"What's Going On": Motown and the Civil Rights Movement

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“What’s Going On”\textsuperscript{1}:  
Motown and the Civil Rights Movement

\textsuperscript{1} Marvin Gaye, “What’s Going On,” \textit{What’s Going On (Remastered)}. (Motown Records, 2002).

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Introduction

Based in 1960s Detroit, the Motown Record Company established itself and thrived as an independently run and successful African American business. Amidst humble origins in a two-story house outside of which Berry Gordy hung the sign, “Hitsville USA,” Motown encouraged America’s youth, urging them to look beyond racial divides and to simply sing and dance together in a time where the theme of unity was becoming increasingly important. Producing legends such as Marvin Gaye, Diana Ross, Stevie Wonder, The Temptations, The Four Tops, Martha Reeves, Gladys Knight, and the Jackson Five, Motown truly created a new sound for the youth of America and helped shape the 1960s. Competing with the “British Invasion” and “the Protest Movement,” in 1960s music, Motown is often said to have had little or no impact on the political and social revolution of the time because Motown did not produce “message
music.” The 2006 film, *Dreamgirls* even depicts Gordy and Motown as hypocrites and race traitors. Yet Motown embodied one of the principles the Civil Rights Movement preached most: black success and independence. Although the founder of Motown, Berry Gordy, never had the intention of proclaiming a message of black independence and empowerment through his actions of establishing an independent record company, he accomplished one of the goals of the Civil Rights Movement: black economic independence. The establishment and success of Motown was an intrinsically political act that served as proof to Civil Rights claims that African Americans could be just as independent and successful as whites.

At the time of Motown’s creation in 1959, Detroit was considered the model city for race relations in United States. This “model city” perception was created by the fact that, compared to most of the early 1960s United States, Detroit was one of the few places not erupting in outright violence or race riots. Nonetheless, the Motor City was far from perfect. Detroit had major problems with employment and housing discrimination, unequal access to education and police brutality against African Americans, but these forms of oppression were more subtle and could be ignored for the time being because they could not be as easily seen. The town, however, was still racially segregated by Woodward Avenue, which was big enough to double as a dividing line in the city; the white neighborhood was west of the street and the black community was just east of it. Before 1967, however, Detroit received national praise and attention for its racial cooperation and peaceful relations.

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This sixties reputation represented quite a turnaround for Detroit. In the early twentieth century, there was a mass migration of African Americans and European immigrants to the Motor City and each ethnic group lived in their unofficially assigned communities. Living separately and competing for the same jobs in automobile and military manufacturing plants, both ethnic groups felt tensions increase and in 1943 the notorious Detroit race riots occurred. For several days, whites and blacks fought in the streets, ultimately leaving 34 dead, hundreds injured and millions in property damages due to looting and acts of arson.\(^4\) Twenty years later with no riots and black entrepreneurship underway with businesses like Motown, it is understandable why people thought Detroit was past racial tensions and violence.

To further praise Detroit’s “peaceful coexistence,” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. decided to lead a march and speak in Detroit. On June 23, 1963, Detroit’s Great March to Freedom commenced and both black and white marched peacefully and displayed inspirational unity. Dr. King later commented that Detroit’s march was “the largest and greatest demonstration for freedom ever held in the United States.”\(^5\) The festive atmosphere of the march, with police cooperation and no violence, certainly supported the notion that Detroit was the new “model city” of the early 1960s.

Motown’s success as an African American-owned and -run business also bolstered the idea of Detroit’s harmonious atmosphere in that Motown was not only evidence of African American success, but black economic independence. Economic independence was one of the main themes preached by the Civil Rights Movement and was first discussed by Booker T. Washington and later Marcus Garvey and the Freedom

\(^4\) Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 33.

\(^5\) Ibid, 21.
Now Party. The most important element of black independence was not having to rely on
the very people who had abused African Americans for centuries: whites. Gordy, an
apolitical and for the most part, self-interested man, did not concern himself with what
others thought about his economic independence, but rather, focused on the most
important thing to him – money. Far from promoting black empowerment and
independence, Berry Gordy did what he had to do to sell records – which ultimately
meant creating music that whites would buy.

Many historians have examined the methods Berry Gordy used to create the
“Motown sound” that was appealing to both white and black audiences and why that
formula worked. Establishing an assembly line-like production system of “crossover
music,” Gordy aimed at getting his songs off the Rhythm and Blues (R&B) charts and
onto the Pop charts.⁶ As author David Brackett explains, if a song was ranked high on the
R&B charts, it meant that African American DJs were playing the songs on African
American radio stations to a predominantly African American crowd. If a song was high
up on the Pop charts, however, it meant that all races were listening to it. For Berry
Gordy and Motown, it meant that white kids were listening to it. “Cross over” meant
targeting the mainstream audience, which was assumed to be “northern, urban, middle or
upper class, and also white.”⁷

Berry Gordy was so focused on creating “crossover music” as a means of
ensuring high record sales that, as author Gerald Posner discusses, Gordy even attempted
to distract attention from the fact that the voices on the popular hits were from African
American artists. Posner notes that, “The Marvelettes’ Please Mr. Postman had only a

⁷ Ibid, 777.
line drawing of a mailbox on the cover; *Bye Bye Baby* by Mary Wells showed only a love letter...*Meet the Temptations* had photographed the group so darkly against a dark background that they were almost in silhouette."8 When these records were released in the early 1960s it was still considered controversial to listen to, let alone buy, black music if one was white. By visibly hiding the fact that the artists where black, the theory was that more white people would be more willing to purchase the records.

Motown’s most successful “cross over” artists - The Supremes, The Temptations and The Four Tops - were well trained to exemplify the Motown look and sound. The sound was specific for each group or artist and contained light, non-controversial messages about love, heartbreak, dancing, fun and even money. The Motown background group, the Funk Brothers, played on nearly all of the Motown songs and number one hits without ever getting proper recognition or praise. In fact, the Funk Brothers were responsible for bringing the Motown Sound to life. John Fitzgerald explains how Lamont Dozier, Brian Holland, and Edward Holland Jr. (the most successful songwriting group for Motown) along with The Funk Brothers infused R&B music with pop and even gospel to create a sound that appealed to all races. Fitzgerald observes that it was important for the “Motown Sound” to be soulful, but “poppy” so as to successfully compete with rock groups of the Pop charts at the same time.9

The “Motown look” fit in the same “cross over” theme in that Gordy’s African American artists had to appear proper and thus appealing to white audiences. Gordy hired a woman from the Maine Powell Model Host and Hostess Agency to teach the men and women of Motown how to properly act and dress. According to Posner, women were

required to walk with books on their heads to improve their posture, and were instructed about how to get out of a car properly and even how to sit down in a lady-like manner. For the men, the Agency taught them everything from proper hygiene to the correct way to apply makeup. Additionally, all artists had to learn how to dance and artfully move on stage. Dance moves Motown artists used were deemed appropriate because they invited the audience to dance without shocking anyone (unlike the hip gyrations of Elvis Presley or James Brown). Artists had to constantly move, act, and talk in a way that positively reflected the proper and upscale image of Motown.

The Motown image and sound was designed to promote “cross over” music and artists. The Supremes, for example, were forced to wear wigs that hid the natural “wildness” of their African American hair because it was thought the Afro would “scare away” the white audience. This was a serious point of contention for many African Americans because the Afro symbolized black empowerment and independence. Gordy, however, did not completely turn his back on the Civil Rights Movement. When Gordy recorded and distributed Martin Luther King Jr.’s *The Great March to Freedom* in 1963, it was the first time the African American owned and operated record company attempted to show any support of the Civil Rights Movement. Eventually Gordy founded the Black Forum label, which produced speeches from prominent Civil Rights leaders such as, Martin Luther King Jr. and Stokely Carmichael.

In 1963, Gordy purchased the Graystone Theater in downtown Detroit, which, according to Suzanne Smith, “…represented more that a simple real estate investment. The purchase rectified the reputation of an entertainment venue that had a troublesome

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11 Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 21.
12 Ibid, 21.
history of racial segregation.” Whether Gordy had the intention of making a larger political statement with his purchase is up for debate. But what is absolutely the case is that by purchasing the music hall and theater, Gordy established a stable performing venue to showcase his artists. Through regular concerts, awareness about Motown spread and the company’s record sales increased which meant more profit for Gordy (not to mention all the money coming in from ticket sales).

Racism was a major issue for Motown artists, even if Berry Gordy attempted to ignore the racial tensions and schisms in Detroit and around the United States. Motown artists were frequently loaded onto busses for the Motortown Revue tours and concerts that worked their way along the eastern seaboard from the North to the South. 1962 marked an increase in the activism of the Civil Rights Movement with protests and sit-ins, which, in turn, increased racial tensions and violence in the South. When Motown artists went to the South, they and their bus, which resembled a Freedom Riders bus, were frequently harassed and attacked. In Birmingham, Alabama, for example, their bus was shot at by angry white supremacists. Most Motown artists were not used to this type of hatred having been in Detroit for most of their lives. Solo artist Mary Wells explained, “Me in my little Motown star bubble…all of a sudden everything kind of crashes.”

Despite these attacks, Motown embodied the spirit of racial integration and cooperation that was a common theme in the Civil Rights Movement. In this sense, what Motown symbolized was more in compliance with Martin Luther King Jr.’s movement than the radical black empowerment movement of Malcolm X or the Black Panthers. Many Motown artists desired to incorporate the themes of the racial struggles and

\[13\] Ibid, 45.
inequality in America, and later on the Vietnam War, but because these issues were
deemed as “polarizing” by Berry Gordy, they were simply not allowed in Motown’s
songs. Gordy refused to act or to let his artists act in any way that would potentially
damage the company’s image as neutral. That way, people would have no political
motive not to support or buy the Motown records that were too hot to resist in the 1960s.

As the years progressed and more tumultuous events unfolded, including the
assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., the Watts riots, and
the growing opposition against the Vietnam war, more and more Motown artists wanted
to speak out about the issues. The most prominent artist who struggled with wanting to
speak out about political issues while Berry Gordy held a tight grip on his freedom was
Marvin Gaye. A extremely troubled and easily angered individual, Gaye eventually
persuaded Berry Gordy to release his “message” songs in the 1970s which included

Envisioning himself as more of a father figure, some Motown artists simply
viewed him as too controlling. The power over artists’ careers and lives started with the
signing of their contracts in the early days of Motown where anyone could walk in off the
street and audition to be a Motown artist. The Supremes, for example, went to Hitsville,
USA, while still in high school and sang for the many Motown producers and artists. The
Temptations’ Otis Williams introduced himself to Berry Gordy in an adjoining urinal and
secured a business card and an invitation to audition for the most promising label in
Detroit. Mary Wells got an audition by simply running up to Gordy on the street and
singing to him.\textsuperscript{15} These examples prove how relaxed the atmosphere was, but also how,

\textsuperscript{15} Posner, \textit{Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power}, 61.
because of the informal environment and general youth of the artists, no one brought (or could afford) a lawyer to look over the binding Motown contracts.

The contracts often bound the artists to Motown for a period of five to seven years and included statements that secured definite weekly “allowances” for the artists. For artists like Stevie Wonder, who signed with Gordy when he was just 11 years old, allowances made sense and protected the young artists. Similar provisions were found in adult artist’s contracts and were considered frustrating, invasive and humiliating. Even the case of Stevie Wonder was extreme in that Motown put a large majority of his money in a trust fund that he could not touch until he was 21 and until then, he was only allowed $2.50 per week despite the fact that his fame, songs and royalties skyrocketed long before he was even near 21. This is how Motown trapped its generally naïve artists, but in the cases when Motown had to recruit talent, getting them to agree to the contracts was trickier. The Four Tops, for example, were already successful when Motown wanted to sign them and they came prepared with a lawyer by their side. Already rehearsed in the music scene, the Four Tops took one look at the Motown contract and left, eventually to return after Gordy agreed to a less binding contract.16

Gordy demanded complete control over his company, his artists, and everything related to Motown. He attempted to appear democratic with weekly meetings to discuss Motown dealings but with one of his rules being that Gordy could always overrule a majority vote, his position as an autocrat was well established. Despite the fact that Gordy insisted that the “Motown sound” could not reflect any Civil Rights messages, his very company was a model of racial integration, unity and cohesiveness. Although Motown was deemed a “black business,” Gordy had no problem hiring whites. He hired

whomever could do the job best, with some black power groups criticizing Gordy for not
keeping Motown all African American.\textsuperscript{17}

One of the reasons Motown was able to reach the Pop charts was Barney Ales, a
white salesman who was able to pitch the “Motown sound” to white DJs. Ales handled
most of the business’s finances, as did a larger team of white, predominantly Jewish,
men. Ales admits that he had to constantly defend his position since he worked under an
African American in the 1960s. Gordy also dealt with racism by combating it with
humor. One time, at a local Detroit, fancy restaurant, Ales, his white wife and Berry
Gordy and his African American wife went out to eat together. As soon as they walked
in, the host walked up to the group and said, “We don’t serve colored people,” and
without missing a beat, Gordy replied, “That’s all right, I don’t eat them.” Laughing
hysterically, the group then resigned to stay until they were served. Incidents like these
made Ales even prouder to work for Motown and strengthened the bond between himself
and Berry Gordy.\textsuperscript{18}

Motown was a business of whites and blacks successfully selling to whites and
blacks across the United States. Although Gordy claimed he never intended to, and even
tried hard not to use his company to send a message about race relations or support the
cause of the Civil Rights Movement, he ultimately did. Whether or not he realized it at
the time, Gordy was indebted to the Civil Rights Movement, for had it not been for
prominent African Americans spreading messages of unity and racial cooperation,
Motown might never have been possible. Had Freedom Riders, marchers, and protestors
not staged sit-ins risking their lives in the South, Motown artists might not have gotten

\textsuperscript{17} Nelson George, \textit{Where Did Our Love Go?} (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 56.
\textsuperscript{18} Posner, \textit{Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power}, 66.
any radio time or record sales in southern states. Furthermore, for a city that was entrenched in a history of racial tension and violence, Motown symbolized hopes of freedom from the dauntingly overpowering white population that appeared to control all upper echelons of business and society.

