

JAMES JAMERSON: FROM JAZZ BASSIST TO POPULAR MUSIC ICON

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Music
with a Major in Music
May 2014

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DEDICATION

To Eddie

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I could not have written this thesis without my wife, Megan Felice Wilson. Megan offered unwavering support and encouragement throughout my graduate studies, from the beginning when I was initially applying to graduate school, all the way to the last written words of this thesis. Her patience and kindness kept me calm and on task. Megan was always there for anything.

I also wish to thank my family: my mother and father, Judith Dix Zarbo and Joseph Angelo Zarbo, and my brothers, Jeff and John, as well as the entire Zarbo family. My family has always supported my musical endeavors and their love consistently and constantly sustains me.

Numerous individuals at Texas State University-San Marcos helped me with the writing of this thesis. In particular, I would like to thank my thesis committee: Dr. Kevin Mooney, Dr. Charles Ditto, and Professor Freddie Mendoza for their expertise and guidance. As my thesis advisor, Dr. Mooney was tasked with a much more long-term commitment to this thesis and his unwavering support throughout the years has been invaluable. Dr. Mooney assumed multiple roles as this thesis took shape, from early mentor when I was developing the subject and organizing early research, to editor and valued critic as I was writing and finishing the thesis.

Finally, I would like to thank my cousin, Eddie Wambach, a.k.a. Eddie Von Bach. Eddie's career as a musician in New York City and the time I spent with him as an impressionable young music fan provided the inspiration and desire for me to become a musician in the first place. This thesis is dedicated to him.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction, Survey of the Literature, and the Detroit Way

The music of Detroit in the twentieth century could easily be divided into two categories: pre-Motown Records and post-Motown Records. As Lars Bjorn and Jim Gallert state in their in-depth study on the history of jazz in Detroit, “There *was* music in Detroit before Motown in the 1960s.”¹ The need to clarify that history is telling. The historic and cultural impact of Motown’s founding and commercial success has cast a wide and dense shadow across the history of music in Detroit. Motown’s impact on American popular music and culture has created a sense that the music of Detroit begins and ends with the famed record label and its exceptional pop product. To disregard the genres of music that thrived in Detroit pre-Motown, however, would fail to acknowledge those exact musical sources that influenced and cultivated the very artists and musicians that would go on to create Motown’s songs and, just as importantly, its sound.

The musicians who had contributed consistently to the label’s recorded output since its inception went mostly unnoticed by Motown fans and their industry peers due to non-credit in liner notes of the original 1960s releases.² Nevertheless, their musical contributions provided Motown with a signature sonic identity.³ The talent these musicians provided to Motown’s pop song craft fused a brilliant hybrid of pop-R&B-soul music styles into a format that became very successful.⁴ Founded in 1958, by 1967

¹ Lars Bjorn and Jim Gallert, *Before Motown: A History of Jazz in Detroit, 1920-1960* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 2001), xiii.

² Nelson George, *Where Did Our Love Go? The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 2007), 104.

³ Bjorn and Gallert, 204.

⁴ Jon Fitzgerald, “Motown crossover hits 1963-1966 and the creative process,” *Popular Music* Vol. 14, no. 1 (January 1995): 3.

Motown “sold more singles than any other company, independent or major.”⁵ The 2002 film, *Standing In The Shadows Of Motown*, a documentary about Motown’s unsung studio ensemble, states that, “this unheralded group of musicians played on more Number One hits than the Beach Boys, the Rolling Stones, Elvis Presley, and The Beatles combined, making them the greatest hit machine in the history of popular music.”⁶ The reservoir from which these musicians drew their inspiration and talent was filled with all sorts of musical genres. As this thesis will show, many would argue that jazz was the most important as a common stylistic and cultural thread.

Motown’s studio house band had numerous players that would perform on recording sessions and a group of about a dozen came to call themselves the Funk Brothers, due to producers continually giving the band stylistic direction to “Make it funky!”⁷ Within this musical collective was bassist James Jamerson (1936-1983), who gave the ensemble their funky namesake.⁸ Almost immediately Jamerson became an essential element to the Funk Brothers’ collaborative working relationship and, as this thesis will detail, his bass performances would play as important a role in defining the sound of Motown as any other musical ingredient on their releases, including the featured artist.

My objective with this thesis is to investigate and document the extent to which Jamerson appropriated the skills he acquired in jazz and blues environments into a

⁵ Joe Stuessy and Scott Lipscomb, *Rock and Roll: Its History and Stylistic Development*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006), 208.

⁶ Various Artists, *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, Deluxe ed., Hip-O Records 440066365-2, CD, 2002, Liner notes, 3.

⁷ Don Waller, *The Motown Story* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1985), 154.

⁸ Jim Cogan and William Clark, *Temples of Sound: Inside the Great Recording Studios* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2003), 145. Some writers on the subject have named drummer Benny Benjamin as the source of the name, Funk Brothers; nevertheless, despite these few exceptions, most sources attribute the ensemble’s label to Jamerson. For an exception, see early Detroit-era Motown pianist Joe Hunter’s comments in the “Standing in the Shadows of Motown” DVD.

popular music context, arguably transforming the role of the bass guitar. Biographical information and excerpted transcriptions of his bass lines will inform my analysis of Jamerson's musical style and evolution. The formal analysis with accompanying transcriptions will be drawn from his career at Motown Records, with mention of his session work for other labels, illustrating both the development of his style and explaining how his recorded output virtually created the model for contemporary electric bass guitar performance. Additionally, this thesis will expand the historical record on Jamerson while correcting errors, creating a selective, centralized and updated source list for the literature on Jamerson while expanding the amount of musical analysis of his specific bass lines and, with the analysis, solidifying the direct connection between Jamerson's jazz experience and his eventual evolved music persona.

Chapter 2 of this thesis begins with a description of Jamerson's early recording work, focusing on his contributions at Motown during the pivotal years of 1963 and 1964, as well as a brief mention of a non-Motown recording session in 1961. The Motown selections will include analysis and transcriptions of his bass lines for "Heat Wave" (1963) by Martha and the Vandellas and "My Guy" (1964) by Mary Wells. Following, the thesis will focus on the years 1966-1971, with further description of Jamerson's session work for Motown; including transcription examples that demonstrate why this period is considered by peers and critics to be his most influential and creative. Transcription and analysis of his bass lines for "Reach Out (I'll Be There)" (1966) by the Four Tops, "You're My Everything" (1967) by the The Temptations, and "Darling Dear" (1970) by The Jackson 5 will represent this era, as well as Jamerson's bass lines for Marvin Gaye's 1971 album, *What's Going On*. Lastly, Chapter 2 will conclude with the

years 1972-1976; the Detroit era at Motown Records ends and Jamerson relocates to Los Angeles and enters a new phase in his career as a freelance session musician no longer under contract to Motown. While this is an important era in the study of Jamerson, this thesis' focus on solidifying the direct connection between Jamerson's jazz character and his eventual evolved music persona is arguably fulfilled by the detailed analysis of his bass lines during the earlier Detroit era. Although analysis and accompanying transcriptions will not be included, important session work will be mentioned, including "Rock The Boat" (1974) by Hues Corporation and "Which of Us Is The Fool" (1976) by Robert Palmer.

Chapter 3 will address Jamerson's final years and death in 1983 but, more importantly, it will focus on the recognition and increased public awareness of his influence after his death, specifically, the publication of Slutsky's biography and music instruction book in 1989 as well as the continued presence and influence of his playing style on bassists spanning generations and genres. In addition, Jamerson's posthumous Grammy award and induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, as well as the *Standing in The Shadows* documentary film will all be discussed in relation to his continuing influence throughout the music industry and popular culture. This chapter will conclude with a summary and explanation of the need for this thesis and how it is an addition and expansion of the literature regarding Jamerson, as well as the need for further research and study. A brief survey of the literature regarding Jamerson's career is necessary to not only show what sources exist, but also to demonstrate the need for this thesis and further research.

Allan Slutsky's book *Standing in the Shadows of Motown: The Life and Music of Legendary Bassist James Jamerson* (1989) is the seminal source on James Jamerson's music career and legendary reputation. Slutsky's premise is to acknowledge Jamerson's significant role in pop music and how his performances on Motown recordings completely transformed the role of the bass guitar in popular music and laid the foundation for its acceptance as a contemporary instrument of virtuosic capability. The book is both a biography of Jamerson and an instruction of his style. Organized into three parts, *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* provides a detailed description of Jamerson's humble beginnings and an in-depth account of his life both inside and outside of music before, during, and after his reign at Motown. Biographical information is found primarily in part one of the book, while part two provides a selective discography of Jamerson's recorded work and a technical checklist of the musical equipment he used during his career. Part three is a treasure trove of numerous audio interviews and dozens of performances and transcriptions of Jamerson's legendary bass lines by a selection of what many consider to be the world's greatest bass players, including an introduction by Paul McCartney. As a music instruction book, *Standing in the Shadows* is unparalleled in its devotion to understanding and explaining Jamerson's style, but even more so, it has been the bedrock resource for any historical study on James Jamerson over the past twenty-five years.

The performances of Jamerson's bass lines by the book's guest bassists are found in the final section of the book, part three. With nearly fifty transcriptions from both the Motown catalogue and non-Motown songs, Slutsky gathers dozens of successful and established bassists from all types of genres (John Entwistle of The Who to recording

session bassist Pino Palladino to jazz and fusion bassist John Pattitucci) and has each one devote themselves to performing either one or a few of the transcriptions. These bassists also provide recorded monologues before their performance detailing their appreciation of Jamerson's style and how his playing directly influenced theirs. Contained on compact discs as an audio component to the book, these performances illustrate not just Jamerson's prowess on the bass but the variety of bassists he influenced from a wide section of music genres. The discs also contain interviews with Motown artists, producers, musicians, and others, relating to the biography covered in part one of the book. Since its publication in 1989, *Standing in the Shadows*'s reputation as an invaluable resource on Jamerson has not only remained but also expanded, including a documentary film based on the book that was released in 2002.⁹ Music instruction periodicals, such as *Bass Player* magazine, and books alike, frequently cite *Standing in the Shadows* as a fundamental source for their writing and analysis of Jamerson.

Nevertheless, while the transcriptions and performances in *Standing in the Shadows* are invaluable, the respective transcriptions have neither an accompanying analysis by the author or the guest bassists. While Slutsky devoted numerous pages to discussing Jamerson's playing style and technique in part two of the book and famed recording session bassist, Anthony Jackson, provides a brief chapter in the section entitled, "An Appreciation of the Style," Jackson only analyzes three bass lines, and they are from songs that Jamerson scholars would perhaps not consider his most significant work. While Jackson does an excellent job with the material he examines, and his brief contribution does list essential stylistic traits of Jamerson's style that will be discussed in

⁹ Joe Hunter et al., *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, DVD, Directed by Paul Justman (Santa Monica: Lions Gate Entertainment, 2002).

this thesis, he acknowledges that, “Even though the material presented here only scratches the surface of the subject, it should serve as a good foundation for further study (in conjunction with the transcriptions and the original tracks).”¹⁰ An opportunity is missed when the specific bass lines performed throughout the guest bassist chapters do not have an accompanying analysis, leaving the characteristic elements of Jamerson’s style that so closely relates to his jazz pedigree unacknowledged when these qualities could and should be highlighted amongst the performances. This is a sorely lacking component for such an important source in the study of Jamerson and, hence, will be an important part of this thesis.

Expanding upon the book and co-produced by Slutsky, *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* (Lions Gate Entertainment, 2002) is a documentary film about the entire Funk Brothers collective. Jamerson is a featured aspect of the group and the film. The documentary is part interview, candid conversation, and archival footage juxtaposed with a new live concert featuring famed guest vocalists singing Motown hit songs with a reunited group of the surviving Funk Brothers. With an abundance of content relating to Motown history, *Standing in the Shadows* is necessary viewing for any study of Jamerson. The film serves as an important primary source for any study on Motown since it contains so many interviews with the Funk Brothers and the label’s artists. Particularly helpful to scholars of Motown, the DVD release of the film has a Bonus Features component that includes important biographical information on the musicians and the listing of recording session personnel for certain songs, providing clarity to a muddled aspect of the Motown historical record.

¹⁰ Allan Slutsky, *Standing in the Shadows of Motown: The Life and Music of Legendary Bassist James Jamerson* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 1989), 92.

Using the bibliographic section of Slutsky's book, I focused on two sources that he listed, Don Waller's *The Motown Story* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985) and Nelson George's *Where Did Our Love Go? The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound* (University of Illinois Press, 2007 [First edition, 1985]). Most other sources were brief obituaries published in music magazines after Jamerson's death in 1983. I knew that I needed more substantial writings and would be relying on the bibliographies of newly discovered sources to find additional information on Jamerson. While Waller's *The Motown Story* is dedicated to the incomparable Motown rhythm section of Jamerson and drummer Benny Benjamin, it contained minimal information on Jamerson and its large-font and illustrations helped determine that it was not written with the scholar in mind; however, the contents are a succinct history of Motown's commercial success.

When focusing on Nelson George's *Where Did Our Love Go?*, I realized that the book had what most sources did not, primary source material, including an interview with Jamerson. The interview quotes were from an earlier article written by George that had originally appeared in *Musician* magazine (October 1983). Titled "Standing in the Shadows of Motown: The Unsung Session Men of Hitsville's Golden Era," it is quite possibly the first article devoted to the story of Motown's Funk Brothers. George interviewed Jamerson as well as other Funk Brothers, but important to this thesis was that the article contained one of only two interviews Jamerson gave during his entire career. Jamerson died in August 1983, mere months before the article was published.¹¹ "Standing in the Shadows of Motown" is an essential source for the study of Jamerson, both as a primary source for research and, as listed in the "Credits" section of the *Standing in the*

¹¹ Nelson George, "Standing in the Shadows of Motown: The Unsung Session Men of Hitsville's Golden Era," *Musician*, (February 1987), 62.

Shadows of Motown book, the inspiration for the title of the previously discussed book by Slutsky.¹²

Gerri Hirshey's book *Nowhere To Run: The Story of Soul Music* (1984) is a vital resource for information regarding Motown's business practices and how they differed greatly from other regional soul labels, usually to Motown's financial benefit. Jamerson and the Funk Brothers are praised for their important contribution to Motown's music, but relegated to historical footnotes. The bibliography of *Nowhere To Run* did provide some tertiary sources for my research.

Peter Benjamin's *The Story of Motown* (Groove Press, 1979) is an excellent source for statistics on Motown's business practices and finances and contains, for example, estimates of the salaries musicians like Jamerson were paid. Details on contracts and recording studio schedules provide a picture of what Jamerson's typical routine would be in the recording studio. Another similar source is *Heat Wave: The Motown Fact Book* (Popular Culture, Inc., 1988) by David Bianco, an invaluable source for historical data relating to single and album releases, chart ratings, and an exhaustive discography of Motown and its subsidiary releases; nevertheless, the book has no information on Jamerson.

Reference works provided minimal content but did emphasize Jamerson's jazz education. For example, the *Encyclopedia of Popular Music* via Oxford Music Online includes a brief biography on Jamerson, noting his importance both to Motown's success and his role in redefining bass performance. As the biography states, "Using his jazz

¹² Slutsky, x.

background, he expanded bass playing beyond holding the two-beat rhythm, to create complex bass lines that made songs move with a great, propulsive force.”¹³

Dan Forte’s article for the June 1979 issue of *Guitar Player* magazine features an interview with Jamerson and is titled, “James Jamerson: Preeminent Motown Bassist.” In the interview Jamerson spoke candidly about his work at Motown and expressed discouragement with his status as a freelance recording session bassist in Los Angeles. With his Motown era several years behind him, his workload was diminishing due to a variety of factors, including poor health aggravated by alcoholism. This source was particularly useful since it lists Jamerson’s influences on upright bass, crediting “modern jazz players” like bassists Ray Brown and Paul Chambers as having a significant influence on his development as a musician.¹⁴ Jamerson also discusses his experience playing jazz clubs in Detroit and the changes that had taken place since his relocation to Los Angeles in the early 70s. As useful as both primary sources were, neither Forte nor Nelson George’s articles were instructional in content. The articles lacked any important musical analysis of Jamerson’s actual bass lines, which are important to this thesis.

