



STEVIE WONDER PROFILE



Uptight (Everything's Alright)

Rip It Up recently received a petition objecting to its allocating space for something called 'boogie spasm'. The editor was told that in future his attention must be confined solely to 'punk, new wave and rock'. Apparently the main source of offence was a full page ad for Stevie Wonder.

Now here we are adding insult to advert by running an article on the dude. Sheer pugnacity? Not really — well yes, partially — but there's more to it than that. Wonder is due to play here next month so perhaps a brief reflection on his career might be in order.

Some new wave fan(atic)s, lost in their purism, tend to dismiss as irrelevant anything pre-about-1977 (with possible exceptions made for uncles Lou and Iggy). Their derision is often most sweeping toward black music yet such cultural/historical lobotomy has never effected their own heroes. Costello based a whole album on 60's Stax-Volt styles, having a hit with an old Sam and Dave number. Similarly Magazine have re-interpreted a Sly Stone classic while both the Jam and the Clash have redone soul standards.

The current prejudice against Stevie Wonder, Motown's major star, is not totally one-eyed however — just short-sighted. In 1979 after the punk explosion had altered the whole way we listened to music, Wonder released a pretentious double-album that seemed to exemplify everything the new rock was reacting against. Suddenly it seemed easy to forget that he had hitherto been the most acclaimed and, alongside Bob Marley, most influential black musician of the 70's.

Workout Stevie, Workout

Stevie Wonder may have just reached 30 but he's been having hits for nearly 18 years. Born Stevland Judkins, he grew up in Detroit and at the age of 12 was introduced to Berry Gordy, founder of a newly-successful independent record company called Tamla Motown. Judkins was dubbed Little Stevie Wonder and began cutting singles. In 1963 his third release, a live-recorded, raucous harmonica shout-up entitled 'Fingertips', topped the American charts and was soon released in Britain. A mere 13, Little Stevie was on his way to world stardom.

His publicity began using the term 'genius' in conscious comparison to Ray Charles. After all, both were black and blind (Wonder since birth) but the resemblance did go deeper: the singers shared a remarkably similar range and style of delivery. (The comedian Lenny Bruce once compared them when commenting that he would never go on a civil rights march because 'it's always the same thing — Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder bumping into each other all the time'.)

Throughout the rest of the 60's Wonder's career continued to ascend, fostered within the Motown system, until his star became bright enough for solo concerts, live appearances were kept part of company 'packages'. Recordings remained within the bounds of the Motown hit formula although, interestingly Wonder's singles showed considerably more variety than those of most of his stablemates. On the one hand there were the great R'n'B-based hits: the soulful funk of 'Uptight'

and 'Signed, Sealed, Delivered' with an ebullient Stevie often working out on harmonica. On the other hand we had string-backed, sentimental ballads from 'Castles Made of Sand' to 'My Cherie Amour'. Nonetheless, whatever the style, the hits (as they say) just kept on coming.

Signed, Sealed, Delivered

Although the above-mentioned numbers were all co-written by Wonder, he by no means recorded only his own material. Nor did he have complete authority over production or arrangement. The company remained the major collaborator in these affairs. But in 1971 that all changed when Wonder, having attained majority, renegotiated his contract to gain complete artistic control over his music (not to mention a higher royalty rate).

He then began an ambitious path which was to revolutionize not only his own career but, in terms of influence, much of black music in general. At a time when Motown was still firmly singles-oriented, Wonder had come to think of albums as the prime musical unit. Between 1972 and 1974 he was to release a quartet of albums which would firmly establish him as the most popular black musician of the decade.

Music of My Mind was, apart from a couple of guest solos, literally all his own work from conception to execution. (The company was henceforth relegated to the role of mere merchandiser.) The album showed a growing musician stretching his horizons into areas previously untouched. Wonder was moving beyond the two and a half minute song format, exploring new synthesized keyboards and the potential of the modern recording studio. Many people, even those previously unsympathetic to the Motown sound, began to take notice.

