

# THE DRIFTERS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1953-1976</i>	<i>Classic R&amp;B</i>	<i><a href="#">Fools Fall In Love (1957)</a></i>

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*Only Solitaire*

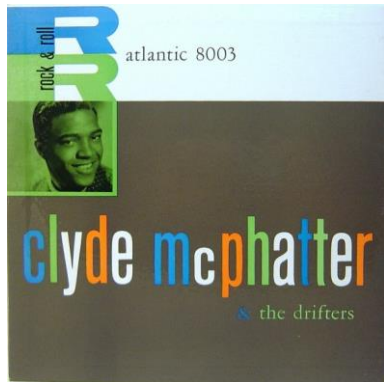
Artist: *The Drifters*

Years: *1953-1958*

George Starostin's Reviews

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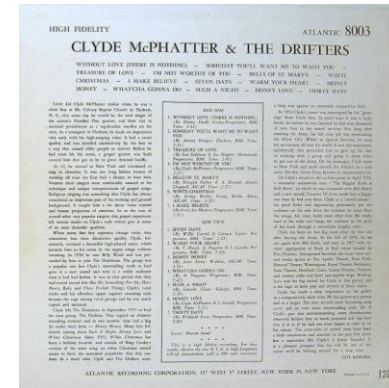
- [Clyde McPhatter & The Drifters](#) (1956)
- [Rockin' & Driftin'](#) (1958)



# CLYDE McPHATTER & THE DRIFTERS

Compilation released: **V A L U E** More info:  

**1956** **3 5 4 3 4**



**Tracks:** 1) Without Love (There Is Nothing); 2) Someday (You'll Want Me To Want You); 3) Treasure Of Love; 4) I'm Not Worthy Of You; 5) Bells Of St. Mary's; 6) White Christmas; 7) I Make Believe; 8) Seven Days; 9) Warm Your Heart; 10) **Money Honey**; 11) What'cha Gonna Do; 12) Such A Night; 13) Honey Love; 14) *Thirty Days*.

## REVIEW

As was usual for the times, this LP is not a proper «album» as such but rather just a collection of singles which were originally released from 1953 to 1956 and credited both to the Drifters *and* to Clyde McPhatter — honestly, at this point there is not much difference, since Clyde McPhatter takes lead vocals on most of the Drifters' material and the Drifters sing backup on Clyde McPhatter's material (at least, I *presume* that they do — there is not enough information on that in the liner notes). And although some of the B-sides end up omitted, while the other songs are presented in shuffled rather than chronological order, this is still a first rate overview of what was arguably the best period in the history of American R&B's first truly great vocal band.



Because, you see, before there was Smokey Robinson, there was Clyde McPhatter — a singer of the same quality and caliber, if nowhere near Smokey's level as a songwriter and stage presence. His was generally the crooner type, tender and

sentimental in the well-established doo-wop tradition; but the songs that the Drifters sang were only occasionally doo-wop, otherwise ranging from old-fashioned standards and vaudeville to newer and edgier forms of soul and R&B: after all, the boys were recording for Atlantic Records, who in the early 1950s unquestionably stood on the cutting edge of popular African-American music. And Clyde obliged accordingly, not getting pigeonholed into a single slot but being able to convey an impressive spectrum of emotions and theatrical gestures — making him R&B's first truly memorable solo superstar, even if the prefix of «super-» might seem way hyperbolic for that infancy period of post-war commercial pop.

The Drifters first broke through to the public conscience with 'Money Honey', a song whose playful and sarcastic nature is probably begging to associate it with the likes of the quirky Coasters than the romantic Drifters — yet it gives us ample opportunities to appreciate McPhatter at his most revved-up and theatrical (and that scream he lets off in the middle of the sax break must have been the loudest scream in 1953's popular music!). More importantly, the song was just so catchy that its memory was still strong in some people's heads when Elvis covered it three years later — and although my subjective sympathies lie with the King because (a) naturally, I heard the Elvis version earlier and (b) I like guitar breaks more than I like sax breaks, the production here, with the Drifters' backing vocals perfectly merging with the sax parts and all, marks a rare occasion when a three years' difference in the 1950s did not make the older version obsolete at all.

More typical on the whole of the Drifters' sound is the second hit single 'Such A Night' (*also* eventually covered by Elvis), a perfect example of synergy between lead and backup singers — the song as a whole is driven by the repetitive spiral hook of the Drifters' "da-doo-bee-doo-bee-doo", but it is also the first showcase for the greatness of Clyde's tenor-cum-falsetto voice as he pushes the boundaries of what we might call «sweet sexuality» (as opposed to the rough one of, say, Chicago bluesmen) to fairly risqué territory for 1953. Just be sure to stay around for the end, as the happy lover rises higher and higher and higher and finally spills it all in one almost literally orgasmic final "SUCH A NI-I-I-I-IGHT!" On this occasion, by the way, he does it overtly sexier than Elvis, whose own "SUCH A NI-I-I-I-GHT!" sounded a bit too... I dunno, *patriotic* in comparison?

