

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>Honey Hush (1956)</i>

Only Solitaire

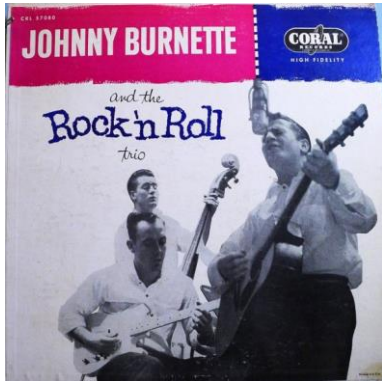
Artist: *Johnny Burnette*

Years: *1956-1961*

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.

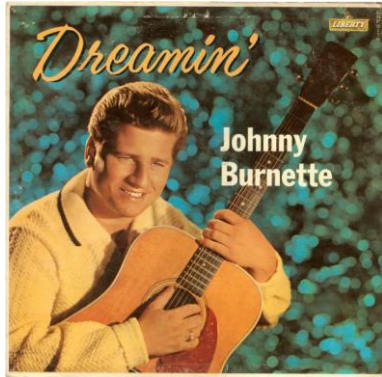
Likewise, when they choose to cover Fats Domino’s ‘All By Myself’, a song that, typically for Fats, used to embody all the cheerful independence of the New Orleanian spirit, Johnny and the boys leave virtually nothing of the original spirit, replacing it with the same rebellious attitude — like it or 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!



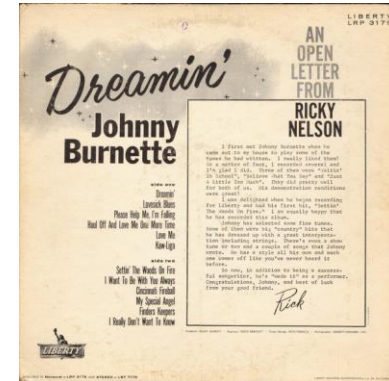


DREAMIN'

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, were on their way to reclaim territory which had only temporarily been 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.





JOHNNY BURNETTE

Album released:

1961

V A L U E
2 2 3 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) **You're Sixteen**; 2) Crying In The Chapel; 3) Dream Lover; 4) Oh Lonesome Me; 5) I Beg Your Pardon; 6) I Love My Baby; 7) Dreamin'; 8) It's Only Make Believe; 9) Singing The Blues; 10) You're So Fine; 11) I Go Down To The River; 12) **Let's Think About Living**.

REVIEW

Way before Karl Martin Sandberg, better known as 'Mad Max' Martin, turned a certain cuddly «Mouseketeer» into the world's most controversial sex symbol, there were the brothers Robert B. Sherman and Richard M. Sherman, two entrepreneurial descendants of Tin Pan Alley veteran Al Sherman, who helped the *original* cuddly Mouseketeer, Annette Funicello, break into the Billboard Top 10 with '[Tall Paul](#)' in 1959 — the first «rock'n'roll» song by a female artist, according to Wikipedia, to reach that level of success (I was all set to gloat about how they are wrong because Brenda Lee's 'Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree' came out in 1958, but then I remembered that it did not actually chart until the re-release for the 1960 Christmas season, so I guess we have to thank Annette for that, too). Of course, *in spirit* 'Tall Paul' is about as much «rock'n'roll» as 'Baby One More Time', but *in form* it was a fairly passable imitation — actually, that moderately wild sax break in the middle could fool you into conjuring Little Richard for a couple dozen seconds — and it put the Sherman Brothers up both on the Disney market ('Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious'!) and on the general pop market, which was where they happened to meet Johnny Burnette, and dirty history was born.

If you go to YouTube and punch in 'You're Sixteen', the first links you are going to receive — with *millions* of views, as opposed to Johnny's measly hundred thousand — are for the Ringo Starr hit version from 1973. There are two forgivable reasons for this — one, because this is Ringo Starr, after all, and two, because this is 1973 rather than 1960 and 1973 remains predictably cooler and trendier on the nostalgic radar of today than 1960. There may also be one scandalous reason

for this: when Ringo recorded his cover in 1973, pretty much *everybody* understood the line "*you're sixteen, you're beautiful, and you're mine*" the only way it could be understood — a sleazy middle-aged (Ringo was pushing 33, but that *was* considered pretty old in those days) rocker's infatuation with fresh underage pussy, sort of a common thing in the original era of jet plane-riding rock superstars that, er, uhm, has not aged all *that* well in itself, so to speak. (Fun fact: Carrie Fisher, who starred in Ringo's TV special in 1978, singing the song with him, actually *was* 16 in 1973, though she certainly was not on the poor guy's radar at the moment).

