

# JOHNNY BURNETTE



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1955-1964</i>	<i>Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i><a href="#">Honey Hush</a> (1956)</i>

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*Only Solitaire*

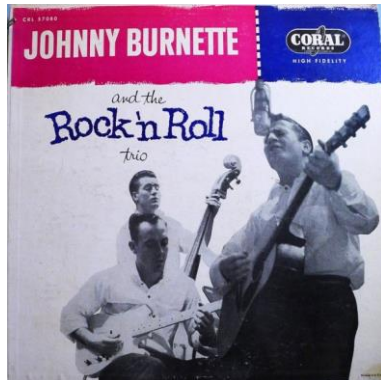
Artist: *Johnny Burnette*

Years: *1956-1960*

George Starostin's Reviews

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# JOHNNY BURNETTE AND THE ROCK'N'ROLL TRIO

Album released:

Dec. 1956

V A L U E  
2 4 4 4 4

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) **Honey Hush**; 2) Lonesome Train (On A Lonesome Track); 3) Sweet Love On My Mind; 4) Rock Billy Boogie; 5) Lonesome Tears In My Eyes; 6) All By Myself; 7) The Train Kept A-Rollin'; 8) I Just Found Out; 9) Your Baby Blue Eyes; 10) Chains Of Love; 11) I Love You So; 12) Drinking Wine, Spo-Dee-O-Dee, Drinking Wine; 13\*) Tear It Up; 14\*) You're Undecided; 15\*) Oh Baby Babe; 16\*) Midnight Train.

## REVIEW

It is hardly a coincidence that both the Burnette brothers' and their guitar player Paul Burlison's primary claim to fame before music was boxing: all three had been Golden Gloves champions (in fact, this is where the brothers met Paul in the first place), and there are obvious and frequent glimpses of pure boxing aggression in much of their music — a perfect sublimational solution as far as I am concerned, though it also brings a whole new subtext to the "holding a baseball bat" line of 'Honey Hush', a line they did not invent but did appropriate with delightful gusto.



You do have to focus fairly hard on the sonic properties of the trio's first single, 'Tear It Up', to note what it is which makes it stand out from the general pool of rockabilly copy-pastes recorded in the mid-Fifties. Although the song is formally an original composition, its melody is more or less completely taken from 'Shake, Rattle & Roll', and the arrangement is standard rockabilly fare *à la* early Sun-era Elvis. But while other performers would be content to simply imitate that sound, the Rock'n'Roll Trio chose to push it one or two steps further — to evolve it in a freer, wilder direction. To that end, Johnny Burnette delivers his lines in an overdriven, ecstatic tone which throws restraint out of the window, alternating them with series of football-fan-level yelps and howls; and Burlison pushes the treble levels on his guitar as high as it could be deemed prudent to go, creating a sound as self-indulgent as possible, one that demands your full attention to itself much like a cat

that has not been fed for several hours. The only other guitar-based rockabilly band at the time who could boast the same desire to jump out of its britches in order to grab you were Gene Vincent and his Blue Caps — but the Rock'n'Roll Trio's big difference was that they preferred a cleaner, more in-your-face sound without Gene's echo-laden production style, which offers you a choice: the slightly «voodoo-like» effect from Gene or the completely down-to-earth, schoolyard-hooligan approach of the Burnette brothers. Both are equally valid from my point of view.

That said, 'Tear It Up' and its early sequels on their own are not enough to consolidate and validate the legend that is the Rock'n'Roll Trio (in fact, a few of them are mildly embarrassing, such as the fast acoustic Western ballad 'Midnight Train', on which Johnny goes way overboard with a faux Southwestern accent and plaintive intonations — this stuff should probably be best left to Johnny Cash). The legend was not properly born, in fact, until the fateful day when, according to his own words, Burlison accidentally dropped his amplifier, dislodged a power tube, and came up with the famous distorted sound of 'The Train Kept A-Rollin' and 'Honey Hush' — two of the most, if not *the* most, period, dangerous-sounding songs of 1956, next to which even the wildest numbers ever recorded by Elvis sound like showtunes in comparison.

