

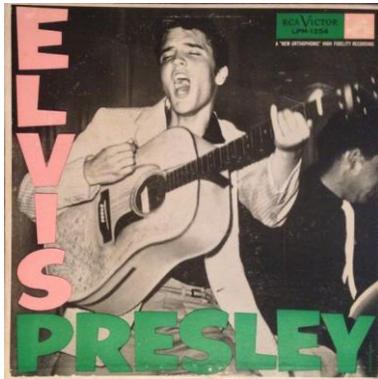
ELVIS PRESLEY



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1953-1977</i>	<i>Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i>Hound Dog (1956)</i>

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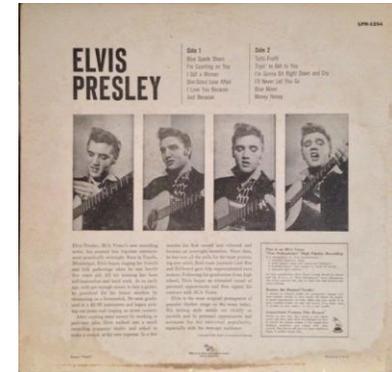
- [ELVIS PRESLEY](#) (1956) ✨
- [Elvis](#) (1956)
- [Loving You](#) (1957)
- [Elvis' Christmas Album](#) (1957)
- [Jailhouse Rock](#) (1957)
- [KING CREOLE](#) (1958)
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ELVIS PRESLEY

Album released: **V** **A** **L** **U** **E**
March 23, 1956 **4** **5** **5** **4** **5**

More info:



Tracks: 1) Blue Suede Shoes; 2) I'm Counting On You; 3) I Got A Woman; 4) One Sided Love Affair; 5) I Love You Because; 6) Just Because; 7) Tutti Frutti; 8) Tryin' To Get To You; 9) I'm Gonna Sit Right Down And Cry (Over You); 10) I'll Never Let You Go (Little Darlin'); 11) Blue Moon; 12) Money Honey; 13*) Heartbreak Hotel; 14*) I Was The One; 15*) Lawdy Miss Clawdy; 16*) Shake, Rattle And Roll; 17*) My Baby Left Me; 18*) I Want You, I Need You, I Love You.

REVIEW

If you want to do this chronology stuff 100% correctly, you should, of course, start with **The Sun Sessions**, a classic compilation that put together everything that Elvis recorded for his first label, but was not released until 1976 (as an unintentionally vicious last minute reminder for the failing King of what it used to be in the good old glory days) — or, better still, with the first disc of **The Complete 1950s Masters**, which simply arranges everything he did in rigorous chronological order and dispenses with the necessity of putting all the scrambled pieces of the puzzle together from his chaotic history of single / EP / LP releases. We shall, however, opt for this fairly messy path instead and proceed from the string of LPs, most of which still remain in print and, together with some accompanying singles as bonus tracks, still paint a fairly authentic picture of the way in which Elvis' original fans were learning of their idol's everyday routine.



Besides, if we just skip the LP's, we shall have no pretext to mention the iconic album cover of Elvis' self-titled debut — the same one, of course, that would later be symbolically imitated by The Clash for **London Calling**. The difference being that neither Elvis himself nor his overseers at RCA Victor probably attributed any revolutionary significance to the image, and yet there is hardly any question about whether the actual music here turned the musical world upside down or not, whereas with **London Calling** this would be fairly debatable. Even so, it is worth noticing that, for a long long while, this was the *only* Elvis LP to feature a typeface-covered hint at Elvis' golden hips, or actually capture him in a moment of ecstatic performance — on everything that followed, his posturing, facial expressions, and camera angles would hardly distinguish him from your average teen idol. Fortunately, enough damage would already be done with *this* photo so as not to let anybody worry about the inoffensiveness of any subsequent ones.

Another special feature of **Elvis Presley** is that it actually happens to mix material from his newer sessions for RCA with leftovers from Sun — with the market clearly demanding an Elvis Presley LP, it was discovered that there simply wasn't enough new material, so five out of twelve songs had to come from Sam Phillips' stock. Most of those are ballads, with the exception of 'Just Because', but this is a good thing, because the minimalistic arrangements from the Sun Studios, focusing almost exclusively on Elvis' vocals, made the songs stand out from the generic doo-wop product of the day — when you listen to something like 'I'm Counting On You', you might seriously wonder about why you should be bothering with this stuff at all when you have The Platters or The Drifters, but that weirdly wobbly version of 'Blue Moon', all echo and popping bass and silence all around, actually makes it feel as if the singer is calling out to the girl in the tower while trying to cross a deep moat late at night.

This mix of Elvis' original Sun style — the lean, raw «power trio» synthesis of country-western and jump blues — and the early RCA style, in which the rawness was partially sacrificed in favor of updated production values and a bigger band, with actual drums and pianos, is delightful in that it shows the creative evolution and expansion of a great sound that has not yet begun to devolve into cuddliness and sentimentalism. Not all the 12 songs on the original LP are equally great, but not a single one is cringeworthy, a feat that would not be repeated on any subsequent record — and all this considering that Presley's best material at the time was not even supposed to go on an LP in the first place.

From the very start, the «rockier» material that he did for RCA fell into two categories — «hard rock», usually inspired by or directly covering such masters of gritty R&B as Ray Charles and Little Richard, and «soft rock», typically driven by piano boogie lines and owing more to the tradition of saloon entertainment: your basic 'Shake, Rattle & Roll' vs. your typical

'Teddy Bear' opposition. Naturally, the rebel in me will always fall for the first category before everything else, and these covers of 'I Got A Woman' and 'Tutti Frutti' will always remain the definitive ones. Of course, Elvis and his band whip the tunes into tight-focused action like the pistol-packin' white cowboys they are, rather than let them hang a little loose and sloppy and irreverent like their original black creators — which is a good thing, because each of these songs now got two lives instead of one. When I hear Little Richard go blop-bam-boom, my mind visualizes a crowded, tightly packed, smoky, sweaty ballroom; with Elvis, the song becomes a frenzied cowboy charge through the prairie — reach Point A from Point B in two minutes flat, lasso the bull, mission accomplished. (By the way, the absolutely insane instrumental break in the middle of 'Tutti Frutti' might just be the single punkiest explosion of noise captured in the rockabilly era — what the heck are those drums even *doing?*).

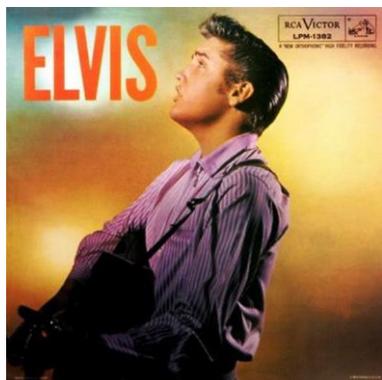
Happily, though, the «soft rock» tunes this time around are also a lot of goofy fun: 'One-Sided Love Affair' features a beautiful rollickin' barrelhouse piano part from Floyd Cramer on top of a vocal that sounds like its owner has just run a marathon but still has to get it all out as if his life depended on it, and 'I'm Gonna Sit Right Down And Cry Over You' is another successful stab at turning generic country blues into rockabilly — and for now, it looks as though adding piano and drums to the mix might have been a *definitive* win over the sparseness of the Sun sound... well, hardly anybody in early '56 could have guessed about the way things would ultimately turn out.

Now, the big question: was the difference between an Elvis LP and an Elvis hit single at the time really *that* crucial? Answer: by no means. Sure, 'Heartbreak Hotel' is only here as a bonus track, and few things in 1956 could beat the stunning effect of 'Heartbreak Hotel'. But all these other 14 tracks — yes, some are weaker than others, but there is no true filler here, because (a) Elvis had great taste in covers, whenever he got to choose them for himself and (b) RCA had the wisdom, at the time, to hook him up with some really talented songwriters who could hammer out distinct, interesting personalities for their songs. And if 'Heartbreak Hotel' may be a one-of-a-kind knockout track indeed (is there one single tune in the universe that actually sounds even remotely like it?), its follow-up single, 'I Want You, I Need You, I Love You', is actually a fairly straightforward prom night slow dance track that is far less exciting than most of the LP tracks.

My point being here that it would be deeply incorrect to regard pre-army Elvis as specifically a «singles artist» because all pop artists were «single» at the time. The high quality of his LPs was not necessarily a good sign: what it really meant was that the commercial machine had almost immediately latched on to him as its major cash cow, and was ready to spin its wheels overtime to ensure high quality product (normally, not a lot of people bought LPs, but with Elvis, sales were

guaranteed all the way). But for a while, as long as the industry was still young and as long as Colonel Parker could be able to stimulate the interest of people who could get excited about something other than *just* money, it worked, and it gave the world approximately two great years during which Elvis Presley would be the most prolific *and* the most consistent of all the young white entertainers in the rock'n'roll business.





ELVIS

Album released: **V A L U E**
October 19, 1956 **4 5 4 4 5**

More info:



Tracks: 1) Rip It Up; 2) Love Me; 3) When My Blue Moon Turns To Gold Again; 4) Long Tall Sally; 5) First In Line; 6) Paralyzed; 7) So Glad You're Mine; 8) Old Shep; 9) Ready Teddy; 10) Anyplace Is Paradise; 11) How's The World Treating You; 12) How Do You Think I Feel; 13*) **Hound Dog**; 14*) Don't Be Cruel; 15*) Any Way You Want Me*; 16*) Too Much; 17*) Playing For Keeps; 18*) Love Me Tender.

REVIEW

All of Elvis' second album, hard and soft stuff alike, pales in comparison with 'Hound Dog', one of the hardest-hitting rock'n'roll numbers of its era and possibly the closest Elvis ever came to capturing that classic punk spirit — a short, tight, uncompromising, fully focused assault on the senses, a musical shotgun blast that sends you off flying in pieces. Of course, it's not just about Elvis: it's about Elvis *and* his entire backing band, particularly D. J. Fontana's drumming, as loud and aggressive and precise as possible, with each fill between the verses cracking off in solid machine-gun style, and Scotty Moore's guitar, which he not so much plays as spansks in full-on BDSM mode, culminating in the second solo which one can regard as a spiritual predecessor to all the garage-rock excesses of the mid-Sixties.



It is precisely this collective punch which makes casual accusations such as «oh, another case of white boy stealing black people's music» so ridiculous — never mind the fact that 'Hound Dog' was actually written for Big Mama Thornton by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, two kids as Jewish-American as they come, but Elvis and his pals learned the song from Freddie Bell & The Bellboys without knowing anything about Big Mama's slower, bluesier version in the first place. And

even if they did, no other band at the time, black or white, would dare to put such a ferocious spin on the melody: I dare say that the intensity of 'Hound Dog' in mid-'56 produced an impact well comparable with, say, the first appearances of hardcore punk around 1979. It is one of the few Elvis songs that instills *that* kind of reaction in me even today, whenever I put it on — most rockabilly classics from the Fifties inevitably sound tamer and cutesier to experienced ears, but not this one. Each time Scotty hits those power chords at 1:22 into the song, it makes me feel like a frickin' teenager, no matter how much time has elapsed.

It is somewhat strange that on this LP, most of which was recorded just a couple months after 'Hound Dog', we do not find even a single attempt to properly recapture the same spirit. The closest they come is with a cover of Little Richard's 'Long Tall Sally', but there's a good reason why 'Hound Dog' remains a classic while hardly anybody remembers this inferior version — for one thing, the production is disappointingly muddy next to the sharp-as-a-knife sound of 'Hound Dog', for another, the band plays in a fairly perfunctory manner, with Scotty in more of a playful jazzy mood than pissed-off punk, and, finally, Elvis' own delivery has a faint whiff of uncertainty about it, as if he were still pondering over what those lyrics really mean and how he should be approaching them as the tapes began rolling (a mistake that would *not* be repeated eight years later by Paul McCartney, who did not shy away from giving the song all the attention that it required and came out with a relative winner). This track really *does* sound a bit like white men trying to steal a black man's thunder, and not doing a very good job of it.

In general, as an LP, **Elvis** takes a predictable step back from the standards of **Elvis Presley**, though certainly not a big one — on the whole, production values, playing enthusiasm, and cover material remain strong, though the balance is slowly becoming to shift in favor of sentimental ballads and «soft rock». «Hard rock» is basically limited to three numbers, all of them Little Richard covers — and at the very least, Elvis does a much finer job with 'Ready Teddy' and 'Rip It Up' than he does with 'Long Tall Sally', possibly because those two contain fewer sexual innuendos and are generally party tunes about having a wild time at the local joint, an activity certainly closer to Elvis' heart than the tabooed sexual practices of 'Sally'. 'Ready Teddy', in particular, brings Moore's and Fontana's energy levels *almost* back to the same heights as we heard them on 'Hound Dog', though the production is still a little too muddied.

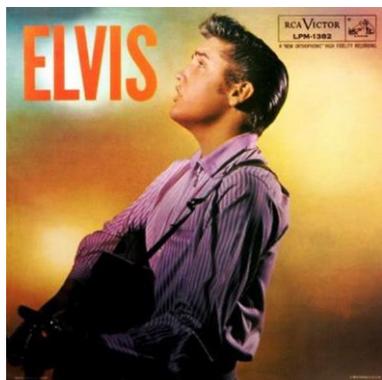
On the other end of the spectrum, however, we see the country boy returning to his whitebread roots with songs like 'Old Shep', a 4-minute Red Foley ballad whose intention it is to show us that, actually, there are hound dogs around that Elvis *does* care about. Like many, many, many other Elvis ballads, your reaction to it will largely depend on how convincing and

hypnotizing you find the man's traditional crooning style; I must issue a warning in advance that if the accompanying melody or musical atmosphere isn't convincing enough, I am not easily swayed by Elvis' voice as the sole benefit — and with the corny, soapy lyrics of the song sinking it deep in the ground, 'Old Shep' is certainly *not* the kind of material I would ever like to play at the funeral of my own pet. But with the song's length and self-importance, this was clearly a sign — a sign that Mr. Presley was going to be just as respectful of the old folk tradition as he would be of the new rock 'n' roll standards, and that he would be marketable to *all* segments of the audience.

In between those extremes there is a whole bunch of bouncier ballads and soft pop-rock nuggets of varying quality, few of them remembered all too well because there are much better examples of the same style: thus, 'Paralyzed' utilizes the same boppy chords as both 'Teddy Bear' and 'Don't Be Cruel' without being nearly as catchy as either, and the old Crudup blues 'So Glad You're Mine' would later get a more melodic and energetic update, becoming 'Ain't That Loving You Baby'. Even Aaron Schroeder, who would later contribute several of the catchiest songs of Elvis' entire career, this time gives him a doo-wop toss-off ('First In Line', a song that nobody probably remembers unless you happened to dance to it during prom night, which, as of 2020, is somewhat chronologically unlikely).

