

USA \$1.50/CANADA \$2.25 APR. 2, 2007

JET

'I AM A VERY
BLESSED MAN'

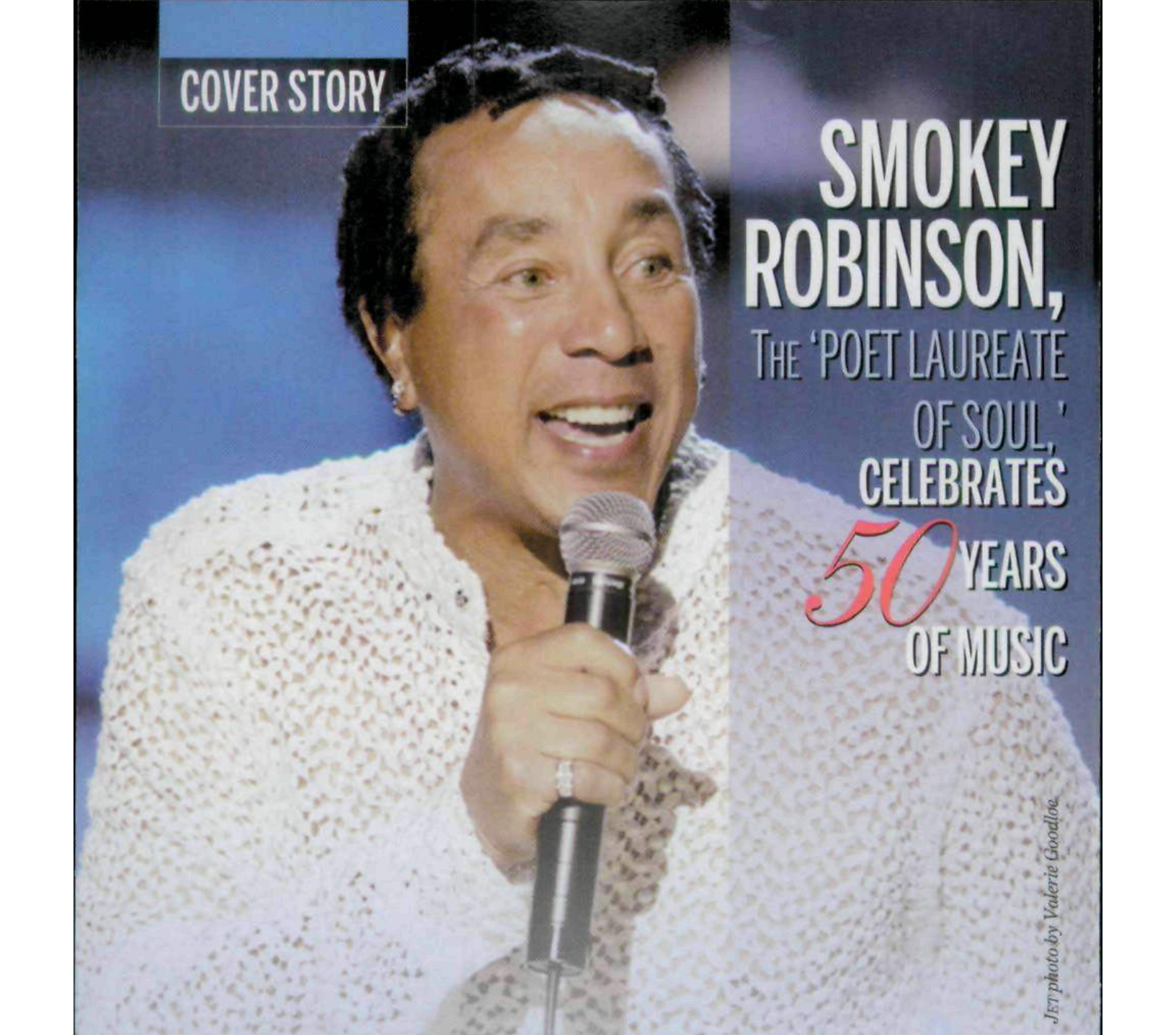
Smokey Robinson

50 Years In Music,
The Story Of A
Soul Survivor



A JOHNSON PUBLICATION
www.ebonyJET.com

Copyright © 2007



SMOKEY ROBINSON,

THE 'POET LAUREATE OF SOUL,'
CELEBRATES
50 YEARS
OF MUSIC

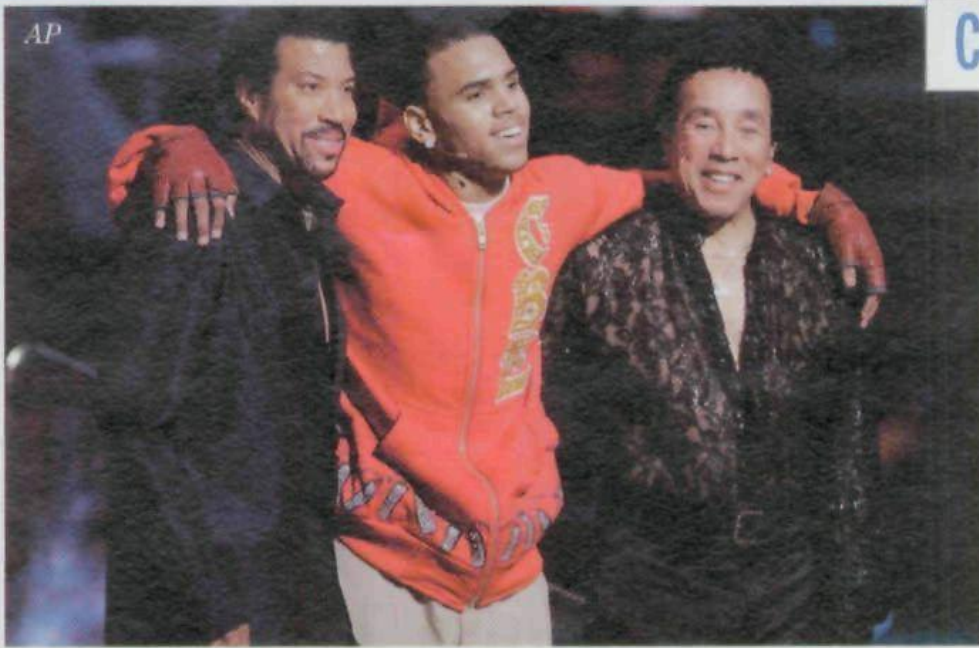
JET photo by Valerie Goodloe

Words have always come easily for William "Smokey" Robinson. As a singer, songwriter, and producer, his career has spanned some five decades with a catalog of 4,000 tunes and 36 Top 10 songs.

Robinson's smooth tenor vocals helped define the soulful sound of the legendary Motown recording empire in the '60s and '70s. Today the mellow crooner maintains his popularity.

"I respect show business," Robinson told JET. "I know through the grace of God that I'm able to do this. I never forget that."

Timeless Love, Robinson's latest album, earned a Grammy nomination this year and has introduced him to a new generation. He recently joined forces during the Grammy Awards with Lionel Richie and newcomer Chris Brown for a medley.



◀ Lionel Richie and Chris Brown performed with Robinson at the recent Grammy Awards. "Having a successful career for 50 years is phenomenal," newcomer Brown told JET. "He is indeed a legend!"

"It was an honor to perform with the legendary Smokey Robinson," Brown told JET. "I learned that being humble can guarantee you longevity in this industry."

Robinson's music has transcended boundaries and played a major part in the soundtrack of Black America.

"The formula is truth," Motown founder Berry Gordy told JET. "He deals with what's real and what's truth and people feel it. He's a philosopher. He believes in what he's singing and hasn't gotten caught up in a lot of changes people think you have to go through to be understood by others. When the world changes, he doesn't change his principles, integrity or character. He changes his style."

Gordy met Robinson in 1957. Then a songwriter for Jackie Wilson, Gordy was looking for groups to produce when he met the upbeat teen singer and his group, the Miracles.

"He played what seemed like 100 songs for me. I turned them all down,"

Gordy laughed, recalling that day. "Each time I would turn them down, he was so aggressive and excited. He would evaluate and keep coming back. He took everything so positive."

