

**This interview with  
MARY WILSON  
was conducted by the Library of Congress  
on April 2, 2018**



*Mary Wilson*  
*Photo credit: Alan Mercer*

**Library of Congress: Can you tell me about the first time “Where Did Our Love Go?” was presented to you as a song to be recorded?**

Mary Wilson: We had already released five, or six, or seven singles and they had been received locally very well in Detroit, and the surrounding area, but we had never had a big, national chart hit and Berry Gordy was like, “We’ve got to get the girls a hit record.” That’s when he put us with his top writing team Holland, Dozier and Holland.

HDH came up with “When the Lovelight Starts Shining Through His Eyes” and we thought we were on our way with a hit record. Motown then released “Run Run Run”—it never made the charts at all—but “Lovelight” made the charts and we thought, “We’re on the right track.” We kept on trying.

One day HDH said they had just come up with some smashes; that’s what they used to say when they felt they had a hit! We were brought several songs to listen to as I recall. When we heard “Where Did Our Love Go?” none of us was really excited about it. I remembered saying to Eddie Holland that if we didn’t get a hit record our parents were going to make us go to college. He said, “Trust me, Mary, this song is going to be a hit.”

The reason that we did not care for “Where Did Our Love Go” was that we wanted a song more like the other girl groups, with more R&B driven rhythm, like the Marvellettes and the Vandellas; after all we were the first girl group to sign with Motown.

It wasn’t so much the song itself that I didn’t like, it was more about what we thought we were as a group. Like when Berry Gordy turned us down at our first audition, going out the front door of Hitsville, Florence said, “He must not know how good we are.”

We had started as a quartet, The Primettes, that sang great harmony. We had come from the doo-wop era when harmonies were the thing. Everything we did was surrounded in harmony and “Where Did Our Love Go?” didn’t have any of that. It was a “basic” song, with a basic beat. So, when HDH played the song, we were not excited. It seemed so bland; no harmony. It just didn’t seem to be what we thought we needed for a hit. At that time we were still making our own decisions, however, they insisted that we record it plus we were pretty low down on the totem pole. We couldn’t say, “Oh, no, we’re not doing it”; we had to accept it, after all we were the “No Hit Supremes.”

By the way, I was the one who created the saying of the “No Hit Supremes.” I just knew that some people at Motown were saying things like that behind our backs, as we were cute young teenage girls! Look up that phrase up, you won’t find it pre my book “Dream Girl: My Life as a Supreme.”

**LOC: Musically, for you individually, and as a group, who were you greatest influences at the start of your career?**

MW: Personally, I grew up listening to my dad John L.’s collection of blues and R&B. I am not sure about Diane and Flo. However, as a group we sang [like] all of the groups who did harmony. Doo-wop groups were the rage and we did all of their songs. Also, we listened to the Andrew Sisters, the McGuire Sisters, who both sang great harmonies. I personally liked the Shirelles and the Chantelles. Rock and roll was new and we loved Frankie Lyman & the Teenagers. Flo sang the R&B songs like Ray Charles, Etta James. Diane did the pop songs and sang the heck out of the Drifters’s songs. So we were not influenced by one particular style or persons, we sang everything.

**LOC: I had heard that, originally, you were supposed to sing the lead for “Where Did Our Love Go?” Is that true?**

MW: I don’t know. I’ve heard that. Eddie Holland has told me over the years that because my voice was soft he felt the song would be more suited for it. But a lot of discussions happened outside, away from us as singers. Producers, in the A&R department, talked among themselves. So a lot of designs may have been decided without us knowing. The main thing for us is that we got a hit record and Diane’s style was perfect for it.

Also it has been said that the song was offered to the Marvelettes before us but Eddie Holland said it was written for us.

**LOC: How were the vocal parts worked out for the song?**

MW: The great thing about the writers was that they had really dissected the song before they gave it to you. They knew what they wanted to do; it was not up to us.... Lamont worked with us on the backing parts; Eddy worked with Diane on the lead. It was already broken down: who sings, how we sing. We didn’t like singing in unison--where were the harmonies?! [Laughs] But, that didn’t mean that we couldn’t add something.

