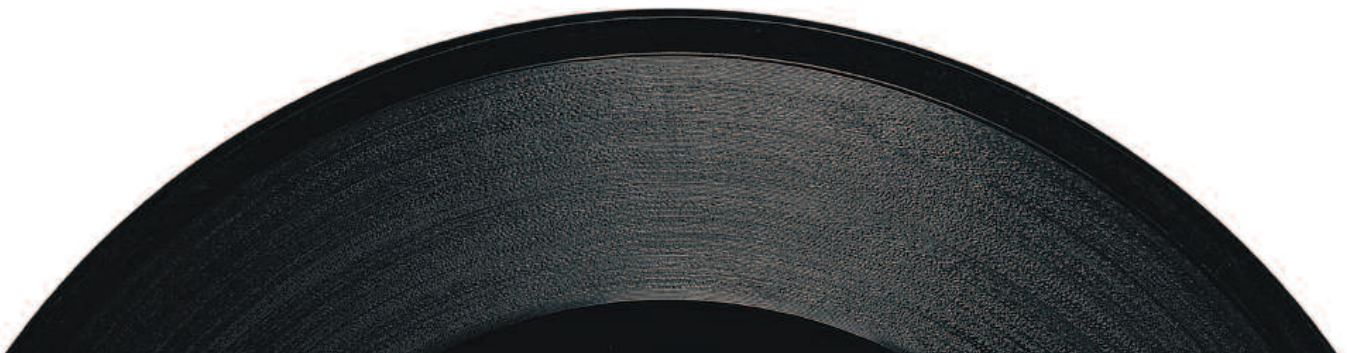


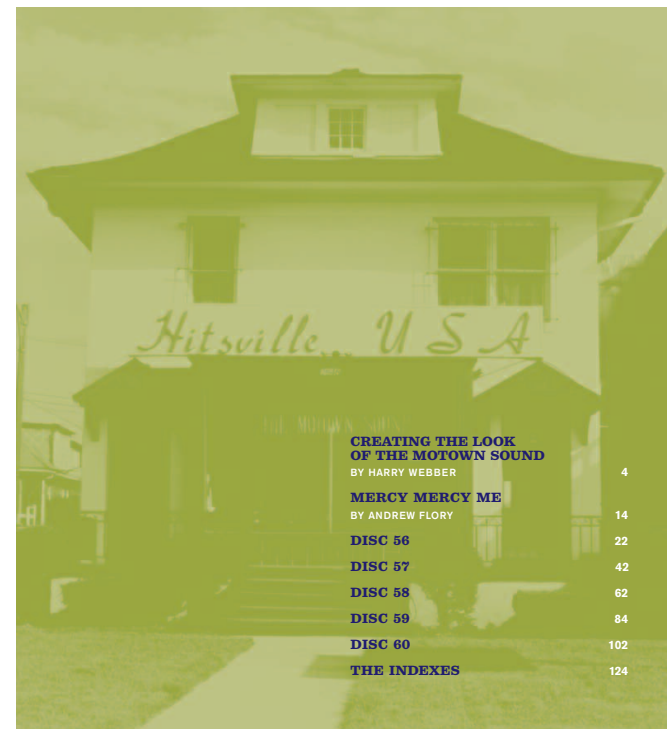
**THE COMPLETE
MOTOWN
SINGLES
VOLUME 11A: 1971**



THE COMPLETE MOTOWN SINGLES VOLUME 11A: 1971

2

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3



Marvin Gaye

MERCY MERCY ME

In the chorus of Marvin Gaye's densely layered 1971 single "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)" is the simple statement: "Things ain't what they used to be."

Gaye was echoing the sentiments of many Americans that year. After thoroughly diagnosing and dismantling the norms of American culture throughout the sixties, America was facing a decade of reconstruction. The optimism of the psychedelic era had been shattered by race riots, assassinations and political instability. Cities were crumbling from negligence after a generation of middle-class migration to the suburbs. And the landmark 1971 legal decision *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, sponsored by the NAACP, began an era of busing in an effort to enforce the desegregation of public schools.

In March, the newly formed Congressional Black Caucus, which included two representatives from Michigan, presented a list of 60 recommendations to President Richard Nixon to combat the growing issues facing America's black public. Nixon's reply,

which formally recognized the group for the first time, came two months later in the form of a 115-page White House task force report. It was published just two days before Gaye's landmark *What's Going On* LP hit the shelves. In his response, Nixon remarked, "this is the building work of the seventies, and it is bound to be more difficult than the legislative efforts of the sixties." Reconstruction seemed to be happening from all sides.

