

[00:00:00] **Music:** Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

[00:00:01] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

[00:00:14] **Music:** “You’ve Really Got a Hold on Me” from the album *You Really Got a Hold on Me* by Smokey Robinson, an upbeat, peppy track that plays under the dialogue.

[00:00:17] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. For most artists, it would be enough to have one signature hit, one all-time great. Like this one.

[00:00:29] **Music:** “You’ve Really Got a Hold on Me” by Smokey Robinson.

*I don't like you, but I love you*

*Seems that I'm always thinking of you*

*Though-oh-oh you treat me badly, I love you madly*

*You really got a hold on me (you really got a hold on me)*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:00:53] **Jesse Thorn:** And if you didn't just sing it, you also wrote and produced it. I mean, that would be pretty extraordinary. In this case, for that song the extraordinary talent in question is, of course, Smokey Robinson: the former frontman of the Miracles and Motown legend, who is my guest this week. And Smokey didn't just write, record, and produce one all-time great hit song. He is responsible for a pile of the greatest pop hits of the 20th century. “Tears of a Clown”.

[00:01:32] **Music:** “The Tears of a Clown” from the album *Make it Happen* by Smokey Robinson.

*Like a clown, I pretend to be glad (sad, sad, sad)*

*Now, there's some sad things known to man*

*But ain't too much sadder than the tears of a clown*

*When there's no one around*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:01:52] **Jesse Thorn:** “I Second That Emotion”.

[00:01:54] **Music:** “I Second That Emotion” from the album *Greatest Hits, Volume 2* by Smokey Robinson & The Miracles.

*But if you feel like loving me*

*If you've got the notion*

*I second that emotion*

*Said, if you feel like giving me*

*A lifetime of devotion*

*I second that emotion, ah*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:02:19] **Jesse Thorn:** “Cruisin”.

[00:02:20] **Music:** “Cruisin” from the album *Where There's Smoke...* by Smokey Robinson.

*Cruise*

*Baby, let's cruise away from here*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:02:54] **Jesse Thorn:** And literally dozens more. Smokey Robinson is now 83 years old. He is still recording, still writing. Earlier this year, he released a new album, *Gasms*. Yes, that's the title, (*chuckling*) and yes, it is about what that title would suggest. Sex. And we should be clear that we will talk a little bit about sex and use some sexual terminology in this interview. So, if you or someone you're listening with is sensitive to that kind of thing, there's your warning. For everyone else, honestly, I bet you can't wait to hear Smokey Robinson talk about all that and about a lot more. So, let's get into it. Here's the single from *Gasms*, “The Way You Make Me Feel”.

[00:03:41] **Music:** “The Way You Make Me Feel” from the album *Gasms* by Smokey Robinson.

*You make me feel like everything's okay every day*

*You make me feel like everything's alright every night*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:04:00] **Jesse Thorn:** Smokey Robinson, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show.

[00:04:02] **Smokey Robinson:** Well, I'm happy to be here. Thank you very much.

[00:04:04] **Jesse Thorn:** And congratulations on this very horny new album. (*Laughs.*)

[00:04:07] **Smokey Robinson:** Alright, (*laughs*) that's a good description. Thank you.

[00:04:12] **Jesse Thorn:** Did you have like a list of types of records you could make, and one said like a dance record, one said—

(*Smokey laughs.*)

And then, just one of them said, “Horny record?” Question mark. Like, on a whiteboard in your office.

[00:04:25] **Smokey Robinson:** No, no. No, I did not have a list. I guess the only thought there was the horny one, because, yeah, I didn't have a list. (*Laughs.*)

[00:04:33] **Jesse Thorn:** Was it a goal to make something that was—that was not what people might expect from you?

[00:04:40] **Smokey Robinson:** Yeah. It was. I wanted to be controversial. I wanna get that attention from the first drop. You know, people hear that word, “gasms”, and normally when you hear “gasms”, the first thought that comes through your mind is orgasm. You know? So, I don't—

[00:04:54] **Jesse Thorn:** (*Playfully disgusted.*) Speak for yourself, Smokey.

[00:04:55] **Smokey Robinson:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Exactly. Yeah.

[00:04:58] **Jesse Thorn:** I would never think of something that dirty.

[00:04:59] **Smokey Robinson:** I know you wouldn't, (*laughing*) but I'm just talking about the average person.

[00:05:02] **Jesse Thorn:** I'm a public radio host, sir.

[00:05:05] **Smokey Robinson:** Yeah, exactly. You know, how dare I say something like that?

[00:05:06] **Jesse Thorn:** I've never known the touch of a woman.

[00:05:09] **Smokey Robinson:** (*Laughs.*) But anyway, yeah, I wanted the controversy. And see, when people—when they hear it, they're gonna know that “gasms” is any good feeling you might have. You know, I looked it up before I continued with writing the song. I started writing the song, and I said, “Wait a minute. I better check this out for myself.”

So, I looked up the word, and it was cool, but now it gives people a chance to make their own minds as to what their gasm is when they hear it.

[00:05:34] **Jesse Thorn:** Now, I'm so grateful to have you here. And you know, I heard your publicist discussing your schedule, getting out to promote this record, and the thought that I had was—look, you're in front of me with your leg crossed. You are live and healthy, but you don't have to be working this hard. So, why are you?

[00:05:57] **Smokey Robinson:** Because I love my job. You know, I tried retiring at one point in my life, and maybe when I tried the retirement, I was too young to even think about retiring at that point. But I was just retiring from the outer edges of show business, from being on stage and performing and doing those things like that or recording and all that, 'cause I was vice president of Motown. And I figured I'd just do that for the rest of my life, you know, just because I had been on the road, man, since I was 16—with the Miracles, you know? And we had done everything a group could possibly do two or three times, and we'd been all over the world and all that.

And when we first started out, there was a girl in the group who was my ex-wife—Claudette. In fact, today day is her birthday. (*Laughs.*) And so, she was in the group. And after a couple years or so of marriage, we decided we wanted to have some babies. And we had seven miscarriages due to the fact that she was on the road. And the road is hard. You know? So anyway, she came off the road and blah, blah, blah. And we finally had my oldest son and my daughter. And when my kids were born, man, that really was a trigger for me. I just wanted to—hey, I wanna be my kids, you know? And I got a job, you know, it's not like that.

So, I told the guys I was gonna retire, and they laughed at me, 'cause—you know, we'd been together since we were like 11 years old. We grew up together and all that. So, they laughed at me, because they knew how much I loved show business, how much I love being with them on stage and all that, you know. So, they just laughed at me and left. (*Laughs.*) So anyway. And then, prior to that time, in 1967, man, Stevie Wonder had given me a track. And he came—we used to have Motown Christmas parties annually every year, and all the artists were there. And so, Stevie comes up to me, he says, “Hey man, I got this music on this track and it's a great track.” He said, “I just recorded this track. It's a great track, but I can't think of a song to go with this track. So, why don't you listen to this and see what you can come up with?”

