

LARRY WILLIAMS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1957-1978</i>	<i>Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i><u>Bad Boy</u> (1958)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Larry Williams*

Years: *1957-1959*

George Starostin's Reviews

Page contents:

- [Here's Larry Williams](#) (1959)



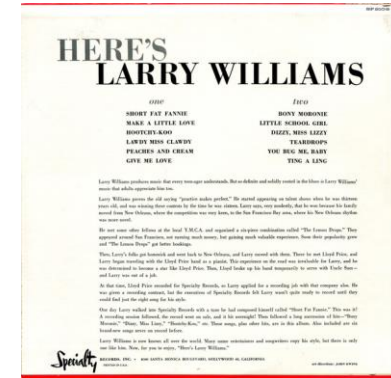
HERE'S LARRY WILLIAMS

Album released:

1959

V A L U E
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More info:



Tracks: 1) **Short Fat Fannie**; 2) Make A Little Love; 3) Hootchy-Koo; 4) Lawdy Miss Clawdy; 5) Peaches And Cream; 6) Give Me Love; 7) **Bonny Moronie**; 8) Little School Girl; 9) **Dizzy, Miss Lizzy**; 10) Teardrops; 11) You Bug Me, Baby; 12) Ting A Ling.

REVIEW

To this day, I cannot fully figure out quite where exactly to put Larry Williams — making a definitive judgement on the guy is almost as hard as trying to find any digital evidence of whether he ever existed in the first place (all that seems to come up is the same set of two or three stock photos from his Specialty years, without a single shred of video footage). Objectively, it would look like his brief rise to fame in 1957 was due to the pure luck of having been the right man in the right place at the right time: first, as a chauffeur to Lloyd Price, who introduced him to the music business, and second, as a buddy of Little Richard, whose shadow behind the little guy's back likely convinced Specialty Records that he would be the perfect — or, at least, an *acceptable* — substitute for their chief star after he'd traded rock'n'roll for Jesus. Ridiculous, I know, but it *was* the sweet innocent time of the late Fifties, when the beast of rock'n'roll had not yet been anatomically dissected multiple times over, and gambling on accidents was commonplace.

After the bubble predictably burst (but do give credit to Specialty Records for letting the guy release about *ten* singles in a row, none of which charted!), Larry Williams would probably have been completely wiped out of public knowledge, if not for Brian Epstein's obsession with collecting any sorts of records released overseas; some of these were Larry's, and, by another sheer stroke of luck, they happened to impress Brian's own golden boys (particularly John Lennon) so much that they would cover no fewer than three of them in their early years. This surprising reverence did not exactly immortalize Larry Williams on the same level as his buddy Little Richard, or Chuck Berry, or Carl Perkins, or any other early-rocker-of-

first-order-of-magnitude whom the Beatles covered, but it did graciously provide his name with a second chance. How many of us, I wonder, have asked ourselves the same question — "Hmm, I wonder who this 'Williams' guy is?" — upon glancing at the back sleeve of **Help!**? Probably more than would be willing to admit.

Even many more of us, I think, upon actually hearing and enjoying **Help!**, have said or thought something along the lines of "great record, but did they *really* have to include such lame, monotonous, antiquated rockers as 'Dizzy Miss Lizzie' when they were already so musically advanced at the time?" And in the overall scheme of things, how many people had finished their acquaintance with the Beatles catalog by saying, "hey, at least this did me some good by introducing me to the genius of Larry Williams!" And then, occasionally, you catch a glimpse of something, I dunno, like [Tom Jones struttin' his sweaty stuff](#) to the Vegas version of 'Bony Moronie', and the impression gets even worse — at least this guy used to write novelty songs for the giggles of mischievous black teenagers, and now they're used to stimulate the sex life of affluent middle-age white housewives... oh boy.

And yet it makes no sense to simply take up and leave this discussion at the shoulder-shrugging «whatever» stage, because we have not even asked ourselves the question — what *was* it, specifically, that attracted John Lennon to such a second-, if not third-tier, mediocrity as Larry Williams? With no fewer than three songs of his recorded in 1964-65, and one ('Bony Moronie') or two more ('Just Because', which was originally a hit for Larry's mentor Lloyd Price) following on his **Rock And Roll** album in 1975, it's almost as if there were some soulmate connection between the two. And there's also a funny correlation in that all the lead vocals on Little Richard's songs in Beatle times were handled by Paul ('Long Tall Sally', 'Kansas City', 'Ooh! My Soul'), whereas John took full responsibility for the Larry Williams ones — you could certainly argue that this was primarily just an issue of vocal range, but I'd say it was also one of mood and temperament.

