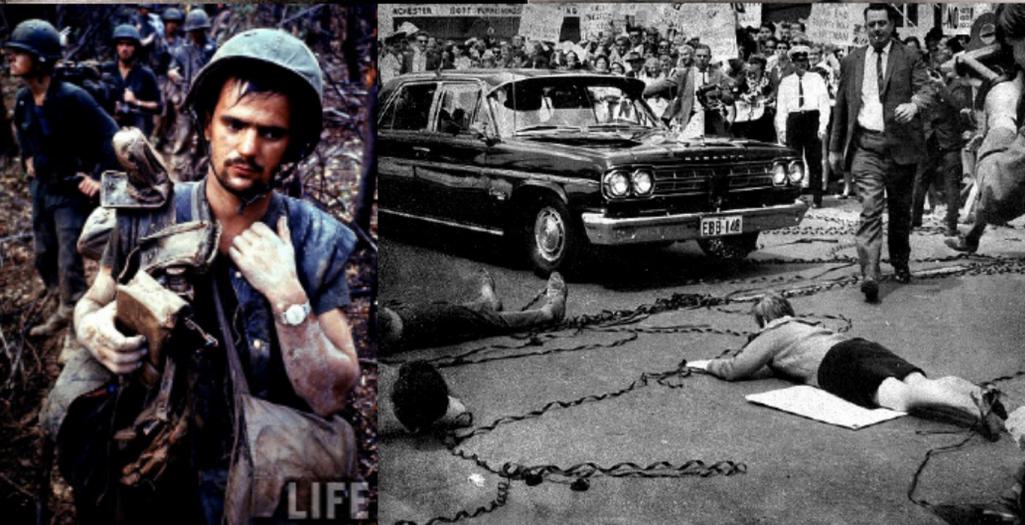


‘Things ain’t what they used to be’:

Marvin Gaye and the making of *What’s Going On*



**By:
Ruth
Charnock**

Born 1939 in Washington, D.C, Marvin Pentz Gay Jnr (who later added the “e” to his name¹) was one of four born to a mother he remained devoted to throughout his life and a father whose cross-dressing tendencies he reportedly found both humiliating and confusing. A minister for a small Hebrew Pentecostal sect, according to his daughter, Marvin Gay Snr. was not one to “spare the rod” when it came to his children.² Violence coursed through Gaye’s life (in a BBC Radio 2 documentary to commemorate the 40th anniversary of *What’s Going On*, Gaye also alluded to frequent scuffles with Motown boss Berry Gordy), culminating in his violent death at the hands of his father in 1984.

An austere and terrorised childhood

As Michael Eric Dyson depicts it: [t]he world into which Gaye was born in Washington, D.C – much like the world his music would resonate – was torn by racial conflict.³ According to Dyson, the edition of the *Washington Post* published on the day Gaye was born featured an op-

ed piece called “The South’s Problems”, and a piece covering opera singer Marion Evans’ refusal from a performance at the Constitutional Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution. As Dyson writes, ‘the same forces of poverty and racial conflict’ that underpinned these two stories ‘shaped the young Gaye’s life.’⁴ By all accounts (except, occasionally Gaye’s own⁵), his was a highly regimented, austere and terrorised childhood.

Escaping from his troubled home-life, Gaye dropped out of high-school aged 17 and joined the Air Force for a short stint but was discharged owing to his inability to obey authority;⁶ a trait that would find further resonance in his fractious relationship with the Motown machine. Building on the love of doo-wop he had fostered throughout school, Gaye joined a variety of D.C bands in the late fifties and early sixties. One, the Moonglows, was discovered by Bo Diddley and signed to Okeh, then Chess Records. When manager Harvey Fuqua moved to Detroit, Gaye moved with him. Gaye was taken on by

Motown as a session drummer, playing for bands like Martha and the Vandellas, the Marvelettes and the Spinners.

