

THE MIRACLES



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1958-1978</i>	<i>Classic soul-pop</i>	<i><u>You've Really Got A Hold On Me</u> (1962)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *The Miracles*

Years: *1958-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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HI WE'RE THE MIRACLES

Album released:

June 16, 1961

V A L U E
2 3 3 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Who's Lovin' You; 2) Depend On Me; 3) Heart Like Mine; 4) **Shop Around**; 5) Won't You Take Me Back; 6) Cause I Love You; 7) Your Love; 8) After All; 9) Way Over There; 10) Money; 11) Don't Leave Me.

REVIEW

It is a little awkward for me to be writing about The Miracles — and, clearly, no account of the musical life in the early 1960s can be comprehensive without writing about The Miracles — just because, unlike the absolute majority of music writers past and present, I have always found it difficult to worship at the altar of William Robinson Jr., better known to us all as «Smokey». As a prolific songwriter who almost singlehandedly built up the legend of Motown; as a hard-working, demanding, and professional band-leader whose charisma helped elevate African-American pop music to new, previously unscalable heights; as the owner of a distinctive, immediately recognizable, versatile, and perfectly trained voice — as all those things and more, Smokey Robinson is owed a big box of sincere respect. But few of us probably value theoretical respect over personal connection; and when I think of all the great black voices of the late Fifties / early Sixties, Smokey lingers far, far beyond the likes of Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, Bobby «Blue» Bland, and quite a few others.



"When Smokey sings, I hear violins", says Martin Fry; "thank you Lord for giving us pure Smokey", adds George Harrison. There is no reason to doubt their sincerity, yet something inside me softly protests each time I hear those odes, insisting that they should have rather been re-addressed to the likes of Sam Cooke or Otis Redding. (Maybe they could — if both of those guys hadn't been long dead by the time those *other* guys decided to write 'Pure Smokey' and 'When Smokey Sings'. Add Smokey's persistence, tenacity, and longevity to the list of his formal values). To me, Smokey Robinson is probably the quintessential Motown entertainer, an absolute master of his craft who has, however, never made me shed a single tear (no, not even while singing 'The Tracks Of My Tears', which is no more tear-inducing than any other sentimental ballad he'd written or sung, be it hook-filled or unmemorable). And, to a large extent, it is probably Smokey who is responsible for coloring my original perception of Motown as a temple of perfectly polished, but heartless pop gloss — which is only part of a much more complicated series of truths, yet a valid part that I still urge everybody to remember.

To put it simply, Smokey Robinson is overrated (and I don't throw that word around lightly these days), and I might probably have an easier time writing about him if he weren't so revered as an exquisite American national treasure. Of all the black pop singer-songwriters of the Sixties, he was the most influenced by the Fifties' doo-wop culture, all of whose sides — the inventive ones and the corny ones — he continued to cherish throughout his life; and of all the Fifties' subgenres of African-American music, I've always had the most problems with doo-wop, at least in its «pure» form (whenever doo-wop is being «inverted» or deconstructed, all the way from The Coasters to, uh, Frank Zappa, it's fine by me). The Miracles themselves started out as a bona fide doo-wop band, only gradually sucking in influences from other styles; and Smokey's early songwriting days for the label showed that there was always a fifty-fifty chance of his picking up genuine inspiration or writing a mediocre hack job — the trademarks of a professional songwriter who's in it for the money *at least* as much as for anything else. It's hardly a crime — we all have to eat — but it's just one more reason not to treat the man as an actual «miracle worker», if you'll excuse the pun, but rather take him for what he was: a talent, held back by the stereotypical chains of an old-fashioned epoch which he kept trying to paint in the bright colors of a modern age.

