

“You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’”—The Righteous Brothers (1964)

Added to the National Registry: 2014

Essay by Sean MacLeod (guest post)*



American Radio's Most Played Hit

By the winter of 1964, Phil Spector's dominance over the "Billboard" charts had begun to diminish. The wizard of pop's alchemical gift of turning simple songs into gold records had kept him at the top of the charts since 1958. Spector's Wagnerian Wall of Sound record productions had come to define the pop single and with a succession of classic pop tunes, including the Paris Sisters' "I Love How You Love Me," The Crystals' "He's a Rebel," and the Ronettes' "Be My Baby," he was virtually vying with himself for the number one position.

After the arrival of the Beatles to America in February 1964, the pop music landscape was being redefined by a host of British bands bringing with them from across the pond their own brand of pop music. Even at home, young musicians, who had once revered Spector, such as Brian Wilson, were now competing with Spector for airplay and chart placement, while folk artists, like Bob Dylan, and the crossover sound of Motown, were also posing a challenge to Spector's chart dominance; Spector's offering of the Ronettes' "Walking in the Rain" in the fall of 1964, was, in the present musical climate, not the commercial success he had hoped for. Spector was running out of ideas fast and his style of pop music was beginning to seem outdated and formulaic. His protégé, Sonny Bono, commented that, "Spector duplicated the same sound and the enthusiasm dropped and it was harder to get the records played." Spector was, noted his onetime engineer, Jimmy Iovine, becoming a "one trick pony."

Not only was the musical landscape rapidly changing but by the end of 1964 the socio-political landscape was also undergoing a transformation with the escalation of the Vietnam War, an increase in Civil Rights activism and other social movements heightening much of the social dissatisfaction felt in many pockets of society. As a result, a greater sense of social conscienceness was entering into the songs of the mid 1960s, songs like Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are a-Changing." Later, songs like the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction," the Animals' "We Gotta Get Out of This Place," and Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" were a direct expression of such cultural changes. The album was also beginning to have an impact on the record buying public--Dylan's "The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan" (1963), the Beatles' "A

Hard Day's Night," (1964) and the Rolling Stones' "12x5" (1964) signalled the shift in popular consciousness and a need for greater forms of musical expression that the limited two-minute pop single could offer.

The pressures of running his own record label and producing hit song after hit song negatively impacted Spector's creativity, making working with him difficult. His romantic life, which had once inspired his creativity, was also in a precarious state--falling out of love with his muse Ronnie Spector and still not fully over his ex-wife, Annette Merar (whom he had claimed he had come up with the song title of 'You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin' for), while, at the same time, his continuing love-hate relationship with the music industry itself was beginning to force him into a state of reclusiveness.

By the winter of 1964, however, Spector courageously stepped up to face all these many challenges and he began work on Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil's new song "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'," which he had requested they write specifically for the Righteous Brothers. Mann and Weil initially found their inspiration in Motown's "Baby I Need Your Loving," which was a big hit that summer for the label's newest recruits--The Four Tops.

It is interesting that Spector had decided to work again with Mann and Weil possibly aware that a shift in social attitudes was taking place with the new music heralded by the British invasion and the folk rock scene and Mann and Weil's lyrics, such as those they had written for "Uptown," "On Broadway," and "We've Gotta Get Out of this Place," had a much greater awareness of social conscience, even though Spector's earlier hits with his song writing collaborators, particularly Ellie Greenwich and Jeff Barry, tended to focus their lyrics on subject matters that revolved primarily around teen romance.

By all accounts, Spector had loved Mann and Weil's original composition on first hearing it but, in typical Spector style, he insisted on adding his magic touches which had the uncanny power of transforming a basic song into a pop masterpiece. According to Medley,¹ Spector had dropped the key by a 4th (from F major to C major), slowed the tempo down significantly and then added a "La Bamba"-style bass riff to its middle section. "Daring to be different," Spector then worked the song through an extensive dynamic range--dropping the song to a whisper and building it back up to a crescendo of almost Wagnerian proportions, something common in classical music, but virtually unheard of in the more restricted dynamic range of pop. To finish off, Spector brashly doubled the song's length, bringing it in at just under four minutes, almost twice that of the standard single.

With an arrangement that consists of reverberated tom toms and snare drum, tambourines, strings, pianos and guitars, as well as trumpets, trombones and saxophones, all arranged by Gene Page, who had replaced Spector's usual arranger, Jack Nietzsche, who was moonlighting much to Spector's annoyance with the Rolling Stones at the time. On top of this lavish instrumental arrangement, Spector added a layer of soft backing female soul singers, The Blossoms, which featured the exceptional talents of Darlene Love. What was singly most impressive, however, with the production was the fact that Spector had only a very limited number of studio tracks available at the time to create such an expansive sound.

For the vocal, Spector decided to go against the formula of his earlier successes when he featured primarily black female vocalists. On this occasion, Spector went for the "blue eyed soul" of the virtually unknown Righteous Brothers. The Brothers, Bill Medley and Bobby Hatfield, who had been performing on the live scene for some time but had yet to have a hit

single, had very distinctive vocal styles. Medley's bass baritone was contrasted and complimented by Hatfield's tenor harmony.

