## THE GIRL GROUPS

With the rough, R&B edges of rock & roll fading into pop, "girl groups" were the most successful avenue for young black singers in the early sixties. Like their doo-wop predecessors, the groups were essentially interchangeable parts—a sound and style rather than an individual voice or image. The groups' relative anonymity meant that the focus stayed on the Song rather than singers (or their skin color). It also meant that their role in the creation of their music was limited: the girl groups were firmly entrenched in the pop "system," and the sound and success of the top groups was largely the result of their link to a specific producer: the Chantels to George Goldner, the Shirelles to Luther Dixon, the Shangri-Las to Shadow Morton, the Marvelettes to the Berry Gordy/Motown team, and the Ronettes and Crystals to Phil Spector. The producer wrote or picked the group's songs, shaped their sound and created records that projected *his* sound and vision, rather than that of the singers. Within this artistically stifling system, the girl groups flourished and made, quite simply, the best records of the early sixties.

Free from any pressure to be "all-around entertainers" (young black women certainly weren't going to make it to Vegas), the girl groups made records with all the excitement and passion that their male counterparts seemed to have lost. Although female singers hadn't made much of an impact during the rebellious days of rock & roll, the girl groups were perfect for an era that valued sweet melodies and apparent innocence above all else. For a start, they were *girls*, and in the pre-liberated days of the early sixties female singers weren't considered a potential threat to decency the way even a relatively tame male singer might be. They could be sweetly innocent without alienating the rockers (any guy would *love* to be sung to like that), and be slightly rebellious without offending the adults: after all, they only sang *about* the rebels—their boyfriends may have been contemptible hoods, but the noble girls who sang "He's a Rebel" or "Leader of the Pack" were only staying true to their guys. And though there was often an underlying current of sexuality behind the "innocence," they were shielded from criticism by sexual stereotypes that were still firmly in place: guys wanted sex, girls dreamed of love... And to extend this a bit further, rock & roll was about sex, but *pop* was all about Love.

The roots of girl group pop stretch back to the idyllic lyrics and group singing of doo-wop (nearly all of the girl groups were from the New York area, doo-wop's home base), but it was not simply doo-wop sung by women. The nature of the voices dictated a simpler vocal interplay, since female voices have a narrower range (compared to the male groups, who could fill the entire spectrum from low bass to high falsettos) and a fragile quality easily smothered by aggressive background vocals. Instead, the background singers sang unobtrusive "ooh's" and "aah's" during the verses, if they sang at all, and saved a full-voiced attack for unison refrains and call-and-response sections. The focus remained on a single lead voice and bright pop melody, and on a heightened aura of romantic yearning that inspired both a sweet innocence and a gospel-style intensity from the lead singers.

The streamlined vocal dynamics left room for bigger instrumental arrangements and larger roles for the producers and arrangers. Consequently, the musical arrangements were always an integral feature of girl group recordings (it's hard to imagine them sung a cappella). The productions grew larger and the beat stronger, but the songs and sentiment remained simple and direct ("I love you" or "get lost"). Girl group pop reached its peak in Phil Spector's productions, but the basic elements of the sound and style were

anticipated in the first true girl group records: the Chantels' "Maybe," and the Shirelles' "I Met Him on a Sunday," both recorded in 1958.

**The Chantels**

The Chantels were basically a one-shot group, but their sound and brief success formed an important model for the groups who followed. Their producer, **George Goldner**, and arranger, Richard Barrett, helped to pioneer the "Uptown R&B" style with their sophisticated productions for the Flamingos ("I Only Have Eyes for You") and Little Anthony & the Imperials ("Tears On My Pillow"). The Chantels' "**Maybe**," on the other hand, hearkens back to the simplicity of earlier doo-wop. Backed by a simple accompaniment dominated by drums and rock-a-ballad piano triplets, Smith delivers a yearning plea for a lover's return: "May-ay-y-be if I pray every night, you'll come back to me..." He does return, but only in her dreams, night after night. The *wish* itself is everything, though: it fills the song and Smith's plaintive voice with an eyes-lifted emotion that is half-prayer and half-passion.

Written by sixteen-year-old lead singer Arlene Smith, "Maybe" captures the tension between innocent romantic dreams and the hint of longing sexuality that fuels them: the underlying tension all of the girl group classics. Smith's singing also illustrates the gospel intensity and urgency that the girl groups brought to their sweet pop melodies. Her desire simply overwhelms the melody, and her disregard for "proper" phrasing and precise intonation gives the record exactly the type of heartfelt immediacy that the girl groups kept alive while the guys polished their act and sang *about*—rather than with—love and emotion.

