HOW I GOT OVER (MOTOWN, SOUL, AND THE LEGACY OF GOSPEL ENTREPRENEURIALISM)

Robert Fink

It is the second week of March, 1960. Berry Gordy is in a Midwestern sound studio, tinkering with the sound of The Miracles' new single, "Way Over There," his fledging Tamla label's first national release. Assiduous promotion has made the track a regional hit, and though the record he's pushing is crude, it has the authentic "soul" sound: lead singer Smokey Robinson's high tenor soars achingly over gospel piano, harmony vocals, and hand-claps which evoke the sanctified singing of the black church, charging his I-miss-you-girl lyric with a powerful, almost mystical longing:

I've got a lover way over there on the mountainside
And I know that's where I should be
I've got a lover way over there across the river wide
And I can hear her calling to me . . .

As Gordy will later recall in his autobiography, Robinson's song means a lot to him personally at this moment. It speaks straight to his overpowering drive not for sexual satisfaction (Gordy was, for the time being, a reasonably happy married man) but for wealth, power, and prestige: "For the guy in the song Smokey was singing about, it was where his lover was, but for me 'way over there' was where my dreams were—for Motown, for happiness, for success." Restless ambition has driven Gordy to re-record the song, flying the Miracles to Chicago for a session in a real recording studio, so that he can fix balances and, most importantly, add a sheen of orchestral strings. He is convinced that the track, doing well in regional markets like Philadelphia as well as his hometown of Detroit, could be a national hit if it sounded a little more polished, a little "richer."

Ironically enough, the time it takes to re-record, press, and distribute the new version of "Way Over There" in the spring of 1960 kills its upward momentum; the song never charts. But Gordy's company, Motown, will go on to dominate the charts by combining the strong emotional drive of black religious music with the sophisticated sound of American studio pop, and in so doing, update some well-worn strategies of gospel music pioneers, pointing the way forward for black musical entrepreneurs of the soul era and beyond.

Images of black gospel music often foreground its unworldliness: a small, plain church by the side of a dirt road; impoverished people seeking ecstatic relief from oppressive circumstances; singers, instrumentalists, and congregations aiming to praise God and feel the Spirit, not to make money. But in pre–Civil Rights America, the black church was *the* bastion of middle-class values, its ministers

respected professional and civic leaders. Compared to the indignities of the so-called "chitlin' circuit" (the segregated world of black popular entertainment) or to systematized exploitation in a recording industry run by whites, a career in the gospel music industry offered stability, respect, and the possibility of financial security for musicians with an entrepreneurial bent. To use an African American vernacular phrase with its origins in gospel, singing spiritual songs about "how I got over [the river Jordan]" was also a way to "get over," that is, to succeed financially, in the material world.

Consider the career of Thomas A. Dorsey (1899–1993), the "father of black gospel music." Dorsey, the son of a rural minister and a church organist, served a rough and tumble secular music apprenticeship in the 1920s as "Georgia Tom." (He played with Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and later hit it big as co-author of an infamous dirty blues number, "It's Tight Like That.") But by the early 1930s, Dorsey had become a respectable businessman: he wrote gospel songs, published them through his own publishing company, employed salespeople on commission to sell the song sheets door-to-door, organized gospel choirs and quartets, and in August 1933 became the first president of what was, in effect, a gospel music trade association, the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses. Much of this infrastructure was built on the extraordinary business acumen and drive of an unschooled musical protégé, singer Sallie Martin, who went on to become a respected soloist, composer, and musical entrepreneur in her own right.

Gospel entrepreneurs like Dorsey and Martin created the business model for 1960s soul music. Musically, they harnessed the excitement of "sanctified" musical performance in the Pentecostal church—the moaning, screaming, shouting, foot-stomping, and hand-clapping that pushed worshippers into physical overdrive—to the theatrical polish and musical sophistication demanded in the "old-line" churches of the urban black middle class. Then they channeled that drive toward success as defined by the American middle class, building lucrative black-owned businesses around soul music's explosive mixture of abandon and control.

Almost every major figure in 1960s soul music had some experience in the segregated gospel music industry built by pioneers like Dorsey and Martin. Some, like Sam Cooke, Aretha Franklin, and James Brown, had significant careers as gospel musicians before they entered the world of pop. This legacy, which African American cultural critic Gerald Early, setting the scene for Berry Gordy and Motown, identifies as a black middle-class tradition of "rectitude and cunning bourgeois thrift," was basic to the way soul musicians did business in the 1960s. Soul musicians were more likely than other 1960s pop music performers to insist on tight discipline from band members (James Brown), more interested in controlling their own master recordings and publishing rights (Ray Charles), and more likely to set up their own recording studios and labels (Curtis Mayfield, Stevie Wonder).

Paradoxically, some of the least empowered soul musicians worked for Motown Records, because their employer, Berry Gordy, had so well internalized the gospel recipe for getting (himself) over. Gordy and his family staffed all the key positions at Motown, and with their help, he built and controlled all aspects of a vertically integrated business empire: Motown owned its own studios, controlled the production and manufacturing of records (Tamla, Motown, Soul Records), brokered publishing rights to the songs on them (JoBete Music, Inc.), and handled the management (ITMI) of the performers who sang those songs, on records or anywhere else.

The resulting business structure was, for those not cut in on the action, almost as exploitative as the overt discrimination and theft practiced by white record label owners. The Motown story is filled with ambitious songwriters, producers, and artists who chafed under the paternalistic rule of the company until they realized that they couldn't get over until they got out from under Berry Gordy's thumb. Gordy always professed to be wounded by their ingratitude, but he forgot that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery: the first thing most Motown alumni did after they broke away was attempt to become independent soul music entrepreneurs just like him.

Berry Gordy quickly found out what the success he saw "way over there" looked like up close; by the end of the 1960s, he had already achieved as much as anyone in the record business could dream of. Even at the time, though, voices were raised calling him, and the music he produced, a "sell out." Nothing so determinedly commercial, so clearly constructed, so obviously aimed at financial success, could really be *soulful*, could it? Gordy's genius—and it was a particularly African-American genius—was to understand intuitively that this was precisely the wrong question, framed in terms that might have made sense to countercultural white rebels but had little meaning within mainstream American culture, black or white. "Getting over," in all its multiple meanings, remains a fundamental, highly prized dynamic within the African American community. That drive is in the music: for salvation, for satisfaction,

for success, and ultimately for *R-E-S-P-E-C-T*. Or, as you might have heard it from the pulpit of an African American church in the Civil Rights era:

You can't have *soul* without a *goal. (Can I get an "Amen"?)*

Epilogue: As the 1960s gave way to the 1970s and 1980s, and the economic environment darkened, ghetto entrepreneurialism parted ways with middle-class values. The drive was supplanted by the "grind" and the "hustle," where, as rapper Raekwon of the Wu-Tang Clan put it in 1993, "cash rules everything around me." Many African Americans are now openly nostalgic for the look and sound of the soul music era; what they fail to see is that hip-hop's most famous entrepreneurs are following in the footsteps of Dorsey, Gordy, and the rest. Linking African American music's inner drives to the fierce will to get over, these strivers represent the latest evolution of goal-directed soul.

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