

# FATS DOMINO

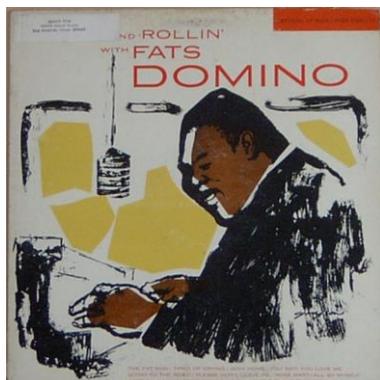


<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1949-2006</i>	<i>Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i><a href="#">I'm Walking</a> (1957)</i>

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## Page contents:

- [ROCK AND ROLLIN' WITH FATS DOMINO](#) (1956) 🌸
- [This Is Fats Domino!](#) (1956)
- [Here Stands Fats Domino](#) (1957)
- [This Is Fats](#) (1957)
- [The Fabulous Mr. D](#) (1958)
- [Let's Play Fats Domino](#) (1959)
- [A Lot Of Dominos](#) (1960)
- [I Miss You So](#) (1961)
- [Let The Four Winds Blow](#) (1961)
- [What A Party!](#) (1961)



# ROCK AND ROLLIN' WITH FATS DOMINO

Album released:  
March 1956

V A L U E  
2 5 4 3 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) The Fat Man; 2) Tired Of Crying; 3) Goin' Home; 4) You Said You Loved Me; 5) Going To The River; 6) Please Don't Leave Me; 7) Rose Mary; 8) All By Myself; 9) **Ain't It A Shame**; 10) Poor Me; 11) Bo Weevil; 12) Don't Blame It On Me.

## REVIEW

Compared against all the wealth of the New Orleanian piano-playing tradition, Antoine Domino Jr. could hardly be called a 'great' musician even next to such commercially oriented entertainers as Professor Longhair, let alone more sophisticated fellow jazzmen. There is quite a serious chance that if you decide to sit through all the 12 tracks on this album in a row, his unabashedly simplistic and straightforward style of finger-banging will cease to hold your attention long before we get to his biggest hit. Yet it was precisely this simplicity, one might even say this *austerity* of approach that somehow catapulted 'The Fat Man' to national attention in early 1950. No superfluous complications, no virtuosity, just a steady, unrelenting pumping, with Earl Palmer locking himself into (allegedly) the first ever backbeat-only groove and the piano lines sacrificing melodic exploration in favor of non-stop intensity: primitive, primal, and premedial.



'The Fat Man', credited to Fats and his long-term collaborator Dave Bartholomew, was musically a re-write of the older standard 'Junker Blues', Champion Jack Dupree's lament on the hardships of a drug-addicted lifestyle. For a guy like Fats,

such subjects were a no-go — his was a cheerful and optimistic New Orleanian vibe, teaching you to accept life as it comes, but try to limit your troubles to unfaithful women... and even then, not to take it too much to heart, because, after all, there is no such heartbreak that a nice filé gumbo won't cure. "They call me, they call me the fat man 'cause I weigh two hundred pounds — all the girls they love me 'cause I know my way around" — the first verse ever sung by Mr. Domino could just as well have been carved on his grave, as it seems to describe his nature to a tee.

If there is one thing that makes *The Fat Man* truly stand out from his rock'n'roll brethren of the Fifties, it is precisely this kind of personality — New Orleanian to the core, as opposed to the darker and sterner Chicago approach or to the country-western overtones of most of the white rock'n'rollers. This is unquestionably rock'n'roll, yes, but without a whiff of that rebellious spirit, without any incentives to crash and burn, driven exclusively by an optimistic, idealistic, good-natured desire to wallow in pure fun, even if all that wallowing might mask a set of troubles and sorrows. "Ain't that a shame, my tears fell like rain", he sings on his signature hit, but does anybody actually feel those tears falling like rain? Not in the vocals — not in the music — not in the atmosphere of the song, which, with its constantly mounting tension and burly sax solos, is as cheerfully party-spirit as it goes. This all might make Fats look like a wary conservative, steadily keeping one foot in the pre-rock'n'roll era... but then again, what exactly would be wrong with that, other than, perhaps, strip him of the right to sit on exactly the same bench as Little Richard and Chuck Berry?

The real problem is that Fats' catalog in general is somewhat disappointing. **Rock And Rollin' With Fats Domino**, released in early 1956, remains his best album because it simply collects most of his quintessential singles, originally issued over a time span of six years, from 'The Fat Man' in 1950 to 'Bo Weevil' in 1956; and even on this collection, the songs for which were clearly hand-picked for quality, you get plenty of repetition — 'Poor Me' and 'Don't Blame It On Me', in particular, are transparent re-writes of 'Ain't That A Shame', quickly rushed out after the original became a hit, according to widespread practice of the times: Little Richard and Chuck Berry in their respective prime would be battling that practice, but Fats clearly had no such ambition. Likewise, 'Goin' Home' and 'You Said You Loved Me' are the exact same song, and 'Rose Mary' is a totally unnecessary slowed down version of 'The Fat Man', without the rushed excitement and the sexy falsetto wah-wahs of the original, though, granted, with an unusually long and complex piano solo for compensation (probably the single best piece of evidence for Fats' technique on the album).

Still, distill the record down to its small handful of truly essential originals — 'The Fat Man', 'Please Don't Leave Me', 'Ain't That A Shame', 'All By Myself', maybe 'Bo Weevil' — and you are left with the finest that New Orleanian-tinged rock'n'roll,

or, maybe, rather rock'n'roll-tinged New Orleanian pop music can offer. Rough enough around the edges (the musicians do not always seem to gel perfectly with each other, which actually adds a bit of chaotic charm), but soft and always friendly at the core, all these songs are insanely catchy — after all, their basic chord structures were not so much invented by Fats as appropriated from tried-and-true musical formulae — and, I would guess, even perfectly appropriate for the spirit of the early 21st century. When Fats sings "meet me in the parlor about half past one, we're goin' out to have some fun", you know what he really means is taking a ride on the Ferris wheel and sharing an icecream or two — something *way* too meek for somebody like Johnny Burnette and the Rock'n'Roll Trio, who deleted that verse and replaced it with 'Good Rockin' Tonight's "meet me and a-hurry behind the barn, don't be afraid 'cause I'll do you no harm". Ever the courteous gentleman, that Mr. Domino Jr.

Personality, indeed, is everything: there were plenty of people who would later cover these songs with far superior musical arrangements, and there were people who were well able to impose their own impressive personalities onto them — John Lennon's 1975 rendition of 'Ain't That A Shame', for instance, turned the song into a veritable venomous diatribe — but nobody could match or replace that charming New Orleanian accent, or that air of slightly lazy, overtly friendly nonchalance that permeates both the nominally happy and the nominally sad songs on this record. You could even argue, in a way, that Fats was more the originator of the "amicable star-at-the-bar" concept, one which would later extend way beyond core New Orleanians like Dr. John and all the way to people like Randy Newman, than he was the originator of the rock'n'roll sound. At the very least, this **Rock And Rollin' With Fats Domino** always sounds more like **Sharing A Drink With Fats Domino** to my ears — which makes even the repetitive numbers fully forgivable, because who really cares if your next shot tastes absolutely identical to the one you just took before?





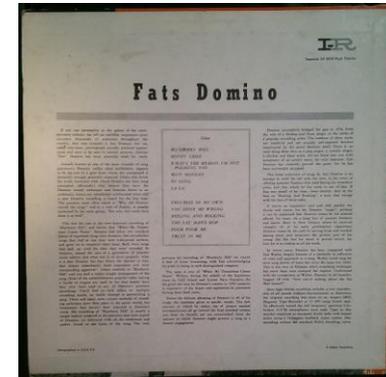
# THIS IS FATS DOMINO!

