

**Cherilyn Sarkisian, known
to the world as Cher, 1973**

*Photograph by Master Photographer
Norman Seeff*



CHER

IN A CAREER SPANNING SEVEN
DECADES, HER SINGULAR VOICE HAS NEVER
LOST ITS FORMIDABLE POWER.

BY ANNIE ZALESKI

During the summer of 1963, Cher found herself in Hollywood's Gold Star Studios contributing backing vocals to one of the most famous songs of all time: the Ronettes' "Be My Baby." The 17-year-old had been a familiar presence at the studio all year, owing to the fact her then-boyfriend Sonny Bono was working for producer Phil Spector. However, she hadn't sung in a session until then, when she was called to fill in for Darlene Love, who had car trouble and wasn't yet at the studio. By her own account, Cher was petrified, and decided to play it safe and sing along with Sonny for the recording.

Despite her anxiety, she left the studio that night eager to get behind the mic again right away – and Spector was impressed enough to offer her additional opportunities. Among other things, Cher sang backup on Love's timeless 1963 holiday song "Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)" and the Righteous Brothers' gorgeous 1964 hit "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'." Even in the background, Cher's contralto voice made a big impression on everyone else in the studio. "The big joke was that I had to stand far back from the other singers," she told *The Guardian* in 2023. "Phil would say, 'Cher, take a step back. And another step. And another.' At that point, everybody said, 'If she takes one more step, she'll be in Studio B!' Somehow, my voice just cut through."

In a career spanning seven decades (and counting),

Cher's voice has never lost its dominance or power. That's certainly because she's serious about her craft – while preparing to record 2023's *Christmas*, she trained daily with her 96-year-old vocal coach, Adrienne Angel – and isn't afraid to stretch herself. With her warbling vibrato and graceful sense of dynamics, Cher sounds effortless singing nearly every style of music: orchestrated torch songs, roaring power ballads, luxe disco, blazing hard rock, playful Broadway showstoppers, slinky soul, high-energy electro, and melodramatic pop. She also possesses a unique (and recognizable) vocal timbre – one that's dusky and sultry, like exquisite black velvet, with a sumptuous low range and soaring high one.

Cher applies her powerful voice to every aspect of her life. A generous philanthropist, outspoken activist, prolific emoji user, and queer icon and ally, she is unabashedly herself at all times: honest, funny, vulnerable, and real. Cher isn't afraid to be earnest – her vocal delivery often feels like a direct line to her soul – and she cares about the things she loves loudly and deeply; for example, the powerful 2021 documentary *Cher and the Loneliest Elephant* followed her quest to save an imprisoned elephant named Kaavan.

Yet Cher doesn't suffer fools gladly, and she doesn't mince words. When she heard the initial mix for the 1998 dance-floor classic "Believe," which became one of her signature songs, she was adamant about keeping the



In the studio with
Phil Spector and
Darlene Love, Los
Angeles, 1963

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futuristic digital effects on her voice. “I said, ‘You can change that part of it over my dead body!’” she told *The New York Times*. “And that was the end of the discussion.” And after pointedly speaking out about being snubbed for the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, Cher was blunt as, following the announcement of her induction, she revealed plans to attend the ceremony after all: “I’m going to have some words to say. I’m going to accept it as me.”

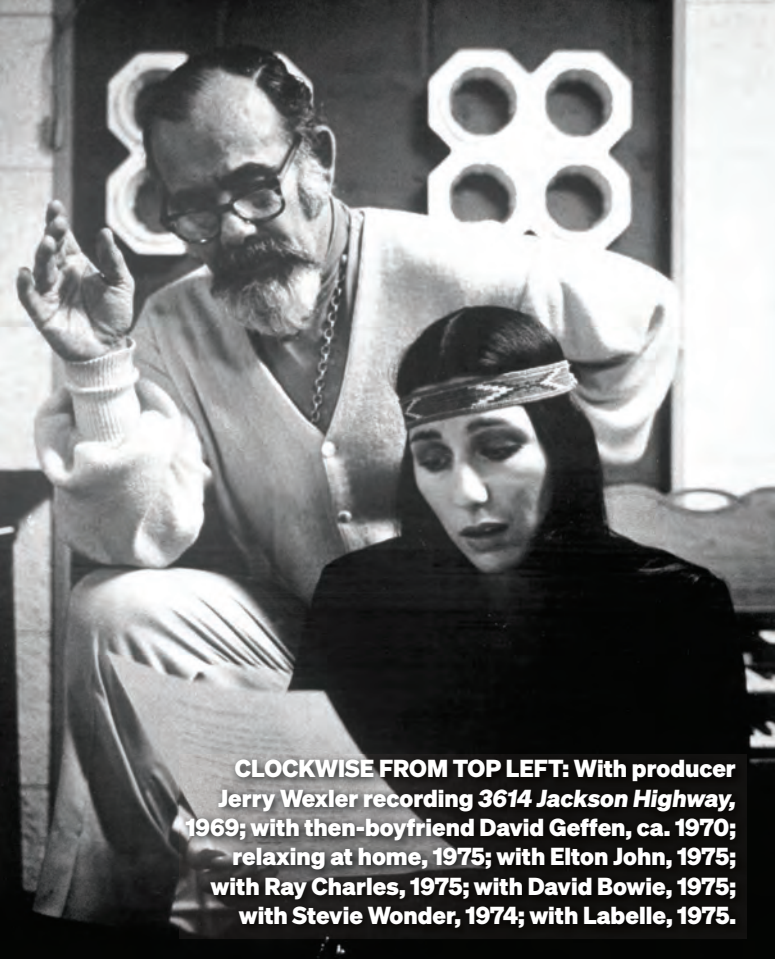
Born Cherilyn Sarkisian in El Centro, California, in 1946, she easily picked up music by ear from a young age. After seeing the 1950 animated film *Cinderella*, she recalled singing “A Dream Is a Wish Your Heart Makes” perfectly during the car ride home. (Fittingly, adult Cher would later cover this magical song multiple times.) She gravitated toward musicals and early rock & roll, nurturing her love for the latter by watching *American*

