

There's No Town Like Motown

Already by the end of the 1950s, the hard-driving rock-and-roll style was evolving into a gentler style known as *soft rock*. This style was represented by such singers as Frankie Avalon, Paul Anka, Neil Sedaka, and Bobby Vinton. Because popular music was moving in this direction, a record producer named Barry Gordy, Jr., created a new record company called Motown Records. It was given this name because it was located in Detroit, the motor capital of the United States.

Barry Gordy, Jr., was a chrome trimmer at the Ford assembly plant who wrote songs on the side. He was convinced by friends to start his own record company. Out of this first company came another company that he called Motown. It was the first and largest recording company owned and operated entirely by African-Americans. It became the most important recording label for black artists for many years.

The particular style of music that Motown Records developed and produced was a combination of gospel music prevalent in predominantly black churches and the earlier style of rhythm and blues. These two styles combined with some of the smoother vocal styles of the soft rock singers mentioned above, thus creating a new style of singing that was made popular by such performers as The Supremes, The Temptations, Gladys Knight and the Pips, and Stevie Wonder. Groups such as Gladys Knight and the Pips and The Supremes incorporated elements of choreography (planned dance steps and movements) in their live performances, which have remained notable characteristics of the Motown style. In the late '60s and early '70s, a family of musicians known as the Jackson Five was promoted by Motown Records and became famous. When the family group broke up, Michael Jackson went solo, becoming a renowned performer in the '80s and '90s.

Motown Records and many other record producing companies like it continue to be influential forces in the development of the music we hear today. They are constantly in search of the next star and newer and fresher styles. This is how singers like Ray Charles and the Jackson Five got started. These groups and many others would not have achieved the popularity and level of success that they did had it not been for the forward-thinking producer Barry Gordy and his establishment of Motown Records.



The Supremes

Name _____ Date _____

Questions for Consideration

1. By the end of the 1950s, what was the hard-driving rock-and-roll style evolving into?

2. What singers represented this new style?

3. What was the name of the record producer who set up a record company in Detroit?

4. What was the name of the new record company he created?

5. What styles were combined to create the new Motown style?

6. Who were some of the performers of this new style?

7. What was an important element in their live performances?

8. What was the name of the family of musicians that was promoted by Motown Records and became very popular?

9. What continue to be influential forces in the development of music?

10. What are record producing companies constantly in search of?
