

Throwback: Motown



On January 12, 1959, Berry Gordy Jr. founded Tamla Records in Detroit, Michigan. Gordy had previously owned a music store that exclusively sold jazz records and was a member of a songwriting team for singer Jackie Wilson and others. A meeting with a 17-year-old Smokey Robinson led to Gordy recording the single "Got A Job" by Robinson's group, The Miracles. He leased the song to End Records, and this practice of leasing songs to bigger labels outside of Detroit continued with the Marv Johnson song, "Come To Me." Robinson encouraged Gordy to start his own R&B record label, and he borrowed \$800 from his family to release Johnson's song on his Tamla label. In 1959, he started Anna Records, which was named after his sister, and they had the most success with Barrett Strong's "Money (That's What I Want)." In April of 1960, he merged both companies and incorporated Motown Records.

Strong's single was Motown's first hit record in June of 1960, and by that time, Gordy had purchased the building that was the label's headquarters and called it Hitsville U.S.A. Motown eventually took up space in seven additional nearby houses for the company's administrative duties, artist development, management, payroll, sales, and recording. The Miracles' "Bad Girl" was the first official Motown release, but it was their single "Shop Around" that was the first million-seller for the group and label. Gordy's motto was to make music that appealed to both Black and white audiences. Motown became the most successful African-American business and independent record company in America, with 79 songs in the Billboard Top Ten between 1960 and 1969. Motown's influence was critical to the integration of pop music. The label was home to some of the most important artists in the history of music, including The Miracles, Mary Wells, The Temptations, The Supremes, The Jackson 5, and Stevie Wonder. The company also moved into the media world after moving to Los Angeles with television specials and movies. Diana Ross' starring roles in *Mahogany*, *Lady Sings The Blues*, and *The Wiz* opened the way for Whitney Houston's *The Bodyguard* decades later.

Motown stayed independent until 1988, when Gordy sold it to MCA. Universal Music acquired Motown in 1998 when they purchased Polygram. In 2025, Motown is home to Brandy, Erykah Badu, Kem, Migos, Lil Yachty, and The City Girls.