Three dissertations are particularly relevant to this thesis. *Dancing in The Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Harvard University Press, 1999) by Suzanne E. Smith has excellent information about Jamerson’s tutelage in the Detroit jazz and R&B scene prior to working at Motown. Smith writes that the musicians at Motown “used their jazz expertise to transform the musical stylings of popular song.”¹⁵ “I Hear a Symphony: Making Music at Motown, 1959-1979” is Andrew Flory’s 2006 dissertation

¹³ *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 4th ed., *Oxford Music Online*, s.v. “Jamerson, James,” <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/epm/13570> (accessed March 8, 2014).

¹⁴ Dan Forte, “James Jamerson: Preeminent Motown Bassist,” *Guitar Player* (June 1979): 45.

¹⁵ Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 160.

and forthcoming book (to be published in 2014). This source provided valuable information regarding the stylistic evolution of Motown's music during its Detroit era and after the label's move to Los Angeles. Of particular importance to this thesis and an aspect of Motown's history that will be discussed further below is Flory's research and writing regarding the pivotal role 1963 played in the evolution and success of Motown. As Flory makes clear, "there were huge changes in store at Motown in the coming years, with nine top ten hits released in 1963 alone."¹⁶ Flory's contribution greatly updates and expands scholarly research on Motown, a needed and potentially developing trend in academic music study. From an analytical perspective, "Solo Techniques for Unaccompanied Pizzicato Jazz Double Bass," a 2008 dissertation by Larry James Ousley, includes important information regarding double (upright) bass technique in a jazz context. This dissertation aided my research on how Jamerson's bass technique and style was so closely related to his jazz schooling.

Academic articles and bass methodological books have informed this thesis as well. In particular, Robert Fink's 2011 article for the *Journal of American Musicological Society*, "Goal-Directed Soul? Analyzing Rhythmic Teleology in Africa-American Popular Music" and Jon Fitzgerald's 1995 article, "Motown crossover hits 1963-1966 and the creative process" in the journal *Popular Music*, provide scholarly insight into the creative process of Motown. While both articles focus on the rhythmic genealogy of the labels' music, Fitzgerald's article is particularly significant to this thesis; with research and statistics detailing the indispensable role the Funk Brothers' musical creations played

¹⁶ Jonathan Andrew Flory. "I Hear a Symphony: Making Music at Motown, 1959-1979" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2006). In PROQUESTMS ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/305295268?accountid=5683> (accessed February 26, 2014), 89.

in fueling Motown's commercial success. *The Evolving Bassist* (1983), a definitive bass method book by jazz bassist, composer, and educator, Rufus Reid, was referenced for supplementary information regarding upright bass methods and principles, further enlightening my research on how Jamerson transferred these methods to the bass guitar. Publications by noted bassist and author Ed Friedland provide more methodological content as well as detailed and updated biographical information on Jamerson that is not found in Slutsky's book. In particular, Friedland's bass method series; *Hal Leonard Bass Method* (Hal Leonard, 2nd Edition, 2004), and his style-themed books: *Building Walking Bass Lines* (Hal Leonard, 1993), *Blues Bass: A Guide to the Essential Styles and Techniques* (Hal Leonard, 2005), and *The Way They Play: The R&B Bass Masters* (Backbeat Books, 2005), provide invaluable insight into bass guitar fundamentals, blues and jazz bass principles and techniques, as well as specifics regarding Jamerson's performances and how they were influenced by his jazz and blues history. Friedland's concise and educated writing fused with the author's colorful sense of humor creates an informative and enjoyable pedagogic experience in commercial music instruction and education.

Berry Gordy, Jr.'s autobiography *To Be Loved* (Warner Books, 1994) mentions Jamerson and the Funk Brothers numerous times, with Gordy describing Jamerson as a "genius on the bass" and a vital asset to the "Motown sound."¹⁷ Although a tertiary source, *Before Motown: A History of Jazz in Detroit* (University of Michigan Press, 2001) by Lars Bjorn and Jim Gallert is an unparalleled source regarding the Detroit jazz scene throughout several decades of the twentieth century. Since the influence and

¹⁷ Berry Gordy, *To Be Loved: The Music, the Magic, the Memories of Motown: An Autobiography* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), 125.

practice of jazz is such an important component to this study, *Before Motown* was invaluable for an understanding of the regional music scene and musicians who created the music at Motown.

Sources that are not specifically related to Jamerson but mention him in relation to the music recording process or the history, study, and performance of the bass guitar include *Temples of Sound: Inside the Great Recording Studios* (Chronicle Books, 2003) by Jim Cogan and William Clark which presents technical data on the quality of Motown's recording and production facilities. Also included is information on recording techniques used at Motown's studios, and although Jamerson is mentioned only briefly, he is referred to in the book as an "indispensable presence" to the recording process.¹⁸ *How The Fender Bass Changed The World* (Backbeat Books, 2001) by Jim Roberts has a chapter dedicated to Jamerson titled, "St. James."¹⁹ Roberts writes that "the immense popularity of Motown changed the course" of popular music and the generation it influenced.²⁰ Robert's book also has significant details about the manufacturing process of Fender basses, which coincides with Jamerson's history since the bass guitar he used throughout his career was a Fender Precision and his use of it helped to solidify that particular model as the standard for electric bass guitar design.²¹

With the literature regarding Jamerson thoroughly sourced, it is important to understand the jazz music scene in Detroit during the early years of Jamerson's career. By doing so, the analysis of Jamerson's bass lines are fully understood within the context they were created. The Detroit jazz scene and its "Detroit way" of educating local jazz

¹⁸ Clark and Cogan, 141.

¹⁹ Jim Roberts, *How the Fender Bass Changed The World* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2001), 68.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

²¹ Tony Bacon and Barry Moorhouse, *The Bass Book: A Complete Illustrated History of Bass Guitars* (San Francisco: Balafon Books and Miller Freeman, 1995), 48.

musicians provided experience in musical performance as well as a social environment yielding a distinctive bond between the players. This affinity benefited the entire studio band, especially Jamerson.

The Detroit jazz scene was a thriving training ground for the musicians that worked and recorded for Motown Records during its illustrious Detroit-era (1959-1972).²² By the time of the label's relocation to Los Angeles in the early-1970s, jazz and its social component had already experienced decades of influence in the region.²³ Prior to the city's musical association with Motown, Detroit produced some of the finest musicians in jazz history during the 1950s, the era when Motown's future musicians were learning and refining their skills.²⁴ As will be covered below, the nurturing quality of the Detroit jazz scene, or as Motown's musicians would call it, "the Detroit way," provided the social environment that allowed these musicians to: meet, frequently play together, influence each other's playing style, and make connections with those in the burgeoning local record label industry.²⁵ This early established rapport enabled by the local jazz scene would pay dividends for Motown in future years as the label was able to claim a distinct "Motown Sound" and benefit commercially from its brand appeal due to the efforts of these musicians. Likewise, the jazz scene raised the quality of musicianship amongst Motown's studio musicians, benefiting the final product and allowing the label to release its most successful recordings during a relatively brief span of time, less than

²² Smith, 47.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Forte, 45.

²⁵ George, "Standing in the Shadows," 62.

ten years (1962-1971).²⁶ While Motown certainly made Detroit into an internationally known music city, “There *was* music in Detroit before Motown in the 1960s.”²⁷

The majority of Motown’s Detroit era music was recorded at the company’s “Studio A” recording facility in the basement of the label’s early headquarters on West Grand Boulevard in downtown Detroit, also known as “Hitsville, U.S.A.”²⁸ The group of musicians who worked for hours in its live tracking room called it “the Snakepit.”²⁹ Throughout their Detroit tenure and even as Motown’s style and songwriting evolved, the musicians played an essential role in contributing crucial musical characteristics to the finalized versions of the label’s releases. Not only did these contributions become vital to the *sound* of the tune, on occasion, and especially in the early years when Motown’s music had not evolved into its pop hybrid form, the house studio band practically assumed the role of group composer when presented by a staff songwriter or producer with a basic musical idea or phrase with minimal lyrical content and needing a finished product.³⁰ The group provided this essential service while still being able to maintain a steady pace of cutting at least two songs, but often as many as four, within a three-hour recording session.³¹ They did this working swiftly as an ensemble without a member of the group in the dedicated role as bandleader, although, as will be noted below, various members of the group assumed roles of authority on certain occasion with the complete deference of the collective. This unique and creatively beneficial relationship had been created and honed during countless hours playing jazz in the Detroit’s numerous venues.

²⁶ George, *Where Did Our Love*, 203.

²⁷ Bjorn and Gallert, xiii.

²⁸ Cogan and Clark, 141.

²⁹ Slutsky, 29.

³⁰ Ben Edmonds, *What’s Going On? Marvin Gaye and the Last Days of the Motown Sound* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2001), 106.

³¹ Hunter et al., *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, DVD.

Those venues were an essential component to the label's founding, and jazz's assertive and complex expectations on its listeners influenced Motown's distilled musical aesthetic and public image more than the casual music listener may realize. Indeed, Berry Gordy, Jr., Motown's founder and CEO, had made his connections with Detroit's jazz musicians in both social and business environments directly related to the city's jazz scene.³²

Gordy's initial foray into the music business was through his ill-fated record shop, 3-D Record Mart-House of Jazz, which specialized in stocking jazz releases and opened in 1953.³³ The business closed in 1955, succumbing to a lack of interest in jazz recordings by Detroit's general record buying public.³⁴ Before and after his business failing, Gordy had been a common fixture in Detroit's jazz venues where his sisters worked concessions, foreshadowing the influence of the entire Gordy family on Motown's business. Gordy befriended numerous musicians at the Twenty Grand Club, the Flame Show Bar, Chappy's Lounge, and the Chit-Chat Lounge.³⁵ Later, it would be at these and other venues all around Detroit's music scene that Gordy, Motown A&R director Mickey Stevenson, and other members of the nascent Motown staff, recruited the musicians to play on the label's recordings.³⁶ But the lesson of his failed record store arguably had convinced Gordy that attaining commercial success was not possible via jazz's advanced musical style. It was in a more tailored and simplified pop song craft that could appeal to a wider audience. And Gordy knew that Detroit's jazz musicians had the talent and skills to record the songs he envisioned for his label. The relationship would prove to be mutually beneficial, as Earl Van Dyke, keyboardist and eventual de facto leader for

³² Peter Benjamin, *The Story of Motown* (New York: Grove Press, 1979), 13.

³³ Bill Dahl, *Motown: The Golden Years* (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 2001), 13.

³⁴ Smith, 70-71.

³⁵ Dahl, 14.

³⁶ Gordy, 124.

Motown's studio ensemble explained: "It [Motown] was just a gig to us. All we wanted to do was play jazz, but we all had families, and at the time playing rhythm and blues was the best way to pay the rent."³⁷ Indeed, early Motown recordings reflected less refined styles like blues, doo-wop, and the twist, and what Van Dyke makes clear is that jazz was not a lucrative pursuit for a working musician in Detroit. Nevertheless, the city's thriving jazz scene proved to be an essential training ground and an important social arena for these musicians.³⁸ The familiarity among each player's style to the other created a unique bond and a symbiotic relationship that would greatly contribute to Motown's music identity. Ben Edmonds makes this point precisely in *What's Going On? Marvin Gaye And The Last Days Of The Motown Sound*, his book on the making of Gaye's classic record:

The Funk Brothers' primary asset as a band was not the well-drilled precision of R&B – though this is what they achieved as a byproduct – but the internal communication endemic to jazz musicians. The remarkable empathy these players developed was due in large part to their shared roots in modern jazz, chops they maintained by jamming into the wee hours at local clubs after they'd put in a full day on Motown's pop-soul assembly line.³⁹

While Motown's music as a product was marketed in a popular entertainment medium and promoted as "The Sound of Young America," the musicality of the songs had harmonic depth and rhythmic complexity thanks in no small part to the experienced musicianship of its studio ensemble.

While Jamerson's obvious musical talent was the reason he had been enlisted to record for Motown in the first place, his initial bass lines on early recordings did not overtly expand the traditional and narrow parameters established for bass lines on typical

³⁷ Smith, 160.

³⁸ Hunter et al., *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, DVD.

³⁹ Edmonds, 103-104.

R&B and popular music recordings of the era.⁴⁰ Within a short span of time, however, his contributions became vital to Motown recording sessions, with Gordy offering Jamerson, as well as select members of the Funk Brothers, an employment contract with the company that included a financial retainer that would keep the bassist working steadily, and hopefully solely, for the label.⁴¹

During the 1960s and into the early 1970s, Jamerson's playing evolved into and reflected a musical talent and creative persona that was fundamental in establishing a template for the emerging electric bass guitar style.⁴² Jamerson's approach on the bass guitar was both virtuosic in ability as well as rich in methodological content for the instrument. Fortunately these performances were captured on tape, and although his bass playing was recognized as truly unique and artistically influential during Motown's successful Detroit years, his identity remained unknown to the common Motown music fan, fellow industry peers, and current recording artists for decades.⁴³ As mentioned above, this was due to non-credit on the liner notes of Motown releases, which reflected a spoken as well as implied policy by the label that its recording musicians' identities should not be shared.⁴⁴ Motown's executive and managerial leadership, including Berry Gordy, knew that the musicians who created and performed on Motown's records were an asset and essential to the label's success.⁴⁵ Motown management believed that these musicians' professional loyalties should remain exclusive to Motown. Lending their talents to other labels was in breach of their employment contract and would result in

⁴⁰ Gordy, 125.

⁴¹ Jack Ashford, *Motown: The View from the Bottom* (London: Bank House Books, 2005), 39.

⁴² Chris Jisi, "The Dance Floor Never Stood A Chance! Inside The Jamerson Style," *Bass Player* (December 2002), 42.

⁴³ Gordy, 210.

⁴⁴ George, *Where Did Our Love*, 106.

⁴⁵ Gordy, 124.

financial penalties if they were discovered working other recording sessions away from Motown.⁴⁶ While the restrictions expressed by Motown reflected an autocratic and ruthless business sense that the Funk Brothers would experience to a much greater extent when the label relocated to Los Angeles in 1972, it did not stop Jamerson, or other members of the Funk Brothers, from lending their talents to other non-Motown recordings that also garnered success. Unfortunately the label's efforts in excluding the musicians' names from being listed on releases did keep listeners and fans from knowing and fully appreciating those who were perhaps most significantly responsible for creating its music.⁴⁷ This is especially true concerning Jamerson's bass lines and their resonating influence on the bass guitar and how it was played.

As was true with music in Detroit before Motown, certainly there was bass guitar playing before James Jamerson. The electric bass guitar in its current form evolved throughout the 1940s and 1950s from various models that were produced by musical instrument manufacturers but rarely went beyond a prototype stage or a limited production.⁴⁸ In time, an instrument was created to meet a perceived demographic that matched the pitch range of the acoustic upright bass, but was similar in design to an electric guitar.⁴⁹ It also reflected current technology by being an electrically amplified instrument with improved sonic clarity.⁵⁰ The concept of the electric bass guitar was initially for functional intent based on a recognizable and traditional design: manufacturers thought it would primarily be used as an instrument of practical necessity for guitar players, allowing them to perform bass parts without needing experience on the

⁴⁶ George, *Where Did Our Love*, 107.

