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Wonderful Words: Stevie Wonder's Musical Politics During the 1970s and 1980s

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in African American Studies

by

Sandra Marie Kilman

2017

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Wonderful Words: Stevie Wonder's Musical Politics During the 1970s and 1980s

by

Sandra Marie Kilman

Master of Arts in African American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Robin Davis Gibran Kelley, Chair

The problem of racial injustice in the United States continued to plague the nation during the 1970s despite the gains made by the Civil Rights Movement during the preceding decades. Under Republican administrations during the 1970s and 1980s, working Americans encountered new financial challenges as the lion's share of economic growth benefitted the wealthiest citizens. As socially and politically conscious popular music faded in popularity, Stevie Wonder continued to express his concerns about the obstacles to the promise of freedom and equality that many Americans continued to face. This paper examines four songs, written and performed by Wonder - "Living for the City," "You Haven't Done Nothing," "Happy Birthday," and "It's Wrong," - to track the trajectory of his commentary from local, community-based issues to national, political topics and, finally, to international causes.

The thesis of Sandra Marie Kilman is approved.

Richard Yarborough

Shana Redmond

Robin Davis Gibran Kelley, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2017

## Acknowledgments

This paper is dedicated to my family, whose love has sustained me throughout my life. Margaret and Bennie, Sr., you immerse me in your unconditional, selfless love, provided my musical foundation and encouraged me to develop those musical skills I so enjoy. Bennie, Jr. you are my first and favorite dance partner and my soul brother. Your love of music delights me. Gia and Anthony, your unwavering goodness, industriousness, intelligence, and honorable character inspire me. Gianna, you are the light of our family, always shining your creative, smart, unselfish, playful, delightful spirit on all of us. Dennis, my life partner, husband, best friend, companion, and stalwart love – you made my musical dreams come true, my life joyful, and you made this academic journey possible.

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## Chapter One

### INTRODUCTION

On December 3, 2014, Stevie Wonder was seated at the keyboard on a Seattle concert stage, in the process of completing a tour that featured compositions from his 1976 album, *Songs in the Keys of Life*. As the band vamped on the intro for the next song, Wonder told the audience that he loved all of them and sees all races “as one family.” The audience roared their support. Wonder then proceeded to ask the audience provocative questions, including: why two grand juries had recently declined to indict police officers responsible for the deaths of “two black men” (Eric Garner in New York and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri), why our legal system “would choose secrecy when there is so much mistrust” and “why there could not have been a public trial where we would be able to hear all sides to the story.” Wonder added: that he heard Eric Garner say “I can’t breathe” and that something is wrong in America that needs to be fixed quickly. “This is why this song unfortunately, is still relevant today,” he announced as he launched into his 1973 classic “Living for the City” (LFTC). The audience sang – from the first word on - a song that was over four decades old (Grow 2014).

During the 1960s and early 1970s, Stevie Wonder produced powerful musical manifestos that describe conditions of black life and struggle beginning with regional concerns and expanding to national and global issues. To illustrate the arc of Wonder’s interest in human rights, I examine four songs from his classic period. “Living for the City” (1973) treats American issues of racism, poverty, and the profoundly unequal impact of the criminal justice system on the lives of African Americans. The corruption, insincerity and callous disregard of issues plaguing American citizens by certain politicians is confronted in “You Haven’t Done Nothing” (1974). By the 1980s, Wonder broached even broader horizons in two songs that are of global



significance. "Happy Birthday" was composed to honor the internationally acclaimed Nobel Peace Prize winner Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was employed as a public relations tool to bolster the campaign to pass legislation that made the King holiday a national day of celebration. By 1984, Wonder's focus had shifted overseas on the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa. In "It's Wrong," he cries out against the South African government's racial policy, charging that, like slavery and the Holocaust - two of the most egregious crimes against modern humanity - the apartheid policy was morally perverse. In the twenty-first century, decades after the song's release, Wonder continues to promote a sense of unity among all people by referencing scientific claims that humanity originated in Africa. At a 2016 concert in London, he told the audience, "All life does matter, but the reason I say black lives matter is because we are the original people of the world. So, in essence, everyone here has some black in you. You've all got some soul in you so stop denying your culture" (Guardian 2016). Examining these four compositions in chronological order of release reveals the growth of Wonder's musical political speech from local through national to international and illustrates the ever-expanding boundaries of his activism.

## Chapter Two

### Roots of Activism – 1950s and 1960s

What does it take to fashion an astute, concerned, erudite, committed voice for the people? The serendipity of a person born at a certain time, in a certain place, to a certain family, with certain talents and interests, and given certain nurturing, educational and broadening opportunities can coalesce and give birth to an outstanding, powerful voice. I contend that the people and circumstances of Stevie Wonder's childhood are significant elements in the forging of his outspoken comments and his critiques of social inequities. The nurturing, loving attention of his mother, siblings, neighbors, his adopted Motown family and his tutor (and traveling companion) formed a cocoon of tender, loving care that fostered the growth of his compassion. The knowledge gleaned from travelling the world from an early age, meeting people from many countries, and witnessing the mores of many cultures gave this keen observer of life a unique insight into humankind. The gift of his celebrity opened doors and facilitated the encountering of people of extraordinary accomplishment who might share their wisdom. Building on the solid foundation of being loved, learning from being loved how to love oneself, leads to the ability to love all people. Stevie Wonder was exposed to all of these elements.

Steveland Judkins (the name on Wonder's birth certificate) or Steveland Morris (the name that Wonder says was on his incubator) was born in Saginaw, Michigan, but raised in Detroit from the age of three (Ribowsky 2010, 11-12, 18). During most of his childhood, Stevie lived with his siblings in a household headed by their mother, Lula Mae Hardaway, a native Alabaman who had migrated to Michigan in 1932 at 13 years of age during the Great Migration. After giving birth to Stevie's eldest brother in her late teens, Lula met Stevie's father, Calvin Judkins, in 1949. Calvin was three decades older than the 17-year-old mother, which proved to

be a distinct advantage to the piano-playing, crap-shooting “street hustler” who convinced Lula to elope and then literally strong-armed her into working as a prostitute (Ribowsky 2010, 8-10). This scenario of a young, black Southerner who migrates to the city, is taken advantage of by a black urban slickster, and suffers from the encounter is eerily like the story told by the lyrics of LFTC. Fortunately for Lula and her children, she found a way out of her domestic oppression but it required the dissolution of her marriage. She led the challenging life of a single mother in a Detroit neighborhood that bordered the bourgeois, upwardly-mobile black community called Brewster Projects. That Stevie lived in Detroit during the time that Brewster residents and future Motown artists William “Smokey” Robinson (founder of The Miracles), Diana Ross, Mary Wilson, and Florence Ballard (soon to be The Supremes) were growing up nearby is one stroke of luck that blessed the future music phenom’s life. That he lived in an “upper lower middle class” neighborhood full of children with whom he could play and bond was also a blessing (Ribowsky 2010, 18-19).

#### The 1960s - Hello, Motown! Hello, World!

African Americans were pouring into Detroit from the South in 1961 when one of Stevie’s good friends, Gerald White, implored his older brother, Ronnie, to listen to Stevie perform. Gerald hoped that Ronnie, who was a member of The Miracles, a group that had recorded some hits for the relatively new, up-and-coming Motown label, might help Stevie procure an audition at the label. Ronnie acquiesced after Mrs. Glover, one of Stevie’s neighbors, also prevailed upon him to listen to the young sensation. He invited Pete Moore, another member of The Miracles, to join them. Stevie sang an original song called “Lonely Boy” in the White family’s living room. Ronnie and Pete were so taken with Stevie’s talent that the next afternoon, Lula, Stevie, and his musical partner and friend John Glover were in the offices of Motown

Records where Stevie sang for several of the Motown staff and eventually auditioned for Berry Gordy (Love and Brown 2002, 142-143, 149). The caring effort of Ruth Glover was remembered by Wonder in later years who commented on his debt to his supportive neighbors and to Mrs. Glover for being “responsible for us getting to Motown” (Davis 2003, 20).

Berry Gordy was reluctant to take on the obligations and responsibilities involved with signing a child to his label. But Stevie’s amazing talent proved to be a significantly more powerful factor than Gordy’s trepidations about managing a minor. However, Gordy’s reluctance was not the only obstacle that had to be overcome. Stevie’s mother, Lula, was very protective of her special son and extremely suspicious of Motown’s contract, which stipulated that Stevie’s earnings would be placed in a trust controlled by Gordy until the boy reached the age of twenty-one and that Motown would control Stevie’s publishing and management. Despite the child’s fervor and excitement over the prospect of becoming a Motown recording artist, Lula doggedly interrogated Gordy and questioned the terms and conditions of the deal. She did not succumb to Gordy’s salesman-like manipulations or intimidation tactics. Nor did she let her love for Stevie and her desire to help him manifest his dream of becoming a musician deter her from walking out of the first meeting with Gordy after telling the label owner that she thought the terms were not right (Love and Brown 2002, 152-156). Lula understood Stevie’s dismay over the failure to reach a contractual agreement. She was a devoted, caring, protective parent who found herself in the rare position of having a child who could earn a significant income and change the family’s economic fortunes. In her authorized biography, Lula admitted that she was not just concerned about equity in financial matters; she was fearful of what would happen to her beloved, precious boy – her “special blessing.” She was concerned that he would be taken from her home by people who might not understand his needs (Love and Brown 2002, 158-159). Despite her

concerns, Stevie's determination to become a professional entertainer prevailed, sending Lula back to the bargaining table; and soon after that first meeting, Little Stevie Wonder was a Motown artist.

Stevie benefitted from a generous amount of tender, loving care during his childhood days at the increasingly successful label. Motown songwriter Brian Holland recalled that in the beginning, Lula always accompanied Stevie to the studio and never left him there alone. This dedication on the part of a busy, working mother of several children must have helped Stevie develop a strong sense of self-worth. The reception he received from many of the young Motown artists also gave him a sense of being valued, respected, and loved. Years later, he recalled the experience as being in a Motown "family" where "everyone over eleven was a parent" and "all the musicians and artists watched over me." Producer Clarence Paul, who Stevie thought loved him like "a father, like a brother and a friend," recalled that singer Martha Reeves (of Martha and the Vandellas) patiently taught Stevie to dance and "felt more like a sister toward him than a teacher" (Werner 2004, 103).

Adding another dimension to the extended family feeling associated with his new career as a professional musician, singer, and Motown recording artist was the eventual infusion of a new teacher into Stevie's daily routine in September 1963. Ted Hull was a young, partially sighted graduate of Michigan State University who loved music and had travelled around the world twice when he was hired by Motown to tutor and chaperone their thirteen-year-old sensation. Hull noticed Stevie's smile when the boy learned that his new tutor was also legally blind and chalked it up to Stevie's belief that Hull understood the world Stevie inhabited. Lula had a markedly different response to the white man who was about to become her son's close

companion and mentor, withholding her trust until she became better acquainted with him (Hull and Stahel 2000, 17-19).

Hull traveled with Stevie over the next seven years, combining academic lessons with life lessons by organizing extraordinary experiences for the young performer in many cities around the world. Hull arranged for Stevie to sit at the same table used by Louis Braille in Paris and to spend a day at a school for blind children in Japan. Hull tried to invigorate Stevie's interest in history as they toured. After reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*, they visited the Amsterdam attic which had been her hiding place. Hull even rented a canoe and allowed Stevie to paddle in the Delaware River to create a special understanding of George Washington's famous crossing so that Stevie could report his outing to his classmates at the Michigan School for the Blind (Hull and Stahel 2000, 44, 79). As the war raged in Vietnam, Stevie and Hull visited Paris, witnessed student uprisings and discovered differences between France and the United States in how the nations dealt with race. In a book recounting his years with Stevie, Hull wrote that working in foreign countries with musicians from around the world exposed the young, curious artist to new musical genres and new ideas while it expanded his understanding of human beings and their many ways of looking at life (Hull and Stahel 2000, 80). Stevie credits his rhythm arrangement of the 1965 hit "Uptight" to lessons learned while he toured with the Rolling Stones in 1964 and noted the audiences' reactions to the aggressive beat of Stones' drummer Charlie Watts (George 1985, 126).

The contributions made by this tutor who also was a mentor, road business manager, and travelling companion to the teenaged artist's life had a profound impact on the mature artist's worldview. Though there were times when they disagreed and even argued - often over politics, Vietnam, and Stevie's growing interest in social activism - they developed a close relationship

built on trust and a respectful bond. That this bond was established between an African American youth whose exposure to white Americans had been limited before this close interaction with Hull and a young white man certainly helped dispel some mistrust for whites Stevie could have held due to the continuing racial animosities all too common in Michigan during the 1960s. In some ways, Stevie may have felt closer to Hull than he felt to many of the other adults in his life because of the visual disability they shared. This mutual physical challenge allowed the teacher to relate with Stevie and anticipate many of his needs whether academic, emotional, or practical. Hull believes that “traveling for up to a solid month on a Greyhound bus forced us to forge bonds as companions” (Hull and Stahel 2000, 93). Hull reinforced the importance of good table manners by reminding young Stevie about the correct use of tableware. He also anticipated what the visually impaired artist would need to know in unfamiliar hotel rooms so that he could navigate the space safely. The dedication Hull demonstrated to his charge’s education, safety, and wellbeing was evident to Stevie and is another example of the tenderness and concern he experienced during his developmental years. The impact of Stevie’s travelling throughout these critical years that are usually spent in one location pursuing an education at a local school fostered a sophistication in the young artist that seemed beyond his years.

