

# “The Tracks of My Tears”--Smokey Robinson and the Miracles (1965)

Added to the National Registry: 2007

Essay by Demitri Coryton (guest post)\*



*Original label*

“The Tracks of My Tears” was neither the biggest selling nor highest charting of the Miracles’ 57 singles, but it was one of their most enduring. In the 1988 “Rolling Stone” magazine critics poll, it came in 12th in the list of the 100 best records of the previous quarter of a century. In 2004, the same magazine ranked it as #50 in its list of the 500 greatest songs of all time. In March 2021, “Rolling Stone” judged it the greatest Motown song ever.

“The Tracks of My Tears” was written in 1965 by William “Smokey” Robinson, Jr., Warren Moore and Marv Tarplin, three members of the Miracles. The group recorded it in Studio A of Motown’s Hitsville USA facility, with the Miracles’ lead singer, Smokey Robinson, as producer. Released on Motown’s Tamla label (catalogue number T-54118) the record made it to No. 2 in the “Billboard” R&B charts (and No. 3 in “Cash Box”) and also crossed over into the pop charts where it reached No. 16 in both the “Billboard” and “Cashbox” Top 100.

The original “Billboard” review of the song in 1965 described it as a “first rate teen ballad with a pulsating dance beat [which] serves as a hot follow up to their smash ‘Ooo Baby Baby.’” There were three important ingredients to this soul record. Smokey Robinson’s smooth vocals, the heart-felt lyrics of teenage angst and guitarist Marv Tarplin’s riff. Tarplin got the idea for the riff from listening to calypso singer Harry Belafonte’s “Banana Boat Song,” a traditional Jamaican folk song recorded by Belafonte a decade earlier. “The Tracks of My Tears” is a classic Motown production, with rattling snare drums, liberal use of strings and blaring brass.

At the time of the recording the group’s line-up was William “Smokey” Robinson (lead vocals); Marv Tarplin (guitar); Bobby Rogers (background vocals); Claudette Rogers Robinson, Smokey Robinson’s wife and Bobby Rogers’ cousin, who was the sister of earlier band member Emerson; “Sonny” Rogers (background vocals); Warren Thomas “Pete” Moore, who was also the arranger (background vocals); and Bobby Rogers (background

vocals). Further background support was given by the Funk Brothers, a group of session musicians who performed on most Motown records, and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

The Miracles were formed in 1955 by five friends from Northern High School in Detroit. Originally called the Five Chimes, after a name change to the Matadors they became the Miracles in 1958. The following year was memorable for two reasons. Nineteen fifty-nine was the year Smokey and Claudette married (they divorced in 1986) and it was the year Berry Gordy, Jr. formed Motown Records in Detroit. The Miracles were one of the first acts he signed, and with "Shop Around" they gave Motown its first national hit. A lengthy chart career followed, with the group changing its name to Smokey Robinson and the Miracles between 1967 and 1972.

Motown was one of the most successful African American businesses in the music industry. While Berry Gordy ran a tight ship, with weekly quality meetings that could see even significant players in the company have their work rejected as not good enough, it was a flexible company. Artists were also songwriters, arrangers and producers.

African American artists had started to break through to the mainstream in the 1950s, usually signed to independent labels. These labels were often owned by white businessmen who did not necessarily even like the music their artists made. They were businessmen there to make money. For example, Sy Waronker, who founded Liberty Records, was asked which of Liberty's many hits he was proudest of. He might have chosen Eddie Cochran's "Summertime Blues" or "C'mon Everybody." Yet his proudest achievement was the novelty act the Chipmunks.

Gordy was different. He was a successful R&B writer before he founded Motown, a company he created as an outlet for his acts when he moved into production. He was involved in every area of the company's activity. Yet he still built Motown into a family of talent rather than a traditional music business.

The Miracles not only helped launch Motown in America, but also around the world. Outside North, America Motown was licensed to the British major EMI, which then dominated the global music business with a 25% market share. EMI released all the Motown labels under the name Tamla Motown, but initially "The Tracks of My Tears" failed to chart. It was only when re-released in 1969 that it charted, reaching No. 9. It was global sales over time that gave the Miracles their fourth million selling record.

"The Tracks of My Tears" almost had an even bigger impact on Motown. In the middle of the 1960s, EMI was making a fortune from the international success of the Beatles and other British beat groups. The one market where sales were less than half the company's global market share was the USA where, to the intense frustration of EMI, its American subsidiary, Capitol Records, passed on most of its hit British acts and consistently under-performed. As one director of EMI Records in the UK put it, "Capitol Records is like Northern Ireland, the problem is always with us." EMI's solution was to buy an American company to add to Capitol. They narrowed the field down to two, Motown and Atlantic. Motown was their first choice because of its broad spread of successful acts, and the Miracles were riding high in the charts at the time EMI was looking for a US acquisition. EMI's boss, Sir Joseph Lockwood, sent EMI's UK managing director, Leonard Wood, to negotiate the purchase.

Len Wood looked like the quintessential Englishman. He would not have looked out of place in a bowler hat with a furled umbrella, and could easily have been mistaken for a provincial bank manager. But in fact he was a very shrewd music man who had overseen EMI's golden age, from the signing of Cliff Richard, the Shadows and Frank Ifield, which were the UK's biggest acts in the late 1950s and early 60s, to the Beatles and the rest of Brian Epstein's stable and then Pink Floyd at the end of the decade. He already knew Motown well, as one of EMI's most important licensed labels, but was not prepared for what awaited him in Detroit. He did not appreciate being body searched for a possible concealed gun by Motown's security people. The company culture in Detroit was very different from the honest but rather staid British business, and Gordy wanted a great deal of money for his business. EMI felt that if they gave it to him, he would then not get out of bed in the morning to work for them. The deal fell through.

A number of artists covered "The Tracks of My Tears," including Johnny Rivers in 1967, Aretha Franklin in 1969 and Linda Ronstadt in 1975.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not represent those of the Library of Congress.