

BOBBY "BLUE" BLAND



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1951-2003</i>	<i>Soul blues</i>	<i><u>I'll Take Care of You</u> (1960)</i>

Only Solitaire

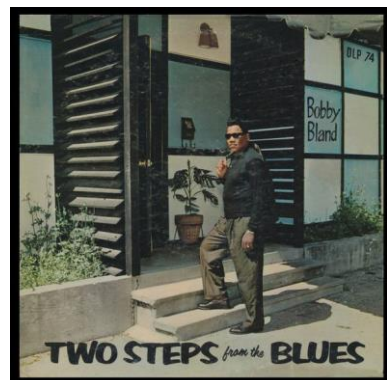
Artist: *Bobby "Blue" Bland*

Years: *1957-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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TWO STEPS FROM THE BLUES

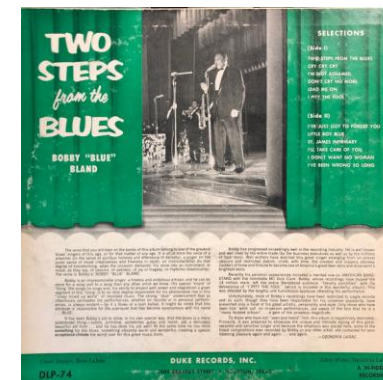
Album released:

V A L U E

January 1961

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More info:



Tracks: 1) *Two Steps From The Blues*; 2) Cry Cry Cry; 3) I'm Not Ashamed; 4) Don't Cry No More; 5) Lead Me On; 6) I Pity The Fool; 7) I've Just Got To Forget You; 8) Little Boy Blue; 9) St. James Infirmary; 10) *I'll Take Care Of You*; 11) I Don't Want No Woman; 12) I've Been Wrong So Long.

REVIEW

Re-reading my original assessment of this album, I'm a bit disappointed that I did not manage to stress hard enough just how outstanding it really is — and, almost certainly, this is because I was still looking at it from the *modern* perspective. Our take on that somewhat elusive and ever-so-often slipping into tastelessness genre of «soul-blues» has been hopelessly contaminated by the likes of people like Gary Moore, who, in spite of all their unquestionable talents, ended up overplaying, oversinging, and over-face-pulling the genre into the depths of corniness. And, well, nobody is really surprised these days to see somebody combine powerhouse gospel-soul singing with stinging blues guitar — Joe Bonamassa and Beth Hart, for instance, do it on a daily basis, cranking up the caps lock button for all it's worth.



But when it comes to Bobby Bland's original string of recordings, the important thing is to be able to look at it from the *then-current* perspective of the late Fifties. Surprising as it may seem, «blues» and «soul» at the time were really quite separate categories. The typical bluesman certainly had «soul» in his voice, but he wasn't a «soul singer» — his was either the art of the quiet, intimate mumble, or that of the ailing rasp, animalistic bark, and hellish growl. Meanwhile, vocally oriented artists of the doo-wop / R&B / early soul variety, as a rule, tended to stay away from basic blues harmonies — their

output was supposed to be positive and uplifting, as remote from the «blueness» of the blues as possible. Even Ray Charles, who probably tinkered more with pure blues than any soulman of his generation, always had more commercial success with tunes whose roots lay either in church choirs, big band jazz, or Tin Pan Alley.

Only a tiny smudgeon of blues greats in the Fifties dared to wear their bleeding soulful hearts on their sleeves — most notably Otis Rush, whose stuff like ‘Double Trouble’, ‘My Love Will Never Die’, and ‘All Your Love (I Miss Loving)’ remain major staples of the soul-blues genre. They were few and far in between, though, and did not make a lot of impression on the charts. Of course, there was also B. B. King, who spent most of the decade (and quite a bit of time in subsequent decades as well) trying to convince the world that he was just as great a soul / gospel singer as he was a guitar player — much to the world’s honor, it failed to properly believe him. B. B. does have a nice singing voice, but he’s really more of a crooner by nature than a tragic loner or a visionary, and his mastery of emotions such as pain and anger only comes through the strings of his guitar, not his vocal cords.

This is why, when you try to put a song like ‘Two Steps From The Blues’, announcing Bobby Bland’s first proper LP, in its rightful context of early 1961, no direct analogies come to mind. Its basic structure seems, quite rightly, two (or even more) steps from the blues — more doo-wop than Chicago, with a little Basin Street influence from the opening mournful horns — but the dark bass line, the minor tonality, the overall atmosphere is quite depressingly bluesy, while the vocals... well, it’s not difficult to see why Bobby is so often called the «Sinatra of the blues», for better or worse. The song is a near-perfect illustration of his range, riding all the way up to the sky-high «schmaltz register» and then landing back in the bluesy gutter as the singer compares his imaginary rosy perspectives with the current grim reality, and, honestly, at least right off the top of my head I cannot think of any other pieces of music at the time which would integrate darkness and light with the same level of smoothness and believability. When fans rave about ‘Two Steps From The Blues’ inventing a new musical language, they are not *that* far off the mark.