Motown, too, was not the way it used to be. Many of its artists, producers and songwriters were beginning to lose their youthful appeal. In March, the company signaled the end of an era by releasing *The Motown Story*, a 5-LP boxed set with interviews, a 24-page illustrated book and "58 golden hits that made Motown history." Meanwhile, the Jackson 5 represented the future. Led by a singer who was in diapers when Tamla released Marv Johnson's "Come To Me" in 1959, the group had just had a banner year with three huge hit songs—"ABC," "The Love You Save" and "I'll Be There."

But the most significant change at Hitsville was the absence of Berry Gordy, who was beginning to focus his creative energy on television and film projects. "His mind was in a lot of different places," sales chief Barney Ales admitted. In April 1971 the Motown-produced primetime special *Diana!* aired on ABC-TV. As Gordy would later recall in his autobiography, "The artists were not the only ones changing. I, too, was going in a new direction—the movies." Always a man of action, at the end of the year he began production for the feature film *Lady Sings the Blues*, set to star Diana Ross as Billie Holiday.



While Gordy was busy starting the entertainment arm of Motown in Los Angeles, his sister, Motown vice-president Esther Gordy Edwards, organized the second annual Sterling Ball, a charitable event in Detroit for the Loucy Gordy Wakefield Scholarship Fund. This event held a personal significance for Motown's first family. Wakefield was one of Gordy's four sisters and an early vice-president of the company, whose sudden death in 1965 stunned the Motown community. The goal of the foundation was to "provide culturally disadvantaged students of the Inner City [*sic*] with the incentive, the encouragement, and financial support to continue their education in college." Based entirely in Detroit, and with all but one of the 53 scholarship recipients going to Michigan State University, this foundation provided a strong connection between the Michigan community and Motown during this time. Like the first Sterling Ball in 1969, a limited edition LP was released, which included the song "Let's All Save The Children" performed by Joe Hinton and composed by Ron Miller for the event.

On the whole, the changes at Motown did not seem to affect the company's bottom line, and Motown did not show any signs of slowing down. Though mainstream popular culture was slowly beginning to appreciate broader aspects of black-based entertainment, the company still maintained chart equality through successful crossover hits with 16 of the singles released between January and June making the top 20 of a *Billboard* chart. In this regard, the company would become just as successful during the seventies as it was during its first decade.

The most popular Motown song of this six-month period was Temptations' "Just My Imagination (Running Away With Me)." A classic Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong composition produced by Whitfield at his peak, this song uses the motif of imagination in both the text and music to great effect. The lyrics follow the classic "unrequited love" song trope, which had been a common formula in teen pop music since the fifties. In this case, we meet a protagonist whose "imagination" creates a serious relationship with a woman who simply passes by every day on the street.

Released at the height of the Temptations' psychedelic period, the anachronistic musical style of "Just My Imagination" supports the throwback style of the lyrics. The tempo, instrumentation, soaring lead of Eddie Kendricks, and bridge sung by Paul Williams, recall the classic Temptations sound of the mid-sixties. Like Gaye's "Mercy Mercy Me," this song is a reminder of the uneasy societal changes during this period. But rather than describing the issues of the day, as was common in the more political Temptations music of the time, "Just My Imagination" allowed contemporary listeners to be transported back in time and temporarily experience things they way they "used to be."

Changes were also evident in the music of Stevie Wonder during the first half of 1971. Though he had released several "message" songs to this point in his career, none seemed as personal as "We Can Work It Out." This was the last single released before Wonder turned 21 on May 13, and he was planning to expunge his current contractual agreement,

which he had signed before his age of legal independence, and renegotiate his entire contract. In this context, Wonder's reinvention of the Beatles' "We Can Work It Out" can be heard as an announcement of Stevie's willingness to make a deal with Motown. Gordy, who remembers this as a "tense time," also remembers, "during the whole time Stevie made it clear that he was staying at Motown." In addition to the textual significance of the piece, Stevie's musical direction in this single is a harbinger of the more mature Wonder style of the coming decade.

Less gradual were the changes in the music of Marvin Gaye. The single "What's Going On" hit stores in January, marking the first recording on which Gaye served as performer, co-author and producer. This song, and the album that followed in May, shook the very bedrock of the Motown empire. In one fell swoop, Gaye challenged the conventions of company culture in a way that gave Berry Gordy pause about even supporting the project.

"They didn't like it, didn't understand it, and didn't trust it," Marvin told David Ritz. "Management said the songs were too long, too formless, and would get lost on a public looking for easy three-minute stories."

Though the musical language of *What's Going On* was daring, Gordy may have been more concerned with alienating listeners during a divisive time of America's involvement in Vietnam. There were rumors he felt pressure from the U.S. Defense Department for issuing the Temptations' "Ball Of Confusion" (among other records) and he was fearful of being labeled unpatriotic. Gordy himself admits he thought Gaye was "taking things too far" by releasing what he called a "protest album." But the subject matter by itself could not have been the chief concern about the project, as Motown had supported, and continued to release, music that was outspoken against the war. Most likely Gordy was worried about maintaining the career of Gaye, one of the jewels in the Motown crown, whose previous three singles had not performed well commercially.

