

BY
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IN THIS AGE OF ALEXA AND SIRI, WHEN accessing information is usually as easy as shouting at your electronic device, it can be surprising to encounter a question with an elusive answer. This is doubly true of any topic related to Playboy's past, much of which has been thoroughly documented by fans, collectors and historians.

But ask Google about Playboy's one and only girl group, and you'll find just such a search-engine stumper. Although many of the specifics surrounding the group have been lost to time, the story of the Singing Playmates—one of lofty ambition, international scope and a bond that has lasted decades—is well worth telling.

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The Singing Playmates were formed in the late 1970s on the initiative of July 1977 Playmate Sondra Theodore. "It was her idea," says July 1981 Playmate Heidi Sorenson. "She was the lead in our group. And her voice was just out of this world."

The lineup changed over the years, but the core consisted of Theodore, Sorenson, Michele Drake (May 1979), Kelly Tough (October 1981) and Nicki Thomas (March 1977). Another figure central to the group was their producer, Vic Caesar, who looked and sounded like the radio disc jockey Wolfman Jack and was most famous for writing a Richard Nixon campaign song. (He also arranged the surprisingly famous theme to the Playboy pinball game.)

"He was like our den mother," says Tough. "We loved Vic

the Mansion's guesthouse, so Sorenson was able to hear every song they were working on. After they left for the day, she would go in and practice with their equipment.

"I was so determined to get into this group, you have no idea," says Sorenson. "I memorized everything. I learned all the harmonies. One day I talked Vic into letting me sing along during the rehearsal, and the rest is history." Determination was key: Rehearsals were five days a week, eight hours a day. "It was full-on. Everybody went into this 100 percent," she says.

Things got even more serious when famed dancer and choreographer Miriam Nelson was hired to polish up the act. Nelson, who passed away in 2018 at the age of 98, had collaborated with the biggest stars of the golden age of Hollywood, from Judy Garland to Doris Day. The practice space moved off Mansion grounds to a location on Sepulveda Boulevard.

"Hugh Hefner had converted a store into a rehearsal hall with a new dance floor, mirrors on the wall, a ballet barre and couches, chairs and a well-stocked refrigerator," Nelson wrote in her memoir *My Life Dancing With the Stars*. "It goes without saying these young women were beautiful and had gorgeous bodies, but their singing was fair and their dancing was fairer. I had my doubts about their abilities, but Mr. Hefner was paying terrific money."

"We got pretty strict," says Drake. "Miriam's job was to whip us into shape to become a Vegas act. We were very lucky to have her. She started us off in one-and-a-half-inch heels and got us

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because he pushed us, and he protected us too. I give him a lot of points for putting up with us, because we were a handful."

For several of the Playmates, getting into the group wasn't easy.

Drake had come out of the Los Angeles rock scene, where she was running around with members of the Knack and Joan Jett's former band the Runaways. The first time she auditioned for the Singing Playmates, she didn't make it. For her second try-out, she says, she brought along a little extra star power: Actor Dan Aykroyd escorted Drake in a limo to the Playboy Club. Still, she didn't make the cut. Determined to change her fate, Drake presented Theodore and Hefner with a tape of herself performing a song she'd written about an ex-boyfriend. "You wrote that?" she remembers Hef exclaiming. "You're in!"

Sorenson's first audition didn't go well either, and she initially wasn't chosen for the group—"probably because I was too self-conscious," she speculated in the story that accompanied her Playmate pictorial. At the time, she resided at the Playboy Mansion ("I think I have one of the records for living there the longest, actually," she says today), a situation she decided to turn to her advantage. The Singing Playmates rehearsed inside

up to two-and-a-half- to three-inch heels. She was a true pro. She knew what she was doing."

One day Hef swung by the practice space, unannounced, to see how the group was coming along. "The girls really put on a show for him," Nelson wrote. "They had such energy that for the first time, I could see this act was going to work just fine."

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The Singing Playmates got a taste of performing live with appearances at small clubs around L.A., billed under a different name so they could get some more or less anonymous practice time under their belt. "It was really funny," says Tough. "We would show up to a small venue in a big black limousine. When we were onstage, people were standing right at our feet. All these guys would be looking up at us while we were singing, like, 'Who are these broads?'"

By this time they had honed a highly choreographed song-and-dance routine that included a tune the popular soul singer Barry White had written, called "I'm So Glad That I'm a Woman." The set consisted mostly of medleys to which they could match their costumes: standards performed in top hats and tails; country songs in tight pants, vests and cowboy boots. Sometimes the