

# ETTA JAMES



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1955-2011</i>	<i>Classic soul</i>	<i><u>Something's Got A Hold On Me</u> (1962)</i>

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*Only Solitaire*

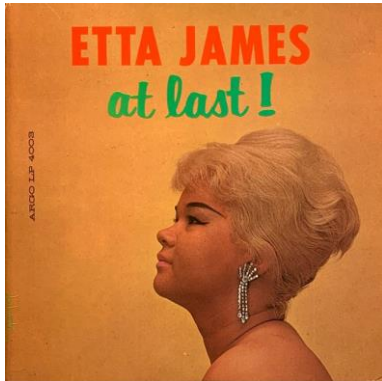
Artist: *Etta James*

Years: *1959-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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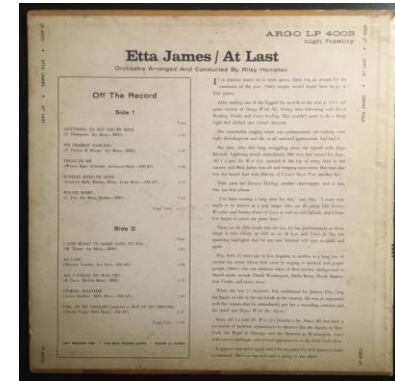
# AT LAST!

Album released:

November 15, 1960

V A L U E  
2 3 3 3 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Anything To Say You're Mine; 2) My Dearest Darling; 3) Trust In Me; 4) Sunday Kind Of Love; 5) Tough Mary; 6) I Just Want To Make Love To You; 7) At Last; 8) All I Could Do Was Cry; 9) Stormy Weather; 10) Girl Of My Dreams; 11\*) My Heart Cries; 12\*) Spoonful; 13\*) It's A Cryin' Shame; 14\*) If I Can't Have You.

## REVIEW

There's a bit of a double entendre to the title of this LP — on one hand, it is simply named after one of its songs, an old ballad from 1941 that would go on to become one of Etta's signature tunes (although its commercial success and popularity would post-date the release of the LP itself); on the other hand, **At Last!** subtly refers to the fact that Etta James *finally* got a chance to release her own LP record — after five years of hanging around Modern Records with nothing but singles, most of them flops after her initial success with 'Dance With Me Henry' in 1955. All it took was a change of contract — from Modern to Chess — and hey presto, an entire LP in Etta James' name, which eventually went all the way to #68 on the general Billboard charts, kicking off Etta's career for real this time, and not a moment too soon.



We shall have a chance to address those largely forgotten, but artistically important recordings from Etta's Modern period a little later on — some of them would be compiled under the title of **Miss Etta James** and released on Crown (Modern's sub-label) or Kent (Modern's rebranding after it shut down) in 1961, after the copyright owners realized that there was suddenly a demand for more Etta James on the market. For now, let us simply state that the transition from Modern to Chess did actually mark a significant change in style for Etta, and *definitely* not the kind of change you would typically

expect of a label like Chess. From 1955 to 1959, Etta James was marketed by Modern as their sort of response to Atlantic's queens of R&B, such as Ruth Brown and LaVern Baker — her songs were typically energetic, danceable, cocky, and slightly aggressive, very much in accordance with the dominant R&B style of the day. Thus, when in 1960 she preferred to sign a contract with Chicago's Chess label instead of her previous deal with Modern, one might have guessed that she was hoping for a transition from «R&B queen» to «blues queen» — the female equivalent of Muddy Waters. Given that Chess Records, at the time, were largely the prime domain of the black man rather than the black woman, she probably would not have a lot of competition for that task. (Etta James was *not* the first woman to be signed by Chess, but arguably *the* first woman whom anybody still remembers, joining way before Koko Taylor, Irma Thomas, and others).

Much to everybody's — and perhaps even her own's — surprise, Chess Records refused to see her that way, and instead of presenting her as the ladies' answer to Muddy Waters, decided to establish her more along the lines of a ladies' answer to Sam Cooke. There is no bigger misunderstanding than to file **At Last!** away under the category of *blues*, as is typically done by various online aggregators and occasional retro-reviewers who prefer to sleepwalk through those old titles rather than try to activate them in their own minds. There is exactly one — count it, *one* — proper blues tune on the album, a cover of Willie Dixon's 'I Just Want To Make Love To You', and even that one is arranged in a «jazzy» rather than «bluesy» way; everything else is pure, unabashed soul-pop — sentimental pop ballads, mostly, many of them quite old-fashioned to boot, and only occasionally diluted by a faster, catchier R&B dance number or two ('Tough Mary').