I said okay, man. So, he gave it to me. So, I took it home, and I listened to it, and the first thing that I heard—or the intro was (*sings the opening bars*). Which is Ringling Brothers. That's Barnum & Bailey, baby. (*Laughs.*) So, I said, “Okay. I'm gonna write something about the circus for this track.” You know? And then I thought about it, I said, “Well, it's circus. You know, if I'm gonna write about the circus, I wanna write something that's personal, something that's—you know, like heart-wrenching or something.” You know?

So, I thought about it, and when I was a kid—when I was in elementary school, one of our teachers told the story of Pagliacci. And ‘til this moment right now, I don't know if Pagliacci was real or if he was just mythical. But anyway, the story of Pagliacci. Pagliacci was the Italian clown who was the headliner of the circus. People came to the circus to see Pagliacci. The animals and the tightrope walkers and all those people, everything was secondary to Pagliacci. They loved Pagliacci, and when he came on they roared and they screamed and they—you know, “More! More!” Everything. So, he was the man. He went back to his dressing room, and he cried because he didn't have that kind of admiration from a woman. You know, he was womanless.

*(Music fades in.)*

So, I said, “Okay, I'm gonna write about Pagliacci, but I'm gonna make it personal.”

[00:09:23] **Music:** “The Tears of a Clown” by Smokey Robinson.

*Now, if there's a smile on my face*

*It's only there trying to fool the public*

*But when it comes down to fooling you*

*Now, honey, that's quite a different subject*

*But don't let my glad expression*

*Give you the wrong impression...*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:09:46] **Smokey Robinson:** So, “Tears of a Clown”, we put it on this album in 1967. And in 1970, a young lady who worked for Motown in England was listening to that album, and that cut came on. And there was a guy named Peter who ran the office in England at the time, and she said, “Peter, I want you to hear this song.” So, they heard “Tears of a Clown”, and they put it out in England.

Now, Motown, we had never had a number one record in England ever. The record goes up and it goes to number one. So then, it starts to spread out all over the world. I had another record ready to come out in the States, and Barry said, “No, no, no, man, we're gonna put out ‘Tears of a Clown’.” Which we did. To this day, “Tears of a Clown” is the biggest selling single I've ever been connected to. Okay? It was just all over the world, you know? So, the guys came to me and said, “Hey man, you are definitely not retiring now! You know, because we got the best record we ever had, blah, blah, blah. Our money is gonna soar.” Which it did, you know, blah, blah, blah.

So, I said, “Okay, I’ll go for another year.” Which I did. I went for another year, and then I retired. And I just would go to the office every day. And I was, you know, doing my vice president thing. And it was great at first, man, because it was a change, and I was going there. And when I was in Detroit, my office was originally designed to induct new talent. And that’s what I did in Detroit, you know.

Move out to LA and Barry tells me—he says, “Okay, man.” He says, “You’re my best friend. I trust you more than anybody. You are gonna be the financial office. All the checks are gonna come through you. You’re gonna sign all the payroll checks, with the exception of the payment for the records. That’s gonna go through the sales, like it always has.”

I go, “Oh! This is great, man.” (*Laughs.*)

So, you should see my signature now.

[00:11:29] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, that’s our dream. That’s everyone’s dream, Smokey, is to sign payroll checks.

(*They laugh.*)

Like, “Finally, I’m—finally, I’m—”

[00:11:35] **Smokey Robinson:** For yourself!

[00:11:37] **Jesse Thorn:** “Finally, I don’t have to arenas, anymore! I can get back to—”

[00:11:39] **Smokey Robinson:** (*Laughs.*) Yeah, yeah, yeah. Exactly. Exactly man. ‘Cause my kids were babies, man. And I would go home every day and see them, you know? And so, I’m doing that. And after about two and a half years, I found myself miserable. I was absolutely miserable, but I’m hiding it. And I’m not gonna show it to my wife, because she’s gonna say, “Well, golly, you just came off the road. You’re here with us and the kids and the blah, blah, blah, and you see us every day. And so and so.” And she would be disappointed.

I’m not gonna tell Barry, because he’s my best friend. He trusts me to do this job and all that, you know, so I’m not gonna tell him. I’m not gonna tell anybody. I’m just gonna suffer in silence, you know? And I think that’s what I’m doing. And one day, after about three years or so, Barry came to my office and he said, “Hey, man.” He said, “I want you to do something for me.”

I said, “What, man?” I’m thinking he’s gonna tell me something corporate. Let’s go have a meeting with so-and-so-forth or go try to get this public—I bought some publishing companies and stuff like that to merge him in. Go do something like that. He says, “No.” He says, “Sit down man.” I sat down. He said, “I need you to do something.” I said, what? He said to me, he said, “I want you to get a band, and I want you to go to the studio and make a record, and I want you to get the F outta here.”

(*Jesse chuckles.*)

I said, “What, man? What'd you say to me?”

He said, “You heard me, man. I said I want you to get a band. I want you to go in the studio and make a record. And I want you to get the F out of here.”

I said, “What are you talking about, man?”

He said, “Man, I see you coming in here every day, and you are miserable.” He said, “You think you're hiding it from me, but you're my best friend. I know you, man.” He said, “You are miserable, and when I see you miserable, it makes me miserable. And I don't wanna be miserable, so I need you to get the F out of my face.” (*Laughing.*)

So, I just hugged him, man, because it was a—it was a godsend. It was a god day, because I wanted so bad. During the—before that day, I would go to little clubs, man, and see anybody, just to see somebody on stage. I was suffering, and I didn't want anybody to know it, but he knew it. (*Laughs.*) You know? So then, I—so, I was very happy, man. I went home and I wrote a song with my sister, Quiet Storm. And I recorded a *Quiet Storm* album. And it—you know, that was my debut back into show business and back into doing what I love. And with the feeling that I got from not doing it, I don't want that feeling anymore. So, I wanna be the George Burns of this era of show business, man. 'Cause I can't find anything that I love like this.

[00:14:21] **Jesse Thorn:** We've got so much more to get into with the great Smokey Robinson. When we come back from a break, we will talk about one of his greatest influences: the legendary Jackie Wilson. It's *Bullseye* for [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

[00:14:36] **Promo:**

**Music:** Upbeat, cheerful music.

**Laura House:** Hi everyone. I'm Laura House.

**Annabelle Gurwitch:** And I'm Annabell Gurwitch. And sometimes, it feels like the whole world is a dumpster fire.

**Laura:** Right? There's too much to worry about it.

**Annabelle:** That's why we make *Tiny Victories!* It's a 15-minute podcast where we celebrate our minor accomplishments and fleeting joys!

