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Getting Back: The Chiffons' Sonic Reclamation

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HILARIE ASHTON

Getting Back

The Chiffons' Sonic Reclamation

ABSTRACT Sixties girl group the Chiffons are famous for their soaring 1964 hit "He's So Fine," a song in turn remembered almost as often for its plagiarism by George Harrison than in its own right. Much of the rest of their catalogue, including the tremendous "I Have a Boyfriend," gets shunted into historical and critical gaps that paint rock music history as controlled by men. In this article, I examine the Chiffons in their own right, reframing a story of well-worn sonic theft to center on the group it obscured, through and alongside interpretative contradictions, assumptions, and historical lacunae. I show that through their voicing of teenage girls' desire, their place in an economy of cover songs, and, most notably, their own cover of Harrison's "My Sweet Lord," they shift the sonic effect away from the masculinized realm of production and push it back toward the singer. They also evoke considerations of cultural memory and legacy, particularly in their longest-tenured lead singer Judy Craig Mann's curation of her own creative legacy. Examined against the historical grain, the Chiffons mark different kinds of powerfully transgressive, voiced spaces that work toward different forms of creative liberation. KEYWORDS ephemera, residue, cover, discovery narrative, reclamation, historical memory

> While The Boy is both subject and object of girl-group fantasies, he is only rarely a physical presence in these mini-melodramas. Absent, in love with someone else, dead, merely fantasized, or otherwise disembodied, The Boy exists primarily in the third person for the lead singer/persona, while the second-person preceptors are other girls.
>
> – Patricia Juliana Smith, from "'Ask Any Girl': Compulsory Heterosexuality and Girl Group Culture"

INTRODUCTION

The Chiffons' "I Have a Boyfriend" is one of the many singles by sixties girl groups that most people today don't seem to know.[1] It didn't do particularly well at the time, at least by chart metrics (one of the material ways we can reconstruct past cultural popularities): It entered the Billboard Hot 100 at number 92 the week of November 16, 1963, and hovered there for three weeks, peaking at 36 and disappearing by the end of January 1964.[2] In the decades since, the song has become a lacuna across the decades of collectively remembered historical culture.

This gap is particularly glaring as a marker of American culture's retained memory of the Chiffons themselves, whose career is often reduced to another song they recorded, "He's So Fine," a song that earlier that same year did better on the charts by leaps and bounds. Five decades later, of course, it's now more widely known in part because a former Beatle plagiarized it. That complicated collective knowledge, and its attendant reductive

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readings of the Chiffons' career, contribute to shutting out "I Have a Boyfriend" (and every other song they recorded before or after) from much of the cultural awareness of what the Chiffons produced.

Any gesture toward quantifying cultural awareness is something of an assumption itself, of course, albeit one that's rooted in real American tendencies to elevate white male–created culture above all other cultural creations. While the Chiffons are certainly not the most overlooked girl group in pop—the genre being littered with flash-in-the-pan names without attached legacies—or the most overlooked Black singing group in any musical genre, they have been curiously sidelined in many discussions of early rock and pop. Their early legacy is particularly and, in various tellings, persistently linked to a handful of white men who made money from the Black art they effectively colonized: namely, the doo-wop group the Tokens and former Beatle Harrison. The Harrison connection especially functions to pull attention away from the Chiffons' soulful, jangly genius and to eternally frame them in a narrative of loss and theft rather than achievement and creativity. "He's So Fine" is seemingly always saddled with the impact of Harrison's plagiarism: the song is rarely mentioned in the press without a reference to its ghostly presence within "My Sweet Lord."

Infamously and, after a protracted courtroom battle, determinately illegally, Harrison's theft of "He's So Fine"—its main melody line folded into his post-Beatles debut single "My Sweet Lord"—helped to retrospectively obscure the rest of the Chiffons' catalog. His misuse has also been read too simplistically as a form of happenstance, one without personal or structural culpability, and one that's limited to melody and not meaning. On the surface, the Chiffons' career is narrated as having begun with a kind of happenstance, too: In an almost mythic discovery narrative, the original lineup met at school and encountered a talent-scouting songwriter, Ronnie Mack, who gave them a song he wrote, called "He's So Fine," and briefly became their manager. By contrast, the happenstance that had their song "I Have a Boyfriend" playing on local Dallas radio while President Kennedy was shot, the broadcast of the song interrupted to share the news of the unfolding tragedy, is all but forgotten, traceable largely in the form of YouTube links and the occasional mention by a journalist.

Like most other girl groups, the surface of the Chiffons' story is one of control. But looking deeper, it's also a story of self-expression and acts of liberation. Despite the cultivated demureness of their girls-next-door image, they were one of several girl groups who openly voiced teenage desire, as critics like Patricia Juliana Smith, Susan J. Douglas, Jacqueline Warwick, and Charlotte Greig have shown. Crucially, their reclamation of their own sonic residue from Harrison in their 1974 "My Sweet Lord" cover is an act of strong recuperatory praxis.

In these acts of sung desire and reclaimed melody, the Chiffons shift the sonic effect back toward the singer and her desires, and away from production, songwriting, management, and other white male–dominated roles. In their songs, they mark different kinds of transgressively voiced spaces (some representative, some liberatory, some deservedly more self-serving) that work toward different forms of creative liberation. And they ventriloquize the tricky, deep, lusty feelings of teenage girlhood, feelings that most girls'

families, social structures, and the cultures around them avoided or papered over. In so doing, they contribute to a legacy of Black women's liberatory sonic work that clears paths for modern artists, from En Vogue to Beyoncé, to follow or to diverge from.

This article reframes a story of well-worn sonic theft, through and alongside interpretative contradictions, assumptions, and historical lacunae. I reconsider key moments in the Chiffons' career, a creative trajectory that's most commonly described through broad strokes of both docility and theft, using them to reframe their creative work within a much more complex story of attribution, narratives of desire, and reclamation. The particular logic of gendered power that these moments construct is complemented by and pushed on by an adjacent narrative within four of their songs: "He's So Fine," "I Have a Boyfriend," "Sweet Talkin' Guy," and their cheeky cover of "My Sweet Lord" (which quotes "He's So Fine") position teenage girls' desire, in lyric and in event, as worthy of having in its own right. By considering a combination of well-known hits and quietly ignored marvels, I continue my critique of which creative products are culturally remembered and which are left obscured in shadow.

EMPTY MEN AND HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

In comparison to the most famous (and most archived) white male rock stars, many of whom are so culturally embedded that we can identify them just by their first names, girl groups are culturally remembered in a much more patchy, faceless, and glossed-over way. And yet 1963 alone saw five Chiffons singles hit the top 40 in the United States; of those five, "He's So Fine" hit number 1 and "One Fine Day" hit number 5. Their first two albums, *He's So Fine* and *One Fine Day*, both came out in 1963, a productivity pace that maps onto the well-known, churning-out factory description of Brill Building music production.

Much of the credit for those successes and that productivity, to say nothing of a maintained legacy, tends to be given to the men in charge, usually by other male critics, rather than the women whose actual voices did the work. For instance, while Keir Keightley correctly identifies the extensive historical exclusion of what he calls "sounds [that] do not easily fit into the hard, masculinist aesthetic privileged in dominant accounts of rock as a musical style,"[3] he insistently blocks women out of the frame of rock 'n' roll, firmly bracketing girl groups as pop and mentioning no other female artists or influences in his otherwise nuanced dive into the early rock 'n'roll period. And Bob Stanley's *Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!: The Story of Pop Music from Bill Haley to Beyoncé* sidelines women even more sharply while taking the structures of white male authority utterly for granted.[4]

In this section, I trace the control-laced discovery narrative that the Chiffons' story ostensibly begins with, and I highlight the appropriative acts by the Tokens and George Harrison that materially shaped the group's career. These power relationships discordantly mimic the Empty Guy figure they frequently sing about, a constant character in girl-group discourse that Patricia Juliana Smith has crucially identified. The gendered power logic in which this catches them is usefully contrasted by the narrative, expressive

vocal work the Chiffons did around female desire, especially in "He's So Fine" and "I Have a Boyfriend," two of their early singles that bookend the release year of 1963 and that assert, through both direct expression and the delicious babble of nonsense words, a girl's love as worthy and important. In its under-discussed adjacency to the Kennedy assassination, I show that "I Have a Boyfriend" also calls crucial attention to what we centralize in cultural memory.

The Chiffons are in some ways a classic example of the most apparently docile kind of homegrown singing group. They met in high school, in the protective confines of one of the spaces sixties teenage girls were allowed to visit outside of the home, and their first album was released in 1962, very shortly after they began singing together. Judy Craig, Patricia Bennett, and Barbara Lee met at the former James Monroe High School in the Soundview neighborhood of the Bronx. (Shut down in 1994 for what Inside Schools calls "poor performance," the school's original building is now home to seven other schools.)[5] Various accounts of their beginnings locate that formation rather vaguely, describing them coalescing as a singing group in the high school's after-school center.

As a site, the after-school center fits in with what I think of as an American mythology of creative discovery, in which regular people (often women) make it big by being "found" by someone more connected, usually in a school or at a soda fountain. That narrative precedence functions to shut out the lived complexities around that discovery, marked by different kinds of socially determined power especially when, as in the Chiffons' story, the discoverer is a young man and the discovered is a group of teenage girls. In this context, the discovery narrative functions as less of an accidental encounter and more as a highly gendered pipeline for men with power to control women with talent.

For sixties girl groups, who were often put together by a male producer and constructed to fit a particular image and sound, a discovery narrative becomes even more controlled and, in some ways, cynically architected, making it less about the discovery of the artists and more about the motivations of the system the discovery entered the artists into. Girl groups commonly started singing together in a shared neighborhood or in a shared high school and were then brought into the music business by a person affiliated with the music industry. The Shangri-Las (formed of two sets of sisters) and the Dixie Cups, for instance, were both discovered locally (by Artie Ripp and Joe Jones, respectively) and then brought to Red Bird Records to be signed by famed songwriters Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller. The combination of broad-stroke forces—of being controlled by and being marketed by white men—that shaped the Chiffons' career and legacy was one that most other girl groups also had to contend with. Phil Spector, for instance, infamously changed the lineups of the Crystals and even the Ronettes, shutting his own wife out of being able to travel to England and open for the Beatles by replacing her.[6]

But the Chiffons' particular relationship to variations of a masculine impresario figure is a complex one, involving more than one figure in the controlling seat and occasioning a shifting of power dynamics crossed through fields of racism. Ronald "Ronnie" Mack, who originally discovered them, was a Black man not much older than the teenage singers; he was trying to establish a career for himself and his clients that would, in under a decade, involve the appropriation of a hit song he wrote by a former Beatle, a lawsuit,

and the purchase of his music publishing company by that Beatle. Judy Craig described Mack's early involvement in the Chiffons' beginnings warmly and generously: "He wrote 'He's So Fine' for us and, to tell you the truth, we didn't even expect to do anything in music. It was basically all him. He just, one day, told us he wanted to form a group together and he started teaching us his songs, and he made demonstration records. He would take them around to the different record companies. He got turned down all the time until he ran into the Tokens."[7]

Having been given what former Token Hank Medress called a "a record production and publishing deal to produce 10 sides, 5 singles" by Capitol Records, it was the Chiffons' success that kept Medress going as a producer rather than a singer. Medress recounted:

> One day the Capitol Records receptionist buzzed me in my office. She said that there was a group outside with their manager who wanted an audition, but none of the Capitol A&R men had time to see them. I told her I'd be happy to see them. So they came back to my office with their manager, Ronnie Mack, and sang me a song that he wrote, 'He's So Fine.' I said, "Oh, my God!" It was one of those times when you know something is an absolute smash![8]

In Medress's telling, the teenage girls in question take a firm backseat to their song and their manager, a depressingly common discursive trope when girl groups are the subject of a question a man is being asked. As Judy Craig much more succinctly described it, "The Tokens were our producers. They liked what they heard; they asked us to come in, recorded it and that was it."[9]

In a twist of appropriative coincidence, the Tokens' ability to produce the Chiffons at all was in part conditioned by the smash success of their stolen single, "The Lion Sleeps Tonight." Released in 1961, "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" reworked "Mbube," a 1939 song written by Solomon Linda. Linda was an African tribesman who died penniless a decade after folk icon Pete Seeger and the Weavers first stole it for "Wimoweh" in 1952. Recent restitution efforts aside,[10] this double theft is especially galling; as *Rolling Stone* uncomfortably described it, "Solomon Linda was buried under several layers of pop-rock stylings, but you could still see him beneath the new song's slick surface, like a mastodon entombed in a block of clear ice."[11]

The currents of misogyny implicit in such creative discovery narratives where men discover women are substantially amplified for Black women. As Patricia Hill Collins writes in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment,* "maintaining images of U.S. Black women as the Other provides ideological justification for race, gender, and class oppression."[12] Drawing from Barbara Christian's observation that "the enslaved African woman became the basis for the definition of [American] society's Other,"[13] Collins parses the problems with the othering, violent mythology of a binary in the first place: "Objectification is central to this process of oppositional difference. In binary thinking, one element is objectified as the Other, and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled."[14] White male power also acts on and against Black men, as Solomon Linda and Ronnie Mack's stories show. As *Rolling*

Stone reports, in 2006 Linda "belatedly receive[d] a co-writing credit on 'The Lion Sleeps Tonight,' and his family [was] handed a lump sum for past royalties and a cut of future revenue."[15] But the damage had already been done.

Drawing from Collins's typology of the "controlling images" to which the racism of white-dominated US society subjects Black girls (and the mythologies it creates therein), I read the Chiffons, in their demure, girl next door posture, as exemplars of the mythic kind of Madonna-esque femininity that teen girls of all races were supposed to emulate, with Black girls' gender expectations cross-hatched with the added, intertwined pressure of anti-Black racism. (By contrast, the Ronettes were placed rather firmly into Collins's jezebel frame, their proud sexiness often interpreted by male critics as unserious or as sexually promiscuous.) In their early sixties incarnation, the Chiffons do not fit easily in the overlapping realms of transgression actively occupied by groups like the Ronettes and the Shangri-Las: They wore the poufy dresses that classical sixties femininity (and music industry expectations) prescribed. The Chiffons were, in other words, visually adhering to the mold the industry wanted.

Despite this docility, the Chiffons' hits, some of which were written by young married songwriters Gerry Goffin and now-legend Carole King, strike notably outside of a marriage pattern. They pine for partnered love, and even socially acknowledged love (as in "I Have a Boyfriend"), but not *married* love specifically. Both "He's So Fine" and "One Fine Day" hope for romantic possession in tantalizingly open terms for such a period with such restricted mores. Certainly, lines like "wish he were mine" and "you're gonna want me for your girl" imply a desired relationship, but there's room between the lines for other things, perhaps including, as Patricia Juliana Smith notes in "'Ask Any Girl': Compulsory Heterosexuality and Girl Group Culture," both sex and pleasure.

Smith makes a refreshing argument for the lyrical and gender-relation radicalness of girl groups specifically: "While The Boy is both subject and object of girl-group fantasies, he is only rarely a physical presence in these mini-melodramas. Absent, in love with someone else, dead, merely fantasized, or otherwise disembodied, The Boy exists primarily in the third person for the lead singer/persona, while the second-person preceptors are other girls."[16] Part of the feminist revelation of this reading is how it cuts against the assumed passivity of teen girls without denying the social forces limiting their agency.

The dramatic yearning needs a gestured direction in order for the plot arc of the song to make sense, after all, but it doesn't actually need to *arrive*. Read this way, The Boy is not just absent: He is a lyrical glimmer winking in and out, a character who appears in the imagined landscape of teen girlhood and the lyrics their teen girl interpreters sing. In this context, singers are subject to the strictures of the white male–dominated music industry, but as the sonic characters they play, they are able to tell stories to and about girlhood that sneak through the ability (or inclination) of the powers that be to understand. The seductive game the listener can then play—of wondering who is singing, the singer or a character or some combination—carries added intrigue when the songs are written by men for women to sing. And The Boy is an object, but more than that, he's a useful absence: one that is dramatic fodder for the plot of the song, and, maybe, for ways the teenage girls listening can evaluate their own presences.

It's not just the lyrics that set out a desire-inflected vocabulary, either: "He's So Fine" announces its goal in a sonic climax, after it sets out the situation, when Judy Craig's voice soars upward in the second half of the bridge: "I don't know how I'm gonna do it / But I'm gonna make him mine." The insistently upward pull of the melody of "how I'm gonna do it," and Craig's warm command over her tone, cements the lyrics' optimism. As Charlotte Greig had it, that lyrical optimism was iron-clad: "There was not much doubt in her mind that she would succeed; and loverboy himself didn't have that much say in the matter. . . . So much for simpering, coy young girls suffering the attentions of over-eager young men; as far as the Chiffons were concerned, the boot was firmly on the other foot."[17] The singer visualizes her goal. It is, after all, just a matter of time.

Several girl-group scholars have traced the meaning inside the absence of meaning that nonsense words sung by women are taken to have. Patricia Juliana Smith positions songs with nonsense refrains as part of a grammar of girl groups' supportive homosociality even when a song's subject is a boy, specifically citing "the quintessential 'Doo Lang Doo Lang' (the Chiffons' 'He's So Fine' [1963]) that serves semiotically to convey an inarticulable if not unspeakable empathy."[18] Mapping inarticulable feelings onto nonsense words is, it seems to me, an intervention of both songwriter and singer: The semiotics are laid down by the writer, but it's the singer's embodiment of their chosen feeling within the syllables that really brings the empathy level to life.

Jacqueline Warwick makes clear that the nonsense syllables link girl groups' sung vernacular to that of their immediate predecessors (and contemporaries) in doo wop, albeit "a specifically female version of doo wop syllables that related equally to the use of vocables in handclapping and ring games, where syllabic phrases often function as a refrain." But they also serve a much stronger narrative function, as well as a potentially feminist one, as Warwick describes: "appear[ing] in songs celebrating an idealized boy, 'the Guy' who is central to so much girl group music . . . a means by which girls could talk about desire without provoking outright censure."[19] Talking about desire at a winking slant like this is a savvy move for young girls; with the added context that some of the songs were written by men, one begins to wonder about the possibility of homoerotic subtext being written in. Beyond the nonsensical sense they announce, the "doo langs" also work very creatively to structure the song itself. They are sung as backup to the lead vocal and as such, they form part of both the lyrics and the instrumentation, occupying a liminal, dual position.

In a funhouse mirror reflection of the Harrison plagiarism and the Chiffons' subsequent cover, the Chiffons made versions of girl-group songs that other singers ended up making more famous, including "It's My Party," "The Loco-Motion" (made famous by Little Eva), "My Boyfriend's Back" (the Angels), "Da Doo Ron Ron" (the Crystals), and "Will You Love Me Tomorrow" (the Shirelles). This kind of sonic cross-pollination wasn't uncommon among a cadre of singers who were most typically used within the music industry as interchangeable versions of each other. Nonetheless, these songs place the Chiffons particularly firmly within an economy of reuse that saw them as vessels for reusable sonic objects. A cover song, after all, carries a particular kind of meaning if you know the original version it's drawing from (or fleeing from); without its original, the song might just land on listeners without that palimpsest.

When reports came through that someone in the Kennedy motorcade had been shot, the Chiffons' "I Have a Boyfriend" was playing on KLIF, the Dallas station. When the song begins, the audio (which I came upon, in a happenstance move, on YouTube) wavers, giving it a (firmly retrospective and technology-dependent) nightmarish quality. The second verse starts ("Feels so good to hold him tight"), and then the KLIF bulletin begins with an interruption from the announcer: "Shots have been fired at President Kennedy's motorcade."[20] They then allow the song to keep playing. Former KLIF reporter Gary DeLaune recounted, "I signaled the DJ and at about 12:36:55 during a song called the Chiffon's [*sic*] 'I Have a Boyfriend,' 1:38 deep into the 45 r.p.m., the old-style record, we broke in and had the bulletin and of course at that point on it was almost incessant."[21] While the "it" he means is of course the presence of Kennedy's death in the news, I am struck by the Chiffons' song's role in the horrific announcement of the assassination, one that would rock the whole country, but also by its rarely mentioned presence in that last moment of quiet before the historical storm.

The contrast between the bubbly optimism of both the melody and lyrics of the song and the horror of the unfolding national tragedy is, in immediate context and in retrospect, quite jarring. The song also places the Chiffons accidentally adjacent to tragedy (and to unalterable history) in a way nobody could have predicted or shifted. Any hit song could have been playing on Dallas radio at that moment, after all. Lesley Gore's "She's a Fool" was at number 6 on the Billboard charts that week. Elvis Presley's "Bossa Nova Baby" was at 8. The Singing Nun's "Dominique" was sitting comfortably at 9. The Chiffons were at place 83: respectably included but not making a splash, rankings-wise.[22]

The valorization of the young president, especially in the Camelot framework that linked him, through the now-classic musical he loved, to King Arthur, invites more than one parallel to the Empty Guy. Any elected official at the head of a violent state, as Kennedy was, is functionally imagined to be more than what they are. And mourning, while not vacated of all forms of presence, is both about the loss of the person who's died and the difficulty of the living loved ones (or, in this case, a considerable section of a populace) that they leave behind in navigating that now-empty space.

Girls as vocal creators participate in a form of restrictive duality: Their voices are located at the center of the song, conveying the lyrical meaning to the listeners' ears, but their voices are not always honored (and sometimes, as with some discussions of Phil Spector's Wall of Sound, placed firmly second to the rest of the sound around them). By centering the performance of the song as a dramatic act—the characterization and the assumed story that a particular singer brings to the lyrics—the valences of a cover version become legible as their own kind of (often displaced) memory. What their versions record, in a historical memory sense, is another way of conceptualizing a song, another constellation of choices that involve producers and sound engineers. The cover versions themselves, consigned to the sidelines of sonic history in the shadow of their more famous versions, become a metonym for the gaps. And when, as with "I Have a Boyfriend," a song both converges on historic tragedy and has its positioning there largely forgotten across time, the question of what we centralize in cultural memory and why becomes even more poignant.

Lyrically, both "I Have a Boyfriend" and "He's So Fine" are firmly directed toward a future the singer wants to be able to predict from a present that may or may not sustain it, and the songs are centered on experiences of love that are valuable in and of themselves rather than what they might lead to (which, to adults especially, was meant to be marriage). "I Have a Boyfriend" conjures the contours of a relationship that has barely begun; new teenage love is secured by the relationship status in the title, and it's in at least one way divinely pushed: The singer thanks "the stars up in the sky." In "He's So Fine," the boyfriend is still to be possessed: The singer has clocked him and knows she can get him, even though she isn't sure how yet.

The singer figures in each song are thinking past the requirements of early sixties sexual politics, where straight marriage was, especially for girls, meant to be the ultimate goal. In its biggest and smallest manifestations, white supremacy, as Black feminist critics like Patricia Hill Collins and Angela Davis have shown, particularly relies on exactly these kinds of false binaries to sustain itself. It categorizes the world in simplistic boxes that are easier to parse, easier to reduce to violence, and easier to control. As Collins explains, "Because oppositional binaries rarely represent different but equal relationships, they are inherently unstable." And as Patricia Juliana Smith puts it, "The boyfriend, no matter how diffident or distant, became the emblem of heterosexuality, a credential girls could display for other girls' approval."[23]

In this section, I excavate some sonic counternarratives in the Chiffons' vocal story, pushing back against the demureness and male control I considered above and marking out the Chiffons' place in the tension among happenstance, appropriation, and finding agency. I move through the hopeful futurity of "I Have a Boyfriend" and "He's So Fine"; the later, added skepticism (and self-protection) of "Sweet Talkin' Guy"; and the major context shift of their almost-forgotten cover of "My Sweet Lord," in which they also cheekily interpolate "He's So Fine," recontextualizing their own stolen song and quietly closing a circle of theft on more or less their own terms.

Still arguably the Chiffons' best-known song (released in December 1962 and marking their first number 1 hit in March 1963), "He's So Fine" begins with background voices and, some would say, with nonsense. The voices of Barbara Lee, Sylvia Peterson, and Patricia Bennett chant the now-iconic falsetto syllables of the "doo lang, doo lang, doo lang" refrain over a steady drumbeat until lead singer Judy Craig comes in low with the first line: "He's so fine, wish he were mine." Held up by the even drums that pause when Craig begins each verse, the song proceeds to tell a story of a nameless dreamboat that the singer hopes to obtain. For Greig, the song "had the heroine coolly sizing up her dreamboat and wondering how best to catch him."[24] The song's context tectonically shifts seven years later with George Harrison's accidental plagiarism of both the song's melody and some of its feelings of desire. Nominally a song about religious ardor, "My Sweet Lord" in fact absorbs the erotic desire of "He's So Fine": "I really wanna see you; I really wanna be with you," Harrison sings. If the Guy here wasn't God, would we even need to underline the absorbed subtext?

Contrast that with “I Have a Boyfriend.” Much of the topical material is shared: The conversation between the songs is one of new love, in “I Have a Boyfriend,” and hoped-for love, in “He’s So Fine.” Cowritten by then-spouses Ellie Greenwich and Jeff Barry with the help of the Tokens, “I Have a Boyfriend” presents a beautiful paradox that’s familiar to most of us who have been teens and have been in love: The singer is so certain in her love even though she only “met him a week ago.” “He’s mine forever,” she continues. Whether or not the relationship implodes is not her concern, and, I think, maybe shouldn’t be the listener’s. The singer is anchoring us in an emotional present that doesn’t particularly need a past or a future to be valuable to her.

Similarly, the “He’s So Fine” syllables, in their apparent verbal meaninglessness, offer up many different possibilities for deep *emotional* meaning, a power that is in a certain sense uniquely afforded to the singers and to the listeners. That is to say that even if songwriter Ronnie Mack meant something different with the nonsense, the Chiffons *as the singers* had the power to shift it. And as new generations discover the song in their own lived contexts, the meaning shifts yet again, with both Mack’s and the Chiffons’ meanings remaining as (legible or not) residue.

“I Have a Boyfriend” is also in conversation with the dozens of other songs Greenwich and Barry wrote for girl groups, many of them enduring classics: the Ronettes’ “Be My Baby” and “Baby I Love You,” the Crystals’ “Da Doo Ron Ron” and “Then He Kissed Me,” the Dixie Cups’ “Chapel of Love,” and the Shangri-Las’ “Leader of the Pack.” The *Los Angeles Times* describes them as “a string of 1960s hits that gave effervescent voice to unbridled teen romance.”[25] Unbridled love, in the voices of teen girls, is both expected and not: It’s what they’re supposed to want (and, indeed, conditioned to expect) when heterosexual marriage is the goal, but the feelings themselves aren’t the focus so much as the outcome.

Girls vocalizing their feelings is one of the simplest and most personal parts of any responsible feminism. While love songs sung by singers of any gender are a marketable object with a potential audience, and while there is a radical edge to boys singing such songs in a cultural milieu that discourages men from expressing their feelings, Black girls in particular have many social strictures to push against. With that, the Chiffons are in resounding chorus with the other singers of Greenwich and Barry’s songs, attending to teenage love and lust as a central concern rather than as a means to a married end. This kind of active expression, especially with respect to sex and sexual desire, is typically a male-coded response, going against the grain of girls’ docile socialization at the time: Even if nabbing a husband was meant to be the (stated or unstated) goal, American culture didn’t openly encourage girls to be “fast,” and yet media often offered up a contrary wink in that direction. As Susan J. Douglas describes it:

> American women today are a bundle of contradictions because much of the media imagery we grew up with was itself filled with mixed messages about what women should and should not do, what women could and could not be. This was true in the 1960’s, and it is true today. The media, of course, urged us to be pliant, cute, sexually available, thin, blond, poreless, wrinkle-free, and deferential to men. But it is easy to forget that the media also suggested we could be rebellious, tough, enterprising, and shrewd.[26]

Especially in these terms, the very existence of the gap into which "I Have a Boyfriend" is tucked is a genuine pity: Judy Craig's richly textured voice unfurls a tale of new, young love, in which the singer, simply and repeatedly, tells us that she has a boyfriend. As we've seen, she underlines the point with some lyrical remarks about her feelings for him and her gratitude for his existence; the plot of the song, though, is really just about how she *feels*: heady, confident, grateful, a little smug, and fully supported by the backup chorus meant to represent her girlfriends. Even in its newness, teenage love becomes eternal. The song gives us the sometimes foolhardy, always intoxicating optimism of teenage love at its highest height, and maybe lowest depth: Patricia Juliana Smith smartly articulates the song's presentation of "the theme of fidelity to the absent boy,"[27] and she calls the song "perhaps the most abject of all girl-group recordings."[28]

The Chiffons had quite a bit of movement in their lead singer role over many decades, starting with Craig in 1960, moving to Sylvia Peterson in the latter part of the decade, involving both Peterson and a rotating roster of other voices from the seventies to the nineties, and since 1992, led by Craig again. Cynthia Cyrus has described the puzzle-piece slotting in and out of singers as part of the ways girl groups performed a kind of vacated belonging: "Personnel changes were common in the girl group arena, reflecting once again the interchangeability of the performers. The market invested little in the personal identity of the performers, emphasizing instead the group as a whole."[29] Charlotte Greig holds, though, that "it was the Chiffons' distinctive sound and lyric style that pulled them through, in spite of the decidedly low-profile, low-rent image that their record company foisted on them."[30]

By 1966, the group was starting to present a sung narrative tinged with cynicism. One of their best-known songs and the title of their penultimate studio album, "Sweet Talkin' Guy" is a warning klaxon from one misled girl to any girls who might come after her. The guy whose words might sound lovely is, Craig announces in the first line, "talkin' sweet kinda lies." Despite the warnings, or perhaps to underline them, the singer is clear that the guy is attractive enough to be almost impossible to resist: "Sweeter than sugar, kisses like wine." The guy is his own addictive substance, and in a cheeky twist, the Greek chorus of the backup singers underline it by quoting their own hit, letting the listener know that "he's so fine."

With "Sweet Talkin' Guy" as ballast, Susan J. Douglas recognizes that the choices songs offered to their audiences were not binary, either, nor were (or are!) girls required to choose one and stick to it: "As altos, sopranos, or both, back and forth, we could love and denounce such boys, we could warn against our own victimization, yet fall prey to its sick comforts. We could feel how desire—irresistible, irrational, timeless—was shaping our destinies. [. . .] In [the Chiffons'] 'Sweet Talkin' Guy,' being divided against yourself is normal, natural, true: the song celebrates the fact not just that girls *do* have conflicting subjective stances, but that, to get by, they *must*." Notably, Douglas doesn't connect the song to its writers or producers, but to its singers: They are the ones who most directly conveyed the song to her and to her generation.

The album *Sweet Talkin' Guy* itself isn't done with love, most closely evidenced by the soaring emotion in "Out of This World," but even tracks like "My Boyfriend's Back" and

"Keep the Boy Happy" display an added layer of strategy and awareness that girls should take on, rather than falling into a dream of an uncertain future. ("Thumbs Down" presents an outright rejection.) Originally made famous by the Angels in 1963, "My Boyfriend's Back" shoos away a guy who's come around in the absence of the singer's boyfriend, warning him that his persistent attentions won't stand now that the singer's man has returned. (Significantly, we don't learn much about her relationship with him, just about how she thinks he'll react.) It's a consistently upbeat melody, with the lead singer in a low, more serious register and the backup singers interpolating a higher, jangly melody with the repeated title. But it starts with a sharper warning, reminiscent of "Sweet Talkin' Guy," except now directed at a guy himself: "He went away and you hung around / And bothered me, every night / And when I wouldn't go out with you / You said things that weren't very nice." What we'd now identify as open sexual harassment becomes, in this description, the hook for a classic pop music bop. And in a very subtle way, the Chiffons sing with their usual richness and precision of phrasing, but without the slightly sultry tone of Angels lead singer Peggy Santiglia.

Sonically, the progression of the next nine years pushed the Chiffons in an underdiscussed, seismically important direction. Their cover of George Harrison's "My Sweet Lord" is little known, to the point of general obscurity. But their version of the song wields radical importance even when partially hidden by historical gaps. The song was released in 1975 as the group's second-to-last single, with "Main Nerve" as the B side,[31] five years after the release of Harrison's album *All Things Must Pass* and four years after the initial *Bright Tunes Music Corp. v. Harrisongs Music, Ltd.* lawsuit was filed in 1971. Harrison's unconscious plagiarism verdict would come down a year after the single's release, in 1976.

The song begins with a soul-drenched instrumental, led by a flute and some bongo drums, that is, at first, barely recognizable as the "My Sweet Lord" / "He's So Fine" melody. Sylvia Peterson's vocals are clear and expressive as she brings in the main melody line and steadily keeps it going. Notably, she changes the lyrics very slightly, repeating the title refrain and the "I really wanna see you" / "I really wanna know you" lines more than Harrison did, and "I really wanna be with you" doesn't appear in the recording until about halfway through (to the point where, on first listen, I thought it might not appear at all). The other Chiffons take up the Sanskrit chanting in the latter half of the song, mouthing praise to the avatars of the godhead just like in Harrison's version.

The overall feel of the song is looser than Harrison's, somehow, even though it's much more produced, with layers of instruments behind and around Peterson's voice. Beyond the differences in instrumentation and production, the conversations that Peterson and Harrison have as lead singers (and, in an adaptation of Simon Frith, as performers embodying sonic characters) feel qualitatively different, and not always in a way that's possible to express. And not everything about the cover is a radical departure from the original, of course. The Chiffons kept the conceit of Harrison's lyrics, that the singer is singing just to the god figure, but the function of recording a song is to also be singing to an audience. And the presence of backup singers in both recordings complicates the reception even more—neither set of singers works exactly like, let's say, a gospel choir, but there are certainly glimmers of their sonic influence.

In the third of the song's four minutes, something explodes, very quietly. Peterson tucks in a sly "He's so fine" and, in case we missed it, an even slyer "He's so fine / Wish he were mine." It's quietly done, but its impact, in the full context of the Chiffons' connections to and suppression by the Harrison theft, is revolutionary. The Chiffons reframed their stolen song in the context of what Harrison made from it, while also allowing them the chance to reinscribe Harrison's original on their own terms. The fact that it's Peterson making the radical vocal choice to cite her group's stolen hit may be more significant than if another of the Chiffons' lead singers had been singing it, too. Since she may have been the inspiration for "He's So Fine" as originally written by Mack, a second- and third-hand reported rumor[32] that neither she nor Mack are alive to verify, her role in its sonic recontextualization carries an extra layer of meaning. And for her to slyly reference it in the fabric of the song it was stolen by is a meta reclamation that it's hard not to push too much meaning onto. Even as a partially imagined set of circumstances, it's heady stuff!

By covering "My Sweet Lord," the Chiffons changed the meaning of the song quietly and from the inside out. While Craig's interpretation of the role of being current is important, it's also true that they recuperated the meaning of their stolen song in another reversed (or rearranged) way: A song all about (maybe) one-sided romantic devotion and dedication to an as-yet undiscovered love becomes, in Harrison's hands, a song about religious (and sexual or sensual) devotion. The quietness of their rebellious act is in part because the cover doesn't come up very often. It's not part of the discourse of the first two recordings, and it's not mentioned in the context of the plagiarism it's reacting to, either. But it still exists, and its future impact is yet to be determined.

The Chiffons' "My Sweet Lord" is shot through with gaps: We don't have, in easy-to-access writing or interview form, the decisions to record the song, obscuring who said what and when they said it, and what the individual Chiffons' reactions and decisions were. It's easy to imagine that the latter would have been very different in 1975 than in 1963: The Chiffons were no longer teenagers new to the music industry. Would they have been more of a challenge to talk over? Even worse, Sylvia Peterson's own legacy is partially obscured in the gaps of history. There's very little information available about her life or her career. She's even typically overshadowed by Craig in the legacy department as the Chiffons' lead singer, even though they both filled that role, and appear to have done so amicably; Craig regularly speaks fondly of her, Lee, and Bennett in interviews.

In a revolutionary twist, though, "My Sweet Lord" turns, in the Chiffons' voices, back into a song of women's desire, like the one that underpins it. It does more than revert to their own song: It makes the listener hear the residue that Harrison skimmed. But the historical impact of an event, especially an event acted out by minoritized people in white (and white supremacist) systems of power, is not really the point. The point is often purposely lost to history. With their cover, the Chiffons intrinsically spoke back to the power of white masculinity via the person of George Harrison. They *use* their own stolen residue to respond, and they reshape someone else's sound just as so many white men before them (like Harrison) have done.

CONCLUSION

While plagiarism and the lawsuits associated with it are still a constant material with which the music industry constructs itself, the avenues available to Black singers now for reshaping other people's sounds are wider and more firmly trod than the paths the Chiffons and their cohort had available to them. Since the release of her first solo album, 2003's *Dangerously in Love*, Beyoncé has eclipsed the ensemble mode of vocal work with which her career began, vaulting past her own previous success with girl group Destiny's Child. In reestablishing her boundaries as a solo artist, she has taken notable control of collaborations and guest spots, often using them to productively transgress genre boundaries in her reshaping of their work. On her most recent release, 2022's *Renaissance,* these collaborators include, among many others, Grace Jones, Raphael Saadiq, and Skrillex. On 2016's visual album *Lemonade*, she showed equal facility with blues-rock (in collaboration with White Stripes guitarist Jack White) and with country. As Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley notes of "Don't Hurt Yourself," Beyoncé's collaboration with White, she also "samples Led Zeppelin's 'When the Levee Breaks,' a 12-bar blues authored and originally performed by classic blueswoman Memphis Minnie in 1929."[33]

With "Daddy Lessons," Beyoncé's specific move into country—a genre that could be considered a geographical birthright for a native of Houston—raised predictable yet vitriolic firestorms, with the racist good ol' boy tradition incensed at a Black woman claiming a genre they wrongly believed is theirs. This unfettered, racist rage culminated in her appearance with the Chicks, previously banished from country radio for their critique of a warmongering president in 2004, at the Country Music Awards in November 2016. As the *Los Angeles Times* described it, in their shared expression of "the tangled roots of American music," the two acts' shared home state is only one of the links that makes them a vibrant combination: "The land that bore both western swing band Bob Wills & His Texas Playboys and proto-R&B rocker Big Mama Thornton is big enough for both, so the notion that Beyoncé, of Houston, and [Chicks lead singer] Maines, of Lubbock, would represent on a single stage is hardly outlandish."[34] A gleeful, rollicking collaboration between two artists was briefly overshadowed by the racist hate it produced; while that hatred has become part of its narrative, both the performance and the recorded song will continue to shine through the bigoted frothing.

Where cultural memory is concerned, the Chiffons' career is positioned in an uneven place: infamously marked by the appropriation of their work by one of the most famous men in music history as well as containing an almost forgotten convergence with a historic tragedy, a contrast that raises crucial questions about the caprices and constructions of cultural memory and artistic quotation. Such a pernicious gap, its conceptual ground broken and maintained by misogyny, racism, and their particular anti-Black intersection within misogynoir, raises questions of what the terms (and the limits) are by which we as a culture determine what to remember and what to forget. As I've considered here, even with the necessary caveat that we can't collectively remember everything, it is crucial to ask which power brokers, canons, and gatekeepers we actively listen to and respect, and what happens to certain legacies when we let them lie (more or less) fallow?

In canny and creative (and capitalist) ways, Beyoncé has managed to move easily past the still sharply defined barriers in the music industry for female artists, while also paying different kinds of cross-genre homage to some of the women who came before her. Notably, she has channeled the eras that the Chiffons themselves came up in, through film. In 2006, she starred in *Dreamgirls*, a musical inspired by Motown and the career arc of the Supremes; her character, Deena Jones, is a composite of Diana Ross and two former Supremes, Jean Terrell and Scherrie Payne. And in 2008, in a neat (and under-discussed) precursor to her inauguration serenade, Beyoncé played Etta James in *Cadillac Records*, a biopic about the life of Leonard Chess, founder of Chess Records. In what at the time seemed like a career culmination (but in the eight years since has been largely obscured by other achievements), in 2013 she provided the soundtrack for the first dance of the president and first lady at the second inauguration of Barack Obama, giving James's soaring R&B classic "At Last" gospel and soul inflections.

Songs help write our own cultural history, ever slanted and incomplete, as do the singers who embody them, even when their stories are ignored. I could tell shades of a different story by examining and putting into conversation different Chiffons tracks. What would, for example, their history look like told through the many famous songs they recorded that were made more famous by other groups? I began this article marking the unsung sunnily emotional power of "I Have a Boyfriend" and end by turning toward the twist of abject historical coincidence that found it playing on the radio in Dallas on November 22, 1963, during President Kennedy's assassination, casting that inherent optimism in a shadow of collective tragedy. To the degree that the song has been immortalized in newsreels and historical compilations, not for that soaring optimism held out in each of Craig's concluding notes, but for where it happened to be playing when a national tragedy occurred, it is a crucial example of the kinds of gaps into which female singers' (and especially Black female singers') work tends so often to be consigned. It is, after all, these sorts of coincidences that end up as historical footnotes, propping up narratives of who gets remembered and how.

As bell hooks noted critically after the release of *Lemonade*, Beyoncé is an industry unto herself now, consistently and constantly shattering chart records and leaning into the associated capitalist imperative; for hooks, "*Lemonade* offers viewers a visual extravaganza—a display of black female bodies that transgresses all boundaries. It's all about the body, and the body as commodity. This is certainly not radical or revolutionary. From slavery to the present day, black female bodies, clothed and unclothed, have been bought and sold."[35] And while she allows that the purpose of the singer's commodification (and her winking usage of it) is to challenge assumptions, "this radical repositioning of black female images does not truly overshadow or change conventional sexist constructions of black female identity." This occurred most recently with the release of her latest album, *Act I: Renaissance*. The day of its release, July 29, 2022, it became "the most-streamed album in a single day by a female artist in 2022 so far" on Spotify, according to a tweet by the company.[36] By contrast, the Chiffons' "I Have a Boyfriend" is one of so many songs sung by Black women that tend to be mostly forgotten by the

different canons, critical spaces, and media spaces that track these things. What I have cast as the song's fallow legacy is even more broadly represented by the Chiffons' broader legacy: ripe for re-examination, excavation, different angles of vision, and crucially recognizable in its own right. And in a 2012 radio interview on the *Topically Yours* show, after Craig had listed some of the Chiffons' hits, interviewer Deardra Shuler noted, "I remember a song called, I think it was, 'I Have a Boyfriend,' you just mentioned?" Craig answered, "We always loved that song" and "we were just shocked that it never went higher on the charts."[37]

Where the Chiffons ingeniously quoted their own work in response to Harrison's ambiguous theft in their cover of "My Sweet Lord," Beyoncé has been able to make something entirely new out of references to other artists. And her purposeful use of pastiche and of visualized power in "Hold Up" stands in stark contrast to the historical gap "I Have a Boyfriend" was allowed to fall into. The second single on *Lemonade*, "Hold Up," builds a song from an idea of Vampire Weekend's Ezra Koenig and a riff from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, using the blurred lines between pop and rock music to her own creative ends. The song illustrates the kind of creative freedom that, while not always easy to put into play, at least is now possible in more empowered models of musical work than the male impresario one the Chiffons worked under. And lyrically, it continues a well-established thematic link back to "He's So Fine" and "Sweet Talkin' Guy" (and before): women in love who examine not just their loved one but the vagaries and processes of being in love in the first place (or wishing you weren't). Beyoncé echoes the Yeah Yeah Yeahs' line "They don't love you like I love you" through her song, and adds, "Can't you see there's no other man above you? / What a wicked way to treat the girl that loves you."

Almost as if to underline that point of independence, the video for "Hold Up" memorably places Beyoncé in the role of active, righteous destroyer, notoriously smashing car windows with a baseball bat,[38] dressed in "Oshun yellow," Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley notes, and thus pulling her power directly from the fount of the Yoruba goddess's fecund, white-hot purity.[39] If, indeed, Jay-Z's infamous infidelity was the inspiration for most of the album, "Hold Up" pushes us past him into a matrix of feminized agency, where a Black woman can and does gleefully claim her right to destroy as well as to build.

As I've shown, the most accessible version of the Chiffons' story is one formation of an inherently generic one—a trio of Black girls meet in the school they attend, add a fourth singer, get signed by some famous men, and record and tour with some songs. Excavating a more active story from behind those facts means both reading over and through some of the narrative frameworks their story tends to carry, among them assumptions of Black female docility and white male music industry power, and it also means putting other facts about them into more primary focus.

Voices shift things, and songs take on different meanings depending on who is singing them. Some of the meanings we hear or otherwise perceive, and some we don't. And unheard, forgotten, or obscured voices still echo. As Saidiya Hartman asks so trenchantly in "Venus in Two Acts": "What are the protocols and limits that shape the narratives written as counter-history, an aspiration that isn't a prophylactic against the risks posed

by reiterating violent speech?"[40] Hartman's context is extremely more violent than the Chiffons' or Beyoncé's, but the same currents of racialized and gendered domination, historical erasures, and narrative recuperation that thread through her analysis exist in these singers' contexts, both shared and separable, and have inspired mine. ■

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NOTES

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