Not all the lessons learned from his travels were happy ones. Young Stevie discovered a great deal about racism by gigging in many American cities and towns. Before Ted Hull’s introduction into his life, Stevie had already been on the road and had experienced the terror of racism firsthand. In 1962, when he was just twelve years old, he was one of forty-five Motown performers and staff who took part in the first Motortown Revue. The artists performed in thirty-six cities over fifty-six days, sometimes in front of a Confederate flag backdrop. In the South, they sometimes had to buy food through the back doors of restaurants (Ribowsky 2010, 79-80).

They travelled in two old busses. On one occasion, after the troupe left a performance in Birmingham, Alabama, they heard gunshots and found bullet holes in the bus windows (Smith 1999, 51). Hull believed that when he traveled through the South with Stevie, racists directed invectives at him for accompanying black entertainers. In 1965 Stevie traveled with Hull to London, where they encountered hit-making rock and roll/country singer-songwriter Arkansan Del Shannon, who was booked on the same BBC radio show as Stevie. Shannon declined to shake hands with Hull, who interpreted the snub as disapproval of his close contact with African Americans (Ribowsky 2010, 114-115). Both teacher and student learned a great deal about the most perplexing social issue confronting our nation as they travelled the world.

### The “Happening” ‘60s

In 1976 twenty-six-year-old Stevie Wonder commented on his belief in the power of music and on the magic of the 1960s. “One of the great things about music is that it can bring people together. That’s what was so exciting about the late 1960s There was a feeling of such unity and celebration. So much was happening ... Motown, Dylan, Hendrix, the Beatles, Sly” (Hilburn 1976). His coming of age during the tumultuous decade that witnessed major shifts in social, political and cultural notions and behaviors was fortuitous. He began to travel within the country and internationally as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. appeared at many African American demonstrations and struggles for civil rights and economic fairness.

Stevie’s activism dates back at least to 1963 when the thirteen-year old artist appeared at the Apollo Theatre on August 23 in a benefit for the Negro American Labor Council to help raise \$30,000 that paid transportation expenses of unemployed New Yorkers to the upcoming March on Washington (““March” Gala Has \$250,000 Talent” 1963). Sidney Poitier, Thelonious Monk, Paul Newman, Tony Bennett, Carmen McRae, Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers, Quincy



Jones, Joanne Woodward, Ahmad Jamal, “Moms” Mabley, and Herbie Hancock were a few of the Hollywood stars and jazz virtuosos with whom Stevie shared the stage that night (Ward 1998, 269). Being a part of this event also had to make Stevie aware of the upcoming event in Washington at which Dr. King was going to deliver one of the most famous speeches in American history. So, by the time Stevie met Dr. King at a Southern Christian Leadership Conference event in 1966 during the Chicago Freedom Movement campaign and attended the rally with over 30,000 others at Soldier Field, the sixteen-year old singer was very familiar with the cause espoused by the great orator (Carlson 2010).

The war in Vietnam was on the minds of American teenagers in the mid-Sixties. The draft was calling up boys who were eighteen years old. Some entered the service straight out of high school and many of these young recruits found themselves in the middle of the Southeast Asian conflict. It must have been on Stevie’s mind during that period too, since two men he knew and admired were preoccupied with the effects of this war. Earlier that year, in January 1966, King had spoken publicly about the resistance he received from political friend and foe alike to his “voicing concern over the war in Vietnam” and his Christian belief that “war is wrong.” Divisions in tactical strategy had formed in different elements of the Civil Rights movement. SCLC was more conservative than King, fearing the repudiation of funders and the Johnson Administration. And the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee was more radical than King, as it not only opposed the war but ultimately supported the right of the Vietnamese to self-determination. By spring, King had convinced the SCLC executive board to oppose the war. King’s view of the problems caused by American capitalism had gradually changed and aligned with those of Malcolm X (Marable 1991, 103). On April 4, 1967, King delivered a severely critical assessment of American foreign policy in his “Beyond Vietnam” speech at Riverside

Church in New York City. He asserted that the United States had become “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today” and received tremendous blowback for what was seen then as a radical accusation (McKnight 1998, 14). That same year, Stevie’s friend, boxer Muhammad Ali refused induction into the military because of his religious beliefs. The politics of war engulfed Stevie through his personal relationships with men for whom he had a great deal of respect and admiration.

The decade of the Sixties did not go quietly into the night. From the middle of the decade through the end, urban uprisings took place throughout the nation in response to chronic economic, social, and political power imbalances that invariably found black Americans on the weak end of the scale. In July 1967, Stevie’s hometown of Detroit was the scene of five days of civil unrest that destroyed more lives and property than any other uprising of the twentieth century. Exactly one year after his “Beyond Vietnam” speech, on April 4, 1968, King was assassinated. Two months later, Democratic presidential candidate Robert Kennedy met the same fate as King, dying from gun violence as he campaigned against war. In between these two tragic occurrences, Stevie Wonder reached his eighteenth birthday and was “little” no more.

## Chapter Three

### Social Activism - “LIVING FOR THE CITY”

On February 28, 1976, Paul Simon’s *Still Crazy After All These Years* won the Grammy Award for Best Album of the Year. During his acceptance speech, Simon elicited a hearty laugh from the audience when he thanked Stevie Wonder for not releasing an album the previous year (The Recording Academy 2017). Industry insiders at the event understood the premise of Simon’s comment. At the Grammy Awards ceremonies held in the previous two years, Wonder had collected so many awards that many fine works of other artists had to settle for recognition as Grammy nominees. Two years earlier, in 1974, as Wonder accepted the Best Album of the Year Grammy for *Innervisions*, his love for his family radiated from the stage. Surrounded by his siblings, his affection for them and his appreciation for the support of his kin was evident as he introduced his brothers and sister to the audience and accepted his fourth award of the evening. The following year, Wonder received five more Grammys, including the 1975 Album of the Year honor for *Fulfillingness’ First Finale*. This period encompassed the early years of his classic period, – a time when he produced music that confirmed his superstar status and added a plethora of immensely popular compositions to his musical legacy.

A *Rolling Stone* magazine reader’s poll conducted in 2013 to determine the ten best Stevie Wonder songs ranked “Living for the City” (LFTC) from his *Innervisions* album as his second-best work. This high ranking of a forty-year-old song sheds light on why it was the 1974 Grammy award winner in the Best Rhythm and Blues Song category and why it reached the top position in Billboard’s Black Singles chart (Greene 2013). It was often the case that popular hits by black artists ranked higher on the R&B charts than on pop charts. LFTC was no exception, climbing to #45 on Billboard’s Top 100 and #71 on Cash Box Year-End Charts for Pop Singles

(Billboard 1974, Cashbox 1974). Such was the tenor of the times. After the politically turbulent 60s and the continuing turmoil of the early 70s, Americans witnessed a backlash to the advances made by the civil rights movement. This rebound was simultaneous with an increase in political discourse in songs by black performers. The stable of hitmakers at Motown demonstrated this shift in the early seventies.

As the new decade dawned, Motown's artists and producers were pushing the envelope and breaking free of the Gordy-enforced formula for hit-making that had prevailed since the label's inception. Gordy's belief that protest songs were not as likely to produce commercial success as ones whose lyrics centered on love and romance had been well-founded and effective in the 1960s. According to a 1971 study that examined lyrical content of the annual Top 10 singles for each year of the 1960s, of the 93 non-instrumental titles, love-sex was the theme of 71% of the songs. In the second half of the decade, a decrease in the occurrence of the love-sex theme was balanced by an increase in the social protest content of the lyrics of Top 10 singles. Whereas no song earning Top 10 ranking between 1960-1967 raised social protest themes, 10% of all Top 10 songs in the second half of the decade - all released in 1968 and 1969 - focused on this topic (Cole 1971, 392, 396). Near the end of the turbulent sixties, pop music lyricists were broadening their conversation.

Of course, few popular songs reach number-one status. Among those sixties' hits that had a longstanding impact on American thought was a song that peaked at the number-two position on the pop charts. Written by Bob Dylan and released on his May 1963 album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, "Blowin' in the Wind" became a huge success a few months later when Peter, Paul and Mary's cover sold 320,000 records in just over a week (Gezari and Hartman 2010, 156). Wonder was so taken by Dylan's lyrics that he wasted no time recording a rendition of the song

backed by The Temptations that Motown did not release (Gilland 1968). But by 1965 Wonder had incorporated the song into his live act as his closing number, which suggests that it elicited a powerful response from his audiences. Gordy allowed him to record it again with producer Clarence Paul adding vocals over bass wizard James Jamerson's rich, compelling rhythmic accents. Released in July 1966, this rendition quickly reached the Top 10 and hit the top position on the R&B charts (Ribowsky 2010, 140-141).

At the tender age of 16, Wonder was already a seasoned traveler who expressed his opinions about controversial issues. In his book about the years he spent with young Stevie, Ted Hull relates a conversation that took place on a hilltop above Paris as they discussed the City of Lights. Just after having noted that they had not encountered any racist attitudes in the city, Hull told Wonder that he thought "things really are getting better." Wonder replied that "white folks like to think so" and make themselves believe this falsehood. He soon apologized for generalizing about "all white people". But the youngster recognized a lack of awareness among white Americans of racial inequality and persistent tensions. Race relations were not the only issue on his mind. Wonder also challenged Hull's support for America's actions in Vietnam (Hull and Stahel 2000, 184). These strongly voiced opinions began to insinuate themselves into his music. His aversion to war and the success of his cover of Dylan's civil rights anthem may have influenced Wonder's decision to record another socially conscious composition on his 1967 Christmas album. "Someday at Christmas" anticipates a world in which people are free, when "men won't be boys playing with bombs like kids play with toys," no children are hungry, and there is truly peace on earth. As one of the first socially conscious Christmas songs, it preceded the John Lennon 1972 anti-Vietnam War release "Happy Xmas (War Is Over)" and Band Aid's 1984 star-studded single "Do They Know It's Christmas" (Ribowsky 2010, 143). In 2015,

Wonder's Christmas song was rereleased as a duet with vocalist Andra Day as part of an Apple marketing campaign. The world's most valuable company recognized the resilience of the song over a half century after its premiere and, in the process of appropriating it, attempted to defang the politically conscious message of its lyrics. Although the teenaged Wonder had to confront and overcome Gordy's reluctance to allow Motown artists the leeway to comment on social conditions, in the seventies the tides began to change.

Marvin Gaye's landmark album *What's Goin' On* dazzled the music world with its biting commentary on war, pollution, and injustice in 1971 and mitigated Gordy's fear that black artists could not be commercially successful singing about controversial topics. Acclaimed Motown songwriter and producer Norman Whitfield had fired an early salvo against Gordy's reticence by forging a new style, dubbed "psychedelic soul," for The Temptations, co-writing and producing their hit "Cloud Nine" in 1968. The song describes several potentially devastating challenges encountered in too many American households: a child's witnessing of his mother's domestic abuse perpetrated by his unemployed father; the debilitating depression that may result from a young adult's inability to find work; and the allure of drugs experienced by those yearning to escape the pressures of slum life. Building on the success of "Cloud Nine," in February 1973, The Temptations' new release, "Masterpiece," reached the top position on the R&B charts. This Whitfield production incorporated spoken word in its description of ghetto life. In his comments on LFTC, music reviewer Ed Hogan compared Whitfield's song with LFTC, noting that Wonder joined the 70s trend of composing "cinematic" works like "Masterpiece" and extended the trend by incorporating a dramatic scene in the middle of LFTC (Hogan).

The evolution of Wonder's interest in socially conscious commentary is conspicuous when comparing LFTC's album, *Innervisions*, to its immediate predecessor, *Talking Book*.

Released in 1972, mere months after his twenty-second birthday, *Talking Book* declared Wonder's independence from the formulaic Motown sound that Gordy believed to be foundational to the success of his label. Despite this testament to Wonder's artistic will, most of his compositions on *Talking Book* are love songs. Released on August 3, 1973, *Innervisions*, Wonder's sixteenth album, evinced the artist's movement away from Motown's outworn lyrical constraints of writing, almost exclusively, about young love and of avoiding controversial topics. *Slate* pop critic Jack Hamilton asserts that *Innervisions* "was an even more high-minded and conceptually ambitious work" that has twice as many tracks focused on a variety of serious topics than the three tracks about love (Hamilton 2016). Wonder's movement away from traditional romantic topics and toward an activist perspective was underway.

