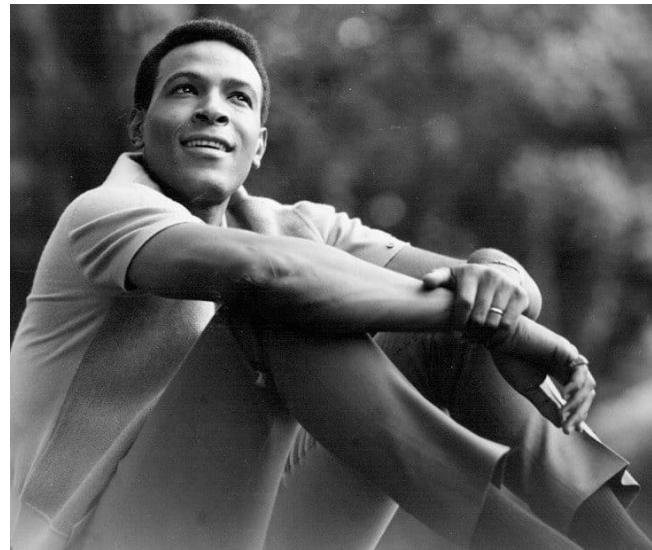


# MARVIN GAYE



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1961–1984</i>	<i>Classic soul-pop</i>	<i><u>I Heard It Through The Grapevine</u> (1968)</i>

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*Only Solitaire*

Artist: *Marvin Gaye*

Years: *1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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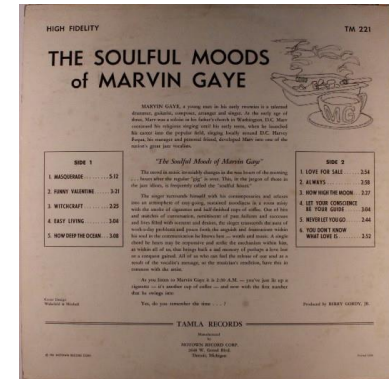


# THE SOULFUL MOODS OF MARVIN GAYE

Album released:  
June 1961

V A L U E  
2 3 2 1 2

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) (I'm Afraid) The Masquerade Is Over; 2) My Funny Valentine; 3) Witchcraft; 4) Easy Living; 5) How Deep Is The Ocean (How High Is The Sky); 6) Love For Sale; 7) Always; 8) How High The Moon; 9) Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide; 10) Never Let You Go (Sha-Lu Bop); 11) You Don't Know What Love Is.

## REVIEW

Marvin Gaye liked Berry Gordy, and Berry Gordy liked Marvin Gaye. That was enough to get Marvin Gaye signed to Motown Records as a solo artist, even if there was precious little evidence of his good prospects at the time; he'd done a little singing in a vocal quartet, a bit of backing for other artists (funny trivia bit — that's Marvin Gaye out there, with several other dudes, singing backup vocals on Chuck Berry's 'Back In The USA' and 'Almost Grown'), and a little drumming as a session player on other people's records. Yet all it took was one fateful meeting with Gordy at his house in December 1960 — a meeting without which we might never have

had ourselves a **What's Going On**, because, for all his notorious artistic stubbornness and tenaciousness, throughout his life Marvin also needed quite a bit of guidance; and for the first decade of his career, he owned quite a huge debt both to Berry and Anna Gordy (Berry's elder sister, whom he married and who was quite a motherly figure to him for a while). It's not even entirely clear what Berry saw in Marvin back at that meeting, other than his charming youthful looks, but who of us wouldn't have envied tha kind of intuition?



The greatest irony of Marvin's first year at Motown, though, is that his and Gordy's story pretty much inverts the classic stereotypical narrative of «struggling independent artist asserting his identity in the face of the greedy and calculating record executive». Gordy, who had only just begun building up the image of his company as the flagman of a brand new pop sound, commercially viable and artistically relevant at the same time, wanted Marvin to become a living brand for that direction. Marvin was really uncomfortable with the idea, though — not so much because he despised that kind of lowbrow teen-oriented entertainment, but largely because it required a kind of stage presence for which he was not ready. Instead, it was *he* who insisted upon pursuing a more «adult» route, singing dusty old standards «for grown-ups» in the good old fashion of a Nat King Cole, albeit slightly modernized for a new decade. In other words, the record executive wanted the artist to be hip, modern, and progressive; the artist insisted that the record executive let him be square, old-fashioned, and out-of-time. And, in what would be the first, but far from the last time, the «stubborn kind of fellow» had the upper hand over the record executive — much to his own chagrin, in the long run.