The thing is, Little Richard at his best was all about total, unending, start-to-finish musical ecstasy: a song like 'Tutti Frutti' does not even need any actual build-up since it just keeps climaxing non-stop for two minutes. Despite the «devil music» moniker, there's way too much soul and gospel flavor in it — who cares about the, uhmm, «secularity» of the lyrics? But unlike Little Richard, a Pentecostal Georgian boy through and through, Larry Williams came from New Orleans, a city far more deeply rooted in earthly pleasures, and one where good-natured (and sometimes «bad»-natured) humor could regularly and remorselessly substitute for frenetic spirituality. Ultimately, Little Richard was a visionary choirboy, taking his lady straight up to heaven; Larry Williams was the little street urchin with a wicked glint in his eye, more likely to peep under the lady's skirt than anything else. Guess which one's Paul's and which one's John's.

It all starts as early as Larry's second single, 'Short Fat Fannie', released in May '57 (the first one, in a respectful gesture, was an almost note-for-note cover of his mentor Lloyd Price's 'Just Because'). With the title possibly influenced by Price's 'Lawdy Miss Clawdy' (which Larry also ended covering anyway), it was an upbeat, merry-whistlin', very New-Orleanian musical promenade whose main point was to namecheck as many contemporary rock'n'roll classics as possible, starting off, naturally, with Little Richard ("*tired of slippin' and slidin' with a long tall Sally...*"), who was still in the business at that time, and ending with references to blue suede shoes, Blueberry Hill, and even Jim Dandy (courtesy of LaVern Baker) — possibly rock music's first meta-collection of tropes, tags, and archetypes to prove that the young genre had already worked out its own mythology and its own sacred canon.

Little Richard himself would have probably never «stooped» down to this sort of level — but then, why should he, being the author of at least half of the songs referenced? Let Larry Williams, the unassuming piano player and part-time chauffeur from New Orleans, assume this jester-trickster function instead. Which he did, earning himself his first and biggest nationwide hit, though it is *extremely* hard for me to believe that it was so popular just because of all the song title references; more likely, it's that insanely catchy whistlin' melody in the intro that did it — once you heard that thing on the radio, you just couldn't hold back from finding the record. (Could this actually be the first prominent use of whistling in the field of rock'n'roll as such? almost every other example I can think of comes from later times).

Despite its immense popularity at the time, 'Short Fat Fannie' never quite reached the influence and shelf-life of its commercially less successful follow-up, 'Bony Moronie' (yes, the original title comes with an *o*, although some later releases as well as some of the cover artists gallantly try to use the spelling 'Maronie'). Melodically, they're almost the same song, but the latter has a crisply pronounced, instantly catchy sax riff *and* does not force you to memorize all those song titles. (It still has quite a few references, e.g. "rock'n'roll by the light of the silvery moon", etc., but this time they feel completely natural and will not lead you to suspect any meta-game going on if you are not already in the clear). Substantially, oh boy... it's as if somebody told Larry Williams, "Hey man, why did you have to go and write a song like 'Short Fat Fannie' and upset all of them overweight ladies?" and then Larry replied, "oh man, I see what you mean, now I just *have* to go and write something called 'Bony Moronie' to upset all of them *underweight* ladies and get the balance right!"

But as utterly silly as the song is (I mean, come on, "I got a girl named Bony Moronie / She's as skinny as a stick of macaroni" is just silly-funny), that chorus reference to "*makin' love underneath the appletree*" — somehow, in the context of this particular tune, it sounds even dirtier than Buddy Knox's "*come along, my party doll, and I'll make love to you*" earlier in

the year. Maybe even proto-Bon Scott level dirty, that sort of grinnin', bad-taste, schoolboy vulgarity here which is typically so annoying, irritating, and, well, vulgar on the actual school grounds but somehow, sometimes, miraculously transcends into a variety of high art on stage or in the recording studio. And now that I've mentioned Bon Scott, I somehow only just realized that the last verse goes "she's a real upsetter, she's a *real live wire*" — just amazing how that old subconscious works on you, isn't it?

That's the good news, though. The bad news is that Bad Boy Larry's winning formula was tremendously thin and limited; pretty much any deviation from it ended in mediocrity or embarrassment. Thus, the flip side of 'Short Fat Fannie' was 'High School Dance', an astonishingly generic — both musically *and* lyrically — piece of poorly-sung pablum; perhaps one might admire Larry's cheekiness in trying to directly invade the turf of The King himself, but bravery is sometimes bravery and at other times foolishness. Meanwhile, 'You Bug Me Baby', the B-side to 'Bony Moronie', shows that Larry has no idea what to do with the stop-and-start dynamics once he'd gotten the hang of it. It's a rare kind of song whose entire chorus consists of one line — "*you bug me baby*" — and it feels appended to the verse out of nowhere, like a fifth limb. Larry's best songs are driven by a solid combination of rock'n'roll energy and humor; songs like these have neither, and, unfortunately, on the whole they would turn out to be predominant in his catalog.

