

performers

GLADYS

KNIGHT

AND

THE

PIPS

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Although they are best known for their great recordings at Motown in the late 1960s and the ballad hits they scored in the early '70s, Gladys Knight and the Pips, in fact, have had a career that encompasses the majority of rock history. Indeed, Knight is one of the few Hall of Famers who have continued to make hits from the '60s until the present day.

The key to this success is Gladys Knight's voice, one of the more remarkable instruments of the rock, soul and R&B eras. A perfect blend of grace and grit has allowed her to record such master-

pieces of balladry as "Neither One of Us (Wants to Be the First to Say Goodbye)," "If I Were Your Woman," "Midnight Train to Georgia" and "Every Beat of My Heart" while also making such funky dance numbers as the original "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," "The Nitty Gritty," "Friendship Train," "I've Got to Use My Imagination" and "Love Overboard."

Knight's nearly constant companions in her 40-year career have been the Pips: her brother Merald "Bubba" Knight, and her cousins William Guest and Edward Pat-



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In a glamorous early publicity photograph, circa 1961, when they were known as Gladys Knight and The Fabulous Pips: Merald "Bubba" Knight, Edward Patten, Gladys Knight and William Guest (from left)

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ten. Their support, both in the studio and onstage, has lent Knight's music much of its warmth and family feeling – rare qualities in any kind of popular music and even rarer in such strong rock and soul terms.

Knight made her public singing debut at Mount Mariah Baptist Church, in Atlanta – she was 4 years old. At 7, she won first prize on *Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour* TV show. She got together with her brother Merald, sister Brenda, and cousins James "Pip" Woods, William Guest and his sister Elenor to tour with Jackie Wilson and Sam Cooke in the late '50s. Following a failed 1957 Brunswick Records debut, Elenor and Brenda left to get married and were replaced by yet another cousin, Edward Patten, and Langston George. This was the lineup that scored the group's first hit single, 1961's "Every Beat of My Heart," a 9-year-old song by Hall of Famer Johnny Otis. Gladys Knight and the Pips scored a second Top 20 hit a year later with "Letter Full of Tears," another moody soul-pop love song. Shortly afterward, George left, and Gladys Knight and the Pips remained a quartet for the rest of their career.

The group's forte remained its stage show – so much so that Gladys and the Pips first came to Motown's attention when they guest-starred on a Motortown revue tour. By 1967, they had made it to No. 2 with the original "Grapevine" (a full year before Marvin Gaye's version), and in 1968 and 1969, respectively, kept up the pace with "The End of Our Road" and the first of their up-tempo hits, "The Nitty Gritty."

But it was Gladys Knight's ballad style – perfectly expressed in such hits as "If I Were Your Woman," "I Don't Want to Do Wrong" and "Neither One of Us" (all made from 1970 through 1973) – that began to build the group a following, both on radio and in soul-friendly supper clubs. The apex of this period came after the group had left Motown Records for New York's Buddha label. There, Gladys Knight and the Pips cut one of their definitive rocking numbers, "Imagination," co-written by Hall of Famer Gerry Goffin, and their greatest ballad, 1973's "Midnight Train to Georgia," a heartfelt summary of the blacks' exodus from the South and their return down-home that was then just beginning ("Midnight Train" was oddly anticipated by "Way Back Home," a 1971 Junior Walker and the All Stars hit, co-written by Gladys Knight, on the same theme). Knight and the Pips made a fine series of albums for Buddha, including their collaboration with Hall of Famer Curtis Mayfield on the soundtrack to *Claudine*,





as well as scoring several other hit singles.

The disco era proved no kinder to Knight and the Pips than to other R&B veterans, and legal problems in the late-'70s also kept Gladys Knight and the group from working together for a time. But once the lawsuit was settled in 1980, the quartet re-formed and signed with Columbia Records, which resulted in the hit "Save the Overtime (for Me)." Since then the group has continued to make solid records, such as the 1988 hit "Love Overboard," and tour successfully, while Gladys Knight has become a media celebrity in her own right, a familiar face on a TV show, *Charlie and Co.*, and talk shows. In 1986, she recorded the huge AIDS benefit hit "That's What Friends Are For" as part of a group with Dionne Warwick, Stevie Wonder and Elton John.

Gladys Knight and the Pips remain what they have been since the beginning: a living tribute to the strength of music and friendship, the power of love and devotion expressed through song and voice. In short, a personification of the very spirit of rock & roll. —Dave Marsh



**Gladys Knight and the Pips (left): Warmth and family feeling — rare qualities in such strong rock and soul terms**

**Above: '70s styling defined the quartet in their great Buddha Records years.**