

MOTOWN THE MUSICAL: BERRY GORDY IN HIS OWN WORDS

The history of Motown and its contributions to the cultural landscape of the United States is a compelling story. What Berry Gordy and Motown accomplished had ramifications far beyond the world of music. As *Motown the Musical* comes to your city, we have provided quotes from Mr. Gordy for you to use as you see fit. Many are from his 1994 autobiography, *To Be Loved*; all are used with permission.

On Motown's Rise to the Top

I am often asked, "How did you do it? How did you make it work at a time when so many barriers existed for black people and black music?" There are many answers to those questions but at the base of them is atmosphere. Hitsville had an atmosphere that allowed people to experiment creatively and gave them the courage not to be afraid to make mistakes. In fact, I sometimes encouraged mistakes. Everything starts as an idea and as far as I was concerned there were no stupid ones. "Stupid" ideas are what created the light bulb, airplanes and the like. . . . It was an atmosphere that made you feel no matter how high your goals, they were reachable, no matter who you were. I had always figured that less than 1 percent of all the people in the world reach their full potential. Seeing that potential in others, I realized that by helping them reach theirs, maybe I could reach mine.

Obstacles Faced by Black Artists Prior to Motown

The biggest obstacle faced by talented black artists was having a place to go – a record company where they would be accepted, where the records would be distributed, get played, and where they would get paid. Another obstacle was an artist having access to great material and great production in order to get a hit record.

From Songwriter to Publisher and Producer

Songwriting was my love, and protecting that love, in many ways, was the motivation for everything I did in the early years of my career. Producing the artists who sang my songs was the next logical step to making sure my songs were done the way I wanted. Publishing came about when I couldn't get my songwriter's royalties from a New York publisher. Protecting my songs was also the reason I got into publishing and eventually the record business.

How Working at an Automobile Plant Influenced His Approach to Motown

At the plant the cars started out as just a frame, pulled along on conveyor belts until they emerged at the end of the line – brand spanking new cars rolling off the line. I wanted the same concept for my company, only with artists and songs and records. I wanted a place where a kid off the street could walk in one door an unknown and come out another a recording artist – a star.

How Motown Began Making Inroads and Eventually Changed the Culture at "White" Stations

Most black artists, I feel, were ignored because of segregation and the music industry's blatant pigeon-holing of artists – Rhythm and Blues, Rock 'n' Roll, Pop. When I started out, I wanted music for all people: the cops and robbers, the rich and poor, the black and white, the Jews and the Gentiles. When I went to the white radio stations to get my records played, they would laugh at me. They thought I was trying to bring black music to white people, to “cross over,” and I said, “Wait a minute; it's not really black music. It's music by black stars.” I refused to be categorized. They called my music all kinds of stuff: Rhythm and Blues, Soul. And I said, “Look, my music is Pop. Pop means popular. If you sell a million records, you're popular.” And that's what we did. White stations in Detroit and then white stations everywhere starting playing our records. Our music became the soundtrack of people's lives for people all around the world who love this music.

I believed it's what's in the grooves that counts. Our music conveyed basic feelings, cutting through cultural and language barriers. Every project that I do – records, movies, TV or Broadway play – that's what I have in mind. It's all the same. I felt that people were all the same, that people have so much in common, and that our similarities were so much more powerful than our differences. So we just put out our music. We worked hard to deliver to people things like joy, love, and desire, the emotions that people felt but couldn't always express. We did it for them. Our international success proved to me that my feelings were right. It's just a matter of communication. Communication breeds understanding and understanding breeds everything else.

On Reaching White Audiences

We released some of our early albums without showing the artists' faces on them. The Marvelettes' album *Please Mr. Postman* had a picture of a mailbox on it; *Bye Bye Baby* by Mary Wells, a love letter. We put a cartoon of an ape on the cover of the Miracles' *Doin' Mickey's Monkey*; and an Isley Brothers album had two white lovers at the beach on its cover.

This practice became less necessary as our music's popularity started overcoming the prejudices.

On Creating the Motown Sound

The “Hitsville” sign over the door let it be known that if you set foot inside you were expected to sing, dance, write, produce, sell, or manage. That name kept our mission in focus. . . . Right at the start, [William “Mickey” Stevenson, head of Artists and Repertoire] went on the lookout for great musicians, combing even the seediest of bars and hangouts. If they could play, Mickey would bring 'em in, putting together the greatest house band that anyone could ever want. They called themselves the Funk Brothers.

Probably the two musicians who were the key for me in this loosely organized group were Benny Benjamin on drums and James Jamerson on bass. The other two members that made up the core of the Funk Brothers were Earl Van Dyke (on piano) and Robert White (on guitar). . . .

James Jamerson was a genius on the bass. He was an incredible improviser in the studio and someone I always wanted on my sessions. He'd get a simple chord sheet and build his own bass line so intricately it was hard to duplicate. Even he had trouble. That was great for the record, but when he stayed in Detroit and other musicians went out on the road to play the song live, they'd go crazy trying to play his lines. Some of the stuff he did on the bass, people are still trying to figure out today.

