

# The Jean Thomas Story—Part 2

**By late 1963 Jean and Don Thomas have achieved a foothold in the music metropolis of New York . After 2 long years of writing and producing demos for the music publishers of 1850 Broadway, the Brill Building and nearby offices, they were still seeking a hit to cement their careers.**

They had come into the scene after the big names of the 'Brill Building' community had established their reputation. The music publishers of this area, known as Tin Pan Alley, spent good money on retaining writers and demo producers for their songs to sell them to the artists vying for the top chart positions every week. Getting a regular wage from their song writing with Shapiro-Bernstein was a stabilizing factor in Jean and Don's life and daily session fees paid the rent on their apartments. Work was plentiful and they established a name as top demo and studio musicians for many of the music publishers and record producers by the end of that year.



It was also a milestone year in the history of rock'n'roll with the US charts becoming alive with great artists like The Beach Boys and the Four Seasons. Lesley Gore had her first hit as did Little Stevie Wonder and the Ronettes and Peter Paul and Mary became pioneers of new contemporary music styles.

Phil Spector's songs written with Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich were dominating the charts with the Ronettes... '**Be My Baby**' and '**Baby, I Love You**', and '**Then He Kissed Me**' by the Crystals. The Angels had hit #1 on Aug 31<sup>st</sup> with '**My Boyfriends Back**'. The girl-group sound was at its peak.

Writing songs and working up demos was a part of Jean and Don's daily life and some were considered good enough by producers for release as master recordings. Writer/Producers like Chip Taylor felt Jean could get a hit on her own, but try as they may, that breakthrough hit was hard to find. Writing songs and racing from studio to studio to perform on demos or master sessions was a daily ritual. John Clemente captured the essence of record making at this time in his book 'Girl Groups'

**"During the Brill Building era, pop hits were churned out faster than an automated assembly line at a canned goods factory. Business during this time was so fast-paced; a song was recorded on Monday, mastered on Tuesday, pressed on Wednesday, released on Thursday, and landed on the charts by Friday. The profession was also about having a new gimmick, something just ahead of everything else to catch the ear of the teenage**

record –buying public. Since new ideas bounced around so quickly, demos often became the actual release. The idea of working with a smaller group of musicians and singers seemed more efficient in order to keep up with the competitive pace. A particular idea or trend could be worked out with a succinct team of session people. A desired sound could be achieved and gotten to market in a shorter amount of time. The actual group was often secondary and sometimes led to fictitious groups. A producer wouldn't have to worry about the artists when there were only session fees to pay. Then if a group were needed they would be hired to go out on the road “

The process by which the songs happen, remains mysterious even when the circumstances are laid out. **Geoffrey O'Brien** writing about “**Always Something In The Air**” by **Ken Emerson** said about these times.....

“As for the writers themselves, there hardly seems time to get to know them; they're too busy. Indeed, there seems scarcely to have been time for them to get to know each other, or perhaps themselves..... The Great Game of breaking into the *Billboard* charts generated an atmosphere of ceaseless competition among writers who watched each other's moves as attentively as they focused on their own work..... At the core of all that hustling and deal-making there is the music that everyone wanted to create, direct, and profit from; music as a source of power, a live element surrounded by people trying to shape and control it, yet only ever submitting to that control partially and temporarily. Work that at its lower limits could be mechanical, as writers struggled on deadline to come up with a production number for the new Elvis movie or a B-side for the next single by the "teen idol" Bobby Vee. But this led at unpredictable moments into the longed-

for astonishment: the magic phrase, usually some thoroughly ordinary phrase that might have been overheard on the subway—"take good care of my baby" or "save the last dance for me" or "don't say nothin' bad about my baby" or "we gotta get out of this place"—would join with the magic cadence or the magic chord and suddenly seem predestined. If songwriters are in awe of their own hits, it's because with all their professionalism, all their fabled ability to produce a "sideways" replication of any hit sound, they still don't really know where the songs come from or where they're going.”



Joey Powers—Photo courtesy of Harry Young

Although nobody knew where the next hit would come from, there were the special moments when artist, song and producer combine in an unexpected and significant way and everyone feels good about the sound. This was the story behind the song and work that was to change Jeans career in many ways by

giving her (albeit in a supporting role) a top ten hit. It was an example of how gambling studio time with experienced session musicians was the way the New York music could often generate the magic that appealed to the young record buyers..

