“Dancing in the Street”--Martha and the Vandellas (1964)

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Essay by Cary O’Dell

Martha and the Vandellas

Erudite music critic Dave Marsh has called it, “As pure a product of its day as anything Dylan or the Beatles ever imagined.”

The song is “Dancing in the Street,” written by William Stevenson, Marvin Gaye, and Ivy Jo Hunter and recorded by Martha and the Vandellas in 1964. Since its release in July of ’64 (it would reach #2 on the Billboard pop chart by September), the song has gone on to become one of Gordy/Motown and pop music’s most definitive works and a powerful anthem, sometimes in spite of itself.

The Martha of Martha and the Vandellas is Martha Reeves. She was born in Alabama in 1941 and raised in Detroit. She began singing with her friends Annette Beard and Rosalind Ashford, as the Del-Phi’s, while still in high school. They cut their first records in 1960. But stardom was not, at that time, in the cards. Not long after, however, and after Reeves briefly pursed a solo career, Reeves became the secretary to Mickey Stevenson, an exec at Detroit’s renowned Motown Records. Legend has it that, one day, label founder Berry Gordy, Jr. needed some backup singers for a session then in progress. Knowing of Reeves’ recording ambitions, he called her and her friends, Beard and Ashford, into the studio. The trio of ladies would end up singing back-up on two Marvin Gaye records, “Stubborn Kind of Fellow” and “Hitch Hike.” Under the moniker Martha and the Vandellas (a hybrid of Detroit’s Van Dyke Street and singer Della Reese’s first name), the revived group also quickly recorded their own single, “I’ll Have to Let Him Go.”

Liking the end results, Gordy signed the group to their own contract in September 1962. The following year, in May of 1963, Martha and the Vandellas would have their first pop chart success with their song “Come and Get These Memories.” The group became full-fledged stars three months later with the release of another Holland-Dozier-Holland song, “Heat Wave.” Later successfully covered by Linda Ronstadt, “Heat Wave” burned up the charts for the first time in August of 1963, hitting #1 on the R&B chart and #5 on the pop chart. With its success, Motown minted its latest all-girl super group.

Other hits followed: “Quicksand” in 1963; “Nowhere to Run” in 1965 and “Jimmy Mack” in 1967. But the group’s biggest success came in the summer of ’64 with “Dancing in the Street.” It was Martha and company’s high-voltage hit, one that made people dance and, perhaps, think.

As mentioned, “Dancing in the Street,” was the work of songwriters/executives Marvin Gaye, William “Mickey” Stevenson and resident Motown songwriter Ivy Jo Hunter. For a tune later to be imbued with such a degree of political and social meaning, its origin was decidedly innocent.

Stevenson was said to have come up with the idea for the song from watching kids jump and play in the street, in the opened fire hydrants of the city, on a hot summer day.

Musically, instrumentally, the song is a rabble-rouser. From its horn-heavy opening onward, this is a song designed to get you to dance. Today, "Dancing" is remembered for many things, but especially its banging drum track—echoing like a tambourine on a chain link fence. According to legend, in the studio, producer Ivy Jo Hunter at first had trouble getting the sound he wanted for the drum line, believing it needed more "bump and grind." Then inspiration hit him. He excused himself, went out to his car and returned with a crow bar. "Roll tape," he said upon his return. As the preliminary track played, he pounded the rod on the floor and created "Dancing's" unmistakable, signature downbeat.

As good as its groove, were the song's lyrics. Simple, understandable, and able to be sung along with, "Dancing in the Street" had then (as it does now) all the vocal elements it needed to forever endure. Adding to its lyrical longevity is the double meanings—intentional or not—that the song's words possess. As the song was released in the summer of 1964, amid a rash of national race riots, the phrase "Dancing in the Streets," has come to be construed as being about civil rights, race riots, perhaps even an incite to riot, a provocative outcry to, literally, take to the streets.

Originally, when confronted with this possibility, Martha Reeves dismissed them. She told a British journalist at the time, "My Lord, it was a party song."

Still, how a work is intended and how it is ultimately interrupted within the culture are two different things. Coming out when it did and filled with references to the major cities (Philadelphia, Baltimore, DC, the "motor city") that were then hotbeds of racial unrest, "Dancing in the Street" could not <u>not</u> be viewed through the lens of the civil rights struggle. Furthermore, lyrics like "Callin' out around the world" and "Lets form a big strong line" also seem to be a call to arms, as does the song's basic, signature beat. Dave Marsh, again, speaks insightfully: "In the same way that Martha's vocal is the embodiment of what was already happening in the streets, the drums are a prophecy of the harsher reality to come."

Martha and the Vandellas would continue to chart music until 1967. The emergence of Diana Ross and the Supremes as Motown's biggest "girl group" supposedly undermined their record company's commitment to Reeves, et.al. The group would also undergo a variety of personnel changes before officially disbanding in 1972. Reeves would go on to embark on a solo career, publish an autobiography (titled, rightfully, "Dancing in the Street") and then occasionally perform with a revamped Vandellas. In 2005, she was elected to the Detroit City Council, working to further assist the city she once celebrated in song ("Can't forget the Motor City.") Reeves and members of her original group were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1995.

Since its explosive debut, "Dancing in the Street" has never left the airwaves or the jukeboxes or any party anywhere anytime. It has also gone on to be covered by other musicians. Most notably is a 1985 version by superstars Mick Jagger and David Bowie which first debuted as a music video during that year's epic Live Aid concert held on August 12th. Released to radio and as a single the same day, the song would go on to hit #1 on the British charts and #7 in America. (Earlier Jagger bandmate Keith Richards stated in an interview that "Dancing in the Street" was the inspiration behind the Rolling Stones' 1965 mega-hit "Satisfaction.")

Others who have recorded "Dancing in the Street" include: Van Halen, The Kinks and Phil Collins.

And though these latter versions often lead to dancing in the aisles, if not necessarily in the streets, they never quite match the original. By virtue of the era in which these latter efforts are recorded and released, the song (and its various performances) is largely stripped of its social and

political meaning. Though the song may not be fully neutered, much of its original impact, emotion and weight has been lost. Because there truly was a time when "dancing in the street" truly did mean more than just moving to the music.

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