL

Gayten was a veteran R&B bandleader who had several big R&B hits between 1947 and 1950 and was now working as a promotion man for Chess Records. When he heard "The Hunch" a record out of Pittsburgh by Bobby Peterson he wanted to cover it desperately so Leonard Chess suggested he offer the idea to Billy and Gwen. Paul's superior promotional abilities led to his cover performing slightly better on the charts than the original. Gayten had produced Larry Darnell in 1949 when he enjoyed a No1 R&B hit with his song "For You My Love". His release on Anna was a new soulful version of his 1950 No.2 hit "I'll Get Along Somehow". It's almost certain that Paul Gayten brought this Larry Darnell master to Anna.

JOHNNIE AND JACKIE

This popular duo was Johnny Bristoe (who later amended his surname to Bristol) and Jackie Beavers. The duo enjoyed much local Detroit and mid-western success with a couple of reasonable selling singles of the handful they made for both Anna and Tri Phi. It is though for the recycling of several of their songs that they are best remembered. Johnny Bristol joined Motown along with Harvey Fuqua after the sale of the labels to Motown. There they used "Carry Your Own Load" and "Do You See My Love For You Growing" for Junior Walker and most famously redesigned "Someday We'll Be Together" as the last ever 45 and No 1 single for Diana Ross & The Supremes. Bristol produced many more hits at Motown before departing for MGM where he enjoyed several big selling albums and the major international hit, "Hang On In There Baby". Beavers also went to Motown before swiftly moving on to Chess Records before settling at the famous Southern soul label Sound Stage Seven where he enjoyed moderate success.

BARRET STRONG

"Money" was originally on Tamla in 1960 and was produced by Berry Gordy. When he was unable to cope with the demand he leased the disc to Anna in order to take advantage of Chess' superior distribution whilst retaining local distribution himself. The result was not only a major hit but also one of the publishing company's earliest successes when The Beatles and seemingly every other British beat group revived the song. Strong went onto an illustrious career as a songwriter and producer at Motown. He wrote "Papa Was A Rolling Stone" for the Temptations and "I Heard It Through The Grapevine" for Marvin Gaye with co writer Norman Whitfield.

HERMAN GRIFFIN AND THE MELODEES/RUBEN FORT

Herman Griffin and his group had been around for a few years in Detroit but never had more than local success. After Anna he went to Motown briefly and then became conductor for Mary Wells. He is perhaps most famous today for having married Mary and then becoming the driving force behind her departure from the label from which her career never really recovered despite many fine recordings. We can find no information about Ruben Fort but his single is the first credit for Harvey Fuqua on an Anna single.

JOE TEX

Joe Tex had been recording for some time and was a popular live performer when Leonard Chess steered him to Billy Davis in Detroit. His releases included a version of Etta James hit, which featured a long rap that gave the disc some regional breakouts. "I Will Never Break Your Heart" is an answer disc to Jerry Butler's million selling "He Will Break Your Heart". Note Tex's writer credit this is again in recognition of the long rap dialogue added to the song. His third outing, "Baby You're Right" is important in that it inspired a cover by James Brown a couple of months later. Brown's version was a No.2 R&B hit but involved some serious re-writing by Brown although Tex still retained a writer credit. By 1964 Tex was a major soul superstar after signing with Nashville based writer/publisher Buddy Killen's Dial label. His hit making career lasted well into the Disco era.

THE CAP TANS

The Cap Tans led by Harmon Bethea were a vintage R&B doowop group from Washington DC. They were recording as early as 1951. Harvey Fuqua who co-wrote this song would have had contact with them during his time in the city when he employed another DC group, The Marquees, who featured Marvin Gaye, to be the New Moonglows. Harmon Bethea briefly became a major soul star in the late sixties under the guise of Maskman & the Agents with a string of moderate hits on Musicor Records.

LAMONT ANTHONY

Lamont Anthony was another Detroit talent who sought solo success after singing with local groups like The Romeos. He is backed by The Voicemasters and of course changed his name to Lamont Dozier and became one third of Motown's hottest writing team Holland-Dozier-Holland. When the trio departed Motown they set up Invictus/Hot Wax Records and Lamont eventually enjoyed a successful solo career in the 70s. In the 90s he settled in London for a while and worked with Phil Collins and other UK acts. He is of course still active today.

DAVID RUFFIN

One of the greatest vocalists ever to come out of Detroit, David Ruffin's solo career did not really take off and he too went to Motown where his brother, Jimmy was already signed. It is again The Voicemasters behind Ruffin's powerful vocals on these seriously soulful sounds. At Motown Ruffin was recruited by the Temptations to become perhaps their greatest lead singer until he was fired for becoming a little too obsessed with his own fame. He then began a solo career at Motown and later Warner Brothers that featured many classic recordings. Sadly he was prone to drug abuse and was found dead in a crack house in 1991 at the age of just 50.

