



From left: Spector, Bennett and Talley in London in 1964.

Behind The Beehive

Ronnie Spector, who returns to the stage in May, on the importance of engineering an image

BY BROOKE MAZUREK

RONNIE SPECTOR WALKS into a Connecticut steakhouse on an overcast afternoon with her hair teased as high as spun sugar and eyes shielded by a pair of Tiffany & Co. sunglasses. “I have nothing to hide,” she declares before sliding into a corner booth. Her voice is warm, raspy and all New York vowels, and in a split second of down-to-earth realness she stops to spit a Tic Tac into a napkin. “OK, now we can talk,” she says. The sunglasses stay put.

It will be 55 years this fall since **The Ronettes**, the seminal girl group that she fronted, released its debut album in 1964. The compilation of its hit singles established the now-75-year-old artist born **Veronica Bennett** as a superstar known for her “whoa-oh’s” and vocals powerful enough to help build producer **Phil Spector**’s Wall of Sound. That voice will be front and center in May, when she returns to the stage in a one-off show with **The B-52s**, as will her self-described “less is more” approach to fashion — the reason she agreed to a rare sit-down today.

“I don’t believe in entourages. I don’t do fads,” says Spector, who is dressed in dark denim, a button-down blouse and a moto jacket, all

from Nordstrom. “I used to wear my husband’s [manager **Jonathan Greenfield**] shirts to bed, and he’d say, ‘You look fucking sexy.’ Now I wear them onstage, buttoned lower.” That understated edge and unwavering consistency might be why it’s easy to overlook the style influence that she, along with her sister **Estelle Bennett** and cousin **Nedra Talley**, who rounded out the trio, wielded.

The act’s synchronized movements and precise harmonies evolved from the doo-wop era, and their cocktail-hour-ready costumes were a result of the control that Motown-era labels began asserting over their artists’ appearances. Like their girl-group contemporaries — **The Shirelles**, **The Supremes** and **The Chiffons** — The Ronettes usually wore coordinated ensembles in monochromatic tones. And yet there were subtle distinctions — with significant implications. Shorter hemlines, higher slits and tighter silhouettes were the members’ ways of sampling what they saw on the ethnically diverse streets of New York’s Spanish Harlem and making it their own. More obvious were the Aqua Net-teased beehive hairdos



Spector

and **Elizabeth Taylor**’s *Cleopatra* eyeliner. “We didn’t have a hit record like everybody else [at first],” says Spector. “So we had to create a look.”

What Spector did then is what many artists do today: There’s that sleek ponytail **Ariana Grande** has been whipping around since she left Nickelodeon; those reflective sunglasses perched perpetually on **H.E.R.**’s face; the pantsuits **Janelle Monáe** has pledged allegiance to album after album. They all learned what The Ronettes understood from the start: the power an image can have if you stick with it long enough to let it become your own. “I remember walking down the street and hearing **John Lennon** call out, ‘Ronnie Ronette!’” says Spector. “People knew me from the back of my hair.”

With an image that echoed her proto rock’n’roll, Spector’s less constricted vocal technique helped the trio last longer than any other girl group of the time. When the British Invasion began, **The Beatles** and **The Rolling Stones** sought them as tour support. **Jimi Hendrix** was a fan, as were **David Bowie** and **Bruce Springsteen**. “I can’t say The Ronettes were better,” she says. “We were just different.” ●



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1 Spector in 1964. 2 The Ronettes on British TV show *Thank Your Lucky Stars* in 1964. 3 From left: Talley, Bennett and Spector in 1964. 4 Spector in 1978.

RONNETTES: DAVID WILKINSON/GETTY IMAGES; SPECTOR: DAVID WILKINSON/GETTY IMAGES; 1: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES; 2: COURTESY OF RONNIE SPECTOR; 3: PICTORIAL PRESS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; 4: ANTHONY BARBOZA/GETTY IMAGES.