Based on this, *Rolling Stone* at one time wrote that Etta James pretty much invented the concept of the «crossover diva» — a somewhat shaky assumption, given that (a) the very expression «crossover diva» makes me want to puke a little, and (b) Etta James certainly did not invent the idea of combining blues, R&B, and «standards» in her repertoire — most blues and jazz vocalists were doing bits and pieces of this as early as the 1920s. However, it is certainly true that Etta was one of the few performers who, having established their career in the 1950s, was able to successfully re-adapt it to changing times, much like the aforementioned Sam Cooke or, to use an even better analogy, like James Brown — whose balladeering style is clearly very much an influence on Etta James around 1960.

First, however, the bad news. Most of these songs... aren't very good. No, really, try as I might, I just cannot generate any excitement at these fairly pedestrian melodies and corny orchestral arrangements, courtesy of poorly-known conductor Riley Hampton, whose work with Etta would nevertheless improve his reputation and make him a regular on various Atlantic, Motown, and other sessions that needed a «rosier» appearance for their lady artists. Not only is this the kind of

sound one could never expect coming from the bowels of such an authentic blues label as Chess Records, it is the kind of sound one should never expect coming from *anywhere*, period. In 1960, still years away from the tasteful takeover by the «baroque-pop» approach to string arrangements, orchestral stylizations could only work if they helped emphasize the strength of the compositions — but *these* songs are mostly either oldies or mediocre, generic contemporary creations, and smothering them in sentimental violins rarely does any good.

You can decide your overall attitude toward the record in about fifteen seconds — the opening bars of ‘Anything To Say You’re Mine’ already display its greatest weakness (string arrangements) and its biggest strength — Etta’s soulful vocals. If the strings sound like they’re coming from an earlier age, the *voice* sounds almost as if it is coming from the future. For us today, it is probably just as hard to realize the greatness of it as it is to realize the greatness of, say, Louis Armstrong’s *Hot Fives and Sevens* — this style, this manner has since become so ubiquitous that it is impossible to imagine a world in which jazz players were not used to taking solos, or one in which a lady soul singer could not allow herself to go «all out» and sound positively «indecent» before her audiences. But yes, before we had Tina Turner, before we had Aretha Franklin, before we had most of the Motown ladies, and certainly a long time before we had the exaggeratedly hardcore versions of this approach (like Patti LaBelle), we had Etta James, who bared it all before the mike as early as 1960.

The inevitable problem is that it is impossible to talk about what it is exactly that Etta is doing to these songs in a, so to say, non-boring manner of presentation. The sharp rises in pitch, the depth, the breath control, the playful variation between soft and breathy bits and all-out screaming — all of those things have been the arithmetic meat-’n’-potatoes of «diva singing» for a long, long time, and I cannot really sense any special uniqueness in Etta’s delivery that would never be replicated by anybody since then. What might have sounded astounding — perhaps even «astoundingly rude» — back in 1960 sounds fairly common today, and the listener’s attention shall inevitably be drawn back, over and over again, to the relative banality of the songs.

It is hardly anything more than just a coincidence, for instance, that it was the title track (‘At Last’) from this album which the people selected to become James’ «signature song» and to which both *Rolling Stone* and the Library of Congress’ National Recording Registry paid special, emphatic attention. It is a slow, fluffy, sentimental ballad, perfect for corny wedding receptions (apparently, for funerals as well, since it was sung by Christina Aguilera at Etta’s own funeral), and not an ounce better than *any* other ballad on the record — the only difference is that it is the happiest and cheesiest of the lot, playing into the hearts and souls of every single fan of happy cheese in the world (and there are billions of them). Honestly,

I do not care if I never hear it again, and would rather go myself after the deeper soul of 'All I Could Do Is Cry', an early atmospheric predecessor of 'I Would Rather Go Blind' and sort of a natural antithesis of 'At Last'. (In fact, the two numbers might be seen as two sides of a coherent story — first presented from the side of the bride speaking her wedding vows, and then from the side of the cheated-upon outcast watching the evil deed from the aisles. I'm always with the cheated-upon outcast in such situations).

