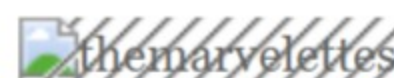


An Open Letter to “Please Mr. Postman”

APR 30, 2012 / WRITTEN BY RUSSELL NICHOLS

The Marvelettes



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Dear “Please Mr. Postman”,

I don’t know when you’ll get this letter. I don’t even know if I’ve got the right address. I’m writing you from Vietnam in 2012. Ironic, I know. But being here for the past few weeks got me thinking: If the war that happened here decades ago never happened, do you think you still would’ve been born?

Forgive me if this question catches you at a bad time. I know you’re dealing with way more pressing identity issues right now, what with the rise of the Internet and the state of the U.S. Postal Service. I’m not trying to make light of your current situation. I just wanted to make sure you hadn’t forgotten the impact of your half-century legacy.

Speaking of, how’d it feel to hit the big 5-0? Honestly, did you ever think you’d make it this far? Of course, I wasn’t around back when you came up in Inkster, Mich. But I wish I could’ve seen your first step in 1961 when The Marvelettes (known as The Marvels at the time) showed you off in front of Berry Gordy Jr. and Smokey Robinson at Tamla/Motown.

The label was just two years old. The girls were just teenagers, their whole lives ahead of them. But Gordy saw potential in you, even then. With Gladys Horton singing her heart out—hoping the postman brings a letter from her boyfriend, who’s overseas at war—the simple lyrics struck a chord. And with your catchy background vocals and the Funk Brothers handling instrumentation, including Marvin Gaye on drums, your star power couldn’t be denied: By December 1961, you became Motown’s first official number one hit.

Did you see this quote from Women of Motown by Susan Whital? “[Please Mr. Postman] was part of the first wave of records by black girl groups that crossed over and totally seduced the white record-buying public. If you were anywhere near a radio in 1961 and heard Please Mr. Postman, you were witnessing, perhaps for the first time, the pop-R&B, uptown-downtown, urban-suburban blend that became Motown’s trademark and was no less than revolutionary at the time. The Marvelettes, like many Motown groups of the time, erased racial lines and created a new sort of omniracial teenage voice.”

Your style laid the foundation for girl groups like The Supremes, The Ronettes and, later, En Vogue and Destiny’s Child. And everybody from The Beatles and The Carpenters to [Martin Scorsese](#), Whoopi Goldberg and Lil Wayne has wanted a piece of you. In 2008, [you popped up](#) on Wii Music by Nintendo. One year later, you got a full dubstep makeover, courtesy of UK-based producer Cragga.

I wouldn’t be surprised if this is your first time hearing this. I’m betting you’re not a big fan of technology. You probably don’t have a computer. Maybe a transistor radio, but definitely no cell phone. I’m sure you think Twitter is just a misspelling of [Twister](#). Trust me, I understand your Luddite stance. You were born out of America’s “first televised war,” and ever since then, you’ve been in a lopsided battle against the Information Age. The Internet boom exploded in your face.

The Web makes you feel insecure. Email, Skype, Google Voice, e-cards—these online communication tools make you feel obsolete. Through a cyber cafe window, you catch a glimpse of Facebook and you tell yourself you can’t compete. You’ve lost your status. You think nobody likes you. You’re not fast enough. You hear them say “snail mail” with such disdain, turning up their noses like you’re spoiled milk.

And I know it’s hard to stay positive if you read the papers. Since the start of the new millennium, technology has forced the U.S. Postal Service into a financial tailspin. To save billions of operating dollars, the Postal Service has cut thousands of jobs and closed hundreds of mail processing centers. As you probably know, this is [devastating to black communities](#). [Saturday deliveries may soon come to an end](#) and Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe predicted that within 15 years, mail service will drop to [three days a week](#).

This is not your fault. How could you have seen this coming? How would you know that in five decades, everything you stand for would start trembling under your feet? Your last name has even been seized by the P.C. police, who now prefer the gender-neutral term “mail carrier.” Again, this is not your fault.

It’s just a matter of timing. As Malcolm Gladwell noted in his 2008 bestseller Outliers, birth dates play a major role in one’s success. You’re living proof. But you’re from a bygone era. You shouldn’t take it personally if they say you sound irrelevant. It’s not you, it’s us—the multi-texting, mobile-browsing, one-click ordering generation that hates waiting. There is a self-absorbed anxiousness in your words that the digital crowd can relate to. But when you say stuff like “I’ve been standin’ here waitin’,” all we hear is static. We feel nauseous. We get DMV flashbacks. Because we live in an Immediacracy. We hear “patience” and we think sick people in hospitals. Delays are worse than death.

But I know that waiting is not what you’re really about. At the core, you represent hope. You believe in the grand idea that commitment knows no boundaries of space and time, that love rises above war. I don’t know if you’ve held onto that youthful romanticism over the years, but I thought about you when I heard about a new program in China.

In Beijing, where divorce rates have been skyrocketing, the [publicly run postal service is playing cupid](#). On their wedding days, newlyweds can write each other love letters and mail them to a special postal code. After seven years, the Beijing post office sends the letters to the couples, hoping to reignite flames that may have dimmed. Granted, if the couple has already split up, the mail might magically turn into confetti. But the point is, your classic brand of optimism still exists.

So whenever you get this, where ever you are, think on these things. You’re not obsolete, you’re nostalgia. In the [New Yorker](#), Adam Gopnik wrote, “The prime site of nostalgia is always whatever happened, or is thought to have happened, in the decade between forty and fifty years past.” This is your time.

Pay no mind to the naysayers who say you haven’t aged well. Remember where you came from. Remember the ones who made you, those country girls whose musical influence too often gets overshadowed. Don’t stress yourself with questions about why you haven’t been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. You’re more valuable than they know. You made history. And 50 years from now, after snail mail has gone extinct, you’ll still be around. You’re a trooper.

I hope to hear from you soon.

The sooner the better.

Russell