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Marvin Gaye's What's Going On and the Civil Rights Movement: A History and Analysis

Jacob Barnhill

Stephen F. Austin State University, barnhilljc@jacks.sfasu.edu

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MARVIN GAYE'S *WHAT'S GOING ON* AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT:
A HISTORY AND ANALYSIS

By

JACOB CASWELL BARNHILL, Bachelor of Music

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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In Partial Fulfillment

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For the Degree of

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APPROVED:

Dr. Samantha Inman, Thesis Director

Dr. Stephen Lias, Committee Member

Prof. James Adams, Committee Member

Dr. Court Carney, Committee Member

Pauline M. Sampson, Ph.D.
Dean of Research and Graduate Studies

Abstract

Marvin Gaye's first self-produced album, *What's Going On* is a timeless work in American popular music. This thesis illuminates many of the intricacies that went in to the creation of the album and discusses its relevance during the Civil Rights Movement. Chapter 1 provides a background in popular music analysis and the genre of Soul music. Chapter 2 includes a biography of Gaye and a brief history of the Detroit record label known as Motown. The collaboration of musicians and engineers at Motown, along with Gaye's influences from his personal life and music career, had profound effects on the outcome of *What's Going On*. Chapters 3 and 4 provide analyses of individual songs from the album, discussing lyrics, form, harmony, and melody. Chapter 5 discusses the album as a whole by comparing it to a song cycle.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Soul is one of the most influential genres in American popular music. Using style elements from a range of music rooted in the black experience, it provided a voice for a new generation. The genre began gaining popularity in the late 1950s, particularly with Sam Cooke's smooth tenor voice accompanied by common jazz chord progressions.¹ By the early 1960s, several vocal groups, such as The Temptations, The Four Tops, and The Supremes, reached a wider, more diverse audience with the help of the growing Detroit record label, Motown. These groups and many others climbed to the top of the Rhythm and Blues (R&B) and Popular music charts.² Even as many African-American musicians rose to fame, there remained a strong sense of racial injustice in America. As the Civil Rights Movement gained steam in the late 1960s, many African-American musicians were at the heart of it.³ Not only did their lyrics touch on subjects of inequality and injustice, but also the music itself served to unite people around both common grievances and hope.

¹ Craig Hanson Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race and the Soul of America* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 31-32.

² Gerri Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1984), 141.

³ Peter B. Levy, *The Civil Rights Movement* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 10.

Marvin Gaye was an inspirational figure in the fight for justice and equality in America. Throughout the 1960s, Gaye had a successful music career with Motown, recording countless hit songs and touring the racially-segregated United States. By 1970, however, Gaye had begun a solo career in order to write his own material and focus on racial and social injustices he had seen while traveling the country. Channeling the emotion of these experiences into his music, Gaye's first self-produced album, *What's Going On*, became both timeless and complex and holds an important place in American popular music.

There are many books devoted to the history and personal life of Marvin Gaye, including those by Michael Eric Dyson, Ben Edmonds, and David Ritz.⁴ Hardly any research exists, however, that is specifically oriented toward the music itself. This thesis will attempt to show that Gaye's music helped to progress social change and bring people together during a time of cultural and social unrest. An analysis of this album will provide a closer look at the connection between his music and the Civil Rights Movement. The connections become apparent through an analysis of musical form, instrumentation, lyrics, rhythmic and melodic motives, and vocal declamation. My intention is for this

⁴ Dyson provides a lengthy biography discussing the different stages of Gaye's musical career. Michael Eric Dyson, *Mercy, Mercy Me: The Art, Loves and Demons of Marvin Gaye* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004). Edmonds focuses on Gaye's career with Motown, discussing the creation of *What's Going On*. Ben Edmonds, *What's Going On? Marvin Gaye and the Last Days of the Motown Sound* (UK: Canongate, 2001). Ritz conducts many personal interviews tracking the personal life of Gaye. David Ritz, *Divided Soul: The Life of Marvin Gaye* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2009).

analysis to ultimately provide a better understanding of the music from the civil rights era and how the two affected one another. Furthermore, my goal is to show the significance of Soul music in the evolution of music theory and encourage its deeper incorporation within academia.

Popular Music Analysis

Popular music covers a large range of genres, from Jazz to Country to Rock. In order to localize this album to a particular genre, I have narrowed my general analysis to Rock music from the 1950s on. *What's Going On* incorporates many general conventions from this era of popular music. My analysis includes a variety of terms and ideas associated with this repertoire. Using analytical models from David Temperley, John Covach and Mark Spicer, and David Brackett,⁵ I will explore different facets of the music, including form, harmony, and melody.

Form in popular music can be interpreted in different ways but contains some universal characteristics. In general, a song is made up of specific sections

⁵ Temperley tracks Rock music from 1950 to 2000 and discusses commonalities in musical language: form, harmony, melody, and rhythm. David Temperley, *The Musical Language of Rock* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). Covach and Spicer edit a collection of nine essays focusing on popular music analysis. John Covach and Mark Spicer, ed., *Sounding Out Pop: Analytical Essays in Popular Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010). Brackett uses songs from different popular music genres to analyze topics of musical and lyrical analysis. David Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

containing different harmonic, melodic, and lyrical content and is organized in a specific way. The sections are most often labeled as follows:⁶

- Intro – An instrumental lead-in that establishes key and/or rhythmic/melodic motives. Used occasionally.
- Verse – A section that recurs with similar melody and harmony but with different lyrics.
- Prechorus – A section sometimes used before the chorus to build tension and anticipation.
- Chorus – Section usually following the verse with a memorable melody. Uses the same lyrics each time, often incorporating the song's title.
- Bridge – Contrasts verse and chorus, often explores different harmonies, melodies, and tonal centers. Can also be used as an instrumental section (no vocals).
- Instrumental Break – A section often used in between verse, chorus, and bridge. Normally maintains same harmonic progression. Could be used as instrumental solo (most common are guitar, piano, or saxophone).
- Fade-out – A repetitive restatement of the chorus or main hook to end the song.

⁶ Temperley, *The Musical Language of Rock*, 151.

Many popular songs only utilize the verse (A) and the chorus (B), resulting in a repetitive structure, AABAAB or ABABAB. Most commonly, the chorus is repeated at the song's end to emphasize the hook, or the song's main theme. When used, the bridge (C) most often appears toward the end of the song, usually after the second chorus in order to provide melodic/harmonic contrast and to anticipate the final statement of the chorus. A commonly used song form with a bridge section is ABABCB. The prechorus typically builds anticipation before the satisfying chorus melody, using faster harmonic rhythm and/or more rhythmically intricate lyrics. Intros are often used as a set-up for the song's overall sound while a fade-out section provides a final restatement of the hook.

Harmony in popular music is often very simple and diatonic. Many popular songs incorporate harmonic movement between the predominant (ii or IV), dominant (V), and tonic (I). A frequent progression found in Rock is (I – V – IV – I). Another common progression in popular music (I – vi – ii – V – I) was frequently used in many genres of popular music, including Jazz, Rock, and Soul (Figure 1.1). Modulation does occur in popular music, but is usually restricted to closely related keys. Extended chords were more common in Jazz harmony but carried over into other genres as well. Finally, an important feature in popular music harmony is the mixture of Ionian and Aeolian modes within a song. Especially found in Rock and Soul, minor-mode chords (bIII, bVI, and bVII) are

incorporated into songs with major keys. This allows the melody to move seamlessly between notes from the major and minor scales.

Figure 1.1: Common harmonic progressions in popular music.
Sam Cooke's "You Send Me" (1957)

The image shows a musical score for Sam Cooke's "You Send Me" in G major, 12/8 time. The first staff contains the first two lines of the melody with lyrics "Dar-ling you send me I know you" and chord symbols G, Em, Am, D7, G, Em. The second staff contains the next two lines of the melody with lyrics "send me Dar-ling you send me Hon-est you do, hon-est you do" and chord symbols Am, D7, G, Em, Am, D7, G. Roman numeral notation (I, vi, ii, V7) is placed below the lyrics to indicate the scale degrees of the chords.

One of the most important aspects in popular music is the melody. Given that limited harmonic progressions exist, the melody is what distinguishes one song from another. As mentioned above, melodies in the chorus are often more memorable than in the verse. Many features are attributed to this, including stepwise motion and sustained notes in the chorus melody. Another aspect associated with melody is the singer's vocal declamation. In order to portray certain emotions within the music, singers would often use non-pitched sounds including bends, growls, shouts, and grunts. These factors are strongly tied to African-American genres like the Blues. Temperley discusses melodic grouping,

melodic rhythm, and the division between melody and harmony in Rock music.⁷ Melodic grouping uses ideas from common practice music, including sentence structures and melodic contours. Melodic rhythm includes topics of rhyming and parallel periods. The “melodic-harmonic divorce” is a common feature in popular music in which the melody is free from the bounds of the underlying harmonic progression. These ideas are easily transferrable to my analysis of *What’s Going On*, considering the close relation between Soul and Rock.

Soul Music

These general traits of popular music apply to Soul, Marvin Gaye’s preferred genre. Set securely in American popular music history, the genre of Soul/R&B contains a vast array of stylistic features. The genre’s popularity peaked in the 1950s through 1970s, allowing Soul musicians to utilize style elements from a vast array of genres. With musical influences from Jazz, Gospel, and the Blues, Soul can be defined as a collaboration of styles. Nicholas Tawa writes, “Soul music has customarily been linked to the singing in the black church, and can be taken as a fusion of gospel and rhythm and blues and as a vehicle for expressing the growing feeling of black pride.”⁸ Gospel music was one of the most prominent influencers of Soul. The expressive vocal style (shouts,

⁷ Temperley, *The Musical Language of Rock*, 87.

⁸ Nicholas Tawa, *Supremely American, Popular Song in the 20th Century: Styles and Singers and What They Said About America* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 194.

growls, harmonizing back-up vocalists) is a key component to the genre's popularity. Soul musicians also utilize one of the most pronounced features found in Gospel music, "call-and-response." Craig Werner describes call-and-response as follows:

An individual voice, frequently a preacher or singer calls out in a way that asks for a response. The response can be verbal, musical, or physical—anything that communicates with the leader or the rest of the group. The response can affirm, argue, redirect the dialogue, raise a new question ... But, both in its political contexts and in its more strictly musical settings, call and response moves the emphasis from the individual to the community, from the present predicament to the ongoing tradition.⁹

Werner spoke of how "the artists during the Civil Rights Movement were responding to the call of their social reality."¹⁰ Finally, the composition of the music itself was often much more complex than the other popular genres of the time. Modal mixture, unexpected harmonic progressions, and complex rhythms are frequently found in Soul music. Overall, the music contains a variety of interesting musical elements, and analyses will illuminate the strong connection to the songs' messages. The lyrics, however, can only be understood with an in-depth view of the social and historical context.

In order to analyze Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, I will first provide some historical context in Chapter 2. A brief biography of Gaye will show his

⁹ Craig Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race and the Soul of America* (New York: Plume, 1999), 8.

¹⁰ Craig Werner, phone interview with author, November 2, 2017.

musical background and some of his strongest influences. A quick overview of 1960s Detroit and the Civil Rights Movement will provide a setting for the album. Finally, a history of Motown and some of the vital musicians associated with it will illuminate the collaborative spirit surrounding the album's creation.

After gaining some historical context, the remaining chapters turn to analysis of the album. Chapters 3 and 4 will analyze two songs from the album, "What's Going On" and "What's Happening Brother," respectively. The purpose of these analyses is to discuss the unique musical happenings and how each amplifies the messages in the lyrics. Both songs present specific qualities in regards to form, harmony, and melody. As this music is only available in recorded versions, I will be using my own transcriptions of these songs. Full transcriptions can be found in Appendices A and B, while annotated segments of these transcriptions will be strategically placed throughout each chapter. Finally, Chapter 5 will discuss the album as a whole, using unifying themes within the lyrics and music. The connections within the music and lyrics will be illuminated through comparisons of the song cycle in common practice music.

