

# FEATURES

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## Motown turns 50, proud of its musical and social legacy

As the soul empire reaches the half-century mark, founder Berry Gordy looks back at the record label that put Detroit on the musical map and its role in breaking down racial barriers in America

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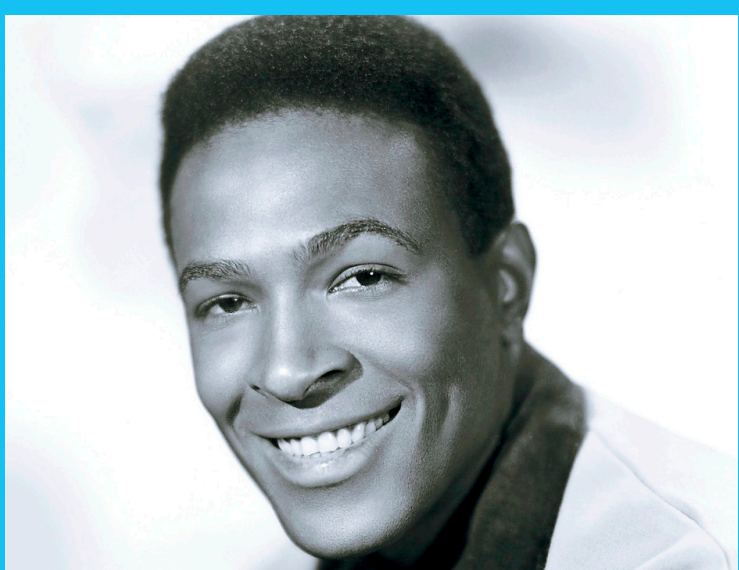
The Contours perform at the Memories of Motown show in Berlin last week. PHOTO: EPA



Thanks in part to Motown founder Berry Gordy's promotional acumen, the Jackson Five's appeal transcended race. PHOTO: REUTERS



Detroit-born Motown star Diana Ross first signed with the label as a member of The Supremes. PHOTO: REUTERS



Singer Marvin Gaye signed with the Tamla subsidiary of Motown Records in 1960. PHOTO: REUTERS

Fifty years ago, Detroit was sharply divided by race. Newspapers still ran ads for "colored" apartments and Detroit police cars weren't integrated until late December of 1959. It wasn't until 1961 that a progressive new mayor, Jerry Cavanagh, promised to fight segregation in Detroit's neighborhoods and public institutions.

Against this unforgiving backdrop, the prospects of one young black man, Berry Gordy Jr, were less than stellar. Gordy had given up boxing (too violent), quit his Ford factory job (too boring) and failed as a record store owner. He sold songs to singer Jackie Wilson, but didn't make any money at it. At the age of 31, the divorced father of three was broke and out of a job.

Still, on Jan. 12, 1959, the Gordy family loaned Berry Jr US\$800 from the family fund so that he could start a record company.

Fifteen years later, Motown Records had become the largest African-American-owned business in the US, turned Detroit into a music mecca and made stars of Detroit-born talent like Diana Ross and Smokey Robinson. Today, Gordy and Universal Motown Records will launch the 50th anniversary of the iconic Detroit label, which includes an event today at the Motown Historical Museum featuring Duke Fakir of the Four Tops, city and state dignitaries and others. Today will also be declared "Motown Day" by city and state officials.

Gordy sold Motown in 1988 for US\$61 million, but the energetic 79-year-old is still busy promoting and defending the company he founded. He's about to get busier. Along with launching Motown 50, he's overseeing a Broadway musical based on his life and a multi-part documentary film on what he did "and how I did it" at Motown, using extensive footage filmed during Motown's heyday. He's also emerging from retirement to manage a new singer, "one of the greatest I've ever met," whom he isn't ready to reveal just yet.

Gordy exudes the same confidence he did when building his music empire.

"I never had any big setbacks to knock my ego down, because I was confident almost to the point of being cocky," Gordy said, speaking by phone from his Los Angeles office. "People would say, 'What makes you so sure?' I'd say, 'I don't think it, I know it.'"

Back in 1959, Gordy was blissfully unaware of how difficult a task was before him, launching a record company in a city still recovering from the 1958 recession.

"I didn't know enough about economics to know," Gordy said. "I was involved in my stuff, and I took very little interest in anything other than my creative activities and the artists I worked with. I know the times were what they were, but I guess in those days I was more concerned about the whole social situation and the racial tensions. Now I'm a lot more aware of economics and how the whole thing works."

Motown launched immortal artists like Marvin Gaye, Smokey Robinson and Stevie Wonder, but it was also a symbol of black achievement and a big part of Detroit's international image.

