

Berry Gordy, Jr.

Biography:



Berry Gordy, Jr., was born on November 28, 1929, in Detroit, Michigan. He was the great-grandson of a slave woman. His father owned several small businesses in Detroit; his mother helped to run a company that sold insurance policies to black customers during a time when it could be difficult for them to become insured.

Gordy had many different jobs as a young man: He worked for his father. He was a professional boxer. He served in the Army during the Korean war, and then came home to Detroit and opened a record shop where he sold jazz records. When the shop failed, he took a job on an assembly line for an auto manufacturer. Eventually, he began pursuing a career as a songwriter.

Gordy was not making much money from his musical work, although he did have some early success. In 1959, he decided to go into business for himself. He borrowed \$800 to start his own record label. (Though he was not the first Gordy to do this—his sister Anna already owned a record company by this time.) All of the operations were based in a house located at 2648 West Grand Boulevard in Detroit, which Gordy dubbed “Hitsville, U.S.A.” When he incorporated his company in 1960, he called it Motown Record Corporation, a name that pays tribute to the city of Detroit, which is known as “Motor Town” for its importance to the auto manufacturing industry.

Soon, Motown was one of the most successful record labels in the country, producing more than a hundred Top 40 hits in the span of a decade.

Role at Motown Records:

Gordy was not only Motown’s founder, but also its leader from the beginning until 1988. He oversaw all of the operations at the label, from music production to artist development to marketing. He knew virtually everyone who worked for the company on a personal basis.



One of Gordy's responsibilities was auditioning new musicians for the label. His ability to spot raw talent was remarkable. He also wanted to ensure that the musicians he hired made a good impression on the public. He insisted that all of the label's musicians receive formal training in singing, dancing, and even etiquette. Gordy himself was often present at recording sessions and could be a tough critic.

Gordy held weekly "quality control" meetings—one of many ideas he borrowed from local auto manufacturers—where members of the Motown staff would evaluate the records being produced by the company before they were released. Any recording not meeting the company's high standards would be rejected. Gordy would ask his team questions like "if you had money only to buy either this record or a sandwich, which would you choose?" His primary concern was whether or not listeners, especially young listeners, would enjoy the songs and want to purchase them.

Quotations:

"At the plant the cars started out as just a frame, pulled along conveyor belts until they emerged at the end of the line—brand spanking new cars rolling off the line. I wanted the same concept for my company, only with artists and songs and records."

"Hitsville had an atmosphere that allowed people to experiment creatively and gave them the courage not to be afraid to make mistakes."

"I broke down my whole operation into three functions: *create, make, sell*. *Create* something, *Make* something and then *Sell* it."