However, when Johnny Burnette released the song back in October 1960, he was just 26 — and, more importantly than his biological age, was working specifically for the teen-oriented section of the musical market. Likewise, although the Sherman Brothers themselves were in their mid-thirties, *they* — just as they did with 'Tall Paul' — were writing specifically with the teen market in mind. The original 'You're Sixteen' is, therefore, merely a love serenade between two young people, no more and no less than that. And it has to be taken in the context of 'Tall Paul', *not* in that of 'Bang A Gong', 'Whole Lotta Love', and whatever Gary Glitter was doing in his alleged prime.

In this proper context, 'You're Sixteen' is bubbly, catchy, toe-tappy, and hardly any worse than any such typical Elvis Presley pop song from the same time period. Both the lyrics and the music, driven as usual by Snuff Garrett's string arrangements, are far more giddily romantic than expressly sexual — you really couldn't prove, based on the song, that its heroes have already ventured anywhere beyond first base — and the *veni-vidi-vici* triple punch of the main lyrical hook, want it or not, is pretty much *the* perfect summation of one's feeling after scoring a date with the prettiest girl in class, right? It's simply the kind of emotional language that went extinct a long time ago, but there was nothing unhealthy about it back in 1960 (well, maybe apart from the music business' idea that middle-aged Tin Pan Alley — make that *Teen* Pan Alley, heh — songwriters would be more adept at mastering teenage emotional language than teenagers themselves; but then again, Johnny Burnette was not really that much of a songwriter himself, so we can't really put the blame on Liberty Records).

With the song riding high up the charts, providing Johnny with an even bigger break than 'Dreamin', it was decided that this smash success had to be quickly backed up with another LP. The bulk of the self-titled **Johnny Burnette** consists of fresh recordings from a five-day Hollywood recording session in late November / early December of 1960, during which Johnny was backed by the same musicians as on 'You're Sixteen' — most notably including Buddy Holly & The Crickets' original drummer Jerry Allison, as well as some lesser known members of «The Wrecking Crew». Actually, Allison's presence is not as unimportant as one might think — if you somehow manage to block Garrett's orchestrations out of your

ears for a while, the rhythmic textures on many of the songs here have a very distinct Buddy Holly-like tinge to them, and overall, the album delivers quite a passable pop-rock vibe; nothing like a return to the glory days of the Rock'n'Roll Trio, but not particularly offensive to the rock'n'roller's taste, either.

The main problem is the lack of interesting material: other than 'You're Sixteen', there are very few songs here that have not been done earlier by somebody else, and, as a rule, done better and/or with a sharper sense of purpose. The obvious exception is the original B-side to 'You're Sixteen', a mid-tempo country ballad called 'I Beg Your Pardon' and credited to Burnette himself; as I said, the lad wasn't much of a songwriter, so this sounds like a cross between Hank Williams and Carl Perkins, without the vocal attraction of the former or the imaginative guitar playing of the latter. Drop the strings, replace Johnny with Elvis, and you could have a little something there... otherwise, just move on.

Another exception from the rule is 'I Love My Baby', a song that, I believe, was specially written for Johnny by Barry De Vorzon and Ted Ellis — the authors of 'Dreamin' — but the problem is that, believe it or not, it is merely a transparent *re-write* of 'You're Sixteen', very slightly amending the melody of the verse and totally leaving in place the melody of the bridge section. In order, perhaps, to introduce a teeny weeny bit more of disparity, Johnny sings the tune with a little extra nasal twang and general braggadocio (his 'Cincinnati Fireball' voice), but in the end "*I love my baby and my baby loves me*" just ended up so less seductive than "*you're sixteen, you're beautiful, and you're mine*". (If you want a song in which that line *does* sound seductive, do a timewind to 1964 for Elvis' 'C'mon Everybody' in *Viva Las Vegas!*).

Finally, there is '(I Go) Down To The River', credited to Ben Weisman, one of Elvis' chief songwriters — and again, it *does* sound like Elvis, being probably the most soulful and even slightly gospel-influenced (as if you could not tell from the title alone) track on the record, but the very inevitability of the comparison already reflects poorly on Johnny; this is a song that *should* have been delivered straight to Elvis' breadbasket.

