THE SHIRELLES

Title: Spontaneous Combustion Live

Label: Scepter Records

Release Date: 1967

Medium: Album

Availability: Rare

Venue: Columbia University, NYC, NY

Recording Date: 1967

Lineup: Shirley Owens Alston - Vocals
Addie "Micki" Harris - Vocals
Doris Coley Kenner - Vocals
Beverly Lee - Vocals

Set List: Mama Said
Baby, It's You
(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction
Knock On Wood
Boys
Tonight's The Night
Last Minute Miracle
No Doubt About It
What'd I Say
I Got You (I Feel Good)
When The Saints Go Marching In

The Shirelles were one of the earliest, and perhaps most influential, of the girl groups that dominated pop music in the sixties. They set the standard for later sixties acts like the Supremes, The Marvelettes, the Shangri-Las, and Martha & the Vandellas. They have also been cited as major influences on La Belle, First Choice, Three Degrees, The Pointer Sisters, the Go-Gos, and En Vogue. Over their career, the group released 12 top forty singles, some of which they wrote themselves. In recognition of their vast influence, the Shirelles were elected into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1996.

The four members of the Shirelles had been singing together at school shows and parties in the late fifties for some time when a classmate convinced them to audition for her mother, Florence Greenberg, the owner of Tiara Records. The girls sang one of their own compositions, "I Met Him On Sunday" in Greenberg's living room and were so good that Florence signed them on the spot. Tiara released the song as a single in 1958 and it began to climb the local charts.

When Decca Records bought it and released it nationally, it cracked the pop top fifty, peaking at number 49. Shortly after, Greenberg formed Scepter Records in 1959 and released the group's cover of the 5 Royales' "Dedicated To The One I Love". Handicapped by the lack of a national distribution channel, the record only hit #83 on the charts.

However, Greenberg continued to build Scepter and in 1960, the Shirelles had their most successful single to date with "Tonight's The Night" (#39). That set up the momentum for their first chart topper, the King/Coffin composition, "Will You Love Me Tomorrow" (#1-1961). Sensing an opportunity, Greenberg re released "Dedicated To The One I Love". This time it peaked at #3.

Before 1961 closed, the Shirelles scored with "Mama Said" (#4) and "Big John (#21), followed by "Baby It's You" (#8) in early 1962. By the middle of the year, they topped the singles chart for a second time with the immortal "Soldier Boy". Before the close of the year, the group placed three more singles into the top forty. They included "Welcome Home Baby" (#22), "Stop The Music" (#36), and "Everybody Loves A Lover" (#19). They also charted an album, *Baby, It's You* (#59-1962).

By this point, the Shirelles had established themselves as being an excellent live act, appearing regularly on Murray The K's all star shows. During this period, Shirley Owens wrote many of their songs with Scepter's staff writer, Luther Dixon. When he left the label in late 1962, the group's fortunes declined.

In 1963, the group charted two top forty singles, "Foolish Little Girl" (#4) and "Don't Say Goodnight And Mean Goodbye" (#26) and two albums, *Greatest Hits* (#19) and *Foolish Little Girl* (#68). They would be their last hurrahs. Even though they continued to record and perform through the late sixties, they never duplicated their early fame. Their last chart single was "Last Minute Miracle" (#99-1967). They finally broke up in the late sixties but reformed in the early seventies to take advantage of the fifties revival circuit.

Their last chance at success came in the mid seventies when they signed a recording contract with RCA. When *Let's Give Each Other* (1976) did not chart, they stopped recording. The group has continued to play shows off and on since that date. On June 10, 1982, original member Addie Harris died from an heart attack. In the nineties, the three surviving members sang together for the first time in 19 years in 1994 at an awards show. They also performed together at their 1996 induction ceremonies for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. On February 4, 2000, Doris Kenner Jackson also passed away.

Since then, Beverly Lee has kept a version of the group together touring under the moniker The Shirelles Starring Beverly Lee. They have performed on a steady basis during the new millennium, playing shows with symphony orchestras and string sections, as well as dance and r&b shows as a feature act. They even perform a Holiday show. As of May, 2014, they are still active, with a show scheduled in NYC.

The Shirelles are featured on a staggering 17 compilations that are still in print. The best of these include the 1986 Rhino set, *Anthology (1959-1964*), which features 16 of their best songs from their glory years. Ace's 1992 release, *The Best of the Shirelles*, includes 32 tracks. Varese's 1999 set, *25 All-Time Greatest Hits*, contains 26 tracks. Finally, Collectables' 1995 set, *For Collectors Only*, includes 68 tracks spread out over three CDs. Each of these sets can be found at a large music retailer. The Shirelles have only released two official live albums, *Original Motown Revue*, a 1964 Motown set that is long out of print and very difficult to find, and *Spontaneous Combustion*, a 1967 Scepter Records set that is equally rare.

