She was a diminutive dynamo, standing a few shades under over five feet tall. But what she lacked in size she made up for in stature. Smart and wise, tough and tender, super confident and super competent, Esther Gordy Edwards (1920-2011) was a towering figure in the history of Motown.

Berry Gordy was, of course, the visionary leader and driving force behind Motown. As *Motown the Musical* indicates, Gordy methodically plotted Motown’s course, and one of his great skills was choosing the right people to help him build a company that would ultimately break down barriers and achieve mass market success.

Few had as much of an impact as his remarkable sister, Esther. The first of the eight Gordy children to go to college – she attended Howard University and Wayne State University – Edwards was involved in virtually every aspect of Motown and served for many years as senior vice president and director of international operations, negotiating deals with EMI to distribute Motown records in Europe and the Far East. “She had a head for business,” says her granddaughter, Robin Terry, Chairwoman of the Motown Museum. “She understood how to grow a business, how to be smart in business, and how to protect a business.”

In fact, she had doubts that her brother, Berry, was a good risk when he asked for an $800 loan from the family’s co-op to start a record company. “She was the voice of reason,” says Allen Rawls, the museum’s interim CEO. “She was a savvy, professional woman, he was a dreamer, and dreams didn’t always come true.” As *Motown the Musical* illustrates, it was Edwards who insisted her brother sign an IOU, “and it had to be paid back with six percent interest.” The promissory note is on display at the museum.

Terry says her grandmother referred to herself as Motown’s “Gal Friday,” because when she initially joined the company she did whatever was needed. As Motown evolved, her responsibilities grew more specific. She managed and mentored many of Motown’s young artists and served as chaperone when her underage charges went on tour. “She got a lot of fulfillment from personally managing artists because she loved them,” says Terry. “She was responsible for getting Stevie Wonder accepted into the Michigan School of the Blind. She set up his trust fund and got him a tutor. She and Stevie had a very special bond; he truly considered her a second mother.”

Edwards was a force not just in Motown, but in Detroit and beyond. She was the first woman elected to the board of both the Detroit Bank of the Commonwealth and the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce. Politically aware and involved – her husband was a Michigan state representative – she traveled to Washington, DC with Michigan Governor G. Mennen Williams to urge John F. Kennedy to run for president.

Perhaps her greatest legacy is the Motown Museum, which she founded in the Hitsville USA house that served as the original studio and company headquarters. Without knowing why, Edwards had saved all sorts of documents and memorabilia from the earliest days of Motown. “She somehow knew that what she had was unique and important,” says Terry.

When Motown made the move to Los Angeles, Edwards stayed put – Terry says she was “a fierce Detroiter” – and one day in 1981 she looked out the window and saw dozens and dozens of British sailors on the Hitsville lawn. “It was at that point that the meaning behind all that she had saved became clear. This was actually something people wanted to see.” The museum was established four years later.
Edwards left behind countless numbers who benefited from her tutelage and wisdom. Terry says that to this day she hears from people, especially women, whose lives were impacted by her grandmother. “Very influential women, CEOs, come up to me and tell me how my grandmother helped them or mentored them,” she says. “Black, white, it didn’t matter. They credit her with helping them navigate uncharted waters. She was a true pioneer.”