

ESQUERITA



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1958-1963</i>	<i>Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i>Hole In My Heart (1959)</i>

Only Solitaire

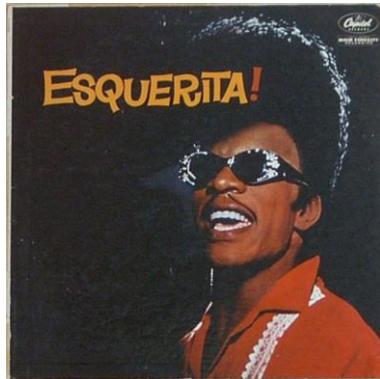
Artist: *Esquerita*

Years: *1958-1959*

George Starostin's Reviews

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ESQUERITA!

Album released:

1959

V A L U E
2 3 3 3 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) Hey Miss Lucy; 2) Why Did It Take You So Long; 3) She Left Me Crying; 4) Crazy Crazy Feeling; 5) Get Back Baby; 6) Hole In My Heart; 7) I'm Battie Over Hattie; 8) Baby, You Can Depend On Me; 9) Believe Me When I Say Rock And Roll Is Here To Stay; 10) I Need You; 11) Maybe Baby; 12) Gettin' Plenty Lovin'.

REVIEW

If this guy, whom we rarely ever hear about until a small minority of us starts digging into the roots of Fifties' rock'n'roll with as much verve as a slightly larger minority of us usually digs into the roots of the Beatles and the Stones — if this guy looks to you like a flamboyant impersonator of Little Richard, then this is because Little Richard... was a flamboyant impersonator of this guy. At least, this way goes the usual narrative, as it is honestly and openly confirmed by Little Richard himself, in his own words, and given how much of an egotistic narcissist the man had always been... if he says he took something from somebody else, there's far more reason to believe him than when he says he *gave* something to somebody else. Indeed, there is a well-known stylistic break between Little Richard's earliest run of generic jump blues singles from 1951-1952 ('Taxi Blues', etc.) and his transformation into the wild cat act as we know him with 'Tutti Frutti' in 1955 — and that, allegedly, is all due to his encounter with Eskew Reeder, Jr., who had already been banging on the piano, screaming his head off, and sporting flashy costumes and ridiculous hairstyles for several years before Richard Wayne Penniman came along and shamelessly stole the black man's mus... uh, borrowed his black brother's act to use it to increase his own fame and fortune.



How come, if so, that Little Richard went on to become a household name, revered as one of the founders of rock'n'roll and still enjoyed by millions of people even today, while his musical guru lingered on in total obscurity, not even getting himself a record contract well *after* Little Richard had finished with his classic line of singles — and today, continuing to exist mainly as a footnote in the biography of Little Richard? Reading occasional modern-day publications about the man (here's [a good one](#), with plenty of memories from Little Richard himself), one can almost get caught up in the excitement of the Lost Legend of the Flamboyant Pioneer — but as far as I can tell, none of this late-coming praise has so far succeeded in convincing people to throw out their Little Richard records and replace them with **Esquerita!**, the man's one and only LP from the decade that could have made him into a big star, but didn't.

The problem is, while we *do* know how this oddball native of Greenville, South Carolina sounded in 1958, we do *not* really know how he sounded in the early 1950s, playing the various pubs and nightclubs in his hometown (where segregation ruled supreme at the time) and occasionally making detours into other Southern cities. No recordings survive from that era, for obvious reasons, and all we know is that he allegedly sported a wild look and had a wild playing style. Just how «dirty» the music was is anybody's guess, really; the legend goes that when Little Richard began doing "Tutti Frutti", his first takes were «X-rated in Esquerita fashion» and had to be cleaned up in the studio, but how do we even verify that?

The objective facts are that Esquerita only got his first recording contract with Capitol in late 1958, and that, too, only through the connections of Paul Peek, an early member of Gene Vincent's Blue Caps, who spotted the dude in Greenville, made him record some demos, and probably somehow convinced Capitol that the guy might easily fill up the niche that had just been so conveniently vacated by Little Richard after his «conversion». At that time, the rock'n'roll vibe was still going fairly strong, with «cleaned-up» teen-pop acts not yet fully encroaching on the turf of wild rockabilly people; and Capitol's only big rock'n'roll star at the time was Gene Vincent, so they certainly wouldn't mind throwing in an eccentric black piano-bangin' dude, if only for diversity's sake.

