

JERRY LEE LEWIS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1956-2014</i>	<i>Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i>Lewis Boogie (1958)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Jerry Lee Lewis*

Years: *1956-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

Page contents:

- [Jerry Lee Lewis](#) (1958)
- [Jerry Lee's Greatest!](#) (1961)



JERRY LEE LEWIS

Album released:

1958

V A L U E
2 4 4 5 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) Don't Be Cruel; 2) Goodnight Irene; 3) Put Me Down; 4) It All Depends; 5) Ubangi Stomp; 6) Crazy Arms; 7) Jambalaya; 8) Fools Like Me; 9) High School Confidential; 10) When The Saints Go Marching In; 11) Matchbox; 12) It'll Be Me; 13*) Mean Woman Blues; 14*) I'm Feelin' Sorry; 15*) **Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On**; 16*) Turn Around; 17*) Breathless; 18*) Down The Line.

REVIEW

There are many obvious (and obviously correct) answers to the question of why it was the guitar, rather than the piano, that became the definitive instrument of rock'n'roll music. Logistic reasons — rock'n'roll comes from the blues, and a rambling Delta bluesman couldn't exactly lug around an entire piano. Economic reasons — rock'n'roll is teenage music, and the average teenager could hardly afford a piano. Technical reasons: you couldn't exactly amplify a piano the same way you could amplify an electric guitar (and even if you could, the results would not be nearly as satisfying). Tonal reasons: the piano has a naturally «softer» sound, making it difficult to convey the atmosphere of rebellious aggression, so essential for rock music. And so on.



One reason that gets quoted less frequently than others, however, is what I'd call *class* reason. Compared to the guitar, the piano is commonly seen as an «elitist» or, at least, «classy» object of art — after all, it is the key instrument in «academic» classical music, and the number one instrument for one's kids to master in music schools. Many an early rock'n'roller took piano lessons when he was little, only to eagerly swap the instrument with a guitar at home, and not *just* because the family could not afford a piano — but also out of conscious or subconscious protest. Sure, «lowbrow» music had already long since

learned how to appropriate the instrument for its own purposes — from ragtime to boogie-woogie — and a few of the most important figures in the early development of rock'n'roll, like Fats Domino and Little Richard, who grew out of the R&B tradition, already used it as their chief instrument. The white kids, however, clearly regarded the piano as a conformist type of beast, suitable for the bowtie snobs at Carnegie Hall or for parent-pleasing vaudeville. How many young white rockers in the 1950s even tried rocking the piano?

To the best of my knowledge, only one. I don't think anybody, including even the man himself, could correctly answer the question why Jerry Lee Lewis, upon falling in love with the «devil's music», did not make the switch from piano to guitar, but stubbornly continued to convert God's own instrument for his own Hellish purposes. (For the record, Jerry did learn to play the guitar a little but never got too good at it, as this [live performance](#) of 'Mystery Train' amply demonstrates). All of us are internally wired for something, and it just turned out that Jerry Lee Lewis was internally wired to play the piano — not just play it, but almost literally *rape* it, *force* it to behave like a rock'n'roll instrument, in what amounts to arguably the single most disturbing case of sexual harassment against a musical device in history. When somebody like Keith Emerson stuck knives in his Hammond organ, it was a brief symbolic moment of art performance — essentially, Keith Emerson was just a regular classical piano player with an exuberant temper and a desire to be loved and revered by the public assembled at the Isle of Wight, rather than the Royal Albert Hall (though he wouldn't mind both). But Jerry Lee Lewis really did the impossible — his achievement on the piano is pretty much the equivalent of, say, a videogamer beating *Mario Brothers* by plugging his guitar into the console and thus inventing a whole new style of playing.

