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1968 Now: Revolution and Revolt

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Marvin Gaye, Motown and Black Power in *What's Going On*

In 1968, the Civil Rights Movement lies at a decisive point in its history. Following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April, the Movement has lost its most well-known and charismatic leader as the conflict in Southeast Asia continues to dispatch black people at alarming rates. Former members of the Movement like James Baldwin and new thought leaders like Angela Davis begin to develop what would become the Black Power Movement, a new campaign that emphasized racial pride, as well as the economic and social empowerment of black people. While this was occurring, Motown Records, the most popular black-owned and operated record label is embarking on a shift both stylistically and in political advocacy. In particular, the release of *What's Going On* by Marvin Gaye marked a new period for black popular music in America, incorporating the activism of the day into his art while inspiring black artists to incorporate Afrocentric elements into future work.

It is important to note that the commercial success of Marvin Gaye and other Motown artists can be partially attributed to the Civil Rights Movement. As Suzanne Smith notes in *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit*, “the Civil Rights Movement created the environment in which broader cultural integration – as typified by Motown’s wide appeal – could occur” (66). Yet until 1968, artists on the Motown label were coerced to cater their music to be sanctioned for a white audience. As Michael Eric Dyson points out, “the styles, themes, sounds, and behavior of its artists were carefully tailored to project an unthreatening image of black identity”(51). This began to shift following the release of *Love Child* by The

Supremes in 1968. The song explores the plight of unwed teen mothers and became the first socially conscious song produced by Motown to achieve commercial success. Using *Love Child* as testimony to black-focused art, Motown experimented more with socially relevant soul music, employing the same tools as the Hippie Rock Movement like the Wah-Wah Pedal and blending multiple rhythmic patterns into tracks. This led to the production of *Cloud Nine* and *Message from a Black Man* from The Temptations in the late 1960s, songs which probed the struggles of inner-city black people, and culminated in the 1970 production of *War* by Edwin Starr, a Vietnam War protest track that remains a rallying cry to this day. It appeared that the limits placed on African American music were beginning to be severed. Around the same time as the release of *Love Child*, Marvin Gaye, the proclaimed 'Prince of Motown', released an album entitled *In the Groove*. Widely regarded as his commercial breakthrough, the album went gold in America and the lead single *Heard it Through the Grapevine* reached number one on the Billboard 100. Gaye had reached the peak of his prowess as an artist up to this point, receiving universal critical acclaim for his work.

Yet following his success in 1968, Gaye became disillusioned with his career and his position in society. While on tour in 1969, he witnessed the Protest Park rioting in which police clashed with hippie squatters. The horror in watching the police brutality reflected the tumult in his hometown of Washington D.C., as black unemployment skyrocketed following the ramp up of the Vietnam War and the resulting cutting to the Great Society programs. Gaye began to notice that many black communities, as Angela Davis puts it, "are occupied, patrolled and often attacked by police" (14). In response to all of this, he took an eighteen month break from recording, an unthinkable stretch of calm given his previous prolific output. During this hiatus, Gaye reads the black power writers of the day while hearing of the horrors of his brother's

experience as a soldier in Vietnam. From this learning he decides to rebel from Motown and reconnect with the working-class black community, forsaking a suit and tie for longer hair, sweatpants and sneakers. The new style brought him closer to his community and to those protesting social injustice.

Gaye's attempt to reconnect with his community spills over into his music. In the studio he lays multiple vocals on top of each other, bringing in other performers as well as professional football players to construct harmonies. He embraces the black aesthetic, in direct conflict with the perceived 'safe' musical styles of the Motown censorship machine, adding conga drums to tracks and seizing on the funk modernism work of Norman Whitfield, who had previously worked with The Supremes and The Temptations on socially conscious music. At the heart of the work is an attempt to emphasize Afrocentrism, valorizing African roots before the diaspora and celebrating black culture, while developing on the struggles of inner-city Black America.

Once all this groundwork was arranged, Gaye began to create his own type of protest in an album entitled *What's Going On*, grappling with issues laid out by contemporary thought leaders through his own experiences. The first track that shares the album title is set in a welcome home party for Gaye's brother, as friends reunite over conga thumps and solemn saxophone chords play to set the mood. Gaye then gently croons "Mother, Mother, there's too many of you crying, Brother, brother, brother, there's far too many of you dying". He laments the suffering of Vietnam "War is not the answer" as well as the ensuing cruelty shown towards black activists "Don't punish me, with brutality", while also asking for mediation to discuss these issues at large. It marks an opening salvo into a deep examination of black people and their position in America, while also situating the album in everyday life.

As the first song leads into the next, *What's Happening Brother* examines the aftermath of Gaye's brother returning from combat. The track tells of the struggle of returning home, "Can't find no work, can't find no job my friend, money's tighter than it's ever been". More broadly, it is about the disruption of community. The soldier beckons for old dance spots and baseball pennant races, his voice dripping with nostalgia for a simpler time. The final song on the album *Inner City Blues* bears witness to the economic disintegration occurring in Black America. Ominous opening piano chords with thudding drum and conga beats perpetuate the anguish of Gaye's tenor as it pierces the listener. He is at his most frustrated point on the album, decrying growing bills, lack of resources, high taxes and increasing imprisonment, all under the looming threat of a discriminatory draft system. His cry of "Makes me wanna holler, throw up on my hands" is legitimized as the sorry state of affairs in Black America sinks in over the slow beat of conga drums. His anger mirrors that of Angela Davis writing about the use of prison as "a key component of the state's coercive apparatus, the overriding function of which is to ensure social control" (15). His agony is clear but he offers comfort, particularly to his mother. This is a common refrain in Gaye, as he viewed a child's relationship to his mother as pivotal in self-development. As the conga drums fade out the end of the album, the implications and indictments made are clear: Black People put their faith in the system, were made promises, and in response the system broke these promises and attempted to destroy them.

Even though Gaye lays the charge of the deterioration of black America on inaction from the United States government and parts of White America, he stops short of rejecting the "apparatus of the bourgeois democratic state" and the "white god" of Christianity (Davis, 13). Rather, in many ways *What's Going On* functions more as a prayer for peace than a political manifesto. Gaye writes in *God is Love*, "God is my friend (Jesus is my friend) he is my friend,

He'll be merciful, oh, yes He will". He seems to reaffirm the message of Martin Luther King Jr, calling for change yet within a lens where most Americans are already a part of, in this case Christian ethics. Gaye even refers in *What's Going On* to a famous quote of King's, singing, "You see, war is not the answer, for only love can conquer hate". The Christian overtones are also reflected in the way the black inner city is spoken about. As musicologist Joanna Summers writes, "Gaye decries the ghetto as a purgatory for lost souls forgotten by society at large. Repression from without (through racist governmental policies) as well as degradation from within (through black-on-black violence and drug sales) conspire to change once-thriving urban centers into ghettos" (102). Striking the balance between demanding for progressive change while also acknowledging the benefits of the past is at the core of the album.

Gaye was able to, as Baldwin wrote "absorb his history, and in that tremendous action, free himself of it and will never be victims again" (20). The ability to rediscover and reassert his blackness, despite the pressure of material loss and a threat to end his career, allowed Gaye to be a pioneer in R&B music and black entertainment at large. Once released, *What's Going On* became one of the best-selling albums in the history of Motown, as socially conscious R&B music reached a new watermark. The album also lays the groundwork for future black artists, in particular Stevie Wonder, who releases *Music of my Mind* in 1972, an album that contains many of the musical attributes that Gaye synthesized. In many ways, Gaye's education mirrors the revolution of black consciousness in the spirit of 1968, as a low-point in the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. gave way to an explosion of black culture into the mainstream. The anger and demand for change, which saturates the album, marks the confluence of the sacrifices of black people at the time and the revolutions taking place musically and socially.

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