

# BRENDA LEE



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1956-2007</i>	<i>Country / Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i><a href="#">Jambalaya</a> (1956)</i>

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*Only Solitaire*

Artist: *Brenda Lee*

Years: *1956-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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# GRANDMA WHAT GREAT SONGS YOU SANG!

Album released:

V A L U E

Aug. 3, 1959

2 4 3 2 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Some Of These Days; 2) Pennies From Heaven; 3) Baby Face; 4) A Good Man Is Hard To Find; 5) **Just Because**; 6) Toot Toot Tootsie Goodbye; 7) Ballin' The Jack; 8) Rock-A-Bye Your Baby With A Dixie Melody; 9) Pretty Baby; 10) Side By Side; 11) Back In Your Own Back Yard; 12) St. Louis Blues.

## REVIEW

Together with Eddie Cochran and a couple other artists, Brenda Lee is notoriously inconvenient to talk about from an LP-based chronological framework. By the time her first album came out (in August 1959, even though the actual sessions were held as early as January of the same year), she had already spent almost three years in the limelight of national attention, and put out almost a dozen singles, including most of her biggest hits – ‘Jambalaya’, ‘Dynamite’, ‘Rockin’ Around The Christmas Tree’, all of which we shall have to consider in the *next* review. Why? Because the Decca label, to which Brenda was signed, apparently pursued a «great stuff for singles, weird stuff for LPs» policy — at least in the actual case of Brenda Lee, the amazing child prodigy who had captured the hearts of rocking teenagers all over the country with her singles... and was now supposed to capture the hearts of their parents with her first LP. You see, singles are for kids, and long-playing albums are for grown-ups. No kid could possibly lift something as heavy as an LP off the ground anyway...



Anyway, the practice itself of having young(er) artists record sets of «oldies» with more contemporary arrangements, to bridge the generation gap and everything, had been well established by 1959, so there is nothing particularly revolutionary about having Brenda Lee, the 14-year old rock'n'roller, turn to pre-war material scattered all the way from Broadway to the Delta for her first «conceptual» exercise. (See Bill Haley's **Rockin' The Oldies** from way back in 1957, for instance). One could squirm at the album cover — even back then — for its corny display of reverence, though discerning listeners in 1959 should have already been accustomed to the fact that LP sleeve art hardly ever correlated properly with the actual musical content of the vinyl disc. But could one, and should one, actually squirm at the music?

This would naturally depend on your priorities. For instance, if you are a fan of the classic Nashville sound, you can hardly go wrong with a set recorded by the local A-grade team, including Harold Bradley, Grady Martin, and Hank Garland on guitars, Floyd Cramer on the piano, Boots Randolph on saxophone, Bob Moore on bass — all those same guys who fed and nurtured everybody from Patsy Cline to Elvis in their Nashville days. This ensures that, even if the material is rotten and the singer is inadequate, the overall sound shall still have enough class.

The actual track selection is also chosen with care, focusing on catchy pop songs amenable to a steady rock beat — in fact, some of them, like 'Baby Face' or 'Just Because', had previously already been tentatively transformed into rock'n'roll numbers by the likes of, respectively, Little Richard and Elvis. Other upbeat oldies, such as 'Toot Toot Tootsie Goodbye', adapt themselves better to being reinvented as «comical R&B» pieces à la Coasters or LaVern Baker. Most of the songs, however, are slower and predictably sound like contemporary mid-tempo country-pop — with major emphasis on *contemporary*, because if you happen to be unfamiliar with the originals, there are very few indications (lyrics, mostly) that these «grandma songs» were not actually written in 1959.

Finally, there is Brenda Lee herself, still below the age of 15, yet singing each of the songs with complete understanding of their emotional content and a level of maturity that often avoids singing ladies twice her age. Granted, her own emotional range is not as wide as we might like it to be: for instance, «vulnerability» and «melancholy» are words totally alien to her lexicon (at the time, at least) — which is perfectly normal for a girl who had to be the chief breadmaker for her family since age 10 (after her father died). So when she tackles a grief-soaked tune like 'St. Louis Blues', she sings it the only way she can — that is, like a powerhouse: her take on "I hate to see that evening sun go down..." is that of an actual *hater*, all set to keep that blasted evening sun in the sky even if it takes violating the laws of physics to do so. But while this attitude is indeed barely compatible with lines like "I got the St. Louis Blues just as bluest I can be", it still gives the song a new perspective.

She could never sing it like Bessie Smith anyway — all the more reason to give it a brand new, «aggressive» spin, if only to show that in this case, the granddaughter might actually have much bigger teeth than her grandma ever had.

Likewise, ‘A Good Man Is Hard To Find’, which also used to be a classic Bessie performance: here, Brenda and her crew cut out the opening verse ("My heart is sad and I'm all alone...") because Brenda's heart is not sad, nor could it, at this point, be as sad as Bessie's — then they transform the rest of the song into an anthem of pure girl dominance, where "hug him in the morning, kiss him every night, give him plenty loving, treat him right" feels more like a procedure of chaining your man to yourself rather than chaining yourself to your man, if you get my meaning. Considering that Brenda Lee is one of those very rare women artists who has been happily married to the same person (Ronnie Shacklett) since 1962, it looks like she was the first one to follow her own (or, rather, Bessie's) advice, so this here is a clear-cut case of practicing what one preaches. (People like Johnny Cash could learn a thing or two from the lady).

This does not imply that Brenda's personality is completely free from tenderness; ‘Pennies From Heaven’, ‘Side By Side’, and ‘Back In Your Own Backyard’ all have their moments of empathy, compassion, and romance, although she always steers clear of croony sentimentalism — rather, she simply does not know how to do it, which is just fine by me. In all these cases, it's more of a «strong, brawny girl shows a good heart» kind of thing, totally in line with Brenda's reputation as «Little Miss Dynamite». It may not be the best way to sing such songs, but I, for one, am not even sure that I would necessarily *prefer* the best way to sing such songs — too much soul here and you risk plunging into suave cheapness. Throw in a touch of grit, though, and you may lose some subtlety, but gain some... honesty? Ah, whatever. These are decent takes.