I don't think Jerry himself, or Sam Phillips, for that matter, were fully aware of the importance of this achievement when they agreed to put out 'Crazy Arms' as the artist's debut single for Sun Records at the end of 1956. 'Crazy Arms' was a hit country song for Ray Price, which Jerry Lee energized only slightly, giving it a bit of a New Orleanian flavor and playing the piano parts Fats Domino-style: you can, in fact, mentally try to exchange Jerry's vocals for Fats' and the song could have easily and unnoticeably slipped into one of Fats' late Fifties' albums. Actually, the vocals, rather than the piano, *are* its main point of attraction — already at this point, even on a relatively slow song like this Jerry Lee Lewis emerges as The Man Who Just Couldn't Sit Still, running his voice up and down, up and down, up and down the chromatic stairs, in stark and sharp contrast to the «dignified» country stars; even the late Hank Williams would have probably recommended the young rebel to gulp down a couple of tranquilizers before trying another take.

On the other hand, the B-side to the single, a Jerry Lee original called 'End Of The Road' which, unfortunately, did not

make it onto the LP, already gives us the earliest sample of the man's rock'n'roll style. There's the boogie-woogie intro, exactly the same as on 'Whole Lotta Shakin', just a teeny bit slower; there are the maniacal repetitive «bashed» chords and crazy gratuitous glissandos; there are the legendary rapid-stuttering drumming patterns of Jimmy Van Eaton and the sharp, precise electric guitar licks of Roland Janes; there are the rebellious, «self-sacrificial», anthemic lyrics ("I don't care if I never get home") with the requisite sexual innuendos ("you can jump in my Ford and give it some gas"). In short, there is everything except for that one extra kick, one decisive punch, one lit match to send that rocket into space.

We all know the exact moment when that match was flicked — on April 15, 1957, when 'Whole Lot Of Shakin' Going On' was issued as Jerry Lee's second single. Or, perhaps, more correctly, it was on July 28, 1957, when the man [performed the song live](#) on *The Steve Allen Show* in front of millions of viewers, pulling all the stops and pretty much out-acting Elvis himself — while having to play (slay?) a piano at the same time. I don't know about you, but whenever I watch this performance I keep thinking to myself that this level of *positive* rock'n'roll exuberance had never been achieved prior to 1957 — and would never ever be outdone in the future; matched, perhaps, by certain type of performers, but never outdone, because it is pretty much unimaginable *how* it could be outdone. (*Negative* rock'n'roll exuberance, one that is all about venting frustration and anger, would, of course, peak to higher and higher levels, but that is a different kind of story — Jerry Lee Lewis would never be about negative vibes, not even in his own moments of career downfall and depression).

Perhaps the most striking thing about 'Shakin' and its ilk, whether you take the slightly more restrained studio recordings or the ferocious, literally let-your-hair-down (as well as up, sideways, and in all other imaginable directions) performances in concert, is the unique balance Jerry Lee had in between the «wildman» antics and staying in total musical control. He was never an avantgarde artist, never a public-defying noisemaker: even at his loudest and craziest, he still had to be singing and playing, staying in touch with his rhythm section and not cuasing his loyal fan following to stutter and slip with their accompanying dance moves. He took the «chaos» element of early rock'n'roll as far as it could go, on the technical and the artistic level, in 1957, but he never once let that chaos out of his control — that performance on the Steve Allen show is like a tight battle between Man and Demon, where you are supposed to let Demon take as much hold of Man as possible, then, at the last minute, get «the bull by the horn» and ride it to victory. Many people would take their cues from the Killer in their careers, but few would follow them to perfection — and none would be actually able to perfect them.

Alas, this last statement just as well could be applied to Jerry Lee himself. While he showed himself able to maintain the same level of commitment, madness, and precision all the way up to at least the early 1960s (after which the madness

became slightly reduced in energy, though commitment and precision stayed sharp well unto the 21st century), the basic formula more or less remained the same. Sitting through 12 or 20 classic Jerry Lee Lewis hits in a row is no chore — in fact, you barely notice the passage of time while they are playing — but it is safe to say that you should not expect a great deal of diversity. Having fallen upon the gold mine of fast and furious rock'n'roll, Lewis did not abandon his first love — mid-tempo country music — but in between these two «extremes» in his repertoire, you'll hardly find anything else of interest.

