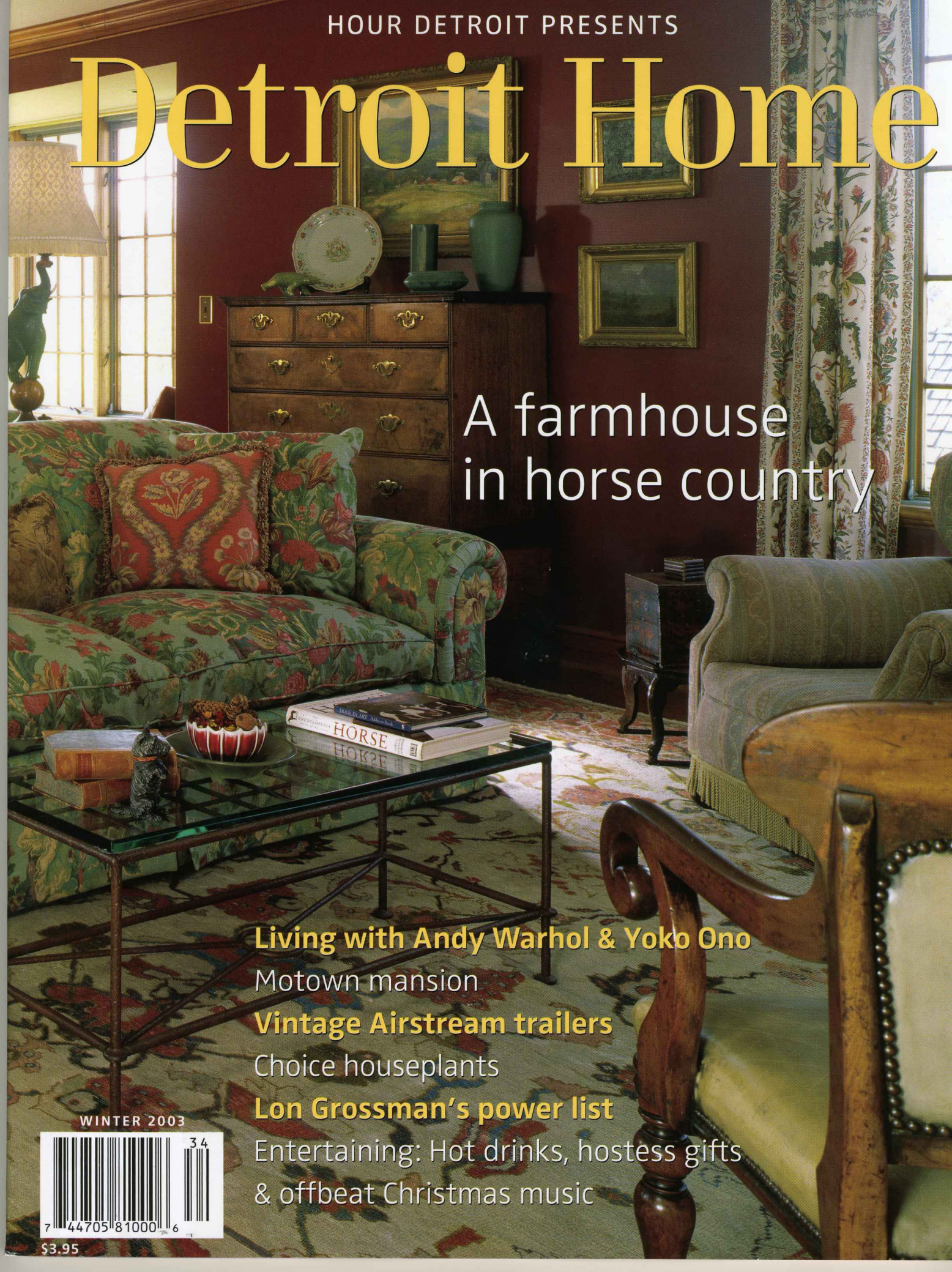
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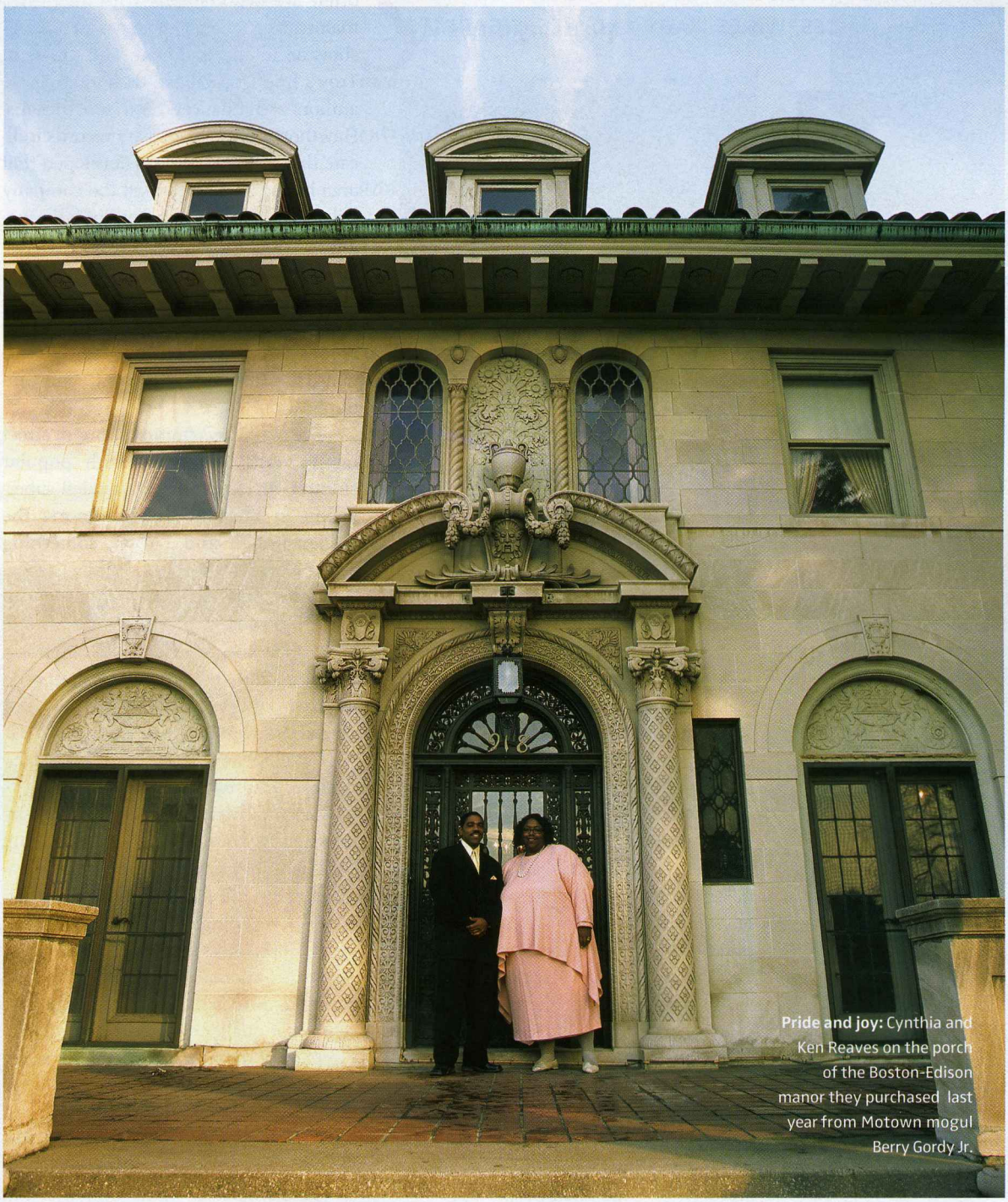
PURSUING A GIRLHOOD DREAM, CYNTHIA REAVES USED THE ART OF PERSUASIVE LETTER WRITING TO CONVINCE BERRY GORDY JR. TO SELL HER HIS LEGENDARY DETROIT MANSION WHERE MOTOWN STARS ONCE PLAYED AND PERFORMED BY ARIC KARPINSKI / PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOE VAUGHN