Medley's baritone, unusual for pop music, which tended to have lead vocals in the upper registers, gave the song a deep masculine soulfulness that expressed a maturity lacking in the original concept for the song, which was pop orientated. With Spector's symphonic production and Medley's deep vocal, which starts the song unaccompanied, another master stroke of Spector's that instantly creates the song's mood of hopeless desperation, the song was transformed from "bubble gum pop" into a "dam-busting thing of extraordinary size and power"ⁱⁱ which, unlike most pop songs up to that point, expressed the feelings of a more mature audience and was, for that reason, "one of the first grownup, sensitive-male songs of the era-marking the end of the teen idol years." While Medley's vocal gave the song an emotional maturity, Hatfield's tenor/falsetto provided the energy to elevate the song towards its epic crescendo, while the contrasting vocal ranges of the middle section added greater dimension and significantly helped expand the song's dynamic range.

The song's initial reception in both the US and the UK was poor. DJ's did not like it, feeling it was too "dirge like" and too long. The influential radio personality Bill Gavin described the song as "blue eyed soul has gone too far." Even the song's writer, Barry Mann, on first hearing the song, thought the tape was "on the wrong speed." Yet, despite these initial reservations among DJ's to play the song, the song was ultimately unstoppable--the record buying public just could not get enough of it. A slow boil, entering America's "Billboard" charts on 12th December 1964 at number 77, it took over five weeks to get in to the top ten and then another four weeks to reach number one, which it did on the 6th February 1965.

In Britain, the Liverpool singer Cilla Black, recorded her version of the song with Beatles' producer George Martin. Her rather standard and uninspired version of the song was fairing much better than Spector's until the Rolling Stones' manager/producer Andrew "Loog" Oldman, always a big fan of Spector's music, and so effected by Spector's recording of the song, took out a full-page ad in the music press to promote it and to challenge Black's middle-of-the-road version. Oldman called Spector's version "the last word in tomorrow's sound today." With Oldham's help and a UK promotional campaign by the Righteous Brothers, Spector's version finally out did Black's and reached number one in February 1965. Black's version sat at number two. The same song occupied both the number one and number two positions almost simultaneously! (Actually, while Black's version peaked at number two in early February of 1965, the Righteous Brothers' version was chasing behind at number three. The following week, however, the Righteous Brothers' took the number one position while Black's dropped back down the charts).

"Lovin' Feelin'" was the summit of the Spector's art--"A Masterpiece of Chiaroscuro, of searing emotional light and darkness, of pain and catharsis." While Spector had reflected the innocence of the early sixties in his girl group songs, "Lovin' Feelin'" captured the culture as it began to awaken to its own social conscience. Spector's production of the song was both a cathartic expression of his own emotional life at the time and an expression of the lost innocence of the early 1960s. "*You've lost that loving feeling/Bring back that loving feeling*" was, in many ways, a plea to return to a state of idealistic bliss when there was the promise of hope, of a resurrection of a new Camelot, during the optimism of the Kennedy era. As such it was one of the first pop songs to reflect the changing social views of the mid-1960s and of the coming of age of the baby boomers.

The song has a tremendous legacy, not only having hit the top ten on three separate occasions, it is also claimed as the third most profitable songs of all time, outdone only by “White Christmas” and “Happy Birthday to You.” It has been covered by a host of great artists, such as Elvis, Dionne Warwick, and Nancy Sinatra as well as by British synth pop group the Human League who recorded a nine-minute version on their 1979 “Reproduction” album. Just over 20 years later it became a hit all over again when the film “Top Gun” re-introduced the song to a new generation in the 1980s helping it become the most played song on American radio in the 20th century with over eight million plays.

Sean MacLeod is a musician, songwriter and Lecturer of Music and Media Technology at the Limerick College of Further Education. He is the author of three books on popular music and culture including “Leaders of the Pack: The Influence of Girl Groups of the 1960s and Their Influence on Popular Culture.” His most recent book is the self-published “Behind the Wall of Illusion: The Religious, Occult and Esoteric World of the Beatles.”

**The views expressed in this essay are those of the¹ author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.*

Bibliography

- BBC. *The Richest Songs in the World*, 2012
- Brown, Mick. *Tearing Down the Wall of Sound: The Rise and Fall of Phil Spector*. (Bloomsbury, New York, London, 2008).
- MacLeod, Sean. *Phil Spector: Sound of the Sixties*. Rowman and Littlefield, New York and London. Tempo Series. 2018.
- Myers, Marc. “Bill Medley on Phil Spector.” *JazzWax*, July 2012.
- Ribowsky, Mark. *He’s A Rebel. Phil Spector: Rock & Roll’s Legendary Producer*. Da Capo Press, 2006.
- Stanley, Bob. *Yeah, Yeah, Yeah: The Story of Modern Pop*. Faber and Faber, 2013
- Williams, Richard. *Phil Spector: Out of His Head*. Omnibus Press, 2003.
-