

Maurice King

Biography:



Maurice King was born in 1911 in the Mississippi Delta. A talented musician and a good student, he moved to Nashville, Tennessee, where he studied music at what is now Tennessee State University. He did not graduate, but he quickly began working full time as a musician in the Nashville area. In the late 1930s, King followed his wife and her family to Detroit, where he soon made a name for himself playing saxophone in bands.

In the 1940s, King served for a time as the director of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, an all-girl Jazz band that toured the country. When group disbanded in 1949, he settled back home in Detroit.

His next gig was as the bandleader for the Flame Show Bar, which would become one of the most important venues for black entertainers during the 1950, hosting some of the most famous Jazz musicians of the era. It was at the Flame Show Bar that King first encountered Berry Gordy Jr., at the time a struggling songwriter. In 1963, Gordy hired King to join Motown Records.

Role at Motown Records:

King was the music director for Motown. He worked with Motown acts on various aspects of their performances. In many respects, he was a teacher who instructed the company's singers in the basics of music. King's biggest role was teaching singers to sound their best, which included teaching group members their individual parts. He described his tasks as follows: "I taught them how to phrase. I arranged their music; I arranged songs for them. I taught them how to blend. I collaborated with their choreographer, did a lot of their staging."

King was also on hand to fix any problems that came up with the musical arrangements as they were performed in the studio or in a live performance. When a lot of musicians were involved in a session, he would act as the conductor.

Motown artists remember King as tough and demanding, but effective. "He taught us the things that would help us to stay out here," recalled singer Gladys Knight.



Quotations:

“I tried to teach performers honesty, integrity, and sincerity in their approach to the business. If they learned that, then they learned a lot.”

“I was working with some of [Berry Gordy's] acts already and he explained it might be a lot easier if I joined his staff and worked regularly with all of the Motown acts. I liked the idea of an artist development department, and being able to have control of the musical end of it was quite an exciting aspect.”