My thesis will begin with an introduction of Berry Gordy, his life before Motown and his fight to become economically independent without settling for the stereotypical “black” jobs of the times. Chapter 2 will then explore the “Motown Sound,” what made it so special and why and how it worked. Chapters 3 and 4 will then examine the broader Civil Rights Movement as well as the role of prominent leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and that will coincide with Berry Gordy’s understanding of racial tensions and the Civil Rights Movement. The overarching theme of this thesis will be the role that Motown played regarding race relations, political tensions, and why and how this African American business was so successful.
Chapter 1: The Man and the Dream

Berry Gordy knew what made a great song and his passion for songwriting fueled his desire to be a part of the booming music industry. A jazz lover at heart, Gordy learned very quickly that the youth were demanding a new sound. Reluctant at first, Gordy put down his jazz records of Miles Davis and Charlie Parker and switched to the rhythm and blues of B.B. King, and Jackie Wilson to better understand the changing music industry. With a better understanding of what sound young America wanted, Gordy used his creativity and drive to write great music. But Gordy still lacked the money, the structured process, and the singers to make his songs come alive. It was only a matter of time before Gordy figured out the music game, made a name for himself, and established Hitsville, U.S.A.

Born on November 28, 1929, in Detroit, Gordy was the seventh of eight children born to Berry Gordy Sr. and Bertha Fuller. From a young age, Gordy was instilled with a
distinct sense of pride regarding his race. His grandfather, the first Berry Gordy, was a freed slave from Georgia and the stories that Gordy Sr. told his children about the struggles that his father, the slave, had endured and how precious freedom was deeply influenced young Berry. Through that reasoning, Gordy Sr. also taught his kids to never take for granted their freedom and that hard work and discipline were the only ways to guarantee success, which was true freedom.¹ Although Gordy Sr. told his children how to live correctly, his important lessons were not immediately instilled in all of his kids, especially Berry Gordy Jr.

Berry Gordy Jr. worked when he wanted to – the trick was getting him to want to work. The class clown in school who constantly disrupted class and brought home “D’s and E’s,” Gordy was not interested in school and could not seem to apply himself to something he did not care wholeheartedly about.² The Gordys stressed the value and importance of the work ethic to all their children, but Berry seemed unable to acquire one. Additionally, and to much of his father’s resentment, Gordy was fascinated by the hustlers that lived around his house near Hastings Street on the east side of Detroit. Ever since the 1920s Hastings Street was labeled a primarily African American part of the city and along with hustlers selling drugs, sex, and alcohol, there was an energy created by the soul, jazz and blues music that played out of shop windows up and down the tattered street. By age fourteen, he could be found shooting craps, gambling away what little he owned, and befriending pawn-shop owners.³ In fact, Gordy was struck by the fact that many of the people he saw getting rich were not educated, “It did not teach me that

² Ibid, 27.
education was worth nothing. What it taught me was that just because I wasn’t doing well didn’t mean that I had to be dumb.”

Realizing there was a difference between education and intelligence, Gordy began to view his world as having far more opportunities, especially opportunities that made quick money without difficult labor.

Those opportunities were still limited, Gordy noticed, because he was black. Growing up in a predominantly black neighborhood, Gordy assumed the world was black except for a few “accidents of nature” and Santa Claus. Once Gordy grew up enough to realize there was a world outside of his neighborhood, he soon realized that he was considered part of “the other” and knew that there was a bad term to describe “his kind” but had no idea what it meant other than the term “n----r” was a horrible word. He soon realized that his teachers, his heroes, the fairytale characters and even the President were white. Worse still, “his kind” were only used to provide comical caricatures. He recalled that: “[African American actors had] bulging eyes and bobbing heads – that they were always scratching. They had a ‘buck and shuffle’ walk and were scared of everything.”

It was not until the emergence of boxer Joe Louis that Gordy had a hero that was like him and Gordy credits Joe Louis as instilling in him a will to fight and to become somebody at age eight.

By age thirteen, Gordy started to develop into the man he would become – cocky. Constantly in trouble, Gordy did not seem to care a lot about anything other than what he wanted and he would often pursue his yearnings to desperate and dangerous extremes. Once Gordy knew he wanted girls, for example, he knew he also wanted sex and offered money to several prostitutes in his neighborhood that rejected him saying, “Sorry short

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5 Ibid, 12.
shot. There’s some things even we won’t do.” But one day Gordy struck gold and got lucky with a woman who was willing to take his money; he felt unstoppable with the new exhilarating rush he discovered, which only fueled his conceited attitude.

With his newfound confidence, Gordy desired to be independent and began pursuing another love of his – money. Starting off small, Gordy set up a shoeshine stand and quickly moved on to distributing papers. It was not long before Gordy turned to what he loved. He decided to try and make money by working with music and started off by taking a friend of his to sing for people door-to-door. While they were fairly successful, charging fifty cents per house, Gordy got the confidence to write his own song on the piano and performed it at the Michigan Theater at an amateur contest. He ended up losing despite the fact that he claims to have “wowed” the audience and judges alike. His ego bruised, Gordy looked for another passion.

During the 1930s and 1940s boxing was the only professional sport in which African Americans could get paid as much as their white counterparts. The fact that Berry Jr. liked to box, was good at it, and knew he could make good money were all the factors he needed to pursue a boxing career. At a local after-school recreation center, The Brewster Center, Gordy received direction from trainers and coaches. Mr. Futch was the trainer that decided to work with Berry and convinced him to really pursue boxing. That meant serious and dedicated physical training, no smoking, no drugs, no alcohol - and the hardest part for Gordy - no girls. But Gordy’s drive to be a champion overpowered his craving for girls and sex. Willing to make the sacrifices, Gordy trained and won and kept

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7 Ibid, 42.
winning. Inside, however, Gordy could not stifle his yearning to work in the music industry so internally, Berry struggled over his desire to be Joe Louis or Nat King Cole. Around the same time, Gordy discovered his passion for jazz music and signed up for music classes to learn all he could about music theory and to receive a true musical education.

Although he did not know which one he wanted to pursue, Gordy knew that the direction his life was going was either music or boxing and neither of those could be pursued inside a high school classroom. Despite the fact that he knew it would upset his parents, Gordy decided to drop out of school in the 11th grade to focus on his two passions. He soon became frustrated with boxing as he was having a harder time getting fights. He was really good but unranked, which meant ranked fighters were less willing to fight because if they lost, their own ranking would fall. Realizing that boxers could not fight for weeks or even months a time, whereas musicians could play and make music every day no matter what, Gordy made up his mind. At age 20, he hung up his boxing gloves and focused on pursuing a career in music.

Extremely excited about his decision, Gordy began feverishly writing songs and even kept a tape recorder by his bed in case he was inspired in the middle of the night. He wrote and wrote but did not receive any positive praise and before he could truly go after his songwriting career he was drafted to serve in the Korean War. In 1953 Gordy returned home safely and knowing what he already wanted to do with his life, he quickly got back to working with music.

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9 Gordy, To Be Loved, 47.
10 Ibid, 52.
“Detroit was a real music town. You heard it everywhere, from radios and record players, outside the doors of clubs that kids like us were too young to enter legally, and from guys and girls standing out on the streets singing. It sounds like a scene out of a musical, but that’s truly how it was,” recalled Otis Williams of the Temptations of the Detroit days before Motown had been established.\footnote{Posner, \textit{Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power}, 12.} Feeling the same contagious musical vibe, Berry Jr. attempted to establish himself in that world. Working closely with his brother, George, Gordy opened up his first record shop, called “3D Record Mart” and exclusively sold jazz records. Unfortunately for Gordy, Detroiter craved the blues sound and customers who came into 3D Record Mart looking for Fats Domino or B.B. King records were simply out of luck. At first, Gordy was adamant about only selling jazz and felt compelled to “educate” his customers about jazz and why it was superior, which in the end simply had potential customers running away from the shop.\footnote{Gordy, \textit{To Be Loved}, 63.} It did not take long for his first music business to flop.

Broke and on the brink of a divorce with his wife, Thelma, Gordy turned to gambling instead of holding down his job with Lincoln-Mercury on the assembly line. Gordy was only interested in things that intrigued his mind and body and boring assembly line jobs or even his family simply did not spark his interest or energy. Reality finally hit Gordy when, during a fight with Thelma, his first daughter Hazel-Joy pulled away from him in fright when he tried to comfort her.\footnote{Posner, \textit{Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power} 19.} Not long after, Gordy was served with divorce papers and, unable to pay for the expensive procedure at the time, the ugly divorce continued for two years before it could be finalized in 1959.
Feeling like a “bum,” Gordy knew he needed to break into the music scene now or never. A racially segregated business with only select record labels dominating the industry, Gordy knew the only sector of the industry he could try to enter was the “black” genre – or rhythm and blues, known as R&B. R&B records sung by African American artists were called “race records” and at this time period almost all of the race records were being played only on African American radio stations, so the market and potential money to be made were extremely limited. Gordy caught a break when his sisters introduced him to a music producer who had just signed a promising young man by the name of Jackie Wilson and told Gordy he was looking for new material to help launch Wilson’s career. The next morning, Gordy ran over to the small and independently run Pearl Music Company where he met his future co-writer, Roquel Billy Davis.¹⁴

Desperate, Gordy knew he had to create great songs and simply hang on to the hope that his songs would make it. Teaming up with Davis, Gordy literally hung on song by song and then paycheck to paycheck and with each success he felt luckier and luckier. Davis and Gordy made a good team and their creative energy together produced Jackie Wilson’s earliest hits like “Reet Petite” and “That is Why (I Love You So).” “Lonely Teardrops,” Jackie Wilson’s first big hit, became Gordy’s first song to break into the top ten of the pop charts.¹⁵ At this time, the pop charts were generally reserved for white artists, so for a song produced and performed by African Americans to reach the pop charts meant a stunning achievement and the possibility of serious profit.

This moment presented Gordy with two major realizations. The first was that he saw his own ideas and expressions quickly producing good cash and then he knew he

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¹⁴ Gordy, To Be Loved, 77.
¹⁵ Posner, Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power, 22.
could be successful in the music business if he just established himself and could keep that energy going. Second, was that Gordy now had the knowledge of how to make the big money: get your songs on the pop charts so that white people would listen to and buy your records. When whites listened to music, it became “popular music” and thus in high demand. Although this was not a new realization amongst black record producers and companies, no one had attempted to get R&B music on the Pop charts. Instead, African Americans sang “Pop” or polished up jazz music to appeal to whites and thus become popular. Although he did not necessarily know how at the time, Gordy knew he could get “black music” on “white charts.”  

This approach would later be called producing “crossover music” and was something that Gordy mastered and a main reason why Motown was so successful.

By 1957, Berry Gordy was well-established as a successful songwriter in the confines of Detroit, but that was about as far as his fame reached. Nevertheless, this was the beginning of what Gordy calls his “Cycle of Success” and part of that meant acting like the star he thought he was (or the star we wanted to become). Gordy relished his newfound fame, success, and especially his fortune. Very quickly, Gordy began accumulating various bills and expenses that he had never had to deal with before, including ones for new flashy suits, and picking up tabs at bars because Gordy’s first goal was to act the part of a rich and successful man. In time, he hoped this would become a reality.

Stepping closer to his desired reality, Gordy was lucky enough to come across the then struggling Matadors (under Gordy’s command they would be renamed the

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16 Gordy, To Be Loved, 146-149.
17 Ibid, 90.
Miracles). Auditioning at the same studio Gordy wrote for, William (Smokey) Robinson, Ronnie White, Pete Moore, Bobby Rogers, and Claudette Rogers tried out some songs for the company only to be rejected. But Gordy knew this group was talented and if the Pearl Music Company was not willing to work with the young singers, Gordy was certainly interested. Immediately attracted to the group by Smokey’s unique voice and style (and Claudette’s good looks did not hurt), Gordy introduced himself and became the group’s manager.  

Robinson obviously paid close attention to the Detroit music scene because as soon as Gordy said his name, Robinson yelled, “You’re Berry Gordy!” and Gordy could not have been more pleased. Smokey described Gordy as “street, but he was no jitterbug; he wasn’t fly…He’d done his share of fighting.” Escorting the group to a back room, Gordy made the Matadors sing every song they had in their playbook, and once they were done, Gordy criticized every song. Instead of getting defensive or acting irritated, Smokey and his group took the criticism and only seemed more eager to write better songs for Gordy. Impressed, Berry Gordy invited the young singers back, and more importantly, that was the beginning of what developed into a close and lasting friendship and partnership between Berry Gordy and Smokey Robinson.

