

THE NASHVILLE TEENS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1964–1972</i>	<i>Classic rhythm'n'blues</i>	<i>Google Eye (1964)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *The Nashville Teens*

Years: *1964*

George Starostin's Reviews

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TOBACCO ROAD

Album released:

December 1964

V A L U E
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Tracks: 1) **Tobacco Road**; 2) Mona (I Need You Baby); 3) Need You; 4) Bread And Butter Man; 5) Hurtin' Inside; 6) Hootchie Kootchie Man; 7) Google Eye; 8) Too Much; 9) Parchment Farm; 10) I Like It Like That; 11) How Deep Is The Ocean; 12) La Bamba; 13*) T.N.T.; 14*) Find My Way Back Home; 15*) Devil-In-Law.

REVIEW

The Nashville Teens mostly remain famous for two things — backing up Jerry Lee Lewis on his classic **Live At The Star-Club** record, and releasing the best known version of ‘Tobacco Road’, one of the first classics of the garage rock movement. Less known is their curious historical connection to Renaissance, the prog-rock giants: keyboard player John Hawken was one of the founding members of the original, Keith Relf-led group (he would also later play in Illusion, the short-lived revival of that original lineup), while Michael Dunford, the Nashville Teens’ original guitar player, would later join the classic Annie Haslam lineup of Renaissance. Gotta love those strange roads of 1960s rock indeed.



Anyway, the actual story of the Nashville Teens is long (apparently, as of 2020 a certain lineup of the band is *still* out there performing, though with none of the original members involved), obscure (very little information is available on them, though they do maintain their own website), and sad — they had something like 5-6 months of minor glory in 1964, from the Jerry Lee Lewis gig to the success of their first two singles. Ironically, their most musically gifted member, pianist John

Hawken, did not even play the Hamburg gig with Jerry Lee — for fairly obvious reasons — though even when reduced to a trio, guitarist John Allen (who had recently replaced Mick Dunford), bassist Pete Shannon, and drummer Barry Jenkins (who would later join Eric Burdon for his New Animals) still raised plenty of respectable rock'n'roll ruckus, not enough to upstage Jerry Lee but sufficient to become one and whole with the man in a magnificent rock'n'roll tornado of sound.

The young band from Surrey (who had nothing to do with Nashville and almost nothing to do with country music, but probably thought that Nashville Teens sounded so much cooler than Surrey Teens) became notorious for providing solid backing service to overseas guests, from Carl Perkins to Chuck Berry, and eventually were picked up by Mickie Most, signed to London Records, and given a chance to prove themselves as creators rather than followers. The signs were auspicious — for the band's very first single, they astutely chose a poignant and catchy song written by little-known American songwriter John D. Loudermilk, which they turned from a [quietly dark acoustic ditty](#) into one of the fiercest rock'n'roll explosions of the year 1964.

Seriously, few things beat that opening lead guitar punch, or the way the bass guitar and the drums not simultaneously, but interchangeably kick your ass in the introduction to each verse — they take the exact CHUG-CHUG (bass) PSHH-PSHH (percussion) contour of Loudermilk's original and amplify them to pissed-off anthemic heights. Throw in the almost martial vocal harmonies from the band's two singers, Art Sharp and Ray Phillips, John Hawken's tight bluesy piano backing throughout the track, and the song's gutsy lyrics ("I was born in a bunk / Mama died and my daddy got drunk" beats even 'House Of The Rising Sun' in terms of social bite) and you most certainly got a recipe for a big hit. Future performers would take the song in even darker and wilder directions — the Blues Magoos, for instance, would turn it into a freakbeat classic two years later — but the leap from Loudermilk to the Nashville Teens is still the biggest evolutionary leap that this song ever took, even if I personally am still more partial to the Blues Magoos version.

One *might*, however, suspect trouble brewing if one also took the time to listen to the single's B-side — a short, frail, tepid cover of Chris Kenner's hit 'I Like It Like That', which did not have even the tenth part of 'Tobacco Road's energy and, frankly speaking, sounds wimpy and insecure even next to the Dave Clark Five's cover from next year. (Also, why the hell do they sing "Come on, let me show you *where I sat*" instead of the expected "where it's at"? My guess is that this was the way they interpreted the backing vocals on the Kenner record, which went with the colloquial pronunciation "where *is-sat*", assimilating the *t*). Of course, this was just a humble B-side and all, but it was not just a mediocre filler B-side — it was a downright *bad* B-side, poorly sung and poorly played.

