

# NONPERFORMERS

Biographies by Andrew Schwartz

## Berry Gordy Jr.



Born November 28th, 1929, Detroit, Michigan

**W**HAT DOES IT MEAN TO SAY THAT BERRY GORDY JR. CREATED MOTOWN? It means that he is responsible for discovering some of the greatest talents in pop-music history and for many of their most memorable recordings. It means that above and beyond the contributions of individual artists, he forged the "Motown sound," which still reverberates through pop music, film soundtracks, even television commercials; its titles and lyrics are a part of our vernacular. Finally, it means that as a black American, Berry Gordy Jr. accomplished these things despite persistent and formidable barriers of race and class, rising to the ranks of entertainment-industry giants and to the leadership of the nation's largest black-owned business enterprise.

The will to succeed and the sense of family unity upon which Berry Gordy Jr. built Motown were qualities instilled in him at an early age. One of seven children, he was born November 28th, 1929, in Detroit, Michigan. His parents, Berry and Bertha Gordy, had migrated to the Motor City from rural Georgia seven years before and by the time of Berry Jr.'s arrival had established themselves within the black community as hard-working small-business owners. As a teenager, Berry Jr. was an indifferent worker in his father's construction and printing firms. Berry didn't mind hard work, but he sensed that his real future wasn't in this blue-collar world.

He tried his hand at professional boxing and fought with courage and determination despite his small size. Then came a two-year army stint and a marriage, and by 1953, Berry appeared to have settled for a secure if stultifying career within the family business. Still, he sought a way to break out of the pack.

After work he haunted the local jazz clubs, digging the sounds of Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk. In 1953 he borrowed enough capital from his father to open a jazz-specialty shop, called the 3-D Record Mart. But the store closed in 1955, and Berry was forced to take a grueling assembly-line job at the Ford Motor Company to support his growing family.

He continued to make the music scene around Detroit, now as an aspiring songwriter. Berry's persistence paid off in 1957, when "Reet Petite," a tune he'd written with Billy Davis, became a Top Twenty R&B hit for Jackie Wilson. More hits for Wilson followed, each containing audible elements of what would later become the Motown sound: a carefully refined blend of pop's upbeat catchiness, the soul power of rhythm and blues and the repetitive intensity of gospel music. In 1959, Berry Gordy Jr. moved from songwriter to producer with his first national R&B hit, Marv Johnson's "Come to Me."

Events moved with astonishing speed. In 1959, Berry established his own Tamla label, and within a year he made a stunning breakthrough with the Miracles' "Shop Around," which was not only a Number One R&B smash but a Number Two pop hit as well. Soon the Berry Gordy roster (spread across a number of labels, including Motown, Tamla, Gordy and Soul) would include the Marvelettes, Mary Wells, Marvin Gaye, Little Stevie Wonder and Martha and the Vandellas. Their songs would be written and produced by such in-house talents as Smokey Robinson, Norman Whitfield, Clarence Paul, William "Mickey" Stevenson, Harvey Fuqua and the team of Eddie Holland, Lamont Dozier and Brian Holland. Their vocal performances would be supported by peerless sessionmen, including bassist James Jamerson, drummer Benny Benjamin and keyboardist Earl Van Dyke.

All of these people were clearly in the right place at the right time. But it took a special kind of leader to bring them together — under the roof of a modest bungalow dubbed Hitsville U.S.A. — and mold them into an unstoppable team of hitmakers. Berry Gordy's personal involvement in every aspect of the fledgling Motown operation cannot be overstated. He wrote and co-wrote songs; produced sessions; critiqued and corrected every track cut under Motown's aegis; and personally promoted his hits to disc jockeys, distributors and retailers around the country.

Two groups stood out during Motown's commercial and creative peak. The Supremes became the archetypal "girl group," as they racked up *twelve* Number One pop hits, beginning with "Where Did Our Love Go?" in 1964, and continuing through "You Keep Me Hangin' On," "Stop! In the Name of Love" and "Someday We'll Be Together." Similarly, the Temptations became the preeminent male harmony group of the mid-Sixties, handily weathering the many stylistic changes of the period as they moved from "My Girl" to "Get Ready" to "Cloud Nine." Of course, we cannot overlook such Motown masterworks as the Four Tops' "Reach Out I'll Be There," Marvin Gaye's "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," Martha and the Vandellas' "Dancing in the Street," the Miracles' "Tracks of My Tears" or Mary Wells' "My Guy," to name but a very few.

