

Nostalgia, Appropriation, and the New Right in Early 1990s Pop

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For those tuning into mainstream radio or turning on the television in the early 1990s, it was difficult to escape the music of Wilson Phillips, as songs from the pop vocal group's eponymous 1990 album were disseminated to a mass audience on a range of radio formats, on MTV and VH1, as well as on award shows. By negotiating an American audience increasingly segmented by media and advertising strategies, and by the generally divisive politics of the period, this group achieved popularity with both the "MTV generation" and an older adult demographic.

Nonetheless, the work of Wilson Phillips has drawn little attention by scholars, even though the group's marketing and music deftly combined ideological elements from both the developing progressive feminist movement and the continued influence of the New Right. This presentation begins to correct this oversight by demonstrating that Wilson Phillips's first two singles, "Hold On" and "Release Me," utilize a complicated approach to pleasing a conflicted American public by lyrically conveying both prevalent conservative ideals and suggestions of vulnerability and delivering these messages through compelling musical settings.

Comprised of Carnie and Wendy Wilson and Chynna Phillips, Wilson Phillips was marketed from the beginning with references to their rock-royalty lineage – starting with the group's name. As a result, the daughters of Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys and John and Michelle Phillips of the Mamas and the Papas benefitted from their relationship to these well-regarded rock artists of the 1960s (Connelly and Eckles, 1991). For those unfamiliar with these groups and their music, the suggestion of authenticity by association, combined with contemporary elements in the group's releases and marketing, generated an aura of significance, quality, and relevance for Wilson Phillips.

Among many possible sources, a 1991 *Rolling Stone* issue clearly demonstrates this marketing strategy. In the wake of the group's success, the magazine featured the three singers on the magazine's cover, accompanied by the title "Wilson Phillips: Surviving Childhood in the Rock & Roll Fast Lane." The title of the accompanying article, "California Girls," is obviously the title of a Beach Boys song, and the article itself describes the trio's "rock & roll childhood" (1991).

Though these connections to the '60s helped encourage broader acceptance, they influenced the *music* in complicated way. "Hold On," for example, lyrically reflected contemporary topics while demonstrating unique vocal and accompanimental elements to situate the group as both modern and historically-oriented. Many listeners have considered the vague life guidance in this song uplifting, but an alternative interpretation suggests that the lyrics articulate sympathy with anti-victim discourse, which suggests private causes and solutions for public problems. Those interpreting the song's lyrics as supportive may have favored this approach, finding it more constructive than offers of assistance. For those on the other side of the issue, the song's arrangement may have softened the message enough to encourage a more upbeat reading (Phillips, Ballard, Wilson, 1990).¹

From the first perspective, this song offers welcome assertions of personal responsibility. Wendy Wilson validates this interpretation, writing in a 2015 interview that this song was about liberty and empowerment. Being strong as a female and turning a negative into positivity. Anyone could relate, really" (McKiney, 2015). Encouraging an individual to take responsibility for circumstances they have caused can certainly prove helpful, especially with a reminder that the maker of these mistakes may be capable of rectifying them.

The song's message is inconsistent, though. In the verses, lines like "I know this pain" (in verse 1) and "Don't you think it's worth your time / To change your mind?" (in verse 2) offer messages of relatability and individual potential – as though having experienced a similar situation, the speaker understands these difficulties and believes that it is within the addressee's power to make things better. Locking oneself in "chains" introduces the assumption that outside forces did not contribute to the situation. The line "Don't ever let anyone step all over you" in verse one reinforces the point by suggesting that others have taken advantage of the struggling individual *because* he or she has been too passive. It may be that the blame for the "mess" described in verse 2 is shared with a more

¹ This analysis uses the album version of the song.

powerful person or institution. Lines like these suggest opposition to a victim's perspective because of the assumption that the trouble at hand is the fault of said victim, who should be held accountable for its resolution (1990).

The choruses reinforce this position, notably with the lines "Until then baby are you going to let them / Hold you down and make you cry." The suggestion that one might "let" this happen suggests that the victim is almost a willing participant and ultimately responsible for their mistreatment by someone capable of literally or figuratively "holding them down." On the other hand, the chorus later suggests that holding on for "one more day" will resolve these issues, thus contradicting the calls to action. Whether one considers the song's advice empowering or unsympathetic "Hold On" was clearly intended to allow for multiple interpretations (1990).

The musical setting facilitates this interpretive variation. The introduction begins with high hat cymbal and conga-like drums, then continues with soft synthesized strings that fade in, followed by chordal electronic keyboard and bird-like sounds. This section ends with descending eighth notes on keyboard. Overall, "Hold On" starts off sounding like a happy song (1990).

The song's production also allows the group's vocals more potential to recall the work of past pop groups. Chynna's double-tracked solo vocals alternate with the group's collective singing, which may remind some listeners of groups such as those led by the parents of Wilson Phillips's members. The double-tracking, frequent harmonization, vocal fills, and use of echo eliminate true solo vocals, a feature that counters the strongly individualistic message that the lyrics convey by emphasizing vocal collectivity. Chynna's vocal timbre, with its light, even girlish, quality also helps to musically suggest a clarity and righteousness of intention (1990).

