

DONOVAN



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1965-2021</i>	<i>Folk Pop</i>	<i>Mellow Yellow (1966)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Donovan*

Years: *1965*

George Starostin's Reviews

Page contents:

- [What's Bin Did And What's Bin Hid](#) (1965)



WHAT'S BIN DID AND WHAT'S BIN HID

Album released:

May 14, 1965

V A L U E
3 2 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Josie; 2) Catch The Wind; 3) The Alamo; 4) Cuttin' Out; 5) Car Car; 6) Keep On Truckin'; 7) Goldwatch Blues; 8) To Sing For You; 9) You're Gonna Need Somebody On Your Bond; 10) Tangerine Puppet; 11) Donna Donna; 12) Ramblin' Boy.

REVIEW

As we all know (or, at least, can guess), physiognomy is a dangerous business — sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, depending on both luck and experience, and making behavioral decisions based on one's initial assessment of a person's looks can be harmful to both parties concerned. When the same technique is applied to art, it results in biases that may strongly impact one's perception of every move the artists make right after their entry into public space. After all, most people shift, evolve, mature, and grow, and often do so in unpredictable ways. Who could guess Tom Waits' **Swordfishtrombones** based on **Closing Time**? Who could calculate that 'I Can't Explain' would lead to **Quadrophenia**, while 'Any Way You Want Me' would lead to nowhere? Who could deduce 'Sussudio' from the drumming of 'Dancing With The Moonlit Knight'?



On the other hand, there's probably no harm done in occasionally looking back at the initial efforts of young, idealistic performers and making pseudo-prophetic judgements on them that would agree with what we already know about their general career arches. Call it a form of *retrospective debutognomy*, if you wish (I can't remember anybody committing the aesthetic crime of joining a French and a Greek root within a single word as of yet, so sign me up for the firing squad). For

instance: **From Genesis To Revelation** by Genesis is way too overtly ambitious for an album of fairly unsophisticated mellow orchestral pop ditties, but it still shows a lot of promise because it is not trying to openly emulate anybody else, but rather attempts — poorly, but charmingly — to push forward a young band's original vision. Who knows, maybe some day these guys will finally succeed and match their craft and professionalism with their pessimistic view of the world?

The reason I'm engaging in this lengthy preamble is that, every time I put on Donovan's first album, I am smitten by one and the same thought: «This guy is *good*, but there is not a single chance in Heaven or Hell that he shall ever be *great*». And this is not because great artists are always supposed to be great right from the start — far from it. For instance, the Kinks' self-titled debut, on a purely competitive level, is probably more of an embarrassment than Donovan's debut. But even if that debut did not contain 'You Really Got Me', even if it were all filled with second-rate covers of American rhythm and blues, I would still refrain from making a strict statement about how these guys will never ever make it into the big leagues. Why? Simply because the Kinks do what they do in their own way. They don't want to *be* Chuck Berry, Slim Harpo, or, God forbid, Odetta; they want to take the melodies and styles of those guys and play them the way they want to play them, or, at the moment, the way they are capable of playing them. It might suck — for the moment — but it's the only guarantee that they might eventually arrive at their own, and nobody else's, thing.

Problematically, when Donovan Phillips Leitch emerged on the music scene in late 1964, he did not really want to be «Donovan». Sharp-tongued critics complained that he wanted to be Bob Dylan. This was only a half-truth, because he did not merely want to be Bob Dylan. He also wanted to be Woody Guthrie. He wanted to be Joan Baez. He wanted to be Lead-belly, and he wanted to be Charley Patton. In short, he wanted to be the embodiment of Americana within the cozy confines of English folk clubs. He was young, fair-faced, ambitious, diligent, hard-working, and sincerely in love with both the old folk and blues traditions and their recent reinvention in the «green pastures» of Greenwich Village. The only person he was clearly *not* in love with was... Donovan Leitch. And I don't mean that in a good way (lack of a narcissistic attitude); I mean it in the «I-have-no-idea-what-this-guy-is-actually-bringing-to-the-table» way.

