

When the music's over, turn out the lights

Standing in the Shadow of Motown, directed by Paul Justman

Joanne Laurier
30 November 2002

Standing in the Shadows of Motown, directed by Paul Justman, produced by Justman and Allan Slutsky and based on Slutsky's 1989 book, *Standing in the Shadows of Motown: The Life and Music of Legendary Bassist James Jamerson*

"When the dust cleared, it was all over and we realized we were being left out of the dream." The dream was the Motown music phenomenon and those left out of the dream, according to former Motown musician Joe Hunter, were the studio's uncredited band members who called themselves the Funk Brothers. ("Motown" refers to Detroit, the center of the world auto industry in the postwar era and hence the "Motor City.")

According to the documentary, *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, the Funk Brothers were the "greatest hit machine in the history of pop music" and played on more Number One records than the Beatles, the Beach Boys, the Rolling Stones and Elvis Presley combined.

Founded by Berry Gordy, Jr. in Detroit in 1958, Motown Records had a profound impact on popular culture on a global scale, launching such remarkable performers and groups as Smokey Robinson, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, The Supremes, Martha Reeves and the Vandellas, The Marvelettes, the Miracles, Mary Wells, Jr. Walker and the All-Stars, the Four Tops and the Temptations.

Overlooked for decades was an extraordinary group of musicians who were not just great individual players. In the words of a former Motown producer, "as a unit they were the best." Although they provided Motown's unique sound, it was not until Gaye's 1970 album "What's Going On?" that any of the musicians were actually credited on a Motown recording.

The documentary's production was described by director Paul Justman as "a race against time." Six of the Funk Brothers were already deceased when filming began: Benny Benjamin (1968), Eddie 'Bongo' Brown (1983), James Jamerson (1983), Earl Van Dyke (1992), Robert White (1994) and Pistol Allen (2002). Johnny Griffith died the Sunday before the film's premiere.

The original band was composed of Joe Hunter, Griffith and Van Dyke on keyboards, White, Joe Messina and Eddie Willis on guitar, Jamerson and Bob Babbitt on bass, Jack Ashford on percussion and vibraphone, Brown on congas and Benjamin, Allen and Uriel Jones on drums. Motown founder Gordy recruited the ensemble, who were largely R&B and jazz players, from Detroit's thriving nightclub scene.

The movie gives a voice to the musicians, who obviously cared

about each other beyond simply putting in the hours and making a pay check. Their stories recreate the atmosphere of the Motown production setting at the famous "Hitsville, U.S.A." studios. The Funk Brothers revisit Studio A, known as the "The Snakepit," where countless blockbuster hits such as "My Girl," "War" and "Papa Was a Rolling Stone" were composed.

Anecdotes center around Jamerson, one of the most talented of the group, who attempted, with unhappy consequences, to follow Gordy when he eventually moved the label from Detroit to Los Angeles. A recurring image is that of Jamerson as a small boy in the rural south, playing a rubber band stuck in an anthill, trying to make the ants dance. Jamerson's fate, movingly described in the film by his daughter, epitomizes the artistic and commercial end of the distinct Motown sound, together with the dispersion of its Detroit house band.

Jamerson died at age 47, a few months after he had scalped a ticket to get into the taping of the Motown 25th anniversary television special in Los Angeles in 1983. At the very least, the documentary does succeed in righting a few of the historical wrongs—Jamerson was posthumously inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2000.

Despite the sincere efforts of its creators and the commendable aim of the documentary, *Standing in the Shadow of Motown* is a flawed project. It is technically amateurish, most notably in its reenactments of episodes recalled and recounted by the musicians. Its narration is very scattered and commits a number of mistakes, particularly when it panders to racial politics—attempting, for example, to artificially separate 'black' and 'white' music and audiences.

Racism was a very real factor in the lives and careers of black musicians and performers in the US in the 1950s, but it is not true that before Motown, as the film contends, black musicians had no success in reaching pop audiences. This claim is made over shots of performers like Jackie Wilson, who hit the Billboard Top 40 chart innumerable times from 1958 to 1963, and Ruth Brown, who sold more records for Atlantic than any other performer in the 1950s. And one could do without the unworthy and tiresome insinuation that performers like Elvis Presley simply sanitized black music for white audiences.