Bandstand and seeing Elvis Presley live at the height of his popularity. Seeing Ray Charles on TV singing “Georgia on My Mind” was also formative; the performance moved her to tears. Even then, Cher had a strong moral compass and an abundance of integrity. As a teenager, she despised Richard Nixon and was furious at the violence inflicted toward participants in civil rights sit-ins.

Cher dropped out of high school during her junior year and moved to Los Angeles, where she met Sonny and began singing for the Phil Spector productions. In 1964, she released an unsuccessful solo single, the rollicking garage-pop nugget “Ringo, I Love You,” under the name Bonnie Jo Mason. Under her own name, however, she nearly topped the *Billboard* Hot 100 in 1966 with the bewitching, string-swept “Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down).” She also experienced success stepping out as

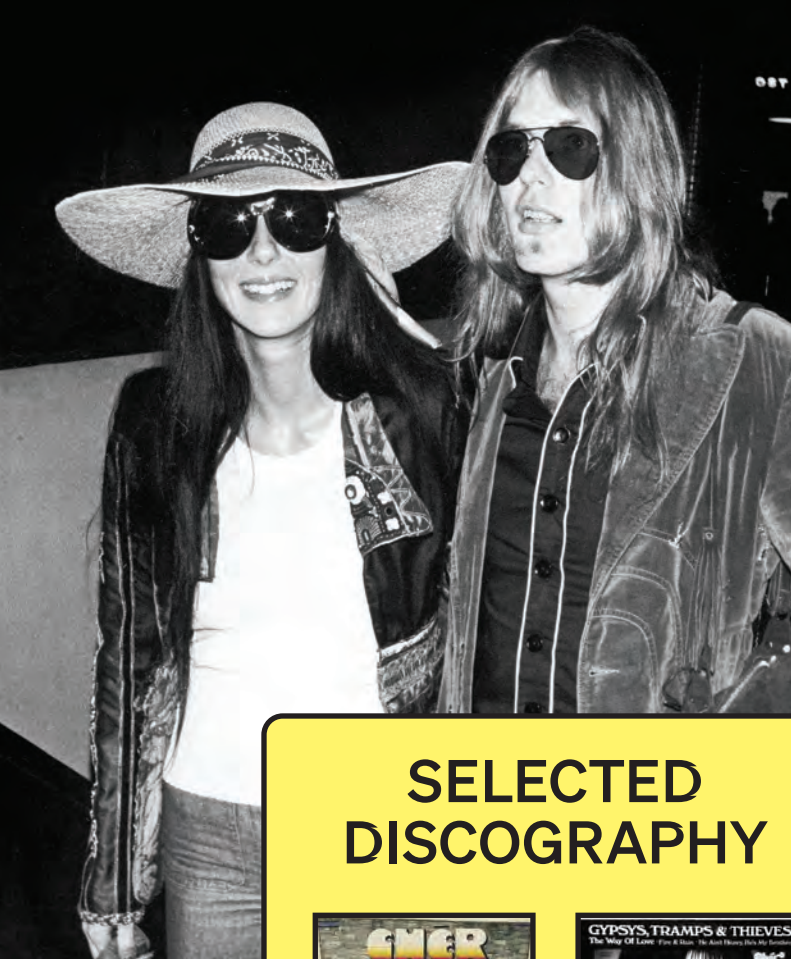


CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: With Sonny Bono, London, 1966; adorned in Bob Mackie, 1978; with Tatum O'Neal, 1975.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: With producer Jerry Wexler recording *3614 Jackson Highway*, 1969; with then-boyfriend David Geffen, ca. 1970; relaxing at home, 1975; with Elton John, 1975; with Ray Charles, 1975; with David Bowie, 1975; with Stevie Wonder, 1974; with Labelle, 1975.





