

**PHIL**

**SOUND OF THE SIXTIES**

**SPECTOR**



**SEAN MACLEOD**



**PHIL SPECTOR**

# Tempo

## A Rowman & Littlefield Music Series on Rock, Pop, and Culture

**Series Editor: Scott Calhoun**

**Tempo: A Rowman & Littlefield Music Series on Rock, Pop, and Culture** offers titles that explore rock and popular music through the lens of social and cultural history, revealing the dynamic relationship between musicians, music, and their milieu. Like other major art forms, rock and pop music comment on their cultural, political, and even economic situation, reflecting the technological advances, psychological concerns, religious feelings, and artistic trends of their times. Contributions to the **Tempo** series are the ideal introduction to major pop and rock artists and genres.

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**PHIL SPECTOR**

***Sound of the Sixties***

**Sean MacLeod**

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## SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Of the many contradictions threaded through the most culturally transformative decade of the twentieth century, over there in the popular music sector was Phil Spector. Chief among the 1960s story of looking for release from control was one who gripped the means of production so tightly that he seemed to rather effortlessly pop out hit songs and hip personalities one after another, such that sixties youth cultures had plenty of encouragement as they pushed for liberation and a future in which popular culture would (ironically) define what a free society looked, felt, and sounded like. This Tempo series of books examining rock, pop, and culture keeps an eye out for sites of tension and couldn't have found a much better one than in Phil Spector. Precisely because Tempo books are about marking the cultural times and analyzing the forces that change these times, they look into the contradictions in popular music and the people who lived the tensions artfully and disruptively. Phil Spector's knack and nuance for developing musical performers, recording their talents in a big way, and then seeding the bed for the empowerment of the teenager, one single record at a time, was his art and his cultural disruption; Spector's narcissism, need for control, and paranoia overshadowed his art and became more destructive than disruptive, not for him alone but for some who worked with him too.

Sean MacLeod helps us mark Spector's fervor and fury behind much of the sound of the sixties by bringing his appreciation and intelligence into a dialogue with what others have said about Spector, including

those who worked directly with him. Presenting the arc of Spector's career in critique and relief against the fraught and complicated plotline of the sixties, and many of its major musical characters, will give readers a greater sense of the Spector-sixties entanglement.

Scott Calhoun

## PREFACE

**E**ver since I was a boy the pop music and pop culture of the sixties has been a big part of my life. My introduction to one of the century's most colorful decades, however, was shrouded in sorrow, since it directly sprang from the killing of John Lennon in December 1980. The TV and radio were buzzing with tributes and commemorations of the former leader of pop music's most celebrated group, the Beatles, whose charm, humor, music, and style was still as alluring at the beginning of the eighties, at least to an eight-year-old such as me, as it must have been twenty or so years earlier at the height of Beatlemania. It wasn't long before I was eagerly exploring the treasure trove that was sixties pop culture, bringing me in touch with the great music of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Beach Boys, and the Byrds.

Although I was aware of Phil Spector, it was only peripheral, and it wasn't until many years later when I came across *The Best of the Ronettes* CD that I first began to realize just how significant he was to the sixties. Every song was a virtual sonic masterpiece, and although I was familiar with his big hits, such as "Be My Baby" and "Then He Kissed Me," I couldn't quite believe how the magic of songs such as "Do I Love You," "Is This What I Get for Loving You," "The Best Part of Breaking Up," and "Walking in the Rain," had passed me by for so many years. No wonder he had been so highly thought of by people such as John Lennon and the Beach Boys' Brian Wilson. This music, as was much of the girl group music of the early sixties that Spector had done so much to create, with groups such as the Ronettes, the Crystals,

and Darlene Love, was very unique and special, while the sonic textures were way beyond anything else the other more successful groups of the time were producing. I became nearly infatuated with the girl group genre, so much so that I wrote a book on it.

After writing *Leaders of the Pack: Girl Groups of the 1960s and Their Influence on Popular Culture in Britain and America*, and before beginning this book, I thought I was familiar with most of Spector's work, the girl groups specifically, as well as the work with the Righteous Brothers and John Lennon's and George Harrison's post-Beatles work, but there was more to Spector than that. So much more. His work in the 1970s with the 1950s singer Dion, although not a commercial success, is a real lost classic, not to mention his earlier work with the Teddy Bears, Connie Francis, and Gene Pitney, as well as his inspirational work with the Paris Sisters, whose songs alone are worthy of securing him a place in pop music history.

