

CARLA THOMAS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1960-1974</i>	<i>Classic R&B</i>	<i>A Love of My Own (1961)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Carla Thomas*

Years: *1960-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

Page contents:

- [Gee Whiz](#) (1961)



GEE WHIZ

Album released:

1961

V A L U E
 2 4 3 2 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) Gee Whiz (Look At His Eyes); 2) Dance With Me; 3) A Lovely Way To Spend An Evening; 4) Your Love; 5) Fools Fall In Love; 6) To The Aisle; 7) The Masquerade Is Over; 8) **A Love Of My Own**; 9) Promises; 10) It Ain't Me; 11) For You; 12) The Love We Shared.

REVIEW

They say that Rufus C. Thomas, during his 1950s tenure as DJ at Memphis' famous WDIA station, the first one in the States to be targeted exclusively for African-American audiences, actually cared about integration so much that he dared play Elvis Presley records on the air — in a famous case of «reverse-breaking» segregation rules. Now admittedly, I am not sure if this is even tangentially related to the fact that this first collection of songs recorded by Rufus' daughter Carla, only 18-19 years old at the time, sounds like one of the «whitest-oriented-ever» R&B albums released to that date. It may have simply been a casual effect of the time: the early Sixties were a period when, for a while, it looked like *every* black R&B performer was deliberately smoothing, softening, and seditiously sentimentalizing his or her sound to bring it more in line with the average moods and vibes of a family-oriented pop number on the Ed Sullivan Show. But *maybe*, just *maybe*, there was also a bit of a nobler intent in these recordings — having something to do with a synthesis of several traditions, breaking down racial and cultural barriers by writing and recording multi-angular music that would take the best (or, at least, the most recognizable) of both worlds. And although Carla Thomas was not the first star of R&B to hit it big simultaneously on the (black-oriented) R&B charts and (white-oriented) pop charts (LaVern Baker, for instance, had that kind of success with 'Tweedlee Dee', 'Jim Dandy', and



'I Cried A Tear' in 1955–1958), 'Gee Whiz (Look At His Eyes)' might just have been *the* textbook example of how to do it so it behaves like a lenticular picture — feels like Ruth Brown from one angle, and like Doris Day from another.

One might feel tempted to accuse Rufus of nepotism, promoting his daughter through personal connections and all, but only a very cynical person could refuse to see the genuine talent — Carla had a fine, exquisite voice, an outstanding ability to interpret other people's material, *and* a moderate songwriting capacity of her own; allegedly, she wrote her to-be signature tune, 'Gee Whiz', all by herself when she was but 16 (or 15, according to other sources). In fact, judging by their comparative discographies, Father Rufus probably did not even think of himself as a proper «artist» for the first three decades of his career — more like a vaudeville entertainer and a cultural promoter — and his own recording career only took off after Carla had been successfully established as a regular recording artist and hitmaker.

That said, Rufus certainly knew how to pull a few strings for his precious little girl, starting with getting her into Memphis' Teen Town Singers at the age of 10 (!), way back in 1952, when he had to convince the people in charge to bend the rules that said you had to be in high school to be a member. And it was for Rufus (or, at least, through Rufus' authority) that the owners of Memphis' Satellite Records, Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton, agreed to distribute a duet that he recorded with Carla in 1960 — a little romp called 'Cause I Love You', very highly derivative of the then-current New Orleanian R&B and, as has been noted, most likely based directly on Jesse Hill's '[Ooh Poo Pah Doo](#)' (my own ears immediately caught the resemblance to Allen Toussaint and Chris Kenner's '[I Like It Like That](#)', but that song actually came out later — they all use a very similar musical momentum, though).

We certainly might find it a little problematic for a father to be singing a love duet with his own daughter, especially one in which the protagonist claims to never have cheated on his lover with another woman — but only if we begin overthinking the nature of show business; as long as we clearly separate real life from acting, there should be no trouble at all enjoying the duet, with Rufus and Carla possibly taking Ike and Tina as their role models. And, for that matter, the 18-year old Carla here sounds more mature, confident, and experienced than she does on her later solo hits — she was versatile enough to switch between «strong adult» and «vulnerable adolescent» personalities at will, making 'Gee Whiz' seem all the more impressive in comparison. Anyway, 'Cause I Love You' is really fun and, also, really unusually tough for Carla, whose rise to fame would all mostly be due to sentimental ballads. (The bluesy B-side 'Deep Down Inside' is also far closer to good old rough'n'tough R&B than everything that was to come, but it's not as fun as the A-side).

