

00:00:00	Music	Transition	“Crown Ones” off the album <i>Stepfather</i> by People Under The Stairs
00:00:06	Oliver Wang	Host	Hello, I’m Oliver Wang.
00:00:07	Morgan Rhodes	Host	And I’m Morgan Rhodes. You’re listening to <i>Heat Rocks</i> .
00:00:11	Oliver	Host	Every episode, we invite a guest to join us to talk about a heat rock, you know, an album that welds its way into our psyche. Today, we are getting too high and living just enough for the city by returning to Stevie Wonder’s 1973 masterpiece, <i>Innervisions</i> .
00:00:25	Music	Transition	<p>“Don’t You Worry ‘Bout A Thing” off the album <i>Innervisions</i> by Stevie Wonder. Mid-tempo, upbeat, light funk.</p> <p><i>Don't you worry 'bout a thing, mama</i> <i>'Cause I'll be standing on the side</i> <i>When you check it out</i></p> <p><i>[Music fades out as dialogue resumes.]</i></p>
00:00:42	Oliver	Host	<p>In the stories we tell about the career arcs of our greatest pop artists, there are always those albums that, in hindsight, become enshrined as keystones in artistic maturations when acts went from being more than mere hit-makers, and instead elevated into cultural icons. For The Beatles, it was <i>Revolver</i>, For Aretha, it was <i>I Never Loved a Man</i>, for Michael, it was <i>Off The Wall</i>. For Stevland Hardaway Morris, the artist better known as Stevie Wonder, his moment came with <i>Innervisions</i>, when he was all of twenty-three years old.</p> <p>“We as a people are not interested in baby-baby songs anymore,” said Stevie around this time, signaling that he was preparing to shift his creative focus away from Motown machine hit songs to something more personal, more social, more spiritual, whether talking about addiction on “Too High,” or taking thinly-veiled shots at Richard Nixon on “He’s Misstra Know-It-All,” or probing the nature of reincarnation on “Higher Ground.”</p> <p><i>Innervisions</i> marked a turning-point in Wonder’s creative, well, visions, setting up the rest of his seventies output and all but establishing him as one of the most important voices in pop music for the era. And, oh, yeah, it sounded pretty good, too.</p>
00:01:53	Music	Transition	<p><i>[“Don’t You Worry ‘Bout A Thing” plays again.]</i></p> <p><i>Don't you worry 'bout a thing</i> <i>Don't you worry 'bout a thing</i></p> <p><i>[Music fades out as dialogue resumes.]</i></p>
00:02:09	Morgan	Host	Nelson George is an author and filmmaker, a cultural commentator, and preservationist. Fortunately for all of us, he’s taken notes about Black history for the last several decades and has been blessed with the grace and gift to share them with us. His presence has been felt at the Billboard Magazine and the Village Voice to name a

few, and he's considered the leading US Historian on hip hop, but is also fluent in virtually every musical genre where it relates to Black folks in this beautiful thing we call music.

A Grammy winner for his work on the liner notes for James Brown's *Star Time*, his output and influence are prolific. He's not an archivist, he's actually the archives, like the whole archives. So, how do you introduce him? You don't, you just keep it short, and thank the stars for aligning themselves well enough to have him talk to you about this beautiful thing we call music. Nelson George, welcome to *Heat Rocks*.

00:03:03 Nelson George Guest Well, thank you, for that, uh, intro, um. You know, I never—you know, it's funny, people always say that hip hop thing, I never think of myself as a hip hop writer, I think of myself as a—a writer of Black music. I love hip hop, but I love Motown, you know. I wrote a book on Motown. I wrote a book on rhythm and blues. So those things are—are, uh, integrally as much a part of me as a break-beat.

00:03:26 Oliver Host So, Nelson, why *Innervisions*?

00:03:29 Nelson Guest I was fifteen or sixteen years old in 1973, and, um, I had already been really starting to really become a musichead, you know. Uh, my mother had—had—was a big soul music fan, we had tons of, um, forty-fives in the house. She used to have Saturday night parties, um, but by '73 the music was becoming more album-oriented, and, you know, Al Green and, um, Marvin Gaye, and *Superfly* and shit—all those albums were part of our house.

And I was beginning to sort of really get into albums as a musical—as, uh, as an experience, not just as a collection of singles. And I feel like *Innervisions* is the first album that really became an album experience for me as uh, as—as a person, as, you know, sort of a music person. I would sit down, at the living room stereo—we had a stereo in the living room—and I would just put the album on, and sit in front of it and just listen to it over and over again. It's almost a cinematic experience I—I feel like this album is.

I mean, if you look at that period of Stevie from, um, '72 to '76, more or less, you know, *Music of my Mind*, *Talking Book*, *Innervisions*, *Fulfilling My First Finale*, *Songs in the Key of Life*, they're almost like one big album. Almost all—almost all those albums, except for *Songs in the Key of Life*, were co-produced by, um, Robert Margouleff and Malcom Cecil, who were kind of masters of the mood synthesizer and a lot of that new technology that Stevie was diving into.

