

VEGAS HAS SOUL

It's Human Nature to have Motown music in Vegas

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The Supremes brought Motown to Vegas with their performance at the Flamingo in 1966. Forty-three years later, Motown continues to headline in Vegas with music performed live almost every night of the week.

Drive down the Las Vegas Strip, and you'll find tributes to Motown ("The Platters, Coasters and Marvelettes" at the Sahara, "Hitzville the Show" at Harmon Theater at Planet Hollywood and "Legends in Concert" at Harrah's) and performers inspired by Motown (Australia's Human Nature performing at Imperial Palace).

There's something about Motown's music that continues to draw audiences to see Human Nature and other Motown revues. "Legends in Concert," Las Vegas longest-running tribute show, has long recognized the attraction of Motown. It's had a Motown act represented in their show for more than 25 years.

"It really gets down to the songs, to the music. I watch the Motown acts in our show, and they get some of the best response that we get from any act that we have in the show every night," said Brian Brigner, CEO of On Stage Entertainment, which produces "Legends in Concert."

"When the Motown acts hit the stage the show hits another gear with the crowd," said Brigner.

The music and the classic Motown-choreographed dance steps create a performance package that has audiences spellbound even today.

Groups like The Four Tops and The Temptations stood out not just because of their music, but also for their amazing performances.

"They had such cool dance routines... We took that on as well," said Andrew Tierney of Human Nature.

Otis Williams, who sang second tenor and co-founded The Temptations, explained that the idea for their choreography came from the late Paul Williams, a member from the group's original line-up.

"He was a very good dancer, and he just said one day as we were rehearsing that we would not be the kind of group that just sang. We needed to be exciting... So we started to rehearse and started putting choreography together, and the next thing you know we started to become known for not only making hit records, but for our choreography," said Williams.

Motown magic

Motown Records was started in Detroit by Berry Gordy in 1959.

In a 10-year period (1961-1971), Motown artists had 110 Top 10 hits. Between 1961 and 1997, Motown had 57 No. 1 hits. More than 20 of The Rock



Photo courtesy Ethan Miller / Las Vegas Sun

and Roll Hall of Fame's 500 Songs that Shaped Rock and Roll are by Motown artists including The Temptations' "My Girl," "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" and "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone;" The Supremes' "Stop! In The Name of Love" and "You Can't Hurry Love;" Edwin Starr's "War;" The Jackson 5's "ABC" and "I Want You Back" and many more.

Phil Burton, one of the members of Human Nature, credits Motown music's popularity to Gordy's vision and a large number of talented performers being at the right place at the right time.

"I really don't think there will be another record man like Berry Gordy again. He just had a vision and knew exactly how to make that vision a reality," said Burton.

Apart from The Temptations and The Supremes, other original Motown artists headlined on the Strip during the '60s and '70s including Gladys Knight and The Pips and The Jackson 5.

Motown inspires a new generation

Four Aussie mates singing Motown music in Vegas seems like an unlikely scenario, but for Human Nature it's a way for them to honor the artists and songs that inspired their career as one of the top-selling music groups in Australia.

The show features the dynamic harmonies of brothers Andrew and Michael Tierney, Toby Allen and Burton, who perform songs from The Temptations, The Jackson 5, The Four Tops and other Motown artists.

"For us it's coming full circle and just showing exactly what our roots are and what our influences are. I was going to say that we've become a bit more old school, but I suppose the routines that we're doing are sort of more updated versions of what the originals did," said Burton.

The Tierney brothers met Allen and Burton while attending Hurlstone Agricultural High School in Sydney, Australia. Andrew Tierney got the idea to form a vocal group from a scene in "Back to The Future" when the character Marty McFly is performing with a band at his parent's high school dance.

"They sang 'Earth Angel.' I liked that



Jackson 5 photo courtesy the Las Vegas News Bureau

At top, the Temptations perform at the Stardust in 2004. Above, The Jackson 5 performs in 1975 at the MGM as the opening act for Frank Gorshin. Below, Human Nature.

song and thought it would be fun to do a doo wop sort of thing. Doo wop is not that big in Australia, but it was the birth of a lot of groups," said Tierney. "There were rock bands at school and stuff, but we didn't play rock band instruments. We just sang."