**Laura:** And listeners call in, like Valerie—who found the perfect gift for her daughter's boyfriend—and Adam, who finally turned his couch cushion the right way!

**Annabelle:** And little happinesses, like how birdsong helps your brain.

**Laura:** That's science!

*(Birds tweeting.)*

**Annabelle:** So, join us in not freaking out for 15 minutes a week.

**Laura:** That's *Tiny Victories* with Annabelle and Laura, Mondays on Maximum Fun. Whoo! It's a tiny victory just to make a network promo!

**Annabelle:** Honestly.

*(Music ends.)*

[00:15:21] **Transition:** Thumpy rock music with a syncopated beat.

[00:15:25] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, I'm talking with Smokey Robinson. He was, of course, the front man of the Miracles, a legendary singer, songwriter, and producer. I mean, look. *(Chuckles.)* The word legendary is a cliché, but I can't come up with a better one for Smokey Robinson. This is the man behind "Tears of a Clown", "I Second That Emotion", and many, many, many, many more. His new album came out earlier this year. It's a concept record about love and intimacy called *Gasms*. Let's get back into my conversation with Smokey Robinson.

It took me a long time after I had kids to feel like I felt comfortable slowing down to their speed. Like I was—because, among other things, like having kids makes you feel scared. If you're the breadwinner in your family, it makes you feel scared that you're not gonna be able to the pieces together right to support your family and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But that energy, that like drive forward, is in opposition to sitting on the floor and putting blocks together with somebody.

[00:16:39] **Smokey Robinson:** Yeah, I was more afraid that my kids wouldn't know me, man. See, I was more afraid of that. 'Cause the Miracles and I were gone 90% of the time, 80% of the time we were gone. So, I was afraid that my kids wouldn't know me, and I had waited so long for them, and I didn't want them not to know me. And I wanted to be there when they said their first words and when they took their first steps and all that. And I wanted to see that, because—you know, we tried so hard. And so, I was more concerned about my kids not knowing me and not feeling, "Okay, here's Dad." You know, rather than I come in the house and say, "Oh, can I have your autograph," or something. *(Chuckles.)* You know what I mean?

So, but anyway, I tried the retirement. It just did not work for me. And like I said, I can't find anything that fulfills me like doing concerts and recording and doing the things that I do pertaining to entertaining.



[00:17:31] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, you never stopped not just performing, but writing songs. Like, you wrote a volume of songs that can't come from the kind of person who's waiting for inspiration to strike. You wrote songs like it was your job, because it was. And that's not something everybody can do. Like, not everybody can sit down and be like, "Alright, circus. I'm gonna write a circus song."

*(They laugh.)*

You know what I mean? And then, write a truly great song, you know what I mean?

[00:18:04] **Smokey Robinson:** But it's my love. It's my love. I write all the time. And I'm a firm believer that God gives everybody gifts. Everybody. I don't care what your conditions are or whatever; you got a gift. And some people never discover their gifts. Some people never pursue them. Some people find them and squander them. Some people do it. But everybody gets one. And I think that one of the gifts that he gave me was to write songs, because I'm not a songwriter who needs to isolate myself or go away for two or three months so I can just write and do that like that, you know? And I don't function like that. You could say something during this interview that might trigger something in me to write a song, man, because that's how it happens for me. I can be, you know, in my car and see a billboard or read something in the paper or online or something, you know, that triggers something in me that wants to write a song about that.

So—and I've always been that way. I don't need certain conditions to write. Or—and people are asking me all the time, "Well, what comes first? The words or the or the music?"

Yes. *(Chuckles.)*

[00:19:10] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, when you were a kid, you were a songwriting nerd.

*(Smokey confirms.)*

Which is like a pretty unusual way to follow the music industry when you're 10 years old or whatever. Right?

*(Smokey agrees.)*

Like, looking at liner notes and what have you.

[00:19:27] **Smokey Robinson:** Yeah. I wrote my first song that anybody ever heard—other than my mom and me—when I was six for a school play. And so, I've been trying to write poems and songs all my life that I can remember. It's just a part of me. It's what I do. And like I said, I can't find anything that I love more than this.

[00:19:47] **Jesse Thorn:** What songs did you admire when you were a kid?

[00:19:51] **Smokey Robinson:** Oh, man. Are you kidding me? I had—

[00:19:52] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, not just records, but like songs.

[00:19:55] **Smokey Robinson:** No, no, no, no. Well, see, I am a person—I was very blessed, man. I grew up in a home where there was always music. I mean of every kind. I had a great dose of music growing up, because my mom played the blues—I mean the gutbucket blues, Muddy Waters, B.B. King, Little Walter, you know, people like that. John Lee Hooker. And then, some days she played the Five Blind Boys and the Volunteers and the Ward singers and People of the Gospel. And then, some days for two or three days in a row, my mom would just listen to Beethoven and Bach and Chopin and people like that. So, I was hearing that.

Then, I had two older sisters. My youngest sister was 14 when I was born, so they were way older than me, you know what I mean? And they played Dizzy Gillespie and Count Basie and Duke Ellington and Patti Page and Sir Vaughan and Frank Sinatra and people like that, you know? So, they had their music, and they played some music. Like, when they—Dizzy Gillespie music, they called that bebop, and they played that. So, I heard every kind of music you can think of.

[00:20:55] **Jesse Thorn:** And there must've been a lot of doowop and stuff on street, as well.

[00:20:57] **Smokey Robinson:** Well, there was. I was about to get to that. When I got old enough, when I was like 10 or whatever and I decided that I would have my own people that I was a fan of, you know, and I wanted to buy my own records and people like that. I mean, and things like that—okay, Jackie Wilson was my number one singing idol. Sam Cooke, Ray Charles, Frankie Lymon, Nolan Strong. These were the guys that I loved, and I listened to, and I bought their music, and I emulated them trying to sing. (*Chuckles.*) You know what I mean? So, I've always had a great love and a great dose of music.

[00:21:34] **Jesse Thorn:** What—let's talk about Jackie Wilson for a second.

[00:21:37] **Smokey Robinson:** Okay! (*Laughs.*)

[00:21:38] **Jesse Thorn:** I've heard you talk about Jackie Wilson before. And you do not sing like Jackie Wilson.

[00:21:46] **Smokey Robinson:** No. No one did. (*Laughs.*)

[00:21:49] **Jesse Thorn:** That's fair. Right? So, like Jackie Wilson really changed the way people sang. You know, Sam Cooke and Jackie Wilson in particular really changed the way people sang.

