

MARY WELLS



| <i>Recording years</i> | <i>Main genre</i> | <i>Music sample</i> |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| <i>1960-1990</i> | <i>Classic soul-pop</i> | <i><u>You Beat Me To The Punch (1962)</u></i> |

Only Solitaire

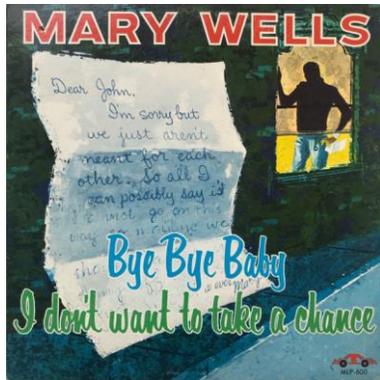
Artist: *Mary Wells*

Years: *1960-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

Page contents:

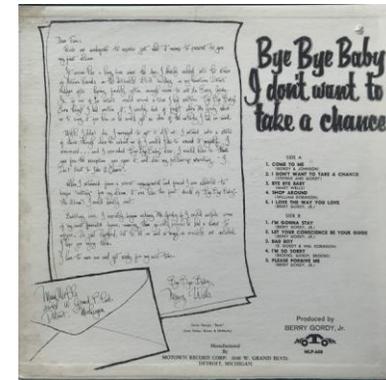
- [Bye Bye Baby / I Don't Want To Take A Chance](#) (1961)



BYE BYE BABY / I DON'T WANT TO TAKE A CHANCE

Album released: **V** **A** **L** **U** **E**
November 1961 **2** **4** **3** **2** **3**

More info:



Tracks: 1) Come To Me; 2) I Don't Want To Take A Chance; 3) **Bye, Bye Baby**; 4) Shop Around; 5) I Love The Way You Love; 6) I'm Gonna Stay; 7) Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide; 8) Bad Boy; 9) I'm So Sorry; 10) Please Forgive Me.

REVIEW

Of all the albums released on Tamla / Motown in 1961 — and there was not a great deal of them as of yet, with only Marvin Gaye, The Miracles, and The Marvelettes receiving the LP treatment — Mary Wells' debut is, without the slightest doubt, the most solid and consistently fun one. Admittedly, all through the Sixties Motown would steadily cling to a singles-based formula; LPs were essentially just extra gifts to loyal fans and did not have any importance until the emergence of Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye as the first (and last) generation of the label's singer-songwriter contingent. But that still does not mean that *all* of those LPs would be equally interchangeable: while their structure was typically the same — a mash-up of awesome singles with quickly assembled and tossed-off filler material — some were much more distinguished, with energetic and tasteful vibes running all the way through, while others, on the contrary, could display a lack of interest or some embarrassing gimmick to ruin the moment. Marvin Gaye wanted to be Nat King Cole; The Miracles wanted to be a Fifties' doo-wop act; The Marvelettes ruined half of their tracks with ugly Ondioline arrangements — and these were just the major problems. The only artist in 1961 to not ruin anything with anything was Mary Wells.



There was quite a bit in common, actually, that Mary Wells shared with Gladys Horton, one of the two leading ladies of The Marvelettes. Both were, naturally, from Michigan; both possessed similar, powerfully expressive and slightly gritty-raspy voices; most importantly (well, not really), both had uneven and aesthetically unappealing teeth — arguably *the* factor that sealed their fate in those early days and ultimately had them both retreat in the overwhelming shadow of Diana Ross. (You can see that Mary practically never smiles on those early album covers or in promotional photos — watch her sing in live performance and you'll immediately know why). Both, in a way and for a very short while, illustrated the «pre-Code» appeal of earliest Motown, a bit more rowdy and rough and R&B-ish than the perfectly polished lush pop formula the label would grow into over 1962–1963. But Mary had the bonus of being a solo act from the start, and thus, perhaps just a little bit more free in her artistic path than Gladys, tied up by her «group obligations» in addition to the expected subservience to Berry Gordy and the other bosses at Motown.

Interestingly, the history of Mary Wells at Motown, just like The Marvelettes, also starts out with a piece of music that she brought to the label herself, rather than received «from above»; the difference is that The Marvelettes were actually ordered to bring back something self-penned (resulting in 'Please Mr. Postman'), while Mary's first recording was almost accidental. Allegedly, the 17-year old graduate of Northwestern High had written 'Bye Bye Baby' with the arrogant intention of peddling the song to none other than Jackie Wilson himself — and using the influence of her Detroit neighbor Berry Gordy to get through to her idol. Gordy, however, was so impressed by her singing the song that he offered Mary to record it herself — which she did, landing Motown a fairly solid hit in the process (#8 on the R&B charts and #45 on the general charts) and becoming the young label's first bona fide solo female star.

The really cool thing about 'Bye Bye Baby' is that, while it is structured and packaged as a formulaic pop song, its main influence is, quite clearly, the hot'n'sweaty R&B scene: the very beginning — "*we-e-e-ell... you know you...*" — is literally a quotation from the Isley Brothers' 'Shout!', and some of the vocal moves Mary employs later on in the bridge are quite transparently borrowed from that very song as well. It is slower, for sure, and a bit more focused on telling its story than getting you to clap your hands and stomp your feet, but the groove is tight, sharp, and almost aggressive, and Mary throws out her lines with fire and passion on the level of a slightly quieted down Tina Turner (which is a good thing, because Tina's incessantly spasmodic mode can quickly become obnoxious). There's some luckily preserved poor quality footage of [Mary performing the song](#) at the Apollo in 1962, with the sped-up tempo forcing her to garble some of the vocals but conveniently emphasizing the rousing R&B properties of the tune — Motown at its edgiest!