It is interesting and amusing how Jerry's first, self-titled, LP, released by Sun somewhere at the end of 1958, treats this dichotomy: the first side and the first few tracks on the second side strictly follow a «fast rock'n'roll song — slow country song» sequencing, but by the time we get to the ninth track, Fate seems to just have had enough of that, and the last four songs are all rockers, including a hyper-exicted reinterpretation of 'When The Saints Go Marching In'. Along the way, he shows us what he *really* thinks of Elvis going soft and poppy, turning 'Don't Be Cruel' into a loud and bragging declaration ("Elvis only plays rockabilly, I play actual rock'n'roll", he used to boast); shows us just how much of a rambunctious rocker Hank Williams could have really been with a sped-up and energized 'Jambalaya'; and comes up with maybe not the most meaningful, but inarguably the wildest school dance anthem of the decade ('High School Confidential', which was used as the title track to a bad, but fun, movie of the same name and pretty much did the same thing for schoolday aesthetics in 1958 as the Ramones' 'Rock'n'Roll High School' would do twenty years later).

Next to the fast, flame-breathing rock'n'rollers on the record the slow country songs could never even hope to be equally impressive — but one should give them their due nevertheless. One is justified to ask the question of whether at this time in his life, the young and boisterous Jerry Lee Lewis could be «sincere» and emotionally convincing to sing something like 'Goodnight Irene', considering how jumping in the river and drowning must have been the last thing on the artist's to-do list at the time (as compared to but a few years later). But while it is probably true that if you want to better appreciate the man as a country performer, you'd do better by peeking at least five-six years into the future, it is also true that his nervous, restless persona of 'Crazy Arms' is equally well reflected in those other slow songs, and that at least makes him stand out from the typical country performer of his time. He lacks the essential country talent of making himself feel miserable, like Hank Williams, instead going for a sneery "you'll be sorry you left me" attitude most of the time, which suits him and his piano playing style much better — and that's good enough for me.

Jerry's biggest hit, 'Great Balls Of Fire', for some reason did not make it onto his first LP (it would resurface on his second), and neither did his third and last Top 10 entry, 'Breathless', which largely followed the stop-and-start formula of 'Great

Balls Of Fire'; soon after that, the Myra marriage scandal hit the world and 'High School Confidential' only managed to climb up to #21 before Lewis' career went down in flames. It is most curious, however, how Sun Records failed to, as they now say, «read the room» when already after the scandal had hit in the UK, they put out the super-confident, arch-cheeky 'Lewis Boogie' ("you take my boogie, it keeps you in the groove") as a single in June '58, with the B-side filled up not by an actual song, but by a (fairly innovative, I might say) collage of interview questions and «soundbite answers» from various Jerry Lee Lewis recordings, called 'The Return Of Jerry Lee' — there is even this one bit where the question goes "how did you manage to get your marriage license with your wife being so young?" and the answer is "I told a little lie...", just to give an indication of how strongly they were pulling the moralistic tiger by his whiskers.

Anyway, from a relatively objective point of view **Jerry Lee Lewis**, as an LP, is perfectly representative of Jerry Lee Lewis as a phenomenal rock'n'roll artist in his prime, but just as obviously flawed if you are looking for the best of the best — at the very least, if you actually want to own it in your CD or digital collection, be sure to grab one of the editions loaded with bonus tracks, such as 'Whole Lot Of Shakin' Going On' and 'End Of The Road'; better still, just hunt for one of Jerry Lee's many detailed compilations and boxsets that would include the record in its entirety along with everything else. Truth is, Jerry Lee in his prime *was* pretty repetitive, but he is one of the very, very few repetitive Fifties' artists in his prime whom I simply would not dare to penalize or castigate for being repetitive — even lesser known, third-rate rockers like 'Put Me Down' get my goat, just because the top spirit of 1957 is so firmly ensconced in them.



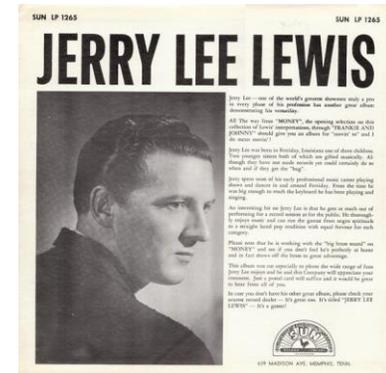


JERRY LEE'S GREATEST!

