"Some Kind of Wonderful": The Creative Legacy of the Brill Building
Author(s): Ian Inglis
Source: American Music, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Summer, 2003), pp. 214-235
Published by: University of Illinois Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3250565
Accessed: 06-07-2015 01:41 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp
JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
There is a curious asymmetry surrounding the recognition accorded to the Brill Building among those who document the development of popular music. On the one hand, it is one of the few buildings whose name may readily evoke a particular period or circumstance—along with, for example, the Cavern, Graceland, Studio 54, and Harlem’s Apollo Theatre. On the other hand, many commentaries on popular music either overlook its significance completely by failing to mention it at all or else dismiss it as a mildly interesting historical footnote by giving it only scant attention.¹

Such oversights are not only puzzling but also regrettable, since they conceal a set of structures and cultures that allowed the Brill Building to become an influential source of national and international musical activity at a crucial transitional stage in the evolution of popular music. Furthermore, its significance did not simply disappear as its period of greatest activity came to an end in the mid-1960s, but has continued to be a considerable force in popular music in subsequent decades.

Accounts correctly identifying the Brill Building’s impact and importance, of course, have added much to our appreciation of its place in popular music.² These, as well as other investigations, have indicated three broad trajectories—stylistic, industrial, and creative—along which the signature of the Brill Building can be distinguished.

Ian Inglis is Senior Lecturer in Sociology in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Northumbria. He edited The Beatles, Popular Music, and Society: A Thousand Voices (New York: Macmillan, 2000), and Popular Music and Film (Wallflower, 2003). His doctoral research considered the significance of sociological and cultural theory in explanations of the career of the Beatles. He is a member of the editorial board of Popular Music and Society.
Stylistically, its innovations can be credited with much of the responsibility for the increased presence of women as performers and producers of popular music, and for the development of the singer-songwriter. Industrially, its working practices and policies informed many of the changing emphases—and the responses to them—characterizing the organization and implementation of the commercial operation of popular music. Creatively, it has been seen as a major source of inspiration for performers and musicians within a variety of popular musical genres.

By concentrating on the creative legacy of the Brill Building, we can identify four distinct areas where the repercussions of its influence were paramount: the British invasion; Motown; Phil Spector; and soul. To the extent that each of these in turn has exerted considerable influences on the creative ambitions of other musicians, any conceptual map of the topography of popular music is obliged to site the Brill Building not at the periphery, but at the very core of its activities.

The Brill Building

Situated at 1619 Broadway, New York City, just north of Times Square, the Brill Building is an eleven-storey office block, built in 1931. Its name comes from the Brill brothers who originally operated a clothing shop on its ground floor, and who later came to own the entire building. Desperate to attract tenants during the Depression of the 1930s, they began to rent office space to music publishers, many of whom would encourage composers to make use of its facilities. Irving Berlin and Cole Porter were among those who wrote in its rooms. As more and more publishers moved into its floors, attracted by the accessibility of its mid-Manhattan position and the proximity it provided to their competitor-colleagues, the building gradually became a focal point for musical production and promotion. By the early 1960s, the Brill Building contained more than 150 music-related businesses.

However, the crucial moment in the development of the Brill Building’s pop sensibilities was not at 1619 Broadway but across the street at 1650 Broadway, where in 1958 Don Kirshner—“a pop entrepreneur par excellence”3—and Al Nevins, a former guitarist in the Three Suns, founded Aldon Music. Conscious that the original impact of rock and roll had become somewhat confused and diluted, “the objectives of Aldon Music were simple... to take its energy and re-apply the old-fashioned Tin Pan Alley disciplines of craft and professionalism to the art of making hits for the youth market.”4 To this end, Kirshner and Nevins assembled a small but proficient group of young songwriters (some of whom were also performers), including Howard Greenfield and Neil Sedaka, Gerry Goffin and Carole King, and Barry Mann and
Cynthia Weil. In the Brill Building itself the same pattern was repeated, initially by composers Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller who, in turn, recruited other writers including Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich. In addition, there were several independent composers and partnerships—including Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman, Burt Bacharach and Hal David, and Bert Berns—working in and around the same stretch of Broadway. It was this broad group that formed the nucleus of what came to be known simply as the Brill Building.

The accuracy of the claim that these writers “were among the most creative, sensitive and innovative talents in the rock music of their era. . . . [T]hey gave us several hundred of the best songs that rock has produced” can be glimpsed merely by reminding ourselves of some of the many dozens of hit records which they wrote and/or produced and/or performed in the late 1950s and early 1960s.5

Greenfield and Sedaka:
- Connie Francis, “Stupid Cupid”
- Neil Sedaka, “Calendar Girl,” “Happy Birthday Sweet Sixteen,” and “Breaking Up Is Hard to Do”
- Shirelles, “Foolish Little Girl”

Goffin and King:
- Shirelles, “Will You Love Me Tomorrow”
- Bobby Vee, “Take Good Care of My Baby”
- Little Eva, “The Locomotion”
- Drifters, “Up on the Roof”
- Chiffons, “One Fine Day”
- Cookies, “Chains”

Mann and Weil:
- Crystals, “Uptown”
- Gene Pitney, “I’m Gonna Be Strong”
- Drifters, “Saturday Night at the Movies” and “On Broadway”
- Righteous Brothers, “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feeling”

Barry and Greenwich:
- Ronettes, “Be My Baby” and “Baby I Love You”
- Shangri-Las, “Leader of the Pack”
- Dixie Cups, “Chapel of Love”
- Tommy James and the Shondells, “Hanky Panky”

