## ROLL OVER COLE PORTER: "BRILL BUILDING POP"

After the payola scandal, the always conservative music industry was more anxious than ever to avoid any hint of controversy in the music and image of its stars. Radio stations across the country turned increasingly to "Top Forty" formats meant to assure the public that their inoffensive playlists were dictated by popular demand, not bags of cash.

All of that said, some great music was made in the early sixties: rock & roll may have been smothered as a vital force, but reports of its death have often been, as they say, greatly exaggerated. The many great songs and creative artists of the era belie the myth that the spirit rock & roll simply died with Buddy Holly and reappeared with the Beatles. The best music of the early sixties retained rock's immediacy and playful spirit and expanded its range with innovative productions and exquisitely crafted songs and melodies. It's certainly hard to write off an era that produced songs like "Be My Baby," "He's a Rebel," "The Loco-Motion," "One Fine Day," "Runaround Sue," "Runaway," "Up On the Roof," "Stand By Me," "Walk Like a Man," "Breaking Up Is Hard to Do," "Only the Lonely," "Heatwave" and so many other classics.

The fact that favorite Songs tend to spring to mind before Singers points to a shift in the early sixties away from the strongly individual voices of fifties rock & roll and back to the pop's pre-rock emphasis on songs and melody and on songwriting and production (an aesthetic also kept alive tin fifties doo-wop). At its worst, this meant a return to the cynical commercialism and cliché-ridden formulas of Tin Pan Alley, now couched in the guise of "teenage music." At its best, however, it meant a new level of sophistication and a new brand of "pop" shaped by young songwriters raised on rock & roll and determined to force Tin Pan Alley to make sense within the context of rock & roll rather than the other way around. The new pop spoke to a new generation with their own romantic landscape: Moon/June and gossamer wings were out, Da Doo Ron Ron and drive-ins were in. And for all the talented singers whose names appeared on the record labels, the true stars of the industry-dominated early sixties were the songwriters and producers, most notably producer Phil Spector and the writers centered around New York's Brill Building.

### Aldon Music

The "Brill Building" was both a real place (1619 Broadway in New York City) and the symbolic center of New York's popular music industry in the early sixties: the new "Tin Pan Alley." The Brill Building itself was the most successful center of activity, thanks largely to the presence of **Aldon Music**, a music publishing company formed in 1958 by Al Nevins and Don Kirshner. Inspired by the high standards set by Leiber and Stoller in the 1950's, Nevins and Kirshner assembled a group of young songwriting teams who were responsible for an amazing number of the era's most memorable songs. Until the Beatles and the self-contained Motown juggernaut re-wrote the rules, the Aldon/Brill Building network was the most successful pop enterprise in the country, both commercially and artistically.

The importance of Aldon Music and other songwriting and publishing houses—of any era—stemmed from the fact that pop singers rarely wrote their own material and were always in need of new songs. Rock & roll had upset the existing order, and the

Beatles would render it obsolete, but the early sixties were a comforting return to business-as-usual for the songwriters, publishers, song-pluggers, A&R men, producers, promoters, arrangers and studio session musicians who wrote, recorded and marketed popular music. Like their counterparts in Philadelphia, Los Angeles and other music centers, the Brill Building writers churned out made-to-order songs with the requisite teen themes, catchy "hooks" and bouncy beat, but they did so with a love and artistry that set them apart from their competitors. The result was "pop" in the best sense: soaring, unforgettable melodies, clever harmonies and chord progressions, inventive arrangements and literate lyrics that captured the innocence of the era without resorting to cloying sentiment.

The Aldon Music songwriters were usually grouped in pairs, one concentrating on the music, the other on the lyrics (following the Rodgers & Hart, or Leiber & Stoller, model). Howie Greenfield & Neil Sedaka and the husband-and-wife teams of Gerry Goffin & Carole King and Barry Mann & Cynthia Weil were the most successful of the Kirshner pairings. Like their Tin Pan Alley predecessors, they were proficient lyricists and trained musicians, notating their work on musical staff paper that would have looked like hieroglyphics to Little Richard. But the Aldon writers also felt a close connection to their young audience (the writers themselves were barely out of their teens) that inspired their best work and kept their music attuned to the latest dance steps and street slang. The teams spent their days huddled around pianos searching for that perfect turn of a phrase or melodic twist: the perfect pop Hook that could lift a song out of the ordinary and into the hearts of American teenagers.

