

CLIFF BENNETT & THE REBEL ROUSERS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1961-1968</i>	<i>Classic rhythm'n'blues</i>	<i><u>I'm In Love With You (1961)</u></i>

Only Solitaire

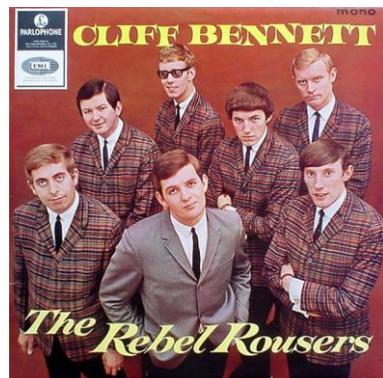
Artist: *Cliff Bennett*

Years: *1961-1964*

George Starostin's Reviews

Page contents:

- [Cliff Bennett & The Rebel Rousers](#) (1964)



CLIFF BENNETT & THE REBEL ROUSERS

Album released:

1964

V A L U E
2 3 3 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) *I Can't Stand It*; 2) Sweet And Lovely; 3) Make Yourself At Home; 4) You've Really Got A Hold On Me; 5) Ain't That Lovin' You Baby; 6) Sha La La; 7) One Way Love; 8) Steal Your Heart Away; 9) It's All Right; 10) Beautiful Dreamer; 11) Mercy Mercy; 12) Talking About My Baby; 13) The Pick-Up.

REVIEW

Although history faintly remembers Cliff Bennett & The Rebel Rousers only for a couple of Top 10 UK singles in 1965–66, one might argue that the band's most interesting recordings were actually made way earlier — in 1961–62, when Cliff's unusually large combo (with a piano player and *two* sax players in addition to the regular rock band lineup) got a fortuitous record deal with Parlophone and were assigned to none other than the legendary Joe Meek, even before his success with the Tornados and 'Telstar'. Together, they recorded four singles which can only be found on various compilations, such as **The Best Of The EMI Years** from 1992 (some of the tracks are also occasionally included on retrospective compilations of Joe Meek's greatest successes as a producer, which, come to think of it, might be preferable to Cliff Bennett compilations).



The combination was quite unique in that Cliff Bennett & The Rebel Rousers were a fairly ordinary, if energetic, rhythm and blues combo from Berkshire, formed as early as 1959 (some sources say 1957) and welded into a tight little band through years of hard practice in London and, later, Hamburg (where they were occasional pals with the Beatles) — Joe Meek, on the other hand, was a wizard of electronic gismos and proto-psychedelic production techniques who didn't really give a shit about who he was assigned to work with as long as whoever it was agreed to become a guinea pig for his magic spells. I have

no idea just how happy Cliff and the boys were to be submitted to this ordeal — probably not *too* happy, since none of those singles ever charted and their partnership with Meek ended after about two years — but the actual results were certainly more than weird; in fact, for the pop standards of 1961–62 they were almost surreal.

The very first single, ‘You’ve Got What I Like’, credited to «R. Duke» (Meek’s preferred pseudonym at the time), is a fast-moving pop-rocker in the general musical style of Buddy Holly, although Cliff Bennett’s dark-tinged vocal tone is much closer to Jerry Lee Lewis, as is the wildman piano playing style of whoever it is that plays the piano (finding chronologically accurate information on lineup changes in the Rebel Rousers is a bit of a nightmare; one source states that in those early days, Sid Phillips doubled on sax and piano, but other sources only credit him for sax — while Roy Young, known as the resident Rebel Rouser piano player, did not join until 1962). What is most striking about the song, however, is the way it sounds — heavy reverb on the vocals, nasty flanging on the guitar, and some sonic compression technique for the piano that makes it sound tinny and slightly «alien». The same magic is worked on the B-side, ‘I’m In Love With You’, which really comes across as something by Jerry Lee Lewis’ long-lost cousin from another dimension. It might not seem like a lot to take in for the modern ear — but no rock’n’roll in 1961 sounded quite like *that*.

The Jerry Lee Lewis connection would continue even more explicitly on their second single, whose B-side, ‘When I Get Paid’, is an actual Jerry Lee cover — and, might I add, more ass-kicking than the original, though most of the extra punch should once again go to Joe Meek (one can only imagine the results if Joe Meek ever actually got the chance to produce Jerry Lee Lewis in person, rather than a Jerry Lee-worshipping band of young UK punks). However, by 1962 things were changing: rock’n’roll seemed to be going out of fashion, and the third single, ‘Poor Joe’ (which Meek probably wrote about himself?), is a 3/4 pop number with mellow sax solos and female backing vocals dubbed as «The Pepperminties», whoever they could be. Again, it is the outlandish guitar and sax tones that attract most of the attention — for all his imagination in modeling sonic textures, Meek was not much of an imaginative songwriter.