Although the single did not chart, it is difficult to overrate its crucial historical importance. In addition to Carla, Rufus, and Rufus' other child, Marvell, on keyboards, 'Cause I Love You' also featured Lewie Steinberg on bass guitar and a 16-year old Booker T. Jones on saxophone — the very first time that two of the future members of Booker T. & The MGs came together in the studio. And that's not all: 'Cause I Love You' was the song that caught the ear of none other than Ahmet Ertegun of Atlantic Records, who, on the strength of it, offered Satellite Records a distribution deal. One year later, «Satellite» became «Stax», and with the power of Atlantic's support, Stax-Volt began its legendary ascension — which, as it turns out, was all born out of this little spark ignited by Carla and Rufus in innocent novelty fashion.

For Carla personally, though, the song meant next to nothing; her true love at the time was romantic balladry, and Satellite Records was the first company to agree to give her a chance in that business. 'Gee Whiz', produced by Chips Moman (who would himself soon become one of Memphis' hottest producers, all the way up to **From Elvis In Memphis**), might seem to be just an ordinary orchestrated doo-wop waltz at first — almost too oddly old-fashioned even for 1961 with its softened tastes. There is one difference, though: the *voice*. The music may be a decade too old, but Carla's performance here is much more in line with contemporary girl groups than pop singers, male or female, black or white, from any time in the Fifties. She delivers her lines with all the starry-eyed giddiness of a teenaged girl (well, she *was* a teenaged girl!) hopelessly lost in her first romance, in just about the perfect vocal tone for this setting — that of a person who's just willingly cancelled all her defenses and succumbed to sweet temptation. The message is nothing new under the sun, just another modern variation on the eternal *Romeo-wherefore-art-thou-Romeo* theme, but the way it is delivered, almost bordering on artistic indecency, is most certainly what triggered public interest, with the song scoring high on both black and white charts. The B-side, 'For You', co-credited to Carla and Chips Moman, was a poppy dance number more in the vein of 'Cause I Love You', but still fun and catchy enough to generate a little bit of uptempo joy.

The same formula — slow ballad vs. relatively more uptempo pop number — would be repeated for Carla's second single, released in March 1961, and while Moman's 'Promises' is probably more distinguished for its tasteful, flourishy piano playing (presumably by brother Marvell again) than its hooks or vibes, the A-side, 'A Love Of My Own', might just be Carla's best recording ever. It failed to repeat the success of 'Gee Whiz', most likely owing to the simple biological fact that humans tend to prefer happy songs over tragic songs (not surprisingly, Carla would not have another truly big pop hit on the general charts until the equally happy 'B-A-B-Y' in 1966), and it takes a *tremendous* amount of stunning power to get a tragic song to score high marks on the commercial scale — something on the level of 'Remember (Walking In The Sand)' (even The Shangri-Las, I think, managed to score only once or twice, remaining as a very modest commercial proposition at all other

times). 'A Love Of My Own', unfortunately, does not quite have that kind of thing — its melody rests on the generic Fifties' progression, and its opening acappella lines do not have that immediate pull which 'Gee Whiz' exerts over the listener, so one might need a couple of extra listens before the magic starts working... and then it's a tragic magic, and not a lot of people find themselves in the mood for that.