The truly delightful thing about these songs is that even today, after every technological breakthrough in sound production has been achieved, there is nothing in the recorded repertoire that sounds quite like that sound — it is truly a bit of a singularity in space and time. Distortion would soon be taken to new, barely imaginable heights, yet the distortion of 'Train' and 'Honey Hush' is in a class of its own. It is a quiet, reserved type of slightly grumbly distortion, a sort of grouchy echo that accompanies each note of the riffage — and since the riffage itself, in a jazzy fashion, keeps on varying and exploring the scale within reasonable limits, this creates the effect of some intimidating, if not openly aggressive, predator menacingly sniffing out every inch of your living space. Actually, while 'Train' is clearly the more famous song out of these two (largely because its legend would later be expanded by the Yardbirds and Aerosmith), 'Honey Hush' seems more wholesome to me because of how perfectly its aggressive instrumental tone matches the (allegedly misogynistic, but oh well) anger of the lyrics and the vocals — that is a whole frickin' wall of pissed-off attitude right here, one that was so impressive on fiery teenagers around the globe that forty years later, even Paul McCartney himself would decide to revive the attitude on his album of oldie covers (he failed, of course).

It has actually been claimed that it was not, in fact, Burlison, but rather session legend Grady Martin who played on many of the Rock'n'Roll Trio's recordings — including these two. Regardless of whether this is true or not (if it is, Grady must obviously be given his due), the fact remains that the sound here is unique, and neither Burlison nor Martin ever explored it

further, perhaps due to being unable (or unwilling) to reproduce the exact conditions in which it had been generated. But this does not mean that the rest of the album is worthless — even if a track like, say, ‘Lonesome Train (On A Lonesome Track)’ is kind of like a twin brother to ‘Honey Hush’, but without the cool distortion, it still carries a swaggy, menacing groove and features Johnny at his most... let’s say, psychopathic. Traditional country-western singers tended to get all melancholic and moody when boarding those lonesome trains; Johnny Burnette sounds as if he’d been shoved head first into the luggage compartment inside a straightjacket.

Likewise, when they choose to cover Fats Domino’s ‘All By Myself’, a song that, typically for Fats, used to embody all the cheerful independence of the New Orleanian spirit, Johnny and the boys leave virtually nothing of the original spirit, replacing it with the same rebellious attitude — like it or not, they make this stuff theirs and nobody else’s. Same with the old R&B classic ‘Drinkin’ Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee’ from the late 1940s — what used to be a friendly advertising for alcohol on the part of Sticks McGhee and his boys turns into a musical impersonation of a frenzied barroom fight. Not *too* aggressive, mind you — not to the point of sounding hateful or anything, rather just reminding you that those days of Golden Gloves are not as far away as one might have thought.

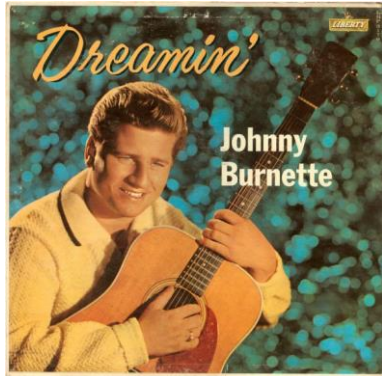
Of course, the Rock’n’Roll Trio were just as capable of tenderness and affection — it would, after all, otherwise be completely unclear how Johnny Burnette would go from rock’n’roll rebel to sweet teen idol in just a few years. It is in the sphere of tenderness and affection, in fact, that their greatest songwriting achievement lies — the slightly Latin-influenced dance ballad ‘Lonesome Tears In My Eyes’, catchy, seductive, and brawny at the same time enough to attract the attention of the Beatles, whose live BBC performance of the tune is now well remembered. However, it is also clear that Johnny emerges as the dominant force on just about every one of their slow blues and ballads, and that this soulful force is not as unique or even downright interesting as the band’s collective rockabilly power. I mean, when you play Big Joe Turner’s and the Burnettes’ ‘Honey Hush’ back to back, you can clearly see the progress; when you do the same with ‘Chains Of Love’, it is far less obvious if the brothers actually bring anything fresh to the table. Johnny may have tried to be versatile, for sure, but essentially there is one thing he truly excels at, and that is screeching his head off like there was no tomorrow. A calm and sentimental Johnny, one who has just taken his shots and been temporarily removed from the straightjacket, is simply not much use to society, if you know what I mean.