The track list of *Innervisions* offers insight into Wonder's concerns during the early 70s. Only four works grace the first side of the album which opens with "Too High," a song about a talented, young female artist's missed opportunity for professional success and her tragic death. Both sad circumstances are attributed to the scourge of drug abuse that took her "too high" and transformed her promising future into a shockingly early demise. That dismal, precautionary tale is followed by "Visions," a dreamy, soothing, philosophical meditation on life.

Here Wonder questions the reality of his experience of the present – a present in which "hate's a dream and love forever stands" and "all men feel they're truly free at last" and wonders if this is just a "vision in my mind." The third song on the first side of the album is LFTC, which Hamilton describes as "a seven-and-a-half-minute migration narrative that touched on systemic racial inequality in employment, housing, the criminal justice system, and damn near everything

else” (Hamilton 2016, 7). “Golden Lady,” a funky-sweet love song brings this side to a close and serves as a softening, calming ministrations to the spirit after the harsh realism of LFTC.

However, the respite is brief. The second side of the record erupts with “Higher Ground,” a driving, up-tempo tune that ominously portends that “it won’t be too long” for this “whole world of sin.” Counterbalancing his warning, the singer exults over receiving the Creator’s bountiful gift of reincarnation, which provides him a second chance at living a righteous life after his first time around was sinful. The interest in Eastern religions that was part of the counterculture of the 1960s may have sparked the reincarnation reference in “Higher Ground” and the praise of Transcendental Meditation in the following cut, “Jesus Children of America.” The appreciation shown for a practice associated with Eastern traditions contrasts with the satirical treatment of some practitioners of Christianity that is the focus of the song. It is a significant indication that Wonder, who was raised a Christian, had been exposed to ideas and belief systems from non-Western sources that dominated counterculture discourse and influenced many popular music genres. After a venture into the bittersweet aspects of love in the dramatic ballad “All in Love Is Fair” and the relationship missteps alluded to in “Don’t You Worry ‘Bout A Thing,” the album ends with a rhythmic indictment of a fast-talking, scheming, lying man in “He’s Mistra Know-It-All.” Although no names are mentioned in the song, musicologist James E. Perone claims that the tune references the embattled U. S. President Richard Nixon (Perone 2006, 54).

Was LFTC the most significant song on the album? Another Black Singles chart-topping song from the album, “Higher Ground,” one that ranked #4 in Pop Singles and #41 on the Adult Contemporary charts that year, may have commercially outperformed LFTC. Still, biographer John Swenson considers LFTC the “album’s most memorable song.” Stevie acknowledged the



song's personal significance when he commented, "I think the deepest I really got into how I feel about the way things are was in 'Living for the City.' I was able to show the hurt and the anger, you know. You still have that same mother that 'scrubs the floors for may', she's still doing it. Now what is that about. And that father who 'works some days for fourteen hours'. I mean it's still happening" (Swenson 1986, 93-94).

In 1972, Wonder learned of an atrocious, tragic, fatal shooting of a 10-year-old boy in Queens, New York by NYPD Officer Thomas Shea. The policeman claimed that he thought the 100-pound, under-five-foot tall Clifford Cleophus Glover was an adult suspected of robbery. In his report Officer Shea alleged that the boy had pointed a gun at him before running away. The child's father told a markedly different story.

According to his step-father, Add Armstead, who was walking with the boy to work that morning, they heard a car stop and saw a man – not a uniformed police officer – leave the car while shouting "You, black son-of-a-bitch." Armstead stated the man shot at them and he thought they were going to be robbed, so he and Cliffie began to run for their lives. Unfortunately, Cliffie was shot in the back and fell. Armstead saw officers in a police car and tried to enlist their help but they drove away. He stopped another car and managed to get a ride back to where Cliffie had fallen. They transported his bloody body to the hospital where he was pronounced dead. Wonder was troubled by this shooting and so profoundly moved that he offered to sing the eulogy at the child's funeral (Ribowsky 2010, 231). Wonder explained why he mourned with the estimated two thousand attendees at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, "I have followed the case. It brings America down another notch in my book. I hope that Black people

realize how serious things are and do something serious about it” (Bailey 1973, 8). This tragic occurrence moved Wonder to write LFTC.

LFTC relates a common Great Migration-like story about a young African American man who moves from his childhood home in “Hardtime, Mississippi” to the fast-paced, slick urban life of New York City. In crafting this tale, Wonder followed in a tradition of crafting works of art based on travel-related incidents. In the mid-twentieth century, travel presented uncommon dangers for African Americans to which white Americans were never subjected. Not only was moving to a metropolis like New York from a small town in the Mississippi a tremendous change fraught with risk, even visiting a location could be such a dangerous experience for black citizens that it could lead to an event that would capture the attention of the nation and inspire a musical work.

Emmet Till was a boy from Chicago who visited relatives in Money, Mississippi during the summer of 1958. His story is the reverse of the Great Migration tales in that he was a city boy did not understand the customs in a small, Southern town. Just as the events surrounding his tortuous murder on August 28, 1955 demonstrate, Wonder’s migration tale reaffirms the danger of moving between two very different communities where the local rules, customs, and modes of safe or acceptable behavior are unfamiliar to the newcomer. Although we do not know if the events experienced by the protagonist in LFTC are based on a true story, we know that Till’s tale is all too real. The horrific treatment of this fourteen-year-old child by two whites who were acquitted, less than a month after their crime took place, by the community that supported the criminals inspired a plethora of literary and musical responses.

Poems and songs about Till’s tragedy were written immediately after the events came to light and continued to be created throughout the 1960s. Days after the Till murder trial, Langston

Hughes published “Mississippi-1955” in his weekly newspaper column for the *Chicago Defender*. The following week, T. R. Skelton’s “Ode to Mississippi” appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. These two African American newspapers and others across the nation published many other poems about Till and the rampant racism of the place where he died. Contemporaneous with the writing of his poem, Hughes also collaborated on a song about the topic. With lyrics by Hughes and music by Jobe Huntley, “Money, Mississippi Blues,” was the first of several musical compositions galvanized by this crime that had captured worldwide attention. A few months later, “Blues for Emmett Till,” a song by lyricist Aaron Kramer and composer Clyde Appleton appeared, in the Winter 1956 edition of *Sing Out!*, a magazine that published many freedom songs in the 1960s (Kolin, Kramer, and Appleton 2008, 455). In 1952 Kramer, an English professor at Dowling College, had written a 26-poem sequence about Denmark Vesey, the African American carpenter hanged for allegedly plotting an 1822 slave rebellion in Charleston, South Carolina. Throughout his career, Kramer wrote about black lives, so his interest in the Till story was unsurprising. However, as far away as Brazil, and as far away in time as the decade of the 1970s, Till’s tragic tale resonated with poet/lyricist VÍncius de Moraes whose *bossa nova* hit and jazz standard “The Girl from Ipanema” brought him international acclaim. In 1971 Moraes and singer/musician Toquinho collaborated on their response to the Till murder in a composition they named “Blues para Emmett.”

Just before Emmett Till left his Chicago home to visit relatives in Money, Mississippi, his mother, Mamie Till Bradley, did what many mothers of black children do. She warned him. She told him not to “hesitate to humble yourself” even if he had to “get down on your knees” (Harold and DeLuca 2005, 264). Whether he followed her advice is not at issue. His mutilation and murder and the decision made by his mother to open his casket so that the public viewed

evidence of the violence he had endured transformed Americans' tolerance for Southern racism. This decision to display the gruesome evidence of unchecked racism accelerated the momentum of the civil rights movement of the 1950s. The impact of this sorrowful migration story was so powerful and long-reaching that in 2004, the Justice Department reopened the Till murder case. Senator Charles Schumer made reference to it when he called on Attorney General John Ashcroft to "fully enforce America's civil-rights laws" (Harold and DeLuca 2005, 265).

Like the poets and songwriters who wrote about Till, Stevie Wonder wrote the dramatic scenario of a story that involved travel in LFTC. He hoped that this song might raise national awareness and understanding of some of the oppressive conditions under which many Black people lived. His song describes the economic injustice many hardworking African Americans experience and the heartbreaking implications of the maltreatment of blacks by the criminal justice system. When accepting the Grammy Award for the Album of the Year on March 2, 1974, Wonder brought his brother, Calvin, and sister, Renee, to the stage with him. He explained that Calvin's voice is heard saying "New York" in LFTC and these younger siblings "are the future for tomorrow, for all people. And I hope that through my music I have given the message of my people and of the world" (The Recording Academy 1974).

### Lyrics Tell the Story

The story Wonder relates is about a young Southern black boy born to loving, industrious parents who strive to care for their children and teach them well. He calls the child's hometown "Hardtime, Mississippi," which suggests that the family endures the weight of constant economic struggle. The setting of Mississippi is significant because this region in the South consistently

had the highest percentage of people living in poverty when compared to other American regions (Table 9. Poverty of People, by Region 2016).

The boy's home has "four walls that ain't so pretty," which could mean that although he is not homeless (surrounded by walls), his residence is not attractive. Has the home fallen into disrepair because there is no money to keep it up? Or is this home rented from a landlord who does not maintain the condition of his property? Wonder swiftly allays any possible concern that the parents are failing their children by stating that they provide "love and affection to keep him strong." The lyrics assuage any fear one might draw from the dire opening by noting that the child is "moving in the right direction" just before we get the first hint of where this story is headed.

Explicating the parents' dilemma, the second verse offers details of their work which provide additional insight into their plight. Some days the father labors for fourteen hours. Despite this extraordinarily long workday, his pay so low that "he barely makes a dollar." Sad as his father's working conditions are, his mother, who also works outside the home, suffers from an even more reprehensible situation. She "scrubs the floor" not just for one boss, but "for many," and receives less compensation than does her persevering husband ("hardly gets a penny"). Wonder wrote this song just after the decade of the 1960s during which President Johnson had declared a War on Poverty in his 1964 State of the Union address and had fostered hope that America would seriously take on the responsibility of eliminating it. Congress had endorsed this effort by passing the Economic Opportunity Act. But even though the number of Americans in the general population living in poverty had continuously decreased since 1950, poverty still affected certain demographic groups more than others in Wonder's formative teenage years. Population reports published in 1969 indicate that while 10.0% of white

Americans lived below the poverty line, the figure for “Negroes and other non-whites” in poverty was 33.5%. Since over 33% of all families whose income fell below the poverty line were headed by a full-time worker at the end of the 1960s, low-hourly-wage-rate jobs like the ones Wonder outlines in LFTC were often the causative factor (Mogull 1972, 162, 165). In less than a minute, Wonder has described a pervasive working-class condition and conveyed a clear impression of this couple’s work ethic and devotion to their parental responsibilities while delineating their dire economic position. The subsequent two verses are character sketches of the two children in this family. First up is the protagonist’s sister, a black schoolgirl whose childhood takes place in times during which African American females rarely saw people in the media with whom they could identify. This chronic lack of visibility stymied the recognition of the loveliness of black bodies until the Black Power movement of the 1970s accelerated change in American standards of beauty.

The same year as James Brown’s black pride anthem, “Say It Loud” hit the charts, television finally provided a brown-skinned, middle-class female character in *Julia*, a situation comedy that starred Diahann Carroll from 1968 to 1971. But few dark-skinned black beauties were seen in film or television until Hollywood took notice of a captivating UCLA undergraduate named Brenda Sykes on *The Dating Game* and director William Wyler cast her in a featured role in his 1971 release *The Liberation of L.B. Jones*. So strikingly beautiful was this ingenue that she was cast in a lead role within a year of her discovery, portraying Sheila Smith, the black girlfriend of a young white man in the film *Honky*. Her beauty inspires the interest of her white paramour who struggled to overcome the racist attitudes of many whites who interact

with the mixed couple – from his parents to the dangerous rednecks who attack him and rape Sheila when they find the lovers walking alone on a highway at night.

In 1973, just after the release of *Innervisions*, 23-year old Sykes joined the cast of *Ozzie's Girls*, Ozzie and Harriet Nelson's last television sitcom. Her character was one of two female college students who rent rooms from the Nelsons. Although Wonder had already written LFTC by the time Sykes portrayed this loveable, erudite, All-American student each week, comparing the two female characters – Sykes' college student and Wonder's school girl provides insight into the changing attitudes of this volatile period in American race relations. In the third verse of LFTC Wonder introduces the young school girl with some telling words: "His sister's black, *but* [emphasis added] she is sho' 'nuff pretty." Why "but"? My contention is that although vision-impaired, Wonder was keenly aware of the racist, mainstream attitude about standards of beauty that, at best, ignored blackness and often denigrated it. This exclusionary attitude had been prevalent throughout his childhood and adolescent years and was just beginning to change with the Black Power movement and the opening of mass media to black faces and bodies in film, television, and advertising. The turn of phrase Wonder uses seems to assert his appreciation for black beauty as it also acknowledges the residual difficulties some listeners may have in sharing this appreciation. For them, he spells it out. She is not just pretty. She is "sho' 'nuff pretty!" The phrase emphasizes her undeniable beauty. He uses a vernacular expression and articulation that is often associated with black people to accentuate his point.