Album released:
December 1961

V A L U E
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More info:
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Tracks: 1) Money; 2) As Long As I Live; 3) Hillbilly Music (Country Music Is Here To Stay); 4) Frankie And Johnny; 5) Home; 6) Hello, Hello Baby; 7) Let's Talk About Us; 8) What'd I Say; 9) Breakup; 10) Great Balls Of Fire; 11) Cold Cold Heart; 12) Hello Josephine.

REVIEW

Looking back at Sam Phillips' and Sun Records' policies and strategies on the LP market, the general conclusion can only be that they had none. Whether it be Elvis, Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison, or Jerry Lee Lewis, LPs for all those artists seem to have been coming out on a lucky dice roll, packed with material chosen at random, released on random dates, targeted at random audiences, and bringing in random amounts of money — it's hard even to label this production as «cash grabs» because few, if any, of them ever grabbed any serious cash. This is not even a criticism, because it's actually fun to know there once was a time when record executives could do stuff without a perfectly calculated, water-proof business plan. But it does drive home the point that I am basically just using these Sun LPs as pretexts to talk about certain periods in certain artists' careers, rather than to judge them on their own as self-sufficient artist portraits, which they were never planned to be.



Take this one, for instance. Its title follows the same pattern as Johnny Cash's **Greatest!** (with the same provocative exclamation mark), released a year earlier — and, just like that album, its actual intersection with the artist's «greatest» stuff is minimal. Instead, it's a rag-tag collection of A- and B-sides selected out of a four-year period, stretching all the way back to 'Great Balls Of Fire' (November 1957) and ending (or, technically, starting with) Jerry's latest single, a cover of

'Money (That's What I Want)' (December 1961). Along the way, it makes plenty of strange choices, omits a whole lot of first-rate cuts, and arrives at a time when nobody was in the mood to buy a rock'n'roll album, let alone a Jerry Lee Lewis rock'n'roll album.

Indeed, Sam Phillips would later explain that he held off for so long releasing Jerry Lee Lewis LPs because, in the wake of the Myra scandal, he feared that the public would take such a gesture the wrong way — but then how come Jerry Lee still had a steady, unbroken sequence of singles on Sun through all those years, with a new one appearing every few months? Because of the scandal, as well as the general wane of interest in rock'n'roll, none of those records sold, which was a pretty good excuse not to let Jerry Lee waste any of the label's money on an LP. But then... why release an LP after all, at a time when the artist had all but vanished off the public radar, and market it under such a cocky title? I fail to see any cold logic or common sense in all those decisions. And it kinda makes me happy.

The real bad retro-news about it is that **Jerry Lee's Greatest!** not only makes little sense in terms of its selection of material, but also cannot be relied upon as a reasonable guide through those «dark years» when Jerry Lee was frantically fighting to save rock'n'roll while rock'n'roll just wanted to die a quiet death and had no intention to be saved. The only way to make it more reliable is to combine its tracks with lots of others, only available in retrospect on various compilations such as **Original Golden Hits Vols. 1 & 2**, or even larger comprehensive boxsets; in this way, I have produced my own version of the album, expanding its 12 tracks with at least another 12-14 for an hour-long experience that leads me from the triumphant days of 1957-1958 to the bleak existence of 1959-1961, illustrating Jerry Lee's rapid slide from the top of the world into an age of brooding darkness and despair...

...but wait, who am I kidding? The reality is that if you arrange all those tracks in chronological order, all the way from the early glory of 'Great Balls Of Fire' to the later energy of 'Money' and 'As Long As I Live', there is absolutely no way you might get a hint of the terrible career catastrophe that the man went through in the middle of that road — at least, certainly not upon your initial listen. By all accounts, Jerry Lee was not as stupid as not to understand (eventually, at least) how much he'd hurt his own career, and not as emotionally rigid as not to give in to fits of anger, nervous breakdowns, and alcoholic depression (some of which, alas, he would occasionally take out on poor Myra). But whatever sad shit was taking place in his own home, he would never, *ever* take it with him into the studio. Even when he sang those miserable Hank Williams tunes like 'Cold, Cold Heart', they still sounded like him trying to crawl into the mind and soul of somebody else, rather than giving in to his own feelings. These days, we're more than accustomed to artists bringing even the pettiest of

their personal troubles to that artistic table — we *expect* them to do so, and praise them for sharing their personal demons with us — even when the actual sharing almost borders on pornographic indecency. Yet perhaps there is also something to be said for the art of «manning up», too? Not letting yourself be weighed down by personal troubles in the line of professional duty and all?

