

*Only Solitaire*

Artist: *Huey "Piano" Smith*

Years: *1956-1959*

George Starostin's Review

# HUEY "PIANO" SMITH



Recording years	Main genre	Music sample
1956-1981	Early rock'n'roll	<u><a href="#">Havin' A Good Time (1958)</a></u>

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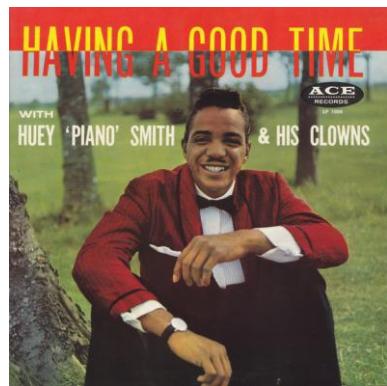
- [Having A Good Time](#) (1959)

*Only Solitaire*

Artist: *Huey "Piano" Smith*

Album: *Having A Good Time* (1959)

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## HAVING A GOOD TIME

Compilation released:

1959

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More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Rockin' Pneumonia And The Boogie Woogie Flu; 2) Little Chickee Wah Wah; 3) Little Liza Jane; 4) Just A Lonely Clown; 5) Hush Your Mouth; 6) Don't You Know Yockomo; 7) Havin' A Good Time; 8) Don't You Just Know It; 9) Well I'll Be John Brown; 10) Everybody's Whalin'; 11) High Blood Pressure; 12) We Like Birdland.

### REVIEW

They say that even today, in 2022, Huey Pierce Smith, a little (but only a little) better known as Huey "Piano" Smith, is still alive and (hopefully) well somewhere down in New Orleans. But for all his long life and for all his devotion to the musical spirit of Louisiana, it is almost frustrating how little information is available on the man and his career, at least in freely accessible sources. His moderately prolific recording career in the late 1950s pretty much ground to a halt already by the start of the next decade; video footage and even photos of the man and his various backing bands are practically non-existent; and most people who can even remember the name probably hold a mental image of Huey as the guy who recorded that silly, but charmingly catchy novelty single 'Don't You Just Know It' which makes for a good choice during goof-off karaoke nights.



In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth, because Huey "Piano" Smith did *not* record just this one silly novelty song while he could still have a recording contract. Nosiree; he recorded *dozens* of silly novelty songs, and most of them were charmingly catchy — I suppose that the public only clung on to 'Don't You Just Know It' because it made for just about perfect family entertainment, a song that [parents could freely share with their kids](#) without having to explain to them who

exactly was John Brown or why guys sometimes refer to girls as "little chickee wha wha". Furthermore, in his own subtle way he was quite influential, not just on the further development of the New Orleanian scene (Dr. John, among others, was a big fan and a reverent disciple), but on, let's say, the promotion of good-natured fun and humor for the rock'n'roll idiom in general. From Roy Wood to the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band, every rock'n'roll artist and band with a bit of a «clownish» streak to them owes at least an indirect debt to Huey Smith and his rowdy bands of merry-makers.

Huey is, in fact, a classic example of a Fifties' guy who was able to make the most of his relative strengths in the face of his many overriding weaknesses. Despite his "Piano" moniker, it would be a serious stretch to call him a «great» piano player; next to such New Orleanian prodigies as Professor Longhair or even Fats Domino, he was neither a virtuoso nor a creative innovator at his instrument. He could play reasonably well, but there was nothing outstanding about his barroom style, and didn't he just know it — there is not a single moment on these Fifties' singles when he ever tries to «show off», as this would probably just result in an embarrassment. He was not a good singer, either, lacking confidence in his own abilities and nearly always relying on the various members of his revolving-door entourage. And as a frontman / showman / wildman, whatever, he allegedly did not qualify at all, not finding it within himself to bang on those keys with the demented abandon of a Little Richard or a Jerry Lee Lewis.

But he did have a good sense of humor, and for a while, he could work wonders with it within the common R&B and rock'n'roll paradigms of the time. Borrowing musical ideas from the local «Mardi Gras Market», Huey would work them into funny variations, adding humorous lyrics (with or without sexual innuendos, depending on the particular corner of that market he wanted to appeal to) and, with the aid of his singers (His Rhythm Aces at first, then His Clowns once it became clear that humor would be a permanent ingredient), turning the numbers into two minute-long vaudeville shows. The style quickly caught on, and by 1959 Smith had made a name for himself as a national phenomenon, even if that fame would be very short-lived — yet the overall innocent charm of the best of those little vignettes feels pretty timeless to me, and may quite easily be resuscitated at any time, give or take a viral video on TikTok or whatever.

