



## Motown Records: Detroit's Sound of Success

### OVERVIEW

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did Detroit's cultural and economic history influence the sound and success of Motown Records?

#### OVERVIEW

*In this lesson, students will examine the experience of Black communities in Detroit during the 1950s and 1960s to determine how the city's cultural institutions and economic structure influenced the sound and success of Motown Records. Students will analyze a variety of materials including videos, music, and articles to understand the significance of Motown in American popular music and culture.*



Motown Historical Museum in Detroit, MI, 2007 / Credit: TmPeukert, Wikimedia Commons

Motown Records is considered one of the most successful and influential independent entertainment companies in American history. Founded in Detroit, Michigan, Motown was Black-owned and operated, and featured some of the most acclaimed Black musical artists of the 20th century. Throughout its history, Motown helped to launch the careers of Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Diana Ross and the Supremes, Michael Jackson and the Jackson 5, The Temptations, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, and many others. Notably, Motown was founded and thrived within the racially segregated and discriminatory practices of Detroit's cultural institutions and its local economy.

Motown originated with founder Berry Gordy Jr. and his family, who had a history of entrepreneurial enterprises in Detroit throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Detroit had a growing and thriving Black population in the midst of the Great Migration—the movement of southern Black Americans into northern and western U.S. cities from the 1910s through the 1970s. Gordy, who came from a middle class Black family, had a range of job experiences, including serving in the military, working on an automobile assembly line, owning a record store, and music songwriting and producing. With his siblings Anna, Gwen, and Robert, Gordy had success writing songs for Rhythm and Blues artists like Jackie Wilson in the 1950s. Receiving only a portion of his songs' earnings, he aspired to take more control of his music industry pursuits. In January 1959, with an \$800 loan from his family, Gordy founded Tamla Records, the independent record label that would become the first of many labels created by Gordy under the Motown Record Corporation.

Later in 1959, looking to keep costs down and maintain record production in-house, Gordy purchased the now famous house at 2648 West Grand Boulevard in Detroit. Later nicknamed "Hitsville U.S.A.", the large house would be the headquarters and main offices for Motown. Gordy



and his growing young family would reside on the top floor of the house during the early years of the company. Additionally, the unattached photography studio in the rear of the property was turned into a recording studio. Gordy wasted no time expanding the company, hiring many of his family members as well as young people in the surrounding community, such as Smokey Robinson. Together, these new hires would write and produce music as well complete administrative work for the fledgling enterprise. The creation of the Motown company name was derived from the nickname for Detroit, the “Motor City” or “Motor Town” to finally “Motown”.

Motown became well known for its in-house operations. It had house songwriters such as Smokey Robinson, and songwriting teams such as brothers Brian and Eddie Holland and their partner, Lamont Dozier. Similarly, Motown’s in-house recording studio group was comprised mostly of local Detroit Jazz musicians and became known collectively through their association with Motown as The Funk Brothers. The group and their celebrated, although publicly unrecognized, body of work for Motown established the careers of musicians such as pioneering bassist James Jamerson and guitarist Robert White. Keeping songwriting, recording, producing, publishing, and even at times distribution, in-house, helped Motown to establish their own unique sound in 1960s Soul and Pop music. Known as “The Motown Sound”, these songs featured call and response style vocals, sophisticated melodies, accentuated tambourines and handclaps, and large orchestral arrangements featuring strings and horns. Gordy instituted “quality control” meetings in which members of the company would closely scrutinize records before their release.

The collective efforts of a company such as Motown was revolutionary, and changed the course of American popular music. Motown had extraordinary success with their approach to making music, even within an industry that was racially segregated; becoming a company that accomplished “crossover” sales in both white and Black music markets. In fact, between 1961 and 1971, Motown had over 100 Top Ten songs on the Pop charts, something that has not been replicated since by an independent record company. This success has led Motown to be an essential part of popular music history, and an influential force in American history and culture. The lyrics and sound of Motown Records has informed music across genres well into the present. The look and sound of Motown acts became characteristically recognizable as TV expanded the means by which Americans engaged with music and entertainment.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The defining elements and themes of “The Motown Sound” and its impact on American popular music
- The collaborations between and contributions of Motown artists, songwriters, producers, musicians, and staff members
- The cultural and economic conditions of Detroit in the 1950s and 1960s

### 2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to explain the sound and success of Motown Records while noting the cultural and economic issues facing the company by listening to music, viewing images and media, and analyzing text.

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. As a Quick Write activity, instruct students to consider their favorite song at the moment and then write about the song. Direct students to focus their writing on what they know about the song's creation and/or its artist.
2. Instruct students to share their writing with each other in small groups. Then ask students (*consider documenting student responses on the board*):
  - Did the featured artist for the song you wrote about write and record the song solely by themselves? Who may have helped them in this creative process?
  - Why might it be beneficial to work with other people when writing and recording a song?
  - Might an artist's location, culture, or identity impact what or how they create music?

