

MARTHA AND THE VANDELLAS

IF YOU HAD A PULSE in the summer of 1964 and heard Martha Reeves' piercing cry – "Calling out, around the world, are you ready for a brand-new beat?" – you might have recognized it as the siren sound of Berry Gordy Jr.'s Motown Records. When you are inside that song, Motown's Sound of Young America is happening, and all is well in the world. As Reeves sings, "Summer's here, and the time is right for dancing in the street," to one of the most irresistible riffs Motown's Funk Brothers ever concocted, for that moment you are young and wild and utterly without a care.

Such is the enchantment that Martha Reeves and the Vandellas were able to summon up out of a three-minute pop song – with the help of Gordy and a fleet of Motown support.

Like so many Motown songs, "Dancing in the Street" sounded deceptively light on the surface, but in Reeves' voice there were deeper inflections, echoes of the sharp righteousness of gospel and the sultry abandon of R&B. More so than most of her sister Motown singers, Reeves had an earthy and direct quality to her delivery. While the Supremes were adored for their kittenish, airbrushed glamour, Martha and the Vandellas were the tough, hip girls down the street. There were intimations of a slight danger in their music, thanks to that interesting, harsh edge of Reeves' alto, a quality that made it slice like a scimitar through layers of background instrumental and vocal accompaniment.

There was an intriguing, raw quality to Reeves when, just out of her teens, she was spotted by Motown's street-savvy A&R director Mickey Stevenson at Detroit's fabled Twenty Grand nightclub one fall evening in 1961. Reeves had won a talent contest, and the prize was a brief gig singing at the club. After Stevenson saw the slim 20-year-old with the exotically uptilted eyes sing "Fly Me to the Moon" and "The Gin House Blues," he presented himself backstage and placed his Motown business card in Reeves' hand, and a career was born.

"When I knew I could sing, I knew I had something," says Reeves. There was no turning back for her after Stevenson glided into her life, a finger-snapping, daddy-cool hero who would whisk her away from her life of drudgery behind the counter of Detroit's City Wide Cleaners. But it wasn't an overnight rescue. Reeves had to fight for her shot as a singer at Motown. While Stevenson saw promise in the singer, there was no instant contract for Reeves at the Hitsville U.S.A. house on West Grand Boulevard when she turned up the next morning. People were too busy arranging sessions, writing songs, recording, trying to impress the boss with their three-minute pop melodramas and just generally reinventing the wheel, so Reeves rolled up her sleeves and became part of the action – answering phones and organizing the A&R department in what turned out to be a full-time job as Stevenson's secretary.

Then came *Marvin* and the Vandellas. From demo vocals, Martha Reeves was tapped to sing backup behind established Motown artists, and for those gigs she would call in Rosalind Ashford, Annette Sterling

and Gloria Jean Williamson, with whom she'd sung as the Del-Phis. Reeves and her friends became the frisky female chorus you heard behind Marvin Gaye on many of his early recordings. Backup singers aren't supposed to jump out at you, but once you know it's Reeves, it's impossible to miss her "Hitchhike, baby!" behind Gaye's lead on "Hitch Hike."

Inevitably, Reeves and her colleagues were ushered into Gordy's second-floor office and offered a contract. The boss gave them 15 minutes to pick a new name, and so Reeves, Ashford and Sterling (Williamson opted out) became Martha and the Vandellas. Their first record, "I'll Have to Let Him Go," went nowhere, but they soon scored with Holland-Dozier-Holland's "Come and Get These Memories," which reached No. 29 on *Billboard's* pop chart and No. 6 on the R&B listing. But it was Martha and the Vandellas' follow-up, "Heat Wave," that elevated them into the Motown firmament. The song is a jolt of pure excitement, with the brassy Funk Brothers in full throttle and Reeves adding her youthful sass to a hip lyric. It became the No. 4 pop song in the country.

The hits continued: "Nowhere to Run," "Quicksand," "Jimmy Mack," "Honey Chile" and perhaps Reeves' best vocal work, "My Baby Loves Me," a torchy song in the tradition of the blues singers she'd grown up with. And cover versions were plentiful, with artists like the Kinks, the Mamas and the Papas, the Who, David Bowie and Mick Jagger reinventing Martha and the Vandellas' greatest hits over the years.