But at least almost nothing here is particularly embarrassing; and if you take the album together with its surrounding singles, most of them available as bonus tracks, the collective weight of the classics (which would also include 'Don't Be Cruel' and 'Too Much') certainly outshines the lack of gloss on the average material. In any case, while **Elvis** does give us a few signs that *maybe* this Memphis kid isn't quite as rebelliously punkish as we'd like him to remain in our hearts, it certainly gives no signs that the fire and passion on his earlier material was just a fluke. Simply put, the «Elvis Machine» had not yet been put in motion by the end of '56, and there was still plenty of room for maneuvering, trying out different approaches, and generally fooling around. Perhaps, most importantly, Elvis was not yet completely sucked into the movie-making business — his first movie, *Love Me Tender*, was shot around the same time as the album was recorded, but he still only had a relatively small side part in it, and nobody could predict his big future on the silver screen.





LOVING YOU

Album released:

July 1, 1957

V A L U E
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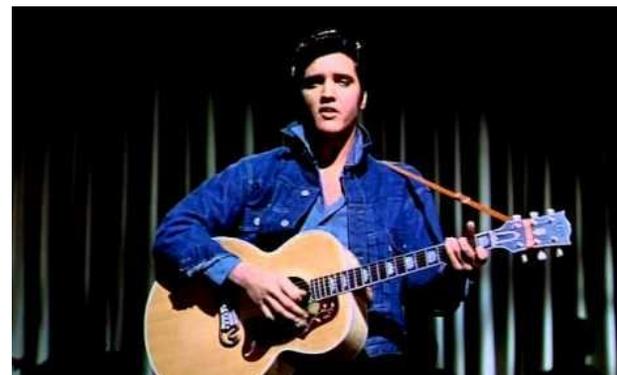
More info:



Tracks: 1) **Mean Woman Blues**; 2) (Let Me Be Your) Teddy Bear; 3) Loving You; 4) Got A Lot O' Livin' To Do!; 5) Lonesome Cowboy; 6) Hot Dog; 7) Party; 8) Blueberry Hill; 9) True Love; 10) Don't Leave Me Now; 11) Have I Told You Lately That I Love You; 12) I Need You So; 13*) Tell Me Why; 14*) Is It So Strange*; 15) One Night Of Sin*; 16) When It Rains, It Really Pours*.

REVIEW

Elvis' soundtracks typically tend to be segregated into a separate section in his discographies, either because there were so many of them or because, due to the — putting it mildly — dubious artistic nature of most of his movies, they would inevitably bear this stigma and had to suffer being categorized as inessential listening. In reality, of course, there was never any systematic, intrinsic discrepancy in quality between the man's proper LPs and his soundtracks; nor does it make sense to complain about any lack of coherence on these soundtracks — like any other Elvis LP, they just give you the usual mix of softer / harder rockers and ballads which will be tenderly appreciated by any supporter of the «more Elvis is better Elvis» ideology. The respective quality of the music and the movies, so it seems, rarely correlated with each other anyway — on one hand, I wouldn't say that the soundtrack to *King Creole*, inarguably Elvis' best movie, was necessarily superior to everything else he recorded in the late Fifties; on the other, the quality of the music is occasionally the only thing that redeems some of his weakest Sixties' films.



In any case, it makes little sense to discuss any specific connections between the plot of Elvis' first movie and the music on this LP (only half of which comes from the movie anyway). What does make sense is to notice that the ratio of hard rock vs. everything else keeps decreasing: the only properly angry rocker in sight is the very first song, 'Mean Woman Blues', for which we should specifically thank the wonderful R&B writer Claude Demetrius, who earlier used to make a living penning hilarious ditties for the likes of Louis Jordan, and later would get Elvis another first-rate ferocious hit in 'Hard Headed Woman' (judging by the lyrics, Demetrius must have had a really tough time with his women even for the average standards of a popular songwriter). In terms of melody or atmosphere, it adds little to Elvis' recorded legacy of 1956, but it does give you another excellent example of how focused and, well, *mean* his little combo could be (though, if you ask me, the definitive version of the song is to be found on Jerry Lee Lewis' **Live At The Star Club** album, where his patented loud-to-quiet-back-to-loud trick blows the roof off the house — Elvis never toys with your senses in such an openly provocative manner).

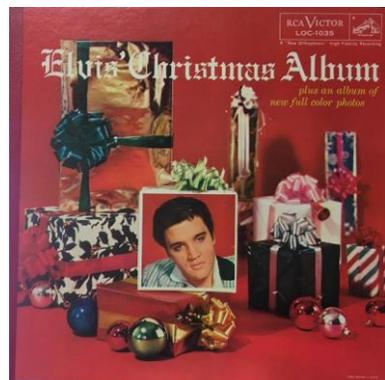
The only other song here that tries to capture a similar type of energy is 'Got A Lot O' Livin' To Do', but its particular energy is not an energy of anger — true to the song's title, it is the energy of some boundless *joie de vivre*, with Scotty's guitar licks in sexy playful mode and Elvis' vocals in sped-up sentimental pop mode; it is simply a bombastic and revved-up rhythm section that distinguishes the song from the likes of 'Teddy Bear'. This is not a reprieve, though — the wild style arrangement gives this happy youthful anthem a whiff of rebelliousness all the same, and a properly happy Elvis can be just as infectious and hypnotizing as a properly sexually provocative or a chillingly morose Elvis. It is certainly more memorable than Jessie Mae Robinson's '(Let's Have A) Party', a generic blues-rock number taken at a disappointingly slow tempo — Wanda Jackson would do a much better job by speeding it up and singing the melody in her knife-sharp rasp as if to insinuate *what* sort of party this would really be; but for Elvis, this particular delivery is more of a throwaway than something to remember.

Still, once again, there are no true total duds on the album. If something is almost unbearably cutesy and cuddly, it is at least impossibly catchy ('Teddy Bear'); if a ballad's tenderness is undermined by a lack of hooks, it can still be redeemed by an occasional odd key change on the piano and a weird vocal flow where you get confused as to when one verse ends and the other one begins (title track); if a track bears the suspicious title of 'Lonesome Cowboy', it is at least given an oddly minimalistic, almost somber musical sheen that is reminiscent of the early days at Sun, but also improved by an eerie arrangement of the backing harmonies. Even the cover of Fats Domino's 'Blueberry Hill' injects a subtle bit of vocal

melancholy that was only implied, not directly delivered, in Fats' original — making this case another potential playground for the never ending «what's better, the black original or the whitebread cover» debate.

Towards the end, the record does begin to drift off into fairly conventional territory, with second-rate doo-wop numbers and even a recent Cole Porter cover ('True Love') whose inclusion must have been fairly detestable for hardcore Elvis fans back in those days. But as long as the band sticks to its minimalistic arrangements, with just the core instrumental quartet and barbershop backing harmonies for extra atmosphere, the results are always tolerable. Unfortunately, already at this stage we occasionally face silly acts of self-censorship — the bonus tracks include Elvis' original cover of Dave Bartholomew's 'One Night (Of Sin)', with lyrics that were considered so «gross» by the executives ("one night of sin is what I'm now paying for") that the song would have to be lyrically re-written and delayed until 1958. As it stands, its fat, bombastic arrangement could have made a very nice and convincing companion to the lighter, thinner New Orleanian sound of 'Blueberry Hill' — but at least thank God for the existence of bonus tracks.





ELVIS' CHRISTMAS ALBUM

Album released:

Oct. 15, 1957

V A L U E

2 4 3 4 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Santa Claus Is Back In Town; 2) White Christmas; 3) Here Comes Santa Claus; 4) I'll Be Home For Christmas; 5) Blue Christmas; 6) Santa Bring My Baby Back (To Me); 7) O Little Town Of Bethlehem; 8) Silent Night; 9) **(There'll Be) Peace In The Valley**; 10) I Believe; 11) Take My Hand, Precious Lord; 12) It Is No Secret.

REVIEW

The actual LP going by this name, released in October '57 so that it could be played non-stop for at least two months by Elvis fans, is really a combo, bringing together all the material from a shorter Christmas-themed EP and an earlier released EP of gospel songs (**Peace In The Valley**), thus giving the listener ample opportunity to evaluate and appreciate Mr. Presley in at least two related, but distinct roles — that of a Christmas caroler and that of an ardent gospel preacher. Both roles, of course, came just as naturally to his fairly traditionalist character as that of the hip-swingin' rock'n'roller, and how much you will appreciate them, to some degree, will depend on how fairly traditionalist *you* are.

Or maybe not, because, actually, the first side of the album was fairly groundbreaking by the standards of 1957. Accustomed as we are these days to all sorts of non-standard, individualistic, often arrogantly irreverent takes on the Christmas subject by zillions of artists, it is easy to forget that in the 1950s this domain was still completely dominated by crooners; so much so that, reportedly, Irving Berlin petitioned radio stations to ban Elvis' version of 'White Christmas', claiming that it profanated the very idea of the song (ironically, he never demanded the same for the earlier Drifters cover which was Elvis'



main source of inspiration, since he most likely paid little attention to «colored» radio stations). It works *much* better, consequently, if you play this side back to back with a Bing Crosby Christmas compilation, if only to make sure how Elvis made the Christmas format adapt to *his* own style rather than vice versa.

It is hardly accidental, anyway, that the album begins with a newly written song, and that its authors are the same iconoclastic kids Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller who'd already given Elvis 'Hound Dog' — and even if the song is nothing but a generic mid-tempo 12-bar blues, this was arguably the first time in history that a bunch of punks was allowed to have this kind of fun with the established format. A couple other songs are done by Elvis in his «softcore» rock'n'roll mode ('Here Comes Santa Claus' and particularly 'Santa Bring My Baby Back To Me'), nothing too offensive but still inviting you to get up on your feet and jump around in a decidedly un-solemn fashion. 'Blue Christmas' is also innovative, with the Jordanaires playing on the title by singing blue notes in the background — and the entire song, consecutively, dipping into the blues rather than pure country, to which it originally belonged.

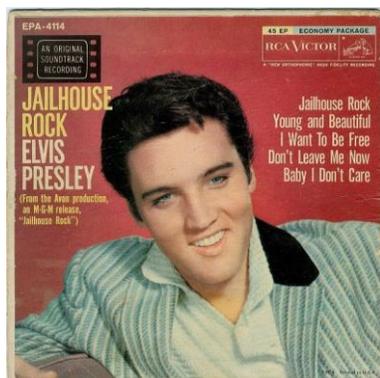
All in all, it is evident that plenty of fun had been had with the source material, even if its impact has inevitably become dimmed with age, and today our enjoyment will largely depend on how much we like Christmas tunes in general and how much we remain in awe of Elvis' voice in particular. This is all in stark contrast with the gospel songs from **Peace In The Valley** — even though their arrangements, too, have been predictably modernized, it is obvious that fooling around with such a mediator of dubious origins as Father Christmas is one thing, but tinkering with the well-established format of a direct address to God is quite another. Here, Elvis loyally follows the singing formula of Mahalia Jackson and other gospel greats, and although he does a technically good job — this kind of material requires far stricter voice control and far more advanced technique, after all, than jump blues — this is not exactly the type of music into which I have immersed myself to the extent of needing to see what Elvis can do with it.

Back in the day, it was probably considered more of a PR move to reconcile Elvis with the offended parents of his teenage fans, or, perhaps, even more cynically, to put him on that last corner of the musical market which was still seriously dominated by African-American artists; Elvis himself, however, most likely regarded this as his sincere homage to all the great masters of spirituals, as well as, perhaps, his own way of making peace with God, just in case the latter really took offense at his hip-swivelling behavior. Regardless of the motives, Elvis has plenty of vocal power and subtlety to make some of these gospel songs every bit as sexy as his best love ballads — replacing the Old Testamental fire and brimstone of Mahalia Jackson's deliveries with romantic sentiment that could make the Lord himself blush a little bit (I mean, 'Take My

Hand, Precious Lord' sounds like a wedding song all by itself, but Elvis' purry touch makes it even more of an under-the-balcony serenade than it already is).

In short, regardless of our personal feelings, this is an album of fairly major historical importance (a fact that is indirectly reflected in its mind-blowing sales records), and furthermore, it might be argued that Elvis would never really match the quality and the freshness of these gospel and Christmas recordings again. Maybe the best news is that this is all still done in the same low-profile, «chamber» format — just Elvis, his little backing band, and The Jordanaires singing hush-hush vocals in the background, no Vegas glitz whatsoever. This way, the material does not stand at odds with the man's contemporary rock and pop classics; however, I still think that it works best *next* to these classics rather than completely on its own, and should rather be judged according to the «terrific rock'n'roll guy puts his stamp on more traditional genres» principle than the «young bumpkin from Memphis dares to compete with Bing Crosby and Mahalia Jackson» alternative. Then, finally, there will be peace in the valley for him.



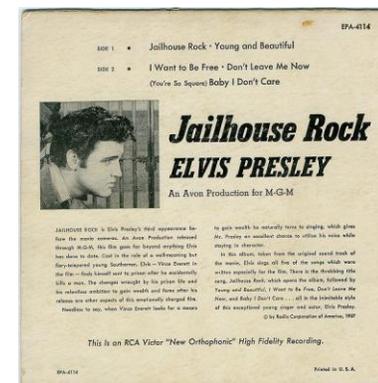


JAILHOUSE ROCK

Album released:
Oct. 30, 1957

V A L U E
2 4 3 2 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) *Jailhouse Rock*; 2) *Treat Me Nice**; 3) *I Want To Be Free*; 4) *Don't Leave Me Now*; 5) *Young And Beautiful*; 6) *(You're So Square) Baby I Don't Care*; 7) *Poor Boy**; 8) *Let Me**.

REVIEW

Although, for some reason, the soundtrack to *Jailhouse Rock* never got expanded to the status of a full-blown LP, it is still well worth making a brief stop for this short 5-song EP — if only because both the movie and the title track were such iconic landmarks in the Elvis legend. The movie, despite the predictably clichéd plot, still remains as one of the few genuinely watchable Elvis films, and the title track... well, just one more great result of the Elvis + Leiber & Stoller collaboration. Unlike 'Hound Dog', 'Jailhouse Rock' does not really bite: its main melody is a fairly harmless, comical piece of boogie, and the maniacal energy of its vocals is rowdy, but not aggressive — it is, after all, the manifesto of jailbirds who just want to have some fun, not beat up the warden or anything. But still, it is a call for fun from the *other* side of the bars — already the opening beat brings on associations with truncheons hitting against polished steel — and this definitely takes us at least one step further in the social sphere than, say, ripping it up on a Saturday night.



Recent assessments of 'Jailhouse Rock' often tend to dwell on the homoerotic connotations of the tune (and especially the movie sequence), of which there are plenty, but I think that the prison theme in general is more essential here — Leiber and Stoller always liked subtly playing around with issues of social justice (remember 'Framed' or 'Riot In Cell Block #9' by the Coasters?), and if they could infuse the music of the country's most popular rock'n'roll performer with such a subject, even in a purely comical manner, how could they have bypassed the chance? Up until then, the jail theme was largely the domain of old bluesmen and weathered country-western performers; 'Jailhouse Rock' introduces it to the prom-party-oriented genre of rockabilly, and in such a way that it would be impossible not to take notice — the production is right in your face, without the slightest traces of echo on the King's voice and Scotty's simple boogie rhythm guitar downtuned and distorted just enough to make the song join the long queue of pretenders for the «proto-metal» sound. Such a friendly atmosphere, but still enough to piss off your parents — and this right at the very moment when they'd nearly come to terms with the man for all his Christmas and gospel offerings.

