

## **The Four Seasons at Motown—Part 1**

**“(Don’t you know? Ahhhhhh-hhhh-hhhh) Today that world is over. (Don’t you know? Ahhhhhh-hhhh-hhhh) You cannot live it over.(Baby, live it over) You’ve hit the bottom-side you nearly died. A chosen few can get to tomorrow, beg or borrow. You wrote the song, now you’ve got to sing along.”**

### **A New Beginning ( B.Crewe – B.Gaudio) opening lyric to ‘Chameleon’ album (1972)**

One period of the Four Seasons career that remains little known is the Mowest/Motown contract and on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of them signing, we are only just beginning to understand the story of their recordings at the label(s). Now that we have the Universal Motown Tape index we can see the work that they did (at least the info listed, although this is likely to be incomplete) and be amazed that this period generated at least 45 recordings that have not been released and in many cases not been heard since, as no research and restoration project has been launched.

So what do we really know about how the Four Seasons came to sign with this Motown label?.



The fact is that the group by this time (1971) had literally fallen apart with Tommy DeVito’s departure at the end of their contract at Philips and Bob Gaudio’s pending retirement from touring.(His last tour of the UK would be in autumn of 1971) Signed up musicians fulfilled the group’s gigs and Joe Long stage managed the shows and to some extent the identity of the group as their MC. But there would be a very good reason for employing the best musicians and finding a new direction and sound.

Berry Gordy the Motown President and owner was moving his operation to the West Coast and in 1971 he launched Mowest Records, which would be based in Hollywood. It is claimed that his original plan was that the Motown label would be superseded by Mowest Records once the move had been

completed. However, it soon became apparent that this new label would turn out to be the home for a number of white acts. The next step in the Four Seasons Partnership’s search for a future took place in late 1971 when Ewart Abner (ex-Vice President of the now defunct Vee-Jay label) who held an executive position at Motown and was a friend of Frankie Valli, heard that the group were looking for a label to record upon. A speedy phone call to the Motown Corporation President, Berry Gordy, resulted in the group signing with Tamla Motown in October 1971. They were the second white group ever to do so and were placed upon the newly formed Mowest label.

A recent article by Greame Thompson in the Guardian UK reveals the background to the MoWest label....”**If success was purely a question of aesthetics, then Mowest could have ruled the world. The label logo certainly deserved to be stuck to the centre of any number of hit records: a generous slice of bright blue Pacific framed by a golden sunset and the equally golden California sand, it promised fine times and good living. The reality of its brief tenure, however, proved less blissful.**

**The existence of Mowest, one of Motown's more obscure subsidiaries, is attributable to a very American impulse to head west and prospect for gold. By the early 70s, Motown supremo Berry Gordy was already inching his Hitsville operation from Detroit to California. Motown had run a Los Angeles office since 1963, while Gordy had been**

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[The Four Seasons line-up in 1970 for a BBC Top Of The Pops TV performance - right to left - Bob Grimm, Joe Long, Frankie Valli, Bob Gaudio]

living in the city since the late 60s. Mowest, a wholly west coast enterprise with its base in LA on Sunset & Vine and a studio in Romaine Street, was formed in 1971 as an expendable advance party for the final phase of Motown's westward creep.

"For Gordy it was a transitional thing," says Don Peake, a member of the

legendary Wrecking Crew group of LA session players, but you may be less familiar with his work in the multicultural seven-piece Odyssey, who released their only album on Mowest. "Mowest was their first arena to test the waters out there and foster talent in the area."

During the September tour of the UK the writing of much of the what was to become the Gaudio inspired 'Chameleon' album took place, as Bob Gaudio and Frankie Valli accepted Berry Gordy's commitment to work closely with them and bring back the success they had achieved in the 60's with a new sound. The deal signed with the label in the fall of 1971, following negotiations between Gordy and Valli himself, involved Gordy taking personal charge of guiding them back to the top, with his team of writers and producers, collectively known as The Corporation. (made up of Berry Gordy, Freddie Perren, Alphonzo Mizell and Deke Richards)

In November and December the group worked extensively in the studio on a supposed Frankie Valli solo album and a group effort. TCB Motown's monthly newsletter in January 1972 reported.... "The group has already finished recording an album with 15 tracks in all being cut at the Mowest studios in Los Angeles. It is thought that a single will be taken from these sessions". Now we can see that the Valli solo tracks were Motown Classics which Mowest's producers (allocated to the label by Berry Gordy) Al Cleveland, Jerry Marcellino, Mel Larson and Hal Davis produced.

