

# “My Girl”--The Temptations (1964)

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Essay by Adam White (guest post)\*



45 sleeve



Original label



Smokey Robinson

One afternoon in early October 1964, in a cramped dressing room at New York’s Apollo Theater in Harlem, William “Smokey” Robinson is coaching five young men in the harmonies--and opportunities--of a new song, helped by the music heard on his portable tape recorder. He’s still in his bathrobe, and they’re not yet suited and booted for the show, either. All of the group are paying close attention, not least because it was Smokey who bestowed upon them their breakthrough hit, 12 months earlier.

The final result came to epitomize the soul and sound of the Temptations, and created a touchstone for the family-owned business which by ’64 was beginning to justify the declaration on the front of its modest headquarters in Detroit: “Hitsville U.S.A.”

The song was “My Girl,” and the company was Motown Records.

It had been a busy and productive year for the Temptations, inaugurated by that earlier Robinson tune, “The Way You Do The Things You Do,” which weighed into the top 20 of the pop charts in March 1964. It was their first such success--and a relief for all, considering that they had been signed to the record company three years earlier. Now, they had a new member in their midst: David Ruffin, recruited when Elbridge “Al” Bryant was fired at the end of 1963. The freshman joined Paul Williams (baritone), Eddie Kendricks (falsetto), Melvin Franklin (bass) and Otis Williams (tenor).

“Ruff,” as he was nicknamed, boasted a tenor that was as gritty as sandpaper and as sweet as honey, but he had to wait a while for lead vocal duties on the topside of a Temptations single. One evening in ’64, the five were performing at Detroit’s 20 Grand nightclub, with Robinson in the audience. “After we came offstage that night,” Otis Williams recalled in his autobiography, “Smokey approached us and, pointing directly at David, said, ‘I’ve got a song for you.’”

“My Girl” was written and produced by Robinson with Ronnie White, his fellow member of the Miracles. (White is not as visible in photos taken backstage at the Apollo that October, but he was present.) The recording showcased the melodic and lyrical skill of its authors, and the powerful harmonies of the Temptations. It also features--hell, it *begins* with--the wizardry of the musicians who fuelled “The Sound of Young America,” as Motown would later call itself in a marketing slogan.

The heartbeat bass of “My Girl” is forever owned by James Jamerson, just as its ascending guitar lines are the permanent property of Robert White, and the sweeping strings are the certain

signature of arranger Paul Riser. “Smokey would first of all sit at the piano and play his little songs as plain and as clear as he could,” said Riser, “and it would just be piano and voice that I would have to work from. Every once in a while, he would require a chord sheet or something to go in [to the studio]. When he wanted something a little special, then he would call myself or Willie Shorter, who did quite a few arrangements for him.”

The track for “My Girl” was cut at Motown under Robinson’s supervision on September 25, 1964. The Temptations overdubbed their vocal parts in the same studio on November 10, several weeks after Robinson had introduced them to the song, and after they had played other live dates on the East Coast in the Motortown Revue, alongside the Supremes, Marvin Gaye, the Contours, the Spinners, Martha & the Vandellas, and Kim Weston.

When Robinson brought the completed “My Girl” into Motown’s weekly Quality Control music meeting, there were one or two doubters. Business affairs executive Ralph Seltzer, for one, wasn’t sure that it was strong enough, but the man whose team had to promote the record to radio, Barney Ales, was certain: this was a hit, and he wanted to get going.

Berry Gordy agreed—his was usually the final say at those meetings—and on December 21, “My Girl” was sent to market under the purple marque of Gordy Records, and into history. In the meantime, the Temptations joined a number of their fellow acts, including the Miracles, for seven days and nights of holiday shows at Detroit’s Fox Theatre. Naturally, the song was added to their repertoire.

Record buyers rendered their verdict soon enough in the new year: “My Girl” reached number one on the “Billboard” Hot 100 in March, and Robinson pocketed a \$1,000 check from the Motown president for the accomplishment. He later remembered Gordy’s words: “David Ruffin’s gonna be a star, and your song’s gonna be a legend.”

This proved not to be hyperbole. “My Girl” has since become one of Motown’s totemic works, recorded by scores of performers from Otis Redding to Alabama, the Rolling Stones to the Mamas & the Papas, Bobby Vee to Michael Bolton. In 1988, the song returned to the “Billboard” Top 20 in a version by an R&B newcomer, Suave, who wasn’t born when the original was made. A couple of years later, the lyric was re-gendered into “My Love” for Dolly Parton to sing. In Britain, the Temptations’ original was not a major hit on first release, but when featured in the soundtrack of a 1991 movie called—yes—“My Girl,” a reissue of the record promptly climbed to number two on the charts.

In the 21st century, “My Girl” has been used in commercials to sell coffee in Italy, Coca-Cola in Brazil, and Amazon.com in America. Naturally, it’s been featured in “Motown The Musical” on Broadway and elsewhere, and in “Ain’t Too Proud,” a stage musical about the life and times of the Temptations themselves. Still, none of this can subtract from the resonance of the recording first rehearsed in the Apollo dressing room more than a half-century ago, and completed in the basement studio of that two-storey house on Detroit’s most famous boulevard. For David Ruffin and his fellow Temptations, there will always be sunshine on a cloudy day, and they’ll forever have the month of May.

*Adam White has written about music, the music industry and Motown for 50 years. He is the author, with Barney Ales, of “Motown: The Sound Of Young America” (Thames & Hudson, 2016) and co-author of “The Billboard Book Of Number One Rhythm & Blues Hits” (Billboard, 1993). He was international editor, managing editor and editor-in-chief of “Billboard,” and a Grammy nominee for liner notes to “Heaven Must Have Sent You: The Holland/Dozier/Holland Story” (Hip-O/Motown, 2005).*

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