In 1989 they formed a group called the 4Trax. They looked at the history of famous vocal groups for ideas and discovered Motown music. The 4Trax took cues from The Temptations and developed their live show. They went from performing on the street to performing in clubs and in talent competitions where they won numerous awards.

The Tierneys started writing their own music, and soon the group signed a record deal with Sony Music Australia. At that time they also decided to change their name to Human Nature. One of the group's big influences on their first album was one of modern Motown's most famous groups -- Boyz II Men.

"They were harking back to the old school vocal groups, but when they hit really big they showed that there was a modern way to do that. We wanted to be the white Boyz II Men when we were growing up," said Tierney.

Human Nature's first album, "Telling Everybody," was released in 1996 and achieved triple-platinum status. Shortly after the release of their album, Human Nature toured internationally

in Europe and the United Kingdom as an opening act for performers like Michael Jackson.

After more successful albums, Human Nature decided to expand their audience by doing a tribute album to some of the first bands that inspired them. Their fifth studio album, "Reach Out: The Motown Record," featured Motown covers. It was another chart-topping success and prompted the release of "Dancing In The Street: The Songs of Motown II." Their third Motown-inspired album, "Get Ready," featured contributions by original Motown artists including Smokey Robinson.

Regarded as "The King of Motown" Robinson is a highly talented singer, songwriter and producer who created 37 Top 40 hits for Motown between 1960 and 1987, the same year he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Tierney and Burton explained that including Robinson on their album was an honor but also a nerve-wracking experience when they performed in front of him for the first time.

"Before [Robinson] recorded we just had this idea that we wanted to sing for him so he knew what we were like and where we were coming from," said Tierney.

After singing The Miracles' "Ooo Baby Baby" a cappella to Robinson, the man who first made that song a hit, the

group had more than just a new fan.

"I grew up with Motown where the standard for talent was so high," said Robinson during a press announcement for the show in May. "When I saw these guys I was blown away."

"In an interview later [Robinson] actually told us that he thought our version of 'Ooo Baby Baby' was the best one he ever heard, and we were thinking 'are you just telling us this?'" said Tierney.

Aside from their singing, Tierney explained that part of what he thinks impressed Robinson is Human Nature's history and how the group formed.

"We reminded [Robinson] of those old Motown groups and how rather than groups put together as there have been over the years, back in the day all the groups started as friends... He saw that in us, and that's probably where the connection started," said Tierney.

"Get Ready" also featured a duet with The Temptations that earned the group the respect of another Motown legend.

"They stood there and did an a cappella number for us, and I was very impressed. I'm just glad to hear that we could inspire them because I really admire them equally," said Williams on his meeting with Human Nature.

The group's talent as live performers made Las Vegas a perfect venue for them to launch their careers in North America.

"We're pretty proud of our achievements in recording and things like that, but I think if you really want to see us at our best you see us on stage. We sort of figured where better to go in the world to push that than Vegas," said Burton.

"With us I guess for better or worse it's four white guys doing Motown. You wouldn't know what to expect, but when you get to the end of the show you realize the full story of how we got together and why we're doing these songs. For us it seems like it's a really unique take on the music," said Andrew Tierney.

Motown continues its reign in Vegas

Today people can hear the songs that first made them fans of Motown music when Robinson, The Temptations, Little Anthony and the Imperials and other current and former Motown artists headline in Vegas. Even when they're not in town, their songs reverberate throughout the Strip from a younger generation of performers who are keeping this music alive.

Jin-Jin Reeves, who stars in "Hitzville The Show" at Harmon Theater, describes Motown as "a healing music." Reeves grew up in Detroit and attended a summer youth program for the performing arts led by Kim Weston. Weston is a Motown alumna famous for her 1966 hit "It Takes Two" with Marvin Gaye.

"The music, the melody, the lyrics it tells a story that anybody can relate to, any generation at any time in life. The stories are something that we live every day," said Reeves.

As for The Temptations, they're just happy to be so widely embraced by fans around the world.

"We never imagined when we started out back during the '60s that our music and The Temptations' image would be so, I guess I'm safe in saying iconic... When our music can be accepted in such a universal way you just love it, and you think, what would the world be like without music?" said Williams.