I think that *Innervisions* is the—for me the best of that—of the single albums, partly because, uh, I think for “Living for the City.”

00:05:12 Music Transition “Living for the City” off the album *Innervisions* by Stevie Wonder. Upbeat, funky, soulful rock with a steady drumbeat.

*And you'd best believe she hardly gets a penny
Living just enough, just enough for the city*

[Horns come in. Music continues for a moment, then fades out as dialogue resumes.]

00:05:32 Oliver Host Nelson, you mentioned before that you were probably around fifteen or sixteen when this album came out. And so you were effectively coming of age at the time in which Stevie was making this really remarkable artistic transition, from his—you know, his roots, as a child star, as little Stevie Wonder, and just turning into what I could only imagine would have been a massive cultural figure of the 1970s.

I'm wondering if you could talk a little about what was it like witnessing that in real time, because the Stevie that we're getting on *Innervisions* is not necessarily the Stevie that we got on *Fingertips*, from the late sixties, and so watching his transition and his growth and maturation, um, what—what were your memories of seeing this—this cultural icon in development, in essence?

00:06:15 Nelson Guest Well, you know, I—we had all of those, uh, *Uptight*, as a forty-five, we had my mother's collection, we had all of those singles, and we would—you know, we were—Motown was the—the track—the soundtrack, for so much. And you'd see Stevie, you know, little Stevie, you know, with the glasses, and the suit, and the—and the white shirt Motown thing. But then you began seeing him on things like Don Kirshner's in concert, and, um, "Soul Train," and this was a different guy.

He was definitely becoming an adult, and an adult in the way that you did in the seventies, um, the—the clothes that Stevie was wearing, the apple-jack hats and some of the other, uh, outfits were stuff that I was seeing my mother's friends wear. Matter of fact, we were wearing in junior high school, and in high school. The way Stevie looked, and the topics of the songs he wrote about, and the feeling of the songs were right in-pocket with what was going on on the streets of—of—of Brooklyn, where I grew up, and in New York City. He seemed like he was reflecting what it meant to be young, Black, and smart.

Uh, he—he was a lot more—I mean, cause the range of topics on, uh *Innervisions*, you know, "Too High" and um, and "Visions," go right—the first two tracks on the album are essentially feel like uh, uh, uh, a guy talking about being high. It's a guy talking about being high. "Too High" is the funky get-down part of being high, and "Visions" is the laid-back on my sofa looking at—looking at the ceiling with my black light poster.

And because—

[Morgan laughs.]

—uh, Stevie—Stevie's music seemed to be perfectly connected to that moment in time. I—I guess—I don't know, I mean, Stevie was probably in his, uh, he was in his early twenties as well, so, even though, you know, he was blind, he was right there with us in terms of what was going on, and being Black and being young.

00:08:15	Music	Transition	<p>“Too High” off the album <i>Innervisions</i> by Stevie Wonder. Soul pop with light, smooth vocals and a funky instrumental backing.</p> <p><i>She had a chance to make it big more than once or twice But no dice She wasn't very nice</i></p> <p><i>[Music fades out as dialogue resumes.]</i></p>
00:08:34	Morgan	Host	<p>It's unbelievable to me that in 1973 when this album was released, that this was like his sixteenth album. And yet, as—as you mentioned, he was really a young man, and—but had gone through some things. I know you wrote a lot about Motown in your book, <i>Where Did Our Love Go</i>, it's about the rise and fall of the sound. Can you put into context what was going on at the label around the time Stevie recorded <i>Innervisions</i>?</p>
00:08:56	Nelson	Guest	<p>Well, you know, the key thing to know is that Stevie had come of age—you know—I guess, uh, I forget at which age, I believe—I—it could be eighteen, it could be twenty-one. At some point, he came of age, and a lot of the royalties and money that had been, uh, accrued over the years came to him, which was a considerable sum. Um, so, he was able to, you know move out of Detroit, and that—that—that—you know, Motown at that point was also—was moving to LA, anyway, but he was able to become a much more bi-coastal person. He was living in New York and Los Angeles, uh, and the label itself was in transition, it was no longer the Motown Sound.</p> <p>You had Marvin, you know, had done uh, Inner—<i>Inner City Blues</i>, and <i>What's Going On</i>, and then he also was moving into, like, things like, um, <i>Let's Get It On</i>. There was a transition, uh, Smokey was doing <i>Quiet Storm</i> album, so the idea of the concept album, uh, was big—a big thing in Black music at the time.</p> <p>You also had FM radio, which was very important to mention. So you had stations that were aimed at Black audiences that had better sound. Literally. There—it was no longer the little AM station at the end of the dial, it was a station with a really lush FM sound, so the—the sound of Black music could—could be bigger, because it was a—a longer landscape.</p> <p>And these stations were playing, uh they weren't fast-talking DJs anymore, you had people like Frankie Crocker, or um—um—uh, the people down in D—in DC who created um, the <i>Quiet Storm</i>, so it was a more mellow, more adult atmosphere, so the texture of the music was bigger, and the songs went from three minutes, two minutes to five, you know, I'm looking at the track listing here, some of these songs are four or five minutes long. That was, again, a reflection of the times.</p>
00:10:52	Oliver	Host	<p>You mentioned the relevance of Marvin Gaye and—and <i>What's Going On</i>, and obviously that marked a massive shift, not just for Motown, but just, in terms of American popular music, black music in particular of that era. <i>Innervisions</i>, I don't know if you would necessarily describe as Stevie's first quote-unquote “political</p>

album”, though I do think he addresses social issues on here to a greater depth than he does on some of his preview LPs.

