

THE RONETTES



BY ROB BOWMAN

The introduction to the Ronettes' "Be My Baby" needs to be heard only once before it is forever burned into the deepest recesses of one's cranium. Studio drummer Hal Blaine lays down a simple baion beat – *boom-ba-boom (smash), boom-ba-boom (smash)*. Swathed in unprecedented levels of reverb, it has a cataclysmic effect. Over the next two bars the ante is upped as multiple pianos, guitars, a solitary bass, and an array of auxiliary percussion fill out what had come to be known as producer Phil Spector's trademark Wall of Sound. Collectively, it's a mélange of sonic fury that would dwarf most singers but not Veronica Bennett. A diminutive twenty-year-old of mixed heritage, Ronnie, as she is better known, is possessed of a powerful, slightly nasal voice that proves the equal for Spector's Wagnerian Sturm und Drang. Equal parts coy innocence and sexual come-on, with "Be My Baby," Ronnie, her older sister, Estelle Bennett, and their cousin Nedra Talley stood the submissive, subaltern world of girl groups on its head. Subsequent teen anthems by the Ronettes such as "Baby, I Love You" and "Walking in the Rain" raised the stakes even higher, fueling heretofore undreamed-of romantic fantasies for adolescent males everywhere.

It's hard to imagine a story more tailor-made for the silver screen than that of the Ronettes. Born in 1943, 1941, and 1945, respectively, Ronnie, Estelle, and Nedra grew up in Washington Heights, near Spanish Harlem, in New York City. As Ronnie and Estelle were entering middle school, their mother, Beatrice, was making ends meet working as a waitress at King's Donuts, located on 125th Street in Harlem, right next door to the fabulous Apollo Theatre. It was while serving sandwiches at the doughnut shop that Beatrice came to know Bobby Schiffman, whose family owned the venerated

concert venue. With Schiffman's encouragement, in the spring of 1959 Ronnie, Estelle, Nedra, and three other cousins, Elaine and Diane Mayes, and Ira Williams, entered the Apollo's fabled Amateur Night contest. The song they had chosen to perform that night, "Why Do Fools Fall in Love," had been a hit for Harlem native Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers a few years earlier. Being the only boy in the group, Ira was slated to sing lead but when he was overtaken by stage fright, the ebullient Ronnie grabbed the microphone and proceeded to tear the house up.

With Ira's stage fright a known liability and Elaine and Diane's mother not wanting them to sing rock & roll, what had been a sextet quickly became a trio consisting of Ronnie, Estelle, and Nedra. Recognizing their nascent talent, Beatrice and her sister Susu agreed to pay for the girls to take singing lessons. Twice weekly, the three budding starlets schlepped down to Camilucci Studios, just a few doors away from the Brill Building, where Mr. Camilucci attempted to school them in the art of Tin Pan Alley vocalese.

Spurred by their reception at the Apollo, Ronnie, now ensconced as lead singer, Estelle, and Nedra secured the services of a small-time agent and spent much of 1960 – first as the Darling Sisters and shortly thereafter as Ronnie and the Relatives – performing whenever possible at sundry birthday parties, sock hops, and bar mitzvahs. In 1961 the fulsome trio signed a contract with Colpix Records. Over the next two years, a pair of singles were issued on Colpix, including their debut, "Sweet Sixteen," and three more were released on the subsidiary May Records. The second May single, "You Bet I Would," was penned by Brill Building stalwart Carole King. The May singles were issued under the sobriquet the Ronettes, the name being a combination of Ronnie's first and last names. The fact that

The Ronettes: Nedra Talley, Veronica "Ronnie" Bennett Spector, and Estelle Bennett (from left)





FROM LEFT: On TV with Soupy Sales, 1965; live in Philadelphia, with DJ Gene Kaye, the same year.

the girls' new name vaguely resembled "Rockettes" was a bonus, as the trio's live performances centered around the girls' über-hip sensuous dance moves.

None of the Colpix or May recordings were particularly distinguished, and consequently airplay and sales were virtually nonexistent. Although their recording career seemingly couldn't get out of first gear, the Ronettes maintained an active performing career. The group had early on developed a sultry, seductive look consisting of mile-high teased hairdos, copious amounts of dark eye makeup, and tight, slit skirts. In 1961 the threesome, dressed to kill in matching outfits, were lined up outside the Peppermint Lounge waiting to get in to check out Joey Dee and the Starlites. In a rather serendipitous moment, the club's owner mistook

them for the backup dancers and singers who had been hired for the night but had failed to show. Making the most of the moment, the Ronettes took the stage, shagging and frugging to everyone's delight, Ronnie bringing down the house with a version of Ray Charles's "What'd I Say."

