



BLACKFORUM

the Sound of Struggle:

A guide to **Black Forum Records** by **Amar Patel**

'I'll Be There'. 'Baby Love'. 'Ain't No Mountain High Enough'. 'I Want You Back'. 'Tears of A Clown.' These are just some of the soul standards that Motown gave us in the Sixties. The Detroit label was like a precision assembly line back then, constructing catchy classics that popped out of car stereos nationwide. More than 100 of them reached the US top 10, as once-segregated audiences began to sing from the same songbook. Motown was "the Sound of Young America".

But these were songs in the key of love, largely detached from the ensuing turmoil of Vietnam, the civil rights struggle, Black Power, bloody riots and countless other sources of tension. There were flickers of social commentary such as The Supremes' 'Love Child' (from 1968), which discourages premarital sex and childbirth out of wedlock. But impresario Berry Gordy was otherwise focused on being a businessman, not an activist.

Many consider 'What's Going On' to be the turning point at Motown. Gaye's 1971 opus was inspired by his brother Frankie's bleak recollections of Vietnam, and connected atrocities like the Kent State University shootings. This was the one-time crooner surveying a decaying planet and pleading to a bitterly divided nation with an uncertain future.

Hitsville didn't just produce pretty pop for the masses. With black consciousness on the rise and America in crisis, Motown decided to also make a space for poetic political statements and militant soul

But it turns out that Motown had already made a powerful statement the previous year with the launch of Black Forum Records. Over the course of three years, this small imprint released eight albums including rousing speeches by Martin Luther King Jr and Stokely Carmichael as well as poetry from Langston Hughes and Amiri Baraka, and songs by the Black Panthers' Minister of Information Elaine Brown.

So what prompted Gordy to throw caution to the wind and join the revolution? The simple truth is that he was under fire from all sides. Black DJs in Detroit had temporarily boycotted the label, irritated by Gordy's coveting of white Middle America. Acts such as The Supremes and Martha Reeves were being quizzed by journalists about their political stance.

Although they couldn't sing about it explicitly, many artists felt part of the civil rights movement and strongly believed that Motown could both reflect and inspire social change. Speaking in 2009, Abdul 'Duke' Fakir of the Four Tops said, "We looked at Martin Luther King and we thought, he's doing the same thing on foot that we're doing on the radio. I like to think that we were softening the blow for him a little bit." ►

Introducing
BLACK FORUM
 THE MOTOWN EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL LABEL

LANGSTON HUGHES BLACK FORUM

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. WHY I OPPOSE THE WAR IN VIETNAM BLACK FORUM

STOKELY CARMICHAEL BLACK FORUM

BF
 BLACK FORUM

"Black Forum is a medium for the presentation of ideas and voices of the worldwide struggle of Black people to create a new era. Black Forum also serves to provide authentic materials for use in schools and colleges and for the home study of Black history and culture. Black Forum is a permanent record of the sound of struggle and the sound of the new era."

Available soon:
 "BLACKS IN VIETNAM"
 "BLACK UNITY"—JAMES BALDWIN
 "THE GOOD COLORED MAN" (Poems by Ted Joans)



Museum created a Black Forum display including several of the original LPs. They also ran a special series of discussions moderated by local professors, and Motown Mic – a spoken word competition to coincide with Black History Month.

Although Black Forum's continued relevance is obvious, Amiri Baraka spelt it out to Alvin Hall before he passed away: "Those things we were addressing ourselves to, still haven't been solved. Even though we had a strange run to the top, there would be no Obama without Motown, Rap Brown, Panthers, Malcolm X, Dr King..."

And what about those rumours of unreleased albums in the vaults? A Black Forum poster from 1971 mentions upcoming releases from James Baldwin (Black Unity) and poet Ted Joans (The Good Colored Man). Pat Thomas says he found an article from an April 1971 copy of the *Philadelphia Tribune*, which mentions "a whole slew of releases about to come out". Eldridge Cleaver, Julian Bond, civil rights activist Andrew Young Jr... If Black Forum truly is a "permanent record", then they are somewhere ... waiting to be discovered.

