



## Manufacturing Motown

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For kids like me growing up in the 1960s in a working-class suburb of Detroit, the music of Motown was more than just something you tuned into while flipping through the radio dial. It was a source of major civic pride—"The Sound of Young of America" emanating from the Motor City to rule the national airwaves like the muscle cars that reigned on streets like Woodward Avenue, the main drag that bisects the metropolitan area from the foot of the Detroit River downtown up to the city of Pontiac 20 miles to the north.

Running through the various hit songs were the distinctive basslines, precise guitar chords, and solid percussion, instrumental and vocal fills that helped to define the Motown sound. Motown Records was literally a hit factory and it operated on the same assembly-line principles that guided the automotive plants where hundreds of thousands of Detroiters, black and white, first staked their claim to a piece of the American Dream. Like the nameplates on the auto industry's productive output, Motown's headline acts were brand identities under which cultural commodities were sold. Underneath it all from the very beginning was the powerful drive train of a group of studio musicians known as the Funk Brothers, led by pianist Earl Van Dyke and anchored by master bassist James Jamerson. During Motown's 1960s heyday, they played on more #1 hit singles than Elvis, the Beach Boys, the Rolling Stones, and the Beatles combined.

Italian social theorist and legendary jailbird Antonio Gramsci dubbed the regime of modern industrial capitalism "Fordism", after the systems and policies implemented early in the 20th century by Henry Ford at the company that at least for now still bears his name. The golden age of Fordism was the 1950s and 1960s. It was the period of widespread prosperity in America following what sociologist Daniel Bell termed "The Treaty of Detroit", the détente between management and workers written into the UAW's 1950 contract with American automobile manufacturers. And it's no accident that the evolution of Motown followed the fate of that industry, which has ruled the company town known as Detroit for more than a century.

Motown Records founder Barry Gordy, Jr. learned directly from the master. After washing out as the owner of a record store specializing in jazz, in the mid-'50s he briefly worked on the line at the Ford Wayne Assembly Plant. (Still in operation, it's where the Focus is currently assembled. In Gordy's day it was dedicated to the much more upscale Lincoln-Mercury sedan.) Besides recognizing the dim prospects of ever doing anything great while functioning as a cog in a gigantic machine designed to harvest every last drop of his labor (along with that of the legions of drones who anonymously toiled their lives away before and after him), Gordy absorbed the two central principles of Fordist production he would apply to great effect at Motown.



The Funk Brothers in 1966

The first of these is vertical integration, the consolidated management control of all aspects of production. The epitome was the Ford Motor Company Rouge Plant, where raw materials were delivered to the sprawling manufacturing complex, still the world's largest, processed and spit out the other end as finished automobiles. By the same token, Gordy espoused a business philosophy of "Create, Make, Sell". Gordy, and soon others on staff, wrote, produced, and recorded songs, published by Motown's own Jobete Music, in the company studio at Hitsville USA. Motown pressed its own records, designed and printed the jackets and sleeves, and managed all inventory, distribution, and billing. Other Motown units directed product placement, airplay, promotions, and advertising. Another subsidiary, International Talent Management, Inc., handled all of the acts, including booking appearances and directing choreography for all performances, designing costumes, and even providing life-skills training for performer-employees in such things as etiquette, diction, and personal grooming. Motown's so-called Charm School, where "civilizing" habits were taught, was in essence a knockoff of Ford's dreaded Sociology Department, which monitored the company's generally immigrant workforce to ensure "good behavior" in the plant and at home.

