

What prompted a Motown special in this issue of *Rip It Up*?

It was the news of the April tour by top soul vocal groups, the Four Tops and the Temptations, who were both with Motown in the 60s and have kept moving on, getting hipper and funkier by the year.

These two groups are back on the Motown label and have recorded tracks together. Some lyrics from 'The Battle Song (I'm the One)' are reproduced here as they aptly describe the qualities of a soul performer.

Temptations' vocalist sings:

*I can sing a melody  
Make the crowd beg for more  
I can get down funky  
Make them boogie on the floor*

Four Tops' Levi Stubbs sings:

*I know how to make them cry and I  
can really make them scream*

*When I sing about the pain all that  
good love brings*

*Ask the lonely*

*Just ask Bernadette*

Temptations' bass singer replies:

*Hey man, I hear you over there  
makin' that noise*

*But you gonna have to really get down  
if you wanna be with the big boys*

*Get ready ...*

Get ready, 'cause soul is a scarce commodity nowadays and soul with more style than the Tempts and Tops ain't possible.

So this is your chance to get hip to Motown ... MC



The Motown story is often told in terms of a one-man rags to riches story — the American Dream — and, undoubtedly, the label's founder Berry Gordy gained wealth beyond all expectations but more than one man's talent was basic to his label's success.

Berry Gordy came from an enterprising family, who were able to lend him \$800 capital in 1959. He had been a boxer (where he met Jackie Wilson), been in the army and owned his own record shop (a jazz store that failed) before briefly working on the Ford Assembly line in the late 50s.

By 1958 Gordy had written several pop hits for Jackie Wilson and he was not the only Gordy in the music business. His sister Gwen collaborated with him in writing and founded the Anna label, then, with husband Harvey



Fuqua (from 50s group the Moonglows), started the Tri-Phi label, parallel with Motown.

Berry had not met Smokey Robinson in 1957 and both sought greater remuneration for their songwriting. Producing masters and pressing records were logical steps.

The first Tamla productions were leased to other labels; Marv Johnson (United Artists, Top 30 hit), Miracles 'Bad Girl' (Chess, minor hit) and Barrett Strong 'Money' (Anna/Chess, R&B hit).

In 1960 Berry Gordy abandoned leasing and successfully distributed the Miracles' 'Way Over There' nationally.

The Miracles were an integral part of Motown in the early years. Smokey Robinson and Ronald White were important in the finding of Detroit's best talent, including the Supremes and Little Stevie Wonder.

Some Motown acts had recorded before — Detroit's Four Tops and Martha and the Vandellas and later signings, out-of-towners the Isley Brothers and Gladys Knight and the Pips. Others such as Mary Wells and the Marvelettes made their recording debuts while still attending local high schools.

In the early 60s Motown absorbed other local independents, adding more talent. The Tri-Phi label became insolvent and Gwen Gordy and Harvey Fuqua moved to Motown with the Spinners, Junior Walker, Lamont Dozier and Johnny Bristol. With the takeover of the Ric-Tic and Golden World labels Edwin Starr was added.

Implicit in Berry Gordy's thinking was that music by black artists should be able to reach beyond the Rhythm and Blues shops and charts. He followed in the footsteps of Atlantic Records, who successfully sold their R&B acts (the Coasters, the Drifters) to a white

audience. Gordy had already known some pop chart success with his compositions for Jackie Wilson.

Smokey Robinson said of Gordy's concept for Motown:

"His idea was to have black people sing, and not sing the blues ... Berry's idea was to go into the mainstream of music. He told me 'you want your songs to have the possibility of being standards'."

To counter the restrictive categories black music disappears into, Motown sleeves instructed retailers; "File: Popular Male Vocal" and the label promoted itself as "The Sound of Young America".

The two-storey suburban house that contained the early office and studio was emblazoned with "Hitsville, U.S.A." Motown was not to be restricted to a region, a race or a style.

Gordy's concept of integration was to make music that would sell to both white and black American teenagers.

The hit singles success in Motown's first decade was phenomenal. Gordy's enterprise as a small indie in 1960 but by 1970 it was a major label — in that year seven of the 21 Number One singles were Motown Records.

In 1974 Edwin Starr reflected on Motown methods:

"Motown has always been singles-oriented ... Motown have always strung together a bunch of singles to make an album."

"They'd rather pay an artist, a writer, an arranger separately than have a guy do all those jobs and then be able to dictate his own terms like Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye can."

