

DALE HAWKINS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1956-2007</i>	<i>Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i>Tornado (1958)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Dale Hawkins*

Years: *1956-1958*

George Starostin's Reviews

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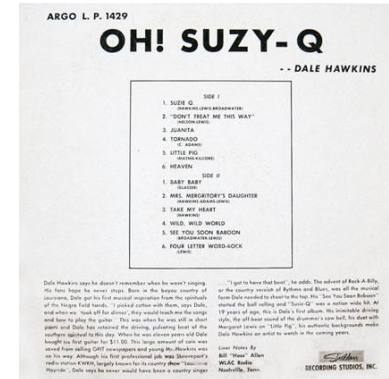


OH! SUZY-Q

Album released: 1958

V A L U E 3 2 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Suzie-Q; 2) Don't Treat Me This Way; 3) Juanita; 4) Tornado; 5) Little Pig; 6) Heaven; 7) Baby Baby; 8) Mrs. Merguitory's Daughter; 9) Take My Heart; 10) Wild, Wild World; 11) See You Soon Baboon; 12) Four Letter Word-Rock; 13*) My Babe; 14*) Back To School Blues; 15*) Liza Jane; 16*) La-Do-Dada; 17*) Hot Dog; 18*) Every Little Girl; 19*) Ain't That Lovin' You Baby; 20*) Lonely Nights; 21*) Someday, One Day; 22*) Cross-Ties; 23*) Yea-Yea (Class Cutter); 24*) Lifeguard Man.

REVIEW

Detailed and accurate information on Dale Hawkins' biography and discography is hard to find, and the results can be as confusing and contradictory as the many ways to spell out the title of the only Dale Hawkins song anybody remembers — listed as 'Susie-Q' on the original single for the Checker label, as 'Suzie Q' on the track listing for Dale's first LP, and as 'Suzy-Q' in the very title of said LP. Maybe he should have simply called the song 'Mary Sue' instead, but allegedly it was dedicated to an actual Susan, the daughter of Dale's friend and part-time employer Stan Lewis, the owner of Shreveport's Stan's Music Shop where Hawkins began his career. So Susie / Suzie / Suzy it is (actually, the title is a transparent reference to Sonny Boy Williamson's 'Susie-Q', released as early as 1939, although the songs themselves have nothing in common).



Nor do I understand fully just how many different versions of the song Dale recorded in late '56 / early '57: there is definitely at least one [alternate](#), much speedier take of the song in existence, but a detailed [sessionography](#) shows at least three attempts, one from an early session at KENT Radio, and two more from the KWKH Radio on February 14, 1957... bizarre, really. I do believe that the speedy take is actually the original demo from '56, which confirms the status of 'Susie-Q'

as the very first song Dale wrote and recorded, although it did not become his first single ('See You Soon Baboon' holds that honor).

The fame of 'Suzie-Q' essentially rests on two facts: (a) almost twelve years later, it went on to become the breakthrough song for Creedence Clearwater Revival, making John Fogerty ten times the star Dale Hawkins ever was; (b) it is commonly referred to as «the song that invented swamp rock», by which, I'm guessing, we mean «straightahead rock'n'roll with native Louisiana features», and at least in this particular case we can claim authenticity, since Dale Hawkins was indeed a native of Louisiana. I mean, John Fogerty was *not* a native of Louisiana, so if you say that «CCR played swamp rock», this means you are actually obligated to be able to explain what swamp rock is, *musically*. Now Dale Hawkins — he could just whip out his birth certificate, and that'd be it.

Anyway, what really makes 'Suzie-Q' so different from the general rockabilly styles going on around 1956–1957 is that its melody is not based on country or R&B rhythmic patterns — that classic opening riff is really straightahead blues, stuck somewhere in between the Delta and Chicago, but sped up and accompanied by a heavy, dance-oriented, jungley-sounding drum beat. The contrast between this fairly dark and menacing groove, and the song's almost elementary, nursery-level lyrics which make the Ramones sound like Keats in comparison, is striking and unsettling (had the song been dedicated to *my* daughter, I might have contemplated going for a restraining order). Additionally, lead guitarist James Burton (the same James Burton who would later go on to become Ricky Nelson's sidekick) plays a guitar break that is very reminiscent of Scotty Moore's «alarm siren» on 'Good Rockin' Tonight', only even thicker and heavier — which makes the song a synthesis of blues voodoo, teen lust, and rockabilly fervor. I'm not saying it is a synthesis that makes a whole lot of *sense*, mind you, but in early 1957, it was definitely a new word in pop music, and the very fact that its legend would be carried on by *both* the Rolling Stones (in 1964) and CCR (in 1968) means there is some objective magic bottled inside these two minutes.

