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Davis Eli ("David") Ruffin

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RUFFIN, DAVIS ELI (“DAVID”) (b. 18 Jan. 1941 in Whynot, Mississippi; *d.* 1 June 1991 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), singer and member of the vocal group The Temptations, inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1989.

Born near Meridian, Mississippi, Ruffin’s mother, Ophelia Davis, died of complications from childbirth soon after he was born, and he was raised by his father Eli Ruffin, a strict Baptist minister and gospel singer, and stepmother Earline Johnson, a schoolteacher who married Eli in 1942. As a child, Ruffin sang both in church and with his older siblings – brothers Quincy and Jimmy (who would also achieve solo fame), and sister Rita Mae.

As a teenager, Ruffin moved to Memphis and joined a gospel group, the Dixie Nightingales, for two years, and even worked briefly as a racehorse jockey in Arkansas. In 1958, after moving on to Detroit with his godfather Eddie Bush, he became a drummer and singer for the Voice Masters, before releasing unsuccessful solo singles for the Anna and Check-Mate labels (both later absorbed into Motown) in 1960-61.

Both David and Jimmy Ruffin were familiar with members of the five-man Detroit vocal group The Temptations, which had released several singles without any hits. At one of their performances, David brought down the house when he joined the group on-stage, spun around, threw the microphone in the air, and collapsed in a split. He was asked to join the group during Christmastime 1963.

Immediately after joining, the Tempts had their first hit, “The Way You Do the Things You Do,” produced and co-written by William “Smokey” Robinson and featuring Eddie Kendricks on lead vocals. Their next hit was written particularly for Ruffin’s rougher, gospel-edged voice: “My Girl” was a crossover smash, climbing to number one on both the Pop and Rhythm & Blues charts. He became the group’s dominant vocalist, singing lead on a string of their most successful and enduring songs, such as “Ain’t Too Proud to Beg,” “Beauty Is Only Skin Deep,” “(I Know) I’m Losing You,” “I Wish It Would Rain,” and “I Could Never Love Another,” all of which reached number one on the R&B chart and the top fifteen on the Pop.

Tall, thin, and always wearing his trademark thick-rimmed glasses, Ruffin was a charismatic showman whose soulful, raspy voice was capable of expressing tremendous emotion, stretching from baritone to gospel-inflected tenor. Ruffin was also responsible for suggesting that the group employ a four-headed microphone stand onstage, which, along with their famous “Temptations Walk,” became the group’s trademark. With their sweet harmonies and slick choreography, the group appeared on many television shows, and shared a TV special with Motown’s top female group, The Supremes.

Ruffin’s vocal prowess and natural showmanship led him to become the group’s focal point, which was sometimes resented by the other four members. He had already been in a drug rehabilitation program in 1967, and his erratic and

sometime egotistical behavior, coupled with his sizeable entourage, began to alienate him from the rest of the group, causing him to miss rehearsals and performances. For example, he suggested that the name of the group be changed to “David Ruffin and the Temptations,” as had been done with other Motown groups (like Diana Ross *and* the Supremes); he insisted on driving separately in a mink-lined limousine; and there were whispers regarding abuse when his live-in girlfriend, singer Tammi Terrell, collapsed onstage in 1967 from a brain tumor. Ruffin was fired from the group in mid-1968 when he chose to be with a girlfriend on her opening night rather than with the Tempts on theirs.

Having complained about being underpaid and over-controlled, Ruffin tried to leave Motown, but the company (which had a contract) sued to keep him, delaying the release of his first solo hit, “My Whole World Ended (the Moment You Left Me),” which eventually reached the top ten on both the Pop and R&B charts in 1969. He continued to record regularly for Motown throughout the 1970s (including an album with brother Jimmy), but Ruffin felt that the label did not actively promote his records (concentrating on Diana Ross, Marvin Gaye, and Stevie Wonder), suspecting that it was punishment for having tried to leave – he called it “economic peonage.” His only other significant hit single during this time was “Walk Away From Love” in 1975, and he later began performing as a duo with fellow ex-Temptation Eddie Kendricks.

Ruffin and his wife, Sandra Kay Barnes, with whom he had 3 daughters,

divorced in 1977. He also had a son with live-in companion Genna Sapia.

The nostalgia boom of the early 1980s generated renewed interest in The Tempts, and Ruffin and Kendrick (who had shortened his name) briefly rejoined the group in 1982 for a “Reunion” tour and album. Longtime fans Daryl Hall and John Oates invited the duo to join them in 1985 at both the reopening of the Apollo Theater (also released as a live album) and the July “Live Aid” concert. In January 1989, The Temptations were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Unfortunately, though, Ruffin had already started smoking crack cocaine, which affected his asthma (forcing him to be hospitalized for respiratory failure) and repeatedly squashed his many comeback attempts. The 1980s are a litany of legal and drug-related problems: he was fined and jailed in 1982 after the “Reunion” tour for failing to file a tax return for 1976, and his house was foreclosed; a 1986 arrest for receiving and concealing a stolen handgun; a cocaine arrest and drug rehab in 1987; a 1988 arrest and conviction for using cocaine; and, after moving to Philadelphia in the Summer of 1989, Ruffin once again violated probation by testing positive for cocaine and was sent to rehab.

After returning from a successful 1991 month-long tour of England with Kendrick and fellow ex-Tempt Dennis Edwards, Ruffin collapsed in a Philadelphia crack-house after sharing ten vials with a friend in under a half hour. He was rushed to the hospital by a limousine driver, where he died; his body was

positively identified only through FBI fingerprints. Although the cause of death was ruled an accidental overdose of crack cocaine, Ruffin's family and friends suspected foul play, claiming that a money belt containing the proceeds from the tour (\$40,000) was missing from his body – he had only \$53 in his pocket. His funeral in Detroit was paid for by Michael Jackson, and the service at New Bethel Baptist Church featured performances by Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, and the surviving Temptations. Although to many it seemed like he spent more time in courtrooms than in concert halls in his later life, David Ruffin's rough but romantic voice made him one of America's finest soul singers.

There is no full-length biography of David Ruffin. His one-time live-in companion Genna Sapia has self-published *Memoirs: David Ruffin – My Temptation* (1998) about their life together. Ruffin's strained relationship with Motown is covered in *Where Did Our Love Go? The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound* (1985), by Nelson George. Numerous reminiscences about Ruffin and the Temptations by the group's bass singer Melvin Franklin (a distant cousin of Ruffin) are included in *The Motown Story*, by Don Waller (1985). *Temptations* (1988), by the group's founder, Otis Williams along with Patricia Romanowski, provides a firsthand (though frequently anti-Ruffin) view of the early days of both Motown and the group. Tony Turner, who was the road manager for many of the

later tours, details Ruffin's drug use in *Deliver Us From Temptation* (1992), written with Barbara Aria.

There are articles on Ruffin in the *Annual Obituary* for 1991, and in volume 6 (1992) of *Contemporary Musicians: Profiles of the People in Music*. Obituaries appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Boston Globe*, and *Los Angeles Times* for 2 June 1991; the *Detroit Free Press*, *Chicago Defender*, and *New York Times* on 3 June 1991; and the *Michigan Chronicle* for 5 June 1991. There were numerous follow-up stories on the mysterious circumstances surrounding the death. Of the many tributes to Ruffin, the most notable are by music critic Tom Moon in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 3 June 1991; Richard Harrington in the *Washington Post*, 9 June 1991; and by singer Daryl Hall ("Last Thoughts on David Ruffin: Remembering a Great Temptation") in *Musician*, number 155 (September 1991), pages 30, 32, 97.

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