

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: *1957-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

Page contents:

- [We Are The Chantels](#) (1958)
- [There's Our Song Again](#) (1961)



WE ARE THE CHANTELS

Album released:

October 1958

V A L U E
2 3 3 4 3

More info:



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.





THERE'S OUR SONG AGAIN

Album released:

1961

V A L U E
2 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) I Can't Take It (There's Our Song Again); 2) Never Let Go; 3) Believe Me (My Angel); 4) C'est Si Bon; 5) Ific; 6) My Darling; 7) I'm The Girl; 8) I; 9) My Memories Of You; 10) I'll Walk Alone; 11) I'm Confessin'; 12) Goodbye To Love.

REVIEW

By the time The Chantels' second and last LP came out on End Records, nothing was the same — yet the album's original liner notes do not betray even a single detail of the group's turbulent history, not even mentioning that there are several different lead singers on this record and that some of its songs even originally came out under a completely different name. With historical information on the group being scarce and not too reliable, it takes quite a bit of effort to reconstruct what happened, so my apologies in advance if I am getting some of this wrong. It's still worth a little trouble, because there is some really good stuff to be found on **There's Our Song Again**; antiquated a little by the general girl group standards of 1961, yes, but well worth revisiting today, when the ideas of a «1959 girl group» and a «1961 girl group» have long since reverted to equivalued status.



Apparently, the story is as follows. After the success of 'Maybe', the Chantels had two more moderate chart successes with 'Every Night (I Pray)' and 'I Love You So' — both songs were included on **We Are The Chantels** — but each of these charted lower than its predecessor, indicating that they were probably just riding the momentum of 'Maybe'. The next two singles, 'If You Try' and 'Prayee' (also included on the same LP) did not chart at all — and the band's last chance for

redemption was offered in early 1959, when they got to put out one more Arlene Smith original (co-credited to Ritchie Barrett), the dramatic doo-wop waltz of 'I Can't Take It (There's Our Song Again)' (depending on the circumstances, you can encounter the track under either one of these titles). It's a pretty powerful interpretation of the post-breakup experience with one of Arlene's finest «painful» vocal performances — the drawn-out "*I can't take it, oh no no...*" feel totally convincing to me — though I kind of feel sorry for the sax player, who gets to do an impressively monumental introduction, only to never return to the forefront again (surely an instrumental sax break would have been right on the money); those first 15 seconds are just the kind of sound that John Lennon would feel so nostalgic about in the first half of the 1970s (think everything from 'Woman Is The Nigger Of The World' to the **Rock And Roll** album). The B-side, 'Never Let Go', credited to Carmen Taylor, was comparatively happier — fast, danceable, almost proto-twistey, and showing that Arlene Smith could convey the sentiment of «confident loyalty» to her loved one every bit as efficiently as that of desperation.

Really, these are two excellent songs, but once again they failed to chart completely. Perhaps their sound was already perceived as a tad old-fashioned — though I find that hard to believe for early 1959, given that stuff like The Shirelles' 'Tonight's The Night', which would really redefine and modernize the idea of a girl group, was still a whole year away. Or perhaps the fans wanted for another 'Maybe' to give them starry-eyed romantic hope, rather than for another anthem of gloom to snatch it away. Or it was just poor promotion and bad luck. Who can really tell with these things? All we know is that the single ended up being their third flop in a row, and that's when two things happened: (a) End Records dropped the ladies' recording contract and (b) Arlene Smith left the group for an attempt at a solo career, followed by Lois Harris, another of the founding members. I am not sure which of these events preceded which other one, or whether they were even related, but basically, by the spring of 1959 it seemed like the curtain had fallen for The Chantels.

Needless to say, Arlene's solo career never managed to properly take off, though she did manage to record at least one semi-interesting single in 1961, produced by Phil Spector himself ('[Love, Love, Love](#)' on Bigtop Records). Meanwhile, the few remaining Chantels were still cared about by Ritchie Barrett, who even temporarily stepped in as lead vocalist; taking the battered group with him to Gone Records, a subsidiary label of End, he cut a couple of sides with them that hardly even deserve mentioning — croony mellow balladry like 'Summer's Love', on which the alleged «Chantels» simply act as his backup vocalists, deep in the background. Ironically, these sides boasted a tiny bit more commercial success and managed to keep the band afloat for a while, once again reaffirming the idea that the record-buying public was much more in the mood for sweet'n'syrupy romance than painful heartbreak.

