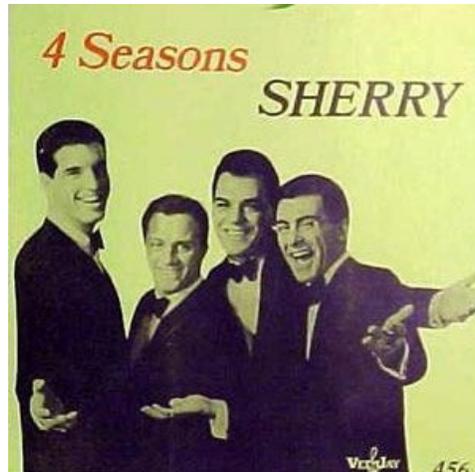


# “Sherry”--The Four Seasons (1962)

Added to the National Registry: 2023

Essay by Douglas E. Friedman (guest post)\*



45rpm sleeve

You don't have to wait long for it. After a brief, march-like, percussive lead-in that features a blend of elements, including handclapping, pizzicato strings and foot stomps, “Sherry,” by the Four Seasons, slides right into the chorus and grabs you, with Frankie Valli’s magnetic falsetto singing “*Sherry, Sherry baby,*” and it never lets you go. It’s a song you cannot forget no matter how many decades have passed. If you mention “Sherry” to someone, often they will break into their version of the opening line in a (bad) falsetto. The public loved it, and that love affair drove the song to number one on the “Billboard” charts, the first of five number ones for the group. “Sherry” remained in the number one slot for five weeks and on the charts for a total of 14 weeks.

The Four Seasons was formed out of members of several groups, primarily the Four Lovers; the Four Seasons’ original members were: Valli, Bob Gaudio, Tommy DeVito and Nick Massi. Gaudio (who was not in the Four Lovers) and Valli were introduced at a party by the now well-known actor Joe Pesci.

“Sherry” was written by Gaudio and produced by Bob Crewe. Gaudio was formerly a member of the 1950s rock band the Royal Teens (whose hit, “Short Shorts,” was co-written by Gaudio when he was only 15). “Sherry” came out in 1962 on the Vee-Jay label, a successful black-owned record company that had been formed in Indiana in 1953. Vee-Jay’s roster included the Dells, the El Dorados and the Spaniels.

Gaudio wrote or co-wrote a string of hits for the Four Seasons, including “Big Girls Don’t Cry” (Pop #1, 1962); “Walk Like A Man” (#1, 1963); “Dawn” (#3, 1964); “Rag Doll” (#1, 1964); “December 1963 (Oh What A Night)” (#1, 1975), and “Can’t Take My Eyes Off Of You” (#2, 1967) (Frankie Valli solo). They had nine other top ten hits as well.

Valli's use of falsetto and Gaudio's songwriting skills propelled the Four Seasons forward, leading, ultimately, to their induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1990, as well as the 2004 hit Broadway musical "Jersey Boys," based on their story. Gaudio was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1995.

While the use of falsetto in pop music was not invented by the Four Seasons, they supercharged it. It is difficult to imagine the Four Seasons' songs such as "Sherry" without the falsetto, especially as used by Valli. "When you had a top voice like Frankie with that kind of uniqueness and you build the harmonies around it, it all comes together," said Gaudio. "When I heard it on the radio--compared to what else was being played, it jumped out at me."

Music, as with other arts, is constantly moving forward. "Sherry" sat squarely between the doo-wop era and the British Invasion/Motown/Beach Boys sounds of the 1960s--and it helped nudge the needle in the latter direction. Some of the changes you might notice are that in the 1950s, various hooks were used to draw the listener into the song. Examples include a guitar (such as the Mills Brothers), or keyboard (see, "A Sunday Kind of Love"). Sometimes, vocals were used such as the bass singer (see, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers). (In addition, in the band-heavy pieces, samples of the chorus itself might be played.) Not so here. "Sherry's" hook was its heavy beat, not typically found in the 1950s. Another distinction from the '50s songs was less separation of the voices--more of a unified sound. None of the individual parts was unique; however, when the voices were put together, they made for a special blend. "Sherry" also reaches back a bit further by using a form of "call and response." The lyric goes "*Sherry, can you come out tonight*" (the call) and "*come, come, come out tonight*" (the response). Call and response has its roots in African culture and came to the US through enslaved people. It was particularly evident in the work songs sung in the fields.

Later, we would see the musicianship that was featured in the self-contained groups--with many of the singers playing their own instruments, as did the Four Seasons.

Gaudio said he wrote "Sherry" in 15 minutes, while he was getting ready to leave his house to go to a rehearsal. The bass line came first and then the song: "Just popped into my brain and I couldn't get rid of it. . . and kept singing it. . . [S]ome of the guys liked it and some didn't." Gaudio said:

Sherry did not strike me as being anything unusual. It was so simple. I wrote a quick lyric just to remember the melody--never intending it to be final. The group worked up a vocal on it and played it for Bob Crewe over the phone. He used a lot of superlatives on it and said, "If I don't f\*\*\* it up, it's a number one record," and that we should do it right away. The dissenters did not like Frankie's high voice,..but Frankie had that edge. Crewe was the tie-breaker, and, fortunately, he made the right decision.

The title did not come as easily as the rest of the song. Gaudio's working title was "Jackie Baby," in honor of then First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy. Other names were thrown into the hat until they settled on "Sherry," the name of the daughter of Crewe's close friend, New York disk jockey Jack Spector.

Gaudio said: “Nothing was intentional, it was always about what sounded right for the song. The harmony had to buzz. We made key changes. If it is not in the right key, the harmony will not buzz. It was helpful that Frankie had that edge in almost any key--he was strong in lower keys too. In the end, when you compare the Four Seasons to other groups and take the best songs, the difference is Frankie.”

Influences on the Four Seasons, particularly the harmonies, included the Four Freshmen and the Mills Brothers. “When the group was doing a performance and had a break, we would go outside and sing--street corner style. Not always doo wop, but older songs, such as ‘It’s A Blue World’ as done by the Freshmen.”

That “Sherry” was written in only 15 minutes is not uncommon. Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys said: “Some of the best songs come pretty quick...they’re the most divinely inspired.” Gaudio said: “When I sit down at the piano, I don’t know where my fingers are going, but somebody does.”

*Douglas E. Friedman is an alumnus of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and the Villanova University School of Law. He served for many years as vice president and counsel to a Fortune-100 energy company. In retirement, he has written five books, including two on treatment of music and musicians under the Holocaust and an award-winning biography of the Mills Brothers.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.