That said, decent takes or not, *my* heart is primarily with Brenda when she rips through songs such as ‘Just Because’, rivaling, if not bettering, Elvis at his own game. Once again, Grandma, you did sing really great songs, but now's the time to sing them with just a bit more of that «girl power». What could feel sweeter than taking that good old misogynistic vibe and turning it back on the perpetrators? And how many 15-year old girls — in 1959, at least — were capable of injecting *that* much sneer and vitriol into a super-energized putdown of the opposite sex? (Joan Jett, eat your heart out!)

All in all, if you only know Brenda Lee through her biggest early hits (which is most likely the case), do not be put off by the cornily old-fashioned album title and cover — both of which actually look quite ironic in light of the actual content. This here is really Little Red Riding Hood kicking the shit out of the big bad wolf, rather than simply pampering her grandma with cakes. I do realize that it is hard to get rid of a biased impression based on a superficial listen — thus, the only current «review» of this clearly forgotten record on RateYourMusic states: "*Prime example of 'finding a new talented artist and*

*being totally clueless what to do with her*" — nothing could be further from the truth.

Admittedly, I do not know if the idea of recording this «conceptual» album stemmed from Brenda, or from her record label, or from her Nashville producer, Owen Bradley, but the fact remains that her heart was clearly in the project, and that she was fully successful in imbuing each of these songs with her strong, snappy, youthful-but-mature personality. These songs may not exactly be «rock and roll» in form, but they are very much so in spirit. Besides, let us not forget that for Brenda, a country girl in her essence, «rock and roll» was at best a passing phase, the same way it could be construed for Johnny Cash and other country artists who were not above letting their hair down every once in a while, but were typically happy to stay lodged in a more «earthy» kind of tradition.





# BRENDA LEE

Album released:  
August 1, 1960

V A L U E  
3 4 4 2 4

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) **Dynamite**; 2) Weep No More My Baby; 3) **Jambalaya (On The Bayou)**; 4) (If I'm Dreaming) Just Let Me Dream; 5) Be My Love Again; 6) My Baby Likes Western Guys; 7) Sweet Nothin's; 8) I'm Sorry; 9) **That's All You Gotta Do**; 10) Heading Home; 11) Wee Wee Willies; 12) **Let's Jump The Broomstick**.

## REVIEW

Now *this*, of course, is the proper way to appreciate the real difference that Brenda Lee brought to the world of popular music — proper, but not optimal, since this 12-song retrospective of Brenda's career from 1958 to 1960, released by Decca to capitalize on the smash success of Brenda's first #1 hit on the charts ('I'm Sorry'), is, as usual, woefully incomplete. Fortunately, nothing is easier in the digital age than to work out a proper chronological playlist, based on Brenda's well-fixed discographies and sessionographies, and in the process, inflate this 12-song shortie from August 1960 with at least as many extra titles. My perfect **Brenda Lee** album ends up being a double LP, with 28 tracks, running close to 70 minutes — and while it does have a slightly larger percentage of filler than Decca's condensed original, it also gives me a far more detailed and diverse portrayal of the artist. With that said, let's jump the broomstick, reshuffle the tracks, and look at Brenda's outstanding artistic curve from the start to the end of the Rule of Rockabilly era, single by single.



It's important to note that the version of 'Jambalaya' presented on the LP, good as it is, is *not* the original single from 1956, famously credited by Decca to «Little Brenda Lee (9 Years Old)» even though she was already 11 at the time; the [original single](#) can only be found on alternate compilations. It is big fun on the bayou, though, to compare both versions. The early one, recorded in July 1956 with Grady Martin and Jack Shook on guitars, is creaky, croaky, raw Nashville-goes-rockabilly stuff, transforming Hank Williams' ode to the delights of Cajun food into friendly rock'n'roll fervor and giving us the full range of Brenda's vocal talent, from the perfectly choreographed hiccupy rockabilly jumps to the deep throaty roar on the chorus, just as amazing to see on an 11-year old as it would be on a 9-year old, honestly. But the stereo re-recording from 1960 is no slouch, either. It is more polished, adds extra layers of sax, piano, percussion, and backing vocals, and Brenda's voice is a little more restrained and mature, but it still gradually whips itself into a frenzy with each new line in each verse, and besides, any recording that has Hank Garland, Floyd Cramer, *and* Boots Randolph honing their chops at the same time is automatically A-OK by me.

They did not re-record, or re-release, the B-side to that single, though, which is a pity, because '[Bigelow 6-200](#)', contributed by a couple of little-known rockabilly songwriters (Don Woody and Paul Simmons), is, in some ways, even better than 'Jambalaya' — it's just, who are those guys to compete with Hank Williams? But this is an even rawer, more guitar-heavy and rocking number that bears a certain resemblance to Elvis' Sun style as well as to the Burnette brothers' 'Train Kept A-Rollin', although Brenda's subtle touch of croon in the "*Bigelo-o-ow...*" chorus still adds a poppy touch. Despite the horny lyrics ("*here's the number to call if you want my lovin'*" is a pretty audacious line for an 11-year old to sing!), there is not so much sex in this song as pure rockin' energy, making it a good candidate for the best rock'n'roll tune to be recorded by a minor in the entire 1950s (if not *ever!*).

