

## Marvin Gaye, “What’s Going On” (1971)

“What’s Going On” began as a conversation between Renaldo Benson, a member of Motown’s Four Tops vocal group, and Al Cleveland, a staff songwriter for the label. While on tour in 1969 in Berkeley, CA, Benson witnessed a violent confrontation between anti-Vietnam War demonstrators and police. Troubled by the experience, he shared his concerns with Cleveland, who turned the vocalist’s impassioned musings into a song. After the Four Tops declined to record the tune, Benson took the composition to another Motown artist, chart-topper Marvin Gaye.



The pairing was well-timed. By 1969, Marvin Gaye had become disillusioned with his status as a pop star. The 1965 Watts Riots in Los Angeles, which was the result of a decades-long strained relationship between the local African-American community and police, had proved a turning point for the singer. Gaye later explained in a 1974 interview: “I remember I was listening to a tune of mine playing on the radio, when the announcer interrupted with news about the Watts riot. My stomach got real tight and my heart started beating like crazy. I wanted to throw the radio down and burn all the songs I’d been singing and get out there with the rest of the brothers. I knew they were going about it wrong, I knew they weren’t thinking, but I understood anger that builds up over years, and I felt myself exploding. Why didn’t our music have anything to do with this? Wasn’t music supposed to express feelings? I wondered to myself, ‘With the world exploding around me, how am I supposed to keep singing love songs?’”

Gaye vowed to stop recording and performing what he considered vapid romantic songs. His disillusionment with the trajectory of his career combined with his consternation about what ailed America led him to rework Benson and Cleveland’s untitled tune. He tweaked the melody and contributed lyrics that represented both his despair and hope for a way out of the apparent darkness. The result was the title track to his next album and it proved to be a hit record and enduring anthem.



### **Lyric Excerpt**

Father, father

We don't need to escalate

You see, war is not the answer

For only love can conquer hate

You know we've got to find a way

To bring some lovin' here today

Picket lines and picket signs

Don't punish me with brutality

Talk to me, so you can see

Oh, what's going on

What's going on

Yeah, what's going on

Ah, what's going on