

BEN E. KING



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1959-2010</i>	<i>Classic R&B</i>	<i><u>I (Who Have Nothing)</u> (1963)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Ben E. King*

Years: *1960-1961*

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SPANISH HARLEM

Album released:

May 1, 1961

V A L U E
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More info:



Tracks: 1) Amor; 2) Sway; 3) Come Closer To Me; 4) Perfidia; 5) Granada; 6) Sweet And Gentle; 7) Quizas, Quizas, Quizas (Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps); 8) Frenesi; 9) Souvenir Of Mexico; 10) Besame Mucho; 11) Love Me, Love Me; 12) **Spanish Harlem**.

REVIEW

Benjamin Earl Nelson's earliest wave of fame was raised by his hit singles with The Drifters — not The Drifters of the Clyde McPhatter and the David Baughan years, but a completely new version of The Drifters which used to be The Five Crowns, a New York-based doo-wop group working on the same circuit. That new version, musically supervised by guardian angels Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, had become a veritable monster hit-making machine, with songs such as 'There Goes My Baby' and 'Save The Last Dance For Me' reaching the kind of mainstream popularity that the original Drifters could never even dream of. However, in the end the new Drifters, directed by the same ironic hand of Fate, suffered the same fate as the old ones — like Clyde McPhatter before him, Ben E. King decided that he was being unfairly ripped off by his management and officially broke up with the band to begin a solo career.



The decision was not as risky as one might surmise; first, by going solo King was not losing any serious business support — not only would he be staying with Atlantic, but he'd even inherit the Leiber-Stoller coaching from the Drifters — and second, there were some auspicious precedents, most notably Clyde McPhatter himself, who'd gone on for several more

successful years as a solo artist after splitting off from the Drifters (that success wouldn't last for much longer, but in 1960 Clyde was still a pretty hot proposition, and Ben probably thought he could do even better). Additionally, Ben was not just a singer; he had a knack for establishing his own artistic style, and although he never played any instruments, he could generate musical ideas in his head for other people to realize (like Jim Morrison, to name a more famous case). Finally, he had that rare visual combination of dashing African-American masculinity with smoothness and suaveness, which could endear him to multi-racial audiences — no doubt here that just as many moody white ladies went crazy over the man as the black girls did.

The first couple of solo Ben E. King singles, however, did relatively little for him, and it is not difficult to see why: '[A Help-Each-Other Romance](#)', recorded as a duet with LaVern Baker, was simply too old-fashioned for 1960. It sounded like a straightforward R&B number from around 1955, with the appropriate production values and the same kind of rough and raggedy saxophone background that rallied so many people around the genre back then, but was already seen as obsolete in an era that — at least, in the eyes of the leaders of the record industry — called for more subtlety and sentimentality. Another single, 'First Taste Of Love', sounded way too much like a hasty rewrite, by the Pomus-Shuman team, of their own 'Save The Last Dance For Me'. It fared a little better on the charts than 'A Help Each-Other Romance', but overall it was clear that in order to properly *launch* a satisfactory solo career, King needed something outstanding.

Salvation and immortality came by way of 'Spanish Harlem', which I would not hesitate to call one of the most elegant and tasteful ballads of the year 1960. Curiously, the song is credited not to the usual Leiber-Stoller team, but rather to Jerry Leiber and Phil Spector; the latter, at the time, was under a sort of «apprenticeship» to the duo, and managed to replace Stoller on this particular occasion by arriving at Leiber's house an hour earlier than the agreement (so the legend goes, anyway) — Stoller only arrived in time to add the famous marimba intro riff (whose chords bear an uncanny resemblance to the main melody of the Crickets' 'More Than I Can Say', by the way, though Stoller expands it into a more complex and twisted musical phrase).

King's own role in the song is fairly humble; he gives an appropriate vocal performance that could be easily matched by many other singers with his type of baritone. On other recordings, he could sound more flexible or more theatrical, more prone to improvisation or ad-libbing, but 'Spanish Harlem' is really all about honoring the glory of a great musical hook. The song has no chorus, no bridge section, and a very brief fade-out coda; it delivers its message in but two vocal and one instrumental verse, and that's quite enough to brand it as an absolute classic of the romantic pop genre — although, if you

listen closely to the melody and observe its synergy with the lyrics, you can quickly perceive that the sentiment of the tune goes deeper and darker than generic suaveness.