Brenda's second single, recorded at the same Nashville sessions in late July 1956 but naturally released toward the end of the year, was just... *weird*. Seriously, '[I'm Gonna Lasso Santa Claus](#)', written by New Orleanian-Italian guy Frank Adorno (or Frankie Adams), is one of the weirdest-sounding Christmas oldies I have ever heard. That's Don Helms on steel guitar opening the song — yes, the same Don Helms who delivers the magnificent solos on Hank Williams' 'Hey, Good Lookin' and elsewhere — and that melody he plays, coupled with Bob Moore's fast-paced bass line, gives a thoroughly un-Christmas sound, more of a Hawaii-goes-to-Japan kind of a thing. Meanwhile, Brenda allows herself to sound a bit more childish this time (well, it *would* seem strange to deliver lines like "*I'm gonna pop Santa Claus with my water pistol gun*" in a grown-up growl), but with the socially conscious context of the lyrics ("*And then I'll take his bags of toys and run / And bring to all the kids who don't have none*") it still ends up sounding pretty serious. This combination of weird lyrics, inventive singing,



and especially the Helms / Moore interplay, in my opinion, makes the song far more interesting than the comparatively overrated 'Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree' (to which we'll get in a bit), and the B-side 'Christy Christmas' is no slouch either (I can't quite figure out what that keyboard is at the beginning of the track; sounds pretty Space Age to me!).

Recorded and released in January 1957, '[One Step At A Time](#)' marked Brenda's first minor appearance on the charts; with a different, less prominent set of players (not too well compensated for by the addition of backup singers) the sole emphasis here, on this fast-paced pop-a-billy number, is on Brenda's vocals, and she delivers once again, keeping the strong tension in her voice throughout the entire performance — it might not be too memorable once things quiet down, but it *does* keep you on your feet with the sheer application of her mind power. Unfortunately, the B-side, 'Fairyland', is a corny show tune out of the hands of Frankie Avalon's resident songwriters, hardly salvageable even through the rough charms of Brenda's loud, rowdy voice (it's real tough to save songs expressly pre-written for suave, syrupy voices in that way). Good news: there is *not a single* other misfire like 'Fairyland' in the remainder of Brenda's 1950's catalog, showing that either she had a good, strong head on her shoulders, or that the business people around her happened to have good ones on theirs.

Brenda's next recording session (April 12, 1957) brought her her famous nickname, even if, surprisingly, '[Dynamite](#)' (one of the authors of which was Mort Garson, later renowned for his experimentation with space-age electronics) was never that much of a hit, stalling at #72 on the charts. The song would also later be re-recorded in stereo for **Brenda Lee**, but this time the differences between the two versions are more subtle; I am not sure about the usefulness of string overdubs on the new version, but at the same time the backing vocals on the 1960 version are a bit less in-yer-face, making Brenda stand out more properly. In any case, it's just a catchy, danceable pop number on its own, but Brenda's roaring take on the *DURRRNAMITE!* hookline takes it to the next level of excitement. Interestingly, the B-side, 'Love You 'Til I Die', is a song written unabashedly in Buddy Holly style (with a very 'Words Of Love'-like lead guitar running throughout), which makes one wonder just how well Brenda's powerhouse anthem style fits a colorfully-jangly Buddy Holly environment. Perhaps not *too* well, but it doesn't hurt to hear her try at least once.

Also interestingly, the exact same songwriter pair (Diane Lampert and John Gluck Jr.) contributed yet another song to the same recording session, but in a completely different style — '[One Teenager To Another](#)' is a bona fide R&B number in the style of Atlantic artists such as The Drifters (some clear rhythmic and vocal parallels between this one and 'Money Honey', for instance). The lyrics, dealing with the issue of schoolboys bragging over their conquests ("*Kiss a guy, the kiss never ends / Talk will fly to all of his friends*"), sound surprisingly modern for 1957, though I wouldn't say Brenda delivers them with

particular conviction — perhaps, having only recently turned 12 and all, her own experiences with such situations were still rather limited. Since we're on the topic of being influenced by Atlantic, kudos to Brenda for putting a cover of Ray Charles' 'Ain't That Love' on the B-side — obviously, Little Cousin Brenda will never be able to steal that piece of burnin' soul away from Old Uncle Ray, but it's still a pretty big achievement for a 12-year old.

The single flopped on the charts, and so did the follow-up, recorded at the end of 1957: 'Rock-A-Bye Baby Blues' is a rather unremarkable (apart from Brenda's typically excellent vocals) piece of slow rockabilly, while 'Rock The Bop' will most likely stay in your memory only for its repetitive and lexically bizarre chorus ("I'm old enough to chick and old enough to rock the bop" — I think that's the only time in my life I saw the word 'chick' used as a verb in such a context). Nor did she have any success with 'Ring-A-My Phone', recorded in a more straightforwardly Elvis-like manner and not too interesting on the whole. BUT! Do not make the mistake of missing out on '[Little Jonah \(Rock On Your Steel Guitar\)](#)' — Brenda does just fine on this fast-paced variation on the classic 'Little Baby' / 'Tweedle Dee' chord progression, but the real hero is the «little Jonah» in question, a.k.a. pedal steel guitarist Buddy Emmons, one of the most expressive players of the instrument. In a perfect world, this song should do pretty much the same for pedal steel guitar that 'Johnny B. Goode' does for regular electric guitar, but, unfortunately, it does not invent an original, instantly memorable riff; instead, it just blows your mind with an incredible solo on which Mr. Emmons smoothly performs just about every single trick possible on the pedal steel at the time, packing them into a perfectly sensible sequence and then stepping back to let Little Miss Dynamite take over. It's the single greatest vocal-instrumental duo on a Brenda Lee record ever, period, and most people don't even know about it, preferring instead to cluelessly rock around the Christmas tree...

...and yes, this is precisely where we come to the single most famous Brenda Lee song of all time. In one of the strangest publicity accidents of all time, 'Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree' (hilariously, written by Johnny Marks who wrote tons of Christmas songs despite never having been a Christian) eventually became such a perennial Christmas favorite in the States that many people today *only* remember Brenda Lee as the original singer of 'Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree'. In all honesty, this isn't even her best *Christmas* song — that honor would undoubtedly have to go to 'I'm Gonna Lasso Santa Claus' — let alone her best song overall, but there is no accounting for the Hand of Fate when it decides to play a naughty prank on humanity and rub your intellectual snob noses in the futility of believing that «time heals everything» when it so obviously doesn't. For sure, it sounds tasteful enough, and a bouncy little pop-rocker highlighted with high-pitched electric guitar blasts is always preferable to a syrupy-stringy crooning performance for Christmas, but it is precisely the relative blandness and straightforwardness of the arrangement that makes it so palatable to the common denominator spirit —

where a song like 'Lasso Santa Claus' can make you want to pay attention to both the musical and the lyrical detail, 'Rockin' Around' is just ideal background music to dance to and to toast to without getting distracted. (Even the B-side, 'Papa Noël', is a little more interesting, with lyrics that constantly back-reference 'Jambalaya' for a special «Cajun-themed» Christmas — but, of course, this is no longer fit for the common denominator in the process).