Higher Ground

Then in 1972 *Talking Book* astounded everyone with its astonishing depth and maturity, beauty and complete accessibility. Not since the Beatles' *Sgt Pepper* had a pop album received such widespread attention and plaudits. If *Talking Book* was a landmark for pop in general it was a crucial album for black music. Not only did the cover photo and certain lyrics depict a culturally-conscious Wonder but, as critic Dave Marsh observed, the music gave coherence to 'the influences of Sly Stone, Curtis Mayfield, Jimi Hendrix, Gamble and Huff and everyone else who had been involved in helping soul music break past the limits of its previous formulas.'

Talking Book also gave Wonder two number one hits in 'Superstition' and 'You Are the Sunshine of My Life'.

1973's *Innervisions* was equally revelatory. Musically it was as expansive and lovely as *Talking Book* and the lyrics showed Wonder ever more socially concerned. His 'Visions' of a 'milk and honey land' were set against the grim realities of 'Living For the City', the delusions of dope in 'Too High' and the con-tricks of 'Mista Know-It-All'.

1974 brought *Fulfillingness First Finale*. Where *Talking Book* dealt mainly with love of woman and *Innervisions* with concern for humanity, *Fulfillingness* may be seen to focus on love of God. Fittingly the music, while no

less beautiful, is overall more serene and less urgent than its predecessors'. The album did contain two uptempo hits however: 'Boogie On Reggae Woman' and a bitter indictment of then-president Nixon entitled 'You Ain't Done Nothin'.

Never Dreamed You'd Leave In Summer

Wonder was at the pinnacle of international success and prestige (his scooping the Grammy award pool, for example, was becoming commonplace) when he suddenly went into retirement. Of his motivation we can only speculate. Perhaps the near-fatal auto accident soon after the release of *Innervisions* may have caused him to question his career. There was some talk of his intention to undertake social work. Whatever the reasons, they remain unclear. Wonder continued to work in the studio however, whether as producer for others (e.g. B.B. King, Rufus) or spending endless hours cossetting his own material. In 1975 he secured a contract for \$13 million, easily the highest payment yet made to any recording artist.

Then in 1976, two and a half years after *Fulfillingness*, Wonder returned with a double album *Songs In The Key Of Life*. Again rich in eclecticism, the album contains some superb tracks, from the bopping 'I Wish' and 'Sir Duke' to the haunting 'Love's In Need Of Love Today' and 'Knocks Me Off My Feet'. Unfortunately *Songs* also includes a few cuts which drag into monotony. There are also a number of lyrics which are awkwardly phrased and occasionally embarrassing in their pretensions, lyrics which are contained in a specially printed booklet.

The next album, also a double, took a further three years to complete. Originally intended as the soundtrack to a movie (which never received general release), *The Secret Life Of Plants* was simply awful, an ego-extravaganza of monumental overreach, it indulged all Wonder's worst tendencies without the saving balance of his great gifts. The less said the better.

Smile Please

Thank goodness *Hotter Than July* is a return to a simpler straight-forward format. 'Master Blaster (Jammin')' is not, as some have argued, a desperate bandwagon-hop by an aging has-been. Rather, like 'Sir Duke' before it, the single should be heard as a sincere tribute from one black musician to another. Wonder has rarely written great lyrics. At their best they are instinctive, straightforward and touchingly sincere (if occasionally corny). But they have always been less inspirational than his music and deeply expressive vocal delivery.

Of course it is too early to say whether *Hotter Than July* marks a rejuvenation or simply a retreat into stylistically established (cliched?) frameworks. Certainly for the sake of our own future listening, one hopes Wonder's musical sensibilities really have been revived. After all, in the past he has always proved too original a talent to be confined by formulas. For him to again produce music as great as he gave us in the 60's and early 70's would be ... well, wonderful.

Peter Thomson