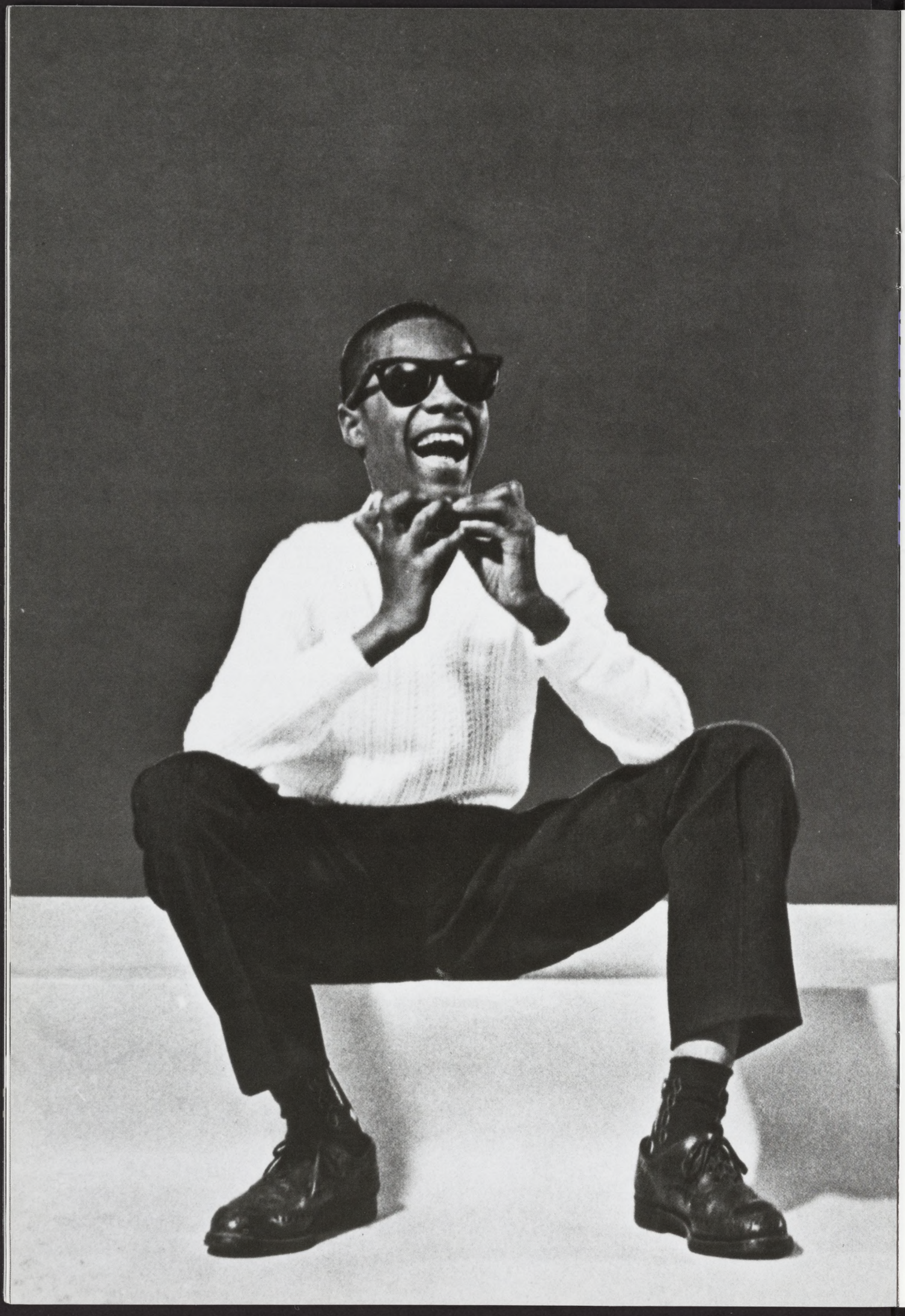

Stevie Wonder

By Michael Hill

EVEN AMONG MOTOWN'S GREATS, Stevie Wonder surely remains unique. He has pursued an ever-expanding vision, creating work that stands alone in the Motown canon for its unflagging adventurousness and thorough originality. As a musical pioneer, he has embraced influences ranging from reggae to jazz, and his work has been a catalyst for social change. His is the Sound of Young America grown up – sensitive, aware, responsible, remarkable.

Ronnie White of the Miracles officially brought Wonder to the attention of Motown president Berry Gordy in 1961, but it's White's younger brother who should be credited with "discovering" Little Stevie. Steveland Morris started out singing in his church choir, but he was headstrong and mischievous, and he preferred to do things his way. And so the street corners became his stage. The younger White was among the kids who hung out with the precocious Morris, whose major pastimes back then were "playing harmonica, bongos and hooky." White pestered his brother to check out this star of the stoops; Ronnie was dubious, but finally relented, and came away impressed enough to arrange, along with songwriter Brian Holland, an audition with Gordy. Gordy was skeptical too, until he listened to Morris sing the Miracles' "Lonely Guy" and demonstrate his facility on a variety of instruments. He offered the boy a deal then and there – and christened him Little Stevie Wonder.