In 1958 Smokey Robinson came running with what turned out to be the Miracles first hit: “Got a Job.” The song was an upbeat “answer record” to the number one record at the time, The Silhouettes’ “Get a Job,” and was almost guaranteed success because not only was it catchy, it was easy to capitalize on a record that had already enjoyed so much success. The song was cut and ready to be distributed but Berry Gordy had one last

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19 Ibid, 65.
20 Ibid, 72.
problem with the group and that was their name. “The Matadors” wasn’t going to sell and the group needed to come up with a name that sold an image (and that image had to include the girl in the group). Finally, they settled on Smokey Robinson’s choice of “The Miracles” and the song was released on Smokey’s eighteenth birthday, February 19, 1958.²¹

The song enjoyed a lot of local success and Gordy was soon pushed into the position of manager as he assumed responsibility for the Miracles. Taking on that position, Berry Gordy invited his brother Robert into the studio to record the catchy tune “Everyone Was There,” which was described as sounding “too white.” After much protest, the song was produced and enjoyed a lot of success. So much so, in fact, that Robert, under the stage name, Bob Kayli, was invited to perform on Dick Clark’s American Bandstand. But after the broadcast the record flopped – everyone refused to match up the “white sounding” song and voice to the African American body it came from.²² This time it hit Berry Gordy harder than before and he learned a lasting lesson, and that was that music was about race. Berry Jr. took the failure of his song and his brother to essentially mean that one could make a great song, but if was sung by the “wrong” voice, the song meant nothing. At the same time in the music industry, however, greats like Elvis Presley were breaking down the racial music divide and R&B, Pop, and Rock were steadily becoming more intertwined.²³

His frustration mounting, Gordy was beginning to get fed up with the measly amount of money he was making, claiming that his skills had proved he deserved more than his average of thirty dollars a week. Threatening to withhold his songwriting skills

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²¹ Gordy, To Be Loved, 97.
²² Ibid, 99.
in return for more money only backfired on Gordy as he was told, “Jackie is a star. You need him. He doesn’t need you.” Gordy knew this to be true, but his own cockiness would not allow him to accept the truth and he walked away from the place where he had enjoyed his first real success.

Although disappointed, Gordy’s sister Gwen was excited at the new possibilities this presented her. For quite some time, Gwen had wanted to set up her own record company and because she was romantically involved with Gordy’s co-writer, Davis, she could potentially grab the two best songwriters in town. Davis eagerly agreed but Gordy refused, claiming he wanted to work alone. Gwen persisted and even offered Berry the position of president, but Gordy was adamant in his original decision to work on his own, free of the “limitations” that partnerships presented. Still, he moved his headquarters into Gwen’s multi-story apartment. Gwen and Davis pursued their record company, Anna Records, while Gordy pursued his own dream. Despite his carelessness and risky behavior in many areas of his life, Gordy was determined to accomplish his dream and desired success in the music industry. Thanks to the tremendous emotional and financial support Berry Jr. received from his family, Gordy was able to realize his dreams.

Gordy’s first move was to establish his own music publishing company and he named it Jobete (a combination of his three children’s names) and quickly signed Smokey Robinson as a writer. The Miracles had recorded other songs including “Money” (not the same as Motown’s later hit “Money (That’s What I Want),” and “I Cry.” It was only a matter of time before the money started rolling in from the success of these records, or so Gordy thought. But then a check for $3.19 arrived and that was supposed to cover the producer’s fee, publishing income, writer’s and singer’s royalties for the

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Miracle’s songs. Smokey then turned to Gordy and advised, “You might as well start your own record label. I don’t think you could do any worse than this.” Gordy agreed. To prove his determination to never let that happen to him again, Gordy framed the check and hung it up on a wall to provide motivation for his new endeavor: liberation and control through his own record label. Gordy’s motivations, again, were purely economic and it never crossed his mind that establishing a successful black owned and operated business would simultaneously be making a political statement.

The one problem Gordy had was the same problem he had always had and that was he had no money. Unable to turn to the banks, Gordy turned to the solid support system of his family and was able to secure an eight hundred dollar loan. Gordy decided on the record name, Tamla (the song “Tammy” by Debbie Reynolds was the number one Pop song in the country at the time and that was the success Gordy was aiming for). The label’s first hit was by Marv Johnson and was called “Come to Me.” The record “sounded as white as it did black” and Gordy distributed the record to two Detroit radio stations: WLJB, which was white owned but had two black DJs, a faithful African American following and a strong signal that could reach all the way to Cleveland, and WCHB, which was African American-owned, had a weak signal and a strong African American support base.

The song was a success and received attention even in New York, but Gordy was still disappointed by the fact that he was not getting enough money back. It cost ten cents to press a record and he wanted to sell his records for 90 cents a piece, but soon realized

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26 Gordy, To Be Loved, 106.
that distributors generally only paid 30 cents for records and then sold them for more to
the retailers and the retailers sold them for even more and kept all the profit. Gordy still
did not have control and he definitely did not have enough money to continue his dream.

Desperate, Gordy participated in his fair share of risky money dealings. Gambling
had been a long habit of his, but this time he engaged in the world of sex trafficking and
acted as a part-time pimp. Disgusted with himself, he claims he did not engage in any of
the cruelty that is associated with pimps such as the beating of women or pimping out
pregnant women, but this nonetheless was not a proud period in his life. Gordy knew that
all he needed was a real hit that produced real money and he could escape his street
dealings.  

Motivated by his desire to make honest money, and hopefully a lot of it, Berry
Gordy focused all of his energy onto the Miracle’s song “Bad Girl” and was so pleased
with its sound he launched a new label: Motown. Gordy got the idea from the fact that
Detroit had long been known as the Motor City because of the booming automobile
industry in the city. Gordy simply replaced “city” with “town” and his new label was
ready.

Gordy’s momentum was slowed down with the arrival of his fourth child with a
new woman, Raymona Liles. Together, the couple bought and moved into the future
home of Hitsville, U.S.A., which they purchased for $25,000 and a mortgage of
$140/month. The couple and new child were now stable and it was time to pick up where
Gordy had left off: Motown. The Gordy family worked together to set up a small sound
studio by plastering the cracks in the walls, buying the cheapest DJ equipment and


30 Ibid, 36.
speakers, and hanging up cut up carpet to act as soundproofing. Feeling confident, Gordy hung up a sign on the front of the house that read, “Hitsville U.S.A. – The Sound of Young America.”

The family effort did not stop at construction. Esther Gordy was named Vice President of Motown and in charge of the label’s artists. Loucye Gordy handled album sales, album designs, and billing and collection of money. Robert Gordy acted as an engineer in training and even Gordy’s father participated by consulting. The neighborhood got involved too, mainly attracted by the fact that Gordy could potentially become a successful black entrepreneur. Musicians, producers, singers all dropped by to help in any way they could – in fact that is how the first and most successful production team at Motown was hired (Holland-Dozier-Holland). Even Martha Reeves started out as a secretary for Motown before she got her own record deal.

Motown was ready, but now it needed a song and Gordy knew exactly what he wanted to have his first song be about: money. Money was what he wanted (and needed). Gordy sat down at the piano and screamed out, “The best things in life are free, but you can give them to the birds and bees…” and Janie Bradford (then receptionist for Hitsville) laughed out loud. Energized by her positive reaction, Gordy sang his chorus, “Money, that’s what I want. Yeah, yeah, that’s what I want,” and Janie returned with, “Your love gives me such a thrill, but your love don’t pay my bills, gimme some money, baby.” Gordy loved it – it was time to record.

The very first song cut in the Hitsville studio was sung by Barrett Strong and it had a raw and edgy feel because of the fact that the recording studio was so small and

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31 Gordy, To Be Loved, 124.
32 Posner, Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power, 44.
33 Gordy, To Be Loved, 126.
everyone who was part of the song had to be placed in one room. Distributed nationally by Anna records, and locally by Tamla, “Money (That’s What I Want)” went as high as number two on the Billboard R&B chart and was Hitsville’s first real hit. The strong dance tune, repetition and R&B feel were the blueprint that Motown would stick to for the production of its future songs.

After the national success of “Money (That’s What I Want)” Gordy was determined to get his next song on national distribution by himself and this time, it was going to be a Motown label hit. “Shop Around” by the Miracles was released, a song that took Smokey Robinson only thirty minutes to write, but when Gordy heard it on the radio at 3:00am one morning, he was disappointed, envisioning a more up-tempo sound for the song. Rounding up the Miracles and the Motown band, the Funk Brothers, at 4:00am that same morning, Gordy re-cut the song with a faster beat and made Smokey Robinson the lead. Gordy’s instincts to improve the song were correct and when the song was re-released, “Shop Around” skyrocketed Motown onto the music scene by reaching #1 on the R&B charts and number two on the Pop charts. “[‘Shop Around’] sent the company into orbit. We were flying high,” recalled Smokey Robinson.34

Not only was it a hit, it was a crossover hit. Motown was on its way to creating the distinct “Motown Sound” that would be responsible for uniting both black and white youth in dance and song.

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Chapter 2: The Sound of Young America

Motown: The Sound of Young America. Berry Gordy created this motto without fully comprehending the social and political implications of his words. Young Americans were just beginning to gather an identity of their own as they entered the 1960s and although the population was very diverse, there was an overarching theme among white youths of rebellion - rebellion from the 1950s conformity and the social ideal of perfection that this generation’s parents had strived for with their “white picket fences” and “happy” families. Inspired by black civil rights efforts in the fifties and early sixties, whites of this generation wanted to tackle problems, and some even wanted to declare that racial and gender inequality were no longer acceptable. On a broader cultural front, sixties youths wanted to dress differently, act differently and live differently from their parents. This identity became a culture that politicized sex, vehemently protested war,
and experimented with drugs on an unprecedented level.¹ With this culture, of course, came a certain sound that for the first time ever could be heard while cruising in a car. The three main sounds of America for this counter-culture movement were, “The British Invasion,” “The Protest Movement,” and “The Motown Sound.” All of them had messages, had fun dance tunes, and held deep meaning for the youth of America. But there was one difference – Motown was black.

At 3 a.m. in Detroit, any year between 1961 and 1967, one could hear the Motown sound drifting through the air from Hitsville, U.S.A. Business was booming and the auto plants and their assembly lines were shut down for the night. The swinging jazz clubs that had been packed with eager musicians, ragged assembly workers, and exotic dancers had just closed. Overall, Detroit was relatively quiet. But down on West Grand Boulevard one could hear a unique sound that combined jazz, R&B and soul. That sound was soon to be the next number one hit for Berry Gordy’s Motown label. These songs originated down in Studio A, or as the artists and musicians affectionately referred to it, the “Snakepit.” There, the Funk Brothers jammed out beats and harmonies influenced by their southern roots and passion for blues and jazz while Mary Wells, Marvin Gaye, and the Supremes belted out smooth lyrics with universal themes of love and heartache. Hitsville USA was a hit factory. With Gordy’s assembly-line like production, and the creation of the unique “Motown Sound,” Motown produced more number one hits than the Beach Boys, the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, and Elvis Presley combined.²

With its creation in 1959, Berry Gordy knew he could have all the talented singers in the world, but without equally talented musicians to give life to the songs he, Smokey or anyone else wrote (eventually, in 1962, he would have the incredibly successful writing team of Holland-Dozier-Holland), the songs would be worthless. Luckily, Gordy was in the booming city of Detroit and he did not have to go far to find some of the finest musicians of the time.

The “southern sound” of raw rhythm and blues had traveled north with people like Berry Gordy Sr. who left the South for better employment opportunity or to escape the racial tension and resurgent Ku Klux Klan. So many African Americans left the South during the years 1911-1918 with hope for a better life in the North that it was labeled the “Great Migration.” It has been estimated that between 200,000 and 1,000,000 African Americans ventured on this mass migration to reach the North. Even financially successful African Americans like Berry Gordy Sr. who had internalized the teachings of Booker T. Washington and relied on only themselves to achieve true liberation felt how threatening and even menacing the presence of jealous whites was and moved north to feel safe. Detroit was an attractive city for many African Americans trying to find peace from the hazardous South because of the employment opportunities, especially in the booming auto industry. Northern newspapers were especially persuasive in luring African Americans from the South claiming, “To die from the bite of frost’s far more glorious than at the hands of a mob.”

Due to the numbers of African Americans migrating to the North, between the years 1870 and 1920, Detroit’s population multiplied 12 times. Berry

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Gordy Sr.’s generation arrived in Detroit and mostly worked on the assembly lines, in construction or even opened up their own stores (Gordy Sr. opened the Booker T. Washington Grocery Store).\(^6\)

The post WWII auto industry boom encouraged another young generation to migrate from the South. Arriving in Detroit, young men essentially had three options: work on an assembly line, boxing, and, music. Those who pursued music ended up in jazz and blues clubs around town dreaming of playing for Miles Davis and Billie Holiday. It was also around this time that Elvis Presley jumped on the scene and was taking the African American created “southern sound” and making it popular. Artists such as Luis Jordan, Jackie Wilson, Ruth Brown, and Big Joe Turner who were really responsible for the raw “southern sound” were forced to watch and be left behind as their sound and songs sold to millions of fans. Denied credit, African Americans knew their sound and beats were catchy and fun, but they also knew race came first, and as long as the same groovy beat was coming from a black face, the music would not sell. The face had to be white, and at this time, it was Elvis’s face.\(^7\) Increasingly, African Americans felt a desire to create and maintain their own unique sound and to not allow others (especially whites) to steal all the glory and make all the money.

