Standing in the Shadows of Motown (2002)

You Can't Hurry Fame: Motown's Unsung Heroes

Cast & Crew

**Director:** Paul Justman
**Producer:** Paul Justman, Sanford Passman, Alan Slutsky
**Screenwriter:** Walter Dallas, Ntozake Shange

**Starring:** Richard "Pistol" Allen, Jack Ashford, Bob Babbitt, Benny "Papa Zita" Benjamin, Eddie "Bongo" Brown, Bootsy Collins, Johnny Griffin, Ben Harper, Joe Hunter, James Jamerson, Uriel Jones, Montell Jordan, Chaka Khan, Gerald Levert, Joe Messina, McShell NdegéOcello, Joan Osborne

**By:** ELVIS MITCHELL
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"Fourty-one years ago they played their first note on a Motown record and three decades since they were all together, the Funk Brothers reunited in Detroit to play their music and tell their story," reads a title early in the director Paul Justman's documentary "Standing in the Shadows of Motown." It is a simple premise that this movie more than lives up to, taking off on the success of the Funk Brothers, the squad of elite musicians heard laying down the rhythm -- and the law -- of Motown's greatest hits.

This salute to the literally unsung and underrecognized studio heroes of Motown is so good because it is one of those rare documentaries that combine information with smashing entertainment. And it is one of the few nonfiction films that will have you walking out humming the score, if you're not running to the nearest store to buy Motown CDs.

The movie, which opens nationwide today, shifts among four components: performers lining up to offer heartfelt but uninvolved tributes to the Funk Brothers; the musicians talking about performances that turned sheet music into legendary recordings; new renditions of Motown classics with the Funk Brothers backing up guest vocalists like Ben Harper, and dramatic re-creations of Funk Brother anecdotes. These dramatizations lack the theatrical timing and phrasing of the Funk Brothers. Yet, by itself, each one is charming eccentricity masked a dangerous streak, which is reinforced when Mr. Ashford remarks, "You try to keep him as tranquil as possible because he could explode at any moment." Such statements bring to mind Bob Dylan's calling Smokey Robinson America's greatest living poet, and raise the question of whether his poetry would have even existed without the Funk Brothers giving it life to his lyrics.

That truth is divined earlier in "Motown" when the drummer Steve Jordan, the linchpin of the original "Late Night With David Letterman" band, assesses the Funk Brothers' contributions: "When these cats cut tracks -- and really, no offense to any of the great artists who sang on them -- Deputi Doug could've sung on them and they would've been a hit." He's right. The grooves in the Motown standards are so solid that even high-school marching bands can't ruin them, so it is a little less than monumental when Gerald Levert, Joan Osborne and Meshell NdegéOcello join the Funk Brothers to sing "Reach Out, I'll Be There" or "Heat Wave" or "A Desperate Situation," was co-written by Mr. Hunter and recorded by Gaye. (It only surfaced a few years ago.) Maybe this movie will compel Motown to take back great, forgotten albums like Griffith's solo work.

"Motown" is a showcase for the natural charisma of musicians who claim the screen by dint of pride, accomplishment and sheer force of personality. Each one of the stars has a story that is unique, funny and filled with heart. The movie, which opens nationwide today, shifts among four components: performers lining up to offer heartfelt but uninvolved tributes to the Funk Brothers; the musicians talking about performances that turned sheet music into legendary recordings; new renditions of Motown classics with the Funk Brothers backing up guest vocalists like Ben Harper, and dramatic re-creations of Funk Brother anecdotes. These dramatizations lack the theatrical timing and phrasing of the Funk Brothers. Yet, by itself, each one is

One minor quibble is that the movie lacks a clarifying touch. No one notes that so much of the transformative artistry of the Funk Brothers' bumping rhythm lines was undeniably influenced by Jamerson. (Jamerson's slippery, sinuous bottom-plucking gave Motown its distinctive throb.)

Two of the brothers, the keyboardist Joe Hunter and the vibes and percussionist Jack Ashford, make especially vivid impressions. Speaking in menthol-cool tones that reflect a life of addiction, Mr. Ashford talks about his first meeting with Marvin Gaye, in which Mr. Ashford didn't bother to sugar his disdain for pop. "Everybody wanted to be like Miles Davis, didn't matter what instrument you played," he says, explaining his cockiness.

The movie hints that Jamerson's charmed life and music were underpinned by a darker side. "Standing in the Shadows of Motown" is rated PG (Parental guidance suggested). It has strong language.

STANDING IN THE SHADOWS OF MOTOWN

Directed by Paul Justman; written by Walter Dallas and Ntozake Shange, based on the book by Allan Sluksy; directors of photography, Doug Milson and Lon Stratton; edited by Anne Erikson; produced by Sandy Passman, Mr. Sluksy and Mr. Justman; released by Artisan Entertainment. Running time: 108 minutes. This film is rated PG.

WITH: Andre Braugher (Narrator); Jack Ashford, Bob Babbitt, Johnny Griffin, Joe Hunter, Uriel Jones, Joe Messina and Eddie Willis (the Funk Brothers); Joan Osborne, Gerald Levert, Meshell NdegéOcello, Bootsy Collins, Ben Harper, Chaka Khan, Montell Jordan, Tom Scott and Richard Allan.