

“Reach Out I’ll Be There”--The Four Tops (1966)

Added to the National Registry: 2022

Essay by Gerald Posner (guest post)*



The Four Tops

The 1966 release of “Reach Out I’ll Be There” was not only a massive commercial hit for The Four Tops, but Detroit’s Motown Museum concludes, “It could also be considered The Four Tops’ theme song, as it musically expressed the feelings of solidarity and brotherly love group members felt for one another.”

In an industry in which personal rivalries and intense competitiveness often split successful musical groups into scattered solo acts, The Four Tops were an anomaly. Levi Stubbs, Abdul “Duke” Fakir, Renaldo “Obie” Benson, and Lawrence Payton were The Four Aims when they performed for the first time at house party in 1954 as 15-year-old high school students. They soon changed their name to The Four Tops to avoid confusion with another popular group, the Ames Brothers. During the following decade, the group had a series of disappointing recordings released by four small labels. The Tops paid their bills by crafting a polished lounge act in which they did cover songs. They toured with Billy Eckstine and played in Las Vegas at small music halls far off the main Strip, as well as hundreds of dates at dingy song-and-dance revues in the Borscht Belt.

Some critics dismissed the Tops as a likable, soulful barbershop quartet. But Berry Gordy, the music visionary who had founded Motown Records in a small Detroit house in 1959, thought they had great potential.

“Smooth, classy, and polished, they were big stuff,” he said. “I wanted them bad.”

It was 1962 when Gordy, hoping to sign the quartet to Motown, invited the Tops to his office. He was quickly impressed by the tight bond among the four singers. Gordy believed their loyalty to one another meant they could be equally loyal to Motown.

Levi Stubbs spoke for the band.

“We'd like to sign with you, but we heard you won't let artists take the contracts away from the office.”

“That's right,” Gordy acknowledged.

“Why not?” asked Stubbs.

Gordy smiled. “Because when I do, they don't come back.”

Everyone laughed.

Gordy told the Tops to send their attorney or manager to Motown's offices and “take as much time as you need, and go over them. This way we'll be right here to answer questions and explain what we do that other companies don't.”

Still, Gordy sensed that the group was uneasy. He launched into his standard sales pitch about how Motown was unparalleled in producing hit songs and building careers for black recording artists. The Tops knew that Motown's roster of talent was growing fast, including hits from Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, the Temptations, Mary Wells, and the Supremes. Stubbs assured Gordy that they were all impressed by what he had achieved in a very short time at Motown but that they nevertheless wanted to take a contract to their lawyer so he could review it at his leisure. Gordy, against his better judgment, finally relented.

Gordy's intuition had been right. The Tops and their lawyer did not like the standard contract, which was titled heavily in favor of Motown instead of the artists.

The Four Tops did not return for two years. When they did, they brought along their manager, Shelly Berger.

“When I first walked into the Motown offices in Detroit,” he recalled years later to a British journalist, “I felt like I had walked into a cult. It was a club, a family. Mr. Gordy was always searching for the new thing. His motto was: ‘Listen to the radio and hear what's going on.’ He'd been listening to Bob Dylan and the psychedelic soul stuff the Temptations were doing. He realized music was shifting away from straight rhythm and blues.”

Berger had been unsuccessful at finding any other label capable of transforming the Four Tops from a minor lounge act to a chart-busting quartet. By the time of their second visit, 1964, Motown had become the third most successful singles label in America (42 of 60 records released that year broke into the charts). The contract they had turned down now looked pretty good in comparison to the new one Gordy offered. Berger got the band only a measly \$400 advance.

Just because Gordy had not risked a lot of money, that did not mean he was any less intent on making the group a great success. He was delighted they were finally on the label, and he asked his top songwriting team, Lamont Dozier and brothers Brian and Eddie Holland (HDH as they

were called inside Motown), to develop a song that would forever shatter the group's supper-club reputation.

Three months after they signed, Motown released the Top's first chart hit, "Baby, I Need Your Loving." HDH had augmented the harmony on that song by adding the strong background voices of the Andantes, Jackie Hicks, Marlene Barrow, and Louvain Demps. Lamont Dozier said "that the harmonies and chemistry were so perfect we kept [the Andantes] on all the songs."

The next year, 1965, the Four Tops had their first number one, "I Can't Help Myself (Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch)." Motown's sales that year were a record \$40 million. A fifth of its 25 records reached No. 1, three by the Supremes and one each by the Temptations and the Four Tops.

HDH wrote songs for the Tops that showcased the natural baritone of its lead singer, Levi Stubbs. He delivered gravely and soulful vocals and won a faithful and large fan base. Holland-Dozier-Holland made sure their lyrics also gave plenty of exposure so the group's other baritone Obie Benson, and its two tenors, Duke Fakir and Lawrence Payton.

Duke Fakir thought that HDH "were geniuses at tailoring a song to an artist: Brian, Lamont and Eddie could make you a song that fitted like a suit."

The HDH and Tops partnership flourished. After "I Can't Help Myself," the quartet was suddenly one of music's hottest commodities. Their success prompted their previous label, CBS' Columbia Records, to re-release their 1961 "Ain't That Love." When Gordy learned about that, he got HDH to write a new song in half a day. The group rehearsed it and laid down vocal tracks late that same afternoon. Motown rushed out "It's the Same Old Song" three days later and it entered the charts the same day as did Columbia's release. While the CBS song stalled at number 93 after a week, the Four Top's new hit remained on the charts for weeks and peaked at number five.

