

THE DUBLINERS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1964–2014</i>	<i>Folk (Celtic)</i>	<i>Home Boy Home (1964)</i>

Only Solitaire

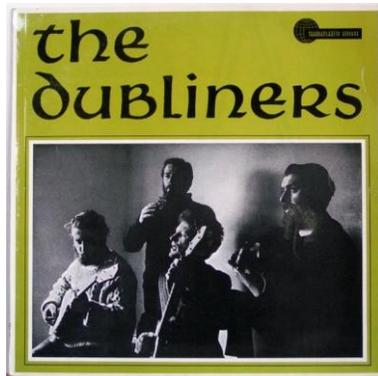
Artist: *The Dubliners*

Years: *1964*

George Starostin's Reviews

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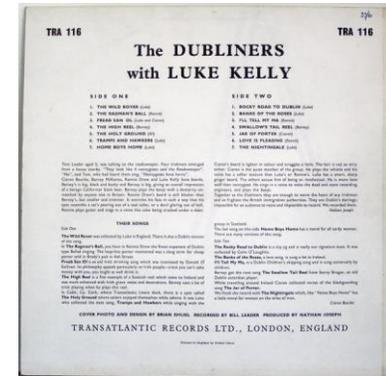
THE DUBLINERS

Album released:

1964

V A L U E
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More info:



Tracks: 1) The Wild Rover; 2) The Ragman's Ball; 3) Preab San Ol; 4) The High Reel; 5) The Holy Ground; 6) Tramps And Hawkers; 7) Home Boys Home; 8) Rocky Road To Dublin; 9) Banks Of The Roses; 10) I'll Tell My Ma; 11) Swallow's Tail Reel; 12) Jar Of Porter; 13) Love Is Pleasing; 14) The Nightingale.

REVIEW

The self-titled debut album of the Dubliners came out in 1964, the exact same year as the self-titled debut album of the Chieftains — making it an undeniable high point in the history of recorded Irish music. Yet the two records couldn't be more dissimilar from each other, pretty much illustrating the two extreme opposites of the country's musical heritage. Music played by the Chieftains was strictly instrumental, focused on the rhythmic contours and melodic temptations of the land's many jigs and reels, as well as the rich tones of its... uhh... tin whistles... and, uh... uilleann p... oh God, no, no, not again, not the horror, please!!!!...

Anyway, er, hmm, the Chieftains laid emphasis on the «serious» side of Irish music, even if most of what they played still had a practical-applied purpose — but then, the secular classical music tradition of Europe did, after all, grow out of dance music just as well, all the chaconnes and pavaues and minuets, and in the same way you can easily trace back tons and tons of complex Celtic-style prog-rock to these dance numbers. In stark contrast, the Dubliners put most of their effort into the



playful, cheerful, pub-based side of Irish folk, the one with which the average non-Irish person is probably much better acquainted through general cultural context. *Their* side of the Irish legacy is the one that segues straight into the Pogues, rather than into Clannad or Alan Stivell, and while that side might be seriously more clichéd and stereotypical than the one involving complex pentatonic interplay between harps and bassoons, it's still much better to have the Dubliners as its champions, rather than your drunk friends at the local karaoke bar.

As of 1964, the Dubliners were — founding father Ronnie Drew on guitar and vocals, the latter famously defined by the band's producer and liner note author Nathan Jones as sounding "like coke being crushed under a door"; founding father Barney McKenna, he of the many unbelievably funny stories, on banjo and vocals; founding father Ciarán Bourke, the one primarily responsible for the intermingling of Gaelic elements, on guitar, tin whistle and vocals; and founding father Luke Kelly, the most politically engaged of them all, on more banjo and more vocals. (Kelly would take a two-year break from the Dubliners soon after the release of this album, which is why subsequent re-releases sometimes had the title extended to **The Dubliners With Luke Kelly**). Ronnie and Luke are the two main driving forces here, taking the lion's share of lead vocals for themselves; Barney usually gets a few instrumental spotlights, showcasing his banjo skills; and Ciarán is the «quiet one», rarely in the spotlight but always steadfastly supportive.

