

THE DRIFTERS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
1953-1976	Classic R&B	<i>Fools Fall In Love (1957)</i>

Only Solitaire

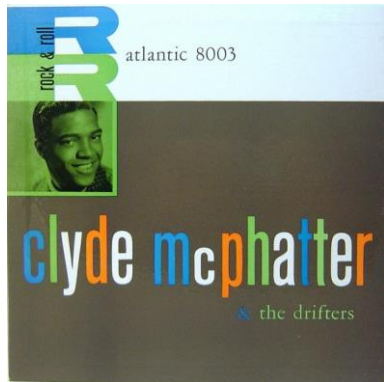
Artist: *The Drifters*

Years: *1953-1962*

George Starostin's Reviews

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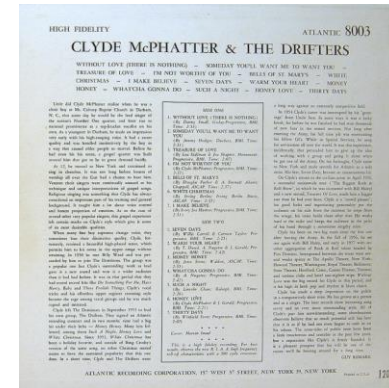
- [Clyde McPhatter & The Drifters](#) (1956)
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- [Save The Last Dance For Me](#) (1962)



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?

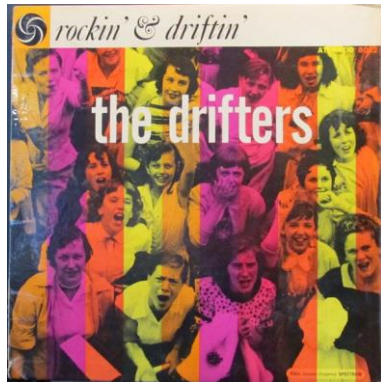
After that, the hits just keep coming — the calypso-influenced 'Honey Love', copies of which were allegedly seized by Memphis police for being too suggestive; the gospel-influenced waltz 'Someday You'll Want Me To Want You', which gives McPhatter a great opportunity to stretch out his cords in slow mode; 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: **V** **A** **L** **U** **E** **More info:**
October 1958 **3** **3** **3** **2** **3**  



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).

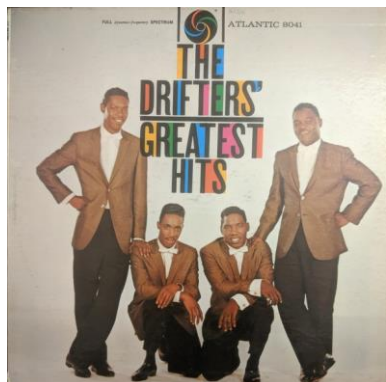
All of these singles sold well ('Adorable' even went to #1 on the R&B charts), but fortunes turned sour sometime in mid-'57. 'Hypnotized' was actually a cool pop song (written by Norman Petty, Buddy Holly's resident songwriter, so you can bet your life it would at least be bouncy and catchy), but it 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).





THE DRIFTERS' GREATEST HITS

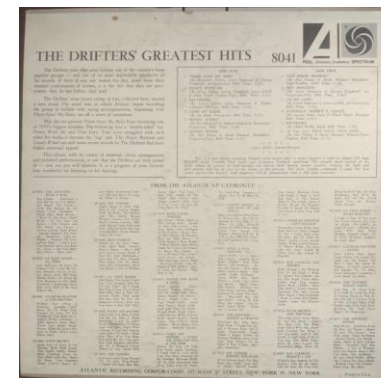
Compilation released:

June 1960

V A L U E

3 3 3 3 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) *There Goes My Baby*; 2) *Dance With Me*; 3) *Baltimore*; 4) *Sadie My Lady*; 5) *Honky Tonky*; 6) *Lonely Winds*; 7) *This Magic Moment*; 8) *Hey Senorita*; 9) *Oh My Love*; 10) *Suddenly There's A Valley*; 11) *Souvenirs*; 12) *(If You Cry) True Love, True Love*.