Of course, it took Mr. Bland quite some time to get there — ten years, in fact, with his first recordings made for the Modern label in 1951, then a brief stint with Chess, and finally, an almost twenty-year long alliance with Duke Records and its chief executive figure, Don Deadric Robey, a notoriously ruthless and controversial figure who, judging by most accounts, ran the label like a «benevolent slave master», seeing to it that the singers were well taken care of, but never forgetting to add his name to just about every title of note written for them to sing. (Thus, ‘Two Steps From The Blues’ itself is co-credited to «Don D. Robey» and «John Riley Brown», but it was really only the latter, better known as Texas Johnny Brown, a session

musician and occasional songwriter for various R&B artists, who had anything to do with the song's genesis). Bobby's early career is still steeped a lot in the early post-war jump blues tradition of Big Joe Turner and Wynonie Harris, and thus lies somewhat outside of the scope of this entire project — also, Robey never saw fit to commission any LPs from the man in the Fifties, so your best bet to assess that period is the much later compilation **Little Boy Blue: The Duke Sides 1952-1959**, tracing the man's evolution from impressive, but not outstanding imitator of the jump-blues giants to a confident master at his own musical game.

There are a few traces of that evolution on **Two Steps From The Blues** as well: recording sessions, which took place in the fall of 1960, did not produce nearly enough new material deemed fit for release, so in the end the album had to be padded a bit by songs previously released as A- or B-sides. The earliest title — and it shows quite prominently in terms of sound quality — is 'I Don't Want No Woman', originally a B-side from 1957; it is a rather straightforward piece of Chicago-style blues à la Elmore James, although Bobby's over-emotional slipping into falsetto and a particularly scorching and tense electric guitar solo from session man Clarence Holloman also give it a bit of proto-Freddie King flavor. (Bobby's most successful recording in that style would come several months later: 'Farther Up The Road', which the modern listener usually knows as Eric Clapton's 'Further On Up The Road', was his first big hit single, the song that made the name of Bobby Bland recognizable outside of the small circle of the «Beale Streeters» in Memphis).

Throughout much of that Fifties' career, people could probably perceive Bobby as a slightly more old-fashioned and temperamentally restrained version of James Brown — dabbling a little in everything from doo-wop to R&B to Chicago blues to rock'n'roll, but with somewhat antiquated production values and a much less «mischievous» attitude. 'Little Boy Blue', another Top 10 R&B hit from 1958, is a good basis for comparison — less a structured verse-chorus song than a long-winded soulful rant from the mouth of a repenting abuser, where, over two and a half minutes, Bobby repeatedly winds himself up into a crazed frenzy. Listening to him walk the tightrope between the opening soft croon ("*When I thought I was so high above you, you were so good to me...*") and the full-on hysteria on the fade-out ("*...if you'd just give me one more chance, darling!...*") shows just how seriously the man took his singer's duties even at that early stage — a good song has got to have some character development to it along the way, no?

But the true turning point comes in April 1959, with the release of 'I'll Take Care Of You', written by Brook Benton (later of the 'Rainy Night In Georgia' fame) and brought to life by Bobby with some serious help from organ player Teddy Reynolds. This might just be one of the greatest soul ballads of all time — the sheer number of covers it has endured over the years is

quite telling in itself, although, as it often happens with way-too-frequently covered songs, I have yet to hear a different interpretation that matches or surpasses the original. It's a true work of multi-layered art — the bass lays down some thriller-level suspense; the stark, minimalistic organ makes you feel in the middle of a memorial service; and the vocals... well, here's the thing — the vocals actually manage to sound like a real life friendly psychotherapy session. No oversinging (Beth, eat your Hart out!), no hyper-emotionality, it's all about the power of subtle overtones and the art of expressing true empathy: Bobby's opening "*I know you've been hurt by someone else*" makes it feel totally believable that *he* has been hurt just as well, and that he's not offering his consolation just to grab the opportunity of getting into a lady's pants, but because he is genuinely moved by someone else's troubles. (And if he does really just want to get into a lady's pants, well, that's some authentically Richard the Third-level shit going on down there!).

Truly, other than the above-mentioned Otis Rush, it is hard for me to think of any proper precedent to 'I'll Take Care Of You' in the world of either African-American or whitebread pop music; people just did not combine that sort of darkness with that sort of tenderness within a single composition, nor were there that many examples of such stately majesty, what with the song's chosen slow tempo and the important role of the organ. Everybody from Etta James to the Animals and the Zombies owes a certain debt to the song — and, for that matter, I feel like the opening vocal bars were borrowed almost note-for-note by Sam Cooke for nothing less than 'A Change Is Gonna Come', in an indirect and probably subconscious acknowledgement of its solemn-majestic vibe.

