

THE TEMPTATIONS

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MELVIN FRANKLIN

The bass vocalist's slot in the Temptations has never needed a fill-in, which is a good thing for some poor, unnamed singer out there. After all, who could ever replace Melvin Franklin? Melvin is almost universally acclaimed as the world's best bass singer. He's armed with what must be one of the lowest voices ever recorded and, unlike many fledgling bass singers, the ability to make his voice blend in with a group harmony. Although Melvin and his voice are identified closely with the Tempts, other acts needing a fill-in have called on Melvin from time to time. Most recent examples include Rick James and songstress Randy Crawford.

Melvin's voice hasn't always brought him acclaim, though. He was born, as he likes to put it, "twelve pounds of bass and brown" in Montgomery, Alabama. He says that as an infant his voice was so hoarse that older people couldn't stand to hear him cry. Later, of course, came school years and the eternal cruelty of other kids. But Melvin apparently weathered that trial well.

"At the time," he says, "it was trouble. It wasn't fun to be froggy. But I had a rich, full Childhood. I don't wanna give the impression I feel sorry about it."

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By the time Melvin's family moved to Detroit, he was no longer "froggy". He was a bass singer in the middle of what was then mecca for street corner singing groups. Although he participated in a few of those groups, Melvin was also very careful about whom he associated with.

That's why he gave Otis Williams such a hard time on that fateful day Otis found himself in emergency need of a bass singer for a recording session set for that afternoon. "I had heard about Melvin," Otis recalls, "and I went lookin'. I ran across him on Woodrow Wilson and Seward Streets. He thought I was a gang member 'cause at the time we wore the process 'dos and the leather jackets and all that, but I wasn't in no gang."

Melvin didn't know that at the time. Everytime Otis would cross the street to talk to him, a frightened Melvin would dart over to the other side. He'd just been accosted by a gang a few days before, he says, "and that other beating was still fresh."

I had to holler," recalls Otis, "and say, 'Hey man, I wanna talk.'" They finally did talk and, after Otis has secured Melvin's mother's permission, they recorded together. Otis and Melvin, often described as the brains and the heart of the Temptations, have been a team ever since.

Offstage these days, Melvin enjoys the company of a special lady and is interested in sports and athletics.