With the 1958-59 Christmas season behind us, we're getting back to secular business: 'Bill Bailey Won't You Please Come Home' is a fast and jolly reinvention of an old Dixieland classic in the early rockabilly style of 'Just Because', while the B-side, 'Hummin' The Blues Over You', is one of Brenda's most blatant pop-Elvis imitations, and works as fine as any catchy Elvis pop tune (with echoes of 'Got A Lot O' Livin' To Do' in particular). Then comes the turn of Little Richard; although 'Let's Jump The Broomstick' is credited to little-known songwriter Charles Robins and was first recorded by [Alvin Gaines & The Themes](#) (a black band, rather uncharacteristically recording in Nashville), it is, overall, a rather transparent variation on 'Slippin' And Slidin', only deviating from the original at the end of each verse. Brenda's performance is as light and «safe» compared to Richard's as the accompanying yakety-sax from Boots Randolph is compared to Lee Allen and Alvin Tyler's kick-ass sax blasts on the original — but unless we plan on getting all stuffy or something, 'Let's Jump The Broomstick' is still a fun piece that makes you want to move. Besides, there's a positive message here! It's like, uh, Myra Brown's love anthem for Jerry Lee Lewis or something! *"My father don't like it, my brother don't like it, come-a lil' baby let's jump the broomstick, come and let's tie the knot!"*

Somewhat ironically, 'Let's Jump The Broomstick' would end Brenda's most quintessentially rockabilly *and* generally least commercially successful period. The general American public, so it seems, really did not want their little talented girls to rock — at least, not unless it was around the Christmas tree — but when the little girls slowed down the tempos and traded some of the power and aggression in for a little more seduction, things clearly improved. Written by Ronnie Self, an erratic and alcoholic songwriter who once had a dream to be the white Little Richard (his '[Bop-A-Lena](#)' does come surprisingly close) but eventually had to resign himself to helping other people realize *their* dreams, 'Sweet Nothin's' opens with Brenda's most «girlie» "uh-huh honey, all right!" up to date, and although it still has a pretty rhythmic and hard-hitting R&B tempo, the basic theme is simplistic sentimental teen romance with a strict parental check ("*come in daughter, that's enough for tonight*" is like a bad happy Hollywood ending tacked on to a drama). But the *psst-psst* whispering gimmick throughout the song worked well enough for it to finally start climbing up the charts. I must say that I am more partial to the B-side, though: 'Weep No More My Baby', a tight-rockin' mid-tempo number with shades of both Hank Williams and gospel to it, is one of the more memorable creations of John D. Loudermilk, the author of 'Tobacco Road', and Brenda's

performance, sharp and slappy, perfectly matches the «lashing» feel of the rhythm track, as well as begins revealing a certain emotional depth that, perhaps, she was not yet capable of in the «Little Brenda Lee (9 Years Old) (Actually 11, But Who Gives A Damn?)» stage. That "*weep no more, my baby, I'm a-comin', comin' home to you*" line actually hits hard, much harder than I'd expected it to.

Seeing that they may have struck gold with Ronnie Self's involvement, Decca chartered another song from him for Brenda, but allegedly held back on releasing it, fearing that the recording might be considered «too serious» for a 15-year old performer; when they finally did release it, it was only as the B-side to Jerry Reed's 'That's All You Gotta Do', a romantic string-filled pop-rocker which was also quite important for Brenda's career — it was essentially her first song to carry that distinctive early-Sixties-lush-pop sound, showing that she was well at ease transitioning from the somewhat homebrewn country-rockabilly stage into the atmosphere of stage lights, backup singers, and glossed-up romanticism; that tough, jerky roar she lets out at the beginning of each verse still shows, however, that there's quite a bit of dynamite left in the «little miss», so it's more of a compromise than a surrender.

Still, the B-side eventually overtook the A-side, proving Decca wrong and showing that audiences were more than willing to accept Brenda Lee in the new function of torch balladeer. I've read occasional dismissive evaluations of 'I'm Sorry' in a «this is Brenda Lee wanting to be Patsy Cline and failing» manner; unfortunately, I happen to be completely and utterly indifferent to Patsy Cline, whose textbookish perfect voice has no specific points of interest, and I would take 'I'm Sorry' over 'I Fall To Pieces' or 'Crazy' any day, simply because Brenda turns it into a bit of an exploration. There's sung parts and spoken parts, there's crooning and there's screaming, there are cool bits of phrasing, like the «wise» little pause after the stern *but...* in the second verse; she's really trying to engage us here in this piece of teenage drama, instead of simply trying to make it all sound as beautiful and as perfect as humanly possible. This is absolutely not my preferred genre, but she does her best to make me want to appreciate it.

This is as far as Brenda Lee's story goes until August 1960, when the self-titled album was released — but a few more words have to be said about the LP-only tracks here. Of these, Jackie DeShannon's 'My Baby Likes Western Guys' is particularly hilarious — no, really, it's just about the protagonist's lover cheating on her with Western TV shows, what did *you* think? — and features some beautiful Buddy Holly-style guitar licks to boot. Also from 1958, 'Heading Home' is Brenda's fair and square take on the powerful gospel style (the lyrics are formally secular, but the vibe is absolutely the same as it is on contemporary Elvis gospel recordings) — she's no Mahalia, but she does pretty great for a 14-year old. Finally, 'Just Let Me

Dream', 'Be My Love Again', and 'Wee Wee Willies' are just fun pop numbers with the usual tasteful arrangements; not much to write about them individually, but I do like hearing them over and over again.

