What's Going On

In 1971, the year when *The New York Times* dubbed Philadelphia the "gang capital of America," Marvin Gaye released his chart-topping album, *What's Going On.* Philly--the city of brotherly love-- was plagued by a gang presence on every street corner, with an average of 400 gang-related murders annually. *Brother, brother, brother, there are far too many of you dying.* Amidst this turmoil, Gaye's album—calling for unity and love among brothers—seemed drowned out by the city's violence. The title, *"What's Going On,"* is a poignant question that reflects the era's confusion and unrest, inviting the planet to ponder the state of the world in Philadelphia, including the naivete of my friends and me at sixteen.

Against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, protests in the streets, civil disobedience, and gang violence in Philadelphia, it was no wonder that *What's Going On* resonated with urgent questions and aching pleas for peace. *Ya, what's going on? Ah, what's going on?* In the haze of sirens, eulogies, empty playgrounds, and protests, Marvin Gaye turned to his craft as both a refuge and a rallying cry to preserve, not take, lives.

The city's fractured spirit was mirrored in the soul music that rose from its streets, refusing to look away from suffering but insisting on asking why such pain persisted. It was into this crucible that Marvin Gaye stepped in--his voice hopeful, yet pessimistic, channeling both the anguish of his times and the longing for a gentler, peaceful world.

Gaye's upbringing in a Pentecostal household in Washington, DC, where religion and belief in God were central, significantly shaped his music. His father wanted him to sing spirituals and gospel music, but he chose secular music. His roots trace back to the early 20th century's migration of enslaved people from the South to northern cities like Philadelphia,

Chicago, and Detroit, where many African Americans settled. The migration to cities such as New York and Pittsburgh is crucial to understanding the deep cultural significance of his music and his roots in African American history.

In my Tioga neighborhood, which included two public schools, three gangs fought for territorial dominance. Even so, I had a crew. We were a social group rather than a gang. None of us had gang affiliations. We carried record albums and marijuana joints rather than guns or knives. *Everything is everything, we're gonna get down today, boy.* Our principal reason for existing was to pursue women, not to fight.

We named ourselves "Club Legs" because, in our minds, we were lovers, not fighters. We wore designer sweaters, not T-shirts. We wore alligator shoes, not sneakers. We favored sharkskin pants over jeans. At parties, our signature dances were the Cha-Cha and the Two-Step. Wherever we went, we were the attraction; we enticed girls who desired to be within our circle, our spotlight

My house was the designated hooky stop. A couple of days during the week, we hung out in the basement, smoking weed and listening to the music of jazz saxophonist John Coltrane and Malcolm X's speeches. The basement was our haven, where we were safe from the gang violence in our neighborhood, having to run for our lives when gunshots were ringing out above our heads. We hung on to every defiant word spoken by Malcolm X, grooving to the riffs of John Coiltran’s saxophone, intensified by the dizzying effects of smoking weed and drinking wine.

But it was Gaye's *'What's Going On'* album that resonated most with us, shaping our understanding of social issues and personal identity. *Everybody thinks we're wrong, oh, but who are they to judge us for wearing our hair long.* It made us feel hopeful and connected, as if Gaye

understood our struggles and validated our feelings. It was as if he reached into our lives and put our thoughts and emotions into his music, making us feel truly seen and understood on a personal level.

The lyrics of *What's Going On* drifted out of the basement speakers, its gentle yet pulsating groove contrasting with the seriousness of its message: mercy, dialogue, change. Gaye's music didn't just provide a soundtrack for our lives; it also opened our eyes to social issues that persist to this day, inspiring respect and admiration for Gaye's courage in addressing the problems that impacted our lives. It made us feel empowered and hopeful, even amid the dangers we faced daily. We were more likely to die from gunshots than from old age. His lyrics encouraged us to believe in the possibility of change, even if it was not guaranteed, and to hold onto hope for a better future without street violence.

To hear *'What's Going On'* for the first time was to listen to imploring questions that echoed through the turbulence of everyday life in Philly. The song was not simply an anthem—it was a conversation he was having with us--*War is not the answer, for only love can conquer hate*-- a collective plea for sanity in a world that felt increasingly violent and unmoved by the gang violence in the streets of Philadelphia.

When we played Gaye's music, no one murmured a word. No finger-popping or feet were tapping. We nodded as the effects of the weed and wine deepened and expanded our consciousness, feeling the weight of his message about love and social change. We were united in our appreciation of his powerful message and in our feeling for the depth of his lyrics, which recognized our daily struggles to stay alive.