This LP, the one and only truly solid collection of Huey Smith originals to own, was released some time in 1959; it includes almost everything he and his bands released from 1956 to 1958 on Ace Records, with only a few gaps that have to be sought out on expanded CD releases or separate collections (mostly, though, they are not very significant, e.g. an instrumental version of 'Rockin' Pneumonia' that was the original B-side of the single). Since Huey seems to have never been in much of a hurry, the stream of those recordings was steady, but slow, no more than two or three 45"s for each year, and even some

of those a bit redundant — which just goes to show that coming up with a nice funny vaudeville tune is a far more difficult enterprise than coming up with a new 12-bar blues record. Or, alternately, that Huey was never all that crazy about the studio environment, preferring the hazy intimacy of the barroom or the sweaty excitement of the ballroom.

The first of these singles, still credited to «Huey Smith And His Rhythm Aces», already fully succeeds in establishing a good mood — ‘Everybody’s Whalin’ is a merry piano-and-sax driven dance tune where the vocals don’t matter much, and the B-side is a fast-paced reworking of the old folk classic ‘Little Liza Jane’ with a hyperactive electric guitar taking a historical lesson from the banjo. The common link between both songs (and, in fact, almost everything that followed as well) is a muddy style of production where the drums are inexplicably put out up front and everything else, *particularly* Huey’s own piano, is completely overshadowed by the wildly crashing and smashing percussion. This does often happen with New Orleanian artists for some reason, but Huey Smith’s records are especially affected by this approach; you will need to learn to overlook it in order to enjoy the music.

The big break for Huey Smith came with his second single, whose title a lot of us will probably recognize without ever remembering the name of the original artist — ‘Rockin’ Pneumonia And The Boogie-Woogie Flu’, now credited to «Huey Smith And The Clowns» and coming in two parts (the second, on the B-side, is just an instrumental version of the A-side and honestly dismissable). It not only introduces the «Huey Smith Opening Piano Flourish», which would subsequently grace a lot of his other songs, but does something much more important — it is really one of the first «meta» treatments of the rock’n’roll lifestyle in the history of recorded music. Up to that time, most of the rock’n’roll numbers whose subject matter was rock’n’roll itself treated it with a straight face — anthemically, reverentially, or with a «wild wild fun» attitude. Even a decidedly clownish band like the Coasters would still sing a song like ‘That Is Rock’n’Roll’ as if they were putting the genre on a holy pedestal.

With ‘Rockin’ Pneumonia’, the tables were turned — Huey’s singers (his own barber Sidney Rayfield and the legendary Mardi Gras Indian “Scarface” John Williams) sang the song not from the point of view of the young rebellious teenager, but from that of an outside old geezer, envying the young man his bit of fun but unable to properly participate in it due to age differences and ailings (the song was written in the midst of the infamous 1957-58 influenza pandemic, which should probably endear it to us even more in the Covid Age). Musically, the song does indeed sound like it *wants* to break out into all-out rockin’ mode, especially with that nagging sax riff doing its amusing «mini-jumps», but is constantly hampered by the players not understanding where to go next... and this, of course, only works to the advantage of the general message: “*I*

would be runnin' but my feet's too slow". No wonder all those old geezers of rock'n'roll come under the song's charm later in life — Aerosmith covered it in 1987, and Deep Purple waited all the way to 2021 (!).

The huge success of 'Rockin' Pneumonia', unfortunately, could not stop Huey from falling prey to self-plagiarizing: the next single, 'Just A Lonely Clown', coupled the exact same melody of 'Rockin' Pneumonia' with a much less interesting message and rather annoying falsetto «clownish» ad-libbed vocals — the humor was still there, but the ironic deconstruction of the rock'n'roll idiom was replaced by slapstick. Fortunately, realizing his own mistake, he quickly bounced back with 'Havin' A Good Time', which gives this LP its title and is fully musically adequate to its own — a cheery manifesto of the supreme rule of all-night partying, nothing more and nothing less (although I like the nearly instrumental B-side, 'We Like Birdland', a bit more — it actually gives more space to Huey's piano playing).

And then it finally came — the one song that, for a while, turned Huey Smith into a household name and still remains his well-worn-out visiting card for most people who remember that name at all. 'Rockin' Pneumonia And The Boogie Flu' may have been his major gift to the musical world, what with all the innumerable covers throughout the decades, but 'Don't You Just Know It' was his crown contribution to The People, a song so simple, silly, and inescapably catchy, it should probably be one of the first on that love-it-hate-it list which leads directly all the way to 'Baby Shark'. Does this really make one a hypocrite to shudder at the idea of 'Baby Shark' being among the most watched YouTube videos of all time, but then to go «oh, cute!» at the idea of 'Don't You Just Know It' having been a smash hit single back in 1958?

