



The first record to roll off the Motown presses in 1968 was 'I Can't Give Back The Love I Feel For You' by a sweet-voiced young female singer who like Martha Reeves and Chris Clark before her had been working as a secretary in the Hitsville building. Her name was Rita Wright. Sadly, her record - though penned by Ashford & Simpson and produced by Brian Holland and Lamont Dozier - bombed ignominiously and Wright didn't record again for another four years (when she triumphantly returned under her real name, Syreeta). Given Motown's astounding success rate during its peak in the mid to late '60s, the failure of Wright's 45 must have been hard to accept even if it was just a minor blip on the company's sales graph. But it certainly didn't set a pattern for 1968. The same month, Motown released the Four Tops' 'Walk Away Renee' and 'Gladys Knight & The Pips' 'The End Of Our Road.' Both were big smashes and the Motown hit machine marched relentlessly onwards. That was a blow for those commentators that were predicting that Motown would struggle in 1968 as a result of the company's principal tunesmiths, Holland-Dozier-Holland, leaving over a bitter royalty dispute. But as the music on this magnificent 144-track box set confirms, it was merely a case of business as usual. Norman Whitfield grasped the production reins, embraced the Zeitgeist and took the label into an exciting new era with the searing psychedelic soul of The Temptations' 'Cloud Nine' (which showcased singer David Ruffin's replacement, Dennis Edwards). Whitfield also masterminded Marvin Gaye's indelible version of 'I Heard It Through The Grapevine,' considered by many as Motown's greatest ever single (there's an actual vinyl 45 of it attached to this set's front cover). There were plenty of other great 45s issued by Motown in 1968 and all are included here of course: 'Love Child' by Diana Ross & The Supremes, 'For Once In My Life' by Stevie Wonder and a personal favourite, the beautiful ballad about inter-racial love called 'Does Your Mama Know About Me' by Bobby Taylor & The Vancouvers. If you've purchased any of the previous volumes, you'll know that there's much here to enjoy besides the music. Packed with nuggets of fascinating Motown info, the track-by-track commentary is superlative. Then, of course, there's a plethora of rare archive photos which help bring the era to life. In addition, Temptations member, Otis Williams, supplies a personal reminiscence while historian, Herb Boyd, contextualises the music via a thoughtful essay. Another glorious instalment of a compilation series that has truly raised the bar for archival retrospectives.

(CW) 5/5

VARIOUS ARTISTS: The Complete Motown Singles Volume 8: 1968 (Label: Hip-O Select)

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