



## Motown Style and the American

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The challenges of the dress styles of the record label Motown were a symbol of the shifting American Dream of the 1960s. This research evaluates two aspects of the dress history of Motown: the garments' design and their social context. During Motown's beginnings in the early 1960's the glamorous image portrayed by its artists was deemed socially progressive by highlighting African American's inclusion into American upper echelon status. Yet as the decade evolved Motown's dress became out of step with the prevailing styles of social movements. The American dream was expanding to focus on civil rights, war, and the environment, thus Motown's wigs, matching velvet suits, and sequined dresses were contrasting the messaging of the new styles of the era.

This research documents the design development process including how the clothing was selected, produced, and where existing pieces are archived. The image making transitioned from do-it-yourself creations to a highly manipulated process of wardrobe stylists, finishing schools, and designer labels. Costumes were homemade such as men's pants split open to make a matching women's outfit for the Miracles, and evolved to the use of hip pads and wigs to create an ideal female form (Posner, 2005). By the time Motown reached its prime success, musical acts like the Supremes received an open clothing budget and department stores such as Saks Fifth Avenue were shut down for their shopping sprees. Finally, for some musicians, it circled back to do-it-yourself as that was linked to the earthy, hippie, aesthetic.

Examinations of the aesthetic revealed the impact of Motown's dress choices on the wearer, the viewer, and greater society. Internal debates were causing struggle. Motown label-head Berry Gordy urged his acts to separate themselves from politics yet contrast was exemplified by fan letters to the Supremes persuading them to wear their natural hair instead of Eurocentric wigs. This was also demonstrated by Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder advocating to wear facial hair and denim garments as their music changed to reflect the politics of the times. External issues were difficult as well as white audiences were comforted by the elegant presentation yet scoffed when it did not exactly suit their prescribed ideals. For example, Motown artists were welcomed by British royalty for performance while wearing older fashions, yet artist Kim Weston was mocked by audiences at another performance because of her more voluptuous figure in an evening dress (George, 2007).

This study conducts primary research by working with musicians, historians, curators and collections managers as well as performing on site examinations of archives and exhibitions of the Motown Museum in Detroit, MI, the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles, CA, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington DC, and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, OH. Secondary research into the literature pertaining to the history of Motown reveals dress details embedded within greater narratives. This research deciphers relationships between the Motown artists' image and the era of their greatest success as related to the shifting American dream of the tumultuous 1960s- 1970s.

#### Reference List

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