Unfortunately, Dale's artistic tragedy was that he was never able to expand upon the early success of the song. Although he put out an entire slew of singles and one LP in the late 1950s, none of them charted (at least, this is what it seems like; again, detailed information on this is hard to find); and even though he wrote much, if not most, of his material himself, you hardly ever find anything other than 'Suzie-Q' revived by famous rock'n'roll artists of the future-in-the-past. One might try to ascribe this succumbing to the one-hit-wonder curse to the spirit of the times — after all, Dale arrived on the scene just a bit too late, at a time when the original fascination with wild, raw rock'n'roll was beginning to give way to the teen idol fad; and this could be partially confirmed by the (admirable, in my opinion) fact that Dale Hawkins, in spirit, was the ultimate

rock'n'roller, refusing to sell out and go all sweetie-pie on the listener despite having what it takes in the looks and the voice department. I mean, there is only one (one!) ballad on this entire LP — even Gene Vincent in his wild gorilla days had much more — and just one or two more on the large bunch of single A- and B-sides from 1957–1959 that constitute its bonus tracks. But the real truth, I believe, is simpler and sadder: the outstanding, innovative sound of 'Susie-Q' was more or less a fluke, compared to Dale's much more typical lack of artistic direction.

If you arrange the 12 songs included on both the original LP and the extra 12 tracks included on the remastered CD edition in chronological order (following the abovementioned sessionography), you shall see that for most of his career, Dale was taking cues from other people — solid cues which he could twist in mildly fun ways, but never enough to make them so much more interesting than the original ideas. After all, it was hardly a coincidence that his first single was not 'Susie-Q', but 'See You Soon, Baboon' — a song transparently influenced not only by the lyrical hook of Bill Haley's 'See You Later, Alligator', but also by Haley's musical style in general. The boppy rhythm, the catchy vocal melody, the exuberant sax break, everything is in agreement with Haley's formula, but the final result is nowhere near as sharp or infectious as the ultra-professional formula of Haley's well-greased Comets. Which is, of course, all the more ironic considering that 'See You Later, Alligator' itself should have been a «swamp-pop» highlight — so Hawkins' song comes across as a noble attempt to win back those honors and vindicate the name of Louisiana; alas, if this were an actual duel, we'd already be burying poor Dale, while Bill would be calmly blowing smoke off his pistol.

Likewise, the very first song recorded after the definitive 'Susie-Q' session was 'Baby, Baby', a minor tweak on the rockabilly sound of Elvis' 'Baby Let's Play House' — with louder, more echoey drums, and a temptingly more «teeny» nasal voice, but they even forgot to put in a proper lead guitar break. The B-side, 'Mrs. Merguitory's Daughter', carries those echoey drums even farther, generating a groove not unlike one of Bo Diddley's, but there is nothing interesting about the song past the first 15 seconds or so. And this is how it generally goes, almost ad infinitum.

Arguably the best post-'Susie Q' recording session for Dale took place in Chicago sometime in December 1957: that was when he cut 'Little Pig', written by Aldine Mathis and W. M. Kilgore (of Johnny Cash's 'Ring Of Fire' fame), a fun little novelty number with one of the best three-little-piggies-related innuendos in the business; getting to impersonate the big bad wolf never sounded so suggestive before. Even better is 'Tornado', which might be the second best example of that «swamp rock» thing — it is essentially 'Smokestack Lightning', sped up and turned into a rock'n'roll number, once again molding together the dark voodoo thing and the dance energy shtick; too bad James Burton was not around this time to

really kick the song off into the stratosphere (guitar players Carl Adams, credited as the songwriter, and Kenny Paulsen are merely competent). On the other hand, the blues ballad 'Heaven', recorded at the same session, is quite generic, stylistically reflecting some old-fashioned, doo-woppy Atlantic Records approach circa 1951 or so.

And on and on it goes. 'La-Do-Dada' goes for some half-assed sweet Mexican vibe, but gets stuck midway between it and regular pop, not too memorable or emotionally resonant. The classic blues tune 'My Babe', appropriately recorded at Chicago's Chess Studios, is nicely sped up and has the historical distinction of featuring the first ever recorded solo from guitar great Roy Buchanan, but is otherwise unremarkable. 'Take My Heart' emulates Elvis' style circa 'Don't Be Cruel', a little rawer and harsher, but not enough to claim its own style; 'Wild, Wild World' from the same session is one-half Carl Perkins, one-half Gene Vincent, and who really needs that? Finally, by 1959 (already after the LP had come out) Hawkins has begun transforming himself into Buddy Holly — 'Yea-Yea (Class Cutter)' borrows some vocal hooks from 'I'm Gonna Love You Too' and generally follows Buddy's boppy pop formula; still later, he would record even sweeter pop stuff like 'Someday, One Day' which could sincerely be confused with lost Buddy Holly outtakes, if not for the voice.

It all sounds nice enough, in the sense of advertising Dale Hawkins as a nice fellow who might be fun to hang around with and whose music, no matter which particular style he was playing in, could never be a turn-off. But it is almost hard to believe that with songs like 'Susie-Q' and 'Tornado', practically on the verge of carving out his own style of early blues-rock, he would let himself down time and time again, marketing himself off as a poor man's Bill Haley, a poor man's Carl Perkins, a poor man's Elvis, or a poor man's Buddy Holly, and eventually becoming yet another footnote in rock'n'roll history, missing out on the chance to explore a gold mine right below his feet. Oh well; at least if you are hungry for more Fifties' rock, you won't be let down by picking up **Oh! Suzy-Q** or any of several compilations that hold most of its tracks — and given that most of them were recorded *after* the early strain of rock'n'roll had gone into slow decline, we can at least be grateful to Dale for helping keep the flames alive at a difficult time for kick-ass music.

