

Former Motown artist prefers to recall civil rights issues

By Mark Price

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) - Curtis McNair marched for civil rights in the '40s, helped integrate the Army in the '50s, and was among the first blacks hired at Chrysler's corporate office in the early '60s.

But The Charlotte Observer reports that people don't ask about such things when the Wadesboro resident agrees to a rare public appearance. They'd rather hear about Smokey Robinson, Gladys Knight and Stevie Wonder.

Oh, and Diana Ross. Eeeeverybody asks about Diana Ross. Such were the icons McNair worked for during another phase of his life, as art director for Motown Records.

From 1968 to 1972, he was responsible for designing nearly 100 covers for the label, some considered among the greatest pop albums of all time.

It's a source of pride to him, but there's also a measure of frustration. At 75, McNair would like to be remembered for nobler acts, like the marches and sit-ins he joined to advance civil rights.

Not likely. The way things look now, McNair will go down in history as the beleaguered artist who kept redoing album covers because Diana Ross' face wasn't big enough.

It's tough not to be awed when McNair flips through chapters of a life that look him from a farm near Laurinburg, through the civil rights movement and into the inner sanctum of one of the world's greatest music factories. He is a man of stories, each of which dovetails into another more surprising than the last. The time he got a civil rights lecture from Malcolm X in a furniture store. The night he lost a game of pool to Marvin Gaye. The day he hung out with the Supremes as they rehearsed backstage for an appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show."

McNair's details are occasionally fuzzy, but to interrupt with questions is to miss whatever comes next.

"Curtis acts like all this is no big deal," says Donna Ingram McNair, who married him three years ago. "He'll be talking about something and I'll think to myself: 'Did he just say he met (poet) Langston Hughes?' or 'Did he just say he did an album cover for Martin Luther King?' You just don't expect the stuff that comes out of his mouth."

In certain circles, McNair is himself a pop culture dignitary. Sixties music historians, including curators at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, know of his work and why it remains relevant.

"The visuals (Curtis McNair) created resonated with people. It touched people's lives, and anybody that can do that is doing good work," says Howard Kramer, curatorial director of the Hall of Fame. "Motown was an incredible moment in time. It wasn't just amazing music. It has become evocative of an era."

In McNair's case, that meant putting an image to some of the century's most enduring music.

Stevie Wonder's "My Cherie Amour" and "Signed, Sealed, Delivered." Smokey Robinson and the Miracles' "Tears of a Clown."

Edwin Starr's "War." The Temptations' "Just My Imagination (Running Away With Me)." The Four Tops' "Still Waters Run Deep."

Diana Ross and the Supremes' "Love Child" and "Someday We'll Be Together."

In each case, McNair has stories, none of them glamorous.

Forced to choose the cover of which he is most proud, McNair says without pause that it's the late Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On."

Critics often refer to the 1971 album as a masterpiece because its lyrics about drug abuse, poverty and Vietnam inspired other black artists to pay greater attention to the meaning of their music.

The cover is a portrait of Gaye wearing an expression of resolve, with the collar up on his black leather coat and flecks of moisture on his face and hair. McNair says the cover represents one of the few cases in which he photographed the recording sessions to get inspiration. He still has the photos.

"Marvin had half the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in the studio, with all these jazz musicians, and he was directing them all, yet he could not read music," McNair says, laughing at the thought.

"I could see how emotional he was, in terms of the essence of the album, and I wanted to match that. Marvin's brother was in the military and had come back from Vietnam with stories of the carnage over there. Marvin was perplexed and he was trying to express that."

The irony, of course, is that Motown founder Berry Gordy at first refused to release "What's Going On" as a single, because he saw it as too political and uncommercial. Likewise, execs didn't like McNair's cover.

"We had 100 slides of photos and I picked this one photo that was taken in Marvin's backyard, when it was sleeting," recalls McNair. "I liked that the sleet made his hair turn white, and on top of that you have the moisture on his coat and that wonderful expression on his face. I thought all of that added to the drama."

