

IKE & TINA TURNER



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1958-1976</i>	<i>Classic R&B</i>	<i>It's Gonna Work Out Fine (1961)</i>

Only Solitaire

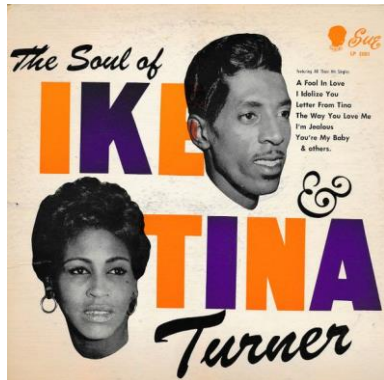
Artist: *Ike & Tina Turner*

Years: *1960-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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THE SOUL OF IKE & TINA TURNER

Album released:
February 1961

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Tracks: 1) I'm Jealous; 2) **I Idolize You**; 3) If; 4) Letter From Tina; 5) You Can't Love Two; 6) I Had A Notion; 7) A Fool In Love; 8) Sleepless; 9) Chances Are; 10) You Can't Blame Me; 11) You're My Baby; 12) The Way You Love Me.

REVIEW

Sometimes I feel a little sad for Ike Turner Jr., whose enormous contributions to the domain of popular music have been completely overshadowed in mass conscience by the long and turbulent history of his abusive relationship with Tina — while fellow musicians and musical historians remain respectful, the common man on the street these days arguably just has a faint idea of «Ike The Rapist» who submitted his wife to almost twenty years of torture before she finally broke free and launched her own star. Admittedly, the idea is true to a large extent: there is hardly any doubt that Ike treated Tina as his own creation and his own property — he was her Professor Higgins, she was his obedient Eliza Doolittle — and even if this was a fairly common attitude at the time, cultural context is no excuse for acting like a slave owner.



But should this dark side in any way negate the fact that Ike Turner *did*, in fact, make a star out of Anna Mae Bullock, whose tremendous stage presence and wild energy would count for relatively little if she were not provided the «meat and potatoes» through her husband's inspired songwriting and boundless inventiveness in the studio? As usual, there's a torturous moral ambiguity here at stake, and I am in no position to make judgements on the ethical side of the situation. Instead, let's just concentrate on the music, which, I believe, is going to persevere anyway long after the mass interest in

tabloid details of the Ike & Tina story has subsided. Ultimately, Ike and Tina will settle their own accounts between Heaven and Hell (I wonder if they deal out visiting hours down below?), but what stays with *us* is their recorded legacy, and it provides many more sources of inspiration than reading Tina's autobiography.

The important thing to remember while listening to the early singles of Ike & Tina, collected on their first album, is that by the late 1950s, Ike Turner was already... well, not a *star* per se, but rather a well-established, creative, driving vehicle behind quite a lot of star power. He is, in fact, one of the very, very few African-American R&B musicians who managed to keep up with the times through three distinctly different decades of artistry — the Fifties, the Sixties, and the Seventies — and if only his penchant for self-destruction (and destruction of other people's lives along the way) had not reached a peak in the Seventies, it is quite possible he might have made his mark on subsequent decades as well. The only reason why I had to leave him out of my Fifties' chronicle is that his discography throughout that decade is a mess — mostly singles, recorded under a dozen different names with a dozen different bands, with Ike acting as either bandleader, composer, guitar or piano player, and usually combining several of these features. (A good way to make one's acquaintance with most of that legacy is through the Ace compilation **Rhythm Rockin' Blues**, beginning with Jackie Brenston & His Delta Cats' 'Rocket 88' — still the «first rock and roll song ever recorded» to some people — and going through twenty more tracks of widely varying stylistic range *and* quality).

Technically, the very first joint recording by Ike & Tina was '[Boxtop](#)', issued on Tune Town Records in 1958 and credited to «Ike Turner, Carlson Oliver & Little Ann», but do not expect anything ground-shaking from that recording — other than a slightly curious wobbly variation on the beat of Bo Diddley's 'Crackin' Up', it offers little in terms of excitement, and «Little Ann» has no more presence here than any regular girl singer, any possible signs of individuality being suppressed by the limitations of the duet format with the tenor Carlson Oliver. (If there *is* any individuality here, it is Ike's, who contributes the quirky, comedic bass-baritone interludes). Above all, it's very much a «Fifties song», in line with everything else Ike did back then — cautiously adventurous, never really boiling over.

Things changed in March 1960 with a well-publicized historical accident, when Ike's newest composition 'A Fool In Love', intended for one of his regular singer clients Art Lassiter, had to be assigned a new vocalist when Art failed to show up for the session — and the only vocalist on hand was Anna Mae Bullock. The song itself is no great shakes, though it is probably important that its melody is more rock'n'roll (or, at least, «pop rock») in essence than R&B (I'm thinking of a slowed down version of 'Great Balls Of Fire'), which no doubt helped its national chart success. But what made it truly stand out, of

course, was Tina's performance — amusingly, Ike himself did not think that much of it, even keeping the recording on hold for a few months, in the hopes that Lassiter would finally come along and they could just erase «Little Ann»'s results and paste Lassiter's over the backing track.