Do we know if—to what extent had Stevie listened to Gaye’s *What’s Going On* and been inspired or influenced or nudged by it, in terms of thinking about his own path as an artist? Or was his coming to making social issue songs something that was really much just about Stevie as an individual, as opposed to what he was listening to from his label mates.

00:11:38 Nelson Guest Well I think Stevie was very—I mean. He and Marvin and those guys—he grew up with Marvin Gaye, and all the Motown musicians. He was definitely affected by *What’s Going On*, and the freedom that meant, the freedom meant for him, not just as a Black artist, but as a Motown artist. Um, so, uh, trying to hold Stevie back from writing anything political, any argument that could have been made for it, that was done. I can’t imagine the guy—you know, we look at Motown, we think about The Supreme’s “Come See About Me” and stuff, “Living for the City” was a single, off this album. It’s a mini epic of coming to the—the great migration of Black people to the north. And like, 7 minutes and 22 seconds.

[Laughs] And, uh, that’s something was inconceivable without *What’s Going On*. That was revolutionary.

00:12:34 Music Music [*“Living For The City” plays again.*]

*His hair is long, his feet are hard and gritty
He spends his life walking the streets of New York City
He's almost dead from breathing in air pollution
He tried to vote but to him there's no solution
Living just enough...*

[*Music fades out as dialogue resumes.*]

00:12:54 Morgan Host Do you think this is Stevie Wonder’s best album? Or is it just your favorite album of his?

00:13:02 Nelson Guest I’d go back and forth. After I went and looked at *Fulfillingness’ First Finale*, and looked at the track listing for, uh, *Talking Book*, you know, I really do believe a lot of these are interchangeable. This whole section, these three or four albums, they seem like they’re probably all done in marathon sessions. Uh, it’s hard for me to make that decision. I would say that ultimately, you have to say that *Songs in the Key of Life* is the big bang, because there’s the range of music, you know, it’s kind of got jazz-rock instrumentals on that thing. You know, there’s conceptual things, with accordions and calvinettes, sort of like spoken word pieces almost on that album.

So that album encompasses the breadth of his musicianship. I mean, when I bought it, you got two albums, and there was a .45 inside. No one had ever done anything like that. Uh, but if you wanna distill—for me, if you wanted to distill Stevie into one record, I would take *Innervisions* over *Fulfillingness*.

00:14:14 Morgan Host I ask because, heretofore, and I’ve talked about this on other shows, *Songs in the Key of Life* is my earliest musical memory, as a

child, that I had an awareness of music, and had an emotional reaction to music. *Songs in the Key of Life*, an album that my father turned me onto, and just listening to it with him.

And so I spent so much time, you know, building the legacy around, and the story around *Songs in The Key of Life* because it's so personal to me as a child, that I think I paid so much attention to that that *Innervisions* for me sort of got lost. Because it's hard to compare, for me. At least, just based on the sheer volume, the breadth of tracks.

But knowing that we were gonna talk about this, forced me to revisit. And I thought, "Gosh, not that I would necessarily change my mind, but I feel that I missed a lot, because I came to *Innervisions* later in life."

00:15:09 Nelson Guest Well even then, you're lucky! You're really lucky, because you get a chance to re-experience this almost as a new album.

00:15:15 Morgan Host Yeah, as an adult. And so, I think—I'm glad that you picked this album, because in prep for the chat, I was thinking, "Gosh, I spent so many years talking about how precious *Songs in the Key of Life* is because of the relationship that it has with me and my father spending time together, coming to know that as a little kid. Um, and to listen to *Innervisions* as an adult gave me an appreciation for *Innervisions* that I might have slept on a little bit earlier.

So I thank you for bringing it up, because it forced me to go back to listen to all these tracks, and listen to them differently.

00:15:47 Nelson Guest *[Stammering]* One thing that was interesting about me going back to this album is, you know, how many people have sung "All in Love is Fair". That's been recorded by a zillion people. "Higher Ground" was done by the Chili Peppers, you know. So, when you look at this, and actually "Jesus Chooses America" has also been covered quite a few times. "Don't You Worry 'Bout A Thing".

So, the thing about some of these songs is that they, um, you've heard of these songs, they're part of the DNA of American music. Um, I think that's what's extraordinary about this whole suit of songs from Stevie from this period, is that—I think of it this way, it's hard for people who don't know more to remember—everyone thinks about the Beatles in the 60's. Everyone talks about how dominant they were.

Stevie in the early to mid 70's was the Beatles. He won best Grammy of the year, this album was best album of the year. He was perennially winning that. Even people think—everyone thinks about *Thriller*, and the dominance of *Thriller*, and you maybe keep going to *Off the Wall* and *Bad*, which is great. They're not as good as these Stevie Wonder albums.

