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The Fabulous Ronnie Spector

FROM BACKSTREETS MAGAZINE
SPRING/SUMMER 1991

BY MIKE SAUNDERS
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BY MARY ALFIERI

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The Fabulous Ronnie Spector

And her fabulous record
with the E Street Band

By Mike Saunders

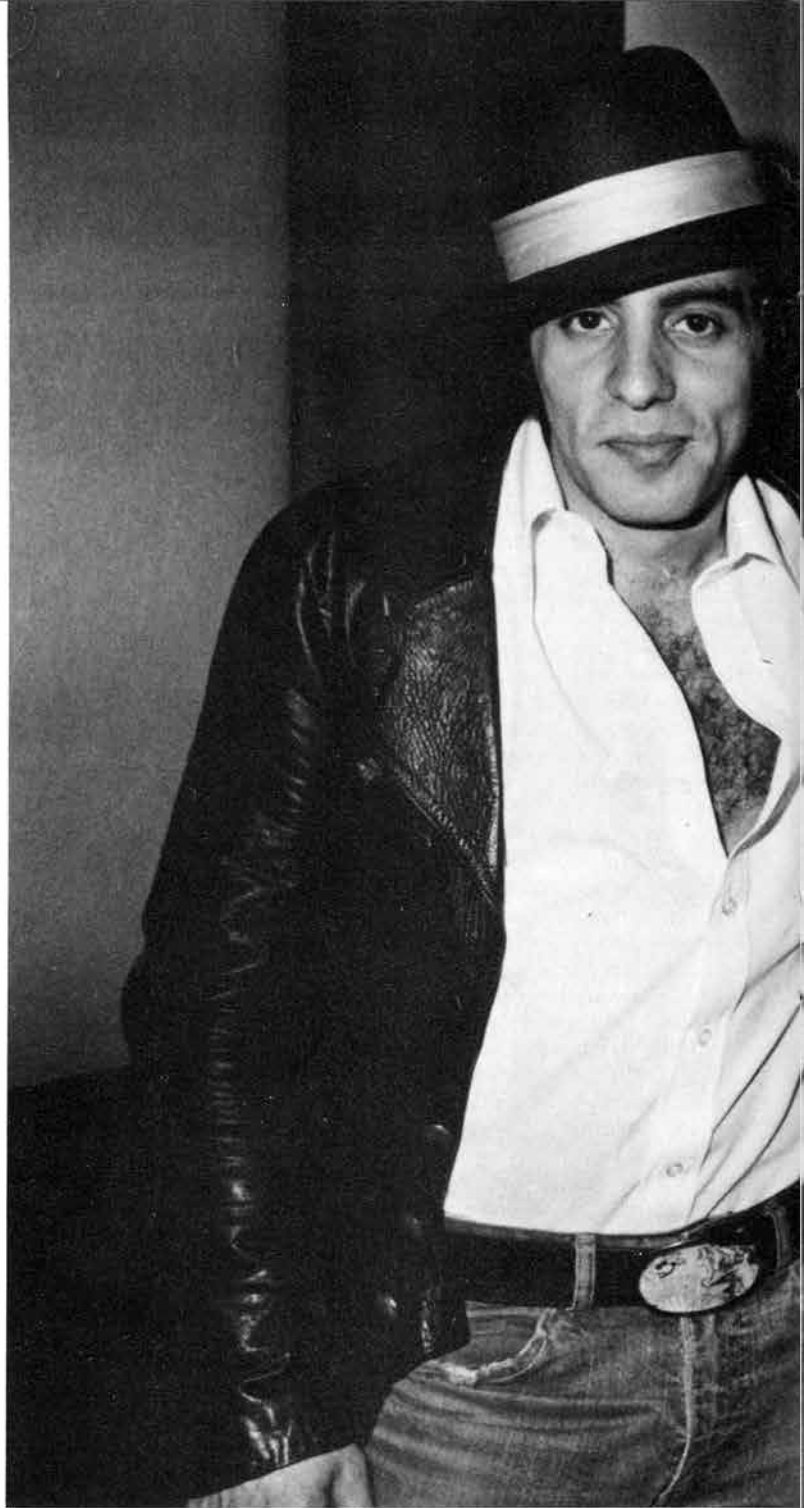
Switch on the radio anytime between 1960 and 1965, and it wouldn't have been long before a female voice filled the airwaves. This was the golden age of the girl groups, when the charts reverberated to the sounds of the Shirelles, the Marvellettes, the Chiffons, the Crystals, Martha and the Vandellas and a thousand others. While the music was guaranteed a place in pop history, individual group members remained anonymous, projecting a wholesome "nice girl" image. The mold was broken in the summer of 1963 when the 16-year old Ronettes, armed with the production expertise of Phil Spector, exploded into the No. 2 spot with their first record "Be My Baby." Teasing almost the entire teenage male population of the USA with their stacked beehives, heavy eye make-up and the slit-to-the-thigh dresses, they could do no wrong for the next two years. Following up with "Baby I Love You" and "Walking in the Rain" alongside their album **"The Fabulous Ronettes featuring Veronica,"** they also recorded several contributions for Spector's famous **Christmas Album**, and toured extensively, often on the same bill as the Beatles, the Stones and the Yardbirds.

