Motown songwriting legend Lamont Dozier dies at 81

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12 August 2022

Songwriter Lamont Dozier died August 8 in Scottsdale, Arizona at age 81. He was a key artistic contributor to the flourishing of the "Motown Sound" during the 1960s, which had an enormous impact on global popular culture.

Dozier was part of the remarkable collection of singers and musicians on the Motown Record label, drawn mostly from the African-American, working class neighborhoods of Detroit, who created some of the most exciting soul, R&B, rock 'n' roll and funk of the second half of the twentieth century. The emergence of this music reflected big changes in American life, including the emergence and struggles of the civil rights movement and the growing confidence of the working class youth in the postwar period determined to express its confidence and rebelliousness.

To list only some of the song titles for which Dozier and collaborating artists were responsible instantly evokes an era and a complex of emotions: "Nowhere to Run," "Baby Love," "Reach Out (I'll Be There)," "Heatwave," "Where Did Our Love Go," "How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved By You)," "Reflections," "I Can't Help Myself (Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch)," "I Hear A Symphony," "You Can't Hurry Love," "My World Is Empty Without You," "Can I Get a Witness" and "You Keep Me Hanging On."

Lamont Dozier was born in Detroit in 1941 in the city's Black Bottom district, a culturally rich neighborhood. After taking up music early, he encountered brief success as a teenager with a doo-wop group called The Romeos. A minor record contract with Atlantic Records ended quickly because the audacious Dozier insisted upon a larger-album deal, which the label rejected. Shortly after that, he was approached by Motown label owner Berry Gordy and signed to a small weekly songwriting contract.

Dozier is best known for his efforts as part of a songwriting team, along with brothers Eddie and Brian Holland, popularly known as "Holland-Dozier-Holland" (HDH). They met at Motown in 1962. Together they helped produce a remarkable volume of hits in a relatively short span of time, including at least 16 number one Billboard hits in the US and UK, and another 70 Top-10 charting songs throughout the 1960s and 70s. All told, they wrote over 400 songs for Motown, primarily between 1962 and 1968.

Holland-Dozier-Holland were part of a talented collection of Motown songwriters who also included Nick Ashford and Valerie Simpson, Norman Whitfield, William Stevenson, Smokey Robinson and many others. These writers and producers gave shape and direction to the early period of Motown and its unique sound. That "sound" was generally characterized by several signatures—an accentuation of the back beat, prominent electric bass lines, melodic chord structures, charted horn and string sections, call and response singing styles and sophisticated yet deceptively simple melodies.

The songwriters were also essentially one component of the "Motown assembly line" that Gordy unabashedly styled after the nearby Ford auto plant model. Songwriters and producers like Dozier were put to work around the clock to get songs and compositions to the growing stable of singers and performers, who in turn worked with the extraordinary group of in-house musicians known as the Funk Brothers. Songs were often supported by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra as well.

Dozier and the Hollands were likely the most prodigious songwriters of the talented collection. Their work with The Supremes in particular, but also The Four Tops, Martha and the Vandellas and Marvin Gaye produced a trove of memorable songs whose moods and sentiments, often tapping into deep popular currents, are unforgettable.

Songs connected to Dozier are often stood standout for their musical and emotional intensity, which were in turn grounded by a world-weary compositional quality. The highly danceable rhythms and grooves, punctuated by soulful harmonies and dramatic key changes, are often undercut with sorrowful or anxious lyrics and phrasings that run counter to the apparent spirit of the music.

Though most of Dozier's songs focus on love and heartache, there is very little fluff or saccharine sentimentality involved. Dreams and hopes are often near, but just out of reach. Or a lover tries desperately to hang on to a relationship slipping out of his or her hands, often for reasons beyond his or her control. Sometimes a song-character simply finds a moment of temporary relief, thankful to have found someone amid a sea of difficulties.

Dozier described the HDH's songwriting approach as "trying to make lemonade out of lemons" in a 2015 interview. This

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often created a unique tension on many of the best songs, giving them an urgency uncommon to popular music up to that point. Interviews over the years indicate the trio worked out an effective system for working together, with Dozier most often helping to build bridges between the existing lyrics and the musical composition, and reworking elements tirelessly.

