

Norman Jesse Whitfield,
1972



NORMAN WHITFIELD

THIS PROLIFIC SONGWRITER
AND BRILLIANT PRODUCER HELPED CREATE
DOZENS OF MUSICAL MASTERPIECES.

BY BRIAN CHIN

From the recorded evidence, there is no reason to believe that Norman Jesse Whitfield (1940–2008) arrived at Motown on a mission to become a creative insurgent, much less a generational change agent for R&B and pop music.

His father moved the family from Harlem to Detroit to pursue work in the in-laws' family business, and the teenager soon developed a reputation for cleaning up at the pool table. By the late 1950s, he encountered future Motown artists and first-generation creatives at small labels on the periphery of Berry Gordy's recently launched operation. Without formal training, he watched – and listened to – talented friends bound for careers in jazz and cultivated his own interest in songwriting, percussion, and brass. He played tambourine on a song he wrote for the pre-Temptations group the Distant. In 1960, they all landed at Motown after a concerted campaign of showing face around Hitsville persuaded Gordy to add Whitfield to the Motown songwriting staff. Falling out with their local label owner, the Distant combined with members of the Primes to become Motown's Temptations.

Inspired by Smokey Robinson's success as a songwriter, Whitfield continued to hustle hard. He integrated himself into the label's nerve center, studying recording sessions and picking brains to improve his skill set. With A&R department chief Mickey Stevenson, Whitfield

cowrote a B-side for Stevenson's then-wife, Kim Weston, "It Should Have Been Me." Producer Whitfield would successfully update it twice, in well-regarded cuts by Gladys Knight and the Pips and Yvonne Fair. Foreshadowing his celebrated run with the Temptations soon to come, he cowrote (with Smokey Robinson) and produced the Temptations B-side "The Further You Look, the Less You See."

With Marvin Gaye and eventual partner Barrett Strong, Whitfield cowrote another significant B-side, "Wherever I Lay My Hat (That's My Home)," cut to a light cha-cha beat. A decade later, British blue-eyed soul singer Paul Young took the song to Number One in the U.K. as a dramatic, almost haunted – and therefore, very faithful to Marvin – electronic ballad. By the early 1960s, Whitfield had graduated from B-side credits in fine style, collaborating with Marvin Gaye and Mickey Stevenson to write Gaye's 1963 Top Ten classic "Pride and Joy." Whitfield's songwriting partnership with Strong would come to equal that of Lennon-McCartney's.

With Eddie Holland, Whitfield also wrote two sizable hit singles in archetypal early Motown uptempo style: "Girl (Why You Wanna Make Me Blue)" for the Temptations, and "Too Many Fish in the Sea" for the Marvelettes. Two more cowrites of 1964–65, "Needle in a Haystack," with Stevenson for the Velvelettes, and "Everybody Needs Love," cowritten with Holland and first recorded



by the Temptations, also gained greatly in stature over time, from a mid-charting R&B run to a re-cut that made the song an all-time fan favorite for Gladys Knight and the Pips. A mid-sixties local Detroit TV special documented Whitfield in the studio with the Tempts, clearly depicting him as Gordy's protégé. Whitfield's on-the-job training led to his move into the label's renowned Quality Control department, evaluating product before their release.

Whitfield hit his stride as a writer and producer in 1966–67, when he cowrote with Holland, Strong, fellow staffer Rodger Penzabene, and Temptations guitarist Cornelius Grant. The result was a series of Number One and Top Five smashes for the Temptations, including a run of sublime songs and productions – “Ain't Too Proud to Beg,” “Beauty Is Only Skin Deep,” “(I Know) I'm Losing You,” “I Wish it Would Rain,” and “You're My Everything” – that made the Temptations one of the most successful artists of the decade. Whitfield's uptempo songs are marked by a hard-hitting style that defined the power of Motown's house band the Funk Brothers and its greatest singers.

“Whitfield was a taskmaster, honing every line until everything punched just right,” said Temptations founder Otis Williams. “We would come out of the

studio, sweating. But we did it because we knew the final product would jump. His genius didn't end there. Norman was also a masterful balladeer. His sweet songs for us were magic.”

Yet another turning point of improbable magnitude awaited in 1968, when the Whitfield-Strong song “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” was cut with several Motown acts, with Whitfield producing. The stormy Detroit funk version by Gladys Knight and the Pips, an extraordinarily timely release in the wake of breakthrough Southern soul smashes by Aretha Franklin and Etta James, became Motown's then-best-selling single in its history. Over a year later, the most troublesome of all the versions of “Grapevine” – disliked by Motown founder Gordy and buried on a routine Marvin Gaye album – was picked out by radio disc jockeys across the country and forced into a single release. Given Gaye's brooding, tormented, and emotionally naked treatment, the song succeeded itself at the time as the label's top singles sales champion.