This is not to demean the quality and importance of the other songs here — if anything, the short length of the EP guarantees its consistency. There is 'Treat Me Nice', which has easily the best combination of piano and quirky percussion on any Elvis record, and a hilarious blend of Elvis' bass mumble and the Jordanaires' backing vocals — always a touch of ecstasy when his "if you don't behave..." rockets out of this confusing vocal soup. There is 'Baby I Don't Care', on which Elvis himself plays bass — and although the bassline is as simple as you could predict, it still somehow ends up making the song. There is 'I Want To Be Free', a song which does for Elvis pretty much the same thing as 'Help!' would do for The Beatles — formulaic love song on the surface, subtle and painful cry for assistance at the bottom: the way he modulates that "I want to be FREE, FREE, FREE - EE - EE... I want to be free, like the bird in the tree" goes from aching to hysteria and back to yearning pain in an amazing emotional somersault. (Did he ever perform the song live? I don't think so — I don't think the Colonel would have approved). There are also two more ballads by Aaron Schroeder that are not as good as the Leiber/Stoller material, but there is still enough first-rate vocal acrobatics on 'Don't Leave Me Now' to pardon its rather generic doo-wop characteristics.

On a technical note, **Jailhouse Rock** did make it to CD on its own, expanded with a bunch of alternate takes (not essential — for instance, the movie version of 'Jailhouse Rock' with backing vocals from the «inmates» somewhat smooths out the punch of the single version) and also throwing on the earlier EP **Love Me Tender**, with four songs from Elvis' first movie. It is a bit amusing to be reverted to that year-old sound and hear how different it was — though, allegedly, *Love Me Tender*

Only Solitaire

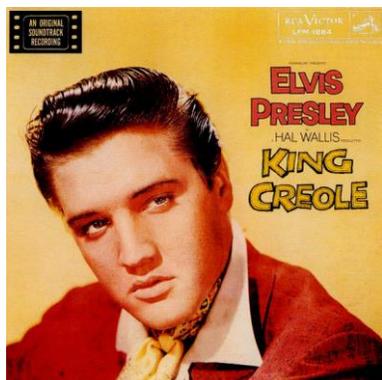
Artist: *Elvis Presley*

Album: *Jailhouse Rock (1957)*

George Starostin's Reviews

was a cowboy movie, accounting for the generally C&W nature of the soundtrack. 'Poor Boy', 'Let Me', 'We're Gonna Move' — rowdy campfire material, all of them, and produced in such an intimate manner that you can almost feel yourself sharing a drink with the King after a hard day of rodeoing or whatever.





KING CREOLE

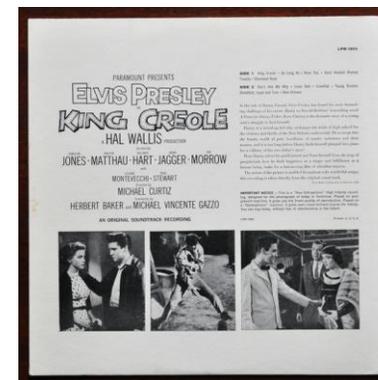
Album released:

Sep. 19, 1958

V A L U E

3 4 4 3 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) *King Creole*; 2) As Long As I Have You; 3) Hard Headed Woman; 4) Trouble; 5) Dixieland Rock; 6) Don't Ask Me Why; 7) Lover Doll; 8) Crawfish; 9) Young Dreams; 10) Steadfast, Loyal And True; 11) New Orleans; 12*) Danny.

REVIEW

Maybe **King Creole** is not the most consistent LP in Elvis' career — it is still limited by its status of a movie soundtrack, after all — but it would be hard to deny that it marks the peak of a very brief period where Elvis actually had a chance to grow into something significantly bigger than the engine behind 'Hound Dog' and 'Love Me Tender'. As legendary as those and other songs were, the true potential of rock'n'roll still remained largely untapped — and the future looked really bright for the partnership between Elvis, Jerry Leiber, and Mike Stoller, as they began writing songs for his next movie, which would also go on to become his best. *King Creole*, directed by none other than *Casablanca*'s own Michael Curtiz, actually managed to go a bit beyond predictable clichés, give its protagonist a biting, almost uncomfortable social angle, and become that one Elvis movie that you are always recommended if you actually want to go and see a *good* Elvis movie for a change. Rather than *just* go see an Elvis movie. Or go see Elvis and a bunch of hot girls in bikinis. I mean, far be it from me to renounce the power of either, and even *King Creole* ain't no Stanley Kubrick, but as far as general entertainment with soul and brains in 1958 is concerned, you could hardly do any better.



In any case, what's a better choice than 'King Creole' to pull Elvis out of his safety zones and make him explode just as credibly in a completely new musical setting? A brand new type of rock'n'roll, diligently crossed with elements of New Orleanian music, a song that you can headbang to just as heartily as to 'Tutti Frutti', but featuring a completely different type of beat, jazzy energy, and even a guitar solo that seems more influenced by Django Reinhardt than any of the old jump-blues heroes. Above all, it continues to ooze Elvis' sexiness, as each verse seems to rise out of the ground, line by line, gaining in intensity with each second — and the man really gets into it, chomping out the line "he holds his guitar like a Tommy gun" with the toughness of a mafia hitman and then getting all properly tiger-ish on "he starts to growl from way down his throat". The rhythm section is much softer here than on the similarly anthemic 'Jailhouse Rock', but it is hard to shake off the feeling that 'King Creole' goes deeper and darker — that somehow we are past comedy here and making our way through much more morally questionable territory.

That feel of personal danger is even more expressly stated in 'Trouble', Leiber and Stoller's second and equally fabulous contribution. It is essentially a Chicago blues number dressed up in a bombastic New Orleanian big band jazz arrangement, and the ruckus generated by the percussion and brass section in the chorus and particularly the sped-up "I'm evil, evil, evil as can be" coda is quite intoxicating, but a large part of the song is completely quiet, featuring nothing and no-one but Elvis in his self-aggrandizing big-bad-boy-of-the-blues mode, inspired by the likes of Muddy Waters. Naturally, the atmosphere is nothing like the mystical, voodoo-drenched terror of the big bad African-American dude, but Elvis is not really trying to emulate the «authentic» swag of Muddy or Howlin' Wolf; instead, this is a near-authentic battle stance of a rough white kid from a tough neighbourhood. However, Presley's deep bass rumble somehow communicates well enough both the idea of the man being dangerous *and* a certain nobility of intent — "I've never looked for trouble, but I've never ran", that sort of thing. When he pulls all the stops with "I'm evil, evil, evil", it sounds nothing like the 'Evil' of Howlin' Wolf — it just goes to show that the man means business if you got his back to the wall. It's a fun, cocky, menacing, life-asserting, happy-licious song, with all these psychological layers to it and more. I remember being mildly disappointed after first hearing the tune on a compilation in deep childhood — who needs all that Vegas jazz brass? where's a Scotty Moore guitar solo? — but even back then, deep in my heart I could not help but know that here was something special.

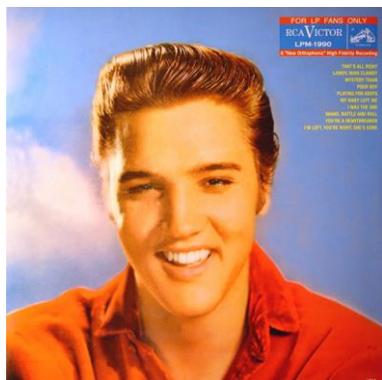
It is a bit disappointing, of course, that Leiber and Stoller only contributed those two numbers to the soundtrack (the third one, 'Steadfast, Loyal And True', is a rather silly acappella school anthem that can only be appreciated by those who are not allergic to any sort of school anthems in principle — which leaves me out), because none of the other numbers come close to

the inspirational punch of 'King Creole' and 'Trouble'. Well, for those who do not mind some good old misogyny in their soup, there is always 'Hard Headed Woman', another little Claude DeMetrius classic delivered by the King at such a breakneck tempo that you will find it quite a challenge to sing along — and here you do get a Scotty Moore guitar solo, although it is still eventually overtaken by a wild brass onslaught. But Schroeder's 'Dixieland Rock' is a disappointment, a transparent attempt to remake 'Jailhouse Rock' New Orleans-style that takes most of the rock'n'roll fury out of the original and replaces it with even more brass soloing — not too good, unless you can force yourself to move and groove to the song totally out of context.

Overall, the weak spot of **King Creole** is that too much of the album is subjugated to one simple formula: take the average Elvis Presley record and cross it with New Orleans jazz. It does result in an album that is almost conceptual in nature, but if you just throw your big band arrangements on top of every melody, well, be prepared that sometimes it will work and sometimes it won't. Not surprisingly, perhaps, one of the album's true hidden delights is 'Crawfish', a short and almost minimalistic «exotic» shuffle about... well, the lyrics speak for themselves, don't they? "See I got him, see the size, stripped and cleaned before your eyes" — how's *that* for a from-the-waist-up Ed Sullivan show? Never mind, even if you read past all the innuendos (and I myself thought for quite a long time it was just a song about fishing down on the bayou), the King's drawn-out howl of "craaaawfish!", lustfully echoed back by Kitty White, is still enough to ignite *something*. Too bad the whole thing is over much too quickly and there is nothing else even remotely like it on the record.

Still, even if 'Dixieland Rock' does not work, and even if several of the ballads are second-hand shadows of earlier successes, individual flaws do not spoil the general feel. Discounting the couple of compilation LPs released while Elvis was in the army, **King Creole** is the very last blast of a young, cocky, and still relatively free true King of rock'n'roll — who *may* have been on the verge of something even greater, if not for the combined counteraction of the Armed Forces and «Colonel» Tom Parker; and while we are all aware that one of the «Colonel»'s worst deeds was confining Elvis to the movie set, an even worse one may have been his isolation from Leiber and Stoller — who allegedly did not wish to sell themselves into Parker's servitude and were consequently banned from access to Elvis by the Memphis Mafia. A sad story, alas, in no way predictable based on the lively exuberance of **King Creole**.





FOR LP FANS ONLY

Album released:

Feb. 6, 1959

V A L U E
3 4 4 2 4

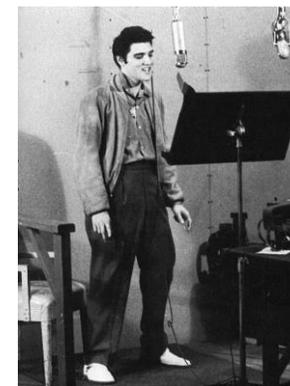
More info:



Tracks: 1) That's All Right; 2) Lawdy, Miss Clawdy; 3) **Mystery Train**; 4) Playing For Keeps; 5) Poor Boy; 6) My Baby Left Me; 7) I Was The One; 8) Shake, Rattle And Roll; 9) I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone; 10) You're A Heartbreaker.

REVIEW

It is amusing that it took Elvis Presley's induction in the US army to familiarize at least some of his younger fans with some of his oldest quality material from the early days at Sun Records. As part of RCA's strategy to keep the artist's legacy fresh in the public eye before his eagerly awaited triumphant return as a national hero, two short LPs of Elvis' «leftovers» were released in 1959, featuring very, *very* heavily randomized selections of previously issued singles, occasional album tracks, and an even more occasional previously unreleased track or two. Neither of the two has any legitimate place in today's world of carefully curated chronological compilations, but it is still useful to include both in this narrative, if only to (a) remember what a weird world it was back in 1959 and (b) have a pretext to gush over some of the early Sun-era singles without having to wait all the way up to 1976, when RCA finally did it more or less the right way by putting together **The Sun Sessions**.



At least they did a sensible thing by putting up 'That's All Right Mama', the one that started it all, as track #1. Listening back on it today and comparing it to the Arthur Crudup original from 1947, I am actually startled at how little change Elvis and his mini-team of Scotty Moore and Bill Black introduced to the song — all they did was speed it up a bit (it was already a fast dance number in Crudup's version) and put more emphasis on the bass than the guitars. If you ever wanted to join in on the

«white man stealing the black man's thunder» crusade, this, in fact, would be quite the place — there is plenty of that early rock'n'roll excitement in Arthur's version already, except that the message is delivered by a whiny old black bluesman rather than an exuberant young white hillbilly; and while Moore's guitar work does indeed smoothen the bluesy edges of the original and goes some way to «countrify» the recording, it is easy to understand why Elvis and the boys felt so nervous about putting the song out in public. Indeed, the role of 'That's All Right Mama' in history should probably be defined as «the moment when white boys seriously got into black men's music», not as «the moment when a completely new musical style was invented» — I don't really see the *fundamental* differences between the two versions, at least not on a level when subtle changes in musical style and arrangement are converted into different types of emotional responses.

Where this revolution *does* properly occur, I think, is on 'Mystery Train', possibly *the* most essential early Sun-era track of them all, especially when you play it next to the original by Junior Parker. [The musical source](#) is a classic slow jump-blues tune in its own right, with a sweet, sorrowful vocal delivery delicately echoed by deep brass sighs and pretty guitar soloing; and equally commendable — if we really want to pay all our dues — is Parker's proto-rockabilly sound on '[Love My Baby](#)', the song that was actually chosen as the basis for Elvis' arrangement of 'Mystery Train'. Both tracks are solid examples of early Fifties' R&B, but neither could be called genuinely outstanding or innovative by the standards of their era.

The biggest difference is that while Elvis' 'Mystery Train' has less soul in it than Parker's version, it actually has *mystery* — as represented by the strange echo-laden sound that Moore and Black get from their instruments: an oddly reverberating *rocking* effect, where each new chord relentlessly pushes and propels you forward, and each new «hiccup» from the yet-to-be-crowned King awakens something dark and rebellious inside your brain. It is the kind of sound that would soon be picked up and amplified by rockabilly giants such as Gene Vincent, but while Gene would certainly make his own advances in terms of loudness, wildness, and sheer maniacal energy, I would not presume to say that the pure class of 'Mystery Train', its subtle combination of restraint with hidden menace, has ever been outdone by any guys in leather jackets.

To put it bluntly, Parker's 'Mystery Train' is a chunk of drama, and Parker's 'Love My Baby' is a round of entertainment, but Elvis' 'Mystery Train' is an *uprising*. If we only think of rock'n'roll in purely technical terms — chord sequences, speed, instrumentation — then Elvis and his mini-team certainly did not invent rock'n'roll. If we think of true rock'n'roll as a force of defiance, shock, straightahead emotional brutality, then they almost certainly did, and 'Mystery Train' is their first ample proof of that invention. I could, perhaps, see the average white parent in 1955 enduring the psychological pressure of 'That's All Right Mama'; I could hardly imagine them keeping their cool to 'Mystery Train'.

