

GARY U.S. BONDS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1960-2010</i>	<i>Classic R&B</i>	<i>New Orleans (1960)</i>

Only Solitaire

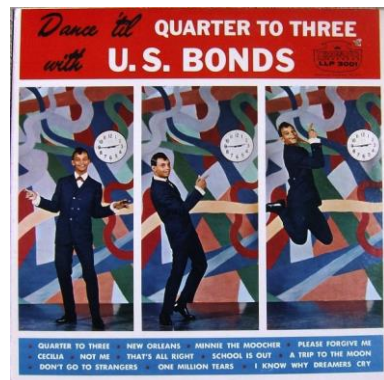
Artist: *Gary U.S. Bonds*

Years: *1960-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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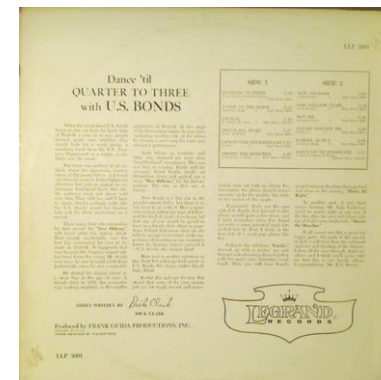
DANCE 'TIL QUARTER TO THREE

Album released:

1961

V A L U E
3 3 2 4 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) **Quarter To Three**; 2) **A Trip To The Moon**; 3) Cecilia; 4) That's All Right; 5) I Know Why Dreamers Cry; 6) Minnie The Moocher; 7) **New Orleans**; 8) One Million Tears; 9) Not Me; 10) Please Forgive Me; 11) **School Is Out**; 12) Don't Go To Strangers.

REVIEW

Some truth, believe it or not, is actually stranger than fiction, but for some reason you need to dig for it — you'd think it should be common knowledge, but instead we get a dozen lying shitposts on Facebook for each amazing gem of real historic trivia like the apparent *fact* that Tommy Facenda, a former backup singer for Gene Vincent's Blue Caps around 1957, recorded a song called 'High School U.S.A.' (musically quite similar to Danny & The Juniors' 'At The Hop', which everybody knows from Sha Na Na's performance at Woodstock) for Frank Guida's newly-formed Legrand Records in Norfolk, Virginia... then recorded it *twenty-eight* more times for Atlantic Records, substituting local high school names for just about every state in the country. Yes, this truly and verily happened in 1959 and you can still hear some of these different versions on [YouTube](#), though, apparently, some have become major collectors' items. (I have it from a reliable source that if you collect all 28, you get +10 Reputation, +25 Endurance, and +50 Resistance To Spotify Ads). For all the wonders and confusions of more modern times, this one achievement could probably only happen once in a lifetime, and 1959 was a very good year for it.



Tommy Facenda never recorded for Legrand Records again, though, which left Frank Guida with a big gaping hole right in the center of Norfolk, Virginia. He tried to patch it up with a bunch of local musicians he'd picked up from the local Bishop Grace House of Prayer, calling them «Daddy "G" And The Church Street Five» — «Daddy "G"» being the moniker of the instrumental band's leader, sax player Gene Barge — and for their first single, came up with a fun, rowdy groove that they simplistically called '[A Night With Daddy G](#)' and stretched across both sides of the record. It might not have looked like much, but in reality it was a rather different type of sound for its time: a fast-paced, bombastic gospel rhythm with quite a maniacally blaring sax on top — like what Little Richard should have *really* sounded like upon (nominally) leaving rock and roll for the Lord's service. Yet it didn't really work all that well without a lead singer to headline the show.

The singer in question turned up a little bit later (I'm not sure about the chronology, since solid data on these events are hard to come by). His name was Gary Levone Anderson, he was 21 years old, he was quite dashing, he also sang in church with his own vocal band called The Turks, and although he probably did not have the most distinctive singing voice in the whole wide world, Guida decided that he would be just fine for his purposes. In yet another stranger-than-fiction twist, he also decided that «Gary Anderson» would probably sound way too academic for the average consumer, so he proposed that the singer call himself «U.S. Bonds» instead — «*in hopes that it would be confused with a public service announcement advertising the sale of government bonds and thereby garner more DJ attention*», as per Wikipedia's summary. This is such obvious genius that we can only wonder why nobody bothered to pick up the practice — I'd definitely suggest The Cuban Missile Crisis Boys instead of The Beach Boys, for one thing.

