

*Only Solitaire*

Artist: *Jan & Dean*

Years: *1959-1960*

George Starostin's Review

# JAN & DEAN



Recording years	Main genre	Music sample
1959-1986	Pop rock	<u>The Little Old Lady From Pasadena</u> (1964)

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# JAN & DEAN

Album released:

March 1960

V A L U E  
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More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Clementine; 2) Judy; 3) My Heart Sings; 4) Rosi Lane; 5) Oh Julie; 6) Baby Talk; 7) You're On My Mind; 8) There's A Girl; 9) Jeanette; 10) Cindy; 11) Don't Fly Away; 12) White Tennis Sneakers.

## REVIEW

As much as I'd like to leave behind a relatively comprehensive overview of the American «teenage music market» of the pre-Beatlemania era, it is pretty hard to force myself to endure the creativity of stereotypical «teen idols», let alone search for interesting or stimulating things to write about their music. While I'm sure that certain revisionist models claiming that Pat Boone, Frankie Avalon, or Annette Funicello had more integrity and importance for the development of pop culture than the Beatles or the Beach Boys may arise in the future (who knows, maybe they're already here), this could only be connected to the psychological phenomenon of «boring is the new exciting». Granted, there is nothing criminal in going back and trying to see something worthwhile in art that was formerly condemned to death by the critics (otherwise, we'd never get to reevaluate the Monkees, Paul McCartney's **Ram**, or Bob Dylan's **Self-Portrait**)... but look, this early precursor of Miley Cyrus' 'Party In The U.S.A.' is simply awful, and that's about as energetic and exciting as early Sixties' «teen idol muzak» ever gets. We should never forget its very existence — it's only through comparison with the truly awful that we get to properly appreciate the good stuff in life — but we should never confuse it with the real thing, lest we become like people who cannot seriously tell the aesthetic difference between 1970s' and 1980s-1990s' Aerosmith.



One exception from the «no early 1960s' teen idols, please!» rule that I can allow myself are several people responsible for the appearance and evolution of the Beach Boys — people like Dion, whose singing style went far beyond the typically polite restrictions on teen idol behavior, and, of course, Jan & Dean, who pretty much invented the early Beach Boys sound for them to pick up. While their music has always been as harmless and inoffensive as a butterfly on opiates, there was a certain naturalness, rawness, and innocence about it (and, importantly, a touch of humor!) which distinguished it from the usual «processed» teen idol output — even if the actual songs were trash (which they were often, but not always), the classic Jan & Dean sound still could be genuinely fun without being genuinely embarrassing.

The story of Jan & Dean actually begins as «Jan & Arnie», with a set of recordings William Jan Berry made with Arnold P. Ginsburg while their other friend from their first doo-wop school band, Dean Ormsby Torrence, was away in the army. Although quite limited in quantity, those early Jan & Arnie recordings have a tiny bit more raunchiness to them than the later Jan & Dean stuff — for instance, their very first single '[Jennie Lee](#)' is sort of a «soft-rock» anthem to the notorious burlesque entertainer, Virginia Lee Hicks, in which the budding Californian songwriters managed to bottle and concentrate the hormonal feelings of thousands of young American boys (*"Her bright eyes make a fire in me / Now I cannot live without Jennie Lee!"*). Musically, it's interesting because of its synthetic nature — listen closely and you'll hear that the guitar and drums are playing a bona fide Bo Diddley melody, the sax part is influenced by the «yakety sax» style of King Curtis, but the most distinctive vocal element — Jan's "*bop bop bop-bop-bop*" harmonies — belongs to these guys and, along with Dion's "*dun dun dun dun dun*" style, quickly rose to the status of Californian youth national anthem.

Jan & Arnie's next two singles, 'Gas Money' and 'The Beat That Can't Be Beat', were also upbeat, light-rocking numbers, focusing on a combination of lightweight teenage humor, carefully checked rock'n'roll energy, and cutesy dum-de-dum harmonies — and I'm guessing that the slightly mischievous feel behind all of that stuff was largely provided by Arnie, who, upon Dean's return from the army, amicably left the group, claiming to be disappointed with the music business and becoming an architectural designer instead. No sooner had «Jan & Arnie» become «Jan & Dean» that the music took a sharply different turn, which is a pity: had Jan, Dean, and Arnie stayed together as a trio, they might have eventually turned into a «toothier» version of themselves, though this is just a faint speculation on my part.

Anyway, Jan & Dean's very first single, also included on their first LP, was 'Baby Talk' — an adaptation of the [only known single](#) from the Laurels, an obscure and short-lived male vocal group who wrote the song themselves but failed to get anywhere with it. Comparing the original with the cover, it immediately becomes clear why Jan & Dean managed to turn it

into a Top 10 hit when the Laurels could not — Jan & Dean’s version is literally swimming in *bah-bah-bop-ooms* and *dip-di-dip dip-di-dips*, making Jan & Arnie’s original vocal style into a perfect fit for the song’s punchline (“*I am only five years old and my baby’s three*”). The Laurels simply tried to sell the song based on its dubious humor; Jan & Dean matched the humor to their vocal harmonies, because what is that vocal style, if not a specific form of «baby talk»?

Released on the short-lived Doré Records (and even incorrectly credited to Jan & Arnie rather than Jan & Dean upon original release), ‘Baby Talk’ firmly establishes the essence of the «pre-surf» Jan & Dean style: light and bouncy rhythm section, cute sax favored over electric guitars, Jan’s deeper voice contrasted with Dean’s falsetto, and, above everything else, that goddamn blasted reverb effect on *each and every* goddamn blasted song — probably the one thing that angers me the most about those early records. I mean, if these guys really had such a good thing going, why oh why did Herb Alpert and Lou Adler decide that they should *always* sound as if trapped at the bottom of an empty well? This may or may not have had something to do with how they constructed their recordings from bits and pieces of individual takes and overdubs, but in any case, the never-ending reverberation in my ears is arguably *the* strongest obstacle to effortlessly enjoying the guys’ music, even more so than the music’s «intentionally infantile» profile.