So what else is there on the record, *beside* this large cluster of diva-style balladry? Ah, now we're talking. First, there is Etta's own sole songwriting credit for 'Tough Mary'; since it is co-credited to «Joe Josea» (the songwriting pseudonym of Joseph Bihari, one of the Bihari brothers who founded Modern Records), I assume that the song was taken away by Etta from her not-yet-recorded legacy at Modern, and it shows — it is faster, tougher, more infectious than all the balladry, and, for once, has a *fun* arrangement, smothered in saxes, woodwinds, and backing vocals, with the entire ensemble having a good time as Etta delivers this surprisingly earthy and cynical early prototype of Madonna's 'Material Girl' ("*don't bring me posies, when it's shoes I need!*"). Why couldn't *this* song be selected by the National Recording Registry? Oh, right, it would probably give an uncomfortable impression of American society to all those alien delegations from the future.

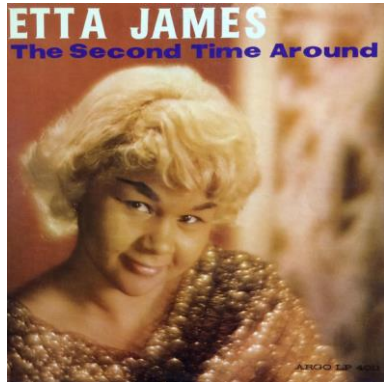
The arrangement of Willie Dixon / Muddy Waters' 'I Just Want To Make Love To You' introduces a new sax riff, loosely based on the cockiness of 'Hoochie Coochie Man', and once again puts up a wall of strings — but at least this time the bluesy and aggressive nature of the song does not allow them to spell out another Hollywood serenade. Etta's fiery, ravenous vocals on this version proudly stand up to Muddy's own, but what's interesting is how she inverts the lyrics to fit a woman's perspective: Muddy's "*I don't want you to cook my bread / I don't want you to make my bed*" here becomes "*All I want to do is make your bread / Just to make sure you're well-fed*" — with this take, Muddy turns out to be a better feminist than Etta, singing about equality of the sexes where Etta rather sings of an unconditional surrender. The paradox, of course, is that she sings of her surrender in the kind of powerful voice usually reserved for frontal assaults and unconditional victories — which makes the imaginary Muddy / Etta «dialog» roll across in a manner reminiscent of Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn in *Woman Of The Year* (Muddy: "*I DON'T want you to cook my bread, woman!*" Etta: "*But I DO want to cook your bread, you sorryass motherfucker!*")

I cannot insist that Etta's adaptation works every bit as efficiently as Muddy's original — it's just a little too twisted and über-sophisticated for that — but it *does* work in somewhat different ways, depending on whether you turn your brain on or off while listening to it. Actually, this applies to most of **At Last!**: it is a record that can easily bore you if you just listen to it

as background music, but it has plenty of intriguing potential if you take it in its proper historical and social context. Unfortunately, I tend to remain a little cold about this kind of music. The general lack of cool musical hooks on **At Last!** means that the album is, in essence, quite dated — unless you happen to perceive something truly unique and outstanding about Etta James' vocal fireworks, which make far less of an impression today than they did in 1960.

If you are able to, get a hold of the expanded edition of the album, which adds four tracks originally recorded in 1959-60 with Etta's work partner Harvey Fuqua (formerly of The Moonglows): except for the doo-wop ballad 'My Heart Cries', the other three are relatively grittier R&B numbers, more reflective of Etta's earlier Modern style — and even if their rendition of 'Spoonful' sounds a little Vegas-y with all the horns, it is yet another unusual reinvention of a classic Chicago blues number, sort of a friendly, lustful celebration of male and female potency rather than the sexually threatening demonic ritual of a Howlin' Wolf. Together with the heated-up family quarrel of 'It's A Cryin' Shame' and the mutual lament of 'If I Can't Have You', these tracks are like an early blueprint for the later masterpieces of Ike & Tina Turner.





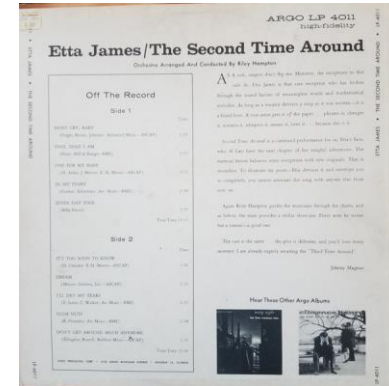
# THE SECOND TIME AROUND

Album released:

Dec. 14, 1961

V A L U E  
2 2 3 2 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Don't Cry Baby; 2) Fool That I Am; 3) One For My Baby; 4) In My Diary; 5) **Seven Day Fool**; 6) It's Too Soon To Know; 7) Dream; 8) I'll Dry My Tears; 9) Plum Nuts; 10) Don't Get Around Much Anymore.

