

MOTOWN: HOW SWEET IT WAS ... AND STILL IS



It left town in '72—now, Hitsville plans a return engagement

BY BRIAN J. BOWE

Fifty years after Motown Records left Detroit, the Motown Museum is poised to become a multibuilding campus that incorporates new historical displays and a live music venue, among other features.

With a deep bench and an unrivaled string of hits, Detroit's Motown Records ruled the 1960s and early '70s. This music factory turned its brand of R&B-fueled pop—billed as “The Sound of Young America”—into an international sensation. Bookended by 1961's *Please Mr. Postman* and 1972's *Papa Was a Rolling Stone*, Motown racked up at least 30 No. 1 singles on the Billboard Hot 100, cementing Detroit's place on the pop culture map.

But by the middle of 1972, Hitsville was splitsville in the Motor City.

Berry Gordy Jr. founded Motown in 1958, building an empire around a distinct brand of lush, soulful pop with wide appeal. But 14 years later, he was trading the Rust Belt for Tinseltown to fulfill his desire to conquer the movie industry.

“It's just simply a matter of sound business judgment, economics and logistics which dictate this development,” Motown's vice president and general manager, Amos Wilder, told the *Detroit Free Press* when the company's move to Los Angeles was

announced in June 1972.

According to news reports of the time, at its peak the label employed about 250 full-time musicians in Detroit, some of them making \$60,000 a year (a cool \$425,000 in 2022 dollars). But by the time Motown officially announced the move to Los Angeles, activity in the Motor City had reduced to a trickle.

The relocation was a business decision, marking the end of an era. But it didn't diminish the central role that Motown music plays in Detroit's

identity. Mega-producer and Detroit native Don Was came of age during the height of Motown's Hitsville era. When Motown's artists soared, he said, Detroit soared with them.

"They were representing all of us," Was said. "And when they were on Ed Sullivan, we were on Ed Sullivan. There was a tremendous local pride."

Even though Detroit was yesterday's news for Motown by 1972, from those remains rose the Motown Museum, which is perennially one of Detroit's top tourist attractions. Now, in the midst of a \$55 million expansion project, the museum hopes to bring some of that original Motown magic back to the Motor City.

TRAINED TO BECOME LEGENDARY

Gordy didn't leave any label operations in Detroit when he moved Motown out West, but he left buildings and other physical artifacts. There was the Albert Kahn-designed Donovan Building on Woodward Avenue, which was Motown's headquarters from 1967 to 1972 and was demolished in 2006.

More important, he left a series of buildings along West Grand Boulevard, anchored by a white and blue house at 2648 W. Grand Blvd., emblazoned with the audacious sign "Hitsville USA."

Gordy purchased the building in



The Donovan Building on Woodward Avenue served as Motown Records headquarters from 1967 to 1972.



In August, the museum introduced a new public space, Rocket Plaza, that unites the campus.

1959, a year after founding his label. The home featured administrative offices and a recording studio affectionately dubbed "The Snakepit."

Transforming the building—and building the label—was a family affair.

"Berry Gordy's father made the studio," remembered Motown legend Martha Reeves, who also worked as an administrative assistant for artists and repertoire director Mickey Stevenson.

"I saw Pops Gordy going by with soundproofing equipment and two-by-fours, changing that garage ... into Studio A, soundproofing it, putting up the different panels of foam to make the sound right.

"They later wanted to call it a snakepit, but I called it heaven because all of that beautiful music was made in that basement," Reeves said.

Taking its cue from the auto industry, Motown succeeded by applying an assembly line approach to making music. The studio worked in shifts and knocked out song after song.

"Our job was to sit in front of the arrangement, read the chart correctly, and we had to do one song an hour with no mistakes and make 'em hits,"



Berry Gordy and Diana Ross, circa 1972.

said guitarist Dennis Coffey, one of the Funk Brothers, who were the backbone of the label's signature sound. "And we did that all day long."

As Motown's success grew, the label expanded into other houses nearby, with Gordy eventually purchasing

seven. One was home to the Artist Development operation, which was the training ground that gave Hitsville artists that extra panache.

Reeves, who scored hits like *Heat Wave* and *Nowhere to Run*, said the training program was a key component of Motown's success.

"Berry was getting us trained to become legendary," she said.

When artists weren't on the road, Reeves said, they'd spend time with Motown's teachers, learning music theory from Maurice King and Johnny Allen and choreography from Cholly Atkins. They learned



Martha Reeves continues to perform around the world.

deportment from Maxine Powell in group classes that featured the Marvelettes, the Supremes, Brenda Holloway and the Andantes.

“We all were trained together to be sophisticated and elegant,” Reeves said. “I don’t think anyone made it who wasn’t trained.”