CHAPTER 2

A History of Marvin Gaye and the Creation of *What's Going On*

Marvin Gaye and Motown

Soul singer Marvin Gaye was an important voice for the African-American community and the Civil Rights Movement. His talents as a musician and composer helped Gaye achieve national recognition, which caused his powerful lyrics to reach a diverse audience across the country. With a passionate voice, Gaye sang songs with messages of love, peace, and understanding. More importantly, however, Gaye touched on many issues plaguing American society in the late 1960s, including the unjust treatment of African Americans, race riots, the Vietnam War, and poverty, among many others. The music propelled the lyrics even further with memorable melodies, genre fusion, and appeal to a wide audience. The music itself helped define the sound of African-American culture, drawing on influences from predominantly African-American genres. This chapter explores Marvin Gaye's biography and influences, particularly those that led to his 1971 album, *What's Going On*.

Early Career

Marvin Pentz Gaye Jr., like many other African-American musicians, was raised in the church. As the son of a strict evangelical pastor, Marvin was often involved in church activities, most importantly the choir. It was here, as a young man, where Gaye learned both to control his tenor voice and the intricacies of harmonization.¹¹ These musical tools were extremely important to Gaye's style and would go on to be vital in the outcome of his renowned album, *What's Going On*.

Gaye was a natural musician with an advanced ear and was quick to learn new instruments, including the piano and percussion.¹² His diverse musical abilities would have monumental effects on his solo studio sessions later in his career. Another crucial element from the church that stuck with Gaye was the effect of call-and-response. Gaye used this feature in many aspects of his music, including echoing in the background vocals and instrumental lines. The effect of call-and-response was also present in the lyrical contexts, almost as a metaphor to the social situation of the time.¹³ In other words, Gaye was using his art as a means of commentary and recognition. As a young, aspiring African-American

¹¹ David Ritz, *Divided Soul: The Life of Marvin Gaye* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2009), 27.

¹² Ben Edmonds, *What's Going On? Marvin Gaye and the Last Days of the Motown Sound* (UK: Canongate, 2001), 18.

¹³ Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 44.

musician in a racially heated country, Gaye had the background and the talent to present his calling to the world in a way that had never been done before.

After moving from Washington, D.C., to Chicago in 1959, Gaye began his musical career singing with the Doo-Wop group, The Moonglows. The four-man group recorded several singles for Chess Records, including “Ten Commandments of Love.”¹⁴ This slow, Doo-Wop ballad featured call-and-response vocals where the soloist sang the melody and the other members responded with well-balanced harmony. Performing with The Moonglows had profound effects on Gaye’s vocal style and on his ear for harmonization. Gaye absorbed many compositional tools from singing in a Doo-Wop style, including the balance of four-part harmony. While performing with the group, many people noticed Gaye’s unique voice and raw musical talent. These included Motown founder and CEO, Berry Gordy Jr., and Motown musician/producer, Walter Gaines. Gaines at one point remarked on how “[Gaye] was singing first tenor and had a great harmony voice, but he also had a presence that stood him out from the rest of the group ... he always had ambitions to be a pop vocalist, the complete entertainer like Nat Cole. He would always strive for perfection.”¹⁵ After discovering Gaye in 1960, Gordy offered him a job as a musician for Motown, changing both of their careers forever.

¹⁴ Edmonds, *What’s Going On*, 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 59-60.

Marvin Gaye had many talents as a singer and instrumentalist, but his unique style of composition was one of his greatest qualities. As Gerri Hirshey describes, “Self-containment was the key to Marvin Gaye’s musical growth from the time he began producing his own work. He’d sit down in a studio full of instruments and play nearly all of them himself. He recorded them, layer by layer, with the improvisations of a vocalist and the solid, canny basics of a natural percussionist.”¹⁶ Gaye was an extremely capable and versatile musician, which ultimately led to his understanding of the intricacies of composition. Though he had no classical training as a composer, he had an excellent sense of how each instrument/voice should interact with one another. Hirshey writes that “if Marvin Gaye did not possess the beauty and virtuosity of Sam Cooke’s voice, he had a greater inventiveness as a composer and arranger. What his vocal expression lacks in pure quality and range, it makes up for in its idiosyncratic expression.”¹⁷ This expressive vocal style, combined with his ability to play several instruments, opened Gaye up to a number of opportunities.

Motown

Based in Detroit, Motown was an up-and-coming business in the early 1960s comprised of a wide variety of talented African-American musicians.

¹⁶ Gerri Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1984), 217.

¹⁷ Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run*, 217.

Detroit was a fast-paced, growing metropolis that offered opportunities to people of all races in a time of racial discrimination. As Detroit's largest employer, the automotive industry drew massive numbers of minorities, predominantly from the South, to the city. Some lucky few of these minorities would find their way to the recording studio at Motown (also known as "Hitsville, U.S.A"), which became an outlet for African-American musicians to gain success in the music business. Fittingly, Berry Gordy Jr. ran his business quite similarly to the assembly line style of the auto industry. Every musician, producer, engineer, and songwriter had his or her distinct place in the business. This is also true of the incredible studio musicians, affectionately known as the Funk Brothers, who would be imperative to the success of *What's Going On*.¹⁸

Marvin Gaye began as a background vocalist and session drummer for Tamla Records, a subsidiary of Motown, but went on to hold many positions in the business. His skills as a vocalist, percussionist and pianist can be heard in several hit singles, including "Stubborn Kind of Fellow" (1962), "How Sweet It Is To Be Loved by You" (1964), and "I Heard It Through The Grapevine" (1968).¹⁹ Throughout the 1960s, Gaye recorded several albums with Tamla (Figure 2.1) and embarked on many national tours singing catchy love songs. Gaye would not continue down this path, however, as he had much bigger plans with his music.

¹⁸ Gerald Early, *One Nation Under a Groove: Motown and American Culture* (New Jersey: Ecco Press, 1995), 138.

¹⁹ Arnold Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America: From the Spirituals, Minstrels, and Ragtime to Soul, Disco, and Hip-Hop* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1986), 225.

Figure 2.1: Marvin Gaye Discography, 1960-1970

Album	Label	Year
The Soulful Moods of Marvin Gaye	Tamla	1961
That Stubborn Kinda Fellow	Tamla	1963
Marvin Gaye: Recorded Live on Stage	Tamla	1963
When I'm Alone I Cry	Tamla	1964
Marvin Gaye and Mary Wells: Together	Motown	1964
Hello Broadway	Tamla	1964
A Tribute to the Great Nat King Cole	Tamla	1965
How Sweet It Is To Be Loved By You	Tamla	1965
Moods of Marvin Gaye	Tamla	1966
Marvin Gaye and Kim Weston: Take Two	Tamla	1966
In The Groove	Tamla	1968
That's The Way Love Is	Tamla	1969
M.P.G.	Tamla	1969

Gordy's handling of Motown operations pointed less to a concern with social issues and more concern with profit. The music, written and performed by young African Americans, was marketed to both white and black audiences. Many musicians were forced to take etiquette classes and perform for segregated audiences.²⁰ Arnold Shaw writes, "In short, the Gordy design was to take black elements and use them to build a black audience base, but also to

²⁰ Craig Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race and the Soul of America* (New York: Plume, 1999), 27.

flavor them so that records would cross over into the white market.”²¹ This helped Motown gain revenue and popularity, but many criticized the business for undermining African-American culture. Werner writes, “Motown resisted its artists’ desires to create more socially explicit music until it became clear that politics, too, could pay.”²² Toward the end of the decade, several Motown musicians, including Stevie Wonder and Diana Ross, began vocalizing their concerns by performing politically heated songs. It was not until *What’s Going On*, however, that a full album from Motown was devoted to social, cultural, and political issues.

The Creation of *What’s Going On*

When it comes to the inspiration for *What’s Going On*, Gaye remarks, “I work best under pressure and when I’m depressed. The world’s never been as depressing as it is right now. We’re killing the planet, killing our young men in the streets and going to war around the world. Human rights, that’s the theme.”²³ To fully understand the meaning behind this album, it is imperative to know the historical context of the time in which it was created. The 1960s had become a time for change and revolution in America. Young people especially were dissatisfied with the social and cultural norms set in place by previous

²¹ Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America*, 224.

²² Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come*, 27.

²³ Edmonds, *What’s Going On*, 153.

generations. Several movements were created and mobilized to fight for equality, including the Civil Rights and Women's Rights movements. People protested America's involvement in the Vietnam War and decried the rising casualties of young men in a foreign war. These protests would, at times, turn into riots, causing the death toll on American soil to rise as well. As Ben Edmonds describes:

The shootings of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy had hit [Gaye] hard. The violence in the streets of Detroit in '67, the streets of Chicago during the Democratic National Convention in '68, and on a grassy knoll at Kent State University in 1970 seemed like eruptions of insanity. Seeing a man walk on the moon when there was unaddressed economic desperation within two miles of his own home was not at all inspirational; it was surreal and depressing. What the hell was going on?²⁴

Several musicians of the time understood these feelings of inequality and injustice, and many became inclined to bring these issues to light in their music. Some African-American musicians were more defiant with their lyrics (Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come," Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddamn"). Marvin Gaye, however, approached the racial and social issues in *What's Going On* with a more hopeful outlook. Though upset, he preached the message of love and understanding while shedding light on issues plaguing American society. Mary Ellison writes, "[Gaye] never mentioned revolution, but he questioned every aspect of the American dream and indicated its self-evident failure in his probing

²⁴ Edmonds, *What's Going On*, 116.

lyrics ... [*What's Going On*] was a single and an album that made people question every unproven political assumption that confronted them."²⁵ While spreading a positive message of love to the American people, Gaye was fueling the fire within them to fight for their civil liberties.

What's Going On is considered to be one of Gaye's greatest musical achievements. The timeless album is still held in high regard, with *Rolling Stone* magazine naming it in 2004 the "sixth best album ever recorded."²⁶ A drastic change from the normal output of Motown, *What's Going On* was groundbreaking on several levels. Though the business was successful, Marvin Gaye was unsatisfied with the system Gordy had created. Songs were written to be chart-topping singles, not for the purpose of a synergetic album. Most records that emerged from Motown were designed, for the most part, as a collection of singles. There was no room for artists' creativity as most of the songs were written by hired writers, hand selected for a specific singer or group, and sent through quality control by several producers and Gordy himself. The studio at Motown was successful for this reason, but Gaye knew he had much more to say in his music. Gaye told biographer David Ritz:

²⁵ Mary Ellison, *Lyrical Protest: Black Music's Struggle Against Discrimination* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 67.

²⁶ Rolling Stone, Last modified May 31, 2012, Accessed February 23, 2018. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/500-greatest-albums-of-all-time>.

I screamed my head off about artistic control. And for most of the time I had the feeling I was screaming alone. Finally, in 1969, when 'I Heard it Through the Grapevine' went through the roof ... I thought to myself: Why? Why go on being led? I knew there was more inside me. And that was something no record executive or producer could see. But I saw it. I knew I had to get out there.²⁷

Gaye possessed the vision and the musical talent, but he did not achieve this greatness alone. Several musicians, writers, arrangers, and engineers were crucial to the creation of this groundbreaking album.

Renaldo Obie Benson, a member of the Motown group The Four Tops, began writing the lyrics to "What's Going On" while touring in San Francisco. Benson had witnessed police officers brutally beating young, nonviolent protesters, many of them African American. This inspired the singer to ask what was going on in the world. Benson presented the song idea to The Four Tops, who rejected it for being a protest song. If he could not perform the song with his own group, Benson knew the man for the job.²⁸

Marvin Gaye had recently achieved immense success with the Motown single "I Heard It Through the Grapevine." He had also been on a performing hiatus after his duet partner, Tammi Terrell, suffered from a brain tumor. At first struggling to get Gaye back in the recording studio, Benson eventually convinced him to perform the song. The lyrics were completed through a collaboration

²⁷ Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run*, 215.