Album released:

Dec. 1956

V A L U E  
2 5 4 3 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) *Blueberry Hill*; 2) *Honey Chile*; 3) *What's The Reason I'm Not Pleasing You*; 4) *Blue Monday*; 5) *So Long*; 6) *La La*; 7) *Troubles Of My Own*; 8) *You Done Me Wrong*; 9) *Reeling And Rocking*; 10) *The Fat Man's Hop*; 11) *Poor Poor Me*; 12) *Trust In Me*.

## REVIEW

This is an interesting release in that it essentially functions as one huge A-Side contrasted with one huge B-Side: most of the truly important and interesting songs are placed on the first side of the vinyl, while most of the throwaways and rewrites are nested on the second. Essentially, this is just a collection of several of Fats' hit singles from late 1956 — with the B-side padded out from a bunch of songs that go all the way back to the early Fifties.

At the very least, it may be clearly seen that in late '56, Fats was in top form and well willin' to compete in the general entertainment field, even as his chief inspiration was still coming from the past rather than the future — 'Blueberry Hill', the best known song from this album, dates back to at least 1940 and had already been popularized by Louis Armstrong himself, yet somehow it took Fats' unhurrying piano waves and the familiar New Orleanian backbeat of his band to turn the song into an undying classic. Perhaps Elvis' cover from 1957 also contributed to this, but there is no denying that it was Fats and nobody else who made it a truly popular standard.



And this time, it is truly all about the music rather than personality — one might even argue that Fats' predictably cheerful, imperturbable delivery does not agree perfectly well with the song's lovestruck-serenade nature, as he tells his tale of faded romance with about as much outside passion as you'd expect from a recollection of a childhood trip to Coney Island or something. No, what really matters is that it took the «simplistic» innovations of Fifties' rock'n'roll to bring out the true earworm potential of the tune — something that used to be loose, squishy, meandering, hard-to-focus-on because of the general melodic conventions of the era, suddenly found its way into the deepest levels of your brain just because it became anchored to a concise, if repetitive piano riff and a toe-tappable rhythmic foundation. Yes, it was always a good song with an intelligent, well-constructed rise-and-fall build-up, but millions of people had to wait until Fats to see it. So thanks, Fats.

On the other hand, the difference between Fats' version of 'Blue Monday' and the 1953 original recording by Smiley Lewis should probably be ascribed to personality — Lewis' vocal delivery is pretty standard R&B fare for the times, barely distinguishable from the average jump-blues wailer, whereas Fats gets into his role with seductive ease, ever so slightly varying his vocal timbre for each day of the week mentioned in the song, going from tiredness and depression to joy and relief and back without ever leaving the closed circle of his generally reserved and nonchalant attitude. The whole thing just sounds so much more powerful and, well, *important* than the original that there is no doubt about it — what we are witnessing is a major step forward in the development of rhythm and blues, making it so much fuller, deeper, modern-sounding than Big Joe Turner and Wynonie Harris (no offense toward either).

Other highlights on the first side include 'Honey Chile', which begins as a variation on the superior 'I'm In Love Again', but still manages to find its own direction due to its somewhat odd stop-and-start structure; and 'So Long', easily Fats' best song on the issue of leaving it all behind — a short and decisive musical goodbye that teaches you, in two minutes flat, how it's no use crying over spilled milk more effectively than any advanced seance of psychotherapy.

Unfortunately, the second side of the vinyl, as I already said, is largely useless — most of it is drawn from early post-'Fat Man' singles, when Fats was not yet fully free from old school conventions and felt no qualms whatsoever about rewriting himself to the left and to the right. Arguably the only track of interest there is 'The Fat Man's Hop', a somewhat messy and overproduced instrumental in which the bass, the piano, and the brass section seem to play three different parts more or less independent of each other, leading to barely controlled chaos (with the drummer so confused that he mostly confines himself to cymbals for some reason) — however, Fats plays some really cool rolls all over it, showcasing excellent technique which he usually kept out of his hit singles. On the whole, though, the only point of the second side, if it was needed in the

*Only Solitaire*

Artist: *Fats Domino*

Album: *This Is Fats Domino! (1956)*

George Starostin's Reviews

first place, is to show you how much more exciting R&B had become over the brief span of 3-4 years.





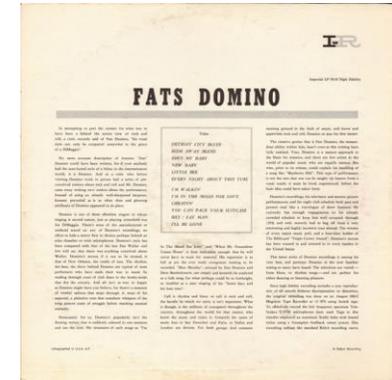
## HERE STANDS FATS DOMINO

Album released:

March 1957

V A L U E  
2 4 2 2 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Detroit City Blues; 2) Hide Away Blues; 3) She's My Baby; 4) Brand New Baby; 5) Little Bee; 6) Every Night About This Time; 7) **I'm Walkin'**; 8) I'm In The Mood For Love; 9) Cheatin'; 10) You Can Pack Your Suitcase; 11) Hey! Fat Man; 12) I'll Be Gone.

### REVIEW

On February 23, 1957 Fats Domino released one of his best singles — maybe even *the* best if you count the quality of both the A- and the B-side. 'I'm Walkin', credited as usual to himself and Dave Bartholomew, shares all of Fats' usual upbeat and nonchalant charisma, but throws one more ingredient into the mix: an insanely fast tempo, with Earl Palmer's martial drums driving the song forward quite relentlessly and Herbert Hardesty's rousing sax patterns clearly foreshadowing King Curtis' classic yakety-sax style on the Coasters' records. Behind this express train speed it is easy to completely miss the lyrics — which, as is common in Fats' songs, talk about loneliness and empty hopes in the most cheerful and uplifting way possible: "I'm lonely as I can be / I'm waiting for your company / I'm hoping that you'll come back to me" except the singer is sprinting so fast that even if she decides to change her mind and come back she's gonna have to put on her jogging shorts first. Slow this thing down and it will become similar to a lazy Hank Williams-style country shuffle à la 'Hey Good Lookin'; speed it up and you get a wholesome shot of R&B for the rest of the day. It actually even made the pop charts, introducing Fats to a whole new audience at a time when he really needed it, what with all the rock'n'roll competition making his music antiquated.



The B-side was no slouch, either: a fairly modern reinterpretation of the old standard 'I'm In The Mood For Love', driven by a loud pendulum-shaped bass line and waves of brass rather than Fats' piano... and by «modern», I actually mean «replacing classic pre-war Hollywood crooning sentimentality with the down-to-earth feeling of the average citizen of New Orleans on a hot, humid, debilitating summer night», hammocks and mosquitoes included, pass the alligators. You gotta love good old Fats when he drawls out an "I'm in the mood for love..." with the intonation of somebody who's actually in the mood for a hot dog — and then it gets you thinking about what it is that makes one's feelings for a hot dog so fundamentally different from one's feelings for another human being... see, such is the power of great reinterpretations of works of art.

Anyway, the single is perfect. What is *not* perfect is the decision of the Imperial label to put it right in the middle of Fats' third LP — which is otherwise entirely comprised of his *old* singles and outtakes, dating from all the way back in 1949 ('Detroit City Blues', the original A-side to 'Fat Man') and up to about 1954. Essentially, this is an archival release which, for all purposes, should have been called **There Stood Fats Domino**, but since it did include his latest single, the producers could at least formally lay down a claim to some current relevance. It does feel weird, though, when the entire first side clearly shows old age, with muffled and muddy old production values, and then 'I'm Walkin' and 'I'm In The Mood For Love' come along loud, bright, sharp, and clear, only to have the needle dropped once again on 'Cheatin'.

The best one probably could say in 1957 — or, for that matter, in 2020 — about those older tracks is how clear a picture they present of R&B's progression from that time, if not in terms of melodic complexity, then certainly in terms of sharpness of sound and immediacy of effect on the listener. Compared to 'Ain't That A Shame' or, in fact, 'I'm Walkin', something like 'Detroit City Blues' sounds limp, sluggish, and sleep-inducing, even if in 1949 it may have produced a different impression, and, to be honest, it gives us a better demonstration of Fats' mastery of the piano than any of his actual hits. Against the slow tempo of the song, he does all sorts of trills, rolls, and glissandos which actually show him quite worthy of at least an Amos Milburn, if certainly well below Art Tatum; listen to his work on this song, on 'Hide Away Blues', or on the faster moving boogie of 'She's My Baby', and it actually becomes curious how he would later all but abandon these blatant show-offs in favor of comparatively more simplistic pop hooks.

But then it's really only that good for the first two or three songs: once you get used to Fats' piano style, the relatively stiff and slow formula of the early R&B years begins to wear off quickly, with nearly identical pieces of 12-bar blues replacing each other with all the excitement of a parade of baby snails. Worse, the album ends on a couple of self-referencing reprises ('Hey! Fat Man', 'I'll Be Gone') whose main attraction consists of a call-and-answer session between Fats and his backing

band — and the punchline is always about being called «fat man», which I have nothing against if it's fully consensual, but the joke gets boring fairly quickly, and besides, cheap vaudeville entertainment is something you'd think a guy like Fats was supposed to take us away from, not rub our noses in it.

In the end, most of this material should probably rest in the archives, sitting next to the shelf on which one lays down, for instance, the pre-'Tutti Frutti' era of Little Richard. You can always embrace a bit of revisionism, of course, but the truth is, Fats Domino is not very interesting when he does 'Detroit City Blues' because he did not invent this formula, he mastered it as an apprentice — old school R&B is always more exciting if you receive it firsthand from the likes of Big Joe Turner and Wynonie Harris. 'I'm Walkin', on the other hand, is 100% Fats, and this is why that single song completely trumps *all* of the man's pre-1955 material.





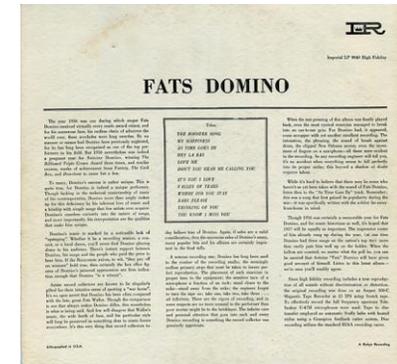
# THIS IS FATS

Album released:

Aug. 1957

V A L U E  
2 5 4 3 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) The Rooster Song; 2) My Happiness; 3) As Time Goes By; 4) Hey La Bas; 5) Love Me; 6) Don't You Hear Me Calling You; 7) **It's You I Love**; 8) Valley Of Tears; 9) Where Did You Stay; 10) Baby Please; 11) Thinking Of You; 12) You Know I Miss You.

## REVIEW

So why spoil a good thing if it ain't working anyway? **This Is Fats** half-borrows its title from **This Is Fats Domino!**, plunging buyers into inevitable confusion, and its formula from **Here Stands Fats Domino**: take one recent hit single and surround it with a bunch of A- and B-sides scrambled together from years past. But this time around, neither the recent hit single is all that good nor the past stuff is all that valuable, given that the best tracks had already inevitably been used for the previous LPs.

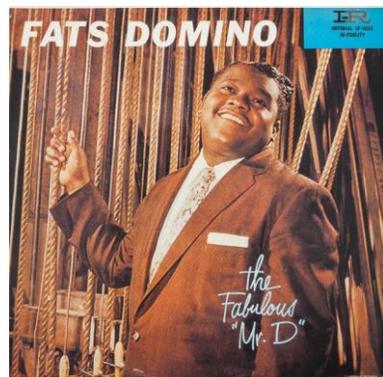


The single was 'Valley Of Tears', a Domino/Bartholomew original which marries a nice little country vocal melody to New Orleanian R&B and a gospel backing choir — it is not bad, and it quickly gained popularity among other artists, with everybody from Brenda Lee to Van Morrison recording cover versions, but it also tries to present Fats as a crooner rather than a belter, and that soulful sentimentality is not exactly his style; besides, nothing about the song's melody is particularly innovative, with its only point of interest being the «crossover» attitude. I am actually far more attracted to the B-side: 'It's You I Love' is fast, funny, repetitive, stupid, and 100% New Orleanian in style and attitude. "We'll get married, go to Paris, come here, kiss me, it's you I love" — somehow I feel that good old Fats had a much easier time picking girls with *that* attitude than "Everyone understands me in the valley of tears".

There is also a relatively recent 4-song EP included here, whose titular track is ‘The Rooster Song’ — a fun novelty number which plays upon the legacy of ‘Ain’t That A Shame’ but switches it all to nursery rhyme mode (“There was an old lady from Houston / She had two hens and a rooster / Her rooster died, the old lady cried / My hens don’t lay like they used to” — and even though it is hard to believe, I do not think there is a hidden sexual innuendo anywhere in here). A curious mini-highlight of the EP is a sped up, upbeat instrumental take on ‘As Time Goes By’, which Fats and his sax player transform from solemn melancholic nostalgia to light-and-cheerful nostalgia (boy, what I’d give to hear Fats Domino put out an LP of The Cure covers — now *that* would be the challenge of the century).

The rest of the material once again stretches all the way back to 1950, when Fats was recording stuff like the ancient Creole song ‘Hey (Eh) La Bas’ (is there a single New Orleanian musician who hasn’t covered it at one point or another?); but at least that song is naturally memorable, which is more than I can say about the rest of the material — formulaic R&B patterns without any specifically interesting vocal, guitar, sax, or piano moments. As usual, it all sounds nice but is strictly for Fats’ big fans. In the end, ‘Valley Of Tears’, ‘It’s You I Love’, and (just for a laugh) ‘The Rooster Song’ is probably all you need to hear from this record.





## THE FABULOUS "MR. D"

Album released:

September 1958

V A L U E

2 3 3 1 3

More info:

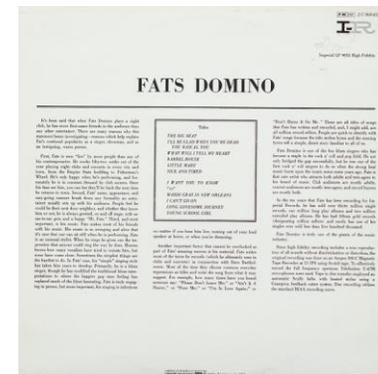


**Tracks:** 1) The Big Beat; 2) I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal You; 3) What Will I Tell My Heart; 4) Barrel House; 5) Little Mary; 6) Sick And Tired; 7) I Want You To Know; 8) 44; 9) Mardi Gras In New Orleans; 10) I Can't Go On; 11) Long Lonesome Journey; 12) Young School Girl.

### REVIEW

Fats' only LP from 1958 was predictably centered around his most recent singles: 'The Big Beat' (December '57), 'Sick And Tired' (April '58), 'Little Mary' (July '58), and 'Young School Girl' (August '58). Imperial Records even gave it a vague semblance of respecting the artist's chronology, putting up 'The Big Beat' as the first track and 'Young School Girl' as the last one. In between, however, we have the usual mish-mash: there is at least one B-side which goes all the way back to 1955 ('I Can't Go On'), and one more from as far away as 1953 — a cover of Professor Longhair's 'Mardi Gras In New Orleans' (again, you will immediately spot the difference based on the huge discrepancy in sound quality). Finally, there are a few tracks which had not been previously released at all, but they also look more like archival outtakes than original recordings from 1958: the instrumental 'Barrel House', at least, is definitely another leftover from the 1953 sessions, and 'Long Lonesome Journey' was recorded even earlier, in April 1952.

