

performers

the

shirelles

When Laura Nyro and Labelle resurrected the Shirelles' "I Met Him on a Sunday" on *Gonna Take a Miracle*, a collection of R&B faves from Nyro's youth, there was nothing nostalgic about the tune. The lyrics, which had the feel of jump-rope rhymes, came across as a sort of plainspoken street poetry, a wistfully romantic chronicle of fleeting and fickle desire. Desire is at the heart of the Shirelles' best work; songs like "Tonight's the Night" and "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?" hold the promise of carnal riches if – and only if – love

Opposite page: The high school Shirelles in one of their favorite photographs: Doris Kenner, Addie "Micki" Harris, Shirley Alston and Beverly Lee (clockwise from top)



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prompts the longing. There was nothing coy about the Shirelles. With adolescent voices that verged on the worldly, they put forth tantalizing possibilities of hands-on romance in the simplest of couplets: "I don't know," lead singer Shirley Alston teased on "Tonight's the Night," "I might love you so."

The Shirelles were a teenage foursome – Alston, Doris Kenner, Addie "Micki" Harris and Beverly Lee – who in 1958 composed "I Met Him on a Sunday" to entertain their fellow high school students at dances and talent competitions. Among their admiring classmates was Mary Jane Greenberg, whose 36-year-old mother, Florence, was attempting to work her way into the thriving Manhattan songwriting scene. As Florence Greenberg, who died last fall, once recalled, her daughter told the girls, "My mother is going into the record business, and she would love to hear you sing." Florence had never put out a record, but that was no impediment once she heard the Shirelles: She simply started her own label, Tiara, and released "I Met Him on a Sunday." Greenberg would prove again and again to be a woman of good musical instincts, and she wasn't wrong her first time out; Decca executives heard the single and offered to buy it for \$4,000. The deal was accepted, and Greenberg remained on board as the Shirelles' manager. Decca didn't believe the group had much of a future beyond "Sunday," which had a modest chart run, and after a few tepid follow-up singles, released the Shirelles. Greenberg decided once more to put their records out herself, this time forming Scepter, a label that would become a formidable independent hit factory, one that in a racially divided era combined talents both black and white to create an impressive catalog of hits that climbed the R&B and pop charts.

In 1959, Greenberg relaunched the Shirelles with a version of "Dedicated to the One I Love," produced by herself and her son Stan. The song, a favorite of the Shirelles, had originally been recorded by the "5" Royales, with whom the Shirelles had shared a bill. Although the Shirelles' rendition is now a classic, it failed to scale the pop charts when it was first released. The group's fortunes changed dramati-

cally when they were teamed with producer, singer/songwriter and arranger Luther Dixon, a successful Tin Pan Alley-style writer with gospel roots whom Greenberg lured to Scepter – following his success with the Crests' "16 Candles" – by offering him a broad range of creative responsibilities and a financial partnership in the company. Dixon's first production with the Shirelles, "Tonight's the Night," co-written with Shirley Alston, had so much hit potential that a rival indie, Laurie Records, hastily produced its own version by the Chiffons and put it out just after the Shirelles' release. The singles competed for chart space and listener loyalty, a battle the Shirelles won, but barely, when their version barely managed to crack the pop Top 40.

Dixon's next pick to click for the Shirelles, "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?," released in November 1960, was significant in many ways: It helped establish the young husband-and-wife songwriting team of Gerry Goffin and Carole King; it put Scepter on the industry map; it became the catalyst for the girl-group sound that would reach its apotheosis a few years later in Phil Spector's multitracked extravaganzas; and, last but not least, it gave the Shirelles a No. 1 pop hit. King, who played drums in the session, originally envisioned the song as a loping country & western number. In the studio, Dixon encouraged her to rearrange it, and the result was a gorgeous track full of soaring strings and clever harmonies behind Shirley Alston's stirring lead. Alston was utterly convincing as she posed that eternally provocative question, one that in the ensuing decades has been pondered with far less grace by everyone from the Supremes ("Love Child") to Meat Loaf ("Paradise by the Dashboard Light").

In 1961, on the heels of this success, Greenberg re-released "Dedicated to the One I Love," and this time it found the audience it deserved and reached No. 3 on the pop chart. Equally direct declarations of love, or the withholding thereof, followed: "Mama Said," "Big John" and the thrilling "Baby, It's You," co-written by another up-and-coming songwriter, Burt Bacharach (who would find his own fame at Scepter via Dionne Warwick). The Shirelles' second No. 1, "Soldier Boy," released in March 1962, became their signature song and biggest seller. Written by Greenberg and Dixon and recorded almost as an afterthought at the end of another session, the single veers



The Shirelles: A promise of carnal riches if – and only if – love prompts the longing



away from other Shirelles' hits because the group sings in unison, a choir of devotion. "Soldier Boy" remains such a perfect pledge of love, with its simple but sublime twangy-guitar break, that it almost makes being in the military seem appealing.

The Shirelles were always in demand as live performers. They were a popular act at holiday-season rock & roll marathons produced by New York City radio stations; Murray the K., of WINS, was a particularly enthusiastic supporter. The Shirelles also joined some of the now legendary rock & roll caravans mounted by DJs like Alan Freed and Dick Clark that crisscrossed the country, promoting Top 40 hits. In 1963, the Shirelles toured England on a bill with Little Richard and Duane Eddy. All of them would be major influences for bands in the coming British Invasion. In fact, the Beatles covered two Shirelles songs: "Boys" – the B side of "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?" – and "Baby, It's You."

By 1963, though, things were changing dramatically for the Shirelles. Luther Dixon decided to leave Scepter for Capitol Records, abruptly ending what had been a magical collaboration. The Shirelles didn't disappear from the charts after that – in fact, they hit No. 4 on the pop charts with "Foolish Little Girl" that year – but their post-Dixon work didn't make quite the same impact. Scepter was reshuffling its priorities, too, as Greenberg began to concentrate on newer and, for the most part, solo acts. By 1967, the Shirelles had left Scepter for a Mercury subsidiary, Blue Rock; in coming years they would also record for Bell, United Artists and RCA. In 1968, Doris Kenner left the group, but she returned to tour with the band in 1975.

The Shirelles remained a hard-working act, together and individually, even in the leanest years. They were invited in 1969 to appear in the first of Richard Nader's highly regarded Rock & Roll Revival series at New York's Felt Forum. Old school rock & roll wasn't exactly coming back, but it had begun to be appreciated as more than just nostalgia. On June 10, 1982, Micki Harris suffered a fatal heart attack after a Los Angeles concert. The following year, the surviving members commemorated their 25th anniversary as the Shirelles. As for their music, it lives on, forever teenage, forever hopeful, forever relevant. Desire is always in style.

—Mike Hill

Opposite page: The Shirelles in gold lamé with Shirley Alston holding one of the many awards the group received from the U.S. Armed Forces for their hit "Soldier Boy"