

SWV has solidified themselves as the architects of modern R&B. The sound, and aesthetic that they gave the world laid the foundation for musicians to come. They are one of the best-selling girl groups of all time, selling 30 million records worldwide and 2023 marks the 30th year anniversary of the release of their seminal debut album, the three times platinum, *It's About Time*.

It all began with Leanne Lyon's vision of starting a girl group. Born and raised in the "Boogie Down" Bronx, Leanne's upbringing was soundtracked by the birth of hip-hop, and her mother's blues records. Music was always a meaningful part of her life. Inspired by watching young women make it big on Star Search, Leanne came to her neighborhood friend, Cheryl, with the idea of starting a group. She knew that Cheryl was the person to approach because Cheryl's angelic voice had a reputation of its own.

Cheryl Gamble was born into the music industry. Her mother, Lady Tibba Gamble, was a famed background singer for legends like Josephine Baker, Luther Vandross, and Al Green. At just 11 months, Lady Tibba noticed that her baby girl had a ear for music and she did everything she could to cultivate it. Cheryl became a soloist in church as a very young girl, but a career in music wasn't her dream job. Known in the neighborhood as a kitchen hairstylist, Cheryl thought that cosmetology school would be a better path. Hair, fashion, makeup, and of course nails, was always an important part of her aesthetic. But when her good friend Leanne approached her with the idea of forming a girl group, with Cheryl as the lead, she knew it was time to step into her true destiny.

Miles away in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, Tamara Johnson was dealing with the devastating loss of both of her parents. Despite these tragic tribulations, Tamara was known in her neighborhood as the model-esq stunner with a beautifully bubbly personality to boot. She grew up with a love of music, joining choir in grade school, so when Cheryl's childhood friend Amy Gregory approached Tamara about joining a girl group she jumped at the opportunity. Tamara, Leanne, and Cheryl's unique blend created Sisters With Voices. SWV. Now known as Lelee, Coko, and Taj, their dream of a successful girl group was finally coming to fruition.

SWV spent the early 1990s crafting the perfect demo, practicing dance moves, and creating their signature sound. It all paid off when in 1991 they signed a record deal with RCA. From 1991 to late 1992 SWV recorded what would soon be known as one of the greatest R&B albums ever, *It's About Time*. In collaboration with their genius producer, Brian Morgan, SWV constructed a style that is still being referenced and sampled decades later. Their debut single, *Right Here*, peaked at number 13 on the Hot R&B singles chart. It was later remixed with Michael Jackson's *Human Nature*, which spent seven weeks at the top spot on the Hot R&B singles chart, and was certified platinum. It is still referred to as one of the best remixes of all time. Their second single, *I'm So Into You*, became their first top ten hit, peaking at number 6 on the Hot 100 Billboard chart.

But it was SWV's third single that catapulted them into the stratosphere. *Weak*, released in April of 1993, was the group's first number 1 hit. It spent two weeks on Billboard's Hot 100, selling

over a million copies in the U.S. Billboard named it one of the best girl group songs of all time. It has been covered by world renowned artists like JoJo, and Kanye West's Sunday Service and is regarded as a classic r&b song of it's era.

*It's About Time* sold 3 million copies world wide. It produced beloved singles like *Downtown* and *You're Always On My Mind*. It contained 5 songs that charted top 10 on the R&B chart and 3 songs that charted top 10 on the Billboard Hot 100. The album earned a Grammy nomination, American Music Award, Source Award, Children's Choice Award, BET's "Best of Video Soul Award, and 11 Billboard Music Award nominations.

SWV's follow up albums *New Beginning*, and *Release Some Tension*, solidified their status as R&B legends. *You're The One* from *New Beginning* topped the Billboard Hot R&B singles chart and peaked on the Hot 100 chart at number 5, making it SWV's fourth top ten single. It sold just shy of a million copies and was certified Gold. *Release Some Tension* was ahead of it's time with several high profile rap collaborations from Snoop Dogg, Lil Kim, Missy Elliott, and Diddy. The album produced several fan favorite hits like *Can We*, and *Rain*.

*Rain* was a return to form for the group and a reunion with the producer who helped to create the SWV sound, Brian Morgan. It peaked at number 7 on the Hot R&B Singles Chart and number 25 on the Billboard Hot 100. *Rain* has proven to be one of SWV's signature songs. It was sampled in Chingy's 2006 hit song *Pullin Me Back*, and has recently gone viral on TikTok amongst young singers attempting to emulate Coko's gorgeous melodic verses.

During SWV's hiatus, each member of the group went on to achieve their own success. Coko was featured on Will Smith's Grammy-Award winning single *Men In Black*, and she released a solo album with RCA titled *Hot Coko*. Taj worked as a professional model and earned her Bachelor's degree. She later appeared on the hit television series *Survivor* and the reality tv show, *I Married A Baller* with her husband Eddie George. Lelee wrote and published her autobiography, *I Regret The Day I Lost My Virginity: You Are Not Your Past*, and was featured on the television show *Growing Up Hip Hop: Atlanta*.

Since SWV's reunification in 2011, they have released two albums to great acclaim, starred in immensely popular reality television series on WeTV and VH1, and they have toured around the world to sold out audiences. After their 2021 Verzuz battle against Xscape, SWV is more in demand now than ever. In March 2023, SWV & Xscape: Queens of R&B will premiere on Bravo. The ladies currently have a biopic about their lives in production slated for release later this year, as well as an upcoming tour.

Overall, SWV has had more than 30 million records world wide. The impact that they have left on R&B, and music as a whole, is massive and it is still growing.