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Sonic Femininity

The Ronettes' Transgressive Gender Performance

Hilarie Ashton

Looking and looking back, black women involve ourselves in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to know the present and invent the future.

—bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators”

On September 28, 1963, the Ronettes performed on Dick Clark’s *American Bandstand* for the first time.¹ The curtain unfurls to reveal three singers exemplifying the uniformity and apparent demureness imposed by norms of classic sixties femininity: their slim bodies are dressed in identical long-sleeved pencil dresses, their hair is partially swept up in identical half-bouffants, and their eyes are thickly lined in black kohl. They sway their hips and arms awkwardly to the opening bars of “Be My Baby,” and then Ronnie Spector, standing on the left, opens her mouth. That *voice*. That voice, which American teens had started hearing the month before when the “Be My Baby” single was released. That voice, which—per *Bandstand*’s practice—was exactly what had been heard on the record, as the singers on the TV screens lip-synched along. But still: *that voice*.

When the camera zooms in, Spector (then still known as Veronica Bennett) pushes past the limits of lip-synching by acting out the lyrics: she points to an unseen audience member on the line “*so proud* of me” (applying tricky emphasis to both of the italicized words) and cocks her head, adopting a quick Marilyn Monroe–esque pout, on “turn their heads.” Still, these motions are small. Estelle Bennett’s and Nedra Talley’s movements, entirely synchronized, as the backup singers’ job demanded, are even more circumscribed: their hands and forearms move up and down, and they remain in their assigned dance space. In a fourth-wall-breaking moment during the bridge, the instrumentals take over, and all three of the singers briefly stop mouthing their “oohs.”

On the surface, this performance falls firmly within the complexly restrictive lines of accepted feminine behavior as understood at the time, especially ac-

¹ The Ronettes, “Be My Baby,” *American Bandstand*, September 28, 1963, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgWVis3_wPM.

cepted feminine behavior in performance: modest clothing, light movements in an assigned space, and come-hither eyes (but eyes only). The Ronettes also fit into the sonic framework of the Wall of Sound: the janglingly bombastic and glitzy set of sounds and recording methods developed by producer Phil Spector and sound engineer Larry Levine. (To add to Spector's own controls exerted over the female singers in his stable of artists, by 1968 he would also become Ronnie Bennett's famously abusive and coercive husband.) But a deeper analysis shows some of the ways that Ronnie Spector, in particular, was rebelling against such strictures: hiding what might be provocation behind the facade of the "good girl," complicating her own performance of gender, and taking direct ownership of her own sonic persona. When Spector performs like this, she shifts the sonic effect of the Wall of Sound away from the production and toward the singer.

Across her career, in performances, rehearsals, and even in the way she counters others' memories of herself, Spector exceeds the sonic and visual spaces allotted to her and injects transgressive power into the smallest of movements, subtly shifting the terms of acceptable, modest femininity in performance and pushing past the perceived obedience of pop. Indeed, Spector retrospectively categorizes her music as *rock and roll*, a frame she deploys capaciously enough to describe her excessive femininity and its connections to her biracial identity. Grandstanding here becomes a creative act, even in small ways. Spector pushes into new artistic territory, past the static choreography assigned to her and the fixed recording of her own voice. These boundary-shifting actions and others like them are characteristic of Spector's solo image building and of Spector, Talley, and Bennett's collective performance work. In this article, I argue that the Ronettes, and Spector in particular, transgressed social, gendered expectations in public performance and in various spaces of performance and rehearsal that cross the public/private divide. They did this through the frame of what I call the sonic feminine, a capacious combination of vocal and visual choices that (re)inserts women's perspectives into the histories of masculine-dominated musical realms and makes space for women and their creative work in a (white) male-dominated genre.

Such work relies on the previous scholarship of numerous women, particularly Black feminist scholars of popular music, who have argued that American rock and roll, as popularly and critically conceived, draws from an almost breathlessly incomplete lineage that relies on white men known throughout sonic and cultural history on a first-name basis while leaving out most of the Black men and women that they took from in order to create and profit from their sound.² And

2. See, in particular, Daphne Brooks, "The Write to Rock: Racial Mythologies, Feminist Theory, and the Pleasures of Rock Music Criticism," *Women & Music* 12 (2008): 54–62; Hazel Carby, "Black Women's Blues, Motown and Rock and Roll," in *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (New York: Verso, 1999), 40–50; Maureen Mahon, "The Rock and Roll Blues: Gender, Race, and Genre in the Songwriting Career of Rose Marie McCoy," *Women & Music* 19 (2015): 62–70; and Tyina Steptoe, "Big Mama Thornton, Little Richard, and the Queer Roots of Rock 'n' Roll," *American Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (March 2018): 55–77. See also Gayle Wald, "From Spirituals to Swing: Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Gospel Crossover," *American Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (September 2013): 387–416; and Wald, *Shout, Sister, Shout! The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007).

race itself is a tricky sociocultural invention: in its originary form as the assumed “default” of American social awareness and cultural production, the general notion of “race” is something that white culture consistently others, even though race as a concept depends on the constitutive, corrosive, and constructed force of whiteness itself.³ What made rock “edgy” is, as Angela McRobbie has powerfully framed it, a function of “the ruthless and tyrannical deployment of ‘cool’ as a disciplinary regime of work and leisure;” it’s thus not as free from strictures as it sometimes presents itself.⁴

I make my argument against these intertwined strictures and fictions in two broadly delineated major moves: describing the Ronettes’ rebellion against the while male power structures of the music industry, with emphasis on Ronnie Spector’s experience carving out privacy in public spaces, and describing and parsing the group’s creative, drag-like gender performance, which was deeply invested in playing with and pushing against (culturally conditioned and racialized) notions of respectability. Throughout, I read Spector’s own practice of looking back, as expressed in her memoir and in interviews, through bell hooks’s theory of oppositional gaze and counter-memory against the white patriarchal power structures within which American Black women must live.⁵ Ultimately, the Ronettes’ actions are forms of rebellious reclamation and self-definition that sidestep and explode past the masculinized arenas of rock and roll and of the recording studio.

