



Classic album

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

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MARVIN GAYE
WHAT'S GOING ON
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Prince of Soul: Marvin Gaye went from in-house session drummer at Motown to become one of the label's most successful artists



WHAT'S GOING ON

MARVIN GAYE

1971 TAMLA MOTOWN

Side 1

What's Going On (Marvin Gaye, Al Cleveland, Renaldo 'Obie' Benson) 3.51

What's Happening Brother (Marvin Gaye, James Nyx Jr) 2.57
Flyin' High (In the Friendly Sky) (Marvin Gaye) 3.40

Save The Children (Marvin Gaye, Al Cleveland, Renaldo 'Obie' Benson) 3.04
God Is Love (Marvin Gaye, Anna Gaye, Elgie Stover, James Nyx Jr) 2.31
Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology) (Marvin Gaye) 3.05

Side 2

Right On (Marvin Gaye, Earl DeRouen) 7.20
Wholy Holy (Marvin Gaye, Al Cleveland, Renaldo 'Obie' Benson) 3.20
Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler) (Marvin Gaye, James Nyx Jr) 5.16

PHOTO BY GEM/REDFERNS

Released in 1971 as war was raging in Vietnam, Marvin Gaye's masterpiece took on the establishment and revolutionised the soulster's clean-cut image...

In 2020, it was voted the greatest album of all-time in *Rolling Stone*, and in other polls of the best records ever made, it's either listed at the summit, or at the very least in the Top 10. It's safe to say, then, that Marvin Gaye's 1971 long-player *What's Going On* is accepted as a masterpiece, and there aren't many that disagree.

Few records epitomise their time like *What's Going On*. But as rare as it was for a record as politically and socially engaged as this was at the dawn of the 1970s, it was even rarer on the Motown label. Set up by Berry Gordy in 1959, its best known hits were usually feel-good stompers or heavenly ballads, aimed at either the dancefloor or the

heartstrings. Yet Marvin Gaye had long felt suffocated by the label's creative restrictions. He'd made his name there through a succession of gorgeous, if lyrically safe, soul numbers, from *Pride And Joy* (1963) to *How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved by You)* (1964) to *You're All I Need to Get By* (1968) to *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* (1968), but with the Vietnam War raging, and racial tensions consuming America, he was frustrated at not being able to tackle these ills in his music. "With the world exploding around me," he asked himself, "how am I supposed to keep singing love songs?"

His declining interest in singing escapist pop-soul hadn't been helped by a series of tragedies in his personal life towards the end

of the 60s. After his singing partner Tammy Terrell was diagnosed with a brain tumour (she died in March 1970), Gaye sank into a deep depression. Add to that, his marriage to Berry Gordy's sister Anna was on the rocks, and he was having trouble with the IRS. And he continued use of cocaine wasn't helping his mental health either. One night he even attempted suicide, only to be stopped by his father-in-law.

But whatever Marvin was going through was nothing compared to the experiences of his brother Frankie. Gaye's younger sibling had been drafted in 1966 and his stories of what was going on in southeast Asia deeply affected Marvin.

"In 1969 or 1970, I began to re-evaluate my whole concept of what I wanted my music to say," Gaye told *Rolling Stone*. "I was very much affected by letters my brother was sending me from Vietnam, as well as the social situation here at home. I realised that I had to put my own fantasies behind me if I wanted to write songs that would reach ➔



MARK SULLIVAN/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES

Gaye on stage at a benefit for Quincy Jones at The Shrine Auditorium, Los Angeles in 1974

the souls of people. I wanted them to take a look at what was happening in the world.”

He'd already flirted with social commentary on his 1969 single *Abraham, Martin And John*. A cover of a song penned by Dick Holler, it had first been recorded by Dion, and was later waxed by Smokey Robinson and Moms Mabley. Written in response to the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy in April and June 1968, the song is a tribute to the memory of four assassinated Americans, all progressive icons – Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, as well as King and RFK.

The success of *Abraham, Martin And John* (in the UK at least, where it went Top 10) appears to have helped pave the way for *What's Going On*. But also influential on Marvin Gaye's most celebrated LP is what's now known as the concept album. Few soul records ever marketed themselves as a concept LP – soul music didn't have its equivalent of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* or The Mothers Of Invention's *Freak Out!* But *What's Going On* was a complete work in itself, outside of its individual songs (with most of its tracks segueing into the next it's been categorised as a song cycle, with the album's narrative told from the point of view of a Vietnam veteran returning to the US to witness hatred, suffering, and injustice).

The origins of *What's Going On's* title song go back to 1969 when The Four Tops' Renaldo 'Obie' Benson witnessed police beating up anti-war protesters at Berkeley's People's Park. Benson later told author Ben Edmonds, "I saw this and started wondering 'What was going on, what is happening here?' One question led to another. Why are they sending kids far away from their families overseas? Why are they attacking their own kids in the street?"

Returning to Detroit, Benson related the story to Motown's Al Cleveland who composed a song about what Benson had witnessed. Taking the track back to his Four Tops bandmates, Benson was surprised when they turned it down, believing it was a 'protest song' ("No man, it's a love song, about love and understanding," he countered).

Benson then offered the song to Marvin Gaye, who added a new melody and lyrics (the finished track is credited to Cleveland, Benson and Gaye). "[He] added some things that were more ghetto, more natural, which made it seem like a story and not a song," Benson's quoted as saying in the book *33 Revolutions Per Minute: A History Of Protest Songs, From Billie Holiday To Green Day*.

Gaye was posthumously inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall of Fame in 1987



MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

“We measured him for the suit and he tailored the hell out of it.”

