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Motown was founded in 1959 by Berry Gordy in Detroit, Michigan. The music that Gordy created and produced changed the sound of the American music. Motown introduced Americans to a new sound of popular music created by black singers and musicians. Gordy overcame many stereotypes and polished his performers to appeal to mainstream America, black and white. With spreading popularity of television it was imperative that music stars be visual appealing as well as have a good sound. The Motown sound and philosophy created in the 1960's still has an enormous influence on the modern music industry.

## **Barry Gordy**

Gordy was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1929. Gordy dropped out of high school in eleventh grade, became a boxer and was drafted into the Army for the Korean War. Upon his return he secured employment in an automobile plant. He eventually opened a record store and began to actively pursue a career in the music industry. Gordy was introduced to Jackie Wilson, a singer who had some modest success recording songs written by Gordy and his sister. Gordy eventually met Smokey Robinson and his group the Miracles. With \$800 he borrowed from his family he started the record label, Tamla. Over the next two years, Gordy produced several hits with Wilson, Robinson, Mary Wilson and the female group, the Marvlettes. From the beginning, Gordy involved his family in the operations of his record labels including his father, brothers and sisters. The company and studio was located in a house on Grand Boulevard in Detroit, eventually the company would buy seven houses where the Motown magic was created (Posner 8-20).

## **The Music Market in the Late 1950's and Early 1960's**

The musical landscape in the late 1950's and early 1960's was undergoing radical changes. Musicians such as Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly and Little Richard were blending different styles of music and becoming hits with teenagers. Musical influences such as bluegrass, country, rhythm and blues and blues were influencing an entire generation of performers and musicians. For the first time in the music history, record labels began to actively market to teenagers and young adults who were beginning to spend quite a bit of money on records (Early 67-69).

## **Early Musical History at Motown**

The Midwest was rich in musical influence which travelled up and down the Mississippi River. The blues, jazz and gospel were the dominant forms of music in Detroit during the 1950's. Popular standards such as Duke Ellington and Frank Sinatra were also widely listened to. The Doo whop sound of the 1950's was experiencing huge success on the charts as well. Gordy had grown up on this music and knew he could create a sound that grew out of these styles that would sell records (Holmes).

## **The Influences on Motown's Early Artists**

Socially, the early artists that Gordy signed were all raised in Detroit. Detroit saw a tremendous growth in the black population in the early 20th century. There were plenty of jobs in the automobile industry and a strong, black middle class grew out of this atmosphere. The educational system in Detroit during the 1950's and 1960's was excellent. Standards were high and the community was active in education. Music programs in the schools were well

funded. Churches also provided a musical space and social backbone to communities. Gospel and choirs were an important part of the black church experience. Music of all styles was an important part of life in Detroit, musical halls, jazz clubs and street musicians all made a contribution (McCarthy).

## **The Motown Sound**

The Motown sound incorporated blues, jazz, gospel and Doo Wop. Gordy and his artists had all grown up on this sound. What Gordy did for the music industry was take the most pleasing and popular elements of this music and apply it to popular music. Songs such as Smokey Robinson's "Shop Around", "Baby Love" by the Supremes and Mary Wells', "My Guy" all drew on the strength of voice that came from gospel, rhythms from jazz and a blues inspired melody which created the early Motown sound. Their performances on television presented clean cut and sharply dressed performers who fit right into American culture. Gordy was producing music that bridged two musical worlds, black and white.

## **The Early Artists**

Gordy had an eye for recruiting new talent. He signed artists that had powerful voices and engaging on stage personalities. Smokey Robinson was Gordy's first performer. Robinson, a native of Detroit, met Gordy in 1958 after a failed audition. Gordy recognized the talent and they went to work. According to Gordy in an interview with CBS he said of Smokey Robinson, "He was a wonderful poet, but he didn't know how to write songs." (CBS News). Within the next year, Robinson and his Miracles would become

Gordy's first Motown act and sold over a million records with the hit "Shop Around". Gordy remarks on Robinson's song writing, "I could see right away he was getting better than me!" (CBS News). Gordy recognized the importance for black artists to preserve their roots in their writing but to be able to present it to America and be accepted despite their color. Gordy, who was also a songwriter, was clever enough to contract the song writing team of Holland, Dozier and Holland and kept a house band that recorded with almost all of the vocal groups, the Funk Brothers (Nantais). These musicians brought the jazz, blues and gospel backgrounds with them, but under Gordy's direction adapted for a wider market.

Gordy had a knack for recognizing talent. However, he realized that in order for this talent to be accepted by America, they had to be packaged and presented. He hired instructors who taught the artists how to behave appropriately, how a lady should sit and how a gentlemen should shake a hand. He hired stylists who groomed and dressed the fledgling stars. He hired choreographers who staged and taught the young stars their on stage moves. Gordy presented America with clean, well behaved and talented performers who were groomed to crossover racial lines (Nantais). This was a very important aspect of the emerging music industry due to the spread of television which gave music a visual medium. America was no longer listening to music, they were watching it too.