REVIEW

In all honesty, this album and everything that followed should not be discussed under the same heading as the output of the Drifters in the 1950s. As we know, in early June 1958 the band's manager, George Treadwell, who owned the legal right to the name of the band (more or less sold to him by Clyde McPhatter years ago), got fed up with the internal struggles and instability of the band that, after Clyde's departure, kept suffering from the lack of a solid internal anchor and discipline — and ended up simply firing everyone and donating the name «Drifters»



to a completely different group of singers which, at the moment, called themselves «The Five Crowns»: Ben E. King, Charlie Thomas, Dock Green, Elsbeary Hobbs, and James «Poppa» Clark (the fifth member, unfortunately, had a drinking problem so he had to stay out — Treadwell had had enough of that with the earlier band, so it seems).

This single fact, per se, was maybe not even all that crucial: The Drifters had already been operating on a major revolving door principle ever since McPhatter's departure, not to mention being completely dependent on outside songwriters,

arrangers, and producers, and while there is no denying the individual singing talents of every single singer that passed through those doors, it would not be an exaggeration to say that «The Drifters», particularly after Clyde's transition to a solo career, were more of a «vibe» than a specific physical presence. They symbolized the spirit of Atlantic Records' vocal groups — along with The Coasters, but those were on the ironic, tongue-in-cheek end of the spectrum, whereas The Drifters usually aimed directly for the heart.

But a much more important dividing line than simply a radical line-up reshuffle separates the «New Drifters» from the old ones. The times, after all, were a-changin'. The age of doo-wop and doo-wop-style R&B was coming to an end. Those cozy, round-the-fireplace sessions with little backing bands and a bunch of choirboy pals huddling around the mike? Who really needed that style with all the improvements in recording technology, now that you could have epic, bombastic sounds blaring out of your brand new stereo equipment? The Fifties, with their rough, crude, «homebrewn» sounds were on the way out; enter the early Sixties, a time of swooping, overwhelming sentiment, lilting romance, and overall cleanliness. The music business was killing two birds with one stone at the same time — it was luring in waves of new customers by offering them sonic brilliance on a level never heard before, *and* it was also taming and pacifying said customers' spirits by subtly «cleaning up» the wild energy and sexual aggression of last decade's R&B explosion. In this department, the African-American scene was no different than the white artists of the time: *everybody* got a haircut and a shave.

For about a year, the «New Drifters» kept away (or were kept away) from the studio as they focused on live performance, struggling to get audiences to come to terms with the fact that old Drifters' material was performed by completely new guys (actually, I have no idea if their setlists in 1958–1959 consisted primarily of songs by the original Drifters or something else; all I know is that there had been reports of the band frequently booed off the stage for being impostors). But when they did eventually earn the trust of their overlords and entered the studio on March 6, 1959 — this time, under the supervision of none other than the illustrious Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller — they emerged with «There Goes My Baby», and pop music would never be the same again, for better or worse.

«There Goes My Baby» was supposedly written by Ben E. King himself, although George Treadwell (the original manager of the old Drifters) and Lover Patterson (the original manager of the new Drifters) both took co-credit because might makes right. As musicological sources tell us, the arrangement shapes the song into an imitation of the Brazilian *baião* (courtesy of Leiber & Stoller, who were big fans of Latin music at the time), though my ears have to struggle to recognize that, because the rhythmic skeleton of the song is buried deep in the mix under the soaring strings and Ben's lead vocal — the loudest,

liveliest, and most operatic that any of the «Original Drifters»' music had ever been. Good-bye, crooning and doo-wop; hello, new R&B equivalent of a Luciano Pavarotti (okay, more like Tito Gobbi, since Pavarotti was still more or less a nobody back in 1959).

