

THE MARVELETTES



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1961–1970</i>	<i>Classic soul-pop</i>	<i>Beechwood 4-5789 (1961)</i>

Only Solitaire

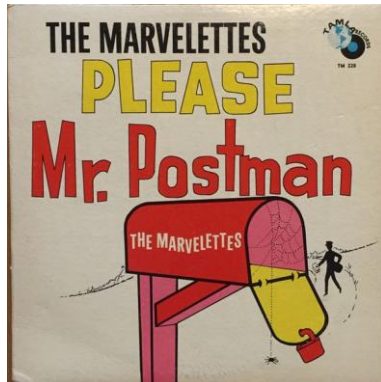
Artist: *The Marvelettes*

Years: *1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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PLEASE MR. POSTMAN

Album released:

Nov. 20, 1961

V A L U E
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More info:



Tracks: 1) Angel; 2) I Want A Guy; 3) **Please Mr. Postman**; 4) So Long Baby; 5) I Know How It Feels; 6) Way Over There; 7) Happy Days; 8) You Don't Want Me No More; 9) All The Love I Got; 10) Whisper; 11) I Apologize.

REVIEW

The Marvelettes were not the first girl group to get signed with Motown or to have a record released on the label — their first audition for Berry Gordy and Smokey Robinson was in April 1961, three months after Gordy had already signed «The Primettes», soon to become known as The Supremes. However, The Supremes did not even begin to enter the charts until ‘Your Heart Belongs To Me’ in mid-1962, and did not have a big hit until ‘When The Lovelight...’ in the fall of 1963; meanwhile, The Marvelettes’ rise to fame was practically meteoric — as was, unfortunately, their subsequent downfall. Together with The Miracles and Marvin Gaye, they were the ones responsible for the very foundations of the Motown citadel, but they did not properly survive past the first floor.



We can, perhaps, poke at the reasons for this discrepancy in fortunes by comparing two different versions of the same song, ‘[I Want A Guy](#)’, which was issued in March 1961 as The Supremes’ first single and then, eight months later, recorded again by The Marvelettes for their first LP. (This, by the way, is the song that is also clearly responsible for the existence of the Beatles’ ‘There’s A Place’ — they totally nicked the melismatic bit of it, along with some of the chords). The Supremes give us a fairly «feminine» rendition — slightly slower tempo, softer drums, «baroque-pop» elements such as a prominent flute

part, and, of course, Diana Ross' thin, fragile, sensitive vocal delivery. The Marvelettes, in comparison, toughen everything up with a faster tempo, a harsher drum sound, saxophones instead of flutes, and a lower, grittier lead performance from Wanda Rogers. Of course, this is not even close to any properly «punkish» or «rebellious» standards, but it's still closer to a «streetwise» sound than the comparatively glitzy Supremes take. But this is just because the Motown machine was not yet working at 100% efficiency; once they'd develop and test out all the marketing strategies for The Supremes, it was only a matter of time before the updated, upgraded, and refined glamor of Diana Ross and her lady friends completely ushered bands like The Marvelettes out of the public consciousness.

These here were the earliest, roughest days, though — days when the barely-coming-of-age Tamla label was desperately looking for a successful girl group of its own, one that could rival earlier acts such as The Chantels and The Shirelles but come with a «Motown stamp», whatever that stamp might turn out to be. With The Supremes already signed but seemingly making little progress, Gordy kept on auditioning, and, according to the most common version, the Marvelettes — at that time, still just «The Marvels» without extra feminization — appeared before him as the winners of fourth place in a local high school contest; the same version also states that, pending Gordy's and Smokey's approval, the group was sent home and told to come back with some original material. (Which is interesting because none of the group's subsequent hits after this one were originals — apparently, Berry Gordy liked him the kind of girl singers who *could* write their own songs but would only do so if specifically prompted by the boss.)