²⁸ Edmonds, *What's Going On*, 96.

between Benson, Gaye, and another Motown musician, Al Cleveland. As Benson describes:

Marvin definitely put the finishing touches on it ... He added lyrics, and he added some spice to the melody. He fine-tuned the tune in other words. He added different colors to it. He added some things that were more ghetto, more natural, which made it seem more like a story than a song. He made it visual. He absorbed himself to the extent that when you heard that song you could see the people and feel the hurt and pain.²⁹

Gaye made the song his own by adding a personal style and creative expression to the music and lyrics. Inspired by the song, Gaye continued to write music and lyrics for the remainder of the album. Many others, however, would also contribute to this album.

The next, and possibly most important, factor to the success of *What's Going On*, were the Motown studio musicians dubbed the Funk Brothers. All prominent members in the Detroit Jazz scene, these musicians came from a variety of musical influences. First under the leadership of pianist Joe Hunter and then pianist Earl Van Dyke, the members include guitarists Robert White and Joe Messina, keyboardist Johnny Griffith, percussionists Jack Ashford, Eddie "Bongo" Brown and Jack Brokenshaw, and bassists Bob Babbitt and James Jamerson.³⁰ The latter was arguably one of the most dominant forces in the "Motown Sound."

²⁹ Edmonds, *What's Going On*, 97-98.

³⁰ Gerald Early, *One Nation Under a Groove: Motown and American Culture* (New Jersey: Ecco Press, 1995), 145.

Jamerson's bouncy bass lines functioned simultaneously as harmonic foundation and as a countermelody, which stood out against the simple, repetitive bass lines in '50s and '60s pop music. His background of performing in Jazz ensembles was extremely present in *What's Going On*. An example of Jamerson's melodic, full-range bass lines can be seen in Figure 2.2. The syncopated rhythms keep the song interesting while the percussionists maintain a steady groove. Jamerson's influences, however, also ranged outside of Jazz. In an interview, Jamerson said, "My feel was always an Eastern feel, a spiritual thing ... I've been around a whole lot of people from the East, from China and Japan. Then I studied African, Cuban, and Indian scales. I brought all that with me to Motown."³¹ James Green, an engineer who helped record the album remembers Jamerson and his style of bass playing: "He'd be the first one to look at the chart, play a few notes, get it down. Then he'd already be into variations on the part while the others were still figuring out the basic chart. Not only could he play it, he understood what it was trying to say."³² Jamerson was an integral part of this group but the interactions between every member are what made the music sound so seamless.

³¹ Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come*, 20.

³² Edmonds, *What's Going On*, 165.

Figure 2.2: Example of technical proficiency in Jamerson's bass line, "What's Going On," mm. 37-44

The image displays a musical score for the song "What's Going On" by Marvin Gaye, focusing on the bass line and melody from measures 37 to 44. The score is written in E major (three sharps: F#, C#, G#) and 4/4 time. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system covers measures 37-40, and the second system covers measures 41-44. The top staff is labeled "Melody" and the bottom staff is labeled "Bass".

System 1 (Measures 37-40):

- Measure 37:** Melody has a whole rest. Bass has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes: E4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4.
- Measure 38:** Melody has a whole rest. Bass continues the eighth-note pattern: E4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4.
- Measure 39:** Melody has a whole rest. Bass continues the eighth-note pattern: E4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4.
- Measure 40:** Melody has a whole rest. Bass continues the eighth-note pattern: E4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4.

System 2 (Measures 41-44):

- Measure 41:** Melody has a whole rest. Bass has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes: E4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4. Chord marking: C#m7.
- Measure 42:** Melody has a whole rest. Bass has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes: E4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4. Chord marking: E maj7.
- Measure 43:** Melody has a whole rest. Bass has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes: E4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4. Chord marking: E maj7.
- Measure 44:** Melody has a whole rest. Bass has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes: E4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4. Chord marking: E maj7.

Lyrics:

- Verse: Mo - ther, mo - ther eve-ry-bo - dy
- thinks ... we're wrong
- Oh, but who are they to judge us?
- Sim-ply 'cause our

After having played together for almost a decade, each member in the Motown backing band could anticipate what the others would do next. Recording *What's Going On* was a breath of fresh air for these creative musicians as it was the first Motown record where they were encouraged to stray from the "Motown Sound" and improvise using their own unique styles. This was also the first record to give recognition to the musicians on the album cover. Marvin Gaye sang lead and background vocals, played the piano, and acted as writer and producer for the album, but the Funk Brothers created the ambiance of a truly collaborative work.

If the Funk Brothers were the ingredients to the recipe, then David Van DePitte was the chef. Van DePitte worked as an arranger for Motown throughout the 1960s and '70s. Van DePitte helped Gaye to convey what he envisioned in his head and connected the music in ways that progressed the story-telling theme. By incorporating lush strings and orchestral winds, Van DePitte was able to elevate this album to a genre-bending composition. Using classical orchestral string arrangements amidst music influenced by Jazz and Gospel created a unique blend of genres. Quoting Van DePitte, Pierre Perrone explains, "The way the tunes were laying, they were little stories, and it just felt that one should flow into the next," explained DePitte, who suggested the musical bridges between the tracks proved important in unifying the album's themes."³³ This style of arranging was an important factor in the song-cycle aspect of the album that I will later explore in greater detail in Chapter 5. The arranger also served as conductor for the orchestra; therefore, Van DePitte remained close to the music from its conception to the physical recording. The studio hired the talented members of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra to perform on the album. Van DePitte received a Grammy nomination for his orchestral compositions and arrangements on this album.

³³ Pierre Perrone, "David Van DePitte: Arranger of Marvin Gaye's epochal album 'What's Going On,'" *Independent*, (September 2009), Accessed September 6, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/david-van-depitte-arranger-of-marvin-gayes-epochal-album-whats-going-on-1786174.html>.

With the help of many talented people from Motown and beyond, Gaye created an album that has remained a classic in popular music. *What's Going On* was a collaborative effort but would not have been such a monumental success without the musical mind of Marvin Gaye. From his call-and-response technique learned in the church to his natural instincts of harmonization, Gaye used his array of influences to create an original album. The Funk Brothers and arranger David Van DePitte helped fuse the record into a well-functioning work of art. After listening to the album in its entirety, its beauty lies within meaningful lyrics and the sophisticated music that accompanies them.

CHAPTER 3

An Analysis of “What’s Going On”

The opening song, “What’s Going On,” was the main inspiration for the entire album. The music is strongly linked to past African-American genres, including Jazz, Gospel, and the Blues. This connection to other genres helped unify the African-American culture around common musical aspects, which in turn created a stronger sense of black identity and pride. Through an analysis of form, harmony, and melody, these musical connections will be illuminated throughout the chapter. The most important elements found in this song are the more peculiar ones. Extended chords, an unusual harmonic departure, and strategically placed moments of party chatter add some contrast to the otherwise standard song. Another important area is the underlying string orchestration by David Van DePitte. The melody within certain orchestral sections is woven throughout the album, working to create musical cohesion. This, along with unifying messages in the lyrics, helps connect the album’s production and intent to the hopeful call by civil rights activists for social equity.

Beginning with both a melodic saxophone intro and background vocalists emulating party chatter, “What’s Going On” tells the story of a Vietnam veteran returning from war. The soldier, who has seen so much death and destruction,

returns to America only to see his own country suffering from violence and brutality. With lyrics like, “Brother, brother, brother, there’s far too many of you dying,” and “War is not the answer, for only love can conquer hate,” the singer protests America’s involvement in the war and its unjustified deaths and violence. However, the lack of specificity in his lyrics — “war” in general rather than the Vietnam War specifically — allows Gaye to link the foreign war with America’s own social war. His lyrics create a fluid space between the two battles, asserting that only love can end the Vietnam War and heal the African-American community.³⁴ As the song continues, other social issues are addressed, including police brutality and the act of peaceful protest. To fully understand the poignant messages within the album, there must be an in-depth view of the lyrics of “What’s Going On.”

Lyrics

Renaldo Obie Benson of the Motown group The Four Tops began writing lyrics to “What’s Going On” after witnessing a peaceful protest that ended in violent police brutality. After Benson gave him the song to record, Gaye was given full creative control of the lyrics.³⁵ An outline of the lyrics and their meaning

³⁴ Scott Sigmund Gartner and Gary M. Segura, “Race, Casualties, and Opinion in the Vietnam War,” *The Journal of Politics* 62, no. 1 (2000): 117, Accessed February 18, 2019. www.jstor.org/stable/2647600.

³⁵ Ben Edmonds, *What’s Going On? Marvin Gaye and the Last Days of the Motown Sound* (UK: Canongate, 2001), 97.

provides a deeper understanding of the song's connection to the Civil Rights Movement (Figure 3.1). The lyrics discuss issues of war and police brutality, but also calls for action by the way of peaceful protest.

The first verse introduces some of the themes later explored in greater detail as the album progresses. The lyrics incorporate the subject of family by beginning each phrase with a different family member – “mother, brother, father.” Gaye pleads for a solution to the violence of war with the line, “You know we’ve got to find a way to bring some lovin’ here today.” Spreading love and understanding is a recurring message in the song and will remain a central theme throughout the album. In the second verse, the singer proclaims war is not the answer and suggests peaceful protest with the idea that only love can conquer hate. Gaye then repeats the final line from verse 1 – “You know ... here today” – furthering the importance of love within the context of the album.

The lyrics in the chorus depict classic protest symbolism, “Picket lines, and picket signs.” As it occurred in Benson’s experience, the protest is interrupted when Gaye rhythmically states “Don’t punish me with brutality.” The chorus attempts to provide a solution to the violence through a call for communication (“talk to me”).

Figure 3.1: “What’s Going On,” Lyrics and Topics

Lyrics	Topics
<p>Verse 1: Mother, mother / There’s too many of you crying. Brother, brother, brother / There’s far too many of you dying. You know we’ve got to find a way / To bring some lovin’ here today.</p>	<p>Family Unjust deaths in Vietnam war</p>
<p>Verse 2: 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.</p>	<p>Main theme: Love can conquer hate</p>
<p>Chorus: Picket lines, and picket signs / Don’t punish me with brutality. Talk to me so you can see / What’s goin’ on / Yeah, what’s goin’ on / Ah, what’s goin’ on.</p>	<p>Peaceful protest Communication</p>
<p>Verse 3: Mother, mother / Everybody thinks we went wrong. Oh, but who are they to judge us / Simply ‘cause our hair is long? You know we’ve got to find a way / to bring some understanding here today!</p>	<p>Younger generation is oppressed but hopeful</p>
<p>Chorus: Picket lines, and picket signs / Don’t punish me with brutality. Come on talk to me so you can see / What’s goin’ on / Yeah, what’s goin’ on / Tell me what’s goin’ on / I’ll tell you what’s goin’ on.</p>	<p>Affirms that “what’s going on” is a statement rather than a question</p>

The final verse brings back some familiar lyrics from verse 1, “Mother, mother ...” but approaches new issues as well. Gaye asks the question, “Who

are they to judge us simply 'cause our hair is long?" Long hair, specifically in 1960s and '70s African-American culture, was associated with rebellion, pride, and empowerment.³⁶ The verse concludes with the repeated but slightly altered line, "We've got to find a way to bring some understanding here today." A subtle difference from the first verse, the word "love" is replaced with "understanding." As seen in Figure 3.1, the second chorus contains some added lyrics, which affirm the song's title is in fact a statement, not a question ("I'll tell you what's going on").