As a team they had early success with Martha (Reeves) and the Vandellas, in particular on the exhilarating horn-driven "Heatwave," which burns with youthful yearning and confusion over a passion about to erupt. Other excellent collaborations include the dramatic "Nowhere to Run," which carries a similar emotional intensity, but from the opposite end—this is a relationship that needs to end. They had also had memorable success on songs like "Jimmie Mack" and "Quicksand."

The HDH collaboration with The Four Tops, propelled by the raw intensity of lead singer Levi Stubbs, also produced some of the most gripping and hard-charging soul and R&B songs ever performed. Dozier tracks such as "I'll Be There (Reach Out For Me)," "Bernadette" and "Baby I Need Your Loving" instantly grab the listener, the are impossible to sit still to. Other remarkable songs followed, such as "Standing in the Shadows of Love" and "I Can't Help Myself (Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch)," which capture heartache and longing brilliantly through The Four Tops' soulful harmonies.

However, it was the songs Dozier helped create for The Supremes, with lead singer Diana Ross backed by singers Mary Wilson and Florence Ballard, that are some of the most haunting and indelible in all popular music. All told, 10 of the group's 12 number-one hit songs were created by Holland-Dozier-Holland.

The most effective Supremes' songs capture the "lemon-lemonade" song approach extraordinarily well. Their arc of love and heartache (and back again) are captured like few others across an excellent string of songs beginning with "Where Did Our Love Go" in 1964. Paired with the singers' creative and dramatic harmonies, along with the phenomenal skills of the Funk Brothers, nearly a dozen more memorable songs emerged in the next four years: "Baby Love," "I Hear a Symphony," "You Can't Hurry Love," "My World Is Empty Without You," "Come See About Me," "Love Is Here and Now You're Gone," "You Keep Me Hanging On" and "Reflections."

Other Motown Holland-Dozier-Holland compositions are also well worth revisiting including "I Gotta Dance To Keep From Crying" by The Miracles, "How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved By You)" and "Can I Get a Witness" by Marvin Gaye and "This Old Heart of Mine" by The Isley Brothers.

But by 1967-68 the tensions between Gordy's business-driven "assembly line" model and the creative pursuits of many artists had reached a breaking point. The departure of Holland-Dozier-Holland from Motown in 1968 signaled the end of the "classic" era of the label.

They left Motown to start their own label, Invictus. Their writing still produced interesting music in the 1970s, including memorable songs like the heartfelt "Give Me Just A Little More Time" by the Chairmen of the Board and Freda Payne's "Band of Gold."

Dozier would return to making music as a singer and musician as well in the 1970s, producing interesting albeit more subdued music, in songs like "All Cried Out." He continued to help produce for artists, including the hit song "Two Hearts" with British artist Phil Collins in 1989.

The Holland-Dozier-Holland team was inducted into the Songwriter Hall of Fame in 1988 and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1990. Their best music retains the vibrancy and liveliness that speaks to the bold, tumultuous era in which they emerged, but also at its best retains a timeless quality.

Recommended selection of songs involving Lamont Dozier

1963
Heat Wave - Martha and the Vandellas
I Gotta Dance To Keep From Crying - The Miracles
1964
How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved By You) - Marvin Gaye
Come See About Me - The Supremes
Where Did Our Love Go - The Supremes
1965
Nowhere to Run - Martha and the Vandellas
I Hear a Symphony - The Supremes
It's The Same Old Song - The Four Tops
1966
My World Is Empty Without You - The Supremes
Reach Out I'll Be There - The Four Tops
This Old Heart of Mine - The Isley Brothers
You Keep Me Hangin' On - The Supremes
Standing in the Shadows of Love - The Four Tops
You Can't Hurry Love - The Supremes
1967
Bernadette - The Four Tops
Reflections - The Supremes
Jimmy Mack - Martha and the Vandellas
1970
Give Me Just a Little More Time - Chairmen of the Board
Band of Gold - Freda Payne

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