

# He's A Rebel

## THE CRYSTALS

### PHILLES (1962)



The Crystals in 1962 – but they weren't in reality the voices behind the hit *He's A Rebel*

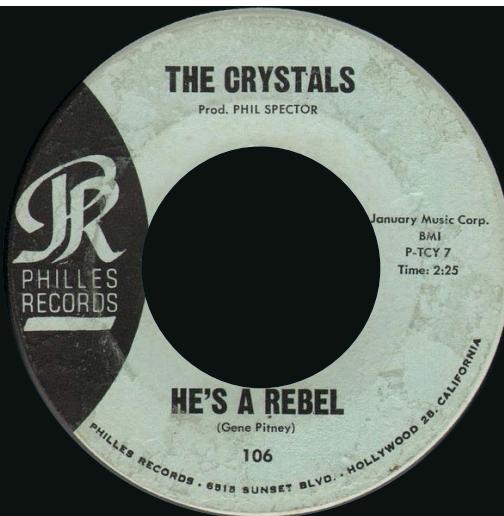
**One of the music industry's first sleight of hands, Phil Spector's competitive streak meant that he bypassed The Crystals to rush-release a hot new song under their own name and steal a march on the competition**

WORDS BY  
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**Y**ears before Milli Vanilli hit the headlines after it was revealed that it wasn't in fact Fab Morvan or Rob Pilatus singing on any of their releases, there was another – possibly even the very first – great pop deception.

Mary Thomas of 60s girl group The Crystals recalled driving through Ohio late at night and, on the radio, hearing a DJ announce, "Here's the new Crystals song." The track, it turned out, was *He's A Rebel*. "Our mouths fell open," she remembered. "I mean, goodness gracious, but what could we do? There was nothing we could do."

The reason for the girls' shocked reaction? It wasn't them. Sure, they'd had a couple of hits before then – *There's No Other (Like My Baby)* and



Rock And Roll Hall Of Famer and Grammy winner, Darlene Love

### *Uptown – but He's A Rebel?*

It may have said The Crystals on the sleeve, but it was, in actual fact, The Blossoms singing on that record, not that many people noticed. As a Phil Spector production, it was the Wall of Sound that people recognised. Few clocked that the singer – actually Darlene Love – didn't sound much like The Crystals' Barbara Alston.

That barely mattered to the wunderkind producer. He just wanted *He's A Rebel* out fast, so as to trample on a rival version by singer Vikki Carr. When the Gene Pitney-penned song first came Spector's way in the summer of 1962 he knew he was looking at a hit, and immediately earmarked it for his most successful group.

However, The Crystals were on tour at the time and Spector was impatient. Instead of flying the girls out of New York City to Los Angeles, he reached out to session singers The Blossoms.

Headed up by Darlene Wright (as she was then), The Blossoms had just finished singing backup on Bobby Darin's *Sings Ray Charles* LP when the call came through from Spector's Philles Records partner, Lester Sill. He didn't elaborate on what he wanted from The Blossoms, but a few days later Wright found herself introduced to "a little man in a toupee, sitting at a piano."

Wright soon found out why she'd been requested. Spector had just discovered that Vikki Carr's version of *He's A Rebel*

was due to be released that September. The producer was intent on beating her to it. With The Crystals otherwise engaged, he had decided to go with The Blossoms, and Darlene in particular, on his partner Sills' recommendation.

Wright and her fellow Blossoms entered the studio on 13 July 1962, along with some of the biggest session names in the business, including drummer Hal Blaine, saxophonist Steve Douglas, arranger Jack Nitzsche

Bob B. Soxx & The Blue Jeans, with the Spector-produced *Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah*.

As gifted as Wright was as a vocalist, she was still prone to slip ups. Perhaps it was nerves or maybe it was the sheer speed of the whole recording process that, at one point, she lost the rhythm and went out of tune. She was horrified and pleaded with Spector to let her have another run at it. "I like the mistake," he told her.

Wright barely thought about

**"The moment you heard He's A Rebel," said Spector engineer Larry Levine, "you knew it would be a smash." When it was released it seemed to be blaring out of every radio set in the country.**

and bassists Ray Pohlman and Jimmy Bond. It was through Nitzsche that Spector managed to gather together so many of the top West Coast musical talents. "Phil didn't know a lot of these people," he told *Goldmine*. "He had been in New York in 1960-1962... A lot of the players came out of my phone book."

Wright took on lead vocals, with groupmates Fanita James and Gloria Jones backing her up, together with Bobby Sheen, a young R&B singer who later that year would have a hit, as part of

*He's A Rebel* in the weeks after. She didn't rate the song and thought it would quietly slip into obscurity. But it wasn't to be. When *He's A Rebel* was released in the Autumn it seemed to be blaring out of every radio set in the country.

"The moment you heard *He's A Rebel*," Spector engineer Larry Levine told *The History Of Rock* magazine, "you knew it would be a smash." As Spector had hoped, the single trounced Vikki Carr's version, hitting the top spot on the *Billboard* chart

in the US. Incidentally, No.2 at the time was Gene Pitney's *Only Love Can Break A Heart*, giving the singer two top-selling singles in his homeland. In the UK, it made No.19.

Of course, to the outside world, *He's A Rebel* was a Crystals song, and the group knew that they would have to include it as part of their live set. The problem was that Darlene Wright's robust, full-throated voice was so unlike Barbara Alston's softer vocals.

The only person in the group who could match Wright's powerhouse delivery was 15-year-old Dolores 'La La' Brooks, who had joined the group after *There's No Other (Like My Baby)*. "It was a lot of tension," Brooks told Mark Ribowsky, author of the book, *He's A Rebel: Phil Spector – Rock And Roll's Legendary Producer*. "When I started doing *He's A Rebel* on stage, Barbara just said, 'The hell with it, let her do *Uptown*, too, and everything else.' She didn't care anymore."

Of course, The Crystals went on to even greater success with the Brooks-sung *Da Doo Ron Ron (When He Walked Me Home)* and *Then He Kissed Me* while Darlene Wright – or rather Darlene Love – would become one of the most celebrated singers of the 60s. Now 60 years on, *He's A Rebel* stands as one of Phil Spector's crowning achievements – a pop lie it may have been, but as one of the finest teenage love songs ever, does it really matter? \*