Summing up, I think that it is precisely what used to be acclaimed as Brenda Lee's chief asset at her time — that magnificent exceptional voice coming from a pre-puberty body — that would later work against her: skeptically-minded listeners tend to digest these songs with a «well yes, this is really impressive coming from a 10/11/12/13/14-year old, but would it ever hold up objectively against grown-up competition?» frame of mind. However, the true opposition here is not really between a «pre-puberty» and «post-puberty» Brenda Lee; it is actually between a «pre-fame» and «post-fame» Brenda Lee, between the early, energetic, exciting, unpredictable rockabilly years and the later, more «mature», «calm», and sentimental years of country and pop as heralded by the likes of 'I'm Sorry' — and in this respect, Brenda Lee's career stages are not all that different from her chief competitor on her own turf, Wanda Jackson, even if Wanda was already several years older when she stepped up on stage. And yes, of course it is true that a little girl with restricted agency in the late 1950s, based in Nashville rather than, say, in Memphis (let alone Chicago), won't ever be able to achieve the same levels of reckless wildness as a Little Richard, a Chuck Berry, or a Sun-era Elvis — but those who would insist that said little girl had no true understanding of the spirit of rock'n'roll can leave their opinions outside the doors for trash collectors, as far as I'm concerned. Together with **Rockin' With Wanda, Brenda Lee** — especially if you fatten it up with bonus tracks from all the 1956–59 singles, as I have done — is one of the few undisputable classics of 1950s' female rockabilly, even if Wanda, by way of historical and social circumstances, still firmly remains in the lead.





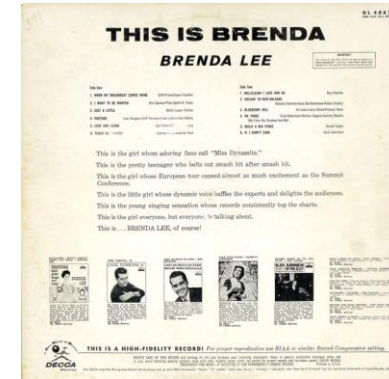
# THIS IS... BRENDA

Album released:

October 10, 1960

V A L U E  
3 3 3 2 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) When My Dreamboat Comes Home; 2) I Want To Be Wanted; 3) Just A Little; 4) Pretend; 5) Love And Learn; 6) Teach Me Tonight; 7) Hallelujah I Love Him So; 8) Walkin' To New Orleans; 9) Blueberry Hill; 10) We Three (My Echo, My Shadow, And Me); 11) Build A Big Fence; 12) If I Didn't Care.

## REVIEW

In contrast with **Brenda Lee**, Brenda's second LP for Decca from 1960, released just two months after the first one, was a much tighter affair, with all of its songs taken from but two multi-day sessions — one in the spring of 1960 and one in the fall. One might just as well have called the album **This Is Brenda Now**, as opposed to the more «career-retrospective» mixed-bag nature of the self-titled LP; unfortunately, «now» was 1960, and this meant that the 16-year old Brenda Lee had to act all grown up and serious, moving even farther away from the hot rockabilly spirit of her early years. No more 'Bigelow' for this lady; nearly half of the songs are sentimental ballads, and the rest walk the line between politely danceable Brill Building pop and friendly Southern R&B with a professionally crafted ball and chain always attached to the groove; surely what might be permissible for a *kid* has to be ruled out for a *lady*. It's weird, though, how Brenda manages to look more or less like both on that front cover photo.



The big hit on here — Brenda's second and last #1 on the charts — was 'I Want To Be Wanted', originally an Italian pop song called 'Per Tutta La Vita' and translated into English by Kim Gannon, the lyricist to 'I'll Be Home For Christmas' and a bunch of other standards. Like the absolute majority of Italian popular songs of the San Remo Festival variety, I absolutely

cannot stand the original Italian version(s) — corny sentimental pap at its worst, *mi dispiace*, all of my Italian friends — but the melody, with some interesting chord changes between verse and bridge, had potential, and Gannon's new lyrics just about completely turned the song around: where the original was just a puffed-up declaration of love dressed up in tattered clichés, a poor paisan's Petrarca at best, Gannon added a touch of personal tragedy, which did not exactly turn the words into high poetry but made it easier to empathize with the sentiment. It's an interesting, and largely successful, experiment in turning the generic sleazy under-the-balcony plea of a «Latin lover» into a teenage girl's moment of i-can't-get-no-satisfaction ("*I wanna be wanted right now / Not tomorrow, but right now!*"), even if we omit the slightly uncomfortable circumstance of the words being written by a 60-year old dude. Brenda catches on quickly, though, and there is no denying the deep sense of yearning and unfulfillment here — I wouldn't be surprised to learn that most of the record buyers for the single were female — so much so that it only takes to hear her go "*where is this someone somewhere meant for me?*" to understand why somebody like the Beatles simply *had* to come along, sooner or later.

The plea for release (both spiritual *and* physical) goes farther than that. 'Teach Me Tonight', the vocal jazz oldie from about 1953 — essentially a song about losing one's virginity to an older partner, so that he can "*help me solve the mystery of it*" — certainly sounds more, umm, *believable* coming from a 16-year old Brenda Lee than a 30-year old Dinah Washington, although she sings the words with so much power and confidence that in the end, it is not exactly clear who's teaching who in this context. (There's so much sternness in the "*One thing isn't very clear my love / Should the teacher stand so near my love*" passage, it's clear that *this* is one gal that's definitely not about to get victimized).

