

The Shangri-las

Simon Moses
HD 271
October 2003



Although rock and pop music has always been a phenomenon that has attracted fans of both sexes, the role of female artists in its development has frequently been marginalised by critics, unless the artiste under consideration has been deemed ‘authentic’ enough to pass muster. This is especially true in the case of the artists who started to emerge at the end of the 1950s, after the commercial demise of the first generation of rock’n’rollers. These second-generation artists are frequently dismissed as an anachronism, something that simply filled the gap between the demise of their predecessors and the rise of artists who were considered important in intellectual terms from very early on, most notably the Beatles and Bob Dylan.

There is some truth in this dismissal if, for example one looks at artists such as Pat Boone, Paul Anka and most notoriously of all, Fabian, who was notable in that he had been chosen for a recording deal on account of his good looks rather than his ability to sing, which even he confessed was somewhat non-existent. This however, is not the full picture. It fails to take into account the role of female artistes on the pop music scene. It is

interesting to note that the first generation of Rock'n'roll, from 1955 to '58 was almost completely devoid of female artists – a situation quite different to that of Blues music from which rock had been derived from. Although male performers dominated the blues, there were certainly notable female artists, such as Big Mama Thornton, who recorded and performed *Hound Dog*, later recorded with great commercial success by Elvis Presley.

Of course, the rock format was one of the first places in the mass media where sexuality was explicit, which, although tame by the standards of today, nevertheless provoked outrage with 'decent' people at the time. And if a male singer mouthing suggestive lyrics whilst pulling lewd body movements had the capacity to draw protest, a female doing the same could well have caused blood vessels to burst in the craniums of the righteous. It is suggested in *The Story of Pop* that the only two female singers in this era that were close to being female rock were Connie Francis and Brenda Lee¹. Although both came out with records that were very close to the rock'n'roll genre (for example: Francis' *Stupid Cupid* and Lee's *Sweet Nuthin's*), their images were however the opposite of rock'n'roll, with both marketed as essentially wholesome acts, all permed hair and stiffly starched petticoats.

Indeed, throughout the 1960s the female rock artist was frequently presented as a far more mannered proposition than her male rivals were. The initial flowering of women in rock comprised of girl groups such as the Shirelles or the Crystals, black vocal groups

¹ *The Story of Pop*. London: Phoebus Publishing, 1973-5. P. 123/4.

who were notable for the almost complete anonymity of their line-up. This was taken to its most notorious conclusion when the Maverick producer Phil Spector released records under the name of his (then) flagship vocal group, the Crystals, such as the classic *He's a Rebel*, when the song had actually been recorded using a session group called the Blossoms. The Crystals had been performing a concert at another town on the day of recording, so were simply stood in for. The music produced in this period was frequently of a high standard, but artist identity was far from being a strong point. If a girl group released an LP, it would usually contain little other than their own hits and a bunch of covers of other girl group staples, which confused matters further. Performing upbeat ditties extolling a boy that they had met, for example, the Ronettes' *Da Do Ron Ron*, or wistful numbers about their heartbreak, such as the Shirelles' *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow*, there was rarely any element of darkness in this type of record. The notable exception to this was *He Hit Me (and It Felt Like A Kiss)* by Phil Spector's Crystals, which was hurriedly withdrawn from the market in 1963.

One of the most distinctive girl groups of this period were the Shangri-las. Although the group did not release a record until 1964, when the Beatles were on the cusp of breaking the American market, they were still able to produce several hit records worldwide, including three top ten singles in the U.S. Despite this, the group have not been well documented in rock history – they barely scrape a couple of pages in Lucy O'Brien's *She Bop II*, or Gillian C. Gaar's *She's A Rebel*. Indeed, in Tony Palmer's *All You Need Is Love – the story of Popular music* (written after the groundbreaking television documentary of 1968) they are not even listed in the index.

This lack of recognition and dismissal is commented on in the publication *The Story of Pop* as this:

“The Shangri-las are often dismissed as rubbish. Those who do that though, miss the point, these songs reflected an era, and represented the secret thoughts and dreams of those very girls who went to scream and weep at groups like the Beatles² .”