Listening to Esquerita's first couple of singles (not included on the original version of the self-titled LP, but occasionally found as bonus tracks on later CD issues), as well as the album itself, clearly shows the Little Richard connection — Mr. Penniman certainly could have appropriated those wild tempos, the maniacal energy, the high-range "who-o-o-o-o's!", and the reckless slappin' style of handling the piano. There are also obvious differences: Esquerita's regular singing voice, for instance, which is lower, deeper, rougher and grizzlier than Little Richard's, somewhat closer to those alcohol-drenched voices of 1940's jump blues heroes like Wynonie Harris. One could perhaps say that Little Richard's voice had more of a

gospel sheen to it, whereas Esquerita's is far more «dirty blues». As for the piano-playing, here, too, Esquerita shows far less discipline and far more aggression, not really minding getting off tempo every now and then as long as the spirit stays strong inside him. (It also feels to me as if he does not really mind keeping that piano ever so slightly out of tune on most of those recordings, though this needs to be confirmed by a professional opinion — at least *my* ear constantly gets thrown off each time he plays an intro).

These are all mostly good signs, though. A dirty-blues-drenched, rag-taggy, flamboyant, grizzled up wildman at the piano, playing ferocious rock'n'roll at a time when most of the old guard of ferocious rock'n'rollers were on their way out? That's true punk attitude, and boy, do we ever need more of that, regardless of whether we take the time machine back to 1959 or stay out here in 2022 which no longer even knows what can be passed for «true punk attitude» any more. There is one serious problem, though — just *one* serious problem, but it is so serious that it pretty much trumps all of the man's virtues put together: unfortunately, Esquerita could not *write* even a semi-original song to save his life. Play up a storm, for sure. String together a bunch of chords in a new fashion? Impossible.

The funny thing is that he *tried*. Most of the songs on his LP, as well as the accompanying singles, are credited either to himself or to his guitar player Calvin Arnold; the only exception is a straightforward cover of Buddy Holly's 'Maybe Baby'. And we should at least give some credit to Esquerita as a lyricist: "Hey Miss Lucy, you're too fat and juicy for me" should almost certainly be counted as a classic line, while "Won't you believe me when I say / Rock'n'roll is here to stay / Do you believe me when I say / It will never pass away" is quite eerily prophetic, if not downright visionary, for 1959, when quite a few people were already beginning to have doubts about this. The *bad* news, then, is that 'Hey Miss Lucy' is essentially Little Richard's 'Miss Ann' — and 'Believe Me When I Say' is essentially 'Lucille' multiplied by 'True, Fine Mama'.

Now I know what you might be saying: "But didn't we just establish that it was Little Richard who took his thang from Esquerita, not the *other* way around?" Well — when it comes to visual and audio *style*, there is little reason to doubt Little Richard's own confessions. But I seriously doubt that it was Little Richard who took all those songwriting *ideas* from his alleged teacher. For one thing, Esquerita is not just ripping off Little Richard — he is a *major* copy-cat, just as keen on chasing after Muddy Waters ('She Left Me Crying' = 'Hoochie Coochie Man'), B. B. King ('Please Come Home'), or Fats Domino ('Baby, You Can Depend On Me' = 'Blueberry Hill'). For another thing, it really does not take long to understand that a song like 'I Need You' can only be derivative of 'Ready Teddy', not the other way around. Most of this stuff just feels somewhat... *broken*, next to the melodic and lyrical elegance of Little Richard's material.

Unfortunately, it is this feeling of being treated to a decidedly «second-hand» product that overwhelmed me upon hearing Esquerita for the first time — and I am fairly sure that potential record buyers in 1959, when the music of Little Richard and other rock'n'rollers was still freshly ringing in their ears, may have been equally disappointed, contributing to the lack of sales and chart success. It is only when I ran through the material a second and third time that I began to get caught up in the fun of it. In Esquerita's defense, I do not think that he gave the slightest damn about «creative songwriting» as a useful virtue — or, for that matter, about the necessity to regulate and rectify the sound of his records to raise their commercial value. All he cared about was being properly carried away by the spirit, and you can definitely hear him carried away on those records. It's like Little Richard, multiplied by Jerry Lee Lewis and crowned with a barrel of whiskey — these studio recordings *really* sound like the entire band is sloppy drunk, and the lead guy is just taking it out on the poor piano.