⁴⁷ Forte, 44.

⁴⁸ Roberts, 21-30.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

upright bass.⁵¹ But via Jamerson and his unique approach, which was influenced by his upright bass training and jazz background, the perception and evolution of bass guitar playing was fundamentally altered when his performances demonstrated that the instrument was capable of exceeding the musical parameters of its originally designed intent. Jamerson established himself as innovative and peerless in his field by creating his iconic bass lines within a popular music context while harmonically and rhythmically referencing his musical heritage of jazz and blues music. By doing so via a popular entertainment medium, his performances have had a substantial impact on popular music and culture.⁵²

⁵¹ J.W. Black and Molinaro, *The Fender Bass: An Illustrated History* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2001), 5.

⁵² Ed Friedland, "The Motown Beat," *Bass Player* (March 2004), 84.

CHAPTER II

Analysis and Transcription

When Jamerson started working at Motown, he had not yet begun playing the bass guitar but was well familiar with traditional roles for the upright bass. His earliest years studying the instrument had been in formal music classroom environments at Northwestern High School on West Grand Boulevard, an area of Detroit with a concentration of music venues and just down the street from the future location of Motown Record's recording studio and company offices.⁵³ Jamerson, as well as other Funk Brothers and various Motown artists, greatly benefited from the high quality of public school music education in Detroit during the 1940s and 1950s.⁵⁴ Specifically, during this time a concentrated performing arts curriculum was available at two of Detroit's public schools, Northwestern High School and Cass Technical High School.⁵⁵ Although some sources erroneously list the school as Northeastern,⁵⁶ the historical record is clear that Jamerson first picked up the upright at Northwestern under the tutelage of the school's band director, Dr. Holstein.⁵⁷

Jamerson already had a musical background prior to arriving at Northwestern and choosing to play the upright bass.⁵⁸ Born to James Jamerson, Sr. and Elizabeth Jamerson on January 29, 1936 in Edisto, South Carolina, his father worked at the local shipyard and

⁵³ Björn and Gallert, 64-65.

⁵⁴ Smith, 158.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Smith's *Dancing In the Street* erroneously lists Jamerson's high school as "Northeastern," 158.

⁵⁷ All other credible sources concerning Jamerson's high school music education list the institution as "Northwestern," the school is currently known as Detroit Collegiate Preparatory High School, <http://detroitk12.org/schools/northwestern/> (accessed February 26, 2014).

⁵⁸ Ben Cooper, "James Jamerson: Funk Soul Brother," *Bass Guitar Magazine*, August 2013, 23-24. The bulk of the biographical background covering Jamerson's early years and musical influences in this paragraph is from Cooper's article.

his mother as a domestic. With both parents working he spent a lot of time with his maternal grandmother and aunt, the former an amateur pianist and the latter sang in the local church. Together, they were responsible for introducing Jamerson to both musical instruments and gospel music. After his parents divorced, Jamerson lived with his mother though his grandmother and aunt continued to help raise him. With music being a part of his regular environment, Jamerson “developed an affinity for music early on, and his skills manifested at a young age. By the time he was 10, James was a proficient enough pianist to be able to sit in and comp [chords] with the choir in his local church.”⁵⁹ Seeking better job opportunities, Elizabeth Jamerson moved to Detroit in 1954 and sent for her son shortly thereafter.⁶⁰ James entered Northwestern in 1954 and began playing upright bass that same year, after being encouraged by Dr. Holstein, who recognized Jamerson’s talent and beneficial physical attributes for the instrument: his “large, powerful hands.”⁶¹

Although Jamerson benefited profoundly from the formal instruction he received at Northwestern, it was in Detroit’s jazz scene where he acquired, practiced, and perfected his bass craft. As music historian Suzanne Smith explains in her study on Motown and music in Detroit:

Motown’s studio musicians like Jamerson and [keyboardist, Earl] Van Dyke received their most profound musical education not in a classroom but in Detroit’s blues and jazz clubs. Throughout the 1950s jazz thrived in such clubs as the Minor Key, Phelps’ Lounge, the Flame Show Bar, the West End, and the Stimson Hotel. Several Motown musicians played jazz at these clubs and collaborated with artists including Charlie Parker, Grant Green, and Dizzy Gillespie.”⁶²

⁵⁹ Cooper, 23.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 23-24.

⁶¹ Ibid., 24.

⁶² Smith, 159.

Jamerson and other Motown musicians expressed the importance of this informal education and called it the “Detroit way,” explaining that the local jazz venue band stand and after hours social gatherings provided the opportunity for improving and refining their musical skills and style while learning from some of the best musicians in jazz at that time.⁶³ As Jamerson reflected to Nelson George during a 1983 interview shortly before his death:

When I was in my teens I used to play jazz at this place where the musicians hung out. Barry Harris, the piano player, was the leader of us guys. As we got older we started playing in clubs like the Minor Key and at all the college dances. At this time I started playing with the heavy weights like Dizzy Gillespie. Different musicians from New York would come in and jam.⁶⁴

Although Jamerson depicts the experience in casual terms, Detroit had a significant role in shaping the history of jazz music. In many ways, Detroit’s jazz scene can be viewed as a type of “farm team,” as found in baseball, for larger and even more influential jazz scenes like New York.⁶⁵ Specifically, tenor saxophonist Yusef Lateef, bassist Paul Chambers, drummer Elvin Jones of the legendary early-60s John Coltrane quartet and his brother, cornetist-arranger Thad Jones, all began their music careers in Detroit but eventually moved on to more lucrative opportunities in New York.⁶⁶

Jamerson’s first years playing upright coincided with a golden age of jazz in Detroit during the 1950s.⁶⁷ This era produced such legendary players as those listed above as well as pianists Barry Harris and Tommy Flanagan, and guitarist Kenny Burrell.⁶⁸ Jamerson spent time playing with both Harris and Lateef in Detroit, as well as

⁶³ George, “Standing in the Shadows,” 62.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Scott Yanow, *Jazz: A Regional Exploration*, Greenwood Guides to American Roots Music (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 182-183.

⁶⁶ Bjorn and Gallert, 123.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Waller, 166.

supporting national acts, like Dizzy Gillespie, when they played in Detroit and relied on local musicians to complete their live ensembles.⁶⁹ But it was with the local musicians that a long-term playing and informal mentor-mentee relationship could be forged. It was in this environment that the “Detroit way” of learning jazz was able to thrive, and be utilized to great success in Motown’s recording studio. As Earl Van Dyke explained, “Detroit musicians back in that time weren’t in competition, but just out to help one another. I remember the hardest tunes for me to get were ‘Cherokee’ and ‘Lush Life.’ Hank Jones taught it to Barry Harris. Barry Harris taught it to me. I taught it to somebody else. That was the Detroit way.”⁷⁰ This informal mentoring service and musical brotherhood solidified a special camaraderie between the musicians that would eventually seep into the recordings made at Motown. Again, as Van Dyke, recalls: “When I started getting into jazz, musicians at the time in Detroit used to get together socially on weekends, and teach each other tunes and ideas. We didn’t compete with each other.”⁷¹ This collaborative spirit combined with the musicians’ talent created a Detroit music scene that was socially connected and allowed for musicians to find new playing opportunities.

An important early opportunity for Jamerson was his gig playing upright bass for the local Detroit bluesman Washboard Willie and his Supersuds of Rhythm in the late 1950s.⁷² Blues music was a relevant and influential component of Detroit’s music scene. In fact, the blues would have a far greater ability in reaching the masses of Detroit’s

⁶⁹ Forte, 45.

⁷⁰ George, “Standing in the Shadows,” 62.

⁷¹ Smith, 159.

⁷² Ibid., 47.

black community and would outpace jazz in popularity for the working-class.⁷³ This fact had a profound effect on Berry Gordy and influenced greatly his decision to concentrate on developing a music business that catered to the common music consumer rather than the elitist jazz aficionado.⁷⁴ Regarding the Funk Brothers, many of them had a passion for playing jazz but also enjoyed the atmosphere of a blues gig or blues music recording session. Important to understanding the make-up of Motown's recording ensemble is that while their vocation as jazz musicians certainly increased the music literacy of these recording aces, blues gigs were also a vital part of their education.

Jamerson's own experience working for a blues artist like Washboard Willie served him well, both in the ability to improve on his instrument and the opportunity to play with a well-regarded local Detroit artist, thus exposing him to the Detroit music scene.⁷⁵ The steady work schedule enabled Jamerson's bass skills to improve dramatically and the non-jazz, blues based environment thoroughly acquainted him with the typical guitar keys of G, D, A, and E, a point made by Ed Friedland in his book, *The Way They Play: The R&B Bass Masters*.⁷⁶ A thorough knowledge of these keys combined with his refined jazz proficiency proved important to Jamerson's future recording session work. As Friedland explains: "Combined with his already solid understanding of the 'horn keys' – F, Bb, Eb, Ab, and Db – he was now fluent in any key he might encounter. The Washboard Willie gig also brought him to the attention of local record producers."⁷⁷ Friedland's book is of particular importance for this thesis due to its concentrated study of ten bassists that Friedland considers to be "the most influential

⁷³ Bjorn, 174.

⁷⁴ George, *Where Did Our Love*, 17.

⁷⁵ Ed Friedland, *The Way They Play: The R&B Bass Masters* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2005), 8.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Friedland, *The Way They Play*, 8.

bassists from the golden era of R&B,” with Jamerson receiving top billing as the subject of the book’s first chapter.⁷⁸ As Friedland notes in that chapter:

James Jamerson is the man who started it all. Before him, the electric bass was an untapped reservoir of potential. Often poorly recorded and played without flair, it had not yet become a force in music. All that changed when Jamerson picked up the instrument in 1960. Jamerson was the primary bassist for Motown Records during the 1960s, playing lines that became the driving force behind some of the most popular recordings of all time.⁷⁹

It was while playing live with Washboard Willie that Jamerson met Johnnie Mae Matthews, owner of the local independent label, Northern Records.⁸⁰ Impressed by his playing, Matthews began offering Jamerson recording session work and his reputation as a bassist with a unique and developing style began to spread throughout the small but budding Detroit studio scene.⁸¹ Jamerson continued to work at multiple studios in the late 1950s; which location or opportunity brought him directly to Motown has been a matter of dispute. In his article “Standing in the Shadows,” Nelson George claims that Jamerson came to Motown via a late 1950s recording session at a studio owned by Berry Gordy’s first wife, Raymona Gordy.⁸² George explains that Mickey Stevenson, who had been hired as A&R Director for the new label, witnessed Jamerson’s talent on the session and brought him to Hitsville.⁸³ Another version of the story has Jamerson coming to Motown with Smokey Robinson, due to the bassist playing in the backing band for Robinson’s Miracles.⁸⁴ Slutsky, in his book *Standing in the Shadows*, asserts that it was the connection of playing on recording sessions at Anna Records, another small independent music label in Detroit owned and operated by Berry Gordy’s sister Gwen, that led to

⁷⁸ Friedland, *The Way They Play*, 5.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁸⁰ Cooper, 24.

⁸¹ Slutsky, 10.

⁸² George, “Standing in the Shadows,” 62.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Waller, 156.

Jamerson working at Motown.⁸⁵ An important footnote relevant to this thesis is that it had been via a song co-written with Gwen that Berry Gordy had experienced his first success in the music industry. As a songwriter, Gordy wrote “Reet Petite” in 1957, which was recorded by Jackie Wilson and was a hit for him and his label, Brunswick Records.⁸⁶

The contradictory accounts of how Jamerson came to Motown seem understandable considering the fluid nature of the Detroit music scene, but the bassist himself explained his route to Motown in his 1979 interview with Dan Forte for *Guitar Player* magazine: “Well, I was playing upright in the late ‘50s, doing some sessions with other people at Berry Gordy’s first wife’s studio. Berry heard the lines I was playing and fell in love with them. He asked me if I’d be interested in coming over and being part of the company, and I told him yes.”⁸⁷ Although contradicted by Jamerson, Slutsky’s version also contends that it was through an invitation by local musicians that the bassist came to attend a Motown session.⁸⁸ Regardless, Jamerson would begin working for the label that year, although routine session work that paid well was still elusive, even at Motown Records. Indeed, the label was still in its infancy and years away from its phenomenal success and thus paid very low wages initially.⁸⁹

With the need for extra work, Jamerson and his fellow Funk Brothers maintained additional live performance schedules and non-Motown recording session work during the early 1960s. One particular non-Motown session is worthy of note in relation to Jamerson’s early recording session work. Unbeknownst to many, and due to this need for extra work, the Funk Brothers, including Jamerson, continued participating in recording

⁸⁵ Slutsky, 10.

⁸⁶ David Bianco, *Heat Wave: The Motown Fact Book* (Ann Arbor: Popular Culture Ink, 1988), 3-5.

⁸⁷ Forte, 45.

⁸⁸ Slutsky, 11.

⁸⁹ George, *Where Did Our Love*, 106.

sessions for other Detroit and regional (primarily Chicago) labels during these early years.⁹⁰ For example, John Lee Hooker's hit "Boom Boom," (Vee-Jay, 1962) featured many of Motown's best musicians, including Jamerson, pianist Joe Hunter, and saxophonists Hank Cosby and Mike Terry.⁹¹ Discrepancies exist in the historical record as to who played drums, with the liner notes to the deluxe edition of the *Standing In The Shadows* soundtrack listing Richard "Pistol" Allen as drummer while the comprehensive online music guide AllMusic.com lists Benny Benjamin. Since Allen explained in an interview for the *Standing In The Shadows* documentary film that he joined Motown in 1962 after being recruited by Benjamin, AllMusic's claim may be the most accurate.⁹² Regardless, the recording features Jamerson and the rest of the Funk Brothers providing a driving but sparse rhythm accompaniment to Hooker's suggestive yet sinister vocalizing. Important to note is that even as Motown's success grew and the musicians attained their status as salaried employees for the label in the mid-60s, they would still contribute to recordings "off-the-books" from Motown, for example, Jackie Wilson's "(Your Love Keeps Lifting Me) Higher And Higher" (Brunswick, 1967).⁹³

Although the time frame for our first analysis of Jamerson's bass lines is several years into the bassist's tenure with Motown, it marks an important period for Jamerson as well as Motown. In the years since his inaugural sessions for the label in 1959, Jamerson had solidified his role due to his valued efforts on the label's early successes. An early recording session in Jamerson's Motown career exemplifies the simmering individuality that would soon boil over into his aggressive musical persona. Jamerson and the Funk

⁹⁰ George, *Where Did Our Love*, 108.

⁹¹ Various Artists, *Standing in the Shadows*, CD, Liner notes, 5.

⁹² Hunter et al., *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, DVD, "Biographies: Richard "Pistol" Allen"

⁹³ George, *Where Did Our Love*, 108.

Brothers contributed the instrumentation to the 1962 Top 40 hit single, “Do You Love Me?” by The Contours, the group’s only Top 40 charting release.⁹⁴ The song is credited as a Berry Gordy composition, and Gordy also led the recording session as producer. In his autobiography, *To Be Loved* (1994), Gordy describes both his tense and confrontational interaction with Jamerson during the session and the process and difficulty of working with the eccentric bassist. Unfortunately, Jamerson’s character traits would become more pronounced and detrimental over the years as these quirks were exacerbated by his increasing alcohol habit. For this early era session though, Jamerson was still in good health and was creatively objecting to Gordy’s specific instructions for the track’s bass line. In Gordy’s words:

I had decided that Jamerson-with his jazzy licks and upbeat-had gone way past the boundaries I’d set. Though I had warned him several times, he continued to do it so brazenly that I had had enough. “Look man,” I said. “I’ve told you over and over again this ain’t no fuckin’ Jazz session. You got to stay on the fuckin’ downbeat.” Jamerson said nothing, but gave a nod and a shrug, as if to say, “Okay, man, mess up your own session if you want to.” We started again, my eyes glued to Jamerson. I knew I’d have to kick him out if he deviated from my directions. Dropping my guard, I had turned my attention to Benny Benjamin on drums; he was grooving like a dog. In that split second, Jamerson hit four or five Jazz upbeat in rapid succession. Reeling around, I turned to let him have it. But before I could say anything he had jumped back on the downbeat so brilliantly I could only smile. He glanced at me in impish defiance. He knew I loved what I’d just heard and everybody else knew it, too. They also knew he had gotten me.⁹⁵

This example illustrates Jamerson’s vision for surpassing the narrow boundaries of Motown’s pop formula. It also serves perfectly to show how he possessed the innate talent to be able to understand and perform within the prescribed parameters of his performance while selectively allowing his creative voice to be heard and expressed, a vision he would bring to innovative fruition in the next few years.