Let us begin with the singles — all of which charted, but not too high, failing to crack the Top 10 even on the R&B charts, let alone the Pop register (and both of my single-CD *Greatest Hits* collections ignore them completely). 'The Big Beat' is indeed utterly unoriginal, more or less a sped up and boogified version of LaVern Baker's 'Tweedlee Dee' whose only outstanding



feature is a surprisingly excessive amount of reverb on Fats' vocals, which somehow produces more of a lulling than a Gene Vincent effect — maybe this is why people did not rush out to buy the record, even if it is still perfectly danceable. 'Sick And Tired' is classic angry girl-bashing 12-bar blues redone as a fast-paced merry New Orleanian shuffle — nice, but relatively inefficient, and besides, who really wants to buy a song called 'Sick And Tired' from New Orleans' most famous good-time entertainer? 'Little Mary' is definitely more like it ("I want you, I need you, you got me spinning like a top"), but it adds nothing to the legacy of 'Please Don't Leave Me' other than sharper sound quality.

Finally, 'Young School Girl', building upon the melodic structure of 'Blueberry Hill', comes on like a cold shower on the heads of all unhappy teens: "The school bell is ringing / Vacation time is gone / No more watching the late show / From now on". With the lyrics delivered in the sweetest, most caring fatherly tone, without the least trace of irony, the song is like a perfect family antithesis to Chuck Berry's 'School Days', and unless somebody like Stanley Kubrick would come up with a brilliant idea to use the song in the soundtrack for *Lolita*, it is hard for me to see how any young person in 1958 could get even the least excited about it. (By the way, did you know that the names of Antoine 'Fats' Dominique Domino Jr.'s eight children are Antoine, Anatole, Andre, Antonio, Antoinette, Andrea, Anola, and Adonica? I sure did not).

With all the A-sides being thoroughly «okayish» rather than outstanding, it would be presumptuous to expect anything of higher quality from the B-sides and outtakes. Fats is being quite charming on the old standard 'What Will I Tell My Heart' (there is just something magical about the unabashed sentimentalism with which he croons out the title), and that old outtake 'Long Lonesome Journey' also has him playing against type on a slow, moody, soulful blues which is closer to the emotional book of Ray Charles than our merry prankster from New Orleans. But that brooding, heartbroken vibe does not come naturally to Fats, not any more than Professor Longhair's deep wildman vibe, which makes Fats' cover of 'Mardi Gras In New Orleans' essentially useless.

Even the instrumental 'Barrel House', from which you could theoretically expect something exceptional, disappoints — beyond the wobbly, repetitive riff introduced from the beginning, Fats does relatively little else on the track, letting his sax player shine for a few bars instead. Not difficult to see why this particular track had been dusting away in the archives for so long: it is more like a warm-up session for the players before getting anywhere serious than something worthy of being focused upon all on its own.

Bottomline: there is precious little that is «fabulous» about **The Fabulous 'Mr. D'**, although it is nice to see that Imperial Records still obviously cared about consolidating their artist's back catalog. On the whole, 1958 was not a very good year for

*Only Solitaire*

Artist: *Fats Domino*

Album: *The Fabulous "Mr. D" (1958)*

George Starostin's Reviews

Fats, though this is hardly a big surprise — if you ask me, it is much more of a surprise that the man would manage to eventually return to the respectable sections of the charts than his slide into pleasant mediocrity and self-repetition at a time when even the rock'n'rolling youngsters of America were being subtly drained of their original enthusiasm... and Fats had been doing that for almost a *decade* by then.





## LET'S PLAY FATS DOMINO

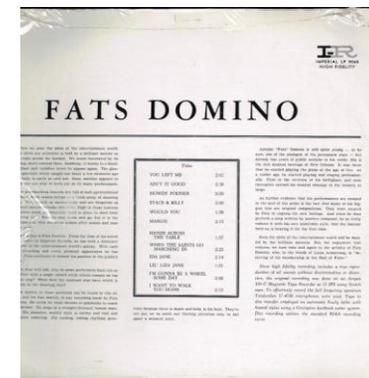
Album released:

V A L U E

September 1959

2 4 4 2 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) *You Left Me*; 2) *Ain't It Good*; 3) *Howdy Podner*; 4) *Stack And Billy*; 5) *Would You*; 6) *Margie*; 7) *Hands Across The Table*; 8) *When The Saints Go Marching In*; 9) *Ida Jane*; 10) *Lil' Liza Jane*; 11) *I'm Gonna Be A Wheel Someday*; 12) *I Want To Walk You Home*.

### REVIEW

Considering that he was indeed the oldest and earliest representative of the first rock and roll generation, it was only too fitting that Fats Domino would also be able to boast the first «rock'n'roll comeback», and this is not an entirely subjective statement. Commercially, most of his career through mid-1957 to late 1958 was in decline: the singles were relatively lackluster, tired and derivative, and the albums, as was pointed out in previous reviews, were a mix of new and old stuff, underwhelming in almost all possible ways. It really did look like this was the end of the road for the Fat Man, who'd said all he had to say and now all he had left to say was say the exact same things with ever lessening impact. Just how much of a coincidence was it, really, calling one of his least successful singles 'Sick And Tired'?



And then, right at the end of 1958, something happened — I have absolutely no idea what it was, but all of a sudden, it was like Fats got himself a new life on the black market. The «revival» was heralded with 'Whole Lotta Loving', a short, fast, concentrated explosion of cheerful energy, with perfectly coordinated boogie-woogie piano rolls and a clever little hook where Fats would replace the word "kisses" with actual kissing sounds; this did not exactly break down the Hays Code, but

it did call for additional attention, and it somehow made the artist feel younger and sexier, even if in real life Fats Domino was probably far from an ideal of the sexiest man alive. In any case, it became his biggest hit since 'Valley Of Tears', about a year and a half ago, and deservedly so. And, miraculously, it was just the beginning.

Admittedly, the decision to follow 'Whole Lotta Loving' with 'When The Saints Go Marching In' (included on the album) was not a very wise choice — I mean, every respectable New Orleanian artist is probably expected to record the beaten old chestnut sooner or later, but the song does break up a nearly immaculate series of singles, and although they take it at a nice break-neck tempo, there's practically no piano at all (just a few exultated sax breaks), and the vocal performance is fairly perfunctory. The B-side (*not* included on the album) was 'Telling Lies', a slower piece of R&B in the vein of 'Ain't That A Shame', also with fairly little piano and a pretty unconvincing vocal hook in the chorus (repeating the word "lies" five times in a row does not immediately turn it into an earworm — at least, not into a particularly charming one).

Just as it might have seemed 'Whole Lotta Loving' was simply one last gasp of brilliance, Fats brought it all back with 'I'm Ready' (again, not included on the album) — which is like 'I'm Walkin' on an extra steroid, namely, an expressive piano riff which, in the instrumental section, turns into one of Fats' most perfectly constructed boogie-woogie solos (Amos Milburn would be so, so proud). The best thing about the song, though, is its vocal melody — there is a peculiarly cool magic to Fats' phrasing here. The trick is probably to keep as formally *calm* and *collected* as possible — all those "I'm ready... and I'm willin'... and I'm able..." sound like a military person's stern and decisive replies to being offered a dangerous mission, except that Fats' mission is to put you on the road to rock'n'roll excitement, and by applying military discipline to this faster-than-lightning performance he really turns 'I'm Ready', with relatively little effort, into one of the finest pop-rock anthems of his generation. You don't even hear the song covered too often by other artists because it is unclear how it could ever be improved upon (the Searchers did a fine, passable version in 1965, but still added nothing to the excitement level of the original; meanwhile, The Band really overdid the production for their take on **Moondog Matinee**).

The commercial and creative successes continued with 'I'm Gonna Be A Wheel Someday', another instantly recognizable Domino-Bartholomew classic, set to the same frantic rhythmic pace as 'I'm Ready' and much more guitar- and sax-driven than its predecessor, but every bit as inspired when it comes to the vocal performance. Again, it is the combination of collected, concentrated decisiveness in Fats' vocal tone *and* the speed factor — speed is of the utmost essence here! — that can drive a listener crazy. "I'M GONNA be a wheel someday, I'M GONNA be somebody, I'M GONNA be a real gone cat...", a fast triple punch that knocks you down before you can set up any critical defenses. It's not *that* faster than 'When The

Saints', but it feels twice as lively and insistent, even without the piano — I do believe, though, that part of the secret is also concealed in that scratchy rhythm guitar part that never lets go throughout the song, keeping the energy level steady high at all times. All of this makes Fats in this era about as proverbially rock-and-roll as he would ever be, temporarily transcending the «New Orleans» stamp of quality and, for a brief shining moment, making him *the* rock'n'roll star of 1959, in that era when Little Richard, Chuck Berry, and even Elvis would fall behind in the race, for various reasons.