(*Smokey agrees.*)

Jackie Wilson was a big performer. Did you want to just rip it like Jackie Wilson could?

[00:22:11] **Smokey Robinson:** Of course, I did! I would've walked 10 miles to see Jackie Wilson perform, man. Jackie was—you know, I tell everybody—Michael Jackson. When I first met Michael Jackson, he was 10 years old. He came to Barry's house with his brothers, and he came to do the audition before they were signed to Motown. And Michael Jackson, when—after I saw him, I called him Jackie Brown, because he was a cross between Jackie Wilson and James Brown. And I mean, he had them down pat. He was 10 years old. He was kicking butt; you know what I mean? He was just dynamic, but he was a cross between Jackie Wilson and James Brown.

So, Jackie Wilson was dynamic. You know, Jackie Wilson was one of those performers, man, you go see Jackie Wilson and as soon as he come out on stage, he don't even have to say a word and chicks were falling out. (*Laughing.*) You know? So, he was that kind of performer, and he was a great entertainer. So, yeah, I loved him, and he was a great example of what I thought a guy in show business should be.

[00:23:15] **Jesse Thorn:** Did you think that you should go out on stage and scream and do the splits? Because that's not what your career ended up being. Right?

[00:23:23] **Smokey Robinson:** No, no, no, no. I didn't necessarily think I should scream, because I've always been a soft singer. So, I didn't necessarily think I should scream, but I did wish that I could do the splits and all that. I'm not a dancer, you know what I mean? In fact, we had a choreographer at Motown, at our artist development school, and his name was Charlie Atkins. And Charlie had been a vaudeville dancer with the guy who ran the Apollo Theater, a guy named Honi Coles. And they were vaudeville dancers, Coles and Atkins, you know. But he came to be our choreographer at Motown, and he used to tell me when we went to rehearsal, “Boy, I'm so glad you're the lead singer, so I don't have to try to show you these steps. (*Laughing.*) ‘Cause—‘cause you cannot do it.”

So, I'm not a dancer. So, I knew—and another inspiration for me, as far as being on stage, was when I first saw Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers. Now, they were more inspiration for me than anybody I'd ever seen up to that point, including Jackie Wilson, because they were my age. You know, I went to see them. There was a theater in Detroit where the talent came to, called the Broadway Capital. They were playing at the Broadway Capital, and I go see them. And here, I'm like 14, you know. And they come out on stage, and they're 14 and 15 and like that. And I'm watching them, and they were dynamic, and they were doing the splits and bouncing each other off their heads and you know. So, that made me think I'd like to do that, (*laughs*) but I—you know, I just don't have the dancing skills to pull that off.

[00:24:49] **Jesse Thorn:** Did you think that you could be a singer as great as those great singers that you admired? Or were you thinking, “I'm gonna ‘write songs’ my way into this”? You know what I mean?

[00:25:00] **Smokey Robinson:** No, I was just thinking, “Can we make a record?” You know, we just wanted to make a record. You know, just we make a record and be on the radio and stuff like that. I wasn't thinking about being in competition with Sam or Jackie or Frankie or Ray. I wasn't thinking about being in competition with them. You know, I just wanna make a record. You know?

[00:25:25] **Jesse Thorn:** Because there was—you know, I read this piece that my producers, bless them, dug up for me that was an ancient Robert Christgau piece about you from the like—I don't know; it seemed like it was around 1970, 1975. And he used the word—you know, he's not always dead-on about soul and R&B. He was a rock guy. But like, he used a word that I thought really telling and insightful, which was he described your performances as modest. And not modest in a diminishing way. Not like modest as opposed to great. But there is always a reserve in the way that you sing. There is always a sort of like personal, almost like conversational quality to your performances, even in a song that's big like “Tears of a Clown”. That's huge feelings. Like, there's that kind of almost like a casual intimacy. You know what I mean? And that's a different thing from those people that you're talking about, even Sam Cooke.

[00:26:26] **Smokey Robinson:** Well, thank you. I appreciate that. I appreciate that, because it gives me an identity. See, I'm glad that I have my own identity. I'm glad that I have my own whatever it is that is my own, as far as being a singer. (*Chuckles.*) I don't necessarily—especially at this point in my life or for many, many, many, many, many years, I wasn't trying to emulate any of those singers after I became a professional.

[00:26:49] **Jesse Thorn:** You met Barry Gordy auditioning for Jackie Wilson's management, right?

[00:26:54] **Smokey Robinson:** Yes.

[00:26:55] **Jesse Thorn:** So, what was he doing there?

[00:26:58] **Smokey Robinson:** Barry, when I met him, man, he was just a songwriter, a record producer. He had written all of the hit songs for Jackie Wilson up to that point. And that day, I tell everybody it was a God day, because it was. Because he didn't have to be there the day that we went to audition. But he was. And we didn't have to go on the day when he was there, but we were. And he was there because he had some new songs for Jackie. Among them was “Lonely Teardrops”.

So, he was there. He was just gonna wait till we got through our—and I thought he was waiting to audition, because he looked so young. Like, I was 16 and Barry looked like he was no more than 18 or 19. You know, he was 10 years older than me, but he looked like he was 18 or 19. I thought he was waiting to audition! You know. And he's just sitting there listening. And so, he liked a couple of my songs, 'cause we sang five songs that I had written, rather than some songs that were currently popular, thinking that it would be an asset, thinking that they would say, “Oh! These kids got their own material! Yeah, we love them. We'll sign 'em.” Well, they didn't like us at all, 'cause we were like the Platters. You know, the Platters were the number one group in the world at that time. And they had Zola Taylor, who was the girl in the group. We had a girl in our group. And Tony sang high, and I sang high.

And they told us, they said, “You guys will never make it. You know, because we already got the Platters. We don't need another Platters. So, you'll never make it.” That's what he told us. “We can't use you.” Meantime, Barry's sitting there, and he heard a couple of my songs that we sang that he liked, and he came out after we walked out there dejected and stopped us, and

he and I struck up a conversation. He wanted to know where we got the songs from. And I told him I'd written them, and then he said, "You got any more songs?" He shouldn't have said that, 'cause I had a looseleaf notebook with a hundred songs in it about, man.

[00:28:35] **Jesse Thorn:** Did you have that—did you have a big-time notebook like in your hand?

[00:28:37] **Smokey Robinson:** I sure did. I sure did, man. I carried it everywhere.

[00:28:41] **Jesse Thorn:** Do you still have it?

