

DEL SHANNON



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1961–1990</i>	<i>Pop rock</i>	<i>Misery (1961)</i>

Only Solitaire

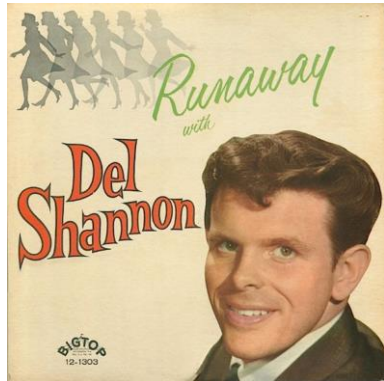
Artist: *Del Shannon*

Years: *1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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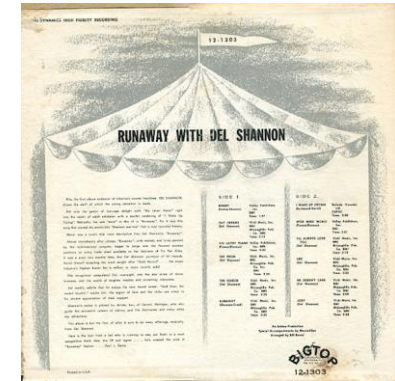
RUNAWAY WITH DEL SHANNON

Album released:

June 1961

V A L U E
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More info:



Tracks: 1) Misery; 2) Day Dreams; 3) His Latest Flame; 4) [The Prom](#); 5) The Search; 6) [Runaway](#); 7) I Wake Up Crying; 8) Wide Wide World; 9) I'll Always Love You; 10) Lies; 11) He Doesn't Care; 12) Jody.

REVIEW

Roy Orbison may have been the first to popularize sadness and misery as a default state of mind in contemporary pop music (at least for the upcoming Sixties' generation), but when it comes to actually counting tears by the gallon, he's got virtually nothing on Charles Weedon Westover, better known to the world at large as Del Shannon. Listening to the twelve songs on his debut album, each of which (even the superficially «happy» ones) is permeated with a goodbye-cruel-world sense of tragedy, it actually makes you wonder how come it took that guy almost thirty years to become a



role model for Kurt Cobain. It also makes you wonder how, even for a brief moment, an artist suffering from such an acute form of clinical depression could rise to the ranks of a major pop star — an accident, for sure, which the public corrected just as quickly as it had instigated it, but still a pretty bizarre accident for the original era of the original «teen idol». Once the fans realized that Del Shannon's misery was all too real, rather than an artistic put-on, everybody quickly jumped ship, except for maybe just a small group who believed that 1962 was just as good a year as any to kill yourself.

Admittedly, Del Shannon does at least formally qualify as a «one-hit wonder», because, for all of his complicated and interesting personality, he never again did write a song as magnificent as ‘Runaway’. Not only does it flaunt structural conventions (replacing the common verse/chorus/bridge sequence with the less common verse/bridge/chorus), but it throws in your face a bizarre salad of moods and melodies, all seemingly in the wrong order: depression and misery in the verse (“*as I walk along, I wonder...*”), anger and pain in the bridge (“*I’m a-walkin’ in the rain...*”), and a little bitter pop irony in the chorus (“*I wonder where she will stay, my little runaway*”). Additionally, the verse sounds like European pop, the bridge has a Motown flair, and the chorus is a piece of ass-wigglin’ twist — and somehow all of that comes together smoothly and meaningfully.

The one ingredient that probably caught the people’s ear faster than anything else was the famous keyboard solo, played by Del’s keyboardist Max Crook (yes, that’s his *real* name, as much as it would rather fit some James Bond movie villain) on his own modification of the clavoline which he called the «Musitron» (but, apparently, was never able to patent because everybody still saw it as just a variation on the already existing models). Yet it is not the actual electronic tone that he gets out of his instrument that still feels so addictive — honestly, what that tone mimicks is the sound of a high-pitched woodwind instrument, like a clarinet or a recorder, and it’s possible that the song might have felt even richer with one of those. The true addiction comes from the melody, which takes its cues from Del’s vocal in the verses and winds a series of rich, playful baroque flourishes around it. I won’t go as far as to say that Max Crook singlehandedly invents «art pop» with his solo, presaging everything from the Zombies to the Mamas & Papas to the Moody Blues and beyond, but I *will* say that back in 1961, this was probably the single most advanced example of keyboard soloing on an «indie» record (the single, as well as the album, were both released on the small label of BigTop Records).

