

# “What’s Going On”—Marvin Gaye (1971)

Added to the National Registry: 2003

Essay by Josiah Howard (guest post)\*



*Original album*



*Original label*



*Marvin Gaye*

A question mark song and album without the question mark in the title, at the time of its release in 1971, Marvin Gaye’s seminal “What’s Going On” was a not-so-subtle statement record: a watershed musical endeavor that broke with Motown Records’ traditions, spoke directly to the volatile times in which it was conceived, and placed its singer/musician/songwriter in the record books. It also has, over the past half century, been reconsidered, reevaluated and recognized as one of the most substantial Pop/Soul music recordings ever set to wax.

But it almost didn't happen. Motown records, “the sound of young America” were, throughout the sixties, the most successful soul music label in the world. It was a strategic triumph that came to pass in part because, with very few exceptions (1963’s “The Great March to Freedom: Martin Luther King Jr Speaks” was one), the label’s music was decidedly uncontroversial. This was a company developing and promoting acts that could “play” anywhere--and for both black and white audiences. Political statement making was off limits. “That’s not our bag,” Motown president Berry Gordy confirmed at the time, “We’re trying to bring people together, not pull them apart.”

Perhaps, but the world outside the regulated environment of Hitsville, USA (Motown’s premiere recording studio) *was* pulling people apart. At the dawn of the new decade a change was not requested: it was demanded. Vietnam War protests, Women’s Rights and Gay Rights movements, Native American awareness, the Black Power Movement, the Black Panther Party, the deteriorating ozone layer and animal abuse, were causes and concerns that overlapped, creating an atmosphere of disruption and chaos.

In 1971, at 32, Marvin Gaye was a singing sensation whose catalogue of music included solo and duet albums, top ten hits, and successful international concert tours. He was also a personality whose wholesome image--winning smile, tailored suits and seductive singing voice--made him something of a black heartthrob.

Preceding “What’s Going On,” Gaye had released ten original albums (his music appeared on Tamla, one of Motown’s many subsidiary labels). “The Soulful Moods of Marvin Gaye” (1961); “Marvin Gaye Recorded Live Onstage” (1963); and the best-selling “I Heard it Through the Grapevine” (1968), competed in the record buying marketplace with Gaye’s collection of show tunes; “Hello Broadway” (1964) and “A Tribute to the Great Nat “King” Cole” (1965).

His hits were voluminous. “Ain’t That Peculiar,” “How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved by You),” “I’ll Be Doggone,” “Too Busy Thinking About My Baby” and “I Heard it Through the Grapevine” were showcases for his lilting tenor, haunting falsetto, and swoon worthy spoken passages. And he shared his magic with others. With Mary Wells (who had a No. 1 Pop hit with

“My Guy”), he recorded the album “Together” (1964). He did the same with Kim Weston, “Take Two” (1966); and with Tammi Terrell, “United” (1967), “You’re All I Need” (1968) and “Easy” (1969). In 1973, he closed out his duet album duties with none other than Diana Ross on “Diana & Marvin.”

Right before the release of “What’s Going On,” Marvin Gaye had gone through some personal and professional changes that would show up, unapologetically, in his music. Along with his singing, songwriting and proficiency at playing the piano and drums, Gaye was a jack-of-all-trades who had served time with the quartet The Marquees, co-wrote the Marvelettes hit “Beechwood 4-5789,” and worked as a session musician for The Miracles and Jimmy Reed. His experience in all roles of music making served him well and he was confident in the knowledge that what he brought to Motown was much more than his voice.

It was Gaye’s new independence, evolution and desire to go in a different musical direction, that gave Berry Gordy--and everyone else at Motown--pause. He had, after all, developed a winning formula: but he had outgrown it. Gaye was now a bearded man with a “black power” Afro who wore dashikis, scarves and Afrocentric jewelry. His “What’s Going On” album cover confirmed it. It showed a rain-soaked, unsmiling man wearing a black leather maxi coat with the lapel upturned. The background wasn’t the carefully lit, pastel-colored photo studios of yore, it was the misty, unpredictable, melancholy outdoors. On the back cover he’s photographed behind a tenement building: an abandoned swing set and pile of garbage completes the effect. This wasn’t a compliant “company” man, this was a cool dude aligned with the man on the street: the *black* man.

The songs:

“What’s Going On,” the two-million-copies-sold single that reached No. 1 on the R&B charts and No. 2 on the Pop charts, opened the nine-song collection--all of whose tunes segued into one another. Conceived by Four Tops member Renaldo “Obie” Benson with additional lyrics by Al Cleveland and Gaye, the song was a reflection of Benson’s memory of witnessing an act of police brutality perpetrated against peaceful protesters. Accompanied by orchestral sounds, layered background vocals, and embellished with exclamations, the song offered up a catchy but unsettling real-world travelogue that included “picket lines and picket signs,” declarations; “war is not the answer, only love can conquer hate,” and sage contemplation; “brother, brother, there’s far too many of you dying.” It was a stark and modern pronouncement wrapped in the soulful sounds of contemporary music.

“What’s Happening Brother” (another question mark song without the question mark), continued to comment on current events. Cleverly utilizing one of the most used African American greetings of the day “What’s Happening” (the black sitcom “What’s Happening!!” ran from 1976-79), the song was a musical compendium of the stories Gaye’s brother Frankie had told him about what it felt like returning to America after service in the Vietnam War. “Money is tighter than it’s ever been,” the protagonist acknowledges, but he’s also happy to see his “brothers” and wonders about how things have changed: “Are they still gettin’ down where we used to go and dance?” / “Are things really getting better, like the newspapers said?” A loosely structured free-association jam, “What’s Happening Brother” continued “What’s Going On’s” determined trajectory.

