

# THE SHIRELLES



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1958-1982</i>	<i>Early soul-pop</i>	<i><a href="#">Mama Said</a> (1961)</i>

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*Only Solitaire*

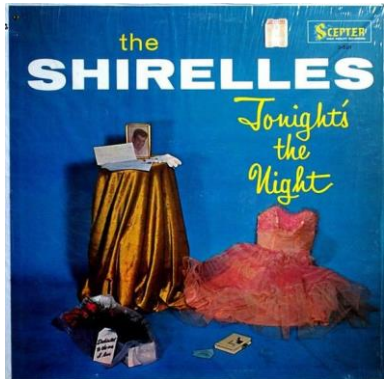
Artist: *The Shirelles*

Years: *1958-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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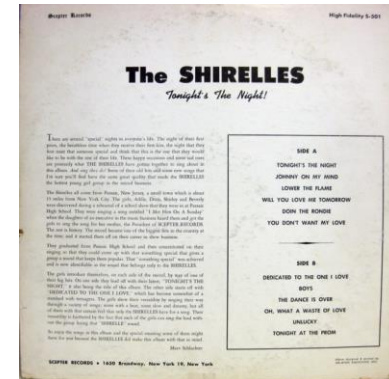
# TONIGHT'S THE NIGHT

Album released:

December 1960

V A L U E  
3 3 3 3 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Tonight's The Night; 2) Johnny On My Mind; 3) Lower The Flame; 4) Will You Love Me Tomorrow; 5) Doin The Ronde; 6) You Don't Want My Love; 7) Dedicated To The One I Love; 8) **Boys**; 9) The Dance Is Over; 10) Oh, What A Waste Of Love; 11) Unlucky; 12) Tonight At The Prom.

## REVIEW

The Shirelles did not invent the «girl group» phenomenon or prove its commercial and cultural potential – if there may be one single artistic entity that deserves such an honor, it would probably have to be [The Chantels](#), whose own 'Maybe' was riding up the charts at the very moment that The Shirelles (at that time still calling themselves «The Poquellos») were holding their first rehearsals at Passaic High School, and who most likely served as a major inspiration for their New Jersey admirers. But where The Chantels broke open a window for the conservative doo-wop aesthetics to whizz out into the open air and evolve into something more exciting, unpredictable, and attractive to the young minds of the late 1950s, The Shirelles were probably the first to make the world understand what this entire «girl group» thing was going to be about.



Unfortunately, when the time came to assemble the first LP for the group, Decca executives did not bother to reach as far out as March 1958, even if the Shirelles' very first single *was* a relative commercial success – not to mention one of the most historically important pop songs of the pre-British Invasion era. 'I Met Him On A Sunday (Ronde-Ronde)' is, indeed,

quite an exceptional little number. It was originally written not by any professional songwriters, but as the result of self-organization on the part of four classmates — Shirley Owens, Doris Coley, Micki Harris, and Beverly Lee — whose only intention was to use the song for a talent show at their school. Another classmate convinced them to record the song for the label of her mother, Florence Greenberg — a bored Jewish housewife who had the idea (and, apparently, the funds) to relieve her boredom by setting up an independent record label (Tiara Records), signing up her daughter's classmates, then selling the label (and everybody who was contracted to it) to Decca once things started picking up. A pretty nifty story, indeed, particularly for those convinced that the entire «girl group» thing was a meticulously planned commercial strategy set up by record executives all along. Well, it *did* turn into a planned commercial strategy pretty quickly — but if it really weren't for these «grassroots» origins, there is no way that the girl group legacy of the era could still be admired with as much respect as it is today.

