

# Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

## Death, Drugs Tarnish Motown Legacy

Fortune was not kind to many of the artists

Some time during the 1970s, Marvin Gaye reflected on his turbulent career in an obscure tune called "Dream of a Lifetime."

"I thank God for my wonderful life," sang the Motown Records enfant terrible. "I've had my ups and downs, but I thank God."

Gaye's life ended violently in 1984. His father, a former preacher, shot him dead during a domestic dispute the day before the singer turned 45.

As Motown celebrates its 50th anniversary throughout 2009, the record label and music fans will no doubt focus on the upbeat songs and fresh-faced performers who brought joy to millions of people around the world.

Smokey Robinson, Diana Ross and Stevie Wonder have become legends in their own lifetimes, but fortune was not as kind to other artists and composers who toiled in the spartan studio at "Hitsville U.S.A." near downtown Detroit.

Drugs, poverty, suicide and murder claimed many Motown figures. Gaye, a tortured soul whose stardom was marked by drugs, divorce, label disputes and bankruptcy, is probably the highest-profile casualty.

A year before Gaye was killed, virtuoso bass player James Jamerson died in obscurity. A raging alcoholic who played on Gaye's landmark 1971 album "What's Going On," Jamerson has since been deified by music aficionados.

Others remain less well known. Roger Penzabene, the co-writer of the Temptations' mournful masterpiece "I Wish It Would Rain," committed suicide in 1967. Hard-partying drummer Benny Benjamin, the backbeat of the Motown sound, was silenced by a stroke in 1969 after battling drugs and alcohol.

Temptations co-founder Paul Williams, the heart of the group and lead singer on "Don't Look Back," turned to alcohol and was eventually unable to perform. Two years after quitting, he shot himself dead in 1973, while sitting in a car parked two blocks from Motown.

Another troubled former Temptation David Ruffin, who sang lead on "My Girl," died of a drug overdose in 1991.

Early Motown star Mary Wells of "My Guy" fame died the following year of throat cancer. She endured poverty in her dying days, as did former Supreme Florence Ballard, who succumbed to a coronary thrombosis in 1976.

Of course, most labels have a lengthy list of casualties, and creative people do have their frailties. But Motown, initially at least, treated its artists like family, taking care of all their personal and professional needs.

Yet it also was run like an auto



Motown musician James Jamerson, who played bass on Marvin Gaye's landmark 1971 album "What's Going On," died in 1983 and has since been deified by music aficionados.



Motown recording artist Florence Ballard of The Supremes



Motown recording artists The Jackson Five are seen in this circa 1960 publicity photo.



Marvin Gaye, a Motown artist whose life ended violently.

2002 documentary of the same name. "He had issues going on in his head that had nothing to do with Motown."

Ruffin, Slutsky added, "was a just a lunatic. He would have been crazy anywhere." And Gaye, he said, "was tormented by a gazillion phobias."

Motown Records founder Berry Gordy did warn his stars about the perils of showbiz and the necessity of saving money, "but you just can't watch all the adults," Wilson said. "Trying to babysit adults, forget that."

Wilson, who was friends with Ruffin, said he refused Motown's offers of help. Ballard, another friend, was miserable on the road, broke her contract with Motown, and accordingly never received any royalties.

"She screwed up," Wilson said. "Everybody that died in a tragic way, they all regretted their actions."

assembly line, with heavy pressure on everyone to keep churning out hits and to tour relentlessly.

"Those who drank or did drugs became alcoholics and addicts because of the stress of the road," said Billy J. Wilson, head of the Detroit-based Motown Alumni Association. "They become depressed, and the depression was based around the environment of the entertainment business."

Some evidently thrived, like the Four Tops, whose lineup remained unchanged until 1997. But others had existing conditions exacerbated by the demands of stardom.

"Jamerson was hellbent on drinking himself to death," said Alan Slutsky, whose Jamerson biography "Standing in the Shadows of Motown" inspired the

### Musical 'The Wiz' Coming

Performances at Jefferson Auditorium

Tickets are now on sale for performances of "The Wiz," the all-black adaptation of the "Wonderful Wizard of Oz," under production by Stumptown Stages, a local theater company bringing a spectrum of theatrical experiences to a wide and diverse audience.

Performances are scheduled Feb. 13 through March 11 at the Jefferson High School Auditorium, 5210 N. Kerby Ave. Shows on Fridays and Satur-

days are at 8 p.m., with Sunday matinees at 2 p.m.

In addition, there will be a 7 p.m. show on Sunday, March 1 and a special benefit performance for Jefferson High School and the Portland School District that will take place Thursday, Feb. 12 at 7 p.m.

Tickets are \$27 for general admission and \$25 to students and seniors. For additional information, visit [stumptownstages.com](http://stumptownstages.com) or call the box-office at 503-381-8686.

The performances are made possible by the Oregon Arts Commission, Regional Arts and Culture Council and Portland Public Schools.

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