The lyrics in "What's Going On" tell a story of racial injustice, the brutality of war, and attempt to provide a solution: for people to open their eyes to these injustices and strive to communicate, love, and understand one another. These include some of the main themes in the album, which are addressed in different ways in the remaining songs. Now, with a deeper understanding of the lyrics, an analysis of form, harmony, and melody will illuminate the song's meaning and relationship to the Civil Rights Movement.

Form

The form of "What's Going On" amplifies the messages within the lyrics. Gaye and orchestral arranger David Van DePitte organize the sections in unique

³⁶ Anthony Synnott, "Shame and Glory: A Sociology of Hair," *The British Journal of Sociology* 38, no. 3 (1987): 398, Accessed February 18, 2019. www.jstor.org/stable/590695.

ways and connect each section with multi-layered vocals and instruments.

Though he uses conventional songwriting techniques as discussed in Chapter 1,

Gaye presents the song in a unique way to enhance the storytelling theme.

Figure 3.2 summarizes the form of the song. By strategically placing party chatter and solo material (Fontaine’s saxophone intro and Gaye’s vocal scattling) at the beginning (Intro), middle (Bridge), and end (Bridge/Fade out), the song weaves in and out of consciousness, so to speak. The two bridge sections also explore different modes, further contrasting with the vocalized sections. The party chatter could be interpreted as a metaphor for community. Interlaced between moments of violence and hatred, the community can offer much needed respite from social turmoil and play an important role in connecting society.

Figure 3.2: Form of “What’s Going On:” AABCABC

0:00	0:21	0:49	1:18	1:41	2:09	2:38	3:01
Intro	Verse 1 (A)	V2 (A)	Chorus (B)	Bridge (C)	V3 (A)	Chorus (B)	Bridge(C)
<i>Party chatter</i>	Mother, mother There’s too...	Father, father We don’t...	Picket lines And picket...	<i>Party chatter</i>	Mother, mother Everybody...	Picket lines And picket...	<i>Party chatter</i>
E: I - -	: I vi : ii V	Same as V1	: ii V : I vi	iv - - - - V	Same as V1	Same as 1 st Chorus	iv - - - -

Rather than ending on the catchy chorus melody, “What’s Going On” concludes with the more unstable harmony of the bridge. This focuses attention on the album as a whole, rather than the single itself. Ending with a chord other than the tonic denies the listener resolution and creates an unstable feeling. This provides an opportunity to seamlessly flow into the next song, furthering the concept of the song cycle.

The form of “What’s Going On” is representative of the struggle African Americans were going through during the Civil Rights Movement. The messages of injustice and inequality are brought to light in each verse. The chorus depicts the act of peaceful protest and communication but also discusses the brutality occurring in the Vietnam War and within America’s own system of justice. The bridge represents the masked, unstable feeling in America’s fragile society. This unstable section is presented in the middle and again at the end of the song, resulting in an unresolved feeling of discomfort that implies permanence. This feeling will be resolved as the album continues, but the song itself attempts to show the constant struggle in the fight for civil rights.

Harmony

Similar to many pop songs, “What’s Going On” contains a repetitive harmonic progression. The verse and chorus revolve around the familiar diatonic chords (Imaj7 – vi7 – ii7 – V7). Jon Fitzgerald discusses this common harmonic

trend in Soul music, “[There were] links to gospel tradition and a preference for repetitive chord sequences, as well as sensitivity to the smooth, stepwise instrumental voicings inherent in such progressions. This liking for recurring sequences extends beyond these songs featuring prominent rhythmic/choral motifs.”³⁷ The verse uses diatonic chords with added sevenths in this well-known progression (Figure 3.3A).³⁸

Figure 3.3A: Verse harmonic progression

Roman Numerals	: I maj7 // vi7 // : ii7 // V7 //
Jazz symbols	: Emaj7 // C#m7 // : F#m7 // B7 //

This twelve-bar section explores a characteristic pattern of “tonic-to-non-tonic,” which is indicative of an open structure.³⁹ In an open structure, the harmony constantly moves away from the tonic, slowly building intensity. The chorus, however, turns the harmony on its head (Figure 3.3B). Rather than repeating the tonic-to-submediant progression (Imaj7 – vi7), the harmony in the chorus builds on the dominant.

³⁷ Jon Fitzgerald, “Motown Crossover Hits 1963-1966 and the Creative Process,” *Popular Music* 14, no. 1 (1995): 7, Accessed February 3, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org.steenproxy.sfasu.edu>: 2048.

³⁸ Most popular music harmony is annotated by lead sheet or jazz symbols (B7). In my analysis, I also use Roman Numerals (V7) in order to show chord function and progression.

³⁹ David Temperley, *The Musical Language of Rock* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 163.

Figure 3.3B: Chorus harmonic progression

Roman Numerals	: ii7 V7 : (3X) : Imaj7 vi7 :
Jazz Symbols	: F#m7 B7 : (3X) : Emaj7 C#m7 :

The repetition of predominant leading to dominant (ii7 – V7) can be viewed as a prolongation of the dominant, which eventually resolves when Gaye sings the lyrics “What’s goin’ on.” While the verse moves from tonic to dominant, the chorus uses the pattern “non-tonic-to-tonic,” which results in a satisfying closed structure. The harmonic rhythm becomes slightly faster, changing chords every measure, rather than every other measure. With the increased harmonic rhythm and the inclusion of background singers, the chorus has an increased energy level. Temperley discusses this phenomenon: “Choruses typically feature a higher level of energy activity than verse—in terms of vocal register, instrumental texture, and implied loudness.”⁴⁰ These techniques are used frequently throughout the album in order to intensify the messages within the choruses.

The most interesting aspect of the harmony, however, is presented in the section following the chorus. In the bridge, where party chatter replaces melody and lyrics, the harmony borrows from the parallel minor and sustains an Am chord, or iv. The A minor melody in the string section increases in volume and

⁴⁰ Temperley, *The Musical Language of Rock*, 170.

range and is reinforced by the bass pedal. The temporary shifting from the E Ionian mode to the E Aeolian represents the mindset of the confused and disoriented Vietnam veteran (Figure 3.4). The suddenness of this modal change along with the added textures of background singers, Gaye's scating, and the orchestral melody reinforce the contrast between the bridge and the rest of the song.

Figure 3.4: Modulation from Chorus to Bridge in "What's Going On," mm. 21-28

The musical score for "What's Going On" (measures 21-28) is presented in E major. The score is divided into two systems, each with a Melody line (treble clef) and a Bass line (bass clef). The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#).

System 1 (Measures 21-24):

- Measure 21: Melody: "Talk to me"; Bass: "Talk to me"; Chords: F#m7, E.
- Measure 22: Melody: "so you can see"; Bass: "so you can see"; Chords: B7, V7.
- Measure 23: Melody: "ooh...what's go-in' on"; Bass: "ooh...what's go-in' on"; Chords: Emaj7, Imaj7.
- Measure 24: Melody: "what's go-in' on yeah what's"; Bass: "what's go-in' on yeah what's"; Chords: C#m7, vi7.

System 2 (Measures 25-28):

- Measure 25: Melody: "go-in' on aah... what's"; Bass: "go-in' on aah... what's"; Chords: Emaj7, Imaj7.
- Measure 26: Melody: "go-in' on?"; Bass: "go-in' on?"; Chords: C#m7, vi7.
- Measure 27: Melody: (Strings); Bass: (Strings); Chords: Am, iv.
- Measure 28: Melody: (Strings); Bass: (Strings); Chords: Am: i.

After eight measures in the disoriented haze of party chatter, the harmony returns to the original key by stepping up to the dominant of the original key, B7. The resolution of the tonic (Emaj7) occurs when Gaye begins the third verse

using familiar lyrics, “Mother, mother ...” After the final verse, the chorus is repeated and returns to the A minor bridge section. The song easily transitions without pause to the following song, “What’s Happening Brother,” using the same chord.

As I have mentioned previously, Gaye employs Jazz harmonies throughout this album in a variety of ways. While extended chords were quite uncommon in most Motown hits, “What’s Going On” utilizes seventh and ninth chords throughout the entire song (Figure 3.3A and B). Another similarity with the genre is the instrumentation. The guitar and piano establish the harmonic progression using syncopated rhythms and extended chords. The rhythm section (bass and percussion) keeps a constant groove with strong accents on beats 2 and 4. The horn section (trumpets, trombones, saxophones) plays a major role in both Jazz and this album. Finally, Gaye’s vocal style, specifically the scatting section in the bridge, is reminiscent of past Jazz singers. The genre had a strong influence on Gaye, and style elements resurface in a variety of ways as the album continues.

Melody

Eli Fontaine’s improvised saxophone melody begins the song and provides an excellent set up for the overall sound (Figure 3.5). The melody revolves around the seventh and ninth scale degrees. The rhythm is syncopated,

but the melody remains smooth and connected. Not represented in the transcription are the bends (or rising microtonal lead-ins), which are applied to each long note. This technique can be heard in Gaye's vocal style throughout the song as well.

Figure 3.5: Saxophone intro to "What's Going On," mm. 1-4



Gaye's vocal style and range in "What's Going On" is quite diverse. The song begins in Gaye's soft mid-range but as it goes on, his intensity grows. In the chorus, Gaye sings in a higher register with a rougher texture. Then, in the bridge, Gaye hovers above the mix with a smooth falsetto. These different levels in Gaye's voice offer him a variety of intensity and range. As I have noted earlier, however, there are other melodies present within the instrumentation, specifically in the bass line. James Jamerson's bass line is a melodic interpretation of the harmonic foundation. At certain points within the melody, Gaye's vocal line and Jamerson's bass line match rhythmically and melodically (Figure 3.6). It is

noteworthy that these matches are at the beginning of each sub-phrase, resulting in a more unified sound.

Figure 3.6: Vocal and bass melodies in Verse 1 of “What’s Going On,” mm. 5-12
 *Boxed notes signify when notes match rhythmically/melodically.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the first verse of "What's Going On." Each system consists of a vocal melody line (treble clef) and a bass line (bass clef). The key signature is E major (three sharps: F#, C#, G#). The first system is labeled "Verse" and "E maj7" above the staff. The lyrics are "Mo - ther, mo - ther - there's too ma - ny of you cry - in'". The second system is also labeled "E maj7" and "C#m7" above the staff. The lyrics are "Bro - ther, bro - ther, bro - ther there's far too ma - ny of you dy - in'". In both systems, several notes in the vocal and bass lines are enclosed in rectangular boxes, indicating where the notes match rhythmically or melodically. The boxes are placed around the first notes of the phrases "Mo - ther, mo - ther", "Bro - ther, bro - ther, bro - ther", and "there's too ma - ny".

Another interesting melodic feature occurs in the chorus (Figure 3.7). The vocal melody ascends to the C# with each repetition. However, when Gaye sings the hook, “What’s goin’ on,” the pitches descend to the tonic, E. This could be an indication that the phrase, “What’s goin’ on” is not asking a question, but rather it is making a statement. The second chorus confirms this with the words, “I’ll tell you what’s going on,” as noted earlier in the lyrical analysis.

Figure 3.7: Vocal melody in the Chorus of “What’s Going On”, mm. 17-24

The image displays a musical score for the chorus of "What's Going On" by Marvin Gaye, measures 17-24. It consists of two systems of music, each with a vocal melody line and a bass line. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The first system covers measures 17-20, and the second system covers measures 21-24. Chord annotations (F#m7, B7, Emaj7, C#m7) are placed above the melody line. The bass line includes annotations for passing tones (PT) in measures 18, 19, and 21. The lyrics are written below the vocal line.

