The legendary listing of “Rolling Stone’s” “The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time,” most recently published in 2020 (compiled with the assistance of the author, alongside Taylor Swift and Beyonce Knowles, among others), features a significant number of soul albums, with Marvin Gaye’s sublime “What’s Going On” even being elevated to pole position, nearly 50 years after its original release.

One trait that had remained constant throughout all editions of the listing (compiled in 2003, 2012 and 2020) was the relative lack of soul albums recorded prior to the middle of the 1960s. Much of the reason for this was that as far as many pundits and commentators are concerned there were too few relevant soul albums issued during this period to be fully considered. Blame, if that is what it is, can be laid fairly comfortably at the door of the trail-blazing Motown record company. Founder Berry Gordy had in his sights the airwaves, so his company invariably made great singles but lousy albums. Those albums that were released (about one hundred between the first in June 1961 and August 1966) invariably contained one or two hit singles and a significant number of filler tracks, more often than not cover versions of songs previously recorded by other Motown artists, further enabling all publishing income to remain in house. The Motown template was copied by numerous other record companies, especially where their soul output was concerned, thus ensuring little of any real significance was released until the likes of the aforementioned Marvin Gaye and his label mate Stevie Wonder started to fashion their own album templates.


The Shirelles had been formed in 1957 by Shirley Owens, Doris Coley, Addie Harris and Beverly Lee for a high school talent contest but quickly came to the attention of Florence
Greenberg, a housewife with a desire to enter the record business. Florence would set up Tiara Records to release The Shirelles’ first single “I Met Him On A Sunday,” which began to gain some traction and was subsequently sold, along with The Shirelles’ contract, to Decca Records for $4,000 (although Florence remained as the girls manager). Florence used the money to establish another record label in Scepter, and when Decca washed its hands of The Shirelles, after the failure of their subsequent singles, quickly assigned them to her latest imprint.

Now back under the direct control of Florence Greenberg, The Shirelles were sent into the studio to record their next attempt at a hit, a cover version of “Dedicated To The One I Love.” Written by Lowman Pauling and Ralph Bass and originally recorded by The ‘5’ Royales but which failed to chart in its original guise (it was later re-released in the wake of The Shirelles’ success and became a modest success second time around), The Shirelles’ version made some minor headway, hitting #83 on the Hot 100, although follow-up singles in “Doin’ The Ronde” and “Please Be My Boyfriend” failed to muster much interest.

Having had limited success thus far with recording material written by outsiders (with the exception of “Doin’ The Ronde,” which was written by all four girls), the group was handed over to producer Luther Dixon (1931-2009), who invited them to consider penning their own songs to see if this would bring about a change in fortune. First through the door with an idea was lead singer Shirley Owens, whose composition “Tonight’s The Night” dealt with the feelings of a woman before she loses her virginity, a then considerably risqué subject matter for what was ostensibly a pop song. With Luther Dixon composing the accompanying music, the end result was a song that retained an innocence even as the lyrics dealt with a sexual overtone. Radio listeners and record buyers alike took the song to their hearts, resulting in a final chart place of #39 on the Hot 100 and #14 on the R&B chart.

Fuelled by this success, Florence Greenberg and The Shirelles opted for more of the same for their next single. This time around it was the Carole King and Gerry Goffin song “Will You Love Me Tomorrow,” which was another song that dealt with a female losing her virginity, although Shirley Owens’ initial reluctance to recording it had more to do with a perceived belief the song (or Luther’s musical setting) was too country for The Shirelles. But record it The Shirelles did, and despite some of the same radio stations that had played “Tonight’s The Night” banning “Will You Love Me Tomorrow” for being too sexually charged, it became a smash hit, topping the Hot 100 (although it peaked at #2 on the R&B chart) and selling over a million copies.

With this new found fame Florence and her charges wasted little time in getting more repertoire out to the market. “Dedicated To The One I Love” was re-promoted and this time around sailed into the upper echelons of the chart, hitting #3 (and again stalling at #2 on the R&B listings), while at much the same time the album “Tonight’s The Night” was issued, a 12-track album that already served as something of a mini greatest hits collection.

For all of the radio play The Shirelles generated with their singles and despite having become a permanent fixture on the live circuit as a result of their single success, Florence and Scepter were not about to alienate any potential (white) purchasers of their album. As was the norm during the early sixties (and which would continue for several years as the decade progressed), there were no pictures of the group to be found anywhere on the album. Indeed, the only image to be found on the cover was snapshot of what many would have mistaken for the white boyfriend of the singers; there was no indication that this was an album recorded by four black girls.
Despite, or maybe even because of the subterfuge, the album failed to make much of a dent on the charts, although it was widely and roundly praised for the contents within. Even now it is difficult to listen to the album in its entirety and not conjure up images of first loves and soda fountains, even if the lyrical content would have caused grandmother to blush when originally released. And that is what sets this album apart from its rivals, which as the decade progressed would become many, mainly led by The Supremes and the Motown machine. For all their success, which was plentiful, The Supremes never quite had the innocent charm that The Shirelles exuded. Indeed, listen to “Tonight’s The Night” alongside “Meet The Supremes” for further confirmation.

Graham Betts is the author of numerous chart books published in conjunction with the Official Chart Company in the United Kingdom, including the acclaimed “Motown Encyclopedia” and accompanying “Stax Encyclopedia” as well as several books on his other main passion, association football (or soccer), in particular those devoted to Tottenham Hotspur FC.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.