The Shangri-las comprised of two sets of sisters – the twins Mary-Ann and Margie Ganser, and Mary and Betty Weiss, who all lived in the Queens area of New York, although the only constant member was Mary Weiss, and the group invariably toured as a three-piece. The two sets of sisters befriended each other once they had started to attend the Andrew Jackson High School, which is where they started singing together, initially on an informal basis, before progressing to performing cover versions at local dances. This led to then being signed to Artie Ripp’s Karma Sutra Production company, and a record, *Wishing Well*, was released at the start of 1964 on the Spokane record label (Karma Sutra would not release its own records until later in the 1960s). From the start of their recording career, lead vocals on the group’s records were handled by Mary Weiss, and her nasal, New York accent is probably the most distinctive part of this record. The use of a spoken intro on this track later became a staple of the Shangri-las’ oeuvre, although this device had been prominent on other girl-group records. However, the record lacked any sense of drama, something the group’s records would develop once they had

² *The Story of Pop*, P. 341

been teamed up with a previously unproven songwriter by the name of George ‘Shadow’ Morton.

Morton had been an acquaintance of the songwriter Ellie Greenwich some years previous, and had gotten in touch with her again after discovering that she had co-written a number of hit singles since they had last met. In a meeting with her and her husband Jeff Barry, Morton informed them that he wrote songs also, at which point Barry called his bluff, and asked him to compose a song with a view to releasing it on the record label he worked for, Red Bird, which was owned by the writers Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller. Morton used the Shangri-las for the demo recording session, after having been made aware of them on the Queens dancehall circuit, and apparently composed the song for this session whilst travelling to the studio. The song in question was titled *Remember (Walkin’ in the Sand)*, and when it was played at the Red Bird offices it was judged good enough to sign both Morton (as a writer) and the group to the label.

In Lucy O’Brien’s “definitive history of women in rock pop and soul” *She Bop II*, she refers to the finished record as bringing “a whole new dimension to the girl group sound, the concept of girl-talk as pop opera³,”. Although the narrative in this song was more of an inner dialogue than the virtual discussions in later Shangri-la numbers, *Remember (Walkin’ in the Sand)* still succeeds in being high drama, and bears more of a resemblance to a Lichtenstein-esque cartoon strip than a pop song.

³ O’Brien, Lucy. *She Bop II*. 1995. London: Continuum, 2002. P. 75

The song opens with a doom - laden three-note descending piano and cello sequence, repeated throughout the verses, before the melodramatic lead vocal kicks in. This is not so much sung as wailed, and respite only comes with the choruses, which are more uptempo, in music if not in mood. The song concerns the reaction of the protagonist, who has received a ‘dear john’ type letter from her boyfriend. In Charlotte Greig’s book on girl groups *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?*, the song is described as “idiosyncratic to a point of absurdity”, due no doubt to Morton’s lack of musical training (he did not know how to play any musical instruments), and yet at the same time Greig acknowledges that “it also had a strong teenage emotional credibility⁴”.

This credibility lay in the way that the song accurately reflected the teenage mindset in the narrative. The song shows little restraint; as the sobbed verses draw to a close, the protagonist seems to pull together (“Let me think, let me think, what can I do?”) before collapsing back into self-pity again (“Oh no, oh no, oh no, no, no, no, no.”). The chorus has the singer gaining composure as she recollects being with her boy, but come the final line, her pitch rises and her voice becomes a strangulated sob once more – “Softly, Softly, we’d MEET WITH OUR LIPS!” before the song launches back into the verse melody. The emotional response depicted in this situation is distinctly juvenile, but came as a blast of raw emotion in comparison to its predecessors. A prime example is Lesley Gore’s 1963 hit *It’s My Party*. This reflected a similar emotional reflex, but in a much more upbeat manner. The Shangri-las’ song struck a chord with record buyers, and duly reached the top ten in the U.S. in the summer of 1964.

