



NEWSLETTER

An Entertainment Industry Organization

The following are excerpts from "Smokey – Inside My Life"

by Smokey Robinson with David Ritz

The President's Corner Cheryl Hodgson

Welcome to the CCC. "Being With You" is a great way to begin our September 2008 meeting with Smokey Robinson. "Thank you," Smokey.

I have the privilege to serve as CCC President until next summer. Hmm. "You've Really Got a Hold on Me." I also expect we will be "Crusin'" to our new location beginning in January 2009. While we have enjoyed many years at the Sportsman's Lodge, (You Gotta Walk) "Don't Look Back."

Meanwhile, the Board and I will do our best to bring you great panels in the months ahead. On October 14th, our annual Legal Update promises to be as informative and timely as ever. Proposed legislation likely to affect us all are being closely followed by members. You can expect a lively discussion.

If are not a member, please join the CCC, and join in to continue the legacy 55 years in the making.

THE BIG MEETING

I graduated from Northern High School in June 1957. Rather than start Highland Park Junior College in September, I decided to take a break and not begin till January. The big meeting came in August.

Despite my insecurity about Claudette, things were happening. The Hawk, even with its unreliable brakes, was taking me where I needed to go. The Matadors were rehearsing - playing a few hops and staying sharp - when a cat named Harold, Ronnie White's cousin, gave us the word.

"Jackie Wilson's people are looking for talent," he clued us. "They're auditioning acts."

Wow!

But just as we went into high gear, Sonny went into the Army.

"How can you do this to us, man?" I argued. "We need five voices."

"And I need to get away," he said. He got his parents' permission, and, just like that, Sonny was gone.

How we gonna sing for Jackie's people?

Claudette! I thought to myself.

Claudette was always on my mind, but this time for musical, not romantic, reasons. Claudette had been at our rehearsals. Claudette had been singing with the Matadorettes. Claudette knew our stuff. Why not have Claudette take her brother's place?

Claudette agreed, and we were thrilled.

With me singing lead, our background blend was set: Claudette on top, Bobby's tenor under her, Ronnie's baritone and, at the bottom, Pete's bass.

We'd usually sing outside songs at parties-stuff being played on the radio-but for the audition we decided to do eight songs that I'd written. We were sure that'd make more of an impression. We were wrong.

Day of the big meeting arrives.

We're clean-shaven, we're processed and primed; Claudette looks like a little doll. We're sharp. We're nervous. We're ready. We get to the office, somewhere in midtown Detroit, and we see three guys in the room.

The first is Nat Tarnopol, Jackie's manager; the second is Jackie's music man, Alonzo Tucker, who does all the talking; the third is some short guy our age who sits in the corner and doesn't open his mouth.

"Okay, kids," says Alonzo. "Show us what you got."

We clear our throats, I give a downbeat, and we start singing. Before we get through our program, though, Alonzo lifts his hand.

"That's enough," he says. "I see what you got and it ain't gonna work. You're not bad, but you got the same setup as the Platters, and who needs another Platters when the Platters are already out there? If I were you, I'd do more of a Mickey and Sylvia type thing. Know what I'm saying? Let the girl sing lead with one of the guys. So go home and work that up and give me a call next time we're in town. See ya."

Just like that, it was all over.

Dejected, downhearted, we left the room and were moping down the hallway when the little guy who'd been sitting in the corner came after us.

"Hey, man," he said.

I turned around and looked at him. He was a street dude, short and plainly dressed.

"Yeah?" I asked.

"Who wrote those tunes you were singing?"

"Me."

"Even that one about your mama, the one where you're talkin' 'bout Samson and Delilah."

"My Moma Done Tole Me." "Yeah, that's my song."

"That's a pretty good song, man."

"Well, thanks."

"Some of the other songs wandered, but that one hung together."

"You work for Jackie?"

"No, I'm a songwriter, I'm Berry Gordy."

"*You're Berry Gordy!*" Soon as I heard the name, I got excited. I'd always read songwriters' credits on records – always wanted to know who created the shit – and Berry Gordy had written some of Jackie's biggest hits, like "Reet Petite." Couldn't believe it was Berry Gordy, though, 'cause he looked so young. His boyish face hid the fact that he was eleven years older than me.

"Can we talk for a minute?" he asked. "There's a piano in that room over there."

Before we went off by ourselves, I whispered to the cats and Claudette, "That's Berry Gordy, and I think he's interested in us."

He was.

"Look, man," he said when we were alone in this tiny room. "I don't care what Tucker says. I think your group's all right. How many songs you written?"

"About a hundred."

"A hundred!" He started chuckling.

I took out my trusty Big Ten notebook and showed him. Hell, I'd been writing songs since I popped out of Mama's womb.

"Well, show me your best ones," he said.

As I sang them he pointed out how they were mostly formless. I'd start on one subject, then move to another. That's what he meant by "wandering."

"Your lyrics rhyme up real good, man, but songs are more than rhymes. Songs need a beginning, middle and end. Like a story."

No one had shown me this before.

"You guys out of school?" he asked.

"Yeah, man, we've all graduated."