⁹⁴ Gordy, 157-158.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

As mentioned above, the first years of Motown are notable for the label's reliance on simpler forms of pop music, like the twist and doo-wop. Jamerson's bass playing during this time is stylistically appropriate, yet it is artistically underdeveloped, and possibly muted when considering the above interaction with Gordy, and when viewed in the context of his entire career. In retrospect, his playing during this period arguably reflects an embryonic stage for the bass player's developing style, coinciding with the label's evolving compositional and production sophistication. Following a series of releases in the early 1960s that found the label commercially broadening its audience outside the bounds of its regional and racial demographics, 1963 would prove to be a historically defining year for Motown, and the musicians who were vital to the product bringing so much success.⁹⁶

Indeed, 1963 is an important year to use for the first analysis for multiple reasons. This is the year that finds Jamerson doing his last regular session work on upright, as he had transitioned to primarily playing electric bass for the rest of his career in 1964.⁹⁷ Although the two examples I will examine from 1963 and 1964 have Jamerson playing upright, 1963 is the year when Jamerson acquired his legendary Precision Bass, also known as "The Funk Machine."⁹⁸ Jamerson would use this bass for his most acclaimed work at Motown and throughout the rest of his career. Sadly, the instrument was stolen weeks before Jamerson's death in 1983.⁹⁹

By 1964, Jamerson would transition to being solely a studio musician for the label, no longer performing live with any regularity for Motown, since his presence had

⁹⁶ Fitzgerald, 1.

⁹⁷ Forte, 45.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Friedland, *The Way They Play*, 11.

become so essential to any Motown recording session.¹⁰⁰ It was also a pivotal year for the bassist and the rest of the Funk Brothers, as the label introduced its notorious exclusive employment contract with the musicians during this time.¹⁰¹ The next several years would see many changes for the musicians at Motown as their workload increased exponentially and their monetary compensation from the label dramatically improved.¹⁰² For example, in 1965, pressure from the local Detroit musicians' union and competing wages from other local recording studios resulted in Motown paying scaled wages to its musician staff.¹⁰³ Gone were the days of the "ten bucks a session" recording gigs at Motown.¹⁰⁴ As detailed in Slutsky's book *Standing In The Shadows*, the improved wages brought about by the label's success transformed the careers of the Funk Brothers. Although their valued contributions were now being appropriately compensated, the institutionalization of the Funks into the Motown company would cut both ways. This new career path as a session musician, exclusively working for one label (on the books, at least) would provide Jamerson and his musical cohorts with the opportunity for a middle-class existence based in financial security and regular employment. This increased awareness and acceptance of Motown's music product via industry success would not trickle down to acknowledgement and exposure for the musicians however, who were working so hard down in "the Snakepit" to make the product a reality.

Perhaps another reason to acknowledge 1963 as such a pivotal year for the label, is that it was during this year that Holland-Dozier-Holland (HDH) solidified their status

¹⁰⁰ Friedland, *The Way They Play*, 8.

¹⁰¹ Gerald Posner, *Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power* (New York: Random House, 2002), 48.

¹⁰² Benjamin, 64.

¹⁰³ George, *Where Did Our Love*, 107.

¹⁰⁴ Ashford, 39.

as Motown's premiere song writing team.¹⁰⁵ This is a position they would maintain with legitimacy, provided by their overwhelming chart success, until HDH severed ties with the label in 1968.¹⁰⁶ A lawsuit would follow between the two parties over publishing, since HDH, as well as any writer(s) of songs released by Motown, were published by the Gordy-owned Jobete Publishing Company, which grew to be one of the most powerful publishing houses in the industry.¹⁰⁷ To understand the degree of success for HDH's penned hits, consider Andrew Flory's description of HDH's broad and distinctive success during this time, as well as the teams' sole competition on the charts:

From 1964 to 1968 HDH produced almost thirty songs that charted for these two groups [The Four Tops and The Supremes] – many of these reached the number one chart position on both the pop and r&b charts, a rare phenomenon known as “crossover.” Largely due to their crossover success, during this five-year period HDH were among the most important and successful practitioners of popular music in the English speaking world, rivaled only by John Lennon and Paul McCartney of the Beatles.¹⁰⁸

Jon Fitzgerald's article further details Motown's crossover success due to HDH's contributions, explaining:

My own analysis of Whitburn's (1987) US top forty charts between 1963 and 1966 demonstrates that Motown's most successful 1960s songwriting team Holland-Dozier-Holland (H-D-H) matched the achievements of Lennon-McCartney in 1965 (after the huge initial impact of the Beatles in 1964) and clearly out-performed them in 1966, achieving twice as many top forty entries and top ten hits.¹⁰⁹

This era is also of special importance because HDH's songs are the means by which Jamerson was able to realize his vision for the electric bass. HDH provided the framework that allowed Jamerson to contribute his masterpieces of bass performance that

¹⁰⁵ Flory, 95.

¹⁰⁶ Bianco, 37.

¹⁰⁷ Dahl, 15.

¹⁰⁸ Flory, 92.

¹⁰⁹ Fitzgerald, 1.

would influence generations of musicians, music fans, and now music scholars, as well as popular culture at large. It is in this era when Jamerson becomes less tethered to traditional bass and genre-specific musical traits and asserts a freer hand in the creation of the bass lines for the songs written by HDH. As Jamerson explained to Nelson George,

Holland-Dozier-Holland would give me the chord sheet, but they couldn't write for me. When they did, it didn't sound right. They'd let me go on and ad lib. I created, man. When they gave me that chord sheet, I'd look at it, but then start doing what I felt and what I thought would fit. All the musicians did. All of them made hits.¹¹⁰

This quote provides insight into the creative process from Jamerson's perspective, and highlights much of the disgruntlement many Funk Brothers would feel towards Motown after the Detroit era. Jamerson explains: "We were doing more on the job then we thought we were doing and we didn't get any songwriting credit. They didn't start giving any musicians credits on the records until the 70s."¹¹¹

Martha and the Vandellas' Number One hit song¹¹², "(Love Is Like a) Heat Wave," (1963), a composition by HDH, is a fitting example to illustrate Jamerson's early bass playing style at Motown. As this example shows, Jamerson's early bass lines on Motown recordings continued a traditional role for bass. While this performance may not illustrate the typical employment of a root-fifth-octave pattern, it does show Jamerson creating a bass line that, while completely efficient, does not necessarily indicate the work of a future bass virtuoso and bass guitar revolutionary. This particular session finds Jamerson in a more traditional role from multiple perspectives. For example, he plays upright on the recording, not yet turning exclusively to the electric bass guitar on recording sessions. Also, the song has a swing-feel that reflects a stylistic trait commonly

¹¹⁰ George, "Standing in the Shadows," 65.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 66.

¹¹² Flory, 96.

found on early Motown releases and is closer to Jamerson's jazz-blues heritage.

Furthermore, since Jamerson is playing upright, his bass line consists of elements directly related to his jazz style upright skills. In addition, at this time Jamerson's bass is at a low volume in relation to other instruments in the overall track mix and not in the prevalent place it would be in Motown's mid-60s recordings and final mixes for release.

Jamerson's transition to electric bass guitar would usher in a variety of new changes in Motown's sound in the coming years.

On "Heat Wave," Jamerson employs a slightly swung but simple quarter-note rhythm, with the use of the root of each chord as the foundation for the bass line while moving through the progression during the verses. An ostinato bass line (Figure 2.1) referencing major pentatonic scale tones in the chorus, serves to give this section a bluesy feel but with functional simplicity, although it certainly lacks the creative and improvisational embellishments that would be a hallmark of Jamerson's later influential and foundational style. Nevertheless, closer analysis reveals Jamerson employing blues and jazz bass principles and techniques within the tune's functional and simplistic harmonic framework. For instance, during the Fm-Gm-Cm chord progression of the verses, Jamerson uses non-chord tones as passing notes to move in half-step motion chromatically throughout the progression (Figure 2.2). Jamerson certainly could have simply remained on the tonic of each chord without any step-wise movement in approaching each forthcoming new chord in the changes. His jazz experience is reflected in his knowledge and skill in using a chromatic approach to harmonically emphasize the movement of the chord progression. Furthermore, the use of this chromatic approach found Jamerson comfortable leaving the diatonic boundaries and substituting major-third

tonalities within a minor chord context. Although harmonically and conceptually his technique is more about emphasizing the approaching new chord via half-step movement to the forthcoming tonic rather than mediant substitutions, this usage still illustrates his ability to appropriate jazz bass techniques into a pop music medium.

Figure 2.1. Chorus bass line on "Heat Wave"



Figure 2.2. Verse bass line on "Heat Wave"



The verse sections find Jamerson striking a creative balance by utilizing a walking bass line during the first two measures and chords of this section, while treading a root-based path with no chromatic movement during the second half and final chord of this four-measure progression. While simplistic in nature, the method foreshadows Jamerson's creative conceptual approach to creating bass lines, the core notion that the part needs to have movement and character.¹¹³ His use of chromaticism in particular during the verses imparts a sense of melodic movement to the bass line, a characteristic obvious to his "walking bass" jazz background and one that would grow to full fruition in later sessions and performances.

As noted earlier, in 1964 Jamerson ceased all touring in order to be available for any Motown recording session. Jamerson explained to Forte in his 1979 interview, "I

¹¹³ George, "Standing in the Shadows," 65.

toured till '64, then came off the road completely to be on staff, I quit traveling with the Miracles in '63. Nobody at Motown would record anything until I came off the road.”¹¹⁴

By this time Jamerson's talent and skills had become essential to the production of music at Motown. Coinciding with the transition to solely working for Motown as a recording musician and not a live performer, Jamerson's evolving style and recorded performances began to solidify into his acclaimed groundbreaking and iconic musical style. Although there are numerous selections to choose from during this important time, for analytical purposes, we will examine Jamerson's bass line on Mary Wells' 1964 hit "My Guy." His performance is an excellent example of the evolving and advanced musical traits that his bass lines were beginning to incorporate. It is also an excellent example for illustrating how the Funk Brothers as an ensemble could significantly influence and alter the music at Motown.

Right from the intro of the tune, the Funk Brothers' jazz skills are utilized to incredible effect. Noticing similarities in the chord progression written by the song's writer, William "Smokey" Robinson, to standards familiar to the jazz musicians in the ensemble, the Funk Brothers, led by Earl Van Dyke on organ, infused the melody of Eddie Heywood's "Canadian Sunset" (heard in the brass) with the rhythm of the Cole Porter standard, "Begin the Beguine" (heard in the keyboard instruments as well as guitar and bass) to create the intro to the song. This lasts for less than ten seconds and floats harmonically above the tonic (Bb), although it is reprised prior to the last chorus and outro. This illustrates how explicitly these musicians could reference their jazz background.

¹¹⁴ Forte, 45.

While the nature of the song's compositional elements evokes jazz characteristics, it took the experience of the Funk Brothers' musical background to notice and exploit these elements to such great effect. For example, although the song's structure does not lend itself to obvious delineations between verse and chorus, the chorus section chord progression is based on the frequent jazz cadence of vi-ii-V-I, before returning to the verse. The verse progression stays static to the tonic for the first six bars, vacillating between versions of the tonic (Bbmaj7-Bb6) before a transition to a D7 and then a four-bar vamp on the Cm7 and F7. Jamerson's upright bass line during the verse recalls a more traditional role as his line relies primarily on a simple half note to two-beat quarter-note rhythm that focuses on the root and dominant, with movement provided by the leading tone (Figure 2.3). Mining his bass line during the chorus however, provides excellent examples of his developing rhythmic and melodic flare, with triplet flourishes both in an ascending and descending melodic pattern usually voicing the triad (Figure 2.4). In addition, this strongly reflects an authentic jazz bass performance. This example is important for understanding the evolution of Jamerson's style, because, while his lines may not be as boundary pushing, there are elements to the performance that would directly transfer to his burgeoning electric style. The use of non-diatonic notes and open strings to aid in position shifts on the upright's neck demonstrate Jamerson's upright tutelage. The right-hand "raking" technique that allows Jamerson to move so quickly from a high-C to a low-F in the outro of the song (Figure 2.5)¹¹⁵ exemplifies his upright training and calls to attention the legendary "Hook," the nickname for Jamerson's right-hand index finger that was used exclusively for plucking, as opposed to the common bass guitar finger style technique of alternating between your index and middle fingers when

¹¹⁵ Slutsky, 107. This figure is taken directly from Slutsky's original transcription.

plucking the strings.¹¹⁶ Jamerson's use of only his index finger resulted in a legendary reputation, especially as his playing progressed into heavy use of sixteenth-note rhythms in future years. But the origination of the technique can be traced to players like legendary jazz bassist Ray Brown and method books on upright jazz technique.¹¹⁷

Figure 2.3. Verse bass line on "My Guy"



Figure 2.4. Chorus bass line on "My Guy"

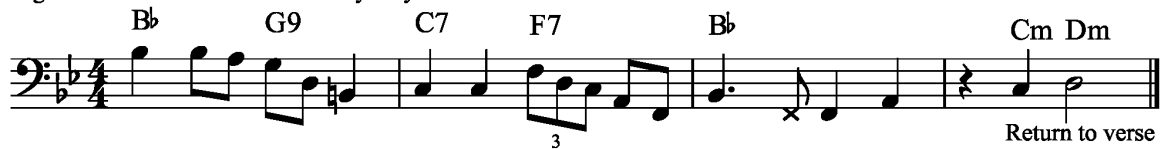


Figure 2.5. Final chorus bass line on "My Guy" with chromatic movement and string rake



It is in the final chorus of the song that the ensemble takes on the character of a jazz ensemble improvising during a performance. The outro finds Jamerson at his most expressive and experimental. Over a repetitive VI7-II7-V-I vamp, Jamerson employs an upper register chromatic run between the C7 and F7 chords (Figure 2.5) prior to the right-hand string rake referenced above. In the fadeout of the song's final measures, Jamerson locks-in with his rhythm section soul mate, drummer Benny Benjamin, on a triplet

¹¹⁶ Chris Jisi, "Secrets of the Motown Vault," *Bass Player* (December 2009): 36.

¹¹⁷ Rufus Reid, *The Evolving Bassist*, International ed. (Teaneck, NJ: Myriad Limited, 1983), 19, 23-26.

rhythm that finds the bassist voicing ghost notes on his bass to percussively accompany the drum set performance (Figure 2.6).¹¹⁸

Figure 2.6. Final chorus bass line on "My Guy" with ghost notes



With the successful early years of Motown Records realized, the mid-60s would find the label, via numerous HDH hits, on a creative and commercially successful streak. This timeframe coincides with Jamerson's ascension to all-new bass playing heights. An essential track signifying Jamerson's evolution into a bass guitar player can be found in the Four Tops' Number One hit single from 1967 (recorded in 1966), "Reach Out (I'll Be There)." While the tune does not have the dense syncopations and sixteenth-note chromatic runs found during this fertile middle period explored in more detail later in this thesis, it is an important transitional performance to study in order to understand Jamerson's appropriation of upright technique to the electric bass guitar.