This is by no means equivalent to saying «Donovan's early records suck»; on the contrary, they are fairly enjoyable and certainly hold up better than, say, Chad & Jeremy, or Peter & Gordon, or any of those other nice, melancholic British boys whose moodiness ends up being the only thing you remember about their songs. Let us start with the very first single that Pye Records released on February 28, 1965: the shorter, «orchestrated» version of 'Catch The Wind' (as opposed to the slightly extended and less pompous version on the LP). The first thing everybody must have noticed about it (even Brian

Jones, Donovan's official «pal», publicly complained about this detail) is that it opens as a straightforward tribute to Dylan's 'Chimes Of Freedom' — there is too much in common between the guitar patterns and the openings ("*in the chilly hours and minutes...*" = "*far between sundown's finish...*") to believe that this was not an intentional borrowing. Likewise, the use of the word "wind" to finish off each verse is, of course, reminiscent of 'Blowin' In The Wind' — also quite intentionally. What does separate Donovan from Dylan, however, is that, from the outset, Donovan is a starry-eyed romantic, without an ounce of Dylan's cynicism or irony: "*I want to be in the warm hold of your loving mind / To feel you all around me / And to take your hand, along the sand*" are lines that would probably make old Zimmerman puke into Bobby Neuwirth's jacket pockets. This sentimentality is more, I dunno, Judy Collins than Bob Dylan, and this crossing of the formal aspects of Dylan's songwriting with a decidedly non-Dylanesque spirit is the only thing that could be called «original» for this song. Unfortunately, it's still... not «Donovan-original».

There is exactly one area in which 'Catch The Wind' is more sophisticated than 'Chimes Of Freedom', and that is in its guitar pattern — introducing Donovan's crosspicking techniques that he originally picked up from more seasoned British folk guitar players (Keith MacLeod and Mick Softley, in particular, but there is probably some influence from big names like Davey Graham and Bert Jansch as well). 'Catch The Wind' already sounds as if there are two guitars playing at once, giving the song a fuller, more lilting and impressive sonic pattern; where Dylan usually had an instinct for finding a strong musical hook and pummeling it with all his might, Donovan prefers to evenly stretch his meticulousness and precision across the entire song, so much so that when he himself states that his chief influence were his guitar teachers rather than Dylan, there is certainly much truth to it, even if it's probably never the first thing to come to your attention.

But even if he did learn to play his guitar from British folksters rather than Dave Van Ronk or Odetta, the songwriting still kept using Dylan as a reference point, over and over. The B-side to 'Catch The Wind' was 'Why Do You Treat Me Like You Do', a song melodically and atmospherically reminiscent of 'Don't Think Twice, It's Alright' — and once again, Donovan crawls under Dylan's throne because, unlike his idol, he simply cannot allow himself to be anywhere near as *nasty*. The protagonist of 'Don't Think Twice' needs no fickle excuse to dump the girl and move on — she just kinda wasted his precious time, you know. The hero of 'Why Do You Treat Me Like You Do', on the other hand, refers to the time-honored leitmotif of his girl cheating on him ("*you say you're so young, gal, I guess that's your big excuse*"), and — horrors! — even permits the thought that maybe *he* might have been responsible for some of that attitude ("*now, maybe I been thinkin' wrong about you, gal / And you ain't really the one to blame*"). Three guesses as to whether it is Dylan's or Donovan's attitude that would be more applauded in the 21st century; and yet, in the context of 1963–65, it was Dylan who looked like the great

modernizer here, whilst Donovan's gallantry comes across as a tad old-fashioned. Well, what can I say? I still remain more partial towards a sharp-mouthed cynic with an acoustic guitar than a sweet-tongued romantic with the same.

There can hardly be any doubt that the big success of 'Catch The Wind' both in the UK and in the US was due to the song's Dylanism, but this may have actually annoyed Donovan a little, so that he made the follow-up, 'Colours', even more in the style of a traditional mellow folk ballad, something that Dylan had gotten over with already by 1962 and now lay more in the domain of beautiful ladies like Joan or Judy. It's... kinda okay; something to divert yourself, with, perhaps, on a nice warm afternoon for a nice little picnic with your girlfriend. "*Green's the color of the sparklin' corn in the mornin' when we rise*", that sort of thing. The B-side was 'To Sing For You', slowed down to, this time, match almost perfectly the typical Dylan strumming pattern, as Donovan lays out his big innovative strategy to settle all of his girlfriend's troubles and worries: "*I'll sing a song for you / That's what I'm here to do*". At least he's goddamn honest about it — though it does remind me, for some strange reason, of how the Bard usually remains the most despised of all possible D&D classes.

In a rather cruel turn of events, it is precisely this «niceness» of attitude (some might even say «submissiveness») that probably earned Donovan the image of «Dylan's little British lapdog» on Bob's 1965 tour of the UK, with the master-and-servant pairing of the two later described in various memoirs and even partially documented by Pennebaker in the *Don't Look Back* film. This was, after all, the peak of Dylan's «mean asshole» period, and woe to anybody he could regard as even very minor competition in 1965; nevertheless, Donovan survived, and it is possible that the metaphorical beatings and humiliations he took from Bob and his clique taught him a serious life lesson. In any case, his first full-blown album which he had completed a couple months before the meeting did its best to show that his influences were far wider than just Dylan, though most of them still roamed somewhere in the vicinity of Greenwich Village, one way or another.