Another reason for Esquerita's commercial failure is that, unlike Little Richard, who'd always boasted of his direct connection to God, his teacher never shyed away from being guided by pagan spirits, to whom he gave the collective name of «Voola» — arguably, his single most historically important track might be an early B-side (not included on the original LP) explicitly titled '[Esquerita And The Voola](#)'. It's essentially just a two-minute long piano jam with wordless ecstatic falsetto vocals, opening with a poppy piano intro not unlike the one in Elvis' 'Treat Me Nice' and then quickly becoming something like a cross between African tribal dancing and the Andian-vaudeville incantations of Yma Sumac. Throughout, Esquerita's piano feels like it is truly guided by some mischievous spirit's hand — going wherever fate sends it, be it Cuban rumba or Russian folk dance. Les Baxter would probably cringe at the sloppiness of this «Exercise in Exotica», but to me, its main flaw is not so much the sloppiness as the silliness: the groove never really understands if it wants to be truly spooky or just comical, stuck somewhere in the middle between pagan ecstasy and parody. Even so, one has to admit that nobody sounded quite like this in 1958-59, and to understand the baffled reaction of the public.

In recording these rock'n'roll numbers, Esquerita always puts much more emphasis on his piano playing than Little Richard ever did — in fact, his banging style and preference for glissandos constantly puts him closer to Jerry Lee Lewis territory, while the Little Richard connection is more securely established with the saxophone breaks. But where a major part of Jerry Lee's attraction had always been the sense of arrogance, dominance, and absolute self-confidence — 100% absolute control over one's own wild instincts — Esquerita seems perfectly okay to just go with the flow, projecting the image of a wild guy absolutely *out* of control, wilfully letting his body to be used as a vessel for each passing spirit with a naughty purpose. His attitude on the whole is decidedly more good-timey New Orleanian than anything else, except that he rarely cares for showing even a dozzenth part of the strict New Orleanian musical discipline that typically goes hand-in-hand with the good

times. I'm still not sure if I really like it or just merely respect it — all I know is that the guy certainly had his own style and stuck to it steadfast and true even when nobody seemed to care.

Ironically, Esquerita's last single for Capitol before the label finally let him go was 'Laid Off', an *extremely* New Orleanian, proto-Dr. John type piece of R&B in which the singer complains of... well, just look at the title already. As usual, it's a poor chunk of songwriting, but the pain in the vocals is quite audible, as the man must have probably known he would not have much time to stick around with his record contract. After that, he disappeared completely off the radar for a few years, and when he returned to the industry in 1962 with 'Green Door', released on the tiny Minit label, this was already a completely different sound — tamer, more disciplined and restrained, and, as it turned out, even less appreciated by the general public. His career would still proceed in hiccupy stops and starts until the early Eighties, but nothing would even begin to approach the level of these 1958-59 recordings.

In the end, Esquerita's «footnote» status is rather lamentable; I would argue that whatever he recorded, at the very least, deserves to be placed on the same «second-tier» level of enjoyable, derivative-but-idiosyncratic early rock'n'roll as Dale or Ronnie Hawkins. The occasional present-day attempts to re-market him as an inspiring icon for the queer community (somewhat bitterly ironic, considering that he died of AIDS in 1986) are of little concern to me, because that trait of his personality is almost completely irrelevant to the actual music — but the wild, rule-breaking, let-yourself-go aspects of that music could definitely be an inspiration. It's always nice to discover somebody brave enough to go against the general tide in a year as proverbially rigid as 1959; it's even nicer to discover that you can still actually enjoy his music, even with all the reservations and limitations. And while I never recommend anybody to get too emotionally swayed over the mythology of pop culture, the «Legend of Esquerita», with all of its aesthetic allure *and* information gaps, is at least well deserving of becoming acquainted with.