For all of its wallowing in self-pity, for all of its structural and sonic innovation, ‘Runaway’ would never have become such a smash hit if it weren’t (a) insanely catchy and (b) [perfectly danceable](#). Fast-paced ditties dealing with melancholy and tragedy were not Del Shannon’s invention, after all — everybody from Elvis to Buddy Holly had some of those — and it is not likely that too many people, enthralled with the song’s power, were able to perceive the genuine darkness lurking within (had they been able to, no way it would have been *that* popular). A tiny extra hint might have been offered by the B-side of the single: ‘Jody’ was a slow, moody ballad that, instead of alleviating the sadness of ‘Runaway’, deepened it: “*Jody, I miss you so, more than you’ll ever know...*”. Of course, what do we know, it’s just about the temporary separation of two young students who still hope to be able to get back together when summer comes, but it does feel a little odd that the B-side is just as miserable as the A-side, doesn’t it? Unfortunately, it’s more atmospheric than catchy: there’s a tasteful little trick

here when each of the arpeggiated guitar lines is caught up and reflected by a corresponding piano response, creating the atmosphere of waves chasing each other in a slow race to the beach — with a moody jazz sax part occasionally hovering over them like some lazy albatross. However, there is hardly any dynamics to the vocal performance, reflecting a melancholic stupor on a somber autumnal day and making ‘Jody’ a proverbial «mood piece» that works if, well, you’re in the mood, and feels terminally boring if you are not.

The faint hint of ‘Jody’ was, however, nothing compared to the depressing mega-punch of Del’s first LP, released shortly after Shannon had become a national sensation (by around April 1961). Predictably called **Runaway With Del Shannon**, a more appropriate title for the record might have been **Kill Yourself With Del Shannon**, because *all* of the songs bear signs of tragedy — even regardless of whether Shannon and Crook wrote them on their own or relied on outside songwriters (three tracks are contributed by the team of Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman, and ‘I Wake Up Crying’ is a cover of a recent single recorded by Chuck Jackson and written by Bacharach and David). Most certainly nobody in the pop business up to then had dared — or even thought of, I believe — to issue an album where doom and gloom would be the sole overriding leitmotif; because of that, we could safely count **Runaway With Del Shannon** as the authentic progenitor of «mope-rock», «goth», «emo», or whatever other terms have been invented for all that music that’s best listened to with a razor blade in your trembling hands.

However, for all that immediately obvious historical importance, the bad news manifest themselves just as quickly: there is not a single song here that would even remotely scale the foothills of ‘Runaway’. Much of the album is decent or pleasant, but if you are looking for something comparable in terms of both catchiness and melodic innovation, you’re in for a major disappointment: it feels as if it were much more important for Shannon to show us all just how incurably broken-hearted he was than to prove he could consistently create boundary-pushing pop songs. The very first original on the LP is ‘Day Dreams’, a slow doo-wop ballad riding atop a generic chord progression — its only attraction being Shannon’s quavering vocal delivery, slowly rising up the scale until it explodes in that lilting falsetto. Unfortunately, in this business he had some major competition going on — Roy Orbison — and while his relatively crude and more down-to-earth voice might be easier to empathize with if you’re a sensitive teenager, it is not enough to provide a feel of «epicness» to any of the songs on its lonesome own. You really need a solid melody along with the broken-hearted drama.

Additionally, the broken-hearted drama can get totally out of hand, as it does on the almost laughably embarrassing ‘The Prom’. Leave it to the other boys to sing about dancing cheek-to-cheek on songs with titles like that; to Del Shannon, the

perfect idea of a «prom» is something that goes like this — "*On my way to the senior prom / Saw a crowd all gathered 'round / Stopped the car, got out to see / Just what it could be / There lying near the crowd / Was a girl dressed in a gown / Walked up so I could see / Just who it could be / Knelt down by her side / Tears came into my eyes / There lies the one I love / One I'd always love...*" — sorry for the large excerpt, but we need to get some perspective here. Actually, we never find out what happened — was his love run over by a car on her way to the prom? was she shot down by a jealous lover? had she accidentally overdosed before the ceremony? suffered a heart attack? This is a quintessential example of very, very *bad* overinflated teen drama: in a little while, The Shangri-Las would learn to do these things more convincingly by bringing the music up to par with the soapy emotions, but the chords of 'The Prom' don't do much except lay down a not-too-expressively gentle foundation for Del's operatic stunt.