Wonder devotes the rest of the third verse to this young student who wears short skirts which were fashionable at the time. So far, she's pretty and stylish. "Lord, her legs are sturdy" offers two obvious implications. She is sexually attractive or she is strong – or both. Wonder compliments her body then praises her character by letting us know that she gets up early "to

walk to school.” He begins to wrap up his portrait of the daughter/sister by noting that “her clothes are old,” reminding us of the serious economic challenges her family faces. One last kudo is given to the family in the last line of the verse, which informs the listener that this child’s clothes are never dirty. The family takes pride in their appearance; even if they cannot afford expensive clothing, they find a way to keep her in style and presentable. This is the loving, respectable environment in which she and her brother have been nurtured.

The fourth verse is all about our young protagonist. The first claim about the young man is that he is smart, which is an important fact to keep in mind considering subsequent events in the song. Furthermore, he is a patient person who has needed this quality to endure frustrations in his hometown. He has been seeking employment that is as hard to find as a “haystack needle” because of the racist employment policies of his region. At the end of the second verse, we hear about “the city” for the first time in the song. Once again, at the close of the fourth verse, Wonder sings his refrain “living just enough, just enough for the city,” followed by a duet of vocables on the syllable “da” with his synthesizer. This time, the duet is followed by a vamp on the refrain which is performed twelve times, setting the stage for something innovative and unexpected.

Over the next minute, Wonder stages a dramatic scene that opens with our young hero catching a bus headed for the Big Apple. He arrives and is awestruck by the skyline of the metropolis. Seconds later, as an ominous tritone riff suggests impending danger, a street-wise voice offers the poor youth an opportunity to earn a few dollars which he, impulsively, accepts. The transaction leads to our protagonist’s ignoble arrest by gruff, hardened police officers. Despite his protestations of innocence, he is tried, convicted and sentenced to ten years in prison.



We hear the devastatingly demoralizing sounds of his incarceration through the exasperated voice of a prison guard who calls him “nigger” as he orders him to get into a cell.

The arc of the young traveler’s story is reminiscent of the journey taken by Wonder’s mother, Lula Mae Hardaway. She was born in Hurtsboro, Alabama in 1932 to an unmarried teenage mother and a father who abandoned mother and child. Although this was one of the poorest areas of the country, Lula was blessed by the care and love of her mother’s Uncle Henry and Aunt Virge who raised the young girl as if she were their own. Like the family Wonder created in LFTC, Henry Wright’s family was respected, loving, and hard-working. Lula thrived under the care of the couple she called Papa and Mama until they passed and she was taken in by her eldest sibling. Upon his death, thirteen-year-old Lula was sent to East Chicago, Indiana to live with the biological father she had never met and his wife and children. Soon the youngster from Alabama learned that she was not adequately prepared by her Mississippi education for her new school. Lula dropped out and was kicked out of her father’s home. She was taken in by older relatives who helped her find work as a seamstress. Lula was no longer welcome in this new home after she became pregnant. After the birth of her first child, Milton, she was taken in by an uncle in Saginaw, Michigan. It was in this cold Michigan town that she met Calvin Judkins, a stylish street hustler who became her husband and pimp. He fathered two of her children and forced her to work the streets to help support her three boys, Milton, Calvin, and Stevie (Love and Brown 2002, 71). Both Lula and the youth in LFTC had left the poor but loving homes of hardworking, caring parents for a life in a Northern city that exposed them - two

innocent, trusting youths - to the harsh realities of urban life through the actions of a scheming, street-wise scoundrel.

How does a tale of such heartbreaking woe become a resounding commercial success that is lauded by *Rolling Stone* at number 105 in its list of the 500 greatest songs of all time (*Rolling Stone* 2017)? The story was troubling but topical as the Black Power movement crested in the 1970s. Although Wonder's status as a successful recording artist impacted the song's reception, the authenticity and keen insight displayed by the lyrics captivate the listener's attention. For any song to be successful – especially one with such an emotionally challenging story – the music has to be a strong selling point. In this musically innovative release, Wonder bombarded the listener of 1973 with new sounds and creative mixtures of musical elements that were bound to create a stir. From the modified blues form to the shifting meter to the unusual commingling of genres, Wonder's song was wonderful. Let us begin with the general and move to the specifics.

In this recording of LFTC, the only musical artist heard is Wonder. Although he recruited voice actors for the dramatic scene, all the musical work – both vocal and instrumental – was performed by Wonder. He co-produced the album with two recording engineers who had introduced Wonder to some exciting new technology that he used to accelerate the change in the sound of 1970s rhythm and blues and help give birth to funk. Wonder's associate producers Robert Margouleff, an American from New York City, and London bassist, Malcolm Cecil were a duo who released *Zero Time*, an album that caught Wonder's attention in 1971. These two men would become integral players in Wonder's career over the next few years. However, the story of Wonder and innovative musical technology really began a few years earlier.

In March 1967, fellow Motown artists Diana Ross and the Supremes recorded "Reflections," a Holland-Dozier-Holland composition. The writing team produced the single

which was released in July and rose to #2 on the *Billboard Hot 100* while reaching #4 on its *R&B Singles* chart. This charting must have caught the attention of a young artist like Wonder who intended to expand his audience from its African American base because black artists' releases typically tracked higher on the R&B charts than on the pop charts. One of the signature features of the Supremes' single was the use of a Moog synthesizer, which was a key element in the cutting-edge sound in the new genre of psychedelic music. The following year, Wendy Carlos (then Walter Carlos) released a groundbreaking album called *Switched-On Bach*, which included 12 classical works by the renowned eighteenth-century German composer performed on a Moog synthesizer. The phenomenal success of this platinum-selling album that featured the innovative Moog synthesizer captured the attention of many forward-thinking musicians. It intrigued Wonder, who, like George Harrison and Keith Emerson (of Emerson, Lake, and Palmer fame), visited Carlos' New York City brownstone to experience the Moog synthesizer for themselves.

Wonder's introduction to the Moog synthesizer marked the beginning of an exciting period of creativity for the young artist. By 1972 he had received a competing synthesizer called the ARP 2600 from its designer, Alan R. Pearlman. Wonder commented, "The synthesizer [allows] me to do a lot of things I wanted to do for a long time, but which were just not possible until it came along ... It's just that the ARP and the Moog give you another dimension. They express what's inside your mind" (Pinch and Trocco 2002, 171). His fascination with the endless sonic possibilities created by electronic synthesis led him to Cecil and Margouloff to learn more about TONTO (The Original New Timbral Orchestra), the sole instrument used to record *Zero Time*. TONTO is a multitimbral polyphonic synthesizer based on Margouloff's Moog III which was expanded by Cecil utilizing additional synthesizers from Moog, ARP, Oberheim, EMI and

Serge and his own digital sound-generating designs (Vail 2001). One week after Wonder's twenty-first birthday, bassist Ronnie Blanco played *Zero Time* for him and explained that a keyboard instrument had created all the sound. Soon thereafter, Stevie visited Cecil at Media Sound Studio in New York to check out the instrument he would use on his next four albums. According to Cecil, "He [Wonder] said, 'I don't believe all this was done on one instrument. Show me the instrument'" (George 1985, 180) The meeting went well. After his introduction to TONTO, Wonder and Cecil jammed at Cecil's apartment for four straight days, recording seventeen different songs (Pinch and Trocco 2002, 182-183).

In 1971 change was in the air on several levels in Wonder's personal and professional life, in his industry, and in American politics. On September 14, 1970, Wonder and musical collaborator Syreeta Wright had married in a church ceremony attended by many of his Motown family. When they returned from their Bahamian honeymoon to their new suburban home, an expensive wedding gift awaited them. Berry Gordy had purchased a \$5,000 Moog synthesizer for the couple (Ribowsky 2010, 185). On May 13, 1971, "Little Stevie" Wonder celebrated his twenty-first birthday as young Americans increased their political power. Five years earlier, when sixteen-year-old Wonder was interviewed on radio, he demonstrated his interest in controversial topics and showed that he had already formed ideas about the plight of teenage boys who faced the draft. "I think the biggest problem facing young people today is their fear that there won't be a tomorrow. I think the threat of war has done this to them. They think, 'well, if I won't be here tomorrow I might as well go out and do anything I want to today.' Then they go out and do all these crazy things" (Wonder 1966). In July 1971, thirty years after Congress first considered the issue and after years of anti-war protests, the Twenty-Sixth Amendment to

the Constitution was ratified, finally giving eighteen-year-olds, who could be sent off to war in Vietnam, the right to vote in federal elections.

Gordy's generosity toward Wonder in 1971 had been extended earlier in the year on the day prior to Wonder's birthday when the record label magnate invited his young artist to his estate for the first time. Although over the last few years the two had rarely spoken, on May 12, 1971, Gordy hosted a birthday party for Wonder. Why was the usually tight-fisted Gordy behaving so solicitously toward Wonder in late 1970 and 1971? Might his motivation have been business-related?

Before this critical birthday in 1971 when Wonder reached the age of majority, he hired an attorney whose reputation as a tough negotiator was confirmed by his work for his new client. He had estimated that before the deduction of expenses, Wonder was owed \$3.5 million by his label which would be due on his birthday. The attorney offered to determine what kinds of offers might come from other labels and sent Gordy a letter that arrived on Wonder's birthday, informing the record mogul that Wonder was vacating all contracts with Gordy's companies effective May 13, 1971. Wonder apologized to his mentor and fired the attorney. When he met Gordy the following week to receive his disbursement, the young artist/songwriter was shocked at the amount of the \$100,000 Motown check. He did not expect to receive \$3.5 million but he certainly had not expected the deduction of expenses to reduce his payment to that degree. His response was to send a wire to Motown exercising his option to void his contract and then to leave Detroit destined for New York City and his soon-to-be rendezvous with TONTO.

The financial shock Wonder had received may have been the trigger for the tenacity it took to wrangle the contractual changes he wanted from Motown, but it may not have been the most important factor in his negotiations. In early 1972, he discussed his 1971 album, *Music in*

*My Mind*, in an interview in London: "Yes, sure I was trapped for many years. I'd wanted to do this kind of album for many years. I can't say I just suddenly decided to do it at that point last summer for any special reason other than it was in me to come out right then and I was in New York, to get a place there and met these people who introduced me to the Moog and the studios" (Valentine 1972). It appears he had been living in a songwriting limbo for a while. The perfidious contractual arrangement with Motown had so bothered Wonder that he had spent the last few years of his agreement composing songs in his mind but not writing them down, seemingly to prevent the songs from being seen by anyone who could testify about the date of their creation and make them subject to the terms of his egregious contract (Pinch and Trocco 2002, 183). Now free of Motown's contractual and procedural constraints, he poured himself into long days and nights recording with Cecil and Margouleff as his engineers and co-producers. With no current recording contract, the decision that Wonder would perform almost all the instrumental tracks on the *Music of My Mind* album project may have been made partly because he desired the challenge of that achievement and partly because it kept production costs down. One way or another, Wonder was free of the powerlessness he had felt at Motown over scheduling studio time and decision-making about tracks for inclusion on his albums. Supported by his new studio mates who so earnestly admired his creative ability that they continually taped his studio activities so as not to lose any tasty morsel of music, Wonder was on his way to a run of albums that established his legendary status as a writer and performer. *Music of My Mind* was followed by three more albums with Cecil, Margouleff and TONTO - *Talking Book* later in

1972, *Innervisions* in 1973 and *Fulfillingness' First Finale* in 1974 – ending an important chapter in Wonder's career.

One other significant blessing Wonder received from his collaboration with the TONTO team was meeting their attorney, Johanan Vigoda, who had worked for a record label and had been recruited to find an American record deal for Jimi Hendrix in 1967. Vigoda was seeking a label for Cecil and Margoueff's second album. Wonder hired Vigoda whose presence in Wonder's life seemed to change things for him both personally and professionally. On a personal level, Wonder was in transition. He had left his wife Syreeta behind in a marriage that soon would end in divorce to pursue his quest for freedom in New York. He met and fell in love with Vigoda's secretary, Yolanda Simmons. This important relationship made Wonder a father a few years later. Vigoda also proved to be the right man for dealing with Motown. By spring 1973, he had succeeded in negotiating a new, five-year contract with Motown that gave Wonder a \$1 million advance on royalties, half the publishing royalties on prior work as well as new work, a 12% royalty on sales and, maybe most importantly to the artist, the freedom to record his choice of songs. Vigoda was responsible for another significant career move in 1972. With Cecil's connections in England, he managed to sign Wonder onto the Rolling Stones' 1972 summer tour. This opportunity to perform live and captivate an audience of rock lovers broadened his fan base and laid a foundation for even greater commercial success. His ever-increasing sphere of influence in popular music undoubtedly did not go unnoticed by Gordy and Motown executives during their contract negotiations with Vigoda in early 1973.