"Good. Now, I'd like to hear you sing something they're playing on the radio. You name it."

"How 'bout Frankie Lyman's 'I'm Not a Know-It-All'?" I asked.

"Fine," he said. "I know that one."

Gordy played piano and I sang, and when I was through, he looked up and smiled, assuring me, as if we'd been friends for years. "I like your voice, man. I really do. It's different. There's no other voice like it out there."

"Thanks."

"I'd like to work with your group. I think I can help you."

"That's great, that's fantastic."

“But right now I gotta catch up with Jackie. Got another tune for him.”

“What’s it called?”

“Lonely Teardrops.”

Before we left the little room, we exchanged numbers. And when we went out into the hallway, who should be walking towards us but Jackie himself, super-slick in white pants and billowy black silk shirt. His shiny piled-high process looked sculpted. Holy shit! I was blown away!

Both boxers, Berry and Jackie started a mock match, throwing fake punches that never landed, each declaring a knockout. After being introduced to me and my partners, the soul star made a beeline for Claudette.

“Oooo-weeeee!” he cried. “Ain’t she a fine thing! Turn ‘round, baby,” he urged, gently lifting her hand over her head and watching her do a pirouette. Impressed with her lines, Jackie whistled while Claudette blushed, embarrassed and flattered at the same time.

Meanwhile, my head was swimming, my heart flopping like a flounder. So much had happened so quickly—rejection, acceptance, discouragement, encouragement – I wasn’t sure where we were headed.

It didn’t matter, though, ‘cause for the first time someone serious, a dude named Berry Gordy, said he heard something he liked.

MIRACLES

Let me tell you about my partners.

Ronnie White was small and wiry, a cat heavy into jazz. He dug Cal Tjader and Horace Silver. In fact, he introduced me to modern jazz, and I loved it, loved the percussive flavorings of Max Roach, loved Clifford Brown’s rich and tender tone on trumpet. Ronnie favored Ivy League clothes, little thin ties and tweedy sport coats. He was the first dude I knew to wear pants without cuffs. He liked giving off an air of sophistication. He was intellectual, he was street and also funny as hell.

We called Pete Moore “Pee Wee” ‘cause he was short and stocky. Pete idolized the gamers – the pimps and pool sharks – but he wasn’t like that. He had a good heart, and excelled at sports. He’d play us at pool with one hand and kick our ass. That wasn’t easy since, after we turned sixteen, we *lived* in the pool hall. Pete was also a walking sports almanac. He had his women, but he wasn’t as girl aggressive as me and Ronnie.

Bobby Rogers, though, was the biggest playboy. He was the biggest at everything except taking shit seriously. Bobby was lighthearted and life-loving. He always wanted the biggest houses and the biggest cars. He was a genuine mechanic and a great interior decorator, the kind of guy who built everything with his own hands. Aside from Claudette, Bobby was our best dancer.

All the cats had quick wit, which is one of the reasons our thing was tight. We liked laughing together, we liked singing together – we even liked rehearsing.

That’s just what we were doing the day after we met Berry, honing down our harmonies, with me revising my tunes according to Gordy’s guidelines.

During the break, Claudette pulled me aside.

“That Berry guy called me,” she said.

“What! What’d he want?”

“He asked me out.”

My head started spinning in confusion. “What’d you tell him?”

“No.”

“Just like that?”

“I told him I was your girlfriend.”

“Oh wow!” She’d never said that before. “And what’d he say?”

“He apologized.”

I was too flabbergasted to speak. Only later that night could I tell Claudette what was on my mind.

We’d gone to Belle Isle, an enormous woodsy park in the middle of Detroit River where guys had picnics during the day and wooed their women at night.

It was one of those summer evenings. You could see the reflections of the city lights shimmering on the water. The air was still. Downriver, smoke from the auto planes floated up into a star-filled sky. Fireflies dated here and there. Crickets hummed, and Claudette, bathed in moonlight, leaned back into my arms.

“Smokey,” she confessed, “when you guys were rehearsing, sometimes the girls would peep in on you.”

“That so?”

“And once,” she went on, “you were singing with your shirt off and the other girls started laughing about how skinny you looked. That got me mad. I told them to shush. I said you didn’t look skinny. To me you looked handsome.”

“Oh, baby,” I said, kissing her lips, “I love you so much. I want you to be my girl.”

“Your only girl?”

“I’ll give up the others,” I promised. “They don’t mean anything to me, I swear I’ll never see them again,”

This time she lifted her mouth towards mine. “I love you, Smokey,” she said, her words warming my heart. “I’ve loved you a long while.”

“What about Raleigh?”

“Raleigh’s a nice guy. I like him but I don’t love him, not the way I love you, Smokey.”

“Will you write him and tell him that?”

“I’ll write him tomorrow.”

“Claudette,” I said, kissing her earlobes, her cheeks, her neck, her beautiful mouth, I’m so happy I could sing.”

We stayed there for another hour, locked in each other’s arms, promising to be true, promising that she was mine and I was hers and that our love would always stay young.

