



Handout 1A - Phil Spector and Girl Group Excerpts

Excerpt from “Phil Spector,” Greg Shaw, *Fusion*, September, 1972

It's hard to remember a time when the role of the producer wasn't considered just as important as that of the musicians in the making of a record. Phil Spector was a mastermind of studio technology, the first and probably most complete example of the producer-as-auteur that rock has given us. His instinctive grasp of what makes rock & roll work is so total that his approach has been refined somewhat but remains basically unchanged after fifteen years.

Turned loose on Atlantic's sophisticated (for the time) equipment, Spector went wild. The “Phil Spector Sound” seems to have sprung full-blown from his teenage mind, for [his] early records bear a strong stylistic resemblance to what was to follow. Bringing in a Latin beat, echo, and a whole new approach to mixing, he went a step further and revolutionized rhythm & blues by introducing stringed orchestration...and the groundwork for the transformation of R&B into “soul” music had been laid.

Spector had an amazing [and large] collection of musicians. Songs like “Then He Kissed Me” and “Da Doo Ron Ron” are almost indescribable. Coming on fast and never letting up, bursting with power, pounding pianos, saxes, timpanis, exotic percussion instruments and surging orchestras, everything overdubbed and mixed down into a dense stew that, while impossible to dissect, leaves each element clear and discernible.

Spector's groups were more vehicles for his production ideas than individual talents (as their non-Spector recordings prove)... Spector understands rock & roll so well he can make you feel anything he wants in his songs, and Ronettes records like “Baby I Love You,” “Be My Baby” and “Walking In The Rain” could make the grimmest military advisor glow with the pangs of first love.

Excerpt from “Phil Spector,” Richard Williams, *Let it Rock*, October 1972

[Spector]...turned the producer from an obscure back-room boy whose name was of little or no importance to the average record buyer, into a figure parallel with the great movie directors...in the mid-Sixties we asked, "Have you heard the new Spector single?" neglecting, probably, to add whether the singers on the record were the Crystals, the Ronettes, or the Righteous Brothers.

[There were] three basic types of producer before Spector came along: the more or less altruistic organizer, the shrewd businessman, and the studio innovator. Spector took all three, rolled them into one, added his own genius, and created a totally new concept: the producer as overall director. In the process he put out a group of the most memorable records in all of pop music.



He took control of everything. He picked the bands, wrote or chose the material, supervised the arrangements, told the singers how to phrase, masterminded all phases of the recording process, and released the result on his own label, a label with no affiliation with any of the supposedly all-powerful major record companies. He introduced many innovations: by concentrating all his efforts on one record at a time, he avoided the wasteful scattershot policy of the majors; by bringing the technique of overdubbing to a new peak, he created a sound never heard before, a sound which came to be known as The Spector Sound throughout the world's recording industry.

He also revolutionized the industry's attitude to youth. Previously, older men like Alan Freed, Dick Clark, Goldner, and the presidents of the major labels had exerted total control over the pop youth culture. Kids made the music, but they had no say in what happened after it got onto the tape, and they rarely saw much of the money....The kids made it and the kids bought it, but it was the "cigar-chomping fatties" who first took the cream, and then the milk, and then threw the empty bottle into the trash can.

Spector set out to change all that. He fought the system through his own company. To make the changes he had to succeed, succeed, and succeed again. At 21 years of age even one failure would have been too costly. It would have enabled the fatties to smirk and tell themselves that the kids couldn't handle it after all; that they actually *needed* the older guys to take care of business for them. But Spector did succeed, for more than four straight years.

Excerpt of "How the Other Half Lives: The Best of Girl Group Rock," Greil Marcus, *Let it Rock*, May 1974

GIRL GROUP ROCK flourished between 1958 and 1965...The girls were usually black, always urban, and the groups featured one completely distinctive lead singer and more or less replaceable back-ups (they met in high school, posed in their prom dresses). If they weren't teenage, they sang as if they were. They neither wrote songs nor played instruments; all needed a producer for the identifiable, striking sound that was the first necessity of any girl group record. The music [was] aimed right at Top 40, not the black charts. Against the basic sound the best singers came up with a style that took full advantage of the producer's art, but still went beyond it – sailing over the rhythmic commotion or the elegant piano line that put the first hook in. The producer grabbed you, but it was up to the singer to win your heart. Almost none of them prospered outside of the care of the one producer who developed their talents in the first place – the relationship was that dependent...So girl group records were very personal, very fragile – based in the relationship of a young girl and an older man (white, until Berry Gordy) who put her on a pedestal and more than likely kept her in thrall.



It sounds insufferably sexist, and the soul of the records bears out that it was. The oppression of the process has to be the source of much of the acute pain and desire these discs convey so powerfully. From one point of view, they're all about one girl's wish to be free, to break loose, and the impossibility of making it. But paradoxically, instead of smoothing out the emotions of the singers, as producers do so often, here they intensified them, because, well, that is rock'n'roll. Or was. So personality came through with real force, and the singers lived, for two minutes, with all the life they had.

Individual Questions:

1. How might you describe Phil Spector's relationship with the artists he recorded?
2. Who do you think the "star" of Phil Spector recordings was? Why?
3. How would you describe the relationship between Spector and the singers and musicians on his recordings? Do you think the musicians were involved in composition and overall decision making?
4. Do you think Phil Spector's recordings are meant to represent something a band would play live?

Group Discussion Questions:

1. What are some of the differences in the production styles of George Martin and Phil Spector?
2. In what ways do you think these different approaches to recording music affected the musicians with whom each producer worked?
3. How would you describe the goals of each producer?
4. Do you think that the early Beatles would have prospered if Phil Spector was their producer? Why or why not?
5. If you were a songwriter with songs you considered almost "finished," which producer would you rather employ?