

SMOKEY ROBINSON

William Robinson
Born February 19th, 1940
Detroit, Michigan



William "Smokey" Robinson is a man whose work is synonymous with love – undying love, unrequited love, passionate love – and whose name is synonymous with Motown Records, as leader of the Miracles, as a solo artist, as a songwriter, as a producer and, along with Berry Gordy Jr., as a founding father of the company. In fact, it was the Miracles' "Shop Around" that established Motown's Tamla label. After leasing previous singles to larger labels for distribution, Gordy decided to do it himself in 1959 with the Miracles' "Way Over There," which was a modest hit, selling to the tune of 60,000 records. Then came "Shop Around." By early 1961, it had reached Number One on the R&B chart and Number Two on the pop chart, becoming Motown's first million seller and establishing a group that would achieve that seven-figure success six more times.

Like many hits that make careers and become legendary, "Shop Around" is one that almost got away: Robinson and Gordy had intended the song for Barrett Strong, who'd previously had a hit for Gordy, "Money." Then the Miracles decided to record the song, but Gordy thought the tempo of their first version dragged. He coaxed the group back to the studio for a 3:00 a.m. session in which they cut it faster and got it right – and Motown's hitmaking dynasty began.

For Robinson, music was always an extended family affair. When his original group, the Matadors – with Bobby Rogers, Emerson Rogers, Pete Moore and Ronnie White – needed a fill-in for their five-part harmonies after Emerson Rogers enlisted in the service, they recruited the Rogerses' sister Claudette, whom Robinson eventually married. The Supremes, known at first as the Primettes, were able to audition for Gordy because Robinson had been a neighbor of Diana Ross's; when they auditioned, Robinson took special notice of their guitarist, Marv Tarplin, who went on to accompany the Miracles and to arrange and co-write many of their songs.

Robinson, whose first production job was "Way Over There," wrote and produced hits for some of Motown's greatest stars, among them Marvin Gaye ("Ain't That Peculiar"), the Temptations ("My Girl"), Mary Wells ("My Guy") and the Marvelettes ("The Hunter Gets Captured by the Game"). But it was with the Miracles that he was carving an even deeper impression in the nation's pop life. Robinson, whom Bob Dylan once called America's "greatest living poet," performed magical ballads pledging unconditional love, love that can hurt but endures in spite of anything. "You Really Got a Hold on Me," "Ooh Baby Baby," "I Second That Emotion" and the twin heartbreakers "The Tracks of My Tears" and "The Tears of a Clown" – these were beloved as prom songs, car songs, songs to spark a new romance or rekindle an old one, songs that simply function as intimate memories.

Robinson performed his final concert with the Miracles in Washington, D.C., on July 16th, 1972. The group continued without Robinson and enjoyed several more hits – including the smoking "Love Machine (Part 1)." Robinson has carried on as a record executive and an active solo artist, proving that his passion for romance is incurable with such recent valentines as "Cruisin'," "Let Me Be the Clock" and "Being with You."

LLOYD PRICE



DEL SHANNON





DOO-WOP

The Street-Corner Roots of Rock

BY PHILIP GROIA

THIS EVENING we honor the drag strips and low-riding alleys of Los Angeles, the housing projects and community centers of Washington, D.C., the churches, rehearsal halls and assembly lines of Detroit, the front stoops and street corners of New York. These were not the great concert halls and recording studios of America; nor were they the great amateur showcases where winners seemed to become recording stars overnight. They are the birthplaces of the Robins, the Marquees, the Miracles and the Dominoes – groups that sang a music now known as doo-wop. The reason we single out these particular groups is that some members of the Robins became the Coasters; the Marquees included the young Marvin Gaye; the Miracles were fronted by songwriter Smokey Robinson; and the Dominoes' lead singer was Clyde McPhatter, who was later replaced by Jackie Wilson.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the big bands gave way to simpler forms of popular music. One of these was the music of the vocal groups. These groups, usually composed of young men, began with little or no musical training and no instrumental accompaniment. They were equipped with talent and passion. But were vocal groups really singing “doo-wop”? Or were they improvising the forerunner of the “hook,” a catchy, easy-to-remember phrase designed to get the listener and record buyer hooked on a song or recording?