Hitsville became a second home to Wonder. He found a mentor in A&R director Clarence Paul and willing musical tutors in Motown's legendary rhythm section, bassist James Jamerson and drummer Benny Benjamin. Wonder's earliest singles, "Thank You (for Loving Me All the Way)" and "Contract on Love," enjoyed only minor success; his live performances, however, were something else. Wonder was a natural stage performer with an infectiously playful demeanor. That caught the ear of the pop audience, when, in August 1963, Motown released "Fingertips, Part Two," an impromptu encore jam recorded live at Chicago's Regal Theater. Although it hardly seemed the stuff of career-breaking success, "Fingertips," which was punctuated by lively audience-artist call and response and a spirited harmonica solo, reached Number One on both the pop and R&B charts just as the accompanying album, *Little Stevie: The Twelve Year Old Genius*, landed at the top of the pop chart. No artist up to that point had dominated all three charts simultaneously.

Motown tried to fashion sound-alike follow-ups for Wonder, but it would take two years before he'd score another Top Ten hit with "Uptight (Everything's Alright)." By then, his voice had deepened and matured – he could hardly be called Little Stevie – and the song itself, the first he co-wrote, was rock & roll, pure and simple. Wonder had been impressed by the young Rolling Stones when they opened some dates for him in 1964, and he sought to recapture some of their rhythmic intensity in "Uptight."

If his confident rendering of "Uptight" suggested the range of the teenage Wonder's talent, his version of Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" illustrated his depth and daring. The decision to record this almost sacrosanct folk anthem shocked many at Motown, yet it became a Top Ten pop and Number One R&B hit. Wonder reprised this success with "Place in the Sun," which managed to be an affecting plea for racial equality. "I Was Made to Love Her," his biggest hit of 1967, was a return to his funkier side, featuring an intense and soulful vocal performance. In fact, Wonder distinguished every effort with an emotional honesty that often transcended the material itself. "For Once in My Life" is a self-aware young man's declaration of independence. "My Cherie Amour" contains sophisticated crooning, yet Wonder remains utterly candid in his romantic yearning. His first self-production, "Signed Sealed Delivered," features gospel-like testifying about a lover's devotion.

At the start of the Seventies, Wonder demanded the freedom to write and produce all his records. *Where I'm Coming From*, produced entirely on his own, was for Wonder something of an artistic disappointment, but it yielded a Top Ten pop and R&B hit with "If You Really Love Me." In 1971, Wonder turned twenty-one and was granted the right to void his contract; he left Detroit for New York City, where he was wooed by eleven major labels before deciding to remain in the Motown fold, reaffirming his commitment as a black artist to a black-run enterprise. *Music of My Mind*, released in 1972, was the first of a quartet of albums that represent the creatively independent Wonder. This was deeply personal work, inspired by the times and bearing the influence of both *What's Going On* and *Sgt. Pepper*. Like Marvin Gaye, Wonder was addressing social, spiritual and romantic issues; like the Beatles, he sought to create a seamless work, both musically and conceptually.

In 1972 and 1973, Wonder topped the pop charts twice, with "Superstition" and "You Are the Sunshine of My Life," both from *Talking Book*. *Innervisions*, released in 1973, consolidated the ideas of his two previous albums in a brilliant aural collage that features moody jazz ("Too High"), gritty funk ("Living for the City"), techno-gospel ("Higher Ground") and Tin Pan Alley ("All in Love Is Fair").

On *Fulfillingness' First Finale* (1974) Wonder is eloquent regarding matters of the spirit, on "Heaven Is Ten Zillion Light Years Away," and matters of the libido, on "Boogie On Reggae Woman." He's especially incisive on "You Haven't Done Nothin'," an indictment of Richard Nixon.

In 1974, Wonder also began to renegotiate his Motown contract, a two-year effort that astonished the music industry for its landmark artist-oriented terms. Throughout those years, Wonder toiled over a record he hoped would surpass his already amazing output; the result was the masterful *Songs in the Key of Life*, released in 1976, a double album that includes an added EP to contain Wonder's creative overflow. Among the many treasures of this set: "Love's in Need of Love Today," "Sir Duke," "I Wish," "Isn't She Lovely," "As" and "Another Star."

Since then, Wonder has performed regularly; collaborated with artists ranging from Michael Jackson to Paul McCartney to Dionne Warwick; and he continues to exceed the standards he has set for himself in the recording studio. He has remained experimental, releasing the pop-symphonic *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants* in 1979, and eager to explore other musical forms, saluting Bob Marley with "Master Blaster (Jammin')." He hasn't lost his playful streak, as a listen to the pseudo-rap coda of "Do I Do" illustrates, or his concern for the black community at home and in the third world. His anthem to the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, "Happy Birthday," became a rallying cry for the movement to recognize Dr. King's birthday as a national holiday.

"Music is a world within itself," Stevie Wonder sings on "Sir Duke," "with a language we all understand." He has reached out from the world of music to the world at large and helped us to understand ourselves. His is music of the soul as well as soul music. To paraphrase "Sir Duke," we can feel it all over.