Lyrics-wise, the song emphasizes, in its first verse, the idea of *reclusiveness* ("*It is a special one, it's never seen the sun / It only comes out when the moon is on the run / And all the stars are gleaming*"), and in the second verse, the idea of *possession* ("*I'm going to pick that rose / And watch her as she grows in MY garden*"). I certainly get a bit of a *Beauty And The Beast* vibe from this narrative, as if it were sung from the Beast's perspective — and the melody largely obeys the lyrical message, as each verse starts out with the pretty, but humble and inconspicuous marimba riff, then begins unfurling, faster and faster and faster, rising upwards to a climax (that is when the moon is on the run and the rose opens up, I guess?), and then quickly winding down and settling back in again, as if it were all about the protagonist making sure that nobody *else* gets access to the treasure. So it's really that kind of «*this beauty is for myself and myself only*» song.

It is this tight integration of melody and lyrics which is the reason why the song never really worked so well in Aretha Franklin's decade-later rendition. She would clumsily change "*a rose in Spanish Harlem*" to "*a rose in Black and Spanish Harlem*" (I'm sorry, but Black Harlem and Spanish Harlem are two different, if adjacent, locations; how can the same rose be present at once in two different locations? are we talking quantum theory here?), pretty much eliminate the «unfurling» sensation from the middle of the verse, and give the whole song an artificial subtext of «black is beautiful» that it never had in the first place.

Honestly, the vibe of the song has more to do with Sting's 'Roxanne' than Black Pride, though I don't remember Sting ever coming up with such gorgeous musical embodiments of his damsels-in-distress' beauty as Leiber, Stoller, and arranger Stan Applebaum do here in the instrumental verse — few individual moments are more breathtaking in the history of the Atlantic label than when the soprano sax comes in at 1:52 to take over the «unfurling» part of the melody. By that time, admittedly, the very presence of Ben E. King on the track has become one of its least significant details, which is why it is 'Stand By Me' and not this track that would go on to become the «quintessential Ben E. King» song, but in overall terms of «musical immaculacy» 'Spanish Harlem' will always receive at least twice the amount of points from me.

If there ever was one particular problem with this particular recording of 'Spanish Harlem', though, it is that, despite being performed by a distinct African-American performer, there was virtually nothing «black» about the song in question. (Hence the upcoming Aretha amendment, which «africanizes» the song to just about the same extent as a "*yo, wassup, Leporello?*" would «africanize» *Don Giovanni*). The lyrics can be traced back all the way to courtly European poetry, and

the melody, true to the song's location, takes a bit of a cue from the average Mexican mariachi serenade. Not that singing it was in any way a crime for the artist — on the contrary, at the time it could be counted as a highly progressive move, intentionally fuzzifying the borders between «black R&B» and «white (art-)pop»; and given the inventive and fresh nature of the song, it was definitely a more tasteful and respectful decision than, for instance, having Sam Cooke record all those crappy collections of old Tin Pan Alley schlock. But it was also a time when a genius move could be easily misconstrued and give rise to disastrous tackiness — in the end, it's much easier for us today to look at the whole process as a part of history than it was for its actual participants to take an impartial look at themselves right in the middle of things.

In this case, the logic was technically impeccable: Ben E. King just recorded a Latin-themed song that became a massive hit — *ergo*, while the iron is hot, let's have Ben E. King record an entire *album* of Latin-themed songs for all those new fans of his to enjoy! Oh, and if those Leiber and Stoller guys are unavailable to write eleven more songs for our guy, no problem: we'll just select eleven random favorites from the Latin market and have Stan Applebaum juice them up. I mean, if you liked Ben E. King singing 'Spanish Harlem', you'll also like him singing 'Besame Mucho', right? Quite a nice display of cultural hybridization it'll be, and right on time what with Ray Charles no longer doing that kind of shit for our label...

At the dawn of my reviewing career, when my tolerance for crass moves like these was about 0%, I would have probably dismissed **Spanish Harlem** — the LP, not the song — right out of hand; and, frankly speaking, even today I think it should be obvious for everybody involved just how much of an artistic gap lies between the album's title track (prudently saved for last) and everything else recorded for it. Not even the general public could be fooled that easily: the LP did not chart at all, although one other track later taken off it and released as a single (Gabriel Ruiz' 'Amor') managed to make it into the Top 20 (one must, however, take note that it was issued right on the heels of 'Stand By Me' — with King being at the absolute peak of his popularity in mid-1961, one should never underestimate the basic power of momentum).