Alas, by 1963 the Meek / Bennett partnership was over — which gave Cliff and the boys a chance to get back to their old and trusty rambunctious ways, but also robbed them of any chances at exclusiveness they ever had. Not that they did not boast a solid, respectable sound: their cover of Muddy Waters’ ‘Got My Mojo Working’, released as a single in 1964, might be the fullest-sounding and tightest of all the UK cover versions of this song I’ve ever heard — unfortunately, that ain’t saying much, because it simply does not get its mojo working without Muddy Waters: you can dance to it, but you cannot get enchanted by it, certainly not when Cliff gives you a high school bugle call instead of a shamanistic invocation.

The band's first LP, which came out either in late 1964 or in early 1965 (again, sources conflict with each other), largely continues that trend. It presents Cliff's band as far more of a soul / R&B outfit than a rock'n'roll one — nothing on the album has the insane tempo or maniacal energy of the first couple of Meek-produced singles, and covered artists range from Don Covay to Curtis Mayfield to Smokey Robinson, rather than Jerry Lee Lewis or Buddy Holly. Much to the band's credit, their extended lineup gives them a chance to foster a relatively unique sound for a British team at the time — the extra saxes give the impression of a big band production, and sometimes bring it closer to the Motown or Atlantic originals than anybody else in the UK could do in 1964. The problem is, what exactly was the *point* of performing a Motown original so close to the Motown original?

Thus, the Rebel Rousers' 'You've Really Got A Hold On Me' differs from the Beatles' version in two respects — there's a dense brass foundation to the melody, and the lead vocals are shared by Cliff and one or more other band members. But the first detail is barely significant, and the second is detrimental — the Beatles did the song a big favor by clearly emphasizing Lennon's tired raspiness over everybody else, giving the song far more actual soul than the Rebel Rousers, whose multi-tracked vocals have very little expressivity, if any at all. Much better, for instance, is their upbeat cover of the old classic 'Beautiful Dreamer', which was quite popular among Britain's bands at the time (Joe Meek produced one version with John Leyton, and you can hear a live performance from the Beatles at a 1963 show for the BBC) — better because Cliff sings it largely on his own, and his burly voice merges perfectly with the equally burly saxes.

But make no mistake about it: when the Rebel Rousers were good, they were really, really good. The cover of the Soul Sisters' 'I Can't Stand It' that opens the album simply rips it up — fast, driven by choppy, snarling guitar chords and a relentless sax buzz, with several lead vocals and two saxes battling it out like mad. Next to it, the other version of the song from the same year, produced by the young and still relatively inexperienced Spencer Davis Group, sounds like a teenage imitation of the real thing. It's just a pity that no other track on the album has managed to bottle that kind of energy.

The album did, however, produce (or, rather, include) the band's first UK Top 10 hit — the cover of the Drifters' 'One Way Love'. UK audiences might not have had the convenience of easy comparison with the equally catchy and delightful original, but it is not excluded they would have preferred Bennett's take anyway: it is harsher, heavier, with not only the rhythm section pounding much harder than on the Atlantic record, but even the saxes having a denser, more distorted vibe to them. This slightly «ragged», «raspy» R&B feel might not specifically raise any eyebrows today, since it would very soon be flaunted by dozens and dozens of classic British artists — but if we want to be nitpicky about it, Cliff Bennett & The Rebel

Rousers might have been the first outfit to do it properly. If only Bennett's voice had been a *tad* more distinctive and a trifle more charismatic — *he* could have been the original Steve Winwood, or Steve Marriott, or Rod Stewart. As it is, the elevator does not quite reach the penthouse: compare, for instance, [the Rousers' treatment](#) of Don Covay's 'Mercy Mercy' with the slightly later Rolling Stones version — the group *tries* to do a good job, but (a) does not come up with anything nearly as atmospheric as Keith Richards' threatening fuzz guitar tone and (b) has nothing by way of Jagger's defiantly razor-sharp vocal delivery, even if *technically*, Bennett might have a voice that is much better suited to belting out R&B stuff than Mick's. Once more, we're talking about difference between honest, hard work and genius — though the two are by no means mutually exclusive.

Rock historian Bruce Eder dared to go on record calling Cliff Bennett «one of the most formidable talents not to ascend to the top rank of British rock & roll during the mid-'60s» — the problem with this definition, the way I see it, is that most, if not all, of the truly «formidable» talents in rock & roll did ascend to the top rank at the time, because «formidability» for such a young and innovative genre of music could almost literally be smelled in the air. Bennett was not so much formidable as he was *reliable* — a professional with great work ethics and a good sense of taste, able to gradually forge out his own sound but unable to make it truly mindblowing. Maybe if he'd stuck with Joe Meek all the way through, Britain's most eccentric record producer would have eventually rubbed off on him and the rest of the band, like John Lennon and Paul McCartney eventually rubbed off on George Harrison. As it is, **Cliff Bennett & The Rebel Rousers** is a fairly enjoyable and completely «authentic» record that «gets it», but does not exactly «run away with it», if you get my meaning.

