

DANCING IN THE STREET

(1964) Performed by Martha & the Vandellas

Words and Music by Marvin Gaye, Ivy Hunter and William Stevenson

Martha Reeves was performing in 1961 as a solo artist (after her first group, the Del-Phis, broke up) when Motown producer William "Mickey" Stevenson caught her act and invited her down for an audition. She ended up with a secretary gig instead, but the "in" made her available for backup work on sessions. One day Mary Wells missed a session and Martha pulled her old band mates in and recorded "There He Is (At My Door)" in 1962. After singing backup for various artists, the group was christened Martha & the Vandellas and followed with "Come and Get These Memories" and their first classic, "(Love Is Like a) Heatwave" (#1 R&B, #4 Pop) in 1963. Through 1967, they had six Top 10 R&B hits. By 1968, several personnel changes had occurred and the hits were drying up. In 1972, Reeves and her Vandellas gave their farewell performance.

In 1974, after leaving Motown, she made her debut as a solo artist to critical acclaim and commercial indifference. From the eighties onward, she has toured with former Motown stars and had a reunion with the Vandellas in the latter part of the decade.

"Dancing in the Street" was their biggest hit at #2 Pop. A joyous call to break loose and "party," it was seen in some conservative quarters as a call to "riot," given the tense political tenor of the times, and was subsequently banned from some radio stations. Incredulously, even "Nowhere to Run" from 1965 was interpreted as having a veiled political message, though the lyrics clearly referred to the tribulations of an unhappy love affair.

"Dancing in the Street" spotlights Jamerson at his most minimal. A man capable of a torrent of melodic notes when required (see "Reach Out, I'll Be There" by the Four Tops), here he sticks to the root of each chord almost exclusively. Again, it is his unique rhythmic stamp that gets people up and shaking their booties.

Figure 1—Intro

Fig. 1 is the rhythmic template for virtually the entire song. Notice how Jamerson devises a complete and logical pattern in each measure. After stating the downbeat with a firm quarter note, he plays two pairs of eighth notes, followed by an eighth note rest on beat 4 that sets up the eighth note on the "and" of 4 as a "pump" into the next measure. The repetition of the root (E) creates a riveting intensity that is maintained throughout.

To help keep the time, it may be helpful to actually pluck the low E string on beat 4 while muting the sound with the left hand.

6 Full Band

Fig. 1

Moderately ♩ = 120

E7₁