And, quite honest—the other key element is the technology. The way Stevie used the—no one had—this keyboard and these synthesizers had been around now, by '73. It's just the late 60s, and everyone from Pete Townshend and on through had been messing

with them, trying to figure out what to do with them. No one made them more musical than Stevie Wonder.

Once these records came out, you could listen to the records of Rufus and Chaka Khan, you can listen to the records of Quincy Jones, you can listen to the records of all of those people, and all of those great musicians who were making great music, and they had to change the game. It changed the game of what Black music sounded like, and then what pop music sounded like.

00:17:38 Oliver Host Nelson, I'm really glad you brought this up, because I do—I could not agree more that I think one of the distinguishing parts of what Stevie was doing during this run in the 70s had a lot to do with his really unabashed embrace of emergent music technologies. So on this album, you mentioned, I think, the mood bass earlier, he's playing Fender Rhodes, electric piano. And the most important instrument, arguably, is the TONTO synthesizer.

And for folks out there listening who've never seen this before, it's really hard to describe, but it's basically a small room-sized contraption that looks like you're in the middle of a retro-futuristic UFO, and there's this really amazing footage online, Wonder recording songs for *Innervisions*, inside of the TONTO chamber, and he's flanked by the synth programmers Nelson mentioned earlier, Robert Margouleff, and Malcom Cecil. And in this clip from the documentary, you can hear Cecil explaining what their collaboration with Stevie was like.

00:18:35 Clip Clip **Speaker 1:** And then for the *Innervisions* album, an inner-city epic, "Living For The City".

Music: "Living For The City" plays again.

*A boy is born in hard time Mississippi
Surrounded by four walls that ain't so pretty*

Speaker 1: But when Marvin Gaye used harmonies and jazz rhythms to sell the message, Stevie Wonder used a synthesized funk beat, with an anger in his voice artfully captured by his co-producers.

Music:

Moving in the right direction...

Malcolm Cecil: We worked in hours. I'd stop the middle of the tape, in the middle of the tape, right, and [*stammering*] to get him angry. To get that anger and that real feeling.

Music:

... just enough for the city

[Music fades out as dialogue resumes.]

00:19:18 Oliver Host So that second voice, that was actually Cecil describing what the

collaboration was like. And Nelson, could you talk a little bit more about the relevance of Stevie's willingness to, number one, collaborate with folks? And especially his embrace of technology as a way of re-shaping, as you were saying before, really reshaping the sound of American pop music of this era.

00:19:38 Nelson Guest Well you know, it's—Stevie was a guy who came up as a child in the bosom of Motown. And when I did the book *Where'd Our Love Go*, I interviewed Earl Van Dyke, who was a band leader, James Jamerson, um, Pistol Allen, some of the great musicians who worked in there. And he was there, he was the guy who was always in studio. He was there with them in what they called the "snake pit". So he was someone who was very much, uh, aware of all the ways music could be used, but those guys were all jazz musicians.

Just to get into his education, he got a vivid education there. He'd seen technology both from a Hendrix point of view—I mean, he worked at—I'm sure he worked at *Electric Ladylands*, specifically because Jimmy had created it. Um, Miles was doing his work when he was, you know, plugging in. So this—Herbie Hancock's work, this was happening, this was always happening. If you're a person who's listening to what's going on in the music at that time, the technology's inescapable. And of the people who were considered the top musicians, not in R&B, just the top musicians in jazz, were adopting the technology.

And the Fender Rhodes, was the new thing to do. The moog, the arp, the TONTO. I mean, but to get—the thing is that Stevie had to be Stevie to get the TONTO. It's a huge commitment. He's got to work with these guys. He can hear what he wants to hear, but then he's gotta go through the technology, and figure out how to get it. And I think that's the real beautiful thing about this, is how he put these things in recognizable structures, so that they weren't just oddities.

00:21:17 Music Music "Living For The City" plays again. Music plays for several seconds, then fades low, playing behind dialogue.

00:21:33 Oliver Host We will be back with more of our conversation with music historian and writer Nelson George about Stevie Wonder's *Innervisions* after a word from some of our sibling Max Fun podcasts. Keep it locked.

[Music fades out.]

00:21:43 Music Transition "Crown Ones" off the album *Stepfather* by People Under The Stairs

00:21:46 Promo Promo **Speaker:** Hey, podcast fan! We have a quick favor to ask. We'd like to get a better idea of who you are and what you care about. So if you have a couple moments to spare, go to MaximumFun.org/adsurvey.

There we've got a short, anonymous survey that won't take any more than ten minutes to fill out. Plus, if you finish it, you'll get a 10% discount on our merch at the MaxFun store! MaxFun shows have always relied on support from our members, and always will. The survey will help keep the few ads we do run relevant and interesting for you.

Again, that's MaximumFun.org/adsurvey. All one word. And thanks for your help.

00:22:30 Promo

Promo

Music: Fun, cheerful music.

Kirk Hamilton: Video games!

Jason Schreier: Video games!