Leiber and Stoller:
- Coasters, “Charlie Brown” and “Poison Ivy”
- Ben E. King, “Stand by Me”
- Elvis Presley, “She’s Not You” and “Treat Me Nice”
- Clovers, “Love Potion No 9”
Pomus and Shuman:
  Dion, “Teenager in Love”
  Drifters, “Save the Last Dance for Me,” “I Count the Tears,” and “Sweets for My Sweet”
  Andy Williams, “Can’t Get Used to Losing You”

Bacharach and David:
  Gene McDaniels, “Tower of Strength”
  Gene Pitney, “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance” and “Twenty Four Hours from Tulsa”
  Shirelles, “Baby It’s You” and “It’s Love That Really Counts”

Berns:
  Isley Brothers, “Twist and Shout”
  Erma Franklin, “Piece of My Heart”
  McCoys, “Hang On Sloopy”

As Jon Fitzgerald rightly points out, “Brill Building writers cannot be regarded as a group devoting its talents exclusively to any one market or narrow range of artists. . . . [T]hey had different musical backgrounds, aspirations and opportunities.” Nevertheless, there are certain characteristics that allow us to define some commonalities in the approach to and execution of their work.

The first of these was their age. Almost all of the Brill Building writers were very young men and women: “by 1962, Aldon had eighteen writers on staff, aged nineteen to twenty-six.” Scarcely older than the teenage fans for whom they were composing, they were thus able to articulate the anxieties of adolescence in ways that were neither condescending nor anachronistic. In place of “middle-aged men churning out novelty songs” the writers of the Brill Building authenticated “the lucid transmission of an emotion or state of mind that any kid could understand, because he or she had lived it.”

The second important factor was the presence of women. “It was at this time that women made their entry into rock ‘n’ roll . . . as composers, players, arrangers, and producers.” Not only did Carole King, Ellie Greenwich, and Cynthia Weil help to compose more than 200 songs that reached Billboard’s Hot 100 Singles charts; they were also among the first women to make forays into the male-dominated world of the studio. Their presence as composers and lyricists allowed for an engagement with themes and topics previously ignored, from perspectives previously excluded. “In the early 1960s, pop music became the one area of popular culture in which adolescent female voices could be clearly heard.” Furthermore, these voices were speaking with conviction and passion about women’s issues in songs that were “bold statements of desire, anguish and independence.”
Third, the Brill Building composers, all of whom were white and many of whom were Jewish, were writing for white and black performers alike. In fact, a majority of the most successful recipients of their songs were black groups—the Shirelles, the Ronettes, the Crystals, the Coasters, the Drifters, the Cookies, and the Dixie Cups—or, to a lesser extent, black solo performers—Ben E. King, Little Eva, Freddie Scott, and Dionne Warwick. Indeed, Rohlfing has claimed that “at no time in rock music’s history have so many African American women enjoyed as much collective radio and chart success as they did between 1960 to 1964.”

Fourth, while it may be difficult to argue that there was a specific Brill Building “sound,” it has been noted that certain themes and components do recur in many of the songs. While they generally conformed both in their structure (utilizing the AABA form) and their subject matter (personal relationships), they were in other ways quite distinctive, employing relatively complex melodies and innovative harmonic progressions that became recognized as key characteristics of Brill Building compositions. “The music was perhaps the most carefully, beautifully crafted in all of rock & roll.”

A fifth element, which helps to typify the Brill Building’s approach to the creation of songs, lay in its studio practices. At a musical level, it introduced into rock and roll a significant orchestral—especially string—presence previously, and chiefly, heard in the arrangements for ballad singers such as Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Perry Como et al. At the personnel level, it adopted an ideology that—uniquely at the time—permitted the songwriter to also assume the roles of producer and arranger (and sometimes performer): “Something unprecedented was taking place. . . . [O]ld definitions were disappearing as the distinctions between songwriter, producer and performer blurred into irrelevance . . . [and] allowed these people to operate at a new and exhilarating peak of creativity.”

Finally, the working practices of the Brill Building presented an archetypal example of “vertical integration.” Containing the offices of record companies, publishers, managers, composers, and promoters, it functioned in a way that has been rather glibly described as a “production line” or “songwriting factory.” Such inappropriate descriptions reduce the creative process to little more than a repetitive and mundane task. Ironically, this impression has to a great extent been encouraged by the recollections of the composers themselves:

*Barry Mann: *Cynthia and I would be in this tiny cubicle, about the size of a closet, with just a piano and a chair; no window or anything. We’d go in every morning and write songs all day. In the next room Carole and Gerry would be doing the same thing, and in the next room after that, Neil or somebody else.
**Neil Sedaka:** At Aldon Music, we wrote every day for at least five hours. Each team had its own cubicle containing a piano. Howie Greenfield and I, having scored the biggest hits, were given the luxury of a room with a window. Down the hall we could hear Carole King and Gerry Goffin... we soon became known as The Hit Factory.\(^{16}\)

However, alongside such reproaches, it is also possible to consider an alternative and wholly positive analysis, recognizing the creative advantages that the logic of the Brill Building generated:

**Carole King:** Sometimes we would try to write the same song upside down, backwards and sideways. Other times we would try to do something immensely different and creative... and both things worked. It was highly competitive... I don’t think it was an assembly line, because it was still a creative endeavour.\(^{17}\)

**Ellie Greenwich:** It was a happy time. On a creative level, you just weren’t bothered with any problems. *All you did was come in and hone in on your craft* [emphasis added].\(^{18}\)

In practice, the opportunities and encouragements that enabled King, Greenwich, and others to produce the hundreds of songs they did were maintained through two interlocking facets of the Brill Building’s organization. On the one hand, activity within the Broadway sites reflected the clear division of labor between those responsible for the production of music, those responsible for its promotion, and those responsible for its distribution. On the other hand, and simultaneously, it enabled communication and contact between those functions to become routinely established.

