



From left: Michael Tierney, Toby Allen, Smokey Robinson, Phil Burton and Andrew Tierney are bringing the sounds of Motown to the Imperial Palace.

IT'S IN THEIR NATURE

Australia's Boy Band Sings the Music of Motown

by Megan Riggs

Who is Human Nature? The Australian pop/doo-wop group—brothers Andrew and Michael Tierney, Toby Allen and Phil Burton—have released eight albums since making their debut in 1996 with the album, *Telling Everybody*. And while the harmonious foursome gained popularity in Australia and Europe performing original pop songs, it was 2005's *Reach Out: The Motown Record*—a tribute to the music that originally influenced them—that started them on their path to meeting Motown legend Smokey Robinson, and ultimately, headlining in Las Vegas. The quartet stars in *Smokey Robinson Presents Australia's Human Nature, The Ultimate Celebration of Motown* at the Imperial Palace.

What's On: How did you choose the name *Human Nature*?

Andrew Tierney: When we started, we were really influenced by the groups of Motown, and we were 12 and 15 at the time. We called ourselves The 4 Trax, which was very similar to The Four Tops. When we finally got a record deal, we'd been together for five years, just singing together and doing live shows... we decided we needed our own name and a new identity. Mike, my brother, came up with the name *Human Nature*, which represents how we are—very natural—and it just fits us perfectly.

WO: How do four teenage boys in Australia develop an affinity for doo-wop and Motown?

T: I don't know. We were all in choirs; we did a lot of singing. There were band competitions around, and I was thinking, at the time, we should start a band, but because we didn't play instruments, I thought maybe a vocal group like the old style doo-wop groups. So that's how we started—we sang The Penguins' "Earth Angel." ... We started singing "Earth Angel" because that was the only song we knew. People told us, "You're great; you should start listening to Motown groups," and that's where we really cut our teeth on all the old Motown stuff and...we've been loving it ever since.

WO: How did you first meet Robinson?

T: We did tributes to Motown, which was such a huge success, we did a second and third record.

...On the third, we wanted to ask if some of the original superstars of Motown would sing with us. We asked Smokey and he agreed to sing with us and do a duet. So did The Temptations and Mary Wilson from The Supremes and Martha Reeves, as well. We wanted to do something really special for Smokey, so the day before, we worked out an a capella version of "Ooo Baby Baby." We sang it for him, and he blew us away—he said it was probably his favorite version he'd ever heard of that song. That's kind of where the friendship, the relationship, started. He came to Australia and did some shows with us and then we were talking together and came up with the idea of presenting us here in Las Vegas. So that's been our plan and our dream, and we've landed here at the Imperial Palace.

WO: What can you tell us about the show?

T: The songs are fabulous, and we certainly have

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our interpretations of the songs, but what we wanted to do with the show was capture the energy that the Motown revues had back in the '60s—the kind of relentless energy, dancing, lots of ballad moments, great choreography, great songs. The energy is infectious and by the end of the show, you're up on your feet.

WO: How did you work with Robinson to develop the show?

T: We had been together so long before we met Smokey that we had a firm idea of what we wanted to do. We just wanted to know that Smokey thought what we were doing with his music was respectable and something he would be proud of. He's a touchstone of how we represent ourselves and how we present this music to America because it means so much to everybody here and particularly to him.

WO: Do you have a favorite Motown song?

T: I've become very attached to "Ooo Baby Baby" because of the sentimental value it has now for us because it's how we met Smokey, and our version meant so much to him. And, I think, "Reach Out I'll Be There," is one of our best songs ever, whether you're a rock lover or you like ballads or soul. "Reach Out I'll Be There" just transcends everything, it's so powerful.

WO: What does each member bring to the group?

T: Musically, Toby has always been our bass singer...one of the most important things about putting together a group was the range, our vocal ranges, and Toby's always had this deep voice. He's the foundation of our sound; Phil and I take the middle parts. Mike, when we started, was a boy soprano, so he used to sing the high parts, but now he's stepped up and taken more of a lead

role, as well. Personality-wise, I'm more the straight-up leader of the group; Toby is relaxed; Mike has always been the "younger brother" because he's younger than the other three of us; Phil is the stubborn one—always wants it his way, which he doesn't get, but he likes to fight for it.

WO: But you need that, right, to keep a balance?

T: Most of our arguments are about creative things. Everyone wants the best for the show and the best things for the group, so it's good

to have those arguments every now and again. If everyone was, "Whatever," I don't think we'd be where we are.

WO: Why do you think doo-wop and Motown have stayed popular for so long?

T: I guess it just makes people feel good. It's not about a message; it's just an emotion. It's uplifting. Motown took that doo-wop route and added a soul tinge to it. I think that's the secret. It's such feel-good music you can't help but smile when you hear it or feel better once you've heard it. Everyone likes to feel good and be entertained and this music's perfect for it.

Smokey Robinson Presents Australia's Human Nature, The Ultimate Celebration of Motown | Sat.-Thur., 8 p.m. (dark Fri.) | \$49.95, \$59.95 VIP | Imperial Theater, Imperial Palace | 888-777-7664