In any case, '[I Met Him On A Sunday](#)' is not so much a great song in its own rights as it is a spontaneous and unprecedented achievement. It is heavily influenced by doo-wop, but it is not really doo-wop — neither musically nor aesthetically. It is an early example of what we sometimes call «lush pop», but not in the baroque mode of the mid-Sixties, rather in a proto-Phil Spector mode — a large, looming sound that picks up a small, casual vibe (a brief teenage romance) and blows it up sky high, with crashing drums, echoes, and loud multi-part vocal harmonies. The loudness and echo had already been employed to much better effect on The Chantels' first singles, with The Shirelles adapting that approach as best they could with their homebrewn local studio arrangement; but the poppy melody, likely adapted from some children's song or other the girls learned at school, and the simplistic-but-empowering "schoolgirl meets schoolboy, schoolboy disrespects schoolgirl, schoolgirl dumps schoolboy" message were a totally new thing.

As was the nonsensical "ron-de-ron-de" refrain, for that matter, which went on to become the blueprint for all the da-doo-ron-rons in the world for the next five years. I honestly do not know where they took it from (not being well versed in the history of doo-wop), but at least this is definitely the first time the *Duran Duran* thing appears in my pop catalog. Together with the subtle humor of the song, with its blurred lines between verse and chorus, with its quizzical mix of tender romance and bitter irony, it is a startling achievement for a bunch of 16-17-year old girls in 1958, perhaps even the first ever startling achievement in pop music history of such a kind. And the song is still great fun to listen to today — they would re-record a much more polished version later on, in 1966, with a full-fledged Spector-style bombastic production, but there's no replacing the exciting schoolgirl freshness of the original recording.

Alas, just as it happens in those quantum-level physical experiments where the results of the observation are inevitably influenced and skewed by the very presence of the observer, so did this early magic of The Shirelles inevitably become tainted and strained immediately upon their transition to a commercial model of activity. Already the B-side to 'I Met Him On A Sunday' — a ditty whose disarming title, 'I Want You To Be My Boyfriend', must have served as a role model to the Ramones later on — is a much more predictable and musically conservative doo-wop ballad, with the girls hardly sounding any distinct from the miriads of doo-wop singer ensembles that preceded them. And no wonder — it is a song written by the songwriting team of «Bert Salmirs» and «Wally Zober», a couple of little-known songwriting hacks whose songs were recorded by the likes of Fabian. Perhaps most importantly, the song goes to show that The Shirelles are simply unfit to sing generic doo-wop: Shirley Owens' voice is way too nasal and «nasty», and the rest of the girls sometimes sing their doo-wop harmonies in such shrill falsettos that I simply cannot take the results seriously (at some point, parodic images of Frank Zappa's Ruben And The Jets start floating around my poor head).

As it turned out, The Shirelles were either incapable of, or afraid of following their initial success with further examples of original songwriting. The A-side of their second single was 'My Love Is A Charm', another run-of-the-mill doo-wop ballad (and this time, further spoiled with the obligatory spoken-word section in the middle); the B-side, 'Slop Time', was at least enlivened with an active saxophone part, and its poppy bounce, reminiscent of Elvis' early RCA-era sound on songs like 'Too Much', was a much better proposition for the lead vocals and harmonies of the group — still, it was too derivative and too short on hooks to make a serious impression. Taking it from there, Shirley Owens and Florence Greenberg's son Stan co-wrote 'I Got The Message' — another boppy exercise in soft-rock — but the song once again lacked any signs of startling originality, and flopped like its predecessor.

At this point, Decca Records, who had until then solely acted as a distributor for Tiara, enter the game as a serious player: with The Shirelles' contract sold to a larger label, while still allowing the band to be managed and collaborate with the Greenbergs, they gain an opportunity for wider exposure, as well as access to better studios and, probably, a better choice of potential song material to record. Their first venture into this new world was 'Dedicated To The One I Love', a cover of a song [originally written and recorded](#) by The "5" Royales two years earlier — back then, it was a showcase not only for the doo-wop vocals of the group but also for the shrill bluesy guitar playing of Lowman Pauling. The Shirelles, of course, dispense with the bluesy guitar and fully concentrate on the vocals, which are, for the first time, recorded with all the clarity that they deserve.