The "Create, Make, Sell" philosophy also embodied the other core Fordist principle, namely, the division of labor that strictly assigned each employee and operating unit a specific task in the production process. In his autobiography, Temptations lead singer Otis Williams observed: "Artists performed, writers wrote, producers produced." In the 1960s these lines were rarely crossed, the exception being Smokey Robinson, the only performer to also write his own hit songs and the only one to become a corporate executive. Group names were routinely changed upon signing to make them more marketable (i.e., less R&B "ethnic"). Thus the Primettes became the Supremes and the Matadors the Miracles. The Funk Brothers were often called into the studio to lay down tracks for songs that weren't finished with lyrics and vocals to be substituted for instrumentals down the line. A separate process, product evaluation, would determine which songs would be released. Another automotive tie-in is that songs would be vetted by playing them through small inexpensive one-way speakers, rather than studio monitors with separate tweeters and woofers, to test for optimum sound reproduction over car and transistor radios, which at the time were primarily tuned to the lower-fidelity AM band.

Car companies use different brands to target products for different consumer segments. In the same way, Motown maintained a portfolio of labels to appeal to different listeners. The flagship Motown plus Tamla and Gordy were the labels for crossover records aimed at the mass market. The Soul label was reserved for more "black" R&B product, like one of my favorites, Jr. Walker and the All Stars. (In high school, I played tenor sax in a blue-eyed soul cover band. Among my big moments every gig was to wail on the one-note solo of "Ain't Too Proud to Beg".) Black Forum presented spoken word records, typically with inspirational themes of black pride. African jazz trumpeter Hugh Masekela's Chisa Records was affiliated with Motown for a while and he covered the Motown classic, "You Keep Me Hangin' On", for his first record, *The Reconstruction of Hugh Masekela*, released as part of the relationship. Motown even appealed to directly white audiences through Rare Earth Records, featuring extended-jam versions of corporate hits like "I'm Ready" and "(I Know) I'm Losing You" performed by the all-white band after which the label was named.

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the first outsourcing of the American automobile industry with investments in the maquiladoras of Mexico, a transformation in manufacturing often referred to as post-Fordist to distinguish it from the previous production regime. So, too, did Motown begin its exit from the city that gave it its name, a mission accomplished in 1972 when its headquarters officially moved from Detroit to Los Angeles. As with the auto industry, Motown left many workers behind, including the Funk Brothers. Most of the Motown records of this period, including Stevie Wonder's classics *Music of My Mind*, *Talking Book*, and *Innervisions*, featured freelance studio musicians recording at outsourced facilities in New York or LA (in addition to Wonder's multi-instrumental talents). The exception was Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, the first Motown record for which the Funk Brothers received liner-note credit and generally considered the greatest soul album ever made.

With the onset of digital music in the 1980s, Motown again followed the evolution of global capitalism, in this case in the transition from the industrial to the informational economy. In 1988, Gordy sold Motown for \$61 million, though he retained control of Jobete along with all of the publishing rights to its catalog. Like the rest of his fellow media moguls, Gordy's main business became not making new product but wrenching every last cent of value from intellectual property he already owned. EMI eventually acquired Jobete Publishing, completing the deal in 2004 when it purchased the last 20 percent of

the company from Gordy for \$80 million. (By that measure the total value of the publishing concern would be \$400 million.) The press release announcing the transaction noted that Gordy would stay on to help with "exploitation of the catalog".

Exploiting the catalog has indeed been big business for Motown Records. Not long after the acquisition, the Funk Brothers were called back to active duty to back up pop-star hopefuls who performed selections from the Jobete song roster on *American Idol*. The top Motown hits have been firmly entrenched in continuous radio rotation since their original release. Reissues have proliferated with "definitive collections" of all the major groups available. The new 50th anniversary multiple-disc set is now on sale, following up on similar 40th, 30th, 25th, 20th, etc., anniversary volumes. There's an abundance of song placements in movies, ads, and on TV. Ringtone downloads of your favorite Motown tunes can be had from the label's website.

Motown suffered its initial decline in the 1970s with the triumph of the pop-artist auteur and the long-playing album format. But in the age of iTunes and the random shuffle, the catchy hook has returned as a killer app. In this regard, Motown has got legs. That's more than you can say for America's auto industry these days.

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