Now that I've gotten that off my chest, it's time to go ahead and finally say **Hi to We're The Miracles**, either the first or the second LP released on the Motown label, depending on how you count the difference in a few days between its release and that of Marvin Gaye's **Soulful Moods**. Actually, before we do that, let's backtrack even a bit further and remember the very first song recorded by The Miracles, because it's somewhat telling. The number, called 'Got A Job', was co-written by Berry Gordy and another songwriter (not Smokey) as a response to 'Get A Job' by The Silhouettes, a recent doo-wop hit that was rockin' the nation in late 1957 / early 1958; where [the original song](#) depicted a situation where the protagonist was

being constantly harassed by his wife for sitting on his ass and letting his family starve, the «sequel» portrays him as finally having gotten a job in a grocery store and now slaving away for the boss ("*And though the boss keeps a-runnin' through my brain / I'll never never never quit my brand new job / Workin' all day and workin' all night*"). While the «sequel» might thus be a little more socially biting than the original, what *really* matters is that 'Get A Job' sounds precisely like we'd expect a fast-paced doo-wop number from the Fifties to sound like — by contrast, 'Got A Job', with its odd echoey production, deep bass, cracking drums, and multi-layered harmonies sounds like... well, more like *points the way* to a somewhat more exciting musical future. The B-side, 'My Mama Done Told Me', a little piece of classic harmless misogyny also credited to Berry, is a curious exercise in marrying country-rock to doo-wop harmonies, and I'm not sure it works exactly the way it was supposed to work... though I have no idea how it was supposed to work, honestly. (Weird random association: on some of the verses here, Smokey sounds spookily close to Morrissey on 'The Queen Is Dead' — the song, that is.)

The second single by the Miracles was most notable for (a) giving Claudette Rogers — soon-to-be Mrs. Claudette Robinson — her first lead vocal on a group song and (b) being called 'Money', but not *the* 'Money' we all know as 'Money (That's What I Want)'; rather, it is '(I Need Some) Money', a much more poppy tune, and also co-credited to Berry Gordy (which probably goes to show the degree of his obsession with finding financial success in the pre-Motown and early Motown days). The B-side was 'I Cry', a very straightforward and generic slow doo-wop ballad that introduced the world to Smokey's shrill falsetto — for better or for worse. The world, apparently, didn't want to catch on; released again on the small End Records label, the record quickly sank without a trace. Interestingly, one more single that followed was actually picked up by Chess Records, the Miracles' only release on that label: 'I Need A Change' is a quirky little tune, riding on a repetitive arpeggiated acoustic riff stuck somewhere in between blues and pop — unfortunately, it has no vocal hook to speak of, unless Smokey's vocal magic counts as a hook by itself, as he (fruitlessly, I imagine) begs for his woman to let him back into her life because, apparently, he "needs a change". (Good argument there, Smokey!)

For the first year of the existence of Motown (more accurately, Tamla), the Miracles weren't its hottest proposition — despite Smokey's active involvement in the company's affairs and close partnership with Gordy. The strongest selling single of 1959 was Barrett Strong's 'Money' (the *other* one), while the Miracles put out three relative flops, all of which, in comparison to 'Money', probably sounded a bit feeble and outdated. Some nasty tongues actually spread rumors that Gordy kept vetoing Smokey's contributions, one after another, as the man wrote them in maniacal droves — until he finally settled on 'Shop Around' as the one that might do the trick.

It's not that easy, today, to understand what exactly made 'Shop Around' into a smash hit and earned Motown its first million. It's a catchy pop song for sure, but its verse melody seems to be fairly trite, not too far removed from whatever was recorded by the more vaudeville-oriented doo-wop bands like The Clovers a decade earlier. Again, just as it was with 'Got A Job', the most important ingredient is arguably the arrangement and the production — very modern for 1960, very tight, very danceable, with the rhythm section of James Jamerson and Benny Benjamin providing a perfect piece of dance hall entertainment. Meanwhile, Smokey does his best to keep the tension high, skilfully switching between high and low registers and placing particular emphasis on the "you'd better shop around" hook — which, by the way, probably made the song quite popular among young males. (How often did you hear songs in 1960 about a mother extolling the virtues of promiscuity before her own son?). In fact, the song's message was so controversial that Gordy and Smokey even wrote a «repentant» sequel, 'Don't Let Him Shop Around', which they gave away to Debbie Dean, Motown's first white girl singer, so as to have a competing feminist perspective.