Meet Me in the Bathroom

The creative work of the Ronettes began in the family and at home; in the Spanish Harlem part of Manhattan where they lived, the Bennett sisters and Nedra Talley would sing hits of the day. Ironically, the neighborhood had inspired the song of the same name, made a hit in 1960 by Ben E. King and written by Phil Spector. In a 2017 interview with *Music & Musicians Magazine*, Ronnie Spector recalled that “Ben E. King song ‘Spanish Harlem’ that Jerry Leiber wrote with my ex-husband. I heard that song and I thought—my goodness, he’s talking about me.”⁶ By the time Ronnie was fourteen, the Ronettes had graduated to dancing and singing at the Peppermint Lounge and singing at the Apollo Theater.⁷ They first entered the recording studio in 1961 without much traction as Ronnie and the Relatives,

³ See, among many others, James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948–85* (New York: St. Martin’s / Marek, 1985); W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935; New York: Free Press, 1998); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination* (New York: Random House, 1993); Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: Norton, 2010)

⁴ Angela McRobbie, “Reflections on Feminism, Immaterial Labour, and the Post-Fordist Regime,” *New Formations* 70 (2010): 74.

⁵ bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115.

⁶ “Video Feature & Web-Exclusive Interview: Ronnie Spector,” *Music & Musicians Magazine*, November 2017, <http://mmusicmag.com/m/2017/11/videoexclusive-interview-ronnie-spector/>.

⁷ See Ronnie Spector (with Vince Waldron), *Be My Baby: How I Survived Mascara, Miniskirts, and Madness* (New York: Harmony Books, 1990), 29, 57.

but their sessions established them among a growing coterie of teen singers coming through the Brill Building, the hub of midtown Manhattan music publishing and recording that would also start the careers of the Shangri-Las, Lesley Gore, and Carole King.⁸ By 1962 the Ronettes were featured performers in Murray the K's revue shows at Brooklyn's Fox Theater.⁹ By January 1963 they had identified a shoot-for-the-stars professional goal, as Spector writes in her bombastically titled memoir, *Be My Baby: How I Survived Mascara, Miniskirts, and Madness*: "At the start of 1963, our New Year's resolution was to get a new producer. And we set our sights high. . . . [W]e were going to get Phil Spector."¹⁰

From its inception, the Ronettes was not only a group of girl singers but an explicit girl group. Rock critic Greil Marcus very usefully introduced the intriguingly liminal term "girl group rock" in the *Village Voice* in 1975, writing that "of all the genres of rock and roll, girl group rock ('group' is merely a convention—the operative word is 'girl') is the warmest, and probably the most affecting."¹¹ Crucially, girl groups were specifically *teenage* girl groups. They had surpassed one demographic category (by aging out of it) and were not yet ready to enter the one to come. In between, they occupied a forming, emerging, *new* category of identity. As well, the category of "girl" uneasily straddled the line between dismissive and liberatory, often depending on the race of the person being discussed. In *Girl Groups, Girl Culture*, Jacqueline Warwick notes that the Black women of the Shirelles were considered girls, while white Carole King was considered a woman, even though King was right around their age. King was white and she had been to college: "The difference between 'girl' and 'woman' here has little to do with age and everything to do with race, class, and relationships to men."¹² The disjunct Warwick identifies is a "study in the artificiality of both these subject positions," which, although she does not say so directly here, depend centrally on the interpretative gazes of the men with whom King collaborated and to whom the Shirelles were subject in the space of the recording studio.

Warwick also highlights the function of an outfit as a mode of both stricture and freedom for girls: "The uniform and mask of girlness can subsume the

8 Spector, *Be My Baby*, 21.

9 Spector, *Be My Baby*, 32–33.

10 Spector, *Be My Baby*, 39.

11 Greil Marcus, "Girl Groups: How the Other Half Lived," *Village Voice*, September 8, 1975, <https://greilmarcus.net/2014/08/15/girl-groups-how-the-other-half-lived-090875/>. He moves on quickly from the term itself, skirting the implications of how the term demasculinizes the rock genre and glossing over its creativity. And the sound turns out to not have been "invalidated," as the rise at the time of Marcus's writing of blue-eyed soul artists like Hall & Oates and David Bowie—and as, thirty to forty years later, the work of Amy Winehouse, Duffy, Adele, and other blue-eyed soul and simultaneously girl-group descendent singers (to say nothing of appropriative white artists like Justin Timberlake and Sam Smith)—would attest. As Daphne Brooks has pointed out, Marcus's "very blue print for the tales that we keep telling in popular music performance culture . . . inscribe[s] a particular kind of historical narrative of past musical innovations that were suffocatingly narrow and establish[es] a lexicon of taste that would perpetuate that narrowness" ("The Write to Rock: Racial Mythologies, Feminist Theory, and the Pleasures of Rock Music Criticism," *Women & Music* 12 [2008]: 54–62, 57).

12 Jacqueline Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 111.

individuality of a girl while promoting her identity as belonging to a specific type, and this function can be both stifling and, paradoxically, liberating. . . . [T]here is room for negotiation, play, and even subversive power in the veil of girlhood.¹³ Warwick uses the concept of *girlness* to denote the characteristics and behaviors that signify girlhood and that the girls can rehearse and put on. Relatedly, in *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed usefully marks out the prescriptions of society on girls as interpellated signs that call girls (or the people it says are girls) out and in with the frame of *girling*:

Girling is enacted not only through being explicitly addressed as a girl, but in the style or mode of address: because you are a girl, we can do this to you. Violence too is a mode of address. Being girl is a way of being taught what it is to have a body: you are being told; you will receive my advances; you are object; thing, nothing. To become girl is to learn to expect such advances, to modify your behavior in accordance; to become girl as becoming wary of being in public space; becoming wary of being at all.¹⁴

In this article, I use the sonic feminine as a way to recuperate the transgressive work of cis women. I purposely interpret “feminine” in its most restrictively normative mode, that is, what “feminine” was thought to be in the sixties when few other options were publicly, culturally available. The sonic feminine works to explain certain aspects of artistic (mis)categorization and gender roles and aims to explode the places where they intersect, even as it relies on a reified notion of gender itself, riding a falsely dividing line that is both culturally and experientially wrongly imposed and that linguistically excludes artists who have also been marginalized by the music industry, though their genders don’t necessarily align with “female.”

Importantly, though, the sonic feminine is not tied to any one sense or action; it instead holds space for female and female-identified musicians’ ignored creative rebellions and the specter of pushback against them, both legible and hidden, when they have been subsumed by the legends of the men around them. The sonic feminine is also inherently transgressive, in that women in male-dominated industries and canons have had to subvert the norms of patriarchy just to do their work, but they aren’t limited to the kinds of rebellions that *look* rebellious. To push back against forces of white male domination in big or small ways is revolutionary, and transgression as I use it in this analysis is a political force to be celebrated, especially when performed by Black and biracial women to create more space for themselves in relation to different forms and instances of white male hegemony. While my focus in this article is the power of the Ronettes’ visual transgressiveness in their performances and Spector’s use of physical space as part of the creative process, sonically, the Ronettes also straddled a shiftingly legible line between the kind of soft (yet sometimes edgy) pop and doo-wop they grew up with and the

¹³ Warwick, *Girl Groups*, 82.