Motown family

Gaye became a staple member of the Motown family (also marrying Berry Gordy's sister Anna in 1964), churning out hits throughout the sixties - from the apt 'Stubborn Kinda Fellow' in 1963, to his run of duets with Tammi Terrell (whose premature death in 1970 from a brain tumour greatly affected Gaye), to the paranoid torment of 'Heard It Through the Grapevine' in 1968. However, Gaye's

real aspirations during this period were far removed from the upbeat party songs or soul ballads for which he became known. An early record of jazz standards had failed to chart but Gaye retained visions of himself as a crooner in the mould of a



Frank Sinatra or Sammy Davis Jr and was heavily influenced by the jazz-inflected phrasings of Nat King Cole.⁷ Subsequently expressing his frustration with the Motown system in an interview with *Rolling Stone's* Ben Fong-Torres, Gaye described himself as a 'free-thinking person' who did not respond well to Berry Gordy's regimented, assembly-line approach: *Invariably, when you are a free-thinking person, one who feels he or she has something on the ball, and involved in a group of people who are in power, and you don't become part of the power ... or bend toward it, or...that's the problem right there. It was power against me, and I didn't like the feeling of made to do something simply because a bunch of people said this is that I should do [...] and the biggest insult was that they always claimed they recognized me as talent [...] but they never proved it by letting me do my own thing.*⁸

It was this sense of being treated 'as though I'm a robot'⁹ coupled with grief over Tammi Terrell's death and clustering attacks

of stage-fright that led Gaye to retreat from public view at the end of the sixties. Between 'I Heard It Through the Grapevine' and *What's Going On*, he ventured into production work for other artists. Worn out from chasing after Anna Gordy-Gaye, whom he suspected of infidelity, Gaye's mind took a turn. As he told an interviewer in the late 1970s, leading up to the making of *What's Going On*: 'I stopped thinking about my erotic fantasies and started thinking about the [Vietnam] war.'¹⁰ Increasingly aware of his country's slide into chaos and violence- what with Vietnam, the 1967 race riots in Detroit and the Kent State shootings (1970) - Gaye was also under keen pressure from Berry Gordy to produce another hit. As Gaye told biographer David Ritz: *My phone would ring, and it'd be Motown wanting me to start working and I'd say, 'Have you seen the paper today? Have you read about these kids who were killed at Kent State?' The murders at Kent State made me sick. I couldn't sleep, couldn't stop crying. The notion of singing three-minute songs about the moon and June*

*didn't interest me. Neither did instant-message songs.*¹¹

Yet according to Ritz, in 1970 'message songs were selling. Edwin Starr's 'War' hit it big, John and Yoko were hot and so were Simon and Garfunkel.'¹² But imagining himself as both cultural commentator and divine conduit, Gaye saw the artist's purpose as to shock audiences into new states of consciousness. His sense that 'an artist, if he is a true artist, is only interested in one thing and that is to wake up the minds of men' was not an affect that could be achieved in three minutes alone.¹³