It is not that the material assembled for King's «Latin Lover» album is crappy — Mexican pop music has never been one of my favorite genres, but the catchiness and compositional virtues of some of these melodies are undeniable, and besides, publicly twirling your nose at stuff like 'Besame Mucho' or 'Perfidia' is a bit like publicly urinating on an Egyptian pyramid: you can only highlight your own pitiful insignificance in the process. And it is certainly not that Ben E. King, either visually or vocally, cannot personify the stereotype of a passionate Latin lover. His timbre, his phrasing, his languishing hums and moans, his willingness to close his eyes and imaginatively transport himself into the middle of a fiesta (or maybe a siesta) under the hot Mexican sun — it definitely *works*. He's got the kind of artistic versatility that none of Atlantic's male stars

really had up to this point: definitely more chameleonesque and, perhaps, even more self-confident than Clyde McPhatter, the man can really do it all.

The question is: *should* he really have done it all? Upon relistening to the record for a couple of times and also — quite importantly — comparing some of the covers with the original hit versions, I think that the album works *in places*, namely, those places where Leiber and Stoller try to do something interesting and challenging (if never too unconventional) with the source material. Thus, ‘Amor’ was mostly familiar to the radio-friendly public from slow, lush, croony versions by Bing Crosby and Andy Russell. Here, the arrangers drastically speed up the tempo, giving the song more of a bossa nova flavor, and King coherently imbues it with a sense of expediency and impatience that is altogether lacking in all those old serenade-style renditions. By the end, the song almost turns into a high-testosterone-level, fully danceable jam, so perhaps there *was* a real reason rather than pure name attraction for which the public still bought it as a single.

On the other hand, the above-mentioned ‘Perfidia’, performed here as a *HOT, LUSTY* tango number, and ‘Besame Mucho’, alternating between two different tempos, do not do too much to register as performances that transcend their own clichés. And there is absolutely nothing to stop ‘Sway’ from being as corny as the version popularized by Dean Martin in 1954; you could just as easily sneak King’s version into any random figure skating competition, where it belongs by definition. These recordings all fall prey to the musical tropes of their source material rather than trying to use them as a trampoline for anything slightly different, though I do admit that Leiber, Stoller, and Applebaum are all quite busy working on making them stand out in *some* ways. It’s just that certain tasks are insurmountable.

One could place some hope, perhaps, into the only two (in addition to ‘Spanish Harlem’) original numbers on the record. Unfortunately, ‘Souvenir Of Mexico’, contributed by the Pomus-Shuman team, is a throwaway, shuffling along without any interesting hooks and with a rather disinterested vocal performance from King. And Ben’s own ‘Love Me, Love Me’ takes its cues both from ‘Save The Last Dance For Me’ and the bridge section of Elvis’ ‘I Need Your Love Tonight’, mashing them together in an okay synthesis which also comes quite short on hooks. In other words, *writing* a «Mexican love song» for the project turned out to be an even more tedious task than re-inventing or re-arranging one.

Perhaps the conceptuality of the approach deserves a formal medal — the bravery of Atlantic, an almost «pure» R&B label opting to put out an entirely Spanish-themed record, has to be admired — but something tells me that the average fan of Latin pop music would rather look on this project indignantly, as an example of (unsuccessful) cultural appropriation; while the average fan of the classic Atlantic R&B sound might condemn **Spanish Harlem** for opening up (along with other

similar projects) a fairly questionable era in the history of the label, when it began to consistently water down its tough and gritty Fifties' sound with suave, sentimental, orchestrated compositions for the adult (possibly even *white* adult, oh my goodness!) audience. Indeed, taken together with something like the Coasters' **One By One** from only a few months back, one could easily form the impression that Atlantic was trying to... turn into a *pop* label?

Well, blame it on the times: everybody was going pop in 1961 — you could, in fact, regard this little period of pre-British Invasion «maturity» as the first of many waves of *poptimism* half a century before the term was even coined — and Ben E. King, with his vocal talents that could effortlessly carry him across genres and styles (not to mention those dashing good looks!), was the perfect spearhead for Atlantic's submission to the general trend. Yet, for all the overall disappointment it could bring, it was also a trend responsible for an occasional *rose in Spanish Harlem, growing in the street, right up through the concrete, but soft and sweet and dreaming* — and for each early Sixties' masterpiece like that, I'm sure we will be willing to forget a dozen concurrent exercises in the crass and the corny.