Prime mover within the group was lead singer Veronica "Ronnie" Bennett. Part black, part white and part Native American, she was born on Aug. 10, 1947 and grew up in the Washington Heights district of New York City. She began singing at the age of three, and by the time she was 12, had put together a vocal group with her sister Estelle and first cousin Nedra Talley. In the early

'60s they recorded a bunch of songs for Colpix Records as Ronnie and the Relatives before changing their name to The Ronettes. Working primarily as backing vocalists or dancing girls, they toured with the Joey Dee Twist Revue and were regulars at Murray the K's all-star package shows at the Brooklyn Fox. In 1963 they were working at the Peppermint Lounge when Phil Spector walked in the door. In the blink of an eye, he'd lured them away from Colpix, signed them to his own Philles label and flew them out to Gold Star studios in Hollywood. His original plan was for the group to continue as backing vocalists, but Spector soon recognized the hit-making potential of Ronnie's Frankie Lyman-like vocals. He furnished the Ronettes with a bunch of classic songs, applied his trademark wall of sound, captured it all on vinyl, and the rest is history.

The Ronettes' hitmaking period came to an end after 1965, by which time Phil's marriage had broken up, and he and Ronnie had become close. At his request, she left the group just prior to their support slot on the Beatles 1966 US tour. She was replaced by look-alike cousin Elaine. Few Beatles fans noticed the difference. Shortly afterwards, the group finally split and the girls opted for marriage and kids. Phil and Ronnie's own marriage took place in 1968 and their son, Dante, was born a year later. The first year in their 23-room Beverly Hills mansion was idyllic, but the happiness was not to last.

Since leaving the Ronettes, Ronnie had looked ahead to what she presumed would be a solo career, pro-



duced by her husband. "I thought Phil and I would have a great marriage because his first love was producing and my first love was singing... together we'll show the world what we can really do" she said at the time.

Her dream was shattered when it became obvious that Spector had no intention of allowing her to resume any kind of career. He became a recluse, isolating them both from any contact with the music scene, even attempting to persuade Ronnie that she had no talent. "He wanted me to be just a housewife, and there I was with five people in the household staff, my own personal maid...

I couldn't even empty an ashtray. I didn't know why I wasn't recording and he didn't understand why I wanted to record." Their relationship cooled. As Phil locked himself in his office day after day, Ronnie patrolled the corridors of what had become her luxury prison, with the lights perpetually dim and the air-conditioning refrigerator-cool. "I was going stir-crazy. I was literally locked in... I sat around all day with nothing to do. I couldn't stand it."

The inevitable split occurred in 1973. Ronnie packed her bags and returned to New York, taking an apartment in Manhattan. Divorce followed Phil's near-fatal car crash



MARY ALFIERI PHOTO

in 1974. Once settled on the East coast, Ronnie began the search for sympathetic writers and producers to help begin her long-delayed solo career but soon discovered it would be no easy task. The music scene of 1973 was a very different one to that of 1965. With her most recent recordings now almost 10 years behind her, she could find no one who perceived her as anything more than a throwback—a '60s artist whose career was long since finished. For a while, she went along with it, forming a new Ronettes for a well-received 1974 UK tour, and making several appearances on Dick Clark's all-star package shows, but

she soon grew tired of the demeaning "oldie but goodie" tag. An association with Buddah Record ended when she realized they also intended to perpetuate the Ronettes connection. Tired of the search and disillusioned by the record industry attitude, Ronnie stopped working. A year passed with no solution in sight.