Artie Wayne..."When Joey Powers and I decided to record, "Midnight Mary", a song I had co-written with Ben Raleigh ( who wrote "Wonderful, Wonderful", "Tell Laura I Love Her") we wanted something special. I was after a fusion of folk music with electric guitars, which wasn't being done in 1963. Al Gorgoni, an excellent guitarist and arranger, suggested that we also use two girls and two background harmonies instead of the usual group of singers. I met Jeannie Thomas for the first time a half hour before the overdubbing session. I don't read music so I sang Jean the parts. When the session started Jeannie took control and it was magical how easily she did the multi-tracks and the parts came together. We doubled the vocals, sat back, listened and knew we had a hit!" . As Jean says, "as far as I knew that day, I was being hired to do a demo. Artie and I worked very hard at getting the background to what it turned out to be. I made most of it up, with his help, of course." 'Midnight Mary' was recorded at Associated on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1963. She recalls..."We were very happy with the outcome and it became the recording that was released. All three background voices are mine on that recording." She and Artie layered all the voices as they built up a multi-girl vocal backing to Joey's lead .

### The 'Midnight Mary' Album

#### SIDE 1

1. **MY HEART IS AN OPEN BOOK** 2:08  
Sequence Music, Inc. ASCAP (David & Pockriss)
2. **IN THE MORNING GLORIA** 2:38  
Boston Road Music Corp. BMI (Raleigh & Wayne)
3. **WALK RIGHT IN** 2:05  
Peer International Corp. BMI (Cannon & Woods)
4. **THE LOVE I'LL NEVER KNOW** 1:50  
Boston Road Music Corp. BMI (Raleigh & Wayne)
5. **CINDY, OH CINDY** 2:28  
E. B. Marks Music Corp. BMI (Barron & Long)
6. **MIDNIGHT MARY** 2:20  
Jimskip Music, Inc. BMI (Wayne & Raleigh)

#### SIDE 2

1. **WALK SOFTLY AND CARRY A BIG HEARTACHE** 2:00  
Boston Road Music Corp.—What's Happening Music  
BMI (Wayne & Edwards)
2. **JUST A RIBBON** 3:14  
T. M. Music BMI (Scott & Resnick)
3. **MISSION BELL** 1:40  
Bamboo Music, Inc. BMI (Michael)
4. **HIGH, HIGH WALL** 2:02  
Boston Road Music Corp. BMI (Wayne & Raleigh)
5. **DON'T THINK TWICE** 2:55  
M. Witmark & Sons ASCAP (Dylan)
6. **OPEN DOORS AND SMILIN' FACES** 2:12  
Boston Road Music Corp. BMI (Wayne & Raleigh)

The demo that became a master was released on Amy Records 892 It entered the Billboard Bubbling Under chart November 2, 1963 at #102 rising to a peak of # 10 remaining on the chart for 13 weeks. The success of this single led to an album but Artie and Jean had one problem to which she had to find a solution. "Later, after it was a hit, I believe it was Artie who asked me if I knew anyone who had a similar sound who could work with me on the album. (Otherwise, it would take forever to record) I suggested a friend of mine from Sarasota who had a lovely singing voice and who had arrived in New York not long before this and was a nurse. She had never done an album session before and I assured her she would be fine. I knew she could do it. Her name was Lettie Hamblet . We did some other sessions together over the next few months"

Artie again...."When it came time to doing the album, we had a difficult time getting it together. Joey Powers only had three days to record his vocals, since he was a full time student at Ohio State. We started recording the tracks on November 22, 1963 the



day of John Kennedy's assassination, and finished the day of his funeral (24<sup>th</sup>). More than once, tears filled the musicians' eyes, as we tried to get through the tracking session. Al Gorgoni, Charlie Macey, Paul Simon, Russ Savakis, Buddy Saltzman and I believe Roger McGuinn. I was amazed that we were able to pull it off. I'm not sure if Jeannie dropped by the studio or called me during the tracking session, but I remember her being a positive influence on my morale. Over the next few weeks we put all the background parts on and the album came out in early 1964." The album features a mixture of songs composed by Artie and Ben Raleigh and some well known songs that they covered:

Jean would do another session with Artie Wayne on 7th February 1964 providing background and overdub on a track called "**Hurt Me**" by **Mathew Reid** (better known as the disco artist DC Larue from the mid 70s). This is really a duet with Jean speaking a response to the lead singer's plea to be 'hurt' in return for his romantic transgressions.