The Moonglows blow-noted their way through “Sincerely” with “who-we-who, whooit, whooit, whooit.” Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers began “I Promise to Remember” with “oodie-bop-a-cow, bop-a-cow.” The Crows introduced “Gee,” a landmark recording, with “doot-a-doot-a-doot.” The Cleftones intoned “yeah, diddle-little-little-lit” in “Little Girl of Mine.” The Chords’ “Sh-Boom” shook up the musical world with “hey, laddie, ding-dong, a-lang, a-lang, a-lang – sh-boom.” The Five Satins “shoo-doo-bee-dooed” through “In the Still of the Night.” In “Get a Job,” the Silhouettes sang “sha-na-na, sha-na-na,” never realizing they were inspiring a blockbuster parody group, Sha Na Na. The Five Keys took us to Chinatown with “Ling Ting Tong” (“tais-a-moke-um-boot-ah-yay”). The Cadillacs responded to “Speedo” with “bah-bah-jibb-a-dee.” The Flamingos came the closest to using the phrase “doo-wop.” They disguised it with split-second timing as they answered Nate Nelson’s “I Only Have Eyes for You” with a lightning-fast “doo-bop-shoo-bop.”

The street corner offered the singing group a symposium to show its talent. Songs were composed and exchanged on the street. There, the lead, bass and harmony singers were chosen, and groups battled to be the best. As friendships were made and broken, a fraternity of group members was formed. Some of the Solitaires sang with the Cadillacs. Members of the Cadillacs, the Flairs and the Valentines sang with the Coasters.

Gaining a reputation in the neighborhood and attracting the admiration of female fans were two important reasons groups were formed. Lyrics and routines were devised to attract girls, and guys who were considered entertainers were given a form of diplomatic immunity from street fighting



The "S" Royales



The Del Vikings



The Five Keys



Lee Andrews and the Hearts



The Ravens



The Willows



The Clovers



The Chantels



The Dominoes



The Turbans



The Harptones



The Channels



The Chords



The Velours



The Swallows



The Cadillacs



The Crows



The Platters



Dion and the Belmonds



The Dells



The Pastels



The Silhouettes



The Monotones



The Impalas

and gang wars. Perhaps this is why most of the doo-wop groups of the early Fifties were male.

Vocal competition often spread from the corners of one block to battles of the groups in other neighborhoods. "We used to go and visit groups in the 150th Street area," said Tony Middleton, lead singer of the Willows, from Harlem's West 115th Street. "The whole area was like one small neighborhood. Groups were, in a way, parts of families. Everybody would go and see the other groups perform. Even though it was six or eight miles away, we would visit one another. We would walk up there and walk back, just singing all the way. Never take the subway. If we did take the subway, it would be for the echo chamber."

Battles of the groups took place indoors at rent parties and red-light parties, where couples danced slowly and closely – hence the name *grind-em-ups*. Reggie Walker, who sang "Bermuda Shorts" with the Delroys, talked about an indoor battle of groups:

"There was a big argument, so we decided to have it out. . . . We had five guys; they had five. We sang this song called 'Raindrops,' by the Inspirations, with Angel, who was really a man. He was fifteen or sixteen years old. He got down on his knees and started crying – 'Raindrops are fall-hall-in'. . . .' The song called for that. In those days crying was really in. He was really crying. He had tears in his eyes. That was it. We won and went on as the best group in the projects."

Establishing peer acceptance in the neighborhood was a mere prelude to the real symbols of success, a recording contract and an engagement on a live stage show. Nothing showed the glamour of the doo-wop group more than the stage show. Adoring fans were treated to the flashy clothes, the exciting choreography, the fancy cars and the endless string of similar names.