Strange enough, RCA executives thought that these two songs were quite sufficient for a shot of Sun-era rock'n'roll, and only threw in two more tracks from the early sessions, both of which are more in the country than in the blues vein — 'I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone' and 'You're A Heartbreaker', the «softer» musical compromises, both of which are perfectly listenable but would have worked better if taken at a slower pace and recorded by the likes of Hank Williams. (There is actually a [slow, bluesier version](#) of 'I'm Left', allowing for Elvis to show a little more soul, but they probably decided to go along with a snappier, speedier take because all the kids wanna dance, after all).

Perhaps this selection was meant to introduce a little balance, since we also have two bona fide rock'n'roll numbers from the RCA transition era — sitting next to 'That's All Right' and 'Mystery Train' we find the later recordings of 'My Baby Left Me' and 'Shake, Rattle & Roll' — for those who want to hear a more «modern» Elvis: louder, broader, angrier, and with an actual drum sound (which is very important for both of those songs). There is no more mystery angle in 'Shake', though — just relentless maniacal rock'n'roll, crowned by a couple of Scotty Moore guitar solos that sound like rapid shoot-outs in the streets between two equally talented and equally bulletproof gunslingers. There is a bit of it retained in 'My Baby Left Me', though, and it is interesting to note that, although this song was also pilfered from Arthur Crudup's repertoire — in fact, it was really just the one hundred and tenth re-write of 'That's All Right' — *this* time the differences are far more pronounced, starting with D. J. Fontana's masterful transformation of Judge Riley's original jazzy drum lead-in into a simpler, but instantly memorable and totally iconic *thwack-thwack-boom-thwack* snare-kick intro. The original lead-in reads: «Gene Krupa taught us all to be Superman». The Elvis lead-in reads: «TO BATTLE!». Make your pick.

Since the remaining four songs were all verbally covered or at least mentioned in the bonus track listings to Elvis' first RCA albums, we shall skip them and mention instead that this particular point in Elvis' discography is also as good a time as any to remind the reader about some of the songs which Elvis had specifically pre-recorded in 1958 before his army stint in Germany to serve as true all-national reminders that the King would always be at the nation's disposal.

Thus, right before **For LP Fans Only**, in late 1958, we had 'One Night' (a «cleaner» re-recording of 'One Night Of Sin') with 'I Got Stung' as its twin A-side — 'One Night' is not one of my favs, but 'I Got Stung' is a totally hardcore two-minute stunner from Aaron Schroeder, as close to noise-rock as it could be at the time, at least in terms of production which combines a breakneck pace, a set of bumbling back vocals fusing together with the bassline, a minimalistic head-drilling piano riff whose primal power would not really be beat until at least John Cale's one-note piano part on the Stooges' 'I Wanna Be Your Dog', and a lead vocal part that is barely comprehensible — rapid, mumbly, slurry, delirious, and

Only Solitaire

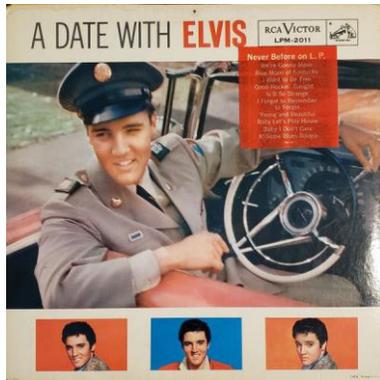
Artist: *Elvis Presley*

Album: *For LP Fans Only (1959)*

George Starostin's Reviews

dangerous. One quick listen to this thing, and any fan worrying about Elvis' post-army future could rest easy... deluded, perhaps, but comfortably happy in said delusion. In between such a powerful single and such a mighty, if short, reminder of the original power of the King as this LP, it's like nothing could go wrong, right?





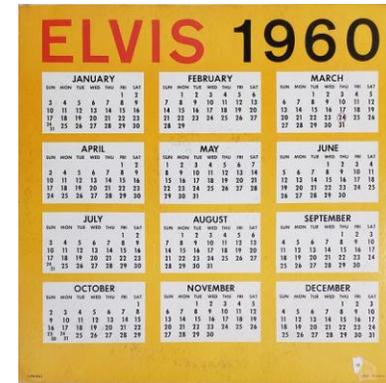
A DATE WITH ELVIS

Album released:

July 24, 1959

V
A
L
U
E
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4
4
2
4

More info:



Tracks: 1) Blue Moon Of Kentucky; 2) Young And Beautiful; 3) (You're So Square) Baby I Don't Care; 4) Milkcow Blues Boogie; 5) Baby Let's Play House; 6) Good Rockin' Tonight; 7) Is It So Strange; 8) We're Gonna Move; 9) I Want To Be Free; 10) I Forgot To Remember To Forget.

REVIEW

I suppose that if you *really* wanted to have a date with Elvis in the summer of 1959, you'd have to go to Germany, sneak inside a U.S. Army base, and be incarcerated as a potential Soviet spy. But if you were willing to settle for the next best thing and save yourself a lot of hassle, RCA Victor Records still had the power to placate you with more stuff from the vaults — five songs on this mini-LP go back to the Sun era, and five more are culled from various later sources. With this push, the Sun backlog was almost exhausted, yet it cannot be said that RCA left the least for last: 'Blue Moon Of Kentucky', 'Milkcow Blues Boogie', 'Baby Let's Play House' and 'Good Rockin' Tonight' are every bit as fabulous as it gets with early Elvis — and the only reason why I am leaving out 'I Forgot To Remember To Forget' is that it takes things more slowly and sentimentally, being a better fit for fans of country balladry than good old-fashioned rock'n'roll.



And speaking of good old-fashioned rock'n'roll, its entire philosophy just might be condensed in that false opening of 'Milkcow Blues Boogie', which seems to amicably mock the ancient slow blues tradition — that "*hold it fellas, that don't*

MOVE me, let's get real, real GONE for a change!" bit when Elvis stops the «first take» and directs his bandmates to speed up and rip it up is like an artificial recreation of the celebrated epochal moment of truth during the sessions for 'That's Alright Mama' — though, I suppose, not that much more artificial than the flag-raising photosession on Iwo Jima: both moves recreated events that were so fresh and recent, they might just as well simply been stretching out the space-time continuum a bit. It is that particular twilight zone where lines between theater and reality get fuzzy.

Anyway, instead of moaning the blues *à la* Sleepy John Estes, which he could never convincingly do anyway, Elvis turns 'Milkcow Blues Boogie' into the punkiest of all his early tunes — the level of testosterone here would not be outdone until 'Hound Dog' — and sets the tone for countless cover versions to follow, from the Kinks to Aerosmith and beyond. Remember that it is really a murderous song, no flinching about it: "get out your little prayer book, get down on your knees and pray", "you're gonna be sorry you treated me this way" and the like are delivered by Elvis in much the same way they would be delivered to Desdemona by a modern day Othello, much less courteous and well-spoken than in Shakespearian times and much more prone to quick action — and although Elvis is inheriting, rather than inventing, that tradition, his gruff, lead-heavy vocal performance raises the stakes considerably, as the man clearly revels in this play with fire. This is the kind of material that makes it easy to understand the «danger» that American parents perceived in the young fellow — and you don't even have to watch any hip-swiveling to feel it in your bones sixty years on.

The same applies to 'Baby Let's Play House' — let us not completely forget Arthur Gunter's [fun-filled original](#), but with the increased tempo, the trembling-rumbling echoey bass drive, and the hiccupy we-want-it-and-we-want-it-now vocal performance, Elvis fully appropriates the song: not so much for specifically *white* audiences as, much more importantly, for *young* audiences, getting this stuff out in the open air despite its originally being reserved for relatively reclusive and generally «mature» listeners. (Sometimes we need to be reminded that before these Sun sessions, roughly speaking, music specifically targeted for the young did not even *exist*, much like children's literature did not exist before the likes of Lewis Carroll and Frank Baum). Furthermore, it is one thing to issue an invitation to «play house» if you are past the age of 30, but the effect of such an invitation on the mind of a hormonally-troubled teenager in 1955 could certainly be compared with the effect of 'Darling Nikki' on Karenna Gore thirty years later. The only saving grace is that, most likely, 90% of parents and kids alike did not have a good understanding of what «play house» actually meant. (Now only imagine if Gunter, and Elvis after him, would save everybody some linguistic trouble and straightforwardly name the song 'Baby Let's Live Out Of Wedlock' instead!).

In a similar way, Elvis took Wynonie Harris' jump-blues classic 'Good Rockin' Tonight', sped it up, delivered it from its «respectable» saxophone-heavy arrangement, replacing the sax with stinging, scorching, but strictly disciplined Scotty Moore guitar licks, and turned it from a nightclub standard into a school ball anthem, omitting all of the song's dated lyrical references to imaginary characters like Sweet Lorraine and adding the "we're gonna rock, we're gonna rock" bridge for emphasis. That Scotty Moore solo, by the way, is one of my personal favorites: unlike many others, which Moore probably just made up on the spot from a (sometimes genially, sometimes not) randomized selection of stock country licks, this one is pre-meditated, simple, geometrically exquisite, perfectly shaped and making great use of microtones, a classic example of emotionally charged sonic greatness made with very limited means — in some ways, still unsurpassed to this very day.

The earliest of all of these is 'Blue Moon Of Kentucky', the original B-side to 'That's All Right Mama' — and just as symbolic for the future as the latter. In a way, that first single could be construed as a powerful claim to racial equality in the face of rock'n'roll: 'That's All Right Mama' put the classic black spirit in the new automobile of rockabilly, whereas 'Blue Moon Of Kentucky' did precisely the same for the classic white spirit, turning Bill Monroe's bluegrass standard into something the Blue Grass Boys could never have foreseen coming back in 1945. (After Elvis' version came out, Monroe would rearrange the song so as to do the first half in the old-fashioned waltzy way, and the second half in the new-fashioned boogie way — not even an old codger like that could withstand the power of true rock'n'roll!).

No wonder that next to these early, ground-breaking, exciting Sun classics all that later RCA material pales a bit, especially after Elvis went really heavy on the doo-wop ballads. On the album, new material is carefully intertwined with the old shit, but it is impossible not to note the difference — cleaner, brighter production and richer arrangements at the expense of raw rock'n'roll energy and minimalist, in-yer-face youthful aggression. Additionally, the odds cannot help but be stacked in favor of Sun-era singles simply because most of the RCA-era stuff is pulled off from the lesser tracks on previously released EPs such as **Jailhouse Rock** and **Love Me Tender**. You put 'Milkcow Blues Boogie' up against 'Hound Dog' or 'Jailhouse Rock' and you can have yourself a debate; put it up against 'We're Gonna Move' and the case is closed.

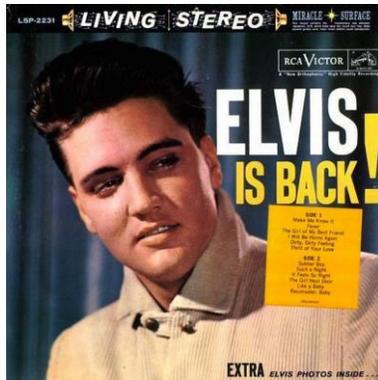
Anyway, since I have already briefly touched upon most of those songs in previous reviews, let's not talk about them any more and, instead, once again use this opportunity to discuss the last couple of singles that were released during Elvis' army stint, stemming from the same 1958 Nashville session that yielded 'One Night' and 'I Got Stung'. Of these, 'I Need Your Love Tonight' is a fun, catchy, hard-driving pop-rock tune brimming with nothing but positive energy — yet, like most of the great rockers, Elvis is always at his best when a bit of devilishness is thrown into the pot, so the real kicker of 1959, and

one of my favorite Elvis recordings of all time, was 'A Big Hunk O' Love', notable not only for its ultra-tightness and humor, but also for giving a great chance to Floyd Cramer and Hank Garland, two major architects of the classic Nashville sound, to shine respectively on piano and lead guitar. (Originally, I was all but devastated to learn that it was not our man Scotty to play the six-string on this track, but give Hank plenty of credit for deceiving me by incorporating some of Scotty's guitar-whipping aesthetics into his own style here for consistency.)

I think what gets me most about 'A Big Hunk O' Love' is that it literally feels like the tightest wound-up spring in Elvis' entire career — the whole song, with its unceasing flurry of quarter-notes from all the instruments, is delivered on one breath, while managing to avoid the impression of «cacophonic messiness» into which the band accidentally plunged with the production of 'I Got Stung' (also a great and sonically unique recording, but a tad crazier than the acceptable requirements for pure rock'n'roll fun). Within this context, Elvis, Floyd, and Hank form a three-headed monster, each of whose heads is a hyperactive equivalent to Jim Carrey on amphetamines — vocals, piano, and guitar flow in and out of each other without giving you a chance to catch your breath, and none of the three parts cracks or stutters even once. I cannot even begin to imagine what sort of combination of professionalism *and* inspiration is needed to produce that sort of level of collective rock'n'roll tightness; the closest analogy in my brain would probably be the Clash's version of 'Brand New Cadillac' from **London Calling**, and it is also quite telling that not a single live version of either of the two songs I have ever heard (Elvis would later incorporate 'Hunk' into his regular set on his post-«comeback» tours) came anywhere close to matching the aggressive tightness of the studio takes — such unique events simply cannot be replicated.

Thus, with the release of 'A Big Hunk O' Love', «Fifties' Elvis» goes out on the highest note possible, every bit as true to his image and original aesthetics as the last Beatles songs would be for the Beatles — «Sixties' Elvis» would be a significantly, if not completely, different animal that one may be free to endorse or decline, but may *not* be free to compare to the original beast who single-handedly did more to raise and justify the self-confidence of young people than the entire teen-pop scene of the past fifty years. (And I'm only stating this in such an explicit manner so as to psychologically prepare us for forgiving the fellow his many, many sins against man's intellectual evolution in the next decade).





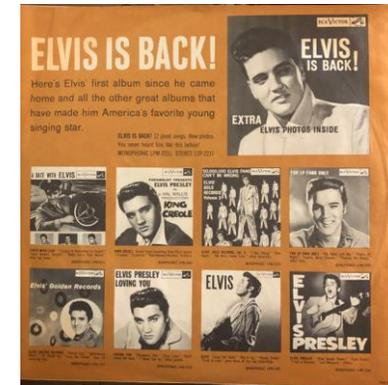
ELVIS IS BACK!

Album released:

April 8, 1960

V A L U E
3 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Make Me Know It; 2) Fever; 3) The Girl Of My Best Friend; 4) I Will Be Home Again; 5) Dirty, Dirty Feeling; 6) The Thrill Of Your Love; 7) Soldier Boy; 8) Such A Night; 9) It Feels So Right; 10) The Girl Next Door; 11) Like A Baby; 12) Reconsider Baby; 13*) Stuck On You; 14*) Fame And Fortune; 15*) Are You Lonesome Tonight?; 16*) I Gotta Know; 17*) A Mess Of Blues; 18*) It's Now Or Never.

