

March 18, 1990-----

Let's clear the air right away.

One of America's most prolific songwriters is William "Smokey" Robinson, and he is pushing Smoke, his new women's perfume. Now, I really can't picture a scene where in the heat of romance, a man will say, "Ooo, baby, baby, what's that scent you're wearing?" And the woman will whisper, "Why, it's Smoke."

That would sound like you're dating a Weber grill.

But if Robinson's fragrance has the endurance of his music, then America will smell like a coast-to-coast powder room. Smoke is being released in conjunction with "Love, Smokey," Robinson's strong followup to 1987's "One Heartbeat." Smoke scent strips will be included in all formats of "Love, Smokey," and Robinson will pass out scent strips when he sings Saturday night at the Star Plaza Theatre in Merrillville.

"This has been an exciting time," Robinson said during a stopover in Chicago. "At the same time we were doing the album, I was smelling all these different scents and extractions. We did lots of combinations. It's an enlightening experience to do perfume for women."

Smoke carries a spicy musk smell. The box of Smoke says the contents include fragrance, water and something called SD Alcohol 39-C. That makes sense. I've had rum drinks that smelled like this. But if there is any rhythm and blues singer who is entitled to market perfume, it is Robinson. Somehow, a Godfather of Soul scent would have to be a man's cologne.

Robinson has recorded 17 solo albums and has had more than 2,000 songs published. He's best known for his soothing love ballads: "Ooo Baby Baby," "The Tracks of My Tears" and "Cruisin'," as well as the classics he has written for other acts - "My Guy" (Mary Wells), "Ain't That Peculiar" (Marvin Gaye) and the timeless Temptations' hit "My Girl."

Robinson, who turned 50 on Feb. 19, doesn't see much of a difference between writing songs at the half-century mark than at 30. "I was raised as a songwriter by Berry Gordy with a certain standard and inner drive in mind," he said. "Even though all of us (at Motown) were friends, we were so competitive, it brought the standard of a song way up. I still have that.

"And I don't feel whatever 50 is supposed to feel like, if it's supposed to feel like you're middle-aged or gettin' there. I actually feel better than I felt when I was 30.

Since I retired from the Miracles, I've been doing a lot of health-conscious stuff. Things like long-distance running and yoga. I haven't eaten red meat since 1972. I've adjusted."

That's why "Love, Smokey" is sultry Smokey at his best. "Love Is the Light" is a tender ballad that features the sympathetic saxophone of Gerald Albright. "Come to Me Soon" is paced by a measured summertime melody that recalls "Cruisin'." You already can hear the women in the audience swooning at this one.

"It took me maybe a week to write 'Come to Me Soon' and get it where I wanted," Robinson said. "It is one of those songs that people might expect. To me, it's more of a feeling song than it is a song song. To me, some songs are like feeling songs, and that's one of them."

"Love, Smokey" was a multipurpose project. He didn't want to lose the momentum of "One Heartbeat," which went platinum. "Love, Smokey" was Robinson's first record for the "new" Motown. (Gordy sold Motown to Boston Ventures and MCA Records in July, 1988.) And the executive producer of "Love, Smokey" is Iris Gordy, who is Berry's sister. To underscore all this, Robinson embarked on a rare publicity tour to promote the record - and his perfume.

The planning appears to have been worth it. On its first day of release, "Love, Smokey" sold 200,000 copies.

"This album was almost like a debut album," he said. "In fact, they talked me out of calling it 'Smokey Robinson's Second Debut.' No one but me thought that was a good title."

Unlike any of his previous solo albums, "Love, Smokey" elevates and celebrates Robinson's exhilarating tenor in a high-tech atmosphere. Robinson knows how to move internal passions into external magic with his vocals. He still has enough confidence in his pipes to attack something like the hard New Jack Swing grooves of "Love N' Life"; the result sounds like a dance club Smokey.

"There are three things happening with the voice," he said. "First, I'm in better shape than I used to be. Second, the older you get, the more you learn how to play your instrument. The voice is my instrument. You learn how to maneuver. You learn how to work when you are sick or hoarse. Third, singing is very psychological. In the early days with the Miracles, I'd sing at a place like the Apollo Theatre, and after the first three or four shows, I'd be hoarse to the point where I almost couldn't sing. It got to be a running joke with the guys because they'd tell me kids were calling up and asking if Smokey was hoarse yet before they'd come to the show.

"A great deal of that was nerves, and it became psychological. Once you get over that hump - which is the biggest hump - you're all right. See, I started professionally at 17, which means I've gone through three different voice changes. More vividly

than me going through it, I always remember Michael Jackson and Stevie Wonder going through it. I used to feel so sorry for those guys, because I knew what they were experiencing. They were younger than me. We'd do these shows and they'd be hoarse, trying to make it. I knew what was happening inside them and that's a horrible feeling."

In 1963, Gordy voiced his confidence in Robinson by naming him a vice president of Motown. The company was just five years old (although Motown is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, it was founded in 1958), and Robinson was 23 years old.

Since Gordy sold Motown, Robinson has ceased to function as a vice president. "I've just been concentrating on my own career," he said. "I've spent the last two years making the new album, and it took me longer to make that album than any album in the history of my career."

The Springsteen-esque segment of time wasn't so much for the writing of songs as for the gathering of songs and the sharp post-production work.

"Usually I'll record 18 or 20 songs, and the album winds up being eight to 10 tunes," he said. "We were so pleased with what we had done, it was very hard to siphon it down to the 13 tunes that are on the CD and the 11 songs on the album. And in recent years, there have been very few albums that have 11 songs."

For an artist who is a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Songwriters' Hall of Fame and who has been honored as one of Grammy's "Living Legends," Robinson maintains a keen sense of challenge. He views every new record by every other artist as competition.

"I feel if I am going to be involved, I want to be involved," he said. "I don't want to just be here. I don't want to be an oldie but goodie. However, I don't divorce myself from my past, because without that there would be no present. But I want to be up to date."

That's how Smokey Robinson wears the sweet smell of success.