

CARL PERKINS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1955-1998</i>	<i>Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i><u>Boppin' The Blues</u> (1956)</i>

Only Solitaire

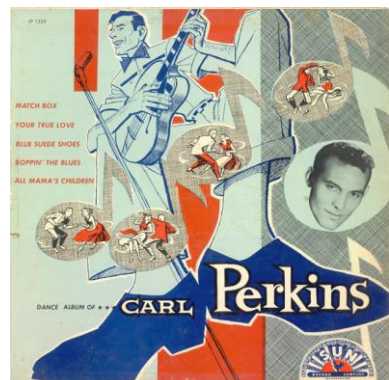
Artist: *Carl Perkins*

Years: *1955-1958*

George Starostin's Reviews

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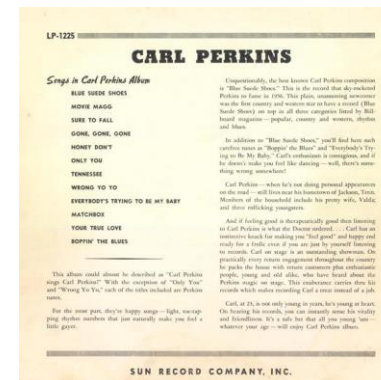
DANCE ALBUM OF CARL PERKINS

Album released:

1957

V A L U E
2 4 3 3 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) *Blue Suede Shoes*; 2) *Movie Magg*; 3) *Sure To Fall*; 4) *Gone, Gone, Gone*; 5) *Honey Don't*; 6) *Only You*; 7) *Tennessee*; 8) *Right String, Wrong Yo-Yo*; 9) *Everybody's Trying To Be My Baby*; 10) *Matchbox*; 11) *Your True Love*; 12) *Boppin' The Blues*; 13*) *All Mama's Children*.

REVIEW

Like most LPs ever put out by Sun Records, Carl Perkins' only «original» long player from his four-year tenure with the label is really just a chaotic compilation of A-side, B-side, and outtake material. But even in this form, or, actually, *because* of this form, it still counts as one of the most impressive and fun-filled LPs from the rockabilly era. Not to mention influential — come to think of it, which other single LP from the era could boast a whole three songs to be officially covered by the Beatles? Not Little Richard, not Chuck Berry, not Buddy Holly, not the Miracles or the Temptations: meet the one and only rocker whose songs *really* screamed to be covered by the Fab Four.



Perhaps the most important thing about Carl Perkins is that, of all the notorious rockabilly people of the era, he was the one who took the most care to faithfully preserve the «simple country boy» essence in his music. Bill Haley probably came close, but in all honesty, Haley did not have that much of an individual personality: his backing band, the Comets, was at least as important as its frontman, blending the old touch of country-western with a Louis Jordan-esque big-band jump-blues entertainment approach. Perkins, on the other hand, wrote his own songs (or radically reinvented traditional ones), sang his own melodies, played his own lead guitar, and, overall, made it so that we rarely ever remember anything about his

sidemen during his recording sessions. Quick, name the bass player and the drummer on 'Blue Suede Shoes' without googling! Yeah, right. Not even Google can help that easily. (For the record: Carl's brother Clayton Perkins played bass, Carl's *other* brother Jay Perkins played acoustic guitar, and W. S. Holland, the future drummer for Johnny Cash's Tennessee Three, played the drums. And now you can forget all about it).

Thus, Carl is essentially a lone wolf, and in that status, gets the right to his own influences and nobody else's — and chief among those influences is the Grand Ole Opry, with Bill Monroe, Gene Autry, and Hank Williams as his major idols. The good news for those city slickers who (like me) feel a bit iffy when it comes to «pure» country music, is that Carl clearly preferred *his* country with a sharper edge, and if anything, his rockabilly style is a direct continuation of Hank's faster-paced, boogie-based material like 'Move It On Over'. Although Carl's own spirit was never as tempestuous or torturous as Hank's (not a single Perkins song shows any signs of such acute bitterness), he always had a thing for raw excitement, energy, speed, humor, good-natured irony — anything that would put a smile on your face and an itch in your feet.

