

The Detroit News

Mary Wilson talks fashion in ‘Supreme Glamour’

Susan Whittall, The Detroit News Published 6:49 p.m. ET Sept. 20, 2019 | Updated 4:35 p.m. ET Sept. 21, 2019

Would the Supremes be less supreme without that image of three glamorous young women in long glittery gowns, swaying gracefully as they sang? Some Supremes fans can describe each outfit the trio wore on “The Ed Sullivan Show” down to the last eyelash and dyed peau-de-soie kitten heel.

It wouldn't quite be the same, perhaps, without those Michael Travis and Bob Mackie-designed confections — shimmering satin and silk gowns, heavy armor of spangles and beads. But while many like to contrast those glamour years with the Supremes' upbringing in the Brewster Projects, according to Mary Wilson, they didn't have to leave town to learn about glamour and fashion: They grew up surrounded by stylish Detroit women.



One thing that may be surprising is that the Supremes paid for those fabulous gowns. (Photo: Dan Gottesman)

Wilson describes the allure of the Supremes' style in a large, beautifully-illustrated new book, “Supreme Glamour” (Thames & Hudson), written with Mark Bego. The photos of their sumptuous gowns, with names like “Turquoise Freeze,” “Green Swirls,” “White de Mink” and “Purple Fantasy” are a window into a unique time, when the most glamorous creatures in pop were three young women from Detroit.

“We grew up around glamorous people,” Wilson said. “All the ladies were gorgeous —Della Reese, who was from Detroit — all the girls who were famous back then.”

The Supremes also took advice from the female chaperones who accompanied them on the road, including Mrs. Maxine Powell, the former modeling school teacher used by the Gordy sisters and hired by Berry Gordy to keep his Motown acts looking fashionably groomed.



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“We had older women who went out (on the road) with us, so the girls wouldn't be alone on the road with all these guys,” Wilson explained. “Mrs (Esther Gordy) Edwards, Mrs. Powell, Loucye Gordy — we'd get tips from all these ladies. But we got most of our information from our moms. Diana's mom was gorgeous! And we would go to church —at First Baptist, the women were so well-dressed. All the women around us, that's how we learned how to dress.

She grew up seeing the black stars of the late '40s and '50s, whom their parents idolized that included Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne and Dinah Washington.

“We learned from all of them,” Wilson said.

When Wilson, Diana Ross and Florence Ballard first started out (with Barbara Marti), as the Primettes, their manager Milton Jenkins would have one of his girlfriends buy them clothing, Wilson recalled. She and Ross would also buy material at one of Detroit's department stores and sew their own dresses, always short in length. It isn't hard to spot those frocks in very early publicity shots, with then-chic accessories like bows attached to their bouffant hairstyles.

They didn't use designers right away, but bought dresses off the rack from Detroit department stores. “When we got the hit records, we got into the longer dresses,” Wilson said. “Of course, Saks was the greatest place in the world, to be actually buying at Saks! I met someone who said her aunt worked at Jacobson's — she had written me, and so we used to come in there. We would go to Hudson's — Diane used to work there. A lot of times we'd go in and they didn't even want to wait on us because we were black.”

Once the trio were recognized as Motown stars, salespeople warmed up.

“They'd keep the store open for us,” she said. “The times were changing — but not very quickly. We saw the change from being ordinary black people to being celebrities.”

One thing that may be surprising is that the Supremes paid for those fabulous gowns. They were considered stage “uniforms,” so when Ballard left the group, Cindy Birdsong had to fit into her frocks, with little adjustment.



"Supreme Glamour." (Photo: Thames & Hudson)

But they didn't always have room to store the outfits, so some would be at Motown, others dispersed at various locations. Over the years, some of the pieces were lost.

Wilson has made it her business to keep what she has, and find missing Supremes gowns. Sometimes they are an ocean away.

"I spoke to a young lady this morning from England, she was vacationing in France and came across one of our gowns," Wilson said. "She didn't know it was ours. She is one of those girls who collects antique-type things, and she bought this. Later on, she noticed it had my name tag in it! She had gotten one of the Supremes gowns — how it got to France, I don't know. I have bought gowns on eBay. People will say, 'Mary guess what, I think I saw one of your gowns on eBay!' Well, buy it! I got a couple that way."

The first designer who made gowns especially for them was Lavetta of Beverly Hills. The Supremes met designer Michael Travis on a TV show, and that led to the beaded gown era, with designers Bob Mackie and Pat Campano. Even Geoffrey Holder, the dancer/choreographer, designed gowns for the Supremes.

An added attraction in the book is the very personal, engaging career narrative that Wilson provides, telling how the Supremes first met and what happened to them along the way.

She pooh-poohs one long-held belief, that Holland-Dozier-Holland's "Where Did Our Love Go" was written for the Marvelettes, who turned it down, opening the door for the then-hitless Supremes to have their first big hit. Eddie Holland told Wilson that they wrote the song specifically for the Supremes, she insisted.

"People are rewriting history," Wilson said. "Stories get changed around a lot. What I wanted to do tell my side, as I remember it. Maybe somebody else would remember it a different way."

Right now, Wilson can be seen doing fox trots in glittering gowns at 8 p.m. Mondays on ABC, on "Dancing with the Stars."

<https://www.detroitnews.com/story/entertainment/2019/09/20/mary-wilson-supremes-glamour/40180163/>