While I do love the song, I can also quite clearly understand why it did not chart higher than #89 upon its original release (but would later go on to climb into the Top 10 when it was re-released after the band had achieved popularity with other material). Again, this is The Shirelles quite far removed from the 'Met Him On A Sunday' vibe that made them unique — the song is a potentially gorgeous, but too overtly bombastic and «mature» doo-wop ballad that must have felt a tad antiquated for listeners in 1959. Doris Coley does a great job on the lead vocals, improving on the phrasing in all the spots in which The "5" Royales had mumbled and stumbled, but the cumulative effect is still insufficient to make the key lines like "*..and the darkest hour is just before dawn*" and "*...this is dedicated to the one I love*" emotionally overwhelm the average listener (at least such is *my* impression). In all honesty, it would take The Mamas & The Papas to bring out all the hidden potential of the song, transforming it into a roller coaster of shifting moods, all the way from melancholy to jubilation; but, of course, it was The Shirelles who laid down the groundwork for the definitive version, and it was 'Dedicated To The One I Love' that marked their transition to adulthood, from where it wouldn't be too difficult to occasionally return back to teenage-hood, but with an increased level of self-confidence and professionalism.

Decca dropped the girls soon after 'Dedicated To The One I Love' failed to make an impression, but Florence Greenberg did not, and sheltered them in the wings of her newly founded Scepter Records. After a couple more flops (at one point, they even tried, out of desperation, to make up a «new dance craze» with the self-penned 'Doin' The Ronde', but it did not work out, either), the resourceful and stubborn Greenberg hired an outside songwriter for her girls — Luther Dixon, a suave-looking gentleman from sunny Florida who'd previously scored modest hits with Perry Como, Pat Boone, and Nat King Cole; certainly not the most impressive resume if you're looking for artistic integrity, but with Shirley Owens and the rest of the girls in real desperate need of putting *some* eats on Mama Greenberg's table, artistic integrity was probably the least of Scepter Records' concerns in early 1960.

For their first record together, Dixon tried out two different approaches. One was represented on 'The Dance Is Over' — a slow, piano-led and maudlin-orchestrated sad waltz with some «torching» potential, but the vocal performance was just not sincere-sounding enough for the public to latch on to it, and overall, The Shirelles were never all that good at trying to sound broken-hearted. The other approach, however, worked like a charm — 'Tonight's The Night', an upbeat tune on the risky subject of the girl worrying about planning to lose her you-know-what, was *precisely* the kind of song the girls had been waiting for. Interestingly, it is a bit hard to categorize musically — at its heart clearly lies a fast, danceable, catchy pop-rocker, but instead of speeding it up and putting it more in line with the twist aesthetics of the era, Dixon slows it down, adds so much syncopation that the drums all but disappear out of perspective every few beats, and saturates it with strings



that carry a decidedly non-Hollywood flavor... in fact, that opening twirl, which makes the song instantly recognizable, is almost proto-psychedelic with its high-pitched bending.

In retrospect, it is difficult to ascertain precisely how shocking the subject matter was back in 1960, but in any case, lyrics like "*you said you're gonna make me feel all aglow*" did not prevent the song from — or, perhaps, even assisted it in — making it to the Top 40 and truly opening the floodgates for the girl group phenomenon. The Shirelles had always been more homely and immediate than The Chantels, and with 'Tonight's The Night' they were able to become a role model for thousands of young girls torn apart with the same doubts that plague the title character of the song. (The only thing I'm not sure of is whether it was a good thing to have the doubts resolved at the end of the track — I think it is the *hesitating* vibe of "*I don't know right now*", going so nicely hand-in-hand with all the stuttering syncopation, that really makes the song, and I'd rather it ended on that note than with "*gonna be a great romance, let's take this chance*". But then again, it was always more profitable to go for a yes than a no at the dawn of the sexual revolution).

Of course, the hoopla of 'Tonight's The Night' was soon overshadowed by what was to become The Shirelles' defining combination of A- and B-sides. 'Will You Love Me Tomorrow' made at least two monumental contributions to the world of pop music: it became the first ever girl group single to top the mainstream Billboard charts — not just the black R&B ones — and it stimulated the song's composer, the 18-year old secretary Carole King, to turn to songwriting as a professional job. One decade later, Carole would record the arguably definitive version of the song herself; but The Shirelles did it first, and did it pretty damn good, despite Shirley's alleged original aversion to the tune which she thought was too much country-based, and accepted only after it was sufficiently infused with strings. (As if you can't do country with strings, hah!)