Due to this increased desire to maintain the African American music scene, many African American musicians flocked to blues and jazz spots, where they would jam with each other and create new and exciting rhythms. That is precisely why Berry Gordy Jr., in 1959, began his search for the Motown band in Detroit’s popular jazz scene, specifically one of Detroit’s most popular jazz clubs, the Chit Chat Lounge. One of Gordy’s best

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finds was James “Igor” Jamerson who played bass and literally changed the way a bass was played by adding certain “twangs” to demonstrate the bass did not have to be a metronomic beat, but could create grooves and funk of its own. Jamerson was also insistent on incorporating different types of sounds, including Arabic, Asian, and Afro-Cuban stylings, into his music. Another key player was the original drummer Benny “Papa Zita” Benjamin whose distinct snare beats were responsible for that distinctive Motown Sound. Over the years, Gordy gathered thirteen of the best jazz, blues, and (later) funk musicians, both black and white, and they called themselves the “Funk Brothers.”

Although they were kept under tight watch and essentially “on call” for late night recording sessions or just whenever Berry Gordy wanted them, the Funk Brothers did manage to sneak away. Instead of resting or stepping away from music, they ran to the very spots that had inspired their musical creativity – jazz clubs. After a long day of work, the Funk Brothers would go to clubs like the Chit Chat Lounge and play off each other in improvised jam sessions, and drum the beat to an exotic dancer’s gyrating moves on stage and on the pole. It was in these clubs that their creativity knew no bounds and their camaraderie blossomed because they were playing the music they knew how to play best, which was music with no rules. One Funk Brother bragged about their achievements: “It took jazz guys to make it feel so good. How many times have you been at a bar mitzvah or a wedding, and you hear the obligatory Motown medley, “Heat

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8 George, Where Did Our Love Go?, 110.
9 Standing in the Shadows of Motown.
10 Ibid.
Wave," "Dancin' in the Streets" and "My Girl"? Did it sound anything like the records? If it was that easy, everybody could do it.”

Coming from a jazz background where constant improvising based on spontaneous inspiration was key, a majority of the Funk Brothers had a difficult time adapting to the strict, repetitious, and therefore limited playing required of a studio band. These nights out kept them going and it was because of these nights that the Funk Brothers would come up with the catchy and fun sounds and incorporate their creations from the night before into that day’s recording sessions.

Without the technology of synthesizers, the Funk Brothers, Gordy, and other Motown writers and producers collaborated to invent special sounds that regular instruments could not create. For example, they would drag chains across the floor, have people stomp to create “thud” sounds that would echo in the “Snakepit,” shake jars with various contents, and even slap boards together. The 1964 release of “Baby Love” has a catchy “hand clap” beat in the background, which was actually two two-by-fours being smacked against each other. Together, the Funk Brothers and other Motown employees improvised and created inimitable sounds and beats that defined the quintessential “Motown Sound.”

Probably the most underappreciated hit machine of all time (Motown musicians were not give due recognition until the 1970s), the Funk Brothers jammed together for fourteen years, playing songs that had already been written or even grooving together to create a sound that one of the writers or producers loved and would rush a singer into the “Snakepit” to record. Since they stayed true to their jazz, R&B, soul and blues roots;

played together for so long; considered each other “family”; and knew each other’s
distinct styles; the Funk Brothers were able to create an exciting yet composed and
cohesive sound that most studio bands never achieve. Drummer Jack Ashford stated, “It
was a job. We never dreamed it was the special part.”\textsuperscript{13} This unique band was one of the
many contributing factors that helped create and develop the “Motown Sound.”

Another major factor that was responsible for the distinctive “Motown Sound”
was the studio itself. Studio A, the “Snakepit” was a tiny basement that had been roughly
converted into a recording studio. The space was so small, the musicians and singers
often claimed they were “on top of each other,” in the small studio. Mary Wilson of the
Supremes claimed, “Working in such close quarters may have been cramped, but it was
conducive to a better rapport between the singers and players. When the band got into a
groove it inspired the singers, and visa versa.”\textsuperscript{14} The melodies of the Funk Brothers and
voices of the young and talented Motown singers reverberated against the old wood
floors and the plastered (to seal the cracks) walls of the basement. Old theater curtains
were used to soundproof the studio and to ensure there was not too much overlapping
sound. Several isolation booths for the singers and louder instruments like percussion and
organ were built into the wall, after Berry Gordy purchased the property next door. The
studio was so small, in fact, that even the use of amplifiers would cause different sounds
to mix into different microphones. Simple functions like heating and air conditioning
could not operate during a recording session because the “white noise” they produced
interfered and was picked up on the microphones. The “Snakepit” was just one room and
all the musicians, singers and back up singers had to fit into this room; recordings of all

\textsuperscript{13} Fred Goodman, “The Players Behind the Motown Sound, Recognized at Last,” \textit{New York Times}
(November 2002): A32.

\textsuperscript{14} Posner, \textit{Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power}, 51.
elements occurred at one time. If one person messed up, everyone had to start over. Despite all of the reasons why the Motown recordings should not have been successful, the “Snakepit” helped define the “Motown Sound” providing Motown tracks with a “raw” and “urban” feel.\(^\text{15}\)

The “Snakepit” was truly unique in that those elements and dimensions could simply not be recreated. That sound was Motown’s. Berry Gordy realized this and although he incorporated new technologies to improve the sound quality of his records, he tried to not disturb the distinctive vibrations and sounds of the “Snakepit.”

In the area of technology, however, Motown had to be innovative and creative. Not able to afford the best that technology had to offer, Motown’s recording producers and writers worked as a team to make what they had sound good. For example, Motown was one of the first recording studios to really rely on limiters, (a device that adjusts for any inconsistency in volume), which was crucial for the “Snakepit” where volume discrepancies were always an issue.\(^\text{16}\) One method that was really championed by Motown was the use of punch-ins (the ability to record over a mistake in a recording). With today’s technology, a sound technician can just flip a simple switch and it is like the mistake never happened. Back then, however, Motown was recording its takes on two eight tracks, which meant that the person performing the punch-in would have to perfectly synchronize the tapes to record over the mistake. The process was tedious, could produce a “muffled hum” on the “fixed” track, and often took hours.\(^\text{17}\) It is clear, however, that the songs were perfect, and so was the “Motown Sound.”

\(^{15}\) The Temptations. DVD, dir. Allan Arkush (1998; Santa Monica: Artisan Home Entertainment, 1999).

\(^{16}\) George, Where Did Our Love Go?, 133.

\(^{17}\) Ibid, 133.
Although the Funk Brothers and the “Snakepit” itself created a uniquely “Motown Sound” that simply could not be recreated, another major factor in shaping this sound were the writers. For the most part, official job titles were given as a formality but did not limit a person’s involvement in the creative or even the non-creative business aspects of Motown. Therefore, writing was done by official writers like Lamont Dozier, Brian Holland, and Edward Holland Jr., writers/singers like Smokey Robinson, the Funk Brothers, and even by people that were not deliberately involved in the creative process, like then receptionist Janie Bradford who helped create the lyrics to “Money (That’s What I Want).” Smokey Robinson was responsible for a fair number of Motown classics, such as the Temptation’s “My Girl” and “The Way You Do The Things You Do,” but it was really the team of Holland-Dozier-Holland (H-D-H), formed in 1962, that dominated the Motown songwriting department.\(^\text{18}\)

H-D-H was the remarkable writing team comprised of Lamont Dozier, Edward Holland Jr., and Brian Holland that created some of the greatest Motown records from 1962 to 1967. Working together, the team composed, arranged vocals, wrote lyrics, and produced such Motown classics as “(Love is Like a) Heat Wave,” “Where Did Our Love Go,” “Baby I Need Your Loving,” “Nowhere To Run,” “How Sweet It is (To Be Loved By You),” “I Can’t Help Myself (Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch),” “This Old Heart of Mine (Is Weak For You),” “You Can’t Hurry Love,” “Reach Out I’ll Be There,” and “Stop! In the Name of Love,” just to name a few. Whenever Berry Gordy wanted a hit, he would start badgering H-D-H to come up with a new number one hit, which they managed to do successfully for about five years.

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There is no doubt that the songwriters were ingenious and created some of the best music of the time period, but part of the “Motown Sound” was the “similarity” in the grooves, beats, and lyrics. One reason Gordy insisted on a “steady” and “light” sound was because he knew what worked well in car radios. The car radio was becoming increasingly popular, especially for young America (the targeted Motown audience) so Gordy had small, car speakers built in his studio where he would play produced mixes through it to hear how they sounded. Was it a song that teenagers cruising in their new Cadillac or Ford could sing along to and groove to in a car? Sometimes the bass was too high, sometimes parts of the song were too heavy, and Gordy would quickly fix them to ensure that young America got hooked on his contagious and repetitious beats. Young America felt the “coolest” while driving their cars and there was no better place to hear a Motown song, because eventually young America would connect the feeling of “cool” to those songs. These “cool” songs then became “popular” songs and jumped onto the white dominated Pop charts. As writer David Morse noted, “Motown’s light, unfussy, evenly stressed beat, its continuous loop melodies, were the ideal accompaniment for driving.”

Berry Gordy took the sound quality of a car radio very seriously because he was making records in the Motor City. Songs like The Temptations’ “My Girl” and The Miracles’ “Shop Around” were edited and cut with the thinking that more often than not, they would be coming through car radios. Both of those songs had been co-written by Smokey Robinson who understood another key element of the car radio song: the time. “The shorter the record is nowadays, the more it’s gonna be played. This is a key thing in radio time… If you have a record that’s 2:15 long, it’s definitely gonna get more play

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19 Smith, Dancing in the Street, 124.
than one that’s 3:15, at first, which is very important,” Robinson observed.\(^{21}\) Because shorter songs were played more often, the more everyone would heard them, including the white audience. The specific “shortness” of Motown songs played a major factor in its success in creating “crossover music” and appealing to whites.

In 1964, the “car of the year” was released and both Ford and Motown were aiming for the same audience: the youth of America. The Ford Mustang was the equivalent of cool and instantly became the most popular car in America. Motown jumped on another golden opportunity to target young America and Gordy arranged for Martha Reeves and the Vandellas to perform their biggest hit at the time, “No Where to Run,” on television at the Ford River Rouge Plant. Over the television, a majority of young America could see their favorite song being sung right next to their favorite (and hippest) car. The mental connection that Gordy forced was ingenious, and Ford certainly did not mind the free publicity.\(^{22}\) Throughout the years, Gordy made many of the Motown artists take photographs next to cars, usually Cadillacs, which reinforced the connection that the American youth made between “cool” music and “cool” cars and how sweet the combination could be.

The car radio sound was very important, but Motown songs also carried an overarching theme; they were simple, easy-to-sing-to and remember lyrics, fun melodies, with heavily emphasized choruses with louder beats, music and singing. Hooks (recurring vocal and instrumental lines) were scattered throughout Motown songs and because of the similar sound Gordy stuck to, each song created a subconscious sense of déjà vu for the listeners. Most of America was almost immediately hooked to the hot new Motown

\(^{21}\) Quoted in Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 124.

\(^{22}\) Ibid, 130.
single. For example, the Supreme’s song “Baby Love,” has very similar melodies to the Supreme’s song “Where Did Our Love Go?” as does the Isley Brothers’ “This Old Heart of Mine (Is Weak For You)” and the Four Tops’ “Shake Me, Wake Me (When It’s Over).” That is not to say that all Motown songs sound the same, but they all contain a similar groove, beat and have passionately sung lyrics. Clearly it took genius and never ending creativity to reach such heights and success on the Billboard charts. Gordy had a formula and achieved success through flawlessness.

Perfection was a key quality that Berry Gordy strived for with his records and he refused or was hesitant to release records that he and his team did not think were going to be a hit. “Berry Gordy is one of the most critical people in the world,” recalled Smokey Robinson. Gordy ensured the upkeep of perfection in his records by establishing a quality control department. Copying the assembly-line style of the Lincoln-Mercury automotive plant, Gordy set up this department to be the final destination of every producer’s final cut mixes. Billie Jean Brown, the head of quality control, would listen to the records, assess their hit potential, and then depending on the quality of the record, the records were brought to the Berry Gordy-run meetings on Friday mornings. Brown was tough and when she was asked “which one of these records do you like best?” she responded with, “You mean which one do I hate least, don’t you?” That level of critique was exactly what Berry Gordy was looking for.

The Friday morning meetings were Gordy’s and he developed his own unique system of assessing the hit potential of each record. The most astonishing fact about Gordy and his being able to critique music and own a music company was the fact that

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24 Gordy, To Be Loved, 156.
Berry Gordy was musically illiterate. He could neither play nor read music.\textsuperscript{25} Despite his illiteracy, he would gather writers and producers, play the record in question, wait until the end, and then begin his series of questioning. “How many think it’s a hit?” Several hands would rise. “Now, if you were hungry and had only one dollar, would you buy this record or a hot dog?” According to Gordy, “Whenever I asked this, invariably they would pick the hot dog. But what I was looking for was how long it took them to make up their minds.”\textsuperscript{26} Gordy’s system may seem “simplistic” or “unorthodox” but it certainly worked. From 1954 through 1967, Motown had 14 number one pop singles, 21 number one soul singles and 46 Top Fifteen pop singles, and 74 other Top Fifteen soul singles.\textsuperscript{27}

Successful, fun, and lucrative, the “Motown Sound” came with a specific look, style, and act that focused on makings its artists successful at “crossover.” This look was crucial because the look became how the “Motown Sound” was delivered. Being African American, the Motown artists had to overcome the inevitable racism they would face in many shapes and forms. Just to prove themselves on par with other successful white artists of the same era, Motown artists had to be absolutely perfect and poised in their dress, talk, and dance. They had to be better than the white artists in every way just to be able to compete on the same level. They were training to perform and act in the public sphere, but they acted like they were training for “kings and queens, lords and ladies.”\textsuperscript{28} Part of the Motown assembly line was “Artist Development,” which was comprised of various stations whose goal was to perfect the appearance of every Motown artist.