From its inception, Motown was more than just a string of hit records. Berry also presided over a growing army of songwriters employed by his Jobete Music publishing division and groomed his artists for lasting "crossover" success through his International Talent Management agency. Some, like the Four Tops, were already seasoned stage veterans when they arrived at Motown. But many more, including the Supremes, the Temptations and Marvin Gaye, were carefully guided along the path of professionalism in lessons that would endure a lifetime. Perhaps the last of the many Motown "charm school" graduates were the Jackson 5, who shot to Number One in 1969 with their very first release, "I Want You Back."

In the Seventies, Berry Gordy steered his ship through the stormy seas of competition and expansion. He retained the allegiance of both Marvin Gaye and Stevie

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Wonder as they made their musical declarations of independence with such albums as *What's Going On* and *Talking Book*. He moved Motown to Los Angeles in 1972 and launched Diana Ross's film career with *Lady Sings the Blues*. He established a film and television company, giving his personal imprint to releases like *Berry Gordy's The Last Dragon*. He issued Michael Jackson's early solo hits; brought along a new act called the Commodores, featuring Lionel Richie; and welcomed old allies like the Temptations and the Four Tops back into the fold after periods of separation. In 1983, Berry's prodigious achievements were celebrated in the NBC TV special *Motown 25: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, with standout performances by Michael Jackson, Marvin Gaye and many others.

"Motown is the ultimate myth of black capitalism," said Nelson George in his book *Where Did Our Love Go?*, "one that says to car dealers and bankers and grocery store owners that 'Yes, it can happen. The odds can be beaten.'" The author goes on to list a half dozen of the past decade's most prominent black music executives and producers but concludes that none have "managed to control the range of their activities and be as successful in the pop marketplace as Berry Gordy. It may be that no Black musical entrepreneur ever will." ■

## Les Paul

**A**S AN INFLUENTIAL JAZZ GUITARIST AND BEST-SELLING POP HITMAKER, LES Paul holds a special place in the pantheon of American musical greats. As a prolific inventor responsible for the development of multitrack recording and the solid-body electric guitar, he is part of a homespun tradition of scientific wizards that includes Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Edison.

Les Paul was born Lester William Polfus on June 9th, 1916, in Waukesha, Wisconsin. He built his first crystal radio at age nine, about the same time that he began playing his first Sears Roebuck guitar. At thirteen, Les was not only playing semiprofessionally on local country and western shows but had already constructed his first radio transmitter, his first sound recorder and his first electric guitar, which was amplified with a phonograph needle through the family radio. Les soon acquired his first Gibson guitar and a year later began working with Joe Wolverton in the country and western duo Sunny Joe and Rhubarb Red.

By the time he was seventeen, Paul was leading his own bands on two Chicago radio stations, as C&W bandleader Rhubarb Red on WJJD and as jazzman Les Paul on WIND. When not broadcasting, Les could be found jamming with the likes of Louis Armstrong, Roy Eldridge and Art Tatum. In 1937, the Les Paul Trio hit New York and won a prime spot on WNBC radio.

In 1941, Les Paul built his first solid-body electric guitar: a four-by-four wooden board with a pickup, fretted neck, six strings and a plug. During the next five years Paul worked with Ben Bernie's big band, was drafted and formed an Armed Forces Radio trio, stationed in Hollywood, which backed entertainers like Dinah Shore, Jack Benny and Bing Crosby.

In 1946, Gibson turned down Paul's electric-guitar prototype, and he built a recording studio, with Crosby's encouragement, in the garage of his Los Angeles home. There he began to develop revolutionary engineering techniques like close miking, echo delay and multiple tracking. Kay Starr, Jo Stafford, the Andrews Sisters and W.C. Fields recorded at the studio. In 1948, Les Paul released his first multitrack recordings, "Lover" and "Brazil." It was the birth of the bright, bubbly, somewhat otherworldly "Les Paul sound."

