

tative examples: Chubby Checker recorded "Let's Twist Again" in 1961; teenager Dee Dee Sharp cut a duet with Chubby Checker, "Slow Twistin'," as well as "Mashed Potato Time" (both 1962) and "Do the Bird" (1963); songwriter Carole King tapped her babysitter, sixteen-year-old Little Eva (Eva Narcissus Boyd), to record her song "The Loco-Motion" in 1962; and the Motown group the Miracles sang about "Mickey's Monkey" (1963). (As we will see, the later disco craze of the 1970s inspired an analogous flood of dance-oriented songs—see Chapter 12. Popular music designed specifically for dancing remained popular through the 1980s into the 1990s; at the time of this writing, "dance" is treated by the music trade magazines as a separate and substantial genre of American and world pop music.) For the most part, the dance songs of the 1960s, like their later counterparts, were catchy and functional and tended to break no new ground musically or lyrically—which may account, at least somewhat, for the poor reputation of this period in many histories of American pop. Simple verse-chorus formats predominated. But if the songs were not in themselves novel or important, the new dance culture to which they contributed certainly was. And a few of these songs have retained the affection of a large public for a surprisingly long time: Chubby Checker joined with the rap group Fat Boys in a successful revival of "The Twist" (subtitled "Yo, Twist!") in 1988, and "The Loco-Motion" was a Number One song for the hard-rock group Grand Funk in 1974 and for the Australian singer Kylie Minogue in 1988.

Phil Spector

As we have seen, many teenagers achieved success as recording artists in the early years of rock 'n' roll. At the age of seventeen, Phil Spector (b. 1940) had a Number One record as a member of a vocal group, the Teddy Bears, whose hit song "To Know Him Is to Love Him" was also composed and produced by Spector. (The multitalented young man also played guitar and piano on the record, which was the first one he ever made!) It may initially seem surprising, then, that Spector elected not to follow the path of songwriting performers like Chuck Berry and Buddy Holly. Instead he emulated Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller (see Chapter 7), with whom he apprenticed, and by the early 1960s Spector had established himself as a songwriter-producer, working behind the scenes of rock 'n' roll rather than in

Phil Spector in 1965. Library of Congress.



its spotlights. But Spector must have sensed where the real emerging power was in this young music business: with the people who actually shaped the sounds of the records. The wisdom of his decision is reflected in the fact that his name today is probably better known, and certainly more widely revered among pop musicians, than that of Chubby Checker, Little Eva, and any number of young performers active in the early 1960s.

By the time he was twenty-one years old, Spector was in charge of his own independent label, Philles Records, and he brought a new depth of meaning to the phrase "in charge." Working with personally selected songwriters (and often serving as a collaborator in their writing) and with hand-picked vocalists, instrumentalists, arrangers, and engineers, he supervised every aspect of a record's sound. Spector's level of involvement, and his obsession with detail, became legendary; as a result a Philles record has a distinctive kind of sonority, tied more closely to Spector's personal talents and vision than to the contributions of any other songwriters, or of the technicians, or even of the actual performers. That is to say, more than records by the Crystals or the Ronettes, these are "Phil Spector records." It is indicative that Spector is, at the time of this writing, the only American pop music producer to have had a CD box set issued under his own name; in fact, if you want to hear the hits of the Crystals or the Ronettes, you need to buy *Phil Spector: Back to Mono (1958-1969)*, a set of four compact discs issued in 1991.

The characteristic Philles sound was at once remarkably dense and remarkably clear, and it became known as the "wall of sound." Spector achieved this effect by having multiple instruments—pianos, guitars, and so forth—doubling each individual part in the arrangement, and by using a huge amount of echo, while carefully controlling the overall balance of the record so that the vocals were pushed clearly to the front. The thick texture and the presence of strings on these records led them to be called "teenage symphonies." A perfect example is "Be My Baby," to be discussed in detail shortly. However, Spector explored many different types of sound textures on his recordings, and a record like "UpTown," also discussed below, has a decidedly different and more intimate—while no less impressive—impact.

Philles Records helped establish a new and important model for the production and marketing of pop records. Many indie companies, mimicking the practice of major labels with earlier styles of pop music, rushed as many records as they could into the rock 'n' roll market, often without much thought for quality control, hoping for the occasional hit. In contrast, as would be expected from the description provided above, Phil Spector turned out an exceptionally small number of records, about twenty in a two-year period, an astonishingly large percentage of which were hits. Of course, the increasingly high profile of record producers through the later 1960s and up to the present (one need only recall the importance of George Martin's work with the Beatles) is a direct outgrowth of Spector's contribution and notoriety; a 1965 essay by the noted writer Tom Wolfe dubbed the then-twenty-four-year-old millionaire "the first tycoon of teen." And when today's bands labor painstakingly for a year or more over the studio production of a disc, they are demonstrating, knowingly or not, Spector's legacy at work.

