

5-2017

Queen Esther: The Life of Esther Gordy Edwards and Her Contributions to the Building of Motown Records

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**Queen Esther: The Life of Esther Gordy Edwards and Her Contributions to the
Building of Motown Records**

Velvet Aisha Johnson Ross

Submitted in partial completion of the Master of Arts Degree at Sarah Lawrence College,
May 2017

Abstract

The Life of Esther Gordy Edwards and Her Contribution to the Building of Motown Records

Esther Gordy Edwards was called the “First Woman of Motown Records.” She was a thirty-year music executive veteran of Motown Records’ label. Edwards was a woman of many capabilities. She served as a mentor, personal manager of artists, Senior Vice President, Corporate Secretary and International Director. Motown Records was founded in 1959, with a loan from a family fund she established. The Motown Museum and her work as the “keeper of culture” helped to seal the Motown Record label into the world’s historical consciousness. Edwards was a true renaissance woman. She established herself as a business owner, historian, civic leader, political leader and philanthropist. Edwards received numerous awards, commendations and accolades for her work.

Even so, the “great man” narrative has been used consistently within the existing history of Motown Records. Berry Gordy is presented as establishing the label alone; a narrative which has stood the test of time, while simultaneously erasing Edwards from historical memory. This narrative has minimized the influence of women, such as that of Esther Gordy Edwards. Her contribution to the building of Motown Records has been understudied and overlooked. In this scholarship, I will use a historical lens to showcase the contributions of Esther Gordy Edwards and present some of the challenges in unearthing this long overdue narrative of a woman whose work helped to solidify the musical legacy of Motown Records.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my maternal and paternal grandmothers: Clem, Maude, Emma, Elsie, Texas, Mary, Merletus and Dorothy. These women died with their stories never having been told. I write your names as a beginning to carry on your legacy and one day will begin to write your stories.

I am honored to be your descendant, knowing the hard journeys you all endured as black women in this world. You struggled, you prayed, you cried, you had your hearts and backs broken, dreams deferred so that I could have better. No, life was not a crystal stair for any of you. Some of you traded the plantations for the projects but through it all you still held your heads up high and never let anything or anyone break your spirit.

You may not have been able to attain an education, vote, articulate your voice, or simply be free black women. I have carried you all with me during this journey and will continue to do all the things that you were not allowed to do, or circumstances barred you from doing, so that I can make you proud.

To Mrs. Esther Gordy Edwards, through this journey you have become my adopted grandmother and from here on out I will carry the lessons that I learned from you. I pray that this work, even though it is just a beginning, makes you proud.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who is the head of my life. Without my faith, I could not have gone through three of the hardest years on my life. To my parents and sisters who gave support, in all definitions of the word, throughout my graduate school career, much love and thanks. To my extended family who have provided support through my travels and helped to sustain me during these past three years with moral support, many thanks.

I want to thank my graduate advisor Nadeen Thomas and the chair of the Women's History Department, Dr. Mary Dillard, for their support in creating this work. Thank you to my colleagues and fellow SLC classmates for their camaraderie. Also to the Sarah Lawrence College library staff for their support and informative conversations. Natalie Gross, who has been a rock this whole time that I have been here, I am grateful for your advice and friendship.

I also want to thank my contacts in Detroit: Robin Terry CEO of the Motown Museum, Levi Stubbs III, Fred Gore, Susetta McCree, Fred Gore, Dr. Marvin Jacobs, Dr. Chrystal Tibbs, Dr. Michael Carruthers, Denice McGhee, Martha P. Noonan, Dalon Wingham. Stephon Owens and the brothers of the NU Omega Chapter of Omega Psi Phi Incorporated. I want to thank Ivan Henderson and Richard Watson from the Philadelphia African American Museum and Dr. Clifford Muse of the Howard University Archives Department.

On a personal note, I must thank friends as I am grateful for your love and support that has exceeded beyond any possible expectations.

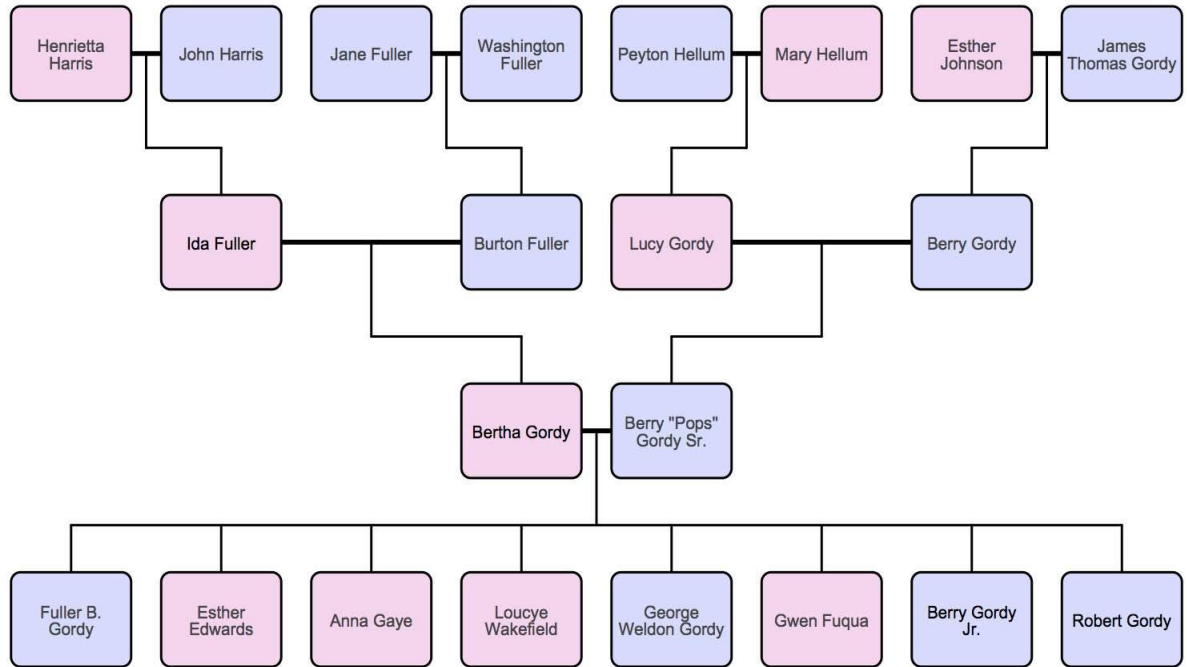
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Gordy Family Tree

Esther Gordy Edwards Family Tree



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Chapter 1: Introduction

"There's never going to be another like her. She's better off than we are. Thank God for our own Queen Esther."¹

On August 31, 2011, Rev. Dr. Charles Adams used these words in his eulogy to describe the life of Esther Gordy Edwards to a large congregation at the historic Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in Detroit. The church was full of respected dignitaries, stars and many family and friends. These people all came to pay their respects to Esther who had been a pioneer, entrepreneur, barrier-breaker, woman of God, influential civic leader, historian, beloved member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, mother, daughter and grandmother. Many at the funeral spoke of her kindness and her business acumen. Stevie Wonder provided a musical tribute fit for a queen. Former Congresswoman Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, Smokey Robinson, and Esther's younger brother Berry Gordy, Jr. offered reflections on a life well-lived. The governor of Michigan Rick Snyder, the former mayor of Detroit Dave Bing, and a member of the House of Representatives for Michigan Fred Durhal, all issued statements offering condolences and special tributes that were placed in a beautifully crafted obituary.

Edwards would forever go down in history as the woman who provided her younger brother Berry Gordy, founder of Motown Records, with the capital needed to establish the world-renowned record company. She would also be remembered as the woman who helped

¹ "Queen Esther': Highlights of remarks from Gordy Edwards' funeral," MLive.com, September 01, 2011, accessed February 20, 2017, http://www.mlive.com/entertainment/detroit/index.ssf/2011/09/queen_esther_highlights_of_rem.html.

to keep Motown in the world's consciousness with the founding of the Motown Museum.

Without the financial and emotional support, connections, and business savvy of Esther Gordy Edwards, the world would never have known about Motown Records or the Motown Museum, established in 1959 and 1985, respectively.

My goal in this research is to provide a new history of Motown Records by offering a consideration into Esther Gordy Edwards' life and legacy. I will analyze how her work, effort and tenacity helped catapult Motown Records onto the world's stage. Her efforts made certain that Motown would stay relevant to the world long after the label had left Detroit with the founding of the Motown Museum. Without Esther Gordy Edwards, the Motown sound would not have existed. Besides knowing of the iconic music and its importance, the world will now learn the true history of the powerful sister behind Motown's flamboyant and controversial founder.

Black women's history teaches us that, as important as community is, an individual's sense of worth and dignity must come from within. This sense of self must be nurtured and made strong apart from the validation of the world.² Edwards' narrative reflects this idea; she was a woman who defied barriers at a time when black individuals and women were faced with extreme forms of racial and sexist subjugation. Edwards served as senior vice president, corporate secretary and director of Motown International Operations for over thirty years. By 1973, Detroit's economic base had deteriorated, as many companies and white citizens left the city for the suburbs after the devastating rebellions of 1967.³ Motown Records also left Detroit for the bright lights of Hollywood. Edwards, however, chose to stay and help

² Darlene Clark Hine., and Kathleen Thompson. *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black women in America*. (New York: Broadway Press,1999). 5.

³ Smith, Suzanne E. *Dancing in the street: Motown and the cultural politics of Detroit*. (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009). 244.

rebuild Detroit by creating the Motown Museum. Esther knew that the recording company was historically significant and therefore sought out a place to mark that. Dubrow and Goodman suggest that historic sites such as museums and monuments are visited by millions of people every year, but most of these places perpetuate the public notion that men have been the primary agents of historical change.⁴ Edwards is an example of the kind significant work in public history that has been done by black women.

Even before Motown Records became a household name, Edwards was a trailblazer. At a time when black women had limited educational opportunities, she attended Howard University in the fall of 1938, where she studied liberal arts. Edwards married Robert Bullock in 1940. As a newlywed, Edwards transferred to Wayne State University in Detroit where she pledged the Beta Mu Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha, a historically black sorority.

Edwards owned and operated her own business, the Gordy Printing Company, along with her brothers George and Fuller Gordy.⁵ She created the Louyce Gordy-Wakefield Scholarship Fund and the Gordy Foundation so that inner city children in Detroit could further their educational pursuits.⁶ Her influence reached even further as she ran her then husband, George Edwards', campaign to become the first black state representative for the state of Michigan. She considered Detroit Mayor Coleman Young, Coretta Scott King and Alex Haley as friends. She was a pioneer, entrepreneur and influencer before she ever

⁴ Gail Lee, Dubrow, and Jennifer B. Goodman. *Restoring Women's History Through Historic Preservation*. (Baltimore and London) John Hopkins University Press, 2003).

⁵ There were eight Gordy children arranged in this birth order: Fuller, Esther, Anna, Louyce, George, Gwen, Berry Jr. and Robert.

⁶ Louyce Gordy-Wakefield was Edwards younger sister, Wakefield died of a brain hemorrhage at the age of 35 in 1965. Edwards established a memorial scholarship in her honor to provided higher educational opportunities for inner-city youth in Detroit. This led Edwards to establish the Gordy Foundation that funded scholarships help inner city youth gain access to higher education.

stepped foot in the musical halls of Motown Records.

Why Esther Gordy Edwards?

I came to my love of Motown as a little girl in the South Bronx, when my parents taught me the story of Detroit through the music of Motown. They wanted to make sure that my sisters and I had an appreciation of our black musical tradition. This history lesson ran the gamut from gospel, to blues, to jazz and pop. My parents instilled in us an appreciation and love for our musical history as black people. Some of my favorite times during these lessons were when my father would throw on his Motown recordings and the whole room would come alive. My dad would play his 35 LP record and we would dance to one of his favorite songs: Smokey Robinson and the Miracles' 1963, "Mickey's Monkey." This was a song he danced to as a kid.⁷ As soon as the beat hit, my daddy would dance around the living room showing his daughters how to do Mickey's Monkey, which was a popular dance created in the 1960s. Smokey's light tenor voice gave a call to action, and we listened to his shout for us to do the monkey, or at least our version of it, all around the living room. I was seduced by the song's rhythms and syncopations, backed by Motown's still unsung house band the Funk Brothers.

From the moment, my dad threw on the first Motown LP, I became an avid reader and collector of anything Motown. I read numerous autobiographies and biographies by former Motown stars, watched documentaries like *Unsung* on cable channel TV ONE about Motown artists such as Florence Ballard and Tammi Terrell, to name a few. I have read

⁷ This is a dance where you move your hand up and down and jerk your body back and forth for further instructions in the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwIGn7uORYg>

newspaper and magazine articles, watched television interviews, and read books and journals about Motown's history.

As my curiosity into the history of Motown expanded, I noticed the narratives throughout had one underlying thread: the story of how one man, one idea, one objective, to be one of the major recording companies of all time, was the reason behind Motown Records' success. I realized that something was missing. The missing pieces were the substantial historical contributions that black women had made to the company, such as those of Esther Gordy Edwards. The legacy of black women's history being written out of historical text has much to do with the intersection of racism, sexism, and classism. These intersections impact African American women's lives and their lack of recognition in the development of many institutions. This thesis aims to correct at least one of those erasures by offering a detailed study of the life and contributions to musical history of Esther Gordy Edwards.

