

The King of Motown, Smokey Robinson

One of the most iconic Black pop artists in the latter half of the 20th century, Smokey Robinson has graced the world of American music as both a soulful singer and a prolific songwriter. For decades, Robinson's music has transcended time and genre, making him one of the most enduring figures in American pop culture. Best known for his smooth vocals and emotive lyrics, he has also been a crucial architect behind the scenes, crafting hits for other artists. This month's musical journey will offer an in-depth look at the life, music, and enduring legacy of Smokey Robinson. From biography to discussion and beyond, the program promises a rich experience. So, get ready to cruise together through the magic of music!

Preparation & How-To's

- Print copies of the activity for the group. Pictures can be printed or displayed on the computer or television during the activity.
- Be prepared to play the [Smokey Robinson playlist](#). Print the lyrics for the songs in the playlist ahead of time.
- Check the [Additional Activities](#) section for more ideas or information to bring to the activity.



How Does It Go?

- Play the Smokey Robinson song "[Cruisin'](#)" at the beginning of the activity.
- Read the Smokey Robinson biography and use the Discussion Starters that follow to spark a conversation.
- Conduct a sing-along.

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Introduction

Smokey Robinson stands as an enduring icon in the history of American music. Starting as the front man for a Motown group called the Miracles, Robinson went on to become one of the most important singer-songwriters and producers of the 20th century. His tenure as vice president of Motown Records not only solidified the label's success but also launched the careers of numerous other iconic artists.

Known for penning classics like "The Tracks of My Tears" and "My Girl," Robinson's lyrical eloquence and emotional depth are often cited as seminal in shaping the soul and R&B genres. Furthermore, his groundbreaking work as a producer has made him an indelible figure in American pop culture. Let's dive into the illustrious career of Smokey Robinson, exploring the many roles he played in shaping the American music scene from the 1960s onward.

Biography of a Musician—The Early Years

William “Smokey” Robinson Jr. was born on February 19, 1940, in Detroit, Michigan, to an African American mother and a father of African American and French ancestry. He was lovingly nicknamed “Smokey Joe” by his uncle, a moniker that eventually was shortened to “Smokey.” From an early age, Robinson was captivated by the music that filled the air in his Detroit neighborhood—rhythm and blues, gospel, and the soulful sounds that would later characterize the Motown era.

As a young teen, Robinson formed a doo-wop group named the Five Chimes with his childhood friends. By the time they reached high school, they renamed themselves the Miracles. It wasn’t long before the group crossed paths with Berry Gordy, the founder of Motown Records. Impressed by Robinson’s songwriting talents, Gordy took Robinson under his wing. This partnership would be a major stepping stone for Robinson’s career in the music industry, and he would soon become an essential part of the Motown family.

Robinson attended Northern High School in Detroit, where his focus on music grew stronger day by day. Shortly after graduating, his group, renamed the Miracles, landed their first big hit with “Shop Around” in 1960. The song not only charted at the top of the R&B listings but also made a significant impact on the Billboard Hot 100, opening the floodgates for both Robinson and Motown Records. The Miracles became one of the first acts signed to Motown, and Robinson took on an executive role as vice president of the label, forever changing the course of American music history.

Robinson’s early days with the Miracles was more than just business. One of his fellow band members, Claudette Rogers, caught his eye. The couple married in 1959. In 1968, the couple had their first child—a son—and named him Berry Robinson, after Motown exec Berry Gordy. Daughter Tamla was born the following year.

Discussion Starters

- Smokey Robinson grew up in a neighborhood filled with a rich blend of musical influences. What kind of music did you grow up listening to, and how has it shaped your taste today?
- Robinson’s journey from member of a doo-wop group to leading figure at Motown Records is truly inspiring. Have you ever had a mentor or guide who helped pave the way for your career or passion?
- The Miracles had their first big hit with [“Shop Around.”](#) which was a significant step for both Robinson and Motown. What was the first record or album you ever bought, and does it still hold a special place in your heart?

The Motown Maestro

Robinson’s impact as an executive and artist on Motown Records cannot be overstated. His keen eye for talent and ear for a hit tune were instrumental in shaping the Motown sound. He penned many of the label’s classic hits for other artists, such as “My Guy” for Mary Wells, “The Way You Do the Things You Do” for the Temptations, and “Ain’t That Peculiar” for Marvin Gaye. These songs not only became staples of American pop culture but also resonated across the world, expanding the Motown brand globally.

Robinson also played an essential role in the label’s operations and artist development. His mentorship was crucial for many young artists who came to Motown hungry for an opportunity. Among these were the Temptations, Stevie Wonder, and Diana Ross & the Supremes, all of whom benefited greatly from Smokey’s guidance.

As a performer, Robinson and his group the Miracles continued to churn out hits in the 1960s, including memorable tunes like “You’ve Really Got a Hold on Me,” “I Second That Emotion,” and the timeless classic “The Tears of a Clown.” Robinson’s velvety voice coupled with his poetic lyrics created a unique and easily recognizable style that bridged the gap between rhythm and blues and mainstream pop music.