We've already heard how 'fictitious' groups would be formed on the basis of a producers ideas and in October 1963 Jean started working with **FGG Productions (Robert Feldman, Gerald Goldstein, Richard Gottehrer)** who also produced the **Angels** and this would continue through to 1964. It produced some notable results. Working alongside the Angels on the 24th October 1963 Jean was added to the **Angels** as they recorded '**You Can't Take My Boy-friends Woody**' which was also released as the **Powder Puffs** on **Imperial 66014** using a different version. Jean had also recorded a 'sweetening' overdub for '**Guess The Boy Don't Love Me Any-more**' by the **Angels** and more would follow in 1964.

It was all part of the 'girl group' sound that would be a chart sound throughout 1964.. As well as these sessions December would generate classic collectible 45's with little known male vocalist **Frank Cherval** on 3 tracks '**Down Our Street**' (which appeared as by **Flip Back** and later became a big Northern soul hit when recorded by Jackie & The Raindrops in the UK). '**Shake Hands With A Loser**' and '**Baby Be Good To Me**' on Mercury 72260. One other classic would emerge from the December sessions as Jean joined the back-up on the Phil Spector inspired 'wall-of-sound-alike' by **Johnny Caswell**, '**My Girl**' **Smash 1879** (not a tune to be confused with the Temptations classic.)



Like everyone at the time the music industry was deeply affected by the Kennedy assassination in November 1963. But life went on and the Billboard Chart finished the year with the Singing Nun topping the charts with the song 'Dominique' whilst in England a certain group was creating a storm which would blow through the USA like a whirlwind in 1964 and change pop music forever. The reaction to this would affect everyone and 1964 would be the year when groups, particularly male British ones would dominate the charts.

As 1963 rolled into 1964 Jean worked on many notable backing sessions including **Buddy**



Greco, and Connie Francis on her movie tracks for 'Looking For Love'. She helped provide the backing to Lou Christie in a January 1964 session of two excellent tracks "There They Go" and 'You May Be Holding My Baby'. She also managed to do the demo for Burt Bacharach's 'Send Me No Flowers' for the film of that name which Doris Day recorded.

As Jean was finding more and more work, producers often called her in to sessions to 'sweeten the sound'. Of course her early singles had given her a sound of the sweet, innocent teenager and this suited the romantic lyrics of many songs in late 1963....but sounds were about to change.

Whilst Jean had teamed up with Lettie Hamblet for a few months in late 1963 for the sessions with Artie Wayne and Joey Powers, by 1964 she contacted her old friend from Sarasota, Mikie Harris and persuaded her to join her in New York to satisfy the demand for female harmony on back-up and in the girl-group work which she had started to do with Ellie Greenwich..

***"Ellie and I met at Associated Recording during a demo session and realized it would be a lot easier to work together on all the background work we were doing instead of trying to do all the background voices by ourselves. We started to work as a duo on a lot of these demos and I called Mikie to come to NY and join us, which she did. We felt it was a good sound together. Mikie sang bottom, Ellie sang middle and I sang top. Bob Crewe used us and, as he said, a few others, depending on the sound he needed. Many times Ellie worked with other singers, as did I, but we did so much work together. Ellie was the queen of the girl's group sound. Mikie and I were the lucky ones to be working with her on so many of those wonderful records.***

At the end of 1963 Jean was focusing more and more on back-up and girl-group work as she, Mikie and Ellie Greenwich were being hired to be the 'sound' behind lots of artists. As a trio Ellie, Mikie and Jean created a very distinctive sound that emerged in studio sessions from





*In the Studio: Left to Right—Valerie Simpson, Jean Thomas, Ellie Greenwich and Mikie Harris, Photo by George Schowerer*

1964 to 1967. The unique sound has earned them the nickname 'Les Girls' but it is debatable if they ever appeared on 45 with this group name.

**"We always had a great time singing together. I don't ever remember us being angry with each other and we spent a lot of time together. I remember a lot of laughter and singing. Ellie was quite a clown and had a wonderful sense of humor and wit. Mikie and I were a great audience. It's amazing we were so busy working together all the time, because none of us could really sight-read a sheet of music. Ellie and Mikie had had some piano training, but I had none. (I started taking sight-reading lessons very quickly.) We would run to a piano and play a note or two if we were in doubt about what we were singing. It's a good thing the three of us had excellent ears for music and could remember quickly. We would learn our parts on the spot when we got to a session. It didn't take more than 10 or 15 minutes to be ready to record. Sometimes we didn't even have that much time. You had to be fast or you didn't work. There were no rehearsals before a session. On many sessions we were left on our own to make up the background or we were sometimes just given ideas by the producer as to where he/she wanted harmony. I've listened recently to so many of the recordings from back then, and if I may say so myself, they sound great!!"**

And of course, Ellie Greenwich was very experienced in the studio, and by 1963 she had written and helped produce several hits with husband Jeff Barry. She paid **"attention to detail** **"and "worried about piano notes and changes and fixing the background parts and getting the correct lead vocal"** according to engineer Brooks Arthur." **She certainly always seems to have had the sound of the record in her mind such that the 'feel was right' he**



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remarked. As a result they were literally 'works of art'. With such pedigree and talent this trio would work extensively together for a couple of years leaving a vocal mark on the sounds coming out of NYC.

