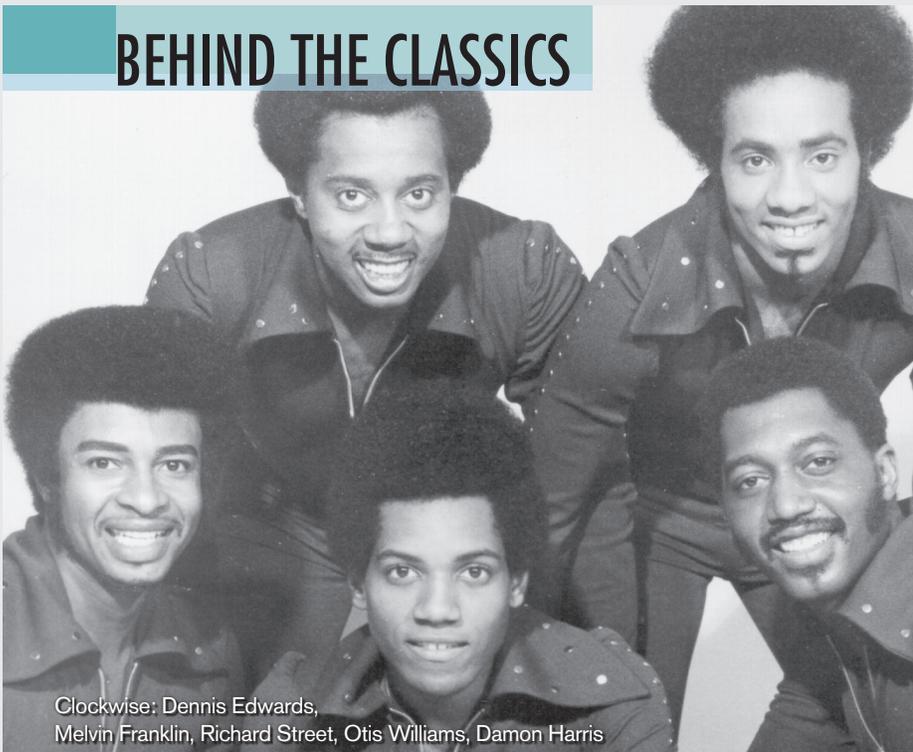


BEHIND THE CLASSICS



Clockwise: Dennis Edwards, Melvin Franklin, Richard Street, Otis Williams, Damon Harris

WRITTEN BY: NORMAN WHITFIELD AND BARRETT STRONG
 RECORDED: MOTOWN STUDIOS, DETROIT
 PRODUCED BY: NORMAN WHITFIELD
 DENNIS EDWARDS, MELVIN FRANKLIN, RICHARD STREET, OTIS WILLIAMS, DAMON HARRIS: VOCALS
 BOB BABBITT: BASS
 URIEL JONES: DRUMS
 WAH-WAH WATSON, JOE MESSINA: GUITARS
 JOHNNY GRIFFITH: KEYBOARDS
 JACK ASHFORD: PERCUSSION
 PAUL RISER: STRING AND HORN ARRANGEMENT
 FROM THE ALBUM: *ALL DIRECTIONS* (1972)



Richard Street

“Papa Was a Rollin’ Stone”

THE TEMPTATIONS

By the early 1970s, the Motown Sound had lost its innocence. Simple three-minute songs about baby love and heartaches had given way to complex epic soul workouts that tackled socially conscious topics. And leading the charge was producer Norman Whitfield. With hits for the Temptations like “Cloud Nine” and “Ball of Confusion,” Whitfield and his lyric-writing partner Barrett Strong kept upping the ante on just how experimental a soul record could be.

In 1972, the team unveiled their masterpiece, “Papa Was a Rollin’ Stone.” Over a 12-minute symphonic canvas, they unfolded a drama of a deadbeat ghetto father and the family he left behind. If Motown honcho Berry Gordy had issues the year before with Marvin Gaye’s socially pointed “What’s Going On,” one can only imagine what he made of the cold, hard realism in lines like: “Some bad talk going around saying Papa had three outside children and another wife.”

Whitfield and Strong had first recorded the song in 1971 with the Undisputed Truth, whose version stalled at No. 63 on the charts. Whitfield, convinced that “Papa” was a No. 1 record, retooled it for the Temptations. It was

a love-hate relationship from the very first time the vocal quintet worked with Whitfield—he gave them hits, but not without torturing them in the studio.

“My first reaction was that I hated the guy,” said lead singer Dennis Edwards. “Norman had a way of making you mad. He was the type who’d yell, ‘You sound like crap. My kid could sing better than this!’ But when you heard the finished product, you realized it was his way of getting the best out of you. And he had this weird talent: We’d get a vocal groove going, and then he’d know exactly the perfect time to record each of us. He’d hear a certain quality and seize on it.”

Bass singer Melvin Franklin recalled his initial doubts about the song. “Norman always came in with huge productions. When I’d hear all that stuff, I’d try to figure out just what we were going to do. You know, where do we fit?” But all five Temps staked out their turf, assuming the roles of sons questioning their mother about their delinquent dad. For all its production grandeur, the song finds its emotional core in the vocal interplay, like a streetwise oral history set to a funky groove.

For radio, the epic was pared down to seven minutes—and still broke other

rules of a typical hit. Songwriters know the conventional wisdom of keeping an intro short. Before Edwards sings the opening line, there are two minutes of instrumental build—and long instrumental breaks stretch between verses and choruses. Perhaps most interesting, the entire song motors along on one single chord.

Topping the charts in December 1972, it would be the Temptations’ last No. 1 hit. It went on to win three Grammy Awards, including Best R&B Song, and was later covered by such artists as George Michael and Phil Collins. “Papa” was also Whitfield’s last hurrah at Motown. He went on to produce hits with Rose Royce (“Car Wash”) in the mid-’70s before disappearing into a reclusive existence. He died in 2008.

Though it was a Temptations chart-topper, the tune was a testament to the genius of Whitfield. As Gordy said, “Norman could play the same chord and do all these different beautiful melodies and things that others couldn’t even imagine. He’d work with all the Temps, changing leads for each. He’d pick the right lead for the right song, and he’d utilize all five leads. It was just incredible.”

—Bill DeMain