PHIL SPECTOR AND THE "WALL OF SOUND"

Phil Spector made the grandest pop records of all: "little symphonies for the kids" he called them, and it was an apt description. His Wall of Sound was built on layer upon layer of instruments and voices that combined the heart-tugging melodies and romance of pop with the big beat of rock & roll and the sound of a symphony orchestra. His work with the Ronettes, Darlene Love and the Crystals represents both the peak of girl group pop and the rock world's first self-conscious foray into the realm of Art.

Spector virtually invented the role of the modern "Producer." While others before him had begun expanding the producer's role, most notably Leiber and Stoller, with whom Spector served his "apprenticeship," Spector completed the producer's transition from knob-turner and musician contractor to Artistic Director. And while many of his predecessors were well-known within the music industry, Spector was the first producer to become a star in his own right—a bigger star, in fact, than the singers and groups he recorded.[i] Spector challenged the notion of disposable hits and created mini-masterpieces that were built for the ages as well as the charts, and he did it without ever losing sight of pop's sentimental immediacy and the spirit of fun.

The "producer's producer" is equally famous for being a true eccentric—an iconoclastic, long-haired, outrageously dressed "freak" years before it became fashionable. His fits of weirdness, in and out of the studio, are legendary and add to his enigmatic persona. He earned his right to be weird by becoming pop's boy-wonder: the "First Tycoon of Teen," as Tom Wolfe dubbed him, who mastered the commercial as well as the artistic intricacies of popular music and beat the music establishment at its own game. The industry-dominated early sixties needed a rebel *within* the industry who could shake things up the way the outsiders had in the fifties. With maverick genius Phil Spector, they got just that.

Background and "Apprenticeship"

Phil Spector was born in the Bronx on December 26, 1940, then moved to Hollywood at the age of thirteen, after his father's death. Scrawny and rather sickly, Spector was very much a loner, out of place in the sunny paradise that surrounded him—the paradise he would reshape in his own image, as if in revenge. He formed a trio, the Teddy Bears, after high school and wrote, produced and supplied the guitar and background harmonies for "To Know Him Is to Love Him," a line lifted from his father's tombstone. The record promptly hit #1 on the pop charts and Spector was on his way, though the hushed gentle sound of "To Know Him is to Love Him" gave little hint of the cataclysms to come.

Spector was all over both coasts for the next few years, producing or co-producing, arranging, writing or engineering—usually uncredited—many hits for a variety of labels. He plunged into New York's Brill Building scene after a brief stint in teen idol capitol Philadelphia, and worked closely with Leiber & Stoller on several releases by the Drifters and Ben E. King. Spector soon established himself as a freelance producer, earning full production credit for records by Ray Peterson ("Corrina, Corrina"), Curtis Lee ("Pretty Little Angel Eyes"), the Paris Sisters ("I Love How You Love Me") and Gene Pitney, whose "Every Breath I Take" pointed toward the aural drama to come.

Phillies Records

Spector formed a partnership with industry veteran Lester Sill and launched Phillies Records in 1961, then bought out Sill's share a year later to become sole owner—a record company president at the age of 21. Spector wanted to launch his label with new artists that he could mold into his production style, and looked to the girl group sound was the best avenue for his ideas. He launched his new label with the Crystals, a group of Brooklyn teenagers he discovered at an audition.

The first Phillies release was the Crystals' "There's No Other Like My Baby," a wistful ode to Him that hit the Top Twenty Hit at the end of 1961. The Crystals repeated their success with "**Uptown**," the Mann & Weil rumination on the harsh realities of life and the redeeming power of love. The song's social commentary subtext is underlined in the music, which evokes Spanish Harlem with a flamenco guitar introduction (played by Spector) and a Spanish-flavored melody punctuated by castanets and Latin rhythms. The string-laden production shows Spector's debt to Leiber & Stoller's as well as his own evolving production voice. After a bizarre follow-up, "He Hit Me (and It Felt like a Kiss)"—a monumental lapse of taste from Goffin & King—Spector moved his operations to California and made the final leap to the pure Spector sound with 1962's "He's a Rebel," which gave Phillies Records its first #1 hit and unveiled the Wall of Sound in all its glory.