**The Shirelles**

The Shirelles were a group of high school students from Passaic, New Jersey, who patterned themselves after the Chantels and began recording shortly after their cross-river heroes. They wrote "**I Met Him on a Sunday**" for a school talent show and later, after some coaxing, auditioned the song for Florence Greenburg, a friend's mother who just happened to run the small Tiara record label. (Greenburg later started Scepter Records as a showcase for the Shirelles). "I Met Him on a Sunday" presents the *other* side of girl group pop—the emotional and musical flipside of "Maybe." Here the singers are anything but moonstruck and compliant: they're tough and they're mad. The song traces a week's romance with the guy who seems OK on Sunday and gets more interesting as the week progresses. But when the jerk doesn't show up on Friday, the Shirelles don't plead or pray for his return. And when he dares to show his face on Saturday, they greet him with a flippant "bye, bye baby" and a defiant chorus of "doo ronde ronDE ronde ronde papa..." (That's telling him!)

The tough sound of "I Met Him on a Sunday" matches the singers' indignation: the pounding drums and tambourines, layers of keyboards, guitars, grinding saxes and heavy echo create an enormous beat and sound that anticipated the Phil Spector's monolithic Wall of Sound. The singers balanced the dense production by singing in unison—a strength-in-numbers approach that became an integral part of the girl group sound. The contrasting styles of "Maybe" and "I Met Him on a Sunday"—sweetness vs.

toughness, melodic solo singing vs. group chanting, sparse vs. heavy backing arrangements—defined the musical and emotional range of girl group pop.

The Shirelles moved to the lighter and sweeter side with 1959's "**Dedicated to the One I Love**," a cover of a 1958 R&B hit by the Five Royales. The switch from male to female, from worldwise adult to innocent teenage voices and from an R&B band to a pop arrangement gave the song an entirely new feeling and shifted the context from hard reality to a yearning dreamworld more familiar to the seventeen-year-old singers and their young audience. The song remained a timeless ode to devotion in the face of separation, but the singer and her beloved now seemed separated less by physical distance than by their youth and the social conventions that keep them from truly sharing their love (or spoiling it by actually being together).

The Shirelles' first releases were not big hits at the time, and it looked like the Shirelles were joining the Chantels on the road to oblivion. Instead, they became the most successful of the early sixties girl groups, thanks largely to the songwriting and keen ear of their producer, **Luther Dixon**. Dixon's transparent productions focused on the voices and emphasized the Shirelles' endearingly amateurish style. Shirley Owens, who assumed the lead singer role after "Dedicated to the One I Love," often sounded willfully out-of-tune, and all of their songs sounded like they were written for a high school talent show. But Dixon also recognized and responded to the changes in the youth market and embellished their sound with subtle string arrangements and other touches that would appeal to pop tastes: "I wanted to have strings because R&B records weren't getting played on pop stations. I said, 'If I put in strings maybe it'll match the pop sound.'"[1]

The Shirelles' first big national hit, 1960's "**Tonight's the Night**," written by Dixon and Shirley Owens, features a subdued string arrangement and a staggered West Indies beat that heightens the sexually-charged anticipation of the night to come. In the Shirelles' next release, Goffin & King's "**Will You Love Me Tomorrow**," that night of romance becomes a reality full of fears and doubts. The musical variation on an age-old question—"will you respect me in the morning?"—shocked many adults and amused many others, but spoke directly to the teenagers who were living such dilemmas. It shot to #1 in 1961, becoming the first #1 pop hit for any black female singer or group, and pulled the re-released "Dedicated to the One I Love" into the Top Ten along with it.

"Mama Said," "Big John," "Soldier Boy" and other hits followed quickly. "Soldier Boy" sent the group back to #1, even though it was a lightweight piece of fluff that Dixon wrote on the spot when he realized the group had a few minutes of studio time left—the Shirelles simply sang in nursery rhyme unison over a simple band backing. Other, more fully realized Dixon songs like "Mama Said" and "Boys" kept a strongly rhythmic R&B edge and emphasized the "tough" side of the Shirelles; and when he decided to look elsewhere for songs, the group's popularity gave him his pick from the top songwriters of the day. Goffin & King followed "Will You Love Me Tomorrow" with "What a Sweet Thing That Was," and Burt Bacharach & Hal David contributed "Baby It's You." (For the latter song, Owens simply dubbed her lead vocals over a Bacharach/David demo, creating a strangely haunting blend of intimate vocals over a distant backing.)