The second verse maintains similar instrumentation to the first chorus and the guitar solo, with synthesized strings and electric and acoustic guitar figures sustaining a fuller texture. In addition to this upbeat instrumental background, vocal performing choices reinforce the song's positive aural character. For instance, the ascent just before a quick descent in the fourth line of the first verse creates a playful and inoffensive interpretation of this previously-discussed line: "Don't ever let anyone step all *over* you," with the first syllable emphasized before a descent to the second syllable and the next word. The same tactic is used in the second verse on the fourth line – "You got yourself into your *own* mess," with "own" emphasized before the descent to "mess.". In both cases, the saccharine musical delivery alters what the words might communicate on their own (1990).

Concerning the choruses, the vocal rhythm creates a sense of forward momentum with the faster pacing of the first several lines, and the accompaniment's faster rhythms and fleshed-out texture (like that in verse 2) reinforce this effect. Starting with the words "hold on" in line eight, elements of the accompaniment change to respond to the more anthemic melody (1990).

As the slide displayed illustrates, the choruses play a particularly significant role here, since these sections comprise a large proportion of the song. Until the end of the second chorus, we find a contrasting-verse-chorus form, but starting with chorus 2, the chorus, and variations of it, are repeated until the end of the single edit version at 3:42 (or 4:25 for the album version, which continues with even more chorus material and a fade-out). This exaggerated repetition has likely influenced interpretations, since listeners hear this energetic setting in over half the song. Listeners could derive the overall meaning of the song from the upbeat chorus (1990).

Wilson Phillips's second single "Release Me" likely found an eager audience in part because of some similarity to "Hold On." This includes the use of a more conciliatory tone for the verse lyrics than for those of the choruses. The song describes a struggle to end a relationship. Verse one indicates that the conclusion is far from ideal but necessary: "I don't wanna give up, but baby / It's time I had two feet on the ground." Verse two fleshes out more details of the situation: the addressee's troubles have wounded the speaker, who feels conflicted nonetheless. Wondering what could have been suggests a lack of closure, even with the blame placed on someone else. Verse three adopts an assertive tone like that of the choruses, declaring a firm end to the relationship from a decisive forward-oriented perspective (Phillips, Wilson, Wilson, 1990).

The choruses begin by trying to reason with the love interest, suggesting, "You knew it was time to just let go." The line "But somehow it's just not that easy" alludes to the complications inherent in the situation. But the tone changes with the line "'Cause you're a waste of time for me," a statement that suggests a selfish basis for the entire song (1990).

The tone of the refrains contrasts most dramatically with the that of the choruses and the third verse, gently asking "can you release me," or shortening the line to "release me." These lyrics place the responsibility for action on the addressee. However, if this song is hypothetically considered a thematic companion to "Hold On," maybe the speaker should accept that the resolution is her responsibility (1990).

The phrase "release me" also completes each of the choruses. This figures significantly since the single edit ends with the climactic last chorus. It also points to the long-recognized strategy of performing the song title both frequently and toward the ending, to help listeners remember what to buy. While this method is not novel

to this song, its execution here is somewhat unusual, since the first chorus arrives a minute and thirteen seconds in. The refrains repeat the song's title and create space between verses before this point. By alternating between two chords, (the subdominant and dominant in C-Major) and ending with a deceptive cadence, they suggest both stasis and tension (1990).

In the previously-mentioned third and final chorus, the thicker and more timbrally complex instrumental accompaniment supports the dramatic vocal volume and emotional expression. In all, we hear bass guitar, acoustic and electric guitar, drum set, keyboards, synthesizer, and synthesized strings. In addition, this elevated chorus comes after the *bridge*, which introduces new vocal melodic material, vocal call-and-response with the only solo vocals in the song, the first synthesized string figures, and a key change that progresses from C-Major, through G-Major to arrive on D-Major in chorus 3. The emotional urgency builds somewhat consistently until this point, but the song's climax begins in this section (1990).

In addition to the more strident verse 3 lyrics discussed previously, the build-up from the beginning of the song to the bridge includes changes in the formal pattern. After the introduction and before the first chorus, verses alternate with refrains. Starting with chorus 1, the pattern changes, as this new section moves to a refrain and to verse 3. This refrain is half the length of the previous two and contains only one line: "release me." Then, instead of another refrain after verse 3, chorus 2 directly follows, and the song continues with the bridge and last chorus (1990).

Though these two songs suggest a somewhat harsh outlook on interpersonal relationships, other tracks on this album offer more reflective and considerate viewpoints. For instance, "You're in Love" portrays the self-sacrificing act of supporting a romantic interest who has moved on. In addition, the simple fact of addressing personal struggle in "Hold On" and "Release Me" could itself be considered empowering. However, lyrically focusing criticism on the vulnerable suggests a conservative orientation for both Wilson Phillips and some of their fans, with musical arrangements drawing in differently inclined listeners (1990).

Rather than potential political leanings, reminders of the group's lineage have continued to play a role in the group's reception. As recently as 2013, Carnie Wilson acknowledged the influence of her parents' generation, stating in an interview that "the underlying voice of Wilson Phillips is that other generation" (McKinney, 2015). Such connections encouraged Wilson Phillips's inter-generational popularity, and strategic arrangements made their songs broadly accessible in a contentious period.

In the early 1990s, amidst debates on "welfare queens," "playing the victim," and other such topics, Wilson Phillips was marketed as a young, modern group with safe countercultural connections. Their music utilized both nostalgic and modern associations to elicit broad appeal in a period of marked cultural conflict.

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