Still, for a while the formula kept working. Larry's next single, 'Dizzy, Miss Lizzy' (nobody puts that comma in any more, but you have to admit that syntactically, it makes a whole lot more sense in the song than the infamous 'Paint It, Black'!) — anyway, it's fairly clear when you listen to the original that the man just wanted to have his own 'Good Golly Miss Molly', but he couldn't handle so much speed and syncopation, and he couldn't write a bridge to save his life, so instead he put it all on René Hall's famous opening riff. Which was so good, he just told René to repeat it over and over again, incidentally creating one of the most controversial rock'n'roll hooks of all time. The Beatles loved it, and George Harrison would later fatten up and perfect each glistening note of it in the comfy tech environment of Abbey Road Studios; the Beatles' fans are always divided on whether the effect is hypnotic or brain-numbing, but at least they usually agree that there *is* an effect.

Most importantly, there is absolutely nothing to the song other than the riff — the song *is* the riff (even the vocals are crappy; in the Beatles version, at least John would make a rippin' vocal effort). How many rock'n'roll songs were «The Riff» before 1958? Maybe Dale Hawkins' 'Suzie-Q' would qualify, although one could argue that its impact came more from the overall rhythmic groove than the specific guitar pattern. It is somehow ironic, though, that it still took the Beatles to recognize and respectfully complete that minimalism — in *their* version, The Riff never ever goes away, staying with you

from the very first to the very last second; in the original, Hall takes breaks during the verses, leaving Larry to spill out his clichéd feelings for Miss Lizzy mainly to the sounds of his own piano and the brass section. Talk about that one time when the four boys from Liverpool were more Larry Williams than Larry Williams himself...

The B-side to 'Dizzy, Miss Lizzy' is almost as famous because the Beatles covered it just as well: 'Slow Down' is arguably the single best-written song in his catalog, with another instantaneously catchy guitar/piano riff and a surprisingly gritty and intense melodic core which honestly feels somewhat ahead of its time — I can't quite lay my finger on it, but its overall pulse in some ways reminds me of an early 1970s glam-rock vibe; strange that Marc Bolan never attempted a cover version. Again, the Beatles would tighten up all the loose joints, replace the antiquated sax solo with a modernized guitar lead, and take the screaming to a whole other level; the one thing they'd have to trade in for this is Larry's «Loser Larry» angle, where he comes across as a pitiable character (see, he's been courting this girl since school, and now she's dumping him for some other poor schmuck) — John, true to his own nature, would play up his psychopathic side here the same way he did with 'You Can't Do That' and 'Run For Your Life', which made the song much more dangerous-sounding, but also, obviously, much more prone to criticism and «discomfort» in an age that keeps increasing penalties, including retrospective ones, for «male aggression» (irrespective of its actual meaning and function) in art.

And yet again, in between this single and the release of Larry's first and last album for the Specialty label there are very few songs in his catalog amounting to anything higher than «just OK». With titles like 'Hootchy-Koo' and 'Peaches And Cream' he tried to go back to sounding as New Orleanian as possible, but 'Hootchy-Koo' lacks the charisma and smoothness of Fats Domino, and 'Peaches'... well, 'Peaches' is like the optimistic, good-timey counterpart to the relatively grim outlook of 'Slow Down' — guess which song has become the classic and which one the rarity. Larry had also taken to the soulful business, which never ever worked for him, recording ballads such as 'I Was A Fool' and 'Teardrops' that never stood the slightest of chances in a world which already had Jackie Wilson, Ben E. King, and Sam Cooke toiling on the same front.

So, with your permission, I'll largely dispense with all that mediocre stuff — unfortunately, filling out most of the space on **Here's Larry Williams** — and concentrate instead on his most significant single from 1959 which, although dated around February of that year, still did not end up on the LP for some reason. You are likely to know both sides: the flip one was 'She Said Yeah', another straightforward headbangin' rocker with defiantly primitive lyrics that ended up covered by both the Animals *and* the Stones — but my preference goes to the slightly more sophisticated A-side, which, in its Beatles version, has always been one of my favorite «early rock» tunes of all time; and, admittedly, although the Beatles perfected the

original as they always did, this time around they hardly even had a chance to throw in an actual melodic invention into the mix — pretty much everything is here already.

