



Motown Records head Berry Gordy, Jr., watches Diana Ross and the Supremes during a recording session.

*walk in one door an unknown and come out another a recording artist—a star.*²¹⁷

Gordy erected a sign over Motown’s Detroit office that read “Hitsville U.S.A.,” telling a friend that the label “expressed what I want it to be—a hip name for a factory where hits are going to be built.”²¹⁸

Motown Records specialized in **rhythm and blues**, often just called **R&B**, which had shifting meanings in the twentieth century. Originally a broad blanket term for recordings by non-white performers, by the late 1950s it had come to designate Black music with energetic and hard-swinging rhythms that made it suitable for dancing.²¹⁹

Gordy’s vision for Motown’s “factory” soon became a reality, and one beneficiary of the musical production line was Marvin Gaye. Gaye had grown up singing gospel at church in a small religious sect called “The House of God, the Holy Church of the Living God, The Pillar and Ground of the Truth, the House of Prayer for All People.”²²⁰ The church mixes doctrine from “orthodox Judaism and Pentecostal Christianity” and does not celebrate either Christmas or Easter.²²¹ Gaye’s father, Marvin Gay, Sr. (his son later added an “e” to his last name), initially preached for the church, but



Marvin Gaye’s recording of “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” stayed at Number 1 for almost two months in 1968.

quarrels within the denomination led him to pull away and turn to alcohol.²²² Still, he held fast to the House of God’s view that secular music was sinful, especially because of its associations with drugs and sexuality—so his son’s growing success as a popular singer was another source of tension in a family that already had its internal pressures.²²³ Sadly, a quarrel between father and son in 1984 resulted in the shooting death of the younger Marvin.²²⁴

Some twenty-three years before that unfortunate demise, Marvin Gaye had connected with Motown, where his rise was slow but steady. He married one of Gordy’s sisters, Anna, in 1963 (when they first met, he was twenty; she was thirty-seven), and she helped to promote his career.²²⁵ One of his first hits was “[How Sweet It Is \(To Be Loved By You\)](#)” (1964), and his recording of “[I Heard It Through the Grapevine](#),” released in 1968, became the biggest hit that Motown had ever experienced. It remained at the top of the pop singles chart for seven weeks.²²⁶ Motown recordings also held the next two positions on the chart, and no other label made it into the top three positions for a month.²²⁷ “Grapevine’s” opening bars soon “became some of the best known in pop.”²²⁸

Ironically, though, Berry Gordy had blocked the release of “Grapevine” for over a year, arguing that it was too