## REVIEW

With an album title like this, you can be pretty sure we're talking formula, and indeed, Etta's sophomore effort feels like a minor variation on the debut, with no big news for anybody and no highlights that would help obliterate the memory of **At Last!** Even worse: the fluffy, sentimental stuff is getting more fluffy, and the harder-rockin' R&B stuff is getting less catchy and infectious. The hit singles kept coming, but their impact got ever fainter, and the LP missed the charts completely — and the bulk of the blame lies on Phil and Leonard Chess, who kept insisting on marketing Etta as a romantic performer, instead of letting her voice shine on hardcore R&B material for which it was tailor-made.



Let's see here: the first single to be included on this LP was 'Fool That I Am', an old Floyd Hunt composition from the mid-Forties, previously recorded by artists like Dinah Washington and Georgia Gibbs. Granted, those were crooner versions, and Etta is a belter, but does it really make a lot of sense to belt out a tune that was originally written with crooning in mind? Besides, it's just standard vocal jazz lounge fodder, no particularly memorable or interesting vocal moves there. The



arrangement is a little more polished and modern, but mainly due to improved studio technology — the strings and pianos pretty much sound like they'd be expected to around 1946. I'd rather be interested in hearing what Billie Holiday might have done with the song (unfortunately, it seemed to have passed her by); Etta's version is fairly hollow.

A little more reassuring is the second single, 'Don't Cry', a rearrangement of an even earlier number by Bessie Smith, with a more rhythmic and bluesy take on life; here, the string melody creates more of an «emotionally perturbed» atmosphere, swirling around the firm and steady bassline, and the resulting effect is less maudlin, while Etta, perhaps somewhat elated to be paying tribute to the Empress of the Blues, gives it her all to sound soulful and seductive. The result was immediately obvious, as the song entered the R&B Top 10 and even moved a little higher on the general charts — this isn't exactly «tough mama Etta», but it's at least «sultry Etta», and it clearly works better than «sentimental Etta».

Unfortunately, just as we have gathered some evidence to praise public taste, all our efforts fall through: 'Seven Day Fool', one of the «toughest» and most fun songs on the album, was a total flop despite deserving to be the biggest hit of the three. Co-written by Billy Davis (the author of Jackie Wilson's 'Reet Petite') and Motown owner Berry Gordy himself, it's a loud, stomping pop rocker that tells us all we want to know about a woman's sacrifice for her man — "*And on a Monday / I scrub your dirty floor / On a Tuesday / I do a whole lot more / On a Wednesday / I wash your dirty clothes / To have a little lovin' 'fore the weekend goes*" — no irony here, Etta is just being a good little housewife as long as her man delivers the required goods with regularity. It's loud, it's passionate, it's catchy, and, of course, it did not chart. What was wrong with all you people? Too busy listening to 'Hit The Road Jack' and 'Runaround Sue' in those October days of 1961?

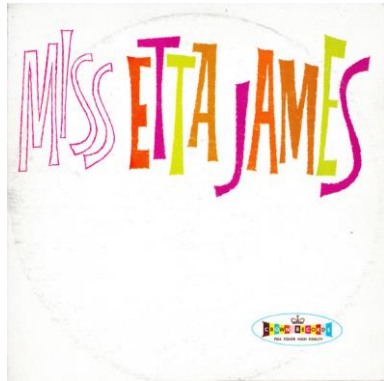
Of the two B-sides and five LP-only tracks that surround these three singles on **Second Time Around**, five are oldies that are of absolutely no interest; I can only state that even by 1961, the world had seen more than enough of its share of covers of 'Don't Get Around Much Anymore', and that Etta James is one of the last persons on this Earth whom I want to hear singing 'One For My Baby (And One More For The Road)'. She just isn't the type, you know? The proverbial «suspension of disbelief» simply does not apply to a case like this. Can *you* imagine falling upon a gloomy Etta James at a quarter to three in some lonely barroom, drinking away her crushed heart and all? No, no, render unto Frank the things that are Frank's, and unto Etta the things that are Etta's.

