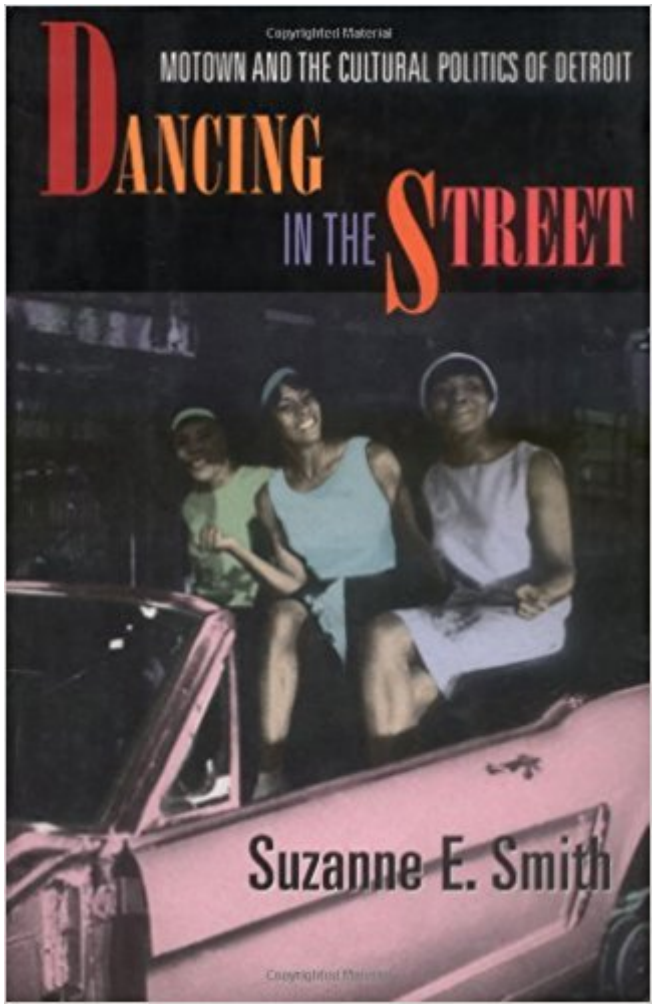
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Dancing In The Street: Motown And The Cultural Politics Of Detroit



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Synopsis

Detroit in the 1960s was a city with a pulse: people were marching in step with Martin Luther King, Jr., dancing in the street with Martha and the Vandellas, and facing off with city police. Through it all, Motown provided the beat. This book tells the story of Motown--as both musical style and entrepreneurial phenomenon--and of its intrinsic relationship to the politics and culture of Motor Town, USA. As Suzanne Smith traces the evolution of Motown from a small record company firmly rooted in Detroit's black community to an international music industry giant, she gives us a clear look at cultural politics at the grassroots level. Here we see Motown's music not as the mere soundtrack for its historical moment but as an active agent in the politics of the time. In this story, Motown Records had a distinct role to play in the city's black community as that community articulated and promoted its own social, cultural, and political agendas. Smith shows how these local agendas, which reflected the unique concerns of African Americans living in the urban North, both responded to and reconfigured the national civil rights campaign. Against a background of events on the national scene--featuring Martin Luther King, Jr., Langston Hughes, Nat King Cole, and Malcolm X--Dancing in the Street presents a vivid picture of the civil rights movement in Detroit, with Motown at its heart. This is a lively and vital history. It's peopled with a host of major and minor figures in black politics, culture, and the arts, and full of the passions of a momentous era. It offers a critical new perspective on the role of popular culture in the process of political change.

