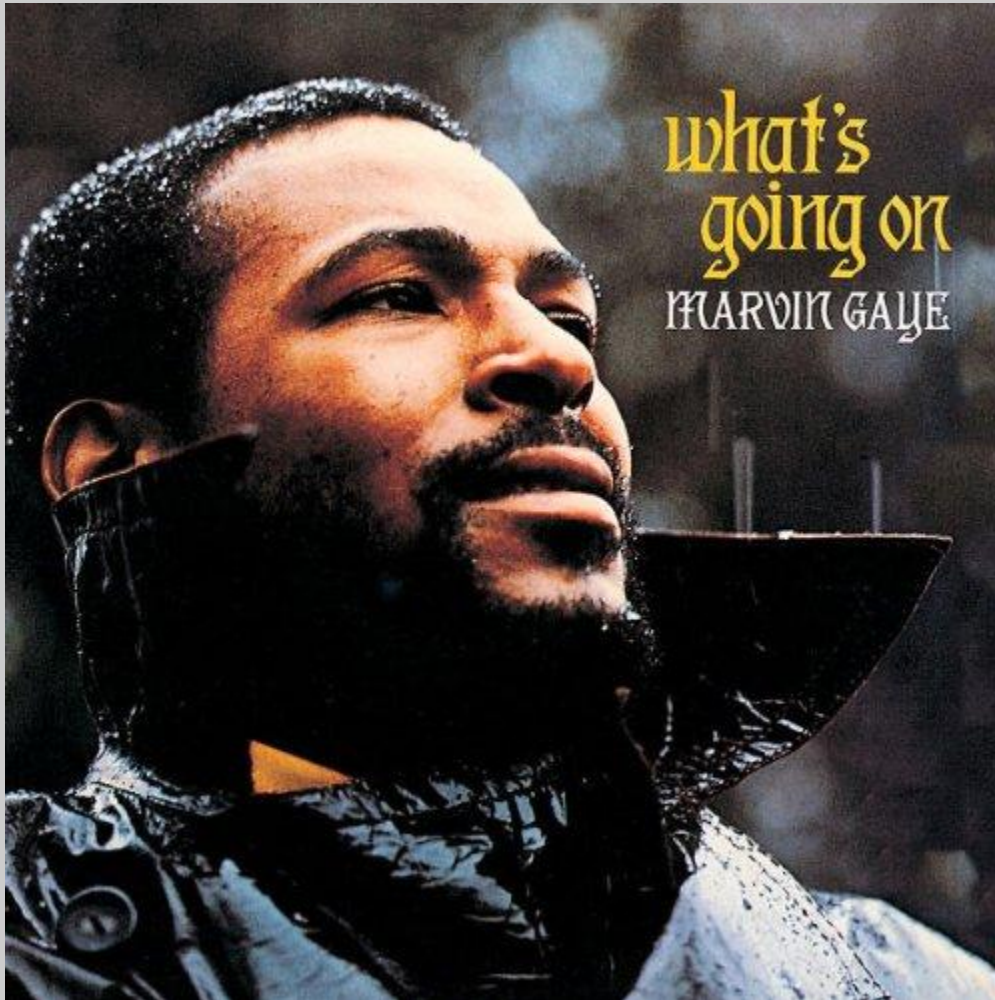


What's Going On by Marvin Gaye

Motown legend and singer Marvin Gaye would have turned 81 years old this year if not for his tragic murder at the hands of his own father at the age of 44. It is a shame he's not around anymore and so is the case with many of the musicians and others that worked on his seminal *What's Going On* album released 50 years ago.

There is a lot to the album as far as styles and influences go, from soul and blues to gospel and jazz, with a lot to say about the state of the world and the environment at the time. There are a lot of factors that make it a great album, most notably the orchestral arrangements by David Van De Pitte, which gives the album its seamless flow, as well as the songs themselves and the long list of musicians who took part. Not everything is known about the album's production, including who played what tracks.



There is another fact about the album that has been a personal challenge of mine in what has turned into a quest. That is, what is the percussion sound (on beats 2 and 4) that dominates “Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)” - the album's biggest hit - and recurs throughout the rest of the record?