My own feelings about the song, and the style in particular, are conflicting. The importance and influence of 'There Goes My Baby' cannot be denied — as is the simple fact that it rose all the way to #2 on the *general* Billboard charts, making the Drifters almost overnight into a national, if not worldwide, phenomenon and giving the R&B market of Atlantic Records an audience far, far exceeding its usual audience of African-American listeners (thus also, perhaps, paving the way for future successes of Motown Records). But it is also quite clear that in order to achieve that success, some values had to be seriously compromised: in fact, other than certain singing overtones from Ben and the dynamics between him and the other Drifters on backing vocals, there is very little, if anything, that is distinctly «black» about the song. The lyrics are typical white schoolboy tripe ("*I broke her heart and made her cry / Now I'm alone, what can I do?*" — jeez, this looks *really* awful when I just put it down in writing like this), the overpowering strings owe their existence to schmaltz, and the Brazilian rhythmic pattern is... well, Brazilian. Rumor has it that Jerry Wexler, the number two guy at Atlantic after Ahmet Ertegun at the time, actually hated the song and even tried to keep it off the market — and I can easily understand why.

On the other hand, I can also understand reports of how people on the streets and inside the jukebox diners would all stop their activities and wonder where that amazing sound comes from when they first heard 'There Goes My Baby' blasting out of the speakers. That's one hell of a *big* sound Leiber & Stoller got out of their singers and musicians: the rhythm section, with all the reverb and mixing preferences, feels like a steady earthquake going on, while the orchestra saunters on top of it like a kick-ass thunderstorm and the singer strains his powerful voice to the max. Interestingly, the arrangement is actually quite minimalistic when you come to think about it — bass, percussion, strings, vocals, I am not even hearing any guitars, keyboards, or brass at all — but it produces an absolutely bombastic impression, and you can certainly see where Phil Spector (who would soon begin his production career as an apprentice to Leiber & Stoller) got his own style from, as did pretty much everyone else opting for that kind of wall-of-sound. Special honorable mention should go to the cello part entering at about 1:00 into the song — giving it an even gutsier feel (you can always tell a good string arrangement by looking at whether it gives cellos precedent over violins at any given point).

With 'There Goes My Baby' completely turning tables over the (New) Drifters' fortune, they quickly followed it up with 'Dance With Me', written this time by Leiber and Stoller themselves (under the pseudonym of «Lewis Lebish and Elmo

Glick»). It was also formula, but a little different, and the differences were not particularly beneficial. There was no drama this time — only pure sappy romanticism — and although there were also Latin rhythmic influences, strings, and plenty of whoah-whoahs from Ben, supported by his loyal backing henchmen, its mood was pure escapist Prince Charming-meets-Cinderella-at-the-ball vaudeville. (Violins, violins, and more violins, of course, no cellos to sour the mood). Listening to the tune somehow always ends up bringing the Beatles' 'I'm Happy Just To Dance With You' on my mind — that one almost seems like an homage to this one, with precisely the same emotional message, but there is a saving element of toughness in the Beatles' song (those crackling electric guitar rhythm chords alone are enough to do the trick), whereas the Drifters' song does not really begin to engage me until the coda, when Ben briefly lets himself go with all the whoah-whoahs. Amusingly, the song *did* fare a little worse with listeners, only making it as high as #15 on the general charts — by all accounts, still a major achievement for an R&B band, but clearly indicating that there was no «stun effect» this time as there had been with 'There Goes My Baby'.

Undaunted, Leiber & Stoller plowed on, taking a composition written by Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman, the honorary pair of songwriters at Elvis' court — they had already donated some of their stuff for the Drifters' B-sides, but 'This Magic Moment' was the first of their A-sides. The song again follows the «happy magic» emotional sway of 'Dance With Me' rather than the dramatic angle of 'There Goes My Baby', and *again* exploits Latin dance rhythms, but this time at least there is a bit more creativity. The opening strings create a stereotypical «whirlwind of passion», clearly simulating the proverbial butterflies-in-stomach feel, and there is a nice intimate segment in the "*sweeter than wine, softer than the summer night*" bridge, when the full-scale arrangement is replaced by just Ben and quiet bits of Spanish guitar, as if we are temporarily transferred to an under-the-balcony setting. Again, I am not a big fan of the song, but it is hard not to appreciate the skill and intelligence that went into the arrangement. However, its chart showing was just a wee bit lower than 'Dance With Me', indicating that perhaps the new formula was wearing a bit thin after all.

