

Dreamgirls: Motown mythologized, obscured

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Dreamgirls, directed by Bill Condon, screenplay by Condon, based on the musical by Tom Eychen and Henry Krieger

Bill Condon's *Dreamgirls* brings to the screen the Broadway show of 25 years ago, which had book and lyrics by Tom Eychen and music by Henry Krieger. Condon (*Gods and Monsters*, *Kinsey*) directed and wrote the screenplay for the new film. The problem with both productions is that the phenomenon upon which they are based—the rise of Motown and its most successful female act, the Supremes—is largely mythologized and its truth (including its musical truth) obscured in the process.

Although it is well known that Hollywood generally perceives reality to be less interesting, and less potentially lucrative, than dramatic and glitzy adaptations thereof, in this case especially, the real history of Motown Records is much more interesting than the stilted version presented in *Dreamgirls*.

Motown Records emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s, the period of the Civil Rights movement, which involved masses of people in a fundamental struggle for democratic rights. By 1981, when the Broadway production of *Dreamgirls* opened, the radical wave of the 1960s and 1970s had long since faded. The Reagan era became known for the “The Me Generation,” with considerable numbers of people oriented toward accruing personal wealth. This is no small factor in the outlook and content of *Dreamgirls*. The story of the Supremes and Motown was translated into a rather unctuous parable of individual triumph.

Dreamgirls' cast includes Beyoncé Knowles, Jamie Foxx, Eddie Murphy and Danny Glover, and introduces Jennifer Hudson as Effie White, the story's central character, the role that Jennifer Holliday made famous in the Broadway production. Hudson was a contestant on the 2004 season of “American Idol,” and much is made of the parallel of her story (she was eliminated in the “Idol” finals) to that of Effie White. Hudson's dynamic performance of “And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going” has been met with almost universal critical praise in the media.

Dreamgirls opens with a scene backstage at a local Detroit talent show. Deena (Beyoncé Knowles), Lorrell (Anika Noni Rose) and Effie (Jennifer Hudson) are barely squeezed in as the last act, and they rock the house. They call themselves the Dreamettes. When they come off stage, a seamy agent (Danny Glover) offers them the chance to tour as backup vocalists for a well-known soul artist, James “Thunder” Early (Eddie Murphy), whom he manages. Two of the three singers are thrilled, but Effie is cool, saying “We don't do backup.” Curtis Taylor (Jamie Foxx) then introduces himself to the threesome and reiterates the offer, adding that backup would only be temporary and he would take care of them, wooing Effie in the process, to soften her up to the idea.

The scene is set for a pseudo-biographical story of the Supremes and Berry Gordy's Motown Records. Virtually every main character in

Dreamgirls can be identified with a real-life counterpart. Deena Jones parallels Supremes lead singer Diana Ross, Curtis Taylor stands in for Berry Gordy, founder of Motown Records, and Effie White for Florence Ballard, the original lead singer of the Supremes, who was fired in 1967, at the height of the group's popularity. The character of James Early is not so clear-cut. He could be a cobbled together combination of Marvin Gaye and perhaps James Brown or even Junior Walker, for whom Gordy enjoyed early success as a songwriter.

While the connection between the plot of *Dreamgirls* and the story of Motown records is left to inference, it is clearly based on the latter. The Supremes, who were originally known in Detroit as the Primettes, were led by Flo, who had the strongest voice, just as the Dreamettes in the film are led by Effie. Deena is thrust into the lead of the group because of her marketable looks and lighter voice...as well as her affair with her producer, and Effie gets fired, as was the real Flo.

Despite the creditable performances of its cast, *Dreamgirls* is fundamentally flawed. For reasons bound up with its attitude toward the subject matter, the production has a congenital identity crisis, undecided whether it is a musical—yet it doesn't bother to signal the need to adopt the suspension of disbelief that goes with that genre—or a serious piece of social commentary.

We only see choreography when the performers are on stage, so there are some tangibly embarrassing moments in the scenes when dramatic dialogue awkwardly breaks into song. Having said that, even in such scenes, which are otherwise weak, Jennifer Hudson captivates, by the sheer emotional power of her voice. Even in moments when she is singing a *cappella*, or close to it, she carries the scene.

Even if *Dreamgirls* were squarely in the “musical” genre, say, like the recent film version of *Rent*, one would have to ask if a Broadway musical could adequately do justice to the Motown sound? Perhaps not, but one would at least hope that paying tribute to the musical legacy of Motown would be truer to the spirit, if not the letter of its music. The music of *Dreamgirls* is clearly not the Motown sound. The small, tightly orchestrated, jazz-influenced and experimental arrangements behind the Motown artists is replaced here by bombastic, fully orchestral, Broadway show tunes.

A 2002 film, *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, (see our review) documented the process, albeit imperfectly. It made the case, in contrast to popular belief, that the real stars of Motown were the unsung backup musicians in the studio, known as the “Funk Brothers.” While giving credit where it is due, this view overcompensates for the lack of notoriety, and compensation, that backup musicians received for their efforts and talents. *Dreamgirls* exemplifies the kind of idolizing attitude of popular culture that *Shadows* criticizes: the star is everything, the artists in the background, nothing.

In any case, even though that was a very different film than *Dreamgirls*, that documentary shares some common fallacies. Among

the most pernicious is the characterization of musical audiences as entirely divided along racial lines. This is not only a vast oversimplification, but it flies in the face of the powerful movement for civil rights in which both white and black Americans participated.

