

Smokey Robinson celebrates 50 years by REUTERS

"Having Fun"

By Gail Mitchell

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LOS ANGELES (Billboard) – The songs alone speak volumes. "Shop Around." "You've Really Got a Hold on Me." "Ooo Baby Baby." "The Tracks of My Tears." "I Second That Emotion." "The Tears of a Clown." "My Guy." "My Girl." "Cruisin'." "Being With You." These are just a handful of the classics written and, in many cases, uniquely interpreted by William "Smokey" Robinson.

The singer-songwriter is celebrating his 50th anniversary in music this year, as is the iconic label Motown Records. On the eve of the release Tuesday of Robinson's new studio album, "Time Flies When You're Having Fun," on his own ROBSON Records, Billboard talked to the man behind the beloved tunes.

Billboard: What's the origin of the nickname "Smokey?"

Smokey Robinson: My favorite uncle, who was also my godfather, gave it to me when I was 3 years old. I used to love cowboys; that was my thing -- especially the ones who sang. And he would always take me to see cowboy movies. His cowboy name for me was Smokey Joe. Whenever anybody asked me what my name was, I'd tell them "Smokey Joe." The Joe dropped off when I became 12.

Billboard: When did you first know you wanted to be a singer-songwriter?

Robinson: I have felt like that since I was 4 years old. At times it seemed like it was going to be my absolutely impossible dream given where I grew up in Detroit. But it was always my dream. Nobody in my family was a professional musically. My mother sang in church and played the piano; my dad sang in the shower (laughs). However, I listened to everything that was being played at home, from gospel to gut-bucket blues to jazz and classical. My two older sisters listened to bebop: Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie. I formed my first group (when I was 14). We went from being the Five Chimes to the Matadors and changed members until we got to be the Miracles.

Billboard: You've said in previous interviews that Motown founder Berry Gordy was your mentor. What did he teach you about music?

Robinson: When I met Berry, I had a loose-leaf notebook of about 100 songs. Back then, I had five songs in one song because the first verse had nothing to do with the second verse, and the second verse had nothing to do with the bridge. It was just a bunch of ideas all rhymed up because I always rhymed things. Berry made me understand a song is like a short story, film or book with a beginning, middle and end that all ties together. And even if you don't give it a definite ending, you have to give people enough material to create their own ending.

Billboard: One striking element of your songwriting is your skillful use of metaphors. Bob Dylan drew attention to that when he called you "America's greatest living poet." Why are these important?

Robinson: Once I learned how to write songs, I recognized the fact that there are no new words. There are also no new notes on the piano or guitar. And there are really no new ideas. So you have to work within the framework of what's been going on for thousands of years since language began. You have to work within that parameter. So the trick for me was to try and say the same thing differently.

Billboard: Do you ever get tired of singing or writing love songs?

Robinson: No, because love is such an important aspect of life. Love can be happy, sad, mad, cruel, hateful, everlasting. Love is the most powerful emotion that we as human beings have.

Billboard: What was it like working at Motown with its formidable stable of writing talent like Holland-Dozier-Holland, Ashford & Simpson and Norman Whitfield?

Robinson: Motown was a very democratic place. It wasn't like Berry ran it like a dictator with an iron hand. He was a songwriter and producer himself and still did a lot of that in the early days. And some of his songs got shot down like everyone else's during our Monday morning meetings when we picked songs and records. All the artists were open to all the writers and producers. If you went to an artist with a song and he or she wanted to record it, no one said, "No, you can't record that song."

But Motown was a fantastic place to grow up in. When you hear people talk about the Motown family, it's not a myth. It's true. That's how it is today for those of us who are still here. Everybody was a part of the family: the artists, writers, producers, musicians, the sales staff. It wasn't like we had this artist clique where we didn't hang out with anyone else.

Billboard: Besides Berry, you also wrote songs with your longtime guitarist, Marv Tarplin. Who else were important collaborators?

Robinson: (Marv's) been the source of many, many songs for me. Marv, who retired last December, is one of the most prolific music people I've ever known. Some things just click, and we did.

