

APOLLO

EDUCATION

APOLLO THEATER
WALK OF FAME
LEGEND

SMOKEY ROBINSON



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A musical revolution once roared through the streets of Detroit, Michigan. On February 19, 1940, the “**Motor City**” gave birth to a figure that helped steer a new course in American music: Smokey Robinson.

Raised in Detroit’s North End, William Robinson Jr. was just a boy when his uncle nicknamed him “Smokey Joe,” inspired by Robinson’s love of cowboys and Western movies. Singing and writing song lyrics since the fifth grade, “Smokey” formed a vocal quintet in high school. First calling themselves the Five Chimes, they later changed their name to the Matadors. Following an audition in 1957, a young man approached Smokey showing interest in his songs. His name was Berry Gordy and he was starting a record company.

Only 17 years old, Smokey had written over 100 songs by the time he met Gordy, who at age 28, was already a master of song writing in his own right. Their first combined hit, “Got A Job,” was recorded by the Matadors in 1958, and featured Smokey’s smooth **tenor singing voice**. Before the record was released, the decision was made to change their name from the Matadors to the Miracles.

In 1959, Smokey and the Miracles scored a national hit titled “Bad Girl.” With the song’s success, they were booked at the world famous Apollo Theater in New York City. Headlining the week they performed, was the Genius of Soul, Ray Charles. Sensing how nervous they were for their Apollo debut, Charles helped arrange their songs, rehearse the house band, and introduce the Miracles to the world of big league show business. Inspired by the experience, Smokey returned to Detroit set on becoming a star.

Meanwhile, Berry Gordy moved into a modest two-story house in Detroit, which he converted into a recording studio and headquarters for his new company, Motown Records. By 1960, the Miracles recorded Motown’s first million selling single, “Shop Around.” Soon after, Gordy’s home studio earned the nickname “Hitsville U.S.A.” due to Motown’s reputation for producing hit after hit record.

WORDS TO KNOW

Motown Sound

Motown’s signature style of music; combining jazz, soul, and rhythm and blues, into a smooth pop blend featuring rich vocal harmonies, horns, and strings.

Tenor Singing Voice

One of the highest vocal ranges for male singers.

FUN FACTS

“My Girl”

The Motown classic “My Girl,” written by Smokey and fellow Miracle Ronnie White, was first introduced to the Temptations backstage at the Apollo in 1964.

\$3.19

In the early days of Motown, Smokey and Berry Gordy received their first check for the first four songs they ever recorded. Grand total: \$3.19.

Friends Forever

Smokey was childhood friends with music legends Aretha Franklin and Diana Ross, all of whom grew up within blocks of each other in Detroit’s North End.

“Motor City”

Detroit, Michigan is nicknamed the “Motor City” due to being the leading automobile manufacturer in the United States. The Ford Motor Company, General Motors (GM), and Chrysler Automobiles are all still headquartered in Detroit, as they have been since the beginning of the 20th century.

Motortown Revue

In 1962, Berry Gordy formed the first-ever Motortown Revue. The national concert tour pulled into Harlem and took center stage at the Apollo. Starring in the weeklong event was a star-studded cast of Motown artists including Diana Ross and the Supremes, Marvin Gaye, the Temptations, and twelve-year-old “Little” Stevie Wonder. Closing the show each night was Smokey Robinson and the Miracles.



While he actively performed with the Miracles in the 1960s, Smokey also wrote some of the most iconic songs of the era for fellow Motown artists; including The Temptations, Diana Ross and the Supremes, and Marvin Gaye. Both his singing and songwriting helped define the Motown Sound, a musical style which brought recognition to dozens of African American artists in American culture.

In the 1970s, Smokey branched out on a successful solo career, scoring a major hit with the 1979 single, “Cruisin.” Honored with a GRAMMY Award in 1988 for Best Male R&B Vocal Performance, followed by a GRAMMY Lifetime Achievement Award in 1999, Smokey has achieved more in his lifetime than many of us could imagine. His library of over 4,000 songs has helped steer the course of popular music in America for over 50 years, driving home a feeling of sweetness and soul that only Smokey Robinson could deliver.

Smokey Robinson was inducted into the Apollo Theater Walk of Fame in 2008.

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LISTENING AND VIEWING

Smokey wrote some of the biggest hits in Motown history. Here are just a few songs that may strike a chord:

The Miracles

“You’ve Really Got A Hold On Me”

“I Second That Emotion”

“The Tears Of A Clown”

The Temptations

“My Girl”

“The Way You Do The Things You Do”

“Get Ready”

Mary Wells

“My Guy”



DO NOW!

Songwriting Workshop

Smokey has written over 4,000 songs in his career, and was especially known for being a great writer of song lyrics, a talent he had since he was a boy. How does one begin writing their own songs?

Try this: Think of a melody to a song you already know, such as “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.” Can you think of any other songs that share the same melody but have different lyrics? *See below for answers.*

Now, take your chosen melody and substitute your own original song lyrics. Before you know it, you’ll have your own song!

Sounds of the City

Smokey grew up in his hometown of Detroit hearing musical sounds all around him. Listen closely to the tones of car horns on a busy street, the rhythms of a train chugging along the tracks, or the melodies birds might sing in a park.

Record the sounds you hear and listen back for musical parts. Then, see if you can organize the different sounds into a musical soundscape. Before you know it, you’ll be able to form a song all your own!

Answers from above: “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star”, “The Alphabet Song”, and “Ba Ba Black Sheep” all share the exact same melody, but feature different song lyrics.

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Hitsville USA building in Detroit MI. Photo taken: Monday June 19th, 2006 by Chris Butcher

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