¹⁴ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 26.

more insistent vocals and instrumentation of the emerging genre of rock and roll that were beginning to push to the forefront of audiences' consciousness.¹⁵

In the service of her creative work, Spector commandeered and recategorized private and public spaces beginning in her teens. Along with her sister Estelle and their cousins, she used the lobby of her grandmother's apartment building as a creative space; in response to the question "How did you start off?" asked before a local performance in Montgomery County, Maryland, Spector replied: "Singing in the lobby of my grandmother's building. It had this really high ceiling and incredible echo. I sang lead and my cousins would sing back-up for me. That's the first time I could hear myself, and I thought, wow, I could do this!"¹⁶ She has also described the use of the lobby in less liberatory, more protective terms, telling *Music & Musicians Magazine*:

We had a grandmother, and there were a lot of girls in my family—first cousins and others. My grandmother wouldn't let us go out to see those groups. We lived on the top floor—the seventh floor, and we could see for miles. The neighborhood had a lot of Spanish, and a lot of black. You'd see those groups just waiting to get a chance. And their parents would say—go outside and sing. (Laughs) Even my grandmother would say, "Girls, if you want to sing—go downstairs to the lobby, and I'll cook dinner for you." But she would never let us go outside.¹⁷

She doesn't specify *why* they weren't allowed outside, maybe because the interviewer and the reader of the interview are assumed to already be able to limn the dangers of city streets for teenage girls. And certainly, as Warwick, Susan J. Douglas, and others have shown, the moment of the creation of the teenager in the late 1950s and early 1960s was already marked by permitted freedoms for boys and curtailed ones for girls, with any teen who didn't fit those precise categories likely being subject to other forms of control as well.¹⁸ Limiting teenage girls' ability to move around in outside spaces is still a prevalent mode among families six decades later. It's driven by often unspoken fears—of rape and sexual assault, robbery, violence—that themselves are consistently framed in a binary carceral logic, albeit often lovingly, rather than a logic of male harm and social healing.

If their freedom to move around the city was curtailed, young Veronica Bennett, her sister Estelle, and their cousin Nedra had a paradoxical freedom when it came to performance opportunities. Spector recounts, "It's funny, but as

15 See Norma Coates, "(R)evolution Now? Rock and the Political Potential of Gender," in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (New York: Routledge, 1997), 50; and Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 5.

16 Ellyn Wexler, "Montgomery College's Parilla Center Welcomes Ronnie Spector and the Ronettes," CultureSpotMC.com, February 20, 2019, <https://www.culturespotmc.com/montgomery-colleges-parilla-center-welcomes-ronnie-spector-and-the-ronettes/>.

17 "Video Feature."

18 See Warwick, *Girl Groups*; Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*.

protective as they were in most ways, Mom and my aunts didn't seem to mind grooming us to get through the doors of New York's steamiest nightclub. I guess they knew it was for the good of our careers. . . . Mom and her sisters helped doll us up until they were sure we could pass for at least twenty-three."¹⁹ As Warwick points out in an analysis of this quote, "With this rationalization of her mother's actions, Bennett/Spector indicates the extent to which she herself is bound by the ideology of respectability and middle-class decency. Recognizing that some readers might disapprove of the role her female elders played in pushing her into a dangerous, adult sphere, she deflects criticism of her mother by insisting that these efforts were all in the service of the trio's career ambitions."²⁰ Spector has retold the story of her freedom in performance spaces more recently, too: "I didn't go out much to see live music because Mom didn't like us going out, but I did get to the Brooklyn Paramount Theatre, and my mom worked next to the Apollo Theatre, and from time to time, we'd go over and watch some of the shows there."²¹ The Ronettes eventually performed at the Peppermint Lounge in Manhattan and Kings Theater in Brooklyn, where Murray the K helped advance their profile in his famed showcases.

The blurring of the lines between staying in and going out worked at home, too, since even the semipublic space of the family room could be made somewhat private. In 1999 Spector recounted, "My grandma's Philco radio was where I heard all the rock and roll music. I had my head stuffed into the speaker, and Grandma would yell at me, 'Veronica, you're going to go deaf!'"²² The excessive physical act of intimacy with this sound gestures toward the kind of ardor Spector's fans would eventually feel for her. Spector's angle of sonic feminine transgressiveness was influenced not only by the contradictions of familial protectiveness but also by the staccato freedom to move through her city and, when curtailed, to hone her craft in other places.

By crediting spaces and influences beyond and behind the recording booth, Ronnie Spector slyly asserts her power over her own sound, despite the brief credit she gives to the impact of Phil Spector's role as producer. Ronnie spent three days recording her vocals for "Be My Baby," she writes in her memoir, and both her shyness and her sense of sound quality influenced her preparation: "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 in Gold Star, but they never heard the sound in the ladies room."²³ Recording or rehearsing in a bathroom for acoustical or spatial reasons is not in and of itself radical (the Beatles famously crammed into John Lennon's Aunt Mimi's bathroom for both reasons long before they got a record deal). But to choose the bathroom when other options were available is to insist on a dissolution of certain public/private boundaries while establishing others.

¹⁹ Spector, *Be My Baby*, 27.

²⁰ Warwick, *Girl Groups*, 186.

²¹ Wexler, "Montgomery College's Parilla Center."

²² Wexler, "Montgomery College's Parilla Center."

²³ Spector, *Be My Baby*, 52.

The choice had impact beyond the sonic. By bypassing the officially designated studio spaces for her rehearsals, Spector carved out her own creative space, repurposing one from which men are explicitly banned. (Sometimes, as she recounts in her memoir, she would bring backup singer Cher with her.)²⁴ The only feedback allowed in a women's room is inherently feedback from other women. The privacy is also, in a certain sense, a necessary condition of her creative work. Spector was able to produce the sounds she did to her own satisfaction in part because of the ways she chose to carve out her own space in the privacy of the bathroom just as she did in the semi-public recording studio. Crucially, in a 2015 interview with *The Guardian* about the recording of the song, she points to the inventiveness the bathroom space allowed her: "While I was in there, I came up with all those 'Oh oh ohs,' inspired by my old Frankie Lymon records."²⁵ Her performance of the song turns out to be a space where she pushes past the producer's power, crafting a demand that exceeds that of the lyrics and using the bathroom space to parse that demand in her own time. In the context of the song, the chorus famously yelps upward with meaningless syllables, allowing sound to overtake semantic meaning. Spector (as singer) configures the listener as her lover through embodied noise, surpassing the linguistic demands of the song and the lyrics that purport to convince (e.g., "So won't you say you love me").

