

History of Motown (High School)

Rationale

This 50-minute lesson is intended to familiarize students with the unique history of Detroit's Motown Records by highlighting the origins of Motown and its founders. Additionally, this lesson challenges students to take an entrepreneurial role in the formation of their own record label by guiding students to think about some fundamental business aspects of running a record label.

Inspiration

"We had the best jazz band in the planet, and yet we were literally starving. That's when I discovered that there was music, and there was the music business. If I were to survive, I would have to learn the difference between the two."

Quincy Jones – Music Producer and Artist

Mastery Objectives

- Students will explore the history of Motown Records and reflect upon obstacles that it might have faced as a business.
- Students will participate in creating an introductory business model for a hypothetical record label of their own.
- Students will evaluate and recognize some of the issues in regards to forming a business.

Standards Addressed

National Standards for Music Education

- Grade 9-12, Music Standard 9
 - Students identify sources of American music genres (e.g., swing, Broadway musical, blues) trace the evolution of those genres, and cite well-known musicians associated with them.

National Standards for History

- ERA 10: CONTEMPORARY UNITED STATES (1968 TO THE PRESENT)
 - Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in contemporary United States

Materials

- Whiteboard or a place to write items for everyone to see.
- Attached article “A Brief History of Motown” by Gilbert Cruz
- Writing materials for students (pen & paper)
- Attached Journal Reflection Activity

Procedures

1. Introduction

Have students come up with a unique name for a hypothetical record label that they are going to start.

Make a list of the label names for the class to see.

Have students come up with a type of music and intended audience for their record labels. Encourage students to think if it’s better to be diverse to have *one* type of music that the label will cater.

To help spark ideas, ask the students the following questions:

- Who will listen to this type of music?
 - Is this music that younger people would listen to? How young? 2 year olds? Teenagers? College Students?
- Will the artists write the music themselves or will you rely on the skills of outside song writers and instrumental musicians?

Have the students brainstorm on where they would find artists to be on their label. Instruct them that professional musicians might not be willing to sign with their label because they are a new company. How might they convince an artist to sign?

2. Context

Write “Hitsville U.S.A.” in a location that everyone can see.

Inform the students that this was a sign placed above the front windows of Motown Records in Detroit and ask

- What this slogan might mean. Also, ask the students whether a slogan like this might help in getting artists to work with their record label.
- What does it communicate to the outside world and to the employees that worked there?

Have the students briefly come up with a short slogan that markets their music to their intended audience and the potential artists that they might want on their label.

While the students are coming up with their slogans, briefly summarize the origins of Motown per the attached Time Magazine article “A Brief History of Motown” by Gilbert Cruz. If wished, give the students a copy for future reading.

Once students have selected slogans, go around the room and have each student announce their record label name, the type of music, their audience and their slogan.

3. Advanced Thinking

Have the students pretend that their record sales have been exceptional and that they now have many people employed for them. In order for their label to continue to grow, they must now branch out to other locations in order to meet the growing demand for their album sales.

Have the students select an additional city in which they will open new offices. Ask students:

- Why they would choose this location
- Is it better to stay in 1 location or is it better to branch out?
- If you select the wrong place and things go poorly there, then what? (Encourage them to think about the employees they may have to let go and/or artists that they may upset and/or lose)
- In the past, records were shipped in physical forms (CDs, Cassesettes, Vinyl Records). Does this still matter or is everything going to be online? (Encourage them to think about what things might be like in 5 years)

Inform the students that Motown eventually grew and moved to Los Angeles in the 1970s. Ask the students:

- Why do they think Motown moved?
- What would they gain by moving to Los Angeles when they were doing well in Detroit?

Have students complete the Journal Reflection Activity.

A Brief History of Motown

By [Gilbert Cruz](#) Monday, Jan. 12, 2009

Above the front windows of Motown Records' Detroit headquarters was a sign that read "Hitsville U.S.A." Placed there by Motown founder Berry Gordy soon after his company moved into the modest home at 2648 W. Grand Blvd, the sign demonstrated Gordy's blazing — and at the time, unearned — arrogance. Then the slogan came true.

Founded on Jan. 12, 1959, Motown quickly became another Detroit factory; where the Big Three produced automobiles, Motown assembled the soul and pop classics that changed America. There's no hyperbole in that statement. Arriving at the height of the civil rights movement, Motown was a black-owned, black-centered business that gave white America something they just could not get enough of — joyous, sad, romantic, mad, groovin', movin' music.

A former boxer and automobile worker, Berry Gordy was a nascent songwriter when, at the urging of Smokey Robinson, a songwriter ten years younger than Gordy, he decided to establish Motown Records. The two had become friends years earlier and Robinson, who was the lead singer of a band called The Miracles, produced, wrote, and sang several of Motown's most memorable hits — including the label's first smash song, "Shop Around" in 1960. A year later, "Please Mr. Postman," by The Marvelettes, was the label's first No. 1 song. It would not be the last.