Maddy Myers: Video games! You like 'em?

Jason: Maybe you wish you had more time for them?

Kirk: Maybe you wanna know the best ones to play?

Jason: Maybe you wanna know what happens to Mario when he dies?

[Someone chuckles.]

Maddy: In that case, you should check out [Triple Click!](#) It's a brand new podcast about video games.

Jason: A podcast about video games?! But I don't have time for that!

Kirk: Sure you do. Once a week, kick back as three video game experts give you everything from critical takes on the hottest new releases—

Jason: —to scoops, interviews, and explanations about how video games work—

Maddy: —to fascinating and sometimes weird stories about the games we love.

Kirk: *Triple Click* is hosted by me, Kirk Hamilton.

Jason: Me, Jason Schreier.

Maddy: And me, Maddy Myers.

Kirk: You can find *Triple Click* wherever you get your podcasts, and listen at MaximumFun.org.

Maddy: Bye!

[Music finishes.]

00:23:14 Music

Transition

“Crown Ones” off the album *Stepfather* by People Under The Stairs

00:23:16 Morgan

Host

And we are back on *Heat Rocks*. We are talking seminal album from Stevie Wonder, *Innervisions* with author, Nelson George.

00:23:24 Oliver

Host

Nelson, I wanted to ask, when I first started writing about music, this

was about 25 years ago, so around '94-'95, and I was hugely inspired by the examples of folks like yourself, and Greg Tate. And, if I'm doing the math, this means that you have been writing about music for at least over 40 years now. I'm wondering what has changed, if any, in terms of your approach of--to how you think and write about music over that time?

00:23:49 Nelson Host I miss getting a vinyl in, really the vinyl but also CDs, and being able to read the credits immediately. I think one of the things that I really used to love about this process was, okay, finding these threads, um, that you didn't know existed. You know, if you get the *Innervisions* album, who is Malcolm Cecil, and who are these guys? So you start going backwards and trying to figure out what their track records are.

Now, music comes as these sort of anonymous downloads or streams with no context, often. And so you kind of have to figure out who these producers are, who these arrangers are. I mean, on *Mr. Know-It-All*, uh, for some reason Willie Weeks who's a great bass player, plays a bassline on *Mr. Know-It-All*. Who's Willie Weeks?

So that's—I would work a lot back then, I would read the credits. That's I guess how I started getting into it, thinking back. I would read the credits on these albums, and that was the beginning of me connecting the dots on, "Oh, this guy, he wrote on such-and-such, or he produced such-and-such." And that was a lot of my early understanding of how music worked, was it—that it wasn't a great man theory.

I miss that sense of being able to have a physical project, and be able to connect immediately to everyone who worked on the record.

00:25:12 Oliver Host I hear that, I hear that. I definitely hear that.

00:25:13 Nelson Guest You know, during the days of *The Village Voice*, we came out—I think we came out on a Wednesday, it was available Thursday morning at certain newsstands. And then by Friday, people were starting to pick it up. So you could go out on a Friday night, or a Saturday, you could go to a show in New York, or a movie theater, and you would run into people who'd read a review you'd written. And they would tell you if it sucked—if it was terrible, if it sucks. I miss the actual, uh face to face that happened, that the *Voice* was part of, because you were part of the New York music community.

Everything here—so people are both meaner digitally than they would ever be face to face, and sometimes a little more reactive.

00:25:56 Oliver Host Well, bringing this back to Stevie in *Innervisions*, you mentioned before, Nelson, that one of your favorite songs off the album—and why don't we actually go around the horn and talk about our respective fire tracks, and If I can take the prerogative of going first here, for me—and this is an album in which you have such a bounty of best potential songs to pick from. But, as a DJ, the one that I have always gravitated towards is "Don't You Worry 'Bout A Thing".

00:26:24 Music Music "Don't You Worry 'Bout A Thing" plays again.

Ee eee!
Watch this y'all
[Speaks Spanish]
See here, mama

[Music fades out as dialogue resumes.]

00:26:40 Oliver Host Partly it's because it is such a perfect bridge track for someone like me who likes to play a lot of R&B, but also a lot of Latin music. And so, this song goes both ways, I can either begin a Latin set with it, coming out of R&B, or I can come out of a Latin set and go into some soul music with it. And so, just to hear Stevie work with that opening Afro-Cuban montuno piano riff, my favorite—not just my favorite song on the album, but also that opening is my favorite moment on the album, as well.

00:27:12 Music Music *["Don't You Worry 'Bout A Thing" plays again.]*

I been to Paris, Beirut, you know Iraq, Iran, "Ukraingia" you know
I speak very very um fluent Spanish
Todo 'está bien chévere', you understand that? Chévere
It's alright mama, I got my shakers

Everybody's got a thing

[Music fades out as dialogue resumes.]

00:27:32 Oliver Host How about for the rest of you, what's your fire tracks off *Innervisions*?

00:27:35 Morgan Host I've gone back and forth on this because it's so hard to pick, and again as I was saying a little bit earlier, having to revisit this album, and really take some time and sit with it, I went back and forth. If you had asked me last year, two years ago, my favorite was always "Too High".

