



# MOTOWN 25: CELEBRATION, NOSTALGIA, AND ACTUALITY

by Andrew Flory

On May 16, 1983, a two-hour television special aired on NBC titled “Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, and Forever” that celebrated the music and historical achievements of Motown. With a reputation for creating world-famous stars, nearly 700 charting singles to its credit, and a history of successfully integrating black performers into the mainstream, there was much to admire in Motown’s accomplishments during its first quarter-century. The Emmy-winning program was primarily a tribute to Motown founder Berry Gordy Jr., and it was produced in the style of an awards show. Hosted by comedian Richard Pryor, it featured musical performances, comedy sketches, and choreographed dance segments. The show made it clear that the

company—now officially called Motown Industries—had changed dramatically over time, growing from a Detroit-based record company to a large-scale Los Angeles entertainment corporation that retained little of the character, sound, and personnel of its early years.

The most important performances on the program were by former Motown artists who had left the company for the greener pastures of major labels. Coming just weeks after the peak of “Sexual Healing,” his first hit for Columbia, Marvin Gaye’s performance included a monologue about black contributions to American culture (accompanied by his own piano playing), followed by his 1971 hit “What’s Going On.” The program’s finale included a brief reunion of the Supremes, arguably the most popular Motown group of the 1960s, led by Diana Ross, who had left Motown for RCA Records two years earlier. In a bittersweet thank you to Gordy, Ross acknowledged the many defections from the Motown stable, assuring the audience, “It’s not about the people who leave Motown that’s important, but it’s about the people who come back, and tonight everybody came back.”

One of the most notable performers who came back was Michael Jackson, whose appearance on “Motown 25” remains legendary in the annals of pop music. At the time of the broadcast, his second album for Epic Records, *Thriller*, was in the middle of a record yearlong run at the top of the *Billboard 200* album chart, and he was easily the most popular entertainer in the world. After a reunion of the Jackson 5, the anticipation of a modern-era Jackson song was incredible, extending far beyond the studio audience to include the millions of television viewers. *Thriller* was already a smash hit, but this was the first chance many of Jackson’s fans had to see him perform this material live.

He energetically paced the stage while reminiscing about the old days with Motown and then, symbolically shedding his youthful past, declared his preference for “new songs” and launched into his current hit, “Billie Jean.” It was not the vocal performance of this song that stunned the nation, for the television broadcast featured Jackson lip-synching to his well-known record. Instead, Jackson’s physical presentation took the spotlight.

Donning his trademark sequined white glove and silver socks, his heavily choreographed introduction began with several highly stylized hip thrusts. While the audience screamed, Jackson’s feet constantly moved as he kicked and spun freely, frenetically accompanying the song’s controversial text about fathering an illegitimate child. It was not until the instrumental bridge, however, that Jackson made history by performing his signature dance move—the moonwalk—for the first time. Perhaps more than any other appearance of his career, this five-minute performance helped to define Michael Jackson as the “King of Pop.” But in many ways, it also helped to signify the end of the Motown era.

In hindsight, “Motown 25” was a deeply conflicted undertaking. Subtitled “Yesterday, Today, Forever,” this special highlighted the nearly impossible task that Motown faced during the early 1980s: the need to celebrate the past while trying to remain vital in the present. This was a time of great nostalgic interest in early rhythm and blues, so there was real public interest in Motown’s exploring its own history. However, the company had grown and changed since the 1960s, and after focusing so much on the glory days, “Motown 25” did little to hide the bleak outlook of its

present state. Fewer and fewer Motown acts were cracking the pop charts, and the departure of many of its most successful artists, songwriters, and producers meant the company’s music division was not the juggernaut it had once been. Two of the most successful Motown artists of the time, Lionel Richie and Rick James, did not even attend the live taping, allowing former Motown greats like Ross, Gaye, and Jackson to steal the show.

Although the program was ostensibly a tribute to the musical legacy of the company, the high production value of the show highlighted the fact that Motown was more interested in television and film production than music. Furthermore, the company’s interest in producing music had drifted away from the styles that made it a household name during the 1960s and 1970s. The great Motown backing band the Funk Brothers had been largely forgotten after the company moved to Los Angeles in the 1970s, and “Motown 25” featured an awards show orchestra. The orchestra did little to recapture the early Motown sound while backing the performances of groups like the Four Tops, the Temptations, and the Miracles. In the end, the internal conflict among Motown’s past, present, and future gave way in 1988, when Berry Gordy Jr. made the first of several moves to sell the once fiercely independent company to a major corporate conglomerate. This signaled the end of what was arguably the most successful reign of black ownership in American music history to date.

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