But give it a chance, and 'A Love Of My Own' might ultimately feel much more rewarding than 'Gee Whiz'. At the very least, it is just as realistic in terms of amplified teenage feelings — only this time, Carla is singing about her inability to score, and the lyrics are fairly ambitious for a young lady: "*I look at the mountains, I look at the sun / I look at everything Mother Nature has done / Then I wanna know / Why can't I find a love of my own*". It's as if we just found out that 'Gee Whiz' was merely a wistful fantasy, while *this* here is the harsh reality. The mini-genius touch to push things over the edge is in how the backing vocals, first starting life as a standard gospel choir, eventually engage Carla in dialog, serving as the inner voice pushing her to get those feelings in the open, making those "*why... WHY? — can't... CAN'T...*" ever more poignant. There are other minor edgy points as well: wait for that middle section where she goes "*Love, how I've waited for you / But it looks like you'll never come / So I sit down, sit down and think this thing over / Is it something I've done?*" and watch out for the transition from the first *sit down*, with regular accent on the first word, to the second "*sit DOOOWN!*" with a strong emphasis on *down!*, as if transitioning to a commanding teacher tone. It adds a bit of a self-castigating vibe that plenty of modern audiences will find outdated and humiliating (of course), but then tragedy is always best served with the tragic hero tearing at him- or herself rather than life simply knocking them over, doesn't it?

In between 'Gee Whiz' and 'A Love Of My Own', it pretty much took Carla Thomas less than half a year to establish herself as, perhaps, *the* single most exciting fresh female presence on the soul/R&B scene from that period — much as I like, for instance, Aretha Franklin's earliest records, there is nothing on them that quite captures either the boundless joy of the former single or the equally boundless pain of the latter. It shouldn't even be that much of a criticism to observe that Carla's first LP, rather hastily assembled to capitalize on the success of the singles, does not do justice to their quality — given the overall time context, that should probably be predictable. As talented as she was, Carla could not have written enough songs on her own to fill up two whole sides of vinyl; and, in fact, her only other self-written song here, called 'It Ain't Me' (*not* to be confused with Bob Dylan's 'It Ain't Me, Babe', which was not even written by that time), is relatively weak in the shadow of the similarly themed 'A Love Of My Own' — just another generic tragic waltz, but comparatively formulaic and also shot down by the hilariously confusing lyrical ineptness of "*Someone else is in your arms my love*" (okay), closely followed by "*And it ain't me*" (well DUH, brilliant observation and all). She still has a great voice — a one-of-a-kind combination of

sweetness and raspiness that adds a bit of depth and discomfort to even the sappiest material, helping me enjoy the LP from start to finish, no matter how many of these generic orchestrated waltzes I have to endure.

The selection of covers with which the LP had been filled up is fairly predictable — a mix of old school Tin Pan Alley with more recent R&B hits, such as The Drifters' 'Dance With Me' and 'Fools Fall In Love' — and while this is as far removed from the crunchy, funky sound of classic Stax-Volt as possible, most of the songs are in good taste, and even those that are not so much in good taste are still redeemed by Carla's innate ability for drama. The only one I really don't care for at all is 'The Masquerade Is Over', whose maudlin spirit even Carla is hardly capable of ennobling; but when, for instance, she tries on for size 'To The Aisle', originally recorded by [The Five Satins](#) in 1957, the song — particularly with the aid of those gospel backing vocals — almost takes on a slightly doom-laden atmosphere. Okay, I might be putting a little too much into it, but honestly, the way she delivers lines like "*then he puts a ring on your finger...*" get me thinking about a potential proper Goth cover of the song, preferably with the likes of Tim Burton filming the accompanying video. I'm sure that was never the original intention, but it just goes to show the unusual qualities of Carla's singing — some of which she might not have been aware of herself.

It's even more poignant on Carla's first single that came after the LP — too late to be included on it — one more formulaic doo-wop waltz, sure, but just as wonderfully reflecting yet another shade of teen psychology as the two previous ones: on '(Mama, Mama) Wish Me Good Luck', she vacillates between the same giddy ecstasy that permeated 'Gee Whiz' and a sort of fearful apprehension — her "*mother, mother, wish me good luck*" is far more than just a ritualistic turn of phrase, but rather a strong reminder that the «luck» in question is liable to change at any moment, and that total boundless happiness is just one step away from loss and catastrophe. The song itself is nothing; the vocal delivery is everything, and once again Carla proves herself here to be a young master of exquisite subtlety, outdoing most of the competition in one swoop — the power of those overtones is on some Ray Charles level, rather than Aretha or any of the other young debutantes circa 1960–1961. That the world was so slow and unwilling to catch up to it, in my opinion, was a bit of a disaster, but then again, the world at large is never a big fan of subtle overtones.