Historiography

Four streams of historiography are relevant for this thesis: the Gordy Family history, the History of Motown, the History of Women in Music and the History of Detroit. I first started analyzing the books written by the Gordy family. *Movin' Up: Pop Gordy Tells His Story*, is the autobiography of Berry Gordy Sr. Berry Gordy Sr., or "Pops" as he was called by his family and everyone in Motown, was the patriarch of the Gordy family who fled Georgia because of white hostility. The book is filled with stories about his entrepreneurial insights as he went on to become a successful businessman, opening a

grocery store and having a plastering and carpentry business.⁸ Pops describes the hostilities he endured to reach his pursuit. Pops, who was a follower of acclaimed educator Booker T. Washington, spoke to the importance of family and racial uplift as the tools that that would help his children to become successful in the white business world. Edwards isn't mentioned specifically, however this is where we see her work in the background. She wrote, typed and copyrighted her father's narrative and then arranged a deal for Harpers & Row to publish her father's book. She then arranged for author Alex Haley to write the forward.⁹

In *To Be Loved: the Music, the Magic, the Memories of Motown*, Berry Gordy, Jr. followed his father's lead and wrote his own autobiography. In Gordy's rendering he recounts his life in Detroit and California, as well as his experiences in music and in Motown. In the book, Gordy offers his version of how he built Motown Records and argues that he was fair in his business practices giving credit where credit was due. He details his career highs and lows throughout the text. He warmly describes the closeness and supportive family environment that the Gordy clan had as an influence on him and his business. This is where we first see some of Edwards' capabilities. Gordy recounts how she was the brains behind the savings club, which funded Motown Records, and how she was reluctant to grant him the funds for this business venture. Gordy and Pops' books overlap to each other as they both speak of the Gordy family entrepreneurial acumen.¹⁰

I then examined the historiography centered on the history of Motown by starting

⁸ Smith,65.

⁹ Berry, Gordy Sr., *Berry Movin' Up: Pop Gordy Tells His Story*. New York: Harper &Row,1979.

¹⁰Berry, Gordy, *To Be Loved: The Music, The Magic, The Memories of Motown*. New York: Warner Books, 2013). 106.

with *The Story of Motown*, by Peter Benjaminson¹¹. Benjaminson, a former *Detroit Free Press* Reporter, analyzed the inner workings of the Motown corporations and its founder. His portrayal illustrates the success of the company from its early beginnings while Motown was still operating with Gordy at the helm.¹²

Journalist Nelson George also wrote about Motown. Award-winning author, columnist, music and culture critic, journalist, and filmmaker, George authored *Where Did Our Love Go? The Rise and Fall of The Motown Sound*.¹³ He argues that Motown's black entrepreneurship had an impact on black America. He illuminates this point by navigating the story of Motown through the key players who shaped Motown's history. Gerald Posner's book *Motown: Music, Sex, Money and Power*,¹⁴ rounds out the authors with an investigative journalism approach to examining Motown. Posner, a former Wall Street attorney, investigates the scandals that surrounded the people who worked at Motown Records. Many of Posner's sources were anonymous and many of his secondary sources were legal documents. Posner gives crucial analysis of the pitfalls, trials and business dealings of Motown Records from a legal perspective. These books speak to the history of Motown, but there isn't anything that cohesively focuses on Edwards' contributions alone. In each of these books we see slight impressions of Edwards' life and contributions.

Susan Whitehall's *Women of Motown: An Oral History*, explores, through interviews,

¹¹ Peter, Benjaminson, *The Story of Motown*. (New York: Grove Press, 1979).

¹² Berry Gordy sold Motown in 1988 to Boston Ventures Management and MCA Records for sixty- million dollars for more information see: http://articles.latimes.com/1988-06-29/business/fi-4916_1_motown-records

¹³ Nelson, George, *Where Did Our Love Go? The Rise and Fall of The Motown Sound*. (Illinois: University of Illinois Press. 2007).

¹⁴ Posner, Gerald. *Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power*. (Random House, 2009).

the experiences of the women who were on the Motown Records music label. This literature focuses on examining gender within the musical landscape. Whitehall's background working as a journalist for the *Detroit Sunday Journal* helps with her methodology of utilizing oral history to give a voice to the unsung women; some of these women were well known and others were not as well known. This work gives a long overdue voice to the artists affiliated with Motown. Former Motown artist Mable John substantiates this when she states, "Gordy was surrounded by many capable women, from his mother, business woman Bertha Gordy - a force who helped mentor singer Mable John, to his four sisters Louyce, Anna, Esther and Gwen."¹⁵ Edwards is mentioned several times as a positive influence on several artists' personal and professional development through her early work in Motown as a mentor and chaperone.

Author Gerri Hirshey also fuses oral history interviews with feminist history in her researching of soul music in Motown. She addresses Motown's respectability politics in her book, *Nowhere to Run: The History of Soul Music*.¹⁶ Hirshey argues that Motown was creating "respectable" black women that could sing at supper clubs and dine with the King and Queen of England. They needed to be respectable because they were in the public eye, making them commodities to Motown and trailblazers in spaces where no other black woman had gone before. Hirshey addresses the impact of Maxine Powell who helped Gordy "groom" his artists for mass appeal. Powell, Motown's etiquette instructor, was discovered by Edwards for the Artist and Development training in Motown.¹⁷ Hirshey addresses

¹⁵ Susan, Whithall, and Dave, Marsh. *Women of Motown: An Oral History*. New York, NY: (Avon Books 1998). p.xiv.

¹⁶ Gerri, Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run*. (Penguin Books 1985)

¹⁷ Elizabeth, Dean. 2017. "Rock and Roll; Respect; Interview with Maxine Powell [Part 1 Of 2]". *Openvault.Wgbh.Org*. http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_6224956EC9BB49C080C966A79D547F2D.

respectability practices, but does so without addressing the history behind racial uplift, the great migration and the black bourgeoisie. These books bring women's roles in music to the forefront, however they still don't include enough intersectional¹⁸ discussion. One reason for this could be that these books are written by white women about black women, which often leaves a lot to be desired.

One of the newest books called *Once in a Great City: A Detroit Story*.¹⁹ In this book David Maraniss gives an analysis of Detroit during the height of its most productive year, 1963. Maraniss synthesizes Detroit by investigating three different perspectives: Detroit's relationship to the auto industry, its relationship to the Civil Rights Movement and its relationship with Motown. Maraniss authors a much-needed analysis on what made Detroit the great metropolis it once was. Maraniss mentions Edwards' role and articulates how important she was to Motown. He also addresses the Gordy sisters Anna, Gwen, and Loucye. This book was important for acknowledging Edwards. He mentions her work in building the Motown Museum and her funeral is written about in detail.²⁰

To gather an analysis on African American women in Detroit I studied Victoria W. Walcott's *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*.²¹ This text gives a gendered voice to African American women's experiences during the great migration. She argues how racial ideology impacted the various classes of black women in

¹⁸ The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. For a further definition of intersectionality see: Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color. Kimberle Crenshaw

¹⁹ David, Maraniss, *Once in a Great City: A Detroit Story*. (Simon and Schuster, 2015).

²⁰ Ibid., 374.

²¹ Walcott, Victoria W. *Remaking respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*. (UNC Press Books, 2013).

Detroit and helped to develop its culture and community.²² Walcott speaks to Motown's respectability politics and gives a black feminist analysis.²³

Core Question

My research has been guided by one overarching core question, why aren't Edwards' contributions more widely known and acknowledged by the public? My objective is to develop a biography that details the life of Edwards and her historical contributions to Motown Records' historical narrative. I wanted to discover why she wasn't known to a broader audience and why her contributions have been diminished in the existing scholarship on Motown. Unfortunately, although Edwards started to write her autobiography, it was never finished or published so gaps remain regarding Edwards' life. I have been left to examine the current scholarship that speaks to the historical significance of Motown Records, women in music and the history of African Americans in Detroit to build a case study that chronicles Edwards' life.

Methodology

Along with using print media, I utilized recordings on YouTube of interviews by Edwards and various individuals that worked at Motown. I visited Detroit and conducted research at the Bentley Historical Archive. I looked at archival documents that former a Motown alumni had donated to view Edwards' historical record. I also researched blogs that were run by Motown fans to uncover the story of Edwards, her life at the Museum and her

²² Ibid., 2.

²³ Ibid., 241.

various comings and goings in Detroit. In addition, I called one of the website administrators to see if they could tell me anything about her, and used Ancestry.com to reconstruct the Gordy Family Tree.

The Gordy family members have their papers housed at the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, but those papers are currently closed. Wonderfully, I was able to conduct interviews with her granddaughter, Robin Terry, who is the current CEO of the Motown Museum. I also interviewed family friends and colleagues to flesh out Edwards' early life, family life and life at the museum. I interviewed a childhood friend of the Gordy family, Mrs. Suesetta McCree whose older sister was a good friend of Edwards'. I also conducted an interview with Levi Stubbs III the son of the late Four Tops' lead singer, Levi Stubbs Jr. Both interviewees not know Edwards well, they were both helpful in giving me an idea of Edwards' character. I went to Edwards' church to get a feel for her life and what it may have been like for her to sit in the pew on Sunday, hoping to receive divine inspiration.

When I went to Detroit I went to the Wayne County Courthouse and found Edwards' divorce decree from her first husband. This provided me with some information about her early life, as well as her personal life outside of her carefully crafted Motown persona. I wanted to study the real woman behind the carefully coiffed hair. I wanted more than the grandmotherly remarks of "She was a nice woman," or "She was tough and pushed you." Too often we don't see what's behind the real women whose stories we are unearthing. I only saw glimpses of Esther within the context of the carefully crafted Motown machine, which she helped to create.

My research methods also included examining music magazines such as *Billboard*, black magazines *Jet*, *Ebony*, and *Sepia*, black newspapers, and Detroit newspapers. I looked at archival records from her family church. I examined the archival records of Alan E. Abrams, located at the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor Michigan. I conducted research at Wayne State University, the Detroit Public Library and the Detroit Historical Society. Finally, I had a particularly helpful visit to the Philadelphia African American Philadelphia Museum to find out about museums and curation. These insights from this visit served me tremendously in writing the Motown Museum chapter.

Theoretical Framework

My theoretical approach will utilize Black Feminist Theory to center my analysis on Edwards' narrative. Black Feminist Theory articulates the complexity of black American women's demand for social, economic and political equality. This is most clearly understood as the desire for a compatible and progressive vision of social justice based on the historical and ongoing struggles against the racial and gendered oppressions black American women have experienced at home, at work, in their communities and, moreover, within the larger dominant culture. Contemporary black American feminists have identified the central themes in black feminism as evidenced in over three centuries of struggle in the U.S. These include:

- 1) The presentation of an alternative social construct for now and the future based on African American women lived experiences, 2) A commitment to fighting against race and gender inequality across differences of class, age, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, 3) Recognition of black women's legacy of struggle, 4) The promotion of black female

empowerment through voice, visibility and self-definition, and 5) A belief in the interdependence of thought and action.²⁴

As black women, we have become cognizant of the multiple systemic forces of oppression we face. We have pursued collective actions for social change, transforming society and for ourselves through our own agency and self-determination.²⁵ Black Feminist Theory is useful in shaping the biography of Edwards, who had a large impact on the building of Motown Records at a time when black women were relegated to the margins of society. The music business has been and still is a sexist and racist commercial industry. As just one example, in 2015, rapper Nicki Minaj was upset that her video “Anaconda” was not being nominated for the MTV Music Awards. She remarked on twitter that she was “Just tired. Black women influence pop culture so much but are rarely rewarded for it.”²⁶ Her tweet sparked various conversations within the music and black feminist circles about how race and gender impacts the way black women are rewarded for their musical contributions in various genres.

Chapter Breakdown

My goal as a cultural historian is to always make sure that I both write history and live it. Seeing Edwards’ face made this desire real, but it also filled me with so many

²⁴ Patricia, Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman,1990).418.

²⁵ Beverly, Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. (New York, New York: The New Press 1995).

²⁶ "Nicki Minaj Says Black Women 'rarely Rewarded' in Music; Taylor Swift Chimes in - Washington Times," The Washington Times, last modified July 22, 2016, <http://m.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jul/22/nicki-minaj-says-black-women-rarely-rewarded/>.

emotions; sadness, excitement, curiosity and a hunger to know more. I decided to write my chapters in a way that would best encapsulate Edwards' life. My Chapter breakdown is as follow: Chapter Two contains a biographical sketch of Edwards' early life to provide context about the major experiences and how her family history contributed to her development as a woman. Chapter Three focuses on Edwards' early years as a business woman and her role in helping to establish Motown. Chapter Four is about Edwards' leadership role in Motown and her role as mentor and creator of the Artist and Development department. Chapter Five examines Edwards' relationship to the Civil Rights Movement, The Vietnam War and the Detroit Rebellion of 1967. Chapter Six presents conclusions of the study on Edwards and implications for African American women's roles within the music industry. I also offer recommendations for further study.

My curiosity in researching Edwards' life led me to this question: if the people behind the scenes don't tell their stories, how will we ever know what happened? Black women's stories matter as much as anyone else's and the silence and patriarchy in the black community need to be addressed. It is important to recognize that this silencing does a terrible disservice to women's history in general, not only to black women. I spent time painstakingly trying to write and craft her story to break this historical silence. I am happy that narratives of black women's lives are now gaining traction in the entertainment industry with movies like *Hidden Figures*, *Bessie* and most recently, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. Black women's stories matter; whether you work for NASA, are a famous jazz singer, or are a poor tenant farmer whose cells have been used to cure almost every disease the world has ever known. Now it is time for Edwards to have her story told. Maybe one day through my efforts, and those of any other interested researchers, I hope that I'll look up and

I'll see the life of Esther Gordy Edwards, the shrewd, determined business woman, cultural historian, philanthropist and mentor that I have grown to cherish and respect, given the attention she deserves.

Chapter 2: Edwards and the Gordy Family

On Saturday, November 12, 2005, a long overdue celebration was held in honor of Esther Gordy Edwards entitled “Motown Forever: Motown Historical Museum’s 20th Anniversary Gala and Tribute to Esther Gordy Edwards.”²⁷ Family, friends, Motown Alumni, elected officials and the public all converged at the Detroit Marriot Renaissance and paid \$350-\$500 dollars per ticket for a seat to celebrate the woman who dedicated her life to helping build the music empire, Motown Records; a legacy that is maintained through the Motown Historical Museum. This celebration was long overdue. In true Gordy fashion, Edwards was perfectly put together, her skin glowed, and her hair was beautifully coiffed with every bit of her hair held in place. Even at the age of 85, she looked regal as she took center stage in her a gorgeous black and gold gown matched with black shoes and gold accessories.