"People identify Motown with the city of Detroit, and the city of Detroit with Motown," said former Detroit mayor Dennis Archer.



Motown founder Berry Gordy poses outside Hitsville USA, the original headquarters of his company in Detroit, in this 1960s publicity photo. PHOTO: REUTERS

They still do; the Motown Historical Museum is one of the region's most-visited tourist destinations, with visitors coming from as far away as the South Pacific.

Such an institution was built not only by Motown's stars, but by many people behind the scenes. One of Gordy's goals for Motown 50 is to point out the hard work of the unsung heroes, the secretaries, accountants and others.

"I had a philosophy and a work ethic that I had gotten from my father and my family," Gordy said. "But people like the Noveck brothers were also so important in my life."

Harold and Sidney Noveck were Motown's tax attorney and CPA, respectively. "I want them to be remembered," Gordy said. "They made me put money aside. Everybody was buying great cars, and I said, 'When can I buy a nice car?' The Novecks said, 'When you can pay cash for it.'"

Other people in the background, without whom there wouldn't be a Motown, were his very supportive four sisters, Gordy said. "They would tell people, 'My brother's a boxer, you have to see him.' Then when I was a songwriter, they said, 'My brother's a songwriter, you have to hear his stuff.'"

### FIGHTER FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

Gordy also praises the courage of his artists who traveled by bus through the American South with the Motortown Revue in the middle of the volatile Civil Rights era. "They were shot at; they were the unsung heroes," Gordy said. "All I'm doing now is what I've done for the past 50 years, protect the legacy because people were trying to rewrite Motown history."

Those "people" include the producers of *Dreamgirls*, the 2006 film that fictionalized Motown's early days.

"The truth can only win if you can afford to fight for it and are willing to fight for it, and I was," Gordy said. Gordy demanded — and got — an apology from *Dreamgirls*' producers, who took out an ad that ran in the movie trades. What irritated him the most about the movie was the tuggish record company boss played by Jamie Foxx.

"It's like, a black guy — a kid — in Detroit could not start a Motown unless he was a Mafia person," Gordy said, indignant. "It's like, a black man could not lead this country because he wasn't smart enough, but ... now one is."

"The Chairman," as Gordy is affectionately known by his artists, will be in Washington next week for US president-elect Barack Obama's inauguration — with bells on.

It was Motown Records that released Martin Luther King's key Civil Rights speeches on records. It was Motown groups like the Miracles, Martha and the Vandellas and the Temptations who insisted that the rope dividing their Southern audiences into black and white be taken down.

And it was Motown that provided a romantic soundtrack and black musical idols for white teenagers around the world, many of whom went on to vote for a black president in 2008.

Jerry Herron, dean of the honors college at Detroit's Wayne State University, sees a direct link between what Gordy did in launching Motown and Obama being elected president.

"It's like Martin Luther King standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, saying, 'I am claiming this space, I can be here, too.'"

Herron grew up in segregated Abilene, Texas, in the 1960s, and his "Rosebud" memory from his youth is directly linked to Detroit and Motown.

"In 1966, at the high school dance, my girlfriend cooed into my ear as we were dancing, 'Baby love, my baby love ...' Something fundamental happened, if two white kids at an all-white dance in Abilene are dancing to Berry Gordy's music out of Detroit. It wasn't just my experience too, it was all the kids I knew. Gordy moved a kind of music around the world that we had not heard."

### MUSICAL LEGACY

Gordy believes that "there could never be another Motown."

"To have another Motown you'd need another perfect storm," he said. "You don't have the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement, Woodstock, a lot of things. It was a creative period in our history, that's why there will be other companies, other things, but another Motown? How are you going to duplicate a Marvin Gaye, a Levi Stubbs, a Smokey Robinson, a Gladys Knight and the Pips, a Rick James?"

There may not be another Motown, but Berry Gordy isn't done yet.

"One thing that shocks me a bit, is when I come to the Motown museum and see, 'This is where Berry Gordy lived,' and stuff like that. I want to say, 'Wait a minute, that's not me. I'm still a kid!' Because I'm still feeling really great, the life I live, with the inspirations I have, the Broadway show, a new artist I'm handling ..."

The music he's already produced isn't a museum piece either.

"It really is a rich record of what it felt like at that moment when things were beginning to change in the '60s," said Wayne State's Herron. "It's a part of 'I have a dream,' the marches, the boycotts. It's an anthem about us rising to the highest levels. Motown music has so much exuberance, people feel it in their bodies, they need to move around. I play Motown for my classes sometimes, and these kids in their teens don't have any geezer memories of it. Yet they still have to move when they hear it."

