

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Bertha McNeal

PERSON

McNeal, Bertha, 1940-

Alternative Names: Bertha McNeal;

Life Dates: June 12, 1940-December 15, 2022

Place of Birth: Shannon, Mississippi, USA

Residence: Kalamazoo, MI

Occupations: Singer

Biographical Note

Singer and performer Bertha McNeal was born in Shannon, Mississippi and raised in Flint, Michigan. McNeal and her cousin, Norma Fairhurst, first sang in a group with their uncle called The Barbees, where they recorded "The Wind" and "Que Pasa" for the Stepp label in 1957. Following high school and the breakup of The Barbees, McNeal enrolled as a student at Western Michigan University as an accomplished classical pianist.

In 1961, McNeal and her friend, Mildred Arbor, formed a singing group called the Velvelettes at Western Michigan University. McNeal then recruited her cousin to join the group and Arbor enlisted her younger sister, Carolyn Street, and Street's best friend, Betty Kelley. After the quintet won an Alpha Phi Alpha talent contest at the University, fellow student and nephew of Berry Gordy, Robert Bullock, suggested they audition for Gordy's Motown Records. The Velvelettes signed to Motown in late 1962 and started recording in January of 1963. They recorded two singles in 1963: "There He Goes" and "That's The Reason Why." In 1964, the Velvelettes recorded and released the single "Needle In A Haystack" on Motown's VIP Records, which peaked at #45 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100. The group then recorded "He Was Really Sayin' Somethin'," which peaked at #64 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 and at #21 on the Billboard R&B Singles chart.

In September of 1964, Betty Kelley left the Velvelettes to join Martha and the Vandellas. The remaining four Velvelettes continued to perform and released the singles "Lonely Lonely Girl Am I" and "A Bird in the Hand (Is Worth Two in the Bush)" in 1965, and "These Things Will Keep Me Loving You," in 1966, which later became a hit in the United Kingdom peaking at #34 on the UK Singles Chart. In the late 1960s, McNeal, Fairhurst and Arbor left the group and were replaced by Sandra Tilley

and Annette Rogers-McMillan. Then, in 1969, Carolyn Street married and disbanded the Velvelettes. McNeal went on to receive her M.A. degree in music and became a middle school teacher and choir director.

In 1984, four of the original Velvelettes, Arbor, Fairhurst, McNeal and Street, reunited. In 1990, the group re-recorded their original hits and new songs for the album *One Door Closes* for Motorcity Records. Motown Records then released *The Very Best of the Velvelettes* in 1999, *The Velvelettes: The Best Of* in 2001, and *The Velvelettes: The Motown Anthology* in 2004. The Velvelettes were the only Motown group of the classic era that still performed with the “original” line-up.

Bertha McNeal was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on June 26, 2014.

Bertha McNeal passed away on December 15, 2022 at the age of 82.

Related Entries

Western Michigan University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

M.A. Degree

Kalamazoo Public Schools [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Music Teacher, Choir Director

Stepp Records [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1957 to ?]

Member, "The Barbees"

Motown Records [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1962 to 1967]

Member, "The Velvelettes"

Motorcity Records [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1990 to ?]

Member, "The Velvelettes"

The Barbees [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Member

The Velvelettes [MEMBEROF]
[from 1961 to 1967]

Member

The Velvelettes [MEMBEROF]
[from 1984 to ?]

Member