Although, for some, such as songwriters and producers Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller and Terry Melcher, Spector was a hustler who just got lucky; to many of the pop aristocracy of the sixties, such as Brian Wilson, John Lennon, and Carole King, Spector was a musical genius. Without doubt, Phil Spector was a complex, mercurial figure full of contradictions and insecurities, and yet, to a greater or lesser degree, Spector and his music had a significant impact on the pop music of the 1960s.

Phil Spector revolutionized the recording process as well as shaped the business and marketing approach of the music industry, which was in its infancy at the time. He raised the bar and standards for other musicians and producers to follow and gave a voice to the newly emerging socioeconomic group of teenagers, as well as other groups struggling to achieve equality during the sixties, particularly women and African Americans. Spector, however, was a complex character whose need for control brought much damage and confusion into the lives of those around him, as well as into his own career and life.

This book primarily focuses on the following themes: his early life and formative years; his significance as a pop music impresario and music business entrepreneur; the impact his visionary approach to pop records had on the musical landscape of the time; his influence on the sociopolitical climate in regard to youth culture, the rise of feminism, and the civil rights movement; his influence on many of the new gener-

ation of pop and rock musicians; his egocentric need for control and power, both personally and professionally; the significance of his role in the post-Beatles' careers of both George Harrison and John Lennon; and his final decline and ignominious fall from his position as pop music's greatest producer to his imprisonment for murder.



# INTRODUCTION

## Between Elvis and the Beatles

### BEFORE ELVIS THERE WAS NOTHING

The devastation of two world wars and the threat of fascism, along with the massive consumerism that had developed hand in hand with the industrial advances of postwar America, meant that life after World War II was being experienced in dramatically different terms than prior to it. Following the war, the United States had become the foremost nation on earth, acting now as the guardian of freedom and democracy while simultaneously promoting capitalist and consumer ideologies. For many young people outside the United States, who were still suffering from postwar depression and the restrictive hierarchical traditions of their own cultures, the American way of life, intrinsically associated with freedom and wealth, became an increasingly more attractive idea.

The postwar years had created a growing youth population, and with plenty of part-time work and few financial responsibilities, the new youth, which became known affectionately as *teenagers*, were considered one of the most lucrative, as well as one of the most impressionable, groups in society and were an easy target for manufacturers, who indulged their fads and trends (Judt, 347–50). It was for this very reason that Colin McInnes, in his 1959 novel *Absolute Beginners*, which depicts the burgeoning youth culture of the time, exclaimed that “the teenager is the new economic class.” This new subgroup, with its own

language, pastimes, fashion, and cultural representatives, encouraged the beginning of a whole new era, primarily interconnected with the fleeting trends of consumerism, otherwise known today as pop culture. In her book *Where the Girls Are*, writer Susan Douglas observed that

for kids born after WW2, the media's influence was unprecedented. . . . Much of this media was geared to the fastest-growing market segment, baby boomers. Media executives knew if they were going to succeed with this group, already known for its rising rebellion against '50s conformity, they would have to produce songs, movies or TV shows that spoke to that rebellion. They would have to create products specifically for teens and definitely not for adults. (14)

The new sound of rock 'n' roll, which was enthusiastically embraced by the postwar youth, had its origins in the African American communities and as a result rejected the color prejudices that had existed in American society up until that point. Music publishing executive Arnold Shaw recounts that the stirrings of something new became obvious when a sweet white Jewish girl called Georgia Gibbs started to hit the charts with covers of the black "gritty" blues singers, such as LaVern Baker ("Tweedle Dee") and Etta James ("Dance with Me Henry"). "Old line publishers," Shaw suggested, "who had dominated the hit parade for years couldn't understand it. They both feared and hated it without really knowing what it was" (Shaw, 3), and when the young, slim, and attractive figure of Elvis Presley made his first appearance on *The Tommy Dorsey Show*, on January 28, 1956, "the music industry saw the writing on the wall, for all was about to change" (Shaw, 11).

While parents detested Presley, thinking he was obscene, the kids loved him and recognized that he was the voice of their generation, leading them, pied-piper-like, into an era that would bow to their every whim. It wouldn't take long before fifties advertisers and marketing men realized the commercial potential of this new youth market, and soon media outlets, TV, radio, and magazines began to heavily promote the new consumer culture.

In Britain, the older prewar values were outrightly rejected by the young in favor of the more consumer and egocentric values projected abroad from the United States. The Rolling Stones manager Andrew "Loog" Oldham describes the mesmerizing effect that the Technical-

ored lifestyles of the new American teenager had on their wide-eyed British counterparts:

Those of us punters not yet part of the new intelligentsia nurtured the hope that someday soon our lives would resemble the American movies we loved, we'd trade places with a miserable young James Dean in a flash. We had no perspective on Britain's glorious and unrecoverable past, so we lived in a make believe present time inspired by Hollywood and rock 'n' roll. . . . Dreams were important because our elders had run out of them and therefore aspiration belonged to the young. Rock 'n' roll was ours because it was American and our parents didn't want it. (Oldham, *Stone Free*).