For now, here are a few notes on the releases we do know exist. Try Discogs or eBay.

Dr Martin Luther King – Why I Oppose the War in Vietnam (1970)

This Grammy Award-winning recording was actually the third King speech that Motown released but the first on Black Forum. Delivered at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Georgia on 30 April 1967, King shares the pulpit with his father to denounce Vietnam and label his own country as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today". He makes the link between racism, inequality at home and conflict abroad, "compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor, and attack it as such". King rejects accusations from those who equate dissent with disloyalty. No, for him, silence is betrayal. On the back of the LP, producer Junius Griffin says: "...this sermon, more than any other I heard Dr King preach, is a vivid portrait of his moral agony but framed by a spiritual hope carved from his personal theology."

Stokely Carmichael – Free Huey (1970)

At Huey Newton's Oakland birthday rally in February 1968, Carmichael was in transition. He had been ousted from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and was gravitating towards Malcolm X's "by any means necessary" approach. Bobby Seale spoke on stage that day, as did H Rap Brown. But it was the Panthers' then Prime Minister that really got the 5,000-strong crowd going, taking aim at "the honky" and booming Black Nationalism down the mic. At crucial times, he would echo his own words to hypnotic effect. "We must first develop an undying love for our people. Our people. Our people. Our people. Undying love. If we do not do that, we will be wiped out." In the face of resistance, Carmichael is deadly serious: "On every level in this country, black people got to fight. Got to fight."▶



◀ After King's assassination on 4 April 1968, Gordy was under great internal pressure, says Pat Thomas, author of *Listen Whitey: The Sights and Sounds of Black Power 1965 – 1975*. "Some of the younger Motown employees started to say to Berry 'it's time to step up to the plate'," he wrote.

Gordy was a supporter of King and had previously released two of his speeches on the Gordy label – The Great March to Freedom from 1963 (which contains elements of the iconic I Have A Dream) and Free At Last five years later. Beyond being seen to do the right thing, Gordy understood the value in archiving historical moments such as this in a pre-YouTube age.

Nevertheless, he was walking a tightrope as he explained in 2014. "The Black Power movement wanted me to stand up and run the 'white devils' off the face of the earth. That's not what I'm about, exactly. I'm just trying to put out music. I'm just trying to put out good songs people want to hear."

King's death clearly spurred him into action. He hired three men to oversee Black Forum: Ewart Abner, manager of acts such as Stevie Wonder, founder of the Black Music Association and an NAACP member; Junius Griffin, Motown publicity director who had previously written speeches for King; and George Schiffer, Gordy's copyright lawyer who had also worked as lead attorney for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in New York City.

In broadcaster Alvin Hall's BBC Radio Four documentary about Black Forum, Professor Suzanne E Smith, author of *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit*, tells him that "[Abner and Griffin] were the ones who had a vision and sold it to Gordy. I interviewed both of them and they were very clear to me that they wanted to bring a sort of political energy to the label. That once Berry gave them the ok, they sort of did their own thing."

Rather than hide their involvement, several releases are labelled as "A Motown product". One poster describes Black Forum as

"a medium for the presentation of ideas and voices of the worldwide struggle of Black people to create a new era. Black Forum also serves to provide authentic materials for use in schools and colleges and for the home study of Black history and culture. Black Forum is a permanent record of the sound of struggle and the sound of the new era."