[00:28:42] **Smokey Robinson:** Uh, no. Man, are you kidding me? See, that's one of the things—when people say, "Do you have any regrets?" Yeah, I regret that I don't have that book, because that would be invaluable right now. You know, all the scrubbed songs and stuff like that that I had in there that didn't make sense until Barry started to mentor me into writing songs and so and so and made them coordinate within themselves. But yeah, I wish I had that. There's another regret that I have, as far as keeping stuff like that, is the fact that when we first started Motown, we had been in business for probably about maybe a year or so like that. And there were places in Detroit, whereas if you were Black, you didn't go to those places. You didn't go to Dearborn. You didn't go to Grosse Pointe. You didn't go to Bloomfield Hills. You didn't go to those places like that if you were Black, unless you had something on you that said you worked for somebody over there. 'Cause if police saw you over there, they were going to either arrest you or whoop your (*sensor beep*), you know? Just for being Black. You know.

We started to get letters from the White kids in those areas. "We got your music. We love your music. Our parents don't know that we have it though. 'Cause if they did, they might make us throw the way. So, we won't tell them. But we got 'em." Those letters would be priceless at this point. We didn't think the save them, 'cause we were young. We would just move on. "Oh, this is great. We're getting these letters!" And then we'd just put them on the desk. We don't know what happened to them, you know what I mean? A year or so after that, we're getting letters from the parents. "We found out our kids were listening to your music. We were curious to see what they were listening to. We love your music. We're glad they had it, blah, blah, blah." You could not put a price on those! You couldn't, you know.

So, yeah, I wish that I had kept some of that stuff, that notebook with those songs in it and so on. I wish that I had kept that, but once you start moving along and you're finally doing what your wildest, most impossible dream is—'cause I never dared to dream that I would actually be in show business for real. I grew up in the hood, and I grew up where there were 1000 singers, you know. And we used to have group battles and things like that. I never thought I'd be one of the ones who would come out of that and have a career in show business. I was afraid to think that, you know? But I did, and I was blessed to get that, you know? So, I cherish it.

[00:31:11] **Jesse Thorn:** I wanna ask you about you and Barry Gordy in the beginning. You mentioned that he mentored you. The thing that ties all the great Motown records together to my ear—the ones that you wrote; you know, there were a number of amazing hit writing songwriting groups at Motown. The thing that ties them all together is this kind of plain

clarity, like each song is an idea distilled. And I get the impression that that is the thing that Barry Gordy brought to you—that he said, “Look, you're talented. Let's figure out how to these songs, to distill these songs to the simplest thing, the clearest thing that means something.”

[00:32:04] **Smokey Robinson:** Well, yeah, he did—what he did with me was to make me realize that a song is a complete idea within itself. When I first met Barry, we sang two songs at that audition, and one of them turned out to be the flip side of our very first record. It was a song called “My Mama Done Told Me”, and it was intact. You know what I mean? Most of my songs at that time, from—like I said, from the time I was four and five years old, I could write poems and I could rhyme stuff. I'll give you an example. My first verse is, “Oh my darling, I love you so much. I'm so glad we're here together. I'm holding you. There's nothing like being here with you, and we should always be like this.” Be all rhymed up. Okay? Second verse. “Oh baby, when are you coming back? I haven't seen you in 10 years. I miss you so much. I want you to be with me, blah, blah, blah, blah.” But it's all rhymed up. Now, it had nothing to do with the first verse, you know what I'm saying? (*Laughs.*)

So finally, after I've sung about 20 songs to Barry that day, he said, “Hey, man.” He said, “Let me tell you something.” He said, “A song has got to be a short book or a short movie or a short play or something that the beginning and the middle and the ending tie in together with one idea and one purpose. Go home, listen to the radio, see what they're writing.” And I've been listening to Gershwin and Cohen and people like that all my life. 'Cause like I said, I grew up in a house where all those people were being played. And they were songwriters. They were songwriters, man. They—to show you how much they were songwriters, their music is just as popular today as it was when it originally came out. They were songwriters. So, that's what I wanna be. I wanna write a song that if I had written it 50 years before now, it would've meant something. Today, it's gonna mean something. 50 years from now, it's gonna mean something. I tell people all the time, I wanna be like Beethoven, man. They're still playing Beethoven's music after 500 years, you know? So, if I can, I'd like to accomplish that.

[00:34:11] **Jesse Thorn:** I wanna give you an example, right? So, you co-wrote “The Way You Do the Things You Do”, which is one of the great pop records of the century, like a—

[00:34:23] **Smokey Robinson:** Thank you! (*Laughs.*)

[00:34:24] **Jesse Thorn:** You know, it's like a perfect song. Right? And there's this story, and I don't even—it's probably apocryphal. I don't know if it is or not. I don't know how real it is—that like when that song got handed in and the temps got it in their hand, there were like, “Wow, ‘love's so bright, you could have been a candle’. This is too stupid to record.” (*Laughs.*)

[00:34:45] **Smokey Robinson:** That's what Otis felt. Oh, you know, Otis is the—Otis is the founder of that group. Otis and I just talked about that about a month ago! But that's how he felt.

[00:34:52] **Jesse Thorn:** But what I mean by bringing that up is that, you know, there is no like trying to be cute and clever in that it is so straightforward and so clear, and its beauty comes from that kind of simplicity, that kind of clarity.

[00:35:12] **Smokey Robinson:** Well, thank you very much. Yeah, because my thoughts on “The Way You Do the Things You Do”, I actually started writing that in the car. I was driving the car; it was my turn to drive, and we were on our way back to Detroit after we had been on a tour. And everyone was asleep. And I was thinking about the Temptations, because I had talked to them before we left town, and they were saying, “Well, we ain't never gonna get a hit,” and all that, you know, and “Barry's gonna fire us,” or another.

And I told him, “No. No, once you sign with Motown, man, we work with you ‘til you can get a hit if possible.” But anyway, and so we're on the way back home and I'm thinking about them, and I had a nickname for them. I used to call them the Five Deacons, because this area that we're in right now, if I had brought David and Eddie and Paul and Melvin and Otis in this room right here and said, “Hey, man, sing ‘ooh’,” and they said, (*singing*) “oooh!”, they would've shook this room. That's how tight their harmony was and how gospel it sounded; you know what I mean? So, I said, I wanna write something for them where they can display that part of themselves.

*(Music fades in.)*

So, that's why I wrote “The Way You Do the Things You Do”, because it had (*singing*) “you gotta smile so bright,” and they're singing and all that together, you know, for that reason.

[00:36:24] **Music:** “The Way You Do the Things You Do” from the album *Smokey & Friends* by Smokey Robinson.