While the consumer-driven culture of the fifties and sixties created an economic boom that “engulfed the adult population,” the blatant manipulation of the young generation by unscrupulous businessmen cast its own dark shadow that “left the idealistic young feeling hollow and unfulfilled” (Doggett, *There's a Riot Going On*, 15); or as Shaw chillingly expressed it, “Considering the animadversions about teen-age taste by the older generation, its readiness to trade on genuine adolescent feelings provided its own cynical commentary” (Shaw, 171). Many artists and intellectuals voiced their opposition to consumerism, seeing it as “an antithesis to America's notion of freedom and democracy, as it trapped people in a state of consumer-driven anxiety and distanced them from the true goal of personal self-development” (MacLeod, 6).

Along with the increasing attitude of cynicism toward the postwar consumerism, there loomed an even deeper sense of unease due to the imminent threat of a nuclear war between the world's two opposing superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—that had emerged in the aftermath of the war. This constant threat led to a new generation growing up in an atmosphere of permanent fear and dread.

Not only did the fear of impending nuclear war cause anxiety that had to be masked by a consumer culture, but also the banality of suburban life, which was inadvertently created by the consumer culture, distracted society from the glaringly obvious personal, domestic, and social issues that the Western world, particularly the United States, was undoubtedly experiencing and added to the anxiety already felt in modern life.

Rock 'n' roll was intrinsically linked to this feeling of alienation and held up those disaffected malcontents, such as Elvis, Marlon Brando, and James Dean, as its heroes; these were figures who strongly connected with and strengthened the inner emotional experiences of the new youth culture and those at odds with the all-consuming self of society's "happiness machine" (Curtis).

## TOWARD SOCIAL REFORM

While black communities benefitted largely from the postwar prosperity, finding jobs in manufacturing plants, particularly the automobile industry, in areas of the north, such as Detroit, there was a heavy migration of blacks from the south who came to seek opportunities and escape the terrible racism they were subject to (Diana Ross's father Fred and Motown's founder Berry Gordy were examples). Under such circumstances many black families found comfortable housing, such as the Brewster Housing projects, and steady employment to help raise their children and provide them with at least a basic education (Marable, 29; M. Wilson, *Dreamgirl*, 10, 11; and T. Wilson, 18–20).

Despite the change in circumstances for the black communities, there was still a feeling of inequality. Many blacks in the towns of Boston, Detroit, and New York began to realize that, although they had more opportunities and rights than those blacks in the south, they were still discriminated against and were thus moved to bring about change by campaigning and protesting. Black soldiers, who were treated as equal among the European countries they liberated from German occupation, had a greater feeling of self-worth and refused to give up their right to equality when they returned home (U.S. Diplomatic Mission).

While the government had made attempts to outlaw segregation throughout America and to ensure equality for all citizens, civil rights were still being violated. Organizations such as the Black Muslims, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Revolutionary Action Movement evolved in order to put an end to racism once and for all.

Young whites began to absorb black culture through the fusion of black and white music; Elvis was liked by both black and white kids

(Shaw, 50); and his mix of country, blues, and gospel was a good example of this racial crossover, while live performances of black artists, particularly, attracted a mixed-race audience. The rock 'n' roll star Little Richard was another example of how such performers broke down racial taboos when demand for personal appearances from him, even in the southern states, was by a predominantly white audience (White, 69). Rock 'n' roll, as writer Mark Kurlansky observed, was "profoundly about racial integration" (2), while Susan Douglas described this changing attitude, particularly in regard to young black female artists, as

the vibrating voices of black teenagers, often trained in the gospel traditions of their churches, [that] suggested a perfect fusion of naiveté and knowingness. . . . Black voices conveyed both a moral authority and a spirited hope for the future. These were the voices of exclusion, of hope for something better, of longing. They were not, like Annette or the Lennon Sisters, the voices of sexual repression, of social complacency, or of homogenized commercialism. (S. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 95)