Al Cleveland has a long and distinguished writing career, initially for New York artists on the Wand/Sceptre labels such as [Dionne Warwick](#)(e) and [Tommy Hunt](#), as well as [Gene Pitney](#) before moving to Motown, where he provided songs for Smokey Robinson & [The Miracles](#), the [Marvelettes](#), [David Ruffin](#), the [Four Tops](#) and [Chuck Jackson](#) before hitting the big time with a co-authorship of Marvin Gaye's "What's Goin' On?" and "Save the Children."

Jerry Marcellino and Mel Larson had worked with the Jackson 5 and would have big hits with 12 year old Michael on "Rockin' Robin" and "Little Bitty Pretty One" during 1972.

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What we can now see is that the still unreleased song ‘My Heart Cries Out To You’(Tape P2060/P2082) was co-produced by Marcellino and Larson as a potential single. Steve Bailey the USA fan club President managed to get into the sessions that finished the song. He wrote on a newsletter at the time....” *Frankie had already done lead vocal and musical tracks were finished. Joe(Long) and Demitri (Callas) with Mel Larsen did background tracks and then Frankie did some doubling and back-grounds. It is a fantastic song. Maybe the new single. I sure hope so.*” ‘Lovewell’ (Tape P2111) was also mentioned re this session.

Frankie Valli also recorded the **The Four Tops ‘Baby I Need Your Loving’** with the same producers and had Al Cleveland producing the Smokey Robinson song (see also Mary Wells and The Temptations), **‘What Love Has Joined Together’** (Tape P2079) plus the Marvin Gaye song he co-wrote **‘Save The Children’**(Tape P2079). Also Hal Davis recorded a stylish up tempo version of **‘Just Look What You Have Done’** (the Brenda Holloway classic) which was released as a promo Motown PR-10 (12") in Oct 1975 and was included on the **‘Inside You’** albums trawl back through the master tapes that year.

Bob Gaudio had in 1971 also signed a contract with Motown as song writer/producer and although he was no longer touring with the group, he remained their producer. His songs for the groups sessions Valli described as a **‘concept album’**, but that was after it was complete. Gaudio says he was just writing constantly as ideas came into his head and he was not thinking in terms of a hit song. The concept came after, when he listened to the recordings and he heard **‘colours changing constantly’**. The opening song **‘A New Beginning’** was in fact a year and a half old and had been penned with Bob Crewe before he and Gaudio had a major fallout. Gaudio at the time said that this was one of the **‘better things’** he and Crewe had written together. But being a ballad it was not thought strong enough for single release by a group with a reputation for up-tempo songs.

The **‘Chameleon’** LP [Mowest 108], which included the aptly titled **‘A New Beginning’** as the first track was a breathtaking example of West Coast pop of the early Seventies - to many an unusual excursion for the group who for so many years were the sound of New York. The album, which everyone could see had a conceptual feel, received massive critical acclaim from the music press - although artistically and musically brilliant, record buyers would need time to adjust to this



sound and the promotional budgets would not accept that. When tracks like “A New Beginning” were performed in concert the fans had become so locked into the oldies style that they failed to appreciate the new direction, destroying the group’s belief in the new sound. The album Bob Gaudio said was based on a fairly **‘legit’** production approach with heavy rhythms, bass and drums, and full orchestrations using Charlie Calello, Dave Blumberg and

Joe Scott as arrangers. The album was held up by technical problems at the new studio. Gaudio worked tirelessly getting the sound right.(eg De-essing Valli’s voice)

**‘Love Isn’t Here/Poor Fool’** Mowest 5011F (2-72) was the first release from the album and Mowest just didn’t have the management to promote the single or the subsequent album. They did-

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n't have the personnel to get the radio promotion and couldn't 'sell' the new sound (it just wasn't a Motown sound). Gaudio said that “ **Motown can't go on living with the same sound...they have to diversify**” in a 1972 interview. “**There does come a point where even the Four Seasons (60s) sound gets to be a drag, after a while....after 42 hits... I don't want to hear it no more...there are a lot of people who have to feel that way**”, he comments. Ironically, how times and attitudes change and today 40 years on that sound is making him millions in 5 shows world wide via Jersey Boys whilst his Mowest/Motown material remains largely unheard.