The Shirelles' career went into a steep decline after Dixon left Scepter Records in 1962. They squeezed out a few more hits before the British Invasion sent them packing

for the oldies circuit (even though the Beatles covered "Boys" and "Baby It's You" on their first album). They then discovered, like so many of others, that the small fortune in record royalties that was supposed to be waiting for them when they turned 21 had mysteriously "disappeared," prompting a bitter legal battle with Florence Greenburg. Scepter continued to thrive through the sixties, thanks to the Bacharach/David productions for Dionne Warwick and hits for the Isley Brothers ("Twist and Shout"), Chuck Jackson ("Any Day Now") and the Kingsmen ("Louie Louie") on Scepter's Wand subsidiary.

**The Girls and THE BOY**

In the wake of the Shirelles' success, girl groups began proliferating just as doo-wop groups had in the fifties, with a second wave of white groups on the heels of the originals. The Shirelles, Ronettes, Crystals, Marvelettes, Chiffons and Shangri-Las were among the most successful of the groups, along with solo singer Lesley Gore, who echoed the groups with her power-pop style. (Connie Francis and Brenda Lee, the top-selling female artists of the period, had more traditional pop styles and adult-oriented appeal.) As with doo-wop, though, many of the most memorable songs of the era came from "one-shots" who struck gold with a song or two and then vanished: the Cookies ("Chains"), the Dixie Cups ("Chapel of Love"), the Angels ("My Boyfriend's Back"), the Exciters ("Tell Him"), Kathy Young & the Innocents ("A Thousand Stars"), the Paris Sisters ("I Love How You Love Me"), Cathy Jean & the Roommates ("Please Love Me Forever"), Rosie & the Originals ("Angel Baby") and many other groups left a brief but indelible mark on the early sixties, along with solo singers such as Little Eva ("The Loco-Motion"), Claudine Clark ("Party Lights"), Shelly Fabares ("Johnny Angel") and Little Peggy March ("I Will Follow Him").

The songs varied between noisy celebrations of and tender ballads to THE BOY, with a few defiant rejections thrown in to keep him on his toes. After years of male yearnings and fantasies in rock & roll songs, boys suddenly joined girls as objects of desire and adoration. Like Peggy Sue, Donna, Diana, Venus and other female teen dreams, the guys were idealized images of adolescent romanticism. HE was, variously, So Fine, a Fine Fine Boy, an Angel, My Dreamboat, My One True Love, Sure the Boy I Love, a Picture of Heaven, the Kind of Boy You Can't Forget, the Boy I'm Gonna Marry... Even the misunderstood rebel had a heart of gold and a sensitive side that only his devoted girlfriend could see. Needless to say, her parents missed it altogether (the eternal enemies of youth never did understand). But love and hope flourished in spite of disapproving parents, inspiring enough heart-tugging declarations to melt the coldest heart. Two of the most memorable came from the Chiffons: "He's So Fine" and "One Fine Day."

**The Chiffons**

A group of high school friends from the Bronx formed a group in 1960 when a young songwriter named Ronnie Mack asked them to sing on a demotape of some of his songs, including "**He's So Fine**." They dubbed themselves the Chiffons and scored a local hit that same year with a cover of the Shirelle's "Tonight's the Night," then graduated to jobs as telephone operators while Mack kept trying to interest someone in

his songs. After hearing nearly every industry figure in New York dismiss "He's So Fine" as "too trite and too simple," he finally found a sympathetic ear at tiny Laurie Records who realized that the record's unabashed simplicity was its great charm. "He's So Fine" was finally released in 1963, nearly three years after the original demotape was recorded.

"He's So Fine" is a simple wish, stated plainly and set to music. The signature "doo-lang" refrain that opens the song continues—changing to "oh yeah" for the bridge—to form a reassuring call-and-response behind lead singer Judy Craig's musings on the handsome, wavy-haired, soft-spoken and kinda shy guy she doesn't quite have yet, but *will*: "it's just a matter of time." Her strong-but-warm voice anchors the song and brings its delightfully asymmetric phrases to life, as in her fluid delivery of "I'd do anything that he asked, anything to make him my own." Why? Because, as the jubilant fade-out declares, over and over, "He's so fine."