Before a group acquired recognition in the neighborhood, it had to have a name. And what names? First came the bird-group era, supposedly influenced by the cool of jazz saxophonist Charlie "Bird" Parker – the Ravens, Orioles, Swallows, Flamingos, Crows, Penguins, Meadowlarks, Cardinals, Wrens and Robins. In the mid-Fifties the high-stepping Cadillacs heralded the era of the car groups – the El Dorados, Impalas, Imperials, Bonneville, Lincolns, Belvederes, Montereys, Montclairs, Edsels, Fleetwoods, Corvairs and V-Eights. Groups were named after musical terms – the Five Keys, Five Notes, Chimes, Cellos, Metronomes, Monotones, Clefones, Harptones, Channels, Dubs, Blue Notes, Vocaleers and Vocaltones. Romance played a part with the Heartbeats, Heartbreakers, Lovenotes, Four Lovers and Valentines. If you wanted to give flowers, you sent Carnations, Clovers, Gladiolas and Marigolds. For those who made only a cosmetic appearance, there were the Avons and Revlons. Geography played a role – the Nutmegs came from New Haven, the Marylanders from Baltimore and the Detroit Spinners from the Motor City. If a group wanted a reputation for being smooth, it chose names like the Five Satins, Velvets, Velvetones, Velours and Smoothtones. And there was royalty too – the Regals, "5" Royales, Five Crowns, Kings, Teen Queens, Royaltones, Monarchs and Queens. After the commercial viability of the boy-soprano lead was discovered came the Schoolboys, Teenagers, Teenchords, Juniors, Cubs and, of course, Youngtones. Finally there had to be something mystical about singing on the street corner at night, as shown by names like the Starlighters, Twilighters, Midnighters, Moonglows and Moonlighters.

The promotion of the vocal group in the 1950s began with the disc jockey. Records were hyped over the airwaves. The groups themselves or their fan clubs submitted on-air dedications. Many radio stations broadcast jock-sponsored live stage shows, which usually featured a large orchestra and a dozen or so hot acts, about half of which were vocal groups. The disc jockey served as the MC. As he introduced the group, the male quartet or quintet would enter from stage right and left, running at full speed, as their teenage admirers shrieked deliriously. The groups would charge to two microphones, one for the lead and bass singers, the other for a huddle of harmony singers. The close-knit ambience of the street corner was re-created on stage. The groups with the flashiest routines and showmanship would fare best, since the noise from the audience was so deafening.

Groups increased the frenzy of the audience by attiring them-

selves splendidly: usually in white shoes and dark suits with a gaudy shirt and tie. Lee Andrews and the Hearts wore white gloves to accent the mood of "Tear Drops." The Heartbeats wore pink shirts with "Mister B" collars, named after jazz-pop crooner Billy Eckstine. The Teenagers wore white sweaters with a red T. The Turbans, famous for the Latin-rock "When You Dance," adorned their heads with a wrap reminiscent of sepy mercenaries.

Other groups, including the Five Keys, the Solitaires, the Four Fellows and Dion and the Belmonts, were too sophisticated for theatrical frivolity. They just stood in front of the mikes, dressed cool, acted cool and blew cool notes. There were agents and managers, however, who sought a different image for their groups. Many acts hired the Apollo Theatre dance team of Cholly Atkins and Honi Coles as choreographers. For a while it seemed that Coles and Atkins, who first choreographed the Regals and the Cadillacs in 1955, had tutored everyone who had a bullet on the Hot 100 or R&B charts.

The Cadillacs were the best dancing group of the doo-wop era. The group would run on stage, and the lead singer, Earl "Speedo" Carroll, would sashay to the mike. Trouser legs fluttering as his feet kept the beat, Carroll accentuated his mouthing into the microphone with gestures – both hands waved side to side accompanied the words "You give me no chance, a no chance, a no chance, no"; he raised his hand as he sang, "Dear Lord, hear my plea"; and a hand clutched against the chest meant his heart went "zoom." At significant moments, the bass, Bobby Phillips, would lean over to the lead singer's mike or would come strutting around the lead to bellow the bass part: "bow, doe, doe." The group responded with "ooh-oooh," and the lead answered, "It's not Marie, it's Gloria." Back at the harmony mike, the background singers would be scating, arms churning, fingers snapping, feet tapping, knees marching. At the instrumental bridge, the bass would break away to the lead singer, and the group, high-stepping, would fake to the left, about-face to the right, take three steps to the rear, dance to the left, dance to the right, fake right, about-face again and return, hands clapping, to the mike, while the audience roared its approval. The group never lost a step, never missed a note, never lost its breath – and all of this in Brooks Brothers vines. For the finale, the bass began with "bom-bom-bom," the lead chanted, "Well, they up and call me Speedo," and the group chattered, "bah-bah-jibb-a-dee." Then slowly, tantalizingly, they disappeared behind the curtains, off the stage, out of the theater and into the street to a waiting 1956 Cadillac El Dorado with *Cadillacs* emblazoned in script on its sides.