Why Motown failed to see the potential of ‘**The Night**’ remains a mystery. A single was scheduled for release on Mowest during 1972 and was allocated to Mowest 5025 but only appeared as a white label promotional single in the USA. People commented at the time that the whole album just didn't sound like a Four Seasons album. As Gaudio responded...‘**if it doesn't sound like the Four Seasons, then who does it sound like. The harmonies are the same but there may be less of them and Frankie Valli is still Frankie Valli. He has his own sound. Certain companies can't sell certain type products and 'Love Isn't Here' was one they just weren't ready for. But it has been a slow building process at Mowest and they have to get into the 'white' market because it is awfully big and they are trying desperately.**”

Several songs not produced by Gaudio didn't make the album from Tapes P2105, P2110,P 2111 and 2113 including **Oh Girl, Everything Is Gonna Be Alright(B.Moss), What It Is(Whitfield-Strong), Girl, Don't Take Your Love From Me(W.Hutch), Love Well, Loving You-That's My Thing, That's All I Want From You, Wigs and Lashes( A Miracles album track), Time Will Tell** and an alternative fast version of Gaudio's production‘**You're A Song**’ . All ended up staying in the vaults as Gaudio concentrated on his own songs with Crewe, Ruzika and with wife Brit who had been separated from Gaudio for some 18 months before their reconciliation in 1972. In March, the Seasons long time writer and producer Bob Gaudio had retired from the group and was replaced by the 20 year old Clay Jordan from LA . He began working as a Motown producer with Diana Ross, Michael Jackson and Martin and Finley.

Not prepared to leave it just to Bob Gaudio, Berry Gordy continued to try to find success for Valli with other producers. Willie Hutch with ‘**Thank You**’ in early 1972 and a Hal Davis session resulted in a master tape (P2134) which included the unreleased **Where Love Ends, I'll Make It Up To You** and [Stop, Look And Listen \(To Your Heart\)](#) which would be a Diana Ross-Marvin Gaye release later in 1973.

The Corporation followed up by writing ‘**Walk On, Don't Look Back**’ (Tape P2205), specifically for Valli's high pitched vocal style. This was after release of the album ‘**Chameleon**’ in May 72 had created little market impact. The record, a classic case of deja vu, had everything a Four Seasons hit from eight years earlier had. Unfortunately, this was 1972, sounds had changed and already Gordy was starting to get sidelined with Diana Ross' movie career. ‘**Walk On, Don't Look Back**’ finally saw release in the USA on Mowest 5026 during August 1972(b/w /**Sun Country**). Unfortunately, there weren't enough Four Seasons fans of this 60s sounding record in 1972.....or more importantly, hearing this song on radio...to buy it in enough numbers. Gaudio remarked at the time that this release was as close to getting the Four Seasons today to do The Four Seasons back in the 60s as they could get. But personally **HE** couldn't re-visit the ‘**old style**’

One other single was scheduled for release on Mowest during 1972 –‘**The Night**’; was allocated to Mowest 5025 but only appeared as a white label promotional single in the USA. Sessions by Valli and/or the group with Hal Davis resulted in **Torn Between Two Lovers** (which would become a hit for Mary MacGregor in 1976) and **Thank You For Yesterday** both remaining unreleased. (Tape P2203). Amongst all the personnel changes efforts were made to resurrect the groups career

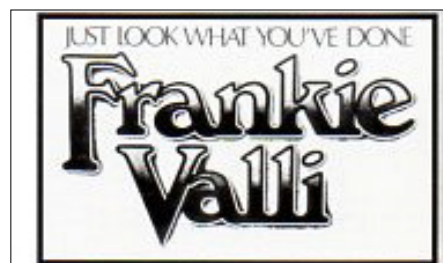
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as 1973 opened. Tracks still in the vault from these sessions include **I Will Love You Like A Man (P2225)**, **After I'm Gone**, **Time Will Tell (P2206)**, **[Include Me In Your Life \(recorded by Marvin and Diana\)](#)** and **Point Of No Return (P2304)**

But although Bob Gaudio stated that he felt the relationship with Motown was **“good and really together”** in 1972, Mowest didn't know what to promote as **“their sound”** and couldn't see merit in these Valli session tracks. Gaudio commented that Motown were only just realising their need to diversify and he quotes The Beatles as an example of how important this is in the way they **“spread themselves”** all over different music styles. He believed Motown were beginning to see their own potential with people like Marvin Gaye and The Jackson Five. But the market still identified a **‘Motown Sound’** (and still does today!). In retrospect we can see it has phases and evolved, but it remained **‘The Sound Of Young America’**

Two more singles were released in the UK **‘The Night/When The Morning Comes’**(MW3002 in 10/72) and **‘Walk on, Don't Look Back/Touch the Rainchild’** (MW3003 in 3/73) but without promotion and this would be the last we would see of the Mowest label. **‘The Night’** became an essential play (without achieving significant sales) at the Wigan Casino in Lancashire, England as the cult Northern Soul dance club scene began to gather momentum. By 1973 the releases seemed to have dried up and the group had virtually disintegrated working the oldies circuit with their sixties hits programme.

