## Music 262: Rock Music, History and Social Analysis, Motown

## [Music Playing on Piano]

[Brian Ward]: So let's talk about the sound of young America in the 1960s in the United States. This sound comes from one label and that is the music label, Motown. Motown can be in its sound, its look, all of its music can really be attributed to one man, and that man is Berry Gordy. Berry Gordy was from Detroit. He had a jazz record store that kind of went bankrupt in the early 50s. He began to write R&B songs for local acts. He was an amateur boxer. He was friends with Jackie Wilson and he wrote Jackie Wilson's first hit as we mentioned before, Reet Petite. He had several hits that followed that and he became kind of known as Detroit's leading songwriter. So he ended up borrowing some money and went into independent production. He started the label Motown. This is R&B music that really passed for black music and white music at the same time. What he did was he perfected this gospel, pop fusion and there's a real formula to it that made it successful.

So here's the Berry Gordy Motown formula. You have stock rock chord progressions. So the progressions we talked about before where you have only three chords or even four chords. He has a gospel feel to the music, especially in the vocals. Often times you will have a lead vocal and female background vocals in a column response, and that's the gospel feel. The male vocals, especially in the lead sing in a doo wop style, which was also (he knew) very popular and very appealing. The final element and probably one of the most important ones is this solid instrumental backup that accompanies the singing in Motown.

So let's talk about how Motown developed. They had an early hit with this song called Money by Barrett Strong. The Beatles covered this song. Strong teamed up with Norman Whitfield. They started to write some hits and Gordy started his record label originally called Tamla, eventually Motown in a very short period of time. Berry Gordy then teams up with Smokey Robinson and they write and record the song Shop Around. Now Shop Around became a big hit and reaches number two on the pop charts. So from that success puts the company in black and Motown is on the map.

A lot of new talent begins to join the Motown team because of their location in Detroit. There's a lot of talent around for him to draw from. This is a great opportunity for these young, black artists and musicians to sing and write music. So we talked about the Motown formula. We have these simple structures. Another real key element to the Motown sound are these hook phrases. Berry Gordy knew that we have to have a hook in the song. Now the hook is the part of the song that everyone remembers and can sing along with even if they don't know any of the other words to the song. So he would take this hook and he knew it was important in pop music. He would repeat it, and repeat it. Making the song really radio friendly and making it appealing to both white people and black people. The lyrics of these songs were often times very trivial. Again we have these gospel vocal devices, the call and response, and these great

instrumental tracks that really you can't sit still when you listen to them. So it was really able to go beyond this R&B cliché that has been going on with doo wop and the girl groups and even the teen idols, pop music, and he mixed it with these hip melodies and cool arrangements. They secularize the gospel sound. This was called the sound of young America. Because for a lot of people in America, especially African American's growing up, this was the background music to their lives, the sound of Motown.

I have to mention again, these instrumental players that played for Motown were often the same rhythm section, the same bass player, the same drummer, same musical director, same keyboard players, same guitarists that played for everyone who recorded hits. These guys were known as The Funk Brothers. There's a really great documentary on these guys. It's called Standing in the Shadows of Motown made in the year 2000 that's really eye opening. These guys played on more hits than The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Beach Boys, and Elvis combined. These are just mere instrumentalists. Because of the volume of hits that came out of Motown and the fact that they played for every single one of these artists in the recording studio, made this possible.

They also had a great lead songwriting team of Holland, Dozier, and Holland. Gordy, of course (kind of like in The Brill Building Style) had writing teams and he would give them assignments. He expanded them as soon as they started to make money. So he hired Lamont Dozier. He teams up with Brian and Eddie Holland and they kind of refine and produce a string of Motown hits within this formula. There are 28 top 20 hits in a three year period written by this songwriting team.