Still, despite a certain proportion of mediocrity, **The Rock’n’Roll Trio** is indispensable listening for all those who are interested in the high peaks of 1950s rock’n’roll — and all those who simply like themselves a bit of timeless rock’n’roll. The

album is now most frequently available in a well-packaged CD edition called **The Complete Coral Rock'n'Roll Trio Recordings**, collecting all the A- and B-side singles, unreleased tracks and alternate takes from the sessions — a bit of overkill, especially due to some novelty doo-wop numbers like ‘Butterfingers’, but at least giving the impression that all the proper dues have finally been paid to this extremely short-lived, but unique and influential combo. Had the band found proper commercial success, things might have turned out differently; as it is, their brand of rock'n'roll somehow fell through the cracks of the public conscience — and maybe, back at the time, it was easier for a professional musician to truly appreciate that uncommon distorted sound than for the general public. On the other hand, it is useless to feel sad that the Rock'n'Roll Trio's prime days lasted less than a year — after all, even the best rockers from that decade, who would go on to have lengthy extended careers, usually made their own legend with but a small handful of genius singles and, at best, one or two great LPs. In that respect, the Rock'n'Roll Trio's worthwhile musical legacy is only a tad skimpier than that of Little Richard, Chuck Berry, or Jerry Lee Lewis. And it's all here, on one disc!





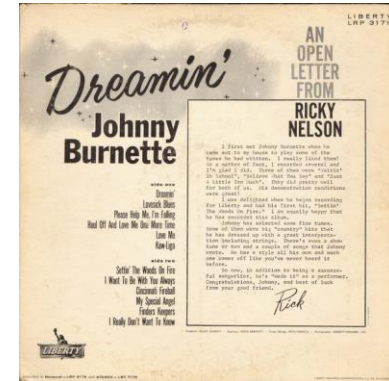


# DREAMIN'

Album released:  
1960

V A L U E  
2 2 3 2 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Dreamin'; 2) Lovesick Blues; 3) Please Help Me, I'm Falling; 4) Haul Off And Love Me One More Time; 5) Love Me; 6) Kaw-Liga; 7) Settin' The Woods On Fire; 8) I Want To Be With You Always; 9) **Cincinnati Fireball**; 10) My Special Angel; 11) Finders Keepers; 12) I Really Don't Want To Know.

## REVIEW

Poor, poor Johnny Burnette. Most of the original rock'n'rollers, cursed with the «Fifties' Curse», had it one of two possible ways — they either underwent a «spiritual death» (or, at least, some sort of debasement) by doing dumb things and embarrassing themselves socially, or by watering down their sound and selling out commercially; or suffered the *real* thing, like Buddy Holly or Eddie Cochran. Johnny Burnette, however, had it worse than most, going through *both* of these phases — first, he traded in his rock'n'roll rebelliousness for a teen-pop sound that completely destroyed his artistic reputation; and *then* he died in 1964, going out the live-fast-die-young way like Buddy and Eddie, rather than fading away like he was supposed to. No doubts about it — some bumbling executive in the Heavenly Chancellery must have messed up a couple of folders, because no unfortunate soul deserves *two* executions in a row.



And from the point of view of eternity, that first execution was far more brutal than the final one: Johnny Burnette's solo career has pretty much been condemned to total oblivion, other than a vague memory of J. B. as the creepy guy who first sang 'You're Sixteen' — although let us be fair about it: the Beatles only sang "*well, she was just seventeen*" because a trisyllabic numeral fit the rhythm of the song better than a bisyllabic one — and even that bad karma has since largely been

reshouldered on Ringo, who would update 'You're Sixteen' for the 1970s and somehow make it sound much sleazier than the original. Honestly, though, Johnny Burnette didn't mean anything offensive. He was a decent chap, and while his solo career *was* somewhat embarrassing, and is unquestionably a big letdown after the monumental singles with the Rock'n'Roll Trio, it has its share of enjoyable moments that deserve to be revisited.

The slide into banality was, as it often happens, gradual, and, as it happens even more often, more a result of Johnny Burnette yielding to peer pressure than his own innate conformity and/or ruthlessness. After the ultimate disintegration of the Trio, with brother Dorsey heading into his own direction, Johnny, as the former frontman of the band and, thus, its most recognizable member, easily landed a contract with Freedom Records, a short-lived subsidiary of the larger Liberty label that only lasted for about a year. (Apparently, *liberty* is a concept more appealing to the population of the United States than *freedom*, whatever that is supposed to imply!).

The three singles that Johnny managed to release in that short period did not chart and certainly were no masterpieces, but they did retain a certain noble integrity from the good old days. 'Kiss Me' was a fun little pop-rocker that somehow managed to mesh Elvis' Sun-era rockabilly style with Buddy Holly's melodicy and vocal harmonies — derivative for sure, but a nice type of synthesis all the same. Musically more impressive was the B-side, '[I'm Restless](#)', driven by a magnificent, tightly ringing out arpeggiated guitar riff (there is no certainty about who plays it, but some sources suggest Chips Moman) that feels like a cross between country-western, surf-rock, and the early, 'Telstar'-era, «space rock» (Joe Meek would be proud), while Johnny's lead vocals are shadowed by not one, but *two* layers or deep-set vocal harmonies, a male doo-wop chorus and a faintly heard female operatic backup. The combination of all these elements is quite unique for its time and sure makes me wish the song were better appreciated in its time — had people sat up and noticed, this might have pushed Johnny into a different direction.