Although 'Money' and 'Shop Around' actually have some melodic similarities, they ultimately illustrate the two sides of classic Motown — the «grittier» one, inspired and influenced by the R&B sound of Atlantic and other labels, and the «poppier» one, taking its cues from the doo-wop culture as well as the «whitebread pop» as illustrated by contemporary Elvis and other artists earning their living out of the hands of professional modern songwriters. Both sides would co-exist throughout the existence of Motown, but the gritty side would always be subservient to the poppy one — and Smokey Robinson would be the first to attend to that, both by flooding the label with his own recordings and by peddling his songs to just about every other Motown artist. This resulted in a lot of good *and* a lot of crap, and a perfect illustration of this can be formed already by listening to the Miracles' first complete LP, very innocently titled **Hi We're The Miracles** (which rather begs for the subtitle of *Do You Have A Minute To Talk About Smokey?*).

Of the eleven songs on the album, *ten* are Robinson originals (though half are officially co-written with Gordy), with the sole exception of the Miracles' own take on 'Money (That's What I Want)' — seriously extended and «jammified», but at the expense of the original's immortal piano riff, sort of «dissolved» into a less impressive piano rhythm part so as to keep all the attention on Smokey's vocalizing. Honestly, it doesn't work: the song needs a bitter-cynical vocal delivery, like Barrett Strong's original performance or the John Lennon approach — Smokey sings of his alleged addiction to money the same way he'd sing about an alleged addiction to his latest crush, replacing aggression with lyricism. As for the ten originals, 'Shop Around' is the clearly and immediately memorable highlight, of course... and what about the rest?

Well, the rest are more miss than hit, if you ask me. There's some generic doo-wop ('Depend On Me'), whose only «virtue» is Smokey's piercing falsetto — a big win for you if you feel emotionally connected to it, a big loss for me if it thoroughly and utterly annoys me as exaggerated pop theater that should have, by all means, lost its relevancy in the new decade but ended up persisting (all the way to the Bee Gees fifteen years later, I might add). There's a lot of slow, melodically trivial blues-pop ('Who's Lovin' You', 'Won't You Take Me Back', 'Your Love'), whose only virtue are Smokey's achy-breaky undertones, using his colleagues' harmonies as soft pillows underneath — these are more credible and enjoyable, I think, than his falsetto, but still not enough to distinguish all these tunes from one another. Finally, there are slightly faster and poppier numbers like 'Don't Leave Me' which feel like second-rate imitations of Sam Cooke. Oh, and Claudette takes the lead on 'After All', another slow-moving number that she transforms into a «girl group» tune à la early Chantels or Crystals, but while she does have a strong, suitably expressive voice, I'd rather still recommend listening to actual girl groups for this vibe.

Honestly, I think that the only song from the album other than 'Shop Around' that occasionally crops up as a suggested highlight is 'Way Over There', and that the main reason for this is the inspired orchestration which takes its 'Hallelujah I Love Her So'-derived piano riff and adds a useful «epic» dimension — I mean, the title itself opts for a bit of a gospel feel, even if it's ultimately just a girl that Smokey is looking for out there on the mountain top, rather than the Almighty. Starting out like Ray Charles, 'Way Over There' quickly transmogrifies into Sam Cooke, attitude-wise, but even then there seems to be more attitude than actual hooks: the "*come to me baby, I'm on my way*" chorus is belted out rather than sung, and in the end I remember nothing about the song except for that cocky orchestral theme.