In the same interview, Spector recounted a more uncomfortable version of the bathroom story than the relatively sunny account narrated in her memoir, framing the act as a retreat from the leering male gaze: "In the studio, I had to hide in the ladies' room so the musicians could get their work done—I was very pretty and they'd keep looking at me." Worse, the band's enthusiasm for her delivery of the line "The night we met I knew I needed you so" triggered Phil Spector's abusive possessiveness: "After that, I wasn't allowed in the studio. There may have been a little jealousy thing going on. I had to stay in the hotel while Phil finished the record."²⁶ Even with these unsettling additions, the story remains capacious enough to allow for multiple angles, just as a space can be simultaneously freeing and constricting.

Even in the semi-public, voyeuristic space of the recording booth, Ronnie Spector reserved her own kind of power, subverting the expectations of the men in charge in one of the most famous and demanding recording spaces in the world at the time. She writes in *Be My Baby*, "When I finally did go into the studio, I'd hide behind this big music stand while I sang, so Phil [Spector] and [sound engineer] Larry Levine wouldn't see me with my mouth all popped open when I reached for a high note. I'd keep the lyrics sheet right in front of my face, and then, after I finished a take, I'd peep out from behind my music stand and look through the window to see how Phil and Larry liked it." Through this telling, Spector

24 See Cher in Spector, *Be My Baby*, ix–x, 53–54.

25 Ronnie Spector quoted in Dave Simpson, "How We Made the Ronettes' 'Be My Baby,'" *The Guardian*, November 17, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2015/nov/17/how-we-made-the-ronettes-be-my-baby-ronnie-spector-phil>.

26 Simpson, "How We Made."

reveals that the story of control and credit that characterizes the Wall of Sound and Spector's role in producing it has resolutely left out the voices of the women making the vocal music; she notes, "My approach to each song was completely up to me, watching Phil and Larry react afterward with the only real feedback I ever got."²⁷

Significantly and somewhat unexpectedly, the feedback Spector received for her production of vocal sound was silent and dependent on her visual acuity. She also told *Rolling Stone*, "I didn't know my voice was supposedly that great because people didn't tell you back then how great you were. Then it was, 'Go to the ladies' room. Re-do your eye makeup, or something.'"²⁸ Here, the bathroom functions strategically for the men, affording a direct way for the male producer and sound engineer to remove Ronnie Spector from the room and to buy time in her absence to catalog and tweak her sound, but for her, it served as refuge and generative space. Men (including Phil Spector and Larry Levine) told Spector when to stop and start and controlled the way the music, the beats, and the depth of the sound interacted with her voice. But the architecture and quality of her sound and the way her body and breath worked to produce it were hers alone. Rather than a Freudian reading of such private spaces in terms of evacuation and cleansing, I read the bathroom as a space where artifice drops away. In a career that would only proceed to demand more and more from her public persona across the decades, private spaces allowed Spector to practice her art without judgment. The bathroom was Ronnie Spector's sanctuary in the stressful setting of the recording studio, and it's where she went to create her own voice. Crucially, it was also a space where she maximized her available resources, choosing the bathroom as much for its artistic possibility as for its safety.

Similarly, Spector's admission that she didn't receive traditional feedback from the men nominally in control of her sound gives her authority, even in a limited way, over the authenticity of her own voice: not only did she not ask for full feedback, but they didn't offer it, either. The space for the singer, as Spector describes it, contained only her. Men weren't allowed in. In this way, the bathroom itself becomes a metaphor for the kind of transgressive rock and roll singularity I am tracing through Ronnie Spector's voice and the Ronettes' look. This demarcation of space is a radical act through its marking of her own presence within a plausibly overwhelming environment and experience. And as I elaborate later in the piece, Spector carries a strong commitment to her sound as specifically rock and to its persistence through time—she is invested in its reputation as an enduring classic.²⁹

²⁷ Spector, *Be My Baby*, 52–53.

²⁸ Kory Grow, "Ronnie Spector on Keith Richards, David Bowie and Life after Phil," *Rolling Stone*, April 14, 2016, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/ronnie-spector-on-keith-richards-david-bowie-and-life-after-phil-181599/>.

²⁹ I articulate that investment here primarily through her commentary in interviews. Though her continued touring schedule is beyond the scope of this article's argument, it deserves mention in the specific context of sonic and reputational persistence. She revived the Ronettes briefly in the 1970s and then again in 2017, performing classic songs as Ronnie Spector and the Ronettes, marshaling both artistic endurance and creative agency.

Sarah Dougher elaborates the complex placement of sung authenticity as a vector of emotional communication that sometimes, paradoxically, confers gendered authority: “The authentic voice in pop music comes less from what the speakers know than how effectively they can relate emotional states. [They] may or may not be communicated in a personal voice, but historically women’s voices have used this ‘I’ to convey the authority of experience.”³⁰ Ronnie Spector exceeds even the freeing, authoritative power of Dougher’s “I” by finding spaces of liberation in the Gold Star bathroom and behind the music stand in the studio. And as a result of those choices, the unmistakable sound of “Be My Baby” carries her creative, transgressive palimpsest, even when listeners do not know what they are hearing.

Unsung Vocal Labor

Ronnie Spector’s vocal work on “Be My Baby” pushes past the limits of the record itself. Particular words, for instance, highlight her vocal idiosyncrasies, which give the lovelorn lyrics their real personality: the sudden throaty rasp in the verb of “*had* the chance,” the New York City lilt of “*nevah* [never] let you go” and “*ah* [I] have been waiting *fabr* [for] you.” Her sound is as unvarnished as the Wall of Sound is slick, a less genteel kind of sonic excess. She sounds like nobody else. Unsurprisingly, Spector has been repeatedly referred to as “the voice” or “that voice,” variants regularly used in reviews and retrospectives and that she recounts in her memoir as praise specifically coming from Phil Spector, Cher, and John Lennon, and for obvious reasons: her voice was so big, so unforgettable, and so unique (via phrasing and accent) as to overshadow the sonic fabric of the Wall of Sound itself.³¹ Their attribution of such excessive singularity puts her talent into a very specific and recognizable aesthetic category. But to reduce Spector’s voice as if it were a non-volitional force that existed separate from her body is to deny her individuality in creating it (in a music industry obsessed with, as the story goes, capturing more and more girl groups that sounded like each other and sung each other’s songs) and the embodied vocal labor it took to produce her voice.