"**He's a Rebel**"

"He's a Rebel" was written by Gene Pitney and submitted as a demo to Liberty Records, where Spector still served as a staff producer Actually, he did very little for Liberty beyond raiding their demotapes in search of songs for his own label. Spector grabbed "He's a Rebel" and, mission accomplished, bolted from the label, even though Liberty was already planning it for Vicki Carr's next release. Carr's version never had a chance. Spector loved the song's blend of rebellion and romanticism, and lavished his full range of production resources on the simple ode to pure devotion.

"He's a Rebel" was credited to the Crystals, even though none of the Crystals actually sang on it. Spector left the group in New York and hired a Los Angeles group called the Blossoms to sing on the record instead. The move was perfectly in keeping with Spector's view of singers as basically interchangeable parts and the *sound* of his records as the true star: "I used voices as just another instrument... singers are instruments—they're tools to be worked with."[ii] (To emphasize the point, the Blossoms were paid union scale and offered no royalties for the "He's a Rebel" session, just like the piano and brass players.) Still, he couldn't have found a better "tool to work with" than lead singer Darlene Love, who belted out "He's a Rebel" and many subsequent Spector productions with a power-soul voice perfect for Spector's vision of delicate pop melodies imbedded in huge arrangements.

The Wall of Sound

Spector's productions grew larger and more spacious with each song and each added layer of instruments, voices and echo. Instead of the usual basic band backing and occasional string "sweetening," a typical Spector session used up to six guitarists, all strumming in unison, four pianos, two bass players, a large complement of brass and

saxophones and a deep, full drum sound augmented by castanets, sleigh bells, tambourines, timpani, cowbells, maracas, marimbas, glockenspiels and any number of other percussion instruments that studio workers, invited guests and surprised visitors could be corralled into banging or shaking. All of this—Phil Spector's idea of "basic tracks"—was recorded live, in take after take until the perfect blend and feel were achieved. When Spector was finally satisfied, the overdubbing began, often with a string section added to the already orchestral sound, along with more percussion to make sure the beat always remained prominent. Finally it was time for the singers: a small army of voices chanting refrains and background ooh's and aah's behind a single, soaring lead singer who put the whole lovingly-crafted cacophony in the service of pretty pop melody and a simple love song.

Spector based his operations at Hollywood's Gold Star studio, which had a uniquely designed echo chamber that added just the right resonance to his mass of instruments and voices. The festive atmosphere of Spector's sessions and his reputation for artistry and hit-making gave him his pick of the best young arrangers, engineers and session musicians on the West Coast. The seasoned professionals sat side-by-side, patiently strumming the same chords, banging out the same patterns and blowing the same simple notes all night long as Spector searched for the perfect sound. This apparent exercise in overkill was the key to Spector's approach, as engineer Larry Levine recounts: "The horn section quietly blew sustained chords in droning unison behind the rhythm section. He never wanted to hear horns as horns which was, I thought, so great 'cause all it would do is modulate the chords—you'd hear the chords changing but there weren't any instruments to say 'I'm changing,' so it would be in the mind of the listener that these moving parts were moving. It was beautifully done. The guitars, like the horns, were merely suggested... a solitary guitar submerged in the pulsating morass of [arranger Jack] Nitzsche's arrangements would have contributed very little to the sound, but three or four added a definite if intangible texture. He would have the pianos playing so that they interlocked in making everything cohesive... not having individual instruments heard. Of all the musicians playing in obedient unison, only the drummer was allowed any sort of freedom. Not for Spector the inflexible metronome-like drumming of early sixties pop. He dictated round-the-kit fills to emphasize chord changes or bridge pauses between lines."[iii]

Among the more notable members of Spector's "Wrecking Crew" were arranger Jack Nitzsche (who later worked with the Rolling Stones, Neil Young and many others), engineers Larry Levine and Stan Ross, pianist Leon Russell, guitarist Glen Campbell, sax players Steve Douglas and Jim Horn, backup singer/percussionist Sonny Bono and stellar drummers Hal Blaine and Earl Palmer (the New Orleans legend). These and many other talented sessionmen conspired, under Spector's watchful ear, to make the biggest sound ever blasted out of transistor radio. To further blend it all to his liking, Spector added extra echo and equalized the sound to emphasize the highs and lows—treble and bass—to a much greater degree than had been done before, and insisted on recording in mono rather than stereo to add to the monolithic Wall effect.

