

## Marvin Gaye Trouble Man

Written by Westside ID94

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MARVIN GAYE'S seminal album *What's Going On* is one of the most popular albums of all time. Recorded in 1971, its multi-track vocals, complex musical score, and fusion of soul and jazz create a wonderful soundscape. Over the top Marvin sings a series of gut-wrenching songs that are laments for the Vietnam War, pollution, drug addiction, corrupt governments and the miseries of ghetto life.

What makes the album even more remarkable is that before its release Marvin was regarded as a mega pop star, the equivalent of Robbie Williams or Justin Timberlake today.

To understand the transformation from pop star to protest singer you have to look not only at Marvin's musical creativity but also at the massive political movements that swept the US in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Marvin was born in Washington DC on 2 April 1939. As a child he was brutalised by his father. The physical and mental torment dealt out by his father continued throughout his life.

His family were also very religious, and belonged to a Christian sect called the House of God.

Washington straddles the divide between the states of the North and South.

The southern states resembled South Africa under apartheid. A series of laws known as Jim Crow enshrined racial segregation in every aspect of life. This state-backed racism was reinforced by violent organisations like the Ku Klux Klan.

Marvin described the South: "Just one hour's drive from Washington you could smell the racism—man, you couldn't even drink a milkshake next to a white guy."

However, Washington was part of the North. There were no laws imposing racist segregation,

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but there was institutional racism on a massive scale. Black families were denied jobs, decent housing and education.

Marvin described how this felt: “How’s the average black kid supposed to buy the Bill of Rights when he sees on his own streets that his own rights aren’t worth shit?”

Marvin’s religious father told him he could only sing music that praised god.

But as he grew into a teenager, Marvin rebelled against his father. He stopped attending the House of God and was drawn instead to the house of doo-wop.

Doo-wop was the equivalent of hip-hop today. It was based on a style that featured harmonies made up of a wide range of vocal parts with just the most basic musical backdrop. It literally evolved from the street corner.

In the early 1960s Marvin moved to Detroit in the hope of becoming a major pop star. Detroit was the heart of the US car industry. It also had a thriving black culture rooted in the blues, gospel and jazz.

Black entrepreneur Berry Gordy lived in Detroit at the time. He was part of a new generation of young black capitalists who refused to accept that the colour of their skin should prevent them from grabbing a slice of the US economic boom.

Gordy’s enormous confidence came indirectly from a young preacher called Martin Luther King. King’s civil rights movement had begun to challenge the deep racism in the South in the mid-1950s.

Gordy set up the Motown record label. “The sound of young America” was born.

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Without King's civil rights movement Motown would not have been possible. It created the environment in which broader cultural integration—as typified by Motown's wide appeal— could occur.

Gordy understood that young people had money in their pockets and were looking for a new sound. Motown's music appealed to both black and white kids. It was the first black-owned record label to achieve this crossover success.

The name of the first Motown hit was “Money”. Its refrain went, “Money is what I want”. Right from the start, Berry was clear where he was heading. Motown would grow into the biggest black-owned industry in US history.

As a young man Gordy worked on the production line at Ford. He adopted Ford's methods of production and applied them to the record producing business.

Teams of writers such as Holland-Dozier-Holland, Ashford and Simpson, and Smokey Robinson wrote the hits. The in-house band, the Funk Brothers, created the sound.

Check out the wonderful film *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* to get a full appreciation of the contribution these guys made.

The music was mixed to sound good through transistor radios and car stereos. Gordy employed stylists to make sure the artists had the “right look”. He even hired elocution teachers to make sure they sounded right.

Gordy also hired a list of singers the like of which has never been seen again—The Supremes, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, The Temptations, Mary Wells, Stevie Wonder, Martha and the Vandellas, the list goes on and on.

These artists sung sugar-coated pop songs. The reality of the outside world was not allowed to

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impinge on the world Motown was creating.

GORDY WAS a ruthless capitalist. Later Marvin would say, “He behaved just the same as any white cat.” He used petty jealousies to divide the singers, he owned all the writing royalties, and he paid the musicians and writers per song and not in percentages.

A friend introduced Marvin to Berry, and he was signed up to join his amazing list of artists. Marvin soon became a major star, recording wonderful pop songs like “I Heard it Through the Grapevine”, “How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved By You)” and “Too Busy Thinking About My Baby”.

He also recorded a number of duets with Mary Wells, Kim Weston and Tammi Terrell—some of Motown’s leading female singers.

In 1963 Motown’s success gave it the space to produce its first spoken-word recording. The Great March to Freedom was a recording of King speaking in Detroit.