It was hard to believe that twenty years ago somehow, she had established the Motown Museum 46 years earlier, with very little funding and that she managed to turn the museum into a historical landmark that attracts millions of people to this day. More than one million people have visited from all over the world.²⁸ At the event the roles were reversed; Gordy served as the honorary chairman to honor the woman who had given him the financial support to establish the Motown label and then left her full-time job to help him run said label 46 years prior. To Edwards it was never about recognition; it was about family. Family

²⁷ Dean, La Douceur, "Motown Historical Museum Presents “Motown Forever: Motown Historical Museum’s 20th Anniversary Gala and Tribute to Esther Gordy Edwards,” Saturday, November 12, 2005." PR Leap. Last modified November 11, 2005. <http://www.prleap.com/pr/19073/motown-historical-museum-presents-motown>.

²⁵ "Esther Gordy Edwards Home of Hitsville U.S.A." Motown Museum. Accessed April 24, 2017. <https://www.motownmuseum.org/about-the-museum/the-museum/esther-gordy-edwards/>.

²⁸ "Esther Gordy Edwards Home of Hitsville U.S.A." Motown Museum. Accessed April 24, 2017. <https://www.motownmuseum.org/about-the-museum/the-museum/esther-gordy-edwards/>.

came first and foremost to Esther. It was the core of what gave Edwards her drive and determination and it all started in a small-town called Oconee, Georgia.

Georgia

There is not much written about Edwards' early life from her own perspective. What I could piece together came from the autobiographies of Edwards' father and brother, *Movin'up* and *To Be Loved*. I also pieced together information from various secondary sources. Esther Gordy Edwards was born April 25, 1920, in Oconee, Georgia, which is in the southwestern part of Washington County. She was the second child and oldest daughter of middle class parents Berry Gordy, Sr. and Bertha Fuller Gordy.²⁹ Their oldest son, Fuller B. Gordy was born two years earlier on September 9, 1918. Edwards was lovingly called "Sua", meaning sister. The name Esther was given to her by her father who insisted on being the one who named his first daughter. He named Edwards after his sister Esther with whom he had a close relationship.³⁰

Edwards spent her first years of life on a farm. Her father was an independent farmer who raised and sold cattle, hogs, chicken and all kinds of vegetables. Bertha was a school teacher, but still helped him on the farm by picking cotton. Edwards was surrounded by family; her grandparents, great-grandmother, aunts, and uncles from both the paternal and maternal sides of her family. As a toddler, Edwards probably attended the Gordy Grove Church of God in Christ, which was the family church. It was built on Gordy property after her paternal grandmother Lucy Gordy Hellum donated the land.³¹

²⁹ Scott, Thompson, "Pieces of our Past: November 2011." Laurens County Historical Society, Dublin, Georgia. Last modified November 29, 2011. <https://dublinlaurenscountygeorgia.blogspot.com/2011/11/>.

³⁰ Gordy, Berry. *Movin'up: Pop Gordy tells his story*. Harper Collins, 1979. p.82

³¹ Smith, Suzanne E. *Dancing in the street: Motown and the cultural politics of Detroit*. Harvard University Press, 2009. p. 276.

Edwards' family members were influenced by the philosophy of Booker T. Washington. Born a slave on a Virginia farm, Washington (1856-1915) rose to become one of the most influential African American intellectuals of the late 19th and early twentieth centuries. Washington believed that the best interests of black people in the post-Reconstruction era could be realized through education, which focused on craft, industrial skills and the cultivation of the virtues of patience, enterprise, and thrift.³²

Washington urged his fellow blacks, most of whom were impoverished and illiterate farm laborers, to temporarily abandon their efforts to win full civil rights and political power and instead to develop their industrial and farming skills to attain economic security.³³ Edwards came from a long line of African Americans that followed Washington's philosophy to be economically independent and self-sufficient. This self-sufficiency would influence Gordy's for generations to come, starting with the story of Edwards' grandmother with whom she shared the name Esther Johnson.

As for many African-Americans born in the south, Edwards' family lineage can be traced back to the brutal and complicated history of slavery. Esther Johnson, Pops' grandmother, was an enslaved woman of African and Native American heritage born into slavery. James Thomas Gordy, Pops' grandfather, was a prosperous white farmer and slave holder near Cusseta, Georgia when the Civil War was declared on April 12, 1861. In 1864, at age 36, James was a wagon master for the Confederacy. He enlisted in 1864, as a private in Co. B., 6th Georgia State Militia. He was a farmer, served as a Tax Collector, and was a

³² Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery*. (Penguin, 1986).

³³ *Ibid.*,

devoted Baptist.³⁴

Throughout the history of slavery many white slave holders had white families, as well as black concubines. Gordy wasn't an exception. He was already the father of three white children by his white wife Harriet Emily Helms before he fathered the first Berry Gordy with his slave Esther Johnson in 1854. The first Berry Gordy had light skin, was short in stature, and had a strong solid physique. Many women born into the brutal system of chattel slavery were subjected to "forcible sexual intercourse" which is the legal and moral definition of rape.³⁵ Some slave owners ignored the implications of miscegenation and denied, consciously or unconsciously, their role in creating America's bittersweet mulatto culture. Given what we know to be true of the sexual violence inflicted on female slaves, it is logical to conclude that Esther Johnson shared in this experience.

Beginning in 1829, it was against the law to teach enslaved Africans how to read and write in the state of Georgia. Even so, the first Berry learned to read and write as well as any white man.³⁶ There isn't anything written in the secondary sources how the first Berry became literate, but he used these skills after slavery ended to help establish himself as a prosperous landowner within Oconee County, GA. The first Berry was recognized by his neighbors, both black and white, as a local leader; a "big dog." A shrewd and thoughtful business man, Berry was respected by all in the community for being "self-reliant."³⁷ The first Berry also worked for another plantation, carefully saving his money so that he would be

³⁴ "James Thomas Gordy (1828 - 1889) - Find A Grave Memorial." Accessed May1, 2017. Find A Grave - Millions of Cemetery Records. Last modified January 11, 2006. <https://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=12951231>.

³⁵ Darlene Clark, Hine, and Kathleen Thompson. *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America*, New York: Broadway Books, 1999.221,

³⁶ George,1.

³⁷ Ibid,2.

able to purchase 168 acres of land in Oconee, County and go into business for himself.

Berry then married Lucy Hellum, a woman of black and Native American heritage. Together they had twenty-three children. Unfortunately, only nine of the 23 survived. One of those children was Berry Gordy Sr. referred to as “Pops,” by his children. Pops was born on July 10, 1888, Pop would not only inherit his father’s name but his entrepreneurial skills as well.

For one hundred years after the Civil War, well into the 1960s, the system of sharecropping effectively kept many blacks in debt Sharecropping was another form of economic slavery. The economics of sharecropping involved the landowner providing loans to sharecroppers. Future crops were used as collateral against the loan. Most of the first Berry’s neighbors were deep in debt to the white landowners on whose land they toiled. No matter how prosperous a black family was during a season, it was never enough to overcome their debts. To combat this Pops was meticulous with record keeping. Lucy kept every bill, every loan statement, and every scrap of paper pertaining to the business.³⁸

The elder Berry preached his dedication to the family business to his children every day. Pops stated in his memoir “Papa was a good businessman and ran his own business. He didn’t depend upon the white people to get things or do things for him.”³⁹ The first Berry purchased him a law book for Pops, and encouraged him to study it. This entrepreneurial education continued as the elder Berry’s business expanded. While this education was important, Pops still attended grade school to learn more traditional subjects such as how to read and write. He spent his teen years working on the Gordy property, delaying his

³⁸ George, 2.

³⁹ Gordy, 5.

enrollment in high school until he was 22 years of age.⁴⁰

Pops' delay in his formal education wasn't a waste as his business education would be put to use sooner than he expected. On May 13, 1913, a lightning bolt struck killing the first Berry Gordy while he was walking the fields of his farm. Young Pops, was only twenty-five at the time. He undertook the duty of administering his father's estate. Whites often acted as administrators when there was a death or change over in the estates of black landowners. Many blacks were cheated out of their land by this practice. Pops, in accordance with his father's philosophy of self-reliance, took it upon himself to study law books and learn all the legal intricacies of the estate administrator's role to avoid his family from being swindled by deceitful white administrators.⁴¹ In 1918, after a stint in the military during World War I, Pops married Bertha Ida Fuller, a local school teacher who was originally from Milledgeville, GA.

In a conversation with Edwards' granddaughter Robin, I learned how influenced Edwards' was by her mother Bertha Gordy. Robin spoke of her grandparents as a couple rather than as individuals, which made it difficult to distinguish one parent's influence compared to the other. As with Edwards or any of the other Gordy women Bertha did not write an autobiography, though her story was just as inspirational.

As Edwards' story needs to be told, so too does the interesting life of Bertha was just as influential as her husband. She was not simply an addendum in her marriage, but a true partner. My discussion with Robin indicated that. Bertha Fuller Gordy was just as ambitious

⁴⁰ George, 3.

⁴¹ Smith, 63.

and driven as her husband. Edwards had a lot of similarities to her mother such as strong work ethic. This personality trait affirmed the business world would never be an exclusively male domain. Bertha Gordy was born Bertha Ida Fuller on April 9, 1899, in Milledgeville, Georgia at the end of Reconstruction and the turn of the century.⁴² Not much information is available on her early life, except for what was included in her husband's autobiography and her son Berry Gordy, Jr's autobiography. Bertha's parents were Burton and Ida Fuller. Bertha's paternal grandparents, Washington Fuller and Jane Fuller, both were born during slavery. Bertha's maternal grandparents, John and Henrietta Harris were both born during slavery.

Aside from the family autobiographies, most of what is written about Bertha Gordy is from a few secondary sources that speak solely to her entrepreneurial acumen. Her early life is still somewhat a mystery; however, through my research I have tried to excavate more information about her family history. I further uncovered that Bertha's family was prominent in Baldwin County, GA. Her father was a farmer and her mother was a homemaker. Growing up Bertha lived with her older sister Berdell, younger brother Washington, and maternal grandmother Jane, in a house the family rented. They were well off enough to have a servant living with them.⁴³ According to Ancestry.com Bertha's mother died in 1905, when Bertha was only seven years old. The only other detail about her life was from the 1910 census record which shows that her parents divorced prior to her mother's death.⁴⁴ Sometime after

⁴² Year: 1900; Census Place: Meriwether, Baldwin, Georgia; Roll: 178; Page: 6A; Enumeration District: 0003; FHL microfilm: 1240178 Ancestry.com

⁴³ Year: 1900; Census Place: Meriwether, Baldwin, Georgia; Roll: 178; Page: 6A; Enumeration District: 0003; FHL microfilm: 1240178 Ancestry.com

⁴⁴ Year: 1910; Census Place: Militia District 318, Baldwin, Georgia; Roll: T624_170; Page: 17B; Enumeration District: 0003; FHL microfilm: 1374183

1910, Bertha's father was remarried to Anna White who was a school teacher. Together they had 4 more children. One of those children was Burton A. Fuller (referred to as BA Fuller) who was Bertha's younger brother who would be an influence on the Gordy children years later.

Bertha followed in her step-mother's footsteps, pursuing teaching as a profession. Bertha was a serious young woman; a scholar who wanted to dedicate her life to her educational pursuits. She taught third grade in Sandersville, Georgia. Bertha's position as a school teacher was important in the black community. For many African Americans education was the key to combat the racist castigation that permeated their daily lives. The role of black educators was vital as they were the lifeblood of the black community. They were held in high regard and deeply respected. Through their professions, black educators carried with them the hopes and dreams of those who were enslaved. Efforts by blacks to educate their community were far from heroic. Attacks on black schools and black teachers continued throughout the late nineteenth century into the twentieth century.⁴⁵ Black teachers in Georgia generally taught larger classes than their white counterparts, thus further increasing the educational discrepancies. School buildings for blacks were substandard and the teaching conditions were not conducive to learning. It was through sheer resolve and determination that they continued their efforts. To them this was important work to further the improvement of the race.⁴⁶

Relegating black women to underfunded segregated Southern schools worked to

⁴⁵ Donald Lee, Grant, *The Way It Was in The South: The Black Experience in Georgia*. University of Georgia Press, 1993.p.228

⁴⁶ Grant.p.234

ensure that a quality education for Black women remained the exception rather than the rule.⁴⁷ Bertha explained to Pops that she would be a good wife, but she was not willing to give up her position as a scholar and an educator once she got married. Bertha was adamant to her future husband that she wanted a partner and not a boss.⁴⁸ As mothers, surrogate mothers, teachers, and churchwomen in essentially all black rural communities and urban neighborhoods, Black women participated in constructing and reconstructing oppositional knowledge. According to Patricia Hill Collins through the lived experiences gained within their extended families and communities, individual African American women fashioned their own ideas about the meaning of Black womanhood.⁴⁹

In 1922, three years into their marriage, Pops made a deal that would change their lives; he sold a load of the farm's timber stumps for \$2,600; a small fortune in rural Georgia. His decision to sell put him in grave danger as it angered the white residents of his Georgia town. At that time, a black man having access to that much power and money was threatening and could possibly lead to death by lynching.⁵⁰ As word of the timber sale spread, the family worried that local whites might try to harm Pops. Bertha urged Pops to leave, so he escaped to Detroit to meet his brother and cashed the check there. The Gordy family would begin a new life and make their mark on Detroit. Berry utilized the entrepreneurial spirit and the \$2600 he possessed to take advantage of the. Bertha would join a national

⁴⁷ Collins, p.4

⁴⁸ Gordy, p.13.