Truth be told — and one thing to be admired in the overall-not-too-admirable life of The Killer — I just think that, for all of his cockiness and narcissism and enjoyment of fortune and fame, there was one thing in his life that Jerry Lee Lewis had always honestly and sincerely loved more than himself, and no, sadly, this was not Myra Gale Brown, but rather rock and roll music. If there is one thing these recordings show us, it is that no other artist of the Fifties has «natural born rocker» imprinted in shinier typeface over each single cell of his body than Jerry Lee Lewis. The ultimate proof for this would be delivered several years later with the release of the **Live At The Star-Club** album — but even these, comparatively more tame and polished studio recordings show that, almost alone out of all his former brethren, Jerry Lee was committed to keeping the spirit of 1957 burning for as long as possible. "*As long as I live / Baby, I'm gonna give you all of my heart / We can't be apart / As long as I live*" — that's not about his woman, it's about his music.

First, though, since this album does delve into the last months of Jerry Lee's «pre-scandal» career, let us remind ourselves, like [Eric Idle once reminded the world's Communist leaders](#), of the greatness of his biggest hit in both the US (#2 — yes, that's right, The Killer never had a #1 hit on the charts in his own country) and the UK (#1 — yes, that's right, The Killer only reached the top of the UK charts once, which was still one more than his US score). It is always debatable about which of the two songs — 'Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On' or 'Great Balls Of Fire' — is the more «quintessential» Jerry Lee Lewis anthem, and some might very well go along with 'Shakin' because (a) it came first and (b) more importantly, both in live performance and even in the original studio recording it gives Jerry more opportunities to stretch out and fully pour out his trickster personality onto the audience.

But for all its greatness, 'Whole Lotta Shakin' wasn't *quite* «rock'n'roll»; if you think about it, it's actually based on a rather old-fashioned jump blues pattern, and it is very easy to imagine somebody like Big Joe Turner wailing it out to Pete Johnson's merry boogie-woogie chords sometime around, say, 1947 or so. ([The original version](#), might I remind you, was recorded by Big Maybelle in 1955 as a fairly standard R&B number). 'Great Balls Of Fire', on the other hand, written by Otis Blackwell specially for Jerry, is the very epitome of rock'n'roll — a short and fast two-minute explosion with great use of the stop-and-start dynamics, a phenomenal one-chord solo break, and, of course, the word "balls" in the title. Be my guest and

try to find a direct equivalent for something like *this* back in 1947 — a futile task if there ever was one.

Emotionally and psychologically, 'Great Balls Of Fire' is also just as different from the typical fast rock'n'roll song by, say, Elvis — all the way from 'Baby Let's Play House' to 'I Got Stung', Elvis in his classic years projected a dominant, overwhelming image, even when singing about falling under somebody else's spell. It was probably a matter of the voice first and foremost, but also of the tightness and perfect self-control of his backing band — Elvis clearly showed you who was in command, really working hard for that King title rather than just receiving it out of the blue. But 'Great Balls Of Fire' is different: it is a genuine portrait of a human being intoxicated, driven so crazy by irresistible desire that it makes him totally lose his marbles. If true rock'n'roll is really about giving in to the beast inside, then 'Great Balls Of Fire' is twice, if not ten times, the rock'n'roll any of Elvis' classic rock'n'roll numbers are supposed to be. Could Elvis ever deliver the line "*goodness gracious, great balls of fire!*" with all the giddiness of an 8-year old kid dropped for the first time in his life in the middle of an exquisite candy store? Well, Jerry Lee can (or at least *could* back in 1957 — a lifetime of subsequent performances has certainly squeezed much of that primordial excitement out of later versions).