Of those, very little remains, though. Her only songwriting credit on the album is 'I'll Dry My Tears', another torch ballad that at least allows for a little more passion, and there is some sonic delight to be found on the stop-and-start sections, as the snakey strings wind their way along the steps. And then there's the aptly titled 'Plum Nuts', aptly contributed by a

certain «Robert Plummer» (no idea who that is), a novelty dance number that seems to alternately borrow melodic lines from The Coasters' 'Searchin' and Ray Charles' 'Little Girl Of Mine', but I don't really mind as long as it gives Etta a pretext to display her whacko side — the same one that worked so well on 'Tough Mary' from the last album. It has nowhere near the Great Psychological Depth of all those oldies from the Songbook, but it has exuberance, and that's the #1 thing I want from my Etta James: ELATION and EXUBERANCE. Thank you, Robert Plummer, whoever you are, for contributing this nonsensical piece of rubbish — along with 'Seven Day Fool' and, to a lesser extent, 'Don't Cry Baby', it is pretty much the only thing I can bring myself to care about on this album.

Like I said, though, this is not so much a dig at Etta as a continuous expression of amazement at the poor judgement on the part of the Chess brothers — they weren't putting the pressure on Muddy Waters to croon "*love oh love oh careless love*", so why would they want to lock Etta James in this completely incoherent image? The only possible explanation is the «spirit of 1961», with everybody encouraging everybody else to «go soft» and nostalgia for the vibes of the pre-rock'n'roll era pop music hitting audiences and record label owners alike. Had Etta James been signed to Chess just a couple years earlier, things might have been different, and maybe we wouldn't have to wait for that [Etta / Chuck Berry duet](#) until frickin' 1987!





## MISS ETTA JAMES

Album released:

1961

V A L U E  
3 3 3 2 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) *Dance With Me Henry*; 2) Do Something Crazy; 3) W-O-M-A-N; 4) My One And Only; 5) I Hope You're Satisfied; 6) Good Rockin' Daddy; 7) Hey Henry; 8) Strange Things; 9) That's All; 10) How Big A Fool.

### REVIEW

Now *this* is the real deal for «Miss Etta James», even if it came about 3-4 years too late and still left way too much to be desired. With Etta turning into a consistent hitmaker and recognizable music figure by mid-1961, it was inevitable that Crown Records would remember they had a pretty solid backlog of Etta's early recordings lying around — the usual mix of out-of-print singles and unreleased outtakes — and since their biggest artists such as B. B. King weren't exactly laying golden eggs on a consistent basis, any potential extra source of income would be welcome. The result was **Miss Etta James**, a rather miserly sampler consisting of just ten numbers, among which happened to be Etta's second-best seller for Modern Records ('Good Rockin' Daddy') but, curiously, not the first one... although, hold on, this is where the story gets a bit interesting.

Let's take a look at John Marlo's original liner notes: "*She was just a little girl of 17 who had high hopes and big dreams... the pert teenager sat down at the piano to set down the melody in her heart. It came quickly, almost effortlessly. Fate stepped in. An A&R executive heard the tune, liked it, and liked the singer better. The singer? Same as the writer. They rushed out a record. It was an immediate smash. Yes, a youngster named Etta James had just written and recorded one of the great rock'n'roll standards of all time... 'Dance With Me, Henry!'*"



Sounds cool, right? Inspiring and all? Except that most of it is bullshit. First and foremost, the track titled 'Dance With Me, Henry', included on this LP as the lead-in number, is actually a recording from 1958, not 1955, when Etta was already a young lady of 20. Second, considering the actual lyrics, the song would formally be a cover version of '[Dance With Me, Henry](#)' by Georgia Gibbs — *that* one was actually released in 1955. So did Etta steal the song? No, of course not; Georgia's version was, indeed, in itself a «verbally sanitized» cover of Etta's 'Roll With Me, Henry', her first single for Modern, which *was* actually released in 1955, when "she was just a little girl of 17", *did* become an immediate smash on the R&B charts, staying on top for about a month, and also had to sport a fake title of 'The Wallflower' because, apparently, «roll with me» was considered inappropriate, though, honestly, the song was all about just dancing from the very beginning.

So the liner notes are not *that* wrong, right? Marlo simply messed up the original recording with the slightly «tamer» re-recording from three years later (probably intentionally — in 1961, the conservative backlash against indecency in popular music was at its peak, and Crown Records did not want to take unnecessary risks). But no, it gets worse. The "pert teenager" never really "sat down at the piano" to compose 'Roll With Me, Henry' for the simple reason that the melody of 'Roll With Me, Henry' was written at least a year earlier — by Mr. Hank Ballard, whose '[Work With Me, Annie](#)' had been an even bigger hit in early 1954. 'Roll With Me, Henry' was a transparent answer to 'Work With Me, Annie' (as is glaringly obvious even from the rhythmic correlation of both titles), co-credited to Etta with her discoverer and promoter, Johnny Otis, so it is not even clear who of the two had the actual idea to latch on to Hank Ballard's hit or came up with the new lyrics. Even in 1961, I think, when public memories of big hits from 1954–1955 were a little fresher than they are today, it would not take much to expose the phoney character of the liner notes; and today, although that age is quite a bit more removed, we have the benefit of much better access to information, so here's another lesson about the importance of double-checking.

That said, the phoney in question here is Mr. John Marlo and certainly not Etta herself. Back in the 1950s — and, some might argue, even beyond that — her principal and very transparent schtick was precisely that: take those big, bold, catchy, oh-so-masculine musical creeds pumped out by various blues, R&B, and rock'n'roll artists, add an extra bit of magic potion, and get them to transition into big, bold, catchy, oh-so-feminist musical creeds of her own. Although other female artists at the same time occasionally pulled such stunts as well, listening to both the songs included on **Miss Etta James** and the rest of her A- and B-sides from the same period shows that nobody was doing this on such a rigorously consistent basis. In sheer musical terms, our lady does nothing much here but steal, steal, steal — from Muddy Waters, from Little Richard, from various doo-wop artists whose names escape me because doo-wop is so not my thing — yet there is always a valid point to all this material being so second-hand derivative: she is literally translating all these songs from «man-speech» to

«woman-speech», which will never make them (like any translations) equally valuable to the originals, but makes them perfectly enjoyable if you can appreciate the pragmatics of the act and admire the passion displayed within. As long as we refuse to buy the «17-year old prodigy sitting down at the piano to create musical masterpieces» myth that not-too-honest people tried to attach to this aesthetics, I think we can enjoy the ride for all it's worth.

Regardless of its origins, '[The Wallflower](#)', a.k.a. 'Roll With Me Henry' (*not* included on this LP), is a lot of fun, with Etta pulling off a fairly convincing Ruth Brown impersonation — at 17, she did not yet have the time to fully work out her own identity, but she did show enough confidence and sassiness to roll along with the finest voices in contemporary R&B. (The opening male vocals, by the way, come courtesy of Richard Berry, the author of 'Louie Louie'). I think that to most modern listeners, the song will be primarily recognizable as a sympathetic piece of nostalgic proto-rock'n'roll by way of *Back To The Future*, but in 1955 it was, of course, all about role reversal — all through the Fifties, Etta's main calling was to show that gals can hold their own against guys, and this is, naturally, where it all starts.

Because of the song turning into such a monster hit, it was inevitable that Etta would revisit its theme at least several times throughout her Modern career. Three years later, she did indeed revive the song once again under its «censored» title of 'Dance With Me, Henry'; ironically, though, from a *musical* standpoint the 1958 edition was much wilder than the original (and certainly a hell a lot wilder than the cutesy Georgia Gibbs cover). It's faster; it completely drops the male vocal counterpart, so that it could be Etta's show all the way; it features a much more aggressive, barking and growling vocal delivery; and it has some maniacal Little Richard-like sax solos to boot. If you want to make a quick audio demonstration to somebody on what was the actual difference between «R&B» and «rock'n'roll» in the 1950s, just play these two versions back to back... and no verbal explanations are necessary. (The LP also includes 'Hey Henry', a direct sequel to 'Roll With Me Henry' with another call-and-response session between Etta and Berry — this one at least has a tiny bit of melodic variation on the original rather than just adding yet another set of lyrics).

Unfortunately, Etta's early winning streak did not last long. Running on the strength of the momentum, her next single, 'Good Rockin' Daddy', still managed to climb to #6 on the R&B charts — written by Berry, it was basically a piece of Muddy Waters-style mid-tempo Chicago blues transposed to a danceable R&B setting, and another solid showcase for Etta's vocal confidence, but it just didn't have the seductive aspect of 'Henry', and besides, that accent on the second beat just doesn't make you want to dance *nearly* as much as when it's on the first one, you know? The «lesson» was not learned, however, and the third single was even slower and Chicago-er: 'W-O-M-A-N' was Etta's intrusive contribution to the Muddy Waters /

Bo Diddley masculinity contest of ‘Hoochie Coochie Man’, ‘I’m A Man’, and ‘Mannish Boy’. All about role reversal once again, but the public didn’t really get it – some might say due to sexism, others might point out that the buyers simply had had enough of the ‘Hoochie Coochie Man’ riff in their lives. However, the other side of the single was ‘That’s All’, a driving piece of rock’n’roll from sax player Maxwell Davis whose roots clearly lie in the jump blues of ‘Good Rockin’ Tonight’ but whose level of power and energy is about as top level as 1955 technically permitted anyone. With a message as simple, punchy, and cockily delivered as "*all you gotta do is rock and roll and that's all*", the fact that this one did not sell is, if not a travesty, then at least a curiosity.

And with that, it was all over for Etta at Modern – over the next three years, the label let her put out 7-8 additional singles, *none* of which made any chart impact, as if the world was strictly determined to have the artist remembered exclusively for ‘Roll With Me Henry’ and nothing else. This was an odd decision on the world’s part. For sure, *all* of these singles – no exceptions – would continue to be highly derivative of other people’s work, running mostly on the fire within Etta’s soul, throat, and loins, rather than on any kind of original ideas. But this was precisely the situation with ‘Henry’ itself, and the fact that it was merely a reinvention of ‘Work With Me, Annie’ did not stop people from appreciating it. There certainly is an element of lucky randomness here, which is a little frustrating.

Personally, having significantly expanded the original 10-track release with at least 12 more recordings from the same era, I find the resulting mega-collection of Etta’s recordings for Modern every bit as enjoyable as any Ruth Brown or LaVern Baker record from the same era, to name just a few of the top female R&B artists. Etta was really willing to try out anything to succeed: we have slow, luscious blues ballads with a doo-wop flavor (‘Do Something Crazy’; ‘I Hope You’re Satisfied’), playful reinterpretations of Muddy Waters (‘My One And Only’, an easily recognizable variation on ‘Feel So Good’), poppier takes on Chuck Berry (‘Strange Things Happening’, basically a fluffier rewrite of ‘Thirty Days’), and lots and lots and lots of girl-perspective takes on Little Richard. Blues, R&B, rock and roll, doo-wop, Latin, pure dance pop, just about every popular genre works for Etta here – she is doing pretty much the same thing that James Brown and the Famous Flames were doing all through the 1950s, ready to try anything as long as it worked (and sometimes even when it didn’t).

A particular favorite of mine from that period, unfortunately not included on the LP, is [‘The Pick-Up’](#), credited not to one, but *two* sax greats from the illustrious state of Louisiana – Harold Battiste and Plas Johnson; I do not know who of the two blows the actual sax on this track (maybe both?), but it is a wonderful example of oh-so-New Orleanian musical humor, with Etta holding an expressive spoken dialogue with the saxophone trying to «pick her up». The real hero on the track is

not Etta, but the saxophone, showing all of the instrument's emotional range in this particular case — from cockiness and swag to moodiness and depression (once the «pick up» fails to work). It's a bit of a theatrical mini-masterpiece here, one of those countless inventive nuggets from the past that all slipped through the cracks, but if you have a couple of minutes to spare, it's got serious potential to brighten up your day for a while.

All in all, I would say that anybody interested in Fifties' music from a more sociological perspective should *necessarily* give this stuff a listen — Etta here does for the male-dominated Chicago blues and early rock'n'roll scene pretty much the same thing that Wanda Jackson did for the rockabilly market: reverse the roles so that the ladies can take charge, for a change. From a more strictly *musical* perspective, of course, this is not Etta's best work, if only because most of the songs are just carbon copies of other people's ideas. But I can also totally see how for some people this could be Etta's finest collection, if only because it features her so youthful, so raw, so energetic, and without all that glossy orchestrated stuff that the people at Chess would heap up on her from the very beginning of her tenure with the label. It's basically the equivalent of something like The Bangles' self-titled EP, when they were still a fiery punk-pop band before sacrifices had to be made for assured mainstream success. One thing's for certain: I would much rather "*roll with Henry*" than live through "*life is like a song*", and somehow I feel that back in those days, Etta would, too.

