

History of Motown (Middle 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 5-8, Music Standard 9
 - Students describe distinguishing characteristics of representative music genres and styles from a variety of cultures
 - Students classify by genre and style (and, if applicable, by historical period, composer, and title) a varied body of exemplary (that is, high-quality and characteristic) musical works and explain the characteristics that cause each work to be considered exemplary

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.

Ask the students to come up with a list of 10 artists that they like. After the students have completed their list, have each student give 1 artist and write the artist in a location for everyone to see. While making this list, have the students begin to think about the types of music that are being listed (R&B, Rap, Country, Bluegrass, Classical, Jazz, Electronic, Rock, Latin Music, etc...) Notate the artist's style of music by the artists name.

Inform the students that each of these artists are signed to a record label that distributes their music and albums. Ask if any of the students if they know any of the record labels that the artists are signed to. (It's ok if they don't or if responses are incorrect)

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

2. Context & Relevancy Building

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?

Split the room into 4 groups of students. Within each group, assign a student leader that will “pitch” a record label to the class. Also, pick 2 students from each group that will pretend to be an artist of this label.

Assign each of the groups a type of music (use the types of music that were identified from the student responses). Have each of groups come up with a name and a location that they will set up their business. Once names and locations have been selected have the student leader and the 2 selected students come to the front of the class (you can do this 1 at a time or all together – depending on classroom space and teacher preference).

While the students are coming up with their names and locations, 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.

Inform the student leader(s) that they now have to sell their record name, their location choice and their artists to the rest of the class. The other 2 previously selected students should now pretend to be an artist on his label (encourage these students to be outgoing -- have them pick out artist names and to act out their roles) and that the student leader now must pitch these artists to the class.

Have the students complete the attached 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. Was it difficult to come up with a label name and location? Why did your group choose the location you ended up with?

2. Why do you think Motown was founded in Detroit? Is there anything about Detroit's history that might have been helpful in this decision?

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