Thus, **Hi We're The Miracles** reveals one bitter, but — in my eyes and ears at least — inescapable truth about Smokey Robinson: the man is best taken in *small* doses. His songwriting drive is astonishing — name me another black pop artist who would write pretty much *all* of his own material back in 1960 — but the downside of it is that about 80% of that drive yields trivial and boring results (and no, that situation would not get *that* much better as time went by). Even after Gordy's filtering, what remains is, for the most part, mediocre material that will only appeal to great big fans of Smokey's vocal powers, a group to which, unfortunately, I do not belong. From this debut album, I can only take home the unquestionable catchiness of 'Shop Around' (give or take its somewhat unscrupulous message), the blaring orchestral pride of 'Way Over There', and... uh, well, maybe just the overall feeling of how much less embarrassing it is to hear a generic and conventional Smokey Robinson in 1960 than in, say, 1987. (Remember 'Just To See Her'? no? good! keep it that way!).

Of course, the Miracles would have much better albums than this one, with different ratios of killer-to-filler, but the fact

that they were the first of the Motown bands to achieve national success — the band that pretty much *made* Motown, as is commonly acknowledged — weighs heavier on my mind than it should. For all the good things to be associated with Smokey (and I'll be happy to do the honors when we get to them), it is also possible to draw a relatively straight line from the Miracles' version of pop music to mainstream dance-oriented pop music of each following decade (hey, it's not for nothin' that The Jackson 5 covered 'Who's Lovin' You' still in Michael's big pink hat era), and it's not always a beautiful line. The primary purpose of the Miracles was to make music that would sell; the secondary and tertiary purposes were to make music that would be emotionally sincere and artistically relevant. When all three overlapped — magic was in the air. But this required extra time; for the moment, Smokey and the gang were still busy «shopping around», looking for those particular formulae that would give them maximum exposure and maximum security.





COOKIN' WITH THE MIRACLES

Album released:

Nov. 13, 1961

V A L U E
2 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) That's The Way I Feel; 2) Everybody's Gotta Pay Some Dues; 3) Mama; 4) Ain't It Baby; 5) Determination; 6) You Never Miss A Good Thing; 7) Embraceable You; 8) The Only One I Love; 9) Broken Hearted; 10) I Can't Believe; 11*) Mighty Good Lovin'.

REVIEW

This and the following LP, *I'll Try Something New*, were released during one of the many relative lulls in The Miracles' career: despite continuing to put out singles at a steady pace, Smokey did not succeed in getting a Top 10 hit in between 'Shop Around' (September 1960) and 'You Really Got A Hold On Me' (November 1962). The Miracles consistently fared better on the R&B charts, but even there it seemed like nothing could break the record of 'Shop Around' for quite a while. Despite that, Berry Gordy never lost faith in Smokey for a moment — not even when the poor fellow landed in the hospital with Asian flu and had to have Claudette temporarily assume leadership of The Miracles on their touring schedule. One might love or hate the group's material, but there's definitely something to be said about loyalty in those good old days...



Cookin' With The Miracles — beside its obvious usefulness in being one of the very few Miracles LPs on which the entire original group is «democratically» featured on the cover — basically just covers the first half of that lull period, containing the first three singles they released in 1961 (with the exception of the B-side 'Mighty Good Lovin' which was, in

retrospect, attached to some of the re-releases) plus five LP-only tracks; just like the first time around, pretty much every single song is credited or co-credited to Smokey, with the glaring exception of a Gershwin cover ('Embraceable You'), maybe for the older folks' sake or something. None of the included songs have really become classic Motown standards, not even in retrospect, but the good news is that **Cookin'** does sound significantly more modern than its predecessor. By this time, The Miracles have pretty much shaken off the shackles of the Fifties' doo-wop formula, and fully embraced a tighter, louder, more energetic sound that places huge emphasis on the groove of the rhythm section way before the vocals even begin to come in. At their best now, the lead singer, the backing vocalists, the horns, the bass, the drums, and the occasional strings can create little musical whirlwinds that promise excitement and involvement even without a memorable hook — though at their worst, these whirlwinds *can* get repetitive and background-ish-ly formulaic.