What did it mean to be safe? To be seen? To be heard? The song's opening bars seemed to answer our questions, at least in part, not with certainty but with solidarity. *Brother what's up? Hey how you doing?* It was a reminder that someone else—Marvin Gaye — was awake to our pain, suffering, and confusion, eyes wide open, willing to ask why the gang fighting had to be this way.

Black boys like us were sandwiched between life and death, and the constant background noise of the trauma of witnessing the flow of bloodshed in the dangerous streets of Philadelphia. Marvin Gaye's message was a lifeline. It addressed issues like police brutality, racial discrimination, and social inequality, providing a source of comfort and reassurance in times of our fear of living on a battlefield in Philadelphia.

Looking back, Gaye's music didn't just entertain us; it brought us together. It created a lifelong bond that we would always cherish, a brotherhood that would carry on to manhood. It created shared experiences that transcended the threat of gang violence we faced while walking through the neighborhood to school, walking home, sitting on the porch, or going to a store. It was a respite from the daily insanity we experienced. We lived in fear of never knowing when we would have to run like hell to save our lives, duck bullets, and avoid what we believed to be inevitable.

Death, like a fog, hung over a three-block radius where we lived. Our friends Frankie overdosed on heroin, as did Johnny and Butch. They escaped the dangers of gang violence only to run into the welcoming, alluring arms of substance abuse, the subhuman existence of pursuing resources to buy heroin daily. *There's too many of you crying.* We understood better than our

parents that our lives ran the risk of either dying from drug addiction or gang violence. There was no middle ground.

Understanding Gaye's artistry, in a technical sense, was beyond us, but what we did know was that *What's Going On* provided a soundtrack for questions we all felt but rarely spoke aloud. We never talked about our friends' drug overdoses, even attending their funerals and being riveted by the sobbing and sorrow of their parents, and the realities of the pitiful souls killing their neighbors and schoolmates.

We didn't know or grasp whether Marvin Gaye wrote lyrics, poetry, or both. The question wasn't relevant to our lives in the perilous streets of Philadelphia. Musical songs are often compared to poetry. Lyrics have melodies, while poetry has mood and tone. Songwriters like Bob Dylan incorporate political, social, philosophical, and literary influences into their songs, earning Dylan the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Like Dylan, singer and composer Marvin Gaye infused his music with political and social messages, most notably in his groundbreaking anthem *What's Going On.* Although Dylan won a Nobel Peace Prize, Gaye's *"What's Going On"* was named the most influential album of all time by Rolling Stone in 2020.

That's because he poetically asks us to examine and question why conflicts exist in our environment, why our parents and the police were failing to address violence, our uncertainties, and what prevented us from feeling protected, from being happy and fulfilled. He asks what stops us from having equal citizenship rights in America, to be free from all types of violence, whether from our neighbors or the police.

And finally, we didn't fully understand the depth of Gaye's implorations: *Father, Father, Mother, Mother.* At best, we figured the salutations were directed at our parents' responsibility to love and protect us and to help us navigate the threatening streets in our neighborhoods. This defines the fundamental theme of *What's Going On*: social stratification amounts to institutional racism, where people are born into low social rankings. Gaye is also asking his parents tough questions. He pursues guidance on how to live and cope with racism, segregation, and discrimination under the banner of the American flag and Constitution.

Marvin Gaye wasn't just a songwriter and performer; he was also a visionary. Gaye's *What's Going On* is the greatest album ever. And rightfully so. The relevance to cultural anthropology lies in the fact that the social, political, and economic commentary remains as relevant today as it was in 1971. Gaye's departure from love ballads to penning lyrics about social, political, and economic injustices sets him apart from his contemporaries, both then and now

Sage. Poet. Prophet. Visionary. Marvin Gaye checks all of the boxes. One might wonder how 16-year-olds could grasp the complexities of *What's Going On*. The truth is, we didn't fully understand. But we knew, in our naive ways, that the lyrics we were grooving to were unlike anything we had ever heard before. It was a powerful message we would come to understand in the years ahead as we matured into manhood.

We realized there would always be street violence, but there would also be *What's Going On*. *Brother* is a metaphor for the 7,243 young Black men who died fighting the illegal war in Vietnam. *We don't need to escalate. You see, war is not the answer. For only love can conquer*

hate. His use of rhetorical questions, rhythm, rhymes, snappy lyrics, and metaphors solidifies *What's Going On* as the most culturally and politically relevant song of the past 100 years.

None of us died from gun violence. For my boys and me, *What's Going On* was our rite of passage that helped us navigate the challenging terrain between boyhood and manhood--racism, discrimination, police brutality, gang violence, and substance abuse—while raising our own black boys.