The album, like all of the Dubliners' early LPs, was recorded live — unfortunately, not in Dublin's O'Donoghue's Pub, where the band made its name with a steady residence going back to 1962, but rather at London's Livingston Studios, a place set up by film director Ray Kinsey with the original purpose of recording talking books for the blind, which somehow soon evolved into recording albums of folk music (for the *culturally* blind). They did invite a small audience for the performance, dutifully cheering and clapping in between some of the tracks, but, of course, this is still quite far removed from what you'd call an «authentic» environment (= a well-advertised pub filled to the brim with earnest music college students and foreign tourists). Still, for 1964, this is probably as authentic as it can possibly get.

It is notable that, for all the alleged Irish nationalism of the band, there is but one song sung in Irish ('Preab San Ól'), and even there, Luke sings the verses in English while Ciarán parrots them back in Irish. (I am actually not altogether sure if the other band members even had a deep knowledge of the language). Then again, any rumors of strong nationalism would have to crash against the fact that the band was named not so much after the town it played in, but rather after the novel by James Joyce — who, as is well known, had been a strong opponent of radical Irish nationalism for most of his life. So the music certainly displays a strong Irish color, but you shall not find any explicitly patriotic or rebel-rousing anthems here. At

most, there are a few deep-felt Kelly-sung ballads about homecoming ('The Rocky Road To Dublin'), which have much more to do with the prodigal son trope than flag-waving.

In general, Kelly, with his agitated, ringing tenor voice, is responsible for the more sentimental and emotional numbers on the record, while Ronnie, with his crunchy «coke-crushing» baritone, takes on most of the rambunctious drinking songs (although one of the most rambunctious, 'Jar Of Porter' — praising the delights of underage alcohol consumption — is given to Ciarán). Both are delightful, though the songs themselves are probably nothing to write about in this day and age, when everybody more or less knows what to expect of an Irish drinking song. You can get some nifty cultural / linguistic lessons from Ronnie, though, particularly through his «talking blues» numbers such as 'The Ragman's Ball', where just a few quiet guitar arpeggios attenuate his half-spoken, half-chanted tale of a "lovely night" when "black eyes were in great demand, not to mention split heads and all". And Kelly can get pretty lascivious as well, e.g. on 'Home Boys Home', a song that is not so much about pining for one's homeland as it is about a playful sailor knocking up an innocent young maiden (judging by the lyrics, it is supposed to be sung as a call-and-response between a male and a female performer, but apparently beards were a requirement for being accepted as a Dubliner, so — no lasses aboard ship, sorry).

It hardly makes sense to pronounce judgement on individual titles, though, when the accent is so clearly placed on the pacing — intermingling the slow and melancholy numbers with the faster and more aggressive ones, two sides of the folk coin creating a wholesome and complete picture. In between, you have two reels with Barney's banjo taking the lead — nowhere near as polished and professional as the dance music on the Chieftains' debut, but much closer, I guess, to what is typically played in those kinds of pubs: rough, simple, friendly, and giving a chance to the singer to thoroughly wet his throat in the meantime.

All in all, every single Irish stereotype you've ever heard of finds its way onto this album, one way or another (including even a very lengthy discussion of the individual Dubliners' beards in the liner notes), but this is precisely when the 1964 factor chips in to make this a delightful rather than obnoxious turn of events — at the time, the idea of an anthology of Irish pub songs, delivered in a rough, rowdy, authentic fashion, was still so fresh and unspoiled that the freshness can still be felt more than a half century later. And for the record, I far prefer this kind of sound to the more polished and disciplined earlier approach by the Clancy Brothers — with all due respect, they have always had a bit more «touristy» sound to them than the Dubliners, which is one reason why they were far more influential overseas (another reason, of course, is simply that they were there earlier — at a time when cleaning up your act was still a major requirement for success).

On a technical note, **The Dubliners** has been reissued on CD in Europe in 2003 with a whole lot of extra tracks, including the entirety of the later live EP **The Dubliners In Person** and some alternate takes from the 1963 session for the original album. However, none of these are truly essential, and there'd be a ton of live Dubliners recordings in subsequent years anyway; the 14 tracks of the classic album are more than enough to get a cohesive picture of what the band was all about in its earliest — and, some would argue, very best — days.

