

SMOKEY ROBINSON

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Berry Gordy founded Motown Records, but one could argue that Smokey Robinson was the man who first pushed America's most iconic soul music label toward greatness. As the leader of the Miracles, Robinson was one of the very first artists signed to the fledgling label in 1959, and while he racked up many hits for it with the Miracles and as a solo act, Robinson was also an invaluable behind-the-scenes talent who wrote songs, produced records, scouted and groomed talent, and served as a vice president at Motown from 1961 to 1988. Robinson is one of the most iconic figures in American R&B; his work helped defined pop-oriented soul, his lush, romantic R&B ballads literally gave quiet storm its name, and no less an authority than Bob Dylan has called Robinson "America's greatest living poet."

William Robinson, Jr. was born in Detroit, Michigan on February 19, 1940. He grew up in Detroit's Brewster housing project, and picked up the nickname "Smokey Joe" from his Uncle Claude, which quickly stuck. Robinson first developed an interest in music by investigating his mother's record collection, which included classic sides by Sarah Vaughan, Billy Eckstine, Muddy Waters, and John Lee Hooker. Robinson's mother died when he was ten, and since his father was frequently on the road making his living as a truck driver, young Smokey was looked after by his older sister Geraldine, and in his early teens he began singing, performing in informal doo wop groups with his friends.

In 1955, Robinson assembled a vocal group called the Five Chimes, which featured his schoolmates Clarence Dawson, James Grice, Pete Moore, and Ronald White. In 1956, the group adopted a new name, the Matadors, after Dawson left and Emerson Rogers took his place, and a year later, Rogers and James Grice left the lineup, and Claudette Rogers and Bobby Rogers (respectively Emerson Rogers' sister and cousin) stepped in. With their new co-ed lineup, the name the Matadors was considered a poor fit, and they began calling themselves the Miracles. A guitarist, Marv Tarplin, joined the act in 1958, and the Miracles began making a name for themselves on Detroit's R&B scene.

In 1958, Robinson met Berry Gordy, a Detroit-based songwriter who had penned several hits for Jackie Wilson and was looking to make a name for himself in the music business. Gordy was impressed with the Miracles and Robinson's talents as a songwriter; he helped the band land a deal with End Records, and the Miracles released their first single, "Got a Job" (an answer song to the Silhouettes' hit "Get a Job") later that year. While the single sold well in Detroit, it didn't make much noise nationally, and follow-ups on End and Chess fared no better. Robinson believed he and Gordy could do better themselves, and he urged Gordy to follow through on his idea of forming his own label. The Miracles became the first act signed to Gordy's new record company, Motown, and in 1960, their song "Shop Around," written by Robinson, was the first Motown single to become a nationwide hit.

Through the '60s, the Miracles were a frequent presence on the pop and R&B charts, scoring hits with such songs as "Tracks of My Tears," "Mickey's Monkey," "You've Really Got a Hold on Me," "Going to a Go-Go," "Ooo Baby Baby," and many more. As Robinson became recognized as the creative force behind the group, their name was changed to Smokey Robinson & the Miracles in 1966. Robinson also shared his talents with many other Motown acts; he wrote "My Guy" and "The One Who Really Loves You" for Mary Wells, "My Girl," "Get Ready," and "The Way You Do the Things You Do" for the Temptations, "Ain't That Peculiar" and "I'll Be Doggone" for Marvin Gaye, and "The Hunter Gets Captured by the Game" for the Marvellettes, among many others. As a vice president at Motown, Robinson was also a key part of the label's management and production team, and helped guide the company into being one of the most successful independent American record labels of all time.

Robinson fell in love with Claudette Rogers not long after she joined the Miracles, and they were married in 1959. By 1969, Robinson was growing tired of dividing his time between his family, Motown, and the Miracles, and he decided to retire from the group so he could spend more time at home and less time on the road. He postponed his departure when "Tears of a Clown" (recorded in 1966) unexpectedly became a major hit in 1970, but a year later, he launched a "farewell tour" with the Miracles, though the group would continue without him (and Robinson would write one of their latter-day hits, "Floy Joy").