REVIEW

"It is almost universally accepted that Elvis, who never saw active service, 'died' in the army. Yet *Elvis Is Back*, recorded in Nashville on his release, is arguably Presley's masterpiece, in which he tackles ballads, blues, rock, pop and gospel with a quality of control that somehow makes his innate sensuality even more potent..". Thus quoth Neil McCormick of *The Daily Telegraph* in a 2015 assessment of Elvis' best albums, and I'd just like to bounce off this particular quotation while coming to terms with Elvis' 1960s legacy because I'm a little fascinated by its internal contradictions (not that internal contradictions in a piece of musical criticism are necessarily a bad thing — music is, after all, a confusing mess by definition, and it often makes the brain work in confusing and frustrating ways, which is ultimately a very natural thing).



The catch here is that Neil McCormick, like most people, would *probably* agree that much, if not most, of Elvis' career in the Sixties represented a gradual slide into corniness, self-parody, and irrelevance — and since any such slide has to have a

reasonable starting point *somewhere*, would he really draw a massive dividing line between **Elvis Is Back!** — an alleged «masterpiece» — and whatever came *after* it, starting with, say, **G.I. Blues**? It is not really an issue of «good» or «bad»; it is an issue of changing musical values, of setting upon a different path of development which may, one day, lead to artistic bliss or complete artistic breakdown. I certainly like **Elvis Is Back!** quite a bit, but I could never bestow the title of «masterpiece» upon it (at least, provided we're only allowed *one* masterpiece) precisely because this is where the seeds of Elvis' impending decline are sown for all to see; and the recent retrospective drive to upgrade its status to VIP level seems rather telling for an age that shows more and more propensity for branding the «tepidly mediocre» in pop culture as the new «emotionally exciting».

In reality, Elvis — or, perhaps, «The Elvis Machine», as would be appropriate to refer to the artistic world of Elvis by that time — was no more exempt from the «Fifties' Curse» than any of his contemporaries: having already *once* invented his own rules of the game, he had no inclination or stimulus whatsoever to try and change the rules one more time. But that was only one part of the story — had it just been the «Fifties' Curse», we might have seen Elvis churning out pale inferior shadows of 'Heartbreak Hotel' and 'Hound Dog' throughout the decade, the same way Chuck Berry and Gene Vincent did, for instance. The *other* part of the story, of course, was that Elvis was King, and as King, he had certain moral obligations to his nation — for instance, the obligation to grow up from Teenager to Man, setting up a proper «maturity example» for the millions of young Americans remaining in dire need of a role model. At least Chuck Berry and Gene Vincent were totally free of any such obligations; Elvis was not. Had he married an underage cousin or something like that, God would probably have spared him any further embarrassments. But he was a «good boy» — too good for his own sake, perhaps.

I am not entirely sure when people started entertaining the actual idea that "*Elvis 'died' in the Army*" (which, if I am not mistaken, stems from a John Lennon quotation from one of his interviews). Certainly legions of fans, both in America and across the Atlantic, were impatiently waiting for the god of rock'n'roll to come back and provide them with a new flow of energetic classics — and the small amount of stuff that Elvis recorded while on furlough, such as 'I Got Stung' and 'A Big Hunk O' Love', was definitely promising, showing the exact same kind of rock'n'roll bite as most of his 1950s RCA output. Just how many people were seriously disappointed with **Elvis Is Back!** and its surrounding singles such as 'Stuck On You' at the time of release is something we'll never know — but I think it would be a fair guess that John Lennon, for instance, was not impressed, or else the whole "*dying in the Army*" thing wouldn't have become a thing.

Of course, there is no impenetrable iron curtain that separates **Elvis Is Back!** from its predecessors. Elvis had already

recorded plenty of pop songs and sentimental ballads before; and while there is not really even a single straightforward rock'n'roll song à la 'Blue Suede Shoes' on this record, it does feature a small bunch of grittier numbers in a bluesy vein ('Like A Baby' and 'Reconsider Baby', above all) which could easily appeal to a demanding musical taste (at least, back at the time). There is no single 'Da Ya Think I'm Sexy?' kind of moment here where the artist crosses a very specific artistic border that separates the likes of «erotic modeling» from «pornography». But there is clearly a focused intention to show the world a 'new' Elvis, one who has left the style of 'Blue Suede Shoes' and 'Hound Dog' behind because it is clearly embarrassing for anybody over 25 years old to sing the likes of 'Hound Dog' — particularly for a King.

All of this is already clearly illustrated with 'Stuck On You', Elvis' first officially released post-Army single that predated the LP by a couple of weeks. On one hand, 'Stuck On You' is a disappointment — it is a relatively quiet, unhurried, blues-poppy creation from the brain of Aaron Schroeder, nowhere near the maniacal level of noise and energy that was 'I Got Stung', written by the same guy and recorded less than two years ago. On the other hand, it's not as if Elvis had never done well-received blues-poppy material like 'Stuck On You' before — there is nothing that would make it intrinsically worse than, say, 'Don't Be Cruel' or 'Paralyzed'. It's got the self-assured macho attitude a-plenty, too, and a super-tight Nashville backing with all of Elvis' great sidemen involved (Scotty Moore, Hank Garland, Floyd Cramer, you name 'em), and the Jordanaires return for their usual role of Resplendent Retinue (gotta love how they «open the doors» for the main vocal hook at the end of each verse, right?). It's a pretty damn good song — just maybe *not* the kind of song that Elvis' most loyal and steadfast fans would expect him to announce his comeback with.

The *real* bad news of March 23, 1960, was the B-side: 'Fame And Fortune', a thoroughly formulaic doo-wop ballad from the embarrassingly lazy hands of the Fred Wise / Ben Weisman team, is the first and the most typical representative of the «tepid Elvis ballad» for the upcoming decade. Take something in a similar style from just a few years back — say, 'I Need You So' from **Loving You** — play the two tracks back-to-back a couple of times, and the meaning of the word «sanitized» shall crystallize right before your eyes, clear as day. In the place of a rougher, rawer style as practiced not just by Elvis, but by his entire band, we have a professional, tight arrangement where everybody quietly keeps to their own business, not allowing themselves *any* freedom; and in the place of a singer who once captivated his audiences by breaking all the «rules of decency» even while singing sentimental love ballads is an equally tightly disciplined crooner, whose voice feels more oriented at middle-aged ladies in a Las Vegas casino than a hormone-addled teenager. (Far be it from me, of course, to discriminate one of these target groups over another — but it *does* go without saying that boundary-breaking art has more often been created when trying to pander to hormone-addled teenagers than to middle-aged ladies in Las Vegas casinos.) At

least 'Stuck On You' was a bouncy, catchy, well-written pop song; 'Fame And Fortune' is one of those throwaway compositions whose value is completely dependent on the style of delivery — and this particular style, wallowing in its own so-called «maturity», pretty much spells out an extended death sentence for the musical career of Elvis Presley.

The actual LP, recorded during the same late March / early April sessions in Nashville as the single, is fully consistent with the promise of its A- and B-sides — typically alternating between fun, catchy pop songs and crooning ballads, all tied together with this new, tightly disciplined and restrained sound from everybody involved. A small part of the blame could perhaps be placed on Chet Atkins, the great Nashville discipliner, as co-producer, but let's not pin *everything* on the alleged Nashville strictness: 'A Big Hunk O' Love' was also cut at Nashville, and somehow managed to combine tightness with maniacal excitement. The bottomline is that if you really want to get wild in Nashville, you *can* get wild in Nashville; it's just that in April 1960, nobody wanted to get wild in Nashville.

Arguably the only small echo of that old wildness comes out with 'Dirty, Dirty Feeling', a very short Coasters-style pop-rock number (with Boots Randolph providing the obligatory yakety-sax backing throughout) which, not surprisingly, comes from the remains of the old Leiber-Stoller stock (although Colonel Parker would keep those guys away from Elvis, he apparently did not have a serious problem with Elvis revisiting the old archives). It's very lightweight, nothing particularly special, but it's got a fast tempo, a pretty demonic, out-of-control guitar break (probably Hank Garland rather than Scotty), and such a high-pitched, frenetic delivery from Elvis that you could honestly mistake this for a recording from circa 1957-58, probably the only such case on the entire album.

Alas, *much* more typical here are songs like the opening 'Make Me Know It', a rather average piece from the usually reliable Otis Blackwell which *should* be working along the same lines as a 'Treat Me Nice', but actually does not, and what kills it is, once again, the lack of rawness — everything is tight as a button, and what once used to be a lively, nervous, hiccupy, unpredictable vocal style has turned into a self-assured, evenly paced, «adult» delivery. The vocal timbre, the phrasing, the pacing, all of that is still unmistakably and uniquely Elvis, but the difference is that just a few years ago he and his band could elevate a generic pop throwaway to the status of a classic; in 1960, in order to be truly memorable, a song on an Elvis album had to have at least a pinch of compositional genius — otherwise, you ended up with this middle-of-the-road stuff like 'Make Me Know It', which sounds kinda cool while it's on and then goes out the window immediately.

By contrast, it is hardly possible to forget 'Fever', yet this is largely because most of the creative work on that song had already been done by Peggy Lee (the [original version](#), released by the somewhat obscure R&B singer Little Willie John, was

OK, but clearly it was Peggy Lee who really brought to light all of the song's unique potential with that bass-'n'-percussion arrangement and all). With its glitzy-sensual reputation and all, 'Fever' is a number which is probably very hard to be taken *not* tongue-in-cheek in the modern day and age (even I have to confess that 'Fever' works best with [the Muppets](#)), but at least it is a good showcase for Elvis' new-found «maturity»: Peggy Lee may have found the perfect way to make the song work and turn it into something unique, but it took Elvis to really bring a «feverish» aspect to the singing — it's not just the deep tone, it's the *wobble* in the voice that matters. It is Elvis' most theatrical delivery on the entire album, and also one that, I think, he would be incapable of earlier (although a few of these dramatic elements in his voice do crop up as early as the Sun era — see 'Blue Moon' and suchlike), which kind of makes me wish that, perhaps, if he really cared so much about sounding more «adult» and all, he might have simply tried to record an entire album of vocal jazz like this.

On the other hand, while I might be alone on this, I am not so sure of Elvis as a great *blues* singer. Surprisingly, **Elvis Is Back!** is capped off with not one, but *two* slow blues tunes: Jesse Stone's 'Like A Baby' and Lowell Fulson's 'Reconsider Baby', taken at more or less the same tempos and given the same piano-and-sax-centered arrangements. They're decent, and they certainly sound a bit more raggedy-shraggedy than the glossy pop songs on the album, and the Boots Randolph-led two-verse jam on 'Reconsider Baby' is a nice boost to the entire band... but I honestly do not see what it is exactly that Elvis' delivery brings to the table that was not already present in [Fulson's classic original](#); besides, the song is really more like a vehicle for cool guitar soloing than vocalizing, so I'd rather listen to people like Eric Clapton covering it than Elvis. Now it goes without saying that hearing Elvis rock out on a slow blues jam with his Nashville buddies is a *way* better proposition than hearing him do his Vegas stuff; but even so, *this* cat was born to give chicks 'Fever', not waste his time on blues triplets. Mick Jagger could give the blues a new voice; Elvis really couldn't.

(Important correction, however: he could give a pretty damn solid voice to «blues-pop» — 'A Mess Of Blues', recorded during the same sessions and later released as the B-side to 'It's Now Or Never', is a terrific performance, but that is because its melody and structure give Elvis a better opportunity to showcase his trembling, vulnerable, quivers-down-my-backbone voice; he doesn't have that much luck with the nonchalantly threatening style of 'Reconsider Baby' which simply does not give him a good opportunity to play Emotional Elvis, and who needs a non-Emotional Elvis?).

In between the fabulous «jazz-pop» of 'Fever' and the somewhat less jaw-dropping «blues-rock» of the 'Baby' songs, we largely find what we expected to find — pop ditties and crooner ballads, some a bit nicer than others, but none really matching the strength and freshness of what used to be. Tired old chord sequences married to tightly predictable Nashville

arrangements and well-disciplined, but not tremendously exciting vocal arrangements — listen to something like ‘Soldier Boy’ and you’ll hear all of Elvis’ tried-and-true vocal tricks, but *restrained* this time, as if he were simply too afraid to wake up the neighbors or something. Of all this remaining stuff, my personal favorite is probably a cover of the Drifters’ ‘Such A Night’ — Elvis’ loving tributes to Clyde McPhatter are always adorable, and at least this one here’s a real naughty one, particularly the ending, which horndog Elvis and his «slutty» Jordanaires retinue somehow manage to turn into the dirtiest bit of moaning on record since Ray Charles’ ‘What’d I Say’ (I made sure to revisit the original Drifters recording and, sure enough, there was *nothing* like that set of ecstatic *oohs* and *aahs* in Clyde McPhatter’s coda).

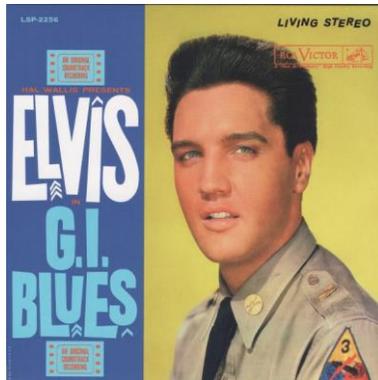
On the whole, as you can already tell, **Elvis Is Back!** is quite a bit of a mess. In a way, Elvis’ post-Army career is not so much «flat-out awful» as it is frustratingly intriguing — few artists had the same mix of highs and lows for such a long time, a Jekyll-and-Hyde sort of thing going on where sometimes Man temporarily triumphs over Machine, but more often it is the Machine that engulfs and enslaves the Man, and the end is always tragic. Here, we see the beginning of the process where Man and Machine sort of work in tandem, with a seemingly mutually beneficial compromise whose consequences, however, in the not-so-long run shall be as strictly determinant as those of the Munich Agreement. In any case, there is no sin in liking this record, in singing along to even its sappiest bits, even in thinking that ‘Reconsider Baby’ is a truly great piece of slow blues if you so desire. There is, however — returning full circle to the quotation at the beginning of the review — something deeply wrong in overrating this record, daring to call it a «masterpiece» and thus insinuate that somehow, it embodies genuine, if not monumental, artistic progress for Elvis compared to his pre-Army years. Statements like these basically put an equality sign between the type of art that dashingly challenges formula and the one that largely conforms to its rules, which I find deeply unjust. (It is true that «challenging formula» is not the only necessary condition for great art, but, fortunately, Elvis had no problems satisfying all those conditions in the Fifties).