The result was an early version of 'Please Mr. Postman', apparently co-written by Georgia Dobbins, one of the original Marvelettes who did not even stick around long enough to appear on the final recording, and her friend William Garrett. No idea how that early version sounded, because ultimately it was re-worked in the studio with the participation of Motown's staff songwriters Brian Holland, Robert Bateman, and Freddie Gorman. At the time of the final recording, The Marvelettes were still a quintet, with Gladys Horton singing lead and four other girls (Katherine Anderson, Juanita Cowart, Georgeanna Tillman, and Wanda Young) backing her up — and an interesting detail is that the recording, beyond such Motown regulars as James Jamerson on bass, features none other than Marvin Gaye himself on the drums, as he was serving a bit of session penance at the time after the flop of his **Soulful Moods** debut.

Now as of today, I think, there are three «classic» versions of 'Please Mr. Postman' in existence — the original, the Beatles cover from **With The Beatles**, and the Carpenters' cover from 1975 — and, although I honestly expected the opposite, it turns out that the original version, in terms of overall views, heavily trumps both of its competitors on YouTube as of today,

which is far from always the case (e.g. 'Baby It's You' and 'Honey Don't' are much more heavily associated with the Beatles than they are with the Shirelles and Carl Perkins, respectively). This is a bit of a surprise, but not *that* much of a surprise; barring the slightly thin and cavernous sound — an inevitable consequence of the song being recorded so early — the original pop song is such a slice of perfection that it is hard to think of any ways to improve it. In fact, the Beatles did not even try all that much: 'Please Mr. Postman' is one of very few Beatles covers where they lift almost every vocal trick from the original note-for-note, both in respect to John's lead vocal and Paul and George's back-up.

What exactly is it that makes the song so special? Hardly the melody itself — based on the fairly common «Fifties' progression» — or any special intricacies of the arrangement, which hangs almost entirely on Richard Wylie's thinnish piano line (which the Beatles completely chucked out in favor of guitars, and the Carpenters replaced with saxophones). Instead, all power is transferred to the vocals, and the vocals give us an awesome lesson in tension-raising: no other girl *or* boy group before had dared to deliver its message of longing and yearning with such naked and brutal passion. That's one thing that John Lennon, of all people, understood pretty well, as he would sing the song with the same reckless abandon that he usually reserved for the likes of 'Twist And Shout' — matching, but not exceeding, the rough desperation in Gladys Horton's "*please Mr. Postman, look and see if there's a letter, a letter for me!...*" It's adorable teenage drama not just at its catchiest, but also at its, well, most *DRAMATIC* — almost like a blueprint for the entire career of The Shangri-Las, only without all the suicidal references.

I do remember being quite specifically captivated by the anguish in Lennon's performance upon first hearing the song, and I do remember how hearing the Marvelettes' original left me just as satisfied (a rare thing with the Beatles, who, as I insist, almost always improved on the songs they covered, at least from a «technical» angle). And there are occasional tiny things about this version, too, that make it even more special — like, for instance, the out-of-the-blue appearance of a reverb effect on the "*deliver the letter, the sooner the better!*" line at the end of the song: some suggest it must have been a production error, but I like how this singling-out unintentionally accentuates the point at which the singer's broken-hearted lament crosses into actual threat, something you don't get with the more polished version on **With The Beatles**. (*Note*: some versions of the song omit this little bit, replacing it instead with an inferior "*don't pass me by, you see the tears in my eyes*" — I have not been able to properly establish the nature of this variation, but it's possible they made the replacement for subsequent pressings specifically to remedy the reverb «error», or maybe because they thought this «angry» bit was out of line with the rest of the song... well, it *is* out of line, but it's totally cool-out-of-line!)

While we're at it, I must say that the Carpenters' version, notably inferior and, to some, perhaps even offensive in nature to the original spirit of the song, does have its merits as well — provided you believe in such a thing as «subtle intensity», where your ears actually let you discern the same pain and yearning behind Karen's quiet, cuddly, caressing delivery of the melody. If you're a non-believer in such things, though, better stay away, because from a general perspective the Carpenters just do a Sesame Street version of the song — or, more accurately, a [Disneyland version](#) if the accompanying video is to be taken as an actual hint.