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Customer Reviews

Smith (history, George Mason Univ.) uses Motown to examine the shift in African American protest ideologies from integration to separatism. Motown, she argues, sprang from the strong tradition of black cultural and economic self-determination that was at the foundation of Detroit's most important black institutions, such as poet Margaret Danner's Boone House and WCHB, the first African American-owned radio station. Smith chastises Motown for its hesitating to change with the times, as Detroit-based Black Muslims became more vocal in their demand for African American rights and the 1967 riot broke out. She also suggests that the label's relocation from Detroit to Los Angeles in 1972 is final evidence of the bankruptcy of its version of African American capitalism. Writing in a somewhat choppy style and using mostly secondary sources, Smith successfully contextualizes Motown within Detroit culture, but she na?vely condemns the logical consequences of the entrepreneurial spirit that drove its founder, Berry Gordy Jr., from his Detroit home to an international audience. Recommended for libraries serving social historians.-David P. Szatmary, Univ. of Washington, Seattle Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The publication of Dancing in the Streets, is an interesting one for an academic press; there's no shortage of general-audience books on the famed soul label, and other books have plumbed the immediate political ramifications of Berry Gordy's family-loan-turned-empire. But Smith aims not to glorify Motown as a can-do parable of black business, but to define it wholly--as a flawed microcosm of Detroit as much as one of black America. At once symptom and synecdoche, Motown is in her eyes the inevitable sum of its influences that somehow reenacted Detroit's external struggles on its own Grand Street stage. (Peter Rubin Boston Book Review)In her scholarly, informative, Dancing in the Street, Suzanne E. Smith reconsiders Motown, not just as the background music of the city's struggles but as a component of black Detroit's march for civil rights and social justice. (RenÃƒÂ©e Graham Boston Globe)Dancing in the Street is a wonderful blend of thorough research, firsthand interviews and an impassioned discussion of the music which keeps the book far away from the suffocating reaches of the academy. Smith, a Detroit native, has found in Motown's apparent order (its arrangements, performers and beats) the perfect juxtaposition to Detroit's growing disorder (in the riots, police violence and cultural devastation of urban renewal). (Detroit Metro Times)Though we would all count Stevie Wonder, Martha and the Vandellas and Marvin Gaye among Motown's greatest recording artists, Suzanne E. Smith would add another: Martin Luther King Jr...[Smith] is correct when she says it has become all but impossible to separate what happened in Detroit in the 1960s from the music that was playing when it did: as Norman Whitfield, the producer who replaced Holland-Dozier-Holland as the label's primary hitmaker, put it in a song he wrote for the

Temptations, it was a 'Ball of Confusion.' Thirty years later, we're still unraveling it, and Dancing in the Street affords valuable insights to those of us who were there and those of us who weren't...It is fascinating reading for anyone who believes the sound of young America was not incompatible with the sound of struggle. (Terry Lawson Detroit Free Press)[Dancing in the Street discovers] a new approach to what had seemed an exhausted subject. [Suzanne Smith's] self-imposed task is to draw back from the larger picture of Motown's conquest of the international market, setting the company in its immediate context in Detroit, the community from which it emerged and after which it was named, and examining its relationship with the civil-rights struggle...[This book] adds a new dimension to our understanding of the forces that created music which has already outlasted the long hot summers for which it was designed. (Richard Williams Times Literary Supplement)In telling the story of the [Motown] label in its habitat, and telling it as an everyday tale of race in America, Suzanne Smith performs an act of historical rescue. (Andrew Blake The Independent)Now, thanks to the publication of the fascinating Dancing in the Street music fans as well as lovers of social history can grasp for the first time the unique nature of Detroit's daily social scheme and its impact on the lives of those who embodied the Motown Sound during the parallel cresting of the civil rights movement...Smith takes readers into the heretofore unexamined sphere of Detroit's sidewalk-level social ferment from Motown's founding in 1958 on through the city's devastating riots in 1967 and the related early-'70s flight from its precincts of the two enterprises central to its modern identity...If you've never heard about the Concept East Theater; or of WCHB, the first radio station built, owned, and operated by African-Americans; or never knew about organizations like the League of Revolutionary Black Workers; or the Freedom Now Part (the first all-black political party in the nation), Smith's text will explain their rich legacies. (Timothy White Billboard)Smith performs a valuable service in showing that Gordy, rather than being the rugged individualist often depicted, was the product of a hard-working and supportive family, one that had displayed a relentless self-help ethic for generations...To be sure, Smith is mainly concerned with the larger issues, but she does a good job of giving behind-the-scenes glimpses of the Supremes, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder and other Motown myths. While capitalism worked very well for Motown and its principles, Smith concludes, it was a far less effective system in exposing and eradicating the roots of racism. (Edward Morris Foreword Magazine)Suzanne E. Smith investigates the connections between music and a positive force: civil rights. Smith's compelling work depicts the exponential growth of the Motown recording company and reveals its role in shaping the civil rights movement in the urban North. (Publisher's Weekly)A finely rendered history of the storybook success of the 'Motown Sound,' arguably the most resonant cultural development of its time, within the localized context of