In *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice*, Nina Eidsheim adds to a scholarly discussion that moves sound out of the purely aural and firmly into the embodied, marking out sound as “dynamic, multifaceted, and multisensorial”; further, she clarifies, sound is a “narrow logic through which our concepts of music have been threaded and that lies at the center of music’s definition,” and it is “merely a trope . . . an empty concept in which we have nonetheless so thoroughly invested that it has produced a kind of tunnel vision.”³² Eidsheim has also located sound in the body in an even more precise way, as a result of “inner choreogra-

³⁰ Sarah Dougher, “Authenticity, Gender, and Personal Voice: She Sounds So Sad, Do You Think She Really Is?” in *This Is Pop: In Search of the Elusive at the Experience Music Project*, ed. Eric Weisbard (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 151.

³¹ See Spector, *Be My Baby*, 52, 113, ix.

³² Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 6.

phies” and “internal shape”: “Timbral indices may be more accurately considered as a set of *inner choreographies*—movements that create internal physical configurations that give rise to a timbral identity. . . . [T]he resultant sound [is] merely a confirmation that this internal shape has been performed.”³³ The sound itself in a song may have no gender or race, as Eidsheim shows, but the body that *made it* does—and, secondarily, its interpretative history is invisibly contextualized by who was encouraged to perform it, who was said to have pioneered it, who wrote and produced it, and who was purported to have listened to it.³⁴ Similarly, the embodied labor behind a singer’s sound isn’t necessarily audible. You have to think beyond just their voices, in the way that Eidsheim is advocating, remembering their fuller, creative personhood.

Femininity Is (a) Drag: Gender Construction and Racial Identity

Gender is a made-up performance, obeying or exceeding socially constructed codes of behavior, yet the scripts for such performances are long, heavy, and deeply ingrained, beginning at birth. We persist in assuming, most of the time, that what a doctor says about a baby the moment after they are born is immutably part of who they are. And so a gender performance that does what it isn’t supposed to is inherently liberatory—when it exceeds, when it feints, when it shifts, when it refuses, when it picks up another script, when it hides, when it screams.

For all of Butler’s deserved influence on ways of seeing and embodying gendered performance, there are gaps that other thinkers have usefully filled.³⁵ In *Queering Drag: Redefining the Discourse of Gender-Bending*, Meredith Heller updates a Butlerian definition of gender as “cultural construction that is both performed and performative,” marking both the (il)legible actions and the depths they may or may not be said to contain (lack of depth not being inherently bad).³⁶ Nadine Ehlers’s *Racial Imperatives: Discipline, Performativity, and Struggles Against Subjection* uses Butler’s framework of performativity to think specifically about racial subjec-

33 Nina Eidsheim, “Synthesizing Race: Towards an Analysis of the Performativity of Vocal Timbre,” *Revista Transcultural de Música* 13 (2009), <http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/a57/synthesizing-race-towards-an-analysis-of-the-performativity-of-vocal-timbre>.

34 In *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), Eidsheim extends her argument about embodied voices to include the listener. She explains the evolution of her argument in her introduction: “The two books are companion volumes, two sides of the same coin. *Sensing Sound* shows what the naturalization of sonic parameters and ways of measuring sound does to the general experience of listening to voice, while this book seeks to show the political and ethical dimensions of such practices as they produce blackness through the acousmatic question” (5).

35 As Butler has shown across decades of influential theory, gender is fundamentally performance. They began this revolutionary excavation/investigation with *Gender Trouble* in 1990 and, as recently as last year, in their spirited defense of trans womanhood and repudiation of the bigotry of their interlocutor’s “gender critical” ideology in a *New Statesman* interview that shook the internet. Alona Ferber, “Judith Butler on the Culture Wars, JK Rowling and Living in ‘Anti-intellectual Times,’” *New Statesman*, September 22, 2020; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

36 Meredith Heller, *Queering Drag: Redefining the Discourse of Gender-Bending* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 4.

tivities of Blackness and whiteness.³⁷ And as Jayna Brown notes in her “Body” chapter in *Keywords for African-American Studies*, “Feminist theories do not adequately account for the ways discourses of race shape what the gendered body means or the levels of violence embedded in processes of its racialization. . . . [They] also rarely [consider] that not all bodies are gendered as women in the same way.”³⁸

Straight women performing femininity can exceed the bounds of what “acceptable”—demure, compliant, obedient, “tasteful”—femininity is supposed to look like. The Ronettes’ high femininity cannot necessarily be read as femme, but it can be read as nonnormative—they exceeded accepted norms in a similar way to femme self-presentations and self-definitions. The Ronettes’ gender performance was socially acceptable and simultaneously not socially acceptable, straddling the Madonna/whore line in an intentional and witty way.

Drag is and has always been a mode of resistance imbricated in gendered, racialized systems of power. As Daniel Harris frames it in “The Aesthetic of Drag,” “If it is possible to borrow from feminist theory the metaphor of the so-called ‘male gaze,’ the ‘gaze’ of drag is a heterosexual gaze. In fact, it is more like a ‘gawk’ than a gaze, the gawk of the slumming sightseer whose uninformed preconceptions about homosexuality gay men brought vividly to life in a strange act of self-exoticization achieved through clouds of luscious marabou feathers, immense trailing veils, and billowing layers of petticoats and flounces.”³⁹ The purposeful exaggerations of “the distance and incommensurability between the straight viewer and the ostentatious drag queen” that drag relies on (and pokes fun at) is altered when straight cis women perform femininity, but incommensurability remains useful as a metaphor for the way (white) male-dominant power acts on women, especially minoritized women.

To wit, the Ronettes’ micromovements in the *American Bandstand* performance and in much of their other live work—swaying hips, synchronized footwork, and lightly moving hands on cue—were typical of the kind of embodied directives from mostly male managers and producers, stemming from the polished synchrony of doo-wop singers. These visual effects are part of the way teenage singers and girl singers in particular were socialized and controlled in the 1950s and 1960s; as Warwick writes, “They communicated particular ways of being girls to their audience members, who could copy their stances and train their own bodies in turn.”⁴⁰ Combined with the Ronettes’ public “look tweaking” (a term I expand on below), the visual and behavioral aspects of “ways of being girls” present an even more arresting notion: the teenage girls in attendance at Ronettes

37 Nadine Ehlers, *Racial Imperatives: Discipline, Performativity, and Struggles Against Subjection* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012).

38 Jayna Brown, “Body,” in *Keywords for African-American Studies*, ed. Erica R. Edwards, Roderick A. Ferguson, and Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 32.