If there was *one* subtle change in Jerry's best material pre-mid-1958 and post-mid-1958, though, it is precisely that I feel less of that giddy, wide-eyed, out-of-control excitement in his singing and playing — though it might take quite a while tuning in to this barely perceptible shift in amplitude. Live, as the recordings show, he could still channel that hormone-driven teenager for quite a while; but in the studio, there's a faint dividing line between his immediate follow-ups to 'Great Balls Of Fire' ('Breathless'; 'High School Confidential'; 'Lewis Boogie', the last single to be recorded while Jerry Lee was still — or, at least, thought himself to still be — in full control of his career and status) and the singles that came after the crash. *Very* faint line; I might, in fact, be imagining it. But then again, how could there not be *any* line? There *had* to be a line.

The first of these singles, quite tellingly, was 'Breakup', written by the little-known songwriter Charlie Rich who would later go on to become a big country star — in the form of an Elvis pop-rock song, even borrowing the piano opening to 'Teddy Bear' and all — but, most importantly, becoming Jerry Lee's first rocking single with a bitter, rather than giddy, edge (he'd already released Hank Williams' 'You Win Again' as a single, but that does not count because it was a slow ballad, not a dance-oriented number). Jerry sings it with a deeper, tighter, more controlled vocal tone, without any serious ad-libbing or breaking into helium fits of head voice, and although his piano playing, especially on the instrumental break, is still as frantic as always, with all the expected glissandos and stuff, it lacks some of his trademark «craziness». It's not exactly a case of running out of energy; it's a case of staying more in control of himself and taking things just a notch more seriously

than before — just one little notch, but it really makes quite a bit of difference. Not that it made a lot of difference to potential record buyers, though, most of whom probably would not dare approach a new Jerry Lee Lewis record at the time regardless of whether he'd burned down the piano while making it or left it fully intact.

Even *more* tellingly, Jerry's next single, released in December 1958 (not included on **Greatest!**), was a cover of Moon Mullican's 'I'll Sail My Ship Alone' from 1950: "*We've been sweethearts for so long / But now you say we're through / The love we shared is now a memory / I had built a ship of dreams / And planned them all for you / And now, I guess, what is to be will be... I'll sail my ship alone / Though all the sails you've torn / And when it starts to sink / Then I'll blame you.*" Not surprisingly, the best version of the song I've ever heard belongs to [Hank Williams](#), too, but Jerry's recording of it in his usual danceable mid-tempo is far more symbolic than entertaining — there is no reason to doubt that the song was chosen intentionally, as an angry letter to his former fans and a proud, stubborn refusal to be held accountable.

Curiously, though, the B-sides to both singles were slow and aching country ballads that almost seem to suggest the exact opposite: 'I'll Make It All Up To You' and 'It Hurt Me So', basically the same — and not particularly interesting — song about humbling oneself by asking pardon from the one you've wronged. The problem with Jerry Lee singing such slow, self-prostrating material is that he has a hard time making himself look vulnerable with all the necessary conviction; more intriguing is this odd mood swing between defiant and penitent attitudes — which, I imagine, is pretty much how things must have been going in real life for The Killer.

By 1959, things seem to have settled down into a sort of quiet routine: with the press tired of dragging Jerry's name through the mud and public attention drawn to other juicy scandals, the records once again became less personal and more fun-oriented — the first of these was 'Lovin' Up A Storm' backed with 'Big Blon' Baby' (March 1959), two straightforward and simple pop-rock numbers that kinda suggested The Killer was going back to his nonchalant, fun-lovin' ways. 'Big Blon' Baby', in particular, was quite symbolic — a cover of Ronnie Self's recording from the previous year which was, in itself, an attempt to marry the humorous vibe of The Coasters to the stop-and-start excitement of 'Great Balls Of Fire'. With the chorus of "*jumpin' Jehosaphat, big blon' baby!*" being essentially copied from "*goodness gracious, great balls of fire!*", it was perfectly natural for The Killer to re-appropriate what had been appropriated from himself in the first place — and, in turn, it is useful to compare the two songs in order to assess the irreversible changes in mood that had taken place between 1957 and 1959. It's still a fine recording, but a bit slower, a bit more disciplined, and seriously less wild when it comes to showing that piano who's the boss in the house.