Interestingly enough, Jan & Dean’s career sort of stalled for almost *four years* after the release of ‘Baby Talk’. Perhaps that was precisely the level of silly novelty that the public expected from them: already the second single, ‘There’s A Girl’, a (comparatively) «normal» pop song written for the duo by Alpert and Adler, barely registered on the charts despite having the exact same vocal features, plus a nice descending piano hook between the verses. The thing that seduces me somewhat about it and its many follow-ups is the innocent simplicity of the arrangement — no strings, no horns, just a primitive little «weave» between the guitar and piano, and surprisingly lo-fi production values that would have been right up the alley of all the twee-pop artists half a century later. Recorded in Hollywood, for sure — but the sound, in some strange way, is almost like «anti-Hollywood», though the reverb effect is still grating.

For the third single, the team chose a modernized pop-rock update on ‘Oh My Darling, Clementine’, retitled simply as ‘Clementine’ and (on that pretext?) officially credited to Berry and Torrence. The single did not sell that much, either, so the credit ruse was somewhat in vain, and the attempt to appeal to a slightly more «rocking» part of the audience, what with the song being driven by a high-octane level distorted electric guitar riff and featuring a rowdy sax break, fell through. Play it next to some of the Beach Boys’ earliest rockin’ classics like ‘Surfin’ U.S.A.’, and it’s easy to see the difference between «decent» and «exciting» — ‘Clementine’ is formally fun, but stiff, with the musicians rigidly adhering to set patterns and

not really feeling the rock'n'roll drive, more like groping around to simulate it. And while Jan & Dean's singing is formally unimpeachable, there's absolutely no variation or deviation from start to finish — the overall feel is a little robotic, as if the boys were constantly afraid to just let go (a feature they did share very much with Mike Love, but the Beach Boys always came through on the strength of their collective harmonic inventions — here, with just two guys and that blasted reverb thing, the artists are at a constant disadvantage).

If you have assimilated these early singles, then the ensuing LP, known either as simply **Jan & Dean** or as **The Jan & Dean Sound** (thus labeled on the back cover), will offer you fairly little else to assimilate — all the other songs on there fall into the same categories of doo-woppy ballads or simplistic pop-rockers, as the boys go through all of their girlfriends' Christian names ('Judy', 'Cindy', 'Julie', 'Rosie', 'Jeannette') and exhaust all the classic doo-wop and pop chord sequences they could think of over the course of the sessions. There is, naturally, a strong Buddy Holly influence over all of this stuff, which is a much better thing in this context than, say, a Cole Porter influence — but it does not save us from the fact that after a short while, most of the songs get kind of glued together in one big glop, as they do not have any individual personalities at all, only one large collective one.

The only songs that are worth an individual mention are a couple of extra tracks included on some of the album's CD reissues that come from later dates (late 1960 or early 1961) — such as 'Baggy Pants', an interesting change of style for the boys; the song was donated by Bob Roberts, the author of 'Tunnel Of Love', and portrays Jan & Dean as a couple of hicky outsiders who happen to "crash a fancy dance" and gain an opportunity to compare their riff-raff appearance with that of the more aristocratic elites in town. It's not as funny as it could be due to Jan & Dean's pathological lack of a *true* sense of humor, but it's refreshing to see a bit of tongue-in-cheek social consciousness brought in, along with a humorous sax hook and some pleasant interaction between the male singers and the female backing vocals.

Then, of course, there is their cover of 'Heart And Soul' from April 1961, which they sort of «stole» from the Cleftones and finally managed to turn into a solid hit for themselves, their first serious chart success after 'Baby Talk'. As befits an authentic R&B group from Queens, the Cleftones certainly had more «heart and soul» in their version than Jan & Dean (which is why it is *their* version, not Jan & Dean's, which you can hear in *American Graffiti*), but it was Jan & Dean who had all the "bop bop bop dip-di-dip" stuff, *and* the falsetto harmonies, *and* the crazy fast tempo — making the whole thing just perfect for white Californian teens as opposed to black kids from the East Coast who simply couldn't afford to send the Cleftones to the same chart positions. Which isn't really to say that one version is intrinsically better than the other —

which, for that matter, isn't really to say that the R&B / pop-rock reinvention of 'Heart And Soul' is such a great thing in the first place. But at least in the case of Jan & Dean, it showed a little more tightness and energy, and featured a slightly more polished production than usual (I think that even the reverb mask is a little less prominent this time), which earned the duo a slightly more lucrative contract with Liberty Records and ultimately set them on the road to 'Surf City' and a bigger degree of success — though I'm sure some might argue that it is these early, rough, quasi-amateurish efforts on Doré Records that should be qualified as «the *real* Jan & Dean», much like Elvis' Sun Records era or something like that.

In the end, it all depends on whether you think these guys were more «charismatic», with their disarming simplicity and rawness and naïve pseudo-humor, or more «annoying», with their stiffness and monotonousness and cloyingness and that damn reverb thing all over the place. Personally, I happen to think that this stuff is okay in small doses — I could easily sit through all of Elvis' **Sun Sessions** in one go, happily enjoying myself, but early Jan & Dean become unbearable after three or four songs in a row. But for the duration of those three or four songs, it feels cute to borrow the innocent, freedom-centered mindset of a West Coast youth circa 1960 — before you realize that the «cuteness» in question can easily become mushy, rigid formula, overdosing on which can be somewhat dangerous to your prospects as a conscious human being.