Case in point: my favorite track on the expanded CD edition of the album has always been ‘I Gotta Know’, the B-side to the boring ballad ‘Are You Lonesome Tonight?’ released late in 1960, but also recorded at the same sessions. The song, written by Paul Evans and originally recorded by Cliff Richard in a more countrified version, is given an absolutely perfect pop arrangement here, catchy as hell and featuring brilliant vocal harmonizing between Elvis and the Jordanaires. The drums, the bass, the piano, the slightly sratchy weave of the rhythm guitar, the perfect choreography of the backing vocals — it’s like a geometrically precise rococo construction without a single flaw in the complex design; even a next-generation pop-meister like Paul McCartney would have a hard time topping something like this. But if I had to choose between ‘I Gotta Know’ and something, like, say, ‘Milkcow Blues Boogie’? (It’s a good thing I don’t). It’s not an issue of «pop» versus «rock»,

mind you; it's more an issue of inspiration versus perspiration, of ecstasy versus craft, all of the good and evil of which can be found in «pop», «rock», «blues», «jazz», whatever label the algorithm sticks on it.

That said, I do not want to make it seem as if «craft» and «perspiration» by themselves are necessarily a bad thing, even if the balance of powers is completely overthrown and all the good cards are on their side. It is, after all, quite possible that, had Elvis had the strength to resist the Machine and stubbornly stuck to his rock'n'roll formula, all he would be capable of would be mediocre self-plagiarism (like, indeed, most of the stuff that Chuck Berry did in his post-Fifties career); there is little reason to argue that, if not for Colonel Parker and the rest of the Memphis Mafia, Elvis' career would have flourished (although it is true that he would probably spend less time on his stupid movies). His submissive placing himself in the hands of «professionals» did bring on mixed results, but said «professionals» weren't exactly mindless, soulless, heartless automatons — accusing the Nashville session players of not loving music or not understanding its purpose would be totally ridiculous. What they *could* be accused of is a lack of ambitions: for most of those guys, music was there to entertain people, giving them what they already want rather than suggesting there might be something *else* out there. The entire point of Elvis' «maturity» was to subscribe to that philosophy — a subscription fully and completely responsible for both his high and low points from now on, and, ultimately, for August 16, 1977.





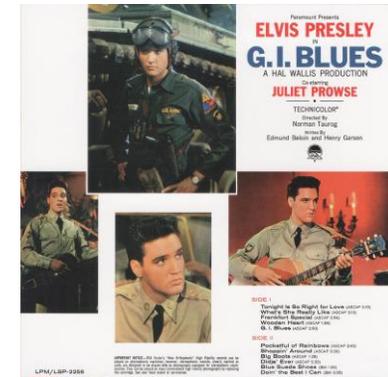
G. I. BLUES

Album released:

September 23, 1960

V A L U E
3 2 2 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Tonight Is So Right For Love; 2) What's She Really Like; 3) Frankfort Special; 4) Wooden Heart; 5) G. I. Blues; 6) Pocketful Of Rainbows; 7) Shoppin' Around; 8) Big Boots; 9) Didja' Ever; 10) Blue Suede Shoes; 11) Doin' The Best I Can.

REVIEW

Allow me to start this with a bit of personal trivia: this re-recorded stereo version of 'Blue Suede Shoes' was the first one I'd ever heard (as opposed to the 1956 original), since, for some reason, it was included on my large vinyl compilation (French, I think) of Elvis' greatest hits instead of the original — by mistake, probably, since I have no information on the re-recording ever being put out as a single, in France or anywhere else. Regardless, the result of this confusion is that I have always remained more partial to this version, by way of sheer nostalgia; yet it is interesting and instructive to play the 1956 and 1960 versions back-to-back — if only to witness with your own eyes and ears how slightly sloppy, but seductively wild youthful exuberance subtly gives way to intentional restraint and self-consciously «mature» professionalism.



On the original, Elvis' voice is a bit deeper and more intimidating, sounding like he is literally jumping at your throat with each line, totally in the throes of rock'n'roll power to the point of barely holding it together. Come 1960, the vocal delivery is calmer, more natural, maybe a bit more homely, without any exuberant ad-libbing — you can actually picture him sitting

down for this one, rather than girating his hips all over the microphone stand. In terms of actual musical backing, though, the second version has a much clearer and «chuggier» acoustic rhythm track, and Scotty Moore's new guitar solos are a bit more smooth, complex, and melodic as opposed to the more «string-tearing» techniques of the original. In short, this is as classic a case as any of bartering away a solid chunk of aggressive energy for extra clarity of sound and melodicy — fortunately, not *too* much, so that both versions can be appreciated. I'd suggest the 1956 version on your headphones when going to work in the morning, and the 1960 version when heading back after a hard day's work. (Some people might prefer exactly the other way round, though).

If I were pressed into choosing only one out of two for a desert island collection, I suppose I'd have to clench my teeth and forfeit my childhood experience — after all, this *is* rock'n'roll, not Tin Pan Alley — but even with all that extra smoothness, it is useless to deny that 'Blue Suede Shoes' still retains the rock'n'roll edge on the re-recording, and that even with this «maturity adjustment» check, post-army Elvis still understood the magic of rock'n'roll better than just about anybody around him, never forgetting what it takes to get a good groove going. If only the same could be said about the rest of this soundtrack! But Elvis, or, rather, the business people surrounding Elvis, had a different agenda in mind: *G. I. Blues*, his first post-army movie, had to deliver a clean, wholesome image of American military personnel for the whole world to see, and that meant that the music had to comply to «family-oriented» demands — including a [nice, long look at Juliet Prowse's legs](#) that was sure to strengthen traditional American morale, as opposed to degenerate rock'n'roll energy.

One has only to take a look at the list of songwriters engaged in creating the movie soundtrack to see what has gone wrong. Abner Silver, the author of '[Bashful Baby](#)' and 'On The Beach At Bali-Bali'. Sid Tepper, the author of '[Red Roses For A Blue Lady](#)' (made into a hit by Guy Lombardo in 1948). Sid Wayne and Sherman Edwards, the authors of '[See You In September](#)'. Ben Weisman, probably the least «square» of this entire lot (it was he who had written 'Crawfish', after all — one of Elvis' most unconventional tunes from the early years), but also as far from rock'n'roll as possible. Essentially just a roll call for all the clean-cut, Brooklyn-born Tin Pan Alley songwriters to assemble an «easy-listening» set that might be allowed to borrow a trick or two from the rock'n'roll era, but only as long as it was integrated and dissipated in the «classic» values of popular songwriting.

Nine out of eleven songs on this record are locked in this mode, the only two exceptions being the above-mentioned re-recording of 'Blue Suede Shoes' and Aaron Schroeder's 'Shoppin' Around', a comically-tinged mid-tempo boogie that would have been considered thoroughly third-rate on any of Elvis' pre-army records, yet here it is a frickin' highlight. As

usual, it relies heavily on Schroeder's beloved stop-and-start tactics, and it's catchy enough, but, unfortunately, the lyrics are so crude and silly this time around ("*you got the hugging-est arms, the thrilling-est eyes*" is something that probably would have made Cole Porter gag on his Scotch) that it is not easy to understand why *this* song in particular would later serve as a role model for the Bonzo Dog Band's Elvis parody 'Death Cab For Cutie' (the one Bonzo Dog Band song that everybody knows because of its inclusion in *Magical Mystery Tour* — and, by the way, Jan Carson, the hot stripper in that particular movie scene, does bear a bit of a resemblance to Juliet Prowse, now that I think of it!).

Admittedly, if we agree to drop the «*traitor!*» attitude and give the Tin Pan Alley spirit a rightful chance, then this setlist is not *that* bad — after all, it is hard to go completely wrong with seasoned pros. There are only two songs here that genuinely make me want to cringe: 'Didja' Ever', an attempt to emulate the spirit of a G.I. marching song that ends up placing Elvis squarely into 'Itsy-Bitsy Spider' mode, and 'Wooden Heart', adapted from a German folk (or army) song and sung in a style with which Elvis himself feels fairly uncomfortable to me. (I'd definitely take Marlene Dietrich's recording of '[Muss I Denn](#)' over Elvis' performance any time: she gives the song, like just about everything she ever sang, a seductively ironic — or was that «ironically seductive»? — reading). Taken together, these two numbers infuse the LP with a made-for-kids feeling that goes starkly against the «mature» image of Elvis in the early Sixties — if anything, it rather gives the impression of an artist descending into infantilism.

Marginally better is 'Frankfort Special', a choo-choo train song whose intro bears a (most likely intentional) superficially pleasant, but disappointing resemblance to 'Mystery Train' — unfortunately, Elvis' call-and-response session with the Jordanaires here is altogether way too cuddly and clean-cut, while the G.I. lyrical clichés quickly get tiring ("*farewell frauleins, don't you cry, you'll soon get another G.I.*" is so 19th century that it probably requires one of those fancy Napoleon grenadier army uniforms to go along with it).

Of all the ballads, Weisman and Wise's 'Pocketful Of Rainbows' may deserve a special mention, with a seductively winding vocal melody and some interesting signature changes between verse and bridge. On the other hand, while 'Tonight Is So Right For Love' proves that Elvis can sing a reworked Jacques Offenbach every bit as efficiently as he can sing a reworked 'O Sole Mio', this overblown serenading style in general has always been and will always remain cheap in essence. All I know is, if I were a girl and Elvis started singing this crap under *my* window, I'd have to send him back to Georgia, 'cause boy that's just where you belong. (Apparently, if you watch Juliet Prowse's facial expression during [the scene when Elvis sings it in the movie](#), you might suspect she's secretly having the same reaction, even if she's too polite to openly express it).

Granted, **G. I. Blues** is only a soundtrack, not a proper LP of original material, but soundtracks *would* soon become a chief component of Elvis' bread and butter for the next decade, and let us not forget that there *was* plenty of greatness to be found on Elvis' soundtrack albums from the Fifties: *Jailhouse Rock* and *King Creole* were both part of the legend, and nobody in his right mind would have to insist on «cutting them some slack» just because the music on those records was somehow subdued to the needs of the movie script.

In comparison, **G.I. Blues** may hold the dubious distinction of our being able to call it the first openly *bad* Elvis album — nowhere near as tasteless and corny as things that were yet to come, but the very first Elvis album where the threat of being eaten up alive by the old-fashioned commercial machine, very faintly looming over the horizon ever since the beginning of his RCA contract and gently knocking on the window with **Elvis Is Back!**, had finally become realized. From now on, the «Elvis Project» would essentially be run by second- and third-rate songwriters from the pre-rock'n'roll era (or even from the pre-World War II era!), adapting their old-fashioned styles to the perceived tastes and values of the rock'n'roll generation — the stage being set for some truly horrendous gastronomic mutations, and Elvis being set up as the business' leading guinea-pig in the matter. The reasons for his amazing pliability and submissiveness throughout these years are better left to a conglomerate of psychiatrists; ours is merely the fate of disillusioned, if, hopefully, somewhat empathetic spectators to this human and artistic tragedy.





HIS HAND IN MINE

Album released:

November 23, 1960

V A L U E
2 3 2 3 3

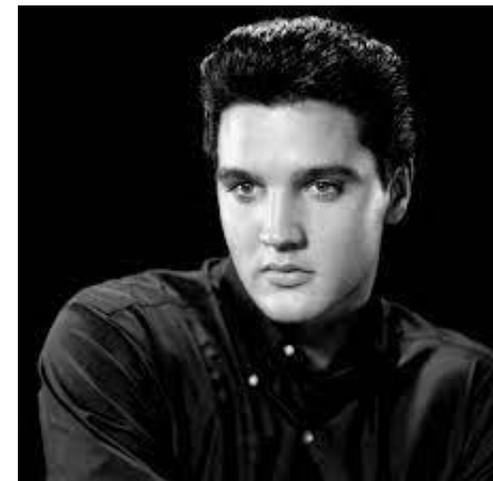
More info:



Tracks: 1) His Hand In Mine; 2) I'm Gonna Walk Dem Golden Stairs; 3) In My Father's House (Are Many Mansions); 4) Milky White Way; 5) Known Only To Him; 6) I Believe In The Man In The Sky; 7) Joshua Fit The Battle; 8) Jesus Knows What I Need; 9) Swing Down Sweet Chariot; 10) Mansion Over The Hilltop; 11) If We Never Meet Again; 12) Working On The Building; 13*) Surrender; 14*) Crying In The Chapel.

REVIEW

In order to appreciate an Elvis gospel album from the early 1960s, you have to be much more of an early 1960s Elvis fan than a gospel fan. Like the several gospel songs that he'd already covered in the previous decade, or all those spiritually-themed Christmas tunes, this material is quite intentionally *never* treated by the artist in some special, solemn, distinctive manner simply because it deals with God's Glory rather than any mundane subject. There are no huge choirs, no grand organs, no feelings of church-sanctioned holiness — if any of these songs had borrowed its lyrics from 'Love Me Tender', you might never suspect anything fishy in the first place. In fact, for all his alleged spirituality and genuine fear of the Creator, Elvis certainly had a very intimate relationship with his Maker, sometimes bordering on the indecent, I'd say. (Then again, what can you expect from a guy who even tried to deviate Mary Tyler Moore from the right path in his last movie?) While he might not have been the first performer who took the idea of «loving the Lord» a little *too* literally, he certainly worked harder on this literal interpretation than anybody who came before him — or, perhaps, even harder than anybody *after* him as well. (Maybe it's just the general confused atmosphere of 1960 that was responsible.)



This romantic relationship with the Lord is seen as a refreshing one by quite a few fans and critics alike, who take pleasure in the quiet and solitary nature of these recordings — sometimes going as far as declaring that **His Hand In Mine** might be one of the greatest gospel albums of all time. Such pronouncements are exaggerated in much the same way as, for instance, calling the Byrds' **Sweetheart Of The Rodeo** one of the greatest country albums of all time: while both of these efforts are enjoyable in their own ways *and* display an intelligent grasp of the essence of the respective genres, major country accolades should probably be left for major country players and the principal gospel awards should be awarded to major gospel singers, such as Sister Rosetta Tharpe or Mahalia Jackson. **His Hand Is Mine** is essentially an album of *ballads*, and if your tolerance level for Elvis' ballads is relatively low, like mine, by the end of the first half of the record you will be wriggling on the edge of your seat, secretly hoping that perhaps along will come Leiber & Stoller and throw their old friend a bone, something like "*everybody on the angels' block, dance to Judgement Day rock*".

From the most basic and formal point of view, this album is more immaculate than the Conception — perfectly sung, perfectly arranged, perfectly produced. Already on the title track you can hear Elvis doing his very best as a singer, utilizing nearly his entire vocal range and pushing The Jordanaires to do the same, while Floyd Cramer at the piano is busy blowing little silvery waves, lapping at the singers' feet. It is the kind of arrangement that totally puts to shame [the original](#) by the Statesmen Quartet, itself no slouch for 1953 but feeling almost vaudevillian next to Elvis' perfect little serenade for his perfect little Lord sitting up there in his perfect little skies. "*Till the day he tells me why / He loves me so / I can feel his hand in mine / That's all I need to know*" — a great way to argue that pronouns really do not matter, because if you change "he" to "she" and "his" to "her" in this particular verse, there shall be no difference whatsoever.