'Bad Boy' is, simply put, a song that I can't see *anybody* recording in 1958-59 other than a guy like Larry Williams. Had he been a thoroughly cheerful soul, like Chuck Berry, he would have never written it. Had he been a bigger star, with his material eagerly played on the radio and shown on TV, they would have never let him record it. But he was neither of those things, and 'Bad Boy', released already after a whole slew of commercial failures (ironically, sessionography data show that it was cut on August 14, 1958 together with 'Peaches And Cream', one of the guy's most optimistic tunes — for contrast?), is where the devil inside the guy — even if it is a devil with a flair for mischievous comedy rather than true terror from the bowels of Hell — is let loose for once. We'd already heard plenty about delinquent school bullies from the Coasters, but their 'Charlie Brown' most certainly is just a clown next to the guy who "*put thumbtacks on teacher's chair, put chewing gum in little girls' hair*", and eventually "*shoot the canary and fed it to the neighbor's cat*". Most importantly, all these terrible crimes are intricately linked to the protagonist's cultural deficiencies — "*just sits around the house and plays that rock'n'roll music all night*", and with a full mop of hair at that!

More importantly, the music fits the lyrics to a tee, and here, once again, René Hall, the hero of 'Dizzy, Miss Lizzy', rises to the occasion, providing the song with a series of menacing, stinging lead lines accompanying almost each of Larry's lines; midway through, Hall gets the beautiful idea to play the entire full solo in the bass register, giving himself a sort of proto-John Entwistle flair when he gets to that droning picking pattern in the stop-and-start section. Be it in the realm of proper punk or just dark comedy, that instrumental break is arguably *the* grimmest thing to come out of the rock'n'roll scene in 1959, proving once again that it is never recommended to underestimate a true New Orleanian: under that permanently friendly gaze and life-lovin' smile one might sometimes discern the darkest depths of the human soul. Maybe for just a brief moment, but it won't be too brief to let you ever forget about it.

The obvious, if morally questionable, reason why the song works so well both in the original version and as a Beatles cover is the soul link between Larry Williams and John Lennon — both guys really did love rock'n'roll with all their hearts, and both knew quite a bit about juvenile delinquency (nothing too serious, but neither was a paragon of conventional virtues, that's for sure). John's delivery would be even more ferocious because of the extra power of his voice (and the Beatles' version would justifiably do away with the annoying vaudeville "*he's a... BAAAD BOY!*" bass backing vocals), but Larry's is perhaps a bit more adequate in terms of finding the right balance between drama and comedy. In any case, nothing builds a

stronger, firmer, more perennial bridge of faith between New Orleans and Liverpool than that single immortal line — "now, Junior... *BEHAVE yourself!*"

Alas, in the end Junior did not manage to take his own advice, and soon after 'Bad Boy' failed to chart (because proper American kids were probably just as afraid of the song as their parents), was arrested for illegal possession of narcotics and guns — maybe it would have been a better idea for people to buy the Bad Boy's records instead of his weed... in any case, this was the last straw for Specialty, who used the pretext to finally get rid of Loser Larry before he was even sentenced (to three years, in 1961) and did not even repent after the world re-learned of Williams' existence in the Beatlemania era (the first properly available compilations of his backlog for the label did not really begin to come out until the CD age). As it turns out, despite arriving on the rock'n'roll scene as a latecomer, Larry was quick enough to exit from it in the same tidal wave of misfortune that struck everybody else — his lottery option being «arrest» next to all the alternate slots such as «dying in an aircrash», «getting drafted», «marrying your underage cousin», or «finding the Lord». Ultimately, I suppose a guy like Larry could go for almost any of those except probably the last one...

Returning briefly to the music, I can only reiterate that Larry Williams had his own mischievous, subtly iconoclastic attitude toward R&B and rock'n'roll, but was either too unfocused, too lazy, or too dim to manifest it *consistently*. For each of his unique, idiosyncratic creations — and by «each» I mean «songs that can be counted on one hand's fingers» — he would supply two or three boring novelty tunes or rip-offs that were of no use then and have not shown any miraculous signs of coming back to life over the years either. But those songs that *can* be counted — they need to be in the collection (and in the head) of anybody who does not believe that pop music began with the Beatles. For that matter, perhaps they need even *more* to be in the head of anybody who *does* believe that pop music began with the Beatles. Because... well, just listen to Larry Williams and I am sure you'll be able to make an equally strong argument for both of these points of view once you're done.