By the early 70s each move — whether contracts, dance steps, live appearances or new songs — was no longer in the hands of

the Artist Development Department or the Quality Control Department. The artists had matured, as had the label.

In a 1980 *Record World* interview, Berry Gordy admitted that the autocratic Artist Development Department was history:

"I don't think economics would ever let it be like it was with us again."

Besides economic factors, Gordy recognised that artists were now more independent and that Detroit was a unique "isolated situation".

In the early 60s rock 'n' roll business was less sophisticated and Motown wisely embraced wider functions to preserve its talent. Performers then travelled in variety shows, each artist doing a five to 20 minute set for little remuneration.

Motown organised its own Motown Revue which did one-nighter tours of the USA — sheltering its artists from the rigours of representing their own interests on the live circuit and lessening the indignity of white-only restaurants and service station toilets, and hotels that would not accept the mixed Motown entourage.

By the late 60s a Motown act could tour alone, there was less need to be ushered and chaperoned. Motown's paternalism subsided.

As the 70s progressed, Motown's success lay with artists who took creative control of their own recordings — Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Smokey Robinson and new acts, the Commodores and Rick James.

By 1976 Diana Ross was the only old-school act still depending on Motown for her material. Accordingly, Berry Gordy lavished time and money upon her career — particularly her film debut *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972). Gordy provided \$3.6 million finance and was present on the film set. He became director of *Mahogany* after three weeks of shooting when his constant presence and suggestions became too much for British director Tony Richardson.

With Diana Ross no longer with the label there is less focus on Motown's film-making side. The most significant movie-related activity is utilising the label's back catalogue for soundtracks like *The Big Chill*.

If one was asked to provide a single reason for Motown's success it would have to be those songs. Even Motown tracks that were not hits in their day are being successfully revived. Paul Young's 'Wherever I Lay My Hat' — for example, is a Marvin Gaye song.

In the first 10 years alone, the Motown songwriters created the most awesome catalogue of songs in popular music (check the hit list) and songs are what it's all about.

Murray Cammick

# EVERY GREAT MOTOWN HIT OF MARVIN GAYE

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15 SPECTACULAR PERFORMANCES

I HEARD IT THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE

TOO BUSY THINKING ABOUT MY BABY

THAT'S THE WAY LOVE IS

MERCY MERCY ME

GOT TO GIVE IT UP (PART 1)

DISTANT LOVER

INNER CITY BLUES

HOW SWEET IT IS

LET'S GET IT ON

TROUBLE MAN

WHAT'S GOING ON

WITH TAMMI TERRELL:

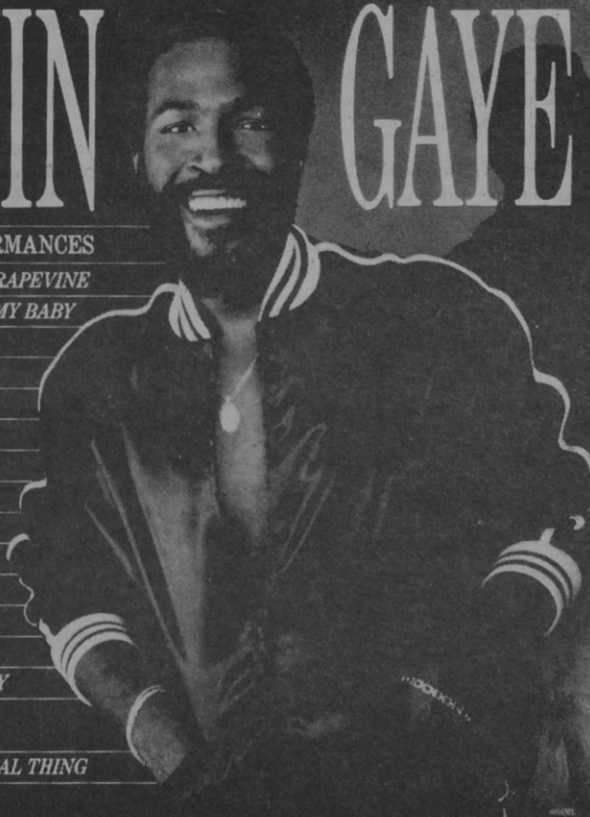
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YOU'RE ALL I NEED TO GET BY

IF I COULD BUILD MY WHOLE

WORLD AROUND YOU

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