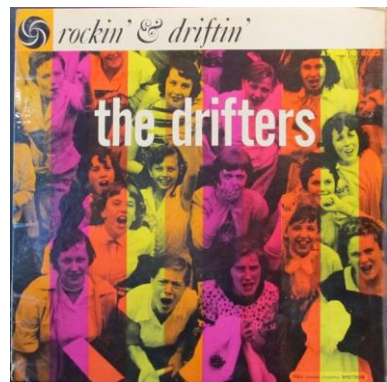
After that, the hits just keep coming — the calypso-influenced 'Honey Love', copies of which were allegedly seized by Memphis police for being too suggestive; the gospel-influenced waltz 'Someday You'll Want Me To Want You', which gives McPhatter a great opportunity to stretch out his cords in slow mode; the playful and danceable version of 'White Christmas' with unforgettable interplay between Clyde's tenor and Bill Pinkney's bass voice; finally, Clyde's solo hits after his official departure from the band — of which 'Treasure Of Love' and 'Without Love (There Is Nothing)' are the best known; while the

former is a bit too syrupy for my tastes, 'Without Love' is a clear attempt at a pompous, chivalrous anthem, straining Clyde's potential to the extreme — the man has a lot of expression, but he isn't exactly the epitome of power when it comes to belting out anthems, yet on 'Without Love', I think, he gives a stellar performance, in which the relative frailty of the voice only strengthens the spiritual effect.

Funny enough, though, my personal favorite song on here is precisely the one that failed to become a hit. Coming at the tail end of the album, 'Thirty Days' is a rather brave stab at a completely different genre — the Western — with a simple, but prominent electric guitar riff, a thin layer of echo, and an aching, vulnerable delivery which, for the first time on the album, conveys a feeling of loneliness and pain, instead of overarching joy which was the main emotion of most of those hits. Clyde is clearly playing out of his usual character here, and it is easy to understand why a song like that could alienate his usual audience and fail to bring in a new one, but I think he handles the task admirably, producing a simple and effective forgotten gem with a vocal delivery every bit as convincing as any from our usual white guy country-western heroes.

Many, if not most, of these hits are available on comprehensive compilations such as Atlantic Rhythm'n'Blues **1947–1974**, so special ownership of **Clyde McPhatter & The Drifters** is not required to learn of the band's place in history or appreciate their lovable greatness (you *do* miss out on 'Thirty Days', though). But the album, like quite a few other releases for Atlantic artists, stands out as good testimony for the label — they placed their trust into the medium of the single, without typically forcing their contract workers to release dozens of copycat versions of their big hits, or saturating the market with inferior LPs containing two hit singles and a pool of fodder filler. The policy of having one LP in three years and filling it to the brim with first-rate material works fine for me, I'd say — even if, perhaps, it is not the most commercially viable strategy in the world.





## ROCKIN' & DRIFTIN'

Compilation released:

October 1958

V A L U E  
3 3 3 2 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Moonlight Bay; 2) Ruby Baby; 3) Drip Drop; 4) I Gotta Get Myself A Woman; 5) **Fools Fall In Love**; 6) Hypnotized; 7) Yodee Yakee; 8) I Know; 9) Soldier Of Fortune; 10) Drifting Away From You; 11) Your Promise To Be Mine; 12) It Was A Tear; 13) Adorable; 14) Steamboat.

### REVIEW

By late 1958, when Atlantic finally deemed it suitable to scrape together another chunk of the Drifters' singles output and put it on another LP, the band had gone through an entire series of lineup changes, fully justifying their ill-given name as well as making this LP, with its chronologically shuffled sequencing, a confusing mess. Clyde McPhatter, officially drafted into the Army in early 1954, completely parted ways with them by the end of that year, 'What'cha Gonna Do' being his last recording with the band; his first replacement in the lead vocal position was former supporting tenor David Baughan, but he proved to be hard to work with, and did not get the chance to record anything during his brief tenure.