Jamerson's bass line is built around an iconic repetitive rhythm and melody constructed in a root-fifth-octave pattern that he cites in both the introduction and chorus (Figure 2.7). While the use of a root-fifth-octave shape might recall those staid archetype bass lines that Jamerson was supposedly dismissing as perfunctory, the pattern in this performance provides an opportunity to discuss not only the notes he was playing, but specifics to what techniques he would be employing. Also, Jamerson's use of sixteenth-note phrasing and a tie to the downbeat of beat four in the tonic chord measures of the

¹¹⁸ Slutsky, 107. This figure is taken directly from Slutsky's original transcription.

introduction (Figure 2.8) instills the historic bass riff with a captivating rhythmic hesitation that belies its rudimentary elements. The chromatic approach technique referenced above plays an important role in giving the bass line movement even when a static eighth-note rhythm is used during the verses. While Jamerson's use of a chromatic approach technique provides seamless movement in the bass line, it is his use of melodic anticipation via the ties that is so effective and is a feature found in much of his playing. For example, while the verse chord progression of this particular tune is written with a "pushed" Db chord on the upbeat of beat four in the first measure of every verse, Jamerson's responding bass part provides the rhythm section with a repetitive groove and his frequent use of ties, in this case across the bar line to the downbeat of every other measure (Figure 2.9), would be a signature trait of Jamerson's syncopated style that would be employed thoroughly in the ensuing creative years.

Figure 2.7. Introduction and chorus bass line on "Reach Out" with left-hand fingerings and positions

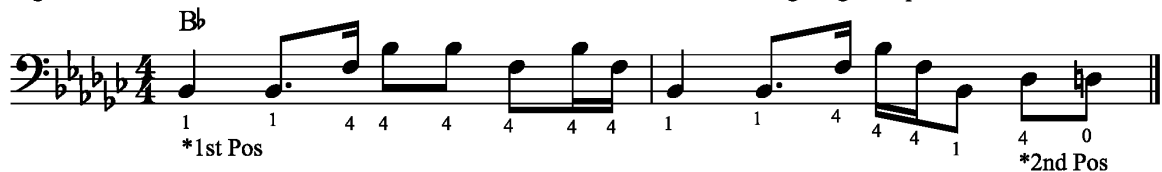
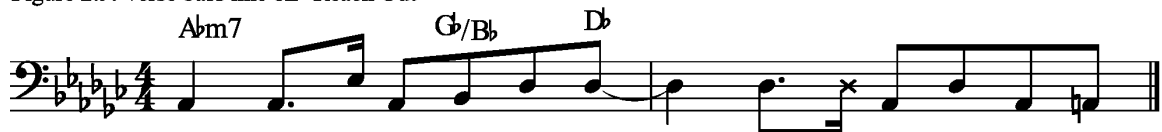


Figure 2.8. Introduction bass line on "Reach Out" with left-hand fingerings



Figure 2.9. Verse bass line on "Reach Out"



Regarding the technique employed and its roots from Jamerson's upright training, the song's key of Eb minor would have Jamerson utilizing a first-position placement for the left hand, since the tonic lies a half-step above the open D string of the bass. Traditional upright method instruction prescribes a left-hand technique where the index, middle, and "pinky" fingers are placed across the span of a whole step, a 1-2-4 fingering model.¹¹⁹ As this 1-2-4 model is moved up the fingerboard in half steps, the corresponding position number increases.¹²⁰ On a bass guitar, the fingers in first position would correlate to the first, second, and third frets of the fingerboard. For "Reach Out," first position is easily maintained during the introduction section of the song as the chord progression moves every two bars between the Ebm and Bb chords (Figures 2.7 & 2.8). Referencing another upright technique, Jamerson uses the open string, a non-diatonic D natural, to move chromatically to the arriving root note of the tonic chord. He anticipates the tonic tonality a full beat ahead by ascending to the Eb from the minor-third tone of the Bb chord, a Db, which also demands the use of a brief shift to second position in order to finger the Db with the fourth finger (Figure 2.7). Jamerson's application of this technique easily facilitates his common use of chromatically approaching the downbeat of a chord from a half step below the tonic. In the right hand, Jamerson's "hook" fingering would find his index finger easily and steadily raking the motivic descending octave-fifth-root shapes found throughout all sections of the tune.

"Reach Out" is important to any study on Jamerson, because the bass performance shows that he could be repetitive with his parts and serve the song to create a group sound. The songs of Holland-Dozier-Holland, combined with the musical

¹¹⁹ Chris Jisi, "The Dance Floor," 47.

¹²⁰ Ed Friedland, *Hal Leonard: Bass Method Complete Edition*, 2nd ed. (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2004), 11.

contributions and performances of Jamerson and the rest of the Funk Brothers, were certainly determining elements in codifying the legendary and publicly recognized “Motown Sound.” With the label’s success growing and Jamerson’s value assured, it was during the next few years that he arrived at his legendary and unique style, and not on HDH compositions alone.

“Reach Out” provided the content for a concentrated study on Jamerson’s bass technique and how the upright principles he learned playing jazz and blues can be found directly influencing his note choices. And as this thesis and the literature reviewed for it suggest, *how* and *what* Jamerson played had a profound influence on forging the template for contemporary bass performance. Although the previous example focused more on the *how* and did not contain the overt virtuosic traits so commonly associated with Jamerson’s style, the next analyses do.

With the following selected performances, Jamerson illustrates his important role in defining how his bass guitar playing could attain an equal role to the featured vocal soloist(s) while still tending to rhythm section member responsibilities for maintaining the groove and retaining the bass’s sonic identity. Although alluded to above, it is important to note that even though the electric bass guitar can be found in many variations and models currently, in contemporary popular music and culture the ubiquitous use of the Fender Precision bass guitar has led to that model being the defining design and sound of the instrument. As J.W. Black and Albert Molinaro explain in their book, *The Fender Bass: An Illustrated History*,

Though it is difficult to imagine modern American music without an electric bass, a production model didn’t exist until 1951. With an inventor’s curiosity, an entrepreneurial spirit, and an unparalleled commitment to musicians, Leo Fender and company were busy forging their place in the guitar market with the Fender

Broadcaster electric guitar when Fender started developing the Precision Bass. Christened for the frets that allowed musicians to hit precise notes on the upright fretless four-string bass, the Precision Bass inspired an entirely new way of playing. Until the Precision, the bass was an upright acoustic instrument that was difficult to hear and cumbersome to transport. Leo Fender's invention allowed musicians to hold their instrument like a guitar, opening the bass world to the curious guitar players, and allowing bass players a level of freedom they had not yet encountered. Due to the bass' solid body construction, it could be amplified to any level, giving it new found aural presence.¹²¹

It is not implausible to suggest that Jamerson's use of a Fender Precision bass aided in solidifying the model's place as the quintessential bass guitar. In *How The Fender Bass Changed The World*, author Jim Roberts explains that, "The commercial viability of the Fender bass was by no means guaranteed, even after ten years on the market. There are no precise records of Fender's Precision Bass production in the 1950s, but we know the numbers were low."¹²² Jamerson would be most associated with a 1962 Fender Precision that he called, "The Funk Machine."¹²³ With this relatively new creation in the hands of such a talented and visionary artist, Jamerson nearly single-handedly defined the sound of modern bass guitar as well as which model was associated with that new desired sound. Two different sources are important to reference here for further clarity and substantiation. Jim Roberts details Jamerson's overwhelming contribution to the instrument and the Fender brand:

By 1961, a few players (most of them converted guitarists) had begun to define a sound and an approach that distinguished the Fender bass from the upright. But the instrument was awaiting its first virtuoso – the player who would expand the range of creative possibilities and firmly establish the position of the electric bass in the musical world. He would arrive in the form of an unassuming studio musician working for a fledgling record label in Detroit: James Jamerson.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Black and Molinaro, 5.

¹²² Roberts, 68.

¹²³ Friedland, *The Way They Play*, 11.

¹²⁴ Roberts, 68.

As Roberts' quote details, Jamerson was not the only bassist making vital contributions to the instrument. Specifically, the company the bassist was keeping in establishing the instrument's growing importance in music while expanding its preconceived musical limitations is striking. As bass historian Tony Bacon explains in his book, *The Bass Book: A Complete Illustrated History of Bass Guitars*:

As the 60s progressed, well over ten years after Fender's Precision had first appeared, the electric bass was at last becoming established as *the* modern bass instrument. In their different ways, Paul McCartney and James Jamerson personified this new acceptance. McCartney was an unschooled pop musician, originally a guitarist who was "lumbered" with the bass but quickly made the instrument his own and showed it off to the world. Jamerson came from a jazz background playing double bass but began to find that pop studio work with his electric bass was far more lucrative – and soon he discovered that he could make beautifully expressive music on bass guitar. His work demonstrated to many session players that the electric bass was a legitimate instrument.¹²⁵

Returning to analysis, The Temptations' "You're My Everything" is an important Jamerson bass line and an excellent selection for this thesis, not just for the actual bass line, but for the influence his part would have on the rest of the ensemble, the vocalists in particular. The source that illuminated this particular selection and the unique insights it provides is found on the soundtrack to the *Standing in the Shadows* feature film documentary (2002). A "deluxe edition" of this soundtrack contains a second CD titled, "In the Snakepit: Naked Instrumental Remixes of the Original Hits." (2004). The liner notes for these selections are of particular importance because they are written by Allan Slutsky, who has multiple roles as a producer of the film, curator for the soundtrack content, and Motown/Jamerson scholar. The liner notes are detailed and specific, providing exact session dates and detailed tracking notes. As Slutsky explains regarding the inclusion of this "naked" mix of Jamerson's bass performance paired with the

¹²⁵ Bacon and Moorhouse, *The Bass Book*, 48.

Temptations' vocals, "...it points out how Jamerson influenced not just the rhythm section, but vocal arrangements as well." Slutsky continues:

Jamerson and the Tempts cut their parts more than two months apart, yet their interplay is breathtaking... It's contrapuntal perfection of melodic lines and interwoven rhythms. Jamerson's tones are pristine; his bass sound has never been more bell-like. His warmth and fullness are a perfect match to the simple, unadorned majesty of Eddie Kendrick's falsetto and David Ruffin's passionate rasp. The backgrounds seem to follow James's every move. The guitars, drums, keyboards and strings on the finished recording are almost an afterthought. The masterpiece is already in place.¹²⁶

On "You're My Everything," Jamerson's bass line has two distinct characters.

The ground bass pattern in the verses moves in scalar motion from the root to the dominant degrees of the tonic chord (Figure 2.10), providing the contrapuntal element Slutsky mentions above and firmly supporting the sixteenth-note melodic movement and syncopated rhythms of the vocal. Emphasizing its ostinato characteristics, the bass line during the verses continues voicing these tonic chord tones even as the progression changes over the four-measure pattern (including the Dm, Em and F chords as well as the tonic). While the ascending motion of the verse bass line may be rudimentary melodically, Jamerson uses ties to deemphasize the downbeat and provide a syncopated feel.

¹²⁶ Various Artists, *Standing in the Shadows*, CD, Liner notes, 25-26.

Figure 2.10. Verse bass line on "You're My Everything" with vocal melody included

The musical score is written in 4/4 time. The first system shows the vocal melody in the treble clef and the bass line in the bass clef. The vocal melody starts with a C major chord (C) and a Dm/C chord. The bass line consists of eighth and sixteenth notes. The second system shows the vocal melody in the treble clef and the bass line in the bass clef. The vocal melody starts with a C major chord (C), followed by an F major chord (F), an Em chord, and a Dm chord. The bass line continues with eighth and sixteenth notes.

In the chorus, Jamerson's line switches characters and assumes a more expressive role with the vocals. Freed from the confines of the repetitive verse part, Jamerson punctuates the spaces between the vocals with sixteenth-note phrasing, voicing the chord tones of the Em7 chord in a pattern that outlines the tonic, dominant, subtonic, and octave (2.11). Apart from the bridge in the middle of the song, "You're My Everything" is in binary form and Jamerson's bass lines exhibit minimal embellishment. While this bass line still may not contain the improvisational virtuosity and aggressive character of later lines, Jamerson's role in the overall scope of the song is vital. His performance arguably equals the featured vocalists throughout the song. Jamerson's bass is set prominently in the mix, providing a countering "voice" to the upper register vocals of the singing group. As discussed above, his lines provide either a contrapuntal relationship to the vocals or a supportive role. Importantly, Jamerson is defining the bass guitar as an instrument worthy of status alongside the featured artist.

Figure 2.11. Chorus bass line on "You're My Everything" with vocal melody included

The musical score is written in 4/4 time and consists of four systems of staves. The first two systems (measures 1-2 and 3-4) show the vocal melody in the treble clef and the bass line in the bass clef. The third system (measures 5-8) features a more complex vocal melody with triplets and the bass line with corresponding triplet patterns. The fourth system (measures 9-10) shows the vocal melody ending with a long note and the bass line with a final rhythmic pattern. Chord symbols are placed above the vocal staff: Em7, F, Em, Dm, Em7, F, Em, Dm, F, Em, Dm, F, Em, Dm, and G7.

Within a few years Jamerson's style would become more complex as the straight forward but essential ostinato figures and expressive but contained sixteenth-note phrasing of his mid-60s playing evolved into a heavily syncopated and improvisatory style that forever widened the parameters of contemporary bass guitar performance. An excellent example is Jamerson's work on "Darling Dear," a track from the Jackson 5's 1970 release, *Third Album*. His bass lines in this piece include numerous characteristics that are essential to understanding the true nature of Jamerson's later and defining bass

style. For example, during the introduction Jamerson contradicts standard rhythm section conventions by playing a pattern that does not synch with the bass drum. Even more striking is his intent to stay rhythmically active with syncopation (Figure 2.12) even though this section features lush strings. The introduction merely foreshadows the coming deluge of bass virtuosity and confident artistic expression found throughout the song.

Figure 2.12. Introduction bass line on "Darling Dear"



At the downbeat of the verse, Jamerson employs an active and rapid sixteenth-note rhythm, with the bass spanning the staff via chromatic and scalar movement amongst the chord tones (Figure 2.13). Unlike earlier selections that featured repetitive bass lines that acted as “hooks” or “riffs” to define the song, Jamerson’s bass line here is an improvisatory, or at least improvisatory-like, performance. His bass takes a soloist’s role within its defined responsibilities as a member of the rhythm section specifically and the ensemble in general. As was found in the Temptation’s song analyzed above, Jamerson’s bass occupies a supplementary role to Michael Jackson’s voice, and the nature of the rollicking bass adds an aggressive and playful mood to Jackson’s solicitous vocalizing.