That said, the slow and sensitive B-side, 'I Want To Walk You Home', sounded as New Orleanian as they come, written and recorded around the traditional slow R&B shuffle, but remade with a variety of extra touches — there is that electric guitar again, for one thing, echoing each of Fats' lines in the chorus, replacing the same old predictable brass backing to make for a far more intimate performance: it really feels like the guitar is playing the role of Fats' little girlfriend here, consenting to his insistent, but gentlemanly courting. And that combination of a smooth, delicate attitude with an atmosphere of stalking is what makes the song so memorable — in live versions of the song, I have sometimes heard him extending the final "that's why I want to walk you home, that's why I want to walk you home..." to at least twice as many bars as we have here on the fadeout, playing the perfect smooth criminal to his audience. It's not at all creepy, though — just the conduct of a man who knows he has to work real hard to win his lady's heart. Quite charismatic, in fact.

With all this newly found inspiration behind his belt, it is little wonder that **Let's Play With Fats Domino** ends up being Fats' most consistent LP since at least **Here Stands Fats Domino**, or maybe even earlier than that, because there is one major advantage here — for the first time ever, the LP does not feel like a mix of creaky, leaky old recordings with a couple of contemporary singles, but rather feels like a brand new collection of songs that go together very well. Which is all the more impressive considering that most of these LP-only tracks *are* older recordings (dating as far back as 1953!), yet somehow they fished an impressive number of outstanding outtakes from the bottom of the barrel, some of which deserve special mention and discussion.

First, the lead-in number 'You Left Me', originally recorded in September 1953, is one of Fats' best ever ballads — very minimalistic in terms of vocals and lyrics, precisely so that more emphasis could be made on Fats' piano playing. The instrumental part, in which he mixes nervous trills, barrelhouse rolls, and classical glissandos all over the place, is about as «virtuoso» a performance as he ever got on tape, and perfectly conveys the feeling of emotional confusion and chaos, verbally introduced by "you left me all by myself, and I feel so bad". It's baffling how this little masterpiece managed to stay under the table for six long years, and it's great to have it here as a reminder of how technically *and* creatively gifted the

man could be at the piano, once a bit of improvisational spirituality managed to take precedence over pure catchiness and rock'n'roll excitement.

Another highlight is 'Stack & Billy', Fats' typically New Orleanian comical take on the classic motif of 'Stagger Lee'; the angle itself might be just a novelty bit, but the element that truly distinguishes the song is an expressive electric guitar flourish, one that you would normally expect to be included in a solo or confined to a lead-in phrase — but here, it is actually turned into a looping riff that carries the entire song, adding a degree of «hyper-activity» to the atmosphere. One might even find it annoying — there is, after all, a good reason why such things are rarely favored by pop artists — but I'd prefer the word «amusing», and it certainly makes the song stand out among a myriad of similarly sounding and indistinguishable tracks (a similar looping riff also drives 'Ida Jane' on the same album, but the guitar is much more quiet in the mix, making the song command your attention with much less insistence).

The rest of the filler tracks aren't all that memorable, but they're still fun, like 'Howdy Podner' with its exaggerated accent; 'Hands Across The Table' with its cute lyricism ("hands across the table meet so gently / and they say in their little way / that you belong to me" is just such a Fats Domino thing to say); or 'Margie', the original B-side to 'I'm Ready' with a rather extraordinary, convoluted verse structure where Fats even has to break up his singing rhythm in order to fit in the lyrics. The best news about these songs is that they do not immediately convey the feeling of merely being uninspired re-writes of something better — more like timid tweaks of known formulae that don't work too well.

Meanwhile, Fats' winning streak for 1959 continues with 'Be My Guest', released even later in the year; this one takes the old formula of 'I'm In Love Again' and tweaks the beat just enough to get a more poppy than bluesy feel out of the melody, making it more danceable without losing the Domino flair. The B-side, 'I've Been Around', is slowed down, putting the beat back on the second measure, and made into a rhythmic ballad with the usual simplistic love message; you may perhaps better know the Animals' cover of the song, which they conversely sped up (and ultimately spoiled by replacing the isolated lead vocal with a silly, quasi-chipmunk choral approach), but the Animals only do Fats better than Fats when he is *not* being romantic, and 'I've Been Around' is about as romantic as Fats ever gets.





## *A LOT OF DOMINOS*

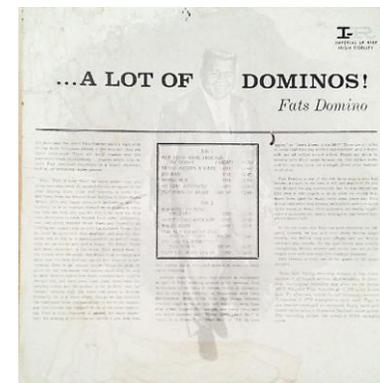
Album released:

October 1960

V A L U E

2 3 3 2 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Put Your Arms Around Me Honey; 2) Three Nights A Week; 3) Shu Rah; 4) Rising Sun; 5) **My Girl Josephine**; 6) The Sheik Of Araby; 7) **Walking To New Orleans**; 8) Don't Come Knockin'; 9) Magic Isles; 10) You Always Hurt The One You Love; 11) It's The Talk Of The Town; 12) **Natural Born Lover**.

### REVIEW

And by «dominos», I suppose they actually mean «strings». At least there is one single defining feature that separates this LP from the others, but if that feature is called «drowning Fats' voice and piano in superfluous string arrangements», I am not sure I am truly buying these goods. The year 1960 started out on a very nice note for Fats with 'Country Boy', a fast-paced piece of slightly autobiographical romance with a great blend of piano, sax, and vocals — and, as we shall see, continued well enough with at least two of his best-known classics released as singles throughout the summer and fall. But when it came to putting out his next LP, some genius had the bright idea to suggest that, since the times were a-changin' and all that, the new generation of fans of New Orleanian music might welcome a transition to a more bombastic and at the same time more sentimental format — which, in this case, meant an orchestral touch.



Few things in the world could feel less compatible with a Fats Domino song than Mendelssohn's Wedding March, yet this is precisely what greets us on the opening bars of 'Put Your Arms Around Me Honey', even if, to the best of our knowledge,

Fats' own wedding bells rang out as early as 1947, and he'd been a fairly devoted family man ever since. But even after the dissonant Mendelssohn quotation is gone, strings continue to overwhelm Fats' playing and singing all through the song, creating a jarring discrepancy in atmosphere, so much so that I cannot get rid of the feeling of annoying sonic interference, as if some Offenbach-playing ensemble happened to rehearse their stuff in an adjacent studio, so loudly that the echo ended up bleeding through the mikes. It isn't that the Fats Domino sound is completely incompatible with strings; it's that on most of these recordings, the extra strings make about as much sense as they would on, say, 'Johnny B. Goode'. This is not Motown, this is not Tony Bennett or Frank Sinatra, these are not autumnal French pop ballads about breakups; this is New Orleanian R&B, and if you want to have it with strings, at least don't bring in Hollywood.

Sometimes the strings' main role seems to be masking the lack of originality: a title like 'Three Nights A Week', for instance, is a rather blatant variation on the vibe of 'I'm In The Mood For Love', but with the sappy violins walking all over the main melody, it takes you a while to realize that (which probably helped the song climb up to #15 on the charts, which was still a good deal lower than 'In The Mood', but as long as it might have helped Fats get another diamond ring, life's good). More or less the same can be said about wishy-washy ballads like 'Rising Sun' and 'Magic Isles', the latter of which is essentially just 'Blueberry Hill' with strings (they don't even change the general atmospheric vibe too much — the same kind of fantasy setting for the protagonist's amorous intentions).

Ironically, the idea of drowning the Fats Domino sound in strings, as it so often happens, had a relatively noble start: Dave Bartholomew originally came up with the plan to add strings to 'Walking To New Orleans', a song written for him by the budding Cajun songwriter Bobby Charles (already known for writing 'See You Later Alligator' for Bill Haley). The idea for the song allegedly came to Bobby after he, currently a resident of Lafayette, was invited by Fats to visit his house in New Orleans, but stated that he'd probably have to walk because he did not have a car (hey, no problem, last time I checked GoogleMaps, it only takes about 51 hours or so). And the idea, of course, is that New Orleans is that one special place in the world which is really worth walking to even if you have no other means of transportation. Well, okay, the lyrics seem to suggest that the protagonist merely has to walk to New Orleans because his girl has robbed him blind, but who cares about context? "*I'm walking to New Orleans*" and "*New Orleans is my home*" are going to be *the* two lines by default that you are going to remember by the time the song's steady, relaxed crawl is over.

On *this* song, the use of strings is beautiful. They do not wash in uncontrolled torrents over Fats' voice, instead entering into a sort of subtle call-and-response dialog with him, adding a touch of epic, supernatural beauty that manages to feel just as

relaxed, lazy, and care-free as Fats himself — and helps to transform the song into no less than an anthem for New Orleans, that one city in the world where you always head back to cleanse yourself of all worries, a pleasant safe haven where nothing bad ever happens and happy people just bask around in the sun, eating beignets all day and grooving to the nearest Dixieland band. (And don't you *dare* tell me this is just a poetic fantasy!) Brenda Lee would cover the song in the same year (she seems to have had a bit of a crush on Fats, actually, covering no fewer than three of his songs on her **This Is... Brenda** album), only a few months later, but nobody in the world except for a true New Orleanian like Fats could do it justice. Maybe Louis could have. But even Louis can't make himself look so cute when rhyming "honey" with "money".

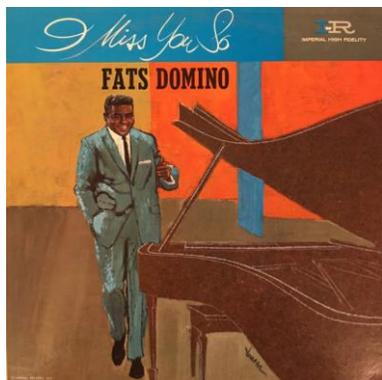
Alas, outside of this song I have to work my way through second-rate compositions that are made to sound even worse with the aid of strings — looking for the few unspoiled numbers that remain. 'Shu Rah' is one of those, a boppy throwaway that, amusingly, opens with almost the exact piano chords John Lennon would later use to bring Paul's 'Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da' to life, and consistently keeps on entertaining with a solid yakety-sax solo — but this is really one for the kids. Fats' take on 'The Sheik Of Araby' is not bad, but here's one song that had already been done to death by gazillions of performers prior to 1960; also, somehow I just don't believe in Fats Domino as the Sheik of Araby as much as I believe in his ability to walk all the way to New Orleans from any random point in the world. (And let's admit it, he'd *really* need the exercise). But 'My Girl Josephine' — which we just as often know as 'Hello Josephine' — is, of course, an absolute (and, also, thankfully string-free!) classic, another textbook example of how to manipulate the standard 12-bar blues structure into a uniquely catchy pop concoction. The guitar riff that runs throughout has the same charmingly-naggin' power as, say, Elvis' 'Mystery Train', and Fats' vocal delivery has a fun, «dashing» quality to it, determined yet friendly, enough to forgive the slightly stalker-ish vibe of the lyrics. (Compare the soon-to-follow [Jerry Lee Lewis cover](#), where the stalkerish vibe is multiplied by a dozen Myra Gale Browns — the Killer sure takes his macho duties more seriously than the Fat Man).

But now, ladies and gentlemen, I just want to skip everything else and head straight to what I consider the most overlooked, and one of the most impressive performances in the entire Fats Domino history. As classic as 'My Girl Josephine' and 'Walking To New Orleans' really are, the major highlight is saved for last. Might it be known that the average length of a Fats Domino studio performance is around two and a half minutes; 'Natural Born Lover' clocks in at a gigantic four minutes and forty seconds, despite only having two verses of lyrics — and there is no better song in Fats' catalog to, so to speak, «humbly aggrandize» the legend of the Fat Man. It's a veritable tour de force for Fats, showcasing his true strength as a piano player (the song opens with thirty seconds of very impressive runs on the ivories), a minimalistic singer, and the charismatic embodiment of the carefree spirit of New Orleans.

Even the strings, this time around, feel perfectly at home; 'Natural Born Lover' is a beautiful, poetic anthem to personal freedom — again, disregard any *literal* reading of the lyrics (such as «she done me wrong, but I'm still free to pick any other hoe I want») and the "*no more crying, no more sighing*" bit easily attains the effect of "*there will be peace in the valley*", as we visualize the hero of the song continuing his long, steady, and hopeful walk back to New Orleans... or was that actually «long, steady, and hopeful ascent to the Kingdom of Heaven?» The shocking length of the song itself demands that it be taken seriously, as Fats' own early equivalent of «progressive rock», and I wouldn't even be surprised to learn that the recording was the result of a self-analytical session, as in, «I'm going to make myself understand what it is about myself that moves people and I'm going to make the most Fats Domino-est song in the world!» "*I'm a natural born lover / Since I got rid of all my trouble / Yes I've done got over at last*" is something they should have probably etched on his grave when he finally passed away. Too bad the song, tucked away (in an abbreviated version) as the B-side to 'My Girl Josephine', never appears on any basic Fats Domino compilations, continuing to function as a «deep cut» for the man when, in reality, it is his personal equivalent of a 'Hey Jude'.

With both 'Walking To New Orleans' and 'Natural Born Lover' on the same album, **A Lot Of Dominos** almost has the feel of a «swan song» — a record on which the artist, partly through a conscious decision and partly through the hand of fate, sums up his own achievements and his current status and makes his own musical testament. Of course, technically Fats would still go on to have a long, productive career, and his string of hit records, though inevitably descending lower and lower on the charts, would continue until the start of the British Invasion (or, perhaps more accurately, until the rise of a new wave of soul, funk, and R&B that made his sound completely outdated). But in all honesty, that would be more like a consequence of general momentum — there is, after all, no reason to stop working at 32, unless you decide to die in a plane crash or go to jail for trafficking minors across state borders. As it is, for all its orchestral flaws, **A Lot Of Dominos** is pretty much the last Domino album on which he tried to both broaden and «monumentalize» his formula. Everything that comes later is, at best, pleasant recapitulation.





# I MISS YOU SO

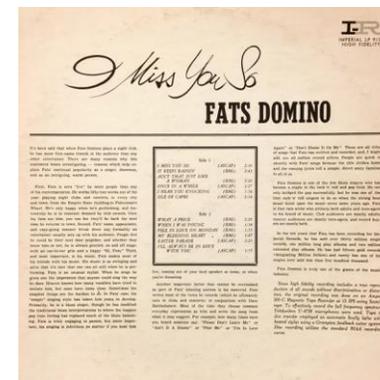
Album released:

January 1961

V A L U E

2 3 2 1 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) I Miss You So; 2) It Keeps Rainin'; 3) Ain't That Just Like A Woman; 4) Once In A While; 5) I Hear You Knocking; 6) Isle Of Capri; 7) What A Price; 8) When I Was Young; 9) Fell In Love On Monday; 10) My Bleeding Heart; 11) Easter Parade; 12) I'll Always Be In Love With You.

## REVIEW

I wish I could say «well, at least there's no annoying orchestration on this record any more», but the sad truth is that the dragonfly-winged violins on **A Lot Of Dominos** at least made that LP somehow stand out, not to mention those rare specific cases when they helped bring in extra magic to the Fats Domino sound ('Natural Born Lover'). Alas, while canceling that approach might have given Fats' first album for 1961 a respectable purist aura of «let's get back to the roots», it also makes **I Miss You** into his first album since 1958 where nothing really stands out: twenty five minutes of pleasant, good-timey Fatsisms with hardly anything left to save up for a rainy day.



