

The 50th anniversary of Marvin Gaye's album *What's Going On*

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May 21 marked the 50th anniversary of the release of American singer Marvin Gaye's landmark album *What's Going On*. It is among the most thought-provoking and socially conscious popular music albums of the 20th century. Marvin Gaye (born Marvin Pentz Gay Jr.) was a talented, charismatic and successful soul singer and songwriter of the 1960s and '70s. Known for his smooth yet vibrant multilayered vocals, Gaye was known to many of his fans as Motown's "Prince of Soul."

Marvin Gaye was born in 1939 in Washington D.C. His father was a preacher and strictly religious, and his mother was a domestic worker. He began singing in his father's church early in childhood. After high school and a brief stint in the military, he joined a doo-wop group called Harvey and the New Moonglows. Under the direction of group leader Harvey Fuqua, Marvin began to compose and sing his own music. As doo-wop began to be overtaken by soul, rhythm and blues and rock 'n' roll in the late 1950s, Fuqua took the 20-year-old Marvin to Detroit, where Berry Gordy Jr. was forming Motown Records.

Motown is where Gaye really developed as a versatile singer, songwriter, performer and music producer. Before *What's Going On*, he became known for his love songs and duets. His first Motown hit, "Stubborn Kind of Fellow" (1961), was very successful, and was followed by many others, including "Hitchhike," "Can I Get a Witness" and "How Sweet it is (To Be Loved By You)." He later teamed up with Kim Weston, Diana Ross and Tammi Terrell to record duets. The most famous of these collaborations was that with Terrell, which produced such classics as "Ain't No Mountain High Enough," "Your Precious Love" and "Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing."

Gaye's artistic development and his transformation from a singer of love songs into one of the most important artists to bring politically conscious lyrics to soul music was closely bound up with the conditions of social and political turmoil in the US and internationally during this period. The US was facing mass opposition to the Vietnam war, high levels of social inequality and unemployment, and rampant police brutality in the major cities. African American ghettos erupted from 1964-68, as in the Watts rebellion in Los Angeles in 1965. The successes of the mass civil rights movement were immediately followed by a crisis of "rising expectations," with seething anger at continuing poverty and inequality. The political crisis also found expression in the assassinations of John F. and Robert F. Kennedy and the murders of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

Gaye was also facing turbulence and tragedy in his personal life. His brother Frankie (Frank Gaye) fought in the Vietnam war for three years, and his cousin was killed in the war. Marvin also faced drug addiction, and his collaborator Tammi Terrell began to experience the health problems that would lead to her tragic death at 24 from a brain tumor in March 1970.

It was in this climate that Gaye began to feel that Motown's popular music formulas were falling out of touch with changing moods and his own strong views. Motown's music certainly struck a powerful chord in

the early 1960s, conveying the youthful and vibrant expressions of singers and musicians in industrial centers like Detroit, with classic songs like "Dancing in the Streets," "Heatwave," "Someday We'll Be Together" and many others. Ultimately, however, some of the more ambitious artists felt hemmed in by Berry Gordy's predictable and business-centered approach.

Social conditions also fueled Gaye's dissatisfaction with the direction of his own music. As he once said to an interviewer after *What's Going On* was finished, "I remember I was listening to a tune of mine playing on the radio, when the announcer interrupted with news about the Watts riot. My stomach got real tight and my heart started beating like crazy. I wanted to throw the radio down and burn all the songs I'd been singing and get out there with the rest of the brothers. I knew they were going about it wrong; I knew they weren't thinking, but I understood anger that builds up over years, and I felt myself exploding. Why didn't our music have anything to do with this? Wasn't music supposed to express feelings? I wondered to myself, 'With the world exploding around me, how am I supposed to keep singing love songs?'"

This outrage inspired the album. Gaye's desire to express these burning social-political concerns in his music brought him into direct conflict with Gordy, a fervent believer in "black capitalism." In a memoir dedicated to Marvin's life, his brother Frankie Gaye describes this. "Berry hates my music, he doesn't want to record it because he doesn't think it will sell," said Gaye at the time. "He may be right about that, but I don't care. I just want to be heard and that's all that matters."

The clash between Gordy and Gaye over the direction of the album is well documented. Gordy himself said much later in life, "I didn't think it (the album) was going to work." Gordy advised Gaye to not release *What's Going On* because it was "too political." He went so far as to block the release of the first single from the album, the title song "What's Going On." Gaye refused to produce any further music for the label until the song was released. It was only after Gordy saw its early sales potential that Gaye was permitted to complete the album. Once released, the lead song reached #2 on the Billboard Hot 100 and sold more than 2 million copies, becoming one of the most successful Motown songs.

The singing and instrumentation on the album are extraordinary. Marvin Gaye's vocals and piano playing are very smooth, multilayered and full. Marvin and the album's engineers accidentally discovered how to "overdub" his vocals and liked the "mistake." This music production process adds a distinct quality to the album itself, essentially fusing two versions of Gaye's singing voice onto different parts of songs at the same time. Most of the instrumentation was performed by the Funk B brothers, the name given to the collection of Detroit-based session musicians behind many Motown hits. These talented players provide vibrant and fresh sounds that combine elements of jazz, blues, Latin percussion, gospel and even operatic musical style.