But weird naming decisions aside, the first song Mr. U.S. Bonds did record together with The Church Street Five was 'New Orleans', and while some of us might struggle to remember the actual name of the artist, most of us are probably familiar with the way it goes — "*c'mon everybody, take a trip with me / down the Mississippi down to New Orleans...*" It's a fairly standard type of New Orleanian melody ('Bony Moronie', etc.) and also with more than a passing resemblance to The Olympics' 'Hully Gully', whose 1959 success had only just rocked the nation, but, as it often happens, the emphasis is not on the originality of the chords but on the freshness of the sound. And the sound was... pretty damn odd. At its core, it certainly had that merry old New Orleans vibe, but the singer and the sax player did everything in their power to emphasize and amplify it, letting their hair down in more brutal and hysterical ways than the comparatively more reserved gentlemen of pure New Orleanian breed ever did down on Basin Street — creating what has occasionally been called the «Norfolk Sound», though Gary arguably remains the only representative of that sound whose name can still ring a bell to anyone.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Guida's production was its probably-intentional awfulness: the entire sound feels squashed and canned, with Gene Barge's sax solos being the only element that has its own voice — even the lead singer is singing out of the same can as the rhythm section and backing vocals. There is no way that this quality could be ascribed to cheap studio equipment and nothing else; Guida must have felt that the messiness was the proper shortcut to excitement, and ended up with a punk-like artistic statement on his hands, a particularly relevant one in the age of rapid improvement for recording studio technology and increased demand for clean, sharp stereophonic sound. Of course, this is a comparative retrospective assessment — back in 1960, serious art critics would not bother coming up with complex aesthetic evaluations of teen-oriented R&B dance numbers.

The production standards did go up a bit on the sequel record to 'New Orleans', but for all its technical improvements (for one thing, Gary's powerful belting voice is finally distinguished on the verses), musically 'Not Me' was a rather banal note-for-note rewrite of its predecessor, following the usual formula of «let's re-record our hit record even if we know for sure that it will sell much less because a penny is worse than a dollar but still better than no penny». Maybe 'Not Me', which finds Gary getting into all sorts of situations that he refuses to solve with violence (very New Orleanian of him), did sell for a penny, but it did not chart at all — so it was time to think of something different.

Or maybe not *too* different. 'Quarter To Three', after all, was nothing more than a re-recording of The Church Street Five's 'A Night With Daddy G', on top of which Guida and the guys threw some rabble-rousin' lyrics, then doused it all in some of the world's worst production values to date. Poorly synced vocal tracks, drenched in reverb to mask the occasionally off-key singing; «fake» crowd noises scattered all over the recording; wild muffled sax soloing that ultimately fades out in mid-swing before your ears have enough time to get used to the chaos — all of this makes 'Quarter To Three' into maybe the least likely candidate for mid-1961 to reach any respectable chart position. But it went all the way to #1 on the US pop charts — and even made it big in the UK, where its number #7 status prompted Jack Good to write an entire column in *Disc* about the song, ironically concluding that "this record could never have been made in Britain" (because any sound engineer at Abbey Road would probably have fainted on the spot upon hearing it).

With the superimposition of a powerful (if fuzzy and muddy) singing voice on the musical vibe forged by The Church Street Five, we essentially witness the birth — or, at least, conception — of The E Street Band, a fact not at all hushed over by the Boss himself who used to regularly close his mid-Seventies concerts with a [prolonged version of the song](#). This big, burly, ecstatic vibe, democratically spread across most of the people in the band, merging gospel with rock'n'roll and vaudeville,

took the world by surprise and opened the gateway to new ways of self-expression, *particularly* for a lot of black performers who might, up until that moment, have still felt constrained by the musical restrictions imposed on them by the popular music business. There is no doubt in my mind, for instance, that the success of 'Quarter To Three' influenced Sam Cooke into writing 'Twistin' The Night Away', a song with obvious melodic and atmospheric similarities even if its own production values are, unsurprisingly, much more demanding than Frank Guida's.