I actually think that as a Shirelles song, 'Will You Love Me Tomorrow' works best as a logical continuation of 'Tonight's The Night' — with the original vibe resolved in favor of yes, the original jubilation triumphing over the original hesitation, and the deed basically done, 'Will You Love Me Tomorrow' comes on as Act II of the melodrama, and I'm pretty sure that the band themselves, as well as all the Greenbergs and Dixons, understood that well enough, picking this fresh offering from the Brill Building precisely because it was, like, the perfect sequel. That said, I'm also going to throw in a pinch of salt and say that 'Will You Love Me Tomorrow' is the perfect Carole King song, but *not* the perfect Shirelles song — when Carole sings "*will my heart be broken when the night meets the morning sun?*" in her breaking, raspy, less-than-perfect voice, she is perfectly believable, but Shirley Owens just... I don't know, feels like too tough a nut for such whiny nonsense. (This is not at all to say that in real life, «tough nuts» are immune to having their hearts broken, but we generally like to have our art a

little less complicated than our life). It might just be a purely formal matter of her voice's overtones, of course; or maybe it runs deeper than that — 'Will You Love Me Tomorrow' is very much a singer-songwriter piece of business, a solitary, individual confession of doubt and fear that absolutely does not require any of that *sha-ba-dup, sha-ba-dup* backing.

Ah, but the B-side certainly *does* require the backing. Co-written by Dixon and Wes Farrell, 'Boys' is *the* quintessential Shirelles song for me — fast, punchy, tough, and with none of that sentimental soul-searching, just a straightahead piece of objectification of the male sex for female pleasure. This is where the lead vocal of Shirley Owens and the backing vocals of the rest of the girls merge in total, thoroughly convincing, ecstasy, and to top it off, we have a brilliantly sassy sax solo by, apparently, none other than the great King Curtis himself. I might be the only person in the world to fully embrace the «simplistic» B-side over the «complex» A-side, but this is simply because I am a great believer in the importance of adequacy, and I would insist that 'Boys' and the Shirelles were made for each other, while 'Will You Love Me Tomorrow' and the Shirelles had an uneasy relationship. Of course, it would take just three more years for 'Boys' to become fully and irrevocably re-appropriated by the Beatles (who, upon refusing to change the lyrics, would inadvertently turn Ringo into a gay icon in the process), but while I love both versions, in this particular case the «adequacy ball» is definitely on the girls' side. (Somebody should produce a mash-up, though, with Ringo's drum parts and Paul's frantic screaming in the background dubbed over the Shirelles' original arrangement — it could use a little of that extra wildness!)

With the single riding as high up the charts as possible, and Mama Greenberg's investment finally redeemed (ah, the happy innocent times when business people could patiently wait for three years for their artists to find themselves!), it was time to follow up the 7-inch format with a proper LP — named after the group's first major success, **Tonight's The Night** included both of the hit singles, along with some of the earlier, unsuccessful, A- and B-sides and a few new tracks recorded specially for the occasion. While those are somewhat «filler-ish», it is interesting how Dixon and the girls continue to explore both the sentimental / heart-broken and the tough / aggressive sides of their musical personality, and how the second side consistently wins over the first one. Thus, the sentimental side is represented by 'Unlucky', a schlocky ballad that much better fits in with the likes of Dionne Warwick than the Shirelles (and *would*, in fact, be covered by Warwick two years later); and 'Tonight At The Prom', a fluffy waltz that is so unbelievably corny that it is hard to get rid of the feeling that the Shirelles are just self-parodying themselves with the song.