39 Daniel Harris, “The Aesthetic of Drag,” *Salmagundi* 108 (Fall 1995): 64.

40 Jacqueline Warwick, “‘He Hit Me, and I Was Glad’: Violence, Masochism, and Anger in Girl Group Music,” in *She’s So Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence and Class in 1960s Music*, ed. Laurie Stras (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 96.

shows were able to watch the gendered expectations of cookie-cutter-esque girlish modesty (being put on them just as on the singers they came to see) reshaped, flouted, teased (literally), and even rejected. And while the Ronettes still had to wear modest identical outfits on television through the midsixties, the moves they made in Brooklyn were transgressive: the pile of their hair and the slashes of their eye makeup carve away at the controlled uniformity of the synchronized movements and demurely matching dresses.

Jayna Brown's reframing of the body as a location of deep knowledge within itself is helpful in refusing or co-opting as much of the male gaze as possible: "The body itself is a site of knowledge production. Theories of embodied knowledge also challenge the idea that the body is a passive recipient of meaning."⁴¹ Women, and Black women in particular, cannot opt out of being seen as objects in a racist heteropatriarchal society, yet there is revolutionary choice in the decision to do as one likes when one can, no matter what the head man in charge might say. A series of such choices shaped Ronnie Spector's decision to rehearse in the bathroom and hide behind the mic stand and the Ronettes' collective decision to rat their hair, line their eyes, and, when possible, sneak their skirts higher: marking out the space they were to occupy and training the gazes that were on them to understand them in a specific way, a way over which they claimed control.

The look that Ronnie Spector, Estelle Bennett, and Nedra Talley built together is drag-adjacent in its excess and also, I'd argue, in its daring and public constructedness. The excess they shot for, as Spector describes it, mimics the image of a drag queen, without perhaps the same intention to parody, but with similar pushes to do more and more and *more*: in 2017, Spector told *SF Weekly*, "We exaggerated everything, our beehives were the highest, our eyeliner was the thickest, our dresses were the shortest—and tightest! And we danced a lot!"⁴² In this way, they stood in marked and purposeful contrast to the prim image of the Shirelles; as Spector said, "We weren't afraid to be hot. That was our gimmick. When we saw the Shirelles walk on stage with their wide party dresses, we went in the opposite direction and squeezed our bodies into the tightest skirts we could find. Then we [would] get out on stage and hike them up to show our legs even more."⁴³ She credits her group with cutting a slit up the side of the skirts because the hiking up became too troublesome. The exaggeration and the excess were so much a part of the moves they made: they weren't just about sexiness but about the most excessive form they had the tools to access, with each component bursting against its own delimited boundaries.

Almost as a corollary to the reclamation of privacy in recording her voice and establishing her own sound, Spector and the other Ronettes tweaked their look in public. They crafted it backstage, but the response to audience feedback

41 Brown, "Body," 33.

42 Peter Lawrence Kane, "Hard French Hearts Los Homos: Presenting the Fabulous Ronettes," interview with Ronnie Spector, *SF Weekly*, June 21, 2017, <https://www.sfweekly.com/culture/presenting-the-fabulous-ronettes/>.

43 Spector, *Be My Baby*, 34.

was part of the performance, and they took it immediately into consideration. In *Be My Baby*, Spector recounts how they tweaked their look almost in real time backstage at Brooklyn's Fox:

It was during these shows [hosted by DJ Murray the K] that the Ronettes' image was really born. And sitting around for hours on end in our dressing room at the Brooklyn Fox, we had plenty of time to work on our look. . . . The louder they applauded, the more mascara we put on the next time. We didn't have a hit record to grab their attention, so we had to make an impression with our style. None of it was planned out; we just took the look we were born with and extended it. . . . Of course, we exaggerated it on stage, because everything on stage has to be bigger than life.⁴⁴

Claiming Race

Significantly, the Ronettes' reconfiguration of a constructed high feminine image also consciously drew from the singers' biracial heritages and their neighborhood of origin. Ronnie Spector refers to her, Talley's, and Bennett's biracial identities with the term "half-breed" frequently in her memoir and across decades of interviews, in reference to herself and to others, often as explicit inspiration: "If we copied anything, it was the look of the girls we'd see on the streets of Spanish Harlem, the Spanish and half-breed girls who walked around with thick eyeliner and teased hair. That's what we saw when we grew up, so we brought it to our act. But when people ask me where the Ronettes got their street image, I always tell them we got it from the streets."⁴⁵ Spector's use of the word also works to underscore the tension she describes of not feeling like she fit into either the Black or the white world in a time of intensely prescribed and coded forms of segregation:

In school I discovered that being a half-breed had its advantages, since light-skinned girls were considered pretty. But even though a lot of the guys at school came after me, I still didn't feel like I really fit in with any one group. The blacks never really accepted me as one of them. The white kids knew I wasn't white. And the Spanish kids didn't talk to me because I didn't speak Spanish.⁴⁶

By sharing memories like these, Spector marks out a nearly constant citational practice of the influences she grew up around and maintains appreciation for today, and, crucially, she centers her racial identity in interview contexts (especially) and for audiences that might otherwise overlook it. By specifying "half-breed," she is reclaiming a word that was wielded as a slur and that, somewhat ironically, her early Gold Star compadre Cher (a white woman of Armenian descent) appropriated in the title of a 1973 song and album, the storyline of which perpetuates violent misconceptions about Native women. The notion of "half-breed" singularity also

44 Spector, *Be My Baby*, 31–32, 34.

45 Spector, *Be My Baby*, 34.

46 Spector, *Be My Baby*, 10.

becomes a tool in the Ronettes' quest for success; as Spector puts it, "My mother always told us to look for a gimmick that would make us stand out from all the other groups, something that made us different. Well, being half-breeds, we were born different, so we figured the thing that set us apart from the other groups was our look."⁴⁷ In her multivalent use of an uncomfortable word—which she says so casually, as though it *should* be comfortable for the (usually white) interviewer—Spector recasts a racist slur as a powerful identifier, reclamatory work that is certainly part of the specific experiences of many biracial people (and people of color as well).

