



DIANA ROSS (centre) was singled out as lead Supreme over Florence Ballard (left) and Mary Wilson (right), resulting in resentment

Don't Stop! In the Name of Love.

Get ready for a relaunch of Supremes classics, new books and the 'Dreamgirls' phenomenon

BY ELIO IANNACCI • Somewhere between soap opera and Greek tragedy lies the ever-enduring story of the Supremes, the world's most successful female pop trio. This year the rags-to-riches legend of Mary Wilson, Diana Ross and the late Florence "Flo" Ballard will once more be front and centre as the Motown label celebrates its 50th year in the music business. To commemorate the big event, several of the trio's discs, taken from the Motown vaults, will be relaunched: a three-disc set called *Classic Albums Vol. 1: 1962-1965* (in April) and *Let Yourself Go: The Complete '70s Albums Volume 2* (in June). To add to the revival, Motown will also be making a series of vinyl reproductions of the Supremes' bestselling album of 1966, *I Hear A Symphony*, which hits stores on April 14.

Mary Wilson is a prime example of how the Supreme dream is alive and kicking. She is in the process of recording a retro '60s R & B album and writing a book about the Supremes' dazzling wardrobe. The latter project coincides with a current fashion exhibit that showcases Wilson's own private collection of Supremes costumes (think Bob Mackie gowns, long silk gloves, and a whole lot of sequins) that is currently touring museums in Europe and the U.S.

When they signed a record deal with Motown in 1961, the Supremes became a part of the era's only African-American-owned-and-operated music company alongside groups such as Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, and Martha and the Vandellas. Initially accompanied by singer Betty McGlowen, the teens, from Detroit's Brewster projects, were first billed as a quartet until McGlowen's replacement, Barbara Martin, split from the group. In 1962, Berry Gordy, Motown's founder,

resolved to reform the remaining singers into a trio. He insisted on a new name and a new look and assigned the girls some new songwriters (the hit-making team known as Holland/Dozier/Holland, who wrote chart toppers such as *Stop! In The Name Of Love*).

But Gordy's boldest move was to give Ross the role of lead vocalist without so much as a consultation with the group's other two members. The decision resulted in a stewing resentment that would last for years. It didn't help that Wilson and Ballard discovered Ross was in a romantic relationship with Gordy (who ended up changing the band's name to Diana Ross and the Supremes).

A recently published Ballard biography called *The Lost Supreme*, by Peter Benjaminson, chronicles Ballard's frustrating work situation and how it added to her problems with alcohol abuse. Ballard was eventually dismissed from the group and replaced by Cindy Birdsong in 1967.

Charting 12 No. 1 hits, the Supremes were one of the few girl groups that were able to successfully integrate black and white audiences across all parts of America—including the South. Even when Florence Ballard left the group in 1967 and Diana Ross embarked on a solo career in 1970, Wilson still thrived with two replacements until 1977. Today, a group called the FLOS (Former Ladies of the

Supremes), consisting of a number of singers who joined the group post-Ross and post-Ballard, still tour extensively. "We lasted so long because we were the *whole package*," says Wilson, now 65, from her home in Las Vegas. "Our secret weapon was our designers. They were mainly gay guys who were living out their wild fantasies with fabric. We were their black Barbie dolls. We came out of an era where glamour was relegated to Hollywood actors—and offered to white people only. So we naturally overcompensated!"

All the glitz was what inspired both Broadway and Hollywood via a vehicle called *Dreamgirls*. The Tony-award-winning musical, scheduled for a full-on comeback to New York's Apollo Theater in November, is also returning to its full-scale size on Broadway in 2010. The stage version (adapted into the hit 2006 screen epic starring Beyoncé) mirrors the Supremes-like rise of a Detroit-based girl group called the Dreams.

Ross, who has surpassed all the women in Motown in terms of success (releasing dozens of chart-topping solo singles and selling over 100 million records worldwide), has yet to open up about her Supremes experience. Her critically panned autobiography in 1993, *Secrets of a Sparrow*, glossed over her Motown days, leaving fans desperate for the real story. Thanks to *Upside Down: Wrong Turns, Right Turns and the Road Ahead*—a much-anticipated sequel to *Secrets*, slated to be published in May, their wish may finally come true. **M**



ETER DOHERTY ... HAS SOMETHING TO SAY

Nana doll still remembers / Leaving town in worn-out shoes / Now she's back out west / in sheltered accommodation / Homes for the old / where pills aren't the only blues / Tread carefully / so carefully / on the drifting ice / staring into the TV guide / In 2009 / oh how it hurts me / I've only seen her twice / since she went west for the second time / since 1939—1939 Returning by Peter (formerly "Pete") Doherty from his new CD Grace/Wastelands