"He's So Fine" went to #1 and established the Chiffons as a national act. In a stroke of cruel irony, Ronnie Mack contracted Hodgkin's Disease just as the hit he'd worked so hard for was finally taking off. He was awarded a gold record for the song in his hospital room, and died soon afterward. (A decade later, the song's long journey took another twisted turn into rock's most celebrated copyright infringement lawsuit, which ended with ex-Beatles George Harrison judged guilty of "subconsciously plagiarizing" "He's So Fine" in his own "My Sweet Lord.")

The Chiffons' talent for attracting good songs continued with Goffin & King's "**One Fine Day**," which featured the Chiffon's voices overdubbed onto Carole King's fully-produced demotape. Like its predecessor, "One Fine Day" exists in hope, this time the hope that the singer's wandering boyfriend will come back when he wants to settle down. In the meantime, the hope itself becomes a celebration—a self-fulfilling prophesy driven by King's bell-like piano riff and Judy Craig's confident delivery. The Chiffon's career stumbled when yet another "fine" song from 1963, "A Love So Fine," failed to follow its predecessors up the charts. The Chiffons scored a last hit in 1966 with "Sweet Talkin' Guy," a final celebration of The Boy who filled their hearts and hits.

### The Marvelettes

**Motown Records** began as a small independent label founded in Detroit by Berry Gordy, Jr., and grew through the early and middle sixties to become America's greatest hit-making machine. Although the label reached its peak (rather amazingly) during and after the British Invasion, Motown was going strong in the early 1960's. It was particularly successful with its female singers, though the Marvelettes were Motown's only true pop "girl group," since the soulful Vandellas and classy Supremes quickly outgrew the girl group image and sound, while the Marvelettes seemed directly descended from the Shirelles. Their first release, 1961's "**Please Mr. Postman**," was the first Motown single to hit #1 on the pop charts. (The Carpenters brought the song back to the top spot in 1975; the Beatles also covered the song, much more convincingly.) "Twistin' Postman," "Playboy," "Beechwood 4-5789" and other Marvelettes hits from 1962 were among the first to bring the Motown Sound to the national audience.

**The Angels**

White groups tended to occupy the extremes of girl group pop, from the ultra-innocence of 15-year-old Kathy Young & the Innocents' "A Thousand Stars" to the Angels' revenge anthem, "My Boyfriend's Back," and the Shangri-Las' "Leader of the Pack," an ode to a martyred motorcycle hood. For the most part, the white singers lacked the gospel-derived emotional resonance of the black groups and relied heavily on melodramatic spoken interludes, unison group chants and breathy, half-spoken singing styles. Their greater acceptance also made them freer to challenge the sugary girl group image: the brazen, "tough girls" attack of the Angels and, especially, the Shangri-Las formed the girl group equivalent of Dion's street-tough pop style.

The Angels' "My Boyfriend's Back" was released in 1963 and was the first #1 hit for a white girl group. Their piece of rock immortality came courtesy of songwriter Bob Feldman and an unknown group of kids he overheard at a Brooklyn hangout. Feldman recalls: "An altercation started between a young girl and a hoody-looking young man with a leather jacket... She was pointing a finger at him and screaming, 'My boyfriend's back and you're gonna be in trouble. You've been spreading lies about me all over school and when he gets a hold of you, you're gonna be sorry you were ever born!'"[ii] "**My Boyfriend's Back**" had practically written itself, with a few more threats added for good measure. ("He knows I wasn't cheatin', now you're gonna get a beatin'"). The Angels gave the song a scolding, finger-shaking reading punctuated by an exuberant refrain of "hey-la, hey-la, my boyfriend's back" and a band backing that alternates between drums & handclaps and a full band accompaniment. The teenage morality play ends with her White Knight rounding the bend to save the singer's besmirched reputation. The Angels gratefully sang his praises in their next and last hit, "I Adore Him."

**The Shangri-Las**

The Shangri-Las capped the girl group era with a series of teen angst epics recorded for Red Bird Records. Red Bird was launched in 1964 by Leiber and Stoller, with George Goldner as co-owner and veteran songwriters Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich as creative partners. The label was founded just in time for the British Invasion, yet still managed a #1 hit with the Dixie Cups' "Chapel of Love," which knocked the Beatles' "Love Me Do" off the top spot in June, 1964, and several hits for the Shangri-Las. Given the illustrious track record of its founders, it's not surprising that the Red Bird releases boasted the grandest productions outside of Phil Spector's Wall of Sound. What is surprising is that much of the credit belongs to a brash newcomer, **George "Shadow" Morton**.