Prior to the album, Gaye began regularly attending performances of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra as a source of musical inspiration for the

album. Many songs feature a choral backing section and have an almost operatic quality to them. Much of the album's pacing also flows from track to track as if one long song, with only one or two breaks along the way. The combination of these styles, music production techniques and ambitious pacing provided an effective and inspiring backdrop for the socially conscious lyrics.

The album's lead song was originally an untitled tune written by Al Cleveland and Ronaldo Benson from the Four Tops. Benson played a major role in Marvin Gaye's creative process, encouraging him to express political issues through his lyrical content. Gaye's lyrics struck a memorable chord. For instance, in "What's Going On":

*"Father father, we don't need to escalate
You see, war is not the answer, For only love can conquer hate,
You know we've got to find a way, To bring some lovin' here today,
Picket lines and picket signs, Don't punish me with brutality,
C'mon, Talk to me, so you can see, Oh, what's going on."*

The lyrics were clearly directed against the hated Vietnam war, as well as police brutality. Musically the song starts out with his friends talking about a party, followed by an interesting intro saxophone riff that blasts the listener into the smooth multilayered harmony of Marvin Gaye's vocals. The rhythm section sounds very fresh, and the improved bass line by James Jamerson really moves the vocals along.

The next song on the album is the thought-provoking "What's Happening Brother," with lyrics like,

*"War is hell, when will it end? When will people start gettin' together again?
Are things really gettin' better, like the newspaper said?
What else is new my friend, besides what I read?
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,
Ah, what's happening brother?"*

Gaye is referring to the desperation faced by those coming back from the war, having difficulty finding employment and finding their place in society, despite what the newspapers and corporate news media were saying.

This album also spoke of conditions in the cities, in addition to voicing opposition to the war. Gaye's song "Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)" speaks about the harsh realities for the working class in the inner-city ghettos:

*"Hang ups, let downs Bad breaks, setbacks
Natural fact is I can't pay my taxes
Oh, make me wanna holler and throw up both my hands
Yeah, it makes me wanna holler and throw up both my hands
Crime is increasing Trigger happy policing
Panic is spreading God knows where we're heading."*

Also on the album is the song "Flyin' High (In the Friendly Sky)," illustrating the self-destructive role of drug addiction, with lines like,

*"Flying high without ever leavin' the ground,
Rest of the folks are tired and weary Oh Lord and have laid their bodies down.
I go to the place where danger awaits me and it's bound to forsake me.
So stupid minded. I can't help it Oh ya, so stupid minded.
But I go crazy when I can't find it."*

Marvin also goes deeper into harsh realities of life in "Save the Children":

*"It fills me with sorrow (it fills me with sorrow) Little children today
(children today) Are really going to suffer tomorrow (really suffer tomorrow)."*

Another song, "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)," worries about the looming ecological disaster facing the planet:

"Woah, ah, mercy, mercy me

*Ah, things ain't what they used to be (ain't what they used to be)
Where did all the blue skies go?*

Poison is the wind that blows from the north and south and east

Woah mercy, mercy me, yeah

Ah, things ain't what they used to be (ain't what they used to be)

Oil wasted on the ocean and upon our seas

Fish full of mercury."

What's Going On inspired countless artists, including many on the Motown record label, after it was released and drew broad critical praise. Among those moved were Stevie Wonder, who subsequently recorded songs highly critical of President Richard Nixon in the early 1970s, and Curtis Mayfield, also an outspoken opponent of war and racism. Although the content of this work generally did not go beyond a pacifist and liberal opposition to the status quo, it reflected the leftward movement of masses of workers and youth. It continues to find reflection in popular culture in many different forms. For instance, large portions of the album served as the soundtrack for Spike Lee's recent Vietnam War film *Da 5 Bloods*.

After the album's release, Gaye was himself beset by drug addiction and mental illness and fell into a deep depression for several years. He regained some success with other albums such as *Midnight Love* (1981), with the popular song "Sexual Healing." Despite this brief resurgence, Marvin Gaye died tragically at age 44, murdered by his father Marvin Gay Sr. at his house in Los Angeles, after a violent dispute.

It need hardly be added that these songs are more relevant than ever today. The devastating opioid epidemic, especially in the rustbelt cities of the Midwest and elsewhere, has followed decades of deindustrialization. Children are being sent back to classrooms in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. Poverty and unemployment have soared amidst the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic, and police brutality and violence affect workers and youth of all races, as shown by the conditions one year after the horrific murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. The growing danger of world war as well as the devastating effects of climate change are major threats to human civilization.

Major media critics have portrayed *What's Going On* simply as a cry of racial protest. While Gaye's songs no doubt capture the experience of African Americans in the early 1970s, the themes, musicality and protest of the album were of a much more universal character than the sentiments of today's identity-obsessed upper-middle-class commentators. Gaye's songs were an honest and moving response to a broad social and political crisis. His genuine warmth and concern for the masses of people affected by this crisis, which has only deepened in the past 50 years and affects workers of every race and ethnicity, is part of the continuing appeal of the music.

What's Going On still resonates today, and should continue to inspire young and old listeners.



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