While the 1960s were a booming period for Robinson and Motown, the 1970s brought new challenges. As musical tastes shifted toward funk, soul, and rock, Robinson felt the pull to explore new directions. He decided to go solo in 1972, leaving the Miracles but maintaining his executive role at Motown. The transition was not without its hurdles, but Smokey eventually found his footing as a solo artist with hits like “Cruisin’” and “Being with You,” which appealed to both his loyal fanbase and a new generation of listeners.

Discussion Starters

- Smokey Robinson was not only a talented musician but also a shrewd businessman. Do you think it’s essential for artists today to be business-savvy as well? Why or why not?
- Many of Robinson’s songs have become classics, transcending generational boundaries. What makes a song timeless in your opinion?
- Robinson penned hits for other Motown artists like Mary Wells and Marvin Gaye. How do you feel about artists writing songs for other artists? Can you name other singer-songwriters who were famous for writing songs for themselves and for others? (Examples: Carole King, Dolly Parton, etc.)

Beyond Motown

In his personal life, Smokey and Claudette’s time as husband and wife would end after he admitted to multiple infidelities, one with fellow musician Diana Ross. After having separated in 1974, then staying together for several more years, the couple finally divorced in 1986.

Professionally, while many would consider Smokey Robinson’s success with Motown Records the pinnacle of an artist’s career, he was far from done. In 1982, he released the album *Yes It’s You Lady*, which continued to showcase his musical prowess and knack for storytelling. His 1987 album *One Heartbeat* produced two Billboard Hot 100 Top 10 hits, “Just to See Her” and “One Heartbeat,” affirming that his music was far from outdated.

In the 1990s, Smokey took a hiatus from performing to focus on other aspects of his life. He returned in 1999 with the album *Intimate*, which took a different route musically, delving into smooth jazz. Though it didn’t enjoy the commercial success of his previous albums, it was critically well-received and showed his willingness to experiment with new genres.

Robinson tied the knot once again in 2002, this time to interior designer Frances Glandney. The two have worked together to launch a skincare line specifically made for people of color. The pair continue to live and work together in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Accolades and an Extended Career

His contributions to the world of music were formally recognized when he received the Kennedy Center Honors in 2006. This was not only a tribute to his musical talent but also to his enduring influence on American culture. Smokey continued to record and tour well into the 21st century, including the Grammy-nominated album *Time Flies When You’re Having Fun* in 2009.

Smokey Robinson also ventured into other creative fields. He co-authored a book of poetry, *Smokey: Inside My Life*, and had several guest appearances on popular television shows. His lifetime of achievements were celebrated when he was awarded the Library of Congress Gershwin Prize for Popular Song in 2016, becoming the second individual performer to receive the prestigious award. In 2022, he became a part of the Black Music & Entertainment Walk of Fame in Atlanta, Georgia.

With a career spanning more than five decades, Smokey has never lost his touch. He remains a revered figure in the music industry, a mentor to many up-and-coming artists, and a living legend who continues to captivate audiences with his enduring songs and charming stage presence.

Discussion Starters

- Smokey Robinson's career has spanned multiple decades. What qualities do you think a musician needs most to have a long-lasting career? Do you think versatility is among the attributes a musician needs for long-term success?
- Robinson has been honored with numerous awards throughout his career. In your opinion, what makes an artist truly "legendary"?

Smokey Robinson Sing-Along Activity

Introduce each song and conduct your own sing-along for the following songs performed by Robinson. If needed, you will find the lyrics in the links below.

1. ["Cruisin"](#): One of Robinson's most iconic hits, this song reached No. 4 on the *Billboard* Top 100 the week of February 2, 1980.
2. ["Being with You"](#): This song is Robinson's biggest solo hit, reaching No. 2 on *Billboard* Hot 100 in 1981.
3. ["Tracks of My Tears"](#): Written by Robinson and his colleagues Pete Moore and Marv Tarplin in 1965, this song is No. 50 on *Rolling Stone's* "The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time."
4. ["Tears of a Clown"](#): Released in 1967, this song was co-written by Stevie Wonder.
5. ["Just to See Her"](#): This song won Robinson his first Grammy Award for Best Male R&B Vocal Performance in 1988.
6. ["I Second That Emotion"](#): This song originated in 1967 when Robinson and band member Al Cleveland were shopping for jewelry for Robinson's wife. They spied a pair of pearls, and Robinson remarked, "They're beautiful. I sure hope she likes them," to which Cleveland remarked, "I second that emotion!"
7. ["Ooh Baby Baby"](#): This 1965 single sees Robinson begging his lover to forgive him for infidelity.
8. ["One Heartbeat"](#): This 1987 solo hit reached No. 10 on the *Billboard* Hot 100.
9. ["You Really Got a Hold on Me"](#): Released in 1962, this song was written by Robinson during a trip to New York that same year.
10. ["Shop Around"](#): This 1960 hit was the Motown Record Corporation's first record to reach one million sales.

Additional Activities

1. Delve deeper into [Smokey Robinson's life history and thoughts on his career](#) by watching this 2019 interview by Al Roker of *The Today Show*.
 2. Watch [Hitsville: The Making of Motown](#) to learn more about Robinson's contributions to building a record label with Berry Gordy and guiding the careers of some of the most recognizable musical artists in history. (Or should we say "hits"tory?)
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