Things don't work out too well, either, when pure tragedy briefly gives way to medieval romanticism: 'The Search' is one of but a couple of songs here that make an effort to mend the broken heart, kind of a thematic sequel to 'Runaway' in which the protagonist declares his intention to not merely sit and wo-wo-wo-wonder where she will stay, but also to keep on looking for her "*on the highways, in the skyways, on the byways*". The main piano melody of the song, however, does little but steal away the principal melodic phrase of 'Runaway' and recycle it at a slightly slower tempo, while feeble strings color the background and Del delivers his trite invocations in the baritonal register, giving the song a slightly Mexican feel in the process. The result, once again, is pretty corny.

Arguably the best of the remaining original compositions is 'Lies', an uptempo pop-rocker with proto-Beatlesque overtones (especially clearly noticeable in some of Del's drawn-out harmonies) — but it is only «best» because, like 'Runaway', it reins in its ambitions and does not spoil the impression with excessively overblown dramatics. Here, Shannon is being perfectly adequate, and the vocal hooks resolving both the verse and the bridge are memorable, but you don't have to be the Del-Shannon-of-'Runaway'-fame to write a song like that: hundreds of halfway decent pop artists made those kinds of records in the early Sixties.

Of the three Pomus-Shuman originals, 'Misery' — appropriately opening the album with the most predictable title — is probably the best, but it feels way too much like a conscious attempt to repeat the punch of 'Runaway', with a similar tempo, a similar rise-to-falsetto vocal hook, a similar piano riff, and a similar Musitron solo in the middle. Alas, in the end it simply does not sound sufficiently miserable. With 'Runaway', the opening guitar chords alone create a highly believable atmosphere of serious emotional trauma; the opening playful saxophone of 'Misery', however, feels as if borrowed from

some uplifting Elvis Presley performance, and no amount of whiny pleading on Del's part can rectify that impression. It almost makes me wonder if the Beatles' own song by that name, generally bearing no relation to the Pomus-Shuman title, did not intentionally take home that lesson — if you cannot make a song called 'Misery' sound truly miserable, the best thing to do is to make it at least sound hilariously sarcastic.

Another Pomus-Shuman title with which most of us are probably familiar is 'His Latest Flame' — which actually preceded the Elvis version by a few months. The lyrical theme of the song was arguably much better suited to Del's style than to Elvis', but, unfortunately, the song is butchered by the crazy decision to set it to a syncopated Bo Diddley beat, so that it becomes difficult to understand if we're supposed to shake our butts to it or to empathize with the plight of a jilted lover whose girl gone and left him for his best friend. 'Runaway' could be danceable and emotional at the same time because the «running» rhythm of the song matched the emotions; 'His Latest Flame' is a stylistic self-contradiction, and a big thank you for Scotty Moore and Neal Matthews Jr. who, with their frantic acoustic strumming, understood how to create perfect atmospheric harmony between the instruments and the singer.

The honor of being the best cover, then, probably falls to 'I Wake Up Crying', a more colorful and polished, if hardly more expressive, version of the Bacharach-David tune that was originally (I think) recorded by Chuck Jackson (the first R&B artist to come out with commercially successful recordings of Bacharach songs). Here, the standard guitar plus sax plus Musitron formula is finally tested on something that does not technically or emotionally feel like a 'Runaway' clone, and Del's vocal work on the complicated melody is impeccable. On the other hand, it's not entirely clear whether Del himself is perfectly comfortable with this decidedly «non-teenage» vibe: it feels as if he'd be more at home singing stuff like 'The Prom', requiring a bit less deep soul and a bit more youthful hyperactivity. If only those lyrics weren't so utterly horrible...

In conclusion, **Runaway With Del Shannon** is one of those albums that finds perfection once and then spends the rest of the day generating fifty shades of imperfections. The simple truth is that he was but a mildly talented person, cursed with the dubious luck of accidentally creating that one absolute masterpiece which God usually grants to all mediocrities upon his first toss of the dice. All of the rest of his career would have to be spent under the shadow of that curse, and one can only imagine how painful something like that can be for somebody who is also suffering from clinical depression.