So they did try to change it a bit. Released in May or June 1960, 'Lonely Winds', although also written by Pomus and Shuman, returned to a more «traditional» R&B basis, temporarily ditching Latin influences and turning to a slightly (though only slightly) grittier mood, as King once again sang about separation and loneliness rather than mushy-mushy and the strings were largely replaced by brass and gospel organ, except for the instrumental break where they entered with an almost playful, catchy, frisky, country-western-influenced melody. Alas, it was too late: public admiration for that style had quite dissipated, and the song did not make enough commercial impact to even be included into the **Atlantic Rhythm & Blues** boxset years later. Too bad. I recognize that it owes a lot to 'My Bonnie' (particularly the *bring my, bring my little*

bitty girly on home to me chorus), and that it is formally «regressive» as opposed to the giant hits surrounding it, but I feel like it has more of that «honest soul» inside that chorus than any of the New Drifters' or, for that matter, Ben E. King's solo starry-eyed Spanish serenades. At any rate, if you're looking down history lane, do not forget about it.

Still, even if technically it all seemed to be slowly going downhill for the Drifters again, with each new single after the explosion of 'There Goes My Baby' faring poorer and poorer, the explosion was so massive and caused so many ripples that Atlantic felt it worthwhile to reward their biggest-selling group of the year with an LP release, unimaginatively and, of course, widely inaccurately called **The Drifters' Greatest Hits**. Because of this, I almost missed the album at first in my own retrospective, believing it to be just a best-of compilation through the years; in reality, it is a rather faithful assembly of most of the stuff they'd recorded with Ben — all four of the aforementioned A-sides together with their respective B-sides. Padding out the album was a fresh recording of the 1955 popular song 'Suddenly There's A Valley' (it would later make the B-side of 'I Count The Tears' at the end of 1960), and three outtakes for which Atlantic dug into the vaults, extracting them from the dust of the interim years of 1956–1957.

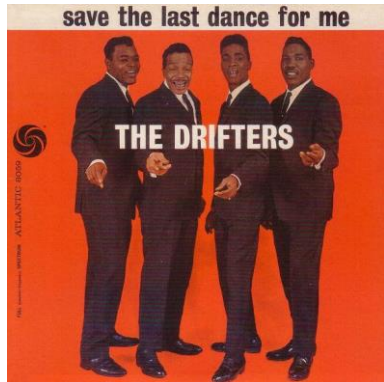
Of the B-sides, 'Oh My Love' is rather generic doo-wop; '(If You Cry) True Love, True Love', featuring the falsetto of new temporary member Johnny Lee Williams, is an even mushier and sappier serenade than anything discussed before; 'Hey Senorita' is the band's lone attempt at «Latin rock'n'roll» sounding a bit like the Drifters covering Bo Diddley covering Ritchie Valens — not even as horrendous as that might seem, but fully out of character for the band and superfluous (if you want dirty / gritty / sweaty like that, just go straight to the sources); but I do like 'Baltimore', with Charlie Thomas taking lead and the entire band showing that if they really want, they can be almost as funny and clownish as the Coasters. Funny that it was the B-side of 'Magic Moment', giving audiences a taste of two completely different sides of the band. That said, of course, it's just a silly little novelty number.