In interviews, Spector has also credited Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers' inclusion of Black and Puerto Rican members as inspiration for the racial makeup of the Ronettes: "That's where we got our idea. Nedra was one of my mother's sister's children. Her father was Spanish. And my father was Irish. My mother is half Cherokee and black—and Puerto Rican. That's what made us look so different."⁴⁸ The most literal unifying force for the group's "idea" was, of course, familial connection, but the impact of Lymon's example read in the context of Spector's underlining of "difference" as a creative calling card makes for an even more complex reading of racial identity. In 2008 Spector told *The Guardian* that "my great-grandfather was Chinese, my dad was Irish, my mother is part Cherokee and black. So I've got all this stuff in me, to please everybody."⁴⁹

Spector also shifts the lack of agency inherent in being passively "born different" by using it to pivot to the creative work of creating a look that caught on across the world. She also regularly underlines the fact that they did the creative work of constructing the look without help: "We created that look ourselves. No stylist, no hairdresser, no makeup artist. Today, you have a whole team of people to put your look together. Our style and sound has lasted for quite a while, and we were just having fun."⁵⁰ The inescapable structures of these grim playgrounds, both personal and structural, limit but also underscore the agency that dominated, commodified (which is to say also minoritized) groups manage to carve out from within oppressive, insidious, sometimes unseen power dynamics.

Spector has described the excessiveness of the Ronettes' look as informed by the Ronettes' queer fanbase, thereby linking performative excess and social transgression as positioned against a heteronormative framework.⁵¹ Less intuitively, she has frequently imbricated the Ronettes' interracial identities in queer acceptance. In a 2017 interview with queer publication *SF Weekly* on the occasion of her show at Hard French, "an outdoor daytime soul music dance party that sets out to modernize, takeover, revamp, trick out, revive, and do up the dance party experience,"

47 Spector, *Be My Baby*, 31.

48 "Video Feature."

49 "Is This It?," interview with Ronnie Spector, *The Guardian*, September 19, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/sep/20/comedy.comedy>.

50 Kane, "Hard French Hearts."

51 Jordan Runtagh, "Ronnie Spector's Victory Lap: The Original Rock Queen Talks New Music and Reviving the Ronettes," *People.com*, June 24, 2017, <https://people.com/music/ronnie-spector-ronettes-tour-2017-new-music-love-power-interview/>.

she weaves the Ronettes' sustaining queer fandom into her already established narrative of biracial identity conferring (and expressing) uniqueness: "There weren't mixed groups like the Ronettes back then. The gay audience took a liking to the Ronettes, maybe because they knew we were different. We're Black, Cherokee, Irish, a bit of Chinese—and my cousin Nedra is the same, plus Puerto Rican. But they were the ones that showed up at our first shows before anyone else."⁵² The repetitions in the accounts she shares across the decades deserve special note: in one sense, they are the kind of repetitions we all produce when talking about our lives. And in another, they can be read as an insistence on the retelling, perhaps repeating for emphasis, and/or perhaps repeating to make sense in different contexts.

The genre position Spector constructs for herself in interviews across the decades is always rock and roll, never pop or as anything else stereotypically "girly." In reference to "Be My Baby," she writes: "That record is a rock and roll classic, and no matter how many horrible things I went through later, at least I can look back and say I made a record that's going to be around long after all of us are dead. And that's a nice feeling. Spooky, but nice."⁵³ Interestingly, her dual emphasis on the Ronettes' rock genre location and their uniqueness, which she often ties together in her public reminiscences, is almost always marked by the visual rather than the sonic. She doesn't talk as much about their voices or even their music but about their heritages and their look. As she told *Vice's* i-D Magazine in 2016, "The Ronettes were so different from most girl groups. We had interracial parents, long hair. We wore slits up the side, like the Chinese dresses. I remember groups like the Shirelles and the Chiffons would come out with these flared skirts and we would come out in skin tight dresses. We didn't have a hit record at the time but the guys went nuts over us more than the groups that did! Girls too. And I loved that."⁵⁴

The Badness of Gender

Spector frequently marks out the invention of the "bad" as a creative act of performance that is desirable for women and girls; at the same time, it is a feminist move: a way to ensnare the male gaze (along with, implicitly, the money it might spend on concert tickets and record sales) and a direct punch against white masculinized cultural attitudes that concerned themselves with the "badness" of girls in a purely restrictive way. As Warwick notes, "The phenomenon of the American 'juvenile delinquent' was of great public concern during the 1950s and 60s, and discourse surrounding 'bad girls' differed significantly from the perceptions of male teens in trouble; the cases of girls going bad were particularly horrifying because they were generally understood to stem from a lack of fatherly authority."⁵⁵

⁵² Hard French website, www.hardfrench.com/about; Kane, "Hard French Hearts." When she returned to New York in 1973, she'd play solo shows at the Continental Baths, the gay bathhouse where Bette Midler got her start.

⁵³ Spector, *Be My Baby*, 57.

⁵⁴ "Ronnie Spector, the Original Bad Girl of Rock 'n' Roll, on Why She'll Never Quit," i-D Magazine, *Vice.com*, June 23, 2016, https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/j583m3/rediscover-ronnie-spector-the-original-bad-girl-of-rock-39n39-roll-us-translation.

⁵⁵ Warwick, *Girl Groups*, 196.

Performing badness can also be, in some of Spector's almost rhythmically repetitive retellings, as simple as deciding to do it. In 2014 she told *The Guardian*, "The 'bad girl' came from when the Ronettes would walk out onstage and we didn't have a hit record yet and all the other groups did—Marvin Gaye, the Crystals. We didn't have a hit record, but we had attitude."⁵⁶ Her emphasis on attitude, which she has elaborated elsewhere more explicitly as a mood of action, plays a crucial role as a distinguishing feature of their creative presentation.⁵⁷ The Ronettes thus use the socially conditioned trappings of feminine artifice—makeup and clothing—as a tool helping to construct what a teenage girl could make herself into while also claiming the art of what could be read as swagger. This is a quintessential use of the tools of the patriarchy, much as other feminist justice-minded and gender-creative or trans artists—among them Prince, Ari Up, Alice Bag, Le Tigre, and Laura Jane Grace—have used makeup and femme style to create their own image. Grace, in particular, has affirmed her gender identity in her art and in interviews while maintaining her position as a hard-rocking punk icon (a figure, like the early rock iconicity I'm dismantling here, too often read as exclusively white and cis male).⁵⁸ Her cogent frame of the necessity of dismantling the male ego—"If you've been raised and socialized, as a male, and you're transitioning to living your life openly as female, then you have to destroy the male ego you've been raised with"⁵⁹—is a lesson cis men could adopt and, in so doing, help to remake the world.⁵⁹

Spector sometimes brackets badness explicitly as a role to be played, as in her comments to *SF Weekly* in 2017: "The 'Bad Girl' image is the Ronettes. We took the style from the streets of Spanish Harlem, brought some fashion and attitude to it, and then took it to the stage. Yes, we were innocent, a family group—and my mom toured with us, so we were protected. But trust me, when I am on stage, even at sound check, I am bad!"⁶⁰ Here, badness is transgressive, but it's also a conscious performance of transgression conspicuously decoupled from any risky (or risqué) behavior. For working-class Black groups like the Ronettes, Warwick notes, "the dangers of being perceived as genuinely 'bad' made them vulnerable to racist criticism, so that they had to play more carefully with the imagery of bad girls."⁶¹

Importantly, Spector's evocation of the transgressive side of the Ronettes' look carries a strong sense of "good girl" values as well: "We may have looked like street girls, but I think the audience could tell that under all that makeup, we were really just three innocent teenagers. And I think they liked that combina-

⁵⁶ Caroline Sullivan, "Ronnie Spector: 'When I hear applause, it's like I'm having an orgasm,'" *The Guardian*, April 17, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/apr/17/ronnie-spector-ronettes-applause-orgasm-interview>.