Even the B-side deserves a quick mention: 'Please Forgive Me', a slow waltzing ballad credited to Berry Gordy, is very transparently sung by Mary in pure James Brown fashion — think 'You've Got The Power' or any other such slow ballads from his **Think!** period, with similarly suggestive drawled whoa-whoahs and a feel of deep primal yearning which most black performers at the time still felt compelled to suppress rather than encourage. With The Funk Brothers adding choppy electric guitar chords and sensual Ray Charles-style electric organ into the mix, the song took on plenty of soul power, far more than the average Miracles or Marvelettes tune at the time.

The follow-up to 'Bye Bye Baby' was 'I Don't Want To Take A Chance', rather aptly titled by Gordy and Mickey Stevenson, who decided not to take any more chances on Mary's songwriting — she would still be allowed to occasionally have a number or two of her own on LPs, but never on a single A-side. Consequently, the song is more on the pop side this time than R&B, which is predictably reflected in its gaining on the general charts, but losing a little on the R&B rankings; even so, it's a damn good one, with the guitars, pianos, and Mary's booming voice delivering an immediate triple punch — and a really clever, sparing and meaningful use of strings that tail and emphasize Wells' phrasing rather than drown her out. It was also a rare sight to experience so much energy and vocal flamboyance in a song whose protagonist finds herself conflicted over whether to surrender her heart to a new love or not: the refrain of "*I don't want to take a chance and come out... come out... on the losing end!*" sounds like a battle cry rather than a fearful consideration. (Sidenote: almost every online source I have seen has that last line as "*only losin' in*", which makes absolutely no sense and is just another example of digital reality creating its own universe).

With two singles out and each one a winner, Mary Wells became a treasured Motown commodity, yet it was probably a good thing that neither of the singles charted *too* high: when the Marvelettes scored big time with 'Please Mr. Postman', Gordy had them immediately rush out a supporting LP on which 'Mr. Postman' was essentially the only memorable track of them all. Mary's first LP, on the other hand, came out more than a year after 'Bye Bye Baby', recorded over several different sessions, and although it was really short — a mere ten songs barely extending over 25 minutes — I must say that *every* track on the LP is enjoyable and emotional to at least some degree. It may not contain any of Mary's monster hits from the peak Motown years, and it may feature a somewhat different Mary Wells than fans of 'My Guy' are used to, but as far as I can tell, it is one of the strongest, if not *the* strongest, collection of songs from Motown's earliest «formative» period.

For sure, most of the songs here are recycled, as was the usual practice with the label, but it's all fairly solid recycling. Thus, Mary's take on 'Shop Around' is not one ounce weaker than Smokey's original: maybe it does not add much, but it does not

detract, either, and, frankly, the song makes a better point when sung from a female rather than male perspective. Her delivery of Marvin Gay's 'Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide' completely dispenses with the Nat King Cole-ish «suaveness» that Marvin was giving all of his songs at the time and takes the song into a more soulful, Ray Charles-style direction. The early Motown single 'I Love The Way You Love', originally recorded by Marv Johnson, is also beefed up significantly, adding rhythmic and vocal muscle to its rather kiddie-like basic melody; so is Marv's debut single 'Come To Me', which Mary transforms into a pleading anthem from its light, playful beginnings. Even the Miracles' 'Bad Girl', expectedly remade as 'Bad Boy', is a nice alternative for those who would prefer the song delivered with strength and power-passion rather than Smokey's honey-drippin' lilt. (I also appreciate the irony of replacing the gentle flute as the lead instrument in the original for a thick and grumbly trombone sound).

I think that the only original composition here that was not an earlier A- or B-side for Mary or any other Motown artists is Gordy's 'I'm Gonna Stay', a rather trifling pop ballad that is still uplifted by Mary's performance — there are some very subtle emotional nuances here (well, as subtle as possible with such simplistic source material) that make it easy to understand why The Beatles probably weren't lying when they declared Wells their favorite American singer in 1964 (of course, that was already after she'd completely switched to a pop style on her single releases). But still, this is all so consistently well played, well sung, and intelligently arranged that it really makes me wonder about the mutual influence of «the Motown Machine» and the singer(s) behind the Machine — namely, just to what extent did the latter determine the sound of the former. Conventional wisdom would have us admit that there was no such influence, but musicians do try to adapt their playing styles to better suit the singers, and I don't think Berry Gordy himself would be telling The Funk Brothers what and how they had to play. Then again, I wasn't there.

Anyway, despite the cumbersome title, **Bye Bye Baby / I Don't Want To Take A Chance** gets my clear vote of «best Motown album from 1960–1961», with the obvious reservation that you could list all those LPs on the fingers of one hand. But considering that Mary here is absorbing material from most of Motown's early stars on here, it can also function as a symbolic release for Motown's primal era: all the good stuff as seen from the perspective of the label's finest and most promising singer at the time. Not too shabby, eh?