The second single was not too bad, either: for '[Me And The Bear](#)', Johnny invented a humorous tale about the disadvantages of the hunting trade, mixing vaudeville with Biblical imagery, and, if you listen closely, actually set it to the riff of 'Train Kept A-Rollin', played here in a colorfully ringing manner rather than the grumbly distorted one of the original but still retaining its magical effect on your body — it is pretty damn hard to sit still while it's on. The B-side, 'Gumbo', then took the listener away from the Northern forests and into the Delta for some shrimp fishing and rhythms that are, perhaps, a little too Latinized for the environments of New Orleans, but still fun, if not nearly as rocking as that bear song.

Finally, for the third single Johnny settled on a ballad: 'I'll Never Love Again' places the emphasis strictly on the crooning



vocals, and although the busy guitar strum and swirling angelic backup vocals are not «tasteless» by any means, the song is clearly aimed at swooning romantic ladies rather than teen rebels. However, the B-side, 'Sweet Baby Doll', still returned us back to the sweet and seductive realm of rock'n'roll, with another funny tale of an unfortunate womanizer chased away by an angry parent — nothing innovative here by any means, but Johnny got plenty of ironic energy to deliver the message, and the rhythm section, rocking guitars, and boogie-woogie piano are nothin' to shake a stick at.

And then? And then Freedom Records folded, with Johnny's contract going over to its parent label — Liberty Records. This was supposed to be good news for Mr. Burnette, since the bigger label had more promotional capacity. However, in order to properly promote Johnny, it was necessary to update his image to more modern standards, and Liberty Records sure knew a thing or two about modern standards. After all, this was the label that had first signed Henry Mancini; made its first really big money with 'The Chipmunk Song'; and, by 1960, was enjoying another wave of major recognition with the incredible career start of Bobby Vee. In almost everything they did, Liberty's motto seems to have been: "*Everything is always better with more strings!*" This is why, for instance, the only original LP by Eddie Cochran released in his lifetime was a collection of sentimental ballads, oversaturated with easy-listening violins.

At least in Eddie's case, Liberty still had the good sense to allow him to put out his rock'n'roll singles the way he liked — raw and rocking. No such luck awaited Johnny Burnette, who joined the label at the end of 1959 and was immediately paired with the aspiring young producer Tommy 'Snuff' Garrett, four years younger than Johnny and, apparently, forty-four years the savvier. Garrett would go on to have a long and productive career, becoming somewhat of a legend in his own rights, but, honestly, «easy listening» would forever remain his specialty, with the likes of Nancy Sinatra and Cher being his typical clients in future decades. For now, though, his task was simple: he had to «gentrify» the wild rock'n'roll sound of Johnny Burnette, which had already become relatively polished during his year at Freedom, but there was still plenty of room left to improve. So, what really makes the difference between *freedom* and *liberty*? «Liberty» = «Freedom» + «Strings»!

The formula was first tested in November '59, with the release of a cover of Hank Williams' 'Settin' The Woods On Fire'. Opening with a mighty string swoosh and goofy poppy vocal harmonies, the song is literally an embodiment of what might be called «early symph-rock»: the strings fully and completely replace both rhythm and lead guitars, leaving Burnette's agitated vocals as the tune's only authentic trace of a rock'n'roll soul. Ironically, some electric guitar is visible only on the B-side, a cover of Bill Monroe's 'Kentucky Waltz', which does not even pretend to be in any way related to rock'n'roll; much to Johnny's honor, though, he still gives an impressive performance, bringing a bit of that old rockabilly hiccup along to make

it all sound a little more earthy and humorous than rigorously serious and pathetic. In any case, though, the first attempt at catching the public eye with this brand of easy-going lite-rock failed: the single flopped just like all of its three Freedom predecessors.