The stalemate could have continued indefinitely had it not been for a late phone call from Jimmy Iovine one evening in February 1976. Iovine had been the recording engineer on a couple of John Lennon's albums that were produced by Spector in the early '70s. He'd met Ronnie at

a Lennon party and they'd kept in touch after her divorce. Iovine had since engineered Bruce's **Born to Run** album in 1975 and was now at the Record Plant Studio in Manhattan performing the same function on Southside Johnny & the Asbury Jukes' debut album **I Don't Want To Go Home**. In the studio with him that night were Southside and Miami Steve Van Zandt. During the previous week, the Jukes (Billy Rush-guitar; Kenny Pentifallo-drums; Alan Berger-bass; Kevin Kavanaugh-Keys; Carlo Novi-Sax, plus session men Rick Gazda-trumpet; Earl Gardner-trumpet; Bob Malach-sax; Bill Zacagni-sax and Louie Parente-

Miami Steve, Ronnie Spector, Bruce Springsteen, Southside Johnny, New York, 1977.

trombone) had laid down the backing tracks, and now Southside was overdubbing his lead vocals. Miami Steve, apart from his job as guitarist with the E Street Band, was also the Jukes' manager, principal songwriter, part-time guitarist and singer onstage, and was about to make his debut as producer of the album. A busier man could not be found in all of New Jersey. Towards the end of that night's session, Iovine called Ronnie and casually suggested she might like to drop by

the studio and check out the tapes. "I wasn't doing anything that evening and it was right up the street, so why not?", she told **Crawdaddy** magazine in 1977.

Shortly afterward, Ronnie strolled through the studio door. Overcoming the initial amazement of being confronted by the object of many of their mid-'60s adolescent fantasies, Southside and Miami played her the backing track of "You Mean So Much To Me," which was one of Bruce's old songs from the early '70s which he'd donated for the album. Ronnie was immediately impressed and jumped at the chance when Miami suggested that she record the song as a duet with Southside. Ronnie then went home, agreeing to return the next day. Realizing what he'd just organized, Miami flew into a mild panic. "I mean... Ronnie Spector!... I didn't have the slightest idea what to do, so I immediately rang up Bruce, informed him that Ronnie was in the studio, that she wanted to sing, and for him to get over to the studio as quickly as possible and rewrite the lyrics as a Marvin Gaye/Tammy Terrell type of duet for the next day's session." Bruce obligingly turned up around 1:00 a.m. to make his alterations.

The following night was an eventful one. Having met New Orleans R&B legend Lee Dorsey when the E

Street Band played his Ya Ya Lounge the previous September, Miami had arranged for him to visit the sessions and duet with Southside on "How Come You Treat Me So Bad?" An hour after Lee had left the studio, the next legend walked in dressed in jeans and a tight red t-shirt. Ronnie approached Bruce — who would have sold his guitar to be there that night — and kissed him firmly on the cheek. More than slightly impressed, he hid in the control booth and hardly spoke to her for the rest of the night. After a brief rehearsal, they rolled the tapes. The first take was fine, but the second was a killer. Ronnie threw in several of her trademark whoa-oh's and ended with "Oh Johnny, sock it to me" with Bruce straightening in his seat with amazement. The whole thing fell into place so smoothly, as Southside remembered, "Totally spontaneous... I had to pick Steven up off the floor, then I had to pick Bruce up off the floor, and then they had to pick me up off the floor, what a thrill, I was up all week after that."

The playback convinced Ronnie that she'd finally found what she was looking for. After a long and fruitless search, she'd met a group of people who respected her, and who shared her belief that she could become a valid '70s recording artist, and not just a nostalgia act. "I said, My God, I can't believe that I've finally met somebody, someone that knew my voice and me as an artist, that could capture my voice

on record." Also impressed was Steve Popovich, the Epic A&R executive responsible for signing the Jukes. He became determined to help Ronnie find suitable material to record for herself. Meanwhile, Miami Steve completed work on the Jukes album in time for another E Street Band tour beginning March 25.

I Don't Want To Go Home, with sleeve notes written by Bruce, was released in the USA in June 1976. "You Mean So Much To Me" was the closer on Side 2 and received generous airplay. The Jukes celebrated the impending release on May 30 at the Stone Pony in Asbury Park, where they'd been the house band for 18 months. Ronnie, Lee Dorsey, Bruce, Steve and most of the E Street Band made appearances during the band's 60-minute showcase set, which was broadcast live on nine FM radio stations in the Northeast. Shortly after this famous broadcast, the Jukes ended their Pony residency and began to tour more widely, first on the East Coast and then nationally, eventually making the transition out of the bars and onto the mainstream rock circuit.