In retrospect the songs by a commercially faltering Frankie Valli & the Four Seasons constitute an unexpected purple patch in their and the history of Mowest according to the recent CD compilation **‘Our Lives Are Shaped By What We Love’ – The Mowest Story 1971-1973.** **‘Chameleon’** represents the peak of the labels creativity thanks to Bob Gaudio and in no small part to the **‘temporarily retired’** Bob Crewe.



As Greame Thompson asks.....**“If the music is this good, why was Mowest such a commercial failure? It lasted barely long enough to leave a trace, releasing just 10 albums and 40 singles, many of which failed to make it beyond the promo stage. Its only hit was Tom Clay's terrible spoken-word rendition of [What the World Needs Now](#), the portentous oration intercut with socially provocative media reports.**

Many of Mowest's troubles stemmed from a fraught relationship with its parent label. **[Dave Pell](#)**, a celebrated jazz saxophonist, producer, record executive and former president of the Grammys, was hired by Gordy to be "in charge of all Mowest's music, production and signings". At least that was the theory. In reality, "Berry was involved in everything," Pell says. "He was a strong record man and I really liked him, but I fought him every day. He hired me to change things, then stood in my way. It was like, 'What the hell did you hire me for?'"

There was, feels Pell, little impetus from above to make Mowest work. Motown's marketing men and pluggers were constantly preoccupied with Marvin Gaye, or Stevie Wonder, or extending the Jackson Five's run of hits. By comparison, Pell's ragged roster of obscurities, in-house writing talent, future stars and familiar names fallen on hard times seemed less than essential. On the rare occasions when an act did show a glimmer of commercial promise, they were swiftly spirited off to the mother-ship. The Commodores released their first two Motown-related singles on Mowest. When the second reached the nursery slopes of the R&B chart, Motown snapped

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them up for further development. "We were auditioning acts for Motown," says Pell. "Of course that was happening. 'It's too good for Mowest.' I heard that a couple of times. I felt we were secondary to Motown people, we weren't on the first team."

The label's image was also problematic. Motown was changing, but it retained a powerful core identity, whereas one of the charms of Mowest's output was its lack of any unifying aesthetic. "It was eclectic, open format, multicultural, crossing all sorts of boundaries," says the Canadian DJ Kevin Howes, who compiled *Our Lives Are Shaped By What We Love*. "People want an identifiable style, and Mowest wasn't that bag, which may have been part of its downfall." Intrinsic to the aim of giving soul music a broader base was the idea of making the music a less overtly black proposition. This, too, alienated both audiences and artists. "Acts didn't really want to come with us because we didn't have the right image," says Pell. "And people weren't buying because they thought we'd made a vanilla Motown that didn't have the soul, the feeling, or anything else that was really Motown. Mowest didn't have an identity."

Perhaps that's why many musicians felt little personal investment in Mowest. Several were house songwriters and session players whose affiliations lay with Motown. Marilyn McLeod, who has written for Diana Ross, Marvin Gaye, the Four Tops and Anita Baker, released one Mowest single, [A Heart Is a House](#), as part of the Nu Page. "I wasn't signed up as a Mowest artist," she says. "I was signed up to Motown as a songwriter." Peake agrees: "I was a staff musician for Motown and I never really felt much of a distinction. While I was in Odyssey I was still making records in California with the Supremes and the Temptations."

Hamstrung by internal power struggles, identity confusion and a commercial profile somewhere south of low, Mowest lasted less than two years. By the time it folded in 1973, Pell had already gone. "I got fired for a story I won't tell," he says. "Gordy brought me into a room with 20 of his people and said: 'Here's what we're going to do, what do you think?' and I said, 'This stinks, it's a shitty way of doing things.' And I was gone, out of my office in five minutes.""