As for pop standards like 'Crying In The Chapel', 'It's Only Make Believe', 'Dream Lover', 'Singing The Blues', they are done passably, but are really only worthy of your attention if you have a soft spot for Garrett's light orchestral arrangements — admittedly, they are somewhat idiosyncratic for their era, which is hardly something I could say about Johnny's voice or manner of singing. Dion could make Bobby Darin's 'Dream Lover' ring anew with his subtle microtones; Johnny Burnette, once again, just makes it sound like Elvis *without* all the subtle microtones.

One thing I'm grateful to this record, though, is introducing me — because of my total inexperience with country music — to Bob Luman's ['Let's Think About Living'](#), a hilariously ironic tune written by Boudleaux Bryant (of the Everly Brothers'

fame) that satirizes artistic obsession with negative emotions and the subject of death ("In every other song that I heard lately / Some fellow gets shot / And his baby and his best friend both died with him / As likely as not / In half of the other songs some cat's cryin' / Or ready to die / We lost most all of our happy people and I'm a-wonderin' why"). Again, Johnny does exactly nothing interesting with the song that Bob has not done already, but I would have never heard Luman's original if not for Johnny, so there's that. Well, maybe, in a way, the song felt close to Johnny's heart because most of his major successes were, after all, very much songs about livin', lovin', a-hoppin' and a-boppin', but (a) he's had his fair share of tear-jerking ballads, too, and (b) he still does not look like the 100% epitome of a happy playboy to me. I mean, less than two months after completing those sessions, they hospitalized the poor guy with a ruptured appendix — how's that for thinking about a-hoppin' and a-boppin'?

Anyway, the only worthwhile song off this album that is not readily available on various best-of compilations is '(I Go) Down To The River', and you have not missed much if you never heard it. 'You're Sixteen' shall always remain a classic — an innocent classic or an immoral classic, depending on the degree of our stuck-upishness but completely disregarding our individual opinions — and 'Let's Think About Living' is good satire. Everything else is for those who enjoy roleplaying as early Sixties' teenagers and covering their walls with posters of *American Graffiti*. (Which, come to think of it, is probably not the worst way to go; but I am still very much on the fence over whether I actually prefer Annette Funicello to Britney Spears or if it's the other way — probably one of those hormonal things).





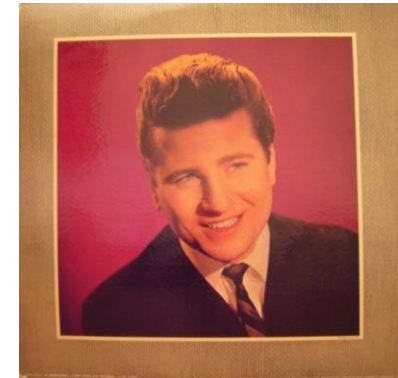
JOHNNY BURNETTE SINGS

Album released:

1961

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Tracks: 1) Little Boy Sad; 2) Mona Lisa; 3) I'm Still Dreamin'; 4) In The Chapel In The Moonlight; 5) Red Sails In The Sunset; 6) Big Big World; 7) Ballad Of The One Eyed Jacks; 8) The Treasure Of Love; 9) The Fool; 10) Blue Blue Morning; 11) Memories Are Made Of This; 12) Pledge Of Love.

REVIEW

It is probably safe to say that people did not turn 'Dreamin' and 'You're Sixteen' into big hits because of Johnny Burnette or Snuff Garrett — they just happened to be catchy songs with sharp romantic hooks. Johnny had a *good* singing voice to put to them, but not an *outstanding* one; also, it was a voice that probably worked best when set to «hiccupy rockabilly rasp» mode, and that mode was no longer in fashion by 1960. As a romantic singer, he had neither the sweep-you-off-your-feet power of Elvis nor the seep-under-your-skin melancholic subtlety of Ricky Nelson. What this meant for his own career was simple enough: Johnny Burnette + strong original songwriting = potential success; Johnny Burnette + lazy songwriting or cover versions = boring failure.



Country songwriter Wayne Walker's 'Little Boy Sad', written for Johnny and recorded by him on the very first day of the same session that yielded most of **Johnny Burnette**, showed that well enough when, released as a single, it failed to break into the Top 10. It was a relatively energetic country-rocker with a distinctly rocking high-pitched electric guitar riff (quite pleasantly flowing together with Garrett's light strings), but it did absolutely nothing melodically that a couple dozen Carl Perkins or Elvis songs had not already done, and the world had relatively little use for it (in fact, I strongly suppose that

most people bought it on the strength of 'You're Sixteen' and ended up disappointed). It fared a little better in the UK than in the US, though, and even ended up being covered six years later... by Herman's Hermits. Uhm, well, that's life. ([The Hermits cover](#) is much more interesting, by the way — turned into a crunchy sugary slice of mid-Sixties' bubblegum-hard-rock at its, well, bubbliest).