Ronnie maintained her friendship with the band, and began to make occasional guest appearances onstage whenever they were in New York City, usually for an encore of "You Mean So Much To Me." Her guest spot at the Bottom Line in October was included on **Jukes Live at the Bottom Line**, an Epic promotional album, also produced by Steve, which was issued to radio.

Having once described the sound of "Be My Baby" as "like universes colliding," Bruce's love for the Ronettes and the Spector sound in general was well known, so it was only a matter of time before he invited Ronnie onstage with the E Street Band. The date chosen was Nov. 4, at the New York Palladium, the last of Bruce's six nights there and the final night of his short fall tour. Introducing Ronnie as "somebody I'd loved and wanted to marry ever since I heard her first record,"

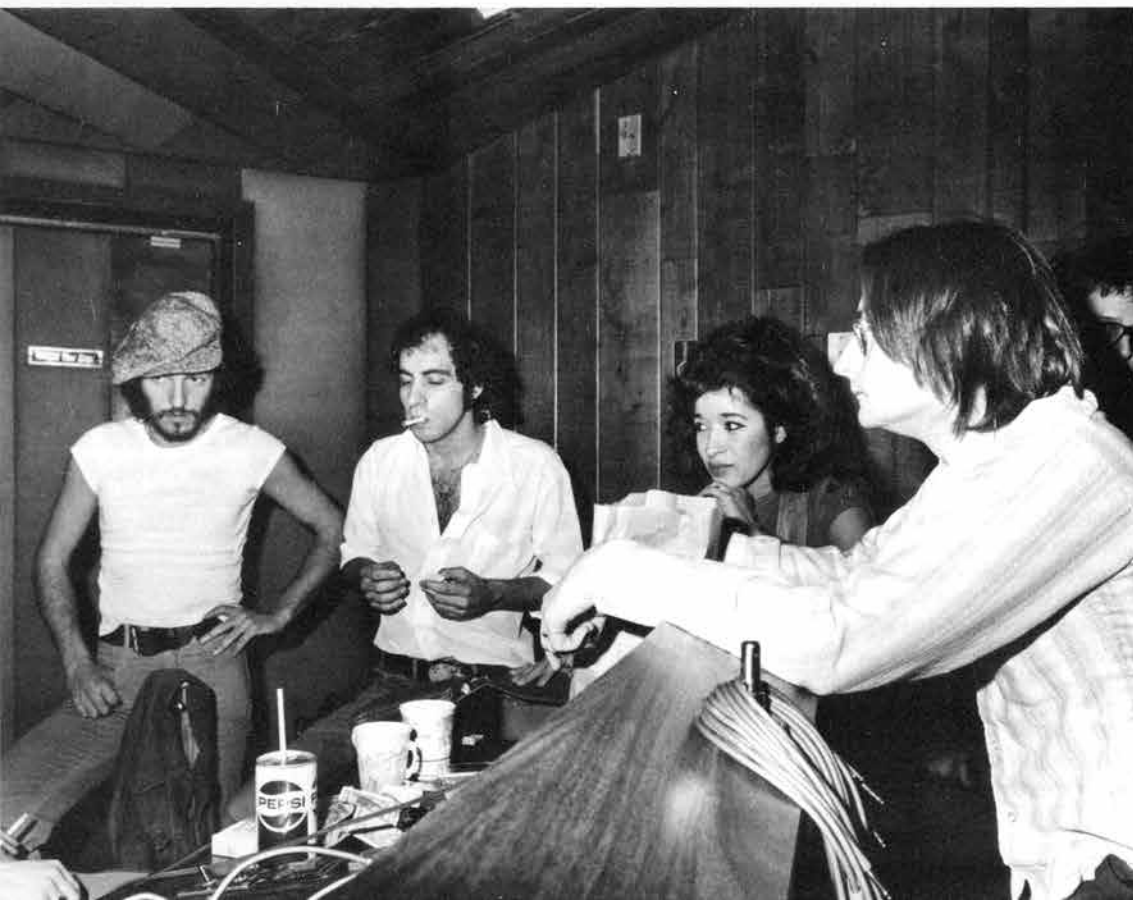
"Ronnie approached Bruce and kissed him on the cheek. More than impressed, he hid in the control booth and hardly spoke to her for the rest of the night."

Bruce kick-started the E Street wall of sound for a three-part medley of Ronettes hits, "Baby I Love You," "Walkin' in the Rain" and "Be My Baby." It was an explosive encore to one of Bruce's best shows.