In its Detroit era, Motown was a self-contained unit that produced the entire package. It benefited from “an incredible convergence of mentor figures,” said Was. And this went all the way to founder Gordy.

“It’s an incredible convergence of talent,” Was said. “Every step of the way you had people with taste and instinct, and no one’s replicated that.”

Not even Motown itself could replicate the label’s Detroit magic in Los Angeles. To be sure, Motown saw success with films like *Mahogany* and *Lady Sings the Blues* (which earned



Motown Museum founder Esther Gordy Edwards.

five Academy Award nominations in 1973, including a Best Actress nod for former Supremes star Diana Ross) and *Thank God It’s Friday*. On the music front, the label continued to score hits with the Jackson 5, the Commodores, DeBarge, Lionel Richie and Boys

II Men. But in terms of output and cultural impact, Motown’s Los Angeles years were muted.

“Since its move to Los Angeles, Motown has had moments of glory, but the magic of the production line has been lost, discarded or buried,” author Nelson George wrote in his seminal Motown book, *Where Did Our Love Go?*

COME AND GET THESE MEMORIES

While Motown may have left Detroit in 1972, Gordy’s sister, Esther Gordy Edwards, recognized the importance of Hitsville. Thanks to her vision, this hallowed ground has been home to the Motown Museum since 1985.

“She is the person who had the foresight to even preserve that history in Hitsville USA, because she knew

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somehow that it was going to be important for the next generation—and the next generation—to understand the history that came from that little house,” said museum Chairwoman and CEO Robin Terry, who is also Edwards’ granddaughter.

Edwards was the eldest daughter of eight Gordy children and the only one who went to college, attending Howard University and Wayne State University. That experience “gave her a very unique perspective on the world and on individual success,” Terry said.

“One of our family philosophies is ‘push up, pull up.’ My grandmother would say that often,” Terry said. “‘Push up, pull up’ meant as you push up in the world, you’ve got to have one arm down, pulling somebody else up. ... Her life reflected that value, of always pushing up, but bringing other people behind her.

“The museum just became the outward way that she expressed that and committed her life to that.”

Terry, who was raised by Edwards from the age of 15 into adulthood, was introduced to the Motown business in the same way that many of her relatives were—through labor. Terry said that as a teenager, every day after school, she had to go to Hitsville, where she would sand down LP centers to be sold as coasters. The work was a drag, but Terry said it had a purpose.

“It wasn’t something we enjoyed doing, but what [Edwards] was doing in her own genius way was ... giving us discipline and a sense of purpose, because we were around the story,” Terry



These young Detroit artists are part of the museum’s Lyric Project, which trains emerging songwriters.

said. “She was slowly building an appreciation for that history and a knowledge base that we’d be able to build on later. So, it was discipline, but it was also something that would mean so much more later.”

There’s no question that Hitsville means a lot to people. It’s a must-see attraction for tourists and visiting dignitaries alike. Don Was said he brought some of the Rolling Stones to the museum for a visit in 2015 when the group played at Comerica Park.

Off the top of her head, Terry can rattle off a list of notable visitors, from Beyonce to Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber.

“That is almost a daily occurrence for us,” she said.

Capitalizing on the museum’s popularity, the current expansion project will add exhibition and educational spaces as well as a new public plaza. The project

connects several of the original Motown-owned homes surrounding Hitsville with a two-story glass atrium. The adjacent homes have been renovated with smart classrooms and a recording studio. The final phase will be a new two-story building behind the current museum that will feature a theater for live performances, a cafe and an expanded retail space, Terry said.

It all adds up to a major music destination for tourists and locals alike.

The museum’s mission of promoting the legacy of Motown’s golden years remains, albeit in a more multimedia way. At the same time, the institution now looks toward the future with educational spaces to help develop the next generation of artists.

HITSVILLE NEXT

Aside from the many hits Motown produced, the label had real impact on the lives of Detroiters.

“It’s just phenomenal what happened here,” Edwards told the *Free Press* in 1998, as Motown was celebrating its 40th anniversary. “These

were really just young kids, African American boys and girls who reached such success. And many of them could have fallen through the cracks if it wasn’t for Motown.”

The current expansion project aims to become a bigger part of its neighborhoods, while also developing Detroit’s future talent. It includes a creative hub called Hitsville Next, which will be home to master classes, camps, songwriting workshops, competitions for singing and poetry, and programming to help students build entrepreneurship skills. The ethos is modeled after Motown’s



Robin Terry, the CEO and chair of the Motown Museum, is guided by the vision of her grandmother.



Detroit poet Ben Will said his Motown Mic experience was competitive yet nurturing, just as the record label was in its early days.

original Artist Development operation, reimagined for the talent of today.

