

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Berry Gordy

PERSON

Gordy, Berry

Alternative Names: Berry Gordy;

Life Dates: November 28, 1929-

Place of Birth: Detroit, Michigan, USA

Residence: Los Angeles, CA

Work: Los Angeles, CA

Occupations: Business Chief Executive; Music Executive

Biographical Note

Songwriter and music executive Berry Gordy was born in Detroit, Michigan on November 28, 1929 to Berta and Berry Gordy, Sr. He attended Northeastern High School, but dropped out his junior year to pursue a featherweight boxing career, where he fought just fifteen matches, winning twelve. He later earned his GED while serving in the U.S. Army.

Gordy served in the U.S. Army's 58th Field Artillery Battalion, 3rd Infantry Division from 1951 until 1953, also serving as a chaplain's assistant, playing the organ at religious services. After discharge from military service, he began writing songs and opened 3-D Record Mart, which mostly sold jazz music. The business lasted just two years, and Gordy subsequently worked at Ford Motor's Lincoln Mercury plant. He continued to write music regularly, penning hit songs for Jackie Wilson and Etta James in 1957. This led him to resign from the Lincoln Mercury plant and pursue a professional songwriting career. Gordy began producing music for the group the Miracles, featuring Smokey Robinson, which led to the formation of Gordy's own record label, Tamla Records. In 1960, Motown Record Corporation was founded, under which many popular artists were signed, including Mary Wells, the Supremes, the Marvelettes, Gladys Knight and the Pips, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Martha and the Vandellas, Tami Terrell, the Temptations, the Four Tops and the Jackson Five. Gordy moved Motown from Detroit to Los Angeles, California in 1972. Expanding his enterprise to films, Gordy released *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), *Mahogany* (1975) and *The Wiz* (1978), all featuring Diana Ross. Additionally, Motown began to spawn the solo careers of many of other artists on their label, such as Smokey Robinson, Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie. Gordy sold Motown in 1988 and Motown Productions the

following year.

Throughout his career, Gordy has received numerous awards, including the Martin Luther King, Jr. Leadership Award in 1969, induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1988, the Grammy Trustee Award in 1991, a star on The Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1996, and the American Legend Award in 1998. In 1994, Warner Books released Gordy's autobiography, *To Be Loved*. In 2016, Gordy was awarded the National Medal of Arts by President Barack Obama; and, in 2019, the Los Angeles City Council designated the former location of Motown Records, at the intersection of Sunset Boulevard and Argyle Avenue in Hollywood, Berry Gordy Square.

Gordy resides in Palm Desert, California.

Berry Gordy was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on November 17, 2012.

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