We did record it with my voice closer to the microphone, that’s because Florence’s voice was so strong and they needed more softness, a more mellow voice. On the recording you hear more of my voice but you can feel Florence’s soul underneath. I think they had Diane singing down a register which gave her that sexier sound. Once we started recording the song we totally got into it.

**LOC: Did you realize at the time you recorded it that this song was going to mark such a major change for The Supremes?**

MW: Every time we recorded a song we were praying for a hit record, so yes we believed in miracles and hoped that whatever song we recorded would be The One.

Once we started recording “Where Did Our Love Go?” we totally enjoyed it. It was clear then that it was a good song; and while recording it we found that it not only felt good to us, but we also liked it.

**LOC: How do you explain the extraordinary, enduring appeal of “Where Did Our Love Go?”**

MW: I don’t know if I have a definitive answer, as I said it was not the type of song we thought was for the Supremes, however it gave us our first of five number one records. People were playing it all over the world. Even NASA beamed it up to astronauts, Gordon Cooper and Peter Conrad, on Gemini 5, as they orbited around the earth.

Lyrical—it was talking about love; it’s a simple song about love. So that’s one area. Another is the instrumentation; Brian Holland and the guys put a simple rhythm with foot stamping at the front of it; it was the start of the Motown sound. It was something new and it captured what Motown was about. The handclaps, that beat. So clear, so simple. It helped that it wasn’t cluttered. Lyrical people were like, “I could understand every word you sang!” And that melody! It was such a haunting melody.

You know, we were all still living in the Brewster Projects when that song came out. And, suddenly, you could hear that song coming out everywhere--all over the streets, out of the windows, around the world....

When that song was first released, we were on a Dick Clark caravan tour. We were on with some very big acts--Gene Pitney, the Shirelles, Cliff Richard, the Drifters. When we started the tour, Mr. Clark would introduce us and we had almost no handclaps from the audience. No one knew us; we had not been on TV. We had only gotten the tour because Mr. Clark wanted Brenda Holloway and when he called Motown, they said, “If you want Brenda, you have to take The Supremes,” otherwise, they weren’t interested.

But, while on the tour, the song became a hit. We became stars on that tour! Each night, when they announced us, the applause got louder and louder and then, one night, we heard people screaming and yelling when they said our names. Well, we thought Gene Pitney had stuck his head out of the curtain but, actually, it was that the song had become #1.

Of course, we hardly got paid for that tour. They flew us back to Detroit at the end of it—that was our first plane ride, before we had always traveled by bus. Diane’s mother was traveling with us. When we got home, we asked for our money [from the tour]. We had had a hit record but they were like, “You guys were nothing when you started.” *[Laughs]*

You know we even recorded “Where Did Our Love Go?” in German! We did a German release. We didn’t speak German, we did it phonetically. We were touring Europe, the song was a big hit in the Netherlands, Norway, and the UK, of course. It charted in all those countries. Went top five. A worldwide hit!

**LOC: The song (not to mention the image of the Supremes) seemed to play a role in the Civil Rights movement, don’t you think?**

MW: America was changing and we were at the top of that change with “Where Did Our Love Go?” Martin Luther King was speaking about love, and so were we. There had been many

black stars before us whose shoulders we stood on--Sammy Davis, Jr, Sydney Poitier, Lena Horne, Ethel Waters, to name just a very few who couldn't even stay in the same hotels they appeared in. But our timing was so right on to "Dare To Dream."

The Sixties, The Motown Sound, "Where Did Our Love Go?": people were standing up for their rights. We were glamorous; we sang about love, it was three black faces on the Ed Sullivan TV show every Sunday night. One evening, a Jewish lady came up to me after our show in Miami, at the Eden Roc Hotel in 1968, and she said, "You girls are so wonderful, I let my whole family stay up and watch you every Sunday night." My brother, a Black Panther wannabe said, "What does she mean she lets her whole family watch you?" But that's the way it was back then, here in America in the sixties.

But things were changing in the world. We became international stars, we started hanging out with kings and queens; we became international stars all over the world. The Motown Sound helped open the borders of the world. It was a time when peace was needed, the Civil Rights movement was happening. The song had this thing about love and peace, it had a peaceful, soothing message and it fit the times.

My thanks to Motown and Berry Gordy for believing in us. DREAMS DO COME TRUE!