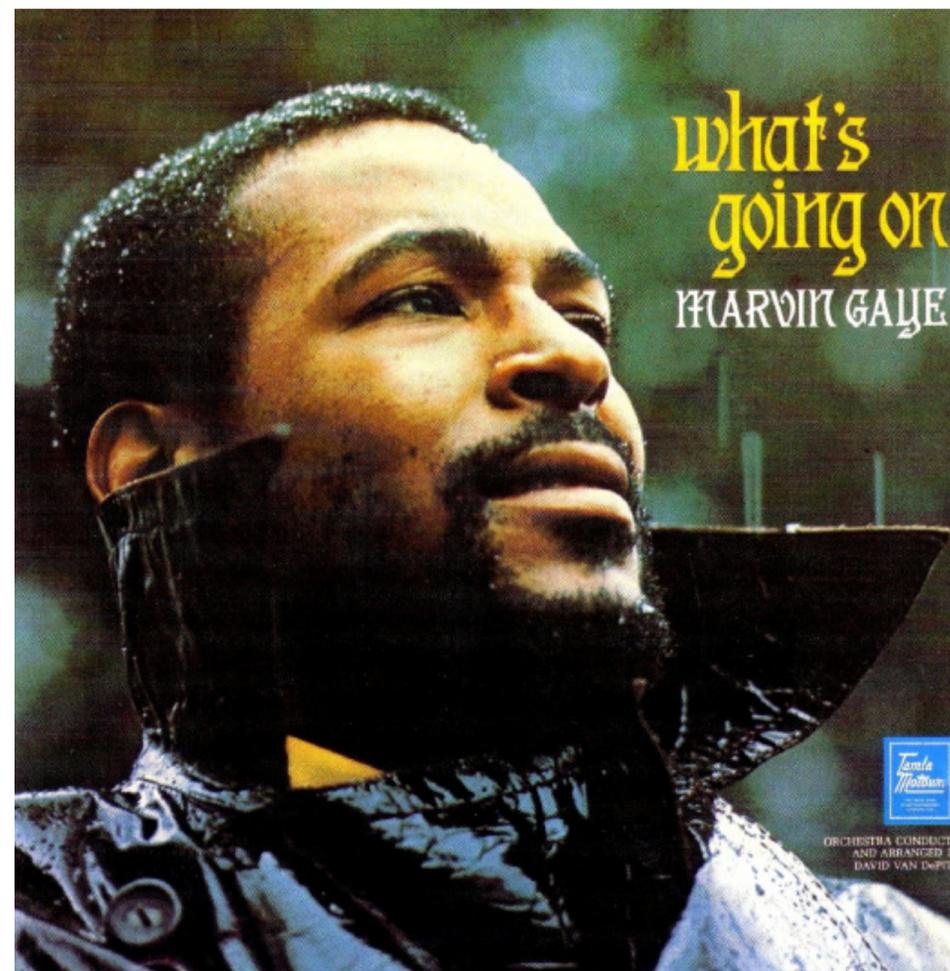
A sonic call to attention

According to James C. Hall, for many African-American artists throughout the 1960s, there was a rising and 'fundamental disbelief in the inherent goodness of the offerings of modernity'¹⁴, fed by events such as the Birmingham, Alabama bombings of 1963. This disbelief permeates *What's Going On* with its often prelapsarian longings for a better time (especially the case in the regretful refrain of 'Mercy Mercy

Me (The Ecology)' where 'things ain't what they used to be.'¹⁵ Speaking to, if not directly about, the spiritual overtones of Gaye's album, Hall writes: *Somewhat like the religious revivals of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, individuals as diverse as Martin Luther King, James Baldwin [...] and many others demanded that Americans face up to a deteriorating social order.*¹⁶

Motown songwriter Lamont Dozier has characterised *What's Going On* as a sonic call to attention: *We as a people have short attention spans and we need to be lectured. And he was lecturing the people with those songs that were going right into each other like that.*¹⁷

As a form, the concept album was the ideal format for Gaye's messages of equality, ecology, pacifism and an end to familial discord. Providing him with the expressive latitude he had felt lacking from the 3-minute format, *What's Going On* is the sound of an artist driving his message home but taking in the scenery along the way. 'What's Going On' was written before



What's Going On. Inspired by the horror-stories Frankie Gay (Gaye's brother) told returning from Vietnam, coupled with the violence witnessed in San Francisco by Renaldo "Obie" Benson when he was on tour with the Four Tops, 'What's Going On' was a joint effort. Motown songwriter

Al Cleveland and Obie Benson were already working on a song of the same title and, according to Benson, 'all the music was already there'¹⁸ before Gaye heard the track for the first time. That said, Gaye added lyrics to the track, produced it and brought in his friends from the Detroit Lions to add the snippets of conversation that punctuate 'What's Going On' - lending it the feeling of 'a successful social festivity' rather than 'of uprisings or demonstrations,'¹⁹ as Eric Henderson puts it. The listener becomes interlocutor – an effect heightened by the multi-layering of Gaye's vocal throughout the record. This conversational, anecdotal register continues throughout *What's Going On*,

especially in 'What's Happening Brother', where Gaye imagines his brother returning from Vietnam to an America he no longer understands, wondering whether 'things are really gettin' better, like the newspapers said.'²⁰