*You know, you could have been a handle*

*The way you swept me off my feet*

*You know, you could've been a broom*

*And, babe, you smell so sweet*

*You know, you could've been some perfume*

*Well, you could've been anything that you wanted to*

*And I can tell*

*The way you do the things you do*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:36:54] **Smokey Robinson:** And I wanted it to be ear catching. Like, you asked me about *Gasms*, you know, earlier. I wanted it to be ear catching. So, it was a sort of like a little fuzzy. (*Slurring the verse together.*) “You got smile so bright, you know, you could have been a candle.” But that's ear catching. You know, “Wait, wait, wait, what is he saying? What—what do you mean?” So, that's what I wanted it to be. And at the time we used to have contests at Motown for records. Every Monday morning, we had a meeting in Barry's office. It started at nine o'clock. If you got there at 9:01, you're locked out. And all of the creative people were there. No salespeople, no anybody else. Just the writers and the producers.

And if you had a song and you had written it, say, for the Supremes and they liked it, you were free to record it on them. Okay? It didn't matter that Holland-Dozier-Holland had the last five number one records on them. If you had a song and they liked it, you could record it on them. Okay? And then you bring it to the meeting. And we sat there and critiqued each other's music to make it better. You know, we were all competing against each other now, but when you hear somebody's music, you say, “Oh man, if you had done so and so and so and so, that would've been much—”

I'll give you an example. “Tracks of My Tears”. I take “The Tracks of My Tears” to the meeting. I've just finished completing the recording and stuff like that. I take it to the meeting. There's a passage in “The Tracks of My Tears” in between—it's sort of like a lead-in between the verses. (*Singing.*) “I need you, need you, need you.” So, now I take it in, and I have ended the record with that. (*Singing.*) “I need you, need you, need you.” And everybody listened to it. And when he got through playing Barry and Brian Holland of Holland-Dozier-Holland said, “Man, what are you doing?”

I said, “Well, what you mean what am I doing?” I said, “You think that's a hit?”

They said, “It could be, but what are you—what are you doing?”

I said, “What are you talking about what am I doing?”

They said, “You got one of the best choruses in the world. (*Singing.*) Take a good look in my face and blah—(*speaking*) and you going to end the song with ‘I need you, I need you’ rather than with that chorus?! Go back, end it with the chorus.” So, I did. I went back and rerecorded it and ended it with the chorus. But that's what we did at those meetings. Brian Holland had some music that he wanted to do. Barry had some, you know. But we helped each other, even though we were in competition with each other. We still critiqued positively everyone's music.

[00:39:20] **Music:** “Tracks of My Tears” from the album *Going to a Go-Go* by Smokey Robinson.

*So, take a good look at my face*

*You'll see my smile looks out of place*

*If you look closer, it's easy to trace*



*The tracks of my tears*

*I need you, need you*

*Since you left me, if you see me with another...*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:39:50] **Jesse Thorn:** I wanna ask you about one of my favorite—in fact, I might even say my favorite of your solo songs. And it’s one from—you know, your solo career had periods where you were really trying to figure out how to reach audiences.

[00:40:06] **Smokey Robinson:** Yeah.

[00:40:07] **Jesse Thorn:** And this was from one of them, it was from before *Quiet Storm*. It's a song that you wrote with your sister, called “Virgin Man”, that was a single. And like, I was thinking of it because of the level of horniness in your new record,

*(Smokey laughs.)*

But it also very sincerely is like one of my favorite songs of yours of all time.

*(Smokey thanks him. Music fades in.)*

And I wanna play a little bit of it for the audience who might not be familiar with it.

[00:40:31] **Music:** “Virgin Man” from the album *Pure Smokey* by Smokey Robinson.

*Can you love a virgin man?*

*Can you love a virgin man?*

*When I’m with my friends*

*And the man talk begins*

*And they brag about all the love they’ve known*

*I sit in the...*

*(Song fades out.)*

[00:41:05] **Jesse Thorn:** You were in your—well into your 30s when you wrote and recorded this song. Stakes were relatively high for your solo career. Right? You didn’t know *Quiet*

*Storm* was coming down the road and that you were about to, you know, have a revival and invent an entire new genre of music. But like, this is a weird song to have written and released as a single, *Smokey*. (*Laughs.*) And again, I love this song.

[00:41:30] **Smokey Robinson:** Thank you. At the time I wrote “Virgin Man”, oh man, I wasn't back in show business. I wrote that because, at the time, I retired. And I retired with the thought in my mind to never ever be on stage again, to never ever go into the studio and record a song for myself. I was gonna write for some other people and produce some other records and stuff like that maybe, but I was just gonna be the vice president and do what I did and blah, blah, blah. And I wasn't gonna be on the outer edges of show business ever again.

So, in retiring from the Miracles, I wrote a song called “Sweet Harmony”. And I wrote that to the Miracles. I didn't intend for anyone in the world to hear that except the Miracles. I was gonna make a copy for each one of them and give it to them as a keepsake.

*(Music fades in.)*

The song says, “Sweet harmony, go on and blow on. Even though I'm not there, you can make it. Because you're just that talented. You don't need me to make it. So, go on. You got a great career still ahead of you, and so on and so forth.” That's what the song is about.

[00:42:33] **Music:** “Sweet Harmony” from the album *Smokey* by Smokey Robinson.

*Make the world aware that you're still going strong, go on*

*Spread your joy all 'round the world*

*Spread your joy all around the world*

*Sweet harmony, yeah, yeah*

*Go on and blow on*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:43:05] **Smokey Robinson:** So, I'm going to record it and give the Miracles each their copy.

[00:43:10] **Jesse Thorn:** Just 'cause you love them.

[00:43:11] **Smokey Robinson:** Just 'cause I love them. Okay? So, I did. And Suzanne de Passe, who was one of our top people at Motown, she was our A&R director at the time, and she heard it. And she said, “Smoke.” She said, “The world should hear this song.”

I said, “No, babe.” I said, “I just want the Miracles to hear it. It's just a thing. I'm out of show business. I don't want to.”

She said, “No, no, no, man.” She said, “The world should know that you feel like this about the Miracles. The world should hear this. 'Cause most groups break up negatively, something's gonna happen negative. And they, you know—” And then she said, “The world should know that you feel like this, and the world should hear this.”

So, I kept saying no, but she finally convinced me. So, I said, “Oh, okay, go ahead. Release it.”

So, she releases it, and she comes back to me about a week later and says, “You know we need an album to go with this record, because albums are what's happening now. You know?”

I said, “An album?!” She said yeah. I said, “I told you I'm not doing it.”

Anyway, she convinced me. I made an album. And on that album, my guitarist—who has passed on now, a guy named Marv Tarplin, who was a source of so many songs for me, so many popular songs for me. He was still with the Miracles. And he called me, and he said, “Hey, man.” He said, “I'm leaving the group.” He said, “I wanna come out to Los Angeles and be with you, and let's just write some songs.”