Maxine Powell, a poised woman who owned her own finishing school, joined Motown to

\textsuperscript{25} Posner, \textit{Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power}, 52.
\textsuperscript{26} Gordy, \textit{To Be Loved}, 186.
\textsuperscript{27} George, \textit{Where Did Our Love Go?}, 103.
teach etiquette, makeup, and proper stage and social charisma. Powell made the young women walk with books on their heads to enforce good posture, taught them how to properly take a seat, and while singing, told them there was absolutely no “spreading your legs or sticking out your buttocks.”

To help out the women who felt they needed more curves to their bodies (Diana Ross and Mary Wilson), Powell provided padding to insert in their bras and hips.

Another important figure in Motown’s Artist Development department was the choreographer Cholly Atkins who had started out in New York as part of a dance team. Atkins danced his whole life and choreographed for many musicals prior to joining Motown. Atkins, like other African American dancers, was constantly reminded of the racial stereotypes against his race in that although they were “depicted as excelling in creative energy, [they were simultaneously depicted] as otherwise mindless.” Nonetheless, he created the different groups’ dance routines with a variety of moves including side steps, claps, and turns. Cholly Atkins and the most creative dance member of the group, Paul Williams, collaborated to come up with the “Temptations Walk.” Their trademark on-stage dance routine included simple slides with their feet and swinging of their hips, but it did wonders for the screaming girls in the crowd. According to Otis Williams, “What set Cholly’s work apart from other choreographers’ was that he built everything around the singing… to create a dance that takes into consideration such things as stage layout… and how the hell you are going to move, sing, and still

The Artist Development department was key in creating the Motown look and sound. As the Temptations’ bassist Melvin Franklin said, “They taught you about makeup. They taught you about personal hygiene. They taught us what questions to answer with the press and what not to answer… I became very programmed.”

Gordy saw the “Artist Development” stage of his artist production line to be absolutely essential not only because he wanted his artists to be presentable and proper, but because he wanted to prove that African Americans were just as capable as whites of acting, dressing, walking, and talking in a “proper” and acceptable fashion and could be just as successful as whites. By making the Motown artists go through this training, Gordy was smashing all racist stereotypes rooted in slavery that claimed African Americans were incapable of being “refined” or “cultured.” Although this process was crucial to the success of Motown and its artists, many argued that Motown “copped out” and that its artists were “acting white,” in a sense. But many Motown artists disagree. As Mary Wilson explains, “None of us came from homes that didn’t teach manners. We were all trying to get ahead, and it’s always be bothered me that by accepting what some consider ‘white’ values, we sold out. It’s just not true.”

During the tumultuous 1960s, if Motown artists had not been presented in this strict and “perfect” fashion, they and the company might never have succeeded.

Finally, another dimension that contributed to the development of the “Motown Sound” was the Motor City itself. Steeped in a history of racial conflict and a hardworking lower class, Detroit had a sense about it that no other major recording city had. Cities like Los Angeles, New York and even Nashville were proud, overcrowded,

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32 Otis Williams, Temptations (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), 87.
34 Smith, Dancing in the Street, 121.
and demanded a certain style right away from their artists, not always being patient and allowing their artists to perform to their highest potential. Motown allowed artists to grow. Two of the greatest Motown acts, for example, stuck around Hitsville, U.S.A., for approximately two years before they became the musical sensations they were (The Temptations and The Supremes). Motown was part of the community. Most of the young people thought of Motown like Mary Wilson, “Motown was the club everyone wanted to join. It was just cool, you know? And if you are sixteen, cool is the meaning of life itself.”

The “coolest” aspect about the Motown “club” was that in the early 1960s almost anyone could audition as there were regular lines of “wanna-be cool kids” lined up outside of Hitsville, U.S.A. and the dream of “making it big” was actually within reach for many people.

Motown started as a family effort (the Gordy family) and from the very beginning, the company felt intimate. Many of the artists were young and for them, Motown was a “home away from home” because in the studio, not only would they work, sing and record, but they would also play games, relax and eat together. The company served family-style meals for everyone who was around throughout the day and these times together allowed the artists to get close and form close friendships. Smokey Robinson recalled, “We loved that house…the house was part of the magic. The house was our hangout. It was also our studio and recreation center. It had to be the most energetic spot on the planet.”

These bonds of friendship and of camaraderie, although far from peaceful at all times, were part of the reason why Motown was so special. Aside

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from the usual “blood, sweat and tears” that went into each record, there was also a soul that became part of each Motown record.

The Motor City, aside from lending its “production line” system to the record company’s method of creating records, carried many unique aspects that went into the “Motown Sound.” The Brewster Housing Project was one of the “nicer” housing complexes that was built for African Americans in the 1930s and naturally, many of the Motown artists, including the Supremes, came from these apartments. It was here that many of the Motown artists began their singing careers as several jazz players and doo-wop groups performed daily on the property. The structure of the building itself provided a distinctive acoustics due to the smooth, concrete hallways and stairwells. Singing groups would often compete, taking advantage of the building’s quality sound. Transforming simple and often empty structures into practice rooms and areas of competition, the Brewster Projects and Community Center was responsible for facilitating the development of future Motown stars, such as The Supremes, The Temptations, and The Four Tops.37

The “Motown Sound” was comprised of many different components, all of which made the sound perfect. It was because of this perfection that the “Motown Sound” was able to successfully cross over and become the “sound of young America.” The backgrounds provided by the Funk Brothers, the songs provided by the many writers, the moves choreographed by Cholly, and Gordy’s savvy understanding of what music young people played (and where they played it) as well as his rigidity in producing quality hits all made Motown music part of sixties America. At a time when many white Americans

37 Mary Wilson, Dreamgirl of Supreme Faith: My Life As a Supreme (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1999), 59.
would not accept blacks into their neighborhoods or schools, Motown brought polished and talented African Americans into white homes via records, radio play, and television appearances. This was no small feat.
Chapter 3: Achieving “Cross over” Through Civil Rights Principles

Motown was built on the strong principles held by the Civil Rights Movement, including black empowerment, economic uplift, equality, and integration. Berry Gordy’s family had long held the teachings of Booker T. Washington to be central to their own success and neither his father nor his grandfather allowed whites to get involved in any of the family’s economic life. In fact, had it not been for the African American community in Detroit that believed in Washington’s message of “self-help,” Motown would not have been able to happen. As far as incorporating the teachings of equality through integration by Martin Luther King Jr., Berry Gordy did not hesitate to hire the “best man for the job,” whether he was white or black. Gordy wanted to make money, bottom line, and although he had a line-up of all African Americans artists, members of the Funk Brothers, the production team, the sales team, and many other areas of the Motown family were white. Of course, the fact that it was Berry Gordy, an African American, promoting an all
African American lineup of artists and style of music, certainly empowered African Americans. Gordy and his company set an example, proving once and for all that African Americans were just as capable as whites and had the potential to go far beyond “successful” to superstardom.

Booker T. Washington preached a self-reliance and self-help principle when it came to ensuring full equality for African Americans. Washington believed that the American economic policy of laissez-faire was color-blind but that society kept African Americans from achieving economic success. African Americans needed economic success because economic success could eventually translate into power. African Americans were constantly robbed of economic independence by whites who stole and deceived African Americans and thus the African American community was crippled because it was denied economic freedom and thus, denied power.¹ Berry Gordy Jr. had learned from his grandfather and father the importance of economic independence. Berry’s grandfather, who lived his whole life in the South, was sure to keep every bill and every statement he received related to his business, because if he did not the local whites would offer their “help” and eventually steal the business away. Berry Gordy Sr. followed these same principles by not allowing the local whites to get involved and reading law books to fully understand his rights regarding his land and business. Berry Gordy Sr. was “too good” at being self-reliant and his family earned the nickname “big dogs” for being so successful.² Unfortunately, as the Ku Klux Klan grew, the number of threats Berry Gordy Sr. received increased as well. From 1900 to 1922, approximately 1,502 African Americans were lynched by the KKK. Due to the unacceptability of Berry

Gordy Sr.’s success, he was forced to leave and seek employment elsewhere. Arriving in Detroit in the 1920s, Berry Gordy Sr. employed the principle of economic self-sufficiency and not too long after he started out, became the proud owner of the Booker T. Washington Grocery Store and two other successful businesses.\(^3\)

Booker T. Washington also preached black entrepreneurship, which the Motown Record Company fully represented. Motown eventually became a model of African American accomplishment and pride in Detroit and across America. African Americans felt a need to support other African American businesses to help further the cause of black independence through economic success. Groups like the Booker T. Washington Trade Association and the Housewives League of Detroit promoted the black ownership of businesses to achieve economic success. These two groups took Booker T. Washington’s dream one step further and promoted strategic consumerism to increase profit in black businesses. The dream of blacks supporting blacks through business led to a bigger dream of political empowerment. Employing these methods of black empowerment, the community rallied behind Charles Diggs who became the first African American elected to the Michigan senate.\(^4\)

Another example on a smaller, community level, of blacks helping blacks was Motown’s relationship with Mr. Kelley’s Lounge. Berry Gordy needed money to start Motown, Mr. George Kelley offered to help out financially. Gordy declined the generous offer, wanting to be the sole owner of Motown, but repaid Kelley’s generosity by having Motown’s aspiring acts perform at Mr. Kelley’s Lounge, which helped both parties. Unknown Motown artists were able to build

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reputations and Mr. Kelley’s Lounge became one of the most popular night clubs in Detroit.  

The theme of black empowerment through economic success was common to all factions of the Civil Rights Movement, as evidenced by Malcolm X’s remarks that “It’s because black men don’t own and control their own community’s retail establishments that they can’t stabilize their own community.” When preaching black economic independence, Malcolm X stressed that African Americans could not rely on the main industries of the cities, which were inevitably controlled by whites. In Detroit, that white-owned business was the automobile industry. Berry Gordy and Motown accomplished Malcolm X’s goal of ideal black economic independence by creating a completely separate industry from the city’s main industry and did so with an all African American artist line up that appealed to a multiracial audience. Although Gordy insisted that he and his company were politically neutral, this accomplishment was intrinsically political and had racial and social implications.

On the other spectrum of the Civil Rights Movement, Gordy appealed to the integrationist goal of Martin Luther King Jr. and Motown achieved this on two fronts: within the company (the hiring of whites) and through the Motown audience (creating “cross over” music). Gordy believed in hiring “the best man or woman” for positions within the company, regardless of race. In the case of Barney Ales, a key member of the Motown sales team, Gordy realized the importance of hiring a white man. Ales was able to make Motown records reach markets and radio stations that Gordy would never have been able to contact or convince to play “race music.”

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Barney Ales was the first white person to become part of the Motown family and became one of the reasons Motown was able to “cross over” to the white markets and become so successful. Unlike large record companies, Motown had to rely on various music stores and radio DJs to push their music to independent distributors. Before Gordy was introduced to Ales, Motown relied on local distributor B&H who specialized in selling Rhythm and Blues (R&B). Unfortunately for Motown at the time, it was nearly impossible to get R&B (“race music”) on white radio stations which strictly played “pop music.” Barney Ales changed all that for Motown.7

Gordy and Ales knew that radio was key, and to ensure air time, a distributor had to know and get along with the DJs. In Detroit, the two main “black” radio stations were WCBH and WJLB. DJs were extremely important, especially within black communities because not only would they play records, but they would also discuss issues relative to the community. They had the power to make stars based on how much air play they gave a song and what they said about a song or company. They also had the power to ruin careers by simply ignoring certain records or “trash talking” the record. Gordy got to know the main DJs of Detroit really well and understood the importance of keeping them happy because DJs literally ruled the air waves.8 Most record companies were large enough that they could shower the DJs with money and gifts, but when Motown was just starting out and desperately needed air time, they could simply not afford to do so. Before Barney Ales started working for Motown, Berry Gordy was forced to improvise and do everything in his power to get the DJs on his side. In 1960, for example, Motown released the Miracles’ “Way Over There,” and Gordy found out that DJ Georgie Woods

8 Berry Gordy, To Be Loved, 140-141.
(the most influential DJ in Philadelphia) was not playing the record. Gordy went to his radio station in Philadelphia and when Woods was on a break, he asked his secretary for a hot dog. Gordy shot up and said, “Hot dog? I’ll get it!” and ran to fetch Woods his food. Returning with the hot dog, Gordy handed Woods the “Way Over There” record and it instantly went on the air. Within two days after the record first played in Philadelphia, 1,000 records were ordered by Philadelphia music retail stores.9

Because personally delivering every new record to each DJ was impossible, Gordy knew he needed a different approach to complete his “create, make, sell” production system. The “create” and “make” parts were under control, but the “selling” phase needed a more professional approach. In 1960, Berry Gordy decided to give Barney Ales a try due to his impressive sales records and popularity with DJs. His first task was to promote the Miracles’ “Way Over There,” and Mary Wells’s “Bye Bye Baby.” Gordy realized the power and level of influence that Ales had over the DJs very quickly. At first, neither record did well, so Gordy decided to have Ales focus solely on “Way Over There” and within a short period of time, Gordy stopped hearing “Bye Bye Baby” all together. Gordy called Ales and asked him if he had anything to do with the sudden disappearance of “Bye Bye Baby” from the radio and Ales replied that he had just mentioned to the local DJs that “Bye Bye Baby” was no longer his record. Gordy was impressed and put Ales back on “Bye Bye Baby” and within a couple of days, the record was back on the radio.10

Ales and Gordy started to become friends, but Ales still felt the need to impress Gordy so as to secure a prominent position within Motown. One weekend, Ales invited

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Gordy to go pheasant hunting (not your typical inner-city activity). Gordy recalled, “It began on a nerve-wracking note. I had never been around that many people, that many white people…out in the woods…with guns.” Ales predicted the racial tension and to make Gordy more acceptable to his white friends, he told them Gordy was a doctor from Detroit. On their drive up (approximately 200 miles north through Michigan) Ales had prearranged for the local radio stations in the cities along their route to be playing Motown songs. Constantly re-tuning the radio to listen to the local stations, Gordy was extremely happy and quite amazed. “I knew I had him” recalled Ales.