The appeal of 'What's Going On' and, to some extent, of *What's Going On* rests on its combination of specificity and abstraction. Whilst Gaye was explicit about the specific events (Vietnam, Kent State, the Detroit riots) that impacted upon his conception of the album, he was also keen to stress the universality of its message: *I wanted to write an album that could be translated into any language and it would still hold its meaning and not be particularly an ethnic statement that other nations or people couldn't get into.*²¹

Cautious

Gaye was eager that *What's Going On* not be branded a "race album", despite the explicit social commentary of songs such as 'Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler.)' His uneasiness regarding identity

politics comes out in a 1972 *Rolling Stone* interview. When asked whether he intended to continue with 'more serious work' after *What's Going On*, Gaye responds: *If you notice, I never stepped on anybody's toes and I didn't intend to. Somebody said the other day, "That's a fine black album." I said, "Wait a minute. The word 'black' is not in my album from the A side to the B side." I was very careful not to do any of those things.*²²

Gaye's caution can, obviously, be attributed to the universal, no-race vision that permeates *What's Going On*. As Michael Eric Dyson identifies, one could 'fix on Gaye's political anthem and make it personal.'²³ But one can also detect Gaye's desire not to be pigeonholed as a one-issue wonder, harking back to his distaste for "instant message songs" expressed earlier, as well as a desire, surprising though it might seem, to fly below the political radar: '[s]ome of these guys go around and think they're crusaders [...] A lot of people don't want you saving the world. They like it the way it is. You gotta be careful.'²⁴

What's Going On is an album of questions; from that implied by the title track with its double-meaning - Gaye is going to tell us "what's going on" but he also wants us to ask - to the plaintive 'where did all the blue skies go?' of 'Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)'. Of the latter, David Kahn points out that Gaye refuses to provide any pat answers: *The song's refrain "Mercy mercy me, things ain't what they used to be" offers a powerful lament that Gaye then builds upon by singing of the ways in which overpopulation, mass extinction of species, toxicity, oil spills and the like waste the planet and threaten existence. With no positive message offered as a counterpoint, Gaye's song thus represents a kind of blues and gospel of spiritual mourning.*²⁵

Harkening back to past times ('things ain't what they used to be'), the mournful impact of the song is belied by its laidback cadences and almost exultant opening. Throughout *What's Going On*, Gaye relies on his lyrics rather than his rhythms to do the lecturing- whilst his messages are

insistent, his melodies ruminate, swing and lazily stretch back (the exception being the bluesy opening and spiralling flutes of 'Right On', although this too has a distinctively languorous feel). But lecture he does, according to Motown's Lamont Dozier. Describing the segues between tracks on the album Dozier suggests that Gaye wanted to give the feeling of an unfolding sermon, as well as a conversation: *[Gaye] was trying to keep the whole thought [with the formatting of the album]. He had a thought about why we're having problems in this world [...] he had these songs running into each other so the thought would not break.*²⁶

Although the album has many moods, this sense of a 'whole thought' is amplified by the recurrence of phrases (melodic and lyrical) throughout the album - especially the calls to familial reconnection of 'What's Going On.' As Kahn gestures towards above, Gaye resembles nothing so much as a preacher, albeit one who draws his highs from places more terranean than the church (cf. 'Flyin' High (In the Friendly Sky)'). *What's Going*

On is an album steeped in Pentecostal foreboding. David Ritz puts it thus: *The fundamentalist Christian view of Marvin Gaye would see him as a fallen preacher. Born with the sacred power to transmit Jesus' love through heavenly song, his religious responsibility was, at least in Marvin's own mind, clear.*²⁷