Even after she has been properly taught tonight, it seems like Brenda cannot get enough: in 'Just A Little', contributed by minor contemporary songwriter Betty Chotas (finally, an actual *woman* songwriter!), she ends up all but terrorizing her partner with her endless nagging. Lines like "*You're just about to make me lose my mind / I'm getting tired of playing second fiddle*" sort of imply that the gentleman prefers locking himself up in the bathroom with a copy of *Playboy* to doing what's right for the family — and the lady is getting more than a little desperate, with the endlessly nagging (but catchy) chorus confirming this on a second-by-second basis. Amusingly, the song would undergo a sort of *reverse* fate to 'Per Tutta La Vita' / 'I Want To Be Wanted': in Europe, it would be picked up by rising ye-ye star Sylvie Vartan and turned from 'Just A Little' into the much more aesthetically complex '[Je Suis Libre](#)', a punchy declaration of girl-power with really interesting lyrics (the first half is about freeing herself from the chains of her family and the second is about wilfully embracing the chains of her new relationship — "*Je serai la servante de mon maître et seigneur*" = "*I shall be the servant of my lord and master*"). But at least this time around, I can genuinely enjoy both versions (even if the ye-ye stylistics, with its slightly

clumsy adaptation of Anglo-American musical patterns to the French language, has never been that much of a turn-on to me, much like the entire «classic Russian rock» movement in the 1970s-1980s... but we're getting way too much off topic here, I'm afraid).

The rest of the tracks fall into three little groups. The first one are golden oldies from the likes of the Ink Spots and Nat King Cole ('Pretend', 'If I Didn't Care', 'We Three'), usually pitching corny strings against passionate, but not too inventive deliveries — nobody would really want to re-associate this stuff with Brenda Lee upon release. The second is a couple of songs that seems to have been written specially for her — 'Love & Learn', penned by Bob Montgomery, one of Buddy Holly's chief songwriters, is a nice, quiet Buddy-style trifle with an interesting «muffled» sax solo from Boots Randolph, and Chuck Taylor's 'Build A Big Fence' is like somebody trying to... uhh, write a song for Ricky Nelson that would copy a song written for Elvis, that sort of thing. It even directly quotes 'I Got Stung' (the "*holy smokes and land sakes alive*" line)! But for all the condescending attitude, I really like this stuff when the word of the day is «playful» — I wouldn't mind an entire album of such «trifles» for Brenda, as long as they offer nifty little alt-takes on previously explored ideas.

Because the *third* group is the most befuddling: copies of recent and not-so-recent hits from the black giants of R&B, namely Ray Charles ('Hallelujah I Love *Him* So') and Fats Domino (a whoppin' *three* covers, from the recent 'Walking To New Orleans' to the much older 'When My Dreamboat Comes Home' — and yes, sadly there is also a 'Blueberry Hill' wedged between the two). They are all finely and professionally recorded, and I can at least sort of see the point of genre-inverting 'Hallelujah' — a womanly revenge on the egotistic sexism of the original, since now it is the guy, not the girl, who has to go "*every morning when the sun comes up, he brings me coffee in my favorite cup*". But a visual image of Brenda Lee who is "*walkin' to New Orleans*", with her suitcase in her hand, because "*New Orleans is my home*"... nah. First of all, everybody knows that to *really* get in the spirit of Fats Domino, you have to weigh two hundred pounds, and with Brenda's tiny height and all, she wouldn't probably get the achievement even if she chomped on muffuletta sandwiches all day. Second, you have to sing as if you do not give the slightest damn about all the troubles in the world — you're just shaking them off like water off a mangy dog's fur — and that's not really Brenda's style either, she's a pretty troubled gal, or, at least, a pretty *focused* one. She can't really relax like Fats does.

That said, I cannot really dislike the record, and neither should anybody, I believe. It still shows plenty of spirit, and even if in the long run there is not much sense in Brenda Lee singing Fats Domino, the very fact that she was ready and willing and able to land three Fats Domino tunes on an LP in late 1960 — an era when nice young ladies like herself were generally



expected to bury themselves in the backlogs of Jo Stafford and Doris Day, if not the Andrews Sisters — speaks volumes. (And how many nice young ladies could be expected to give out that guttural roar on the second iteration of the "*moonlit waters will sing...*" verse in 'When My Dreamboat...'?). The hooks, the playfulness, the strong feminine vibe, the relative lack of arch-sweet sentimentality — all of this makes **This Is... Brenda** a keeper. Like **Elvis Is Back!**, this is a «post-army» Brenda Lee album whose added «maturity» does not yet result in flat-out «squareness», even if we can all shed a tear for the departure of Little Miss Dynamite with her cutesy rockabilly flourishes of old.



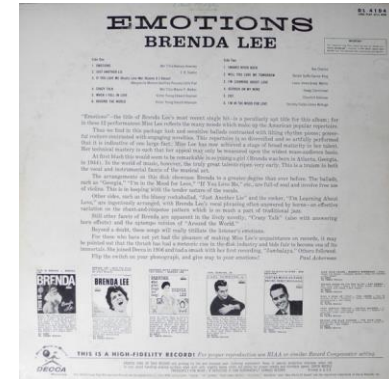


# EMOTIONS

Album released:  
April 3, 1961

V A L U E  
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More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Emotions; 2) Just Another Lie; 3) If You Love Me (Really Love Me); 4) Crazy Talk; 5) When I Fall In Love; 6) Around The World; 7) Swanee River Rock; 8) Will You Love Me Tomorrow; 9) I'm Learning About Love; 10) Georgia On My Mind; 11) Cry; 12) I'm In The Mood For Love.

## REVIEW

The tracklist of **Emotions** was compiled, this time around, from seven different sessions, but most of them took place within a short period of time (end of 1960 up to January '61) and largely with the same personnel. Some of the songs are simply outtakes from **This Is... Brenda!**, and the album as a whole follows the same pattern — a mix of one or two contemporary big hits, a bunch of Tin Pan Alley oldies, a couple of nice pop-rock numbers specially written for the artist, and some homages to Brenda's idols like Ray Charles and Fats Domino. It's a formula that worked well enough on the previous LP, and it remains decent enough for **Emotions** — a solid pop album with quite a backbone, once again proving that Nashville was arguably *the* single best place for an American artist to record pop music in the early 1960s: at the very least, you could count on being backed with top-notch session musicians rather than saccharine string orchestras.