Figure 2.13. Verse bass line on "Darling Dear"



For the chorus, Jamerson's bass follows Jackson's melodic movement, answering the vocalists' romantic promises and words of caution with a bass line that has all of his style characteristics flowing smoothly: chromatic movement within a heavily syncopated sixteenth-note rhythm laced with ghost notes and diatonic chord tones, providing a steep melodic contour (Figure 2.14). Another important stylistic feature of Jamerson's later bass lines is his frequent use of a sixteenth-note rhythm that provided much syncopation to his lines, especially when he frequently would employ a tie from a previous beat to deemphasize the downbeat of the rhythm (Figure 2.15). Nearly any performance from this time period in Jamerson's career features a frequent use of this rhythm

Figure 2.14. Chorus bass line on "Darling Dear"

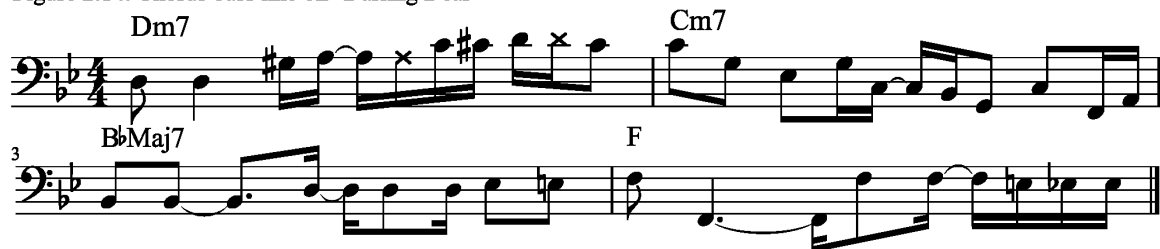


Figure 2.15. Characteristic Jamerson syncopation



Jamerson's performance on "Darling Dear" represents the bassist at a creative height. With a decade of service to Motown under his belt, Jamerson had completely transformed the role of bass on all Motown recordings. A cursory glance at the bass lines chosen for this thesis shows just how far the bassist had come during that time. And while his performances during this era of the Motown catalogue are vital to understanding the artistic alchemy that took place, his performances on one album are of particular importance, especially in relation to Jamerson's jazz background and the appropriation of those skills and style traits into Motown's pop medium.

In 1970, around the time of the recording sessions for "Darling Dear," Jamerson and select members of the Funk Brothers participated in sessions for Marvin Gaye's next single, "What's Going On."¹²⁷ Unbeknownst to the musicians, this single and the subsequent album of the same name would serve as the high-water mark for their time at Motown during its Detroit era. For while their performances on the single and album illustrated the vast artistic capabilities and talents of Motown's Detroit musicians, the business side of the company was diversifying its interests and following industry trends that had the label pursuing new opportunities out west in Los Angeles.¹²⁸ Motown's relocation to Los Angeles in 1972 would prove to be devastating to Jamerson professionally and personally and would mark the end of the Funk Brothers collaborative collective at Motown.¹²⁹

The "What's Going On" single and album featured artist, Marvin Gaye, reaching for a new level of artistic expression on his Motown releases. With lyrical content that delved into the lingering war in Vietnam and commented on the nation's under-served

¹²⁷ Edmonds, 125.

¹²⁸ Slutsky, 64.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

and marginalized while juxtaposed with a hopeful message offering transcendence via a spiritual path, Gaye knew he wanted a musical sophistication to compliment the serious subject matter. He knew he could achieve those artistic goals with the quality musicianship found amongst the Funk Brothers, and he sought out Jamerson in particular for the sessions.¹³⁰ As Ben Edmonds explains in his book about the album, *What's Going On? Marvin Gaye And The Last Days Of The Motown Sound* (2001), Gaye knew he wanted to avoid any resemblance of the traditional Motown pop formula on his new recording and enlisted David Van DePitte, the arranger and music supervisor of the sessions, to form an ensemble that could realize this vision.¹³¹ Jamerson was matched with “veteran big band drummer Chet Forrest, who was augmented by a phalanx of percussionists: Jack Ashford on tambourine, Eddie “Bongo” Brown on bongos and congas, Earl Derouen on congas and Jack Brokensha on vibes and assorted percussion toys.”¹³² Gaye himself bucked Motown studio etiquette by leading the ensemble from the studio piano, thus becoming another part of the group of performing musicians. By doing so, Gaye purposefully deconstructed the institutionalized hierarchy at Motown, which placed the contracted artists and production staff in a superior role to the musicians, even though these same musicians were often creating much of the music content and informally leading the sessions when both artist and producer lacked the needed expertise. Gaye’s efforts galvanized an ensemble performance that would result in new artistic heights for Gaye and the musicians, as well as bringing changes to other common Motown practices.

¹³⁰ Edmonds, 120.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

As detailed earlier in this thesis, Jamerson and the Funk Brothers worked in practical anonymity at Motown due to the label not crediting the musicians on their releases. With the release of *What's Going On (WGO)* in 1971, Gaye formally ended that tradition. As Slutsky makes clear in *Standing in the Shadows*, “There was actually an obscure Valerie Simpson album that listed credits before *What's Going On*, but since it sold very little, the recognition factor and its impact upon the musicians is generally overlooked.”¹³³ In fact, the *WGO* single exceeded all sales expectation of Motown’s executives, including the most important, Berry Gordy. Upon first hearing a rough mix of the title track before it was released in January 1971, Gordy himself declared it, “The worst thing I have ever heard in my life.”¹³⁴ Jamerson and the rest of the ensemble knew better. In fact, when Jamerson arrived home after the tracking session for the single, he declared to his wife Annie that he had just cut a classic.¹³⁵ And with commerce being king at Motown, the single’s number one status on the R&B charts for five weeks, as well as a number two position on the Pop charts for three weeks, validated Gaye’s musical endeavor and direction and had the label asking for a full-fledged album.¹³⁶ The tracking sessions for the *WGO* album took place over three days in March 1971, and it is those sessions and songs that are important to discuss and detail in this thesis.

As mentioned above, Gaye’s inclusion of the musicians in the liner notes of *WGO* began to remove the veil of who was actually performing the music on Motown’s releases. But while acknowledgement certainly validated the musician’s contributions and righted a wrong that had existed for so long, even this action contributed to

¹³³ Slutsky, 63.

¹³⁴ Edmonds, 125.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Bianco, 82.

Motown's error-prone historical record. Precisely, on the original album liner notes, Jamerson is listed as the sole bassist. Bob Babbitt, who started his affiliation with Motown as a touring bassist for Stevie Wonder and had his first recording session at Motown in 1967, played bass guitar on the album as well but was not credited, either due to poor session record keeping by Motown or Gaye's error in including the bassist when compiling the album's credits.¹³⁷ Fortunately, the error in the liner notes was corrected somewhat on later releases, with Babbitt being credited for bass contributions with Jamerson. The 2001 CD deluxe reissue, however, lists Babbitt as the bass player on only "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)" and "Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)." Since that time, Babbitt, *Bass Player* magazine staff, like Senior Contributing Editor, Chris Jisi, as well as author Ben Edmonds, whose authoritative book seeks to highlight these discrepancies, claim that Jamerson actually played bass on the first five of the album's nine tracks, with Babbitt playing on the final four.¹³⁸ Since the entire album was cut over three days in March and Babbitt participated in the last two session dates with Jamerson only on the first, Babbitt's claim supported by experts in the field would likely be true. And, if one were to qualify the two bassists' contributions in minutes played on the album, Babbitt actually played on more of the album than Jamerson, since the songs Babbitt contributed to take up more time on the album. This controversy is one of many concerning Motown's recording sessions. It is a testament to the murkiness of the label's history that even moments of clarification can still lead to confusion and errors.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Hunter et al., *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, DVD, "Biographies: Bob Babbitt".

¹³⁸ Chris Jisi, "Transcription: Marvin Gaye's 'Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler),' Bob Babbitt's Complete Bass Line," *Bass Player* (February 2008): 97.

¹³⁹ Edmonds, 205.

With these new credits in mind, Jamerson's contributions uniquely take up nearly the entire first side of the original LP, with Babbitt's bass lines ornamenting the last song on Side One ("Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)") and the second side's songs. Since the album was eventually sequenced to proceed without any gaps between the tunes, Jamerson's performances on *WGO* flow in a consecutive and "suite-like" arrangement. Due to the fact that Jamerson's contributions are arranged in such a unique format and since these bass lines represent so well his fully realized and unfiltered bass playing persona, this concentration of Jamerson demands analysis of bass lines from all the songs he participated in for the album.

On *WGO* Jamerson at times is performing parts that could arguably be labeled as solos masking as supportive rhythm section components. Returning to analysis, however, Jamerson's bass line on the album's title track and initial single finds the bassist creating a more thematic line, with a part that incorporates major pentatonic scale tones over the tonic E major seventh chord and is textured rhythmically with his signature ties and syncopation. The following C#m7 chord has Jamerson using sixteenth notes to voice the subtonic and dominant chord tones while using his characteristic chromatic approach to return to the root of the C#m7 (Figure 2.16).

Figure 2.16. Verse bass line on "What's Going On"

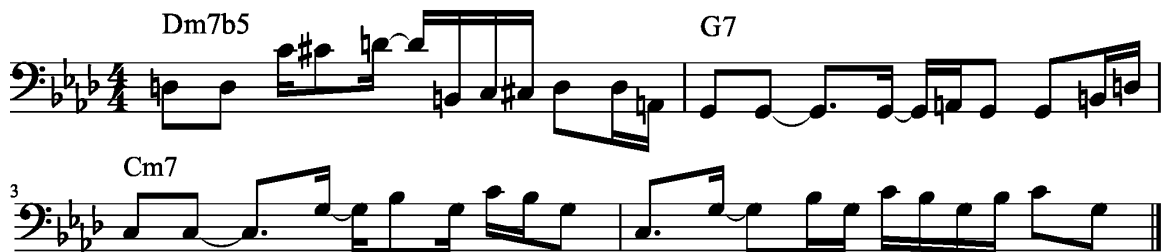


While this bass line may contradict the earlier claim of Jamerson inhabiting a soloist's role throughout the album, at the time of its recording, "What's Going On" was intended as a stand-alone single for release without a planned album. As mentioned above, those sessions would not take place until nearly a year later after Motown realized it needed to capitalize on the success of the single. Jamerson's contributions to the *WGO* album expand upon his thematic style and eventually forge a path that would have a much more improvisatorial quality. In listening to the *WGO* album, Jamerson's bass again presumes a featured role alongside the vocalist. His instrument, as will be illustrated in examples below, is a companion voice to Gaye's, occupying various roles of support and contrast to the vocals or the subject nature of the lyrics. Jamerson's bass lines command a defining and essential role on each song, something akin to the relationship of the solo vocalist and horn player in a jazz combo context. With such heavy use of improvisation, Jamerson's bass lines are more exploratory and jazz-like as the album progresses, culminating in a brief, but certainly note-worthy for this thesis, full-on jazz jam in "Save The Children."

Following the sequence of the *WGO* album, on "What's Happening Brother" Jamerson aggressively enters the verse with a busy syncopated bass line built primarily on sixteenth-note rhythms and exploring chromatically between the chord tones. Jamerson leads into each chord via the super tonic or with a traditional dominant approach (Figure 2.17). As seen in this example, and even more so with other examples to follow below, much of Jamerson's bass lines on the album frequently navigate the upper-register territory on the bass. The entirety of the bass line for "What's Happening Brother" is improvisatory in scope and detail. The four-bar example below is a brief

representation of Jamerson expertly asserting and combining both sides of his playing style; the thematic and improvisatory. To match the relaxed and conversational quality of Gaye's vocal performance in certain verses, the bass answers with punctuating sixteenth-note rhythms that are decorated with playful melodicism. When Gaye's vocals turn to dispirited socio-political commentary, Jamerson responds with brief syncopated ostinato grooves that emphasize the downcast lyrics.

Figure 2.17. Verse bass line on "What's Happening Brother"



After the upbeat tempo of "What's Happening Brother," the album turns to a slower and introspective mood for "Flyin' High (In The Friendly Sky)." Punctuated by drum kit tom fills performed with mallets, the song maintains a subdued quality throughout. As seen below, Jamerson's characteristic ties are employed in an incredibly sophisticated manner, instilling a programmatic narrative by illustrating the song's title with a bass line that elicits a floating feeling. This is achieved by the bass lines' tied quarter-note-triplet rhythm purposefully deemphasizing the foundational downbeat while at the same time sailing upward due to Jamerson scaling the tonal heights of his Fender Precision fretboard (2.18).

Figure 2.18. Introduction bass line on "Flyin' High"



A meditative atmosphere achieved, the album transitions to “Save The Children.” Here Jamerson and Gaye switch traditional roles, with the singer occupying a more static melodic contour by the use of recitative passages, while the bassist contrasts with an opening intro line that rapidly oscillates within multiple octave registers over the narrow six-bar confines. Contrarily, Jamerson foregoes his distinctive syncopation to emphasize with triplets the song’s emerging swing feel, which will be exploited to great effect later. Within this rhythm, he weaves a melodically rich fabric underneath Gaye’s sparse vocalizing. Although Jamerson’s bass line is complex rhythmically, harmonically it consists of mostly scalar and triadic elements with chromaticism used effectively but sparingly to give the line a more seamless shape; his jazz training conceivably informing this design (Figure 2.19).

Figure 2.19. Introduction bass line on "Save The Children"



After the intro section and as the ensemble builds dynamically through the song's verses, session drummer Chet Forest explodes into a blazing jazz drumming performance in the chorus with all the authentic elements: a "pinging" ride cymbal with dynamic accents emphasizing the now definite swing groove and a "comping" snare and bass drum pattern that is the exact opposite of the routine Motown backbeat. Jamerson joins in likewise with a performance that is more comparable to jazz bassist Jimmy Garrison's active and aggressive bass playing with the legendary John Coltrane quartet than anything found on a pop music label. Again, Jamerson eschews his typical syncopated style in favor of an authentic jazz bass line. He uses scalar and triadic voicing combined with chromatic movement to give the line a "walking" feel while exploring more advanced characteristics like upper-register fills on the dominant chord. Here, as well as noted above in an earlier analysis, the musicians seize upon their familiarity with the vi-ii-V-I chord progression and cadence to exploit the song's overt jazz harmony, but never were the results so overtly jazz in style as they are in the part of the song shown in the example below (Figure 2.20).

Figure 2.20. Chorus bass line on "Save The Children"



As side one of the original *WGO* LP nears its end, “Save The Children” transitions seamlessly to Jamerson’s final contribution to the album, “God Is Love.” Only 1:42 minutes in length, the song provides a brief but powerful message on the album. Lyrically, the song displays Gaye’s deep Christian roots with the singer preaching from his sonic pulpit to his fan faithful about the benefits of living a spiritual life. Transitioning from the concerned and pleading “Save The Children,” “God Is Love” is joyous in tone and content poetically. Jamerson reciprocates this new uplifting musical environment by incorporating a bass line that returns to a more syncopated rhythm in the verse, emphasizing harmonically the supertonic of Ab/Bb chord. With Forest playing a supportive and simple beat and the strings providing a harmonic bed of sustained tones, Jamerson’s busy and supple bass line is able to assume the role of the dancing parishioners in the congregation, elated with their new salvation. Chromaticism, as always, plays an important role in bridging the Ab/Bb and Ebmaj7 chords but its use is

also found in the final measure of the figure below, where Jamerson uses the half-step device during a full measure of movement back to the Bb (Figure 2.21).

Figure 2.21. Verse bass line on "God Is Love"



What's Going On was released on May 21, 1971 and spent nine weeks in the number one slot on the R&B charts and reached #6 on the Pop charts, and the success broadened as the album continued Motown's crossover appeal.¹⁴⁰ As Ben Edmonds writes in the liner notes to the 2001 deluxe edition of the album, "It got substantial airplay on rock as well as R&B and Top 40 radio, staying on the charts for a year."¹⁴¹ Importantly, these statistics combined with the above analysis and transcriptions arguably support one of the main assertions made by this thesis: that Jamerson's bass playing within a pop music format was directly related to and also overtly displayed the characteristics of his jazz bassist persona. While "Save The Children" may be an example of the bassist blatantly displaying these jazz skills, all of the selections above clearly show the bassist appropriating the techniques and traits he acquired as a jazz musician into an alternate music medium that had yet to define the emerging role of the bass guitar. Jamerson's characteristic use of chromaticism and non-chord tones provided his bass lines with a smooth and sloping melodic contour and the improvisatory nature of his

¹⁴⁰ Marvin Gaye, *What's Going On*, Deluxe ed., Motown Records 440013404-2, CD, 2001, Liner notes, 24.