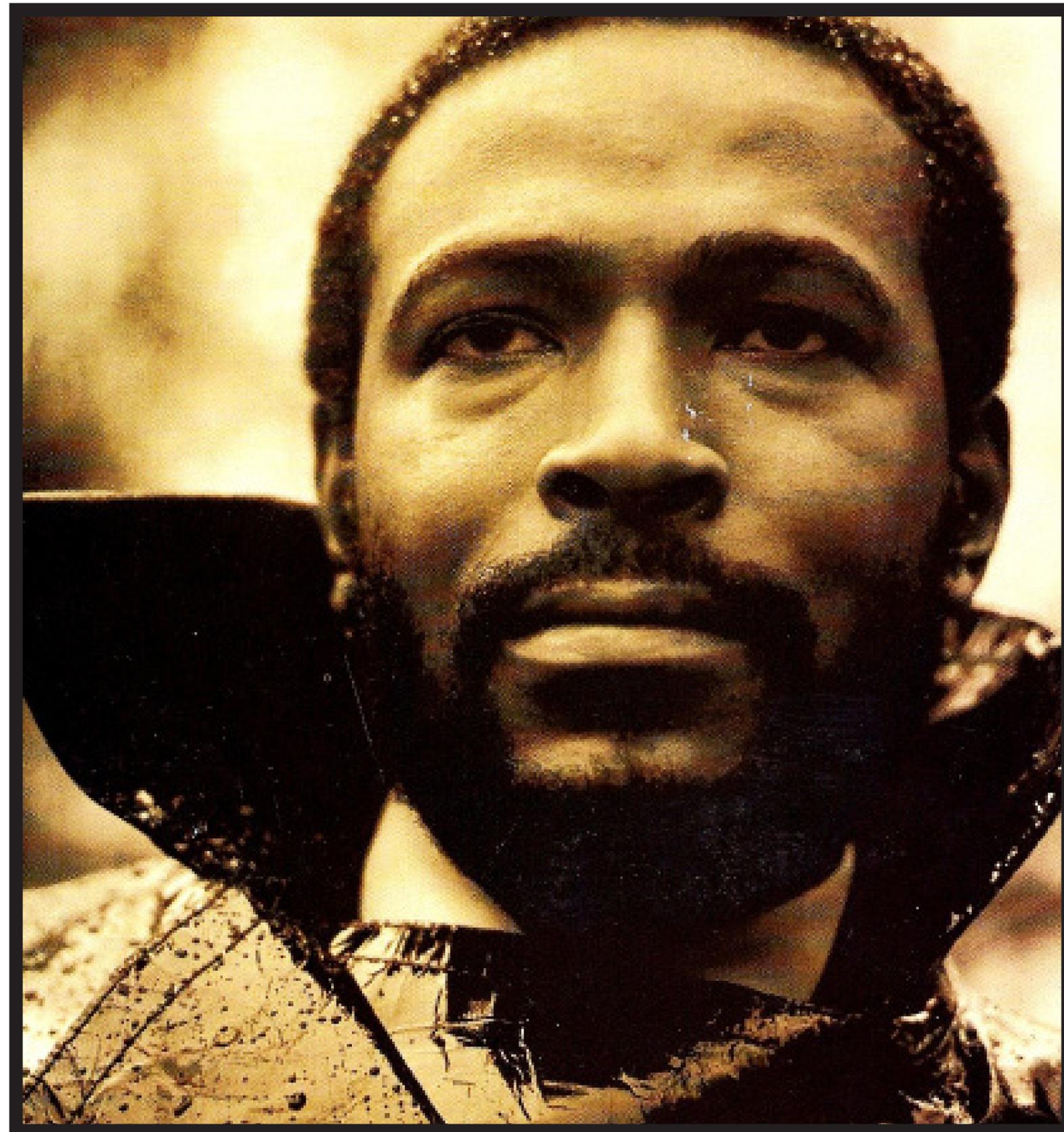
Indeed, when called upon to give an account of the process behind *What's Going On*, Gaye would often abdicate responsibility – saying on one occasion '[it] was a very divine project and God guided me all the way. I don't remember a great deal about it.'²⁸