urban turmoil and the civil-rights struggle...Relying on primary sources and on the recollections of Motown's acts, employees, and session players, Smith touchingly captures the industrious determination of a cultural community whose ambitions were underwritten by social cohesion and a generations-strong work ethic...She captures the spirit of this exciting time by focusing on individuals (Nat King Cole, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Motown discoveries like the Supremes and Marvin Gaye) whose actions were central to their era's cultural and civil-rights triumphs. More sobering is her re-creation of events leading to Detroit's 1967 riots, when intransigents on both sides of the color line overrode more moderate, conciliatory factions, leading the city toward a conflagration that permanently sundered the region's black and white communities. This reconstruction of Motown's meteoric popular rise during an era of fractious social division is compelling and informative for both aficionados of the music and students of American urban history. (Kirkus Reviews)That Detroit birthed a black music style, Motown, that conquered the white market at a time of unprecedented racial and social upheaval has attracted much comment. Investigation, Smith observes, has concentrated on how a black company, Motown Records, succeeded with white audiences and on the civil rights movement's effect on that success by fostering 'broader cultural integration.' Smite probes deeper...Tough stuff for a pop music book, but Smith answers rationally and evocatively in a serious book about the music biz that is excellent for pop music collections and downright obligatory for serious pop culture collections. (Booklist)Smith argues that [Motown's] immensely successful black-owned, Detroit-based corporation had an ambivalent attitude towards the changes brought about by Civil Rights campaigners in the 1960s: its music was designed for a multiracial audience, yet engaged with African-American politics. (Financial Times 2000-12-16)Smith places Motown in its immediate context in the Detroit black community from which it emerged. She presents a focussed account of the city in the grip of social and political change. It is the approach which will endear the book to readers of both music journalism and historical narrative...Smith has used the rich tapestry of the Motown sound to present a truly exceptional book. It is well-argued and thought-provoking. (J. Ahmed Awaaz)Dancing in the Street, by Suzanne E. Smith, explores 1960s Motown music and culture against the backdrop of Detroit itself. She contrasts the racism that greeted migrating black auto workers with the shrewd way Motown created upbeat music that seemed to erase color lines. As Smith sees it, music and culture had to meet. (David Hinckley New York Daily News 2001-01-10)While music in white society was seen as a diversion from the real world, Smith argues that in the black community it constituted daily life. Weighty, thorough stuff. (Lois Wilson Q Magazine 2001-12-01)By pulling back "the veil of nostalgia that enshrouds" the Motown sound, Professor Smith provides a clearer and more realistic

view of the accomplishments and limitations of Motown, the sound and the company. The study concludes that Motown's historical legacy encompasses outstanding contributions to the history of popular music, to the history of Black capitalism and to the history of the civil rights movement and race relations...This thoughtful and well-documented study will help readers to understand how "cultural politics" operates at grass-roots level. It will also provide them with an informative account of the Motown sound of the 1960s. (Race Relations Archive 2002-05-02)Smith details the connection between the rise and success of Motown Records and the more specific histories of Detroit's civil rights struggles…Dancing in the Street does and excellent job of detailing the fine line between the production of goods and the ideology behind that production. Suzanne Smith gives the reader an interesting history of Detroit in the1960s and of Motown and its cultural and musical impact, but she also provides a road map for other studies that seek to use culture as a means to understand larger historical situations. (Kenneth J. Bindas Historical Review)Suzanne Smith's wonderful new book, Dancing in the Streets: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit, seeks to resituate the Motown sound within the history of the Motor City and, more broadly, to reconnect it to the larger historical moment of African American activism that was the 1960s. As Smith reminds us, a Motown hit like 'Dancing in the Street' was 'never just a party song'. From the outset Smith's engaging narrative immerses readers in the fascinating tale of how Motown rose from its humble beginnings in Detroit to become a corporate conglomerate far from its Motor City roots…she must be given tremendous credit for identifying just how powerful and malleable this record company was as a symbol of the tumultuous 1960s. (Heather Ann Thompson Labor History)