Encouraged by the civil rights movement, women too began to assert themselves and break free from the traditional but extremely restrictive role of "finding a husband and bearing children." Prior to the Second World War women had made a certain amount of headway in having their civil liberties respected, due mainly to the suffragette movement in the 1920s, and during the war women played a pivotal role, taking over traditionally male jobs, while the men were away fighting. Once the war ended, however, a vigorous campaign started, "fueled by the fear that there wouldn't be enough jobs for returning servicemen" (S. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 47), to encourage women back into the home (Wolf, 64). One commentator, particularly, observed that

social mores, indeed, were changing and so were the expectations for marriage. Sexual enjoyment and companionship in marriage altered women's private worlds and thoughts. But if women dared to chart a course for themselves outside the traditional family sphere, they were either chastised or ultimately forced to surrender to their "natural feminine instincts." (Gluck, 6)

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s many feminine groups formed to support and encourage women in their fight for equal rights and indepen-

dence (Judt, 338, 339, 487), and soon many women were occupying positions in politics, business, and media that were once only filled by men.

The legalization of the contraceptive pill, in 1961, brought with it sexual freedom, which fit neatly into a youth culture influenced by feminism, rock 'n' roll, economic prosperity, and the birth of the teenager. Both men and women could now experience and express themselves sexually, without the fear and stigma of an unwanted pregnancy.

All of these new freedoms and attitudes fed into each other and produced a society of young people, who were freed from the drudgery and responsibility of becoming young adults as soon as they left school. The new youth had greater and more exciting opportunities than had their parents. They had money to buy things, fueling the consumer culture, and the means (particularly with the postwar boom in the motor industry) to go places, as well as greater sexual freedoms that previous generations couldn't even imagine. Most importantly, this new youth culture had its very own style of music—rock 'n' roll, a virtual euphemism for sex, (Shaw, 106), which provided the perfect soundtrack to the new generations' journey to freedom and personal happiness.

## **THE SCENE IS SET**

The advent of rock 'n' roll had set a teenage Phil Spector on a course of personal adventure, while the new consumer culture created opportunities for individuals such as him to become very wealthy and successful. The new trends and fashions in teen consumerism meant that teenagers with any drive were seen as gold dust among clever marketing and businessmen, who wanted access to the teen markets, as well as a product that would attract the potential teen consumer. The young Spector with his musical ambition and talent fitted this profile perfectly and was virtually dollar signs in the eyes of marketing men of this type.

The waking impulses of the civil rights movement and the cultural acceptance of black music not only influenced and encouraged Spector to develop his sound but also allowed him to operate in an industry that could draw on the wonderful resources of black vocalists, as well as the teenage sensibilities that the young teen songwriters, who had begun to emerge, were able to tap into. All this provided Spector with the ele-

ments he needed to create a successful brand of pop music. Also, growing up in the postwar era as the first wave of teenagers meant he was already attuned to the outlook and emotional responses of his own audience. By the time he had developed his production and songwriting skills, he was already experiencing and feeling the things that his teen audience were also experiencing and feeling, ultimately making his music the perfect musical accompaniment to their lives.



## TIMELINE

### *Phil Spector*

**January 10, 1903:** Benjamin Spector is born.

**July 15, 1911:** Bertha Spector is born.

**November 27, 1911:** Bertha Spector arrives, with her family, in America.

**June 1913:** Ben Spector arrives, with his family, in America.

**1934:** Spector's parents marry.

**1935:** Spector's sister, Shirley, is born.

**December 26, 1939:** Spector is born.

### *Cultural Events*

**Dec 7, 1941:** United States enters World War II after Japan attacks U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor.

**May 8, 1945:** Germany surrenders.

*Phil Spector**Cultural Events*

**Aug 14, 1945:** Japan surrenders. Bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. End of World War II; peace declared.

**June 1945:** Following the Allied victory in World War II, the first of the U.S. soldiers begin returning home from Europe, the Pacific, and Asia.

**Oct 1945:** Setup of the UN in the aftermath of the war.

**April 1948:** Marshall Plan established to provide aid to Europe in the aftermath of the war. Britain in the grip of recession and rationing. The Marshall Plan aims to get Europe back on its feet.

**January 5, 1949:** Truman presents his proposal for a “Fair Deal,” which provides great social and economic reform in the United States following World War II.

**April 20, 1949:** Spector’s father commits suicide.

**June 25, 1950:** North Korea invades South Korea. United States comes to the aid of South Korea, bringing them into a three-year-long war.

**July 1950:** Marlon Brando makes his first movie appearance and shakes the cinematic world with

***Phil Spector***

**December 26, 1952:** Spector gets his first guitar.

**1953:** Spector's family moves to LA.

**Fall 1954:** Spector enters Fairfax High School.

***Cultural Events***

his new acting style. His 1953 film *The Wild One* makes a big impact on the postwar generation.

**April 1951:** European Union begins with the France/Germany Coal and Steel Treaty, otherwise known as the Paris Treaty, reinforced six years later by the Treaty of Rome.