In 1971, Wonder, at the age of twenty-one, embarked on new paths, both personal and professional. Two years later, he appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone's* April 26, 1973 issue while he was working on his *Innervisions* album. After the release of the first two of his albums

on which he exercised control, the signing of his lucrative and more equitable new contract with Motown and the completion of the Rolling Stones tour which added many white fans to his already substantial following, Wonder had good reason to be happy. However, he also felt there was cause for concern over political and social issues. This activist side of his nature was evident in December 1971 when he joined John Lennon and other artists on the stage at the University of Michigan at a concert dedicated to freeing John Sinclair, a man sentenced to ten years behind bars for selling one marijuana joint to a police officer. Wonder had met Sinclair in the 1960s when he managed a band in Detroit and wanted to help Sinclair who had already spent over a year behind bars. Given Gordy's determination to keep his artists away from scandal or controversy, Wonder's participation in the concert was another sign of the singer's independence. He shared the evening with counterculture activists, SDS members Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin and Black Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale. Having already examined the story related in the song and Wonder's activism contemporaneous with his crafting of the song, a description of the extraordinary music of LFTC is warranted.

Wonder wrote all the lyrics and employed only a few instrumental and vocal musicians (on six of the nine cuts) on the *Innervisions* album. On three songs (including LFTC), Wonder is the sole musician and vocalist. Two of these one-man releases – LFTC and “Higher Ground” - became mega-hits. On LFTC he sang the lead and background vocals, performed hand claps, and played drums, Fender Rhodes, Moog bass, and TONTO. At a tempo of 98 beats per minute, the prominent bass drives the momentum of the tune. But Wonder's drumming on this album is innovative. To the responsibility of keeping time he added the challenge of developing the drum part by incorporating creative variations throughout the song in keeping with the approach of an accomplished jazz drummer. He understood the importance of this method in creating his desired



groove and mixed the drums more in the foreground than they had been mixed in previous albums (Perone 2006, 48).

As the song opens, the bass and Fender Rhodes establish the beat with a series of quarter notes on the bottom while in a higher register the Fender Rhodes plays chords that “move in and out of phase with this pulse,” on the first three beats then on eighth-note off beats (Hughes 2003, 28). The rhythmic pattern of the keyboard sounds like the rhythm heard in the bridge of the jazz standard “Mercy, Mercy, Mercy” composed by Joe Zawinul and recorded by Cannonball Adderley in 1966. The repeating chord progression moves up in pitch and returns as it alternates between major and minor chords. This modal alternation between major and minor is a practice encountered in African American music genres which allows vocalists to sing either the major third or minor third at different times in the song. Three cycles are coordinated in the keyboard part: a movement of the right hand up in pitch while the left hand remains locked on the same pitch; a movement of the right hand out of phase with the left hand which continues to play quarter notes; and a movement of the right hand into a minor chord while the left hand continues to suggest a major harmony by reiterating the root of the major chord that begins the cycle. An eighth note cycle is established in the keyboard mix by panning between the left and right channels of the stereo mix giving the impression that two keyboards are being played simultaneously (Hughes 2003, 28-29). This semblance of two keyboard instruments adds depth to the texture of the recording and makes a sparse instrumentation arrangement feel more present and enveloping to the ear.

The profusion of sound in *Innervisions* was one of Wonder’s goals for the album. When the press previewed it in New York City, Wonder treated them to an acousmatic experience on a bus tour. The writers were blindfolded so that they might share the artist’s sightless experience of

the sounds of the city that inspired him as he composed the ground-breaking songs on this album. The adjective “acousmatic” is an excellent description the composer’s experience of the world. It derives from the Greek language and is used to describe Pythagoras’ practice of teaching his disciples from behind a veil so that they would hear his words but not be distracted by viewing the source of the lessons. Implied by this unusual practice is the notion that this approach sharpened the impact of the philosopher’s words. Although one journalist concluded that Wonder “wanted us to hear what he himself heard when he was doing the album,” in truth, any New York based journalist already had heard these sounds (Swenson 1986, 94). More precisely, Wonder wanted them to have an experience of listening that more closely approximated his personal auditory understanding of his new home base. Wonder had visited many of the world’s major cities, but he had only recently moved to the singular metropolis of New York City.

Waking up and traveling through this bustling metropolis daily must have presented him with a plethora of fresh auditory stimulation that, in turn, galvanized fresh artistic impulses. He had grown up during the reign of the Beatles and was familiar with the formidable commercial success of albums that included tracks featuring recording studio experimentation with techniques pioneered by avant-garde Western art music composers. In LFTC, Wonder adapted an experimental approach to composition that the Beatles used in the late 1960s on songs like “Tomorrow Never Knows” and “Blackbird.” The technique was developed in the 1940s by French engineer and composer Pierre Schaeffer. Working at Radiodiffusion Française, a Parisian radio station, he and a small group of French composers, pioneered *musique concrete*, a modern compositional approach that employs natural sounds from the composer’s environment (Schwartz 1973, 41). Enraptured by his new surroundings, it is not surprising that Wonder chose

to dramatize his story and enhance the sonic impact of his message with the sound of a bus engine over music containing a background pulse and musical synthesizer riffs that fades out as his protagonist leaves his hometown. During the audio scene depicting his arrest and conviction, many other instances of *musique concrete* enhance the emotional impact of the story. From the police sirens to the slam of the prison cell door, the listener experiences the devastation of this young life as would an eye witness to the event.

Music fades in again near the close of the scene. But the timbre of the sounds of the instruments has changed. Brassy, dissonant riffs reminiscent of the sirens, horns, and discordant city sounds are prominent, reminding us of the changed nature of this young man's life. The funky groove returns, but now the sounds are grittier. Even Stevie's vocal timbre has changed dramatically to reflect the toughness and merciless ambiance of "the City" in which our hardened protagonist struggles after prison life. In a departure from his usual vocal timbres, he creates a disturbing, uncomfortable, deep, rough quality that sends a clear signal that he, the narrator of this tragic tale, is profoundly moved by the story he has just related. He finishes the last verse, delivered in this new vocal timbre, with a warning that he evidently intends for listeners to take seriously. He demands that we become aware of the cruelty inherent in this tale and cautions us that society must change and reject the injustices he has outlined. He insists that our situation is urgent. If we do not heed the warning, "the world will soon be over."

How does a pop music artist engage his audience to such a degree that they will listen to an emotionally challenging narrative delivered in an extended format that is more than twice the length of a typical pop record? Wonder demonstrates his mastery of performance in his solution to this question. Of course, he created a groove that is irresistible. Wonder incorporates several of the elements that respected musicologist Olly Wilson identifies as having African roots:

rhythmic contrast using cross-rhythm that upset expectations and imbue the music with a funky syncopation; a percussive approach to singing as well as to the playing of instruments; antiphonal interactions within vocal parts and between vocals and instruments; and a depth of texture resulting from a high density of musical elements (Wilson 1983, 3).

Wonder also understood that high danceability of a track that carried such a heavy message would help listeners bear the suffering, just as field hollers, spirituals and soul music had helped black folk endure the injustices and oppression of their American condition. But in addition to these features that are found in many rhythm and blues, soul, or funk compositions, the genius of Wonder is evidenced by his inclusion of several unconventional features in the music that demonstrate his advanced comprehension of the impact of meter and his openness to musical genres that are less often appreciated by popular music lovers. After each even-numbered verse in this adapted twelve-bar blues format, Wonder includes meter changes from the original 4/4 to 3/4 then 2/4 before returning to 4/4. Despite the normally jarring impact of shifting from a duple meter to a triple meter, he manages to envelop the shift in a new vocal part that provides sufficient rhythmic and melodic interest to help the listener adapt to the change and go with his new flow. As admirable as this innovative, repeated feature is, the surprise at the end of the tune may be even more impressive. At the end of the third repetition of the triple-meter vocal part sung on the vocable “da,” the music abruptly shifts and exhibits elements of an antiquated musical genre. Several vocal lines singing the protesting word, “no” in counterpoint are joined by synthesized horns playing a Baroque-flavored accompaniment in a high register that commands attention. The music ends on a climactic note, leaving the human voice bellowing, in rich harmony, a determined, sustained “No!” By making this his final word on the

subject, Wonder strongly implies that it should also be society's response to the desperation of a nation living in the conditions depicted by his musical cautionary tale.

## Chapter Four

### Political Activism - “YOU HAVEN’T DONE NOTHIN’”

In the introduction to his biography of Wonder, Ribowsky calls “You Haven’t Done Nothin’” (YHDN) a “lacerating putdown of Richard Milhous Nixon” (Ribowsky 2010, 3). That kind of criticism on Wonder’s part would seem to be a less than gracious way to repay the president who invited the eighteen-year-old singer to the White House on May 5, 1969. In the morning, he and his mother, Lula, met President Nixon in the Rose Garden. Later in the day, he was given the highest honor that the President’s Committee on Employment of Handicapped People was authorized to confer – the Distinguished Service Award (Elsner 1977, 118-119). In a few short years thereafter, although the sharing of a recognition ceremony at the nation’s house with his mother must have been a treasured memory for the twenty-something Wonder, his scorn for Nixon and the Republican president’s policies was evident.

Wonder was not the only artist to critique the conditions faced by poor Americans and by minority communities on Grammy Award-winning recordings in the 1970s. At the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Grammy Awards show broadcast March 1, 1975, Richard Pryor’s *That Nigger’s Crazy* album received the award for Best Comedy Recording. Like Wonder, Pryor dominated the Grammy Awards for several consecutive years, earning the same honor for subsequent albums – *Is It Something I Said?* in 1976 and *Bicentennial Nigger* in 1977. In one of the popular routines from *That Nigger’s Crazy*, Pryor compared black and white church services. To illustrate the exuberance of African American churches, he portrayed a black preacher reading from “The Book of Wonder.” In Pryor’s distinctive preacher persona, he intoned, “A boy was born in

Hardtime, Mississippi” which elicited delighted laughter from his live audience. They recognized that Pryor was quoting Stevie Wonder’s hit song, LFTC.

These two masterful performers and socially conscious writers were leaders in the arena of artistic protest in the frustrating 1970s, a decade that took the wind out of the sails of many progressive Americans who had become emboldened by the achievements of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and the cultural revolution of the 1960s. The 1975 Grammy Award webpage states that on Wonder’s newest award-winning album, *Fulfillingness’ First Finale*, the song YHDN is a commentary on the “climate of the mid-70s in the inner cities.” In truth, Wonder spoke to the sentiments of people within inner-cities and without. Adult Americans from all regions of the nation had recently endured the early termination of two presidencies. Just over a decade after weathering the shocking end of the Kennedy administration in 1963, Americans were faced with the resignation of Richard Milhous Nixon in 1974. These unusual early, unexpected terminations of two presidencies shocked and dismayed the nation.

If the dramatic, sometimes progressive, changes of the 1960s had been unsettling for conservative Americans, the reactionary braking of progressive change in the 1970s had a desultory effect on those who had been inspired by gains made on behalf of underserved populations, minority groups, the working poor, and struggling unemployed Americans. Wonder reached voting age in 1971 during an era that witnessed a backlash in academia, the entertainment media and politics against political, economic, and cultural gains made by black Americans during the 1960s. In YHDN, his dismay over the state of politics and government is evident. Before examining the song, a review of issues that caused concern for Americans who

were striving for a more equitable, just, and tolerant society in the early seventies may be fruitful.

Despite the achievements made by the civil rights movement since 1950, racism still prevailed as the 1960s ended. In the arena of academia, where one might expect to find few scholars who retained archaic, unscientific views on alleged race-based differences, two well-known educators held controversial, outdated positions on the subject and vociferously shared them with the public. Arthur Jensen and William Shockley taught at universities in California. Both had earned the respect of colleagues for the work they had done in their respective fields. The two scholars became known to the public and provoked a national discussion because of the views they held on the question of white racial superiority.

University of California professor Arthur Jensen wrote an article that was described as a “bombshell” by the noted and widely-read *Washington Post* columnist Joseph Alsop four years after it was published in the April 1969 issue of the *Harvard Educational Review* (Alsop 1973). The article “How much can we boost I.Q. and scholastic achievement?” argues that whites are significantly more intelligent than blacks. At universities across the nation it created a controversy over what became known as “Jensenism.” In the early 1970s, Jensen’s view found support from two other acclaimed scholars: the Edgar Pierce Professor of Psychology at Harvard University Richard J. Herrnstein and Hans J. Eysenck of King’s College in London. Herrnstein wrote an article called “I.Q.” for the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1971 in which he supported Jensen’s views on race. However, Herrnstein’s most polemical work is *The Bell Curve*” which he co-authored with Charles Murray in 1994.