It is such a great tune, in fact, that I can even feel some of its greatness rubbing off on the immediate sequel: 'Lead Me On' is a *very* obvious attempt to repeat the vibe of 'I'll Take Care Of You', with pretty much the same semantics and the same vocal melody, but with the mystical darkness of the bass and organ replaced by more conventional strings, flutes, and backing choirs. Little good comes out of replacing tense intimacy with sentimental bombast, but the power of Bobby's lead vocal remains unscathed. I sometimes think of the two songs as a mini-suite, with a dark beginning and a happy ending at the altar, and it always reminds me of how Dante's *Inferno* is always so much more involving than Dante's *Paradise*. We all need happy endings, but there's no denying that the happiest ending is usually the most boring one.

At this point, we've pretty much caught on with the actual sessions for **Two Steps From The Blues**. These yielded three singles, all of them credited exclusively to Don D. Robey or «Deadric Malone», which was actually Robey's pseudonym that he occasionally used because of, er, uhm, exceptional modesty or something — what poor slob really wrote the songs, we'll never know (given Robey's well-advertised interest in guns, it cannot be excluded that they all ultimately fed the fishes in

the depths of the Mississippi River). The first two were set to more or less the same syncopated slow shuffling tempo in order to get as much soulful juice out of Bobby and the accompanying horns as possible — and both are broken-hearted rants at the bad ruthless bitch that drove poor Bobby to madness: 'Cry, Cry, Cry' is the more desperate of the two, but 'I Pity The Fool', Bobby's first #1 hit on the R&B charts in four years, is the more well-known (and not just because it would later become the second single and the first ever «blue-eyed soul» number of David Bowie's career). The rowdy «quarrel» between Bobby's screaming vocals and the answering quasi-martial horns is indeed quite exciting, although, to be fair, this is the kind of sound that could very well be expected of the likes of James Brown — unlike 'I'll Take Care Of You', which is something that James would never have been able to do the Bobby Bland way.

The third single was somewhat unusual in that, much like in the case of the pairing of 'I'll Take Care Of You' with 'Lead Me On', 'Don't Cry No More' has to be seen as a sequel to 'Cry, Cry, Cry' — except that this time around, it is not a re-write of the earlier song, but a direct mood reversal. In the slow and aching 'Cry, Cry, Cry', Bobby wants his unfaithful partner to "*cry me an ocean, then I want you to cry me a sea*"; in the fast, playful, danceable 'Don't Cry No More' he acknowledges that "*you cried me a river, you cried me a sea*" and generously accepts the prodigal lover back, because "*now I believe without a doubt that you really love me*". It might be corny and just a little demeaning, but there's no denying the feel-good infectiousness of the groove; the song hit the charts once again, and its success led to believe that the «let's twist again» musical idiom would fit Mr. Bland just fine as well, which would ultimately lead to 'Turn On Your Lovelight' at the end of 1961... but let's not run too far ahead.

That said, «dark, slow, and foreboding» is still the bread and butter of Mr. Bland's approach, and fortunately, most of the album is in that vein — meaning that there is nary a single stinker in its twelve masterful selections. This version of 'St. James Infirmary', along with its «authentically New Orleanian» horns, is certainly one of the best available on record; and both 'I've Got To Forget You', with its beautiful accompanying jazzy lead guitar work from Wayne Bennett, and 'I've Been Wrong', with its ominously sliding loud bass riff, are emotionally memorable and memorably emotional. Importantly, even if the general moods of the record are relatively few, and for each sensational smash there are at least one or two inferior attempts to recreate it, **Two Steps From The Blues** are all about original songwriting and creative craftsmanship. Just about every song has a *musical* hook in addition to Bobby's vocals, and the album would not be half-bad even if it were stripped of vocals altogether — though, of course, it would only be half as good. This is all the more fascinating given that most of the time, we don't even know who wrote the songs, and that most of the session players are relative unknowns.

Once again, if you approach this level of craft and emotion from a «retro» perspective — working your way back to it from all the years and years of Stax/Volt and their blue-eyed competitors from across the Atlantic, the proper feels might not be forthcoming. But from a «future-in-the-past» point of view, once you understand just how far ahead this style of soul-blues was ahead of most competition in 1961, **Two Steps From The Blues** is a giant achievement — and I, for one, admire its relative restraint and beautiful balance between cockiness and humility, which, one might argue, would be overthrown in the coming decades because of subsequent artists' imminent need to «step up the game». And *this*, rather than the dry factor of «historic importance», is the prime reason why the album might still appeal to a small, discriminating part of the population even in the 21st century.