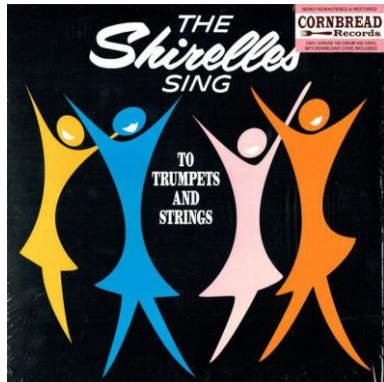
On the tough side of the fence, though, we find more enjoyable and credible pieces such as 'Lower The Flame', a derivative (the instrumental hook is borrowed from Elvis' 'Trouble'), but fun pop-rocker with a bit of sexual menace to it; and, most



importantly, 'You Don't Want My Love', Dixon's own rip-off of the Chicago blues of 'My Baby' and the like, which is a pretty great showcase for the voice of Beverly Lee, who suddenly turns out to be a pretty great, rip-roaring blues screamer. Granted, this is not the Shirelles at their most inventive or important, but I'd rather they had more dark blues numbers in their catalog than fluffy embarrassments like 'Tonight At The Prom'.

Still, it would be futile to insist that the Shirelles — or, for that matter, just about any of those «girl groups» to arrive in their wake — could ever be fully adequate «album artists»; the LPs are largely there to make them a little more colorful and diverse as musical personalities, and the probabilities of finding «deep cuts» that are every bit as overwhelming as the hit singles, while higher than zero, are still vanishingly tiny. The bad news is that with the arrival of Dixon, the Shirelles all but completely stopped trying to write anything themselves, even despite the fact that their very first song of any significance was self-penned; and, naturally, if you are completely reliant on outside songwriters, the resulting LPs are bound to be dominated by filler. The good news is that as a singles' group, the Shirelles had two more great years left in store for them — before the eyelashes of Diana Ross wiped the rougher facial features of Shirley Owens from the public conscience, proving once and for all that nothing tightens up one's artistic integrity as much as proper makeup.





# THE SHIRELLES SING TO TRUMPETS AND STRINGS

Album released:  
June 1961

V A L U E  
2 3 3 2 2

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) **Mama Said**; 2) What A Sweet Thing That Was; 3) It's Mine; 4) I Saw A Tear; 5) I Don't Want To Cry; 6) Rainbow Valley; 7) My Willow Tree; 8) The First One; 9) What's Mine Is Yours; 10) Without A Word Of Complaint; 11) I'll Do The Same Thing Too; 12) Blue Holiday.

## REVIEW

"Mama said there'll be days like this, there'll be days like this my Mama said". I guess this is the only lyrical line people will remember from 'Mama Said' (like any hard-working pop song, it hammers it inside your head with diligent repetition), thereby forming the inevitable association with, uh, *those* particular days that really usually require a young girl to take some coaching from Mama. Of course, Luther Dixon's and Willie Denson's lyrics would not want to cope directly with such a delicate physiological subject, so they made all those verses about a girl's first crush and everything — but regardless of how you want to interpret it, 'Mama Said' does a pretty good job of capturing that wonderful-or-weird moment when one crosses the threshold from one stage of life into another.



As is often the matter with great commercial pop songs, it's pretty darn difficult to pinpoint what makes this one such a particular standout — but clearly, *not* the verses or the bridge, all of which feel just like regular flows of a body of water before the chorus picks you up and chucks you down a gentle, but head-spinning waterfall. Amusingly, the only respect in which it fails a little bit is that the 20-year old Shirley Owens, with her deep and powerful voice, is not the most natural person in the world to be conveying that primal feeling of wonder 'n' terror — nor, of course, would be the 24-year old Dusty

Springfield, who would open her debut album with a cover of that very same song in 1964, sounding more like «Mama» than «Daughter» herself. (Perhaps the closest the song ever came to getting the right type of singer for it was in 2009, when it was revived by the 13-year old [Dionne Bromfield](#), a young retro-soul enthusiast and protégée of Amy Winehouse — alas, by that time the Sixties' flavor of the song had rendered it unrevivable for the new millennium). But that's something we'll probably have to live with the same way we'll always have to live with the understanding that it'll never be possible to film Nabokov's *Lolita* in strict accordance with the author's original vision.