What's Going On was also unconventional because it listed individual musicians who played on the record. This record was part of a small movement at Motown to finally start crediting the Funk Brothers during this period, as Valerie Simpson's solo album, *Exposed*, released two weeks earlier in May 1971, also listed musician album credits. Though Marvin's record sold more, and is often remembered for this feat, Valerie's was actually first.



Nickolas Ashford and Valerie Simpson

"[Simpson] was the first producer-writer who insisted we got credit for an album we recorded for her," said guitarist Dennis Coffey. "She knew it was important for a musician to receive album credits because it resulted in additional work opportunities. Valerie told me it was routinely done in New York City, where she lived, and should be done in Detroit too."

In light of the controversial subject matter of *What's Going On*, there are two other particularly interesting examples of "protest" records from this period. In the spring of 1971, the year of the first Grammy Award telecast, Motown received an award in the Spoken Word category for the posthumous 1970 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. LP on the Black Forum label, *Why I Oppose The War In Vietnam*. Another single from June 1971 that addressed the war directly was Tom Clay's audio collage medley "What The World Needs Now/Abraham, Martin And John." Clay's piece interspersed audio clips of children and soldiers talking, famous political

speeches and eulogies, and sounds of wartime with newly-produced versions of these two songs. This uncharacteristic Motown single flew up the charts, peaking at No. 8 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 in August. It appeared on MoWest, one of Motown's two new imprints of the year, which would issue more than 50 singles and 12 albums between 1971 and 1973. It was the first—and last—record on the new label to appear on the pop chart.

While Motown scored a ferocious number of hit singles during the first half of 1971, there were also some interesting missteps and disappointments. The Four Tops, who had struggled commercially since the departure of H-D-H, had two singles released during this time, "In These Changing Times," which stemmed from their concept album of the same name, and "You've Gotta Have Love In Your Heart," part of their collaborative project with the Supremes. Neither was very successful. There would be no subsequent singles from the supergroup, and the next year the Tops left Motown for the ABC Dunhill imprint.



R. Dean Taylor, the topical singer-songwriter assigned to Motown's growing Rare Earth label, was very active during this period, but none of his three singles met Gordy's—or his own—expectations.

In contrast to his last lead performance with the Temptations on "Just My Imagination" released that January, the A-side of Eddie Kendrick's solo debut, "This Used to Be the Home Johnnie Mae" didn't chart at all; instead, the B-side charted, but barely. It would be more than two years before Kendrick's first significant pop hit, "Keep On Truckin'."

This also began the period of denouement for the Jackson 5 at Motown. Though the singles "Mama's Pearl" and "Never Can Say Goodbye" were smash hits, these were the first two songs released by the group not to hit No. 1 on both the *Billboard* Hot 100 and Soul Singles charts, a feat that the group would never achieve again. The next Jackson 5 song to reach the popularity of "Never Can Say Goodbye" would not come until "Dancing Machine," released in March 1974.



Eddie Kendrick, Gladys Knight and Sammy Davis Jr.



The Undisputed Truth

Debuting in January 1971, the new sitcom *All In The Family* used the fictional characters Edith and Archie Bunker to reflect the legacy of changes that occurred during the sixties. Every week the show began with the theme song "Those Were the Days," which centered on a theme of remembrance that was, ironically, not so different from that of Marvin Gaye's "Mercy Mercy Me." All in all, this was a pivotal period for Motown. As America began the difficult task of reuniting the country after a decade of struggle with civil rights while facing an unpopular war, the music of Motown reflected this tension.

The youthful tenor of "Shop Around," "Please, Mr. Postman," and "My Guy" had been replaced by topical manifestos like "What's Going On," "What The World Needs Now" and "In These Changing Times." This was a time when Rare Earth was happy to simply "celebrate another day of living," when the Undisputed Truth reminded us how "smiling faces show no traces of the evil that lurks within," and when Marvin Gaye earnestly asked, "where did all the blue skies go?" Though the move to Los Angeles was slowly happening in broad daylight, there was still much to enjoy

about the music emanating from 2648 West Grand Boulevard in Detroit. And while the nation was trying to rebuild public confidence, the music of Motown echoed the attitudes and opinions of Americans from all walks of life.

— Andrew Flory

Andrew Flory is Assistant Professor of Music History at the Shenandoah Conservatory. He has taught courses about, and written widely on, many different aspects of American popular music. His book I Hear a Symphony: Listening to the Music of Motown is forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press.