System 1 (Measures 17-20):

- Measure 17: Melody: F#m7, Bass: PT
- Measure 18: Melody: B7, Bass: PT
- Measure 19: Melody: F#m7, Bass: PT
- Measure 20: Melody: B7, Bass: PT

System 2 (Measures 21-24):

- Measure 21: Melody: F#m7, Bass: PT
- Measure 22: Melody: B7
- Measure 23: Melody: Emaj7
- Measure 24: Melody: C#m7

Lyrics:

Pi-cket lines and pi-cket signs Don't pun-ish me with bru - ta-li-ty
 Talk to me so you can see ooh what's go-in' on what's go-in' on yeah what's

This section also contains a busier bass line. Jamerson includes non-chord tones such as the G naturals in m. 18 and the C natural passing tones in mm. 17, 19, and 21. The bass line is also much more rhythmically active until it reaches the half note in m. 23. These effects are implemented to build intensity to the peak of the chorus.

The melodic rhythm is one of the most prominent characteristics of Gaye’s vocal style. His syncopated entrances are reminiscent of Jazz and Blues singers. As exemplified in the chorus melody (Figure 3.8) the word “what’s” always occurs on the up beat of 4. This anticipatory statement of the song’s title could imply a sense of Gaye’s urgency in addressing social issues of the time.

Figure 3.8: Upbeat entrances in the Chorus of “What’s Going On”, mm. 21-26

The image shows a musical score for the chorus of "What's Going On" in A major. The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The melody is written on a treble clef staff. Above the staff, chord changes are indicated: F#m7, B7, E maj7, C#m7, E maj7, and G#m7. Arrows point from these chord labels to the corresponding notes in the melody. Below the staff, the lyrics are written: "Talk to me so you can see ooh what's go-in' on what's go-in' on yeah what's go-in' on aah what's go-in' on".

Another important melodic element not illustrated in the transcription is the background vocals. Gaye recruited help from the female Motown singers, The Andantes, and even some members from the NFL’s Detroit Lions to simulate the party chatter throughout the song.⁴¹ Gaye can also be heard as a background singer displaying “dazzling virtuosity by overdubbing (building sound track by track onto a single tape) his own voice three or four times to provide his own rich harmony, a technique he would employ for the rest of his career.”⁴² The melody written in my transcription is more present in the mix, but his backgrounds accent certain sections by adding different harmonies and rhythmic variations.⁴³

One of the most important melodic lines in this song is presented in the bridge. The string section plays a legato melody in A minor (Figure 3.9). Similar to the opening saxophone line, the string melody highlights the seventh and ninth scale degrees. In the Am chord the seventh scale degree is G (mm. 32 and 34)

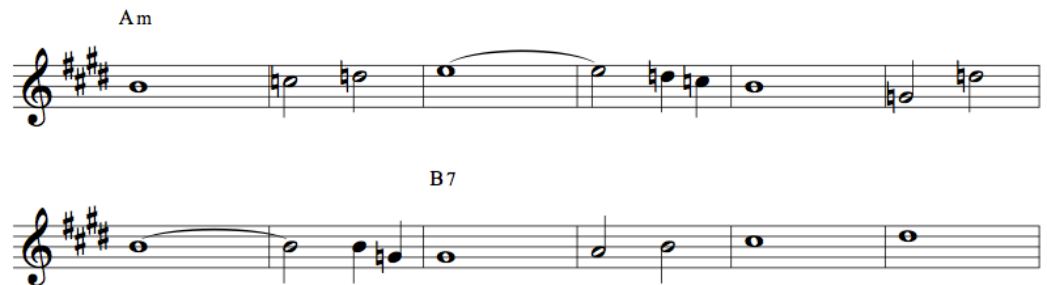
⁴¹ Michael Eric Dyson, *Mercy, Mercy Me: The Art, Loves and Demons of Marvin Gaye* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 64.

⁴² David Ritz, “Marvin Gaye,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Accessed January 14, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marvin-Gaye>.

⁴³ Edmonds, *What's Going On*, 67.

and the ninth scale degree is B (mm. 27, 31, 33, and 34). Given what we know of the historical context within which the song was written, this minor melody could be interpreted as Gaye's attempt to allude to a looming presence of injustice in America. The same melody reappears several times throughout the album, working to thread an apprehensive theme throughout.

Figure 3.9: String melody in the Bridge of "What's Going On," mm. 27-38



Conclusion

"What's Going On" employs a variety of musical gestures to accompany evocative lyrics. A slightly unorthodox layout of the form within the song enhances the story line of the Vietnam veteran while also addressing the broader topic of the social injustices occurring in 1960s America. The harmonic progression is reminiscent of another predominantly African-American genre, Jazz. This nod to the past could be Gaye's way of implying the issues addressed

throughout the album, such as racism and inequality in America, have not changed as much as they may appear. Finally, with the help of Van DePitte, Gaye uses a memorable melodic line in order to tie the full album together. With all of these musical tools, he is able to portray the flawed state of American society while offering hope for a better future. As the album continues, more subjects are addressed, and the music that accompanies them instills a paradoxical sense of anger and hope.

CHAPTER 4

An Analysis of “What’s Happening Brother”

The second song on the album, “What’s Happening Brother,” continues Gaye’s exploration of social instability and utilizes a variety of complex formal and harmonic structures to articulate its message. The form is constructed in a unique way with the inclusion of asymmetrical phrases and a variety of sections, such as a prechorus, an instrumental break, and a four-bar coda. The harmonic progression bounces between different tonal areas and avoids tonic resolution. The melody utilizes the chromatic scale and highly syncopated rhythms. The combination of these complex musical elements contributes to the song’s overall message of tension, confusion, and anxiety within American society.

I have chosen to analyze this particular song for its abnormalities and unusual composition as a commercial pop song. A strong rebellion from the normal output of Motown, “What’s Happening Brother” incorporates chromatic melodies, unstable tonal centers, and asymmetrical formal structures. A brief lyrical analysis continues the storyline within the album. As the formal and harmonic structures are more complex, more time will be devoted to these sections. Finally, a section on melody will include topics of Gaye’s syncopated entrances, vocal declamation, and chromatic lines.

Lyrics

Marvin Gaye wrote the lyrics to “What’s Happening Brother” with the assistance of Motown songwriter, James Nyx. Gaye approached this song through the eyes of his brother, Frankie Gaye, while Nyx applied his poetic writing skills to enhance the story line. Frankie, who served three years in the Vietnam War, sent his brother many letters of the horrors he had seen while away at war.⁴⁴ With the lyrics, “War is hell, when will it end? When will people start getting together again,” the subject protests the war and longs for a united, peaceful society. Gaye addresses the issue of poverty with the line, “Money is tighter than it’s ever been.” The lyrics and their meaning are outlined in Figure 4.1.

Unlike the statement of “What’s going on” in the first song, Gaye uses this song’s title to ask the question, “What’s happening?” Nearly every line in the song is a question, invoking a sense of confusion and uncertainty. The song tells the story of a man returning from and been changed by war. The violence he experienced abroad forces him to approach American society with a new outlook. He sees the same issues of poverty and brutality in America as those he witnessed abroad and asks if “things are really getting better.” The subject faces many difficulties upon returning home with lyrics like “Can’t find no work, can’t

⁴⁴ Edmonds, *What’s Going On*, 113.

find no job.” Gaye subtly connects the first two songs in the prechorus by embedding the phrase “what’s going on” within the lyrics.

Figure 4.1: “What’s Happening Brother,” Lyrics and Topics

Lyrics	Topics
Verse 1: Hey baby, what you know good? I’m just getting back, but you knew I would. War is hell, when will it end? When will people start getting together again?	Protests war Encourages community
Verse 2: Are things really getting better / like the newspaper says? What else is new my friend / besides what I read?	Questions the positivity after seeing wartime
Prechorus: Can’t find no work, can’t find no job my friend. Money is tighter than it’s ever been. Say man, I just don’t understand / What’s going on across this land.	Hardships for returning veterans “Land” refers to America Poverty
Chorus: Ah, what’s happening brother? Yeah, what’s happening?	Reiterates previous subjects
Prechorus 2: Are they still getting down / Where we used to go and dance? Will our ball club win the pennant? Do you think they have a chance? And tell me friend / How in the world have you been?	Uses distractions of normal society to forget perils of war Reaches out to friends/community
Chorus 2: What’s happening brother? I wanna know what’s in. What’s happening brother?	Reiterates previous subjects
Coda: What’s been shakin’ up and down the line? I wanna know ‘cause I’m slightly behind the times.	Tries to re-assimilate to American society

An important message is approached in the section following the chorus. As Michael Dyson notes, “When they focus on what their subject wants to catch up on – dance spots, the baseball team’s pennant chances, social trends – Gaye and Nyx underscore an awful effect of war: it disrupts life and robs one of the pleasures and distractions that others take for granted.”⁴⁵ After a second repetition of the chorus, the subject attempts to immerse himself back into society once more by interrupting with, “What’s been shakin’...” The lyrics in “What’s Happening Brother” portray the struggles of a veteran returning from war, while also questioning the dysfunctional society to which he has returned.

Form

The form of “What’s Happening Brother” is composed in an interesting way, specifically regarding phrase structure and non-repetitive harmonic progressions (Figure 4.2). The twelve-bar introduction sets the tempo and groove of the song. The two verses following the intro are strangely independent of one another, as it pertains to melody and harmony. By exploring different tonal areas and altering the melody, verses 1 and 2 share few similarities. After the second verse, a prechorus is introduced before the statement of the chorus. The differences between the prechorus and chorus are based on their complexities.

⁴⁵ Michael Eric Dyson, *Mercy, Mercy Me: The Art, Loves and Demons of Marvin Gaye* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 64.

The prechorus incorporates faster harmonic rhythm and a more rhythmically active melody, while the chorus contains the title in the lyrics, a simple melody, and a slower moving harmonic rhythm. Another way the prechorus builds anticipation is by utilizing an asymmetrical phrase, containing only seven measures. This asymmetrical phrasing combined with constant harmonic shifts results in an unstable feeling surrounding the chorus. This seems appropriate as the lyrics in the chorus repeatedly ask, “What’s happening?”

Figure 4.2: Form of “What’s Happening Brother”

0:00	0:29	0:49	1:09	1:26
Intro	Verse	Verse	Prechorus	Chorus
Ahh... (12 mms.)	Hey baby... (8 mms.)	Are things... (8 mms.)	Can't find... (7 mms.)	What's happenin'... (4 mms.)
Am: i9 - - / Bbm: i9	Cm: V7/V - V7 - i7 - - / Eb: vi7 - V7/V - ii7 - V7	Ab: ii7 - vii - I - - / Eb: vi7 - V7/V - ii7 - V7	Eb: V7 - - - / iv7 - iii7 - vi7	IVmaj7 - V7
1:36	1:53	2:03	2:27	
Prechorus	Chorus	Instrumental break	Coda	
Are they... (7 mms.)	What's happenin'... (4 mms.)	*instrumental* (10 mms.)	What's been... (4 mms.)	
Eb: V7 - - - / iv7 - iii7 - vi7	IVmaj7 - V7	Ab: Imaj7 - - - - -	Abm: i7 - - -	

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the first chorus in a pop song generally moves to another verse or bridge. This song strays from the norm, however, and moves directly into another prechorus. By using the same asymmetrical structure as before, the overarching structure becomes balanced. The seven-bar phrase followed by a four-bar phrase (eleven measures) is repeated, resulting in a symmetrical structure.

Following the second chorus, a ten-bar instrumental break is included, featuring the background singers and Jamerson's active bass line. In most cases, the song would either fade out or simply come to an end on this stable harmony. However, the song ends with an abrupt modal change (Ab major to Ab minor) and a new melody in a four-bar coda. With the unusual phrase length and odd placement of sections, this song contains an unconventional formal structure. The second half of the song contains more unique elements: a back-to-back prechorus-chorus section comprised of asymmetrical phrases, followed by a key change, instrumental break, modal shift and a coda.

