

The classic Spinners lineup: Henry Fambrough, Bobbie Smith, Pervis Jackson, Billy Henderson, and Philippé Wynne (clockwise from left), ca. 1972



THE SPINNERS

THEIR EXTRAORDINARY VOCALS AND
DECADES OF HITS MADE THEM ONE OF
OUR MOST BELOVED GROUPS.

BY HERB POWELL

No matter how much someone loves another person, if that love is to last, eventually there will be some kind of sacrifice. That pure sacrifice – the one that is beyond being right or wrong. Writers of sacred literature, marriage counselors, and others have all tried to communicate this truth. Unfortunately for them, they didn't have the smooth symphonic soul of the Spinners.

“And when you know you're right, but you got to make a little sacrifice

You make it for love – you make it for love”

“One of a Kind (Love Affair)” – 1973

Their elegant, soulful, sometimes ebullient, sometimes melancholy music – coupled with their incomparable stage performances – would grace us for almost seventy years. When Henry Fambrough, the silky-voiced baritone of the group, retired in April 2023, it marked the end of an era. But when that era began in 1954, just outside of Detroit in Ferndale, Michigan, the four young men who would ultimately form the Spinners – Pervis Jackson (1938–2008), Billy Henderson (1939–2007), Bobbie Smith (1936–2013), and Fambrough (b. 1938) – were singing in the hallways of Lincoln High School. They were crooning on street corners, at high school dances, and in city parks. And as innocent as it then seemed, these would

be the ties that would bind them.

Their first record contract was with Moonglows founder Harvey Fuqua's Tri-Phi Records. The group's debut, penned by Fuqua and Gwen Gordy, sister of Motown founder Berry Gordy, was “That's What Girls Are Made For.” A young Marvin Gaye played drums on the single. But Fuqua was frustrated with his label's distribution problems and as a result jumped at the opportunity to sell the Spinners' contract to Motown. In the early sixties, Motown was just beginning to change popular music and in the process how America viewed African Americans. The Spinners were excited to join the label. Motown had so many stars, though, that the group was perpetually put on the back burner. They did have some minor success, including 1965's “I'll Always Love You” and 1966's “Truly Yours,” with Bobbie Smith singing lead. Yet the big, transformative hit song eluded them. In 1967, the lightning-voiced G.C. Cameron joined the Spinners. Still nothing. The group's Motown tenure devolved into doing errands for the label, like chaperoning around a young Jackson 5 or working in the shipping department. To make matters worse, they were expatriated to lesser-known Motown subsidiary V.I.P. Records. The future looked bleak for the Spinners.

But in early 1970, excited by Cameron's multifaceted voice, the young prince of Motown Stevie Wonder cowrote a song for the group. The Spinners entered Golden World Studio – Motown Studio B – to record “It's a Shame,” the

first song Wonder solely produced for another act. When “It’s a Shame” was released in June, it became a crossover smash, climbing to Number Fourteen on the pop chart and Number Three R&B. Finally, after sixteen years together, Jackson, Fambrough, Henderson, and Smith had scored a bona-fide hit. They could breathe.

Even with the success of “It’s a Shame,” the Spinners’ almost nine-year odyssey at Motown left the group embittered. Queen of Soul Aretha Franklin, who deeply believed in them as vocalists and as gentlemen, recommended the group to her home, Atlantic Records. They signed to the venerable label in 1972. Cameron, for a variety of professional and personal reasons, stayed at Motown. As his replacement, Cameron recommended his cousin Philippé Wynne, who had honed his chops singing with Bootsy Collins in his native Ohio.

At their new label, the Spinners were assigned former Motown staffer Jimmy Roach as producer. The four songs they recorded together in Detroit were uninspired, and Atlantic considered dropping them. As bright as things looked just one year earlier, familiar dark clouds began to form over the Spinners.

At the time, Thom Bell, the prolific Philadelphia-based producer-writer-arranger who’d enjoyed massive success with the Stylistics and the Delfonics, was being courted by Atlantic. The label offered him the biggest names on Atlantic’s roster to work with. Near the bottom of that list was a name Bell knew: the Spinners. A decade earlier, Bell was playing in the house band of the Uptown Theater in Philadelphia and the Spinners were on the bill. Back then, the young Bell was impressed by the close interwoven nature of their harmonies.

Bell immediately went to Detroit. Surrounded by the group, he sat down at the piano and methodically went through the nuanced sound of each member’s voice: from their tonality to their preferred rhythm patterns, if they favored singing on the upbeat or downbeat. He also examined where their voices changed from tenor to falsetto. Bell rose from the piano, gathered his notes, and proclaimed, “Next year, you’ll be number one.”

The Spinners were skeptical at best. What they couldn’t imagine was that Bell had summoned a group of talented songwriters whose sole directive was to come up with the best songs for the Spinners. They also couldn’t imagine that the bedrock of the Philadelphia Sound, an amalgam of session musicians and orchestra players named MFSB (Mother Father Sister Brother), would be laying down irresistible tracks for the group. And that the classically trained Bell wrote every part for every musician with the Spinners’ voices in mind.