The actual covers are mostly pointless, though — typical filler, whose only purpose is to pay homage to Donovan's heroes without any new ideas thrown into the mix. Namely, he tips his hat to The Kingston Trio with 'Remember The Alamo' (one might wonder just how much the message of the song could mean to UK audiences); to Woody Guthrie with 'Car Car' ("this is for Woody", he hastily admits in the song's opening, as if Woody could really care at this point); and to Joan Baez with his faithful interpretation of *her* faithful interpretation of 'Donna Donna'. Unless you're an admirer of the fair-haired boy's charisma in general, there is hardly any need to bother with them.

He then tries to dig a little deeper into the American heritage, covering the old rag melody of 'Keep On Truckin' and the equally rusty old blues 'You're Gonna Need Somebody On Your Bond' (which he probably learned from Buffy Sainte-Marie

rather than Blind Willie Johnson) — the latter is a bit of a stand out in that it is the only song on the album with a proper rhythm section and even an electric guitar lead melody, although at this point this was as far as he was willing to concede to the «going electric» trend (Dylan had not even released **Bringing It All Back Home** at the time Donovan was holding his own sessions). Strangely, the electric arrangement helps: the slightly mysterious, foreboding «hum» of the guitar tone, coupled with Donovan's own «nasty» nasal delivery of the vocals, gives it a very mildly proto-psychedelic sheen that would later characterize many of his best songs. At the very least, of all the «extra-territorial» material he records for this album, this song is the most unique-sounding.

The same cannot be said, alas, about quite a few other songs credited to Donovan himself. 'Cuttin' Out' is a rather blatant rip-off of 'St. James Infirmary' (it even dares to begin with the same "*I went down to...*") with lyrics that seem to have been written in about two minutes' time (perhaps Donovan originally just thought of covering 'St. James Infirmary' but changed his mind at the last moment, for some reason). 'Ramblin' Boy' again rips off something by Dylan (the closest melody I can think of right now is 'It Ain't Me Babe', but I'm sure there must be something else as well). 'Josie' is basically a sequel to 'Colours' (again with the frickin' *corn* references!), melodically different but with the exact same lazy, nonchalant, static vibe. And 'Goldwatch Blues', credited to Donovan's friend and mentor Mick Softley (who would himself only record the song as late as 1971 for his **Street Singer** album), introduces a little bit of social consciousness but sounds no different from gazillions of contemporary protest songs built on the musical foundations of traditional folk.

Finally, Donovan's acoustic-playing skills are best assessed on the short instrumental 'Tangerine Puppet', which is indeed quite pretty and shows the kind of technique that Dylan never even began to strive for; however, it still fails to distinguish Donovan from all those expert British guitar players that came before him, and there is a good reason why people still come back to Bert Jansch's 'Angie' instead — that tune tells you a dynamic story, whereas 'Tangerine Puppet' is more like a "hey, there's this cool picking pattern I just learned and I wanna show it to you" kind of thing.

Returning to the *debutogonomy* exercise mentioned earlier, what we can see is that Donovan sincerely loves different types of music, but has few ideas of how to enhance their potential or even bend them to his own purposes, because, essentially, he does not *have* any purposes other than to show how sincerely he loves different types of music. We can see that he is a nice, charming, romantic, idealistic type of person, but — as is, indeed, quite often (though not always) the case with nice, charming, romantic, idealistic types of people — that he also does not have a whole lot of depth of artistic character. We can see that his typical vibe is that of the, let's say, young country swineherd, whose chief passion in life is weaving dandelion

wreaths for his sweetheart (and corn, corn, lots of corn, green corn, yellow corn, you name it). We can see that he is a good learner, but is more interested in mastering the craft that already exists than even slightly pushing its borders in some unpredictable direction. We can consequently predict, with a certain degree of certainty, that even if he goes electric, psychedelic, progressive, or acid house (I think he would try all of these except for the latter), all of those developments will be in accordance with the current times rather than bringing on the future.

And yet, there is also no denying that if you and your sweetheart are enjoying a nice, warm, sunny day in the countryside, with plenty of dandelions for wreaths in the surrounding meadows (and a little green corn to nibble on), the ghosts of 'Catch The Wind' and 'Colours' and 'Josie' will all be hovering somewhere nearby. Even if all of those put together are hardly worth one single 'Mother Nature's Son' (in which McCartney captured the same vibe better than Donovan ever did with anything), you might, after all, need a slightly longer soundtrack than 2:48 for such a particular vibe. This is where Mr. Leitch comes to the rescue, and where even his first, formative album might still be of some use.