A lot of the guys like Al Cleveland and Frank Wilson used to give me (music) tracks and I'd write songs to those. One of the biggest records I've ever been associated with was "Tears of a Clown." Stevie Wonder brought me the complete track just like it is on the record. He said, "Hey, man. I can't think of a song to go with this. See what you can come up with."

The biggest competition I ever had was with Barrett Strong and Norman Whitfield writing for the Temptations. Norman and I would compete to try and get the next Temptations record. But we would still help each other. He could be recording something with the Temptations and say, "Hey, Smoke. I want you to sing a part on this record or clap your hands and stomp your feet." And in turn, he would do it for me.

Billboard: Did you realize at the time what a major role Motown was playing in breaking down racial barriers?

Robinson: We knew we wanted to make great music. Not only black music but quality music for everyone. I only wish that we'd have known we were making history while we were making history. If we'd have known, I would have saved everything. Back then, there were certain areas in Detroit where, if you were black, you better be working for somebody and you better be able to prove it. When we started to have hit records, we used to get letters from the white kids in those areas saying, "We love your music. But our parents don't know we have it. If they did, they'd make us throw it away." Then about a year or so later, we began getting letters from the parents saying, "We found out our kids listen to your music and they turned us onto it. We love it and we're so glad you're making this music."

We broke down a lot of walls. In the South, we'd find segregated audiences; whites on one side and blacks on the other. We'd go back a year or so after, and the kids would be dancing together, hanging out and talking. Even overseas . . . the Cold War was going on in Russia, but the Russians loved our music. We'd go there and get a warm welcome.

Billboard: Why did you decide to go solo?

Robinson: I had no intention of going solo. Ever. When I retired from the Miracles, I was already a VP at Motown. I figured that would be the rest of my life, going to the office every day and making official decisions. At that point, my kids were born after my (wife at the time) Claudette had suffered several miscarriages, and I just wanted to spend more time with my family. The Miracles had done everything a group could do three or four times over by then and I wasn't contributing as much anymore. My plan was to retire from the group and probably write and produce records for other artists. But I would never again be onstage as a singer. I did that for (a while) and went stir crazy until Berry came by my office and said, "You know what I want you to do? Get a band together and get out of here, because you are miserable."

Billboard: You later overcame a personal battle with drugs.

Robinson: I speak at schools, churches, gang meetings, rehab facilities, telling people that drugs don't discriminate. I was 39 years old and my life was going exactly as I would have it go. I couldn't have written it any better. But drugs don't care who you are, what you're doing, where you are or where you're going. When you open yourself up to them, you are vulnerable. And I was. You think drugs won't get the best of you, that you will never become an addict. Ninety-nine percent of the people who start doing drugs do so with their friends. It's a social thing and you call yourself having fun. Then you look up and fun has wiped you out like it did me. I did it for two years. I was a walking corpse, totally out of it.

Drugs are also a spiritual condition. If you don't get your spiritual self together, you'll never conquer them. I went to church and was prayed for; I gave it to God. I went to church one night a drug addict and when I came out of that church, I was free. That was May 1986. I haven't even thought about drugs since then other than that I'm at war with them.

Billboard: If you could, what one thing would you change about the industry?

Robinson: I would change the fact that people are able to get your music whenever they want to, free of charge. After you've labored over it and took the time to create it, that's unfair.

Billboard: Whose songwriting skills do you admire among the newer artists?

Robinson: There are so many talented young people out there making great music: Alicia Keys, Mariah Carey, Justin Timberlake, Beyonce, Maxwell and John Legend. It kills me when I hear people say music is not going anywhere nowadays. I'm sure there were some people saying the same thing when we started Motown: "What is this stuff? What are they doing?" Sure, there's some negative music out there. But there's no need to focus on that and say it's all negative.

Billboard: Is there anything you'd change about your career?

Robinson: I'm sure there are some things I would do differently. However, I'd leave the majority of things just as they are, including the hardships. That just builds your character. Time is the greatest educator that we have. It gives you a great outlook on life and teaches you--if you're looking. In my case, I just hope I've made a positive imprint and that I will continue to do so.

(Editing by SheriLinden at Reuters)

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