In December, Miami Steve and the Jukes started work on the band's second album **This Time It's For Real**. After a week's work, it became clear that their chosen studio was inadequate for their needs, so the sessions were scrapped and the Jukes hit the road again. Shortly afterwards, Miami was offered the services of the CBS studio in Manhattan. With the Jukes now temporarily unavailable, Miami found himself in the frustrating position of having a studio at his disposal, but nobody to record. Steve Popovich then stepped in and suggested they now had the perfect opportunity to record a single with Ronnie. Having spent several months searching out suitable material, Popovich had selected a Billy Joel song, "Say Goodbye to Hollywood," released earlier in the year on Joel's **Turnstiles** album and apparently written with Ronnie in mind. "Popovich called me and said, 'Ronnie you must hear this song,' so I decided to go down to Epic and listen to this 'Hollywood' thing... It flipped me out. In a way it's my life story... I knew it was for me. I thought, 'This is it — this is me in the '70s.'"

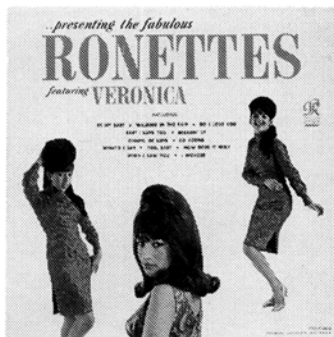
For the B side, Miami chose his own haunting ballad "Baby Please Don't Go." They now had a studio, an artist and two songs, but no musicians. Popovich then suggested

Steve Van Zandt (no hat!) directs the recording of "Say Goodbye to Hollywood."



the E Street Band. Even though he was their guitarist, Steve hesitated, considering it almost an impertinence to ask for his boss's help. "It took a lot of balls to even agree to record Ronnie Spector, but using the E Street Band was an even harder decision to make" he said at the time. "The E Street Band is Bruce's band — it comes through him — we follow where he leads." Also to be considered was the fact that Bruce was embroiled in the midst of his bitter legal battle with manager Mike Appel. Nevertheless, when asked, Bruce proved more than willing to involve himself and the band, and the tapes rolled again. Just as it had at the Jukes session back in February, the whole process ran very smoothly. Backing tracks for both songs were recorded live in one night, with vocals and a handful of overdubs added the following evening. The final result was a '70s rock production which paid just the right amount of homage to the classic Spector sound. Miami recalled the session a few months later during an interview on WNEW-FM in New York: "We got Clarence the Kahuna playing tenor sax on both sides, Roy playing piano, Danny played organ and glockenspiel and possibly celeste. . . . Garry played bass, Max played drums and castanets and tamborines and anything else we could get our hands on in the studio that was free. . . . The Boss is hackin' away on acoustic guitar. . . . I'm playing the electric, playing Bruce's guitar as a matter of fact, that's why it's outta tune! We're all there somewhere. It was really an experiment. The whole thing was live except of course Max doing castanet parts on top of the drums. The sax I had intended to overdub as usual, but I just said 'Clarence, blow along, maybe we'll get something we can keep.' There is a certain feel to it, I think. It just worked out nice. I'm really happy with it. . . . Ronnie's voice has such a very personal identity that no matter what you do, you can't disguise it or the way that she should sound, not that you'd want to in the first place. Anything she cares to sing has to turn out sounding emotional and quite similar to how people love to hear her voice. She's just unique."

With Ronnie's single complete, Steve brought the Jukes into the same studio in early January 1977 to make a fresh start on **This Time It's For Real**. This time there were no problems. Steve even managed to coax along the Drifters, Coasters and Five Satins as backing vocalists, and completed the album in time for another E Street Band tour beginning



The classic Ronettes album.

on February 5. Ronnie made her second (and final) appearance with the band at the Richfield Coliseum in Cleveland on Feb. 17, repeating the Ronettes medley from the Palladium show in November, and adding "Say Goodbye to Hollywood." Ronnie later noted Bruce and the band's obvious fan worship. "When I do his show, he insists upon doing 'Be My Baby,' 'Baby I Love You' and 'Walking in the Rain.' He loves those three songs, and when I'm onstage he's just mesmerized. It makes me feel funny in a way because I didn't think I was great like **they** think I'm great."

While Ronnie made only two appearances with the E Street Band, she began to perform on a semi-regular basis with the Jukes in 1977, to the point where her mini-set became almost an integral part of their show. Dressed in a series of dazzling see-through outfits, Ronnie would appear mid-way through the Jukes main set to sing the Ronettes medley and "Hollywood," returning during the encores to perform "You Mean So Much To Me" with Southside. She ventured out of the city to join the band on tour, appearing not just at the Pony or the Bottom Line, but at the Jukes' second home — the Agora in Cleveland, and once at the Rainbow in London, where the Jukes celebrated the end of their debut UK tour on April 6.

