

PERFORMERS  
THE LEGENDARY GROUPS




THE BLUE CAPS • THE COMETS  
THE CRICKETS • THE FAMOUS FLAMES  
THE MIDNIGHTERS • THE MIRACLES



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FROM POWERFUL HARMONIZERS  
TO TREND-SETTING INSTRUMENTALISTS,  
THESE **INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS** BLAZED  
THE ROCK & ROLL TRAIL





Charles Sutton, Woods, Smith, Ballard, and Arthur Porter  
(clockwise from top left), 1954

and "Annie's Aunt Fannie," charted high, despite all three being banned by the FCC. That same year, the hit "Sexy Ways" helped solidify their reputation as risk-takers, and they continued to tackle subject matter most of their contemporaries would not touch (at least not directly).

With increased demands came personnel shifts: Lawson Smith returned, replacing the departing Sutton; Norman Thrasher took over for Woods; and guitarist Cal Green replaced Arthur Porter, who'd earlier replaced Alonzo Tucker.

The late fifties saw a lull in chart action for the Midnighters, but they never stopped honing their intense, lusty live show, which incorporated tight, gospel-influenced harmony with synchronized moves, call-and-response, and audience participation. Fellow Federal Records act James Brown was watching closely: The Hardest Working Man in Show Business would later acknowledge a deep debt to the Midnighters.

The band hit again in 1959 with "Teardrops on Your Letter," backed with "The Twist." The B side, of course, would go on to be covered by Chubby Checker, inspiring a dance craze and a reprieve from obscurity for the Midnighters, who would release several more hits, including the 1960 classic "Finger Poppin' Time" and its followup, "The Hoochi Coochi Coo."

Until their breakup in 1965, as members came and went, the Midnighters consistently brought to their fans great tunes, soulful playing, and a fearlessness that has since become a hallmark of rock & roll.

R . B . W .

## THE MIRACLES

In the beginning, there were the Miracles. They were Berry Gordy's first group, before he started Motown Records. They were his anchor and his talent scouts, the softly urgent choir behind his—and their—ambitions. William "Smokey" Robinson was the Miracles' lead singer, their chief songwriter, and eventually their producer. With him, behind him—his "partners," Smokey called them—were Warren "Pete" Moore, a bass singer whom Smokey had known around their Detroit neighborhood since they were 13; Ronald "Ronnie" White, a baritone, a harmony whiz, and intellectual nicknamed "Mr. Exact," who introduced the group to modern jazz; Robert "Bobby" Rogers, the suave second tenor, lover of life, and their choreographer; and Claudette Rogers, Bobby's younger cousin, a soprano/first tenor/alto, smart, cute, their den mother and secretary—and future Mrs. Robinson.

Formed in 1957, when they were teenagers barely out of high school, they were a product of Detroit's rich musical atmosphere—thick with pop and jazz harmonies and doo-wop swirling on every corner. At first they were the Five Chimes, with other members who didn't get a chance to record; then, with White, and Rogers and his cousin Emerson "Sonny" Rogers, they were the sharp-suited Matadors with a matching girl group, the Matador-ettes. But as an important audition with Jackie Wilson's manager and creative team loomed, Sonny Rogers jumped to the Army, forcing Robinson to find a replacement from the Matador-ettes: Sonny Rogers' sister, Claudette. Already in love, she and Robinson were a vocal match, too.

The audition was a flop. But sitting anonymously in that room was Jackie Wilson's songwriter, Berry Gordy Jr. A full decade older than the members of the group, Gordy grabbed them up, pored over the lead singer's notebook of lyrics, requested the Matadors change their name, and saw his future. He produced the Miracles' first record, "Got a Job," in late 1958. He cut a few more, all leased to other labels, including one, "Bad Girl," which had first been issued locally on his own Motown Records. When it got national attention but no income, Robinson told Gordy to stop leasing and put out the records himself. The Miracles became the star group on the company's Tamla label.

Motown's first national Number One, the Miracles' "Shop Around," with its incisive "*shop!*" on the harmonies, hit in late 1960. New in the Miracles' mix was a guitarist and songwriter, Marvin Tarplin, whom Smokey had heard at an audition for a girl group that later became the Supremes. Though not a part of the vocal group, he was a Miracle and the cowriter of the group's hits "The Tracks of My Tears," "Going to a Go-Go," "The Love I Saw in You Was Just a Mirage," and others, including two hits produced and cowritten with Robinson for Marvin Gaye, "Ain't That Peculiar" and "I'll Be Doggone."

Other Miracles were songwriters, too. Pete Moore collaborated with Robinson and Tarplin on the group's hits

"The Tracks of My Tears," "Going to a Go-Go," "My Girl Has Gone," "Choosey Beggar," "Baby Baby Don't Cry," and others, including the hits Robinson produced for the Temptations, "It's Growing" and "Since I Lost My Baby." Ronnie White cowrote the immortal Temptations hits "My Girl" and "Don't Look Back," as well as Gaye's "Peculiar." Bobby Rogers pitched in on the Tempts' "The Way You Do the Things You Do" and "My Baby," the Contours' "First I Look at the Purse" (that's his high voice during the song's intro), and the Miracles' "That's What Love Is Made Of," and more. He notably also sang co-lead on the Miracles' 1963 hit, "You've Really Got a Hold on Me."

The Miracles were a hot live act, though they were sans Claudette, who recorded every song but stayed home after 1964. Missing his family, Robinson grew tired of the road and announced his withdrawal from the group in 1969. But the discerning ear of a secretary in Motown's U.K. office, who plucked "The Tears of a Clown" off a three-year-old album, blocked his plans. Smokey watched it soar to Number One in the U.K. and U.S.

The unexpected hit gave the group time to prepare their goodbye. Robinson toured one last time in 1972 with Rogers, Moore, White, Tarplin, and—at the final show in Washington, D.C.—Claudette.

Billy Griffin replaced Robinson, while Billy's brother Donald Griffin replaced Marv. Staying with Motown, Robinson would go solo a year later, while the group released several beautifully crafted albums, including the cult classics *Renaissance* and *Do It Baby*. In 1975, the Miracles released the concept album *City of Angels*, showcasing Moore and Billy Griffin as the group's new lead producers and songwriters, and including the Number One smash "Love Machine." After a stint at Columbia Records, the Miracles stopped recording as a group in 1978. Bobby Rogers and Moore continued to tour with various members. Ronnie White died of leukemia in 1995. Tarplin remained one of Robinson's crucial collaborators, touring with him for more than thirty years and cowriting, among others, Smokey's Top Five hit "Cruisin.'" He died on September 30, 2011, at age 70.

Ronald White, Smokey Robinson, Marvin Tarplin, Pete Moore, Claudette Rogers Robinson, and Bobby Rogers (clockwise from top left)