By then together for almost twenty years, the Spinners felt as though they were starting anew. Consequently, their debut album for Atlantic was simply titled *Spinners*. Right out of the box, a B side, “I’ll Be Around,” caught fire. Bobbie Smith’s comforting tenor voice – eternally the foundational sound of the group – never felt so good to the ears. Matched with Bell’s orchestration and a punchy drumbeat using the floor tom with the snare on beats 2 and 4, “I’ll Be Around” was a smash



THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Jackson, Smith, Fambrough, Henderson, and G.C. Cameron (left to right), ca. 1970; doing the Brown Beatles routine, ca. 1965; live at the Hammersmith Odeon, London, 1976.







SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



Spinners
1973 (Atlantic)



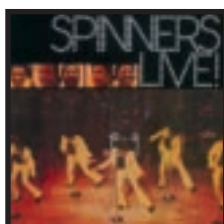
Mighty Love
1974 (Atlantic)



New and Improved
1974 (Atlantic)



Pick of the Litter
1975 (Atlantic)



Spinners Live!
1975 (Atlantic)



**Happiness Is Being
With the Spinners**
1976 (Atlantic)

**On The Midnight
Special, 1976.
OPPOSITE PAGE:
Riding high in 1974.**

in every way. The Number One R&B and Number Three pop record sold a million copies.

The next single, “Could It Be I’m Falling in Love,” was another million-seller. The R&B chart-topper and Number Four pop single is what formally introduced the world to Philippé Wynne. Raised in the church, like many great singers, Wynne (1941–1984) had no peer when it came to the art of the ad-lib. He could spontaneously compose new rhymes and new melodies in the last minutes of a song – essentially bringing that church vibe and nightclub sensibility into the recording studio. The Spinners’ next chart-topper, “One of a Kind (Love Affair)” in 1973, rounded out one of the most dynamic albums of the 1970s, elegantly produced and driven by extraordinary lead singers.

The Spinners’ followup, *Mighty Love* (1974), would



Performing on *Don Kirshner's Rock Concert* with new lead singer John Edwards front and center, 1979. OPPOSITE PAGE: An early Adidas promotional campaign, Los Angeles, 1981.



“

WHILE THE SPINNERS WERE UNQUESTIONABLE HITMAKERS AND STORYTELLERS OF THE HIGHEST ORDER, MANY OF THEIR LESSER-KNOWN SONGS LAY BARE AND UPLIFTED THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE.

”

contain more top hits, such as the anthemic title track and “I’m Coming Home.” “Love Don’t Love Nobody” would become a Quiet Storm classic; no song better explores the bleak side of love. Conversely, on 1974’s *New and Improved*, “Then Came You” expresses the enthusiasm and promise of new love: Featuring Dionne Warwick and Bobbie Smith singing together – and apart – in a give-and-take, the track is reminiscent of

the great Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell duets. Coupled with Thom Bell’s spirited orchestration, “Then Came You” became a milestone for Warwick and the Spinners – the first Number One pop single for both.

The Spinners’ success with Warwick, a staple in the cabaret circles of Las Vegas and Lake Tahoe, opened up new venues for the quintet. From their beginning, the Spinners always put on dynamic shows. In the



When Philippé Wynne left the group in 1977, his replacement was distinctive vocalist John Edwards (b. 1944). With a high tenor voice, he had a tone that could be smooth one moment and piercing the next. In the Spinners' fourth decade, this lifted their fortunes once again, leading them to connect with two international smashes. The medley "Working My Way Back to You"/"Forgive Me, Girl" was a Number Two pop and Number Six R&B hit in 1980. Another medley that reworked classics, "Cupid"/"I've Loved You for a Long Time" soared to Number Four on the pop chart and Number Five R&B in late 1980.

While the Spinners were unquestionable hitmakers and storytellers of the highest order, many of their lesser-known songs lay bare and uplifted the African American experience: "Ghetto Child" is a poignant and wistful song about urban life. In "Living a Little, Laughing a Little," they acknowledge that life can break you, but the victory comes in the living of life itself. "Sadie," their sweet homage to Black mothers, lingers in the hearts of many. The spoken-word introduction to the song says a lot about who the Spinners were and who they are in our memory: "In a world like today/It's a rare occasion to be able/To see young mothers like the ones/That were around when I grew up/But they live on in memory/To quite a few of us/And this song is dedicated/To those who cherish that memory."

We celebrate the Spinners as artists and as men.

mid-sixties, they performed a routine where they called themselves the Brown Beatles, in which they donned wigs and mimicked playing instruments. Now with huge hits, superb showmanship, and expert choreography, the Spinners were a major draw in the biggest venues around the world.

While their career was in full bloom, disco started its takeover of American radio. But the Spinners would take an opposite approach. The group's Number One R&B and Number Five pop smash, "Games People Play," swings like it's from a bygone era. With its jazz-like walking electric bass line and old-timey-saloon piano break, the single was one of the most refreshing things on radio in 1975. "Games People Play" also features Pervis Jackson's resonant bass voice singing that "12:45" line, an iconic moment. The following year, the group would enjoy one of the most imaginative and clever hits of its career with "The Rubberband Man."



Pervis Jackson, Henry Fambrough, Bobbie Smith, Billy Henderson, Philippé Wynne, and John Edwards were survivors. Their music is indelible and will outlive us all. They are forever cherished and so well deserve to be in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.