

Marvin Gaye 1939-1984

According to biographer Jason Ankeny, Marvin Gaye was one of the most gifted, visionary, and enduring talents ever signed by Motown, and after signing with them in 1961, “blazed the trail for the continued evolution of popular black music. Moving from lean, powerful R&B to stylish, sophisticated soul to finally arrive at an intensely political and personal form of artistic self-expression, his work not only redefined soul music as a creative force but also expanded its impact as an agent for social change.”

Although his father was an ordained minister he beat the young boy on an almost daily basis. He sang in the church choir starting at the age of three and later took up piano and drums, and music became his escape from the nightmarish realities of his home life. Gaye also served in the U. S. Air Force.

Among his many Top Ten hits are "How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved by You)" (1965) and "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," (1968) his biggest hit, and arguably the pinnacle of the Motown sound.

Ankeny asserts that Gaye “found the material he recorded for Motown to be increasingly irrelevant in the face of the tremendous social changes sweeping the nation, and after scoring a pair of 1969 Top Ten hits...he spent the majority of 1970 in seclusion, resurfacing early the next year with the self-produced **What's Going On**, a landmark effort heralding a dramatic shift in both content and style that forever altered the face of black music.” The album “incorporated jazz and classical elements to forge a remarkably sophisticated and fluid soul sound.” The content of the album ranges from Gaye's deeply held spiritual beliefs, poverty and discrimination, environment, drug abuse, and political corruption to the conflict in Vietnam. Gaye wrote “What’s Happening Brother?” to honor his brother who served in Vietnam and had great difficulty finding employment as he reentered the job market upon his return. Quoted in the book *Divided Soul*, Gaye said, “Suffering and injustice are things which I’ve always felt deep in my soul, and I wondered what I was doing singing rock and roll in some dive instead of leading the marchers. I know I had that ability, but that wasn’t my role. My role was to sing. Years later when Bob Marley came around, I saw that both things were possible. His music caused political change, and that’s why he’ll occupy a high place in history.”

Ankeny, Jason. “Marvin Gaye.” <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/marvin-gaye-mn0000316834/biography> . September 26, 2016.