

## Maxine Powell

### Biography:



Maxine Powell was born Maxine Blair in 1915 in Texarkana, Texas, and she was raised in Chicago by her aunt, who taught etiquette classes.

Powell worked as an actress and model in her youth, appearing with a company in Chicago called the Negro Drama League. From there, she went to school to become a manicurist and cosmetologist. She was also a model.

In the 1940s, Powell moved to Detroit, where in 1951, she opened the Maxine Powell Finishing and Modeling School. Her school acted as one of the first agencies in the region for African-American models. Among the schools' students

were members of the Gordy Family. It was Gwen Gordy who encouraged her brother Berry to hire Powell in 1964 as part of Motown's Artist Development Department. Powell's job would be to help the company's singers improve their public images. She closed her school and took the position, which she held until 1969.

### Role at Motown Records:

Powell was Motown's etiquette instructor. Her duties included running what has been called the "Motown Finishing School"—she taught the label's artists how to present themselves well. She would often say that she was training singers to appear at the White House and Buckingham Palace. Berry Gordy, the label's founder and president, said of Powell: "She was tough, but when she got through with [the artists], they were poised, professional and very thankful."

Singers at Motown were typically required to take classes from Powell for up to two hours a day whenever they were not on tour. During class, they would learn about topics ranging from table manners to speaking skills to proper posture. She advised her pupils to take care in how they looked and acted: she told Marvin Gaye that he shouldn't close his eyes when he sang, and cautioned Diana Ross not to make faces while she performed.

Powell took on some other responsibilities at Motown. She occasionally went on tour with groups, acting as a chaperone. She also advised singers on matters of style, including wardrobe and makeup.



## **Quotations:**

“You are protruding the buttocks. Whenever you do a naughty step like the shake, add some class to it. Instead of shaking and acting tough, you should roll your buttocks under and keep smiling all the time.”

“Everybody walks, but I teach how to glide.”

“You're going to be trained to appear in number one places around the country, and even before the king and the queen.”

“I am a motivator and an image builder.”