That same year, his progress was disrupted by a near-fatal auto accident in which his right arm and elbow were shattered. Surgeons set the arm at an angle that would still allow him to cradle his guitar, and Les Paul played on to new heights of popular acclaim. In 1949, he married Colleen Summers, a young singer. She changed her name to Mary Ford, and her multitracked vocals over Paul's multiple-

instrumental parts became the duo's formula for a steady stream of hit records: "How High the Moon," "The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise" and the 1953 Number One smash "Vaya con Dios." Their TV series, *Les Paul and Mary Ford at Home*, ran for seven years; their endorsement of Rheingold beer was one of the first commercial-product tie-ins by a major pop-music act.

The year 1952 brought the introduction of the eight-track tape recorder, designed by Les Paul and marketed by Ampex, and the debut of the Gibson Les Paul solid-body electric guitar. Les was also responsible for many of the advances and refinements (such as low-impedance pickups) incorporated by Gibson over the next three decades. Eric Clapton, Mike Bloomfield, Duane Allman, Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page are just a few of the major guitarists who made a Les Paul Gibson their instrument of choice.

Divorced from Mary Ford in 1964, Paul retired to his home in Mahwah, New Jersey, to pursue a full-time inventing career while keeping careful track of stylistic and technical changes in the music industry. In 1974, he returned to public prominence with a cross-country tour, displaying his guitar virtuosity and electronics techniques. In 1977, he won a Grammy for the album *Chester and Lester*, a masterful collection of pop-jazz guitar duets recorded with his old friend Chet Atkins. Today, Les Paul is still creating in his basement workshop-museum and still performing at top New York jazz clubs, where devotees like George Benson come to sit in with the living legend.

The late Ralph J. Gleason, in praise of Les Paul, wrote that "no one in the history of pop music has had a greater effect on the ultimate pop sound." The man himself is far more modest: "The day that I recognize the fact that I'm not needed or that I can't make somebody happy, then I'm not going to play."

For Les Paul, that day has yet to come. ■



Born June 9th,  
1916, Waukesha,  
Wisconsin



# THE RISE OF MOTOWN

By Joe McEwen and Jim Miller

Adapted from *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock e's Roll*



**T**HE SUCCESS OF MOTOWN RECORDS is almost entirely attributable to one man: Berry Gordy Jr. A former boxer and record-store owner, Gordy, through a combination of pugnacious panache, shrewd judgment and good taste, became the mogul of the most profitable black-music concern in the world.

It all began in Detroit in the early Fifties. When Gordy's record store, specializing in jazz, went bankrupt, he decided to redirect his musical money-making interests to the burgeoning field of rhythm and blues. While supporting himself with a series of odd jobs, Gordy began writing songs for local R&B acts. At first his amateur efforts failed miserably. But he soon acquired a local reputation as a songwriter, producer and hustler. In those days, Gordy would write songs for a performer, cut a demo tape and then take the finished masters to New York, where he would try to peddle his product for a five-percent royalty on net sales. Unfortunately, even when somebody did purchase his masters, they were never promoted properly; and if they did sell, royalties were rarely accounted for.

It was a tough racket, but Gordy persevered. His first break came in 1957, when Brunswick Records bought a song he had written, called "Reet Petite," for Jackie Wilson. "Reet Petite" was an R&B hit, and though his profit only amounted to \$1000, several successful follow-ups for Wilson and Brunswick soon established Berry Gordy as Detroit's leading songwriter. But that was not enough: Gordy was determined to produce and market his own music.

The Motown mythology has it that Berry Gordy, fresh off an automobile assembly line, borrowed \$700 to start his company. In truth, Gordy was, by 1959, a prospering songwriter; he first borrowed money not to start a label but to go into independent production.

At the time he had his eye on a local singer named Marv Johnson. Their

first joint effort, "Come to Me," was leased to United Artists; although it was only a modest hit (Number Thirty on the pop charts), it was an indication of where Gordy was headed.