Although I lack the precise session details for this stuff, the recent LP re-release on the Jazz Messengers label states that the album "was assembled from a variety of sessions taped between 1958 and 1960"; however, none of those songs were released as singles in the 1958–60 period, meaning that, essentially, we are dealing here with a collection of *outtakes* and original *rejects*, and you should adjust your expectations accordingly. When taken off the album to be gradually released through the first half of 1961, the singles *did* chart — probably still riding the momentum of 'Walkin' To New Orleans' and

‘My Girl Josephine’ — but not too highly, playing up to the tastes of Fats’ well-established fan base and nobody else. ‘What A Price’ was the first of those, a monotonous slow blues with lazy piano and languid horns, «cheered up» a bit by Fats’ melancholic tale of how his lady wrecked his life by making him stop gambling and "staying out all night" (it is probably implied that she still dumped him after making all those sacrifices, though). The song has all the formal trappings of Fats’ classic vibe — but absolutely nothing that would make it stand out even an inch, which, really, is all that is required of a truly classic Fats Domino number: stand out a tiny inch. It doesn’t, so it don’t get to be a *true* classic. The B-side was Louis Jordan’s ‘Aint’t That Just Like A Woman’, a classic of the misogynistic genre tried on for size by many, but never really improved over Jordan’s original from 1946. At least this one goes really fast and Fats gets to boogie.

‘Fell In Love On Monday’ (which had ‘Shu Rah’ from the previous album as its B-side) is the prototypical «slow and happy» Fats song, with a gospel choir backing the man to add a slightly churchy feel — and, of course, it does not work because the song itself hardly has any genuine spiritual depth to add anything to. Much better, and, perhaps, the closest thing to a classic on here, is ‘It Keeps Rainin’, an upbeat pop song whose vibe is generated by the interplay of a merry mariachi-style horn part with an incessant arpeggiated electric guitar lick, emulating the "*it keeps rainin’ and rainin’*" mood of the lyrics (funny enough, it merges with Fats’ minimalistic piano playing so perfectly that my ears almost mistook the guitar for the piano first time around!). Apparently, the song had plenty of potential, as it would be turned into a big hit thirty years later by Bitty McLean — with a version that would be fairly true to the original. Given that Bitty’s primary genre was reggae (he used to work together with UB40 for a while), this does bring to mind a slightly more Caribbean than New Orleanian vibe for the song — although in terms of sheer mood, that whole "cheer-me-up-with-a-sad-song" attitude is certainly one thing that New Orleans and Kingston have in common.

As for the LP-only numbers, the first and last thing to notice is how heavy the album is on covers of oldies. The title track itself is a modernized reinvention of the classic hit by The Cats And The Fiddle from about 1940, which would go on to become a favorite for all sorts of vocal jazz artists. [The original](#) is still worth revisiting, but Fats’ version is hardly so, and, in fact, its very selection as the title track for the new album brings out an unnecessary nostalgic vibe — with all these covers of Jimmy Henderson, Louis Jordan, Irving Berlin (‘Easter Parade’), and Jimmy Kennedy (‘Isle Of Capri’), it only makes Fats the latest in a series of African-American performers who, in the late Fifties and early Sixties, all started jumping on the grandma-what-great-songs-you-sang bandwagon. It’s a little sad, though hardly tragic; but while back in 1961 the effort to «modernize» all those classics may have had some novelty value, its lasting value was doomed from the beginning. There is nothing intrinsically good about converting all of them to the Fats Domino formula.

In short, the entire point of the album is perfectly summarized in its single most honestly written Domino-Bartholomew original, 'When I Was Young': "*When I was young and in my prime / The girls used to hold me up all the time / But I'm gettin' old every day / It's a pity that now I ain't gettin' any!*" (Fats kinda slurs that last line, but this is how it's been enshrined in all digital lyrics collections). Even that song, though, was just a lyrical rewrite of the earlier 'La La (I'm Gonna Tell You A Story)', though, admittedly, a superior one.

From this point on, even if Fats would still have occasional hits that would stay with us ('Red Sails In The Sunset', etc.), any attempts at (convincingly) broadening his horizons would be abandoned. However, as I said, **I Miss You** is thoroughly forgettable, but not unpleasant — by staying firmly within his comfort zone, Fats is able to avoid corny embarrassments and failed experiments; and we do at least have to recognize the album's worthiness in that it never bogs down in schmaltz territory, like so many did at the time. Even all those romantic oldies are done as merry boogie anthems, rather than sweet serenades for the ears of restrictive old ladies. So perhaps you could no longer count on Fats Domino to lead you any place you had not been before, but at least you could still count on him holding on to his bulky integrity.





# LET THE FOUR WINDS BLOW

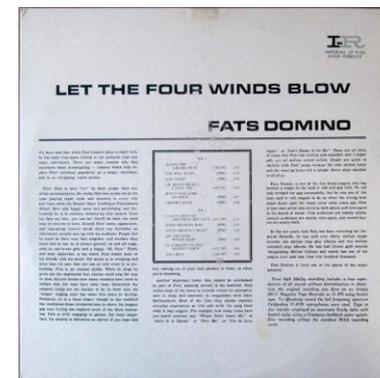
Album released:

June 1961

V A L U E

2 3 2 1 2

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Along The Navajo Trail; 2) You Win Again; 3) One Night; 4) I'm Alone Because I Love You; 5) Won't You Come On Back; 6) Trouble Blues; 7) I Can't Give You Anything But Love; 8) Good Hearted Man; 9) Your Cheating Heart; 10) Let The Four Winds Blow; 11) In A Shanty In Old Shanty Town; 12) Am I Blue.

## REVIEW

Fats' last ever entry into the Top 20 would be with the title track to this LP — a nice, light-hearted danceable romp that does not stray too far from the formula of 'My Girl Josephine', except for being even more lyrically simplistic. "*From the east to the west / I love you the best*" is as direct as it comes, delivered with the usual Fats charm — a light touch of irony added to the overall friendliness is all it takes. It is rather telling, though, that the song was not even freshly written, having been first recorded by Dave Bartholomew himself as '[Four Winds](#)' back in 1955, when it expectedly had more of a mid-Fifties' R&B swing to it. Comparing the two versions lets you understand why, in the end, Fats was the frontman and Dave was the crown songwriter behind the throne — but while the «Fats touch» does indeed have a magical nature, 'Let The Four Winds Blow' is hardly a great contender when it comes to originality.



Even so, it is quite obviously a highlight on the LP, which, once again, offers one big *zilch* in terms of concealed delicious goodies. This time around, Fats suddenly declares himself a fan of the country-western routine, kicking things off with a cover of 'Along The Navajo Trail' and then throwing on not one, but *two* Hank Williams songs, even if 'You Win Again' and

'Your Cheating Heart' both largely share the same melody. A bit later on, Fats would do 'Jambalaya', which is pretty much Hank Williams' natural gift to Fats Domino — but these two psychological pieces are...well, maybe a bit too bitter for Fats' good-natured style, with vibes that do not easily translate to his style. Particularly since 100% of the emphasis is on the vocals: musical arrangements are lazy, with Fats merely hammering out his classic rhythm pattern, while the rhythm and horn sections add monotonous metronomic backing. Then again, at least the subject of cheating is something Fats had had plenty of previous experience with — 'Along The Navajo Trail' is much weirder in that respect, as you really have to strain yourself to picture the proverbial « fat man» "*riding through the slumbering shadows*" and "*dreaming by his smouldering fire*". Fats Domino as Roy Rogers is truly one step down the ladder of believability from Fats as Hank Williams.