Hans J. Eysenck, who was extremely influential in the field of psychology, seemed to provide support for Jensen’s position. Eysenck, a prolific writer of international acclaim, was



“the most cited living psychologist of his time and the third most cited psychologist of all time” (Rushton 2001, 1). His views reached a large audience. In his 1971 book *Race, Intelligence and Education*, Eysenck claimed that genetics displays “overwhelming importance” in determining differences in the assessed intelligence of “certain racial groups” and thereby bolstered the tenets of “Jensenism” (Eysenck 1971, 130). Alsop warned *Washington Post* readers that “a new phase” of “Jensenism” was trending and cited the publishing of Eysenck’s book that argued “the most unqualified support for “Jensenism” and was “now appearing under the auspices of a major university press” [Oxford]. Furthermore, Alsop was concerned that Jensen’s two most recent books, in which he continued to promulgate his theories about intelligence and race, were being anointed with a stamp of credibility because they were reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement* (Alsop 1973). The columnist’s national readership suggests that this topic was being discussed throughout America.

Another California-based, renowned educator who rocked the “race” boat in the 1960s and 1970s, Stanford University professor William Shockley won the 1956 Nobel Prize in Physics. His work culminated in the invention of the transistor, an innovation that had far-reaching impact on the world of technology and facilitated the development of many electronic devices from radios to computers. This lauded electrical engineer became interested in eugenics and conducted research on genetics through his nonprofit Foundation for Research and Education on Eugenics and Dysgenics that was paid for by grants from the Pioneer Fund. In the article “Negro IQ Deficit: Failure of a ‘Malicious Coincidence’ Model Warrants New Research Proposals,” published in the *Review of Educational Research* in 1961, Shockley argues that “an increase of 1% in Caucasian ancestry raises Negro IQ an average of one point for low IQ populations.” At a Nobel conference in 1965, he predicted that humanity was destined to endure “genetic deterioration” because

President Johnson's Great Society welfare program enabled blacks to reproduce at will. Shockley's words were particularly alarming to a generation that had just witnessed victories in the fight against deeply entrenched racial myths and injustices that had presented obstacles to integration and often prevented blacks and whites from eating, attending school, associating, or falling in love with one another (Southern Poverty Law Center). Although the views of Jensen and Shockley were not representative of mainstream academic discourse, their voices provided pseudo-scientific support for Americans who maintained an inaccurate, archaic vision of white superiority, anticipating the coming racial backlash despite the increased visibility of blacks since the gains of the Civil Rights movement. Nixon's "law and order" presidency that touted being tough on crime, New York's Rockefeller drug laws, and the Regents of the University of California v. Bakke Supreme Court decision signaled an unambiguous, consequential ideological shift in America against the progress recently made toward the goal of racial justice. Other reinforcements of disparaging, antiquated ideas about African Americans appeared in the media in the 1970s.

As the decade began, stereotypical images of blackness reasserted disparaging, nineteenth-century caricatures that had been propagated throughout the first half of the twentieth century and were widely disseminated on television and in motion pictures. The activism and visibility of the black community in the 1960s may have reminded corporate America that there was a significant black market that could be tapped for profit. The entertainment industry did just that. As the black cultural revival during the 1920s had coincided with interest in the black commercial market that spread among major, white-owned record companies at that time, white-owned television and film companies dove into projects about black lives in the 1970s. But the divisions that had kept whites and blacks, for the most part, separate and unequal over more than a century since

emancipation created obstacles to an authentic portrayal of black life. White television executives discovered that all-white writing staffs had difficulties trying to capture the essence of black life and create a commercially successful television product. Since the everyday lives of African Americans were unfamiliar to some of these white writers, black writers were often added to black-oriented productions to mitigate the failure to authentically portray African Americans that plagued these shows. But despite the input of black writers and actors, the fact that the decision makers working on these black situation programs were white had consequences. These businessmen understood that the commercial viability of their product needed the support of the white American community wherein stereotypes that had plagued African Americans for the last century lay dormant, if not still alive and kicking. Despite the interest in providing a genuine depiction of the characters' lives that television producers professed, appealing to the much larger white viewing base to increase ratings may have been a more pressing goal.

In January, 1971 Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin premiered their new sit-com, *All in the Family*. After a shaky start, the show was well-received, leading the Nielsen ratings for several years. Along with *Maude*, another Lear production, it gave birth to several spin-offs. Among the popular offshoots of these hit shows were two sitcoms featuring African American characters who debuted in their parent shows: *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons*. The behind the scenes drama on the set of *Good Times* is illustrative of the struggle over the characterization of African Americans in television during the early 1970s.

Esther Rolle and John Amos starred in the roles of Florida and John Evans in *Good Times*. Esther's character had first appeared on *Maude*, a show created around a gruff, liberal white female protagonist. In an episode which was broadcast in 1972, Maude decided to hire a maid. Rolle, a veteran stage actress, portrayed Florida, an applicant for the position. When Rolle

contracted to play the role on *Good Times*, she believed her character would continue to be as strong, outspoken, and self-assured as Florida was in her premiere on *Maude*. She and Amos, who portrayed her husband, were determined that their show would give voice to African American views on controversial issues like busing, crime, and racism. Having already won a battle against those on the production team who wanted the family to be headed by a single mom, Rolle, who insisted that the show portray a two-parent family, thought that her input was a valued element in the decision-making process.

However, when the stand-up comedian J. J. Walker, who was cast as her teenage son, exclaimed “Dy-no-mite” during a rehearsal, director John Rich, (winner of an Emmy award for *The Dick Van Dyke Show*) was convinced that J. J.’s interjection should appear in every episode – and so it did. Soon, major print media took notice of the gag and began to poke fun at Walker. He was surprised when his approach to the role was “demonized for ‘cooning it up’ and being a racist, demeaning throwback to actor Stepin Fetchit” (Walker and Manna 2012, 99). By the second season, the cast publicly lobbied to prevent the show from becoming “embarrassing to blacks” (Robinson 1975, 34). In addition to the cast members, these concerns were shared by African American writer and co-creator of the show Eric Monte.

Monte was born in Chicago in 1943 and spent his youth in the Cabrini-Green housing project. At 22, he moved to Los Angeles in the mid-sixties and, a few years later, sold a script to Lear for an episode of *All in the Family*. Monte and actor Mike Evans (who had appeared on *All in the Family* portraying Lionel, the son of George Jefferson) eventually convinced Lear to produce *Good Times*, a show about a black family in a Chicago project. Monte claims that the show’s producers encouraged the clownishness of the J. J. character from the start and wanted to eliminate Amos’ father role because “a strong black man in a sitcom don’t work” (Monte 2006).

It seems that Rolle's confidence that her show would depict an African American two-parent family was not well-founded.

The two lead actors also had their concerns about the direction taken by the producers. Amos was the first to make his dissatisfaction known to his coworkers and producer Norman Lear. He complained that the focus on the silliness of the J. J. character and the lack of attention paid to the characters of the two children who had high vocational aspirations were misguided. After three seasons, Lear fired Amos because he had become a "disruptive influence" (Callahan 2015). Rolle was also uncomfortable with the direction taken by the writing staff. In 1977 African American writer Michael Moyer was added to the team, becoming the second black writer to work on the show. He recalls that the cast asked him to help them convey their concern over the way the topic of welfare was approached by the white writers who had crafted an episode in which the characters seemed elated and ready to "party" because they would be getting a government check. Acting as a liaison between the two camps, he explained to the writers that having to "go on welfare" was not something that was celebrated in the black community. Instead, it was often felt to be something to be suffered through and a humiliation. The celebratory attitude that had been written into the script was dismaying to the black actors. Moyer also recounted an incident that he considered comical when one of his white co-writers popped into Moyer's office to ask if black girls play with Barbie dolls (Moyer 2012). The disparity between the views of the white and black staff was reflective of American society in the 1970s.

Rolle left the show one season after Amos' departure. To explain the absence of the last parent in the household a storyline was crafted in which Florida married a man who needed to move to Arizona for health reasons. Of course, his new wife accompanied him, leaving behind her three children – a more mature, 21-year-old J. J., 20-year-old Thelma, and 15-year-old

Michael. Lacking both parental figures, this show that had started as a family-oriented African American sitcom lost credibility. A downward spiral in ratings ensured its demise.

During the years when *Good Times* flourished, the controversial genre known as “blaxploitation” proliferated in the movie industry. These films featured black protagonists and targeted the black youth demographic. The predominance of black faces on the screen in the early 1970s belied the dearth of black workers involved in the production of these movies. From the executive suite to the movie set, blacks were scarce. There were no African American senior executives at the major film studios. The craft union members were almost exclusively white (Quinn 2010, 88). But some movie executives tried to project a more optimistic picture about the state of black employment in their industry. According to a *Los Angeles Times* article, at the 1969 NAACP Image Awards show, the Association of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) and Hollywood-Beverly Hills NAACP branch were set to announce that there had been significant improvement in the employment of minorities in films. While the AMPTP president was “very pleased” with the increased numbers of black workers, in March the U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission had recommended that the U. S. Justice Department sue the AMPTP, unions and studios for violations of the Civil Rights Act (Knapp 1969a). Appearances can be deceiving. Despite the increased visibility of blacks in the movies of the early seventies, little had changed in terms of behind-the-scenes employment of African Americans.

Many of the blaxploitation movies provided work for some black musical artists who had raised their voices in protest or commentary. Singer/songwriter Marvin Gaye, whose *What’s Goin’ On* had been lauded as a masterpiece that commented on many social issues troubling America in 1971, composed the title song and soundtrack for the 1972 film *Trouble Man*. The

producers of the extremely successful film *Superfly* hired Curtis Mayfield to compose a soundtrack that eventually earned more than the film. Like Gaye, Mayfield had been known for the uplifting outlook in his songs. “Keep on Pushing,” “We’re A Winner,” and “Move on Up” were mainstays of the civil rights movement. Although these celebrated artists enjoyed substantial financial success from their work in this controversial film genre that depicted many black characters in a less than favorable light, like the motion picture business, the number of African Americans who worked behind the scenes in the recording industry was disappointing. Hollywood-based Capitol Records employed 48 minorities in a 600-person workplace; only two black employees held key positions in the record production process (Knapp 1969b).

Wonder had worked in the recording industry for just over a decade when he released YHDN in 1974. Clearly, he was aware of racial inequities suffered by black artists when, at the 17<sup>th</sup> Grammy Awards show, he asked that his trophy for best vocal performance be given to Duke Ellington’s son because of the immensity of the composer’s body of work. Two years hence, he paid homage to the brilliant American composer in “Sir Duke,” a tune from the *Songs in the Key of Life* album that hit the top spot on Billboard’s Hot 100 in 1977-78. Earlier, in pre-telecast award presentation, the late Charlie Parker won his first Grammy after being nominated for the first time twenty years after his demise (Flippo 1975).

Whether in front of the mic or backstage, African Americans in the industry still were not playing on a level field in the music industry in the early 1970s when Wonder wrote YHDN. One of the most glaring obstacles to continued progress toward equal treatment for the black community was the Nixon Administration and his actions regarding race issues.

First elected to the presidency in 1968, Nixon sent mixed messages about his positions on issues that affected African Americans. On April 25, 1968, in an address to the nation broadcast

on CBS Radio, he delineated his path to alleviating the problems faced by “Negroes” in urban areas. The central idea he proposed was support for black capitalism that would “break the cycle of despondency” by “opening new capital sources” and helping Negroes “start new businesses in the ghetto and to expand existing ones.” He opined that instead of the federal government spending billions of dollars on the cities that “aren’t there,” private capital should be allowed to invest in black businesses. Attacking the approach taken by the Johnson Administration, he asserted that “white America has sought to buy off the Negro – and to buy off its own sense of guilt – with ever more programs of health, of public housing, of payments to the poor,” causing frustration and urban violence (Just 1968). This strategy did not address the concerns of Americans troubled by the immediate crisis of poverty, inadequately subsidized schools, and a lack of job opportunities that plagued urban blacks. Fifteen months later, Nixon’s lack of support for his own stated policy left Philip Pruitt, his African American SBA director for black capitalism, so disillusioned that he resigned his post “in disgust and frustration.” Explaining that “the President just didn’t support the program,” he complained of “rhetoric, rhetoric, rhetoric, but no support.” A comment made by the Executive Director of the National Urban League Whitney M. Young, Jr., echoed Pruitt’s assessment: “Mr. Nixon’s campaign rhetoric has never been followed up by any concrete plans or proposals” (Maynard 1969). Empty campaign promises like this certainly can be construed as a motivation for Wonder’s opening lyrics in YHDN: “We are amazed but not amused by all the things you say that you’ll do” and his refrain “But we are sick and tired of hearing your song, / telling how you are gonna change right from wrong / ‘cause if you really want to hear our views / you haven’t done nothing.”