Another musician I had to have on all my sessions was Benny Benjamin. He was so good on the drums and had a feel no one could match. He had a distinctive knack for executing various rhythms all at the same time. He had a pulse, a steadiness that kept the tempo better than a metronome. . . .

Whenever a new player came into the group the sound would change slightly, based on his style.

Artists sang background on each other's sessions, or played the tambourine or clapped their hands; any employee who could carry a tune or keep a beat was used. . . .

The love we felt for each other when we were playing is the most undisputed truth about our music. I sometimes referred to our sound as a combination of rats, roaches, soul, guts and love. . . .

I was never really happy with our studio sound. But as it turned out, its many limitations forced us to be innovative. For example, having no room in the studio for a vocal booth, we made one out of the hallway that led from the control room to the stairs that took you into the studio. Since there were no windows we couldn't see the singer, so we communicated only over the microphones. But the end result was a good, clean vocal.

Our first echo chamber was the downstairs bathroom. We had to post a guard outside the door to make sure no one flushed the toilet while we were recording.

Later we also adapted an attic area as an echo chamber. That worked very well, except for an occasional car horn, rain, thunder or any other outside sounds that came in through the roof. Eventually we started recording the songs dry and adding echo afterward. Echoes gave the recording a bigger sound and made the voice sound fatter with a lingering feel to it. We bought a German electronic echo chamber, called an EMT, which we installed in the basement. That worked the best of all. . . .

Long before there were electronic synthesizers, I was looking for new ways to create different sound effects. We would try anything to get a unique percussion sound: two blocks of wood slapped together, striking little mallets on glass ashtrays, shaking jars of dried peas – anything. I might see a producer dragging in big bike chains or getting a whole group of people stomping on the floor. . . .

I may not have always known what I was looking for exactly, but when I found it I knew it. While open to a broad range of influences – Gospel, Pop, Rhythm & Blues, Jazz, Doo Wop, Country – I always emphasized simple, clean communication.”

The Committee Approach to Choosing Records:

In many ways Hitsville was like growing up in the Gordy family— fierce closeness and fierce competition and constant collaboration. I believed competition breeds champions. I knew . . . that competition could be a very effective tool in getting results, so I made it clear that it was open season for anyone who felt creatively inclined to compete with me to get the next big hit. In order to ensure top product, I set up Quality Control, a system I had heard about at Lincoln-Mercury.

The Friday morning product evaluation meetings were . . . the lifeblood of our operation. That was when we picked the records we would release. Careers depended on the choices made those Friday mornings. . . .

Some of the employees who came to the meetings weren't creative people, but I felt their reactions to the songs would be like those of the average record buyer. A noncreative person's vote counted just as much as a creative person's. . . .

My three main rules for these meetings were: 1) No producer could vote on his own record; 2) Only I could overrule a majority vote; and 3) Anyone over five minutes late would be locked out.

Another thing I was *very* serious about was people having the freedom to express their honest opinions openly at these meetings – without fear of reprisal. To me that was critical to the process. . . . “The real boss around here is not me, it's *logic*.”

These product evaluation meetings became one of the key elements in our overall growth. Each time a record made it through one of these meetings and became a hit, we got a little bit bigger.

I took the democratic approach because although I was in charge at Motown, I made logic the boss: no egos or politics allowed. Not even mine. And I did it because of *truth*. “The truth is a hit,” was what we used to say in our Quality Control meetings at Motown, with producers and writers vying for who would get the next release on the hottest artists. We listened to the records in contention, debated, and then voted. Many ingredients mattered, but the trump card was always truth. If what we heard wasn't true to that individual group or artist, or didn't communicate a true feeling, it wasn't going anywhere.

Touring the South

Things were very bad when we went to the South. I remembered in 1955 how terrified I was when I'd heard about Emmett Till, a 14-year-old kid from Chicago who was visiting relatives in Mississippi. Dragged from his grandfather's home, he was beaten unmercifully, lynched and his body was thrown in the Tallahatchie River. I couldn't

believe it when I heard that his crime was “thinking” under a white woman's dress.
Thinking?!? The two white men who had killed him were freed.

Our first Motortown Revue started off in Washington, D.C., but as the bus approached Birmingham and other cities in the South, we were greeted with signs of “Whites Only,” “No Coloreds Allowed...”

But then our tour bus was shot at. We were aware of how tough the racial conditions could be – the motels, restaurants, filling stations, and bathrooms where blacks were refused service. But my artists being shot at? All of a sudden the real world had shown its ugly face. These were just kids out there, and I was responsible – I had sent them out there. I wanted them to come back, but they insisted on staying.

Despite the hostility and racism we faced, we knew we were bringing joy to people. The audiences were segregated. The venues had a rope down the middle of the audience separating blacks from whites, but soon the rope was gone and black kids and white kids were dancing together to the same music. It created a bond that echoed throughout the world.