Detroit poet Ben Will is one of the beneficiaries of Hitsville Next. He's the 2022 winner of the Motown Mic spoken-word contest. He performed his award-winning poem at an August launch event before luminaries including Reeves, Smokey Robinson and Temptations founder Otis Williams.

Much like in the old days, Will said a major part of the competition centered on his development as an artist. He worked with a coach and received media training, a styling consultation and a photo shoot.

"It actually was an intense competition, but it was still a nurturing kind of community that Motown built," Will said, adding that is "how many artists felt during the golden age of Motown—that it was intense, but it was also family at the same time."

An antecedent can be found in most of what Hitsville Next does. The Motown Mic contest is an homage to Motown's Black Forum label, which Gordy founded to release spoken-word albums by Langston Hughes, Stokely Carmichael and Martin Luther King Jr.

"The heart of everything that we do in caring for this legacy ... is to make sure that what we do is authentic, that it is authentically rooted in the spirit of Motown and, in some instances, even

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Motown's first foray into film garnered five Academy Award nominations. Photo | Paramount Pictures.

in the practice of Motown," Terry said.

The expansion hopes to recapture the original, familylike vibe that Motown fostered in its early days on West Grand Boulevard.

"It was the creative space that, if you were a singer, songwriter, musician, engineer, you just wanted to hang around that space," Terry said. "And you had this community that was really held together through this sort of bond of family and collaboration. And that's what you get at Hitsville Next."

Because of its authenticity, the Motown Museum remains one of Detroit's prime attractions.

"The beauty of the Motown Museum is that we haven't gone anywhere," Terry said. "We've been a part of this community doing what we do well, which is telling the Motown story, since our founding in 1985.

"Our role hasn't changed, it's just expanded, because now we're finding even more creative and innovative ways to engage the community."

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BEHIND MOTOWN MUSEUM PROJECT, SOME MEMBERS OF THE DAC BAND

As with many major downtown projects, DAC members and their businesses are intimately involved in helping the Motown Museum maximize its potential as a global cultural destination that generates jobs and community pride and activates and inspires future generations of creatives, artists and entrepreneurs.

Here are just some of the organizations guided by our members that have propelled the project.

In the expansion's final phase, a new 40,000-square-foot space now under construction will include a state-of-the-art theater for live performances, dubbed the Ford

Motor Company Theater. A \$6 million gift from the automaker and UAW-Ford was made in 2016. Retired Ford board member Edsel Ford II and his wife, Cynthia, are longtime DAC members, and Ford Motor Co. and the Ford Fund are listed as lead donors for the overall Motown Museum expansion campaign.

In August, Dan Gilbert's Rocket Cos. and the Gilbert Family Foundation donated \$5 million to the \$55 million capital campaign, bringing its total to \$43 million collected as of this writing. The expansive outdoor plaza along West Grand Boulevard is now named Rocket Plaza.

Hamilton Anderson & Associates designed Rocket Plaza and Hitsville Next, the renovations that were revealed in August with a host of Motown greats in attendance. The firm's president, owner and principal, Rainy Hamilton Jr., has been a DAC member for over 20 years.

The Erb Family Foundation, chaired by member John M. Erb, is also a major funder, as is the Hudson-Webber Foundation, led by its board chair and DAC member Jennifer H. Parke.

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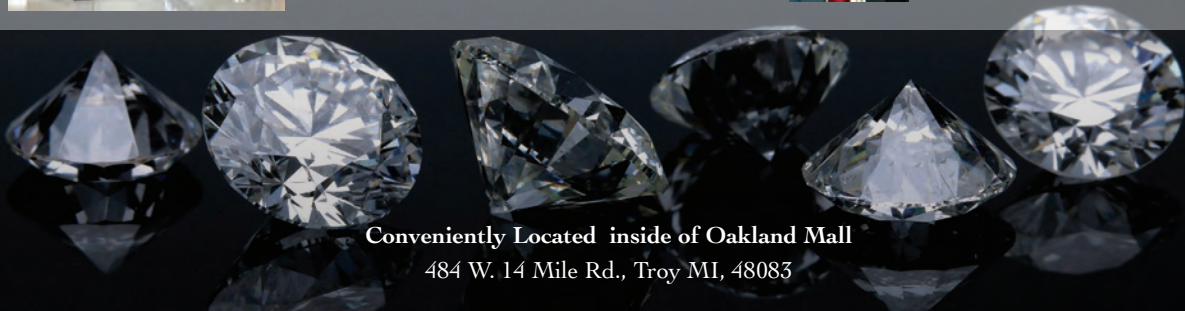


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