"Well, the guy over my department saw it, and he did not like the photo and got upset. ... Marvin happened to be in the building, doing some work, so I said, 'Let's go ask him and see which one he likes.' We gave him both slides, and he looked at the one I selected and said, 'That's it.'"

There were lost battles, too. One of his least favorite works is a 1971 collage-like cover for Smokey Robinson and the Miracles' "One Dozen Roses."

"Smokey brought me these bad pictures of his wife, these candid shots, and no negatives. He says to me, 'I want you to design this album and I want my wife to be in it,'" McNair says. "He wanted her on it and roses on it. I told him it was too messy. He told me, 'Put it on there!' So I did, and we have one ugly album cover."

Diana Ross was another act who typically got her way, including one instance in which Berry Gordy flew McNair from Detroit to New York City, just to tell him in person that Ross' face needed to be bigger on a Supremes-Temptations duet album.

"I had also done a cover for Diana Ross and the Supremes' Greatest Hits, which Berry didn't like," McNair says. "But it sold millions. He had no complaints once the money started coming in."

Essentially, McNair did all of Motown's albums from 1968 until the label moved to the West Coast in '72. The one notable exception was The Jackson Five, who were popular enough to commission their covers with outside sources, he says.

That was OK with McNair, since he was basically a one-man operation.

"When a friend of mine recommended I apply for the job, I went to Motown expecting to see an art department with five or 10 people working. I remember asking, 'Where is everybody?' and I was told, 'You are it.' So, I was art director, designer and whatever else was needed," recalls McNair.

That didn't stop him from averaging 25 covers a year, which historians say is amazing. Most of the covers were low-budget affairs strung together with ideas he pulled out of thin air, including colorizing old photos from file cabinets, combining several photos into one drawing, and flipping photos upside down or backward.

In doing so, McNair inadvertently created a badly needed new look for the label.

"He really hasn't gotten the recognition he should have," says David Rice, chairman and founder of the 10,000-member Organization of Black Designers.

"He was a true pioneer in terms of the cover design he did for Motown. ... Some of it was masterful in helping establish the 'brand' of Motown."

McNair was born in Scotland County during the Great Depression, but doesn't remember an upbringing in the state.

When he was 3, his father was shot in an argument with another man, and died a day or two later. McNair's mother was only 17 at the time and decided to pack up her two sons and move in with relatives living in Detroit.

His memory of boyhood is one of constant change, as the family was passed from one crowded home to another, and one school to another.

In fourth grade at Detroit's Alger School, McNair began to display artistic abilities. A teacher convinced his mother to enroll him in an art correspondence course.

McNair eventually became skilled enough to earn a partial scholarship to the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts, now known as the Center for Creative Studies-College of Art and Design.

However, he was drafted into the Army for two years shortly after high school and was among the first African Americans trained alongside white soldiers at Fort Campbell, Ky.

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THE CAROLINA TIMES
L.E. AUSTIN
Editor-Publisher 1927-1971

(USPS 091-380)

(Mrs.) Vivian Austin Edmonds
Editor-Publisher, 1971-2002

Kenneth W. Edmonds
Editor-Publisher, 2002-

Published every Thursday (dated Saturday) (except the week following Christmas) in Durham, N.C., by United Publishers, Incorporated. Mailing address: P.O. Box 3825, Durham, N.C. 27702-3825. Office located at 923 Old Fayetteville Street, Durham, N.C. 27701. Periodicals Postage paid at Durham, North Carolina 27702.

Volume 87, Number 21
POSTMASTER:
Send address changes to THE CAROLINA TIMES, P.O. Box 3825, Durham, N.C. 27702-3825.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: One year, Durham County, \$18.00 (plus \$1.08 sales tax); one year, outside Durham County, \$21.00 (plus \$1.32 sales tax); one year, out of state, \$22.00. Single copy \$3.00. Postal regulations REQUIRE advance payment on subscriptions. Address all communications and make all checks payable to: THE CAROLINA TIMES.

NATIONAL ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE: Amalgamated Publishers, Inc., 341 West 38th Street, Suite 800, New York, New York 10018.

Member: United Press International Photo Service, North Carolina Black Publishers Association, Associated Press.

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