I said, okay, cool. So, in the meantime, he and his girlfriend had started this song called “Baby Come Close”. He brought that, and he let me hear it. It was so beautiful, and I took it, and I finished it up and wrote some words, and I recorded it. And so, we put the album out, and it becomes like a mild hit. I'm not looking to get a hit. I don't even want that! (*Laughing.*) You know what I'm saying? But here it is, you know. So, that was the reason that I recorded those albums that had “Virgin Man” on it.

[00:45:01] **Jesse Thorn:** We have to go to a quick break. More with Smokey Robinson when we come back. Don't go anywhere. It's *Bullseye* for [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

[00:45:13] **Promo:**

*(Animal noises.)*

**Music:** Cheerful, upbeat music.

**Alexis B. Preston:** Are you tired of being picked on for only wanting to talk about your cat at parties?

**Ella McLeod:** Do you feel as though your friends don't understand the depth of love you have for your guinea pig?

**Alexis:** When you look around a room of people, do you wonder if they know sloths only have to eat one leaf a month?

**Ella:** Have you ever dumped someone for saying they're just not an animal person?

**Alexis:** Us too.

**Ella:** She's Alexis B. Preston.

**Alexis:** She's Ella McLeod.

**Ella:** And we host *Comfort Creatures*, the show where you can't talk about your pets too much, animal trivia is our love language, and dragons are just as real as dinosaurs.

**Alexis:** Tune into *Comfort Creatures* every Thursday on Maximum Fun.

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:45:49] **Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

[00:45:53] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Smokey Robinson, the legendary Motown singer-songwriter and producer. He's created dozens of chart-topping hits. He has a new solo album out, called *Gasms*. Let's get back into our conversation.

Look, I'm gonna go ahead and stipulate that you're a very good-looking man, famously good-looking man. You don't have to say anything about that.

[00:46:15] **Smokey Robinson:** Wow!

[00:46:16] **Jesse Thorn:** You don't have to say anything about it.

[00:46:17] **Smokey Robinson:** I'm staying with you all day! *(Laughs.)*

[00:46:19] **Jesse Thorn:** I'm just letting you know. Okay? Right. And you have been a hit maker for a long time. You very well could have just been cutting records about how—look, if not macho—like you weren't gonna sing any songs about beating anybody up, but like how you were the king of love or something. You know what I mean?

*(Smokey laughs.)*

And you've written so many love songs, and so often they are about being a little scared, being lonely, like being worried. That is the kind of modesty that I was talking about. Right? There is always like a little bit of reserve. It's not even like—you know, you were tight with Marvin Gaye. When Marvin Gaye sings a love song, it's about that like being enveloped in this sensuality and, you know, you're tied in to Marvin. Right?

*(Smokey agrees.)*

Yours are always about sort of asking a little bit, you know what I mean? Like, being there and saying—that kind of connection.

[00:47:23] **Smokey Robinson:** Well, love to me is—it's the greatest subject. It's the most powerful emotion that we can possibly experience. Love is the ruler. You see? Even people—I'll use bigotry as an example of this. People are bigots. They hate other people, because they call themselves being protective of those that they love. "I'm gonna protect my race. I love my race. I'm gonna protect my race. I love my people like me, and so and so on." Love trumps hate every time. See? And so, love is the most powerful emotion that we can experience. And if I'm gonna write, I wanna be in the ballpark with something that's gonna be interesting to people.

And love is—whatever face it has, however it presents itself, it's still powerful. It's probably the most hurting thing you could feel and the most joyful thing that you could feel. It covers the gamut of emotion, and it is the most powerful one that we could possibly experience, as far as I'm concerned, as people. Because it just trumps everything. You know, you love somebody, and people say, "You know, well, you shouldn't love that person." If there was a button, nobody would ever love anybody. 'Cause you wouldn't wanna take that chance. You don't want to get your heart broken or your feelings hurt or any of that, you know? So, I'll just keep 'em to myself. Just be with this person, but I don't love them. So.

But love makes you do foolish things, you know? (*Laughs.*) So, it's just all powerful, and I like presenting that if I can. 'Cause like I said, it has any face you can think of: sadness, happiness, hurt, joy. It covers all that.

[00:49:18] **Jesse Thorn:** And you in your life have had experience really—not just with love, but with really messing up love. I mean, like you have—one of your kids was with someone who wasn't your wife. Your wife ended up—your first wife, Claudette, ended up breaking up with you, or the two of you broke up.

[00:49:34] **Smokey Robinson:** Yeah.

[00:49:35] **Jesse Thorn:** You know, there was a period in your life where you were using so much that you basically messed up your relationships with everybody in your life.

[00:49:46] **Smokey Robinson:** Yeah. Especially me. Mm-hm.

[00:49:50] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. So, it's not like—it's not like love has been a smooth and easy thing for you.

[00:49:59] **Smokey Robinson:** No, I don't think it's been a smooth and easy thing for anybody who falls in love or anybody who—anybody who loves anything or anybody is not a smooth—you know, it's not smooth going, like I said, and I think if it is—if it's just—you're just smooth and everything is all right, all the time, you're not in love, you know? 'Cause when you're in love, you know, you care about that person. You care about what they're doing or saying or being or any of that, and nobody's perfect. So, you have to go through all that in order to withstand love, in order to cope with it, in order to cope with the person that

you love or have them cope with you. You have to experience some negativity involved in it, because it's not gonna be smooth if you're really in love, you know?

Now, it can get overbearing, and you can kill love. And especially with women—you know, a woman can take a man who is a derelict. She can go down on skid row and see a dude and something about him that she likes, and he hasn't bathed in two months and he's scruffy and homeless and all that and derelict. And she'll take him home, clean him up, 'cause she loves him. And she'll clean him up and be with him and love him. And then, he can get to the point where he is the CEO of IBM, and she don't love him no more. It's over. It is over. Okay? (*Chuckles.*) So, love is like that.

[00:51:35] **Jesse Thorn:** Did that happen to you in your life?

[00:51:36] **Smokey Robinson:** Not exactly like that. You know, I think that I was the one who screwed up more so than, you know, Claudette. I know I was, and I searched myself to find out why, because she's only been loving to me for my whole life. Still today. Like I said, today is her birthday and, you know, I'm married to somebody else now, but we still have a great relationship, you know. But I screwed up with her, because I was young. Gosh, I married her when I was 19. I thought I was a man. I thought I was, "I'm a man. I'm getting—I'm gonna get married, 'cause she's in the group. We're traveling. I'm a man! I'm 19." You know? That's a joke. (*Laughs.*) I wish one of my kids would've come to me when they were 19, talking about getting married!