EDDIE BURNS

Eddie Burns was a member of Detroit's then still active blues scene. The city was home to John Lee Hooker, in whose band Burns often played. By 1961 when Harvey Fuqua chose to record Eddie, the blues was a fast declining genre amongst the African American population. Burns recording career had been spasmodic since the late 1940s so quite what prompted Fuqua to record these brilliant tracks is lost to time but classics they are. By the early 70s Burns became popular in Europe touring the UK several times and recording in the UK, Holland and France. He died on December 12th 2012 at the age of 84.

JUNIOR WALKER & THE ALL STARS

One of Motown's most popular international acts, Junior Walker and his band were spotted by Johnny Bristol in Battle Creek, Michigan he then tipped off Harvey Fuqua. The honkers of the 40s and 50s inspired Junior's blasting sax style and his ability to use these elements along with his bluesy vocals resulted in a unique style which appealed to audiences around the world. We present here his very first 45 release the b-side of which is performed and written by the groups guitarist, Willie Woods. When Motown bought Harvey/Tri Phi, Junior was transferred straight to the new Soul imprint and eventually hit the top in 1964 with the classic "Shotgun". Motown recycled many of Junior's Harvey recordings as b-sides and album tracks, a practice that was only really applied to one other act, The Spinners. Junior died in 1995 at the age of 64.

THE FIVE QUAILS

This group emanated from Cleveland where Harvey was based in the early years of his career. He had originally found them whilst touring with The Moonglows in the late 50s and was impressed enough to always promise to record them. It may have taken a few years but he did sign them in 1961 and released a couple of singles which feature Junior and The All Stars backing and Harvey quite prominent on vocals. The closest they came to a hit was with "Been A Long Time" which featured Harvey. The song was later recycled for the Motown group, The Elgins in 1967 under the title, "It's Been A Long Long Time" reaching No.35 on the R&B charts. The Five Quails eventually disbanded and returned to Cleveland when little sales action was forthcoming

THE SPINNERS

Without a doubt the biggest act to emerge from this period, The Spinners went on to incredible fame on a global level during the 70s but not on Motown where they only really enjoyed one hit in 1970, "It's A Shame" written for them by Stevie Wonder. Stardom eventually came via Atlantic Records who signed them in 1972 on the advice of another Detroit resident, Aretha Franklin. Formed in 1954 as The Domingoes, inspired by their favourite groups, The Dominoes and The Flamingos they changed their name to The Spinners after Harvey signed them to Tri Phi. The line up at this time was Bobby Smith, lead; George Dixon, second tenor; Billy Henderson, baritone and tenor; Henry Farnborough, baritone and Pervis Jackson, bass. They enjoyed one major hit with the label. "That's What Girls Are Made For" which features Harvey alongside lead singer Bobby Smith. Although never an official Spinner, Harvey is all over their releases and several were released as Harvey with The Spinners often uncredited. Today only Henry Farnborough from the original line-up is still alive and performing on the nostalgia circuit where they are an enormous attraction. Original lead singer Bobby Smith died on March 16th 2013.

SHORTY LONG

Shorty Long was another of Fuqua's quirky signings. Again the singer was somewhat blues rooted for the time but in fact his recordings like "Devil In A Blues Dress" which appeared on Motown after Berry Gordy bought his contract are even bluesier in orientation. However he recorded two highly regarded albums on Motown's Soul label before his tragic death in a boating accident in 1969. Despite the purchase Motown has never reissued any of his recordings for Tri Phi.

THE MERCED BLUENOTES

This very obscure frat band from Merced, California made a few records for local labels beginning in the late 50s. Very R&B orientated they became a popular live attraction and when one of their obscure singles "Rufus"

made a lot of noise in Detroit Harvey signed them up for Tri Phi. They also recorded for Fantasy Record's subsidiary label, Galaxy.

HARVEY FUQUA

Despite his abilities as a writer and producer Harvey Fuqua could never resist the attraction of a vocal harmony session and in the years before his death in 2010 had reformed a version of The Moonglows to perform at oldies concerts across the USA. After joining Motown he became responsible for many aspects of the company in addition to the too numerous to mention hits he wrote and produced for the label's artists. He divorced Gwen but remained close to her and she remained Gwen Gordy Fuqua for the rest of her life, passing away in 1992. In 1971 he left Motown and formed a production company financed by RCA. From this arrangement came such hit acts as New Birth, The Nitelites and Love Peace & Happiness. In the mid-seventies he was in San Francisco and spearheaded the career of gay disco icon, Sylvester to international fame. By the early 1980s he was back with Marvin Gaye supervising and co-producing his comeback album, "Midnight Love" and single, "Sexual Healing" for Columbia. After Marvin's death in 1984-he semi-retired and split his time between new versions of The Moonglows and playing golf with his friend Smokey Robinson.

Sam Hicks March 2013