

“My Girl”—The Temptations (1964)

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Essay by Mark Ribowsky (guest post)*



The Temptations, c. 1964

The Temptations’ 1964 recording of “My Girl” came at a critical confluence for the group, the Motown label, and a culture roiling with the first waves of the British invasion of popular music. The five-man cell of disparate souls, later to be codified by black disc jockeys as the “tall, tan, talented, titillating, tempting Temptations,” had been knocking around Motown’s corridors and studio for three years, cutting six failed singles before finally scoring on the charts that year with Smokey Robinson’s cleverly spunky “The Way You Do the Things You Do” that winter. It rose to number 11 on the pop chart and to the top of the R&B chart, an important marker on the music landscape altered by the Beatles’ conquest of America that year.

Having Smokey to guide them was incalculably advantageous. Berry Gordy, the former street hustler who had founded Motown as a conduit for Detroit’s inner-city voices in 1959, invested a lot of trust in the baby-faced Robinson, who as front man of the Miracles delivered the company’s seminal number one R&B hit and million-selling single, “Shop Around.” Four years later, in 1964, he wrote and produced Mary Wells’ “My Guy,” Motown’s second number one pop hit. Gordy conquered the black urban market but craved the broader white pop audience.

The Temptations were riders on that train. Formed in 1959 by Otis Williams, a leather-jacketed street singer, their original lineup consisted of Williams, Elbridge “Al” Bryant, bass singer Melvin Franklin and tenors Eddie Kendricks and Paul Williams. Then, late in 1963, Bryant was fired. The decision as to who would replace him was made when David Ruffin leapt onto the stage while the group performed at the Motown Christmas party and tore into a rousing rendition of “Shout.” He seemed constructed with matchsticks, all arms and legs, his square-jawed face dominated by thick black turtle-shell shades. On stage he was riveting, primal, both demanding and begging. His dance moves, leaps and splits defied gravity.

As Otis Williams recalls, “I didn’t think any human being could do [what he did]. I still don’t know how he tossed the microphone up, to a three-sixty, fall to his knees, rise up, and without looking reach in the air and catch it as it came down. The man didn’t *seem* human.”

Never was that more evident than when Smokey Robinson wrote the song that seemed destined for Ruffin to sing. Smokey and fellow Miracle Ronnie White composed it as an answer to and a rub off “My Guy,” originally intended for their own group. The Miracles cut a demo on it in late summer. At the time, Ruffin was relegated to background vocals, behind Eddie Kendricks’s lead on “The Way You Do.” But Ruffin’s voice intrigued him. During the famed Motor Town bus tours through the back roads and urban centers of America, he believed that Ruffin, whose strop-like voice Smokey described as “mellow and gruff,” was a “sleeping giant.” He was even willing to shunt the nascent “My Girl” to the Temptations, for Ruffin to take the lead, his first words as a front man to be: *“I’ve got sunshine on a cloudy day/When it’s cold outside I’ve got the month of May.”*

Smokey played the demo for the group during a break at the Apollo Theater and they rehearsed it to perfection. On September 25th, Smokey, with Motown arranger Paul Riser, created a lush rhythm track at Motown’s Studio A at Gordy’s residence/office/headquarters on West Grand Boulevard in Detroit. Laid down by the Motown house band self-dubbed the Funk Brothers, it began with the opening notes, legendary bassist James Jamerson’s three-beat repetition on his Fender Precision that would reverberate hypnotically through the song, approximating the sound of the protagonist’s cleaved heart. Motown producer Cornelius Grant calls it “classic Jamerson. He felt it, so he played it.” After four couplets, Robert White played a sinewy, melodic riff on his oversized Gibson L-5 electric guitar.

When the Temptations came off the road in early November, they recorded the vocals, commencing with Ruffin cooing about sunshine on a cloudy day and a chord change leading to: *“I guess you’ll say/What can make me feel this way,”* cueing drummer Benny Benjamin’s snare drum and the entrance of the background vocals--arranged entirely by the group. The effect was a rising swell of rhythm, blues, soul, and pop that fed off Ruffin’s raw sensuality. Riser and Robinson had him begin his vocal in the key of C, so that he could cruise through without straining, then taking it up to a more demanding D for the final verse, requiring him to turn up the heat. At the fadeout, he would wing it, demanding *“Why don’t you believe she’s all my girl?”* which would be left off the single release, to be later restored on reissues of the record.

Smokey had more work to do. He scheduled a follow-up session to overdub instruments and magnify the already heavily echoed, dreamlike sound. Another session was booked for the Detroit Philharmonic Orchestra to lay on swirling strings in a concert hall rented specifically for that purpose. When he heard the final mix, Otis recalls, “I was knocked on my ass. It just had a whole ‘nother daylight to it.” He remarked to Smokey that he thought the song was gonna be *big*. Smokey cautiously replied, “Hope so.”

Released just after Christmas, the record ran up the charts, its groove heard everywhere, on black stations, white ones, and all in between. The week of March 6, 1965, it displaced “This Diamond Ring” atop the “Billboard” pop chart, looking down at the Righteous Brothers’ “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’” and the Beatles’ “Eight Days a Week,” the latter of which would displace “My Girl” a week later, a deceptively short stay at the top, as it remained on the chart for 11 weeks, as well as making it to the top of the R&B chart for six weeks. Nominated for Motown’s first Grammy, as “Best R&B Recording,” it lost to James Brown’s “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag,” both of which had massive crossover appeal but were subject to the unwritten industry strictures that kept black performers from mainstream awards.

Even so, Gordy had found his entrée to the white mainstream with the Supremes and the Temptations, whom he would ride to enormous success and wealth--mainly for him. The Temptations, with Ruffin handling most lead vocals and sharing others with Kendricks, would tour endlessly in support of a long conveyor belt of hits, their intricate dance moves and glittery suits forming the template for all black singing groups, their choreography matching their smooth vocals. It was said that men wanted to be them and women wanted to be *with* them.

But success also stoked Ruffin's dark side; after missing shows and descending into drug use, he was fired in 1968 and replaced by Dennis Edwards. That edition of the group had even greater success; produced by Norman Whitfield, they turned toward psychedelic soul, notching three number one pop singles ("I Can't Get Next to You," "Just My Imagination," "Papa Was a Rolling Stone"), winning a Grammy for "Cloud Nine" in 1968 and two more for "Papa Was a Rolling Stone." (They were nominated for three others, and in 2013 were awarded a Lifetime Achievement Grammy.)

In constant reconfigurations the group tours to this day, and, as recently as 2013, they are still recording albums. Only Otis Williams would long survive the twists, turns, tragedies and early deaths of their endless saga as self-titled "Emperors of Soul" but the five mortal men who recorded "My Girl" will never really die. Given the ethereal, almost metaphysical standing of this timeless song identified by Otis as the "National Anthem of the Temptations," "My Girl" stands as a dreamy metaphor for our fairytale fables of love and security--and, as the Temptations confirmed a year later in another vinyl evergreen, we ain't too proud to beg for it to come true.

Mark Ribowsk is the author of the book "Ain't Too Proud to Beg: The Troubled Lives and Enduring Soul of the Temptations." He has also authored books about such music legends as Phil Spector, Stevie Wonder, the Supremes, Otis Redding, Hank Williams, Lynyrd Skynyrd, James Taylor and such sports luminaries as Howard Cosell, Tom Landry, Satchel Paige, Al Davis, the Manning football dynasty, and Don Shula.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.