You could write a song there, or make the rounds of publishers with one until someone bought it. Then you could go to another floor and get a quick arrangement and lead sheet for ten bucks; get some copies run off at the photo duplication office; book an hour at one of the demo studios in the building like Audiosonic; round up some musicians and singers who hung around; and finally cut a demo of the song. Occasionally the demo even turned out to be the finished record.\(^{19}\)

The transition from a set of informal practices that supported these connections to the introduction of a formal system of vertical integration was eventually achieved through Aldon’s establishment of Dimension Records in 1962 (for which Goffin and King were the principal writers and producers) and Leiber and Stoller’s formation of Red Bird Records in 1964 (with Barry and Greenwich). Apart from consolidating control over every aspect of the creative process, the formation of these record labels brought considerable financial rewards. Instead of
receiving one cent per copy in publishing royalties and one cent per copy in writing royalties from sales of records they had produced and licensed to major record companies such as Atlantic and United Artists, the entrepreneurs of the Brill Building were to enjoy (at least for a while) a more lucrative independence, as Jerry Leiber has noted: “After a while, we got to thinking...why should we settle for two cents when we could have our own company and get twenty-one cents?”

Thus, uniquely characterized by its demographic, stylistic and organizational components, the Brill Building was in the early 1960s a vigorous and dynamic location from which much of the world’s popular music derived.

Often dismissed as a dull interregnum between the original fifties rock explosion and the arrival of the “modern pop band”...the late fifties/early sixties was in many ways a uniquely rich time for rock and roll, and one that found the music growing in fresh and unexpected directions.

By examining four distinct directions of musical growth that were stimulated by the Brill Building, we can see how the creative significance of the Brill Building continued long after the late fifties/early sixties and influenced many of our most familiar and fundamental assumptions about contemporary popular music.

**The British Invasion**

In historical terms, the British invasion began at 1:35 P.M. on February 7, 1964, when the Pan Am flight carrying the Beatles from London to New York touched down at Kennedy Airport. Within a few weeks the group held the top five positions on the Billboard singles charts. Four of the songs—“Can’t Buy Me Love,” “She Loves You,” “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” and “Please Please Me”—were Lennon-McCartney compositions. Ellie Greenwich’s response typified the immediate disquiet felt by the professional songwriters of the Brill Building: “We were all ready to say, ‘Look, it’s been nice [but] there’s no more room for us...and I think mortal fear set in to the writers, so we didn’t know what to write...I think everyone of us panicked...we got scared.”

While apprehension over their professional future may have been legitimate—in 1965–66 Barry and Greenwich and Goffin and King were to write just six U.S. Top 40 hits, whereas in 1963–64 they had written seventeen—their apparent resignation concealed a significant point about the success of the Beatles. The fifth of the Beatles’ top five singles in April 1964 was “Twist and Shout,” written by the Brill Building’s Bert Berns under the name of Bert Russell. Furthermore,
the group’s first album, Please Please Me, contained—in addition to “Twist and Shout”—versions of Goffin and King’s “Chains” and Bacharach and David’s “Baby It’s You.” At the Beatles’ unsuccessful audition for Decca Records in January 1962, the fifteen songs they had performed had included Goffin and King’s “Take Good Care of My Baby” and Leiber and Stoller’s “Searchin’” and “Three Cool Cats.” And other songs in the group’s live repertoire in 1962–64 (many of which were eventually released on The Beatles Live at the BBC in 1994) included Goffin and King’s “Keep Your Hands Off My Baby,” “Sharing You,” “Will You Love Me Tomorrow,” “Don’t Ever Change,” Leiber and Stoller’s “Young Blood,” “Some Other Guy,” “Kansas City,” Pomus and Shuman’s “Save the Last Dance for Me,” and Mann and Weil’s “Where Have You Been All My Life.” Producer George Martin has admitted freely that these were songs “by the American artists whom they liked to copy” (emphasis added).

It has been suggested that an explanation for the extraordinary impact of the British invasion that followed the initial breakthrough achieved by the Beatles lay in the sorry state of popular music in the United States at the time—“a country that had easily forgotten the beat, rebellion, and authentic emotionality of the classic rock era.” While it is undeniably true that the Beatles displayed an excitement and energy in their music, demeanor, and performance that was seen as startling at the time, such an explanation overlooks the equally important element of professionalism that had been impressed upon them by manager Brian Epstein from the start of his involvement with the group. His frankly commercial concerns were not, as is often imagined, at odds with the ambitions of the Beatles themselves. John Lennon’s admission that “Paul and I wanted to be the Goffin and King of England” is a concise summation of the group’s admiration of the Brill Building composers. So too is the observation that “on their first visit to New York, the Beatles made a point of meeting Goffin and King, whom they counted among their idols.” It is clear that an important foundation of their success was continuity rather than change. The Beatles did not provide a superior or radical alternative to the music being produced in the United States, but did deliberately utilize much of that music they admired so greatly as an important component within their overall commercial strategy. They provided “an altered perspective, not a foreign landscape.”

And the Beatles were by no means alone among British groups and performers in their employment of Brill Building songs which, in fact, provided many of the hit singles associated with the subsequent British invasion. These included Dusty Springfield’s “Wishin’ and Hopin’” (Bacharach and David) and “Some of Your Lovin’” (Goffin and King), Manfred Mann’s “Do Wah Diddy Diddy” (Barry and
Greenwich) and "Oh No Not My Baby" (Goffin and King), Herman's Hermits' "I'm Into Something Good" (Goffin and King), the Animals' "We Gotta Get Out of This Place" (Mann and Weil) and "Don't Bring Me Down" (Goffin and King), the Merseybeats' "It's Love That Really Counts" (Bacharach and David), the Hollies' "Yes I Will" (Goffin and Russ Titelman), the Rockin' Berries' "He's in Town" (Goffin and King), and the Searchers' "Sweets for My Sweet" (Pomus and Shane) and "Love Potion No. 9" (Leiber and Stoller).

