

“Where Did Our Love Go?”--The Supremes (1964)

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Essay by Susan Whittall (guest post)*



Original album



The Supremes



Original 45

When you hear the Supremes' single “Where Did Our Love Go,” it’s hard not to consider it a fully-formed, mature work that was a slam-dunk from the beginning, solidifying the Motown Sound in the public’s mind in those heady days in 1964.

Diana Ross’s sexy purr kicks off the song with “*Ba-by, ba-by,*” expressing girlish teenage angst (her words written by three worldly, grown men), set to the Funk Brothers’ irresistible shuffle beat--everything fans came to love about the Supremes was there, all in full effect.

But a series of happenings had to go just the right way, for the song to happen the way it did.

There would have been a different outcome if Gladys Horton of the Marvelettes had liked the song when Lamont Dozier brought it to her. Horton and the Marvelettes were still riding high from their 1961 smash “Please, Mr. Postman,” compared to the then “no-hit Supremes,” who were still hanging out on Motown’s front porch, angling for sessions.

Dozier excitedly played Horton the instrumental track of the song, telling her not untruthfully that he’d written it “just for you.”

Horton was blunt. “Oh, honey, we don’t do stuff like that. And it’s the worst thing I ever heard,” she said.

Imagining Horton’s brash voice trying to convey those lyrics, showing the vulnerability of a teenage girl lamenting her faithless love--well, it would have been a stretch.

Still, Dozier was shocked--and determined not to have Berry Gordy make him pay for the instrumental track he’d already cut on the song, that was the deal, with Motown songwriter/producers.

So he admits, he went to the Supremes with the same story--“I wrote this just for you.” To his shock, they turned it down, too--although his songwriting partners Brian and Eddie Holland put pressure on, and all eventually relented. After all, they had no hits to their name, apart from a

slight bump their single “Buttered Popcorn” got in Detroit, thanks to the group’s constant appearances at sock hops.

To make matters worse, Dozier claims that Ross was irritated, both by the song and the fact that she had to sing it in a lower key than she was used to--the instrumental track had already been recorded in Horton’s lower key.

While the song sounds as upbeat and thrilling as any Motown single, the mid-June 1964 session was anything but sunny. Ross evinced a “bad attitude” (in Dozier’s words), but, already a trouser, she gave H-D-H what they wanted--a beautiful lead vocal sounding “as tragic and helpless as she could,” with an eye to appealing to teenaged girls.

The lower pitch she sang in was sexier and less shrill, and that vulnerable Ross purr became her signature. She still hated the song, but once he heard it, Berry Gordy was convinced it would be Top 10.

It went far beyond that. The song hit No. 1 in July, which meant that the Supremes started the Dick Clark Cavalcade of Stars tour at the bottom of the bill in June and ended it a month later at the top.

Susan Whitall is the author of “Women of Motown” and “Fever: Little Willie John's Fast Life, Mysterious Death and the Birth of Soul.” She was editor of “Creem Magazine” in the 1970s, before moving to the “Detroit News,” where she wrote about music and pop culture.

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