

The career of popular songwriter Gerry Goffin (1939-2014)

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Lyricist Gerry Goffin died June 19 in Los Angeles at the age of 75. Along with his former wife and writing partner, composer Carole King, Goffin penned some of the better known pop hits of the 1960s. Recorded by artists such as Aretha Franklin, the Drifters, the Shirelles and many more, the duo's music captured some of the energy of a young generation coming into their own in the postwar United States, as well as some of their anxiety and uncertainty.

Goffin, born February 11, 1939 in Brooklyn, New York, met King while studying chemistry at Queens College. They began writing songs together soon after, pursuing careers in music while working day jobs to make ends meet. King worked as a secretary and Goffin an assistant in a chemical plant laboratory. They married in 1959.

The following year, Goffin and King were hired by music publisher Don Kirshner to write for his Aldon Music firm, and the duo set up shop at the legendary Brill Building at Broadway and 49th Street in Manhattan. Headquarters for more than 160 different music businesses, the building was home to countless songwriters, producers and recording artists.

An astonishing number of enduring pop hits emerged from the small offices occupied by the songwriting teams. Joining Goffin and King in the Brill Building were Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller ("Hound Dog," "Stand By Me"), Ellie Greenwich and Jeff Barry ("Be My Baby," "Then He Kissed Me"), Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil ("We Gotta Get out of This Place," "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'"), Burt Bacharach and Hal David ("Walk on By," "Wishin' and Hopin'") and many others.

The songs of Goffin-King were catchy, accessible and easy to remember. At the same time, Goffin had the ability to introduce complex emotions into otherwise

"simple" lyrics. His songs dealing with young love and sexuality were frank for the time, but also thoughtful and tasteful.

Goffin and King would have their first number one hit in 1961 with "Will You Love Me Tomorrow," recorded by the Shirelles. While not the most polished of the 1960s "girl groups," the Shirelles provided many of the more remarkable performances in the genre. They proved to be the ideal group for the song.

On this pop classic, King's fragile melody seems to rise nervously from its bed of chords as if she were raising a question she is afraid to ask. To this, Goffin's lyrics add: "Tonight you're mine completely/You give your love so sweetly/Tonight the light of love is in your eyes/But will you love me tomorrow?"

As was often the case, Goffin's words seemed to marry so exactly to King's melodic line that it was difficult to imagine the two having been written separately.

For the Drifters, Goffin and King wrote the 1963 hit "Up on the Roof." In the song, a young man retreats to the roof of his building in an effort to escape for a few moments "all that rat race noise down in the street." Lead singer Rudy Lewis's voice soars with Goffin's vulnerable gaze over the city: "When this old world starts getting me down/and people are just too much for me to face/I climb way up to the top of the stairs/and all my cares just drift right into space."

Yearning for something better, he goes to the roof to reflect, catch his breath and see something beautiful for a change. He longs to share that space and those feelings with someone else: "And darling you can share it all with me ..." sings Lewis.

In 1967, Aretha Franklin recorded "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman." The sultry melody once again provided Goffin fertile ground for his vulnerable,

searching lyrics. Franklin, of course, made it sound as though the words were every bit her own:

“When my soul was in the lost and found/you came along to claim it/I didn’t know just what was wrong with me/’till your kiss helped me name it...”

Other noteworthy compositions by Goffin and King included “Some Kind of Wonderful” by the Drifters, “Take Good Care of My Baby” by Bobby Vee, “Chains” by the Cookies and later The Beatles, “The Loco-Motion” by Little Eva and “I’m into Something Good” by Earl-Jean and later Herman’s Hermits.

“Pleasant Valley Sunday,” made famous by the Monkees in 1967, took aim at middle class conformity. A demo recording with King taking the lead vocal is somewhat more interesting than the made-for-TV band’s hit record.

In 1968, Goffin and King divorced. Their writing partnership, and a streak of almost uninterrupted success, ended soon afterward. King went on to have an immensely successful solo career as a performer, beginning with her 1971 album, *Tapestry*.

Articles on Goffin’s death attribute his subsequent difficulties to struggles with drug abuse and mental illness, possibly schizophrenia. For a sensitive artist like Goffin, however, whose lyrics seemed so attuned to the complex moods of the day, the vast social changes taking place in the late 1960s must also have come into play.

The promise of the postwar period had been shattered by this time in the US. The social conditions and atmosphere to which so much of the youthful energy in the classic pop of the Brill Building was linked had been transformed into something else. The Vietnam War had escalated sharply, and horribly. Riots erupted in many major American cities. Political assassinations had become commonplace.

The pressures of the music industry, in those years in which it employed a virtual assembly line of songwriters asked to churn out one hit after another, would also have taken their toll. Goffin, inspired by singer-songwriters like Bob Dylan, certainly grew tired of the traditional pop song format.

When he made an attempt at a solo career in 1973, it was in the form of protest music. His album *It Ain’t Exactly Entertainment* featured the song “Honorable Peace,” which expressed his bitter opposition to the Vietnam War:

“Oh but what kind of logic
In what kind of brain
What manner of man
Would think it was sane
What kind of soul
And what heart that beats
Would choose to kill millions
And call that honorable peace?”

Goffin’s only other album, released in 1996, had the suggestive title *Back Room Blood*.

Goffin’s greatest successes in the years and decades following his partnership with Carole King were the Oscar-nominated “Theme from Mahogany” (1975) and “Saving All My Love for You,” which would become a hit for Whitney Houston in 1985. On the whole, however, one heard less and less from and of him.

Following Goffin’s death, King generously commented in a statement, “Gerry Goffin was my first love. He had a profound impact on my life and the rest of the world. Gerry was a good man and a dynamic force, whose words and creative influence will resonate for generations to come. His legacy to me is our two daughters, four grandchildren, and our songs that have touched millions and millions of people, as well as a lifelong friendship.”

Whatever difficulties Goffin faced in later years, those lively and sensitive songs of the 1960s remain. Goffin leaves behind an indelible mark on pop music.



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