One day Robinson came up with a song that did work. It was *Got A Job*, an answer song to the Silhouette's 1958 hit *Get A Job*.

"I thought it was incredible," recalled Gordy. "To think 50 years later he is one of the greatest writers in the world today. I had no idea that not only would he become way better than me as a songwriter, but better than everybody."

As the heartthrob lead singer for the Miracles, Robinson's silky voice caressed classics like *Shop Around*, *You've Really Got A Hold On Me*, *Tears Of A Clown*, *I Second That Emotion* and *Ooo Baby Baby*.

Gordy founded Motown Records in 1959. Robinson, also respected for his business acumen, would serve as a founding executive at the label as well as a talent scout, in-house songwriter and producer. He would later write songs for

COVER STORY

► Robinson was the front man for the Miracles, Motown's first successful group, until 1972. Members included (l-r) Bobby Rogers, Pete Moore and Ronnie White. White died in 1995.

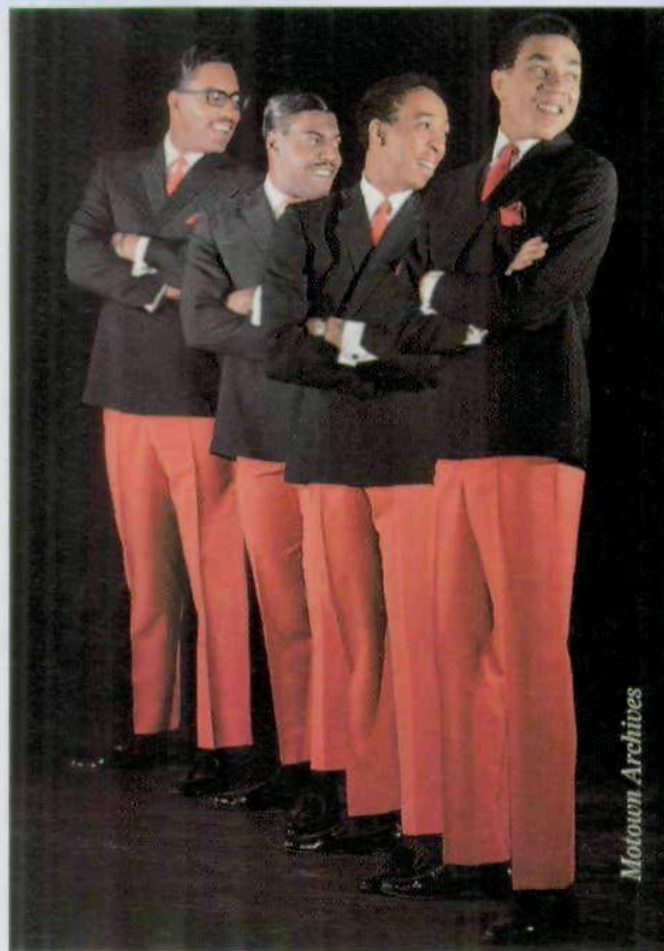
Stevie Wonder, the Temptations, Mary Wells and Marvin Gaye. Gordy still calls him "the soul of Motown."

"When I sit down to write a song, I'm trying to write a song where if I wrote it 50 years before then, it would have meant something and it's going to mean something today and 50 years from now it's going to mean something," said Robinson, who also brought Diana Ross and the Supremes to the label.

"Diana Ross grew up four doors down the street from me," said Robinson. "The first records ever recorded on them, I recorded."

Robinson left the Miracles in 1972 to concentrate on his role as vice president of Motown. A year later, he embarked on a solo career. The hits kept coming with songs like *Cruisin'*, *One Heartbeat* and *Being With You*. He also teamed up with Rick James for the 1983 song *Ebony Eyes*. The ballad *Just to See Her* won Robinson his first Grammy in 1987.

"Smokey Robinson is an American institution," cultural critic Kevin Powell told JET. "His work as an artist, songwriter, producer, and record executive with Motown foreshadowed the success of today's stars like Diddy, Jermaine Dupri, and Beyoncé, all of whom owe a mighty debt to Mr. Robinson. No one, save Sam Cooke, wore as many hats as



Smokey did during those times.

