

**This interview with  
MARTHA REEVES  
was conducted by the Library of Congress  
on August 31, 2017.**



*Martha Reeves*

**Library of Congress: How were you and the Vandellas born?**

Martha Reeves: After the last of a three-night performance--a reward for winning an amateur contest--I was greeted by [Motown's] A&R President, William R. Stevenson. It was my first engagement after turning 21. I starred with Levi Mann and his trio during "Happy Hour," a performance at the now defunct Twenty Grand nightclub in 1961.

I had just finished my solo performance under the name Martha Lavaile, a name given to me by my Aunt Bernice who gave me an alias and told me that I would one day become famous, when [Stevenson] presented his business card to me and said, "You have talent, come to Hitsville USA!"

I reported to the [Hitsville] studio the next morning, after phoning and quitting my job at the City Wide Cleaners as a counter person. I showed up at 2648 West Grand Boulevard, Berry Gordy's home, just as people were lining up outside waiting for an audition.

But I showed the business card that I had been given and walked in with ease.

[Stevenson] was surprised to see me, and advised me that they held auditions every third Thursday and that I should answer the telephone, he would be right back. About three hours later, I had become the first woman/secretary/demo making-singer in that office of 17 writers and producers.

Later... I became the lead singer with a group of background singers that that I named the Vandellas. I originally called Rosalind, Gloria and Annette to record behind Marvin Gaye for "Stubborn Kinda Fellow."

We were formally The Del-Phis, a Check-Mate recording group. We were named after a street on the eastside named Van Dyke and after Della Reese, my idol.

**LOC: Do you recall when you first heard “Dancing In the Street”?**

MR: It was around 4pm and we had just finished our lessons in the Artists Developing Department, where we were taught music theory by Maurice King and Johnny Allen; choreography by Cholly Atkins; social graces by Maxine Powell; and stage presence by Harvey Fuqua.

After my four-hour session, I crossed the street to the Hitsville building to hear the song that William (Mickey) Stevenson had written. And when I heard Marvin Gaye sing “*Calling out around the world/Are you ready for a brand new beat...*” I was mesmerized.

As I stood there in awe of him and his jazzy smooth voice, he glanced my way and said to Ivy Hunter and William Stevenson, “Let’s try this song on Martha.” I was taken aback. I nearly fainted. What a thrill!

I had practically memorized the song after listening to Marvin croon it. But I asked if I could sing it the way I felt it. They agreed and I gave it a go.

The song reminded me of years ago...we would dance in our cobblestone streets in my neighborhood in the fifties. My dad, Elijah, worked for the city Water Department, and he and our neighbor, Mr. Elliott, who worked for the bus company, once asked the city and they were given permission to block off the street with wooden sawhorses and yellow tape.

We placed our record players on the front porches and we could dance on Saturday nights during the hot summer days until the sun went down and the street lights came on.

This is what dancing in the street is for me.

**LOC: I have heard that the version of the song on the record is one of your very first times singing it, is that true?**

MR: Yes, it’s my second time. After my first time singing it, Lawrence Horn, the engineer, informed us that he thought we were just practicing and had not turned on the recording machine. Could I sing it again? My second take was all the way live, straight through, and I was satisfied that I had done my best and given it my all.

**LOC: What do you think of the many covers of “Dancing” that have been done over the years? Many seem to follow your phrasing.**

MR: I was echoing Marvin’s version. Imitation is the highest form of flattery....

The intro reminds me of the bullfights in Spain. I get excited every time I heard the drum pick up, and the horns chime in. I am truly grateful to the “Funk Brothers” and that Marvin thought me worthy to sing his masterpiece.

**LOC: Do you sing the song any different now than you did 50 years?**

MR: No, it’s a staple and you capture the magic of the song as the band begins. I have to go to the space of excitement that was originally created. It’s always thrilling when everyone sings along.

**LOC: Did you recognize the message in the song from the first moment you heard it?**

MR: Yes. It's a CALL, a shout out for the world to dance and celebrate freedom.

It will always mean great excitement to me!