Selling an image: girl groups of the 1960s

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Abstract

This article considers the parameters and implications of the look of 1960s girl groups such as the Marvelettes, the Shirelles and the Shangri-Las through an examination of approximately two hundred images taken from title pages for songs, from LP covers, and from ads and publicity photos. An overwhelming majority of these visual images depict the members of an ensemble as equal and visually interchangeable, for the members dressed in the same clothes and accessories, sported the same hair style and stood in the same pose. This uniformity supported the chatty teenage dialogue which typified the girl group lyrics. Perhaps more importantly, it also invited the audience member to identify herself with the members of the group. Such a message of belonging was an important part of a marketing strategy aimed at the increasingly multiracial teen market of the period.

Introduction

The girl group repertory of the 1960s provides tales of teen desire from a female perspective in an aurally inviting sing-along format. The narratives of these songs, decoded in a 1988 article by Barbara Bradby, offer multivalent perspectives on romance and desire and on adolescent community. The songs are typically built around a mixture of narrative and of fantasy in which the female speaker posits some future desired end; they are further complicated by a dialogue between a ‘contradictory chorus’ and the feminine self of the lead singer. As Bradby points out, ‘None of these songs is simply “for” romance: the songs are always both for and against it’ (1990, p. 365; emphasis hers). The phenomenal success of this repertory in the period immediately before the rise of the Beatles has been attributed in part to the formation of an adolescent female market – a community of girls who listened to, purchased, and sang along with the songs produced by dozens of small ensembles of three to five female teenage singers.

Feminist studies of girl group repertory have generally focused on audience response. Bradby’s work engaged with the language of the songs to decode what those songs meant: ‘I wish to shift the focus and ask why these songs sold . . . how that consumer group is “summoned up” and given an identity by the address of the song itself’ (ibid., p. 343). Such audience-mediated understanding is important for the historical placement of the girl group repertory, and three other feminist studies have taken as their point of departure the evidence of personal reception of the repertory. In ‘Why the Shirelles mattered’, it is Susan Douglas’s (1994) own internal reaction that serves as the basis for a broader sociological hypothesising: the Shirelles mattered, Douglas suggests, because they mattered to her. Douglas maps out ways in which community identity could be constructed through the
shared repertory. There was a strong element of self-identification with the music: ‘Girl group music was really about us – girls’. But that self-identification could happen on several levels: ‘it gave voice to all the warring selves inside us . . . [C]ontradictory messages about female sexuality and rebelliousness were . . . poignantly and authentically expressed’ (p. 87). Douglas sees these songs as allowing a sense of camaraderie. The girls of the songs giggle, gossip and argue, offer multiple opinions, and most of all share with one another, sometimes through competition, sometimes through advice-giving, sometimes through empathy. The girl group, in Douglas’s view, is in some ways an antecedent of the women’s group of the next generation. Patricia Smith (1999) has similarly focused on the reception of the music, arguing for a strong and positive homosocial element in the creation of a female adolescent subculture around the girl-group phenomenon, ‘a new medium of what . . . might best be called “girl culture”’ (p. 97). In the same vein, co-authors Karen Pegley and Virginia Caputo (1994) respond to the content and material presence of the songs as sounds on the basis of their own lives, and in particular their own female identity and its attendant engagement with (and resistance to) girls’ culture. They highlight this perspective through a pair of case studies revealed in the end to be personal response.

That feminist investigations of this repertory should be so strongly shaped by personal experience is hardly surprising. Girl group repertory takes its place alongside other women’s genres such as soap operas and weepies as one of the ‘feminine forms’ of representation, one that is historically situated in the changing sexual and political mores of the early 1960s. Our first task as scholars has necessarily been to construct a framework for understanding and articulating the success of such genres. The sociological approach – interviewing informants about the meaning or importance of such forms in their lives – has revealed a richness and depth to the girl group repertory which may not be apparent from surface elements. Like the soaps of which Annette Kuhn speaks (1984, p. 20; she draws some of these ideas from Tania Modleski), ‘Their characteristic narrative patterns, their foregrounding of “female” skills in dealing with personal and domestic crises, and the capacity of their programme formats and scheduling to key into the rhythms of women’s work in the home all address a female spectator’. Girl group repertories were performed for and by adolescent girls, and addressed the themes common to that age group.

The feminist response to girl group music has been affirmative; scholars have seen girl group songs as potent mechanisms for audience members to construct their own idea of ‘what it means to be a woman’ through what might seem at first to be stereotypical lyrics. Unlike my feminist peers, however, my concern is not directly with the interiority of audience response. Rather, my interest lies with the external, material means through which such personalised responses were provoked. In the study which follows, I attempt to tease out some of the strands which allow for such negotiations of feminine identity. I am particularly interested in the intersection of the visual image and the textual-musical content of the girl group repertory. In her introduction to a study of the way femininity has been constructed through visual media, Rosemary Betterton (1987) calls for a broad analytical scope: ‘While paintings, pin-ups, news photographs, fashion and pornographic images vary considerably in the ways in which they are produced and consumed, they overlap and intersect in their representations of femininity and female sexuality. It therefore makes sense to look at the ways in which the feminine image is constructed across a range of differing cultural practices’ (p. 2). This study, then, offers
an investigation of the way in which feminine and group identity is negotiated by
the creators and the consumers of girl group repertory.

Lisa Lewis’s 1990 study of adolescent fans of Madonna and Cindy Lauper
suggests that a central moment of fans’ engagement with a star might come in a
period following an encounter with the music video at a time when a fan partici-
pates in what Lewis terms ‘consumer girl culture’ by adopting the look – clothes,
style, makeup – highlighted in the video. Fashion here is more than a mere sign of
fandom; it is, Lewis argues, part of the language through which a particular femi-
nine identity is constructed, one shared between fan and star. Just as the videos
present ‘girl practices’ such as wearing glamorous clothes and makeup as part of
female gender experience, one distinct from adolescent male practices and worthy
of celebration, so too style becomes for the fan,
a mode through which girls formulate their response to the videos and associated stars. By
imitating the dress and performance codes of their favoured musician, girl fans demonstrate
their identification with the star and with female address, represent their extensive knowl-
dge of textual nuances, and display their association with a community of fans . . . The fans’
imitation of the stars’ affected modes of appearance re-enacts the stars’ subversive stance
against the femininity discourse and the privileging of male adolescence. (Lewis 1990, p. 97)

Fashion is, for these Madonna wanna-bes and Lauper look-alikes, part of the stra-
 tegy through which the fan crafts a personal response to the music, which is in turn
part of the mechanism of crafting a personal and particularly feminine identity.

This emphasis on fashion and on consumption has extensive historical ante-
cedents, of course. I would argue that for the girl group fan of the early 1960s, the
vision of performers’ clothes, style and makeup was equally important, but that the
central moment of consumerist engagement with the ‘look’ of the performer came
not in the shopping mall after digesting the musical experience but rather in the
record store when the moment came to examine and perhaps buy the LP of a
particular performing ensemble. For the 1960s fan, the impulse to buy singles in
their plain non-photographic wrappers presumably came from exposure to the
music through radio and word-of-mouth. But the urge to buy the more expensive
LP would have been shaped at least in part by the album cover. Album covers
could, as Ian Inglis has pointed out, serve as an advertisement and, once taken
home, function as an accompaniment to the music, ‘an integral component of the
listening which assists and expands the musical experience’ (Inglis 2001, pp. 83–4).
The girl group album cover does indeed serve as an advertisement for both the
music and the performing group, targeting the record buyer in the place – the
store – where she (or he) is most likely to make a purchase. The stylistic presentation
of the group name, the title of the album, the pictures that are incorporated, even
the colour scheme adopted each contribute to a sense of album identity that will,
or so the marketer firmly hopes, encourage the buyer to spend her money. So, too,
the record jacket offers pictures and texts which can enhance the listening experi-
ence once that album is brought home. Few girl-group albums offer printed lyrics,
but nearly all of them offer photographs of the group, photos which establish a
visual framework for interpreting the music that the album contains.

Inglis points to the ‘universal familiarity of the images of the four Beatles’
(2001, p. 95); any album with a photo of the Fab Four would be instantly recognis-
able since the Beatles were so extensively covered by the media. For girl groups,
the dynamic is somewhat different; the cover most often seems pitched to empha-
sise the genre (ensemble music performed by three or four female singers) rather

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than the performer. Thus, the focus of the girl-group album cover is typically not on the known and identifiable performer but rather on the group as a whole. In this way, the album covers intersect with a large pool of group-oriented images found on sheet music, in concert advertisements, and on the publicity photos which circulated so widely. It is through an evaluation of all of these forms of visual stimuli that we can obtain a sense of what the projected ‘girl group image’ might be like.

This article considers the parameters and implications of the look of the 1960s girl groups such as the Chantels, the Crystals, the Marvelettes, the Shirelles and the Shangri-Las through an examination of approximately two hundred images taken from title pages for songs, from LP covers, and from ads and publicity photos. An overwhelming majority of these visual images depict the members of an ensemble as equal and visually interchangeable, for the members of a group dressed in the same clothes and accessories, sported the same hair style and stood in the same pose. This visual uniformity supported the chatty teenage dialogue which typified the girl group lyrics. Perhaps more importantly, it also invited the audience member to identify herself with the members of the group. Such a message of belonging was an important part of a marketing strategy aimed at the increasingly multiracial and self-consciously female teen market of the period.

Leaderlessness and conformity

The ‘look’ captured by girl-group publicity — whether on an album cover or another medium — nearly always involves all of the singers of the group in positions of relative equality. The singers are dressed alike, wear their hair alike, and pose alike. They also typically establish a visual claim to youth and to innocence. On the cover of *The Supremes: Where Did Our Love Go* (Supremes 1964a), for instance, the three singers appear wearing the same lime-green sleeveless tops, with their hair straightened and gently waved to provide volume (see Figure 1). Each of them has black eyeliner providing lift at the edge of the eyes and each wears the same coral lipstick to set off the same straightened and whitened teeth. In this 1964 photo, they gaze wide-eyed at a position slightly off-centre. We can identify Diana Ross as the lead singer, for she has a slightly lighter hair-colour than the others which glistens more in the light and she takes more of the physical space because of her position at the bottom of the ‘L’. Other than those two features, however, there is nothing to distinguish her from her colleagues. The liner notes (supplied by Scott St. James) reinforce this visual message, asserting that ‘Sometimes three is not a crowd, but instead a delightful unified package. That’s always the case when the three are the lovely and talented Diana Ross, Mary Wilson and Florence Ballard, the trio of young ladies called “The Supremes”’. The emphasis on unity and on the importance of ‘the trio’ displaces the contributions of the members themselves, just as the costume, the make-up and the pose encourages a comprehensive, group identity at the expense of the individual performer.

In a similar vein, the Shirelles’ self-presentation as a group of equally talented teens was one with which both other performing groups and the potential adolescent audience member could identify (see Figure 2). In a standard studio pose, the group stands arrayed in a line, all figures equidistant from the position of the viewer. With linked arms, they gather themselves inward as a group, a visual metaphor for the acoustic unity for which the ensemble was famous. They even stand
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Figure 1. LP cover for The Supremes: Where Did Our Love Go (Supremes 1964A).

alike, one foot forward, the other at an angle, with the outer members’ feet more sharply angled than the inner members’, reinforcing the eye’s tendency to move towards the centre. That central focus is reinforced by the slight curve provided as the outer members’ bodies face inward to the centre. The implication of equality of status is reinforced by costume and demeanour. All wear the same below-the-knee dresses made out of the same fabric, with gathered tops and uncomfortably tight (and not terribly flattering) fitted waists. Each singer adopts the same smile, the same ingenuous expression, the same carefully elevated chin. The photo provides a visual representation of equality of status, in which no one performer serves as a leader. It is manifestly a photo of a group, not one of four individuals.

This emphasis on what can be thought of as ‘leaderless conformity’ typifies girl-group publicity. As shown in column 1 of the Table, the overwhelming majority of girl group images involve all members of the group in a position of equal status. As is the case with the images just discussed, it is often impossible to tell which singer might be the lead merely by looking at the photos. The staging of the shots contributes to this sense of leaderlessness. Larger groups of four or five singers frequently pose in clusters, often symmetrically arrayed on either side of the picture, although they may also stand in a line as if on-stage. The more common three-person groups traditionally appear in lines or positioned as the corners of a triangle. Such placement tends to eliminate visual hierarchy since all of the singers inhabit the same plane. Moreover, the photographers apparently took pains with the lighting, for shadows, when they occur at all, affect all of the singers alike. If
any cropping occurred, it too affects all singers the same; the pictures can generally be characterised with a single descriptor as being full-length, torso, or head shots. Only occasionally does one singer appear to differ in role from the others. She may be framed by the outer two singers, perhaps seated while they stand or standing straight while the others lean in. Even in such instances, it can be unclear whether the difference in pose or placement derives from a desire for visual variety or from a hierarchical distinction between lead and back-up. By and large, the images would have us believe that the singers in the girl group are equal.

The exceptional degree to which the girl groups adopt common costume within their ranks reinforces this sense of equality. Column 2 in the Table shows that an overwhelming majority of girl group images display the members in identical outfit. The singers wear the same clothes, most often with the same accessories.

Table 1. Analysis of girl group images. The statistics in this table draw on the author’s database of 210 images taken from LP covers, sheet music, advertisements and publicity photos.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Members of the group appear to be:</th>
<th>Status of members (group vs soloist)</th>
<th>Clothes and accessories</th>
<th>Hair style</th>
<th>Pose (especially hands and head angle)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identical</td>
<td>174 (83%)</td>
<td>175 (83%)</td>
<td>140 (67%)</td>
<td>123 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar</td>
<td>15 (7%)</td>
<td>3 (1%)</td>
<td>11 (5%)</td>
<td>26 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different</td>
<td>14 (7%)</td>
<td>23 (11%)</td>
<td>52 (25%)</td>
<td>53 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indeterminate/not applicable</td>
<td>7 (3%)</td>
<td>9 (4%)</td>
<td>7 (3%)</td>
<td>7 (3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There might be slight differences to accommodate body type, such as a hem line that is slightly higher on one singer than another or a neck-line that dips slightly lower. Typically, however, the dress (and they usually were dresses), the shoes, and even the jewellery established a communal look for that particular image of that particular group. This commonality of look has ties to the expression of girl-to-girl friendships. As Lewis (1990) articulates, ‘the girl practice of dressing alike . . . has roots in female socialisation and cultural expression, not just in the form of adherence to a regime of feminine attire, but as a symbolic system that signifies female solidarity and female bonding’ (p. 94). Girl group fashion asserts a degree of camaraderie between the members of the group; it portrays them as friends and equals rather than as leader and back-up.²

Although the outfits were shared within a single photo, they differed quite markedly from album cover to album cover and picture to picture. The singers nearly always adopted different apparel for each publicity photo and each LP cover; there are only half-a-dozen instances of reused clothing among the multitudinous images consulted by the author. Many of the costumes were quite striking, and presumably helped to distinguish one girl group from another. A few were chosen for purely symbolic reasons. For instance, Christmas spirit clearly inspired the Santa suits (modified by the remarkably short skirts) worn by the Ronettes for the front cover of a December 1966 issue of Elegant Teen (reproduced in Betrock 1982, p. 139). Similarly, local colour influenced the choice of English country outfits, complete with umbrellas, hats and gloves, worn by the Supremes for the front cover of A Bit of Liverpool (Supremes 1964b). More often, however, the dresses appeal to someone’s stage sense. The old-fashioned layered and frilly skirts of the Chantels contrast with the slinky profile of the Supremes; the lace-topped confirmation-white dresses of the Crystals are far distant from the glittering golden Cleopatra collars of the Marvelettes; the large flower pattern on the gathered-knee dresses of the Angels look far different from the glitters of the Supremes, the checks of the Blossoms, or the amoeba patterns on one less flattering choice by the Marvelettes. Colours reign supreme, with bright reds and oranges, Kelly greens, electric blues, or stark black-and-white contrasts. The outfits are adorned in buttons, fringes, spangles, bows, lace, ruffles, tulle, or whatever else the seamstress had to hand.

Accessories and cosmetics reinforce the standardised costuming. Oversized bead necklaces or delicate pearl-drops, long faux-diamond earrings or dramatic head-bands, firm white gloves or hot-red nail polish, torso-length glittering bows or filmy capes: these too contributed to a conventional group-oriented presentation. Ellie Greenwich recalls seeing the Ronettes before they became a national success: ‘I had seen Ronnie out at Levittown Memorial High School as Ronnie And The Relatives. They were something even then, with that long hair, and those eyes – they were into some heavy-duty eye makeup . . .’ (Betrock 1982, p. 131). The heavy eyeliner of one picture might be replaced by a gentler brush the next time around, but the overall presentation idealises conformity. Each member has chosen to subordinate herself to the group. The audience can imagine the fun of shopping with friends, the whispered conferences over what to wear the next day, the careful examination to see that everything is just so and that everyone matches. It is a game, one which does not differ so much from the huddled discussions amongst a group of friends over what to wear to school tomorrow or how to fix that new hair style.

As could be expected, hair styles too are remarkably uniform within a group
(see column 3 of the Table). In roughly two-thirds of the girl-group images, the effects of the iron, the blow-drier, the curlers, the scissors and the pins have created common coiffure. The presence or absence of bangs and a close cut or a dramatically long hair style reveal a willingness to conform to the group ideal, for some of the shorter cuts would have taken months to grow into something that could be freshly styled. Most groups, whether white or black, adopted full-volume hair styles which looked good when seen from the stage. Donna Gaines somewhat dismissively dubs the girl groups ‘Matron Saints of Big Hair’ in her article on Girl Groups in The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock (Gaines 1997, p. 107), and indeed, several ensembles, particularly the Ronettes, prided themselves on their bee-hive hair style. White groups like the Shangri-Las played with long straight hair, with ponytails, with braids and with bobs, but the Mary Tyler-Moore hair-flip for the Nu-Luvs, like the quality of their puerile vocal productions, proved to be less sustainable. For the black groups, straightened hair becomes a norm, and it must surely have been teased and troubled with for hours at a time. Hair, like clothing, offers a way of establishing the commonality of the group; it helps to place the group into a particular niche for the fans.3

Many groups exploited the possibilities of multiple styles to position themselves in the market. In such cases, the chosen dress code may interact with the repertory. The nostalgic posturing of groups such as the Angels and the Chantels may have helped to deflect the very real anxiety which stemmed from presenting black groups to a predominantly white audience. In Charlotte Grieg’s analysis, the success of the Angels in particular lay in the familiarity of their material: ‘[w]ith their bouffant hairdos, floral gowns, big smiles and wagging forefingers, the Angels bore a reassuring visual resemblance to the familiar white girl groups of the fifties, even if the music was a bit close to rock ‘n’ roll for comfort’ (Grieg 1989, p. 71). By adopting a familiar guise, the black groups could more easily sell their acts (and their recordings) to a cross-over teenage crowd.

Freed by virtue of race to tap into a somewhat different vein, the Shangri-Las, a white group, evoked their bad-girl image with consistently slinky outfits, usually paired with go-go boots. They spin out variants of tight dark pants in leather, knit, and woven fabrics. The shirts can be ruffled or button-down, worn with vests or abandoned altogether for soft but sleeveless sweater tops. They flaunt the sophistication of the in-crowd. It comes as little surprise when they appear on an album cover alongside a motorcycle-riding leather-jacketed hunk: he is, as the title above his head confirms, the ‘Leader of the Pack’. The later black groups, more secure in their identity as girl groups, also chose to craft more rounded character types through visual cues. In contrast to the retro image of the early girl groups and the bad-girl image of the Shangri-Las, the Marvelettes, for instance, established an elegant, if still deliberately sophisticated, persona. The empire-waist gowns of The Marvelettes: Sophisticated Soul (1968), the crocheted collars of the loosely gathered gowns in an undated publicity shot, even the elaborate tops with bold flower embroidery and fringed squares set off by plain sedate straight skirts in their most famous finger-pointing image, establish a self-assurance that seems at times almost regal. For them, as for other groups, clothes are an elaborate stage prop:

The heartbeats on the dresses for ‘Locking Up My Heart’ we found at a psychedelic dress shop in Detroit. When we saw the dresses where the heart came on, we had the same thought at the same time, ‘We could use those on “Locking Up My Heart!” . . . We tried many different things to try to go along with whatever song we were singing. I used to always
feel that it just wasn’t enough to do the song, end it, bow, and then do another song. (Tong [n.d.], p. 39)

Clothes, then, are an important part of the stage performance. They aid in establishing the group’s identity and help to explain the singers’ responses (as characters) to the situations in which they find themselves. It is a sign of girl-group versatility that the acts that demand such careful attention to dress range in style from confirmation-class innocence to prom-night energy to a sultry Vegas sensuousness.

Of course, girl groups were neither the first nor the last ensembles to adopt a common costume. What does make them stand apart from other pop ensembles, however, is that the groups retained a common dress code even for photo opportunities unrelated to public performance. That is, even when nominally off-stage, the members of a particular girl group frequently dressed alike.4 Take, for example, recording sessions. Because the focus was on the sound and not the visual image, the studio session demanded less pageantry than did public performance. The girl groups, however, responded not with mutual independence but rather with a different kind of costume. The look might be informal, merely a shirt paired with comfortable pants, but all of the members of the group would be carefully dressed alike. An image of the Cookies singing into a studio microphone captures them in matching striped tops and white neck-scarves; one of Martha and the Vandellas from their first recording session shows them in simple A-frame dresses with multi-strand necklaces of big beads and matching beaded earrings. These are not glittering stage costumes, but they are costumes nonetheless, a visual assertion of group identity perhaps even more striking in this seemingly civilian context.

Such a collective look helped one of the most visually precocious groups, the Ronettes, to get their start. As Alan Betrock describes it,

In 1961, they were waiting on line to get into the Peppermint Lounge, the hottest night spot in town since the Twist craze had broken open, and the person guarding the door thought they were in show business – they all dressed alike and had ‘a look’ about them. He let them in, and within a few weeks they were hired to dance on stage while the music played. (Betrock 1982, p. 129)

Their success in using what appeared to be show business clothing in order to establish a non-existent show-business identity supposedly came into play again two years later:

As the story goes, Estelle was calling someone about some recording work, and mistakenly got Phil Spector on the other end of the line. He asked who they were, what they did, and so on, and then asked if they wanted to do some vocal backups on a session. They said yes, and met up at a studio on 57th Street. Phil was taken first by their appearance – they wore heavy eye makeup, tight dresses and slacks, and all had matching hairdos piled high on their heads. He quickly decided that he wanted to record them, and later on when he actually heard them sing, was surprised at just how good they sounded. (Betrock 1982, p. 130; emphasis mine)

Although the story appears to be apocryphal (in 1963 Spector was already in the process of enticing the Ronettes away from Colpix to Philles), the implications are clear: people thought it was a look, not a sound, that attracted the producer. Although the Ronettes’ acts gave more emphasis to dancing and stage routines than other girl groups, their emphasis on visual uniformity was standard fare in the girl group market.

Like clothing and hair style, the choreography of girl group acts contributed
to the cohesion of girl group identity. Certain gestural clichés recur with marked frequency. Finger snapping might be explained away as musical in its import, but the coordinated finger-pointing with its inclusion (or accusation) of the audience, the upstretched arms of exuberance, and the palm which faces the audience and instructs it to ‘stop’ form a cultural lexicon of motion-based interpretation. The routines, whether imposed from outside or generated from within the group, provided structure and regularity to stage movement. They also reinforced the seeming equality of the groups members, for all members of the group typically employed the same gestures and the same floor patterns, coordinating their movement to the songs as a kind of visual accompaniment to the lyrics. The gestures might be mirrored from one side of the stage to the other, or all performers might opt to use the same hands for the same actions; in either case, the visual goal is sameness and inclusiveness. Only occasionally does one singer move outside of the performance plane to take centre stage, either literally or figuratively. Thus, the physical uniforms were matched by a choreographic plan that stressed homogeneity rather than fostering difference.

The photographers who chronicled girl-group successes allowed the choreographic element to intrude even on still images. In many instances, the ensemble, though obviously posed, appears to be caught in mid-movement. The cocked wrist, the swivelled hips, the gesturing pointer finger at the bottom of its arc all invoke the vitality of live performance. They bring to the photographic milieu some of the energy that the live acts conjured directly. And, of course, the dance poses imply a routine that could be followed, a dance that could be learned, an act that could be joined. One has but to strike the pose to feel inwardly the bodily impetus behind the songs.

The poses in the photographs, then, serve at one level as an invitation to the audience member to join the act. Perhaps the most recognisable pose is the Supremes’ trademark ‘Stop in the Name of Love’, but other poses abound. Singers pose with arms akimbo, arms slightly angled up, arms entwined, arms overhead in a broad ‘V’. They place their hands on their legs, at their necks, on their chin, overhead. They snap their fingers, shame the audience with them, point identifyingly to the ‘me’ of the moment. Nothing in these movements is too complex, and in most cases all of the performers of the group have a common stance. In still photos, they even stand or sit alike. As column four of the Table reveals, well over half of the girl group images capture all of the singers in the same pose. When symmetrical gestures and a few inexact copies of what were probably meant to be identical poses are factored back in, nearly three-quarters of the photos depict a world of sameness. With the right energy level and a bit of coordination, the viewer could become an analogue of the singers before her. Wear the uniform, strike the pose, and what is left to distinguish viewer from performer?

This flexibility became important as the personnel of the groups changed. Betty Kelley recalls her first experience with Martha and the Vandellas:

One day ... I received a phone call. The voice asked me if I would like to go to Washington, D.C. for a week as part of Martha and the Vandellas. He explained that one of the girls was getting married and Motown needed a temporary replacement. Would I do it? (Wouldn’t I!). I had a day and half to learn the songs and the dance routines ... That first night, in Washington, I had a giant case of stage fright and did the wrong dance routines to the wrong records. My mixed-up dance routine was the only way the audience could tell I was a new Vandella because there is a resemblance between me and the other girl. Anyway, I guess I
was okay because they asked me to team with Martha and the other Vandella, Rosalind Ashford. (Thinnes [n.d.], pp. 8–9)

Her perception of success confirms the importance of the visual element to group identity. There were three things she needed to do: learn the songs, learn the dance routines, and resemble the other members of the group. Though she actually failed (at least initially) at mastering the dance routines, she evidently captured enough of the style of the group to be invited to join. It may be important that her dancing was merely ‘mixed-up’, a matter of which gestures go when rather than a matter of how to move, which would have been a more basic and perhaps insurmountable difficulty. Her ultimate success in becoming a member of the group signals the plausibility of the dream that the girl-group acts embody: if one only looks like the group and acts like the group, one can belong to the group.

In fact, such personnel changes were common in the girl group arena, reflecting once again the interchangeability of the performers. The market invested little in the personal identity of the performers, emphasising instead the group as a whole. Thus, the ‘same act’ could be put on with a new cast of characters with little fanfare. Some acts rotated artists and backup singers. The producer, a Phil Spector or a Berry Gordy, would mix and match performers seemingly at will. Other groups discovered that when they needed substitutes, whether temporary or permanent, they could accommodate the changes without disrupting the basic identity of the group. There were several variations on the Vandellas, for instance: Martha Reeves, Sandra Tilley, Lois Reeves; Martha Reeves, Rosalind Ashford, Betty Kelly; Martha Reeves, Rosalind Ashford, Annette Sterling. The individuals might vary, but the group ‘stays the same’. In some instances, the managers or producers owned the group name outright, and the performers themselves had little say in how the group might be constituted. Phil Spector owned the name of the Crystals, and forced the five girls to tour, fronting hits they had never recorded. He also used their name to bring out ‘He’s a Rebel’ with Darlene Love, rather than the original members. There is an element of exploitation here, of course: the teenage girls who negotiated contracts with the big record labels often had little if any legal expertise watching out for their interests. But the changeability of performers also reflects a particular market situation, in which the producer could test the waters with relatively little risk. In 1963, for instance, Motown released a Marvelettes recording, ‘Too Hurt to Cry (Too Much in Love to Say Goodbye)’, under the pseudonym the Darnells:

I think they were trying to find out if they (Motown) could release our songs under another name and have a hit too … We didn’t know that it would be released at the time. They thought that since we were hot they could release something else and get another group out and see how they would respond to the Darnells. If the response had been very good, they would have done just that. It was a good record, but it didn’t sell. (Lowe 1988)

The visual cohesion of the girl groups, the emphasis on group over individual, facilitated this kind of interchangeability, both within acts and between them. The membership of the groups could be manipulated to reach their ideal niche in the market at large.

Close analysis of the visual images which chronicle girl group success demonstrates the remarkable extent to which girl groups relied on a communal look. Their visual representations emphasised their sameness, their interchangeability. The liner notes too asserted the equality of members, stressing their ‘teamwork’
(Supremes 1964A) or their ‘combined talent’ (Shirelles 1963), calling to the listeners’ attention ‘these gals’ and ‘this group’ (Shangri-Las 1965), rather than the identity of the members themselves. This group-oriented identity served a teen market admirably, for the idea of inclusion plays well to an adolescent crowd. We Are The Chante-
tels, proclaimed one debut album (1958), but the implied message is that ‘you could be too!’ If there is little to distinguish one group member from another, then one has only to don the attributes of the group to belong to it. The newspaper stories in which new singers are suddenly discovered to fill the vacancies of an established group entice the reader into imagining or even believing that she too might find a place within the group she idolises. In short, the urge to dress and look alike which so heavily affected girl-group self-presentation mimics more generalised fads; both embody the adolescent desire for acceptance and belonging.

The intersection of ‘the look’ and the music

An act involves more than a look, it involves a repertory, and it is here that the purpose of the girl groups’ visual conformity becomes apparent. The girl group repertory, as created by the likes of Carole King and Gerry Goffin, Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, Smokey Robinson, and the team of Holland-Dozier-Holland, provides a musical environment in which equality of status mattered. In the realm of the girl group song, one conversationalist might tread acoustically on the toes of another without fear of reprisal. The look of the act, with its appearance of visual equality among partners, lent itself to a seeming musical free-for-all in which the back-up singers might just step up to the microphone and take over the fans’ attention. Nearly every girl group song has a lead, but her role flexes and shifts with the material at hand. She might talk to her partners, be supported by them, be contradicted by them, or be pre-empted by them. Moreover, she might be replaced by them, if not in this number, then in another. The visual sameness contributes to an air of unpredictability. Faced with a row of look-alike singers, the audience must guess in which direction attention should be directed. Like as not, that direction will change over the course of the song, if only for a moment or two.

One of the common ploys of the girl-group repertory is a game of musical leapfrog. It can be hard at first to track who exactly is going to provide the central story in the song, for attention may be shared equally between two or three narrative voices. At the very beginning of the Marvelettes’ (1961) most famous hit, the back-up singers demand our attention. They emerge abruptly out of silence, barking their demands, as the lead singer weaves a more seductive plea:

Wait! (Oh yes, wait a minute Mr Postman)
Wait! (wa-------it, Mr Postman)

After this two-line introduction, the chorus surprises us again. Here they, rather than the lead, introduce the ever-so-familiar tune along with the emotional justification for the song. The nominal lead again confines herself to providing some aural reinforcement:

Hey Mr Postman look and see (woh yea)
Is there a letter in your bag for me (please please Mr Postman)
‘Cause it’s been a very long time (woh yea)
Since I’ve heard from this boyfriend of mine.

It is not until we get six lines into the song that the lead singer emerges as the girl
who will tell the story. Her version, supported by the familiar wordless ‘dah-woos’ of the back-up singers, ultimately triumphs in the song. The audience empathises – is made to empathise – with her tears and her impatience. We discover that the other singers – her friends? – are merely helping her to voice her desolation; their chorus is an anticipatory echo of the words that she herself sings in the second half of the song. The song invokes a conversational element common to group dynamics in which the group helps reinforce the sufferer’s emotional position. Sure she suffers: ‘it’s been a very long time’, say her friends; ‘this boyfriend’, they grumble. Her complaints, reiterated multiple times, can be reflected and even anticipated, for no doubt they have been uttered before and will be uttered again. The exchange of musical attention, then, from back-up to lead provides verisimilitude of a sort, and encourages the audience to get emotionally involved with the story. The love lyrics that comprise the core of the girl group repertory capitalise on adolescent experience; the musical settings exploit an adolescent conversational style. And both function especially well within the parameters of belonging established by the girl groups’ look.

Dance numbers too could involve conversational elements. To craft a successful dance number, Gerry Goffin and Carole King, the composers of The Locomotion, relied on the standard dance-craze effects: a catchy beat, a simple tune, and the novelty of a new routine. But as Brill Building regulars, used to composing for a girl-group ensemble, they also relied on the interplay between the nominal lead, in this case Little Eva (1962), and the back-up singers who enhance her message. At the beginning of the song, the narrator teases the audience, describing the dance but leaving its identity for later in the song. The back-up singers, however, reveal the title at the end of the very first exchange, as they do again at the end of the second brief exchange. This is not a dialogue, at least not between the singers, because both Little Eva and the back-up singers address the audience and not each other: ‘Everybody’s doing a brand new dance now’. ‘Come on, baby, do “The Locomotion”’. As first stanza shifts to a description of the dance (easy to learn, your baby sister could do it), Little Eva takes over the verbal content and is supported by sustained ‘oohs’ of the slow-moving harmonies. This is, after all, her number. But as the lead singer finally moves on to make her own invitation to the audience, the backup singers join back in, reinforcing her summons, but also transforming that summons if the audience chooses to hear the double entendre: ‘Come on, come on, do the locomotion with me’. Such an element of verbal play relies heavily on the expectation on the part of the audience that each subgroup within the ensemble has a chance to speak its mind. Furthermore, the implicit involvement of the audience as the person addressed by the singer(s) reinforces an emotional identification with the singers. We can participate by doing the dance, by listening to the message, by singing along, and, the song suggests, by belonging to the conversation.

In light of such imitations of conversational intimacy, it is little wonder that the most successful numbers in the girl-group repertory typically pose the same question: who is singing? The songs intrigue through an ambiguity of focus. For the first half-minute of ‘Foolish Little Girl’ (Shirelles 1963), the audience may be convinced that it has the answer. A soft-spoken narrator invites the listener to make the transition from spoken conversation into the world of musical conversation, and the music picks up with descending triadic accusations: ‘[You] foolish little girl . . . You didn’t want him when he wanted you’. The relatively aggressive musical outline, coupled with the open-throated singing, claims a kind of musical priority.
But as we hit the first verse, a different voice takes over our attention. ‘But I love him’, she argues in a slower, more deliberate voice. This character lives in a dream, her musical lines ending without resolution on upwards gestures. A third musical element grounds her dreaminess with tart and rapid-fire commentary: ‘No you don’t, it’s just your pride that’s hurt!’ This pair of singers provides both musical and emotional contrast to the love-lorn lass’s lines; significantly, they also provide the necessary musical resolution. Given the variety of emotional perspectives here (and the variety of musical lines that accompany them), the issue of who is singing is ultimately unanswerable, for everyone participates in the conversation. The group, not any one individual, delivers the message(s) of the song, and the audience member can choose among the perspectives to find the one that fits her best.

The music of the girl groups, like the images they project, insists on a relative equality among the members of the act. Backup singers can (and do) step up and comment on the text, and the lead can change between, or even within, songs. Such flexibility depends on the apparent anonymity of the individuals, for such interchanges would be unfeasible or at least implausible with a ‘star’ as lead. If we could see the central figure, we might all too readily relegate ‘back-up’ to background. Even in an electronic environment where the sound of the group predominates over the visual element, the pictures on the LP covers reassure the audience that all of the performers in the act merit our attention. Perhaps this is why even the off-stage photos on the backs of LP album covers tend to show the girls in equivalent outfits. Only in the absence of visual hierarchy can the songs emulate the chatter of friends.

The rough-and-tumble of conversational interchange mimicked by the girl group songs offers two key elements to the girl group success. First, it encourages the kind of multivalent messages prized by Susan Douglas in her seminal article, ‘Why the Shirelles Mattered’ (1994). Each teen is free to choose her own perspective on the song, and to try on new roles. She can be the narrator watching the action from the outside; she can be the girl in love; she can be the disapproving friends dissecting that love. In imagination, the listener can even be all of these roles simultaneously. Thus, the songs encourage the listener to identify emotionally with each of the characters. But the second element of girl group success is perhaps more important. With their standardised look and with the rotation of musical status as if between friends, the girl groups invite the listener to imagine herself as a member of the group. Pretending to be ‘just a group of girls’, the girl groups invite identification between the audience member and the clique. Dress like your idols, move like your idols, sing and swing like your idols and what will prevent your belonging to the group? Just as a new girl can join in an ongoing conversation, the new singer of the listener’s imagination can join in the chit-chat about boyfriends and love, about whether or not to do it, about the new dance and the old girlfriend, and all of the other implications of teenage social life.

Marketing an image

The vision of inclusiveness generated by the girl groups’ potent combination of look and repertory capitalised on a teen market that was growing by leaps and bounds in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Smokey Robinson recalls that Berry Gordy at Motown was particularly conscious of the multiracial nature of his audience: ‘Berry wanted to make crossover music. Crossover at that time meant the white
people would buy your records. Berry’s concept in starting Motown was to make music with a funky beat and great stories that would be crossover, that would not be blues. And that’s what we did’ (Robinson, as quoted in Friedlander 1996, p. 174).

In fact, by 1967, seven of ten records sold went to whites. The managers, producers and promoters of the girl-group sound undertook to establish an image that they felt comfortable marketing to this predominantly middle-class audience. As rock scholar Jim Curtis argues, Gordy owned the performers in much the same way that MGM owned the actors of the 1940s and 1950s; he then redesigned them to be acceptable to middle class whites (Curtis 1987, p. 93). That the girl-group look was standardised and inclusive may have had more to do with market appeal than with the artistic desires of the ensemble members.

Berry Gordy at Motown went so far as to reverse the typical order for performance success. Rather than begin with a group’s on-stage success and move to recording contracts, Gordy began by creating recordings and assumed that concert and TV appearances would follow. While the group was refining its sound, he was also ensuring that it was refining its deportment. Indeed, it is said that Gordy placed his own stamp on performers by treating Motown as ‘a factory-type operation’ (Brown 1967, p. 104). In essence, he sent his performers to charm school. At the International Talent Management training school, the singers learned etiquette and hygiene and practised even the simplest and most basics of tasks. They re-learned how to walk, talk, sit, rise. They studied proper table manners. They had their clothes and hair styled by staff experts. They were even taught how to fill out tax returns. Recalls Martha Reeves,

I remember Miss Powell gave a speech to all the girls in the class – The Marvelettes, Mary Wells, Claudette Robinson, us and The Supremes, we were all gathered together. ‘You’re not the prettiest girls in the world’, she said. ‘You’re not the best singers. But what I’m going to teach you will give you all the charm, finesse and glamour you need to take you through the rest of your life’. We rolled around on the floor with laughter. She stayed firm. ‘It’ll take you all over the world, if you apply yourself’. She gave us handsome tips that I use even today. I’ll always be grateful to her. She made us walk down the stairs with books on our heads, sit on stools without falling off, keep our knees together. I loved the Motown experience, I feel I graduated from university – between the choreography from Cholly Atkins, the music director Maurice King and the charm school of Miss Powell – I feel I got the best education any performer could get. All young, upcoming talent needs people expert in their fields to show them the ropes. (O’Brien 1996, p. 77)

The work was hard, and the groups that caught on the fastest to the middle-class style that Gordy wanted were the ones who were promoted the hardest. The pressure to conform came both from financial exigencies and from an awareness of the market. There was an urge to ‘get it right’ because Motown could not afford any flops. This need for immediate success may ultimately have led to Gordy’s selection of the Supremes over the Vandellas, the Marvelettes, and other groups for promotion to a mixed and increasingly white market. As Lucy O’Brien remarks in She Bop, ‘the country gals, those with the rougher edges, didn’t fit . . .’ (O’Brien 1996, p. 79). Even at the time, the Marvelettes recognised their origins in a small town like Inkster, Michigan as a detriment: ‘We weren’t pretty city girls from the projects like The Supremes, with nice clothes and make-up on and long nails . . . We had no experience of life at all’ (Grieg 1989, p. 105).

An adoring fan would have had access to three kinds of visual poses for her favourite groups, and all three were carefully controlled to market the same ‘middle-class’ image that Gordy (and Spector, and Florence Ballard, for that matter)
tried so hard to establish. The ‘performance’ poses of LP covers and some sheet music (plus the occasional newspaper clipping) necessarily adopt the professional formal wear of the entertainment establishment, ranging from mock prom dresses to spangles and glitter. Given the stage habits of the era, this is hardly surprising. The emphasis on a studio-controlled middle-class image is more apparent, however, in the other two types of poses. Publicity shots nominally set out to capture a particular girl group in more casual surroundings, yet these photos are almost all as carefully staged as their more formal counterparts. The group members wear ‘nice’ clothes, mostly dresses, and are as carefully made up (though not perhaps as garish) as they would have been on stage. Necklaces and earrings reinforce a general air of prosperity. Publicity shots also tend to adopt the formal iconic poses – pointing or snapping fingers, triangled or linear spacing, careful demeanour – familiar from the performance medium. In other words, the more casual clothing of the publicity photo is a mis-cue: these are simply performance photos placed into a more accessible context. The girl group member is costumed to look somewhat like her teen fan, but she still inhabits a staged space in which uniformity and controlled action are the norm. No matter what her social origins, she dresses and acts the part of a comfortable middle-class peer.

The importance of this middle-class persona is revealed most starkly in the third class of images available to the fan: the putatively candid shot. Although fewer in number than their performance and publicity counterparts, these ‘candid’ shots contributed just as directly to the projection of the studio’s desired image for the girl group in question. In these photos, the young women are dressed in carefully chosen casual attire to avoid grubbiness at one end of the spectrum and overt sophistication at the other. No back-of-the-closet hand-me-downs here: the members of the group are dressed in wish-I-could-own-that clothing. If the activities appear to be spontaneous, the costuming is nevertheless carefully choreographed. Martha and the Vandellas ride in a car, for instance, but they all have matching hairbands, light tops, and above-the-knee skirts. The Supremes walk down a city street, but each has chosen a distinctive ruffled blouse that hints at a relatively high disposable income. The Marvelettes are caught on film relaxing back stage, but they still sport their performance costumes and an almost regal stage presence. Sweaters or blouses, dresses or dress pants, the clothing and the deportment of the performers in these studio-controlled snapshots universally attest to the respectability of the performer herself. In studio land, performers are ‘nice’ high-school girls, freshly coiffed and carefully dressed.

Were these images studio-controlled? The answer is a resounding yes, for the images consulted here come largely from the studio’s own marketing department. Formal performance photos adorn the fronts of LPs and ads for the same. Publicity photos are found in ads, on sheet music, in press clippings, and in the occasional lucky fan’s personal collection. Even the candid shots examined for this study represent studio ideals, for they adorn the backs of LP covers or accompany a studio press release. The selection of the images fell to an administrator, not to a performer. And overall, it appears that the look of the group was deemed as important to success as the sound of the performances themselves.

Indeed, in the environment of the fast-paced popular music business, the girl groups found themselves with little to no artistic control. Jim Curtis sums up the impact of finances on power quite nicely: ‘Motown artists recorded in Motown studios, and paid Gordy for the recording costs; they signed their publishing rights
over to Jobete Publishing, which Gordy owned. They also signed management contracts with International Talent Management, Inc., which Gordy owned (Curtis 1987, p. 93). In short, the girls’ act became a possession of the studio, and not of its putative creators. Nor was the situation different in other studios. Phil Spector was also famous for monopolising control of both artistic and financial decisions for the groups under his guidance. In an interview, Dee Dee Kennibrew of the Crystals recalls some of the frustrations of the teenage performers:

We were never allowed any say in what we did at all. We were very young, of course, but we were teenagers making teenage music, and we would have liked, you know, some input. But no way! There was nothing we could do; Phil Spector was our record company, our producer, our everything. I don’t think our manager at that time had the experience to keep up with what was going on. (Grieg 1989, p. 48)

The emphasis on group identity left the performers with little recourse. They lacked the power that comes with celebrity. As Jim Curtis points out, teen magazines which covered what Fabian had for breakfast generally ignored the poor black females of the typical girl group. Male ensembles appeared on American Bandstand, while girl groups were relegated to spots on Shindig and Upbeat (Curtis 1987, p. 87). The very lack of individual fame which promoted the girl group togetherness had the unfortunate effect of demoting the performers to a position of powerlessness.

But this was not simply another opportunity to oppress women; the treatment of individuals as cogs in a musical production line was a practical business decision. When Phil Spector decided to send the Crystals on tour with music that had been recorded by others, he wasn’t trying to assault the group’s artistic integrity, he was trying to sell more tickets and more records than he thought could be sold with their own material. The goal of the studio (and producer, and manager, and, indeed, of the performers themselves) was to broaden the appeal of the group. The best of the girl group managers was conscious of audience needs, and the girl groups were designed and redesigned to fill that need.

The need, the niche that the girl groups attempted to fill was one of inclusiveness. The reason that the look of an ensemble was so important was that the picture was the message: it identified the commonalities of a tangible community. To the girl group marketer, unity required a resemblance of costume, voice, movement, hair; it demanded the establishment of a look that could be appropriated or, more idealistically, shared by others. It was the work of the fan to assign names to faces and pictures to voices. And if the assignment was wrong, or if an ‘I’ crept in (this is my voice, my words, my image) as the listener identified herself as belonging within the group, what harm was done? The group’s unindividualised identity remained intact, for the nameless singers there on-stage might just as well have included the audience member among their ranks. In short, the girl groups were carefully positioned to communicate their message of belonging: all the girls (in the group) are the same, all the girls (in the audience) are the same. One had only to buy the concert ticket or the album to achieve a place within the community. Take it one step further, learn the words and the dance routine, and who knows, you yourself might become the performer you see before you.

The reason for faceless anonymity, then, was not to exploit the performer, but rather to exploit the market. If a visual representation of sameness and belonging encouraged identification with characters and with singers, it also presumably encouraged the acquisition of sheet music, albums and tickets. The songs that the
girl groups sang often asked difficult questions or implied undesirable answers. 'Will you still love me tomorrow?' cries the teen lover. But the community effort put into posing the question suggests that the answer may not matter. For whether her man is present or absent in the future, her girl-group friends will be side by side with her as they move on together to explore a common emotional world.

The negotiation of feminine identity

Girl group members might collaborate in the construction of their image, but they did not have primary artistic authority the way that singers from later generations did. The decision to market girl groups as visually similar, like the decision to adopt race- and class-neutral marketing strategies, lay largely in the hands of male producers and studio executives. For the girl group genre, as for many genres of the mid-to-late twentieth century, women were both the focal point of the image and its intended consumers:

women are in the strange and unique position of . . . being spectators, consumers of their very own image, their very own objectification. At the same time that we witness our own representation, we are also, so often, denied a place in that process of representation – denied a voice – so that more often than not those images of ourselves that stare at us from the glossy pages of the women’s magazines or from the glowing eye of the television screen are not of our own creation. They are, in more senses than one, truly ‘man-made’. (Walters 1995, pp. 22–3)

The girl group members lacked the power to be agents of their own representation. Nevertheless, as I have suggested, there is a parallel between the construction of a group feminine identity for the girl group ensemble and between the negotiated feminine identity on the part of the girl group fan. These images, even if mere studio constructions, were interpreted and appropriated by the teen audience for whom they were intended. The girl group phenomenon became for many adolescent females part of the way in which they structured their own feminine identity.

In such a context, it is perhaps important to consider what the images of girl groups don’t do. I would argue that ideas of the male gaze have little to do with the ways in which these images were crafted or received. Yes, men manipulated the image. Yes, the pictures took part in the objectification of females by focusing on socially constructed ideals of feminine beauty. This is not a feminist, independence-oriented genre. These are girls, dressed up and adorned with the paraphernalia of teenage sophistication, paraphernalia that contains all kinds of messages about what it means to be female and young in the 1960s. Instruction in dress is in some measure instruction about whom one could be. Still, to understand these images primarily as symbols of male desire is to miss the point. These are not images intended for voyeuristic consumption. The teen standing in front of the record bin would not have primarily engaged with the picture through some displaced sexual desire. Rather, she would have evaluated these images as what they were, invitations to consumer participation. The girl group images offer affirmative messages about what it means to be female, messages about belonging, about possibilities for participation, about the possibility of success. Buy the album and become part of a group, whether that be the subculture of girl group fans or the imagined space of girl group involvement – the sing-along culture which was so important to the lasting success of the genre.

Ultimately, I would argue, the role of the viewer is central to creating mean-
ing, and the girl group fan engaged actively in dialogue with the images placed before her. Ethnographic evidence suggests that viewers did, in fact, identify with the girl group image. Pegley and Caputo (1994), for instance, see in the choice of repertory a conscious strategy of self-identification. As one informant/author describes it, ‘Music provided her with a way to maintain her position within the girls’ groups without jeopardising her ability to interact with boys who were excluded from this musical group’ (p. 302). By acquiring the album or the memorabilia, one could affiliate with the performing group without rejecting alternative social groupings; music fandom becomes one part of a multiplicitous identity. One’s relationship to the songs could be used both as a strategy of affirmation and one of resistance to the prevailing message of the genre. Girl group songs form part of the broader context of social signification; the songs, the look, the ensemble each point the listener towards some understanding of feminine identity at an individual and a group level, whether that understanding involves adoption or rejection of the proposed sexual standards. The songs, Douglas asserts, were about us, about our identity as girls, however changeable and multifaceted that identity might be. This ‘we-ness’ of the repertory has been the single most important interpretive strand in understanding the girl group phenomenon, and the ‘girl talk’ of the songs fitted into a larger context of adolescent dialogue. One engaged with the texts of the song – should I or shouldn’t I, will he or won’t he – in ways similar to a conversation among friends.

Through the girl group repertory and through the visual cues of conformity associated with that repertory, an adolescent was able to construct a notion of what it meant to be female. To be feminine in girl group land is to be young, well-dressed, conscious of social expectations, to have good deportment and good taste. It is to have an interest in boys, to have emotional conflicts with friends, to have unfulfilled desires. It is also to be active as performer, or dancer, or listener, or all three. And, the studio hopes, it is to be active as a consumer – of sheet music, of concert tickets, of LPs. There is no simple solution to the love-longing characteristic of the girl-group song. But the repertory does provide the answer to another need. Through its invitation to join in, to participate, to sing along, it answers that adolescent, that feminine, that oh-so-human longing for belonging.

Endnotes

1. The majority of images come from the years 1958 to 1964; a few images, for example of the Supremes, stem from as late as 1968, but images from later from than 1968 were deliberately excluded from the database. The images can be clustered into broad categories: forty-three stem from advertisements and press coverage (newspaper and magazine articles); another fifty-two images are publicity photos produced by the studio. Seventy-four images come from LP/45 covers; note that some of these are the lesser-known ones from the backs of albums. (I am grateful to the staff of the Record Archive in Rochester NY for allowing my repeated forays into their ‘collectable’ bins.) Twelve images come directly from sheet music, but at least half-a-dozen sheet music images are also found in the ‘advertisements’ of the period, so this category would be larger if items were double-counted. Nineteen images come from live performances, and an additional eleven pictures come from photos taken for fans, including some of the important ‘candid’ shots discussed below.

2. Some male ensembles of the period also adopted a common costume, but the male clothing was rarely as distinctive as the girl group fashions, nor did it vary from picture to picture, album to album the way the girls’ clothing did. Furthermore, if a unified picture of the male ensemble adorned the front of the album, the back side was likely to contain one
or more ‘hierarchical’ photos which singled out one singer as lead. Girl group albums, on the other hand, nearly always relied on look-alike images for both front cover and back cover images. Most significantly, substantially fewer than half of the male groups adopt the strategy of look-alike presentation, where close to 90% of girl group images show this visual conformity.

3. Straightened and teased hair styles also helped to shift black groups’ image closer to a resemblance of the white middle class audience the studio was seeking as consumers.

4. There are, of course, pictures of girl groups on travel or in hotel rooms in which common garb would seem outré, but these comprise a small fraction of the overall pool of images. The male groups take a very different approach to such casual shots; on a rare occasion an out-of-studio shot of a male ensemble might include a common clothing style, but the norm is to portray the men of the ensemble as sartorially independent.

5. Of course, the opposite was true too; as O’Brien points out, Gladys Knight had too polished an image to fit the innocence of the girl group image that Gordy promoted (O’Brien, 1996, p. 79).

6. Phil Spector is perhaps a poor example, for he was a man obsessed with an artistic vision of his own that he, rightly or wrongly, set out to impose on the groups with which he worked. But decisions about repertory, about instrumental accompaniments, even about how to promote a group, were intended to make a success out of a collaborative effort. It might have been an uneven collaboration, but the ‘product’ was unmakeable without the girl group around which those efforts were centred.

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