After a two-year layoff, Robinson returned to the recording studio with his first solo album, 1973's Smokey. The album found Robinson focusing on midtempo romantic numbers as well as more mature and personal themes, which would carry over to his second solo effort, 1974's Pure Smokey. Robinson scored a pair of major R&B hits with 1975's A Quiet Storm, the title tune and "Baby, That's Backatcha," and the former tune would give a name to the sort of polished, romantic R&B that was becoming Robinson's stock in trade. Robinson was no longer as consistent a hitmaker as he once was, but he continued to make his presence known on the charts with tunes such as "Cruisin'" (from 1979's Where There's Smoke) and "Being with You" (from the 1981 album of the same name). The year 1987 was a memorable one for Robinson — the album One Heartbeat would score a massive hit for him with the song "Just to See Her," which also earned him a Grammy, and he was also inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame (though the rest of the Miracles were not, much to his consternation). But this came near the end of an important era for Robinson — in 1988, Motown was sold to MCA, and Robinson stepped down as vice president. In 1990, he recorded a final album for Motown, Love Smokey (Robinson received a Lifetime Achievement Grammy the same year), and he signed with SBK Records for 1992's Double Good Everything.

The end of Motown came during a turbulent period for Robinson — in the mid-'80s, he developed a serious addiction to cocaine, and his marriage to Claudette ended in divorce in 1986. While Robinson would kick drugs shortly after the end of his marriage, following the commercial disappointment of Double Good Everything, he wouldn't record again until 1999, when he recorded Intimate for MCA's revived Motown label. In 2004, Robinson (who cited a spiritual reawakening as a key factor in giving up drugs) recorded a contemporary gospel album, Food for the Spirit, and a collection of standards, Timeless Love, followed in 2006. Robinson returned to the smooth soul sounds of his '70s and '80s solo work with 2009's Time Flies When You're Having Fun, released on his own label, Robso Records; several tracks from this album were matched with remakes of Robinson's Motown hits for the collection Now & Then. In 2014, he released a Verve album, Smokey & Friends, for which he remade 11 of his most popular compositions with a roster of duet partners that included Elton John, James Taylor, Mary J. Blige, and Jessie J. ~ Mark Deming

ARTIST:	TITLE:	ALBUM:	LABEL:	CREDIT:	YEAR:
The Miracles	Bad Girl	Ooo Baby Baby: The Anthology	UMG Records	W,P	1959
Barbara McNair	Here I Am Baby	The Complete Motown Singles Vol. 7:1967	Motown Records	W,P	1965
Diana Ross & The Supremes	A Breath Taking Guy	Anthology	N/A	W,P	N/A
Kim Weston	Feel Alright Tonight	The Complete Motown Singles Vol. 4:1964	Motown Records	W,P	1964
The Marvellettes	The Hunter Gets Captured By The Game	The Best Of The Marvellettes	N/A	W,P	1966
Smokey Robinson	I've Been Good to You	Ooo Baby Baby: The Anthology	Motown Records	A	1963
The Flying Pickets	The Tears of A Clown	The Best Of The Flying Pickets	EMI Records	W	1983
The Beatles	You've Really Got a Hold On Me	With The Beatles	EMI Records	W	1963

ARTIST:	TITLE:	ALBUM:	LABEL:	CREDIT:	YEAR:
Mary Wells	Two Lovers	Best of Mary Wells	Motown Records	W,P	1961
Jackson 5	The Love I Saw In You WAS Just A Mirage	Third Album	N/A	W,P	1970
The Temptations	Way Over There	The Temptations Sing Smokey	Motown Records	W,P	1965
The Temptations	You've Really Got a Hold On Me	The Temptations Sing Smokey	Motown Records	W,P	1965
The Temptations	Who's Lovin' You	The Temptations Sing Smokey	Motown Records	W,P	1965
The Temptations	The Way You Do The Things You Do	Meet The Temptations	Motown Records	A,W,P	1964
Smokey Robinson & The Miracles	My Girl Has Gone	Ooo Baby Baby: The Anthology	Motown Records	A,W,P	1965
Smokey Robinson & The Miracles	Give Her Up	Ooo Baby Baby: The Anthology	Motown Records	A,W,P	1968
Smokey Robinson & The Miracles	That's What Love Is Made Of	Ooo Baby Baby: The Anthology	Motown Records	A,W,P	1964
Smokey Robinson & The Miracles	Crazy About The La La La	Ooo Baby Baby: The Anthology	Motown Records	A,W,P	1971
Smokey Robinson & The Miracles	I Don't Blame You at All	Ooo Baby Baby: The Anthology	Motown Records	A,W,P	1971