Bob Gaudio was aware of the 'casualties' of Berry Gordy's new regime in LA and the resentment some felt that long-standing Motown artists were no longer there. Bob Gaudio recognized that albums were the future and 'you couldn't just rely on top ten hits all the time' as he said, "albums are the thing that bring in really big, big money, and (in the past) they (Motown) never really took the time to make good albums.....they could win awards for some of the worst albums ever with B sides, C sides and even E sides on compilations". But he believed the current issues of singles and albums in 1972 "was incredible" and "not typically in a Motown groove". He quoted Michael Jackson's 'Ben' as an example.....and his attitude re the Four Seasons was uncompromising..... "What the Four Seasons were, is not what they are and I understand it's hard to accept but somewhere along the line they (the fans) need to stop putting down releases because they say...'It doesn't sound like the Four Seasons that I know'...well OK it doesn't but at some point they have to stop looking at it in that aspect....to open their ears and ask.....'Is it a good record?. Is it a hit record? Do I like the song?....forget it is The Four Seasons ....and that's a problem....but somewhere along the line it will break through because if you make 'good product for long enough' somewhere along the line somebody is gonna have to buy it...I really believe that."

Gaudio has always been and remains a seeker of 'commercial success' rather than being focused on 'artistic direction' although he always wrote solely from 'where his head was' at the time.

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He staunchly believed ‘**Chameleon**’ was **NOT** un-commercial when you look at the ‘**current charts**’ of late 72 as he was interviewed by UK Fan Club President Stuart Miller. He felt that the success of artists like Gilbert O’Sullivan with songs that are surprising hits showed what was possible... “**it was a commercial record....but if Frankie Valli sang it, would it be accepted?**”....he asked. Fans have to move on he correctly stated....and “**HE couldn’t remake ‘Sherry’!**”

But by the start of 1973 ‘**Chameleon**’ had failed to generate any success. (although ‘**The Night**’ thanks to the Northern Soul scene would gain a Top Ten position in the UK in 1975 and generate an LP release of some of the vault tracks mentioned above...proving Gaudio’s comment about ‘**good product**’ to be correct). But with Mowest in 1972 – “**the product was simply lost amongst the changing cultural tides and lack of promotional power**” as Kevin Howes aptly says in this new CD compilation of the label.

Graham Thompson concludes.....”**By 1973 Mowest had fulfilled its primary function of preparing the ground for Motown to make its permanent base in Los Angeles, which it did in 1973. In the end, Pell believes: "Motown didn't fit, out in California, I thought they were very uncomfortable." History largely backs him up, and yet had its adventurousness been enthusiastically harnessed and its output properly promoted, Mowest could well have mapped a viable route for Motown to follow. Several songs on Our Lives Are Shaped By What We Love predict the popular soul trends of the near future: the sleek, orchestrated shimmer of Philly, the polished sheen of disco. The new sounds, in fact, that by the mid-70s had made Motown seem increasingly irrelevant as it became over-reliant on a handful of waning big-hitters.**”

The vaults index reveals that there are at least two albums full of unreleased tracks from this period by Frankie Valli and The Four Seasons. A project of ‘**Valli Sings Motown**’ and ‘**The Chameleon Sessions**’ with alternative versions and unreleased tracks would we believe make a very sellable collectors CD release. All tracks characterized by Frankie Valli’s distinctive vocal style and the sleek sounds commented on above. Eventually they may see release.

Perhaps in the circumstances the Four Seasons didn’t have much of a chance at Mowest. Its internal management frailties are clear. But they were still signed to Motown and 1973 would see a return of one man who could perhaps save them By late 1972 Bob Crewe was negotiating a writing and production deal with Motown.

Casey Chameleon

**Next Time – Part 2: How Bob Crewe Saved Frankie Valli’s Solo Career—Thanks to George Ingram, Ken Charmer, Stuart Miller and Frank Rovello for information re this period.**

**THIS ARTICLE IS DEDICATED TO FORMER FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT OF THE FOUR SEASONS UK APPRECIATION SOCIETY – STUART MILLER**

Stuart sadly died in a motor cycle accident in Manchester in May 2011. He was 58, a father of 4 and a grandfather. [His contribution to our society is documented here](#). Stuart’s crowning glory’s were a bootleg vinyl album of rare Four Seasons recordings in 1971 and a comprehensive interview with Bob Gaudio in September 1972 which is, we believe is the most ‘**definitive**’ portrayal of Bob’s role with the group and enabled the writing of this article. Thanks Stuart, for giving us the inspiration to keep the stories and the music in our heart’s and ears. Sorry that you wont get to hear the ‘lost tracks’ mentioned above.