Pride and joy: Cynthia and Ken Reaves on the porch of the Boston-Edison manor they purchased last year from Motown mogul Berry Gordy Jr.

As children, Ken and Cynthia Reaves would peek out their attic window, craning for a view of their famous neighbor's yard, wondering who and what was behind the tall wrought iron gates. On some nights, there would be a seemingly endless parade of cars with red carpets rolled out to the curb and the faint sounds of music emanating from the estate.

"I was younger than my sister, but I remember all the attention placed on the house," says Ken, now the educational manager of WDTR-FM radio. "We could hear the music and we'd fantasize about what was happening and who could be in all those cars."

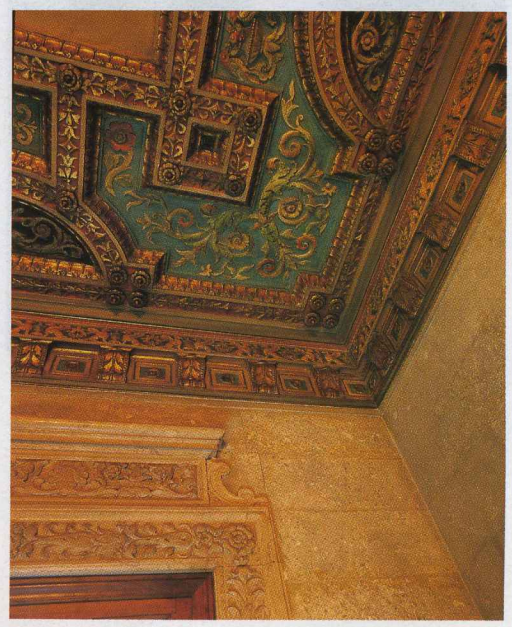
While voyeuristic curiosity isn't uncommon in children, theirs was amplified by the fact that it was the late 1960s and their neighbor was Motown impresario Berry Gordy Jr. The music they heard was performed live by the likes of Diana Ross, The Jackson 5 and Stevie Wonder.

More than 30 years after Gordy — the mastermind behind Motown Records' success — moved his hit-making factory to Los Angeles, an army of contractors and craftsmen has been hired to restore his former Boston-Edison residence. Their work boots trod the same red carpets that once welcomed celebrities to high-profile parties. "They used to take these carpets and put them right around the block," recalls Cynthia, who purchased the home, along with answers to some of her attic-window inquiries, from Gordy last year.

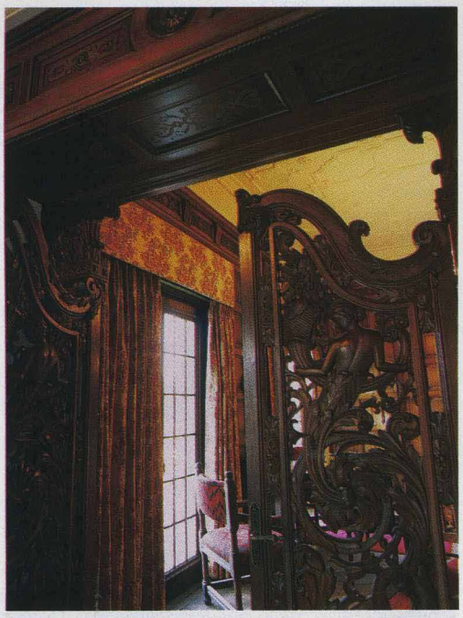
On a mild late-summer afternoon, Reaves sits on the steps outside the home's solarium, talking shop with one of the many workers she's hired for the job. Between them there is an obvious affection. "We've got a good group of contractors," she says while making her way back inside the approximately 10,000-square-foot home. "One of the things about having a house like this and trying to be true to it is finding people who respect it."

Walking the halls with Reaves, who's so thoroughly researched the home's history that she's able to recall the details of a cholera outbreak that killed 200 passengers on the ship that carried original owner, Nels Michelson, from Denmark, her respect for the home is infectious. "I really do love this home," she says with an almost motherly pride.

