

*Motown hit-makers are back in the groove
with 'First Wives Club' the musical*

Dozier and brothers Brian and Eddie Holland - famed simply as Holland-Dozier-Holland - created indelible, home-cooked hits on the ground floor of a two-story house in Detroit that label owner Berry Gordy, who lived upstairs with his family, dubbed Hitsville, USA. Now, with their sights set on Broadway as the songwriting team for a musical based on the Diane Keaton-Bette Midler-Goldie Hawn film 'The First Wives Club,' HDH is open to inspiration while eating out. They're at a Coco's in North Hollywood, across the street from the rehearsal studio where they've just finished playing demo recordings of numbers they've written for the show over the last half-year. It's a progress report for producers Paul Lambert and Jonas Neilson, theatrical novices whose backgrounds are in marketing and filmmaking. The two are betting that - 35 years after their last chart hits - these architects of what Gordy branded 'The Sound of Young America' still have what it takes to create enticing songs for middle-aged America. Especially middle-aged women. That target audience helped turn 1996's 'The First Wives Club' into a screen hit that grossed more than \$105 million in the United States. It's about a trio of divorced women, traded in for younger wives, whose quest for vengeance on their ex-husbands turns into something more uplifting, although the vengeance still is sweet. The same demographic, the producers reason, constitutes a potentially boffo box office base for a musical - if, unlike many new Broadway shows, it can be stocked with songs the audience walks out humming. Enter Holland-Dozier-Holland, 1990 inductees into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, whose tunes for the Supremes, the Four Tops and Martha & the Vandellas, among others, place them in such rare company as Lennon-McCartney and Leiber and Stoller when it comes to inspired teamwork that's almost guaranteed to elicit humming in listeners of a certain age.

Not resting on lyrics and laurels MERELY to consider the titles of some of the songwriters' 30-plus Top 20 hits - including '(Love Is Like a) Heat Wave,' 'Stop! In the Name of Love,' 'You Keep Me Hangin'

On,' 'How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved by You)' and 'Reach Out I'll Be There' - is to hear a symphony. But they're not milking the oldies now. 'The First Wives Club' is no hit-fueled 'jukebox musical,' such as 'Mamma Mia!' 'Jersey Boys' or 'Ain't No Mountain High Enough,' the stage monument to Motown that Gordy was going to write for L.A.'s Center Theatre Group - before it got indefinitely sidetracked when Gordy was said to be having trouble getting permission to include songs he needed but no longer owned. Dozier is so immersed in HDH's first new songs together since the 1980s that he barely notices when one of their nuggets, the Supremes' 'Where Did Our Love Go,' comes over the restaurant's sound system. 'I hear them all the time. I tune them out, mostly,' says the moon-faced middleman of the trio, who seems to be its live-wire nerve center, with lyricist Eddie Holland as a talkative but steady conceptualist and Brian Holland as the quiet one who joins Dozier in whipping up melodies and nailing down studio performances as a producer. But when the women at the table - Dozier's wife, Barbara, and Eddie Holland's assistant, Shirley Washington - start talking about a recent discussion of menopause on 'The Oprah Winfrey Show,' Dozier tunes right in and gets a sudden hot flash. 'But I don't mean menopause!' 'Let's remember that one,' he calls out, beckoning from across the long table to Eddie Holland, who nods his agreement. HDH already has written a rousingly funky first act anthem for 'The First Wives Club,' 'Ready to Make a Change,' in which the three divorcees become allies and begin to move on down the road to revenge and recovery. You can almost imagine the titters should one of the wives - maybe Hawn's character, whom the musical will recast as a pop chanteuse rather than a movie actress - sings Dozier's lunchtime inspiration: Yes, she's ready to make a change but not the change. The ability to hear what women say, and to transform it into songs women want to hear, helped drive their hits, HDH agree. They think it's a crucial qualification for their membership in the All Guys Club that is creating 'The First Wives Club.' Joining HDH is Broadway veteran Rupert Holmes, who