Most importantly, Carl's «lonerism» is responsible for making 'Blue Suede Shoes' into one of the coolest songs of its era — and the lyrics had a lot to do with it: "Don't you step on *MY* blue suede shoes...", sung in a friendly enough tone but with a very clear hint of a threat. This is really where all the Gene Vincents of this world come from: the «rebels» were inspired by the individualistic cockiness of a plain, harmless, friendly «country bumpkin» who inadvertently tapped right into the spinal cord of his era. 'Rock Around The Clock' was a good enough count-off for the rock revolution, but it was a general fun party song. 'Blue Suede Shoes' takes us into one particular corner of that party, where one particularly self-consciously hip guy is busy protecting his own particular interests against the whole world, and backing them with sharp bluesy lead guitar licks that sound like a bunch of slaps in the face of whoever has been unlucky enough to step on the protagonist's lucky footwear.

There is a myth going around that Elvis «stole» the song from Carl while the latter was recuperating in the hospital after a car accident, and that this effectively put an end to Carl's career as a pop star. In reality, Carl never had the makings of a star, and the image of a «teen idol» would have probably never sat too well with him in the first place — he was, first and foremost, a songwriter and a guitar player — none of which, however, prevented *his* 'Blue Suede Shoes' from going all the way to the top of the charts, while Presley's version (a classic in its own right, no doubt about that) stuck at No. 20 (admittedly, RCA people agreed to hold back the release until Carl's version lost its original freshness — see, there *was* a time when record industry people could occasionally show signs of gentlemanly conduct).

Already ‘Boppin’ The Blues’, the direct follow-up to ‘Blue Suede Shoes’, did not chart as high (No. 7 was its peak) — and it wasn’t Elvis that had anything to do with it, but rather the fact that the song was comparatively toothless in comparison, a fairly formulaic rockabilly creation describing the simple joys of rock’n’roll dancing with little challenge or defiance. In the hot, tense competitive air of early 1956, Carl soon lost the lead, and although the next three years would see him reeling between inspiration and repetition, the record-buying public pretty much wrote him off as a one-hit wonder and focused on Elvis instead. In addition, Carl loyally stuck with Sun Records through those years, meaning that he couldn’t even begin to hope for the kind of promotion that Elvis got (on the positive side, Carl never got to have his own Colonel Parker).

It is a doggone shame, though, that such fate also prevented a great tune like ‘Matchbox’ from charting — without the Beatles’ support, it might have altogether sunk into oblivion, but really, few pop songs sounded as harshly serious and deep-reaching in 1957 as that particular reincarnation of an old, old, old blues song by Blind Lemon Jefferson. When those echoing, distant-thunder-like boogie chords start rattling around the room, it’s almost as if you were being intentionally prepared for some important social statement — and in a way, you are, since Carl preserves many of the original lyrics, infusing the song with a blues-based sense of outcast loneliness instead of the usual get-up-and-dance stuff. "I’m an ol’ poor boy, long way from home" is, after all, quite different from "lay off of my blue suede shoes". It might even be argued that «socially conscious» rock’n’roll music starts somewhere around this bend, even if Carl would probably never describe himself as rock’s first protest artist.

On a personal note, I must say that ‘Honey Don’t’ feels to me as one of the very few rock and pop songs by other artists that the Beatles did *not* manage to improve upon — and not because Ringo is a worse singer than Carl (he actually did a fine job to preserve the tune’s humor), but because George Harrison never really got around to learning all the tricks in Carl’s playing bag: as rough as the production is on the original, Perkins compensates for it with a series of improvised «muffled» licks that George did not even try to copy, playing in a «cleaner» style that left less room for dirty rock’n’roll excitement. (On the other hand, George *did* get the upper hand on ‘Everybody’s Trying To Be My Baby’ by managing to raise the tension on the lengthy second instrumental break, whereas in Carl’s version it pretty much stays the same throughout).