So some of the great artists that come out of Motown. Smokey Robinson of course. Smokey Robinson and The Miracles were probably the first real success of Motown. They were known for really Smokey's beautiful falsetto voice and his penchant for singing ballads. We also have a guy named Marvin Gaye. Now Marvin Gaye was a shy performer. Originally he was a session drummer from Motown. He went on to become a singer and became one of Motown's most enigmatic, mysterious and consistently popular acts. With Marvin Gaye you can break his career down into two stages. He has his early stage where he worked with all the Motown production staff, found medium tempo hits to sing. I Heard it Through the Grapevine is a good example. The second stage of his career, he really became a composer himself and he liberated himself from Gordy's studio system. He really started to capture the social signs of the era, and the signs of the times in his composition. There's a lot of pensive and introspective style that comes from this period. He also returned to love songs in a really erotic form. Songs like Let's Get It On.

Another great group coming out of Motown is The Four Tops. Now The Four Tops were this group kind of cast in the mold of doo wop and this urban R&B. They produced a ton of hits, non-stop hits for about four years in the 1960s. They were built around their lead singer, Levi Stubbs. If you ever see the movie, Little Shop of Horrors, Levi Stubbs is the voice of the plant.

Another great group from Motown is The Temptations. The Temptations were probably the best group that came out of Motown. They were probably considered to be the finest vocal soul group of the whole 1960s. They out dressed everyone. They out danced everyone. And they out sang everyone. The cool thing about The Temptations is that they weren't local Detroit artists. They came from the south, places like Georgia and Alabama. Each singer had his own way of singing gospel and they blended together well. They could also each sing leads well. This is the group that is really closest to the church and the gospel roots.

Another great group from Motown of course is Diana Ross and The Supremes. They are also one of the most important female groups in rock history. They were Motown's most consummate commercial group as far as record sales go. They had twelve number one pop hits. No other female group has ever surpassed this. Holland, Dozier, and Holland wrote a lot of their music and they devised a formula to write for lead singer Diana Ross. It really propelled her career. She had a real carefree delivery and it really appealed to people. So you could say that The Supremes' music is really the purest expression of the Motown sound.

The last great act to come out of Motown is the Jackson 5. The Jackson 5 was a child group. At first Berry Gordy didn't even want to hear this group audition because he knew all the troubles that would happen with a child group. These were all young men from age 10 to 18 or so. He knew that there would be a lot of problems getting them tutors, being on the road with chaperones, and stuff like that. Well once he heard them perform for him in their audition, he knew he had to sign this group. This group was fronted by a young ten year old boy named Michael Jackson. Now young Michael, he had this great way of singing that was very mature for his age. If you listen to early Jackson 5 records, the things he does with his voice are amazing. They maturity in his music is uncanny. He also danced like a little miniature James Brown, so he had that going for him as well. Just a superb stage presence and a superb leader and front man for this young group. As we know, Michael Jackson went on to become the king of pop.

The most successful artist of Motown's history is a young man also, Stevie Wonder. Stevie Wonder was born Stevland Morris in 1950 and he was blind since he was an infant. He was introduced to Berry Gordy and he was eleven years old when he was signed with early form of Motown, Tamla Records. At the beginning he was sort of a novelty act. He played bongos, harmonica, he had all this energy, but he was a really quick learner growing up at Motown. He had a number one hit at age 12. This hit was called Fingertips Part 2. This is actually the only number one live record in rock history. He also created a string of hits after that. His voice soon matured into this really distinctive tenor voice that we know of Stevie Wonder's voice today. Another example of this is the song Signed, Sealed, Delivered that he did in 1970. In fact that was his first production work. After that he was able to gain control of his own finances because he was 21. He had an important contract in music history. He wrote a 120 page contract with Motown and this made history because of all the concessions that the record company had to make to the artist. He got higher royalty rates and he also got complete artistic freedom. By the 1970s he was playing most of the instruments on his albums. He was free to create all these

different styles of music and these great records like Songs in the Key of Life. So today, Stevie Wonder is still around. He produces. He writes music including music for several movie soundtracks and television. He's a legend in the music industry.