It is also significant that Spector's own preferred recording venue was Gold Star Studios in Los Angeles; this was an early indication of the coming shift away from New York as the dominant power center of the pop music industry. The studio mu-

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sicians with whom Spector worked regularly at Gold Star Studios came to be known as the "wrecking crew"; individually and collectively they made essential contributions to a remarkable number of hit records from the 1960s on. Among the best known of these musicians are Hal Blaine, drummer; Carol Kaye, bassist; and Jack Nitzsche, arranger and percussionist.

Phil Spector preferred to work with vocal groups over individual artists (although he did do some work with soloists), and his output as producer helped assure, as a result both of its own quality and of its influence, that the early 1960s were a golden age for rock 'n' roll vocal groups. Spector's predilection for vocal groups—shared by many songwriters and producers at the time—was probably due to a couple of factors. The groups offered great potential for intricate and varied vocal textures, of course. But the groups also had a kind of anonymity, as far as the listening public was concerned: they had no star leaders known by name, and their personnel could be reduced, augmented, or otherwise altered at the will of the producer. The increased power of the producer in this situation was most likely the critical issue here. Cultural historians would also attach significance to the fact that the producers of vocal group rock 'n' roll in this period tended to be, like Phil Spector, male and white, while a large proportion of the most popular vocal groups were female (the so-called *girl groups*), and of these, a significant number were composed exclusively of African Americans. In effect, the increased specialization and resulting hierarchical arrangement of power and influence that occurred in an operation like Philles Records restored a Tin Pan Alley-like model to the creation and marketing of some of the most successful rock 'n' roll. The parallel even extends to the fact that a large number of the most important songwriters and producers of this period, including Spector himself, were Jews born in New York.

To list the songwriters with whom Spector worked is to list some of the most prodigious talents of the early 1960s, including the teams of Carole King and Gerry Goffin, Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, and Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich. For these and many other aspiring songwriters of the time, New York's *Brill Building* (at 1619 Broadway) served as a base of operations, where they worked in little cubicles with pianos, all packed tightly together, turning out songs for large numbers of artists and (mostly indie) labels. Producers and label executives were constantly in attendance or close at hand, and the Brill Building became quite literally rock 'n' roll's vertical Tin Pan Alley. The successful songwriters were often working with a number of different artists, producers, and labels at the same time, and consequently could hope to have several hits on the charts simultaneously; the regular work at a stable location and the promise of considerable royalty income made this type of work seem both more reliable and more potentially lucrative than that of performers. (Some of the Brill Building songwriters did perform occasionally on records, playing instruments, providing background vocals, and sometimes even doing a lead vocal, but this was not a regular thing. In the early 1960s the only one of this group to have a name as a recording artist was Neil Sedaka, who generally performed his own material; Carole King's performing career took off much later.)

Like Phil Spector, a large proportion of the Brill Building songwriters tailored their output toward vocal groups, and many of the resulting records remain classics of their period. The Drifters performed "Save the Last Dance for Me" by Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman (Number One, 1960), "Up on the Roof" by Goffin and King (Number Five, 1963), and "On Broadway" by Mann and Weil and Leiber and



Songwriters at work
in New York City's
Brill Building: **Barry
Mann, Cynthia Weil,**
and **Carole King**.
Frank Driggs Collec-
tion.

"GOOD VIBRATIONS": AMERICAN POP AND THE BRITISH INVASION, 1960s

Stoller (Number Nine, 1963); the Shirelles—one of the first successful girl groups—recorded "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?" by Goffin and King (Number One, 1961); the Dixie Cups sang "Chapel of Love" by Barry and Greenwich and Spector (Number One, 1964); and the list could go on and on. Talented hopefuls flocked to the Brill Building. In addition to those already mentioned, Neil Diamond also got his start as a writer there before becoming a superstar singer-songwriter in the late 1960s and 1970s. Phil Spector retired from steady writing and production work in 1966. But he has periodically resurfaced to work on special projects that attract his interest. The best-known of these involved the Beatles; he worked on the last album released by the group, *Let It Be* (1970), and then assisted individual members with solo albums in the early 1970s.