

Motown Records Album Covers

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ARH-140-W1-History of Graphic Design

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April 19, 2024



Figure 1. *Stevie Wonders' Greatest Hits*. Art direction by Curtis McNair, with supervision by Tom Schlesinger. October 21, 1971. Fonts in Use. <https://fontsinuse.com/uses/48094/stevie-wonder-stevie-wonder-s-greatest-hits-v>.

Originating in Detroit, Michigan, Motown Records not only transformed the music industry with its iconic sound but also contributed significantly to graphic design through its eye-catching album covers. One of the pioneers of this visual revolution was Curtis McNair whose innovative mind and design skills helped greatly to establish the visual identity of Motown.

Berry Gordy established Motown Records in 1959 as a platform for African American artists who made pop, R&B, and soul music. During its growth, the company sought to produce album covers that could effectively capture the essence of the music while also reflecting the

label's character and the artists' identities.¹ Curtis McNair, as an in-house graphic designer, played a pivotal role in shaping instantly recognizable album covers by utilizing bold letters, vibrant colors, and dynamic imagery, exemplified in Stevie Wonders' Greatest Hits Vol. 2. (fig. 1). This invited people to get a sense of the album before playing it at all. The design elements and imagery helped differentiate Motown from other labels, establishing its unique branding identity in the competitive music industry.

The evolution of Motown album covers mirrors the label's growth and the changing landscape of music and design. In the beginning, the cover art was simpler and more direct, often featuring portraits of artists against plain backgrounds with minimal design elements. However, as Motown expanded its roster and grew in popularity, album covers became increasingly intricate and sophisticated, featuring innovative designs reflecting the cultural mood of the time.² McNair's designs showcased a deep understanding of Motown's audience and the cultural context in which the music resonated. His designs captured the spirit of the label and its artists, combining elements of soul, rhythm, and emotion into captivating visual narratives. The imagery and design choices reflected the aspirations and struggles of African American communities, capturing moments of joy, resilience, and celebration, transcending their role as mere packaging for music.³ They became cultural graphic design artifacts that reflected the social and political climate of their time, which in turn led to movements by several artists who came after them both within and outside the city of Detroit. Curtis McNair's influence on Motown's visual heritage

¹ Tasia Bass, "The Sounds of Detroit: Motown Records," Impact 89FM, February 26, 2021, <https://impact89fm.org/95726/music/the-sounds-of-detroit-motown-records/>.

² David Edwards and Mike Callahan, "Motown Album Discography," Motown album Discography, part 1 (1961-1981), August 7, 2012, <https://www.bsnpubs.com/motown/motown/motown.html>.

³ Motown Graphic Design: The Motown Box Logo, November 24, 2022, <https://soulfuldetroit.com/showthread.php?30182-Motown-Graphic-Design-The-Motown-Box-Logo>.

lives on, serving as a reminder of how art can transcend boundaries and bring together audiences from different cultures and generations.



Figure 2. *What's Going On* a Marvin Gaye Album. Photograph by Jim Hendin, Graphic Design by Curtis McNair. May 21, 1971. Genius. <https://genius.com/albums/Marvin-gaye/Whats-going-on>.

Several Motown album covers are notable for their artistic genius and the representation of Curtis McNair. On the cover of Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On", there is a picture showing him standing amidst dilapidated houses symbolizing urban decay, also reflecting the themes of social consciousness and introspection for the album (fig. 2).⁴ *Together* the Supremes Temptations duet album is designed with striking graphics, imagery, and bold colors, showcasing the funky soul spirit of the album. Given the popularity and iconic status of both The

⁴ Tasia Bass, "The Sounds of Detroit: Motown Records," Impact 89FM, February 26, 2021, <https://impact89fm.org/95726/music/the-sounds-of-detroit-motown-records/>.

Supremes and The Temptations, the cover art aimed to capture the attention of fans of both groups, which it did effectively, selling millions (fig. 3).⁵



Figure 3. *Together* a studio album by Diana Ross & the Supremes and The Temptations. Design by Curtis McNair. September 23, 1969. Discogs. <https://www.discogs.com/release/552077-Diana-Ross-The-Supremes-With-The-Temptations-Together>.

In conclusion, Motown Records' brand image created through Curtis McNair's eyes stands for nothing less than a testament to the label's cultural significance and artistic innovation. From humble beginnings to global acclaim, Motown album covers have captured the soul of its music and artistry which has left an indelible mark on graphic design culture forever. As

⁵ Mark Price, "The Man Behind Motown's Image," *The Bay State Banner*, March 9, 2018, <https://baystatebanner.com/2008/12/18/the-man-behind-motowns-image/>.

Motown's legacy persists it is essential to pay tribute to visionaries like Curtis McNair whose creativity and talent continue to inspire today.

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