In this time of commercial success, the prolific Whitfield found his musical signature addressing the pop music landscape altered by Sly Stone and the emergent rock ethos via complex, socially conscious songs



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Making the hits happen, ca. 1969; in the studio with members of the Undisputed Truth, 1979; with guitarist Wah Wah Watson, 1978; signing Junior Walker to Whitfield Records, 1979.





“

WHITFIELD'S UPTEMPO SONGS ARE MARKED BY A HARD-HITTING STYLE THAT DEFINED THE POWER OF MOTOWN'S HOUSE BAND THE FUNK BROTHERS AND ITS GREATEST SINGERS.

”

cowritten with Barrett Strong and arranged in baroque orchestrations by Paul Riser, David Van dePitte, and Jerry Long – songs often described in retrospect with the term “psychedelic soul.” Like that of Marvin Gaye, Whitfield’s appearance mirrored the evolution – from a clean-cut up-and-comer to bearded, Afro’d auteur. His progressive production pieces include “Cloud Nine,” “Message From a Black Man,” “Psychedelic Shack,” “Runaway Child, Running Wild,” “Ball of Confusion (That’s What the World Is Today),” “War,” and “Smiling Faces Sometimes” (the latter two notably covered by Edwin Starr and the Undisputed Truth). These gut-punching tracks were rightly received as departures from the comfortable, polished Motown pop-soul sure-shot style. In hit revivals by Bruce Springsteen and Tina Turner in the 1980s, they were sadly proven as relevant as ever.

Even so, significant hits like Whitfield/Strong’s “I Can’t Get Next to You,” “Just My Imagination (Running Away With Me),” “Papa Was a Rollin’ Stone,” and the frantic, bass-driven Undisputed Truth club hit “You + Me = Love” were, at their heart, latter-day manifestations of traditional Black vocal style – and these, too, resonated for decades after initial release. Years later it surfaced that a discussion of a Whitfield label as a Motown subsidiary occurred as early as 1971, but the deal was never made.

Whitfield’s development of the band Rose Royce, for the specific purpose of scoring the urban film comedy *Car Wash*, balanced – as he did with the Tempts – barnstorming uptempo R&B with tender balladry, resulting in the Number One title song on MCA, and a Whitfield label deal with Warner Bros. soon after. Away from the sometimes-conservative environment of quality con-

trol at Motown, he continued to cultivate an intensity of feeling in his productions – a Whitfield trademark even more pronounced than his many technical innovations and genre-broadening fusions. His next soundtrack smash after “Car Wash,” the R&B Number One “Theme From ‘Which Way Is Up’” – written for the female trio Stargard – reflected his hard-hustle attitude. The disco record burst with bubbling synthesizer, sharp percussion, prominent handclaps, and darting vocals that recalled his greatest Temptations records. Long after the seventies, Whitfield and fellow Motown alums Frank Wilson, Freddie Perren, Nickolas Ashford and Valerie Simpson, Harvey Fuqua, Fonce Mizell, and Holland-Dozier-Holland had been rewarded repeatedly for a decade of risk-taking. But Whitfield’s more retro creations – for Rose Royce on MCA and his own Whitfield Records, and including “Wishing on a Star” (written by the Undisputed Truth’s Billie Rae Calvin), “Love Don’t Live Here Anymore” (written by U.K./New Zealand theater director Miles Gregory), “Ooh Boy,” “I Wanna Get Next to You,” and “I’m Going Down” – attracted extravagant worship. They would be successfully revived in the era of hip-hop and dance music. With hit runs lasting more than a decade, such Whitfield productions set up the cultural dominance of Black music to the present day and into the foreseeable future.

Pre-Motown, peak Motown, and post-Motown, Norman Whitfield’s vision of music – encompassing complete command of the traditional and the fearless embrace of the innovative – never failed him. He remains one of the most timeless and influential names in the annals of popular music.



FROM TOP: A rare R&B songwriters reunion of Mickey Stevenson, Whitfield, Kenneth Gamble, the Temptations' Otis Williams, and Leon Huff (from left), 2005; being inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame, 2004. **OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT:** Signing with Warner Bros. Music chief Mo Ostin (right), 1976; doing okay in the mid-seventies.