In an even hickier attempt to turn the tide, Garrett and Burnette's next recording would be 'Patrick Henry', a total novelty pop tune written by a couple novelty pop songwriters and adorned with the trappings of sounding like an «authentic» Revolutionary War marching band musical number. The chorus may have been intended as a subtle pun on the name of Johnny's record label — I'm sure all the executives had a blast chanting "*give me liberty or give me death!*" in those young and innocent days of March 1960 — but ultimately, the tune is so corny that its semi-patriotic, semi-vaudevillian spirit reeks of quiet desperation. At least the B-side, 'Don't Do It', a country-cum-rockabilly number with reverberating guitars and an Elvis-style vocal performance that Johnny wrote himself, still saved a bit of reputation. But it was only a B-side, and the single did not chart anyway. Apparently, Patrick Henry was not all that much on the agenda of American record buyers in the days of Bobby Vee and Frankie Avalon.

And then it finally happened. 'Dreamin'', an unabashed pop song combining a twist-like danceable rhythm with a little bit of sentimental yearning stuck somewhere halfway in between the Everly Brothers and Elvis — and, of course, soaked heavily in Garrett's swooping strings — rose all the way to #11 on the charts, and, surprisingly, became even more of a hit in the UK, where it reached #5. In its defense, I have to say that the song is indeed catchy, that Johnny's vocal delivery is not too over the top or devoid of true feeling, and that the arrangement of the «dialog» between the voice and the strings shows signs of creativity and professionalism. Also, I'd certainly have it over 'Patrick Henry' any time of day or night. But it still fails to pass what I call the «adequacy test»: sentimentality, pathos, and production gloss here clearly override the song's melodic value, making it impossible to «give in» to the magic of the music.

My money, instead, is on the B-side — 'Cincinnati Fireball' is a hilarious and totally enjoyable rocker from the songbook of Aaron Schroeder, written in the humorous tradition of people like Larry Williams and Huey 'Piano' Smith. It's bluesy, it has some stinging electric lead playing, it returns Johnny to a proper predatorial mood, and even the obligatory strings sort of recede into the background. It's kinda strange that almost nobody of merit ever covered the song: I'd imagine it would have been perfect for the likes of «occasional revivalists» from The Flamin' Groovies to Cheap Trick, but perhaps Schroeder, whose fame chiefly lies in writing songs for Elvis in the early Sixties, had a bad reputation with these guys.

In any case, the sudden and serious success of 'Dreamin' finally put Burnette back on his feet, and this was, of course, the

perfect occasion to follow it up with an entire LP. The record would include 'Dreamin' itself (and, predictably, be named after the song), along with 'Cincinnati Fireball' and 'Setting The Woods On Fire' — thankfully, no 'Patrick Henry' — and the rest of it would be somewhat evenly split between 'Dreamin'-style ballads and 'Woods'-style «symph-pop-rock» versions of classic tunes, including two more Hank Williams covers. Making a rough generalization, **Dreamin'** is really a *country* album, and should perhaps be approached as such to avoid any additional disappointment — the country melodies may be a little sped up, a little obscured with incessant string flourishes, a bit roughened up by Johnny's rockabilly-addicted voice, but essentially it's just good old Nashville all over the place.

And it's not too bad: 'Lovesick Blues', for instance, is one of the most interesting vocal reinterpretations of Hank's classic I have come across — Burnette replaces Williams' creaky worn-and-torn intonations with the fuss-and-agitation of a young rockabilly guy, and, strange enough, it works. Maybe it's just on a technical level — Johnny seems to have no trouble whatsoever hopping all across the rather complicated range and yodeling bits of the song — but in any case, he manages to be charismatic enough to push the tune into a slightly different plane from Hank's. (The same, unfortunately, cannot be said of 'Kaw-Liga', the sad and corny story of a cigar store Indian that was never one of Hank's best songs in the first place and with which there ain't not too much remaining for Johnny to do). Another decent «upgrade» is for Wayne Raney's 'Haul Off And Love Me One More Time', an old country hit from 1949 sped up to an insane tempo and featuring Johnny go from falsetto to guttural roar in less than two minutes. Not all that jaw-dropping, but a reasonable transformation — unlike, say, his formally commendable, but ultimately pointless exactly because of its by-the-bookishness, Elvis impression ('Love Me').

Overall, the album clearly follows a filler formula, but the formula is not nearly as horrendous as it could be for any aspiring «teen idol» of the early 1960s. Burnette's heart is still clearly wedged in the rip-it-up plane of being, as much as he is being held back by the choice of song material, the «polite» approach to musical performance, and Garrett's omnipresent strings that, per Liberty Records' ideology, wre on their way to reclaim territory that was only temporarily occupied by those uncultured barbarians with their noisy electric guitars. In some strangely perverted way, this combination of a rock'n'roll heart with «easy listening» elements has a sad charm of its own — like watching some downcast ancient Greek hero tragically trapped for eternity in some unescapable situation, while still trying to make the best out of it for himself.