**Goffin & King**

Gerry Goffin and Carole King were the most prolific hitmakers at Aldon. Their songs set teen romance against an urban landscape and blended pop innocence with a world-wise realism and heartfelt emotion. In an era dominated by cliché-ridden formulas and "product," Goffin & King glorified the art of songwriting and created a personal voice within the songs-for-hire pop system. Goffin's graceful lyrics and King's irresistible hooks and shimmering melodies defined the best of the new pop.

Carole King (originally Carol Klein) was born in Brooklyn in 1942. She began writing with Gerry Goffin in 1958 and toyed with a singing career of her own, beginning with "Oh! Neil," her 1959 answer to Neil Sedaka's "Oh! Carol." When her own singing ventures proved unsuccessful, the pair concentrated on writing for others. Their first big hit came in 1960 with the Shirelles' recording of "Will You Love Me Tomorrow," an intimate and surprisingly honest look at the fears and realities of teenage love. They followed with "Some Kind of Wonderful" and "Up on the Roof" for the Drifters, the Everly Brothers' "Crying in the Rain," Bobby Vee's "Take Good Care of My Baby," Gene Pitney's "Every Breath I Take," Darlene Love's "Long Way to Be Happy," the Cookies' "Chains" (covered by the Beatles), the Chiffons' exultant "One Fine Day," and "The Loco-Motion," which started a new dance craze and propelled Goffin & King's baby-sitter, Eva Boyd, to instant, short-lived stardom as Little Eva.

Goffin & King's long lists of great songs was not confined to the pre-Beatles era. Their ability to change with the times and write convincingly in a variety of styles kept them in demand and gave some marginally talented groups (like Herman's Hermits and the Monkees) some of their best moments. They managed to stay on the charts in the

wake of the British Invasion, selling songs to the Animals ("Don't Bring Me Down"), Herman's Hermits ("I'm Into Something Good") and other British groups, and remained a force through the sixties with the Righteous Brothers' "Just Once in My Life," the Monkees' "Pleasant Valley Sunday," the Byrds' "Wasn't Born to Follow," Blood, Sweat and Tears' "Hi-De-Ho," Aretha Franklin's "A Natural Woman," and a string of middle-of-the-road hits for Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme, including "Go Away Little Girl," a #1 hit for Steve Lawrence in 1963 and again for Donny Osmond in 1971. (On a brighter note, "The Loco-Motion" also hit #1 twice: for Little Eva in 1962 and for Grand Funk in 1974.)

Goffin and King both stayed in the music business after divorcing in 1968. Goffin continued writing for others with moderate success, while King decided to revive her singing career and worked to improve her lyric writing and overcome her stage fright. After a few false starts, King found her voice and again proved her ability to change and grow with the times. Her 1971 *Tapestry* was the largest selling album ever to that point and introduced her to a huge audience amazed to learn that the same woman had written some of their favorite "oldies." (No *wonder* those songs were so good!)

**Mann & Weil**

Barry Mann & Cynthia Weil were nearly as prolific and versatile as Goffin & King. Between 1961 and 1963, they wrote hits for James Darren, Tony Orlando, Eydie Gorme, Shelley Fabares and a wide range of other artists, including the Drifters' classic "On Broadway" and Mann's own recording of "Who Put the Bomp (In the Bomp, Bomp, Bomp)," a delightfully tongue-in-cheek tribute to their profession and the Great Man who wrote the tender words ("bomp, bomp, bomp, rama-lama ding-dong") that "made my baby fall in love with me."

Mann & Weil did their best and most creative work in connection with producer Phil Spector. Their songs for the Crystals ("Uptown," "He's Sure the Boy I Love"), the Ronettes ("Walking in the Rain"), the Righteous Brothers ("You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'," "Soul and Inspiration") and other Spector artists had a genuine emotional depth and a realism that often bordered on social commentary. In the Crystals' "Uptown," for example, the singer's boyfriend toils unnoticed and unappreciated in the downtown workaday world, but when she welcomes him "each evening to my tenement" he's the most important man in the world—the man she loves. The frank references to class boundaries ("Uptown" is clearly Harlem) was strikingly honest for 1962, and the song itself remains a moving testimony to the power of love.

Mann & Weil were the last of the original gang to leave the Brill Building—they stayed until 1970 and responded to the changing times by toughening their lyrics and amplifying their undercurrent of social commentary. Their later hits included the Animals' "We Gotta Get Out of This Place," Jody Miller's "Home of the Brave," the Vogues' "Magic Town" and Paul Revere and the Raiders' "Hungry" and "Kicks," a hard-rocking anti-drug anthem. Barry Mann took another stab at a solo recording career in the 1970's, but remained more successful at writing hits for others, including "Sometimes When We Touch" (co-written with singer Dan Hill) and Dolly Parton's crossover hit, "Here You Come Again."