However, as soon as the tempo speeds up and the King's Nashville team begins goading him into a bit of spiritual ecstasy, things start feeling a bit too... old-timey? I'm sure The Jordanaires were delighted to back the man on their own song ('I'm Gonna Walk Dem Golden Stairs' was first recorded by them in 1952, when our hero was still in high school), and as a cuddly piece of catchy, fast gospel-pop, it is quite enjoyable, but throughout Elvis executes the same vocal restraint as The Jordanaires themselves did back in 1952, emphasizing melody and harmony over power and ecstasy — a far cry from the genuine African-American church atmosphere, though it would be naïve to suggest Elvis could be intentionally aiming to imitate such an atmosphere. Later on, the same moderate, «hush-hush» pattern of singing and playing will be present on 'Joshua Fit The Battle', 'Swing Down Sweet Chariot', and 'Working On The Building'; all of these songs play out like some covert church service taking place in a deep basement in some alternate version of America modeling itself after Stalin's

Soviet Russia — keep your voices down, brothers and sisters, the NKVD is always listening. *Joshua fit the battle 'round Jericho* is delivered almost in a fearful whisper, as if it were some incredible rumor passed around... which, come to think of it, it probably was in the first place, about three thousand years back in time.

Needless to say, this kind of restrained, «catacomb» approach has its own charms; but in 1960, the year when untamed rock'n'roll was in serious danger of being expurgated from the public conscience, it might have seemed to some that even the traditional red-hot flame of the gospel performance, for good company, was being put out in the same manner. «*Sure we'd be glad to raise Hell for the Lord, but it's getting late and we really don't want to wake up the kids, so keep the noise level down, please*». In retrospect, now that we are able to look back on 1960 as the year in which rock'n'roll took a quick vacation rather than got a toe tag, such context should no longer be hurting the overall effect — after all, we got enough «loud» and «ecstatic» gospel recordings in our backlog to leave space for a few quiet and intimate ones, right?

Yet even so, I can't help wondering how much more powerful those workouts would have been, had they been put on record *before* the Army — or, at least, had they been produced at some slightly less inhibited location, like Atlantic's studios, for instance (LaVern Baker's ['Saved'](#), in terms of sheer energy, blows everything on this album out of the water — even if it does have a slightly comical sheen to it, which was absolutely *not* Elvis' purpose). Sure, Elvis would have probably completely blurred the line between gospel and rock'n'roll, but (a) that's a line begging to be blurred in the first place, (b) isn't that better than blurring the line between gospel and soft country-pop, which he does on here instead?

Individual comments on individual tracks are very hard to produce; **His Hand In Mine** has two settings — slow / sentimental and fast / playful — and each of these utilizes very similar arrangements and atmospheres. The crucial element for both settings are the interactions between the Apostle (St. Elvis of Tupelo) and the acolytes (The Jordanaires); the element that separates the two is Floyd Cramer's expressive piano playing, functioning as the unseen presence of the Dove of the Holy Spirit on the slow setting — if justice were truly served, I'd say we should be seeing Floyd, rather than Elvis, sitting at that piano on the front cover. Meanwhile, for the fast setting what matters most is the steady, pumping groove of the rhythm section — let it be noted that the entire album features not a single instrumental solo, emphasizing the idea that singing God's praise should be an exercise in collective humility rather than individual self-promotion. (That is, unless the individual in question happens to be St. Elvis of Tupelo himself).

Interestingly, although the official credits for the record list Scotty Moore on electric guitar and Boots Randolph on saxophone, I'm pretty hard pressed to find traces of either instrument on the record — both of them might be hiding somewhere

out there in the shadows, but I'm sure that neither one nor the other ever manifest themselves *expressly*, presumably for fear of making the album less subdued than it was originally intended. On the positive side, there are no strings, either: the combination of drums, bass, acoustic guitar, and Cramer's all-overriding piano leads is fairly tasteful, so that we might accuse Elvis of underselling the «gut power» aspect of the gospel genre, but never of crassly cheapening the gospel vibe or «selling it out» to the lowest common denominator.

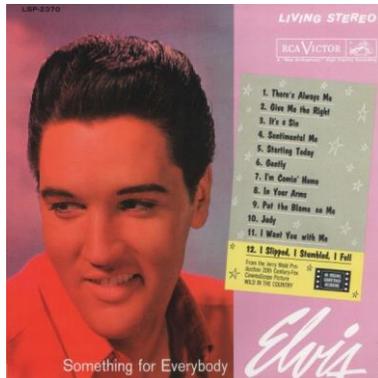
And it does look like the lowest common denominator was not that impressed: **His Hand In Mine** only reached #13 on the charts, a far cry from the endless top spots of his 1950s LPs (even **Christmas Album** had hit #1, for God's sake!) — a clear sign that «gospel Elvis» was not really going to cut it either for his younger followers (whose disappointment would be predictable) or for their parents. Theoretically, one could praise the move as a decidedly anti-commercial challenge on Elvis' part — but this is only in retrospect; at no point in his personal history was Elvis actually encouraged by his superiors to make daring anti-commercial moves, and I am pretty sure that the RCA executives were secretly hoping that by now, the legend of Elvis was strong enough to make him sell like hotcakes even if he decided to join Glenn Gould for an improvised vocalise of the *Goldberg Variations*. On the other hand, the relative commercial failure of the album did not stop them from allowing the King to put out two more gospel albums over the next decade — after all, each such attempt could solidify and repair Elvis' musical reputation in the eyes of all those who hated his movies.

On the whole, the critical reputation of **His Hand In Mine** seems to have significantly increased in recent decades, as part of a larger movement to re-assess and re-appraise Elvis' pop years; *Rolling Stone* and *The All-Music Guide* never fail to remind you now how Elvis was the greatest white gospel singer of his epoch. What they rarely mention explicitly is that the only principal difference between Elvis' love ballads and gospel ballads may be a sense of extra seriousness and belief displayed on the latter, as opposed to relative «indifference» and «acting» on some of the former. But even this difference should not be overstated. When I hear Elvis crooning "*I believe in the man in the sky*", I get more of a feeling that he is trying to woo a crowd of bug-eyed gullible kids than reaffirming himself in his own faith, which is presumably what the song is all about in the first place. It's tastefully suave and charming, but «depth» is not the kind of word that springs to mind while the song is weaving its smooth spider web around you.

For the record, the same Nashville sessions that yielded this LP in its entirety also produced 'Crying In The Chapel', an outtake that was shelved until 1965, when it became an unexpected «retro hit»; and a big secular hit in 'Surrender', a Pomus-Shuman reworking of the Neapolitan song 'Torna A Surriento'. From a purely linguistic point, I admire the monde-

greenish genius of turning *Surriento* into *Surrender*; from an aesthetic point, I hate Neapolitan songs with almost as much passion as Pavarotti sings them, so you can tell 'Surrender', much like 'It's Now Or Never', is never going to become one of my favorite Elvis tunes of the decade. But this is just a reactionary reaction from someone who has never been able to make peace with the idea that for most people, «classical music» = «The Three Tenors»; on an emotionally detached level, it is hard not to admit that 'Surrender' features Elvis at his very technical best.





SOMETHING FOR EVERYBODY

Album released:

June 17, 1961

V A L U E
2 3 2 1 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) There's Always Me; 2) Give Me The Right; 3) It's A Sin; 4) Sentimental Me; 5) Starting Today; 6) Gently; 7) I'm Comin' Home; 8) In Your Arms; 9) Put The Blame On Me; 10) Judy; 11) I Want You With Me; 12) I Slipped, I Stumbled, I Fell; 13*) Surrender; 14*) I Feel So Bad; 15*) His Latest Flame; 16*) **Little Sister**; 17*) Good Luck Charm; 18*) Anything That's Part Of You.

REVIEW

There was an actual chance for Elvis' second proper post-Army LP to have *one* good song on it. Originally, the cover of 'I Feel So Bad', a semi-forgotten Chuck Willis R&B hit from 1954, was supposed to go on the record — then, for unclear reasons, it was substituted at the last minute for 'I Slipped, I Stumbled, I Fell', taken from the mini-sound-track of Elvis' *Wild In The Country* movie and, thus, the only song on the LP to have been recorded earlier than the sessions of March 12-13, 1961. Unfortunately, *that* song is essentially a poorly masked rewrite of 'I Got Stung', with Fred Wise and Ben Weisman faithfully copying the basic skeleton of Aaron Schroeder — except that the song rolls along at a sludgier tempo and has twice less the energy of the original pop-rock mini-masterpiece. Faint, feeble fun at best.



'I Feel So Bad', on the other hand, is a damn good cover. Elvis sticks very closely to [the original](#), preserving that nagging, persistent, can't-get-it-out-of-your-head piano riff as the main hook — for good reason, since the song *needs* a unique hook to compensate for its generic blues structure — but employing the full talents of his Nashville team to upgrade and energize

the sound to contemporary standards. Buddy Harman, in particular, gives it a tough, frenzied drum sound, with his nervous fills often stealing the attention away from the singer. The most interesting comparison, though, would be for the instrumental break section: in Willis' original, the «Latin-meets-blues» groove temporarily gives way to a decidedly jazzy little improv, while the Elvis version kicks the song into a rock'n'roll-ish overdrive instead, as Boots Randolph contributes a sax part that wouldn't sound out of place on a Little Richard record. It all clicks together, and 'I Feel So Bad' genuinely lives up to its title in the end. The piano riff, the paranoid drumming, Elvis' «I-really-got-a-splittin'-headache» approach to his vocal delivery, the maniacal mid-section — all contributes to a damn fine artistic portrayal of somebody in a state of complete mental disarray, gnawed by doubt and confusion.

Alas, it looks like there was simply no place for this bit of psychological triumph on an LP entitled **Something For Everybody** — and by «everybody» I'm assuming that they mean «everybody who has never listened to good music in the Fifties». Recorded in its near-entirety during the same two-day session in March, the record is semi-officially separated in two parts: slow-and-sentimental A-side for lovers of romance, fast-and-danceable B-side for lovers of butt-shaking... and I guess they must have instinctively realized just how weak the album is, because otherwise it would never have required any special structural gimmicks to help market it for the masses. Only goes to show, really, just how much genuine «importance» Elvis and his gang were attaching to original LPs at the moment (though, admittedly, the soundtracks to their cherished movies showed even fewer signs of life).

The main problem with the record is that it not only sounds as if it were *recorded* in a mere two days (as we remember, the Beatles recorded **Please Please Me** in *one* day and it turned out pretty cool); it sounds as if it were *written* in a mere two days, if not two hours. All of the usual culprits are assembled for the reaping — such as Schroeder, Wise, and Weisman — plus some newcomers from the country scene, e.g. Fred Rose and Don Robertson; but nobody even lifts a finger to produce something original. The country numbers are stereotypical as heck, and the pop numbers *all* sound like half-assed rewrites of what used to be fresh and exciting a few years back, but has now been reduced to a set of weak shadows of former glory. It is, quite honestly, as if most of those songwriters were specifically tasked with quests such as «write a song for Elvis that would evoke 'Blueberry Hill'», «write a song for Elvis that would have the same hooks as 'One Night'», «write a song for Elvis that would have the same cool bridge section as 'Stuck On You'», etc. For all the relative disappointments about the level of songwriting on **Elvis Is Back!**, *that* album was a true masterpiece of human creativity when compared to the creative cesspool of **Something For Everybody**. Who even remembers anything off it these days?

The only «good» thing I can say is that the technical quality of the arrangements, vocals, and production is at the usual super-high level of Elvis' entire Nashville period. As always, Floyd Cramer shines on crystal-clear piano; Scotty Moore and Hank Garland ring out loud and proud on electric guitars; the rhythm section is impeccably tight; and Elvis himself polishes each note as if his checks were directly dependent on their tone, pitch, and sustain. Faced, however, with this blatant trade-off of the old Dionysian rawness for the new-fangled Apollonian sterility, I could only accept the deal if it were accompanied by a complete change of musical style and direction, which is clearly not the case here.

It is even difficult for me to say which of the two sides sucks worse — the ballads or the pop-rockers. Normally, my own preferences rather veer to the bouncy pop-rocker than the sentimental serenade, so I'd be tempted to smear the first side, shared more or less equally between the most formulaic country ('There's Always Me', never living up to the expressive five-second piano intro from Cramer; 'It's A Sin'; 'Starting Today' — aren't they really the same song?) and conventional doo-wop ('Give Me The Right'; 'Sentimental Me'); only the closing 'Gently' breaks the mold a bit with a pretty folk-pop acoustic melody nested somewhere in between Buddy Holly and The Weavers, but even then it can hardly hope to knock 'Love Me Tender' off its throne. All of that is Dullsville incarnate.

Then, however, we get to side two and I feel even *more* offended because this is where the songwriters infringe upon Elvis' classic bread-and-butter territory and burn down the bread, leaving nothing but the butter. Charlie Rich's country-rocker 'I'm Comin' Home' is barely passable, similar in terms of arrangement to 'A Big Hunk O' Love' (again, Cramer and Garland kick up an enjoyable guitar-piano storm) but without a single shred of threat or naughtiness; still, it's probably the best of all these half-baked numbers. 'In Your Arms' is a poor man's copy of 'Stuck On You' (shame on you, Mr. Schroeder); 'Put The Blame On Me' is a rip-off of some lounge jazz number I can't remember, with the bridge section recycled from 'A Mess Of Blues'; 'Judy' is pedestrian country as already reflected in zillions of radio standards; 'I Want You With Me' sounds like an Elvis cover act seeking to recreate the form and spirit of 'Trouble'; and I have already mentioned the musical debt that 'I Slipped, I Stumbled, I Ripped Myself Off' owes to 'I Got Stung'. So much for «rocking out».

It's all the more baffling to witness this train wreck of an LP in the context of Elvis' singles from the same year — three of them, in fact, each showing that he was anything but spent in both the pure pop and the rock'n'roll department. In addition to the already discussed 'I Feel Bad', just three months later another recording session brought back the virtues of the Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman team. '(Marie's The Name Of) His Latest Flame' was a song originally recorded by Del Shannon for his debut LP — but the [original version](#) made the dreadful mistake of setting the melody to a syncopated Bo Diddley

beat, atmospherically incompatible with the song's plaintive melody (the Bo Diddley beat really only works properly in an uplifting context, rather than a depressed one). The Elvis arrangement wisely corrected the annoying discrepancy, and now the song sounds denser, darker, more frantic due to the frantically strummed acoustic rhythm — and Elvis sings everything in a moodier, lower pitch than Del, sort of «introverting» the pain of being dumped by one's lover rather than singing his heart out *to the wide open spaces*, as the Who would say. As a result, 'His Latest Flame' alone is worth *all* the twelve songs on **Something For Everybody** put together.