They don't sing and dance like that anymore. But many people cannot forget waiting in line for hours to buy a two-dollar ticket only to endure a dreadful film before screaming and hollering for the rest of the day. The stage show has etched indelible memories – Sonny Til of the Orioles canting his body to the right as women threw themselves at the stage; the Flamingos, dressed impeccably in green suits, extending and retracting their arms to the cadence of a love ballad, "I'll Be Home," led by "the voice of champagne," Nate Nelson; the Harptones dancing so fast you could hardly see their feet; the Valentines forming a human locomotive for "The Woo Woo Train"; little Frankie Lyman illuminating the stage with the effervescence of youth; the Chantels' angelic harmony turning the delirium into a religious service; the voice of the Crests' Johnny Maestro reverberating through the theater; tenor sax breaks that sounded fifty times louder than on record; the Del Vikings' air-force uniforms; Clyde McPhatter's powerful melisma; the lead singer who cried; the harmony sung so smoothly you could snatch it out of the air; and the youth who proclaimed that freedom is singing, dancing and being a star.

Gone are groups of young men armed with a bottle of wine, urban cool and four-part harmony to compete for the attention of young women. The warm glow of stardom at a big stage show has faded. Mostly because of changing musical tastes and recording technology, the cultural phenomenon of street-corner doo-wop no longer exists. We may never again see four or five young men or women harmonizing under a lamp post, or hear the first tenor hit his high note at the end of a romantic ballad, or see a group fade off stage in perfect unison, but the music and feeling that grew out of their efforts shall live in many people's hearts forever.



Annette's scrapbook: with (left to right) Dick Dale, Bobby Rydell and Frankie Avalon



The songwriting team of Holland-Dozier-Holland



Gary "U.S." Bonds

The Shangri-Las



Wilson Pickett

Gerry Goffin, Ellie Greenwich, Jeff Barry, Cynthia Weil, Barry Mann, Neil Sedaka and Howard Greenfield, to name only some of the best) and producers (Bob Crewe, Shadow Morton, Feldman, Goldstein and Gottelher, Leiber and Stoller, Bert Berns) turned out hundreds of hits, many of which have become standards, and also fueled the girl-group explosion, which avoided the artificiality of its male counterpart, the teen idols, and produced some music now rightly regarded as classic. An indigenous rock scene emerged for the first time in Los Angeles, with a full complement of producers, managers, studio musicians, indie labels and even "teenage millionaires," like Phil Spector, who, more than anyone, defined the role of the producer as a creative force in rock and roll. Surf music came out of this era, as did instrumental bands and the very *idea* of the rock and roll band, as opposed to solo singers or vocal groups. This was happening all over America and, for some curious reason, in a British port called Liverpool . . . and we all know what *that* led to!

The city of New Orleans, source of so many musical advances, had played a leading role in the first wave of rock and roll. As early as 1948, many people, including Fats Domino, Roy Brown and Professor Longhair, were playing a kind of rock and roll. Many more were to follow, as the Crescent City became known for its good-time boogie-woogie sound. Then, around 1960, a new cycle began. Allen Toussaint, a prolific writer-performer-producer, worked with such singers as Irma Thomas, Lee Dorsey, Chris Kenner and Ernie K-Doe to create a steady flow of hits for recently created local labels like Joe Banashak's Minit and Instant. In 1961, arranger Harold Battiste and New Orleans's top session players started their own label, A.F.O., in an attempt to keep for the musicians some of the vast profits their hits were earning for other record companies. They charted with Barbara George's "I Know," but the rebellion was crushed by the big New York labels. Battiste and some of his best players countered by departing for other cities, chiefly Los Angeles, where they would have a critical role to play.

Almost immediately after Battiste's arrival in Los Angeles, which roughly coincided with the arrival of drummer Earl Palmer and saxophonists Alvin Tyler and Lee Allen, the studios of Hollywood got busier. At the same time indie labels began proliferating, and a rising generation of songwriters, producers and young session musicians got their first experience and, often, hits. Out of Phil Spector's studio band and the New Orleans contingent came a burst of activity that soon put Los Angeles on the map as a recording center.

In Detroit, another studio scene was taking shape at Motown. The sound that built America's most successful black-owned company – and launched the careers of Stevie Wonder, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, the Supremes, the Four Tops, the Temptations and so many others – was a controlled studio product in which the artists were often interchangeable, while the "feel" remained consistent.

Meanwhile, all over the country, soul was emerging. Following Sam Cooke's lead, others – including James Brown, Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, Ray Charles, Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions, Jerry Butler and Jackie Wilson – were refining the possibilities of R&B ballads, often utilizing strings (first tried on the Drifters' 1959 hit "There Goes My Baby"). These innovations would influence the course of black music for at least the next twenty years.

