A Lifetime of Devotion

Maybe you think Smokey Robinson is one of the most important entertainers of all time. We second that emotion.
An Evening With
SMOKEY ROBINSON
viewed by L

The theme auditorium at Chicago's Northwestern University School of Law, Terra Marie — the 1980s Motown hit maker — is on stage, treating the audience to her rendition of Smokey Robinson's classic "The Tracks of My Tears." It's one of those songs that have sunk so deep down into our psyche that we never hear it the same way after hearing it first.

But if the people in the naturally attired audience here at this $500-a-seat benefit are looking at anyone's face, it's likely that of the man Marie is singing to. There on the stage is Smokey Robinson himself, dressed in a sharp, three-piece pin-striped suit that resembles the threads of a banker. And when the tribute — An Evening with Smokey Robinson, part of the History Makers series on PBS, which tells the stories of notable African-Americans — airs this month, it's not likely that anyone will find Robinson's smile out of place, as is the case with the subject of the song. No, he looks more than content, maybe a little amused, clearly happy, grinning like — well, like a fan at a Smokey Robinson concert.

Indeed, this gathering isn't about true tracks. In part, it's about the astonishing number of musical tracks Robinson has given us over the course of the 50 years since the founding of Motown Records, the label that first gave his group, the Miracles, a chance. And perhaps most remarkably, it's about the tracks that Robinson continues to churn out, even on the eve of his 70th birthday. Few artists can claim similar longevity and continued activity in the industry.

Robinson is well aware that he could not have come as far as he has, without the support of his late brother, Berry. "Berry was the one because of the first record label that was owned by an African-American and featured mostly African-American acts. The significance of this event was not lost on Robinson, as he admits his focus was elsewhere.

"I could see that the changes were happening," Robinson remembers. "I was aware of what was going on, but my concentration was on my personal life and my music, because it was the beginning of my dreams coming true."

The Mirvetown music was a family affair, with Gordy's father and siblings holding prominent positions in the company — as well as a young William Robinson Jr., who sang lead vocals for Motown's second signed act, the Mirvetown. Robinson, who went by the longtime nickname of Smokey, was named the label's vice president, beginning a decades-long partnership and a lifelong friendship between Gordy and Robinson.

That same year, Gordy purchased the first of several homes on Detroit's West Grand Boulevard that would become the nucleus of Motown Records. Sales, management, songwriting, and recording all took place there in the early days.

"Nobody could ever verbally describe the energy," Robinson says. "It was constant office/recording studio that read: "Hitville, U.S.A."

It was a place where the hits started coming, and in. And so they did. Motown had 110 top-10 songs before 1971. The label's first number one R&B hit was "Shop Around," from none other than the iconic Gordy Robinson.

Robinson's songwriting process quickly became the stuff of legend. He not only matched but beat most of the offerings from his contemporaries. He answered the Silhouettes' "Get a Job" with the Mirvetown's early hit "Got a Job." He countered Sam Cooke's "Bring It on Home to Me" with the Mirvetown's "You Really Got a Hold on Me."

And one night, having just completed "ISecond That Emotion" with a friend, Robin-

"I always wanted to do music. I just didn't think it would be possible from where I grew up, in the hood in Detroit. That was just my impossible dream."
HOW DOES THIS 70-YEAR-OLD DOCTOR HAVE THE BODY OF A 30-YEAR-OLD?

Robinson snaps out of the past and back into the present as the show pulls up to the audition room overlooking Chicago’s lakeshore. He’s ushered in, he steps to chat with host and interviewer Green Hill, who promises she’s going to “dig deep” during the montage session to come. “Dig on,” says the bemused Robinson. “I don’t care.”

Outrage, Robinson is the perfect guest; he’s engaging, charming, and radiating with join de vivre. Guided by Hill, he covers some of the history that he’d already recounted to me during the past hour and some new areas as well. He talks about Detroit’s street-corner doo-wop scenes of the late 1950s, and how one of those groups — Northern High School’s the Five Chimes — became the Motetts, which later became the Miracles. He talks about the group’s failed audition and first meeting with pre-Motown Berry Gordy Jr. He talks about his leaving the Miracles, his reemergence as a solo act in the 1970s, his 1980s’ victory over drug addiction, his faith in God, and the blessing of his late-in-life second marriage.

Eventually, Howard Hewett and Musiq Soulchild join Teena Marie in replacing some of Robinson’s hits, while photographs from Robinson’s past flash across a large screen. We see him with the all-star roster of singers who contributed to “We Are the World,” an album cover, and outtake microphone in hand, eyes closed, head cocked back and to the side, clearly utilizing his angelic upper register and driving ladies wild. When the talk is over, Robinson joins Teena Marie, Motown veterans Martha Reeves, and the others to sing “Cruising” and “Quiet Storm.”

Seeing Robinson outtake feels a little bit like a flashback to those days in the 1960s, when he was first hitting it big and his friend Gordy was breaking boundaries. Fifty years later, Robinson is still singing, and things around him are still changing in big ways. This time, though, he’s not overlooking any of the significance.

“We were held back for so long,” he says, “and now we have a black president. You know what I mean? It’s awesome. I always believed it would happen some day, but I wasn’t sure that I would live to see it. But I have, and it’s a wonderful experience.”

As for Robinson, he will go from here, he speculates that he might pen another memoir to add to his 1987 debut, Sunday: Inside My Life. And he says he’d love to give film acting a try — not necessarily in a starring role but in a good one. In the meantime, the man who once rode with Goddy to fetch 65 rpm singles from the pressing plant is learning to navigate a vastly different record industry with his own Robio label. He’s got numerous gigs scheduled for this year in the United States and abroad, and he’ll serve as the keynote speaker at the South by Southwest music festival in Austin, Texas, next month.

But as much as he likes looking toward the future, on a special night like tonight Robinson can’t help but stop and look back in awe at the past.

“It amazes me that I am considered a part of history,” he says. “It’s not that I don’t understand what happened at Motown and what has happened in my career as an artist and as a songwriter and all of that. I do understand that. I wish I’d known we were going to make history when we started Motown, because I would have saved every scrap of paper that I started a song on, every contributed line, every piece of tape, but you just don’t know. You’re young and you’re making music, and you don’t realize that you are not only making music, but you are making history.”

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