Motown is inescapable these days. I was talking with a friend on the phone today and she was mentioning how Michael Jackson was on TV in Tokyo. Motown directly and indirectly has influenced black culture so much and this Dreamgirls moment is a mighty opportunity to peer beyond the veil and see some of the less talked about sides of Motown.Many focus on the content of Motown music but Motown as a case study in Black Capitalism is a more prickly topic. Suzanne Smith chooses to highlight several episodes in Motown's history against the history of Detroit that was taking place behind it. In this book you're getting exposed to some lesser known events in Motown's history along with community history of Detroit. This book will be of greatest interest to scholars in the music business and urban history. I don't feel that this is the best place for those to turn who just like the sound of Motown's music and want to learn more.Suzanne Smith's perspective is that Motown had to be a Black Business due to the nature of its times and the affect that its music had on its surrounding community. In a little bit over 250 pages of text [thorough academic references take up

the rest], it’s hard to make a rock solid case for that point. Conventional wisdom is that Berry Gordy was a *family* capitalist more than a black capitalist and Motown was more about making money for the Gordy family than the Detroit community. Motown struggled to scale up when the Supremes hit big at the same time that the nation lost its faith in coalition politics. Rather than go Black Power, Gordy became focused on Hollywood and abandoned the grassroots foundation of Motown. I feel that’s more the interpretation in other books that I’ve read on the topic and this book wasn’t thorough enough to overturn that perspective.On the other hand, this book certainly spices that conventional wisdom up a bit. I recently purchased and read Perniel Joseph’s "Waiting ’Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of the Black Power Movement". This book offers an effective cultural complement to that work. Joseph talks about Rev. Albert Cleage, father of popular novelist Pearl Cleage. In Dancing in the Street you learn more about the cultural battles that Detroit leaders like Rev. Cleage and Rev. C.L. Franklin, father of Aretha Franklin, were fighting to raise the status of black people in a city that was losing industrial jobs.There are some stories in this book that add complexity to my understanding of Motown. I did not realize that Langston Hughes had recorded for Motown. I did not know that the Supremes had recorded a public service movie for a campaign to raise money for a local charity and that Florence Ballard was included in the movie despite Cindy Birdsong’s replacing her to maintain ties to the hometown fans! Like Barack Obama in 2007, Motown had a delicate balance to maintain with national and international ambitions as a goal even as they had to continually convince local talent to be part of the Motown family at submarket wages. I think that this book was written well before the documentary Standing In the Shadows of Motown, and that makes it seem a little hollow at times. On the exploitation of artists, this book focuses more on the Holland, Dozier, Holland suit as an example of exploitation and chooses not to engage in the biographies of the artists as much.I feel that this book would have needed to be more detailed and have more primary interviews with living Motown artists and some new interviews with Berry Gordy by the author to be a highest priority read for Motown heads. As it stands, this is still a good book for those interested in urban history and some of the less frequently told tales of the Motown empire.3.5 stars.--SD

Suzanne Smith deserves tremendous credit for transforming her love of Detroit, her home; her love of Motown, the soul music of her generation; and her love of historical analysis, the career she has chosen, into a remarkably readable and indeed breathtaking review of a city, a time, and a musical genre that is too often neglected. Sure, the most celebrated heirs of the Motown legend, the Jackson family, Diana Ross, Stevie Wonder, achieved fame and fortune. But Barry Gordy’s Motown

