

CyberSoulMan: Smokey Robinson charms Konocti

Written by T. Watts

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Smokey Robinson had the crowd singing with him at his concert at Konocti Harbor Resort & Spa on Friday, July 31, 2009. Photo by Gail Salituri.

KELSEYVILLE – “I am the Negro Hip-Hop Opera Singer,” intoned the unrated comedian who opened for Smokey Robinson at Konocti Harbor Spa & Resort Friday night. He was bad and I don’t mean good.

Good, I thought, the show can only get better from here. There was a 30-minute delay between the new-material-needin’ comic and the star of the show.

As fate would have it, I was sitting next to guitarist Robert Bowle’s wife, Izumi, who

filled me in on the departure of the legendary Marv Tauplin who was Smokey Robinson & The Miracles' original guitarist from 1959 until last year. It is the sweet strains of Tauplin's arpeggios you can still hear on the original recorded versions of "Tracks Of My Tears" and so many others.

As I chatted with Izumi, the band, background singers and dancers assembled on stage. Everyone was dressed in white and the six-piece band somehow seems immediately in tune. The crowd had already forgotten the comedian.

At 8:45 p.m. the stage lights shifted and suddenly the thunderous roto-tommed intro to "Going To A Go Go" filled the air. A very svelte Smokey Robinson kinda cha-cha-cha'd on stage singing. He is, as we used to say when he first became my favorite artist, "tabbed down." The suit, though stage attire, was a resplendent champagne in color and I coveted it immediately.

*"Well there a brand new place I've found
Where people go for miles around ..."*

After an abbreviated version of the opening song the band segues into "Second That Emotion" and the crowd singing along, is changed. We become the Miracles and stayed that way the whole show.

Smokey acknowledged us at the end of the number and noted, "We've got some singers out there. You sound good. Let's sing another one."

"You Really Got A Hold On Me," though simply constructed with its single note piano intro and hook-laden lyrics, still resonated powerfully with the adolescent psyche of the baby boomers in attendance. For me, the song brought back memories of how we learned the notes to that song in band class in junior high school when we were supposed to be learning "March To Aida."

*"Soft and warm, a quiet storm
Quiet as when flowers talk at break of dawn, break of dawn ..."*

"Quiet Storm" was a song released by Smokey Robinson after he left the Miracles.

Another powerful gem from Smokey's pen, "Quiet Storm" actually became a radio format, typifying the slow jam R&B nuanced sets of some stations across the country. It was performed beautifully and augmented by a breathtaking flute solo by Kenny Geoffrey who tripled on alto and tenor saxes.

Up next was another slow grinder, the classic "Ohh Baby Baby." I need to point out that all the material performed by Smokey and his bandmates were fresh new arrangements that recalled the original studio recordings yet added significant, unique interpretations to the material. We ate it up. Even though we had morphed into the Miracles, we gave the folks onstage a standing ovation.

"Well, I guess that's it," Smokey cracked. "We should'a played that one first and went home!"

Smokey kept us entertained in between song patter. "Sound check wasn't the same without you."

He reminisced about the early days with Motown. Fifty one nighters in a row. Driving to all the gigs. When they did the Motortown Review featuring acts including Mary Wells, The Marvelettes, Little Stevie Wonder, Martha & The Vandellas, The Temptations, Jr. Walker & The All Stars, The Contours and the Miracles, they would do five shows a day. Whew!

He talked about the genesis of the song "The Way You Do The Things You Do."

On the road with the Miracles, Smokey was driving. The lyrics came to him as a defense against boredom. It became The Temptations' first international hit. Robinson then performed Temptations hits that he wrote including "Get Ready" and "My Girl."

The Smokey Robinson Band is a talented cast of players. In addition to the aforementioned Robert "Boogie" Bowles on guitar, the band included Larry Ball on bass, Syvan on keyboards, musical director Demetrius on keyboards and Tony Lewis on drums. The backing vocalists were Syreena, Aman and Kerry. The sexy dancers who must've gone through half a dozen costume changes were Tracy and Linda. Don't forget the near-capacity Konocti crowd who filled in for the Miracles.

One more amusing anecdote that Smokey told was how at a Motown party, Stevie Wonder, upon arriving, walks up to Robinson and says something to the effect of, "Smoke, as the flowers kiss the dawn of the cosmos and the infinite Author of Creation finally bestows peace upon all living things, there is a great possibility that all people will be free." According to Robinson, that's how Stevie says hello.

Robinson then relates how Wonder gave him the music which evolved into the hit song "Tears Of A Clown" for which Smokey wrote the lyrics.

Somehow, almost unnoticed, the band broke down and became a trio while Smokey bantered with the audience. Smokey disappeared when the trio started to riff and Smokey reappeared in a black tux and swings very credible versions of "Fly Me To The Moon," "I Love Your Face" and "I Can't Give You Anything But Love." The ladies in the first row appeared to be getting heated. The backing vocalists took center stage while the band reformed. Kenny tagged it out with a way out tenor solo.

The dancers reappeared and did an interlude until Mr. Robinson rejoined us. Smokey was now dressed in gold leather slacks and a white mesh shirt. We were well into the second hour of the show. Smokey sang hypnotic versions of "The Tracks Of My Tears," "Just To See Her" and "The Love I Saw In You Was Just A Mirage." He built and released tension with long dramatic pauses.

Smokey's new album, "Time Flies When You're Having Fun," will be released Aug. 25. He sang "Don't Know Why" his magnificent cover of the song made famous by Norah Jones, which will be on his new release.

For the finale, Robinson & company did an extended version of "Cruisin'" – complete with an audience participation feel good contest. Pitting one side of the amphitheater against the other, Smokey encouraged the singers in all of us to come all the way out. Finally, it was determined that Group I and Group II were equal versions of The Miracles.

It was very emotional and many folks were near tears at the end. Let's see now. That was the fourth time I've seen Smokey in this life. He gets better each time. Oh, I forgot

to mention he did a meet and greet with scores of people after the concert. What stamina! What a charmed life!

This just in: "I'm in it strictly for the Music ... BLUES Music that is. I'll be playing somethin' old ... somethin' new ... but whatever I play, it'll be straight up from The Roots & Soul of our great original American Musical heritage ... THE BLUES. We gonna have a natural ball, y'all. Have mercy!" – Barry Big B Brenner

And from Mighty Mike Schermer: I guess the biggest news I have right now is a new live CD which we will be featuring at the Blue Wing ... and in mid-September I am relocating to Austin, Texas, and joining Marcia Ball's Band after 25 years on the West Coast.

Keep prayin', keep thinkin' those kind thoughts.

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