Over the next decade, the sheer number of chart-topping artists, musicians, and groups produced by Motown defied comprehension: Martha and the Vandellas, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, The Temptations, The Four Tops, Diana Ross and the Supremes, Gladys Knight and the Pips, The Jackson 5, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye. All became part of what would come to be known as the Motown Sound. It is rumored that Gordy modeled his hit factory after the Detroit car assembly line that he knew so well: Make a good product, then make something similar, and make it quick. Over here were the songwriters — Robinson and the team of Eddie Holland, Lamont Dozier, and Brian Holland (Holland-Dozier, Holland, or H-D-H). Over there was the talent — Stevie Wonder, whom the label discovered when he was 11; Marvin Gaye, who wanted so much to be a jazz crooner before he came into his own in the late 60's; and, above all, Diana Ross, whom the label put its stake in early on, and who was told so many times that she was a star that she drove off one of the Supremes before quitting to launch a solo career. In a neglected corner were the session musicians the Funk Brothers, who played on God knows how many hit songs. Let's just say a lot.

So what was the Motown Sound? Great melodies, lots of tambourines and hand clapping, blaring horns, interplay between the lead singer and his or her backup vocalists, driving bass lines and foot-slapping drum parts. In his still essential Motown history *Where Did Our Love Go?* Nelson George writes, "Motown chief engineer Mike McClain built a miniscule, tinny-sounding radio designed to approximate the sound of a car radio. The high-end bias

of Motown's recordings can be partially traced to the company's reliance on this piece of equipment." They knew people would be listening on their car stereos and on their transistor sets and they were going to do what it took to make their songs sound good and memorable. Even if you couldn't put your finger on it, when a Motown song came on, you knew it.

Throughout the Sixties, Motown produced a catalog of songs that cannot be rivaled. "You've Really Got a Hold On Me," "Heat Wave," "Dancing in the Street," "Tracks of My Tears," "Where Did Our Love Go," "My Guy," "My Girl," "Baby Love," "Reach Out, I'll Be There," "I Can't Help Myself," "Get Ready," "Stop! In the Name of Love," "The Way You Do the Things You Do," and so on. They were simple love songs that told simple stories, often in joyously happy or heartbreakingly sad ways. And all the while Motown was the pride of Detroit and the pride of black America (though Gordy tried, with his usual bluster, to make it the "Sound of Young America," a label he began to stamp on all of the company's vinyl).

Around the time of the '67 Detroit riots, however, things changed, as they eventually had to. Gordy looked west, towards Los Angeles (how could such a large entertainment company as his *not* be involved in movies and television?). Dissatisfied with the increasing disconnect between the success of their work and the level of their pay, Holland-Dozier-Holland broke off from Motown. And while the Jackson 5 was on the rise, most of the rock-steady Motown acts of the early '60s were on the wane. In 1971, though, the label released what is arguably its grandest artistic statement, something not at all of a piece with its previous, poppy output. Marvin Gaye put out *What's Going On*, a thoughtful, socially conscious album whose title track Gordy famously called the worst song he had ever heard. A year later, Motown deserted Detroit for L.A. and Stevie Wonder turned 21, thereby taking creative control of his music. Within four years he had released *Talking Book*, *Innervisions*, and *Songs in the Key of Life*.

It was arguably the last great burst of Motown creativity. Gordy, distracted by Hollywood, released two films starring Diana Ross — *Mahogany* and the Billie Holiday biopic *Lady Sings the Blues*. The 80s brought Rick James and Lionel Richie and *The Big Chill* — a white, yuppie film with an amazing Motown soundtrack ("Ain't Too Proud To Beg" was reduced to dishwashing music). By 1988, Gordy had had enough; he sold the company to MCA, which in turn sold it to Polygram, which in turn was bought by Universal. Really, though, who cares who owns it now? Just pop on one of those numerous greatest hits albums in your collection (or, ok, fine, *The Big Chill* soundtrack) and recall the glory of Motown. The music doesn't sound fifty years old at all.

Read more:

<http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1870975,00.html#ixzz1ECN48gFb>

Journal Reflection Activity

1. Why is it important to know your customer before starting any kind of business?

2. When Motown was founded in the 1959, it consisted of mostly African-American artists. What kinds of concerns might the record label have when marketing these artists to mainstream America? (Remember that many parts of the United States were debating social issues – such as race and segregation)

3. Motown relied heavily on in-house song writers to create many of the hit songs. Does it matter if an artist writes his/her own material? Why or why not?