The revolutionary developments so far discussed took place within the framework of the record business. But at the same time, another movement was afoot, one that would lead to the rock-band explosion of the Sixties. With the disappearance of the great rock and roll stars on the touring circuit, there was a healthy audience for local and regional bands, particularly outside the big cities. All across the Midwest, the Pacific Northwest and the Southwest, thousands of bands were forming and playing at schools and dances, some of them becoming regional stars with audiences extending over several states.

At first, most of the songs these bands played were instrumentals, along with covers of rock standards by Holly, Berry and others. For millions of teenagers with no other exposure to rock's potential for raw exuberance, these bands kept the flame burning.

And out of them came the grass-roots garage-band movement, which grew to such strength in the later Sixties.

It takes some stretch of the imagination (or the memory) to envision a time when rock bands were virtually unheard of, but the late Fifties was such a time. Gene Vincent had his Bluecaps, the Crickets were carrying on without Buddy, and a few others could be mentioned, but that merely underlines the predominance of solo singers and vocal groups. Sometimes local bands would be hired to back up touring singers, but the rest of the time they worked on their own material and occasionally cracked the charts with an instrumental composition.

Just as the London-based British record industry remained unaware for years of the revolution stirring in Liverpool, American music in this period often continued to be dominated by the teen sound of New York, Philadelphia and Los Angeles. But we now know how decisive those years were in setting the stage for the legions of bands to come. The instrumental hits of 1959 and 1960 brought to light bands like Johnny and the Hurricanes (Ohio), the Fireballs (New Mexico) and the Wailers (Washington), but these were only the iceberg tip of the regional music scenes that surfaced between 1961 and 1963 with the creation of surf music (chiefly by Dick Dale and the Beach Boys), followed over the next couple of years by frat rock, then early garage-punk music, typified by the Kingsmen's "Louie Louie," the Trashmen's "Surfing Bird" and the Rivas's "California Sun." Out of bands like these, in turn, came the musicians who created the classic music of the middle and late Sixties.

The growth that took place in these years provided an infrastructure without which the tumultuous events of 1964 and onward could not have occurred. A major illustration can be found in Los Angeles, which before 1961 was more or less a sleepy little outpost of the teeming New York industry. The quality of the music for which L.A. became known in the Sixties could not have been achieved without the experience of a legion of gifted young producers and songwriters who had worked with local bands, primarily surf bands, in the formative early Sixties. The best known of these songwriters and producers are Gary Usher, Richard Podolor, Gary Paxton, Lou Adler, Jack Nitzsche, Bruce Johnston, Nick Venet, David Gates, P.F. Sloan and Steve Barri, Terry Melcher and, of course, Brian Wilson, but behind them were scores of active figures who kept the studios and indie labels of Hollywood jumping.

The girl-group phenomenon, previously cited as giving an outlet to New York's brilliant new songwriters, also offered many budding producers a chance to cut their teeth on elaborate and experimental studio techniques. Furthermore, Phil Spector's relocation to Los Angeles from New York in 1961 spurred the growth of what was to become the world's leading studio scene, with legions of first-rate musicians available to turn anyone's teen dreams into chartable hits. Out of Spector's handpicked studio band came the players and the inspiration behind innumerable success stories, from Sonny and Cher's string of hits to the Byrds (whose early records were largely played by Spector alumni). The same scene produced folk-rock, America's first serious riposte to the British Invasion.

The linkages become more convoluted and fascinating as they are explored, but I believe the point has been made. Although the years immediately following 1958 may seem a period of musical doldrums, compared with the all-out mania that came before and was soon to follow, the fact remains that without the retrenchment and gradual development of diverse approaches that took place in these interim years, rock and roll might never have returned with the strength it did.

It's commonly said that the Beatles merely updated the music of Chuck Berry, the Everly Brothers and Buddy Holly, but this is far from the truth. The Beatles, and every other British band of note, drew just as heavily (if not more heavily) from the girl groups, the Brill Building tunesmiths and now-obscure contemporary soul artists. The British may have been twenty years ahead of us in acknowledging the importance of the American music of the early Sixties, but those who love music must no longer fail to recognize the significance of these few short years, this breathing space in which nearly everything that has happened since was formulated.