It has also been argued that in addition to their cover versions of Brill Building songs, Lennon and McCartney's own compositions were in many respects very similar to the songs of Goffin and King and Barry and Greenwich. A lyrical concern with relationships, a preference for major or hexatonic scales, a typical tempo of 120–149 beats per minute, a standard reliance on the AABA form, a melodic contrast between A and B sections, an unusual complexity in chord progressions, and a routine modulation to a different key in the bridges of their songs are among the key common characteristics of both sets of composers.

Perhaps the area that reveals the most obvious musical influence that the Brill Building output exerted on the Beatles was in the group's vocal and harmonic traits. The customary vocal arrangement in which members of the girl groups repeated the lead singer's words in close succession—on tracks such as "Will You Love Me Tomorrow"—was freely employed on songs like "Hold Me Tight," "You Won't See Me," and "You're Going to Lose That Girl." And the chanted backing phrases—such as "sha-la-la-la-la" on "Baby It's You"—were adapted and adopted in numerous early Beatles songs, including "Do You Want to Know a Secret," "Girl," and "From Me to You."

It should also be noted that despite their responsibilities to the Beatles, Lennon and McCartney continued to supply songs for others to record. Cilla Black, Billy J. Kramer and the Dakotas, The Fourmost, Peter and Gordon, and the Applejacks were among those who enjoyed considerable chart successes as a result. In this, Lennon and McCartney were, like the Brill Building composers, continuing and reinforcing the traditions of the professional songwriter.

There is an obvious irony in these patterns. If it is true that the British invasion did signal the end of the Brill Building's dominance over popular music, that blow is only exacerbated by the source of the inspiration for much of the "new" music, and by the evident similarities it shared with the music it is widely perceived to have replaced. Portraying the Brill Building's output as a form of "uptown rhythm and blues," Terence O'Grady has pointed to its mostly black tradition "which is blues-influenced in its intensity and rhythmic identity, but possesses a greater harmonic variety and sophistication."27 It
is difficult to dissociate his description from the music of the Beatles or from many of the self-composing groups—the Rolling Stones, the Hollies, the Spencer Davis Group—who followed them. To this end, it must be recognized that among the most effective weapons in the British invasion were those that had been borrowed from the very country it sought to conquer.

**Motown**

After some success as a writer (Jackie Wilson’s “Reet Petite”) and producer (Marv Johnson’s “You Got What It Takes”), Berry Gordy founded the Detroit-based Tamla Motown company in 1959, locating the whole enterprise in a row of adjoining properties on West Grand Boulevard. Containing administrative offices, songwriting and production facilities, a recording studio, and even living accommodations, the Motown organization was, like the Brill Building, a model of vertical integration.

All the creative staff worked in cramped conditions which were considered ideal by Gordy for his family of music. A song could be conceived in one of the small rooms then passed for opinion and alteration throughout the building until completed.

It was then left to Gordy to decide whether the result should be recorded and by whom.28

The songwriting practice was remarkably similar to that within the Brill Building. Teams of writers—Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong; Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier, and Eddie Holland; Smokey Robinson; Nickolas Ashford and Valerie Simpson—were employed to produce a constant supply of songs for a rapidly expanding cohort of performers.

*Lamont Dozier:* If we didn’t complete an average of two or three songs a day, at least we would start them. We would have parts of the songs or maybe parts of a verse done, so that at the end of the day we would have something accomplished. Berry Gordy trusted us to do what we wanted to do. We had a free range.29

In late 1961 the Marvelettes’ “Please Mr Postman” was the first Motown single to top the Billboard charts in the United States. Its success was quickly consolidated by many other of the label’s performers, including Mary Wells, the Supremes, the Miracles, the Temptations, the Four Tops, Gladys Knight and the Pips, Martha and the Vandellas, Marvin Gaye, and Stevie Wonder. By 1965 Motown had produced forty-five Top 20 singles.

Through its organizational and administrative characteristics, its
impressive international success, its specific connections with a particular sense of place, and its willingness to rely on young, relatively inexperienced performers and composers, “Motown was itself a kind of black Brill Building.” However, the clearest legacy that the Detroit organization owed to its New York counterpart was perhaps in the manner in which it borrowed and promoted the format of the girl group. It was, after all, the Brill Building which had challenged the tradition of the solo male singer so firmly established in the United States since the emergence of rock and roll. Commercial popular music in the late 1950s had been dominated by the output of performers like Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran, Chuck Berry, Pat Boone, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, and Little Richard. Although the presence through the decade of female performers such as Little Esther, Big Mama Thornton, Etta James, and Dinah Washington cannot be overlooked, only Brenda Lee and Connie Francis had enjoyed chart successes that compared with those of their male counterparts. It was not until December 1960 that the Shirelles’ “Will You Love Me Tomorrow,” composed by Goffin and King, became the first record by an all-girl group to top the singles charts. The Brill Building’s production of more hit singles for the Shirelles and other girl groups—the Cookies, the Dixie Cups, the Shangri-Las, the Chiffons—confirmed a template that Motown astutely incorporated into its own commercial policy.

In fact, such was the importance to the label of early hits by groups like Martha and the Vandellas, the Marvelettes, the Supremes, and the Velvelettes, that it has been forcibly argued that “girl-group music was very much responsible for putting Motown on the map . . . without the girl-group sound, and the Supremes in particular, the Detroit soul sound of the sixties may never have materialized.” Many of the traits possessed by the girl vocal groups of the Brill Building were utilized with equal enthusiasm by their (male and female) Motown counterparts—the call-and-response style, vocal counterpoint, insistent handclaps, and modal harmonies. And while it is true that Motown’s composers went on to confront “social issues” in songs such as the Supremes’ “Love Child” (Pam Sawyer–R. Dean Taylor–Frank Wilson–Deke Richards), the Temptations’ “Ball of Confusion” (Whitfield–Strong), and Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On” (Renaldo Benson–Al Cleveland–Marvin Gaye), it should not be forgotten that earlier Brill Building compositions such as “Uptown,” “Leader of the Pack,” and “On Broadway” had already recognized that differences of social class, wealth, and background might have important roles to play in the personal and romantic relationships of their young audiences and were, consequently, legitimate topics for popular music.
Ironically, Motown’s importance in the U.S. song market would increase while that of the Brill Building diminished in the wake of the British invasion. Several explanations have been offered to account for their differing fortunes when faced with the same set of challenges. Rohlfing has commented that Berry Gordy’s insistence on promoting the singer rather than the song contrasted sharply with “the more democratized impulses of the Brill Building sound and its production infrastructure” and ensured a prolonged career through the potential for identification that Motown audiences (black and white) maintained with its performers. Ellie Greenwich has pointed to the lack of a competent professional strategy among the Brill Building songwriters themselves: “We didn’t fight back, that’s for sure. And the few people that had the resources or the wisdom—Motown for example—went on. We got scared and rushed the cycle. Maybe if we had fought back, things would have been different.” Others have pointed to the demographic advantages enjoyed by Motown as one of the few black-owned labels at a time of increased social awareness of, and interest in, black issues and black culture: “the Motown label tapped the enormous talent of Detroit’s black musical community, helping to polish the rough edges and presenting it in a way that excited white America.” And there are explanations couched exclusively in musical terms which emphasize the innovative and commercially attractive nature of Motown’s output: “a new style of mainstream popular song, thoroughly based in gospel . . . where the hidden architecture supporting the melodic/lyric hook is now primarily rhythmic.”

Yet despite these points of divergence, there remain additional and fundamental points of correspondence between the creative practices of the two. Not least of these has been the way in which, like the Brill Building, Motown has been repeatedly characterized as an “assembly line” or “music factory.” However, more specific affinities can be noted, which clearly demonstrate the debt owed by Motown to the Brill Building.

First, both labels employed a deliberate strategy of following each hit song with remarkably similar sequels, until one finally failed. Neil Sedaka’s sequence of heavily double-tracked singles through 1961 and 1962, all of which were composed by Sedaka and Howie Greenfield, (“Calendar Girl,” “Little Devil,” “Happy Birthday Sweet Sixteen,” “Breaking Up Is Hard to Do,” “Next Door to an Angel”) and the Four Tops’ remarkable run of call-and-response emotional ballads written for them by Holland-Dozier-Holland from 1964 to 1967 (“Baby I Need Your Loving,” “I Can’t Help Myself,” “It’s the Same Old Song,” “Reach Out I’ll Be There,” “Standing in the Shadows of Love,” “Bernadette,” “Seven Rooms of Gloom”) might be among the clearest examples of this philosophy of “innovation within predictability.”
Second, in order to prolong the career of their performers, both the Brill Building and Motown were, through abrupt interventions in their musical and professional decisions, able to reinvent former “pop idols” as adult-oriented performers. The trajectories followed by Stevie Wonder, Diana Ross, and Gladys Knight in the late 1960s had already been located and followed by Bobby Darin, Dionne Warwick, Neil Sedaka, and Gene Pitney several years earlier.

Third, neither the Brill Building nor Motown sought to maintain Tin Pan Alley’s traditional divisions of labor. In both cases, many individuals were encouraged to be active as songwriters, producers, and performers. The range of activities explored by Carole King, Ellie Greenwich, Barry Mann, and Jeff Barry was replicated by Smokey Robinson, Stevie Wonder, and Marvin Gaye, and provided some of the earliest examples of the diffuse creative role now seen as routine within popular music.

Finally, Motown has been justifiably praised for its dismantling of racial barriers within popular music: “it involved many white people for the first time accepting black music and musicians in a direct way.”35 Although similar shifts had taken place in swing music of the late 1930s, modern jazz of the 1940s, and rock and roll of the mid-1950s, the first general opportunity for black performers to be successfully and regularly exposed to the mainstream white pop audience was in fact provided by the Brill Building. While the significance of Motown lay in the opportunities it afforded to black composers and producers, they were nonetheless an expansion and development of possibilities initially introduced by the Shirelles and other black performers for whom so many Brill Building songs had been written.

Overall, the depth of the mutualities between the policies and practices of Motown and those of the Brill Building is striking, and Jon Landau’s assessment of Motown in the late 1960s serves with equal precision as a description of the Brill Building in the early 1960s:

Motown is two things above all. It is a place and a form. By the first I mean that it is a community, obviously tightly knit, made up of a group of people all aiming at the same thing. By the second I mean that the music that this community makes is stylized to express precisely what Motown wants it to by use of recurring techniques, patterns, and other devices.36

Phil Spector

Robert Palmer has suggested that there are two principal approaches to telling the history of popular music—“the history of creative flashpoints and the history of an ongoing tradition.”37 In this respect,
the conventional narrative of New York–born Phil Spector’s entry into popular music is an archetypal example of the first approach: in 1958, one month after graduating from high school in Los Angeles, the seventeen-year-old wrote, arranged, performed, and produced the Teddy Bears’ “To Know Him Is to Love Him,” which within several weeks sold 1.4 million copies and was topping the singles charts in the United States.

Over the next few years his successes as a producer and songwriter were intermittent, and in May 1960 Spector relocated from California to New York in order to take advantage of the musical networks that existed there. Working with Leiber and Stoller at the Brill Building, he contributed to the writing and production of Ben E. King’s “Spanish Harlem” and the Paris Sisters’ “I Love How You Love Me,” and soon began to produce occasional songs written by Jeff Barry (Ruth Brown’s “Anyone but You”), Goffin and King (Gene Pitney’s “Every Breath I Take,” Arlene Smith’s “He Knows I Love Him Too Much”), Pomus and Shuman (LaVern Baker’s “Hey Memphis”), Barry Mann (Ray Peterson’s “I Could Have Loved You So Well”), and Leiber and Stoller (Sammy Turner’s “Falling”). By 1962 he was wholly integrated into the working practices and professional communities of the Brill Building and was fashioning a successful career alongside its leading personnel.

Ellie Greenwich: It was wonderful, really simple. Jeff and I worked with Leiber & Stoller, and built their little stable with Phil Spector. Little families were created, people helped each other out. There was a spontaneity about the process . . . but it worked. He [Spector] was very erratic, but on a creative level, terrific.38

The most significant component of the Brill Building’s output for Spector’s subsequent career trajectory was its routine union of white songwriters and producers with black performers, exemplified by the extraordinary impact in 1960 of “Will You Love Me Tomorrow”—produced by the white Luther Dixon, composed by the white Goffin and King, performed by the black Shirelles. In fact, Spector’s later declaration that “all my records have a black flavor . . . I don’t like to record white artists . . . there’s something unnatural about white artists doing it” is, as an explanation of a commercial rationale, as profound as that attributed to the head of the Sun Record Company, Sam Phillips, long before he met Elvis Presley: “If I had a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars!”39

The continuing success of the Shirelles’ recordings of songs by Goffin and King, Bacharach and David, and Sedaka and Greenfield provided the template that Spector was to employ consistently for the next few years—initially with a group of four young women from New
Jersey: “Dixon’s work with the Shirelles seemed to be the spark of inspiration that set Phil Spector off. . . . [H]e started recording the Crystals in a comparable little-girl style.”40 Within a few months the group’s third Spector-produced record—“He’s a Rebel,” written by Gene Pitney—was at the top of the U.S. singles charts.

Despite his decision to return to Los Angeles, where he concentrated his recording activities at Hollywood’s Gold Star Sound Studios and his business activities at 9130 Sunset Boulevard, much of Spector’s creative output in the 1960s remained dependent on that of the Brill Building.

First, his persistent preference for the girl-group format—even in the wake of the male-dominated British invasion and the growing number of U.S. male groups like the Beach Boys and the Four Seasons—led him additionally to recruit the Ronettes, Darlene Love, and Bob B. Soxx and the Blue Jeans to repeat and consolidate the example set by the Crystals. That many of their records were marked by shifting line-ups, uncredited vocal appearances, and diffuse memberships simply duplicated a practice widely seen in the Brill Building’s organization and presentation of groups such as the Cookies and the Raindrops. However, the practices adopted for reasons of mutual convenience at the Brill Building seem to have taken on a more deliberate complexion through the manner in which they were developed and augmented by Spector, who saw them as mechanisms through which he was able to restrict the individual ambitions of his performers: “It seems apparent that Spector chose to work with young, inexperienced girls because they offered little resistance on the creative end. . . . [T]hey were disposable pawns, and if they would leave, there would be others ready and able to take their places.”41

Second, Spector relied enormously on Brill Building composers to supply the songs (sometimes written in collaboration with himself) which he then produced for the performers on his own Philles record label. These included compositions by Goffin and King (the Crystals’ “He Hit Me and It Felt Like a Kiss,” the Righteous Brothers’ “Just Once in My Life,” the Ronettes’ “Is This What I Get for Loving You”); Mann and Weil (the Crystals’ “Uptown,” “He’s Sure the Boy I Love,” the Ronettes’ “Born to Be Together,” “Walking in the Rain,” the Righteous Brothers’ “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feeling”); Barry and Greenwich (the Crystals’ “Da Doo Ron Ron,” “Then He Kissed Me,” the Ronettes’ “Be My Baby,” “Baby I Love You,” “I Can Hear Music,” Bob B. Soxx and the Blue Jeans’ “Why Do Lovers Break Each Others’ Hearts,” “Not Too Young to Get Married,” Ike and Tina Turner’s “River Deep Mountain High”). This extraordinary catalogue, derived from the resources of the Brill Building, compacted the apparently disparate elements of production, songwriting, and performance to an ex-
tent unprecedented in popular music. As a result, Spector found himself being lavishly described as “the bona-fide genius of teen.”

Third, Spector’s most significant contribution to the production of popular music was his introduction—and eventual registration of the words as a legal trademark—of the “wall of sound.” The essence of the wall of sound has been defined as “the blurring of individual timbres into the overall sound.” In practice, this would involve the presence in the studio of an expanded rhythm section—“four guitars, three basses, three pianos, two drums and a small army of percussion” often supported by horns (trumpets, tenor saxophones, trombones) and strings, the free use of echo chambers, and the utilization of the performer’s voice as one part of the overall arrangement of a song. “Mixing the tracks down on to mono so that each instrument blurred into another instead of being a separate, identifiable sound . . . he was able to gain a depth and complexity of sound on disc that was quite astounding, and quite unheard of outside the world of classical music.”