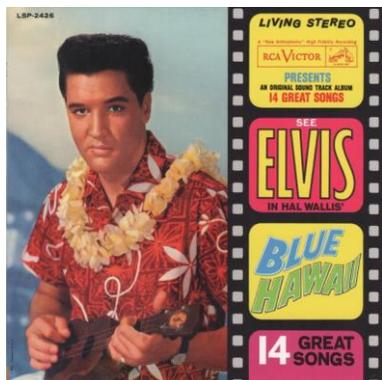
But I am even more partial to the B-side: 'Little Sister', also by Pomus and Shuman, is the song that might have single-handedly saved Elvis' reputation as a rocker in the year when the double-mispatch of **Something For Everybody** and **Blue Hawaii** would pretty much bury it for good. In fact, it's not even clear how such a (relatively) ferocious track even slipped out from under Colonel Parker's radar. It's dirty, it's threatening, it's sexually aggressive, it's downright indecent for the times: "*Little sister, don't you kiss me once or twice and say it's very nice and then you run / Little sister, don't you do what your big sister done*". That menacing twangy little riff alone — the one that Hank Garland twirls twice during the intro and then, unfortunately, loses forever — is worth the price of admission; but the entire song consistently cooks along the same delightfully cynical-delinquent lines of 'A Big Hunk O' Love' without, however, copying any of that song's melodic patterns. For one brief moment, «Elvis The Parental Nightmare» is back...

...and guess what? The single sold pretty damn well, though, just like 'I Feel So Bad', it did fail to rise to #1, proving that (a) «darker Elvis» was indeed in slightly lower demand than «family-friendly Elvis» back in 1961; (b) however, «darker Elvis» was still in pretty high demand, and if only they'd agreed to settle for a wee bit lower chart status, his artistic reputation for future generations might have fared much better. Alas, «The King» required a properly kingly status, so the reconstructed reasoning is simple enough — if gritty, hard-hitting material had no chance to go to the top of the charts in 1961, there'd be no more gritty, hard-hitting material for The King's singles, period.

Not that we should mind if the non-gritty material for The King's singles is as good as 'Good Luck Charm', a song that is also commonly appended as a bonus track to **Something For Everybody**, even if it did not come out until early 1962 (but it was recorded in October 1961). Again, *this* is a prime example of how it is still always possible to excel within the limits of a set formula if you truly put your mind to it. Written once again by the almighty Aaron Schroeder and following, once again, along the lines of 'Stuck On You', it is, nevertheless, quite different melodically and featuring a completely different hook. A lightweight love ditty, for sure, but catchy, with a beautifully constructed and resolved chorus that adds a pinch of

sexual suggestivity to the general sentimentality of the verses; the cherry on top is the back-and-forth bass-baritone vocalizing between Elvis and some of The Jordanaires which, if you strain your imagination far enough, can seem like a surreptitiously gay perspective on the carnal ritual of Ray Charles' 'What'd I Say'. At the very least, I can never repress a lewd grin while listening to the song — which is a far more human and pleasant reaction than the near-complete emotional paralysis I get from just about anything on **Nothing For Anybody**.



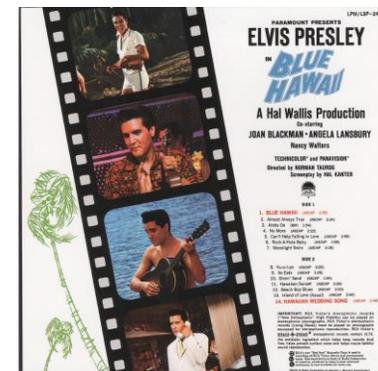


BLUE HAWAII

Album released:
October 20, 1961

V A L U E
2 1 2 1 1

More info:



Tracks: 1) Blue Hawaii; 2) Almost Always True; 3) Aloha Oe; 4) No More; 5) Can't Help Falling In Love; 6) Rock-A-Hula Baby; 7) Moonlight Swim; 8) Ku-u-i-po (Hawaiian Sweetheart); 9) Ito Eats; 10) Slicin' Sand; 11) Hawaiian Sunset; 12) Beach Boy Blues; 13) Island Of Love (Kauai); 14) Hawaiian Wedding Song.

REVIEW

The more I listen to this record, meaninglessly shortening my life span, the more I am convinced that this was indeed the point of no return. Quite a few people, even some of those who do not worship every inch of ground ever trod upon by the King's august boots, view **Blue Hawaii** — both the movie and the soundtrack, or at least just the soundtrack — as a pleasant, relaxing, and charming fantasy, a perfect little vehicle for sweet escapism that took people's minds away from the Bay of Pigs like nothing else. That may be so, and it would be inconsiderate to deny the people the right to cotton-candy entertainment, at least as long as they do not get used to cotton candy as a natural foundation for all sorts of entertainment. There's just one question, though: why did it have to be Elvis Presley?



Before *Blue Hawaii*, Elvis movies in general weren't all that bad. None were masterpieces of cinematography, though *King Creole* at least came really close to becoming a bonafide classic in its own right; however, the scripts felt relatively intelli-

gent, and the characters played by Elvis could display psychological depth and a degree of realism. Similarly, the music written for the movies was generally no different from Elvis' usual music — lots of energetic rock'n'roll in the Fifties, plenty of catchy pop stuff in **G. I. Blues** and **Flaming Star**. Apart from a tiny bit of added conceptuality (like the martial and German themes in **G. I. Blues**, etc.), the soundtracks did not contrast too sharply with the regular LPs in terms of quality, impact, and purposefulness.

Blue Hawaii, on the other hand, *does* sound like a wholesome soundtrack — a conceptual soundtrack, put together as one big love song to a carefree world of blue skies, endless beaches, mindless fun, and plenty of cuddly Austronesian stereotypes to amuse and delight middle-to-low class white audiences. Putting aside inevitable, but pointless accusations of «cultural appropriation», there is nothing particularly offensive about exploiting those stereotypes (the short humorous ditty 'Ito Eats', an anthem to mindless gluttony, is probably the lowest point here, but its main problem is that it is simply nowhere near as funny as it would like to be). It's just that, when put together, they all give out such a strong vibe of shallowness and superficiality that I find it impossible to «give in» to the music — it would be the equivalent of «giving in» to an episode of Candid Camera or something like that.

All the usual culprits had been assembled to write songs for the soundtrack, with the lion's share going to Ben Weisman (three songs on Side A) and the hack-o-rama pair of Sid Tepper and Roy C. Bennett (all but two songs on Side B). The idea was simple — to give the world their usual pairing of Romantic Elvis and Rock'n'Rolling Elvis, but with steel guitars and ukuleles to capture the oh-so-realistic spirit of Hawaiian Paradise. The quintessential expected result is something like 'Rock-A-Hula Baby', which sounds like a typical Elvis rockabilly number but with all the sharp angles smoothed and Scotty Moore's kick-ass electric guitar jolts replaced by buttery steel guitar twangs. Perhaps if taken squarely on its own terms, the song could pass for lightweight self-parodic fun; the problem is that **Blue Hawaii** consists of such songs in its entirety — and aspires to be a modestly serious artistic statement, rather than pure, intentionally self-ridiculing comedy.

It is highly symbolic, I think, that the title track — and the name of the movie itself — was taken directly out of 1937's *Waikiki Wedding*, a similarly sweet romantic fantasy for [Bing Crosby](#) that did a great job of relieving the minds of movie-going American audiences from the severe twist the Depression took in 1937. Technically, both singers do the usual great job, but musically, both versions are just generic cotton-candy ("*lovely you and blue Hawaii / with all this loveliness there should be love*" is one of those lines you can stare at all day and still not understand how it is able to co-exist in the same world with Shakespeare, Bob Dylan, and string theory); worse, the Elvis version is arranged in such a way that it *demand*s

from you to pay attention to how many delightful and delicious layers of cotton-candy the arrangers have gone out of their way to wrap around its lazyass, super-brittle musical skeleton. Purring lap steel, tinkling pianos, cooing backing vocals, gently tapping bass, subtle marimbas, and, of course, the King's ability to glide that deep baritone in the smoothest way possible across your back. Sexy! Seductive! Sensual! The perfect soundtrack for an erotic massage parlor.

And speaking of erotic massage parlors, **Blue Hawaii**, of course, cannot forget that the image it creates of its prime hero should not be *completely* wholesome and dedicated to nothing but proper family values. Hence the ideally calculated 'Almost Always True' — Weisman and Wise achieve here an ideal compromise between «faithful lover» and «naughty boy», captured both in the song's title (gotta love the juxtaposition of *always* and *almost!*) and its middle-o'-the-road melody, which kinda sounds like it rocks in a mischievous way but is really quite tame as far as the tone and energy levels of all instruments are concerned. A perfect offer for Elvis' ever-growing audience of bored middle-aged housewives who, too, would probably all stay true to their husbands but if ever a hunk like Elvis came along... oh boy!

After this quintessential «Hawaiian ballad» and «Hawaiian rocker» the two sub-styles continue to alternate without any major revelations, with songs like 'Moonlight Swim' and 'Hawaiian Sunset' epitomizing the former and 'Rock-A-Hula Baby' and 'Slicin' Sand' the latter — needless to say, most of them are basically just rewrites of older Elvis ballads and rockers with a few lazy twists thrown in here and there to avoid plagiarism suits. On tracks like 'Slicin' Sand', it almost hurts to hear Presley's formerly exciting rockabilly stunts turned into diet shadows of their former selves — if you can listen to 'Treat Me Nice' and 'Slicin' Sand' back-to-back, recognizing the similarity but refusing to acknowledge the tremendous aesthetic difference between the two, I'd say — mildly enough — that we have a problem, Houston.

Even worse, some of the songs make no sense whatsoever outside of the context of the movie: the already mentioned 'Ito Eats' is one, as is 'Beach Boy Blues', whose clumsy refrain ("now I'm a kissing cousin to a ripe pineapple, I'm in the can") can only be understood properly when watching Elvis' character sing the tune from behind bars. (The "kissing cousin" thing somehow lingered in the backs of the minds of Elvis' courtiers all the way up to 1964, when it would become the central theme of yet another movie and its title track). Musically, it's just a bombastic piece of blues vaudeville and if that kind of joke level is up your alley, go ahead, but for some reason, Elvis as a source of humor never did much for me even in the good old pre-Army days, much less so in the shiny happy days of leis and luaus.

The less said about the «authentically Hawaiian» numbers on here, the better. The rendition of 'Aloha 'Oe', arranged in an exaggeratedly reverential fashion, is obviously included as a polite tribute to that «funny little native culture»; if you are

interested in authentic Hawaiian art, there are dozens of more authentic renditions one could probably check out (and no, I'm not talking Bing Crosby or even *Lilo & Stitch*), and if you are interested in Elvis, you don't need to hear him croon his way through the (admittedly fairly simple) Hawaiian phonetics to become convinced of his versatility. As for 'Hawaiian Wedding Song', I suppose it can work if you're planning a Hawaiian wedding. If you don't, might as well just settle for The Bridal Chorus without making too much of a fuss.

All of which leads us to the burning question: can **Blue Hawaii** really be so bad in the final run if it includes 'Can't Help Falling In Love', which is, like, the *ultimate* Elvis Presley love ballad? How can one go wrong with a song that, according to [a recent survey](#), 10.48% of people (Americans, I assume) choose as the soundtrack for the first dance on their wedding day? Well, the thing is, it might not be a *total* coincidence that the initial association of 'Can't Help Falling In Love', no matter how much of a life of its own it would go on to acquire, is with the first hundred-percent corny movie in Elvis' career — because the mood of the song ideally fits the mood of the movie.

Let's just put this thing into context and remember that 'Can't Help Falling In Love' is a carefully crafted Hugo & Luigi remake of Jean-Paul Martini's 'Plaisir D'Amour', a romantic ballad that goes all the way back to 1784. In the first half of the 20th century, it was mildly popular in the world of «light classical» entertainment, with multiple orchestrated and chamber versions recorded by French and American artists alike; then in 1961, merely a month before **Blue Hawaii**, it was amicably introduced into the world of folk revival by Joan Baez on her second album, who helped make it into a standard of folk and baroque-pop (with later covers by The Seekers, Marianne Faithfull, Judy Collins, the list is endless). At about the same time, Hugo Peretti and Luigi Creatore (the «Sam Cooke team»), joined by George David Weiss, were working on remaking the ballad into a more contemporary pop framework — inspired, perhaps, by the smashing success that Elvis had had with all those remakes of old-timey Neapolitan songs.

Once you know it, it is all but impossible to avoid comparisons between the Joan Baez recording and Elvis' hit, released on the market within months of each other. While the songs are not completely identical — 'Can't Help Falling In Love' omits the verses, replacing them with a different bridge section — the main chorus hook is, of course, the same; but the biggest difference is that the original 'Plaisir D'Amour' is a tragic lament on the fleeting nature of love ("*Plaisir d'amour ne dure qu'un moment, chagrin d'amour dure toute la vie*"), while the lyrics of 'Can't Help Falling In Love' have been completely expurgated from any feelings of sadness, and Elvis' vocals, accordingly, are pure wild honey. What used to be a moderately complex combination of tenderness, nostalgia, pain, and disillusionment, cleverly morphed one into another over the

course of the melodic chorus, has been simplified and straightened out for the sake of pure, if admittedly powerful, romance. I mean, you're in Hawaii, man. Who the heck would come up with the stupid idea that "*the grief of love lasts a lifetime*" in frickin' Hawaii, of all places? Aloha!

I don't want to say that this «emotionally lobotomized» reinvention of 'Plaisir D'Amour' is a bad song. The original melody is a stroke of catchy marvel and it stays that way, and out of the millions of covers of the rewrite there is not a single one that could compare with Elvis' once-in-a-lifetime vocal delivery. But there is still a nasty, sugary aftertaste it leaves behind, especially if you compare it with Baez or, for that matter, almost any random Elvis love ballad from the pre-army days. Much of this also has to do with the arrangement, meticulously calculated for one of those «Disney Magic» moments: the fairy godmather chimes, the angelic backing vocals, the smoothly cooing style of the «Hawaiian» lead guitar — at least they refrained from adding swooping strings, but even without strings the song still sounds overproduced. But ultimately, I guess, criticizing it is a bit like criticizing Mendelssohn's Wedding March: you can poke it, you can prod it, you can make fun of it or parody it, but it's still up there, laughing at you, and you're still down here, powerless in your sarcasm.

The bottomline is that 'Can't Help Falling In Love' is not an exception from the field-of-corn rules of **Blue Hawaii**, it simply raises the level of corn to such levels where it is no longer in dangerous reach of your criticism. But still it remains an integral part of the album's philosophy — creation of a rose-colored fantasy that is completely removed from any contact with reality. And, true enough, from here on Elvis would be forever confined to a world all his own, a King confined to the comforts of his palace and permanently out of touch with the universe outside those windows. Meanwhile, the world outside would, of course, go on to be divided into the monarchist and anti-monarchist camps — those who kept on going to the movies and those who sold their souls to the Beatles instead — and I'm fairly sure that **Blue Hawaii**, both the movie and the album, was extremely instrumental in the creation of that division.