Enter Johnny Moore, a completely new recruit taken over from the Hornets, a minor vocal band from Cleveland of more or less no importance. This is where things once again started cooking: to reinforce the Drifters as a leading force in vocal-heavy pop, Atlantic selected 'Adorable', a minor hit for the L.A. doo-wop group The Colts, and (probably) gave Johnny Moore instructions to blow that thing sky-high. Which he did: comparison with [the original](#) shows that the song works much better in tenor than in baritone form, and, most importantly, Moore showed that he could carry the classic Drifters'

soulful-romantic spirit with just as much confidence as McPhatter. Perhaps the ritualistic doo-wop chanting of "adorable-dorable-dorable-dorable baby" has not truly survived its epoch, but Moore's beautiful upscale flourish of "and soon — you'll be mine — alone — you adorable ONE!.." is so perfectly executed that it can probably survive a nuclear winter, if need be. The B-side to the single, Buddy Lucas' 'Steamboat', is less interesting: a bluesy R&B tune that sounds like a cross between 'Money Honey' and a generic Jimmy Reed blues, probably included to show that the new band could handle «grittier» material just as well as it could continue the sentimental tradition. It certainly could, but it's just one of those been-there, done-that moments which does not have the humor, catchiness, or originality of 'Money Honey'.

For their next move, Atlantic turned to the genius of Leiber and Stoller, who gave the band 'Ruby Baby', a fairly straight and simple number devoid of their usual humor (this, after all, was not the Coasters), but still injected with their usual bouncy energy and catchiness. Although Moore also does a great job here (note especially the exuberant whoa-oh-oh's, whose function is to reroute the hero from passive to active mode in the blink of an eye), the main focus is on group harmonies — the smooth integration between Moore's lead, tenor support, and baritone corner-turns. With the song's sprightly tempo, it is not the easiest job in the world to keep this complex system of vocal cogs in ideal motion, but this is what the Drifters did better than almost anybody at the time. Again, the B-side is a little inferior — the slow torch ballad 'Your Promise To Be Mine', with an impeccable Moore vocal but no particularly distinctive features otherwise.

Things went on rollin' steady in early '57, when Leiber and Stoller upped their antes and came out with 'Fools Fall In Love', an even more sentimental tune than 'Ruby Baby' but also an even faster one, and also featuring cleaner and sharper production — where the Drifters sounded somewhat muffled earlier, as if some invisible pillow separated them from us listeners, 'Fools Fall In Love' finally boasts ideal clarity of sound, giving Johnny's "...shake the hand of a brand new fool!" refrain all the ironic jubilation it deserves. (My favorite part of the song, though, is the sax flourish bringing it to its abrupt end — such a tasty, kick-ass finale, and you won't find it on the Elvis cover, for that matter).

All of these singles sold well ('Adorable' even went to #1 on the R&B charts), but fortunes turned sour sometime in mid-'57. 'Hypnotized' was actually a cool pop song (written by Norman Petty, Buddy Holly's resident songwriter, so you can bet your life it would at least be bouncy and catchy), but it did not make great use of the band's vocal powers, and maybe even sounded a bit too comical and vaudevillian for the fans. Worse, the follow-up was 'Yodee Yakee', an even faster and an even more comical tune — ironically, it came out several months *before* the Coasters' 'Yakety Yak', yet while the latter became a national smash, the former went completely unnoticed. Apparently, nobody wanted to see the Drifters as a comedy outfit,

which is perfectly understandable, given their previous reputation, and perfectly baffling from the point of view of whatever the hell those strange people at Atlantic were thinking. (And I *like* 'Yodee Yakee', but I sure as hell wouldn't guess to ever associate it with the Drifters).

The situation worsened even further when Johnny Moore had to follow in McPhatter's steps — Uncle Sam needed more fresh meat for active duty — and was replaced by Bobby Hendricks, who, ironically, just a year before was the lead singer in the Flyers, a band co-founded by him with ex-Drifter Bill Pinkney, who had quit the band due to the low salary issue. The label turned to Leiber and Stoller again in search of salvation, who gave them 'Drip Drop' — honestly, not one of their highlights, merely a piece of standard 12-bar blues given a bit of extra bounce and crowned with a questionable hook whose main point is to find as many closed syllables with the coda of *-ip* to rhyme with each other ("tip, tip, tip... hip, hip, hip... lip, lip, lip... slip, slip, slip..." etc.). In addition, the B-side to that single was 'Moonlight Bay'. You know you're in serious trouble when you have nothing better than 'Moonlight Bay' to give to your best vocal group for a B-side.

And this is precisely where we close the page on *this* era of the Drifters, with the simply, but aptly titled **Rockin' & Driftin'** putting together all that stuff, padding the record out with a couple extra outtakes, and giving it out to the public in order to remind us all that anybody can have their good days and their bad days. I am a little stumped about why the *opening* track should have been 'Moonlight Bay' (couldn't they have left it for last, like a 'Her Majesty'-type joke or something?), but other than that, well, it's just a fairly loyal compilation of the band's 1955–1958 material. (You might note, by the way, just how little stuff those Atlantic bands were recording — much to Ertegun's honor, he was not in favor of having his artists re-record precisely the same formula every 30 days or so, preferring to give them more time to come up with fresh solutions, though, as you can see here, it did not always work so well, either).