Not too long after that, Ales was assigned to promote the new Miracles’ record, “Shop Around,” which, due to his zealous promotion, became a huge success and officially Motown’s first “cross over” hit (number one on the R&B charts and number two on the Pop charts). Gordy’s ex-wife Raymona, recalled, “Within two weeks of [Ales] joining Hitsville, ‘Shop Around’ started to move…We had crossed over, and Barney Ales had been our navigator.” After the huge success of the record, Ales wanted to make it official and sign with Motown, demanding $125 a week (at that time, the highest paid person in Motown was Gordy’s sister Loucye Gordy who was paid $35 a week). Gordy agreed because he knew he had to have Ales in order to have a successful business. Instantly, Ales saw ways to restructure and reorganize the Motown “sell” stage within the company and instead of receiving orders for 1,000 records at a time, Motown was getting orders for 10,000 records at a time.

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11 Gordy, To Be Loved, 146.
12 Posner, Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power, 63.
13 Raymona Gordy Singleton with Bryan Brown and Mim Eichler, Berry, Me, and Motown: The Untold Story (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1990), 49.
Ales approached his job as a Motown executive very enthusiastically, but his friends only saw color and were not pleased that Ales was working for an all-black business promoting “race music.” “I did take a lot of heat back in the early 1960s for working for a black guy. A lot of whites couldn’t get that. I didn’t care. It was their problem.” Another white executive that joined the Motown family several years later, Tom Noonan, recalled “When friends would see me, people would often ask what it was like to work for a black company, and I would say, ‘The money is green.’” Race factored into Ales’s dealings and association with Motown on a regular basis. For example, whenever Ales would travel to promote Motown records, Ales soon discovered that companies would consistently book him into hotels that were in almost exclusively black neighborhoods because companies assumed that Ales had to be black if he was promoting a black music company.

Barney Ales was the first white person to become part of the Motown family but many others joined the company and helped bolster its success and popularity. Another prominent white man who worked for Motown in the sales team was Shelly Berger. Berger was hired in mid-1966 to oversee the biggest and hottest two Motown acts at the time: the Supremes and the Temptations. Gordy hired Berger over the phone after researching his work and several phone interviews and when they finally met face to face, Gordy was surprised to learn that Berger was white. Berger was hired because he shared the same vision that Gordy did, which was crossover. Berger had the connections to push the Supremes and the Temptations into popular night clubs, more television shows, and to help the groups appeal to a broader audience and market.

15 Ibid, 65.
16 Ibid, 65.
17 Otis Williams, Temptations (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), 104.
At the time Berger took over as the Supremes’ and Temptations’ manager, many people loved the Temptations, but everyone loved the Supremes. Therefore, one of Berger’s first acts as their manager was to have the two groups appear in television shows and concerts together. The Temptations felt the pressure performing with the Supremes, but there was no need to worry as the Temptations performed fantastically whenever they performed (they were known for their dancing and precision). Berger helped push the Motown goal of “cross over” and achieved a lot of success for the company and for its artists.

Other whites that joined the Motown family were people like Ralph Seltzer, a lawyer, who was given the vague position of “assistant to the president,” which essentially allowed him to be involved in a wide range of the company’s dealings. Sidney Noveck was an accountant for Motown, and his brother, Harold Noveck, was an important consultant for Motown. Additionally, two promotion staffers that worked under Barney Ales, Phil Jones and Irv Biegel, were important additions to the sales team at Motown. In fact, by the time Motown was well established, most of the sales team was white, which clearly helped Motown records reach previously unreachable audiences. Additionally, and unfortunately, the primarily white sales department furthered already well established rumors that Berry Gordy was “selling out” to white interests. Regardless, Motown was expanding and as it did, its family became more and more diverse.

Due to the increasing size of Motown, the company had many more minds to assist in accomplishing the goal of creating “crossover music” and appealing more to white audiences. Motown already had an “Artist Production” department that groomed its artists to perfection, had perfected the car radio sound, and had accomplished getting its

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18 George, Where Did Our Love Go?, 56.
records played on almost all the major radio stations around. What they needed now was for their artists to start performing on typically “white” stages and on typically “white” shows. Among these would be the *Ed Sullivan Show, American Bandstand*, and the Copacabana.

The *Ed Sullivan Show* and Dick Clark’s *American Bandstand* were key for exposing the Motown stars to a broader audience. With a huge following, an obsessive, dedicated, and diverse audience of American youth tuned in to watch these shows to hear the newest jokes, catch the newest dance moves, and to see their favorite groups/singers perform. Berry Gordy knew that if he wanted to accomplish full “cross over” he had to get his African American stars in front of a national audience via the most popular shows on television. Gordy also knew that if they were the most popular shows in America, it was because a majority of white youth was eagerly watching.

When, in 1960, The Miracles achieved Motown’s first major hit and first official “cross over” hit with “Shop Around,” the time seemed right for Motown to make a television debut. Largely due to Barney Ales, the Miracles became the first Motown group on ABC’s *American Bandstand*. The performance was a success and “Shop Around” laid the groundwork for all future Motown artists and their hits. Now that Motown had accomplished the goal of getting one of their acts on a nationally televised and primarily “white” show, people were paying attention to the new record company and Motown had established connections to get their artists in the limelight.

Motown used its connections with Dick Clark at a crucial moment in 1964. Clark hosted and organized many types of shows, *American Bandstand* being the most popular and successful. He also organized a tour he called the “Caravan of Stars” which began in

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1959 and organized some of the hottest acts at the time to tour the United States. In 1964, the “no hit” Supremes needed a boost and Motown was able to convince Dick Clark to include them on his “Caravan of Stars” tour for that summer. At the time, the Supremes had just released, “Where Did Our Love Go?” and it had yet to really take off and Gordy thought if the group got more exposure, the song and group would receive the credit they deserved. Although Dick Clark was initially reluctant to incorporate the female trio on his tour, Gordy insisted, claiming, “We need Dick Clark for the white people, I gotta have that tour…” Gordy was absolutely correct. As the summer progressed, The Supremes got the exposure they desperately needed and “Where Did Our Love Go?” steadily climbed the charts and became one of their trademark hits. After eleven previous attempts at hit songs, The Supremes had finally made it, and more importantly, they had officially “crossed over.”

Because of their exposure, the Supremes reached a level of success they had previously thought impossible. Soon after returning from the “Caravan of Stars” tour, The Supremes were anxious to release their next song, and already recorded, “Baby Love.” Gordy insisted that it be re-cut to be more up-tempo. Also, Diana Ross added her quintessential “Ooo-ooo-ooo” to the beginning, which arguably made the song the hit it was. A month after the song was released, it became a number one hit. Remarkably, a month after that, it became a number one hit in Britain, which was another first of many to come for Motown. White audiences around the world were now paying close attention to Motown.

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21 Gordy, To Be Loved, 206-207.
Although Dick Clark’s shows and tours were crucial for exposure to white audiences, Motown artists felt like they had really hit the big time once they made it on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. As a host of a successful variety show that ran from 1948 to 1971, Ed Sullivan is arguably one of the most prominent television personalities of all time. Sullivan was also an outspoken advocate for integration on television, arguing the television had the power to positively impact race relations in America.\(^{23}\) To be invited on the show was a huge honor and the Supremes became the first Motown group to appear with Ed Sullivan. Riding the success of their 1964 singles, The Supremes’ appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* marked an important moment not only in Motown’s history, but also for African American culture as a whole. Ed Sullivan introduced the “three youngsters from Detroit,” on December 27, 1964, and The Supremes belted out “Come See about Me,” which immediately captivated the audience and soon became their next big hit.\(^{24}\) The Temptations also appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show* and Otis Williams claimed, “While we were singing (the group performed “My Girl”), one part of me was really trying to focus on what my feet and my mouth were doing, while another part of me kept saying, ‘Shit, I am on Ed Sullivan. I am on *Ed Sullivan*.’”\(^{25}\) Again, exposure proved crucial for the success of Motown groups and for the Motown record company as a whole. Groups like the Temptations and the Supremes were able to appeal to the mainstream, white audience via the *Ed Sullivan Show* and that allowed Motown to continue growing and be a successful black business.

Soon after The Supremes’ appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, Berry Gordy incorporated an appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* as the final step of his record

\(^{24}\) Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 131.
\(^{25}\) Williams, *Temptations*, 93.
production line. Gordy arranged for artists like The Supremes, The Four Tops, The Temptations and The Miracles to appear on the *Ed Sullivan Show* right after they released a new single. Almost like clockwork, the single would explode and hit number one on the charts after performing it on Sullivan’s variety show. It soon became regular to see the Motor City’s African Americans, their culture, and their “sound” on televisions in white suburbs across the nation. Needless to say, record sales for Motown skyrocketed even more after their landmark year of 1964.26

Exposure on television shows was key to the success of the Motown artists, but so was where the Motown artists performed and who they performed for. One of the most prominent night clubs of the time was New York’s Copacabana and Gordy used exclusive clubs like this one to reach the final “cross over” stage: the white adult audience. Berry Gordy knew that if he could get “the Sound of Young America” to appeal to the white adult audience, Motown would obtain a whole new market. The Copacabana was known to attract the upper-middle class, white, socialite audience and the club itself usually booked artists that had very well established careers and were in the jazz and vocal genres. For example, before the Motown artists made it to the Copa, the night club’s regulars were singers like Tony Bennett, Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, and Perry Como. The Copa also invited regulars like Sammy Davis Jr., Ella Fitzgerald, Lena Horne, and Nat King Cole. In fact, by the late 1950s, Nat King Cole established a reputation as the “King of the Copacabana” but unfortunately for Cole that was the same time rock n’ roll was emerging on the popular scene. Soon music producers switched their focus from the adult market to the teenage market.27

26 Ibid, 131.
27 Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 153.
Although the music industry’s focus switched to young America, the Copacabana maintained its “distinguished” performance choices. Gordy and his sales team pushed Motown artists to the Copacabana, persuading the night club owners that their artists were “well-groomed,” distinguished, and already appealed to the youth of America. Besides, many Motown acts had appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, and the Motown artists could use their sophisticated acts to include the white adult audience in the new movement of music. Diana Ross and the Supremes appeared at the Copa in 1965, ironically not too long after “Bloody Sunday” in Selma, Alabama. On that day, Alabama state troopers attacked a group of nonviolent protesters attempting to cross the Edmond Pettus Bridge on March 7, 1965.\(^{28}\) It must have been difficult for the Supremes and the Motown staff to know that at the very same time Motown was working on perfecting the Supremes to be acceptable to the white adult audience, whites were attacking African Americans demanding equal rights. The Supremes and the Motown family stayed strong, however, and the Supremes appeared at the Copacabana on July 29, 1965, and received great reviews after the white, elite, adult audience went wild for “Baby Love” and “Come See about Me.” One great review from the Copa meant the entire night club circuit from New York, to Las Vegas and Los Angeles would want to book those acts. A world of possibilities and a whole new market opened up for Motown after the Supremes’ great reviews.\(^{29}\)

Marvin Gaye, for example, was signed to play a week at San Francisco’s Bimbo’s 365 Club, which, despite its name, was a prestigious and distinguished night club that was first opened in 1931. Gaye was known for his sexual lyrics, image and performances.

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\(^{29}\) Gordy, *To Be Loved*. 229.
on stage. He knew he had good looks, loved to party, and loved women; he sold sex through his singing. Gordy warned Gaye to not get “carried away” while on stage. Gaye, who came from a strict and very religious family was worried, so he created a whole new routine in which he sang “classics” like “Blue Moon” but Gaye bombed in front of a standing-room-only crowd. Gordy was furious, bewildered and wondering where Gaye’s classics had gone and his show was immediately changed so he would sing songs like “Pride and Joy” and “You’re a Wonderful One.”30 That show, the real Marvin Gaye show, was a success and received high praise. Gaye was lucky he could fall back on his sex appeal to book him gigs at night clubs and keep on the crucial night club circuit.

