

Berry Gordy Jr. and the Original "Black Label"

by *Larry Schweikart*

Asksed to identify prominent people in the music industry, most Americans will name musicians. A few may mention Phil Spector, Herb Alpert, Burt Bachrach, or Quincy Jones—producers, writers, and arrangers, not (essentially) performers. A true “music geek” may even name behind-the-scenes music gurus such as Clive Davis (founder of Arista Records) or Ahmet Ertegun (founder of Atlantic Records). Yet few musicians, songwriters, or performers have had as much impact on the American music industry as Berry Gordy Jr., founder of the original “black label,” Motown Records.¹ His is an illustrative chapter in story of American entrepreneurship.

Gordy loved the music business and dreamt of writing and producing. A former Golden Gloves boxer, he was drafted during the Korean War, and when he returned to his native Detroit, he started Gordy’s 3-D Record Mart to sell jazz records. But the store floundered: his customers wanted soul and blues. In 1955, after only two years, Gordy folded the business and took a job at Ford Motor Company’s Lincoln division.

But he had not given up his dream. He got his break when a concession business run by his family at the Flame Show Bar introduced him to several top entertainers. The Flame Show featured the top black acts in Detroit,

including Billie Holiday and T-Bone Walker, and the club owner managed a young singer named Jackie Wilson. Gordy was invited to write some songs for Wilson, and he collaborated with Roquel “Billy” Davis to pen the hit “Lonely Teardrops.”

Gordy soon met Raynoma Liles, who auditioned for backup singer in some of the acts Gordy had begun to produce. Raynoma (whom Gordy married) could write music, and this talent fit perfectly with Gordy’s own freelancing songwriting style. In 1957 he produced “Reet Petite,” also sung by Wilson, bringing still more ambitious acts to Gordy’s doorstep. When a group called the “Matadors” was turned down by Wilson’s manager, Gordy took it under his wing, changing its name to the “Miracles” and spotlighting its lead singer, William “Smokey” Robinson. Gordy was now wearing three hats, as manager, writer, and producer for the Miracles. He produced their minor hit “Got a Job” (an answer to the Silhouettes’ “Get a Job”) and the success of the Miracles, along with the songs Gordy wrote for Jackie Wilson, convinced him that he could make the leap to the next level: owning his own record label. In 1959, using \$500 that his mother lent to him, Gordy formed Tamla Records and a publishing arm, Jobete Publishing. This was a significant move, because as any musician knows, the lion’s share of the royalties goes to the publisher and writer, not the performer.

Gordy continued to write hits, including

Larry Schweikart (schweikart@erinet.com) teaches history at the University of Dayton.



Jackie Wilson

“Money (That’s What I Want),” recorded by Barrett Strong. But finding that his little label could not efficiently distribute the records around the country, he signed a national production and distribution deal with United Artists. In 1960, Gordy converted the Tamla and Hitsville USA record labels into a new company, “Motown,” from Detroit’s “Motor Town” nickname. On the advice of Smokey Robinson, Motown began to distribute its own records that year, bolstered by the success of Robinson and the Miracles’ “Shop Around.” By that time Detroit-based black talent started to beat on Gordy’s door with regularity, and the artists produced by Motown started to gain acceptance in wider markets. Mary Wells, for example, achieved “crossover” into white markets with the classic “My Guy” (1964).

Some stars were literally right under Gordy’s nose. His secretary, Martha Reeves, had a group called the “Vandellas,” and she successfully lobbied Gordy to record the group. After proving their mettle by singing backup on a few Motown hits, “Martha and the Vandellas” was allowed to record solo, with results that, by that time, should not

have shocked Gordy. Their songs “Heat Wave” and “Dancin’ in the Streets” shot to the top of the charts.

Gordy realized, however, that blacks constituted only about 12 percent of the population in the United States, and even if he sold a record to every black adult, he could not make as much money as if he sold to only one-quarter of the white population. He therefore embarked on a risky and, in retrospect, brilliant strategy to “package” black Detroit acts in such a way that white audiences would buy their records. This was no mean feat. It could have backfired with his large black audiences, giving him a reputation for selling out. On the other hand, he faced a substantial hurdle in getting black artists on mainstream radio. Only a few years earlier, a white singer from Tupelo, Mississippi, Elvis Presley, had been denied airplay on some radio stations because he “sounded black.” But Gordy realized that cultural differences had to be bridged from both directions. If whites were to embrace the less rigid structure of black rhythm and blues, the music had to be presented in a polished, sophisticated (and non-threatening) way. In short, Gordy’s genius was that he presented black music in the entertainment structure that white audiences were familiar, and comfortable, with.