Hired as regulars at the Peppermint Lounge, the group headed south later that year with Joey Dee to open the Miami branch of the club. There they were seen by a vacationing New York disc jockey, Murray "the K" Kaufman, who proceeded to hire the Ronettes for his shows at the Brooklyn Fox Theatre. Billed as Murray's Dancing Girls, the Ronettes sang backup for a variety of artists and had their own two- or three-song miniset. With their hair, makeup, clothes, and general attitude, no one was going to mistake



Ronnie, Nedra, Estelle, and Phil Spector with George Harrison and others around the time of the Beatles-Ronettes tour, 1964



Performing on the set of *Hullabaloo*, 1965

the Ronettes for what was then the standard girl-group look and sound of the Chantels or the Shirelles. Somewhere in this period the group managed to appear in a dance scene in the movie *Hey, Let's Twist*.

In addition to their performances at the Peppermint Lounge and the Brooklyn Fox and touring with a *Twist* package put together by Clay Cole, the Ronettes sang backup on recording sessions for Bobby Rydell, Joey Dee, and others. How they hooked up with Phil Spector is the subject of legend. According to Ronnie, they had managed to get ahold of Spector's office number and had decided that Estelle would call the office and ask for an appointment to audition for the fast-rising producer. To Estelle's surprise, Spector's secretary put her on hold and a minute later the man himself was on the phone. What the girls didn't know was that Spector had already seen the Ronettes perform several times at the Brooklyn Fox. Smitten by their looks and sound, he was determined to steal them from Colpix Records. Once the connection was made, Spector and Ronnie and Estelle's mother persuaded them to tell Colpix exec Don Kirshner that they were quitting the business, a ruse to get them released from their contract. A few months later Spector signed them to Philles Records, spending close to a year searching for the right song.

When the Ronettes signed with Spector in 1962, the boy-wonder producer was on a roll, turning the music industry on its head with hit records for the Teddy Bears, the Paris Sisters, the Crystals, Bob B. Soxx and the Blue Jeans, and Darlene Love. While Spector's female groups typically sang songs such as the Crystals' "He's a Rebel" and "He's Sure the Boy I Love" as third-person narratives, for the Ronettes he cast everything in the first person. Ronnie sang directly to her object of affection in virtually all their hits, including "Be

My Baby," "Baby, I Love You," and "Do I Love You?" The effect was one of greater agency for the songs' female protagonists and a hypersexuality conveyed via direct address that was totally absent on the vast majority of recordings by other girl groups.

The Ronettes' first Spector-produced release, "Be My Baby," proclaimed by Beach Boys wunderkind Brian Wilson as his favorite song ever, soared to the Number Two spot on the pop charts and Number Four R&B. It was quickly followed by the even more volcanic "Baby, I Love You," both singles written by Spector, Jeff Barry, and Ellie Greenwich. Between the group's first two hits on Philles Records, they contributed three songs to Spector's *A Christmas Gift for You*, considered by many to be the finest Christmas album in rock & roll history. As 1963 gave way to 1964, the Ronettes continued their chart streak with "(The Best Part of) Breakin' Up" and "Do I Love You?" That year, Spector test-marketed two singles by Ronnie under the name Veronica: "So Young," a cover of a 1958 recording by the Students, and a Spector-Barry-Greenwich original, "Why Don't They Let Us Fall in Love," both released on the otherwise nonexistent Phil Spector Records. Capitalizing on their success, the group toured England in February, headlining a bill that included the Rolling Stones.

That fall Spector produced what might be the greatest of all Ronettes records, the Barry Mann-Cynthia Weil-and-Spector-penned "Walking in the Rain." Opening with the crackling sound of thunder, the track features a pleading, tremulous vocal from Ronnie replete with her trademark "who-oh-oh." The multitracked background vocals of Nedra and Estelle ably support Ronnie, echoing her every phrase on the chorus, engaging in call-and-response on the bridge, and underpinning the verse with



Ronnie Spector in 1999



Ronnie gets a little help from her friends: Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, 1977.

vocables. To this day, "Walking in the Rain" remains Ronnie's favorite recording by the group. The first Philles record to be released with a picture sleeve, it won its producer a Grammy in the "Special Effects" category.

In November 1965 Phil Spector was hired as musical director and associate producer for *The Big T.N.T. Show*. It was loosely modeled on *The TAMI Show* from the year before, and Spector chose an eclectic range of artists to perform, including Joan Baez, the Byrds, Ray Charles, the Lovin' Spoonful, Donovan, Petula Clark, Bo Diddley, Ike and Tina Turner, and, of course, his prize charges, the Ronettes. Their riveting, frenetic performances of "Be My Baby" and "Shout," included in the film of the event, give a sense of just how electric the Ronettes were onstage. Pity those who never had the chance to see them.

