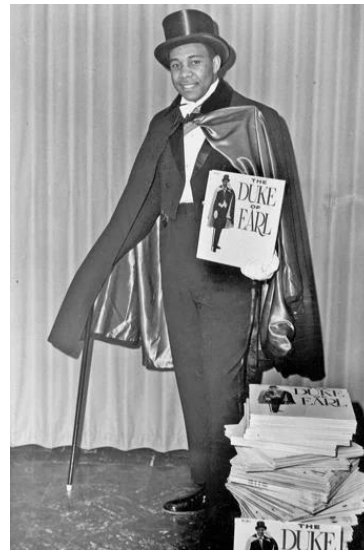


GENE CHANDLER



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1961-1995</i>	<i>Classic R&B</i>	<i><u>Groovy Situation</u> (1969)</i>

Only Solitaire

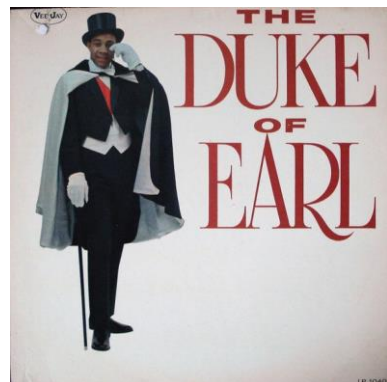
Artist: *Gene Chandler*

Years: *1961-1962*

George Starostin's Reviews

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- [The Duke Of Earl](#) (1962)



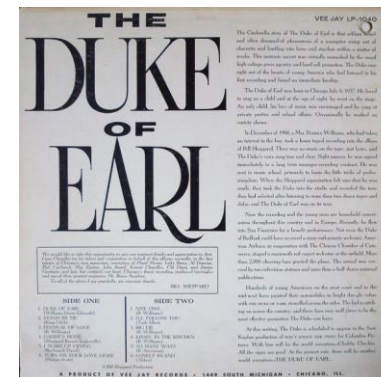
THE DUKE OF EARL

Album released:

January 1962

V A L U E
2 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Duke Of Earl; 2) Stand By Me; 3) Festival Of Love; 4) Daddy's Home; 5) I Wake Up Cryin'; 6) Turn On Your Love Light; 7) Nite Owl; 8) I'll Follow You; 9) Big Lie; 10) Kissin' In The Kitchen; 11) So Many Ways; 12) Lonely Island.

REVIEW

Those of us who are still under 80 *and* have not yet graduated from the college of pop music history may so rigidly associate «doo-wop» with the 1950s that they'd probably think it officially expired on January 1, 1960, and was buried the next day to little fanfare, much like the Western genre in cinema. In actual fact, though, nothing happens *that* quickly — hey, even rock music occasionally tries to feebly wave a crutch in the air in 2024 — and both Westerns and doo-wop were still alive in the first years of the new decade, though already somewhat struggling to make a critical and commercial difference in the face of fresher, more attractive distractions. Yet sometimes it still happened: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* was a big commercial hit in the movie-going world of 1962, and 'The Duke Of Earl' was one of its biggest musical hits.



By that time, Gene Chandler (still under his original name of Eugene Dixon) was already a recognizable figure in the Chicago area: he had been singing with The Dukays, one of the city's many prominent doo-wop ensembles, since 1957 (back when «pure» doo-wop still competed with R&B for chart dominance), though the group did not manage to secure a recording contract until 1961, when Nat Records, a *very* short-lived label formed by music executives Carl Davis and Bill Shephard ("Nat" was apparently the name of their bookkeeper), released their first single, '[The Girl's A Devil](#)', sounding like

a slightly less funny version of the Coasters on this particular tune. It is not quite clear why they decided to go with a solo artist moniker — just Gene Chandler, rather than «The Dukays» — with their next recording that they offered to Vee-Jay Records, but perhaps everybody thought that by late 1961, vocal groups (at least *male* ones) were indeed being perceived as something antiquated, while a «Gene Chandler» could easily be marketable on the level of Sam Cooke, Jackie Wilson, or Ben E. King. (Another story says it was because of copyright matters, since Nat Records already owned the legal rights to «The Dukays», but since «Nat Records» themselves essentially consisted of Gene's producers, I am not sure that this could have been a real problem).

To be quite honest, there are few songs in this world that sound as downright silly — meaner tongues might say *stupid* — as 'Duke Of Earl'. Suffice it to say that if you have ever witnessed Sha Na Na's glorifiedly tasteless performance of 'At The Hop' in the *Woodstock* movie, 'Duke Of Earl' was actually the next number in their setlist on that day, and yes, that band would stake their entire career on glorifying each and every juvenile aspect of pre-Beatles teen pop music, so no accident here. The song's title and, consequently, its entire lyrical setup stemmed from a series of vocal exercises by The Dukays in which their doo-wop vocalizing eventually coagulated into «*doo-doo-doo-duke of eh-eh-Earl*», which they liked because one of the group members' name was Earl Edwards — even if the line would probably have every single member of the British aristocracy rolling in the aisles, as they might just have well called it 'Marquis Of Baron'. "*As I walk through this world / Nothing can stop the Duke of Earl*", sings Gene Chandler in one of the most sugar-drippin' deliveries of its time — implying that if *something* ever tries to stop the Duke of Earl, it shall immediately encounter a 150% increase in its blood sugar level and enter a happy, immobilized vegetative state of existence.