⁵⁷ See Kane, "Hard French Hearts."

⁵⁸ See Laura Jane Grace and Dan Ozzi, *Tranny: Confessions of Punk Rock's Most Infamous Anarchist Sellout* (New York: Hachette Books, 2016).

⁵⁹ Jim Farber, "Laura Jane Grace: 'Punk was more closed-minded than the church,'" *The Guardian*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/nov/10/laura-jane-grace-against-me-tranny-memoir>.

⁶⁰ Kane, "Hard French Hearts."

⁶¹ Warwick, *Girl Groups*, 147.

tion. The girls loved us because we were different—we followed our own style and didn't care what anybody thought. And the boys liked us for obvious reasons. The Ronettes were what the girls wanted to be, and what the guys dreamed about.”⁶² Spector claims the freedom to not only embody sexiness on her own terms but also to *use* it for her own purposes and specifically to use it to add to the popularity of the group (one of the things a gimmick usually attempts to engage).

Conclusion: Looking Forward and Looking Back

Within just two years of their memorable introduction on the stage of *American Bandstand*, the Ronettes were starting to flex their creative muscle more publicly, at least in the body and presence of their singer. In a November 29, 1965, performance of “Be My Baby” at the Moulin Rouge Club for *The Big T.N.T. Show*, the singers are dressed in identical pantsuits, and their beehive hairdos are only a ghostly presence in the slight pouf at the top of their heads; the heavy eyeliner is still in clear view.⁶³ While Spector starts out moving with Talley and Bennett, she spends most of the performance breaking out of the choreographed mold of those movements, as well as the molded sound of her own vocals on the record. She seems to let the physicality of singing drive the way her body moves in the space, and maybe as a result, her body language is more comfortable, especially compared to her work on the 1963 *Bandstand* performance; Spector sings with a slight smile. Sometimes she throws her head back, including on “I’ll make you happy, baby,” in the second verse, and it’s easy to read the gesture as one of freedom.

Vocally, Spector deviates from her recorded phrasing on almost every line, adding extra syllables to single-syllable words like “me” and improvising a rising “uh huh huh” after “needed you so,” inserting a sort of half line between the first two. On the “please” in the “won’t you please” lead-in to the chorus, she adds an extra syllable to the word and also broadly gestures her mic out to the audience with a pout that leads into a broad, full smile. Spector lets out a hooting yelp before the bridge, and that’s where she joins most fully back into the choreographed dance, punctuating it with yelps and woos and leaning from side to side, taking up visual space. I read her comparative spatial and vocal ease as, in part, an intentional harnessing of the male gaze she knows is on her, an action in which she is now an expert after two frenetic years of international fame, performance, recording, and fandom.

As I’ve argued here, the Ronettes worked to transgress the gendered limits placed on teenage girls at the time by visually and attitudinally exceeding them—as “bad girls” do, whether that badness is being read through a constrictive lens as improper or as a transgressive form. Ronnie Spector, alone and with the other Ronettes, carved out spaces of sonic and visual resistance for her emerging creative voice from the confines of a racist and misogynistic industry within a broader

62 Spector, *Be My Baby*, 34.

63 The Ronettes, “Be My Baby,” *The Big T.N.T. Show*, November 29, 1965, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRy2pV7b2QA>.

racist and misogynistic society. The Ronettes exemplify both the absence of artifice (in their lack of a certain kind of vocal polish and training and what Spector herself has called the “innocence and honesty” of girl group music) and its presence (in their first chosen and then marketed performances of a certain kind of excessive femininity).⁶⁴

Informed by hooks, I offered the liberatory interpretative framework of the sonic feminine to capture and center the revolutionary moves made by female-identified artists against and away from the pressures of white patriarchy in general and the white male gaze more specifically. The purposeful wielding of visual artifice can, as the Ronettes’ look construction shows, also be a tool for various kinds of liberation. With their caked-on eyeliner and short and shorter skirts, the Ronettes made themselves noticeable, embraced loud sexiness, and used both sound and visuals to their creative and cultural advantage, cementing part of their legacy in the sartorial choices they made. When all gender is performance anyway, who’s to say whether any chosen form of artifice can be said to be “shameless” or “bad” (in the sixties media sense of the word)? The work of Spector’s memoir, along with scores of interviews, lends her a dually critical and personal stance with respect to her own history. It lends her the power of hooks’s counter-memory: taking control of one’s own stories, fully imbricated in the power of biracial Blackness, even as society has minoritized it.

Pointing, via the sonic feminine, to the intersections of the Ronettes’ unvarnished sound, constructed image, and space taking-up rethinks the way that rock stories have been told and the elements that have previously been the focus of such stories. The Ronettes’ singularity is rooted in the way they wield both sonic and visual artifice as transgressive tools, working within the expectation of femininity to mark out and modulate a space that exceeds it. Through their movements within the behaviors of the sonic feminine, I have argued that the Ronettes were transgressive in ways that surpass some of the white masculinist myths of rock and roll.

Ronnie Spector’s performances pushed against accepted boundaries of sound, space, modesty, and normative femininity and called into question the gender norms of the sixties—just as they challenge the accepted definition of what rock is and who gets to make it. Part of the work that the sonic feminine takes on is reexamining famous performers who have been too long hidden in the shadow of famous white men. Different materials, different critics, and the new analytic of a fresh set of eyes and ears committed to gender and race analytics: in this remixing, sharper, different stories can be told.

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64 Ana Gavrilovska, “Girl Groups, Gold Star Studios, and More: A Conversation with Ronnie Spector,” *Detroit Metro Times*, December 5, 2018, <https://www.metrotimes.com/detroit/girl-groups-gold-star-studios-and-more-a-conversation-with-ronnie-spector/Content?oid=18495106>.

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