Actually, the run wasn't even all that long: Marvin's first complete LP for Motown hardly managed to catch anybody's serious attention. First, it clearly wasn't the right place: throughout 1959–60, people had already grown accustomed to Tamla / Motown's initial roster of artists — The Miracles, Barrett Strong, Mary Wells, Eddie Holland — and none of them were exactly doing the *play-it-again-Sam* routine, so an entire album culled from the Songbook for Motown would be like Ivo Watts-Russell signing Michael Jackson to 4AD a couple of decades later. Second, it clearly wasn't the right time: the procedure was such that you'd need to become a relevant contemporary hitmaker *first*, and then start pleasing Grandpa and Grandma *later* — see both Ray Charles and Sam Cooke, two of Marvin's primary inspirations. Third, well... the album just isn't very good, you know. Simple as that.

One general issue with Marvin Gaye is that — and I do realize it's a pretty subjective assessment — while his singing has always been perfectly professional and strongly charismatic, his voice is hardly what I'd call «outstanding»: it does not have its own, unique, immediately recognizable timbre, and his phrasing is devoid of any individualistic trademarks that, with some other singers, could allow even a mediocre song strongly register across your conscience. In other words, for a Marvin Gaye recording to count as great, it needs to have a strong musical backbone behind the nice voice — which means that he really should have avoided approaching the Songbook within a ten-mile radius. For all the flack I've thrown at the likes of Sam Cooke for doing this thing, Sam's timbre, range, and modulation are precious gifts in themselves; next to him, Marvin has a softer, weaker voice, and he hardly ever tries to generate any intrigue with it.

The arrangements are fairly tasteful, more in the vein of late night jazz than orchestrated Hollywood pap; Marvin's own piano playing (and, occasionally, drumming) are at the center of things, with light jazzy electric guitar coming in next (the credits do not list the actual players, but there's some pretty damn nice and fluent soloing on 'Always' and a couple other tracks), and the swingin' groove can get surprisingly tight and jumpy for a record label that is *least* likely to be associated with this kind of genre. But taste is not enough — you have to prop it up with either dazzling virtuosity, which would be too much to require of Motown's home band, or unique arranging vision, which Berry Gordy was unable to provide. The result is predictable: **The Soulful Moods Of Marvin Gaye** is pleasant background muzak that goes against core Motown values and barely offers any glimpses into the glorious future that would eventually await Marvin on the label.

Arguably the only point of mild interest here is Marvin's very first single for the label, thematically and stylistically different from the bulk of the LP but probably included to fill up space or simply to give it another chance. 'Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide' is a slow, sentimental blues waltz with a pervading organ melody (to give it a bit of a Ray Charles feel, I guess); although written by Gordy specially for Marvin, it still feels more somber and serious than the usual early Motown stuff like 'Money' or 'Shop Around' — and far more old-fashioned than required from the times. The B-side, 'Never Let You Go (Sha-Lu Bop)', is actually more interesting: co-written by Marvin's old manager Harvey Fuqua and Anna Gordy herself, it is a tricky dance number, combining two different time signatures, a heavily syncopated one in the verse and a straight Little Richard-esque boogie-woogie in the chorus — although, at this point, Marvin's natural shyness and restraint still prevent him from fully exploiting the song's potential of excitement.

In the end, we are left with mostly historical interest: **The Soulful Moods** was not just Marvin's first album, but the very first LP released on the Motown label (along with **Hi We're The Miracles**, which allegedly followed it in about a week's time) — and, stylistically, also one of the most unusual LPs to be expected from the Motown label. Knowing that it exists will help you get a better understanding of Gaye's complex personality — but keeping it around probably won't help get you a better appreciation of Gaye as a masterful interpreter of the Songbook.

