Motown songwriter Nick Ashford dies at 70

Hiram Lee
6 September 2011

Songwriter Nickolas Ashford died August 22 at the age of 70. Along with his wife, composer Valerie Simpson, Ashford wrote songs for some of the most talented performers at Motown Records during the late 1960s, including Marvin Gaye, Gladys Knight, The Supremes and Smokey Robinson.

Ashford was born May 4, 1941 in Fairfield, South Carolina. Like so many black working class families during the 1940s, the Ashford family would leave the South in search of better jobs and living conditions in the industrial centers of the North. They settled in Willow Run, Michigan, outside of Detroit, where Ashford's father worked on construction jobs. It was here that the young Ashford's passion for music first found an outlet, when he began writing and performing songs for the choir of the Willow Run Baptist Church.

After attending East Michigan University in Ypsilanti for a time, Ashford chose to leave school and pursue his interest in music. He left for New York in the early 1960s in the hopes of making it as a performer. Ashford was homeless and sleeping on park benches when he first met music student Valerie Simpson at the White Rock Baptist Church in Harlem in 1964. The two young musical talents took to each other fairly quickly and began what proved to be a lifelong collaboration. Within two years, they would have a number one hit on the R&B charts, with Ray Charles' 1966 recording of their song "Let's Go Get Stoned." That same year, Ashford and Simpson signed with Motown Records in Detroit.

At Motown, Ashford and Simpson joined an impressive staff of in-house composers, including such dynamic songwriters as Smokey Robinson, Holland-Dozier-Holland, and Norman Whitfield, along with a who's who of singers and musicians. These talented songwriters and performers produced some of the most outstanding pop music of the 1960s.

Ashford and Simpson's most enduring compositions are undoubtedly those recorded by Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell (who died of a brain tumor in 1970 six weeks before her 25th birthday) between 1967 and 1968, among them "Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing," "Ain't No Mountain High Enough," "You're All I Need to Get By," and "Your Precious Love." Just to say the names of these songs is to conjure up a wealth of emotion and memory.

While Ashford and Simpson arrived somewhat late in Motown's heyday, the songs they composed for Gaye and Terrell in some ways epitomized the "Motown sound." There was the upbeat punch of those driving dance rhythms, the energy and confidence which seemed to be released from every aspect of those recordings—music, lyrics and performance.

If the young couples of Ashford and Simpson's songs are momentarily separated, there is no doubt they'll be reunited, or that they're committed to fighting for that outcome. "There ain't no mountain high enough/Ain't no valley low enough/Ain't no river wide enough/To keep me from getting to you," wrote Ashford in one of their biggest hits.

Ashford's lyrics were simple and direct in a way that remains very appealing. "No other sound is quite the same as your name," he wrote in "Ain't Nothing Like The Real Thing," "No touch can do half as much to make me feel better/So let's stay together."

One finds expressed in these songs, and in the best work produced by Motown in the years before, something of the confidence and optimism of a

© World Socialist Web Site

generation of working class youth for whom the postwar boom had brought an improvement in living conditions. Decent paying jobs could be found for a time and a little breathing room was finally to be had. The Civil Rights movement and the mass struggles for democratic rights by black workers had an enormous influence on the young musicians at Motown, as well.

However, things were already beginning to change by the time Ashford and Simpson arrived at Motown. Things were not the same in 1967, the year of the riots in Detroit, or 1968, the year of Martin Luther King's assassination, as they were in 1963. The contradictions of postwar society were emerging with force.

Bound up with the new social crises taking place, Motown, and popular music generally, was entering into a decline and this had its affect on the duo's work. After decades in Detroit, Motown Records moved to Los Angeles in 1972, effectively bringing to an end the period in which it was a real force in popular music.

Ashford and Simpson began their own successful recording career in the early 1970s, going on to record popular hits of their own, including "Found a Cure" and "Solid," while continuing to write music for other artists like Diana Ross and Chaka Khan.

While little of the later music compares to their best work with Motown, Ashford and Simpson continued to connect with audiences throughout their career. Their best music, above all that small but powerful group of songs written for Gaye and Terrell in the late 1960s, will no doubt continue to be admired for a very long time.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site