And, as usual, it feels weird and bizarre to have those oldies from 1956 mixed with the new songs — mainly to show just how deeply the music had changed in those few years. Songs like 'Sadie My Lady', a hybrid of jump-blues and doo-wop, still with Johnny Moore at the helm, are so sonically mid-Fifties that they feel decidedly dinosaurish next to the King-era hits; yet they also remind of that roughness and immediacy that was, unfortunately, lost for good with the transition to new production and arrangement values, and hearing both this song and the even more good-time «pub-R&B» of 'Honky Tonky' almost makes me greet these forgotten guys like dear old friends. Honestly, I tip my imaginary hat to all of those **Greatest Hits**, but I feel that if this were a completely personal desert island choice, I would ultimately trade in 'There Goes My

Baby', 'Dance With Me', and 'This Magic Moment' — all three of them in one bundle — for the merry, life-asserting stomp of "*honky tonk rock'n'roll*", because I like it when the boys just let their hair down and allow themselves to have fun.

Overall, I would not go as far as to say that Leiber & Stoller «sold out» the new Drifters to schmaltz-loving middle-aged white audiences, but it may be worth noting that none of these big singles, despite their popularity and everything, were ever picked up by any artists I care about ('Dance With Me' would be covered by the likes of Billy J. Kramer & The Dakotas, I believe, or Engelbert Humperdinck), as opposed to McPhatter-era songs or later, swaggier pieces like 'Under The Boardwalk' — apparently, there *must* have been a feeling that they were pandering to the white mainstream, which, let's face it, would be perfectly expectable around 1959–1960. On the other hand, this is one complaint that can easily be extended to a *lot* of soul / «soul-pop» music in the Sixties, or even transformed into a full-fledged refutation of the entire aesthetics of classic Motown; walking the thinnest of thin lines here while trying to decode your gut feelings about what is «honest and true» and what is «slick and artificial» in this music is a tremendously difficult task. But a fun one!





SAVE THE LAST DANCE FOR ME

Compilation released: **V A L U E** **3 3 3 3 3** *More info:*  



Tracks: 1) *Save The Last Dance For Me*; 2) *I Count The Tears*; 3) *Somebody New Dancin' With You*; 4) *Jackpot*; 5) *No Sweet Lovin'*; 6) *Sweets For My Sweet*; 7) *Mexican Divorce*; 8) *When My Little Girl Is Smiling*; 9) *Some Kind Of Wonderful*; 10) *Please Stay*; 11) *Nobody But Me*; 12) *Room Full Of Tears*.

REVIEW

In this deep, deep retrospect I almost find it cute how those (usually meandering and meaningless in their complimentary syrup) liner notes for old LPs from the halcyon days of the pop music industry always remember to forget to even mention, let alone discuss, the internal goings-on within the band — *even* when this has a crucial impact on the structure and quality of the LP. Here, for instance, a fictional lady called Georgia Winters — the editor-in-chief of teen girl mag *16 Magazine* invented by *real* editors Jacques Chambrun, Desmond Hall, and George Waller — glowingly writes about how "*the Drifters have never been a group to stand still*" but carefully avoids mentioning any single Drifter by his real name. Is this because «Georgia Winters» never even bothered to learn the names, or is this a delicate attempt to avoid reminding us that by the time this LP came out on the market, the Drifters were already on their fifth or sixth lead singer? Once again, the LP is a real hot mess, chronologically randomized to throw the listener off the track — although at least this time around, the *body* of the group remains more or less intact throughout. The *heads* continue to roll, though.



The actual chronology of the singles included here stretches from February 1962 all the way back to August 1960 — the date of the official release of the title track, still sung by Ben E. King who had, however, by that time already left the Drifters to start his solo career three months earlier; and I bet he spent several really tense months in the fall of 1960 doubting over whether he made the right decision, before history redeemed him with the success of ‘Spanish Harlem’ and ‘Stand By Me’. Because ‘Save The Last Dance For Me’ somehow managed to become the Drifters’ biggest commercial hit of all time, their only #1 on the general charts and arguably the one song that still most frequently comes to mind whenever the Drifters are mentioned (at least, if you’re a certified boomer).