**Sedaka & Greenfield**

Neil Sedaka & Howie Greenfield wrote songs for Sedaka's own successful solo career (which was the envy of King, Mann and the other frustrated singers at Aldon). Sedaka & Greenfield signed on as Aldon songwriters and scored their first hit in 1958 with Connie Francis' recording of their "Stupid Cupid." Their focus shifted to Sedaka's own recordings later that year when he signed a recording contract with RCA and released the doo-wopish "The Diary," launching a string of thirteen hits that kept Sedaka on the charts through 1963, including the peerless pop of "Breaking Up Is Hard to Do," "Calendar Girl," "Happy Birthday Sweet Sixteen," "Next Door to an Angel." Since Sedaka was writing for his own voice and style, the teams' songs were less varied than those of their fellow Brill writers. They strove instead to perfect their own pop formula, combining Greenfield's clever metaphors and Sedaka's impeccable melodies with a technical polish that the great tunesmiths of old would have admired. Of all the Brill writers, Sedaka & Greenfield fit most easily into the grand tradition of popular music as a blissful escape from the mundane realities of real life and love: a rarefied world where a perfect melody can create its own meaning and yield its own inexpressibly sublime reward.

**Barry & Greenwich**

Jeff Barry & Ellie Greenwich, yet another husband-and-wife team, were not directly connected to Aldon Music but were part of the Brill Building scene and shared their peers' creative empathy for teenage life and love. In contrast to the rather crafty sophistication of the Aldon writers, though, they wrote in an unadorned style based on simple chord progressions, singalong melodies and "teen poetry" lyrics that reflected the way teenagers really sang and spoke. Their melodies may have lacked the finesse of a Carole King or Neil Sedaka tune, but their simple structure and roughness served to heighten their sincerity. Likewise, their lyrics may have lacked Gerry Goffin's poetic elegance or Howie Greenfield's formal purity, but they only sounded more real because of it. True Love reigned supreme in their songs: no heartaches, breakups or doubts to cloud the horizon, just idyllic love the way it ought to be (and never really is, but that's what pop songs are *for*).

Like Mann & Weil, Barry & Greenwich were at their best when working with Phil Spector, with whom they shared songwriting credits for a string of 1963 hits that formed the foundation of Spector's "Wall of Sound": the Ronettes' "Be My Baby" and "Baby, I Love You," the Crystals' "Da Doo Ron Ron" and "Then He Kissed Me," and Darlene Love's "A Fine, Fine Boy," "(Today I Met) The Boy I'm Gonna Marry" and "Wait 'til My Bobby Gets Home."

Barry & Greenwich often opened their songs with a scene-setter ("He walked up to me and he asked me if I wanted to dance"; "There she was just walking down the street"; "I met him on a Monday and my heart stood still") and went on to tell a story or extol the virtues of the singer's guy—and when He was simply too good for words, a breathless "Da doo ron ron" or "Do wah diddy diddy" could make the point even better. Other songs were addressed directly to "you" and read like love letters ("The night we met I knew I needed you so," "Have I ever told, how good it feels to hold you?") and climaxed in memorable refrains ("Be my baby," "Baby, I love you") that turned a single,

direct sentiment into a joyous declaration of love. "Simple" in the best sense, their sparkling gems were perfect vehicles for Spector mega-productions that would have buried songs with more intricate lyrics and fragile melodies.

Barry & Greenwich signed on as writers and producers with Leiber & Stoller's Red Bird Records in 1964, where they presided over the last days of the girl group era. They collaborated with George "Shadow" Morton on two epic melodramas by the Shangri-Las, "Remember (Walking in the Sand)" and "Leader of the Pack," and wrote and produced the Dixie Cup's "Chapel of Love" and the Jelly Beans' "I Wanna Love Him So Bad." They scored #1 hits with the British group Manfred Mann's version of "Do Wah Diddy Diddy" and Tommy James & the Shondells' "Hanky Panky," gave Lesley Gore "Maybe I Know" and "Look of Love," and returned to Phil Spector with Ike & Tina Turner's "River Deep, Mountain High." They both remained active in the music world after their mid-sixties divorce, but turned their attention to "bubblegum" groups and the Monkees, a Don Kirshner "invention," since few other outlets remained for professional songwriters once the example of the Beatles forced any self-respecting group to write their own songs. Barry produced several Monkees recordings and wrote "Sugar, Sugar" for the "Archies," and descended still further in the next decade with Olivia Newton-John's "I Honestly Love You" and the theme song for TV's *The Jeffersons*.