Still, don't get me wrong: the mood / energy shift between 'Great Balls Of Fire' and 'Big Blon' Baby' is nothing like the same shift, for instance, between classic Gene Vincent records from 1956–1957 and his own «diet» version starting in 1958. Neither Jerry nor his backing band at Sun sound like they have forgotten what true rock'n'roll is all about; there is no conscious attempt here to dumb down or water down the sound for an audience whose demand has allegedly shifted from hardcore to softcore. The only new unwritten directive, so it seems, is to «keep one's head firmly attached to one's shoulders while recording» — as if Jerry had recognized that all his troubles came from letting himself get out of control, and that the key to salvation and redemption lay in firmly taking conscious charge of each single move. Maybe this helped him survive; but it also makes it more difficult to quickly get drunk on *this* strain of Jerry Lee's music as opposed to his earliest singles, whose effect is usually immediate and works more efficiently than 180 proof moonshine.

One recording from September 1959 that *should* have, by all means, made it to **Greatest!** but also did not, was Jerry's cover of Chuck Berry's 'Little Queenie' — I have always been every bit as partial to it as to Chuck's own version, and now that I am looking at things from a chronological perspective, it seems clearer as to why: 'Little Queenie' introduces yet another slight variation on the Killer Attack, this time, a cold-and-cool one, with the piano deliberately kept under tight, quiet control and the vocal fully shifted from exuberant hormonal teen roar to a Jamesbondian predatorial calm-and-collected assessing sneer. Unusually, the musically dominant instrument on the recording is Roland Janes' lead guitar, every bit as tight and cool as Jerry's vocals, more disciplined than Chuck himself but still managing to kick ass. In a way, this 'Little Queenie' exudes *more* actual «danger» than all of Jerry's early hits put together — it gives us a brainier, more calculating and cautious woman-hunter than 'Great Balls Of Fire' ever did. It's a good thing, really (for all the dotting parents at least), that by the time Jerry had developed that instinct, he'd already turned «chart poison»!

Now perhaps Phillips' decision to finally allow his disgraced artist to have another LP out on the market was influenced by the fact that 1961 was a teeny bit kinder to Jerry Lee than the previous two years. In March, Jerry's instincts served him right when he chose to cover Ray Charles 'What'd I Say' — clearly a tune right up his alley, with a very compatible piano style and also perfectly suited for this new emerging style of «Jerry Lee Lewis, served ice-cold». He cautiously leaves out all the overtly suggestive orgasmic bits of the song, concentrating instead on the tightness of the groove and the piano hooks, basically turning the whole thing into a sequel to 'Little Queenie' — the Killer stalking his prey on the dance floor — and making it irresistible enough to make it as high as #30 on the charts (and #10 in the UK), a major success for the artist after two and a half years of virtual chart starvation. Yet there is something disturbingly symbolic about how de-sexualized this version is compared to Ray's original, where foreplay started already with the first suggestive electric piano runs — mean-

while, Jerry Lee Lewis, supposed to be the ladies' man *par excellence*, makes an almost family-friendly version of the tune. I do not think, however, that this was a choice forced on the artist — actually, if you think of Jerry's career on the whole, *sex* is not really the main thing that sells it. In fact, I have a hunch that Jerry always loved his piano much more than he loved his women. There might, you know, actually be much more in common between him and his cousin Jimmy Swaggart than we might ever suspect before thinking deep and hard over the matter.

So, naturally, 'What'd I Say' ended up on the album, as well as two more singles that followed — 'As Long As I Live', a poorly masked rewrite of 'By The Light Of The Silvery Moon' by Dorsey Burnette that, however, features Jerry in a brighter, lighter mood, more reminiscent of the earliest recordings; and 'Money', Jerry's first cover of a Motown song and one of his first recordings on which he is backed with a brass section — completely unnecessary, I think, but at least the saxophones do not drown out the piano or the vocals. He doesn't do anything particularly interesting with the song, though; it took John Lennon to really bring out its «demonic» aspect — Jerry sings it like regular entertainment. (And, of course, the Nashville Teens-backed live version on the **Star-Club** album annihilates the studio original).