While not wishing to undermine the distinctive impetus of Spector’s recordings—“little symphonies for kids” as he saw them—it should be remembered that his assembly of large numbers of studio musicians was a logical extension of some of the practices first developed by Leiber and Stoller, whose own production techniques, to which Spector had been exposed during his months at the Brill Building, had also made use of multiple instruments: “we had five guitars playing, each one assigned a slightly different sound and different style.”

Every aspect of Spector’s creative policy—the combination of black and white roles, the choice of girl groups, the dependence on particular songwriters, and the preferred studio patterns—directly connected to the traditions of the Brill Building. Often perceived as rock’s first auteur, Spector is perhaps more accurately considered as the star pupil whose celebrity eventually eclipsed that of his teachers, Leiber and Stoller. The claim that “it is the Brill Building sound that undergirds the entire canon of Phil Spector’s wall of sound revolution” provides a precise summation of an individual contribution to American popular music history that might in retrospect be more plausibly seen as evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

Soul

When the disparate musical forms of gospel, blues, jazz, ballads, and folksong converged in the early 1950s to produce the new hybrid music that became known as rock and roll, the overwhelming impetus that surrounded that coalescence was the fusion of white and black traditions. Less scrutinized perhaps was the synthesis of styles within the black tradition; the combination of blues patterns and gos-
pel inflections created the foundations of soul music. Although it was (and is) often misleadingly referred to as a subcategory of “rhythm and blues” (a marketing term applied to black music, introduced in the 1940s to replace the overtly offensive nomenclature of “race” records employed by the entertainment industry since the 1930s), its lyrical exploration of love, romance, and desire served to distance it from gospel’s preoccupation with salvation, and from the concern with the world of work found in blues. From the mid-1950s, performers like Ray Charles, James Brown, and Sam Cooke “stood as musical and commercial role models to the younger African-American generation of performers who emerged in the late 1950s and formed the backbone of the soul sound.”

Attempts to define soul music have rarely been satisfactory, often emphasizing its gospel roots but neglecting its other properties. Martha Bayles offers a more comprehensive definition that incorporates additional facets of black culture: “rhythmically, it asserts Afro-American complexity . . . vocally, it asserts the power and expressiveness of gospel and blues . . . lyrically, it asserts a broader range of emotion and experience. Soul qualifies as a true revitalization.”

However, few cultural forms—including music—develop in a “pure” way, and in fact “none of the musical characteristics traditionally associated with black American music are actually unique to the music of black Americans.” This is particularly true of soul music’s two principal creative and commercial outlets: Atlantic Records, formed in 1949 by Turkish-born Ahmet Ertegun (the son of Turkey’s wartime ambassador in Washington, D.C.), who quickly recruited white New Yorkers Tom Dowd (a physicist whose parents were both classical musicians) and former publicist Jerry Wexler; and Stax Records, established in Memphis in 1960 by white ex-teacher Estelle Axton and her brother Jim Stewart (a business graduate and trainee banker).

From 1956, when they had become attached to Atlantic as independent songwriters and producers, the Brill Building’s Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller had conceived hit records for performers like Elvis Presley, Wilbert Harrison, Joe Turner, and LaVern Baker. However, their most conspicuous achievement had been with the Coasters, a black male vocal group, for whom they had written and produced a run of eighteen hit singles in seven years, including “Young Blood,” “Searchin’,” “Yakety Yak,” “Charlie Brown,” “Poison Ivy,” and “Little Egypt.” Significantly, the Coasters were one of the few black groups whose record sales in the rhythm and blues market were matched by equally consistent success in the white-dominated pop market. The first black group to cross over into the white market had been the Platters, the five-piece doo-wop group who recorded a string of melodra-
matic romantic ballads in the late 1950s. The Coasters have also been cited as key stylistic contributors, introducing components that were to become perceived as defining characteristics of soul music through the 1960s: “In the entertaining discs of the Coasters, r&b reached one of its peaks, demonstrating that the style could have substance as well as excitement, drive and danceability [emphasis added].”

However, it was Leiber and Stoller’s subsequent collaborations with the Drifters that linked the emergence of soul with the resources of the Brill Building in a direct and radical way. Crucially, their production in 1959 of “There Goes My Baby” was the first occasion where strings and Latin percussion were featured on a rhythm and blues record, and has been seen as one of the decisive innovations in popular music’s history: “the introduction of the violin to rhythm and blues unleashed a trend as significant in popular music as the invention of the electric guitar.” More immediately, its impact was such that Leiber and Stoller wrote “Spanish Harlem” and “Stand by Me” for the group’s lead singer Ben E. King to record in a similar style as a solo performer. In addition, they procured additional compositions for the group from Brill Building writers Pomus and Shuman (“Save the Last Dance for Me,” “Sweets for My Sweet,” “I Count the Tears”), Goffin and King (“Up on the Roof,” “When My Little Girl Is Smiling,” “Some Kind of Wonderful,” “At the Club”), Mann and Weil (“Saturday Night at the Movies,” “Come on Over to My Place”) and Bacharach and David (“Please Stay,” “Let the Music Play,” “Mexican Divorce”) all of which relied on the arrangement as much as the vocal delivery within their overall production. “It was Leiber & Stoller who first conceived the possibility of enhancing the emotive power of black music by surrounding it with elaborate production, an innovation that ushered in the era of soul music [emphasis added].”