Spector spent days and weeks perfecting his "little symphonies." In the time it took most record companies to record ten songs in hopes that one of them would hit, Spector recorded a single gem that he *knew* would hit. "I imagined a sound—a sound so strong that if the material wasn't the greatest, the sound would carry the record."[iv] The

sound did carry a few songs, like "Zip-A-Dee Doo-Dah," that he seemed to pick for the sole purpose of testing his theory. For the most part, though, his reputation guaranteed him his pick of the best songs from the best of the Brill Building writers—his mission was to turn great Songs into great Records.

Darlene Love

Darlene Love reprised her role as an honorary "Crystal" for Mann & Weil's "He's Sure the Boy I Love," then joined Bob B. Soxx & the Blue Jeans on "Zip-A-De Doo-Dah," "Why Do Lovers Break Each Other's Heart" and "Not Too Young to Get Married. Love finally had hits under her own name in 1963 with "Today I Met the Boy I'm Going to Marry" and "Wait 'til My Bobby Gets Home," a bouncy affirmation of fidelity ("sure do need some lovin' and some kissin' and a-huggin' but I'll wait until my Bobby gets home"). For some reason, though, her greatest songs weren't hits: "A Fine Fine Boy" only managed to make it to #59, while "Long Way to Be Happy" failed to chart at all. Her crowning moment came on Barry & Greenwich's "**Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)**," an unbelievably impassioned plea couched as a Christmas song and buried on Spector's 1963 *Christmas Album*, a sentimental collection of new songs and Christmas standards sung by Spector's roster of stars that was itself buried by the national gloom following the Kennedy assassination.

The Crystals

After sitting out two of "their" biggest hits, the Crystals regained their rightful place with 1963's "**Da Doo Ron Ron**," singing in full-voiced unison atop a typically Spectorian cast of thousands. Only Steve Douglas' sax solo and Hal Blaine's drumming stand out from the dense mass of voices and instruments: Blaine drives the song along in magnificent fashion, with deep, echoed drum fills that punctuate each line of the chorus and long quasi-rolls that bridge the verses. The Crystals followed with "**Then He Kissed Me**," another classic monolith highlighted by soaring strings, steamrolling castanets and an opening signature riff that rings ethereally throughout the song. The gradual addition of new layers of instruments through the first verses provides a good glimpse of the Wall going up, growing from huge to devastating. "Then He Kissed Me" was the Crystal's final moment of glory. A pair of 1964 releases failed to hit and Spector lost interest in the group, having found another group to lavish his attention and best material on: the Ronettes.

The Ronettes

The Ronettes inspired Spector's greatest work. During their two-year run at the charts they were a vehicle for "Do I Love You," "Walking in the Rain," "(The Best Part of) Breaking Up" and many other great records, including Spector's crowning masterpieces: "Baby My Baby" and "Baby, I Love You." Before signing with Spector, the Ronettes—sisters Ronnie and Estelle Bennett and cousin Nedra Talley—were featured vocalists at New York's Peppermint Lounge, the home of the Twist, where they polished their dance routines and developed a sultry "bad girls" image that balanced the innocence of their songs and the Frankie Lymon-esque sound of their lead singer, **Ronnie**

Bennett. Spector saw their act, signed them to Philles and promptly recorded "Be My Baby," a million seller in the summer of 1963.

Spector fell in love with and eventually married Ronnie Bennett, whose presence assured that the Ronettes were much more than another "interchangeable part" in his eyes. The Barry & Greenwich songs he picked (and helped write) for Ronnie to sing were achingly beautiful declarations of love phrased as simply and directly as possible. While the rest of the world heard the songs and fantasized that they were sung for them, Spector was able to live the fantasy: to really hear his girl sing "have I ever told you, how good it feels to hold you?" directly to him. He returned the sentiment in the magnificent palaces of sound he built to house Ronnie's earnest little voice.