Shadow Morton had gone to high school with Ellie Greenwich and was shocked to find her name on so many of the hit records he was hearing. Determined to get in on the action, he contacted his old friend in 1964 and boasted that he too could write and produce a hit, though he'd actually never written a song or been in a studio in his life. Greenwich called his bluff and Morton went to work: he assembled a backup band and found the Shangri-Las—two pairs of sisters from "the bad part of Queens"—to sing on his demotape. There was still one small detail missing, though, as Morton recalls: "On the way over to the studio that day it dawns on me that I have everything going except a

song. I don't have a song. So I pull the car over on South Oyster Bay Road and I start to write."[iii]

The seaside road inspired "**Remember (Walking in the Sand)**," the song Morton pulled out of his hat on his way to the session. The Red Bird heads were duly impressed and turned Morton loose to record the song for real. Morton responded with every trick he could conjure up to make his first production unforgettable. He layered the tale of obsessive woe with shrieking seagulls, crashing waves and enough echo to make the booming minor chords and despairing voices sound like the end of the world. Jilted by her boyfriend, lead singer Mary Weiss wails her lament on the verge of tears while the rest of the Shangri-Las cry along atop the dirge-like backing band. And just when the pain seems almost unbearable, it gets worse: the band halts, leaving poor Mary alone in her shock and anguish, repeating "oh no" until the background singers return, whispering "remember" over and over like a voice in her head that won't let her forget that magic night by the sea with her guy, or the fact that he's now gone for good. Reality and another verse crash back in, then the whispered "remember"'s and *that night* return to haunt her as the record fades, leaving Mary trapped in her memories and despair.

Morton went straight for the throat with his songs, exaggerating emotions and cramming epic teen dramas into densely-packed records that sound like aural versions of those gaudy Sunday newspaper love-and-drama comics. Similarly, the Shangri-Las were one of the few girl groups that consciously developed an "image": they played the role of the "bad girls" to the hilt, decked out in tight black pants and boots, leather suits, heavy make-up and beehive hairdos. They looked like the type who hang out with motorcycle gangs, and they became just that in "**Leader of the Pack**," a #1 hit in 1964 that tested the limits of good taste to become the last and greatest in a flood of early sixties car crash and death-rock songs (Jan & Dean's "Dead Man's Curve," also from 1964, was a close second). Hot rods, drag races and motorcycles were all the rage in the early sixties and were a favorite topic for songs, along with misunderstood, sensitive tough guys, ill-fated love, parents who don't understand, fiery death and eternal devotion. Morton and company packed it all into "Leader of the Pack," an epic, modern-day Romeo and Juliet tragedy played out in a two minute record.

A spoken, post-crash exchange between the bereaved heroine and her pals introduces "Leader of the Pack": "...is he picking you up after school today?" "Mmm-mmm" (in other words, "no, he's dead"). Then a sudden burst of plaintive singing evokes the memory of the tragic events, all accompanied by appropriately ominous music and mock-solemn interjections from the backup singers as she recalls telling her guy that her parents will not let her see him any longer. His reason for living suddenly gone, the Leader promptly races off into eternity as the singer looks on, shouting in horror. Morton's trademark sound effects high-camp realism with a wonderfully sickening, drawn out crash. As the dust clears, the widowed girlfriend vows she'll never forget her Leader of the Pack (at least not until Study Hall, anyway).

Shadow Morton and the Shangri-Las continued turning out oversized teen angst hits through 1965, returning to a celebration of the greaser in "Give Him a Great Big Kiss," and to the ever-faithful theme of untimely death caused by the generation gap in "Give Us Your Blessings" and "I Can Never Go Home Anymore." After a final hit in 1966, "Long Live Our Love," Red Bird folded and the Shangri-Las, the last of the classic girl groups, went with it. Shadow Morton went on to produce in an eclectic range of

styles, including the Vanilla Fudge's hard rock version of "You Keep Me Hanging On," Janis Ian's social commentary, "Society's Child," and the New York Dolls' 1974 album *Too Much Too Soon.*

---

[i]Bruce Pollack, "When Rock Was Young" (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1981), p. 39.
[ii]ibid., p. 131.
[iii]Joe Smith, "Off the Record" (New York: Warner, 1988), p.148.