A couple months later, the Teens tried to repeat the success of ‘Tobacco Road’ by covering yet *another* Loudermilk song — believing, apparently, that lightning would strike twice, after all. This time, however, they did not manage to find anything with equal amounts of social relevance, and settled for ‘Google Eye’ — no, *not* a prophetically protest song against a giant Internet Big Brother illegally gathering personal data from all of its subscribers, as one might think, but rather a simple, fun folk ditty about going out for some fishing (“google eye” = “googly eye”, i.e. “bulging eye” of the doomed little fishy). Alas, while the result was not bad (and the song still managed to hit the charts), this time around I must state that I by far prefer [Loudermilk’s original](#) — which has a very imaginative acoustic guitar arrangement, a beautifully sung verse melody, and some fantastic tongue-twisting in the chorus. The Nashville Teens, on the other hand, try to give it a rock arrangement, opening the song with a guitar-and-bass groove that is *very* similar to the one used for ‘Tobacco Road’ (give the people more of what they want, right?), and the result is neither fish nor fowl, a song stripped of its folksy charm but not given enough opportunity to blossom into a rock’n’roll ass-kicker. (The B-side, a «self-penned» jam set to the groove of Booker T & The MG’s ‘Green Onions’ and the vocal melody of John Lee Hooker’s ‘Dimples’ and called ‘T.N.T.’, is actually superior — pretty damn heavy for 1964 and featuring some cool soloing from Hawken and Allen).

Anyway, ‘Google Eye’ still made it into the UK Top 10, which provided the band with a chance to prove themselves with a full-fledged LP — released at the tail end of 1964 and, naturally, called **Tobacco Road**. The chance was largely wasted, as the Teens did not manage to present themselves either as songwriters (not a single track was self-written) or even as useful interpreters of others’ material. What do they actually do? They cover Bo Diddley — with ‘Mona’, the definitive British cover of which had already been done by the Stones; the only distinctive element about this one is Hawken’s masterful electric piano playing throughout, unfortunately buried much deeper in the mix than necessary. They cover Muddy Waters — yet *another* cover of ‘Hoochie Coochie Man’ that nobody really needs (the weird thing about this one is that they follow the American artist Hoyt Axton, who had the nerve to orthographically rechristen the song as ‘Hootchie Kootchie Man’ and then credit it to himself rather than to Willie Dixon). They even close the album with their own take on ‘La Bamba’, which has about half as much energy as Ritchie Valens’ classic version.

Probably the single most creative thing they do on the LP is record a fast, poppy version of ‘How Deep Is The Ocean?’, which they completely reinvent as a «Dylan-meets-the-Isley-Brothers» kind of song, starting out as a harmonica-driven folk tune and occasionally breaking out into a ‘Shout’-type groove. It’s an original take (provided they do not lift the idea from somebody else, which I am not entirely sure of), but not a very meaningful one — it is hard to marry the folk vibe and the R&B vibe convincingly enough to prove that they really belong in bed together. I’m not even sure who could do such a thing

well enough — maybe if, say, the Searchers and the Animals came out on stage together and did a spliced version where one band would gradually merge in and out of the other, it could have been awesome. The Nashville Teens, unfortunately, did not have the competence or inspiration to do this right.

Still, at the end of the day **Tobacco Road** is a routinely competent LP, one that could have been much better, perhaps, if the band thought of themselves as «John Hawken and the Nashville Teens» and gave their piano player top billing (and top mixing) on just about everything here. And the band was not exactly finished with it: the boogie-rocker ‘Find My Way Back Home’, released as their third single in early 1965, is a good spiritual predecessor to the simple-and-stupid strain of early 1970s glam-rock, certainly not much worse than your average Sweet single of the time and still a modest chart success for the band. Yet all of this, as well as their subsequent career (much of which is reflected on the compilation album **Nashville Teens**, released in 1972), is still bound to forever remain as a footnote to ‘Tobacco Road’, which, in turn, is itself a footnote in the history of the classic British Invasion period. Maybe there is a moral lesson for British kids in there somewhere — like, do not name yourselves after American toponyms, it brings bad luck or something...