Okay, so not *quite* the same way. There's definitely a nuance or two.

But in any case, 'Mama Said' was yet another well-deserved smash hit for the Shirelles, opening 1961 for them on a note full of hope and promise — unfortunately, a note that would be unable to resolve into a perfect musical phrase. Several months later, Mama Greenberg's Scepter Records amassed the right budget to let the girls complete a second LP, but its very title already suggested that things maybe weren't heading *quite* into the right direction. Honestly, **The Shirelles Sing To Trumpets And Strings** does not ring the same bell as would, say, **The Shirelles Sing To Their Generation** or **The Shirelles Sing To All The Young Girls In Need Of A Guiding Light**. I mean, I do love trumpets and strings as much as the next guy (on second thought, I probably love trumpets and strings *much* more than the next guy), but art is supposed to only be efficient when there's a back-and-forth communicative process going on, and how much feedback are you going to get from trumpets and strings? They're not even plugged in, for God's sake!

Seriously, though, most of the *other* eleven songs that constitute this LP are tasteful and decent and listenable, but three listens have not been enough to make any of them suddenly reveal themselves as emotional shockers on the level of 'Mama Said'. It's solid, generic, and highly derivative contemporary pop, most of it written by Dixon, Denson, and Van McCoy (of the much later 'The Hustle' fame) and classifiable as love songs hovering between teen-crush stuff and slightly more mature ballads of attachment (or detachment). Nothing as rocking as 'Boys', or as musically surprising as 'Dedicated To The One I Love', or as lyrically shocking as 'Tonight's The Night', or even as gratingly annoying as 'Tonight At The Prom'.

The proverbial strings, not included on 'Mama Said' (although there *are* trumpets on that one), break in with tremendous strength on the second song, 'What A Sweet Thing That Was' — another offering from Goffin and King which, however, has none of the depth or subtlety of 'Will You Love Me Tomorrow'. Let's face it, we always tend to remember more sharply those songs that ask questions instead of those that give answers, and 'What A Sweet Thing That Was' is basically like the Hollywood happy ending to 'Will You Love Me Tomorrow', and its a cappella hookline just doesn't resonate as intensely as the

anxiously hanging question of the previous song. It's just too happy-dippy for a band like the Shirelles, and although it is possible that somebody like Phil Spector could have done a much more striking job with those strings, there's a damn good reason why everybody in the world would go on to cover 'Will You Love Me Tomorrow', but *this* song just got lost deep in the well of history.

Shirley Owens' only contribution is even more disappointing: 'I Saw A Tear' is a good old-fashioned doo-wop ballad that feels more 1954 than 1961 — more «adult» than 'I Met Him On A Sunday', for sure, but much less creative and sincere. It is almost as if the song's only function here is to answer the burning question: «Why did these girls have to rely so much on professional songwriters if they started out by writing their songs on their own?» — well, *this* is why. At least something like Denson's 'It's Mine' has a nice steady beat to it that makes you want to jiggle along. It's pretty formulaic for 1961, but it does sound like it was written in 1961: the Shirelles' songwriters had a good sense of what was square and what wasn't, unlike the Shirelles themselves, who, apparently, needed to be *told* what was not square — and then they'd somehow get around to not sounding like they were square.

Still, not even the expert songwriters can save the album from sounding *way* too monotonous. For all of its deficiencies, **Tonight's The Night** tried out many different directions; the sophomore effort puts barriers on a lot of them, stifling the group's development — a telling sign of how the merciless «pop machine» used to grind down its victims even back in the old innocent days, let alone the hellish calculation gears of today, with most of the victims lacking that unique combination of talent, confidence, and guts to make their own stand. Again, though, the good news is that the «predators» sincerely cared about things such as groove, melody, and production, and, as 'Mama Said' clearly shows, could — at least occasionally — strike gold on their own. Thus, ready yourselves for some good, tasteful vibes, the fresh 'n' trendy sound of the earli(est) Sixties, and, uh, a lot of copy-paste rewrites of hooks from various pop and R&B hits of the day.