The song itself was slight: simple lyrics set to a stock rock chord progression (compare Gordy's smash hit for Wilson, "Lonely Teardrops"). But to accompany Johnson, who followed in the gospel footsteps of Clyde McPhatter and Jackie Wilson, Gordy added a churchy female chorus for some call and response (shades of Ray Charles) and a bubbling male bassman (shades of Clyde McPhatter's "Lover's Question" on Atlantic). Instrumentally, the record was anchored by a persistent baritone sax and a tambourine, with a flute break in the middle (recalling Bobby Day's "Rockin'-Robin"). The result was a clean R&B record that sounded as white as it did black.

Gordy perfected this gospel-pop fusion in the months that followed, and by 1960 he'd made two similarly styled Top Ten hits with Johnson — "You Got What It Takes" and "I Love the Way You Love." After leasing yet another hit single, "Money," by Barrett Strong, to Anna Records, a label owned by his sister, Gordy decided to form his own label: Tammie, soon changed to Tamla Records.

It wasn't surprising that the first Tamla hit of any size belonged to a vocal group called the Miracles. Gordy had discovered the quintet working in Detroit. Although initially attracted by the group's only female member, Claudette — the lead singer's girlfriend — Gordy quickly realized the potential of the Miracles' songwriter, Smokey Robinson, who also happened to be



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the lead singer. He leased a few Miracles sides to Chess Records in 1959, but it was only with “Way Over There,” released on Tamla in 1960, that the group (and label) began to sell records: 60,000 on that release. In a few months, that would seem like chicken feed.

As a follow-up to “Way Over There,” Robinson came up with a song called “Shop Around.” Gordy found the first master too sluggish and called the Miracles back into the studio at three o’clock one morning to cut a new version at a faster tempo. The result was Tamla’s first real hit; by January, “Shop Around” had reached Number Two on the pop charts, and Gordy’s company was in the black.

From the beginning, Berry Gordy relied on a handful of dependable writers and producers. In late 1961 he began to expand his staff of songwriter-producers, and among the new additions was Lamont Dozier, a veteran of the local scene who toiled in relative anonymity at Motown for a couple of years until he began a creative partnership with Motown cohorts Brian and Eddie Holland. In 1963 the fledgling trio of writers clicked. Working with Martha and the Vandellas, the Holland-Dozier-Holland team set out to refine and systematize the production techniques Gordy had pioneered with Marv Johnson. “Heat Wave,” by Martha and the Vandellas, inaugurated a three-year stretch that saw Holland-Dozier-Holland amass twenty-eight Top Twenty pop hits.

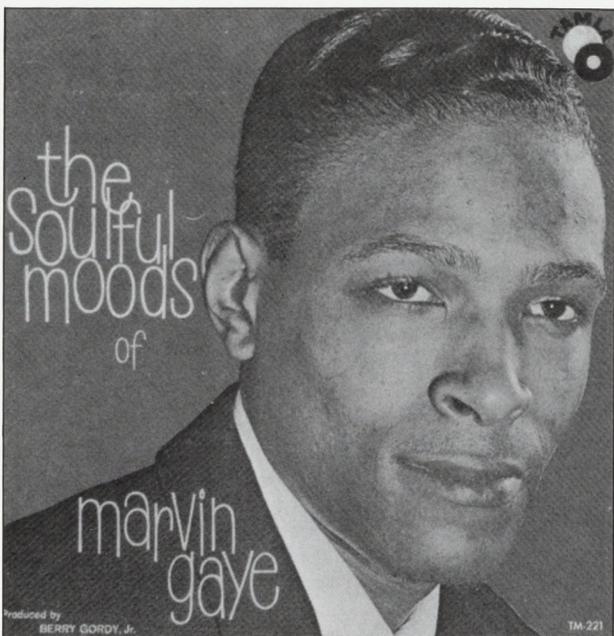
As soul producers the trio was little short of revolutionary. They rarely used standard song forms, choosing instead a simpler, more direct *abc* pattern, anchored by an endless refrain of the song’s hook line. The effect of this cyclical structure was cumulative, giving records produced by H-D-H a compulsive momentum; even better, the constant refrains and consistent use of repetition helped make their hits ubiquitous: after you’d heard one, you’d heard them all, and each and every one of them was immediately familiar, subtly distinctive and quite unforgettable.

