



Spinning again

Legendary Detroit group is making music for a proposed comeback album

By Lynn Ford
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Five casually dressed guys surround a microphone in an Indianapolis recording studio, singing to this piece of metal as if it were a lover.

"Weeeeeee're gettin' this down to the letter . . . In love is where we're gonna staaaaaaay . . ."

They sway to the laid-back music playing through their headphones, trading glances and smiles. Their voices mesh beautifully. But to the man listening in an adjacent control room, they could sound even better.

"Bring it up, Billy," producer Allen "Turk" Burke Jr. tells one singer, looking through the window between the control room and the studio. "Get a little closer to the mike, Henry." Burke is producing a session for The Spinners.

The Spinners? Recording in Indianapolis?

Yes, the smooth-singing Detroit quintet that brought you *Mighty Love*, *I'll Be Around* and *Could it Be I'm Falling in Love?* is here for a week of sessions scheduled to end today. The veteran group is cutting "demos" -- studio lingo for demonstration tapes -- for a proposed comeback album.

Why did Billy Henderson, Henry Fambrough, Pervis Jackson, John Edwards and Bobbie Smith pick Indianapolis to begin what they hope will be a new chapter in their already hit-laden careers?

Henderson is an Indianapolis native with relatives here. So is Burke, The Spinners' longtime musical director. And Rodney Stepp, one of several producers for the Indianapolis sessions, once played keyboards in the group's touring band.

When Stepp found out The Spinners wanted to record again as part of their search for a new label, he offered the services of his 10-year-old production company. Indianapolis-based Brooks Street Music does commercial jingles for about 30 clients, ranging from Hardee's to The Children's Museum.

"We did some demos and Turk gave them to The Spinners," says Stepp, who can be heard on the long-out-of-print Spinners Live album from 1975. "Our attorneys got together and now we have a production deal - a chance for them to get back on the charts and for us to climb the ladder. It took a lot of prayer, but it finally happened."

The Spinners have been recording more than 30 years, including stints with Motown Records in the '60s and Atlantic from 1972-87 that produced several No. 1 hits.

Solid in the '70s

The Spinners was arguably America's top R&B vocal group of the early '70s, with hits like One of a Kind (Love Affair), The Rubberband Man, Love Don't Love Nobody and Then Came You, a duet with Dionne Warwick. But the group hasn't had a major hit since its 1980 Cupid/I've Loved You for a Long Time disco medley.

Now, The Spinners want to do battle on the charts with '90s upstarts like Boyz II Men and Jodeci.

"We wouldn't be here if we didn't think the material was up to par," says Henderson, who lived here until his parents moved to Detroit when he was 5. "When we finish, we'll make copies and go for the best offer."

A visit to the sessions at near-Downtown Studio 815 provides an interesting look at how singers, musicians and producers create the songs you hear on the radio. Unlike sessions 20 years ago in which singers and musicians performed simultaneously, today's hits are often done in portions.

The Spinners do a verse here, a chorus there. Background vocals are done, then the leads - all sung over instrumental tracks recorded before the group arrived from Detroit late last week

The Spinners will spend several hours on the chorus of Better and Better, one of seven songs written by Stepp and fellow Indianapolis natives Eric Fleming, James Walker Jr. and Bill Simmons, a former member of Midnight Star.

They'll sing the same lines over and over. If Burke or Stepp hear a sour note, a missed word or even a hint of raspiness, they'll start over. Sometimes, they'll even stop in the middle of a take.

All aglitter

Group members drift in for the Monday session about 1:30 p.m., nine hours after a 16-hour session that had ended at 4 a.m. Several wear the trappings of past glory - caps and sweatshirts with the glittering SPINNERS logo from a 1977 Atlantic album.

They gather in the control room, jammed with a mixing console, nine electric pianos and synthesizers, several CD players and digital audio tape recorders.

Stepp plays the track for Better and Better, which sounds something like Boyz II Men's End of the Road. He passes out lyric sheets to The Spinners, Burke and Walker, who'll pitch in on background vocals.

Stepp turns from the mixing console, a sea of knobs, buttons and lights, and flips on an electric piano. He plays the bass, baritone and tenor parts, helping the singers find their notes. He even drills them on how to pronounce certain words: "gettin' " rather than "getting," "betTER," rather than "better."

Then, he sends Edwards, Fambrough, Henderson, Smith and Walker to the studio, a soundproof room covered with black, foam-like padding. Jackson will add his bass voice later, so he goes outside to polish his car.

"WEEEEEEE're gettin' better and betTER . . . Our love gets stronger every daaaaaaay . . . "

So begins two hours of stops and starts, near-keepers and obvious failures that even make the singers laugh. When they finally break for lunch -- take-out from the local End Zone soul-food eatery -- the singers need a break.

"We're striving for perfection, but you go in realizing you're human," says lead-singer Edwards, who joined The Spinners after Phillippe "Soul" Wynne went solo in 1977, seven years before he died of a heart attack on a California stage. "I don't care if you're Pavarotti, you're going to make mistakes. That's why you have somebody on the other side of the glass saying: `That's good' and `That's bad.' "

Long days and nights

That somebody is the producer, a coach who tries to pull the best out of each performer. All in the name of creating music for record buyers to love.

"When you go into the studio, be prepared to stay all day and all night," Jackson says. "If you're lucky enough to finish one song, it's a good day. If you finish two, it's a better day."

The Spinners won't get to the lead vocals for Better and Better during the Monday session. But they will start on Given a Second Chance, a ballad with the lush feel of the group's Thom Bell-produced '70s hits.

In between, they pause to joke, stretch and reminisce. They even watch a silent video shot by Henderson's cousin, Norman Smith of Indianapolis, at a 1966 Motown Records picnic in Canada. They marvel at a teen-aged Stevie Wonder and a Twiggy-like Diana Ross. They chuckle at Motown boss Berry Gordy in shades and gaze in awe at the late Florence Ballard of The Supremes and Tammi Terrell.

"It was 90 degrees that day and The Isley Brothers were runnin' around in suits and ties," Smith recalls, sending the packed control room into laughter.

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It's early evening. Time to do background vocals for Given a Second Chance. For the second night in a row, The Spinners will sing into the wee hours.

One more time . . .

First, they must rehearse.

". . . yooooooooo aaaaaaare," they sing, ending a line in five-part harmony.

"Damn!" Edwards says. "I've got to hold that note longer. Let's do it again."

". . . yooooooooo aaaaaaare."

Stepp's eyes light up.

"That sounds good! Angelic! One more time! Sing! One, two, three. . . "

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