

Tower of Power

Tower of Power is an American R&B and funk based band and horn section, originating in Oakland, California, that has been performing since 1968. There have been a number of lead vocalists, the best-known being Lenny Williams, who fronted the band between early 1973 and late 1974, the period of their greatest commercial success. They have had eight songs on the *Billboard* Hot 100; their highest-charting songs include "You're Still a Young Man", "So Very Hard to Go", "What Is Hip?", and "Don't Change Horses (in the Middle of a Stream)".

History

In the summer of 1968, tenor saxophonist/vocalist Emilio Castillo met Stephen "Doc" Kupka, who played baritone sax. Castillo had played in several bands, but Castillo's father told his son to "hire that guy" after a home audition.^[5] Within months the group, then known as **The Motowns**, began playing various gigs around Oakland and Berkeley, their soul sound appealing to both minority and counterculture listeners.

Castillo wanted to play Bill Graham's Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco, but he realized he would never get in with a name like The Motowns. The band agreed on Tower of Power and the name stuck.

By 1970, the now renamed Tower of Power—now including trumpet/arranger Greg Adams, first trumpet Mic Gillette, first saxophone Skip Mesquite, Francis "Rocco" Prestia on bass, Willie Fulton on guitar, and drummer David Garibaldi—signed a recording contract with Bill Graham's San Francisco Records and released their first album, *East Bay Grease*. Rufus Miller performed most of the lead vocals on this debut album. The group was first introduced to the San Francisco Bay area by radio station KSAN, which played a variety of artists such as Cold Blood, Eric Mercury, and Marvin Gaye.

Augmented by percussionist/conga/bongo player Brent Byars, Tower of Power was released from their San Francisco label contract and moved to Warner Bros. Records. Rick Stevens replaced Rufus Miller as lead singer on 1972's *Bump City*, which gave the band their first national exposure. This album included the hit single "You're Still a Young Man", which peaked at #29 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 and was Stevens' pinnacle vocal performance before leaving the band. Emilio Castillo, who co-wrote the tune with Stephen Kupka, told Songfacts that the song was based on a true story about him and a former girlfriend who was six years his senior.

Tower of Power, released in the spring of 1973, was the third album for the band. It featured soul singer Lenny Williams on lead vocals and Lenny Pickett on lead tenor saxophone. Bruce Conte replaced guitarist Willie Fulton and keyboardist Chester D. Thompson also joined the band during the recording of the album. The album spawned their most-successful single "So Very Hard to Go". Although the single peaked at #17 on the *Billboard* Hot 100,^[4] it landed in the Top 10 on the surveys of many West Coast Top 40 radio stations, hitting #1 on many of them. The album also charted two other singles on the *Billboard* Hot 100, "This Time It's Real" and "What Is Hip?"

1974's *Back to Oakland* spawned another hit, "Don't Change Horses (in the Middle of a Stream)", that reached #26 on the Billboard Hot 100, and "Time Will Tell", which charted at #69. The funk-jazz classic instrumental "Squib Cakes" also came from this album.

On *Urban Renewal* (1974), the band moved more toward funk than soul; however, they continued recording ballads as well. Williams left the band in late 1974, and was replaced as vocalist by Hubert Tubbs. Though the band remained popular, their days of chart radio airplay declined. During the late 1970s they briefly tried recording disco-sounding material.

Early 1994 saw another string of personnel changes in TOP: vocalist Brent Carter replaced Tom Bowes, drummer Herman Matthews replaced Russ McKinnon, and trumpeters Greg Adams and Lee Thornburg were replaced by Bill Churchville and Barry Danelian. Adams, a constant member since the band's formation, later stated about his departure simply that "I was at a point in my life where I needed to do something different. I was stagnating." [The new lineup released *Souled Out* in 1995. The following year, John Scarpulla replaced David Mann. In early 1997, former Starship guitarist Jeff Tamelier replaced Carmen Grillo. [After the release of *Rhythm & Business* that year, Danelien was replaced by Don Harris, who toured with the group from June to December 1997.

At the beginning of 1998, Matthews, Scarpulla and Harris were replaced by David Garibaldi (returning for his fourth tenure), Norbert Stachel and Jesse McGuire, respectively. The group recorded live album *Soul Vaccination* that October, after which Nick Milo left and Roger Smith took his place.

On January 12, 2017, long-time drummer David Garibaldi and bassist Marc Van Wageningen were hit by a train as they walked across tracks before a performance in Oakland. They both survived the accident. According to their manager, Jeremy Westby, they were both "responsive and being treated at a local hospital". They fully recovered and returned to the active lineup later that year.

Collaborations

Tower's horn section appeared on a number of other artists' recordings, including Otis Redding, Aaron Neville, Aerosmith, Bonnie Raitt, David Sanborn, Eric Clapton, Elton John, Labelle, Huey Lewis, Little Feat, Heart, Michelle Shocked, Paula Abdul, Santana and Stevie Nicks.

The horn section also recorded with bassist Larry Graham's Graham Central Station, Grateful Dead, Carlos Santana, Journey, Elkie Brooks, Cat Stevens (on his *Foreigner Suite*), Luis Miguel, Linda Lewis, R.A.D. (Rose Ann Dimalanta), Jermaine Jackson, John Lee Hooker, Helen Reddy, Rufus, Rod Stewart, Jefferson Starship, Mickey Hart, Heart, Damn Yankees, Frankie Valli, Spyro Gyra, KMFDM, Lyle Lovett, Poison, Phish (two songs on their album *Hoist*), Toto, Pharoahe Monch, Brothers Johnson, and Sam The, among many other acts.

The song "So Very Hard To Go" was featured on the soundtracks of the 2002 film *City of God*, and Will Ferrell's 2008 film *Semi-Pro*.

Members 1998

Current members

- Emilio "Mimi" Castillo – tenor saxophone, backing and lead vocals (original)
- Stephen "Doc" Kupka – baritone saxophone, oboe, backing vocals (original)
- David Garibaldi – drums, percussion, backing vocals (original)
- Nick Milo– keyboards, backing vocals
- Francis Rocco Prestia – bass
- Carmen Grillo – guit.
- Brent Carter – lead voc.
- Bill Churchville – horns, back voc.
- Norbert Stachel – sax, flute
- Jesse McGuire – trumpet, back voc.