It was a joke, you know? But I did, and she was my girlfriend from the time I was 14 years old. You know what I mean? So, when I started, you know, getting out into the world and all that, I just guess I was too young to cope with it or to know how to deal with it. And so, I screwed up, and I admit it. You know? But you know, that's love.

[00:52:46] **Jesse Thorn:** When you were using coke in the eighties, I mean, you got pretty close to—the story that you told just now, the theoretical story that you just told right now about somebody getting found on the street by somebody—you know, five years ago maybe Charlie Wilson was in here, a great singer.

[00:53:04] **Smokey Robinson:** Yes.

[00:53:05] **Jesse Thorn:** And Charlie Wilson was very literally living on the street for a few years.

[00:53:07] **Smokey Robinson:** Yes. Charlie is my brother. I know that, man. I know. You know, I've been following Charlie, man, since The Gap Band. Yeah.

[00:53:12] **Jesse Thorn:** Right. And you know, his wife, you know, works very—they're very much partners. That was their story.

[00:53:19] **Smokey Robinson:** That was their story. Absolutely.

[00:53:21] **Jesse Thorn:** And you know, I couldn't—when I was reading about you using in the late '70s, early '80s, like I couldn't help but notice that parallel. I thought, “Smokey did not end up that far from that situation. Like, if he hadn't dragged to church one day, that could have happened to Smokey Robinson.”

[00:53:44] **Smokey Robinson:** It could have happened to me, or I could be dead. Yeah. Because I was strung out, and I never—see, drugs are so sneaky, and they're so unassuming. You know. It's like people, especially people who consider themselves to be too strong, like I did. “I'm ego tripping. I'm too strong for this. This will never happen to me.” That kind of stuff, you know. I'm like—

[00:54:07] **Jesse Thorn:** You were like a grown—like, it's not like you had been using for decades and—

[00:54:11] **Smokey Robinson:** You know what I mean, man?

[00:54:12] **Jesse Thorn:** You had—you were a grown adult who started as a grown adult, and it got out of control really fast.

[00:54:17] **Smokey Robinson:** Absolutely. And that's what I tell people all the time about it. 'Cause I speak everywhere now. I speak at churches, rehabs, and gang meetings, and schools, and everywhere. And I talk about the drug thing, man, because people think that—you know, drugs are something that, you know, you just—like, take for instance, people would say, “Well, you know, they're coming to the schools, and they're giving drugs to our kids.”

And so, our kids are not stupid! You know, like some strangers are gonna come to them and say, “Hey, kid, try this.”

And they're gonna say, “Yeah!” You start doing drugs with your friends, with the people you love, who love you. You start because you trust them, and they trust you. So, you're passing these drugs back and forth, and you start with them. You don't start doing drugs with a stranger just comes off from nowhere and stuff like—and people have a mythical thing about that. “Well, you know, if they—if this person hadn't come along—” No, no, no. You start with your best friend. With people that you've known all your life. You start with the people you trust. You know, and that's how sneaky drugs are. And if you open that door, they're gonna come in.

[00:55:21] **Jesse Thorn:** You're Smokey Robinson, Smokey, which means your public persona is—you know, if people think of Smokey Robinson, they think about the sweetness of your singing. They think about the sweetness of your songs, the coolness of—you know—*Quiet Storm*. They think about the relaxation of “Cruisin’”. You know what I mean? These feelings of kind of gentle love, but that could be a lot to carry as an actual human being. Do you feel pressured to be that in the world?

[00:56:00] **Smokey Robinson:** No, man, I really don't. See, I think that when you flow naturally—I just flow like that, man. I—you know, I'm a people lover. And I just flow like

that. I don't have to pretend or it's a burden for me to be who I am or anything like that. I just am who I am, and I've been this person all my life.

[00:56:26] **Jesse Thorn:** Do you remember the campaign song that you wrote for your friend, Naomi, who ran for class president?

*(Smokey confirms.)*

How did the song go?

[00:56:34] **Smokey Robinson:** Uh, well, I was in junior high at the time, and it only went to the ninth grade. And it said, “Hey, hey, nine-ies! I say that today is election day, and I hope—feel—something—I pray that you vote for Naomi.” ‘Cause Naomi was our girl who was running from our class, you know. So, yeah. And Aretha Franklin's brother, Cecil, and a guy named Floyd, and a guy named Michael Fitzgerald. We had a group in junior high school, *(chuckles)* and we sang it, and she won. *(Laughs.)* So, yeah.

[00:57:09] **Jesse Thorn:** Smokey. I'm so grateful for your time. Thank you for coming here.

[00:57:11] **Smokey Robinson:** Thank you very much. I really appreciate you.

[00:57:12] **Jesse Thorn:** It's a real honor to get to talk to you.

[00:57:13] **Smokey Robinson:** Thank you so much.

*(Music fades in.)*

[00:57:16] **Jesse Thorn:** Smokey Robinson, folks. His new album is called *Gasms*. Let's go out on one more song from that record. This is “Beside You”.

[00:57:24] **Music:** “Beside You” from the album *Gasms* by Smokey Robinson.

*Beside you*

*That's where I want to be forever*

*I'm like a soul lost in the river*

*Searching for a helping hand*

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

[00:57:57] **Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. Here in my home, I have been thinking about the great Sinead O'Connor, who was



a staple in my home, growing up. I have an Irish stepmother and a father who loved soul music. And the intersection of those things was the courageous and incredible Sinead O'Connor. And look, so many people have said so many things about her. I only wish I ever could have had her on this show. We tried many times. And there just have been none greater than Sinead O'Connor, an absolute hero to me. And I'm so happy that she's been so deeply appreciated. Even if it is in like the tragedy of her passing.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Bryanna Paz. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is composed and provided to us by the great Dan Wally, DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Our thanks to The Go! Team. Our thanks to their label, Memphis Industries. Our special thanks this week to NPR's Standards and Practices Managing Editor, Tony Cavan, for confirming that we can say the title of Smokey Robinson's latest album here on NPR without bleeping it. That might sound sarcastic, (*chuckling*) but I'm so sincerely grateful for the folks who handle standards and practices at NPR. It is always fun and delightful to bring them a conundrum like that one, and they're always so great. Just know there's good folks looking out for your ears at NPR.

You can find this week's show on YouTube, on Twitter, and on Facebook, where we share all of our interviews. Tell somebody about it if you liked it. Or if you heard part of it—you're listening on the radio, you didn't hear all of it, go to [NPR.org](http://NPR.org) or [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org). Search for Smokey Robinson or just find it on YouTube and share it that way.

I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

[01:00:25] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

[01:00:31] **Music:** "Beside You" by Smokey Robinson.

*Yes, beside you*

*(Music ends.)*