has written an initial treatment they're using as an outline for songwriting. Holmes, who is also a composer but will stick to scriptwriting on this project, wrote the book for the final Kander and Ebb musical, 'Curtains,' which ran at the Ahmanson Theatre before opening last month on Broadway. He won 1986 Tony Awards for his book and score for 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood.' What the men create, a woman will mold for the stage: Enlisted as director is Francesca Zambello, a leading opera director (including L.A. Opera's upcoming 'Porgy and Bess') who is scheduled to make her Broadway debut this year overseeing Disney's 'The Little Mermaid.' 'All our records were geared toward females, so it's a natural' writing a musical with a similar idea, Eddie Holland says. 'We grew up in a household of females that raised us and ruled the roost.' Dozier recalls learning on the job as a boy while sweeping the floor of the Detroit beauty shop owned by his grandmother, Melvaline Waters. 'Listening to all these women's stories and my grandmother giving them advice set me on my journey being the woman's confidante,' he says. Gordy was another good influence on that count, agree HDH - who say they're on good terms with their former boss after

decades of legal disputes over money, dating to 1968, when they left Motown to launch their Hot Wax and Invictus labels. Gordy 'always had a great respect for females,' Eddie Holland said. 'From early on, I noticed that he would listen to females in a way that other men would not.' Putting their pain on the page THE lyricist, whose duties in the Motown days included coaching the lead vocalists, while Dozier handled backup singers, says that his preparation for the musical included intense talks with divorced female friends. 'I've had calls as late as 12 or 1 o'clock, 'Let me give you some more information.' 'One late night conversation led him to change 'One Sweet Moment,' a lovelorn ballad about the intense pain women suffer after a breakup. Holland says his first attempt underestimated the trauma. 'I had, 'A few days have gone by ' ' One of his consultants told him he needed to be writing about long-haul hurting. 'She said, 'It's not about a few days. It's months of waking up at night in a sweat.' I changed the lyric around to fit what she described.' HDH has not worked so intensely together since 1983, when they returned briefly to Motown to produce half of an unsuccessful Four Tops album. The three Motown heroes owe their rebirth as a songwriting team to an effort to bring Chinese automobiles into the U.S. market. Lambert, lead producer of 'The First Wives Club,' is a marketing and advertising expert who's on the management team of Visionary Vehicles. Neilson was helping to produce a documentary on the import venture when the two met and decided to branch into showbiz together. After first interest-

ing Holland-Dozier-Holland in a televised tribute to their music, Lambert and Neilson started thinking about the potential of film franchises as Broadway musicals - especially if one could be done with memorable songs. Getting HDH on board was the door opener to acquiring theatrical rights to the film and the Olivia Goldsmith novel on which it was based and to recruiting Holmes. Contractually, the producers can use as many as five HDH oldies - a safety net Lambert says won't be needed given the strength of the new music they've tailored to the story. Over the summer, the producers plan to line up investors to float a projected budget of up to \$15 million. New musicals can require years of gestation, but the hope is for 'The First Wives Club' to have a shake-down run at a regional theater in 2008 and make it to Broadway by the end of 2009. Meanwhile, Lambert and Neilson are launching firstwivesworld.com, promoted as an information and social-networking site 'for a new generation of women going through all stages of divorce.' No chance of a marketing tie-in there.

Dozier says he's dreamed of being on Broadway since he first hit New York City as an aspiring teenage R&B singer (who soon went back to Detroit). He and the Holland brothers are taking in shows and grappling with weaving songs that tell a story and illuminate characters, instead of grabbing ears with discrete, 2 1/2 -minute jolts of pure, 45 rpm emotion. The assignment from the producers and Holmes includes writing at least three or four 'tent pole' numbers that will become emblazoned in theatergoers' minds and sell the show. That's asking a lot of three guys whose average age is 66 and who haven't had a hit since the Nixon administration. If there's any trepidation on the part of HDH, it isn't showing.

'Corny as it may sound, the muses have always been with us,' declares Dozier, who has kept his hand in the business over the last 20 years or so by writing songs here and there with Eric Clapton, Phil Collins, Simply Red and, more recently, with Airpushers, an offshoot of the L.A. hip-hop group Black Eyed Peas. But write a musical? Just the thing to get any rust out, says Eddie Holland, who with his brother runs Holland Group, a small Los Angeles record company. 'Broadway has been a whole new challenge to us. It gets harder and harder to find something that gets you up and going. This has added new life.'

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