¹⁴¹ Gaye, 9.

creations were fused with a syncopated and complex rhythmic undergirding. These elements illustrate how his popular music work with Motown and other labels was not merely inspired or informed by his jazz tutelage, but are actual distinct low-end jazz styled chromosomes within the pop music DNA strand. While *WGO* is an excellent example signifying this musical alchemy, as will be discussed in more depth below, the dissemination of Jamerson's bass lines via the overwhelming commercial success of Motown's music resulted in these advanced jazz bass characteristics being the founding elements of a completely new contemporary bass guitar style. This style would be inherited both by Jamerson's peers and future generations of bassists.

The success of *WGO* resulted in Marvin Gaye returning to his hometown of Washington, D.C., on May 1, 1972 for a civic event where he received a key to the city, and then an evening concert at the Kennedy Center, featuring many of the musicians who played on the album, including Jamerson.¹⁴² The 2001 deluxe reissue of *WGO* features a recording of the concert.¹⁴³ Gaye leads the band initially through a medley of early hits before transitioning to a sequentially scattered version of *WGO*; the reissue's liner notes, by Gaye author, Ben Edmonds, explains that Gaye was suffering from nerves and there had not been much time for rehearsing the band and orchestra.¹⁴⁴ Regardless, the band combined with an orchestra performs the album material with aplomb and Jamerson's bass guitar playing is perfectly suited to the larger ensemble, adding an electrified bass timbre to the added brass and strings. Interestingly, the recording of this concert captures an instance of Jamerson performing and interpreting another Funk Brother's bass playing, Bob Babbitt's. With Jamerson performing live all of the songs from *WGO*, less "Mercy,

¹⁴² Gaye, 23.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 25.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 23.

Mercy Me (The Ecology),” he played Babbitt’s bass lines from the songs Babbitt had tracked during the recording sessions in 1971.¹⁴⁵ Jamerson definitely embellishes Babbitt’s lines to suit his individual style and certainly Jamerson was the template for that style when Babbitt became a Funk Brother; nevertheless, hearing Jamerson interpret Babbitt, or any other bassist’s bass lines, provides another unique experience into understanding the totality of Jamerson during this time in his career. Jamerson’s version of Babbitt’s double-tracked dual bass lines for “Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)” sounds upright-like with muted articulation countered by ominous glissandos connecting the individual original bass lines. The recording of the concert and its inclusion on the album’s reissue is an excellent and unique document of Jamerson.

While the concert, as well as *WGO*’s commercial success, was a matter of pride to all the participating musicians, behind the scenes Motown was planning its transition to Los Angeles and the next several years would bring unforeseen changes to Jamerson’s professional and personal life. The “Detroit way” that these musicians had developed and honed their craft, in a large and collaborative group environment with deep personal and social connections, would come to an unexpected end. Their salaried status at Motown would soon cease, ushering in a Los Angeles freelance career that many, including Jamerson, were not ready for and eventually floundered in.¹⁴⁶

In June 1972, Motown officially announced that it was relocating its business and primary recording operations from its famed office and recording facilities on West Grand Boulevard in Detroit to Los Angeles.¹⁴⁷ The territorial change marked Motown’s ascent from a small regional label in the Midwest to one of the most successful

¹⁴⁵ Gaye, 25.

¹⁴⁶ Cooper, 27.

¹⁴⁷ Smith, 240.

independent recording labels with numerous hit records and a global musical identity and influence. While the move to Los Angeles provided the label with the ability to compete at an increased advantage with its major-label rivals and enter the lucrative world of feature films and television production, the geographic change ended the long-term relationship the label had had with Detroit's musicians.¹⁴⁸

The storyline in current Motown history portrays the Funk Brothers as almost hapless victims, receiving no notice from their employer ahead of the Detroit Motown facilities permanently closing down, but that narrative does not accurately explain this transitional phase. Certainly, the *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* film endorses this account, with Funk Brother guitarist Eddie Willis recounting how the musicians showed up for a recording session one day and found a note on the door stating that there would be no more sessions and that the company was relocating to Los Angeles.¹⁴⁹ While the label did not fully communicate its intentions and plans until after they had been put into affect, Jamerson and other Funk Brothers were offered an opportunity to continue recording for the label out in Los Angeles, but now as freelance musicians and without the exclusive work contract that provided a regular salary.¹⁵⁰

In referencing the sources for this thesis the reality of the situation appears more nuanced and sheds further light on the Funk Brothers' working relationship, aspects that have not received much attention, even with all of the new writings regarding Motown's exceptional musicians. For example, Jack Ashford, a Funk Brother who played percussion and vibes on sessions, recalls in his 2003 memoir, *Motown: The View from the*

¹⁴⁸ Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby, eds., *African American Music: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 450.

¹⁴⁹ Hunter et al., *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, DVD.

¹⁵⁰ Ashford, 112.

Bottom, that Jamerson's potential gig in Los Angeles at first appeared to be a great opportunity, "His potential seemed better than the other Funks because Berry had at one time seemed to pay favoritism with him."¹⁵¹ Indeed, as Slutsky relates in *Standing in the Shadows*, Jamerson's eccentric personality and developing substance-abuse habit had frayed relationships between the bassist and Motown executives as early as the late '60s.¹⁵² Many in positions of authority asked for the bassist's exclusive contract to be terminated and his services ended, but Gordy personally intervened on Jamerson's behalf and overturned the potential firing.¹⁵³ Ashford's quote and claim of favoritism supports this view, demonstrating that Jamerson had reached an elevated level of priority to the most important executive at Motown, Berry Gordy. But even this personal connection to Gordy would not be able to keep Jamerson's career in tact after he moved to Los Angeles.

This new and final phase in Jamerson's career has not received nearly as much attention as his Motown era and could certainly benefit from further scholarly research. What is known is that the first several years of his time in Los Angeles were productive and he continued to work regularly. Another quote from Jack Ashford's memoir explains the personal and professional contradictions that Jamerson was experiencing during this time, "He made money and seemed to have been doing well. He would call back to Detroit and express how much he missed playing with all of the Funks, and how he really missed his family. He would say things like, 'This is a foreign land out here and everybody is a big phony. I just can't lock in to what these musicians are playing.'"¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Ashford, 111.

¹⁵² Slutsky, 55.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ashford, 112.

Ashford's quote articulates the factors that were exacerbating Jamerson's difficulties in Los Angeles. He was in a new environment that did not have the nurturing familial atmosphere of the Detroit recording sessions. He was also experiencing a transition in musical tastes and upgraded recording technology as new musical styles emerged and recording techniques improved and influenced the sound of modern recordings. As Jamerson's son, James Jamerson, Jr., explains in the bonus features of the *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* DVD, "California was different, it was different musically. Music had changed and people, producers, knew exactly what they wanted. Ya know, 'Just play the part.' And he [Jamerson, Sr.] was accustomed to doing, ...playing, ...being him, instead of somebody else. Playing a part was not him. And, I believe that that kinda hurt 'cause he was always one to express himself."¹⁵⁵

As Jamerson, Jr., alludes to in the above quote, his father had become accustomed to Motown's accommodating creative relationship. In Detroit, Jamerson's inventive and new style of bass playing had helped define the sound of Motown. Although his professional relationship with the label in Detroit had been codified by the notorious exclusive contract, which was certainly restrictive professionally due to the often-ignored non-compete clause, Motown still acknowledged his overwhelming value to the label by having him under contract and paying a hefty salary.¹⁵⁶ Jamerson's unique and defining style that had made his playing so essential to the Motown sound was now less essential as producers and songwriters in Los Angeles functioned in a studio environment that did not routinely operate as the collaborative environment in Motown's studio did during the Detroit era. As Jamerson, Jr.'s quote makes clear, the studio environment in Los Angeles

¹⁵⁵ Hunter et al., *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, DVD.

¹⁵⁶ Slutsky, 36.

was noticeably different. This new scene found the senior Jamerson being asked to perform prescribed bass parts without necessarily the need for his personal creative touch, as had been such an indispensable part of the recording process in Detroit. Jamerson specifically commented on this new reality in his 1979 interview with Dan Forte. When Forte asks, “Do you still create most of your own parts?” Jamerson responds, ““Sometimes; some leaders come into the session with the bass lines written out. They want it nice and simple now.”¹⁵⁷

Musical trends were changing in the 1970s and the role of the bass guitar, which became a highlighted instrument in song arrangements arguably due to Jamerson’s influential contributions, was also changing. As disco music and its musical characteristics began to dominate the popular music scene in the mid and late 1970s, bass lines became more repetitive rhythmically and thematically, transitioning away from Jamerson’s improvisatorial and melodic approach. Jamerson continued to work and make significant contributions to music from the era, however.¹⁵⁸ In fact, Jamerson contributed to multiple recording sessions for songs in the disco genre. Specifically, in 1974, Jamerson contributed bass to the Hues Corporation’s Number One hit single, “Rock The Boat.”¹⁵⁹ The bass part finds Jamerson relegated to a supportive role, following the rhythm guitar’s repetitive eighth-note disco strut and straying no further than a simple root-submediant-dominant melodic pattern. This session was one of many that Jamerson participated in during his initial years in Los Angeles. The bassist was also busying himself with television and soundtrack work, notably performing the bass line to “Theme

¹⁵⁷ Forte, 133.

¹⁵⁸ Edmonds, 27.

¹⁵⁹ Slutsky, 65.

from ‘S.W.A.T.’ (1975), and he had begun touring again and participating in live performances for artists.¹⁶⁰

Unfortunately Jamerson’s problems began to overshadow his work. Untreated alcoholism and ensuing mental health issues began to wreak havoc on his career. For example, he was dismissed from a Diana Ross tour in 1975 due to “attitude problems” and a reputation began to spread within the Los Angeles recording scene that he was moody, unpredictable, and unreliable. In spite of this, Jamerson was still able to contribute his inventive and sophisticated bass lines to certain recording sessions, perhaps best exemplified on Robert Palmer’s album, *Pressure Drop* (1976).¹⁶¹ In particular, “Which Of Us Is The Fool” from the album finds Jamerson in classic form, with a bass line that reaches the upper heights of the instrument’s range all while embellishing melodically around a syncopated rhythmic figure in the verse that would easily find itself comfortable on any Motown release. While the line doesn’t have the improvisatory nature of bass lines from the Motown Detroit era, it does show that Jamerson was still capable of performing beautifully in an environment that suited his style, and Palmer’s tunes certainly do that for Jamerson. Infused with Palmer’s blue-eyed soul singing style and opulent string arrangement, *Pressure Drop*’s stylistic amalgamation of soul and pop perfectly suited Jamerson’s unique bass crafting and allowed an opportunity for the bassist to shine, a role in which he often relished and thrived.

By the end of decade, Jamerson was working less and less and his personal problems were unresolved and destroying his career. As Dan Forte asked him specifically in 1979, “How often are you in the studio these days?” Jamerson replied, “It varies; it’s

¹⁶⁰ Slutsky, 65.

¹⁶¹ Friedland, *The Way They Play*, 10.

not like it used to be. I had to go into the studio every day at nine in the morning and come out at three the next morning.”¹⁶² Slutsky’s *Standing in the Shadows* offers further evidence of Jamerson’s decline during this late 1970s time frame and the toll it had taken on his playing abilities. The audio component to the book contains an interview with Smokey Robinson. Robinson says that during the recording sessions for his 1979 album *Where There’s Smoke...* he personally asked Jamerson to perform on a disco style remake of the Temptations’ hit song, “Get Ready” (1966), a Robinson composition with Jamerson playing bass on the original version. In the interview, Robinson states, “In fact, I think that the last person to try and use him on a Motown session was me.”¹⁶³ Robinson recalls the absolute heartbreak of witnessing Jamerson in such bad shape from his declining health, noting that the bassist was not even able to physically play his original syncopated eighth-note bass line, a part that would be characterized as representative of the simpler, thematic groove based bass lines of Jamerson’s early career, and nowhere close to his improvisatory and much more complex later style. Robinson described the experience this way, “It was a real bad experience... He was like the champion... and then here he is, he’s matched with a bum and the bum knocks him out... It hurt me.”¹⁶⁴ Jamerson was not used for the session and with Robinson’s story in mind, the remake’s bass tone and performance hauntingly contributes to the narrative of Jamerson’s changing and declining fortunes. Here was his original work being updated and modified, displacing the original in favor of current trends, namely a bright and crisp bass guitar timbre combined with a slapping and popping performance technique that had become in vogue for bass performances at this time and was characteristically un-Jamerson. Yet the

¹⁶² Forte, 45.

¹⁶³ Slutsky, *Standing In The Shadows* book, Audio interview, CD2, Track 17.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

remake was still benefiting from the earlier version's success and known appeal to a record buying public, which had featured Jamerson and the Funk Brothers musical contributions and perhaps achieved the success it did due in part to these contributions. Although Robinson erroneously believes that this late 1970s session was "maybe six months or so before he [Jamerson] died," the comment is noteworthy because it eludes to the bleak nature of Jamerson's career and life at this point and until his actual death in 1983.¹⁶⁵

With his habit for unpredictability still lingering and affecting his reputation, Jamerson was no longer valued as an essential asset to a recording session, but rather a potential obstruction to the creative process and the commercial constraints of the booked session. This sadly resulted in Jamerson's late career reputation that he should be avoided when contracting players for sessions.¹⁶⁶ There is a dispute in the historical record regarding the extent of Jamerson's bad reputation and habits and how greatly they affected his playing, or whether there was an institutionalized bias against Motown players who had migrated to Los Angeles from Detroit after the label changed locales. For example, Jack Ashford says in his memoir that the personal problems affecting Jamerson's bass playing in the 1970s were caused by the lack of appreciation he received for his style in Los Angeles and that a particular contractor, Ben Barrett, personally left most Funk Brothers off of preferred session booking lists.¹⁶⁷ Barrett comments on his reasons for not using Jamerson on recording session in Los Angeles in Slutsky's book, explaining, "Producers began to complain about losing a recording session if he didn't show up... We had talks. He was respectful, but he would try to hide his problems, saying that he didn't feel well

¹⁶⁵ Slutsky, *Standing In The Shadows* book, Audio interview, CD2, Track 17.

¹⁶⁶ Slutsky, 67.

¹⁶⁷ Ashford, 111.

or he had a cold, his car broke down, or he went to the wrong studio.”¹⁶⁸ Regardless of the reasons, Jamerson’s move to Los Angeles had not turned out as hoped and the next decade would find the bassist receding from view. The next decade would also be when the scholarship regarding Jamerson and the Funk Brothers would begin, unfortunately after the bassist’s death.

¹⁶⁸ Slutsky, 67.

CHAPTER III

An Assessment of Jamerson's Legacy and Conclusion

Jamerson receded into obscurity during the last years of his life. Jack Ashford recalls that in 1981 Jamerson was involved in a violent interaction that left him with a severed artery and noticeably physically weaker.¹⁶⁹ These final years are explained in Slutsky's book and while their details are important, in relation to this thesis it was during this time that the research and scholarship on Jamerson was founded. As referenced above, in 1983, just weeks before his death, Jamerson participated in an interview with music journalist Nelson George.¹⁷⁰ George's article, "Standing in the Shadows of Motown: The Unsung Session Men of Hitsville's Golden Era" began to shed light on the plight and story of the anonymous musicians who had contributed so much to Motown's music and success. It is in this article that the elements of the Jamerson's style began to be understood, even aspects that had not yet been considered or noticed. For example, while Jamerson's jazz tutelage, as well as that of the other Funk Brothers, was acknowledged, other influences had not been so readily apparent until the bassist discussed them with George. As Jamerson explained:

My feel was always an Eastern feel. A spiritual thing. Take 'Standing in the Shadows of Love.' The bass line has an Arabic feel. I've been around a whole lot of people from the East, China and Japan. Then I studied the African, Cuban and Indian scales. I brought all that with me to Motown."¹⁷¹

It is in this article that the seeds for the future appraisal and acknowledgement of Jamerson's vital contributions to Motown and contemporary bass playing took shape;

¹⁶⁹ Ashford, 112.