The formula is perfectly illustrated with 'Ain't It Baby', released in February 1961: far from the catchiest tune Smokey ever wrote, its main point is to set up a two-and-a-half-minute groove that never ever lets go — apart from a short saxophone break, Smokey almost literally *never* shuts his mouth, bouncing his vocal cords off each single note pumped out by the bass and automatically triggering a response from his bandmates each time he does. It's fun, except that it's basically 'Shop Around, Pt. 2' without the stop-and-start hookline and a slightly less interesting story behind the lyrics (clearly "*my mama told me you'd better shop around*" carries more intrigue than "*you wanna fool around and drive me crazy*"). The B-side 'The Only One I Love', in contrast with the dance groove of 'Ain't It Baby', was a generic sugar-sweet bit of doo-wop, great for admirers of the *I-hear-violins* attitude but still completely out-of-time with its Fifties' fetish.

Four months later came 'Broken Hearted', whose only outstanding feature is a clever way in which the strings and horns are made to sound in unison on the opening, creating a lyrical-but-tough attitude from the get-go — and the strings then continue to provide the main hook, while Smokey and the gang feel more like superfluous appendages, a bunch of drifters chaotically tossed around by the waves of strings. They get a bigger break on the B-side, 'Mighty Good Lovin', which most likely works because it is really a Little Richard / Chuck Berry type of rock'n'rolling number disguised as friendly R&B, with Smokey again fully in charge, never letting up for a second. This is as close as The Miracles ever get to truly rocking out, and while Smokey could never have the angry/aggressive or sarcastic/sneering type of rock'n'roll voice, he can easily do with the exuberant/hysterical type of one. (Of course, it's only natural that 'Mighty Good Lovin', probably the band's single best recording of 1961, was *the* one song originally omitted from **Cookin'**.)

Finally, in October Smokey and Gordy released 'Everybody's Gotta Pay Some Dues', a decent tune that showed, however,

just how much Motown was still in the grip of 'Shop Around' — this is another one of those sat-him-on-my-knee moralistic tunes, except now the protagonist is passing life's lessons on to his imaginary son rather than receiving them from his imaginary mother, oh, and the lesson is a bit more general than last time around, too: "*son, don't you know you can't win all the time / sometime you're gonna have to lose*" — seems like somebody has been taking the inability to repeat the commercial success of 'Shop Around' quite close to the heart, no? Actually, I think the song might even have a bit more heart-tugging potential than 'Shop Around', what with the way they keep raising the verse melody up, up, up, before landing it quite sternly and brutally with the inescapable conclusion of "*everybody's gotta pay some dues*". But it's not nearly as optimistic, not to mention not nearly as surprising, which is why it still got held up on the charts.

Of the songs recorded to fill in the rest of the LP, one could perhaps single out 'That's The Way I Feel', possibly the most dirge-like tune from the group up until that moment (weeping lead vocal + deep dark harmonies = as close to a Goth atmosphere as Smokey ever gets); 'Mama', a rather hilarious take on the craziness of sudden infatuation ("*Mama, I've only known her for a week / But I'm glad that I waited like you told me to*"); and 'Determination', another short and tight pop-rocker with the strings providing more of a hook than the vocals. The line about "*I've got determination / Plus a whole lotta conversation*" does hit close to home, though — on all of these tracks and most of the others, Smokey makes as much «conversation» as acoustically possible, filling up every single bar without even having to resort to spurious ad-libbing of the *baby-baby-baby* kind: he's just a natural-sounding chatterbox, and this excited exuberance permeates every one of these mid-tempo numbers, be they happy, tragic, or just filled with «determination».

Thus, with the exception of a bunch of slow and boring doo-wop numbers (and that cover of 'Embraceable You' which is probably one of the last things you'll ever need in your life), I would say that **Cookin'** was still a big step in the right direction for those guys — it's formulaic, it hardly has any obvious major highlights, but it does a good job of presenting the brand new Motown sound, leaving behind much, if not most, of the obsolete Fifties' baggage and asserting The Miracles as one of the tightest and most infectious vocal bands of its time. If only there was a bit more diversity to this formula... but we're talking 1961, after all, when «diversity» of musical approach wasn't much of a thing for anybody, and *definitely* not for a guy who'd just hit upon a winning formula and probably thought he was stuck with it for the rest of his life anyway.