"**Be My Baby**" opens with rock's most famous drum line, a heavily-echoed hook-line (boom-ba-boom-WHACK) that forms the underlying rhythm for the verses, where it is transformed into a gentle bass riff as the Wrecking Crew rumbles in beneath Ronnie's opening lines. A choir of voices and sustained brass is added as the verse begins winding its way to the jubilant chorus, where the beat straightens out into a giant sledgehammer and everyone joins Ronnie for the title refrain. The brass and voices stay with her through the second verse, bolstered by the subtle entrance of a string section that further enlivens the second chorus and takes a brief melodic solo before a final refrain. "Be My Baby" is capped off by a sudden halt for a surprise return of the opening drum line, followed by a triumphant reentry and a joyous fade-out that turns into a lavishly accompanied drum solo.

"**Baby, I Love You**" is very similar to "Be My Baby," and even better. The arrangement is larger and more seamless, Ronnie's singing is more assured and Hal Blaine's drum extravaganza is even more aggressive, joined by sleigh bells, castanets, tambourines, cow bells and a full battery of other percussion instruments. The song itself is a love letter set to a long, gentle melody that flows into the simplest and purest of all pop refrains: "Baby I love you, baby I love you, baby I love only you."

The Ronettes followed with "(The Best Part of) Breaking Up," "Do I Love You," a forgotten classic on a par with their first hits, and Mann & Weil's great "**Walking in the Rain**." "Walking in the Rain" is all about the *dream* of love: "I want him, and I need him, and someday, someway, I'll meet him." The song's brooding melody and atmospheric production—complete with thunderclaps and rain showers—create a truly melancholy mood: the singer's feelings are so close and real, but the reality of a true love remains far away as the song ends with a wistful "where can he be?"[v] Unfortunately, "Walking in the Rain" was lost in the chart chaos of the British Invasion and the Ronettes were unable to regain their stride with their remaining releases. Pop's fairy tale romance lasted a bit longer, but ended with Phil and Ronnie Spector's divorce in 1974.

The Righteous Brothers

Phil Spector's recordings of the Righteous Brothers were his last great successes. With the arrival of the Beatles and the declining popularity of the girl groups, Spector looked for a new vehicle for his sound and found Bill Medley and Bobby Hatfield, a white singing duo from Southern California who had a local hit in 1963 with "Little Latin Lupe Lu." The duo was dubbed the "Righteous Brothers" by black fans who liked their soulful singing style. Spector was likewise drawn to their soulful two-part harmonies and their flair for vocal theatrics, pitting Medley's rich baritone against Hatfield's wailing

falsettos. He signed them to Philles in 1964 and commissioned Mann & Weil to write "something different" for their first release.

"**You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'**" was certainly "different." The record opens at a funeral march tempo with Bill Medley singing in a low, smoky voice that sent more than a few listeners running to check the speed on their record player. The spacious death-knell sound that surrounds him is as desolate as the song's opening line: "You never close your eyes anymore when I kiss your lips." The slow torture heightens with Medley's rise to full-voiced pleading and the dramatic entrance of Hatfield's harmonies and the full backing Wall for the title refrain. The chorus dissolves into a sighing bass line and a deep drum fill that rumbles into the second verse, where the introverted sorrow continues. After another gut-wrenching chorus the song implodes to stark near-silence to introduce the extended "bridge" section, where Medley and Hatfield trade lines then join in a call-and-response that builds to a high shrieking climax before collapsing into another desperate chorus. For a final dramatic flourish, Spector tacked on a false ending and a sudden full-fury return for an ending fade-out.

