

Cholly Atkins

Biography:



Cholly Atkins was born Charles Sylvan Atkinson in 1913 in Pratt City, Alabama, and raised in Buffalo, New York.

He started out in entertainment as a singer in Buffalo, but soon turned to dancing. He went to Hollywood for a few years, where he was an extra in films and a nightclub entertainer. He toured the Midwest in the 1930s, finally moving to New York in 1939, where he performed in Broadway shows. After serving in the military in the early 1940s, he became well known as part of the dancing duo Coles and Atkins. The two toured with major artists of the day, including jazz musicians Louis Armstrong and Count Basie.

During the 1950s, the popularity of the type of variety theater he worked in had begun to decline. "Tap dancing began to fade out," he explained, and jobs were harder to come by. Atkins began providing dance instruction to vocal groups. He coached some of the best-known groups of the era, including the Cadillacs, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, and Little Anthony and the Imperials.

In 1965, the head of Motown Records, Berry Gordy, Jr., hired Atkins to help the company's acts develop a more sophisticated style on stage. Atkins held this position until 1971.

Role at Motown:

At Motown, Atkins was given the title "Choreographer-Director," and he worked in the Artist Development department. He taught singers how to dance and created routines for them, a process he called "vocal choreography." Many of his Motown students had little or no formal training in dance, and often, he had to worry as much about balancing the egos and personalities in a group as he did about helping the individual members learn to keep their balance.

Atkins' choreography style was distinctive. He trained groups to perform synchronized moves, which were sometimes borrowed from tap dance or jazz styles. His "vocal choreography" also sometimes involved acting out the lyrics of the song. When the Supremes sang the phrase "stop in the name of love," for example, they held out their hands as if stopping traffic.



Quotations:

“In ‘vocal choreography,’ you had to give a lot of considerations to the fact that you were working with singers, not dancers.”

“I would get a set of the lyrics and get the story line of what they were singing about. I made sure that we did things that corresponded with musical tracks along with the lyrics.”

“Motown hired me as an artist developer. I wanted to make a harmonious marriage between the singing and the dancing—the visual.”