00:27:50 Music Music "Too High" plays again.

I'm too high
I'm too high
I can't ever touch the sky
I'm too high
I'm so high
I feel like I'm about to die

[Music fades out as dialogue resumes.]

00:28:07 Morgan Host I started hearing that a lot on the radio, because it was covered by New York Voices. And so, I heard it both ways, I heard it—I heard Stevie's original, and then I heard it really jazzy, sort of Manhattan transfer-y, because of the New York voices.

00:28:20 Music Music "Too High" off the album *Hearts of Fire* by New York Voices. A jazzy version of "Too High" with multilayered vocals.

She's a girl of the past

*I guess that I got to her at last
Did you hear the news about the girl today?
She passed away*

[Music fades out as dialogue resumes.]

00:28:36 Morgan Host Listening to it now, my standout track is “Golden Lady”.

[Oliver hums in interest.]

And it’s also responsible for my favorite moment, because it is just—it takes me to a place, sonically and emotionally, I feel like I keep rising with Stevie. And the way that the song fades out, and I think this start’s about 3:31, he spends the last minute and change of the song going from scale to scale to scale. I love Stevie’s vocals on this, and it is now for me, my favorite song of the album.

00:29:11 Music Music “Golden Lady” off the album *Innervisions* by Stevie Wonder. Funky soul pop with a complex instrumental backing.

... that I'll be losing

*Golden lady, golden lady
I'd like to go there
Golden lady, golden lady
I'd like to go there*

[Music fades out as dialogue resumes.]

00:29:34 Nelson Guest I used to play “Golden Lady” all the time, uh, when I was younger, yeah. It’s a beautiful, beautiful record. Um, I like the combo of uh, “High Ground” and “Jesus Children” back to back.

They’re, you know, that’s him going—“High Ground” is percolating, and uh, again, both of them are about spiritual uplift, in a sense? “High Ground” is definitely about trying to find where you go, where am I going, what can I reach, very inspirational. “Jesus Children” is a little more, you know, a little more cynical. He’s definitely questioning, in his own way, some of the commitment of people to their spiritual practices.

“Jesus Children” is probably my favorite, because it was the one that was probably not the—it was not the hit record, but it’s that kind of album track of thoughtfulness, and great musicianship, and funkiness, that kind of makes the record work as an album. And Stevie has all those kinds of tracks that aren’t necessarily the hit records, but are just as musical, and just as meaningful as any of the records that were on the radio. So uh, “Jesus Children of America”.

00:30:45 Music Music “Jesus Children of America” off the album *Innervisions* by Stevie Wonder. Soulful funk with passionate vocals.

*You'd better tell
Your story fast*

*And if you lie
It will come to pass*

[Music fades out as dialogue resumes.]

- 00:31:05 Oliver Host Nelson, not to put you on the spot, but we've been talking about some of our favorite moments on the album. And I'm wondering if, as someone who's probably listened to this LP more times than you can remember, are there any particular moments that really stand out that even now to this day still just get you amped, or just give you that tingly feeling?
- 00:31:24 Nelson Guest *[Stammering]* The other thing to say about that album, I mentioned, you know, he had influence by gospel, and also, Latin music. I mean, he's working in New York in 1973, when salsa music is everywhere. It's pumping out of every fucking window, it was a huge part of the sonic landscape of the city, then. And so, there's no way that someone as—if he was going out to the clubs in New York, if he was driving up the street, he knew—he heard salsa music.
- So, I love that fact, that, and that to me—that's something that definitely comes out of him being in New York. Uh, again, he's pulling all of these different threads, but they all sound like Stevie Wonder. They don't sound like a guy imitating someone else's music.
- 00:32:09 Oliver Host And especially—I don't know if this was the moment that you were talking about, but there is—and I forget where in the song structure it is, it's probably something like the third chorus. But it comes after, I think, the bridge part, where he just launches into it, almost full bellow, you know, *[Singing]* "Don't you worry 'bout a—" I'm butchering it. I feel so bad feel so bad I'm doing this, but—
- 00:32:28 Morgan Guest It's okay, that's alright.
- 00:32:29 Oliver Host The exuberance at which he's singing this, because it's at a whole other volume level than the previous chorus, that is just—you know, Stevie—and we haven't really talked much about the qualities of Stevie's voice, because as gifted as he was in all the other spheres, he just had an incredible voice! And I think it's that moment in the song where he just really lets loose, that to this day, I just really get chills listening to.
- 00:32:54 Music Music "Don't You Worry 'Bout A Thing" plays again.
- Don't you worry 'bout a thing
Don't you worry 'bout a thing, pretty mama
'Cause I'll be standing in the wings
When you check it out
Don't you worry 'bout a thing*
- [Music fades out as dialogue resumes.]*
- 00:33:14 Nelson Guest He can do almost anything with his voice. Sometimes playfully, sometimes with great compassion, with all great emotion. I think that's the secret part—people tend to think of Stevie, you know, little Stevie Wonder had that high pitched voice, but as he—growing

around Marvin and growing around all those v—can you imagine being on the road with, you know, you're on the road as a kid with Diana Ross, with Levi Stubbs and the Four Tops, and some other soul singers from that time. He seemed to have been a real vacuum of not just musical wrists but also vocal techniques.

