

Stevie Wonder

Born May 13, 1950

American musician, singer, songwriter, record producer, and multi-instrumentalist Stevie Wonder was born in this day in 1950. Wonder was a child prodigy who developed into one of the most creative musical figures of the late 20th century. Wonder who has been blind from shortly after birth, signed with Motown's Tamla label at the age of eleven and continues to perform and record for Motown to this day. Wonder has scored over 40 US & UK Top 40 singles.

Albums include Talking Book, Innervisions and Songs in the Key of Life.



By the time he was 21 Stevie Wonder was already one of the Tamla Motown label's most important artists, having been with them for a decade and achieved hits as Little Stevie Wonder and after he dropped the 'Little' and had his first smash hit 'Everything is Alright'. Maybe because he came to them as a child, Berry Gordy and the other decision makers at Tamla Motown, exerted firm control over Stevie's musical output which he found increasingly frustrating as he matured into adulthood. On turning 21, Wonder decided that a little reminder of his value to his recording label might be in order and had his lawyer terminate his contract and then, when Motown begged him to stay, draw up a new contract giving him far more artistic control and much more money! Clever Stevie! Maybe, the fact that he had made himself very valuable to the industry whilst still a child, gave him a very

strong hand to play when bargaining for his artistic life, as an adult. Thank goodness he saw the opportunity and had the courage to threaten to walk away.

Most artists make the most important deals of their lives when they are newly discovered, before they have any business clout or proven track record. Consequently, they sign bad deals which they later regret. They're just happy to be noticed and believed in and to be given the opportunity for their music to be widely heard. Artists like Prince and George Michael to name but a few, have wasted years tied up in legal knots trying to undo terrible deals they felt duped into; years when they could have been making great music. Of course, record labels gamble on lots of artists and they lose money on those which don't hit the jackpot for them, so when a Prince or a Stevie Wonder comes along, that's their chance to make up for their losses, and then some.

Usually the transition from child performer to adult is tricky, but in Stevie's case he came to the time when he needed independence, freedom, control just at the right time, when he had the clout to demand it. Good on him! And seminal albums like 'Inner Visions' and 'Songs in the Key of Life' are the product of that new found freedom. The music on these albums represent an incredible coming together of musical genius, technical mastery at the cutting edge of synthesized sound, lyrical originality, harmonic, melodic and rhythmic sophistication, self-awareness, social-awareness, spiritual awareness, study and joy! And just when the record label might start to complain that all this sophistication might not pay out enough, Stevie Wonder delivered his monster, worldwide hit 'I Just Called to Say I Love You' and put everyone's minds at rest! He literally ticked all the boxes, artistic invention and integrity, ongoing commercial success and a social conscience to boot.

In the late '70s and early '80s Wonder abandoned his music for a while to focus completely on promoting the campaign to make civil rights campaigner Martin Luther King's birthday a US national holiday. This finally began in 1986 and Stevie's 1980 hit 'Happy Birthday' played a huge part in raising awareness for the campaign.

When an artist's music really touches you, you feel very close to them. That's the wonderful thing about music. Their music really speaks to your heart. You feel like their friend, like you know them inside and out. My feeling, as a fan of Stevie Wonder, is that he feels his music very deeply, physically and spiritually. I wonder if his blindness enables him to experience music in a much more focussed and abstract way. At its best, music will enable us to transcend out of the every day. Maybe blindness makes that a more profound sensation for the artist.

EXERCISE

Let's try some sensory deprivation. Choose a song you love. If you haven't got one in mind, why not try a Stevie Wonder song? I can recommend the romantic 'Ribbon in the Sky', or the cheeky 'If you really Love Me' or the groovy 'Everything is Alright' or the gritty 'Just Enough for the City'... I could go on, for a long time! Anyway, go Stevie-surfing online and choose one. Close your eyes and soak it up. Stand up and let the music move you. To coin a phrase 'Dance like no-one's watching'. People mock Stevie Wonder's head movements but have you ever noticed that people often mock things which are beautiful and moving. It's just the way we humans cope with feeling a bit challenged, embarrassed or moved. We make a joke out of it. Stevie Wonder's moves are pure joy. There is something pure, childlike, transcendent about them. He has wisely left the cares of this world behind when he is making his music. Both Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles smile when they sing. What does that tell you? It tells me two things. One, they're both happy making music and two, it sounds good when you smile. Their ears are telling them that when you draw your lips back past your incisor teeth, spread and lift your cheeks and nostrils, your voice sounds brighter and clearer. Close your eyes, smile and sing while you feel the groove and soul of the music through your whole body. Sing along with Stevie, then find a backing track and do it again on your own. Fill the darkness with sound, joy, music.