

LIFE AS A TEMPTATION

By Helen Marketti

"Motown music was the primary influence for me. There was extraordinary presentation. You could look at them (The Temptations) and see they were unlike any other group. The way they appeared, performed and sang influenced me the most." Sharing his thoughts about the singing group he idolized as a teenager Damon Harris would later find himself right in the midst of their presence as he became a "second generation" member of the group replacing his vocal hero, Eddie Kendricks.

Singing in bands (The Vandals and The Tempos) during his high school years Damon was acutely aware of where his music interests originated from. "Music is innate through me because of my mom. We had many who were musically inclined in the family," recalls Damon. "I always liked James Brown, Curtis Mayfield, Aretha Franklin and so forth. Even before Motown there was Ray Charles whom I have always admired."

Damon's pathway took forks in the road that lead him to become a member of Motown's hottest group during the early 70s. Other forks in the road that were not fully explored was the possibility of playing professional football or baseball or being an educator of music. "Football and baseball were the prime sports at the time and I was good at both," Damon said. "I could be with the NFL as a coach or maybe a music professor at a university but you live with the choices you make."

Modeling himself after Temptation's member Eddie Kendricks, Damon sang the falsetto highs that matched Eddie's. He perfected the sound of this idol during his high school days so much so that others would comment on how much they sounded alike. "To me Eddie was the total package. First of all he had a lot of attention from the women," Damon laughs. "His sound, his manner on stage and his charisma was very compelling."

Damon had become friends with Marve' Braxton who was the girlfriend of Eddie Kendricks. It would seem obvious to think that these were incredible odds of happening but it was true. "She was a friend of one of our mentors from the early days (high school)," Damon said. "I had bumped into her one day out of the blue and she asked me if I had heard that Eddie had left The Temptations which I was aware of."

Marve' suggested to Damon that he try out for the group as they were not happy with Eddie's replacement at the time. "I lived in Baltimore and The Temptations were staying at The Watergate Hotel in Washington," Damon said. "I was ambiguous at first but Marve' was sincere about me auditioning for Eddie's spot. I was humbled. Things like this just don't happen to people like me. Eddie was the one who had the tenure with the group. He went through the rough times with them from the early days so who was I to step in? I was going to be responsible for singing his stuff."

"My girlfriend at the time and I drove to the hotel and I remember singing for Otis (Williams) in the corridor of his hotel room. I sang the love theme from Romeo & Juliet, Get Ready and You're My Everything in acapella," Damon remembers. "Otis sat astride in a chair, held his head in his hand and kept himself turned away from me. Here was someone who I admired and respected for so long and it upset me that he wouldn't look at me which made me sing all the more."

Although Otis may not have been making eye contact he was definitely listening. "The next day Otis called me and invited me to their show that evening to watch from backstage. As they were coming off stage Melvin (Franklin) looked at me and said, "Get ready. Learn this stuff...now." So it was at that moment when Damon became a Temptation. He was now part of the very group that he had idolized for many years.

"I was 21 at the time," Damon recalls. "I was in awe. I was in shock. I was all over the place with how I was feeling."

The first song Damon sang as a Temptation was Get Ready which was usually sung at the beginning of every show. It was their anthem. "It was a very intimidating time for me," said Damon. "Audiences seemed to accept me. I did sound like Eddie. Because I was now in the group I could contribute to their longevity."

There did come a time when Damon was able to meet his hero, Eddie Kendricks face to face. "It was a good experience and yet bizarre too because to me he had been so far out of reach and now here we were having rapport. I'm still a fan but in a more significant way I am part of his legacy," said

Damon. "I told him that he should have never left the group because he took something away from me as a fan."

When asked what Eddie's reaction was to those comments Damon replied, "Eddie seemed conflicted and confused because I think he expected me to be some cocky, defiant guy who took his place but when he saw that I didn't act that way he wasn't sure what to say."

Damon took the stage as a Temptation for five years during the early 70s. He saw them through nine gold records, three Grammy Awards and two American Music Awards. Eventually his time with them would come to an end.

Taking his time to sort through the various rumors why he was let go is still unclear. "Rumors had circulated that I did not handle success well, that I was cocky, that I had insulted Motown founder and producer Berry Gordy with something I said," Damon said quietly. "Those things aren't true. Jealousy and fear can be intimidating. After I left the group I was still asked by Motown to stay on as a solo artist. At the time I didn't think it was in my best interest to do that. I was too overwhelmed."

Within eight months after being let go from what he thought was a dream come true Damon also lost his father to prostate cancer. Two significant events in less than a year that challenged Damon's inner strength and determination. He went back to school and earned a degree. During the years that followed his strength would be tested yet again.

On January 21, 1998 Damon was diagnosed with prostate cancer and told that he was actually in an advanced stage and little time was left. Now over ten years later Damon is a survivor and doing well. "Having cancer changed my perspective of how I look at things," Damon said. "When you are put through a task knowledge will come. I started getting an association with people who were of more substance. Going through treatment really opened my eyes to more things around me. So far I am responding well to treatment."

Damon is currently working on a book about his life experiences before, during and after The Temptations. He is currently writing songs, enjoys performing and has created The Temptations Tribute music group which is his way



Damon with Grammy Award for "Papa Was A Rolling Stone"

Photo: Courtesy of Damon Harris

of paying honor and homage to those that have come before. Eddie Kendricks, the man Damon admired for so long passed away in 1992 from cancer. Other original members of The Temptations who have also passed away are David Ruffin, Melvin Franklin, and Paul Williams. Original member Otis Williams is still with us. So this is an ultimate tribute to the Motown group that Damon embraced for many years.

When asked what life lessons were learned through the years of what he has gone through Damon thoughtfully said, "Be careful of whom you choose to idolize and know in your heart that they are worthy guides and examples to follow. Sometimes we see what is superficially intact but it isn't that way legitimately. There are other influential role models that are more tangible like parents, college professors, Leonard Bernstein, Martin Luther King...these people had a sense of order. My ambition and desire is to finish the things I want to do. Living my life is my ambition."

For more information on Damon's music and other projects: www.damonharris.net

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