It cannot be said that 'Duke Of Earl' is a complete and utter throwback to the mid-Fifties; the actual vocal progressions are more in line with the contemporary pop style of bands like The Drifters, and the bridge section in particular strives for the same soulful tension as one might encounter in some recent Ben E. King hit. The band's harmonizing, though, with the trademark separation of high and low ranges, is decidedly in the old-fashioned doo-wop style, which makes the song into an interesting musical hybrid. But while I *can* take some of Ben E. King seriously, 'Duke Of Earl' has no chance to register on any other line than «unintentional comedy». With less ridiculous lyrics, it would have been a middle-of-the-road pop tune, barely noticeable against superior competition from Atlantic and Motown; the actual words, however, give it a defiantly absurdist edge — one that Chandler himself took care to exploit by buying himself a cape, a top hat, and a monocle to don onstage, which all but turned him, for a while, into the second most flamboyant African-American performer in the nation after Screamin' Jay Hawkins and his portable coffin. However, the simplest possible reason for why the song spent 15 weeks

on the charts is the magic quality of its underpinning bass line — the "*duke, duke, duke, duke of Earl!*" chant that takes the instrumental appeal of the then-popular descending pattern and translates it to the vocal language. I can vouch for that — without being charmed by the song as a whole, I ended up having that pesky pattern in my head for a few days after sitting through it two or three times in a row.

As it often happens, the main problem with 'Duke Of Earl' was that it was essentially a fluke. None of The Dukays, including Dixon / Chandler himself, were talented songwriters — they loved doo-wop and could sing it along with the best of 'em, but that was just about the total extent of their capacities (and their actual ambitions, I suppose). Apart from relying on covers of non-original material, their only support from the contemporary creative world was a lady by the name of Bernice Williams, a music business manager and part-time songwriter who is said to have actually discovered Dixon and originally introduced him to his future agent Bill Sheppard and to the rest of The Dukays. It was she who came in to help Chandler and Edwards transform 'Duke Of Earl' into a finished song, and she is also credited as the sole writer on four more tracks that constitute Chandler's self-titled debut album, although three of them were originally released on Nat Records and still credited to The Dukays.

Of these, 'Nite Owl' is a highly derivative, but mildly fun pop-tinged R&B number that borrows vocal moves out of everything from Larry Williams' 'Bad Boy' to the Coasters' 'Poison Ivy' and puts them in the service of a strange hymn to night prowling (for the sheer sake of pissing off your parents, not in some depraved Rolling Stones or AC/DC sort of way, mind you); 'Kissin' In The Kitchen' is a musical variation on 'Hully Gully' married to a lyrical variation on the *catch you with another man that's the end, little girl* theme (not nearly as interesting in practice as it could be in theory); and 'Festival Of Love' and 'The Big Lie' are slow and slippery doo-wop ballads, with the former offering another mighty saccharine overdose while the latter is at least a little bit more subtle. I suppose this is as good a place as any to mention that Gene Chandler does have a pretty great singing voice — you know everything he does is pure vaudeville, but somehow he usually manages to stop precisely at that line which separates «honest professionalism» from «cringy over-singing».

The rest of the album is mostly padded out with covers, which mainly just remind you of the kind of market in which Gene and his managers were competing. That said, 'Stand By Me' fares pretty damn well with a tougher arrangement, in which quiet jazzy electric guitars and thick sax riffs replace the fragile chimes and strings of Ben E. King's original — amusingly, that way the song becomes closer in mood to the famous John Lennon cover from 1975 (I have no reason to suspect John was a big Gene Chandler fan, though). But 'Turn On Your Love Light' adds nothing to the Bobby Bland original, and 'Lonely

Island' directly pits Chandler against Sam Cooke, which you can tell is probably a losing battle even without listening. Nice enough, but utterly superfluous.

Returning to the point made by 'Stand By Me', a notable feature of the entire LP is a complete lack of string arrangements — quite unusual for a sentimental R&B album in the early Sixties. Something tells me this might simply have to do with not being able to afford any of the local orchestras, but in any case, the reliance instead on a combination of piano, saxophone, and electric guitar gives the songs a bit of a special edge. So even when they decide to cover Burt Bacharach's 'I Wake Up Crying' (previously released by Del Shannon on his debut LP) and intentionally slow it down so as to try and wring out every ounce of sentimentality and self-pitying from Chandler's voice, the backing track remains unusually classy, with tomtom percussion, jazz guitar, ragged sax, and occasional bluesy bursts from the piano merging in a surprisingly refreshing and moody manner — really, it's just the kind of sound that would be revived and amplified by Blood, Sweat & Tears at the end of the decade, and this one certainly wasn't as meticulously planned as the BS&T vibe would be.

I guess the main point here is that Gene Chandler should not be judged exclusively by the novelty value of 'Duke Of Earl': he and his Dukays team were serious performers with a decent sense of taste — and they could have made much more of a difference if they had a better songwriting team behind them (in fact, I see no obstacle to their occupying the same niche as Motown's Temptations or Four Tops, had somebody ever set such a goal). But as it actually turned out, although he would continue recording and charting for quite a long time, Chandler would never again come close to repeating the success of his debut single, remaining trapped in his cape and top hat for pretty much the rest of his life. Like in some generic RPG, the Cursed Duke Of Earl Outfit could only be removed with a proper Counter-curse, and poor Mr. Chandler never found it in the short time window when it still could have worked. Now, of course, it is much too late.