Less than a month after *Fulfillingness’ First Finale* was released on July 22, 1974, the first single from the album hit the market. YHDN was almost a one-man effort; Reggie McBride



played electric bass and the superstar group of Motown, The Jackson 5, added background vocals to Wonder's lead vocal, keyboard and drum performance. Wonder reached number one on the pop charts for the fourth time and on the soul charts for the tenth time in the U.S. with this song, described by musicologist Craig Werner as the "most uncompromising expression of black anger ever to reach" that position. Werner connects the tune with Nixon's Watergate scandal and resignation quoting Wonder: "The only trouble is that you can always hear the president or people say that they are doing all they can. And they feed you with hopes for years and years. I'm sick and tired of listening to all their lies" (Werner 2004, 200). On the B-side of the single was "Big Brother," a song from his 1972 album *Talking Book*. With lyrics that also accused politicians of insincerity and hypocrisy in their dealings with African Americans ("I live in the ghetto, / you just come and see me 'round election time"), this choice of a two-year-old tune that contains a biting indictment of the government underscored the political critique in YHDN (Ward 1998, 367).

The beginning of YHDN's second verse seems to fit the Nixon-Watergate scandal perfectly: "It's not too cool to be ridiculed / But you brought this upon yourself." These words are more ironic in light of the story of one of Nixon's attempts at humor. On March 23, 1971, as he hosted a White House meeting with dairy industry representatives, Nixon tried to poke fun at his "Tricky Dicky" image by stating, "Matter of fact, the room is not taped. Forgot to do that!" It may have broken the ice and facilitated the discussion, but it was a lie. This was one of the early meetings recorded by the taping system installed in the Oval Office that would become public knowledge in a few years and subject the troubled President to the ridicule of having installed the

tool that provided evidence of his guilt in covering up his actions during the Watergate burglary scandal (Perlstein 2008, 549).

In the last verse of YHDN, Wonder calls America's condition a "nightmare that's becoming real life" and comments on the chagrin of a mind betrayed ("But when misled, who knows a person's mind / Can turn as cold as ice"). Under the Nixon Administration, Americans who carefully followed his statements and actions, were confused by the mixed messages his policies sent. Even though he dramatically increased federal spending on civil rights enforcement, he contradicted that act by easing pressure for segregation by having his Department of Health, Education, and Welfare slow efforts to desegregate Southern schools and by opposing school busing. However, the method to his madness may have been revealed by one of his speech writers, conservative Patrick Buchanan, who explained that Nixon shifted between left and right based on political expediency, disappointing and fostering distrust on both sides of the aisle. He seemed to be motivated by the political gain he could achieve as is illustrated by his resurrection of Philadelphia Plan initially proposed by Johnson's Labor Department in 1966. Under this plan, construction companies receiving federal dollars would be required to hire enough minority workers to meet the demographics of their region. In 1969, Nixon saw this move as a way to add many blacks to the skilled work force but at the expense of white workers which would create tension between two groups that were Democratic mainstays – organized labor and African American civil rights groups. The plan also threatened labor's traditional seniority system of job and benefit allocation in favor of an affirmative action approach (Graham 1996, 101-103). After creating this political problem for the Democratic party, by 1972 Nixon had disappointed blacks by his refusal to enforce the plan to "achieve equal opportunity for

minority workers.” California Assemblyman Willie Brown complained that during Nixon’s first term, millions had been added to the unemployment and welfare rolls (Williams 1972).

In the early 1970s, as Wonder wrote and released YHDN, African Americans could not escape the backlash against the gains made by the civil rights movement in previous decades. In academia, support by noted scholars for white racial supremacy, foot-dragging in the entertainment industry over fixing the underutilization of minorities in the workplace, and Nixon’s inconsistent rhetoric and action with regard to issues of importance to Americans focused on leveling the racial playing field all fed into “the nightmare that’s becoming real life.” In the midst of this confusion, Wonder persisted in his attempt to raise the national consciousness with an up tempo, funky tune that carried a serious message. Inviting the wholesome Jackson 5 to join him in song may have helped lighten the weight of the lyrics with “doo doo wops” reminiscent of the 1950s. But the master writer and performer explained his tactic for delivering a sobering political dispatch by stating: “The best way to get an important and heavy message across is to wrap it up nicely. It’s better to try and level out the weight of the lyrics by making the melody lighter. After all, people want to be entertained, which is all right with me. So, if you have a catchy melody instead of making the whole song sound like a lesson, people are more likely to play the tune. They can dance to it and still listen to the lyrics and hopefully think about them.”

## Chapter Five

### Campaigning - “HAPPY BIRTHDAY” and “IT’S WRONG”

The music playlist at an October 2008 Obama campaign rally in Orlando, Florida generated some nostalgic comments from supporters in attendance. Attendees who remembered the 1960s were familiar with tunes like Jackie Wilson’s “Higher and Higher” (1967) and danced to Stevie Wonder’s “Signed, Sealed, Delivered.” Wonder’s hit had reached the top position on the R&B charts and had ranked third on the Pop chart in the summer of 1970. Throughout the summer and fall before the 2008 election, the song was played after Obama spoke at rallies and was reprised as the Obama family walk-on music on election night in 2012.

At the 2008 Orlando rally, a few attendees opined on the role of music and music makers in their lives. A 50-ish, white, female business owner expressed her admiration for Wonder and Obama stating that they inspire others because “nothing kept them down.” About the African American music of their youth, her husband noted, “Parents just went nuts when we listened to that music in the 1950s. In the ‘60s, everything changed.” A black, female senior in attendance said that songs like 1972’s “I’ll Take You There” by the Staples Singers were “always uplifting” and were “always giving us a message.” These observations were reported in an article in which Professor Mark Anthony Neal shared his insights into the power of the music Obama played at his campaign events: “I think it’s partially a black thing, but also a ‘Big Chill’ thing. Now those people are in their 50s and 60s that grew up listening to that Motown sound. It’s bringing to

fruition all of the promise of that moment 40 years ago, when suddenly you had a mixed race of people listening to black music” (Talev 2008).

Neal’s insights into the role of music in Obama’s campaign make several points that are germane to understanding how popular song and musical artists impact the public. Recalling that it was during the early years of school integration that some of these songs were popular, he said, “It stirs a nostalgia about when folks had hopes that we’d see a kind of society where we can elect a black president.” Although Nina Simone had a song listed among Obama’s personal Top-10 favorites, she and other artists who might still be considered radical to some voters were absent from the rally playlist. On the other hand, Wonder was considered “a safe choice” because he has a multicultural fan base. By including popular hits from the 1960s and 1970s, Obama forged a connection to the inspirational, courageous struggle waged by Americans of various racial and ethnic backgrounds during that period on behalf of the black community (Gorzelay-Mostak 2015, 8). Still, in the article, Neal reminds readers that by the beginning of the Reagan Administration, African Americans “were starting to see erosion of the gains” made during the previous two decades (Talev 2008). That this troubling reality did not escape Wonder is evident from the message songs he composed in the 1980s.

One of those songs is “Happy Birthday” from the *Hotter Than July* album, released in September 1980. Ranked as the eighth best album of the year in *The Village Voice’s* annual *Pazz & Jop* critics poll, it earned the highest spot accorded an African American musician, ahead of releases by Prince and Michael Jackson, the only other black artists listed in the top twenty positions (Christgau 1981). “Happy Birthday” was also released as a single in two versions: in the UK as a 7-inch record, and in the U.S. as a 12-inch. On the B-side of the longer version were

excerpts from several speeches delivered by Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life work and the campaign to acknowledge it were the inspiration for Wonder's "Happy Birthday."

On April 8, four days after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, Michigan Congressman John Conyers introduced legislation crafted to establish a national holiday in honor of the fallen civil rights leader. It did not become law in 1968, but Conyers was persistent and re-introduced the bill every year during the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations. In 1972 James Brown supported Nixon's plan to promote black capitalism and his bid for reelection. When he visited the White House during the spring, months before the election, Brown made one request of Nixon – support for the King holiday. The president refused to lend his support for the passing of the King legislation. It seemed that the entertainer had little clout despite having taken a risky political position for Nixon.

By 1976, Conyers was still pushing for the passage of the bill. Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter supported the idea of the King holiday but did nothing to help the cause during his years in office until January 1979. Senator Ted Kennedy, who was vying with Carter to be the Democratic nominee and had been a co-sponsor of similar legislation for the King holiday, visited Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church during the six-day commemoration ceremonies honoring King's birthday. He delivered a speech that was lauded in the *Washington Post* as a "show-stopper," which prompted Carter to call on Congress to pass the holiday legislation so as not to give Kennedy an advantage with the black vote ("Carter pledges holiday for King" 1979). Carter confirmed his support for the holiday in the State of the Union address.

Although the resistance to the federal holiday was bipartisan, Republicans led the effort to defeat the bill. In the House, King's character was attacked by John Ashbrook (R-OH) and Larry McDonald (D-GA), who alleged that his actions incited violence. By 1979, in the Senate

only Jessie Helms (R-NC) continued to make an old argument that King's association with Communists was a good reason to oppose the holiday. Senator Strom Thurmond (R-SC) favored several oppositional positions: it would be unfair for King to have a holiday when great Americans like Theodore Roosevelt and George Washington Carver were not celebrated; the expense of a federal holiday required paying workers for a vacation day; there was not yet a conclusive judgement on King's place in history; and since the civil rights movement was unfinished so was King's work which made it premature to honor him with a holiday.

In 1980 Wonder entered the fray with a multifaceted effort to win public support for the holiday that would turn the tide in Congress. His first salvo was the release of *Hotter Than July* on September 29, an album containing the song "Happy Birthday," images on the packaging depicting strife over the civil rights struggle and urban unrest, and Wonder's comments under a photo of Dr. King:

It is believed that for a man to lay down his life for the love of others is the supreme sacrifice. Jesus Christ by his own example showed us that there is no greater love. For nearly two thousand years now we have been striving to have the strength to follow that example. Martin Luther King was a man who had that strength. He showed us, non-violently, a better way of life, a way of mutual respect, helping us to avoid much bitter confrontation and inevitable bloodshed. We still have a long road to travel until we reach the world that was his dream. We in the United States must not forget either his supreme sacrifice or that dream.

I and a growing number of people believe that it is time for our country to adopt legislation that will make January 15, Martin Luther King's birthday, a national holiday,

both in recognition of what he achieved and as a reminder of the distance which still has to be traveled.

Join me in the observation of January 15, 1981 as a national holiday.

Wonder seized the opportunity provided by the press and magazine coverage of the album's release to lobby for the federal holiday. *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Sepia* magazines and many other African American press outlets covered his appearances at rallies, special hearings, and musical events where he advocated on behalf of the holiday (Perone 2006, 83).

Wonder's campaign continued through the fall after the election of Ronald Reagan in November 1980 as he toured to promote his *Hotter than July* album. Bob Marley, an artist known for his activism, was slated to tour with Wonder. Due to illness, he was replaced by poet, activist, singer-songwriter and spoken-word artist, Gil Scott-Heron, who was known for his somber social commentary in compositions such as "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised."

In his memoir, *The Last Holiday*, Scott-Heron provides intimate insights into of his experiences on the road with Wonder, who traveled and performed while constantly working on his King holiday campaign. Many of these stories illustrate the depth of Wonder's compassion and sincere concern for his fellow man. After his stage manager was beaten up in Boston, Wonder paused during his concert to address the city's history of racially-motivated violence. On the afternoon of December 8, 1980, Wonder worried about how to handle the shocking news of John Lennon's murder at the concert scheduled for that evening. He decided to wait until late in the concert before announcing the tragic death and sharing his thoughts and memories of Lennon and their friendship with the audience. As the Motown legend talked about the kind of person he thought Lennon was and drew a connection between Lennon's quest for peace and the work of



Dr. King, tears streamed down his face. Scott-Heron thought that the people present had a better understanding of why Wonder was fighting so hard for this holiday. The poet summarized the impact of Wonder's words that night:

It went from somewhere back down memory lane  
To hey motherfuckers out there! There are still folks who are insane  
In 1968 this crowd was eight to twelve years old  
And they weren't Beatle maniacs but they did know rock and roll.  
The politics of right and wrong make everything complicated  
To a generation who's never had a leader assassinated  
But suddenly it feels like '68 and as far back as it seems  
One man says "Imagine" and the other says "I have a dream."

Scott-Heron remembered that the following day's local newspaper article accused both black artists of neglecting to mention Lennon's murder and implied that there were racial reasons for it. He assumed the reporter left before the show ended to meet his deadline, missing Wonder's heartfelt tribute. The unfortunate bottom line was that although those present at the concert heard Wonder's expression of love and admiration for Lennon, the much larger readership of the newspaper was given a false impression of Wonder as racist (Scott-Heron 2012, 276-282).

In February 1981, *Jet* magazine reported that Wonder "spearheaded" a national campaign that led up to a climactic day of events on January 15 in Washington. Wonder called for Americans to join him in the nation's capital for a march, rally and concert on that cold winter day. In the morning, he attended the annual Anacostia King Day march in Southeast Washington for the second year in a row. Then he joined thousands who had marched from the Capitol at the Washington Monument where he addressed the crowds in a speech reprinted in

newspapers across the nation. He told the gathering, “Oppression against one group is oppression against us all. His [King] efforts reflected a moral drive to improve the life of all human beings.” After explaining that this would be a holiday for all Americans and not just African Americans because King championed justice and liberty, he made a request: “So, when you return to your cities, your homes, your jobs please carry on the vigil. For this dream, our dream, goes beyond politics, beyond oppression, beyond mere history, but not beyond hope or love, for this dream shall never die.” (TheGrio 1981).