**Doc Pomus & Mort Shuman**

The archetypes for the songwriter era, Jerry Leiber & Mike Stoller, often looked to the veteran writing team of Doc Pomus & Mort Shuman to provide songs for their Drifters productions. Pomus & Shuman were nearly as versatile and far-flung as their mentors, with a songbook that included "This Magic Moment" and "Save the Last Dance for Me," their standout contributions to the Drifters, along with hits for Dion & the Belmonts ("Teenager in Love"), Ray Charles ("Lonely Avenue"), Bobby Darin ("Plain Jane") and Fabian ("I'm a Man"). Pomus & Shuman also provided Elvis Presley with some of his finest sixties moments, including "A Mess of Blues," "Surrender," "Little Sister," "(Marie's the Name) His Latest Flame" and "Viva Las Vegas."

**Burt Bacharach & Hal David**

Bacharach & David were the Rodgers & Hart of the 1960's. The team wrote hits in the early sixties for the Shirelles, the Drifters, Gene Pitney and Jerry Butler, but achieved greater success later in the decade with middle-of-the-road pop hits for Dionne Warwick ("I Say a Little Prayer," "Do You Know the Way to San Jose," "Promises Promises"), the Fifth Dimension ("One Less Bell to Answer"), the Carpenters ("Close to You"), B. J. Thomas ("Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head"), Dusty Springfield (Wishin' and Hopin'"), Jackie DeShannon ("What the World Needs Now is Love") and many others, with a special affinity for romantic ballads sung by female singers and backed by classy arrangements that matched the polished craft of the songs.

**Bert Berns**

Bert Berns was an incredibly versatile producer, songwriter and talent scout. Working with various writing partners, most notably Jerry Ragavoy, Berns came up with a truly impressive catalog of pop, soul and garage-rock classics: "Twist and Shout" (Isley

Brothers), "Time Is on My Side" (Irma Thomas, the Rolling Stones), "Piece of My Heart" (Erma Franklin, Janis Joplin), "Hang On Sloopy" (the McCoys), "Cry to Me" and "Everybody Needs Somebody to Love" (Solomon Burke), "Up in the Streets of Harlem" (the Drifters), "Here Comes the Night" (Them), "Brown-Eyed Girl" (Van Morrison) and many others. Berns also served as a producer for Atlantic Records before starting his own Bang Records in 1965, where he launched the careers of Van Morrison and Brill Building alumnus Neil Diamond before dying of a heart attack in 1967.

**End of an Era**

The Brill era ended with the British Invasion, which rendered rock's Tin Pan Alley obsolete and forced its practitioners to find a way to fit into the changing rock scene or simply abandon it altogether for the security of middle-of-the-road pop, movie soundtracks or television jingles. Don Kirshner sold Aldon Music to Screen Gems and became head of that entertainment giant's music division. He brought much of his Aldon staff along with him, added new writers (most notably Harry Nilsson and the team of Tommy Boyce & Bobby Hart) and helped launch the Monkees in 1966.

In true teen idol fashion, the Monkees were manufactured for television and hired for their looks and appeal rather than their talent. Only the model had changed: instead of watered-down Elvises, they were watered-down Beatles. The Monkees proved that there was still a market for pop—that even though the old Fabian fans were starting to freak out, wear love beads and listen to strange psychedelic music, their younger siblings still longed for safe and accessible idols and music. But even the Monkees eventually freaked out and demanded artistic control of their music, so Kirshner went a step further and created the Archies, a "group" of comic book characters who, presumably, couldn't complain or harbor secret artistic ambitions. (The Archies were actually a group of sessionmen assembled by Kirshner to provide music for a TV cartoon show.)

Kirshner's "bubblegum music" was despised by earnest rock fans and artists in the late sixties. Considered alongside Jimi Hendrix and *Sgt. Pepper*, Kirshner's contrived "product" only served to illustrate the radical changes that had taken place in a few short years. While Carole King and other old Kirshner protégés responded to rock's changes with a deepened sense of artistic commitment, Kirshner continued to market pop as a commodity, earning and alienating millions through the 1970's with projects like *In Concert*, the *Rock Music Awards* and *Don Kirshner's Rock Concert*. In many ways, Kirshner came to represent "pop" in the worst, mass-marketed sense, but for a few golden years his music machine breathed new life into pop and made the radio worth listening to during the long gap between Elvis and the Beatles.