



The Motown Beat

Video clips from Hitsville, U.S.A.

BY [DAVE NANTAIS](#) | FEBRUARY 9, 2009

Many people don't know that Motown founder [Berry Gordy Jr.](#) was also a great songwriter. He helped write several tunes for singer Jackie Wilson, including the hit "[Lonely Teardrops](#)." The song "**Shop Around**" by the Miracles, co-written by Gordy and Smokey Robinson and released in 1961, became Motown's first national hit and earned the company's first gold record for selling one million copies.

"*You Can't Hurry Love*" has an infectious opening beat. The tambourine, which became a big part of the Motown Sound, is up front in the mix on this song. "Love" was one of the Supremes Number 1 hits—they had more than any other Motown artist. Most people associate the Supremes with Diana Ross, but all three of the original Supremes, including Mary Wilson and Florence Ballard, had their own fan base. Ballard sadly developed a drinking problem and was living on welfare in the mid-70s. A new book written by former Detroit Free Press journalist Peter Benjaminson was recently released called [The Lost Supreme: The Life of Dreamgirl Florence Ballard](#).

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Some Motown fans believe the best voice ever to emerge from Hitsville U.S.A. was that of Levi Stubbs from the Four Tops. Sadly, [Stubbs died](#) in his Detroit home last fall. “**Bernadette**” showcases Stubbs’ amazing vocal abilities. When he cries out to the song’s muse, “I need you to live,” it is with a potency and conviction that has rarely been equaled. The Four Tops will be receiving a Lifetime Achievement award at this year’s Grammy Award Ceremony.

I defy anyone to resist clapping or tapping his or her foot to the Temptations’ “**I Can’t Get Next to You.**” This song has both soul and funk elements and the shift from bass to falsetto vocals is playful and witty. There is a great rhythmic break in the middle of the song during which the drummer plays a syncopated pattern between the ride cymbal bell and the snare drum. “I Can’t Get Next to You” is one small example of the spectacular talent of Motown’s session musicians, who were largely responsible for the label’s success.

Rolling Stone magazine recently ranked Marvin Gaye as [number 6](#) on a list of the [top 100 singers](#) of all time. It is easy to understand why when listening to “**What’s Going On.**” Recorded in Motown’s famous Studio A just before the company moved to L.A. “What’s Going On” is as musically innovative and socially relevant today as it was in 1971. The song documents the divisive effects of war, and the lyrics are based partly on the letters Gaye’s brother was sending back from Vietnam.

David Nantais is an adjunct instructor in the departments of philosophy and religious Studies at the University of Detroit Mercy.