That evening Wonder performed at a concert co-sponsored by the artist and the Congressional Black Congress to benefit the King holiday effort. In 2014 Gloria Black posted her recollection of the concert at the National Association of Black Storytellers website:

I attended a concert given by the great musician, Stevie Wonder. Needless to say, the concert was sold out. Stevie of course rocked the house with his performance, but when he did his new single, “Happy Birthday”, he brought down the house. We all were in the groove with his lyrics and his music. The emcee asked everyone to stand and join in. That’s when the spirit became intense. The audience began to shout that we wanted a holiday passed by Congress to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. When the lights were turned on, I saw that I wasn’t the only one with a tear-soaked face. We were told that petitions were at the concert as well as in circulation around the world and that each one of us could sign our names before we left the building. (Black 2014)

Wonder used the concert events for the *Hotter than July* tour in 1980 and 1981 to garner grassroots support for the legislation before and after the events in Washington. The following year, he sponsored a second march on Washington, enlisting former Operation PUSH attorney Theresa Cropper as the national coordinator. Wonder promoted the event with television

appearances; his hour with Phil Donahue generated hundreds of calls to the mobilization office from people who wanted to help. Cropper also coordinated post-march measures for participants including post cards they could send to their congresspersons and petitions that could be submitted to the King Center in Atlanta (Trescott 1982).

For the third consecutive year, a March on Washington took place in August 1983. It was organized to commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the march for jobs and freedom at which Dr. King delivered his remarkable “I Have a Dream” speech. This mobilization of over 200,000 participants witnessing economic crisis, the reactionary policies of Reagan, and the rise of the New Right added “peace” as a third goal for the new march (Marable 1991, 4-5). Leaders of the Civil Rights movement joined with political leaders and entertainers on that hot Saturday. Flanked by Mrs. Coretta Scott King and Representative John Conyers, Wonder asked the listeners to join him in urging the Senate to pass legislation that made King’s birthday a federal holiday and to sing “Happy Birthday” with him (C-SPAN 1983). In November 1983, President Reagan signed the legislation that Wonder worked so diligently to enact. Remembering the first march, former Motown president, Ewart Abner told the Washington Post:

Nobody really knew or understood what was happening. Here’s this writer and composer, this entertainer, talking about a political action, a people action, and I don’t think anyone took him seriously. I don’t even think the political forces took him seriously. Until they saw 50,000 people that day. Even before that, in the momentum of the two weeks before, when they heard buses were coming from New York and Chicago, Detroit and Philadelphia, Louisiana and Texas, and the congressmen's offices were being inundated with phone calls. I remember with the platform, we had to have the police say, 'No more!' All the political figures I'm not saying they were against it, but they just didn't take him

seriously were now clamoring for an opportunity to get up on this platform and speak to the people about this holiday. It was an amazing, wonderful thing. (Harrington 1986)

“Happy Birthday,” the anthem for this legislative campaign, weaves several musical tactics together. It implies the universality of Dr. King’s work through the mixing of elements from various cultures in a musical melting pot that symbolizes the multicultural, multiethnic character of the United States. The song’s lyrics highlight aspects of Dr. King’s message of peace as well as key points supporting the argument for the establishment of a federal holiday in his name. Composed by a master musician, the song employs simple chord progressions typical of anthems of many nations, again signifying the universality of Dr. King’s – and Wonder’s – message of tolerance and support for human rights.

The syncopated quasi-reggae groove over a four-on-the-floor kick drum reminiscent of American disco undergirds synthesizer lines that sound like Caribbean musical instruments. Halfway through the intro, as the bass begins to play, one is reminded of Marley’s “Stir It Up.” Wonder’s virtuosic approach to rhythm is evident in the variations played by the cymbals and by the syncopation of his vocal phrasing. Despite the composer’s familiarity with jazzy augmented and diminished chords, he confined himself to simple chords common in rhythm and blues. Combining the reggae feel with the Motown-style, gospel-drive trajectory preceding the chorus lifts the spirit as Wonder urges us to be grateful for King’s efforts on behalf of civil rights and to honor his birthday.

Although it was created to influence a national conversation, Wonder’s song also has international implications. One of the most poignant and important questions raised in the text of the song asks, “Why has there never been a holiday where peace is celebrated all throughout the world?” In this upbeat, simple song, Wonder uses music and lyrics to pitch peace and tolerance

to the world, suggesting that like the musical elements from different nations work toward a harmonious end, so can we. He has performed the song over the decades at birthday celebrations for foreign leaders. In 2009, he and a multi-national coterie of artists from Africa, Europe and America sang “Happy Birthday” to Nelson Mandela at a Radio City Music Hall televised celebration and publicized the United Nations’ establishment of Nelson Mandela International Day in honor of Madiba’s dedication to public service and his three guiding principles: free yourself; free others; and serve every day. At the 2012 Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Concert outside of London’s Buckingham Palace, will.i.am joined Wonder in a rousing salute the British monarch.

Four months after his release from prison, Mandela visited Detroit and spoke to a crowd of 49,000 people at Tiger Stadium on June 28, 1990. He quoted lyrics from Marvin Gaye’s groundbreaking hit, “What’s Going On” stating, “Brother, Brother, there’s far too many of you dying. Mother, Mother, there’s far too many of you crying. These words are a reflection of the South African condition. For how long must our brothers and sisters go on dying?” Stevie Wonder, one of the performers that day, told Mandela, "I'm very happy that you will take back with you to South Africa the love we have for you." One of the songs Wonder sang is “Dark and Lovely,” a song from his 1987 album, *Characters*. This anti-apartheid song begins, “There is a place on earth's motherland where a people die in bantu stands. Man-child at eight will face guns of hate. Womanchild's fate is life second rate just because they're dark 'n' lovely.” Wonder’s lyrics called out South African leader Pieter Botha by name and warns him that “We’re watching” three years before Mandela’s release from prison (WDIV 1990). This composition was not Wonder’s first polemic against apartheid; it was preceded by “It’s Wrong,” a song

released on the album *In Square Circle* that reached the number one position on Billboard's R&B charts in November 1985 and remained there for twelve weeks.

On February 25, 1986, Wonder garnered his first Grammy in nine years for the album *In Square Circle* at the 28<sup>th</sup> Grammy Awards, the same ceremony that honored USA For Africa's "We Are the World" with the Song of the Year Award. The album's reception among major critics was warm and effusive. Although love songs were the major components of the album, it ends with "the politically incisive, rhythmically exuberant "It's Wrong (Apartheid)" (Harrington 1985). The *Washington Post's* Richard Harrington noted in his review that the song encourages black South Africans to continue to have faith that their struggle will succeed ("Hold on tight, freedom is coming") while warning white South Africans of the consequences of the oppression of apartheid. He quotes the passage "The wretchedness of Satan's wrath will come to seize you at last / 'Cause even he frowns upon the deeds you are doing / And you know deep in your heart you've no covenant with God," calling it a serious message. The *New York Times* reviewer notes that Wonder compares apartheid to slavery and the Holocaust in his refrain: "You know apartheid's wrong, wrong / Like slavery was wrong, wrong / Like the Holocaust was wrong, wrong." Comparing its "powerful expression of resolute and righteous indignation" to that of "You Haven't Done Nothing," he adds that Wonder had been "black America's most persuasive musical voice" for over a decade and has an "ability to express a deep and far-reaching sense of personal and social history." He closes his review with an extraordinary commendation: "a musician whose moral stature transcends the pop realm, Stevie Wonder at 34 is almost a force of nature" (Holden 1985).

A few months before the reviews appeared in 1985, the British newspaper *Telegraph* reported that the "force of nature" had been honored at the United Nations. The General

Assembly sang “Happy Birthday” to Wonder in “a rare and emotional tribute” that brought some delegates to tears. He told the gathering about his new anti-apartheid song, “It’s Wrong.” Just two months prior, in March 1985, the government-run South African Broadcasting Corporation announced they would no longer play his music because he dedicated the Best Original Song Oscar he won for “I Just Called To Say I Love You” to Nelson Mandela. In a press conference following his hour with the General Assembly in May, he discussed the banning of his music by South Africa stating that although he had not planned to ignite a controversy at the Oscar ceremony, he was unapologetic for his anti-apartheid stance. Decrying the white minority South Africans’ assertion that “they had a covenant with a God” to take care of the black South African majority, he noted that “all people are created equal, not created to take care of another race of people” (Belbin 1985).

In an October 1985 interview for a *New York Times* article, Wonder explained the genesis of the song. "I actually wrote the song two and a half years ago, after reading an article in Newsweek, in Braille, that gave me a little more understanding of what apartheid was about," Wonder said. "At the time, the demo recording I made of it sounded a little too synthetic. Then a new sort of synthesizer came along, the Synclavier, which lets you take just about any sound you want, program it in, and control the pitch and tone and duration of it. I was able with that to get the kind of sound I wanted." The organization of the chorus with Wonder singing in English and a chorus composed of South African exiles answering in Xhosa forming a call-and-response pattern commonly found in both African and African American music adds a cultural bridge between people on the African continent and Americans in the African diaspora (Palmer 1985).

## Conclusion

When Stevie Wonder reached the age of majority in 1971, he began a period of activism during which he offered searing critiques of injustice in many of his most popular hits. Over the next two decades, the arena of his social protest expanded from local to international issues. In 1973 “Living for the City” chronicled a young man’s journey that began in a small town in Mississippi and ended in New York City. His change of residence, motivated by the same economic inequities and racial intolerance that fueled the Great Migration of many Southern African Americans to Northern urban areas, was dramatized by the unusual inclusion of a dramatic scenario containing an indelible depiction of the tribulations he suffered. Wonder suggests that these trials were precipitated by racist social customs and government policies which cause higher rates of unemployment, pay inequities, and unfair administrations of criminal justice that systematically injure black Americans. When Wonder targeted politicians and government leaders in “You Haven’t Done Nothin’,” (1974) his upbeat, funky music enveloped a withering attack on their corrupt and devious behavior. “Happy Birthday” was Wonder’s 1980 tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and an effective means for disseminating his argument for a federal holiday in honor of King’s legacy. He raised his voice in 1985 to support the anti-apartheid campaign in “It’s Wrong,” expanding the scope of his commentary to South Africa.

Singing about the plight of South Africans in “It’s Wrong” may be viewed as a symbolic closing of the circle of influence that popular music exerts on the peoples of Africa and America. From his depiction of the injustices of economic oppression and the criminalization of poverty in “Living for the City” to his indictment of those who supported apartheid in “It’s Wrong” the stage of his topics expanded. Still, certain things remained consistent. His outspoken comments often expose the oppressive conditions endured by economically and politically vulnerable



groups within the United States and abroad. He targets racism that victimizes African Americans and indifferent, if not unscrupulous, politicians who neglect the needs of the poor as they tend to the desires of economically and politically powerful special interests.

These four socially-themed compositions became hits, enhancing Wonder's *éclat* as a purveyor of incisive, compassionate art. Embarking upon a path of social commentary can be a risky proposition. It is a balancing act which the artist must negotiate that requires sufficient discretion to challenge, confront, and expose controversial issues without alienating those who provide commercial support. An entertainer who plans to have a long career must be mindful of maintaining healthy relationships with concert promoters, recording industry executives, and fans. Each potentially contentious remark is a double-edged sword that may inspire admiration or provoke retaliation. Despite the danger of being misunderstood, misquoted, or misconstrued Wonder accepted these risks and enveloped sobering commentary in masterfully-crafted music.

The *Washington Post*'s Richard Harrington wrote, "As Wonder talks, it is apparent that just as there is no separation of music and man, there is no difference between his imagination and his conscience." In the same article, Wonder explained his commitment to the King holiday effort. "The holiday is for people like Martin Luther King. It is for people like Stephen Biko. It is for people like John Kennedy. It is for the black and Jewish civil rights workers who went down South and were found in a ditch. It is for all those people who in their hearts saw America as being the spearhead, the leading force of getting people in the right place. We have so many different elements in our culture, and we still have so many lessons to learn. But if we really put our energies into the highest and better part of ourselves, we can achieve things that have never

been achieved in any other culture in the world. I really believe that. I have lots of confidence” (Harrington 1986).

It is that “Yes, we can” spirit that resonates so powerfully in Wonder’s music, his words, and his deeds. In Harrington’s article, Wonder states that in 1979, he told Coretta Scott King he imagined a march on Washington that would bring people out to support the King holiday movement. He assured her that he could “feel the pulse of the people” and expected the “best part” of them to manifest. Wonder explained, “In performing, your soul, the better part of you, comes out, both in myself as well as in them.” That may be the crux of his musical magnificence – allowing us access to his soul. It is a soul steeped in faith. “You have to use your mind, but you have to lead with your heart because evil can never, never do anything to destroy a heart that’s in the right place. Never!”

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