Things took an even odder turn from there. In February 1961, Johnny returned to the studio to record 'Big Big World', an even more generic number that completely left the «rock» out of «country-rock» and replaced it with loud backing vocals and obnoxious strings (here they really fill up all the space, as opposed to Garrett). It was rootsy enough to avoid any straightforward accusations of plunging head first into «teen-idolism», but so toothless and hookless that it absolutely did not matter anyway. The B-side was at least on the weird novelty level for Johnny: 'Ballad Of The One-Eyed Jacks' was, indeed, a rambling story-based country ballad *à la* Marty Robbins, apparently written as a «musical companion» to Marlon Brando's only directorial experience, the 1961 Western movie *One-Eyed Jacks*. While the movie did go on to become a bit of a cult classic, the song (which, as far as I know, was written *about* the movie rather than part of the actual soundtrack) never really went anywhere. It tries to conjure up a little of that Western mystique, but Johnny's voice has nothing mystical about it and the arrangement is as formulaic in every little detail as they come in the field of Western soundtracks. Well... the only good thing I can say about it is that at least Johnny Burnette is a little more credible as a cowboy than he would have been as a surfer.

Even though 'Big Big World' fared even worse than 'Little Boy Sad', Johnny was given the green light for yet another short LP — comprised of these two singles, a few outtakes from the November 1960 sessions and the results of one new extensive session in March 1961 that yielded seven new tracks, all of which are here. These are mostly covers of relative oldies, with one notable, but unnecessary exception: 'I'm Still Dreamin', as one might have easily guessed, is a shadow-sequel to 'Dreamin', written by the same people and working as a «happy ending» to the original: "*I'm still dreaming / But not like before / Though I'm dreaming / I'm lonely no more*". Perhaps it would have made sense if the original had a properly tragic atmosphere and the sequel would be the melodramatic resolution. As it is, the original was already syrupy enough for the sequel to send you into the spasms of sugar shock.

Slightly more interesting is the decision to turn Nat King Cole's 'Mona Lisa' (after a deceptive slow intro) into a rollickin' pop-rocker that is melodically closer to 'Jambalaya' than Tin Pan Alley — even if, ultimately, this has more shock value than common sense (and even the shock value would be appreciated by only a handful of people). Invading the territory of Fats

Domino ('Red Sails In The Sunset') and Clyde McPhatter ('The Treasure Of Love') does not work too good, either, because Johnny shares neither Fats' quirky sense of New Orleanian humor nor the pristine angelic beauty of Clyde's vocal cords. And then there's a Dean Martin cover ('In The Chapel In The Moonlight') which is all about trying to modernize the romantic Broadway ballad of the 1950s, but who really gives a damn?

One song that makes me a little more happy than the rest is 'The Fool', a song that was first released by Sanford Clark in 1956 and, if I am not mistaken, first dragged out of the country circuit and exposed to a wider market by Johnny on this LP (subsequently covered by Johnny Kidd & The Pirates in 1966, by Elvis in 1971, and even by Paul McCartney for his *Unplugged* performance in the early 1990s). 'The Fool' is notable for basically being the very first song submitted to the world by the genius of Lee Hazlewood — in this case, «genius» consisting of taking the riff of 'Smokestack Lightning' and adapting it to a country tale of self-deprecating depression, showing how pretty much the exact same melody, with but a slight tonal shift, can be used to express both extroverted menace and introverted sarcastic melancholy. Unfortunately, Johnny's version does not expand the song's potential beyond whatever Sanford Clark [had already done with it](#). But it's a likely bet that this is the version all those UK kids heard first, so there's that.

In any case, Johnny's second LP from 1961 does not really show him sliding significantly deeper into the precipice of cheese and irrelevance than the levels of his first one. 'Little Boy Sad' and 'Mona Lisa' show that he still vaguely remembered how to rock, while oddities like 'Ballad Of The One Eyed Jacks' show that he was certainly not happy about the idea of being branded as one of the «teen idols». But he still hadn't learned to write his own material, nor could he afford collaboration with professional songwriters who could write songs specifically for his needs — creatively, he was more or less on the level of Gene Vincent, whose own slide into mediocrity followed similar lines (except that Vincent was never lucky enough to find a gold nugget like 'Dreamin' or 'You're Sixteen' in that time period).