The film begins from the premise, openly stated by one of the musicians, that the Funk Brothers were so essential to Motown that anyone could have sung the songs and made them hits. To give long-overdue recognition to the Funk Brothers is not a license to

ignore virtually all the other historical, social and cultural factors that produced the Motown experience. Images of the civil rights movement, Detroit's auto factories and the city's 1967 riots flash by with only sound-bite captions. Without taking anything away from the musical personality and innovations of the racially integrated band, the sequences where talented singers such as Chaka Khan, Joan Osborne, and Bootsy Collins perform Motown hits with the Funk Brothers are deficient in magic and depth.

The level of musicianship, itself the product of complex factors, was a major but not the exclusive influence in Motown's evolution from a small local record company into an international music industry giant. Long before Motown developed its sound, Detroit, as the "Motor City," attracted blues singers from the poor south to jobs in the automobile factories, as chronicled in songs like Blind Blake's "Detroit Bound Blues." The war years saw more than 500,000 blacks and whites from the south and Appalachia, as well as European immigrants, flood into Detroit. The war's aftermath brought the beginnings of the city's deindustrialization, which hit black sections of the working class most acutely.

Explaining the "Motown sound," like any musical phenomenon, is a complex business. It can hardly be accidental that it arose in the center of American industry, where, for the first time, a generation of black youth had money in their pockets and some leisure time to go along with it. Moreover, the mass struggle for democratic rights in the 1950s and 1960s, the Civil Rights movement, had a profound impact on youth, black and white. The early songs have a celebratory quality, expressing great self-confidence and general confidence in the future.

Berry Gordy, Jr.—the son of one of Detroit's most successful black entrepreneurs, who had profited from an earlier economic "black self-help" movement based on the city's industrial strength—was perceptive and clever enough to put the pieces together at Motown Records.

In 1955, the young Gordy had to work briefly at the Ford Wayne Assembly Plant, hoping to break into music and create a business that would not be vulnerable to Detroit's disaggregating auto factories. Gordy later wrote about how the efficiency of Ford's production methods influenced his notions about mass-producing hit records: "At the plants 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." (*Dancing in the Streets*, Suzanne E. Smith.) Even the Funk Brothers used anything "from tambourines to tire chains" to create their gritty sound.

Gordy's record company was also the product of the heyday of independent recording labels. In the 1950s major labels such as Capitol and Columbia ignored the emerging sounds of rock and roll. According to Smith in *Dancing in the Streets*: "Independents were able to challenge major labels such as Victor because their product—rhythm and blues and rock and roll—was the indigenous sound of urban America."

Motown Records' relationship with the civil rights struggle,

barely touched on by the film, is an intriguing and revealing subject. In 1963 Gordy's company released a spoken-word recording of Martin Luther King Jr.'s address to Detroit's Great March in June of that year, which was declared by King to be "the largest and greatest demonstration for freedom ever held in the United States." Gordy proclaimed: "Realizing that in years to come, the Negro revolt of 1963 will take its place historically with the American Revolution and the Hungarian uprising, we have elected to record the statements of some of the movement's leaders ... [which] should be required listening for every American child, white or black."

However, Smith recounts, by the fall of 1965, Motown had no interest in producing music "that might evoke revolutionary sentiments or provoke radical action." Further, in contrast to the 1943 race riots in Detroit, the 1967 upheavals in the city had more of a class than racial character. Undoubtedly this traumatic event undermined some of Motown's claims of being a vehicle of betterment for the black community and frightened the layer of budding black entrepreneurs. Smith quotes an observer of the 1967 rebellion: "Not to say that racial tensions didn't exist, but it wasn't black against white. It was the propertied against the non-propertied." Smith continues: "For the Motown studio band, the Funk Brothers, the Great Rebellion marked the end of a musical era. The Chit Chat Club, where the musicians moonlighted as the house band and created many of Motown's musical innovations, did not survive the uprising."

In the most general sense, the decline of the energy and creativity that produced the Motown sound was bound up with the decline of Detroit and the auto industry and the growing social polarization in the US, including within the black population itself. When Marvin Gaye wondered out loud, "With the world exploding around me, how am I supposed to keep singing love songs?," he was reflecting on a real objective problem. In a certain sense, the "love songs" of a certain period and a certain type had exhausted themselves. New social problems and contradictions were emerging with explosive force.

The Motown sound came brutally to an end in 1972, when Gordy moved the label to Los Angeles, with "no warning or no acknowledgment," according to the Funk Brothers. The musicians simply found a note tacked to the door of the Detroit studio stating that no more recording would take place at that location.

As important as it is to bring unsung heroes out of the shadows, evoking some powerful memories and feelings in the bargain, *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* is a fairly lightweight piece.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact