

THE CHANTELS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
1957-1970	Early soul-pop	<u>Congratulations</u> (1958)

Only Solitaire

Artist: *The Chantels*

Years: *1957-1958*

George Starostin's Reviews

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WE ARE THE CHANTELS

Album released:

October 1958

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Tracks: 1) **Maybe**; 2) The Plea; 3) Come My Little Baby; 4) **Congratulations**; 5) Prayee; 6) He's Gone; 7) I Love You So; 8) Every Night (I Pray); 9) Whoever You Are; 10) How Could You Call It Off?; 11) Sure Of Love; 12) If You Try.

REVIEW

Studying the history of any particular musical trend can be a tough and tedious affair if you are not a devoted fan of the trend in question — and even if you are, it can be pretty disappointing to trace it all the way back to its roots only to see how pathetic these roots now sound compared to what they eventually nurtured and influenced. From that point of view, it is a great relief to discover that the debut (and, in fact, the only «proper») album released by the Chantels, typically acknowledged to be the first classic girl group in the history of girl groups, quite openly transcends «merely influential» and, in fact, is every bit as listenable today as any randomly selected Motown album from the next ten years.



The Chantels were as indie as they come — a bunch of choir girls from the St. Anthony of Padua school in the Bronx, who, because of the school's Catholic creed, happened to specialize more in classical and Latin hymns than in African-American gospel at the time they were discovered by singer / producer Richie Barrett of the Valentines and signed to the tiny record label of End Records, founded by George Goldner (its main client at the time were the Flamingos, one of the more famous doo-wop outfits of the 1950s). Naturally, they were not the only girl group to coalesce around 1957 — the Shirelles, for instance, emerged in New Jersey at exactly the same time — but they were different in that their own star skyrocketed early

in history, and just as early bounced back to make way for others, leaving them as a one-hit flash-in-the-pan in the minds of the general public, which is... somewhat unjust.

Although the group's first single was a flop, already on 'He's Gone' you can clearly discern their trump card — the strong, ringing, expressive lead vocal of Arlene Smith, who was both the group's frontgirl in their classic period *and* their only songwriter for a while (many of the early tunes are co-credited to her and Goldner). The song's melodic base is fairly generic doo-wop progression, but Smith's singing transcends the usual expectations from this mellow genre: loud, proud, soulful to the core, while still following the melodic contours of lounge-pop rather than blues-gospel. Even better, in my opinion, is its B-side, 'The Plea', whose chorus trades in loudness for tenderness but still comes out as playfully soulful — come to think about it, this is probably the earliest song I know with a falsetto "baby, baby, baby, baby" refrain that would have sounded perfectly modern even in the 1970s.

Importantly, though, Smith's beautiful vocals do not exist in a vacuum. Despite not having anything to do with Motown (which had not even been incorporated yet), or Phil Spector (who was still a member of the Teddy Bears at the time), 'The Plea' has a thick, rich, bombastic sound, with an echoey production style and every musician and singer performing at the top of their abilities — an extremely far cry from the usually cozy and quiet arrangements of doo-wop ensembles, or even from the louder, but more ballroom-like standards of the Atlantic R&B sound. Honestly, *nothing* else from 1957 that I have ever heard sounded quite like this — but, of course, a huge amount of stuff from later years would. And even if, technically, there is no «wall-of-sound» production here, with their limited means they achieve almost the same overwhelming effect as Phil Spector would soon learn to generate by means of a much larger budget.

It all comes together on 'Maybe', the Chantels' second and best-selling single, and still probably the only song by them that a significant amount of people might find familiar. The thunderous piano intro, the angelic harmonies of the girls, and Arlene Smith's grand opening "maybe, if I pray every night..." did what 'He's Gone' did not quite pull off — announce the arrival of a new kind of music, the Teenage Gospel Pop of black America. The most repeated word in the song is "maybe", and this is its rock-solid hook that separates it from the other 11 songs on this album; but perhaps the more important word, also repeated over and over throughout the verses, is "pray", because the song is indeed emotionally formatted as a prayer. Thus, what Ray Charles did for all the hot-blooded male youths in America, the Chantels did for all of its young women, using all that mighty powerful religious energy to charge up a simple pop song. And if you crank it up real loud all the way, even now, in the 2020s, you will find out that battery still holds the charge damn well.

It is hardly surprising, then, to see just how often those religious references crop up in subsequent Chantels' releases. One of the songs is called 'Prayee'; another is 'Every Night (I Pray)'; and 'Whoever You Are' reminds us that "when God made Adam and Eve, he also made a lover for you and a lover for me" (a bit of chronological confusion here, but whatever). The problem, however, is that Arlene is really at her best when singing songs of desperation and heartbreak rather than praise-the-Lord-for-sending-me-this-boy kind of stuff — and yet Barrett and Goldner did not want the group to cultivate a focused morose image. Thus, songs such as 'Sure Of Love', despite technically being just as powerful as 'The Plea' and 'Maybe', come across as more shallow and stiff in comparison.

There is at least one more mini-masterpiece here which deserves just as much praise as 'Maybe': 'Congratulations', written by the little-known duo of Bernice Andrews and Joe Dasher and relegated to the B-side of 'Prayee'. Driven by an unusually thick and loud bass guitar riff rather than the more typical sax and piano, it is the kind of song that could have become a hit for Sam Cooke — with its near-tearful dramatic soulful verses, surprisingly clashing with the bitterly ironic tone of the bridge section — but instead, sank to the bottom with the Chantels, quite unjustly so. (It should have at least been the A-side, being far more musically interesting than the formulaic doo-wop of 'Prayee').

Still, whenever Arlene takes the helm, the result is always listenable at the least, which is why, ultimately, the only truly bad (or, at least, totally dismissable) song here is 'Come My Little Baby', a cutesy novelty tune sung by all the girls collectively in the form of a merry go-round. Ironically, it was the B-side of 'Maybe' — even though the two songs could not have sounded more dissimilar to each other — and it probably meant that Barrett and Goldner were trying out different models for their protégés; happily, the success of 'Maybe' at least guaranteed that they would lock them for good into their *best* model and forget all about the cringy ones.

In all honesty, 'Come My Little Baby' is also the only song whose attitude agrees full well with the cheesy photo on the album sleeve, which had the girls «elegantly» dressed up as Southern belles — despite all of them being from the Bronx (unless, of course, those were the traditional school uniforms at St. Anthony of Padua, which I somehow doubt). Even *that* cover was, however, later deemed to be inappropriate, and less than one year after the original LP, End Records reissued the album, simply titling it **The Chantels** and putting two white kids hanging around a jukebox — which should probably be chalked up to general racism of the listening public rather than specific racism of the label owner, looking more like a trick on Goldner and Barrett's part to fool white audiences into assuming that the Chantels shared their skin color (as we can see, it did not really work; in any case, pretty soon the people at Motown would begin to come up with far more subtle,

if just as morally ambiguous, strategies to endear their black artists to conservative white audiences).

Anyway, it is not entirely clear to me why the band's post-'Maybe' career slid down the nose of public attention so quickly. Either they were perceived as too old-fashioned, with the shadows of doo-wop closing in too tightly on their output, or as too «churchy» for their own good, with the near-constant anthemic sound being too heavy for pop-attracted audiences — or, likeliest of all, they simply did not have the right management to steer them in the correct direction. On the other hand, in retrospect it is precisely this combination that gives the Chantels their own unmistakable niche in the long queue of girl groups to follow: I may not be in awe over the majority of the individual songs on here, but the collective sound so distinctly has one foot in the past and one in the future that you will never confuse it with either the past *or* the future.