The release of the Drifters’ “There Goes My Baby” was one of the pivotal moments in the production and circulation of “sweet soul” which, coupled with the success of Motown, was responsible for introducing forms of popular black music to new cohorts of white and black audiences. Charlie Gillett describes this process of musical incorporation and reinvention: “In what has become a predictable pattern, southern singers or musicians work out a style that is quite distinct from any previously available musical style; somebody in the North discovers it, develops it, and becomes famous with it.”

The Brill Building’s role in the discovery and development of soul music can be seen as a singular illustration of this process and the careers of the Coasters and the Drifters provide the most telling examples of its importance. But there were many other performers whose output was similarly characterized by the string and tympani accompaniment, tight call-and-response interplay of vocal and instru-
mental parts, and lyrics that, although written by whites, “were among the most forthright in their portrayals of black, especially urban, life and its social, domestic and economic travails . . . and sensitively evoked key aspects of the black mental and physical world.”

They included Chuck Jackson’s “Any Day Now” and “I Wake Up Crying” (Bacharach and David); Jerry Butler’s “Make It Easy on Yourself” (Bacharach and David); Freddie Scott’s “Hey Girl” (Goffin and King) and “On Broadway” (Leiber and Stoller–Mann and Weil); and Dionne Warwick's “Anyone Who Had a Heart” and “Walk on By” (Bacharach and David).

Furthermore, these composers created a catalogue from which subsequent soul performers would regularly select songs for reinterpretation, including Aretha Franklin, whose late-1960s versions of “I Say a Little Prayer” (Bacharach and David), “Spanish Harlem” (Leiber and Stoller), and “You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman” (Goffin and King)—the latter “considered by many to be the finest performance of her career”—contributed hugely to her reputation as the “Queen of Soul.”

Examination of the definitive elements of its commercial, stylistic, and creative practices thus reveals that the trajectory of soul music through the 1960s was largely determined and directed by the refinements and contributions of the Brill Building in the early years of the decade. While it was absent at its birth—“soul music is Southern by definition . . . its birth and inspiration stem from the South . . . soul music derives from the Southern dream of freedom”—its presence throughout its development and at its popular introduction confirm the Brill Building as a significant agent in the generation and transmission of the genre.

Furthermore, it helped to identify many of the music’s programs and policies which served to distinguish it from other black musical forms, and which precisely mirrored those of the Brill Building itself: “Soul music kept a hungry eye on the market, including the white market. Not only that, but it violated the cultural-separatist standard of racial purity by being the product of intimate collaborations between black and white entrepreneurs, producers and musicians.”

Conclusion

As an active creative entity and a force in the pop-music scene, the Brill Building had effectively disappeared by the late 1960s. The pursuit of careers as solo performers (Carole King, Neil Sedaka), divorces within its songwriting teams (Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich, Gerry Goffin and Carole King), gradual or permanent retirement (Phil Spec-
tor), assertions of independence (Burt Bacharach), and the emergence of Britain and California as principal sites for musical production all contributed to its decline.

Scholars are widely agreed that the Brill Building occupied an important place in the history of popular music. Greg Shaw’s conclusion that its personnel “had brought a new professionalism and maturity to rock’n’roll . . . brought production techniques for rock into the modern era . . . and brought an intelligent romanticism to the music” and Jon Fitzgerald’s observation that they “played an important role in continuing the long tradition of the nonperforming professional songwriter” are certainly correct, but each contains an implication that the impact of the Brill Building was confined to a particular time and place.62 And while there have been attempts to recognize influences over a longer period, these have normally taken the form of identifying relevant outputs from individual performers: “its trace elements can be found in the hits of Madonna, the Beatles, Mariah Carey, Bruce Springsteen, En Vogue, and Salt ‘n’ Pepa.”63

In addition to the influence that the Brill Building had during the early 1960s and may continue to have for sets of specific performers, its true legacy also includes its role in the design and architecture of some of popular music’s most familiar territories. In this sense, the dominant characteristic of the creative legacy of the Brill Building is its resilience.

The reason for the durability of the style is that it satisfies two needs: for audiences, it satisfies the seeming insatiable and ongoing need for melody in music and romance, and the combination of the two; for the artist, it satisfies the need to push the boundaries of the form of the pop song, to find new ways to capture the universal and particular experiences of their audiences (and themselves) in fresh and imaginative musical terms.64

Within the creative spheres that characterize the music of the British invasion, the sound and style of Motown, the output of Phil Spector and the wall of sound, and the musical attributes of soul, audiences and performers have been able to engage with and explore these needs. For four decades the legacy of the Brill Building has largely colored and explained these activities. As the proliferation of subdivisions and reclassifications of these musical forms and their derivations continues to increase, there are ever more opportunities for historians of popular music to chart the persistent and enduring connections that will continue to link the music of the new millennium with that of 1619 Broadway.


20. Ibid., 90.


29. Ibid., 23.
34. Betrock, Girl Groups, 58; Palmer, All You Need Is Love, 158.
37. Palmer, Rock and Roll, 12.
41. Betrock, Girl Groups, 29.
43. Fitzgerald, “When the Brill Building Met Lennon-McCartney,” 64.
44. Mark Ribowsky, He’s a Rebel (New York: Dutton, 1989), 2.
46. Ribowsky, He’s a Rebel, 4.
47. Fitzgerald, “When the Brill Building Met Lennon-McCartney,” 64.
49. Friedlander, Rock and Roll, 161.
50. See, for example, Gillett, The Sound of the City; Palmer, Rock and Roll; Friedlander, Rock and Roll.
56. Palmer, Rock and Roll, 37.
57. Gillett, The Sound of the City, 199.
61. Bayles, Hole in Our Soul, 158.
64. Scheurer, “The Beatles, the Brill Building, and the Persistence of Tin Pan Alley in the Age of Rock,” 100.