### **Competition in the Music Industry in the 1960's**

Motown began having a string of successes with their artists and music.

However, there was stiff competition in the music market. The British had an entire generation of musicians who were heavily influenced by early rhythm

and blues and country. Acts such as the Beatles, became tremendous overnight sensations. Other British acts followed closely behind like the Rolling Stones and the Kinks. Elvis Presley had just returned from army service and was heating up the charts with hits and was under contract in Hollywood where he was cranking out movies. The 1960's also became a period of radical change in the sound and business operations of the music industry. Society was undergoing dramatic change and music was at the forefront (Hirshey).

### **Motown in the 1960's**

Motown began to peak as a musical giant and business in the mid to late 1960's. They experienced tremendous success with their largest stars ever, Diana Ross and the Supremes, the Jackson 5, Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye. Gordy was uneasy about signing Stevie Wonder who was only 11 years old at the time because, “ You know, tutors, chaperones. I didn't like his singing, I liked his harmonica playing!” (CBS News). The Motown sound became firmly established in the American music scene. Popular television shows like The Ed Sullivan Show introduced America to the artists that Gordy was creating. Motown had presented America with a crossover sound and style of music that everyone enjoyed, black and white. Their formula for creating their artists looks and sound remained consistent throughout this period. The radical changes occurring socially would prove to be a challenge for Motown. They would have to change to remain relevant and popular (Posner 140-182).

## **Competition, Atlantic Records and Stax**

Stax Records was founded in 1957 and featured artists such as Otis Redding and Issac Hayes. Atlantic Records was begun in 1947. These companies also recognized that primarily black forms of music could be accepted into mainstream America. They had a long line of successful R&B and jazz hits. Their biggest names included Aretha Franklin and Ray Charles. These companies were direct and difficult competition for Motown. The new sounds of British rock and the changing scene of the music industry with bands such as Led Zeppelin and the hippie movement were difficult waters for Motown to navigate (Covach).

## **The 1970's and Los Angeles**

Motown relocated to Los Angeles in 1972. Gordy also began Motown Productions which produced television specials and eventually Diana Ross's movie, Lady Sings the Blues. Both the move and the production company were smart business decisions. Motown Productions released several hit movies and television shows cashing in on the success of music becoming a visual medium as well as the record sales. The music label had continued success with artists such as Gladys Knight and the Pips, Lionel Ritchie and the Commodores and Rick James. Acts such as the Jackson 5 and writers Holland Dozier and Holland had left the company over the last few years.

## **Sale to MCA**

In 1988, Gordy sold Motown to MCA Records. Motown still had several acts that continued to be successful, but the magic and glory of its early years were lost. Boys II Men, DeBarge and the Pointer Sisters were some of the

stars of Motown in the 80's and 90's. In 2005, Motown was absorbed into Universal Music Group.

## **Influence of Motown**

Artists that were discovered and signed with Motown such as Stevie Wonder, Michael Jackson and the Jackson 5, Diana Ross and Lionel Ritchie were also tremendous stars in music. Their influence and talent as well as their commercial success have created a library of music that is still relevant today. Their personas and music have all become a part of mainstream America.

The sound and popularity of today's popular music has its roots in Motown's sound and look. Modern bands in the genres of R&B, Hip Hop and Popular music all exhibit that Motown sound and look. Record companies polish their artists like Gordy did to appeal to mainstream America. Incorporating choreography and a sharp, visual image is the mainstream of music videos in modern culture and can be attributed to the look that Gordy created with his Motown groups. Record companies employ composers and session musicians who are at the height of their talent to back artists they are developing and promoting, just as Gordy did. Hugely popular groups groomed by record executives are represented by Backstreet Boys, Destiny's Child, N Sync and En Vogue. One Direction is currently one of the hottest boy bands that were created, coached and presented by a major record label.

At a symposium in Detroit that marked Motown's 50th anniversary, Provenzano for his article, spoke with several leaders and academics about Motown and its influence on American culture and music. One of the attendees, Betty Ann Yonker the associate dean for The School of Music,



Theater and Dance at the University of Michigan said, “ There’s a division between school music and other forms of music, and with Motown, we discover a music informed by public schools, churches and communities” (Provenzano). Barry Gordy is credited at the symposium of saying that when he heard a singer, he wasn’t concerned with skin color, he wanted more of their sound. He brought this attitude to the music he was producing (Provenzano).

The fact that these artists introduced mainstream America to a music that was heavily influenced by black forms of music such as blues, gospel and jazz, speaks volumes for Gordy and his vision. Artists such as Jewel, Taylor Swift and Coldplay all credit Motown as being an influence in their music (Householder and Karoub). Motown paved the way for acceptance of black music and artists for Hip Hop and Rap. Today’s musical landscape is a richer, more vital and diverse place because of Motown’s contributions.

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