“Flyin’ High (In the Friendly Sky)” appropriated the United Airlines slogan: “Fly the friendly skies.” The aircraft company’s saturation advertising campaign was, throughout the sixties and seventies, hard to escape. It was also easily commandeered. There was no doubt about what “flyin’” and “high” meant, as it related to drug culture and the inner-city black experience. “Well, I know I’m hooked my friends/To the boy who makes slaves out of men” and “But soon the night will bring the pain/The pain, the awful pain” spoke directly to the pitiful cycle of addiction and withdrawal, something that Gaye would later admit he struggled with himself.

With his stirring falsetto front and center, “Flyin’ High” conjures up images of Gaye slowly drifting into the haze of a drug induced high: light, free-flowing and trippy: but dangerous.

Not released as a single in America but topping out at No. 41 in the UK, “Save the Children,” continued Gaye’s appropriation of slang, advertising and familiar organizations as an ear-catching musical component. The Save the Children Foundation was founded in 1919--to do just that. It was also the title of the British television documentary “The Save the Children Fund Film” (1971), as well as Paramount Pictures’ concert film “Save The Children” (1973): “When I look at the world it fills me with sorrow/Little children today are really going to suffer tomorrow.” Gaye’s plaintive plea further established the album’s unwavering presentation of pertinent issues. Spoken passages--more like poems--brought the message home memorably.

“God is Love” put on vinyl Gaye’s straightforward declaration of his Christianity. “Oh, don’t talk about my Father, He is my friend/He made this world for us to live in,” were upfront and unencumbered: both a celebration and a statement. With “God is Love,” Gaye joined the long list of black performers who, after hitting it big, returned to their religious and spiritual roots--including secular music right alongside tunes specifically fashioned for the radio.

“Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)” closed out the first side of “What’s Going On.” As a single it reached No. 1 on the R&B charts and No. 4 on the Pop charts. A third tune lacking punctuation (no comma in the title), the haunting musicscape behind Gaye’s vocals marked one of the very first times that an African American performer sang about the environment. Just the use of the word “ecology” was a transgression, and coupled with lyrics like “poison is the wind that blows,” “fish full of mercury,” “oil wasted on the ocean,” “radiation on the ground and in the sky,” and “What about the overcrowded land/How much more abuse from man can she stand,” here was a distinct and rare song: a choral ode to the living, breathing world around us.

Utilizing the African American catchphrase “Right On!”--an expression of positivity as well as the name of the concurrently popular black teen magazine “Right On!” and the motion picture “Right On!” (1971), Gaye continued to give his songs titles that spoke directly to his young, black, audience. A support tune, “Right On,” heavy with the affirmation “I know that’s alright,” praised those who “tend the sick” and “heed the people’s cries.” It also implored listeners to have “love for your brother” and “love for God.” As presented by Gaye this was a Holy Rollers meeting in which the Lord was praised at the same time that some necessary truths were imparted. Right on indeed!

“Wholy Holy,” with its play on words title, returned to themes covered in “God is Love” but more explicitly. The name “Jesus” is recounted and the bible referenced—“He left us a book to believe in”--and the jam has a church feel: a Sunday sermon for those most in need of hearing it: the young and disenfranchised. Devoid of the percussive elements and background chants heard previously, this laid back, largely instrumental track foreshadowed Gaye’s work a year later on the “Trouble Man” soundtrack album.

“Inner City Blues (Makes Me Wanna Holler)” was “What’s Going On’s” third and final single release. Topping out at No. 1 on the R&B charts and No. 9 on the Pop charts, it was a perfect finale to an album that had something to say: both a fist bump and a confessional. “Inflation, no chance/To increase finance/Bills pile up sky high/Send that boy off to die” left little to the imagination. With “Mercy Mercy Me” Gaye used the word “ecology,” with “Inner City Blues” he used “inflation”: words seldom heard in pop music. And he used the song as a moment of commentary on his own life and times. “Natural fact is/Oh, honey I can’t pay my taxes,” made reference to Gaye’s own much-reported-on struggles with the IRS (he was cited for non-payment of \$4.5 million in taxes and would later file for bankruptcy). “Inner City Blues,” like the album itself, was impactful. Throughout the years it’s been covered by some of the recording industry’s most revered talents: Etta James, Sarah Vaughan, Herbie Mann, Joe Cocker, and Angela Winbush, to name just a few.

A half century after its release “What’s Going On” remains germane and relatable. The single “What’s Going On” asked questions about the Vietnam War: today there are questions about the Iraq War and the Afghanistan War. “Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)” voiced concerns about the environment: today global warming is real and the effect indisputable. The Black Power Movement, riots and marches demanded equality and inclusion: today there are movements for gender identity, sexual orientation, and equal pay. And “Inner City Blues (Makes Me Wanna Holler)” commented on current events, but foresaw America’s continuing racial reckoning: the 2020 protests, marches and unrest spurred on by the filmed murder of George Floyd (and other African Americans) by uniformed white police officers.

Beautifully crafted, strikingly melodic, pointedly ethnic, and genuinely concerned about the world in which it was created, Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On”—a profound 35 minutes and 38 seconds—has proven to be the artist’s masterwork: an informed personal reflection set to music. Although he would continue creating art and having hits—“Let’s Get it On” (1973), “Sexual Healing” (1982)—“What’s Going On” was everything it needed to be and more. A record for the times, that spoke about the times, and has stood the test of time.

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