Written by the Pomus-Shuman duo and traditionally produced by Leiber & Stoller, the song again restored the formula of mixing soulful vocals, Latin rhythms, and schmaltzy strings — its overall mood and message is, in fact, not far removed from the earlier ‘Dance With Me’, except that ‘Dance With Me’ was about the early stages of courting ("*maybe we'll be lovers when the music ends*") and ‘Save The Last Dance’ is all about the jealous stages of an ongoing relationship ("*don't forget who's taking you home and in whose arms you're gonna be*"). It is certainly more inventively crafted and catchy than its predecessor — Pomus and Shuman make clever use of the rapid-fire internal rhyming ("*every dance with the guy who gives you the eye...*") and each verse is like one perfect gliding circle across the ballroom. It's also allegedly more personal (since Doc Pomus was wheelchair-bound as a result of polio, it is rumored that he specifically wrote the lyrics about his wife in whose dancing activities he naturally could not partake at the wedding reception, although, for the sake of accuracy, the song was written in 1960 and the wedding took place in 1957), and, well, basically, tells a more interesting story than ‘Dance With Me’ never really tried to do.

For that matter, it's also not particularly difficult to sing if you know how to do breath control, which is one reason why there have been tons of cover versions, starting already with Dion and even Jerry Lee Lewis himself already back in 1961; most of the covers capitalize on the happiness rather than the drama, but you can't really blame them because that is what the Drifters and Ben E. King do, too, or those ethereal butterfly-like violins that steal the second bridge away from the lead vocalist. It's all a little fluffy, quite handy if you use it for the soundtrack to practice your hot Latin dance moves, but it's still graceful melodic perfection. Does it deserve to be the «greatest Drifters' song of all time»? No, because the Drifters were capable of a large emotional spectrum, and this is just one area of it. Do I understand why it is the best-selling Drifters' song of all time? Sure I do. It's in the same ballpark with *The Nutcracker* and the *Hochzeitsmarsch*, that's why.

The funny thing is that its B-side, ‘Nobody But Me’ (*not* to be confused with the slightly later Isley Brothers' hit by the same

name), also written by Pomus and Shuman and originally designed to have been the A-side before commercial sensibility took over, is pretty much the equal of 'Save The Last Dance For Me' in terms of prettiness and catchiness — a little less complex, though, because it has no bridge section distinct from the verses — and might even be its superior in terms of soulfulness, due to King's ecstasy in the chorus. Although the strings are more persistent here (on 'Save The Last Dance' they are only really prominent during the instrumental break), 'Nobody But Me' has more of a gospel feel to it and comes across as less of a «sellout». But it never ingrained itself in public memory with the same impact as 'Save The Last Dance', which is just one of those odd mysteries of hive psychology we have to live with.

Because of the huge success of the single, Atlantic made an effort to dig out another Pomus-Shuman-written, King-sung track from the vaults before fully handing the reins over to the new lead singer: this was 'I Count The Tears', and, of course, it did not manage to repeat the success of its predecessor, though #17 on the general charts was still fairly respectable. If there might be a problem, it is that the song seems tailor-made for the likes of Del Shannon rather than a bona fide R&B group: a rhythmically steady melancholic pop song with all the right vocal moves for a gorgeously heartbroken white teen pop idol of the 1960–1962 brand. But turns out that this problem is more theoretical than anything — it's a cool recording! The *na-na-na-na-na late at night* harmonies are fun, the imaginary-revenge lyrical shift from first to third person (you never even notice when *I'll sit and count the tears* has become *he'll sit and count the tears*), the bitter-sweet teenage drama intonation of *I have counted every day since you've been away*, it's all good. Ben even does his best to sing like Del Shannon. And the original is better than the Searchers' cover from 1964 — more soulful, more full, more satisfying because of all the backing vocals. (The Searchers could never reproduce those gorgeous bell-accompanied falsetto *woo-woos* before the start of each verse).