Back to the Marvelettes now. For a short while, 'Please Mr. Postman' made them into superstars — it became Motown's first #1 hit on the general charts, sold even more copies than The Miracles' 'Shop Around', and opened up a brighter future for girl groups than any previous girl group song. Overwhelmed by the success, Berry immediately rushed the girls back into the studio to record a full LP (meanwhile, the poor Supremes were still kept on a meager diet of one new single per several months, probably gnashing their teeth and dying of jealousy in the corner while the Motown machine kept working full-time for the benefit of their chief competition). All fine and dandy, with just one problem: there was nothing to record. The girls themselves were not stimulated to contribute any more original material, and that meant that Motown's songwriters had an emergency on their hands.

Impressively enough, only two of the songs here were culled from past releases: the aforementioned 'I Want A Guy' (taken away from The Supremes, thus adding insult to injury) and The Miracles' 'Way Over There', which Gladys sang with even more dedication than Smokey himself (and I, for one, sure prefer her soulful rasp to Smokey's high pitch). Everything else was written right on the spot — by Gordy himself, along with the bulk of the Motown gang (Janie Bradford, Robert Bateman, Brian Holland, William Robinson, etc.). Unfortunately, spontaneous inspiration was simply *not* the kind of fuel on which the Motown machine ran best, and most of this stuff is forgettable; 'Please Mr. Postman' towers over every one of these new numbers here like an early skyscraper over a bunch of hovels.

There are two specific problems. One is that, from the very outset, The Marvelettes were set to function in two modes. There was a rougher-'n'-tougher mode, bluesy and R&B-ish, with the bulky Gladys Horton and her menacing front tooth gap as its vocal director; and then there was a slower, waltzier, more doo-woppy mode, with the slightly more «elegant» Wanda Young and her higher range as the engine for that one. On **Please Mr. Postman** (the LP), the two modes are given more or less equal attention, and the Wanda-sung material is always more old-fashioned, more generic, and, in my opinion, more annoying — she has a rather nasty vocal timbre which, when pushed into the higher frequencies, becomes squeaky and

meow-ish (not that there wasn't an entire tradition of such singing in doo-wop, but I'd rather see it confined to the Fifties than have it reverentially transferred over to the early years of Motown, you know). Consequently, songs like 'Angel', 'So Long Baby' (the original B-side to 'Mr. Postman'), and 'I Know How It Feels' suffer both from lack of melodic ideas *and* a somewhat, let's say, outdated approach to the art of singing.

Fortunately, six out of eleven songs in total are still sung by the far more expressive and powerful Gladys Horton, but there is an additional problem: the album, more than any other contemporary Motown record, features the fascination of Raynoma Mayberry Liles «Miss Ray» Gordy, then-current wife of Berry Gordy, with the trendy electronic sounds of the Musitron and the Ondioline — early analog thingamajigs that could be lovably futuristic and visionary when employed with sufficient talent and ingenuity, e.g. on Del Shannon's 'Runaway', but could just as well sound atrociously corny if you started inserting them as lead instruments everywhere. My intuitive guess is that the record had to be cut so quickly that Gordy didn't have the time to assemble a proper string orchestra, so all the potentially orchestral parts went to Miss Ray, and honestly, it's a disaster. Some people find the effect cute, but when decent songs like 'Happy Days' or 'You Don't Want Me No More' open with the kind of electronic sounds that, to the ears of a 21st century listener, are probably associated with Eighties' arcade machines rather than anything else, it's a total mood-killer.

In the end, as much as I'd love to, there's hardly anything I could recommend off this album apart from its one obvious highlight, and *maybe* the Marvelettes' takes on those early singles by The Supremes and The Miracles — those were at least songs where it's obvious that *some* effort went into their creation, and the girls take on both challenges with verve. The rest, whatever it is, is the definition of filler: sometimes listenable, sometimes (when it goes way heavy on either Wanda Young's higher register or the Ondioline) barely so. The moral of the story is simple enough: too much fame and fortune, as it befell to 'Please Mr. Postman', can lead to hasty and irresponsible decisions. Of course, classic Motown, all through its existence in the Sixties, was really always about singles and never about albums — but, unfortunately, this is why it is so commonly referred to as a «factory», and not necessarily in the reverential sense of the word.