Motown itself would never have a more successful year than 1966. In an industry in which only ten percent of new releases become hits, Motown had a remarkable 75 percent of its songs that year make the charts. By that time, Top's manager Shelly Berger recalls, HDH were "regarded as legendary." And Gordy trusted them so much he gave them considerable leeway to push the label's performers out of their comfort zones.

Unknown to Berger and the Tops, Gordy and HDH had decided that to take The Four Tops to even greater success, but the group needed to be artistically challenged on their next recording.

"We were all in the studio one day when they said they wanted to try something experimental," recalled Duke Fakir. "They had this thumping backing track played by the Funk Brothers (Motown's house band). It had an amazing drumbeat created by timpani mallets hitting a tambourine." James Jamerson had the bass, and the drummer was Richard "Pistol" Allen. The guitarists were Eddie Willis, Robert White, and Joe Messina. Songwriter and producer Norman Whitfield was responsible for the all-important tambourine. The Andantes again provided the strong background harmony.

“Dylan was happening at the time,” remembers Lamont Dozier, “and the phrasing for ‘I’ll Be There’ came from listening to the way he sang. He’d do that thing, ‘Heyy,’ and ‘Heyy’ and ‘Hoeww,’ where he’d drag a phrase out, that I liked. The day we wrote it, I just began mumbling: ‘Now if you feel like you can’t go on, because all of your hope has gone...’”

“We wanted Levi to shout-sing the lyrics,” recalled Dozier, “as a shout-out to Dylan.”

Levi did not like that idea. “I’m a singer. I don’t talk or shout.”

His bandmates suggested they at least work on it. Fakir thought that the song, which was “ostensibly about a guy telling his girl he’ll be there for her in her darkest moments...felt like a chant, almost religious--a song of hope for the world.”

The Tops worked on the song for a couple of hours. HDH had included many innovative musical elements. To achieve a sense of sustained emotional tension, Dozier “alternated the keys, from a minor, Russian feel in the verse to a major, gospel feel in the chorus.” Before any voice is heard, the introduction is from a solo piccolo (played by 14-year-old Danya Hartwick, who was in her first session at Motown, after being tapped at the last moment by the local musicians union).

It was obvious that HDH’s lyrics pushed Stubbs to the upper limit of his vocal range. Stubbs complained that he did not sound good hitting the higher notes. Eddie Holland assured Stubbs that when he struggled at the top of his range, it sounded “like someone hurting.” That was an emotionally evocative quality that could not be faked, Holland said.

“Levi complained,” recalled Fakir, “but we knew he loved it. Every time they thought he was at the top, he would reach a little further until you could hear the tears in his voice. The line ‘Just look over your shoulder’ was something he threw in spontaneously.”

When they finished that day, the group thought the song, titled “Reach Out I’ll Be There,” was an experiment that might be released on their next album but never as a single.

“The finished song didn’t sound like the Four Tops,” concluded Fakir.

Scott Regan, a Detroit disc jockey, ran into Stubbs after the recording session. “He did not like the way they made him shout,” recalled Regan.

The group did not know that Gordy liked it so much precisely because it did not have the standard Four Tops sound.

A couple of weeks later, Gordy sent the group a note that said in full: “Make sure your taxes are taken care of--because we’re going to release the biggest record you’ve ever had.”

When he called them into his office a couple of days later, one of the Tops asked, “So when are we going to record this great song?”

Gordy barely glanced up from the paperwork.

“You already have.”

The singers were perplexed.

Gordy reached across his desk and flipped on a tape player. As soon as the Tops heard the first chords of “Reach Out” they started protesting and talking over one another. “Hold on, Berry, we were just experimenting. Please don't release that as a single. It's not us. It has a nice rhythm to it but if you release that we'll be on the charts with an anchor.”

Gordy only laughed but did not commit himself. The Four Tops left the meeting, as Fakir later recounted, “feeling very upset, almost angry.”

Motown owned the rights to the music created by HDH and had the sole discretion about which songs to release on albums and singles.

A few weeks later, Duke Fakir was driving to see friends when he was stunned to hear the song on the radio.

“I turned my car round and drove right back to Berry's office. He was in a meeting but I opened the door and just said: ‘Berry, don't ever talk to us about what you're releasing. Just do what you do. Bye.’

The band members were about the only ones who did not instantly love a song that was about to become a Transatlantic number one hit.

Scott Regan, the disk jockey to whom Stubbs complained the day the Tops recorded the song, was blown away when he heard it. “I was dumbfounded he [Stubbs] felt that way. I told him, ‘Levi, you're wrong! The vocal is great. This is gonna be a No. 1 record.’”

Adam White, who was then a 19-year-old Motown fan and later would run “Billboard” magazine in Europe before becoming a senior executive at Universal Music Group, was in a car crossing the Seven Bridge near Gloucester when he first heard “Reach Out, I'll Be There” on the radio. He was so excited that he insisted the driver pull over so he could listen without any distraction.

“I couldn't believe this extraordinary music was coming out of that car radio speaker,” remembered White. “It's a moment I can never forget. That's the power Motown music had then. It was simply the most dynamic, vibrant music I had ever heard.”

The original Four Tops performed together for 44 years, until the unexpected death in 1997 of Lawrence Payton at only 59 years of age. During that long career, they never had a bigger commercial hit than “Reach Out I'll Be There.” But the success of that song was not measured simply in the number of sales and royalties to the band. It became the signature tune for the Four Tops and was a song that helped shape the iconic Motown sound of the 1960s.

Gerald Posner is the author of “MOTOWN: Music, Money, Sex and Power.” Visit him online at www.posner.com or on Twitter @geraldposner.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.