

Smokey Robinson

Biography:



William “Smokey” Robinson was born in 1940 in Detroit, Michigan. His mother died when he was ten, and he was raised by his older sister in a house with eleven other children. He was musically inclined from an early age and wrote his first song at six years old.

Robinson grew up hearing jazz, blues, and gospel music in his neighborhood. While still in high school, he founded a singing group with some of his friends known as the Matadors, and later, the Miracles. He wrote songs for the group, and they began playing in venues around Detroit.

The Miracles began seeking a record deal. In 1957, they had an audition in New York City for a company called Brunswick Records. Brunswick turned them down, but they were overheard by a fellow Detroit resident by the name of Berry Gordy. Gordy was

impressed with the group’s sound, and particularly with the songs Robinson had written. Gordy mentored Robinson in songwriting and helped the Miracles to record and release their first records.

Role at Motown:

Robinson was one of the first singers to record for Motown. His early hits were with his group, the Miracles—their record “Shop Around” was the first Motown record to sell a million copies.

Robinson was also an important figure behind the scenes at Motown—in fact, he helped convince Gordy to start the label. He became vice president of the company, assisting with operations. Along with Gordy, he played an important role in defining the characteristic sound of Motown records.

Robinson’s skills as a songwriter and producer were in high demand at Motown. He wrote songs for himself as well as for other singers on the label; a number of these became big hits. As a producer, his duties included managing recording sessions and to deciding which songwriters and musicians would be involved in a project.



Quotations:

"I have so many songs that have been a songwriter's dream because when I write a song I hope I'm writing a song that will be re-recorded and sung forever."

"I've always known there are no new words, there are no new notes, there are no new chords, so I've gotta use those same old tools and make it come out differently. And it happens!"

"About ten of us took all the decisions on a collective basis. Berry had the final say, of course, but we had a chance to make our contributions. It was all very informal, we knew all the secretaries and studio staff by their first names."

"The function of my office was originally designed for artist coordination. So if someone signs up with Motown, I might pick song-writers and studio people to work with them."