Now this is where the story gets even more complicated. Apparently, around the same time that he was trying to support the remaining Chantels, Barrett also curated another recently formed girl group from the Bronx, who called themselves The Veneers and, curiously, consisted of two sets of sisters: Annette and Valerie Swinson and Lorraine and Barbara Joyner, with both sets descended from two sisters in turn (!), forming a rather unique kinship configuration in the art world. Barrett spotted them around and signed them up with the tiny Princeton Records label, giving them two of his own compositions to record. 'Believe Me (My Angel)' was the A-side, another of those syrupy ballads but elevated to a slightly higher plane by Annette's vocal performance, which does have a bit of a transcendental quality — here was a vocal timbre completely different from Arlene Smith's, more «heavenly», «lady-like», and vulnerable, but still with a grain of earthiness to not make her sound like an absolute china doll. The B-side, a pleading ballad simply called 'I', employed Annette's talents even more smartly, making a subtle move from the realm of courtly doo-wop into more down-to-earth contemporary soul: the main vocal hook in the chorus actually tugs at some genuine strings.

Most sources tell me that what happened next was Barrett convincing Annette Swinson to drop The Veneers and assume the position of lead vocalist in The Chantels, breaking the unique kinship bonds and also renaming herself Annette Smith in the process — allegedly, so that all the remaining fans would still see the group fronted by «A. Smith», despite the obvious discrepancy in looks *and* in voice; then he would have the new group record 'Look In My Eyes', take the song to Carlton Records and give the new Chantels a brief second stab at glory. However, as this LP, **There's Our Song Again**, clearly tells us, there was an intermediate stage to this business — it was released in 1961 on the same End Records that had previously broken up its own contract with the band, and it includes *both* the band's last single with Arlene ('I Can't Take It' backed with 'Never Let Go') *and* The Veneers' one and only record ('Believe Me' backed with 'I'), credited on the LP to The Chantels with not a single mention of it being originally released by The Veneers. Nor is there, of course, any mention that there are two different lead singers, both named «A. Smith». Who the heck cares about such useless trivia, right?

Unbelievable as it might be, though, the rag-taggy LP, consisting of previously released official singles and outtakes as performed by two completely different girl groups... is quite fun! Well, in certain spots, at least. Some of the older stuff from the Arlene Smith era is a bit too stiff: 'Goodbye To Love' and 'I'm Confessin' are slow and solemn doo-wop ballads with not a lot of open space for personality. But I really like the lightweight 'n' fluffy bits — 'C'est Si Bon' (from a long-forgotten EP of the same name, originally released in 1958) exploits the «I love Paris in the springtime» vibe the best way you could imagine from a simple, excited teenage girl's perspective; and 'Ific' was their fastest song up to date, with an irresistible Elvis-influenced pop-rock vibe and an interesting attempt to mimick the «head-swirling» mood of the song with some

spiralling, proto-psychedelic brass swirls. These tracks, corny as they are, show that The Chantels were slowly starting to come out of their shells — too late, unfortunately, to catch up with fresher competition.

Most of this is mildly adorable in its old-fashioned way, and if you are really hot for girl groups, **There's Our Song Again** will not disappoint: in fact, I would say it's probably more consistent, on a song by song level, than any single LP by The Supremes — the commercial singles are rawer and less glossy, while the filler is less desperate and embarrassing. I guess there's just something to be said about the earliest stage in any big new musical development: while the pioneers rarely take the art to its highest peak, their very crudeness and roughness sometimes gives them a unique edge that's well worth appreciating once you've gotten sick and tired of the big names. All in all, no need to hunt for this specifically, but there are far, far worse slices of late-Fifties-early-Sixties pop than this.