Gordy continued to keep his eye on the prize: to appeal to all of America, races and ages, and to encourage America to buy his records. One way Gordy accomplished this was allowing the Beatles to record specific Motown hits. Soon after the Supremes had clinched a number one hit song on the British charts with “Baby Love,” Gordy received a call from the Beatle’s manager, Brian Epstein. Epstein raved about the “Motown Sound” and went on to describe how much the Beatles loved Motown, the songs and the artists. The Beatles gave an ecstatic public endorsement of Motown while Motown was on their UK tour in 1965 and John Lennon publicly claimed that Marvin Gaye’s “Can I Get a Witness?” was one of his favorite songs.31 After boosting Gordy’s ego quite a bit, Epstein pitched the idea of the Beatles recording three Motown songs, the Marvellettes’ “Please Mr. Postman,” the Miracles’ “You’ve Really Got a Hold on Me,” and one of the first Motown hits, Barrett Strong’s “Money (That’s What I Want).”32

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31 Gordy, To Be Loved, 213.
32 Posner, Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power, 142.
Flattered and feeling even more powerful that before, Gordy was convinced that the Beatles needed Motown more than Motown really needed them. Epstein only offered one and a half cents per record sold for each song, instead of the standard two cents, and Gordy initially refused the offer. Barney Ales quickly stepped in and calculated that with the Beatles’ star power, Motown would still generate a good income, would generate more interest in the company, and most importantly, further the process of creating “cross over” music. As soon as Gordy gave his approval, he was stunned to learn that less than two hours later, the Beatles’ label, Capitol Records, already had the records in stock and were beginning to distribute them.  

Motown’s goal of “cross over” defied the myth that African Americans only sang R&B, or more commonly put, that blacks could only sing “black” music. Gordy further defied this when he had the Supremes record two of the Beatles’ songs, “I Want To Hold Your Hand,” and “A Hard Day’s Night” in 1964. It was previously deemed appropriate for whites to record “black” songs and even more appropriate to simply steal them without crediting the original artists. Now that Motown had established itself and had the money to protect its songs and artists, nobody could steal its “sound.” Additionally, Motown made a bold move by taking songs that everyone knew to be “rock and roll” songs and re-recording them with black artists. The Supremes were chosen because out of all the Motown artists, they had the most star power and thus the most potential to defy racial barriers and achieve “cross over” success.

Because Motown was able to incorporate Civil Rights themes of black empowerment and integration, it was able to reach broader markets and attain a level of

33 Ibid, 137.
success previously untouched by an African American owned business with African American stars. Motown was a progressive business and broke racial barriers while simultaneously smashing through sales records and dominating the Pop and R&B charts. As Motown became more successful, the more it disproved African American stereotypes, thus furthering the cause and providing a solid example for the Civil Rights Movement.
Chapter 4: Race, Motown and Music

The “Motown Sound” laid the soundtrack to the moving speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and encouraged young African Americans to feel empowered and inspired while simultaneously reaching out to young whites and forcing them to come to terms with the vast inequalities of the time. Some African Americans have argued that Motown could have done more to promote the Civil Rights Movement, but the “Motown Sound” still encouraged young America to come together: “Oh it doesn't matter what you wear, just as long as you are there, so come on every guy, grab a girl, everywhere, around the world, they're dancin', dancin' in the street.”

On August 28, 1963, Motown Records released *The Great March to Freedom*, a recording of Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech when he lead Detroit’s Great March in 1963. The diverse city of Detroit proved an ideal platform for King to deliver his speech.

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The *The Great March to Freedom* album greatly deviated from Motown’s production system of producing grooves people liked to dance to and lyrics people liked to sing from their cars. Berry Gordy understood the significance of this historic speech and of this great man and therefore recorded the speech to preserve forever. Still, Gordy was in the record business to make money and there is something to be said for the observation that Gordy may have hoped the speech to be bigger than it was and that people of all color would see the record as a “must-have.”

Regardless of his original intentions, by recording King’s speech, Gordy aligned himself with the SCLC wing of the Civil Rights Movement.

Gordy was very clear in his choosing to support Martin Luther King Jr. and the peaceful resistance movement within the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, in October, 1963, King signed an exclusive recording contract with Motown Records. But Gordy’s choice to support Martin Luther King Jr. and not the more radical branches of the Civil Rights Movement became evident when Malcolm X arrived in Detroit on November 10, 1963, to deliver his stirring “Message to the Grass Roots” speech. Motown, however, did not offer to record this speech and Gordy thus distanced himself from any militant wing of the Civil Rights Movement. This was perhaps because Gordy preferred the peaceful and positive approach of the Reverend King and also perhaps because aligning his company with the Islamic militant Malcolm X would most certainly have political and financial repercussions.

Before King’s speech in Detroit, the Motor City was starting to get a reputation as the “model city” for interracial relations. Much of this “progressive” image was due in

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3 Ibid, 56.
large part to the liberal mayor Jerome P. Cavanagh in 1962 and the Motown Record Company. Motown promoted the perception of racial equality and tolerance because it was a successful, predominantly African American company promoting African American artists. Berry Gordy was credited with creating a safe space for talented, young African Americans to gather and succeed in a competitive industry and creating a field for African Americans to participate equally with whites. The NAACP of Detroit, in 1963, commended Berry Gordy Jr. for his efforts, “‘in recognition of his spectacular rise in a very competitive field and for his efforts in opening the field to Negroes…Detroit has become recognized as the center of the rhythm and blues recording industry.’”

Despite Gordy’s efforts to distance himself from the Civil Rights Movement he was certainly gathering a lot of praise from activists and groups promoting equality amongst the races.

Being in the North, Gordy thought he had already distanced himself from much of the race struggle due to the fact that at the time, the Civil Rights Movement had been seen as a primarily Southern battle. Although there were many aspects of life in the North that were far from equal between African Americans and whites, northern blacks were seen to have it better and because of that, the general sentiment in the North was to leave things be – a comfortable level of complacency. During the Great March, Martin Luther King Jr. reminded Detroiters, “to work with determination to get rid of any segregation and discrimination in Detroit – realizing that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

There were still many forms of discrimination in the North and although they were not as blatant as the Jim Crow laws in the South, they took forms of overt and

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4 Smith, Dancing in the Street, 24.
5 “Speech at the Great March on Detroit,” http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches/Speech_at_the_great_march_on_detroit.html
subtle discrimination in housing, employment, and education discrimination. Instead of praising the new “city of model race relations,” King urged the population of Detroit to protest conditions that were “not great, but better than the South” and to fight for true equality.\textsuperscript{6}

Motown artists noticed the vast differences between the ways in the North and in the South every time they went on tour and were treated like second class citizens or simply witnessed the discrimination southern blacks faced. Most of the Motown artists, band, and production teams were from the South or at least their parents were, and every time they returned from a southern tour they were happy that they had escaped, but still saddened by the extreme inequalities enforced by the Jim Crow laws (or what they called “the old ways.”)\textsuperscript{7}

Entering the South on the Motortown Revue tours, Motown artists had to face direct racism. It was generally the older generation of whites who gave the Motown artists a hard time, probably out of anger and frustration knowing that the younger generation of whites was flocking to the Motortown Revue concerts to sing along and dance to the “race music.” Radio stations all over the South, since late 1963 and early 1964, when Motown hits were topping the Pop charts, were starting to play Motown records and young America was getting increasingly hooked on the “Motown Sound.” Mary Wilson of the Supremes recalled that restaurants were usually their biggest problem: “The bus driver would stop and check out the atmosphere, but most times he’d


\textsuperscript{7} Otis Williams, \textit{Temptations} (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), 78.
be told, ‘Yeah, sure ya’ll can eat here. Tell ‘em to come around to the back,’ to which the bus load of Motown stars would yell back ‘We’re not going around to the back!’  

Generally traveling for approximately thirty days (the first Motortown Revue in 1962 went for ten weeks), the Motown artists and chaperones were all packed into one bus (usually with 5-6 acts per tour). This cramped lifestyle, living on a bus and only rarely checking into a hotel to wash up and maybe nap, created a unique camaraderie among the Motown artists and certainly created a family atmosphere. Places that the Motortown Revue had its artists play in were anything from gymnasiums, to black clubs, theaters, and even open-air arenas. It was troubling for many of the artists to perform at times, however, due to blatant discrimination such as segregated crowds. The intense irony upset many of the artists in that they sang their songs to an audience divided, yet the audience danced and belted out the lyrics to their favorite Motown songs in unison – why was the rope there? Otis Williams of the Temptations recalled performing in South Carolina in 1964 and was simply livid with the situation. “Angry, we asked, ‘What the fuck is the rope for?’ but we knew the answer.” A year later at the same arena, however, the rope dividing the races was gone and young whites and blacks could dance and sing together, which he saw as an important step in the right direction. Young America could sing and dance to Motown songs together and that was a very important barrier to break. 

It seemed that in the South, getting young people to dance and sing together only furthered the hatred and disgust of the older whites. There was one incident, in Birmingham, Alabama, where the Motortown Revue bus was actually shot at and bullet

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8 Mary Wilson, *Dreamgirl of Supreme Faith: My Life As a Supreme* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1999), 121.
9 Otis Williams, *Temptations* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), 79
10 Ibid, 78.
holes were riddled along the side. Fortunately, no one was hurt but it certainly caused a panic amongst the Motown artists. Mary Wilson observed, “The big problem with touring the South was that even when you weren’t being shot at or called ‘nigger,’ you could never forget where you were. Bigots who were too smart to get violent used intimidation and insults to put you in your place.”

Mary Wilson of the Supremes recalled another time, again in South Carolina, when the Motortown Revue bus pulled up in front of a motel. While they were unloading their luggage, two “rednecks” watched and made racist and offensive remarks despite the fact they were clearly outnumbered. One taunted, “‘By gosh, that’s a shame. We gotta get rid of that President Kennedy ‘cause he ain’t doin’ the right thing letting them niggers go and do whatever they want.’” All the Motown artists and Motortown team had to ignore the bus riders until they were all inside the motel where most of them started to laugh. “Here they were acting like they were so superior, yet talking like idiots. We couldn’t help but laugh at them.” If anyone of the Motown crew had lashed out or retaliated in any form against any number of racist incidents, the racist “justice” system of the South would have seen to it that they would be unfairly punished. Overall, it was important for the artists to know that they were truly making a difference:

Our tours made breakthroughs and helped weaken racial barriers. When it came to the music, segregation didn’t mean a thing in some of those towns, and if it did, black and white fans would ignore the local customs to attend the shows. To see crowds integrated – sometimes for the first time in a community – made me realize that Motown was truly the sound of young America.

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11 Wilson, *Dreamgirl of Supreme Faith*, 123.
12 Ibid, 124.
13 Ibid, 125.
Mary Wilson knew Motown’s music encouraged young America to increasingly work and live together. Berry Gordy wanted to steer clear of “message music” that openly fought or questioned the status quo, but the production of music that appealed to everyone brought young America together and indirectly challenged the status quo. Music can transcend barriers, and in the case of the “Motown Sound” it unified two cultures divided by hate.

There were many other groups and people working towards the integration of America and striving for the ultimate goal of equality between the races. The Great March to Freedom in Detroit in 1963 took a lot of serious planning and cooperation between such people and groups. Various Reverends (including the prominent Detroit Reverend Franklin – Aretha Franklin’s father), groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the United Auto Workers, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were all present in the discussion on how best to proceed with the Great March and just what it would mean and accomplish. With some disagreements among the groups and concerns regarding the potential for police brutality, the Great March went forward on June 23, 1963.14

The Great March took place down the Motor City’s Woodward Avenue (a prominent and busy street) and there was an overall festive and very positive tone surrounding the entire event. There was a feeling of change and moving forward toward a better and more promising future as Detroit’s population moved through the streets together. Once the crowds arrived at Cobo Hall, the crowd’s destination, King remarked on the 100th year anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation (1863), “But 100 years

14 Smith, Dancing in the Street, 56-57.
later, the Negro in the United States of America, is still not free.”15 Forced to reflect on history, the “model city for race relations” had experienced the eruption of two race riots since 1863.

On March 6, 1863, jubilation erupted in the streets when African Americans started celebrating Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. Upon hearing the news, white immigrants began to panic and became increasingly fearful that their jobs would be given to free blacks. Additionally, irrational fears about what free blacks might do to “disturb” the preservation of “racial purity” fueled the white retaliation against the African American celebration. Violence broke out as military guards marched Thomas Faulkner (a man of mixed race charged with attacking one white woman and one black woman) on the way to prison. Rumors of his race and his sexual crimes spread throughout the city and a mob approached. Military guards fired at to keep the angry whites at bay. Immigrants (Irish and German) started shouting obscenities such as, “Kill all the damned niggers!” and the mob began to crash windows, loot, and burn homes and businesses in primarily African American communities. Anyone standing on the streets at the time was vulnerable to attack and many were injured and killed. After the riot, it became evident that Detroit needed a police force of its own. Not long after, the Detroit Police Department was founded with the goal of containing racial violence.16

15 “Speech at the Great March on Detroit”
16 Smith, Dancing in the Street, 28-30.
a steady factory job. Franklin D. Roosevelt had also just formed the Fair Employment Practices Committee, which declared there could be no discrimination in the work place and banned employment practices based on race. African Americans who migrated thought they had a job secured. Tensions grew and rumors spread. According to African American sources, rumors spread that a crowd of whites threw a black baby and a black mother over a bridge, whereas white rumors reversed the claim and reported the rape of a white woman and her body being thrown over the bridge.\textsuperscript{17} On June 20, 1943, violence erupted between young whites and blacks, which resulted in the destruction of the property of both blacks and whites. Once the police, whose primary goal was to contain racial violence, got involved they aimed their guns at the rioting blacks and shot 17 dead (their bullets missed all the rioting whites). Overwhelmed, the police force requested federal help and after three days, the riot was over, leaving 34 people dead (25 African American, 9 whites), and 1,800 arrests (1,300 arrested were African Americans).\textsuperscript{18} Both riots had horrible consequences, and exacerbated the root of the problem: racism and inequality.