## PIANET POP

Patrick Swayze has checked himself into the hospital for observation after contracting pneumonia, A&E President Abbe Raven announced on Friday at a meeting of the Television Critics Association.

Swayze, who has pancreatic cancer, was scheduled to discuss his upcoming drama *The Beast*. Robert DeBitetto, A&E's programming senior vice president, explained his absence.

"Patrick has asked that I tell you

Patrick Swayze: "I'm going through hell." PHOTO: EPA

that this morning he checked himself into the hospital for observation," said DeBitetto.

"Chemotherapy can take its toll on the immune system, and illnesses are a part of that. Patrick wishes me to tell you that he's very sorry he cannot attend, but plans to get back to promoting *The Beast* soon." Earlier this week, Swayze told ABC's **Barbara Walters** that his yearlong battle with pancreatic cancer put him "through hell" while he pushed ahead on his new TV series.

The 56-year-old actor also owned up to his fear: "Yeah, I'm scared. Yeah, I'm angry. Yeah, I'm [asking], 'Why me?'"

**Will Ferrell** says audiences should expect the unexpected from his upcoming one-man Broadway show and HBO special about US President **George W. Bush**.

Ferrell, known for his Bush impersonation on the TV comedy show *Saturday Night Live*, said on Friday there's nothing derivative about the production. He says it will surprise people with its twists and turns and what it has to say about Bush.

Executive producer Adam McKay says the show aims to be funny but also hold the Bush administration's feet to the fire.

**Will Ferrell: You're Welcome America. A Final Night with George W. Bush** is set to begin previews on Jan. 20 and open on Feb. 5.

Can he type with those shades on? **Bono** is now a contributing columnist for

the *New York Times*.

The Irish rocker's first column, a lengthy meditation on **Frank Sinatra**, appeared yesterday. He also did a podcast for the column.

Bono called the gig "an honor," and joked that he's "never been great with the full stops or commas."

The 48-year-old U2 rocker has been an advocate in the fight against AIDS and poverty in Africa.

**R. Kelly** can officially bump and grind with whomever he chooses: He has finalized his divorce from his wife.

Kelly and his former wife, Andrea, confirmed they were officially divorced after 11 years of marriage.

A joint statement on Thursday said they had reached an amicable resolution concerning all issues related to their marriage and will share joint custody of their three children.

The 41-year-old Kelly — known for the hits *Bump N' Grind*, *I'm a Flirt*, *Trapped in the Closet*, *I Believe I Can Fly* and many others — was acquitted of child pornography charges last year.

A convicted pedophile, fugitive filmmaker **Roman Polanski**, on Friday lost his bid to disqualify the Los Angeles County court system from considering his motion to dismiss a 30-year-old charge of unlawful sex with a minor.

Lawyers for the Oscar-winning director behind such classics as *Rosemary's Baby*



There's no "misunderestimating" Will Ferrell. PHOTO: AP

and *Chinatown* filed court papers this week requesting the case be referred to the California Judicial Council for "selection of an impartial, out-of-county" judge.

But Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Peter Espinoza ruled the defense motion "discloses no legal grounds for disqualification" and was therefore "ordered stricken."

Polanski's lawyers filed a separate motion last month seeking to dismiss the 30-year-old case altogether, citing "extraordinary new evidence" of prosecutorial and judicial misconduct.

Polanski, 75, an Academy Award winner in 2003 for directing the Holocaust drama *The Pianist*, fled the US for France in 1978 as he was about to be sentenced

for his guilty plea on charges of having unlawful sex with an underage girl.

His bid to dismiss the matter stems from claims that the now-dead Los Angeles judge in the case was improperly coached by a deputy district attorney, David Wells, since retired, ahead of sentencing.

Those allegations gained public attention a year ago in the documentary *Roman Polanski: Wanted and Desired*, in which Wells spoke of his contact with the judge.

Polanski originally was indicted on six charges, including rape, for having sex with a 13-year-old girl after plying her with champagne and drugs. The director insisted the sex was consensual but pleaded guilty to a single count of having sex with a minor, punishable by up to 20 years in prison.

Vilified in the US media at the time, the director has earned a measure of sympathy in Hollywood for the 1969 tragedy of the murder of his then-pregnant wife, actress **Sharon Tate**, by followers of Charles Manson.

The victim in the sex case against him, Samantha Geimer, now in her 40s and a mother of three living in Hawaii, has said she believes Polanski's long exile from Hollywood has been punishment enough. A civil suit brought by her family years ago eventually was settled.