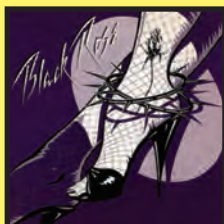
SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



3614 Jackson Highway
1969 (Atlantic)



Gypsies, Tramps & Thieves
1971 (Atlantic)



(with Black Rose) Black Rose
1980 (Casablanca)



Cher
1987 (Geffen)



Heart of Stone
1989 (Geffen)



Believe
1998 (Warner Bros.)

a duo with Sonny. Signed to Atlantic Records, the pair landed at Number One with the bohemian 1965 love song “I Got You Babe” and went Top Ten with the 1967 mod-pop shimmy “The Beat Goes On.”

During Sonny & Cher’s heyday, Cher continued to release solo material, led by the underrated *3614 Jackson Highway*, a 1969 covers album featuring the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section and coproduced by Jerry Wexler, Tom Dowd, and Arif Mardin. This put her in a much



FROM LEFT: With then-husband Gregg Allman, 1976; with her Oscar for *Moonstruck*, 1988.

stronger position for solo success when Sonny & Cher’s commercial fortunes waned. Throughout the first half of the 1970s, she earned three Number One solo singles: “Gypsies, Tramps & Thieves” (1971), “Half Breed” (1973), and “Dark Lady” (1974). She also distinguished herself as a master interpreter of pop songs, highlighted by a twangy, gospel-tinged cover of James Taylor’s “Fire and Rain” and a swooning, Jimmy Webb–produced take on Jackson Browne’s “These Days.”

After an acrimonious 1975 divorce from Sonny, she received a confidence boost with the solo TV variety show *Cher*, which was reflected in her outfits – a glittery parade of rainbow-colored costumes designed by Bob Mackie, who would become her fashion partner for decades. But the show also allowed Cher to take more control over her career – a 1975 *Time* cover story detailed long days of writing, rehearsals, meetings, and show tapings – and expand her musical horizons. During one episode, Cher and Tina Turner strutted, kicked, and hip-bumped onstage while belting out the Sylvia Robinson–

penned “Shame, Shame, Shame,” transforming the 1974 soul and disco hit into a fiery rock & roll barnburner. In another episode, she teamed up with David Bowie for a kinky medley of popular hits and embraced luxurious R&B vibes on a duet of his “Can You Hear Me?”

The TV show was merely one of the times Cher would reinvent herself. Her disco period peaked in 1979, led by the blazing “Hell on Wheels” and frothier “Take Me Home,” while 1980 found Cher downplaying her icon status as she fronted the hard rock band Black Rose. Although the freewheeling 1981 Meat Loaf duet “Dead Ringer for Love” was a massive U.K. hit, she spent the next few years focused on acting, winning two Golden Globes and the Academy Award for Best Actress for *Moonstruck* (1987). But her late-1980s musical comeback, marked by hits such as “I Found Someone” and “If I Could Turn Back Time,” was an unqualified triumph, in no small part because the trend toward glossy production and blockbuster hooks suited her powerhouse voice. With the “If I Could Turn Back Time” music video, which was filmed on the USS *Missouri* battleship, Cher also added another memorable outfit to her legend: a tough leather jacket worn over a sheer body stocking and a derriere-baring G-string.

In spite of her heightened popularity, Cher needed all the resilience she could muster in the 1990s, when health issues and Sonny’s death put a damper on her upswing. Still, she persevered with a sassy cover of the 1960s classic “The Shoop Shoop Song (It’s in His Kiss)” and the sophisticated 1995 album *It’s a Man’s World*, the latter of which featured a faithful take on Marc Cohn’s “Walking in Memphis.” Redemption came in the form of the global hit “Believe,” which nabbed Cher her first Grammy Award, for Best Dance Recording, and made her (at the time) the oldest female artist to top the *Billboard* Hot 100.

The warm feelings toward “Believe” lingered well beyond the song’s chart life and ensured that rewarding roles and high-profile opportunities continued to come Cher’s way. She returned to acting in *Burlesque* (2010) and landed a Number One dance hit with the Diane Warren–penned “You Haven’t Seen the Last of Me.” A role in the 2018 musical film *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again* led to a buoyant ABBA covers album, *Dancing Queen*.

In 2023, Cher also became the first woman to have a Number One song on a *Billboard* chart in each of the past seven decades, when the airy electropop “DJ Play a Christmas Song” reached the top of the Dance/Electronic Digital Song Sales chart. The only other artist to achieve this chart feat? The Rolling Stones. “Took four of them to be one of me,” Cher quipped on *The Kelly Clarkson Show*. Poignantly, she also reunited with Darlene Love for a new version of “Christmas (Baby Please Come Home).” Sixty years later, there were no traces of fright in Cher’s voice – only joy as the women traded off lines and came together in brassy unison. And tonight, she rightfully joins Darlene Love in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.



**Live on the
Wetten,
dass...?
TV show,
Offenburg,
Germany, 2023.
INSET: On her
Love Hurts
Tour, Wembley
Stadium,
London, 1992.**