To consolidate their success, Frank, Gary, and Gene Barge quickly followed 'Quarter To Three' with 'School Is Out' — yes, more than a decade prior to Alice Cooper's classic of nearly the same name, but a far more destructive spirit — and the funny thing is that, although the song featured a slightly clearer and more comprehensible sound, its top position on the charts stalled at four slots lower than 'Quarter To Three'. It is as if the record-buying public *craved* that sloppy, chaotic vibe, although it might also have to do with the fact that 'Quarter To Three' appealed to everybody while 'School Is Out' with its very title appealed only to a certain subclass of teenagers. Even so, the song is almost as fun as 'Quarter To Three' — I only wish that Gene Barge's sax solos weren't buried so deep in the mix, because they are more symbolic of the tune's spirit of reckless self-liberation than anything else.

In a rather ironic twist, 'School Is Out' was quickly followed by its equally happy and rambunctious counterpart 'School Is In' — perhaps Guida and the boys got alarmed that their latest success would be interpreted as being anti-educational, so they tried to straighten things out by writing something positive about the school experience instead. You gotta give them their dues, though: 'School Is In' is not so much a celebration of the rigid educational system as it is a protest against family values — "*I worked and slaved the summer through / Doing the things my mother told me to do / I washed the dishes and scrubbed the floor / And taught the baby how to count to four / I made the beds and cut the grass / I'm glad that school is in at last*". Could a stronger point in *favor* of spending one's day in the stuffy classroom actually have been expressed in the context of a simple pop song? I doubt it. Anyway, the new lyrics make this one of the more interesting specimens of «hit rewrites» from the early days of the pop industry. And the friendly, humorous New Orleanian vibe provides an excellent variation on the «down-with-school» trope, previously popularized mostly by the likes of Chuck Berry — in a sharper, more belligerent Chicago blues kind of way.

With three Top 10 singles tucked in his belt over less than a year's time — a level of success which few artists could boast in 1960–1961, and which Gary would never be able to repeat in the future — it was also time for a proper LP to hit the market. **Dance 'Til Quarter To Three With U.S. Bonds** diligently included all three hits, as well as the non-charting 'Not Me'

and two of the B-sides ('Please Forgive Me', credited to Gary himself, was a Fats Domino-style waltzing ballad where Gary got to showcase the crooning properties of his voice; 'One Million Tears', credited to Guida, was more of a sentimental Latin dance number, well in line with the tendencies of R&B development in 1961 but hardly a fitting proposition for this kind of band). But, as usual, filling the rest of the LP space with quality material was a tough task.

One more fine example of the «Norfolk Sound» is 'A Trip To The Moon', a little less party-like in atmosphere than 'Quarter To Three' but adding a cool space-themed lyrical twist to Bonds' exuberant vibe. This one, too, soaks his vocals in plenty of reverb, but now it's totally justified because it does give the vocal melody an «out-in-space» quality (unfortunately, at the expense of muffling Gene Barge's saxophone parts even further). Anderson and Barge also take credit for 'That's All Right', a massive lush-pop number that brings on associations with both Phil Spector and early Sixties' girl groups, on one hand, and the classic sound of the Dave Clark Five, on the other (Gary's "*that's alright, that's alright, anyway you do it, that's alright with me*" is such a dead ringer for the DC5's "*it's alright, it's alright, any way you want it that's the way it will be*" that it's a wonder Gary and Gene never sued the band for copyright infringement).

Things get less exciting or interesting on tracks copped from other writers — including such strange ideas as covering Cab Calloway's 'Minnie The Moocher' or the Orioles' 'Don't Go To Strangers'. The main problem is that, although it is pleasing to see Gary and his band not locking themselves inside one particular formula, the actual «Norfolk sound», with its awful production values and lo-fi messiness, really only works well within that formula. 'Quarter To Three' and 'New Orleans' *want* you to get sloppy and messy to reach ecstatic enlightenment; old school doo-wop ballads, however, do not benefit from being messy, and end up as inferior and unrewarding covers. The resulting rule is simple: brazen, in-yer-face Gary U.S. Bonds is flat-out cool — subtle, sentimental, or mysteriously enigmatic Gary U.S. Bonds is a tax on the ears.

The singles are absolutely essential, though: the trilogy of 'New Orleans', 'Quarter To Three', and 'School Is Out' is a master-class in dirty, sweaty, ass-kicking bombast whose influence may run much deeper than I have already suggested. If you have sufficient tolerance for lo-fi, there is simply no excuse for not familiarizing yourself with those classics.