Gaye would record *What's Going On* – the song – on 1 June 1970 at Motown's HQ, nicknamed Hitsville USA. Only Berry Gordy had, according to reports, little faith in the track, believing its sound to be out of date, saying, “That Dizzy Gillespie stuff in the middle, that scatting, it's old.” (*Marvin Gaye: The Real Thing*).

However, others within the label were of a different opinion and Motown executive Harry Balk, with the assistance of sales executive Barney Ales, got the song released to record stores on 20 January 1971. It was a sensation. *What's Going On* would become Motown's fastest-selling single, peaking at No.1 on the Hot Soul Singles Chart, and No.2 on the Billboard Hot 100. A stunned

Gordy then travelled to Gaye's home to talk about what came next. If the singer could finish a record before the end of March '71, he could do whatever he liked with it, it was agreed.

What's Going On – the album – took just 10 days to record, between 1 and 10 March 1971, with final mixing completed by 5 April. The LP would reflect the turmoil of the time, with Vietnam-specific second track *What's Happening Brother*, dedicated to Gaye's brother Frankie. *Flyin' High (In The Friendly Sky)* deals with drug addiction, while *Save The Children* is an emotional plea to help disadvantaged children, warning, “Who really cares/Who's willing to try/To save a world/That is destined to die?” *God Is Love* is a plea for peace and *Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)* for the environment.

Side Two kicks off with *Right On*, a seven-minute jam with funk rock and Latin soul flourishes. *Wholy Holy* is a gospel plea advising people to “come together” to “proclaim love [as our] salvation”, while closing track, *Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)* shines a spotlight on police violence and urban poverty. With most of the tracks knitted together, there's a satisfying wholeness to *What's Going On*, a sense in which this is a complete declaration, a state of the nation address by one of music's most socially attentive artists.

Released on 21 May 1971, *What's Going On* would peak at No.6, staying on the US Album Chart for over a year and shifting two million copies within 12 months. It was Motown's (and Gaye's) best-selling album up to that date (a record broken in 1973, by Gaye's next LP, *Let's Get It On*).

What's more, three of its four singles did gangbusters – after *What's Going On*, *Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)* went to

IT WAS A SENSATION. WHAT'S GOING ON WOULD BECOME MOTOWN'S FASTEST-SELLING SINGLE, PEAKING AT NO.2 ON THE BILLBOARD

THE VIOLENT DEATH OF MARVIN GAYE

It was just 13 years after the release of *What's Going On* that Marvin Gaye died. And it seemed especially cruel that this man who sang about peace and love should die so violently, especially at the hands of someone who should have loved and protected him.

Marvin Pentz Gaye Jr was just 44 years old when he was shot dead by his father, Marvin Gay Sr at his parents home in Western Heights, Los Angeles. By all accounts Marvin Gaye's father was a difficult man, and his four children with wife Alberta – he fathered one more with a woman he was having an affair with – were used to living in fear of their abusive, volatile father.

At the time of his death, Marvin was living back with his parents, having moved back to look after his mother, who was recovering from kidney surgery. On the night of his death, his parents had been arguing loudly over a misplaced insurance policy letter. The

shouting match spread to Gaye's bedroom. After his father refused to leave the room, it's said that Marvin pushed him out and began punching and kicking him. Alberta eventually separated the two and escorted her husband to their bedroom. Only minutes later he returned to Marvin's room with a Smith & Wesson .38 Special pistol and shot him in their heart. Marvin Sr then stepped closer after the first shot and fired again at point-blank range.

Marvin Sr was arrested immediately after the shooting and, in the trial, pleaded no contest to a charge of voluntary manslaughter. Due to the cocaine found in Marvin Jr's system and the injuries sustained by Marvin Sr at the scene of crime, the judge agreed to let Gay enter a plea bargain. He was eventually given a six-year suspended sentence and five years of probation for the shooting. He would die 14 years later, in 1998 at the age of 84.

IT'S ALMOST BECOME SACRILEGIOUS NOT TO INVOKE WHAT'S GOING ON AS A MASTERPIECE

No.4 on the Billboard, and third 45 *Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)* to No.9. *Save The Children*, while not released in the States, was the highest placed single from the album in the UK.

Reviews of *What's Going On* were rapturous. Writing in *Rolling Stone*, critic Vince Aletti praised Gaye's approach towards social and political concerns, writing: "Ambitious, personal albums may be a glut on the market elsewhere, but at Motown they're something new... the album as a whole takes precedence, absorbing its own flaws. There are very few performers who could carry a project like this off. I've always admired Marvin Gaye, but I didn't expect that he would be one of them. Guess I seriously underestimated him. It won't happen again."

Billboard, meanwhile, believed it was "a cross between Curtis Mayfield and that old Motown spell, and outdoes anything Gaye's ever done."

It was Gaye's death in 1984 that seemed to solidify the album as an all-time classic, however. After his murder, the album re-entered the Billboard 200 and it was the record that most obituarists reached for when talking up Gaye's genius. It's almost become sacrilegious in the past 40 years not to invoke *What's Going On* as a masterpiece. A 1999 critics' poll conducted by *The Guardian* named it the Greatest Album of The 20th Century, while, in 1997, *What's Going On* was named the 17th greatest album of all time in a poll conducted by HMV, Channel 4, *Classic FM* and *The Guardian*. And as recently as 2022, online music magazine *Consequence Of Sound* voted *What's Going On* as the 9th best album of all time.

Marvin Gaye would release another five studio albums in his lifetime, but he was never as affecting, as passionate, as fired up, and as articulate as he was on *What's Going On*. Fifty-three years on, it's a powerful time capsule of America at a very specific point in its history, and yet with wars still raging in the world and racial tensions still sadly prevalent, its heartfelt message of peace and hope is still pertinent. ★

21 May 1971: Marvin Gaye in pensive pose during a promotional shoot for *What's Going On*