Possibly an even bigger surprise is Fats' cover of 'Trouble Blues' by Charles Brown, essentially the same song as 'Worried Life Blues' and 'Trouble No More' (by everybody from Sleepy John Estes to Muddy Waters and The Animals). Surprise, because this is a very rare case of Fats directly tackling slow and moody 12-bar blues instead of turning it into feel-good New Orleanian boogie, as he usually does. For a bit of change, he even tries to sound as if he were *really* broken-hearted, instead of broken-hearted the New Orleanian way (where there's nothing that can't be cured with a bit of gumbo and a muffuletta sandwich). The result is good, but I'd still rather prefer the more authentic sound of an Otis Spann tinkling the ivories with Muddy Waters or Willie Dixon brewing dense Chicago gloom behind his back. We cannot take the idea of Fats Domino migrating to the colder climes of Illinois too seriously, anyway.

The rest of the tracks are mostly oldies' covers, with the occasional orchestration ('Am I Blue') and the occasional sappiness ('I Can't Give You Anything But Love'); of the three remaining originals, it's fun to hear 'One Night' with its original lyrics ("*one night of sin is what I'm now payin' for...*"), if only to remind ourselves that the song, which we usually associate with Elvis, was another of those brilliant Dave Bartholomew creations. The other two, 'Won't You Come On Back' and 'Good Hearted Man', are respectively clones of 'My Girl Josephine' and... uh, about half a dozen lesser Fats tunes with the same chord progression, so there's nothing to be said, really. Overall, a pretty sad state of affairs, although Fats' experimentation with 12-bar blues and country at least deserves some formal encouragement.





# WHAT A PARTY!

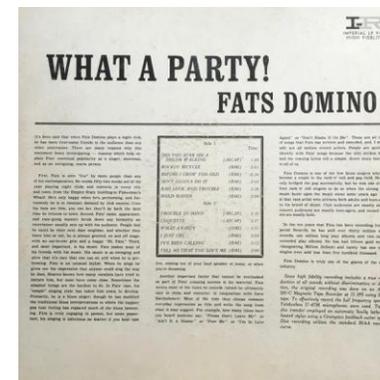
Album released:

V A L U E

October 1961

2 3 1 1 2

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Did You Ever See A Dream Walking; 2) Rockin' Bicycle; 3) Before I Grow Too Old; 4) Ain't Gonna Do It; 5) Bad Luck And Trouble; 6) Hold Hands; 7) Trouble In Mind; 8) Coquette; 9) What A Party; 10) I Just Cry; 11) I've Been Calling; 12) Tell Me That You Love Me.

## REVIEW

Actually, the party was not *that* great. More precisely, this was merely the title of a short and mediocre pop-rock tune tossed out by Domino and Bartholomew for the single market in September '61 — and they probably felt it was mediocre deep down inside, so they sweetened it up with extra «party noises» all around (much like the Beach Boys would do for their own **Party!** four years later), to artificially raise the excitement level. Maybe it helped a bit — the single rose as high as #22 on the charts, not at all bad for Fats at the time — but the songwriting was quite openly lazy here, and letting some anonymous backing vocalists carry the chorus to its conclusion was a fairly corny move, too (even despite the ironic self-reference of "*big fat piano man, he sho' could play!*"). You can still dance to it, and enjoy the usual New Orleanian spirit of care-free joviality and everything, but there's not an ounce of originality or even a single chord change or vocal inflection you haven't heard a hundred times before. And absolutely the same can be said about the B-side, 'Rockin' Bicycle', a transparent attempt to repeat the inspiration of 'I'm Ready' that fails because you cannot really «repeat inspiration» — the whole thing feels tired, rather than exciting.



And it is absolutely not clear to me what in the world made Imperial Records think that the single deserved to become expanded into yet another 12-song LP — other than some weird desire to make Fats beat all his previous records by registering *three* LPs of previously unreleased material under his name over the course of just one year. Maybe Mr. Domino really wanted to assert his status as that of The Last Survivor of the First Generation of Rock'n'Roll — seeing as how most of his contemporaries were, indeed, either dead, indisposed, or under-productive. Unfortunately, being over-productive under such circumstances would produce an equally negative effect. Actually, **What A Party!** is the first Fats Domino LP for which I have been unable to locate even a single review ever written by a professional or amateur critic — and although this does not automatically mean that the album totally sucks, I'm afraid that in this case, the vow of silence is more or less justified, because this is certainly the most non-descript Fats LP up to that particular date.

Only one more song was produced during the recording session for that single, and it was 'Did You Ever See A Dream Walking', a slow, sentimental, and thoroughly generic shuffle that is impossible to actively dislike — imbued as it is with the gentle and adorable aspects of Fats' personality — but barely possible to remember. Then, to pad out the album, Imperial had to dig into Fats' outtakes from previous sessions, with six songs coming from March 1961, two from February 1960, and one ('Coquette') even going as far back as 1958, when it was a humble B-side to 'Whole Lotta Loving'. Considering that none of these tunes had been seen fit for **Let The Four Winds Blow**, it would be fruitless to expect any forgotten masterpieces, and although the collection might sound fine and friendly if taken completely out of context, pretty much everything here is just inferior variations on superior earlier hits. Short, passable, instrumentally and vocally un-challenging songs that rehash former glories, with barely anything to cling on to in sight.

There are patches of lyrical cleverness every now and then, particularly in the poignant 'Before I Grow Too Old' (which had already been issued as a B-side in 1960): "*I got to hurry up / Before I grow too old... Because I'm gonna do a lot of things I know is wrong / And I hope that I'm forgiven before I'm gone*" cuts pretty deep for a Domino-Bartholomew tune, even if there is little hope that anybody might pay too much attention to the actual words of a Domino-Bartholomew tune. It is too bad that this confessional message is hidden within the depths of an otherwise completely forgettable arrangement, lacking the epic depth, length, and instrumental sweep of something like 'Natural Born Lover', for instance.

From slow and lumbering pop Fats moves on to equally slow and lumbering blues: his renditions of 'Bad Luck And Trouble' and 'Trouble In Mind' feel like they might have been recorded in 1949 rather than 1961, not to mention that they're almost the same song in terms of lyrics, melodies, arrangements, tempos, and (lack of) energy. As we have already established with

'Trouble Blues' off the previous album, Fats developed a bit of a craving for slow 12-bar stuff in 1961 (as long as it's got the word "trouble" in the title, everything goes), and while I'm sure he might have had his own reasons for feeling a bit more down than usual — either the trickle of royalties thinned out, or somebody shut down his favorite brand of donuts, I really have no idea — neither of these two blues songs do anything to correct the impression that Fats is simply incapable of conveying the classic blues feel. He does play some nice piano on 'Trouble In Mind', but it's relaxing lounge piano that puts you into a soft, purring mood. It's much easier to believe that "*the sun will shine in his back door someday*" in the future than that he is truly "*blue*" today.

The only song to slightly relieve the monotonousness of endless generic blues covers and rehashes of 'Blueberry Hill' and 'I'm Ready' is the aforementioned 'Coquette' from 1958, and that one *only* because high prominence is given by the song to vocals from The Velvetones, a long-forgotten girl vocal group from New Orleans whose role is to enhance the song's level of sexiness by taking over a part of the bridge section. It's a little confusing, though, because they sing the words "*someday you'll fall in love / as I fell in love with you*" that are clearly meant to be sung by Fats himself, so it's unclear why exactly for those few bars the spirit of Fats splits itself into the spirits of three lively New Orleanian girls before reassembling itself back to Fats. But whatever — *anything* to add a little freshness and surprise to the proceedings.

That said, if you love the Fats formula and want more of the Fats formula, **What A Party!** will be enough — in fact, it might even seem too short — to satisfy the stereotypical lover of the stereotypical Fats formula. It's still much better than if Fats began drifting away into the world of sentimental orchestrated ballads, for instance, or, moving in the opposite direction, tried his luck in the trendy fields of surf-rock or acoustic folk. The best thing that can be said about the record is that, throughout (with the possible exception of those blues numbers), Fats continues to stay rigorously true to himself, like AC/DC in the late Eighties or some other of their less-popular periods. Certainly the same kind of thing could not be said of, say, Elvis Presley at the time.