You also get to hear Jerry interpret Fats Domino with 'Hello Josephine', again, in the «predatorial-cool Jerry» style; in the hands of Fats, this was a well-meaning random encounter with an old flame — in Jerry's version, with that devilish laughter thrown in, it becomes more of a «so fate has thrown you back into my hands, my dear» thing, which does not worry me nearly as much as the prevailing of saxes over piano this time. And, of course, there's always some extra space left for another Hank Williams tune ('Cold, Cold Heart'). I am rather ambivalent about Jerry Lee covering Hank — on one hand, there is no doubt that a lot of his internalized pain could find honest release through singing Williams' depressed masterpieces; on the other, Jerry Lee Lewis' voice is pretty much incapable of expressing vulnerability and suffering, and all those Hank covers never do proper justice to the originals.

In general, both the album and the surrounding non-LP singles show that by the early 1960s, Jerry Lee was caught in what might be called a «respectable rut»: like all of his former rock'n'roll brethren, he was trapped in a limited formula without any ideas of how (or why) to expand beyond it, but unlike some of those brethren, he had enough taste, energy, and common sense left to keep that formula on perma-burn — at about, say, 75% or so intensity of his original explosive force. Unless you're absolutely living on the same wavelength as The Killer, you will probably get bored rather quickly even halfway through this short record — but you gotta admire the tenacity of the guy, willing to let his sound «mature» a little but not even beginning to think of betraying the rock'n'roll vibe. No orchestrated ballads; no kiddie pop; no reimagining

oneself as a potentially suave, family-friendly teen idol. Not that such a rebranding would have helped the man's career — his reputation had been undermined way too heavily to be saved by putting on a Paul Anka face. But it was still the age of rebranding, and any artist fiercely sticking to the *you-could-stand-me-up-at-the-gates-of-Hell-but-I-won't-back-down* principle in an age of total rebranding deserves at least a bit of admiration.

Even so, **Jerry Lee's Greatest!** turned out to be his second *and* last LP for Sun Records during Jerry's entire tenure with the label — disgruntled and dissatisfied with what he saw as Sam Phillips' total indifference to his career, he'd finally leave Sun in 1963 for a new future with the Smash label. Honestly, I am not sure that the anger was fully justified. Phillips *did* continue to keep Jerry under his wing for five years after the man had turned into a living commercial bomb, and he *did* allow him a reasonable level of artistic freedom — as for the lack of promotion, well, who can be blamed for not wanting to throw away money on a deal that is almost inevitably bound to lose? The fact remains that, as a viable rock'n'roll artist in the studio, Jerry Lee Lewis only continues to exist for as long as he records for Sun; his rock'n'roll output for Smash would be completely dismissable. Say what you will about Sam, but Sun Records still knew how to make a decent rock'n'roll cut in 1961-62, when almost everybody else couldn't really give a damn.

To conclude this with an actual recommendation, I have to remind the reader that my reviews of Jerry's two LPs for Sun only touch upon maybe 15-20% of the entire wealth of material he'd recorded for Sun from 1956 to 1963; in addition to all the A- and B-sides that did not make it to either, there was also a boatload of unreleased recordings that would later randomly end up on assorted compilations or just lay there gathering dust. A good way to satisfy your craving of classic Jerry Lee is the 4-CD compilation **Sun Essentials**, issued by Charly Records in 2002; it collects almost everything of note (minus the preserved demos and alternate takes) from those classic years, separating each disc into a «side» of rock'n'roll / R&B and a «side» of country, although, unfortunately, the track running order is not chronological. It's much, much more stuff than you need to get a representative portrayal of all (both?) sides of Jerry Lee Lewis, the Artist, but all of it is consistently listenable and entertaining, especially if taken in reasonable doses at a time. (For the completist, there's also an alternative 11-CD boxset **The Ultimate Sun Years**, with all the alternate takes thrown in, but that's just overkill).