Gordy bought the 1917-era home in 1967. But it was used only sparingly in the years since Motown migrated to Hollywood. The four-story Venetian Renaissance-style main residence has four fireplaces, five full baths, nine bedrooms, a marble ballroom complete with a stage, an authentic English pub, and elaborately painted ceilings and stained-glass windows throughout. A tunnel connects the main home with a separate pool house, which houses a two-lane bowling alley, a billiards room and an Olympic-sized pool with three-dimensional fish and mermaid sculptures resting on its tiled floor. The grounds hold a five-car garage with a two-bedroom carriage house and one-bath guest apartment. But aside from the years Gordy's sister, Esther Edwards, lived in the house, occasional visits from Gordy or out-of-town guests, (including a notable late-1980s dinner party for Michael Jackson



Smiling faces: In the home's solarium, a marble fountain was designed by local artist Francis Geck, but made in Italy (above left). An elaborately painted coffered ceiling greets guests just inside the home's front entrance (above).



If I were a carpenter: Francis Geck designed the hand-carved doors that separate the library from the dining room. The job, according to a letter the now 102-year-old Geck sent Reaves, took three years to finish.

and then-Mayor Coleman A. Young), it has sat vacant.

Commonly referred to as the Gordy house by the legions of curious passersby who stop to gaze at the home's limestone facade, the rich history contained within its walls reflects more than the heady heyday of Detroit's soul-stirring sound. The home was built by Michelson, who moved his family to Detroit in anticipation of a population boom that he thought would benefit his company, Michelson Land Home Co., which was instrumental in building the city of Ferndale. Using the expertise he'd gained as a lumber magnate in Grayling, Michelson embellished the house with exotic woods and superior craftsmanship. "His contribution to the house is the wood," Reaves says, sounding more and more like an official tour guide while pointing out the intricately hand-carved details in the teak-paneled library. "The craftsmen would live in the house for months and carve each of these patterns by hand."

The home's second owner, Leonard Augustus Young, bought the house in 1925 and made significant contributions to the home and grounds. "He added the pizzazz to the house," Cynthia says. "We have the architectural records from 1926 and, if you look at the blueprints, they show you how forward-thinking he was." An accomplished athlete and self-made man, Young purchased the Detroit Wire Spring Co. with nothing more than an IOU. Soon, he was selling his seat-cushion springs to Detroit's automobile industry. He is credited with the addition of the pool house, bronze front and rear entry doors, marble fountains and basement ballroom.

Gordy bought the house from its third owner, Max Gozesky, a Birmingham Public Schools librarian. While there is little known about Gozesky's imprint on the home, a letter from a former tenant of the carriage house apartment explains the elaborate seduction Gordy staged, including private performances from some of his biggest stars, to acquire the house.

Reaves, a health-care specialist and partner in the law firm of Honigman, Miller, Schwartz and Cohn, is the fifth owner of the home. She convinced Gordy to sell the home by using her own brand of real estate seduction: persuasive letter-writing. It's an art she began honing as a child, when she wrote to the Queen of England and received a response. In her letter to Gordy, she says, "I didn't write about cost. I didn't write about price. I talked about what I thought the potential for the house could be and that I thought it was a travesty that it wasn't lived in.

"I told him, 'I'm not a rich person so I can't afford whatever you're thinking you could get for it.'"

After a brief negotiation, however, Reaves owned the home — along with Gordy's trust. "I have several letters that he's written me that say he's very happy that I own it," she says. Although he had been approached by several people over the years, including movers and shakers from the sports, music and political worlds, he ultimately was swayed by Reaves' affection for the home. The sale was also facilitated, no doubt, by the fact that Reaves and her brother, who's her partner in the project, grew up across the street in a house where their mother still resides.

Now their intentions, beyond restoring and enjoying the home, include using the public areas of the house for charity events and community functions. "The first few months we were here we kept triggering the alarm system," she says with a laugh. "Every time the police officers would be here right away and insist on checking every room for us. It became like a joke, but that's when we started thinking about making sure we keep it as part of the city."

Cynthia and Ken see their new home as a small contribution to Detroit's revival, which they endorse. Their enthusiasm and generosity eventually will fill the halls with a soul not unlike the one that reverberated off the ballroom's walls when Smokey Robinson and Marvin Gaye sang sweet songs for their friends and family. □

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