

“One of the great art forms that touches everyone”

Ronnie Spector, singing star of the 1960s, dies at 78

David Walsh
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American singer Ronnie Spector died Wednesday. Spector was the lead singer for the Ronettes singing group, active from 1957 to 1967, which also included her elder sister and cousin. She pursued a solo career until her death, performing and recording with many significant artists.

The group’s relationship with famed producer Phil Spector, Ronnie Spector’s husband from 1968 to 1974, produced a series of hits, including (most famously) “Be My Baby” (1963), “Baby, I Love You” (1963), “The Best Part of Breakin’ Up” (1964), “Do I Love You?” (1964), and “Walking in the Rain” (1964). In 1965, the Ronettes were voted the third most popular singing group in England behind the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, and in 1966 toured the US with the Beatles. The group was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2007.

Ronnie Spector’s family issued a statement following her death explaining she had died “after a brief battle with cancer. She was with family and in the arms of her husband, Jonathan [Greenfield.] Ronnie lived her life with a twinkle in her eye, a spunky attitude, a wicked sense of humor and a smile on her face. She was filled with love and gratitude.

Her joyful sound, playful nature and magical presence will live on in all who knew, heard or saw her.”

Various online videos of Ronnie Spector and the Ronettes have drawn thousands of comments over the past two days, from young and old, expressing sadness at the singer’s death and appreciation for her life and music.

Spector was born Veronica Yvette Bennett in upper Manhattan to a mother who was part black and part Native American and an Irish-American father, a transit worker. In her 1990 memoir, *Be My Baby: How I Survived Mascara, Miniskirts, and Madness, or, My Life as a Fabulous Ronette*, she repeatedly refers to herself, with irony but also no doubt accumulated painfulness, as a “half-breed.” Her sister Estelle and cousin Nedra Talley, of African American, Native American and Puerto Rican descent, made up the rest of the Ronettes.

In contrast to the “good girl” image of many of the other female pop singing ensembles of the time, the Ronettes set out to be dangerous. Ronnie Spector recalled in her memoir, “For three years, 1963 to 1966, we had the best times getting ready to go on stage ... our dresses slit up the side ... our beehives sprayed with Aquanet ... the excitement from the crowd when we would walk

out on stage. I always said we weren’t better, just different.”

Richard Williams noted in the *Guardian*, “Ronnie’s voice, marked by a slow, wide vibrato, combined the sweet optimism of adolescence with a sultry undertone that hinted at a more knowing sophistication. When [Phil] Spector unleashed his echo-swathed battalions on a song called ‘Be My Baby,’ it gave the Ronettes an immediate smash hit—and one that made a profound impression on other would-be hitmakers, including Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys, who listened to it endlessly.”

Indeed, Wilson declared the song the greatest pop record ever made. He later explained, “Boy, first heard this on the car radio and I had to pull off the road, I couldn’t believe it. The choruses blew me away; the strings are the melody of love. It has the promise to make the world better.”

Ronnie Bennett’s relationship with Phil Spector would become something nightmarish, but when he first encountered the group and her singing, he declared that her voice was perfect for his “Wall of Sound” approach. Ronnie would recall, “Phil won the lottery when he met me, because I had a perfect voice. It wasn’t a Black voice; it wasn’t a white voice. It was just a great voice.”

In her memoir, Ronnie Spector described the famed Gold Star Studios in Los Angeles, where, in July 1963, “Be My Baby” was recorded. She noted that Studio A was “old and really tiny, but that was the only place he [Phil Spector] ever recorded anymore, because he knew he could get sounds out of that room that he couldn’t get anywhere else. It had something to do with the acoustics. The room was so small, the sound seemed to bounce off the walls, creating a natural echo that made every song recorded there sound fuller.”

Spector was always experimenting, Ronnie Spector explained, “with ways to make his sound as big as possible. Instead of having one guitarist playing rhythm, he would have six. Where someone else might use one piano, Phil would have three. He’d have twin drum sets, a dozen string players, and a whole roomful of background singers. Then he’d record everything back on top of itself to double the sound. Then he’d double it again. And again. And again and again, until the sound was so thick it could have been an entire orchestra. That’s what Phil was talking about when he told a reporter that his records were like ‘little symphonies for the kids.’”

In her autobiography, she also described the three-day process

needed simply to record her vocals on the two minute and forty-one second song (written by Jeff Barry, Ellie Greenwich and Spector): “I was so shy that I’d do all my vocal rehearsals in the studio’s ladies’ room, because I loved the sound I got in there. People talk about how great the echo chamber was at Gold Star, but they never heard the sound in that ladies’ room. And, between doing my makeup and teasing my hair, I practically lived in there anyway. So that’s where all the little ‘whoa-ohs’ and ‘oh-oh-ohs’ you hear on my records were born, in the bathroom at Gold Star.”