### PROCEDURE

1. Play **Clip 1, The Temptations - "My Girl"**. Then, ask students:
  - Do you know the song, "My Girl" by The Temptations? If so, how are you familiar with it?
  - What did you hear in the song? How would you describe its sound, lyrics, or feeling?
  - Do the Temptations remind you of any artists today?
2. Organize students into pairs. Inform students that they are going to examine Motown records, the record company for which the Temptations recorded, "My Girl." Distribute **Handout - Encyclopedia of Detroit Entry, "Motown Records"**. Review the directions on the handout, instructing students to work together in pairs to analyze the text and answer the questions. Then, have pairs share their answers from the handout with the class.
3. Display **Image 1, "School District Boundaries, Detroit Public Schools, Center District, September 1959" Map**. Explain to students that the map was created by the Detroit Public Schools system. Request volunteers to read the text on the right aloud, including the Legend text from the map at the bottom left corner. Then, ask students:
  - What does the map and text suggest about the racial dynamics of Detroit in the 1950s and 1960s?
4. Continue to display **Image 1, "School District Boundaries, Detroit Public Schools, Center District, September 1959" Map** and organize the class into small groups of four students each. Explain to students that they will be working in groups for the remainder of the lesson and will now be participating in a group activity to gain knowledge about the cultural and economic conditions in Detroit when Motown Records was founded.

5. Distribute **Handout - *Detroit Under Fire*** to student groups. Inform students that each group will examine four issues influencing racial dynamics in Detroit when Motown Records was founded in 1959: Education, Employment, Housing, and Urban Renewal. Review the directions on the handout with students. Once completed, ask for volunteers to share about one of the four issues they examined until all four issues are shared. Then, ask students:
  - Considering your examination, what kind of challenges might African Americans have faced if they wanted to start their own business in Detroit?
  - How might these issues have impacted Berry Gordy, Jr.'s founding of Motown Records?
  - What might Motown Records have offered to African Americans in Detroit and the city-at-large?
6. Display **Image 2, “The Motown Sound: The Sound of Young America” Flyer**. Explain to students that this is a flyer created by Motown Records that would often be found inside music magazines to advertise the company. Then, ask students:
  - What is the Motown slogan in the top right of the flyer? (*The Sound of Young America*)
  - Thinking of the handout you read and analyzed about the company, what was the nickname for the company's headquarters building in Detroit? (*Hitsville U.S.A*)
  - What do these slogans and nicknames suggest about Motown's audience?
- Who was Motown's music intended to appeal to? Who may have been listening to it?
7. Inform students that they will now be exploring the song “My Girl” more deeply. Distribute **Handout - “My Girl”—The Temptations (1964)”** essay with graphic organizer. Explain that every student will read and analyze the “My Girl” essay and then the group will collectively complete the graphic organizer. Review the directions on the essay and graphic organizer with students and, if necessary, model how to fill out the graphic organizer.
8. Once student groups have completed the activity, ask students:
  - What may have been the benefit of including many people in the writing, recording, and quality control process of “My Girl”?
  - How may this process be different from the way other artists and record companies operate?
  - What about these people was interesting or stood out to you?



## SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Play **Clip 1, The Temptations - “My Girl”** again. Instruct students to consider what they now know about the song, and the city of Detroit in the 1950s and 1960s, as they are viewing the video. Then, ask students:

- What do you notice in the song or the performance that you didn't notice in your first viewing?
- How might the cultural and economic conditions in Detroit during this time inform your knowledge about “My Girl”?
- Why do you think this song is still popular and commonly heard today?

2. Direct students to consider what they wrote about their favorite song at the moment at the beginning of the lesson. Then, ask students:

- How might cultural and economic conditions have influenced the creation of your favorite song at the moment? What might those conditions have been?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Assign students to independently research the origins of another famous Motown song of their choice. Using a similar documentation method as shown in this lesson, students will record who was involved in the writing, recording, and production of the song. Then, students will present their research and documentation.
2. Assign students to research events in Detroit during the Civil Rights Movement such as the 1963 Walk to Freedom or the 1967 Detroit Riot/Uprising. As they research, students will consider how these events may have influenced those working at Motown Records and the music that they were producing.



## STANDARDS

**COLLEGE, CAREER, AND CIVIC LIFE (C3) SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS***Geography*

D2.Geo.2.9-12. Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationships between the locations of places and regions and their political, cultural, and economic dynamics.

D2.Geo.5.9-12. Evaluate how political and economic decisions throughout time have influenced cultural and environmental characteristics of various places and regions.

D2.Geo.8.9-12. Evaluate the impact of economic activities and political decisions on spatial patterns within and among urban, suburban, and rural regions.

*History*

D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

**COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS***College and Career Readiness Reading Information Text Standards for Grades 9-12*

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

*College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing for Grades 9-12*

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.



CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 9-12*

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.



CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

## **SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)**

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity





## RESOURCES

### VIDEO RESOURCES

- The Temptation - "My Girl"

### HANDOUTS

- Handout - Encyclopedia of Detroit Entry, "Motown Records"
- Handout - *Detroit Under Fire*
- Handout - "'My Girl'—The Temptations (1964)" Essay with Graphic Organizer