⁴⁹ Collins, p.10.

⁵⁰ Georgia was one of the leading Southern states in terms of lynching incidents. In Georgia, there were 381 instances of lynching between 1882 and 1930, with a total of 458 victims. 435 or 95% of these lynching victims were black. A notorious incident occurred in 1905, there was a notorious incident when a mob went to the Oconee, County jail in Watkinsville. Nine out of the 10 prisoners accused of various serious crimes were pulled out of the jail. The mob tied the nine men, eight black and one white, to a fence and shot them. One of the nine survived, but the eight who died made the Oconee lynching incident one of the largest ever recorded.

community of African American individuals and would put into social action the philosophies of piety, thrift, hard work, racial uplift, and self-sufficiency. Bertha would also instill those values into her children and member of her new community.⁵¹

Detroit

Edwards' first few years in Detroit as a young girl were filled with hard times and struggle for her family. In Detroit, Bertha gave birth to five more children. Loucye was born in 1924, George was born in 1926, Gwen was born in 1927, Berry Jr. was born in 1929, and the youngest, Robert was born in 1931. Edwards' father wanted desperately to own his own home for his growing family. Pops was so anxious about this that he was duped by a white real-estate agent to buy substandard property that they couldn't afford. Gordy put down \$250, the only money that he had left of his \$2,500 dollars. Edwards' mother couldn't find a job as a schoolteacher because her southern teaching credentials were not accepted in Detroit.⁵² Pops tried to find whatever work he could, but it became harder as the Great Depression hit. Like many families across the nation, the Gordy family was hit hard by this financial crisis.

Edwards' family lost their house and ended upon welfare for a short period in the direct aftermath of the Great Depression. They moved several times throughout Edwards' youth, sometimes staying with family.⁵³ Edwards would often have to share a bed with her younger sisters and her brothers would also share a bed. This crowding was a way of life in

⁵¹Wolcott, 6.

⁵² Gordy,13.

⁵³ Ibid.,14.

the early years for Edwards.⁵⁴ Rodents were a constant scourge in some of the places that Edwards lived. Edwards watched her father grapple with rodents and vermin, the conditions were so severe that in one instance Edwards watched her father's face get scratched up by a large rat.⁵⁵ Many African Americans who migrated to Detroit ended up living in deplorable conditions. Redlining⁵⁶ was rampant as many lived in ill kept rental housing, paying premium rates for neighborhoods that only African Americans could move to.⁵⁷

In the 30's the family finally saved enough money and bought a building on the eastside of Detroit where they lived and opened a family business. Edwards' father established a successful plastering and carpentry business after an apprenticeship. Edwards' parents soon had enough money to open a grocery store and as faithful followers named the store after Booker T. Washington. It quickly became a fixture in the black working class section of the neighborhood it was a part of.⁵⁸ To Pops and Bertha, the store was both a business and a living testament to its namesake. They followed a philosophy that hard, often menial, work was a stepping stone to financial success.⁵⁹ The Gordy parents instilled these ideals in all their children. To them, work ethic had no gender restrictions. Edwards and all her siblings were encouraged to be industrious and develop their own business ventures.⁶⁰

Bertha still pursued a formal education to enhance her business skills. She studied

⁵⁴ Gordy, 23.

⁵⁵ Ibid.,23

⁵⁶ Redlining refers to a discriminatory pattern of disinvestment and obstructive lending practices that act as an impediment to home ownership among African Americans and other people of color. - See more at: <http://www.blackpast.org/aah/redlining-1937#sthash.zaFwIEET.dpuf>

⁵⁷ Scott, Martelle, *Detroit: A biography*. Chicago Review Press, 2012.p. 90-91

⁵⁸ Smith,65.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

retail management at Wayne State University and graduated from the Detroit Institute of Commerce.⁶¹ Bertha would become an agent at Briggs Manufacturing Company and assume a leadership position in the Paradise Valley's Consumer Association. In 1945, she founded the Friendship Mutual Insurance Company with her younger brother BA Fuller.⁶² Bertha was also an active member of the local Democratic Party, making friends with Governor G. Mennen as well as other members of Michigan's white power structure.⁶³

Bertha Gordy was a founding member of the Housewives League of Detroit, established by Fannie Peck. The mission was to encourage African American housewives to patronize African American-owned businesses through "directed spending." The Housewives League was a force for Black Nationalism and they were the first to appeal for women's solidarity in Detroit.⁶⁴ Edwards accompanied her mother to these meetings where she would see her friend Betty. Betty would later be known to the world as Betty Shabazz. Even with all the trauma of her family's early beginnings, being in Detroit's Westside held some of the most influential and fondest moments in Edwards' life. She lived in a stable black community that was close knit, loving, and supportive. Many of the people that were Edwards' peers would go on to excel in medicine, law, politics, education, athletics and the arts.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Smith, 66.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ George, 11.

⁶⁴ John Hope, Franklin, and Darlene. Hine Clark, 1997. *Hine Sight: Black Women and The Re-Construction of American History (Blacks in The Diaspora Series)*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press p.143.

⁶⁵ WestSiders (Society), and Esther Gordy-Edwards. "'Memories' The Fondest of Them Began on the Westside of Detroit." In *Remembering Detroit's Old Westside, 1920-1950: A Pictorial History of the Westsiders*, 1st ed., 222-223. Detroit: WestSiders, 1997.

When I was in Detroit, I had an opportunity to interview Suesetta McCree who grew up with the Gordy family. McCree's older sister Vivian Talbert was friends with Edwards. The sisters were next-door neighbors with the Gordy family on the Westside. In conversations with McCree about growing up on Detroit's Westside she spoke about how stable and tight knit the community was.⁶⁶ To many of the Westsiders it was one of America's most progressive neighborhoods for African-American families. Years later, Edwards would participate in a book that McCree helped to edit called *The Westsiders "Our Story" Book*.⁶⁷

Edwards attended Columbian Elementary School and then later she McMichael Intermediate School on the Westside of Detroit, after which the family moved to the eastside.⁶⁸ Detroit public schools were lauded as a model for the nation in the 1920s and 1930s when Edwards was a student. In 1922, by the time Edwards' family arrived in Detroit "the city boasted that 74 percent of its elementary students were [testing] above grade level."⁶⁹ Despite how well the school system was, Detroit's African American community had problems with the lack of black teachers and concerns with the curriculum. From 1930 to 1950, the black community, in alliance with the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) and

⁶⁶ When I went to Detroit, I noticed a difference in how people identified themselves by the location in which they lived or grew up. People identified themselves as coming from either the Eastside or Westside. I wasn't given a concrete explanation as to why that was until I ran across an explanation in a study conducted at the University of Michigan about Black Bottom. The differences between east and west was in the East Side/ "Black Bottom" in the early 1940s, the population was 75 percent black but only 10 percent of residents owned their homes the rest rented. On the Westside of the 30,000 residents of this in early 1940s, thirty-three percent of residents owned their own homes. For further information on this: http://www.umich.edu/~bhlumrec/programs_centers/artsofcitizenshipprogram/www.artsofcitizenship.umich.edu/whatwedo/mosaicprimer.pdf

⁶⁷ Suesetta, McCree, Personal Interview. Detroit, Michigan, November 13, 2016.

⁶⁸ WestSiders (Society), and Edwards p.222

⁶⁹ Kristi L. Bowman, *The Pursuit of Racial and Ethnic Equality in American Public Schools: Mendez, Brown, and Beyond*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State Univ. Press, 2015

the United Auto Workers (UAW), continued to fight to reform the system. They wanted to increase the number of black teachers and counselors and improve the curriculum for black students.⁷⁰

Education

This re-segregation affected Edwards and her siblings educational trajectory as she entered high school and the family moved to “Black Bottom.” This was an area where African Americans lived on the thirty-block portion of the eastside neighborhood known as the “St. Antoine District.” Edwards’ family store was in the heart of “Black Bottom,” on the intersection of Farnsworth and St. Antoine streets. This area was originally known for its rich soil. The term “Black Bottom” soon became associated with African Americans due to the heavy concentration of blacks.⁷¹

Students near eastside neighborhood went to Miller, Eastern, Northeastern, Cass Technical, and Northwestern High Schools.⁷² Edwards’ older brother Fuller and younger sister Anna attended Northern. Edwards went to Cass Technical High School, which was a highly selective magnet school. Kids who gained entrance to Cass Tech were picked either for their talents in the arts or academia. Edwards had the experience of attending high school with teens from different neighborhoods and varying racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds.⁷³ Also Cass Tech had a high standard for their students academically. Students had to have a

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ The Arts of Citizenship Program. "Detroit History Primer." University of Michigan. Last modified 2000. http://www.umich.edu/~bhlumrec/programs_centers/artsofcitizenshipprogram/www.artsofcitizenship.umich.edu/whatwedo/mosaicprimer.pdf.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

3.0 grade point average to get accepted and then once accepted were required to maintain a 2.5 grade point average to stay enrolled. Employers were aware the type of student Cass graduates were, there were plenty of companies willing to hire them. According to the Detroit Free Press, Cass Tech "educated Detroit's smartest kids."⁷⁴

Edwards majored in chemistry where she had vivid recollections of being “the only girl in some classes and the only black in others and the only one both black and a girl still in others.”⁷⁵ Edwards graduated from Cass in 1938, joining a distinguished group of alumni. The list included: comedians Lily Tomlin and David Alan Greer, auto executive John DeLorean, former Miss USA’s Carol Gist and Kenya Moore, violinist Regina Carter, jazz musicians Donald Byrd, former Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, and Compuware CEO Peter Karmanos. Aviator Charles Lindbergh’s mother, Evangeline Lindbergh, taught chemistry at Cass from 1922 until 1942.⁷⁶

In the fall of 1938, during the beginnings of World War II, Esther entered Howard University’s Liberal Arts College. Howard University is a historically black college in Washington DC. The university has a history of educating some of the nation’s best and brightest in black America. The university was founded on the belief that blacks should have as equal an access to education as their white counterparts if they were to reach their full potential. Howard University, at that time, had established itself as “the capstone of Negro

⁷⁴ "Nailhed: "Second to None"." Nailhed. Last modified August 2007. <http://www.nailhed.com/2014/06/second-to-none.html>.

⁷⁵ Frank, Angelo, "Business Woman Fills Many Roles," *Detroit Free Press*, February 2, 1972, p.7.

⁷⁶ Dan, Austin, "Cass Tech High School (old)." *HistoricDetroit.org*. Last modified 2017. historicdetroit.org/building/cass-tech-high-school-old/.

education.” The District of Columbia was also the center of the “colored elite.”⁷⁷ A large population of well to do African Americans lived around Howard and were employed in the nation’s capital. Washington DC served as a center for protest systematic racist policies in federal jobs. In the 40s Howard University was a place where political and economic activities collided. Edwards set out to surround herself with other black, upwardly mobile students. She was the first and only of Bertha and Berry Gordy Sr.’s children to attend college.

While on the campus of Howard University she met another young woman from Detroit, Roberta Hughes Wright with whom she would enjoy a lifelong friendship. Edwards was roommates with Roberta Hughes who would later become Dr. Roberta Hughes Wright Ph.D. D, J.D. Wright was born in 1922, in Detroit’s Black Bottom and was the daughter of Dr. Robert Greenwald, a prominent physician and well respected businessman. In 1962, Greenwald was recognized in *Ebony Magazine* as one of the 100 Richest African American men in the United States. His philosophy was like that of the Gordy family. He believed that blacks needed to organize their own businesses and practice the philosophy of self-reliance. The bond between Edwards and Hughes would become tighter as they both pledged Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) sorority.⁷⁸

AKA was America’s first Greek-letter organization established by black college women. It was founded in 1908, on the campus of Howard University with the goal of establishing a sisterhood with a commitment to servant-leadership that was both domestic

⁷⁷ Willard B. Gatewood, Jr. *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Feb. 1988), pp. 3-20.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/2208518?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

⁷⁸ Robin, Terry, Personal Interview. Detroit, Michigan, November 11, 2016.

and international in its scope.⁷⁹ Edwards left Howard and transferred to Wayne State, back in Detroit. There she pledged AKA's undergraduate chapter Beta Mu in 1940.⁸⁰ In 1941, AKA President Dorothy Ferebree urged her sorority sisters to promote civil rights.⁸¹ Edwards was an active member of the AKA Detroit graduate chapter of Alpha Ro and would remain active until the end of her life.

Marriage

Edwards was briefly married to Robert Theron Bullock in 1942, at Howard Chapel, on the campus of Howard University.⁸² I don't have any records about how Robert Bullock Sr. and Edwards met. However, I did find out that Robert Theron Bullock was born in Georgia on December 8, 1919. Like many black men hoping to prove their patriotism to the United States, he enlisted in the military on October 23, 1941, during WWII.⁸³ During their brief marriage Edwards gave birth to a son Robert Bullock Jr. on December 15, 1943.

In the 1940s, when gender specialization was high and educational attainment was rising for women, there was a negative relationship between education and marital status for women.⁸⁴ Edwards hired an attorney and filed for a divorce from Bullock in 1945, citing

⁷⁹ Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.". 2017. *Aka1908.Com*. <http://aka1908.com/about>.

⁸⁰ Patricia A. Watkins, Letter to Diane Dean to. 2017. "Resending Request for Information - E. Gordy-Edwards To Alpha Kappa Alpha Director of Membership". Email.

⁸¹ Shockley, Megan Taylor. 2004. "*We, Too, Are Americans*". 1st ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, p.29.

⁸² In a conversation with Robin Terry at the Motown Museum in Detroit Michigan, Edwards daughter she divulged her grandparents got married at Howard chapel on the campus of Howard University. Terry didn't know much more about her grandfather as she only seen him twice in her life.