It was certainly an album that Berry Gordy tried hard to forget. Upon hearing 'What's Going On', Gordy apparently named it the 'worst record' he had ever heard.²⁹ Gordy has admitted himself 'when Marvin Gaye wanted to do a protest album, I was petrified'³⁰, afraid that such political fare would trash Gaye's reputation as the premier Motown pin-up. Although accounts differ as to how the track was eventually released, released it was – to instant chart

success. Gaye told Motown that unless they allowed him to release the album, he would never record for them again: '[t]hat was my ace in the hole and I had to play it.'³¹ Coming out from under the Motown thumb, Gaye blazed the trail for other Motown artists such as Stevie Wonder who would mount his own fair share of musical protests in the 1970s. Ex-Motowner Michael Jackson would also make his own 'Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)' with 1995's 'Earth Song', but perhaps the less said about that moment in his oeuvre, the better.

Lamont Dozier has described *What's Going On* as: *almost one constant chant that keeps pounding at your head to get you to understand that there has to be change in this world and we can only do it ourselves, by coming together as a people.*³²

Certainly, the album turned around Gaye's critical reception – whilst he had always been celebrated for his vocal abilities, now these vocals were coupled with a new political swagger. As David Ritz recounts 'the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People] gave



Marvin their fifth annual Image Award, naming him the “nation’s most socially significant entertainer,” as well as the year’s best singer and producer.³³ Gaye was invited to headline Martin Luther King Day (although he didn’t show up). The album remained on the Billboard Album charts for over a year and reviews were glowing, if often containing a note of surprise as in this response from *Rolling Stone’s* Vince Aletti: *Ambitious, personal albums may be a glut on the market elsewhere, but at Motown they’re something new [...] 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.*³⁴

For the rest of the seventies – indeed, for the rest of his career – Gaye would continue to surprise. *Trouble Man*, the soundtrack to the blaxploitation movie of the same name, saw Gaye in a contemplative, bluesier mode, especially in the title track which sees Gaye musing darkly ‘there’s only three things for

sure: taxes, death and trouble.’³⁵ In 1973, Gaye created the soundtrack to a thousand seductions with *Let’s Get It On*, followed by the more neurotically yearning *I Want You* in 1976. *Here, My Dear*, released in 1978 was Gaye’s sonic payoff to his ex-wife Anna Gordy Gaye. Commercially unsuccessful at the time, on its re-release in 1994 it was critically reappraised as a work equal in craft to *What’s Going On*.

Mired in cocaine addiction, with a huge IRS bill, a second divorce and consuming paranoia, in the late 1970s Gaye once again retreated from public view and moved to Hawaii, then London, and then Belgium. 1983’s ‘Sexual Healing’ from the *Midnight Love* album crossed the troubled spirit of ‘I Want You’ with the unabashed lust of ‘Let’s Get It On.’ Touring the album, Gaye’s stage fright manifested, perversely, in increasing exhibitionism – he often ended ‘Sexual Healing’ either in an open silk robe or just in his underwear, performing, as David Ritz sees it ‘a sad parody of himself.’³⁶ By spring of the following year, Marvin Gaye was dead - shot twice in the chest

by his father, whilst trying to break up an argument between his parents. Initially charged with first-degree murder, when it was discovered that Marvin Gay Sr. had a brain tumor, he received a six-year suspended sentence.