My first live recording of the Shirelles is their 1967 Scepter Records set, *Spontaneous Combustion*. Although I am not sure when this set was recorded, I would guess 1967, given the release date and the presence of their last chart single, "Last Minute Miracle". At the time, the original lineup was still intact, although Doris Kenner had married and was going by the name Doris Jackson. The four singers are accompanied by Joe Richardson and the Professionals.

*Spontaneous Combustion* contains several of the group's hit singles, including "Mama Said", "Boys", "Baby It's You", and "Tonight's The Night". It also includes their last pop chart single, "Last Minute Miracle". However, it leaves out other top forty hits like "Soldier Boy", "Dedicated To The One I Love", "Will You Love Me Tomorrow", "Foolish Little Girl", "Big John", "Welcome Home Baby", "Stop The Music", and "Everybody Loves A Lover". ]

It seems to me that a 1967 live recording would have been the opportunity to showcase their entire catalog, but think again. Instead of these songs, we can covers of "Satisfaction", "Knock On Wood", "What'd I Say", and "When The Saints Go Marching In". They range from okay to awful, but it certainly would have been better to showcase their own material. And, we could do without the Supremes knock off, "No Doubt About It".

The hit singles that are represented are well performed, although the group sounds uniformly better on their earlier live recordings. All in all, this set could have been special, but instead is mediocre because of song selection. Too bad, the Shirelles deserved better. Bottom line, not worth the search.

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| Title: Murray The K's Greatest Holiday Show | Label: Brook-lyn |
| The Greatest On Stage | Wand |
| Let The Good Times Roll | Arista |
| Release Date: 1965 | Medium: Album |
| 1964 | Album |
| 1982 | Album |
| Availability: Rare | Venue: Brooklyn Fox, New York City, NY |
| Rare | Not Specified |
| Rare | Not Specified |
| Recording Date: December 21, 1964 | |
| 1964 | |
| 1971-1972 | |
| Lineup: Shirley Owens Alston - Vocals | Doris Coley Kenner - Vocals |
| Addie "Micki" Harris - Vocals | Beverly Lee - Vocals |
| Set List: Baby It's You | Boys |
| Boys | Dedicated To The One I Love |
| Mama Said | Soldier Boy |
| Tonight's The Night | |

In addition to *Spontaneous Combustion,* I have pulled together seven live tracks of the Shirelles from three different sources that showcase just how good they were during their prime. Four songs come from the rare compilation CD, *Murray The K's Greatest Holiday Show*. They were recorded on December 21, 1964, during a one week run at the Brooklyn Fox Theater in New York City. Accompanied by the house band, the Shirelles perform four of their top forty singles including "Baby It's You", "Boys", "Mama Said" and "Tonight's The Night".

The recording quality of the songs is surprisingly good, with good separation between Shirley Owens' lead vocals and those of the three remaining group members. In addition, the house band does an outstanding job, producing vibrant horn work and a brisk rhythm. Owens gives a strong performance and the backup harmonies of Harris, Kenner, and Lee are flawless. It's a solid performance.

I also found two additional live tracks on the equally rare compilation album, *The Greatest On Stage*. This set was released by Wand Records in 1964. It also includes performances by the Kingsmen, Dionne Warwick, Maxine Brown, Tommy Hunt, and Chuck Jackson. Accompanied by a solid house band, the Shirelles romp through "Boys", later covered by the Beatles, and give a soulful rendition of their top ten single, "Dedicated To The One I Love". As is the case with the Murray The K show, the Shirelles sound great, with strong lead vocals and tight harmonies. Once again, recording quality is good, a rarity on live recordings from the early sixties.

My last live cut from the group is an early seventies performance of their best known hit single, “Soldier Boy”. The song appears on a 1982 Arista reissue of the 1973 Bell Records release *Let The Good Times Roll*. The soundtrack to the film of the same name was recorded at an undisclosed location and features many of the fifties and early sixties biggest acts.

By the time this track was recorded, the Shirelles had broken up and reformed to take advantage of the rock revival movement. Unfortunately, the song is marred by a bizarre mid song break where a disc jockey cuts into the song to introduce some dance steps. However, the song’s classic call and response sections and rapping is left intact and recording quality is excellent. Owens’ lead vocals are a little weak but I’ll take a mediocre version of this classic any day.

I was lucky to find it, as well as the other two compilations described above, since both the original Bell soundtrack and the Arista release are not in print. Check out a large used record store and hope you get lucky. You can also try the internet. Either way, you should have some live material by one of the classic girl groups of all time in your collection.