In a broader sense, the form could be interpreted as ternary, or ABA (Figure 4.3). The intro and verses 1 and 2 make up the first section of the song (A), using a constant shift in tonal areas. The bass line and background singers are featured in the intro and Gaye's syncopated melody takes over in the two verses. The repeated prechorus-chorus section (B) establishes a more stable tonal center, Eb, and creates a symmetrical phrase using asymmetrical sub-

phrases. The instrumental break and coda return the song to the harmonic instability of the beginning (A), with a key change and modal change. As in the first section, the bass line and background singers are featured in the instrumental break and Gaye’s syncopated melody returns to end the song.

Figure 4.3: Overarching formal structure, “What’s Happening Brother”

A	B	A
Intro / Verse 1 / Verse 2	: Prechorus / Chorus :	Instrum. break / Coda
Unstable key areas Am – Bbm – Cm – Eb – Ab	Establishes key Eb -----	Key chg. – modal chg. Eb → Ab → Abm

Harmony

“What’s Happening Brother” is much more chromatic than most pop songs from this era. Several unexpected movements also can be found in the harmony. The key modulates twice before the melody enters. The two verses toy with tonality by constantly changing tonal areas. The song avoids tonic resolution and concludes with an unexpected modal change. This unpredictability in the music could be viewed as a metaphor for what the veteran is thinking as he returns to see his own country in disarray. Like the avoided tonic resolution, the subject continues to ask questions but never receives an answer. Figure 4.4 contains a harmonic reduction.

Figure 4.4: “What’s Happening Brother” harmonic reduction

Intro	Chord: Am9 - - - - - Bbm9 - - - RN: Am: i9 Bbm: i9
Verse 1	D7 – G7 – Cm9 - - Cm7/F – F7 – Fm7 – Bb7 Cm: V7/V – V7 – i9 Eb: vi7 – V7/V – ii7 – V7
Verse 2	Bbm7 – Gdim7 – Abmaj7 - - Cm7/F – F7 – Fm7 – Bb7 Ab: ii7 – viidim7 – Imaj7 Eb: vi7 – V7/V – ii7 – V7
Prechorus	Bb7 - - - - Abm7 – Gm7 – Cm7 Eb: V7 iv7 – iii7 – vi7
Chorus	Fm9 - - Bb7 - - ii9 – V7
Prechorus	Bb7 - - - - Abm7 – Gm7 – Cm7 Eb: V7 iv7 – iii7 – vi7
Chorus	Fm9 - - Bb7 - - ii9 – V7
Outro	Abmaj7 - - - - - Ab: Imaj7
Coda	Abm7 - - - Abm: im7

One of the more interesting aspects in this song is the idea of an absent tonic. Though there are brief instances of implied tonics in verses 1 and 2, the tonal center is never stabilized. Once the key of Eb is finally established in the prechorus, the song never resolves to the tonic chord of Eb. Mark Spicer discusses this phenomenon in popular music:

Songs with an absent tonic, an extreme case in which the promised tonic chord never actually materializes. In each of these scenarios, the composer’s toying with tonality and listener’s expectations may be considered hermeneutically as a means of enriching the song’s overall message.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Mark Spicer, “Fragile, Emergent, and Absent Tonics in Pop and Rock Songs,” *Music Theory Online* 23, no.2 (2017), Accessed September 13, 2017. <http://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.17.23.2/mto.17.23.2.spicer.html>.

The absent tonic in “What’s Happening Brother” certainly adds to the overall meaning of the song. A man returns home from war but finds another place entirely. Though there are several instances of the predominant-to-dominant progression, the tonic is constantly avoided.

The harmony constantly evolves throughout the song and incorporates extended chords in order to create a wider range. As seen in Figure 4.4, the harmony in the introduction is composed of minor ninth chords, resulting in an expanded harmonic texture. Beginning in the key that ended “What’s Going On,” “What’s Happening Brother” establishes the A minor chord in the first eight measures. As soon as the song seems comfortably established in this key, the harmony moves a step up chromatically, modulating to Bb minor. Just four measures in this key, the song modulates once more to C minor to begin the verse. This uncertain harmonic movement in the intro could be seen as foreshadowing for the unstable, constantly moving harmony in the sections that follow.

Because of the constant fluctuation in tonal centers, the harmony in verses 1 and 2 is by far the most intriguing. An outline of tonal areas in these verses can be seen in Figure 4.5. Verse 1 begins in the key of C minor. This is established with the progression (V7/V – V7 – i7). With this common predominant-dominant-tonic progression, the harmony implies C minor as the new tonal center. In the second half of verse 1, however, the song seems to

tonicize the relative major, Eb. With the progression (vi7 – V7/V – ii7 – V7), the implication is that there will be a resolution to the tonic, Eb. The second verse, however, denies any hope for a tonic chord. The progression that begins verse 2 (ii7 – viidim7 – Imaj7) tonicizes the key of Ab major. The second half of verse 2 transitions back to the key of Eb, using the same progression from verse 1. With a change in tonal centers occurring every four measures, the music sounds somewhat indecisive.

Figure 4.5: Verse 1 and 2 tonal areas

	First half		Second half	
Verse 1	Cm: V7/V-V7-i7	Establishes key: Cm (relative minor) Tonic resolution	Eb: vi7 - V7/V - ii7 - V7	Establishes key: Eb No tonic chord
Verse 2	Ab: ii7-viidim7-I	Establishes key: Ab (IV) Tonic resolution	Eb: vi7 - V7/V - ii7 - V7	Establishes key: Eb No tonic chord

The prechorus tonicizes Eb by sustaining the dominant (Bb7) for four measures. The three measures that follow use a descending harmonic progression to accompany the chromatic walk-down in the melody. The progression (iv7 – iii7 – vi7) has a dark tone by utilizing the borrowed (iv7) chord followed by consecutive minor chords. The chorus lasts only four measures and

brings back the familiar predominant-dominant progression. With a G in the melody, the first measure of the chorus has the appearance of a ii9 (Fm9). The bass line ascends the scale to the Bb (V7). Once again, however, the resolution is avoided.

The absent tonic in these sections causes the second iteration of prechorus and chorus to build even more tension. Using the exact same harmonic progressions, the second iteration is expanded upon with a more rhythmically intense melody. In the instrumental break following the second chorus, the Ab is tonicized. The Abmaj7 chord is sustained for ten measures, resulting in temporarily stable tonic, reminiscent of the Am tonic chord in the intro. The coda, however, disrupts this stability with a modal shift from Ab Ionian to Ab Aeolian. The modal change at the end of the song is reminiscent of the Picardy third in common practice music.

The rapid harmonic rhythm, constant key changes, and avoidance of tonic resolution result in feelings of tension, instability, and confusion. These feelings are consistent with the lyrics and the overarching storyline of the Vietnam veteran. The constantly changing tonal center in the verses is accompanied by chromaticism in the melody. The unique structure of the repeated prechorus-chorus section builds on the dominant and affirms Spicer's definition of "absent tonics." The emotions hinted at within the lyrics are purposely balanced with this unique harmonic progression.

Melody

The melody in “What’s Happening Brother” seems to accompany the instability found in the formal structure and harmonic progressions. There are some consistencies in melody, such as Gaye’s syncopated entrances and the repetitive chorus melody. There are, however, far more inconsistencies such as the melodic differences between each section. With the constantly changing tonal areas, the melody travels seamlessly between different keys. Gaye’s vocal declamation and syncopated entrances add to the feeling of instability. The chromatic movement within the melody arises in the verse and prechorus sections and is accompanied by borrowed chords in the harmony. These factors are combined to create an uncomfortable sound that mimics the lyrics.

Syncopation, a common rhythmic feature in Soul music, is often used to create tension until a significant arrival point on a downbeat. In “What’s Happening Brother,” Gaye uses syncopation in an interesting way. Almost every vocal entrance occurs one sixteenth rest after beats two or four. This rhythmic feature is quite appropriate for the subject of the song, with the lyric, “I’m slightly behind the times.” The few times the melody enters on a downbeat, however, the lyrics seem to have more meaning. In verse 1, for instance, Gaye sings the line “war is hell” on the downbeat of m. 17, creating a stronger emphasis on the lyric (Figure 4.6). Notice the next entrance in the same measure, (“when will it end?”) does not occur on a downbeat. The questioning nature of this lyric is accented by

the slight hesitation in the rhythm. The only other non-syncopated entrances in the song occur in the second prechorus (Figure 4.7). As discussed in the lyrical analysis, this section had significant meaning regarding the effects of war on returning veterans. The rare instances of downbeat entrances in the song add to the effectiveness of these specific lyrics.

Figure 4.6: Rhythmic entrances in Verse 1, “What’s Happening Brother,” mm. 14-19

The musical score for Verse 1 of "What's Happening Brother" (measures 14-19) is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a Melody line (treble clef) and a Bass line (bass clef). The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: "— you know good? I'm just gett-in' back but you knew I would War is — hell, when will it end? When — will pe-ople start".

Chord changes are indicated above the melody line: G7 (measures 14-15), Cm9 (measures 16-17), Cm7/F (measures 18-19), F7 (measures 20-21), and Fm7 (measures 22-23). Arrows point to specific rhythmic entrances in the melody line: one at the start of measure 16, one at the start of measure 18, and one at the start of measure 22.

Figure 4.7: Strong beat entrances in Prechorus, “What’s Happening Brother”
mm. 38-44

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with a Melody line (treble clef) and a Bass line (bass clef). The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The first system is marked with a $B\flat 7$ chord. The lyrics are: "What's happ-enin?" and "Are they still — get-tin down". A downward arrow points to the first strong beat entrance in the melody at the start of the second measure of the second system. The second system continues the lyrics: "— where we — used to go and dance?" and "Will our ball — club win — the". A second downward arrow points to the first strong beat entrance in the melody at the start of the second measure of the third system. The third system is marked with an $A\flat m 7$ chord. The lyrics are: "pen - ant, do ya think they have a chance?" and "And tell — me friend,". The bass line features a consistent rhythmic pattern of eighth notes throughout the prechorus.

An important factor of the melody lies in Gaye’s vocal declamation, which helps to amplify the storyline in a variety of ways. As he did in “What’s Going On,” Gaye recorded separate vocal tracks and interlaced them. These separate tracks provide different versions of the melody, resulting in an ambiguous interpretation. Gaye also uses voice fluctuations in order to emphasize certain points in the melody. For example, in m. 45, while holding a non-chord tone (F)

Gaye uses wide vibrato to subtly move back and forth between F and G, the fifth scale degree of the chord (Figure 4.8). This movement between non-chord tone and chord tone could be viewed as balance between stability and instability in the subject.

Figure 4.8: Voice fluctuation in Gaye's vocals, mm. 45-47

The musical score for Gaye's vocals, measures 45-47, is presented in G minor. Measure 45 features a Gm7 chord and the lyrics "how in the world have you". Measure 46 features a Cm9 chord and the lyrics "been?". Measure 47 features an Fm9 Chorus chord and the lyrics "What's happ-eninbro - ther? I". The vocal line shows a wide vibrato on the note "been?".

Chromatic melodic lines in both vocals and bass of “What’s Happening Brother” represent tension. The harmony accompanies the chromatic movement in the melody by using borrowed and extended chords. The first instance of this is found in the introduction as the key modulates up a step chromatically. However, verses 1 and 2 showcase the extensive use of chromatic movement in the melody. The vocal melody in verse 1 begins on an F# and descends chromatically following a leap within the chord (Figure 4.9). The bass line also implements chromatic movement in the same measure. Outlining a D7 chord, Jamerson uses C# as a passing tone between the seventh and the root. As the

song continues, more chromatic movement surfaces in Gaye's vocal melody. In a descending chromatic pattern from Bb to F, the melody utilizes the seventh and third scale degrees of the accompanying harmony (Figure 4.10A).

