Berry Gordy Jr. poses with one of his label’s hit records outside Hitsville USA headquarters on West Grand Boulevard in 1964. Hitsville USA was the birthplace of the Motown sound, where many hit songs were recorded.

*TONY SPINA/DETROIT FREE PRESS/TNS*
Return to the ‘60s

In “Once in a Great City,” a beautifully written, vivid and vibrant account of Detroit in 1963, Maraniss captures this moment.

His portrait of a city taking its highest flight at dusk brings back to life Berry Gordy’s Motown Records; Lee Iacocca’s Ford Mustang; Walter Reuther’s United Automobile Workers; the “I Have A Dream” speech delivered by Martin Luther King in Detroit two months before he gave it in Washington, D.C.; the campaign to bring the 1968 Summer Olympics to the Motor City; and the efforts of civil rights advocates to pass open-housing legislation.

Maraniss’ analysis of the “precarious balance between composition and decomposition” builds on historian Thomas Sugrue’s classic study of postwar Detroit, “The Origins of the Urban Crisis.” Like Sugrue, Maraniss places great emphasis on the complex dynamics of race. Thanks to the auto industry, Maraniss points out, most Detroiters, including African-Americans, had steady incomes in the 1940s and ‘50s.

Change predicted

This economic geography allowed “the vast majority” of them to live in single-family houses, with enough room for pianos, a phenomenon that helps explain why so many Black musicians came of age.

But even in 1963, a year in which 7.3 million new cars rolled off the assembly line while (only) 4.1 million people were born in the United States, and the Big Three were making money hand over fist, sociologists at Wayne State University were warning that if current trends continued, Detroit would lose one quarter of its population by the end of the decade, with relatively productive individuals abandoning the inner city to “those who suffer from relatively great housing, educational and general economic deprivations.”

The percentage of African-Americans in the city, they predicted, would increase from 28 percent of the population in 1960 to 44.35 percent in 1970.

Lingering questions

Maraniss thinks it’s worth pondering whether the riots of the summer of 1967 “would have happened, or happened in the same way,” if Detroit has been chosen to host the Olympics (and the world was watching) and/or the Cavanagh administration had “reacted more effectively to control or prevent them.” But he deems his question “unanswerable.”

And so, “Once in a Great City” leaves its readers to wonder, perhaps fatalistically, about the impact of woefully inadequate urban renewal policies and the failure to enact fair housing laws. And about how much to attribute the fall of Detroit, which declared bankruptcy in 2013, to “a grab bag of Rust Belt infirmities, from high labor costs to harsh weather,” and/or to municipal corruption and incompetence.

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