⁸³ Ancestry.com. U.S., World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2005. 2017.

⁸⁴ Torr, Berna M. "*The changing relationship between education and marriage in the United States, 1940-2000*." *Journal of Family History* (2011)

emotional cruelty.⁸⁵ Edwards' divorce filing defied black respectability politics as divorce had a negative impact on how women were viewed, especially in black bourgeoisie circles. Edwards did not allow the current gender norms and hegemonic mores to undermine her desires. Edwards quietly fought against gendered, cultural and societal norms. She decided to file for divorce, while many women would have stayed for the sake of their children.

Edwards tried to figure out a way to provide for her child and herself. There were very few options for black women in the 1940s. Black Civic leaders and trade unionists fought a sustained and energetic battle to open Detroit's war productions to black women. The government's manpower and officials were discriminatory against black females and made them a low priority.⁸⁶ For Edwards, growing up in a family of entrepreneurs, Edwards could count on a family motto of self-reliance. Edwards' sister Loucye was the first female civilian to be assistant property manager officer at the Michigan and Indiana Army Reserves at Fort Wayne; a position that placed her in charge of all the vehicles, food, clothing, and supplies used by the reserve unit.⁸⁷ Edwards and her brothers Fuller and George went into business for themselves, establishing the Gordy Printing Shop in 1947. Given the history of U.S. racial segregation, Black feminist activism demonstrates distinctive patterns. African Americans have long been relegated to racially segregated environments within the United States. Black feminist practice has often occurred within a context of Black community development efforts and other Black nationalist-inspired projects.

In 1951, at the age of 31, Edwards married her second husband George H. Edwards, a

⁸⁵ Esther Bullock, Plaintiff vs. Robert Bullock Defendant. 1945. Wayne County, Detroit. Michigan.

⁸⁶ Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 135.

⁸⁷ Smith, p.67.

hospital administrator. With her help, he would become Michigan's first black Representative. Using her superb administrative skills which she harnessed at the Booker T. Washington Grocery store. She ran her husband's campaign. George, a native of Georgia like Edwards, would go on to win three more elections in the 11th District from 1955-64, in the 12th District from 1965-72, and from the 9th District from 1973-78.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Lawrence, Kestenbaum, 2015. "The Political Graveyard: Episcopalian Politicians Michigan". *Politicalgraveyard.Com*. <http://politicalgraveyard.com/geo/MI/episcopalian.html>.

Chapter 3:

Edwards and the Beginnings of Motown

“You’re 29 years old and what have you done so far with your life? Well if you’re so smart why aren’t you rich?”¹ In 1959, Esther Gordy Edwards asked these pivotal questions to her younger brother, Berry Gordy, Jr. Gordy had approached his family to invest in yet another entrepreneurial venture in the 3D Jazz Mart. In 1953, their brother George invested his own money to become co-partner and Berry Gordy Sr., wanting to see Berry Jr. son succeed, borrowed money from their church credit union to assist Gordy in his entrepreneurial pursuit.² Unfortunately, this first business venture, a jazz store the 3D Jazz Mart, went out of business as Gordy realized that he didn’t have the consumer base needed to support this endeavor. Edwards was extremely astute in her judgment on business matters; her vote of approval was vital if the future music mogul wanted to achieve his goal of creating his dream record label.

Edwards asked Berry the most difficult questions, not because she didn’t believe in her brother’s talent, but because she was prudent. Prior to his request, Gordy had been denied a bank loan from a local bank. Detroit had a long history of discriminatory lending practices towards blacks for both business and home loans. Denying the black community access to credit, including home financing, was but one small piece in a larger set of discriminatory practices imposed on the black communities in Northern cities.³ Gordy decided to speak with his older brother Fuller Gordy about his dilemma and Fuller suggested

¹ Gordy, 107.

² Ibid, 59-60.

³ James, Greer, "Race and Mortgage Redlining in the United States." WPSA Western Political Science Association. Last modified March 22, 2012. <https://wpsa.research.pdx.edu/meet/2012/greer.pdf>.

that Gordy ask his family for a loan.⁴ This family drama set in motion a chain of events that would leave its mark on black, cultural, national and gender history.

Edwards was the architect and president of the Ber-Berry Co-op. Her position was a source of power and influence within the family and to the public. The Ber-Berry Co-op, named after Berry Sr. and Bertha Gordy, was a fund that distributed loans to family members to launch various Gordy business ventures. For family members to receive loans the entire family had to agree. Each week individual family members deposited ten dollars into the fund. Weekly business meetings were held with minutes, an agenda and discussion items that often went to a vote.⁵

Edwards, George and her younger brother Fuller most assiduously emulated their parents' business practices. Their younger sister, Louyce Gordy Wakefield, also used her business and organizational skills, learning from her parents and as mentioned previously was the first woman civilian to be assistant property officer at the Michigan and Indiana Reserves at Fort Wayne.⁶ Edwards' younger siblings Anna, Gwen, Robert and Berry Jr., were also ambitious, but did not always pursue the traditional family business ventures of printing, insurance or grocery retail. They followed their passions in the arts but was not to the extent that Gordy would later.⁷ Of all the children, Gordy appeared the least interested in following his family's footsteps. He did not want to establish himself as a small business owner.⁸

Edwards knew Gordy had a proclivity for the "fast-life." In February of 1978 in a

⁴ Gordy,104.

⁵ Raynoma Berry Singleton Gordy, *Motown and Me*, (Chicago, IL: Contemporary Books, 1990),70.

⁶ Susan E. Smith, *Dancing In The Street: Motown and The Cultural Politics of Detroit*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999,) 67.

⁷Smith, 67.

⁸ Ibid.

speech she gave to the Organization of Black Unity in Detroit about the success of Motown, she stated, “Berry was influenced by the amount of money flashed by the pimps in his neighborhood.” But, she said, “The family kept him honest.”⁹ Considering all his financial and personal problems, her hesitation about giving her brother money was well founded. Edwards eventually relented, giving Gordy a loan of \$800.¹⁰ With the final go-ahead from Edwards, Gordy went on to start Tamla Records¹¹, Tamla, was named after his adoration for a 1957 Debbie Reynolds’ song “Tammy.” Tama would later be renamed Motown. Ultimately, Edwards would become one of his greatest allies and supporters. However, at Esther’s insistence, Gordy had to go beyond the family’s standard repayment form and agree that any of his future earnings would go first to pay off the loan. Gordy would later say, “Esther had been tougher than I anticipated, but I knew right then, if I ever made money, she would be the one I get to watch it for me.”¹²

The loan that helped fund Motown was not an informal oral agreement, it was a written document, signed on June 12, 1959 with a payback date of June 12, 1961. The loan note came from the Home Federal Savings and Loan Association of Detroit, but that institution’s name was crossed out, replaced by that of the Ber-Berry Co-op. The interest rate on the loan was six percent.¹³

Even though Berry had already established a roster of talented artists, musicians and lyricists, Edwards did not quit her job as immediately to help Berry run the record label. Instead, in keeping with the Gordy family tradition of family helping family, Gordy’s sister

⁹ Holly Kerfoot, “Speaker Traces Success: “Motown a Family Affair “Central Michigan Life, (Mount. Pleasant Michigan), February 17,1978. Volume 59 No. 57.

¹⁰ \$800 is the equivalent to \$6,683 today.

¹¹ Maraniss, 56.

¹² Posner,33.

¹³ Maraniss, David. *Once in a Great City: A Detroit Story*, (Simon and Schuster, 2015), 55.

Loucy pitched in. She allowed Berry access to her apartment as a rehearsal space and took on the role of publisher, heading up Jobete Music Company, named after Gordy's children.¹⁴

In his care, he had a young, smooth and talented singer-songwriter by the name of Smokey Robinson, as well as songwriters Brian Holland, Janie Bradford, Robert Bateman and Raynoma Gordy Singleton. Singleton would later become Gordy's second wife and an unsung figure in Motown. This group of singers and songwriters was part of the original team for the record label, Tamla, named after his adoration for a 1957 Debbie Reynolds' song "Tammy."¹⁵ These musicians coalesced around Gordy between 1957 and 1959, a period when he broke off from writing songs for Jackie Wilson and his management group. They were there when Gordy decided to establish his own record company and publishing arm. He wanted to avoid being shortchanged on royalties.¹⁶

During the first year of Tamla, Gordy recorded the Miracles and Mav Johnson, and received one of his first smash hits with the song "Money (That's What I Want)," written by Berry and Janie Bradford, and performed by the soulful singer Barrett Strong.¹⁷ Edwards pitched in while still holding two jobs, working as Gordy's assistant and assisting with many of the Tamla artists. Tamla was still not equipped to break into the national field, so songs could only be released locally through Tamla. Gordy's other older sister, Gwen, came to the aid with national distribution through her label Anna Records. Anna Records released his

¹⁴ Nelson George, *Where Did Our Love Go: The Rise and Fall of The Motown Sound*, (Illinois: University of Illinois Press. 2007), 28.

¹⁵ Maraniss, 56.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Years later Barret Strong would seek to get his name back onto the copyright credits for the song. He claimed Motown duped him out of songwriting credits. For more information see:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/01/arts/music/for-a-classic-motown-song-about-money-credit-is-what-he-wants.html>

song “Money” nationally in 1959.¹⁸

Anna Records

The Gordy sisters were a quartette whose musical contributions behind the scenes have been undervalued by existing scholarship. Female performers have been the most visible example of women’s progress in the history of rock and pop. While many believe that women were traditionally excluded from the “serious money talk,” they have always fought to achieve decision-making power and substantial budgets.¹⁹ Gwen and Anna Gordy were no exception, veering away from the family’s traditional business practice of plastering, carpentry, printing and insurance. Gwen and Anna, like Gordy, became involved in the entertainment industry.

Gwen and her songwriting partner/boyfriend Billy Davis were collaborators with Gordy for Detroit singer Jackie Wilson. Berry was upset that he wasn’t making the kind of money that he felt he should, so he approached Wilson’s manager, Nat Turpool. Turpool told Gordy, “Jackie is the star. You need him he doesn’t need you!” Gordy was angry and tried to get Jackie Wilson to intervene on his behalf, but to no avail. After this, Gordy decided to sever his relationship with Turpool and Wilson.²⁰ Davis and Gwen were disturbed that their brother severed their highest profile gig with Wilson without consulting them first. However, instead of sulking over a lost opportunity, Gwen saw this as a chance to establish her own record label.

It is revealing that upon entering the recording business, she immediately sought to

¹⁸ Gordy, 123.

¹⁹ Lucy O’Brien, *She Bop II: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002) ,412.

²⁰ Gordy, 97.

maintain some control of their product. Gordy's sisters had absorbed their parents' lessons about entrepreneurship and self-reliance.²¹ Instead of simply leasing records to other labels they started their own label, and secured distribution with Chicago-based record label, Chess Records, for national distribution.²²

Gwen and her partner Davis formed Anna Records in 1958.²³ Gwen and Davis initially approached Gordy about assuming the position of president of Anna Records. Gordy announced to everyone's surprise that he did not want to have any partners.²⁴ This business move ensured a larger return on sales than record leasing could provide them. Moreover, it gave their music an identity within an industry of record buyers.²⁵ By their participation in the male-dominated entertainment sphere, Edwards and her sisters Gwen and Anna operated outside traditional gender, class and race norms.

However, Gwen and Anna strayed farther, as they not only operated outside of the traditional Gordy family business model, but were also veering away from the model that Edwards was trying to uphold. Within the Cold War context, middle class women re-emphasized respectability, but shored up these notions with "scientific" understandings of social work and community uplift. Entrepreneurship was the traditional family more, but it may have alienated Anna and Gwen from other black middle class society women, women who may have viewed the music industry as less respectable place for a woman, even if Gwen and Anna were in positions of leadership.

As time went on, problems developed between Gwen and Davis. Davis was on the

²¹ George, 26.

²² Ibid, 25.

²³ Named after Anna Gordy, who was a limited partner.

²⁴ Posner, 29.

²⁵ George, 26.

road frequently promoting Anna recordings. In his absence, Gwen began a relationship with Harvey Fuqua, the former lead singer of the Moonglows, and known for bringing singer Marvin Gaye into the Motown fold. Chess Records sent Fuqua to Detroit to work at Anna Records. Fuqua and Gwen fell in love, prompting Davis to leave Anna Records to form Checkmate Records (also Chess-distributed).²⁶

At that point, Fuqua was dating singer Etta James. But he Eventually, he broke up with James to marry Gwen, causing some friction at Chess Records. Davis moved to Chicago to become an A&R Director for Chess Records. In 1961, after Gwen and Harvey's marriage, Anna Records was resurrected within Fuqua's company, Harvey and Tri Phi Records. These smaller companies later merged to form Anna Tri-Phi. Gordy would eventually bought out these smaller companies, merging them all into Motown.²⁷

Gordy thought of this name based on a contraction between Detroit, which had long been known as the Motor City, and the substitution of "town" for "city." Gordy found a house located on 2648 West Grand Blvd in a middle class integrated neighborhood in central Detroit. He converted the house into his main operations and immediately dubbed it "Hitsville, U.S.A.". Before long, in a front window, Gordy added a homemade poster that read the SOUND OF YOUNG AMERICA.²⁸ Thus, Motown was born.²⁹ Three years into the enterprise, the bills were paid, Tamla had morphed into Motown, and the studio was teeming with singers, band members, producers, arrangers, writers, technical engineers, and recording engineers, pumping out music twenty-two hours a day, closing only for clean-up from eight

²⁶ George, 35.

²⁷ Ibid, 36.

²⁸ Posner, 43.