Figure 4.9: Chromaticism in Verse 1, "What's Happening Brother," mm. 11-13

The image displays a musical score for the first three measures of Verse 1 from the song "What's Happening Brother." The score is written in a key signature of two flats (Bb and Eb) and a common time signature. It consists of a vocal line in the treble clef and a piano accompaniment in the bass clef. Measure 11 begins with a vocal line containing a whole note chord and a piano accompaniment of eighth notes. Measure 12 continues the piano accompaniment with a chromatic descending line. Measure 13 features a vocal melody with the lyrics "Hey ba - by What" and a piano accompaniment with a chromatic descending line. Chord symbols "D7" and "PT" are indicated above and below the notes in measure 13.

Figure 4.10A: Descending chromatic melody, “What’s Happening Brother,” mm. 16-21

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with a vocal melody line and a piano accompaniment line. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats).

- System 1:** The vocal melody begins with the lyrics "knew I would". A bracket labeled "Descending Chromatic Melody" spans the notes C4, B3, A3, G3, F3, E3, D3. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line. A chord change to C^{m7}/F is indicated above the second measure.
- System 2:** The vocal melody continues with "War is ___ hell, when". The piano accompaniment includes a chord change to F⁷ (marked with a natural sign) and then F^{m7}.
- System 3:** The vocal melody concludes with "gett-in to-ge - ther a - gain?". A chord change to B^{b7} is indicated. The system then transitions to "Verse 2" with the lyrics "Are things ___ real - ly". The piano accompaniment continues with a consistent harmonic texture.

Another instance of a descending chromatic scale occurs in the last three measures of the prechorus. As it occurs in the verse, the harmonic progression accompanies the chromatic melody, descending from B^{b7} – A^bm⁷ – G^{m7} – C⁷.

The melody begins on C and descends chromatically to B^b. (Figure 4.10B).

Remaining consistent with the beginning of the song, Jamerson uses a chromatic passing tone in m. 34. The chromatic descents in both melodic and harmonic

lines evoke a sense of helplessness in the song's subject, ultimately leading to the question, "What's happening brother?"

Figure 4.10B: Descending chromatic melody, "What's Happening Brother," mm. 32-35

The image displays a musical score for the song "What's Happening Brother" in B-flat major, measures 32-35. The score is written in a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The time signature is 4/4. The melody is characterized by a descending chromatic line. The lyrics are: "— it's ev - er been. Say man I just don't un - der - stand what's go - ing on ac - ross this land Aah—". The score includes chord symbols: Bb7 above measure 32, Abm7 above measure 33, Gm7 above measure 34, and Cm7 above measure 35. A "Chromatic walkdown in harmony/melody" annotation is placed above the staff between measures 32 and 33. A "PT" (pedal point) marking is present in the bass line of measure 34. The bass line features a consistent eighth-note accompaniment pattern.

These rhythmic and melodic elements serve to advance the story line and remain stylistically consistent with the formal and harmonic structures in the song. Though syncopation is common in many genres of music, the use of it in "What's Happening Brother" is unique regarding the consistency of syncopated entrances and the strong lyrical moments on downbeats. Gaye's vocal declamation portrays a sense of confusion and urgency. Finally, the extensive

chromaticism creates a tense environment that matches the story presented in the lyrics.

Conclusion

Possibly the most musically unique song on the album, “What’s Happening Brother” is arguably one of the first staunch rebellions against the “Motown sound.” Asymmetrical phrase structures, unstable tonal centers, and chromatic melodies all contribute to the defiance against the formulated pop songs Gaye was once required to perform. These unique features are certainly the product of Gaye’s mind, but the musical contributions made by the Funk Brothers, Van DePitte’s orchestration, and the sound engineers are indisputable in the completed product. The music accompanies the story of an uncertain veteran returning to his dysfunctional country. The questions in the lyrics are mimicked by the indecisive tonal centers and chromatic harmony and melody.

CHAPTER 5

What's Going On, The First Song Cycle of Soul

Chapters 3 and 4 provide close analyses of two selected songs. The placement of certain sections, like the party chatter in “What’s Going On” and the indecisive tonal areas in “What’s Happening Brother,” contribute to the unique sound of the album. The influences and collaboration that went into the making of the album creates a sound specific to the African-American community. Broadening in scope, this chapter identifies musical and lyrical relationships that work to connect the album as a whole. Through comparisons of the nineteenth-century song cycle, the overarching formal and thematic connections strengthen the analysis of *What’s Going On*.

In her book, Laura Tunbridge argues *What’s Going On* is the first Soul concept album.⁴⁷ A concept album, such as *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* by The Beatles, features a cycle of songs “structured around a predetermined musical or lyrical (or sometimes iconographic) idea.”⁴⁸ This album structure, normally found in Rock music, shares traits with the song cycle in common practice music. Reoccurring thematic, harmonic, and melodic ideas are

⁴⁷ Laura Tunbridge, *The Song Cycle* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 180.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

common in both concept albums and song cycles. The main difference between the two, however, is the authorship. A single composer, such as Robert Schumann, would generally be the sole composer of a song cycle. Concept albums, however, are created by a collaboration of people, including songwriters, instrumentalists, engineers, and producers.

One of the strongest elements relating *What's Going On* to a song cycle is the musical transition between each song. Sound engineer Lawrence Miles and producer Marvin Gaye pieced the album together using David Van DePitte's orchestral lines. In her analysis of *What's Going On*, Tunbridge writes, "All the songs are interwoven; once the lyrics of one have ended, the instrumental backdrop melts into the next with no sound breaks or fadeouts (this had been achieved by splicing the tracks together and then applying overdubs to the whole album, rather than individual songs)."⁴⁹ These connections modulate to distantly related keys in order to travel to the tonal area of the following song. Some of these transitions contain reoccurring melodies that function as connecting thematic material.

Reoccurring melodic material is a common feature in nineteenth-century song cycles, including Robert Schumann's *Dichterliebe*. Tunbridge writes, "[Dichterliebe] deals with lost love, makes explicit tonal connections between

⁴⁹ Tunbridge, *The Song Cycle*, 181.

songs, and returns to earlier musical material toward its end.”⁵⁰ The return of musical material is quite frequent in *What’s Going On*, specifically regarding Van DePitte’s underlying string melodies and Gaye’s reoccurring vocal melodies. One of the strongest melodic returns occurs on the album’s final track, “Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler).” The end of the song incorporates a reprise from the opening track, “What’s Going On,” utilizing similar melodic, harmonic, and lyrical material to bring the song cycle to a satisfying close.

The lyrics help connect the music in order to unify the album around a central message. As in the song cycles of Schumann, Gaye uses text painting and common images to strengthen the overarching subject of the album, the state of humanity. Though the lyrics specifically focus on African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement, the message is to spread love and understanding to all people. This comprehensive analysis of lyrical, formal, and melodic structures within the album aims to strengthen the album’s connection to the Civil Rights Movement.

Lyrical Connections

Several subjects recur throughout the nine songs in *What’s Going On*. These pertain to different issues in American society, ranging from drug abuse (“Flyin’ High in the Friendly Sky”) to destruction of nature (“Mercy, Mercy Me (The

⁵⁰ Ibid, 10.

Ecology)”) to poverty (“Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)”). Intertwined within these messages, however, are songs with a more positive message. Gaye recalls his Christian upbringing in songs like “God is Love” and “Wholy Holy.” These gospel-influenced songs focus on the singer’s own religious beliefs while preaching the message of spreading love to all. Every song, however, seems to contain a central underlying message, that “love can conquer hate.” This phrase appears in two different songs throughout the album and a final time with a slight variation. As seen in Figure 5.1A, Gaye replaces the word “love” for “we” the last iteration, incorporating the importance of family and community.

Figure 5.1A: Lyrical repetitions in *What’s Going On*

Song	Lyrics	Time
Track 1: What’s Going On	“You see war is not the answer. For only <i>love can conquer hate.</i> ”	0:57 - 1:05
Track 7: Right On	“ <i>Love can conquer hate</i> every time. Give out some love and you’ll find / Peace sublime.”	6:04 - 6:15
Track 8: Wholy Holy	“ <i>We can conquer hate</i> forever, yes we can. Ah, wholy holy, Oh, Lord.”	1:51 – 2:10

The album also considers struggles faced by people living in poverty. A common theme in the storyline of the album addresses people in poor communities who often turn to drug abuse or violent aggression (“Make me wanna holler / Throw up both my hands”). Four songs are connected with similar

subject matter in Figure 5.1B. African Americans in 1960s Detroit were commonly forced to live in underdeveloped, poor communities. Thomas J. Sugrue writes of how “the ‘street corner society’ of African American men became one of the most potent symbols of the ‘culture of poverty’” and how “the picture of chronic black joblessness became a tool that reinforced the politics of racial domination.”⁵¹ Gaye criticizes this flawed system with these poignant lyrics.

Figure 5.1B: Topic similarities in *What’s Going On*

Song	Lyrics	Subject	Time
Track 2: What’s Happening Brother	“Can’t find no work, can’t find no job my friend. Money is tighter than it’s ever been.”	Poverty	1:10 – 1:20
Track 3: Flyin’ High (In the Friendly Sky)	“Well I know I’m hooked my friend, To the boy who makes slaves out of men.”	Drug abuse	2:48 – 3:04
Track 7: Right On	“Some of us feel the icy wind of poverty blowing in the air.”	Poverty	1:28 – 1:35
Track 9: Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)	“Money, we make it. ‘Fore we see it, you take it.”	Poverty Political discrimination	0:52 – 1:00

Finally, *What’s Going On* touches on the subject of global negligence and destruction. The song “Mercy, Mercy Me (The Ecology)” is fully devoted to this

⁵¹ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 120-121.

subject with lyrics like “What about this overcrowded land? How much more abuse from man can she stand?” Another song, “Save The Children” approaches the topic as well with the lyrics, “Who really cares? Who’s willing to try to save a world that’s destined to die?” While the other songs focus on more local issues, the lyrics in these songs take the album’s message to a global level. Each song represents a specific story, but all contribute to the overarching theme of the album. People must overcome the struggles of hatred and discrimination with love and understanding.

Formal Connections

One important element in the cyclical nature of *What’s Going On* is its overall formal structure. In Figure 5.2, a form chart of the album includes each song’s formal structure and key areas. As seen in the figure, every song begins with an intro of varying length to seamlessly connect one song to the next. Outros and codas are also used in order to transition to the following song. The difference between the two lies within the musical material. Outros use previous melodic and harmonic material to conclude the song, while a coda introduces new material. Non-vocal sections, such as the bridges, outros, and instrumental breaks, frequently showcase a specific instrument or section and often incorporate reoccurring melodies.