Speaking of new lead singers, it was not until February 1961 that the King-less Drifters could finally assemble for a new studio session, after a lengthy period of trying out several lead vocalists and finally settling on Rudy Lewis (formerly Charles Rudolph Harrell). By all accounts, Rudy was a nice guy and he had a pleasant, inoffensive tenor slightly reminiscent of Sam Cooke's, but with less depth to it; he was also no stranger to dangerous substances, leading to his becoming an early member of Club 27 in 1964, but, fortunately for humanity, he still left behind a solid legacy of hits marking the Fourth (and Last Truly Relevant) Age of The Drifters. And what a better way to mark the start of a Fourth Age than by entering into a partnership with Carole King and Gerry Goffin, the new rising stars of Brill Building who had only just demonstrated their golden touch with the Shirelles and Bobby Vee?

Not that I am a particularly big fan of this original recording of ‘Some Kind Of Wonderful’. Apart from a bouncier, poppier, slightly Latinized (the Leiber-Stoller touch again) rhythm, Lewis and Co. seem to be re-embracing some of the ancient doo-wop stylistics here, and the strings are more syrupy than seriously expressive. Carole’s own version of the song, which she would release a decade later on **Music**, adds the heart-melting touch of intimacy and shyness, whereas *this* here is pure rose-colored happiness and nothing else, not to mention that melody-wise, it is far from the most striking examples of Carole’s chord-spinning or vocal-hook-crafting magic. Still, it’s every bit as perfectly romantic as any of the preceding Ben E. King hits, and one absolutely cannot excuse Rudy or Leiber and Stoller of «misrepresenting» the song.

The same recording session from February 1961 yielded material for the Drifters’ next two singles as well. ‘Please Stay’ was provided by Burt Bacharach; I am no big lover of Burt Bacharach, but I think that even big lovers of Burt probably will not want to defend this early piece of writing as anything more than a romantic trifle (though it did end up charting higher than ‘Some Kind Of Wonderful’). (In 1966, it went on to become a much bigger hit for The Cryin’ Shames when they slowed it down, added stately baroque organ, and ultimately turned it into a solemn operatic hymn — which, I am afraid to say, did not really do the song much good at all).

Much more fun was ‘Sweets For My Sweet’, an upbeat and lightly-humorous, tongue-in-cheekish romantic ditty from the tried’n’ttrue team of Pomus-Shuman. Instead of strings, here you have a tasteful piano riff driving the song (played by Mort Shuman himself), delightful backing vocals from a bunch of ladies (allegedly including Dionne Warwick with her sister *and* Doris Troy!), and several percussionists giving the song an Afro-Cuban touch. It’s also a trifle, but an unpretentious one that easily wins over with all the cuteness — and while most people are probably more familiar with the Searchers’ version, which replaces the original piano with a Mersey-style jangly guitar pattern, it does not substantially improve on the original at all (though it’s a fair homage in its own rights).

Pomus and Shuman are also responsible for both the A- and B-side of the next single: ‘Room Full Of Tears’ is pretty much a conventional Mexican mariachi ballad with orchestral strings taking on the function of brass and fiddles, while ‘Somebody New Dancin’ With You’ could be thought of as an anti-climactic sequel to ‘Save The Last Dance With Me’ (provided the lady deuteragonist of the song has not heeded her unfortunate lover’s advice after all) — it’s kinda tragic and funny at the same time. Both tunes feel like trifles, though, and it’s no surprise that they pretty much failed to chart, showing some of the Drifters’ lowest results in years.