²⁹ Ibid, 39.

to ten each morning.³⁰

Edwards was there, assisting her brother behind the scenes doing secretarial work in the early days, even when she didn't have the official title of vice president of Corporate Secretary and Director of International Relations. She knew that leadership in Gordy's budding company was important. In a 1976 speech given to a Michigan State University marketing graduate class, Edwards remarked "Everything hinges on the company leadership. Because the company is an extension of its leader."³¹ Edwards was critical of Gordy in the beginning, but, in keeping with her position of family organizer, she eventually abandoned her own comfortable position to help her brother's new record label.³²

According to Crawford African American women's quest for self-definition and empowerment is often advanced by their political activism.³³ African American women involved in the ongoing struggle for social change contributed most to the black community when they stepped out of roles defined for them by black males and used both their personal experience as black women and their collective history as African Americans to define and empower themselves.³⁴ Edwards became a trailblazer by choosing to assist her brother propelling his company into a global brand.

It's a Family Affair

³⁰ Maraniss, 57.

³¹ Holly Kerfoot, "Speaker Traces Success: "Motown a Family Affair "Central Michigan Life, (Mount. Pleasant Michigan), February 17,1978. Volume 59 No. 57.

³² Maraniss, 44.

³³ Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods, *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941- 1965*, (Bloomington, Ind. Indiana Univ. Press, 2008,) 219.

³⁴ Ibid, 219.

Motown eventually became synonymous with Gordy, but it was more a product of the entire Gordy family, especially his older sisters.³⁵ Edwards, being the eldest Gordy sister, meant what she said about supporting her baby brother. Instead of merely providing financial backing for her brother, she decided, in true Gordy fashion, to go all in. Edwards was already helping Gordy prior to her resignation from secretarial work. She juggled both her job and assisted Gordy in arranging tours for early artists signed to Motown.³⁶ Her daily schedule was as follows: 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., Records Court; 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m., Gordy Printing Company; 4:00 p.m. to midnight, working with Gordy. Even then, Edwards' job wasn't over as she had domestic responsibilities as a wife and mother.

Edwards' decision to leave her full-time in 1962 job points to Edwards' loyalty and dedication to her family. Her post as the Records Jury Chief as chairwoman made history. Edwards was appointed by the Governor G. Mennen Williams, and was the first African American woman to hold the position.³⁷ Edwards' choice to leave her government post was met with resistance among her closest friends. Roberta Wright, her former college classmate at Howard University and sorority sister, tried desperately to talk her out of resigning from the commission. "That's not going to work," Wright told her. "Your brother is just playing around with those tapes. You have to have a good job."³⁸ Edwards, the wife of State Representative George Edwards and stepmother of a future federal judge, (Harry T. Edwards) did not live a life of frivolity. She had a son at Western Michigan in Kalamazoo and a stepson at law school in Ann Arbor to worry about.³⁹

³⁵ Maraniss, 44.

³⁶ George, 32.

³⁷ Detroit Free Press (Detroit, Michigan), October 12, 1962, accessed January 12, 2017.

³⁸ Maraniss, 42.

³⁹ Ibid.

Edwards wasn't the only one to abandoned the comforts of stability for her brother's new venture. It was part of the Gordy family lore that everyone helped the another succeed. Edwards' husband followed his wife's lead in the music business when he was appointed comptroller for Motown.⁴⁰ In addition, Edwards' sister, Loucyce, left her army reserves post to become vice president, responsible for managing everything from album design sales, billing and collection, and even actual pressing the records. Ron Wakefield, Loucyce's husband, came on as a saxophonist and a staff arranger. Edward's brother, Robert, quit his post office job and became an apprentice engineer in the studio. Edwards' brothers were still running the family's construction and printing shop, but were finally drawn in when Berry, Sr. became an unpaid consultant.

Bertha Gordy served as the assistant corporate secretary of Motown Record Corp, Motown Industries, and all the organizations affiliated companies.⁴¹ Edwards' sisters and their spouses joined Motown as executives. Anna Gordy continued her artistic pursuits helping to write songs for her husband Marvin Gaye. Singleton, Gordy's wife, also pitched in by providing background music and accounting, even establishing a Motown's payroll.⁴² Edwards' stepson, Harry T. Edwards joined the business while attending the University of Michigan Law School. He spent the summers and spare moments attempting to install a personnel system based on what he had learned as an undergraduate at Cornell, where he earned a degree in industrial relations. He was only twenty-two, but he felt the freedom at Motown that allowed people to use and develop their various talents with less emphasis on

⁴⁰ George, 32.

⁴¹ "Detroit Rites Are Held for Mother of Berry Gordy". *Jet*. Magazine February 20, 1975, 45.

⁴² Posner,44.

age and experience.⁴³

Edwards was heavily influenced by southern norms of respectability and black club women's ideology of racial uplift. The same ideology that influenced other northern female migrants. Edwards had a keen awareness of respectability, which was so when she joined Motown Industries in 1962, her philosophies on black female respectability ideology would not only impacted the young impressionable women of Motown.

⁴³ Maraniss, 58-59.

Chapter 4: Edwards Makes Her Mark in Motown

Edwards was not deterred by the fact that she was new to the music business, and she approached Motown with the same work ethic that she utilized in her other work positions. Edwards introduced new ideas that helped bring Motown's stable of young, talented and hungry artist to new audiences around the United States and internationally. Her additions to the operational aspects at such the Motown Revue, Artist Development and the future Motown Museum helped to change the cultural landscape and ways in which black artists were marketed and promoted to the public.

Edwards was appointed vice president, in charge of developing the management company, International Talent Management, Inc. ("ITMI") in 1962. For ten percent of all artists' earnings, ITMI became the personal management team for artist getting them club and television bookings. They provided career advice was provided in addition to handling personal finances and paying the artist taxes. Managing performers' careers, as well as the record company, Motown Records became the musical version to that of the old Hollywood system. In that system, performers were signed, had their careers developed, and stayed contractually bound for many years to the studio. In this case, that studio was Motown Records. Few artist questioned whether their interests were best served by having their record label act as a manager.¹ Although it was a conflict of interest at the time, managerial imbalances were a part of the standard practice in the recording industry.²

Edwards ran this division for almost ten years, and every recording artist signed by

¹ Posner, Gerald. *Motown: Music, Money, Sex and Power*, (New York: Random House Trade Publications.) 2005, 67.

²Posner, 68.

Motown and its group labels was managed by ITMI. Edwards Edwards stated, in her role at Motown she stated “I just had a burning desire to protect the artist. These were young people who came from less fortunate families or one-parent families. Motown was a family itself. I wound up learning a lot about young people.”³ Through her leadership at ITMI, she nurtured the careers of many young artists and provide the guidance and education that helped them succeed at Motown.

Stevland Morris AKA Little Stevie Wonder

One day, Steveland Morris would emerge from his cocoon, becoming the world-famous Stevie Wonder. His origin story, however, is quite bleak. Steveland was born four weeks premature in Saginaw, Michigan to Lula Mae Hardway and Calvin Judkins. Because he was premature, he had to be kept alive for a month in an incubator. Too much oxygen was pumped into his incubator, as a result, Steveland developed retrolental fibroplasia, which created a fibrous membrane behind each eyeball, rendering him permanently blind.⁴ Despite his disability. Steveland had a chance meeting with Ronnie White, of the Miracles, and White arranged for him to meet Gordy at Hitsville. Steveland was going let his gift shine. Gordy was impressed by this blind kid, who played the piano, harmonica, and the bongos. Gordy had Edwards wrote up a contract for Steveland in 1961. Gordy, in one of his more inspired name changes, decided Steveland would hereafter be known as Little Stevie Wonder.⁵ When Edwards entered Steveland’s life, she became a surrogate mother for life. Later in life, Steveland said, “She believed in me. When I was fourteen years old and many

³ Thomson. Gale, 2005. "Edwards, Esther Gordy 1920-2011 Dictionary Definition of Edwards, Esther Gordy 1920-2011 Encyclopedia.com <http://www.encyclopedia.com/education/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/edwards-esther-gordy-1920>. (April 1, 2017)

⁴ George, Nelson. *Where Did Our Love Go: The Rise and Fall of The Motown Sound*, (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2007,) 70.

⁵George, ,70.

other people didn't or could only see what they could at the time, she championed me being in Motown. I shared with her many of my songs first before anyone else. She was like another mother to me; she was an extension of that same kind of motherly love."⁶ Edwards went a step further mothering him, serving as his personal manager and enrolling him in the Michigan School for the Blind, finding tutors for him, and helping him manage his money.

Because of Steveland's was only 11 when he signed to Motown, Edwards had to work with the Michigan Department of Labor to structure his contract to fit the specifications of the child labor law. While at the company Stevie received a small weekly allowance: his royalties and performance fees were administered by Jobete and ITMI. Unlike any Motown act, his earnings were placed in a special trust fund. This fund was monitored by the State of Michigan, Schools for the Blind, and his protectors within the company. It was a provision that would have a profound effect on Motown and popular music.⁷

The Marvelettes

In 1961 five teenagers from Inkster, Michigan a suburb located west of Detroit, Michigan came to Motown calling themselves the the Casinyets (or "Can't Sing Yets"). Their names were Gladys Horton, Georgia Dobbins, Georgeanna Tillman, Wyanetta Cowart, and Katherine Anderson.⁸ These young women would become The Marvelettes, Motown's first successful female vocal group. The Marvelettes are most notable for recording the company's first #1 Pop hit, "Please Mr. Postman", and for setting the precedent for Motown girl groups

⁶ "UNLIMITED | CMU Daily." Complete Music Update. Accessed March 29, 2017. <http://www.completemusicupdate.com/htmldaily/110826.html>.

⁷ George, 71.

⁸ Carl Hoffman, "The Official 60's Site-The Marvelettes." The 60s Official Site – Home, Last modified 2008. http://www.the60sofficialsite.com/The_Marvelettes.html.

such as Martha and the Vandellas, the Supremes, and The Velvelettes.⁹

Edwards took on a personal role as an advisor to the Marvellettes when they first came to Motown. The success of Please “Mr. Postman” brought an inevitable demand for live performances; an often-complicated situation, except for Wanda Rogers all the Marvellettes were still in high school. There were many occasions where Motown would have to give written excuses to get the girls out of class, such as the groups status rose in Motown.

Gladys Horton was an orphan, and thus a ward of the court. As a result, Motown had to appoint a legal guardian for her. Edwards asked her husband George to pull some strings in his position as a Michigan state legislator and through his contacts Edwards convinced a probate court judge to let Gladys go on the road as Edwards became her guardian, under assurances that she would be a chaperone and would make the girls study.¹⁰

Throughout these proceedings, Gladys had to write to the state of Florida for her birth certificate. At Age 16, for the first time discovered her background. Horton recalls,

“Mrs. Edwards and her husband became legal guardians for me. I was an orphan so early in life that it wasn’t until I met her that I found out my real birth date, my middle name, my mother and father’s names, and place of birth. I had to send off for my birth certificate for the courts to acknowledge and sign the Edwards on as my legal guardians over my business and money affairs. That knowledge opened a brand-new door for me. I discovered part of my roots were

⁹ Marc Taylor, *The Original Marvellettes: Motown's Mystery Girl Group*, (Aloiv Publishing Company, 2004)

¹⁰ Taylor, *The Original Marvellettes*, 33.

from the West Indies.”¹¹

Edwards also had influence and power with the artists and their parents to a point where her brother had no choice but to rely on her to be able to sign many young artists.

Edwards saw herself as an agent to help the artists in every aspect of support that they needed to become successful at Motown Records. Her brother, Gordy then job was to take unpolished, yet talented performers and groomed them to play any venue in the world. The end goal was to prepare the artist for more lucrative supper club and Las Vegas engagements. These venues not only meant higher earnings for the company, but helped establish an artist’s across-the-board credibility and longevity. Before Motown, most African-Americans were relegated to the “chitlin circuit,” an archipelago of black clubs, theaters and auditoriums in the East and South that black performers were regulated to because of segregation. with little chance for success in mainstream America.¹²

Motown’s Artist and Development Department

Edwards went to work and established the Artist and Development Department, Edwards sisters Gwen and Anna ran the Artist and Development department for the artist that would help them with their presentation. Edwards met Maxine Powell while she was looking for a printing company to run advertisements for her annual show that she had every year. ¹³

Maxine Powell was a trailblazer in her own right, she ran a Model, Host, and Hostess Agency school. It was Detroit’s first black modeling school and she broke new ground by persuading Detroit’s major automobile companies to use black models at their trade shows in

¹¹ Ibid, 33-34

¹² Mark C. Peyko, “Can’t Forget the Motor City: Motown Hits 50,” Made in Youngstown, entry posted February 2, 2009, <https://madeinyoungstown.wordpress.com/tag/motown/> (accessed April 24, 2017.)

¹³ Maxine Powell, "Rock and Roll; Respect; Interview with Maxine Powell." openvault.wgbh.org. Last modified September 1995, http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_6224956EC9BB49C080C966A79D547F2D.

the 50s. She also placed many of her models in advertisements that bought space in local newspapers which was unheard of in the 1950's.¹⁴

For one of Powell's planned events, she was referred to the Gordy Printing Company. She was told the company did some of the best printing work, for doing souvenir booklets. There she was impressed by Edwards and her brother Fuller. She was also impressed that Edwards was also working at the print shop by day and managing her husband's campaign for the Detroit City Council in 1955.¹⁵ The other Gordy women were so impressed with Powell that, Bertha, Louyce, and Gwen and even Edwards took etiquette classes with Powell and Gwen even became one of her models.¹⁶

Powell's company was hired in 1964, Edwards hired Maxine Powell, who embodied Motown's first idea for Artist Development. Powell was to tend to the performing sons and daughters of migrant laborers, making sure they knew how to carry themselves, eat in public, gesture onstage and give innocuous interviews. Powell felt that many of the artist that were already on the Motown label were "Rude and some were crude and some hadn't been anywhere."¹⁷ She gave the artists 2 hour classes daily that were mandatory. She encouraged the girls to wear hats and gloves walking around Motown. She taught them how to best get in and out of a car as she said, "a lady should". One of Powell famous remarks was "We're training them for Buckingham Palace and the White House".¹⁸ She said, "Good manners

¹⁴ Maxine Powell, "Rock and Roll; Respect; Interview with Maxine Powell." openvault.wgbh.org. Last modified September 1995, http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_6224956EC9BB49C080C966A79D547F2D.