The only reason I decided to find out is because last summer a friend asked me “do you think that sound is meant to simulate a submarine sonar?”



The more I listened to it again, however, it was remarkable how much like a sub sonar it sounded.

“No,” I replied, reasoning the album has no nautical or military aspect to it and that it just wouldn't make any sense. The more I listened to it again, however, it was remarkable how much like a sub sonar it sounded. Nothing special about the sound except it really carries the rhythm of the song and gives it an ethereal quality, which became the real Marvin Gaye sound, even emblematic of the early 70s soul sound.

To me it sounds like a temple block struck with a rubber mallet with lots of reverb, but that's lots of reverb. I'd listened very carefully to the album hundreds of times long before that question was asked, it became somewhat of an obsession to find out how they did it.

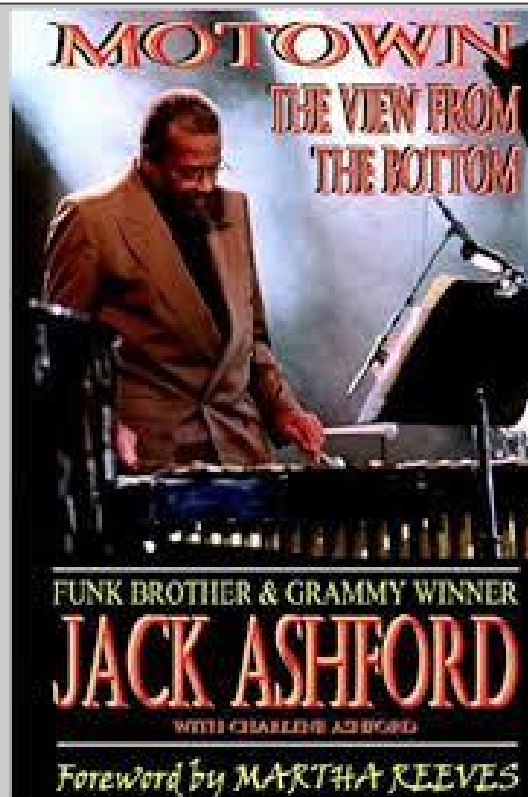
Since then, I have read every book I could find about Marvin Gaye and even contacted Motown to interview a percussionist who played on the album. I began with the Motown History Museum, which was little help. Those I managed to get on the phone sort of laughed at me and were urgent to get me off the phone, but I did get a few links to musicians that I might have found myself anyway.

One of them was Jack Ashford, a percussionist and one of the “Funk Brothers” who played a lot of Motown sessions in the 60s and 70s. He’s credited on the *What's Going On* album so I figured what better place to start. Email after email, letters and phone calls produced no replies so I was out of luck with him as well as plenty of other musicians, engineers and arrangers who worked on the album.

Here’s a sample of one of my letters:

Hello Mr. Ashford,

I’m writing a short piece about the “Mercy Mercy Me” song. I’m a freelance writer and had a few questions about the recording sessions of the album - what instruments were used and mainly how you got the percussion sounds. If you would answer a few questions or let me know who to contact, that would be great. Thank you very much for your time and help and best of luck in the New Year. - Bob Deakin in Connecticut.



As a reporter, I’m used to research and cold-calling people with odd questions, so it wasn’t a great effort on my part but after a while I was getting frustrated. Granted it was 50 years later so many of them are not around anymore and many more don’t maintain a public profile.



After months of research, I'm still in the same place as I was before but I haven't quit. What I have found out is that the percussion tracks were recorded at the Motown studios in Detroit between 1970 and 1971 and all the orchestrations and backing choruses were recorded at facilities in Los Angeles.

Beyond that, this investigation is still a work in progress. I don't believe the temple block sound was meant to replicate a submarine sonar, I just think it sounds great, and probably involved no more thought than "okay, that sounds good, we'll keep it" after two or three takes in the studio. Who knows, maybe it was recorded in a big hallway, bathroom or staircase. That's the kind of story I'm looking for.

However, it was recorded, it probably took no more than a few minutes, which is a lot less time and effort than I've spent trying to find someone just to tell me about it.

Mercy, mercy me.