At this point, it may have looked like there was an ongoing unseen, highly indirect, battle around the Drifters: the «older»

way of songwriting, as illustrated by the Pomus-Shuman duo, and the «newer» way, as represented by several young faces from the Brill Building, chief among them Carole King and Gerry Goffin — who, at that time, seemed to have a better idea of what the young audiences really wanted for themselves. And thus, after the commercial fiasco of ‘Room Full Of Tears’ came ‘When My Little Girl Is Smiling’, which bounced the Drifters back all the way to #28 from a shameful #72. It’s one of Carole and Gerry’s lighter, simpler numbers, without any real tricky psychological underlayers, but the lyrics tell their own special story — some good advice for them ladies here on how to deal with their men when they get unruly — and the cool thing is that the melody basically uses the ‘What’d I Say’ chord sequence, just transposing it to a different key, which makes the song into a hybrid of romantic pop and danceable R&B. *And* they bring in harps to play it, for the first time in Drifters history, I think (the strings appear on top eventually during the instrumental break, mimicking the vocal countermelody, but the rhythm part is mostly harp-based). Once again, Leiber and Stoller come out shining.

This is where the LP comes in: with ‘Little Girl’ once again pulling the Drifters out of the muck, Atlantic remembered that it had been at least a year and a half since they offered the band the full album treatment, and diligently assembled most of the A- and B-sides from all of that period in one place. Of course, since nothing they did afterwards beat the commercial punch of ‘Save The Last Dance For Me’, they still had to give the song top billing and name the album after it, despite the fact that Ben E. King was lead vocalist only on 3 out of 12 of the tunes here. But at least this time around it was not two *completely* different sets of Drifters, as on **Greatest Hits**, and overall I would say that the bigger difference here is illustrated by the Pomus-Shuman vs. Goffin-King division rather than the contrast between King and Lewis (even if they do have fairly distinct vocal tones and ways of singing).

Of the hitherto unmentioned B-sides I’d only make a quick sidenote about ‘No Sweet Lovin’, the B-side to ‘Please Stay’. If you feel that it sticks out like a sore thumb, you’re absolutely right: it is a «boogie-wop» outtake from the immediate post-McPhatter era, with Bill Pinkney on vocals — hilariously outdated, but fun. Another, more modern, outtake that became an LP-only track is the slow-paced country-blues ‘Jackpot’, which, for some weird reason, reminds me of ‘The Jack’ by AC/DC, not just because of the name, but also because of the slow tempo and the prominent role of the syllable “*jack*” in the chorus. Surely the mind works in mysterious ways, but couldn’t the same be true of the Young brothers and Bon Scott? In any case, ‘Jackpot’ is a bit of a stylistic mish-mash curiosity, combining very Fifties-style rhythmic with very early Sixties-style arrangement tactics, so it’s definitely a step up from pure filler, and certainly more impressive than a bunch of those go-nowhere B-sides like ‘Mexican Divorce’.

Overall, the LP turns out to be quite consistent, with the transition from the Ben E. King period to the Rudy Lewis era marked by many more triumphs than embarrassments. But, of course, it almost goes without saying that by this time «The Drifters» was more of a trademark, employed by the powers-that-be at Atlantic to test out the talents of their songwriters, arrangers, and producers, than a moniker for some distinct artistic entity. Clyde McPhatter and Ben E. King were notable individuals with their own styles and ideas; Johnny Moore and Rudy Lewis were decent singers who could handle a tune and little more than that. Not that this comes as a big surprise — vocal groups tend to be even more of a «tool» in the hand of their managers than individual singers-not-songwriters — but if you ever felt weird for being familiar with ‘Save The Last Dance For Me’ or ‘Up On The Roof’ or any other of those big hits without remembering to whom it originally belonged, that weird feeling would certainly have to do with this particular arrangement of circumstances.

Still, even conveyer production can be terrific as long as the right people are running the conveyer, right? And with Jerry Leiber, Mike Stoller, Doc Pomus, Mort Shuman, Carole King, Gerry Goffin, Jerry Wexler, Ahmet Ertegun, and other people with talent to burn and vision to spare sitting steady behind the wheel while the big road of popular music kept offering new opportunities, you really couldn’t go wrong even in those allegedly «retrograde» interim years between the two big waves of rock’n’roll music, which may have seemed boring and limp to more radical minds but in reality were quietly building up the foundations for the sky-scraping pop edifice to be mounted in the next few years.

