

BY JACQUELINE CUTLER
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

Shop! In the name of love!

Even before they were The Supremes, Diana Ross, Mary Wilson, and Florence Ballard were passionate fashionistas. They cruised upscale stores for ideas. They sketched designs, hunted fabric sales, and sewed their fab dresses at home.

Then the three teenagers signed with Motown and took off. They became music's biggest girl group. Now their glittering gowns were designer, and astounding. Their style was flawless.

And "Supreme Glamour," a celebration by Wilson and co-author Mark Bego, recaptures it all.

Wilson talks about musical scores and hit records. She also occasionally corrects the record and settles some scores. But this is, at heart, an upbeat salute to a million-selling group, and three singers who were not just fashion icons, but inspirations.

"They were three of the most beautiful women I had ever seen," Whoopi Goldberg writes in a forward. She remembers seeing them for the first time as a kid, their "arms swaying like thin grass in a mild summer breeze" as they performed on "The Ed Sullivan Show."

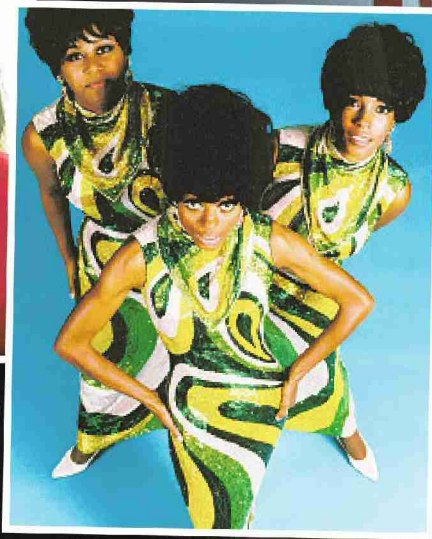
"The Supremes, right there in front of me, three different shades of brown, gorgeous, stunning and stylish, made my head explode," she recalls. "I look back and wonder if they had any idea that they taught me and a new generation the pride of being black."

It certainly wasn't what the group set out to do in 1959.

It began with Ballard, a 16-year-old wowing a local talent show with a reverent "Ave Maria." Afterward, Ballard congratulated Wilson on her performance, a gender-switched version of "I'm Not a Juvenile Delinquent."

Walking home to the projects, the teens talked about starting a singing group.

A few weeks later, Ballard ran up to Wilson in the high school hallway. Ballard's sis-



BABY, YOU GOTTA LOVE STYLE

Supremes were haute before they were hit

ter was dating the manager of a local male group, The Primes. He thought a female version could land bookings, too. Did Wilson want to join Ballard and two other girls in a quartet?

Enter the Primettes. Different girls filled in as the fourth voice, but the third singer remained steady — Ross, still known as Diane to all her friends and family.

The group's first gig was playing at a party for one of the auto workers' unions. The girls wore white Oxford socks, ankle socks, pleated skirts, and sweaters with a big "P." The show didn't bring in any money, but the applause was validating.

Next, the group set their

sights on Motown, the Motor City's hit-making label. Ross knew Smokey Robinson's sister and wrangled an audition with mogul Berry Gordy. The Primettes nervously sang for Gordy.

His advice? Go back and finish high school.

It was a setback, and naturally, more would come. The fourth girl quit. Then Ballard dropped out of sight. Wilson later found out she had been sexually assaulted. The details remained unspoken, and although Ballard soon rejoined the group, she never recovered her former carefree self.

Even after going back to school, the three Primettes kept haunting Motown. Fi-

nally, in 1961, Gordy decided to give them their chance, although he cautioned that they needed a more glamorous name. "The Supremes," Ballard announced.

Because they were still minors, their parents had to sign their contracts. It didn't matter that Wilson's mother was illiterate. Nobody but Gordy read the fine print anyway.

Later, that would become a problem.

The group struggled, at first. None of their singles became a hit. They toured for three months, with Ross' mother serving as chaperone. They returned home penniless.

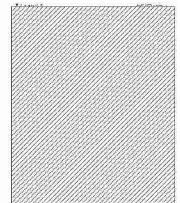
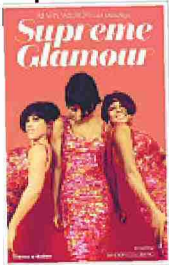
How was that even possible?

It seemed their new manager, who was also Berry Gordy's sister, agreed to a deal giving the Supremes \$600 a week on the road. Out of that, they had to pay for their rooms, meals, and costumes.

It was a hard lesson in music business economics.

There were also image-related lessons to learn. Like the old movie studios, Motown ran a kind of charm school. Their Artistic Development Department, headed by a formidable woman named Maxine Powell, taught artists how to walk, handle the press, and even meet royalty.

"All of you are diamonds in the rough," she announced.





The Supremes, Florence Ballard, Mary Wilson and Diana Ross (left to right) perform in May 1965. Far left, they toured in Paris that same year. Cindy Birdsong (left in photo left) replaced Ballard and performed with Ross and Wilson in 1966.

"We are here to polish you." Meanwhile, the veteran dancer Cholly Atkins taught them how to move. The powerhouse composing trio Holland-Dozier-Holland worked on new songs, eager to fulfill Gordy's edict: "We've got to get the girls a hit record!"

They finally got one with "Where Did Our Love Go?" in 1964. The No. 1 hits kept coming, including "Come See About Me," "You Keep Me Hanging On," and "Love Child." The Motown gang took a special pride in how often the Supremes bested the Beatles on the pop charts.

It was a friendly rivalry. Except the groups never really became friends. When a meeting was arranged in

New York in 1965, the Supremes arrived at the Beatles' hotel wearing high heels, furs, and white gloves. The Beatles just stared.

Perhaps they were stoned. The women, Wilson notes, "could instantly detect the faint smell of marijuana, which is something in which proper young ladies would never indulge." But after a few awkward moments — John Lennon simply gawking at them — the Supremes left.

"We expected soulful, hip girls like the Ronettes," George Harrison later told Wilson. "We couldn't believe that three black girls from Detroit could be so square!"

Not quite so hip, however, was the way Gordy preferred

them. From the beginning, he positioned The Supremes as the label's crossover act, the one that would appeal to black teens and white adults.

So, for every "Baby Love," there would be an album of Broadway standards. For every Motown revue, a gig at New York's Copacabana.

Diane, now Diana, Ross became the most significant part of that strategy. On early records, both Ballard and Wilson occasionally sang soulful leads. In concert, Ballard was the act's comic star, snapping out improvised one-liners.

Gordy, who had begun a long affair with Ross, had other plans. He put Ross out in front. He changed the

billing to "Diana Ross & The Supremes." Finally, in 1967, he fired Ballard from her own group, replacing her with Cindy Birdsong.

Diana Ross & The Supremes continued until 1970 when Ross left for a solo career. Their last single was "Someday We'll Be Together." They never reunited.

Nor did Ballard survive. Haunted by the long-ago assault, in thrall to alcohol, she went back to Detroit and mounting debts. Ballard died of a blood clot in 1976. She was 32.

Wilson continued as the leader of a revamped Supremes, but it wasn't the same. Gordy lost interest in promoting them, and there

were legal battles. The group charted a few singles but faded. In 1977, it broke up.

But Wilson is still around and nothing makes her prouder than what she and her friends contributed during a tumultuous time, three black women showing the world old-school style and elegance and class.

Sometimes, she remembered, "wannabe Black Panthers" would nag her about her group's image. "My brother would always say, 'You girls should be wearing Afros and making a political statement.' I'd always say, 'Roosevelt, we are making a political statement.'"

"But we're making it our way."

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