The shyness of Ronnie, her sister and her cousin, all still teenagers, comes across clearly in this remarkable segment from *American Bandstand* in 1963, during their post-performance interview with host Dick Clark. The girls are so soft-spoken in conversation they can hardly be heard.

Once Ronnie married Phil Spector (who died in prison in 2021), a deeply insecure and unstable individual, as one commentator explains, he extended “tyrannical control over her life. He forbade her to speak to the Rolling Stones or Beatles for fear that she would cheat on him, kept a glass coffin in the basement and threatened to kill her if she ever left him. She was locked inside the mansion at all times, her shoes taken away so she couldn’t go outside. Phil made her drive with a life-size blow-up doll of him on the rare occasions she was permitted outdoors.” (Biography.com) She eventually escaped his domination in bare feet and with not much more than the shirt on her back, eventually suing him for royalties she was owed. She married Jonathan Greenfield, who became her manager, in 1982, with whom she had two sons.

One of the musicians in the July 1963 recording session that produced “Be My Baby,” famed keyboard player and songwriter Don Randi, a member of the Wrecking Crew, the group of Los Angeles-based musicians who appeared on thousands of records in the 1960s and 1970s, was kind enough to share his memory of the singer with the WWSWS.

Randi, the author of *You’ve Heard These Hands* (2015) and, by his own estimate, having featured on 300 hit records, indicated in an email he would be “glad to” speak about Ronnie Spector. He went on, “She was a terrific person from the very beginning, loving the whole music business. Delightful to be around and had an incredible voice with her sister and cousin to make up the Ronettes.

“When I heard the playback of ‘Be My Baby,’ I knew that was a hit record—one of the few times I was able to do that. Phil [Spector] in the beginning was smitten by Ronnie, but unfortunately it didn’t last. Her vocal sound was unique, fantastic and easily became one of the great vocal styles. I choose to remember her from 1964 or 1965 full of life. She has given me joy my whole life playing her songs and listening to other people trying to emulate her sound. I will miss her. God bless her and her family.”

Denny Tedesco, the son of guitarist Tommy Tedesco, another of the legendary Wrecking Crew members, and the director of a lively, detailed 2015 documentary about the group of musicians, was also generous enough to speak about Ronnie Spector on the phone from Los Angeles. Ronnie had been of genuine assistance

during the effort to raise funding for and publicize Tedesco’s *The Wrecking Crew*.

When asked what the late singer was like as a human being, Denny Tedesco commented, “She was fabulous, she was so sweet and helpful. Such a kind woman. She was so giving. She wanted to help the musicians [by assisting with the making of the documentary]. Obviously, she didn’t want to help ‘the guy,’ Phil. I totally understood that. Even when you were doing an interview with her, you couldn’t mention his name. She endured such horrible stuff from him. But Ronnie was still there for the musicians. That said so much about her.”

Speaking of “Be My Baby” and the popular music of that period, Tedesco continued, “It’s one of the great art forms that touches everyone, it goes across boundaries, to every race, every nationality. One of the great things about showing *The Wrecking Crew* was showing it in different countries. It played in Japan, it played in Estonia last year, all through Europe. And the audience knows all the music.”

In a subsequent email, Tedesco explained that he “wanted to share a personal story ... about Ronnie Spector. In 2011, we were still struggling to get the film into distribution. We still needed to raise money to pay off the licensing. We took the film to New York for a sneak preview to raise awareness and, hopefully, some cash.”

Out of the blue, Tedesco received a call from Ronnie’s husband and manager, Jonathan Greenfield. “He had heard that we were going to Brooklyn for this screening. He wanted to know if I would be interested in Ronnie coming to introduce the film. Can you imagine what went through my head at that point?

“We didn’t tell anyone in the audience. The only ones that knew were my wife Suzie, myself and one of my oldest friends from grade school, Ron Insana, who ... was going to conduct the Q&A after the screening. ...

“I introduced Ron and spoke a little about our relationship. I then started to present Ron a Wrecking Crew bowling shirt with his name on it. Playing the fool (I’d like to think I’m good at that), I pretend to realize that the shirt doesn’t say ‘Ron,’ but ‘Ronnie.’ Apologizing to Ron, I say, ‘Let me get you another one made. But I know who we can give this too ... Ronnie Spector.’ At that point, Ronnie walks down the aisle. Audience went crazy.

“After Ronnie read a few words to introduce the film, she started to return to her seat and someone (in my memory) in the audience yelled out to sing something. Some artists could easily be thrown by this. But not Ronnie. She turned around and ... sang ‘Be My Baby.’”

Tedesco continued, “Even though I only met her a couple of times, you could see she loved performing and she wanted to help others around her. I will always remember her singing ‘Be My Baby’ a cappella the first time we met. She will be missed, but never forgotten. RIP, Ronnie.”



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