-- the Motown of European-Americans like Suzanne Smith, and the Motown of all of Detoit's people of color, needs to be remembered often and with affection. That Suzanne Smith can tell the story of Detroit in the turbulent 1960s with such style and grace, is a testament to her skill as an analyst of culture and her skill as one of the next generation of honored historians. Presently at George Mason University in Virginia, look for Professor Smith to soon teach from a tenured chair in Ann Arbor, Michigan; New Haven, Connecticut; or Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Professor Suzanne E. Smith' project *Dancing in the Streets: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* is a well-written and fascinating work of revisionist, myth-busting history. For perhaps no other musical institution has been given such a large free pass for (mis)representing its founder's ideology as the company's actual history.The story of Motown is usually told as the early story of Berry Gordy, a member of an Black entrepreneurial family who borrows $800 from his other family members and ends up the king of a musical empire, thus proving the Horatio Alger myth that anyone (even an African-American) with a little grit and determination can succeed in America. But such a story fails to account for much of the instituional, and ideological factors that made a specific type of entrepreneurial cultural production possible in Detroit, Michigan. Along with churches, temples, businesses, newspapers and activists, we are treated to a history of Motown that is deeply inscribed in an underclass familial net of relationships and social networks, given a boost by black media and a history of both jazz production and humanistic training for songwriters and musicians in the Detroit educational system. Not in the least, there was the automotive industry, which was both a source of Black humilation, frustation, and yet inspiration for adapting technologies and industrial processes of streamling and assembly-line production. Motown literally manufactured its artists using the same separate teams for songwriting, backup production, etiquette and image cultivation for all its artists. As the business grows the model remains, although soon Motown is a multi-million dollar international industry, and no longer a small paternalistically run family operation.Throughout it all, Motown is given a both a special place in the Black community and a difficult role in attempting to market its product to a larger white (and mostly teenage) audience. Indebted to the civil rights ideologies of Booker T. Washington and Carter G. Woodson, Motown maintains an ambivalent relationship with the fracturing civil rights movement and its divergent leaders and interests. As the tumultuousness of 1967 and 1968 come forth, the fissures at Motown erupt, as many artists demand a greater profit-sharing, and more creative control over their music and roles at the company. We see and follow the careers and songs of the Supremes, Little Stevie Wonder, Martha and the Vandellas, and well as The Miracles and Marvin Gaye. Smith builds a woven patchwork of

cultural history and its emergent politics around several different themes, such as the rise and ultimate failure of Black capitalism to remain tied to its original community, the uses or Motown for the greater Detroit black community, and the role of other Motown among other institutions in ameliorating economic and political hardship for the Black community, both locally and nationally. We get to set not only the production side of Motown, but also the myriad ways that the music was inextricably interwoven and read into the lives of those who held it dear to Detroit' heart.Methodologically, Smith does all this by using the theoretical perspective of Raymond Williams, who coined the concept "cultural formation." In Williams' view, it is impossible to understand "an intellectual or artistic project without also understanding its formation." Cultural formations are "simultaenously artistic forms and social locations." The relationship dynamic between the two structures the formation that emerges as a result of the synergistic effects of the individual projects, agents, and institutions involved. Each functions as a distinct agent with its own agendas and motivations, constituting a complex mosiac of reactions, relationships, and tensions. This is particularly well suited to an analysis of Motown Records, precisely because of the culturally mythological status it has acheived---an American everyman's music. But even the deep seated agendas and motivations that gave birth to this acheivement of seemingly apolitical universalism are themselves deeply political and reflect political consequences of judgments. These judgments to aggresively pursue a project of Black capitalism modeled on the industrial production of the automotive industrial ("assembly line production" of hit songs) are the efforts of Detroit's most famous "cultural producer," regardless of how the company may have attempted to steer clear of explicit poltical messages in its products as much as possible.All in all, the book is a significant addition to recent scholarship. In depth for the cultural historian and Motown fan, but very easy and user-friendly for the casual reader. The book has been criticized for its approach to Black capitalism, but Smith's perspective is in no way "naive." Rather, it is solidly based in historical political economy of African-Amercan underdevelopment as discussed by Manning Marable, among others. Her criticism of Gordy is tempered, and is presently more as the inevitable consequence of becoming a large impersonal corporation that still uses paternalistic rhetoric towards its cultural workers and larger community while acting solely in its own self-interest. If Smith draws largely on black newspaper accounts, autobiography and insider media, it is not because she wishes to avoid "primary" sources, but is instead interested in drawing a picture of the relationships and interactions that emerge at the time among institutions as well as people--something not easily obtainable from interviews and other types of so-called "primary sources" years later. Of course, the political and hermeneutic assumptions inherent in classifying some sources as primary and others as secondary

are themselves sometimes suspect. But that is a discussion for another time and place.

An incisive combination of music journalism and pathbreaking social history about the city, people and circumstances that gave rise to, participated in, supported,and finally watched the physical exit from the Motor City in the early ’70s of Motown Records. A vivid and unforgettable study of the roots of an important facet of American cultural history. Excellent.

I knew most of the information. The best thing was the photo on the front of the book and that was because I like Martha & the Vandellas.

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