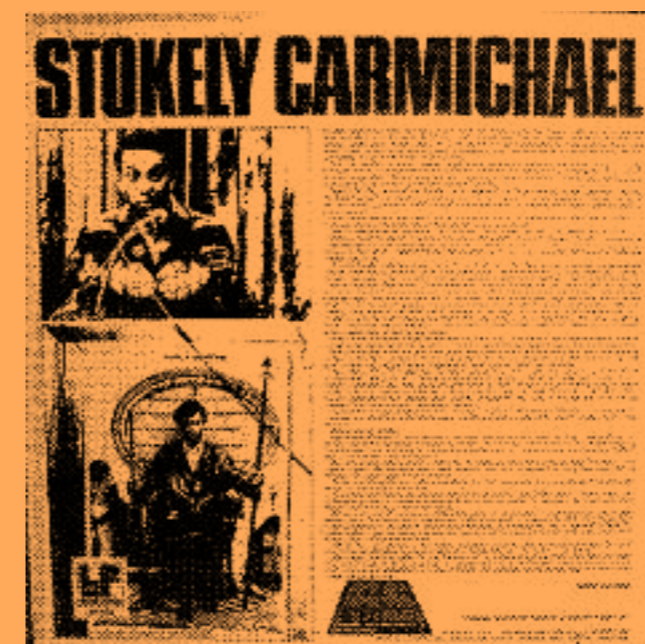
This was the record label as library, with the album becoming a newspaper as Elaine Brown put it. Woodie King Jr, who produced the Black Spirits poetry recording and Amiri Baraka's *It's Nation Time*, told Hall: "I feel that the period of Motown and Black Forum was an unbelievable communication to America that this is what Black America feels."

King, Carmichael, Hughes, Baraka... Some of the most important black cultural figures of the Sixties, released by the most famous label of all time. So why don't more people know about Black Forum? Mystery is one reason. It's hard to find a reference in Motown books or a track included in the countless anthologies. None of the eight albums have ever been reissued.

Black Forum also disappeared before it could get going. By 1973 the Black Power movement that had helped to inspire the label was winding down. The numbers just didn't add up, as Pat Thomas explains in his chapter from *Heaven Was Detroit: From jazz to Hip-Hop and Beyond*. "Ultimately, like most things in life, it comes down to money. Black Forum records couldn't sell in the quantities that Motown had become accustomed to via hitmakers like The Supremes, The Temptations and the Jackson 5."

But as former Motown executive Miller London told Thomas, it's hard to sell records if people can't buy them. "The main problem was that Motown's network of regional distributors simply didn't want to stock the album. They were of course hungry for the next pop album but getting behind these political releases was difficult."

Today, Black Forum largely endures through the fanaticism of collectors and the work of music historians. In 2016 the Motown





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dom of Kali Grosvenor to Norman Jordan's righteous provocations. Elsewhere, Amus More takes flight like a horn solo: "We are the hip men, singing like brown doves. Why were we sent here? Only to love." (Diggers' note: listen out for the Black Star sample from 'Yo Yeah'.) Perhaps the most stunning work is 'Notes From A Guerrilla Diary' by Black Arts Movement pioneer Aski Mohammed Toure [sic]: "I wanted to be an artist before Allah took my heart and tuned it for the Jihad of this age. Alone at dawn, I bow to the East for the trumpets of Islam, which will free my son Tariq and millions who will move towards the palm tree of beauty once the earth becomes a paradise, where art can flourish with the simple peasant song." Drop the needle and past becomes present. Fingers ruffle pages. Drums rattle between readings. Visions come and go.

Imamu Amiri Baraka - It's Nation Time (1972)

It's Nation Time was Baraka's second appearance on Black Forum after Black Spirits. This time, the fiery orator has more than a rattily cassette player to accompany him. There's Gary Bartz on alto sax, Reggie Workman on bass, Idris Muhammed on drums, Lonnie Smith on piano and Gwen Guthrie on vocals. Over everything from hard bop to cacophonous free jazz and gutsy R'n'B, our "black priest" challenges the listener to imagine seeing something other than what they can see. It's a rallying cry, the prequel to Kendrick's 'To Pimp A Butterfly'. He feeds off the

band's energy, as they do him. The apocalypse is upon us as Baraka urges us to "get up" on 'Answers', proclaiming the liberation of black people. "Keep keep keep punching. Attack attack, make the sucka back back." And has there ever been a more catchy and cutthroat groove than 'Who Will Survive America'? The choir is like a funeral march as Baraka dances round the fire ("no crackers at all, no crackers at all, no crackers at all") and the band grooves on...