Breaks New Ground

Gordy hired a choreographer, for example, to teach the groups how to move. Motown choreography, which eventually became a caricature of itself, nevertheless in its early years broke new ground in musical presentation. He also realized that his singers, most of whom were from poor inner-city neighborhoods, needed to be able to make a good showing in interviews to better promote their records. He hired elocution instructors and taught the artists proper English and social skills. Gordy dressed his acts in suits, tuxedos, or full dresses. If racists were going to complain that black music would pervert the nation’s youth, they would have a hard time proving it by looking at the Motown stable of groups, whose

members were well-dressed, articulate, and polished. This was more than a superficial remake. “We don’t accept an artist easily,” Gordy told a Detroit newspaper. “We look for character and integrity as well as talent, and this produces a big family-type organization.”

Gordy demanded of his acts hard work, a straight life, and commitment to “the system,” and in return he recognized that he owed them sound financial advice so they would not squander their money. Setting up a financial-counseling service, Gordy explained in 1962, “We try to help artists personally with their investment programs so that they don’t wind up broke. We are very much concerned with the artist’s welfare.”²

Perhaps Gordy’s most impressive barrier-breaking move was not his formatted choreography or his “packaging” of black acts, but his fundamental assault on the construction of black blues itself. Knowing that traditional blues, as played by Muddy Waters, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and B. B. King would be a hard sell to white audiences, Gordy worked with Eddie Holland, Lamont Dozier, and Brian Holland (known as “Holland-Dozier-Holland” on the record labels) to transform the traditional 12-bar blues and 32-bar ballads into new, short strains that featured a repeated “hook,” or catch phrase. The innovation can be heard in the Supremes’ hit “Stop, in the Name of Love” and others.

Gordy’s Motown Records cranked out many hits in the early-to-mid-1960s from the Temptations, the Supremes, Martha and the Vandellas, and the Four Tops, always keeping the records within a two- to two-and-a-half-minute time frame so that disc jockeys would play them.

Like other artists, Holland, Dozier, and Holland flourished in Gordy’s Motown system, and yet they came to resent his control. The songwriters broke off in 1967 to form their own label. While they still produced a few minor hits, they never enjoyed the success they had at Motown—perhaps due in part to changes in musical taste by that time. They were not the first to leave: Gladys



COURTESY: DETROIT-FREE PRESS

Berry Gordy

Knight and the Pips had left Motown after a huge hit, redoing Marvin Gaye’s “I Heard It Through the Grapevine.”

Motown suffered with the loss of artists and songwriters, and it fell into a two-year funk while Gordy struggled to find replacements. He found renewed life with a new band, the Jackson 5, who submitted to Gordy’s “polishing” process in Los Angeles. After a year of preparation, the Jackson 5 released “I Want You Back,” featuring the powerful and dynamic vocals of the youngest member of the family, Michael Jackson. Gordy realized that Michael had the strongest fan appeal, and during the time that the Jackson 5 continued to turn out the hits, Gordy groomed Michael for a solo career.

Gordy was correct in his assessment of Michael Jackson, but as had occurred with

other Motown stars and songwriters, his tight grip alienated Michael and the group. In 1976 the Jackson 5 left Motown, renaming themselves the Jacksons, and not long after that, Michael Jackson changed the face of music history with his stunning albums, "Off the Wall" and "Thriller" (which was co-produced with Quincy Jones). Given the Gordy formula, it is unlikely Jackson ever would have created many of his masterpieces had he remained at Motown. But like so many others, including young Steveland Judkins (whom Gordy repackaged as "Little Stevie Wonder"), Michael Jackson owed his start to Gordy's genius.

Top Black-Owned Business

By the early 1970s, when *Black Enterprise* magazine labeled Motown the top black-owned business in America, Gordy had relocated many of his operations to Los Angeles. As he involved himself less in daily matters, Motown's hit-making reputation suffered. But with or without Gordy, Motown found that music itself had changed, developing a harder edge with the 1970s rock bands and the advent of the drug culture's psychedelic and "metal" music. Motown remained

locked into a formula for groups, producing the Commodores, but the heyday of its creativity was gone, and further erosions of black dance music occurred when the "disco" scene made several white acts, such as the Bee Gees and K. C. and the Sunshine Band, into dance-music stars.

In 1988 Gordy sold Motown to MCA Records. He had literally changed the American music industry, introducing large numbers of suburban whites to "black" music and advancing the careers of many who now are honored in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, as is Gordy himself. Gordy became a victim of his own success, and like Henry Ford, the revolutionary finally turned into the old guard. But weep not for Berry Gordy Jr. In the process of creating Motown records, he became wealthy, started an empire, and gave America some of its best music moments. □

1. For information on Motown, see Dave Edwards and Mike Callahan, "The Motown Story," online at www.bsnpubs.com/gordystory.html; "Sweet Soul Music," in Thaddeus Wawro, *Radicals and Visionaries: Entrepreneurs Who Revolutionized the 20th Century* (Irvine, Calif.: Entrepreneur Press, 2000), pp. 154–57; and Larry Schweikart, *The Entrepreneurial Adventure: A History of Business in the United States* (Ft. Worth: Harcourt, 2000), pp. 398–99.

2. Ken Barnard, "Berry Gordy Jr.—Detroit's Record King," *Detroit Free Press*, December 26, 1962, www.freep.com/motownat40/archives/122662mo.htm.