Vandellas came and went: Betty Kelly was an early addition, and then there were Sandra Tilley and Reeves' sisters Lois and Delphine.

Today, Martha Reeves is the most visible reminder of Motown in the city of Detroit. She is there, resplendent in her diva furs, for the festive events at the Hitsville house (now the Motown Historical Museum). And she is there for the sad ones as well, particularly when her Motown peers are in trouble. Musing about what went into the Motown sound, Martha Reeves is eager to credit the metropolis from which it came. "I think it was Detroit," she says, "and the musicians who lived here. We had jazz musicians, so our sound was hard to duplicate. And it was the building, the fact that Hitsville was a house, not an office building. But you'd have to have the Funk Brothers, because they created it."

Now, Martha and the Vandellas join their Motown siblings in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. It hasn't been easy for Reeves and her group, which was not given the potent Motown star treatment bestowed on their daintier rivals, Diana Ross and the Supremes. And once Motown moved to L.A., Martha and the Vandellas were on their own.

In their heyday, Martha and the Vandellas were peerless. No other girl group could pack the excitement into a single that they could or electrify a live audience with the amount of wattage that Reeves and her singers delivered. Generations later, Reeves' plea to go dancing in the street still lifts the spirit and evokes an eternal summer and a wild night of the soul.

— SUSAN WHITALL

Martha Reeves, Rosalind Ashford and Betty Kelly (from left) in a 1966 Motown publicity still



GIRL

A distinctive sound and style and a new space for women in music

GROUPS

THE FIVE-YEAR PERIOD between 1958 and 1963 is often depicted as a long dry spell in the history of rock & roll. According to the traditional refrain, Elvis got drafted, Little Richard got religion, Jerry Lee Lewis got married, Buddy Holly got killed, and a horde of talentless teen idols took over the charts until the Beatles brought back the Real Thing. ∞ This theory ignores one of the most significant and influential musical genres of the post-'58 era. The genre represented a distinctive new musical style and the creative efforts of a diverse young group,

both black and white, of upstart singers, songwriters, producers and business people, and it was accompanied by striking new fashions and hairdos, the charms of which seem more and more dead-on as the years go by.

This was the sound and style of the girl groups.

In his definitive study *Girl Groups: The Story of a Sound* (Delilah Communications), Alan Betrock marked 1958 and the Chantels' landmark hit, "Maybe," as the genesis of the girl-group era; 10 years later, it was all over but the shouting (or the reissuing, as it were). The style reached its artistic and commercial height between 1963 and 1966. These few years saw the release of hundreds of girl-group records made memorable by the high quality of their songs, production and performances.

Foremost among these was the unsurpassed string of hits produced by Phil Spector and released on his Philles label. Amazingly, just 36 Philles singles were issued commercially. Of these, 17 made

the *Billboard* Top 40, including all-time girl-group classics by the Ronettes ("Baby I Love You," "Walking in the Rain," the No. 2 smash "Be My Baby"), the Crystals ("Uptown," "Da Doo Ron Ron," "Then He Kissed Me," the No. 1 "He's a Rebel") and Darlene Love ("[Today I Met] The Boy I'm Gonna Marry").

Of course, each Spector smash started with a great song. The producer collaborated with many writers during the course of his career, from Gene Pitney to Doc Pomus. But his Philles output relied on the work of three gifted songwriting teams: Ellie Greenwich and Jeff Barry; Gerry Goffin and Carole King; and Barry Mann and Cynthia Weill. As Alan Betrock explained: "From the time Spector first used a song by Ellie Greenwich ("[Today I Met] The Boy I'm Gonna Marry," released in early '63) until the spurt ended, two years had elapsed, and *all 11* of Spector's single releases during this period were written by Ellie with either Tony Powers or Jeff Barry. . . . The result was one of the most fertile and significant

The Supremes, the Marvelettes, the Chiffons, the Chantels (clockwise from top)



Girl Groups

collaborative efforts that pop music has ever produced."

Mann and Weill stuck to writing, and to this day they're turning out hit songs for artists like Celine Dion. But the Barry-Greenwich and Goffin-King teams quickly blossomed into writers, arrangers and producers of their own string of girl-group hits.