Elaine Brown - Elaine Brown (1973)

The Black Panthers' Minister of Information had already recorded one album for the party in 1968 called 'Seize the Time', arranged by Horace Tapscott (see SNC issue 98). Huey Newton had been listening to it while in prison. He ordered her to make another ... with Motown. Co-produced by Fonce Mizell and again featuring cover art by Emory Douglas, 'Elaine Brown' is a collection of more introspective overtures, performed by Tapscott's Ark. 'No Time' laments the loss of more young lives at the hands of police with the chilling line "I want to hold some black child". 'Child in the World', whose crisp drum break and bassline were sampled by Biz Markie, cautions the man who "does what he says and fights till he's dead" and yet doesn't realise "he's a child in a world that won't be kind". And 'Until We're Free', with its a gospel feel, looks to a brighter day ("oh yes my friends, our history, the memory, shall carry me ... until we're free"). ■

◀ Langston Hughes and Margaret Danner - Writers of the Revolution (1970)

Pen pals Hughes and Danner were at difference stages of their careers when they came together in 1963 to record this album of readings and conversations. An important cultural moment thankfully archived by Black Forum. Harlem's favourite son was the lyrical "Poet Laureate of all Black America" while Danner was assistant editor of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* and an emerging voice in the Midwest. In 'To a Cold Caucasian on the Bus', Danner kills us softly with her words to an inimical passenger who won't indulge her three-year-old grandson. "I have not yet sung him the lullaby of hating you." Hughes is no less affecting in his tale of a young girl from the Jim Crow South who now finds herself at a carnival in the North. "On the bus we're put in the back, but there ain't no back to a merry-go-round."

Guess Who's Coming Home - Black Fighting Men Recorded Live in Vietnam (1972)

Between 1967 and 1969, Time correspondent Wallace Terry travelled across Vietnam to interview black infantry and officers. What he captured was a candid, occasionally funny yet often disturbing account of the war within the war. Discrimination and double standards, confederate flags flying in the wake of King's death, cross burnings... How African Americans (who accounted for 41% of the draft between 1966-69) were considered more expendable and pushed to the frontline... Some as young as 19, with no education, trained to do only one thing - kill. You can sense the futility as they ponder who the real enemy is. But this recording also crackles with defiance. When Terry asks one sol-

dier what he plans to do if/when he returns, he says: "Let the man know well ... he's got something to deal with... I ain't coming back singin' 'Say can you see...' I'm whistlin' 'Sweet Georgia Brown' and I've got the band." Pick up Terry's book *Bloods*, which is an important companion piece to this album.

Ossie Davis and Bill Cosby - Address The Congressional Black Caucus (1972)

The Caucus was established to present a unified African American voice in Congress. This was the post-King era, a determination to change the system from within. For their first gathering in 1971, more than 3,000 attended a banquet in Washington to honour the election of people such as Shirley Chisholm. The press release tells us that another goal was "to finance a permanent, independent staff to conduct in-depth analysis of issues and policies relevant to Black and poor America." Ossie Davis was the keynote speaker and Cosby was one of the Caucus' most prominent celebrity supporters. This album captures both in their pomp. Davis stirring the crowd with lines like, "It's not the man; it's the plan; it's not the rap; it's the map." Meanwhile Cosby drops the n-word with wild abandon and mocks the crowd: "It's like church because I feel that while you're here you'll say 'right on'. And two hours later, after you're outside, it'll be right off."

V/A - Black Spirits - Festival of New Black Poets in America (1972)

Recorded live in a packed Apollo Theatre, this event showcased the work of a diverse array of writers, from the precocious wis-