The reasons behind Motown’s popularity are diverse. Overseeing the whole operation was Berry Gordy, who endorsed the old bromide for predictable success: keep it simple. Under his tutelage, Motown’s musicians took the concept of formula pop to a new level of sophistication and, thanks to the music’s gospel-blues roots, visceral intensity.

The formulas might quickly have become tedious, of course, were it not for the ingenuity of Gordy’s stable of producer-songwriters. Smokey Robinson, who handled the Temptations and Mary Wells in addition to the Miracles, was able to transfigure the most banal romantic motifs with clever lyrics and catchy hook lines. Norman Whitfield, who worked extensively with the Temptations as well as Marvin Gaye and Gladys Knight, was able to go beyond R&B clichés with punchy melodies and arrangements. Such late comers as Nickolas Ashford and Valerie Simpson, who produced the Marvin Gaye-Tammi Terrell duets as well as Diana Ross’s solo records, were able to amplify secularized gospel lyrics with grandiose orchestra settings. And, finally, Holland-Dozier-Holland did nothing less than make “the formula” a work of art itself.

And then there was the Motown house band, an unheralded lot of the best R&B musicians of the Sixties. While Booker T. and the MGs helped define the style of Memphis soul, their largely anonymous Motown counterparts were expected to play only what they were told to play. As a result, the Motown band — which included Earl Van Dyke on keyboards, the late Benny Benjamin on drums, Joe Messina on guitar, the late James Jamerson on bass, Robert White on guitar and the late James Giddons on percussion — developed a unique dexterity and adaptability. Yet a player like Jamerson nonetheless left his own mark on the music (the explosive bass line on Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell’s “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough” could have come from no one else). Their existence was hardly glamorous, however. Usually paid a flat salary, the Motown musicians toiled in obscurity; where Booker T. and the MGs cut instrumental hits, Earl Van Dyke and the Soul Brothers played small lounges near West Grand for a few dollars, free pizza and the applause of local patrons. In the morning, it was back to the nine-to-five grind.

Motown’s roots may have been in gospel and blues, but its image was purely one of upward mobility and clean, wholesome fun (Gordy’s vision of “Young America”). Motown’s stars were groomed to offend no one; the songs they sang were equipped with romantic lyrics that could appeal to practically anyone; and the music itself was rarely demanding or even aggressive in the tradition of Southern soul. Martha and the Vandellas’ “Dancing in the Street” (1964) may have been interpreted by black activist-



poet LeRoi Jones as an evocation of revolutionary times, but the closest thing to an overt political statement released by Motown in the mid-Sixties was Stevie Wonder's "Blowin' in the Wind" (1966).

Of course, ever sensitive to changing fashion, Motown eventually hopped on the political – and even psychedelic – bandwagon with hits like the Temptations' "Psychedelic Shack" (1970) and Edwin Starr's "War" (1970), both Norman Whitfield compositions.

One statistic gives eloquent testimony to Gordy's success in courting the white market. In 1966, Motown's "hit ratio" – the percentage of records released to make the national charts – was nothing less than seventy-five percent. It was an appropriately awesome achievement for a truly astonishing record company.

Motown in its heyday knew no peers. In the end it was a wholly me-

chanical style and sound that roared and purred like a well-tuned Porsche. Contrived yet explosive, the very epitome of mass-produced pop yet drenched in the black tradition, the Motown hits of the Sixties revolutionized American popular music. Never again would black performers be confined to the fabled chitlin circuit; never again would black popular music be dismissed as a minority taste. For more than a decade, Berry Gordy and his many talented cohorts managed, with unerring verve and against all the odds, to translate a black idiom into the Sound of Young America. Aesthetically as well as commercially, Motown's achievements will likely remain unrivaled for years to come. ■

*Smokey Robinson and the Miracles' "Shop Around" was Motown's first real hit, reaching Number Two on the pop charts in 1960.*