



# ASSEMBLING HITS AT MOTOWN

## OVERVIEW

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did Motown Records in Detroit operate during the 1960s?

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The Motown Record Corporation was one of the most successful record labels of the 1960s and one of the most influential black owned and operated companies in the world. During this decade, golden years for the organization, Motown's roster included Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, the Supremes, Martha and the Vandellas, the Marvelettes, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, and the Jackson Five. The hits came one after another: By the early 1970s, Motown had over 100 Top 40 hits to its credit.



For all of its success, the company had humble beginnings. Berry Gordy Jr., who had previously owned a record shop and pursued a career as a songwriter, borrowed \$800 from his family in 1959 to set up shop in a house located at 2648 West Grand Blvd. in Detroit. He loosely modeled the Motown operation on the most prosperous business model he saw around him — the assembly lines at the many automotive plants in the region. (In fact, Gordy himself had worked in a Ford assembly plant during the 1950s.) Instead of assembling cars, though, he put together hit records.

Gordy adopted the idea of making development a team effort, and, as on an assembly line, each member of the team was given a specialized task to perform. He cultivated a group of experts who, working together, could take unrefined young singers and turn them into hit-makers ready to perform and promote the Motown product: records. The Motown staff included songwriters, arrangers, and producers. As much of the work as possible was done in-house.

Motown's artists were also polished and choreographed by the label's "Artist Development" department, a process that included training in singing, dancing, speaking, and even etiquette. The artists who signed with Motown had raw talent, but in many cases, they were inexperienced performers — sometimes they were young people from the city's housing projects who had previously encountered few opportunities for professional training. Gordy also insisted on a high level of quality control, and was known for assembling focus groups to test every product.

In this lesson, students will learn about behind-the-scenes operations at Motown Records — and a few of the company's most important contributors — through a "café conversation."

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The model that defined production at Motown Records, and how it was influenced by factory assembly lines
- The cultural and economic conditions in Detroit, Michigan, and surrounding areas in the 1960s
- The contributions of Motown to the popular music of the 1960s

### 2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Interpret a range of media, including songs, images, and text to develop and demonstrate an understanding of a period of time.
- Common Core: Students will develop speaking and listening skills by engaging in a simulation in class, a “Cafe Conversation” (CCSS Speaking and Listening 1; CCSS Speaking and Listening 4; CCSS Speaking and Listening 6)

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

#### 1. Play the video of the Motown group the Temptations singing “My Girl” and discuss:

- What do you notice about the way the group’s act is staged? How are they dressed? How do they move? Does their performance seem planned out or spontaneous?
- What kinds of things would the group have to rehearse in order to prepare a performance such as this one? What might be difficult or challenging for the group?
- Do you imagine that the Temptations had help preparing their performance? If so, who do you think might have assisted them?

## PROCEDURE:

1. Show students the photo of Motown’s “Hitsville, U.S.A.” studio. Explain to students that the Motown Recording Corporation was founded in this house in Detroit, Michigan, in 1959 by Berry Gordy Jr. It would go on to become one of the largest and best known record companies owned and operated by an African American, and it helped many black musicians start successful careers. The company produced many Top 40 hits in the 1960s.



2. Watch the video of Smokey Robinson — a Motown singer, songwriter and producer who worked with Gordy — talking about the company’s first day of operations. Briefly review the video:
  - What does Robinson say about Gordy’s mission for the record label? To whom was he trying to appeal? What do you think the challenges were for African-American artists who wanted to appeal to white listeners in the late 1950s and early 1960s? (Remind the class that Motown was founded as the Civil Rights movement was taking hold, and only a few years prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.)
  - According to Robinson, what has made the music of Motown so lasting?
3. Distribute the biography handouts and ask students to study them. As an option, students may also conduct research to learn more about their assigned persona. (This could be done as homework before class.) They should be able to answer the following questions:
  - Berry Gordy handout
  - Maxine Powell handout

- Cholly Atkins handout
  - Smokey Robinson handout
  - Maurice King handout
4. Next, divide students into groups of five, with each student representing their assigned persona: Berry Gordy, Maxine Powell, Cholly Atkins, Smokey Robinson, or Maurice King. (Note: depending on the size of the class, students may alternate observing and playing roles.)
  5. Have students briefly introduce their persona to the rest of their group.
  6. Explain to students that they should imagine that it is the mid-1960s, and Motown has just signed a new group, a hypothetical trio of young women who grew up in the Detroit projects. Ask the group to discuss how they will help this group to create and promote hit records. Some things that they might touch on in discussion:
    - How should the group appear on stage? What clothes should they wear, and how should they move?
    - What kind of training might they need to deal with the press and public appearances (interviews, television appearances, etc.)?
    - What challenges might these artists face, and how can these difficulties be overcome? For example, as African-American artists who wanted to appeal to white as well as black audiences, what would they need to consider?
    - What musical skills will this group need to have? What steps will be involved in making a record, and who will oversee this?

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Show students the video about assembly line production at an automotive plant, noting that the Detroit area was home to many such factories, including those operated by Ford. Inform the class that before he opened Motown Records, Berry Gordy worked on a Ford assembly line. If necessary, remind students that on an assembly line, each worker has a specialized task that they perform in succession as the item — such as a car — is built and inspected. Discuss:

- How is Gordy's way of running Motown similar to a factory production line — what about this approach may have inspired him? (Think about production as well as promotion.)
- What advantages could this approach provide to a record company? What did the team of experts at Motown achieve that may have been more difficult for any single individual to accomplish?
- How is producing a hit record different from producing an item like an automobile? Is it really possible to create a “factory” for producing good music? Why or why not?

## WRITING PROMPT:

Imagine that you are a young singer coming to work for Motown for the first time. Write a journal entry describing what it was like to work with Berry Gordy, Maxine Powell, Cholly Atkins, Smokey Robinson, and/or Maurice King. What did they help you with? What did they teach you to do?

## EXTENSIONS:

1. Have students conduct research on the history of Detroit. Topics could include:
  - Racial tensions and rioting during the civil rights era
  - The development and decline of the automotive industry
  - Housing conditions for the working poor in the postwar period, and the development of housing projects such as the Brewster-Douglass complex.
2. Have students read the article “Berry Gordy: Motown Musician,” a more detailed biography of Gordy. Ask them to use the information in the article to create a timeline of Gordy's early life and career.

## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

*College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational Text*

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

*College and Career Readiness Writing Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects*

Writing 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

*College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12*

Speaking and Listening 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Speaking and Listening 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Speaking and Listening 6: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

### SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Places, and Environments

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

### NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

*Core Music Standard: Responding*

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or

performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

### *Core Music Standard: Connecting*

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

## RESOURCES

### VIDEO RESOURCES

- The Temptations – My Girl (1965)
- Jam Handy Corporation for Chevrolet American Harvest (1955)
- Smokey Robinson – The Birth of Motown (2006)

### FEATURED PEOPLE

- Berry Gordy
- Smokey Robinson
- The Supremes
- The Temptations

### HANDOUTS

- Handout: Berry Gordy
- Handout: Cholly Atkins
- Handout: Maurice King
- Handout: Maxine Powell
- Handout: Smokey Robinson