That night I couldn’t fall asleep. I felt thrilled by the promise of the future. Finally, Claudette had agreed to be my girl; finally, my group was getting somewhere. My life was blossoming like a beautiful flower. I was going to college at the end of the year, but, in the back of my mind, I could already feel myself going somewhere else.

Berry Gordy was street, but he was no jitterbug; he wasn’t fly, wasn’t the kind of cat who strolled with the limb walk. In the past he’d done lots of shit. He’d come out of the same gang era as Jackie Wilson. He’d done his share of fighting, some of it in a ring. He’d paid his dues working the auto plants. He’d opened a jazz record shop that flopped, been married to a lady named Thelma, had three kids, and now was divorced. Had another lady named Raynoma.

When I met him he didn’t have money, but he had direction. Working with his partner, Billy Davis, who wrote as “Tyran Carlo,” their hits for Jackie didn’t generate much cash. In those days writers’ royalties were a joke. Mainly, Berry was searching-for songs, talent, a way to get over, a way to get paid. He was a warmhearted cat. He had a knack for handling people, a certain low-key charm, a charisma. He had the smarts to figure out the way the business world was working – or not working – and he had the balls to go after what he wanted.

“I want to manage you guys,” he told me straight-off.

“Go ahead, man,” I said, knowing no one else had shown interest. “Tell us what you want to do.”

At first he got little gigs. He couldn’t give us any money, so we bought our own blue suits, which didn’t quite match. Claudette was wearing a white dress with little red flowers.

It wasn’t easy. Berry was there, for instance, while we were singing at a dive bar in a basement in Pontiac when dudes got to fighting. They started slashing and we started running, but there was only one way out – this small stairwell. Somehow we squeezed our way up, scared shitless that the razor blades were gonna slice us. Finally, when we made it outside to the Hawk, everyone was exhausted and pissed. Especially at Berry.

On the way back to Detroit, my partners were ragging Berry, running down their beefs in no uncertain terms.

“A real manager wouldn’t book us into no jive-ass joint like that.”

“Ain’t managers supposed to supply outfits for the singers?”

“I think they usually do,” I piped up, knuckling in to the peer pressure.

Like he often does, Berry kept quiet.

It was a sad night, and when I dropped everyone off and started home, I couldn't live with myself. I turned the Hawk around and headed back to Berry's place.

"Look, man," I said, "I gotta talk to you."

He was as depressed as me. "What's on your mind?"

"I feel terrible, man. I was bad-mouthing you with the rest of the cats, even though I know goddamn well that you don't have a dime and you're doing this 'cause you really believe in us. I just came to apologize."

His face lit up. "I'm glad you came back, Smokey. You don't know how glad. I was sitting up here feeling like shit, 'specially the way you were agreeing with the other guys. See, I like you so much, man, and I was feeling like you were turning against me. That hurt, I got big plans for you, Smoke. I know we're going to make it. And your coming back here tonight shows me a lot, shows that you really care about me."

We must have talked all night, discussing everything, even how he had hit on Claudette.

"Out of all the cats," said Berry, "she had to say that *you* were her boyfriend. Oh man, I hated hearing that!"

We laughed and laid out on the floor, our heads against the couch, him telling me about his life, me telling him about mine, two guys scheming and dreaming about things getting better.

"It's gonna happen," he predicted, speaking with such gritty determination that, for the first time, I became a believer myself. At the very least, I knew I'd made a friend.

It happened while I was watching *American Bandstand* on TV. The Silhouettes were singing "Get a Job," number one song in the world, when it hit me like a bolt of lightning:

Get a job?

Got a job!

Why not write an answer song called "Got a Job"?

I whipped out my Big Ten notebook and started scribbling like crazy. In a few minutes I had the sucker written. The Hawk wasn't running, so I caught the bus to Berry's busting in on him, talkin' 'bout, "This is it! I got it!"

"Got what?"

"'Got a Job.' "

"What's that?"

"Our first hit."

And it was.

Berry helped whip it into form, the group started some serious rehearsing and we cut it over at United Sound in the early part of November 1957. Flip side was "Mama Done Tole Me."

There were no dub-ins or do-overs. In those mono days everything happened at once – the playing, singing and mixing. I'd never been with a producer before. Didn't even know what a producer did. Watching Berry like a hawk, learning all I could, I saw that he was on top of his shit, a perfectionist who pruned the tune till he got an overall dynamite sound.

"You gonna have to change your name," he said afterwards. "The Matadors sound a little jive."

Everyone thought of a name, scribbled it on a piece of paper and threw it in a hat. By chance we picked my choice.

"Miracles," said Berry, mulling it over, "I like the sound of that. I like the attitude. Yeah, y'all are Miracles,"

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David Ritz has collaborated on the biographies of Smokey Robinson, Marvin Gaye, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, BB King and Etta James among others. His most recent books are the autobiographies of Grandmaster Flash and pianist Lang Lang. He's currently working on books with Leiber & Stoller, Paul Shaffer and Cornel West. Ritz has won a Grammy, an ASCAP Deems Taylor award and the Ralph J. Gleason Music Book of the Year Award four times. He also cowrote "Sexual Healing".