Jean isn't sure what was the key to the sound they produced together....."It's fair to say that no one person in the group was responsible for the sound. I always felt it was the combination of the voices. Mikie, who

sang bottom, and Ellie, who sang the middle, had powerful voices. I had power to my voice when I sang in my chest voice, which is part of ones normal register, but my head voice was lighter especially when I had to sing the high part in my upper register. My feelings are that the high voice should be strong enough to be clear and heard, but not so strong as to take over the sound. The high notes are the easiest to hear and if sung too strongly won't blend with the sound. When it was all put together our sound was a good one and seemed to make everyone happy. Whatever the case may be, we were successful at what we did and I guess that's the proof that it worked."

Listening to this trio it is a fair assessment that their strength was that they all had power in your voices which gave the choral harmony great depth and width but Jean also had range because her 'lighter' voice could soar without too much loss of power. This technique is a unique aspect of your combined skills (as all harmony groups have). A particular character because of the synergy in harmony of their individual unique voices was perhaps the reason why so many producers liked what they could add to their productions.

As 1964 opened few would realize the way pop music would change. A change which for the USA and NYC in particular commenced really on February 7<sup>th</sup> when flight PA101 landed at JFK



After The Beatles historic February visit, Jean was in the studio on 2<sup>nd</sup> March recording 'Beatles Please Come Back' as part of Gigi Parker and The Lonelies. It was a case of cashing in on the new cult with a classic girl group sound.....Now a CD collectors item





airport to bring the Beatles to America for their historic tour. They would impact on the world of popular music, for all time in a quite dramatic way. Some say the US music industry never recovered, but at the time it was just a big publicity event. The production line of demos and masters continued to roll at the studios around 1650 Broadway and it was very much a case of business as usual and finding a way of cashing in on this new phenomena. Well as soon as they left Jean was in the studio on 2<sup>nd</sup> March recording **'Beatles Please Come Back'** as part of **Gigi Parker and The Lonelies**. It was a case of cashing in on the new cult with a classic girl group sound..

Connie Francis' bio tells us how established stars responded to the Beatles arrival....." **The year 1964 was a major upset for many**

**American singers. Record sales, and careers, for many of rock'n' roll's first generation artists more or less ended abruptly after the British Invasion beginning with The Beatles. Connie was already an established big band and "standards" performer and even when her reign as a rock-n-roll chart-topper ended, she still continued selling records and performing as a leading entertainer. Throughout the sixties Connie released many albums ...." And Jean would do background on many tracks.... including 'Souvenirs', 'Don't Ever Leave Me' and 'Tommy' during 1964**

**"Like a tornado that demolishes some houses yet leaves their next door neighbours unscathed, the onslaught of the Beatles, Motown and an electrified Bob Dylan bowled over some New York songwriters, while others in nearby offices and cubicles survived and even thrived." Says Ken Emerson, in "Always Something In The Air" ".....Red Bird had 4 top ten hits in 1964 and five more that made the top 100. All but two of these were written by Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich."**

Jean was therefore in good company working with Ellie so much and would also be working with another producer as the year unfolded that put up a good resistance to the 1964 chart topping songwriting teams of Lennon-McCartney and Holland-Dozier-Holland....his name was Bob Crewe.



Sessions continued to focus on the girl group sound for the first half of 1964. As **Charlotte Greig** says in **'Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow'....."What made the girl-group music of the time so appealing was .....the quality of natural, throwaway verve and flair, so genuinely close to the style of the ordinary teenage girl!"** Before 1964, the work Jean did as a solo artist had followed the then popular theme of sweet love and marriage. Charlotte Greig observes ....**"By 1964 the theme of marriage had become absolutely central to girl-group music: songs of suffocating sweetness and cloying schmaltz about the Big Day were everywhere.....the fantasy of marriage ....expressed firstly, the teenage girl's ambition to be a star, to be somebody: and secondly, for many, the desire to move up into the mid-**





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dle class instead of remaining at the bottom of the heap.”