The big hit was 'Emotions', coincidentally recorded on the exact same day as 'I Want To Be Wanted'. The song, written by professional songwriter Ramsey Kearney, had originally been a rather generic [country hit for Carl Smith](#); in his rendition, it feels like a watered-down Hank Williams tune. A couple of years later, Mel Tillis completely rearranged the song, amended

a lot of the lyrics, and pitched it to Brenda in the form of a doo-wop ballad. It's a little less nuanced than 'I Want To Be Wanted', but it's reasonably catchy and the vocal delivery fully lives up to the standards of 'I'm Sorry'. One might grumble that Brenda is too obsessed with showing her vocal power to properly nail the «emotional» side of this painful breakup anthem, but give her a break — she was only 16 and if you've got that kind of vocal power when you're 16, what will it take to put an intentional leash on it? Besides, there's plenty of believable desperation at the finish line of "*emotions, please leave me alone!*" — far more than in the average performance of the average 21st century «pop diva».

Unfortunately, the problem with her powerful 16-year old voice still remains whenever she tries to tackle a giant. There are at least two covers here that are far more than Brenda Lee can properly chew — one, of Edith Piaf's 'Hymne A L'Amour' ('If You Love Me' in English translation), and two, of Ray Charles' 'Georgia On My Mind'. There's nothing cringeworthy about either: the passion is real, and the technical side is without reproach. But Piaf has unique character, and Ray has unique soulful depth; Brenda Lee has neither, and both covers come off as gimmicks — «can a 16-year old girl really sing such mature masterpieces and not fall flat on her face?» — well, no, she does not fall flat, but neither is she capable of giving her own interpretation of the source material. She certainly sounds far more natural and believable on 'Will You Love Me Tomorrow', though, again, in between the original version by the Shirelles and the later «native» version by Carole King herself, it is hardly likely that people will be frequently returning to Brenda Lee for that question.

So let's just skip all the classic covers and all the Tin Pan Alley re-runs and pay a little attention to the fresh or the little-known material. 'Just Another Lie' was originally recorded in 1958 by country singer Linda Brannon in a minimalistic guitar-based arrangement, but here is reinvented as an R&B number, melodically reminiscent of Chuck Willis' 'What Am I Living For?', and features one of the best arrangements on the entire album — a funny, fuddy-duddy guitar rhythm, tasteful piano fills from Floyd Cramer, Boots Randolph's sax runs, and a moody, quasi-Stephane Grappelli violin part deep in the background. Oh, and a fairly quiet, but piercing performance from Brenda herself, of course.

Still, my favorite two numbers on the record are the fastest, chirpiest, and most energetic ones — 'Crazy Talk' and 'I'm Learning About Love' are both unabashed, simplistic teen-pop anthems that, hard as it might be to admit, at this point sit much more naturally with Brenda Lee than her attempts to fill the boots of Piaf or Ray Charles. Both sound very much like contemporary Elvis pop material (no wonder, as they are essentially recorded by Elvis' own musical team), and both are delicious: 'Crazy Talk' has Brenda and Boots Randolph «babbling» against each other to express the art of being tongued next to one's love interest, and 'I'm Learning About Love', for once, brings back the «Miss Dynamite» snappy growl,

mostly forsaken on the album for the sakes of «maturity», but resurrected for this little teenybopper anthem, catchy, sexy, and fun. Too bad there's so little of this kind of material on the album.

Overall, **Emotions** continues to suffer from (or maybe benefit from?) a split personality syndrome — there's a very clear, very intentional effort on Brenda's part to come across as «deep» and «mature», while at the same time she still ends up sounding more natural and convincing whenever she sings something «shallow» and «immature». There is not a single song on the record that I would be unable to enjoy; and yet, at the same time, it cannot help but reek a little of exploitation (perhaps self-exploitation, because I have no evidence of anybody forcing those Ray Charles covers down Brenda's throat), which ultimately explains why Brenda Lee's popularity waned so quickly once she came out of age — not because of the British Invasion or anything, but simply because Brenda Lee singing «serious songs» at the age of 21 no longer interested anybody who'd already heard her singing all those songs at the age of 16.



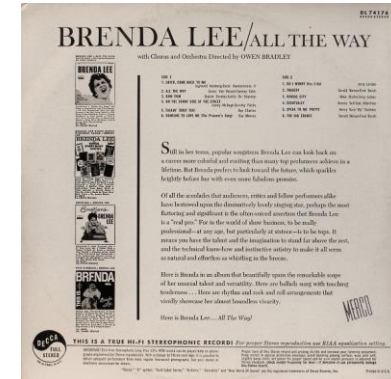


# ALL THE WAY

Album released:  
August 7, 1961

V A L U E  
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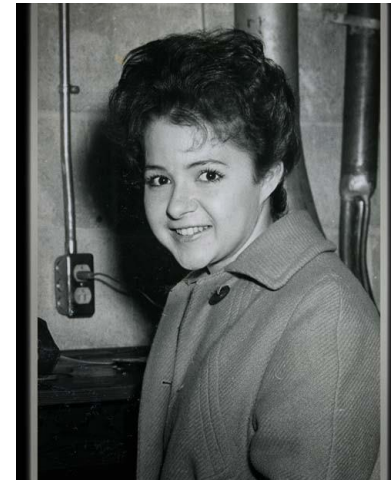
More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Lover, Come Back To Me; 2) All The Way; 3) **Dum Dum**; 4) On The Sunny Side Of The Street; 5) Talkin' 'Bout You; 6) Someone To Love Me (The Prisoner's Song); 7) Do I Worry (Yes I Do); 8) Tragedy; 9) Kansas City; 10) Eventually; 11) Speak To Me Pretty; 12) The Big Chance.

