It’s been more than 60 years since the Ronettes released “Be My Baby” in August 1963. The 2-minute, 39-second epic was crafted by an unlikely group of young artists, most of them barely out of their teens but already working at the peak of their powers. The chief architects of the record included Phil Spector, a 23-year-old producer who’d penned his first No. 1 single while still in high school; Jeff Barry, 25, and Ellie Greenwich, 22, a pair of recently married songwriters who displayed an uncanny knack for tapping into the teenage zeitgeist; and, crucially, the Ronettes — fronted by 19-year-old lead singer Ronnie Spector — a trio of mixed-raced singers from Harlem who would redefine the look, sound and spirit of rock and roll with their very first hit record.

Ronnie Spector’s lead vocal on “Be My Baby” signaled a distinct break from every girl group record that came before, not only in the sheer power of her performance but also in her nuanced reading of the record’s subversive lyric. While most earlier girl group songs voiced the concerns of a young woman worried about getting and keeping a boyfriend, the lead singer of “Be My Baby” doesn’t seem the least bit shy about setting her own romantic agenda. “For every kiss you give me, I’ll give you three,” promises Ronnie Spector, who doesn’t appear overly distraught about whether her boyfriend will still love her tomorrow.

A trio of close-knit family members, the Ronettes were formed in the early 1960s when lead singer Ronnie Spector, then known as Ronnie Bennett, enlisted her older sister, Estelle Bennett, and their younger cousin, Nedra Talley, to start a girl group styled after the vocal groups they listened to on the radio. The girls practiced three-part harmony on the roof of their grandmother’s apartment in Spanish Harlem, the neighborhood where they would also develop their stunning visual style. With their tight skirts, towering beehive hairdos and razor-sharp eyeliner, the Ronettes made sure they were not easily missed in any venue in which they appeared. After turning heads as dancers and occasional singers at New York’s Peppermint Lounge in 1961 and
later at DJ Murray “The K” Kaufman’s live rock and roll shows in Brooklyn, the group came to
the attention of Phil Spector, the music industry wunderkind who would produce the Ronettes’
first hit record — and many others to follow.

Phil Spector recorded “Be My Baby,” which he co-wrote with Barry and Greenwich, at
Hollywood’s Gold Star studios in sessions that began on July 5, 1963. The record was an early
example of the producer’s trademark Wall of Sound, a multilayered recording technique that Phil
Spector pioneered with arranger Jack Nitzsche and engineer Larry Levine to create what the
producer would later describe as “little symphonies for the kids.”

The music you hear backing the Ronettes on “Be My Baby” was played by an ensemble of
seasoned session musicians who would, plus or minus a few other members, come to be known
as The Wrecking Crew, a group of then-unheralded musicians who would go on to create the
musical backing on thousands of pop and rock hits of the 1960s and ’70s. The players present for
the “Be My Baby” session included guitarists Tommy Tedesco and Bill Pitman, bassists Ray
Pohlman and Jimmy Bond, keyboardists Don Randi, Leon Russell, Al DeLory and Mike Spencer,
percussionist Frank Capp, trumpeter Roy Caton, trombonist Lou Blackborn, saxophonists Steve
Douglas and Jay Migliori and drummer Hal Blaine, who would create the song’s iconic and
often-imitated opening drumbeat.

Phil Spector produced multiple takes of the song’s musical track before he captured a version he
deemed worthy, then turned his focus to Ronnie Spector’s lead vocal, which, according to the
singer, took three days to record. During her downtime, Ronnie Spector rehearsed her soaring
vocals — including the “whoo ho-oh-oh” yodels that would become her signature — in the
privacy of the studio’s ladies room, where, she would insist, the acoustic qualities rivaled those
of Gold Star’s fabled Studio A.

The background vocals heard on “Be My Baby” were based on arrangements Phil Spector
worked up with the Ronettes in New York some weeks earlier and which he augmented in the
studio with a makeshift chorus of additional background singers that included Darlene Love,
Fanita James and Gracia Nitzsche (wife of the song’s arranger, Jack Nitzsche) as well as Phil
Spector’s old friends Nino Tempo and Sonny Bono. Also present was Bono’s then-girlfriend
and future wife, Cher, who made her professional debut as an uncredited background singer on
the record.

“Be My Baby” was released as Philles records 116, which included a tossed-off instrumental
titled “Tedesco and Pitman” on the B-side. The record began its rapid ascent of Billboard’s Hot
100 chart in August 1963, peaking at No. 2 in October of that year, the same month that it
grabbed the No. 1 spot on Cashbox magazine’s 100 Best Sellers chart. Although the song earned
no Grammy nominations on its initial release, it was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in
1999, by which time its reputation had become unassailable. In 2006, “Be My Baby” was added
to the prestigious National Recording Registry at the Library of Congress. In 2017, the song took
the top spot on Billboard’s list of the 100 greatest girl group songs of all time; in 2021, it ranked
No. 22 on Rolling Stone’s tally of the 500 greatest songs of all time. And in March 2007, “Be
My Baby” echoed through the hall the night Ronnie Spector, Estelle Bennett and Nedra Talley were reunited on stage for the first time since 1967 for the Ronettes’ induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. 11

One of the most influential songs of the early rock and roll era, “Be My Baby” has sparked the imagination of successive generations of recording artists going all the way back to the Beach Boys’ Brian Wilson, who was 21 when he first heard “Be My Baby” — a song he would go on to cite as “the greatest record ever produced.” 12 More recently, the Grammy-winning songwriter and producer Rick Nowels, who has worked with artists from Stevie Nicks and Madonna to Lana Del Rey and Dua Lipa, declared “Be My Baby” to be “ground zero for the modern pop era...the beginning of pop music being a serious American art form.” 13

Ronnie Spector continued to include “Be My Baby” in the setlist of her live shows until shortly before her passing in 2022, where it was invariably greeted by rousing ovations from audiences young and old. The song has become a favorite of filmmakers looking to inject a jolt of unexpected joy into the soundtracks of movies and TV shows, from “Mean Streets” to “Money Heist.” And 60 years on, “Be My Baby” continues to spin in heavy rotation on classic radio and streaming playlists, where the timeless appeal of this enduring work of art attracts new fans with every play.


SOURCES:


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