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# SKYSCRAPER

## **DON'T FORGET THE MOTORCITY**

3DVD – MVD Visual

What should be put up front is that this three-disc package does not include archival video footage or live performances from Motown Records' golden era, and with a handful of exceptions does not include the labels' iconic hit songs from the sixties. In the late eighties, British DJ and music producer Ian Levine, who as a teenager collected every single British Motown release, began documenting and re-recording songs in Detroit and Los Angeles with artists who had been signed to Motown Records in the sixties and seventies. He also produced new material by many of them – all in all, Levine recorded over 850 songs by former Motown artists, and 100 videos made from these are found herein. Most of the charmingly or humorously low-budget videos – recorded on stages, in clubs, recording studios, and living rooms – look and sound distinctly 1989-1990. The good thing about this set is it gives exposure to lesser-known soul artists

and great African-American vocal stylists, such as Bobby Taylor (whose 1968 song "Does Your Mama Know About Me" is a standout here, presenting a sharp critique of racism; oddly enough, it was co-written by Tommy Chong, then guitarist of Taylor's band The Vancouvers). Other standouts include Frances Nero, Sidney Barnes (whose "I Hurt on the Other Side" is reminiscent of The Four Tops), Bettye Lavette, and Kim Weston. Another standout is the quirky video for Richard "Popcorn" Wylie's bewitching "Rosemary What Happened," shot in his living room. Versions of Motown hitmakers The Supremes, The Miracles, Martha Reeves and The Vandellas, and The Marvelettes are present, along with Mary Wilson, Edwin Starr, and The Supremes' Mary Wells. Absent, of course, are The Temptations, The Four Tops, Diana Ross, Smokey Robinson, et cetera. The downside is that the backing tracks are usually very dated – peppy drum machines,

sequencers, and synthesizers abound. You might suffer a flashback to the Top 40 radio days of Rick Astley, Londonbeat, and Bananarama, the latter two of which Levine actually did produce, along with a bunch of U.K. boy bands including Take That. One of the great things about classic Motown is the warmth of the Detroit house studio musicians, dubbed The Funk Brothers, previously documented in the film *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*; that groove is sorely missed. While many of the new tracks are none too great, they still showcase strong singers and, fortunately, a bunch of the re-recordings of early songs remain true to the classic Motown sound. Frankly, you have to wade through a good deal of dross, but there are gems here. *Don't Forget the Motor City* induces a desire to seek out original recordings by the lesser-known standouts, and will be appreciated by hardcore Motown devotees and historians of American soul and R&B music. (Michael Snyder)

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