I've—there's certain singers. I remember Luther Vandross used to talk about, there was chest singing and head singing. Um, and they were two different techniques he employed depending on the song, uh, that created different sounds and emotion in his vocals. And Stevie is one of those people who, sometimes he's singing right from his—his uh, his chest. Sometimes he's singing from his head. And they are different sounds, and they are different ways of approaching.

I think that is one of the underappreciated aspects, because someone who writes ballads as well as he does has to be really studious of singing, because the ballad is about interpretation. It's—I mean, all the old musicians I used to interview always used to say, you know, anybody can play fast, but can you play slow or sing slow with passion? And Stevie manages to do both.

And again, he's—what is he? He's uh, little Stevie Wonder, he's 20-something. I guess one way to put this for people who are younger is Frank Sinatra covered his songs. Barbra Streisand covered his songs. So, he was a pop song writer. His ballads were sung by everybody who thought they were—who sang pop music. So, it wasn't simply that he was the guy who wrote great—had made great sounds. He wrote songs that great interpretive singers wanted to sing.

- 00:35:16 Music Music "All In Love Is Fair" off the album *The Way We Were* by Barbra Streisand. Slow, tender, adult contemporary music with a gentle instrumental backing.
- All is fair in love*
Love's a crazy game
Two people vow to stay
- [Music fades out as dialogue resumes.]*
- 00:35:38 Oliver Host Nelson, I'm wondering, hard as it would be to imagine someone who's never heard of Stevie Wonder before, but if you were to run into such an alien, and you had to try to introduce them to Stevie through this album, and specifically through one song off of this album, which song would you choose as being that distillation of what it is to be—what it is to listen to Stevie Wonder?
- 00:36:00 Nelson Guest I think I would go with "Don't You Worry 'Bout A Thing". It's fun, and it's a record that will make you want to listen to more. I don't want to depress them with "Living For The City" off the top.
- [Everyone laughs, Nelson uproariously so.]*

And um, or maybe even, you know, "Higher Ground." I think you'd bring them in. Before you drag them through the mud, you gotta

			give them a little sunshine.
00:36:20	Music	Music	<p>“Higher Ground” off the album <i>Innervisions</i> by Stevie Wonder. Up-tempo funk with passionate vocals and a prominent, funky bass line.</p> <p><i>Teachers keep on teaching Preachers keep on preaching World...</i></p> <p><i>[Music fades low and plays under dialogue.]</i></p>
00:36:37	Morgan	Host	If you could describe this album in three words, what would they be?
00:36:43	Nelson	Guest	Diverse, uh, emotional, cinematic.
00:36:47	Oliver	Host	<i>[Delightedly]</i> Hmm! I love that!
00:36:48	Music	Music	<p><i>[Music increases in volume again.]</i></p> <p><i>'Till I reach my highest ground No one's gonna bring me down Oh no</i></p> <p><i>[Music fades out completely as dialogue resumes.]</i></p>
00:37:04	Oliver	Host	Well, for our listeners who might want to listen to something after this LP, we have some recommendations for you. And uh, I'll start off, and would suggest that an audience member who really liked our discussion and specifically have sat down to check out <i>Innervisions</i> , after this, move on to another album from 1973, and that would be Curtis Mayfield's <i>Back To The World</i> . Another album by an undeniable soul genius that tackles all manners of social issues. And not to be too self-serving, but after you listen to that album, go back and check out our <i>Heat Rocks</i> episode with Lyrics Born talking about that specific Curtis Mayfield LP.
00:37:41	Music	Music	<p>“Future Shock” off the album <i>Back To The World</i> by Curtis Mayfield. Ardent funk with high-pitched vocals over a steady beat.</p> <p><i>We got to stop all men From messing up the land When won't we understand This is our last and only chance Everybody, it's a future shock Future shock...</i></p> <p><i>[Music fades out as dialogue resumes.]</i></p>
00:38:02	Oliver	Host	Morgan, how about you?
00:38:03	Morgan	Host	I'd ask you to go forward to 2003 and an artist that I love named Donnie, and he had an album called <i>The Colored Section</i> . He released it independently in 2002, and then Motown picked it up in 2003. Heavy on the sociopolitical commentary, definitely about Black life issues, and uh, I think the track to listen to off that one

would be the title track, or a track called “Heaven Sent”. His voice has really been compared a lot to Stevie Wonder’s, and of course Donny Hathaway’s, but it brings up a lot of sensibilities, and the feeling, and the sound of *Innervisions*.