In the summer of 1966 the Beatles personally requested that the Ronettes open up their North American shows. By year end, Phil Spector had all but retired and Nedra Talley had gotten married, found the Lord, and decided that being a Ronette

was ultimately not where her life was headed. Ronnie, Nedra, and Estelle played their last show together in January 1967. In the early 1970s, after Ronnie separated from Phil Spector, she put together with Denise Edwards and Chip Fields a new set of Ronettes, issuing a pair of singles on Buddah Records. Neither record went anywhere, and by 1975 the group had disbanded. While Estelle and Nedra were never interested in taking another crack at music-industry success, Ronnie has recorded a variety of records over the years for Apple, Polish, Epic, Alston, Columbia, Kill Rock Stars, and Bad Girl Sounds. Among the highlights of her solo career were the 1977 Billy Joel-penned "Say Goodbye to Hollywood," recorded with the E Street Band and produced by Steve Van Zant; her 1986 duet with Eddie Money on the Top Ten pop smash "Take Me Home Tonight"; and the 1999 Joey Ramone-produced *She Talks to Rainbows*, which included a cover of the Beach Boys' "Don't Worry Baby," a song that was written by Brian Wilson a quarter-century earlier for the Ronettes but had been rejected by Phil Spector.

While their recording career lasted less than six years and they placed only a handful of singles on the charts, songs such as "Be My Baby," "Baby, I Love You," and "Walking in the Rain" were larger-than-life hit recordings that made the Ronettes an indelible part of the sonic memory of early- and mid-sixties rock. As the sexiest, hippest, and perhaps greatest-sounding girl group of all time, tonight they take their rightful place as members of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. ☒



Ronnie performing in the 1970s



Nedra, Estelle, and Ronnie with Phil Spector while recording *Christmas Gift*, 1963

For me, the story of Ronnie, Estelle, and Nedra began a long time ago – in fact, in the late fifties and early sixties, when I was on the road with Danny and the Juniors doing one-nighters. From city to city, the record companies would set up local dance shows and hops for the artists to promote their records. One of the shows was the *Clay Cole* TV show. This was the first time I saw those three knockout, sensual, and sensational dancers. One must remember that this was before the go-go craze. The girls stuck in my mind. A year later we appeared on Murray the K's holiday show at the Brooklyn Paramount. And lo and behold, these three magnificent dancers were there as Murray took the stage.

Next, I was in New York having dinner at Al & Dick's when I walked my friend Morris Levy, who had not only owned Roulette Records but also the Round Table and a piece of the hottest club in New York, featuring the newest dance craze of the decade, the twist – the Peppermint Lounge, where his artists, Joey Dee and the Starlites, performed. Naturally that was the next stop, and, déjà vu – these three knockout ladies. Now they're not just dancing but singing with the Joey Dee revue.

In 1961, for my radio show in Camden, New Jersey, I played strictly R&B. In those days, the disc jockey was the sole commander of his show and destiny and created his own persona. Promotion men, label owners, and artists would visit when I was doing my show. Enter Phil Spector, who at that time was producing for Ray Peterson ("Corinna, Corinna"). He flipped when he heard me play a song by the Students called "Every Day of the Week." He had to have it. He took it and produced "Pretty Lit-

tle Angel Eyes," by Curtis Lee, giving it the same stomp beat as "Every Day of the Week." That meeting was the beginning of a friendship that has lasted a lifetime. He was about to leave Leiber & Stoller to start his own label, with backing from the Philly Connection – Harry Finfer, Howard Lipsius, Helen Noga out of Chicago, and an early mentor, Lester Sill. The label, named after Phil and Lester, was the Philles label.

Meanwhile, the three dancers were pursuing a singing career, with little success. But talent is like a fine precision instrument. In the hands of someone who doesn't know what to do with it, it won't happen. Phil knew what to do. He took them into the studio and recorded a song, "Be My Baby."

When Phil sent me the demo, I flipped over the record. It never entered my mind that the Ronettes were the three ladies I had seen years earlier. It was not until Phil sent them to Philly to do my TV show, *The Discophonic Scene*, that I realized that Ronnie and Estelle Bennett and their cousin Nedra were the dynamite trio I had first seen as dancers and then singers at the Peppermint Lounge.

The flipside to "Every Day of the Week," "I'm So Young," would eventually play a part in Ronnie's solo career when she recorded it under the name Veronica. So greatly impressed was Brian Wilson by Ronnie's sound on the recording that he and the Beach Boys went into the studio to do their own version.

The Ronettes, whom we honor and induct tonight, are a great example of how passion, desire, defeat, and determination can all eventually lead to stardom.

– Jerry "the Geator" Blavat