Gordy set up Black Forum Records. Its brief was to record the historic events that were taking place. But Gordy paid little attention to the label, which went on to record the poet and ex-Communist Langston Hughes and Black Panther leaders Stokely Carmichael and Elaine Brown.

However, there was a dividing line. Motown was about making money and Berry instructed its stars to steer clear of politics.

But on a hot summer’s day in August 1967 Berry’s wishes literally went up in smoke. Police racism and poverty sparked off a wave of riots in Northern cities. The riot that hit Detroit was the most violent.

Time magazine reported, “Detroit became the scene of the bloodiest uprisings in half a century and costliest in terms of property damage in US history. At the week’s end there were 41 known

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dead, 347 injured and 3,800 arrested. Damage estimates reached \$500 million.”

Gordy shut up shop and moved the whole Motown operation to Los Angeles. Marvin stayed in Detroit, frustrated with Gordy, the government and the Vietnam War.

Marvin said, “The government wanted me to pay for the guns and the bombs with my hard-earned money. I felt like Muhammad Ali. No Vietnamese had done nothing to me. Other people went to jail and I didn’t—I was privileged.

“I saw what was happening in the country and I wasn’t doing a damn thing about it. All I could do was admit how much I hated showbusiness. Showbusiness is shit!”

Marvin Gaye was not the only Motown artist demanding the right to reflect his political views in his music.

Gaye’s first attempt was the song “Abraham, Martin and John”, recorded in 1969. It was a mournful denunciation of the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln and John Kennedy.

His bitterness with the system grew when a cousin of his was killed in Vietnam. He set about writing an album which was a cry against all the injustices he saw. The result was *What’s Going On*.

Berry refused to release the album—he described it as “the worst record I have ever heard”. Marvin went on strike, saying he would never record for the label again. Berry, fearful of losing one of his biggest stars, backed down.

Marvin went further. He pushed for more artistic control. He demanded the right to choose the album cover. His suits were put into storage, and on went the beanie hats and jeans. *What’s Going On* was the first album which credited Motown’s musicians.

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The rest, as they say, is history. The album went on to become an enormous commercial and critical success.

Marvin told Melody Maker, “White kids, black kids wanted a different kind of music, they wanted to hear about something more than just love. They were smoking weed, dropping acid, and I went along with them. They were rebels like me, and they did this country the world of good. They finally stopped this terrible war.”

Marvin then released the wonderful album *Trouble Man*, a soundtrack to the blaxploitation movie of the same name.

He played a number of benefits for the NAACP, a black civil rights organisation. He donated money to Jesse Jackson’s community self help project, Operation Push. He even cancelled a tour, costing Motown millions of dollars, because he wanted to follow the Watergate investigations. He told horrified Motown executives, “I wanted to see Tricky Dick go down, down, all the way down.”

In 1972 he released the single “You’re the Man”, a barbed attack on Nixon’s presidential campaign. It only reached number 50 in the US chart and didn’t even get released in Britain. Marvin said it was a commercial failure because “it came out too late—the movement was in decline”.

At a meeting with Motown executives Marvin was told, “Sex and love sells—that’s what we need from you”. The executives were trying to wrestle artistic and creative control back. The result was *Let’s Get It On*, which was the biggest commercial success of his career.

But Marvin’s personal life was in a mess. A series of relationships broke up in very destructive ways. He took copious amounts of drugs and suffered from severe paranoia. His life was spiralling out of control.

He brought out a series of more musically complex albums—I Want You, Here My Dear and *In Our Lifetime*. Each album was less successful than the one before.

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Marvin hated the way Motown treated him. And when Ronald Reagan was elected US president in 1980 he fled the US, saying, "I can't go back—not to a country that has just elected a cowboy."

First he lived in Britain, then he moved to Belgium. By the age of 42 Marvin was a broken man, a drug addict suffering from mental illness.

He finally left Motown and joined the CBS label. His first album for the company was Midnight Love, released in 1982, which spawned the classic single "Sexual Healing".

Marvin's health continued to deteriorate. In an attempt to stabilise his life, he moved into his parents' home in California.

His father's paranoia and jealousy of his son got out of control. On 1 April 1984, just one day short of his 45th birthday, Marvin was shot dead by his father.

It was a tragic waste. Despite being one of the most famous singers in the world, Marvin had little or no control over his personal and artistic life.

Twenty years on, Marvin's greatest testament is still the album What's Going On, which remains a powerful statement against war and poverty.

Marvin was one of a handful of great artists who asked the question, "Why does the world have to be like this?"

Source: [Socialist Worker](#)