¹⁷⁰ George, "Standing in the Shadows," 65.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

however, even in these last days of his life, the bassist was still looking for work. As George explained, although Jamerson was “resting in a suburban Los Angeles hospital from a recent illness. Still, he wants everyone to know, ‘I’m ready, willing and able. Just give me a call.’”¹⁷² From the confines of his bed, in these last weeks, Jamerson surmised his feelings toward Motown:

There is sometimes a tear because I see now how I was treated and cheated. I didn’t see that until I got a little older. Everybody, as time went on, got sort of strange. Especially after Motown moved out to California. If they see you, they’re glad to see you. They just change their phone numbers so much. I don’t believe in changing mine. I don’t believe some of them know I’m alive.¹⁷³

James Jamerson died on August 2, 1983 in Los Angeles, as George reports, just weeks after the interview and before it was published.¹⁷⁴ Although the future work Jamerson craved would not be forthcoming, George’s article, and especially its title, would become the inspiration for Allan Slutsky’s formative book on the bassist. The publishing of *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* in 1989 would solidify in text and transcription the notion of Jamerson as the architect of contemporary bass guitar playing. It is in Jamerson’s legacy and overwhelming influence on generations of bassists that he has perhaps made his most profound and lasting contribution to popular music and culture.

In 1983, Motown celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary with a television special featuring a variety of former and current Motown artists performing songs from the label’s catalogue that had generated so much success.¹⁷⁵ Billed as “Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever,” the program noticeably never mentioned any of the

¹⁷² George, “Standing in the Shadows,” 66.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 65.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 66.

¹⁷⁵ Gordy, 84.

musicians who had contributed so much to the label. Just mere months before his death, Jamerson purchased a ticket to watch the taping of the special, an invitation from Motown not forthcoming, but the bassist's appearance was not noticed or celebrated and he watched the taping from the audience, in obscurity.¹⁷⁶ With Motown failing to publicly recognize any of the musicians who had become an essential component to its business, it would seem unlikely that their plight and contributions would move out of the shadows, especially for Jamerson, whose career and life was in deep descent.

As Nelson George's 1983 article shows, interest in the history of Jamerson and the Funk Brothers was developing. Regarding Jamerson specifically, as *Standing in the Shadows* would illustrate upon its publication, musicians from all genres and all parts of the world were influenced by the bassist's style and performances. Although briefly mentioned above when detailing *Standing in the Shadows* as a source, the book contains interviews and performances of Jamerson's bass lines by a wide variety of bass players. The careers and genres in which these bassists work illustrate Jamerson's wide-reaching influence, from numerous freelance session bassists with their own distinguished credits (Chuck Rainey) to band members of legendary artists (Garry Tallent of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band) to musicians who led their own bands (Jack Bruce, formerly of Cream and a solo artist, and Geddy Lee of Rush). While the book is the essential source for anyone studying Jamerson, these bassists' contributions show that his influence was far-reaching and long lasting. As John Entwistle of The Who explains during his segment, he did not know the name of the bassist who was contributing these incredible bass lines. He simply referred to him as, "the guy who plays bass for Motown," but what he did know was the bass lines were inventive and unlike any other

¹⁷⁶ Jisi, "The Dance Floor," 42.

in music. Entwistle remarks, “Soon every bass player in England had a little bit of James in their playing style.”¹⁷⁷

While all of the bassists’ personal comments regarding Jamerson are important and provide numerous examples of his influence on so many musicians with varied careers and styles, certain comments deserve specific attention in relation to this thesis and its assertion that Jamerson appropriated jazz principles into a pop format. For example, Jack Bruce notes that his early music career was as a jazz upright bassist and at that time Charles Mingus was his biggest influence.¹⁷⁸ When Bruce, like Jamerson, transitioned from upright to bass guitar in the 1960s, Jamerson’s unique and defining style aided Bruce in transitioning instruments, providing a template founded in an improvisatory and melodic approach to the instrument that substantially influenced and benefited the bass guitarist and songwriter during his years in Cream and afterwards.¹⁷⁹ David Hungate, noted not only for his tenure in the band Toto, but also for his career as a successful session musician primarily performing on country music recordings in Nashville, credits Jamerson for influencing “directly or indirectly virtually anyone who plays the electric bass” due to his innovation on the instrument.¹⁸⁰ According to Hungate, Jamerson “invented a style that gave the bass an importance in the rhythm section it previously hadn’t enjoyed.”¹⁸¹ Bassist Anthony Jackson brings an academic quality to his monologue concerning Jamerson. Jackson argues that by the time of Jamerson’s death, the bassist “had clearly established himself among the first-rank of twentieth-century geniuses in music.” Furthermore, as Jackson argues:

¹⁷⁷ Slutsky, *Standing in The Shadows* book, Audio monologue, CD1, Track 5.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., CD2, Track 11.

¹⁷⁹ Roberts, 105

¹⁸⁰ Slutsky, *Standing in The Shadows* book, Audio monologue, CD2, Track 8.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

His name must be ranked alongside others, such as, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Charles Ives, Paul Hindemith, Scott LaFaro, Charlie Christian, and Art Tatum. All these individuals changed music as they came in contact with it. All had a profound influence on their peers. All encountered a world that said, ‘Just what the hell do you think you are doing?’ And all persevered.

Finally, Stevie Wonder’s recorded eulogy at Jamerson’s 1983 funeral ends the audio component of *Standing in the Shadows*. With his words, Wonder explains that Jamerson’s bass playing directly influenced him as a young and developing musician and that his performances “made a certain fabric of my life visual.”¹⁸²

Jamerson’s legacy extends far beyond the contents and confines of *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, both the book and the subsequent film. As noted above and in particular, Jack Bruce and Paul McCartney were both disciples of Jamerson. Uniquely, while both Bruce and McCartney acknowledge their debt to Jamerson, each bassist had differing styles that influenced generations of bassists and musicians in a variety of genres via the millions of records they sold in their respective bands and solo careers. For example, as noted above, McCartney was a bassist who had transitioned from guitar to bass and maintained his picking technique, not employing Jamerson’s finger-style traditionalism, but McCartney did develop his own creative and highly influential melodic style based on Jamerson’s design. Bruce, who did utilize a finger-style technique on bass guitar, infused his bass lines with improvisatory elements and virtuosic traits, especially during his time playing with Ginger Baker and Eric Clapton in Cream.¹⁸³

Arguably, both McCartney and Bruce were in unique positions to disseminate their more active and progressive Jamerson-influenced bass parts. This was due to the fact that they were the songwriters and lead vocalists for their respective bands, which allowed them to

¹⁸² Slutsky, *Standing in The Shadows* book, Audio monologue, CD2, Track 20.

¹⁸³ Roberts, 105.

be in featured roles and bring more attention to their bass contributions, unlike Jamerson who worked in relative obscurity. Regarding Jamerson's influence on McCartney, as well as any bassist during the 1960s, author Tony Bacon makes clear in his book, *Paul McCartney: Bassmaster. Playing the Great Beatles Basslines* (2006) that, "Jamerson's influence on McCartney was inevitable – no 1960s bassist with ears could have missed him."¹⁸⁴

Beyond the superlatives of his fellow popular music peers and the strains of his influence heard in their playing, Jamerson's legacy can be found in areas of music study and instruction. For example, his bass lines are featured examples in methodological bass books not just associated with pop music styles. In particular, Jamerson's bass playing on *What's Going On* is listed as essential study alongside classical double bassist Francois Rabbath's *Rabbath Plays Bach*, jazz-fusion bassist Jaco Pastorius' legendary eponymous debut album, and Paul Chambers' upright playing on Miles Davis' modal jazz classic *Kind Of Blue* in Rufus Reid's *The Evolving Bassist* method book.¹⁸⁵ Chuck Sher's *The Improviser's Bass Method* (1979), which, as the title suggests, provides methodological instruction for the developing improviser features a transcription of Jamerson's divergent and percolating sixteenth-note bass line to the Jr. Walker and the All Stars song, "Home Cookin'."¹⁸⁶ The improvisatory nature of Jamerson's part relates directly to the intended curriculum and its inclusion by the author confirms that his bass line is appropriate

¹⁸⁴ Tony Bacon and Gareth Morgan. *Paul McCartney: Bassmaster. Playing the Great Beatles Basslines* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2006), 39.

¹⁸⁵ Reid, 163-164.

¹⁸⁶ Chuck Sher, *The Improviser's Bass Method* (Petaluma, CA: Sher Music Co., 1979), 201.

alongside transcriptions for bass lines by jazz bassists Charles Mingus, Ron Carter, and Richard Davis, to list but a few from the book.¹⁸⁷

Bass educators and authors also consistently and constantly proclaim the all-encompassing influence of Jamerson on contemporary bass playing. As Ed Friedland noted in a 2004 *Bass Player* magazine article titled, “The Motown Beat,” which analyzed Motown’s rhythm section, “On a side note, as an electric bassist, it is your sacred responsibility to dive into the recorded works of James Jamerson. This man singlehandedly changed the way the instrument is played, in turn changing the face of modern music and culture.”¹⁸⁸ As Friedland explains in his 2005 book, *The Way They Play: The R&B Bass Masters*, “Whether they know it or not, all electric bassists are James Jamerson’s children.”¹⁸⁹ Friedland continues, making the argument that Jamerson is the architect of modern bass guitar playing:

James Jamerson is the man who started it all. Before him, the electric bass was an untapped reservoir of potential. Often poorly recorded and played without flair, it had not yet become a force in music. All that changed when Jamerson picked up the instrument in 1960. Jamerson was the primary bassist for Motown Records during the 1960s, playing lines that became the driving force behind some of the most popular recordings of all time.¹⁹⁰

With Jamerson’s legacy finding recognition both from peers and music pedagogues, the music industry began making efforts to recognize the efforts of Jamerson and his fellow musicians at Motown. In 2000, Jamerson was the first musician “sideman” inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.¹⁹¹ The release of the *Standing in the Shadows* film in 2002 brought more recognition to Jamerson and the accompanying

¹⁸⁷ Sher, 174.

¹⁸⁸ Friedland, “The Motown Beat,” 84-85.

¹⁸⁹ Friedland, *The Way They Play*, 10.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹⁹¹ Jisi, “The Dance Floor,” 44.

promotion for the film resulted in new articles assessing and analyzing Jamerson's style. For example, Chris Jisi's 2002 article for Bass Player magazine, "The Dance Floor Never Stood A Chance! Inside The James Jamerson Style" is of particular importance due to Jamaican bassist Phil Chen's comment regarding Jamerson's playing style. As Chen explains in the article:

The ingredients that made up Jamerson's style were unique. He had Caribbean bloodlines and Deep South roots, and he was influenced by all musical styles played in Detroit as well as Charlie Parker and other bebop musicians. As a result he used half-steps as passing or leading tones, just like a jazz soloist, with the root or chord tone on the strong beat and the chromatic passing note on the weak beat – or as an ear-catching anticipation on the downbeat. It also enabled him to create smooth lines in flat keys. He was rare in that he had perfect tonal pitch and perfect rhythm pitch. James Jamerson wrote the bible of electric bass playing.¹⁹²

In the years to follow, the Funk Brothers, including Jamerson, would be posthumously honored with a Lifetime Achievement Grammy in 2004 for their contributions to music. Jamerson is still consistently regarded as the founding father of modern bass guitar performance, with his legacy now expanding beyond bass culture. In 2012 the PBS television program *History Detectives* featured a segment titled "The Motown Bottom Line."¹⁹³ A 1960s era bass amp with Jamerson's name stenciled on the side was the focus of a search by a television journalist in his quest to determine whether the amp had been used by Jamerson during his recording career in Los Angeles. While the results of the search and the program's theories proved inconclusive, the segment itself and the fact that Jamerson's work had become synonymous with not just music history but American culture signifies the height to which his name and legacy has risen

¹⁹² Jisi, "The Dance Floor," 46.

¹⁹³ PBS, "The Motown Bottom," PBS Video site, 15:19, <http://video.pbs.org/video/2256479348/> (accessed March 12, 2014).

in the thirty years since his death and the over half-century since he began working at Motown.

Over thirty years ago the first attempts at revealing and understanding the history of Motown's session musicians began in popular music periodicals and music instruction magazines. Since that time the subject of these select musicians and the resulting research and study has evolved dramatically. Now, not only can information and content of this subject be found in the initial sources of magazines, but also in abundance in feature film productions, television programming, scholarly articles published in academic journals, as well as subjects of study for graduate research. Academic study regarding the Funk Brothers specifically and Motown in general has increased substantially in the last decades as the survey of the literature for this thesis clearly illustrates. Initially an icon within the specific demographic of bass players and the vocation's culture, James Jamerson is now considered an essential pillar in the history of popular music instrumentalists of the twentieth century. He is recognized and honored both for his role as a musician who added a jazz-influenced improvisatory character to a popular music medium, as well as stylistically defining a new instrument within that genre. Jamerson's history and legacy has transcended the environment from which it first sprang, incidental pop music for a young generation, as his contributions are now recognized and valued for their exploratory spirit, boundless creativity and virtuosic capabilities. This thesis highlights and explains the resources to thoroughly understand his contributions and provides additional content to expand the sources that aid in the study of Jamerson.

With this thesis and future publications forthcoming, the study of Motown and Jamerson is not only growing in size but also improving in quality. Certainly there is a

need for continued research and study. As noted above, the last years of Jamerson's life are still shrouded in conflicting stories regarding his quality of work in Los Angeles. A closer study of Los Angeles session contracting and recording session logs would aid in determining the amount of work Jamerson had during his time in Los Angeles and would statistically reveal where and when he performed on his final sessions. Another subject worthy of further research due to its relation to Jamerson's legacy is the controversy surrounding Jamerson and Los Angeles session bassist Carol Kaye. Specifically, Kaye has made claims to playing bass on Motown songs that have routinely and regularly been credited to Jamerson¹⁹⁴. Kaye's claims rest in the disorganized nature of session book keeping when Motown began using Los Angeles musicians on its recordings while simultaneously using the Funk Brothers in Detroit.¹⁹⁵ The validity of Kaye's assertions have been called in to question and resulted in a direct response from Jamerson author Allan Slutsky, who has aggressively defended Jamerson's contributions¹⁹⁶. A study of this particular subject could not only aid in clarifying the historical record regarding Jamerson but also benefit the study of popular music recording and business practices during an important time in American music history.

Without the influence of Detroit's jazz scene during the first several decades of the twentieth century, there perhaps would not have been the musical environment to cultivate the musicians that Motown employed, as well as the social network that so importantly benefited both the musicians creatively as well as the label commercially.

And it is in Motown's relocation to Los Angeles that the deterioration of those regional

¹⁹⁴ Tom Mulhern, ed., *Bass Heroes: Styles & Secrets of 30 Great Bass Players: From the Pages of Guitar Player Magazine* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 1993), 158-159.

¹⁹⁵ Mulhern, 158-159.

¹⁹⁶ Carol Kaye, "Frequently Asked Questions," Carol Kaye website, copyright 1998-2001, <http://www.carolkaye.com/www/library/faq.htm> (accessed March 12, 2014).

scenes can be noticed and understood, not to mention the effect that this territorial change had both on the musicians' careers as well as the city of Detroit. While a study of James Jamerson can be as specific as his appropriation of jazz principles and techniques into a popular music format, the history surrounding him is filled with content that can span from anecdotal facts to thorough academic study. This thesis arguably contributes new details and additional clarity to that history, ensuring that the study of Jamerson continues to improve in quality and content.

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