

The Four Tops' Levi Stubbs dies at 72

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By Steve Jones and Jim Cheng,
USA TODAY

Never you mind if I

Don't tell strangers passing by

If I don't brag, if I don't brag or boast

Click my glass and say a toast

About my love for you

How it runs so deep and true

•*Still Water (Love)*

The soul of Levi Stubbs ran deep, and you could hear it in every note he sang. In a Motown stable renowned for its smooth crooners, Levi's rich baritone was raw, passionate and distinctive.

And while the harmonious Four Tops exuded class and sophistication, their music also brimmed with emotion, thanks to him. Whether he was bemoaning "empty nights echo your name" on *Baby I Need Your Loving*, offering reassurance when "your world around is crumbling down" on *Reach Out I'll Be There*, or cooing sweetly to his "sugar pie, honey bunch" on *I*



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Reuters file photo

In 1997: Levi Stubbs during the unveiling of the band's star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.



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AP file photo

In 1966: Abdul Fakir, left, Levi Stubbs, Lawrence Payton and Renaldo Benson in the year of one of their biggest hits, *Reach Out I'll Be There*.

Hall of Fame in 1990.

Despite numerous offers for a solo career, Stubbs remained loyal and usually let other members do most of the talking in interviews. When Motown chief Berry Gordy offered Stubbs the role of Louis McKay (ultimately played by Billy Dee Williams) opposite Diana Ross as Billie Holiday in 1972's *Lady Sings the Blues*, Stubbs turned it down out of loyalty to his bandmates.

"He could have easily gone off on his own when the Four Tops were at their peak," Fakir, the lone survivor, told USA TODAY in 1997 before receiving the Rhythm & Blues Foundation's lifetime achievement award. "And I'm sure he could have gone and done great things for himself. It says a lot about the man because not too many guys would have withstood the pressures and stuck around to split it four ways."

Stubbs remained humble after years of accolades. On the few occasions when he did talk about himself, he was self-deprecating.

"Well, I'm rather loud and raw," Stubbs told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1994. "I don't really even have a style; I just come by the way I sing naturally. When I learn a song, I try to live it as best I can."

His few forays outside the group included voicing Aubrey II, the man-eating plant in the 1986 film *Little Shop of Horrors*, and Mother Brain in the 1989 TV cartoon *Captain N: The Game Master*. Stubbs' last public appearance with the Tops was the group's 50th anniversary concert in Detroit in July 2004.

Can't Help Myself, it had such feeling you never doubted that he meant it.

Stubbs, 72, who suffered a stroke in 2000 and had battled cancer since 1995, died Friday at his home in Detroit.

He was a rarity at a label where the lead singers of such legendary groups as The Supremes, The Miracles and The Vandellas had their names in lights. Stubbs steadfastly refused to distinguish himself from his three friends — Renaldo "Obie" Benson, Lawrence Payton and Abdul "Duke" Fakir — that he began singing with in high school in 1954. The group remained intact until Payton died in 1997; Benson died in 2005.

Together, they charted with more than 50 hits, and many of them, including *Bernadette*, *Standing in the Shadows of Love* and *Shake Me, Wake Me (When It's Over)*, are essential to the Motown canon. The group was inducted into the Rock and Roll