

## BEHIND THE CLASSICS



Marvin Gaye

WRITTEN BY: NORMAN WHITFIELD  
AND BARRETT STRONG  
RECORDED: MOTOWN, DETROIT  
PRODUCED BY: NORMAN WHITFIELD  
MARVIN GAYE: VOCALS  
JAMES JAMERSON: BASS  
RICHARD "PISTOL" ALLEN: DRUMS  
ROBERT WHITE: ELECTRIC GUITAR  
EARL VAN DYKE: ORGAN  
THE ANDANTES: BACKING VOCALS  
PAUL RISER: STRINGS  
FROM THE ALBUM: *I HEARD IT THROUGH  
THE GRAPEVINE!*



## "I Heard It Through the Grapevine"

### MARVIN GAYE

Though it has become one of Motown's signature songs and most successful singles ever, Marvin Gaye's "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" was almost never released. The song began its life in 1967, when label writer Barrett Strong hammered out the chord changes on a \$40 piano that had only 10 working keys. "I was always a fan of Ray Charles, and this, like so many of my best feels, was based on what Ray was doing," said Strong.

The tune was originally ruled by record company execs as being "too bluesy" to fit with the poppier vibe of what Motown was releasing at the time. Undeterred, Strong found a sympathetic ear in up-and-coming producer Norman Whitfield. After Whitfield matched the tune with a lyric about a lover tortured by rumors and lies, the song was first recorded by Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, and then recorded again by the Isley Brothers. But neither version troubled the charts.

That's when Whitfield turned to Marvin Gaye. Over a brilliant arrangement that features a brooding Wurlitzer-driven groove and stabbing strings, Gaye brought the song to life with his fierce, pleading vocal.

For Gaye, the production of the tune carried some thorny memories. "Norman and I came within a fraction of an inch of fighting," he said. "He made me sing in keys much higher than I was used to. I was reaching for notes that caused my throat veins to bulge."

However, the real difficulties began after the song was recorded. Motown deemed Gaye's version of "Grapevine" not commercial enough for release, and it was quickly shelved. An angry but determined Whitfield marched back into the studio, this time recasting the song as an uptempo Aretha-style shouter for Gladys Knight and the Pips. The song was released, and Knight's version shot to No. 2 on the charts.

But that didn't satisfy Whitfield. A year later, he was still lobbying for the release of Gaye's version, which he was convinced could be an even bigger hit. In his autobiography *To Be Loved*, Motown president Berry Gordy recalled, "I told Norman it was too late. It would be crazy to release the same song so soon after it had been a hit for Gladys and the Pips." But Whitfield was steadfast. "Berry told him, 'Get out of my face. Mention that record again and you're fired!'" said Strong.

Finally Gordy relented, agreeing to add the song as filler to Gaye's 1968 album, *In the Groove*. The story may have ended there if it weren't for a Chicago disc jockey. When he spun the song—instead of the single the label was pushing, "Your Unchanging Love"—the phones lit up. Radio stations across the nation quickly followed suit, and within weeks the album, *In the Groove* had been retitled by Motown as *I Heard It Through the Grapevine!* Meanwhile, the single sold more copies than any previous release in the label's history—staying on top of the charts for a whopping seven weeks.

"I Heard It Through the Grapevine" has since become a staple of oldies radio—and thanks to exposure on film soundtracks like *The Big Chill* and TV ads like the California raisins campaign, it's earned a permanent place in American pop culture. It also ranked 80th on *Rolling Stone's* list of the 500 Greatest Songs of All Time, and has been covered by many acts, from Creedence Clearwater Revival to Ike and Tina Turner to Michael McDonald. Two years later, Gaye would go through a similar struggle with Gordy over another single they deemed unreleasable, "What's Going On."

—Bill DeMain