## REVIEW

Sometimes it's just the itsy-bitsy things, you know. There is not a whole lot of difference between the performance of 'Tragedy', a melancholic country-pop ballad written by Fred Burch and Gerald Nelson, as [done by The Fleetwoods](#) — not the first recorded version, but clearly the one Brenda was covering — and by Brenda Lee on this album. Of course, Brenda's super-professional Nashville recording is cleaner, deeper, more multi-dimensional with the addition of backing vocals and strings, but none of that really matters. What matters is that the Fleetwoods go "you've gone from me, *whoooah whoooah*, tragedy!" where Brenda goes "you've gone from me, *whoa oh oh oh*, tragedy!", leaving the drawn-out *whoooah whoooah*'s to the backing vocalists. It's difficult to put into words what exact difference does this «staccato-style» addition of a set of glottal stops throw into the pot — but a direct analogy would be the same kind of thing that the Beatles did to 'Baby It's You' when they covered the Shirelles, adding that teeny-weeny hiccup to "*whoa-uh, many many many nights go by*" that Shirley Owens never had. Maybe there's a bit of implied emotional lightness to it, a tiny hint of rising above the bleakness of the situation, or just a touch of self-irony. I don't really know. But one thing I do know for sure is that it makes the song more complex — *and* more fun. Even somewhat more believable on an emotional level, perhaps.



That's the key to appreciating Brenda Lee's «early grown-up» period: she has her own way of weaving adolescence into maturity and maturity into adolescence that you wouldn't easily get from any other artist at the time. This is why, although **All The Way** is basically just **Emotions Vol. 2**, with most of the material recorded by the same musicians only a few months away from the previous sessions, it is just as listenable and enjoyable, perhaps a little thinner in terms of relative highlights but also, perhaps, a little more consistent on the whole — at least this time around, she does not attempt to take on the impossible, such as making Uncle Ray proud with another 'Georgia On My Mind'.

Curiously, the lead single, preceding the LP by about a month or so, was not a pop ballad this time, but a grittier (and also fluffier, at the same time) pop-R&B hybrid, co-written by lady songwriters Jackie DeShannon and Sharon Sheeley: in name and lyrics, 'Dum Dum' probably brought on memories of LaVern Baker's 'Tweedlee Dee', but in melody — and in spirit — it certainly owed more to Bo Diddley's 'Diddy Wah Diddy'. After all that stuff like 'Teach Me Tonight' and 'I'm Learning About Love', on 'Dum Dum' the Little Miss «not-yet-17» Dynamite finally sounds like she's ready to teach *her* partner a thing or two about having fun: that unaccompanied "*I couldn't love you any more than I do...*" line drips more sex than any random Marilyn Monroe performance, and must have been *the* primary reason for the public to send this all the way up to #4, even if I still secretly hope that some of that influence should be ascribed to Floyd Cramer's mood-setting organ part, eerily similar to the not-yet-recorded 'Green Onions' by Booker T & The MG's.

It might be a little too cheesy and sleazy, but on the whole it's harmless, catchy fun that shows Brenda Lee now knows how to get «dirty» without drowning in the dirt — so it's actually a bit sad that it is the only example of such an approach on the entire album. There are a few solid upbeat recordings as well: the fast, playful cover of 'Lover, Come Back To Me' that opens the LP works well for Brenda, as does her jog through Ray Charles' 'Talkin' 'Bout You' (certainly more adequate than 'Georgia') and 'Kansas City' (although I'd still rather have Wanda Jackson lead me through that one than Brenda Lee, if we're talking girls' version of the song). However, all of these are examples of delightful emotional exuberance rather than dominant sexuality, and now we know that Brenda Lee *can* handle dominant sexuality... hey, gimme more!

Ah well, could be too much of a good thing anyway. So instead, try to dig those ballads, like 'Eventually', another attempt to get Ronnie Self to repeat the success of 'I'm Sorry' but a little less epic on the whole. I have no idea why Brenda decided to sing the hook as "*evenCHH... walleee!*", making a weirdly unnatural syllabic border; maybe she thought there'd be a whiff of the cigarette-holding femme fatale image associated with that extra friction, or she just wanted to give us something to think about within the context of this otherwise rather unexceptional, if pleasant, melancholic shuffle that somehow feels

far more conventional than what she does with 'Tragedy'. Then there's the title track, originally made famous by Sinatra back in 1957; not a great improvement, but she does deliver a powerful finale that has to be respected, if not necessarily admired. Where there is an interesting improvement is in her interpretation of 'On The Sunny Side Of The Street': this tune, rightfully performed by just about everyone from Ted Lewis in 1930 to Armstrong and Sinatra as an optimistic bout of positive energy, is taken at a slow, melancholic pace, feeling like anything *but* an attempt to cheer you up. Already the opening "*Grab your coat and get your hat!*" gives sort of a "*let's get our sorry asses out of this Shitsville!*" vibe, and the very existence of a «sunny side of the street» seems more like a questionable hypothesis than an established fact.

Maybe it was an accident, of course, but overall, this reversal of the song's original mood leads me to observe that Brenda's image, as a whole, was gradually turning over to the bleaker side — most of the ballads here have a pessimistic, melancholic, or at least over-anxious atmosphere to them. With Side A of the record ending in 'Someone To Love Me (The Prisoner's Song)', and Side B immediately picking up with Jerry Lordan's 'Do I Worry? (Yes I Do!)', what more evidence do you need to validate that kind of statement?..

Almost as if they realized at the last moment that the album was coming out darker than expected, they finish it with two intentionally upbeat songs — the danceable pop ditty 'Speak To Me Pretty' and the even faster-paced 'Big Chance', which sounds like a cross between Elvis' 'Mystery Train' and some passionate gospel number. They're likeable, and Brenda does an excellent job whipping herself up into a frenzy on the latter, but they still cannot shake off the idea that "*this look I'm wearing, it's called a frown*" (from 'Eventually') is the album's slogan, regardless of Brenda's attempt to force a smile on the front sleeve. Which is all right by me: Brenda's brooding feels natural, only occasionally over-dramatic and mostly quite reasonable for the «young adult» period. Throw in the usual Nashville quality, and you get yourself another highly enjoyable, if not terribly original or adventurous, mood piece from an era of innocence that did not take its mood pieces more seriously than they deserved.