Of the twelve songs assembled here, only a couple are relative clunkers: ‘Tennessee’, in particular, sounds as silly as it is sincere, a heartfelt tribute to Carl’s native state with a hillbillyish chorus and somewhat uncomfortable lyrics that, among other things, urge us to give credit to the fact that "they made the first atomic bomb in Tennessee" (a somewhat inaccurate reference to Oak Ridge, but even if it *were* accurate, I’m not sure I would want to boast about it even at the height of the

Cold War). Pompous, vocally demanding ballads are also not one of Carl's fortes ('Only You'), but he *can* come up with a highly catchy homely, simple country ballad when he puts his heart into it — 'Sure To Fall', with its melody almost completely based on serenading trills, is quite a beautiful little piece.

One of the most interesting things about comparing old rockabilly records from the mid-to-late 1950s is the relative proportion of their ingredients. Some veer closer to R&B, some to electric blues, some to «whitebread» pop, some are jazzier, some vaudevillian. From that point of view, **Dance Album Of Carl Perkins** is a curious mix of something very highly conservative with an explosive energy that is nevertheless kept under strict control, like a fire burning steady and brightly, but only within a rigidly set limit. Had all rock'n'roll looked like Carl Perkins in the 1950s, it would probably have taken us a much, much longer way to get where we are right now — but, on the other hand, maybe we wouldn't already be wondering where exactly is it possible to go from here.





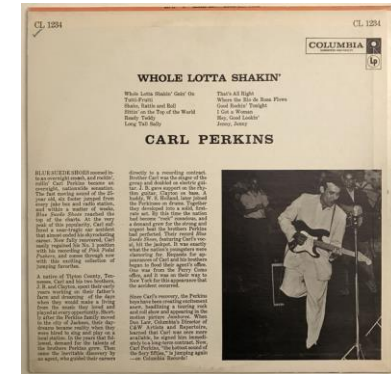
WHOLE LOTTA SHAKIN'

Album released:

1958

V A L U E
2 2 2 1 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Whole Lotta Shakin'; 2) Tutti Frutti; 3) Shake, Rattle & Roll; 4) Sittin' On Top Of The World; 5) Ready Teddy; 6) Long Tall Sally; 7) That's All Right; 8) Where The Rio De Rosa Flows; 9) Good Rockin' Tonight; 10) I Got A Woman; 11) Hey, Good Lookin'; 12) Jenny Jenny.

REVIEW

Sooner or later, every successful Sun artist had to leave Sun Records for the big time, just because such was the way of the world; few Sun artists, however, upon leaving their alma mater, ended up in such an ignoble position as Carl Perkins. Although Columbia Records, where he found himself together with his buddy Johnny Cash, still allowed him to put out a few original compositions as singles, the one and only LP he cut in the 1950s for the label was this clearly disappointing, if not downright dreadful, collection of covers. A single look at the tracklist shows that the record consists of almost nothing but major and well worn-out (by 1958 already) rock'n'roll hits for Carl's Sun partners Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis, as well as other notorious rock'n'rollers like Bill Haley and Little Richard. Naturally, the *last* thing the world needed in late 1958 was yet another take on the classics from an artist whose chief asset had always been songwriting, not impersonating.



I would not dare say that all of this sounds completely forced and unnatural, or that Carl was clearly *not* having himself a ball with at least some of this stuff — he may not have written these songs, but there is little doubt that he loved all of them, since they are so right up his own alley of interests. The problem is that he does not seem at all to be in real charge of the

sessions. Although Columbia's production values are slightly (*only* slightly) higher than those of Sun, the actual recordings are not at all beneficial for Carl. The sound is almost completely dominated by session players, such as the 47-year old Marvin Hughes, a veteran of Nashville piano playing, and the somewhat younger jazz saxophonist Andy Goodrich — both of them obvious, but hardly outstanding, professionals who loyally deliver the goods, but way too often end up drowning out Carl's vocals and even Carl's guitar playing to the point that it becomes unclear why the hell would Columbia Records even bother signing this guy up.