Perhaps for Ike, who had already worked with Tina for several years and was probably accustomed to the timbre, power, and «gurgle» of her voice, what she did on the song was nothing special — but for the American public at large, this turned out to be quite a fresh new sound. Now it's definitely true that Tina Turner was far from the first black female performer with a powerful bark; big gals like Big Mama Thornton and (more recently) Etta James had even thicker, more imposing chords and, in terms of raw dark power and/or subtlety of expression, could arguably sing Tina under the table. But they had two drawbacks. One is that they weren't really pop singers — Big Mama was a blueswoman through and through, and Etta was too much of an old-fashioned balladeer. «Black pop» in 1960-61 was really all about the quickly burgeoning girl group scene, and girls like The Chantels or The Shirelles were more about harmony than energy.

Drawback two is that most of the powerful ladies of the Fifties, what with all of their flair and independence, still may have given out a «groomed» vibe — singing it the way it was all taught to them and professionally pre-rehearsed. Even when you hear Ruth Brown belt it out on a hot number like 'Wild Wild Young Men', there's still a feeling that the lady knows her boundaries and does not allow herself any spontaneity (not on the studio recording, at least) for fear of being considered «unruly». Even when you get all those girl groups whose members come from tough neighborhoods where strong character is a pre-requisite for survival, any rough-and-toughness still has to stay behind the threshold of the studio doors. It really took Tina Turner to demonstrate that the times were changing — that, for once, you could actually let your hair down in the studio *and* expect the public to catch up to it rather than shy away in disgust.

To be perfectly honest right from the start: in the overall sense of things, I am not a huge fan of Tina Turner's singing style. Like quite a few notorious «screamers», black and white, male and female alike, that appeared on the stage in her wake, she is too often driven by the passion of the moment, screeching her head off whenever her biochemistry tells her to and not whenever the song actually demands it. Even here, on her first try, it is not at all clear that a song about loyalty and devotion to her man requires a near-constant hystrionic bark all through the verses (so much so that «The Artettes» on backing vocals come across as a bunch of white-coat nurses trying to pacify the straitjacketed patient). But personal enjoyment is one thing, and recognizing the arrival of «streetwise toughness» on the hitherto well-combed, suit-and-tie-only R&B scene is quite another. Almost a decade earlier, Ike Turner heralded a new kind of instrumental sound in the music world with

‘Rocket 88’; now, in an almost sheer stroke of luck, the good Lord guided his hand to help revolutionize the art of the vocalist as well. Okay, so this time around, it’s not really so much *his* merit as it is Tina’s — but then again, let’s face it, he did not erase the vocals after all, and once ‘A Fool In Love’ started climbing up the charts, he must have realized that from this day on, he would be forever doomed to live in the shadow of the glory of his own protégé (which certainly explains quite a lot of that history of abuse over the next sixteen years).

The immediate follow-up to ‘A Fool In Love’ was ‘A Fool Too Long’, an unconcealed melodic and lyrical «sequel» to the original that flopped and sank without a trace — by now, the public had been spoiled deeply enough to expect freshness rather than direct self-repetition, and these days, you won’t even see the song anywhere except on in-depth retrospectives and completist boxsets. Learning his lesson, Ike quickly corrected his mistake and gave Tina something totally different: ‘I Idolize You’ is arguably my favorite song from that period — much bluesier and darker than its predecessor, it provides a *much* better excuse for Tina’s «psychotic» singing as she raves and rants about her downright unhealthy obsession with her «idol»... an obsession that is both submissive and dominant at the same time ("*oh what a thrill I would get / if I could comfort you baby, and make you my pet*" — amusingly, this verse ended up irritating Ike so much that for the re-recorded 1966 version, he would change it to "*if you want me to beg to you, I'll forget my pride*"; feel the difference, eh?).

Although in terms of style and arrangement, this is not a complete departure from ‘A Fool In Love’, mood-wise ‘I Idolize You’ goes much further than that, almost bordering on musical pornography; Tina’s "OW!"s before landing the final line of each chorus sound like she’s just been bitten on some particularly sensitive erogenous zone, and even Etta James would probably blush when hearing the proud exhibitionism in Tina’s voice upon delivery of lyrics like "*I would like to make love to you / When the lights are low / And I would like to SCREEEAM to you baby / Just so I can let you know*". We may be quite accustomed to powerful singers sounding like maniacal sex addicts *today* — but name me anyone who would dare do it with this kind of primal animal intensity *before* Tina Turner. Here she was, almost literally converting cultured R&B to low-down dirty punk — and the general public was actually buying it!