¹⁵ Maxine Powell, "Rock and Roll; Respect; Interview with Maxine Powell." openvault.wgbh.org. Last modified September 1995, http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_6224956EC9BB49C080C966A79D547F2D.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Posner,115.

¹⁸ Ibid.

will get you into places that money never will.”

The Artist and Development department scrutinized every aspect of a performance and tailored it to maintain a consistent and prescribed image. Every artist was scrutinized for every detail. The choreography of the Temptations was athletic and exciting, the Supremes, due to the restrictions of floor-length gowns, were demurer.

Cholly Atkins of the legendary choreographer of the Coles and Atkins Dance team¹⁹ took responsibility for creating the artist dance routines. Maurice King, an accomplished band leader from Detroit’s Flame Show Bar²⁰ acted as a musical director of Artist and Development. The Artist Development department with its team of skilled show business practitioners, proved vital to Motown’s continued success and public image.²¹

This Development department had a focus on public image, proper etiquette, and general decorum this stood in direct relation to older philosophies about black respectability politics.²² The company sought to produce black music out of Detroit but also package it in such a way as to not contribute to any racist stereotypes about African-Americans as uncouth or uncivilized.²³

In retrospect, not everyone was happy with the “Motown Myth” of having to be remade because they lacked manners. Mary Wilson one of the original members of the Supremes took offense to this idea. Wilson argued that the Supremes were hardly uncultured and that when they came to Motown they were already well spoken well dressed and

¹⁹ For more information see: <http://www.danceheritage.org/atkins.html>

²⁰ For more information see: <http://www.metrotimes.com/city-slang/archives/2015/06/24/the-legendary-flame-show-bar-opened-66-years-ago-today>

²¹ Susan E. Smith, *Dancing In The Street: Motown and The Cultural Politics of Detroit*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999,) 120.

²² Ibid, 121.

²³ Ibid.

ambitious. Wilson and her fellow artist wanted to move up into the world and saw respectability as a tool to achieve this.²⁴ When Motown's young female performers wore their white gloves, and took lessons in etiquette, they drew from a long lesson of female respectability.

The Artist and Development man have been seen viewed as problematic by some, however Powell's strict regime led may Motown talent to the most prestigious and popular stages of the world.

Young black women who never saw themselves on stage or in screen were influenced by many of the Motown Acts and grew up wanting to be like them. Martha Reeves, from Martha Reeves and the Vandellas remarked years later "Esther Edwards, exemplified elegance. She is the reason why we had the artist and development department. She knew we needed nurturing and she hired the best so we would have the best look and sound "²⁵

The Motortown Revue

Edwards came up with the novel idea of a rolling tour throughout the winter of 1962 showcasing all the Motown Acts which she called it the Motortown Revue.²⁶ It was Edwards's responsibility to find the right touring contacts. Edwards convinced the energetic Henry Wynne of Supersonic Attractions to take a chance by booking the entire roster. Wynne was black and Edwards told him that two black companies needed each other. She also promised him that if he did this tour, he would have an inside track to grow with Motown.²⁷ Edwards was a persuasive woman, and as was often, she kept Wynne on the phone for hours,

²⁴ Wolcott, 241.

²⁵ Brian McCollum. 2011, "The Soul of Motown: She Helped Develop Talent and Preserve Its History". *Detroit Free Press*. August 26, 2001,4A.

²⁶ Gareth Murphy, *Cowboys and Indies: The Epic History of the Record Industry*, Macmillan, 2014.

²⁷ Posner, 98-99.

until he bought the whole show and at a price considerably higher than he originally intended.²⁸

Wynne strung together the venues of the tour, he had a knack for maneuvering around race relations and could squeeze advance money out of local promoters.²⁹

Thomas “Beans” Bowles, a saxophonist and arranger by trade, had been in the employed by the Twenty Grand’s³⁰ house band since the early fifties, befriending George Gordy, Gwen and Anna at the night club. Through them, Bowles began playing sessions for Gordy, impressing everyone with his head for business and ideas on how to enhance live performances. He clicked with Edwards at ITMI and together the Motortown Revue was their baby.³¹

Touring revues had been a staple of rock and roll since musician entrepreneur Johnny Otis had organized the first package in 1950. Subsequently, everyone from deejay’s such as Alan Freed and Dick Clark, to stars such as James Brown and Little Richard organized shows with as many as ten acts on the bill, each performing one or two songs.³²

Edwards had studied the mechanics of Dick Clark’s *Caravan of Stars* of 1963 to figure out how it was done. The Motortown Revue which began in 1962 was the complete sales package, all things Motown, vertical and horizontal, everything and everyone together imported from Detroit all in the family.³³ Through the tour, Edwards was yet again entered a very male dominated territory, as a black woman organizing a national and international tour

²⁸ George, 46.

²⁹ Maraniss, 44.

³⁰ For more information see: <https://michronicleonline.com/2010/11/16/remembering-the-20-grand-detroits-most-celebrated-nightclub/>

³¹ George, 36.

³² Ibid, 45.

³³ Maraniss, 44.

for black artist. Edwards navigated the intersectional space of being a woman and black in an industry that was heavily dominated and occupied by men. This was another example of Edwards' tenacity and courage to thrive in a space where very few women had ventured in. She was up for the challenge ins an article in the Detroit Free Press she said" I've never had a complex about being around men, I've always enjoyed it" ³⁴

Edwards was also twice as old as many of the artist and more than three times older than the youngest of them, Little Stevie Wonder.³⁵ She was aware of the segregation of the South; had attended Howard University in segregated Washington DC in the late 30s. In anticipation of the Revue, Edwards gave a final lecture to the tours three chaperones: Ernestine Ross, (Diana Ross's mother) Bernice Morrison and Ardena Johnson.³⁶ Safety precautions needed to be expressed for two reasons business reasons, as these artists were representing Motown's brand and to keep the artist safe as they were heading into the Jim Crow South.

Edwards had good reason to warn the artists and Motown's staff; the murder of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black boy from Chicago, had taken place just seven years prior. Till was tortured and lynched by white men after allegedly making comments toward a white woman. His mutilated corpse became one of the first mass-media images of the violence of Jim Crow, and the trial of his killers became a pageant illuminating the tyranny of white supremacy.³⁷

Traveling around America in the year 1962, even by bus, was a thrilling yet shocking

³⁴ Eileen Foley, "A Reason for Motown's Success." *Detroit Free Press* (Detroit Michigan), February 12, 1970, 3

³⁵ David Maraniss, *Once in a Great City: A Detroit Story*. (Simon and Schuster, 2015,) 42.

³⁶ Posner,100.

³⁷ Vann R. Newkirk, II, "How the Blood of Emmett Till Still Stains America Today," *The Atlantic*. February 16, 2017, Accessed April 02, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/02/how-the-blood-of-emmett-till-still-stains-america-today/516891/>.

experience as for many of the Motown Acts this was their first time in the segregated south, The Motortown Revue took them to the South for the first time and showed them the ugly face of true segregation. In the South, the Motown performers were barnstorming through a largely segregated area at a time when civil rights leaders were fighting to have equal rights for blacks made law, when civil rights marchers were met with police dogs and fire hoses, and when troops were needed to force admission of black students to southern high schools and universities.³⁸

The performance schedule was so rigorous that the performers and staff only slept three nights in motels.³⁹ Motown staff figured out far in advance what hotels would house them and what restaurants would feed them. Their day might begin with a visit to a restaurant where they would be refused service in the front.⁴⁰

In 1962 in Miami Beach, as the Motortown Revue act checked into a motel, fifteen police cruisers with dogs pulled up outside and waited as the performers entered the motel. When they left later in the day to perform, the cruisers were still there. Finally, someone went out and explained to the cops that this was a musical show on tour and the surveillance was finally lifted.⁴¹

In 1962, the wave of boycotts in were rocking the South's social and political foundations. Black and white college students from the North called Freedom Riders⁴² flocked the South with buses and cars not unlike those carrying the Motown crew. Their Michigan license plates stuck out on Southern highways. For the young Motown artist who

³⁸ Peter Benjaminson, *The Lost Supreme: The Life of Dreamgirl Florence Ballard*, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill, 2008.)

³⁹ Posner, 100.

⁴⁰ Benjaminson, 41-42.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 42.

⁴² For more information see: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/freedomriders/>

grew up in Detroit, it was a shock to be denied food and at one point their bus was shot at causing the performers and band to run for cover.⁴³ Even with the issues encountered on the tour Edwards idea was a great success that an article stated that: “The Tamla- Motown rock and roll show opened at New York’s Apollo theater last week and in its first few days appeared to be most successful”.⁴⁴ Edwards would then go on to successfully organize a European tour March of 1965. The Tamla-Motown Revue touched down in London, bringing the Supremes, the Miracles, Stevie Wonder, the Temptations and Martha and the Vandellas to British audiences for the first time. Ultimately, the Sound of Young America, Gordy's favorite slogan, spread around the globe.⁴⁵

Following the success of these tours Gordy and Edwards would go on to set up an international division for distribution of their firm’s Motown, Tamla, Gordy, Melody and workshop labels. Edwards and Gordy would tour Holland, France, Belgium, Italy, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and England to set up overseas distribution.⁴⁶

Motown had Edwards to thank for her ingenious and tireless work in helping his dream to reach audiences domestically and internationally. Her work helped to reach audiences around the globe and put Detroit and its musical ingenious on the map at a time of much social unrest. Edwards work later connected Motown and various movements.

⁴³ Ibid, 41.

⁴⁴ Posner,109.

⁴⁵ Richard Williams, "Are You Ready for a Brand-new Beat?" *The Guardian*, March 18, 2005, Accessed April 02, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2005/mar/18/popandrock>.

⁴⁶ "Gordy and Esther Edwards set up Distribution." *Jet Magazine*. April 11, 1963.

Chapter 5

Edwards, Motown and Political Changes

Junious Griffin was at the public relations director for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. After King's death, he later he served as vice president of public relations for Motown until 1982. In a conversation, Griffin had with Edwards said, "Esther once explained to him that Motown was reluctant to allow their artists to participate in [Civil Rights] Movement events and activities because they were used as mere addendums to programs and never as an integral part of these activities."¹

Another reasons artists were hesitant to speak out was concern about alienating their white audience; even so, this didn't stop Edwards from being a part of the movement herself. As a child born in the South, Edwards was aware of the racism that black migrants in the South faced which motivated hem to Detroit.

In September of 1962, Edwards contacted the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) about recording Martin Luther King, Jr. speeches. Edwards knew well King's efforts advocating civil rights. At the time, King was still not well known nationally and too radical a figure for Motown's racially integrated target audience.² In the letter, Edwards wrote about the "possibility of recording some of your literary works, sermons and speeches." After negotiations, King agreed to let Motown record and release his speech at Detroit's Cobo Hall following a major rally in the city on June 23, 1963. All royalties from the recording were to be assigned to the SCLC.³

¹ Ward, Brian. *Just my soul responding: Rhythm and blues, black consciousness, and race relations*. University of California Press, 1998.

² Clague, Mark. "What Went On? The (Pre-) History of Motown's Politics at 45 Rpm." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 49, no. 4 (2010): 503.

³ Ward, 273.

It was Edwards who introduced Gordy to Griffin while Griffin was seeking the performance services of Stevie Wonder. She was aware that Griffin's involvement with SCLC.⁴

A key aspect that hasn't been analyzed by scholars was the connection that King and Edwards had as they both attended historically black colleges in the South and both were members of Historically Black Greek letter organizations. King was a member of Alpha Phi the first black Greek male organization founded in 1906 and Edwards was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha. Both organizations had a history of involvement in the Civil Rights Movement within their respective organizations. After King's death, Coretta Scott King would remain friends with the Gordy family; Edwards gave Coretta's daughter a birthday party in her home in Detroit.⁵

Edwards was the mastermind behind another aspect in history, connecting a Civil rights icon with a recording company that would be a vessel for distributing political messages to the public. Edwards political interests were also evident in her next attempt to facilitate Motown's participation in supporting the troops who were stationed in Vietnam. Throughout December of 1967, Edwards was in near daily contact with the headquarters of the United Services Organization (USO)⁶ in Washington DC.⁷ USO staff religiously scoured Jet Magazine, hoping for clues to which soul groups might be willing travel. They were aware that both Mary Wilson and Diana Ross of the Supremes had brothers that were

⁴Ward, 273.

⁵ Myers, Bev Janai. *Passing it on Moving Stories of Activists—1960 to 2000*, 2015. 1st ed. Bloomington, Illinois: Archway Publishing.