The only curious, and moderately successful, idea on the entire album was to turn 'Sittin' On Top Of The World', formerly played as a slow country-blues piece by everybody from the Mississippi Sheiks to Howlin' Wolf, into a lightning-speed rock'n'roll number — thus, giving it essentially the same treatment that Carl earlier gave to Blind Lemon Jefferson's 'Matchbox Blues' during his tenure at Sun. Unfortunately, while 'Matchbox' managed to sound gritty and serious, with a guitar sound bordering on proto-punkish because of its angry vibe, *this* rendition, in comparison, is just a fun bit of frolick with no guitar solos and a barely discernible rhythm guitar part. If they could at least get somebody like King Curtis to complete the transformation of the song into Perkins' answer to 'Yakety Yak', it would have made some kind of sense; the way it is, it takes most of it out of the original and adds little else.

Vocal-wise, Carl is in good form, but he never gives other people's songs the same kind of sly, sexy reading that he usually gives his own. Every now and then, he tends to overscream (sometimes getting out of tune in the process), and, worst of all, as long as you preserve your basis for comparison and as long as the voices of Little Richard, Elvis, and even Jerry Lee Lewis doing the same songs still ring out in your head, Carl's relative lack of power and singing technique remains a constant problem. On his cover of Hank Williams' 'Hey, Good Lookin', he does not even try: the original was *all* about making you swoon by drawing out those opening notes ("h-e-e-ey, good lookin', wha-a-a-t you got cookin'..."), while Carl just swallows them completely — which is all the more strange, given that it didn't used to be *that* bad: at least on songs such as 'Sure To Fall' he could show some impressive range.

The further down you go, the more it begins feeling suspiciously like an intentionally butchered hackjob: I do not know the details, but either Carl was just pissed off at his new label for demanding that he cover other people's hits, or some things simply did not work out. He may have been uncomfortable with the new session band, or the new recording studio, or something else, but one thing is for certain: **Whole Lotta Shakin'** is quite far from being the best possible introduction to the guy's songwriting and overall charismatic genius. One might even want to go further and grumble that it is one of those

albums which explains the beginning of the temporary decline of rock'n'roll in the late 1950s — with lackluster sessions like these coming from established icons, you'd certainly want to think that rambunctious rock'n'roll had passed its prime, and that it was high time to try out something *truly* new — like Chubby Checker, or Bobby Darin.

It must be added, for honesty's sake, that even in terms of original songwriting Carl never achieved the same level of quality and immortality with Columbia as he did with Sun. Pretty much every textbook classic he did, about a dozen or so of them, was recorded during his Sun period; I don't think that even one song from the Columbia years can boast as much publicity or covers by subsequent artists as that early golden bunch. You can clearly feel the difference yourself by comparing the [early Sun version](#) of 'Pink Pedal Pushers' and the [Columbia re-recording](#) of the same title (which, I think, was officially released earlier than the Sun recording, which lingered in the archives for some time). The former has a shallower, dirtier, more classic rockabilly-style sound; the latter is denser, deeper, cleaner, and ultimately, less inciting and seductive — lacking the original's little scat intro and discarding its let's-take-the-elevator-to-hell descending bassline.

At least it is good to know that in those troubled years for rock'n'roll, Carl never truly slipped into schmaltz (which would have been hard for him to do anyway due to his naturally rough voice, totally unfit for sugary crooning). But whether it was the fault of Columbia or simply that of the spirit of the times (it was certainly *not* related to his accident, which took place in early 1956 and was followed by a whole lot of raunchy classics for Sun Records), his act got cleaned up and stiffened all the same. It is things like these that truly make you believe in voodoo magic — doubtless, somebody must have placed a hex on rock'n'roll music by mid-1958 or something.