Goffin and King became the sonic auteurs of Dimension Records, giving this Don Kirshner/Al Nevins label a No. 1 smash with its very first release, "Loco-Motion," as recorded by Goffin and King's 17-year-old baby sitter, "Little Eva" Boyd. Though the company never scored another No. 1 record, Goffin and King followed up with Dimension girl-group winners by the Cookies ("Chains," "Don't Say Nothin' Bad [About My Baby]"), Earl-Jean ("I'm Into Something Good") and the Honeybees ("One Wonderful Night"). Goffin and King wrote the Shirelles' No. 1 "Will You Love Me Tomorrow," which was recorded by 15 other artists within 18 months of its initial release. The songwriting team took the Chiffons to No. 5 with "One Fine Day"; King's pounding piano was the cornerstone of her brilliant arrangement. In 1962, 17 Goffin-King songs reached the Top 40.

The creative output of Ellie Greenwich and Jeff Barry during their tenure with Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller's Red Bird Records actually surpasses, in innovation and quality, Goffin and King's Dimension work. Greenwich and Barry, too, gave their label a No. 1 hit with its very first release, the Dixie Cups' immortal "Chapel of Love," and backed up this stunning success with superb records by the Jelly Beans ("I Wanna Love Him So Bad," "Baby Be Mine") and the Butterflies ("Good Night Baby," "I Wonder").

Most wondrous of all, perhaps, were Barry and Greenwich's collaborations with co-writer Shadow Morton and those immortal queens of Queens, the Shangri-Las, whose Red Bird hits like "Leader of the Pack," "Remember (Walkin' in the Sand)" and "Out in the Streets" rank with the most imaginative and emotionally daring records of their time. (The Shangs' "Past Present and Future," produced by Morton, was a haunting recitation that seemed to suggest its narrator was a victim of rape: "Don't try to touch me . . . for that will never . . . happen . . . again.")

Meanwhile, in Detroit, another creative partnership was listening attentively to the work of Spector and his New York protégés cum competitors. Among Motown Records' most significant early suc-

cesses were hits by Mary Wells, the Marvelettes and Martha and the Vandellas. Records like Wells' "Two Lovers," the Marvelettes' "As Long As I Know He's Mine" and the Vandellas' "Heat Wave" put their own immediately identifiable spin (sometimes sweet and sophisticated, sometimes bold and brassy) on the qualities embodied in the East Coast girl-group hits. Indeed, *Girl Groups* contributor Aaron Fuchs describes Motown's legendary Holland-Dozier-Holland team as having "melded equal parts of Phil Spector's Wall of Sound with tambourine-shaking gospel fervor."

In 1964, with the first of 12 No. 1 pop singles, Motown brought forth the most successful girl group of all time, the Supremes. Not just hitmakers, Diana Ross, Mary Wilson and Florence Ballard became an international show-business institution and the principle role model for every black female vocal group attempting the R&B-to-pop crossover — from Sister Sledge to En Vogue to SWV.

By 1968 the naively romantic spirit and Brill Building production values of girl-group music had been eclipsed by the rise of the self-contained rock band (from the Beatles and the Stones to the Airplane and the Dead); by a new breed of female singer/songwriters such as Laura Nyro, Joni Mitchell and Carole King (who would find solo success far beyond her teen-age dreams with *Tapestry*); and by a host of changes in the music business and society at large. Every now and then, though, a vivid girl-group memory would emerge in the new music.

There were Grace Slick singing "Sally Go 'Round the Roses" with the Great Society and Janis Joplin pleading "Maybe." There were the New York Dolls, romping through the Shangri-Las' "Give Him a Great Big Kiss." There were the female-led

bands of the punk era like Blondie, the Go-Go's, Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, Bananarama and Blue Angel (featuring Cyndi Lauper), all of which lovingly acknowledged the influence of their girl-group predecessors.

The charm and innocence of girl-group music may not be readily apparent in the raw, metal-edged rock of Seven Year Bitch or in the seductive sway of SWV. But whether they know it, these contemporary artists are walking in the artistic shadow of the girl groups — who, once upon a time, cleared a new space for women's expression in popular culture.

— ANDY SCHWARTZ



The Ronettes (above). Right: The Crystals, Martha and the Vandellas, the Shangri-Las, the Shirelles (clockwise from top left).