⁴ Greig, Charlotte. *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?* London; Virago Press, 1989. P. 78

The follow-up was jointly composed by Morton with Barry and Greenwich, as were several of the follow-up records, and proved a much more sophisticated record, in terms of structure, use of sound effects and empathy to a teenage mindset. While *Remember (Walkin' in the Sand)* encapsulated the fairly everyday situation of a jilted young girl, *Leader of the Pack* was perhaps the ultimate in macabre adolescent wish fulfilment. Banned in the U.K, this song owed a direct lineage to Jody Reynolds' 1958 hit *Endless Sleep*, which was covered in the U.K. by Marty Wilde, or perhaps Ray Peterson's histrionic 1960 hit *Tell Laura I Love Her* – at least there were no fatalities in *Endless Sleep*. Although this kind of record was decried as morbid and tasteless at the time, a reappraisal of this so-called 'Death Disc' formula published in the early 1970s points out, that while this is not untrue,

“(in comparing a song of this genre to *Romeo and Juliet*) death discs plunder universal mythology. The props may be up to date (stock cars, trains, motorcycles), but the tragedy is timeless⁵”.

The plot to *Leader of the Pack* goes something like this: Girl is asked by her friends if she is going out with the boy the song is about, and if she is seeing him that day, to which she replies in the negative. She then recounts how her parents disapproved of him, and that her father had issued an ultimatum to end their relationship. She does so against her wishes, and the boy is so upset that when he sets off on his motorbike (“on that rainy night”) he loses control of it, crashes and is killed. The various stylistic devices used

⁵ *The Story of Pop*. P. 438

throughout the song accentuate this highly dramatic plotline. This is how it occurs in the song:

00:00 – 00:16 – Start of first verse. Spoken intro between three girls (“is she really going out with him?”), with a background of sparse piano chords and a girl softly humming the melody.

00:16 – 00:30 – Upped tempo. Rest of verse sung, ending (as all of the verses do) with the song’s title and the revving of a motorcycle engine.

00:30 – 01:00 – Second verse. More strident instrumentation. Revelation of parental disapproval of the boy. “My folks were always putting him down.”

01:00 – 01:30 – Third verse. Girl finishes with boy at parent’s behest.

01:30 – 01:53 – Middle eight. This is the most dramatic part of the song. Monologue where the girl recounts the boy setting off “on that fateful night”, and how she “begged him to go slow”, although she is unaware if he heard this. At 01:44, we hear the motorcycle revving again, followed by the sound of screeching tyres at 01:46 and the narrator yelling one second later “look out, look out, look out, look out!” as the deadpan backing vocals turn into a chant of the word “no”. Two seconds after this, we hear the sound of the motorbike crashing.

01:53 – 02:24 – Verse four. The aftermath. Instrumentation pared down again to piano chords with bass and snare drums. “I can’t hide the tears, but I don’t care”.

02:24 – 02:54 - Outro. Girl sings “Leader of the pack, now he’s gone” while the backing chorus chants the word “gone”. Reprise of sound effects of bike crashing to fade.

Unlike many of the earlier death discs however, *Leader of the Pack* tapped into more than just a morbid interest on the buyer’s part. *The Story of Pop* quotes vocalist Mary Weiss in saying that “We try to stay real close to our audience. Most kids have a hangup with their parents and a lot of girls want to be the centre of attention, *the way the girl in Leader of the Pack is*.”⁶ As Mary was barely sixteen years old herself at the time the record was released, this gives her view of the song some credence. Greig agrees with this, referring to it as an “if I die, you’ll all be sorry” style of fantasy that has been known to occupy the teenage psyche⁷.

Although the Shangri La’s image had started off as being little different to other girl groups, when this record took off they found themselves dressed in a far ‘tougher’ looking style, defined on the website *Out in the Streets: The story of the Shangri-las* as “skin-tight slacks, spike-heeled leather boots, and puffy white blouses and vests⁸.” Greig comments that the group by this time “exuded an air of tough independence that spoke to a whole new generation of hip, white working class city girls... But it was also clear, to

⁶ *The Story of Pop*. P.498

⁷ Greig, P. 81.

⁸ <http://www.redbirdent.com/slas2>

teenagers at least, that the Shangri-las were at heart, nice ordinary girls⁹.” This undercurrent was reflected in their records – although the narrator of *Leader of the Pack* is dating a ‘bad boy’ from “the wrong side of town,” she obeys her parents when they instruct her to call it a day with him.

Despite the popularity of this record, Red Bird decided that the follow up was to be a much less controversial, and more conventional, upbeat love song entitled *Give Him a Great Big Kiss*. Although this song concerned another dark horse boy (“he’s good – bad, but he’s not *evil*”), the delivery was far more jocular, and nobody died at the end. As with *Leader of the Pack*, this song features a spoken (and memorable) intro – “When I say I’m in love, you’d best believe I’m in love, L.U.V.,” which was subject to an *homage* nine years later by another group from the Shangri-las’ hometown, the New York Dolls. In fact, it was stolen wholesale and used by singer David Johansen to precede a song called *Looking for a Kiss* on their debut album. This act was topped the following year, when the Dolls were able to persuade ‘Shadow’ Morton to produce their second (and final) album, although the results were distinctly underwhelming. Indeed, although they came in for much critical contempt at the time, the New York Dolls were later acknowledged as being one of the first groups to recognise and exploit trash culture as an art form.

Give Him a Great Big Kiss proved to be a relative flop however, charting at number eighteen in the U.S, and the following single, *Out in the Streets* returned to the hysterical tone of *Leader of the Pack*, but with the situation shifted into a parallel universe; this time,

⁹ Greig, P. 80.

the ‘bad boy’ does not meet a gristly end, he settles down with the girl. Nevertheless, something has still died – “his heart is (still) out in the streets.” “He grew up on the sidewalk, he grew up running free, he grew up... and then he met me” sings the narrator, agonising over whether or not to set him free, back where he belongs. *Out in the Streets* was a far more subtle number than *Leader of the Pack*, with a particularly beautiful arrangement of plucked strings, which are especially notable after the middle eight. On the website *Out in the Streets: The story of the Shangri-las* the atmosphere on the record is likened to that of a church¹⁰, which is particularly evident in the unaccompanied harmony that occupies the first ten seconds of the record. Incidentally, some sources report that another single by the group, a cover of the Isley Brothers’ *Shout* was released at the same time, but this record, dubbed with audience noise to simulate a live concert seems to have been unsuccessful. But despite the quality of *Out in the Streets*, it failed to make the top fifty in the U.S, and the record that was to follow it up resorted once more to the adolescent-spite-revenge formula of their biggest hit.

Give Us Your Blessings in fact topped *Leader of the Pack* in that both partners were killed. This time, the young couple, Mary and Jimmy elope after their respective parents had the temerity to *Laugh* at them when they were told of their wedding plans. Opening to an ominous clap of thunder and a vocal refrain of “Run! Run! Run, Mary. Run! Run! Run, Jimmy,” and tells the story of their escape and tragic end, the latter of which proving to be one of the campest couplings in the group’s repertoire:

“Well, as they drove off, they were crying,

¹⁰ <http://www.redbirdent.com/slas3>

and nobody knows for sure,
 if that is why they didn't see
 the sign that read 'detour.'"

One needs a heart of stone to not burst out laughing at this point. The "you'll be sorry" factor in this song is further heightened by the middle eight section, when the parents arrive at the crash site:

"The next day when they found them,
 Mary and Jimmy... Dead,
 And as their folks knelt beside them in the rain,
 They couldn't help but hear
 The last words Mary had said..."

(Chorus) Give us your blessings!
 Please don't make us run away,
 Give us your blessings,
 Say you'll be there,
 On our wedding day."

This record brought the group back into the American top thirty, and an outside writing team, Bob Bateman and Ron Moseley, who had previously worked with Motown. The resultant single, *Right Now and Not Later* bore more than a passing resemblance to

material from that stable, which had the unfortunate effect of making the record sound comparatively anonymous. This would appear to be borne out by its lack of success despite an appearance on the American television show *Shindig* to promote it.

The last record released by the group that could be attributed to the death disc genre was also the group's final stateside top thirty hit. *I Can Never go Home Anymore* reached number six in the American charts, and whilst being instantly recognisable as the work of the Shangri-las, it twisted the revenge fantasies of the group's other hits right round. The song opens dramatically with a churning instrumental backing and another spoken word intro – "I'm gonna hide, if she don't leave me alone, I'm gonna run away," only for the whole thing to stop dead when another young female voice interjects anxiously: "Don't." Throughout the song, the verses are performed as a spoken word piece, with the narrator warning her subject against running away from their mother. It transpires that she had done so (naturally, the argument that provoked this was over a boy), but found that she missed her mother and returned home. By this time, however, her mother has died of a broken heart – "She got so lonely in the end, the angels picked her for a friend... And I can never go home anymore."

Their label, Red Bird, was in serious financial trouble by this point, a situation which had been becoming increasingly serious for some time, and Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich had left the label before the release of the above single. Indeed, Red Bird shut up shop in 1966, and the group and Morton transferred over to Mercury records for a further two singles before disbanding.

Between *I Can Never Go Home Anymore* and the demise of the group, a further five singles were released. *He Cried* was a cover of *She Cried*, by Jay & the Americans, and was produced in a typically melodramatic style. *Past, Present and Future*, the last single for Red Bird featured oblique lyrics to the tune of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, and *Sweet Sounds of Summer*, a lightweight pop number, featuring an incongruously psychedelic middle eight that sounds like it was lifted from the Pink Floyd's debut album. More interesting were the final single on Mercury, *Take the Time*, and the penultimate-but-one single for Red Bird, *Long Live Our Love*.

By the release of these two singles, the US had already embarked on the Vietnam War, and the drafting of young men to fight in the war zone had started. Although no one was aware at the time of the outcome of these hostilities, the decision was taken by Morton to record not one, but two songs that were in market contrast to popular music's later reactions to the situation.

Long Live Our Love opens with a half-spoken monologue ("When Johnny comes marching home again, hooray, hurrah") before we hear a drum roll, and the song bursts into life. The second verse gives a flavour of the song:

"Something's come between us,
 And it's not another girl,
 But a lot of people need you

There is trouble in the world.”

And apart from a brief soliloquy towards the end of the song (“Please Lord, don’t let anything happen to him... Please.”), there is little suggestion that the boy will come to any harm. After all, the earlier songs of the Shangri-las were morbid fantasies that in reality represented highly unlikely scenarios; the Vietnam War on the other hand held a very tangible risk of real death, not the comic-book kind.

Take the Time was even more remarkable, although it must have seemed hugely out of step in 1967. “This Country that we’re living in knows only that we’ve got to win, no matter what the cost may be, our loss is keeping you and me free” go the lyrics patriotically, to the complete apathy of the record buying public.

By 1967 though, girl groups were no longer selling, with the exception of the Supremes, who had the backing of the powerful Motown empire behind them. The music of the Shangri-las was considered particularly anachronistic – rock and pop’s newly discovered intellectuality had no time for silly teenage angst about boys and parents. But despite this snobbery, the Shangri-las racked up two further hits in the U.K, both times with reissues of *Leader of the Pack*, which reached the British top ten in both 1972 and 1976 (a better chart placing than the original release had managed here).

Lucy O’Brien recounts the appeal of this record to a pre-teen audience in 1970s Britain in *She Bop II* – “This was our pre-teen drama, the one we learned the words to – right

down to every tear and every rev of that deadly motorbike¹¹.” This success testifies to the magic of this silly little pop song. The Shangri-las are unlikely to ever be categorised as high art, but this is unnecessary anyway, as the combination of the quaint lyrical thrust of the songs along with their distinctive structures makes them unique. No matter how old fashioned their music sounds now, the Shangri-las also brought a darker edge to pure pop, turning self-righteous and immature teenage angst and rebellion into unique pieces of music.

¹¹ O'Brien, P. 75.