In the world of music, where for many years black artists were discredited as their music gained popularity only after it was stolen and sung from a white face, Motown thus represented more than a “Sound” and “unity.” Motown emerged from the broken-down and devastated ruins of Detroit to open a world of equality where African Americans could compete on the same level and on the same charts as whites and claim the money and fame that was rightfully theirs. Artistically, they were equal and proved their equality with every chart-topping hit.

\textsuperscript{18} Smith, \textit{Dancing in the Street}, 33.
While Motown was struggling to appeal to all audiences, primarily focusing on their “cross over” to white adult audiences, the Civil Rights Movement was picking up a lot of momentum and America was being shaken by the tumultuous social upheaval, including several race riots and the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. One event that disturbed America, but most directly affected Motown, was the Detroit riot of 1967.

July 23, 1967, was a hot and humid afternoon in Detroit and Martha Reeves and the Vandellas had just stepped on the stage of Detroit’s Fox Theater to perform. It was the Vandellas grand finale to their “Swinging Time Revue” and as usual, Martha Reeves jumped into her song with contagious excitement and vitality. As soon the Vandellas began their show, they were quickly distracted by a stage manager frantically waving his arms back and forth, signaling for the group to wrap up their song and run off stage. He then informed Reeves and the Vandellas that violent rioting had broken out all over the streets of Detroit and it was reported that the young people, the main group of looters and rioters, appeared to be “dancing amidst the flames.” Immediately, the group and the band packed up their belongings and darted off to Newark, New Jersey, thinking they would be safe, but once they arrived, riots broke out there as well.

The notorious Detroit riot of 1967 abruptly ended Detroit’s reputation as the “model city” for race relations and is today regarded as one of the most destructive riots of all time (along with the 1965 Watts riot). Unlike Detroit’s 1943 race riot, which was very much white versus black in the form of violent, open attacks, the 1967 riot in Detroit

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19 Smith, Dancing in the Street, 2.
was more based on the “propertied against the non-propertied.” The propertied and more elite classes tended to be white, however, and the non-propertied were disproportionately black and therefore, the underlying theme of the 1967 riot was very much racial.

The precipitating event began at 3:45am on July 23, 1967, when Detroit Police raided an illegally operated “bar,” called the “blind pig,” in a predominantly African American neighborhood. What began as a routine raid and arrest, turned into a violent upheaval. Resisting the racist Detroit Police created a contagious mob mentality of destructive behavior that encouraged looting, arson and violence. Unable to contain the massive outbreak throughout the city of Detroit, Governor Romney and Mayor Cavanagh requested federal assistance and federal paratroopers arrived in the burning city around 1:00 am on July 25. Violence persisted for another week and federal troops were unable to leave until August 2. With “law and order restored” there were a total of 7,231 arrests, 700 injured, 43 dead – 33 blacks and 10 whites – and property damage that exceeded $50 million.

The Supremes had recently released their upbeat, yet surprisingly heartbreaking song of caution, “The Happening,” which ironically seemed to fit the devastated Detroit scene. Its lyrics urged: “Hey life look at me, I can see the reality, cause when you shook me, took me out of my world, I woke up, suddenly I just woke up to the happening.”

The song became wildly popular and even led to a movie starring the Supremes called

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22 Smith, Dancing in the Street, 187.
**It’s Happening.** The song, like many other Motown songs, had a clear and foreboding message, but because of its catchy and easy to dance to beat, the message was lost and it became simply another pop hit.

It has been argued by some Civil Rights activists and African Americans that Motown could have done more to help the Civil Rights Movement by producing songs with more racial significance and that Motown stifled its artists’ creative freedom when they expressed the desire to create “message music.” Motown was first and foremost a record company the main objectives of which were to sell records and make money and it is unfair to criticize Motown for not producing enough “message music” simply because it was an all African American company. The burden to produce this “message music” did not fall on major white record companies, and their artists were more or less allowed to produce controversial music. Nonetheless, although Gordy often resisted “controversial” music, Motown still produced “message music.”

With increased levels of protest and social upheaval in the United States in the turbulent 1960s, it was inevitable that messages of peace, unity, and even outright defiance would become part of the Motown song production system. Gordy’s main reason for resisting the production of “message music” was that a message limited a song’s marketability, which contradicted his main goal of “cross over” and making the world Motown’s market. Still, artists and fans knew how music had a deeper power in that it could transcend racial barriers and it had the potential to be interpreted as a social force, which seemed to be one of the main themes of the 1960s.

Although known for creating songs with “fluff” messages about love, relationships, and heartbreak, the message that came across was really in the ear of the

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24 Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 98.
beholder. People have attempted to discredit the impact of Motown’s lyrics by generalizing about them as one contemporary critic did as, “the yearnings of adolescent love in a direct and energetic manner that avoids soppiness.” Motown lyrics, however, held a deeper and inspirational meaning that can be labeled as “message music.” One of the best examples of a Motown song that promoted integration and unity was Martha Reeves and the Vandellas’ “Dancing in the Street.” With its fun beat people could choose to simply dance to it or the song could be really listened to and interpreted to mean that people “all around the world,” of all races and ethnicities should “dance in the street” together. As previously seen, Motown did bring people together as the black and white youth danced and sang along to the same Motown tunes together all over the United States.

Some of Motown’s messages were more subtle, like The Four Tops’ “Still Water,” which conveyed the message of how although things might appear calm on the surface, there might be turmoil and troubles beneath, as they repeat the line “Still waters run deep.” The Supremes’ “Love Child” was the company’s first major “message song” in 1968, “Love Child” had a social message that warned against everything the Summer of Love stood for: care-free, pre-marital sex. The Supremes’ performance of the song on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1968 shocked fans because they were used to seeing the Supremes in glamorous and matching dresses with flawless makeup. Although they matched, the women came out barefoot wearing tattered skirts and sweatshirts with “Love Child” written across their chests. The message was also feminist, for women were the ones usually saddled with the care of a child conceived out of wedlock. Another

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aspect of their performance that could be interpreted as a political statement was that instead of wearing their usual gorgeous wigs and weaves, they were sporting their natural, short cut Afros.\(^{26}\)

Other Motown message songs were extremely aggressive and overt in their message. The Temptations’ “Ball of Confusion (That’s What the World is Today)” is a song that expresses the mounting frustration that people around the world were experiencing:

People moving out, people moving in.  
Why, because of the color of their skin.  
Run, run, run but you sure can't hide.  
An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.  
Vote for me and I'll set you free.  
Rap on, brother, rap on.

Well, the only person talking about love thy brother is the preacher.  
And it seems nobody's interested in learning but the teacher.  
Segregation, determination, demonstration, integration, aggravation, humiliation, obligation to our nation.

Ball of confusion. Oh yeah, that's what the world is today.\(^{27}\)

Other examples of songs with a very direct message regarding the then current state of affairs in the United States are: Edwin Starr’s “War,” and Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On,” “Mercy Mercy Me,” “Inner City Blues.” A critically important “message song,” “What’s Going On,” incorporates all factions of late 1960s pop culture, including the anti-war movement and the hippie movement:

“Mother, mother  
There's too many of you crying

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Brother, brother, brother
There's far too many of you dying…

…Father, father, everybody thinks we're wrong
Oh, but who are they to judge us
Simply because our hair is long”

Although it is true that Motown took longer than most record companies to produce songs that carried direct messages of defiance, Motown had been producing “message music” all along. Additionally, Motown was in a more difficult position because Motown was a predominantly African American company with all African American stars, which gave society more license to question and condemn the company for producing anything controversial. Any backlash that Motown received had the potential to spiral out of control, which would almost certainly translate to devastation for the company.

Motown endured through arguably one of the most radical and chaotic periods of American history. The company produced music that unified the races under specific beats, lyrics and dance moves despite the racial divisions occurring throughout the country. Motown artists witnessed the horrors of Jim Crow and celebrated as it was destroyed. The inspirational record company introduced Americans to talented and successful blacks that defeated previous racial stereotypes. In these many ways, Motown contributed the Civil Rights Movement without deviating from its founder’s main goal: to make music that most Americans wanted to listen to. By producing hit music, the youth of America came together and implemented the Civil Rights principles of integration and cooperation.

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CONCLUSION

Motown represented a time, a generation and a culture. The 1960s were a time of political and social upheaval and Motown managed not only to survive but to exceed all previous expectations for an African American owned and operated business. Because Berry Gordy was able to implement principles from the Civil Rights Movement, he created a business that not only aided the Civil Rights Movement by encouraging integrationist principles, but simultaneously disproved years of negative stereotypes that were used to oppress African Americans. 1960s youth fell in love with the “Motown Sound” and many white youth quickly realized the backwardness of their parents’ segregationist policies. Motown was embraced by the 1960s generation and its impact can be seen through movies like The Big Chill and the Broadway play, now movie, Dreamgirls. Stories that reflect on the 1960s are incomplete without the Motown stars
and their legendary sound. Staying ahead of popular trends in music, and pop culture, Motown was able to become the ultimate symbol for independent black capitalism.

Motown thrived in the diverse and racially and politically heated Motorcity. Detroit was a city steeped in a rich and turbulent racial history, which included immigrants of European descent and African Americans from the South. The post WWII economic boom was a main reason why such a diverse crowd gravitated to Detroit and its automobile factories. Racial tensions escalated as people of all races competed for the same jobs on the assembly line and Detroit erupted in three riots, all of which had devastating consequences.¹

Detroit’s history and culture was important in the development of the quintessential “Motown Sound.” The city’s Brewster Housing Project provided a safe and fun area for the youth to experiment with their artistic and creative abilities. The housing itself provided excellent echo chambers and unique acoustics, which the aspiring Motown artists used to battle other groups and vocalists. The success of the Motown label drove the Detroit singers, who originally were largely having fun, to hone their skills and became eager to join the “coolest club in town.”² Motown launched young native Detroiter into an unthinkable super-stardom and in so doing, transformed a city previously known only for its automobile manufacturing into a city that prided itself on its African American record label.

Developing a new style and music form, Motown targeted the youth of America and for the first time, made African American music and artists marketable to whites. “Cross over” music was able to become remarkably successful at this time because

Motown implemented the goals of the Civil Rights Movement which was rapidly gaining popularity, especially among the youth of America. Motown also appealed to the youth by marketing its artists and sound with the “coolest” car of the day.³

Motown was able to appeal to whites of all generations by strictly enforcing a “proper” look that was enforced by finishing school owner, Maxine Powell. Demanding perfection, Powell taught the young men and women of Motown how to act in an extremely polite fashion.⁴ Gordy demanded perfection of his artists and wanted to be sure that they could not be oppressed by any stereotype that could possibly taint the Motown look. Perfection was demanded on and off stage, and while Powell made sure the artists were presentable to the Queen of England, choreographer Cholly Atkins ensured their flawlessness during performances. Atkins was a well respected and accomplished choreographer by the time he joined Motown and when he did so, he took complete charge. There were occasional disagreements over style between some artists and Atkins, like the Temptations’ Paul Williams who loved to dance in his own style.⁵ Overall, however, the artists listened to Atkins and he was ultimately responsible for many of the group’s signature moves.

Crossing racial borders, Motown echoed the main principles of the Civil Rights Movement including integration and achieving power through economic independence. It was apparent through the recording and release of Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 *The Great March To Freedom* album that Berry Gordy favored the peaceful branch of the Civil Rights Movement. Motown embodied the peaceful approach by creating upbeat,

³ Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 130.
harmonious records that were simply fun to sing and dance to and thus were able to “cross over” to white markets. Additionally, Gordy did not discriminate based on race and focused on hiring the “best man for the job” regardless of race. Although it can be argued that the predominantly white sales team of Motown was a strategic move on Gordy’s part to appeal to white America, there were whites dispersed throughout the company as well, including two members of the Funk Brothers in the late 1960s.⁶

Leaders of the Civil Rights Movement and other African American organizations praised Berry Gordy’s efforts and his accomplishments through Motown. Seen as “uplifting” the African American race, Motown’s artists, so poised and perfect, destroyed oppressive stereotypes and proved that blacks could compete against, and often beat out, whites on an equal playing field. To congratulate Motown, the NAACP awarded Berry Gordy with a citation “in recognition of his spectacular rise in a very competitive field, and for his efforts in opening the record management field to Negroes.”⁷

The success of Motown provided hope and heroes to African Americans across America and inspired people of all races to fight against the race segregation and discrimination that the Civil Rights Movement rallied against. “Message music” released from Motown, like Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On,” brought people together by pointing out the blatant hatred and injustices occurring in the land of freedom and democracy.

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What started as “The Sound of Young America” quickly became “The Sound of America” as all generations and races grew to love the “Motown Sound” and came together through its unparalleled beats, grooves, and lyrics. The Motown label is constantly celebrated, like in the 1998 Super Bowl Halftime Show and the 1998 Motown 40: The Music is Forever ABC television special commemorating the label’s landmark anniversary. The “Sound” evokes powerful and often positive memories for the generation of the 1960s and remains popular today due to its raw, urban and easy-to dance-to-feel. Nearly fifty years later, Motown songs continue to be the main songs playing at weddings, parties, and dances because of its unique ability to bring people together in a celebratory mood. Berry Gordy’s company proved racist stereotypes wrong and made white Americans more accepting of black performers and African American success.

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8 Smith, Dancing in the Street, 247.
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