"And people tend to forget that Smokey not only wrote some of the greatest love songs of all time, but literally created the Quiet Storm radio format, made enormously popular dance songs like *Mickey's Monkey*, and was called by none other than Bob Dylan, 'America's greatest living poet.' And you cannot talk about American music over the past half century without mentioning Smokey Robinson several times. His work and his influence are that broad, that significant."

Robinson made a new kind of history in 1987 when *Just To See Her* and the tribute song to him, *When Smokey Sings*, performed by British group ABC, were released. It was the first time that a tribute song and its tributee both made the



▲ Motown founder Berry Gordy and Robinson have been best friends for 50 years.

Top 10.

With every high note in Robinson's life, a low note hasn't been far. The worst being his two-year bout with drug addiction, which he detailed in his 1989 autobiography *Smokey: Inside My Life*.

"I was a cocaine, weed junkie when I walked into that church," Robinson once told JET, recounting how another best friend, Leon Isaac Kennedy, took him to a prayer service. "When I came out, I was free. That was in May of 1986 and the only thing that I do as far as drugs go now is I'm at war with them."

The soul icon recently celebrated his 67th birthday with his wife of nearly five years, Frances, who shares his same birthday, Feb. 19.

► Last year Robinson became a Kennedy Center honoree and joined (clockwise, top l-r) filmmaker Steven Spielberg, country singer Dolly Parton, conductor Zubin Mehta and composer Andrew Lloyd Webber.

"We have a lot in common. I've known her for 25 years," said Robinson. "We didn't become romantic until six years ago. I think being friends makes for the best relationships because you know the person."

Soothing the soul musically is a given for Robinson, who recently began stirring things up in the kitchen in 2004 with the launch of his Cajun-style cuisine, *The Soul Is In The Bowl*.

"We're in 4,800 supermarkets and we serve the armed forces now," Robinson said about the frozen foods, low in sodium and preservatives.

Robinson has a voice like butter, but don't let the smooth taste fool you. He always has something profound to sing and say. Recently the award-winning performer made it no secret that he wasn't pleased with the film *Dreamgirls*. He publicly expressed his disapproval of the film's inaccurate portrayal of Gordy, his





▲ The 67-year-old performer shares a moment with his wife, Frances.

best friend of 50 years. Gordy never said a word. Robinson said it all and then demanded an apology on Gordy's behalf from the filmmakers. An apology was granted (JET, March 19).

"Motown is my heritage. It's my life. If I didn't speak out, I would be letting them step on my life," Robinson said. "The young people who don't really know the real story will look at this as being what really went on at Motown...I don't want that picture to be painted to young people about Motown and about Berry Gordy. People should be proud of Berry Gordy. He bridged some gaps, broke down some racial barriers, some ethnic barriers, some intercontinental barriers and all that with music. All over the world Motown music is loved and respected."

These days Robinson and Gordy are closer than ever, and still have each other's back.

"We've been competing for 50 years.

He thinks he's been beating me more than I've been beating him," laughs Gordy. "We play chess, poker, golf and tennis. He's slightly better than I am in golf, but I'm gaining very strongly...I call him the tornado beneath my wings. He's more powerful than the wind. He's one of the finest people I've ever met." □

—Margena A. Christian

Where There's Smokey, There's Fire!

Robinson could make audiences party all night on a song like *Going To A Go-Go* or pull out the tissue on a tune like *The Tracks Of My Tears*. He also managed to produce hit songs for others while continuing to make his own history.

Songwriter

The Temptations (*My Girl, The Way You Do The Things You Do* and *Get Ready*); Mary Wells (*My Guy*); Marvin Gaye (*Ain't That Peculiar* and *I'll Be Doggone*); The Supremes (*I'll Try Something New*) and The Marvelettes (*Don't Mess With Bill*)

Honors

- Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1986
- Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986
- Grammy Living Legend Award 1999
- National Medal of Arts in 2002
- Kennedy Center Honors 2006
- Honorary doctorate of music from Howard University 2006

NOTE: The 1975 solo album, *A Quiet Storm*, featured the smooth ballad *Quiet Storm*, which inspired the name of a new radio format for an innovative genre of laid-back soul.