"You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'" evokes the feeling of love lost with chilling force, surging from one climax to another within an emotional range bounded by quiet sorrow and unadulterated grief that seems too much for a mere record. It was, in any case, too long: at 3:50, Spector knew that radio stations would balk at playing it (even though the false ending helped disguise the length). In typically bold fashion, he solved the problem by simply stamping "3:05" on the record label. The record received massive airplay and Spector had his last #1 hit of the 1960's. ("You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'" also hit #3 on the R&B charts and virtually invented "blue-eyed soul"; Righteous Brothers disciples Hall & Oates also had a hit with the song in 1980.)

Spector recorded a near sound-alike for a follow-up, Goffin & King's "Just Once in My Life," that managed to match its predecessor's emotional and orchestral density. Their next hit was a remake of the pop standard, "Unchained Melody," even though the song was actually released as the B-side of another Goffin & King original, "Hung On You." Spector was less than thrilled about the public's preference for the old song and, in a typically twisted stroke of vengeance, he decided to record *only* pop standards for their next releases. "Ebb Tide" followed "Unchained melody" into the Top Ten, but "White Cliffs of Dover" failed to chart and the Righteous Brothers bolted for the saner confines of the Verve label. They promptly returned to #1 with "(You're My) Soul and Inspiration," written by Mann & Weil and produced by Bill Medley in grand Spector fashion.

Ike & Tina Turner

Suddenly hitless and out-of-step with the times, Spector staked his reputation on Ike & Tina Turner's "**River Deep-Mountain High**," recorded in 1966. Spector smothered the rather slight Barry & Greenwich composition under the most bombastic production of his career, knowing that Tina Turner's powerhouse voice could blast its way through anything. The joyously maniacal exercise in excess capped the Wall of Sound years and was a big hit in England, but it climbed only up to #88 on the American charts. Meant to re-establish Spector's preeminence, it became his grand farewell instead. Devastated by the song's inexplicable failure, Spector retreated into semi-retirement. He was 25 years old.

Let It Be

Spector returned to the charts in 1969 with Sonny Charles & the Checkmates' "Black Pearl," a great song and effective production that recalled his past triumphs but added a new element of social conscious. Spector's tenure as *the* rock producer was well in the past, however, Still, it's hard to say his career was "over" when the next group he worked with was **The Beatles**(!) He was actually an old acquaintance of the group, having met them during a Ronettes tour of England. (He even flew with them on their first triumphant visit to America. Spector visited and contributed ideas to several of the Rolling Stones' early recording sessions as well.) Spector never really "produced" the Beatles, but was called in after the fact to assemble a coherent album out of the hours and hours of tape left over from the Beatles' *Let It Be* sessions. He then produced the first solo albums for John Lennon and George Harrison, including the hit singles "Imagine" and "My Sweet Lord." Needless to say, no one was calling them "Phil Spector records": for the first time in his career, Spector was working with artists more famous and strong-willed than he was. While Spector's production touches certainly added much to the records, particularly the spacious quasi-Wall of Harrison's *All Things Must Pass* and the heavily-echoed pop sound of Lennon's "Instant Karma," he was, finally, a "normal" producer, forced to accommodate his artists' ideas and bend to their sound and style.

Spector's behavior grew increasingly bizarre as the hits that had justified his eccentricities faded. He produced sporadically through the late seventies and eighties (including the Ramones' 1980 *End of the Century* album) and ended up something of a rock & roll Howard Hughes, secluded in his mansion and memories of past glories. He has been more visible—and visibly calmer—in recent years, and he continues to be an icon and influence.

Phil Spector single-handedly changed the sound and shape of popular music and crafted some of its finest and most exhilarating moments. The Wall of Sound still stands as his monument.

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[i] One rarely sees a "Ronettes Greatest Hits" package, for example;. You'll find your favorite Ronettes song on a "*Phil Spector's* Greatest Hits" collection.

[ii] Album liner notes for "Phil Spector's Greatest Hits," Warner/Spector Records (WB 2SP 9104, 1977).

[iii] ibid., quoted from Rob Finnis, "The Phil Spector Story."

[iv] Shannon and Javna, p. 108.

[v] The rather run-of-the-mill sound effects won Spector his only Grammy Award, a good example of how little the Grammy Awards mean.