⁶ For more information about the USO see: <https://www.uso.org/about>

⁷ Cosgrove, Stuart. *Detroit 67: The Year That Changed Soul*. Edinburgh: Birlinn, Ltd, 2016.

actively serving in Vietnam, and the Supremes had become their top target.⁸

A high-profile tour of Vietnam featuring the most successful female group in the world would have been a propaganda coup for the military, the White House and the war effort. But the benefits to Motown were questionable. The company would be guaranteed network exposure, but opposition to the war was growing at such a rate that there was now a very real risk that a tour of the war zone could backfire. With growing resistance to the war in Vietnam, The Temptations voted to reject any overtures to visit Vietnam. Edwards and USO had a breakthrough of sorts when a short contract was signed by Motown's Los Angeles office committing pop singer and actress Barbara McNair to join a live tour of Vietnam with Bob Hope on his pilgrimage to entertain the troops.⁹

Motown and the Detroit Rebellion of 67

In 1967, Detroit experience the worst race riot in the city's history during the two-week period, which began on July 23 at least 43 people were killed hundreds were wounded and numerous properties destroyed.¹⁰

The flash point was a raid by white police officers on an after-hours drinking and gambling club at the corner of 12th and Claremont Streets, in a mostly black neighborhood. By the time the smoke cleared almost a week later, 683 buildings across the city had been damaged or destroyed and tanks rolled through the streets.¹¹

There were nearly four dozen riots and more than 100 smaller cases of civil unrest in the United States in 1967, but Detroit's riots were the deadliest. A Presidential commission

⁸ Cosgrove,538.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Richard W. Thomas., and Joe T. Darden. 2013. *Detroit: Race Riots, Racial Conflicts, And Efforts to Bridge the Racial Divide*. 1st ed. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

¹¹ Robyn Meredith, "5 Days in 1967 Still Shake Detroit," *The New York Times*, July 22, 1997, accessed March 31, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/23/us/5-days-in-1967-still-shake-detroit.html>.

established in 1968, later attributed most of the 43 deaths to police shootings and National Guardsmen who, in the commission's view, had gone out of control.¹² Whole blocks had went up in flames and the looting was so extensive that in some neighborhoods, alleys and sidewalks were lined with old sofas and armchairs that residents had cast out to make room for new furniture. Along 12th Street, smoldering piles of debris had replaced a bustling neighborhood of apartment houses, grocers, bars, a shoe store, a dry cleaner, a meat market and a bicycle shop.¹³

Hitsville stayed open during the riots “We continued as business as usual,” Gordy said, “But outside were constant reminders of the turbulence surrounding us. Flames jumping, broken glass and debris from shattered windows and looted stores. Despite marshal law, the rebellions were still out there, running up and down the streets with stuff, toasters sofas, stereos, TV’s and everything they could carry.”¹⁴ Motown’s Hitsville studios escaped largely unscathed except for damage to the front window caused by a tank shell which was fired across West Grand Boulevard.¹⁵

After the riot by 1968, some eighty thousand residents left Detroit, and another forty-six-thousand departed in 1969. Not just people were leaving but businesses were leaving too.¹⁶ By 1974, the city was seen by many as officially dangerous; the city had a record number of murders, obtaining the distinction of “America’s Murder Capital.” By the end of the decade over 414,000 people, mostly whites, would leave the city, but blacks were moving

¹² Robyn Meredith, "5 Days in 1967 Still Shake Detroit," The New York Times, July 22, 1997, accessed March 31, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/23/us/5-days-in-1967-still-shake-detroit.html>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Cosgrove, 311.

¹⁵ Ibid, 334.

¹⁶ Martelle, 197.

as well.¹⁷

Edwards agreed with her brother's plan to start selling off the low-rise houses that surrounded Hitsville on West Grand, closing the rehearsal space and the charm school. Both had been a vital part of Motown's performance and decorum academy.

By 1967 Motown had started setting up offices in LA, the west coast Motown office was located on Sunset Boulevard. The Gordy family move was a part of a larger move from Detroit, Gordy moved all his family and close friends to Los Angeles. He relocated his parents and his two brothers Fuller and Robert as well.

Motown would soon make its own exodus, slowly, as the company gained worldwide recognition. However, Edwards, in keeping with her traditions as eldest sister and keeper of the castle, decided to stay in Detroit. She would run the Detroit offices in her new position as the head of Public Affairs for Motown. Edwards had her roots in Detroit and became more involved in various civic activities and community affairs. The political campaigns that she ran for her husband George had help him become a Detroit political powerhouse.¹⁸ Motown officially moved to California in 1972 and the company did not officially close its Detroit operations until 1975.¹⁹ Gordy was focused on conquering the movie business and establishing Motown Enterprises as a key player in film and television. Gordy left Detroit so that he could venture into arenas of mass entertainment. He would successfully produce several films such as Mahogany, The Wiz, Lady Sings the Blues and other various movies, television and theater productions.

Diehards in Detroit resented the pull of the West Coast and the 'talent drain' of

¹⁷ Ross, Artaka. "Detroit: Blood, Sweat, and Tears." LinkedIn. Last modified November 29, 2016. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/detroitblood-sweat-tears-artaka-ross>.

¹⁸ Posner, 230.

¹⁹ Ibid, 229.

musicians who moved westward. For a few brittle years, many Detroiters felt that those who had left the Motor City for Los Angeles were little better than traitors.²⁰ Edwards, however, wouldn't stay in Detroit, she said in an interview "I didn't like LA enough to want to live there. Detroit was home, and she intended to stay."²¹ "Motown is Detroit, Edwards said. All these kids came out of Detroit, the ones that people know us by, the ones who most people associate us with."²²

However, the move continued Gordy's successful vision that by 1973 Motown was listed by *Black Enterprise* magazine as the biggest black owned company in America, grossing \$40 million and employing 135 people.²³

While Berry Gordy rightfully receives much praise for founding the company, its existence was also the result of Edwards, the who established a family fund to help her brother become an entrepreneur that would make music history and black history. Edwards' next venture after leaving Motown would solidify her position as a cultural historian, while also preserving her as Motown as household name.

Motown officially left Detroit in 1972, and moved to Los Angeles. Edwards ran the Detroit location and moved her offices back to the West Grand Boulevard location where she was working as Motown's Director of Public Affairs. Edwards also continued her political

²⁰ Spratling, Cassandra. "Motown's Faithful Esther Gordy Edwards Keeps the Legacy Alive in Detroit. (Originated from Knight Ridder Newspapers) - Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service | HighBeam Research." Knight Rider/ Tribune Services. Last modified February 12, 1998. <https://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-20233878.html>

²¹ Cosgrove, Stuart. *Detroit 67: The Year That Changed Soul*. Edinburgh: Birlinn, Ltd, 2016.

²² Cassandra Spratling, "Motown's Faithful Esther Gordy Edwards Keeps the Legacy Alive in Detroit. (Originated from Knight Ridder Newspapers) - Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service | HighBeam Research," Knight Rider/ Tribune Services, last modified February 12, 1998, <https://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-20233878.html>.

²³ Reynolds, Rhonda. 2017. "Where Are They Now?". *Vlex*. <https://black-enterprise.vlex.com/vid/where-are-they-now-53335775>.

involvements as she became good friends with Detroit's controversial first black mayor Coleman Young²⁴. Young was a former Tuskegee Airman²⁵ who testified in front of the House of Un-American Activities on his relationship to the communist party in 1952. Young had a bravado but he also had a history of many of fighting against racism with his involvement with the labor unions.²⁶

On November 6, 1973 Detroit voted for its first African-American mayor. In celebration for the festivities Edwards, was the co-chair of the inauguration and arranged a concert. She was able to get Diana Ross to perform free of charge.²⁷

Edwards became involved in several other projects. She served on the National Committee for the Rosa L. Parks Shrine, a committee dedicated to developing a museum for activist Rosa Park.²⁸

However, Edwards would make sure she got something else historical off the ground, while working at the Hitsville offices her work was frequently interrupted by Motown fans who dropped in for a look at the house where the hits were made. Edwards and her secretary accommodated the visitors with tours, and she eventually tacked up posters and photos so guests had more to look at than the worn building.²⁹

²⁴ For further information on Coleman Young: <http://www.biography.com/people/coleman-young-39987>

²⁵ For further information on the Tuskegee Airmen see: http://www.tuskegee.edu/about_us/legacy_of_fame/tuskegee_airmen/tuskegee_airmen_facts.aspx

²⁶ Smith, *Dancing In The Street*, 244.

²⁷ Ibid, 246.

²⁸ David Josar, "Business | Promises to Honor Rosa Parks Unfulfilled -- Detroit's Good Intentions Went Nowhere | Seattle Times Newspaper," The Seattle Times | Local News, Sports, Business, Politics, Entertainment, Travel, Restaurants and Opinion for Seattle and the Pacific Northwest, last modified November 16, 1997, <http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=19971116&slug=2572742>.

²⁹ Sophia. Dembling, "Esther Gordy Edwards: The Pack Rat Who Preserved Music History | National Trust for Historic Preservation." Together We're Saving Places | National Trust for Historic Preservation. Last modified July 13, 2015. <https://savingplaces.org/stories/esther-gordy-edwards-the-pack-rat-who-preserved-music-history#.WQCQ1VKZN-U>.

When a cadre of 50 British sailors turned up one day to look at the significance of the location -- and all that Motown had accomplished -- it really sank in for Edwards and she had another idea.

Edwards founded the Motown Museum in 1985, with her memorabilia that she had collected over her 30-year career in Motown was utilized as some of the core collection. Edwards worked hard to put the museum on the map and make it into something that would keep Motown's legacy in place in Detroit. The museum was designated a state historic site in 1987 and in 1995 it was renovated, including the original offices and the upstairs flat, where Gordy and his family lived in the label's early years.³⁰

On requisite guided tours of the museum, visitors may see the reception area, where anxious performers waited for their moment with Gordy; the orange couch where Marvin Gaye crashed during all-night recording sessions; the same control room, with the floors worn through by the restless feet of people sitting at the mixing board.³¹

The dining room table where millions of dollars of product were packed and shipped; some of the stars' "uniforms" as their stage wear was called, posters; gold records; Studio A, where many famous Motown stars created their magical recordings were made is featured. In 2013, the studio's original Steinway grand piano was restored courtesy of Sir Paul McCartney.³²

Edwards would work as hard as she always did and sought support on making

³⁰ Sophia. Dembling, "Esther Gordy Edwards: The Pack Rat Who Preserved Music History | National Trust for Historic Preservation." Together We're Saving Places | National Trust for Historic Preservation. Last modified July 13, 2015. <https://savingplaces.org/stories/esther-gordy-edwards-the-pack-rat-who-preserved-music-history#.WQCQ1VKZN-U>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Hitsville USA a full-fledged museum where people from all over the world would flock to. Edwards died in August of 2011 but saw her dream of the Motown Museum come to fruition, she loved the museum so much that sometimes she would sometimes give people tours herself.

Edwards was not a museum professional or an academic. She did not have a background in museum or curatorial studies but what she had was a track record of success and the attitude of many black women of her generation, a vision to create a historical space that is still relevant today. The Motown Museums is more than just a space to see where everything started for the label, with a repository for documents and artifacts. It also serves serve as a monumental representation of African-American ingenuity in face of hundreds of years of oppression.³³

In 2016, the Ford Motor Company and Ford-UAW announced a \$6 million investment as lead donor in a \$50 million expansion of Motown Museum. In a press statement, Joe Hinrichs, president, The Americas, Ford Motor Co., commented, “We are thrilled to play a role in the next chapter of a global music icon, who will hold a leadership position as part of the expansion efforts.” He added, “The enhanced museum will not only upgrade the visitor experience, it also fits with our commitment to investing in the cultural heritage of Detroit and southeast Michigan.”³⁴

³³ Andrea A. Burns, *From Storefront to Monument Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement*, 182. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014.

³⁴ Brian McCollum, "Detroit's Motown Museum Expansion Gets \$6 Million from Ford," USA TODAY, last modified November 18, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/nation-now/2016/11/18/detroits-motown-museum-expansion-gets-6-million-ford/94069572/>.

Conclusion Edwards In Focus

In this thesis, I gave a snap shot on the life and the contributions of Esther Gordy Edwards and the building of the Motown Record Company. After completing this research, I am convinced that there needs to be more scholarship on the contribution that black women who have contributed their efforts behind the scenes in music have made. One aspect of black feminist analyses consists of analyzing black women's work in the labor market as victims.³⁵ Edwards unlike many black women of her generation, Edwards was an exception as she had a choice in her work life. Edwards' position was that of someone who shaped her own destiny while navigating the boundaries of race, gender and class.

Darlene Clark Hines analyzes the many ways in which black women responded to racial and gendered oppression. "Coming out of slavery for three and a half centuries African American women have carried special burdens. They have responded in dichotomous ways; by protesting racial and sexual discrimination or by somehow avoiding it."³⁶ As shown in this thesis, paper, Edwards' avoided direct protest but instead allowed her work to be used as a vehicle for racial uplift. Edwards' was a daughter of a Bertha Gordy, a woman who had been born during the time of black feminist Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells Barnett and Mary Church Terrell. These black educated clubwomen who were outspoken politically about racist and sexist oppression. Edwards' mother was an example of a woman

³⁵ Collins,45.

³⁶ Hines, 3.

who followed in the footsteps of women whom did not fit into the social scripts domestically, intellectually and politically. Edwards would followed in her mother's black feminist footsteps

Edwards also stood up against patriarchy when she made the choice to divorce her husband and became a single mother with a small son in the 40s. She also went against patriarchal models by establishing a business with her brothers, as the founder. She stood up against patriarchy by questioning her brother Berry Gordy for his lack of career direction and financial expertise.

Edwards was autonomous with her life but when it came to the young female and male performers social and sexual behaviors in Motown, she embraced bourgeoisie reform. This relationship had a lot to do with her positionality as part of the first wave of the great migration.

This core historical scholarship is not finite, her contributions were so impactful that one thesis isn't enough to include everything although, my work represents a serious effort to do just that. However, I am also aware that writing about Edwards as if I've written a comprehensive story would diminish Edwards narrative as she is just not a simple essay or write up during Women's History Month. The duality of black women's voices being muted in music is still very much a reality as highlighted earlier in this thesis by rapper Nicki Minaj. Historians should be interested in this thesis because most often, black music scholarship still privileges male cultural producers. Edwards' navigated working and creating in a very male dominated business. Despite the fact that she has the Gordy name, I believe that her contributions to history are not as widely known because of the interlocking oppressions of race and gender. My hope is that, this work will shed a light and encourage scholars,

bloggers, musicologists, cultural historians, feminists, journalists and music lovers to write about Edwards' so this work will someday become part of a larger chorus and not simply my solo.

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