- 00:38:39 Music Music “Heaven Sent” off the album *The Colored Section* by Donnie. Slow, tender, romantic vocals over a steady beat.
- I'm riding with an angel on a wave of love
I'm riding so high, riding with an angel*
- It's very evident that you are heaven sent
It's very evident*
- [Music fades out as dialogue resumes.]*
- 00:38:57 Oliver Host Nelson, what would you recommend that audience members check out next after this album?
- 00:39:01 Nelson Guest Well, I mean, the Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes album called *To Be True* came out around the same time as this, maybe a little bit later, and it's early. It's before—it's before Teddy Pendergrass is even you know, he's not a solo artist yet. And yet, he dominates the record. There's also a beautiful young singer who never really made a solo album named Sharon Paige who sang a bunch of duets with Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, she's featured on a couple of tracks there.
- 00:39:29 Music Music “Hope That We Can Be Together Soon” off the album *To Be True* by Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes. Passionate, soaring vocals over a romantic instrumental backing.
- I hope that we can be together soon
I hope that we can be together soon*
- [Music fades out as dialogue resumes.]*
- 00:39:47 Oliver Host Well, that will do it for this episode of *Heat Rocks* with our special guest, Nelson George. Nelson, what are you working on right now?
- 00:39:54 Nelson Guest Well, I gotta put a little commercial in. I have—
- 00:39:57 Nelson Guest —a book out called *The Nelson George Mixtape*. It's a collection of my writings from 1977 to 1993. You can really get it through Pacific Books which is an independent publisher here in Brooklyn, New York, if you go on their website, Pacific Books. They're also on Instagram. [PacificPacific.pub](https://www.pacificbooks.com).
- And you know, it's got a Marvin Gaye interview—actually a couple of Marvin Gaye interviews. I did a Bob Marley interview. Um, Whitney Houston, uh, early Prince, and actually one of the only interviews um, [???] Grandmaster Flash, Bambaataa, and Herc ever sat down together, which I did for the Source magazine back in like, the early 90s.
- So uh, it's a thing I wanted to do. It kind of celebrates—I put it out a couple years ago to celebrate the fact that I'd been writing about

music for about 40 years, and I wanted to, you know—so it's [Stammering] it's a—it's even got rejection slips in it.

- 00:40:54 Oliver Host Yeah, I was gonna say, I had a chance to take a look at it, and I think one of the first things you open with is a rejection slip. It might have been from Bob Christgau, the Village Voice, so. [Laughs.]
- 00:41:04 Nelson Guest 'Cause, I mean, that—the process is not about—it's a journey, y'know, the book is kind of a document of the process, and it's not always about winning. [Laughs.] You lose sometimes, too.
- 00:41:14 Oliver Host No doubt. And where can people find you online?
- 00:41:18 Nelson Guest @315NelsonGeorge on IG, and TheNelsonGeorge on Facebook. There's a couple—there's a couple of Nelson Georges, but uh, I'm the guy who has—I'm the better looking one. And then there's uh, there's one on Twitter as well, @NelsonGeorge, me.
- 00:41:35 Oliver Host Just wanted to acknowledge real quick that between the time that we taped this interview with Nelson and when this episode airs, Nelson George actually lost his father. I think age—I believe it was 88, to Covid. And so we send out our condolences to Nelson and his family for that loss.
- 00:41:51 Oliver Host You've been listening to *Heat Rocks* with me, Oliver Wang, and Morgan Rhodes.
- 00:41:57 Morgan Host Our theme music is "Crown Ones" by *Thes One of People Under The Stairs*. Shoutout to Thes for the hookup.
- 00:42:02 Oliver Host *Heat Rocks* is produced by myself and Morgan, alongside Christian Dueñas, who also edits, engineers, and does the booking for our shows.
- 00:42:10 Morgan Host Our senior producer is Laura Swisher, and our executive producer is Jesse Thorn.
- 00:42:15 Oliver Host We are part of the Maximum Fun family, taping every week live—normally—in their studios in the West Lake neighborhood of Los Angeles, but we are all sheltering and taping at home right now.

We would like to thank our five-star iTunes reviewers, the most recent one being Svensurge, who describes us as "wonderful show." They uh—Sven loves the format of inviting another well-versed person to talk about a favorite album, and certainly I could not agree more with Sven on this.

If you, dear audience member, have not had a chance to uh, leave us a review yet, please do consider it. It doesn't take very much time and it is a big way that new people can find their way to our show.

One last thing. Here's a teaser for next week's episode, which is part three of our Comfort Music series, and this time, Morgan and I selected our starting five from your selections that you shared with us on the *Heat Rocks* Facebook group. So we're very much looking forward to talking about your picks.

00:43:15	Morgan	Host	What I've always loved about Erykah Badu's music is its honesty, its reflectiveness, and its vulnerability, and there's poetry to it. Whether she's talking about falling in love, whether she's talking about falling <u>out</u> of love, as is the case on "Green Eyes" from <i>Mama's Gun</i> , or whether she's just navigating the sometimes sticky-icky processing that we do in the aftermath, after the love is gone. Shout-out to Earth, Wind & Fire. This sort of vulnerability and this open view into her life and into her loves is also present on this album, and just one of the reasons I like this album so much.
00:43:54	Speaker 1	Promo	MaximumFun.org .
00:43:56	Speaker 2	Promo	Comedy and culture.
00:43:58	Speaker 3	Promo	Artist owned—
00:43:59	Speaker 4	Promo	—Audience supported.