Caught throughout his life ‘between hot sex and high spirituality’, as David Ritz puts it, Marvin Gaye not only made it possible for other Motown artists to break for creative freedom, he achieved the rare feat – a concept album that pleased as well as preached. In their paean to passed soul singers, ‘Nightshift’, The Commodores get it right: ‘Marvin, he was a friend of mine/ And he could sing a song/ His heart in every line.’³⁷

Endnotes

- 1 Biographer David Ritz has speculated that Gaye added the “e” to distinguish himself from his father, see: *Divided Soul: the Life of Marvin Gaye*. Da Capo Press, 1985. Kindle edition. Michael Eric Dyson argues that the change of surname was to avoid the connotation of homosexuality (see details below).
- 2 Jeanne Gaye, interviewed for “What’s Going On.” Part of the American Masters series for PBS, aired May 7, 2008 . <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/marvin-gaye/whats-going-on/73/>

3 Michael Eric Dyson, *Mercy, Mercy Me: The Love, Art and Demons of Marvin Gaye*. New York: Civitas Books, 2004, 5-6.

4 Ibid.

5 Occasionally, Gaye would paint his childhood relationship with his father as much more amicable than it was. See, for example, the interview with Ben Fong-Torres (details below).

6 Gaye gives his own account of this in the “What’s Going On” PBS documentary.

7 Smokey Robinson discusses Gaye’s love for Nat King Cole in a BBC Radio 2 documentary aired to commemorate the 40th anniversary of *What’s Going On*. Aired August, 2011: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b013ds1b>

8 Marvin Gaye interviewed by Ben Fong-Torres, ‘Honor Thy Brother-in-Law,’ *Rolling Stone*, April 27, 1972. Reprinted in *Not Fade Away: A Backstage Pass to 20 Years of Rock & Roll*. Berkeley: Miller Freeman, 1999, 84.

9 Gaye, *ibid.*

10 Marvin Gaye, *Motown on Showtime* 1988/2010: Universal Music Group.

11 Marvin Gaye talking to David Ritz for *Divided Soul: the Life of Marvin Gaye*. Kindle edition.

12 Ibid.

13 Marvin Gaye, *Motown on Showtime*.

14 James C. Hall, *Mercy, Mercy Me: African-American Culture and the American Sixties*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 4.

15 Marvin Gaye. ‘Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)’ from *What’s Going On*. Tamla, 1971.

16 Hall, 6.

17 Lamont Dozier, speaking in *What’s Going On*. BBC Radio 2, [51.39].

18 As told to David Ritz for *Divided Soul*.

19 Eric Henderson, *What’s Going On*, album review for *Slant Magazine*. November 10, 2003.

- 20 Marvin Gaye. 'What's Happening Brother' from *What's Going On*. Tamla, 1971.
- 21 Marvin Gaye, speaking in *What's Going On*, BBC Radio 2, [32.06].
- 22 Marvin Gaye, 'Honor Thy Brother-in-Law.' 85.
- 23 Michael Eric Dyson, *Mercy Mercy Me: The Arts, Loves and Demons of Marvin Gaye*. Basic Civitas Books, 2004, 1.
- 24 Marvin Gaye, 'Honor Thy Brother-in-Law.' 85.
- 25 Richard Kahn, 'Environmental Activism in Music', in *Music in American Life: The Songs, Stories, Styles and Stars that Shaped Our Culture*, ed. Jacqueline Edmondson, ABC-CLIO, forthcoming.
- 26 Lamont Dozier, interviewed for *What's Going On*, BBC Radio 2.
- 27 Ritz, *Divided Self*.
- 28 Marvin Gaye, speaking on *What's Going On*, BBC Radio 2.
- 29 Jack Ryan, *Recollections: The Detroit Years. The Motown Sound by the People Who Made It*. Glendower Media, 1982. 36.
- 30 Berry Gordy, interviewed for *Showtime Motown*.
- 31 As told to David Ritz, *Divided Soul*.
- 32 Lamont Dozier, speaking on *What's Going On*, BBC Radio 2.
- 33 David Ritz.
- 34 Vince Aletti, *What's Going On: Album Review*. *Rolling Stone Magazine*, 5th August, 1971. <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/whats-going-on-19710805>
- 35 Marvin Gaye, 'Trouble Man.' From *Trouble Man*. Tamla, 1972.
- 36 David Ritz.
- 37 *The Commodores*, 'Nightshift.' From *Nightshift*. Motown, 1985.



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