Whether he was a little scared himself of his latest creation or not, Ike then held back a bit with the next single: ‘I’m Jealous’, released in January 1961, ditched the bluesy darkness, cranked up the tempo, and took on the guise of a quirky pop ditty, something that would have been quite fit for any chirpy girl group at the time. This is precisely the right moment to remember those limitations: Tina’s «barking» style, which works so perfectly for ‘I Idolize You’, becomes just a tad irritating on this faster and lighter number, which calls for a more melodic approach in the vocal department. In the context

of the previous song, Tina's wildness made it downright scary; here, though, she somehow sounds hysterical for the sake of hysteria, losing control in a situation where she should have retained it. Maybe it wasn't even her own fault — maybe Ike and the others just told her to keep on screamin', because that's what the fans like about her — but, regardless, this time around the chosen vocal approach spoils what could have been a perfectly nice-ish (not outstanding) pop number.

And that is basically how things are on the entire first album by the duo, which collects all of their previous A- and B-sides (with the wise exception of 'A Fool Too Long') and adds a bunch of newly recorded tracks. For every hit, there's a miss; for every miss, there's a realization that what we're dealing with here is the proverbial «diamond in the rough» — a brand new talent which is so unusual, there is as of yet no clear understanding of how it should really be used. Some songs are more memorable than others; some suffer from over-screaming more than others; some are more traditional than others — for instance, the only cover on the album, the slow ballad 'I Had A Notion', is an old doo-wop hit from 1953 (by Atlantic's own Joe Morris Orchestra featuring Al Savage on vocals) whose only «fresh» point of attraction is the slash-across-your-vocal-chords delivery by Tina, which still feels hyperbolic and unnatural.

Let me just try and briefly list what I consider to be highlights. Apart from the already-mentioned 'A Fool In Love' and 'I Idolize You', the real good stuff includes 'If', a simple enough piece of bluesy R&B on which Tina throws a hissy fit over her potential hubby cheating on her (something she'd have to live through with Ike often enough); 'You Can't Love Two', a soulful doo-wop ballad on the exact same topic that, fortunately enough, features Tina in crooning and belting rather than barking mode; and 'Chances Are', on which Tina's singing is well accentuated by a grimly martial bass and a sordidly percussive rhythm guitar part from Ike — on the whole, in those early days Tina's presence is much more mesmerizing when she is in doom-and-gloom mode than when she tries to be sentimental. And it is definitely more mesmerizing when she sings solo than when she duets with Ike on the repetitive and static pop songs 'You Can't Blame Me' and 'You're My Baby', both of which perfectly satisfy the definition of «filler», or when she slips into full-on recitative mode on 'Letter From Tina' — at this point, her «purely theatrical» skills are not yet developed well enough to keep you properly transfixed.

Admittedly, it would not be fair to expect that the mere fact of getting a hot new star with a fresh, seductively aggressive take on life would cause Ike Turner, whose musical ideology had been fairly well shaped during the 1950s, to immediately revise and revolutionize his styles of songwriting and production. Take away the unique vocal style and more than half of these songs would sound perfectly fit for any old R&B or doo-wop artist from the early, formative days of both genres — and since even the unique vocal style can easily get obnoxious, **The Soul Of Ike & Tina Turner** is pretty damn far from a

consistent masterpiece. But there is no denying that the album is convincing enough as a detailed, sure-fire announcement of a new presence on the scene — and even more than that, a whole new approach to the art of vocal performance, a major step forward in the «liberation» of the voice of the pop singer (particularly the black voice, but there is no doubt that this style was hugely influential, for instance, on the likes of Janis Joplin as well).

It is fun to realize, actually, that two of the greatest soul singer-ines of the decade — Aretha and Tina — would have their debut LPs released within days of each other (February 1961), both introducing their own styles that had quite a bit in common (above all, the enhanced freedom of self-expression) but were also vividly different: Aretha, if one might say, as «the Beatle» of R&B and Tina as its proverbial «Rolling Stone», the «polite and elegant» freedom versus the «aggressive and hysterical» variety. In popular conscience, the former usually wins over the latter, which is why Aretha today is #1 on the Rolling Stone list of great singers and Tina Turner is but #55 (funny enough, sitting comfortably close to Mick Jagger at #52). But it didn't start out that way: in 1961, Ike & Tina Turner were a *way* hotter commercial proposition than Aretha, despite all of the «safe and cozy» reputation of the first years of the new decade. And while I'd be really hard pressed to say whether I prefer 'Won't Be Long' over 'I Idolize You' or vice versa on a «theoretical», «intellectual» level, there is no question as to which of the two agrees more with my «biology of purpose» (as per Brian Eno's definition)!

