

Supremely talented

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By [Graham Reid](#)

Two days on from the Grammys and the incident involving Chris Brown and Rihanna is the talk of webworld.

Brown is only 19 and that's very young to be dealing with global fame. And as the old saying goes, there's no school in which you can learn either.

Well, there was actually: it was Motown and 50 years ago – under the watchful eye of its founder Berry Gordy – it was lifting its singers from Detroit's tenement buildings and turning them into stars, remarkably few of whom hit the headlines in the way Brown has.

These were stars with chaperones, charm school lessons, dressers, discipline, a social conscience ... and yet still having fun.

Mary Wilson – the former Supreme who was the only founding member until the group disbanded in 1977 – was at the recent Grammys, celebrating the lifetime achievement award given to her former labelmates the Four Tops. And yes, she observed how young so many on the stage were.

"I have to applaud Motown and Mr Gordy who recognised we needed to know how to carry ourselves, and that is something missing in today's market strategies. You can't just throw someone out there just because they are talented."

Wilson – an articulate, quick-witted 64-year old who still tours and does charitable work – notes also that although many of the artists came from poor backgrounds, they were from families "who were concerned about us being better human beings, so our parents really taught us well".

Of course when the Supremes first got together – originally as a five-piece called the Primettes when Wilson, Diana Ross and Florence Ballard were barely into their teens – they were, in the words of their charm school coach Mrs Powell, "diamonds in the rough".

"We were already working at record hops with very famous artists and after doing those we thought we could record too.

"So we auditioned for Mr Gordy. He liked us but said, 'Come back after you've graduated from high school'.

"Years later we found out he just didn't want us girls running around the studio no matter how good we were.

"But we started hanging around and eventually one of the producers said the background singers weren't there and we said, 'we'll do it' ... and that was our entree to Motown."

The Supremes' story is a controversial and well-known one: how after years of no chart success they started nailing hit after hit (*Baby Love*, *Stop in the Name of Love*, *I Hear a Symphony*, *My World is Empty Without You* and *You Can't Hurry Love* in a two-year period from 1964); how their huge fake eyelashes, elaborate gowns and bouffant hairstyles became an iconic look of the mid 60s; how Gordy pushed Ross into taking lead vocals and in 1967 started billing the group as "Diana Ross and the Supremes"; how Ballard spiralled down through depression and alcoholism to be fired in 1967 and die in poverty nine years later; how Ross quit in 1970 to pursue a solo career; how Wilson kept the Supremes going through a revolving door of other members ...

It is a sometimes tragic story, but has been replaced by that told in the recent movie *Dreamgirls* about a similar but fictional group, and a similar record industry figure to Berry Gordy. Motown star and later company vice-president Smokey Robinson said the filmmakers should apologise to Gordy and to Motown.



Florence Ballard (top) Mary Wilson (left) and Diana Ross found fame in the sixties after hanging around the Motown studios. Photo / Supplied by Universal

Wilson – who wrote a best-selling autobiography *Dreamgirl: My Life as a Supreme* in 1986 – is ambivalent about *Dreamgirls*.

"It's very hard to be open and honest because you have a work that could be about this entity, but people take the liberty of adding certain things and taking certain things out and then say, 'it's not really about them.' But you see that it's similar.

"I can't say I don't like it, I would never say that because it is a beautiful piece of work.

"But it's not the story of the Supremes even though people think it is. So it's about you, but not about you? I'm very happy that Motown and Smokey stood up."

As Wilson admits, in the popular imagination *Dreamgirls* is the Supremes' story, but her own is much more interesting: by the time Gordy moved the label out of Detroit to Los Angeles in 1975 – a controversial move because many said it would lose touch with its roots – Wilson and Cindy Birdsong (who replaced Ballard) had already moved on themselves.

"We were doing a lot of TV shows – Dean Martin, Sammy Davis and so on – so we were always in Hollywood and had become so closely connected to it in 1968.

I had a home there and back in Detroit. There was something that everyone felt about Motown leaving Detroit, but at the time Detroit had declined and there had been the riots so the label wanted a better environment.

"We moved away from Motown so we could have more freedom."

In 1973, with Motown indifferent to the Supremes whose career was now in a slow decline, Wilson took over the group's management and the changing line-up had to stay on the road to survive.

Then began protracted litigation with the label because Wilson saw value in the Supremes' name and wanted to protect it.

This is a cause dear to her and in the past decade she has been the outspoken advocate for legislation to protect groups' names and reputations through the Truth in Music Bill, and for artists' copyright.

"We have now got legislation passed in about 30 states which says that if you were not part of the original recording group then you cannot call yourself by that famous name. Artists who have given so much of their talent are dying without being compensated."

Wilson also lectures, performs in a variety of formats ("symphonies, my rock'n'roll show which includes Supremes songs, a jazz show") and was previously a cultural ambassador for the United States appointed by Colin Powell.

She now travels the world – as did Princess Diana – raising awareness about land mines.

"That's one thing Motown has given me and many of my contemporaries: we have a lifelong career and it helps us do many things other than sing or perform."

LOWDOWN

Who: Mary Wilson of the Supremes

What: The 50th anniversary of Motown

Five classic Motown albums: The Supremes – Where Did Our Love Go (1964); Smokey Robinson and the Miracles – Going To A Go-Go (1965); Marvin Gaye – What's Going On (1971); The Temptations – All Directions (1972); Stevie Wonder – Songs In the Key Of Life (1976)

See also: Various – Motown 50, out now

Trivia: Wilson's collection of Supremes' gowns and memorabilia tours the world. Last year it was in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.