

Mary Wilson
Singer, 75

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The Supremes' founding member talks about the girl group's influential fashion and the lack of hate in the Motown family

Mary Wilson: 'Motown was like walking into a Disneyland.' Photograph: Rozette Rago/ NYT/eyevine

Mary Wilson was a founding member of the Supremes, with Diana Ross and Florence Ballard. At their 1960s peak, with Detroit-based Motown records, the Supremes rivalled the Beatles. Wilson's 1986 autobiography, *Dreamgirl: My Life as a Supreme*, was a bestseller. She had three children (one of whom, Rafael, 16, died when the Jeep Cherokee his mother was driving overturned on a highway in 1994). Meeting to discuss her new book *Supreme Glamour*, a sartorial history of the Supremes, Wilson is friendly, warm and delighted to be in Britain, where she first toured in the 1960s: "I fell in love with it here – I thought I was going to marry an Englishman!"

You call the Supremes "the original pop fashionistas".

We were! You can look at Beyoncé, and I'm sure it wasn't she who copied us, but her mother would have grown up with the Supremes. We loved to dress up. Other girls, like the Shirelles, wore gowns, but our clothes were like couture.

The Supremes' style was also a political statement – about black affluence and sophistication, all the huge social and cultural changes of the period.

Yes, my brother would say: "Mary, why don't y'all wear some afros?" I'm like, no, we're making a statement in our own way. That was the time of "black is beautiful" and "black pride", which was cool. We did it later.

You were just teenagers when you joined Motown...
It really was like walking into a

Disneyland. All these creative people. People say: "Motown, it was this big building", but I always say no, Motown was always a collaboration between the people, with Berry (Gordy) at the head of course.

You've had disputes with Motown over the years, but you're like a family?

Yes, a family. I think we all think of ourselves as distant cousins. There are some things, but there's no hate – I still would want to be at Motown.

For a time, the Supremes outsold the Beatles. Didn't they meet you and call you "square"?

We were – there were rock'n'roll girls and we were good girls! I don't think there was rivalry between us and the Beatles. Paul [McCartney] called me when Diane [Diana Ross] left, saying: "Why did she leave – what's going

on?" Entertainers are really quite friendly with each other. Unless some person irks you and you think, "That person irks me!"

Wasn't Princess Margaret rather rude to you at a Royal Variety Performance?

Yes. She said: "Is that a wig you're wearing?" I thought [with] royalty, you'd meet them and it would be: "It's lovely to meet you", but it was: "Oh, is that a wig you're wearing?" Whoa! She sounded like one of my neighbours in the projects.

You write about the Supremes touring the deep south, dealing with segregated hotels and bathrooms. There were signs that said "No coloured". If you drank out of a water fountain that said it was for white people, they could hang you.

'Princess Margaret said: "Is that a wig?" She sounded like one of my neighbours in the projects'

People can't even imagine what most black people endured.

Now there are movements such as Black Lives Matter...

People are still fighting for their right to be a human being. When Obama won, it was amazing. Most of our parents had died. Had they still been alive, they would not have believed that could happen. Someone asked me: How do you feel?" I said: "I can see my mom, my aunt, my uncles, all saying, 'Hallelujah! Hallelujah!'"

Have you felt a change of atmosphere with Trump?

Are you kidding? Of course! I don't mind the Republican beliefs, it's not about that. But his thinking is all wrong. Not to get too much into politics, but it should be about what the people want, about helping the people, not about personal opinions.

There've been rifts with Diana Ross. Are you back on friendly terms – you call her "Diane" in the book?

She grew up as Diane, and Florence grew up as Flo. We're friends but we don't call each other constantly. We've grown apart, but it's not because we don't like each other. My love for Flo and Diane is pretty much almost the same as for my sisters – we had so much together, we grew up together.

It comes across strongly in the book that you're still grieving for Florence. (After leaving the Supremes, Ballard, who'd been sexually assaulted as a child, struggled with depression and alcoholism and died aged 32.)

Oh God yeah – because she got the short end of life. She didn't have a chance. Can you imagine if somebody raped you at the age of 14? You'd be angry, you'd be hurt, you'd be... broken. Back then, your parents protected you by not telling anyone, but that was not protecting. What hurts me is that some people say: "One of the Supremes was an alcoholic." Flo drank to cover the pain. She only become an alcoholic because of that.

You still feel protective?

I feel the same way about Diane. I can tell you things about Diane I wish she wasn't. I can tell you things about me, I wish I wasn't. It doesn't mean it's all bad. I was very lucky all my life until I lost Flo. And then my son [Rafael]. I think you're lucky if you don't get that kind of loss in your life. You can lose a job, you can lose a love, but the loss of a child, and the loss of a dear friend, can be very detrimental. It made me see that life can be very cruel to someone you love.

Interview by Barbara Ellen

Supreme Glamour by Mary Wilson, with Mark Bego, is published by Thames & Hudson (£29.95); *Hitsville: The Making of Motown* is in cinemas on 30 September