Perhaps it does and perhaps it does not, but I'm pretty sure that 'Don't You Just Know It', for all its simplicity, repetitive structure, and manipulative treatment of the listener, has one thing that 'Baby Shark' doesn't — *personality*. What keeps it alive and charming is that irreplaceable, unimitable, exclusively New Orleanian good-naturedness. People usually covered 'Rockin' Pneumonia' and not this song not so much because the former was «deeper» (although it was), but because it did not have nearly as much of that Mardi Gras spirit — the call-and-response vocals, the «deep male» vs. «high-pitched female» dialog, the clownish, but sincere ah-ha-ha-ha's and follow-ups (even today, I am happy to see that the Internet is regularly hosting discussions on whether the vocals go *dooba-dooba-dooba-dooba* or *gooba-gooba-gooba-gooba*; my semi-professional phonetic opinion is that, for some reason, they have a very back-slanting *u* in there, which makes [duba] feel like [guba], though this still needs to be checked with a proper spectrometer). Anyway, this is really the kind of tune that can only be made justice to by the likes of Dr. John, and even then, preferably some time close to the Epiphany.

Not that the song is all *that* simple, you know; honestly, I would request a second opinion before using it in the curriculum

as part of [six lessons in the New Orleans Rhythm & Blues unit](#), where students are supposed to "learn the musical devices "call and response" and "echo" and how they appear in instrumental and vocal music". Particularly suspicious is the contribution to Common Core State Standard RL.5.4 "Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes" — hats off to the brave professor who will have to deal with phrases such as "*I can't lose with the stuff I use*", "*Ya got me rockin' when I ought to be rollin'*", and, particularly, "*Young girls in trouble the tighter they squeeze*", trying to explain their figurative language without getting reported to the dean's office. Really, one probably shouldn't push one's luck too far.

One should not totally ignore the B-side, either: I am pretty sure that 'High Blood Pressure', whose own mid-section borrowed heavily from Elvis' 'All Shook Up', in its turn, may have been a subconscious influence on AC/DC's 'High Voltage' years later — just compare the way Bobby Marchan sings "*I get HIGH... blood pressure*" to Bon Scott's chorus. And why should we get too surprised? There had always been a pretty large comic streak to AC/DC's early material, and enough of that New Orleanian influence had seeped in to Australia anyway; it is precisely the boys' not taking themselves too seriously as Rock Gods that still endears them to our heart.

Fortunately, the follow-up single to 'Don't You Just Know It' was more of a variation on its success than a straightahead repeat of the melody, as it was with 'Just A Lonely Clown': 'Don't You Know Yockomo' is just a pure bunch of nonsense, throwing together every phonetic symbiosis known to pop music ("*hidey-hidey-hidey-ho*", "*reet-petite*", "*ting-a-ling*", you name it) and advancing the tempo just a bit to generate even more excitement. Even so, I suppose they went over the top here with the lyrics — the song turned out way too difficult for the kiddies, blew that family entertainment value and ended up forgotten. In any case, I'm a bigger sucker for the B-side, 'Well I'll Be John Brown', which puts a wicked rhythmic twist on the 12-bar structure and rounds it up with popularizing an allegedly common Southern expression whose expressiveness can only be compared with Katharine Hepburn's spirited "*Christopher Columbus!*" from *Little Women*.

Unfortunately, the LP came out too early to include Huey's best song of 1959, which somehow fell through the cracks, so we shall have to mention it separately. 'Genevieve', with "Scarface" John Williams taking lead, is a somewhat more serious than usual mid-tempo blues-cum-R&B number with a rising-falling chord pattern that presages Howlin' Wolf's 'Killing Floor' several years later — and, incidentally, also a song in which you can pretty clearly hear the roots of the Beatles' 'Hey Bulldog': make just a couple subtle changes to [that opening piano riff](#) and there you go. The song is just a small step away from becoming «soulful», but that is certainly not the direction in which Huey generally wanted to go — the B-side, 'Would

You Believe It (I Have A Cold)', promptly returns us to the safe old comic grounds. Then again, even Louis Jordan had his «serious» detours every now and then.

In the end, it's all too easy to dismiss Huey "Piano" Smith's «Clowns» as a lightweight novelty act — but let me tell you this: I'd much rather take a New Orleanian lightweight novelty act from 1958 over any lightweight novelty act that covers the time span from Woodstock to TikTok. At least *this* novelty act was feeding on the essence of the most fresh and exciting kinds of popular music around (R&B and rock'n'roll), had a modern and creative approach to its music, and, *most* importantly, seems to have been operating under the banner of, well, just havin' a good time, rather than attain fame and fortune at the cost of losing one's dignity.