**November 1952:** The world's first music chart is compiled in the UK.

**June 1953:** The coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.

**July 1954:** Elvis Presley records with Sam Philips at Sun Studios. Eighteen months later "Heartbreak Hotel" is released to completely transform popular music and culture.

**March 9, 1955:** James Dean makes an impact with Steinbeck's *East of Eden*.

**March 19, 1955:** Bill Haley's song "Rock around the Clock" features in the film *Blackboard Jungle* about juvenile delinquency

## *Phil Spector*

**December 26, 1955:** As a birthday present Bertha and sister Shirley take Spector to his first major musical experience, Ella Fitzgerald. He is most impressed with her guitarist, Barney Kessel, who becomes a major inspiration for Spector.

## *Cultural Events*

and begins the craze for rock 'n' roll.

**September 30, 1955:** James Dean dies in a car accident. *Rebel without a Cause* is released in the wake of Dean's tragic death. The film makes an huge impact on the teen culture that begins to emerge.

**July 30, 1955:** The United States proposes to send "artificial" satellites into space, beginning a space race with the USSR, which was supposedly won by the United States when they eventually "landed" a man on the moon.

**December 1, 1955:** In Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks sparks off the civil rights movement by refusing to give her seat on a bus to a white passenger.

**Fall 1956:** The Suez Canal Crisis has a disastrous effect on the UK and establishes the United States as the world's leading superpower. The British Empire begins to unravel its commonwealth as

## *Phil Spector*

**Early 1957:** Spector forms his first rock 'n' roll group with friends from Fairfax High School.

**Spring 1957:** Spector makes his first TV appearance on a late-night show called *Rocket to Stardom*. He also starts an apprenticeship, of sorts, in Gold Star Recording Studios.

**June 1957:** Spector graduates from Fairfax High School. He studies French at Los Angeles City College. He also takes a course in court reporting in a business college. He works as a court stenographer on the famous Lana Turner/Cheryl Crane and Johnny Stompanato murder trial.

**May 20, 1958:** Spector forms the Teddy Bears with Annette

## *Cultural Events*

Australia and Canada begin to seek their independence. India and the West Indies too seek their independence; Britain allows its subjects from these countries to enter Britain.

**September 1957:** Jack Kerouac's book *On the Road* creates a new literary style and draws attention to the beat poets and certain unsavory elements of American society.

**October 4, 1957:** USSR beats United States in putting the fist satellite, *Sputnik 1*, into orbit.

***Phil Spector***

Kleinbard and Marshall Leib and records a demo, “Don’t Worry My Little Pet,” in Gold Star.

**July 3, 1958:** Spector and the Teddy Bears sign to Era Records.

**Summer 1958:** Spector records “To Know Him Is to Love Him.” The song is released at the end of September.

**November 28, 1958:** Spector and the Teddy Bears appear on *American Bandstand* to promote the single.

**December 1958:** Spector has his first number one with “To Know Him Is to Love Him.”

**Late December 1958:** Spector leaves Era Records to sign with Ricky Nelson and Fats Domino’s label Imperial.

**March 1959:** Spector begins recording tracks for the *Teddy Bears Sing* album.

**Fall 1959:** Spector officially breaks up the Teddy Bears. Soon after, he manufactures a group

***Cultural Events***

**January 12, 1959:** Berry Gordy establishes Motown record company. The Miracles release the label’s first major hit, “Shop Around,” the following year.

**February 3, 1959:** Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, and the Big Bopper are killed in a plane crash.

***Phil Spector***

called the Spector Trio for which he writes and produces the material. It lasts only a brief time.

**Summer 1960:** Music industry professional Lester Sill, Spector's friend and future partner, arranges for Spector to go to New York as apprentice to the highly successful production duo Leiber and Stoller.

**Fall 1960:** Spector records "Corrina Corrina" with Ray Peterson, his first big hit since "To Know Him."

**October 20, 1960:** Spector had cowritten "Spanish Harlem" with Jerry Leiber; he begins recording the song with Leiber and Stoller. The song features Ben E. King on lead vocals.

**Spring 1960:** Spector has four songs in the charts: "Corrina Corrina," "Spanish Harlem," "Pretty Little Angel Eyes," and "Some of Your Lovin'."

**1961:** Spector records Bert Bern's "Twist and Shout" with a group called the Topnotes for Atlantic Records. Spector ruins the song, which would become a hit by the Isley Brothers a year later. The Beatles would cover it on their

***Cultural Events***

**November 8, 1960:** John F. Kennedy is elected president of the United States.