No one can seriously doubt that the story is inspired by the Supremes phenomenon. However being only “loosely based” on that story doesn’t excuse the historical inaccuracies that are rife in *Dreamgirls*.

The rise of Motown Records was a peculiar phenomenon bound up with the civil rights movement and the unique historical development of Detroit. The promise of good-paying jobs in the automobile industry attracted African Americans to migrate from the South as far back as 1914, when Ford Motors developed assembly line methods in the production of its Model T. In the 1950s, Gordy actually spent a period as an auto worker and was so influenced by the assembly line that he incorporated the idea into his music business. He would later dub his recording studio, “the hit factory.”

A central issue in *Dreamgirls* is the existence of two music hit charts: the R&B, originally called “race music,” chart, and the pop chart, which listed the mainstream hits sold to largely white audiences. The music industry felt it necessary to keep its eye on the recordings popular among black listeners, but the separate charts were clearly a product of the official racism endemic to a certain epoch. The existence of two “separate and unequal” charts actually began to break down in the 1950s for several reasons.

A scene notable for its lack of authenticity depicts a conversation between Effie’s brother, CC (Keith Robinson), a young black songwriter that Curtis Taylor takes under his wing. Curtis asks CC who was the first performer to have a hit with “Hound Dog.” CC responds that it was Elvis Presley and is corrected by Taylor, who points out that it was Big Mama Thornton, a black blues musician, who first recorded the tune. First, it stretches the imagination to think that an aspiring black musician from that era (presumably around 1960) wouldn’t know that. But more importantly, despite Thornton’s claims that she had penned the tune herself, it was written by Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, a young, white songwriting team who went on in the mid-1950s to write and produce songs that became known as “crossover” hits for black recording artists such as the Coasters, the Drifters and Ben E. King.

Dreamgirls portrays Taylor as a visionary in his business plan of building an independent recording company that would break into the pop audience, rather than settle for distribution only to blacks and performances on the “chitlin circuit.”

In reality, the “crossover” phenomenon was largely due to the electrification of young people of all races by the civil rights movement. Even prior to the movement reaching its height, there are many examples of black musicians being embraced by multiracial mass audiences. Alan Freed, a version of whose story was told in the 1978 film, *American Hot Wax*, was successfully promoting both black and white groups as “rock and roll,” from the early 1950s, first in Cleveland, then in New York City. Berry Gordy himself attained a certain measure of success writing tunes with Roquel Billy Davis, for Jackie Wilson, the seminal Detroit soul sensation.

Even in the 1960s, when Gordy had a two-tiered marketing approach, there were recordings that surprised even their promoters in their widespread and explosive popularity. In 1965, the tune “Shotgun,” by Junior Walker and the All Stars, was marketed by Gordy on the R&B circuit, but spontaneously broke through and became a pop smash success.

Obviously, it would be absurd to claim there was no racism in that period, particularly in the music industry, but it does a disservice to misrepresent the period in portraying “white America” as a monolith of prejudice and racial intolerance. The scenes in the clubs where the Dreamettes perform show universal backwardness among the white performers and clientele. A Jewish comedian makes a quip about the “negro” singers being there to clean up after their performance. Nowhere to be seen is deep anger and hostility to racial bigotry and the striving for equality that gripped large numbers of people, both black and white, during that period.

In its attitude toward the history of the period of the civil rights movement, *Dreamgirls* gravitates toward the reactionary view of identity politics. Implicit throughout the film is the idea that there is an unbridgeable chasm between black and white culture. Insofar as the social struggle is even referenced, the vague references to Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement are employed solely as historical ambience.

In an unfortunate scene, Effie makes a bizarre reference to Curtis’s production of a recording of one of King’s speeches, which turns into a bad joke. Motown actually did, in 1963, issue such a recording. The album, “The Great March to Freedom,” contained the speech King delivered in Detroit, prior to the march in Washington later that year. Gordy flew to Atlanta in August of that year to present King a copy.

The perfunctory treatment of the Detroit ghetto rebellion of 1967 is also worth mentioning. The brief scene presents rampaging youth in an unmistakably unsympathetic light. Only a few years before, in the name of “urban renewal,” Paradise Valley, the cultural heart of the black community, known as the “Black Bottom,” was plowed under to make way for the new Chrysler Freeway.

This was an area that contained a vibrant nightlife in many after-hours music venues, known as “blind pigs.” In the years subsequent, the Detroit police force employed a tactic of patrolling black neighborhoods with four-man patrol cars, called “Big Four” cruisers, harassing, beating and in some cases murdering blacks for minor infractions. It was at such a relocated blind pig in July 1967, when police attempted to arrest all 60 to 80 of the clientele, who were celebrating the return of two servicemen from Vietnam, that the rebellion began.

Unfortunately, the storyline of *Dreamgirls* takes the lowest common denominator. Historical context is determined to be irrelevant. The story is reduced to the struggle of a single black woman to overcome adversity. The fact that Effie’s real-life counterpart, Flo Ballard, died in relative obscurity at the age of 32, nine years after being dumped by Motown, was ignored in the interest of making a feel-good ending.

The Motown legacy remains indelible in the memories of millions as an era that posed the possibility of overcoming inequality and backwardness. Its music expresses hope and optimism. One would have hoped for more truthfulness, even from a film loosely based on its story.



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