

“What’s Going On”—Marvin Gaye (1971)

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Essay by Cary O’Dell



Original album



Original label



Marvin Gaye

It was the year of “Blue” by Joni Mitchell, “Sticky Fingers” by the Rolling Stones, “Imagine” by John Lennon and “At Filmore East” by the Allman Brothers Band as well as eponymous releases by the likes of Bonnie Raitt, Barbra (Joan) Streisand, John Prine, the Doobie Brothers, Link Wray, and Linda Ronstadt. All in all, 1971 was an important year for music and the artform known as the “album.” But even among these stellar achievements, another release from that year, Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On,” endures as a standout example of modern soul, political commentary and musical craftsmanship.

Born Marvin Pentz Gay, Jr. in 1939 in Washington, DC (Gaye would add the “e” to his last name later), Marvin Gaye, like many black artists of the era, first sang in his father’s Apostolic church. After serving in the Air Force, Gaye returned to DC determined to have a career in music. His first group, a group of vocalists who called themselves the Marquees, formed in 1957 and, with the assistance of their mentor, Bo Diddley, recorded their first song, “Wyatt Earp,” for the Okeh label. By 1958, the Marquees had morphed into the Moonglows and sang backup for Harvey Furque. By the early 1960s, the Moonglows were touring the country. One tour eventually brought them to Detroit where the young Marvin happened to meet Motown impresario Barry Gordy.

Gordy’s impressive eye for talent (he had already discovered Stevie Wonder, Diana Ross and innumerable other legends-to-be) soon zeroed in on Gaye and Gaye was signed to Motown Records shortly thereafter. (Gaye’s ties to Motown became even stronger shortly after when he married Gordy’s sister Anna.) Gaye’s first successful single was the R&B hit “Stubborn Kind of Fellow”; it was released on the Motown subsidiary label, Tamla, in 1963. Gaye had his first pop hit a year later, also on Tamla, with the song “Hitch Hike”; it reached #30 on the charts in March of 1963.

Gaye followed that success with other smashes, upbeat dance tunes and tender ballads, including “How Sweet It Is to Be Loved By You,” “I’ll Be Doggone,” “Ain’t That Peculiar,” and “I Heard It Through the Grapevine.” Gaye also proved to be an excellent duet partner; he scored hits singing alongside Mary Wells, Kim Weston and, most successfully, Tammi Terrell.

Despite his chart success, the death of Terrell in 1970, the collapse of his marriage to Anna Gordy around this same time, and the political and racial strife of the era, soon had Gaye turning introspective and re-evaluating his career and the types of songs he was writing, recording and releasing. The result of this reassessment was his landmark album “What’s Going On.”

While the album's title song is easily the LP's best known (and most revived), all of its cuts are integral to the whole. "What's Going On" has been variously called a concept album or song cycle based upon the inter-relation of each of the album's nine songs, both musically and lyrically, and the album's uncommon production style of removing standard breaks between each song thus allowing them to flow uninterrupted from one to the next. "What's Going On" would also be Gaye's first album to be wholly produced by him. Gaye would state later, "What mattered was the message. For the first time, I felt like I had something to say."

While the album's melodies are as smooth as Gaye's velvety vocals, what made "What's Going On" stand apart was its eagerness to take on socio-political issues, highly unusual for the Motown/Tamla label which tended to favor dance tunes over any material hinting at controversy.

"What's Going On's" break from the Motown norm was evident from the beginning. After Gaye delivered the title tune to boss Gordy, Gordy refused to release it, supposedly stating that it was "the worst record I ever heard in my life." (When it was released later and sold 100,000 copies in its first day, Gordy quickly changed his mind.)

To be sure, the themes explored on "What's Going On," the album, were a major departure for Gaye. "What's Going On's" opening lyrics were blunt in its subject matter:

Mother, mother
There's too many of you crying
Brother, brother, brother
There's far too many of you dying

Later, the song references war and "picket lines and picket signs."

And this was just the beginning. "What's Happening Brother," the next track, lamented:

Can't find no work, can't find no job my friend
Money is tighter than it's ever been
Say man, I just don't understand
What's going on across this land

"Flyin' High (In the Friendly Sky)," also on the album, addressed the topic of drug addiction; the song "Save the Children" asks the question "Who really cares?," and "Mercy Mercy Me" addressed pollution and misuse of the environment.

Despite the weighty topics addressed in the songs (all written or co-written by Gaye), "What's Going On" however did not emerge as a "heavy" or depressing album. Instead, it has been called "a whirl of crosscurrents--silky rhythm-and-blues, string-laden pop, gospel sensibilities, free-form jazz."

Remarkably, "What's Going On" was recorded in only 10 days.

Upon its release, not only was the title track a hit on both the R&B and pop charts, but the album was a commercial success. It sold over two million copies and was on the charts for well over a year. It would become the best-selling album of Gaye's long career. Critically, it was well-received as well. A rapturous write-up by Vince Aletti appeared in "Rolling Stone." He wrote, "The album as a whole takes precedence, absorbing its own flaws. There are very few performers who could carry a project like this off. I've always admired Marvin Gaye, but I didn't expect that he would be one of them. Guess I seriously underestimated him. It won't happen again."

Ironically, though, after working so hard to embrace more meaningful themes in his music, Gaye's subsequent musical output often steered clear of any political and social commentary. Thanks to his later, post-"What's Going On" hits like "Sexual Healing" and "Let's Get It On," Gaye is probably better known for his provocative musical seductions than his politics.

The last years of Gaye's life and career were erratic. First there was a bitter divorce from his first wife, Anna, then problems with the IRS as well as an escalating drug dependency. He died tragically in April of 1984, shot to death by his own father after an argument. Gaye was only 45 years old.

Even before his death, Gaye's disparate musical legacy was already being celebrated. His songs are irrevocably part of the legendary Motown sound. His album "What's Going On" is a certified classic and an important transitional record. Upon the 40th anniversary of its release, "People" magazine called the album "a masterpiece" and said, "this ushered Motown from its '60s hit parade of pop-friendly singles into a brave new era, paving the way for more album-oriented artists and socially conscious soul."

Many of the songs from "What's Going On" have since been covered by others. "Inner City Blues," which concluded the original album, has been sung by Sarah Vaughn; "Wholy Holy" has been done by Aretha Franklin, and "Mercy Mercy Me" by Boyz II Men. The title track has proved the most popular for other artists to take on. Both Joe Cocker and Hall and Oates have sung it. Most famously, Cyndi Lauper returned it to the top 20 with her version which appeared in 1987.

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