An appearance in March with a line-up that was named **The Tomboys** generated the Girl garage sound of **'I'd Rather Fight Than Switch'** **Swan 4181** and Jean also worked on her brother Don's session for Decca in April for tracks .....**'She Acts Like She Doesn't Care'** and **'Turn Her**

**Around'** which they also wrote. These would eventually get released on the Decca and Coral labels but without any success in the charts. Sessions at this time also included her solo MGM release of the Chip Taylor produced **'Don't Make Me Fall In Love With You/ I Don't Miss you at All'** **MGM13263**

*"I met Chip after the release of "Moon River". He called me at Spanka Music to introduce himself and tell me how much he liked my version of the song. I started doing demos for him and we remained friends for quite a few years. I did lots of demos with Chip but he also became my record producer for these two songs in June 1964 and later in 1967 on 'Working Girl'. Emile La Viola, at Shapiro-Bernstein (Painted Desert) published the songs and got me a recording contract with MGM. I was signed as a writer with Shapiro-Bernstein at the time. We recorded at Associated Recording. We lost contact in the very late '60s. It's a shame that happens, but I guess everyone starts moving in different directions at different points during their lives. It was fun working with him. I loved his approach to the music he wrote and to the sounds that he wanted. He worked with me long and hard to get just the sound he was looking for."* Chip produced these tracks in the sweet innocent sound that had been Jean's trademark solo sound till then. But as for her other work in early 1964, this sound was more and more being challenged by the group harmony style.

The manufactured group was again around in June as Jean once again resumed work with The Angels and F-G-G. They teamed up again in June of 64 with Jean joining **The Angels**, on record **'Jamaica Joe'**, and there is a possibility she also appears on.....**'Little Beatle Boy'** and **'Guess The Boy Don't Love Me Anymore'** which may have been recorded at this 5 hour session. What also emerged was a 45 as **Angie and The Chicklettes (Apt 25080) 'Treat Him Tender, Maureen'** (an appeal to Ringo Starr's new fiancé ), and **'Tommy'** on which Jean takes the lead vocal.

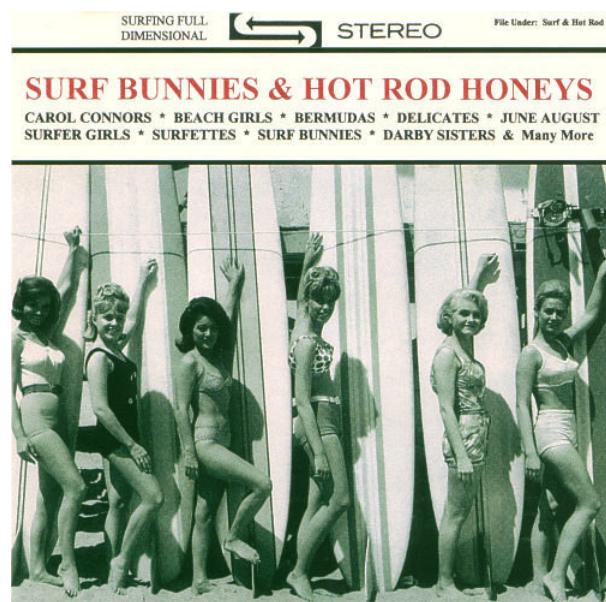
But better was to come that month when Jean and other session singers showed up for an appearance in a line-up that was re-released as **The Surfer Girls...('Draggin' Waggon/One Boy Tells Another' (Columbia 43001)**. The Billboard Hot 100 Bubbling Under book describes this as a “Female studio group assembled by producer Steve Venet.” The single entered the charts on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1964 and stayed for one week at #134.

As spring turned into summer Jean picked up work backing **Ann DAndrea** on ‘He’s The Boy/ Johnny’s Back In Town’ Philips 40182, and **Darlene Terri** and **April Young** as well as **Connie Francis**, **Lesley Gore** and on **Freddie Cannon’s** ‘Summertime USA’.

By this time Ellie, Mikie and Jean had developed a group sound of their own and producers were taking notice. These sessions were building a distinctive sound and when Bob Crewe was introduced to Jean’s sound in the second half of 1964 it would generate one of the distinct female vocal styled performances of the decade.....all because of a song that hit the # 1 spot on **July 18<sup>th</sup> 1964** for 2 weeks. It was a classic by **The Four Seasons** that would create the cult group that would be ....’**The Rag Dolls**’. **We will continue the story from the middle of 1964 on in Part 3.** Check out the logs in the ‘**Session Logs**’ section on our web



Compiled by Ken Charmer and Jean Thomas. Special thanks to Artie Wayne.



The Surfer Girls and The Powder-Puffs feature on this Collectors CD