

Motown: Past Vs. Present

Extended Essay

Word Count 2664

March 7, 2006

Table of content:

Abstract	pg. 3
Introduction	pg.4
Body	pg.5
	Pg.6
	Pg.7
	Pg.8
	Pg.9
Conclusion	Pg.10
Bibliography	Pg.13

## Abstract

The extended essay shows the process Motown Records went through, due to the change in the ownership. The question that I came up with is “does the genre of music alter since the change in ownership?” To see the transformation that Motown went through, I had to research the history. I’ve found out that the genre of music had changed, since Barry Gordy sold Motown to MCA Records. It went from Soul music to Neo Soul music. Some of the artists that sang under Barry Gordy remained with Motown, but many new artist surfaced and began singing in a different way.

There was difficulty-finding information on the new Motown while under MCA Records. Not much was recorded or posted like it was for the classic Motown.

## Introduction

In the 1960's Motown was a new era of musical genre, emerging from the depths of African American artists and songwriters. It was apart of a generation where blacks weren't allowed to mingle with the whites at concerts, where places were segregated, and where there weren't equal rights for minorities. It was a struggle to make a simple living during the 60's, so Motown was a safe haven to enjoy the musical talents of young artists who were free to express themselves unlike in the real world. Barry Gordy, the founder, encouraged those who were in hiding from the white man to come and make Motown their home. 30 years went by and the times had changed, Barry Gordy concluded his ownership of Motown. He sold it to a musical corporation called MCA records. The event of changing ownership got me thinking if the music genre of Motown would be the same. Sometimes once something is sold and bought by a different person, it is altered in some way shape or form. To come to a conclusion, I'm investigating Motown Records current vs. Motown Records past, to see if the music genre had changed.

A skilled songwriter and producer, Berry Gordy Jr. has been sanctioned with changing the direction of contemporary music when he established Motown Records. His perceptive eye for talent and management abilities uplifted the careers of African-American entertainers during time of oppression. Also his business credentials imbedded Motown Records into the largest black-owned enterprise in America.

In Gordy's younger adult years, he had two loves: music and boxing. By

sharing his time between the two: composing songs on the piano and training at a Detroit gym, Gordy became aware of the different possibilities of a career for himself. Gordy mastered his talents in 1948 becoming a professional boxer. Then he opened up a record store, which later closed in 1955. The last employment Berry obtained was working in a factory for Ford Motors, until 1959. Realizing he wasn't going to make it as a boxer nor by working in factories, Gordy devoted his life to writing songs. His first success as a songwriter was in 1957, when Jackie Wilson recorded Reet Petite. It became a huge slam and Gordy made around \$1000 off the hit. He continued to co-write songs for Jackie Wilson such as "To Be Loved", "Lonely Teardrops", "That's Why" and "I'll Be Satisfied". Berry became very successful in his current career path, which he decided to stick with it and produce some songs for himself. His first production break was with the Five Stars; their hit was entitled "Ooh Shucks"(Vivian M. Baulch / *The Detroit New*). To find fresh talent, Berry attended a Detroit talent show; it was there where he saw a group of young men he thought had the skills. Claudette Rogers, Ronnie White, Pete Moore, Bobby Rogers and the lead singer William "Smokey" Robinson, were known as The Miracles. Their first release under the production of Gordy was entitled "Get a Job," which was signed on End records. The joint had some playtime but wasn't a huge hit, it soon died off. The Miracles followed it up with another record called "I Cry.", but it was also a down fall.

In 1958, Berry produced a record under his own publishing company called Jobete, which he named after his three children. The record was entitled "I Need

You" by Herman Griffin. After the continuous success in producing, Berry decided to take the next step by building his own record company.

Gordy decided that he wanted control over all of his creations, so on January 12, 1959, and he borrowed \$800 from his family to start his own record label, which he called Tamla. The studio was located at 1719 Gladstone Street in Detroit. It became the home of Marv Johnson's first release "Come to Me". It became a hit and United Artists signed Marv Johnson to a recording contract and Berry Gordy continued to produce for the label. In 1959, Marv Johnson's "You Got What It Takes" became Berry's first production to hit the Top 10 in the United States. In the early 60's, Tamla released another record called "Money" by Barrett Strong. It also became a hit for Tamla Records. The ironic thing is that Tamla Records didn't last long, it was up and running from 1958 to 1961.( Vivian M. Baulch / *The Detroit New*) Now Tamla became two record companies in one Motown/Tamla Records, but it mainly went by Motown Records, though records were still being released as Tamla Records. After "Money" became a hit, Barrett Strong went to Motown Records and worked as a songwriter. Within the new Motown Records, The Miracles released their hit song called "Bad Girl" which was leased to Chess records of Chicago, where it became a hit there also. In the late 50s, there weren't many well-built independent record companies within the cities of Detroit. When Berry established Motown, local minority talent began to pour in, many people started to show up at the office, trying to audition. Gordy saw his first talented group, their name was the Primettes. He was pleased with their performance, and

wanted to sign them, but since they were still in high school, he wanted them to finish school and then come back. Gordy felt, even talented people needed an education, especially when their young. The Primettes did come back to Motown after they all graduated from high school, and Berry signed them in January of 61. He changed the group's name to the Supremes, and they had their first release on Tamla Records in April of 61. With more talent pouring in, Barry came across a lady named Mary Wells, She was an immediate add on to his record company. She made a hit called "Bye Bye Baby", which she wrote on her own. Many hits began to roll in from Mary Wells records. ( David Edwards and Mike Callahan, Last update: March 14, 1998)

Next Barry came come upon another talented group, which called themselves the Distant, though later Gordy changed their names to the Temptations. A lad from DC came strolling into Motown and Barry fell in love with him right away, his name was Marvin Gaye. His first record was "Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide" and his first hit was "Stubborn Kind of Fellow."

With the founding of Motown Records, Gordy became a producer for black entertainers and the success of Motown soared for many years to come. With Smokey Robinson/Miracles, Diana Ross/Supremes, Jackson Five, Gladys Knight and the Pips and the Temptations, Barry had 5 of the best vocal groups in Detroit. Also he had the solo singers such as Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder. Barry had proven that poor black kids can make it in the songwriting and producing business and knew how to make hits.

Soul is a genre of music that is a combination of R&B, gospel, and doo-wop. It was a product of involving social conditions and a touch of diverse musical influence. It has a great emphasis on recording techniques, arrangements and producers. Black musicians for a black audience mainly performed soul music. There are distinguishing features of soul music such as the involvement of vocals and instruments, which impels the listener to participate with clapping and verbal response. Also the emotional singing style, back up choruses and the instrumental back up brought out soul music even more.

Barry Gordy dominated “Detroit Soul” through Motown’s strong rhythmic and influences from gospel, which included handclapping and a powerful bass line. Motown/Detroit Soul made the black popular music acceptable for white audiences. Gordy excluded sexual content in the majority of his songs, so that they could be performed in front of mainstream America. The soul style was altered and softened to make it more acceptable to mass audiences.( David Edwards and Mike Callahan, Last update: March 14, 1998). Such performers as The Temptations, Smokey Robinson, Marvin Gaye and The Supremes are just only a few of Motown’s greatest soul artists.

The Temptations were an all male group who dominated the pop and soul charts during the 1960’s. The group underwent many changes and never did achieve the level of success after the 1960’s.

Smokey Robinson was a singer and songwriter who, over a span of four decades had some of the best pop-soul music ever written and sung. He formed a



group called The Miracles, Gordy brought the group several million dollar sells, but in the end, Smokey left the group and became vice-president of Motown.

Marvin Gaye was a solo artist who favored romantic and sensual ballads. He had several Top Ten hits such as “Pride and Joy”, “I’ll Be Doggone”, and “Try it baby”. Though he was successful, Gaye was depressed and abused cocaine.

The Supremes were a group of three ladies who became the first American group to have three number one hits on the same album. They had become superstars in pop entertainment.

Soul was the basis of all music that was created during the Motown era, and was the grave difference between Motown then and Motown now. Artists now a days focus more on the sexual aspect of music, which is the total opposite of what Gordy created.

After Gordy decided to give up Motown, it was sold to MCA/Boston Ventures for 61 million dollars. MCA put up 20% of the price for Motown and Boston Ventures put up the rest. MCA stands for Music Corporation of America and it was founded in Chicago of 1924. The president Jheryl Busby, had the vision for the company to be neo-soul music, which is different than what Gordy had in mind. Neo Soul also known as nu soul (Neo Classical music) is a retro sounding form of music. It’s a mixture of R&B, gospel, soul, poetry, and hip-hop that began in the late 1950’s. The genre of music allows the artist to achieve sales not through corporate sounds but through vocal. With neo-soul, individualism and freedom in music, performance, and appearance is celebrated. Neo Soul can be sometimes

looked as nothing more than a specialization of contemporary R&B instead of an honest revival of soul music. Most people who record in the genre of Neo Soul and its listeners tend to favor the Neo Soul's underground credibility and soulfulness over its mainstream popularity. Most of its artists are unfamiliar to mainstream audiences, and its sound generally focuses on artist expression rather than pop orientation. Some believe that Neo-soul isn't very much new at all, but just reincarnation of the original soul music fused with hip-hop. Producer Bobby Blake believes that the term "neo" means that soul is dead. "In order for it to really have any meaning, soul music would have to have been dead at some point. Soul music never went anywhere." (By David Edwards and Mike Callahan, June 11, 1999)

Motown is a company of transition, trying to resume its hit making ways after bottoming out during the mid-80's was an success. The New Motown has had over 20 number 1 hits on billboards black music charts. Today Motown is still active as a record label as a subsidiary of Universal Music. It has been home to artists such as Boyz II Men, Brian McKnight, Erykah Badu and India Aire. To this day, Stevie Wonder is still signed to Motown, making him the only act from the "classic years" to remain on the label.

### Conclusion

Has the Motown genre of music changed since the alteration in ownership, I believe that it has and also through my research I have drawn my conclusion. While Barry Gordy owned Motown in Detroit, the musicians sang during a time of

racism and oppression so they had it more difficult than the new Motown artists. The new Motown moved to New York City, which is a different place from the one Berry Gordy Jr., started in Detroit in a small house where he dubbed Hitsville U.S.A. ( March 26, 1998 *By Larry Katz*) In Detroit they were something special, but in New York they're just another company. Also the music genre changed from Soul to Neo Soul.

I believe that the two genres of music are totally different; Motown had changed once MCA took over. The artists are different; there aren't many groups' singers but a lot of solo singers. Georgia Ward, who joined the Motown staff as a secretary in 1966, agrees with my statement that Motown has changed due to the altering of ownership. She says that "I'm the link between the past and future... basically, the whole company is new, totally new. Stevie Wonder is still here, Otis Williams of the Temptations and Diana Ross, but we're in different categories." ( March 26, 1998 *By Larry Katz*) Ward said that she saw old Motown as a far more corporate company than how it is now. "I was in the office on the second floor," she says, "and the recording studio was right below us on the first floor. It was just a house, not a soundproof building. When they'd start a session, you'd type to the beat of the music. It was a fun time. Everybody was free to roam. There were all these creative people hanging out. Everybody was friendly, down-to-earth. We were treated like one big happy family." ( March 26, 1998 *By Larry Katz*) All of that changed once Gordy sold Motown to MCA; the company was now a huge firm,

where everything was in a structured office environment. Ward says, “It has an entirely different feeling. ( March 26, 1998 *By Larry Katz*)

Polygram bought Motown in 1993 for \$301 million during an era of hip-hop. Andre Harrell a hip-hop entrepreneur who producer songs for Heavy D, Mary J. Blige and Al B was given a contract to run Motown for five years. (*"MCA Records": The Free Encyclopedia.. 8 Feb.2006*) While in power, Harrell dismissed one of Motown's greatest, Diana Ross. With Harrell in reign, Motown was a company in chaos. Motown had to make more changes, so they hired a new president, George Jackson, which he turned Motown into an urban music company. Urban music is a genre that promotes rap, hip-hop and R&B, totally different from the original soul music Gordy created. Urban music focuses on music released within the last five years, the music is selected based on the Billboard magazine Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Singles & Tracks chart, which calculates the most popular R&B and hip-hop singles in the United States. Such artists such as Tony Toni Tone, Brian McKnight and Will Downing became new members of Motown. The only problem was trying to recapture Motown's glory but now with a huge corporation. Jackson plans were to go back to Motown's roots, so he set up an office in Detroit that's being run by Michael Bivens. Any president can come in and say that they are going to take the new Motown and bring it back into the old way, but it's hard to recapture what was great during the 60's to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Bibliography

- 1.) Miller, Jim (editor) (1976). *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*. New York: Rolling Stone Press/Random House. ISBN 0-394-73238-3. (Chapter on "Soul," by Guralnick, Peter. pp. 194-197
- 2.) "Motown." Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. 19 Aug. 2005, 10:09 UTC. 23 Aug. 2005 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motown>>.
- 3.) "Musicians behind the "Motown Sound": InternetScottProject. May 2003, Vol 9, number 17 <<http://scout.wisc.edu/Reports/ScoutReport/2003/scout-030502-inthenews.html>>
- 4.) "The Motown Story": David Edwards and Mike Callahan. Last update: June 11, 1999. <<http://www.iconnect.net/home/bsnpubs/gordystory.html>>.
- 5.) "Motown": Vivian M. Baulch/Detroit News. Updated April 17, 2000 <<http://info.detnews.com/history/story/index.cfm?id=26&category=life>>
- 6.) "Can the new Motown recapture the old magic": Larry Katz. March 26, 1998 <http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/9803/26/motown.anniversary.lat/>
- 7.) "MCA Records": The Free Encyclopedia.. 8 Feb. 2006. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MCA\\_Records](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MCA_Records)>