Figure 5.2: Form Chart for *What's Going On*

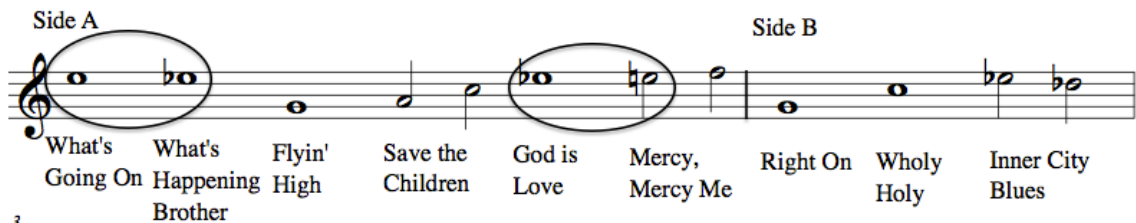
Song	Form	Key
SIDE A:		
1) What's Going On	Intro – Verse1 – Verse2 – Chorus – Bridge – Verse3 – Chorus – Bridge	E
2) What's Happening Brother	Intro – Verse1 – Verse2 – Prechorus – Chorus – Prechorus – Chorus – Instrumental break – Coda	Eb
3) Flyin' High (In the Friendly Sky)	Intro – Verse1 – Chorus – Verse2 – Chorus – Coda	Gm
4) Save the Children	Intro – Verse1 – Verse2 – Chorus – Bridge – Coda	Am/C
5) God is Love	Intro – Verse1 – Verse2 – Chorus – Verse3	Eb
6) Mercy, Mercy Me (The Ecology)	Intro – Verse1 – Verse2 – Verse3 – Verse4 – Instrumental break (sax solo) – Outro	E/F
SIDE B:		
7) Right On	Intro – Verse1 – Chorus – Bridge – Verse2 – Verse3 – Instrumental break – Bridge – Outro	Gm
8) Wholy Holy	Intro – Verse1 – Verse2 – Chorus – Verse3 – Chorus	C
9) Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)	Intro – Verse1 – Chorus – Verse2 – Chorus – Instrumental break – Verse3 – Chorus – Verse4 – Chorus – Instrumental break – "What's Going On" reprise – Coda	Ebm/ Db/ Dbm

The figure also reveals some similarities in the verse-chorus structures. Several songs ("God is Love," "Mercy, Mercy Me," "Right On") incorporate three or more verses, and only one statement of the chorus. This song format is unusual because the chorus is presented only once, unlike the several iterations in many other pop songs. The verses present the strongest subject matter in the lyrics and tend to focus more on the groove rather than the melody. The constant

percussive groove combined with the syncopated bass line creates a cyclical pattern within these individual songs.

Another interesting element in *What's Going On* is the succession of key areas throughout the album. Modulation and modal shifts are used at the beginning and end of each song in order to transition smoothly to the next.⁵² Key relationships can be seen diagrammed on a staff in Figure 5.3. One of the more intriguing relationships has to do with the movement to distantly related keys. The album begins with "What's Going On" in the key of E major and though "What's Happening Brother" never arrives on a tonic chord, the tonal center is Eb. This descending chromatic movement is mirrored in the last two songs of Side A, "God is Love" (Eb) and "Mercy, Mercy Me" (E).

Figure 5.3: Key Areas in *What's Going On*

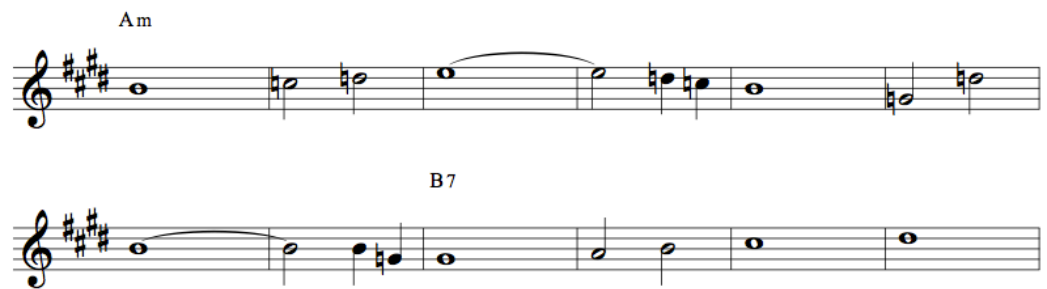


⁵² An example of this can be seen in Appendix A and B, the last measures of "What's Going On" and the intro of "What's Happening Brother."

Melodic Connections

Melodic recurrence also contributes to the unity of the album. The most obvious is the string melody found in the bridge of “What’s Going On” and the introduction of “What’s Happening Brother.” The melody, seen in Figure 5.4, resurfaces twice more as the album continues, occurring in pivotal places.⁵³ The third appearance of the melody occurs in “Mercy, Mercy Me (The Ecology)” the final song on Side A. This has the effect of a cadential feature, as there is a pause between Side A and Side B. The final occurrence of the melody appears in the last song on the album, “Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler).” Played on the saxophone, this melody concludes the album, bringing its lyrics and recurring musical features full circle. Figure 5.5 shows the locations of the melody within the individual songs and the album itself.

Figure 5.4: String melody used as connecting material in *What’s Going On*



⁵³ In this time period, most albums were recorded on a 33 1/3 LP vinyl record. This type of record is played on two sides, Side A and Side B.

Figure 5.5: Melodic connections in *What's Going On*

Song	Connecting Material	Location in song
Track 1: What's Going On	String Melody	Bridge / 1:41 – 2:08 Bridge / 3:01 – 3:56
Track 2: What's Happening Brother	String Melody	Intro 0:00 – 0:31
Track 6: Mercy, Mercy Me (The Ecology)	String Melody	Instrumental break 2:14 – 2:35
Track 9: Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)	String Melody (Played by saxophone)	Coda 4:55 – 5:16

A melodic similarity between the first two songs can be found in the chorus of “What’s Going On” and the prechorus of “What’s Happening Brother.” Gaye incorporates the album’s title, *What’s Going On* in both songs (Figure 5.6A and 5.6B). This repetition of the lyrics is enhanced by similar rhythmic patterns, with the word “going” occurring on strong beats in both occasions. This feature of returning rhythmic and melodic motifs contributes to the overall connectivity of the album.

Figure 5.6A: Rhythmic similarities in “What’s Happening Brother” mm. 34-35

Figure 5.6B: Rhythmic similarities in “What’s Going On” mm. 57-60

Finally, the most powerful melodic connection occurs at the opening and closing of the album. The last track, “Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)” ends with a reprise melody from the first song, “What’s Going On.” Though the melody and lyrics remain the same, the reprise adds expressive piano and Gaye’s soaring falsetto. As “Inner City Blues” seems to fade out on the instrumental break, the reprise begins with a modulation to Db major. Gaye sings expressively with rubato, “Mother, mother. Everybody thinks we’re wrong. Who are they to judge us simply cause we wear our hair long?” Reminiscent of the

bridge in the first song, the mode shifts to Db minor. Bongos, piano, saxophone, and Gaye's scattling are all that remains as the album comes to a close.

Conclusion

There are several components that make Marvin Gaye's album, *What's Going On*, an important album in American music history. The powerful messages within the lyrics continue to remain relevant even today, focusing on many problems that continue to plague American society, including racial discrimination, police brutality, flawed political systems, and the struggle for equality for all people. The collaboration of musical elements that make up *What's Going On* contain many elements from African-American music history, such as the highly syncopated rhythms and the Blues influenced melodies. Though Gaye sings of specific issues associated with his time, the music connects the album to different points in American history. Jazz harmony is consistent within the album, allowing Gaye to pay homage to African-American musicians like Nat King Cole. Gospel traditions, such as call-and-response and emotional vocal declamation, show the importance of love within the context of the album. Finally, influences of Rock and the Blues are heard in the formal and melodic structures within the album.

With his powerful song cycle, Marvin Gaye reminds his listeners that only love can conquer hate. The music helps to advance the overarching story using a

broad range of stylistic features, including modal changes, asymmetrical formal structures, and reoccurring melodic material. The album bounces between subjects of struggle (“Inner City Blues”) and hope (“Save the Children”). This balance between celebration and confusion, love and hate, hopefulness and hopelessness, mirrors the progression of the Civil Rights Movement.

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APPENDIX A

Transcription of "What's Going On"

E maj7
Intro

Melody

Saxophone

Bass

E maj7
Verse

Mo - ther, mo - ther — there's too ma - ny

C#m7

E maj7

of you cry - in' Bro - ther, bro - ther, bro - ther

C#m7

10

there's far too ma - ny of you dy - in' you know we've

13 F#m7 B7

got to find a way — to bring — some lo - vin here to-day

16 F#m7 Chorus B7

eh — eh — eh — Pi-cket lines and pi-cket signs Don't

19 F#m7 B7 F#m7

pun - ish me with bru - ta - li - ty Talk to me so

22 B7 Emaj7 C#m7

you can see ooh what's go - in' on what's go - in' on yeah what's

25 Emaj7 C#m7 Am Bridge

go - in' on aah what's go - in' on String Melody

28

31

B7

34

Emaj7
Verse

37

Mo - ther, mo - ther —

C#m7

40

eve - ry - bo - dy thinks — we're wrong Oh, but

43 E maj 7 C#m7

who are they to judge us? Sim - ply 'cause our hair is lo - ng

46 F#m7

Oh, you know we've got to find a way bring some un - der -

49 B 7 F#m7 Chorus

stan - ding here to - day Pi - cket lines and

52 B 7 F#m7 B 7

pi - cket signs Don't pun - ish me with bru - ta - lit - ty come on talk

55 F#m7 B 7 E maj 7

to me so you can see Oh, what's go - in' on yeah what's

58 C#m7 E maj7 C#m7

go-in' on tell me what's go-in' on I'll tell you what's go ing on

61 Am Bridge

64 (Fade out)

APPENDIX B

Transcription of "What's Happening Brother"

Am9
Intro

Melody

Aah

Bass

4

Bbm9

8

11

D7
Verse 1

Hey ba - by What

The musical score is presented in a grand staff format with two systems. The first system (measures 1-3) is in 4/4 time and features an Am9 chord. The melody line begins with a whole note G4, followed by quarter notes A4 and B4, and a half note C5. The bass line consists of eighth notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4. The second system (measures 4-7) continues the melody with quarter notes D5, E5, F5, and G5, and a half note A5. The bass line continues with eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, C6, D6, E6, F6, G6. The third system (measures 8-10) is in Bbm9 and features a melody of quarter notes Bb4, C5, D5, and E5. The bass line continues with eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, C6, D6, E6, F6, G6. The fourth system (measures 11-13) is in D7 and labeled 'Verse 1'. The melody line has a whole note Bb4, followed by quarter notes C5, D5, and E5. The bass line continues with eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, C6, D6, E6, F6, G6. The lyrics 'Hey ba - by What' are written under the melody line.

14 G7 Cm9

— you know good? I'm just gett-in' back but you

16 Cm7/F

knew I would War is — hell, when

18 F7 Fm7

will it end? When — will pe-ople start

20 Bb7 Bbm7 Verse 2

gett-in to - ge - ther a - gain? Are things — real - ly

22 G°7 Abmaj7

get-ting-bet-ter like — the news — pa-per says?

25 Cm7/F F7 Fm7

What else is new my friend be - sides

28 Bb7 Bb7 Prechorus 1

what I read? Can't find no work, can't find no job my friend

31

Mo - ney is tight - er than it's ev - er been.

33 Abm7 Gm7

Say man I just don't un - der - stand what's go - ing on ac - ross

35 Cm7 Fm9 Chorus

this land Aah What's happ-enin' bro - ther? Yeah

38 Bb7 Prechorus 2

What's happ-enin? Are they still get-tin down

41

where we used to go and dance? Will our ball club win the

43 Abm7

pen-ant, do ya think they have a chance? And tell me friend,

45 Gm7 Cm9 Fm9 Chorus

how in the world have you been? What's happ-eninbro-ther? I

48 Bb7

wanna know what's in What's happ-enin'?

51 $A\flat maj7$
Instrumental break

Background vocalists

55

58

61 $A\flat m7$
Coda

What's been sha - kin' up and down the line? I

63

— wan-na know 'cause I'm slight - ly be - hind the times

VITA

Jacob Barnhill received his Bachelor in Music Education from Stephen F. Austin State University in May 2014. During his undergraduate program, Jacob attended many conferences involving music education and saxophone performance. Following graduation, he pursued a music career, and gained a newfound appreciation for music theory. In August 2016, Jacob entered the Graduate School of Stephen F. Austin and received the degree of Master of Music in May 2019.

Permanent Address: 2210 Alumni Dr
Nacogdoches, TX 75965

Style Manual:

Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. 8th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

This thesis was typed by Jacob C. Barnhill