



Spector's fame a golden oldie

Many in jury pool say they don't know much about the producer's accomplishments, which are esteemed in the music world.

By Geoff Boucher, Times Staff Writer
April 25, 2007

At one point during jury selection for Phil Spector's murder trial, defense attorney Bruce Cutler clutched his client's shoulder to emphasize the distinction he was about to draw between the 67-year-old record producer and Paris Hilton.

It's "an example of talent ... versus celebrity," Cutler said.

That may be true. But as attorneys today begin to deliver their opening statements, one of the odd undercurrents is that the defendant's fame takes some explaining.

FOR THE RECORD:

Spector writing partner: An informational box in Wednesday's California section about record producer Phil Spector's musical achievements misspelled the last name of Jeff Barry, one of Spector's songwriting partners, as Berry. —

Unlike O.J. Simpson and Robert Blake, whose own murder cases resonate in this latest celebrity trial, Spector never came into the living rooms of America on television. And his achievements in the music industry are remembered better by today's artists than today's fans.

"Everybody in the music business knew who Phil was and they still do. He had a big impact on the way everyone made records, but now the general public might know him better as the guy going on trial," said Hal Blaine, the drummer who kept time for many of Spector's signature hits in the 1960s glory days.

Spector has pleaded not guilty to charges he murdered actress Lana Clarkson in his Alhambra mansion in February 2003. Each side will have 90 minutes to lay out its case, said Judge Larry Paul Fidler, in Los Angeles County Superior Court.

Spector certainly worked with plenty of famous names — John Lennon, George Harrison, Ike and Tina Turner, Cher, the Ramones and the Righteous Brothers among them — but, for casual pop fans, all his hits don't seem to quite add up to the stature he achieved in the eyes of music historians.

The reason for that disconnect is simple: Spector's true claim to fame is that he changed the studio approach and the ambition of those recording pop music more than four decades ago. As his onetime engineer, Larry Levine, summed it up: "The way he made records changed the way everybody else made their records. Nothing was the same after Phil showed people what you could do in the studio."

Spector's special brand of studio magic was dubbed the "Wall of Sound," a moniker that is frequently noted in media reports but rarely explained in detail.

Basically, Spector was an exceptional music arranger who elevated the making of pop music by mixing orchestra strings and horns with the typical rock 'n' roll band consisting of guitar, keyboards, bass and drums. Spector would line up multiple musicians — it wasn't unusual to have five guitarists in the room — and percussion that was exotic to pop, such as bells.

Then he would funnel them into the echo chambers at Gold Star Recording Studios in Hollywood to create music that was greater than the sum of its parts — a wash of sound by turns dreamy, majestic or amorphous.

That's why "Be My Baby" by the Ronettes seemed to jump out of car radios like some sort of densely crafted pop symphony and "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin' " by the Righteous Brothers became a classic defined by its distinctively epic swoon and tension. Spector was a pop maestro and his impact continued in the music of the Beatles, the Beach Boys and pretty much everyone else.

In 2004, Rolling Stone magazine celebrated the 50th anniversary of rock 'n' roll by naming the 100 greatest artists in the genre, as determined by votes from their peers, critics, notable industry figures and the magazine's editors. Spector, who never once performed in a spotlight on a major concert stage, made the list at No. 63, ahead of such superstars as the Eagles, the Police and the Kinks.

In the magazine, producer Jerry Wexler, a music industry legend in his own right, wrote this in tribute to Spector: "When he went into the studio, it came out of him, like Minerva coming out of Jupiter's head. Every instrument had its role to play, and it was all prefigured. The singer was just one tile in this intaglio."

While this legacy is enduring for industry types, by the 1980s, Spector was becoming a pop history-book character and his reputation for tantrums and arguments as well as gunplay became a big part of his persona. (Such snits undermined his comeback effort with Celine Dion in the 1990s, as well as Starsailor, a promising indie British band that worked with Spector shortly before Clarkson's murder.) That personal history is now on trial with him as the prosecution presents its case.

While Spector's trial gives signs of being a top-shelf celebrity justice affair — Court TV has its cameras in the gallery and East Coast columnist Dominic Dunne is winging in — the producer's reputation did not appear to precede him into the jury pool.

"I don't know him. I know nothing about him," one prospective juror said, in a typical response.

Mick Brown, the London-based author of a forthcoming Spector biography who is covering the trial for the Daily Telegraph, said he was surprised so many middle-aged jurors did not know of Spector. He remains "a legendary figure" in Britain, both for his work with the Beatles and perhaps because of the still-recognizable effect of his musical techniques on British pop, Brown said.

But it's far from a given that jurors know enough about Spector to be awed in any way by his dated celebrity.

Loyola Law School professor Laurie Levenson, who has monitored several celebrity trials, said jurors may care less what he is famous for than what his fame might mean for them.

"Star-struck jurors have a track record they can follow. When there are acquittals, they appear on the morning shows; they're flown to New York. O.J. had a party for jurors; Michael Jackson invited them to the ranch," she said.

On the other hand, jurors could fixate more on the excesses of fame than the glowing aura of

talent, Levenson said.

As one prospective panelist, an aspiring actress, said before she was dismissed: "Honestly, I think he did it." In her experience, she added, one truth about celebrities is that they often "just act inappropriately."

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

Spector sampler

Phil Spector was honored as the inventor of the "Wall of Sound" — introducing a symphonic approach to pop music — with his 1989 induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Some of his other achievements, with the performers and composers:

1958: "To Know Him Is to Love Him," written and performed by Spector in the Teddy Bears

1960: "Spanish Harlem," performed by Ben E. King, co-written by Spector with Jerry Leiber

1961: "Pretty Little Angel Eyes," by Curtis Lee, produced by Spector

1961: "I Love How You Love Me," by the Paris Sisters, written by Barry Mann, Larry Kolber; produced by Spector

1963: "Da Doo Ron Ron (When He Walked Me Home)," by the Crystals; written by Jeff Berry, Ellie Greenwich, Phil Spector; produced by Spector

1963: "Then He Kissed Me," by the Crystals; written by Jeff Berry, Ellie Greenwich, Phil Spector; produced by Spector

1963: "Be My Baby," by the Ronettes; written by Jeff Berry, Ellie Greenwich, Phil Spector; produced by Spector

1965: "Unchained Melody," by the Righteous Brothers; written by Alex North, Hy Zaret; produced by Spector

Other records he produced: "Let it Be" (the Beatles), "Plastic Ono Band" (John Lennon), "All Things Must Pass" (George Harrison), "End of the Century" (Ramoness)

Sources: Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, www.spectropop.com, www.Rollingstone.com