

FOCUS



Anika Noni Rose (from left), Beyonce Knowles and Jennifer Hudson star in 'Dreamgirls,' a film based loosely on the Supremes and the many girl groups from Motown in the 1960s and 70s.

Step Back with the 'Dreamgirls'

Movie shines spotlight on Motown's girl groups

(AP)--Set in the 1960s and '70s, "Dreamgirls" doesn't profess to be a literal history of Motown or any other music scene from the past.

But the film, which is loosely based on Detroit chart-toppers the Supremes, does examine the issues that confronted many girl groups over the years. In this case: a calculating manager, relentless ambitions and ego-driven clashes among the artists.

Motown Hall of Famer Martha Reeves says she's glad that the film, which opened last Friday in New York and Los Angeles and opens Christmas Day across the country, is shining a spotlight on the sound, glamour and elegance of girl groups.

"Being a performer, I could identify with the development of the talent, our personalities and opinions and how judgments are decreed," said the 65-year-old former leader of Martha and the Vandellas, whose hits included "Dancing in the Street" and "Heat Wave." "But I couldn't say there was anything (in the film) like my experience in Motown."

The film, adapted from the 1981 Tony Award-winning Broadway musical of the same name, chronicles a fictional three-piece girl group known as the Dreamettes. Its two main members — Deena Jones (Beyonce Knowles) and Effie White (Jennifer Hudson) — were inspired by the Supremes' Diana Ross and Florence Ballard, respectively.

The three, who are rounded out by Lorrell



Martha Reeves, the former leader of Martha and the Vandellas, in front of the Motown museum in Detroit. (AP photo)

Robinson (Anika Noni Rose), are discovered by manager Curtis Taylor Jr. (Jamie Foxx) and offered a job as backup singers for hit-maker James "Thunder" Early, played by Eddie Murphy.

Taylor eventually establishes the trio as the stand-alone act The Dreams and begins shaping the women's look and sound, a la Motown.

As Berry Gordy did for Ross, Taylor grooms Jones for the spotlight, while the less photogenic Effie is pushed out. (Ballard left the group in 1967, ended up on welfare and died in 1976.)

Charles Sykes, an Indiana University professor who teaches a class on the history of the Motown music movement, said girl groups rode a wave of popular music that targeted an emerging market of music-hungry teenagers. He said most of Motown's girl groups didn't necessarily stand apart from the label's overall talent roster until the Supremes began to emerge as superstars in 1964-65 with hits such as "Baby Love" and "Stop! In the Name of Love."

Many girl groups saw their declines come as quickly as their ascents, Gaines said.

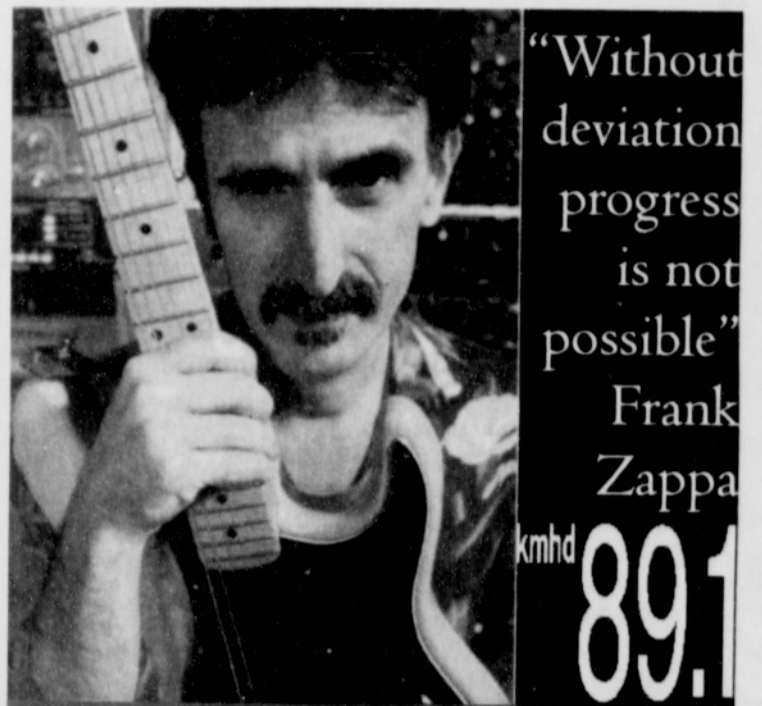
"They were horribly underpaid and exploited. They had very few legal protections. They were just easy prey for exploitation and some of them met with very tragic circumstances."

Reeves, a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame who now serves on the Detroit City Council, cited examples such as the Shirelles' "Soldier Boy" and Freda Payne's "Bring the Boys Home" to argue that Motown acts and others rose to popularity by singing about love during a turbulent period in history.

"The girls had their way in the '60s, I guess, because we sung through wars," Reeves said. "I remember the Korean War and the Vietnam War, and people would come to me and say: 'Your music took us through it.'"

She added: "They were songs that took us through a crisis and people could identify with it."

Sykes said he often compares lyrics of Motown hits such as the Marvelettes' "Please Mr. Postman," in which a woman eagerly awaits notice from her faraway boyfriend, to modern-day female lyricists and finds stark differences in what he called "the empowerment of the female image." But, he noted, girl groups capitalized on certain timeless elements of longing.



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Wynton Marsalis

(AP) -- On Wynton Marsalis' upcoming CD, he criticizes political leadership in America, cultural corruption, and sex and violence in rap — and that's just on one song. "I'm a part of it, I'm speaking from inside of our culture," Marsalis said. "We're not taking a moralistic view.

Marsalis Gets Political

Upcoming CD criticizes political leadership

It's not, 'Let me tell y'all how I'm different from you.' It's a comment on our way of life and our culture."

The CD "From the Plantation to the Penitentiary" is due out March 6. Marsalis, 45, calls it his most political album in years.

"It's been in my mind for a while. Every decade I like to do one piece that has that kind of social involvement with American culture," he said.

A look at some of the lyrics shows Marsalis is disenchanted with that culture. "The Return of Romance" appears to take rappers to task,

accusing them of being modern-day minstrels with "song-less tunes"; "Super Capitalism" chastises those obsessed with materialistic goals; and "Where Y'all At," among other things, criticizes '60s radicals and idealists who have lost their revolutionary slant.

"Where Y'all At" is notable because it features Marsalis as the vocalist, delivering a sort of rap chant.

"I always try and do something different. I don't try to make any of my records the same," he said. "I'm

always singing and chanting all over my house. I grew up doing it in New Orleans, chanting and singing and making up rhymes; long before there was rap music we were doing that. That's the New Orleans' way."

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