The Jukes album and Ronnie's single were released almost simultaneously in April 1977. Although she made no vocal contribution to **This Time It's For Real**, Ronnie's name was included in the extensive sleeve credits as "First lady of rock and roll and queen of the E Street Kings." "Say Goodbye to Hollywood" appeared on the new Cleveland International label, a subsidiary of Epic, and was credited to 'Ronnie Spector and the E Street Band.' It was originally made available in a special sleeve featuring a great shot of Ronnie and the band on one side and suitably glowing sleeve notes by latterday Bruce biographer Dave Marsh on the other, which described Clarence's opening sax blast as "A herald's trumpet

announcing the return of the queen of our hearts."

In May, Southside fell ill, threatening the cancellation of four scheduled Jukes shows at the Monmouth Arts Center in Red Bank, NJ. In order to save the day, Miami Steve hastily put together what has since become known as 'The Asbury Allstars Revue.' While the first of the four shows had to be cancelled, the remaining three went ahead featuring various combinations of Bruce, Steve, Ronnie, the Jukes and the E Street Band. The shows represent a unique slice of Jersey Shore music history, and were the only occasions where Bruce duetted with Ronnie on "You Mean So Much to Me," backed by the Jukes.

In the spring of 1977, the rock grapevine was buzzing with rumors of a Ronnie Spector album to be recorded with either the Jukes or the E Street Band. (Most likely choice would have been the E Streeters, since the Jukes' relentless 1977 touring schedule allowed them very little time off.) Certainly there was no lack of enthusiasm for the project on either side. "Hollywood" had shown the potential of such a collaboration, even if it had not been a commercial success. Ronnie often stated in interviews that she was gathering material and discussing production ideas with Steve, and that there were tentative plans for her to join the next E Street Band tour. Miami Steve led an exhausting double life, dividing his time between the Jukes and the E Street Band, but would inevitably have worked on a Ronnie Spector album given the chance. Sadly, in the end, the project was beaten by the clock. On May 28, Bruce's ten-month legal battle with Mike Appel finally came to an end. Less than four days later, he had begun the year-long process which would produce the **Darkness** album. There had been a shift in priorities and there were simply not enough hours in the day to accommodate Ronnie. Miami Steve would spend the next year working on Bruce's album and the Jukes' third album, **Hearts of Stone** virtually back-to-back. The chance had slipped away. Ronnie continued her appearances with the Jukes throughout the summer, but was eventually forced to work full-time on the search for a new producer, finding herself back at square one and facing an uncertain future. Her last known guest spot with the Jukes was at the Pony in late August. After that, the Ronnie Spector/Jersey Shore connection faded away, and the world was left to wonder just what that album would have been like.

With hindsight, Ronnie's association with the New Jersey crowd was probably her greatest chance of achieving some measure of success. In the 13 years since 1977, her recording and performing career has been intermittent and directionless. During this period she has released only two albums — **Siren** in 1980 and **Unfinished Business** in 1987, which included the well-received single "Love on a Rooftop" and a duet with Bangle Susannah Hoffs. Elsewhere there have been sporadic club gigs, a further, much less successful incarnation of the Ronettes, and more appearances on all-star package shows. Ronnie married her manager, Jonathan Greenfields, in 1983 and they have two sons, Austin and Justin.

Ronnie has found it impossible to find success beyond the heady days of the mid-'60s, and has never fully escaped the shadow of Spector. She is currently entangled in legal problems of her own, suing Mark Roibowsky, author of the Phil Spector biography **He's a Rebel**, over allegations about her sex life contained in the book, and being sued by Vince Waldion for breach of



The single that resulted.

agreement regarding his share of the profits from her autobiography **Be My Baby** on which he collaborated. Ronnie allegedly broke the agreement when she signed over TV and motion picture rights to Motown Productions. Whatever the outcome, it's expected that Phil Spector will not allow any of the songs he wrote for the Ronettes to be used in any subsequent biopic. The problems continue.

Despite the fact that her solo career failed to ignite, Ronnie can at least rest assured that she has made a lasting contribution to pop history. The recordings she made with the Ronettes are timeless classics, and "Say Goodbye to Hollywood" was a spontaneous masterpiece. Baby, we still love you! 🍷

Mike Saunders is a UK Backstreets subscriber presently at work on a biography of Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes.