

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>

Only Solitaire

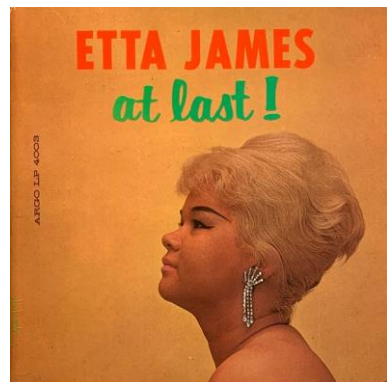
Artist: *Etta James*

Years: *1959-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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AT LAST!

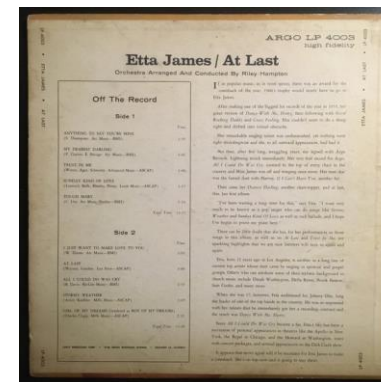
Album released:

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.

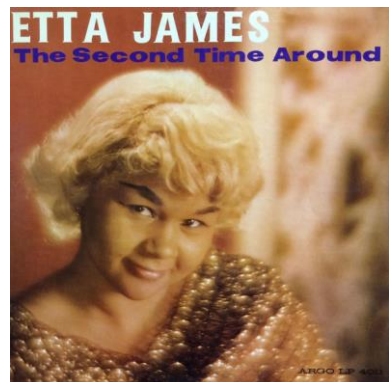
The arrangement of Willie Dixon / Muddy Waters' 'I Just Want To Make Love To You' introduces a new sax riff, loosely based on the cockiness of 'Hoochie Coochie Man', and once again puts up a wall of strings — but at least this time the bluesy and aggressive nature of the song does not allow them to spell 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.

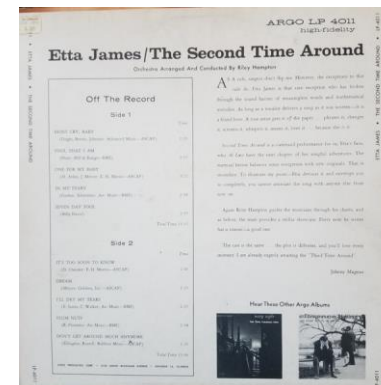




THE SECOND TIME AROUND

Album released: **V A L U E**
Dec. 14, 1961 **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!

