

# P. J. PROBY



| <i>Recording years</i> | <i>Main genre</i>       | <i>Music sample</i>                    |
|------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| <i>1958-2012</i>       | <i>Classic soul-pop</i> | <i><a href="#">Question</a> (1964)</i> |

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*Only Solitaire*

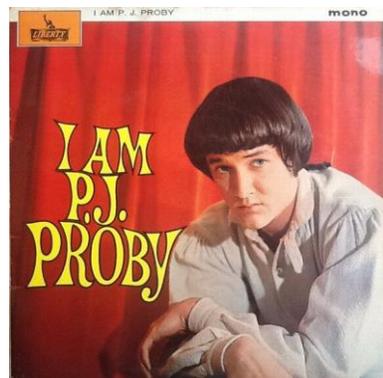
Artist: *P. J. Proby*

Years: *1964-1965*

George Starostin's Reviews

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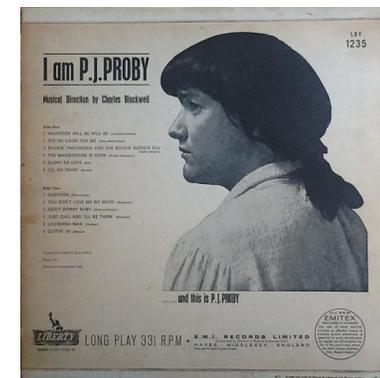
## I AM P. J. PROBY

Album released:

1964

V A L U E  
3 3 3 2 2

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Whatever Will Be Will Be; 2) It's No Good For Me; 3) Rockin' Pneumonia And The Boogie Woogie Flu; 4) The Masquerade Is Over; 5) Glory Of Love; 6) I'll Go Crazy; 7) **Question**; 8) You Don't Love Me No More; 9) **Don't Worry Baby**; 10) Just Call And I'll Be There; 11) Louisiana Man; 12) Cuttin' In.

### REVIEW

Before Tom Jones as the epitome of the «corny soul-pop belter with great voice and horrible taste», there was P. J. Proby — maybe with a bit of an amendment, to the effect that he had a slightly less great voice than Tom Jones, but also a slightly better sense of taste. Born in Texas (as James Marcus Smith) and having started out as an artist in California, where he recorded his first small batch of flop singles, Proby relocated to the UK in 1964 and remained there for most of his life, essentially qualifying as a UK rather than US artist — although his Texan childhood must certainly have had an impact on his singing



style and general manners; at the very least, unlike most UK-based soul singers, it is formally impossible to accuse the man of a «lack of authenticity» — provided one assumes that «authenticity» is dictated by one's birth certificate, that is.

Proby's shining window of opportunity remained open for about one year — from sometime around mid-'64, when his cover of the oldie 'Hold Me' (with Jimmy Page on rhythm guitar!) rose to #3 on the charts, to sometime around mid-'65, when he did good with a couple of covers from *West Side Story*. During that period, he was somewhat of a sensation, earning his fair share of swooning girls who treated him with the same kind of reverence one would usually reserve for Elvis; and for good

reason, because Proby had what it takes — one of the strongest voices and one of the most energetic presences on the UK stage. There was plenty of young bands around who could do justice to the spirit of American rhythm and blues, and people like Mick Jagger or Eric Burdon were powerful and charismatic frontmen with unique singing styles; but sometimes what you really needed was THE frontman, a solo artist with the spotlight on him all the time, and finding a really gritty one, the British equivalent of a James Brown or a Jackie Wilson, was a pretty tough challenge. Long John Baldry kind of did this for the blues-oriented market for a while, but the soul-oriented market remained hungry.

In stepped P. J. Proby, fresh from Texas and California, combining a bit of the Southern grit of the former with a bit of the laissez-faire attitude of the latter and showing them Brits what it *really* meant to be a solo performing artist. In his earliest performances, he still used to hold back a bit, as you can see, for instance, in [his segment](#) during the *Around The Beatles* TV show, where he belts out a powerful medley of ‘Walkin’ The Dog’ and ‘Cumberland Gap’ while almost completely focusing on the singing; soon enough, he’d be going all Elvis on his audiences, spraying them with gallons upon gallons of Soul (or Sweat, whichever you might prefer to call it).

Considering that it took him a trans-Atlantic change of residence to reach that kind of success, and that even the success itself only lasted for a very short while, you might be tempted to conclude — without even hearing a single song of his — that P. J. Proby was a fluke, a phoney, and an embarrassing con man who simply profited from the availability of an open space on the market and was pushed out of it as soon as better candidatures came along. And you would not be *entirely* wrong about that; but I believe that if you at least give the man’s debut, the suitably arrogantly titled **I Am P. J. Proby**, a good listen, you will come to the conclusion that you were not entirely right, either.

Unfortunately, simple research does not disclose the playing credits on the album, produced by notorious UK pop producer Charles Blackwell and released on the Liberty label (available sources are even in conflict with each other over the date of release — some say 1964, others go for 1965). The arrangements are, nevertheless, quite sharp and energetic, with a lively rhythm section, passionate guitars and pianos, and triumphant brass parts — all of them strictly supportive, never letting themselves overshadow the main attraction. The track list mainly consists of contemporary R&B and pop hits, or golden oldies rearranged or even completely rewritten for the new Age of Soul, although Blackwell manages to slip in two numbers of his own for good measure (unsurprisingly, they are the weakest of the lot). And Proby himself gives almost each single tune a reading that is somewhere in between «sincerely from the heart» and «strictly tongue-in-cheek», so that it is hard to tell just how serious the man is trying to be, or whether he is merely pulling our leg all the time.

The very first tune, for instance, is a cover of Doris Day's hit 'Que Sera Sera' (here under its English title), but *not* the way you hear it in Hitchcock's movie — instead, Proby selects a recent cover version by the American vocal group The High Keyes as his inspiration, following their manner of remaking it into an R&B groove that steals its main melodic hook from 'Twist And Shout'. To be fair, Troy Keyes sang the song more powerfully than Proby, but the original Atlantic arrangement and production was far weaker — call it a battle of raw talent against the pop-churning machine, if you wish, but there is no denying that there is a certain element of spontaneous mischief in Proby's voice as well. (Amusingly, this arrangement of the song quickly took on a life of its own, and the very next year would be taken to the top of the Australian charts by local star Normie Rowe — even though Normie's recording was most likely modeled after P. J. Proby's and, frankly, added absolutely nothing to it).

Seriously-sounding, emotionally overdriven material like 'It's No Good For Me' (originally written by the Elvis-associated team of Bill Giant, Bernie Baum, and Florence Kaye and recorded by such soul singers as Gene Chandler and Johnny Nash) are interspersed with humorous vaudeville such as Huey Smith's 'Rockin' Pneumonia And The Boogie Woogie Flu' — and I am tempted to say that P. J. actually does a better work with the latter than the former. Both of these numbers show signs of overacting, but dramatic wipe-my-sweat-off-my-bare-chest overacting is corny, whereas comic look-at-me-I'm-a-madman overacting feels almost rebellious in comparison. Plus, I simply prefer Proby when he is in his «naughty» vocal range, shredding his voice to pointed shards instead of putting on a romantic show for the ladies. He even manages to pull off a convincing James Brown impersonation on 'I'll Go Crazy', where he tries to reproduce Brown's performance note-for-note and inflection-for-inflection and nails the man's theatrics to a tee (not that this makes a whole lot of sense *now*, in comparison to the England of 1964, which had never even seen the real James Brown up close).

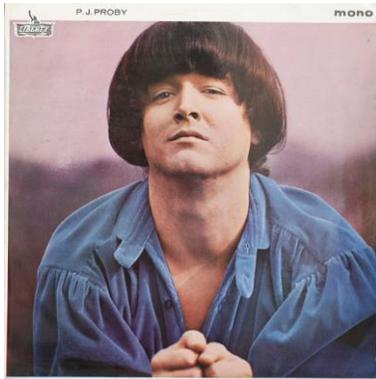
Still, perhaps the biggest advantage of this record as a whole — not even of Proby himself — is how it is able to take several raw (in the *negative* rather than positive meaning of the word) cuts from American soul records, whose full potential was only hinted at on the underdeveloped and underproduced originals, and transform them into powerful anthems. The best example is 'Question', a song originally written and recorded by Lloyd «Mr. Personality» Price, but sounding like a semi-completed demo version in all of its aspects — musical arrangement, backing vocals, lead singing — next to the loud, cocky, well-polished performance on **I Am P. J. Proby**. Even before P. J. steps up to the mike, the brass section delivers a tight fanfare, the rhythm section kicks in like a powerful machine, and the backing vocalists chant the title with loud, properly sustained notes — once he *does* step up, he pummels Price into the ground. Admittedly, Price *wrote* the song, and as its songwriter he might not have felt obligated to give it his whole punch; meanwhile, Proby, like any interpreter, is left with

the obligation to prove the worth of his remake — but that he does with resolve and gutsiness, making ‘Question’ into the un-question-able highlight of the album. He does more or less the same thing with Johnny ‘Guitar’ Watson’s ‘Cuttin’ In’; and although I do not know exactly whose interpretation of ‘Glory Of Love’ he is following here (probably not the classic doo-wop version of The Five Keys from 1951, but rather the one done by the Velvetones, because of the spoken word intermission), once again, the arrangement and production improve drastically on almost everything I’ve heard.

There is exactly one spot on the entire album where Proby falls flat on his face — and that is when he attempts to put his stamp on the Beach Boys’ ‘Don’t Worry Baby’. On almost every other song, his backing band and his producer were capable of overcoming the technical limitations of the original recording, and Proby’s own vocals were generally sufficient to match or outperform the original singers. But when it comes to the Beach Boys around early 1964, one of the few American bands that already placed a huge emphasis on the studio itself as a musical instrument and an even huger emphasis on Apollonian vocal harmonies as the main expression vehicle for their art — well, in Johnny ‘Guitar’ Watson’s own words, "sorry partner, I’m cuttin’ in on you". Not that they even try on this one: all of a sudden, the production feels flat as a splattered cardboard box, featuring none of the depth of the original — *and*, on top of that, Proby’s vocals, especially when they melt down into the sickeningly sweet falsetto, are inexcusable for the song. What can we do? No amount of chameleon magic can make one and the same person sound equally convincing as an avatar of James Brown *and* of Brian Wilson — you either do a good James or a decent Brian, but if you try to do both, you’re probably Jimmy Fallon and you shouldn’t even be here.

Still, everybody is entitled to a mistake or two when treading untested waters, and on the whole, P. J. Proby does a much, much better job of treading here than I would have expected just by reading about the guy and looking over the track listing. Of course, the lack of original songwriting and the fact that soul singing in the UK would soon be moving up to the next level pretty much kills off the potential of any long-term impact here. But if ever you want to briefly go back in time and look at how the kids did it back in the innocent days of early Beatlemania, P. J. Proby is a pretty good place to start.



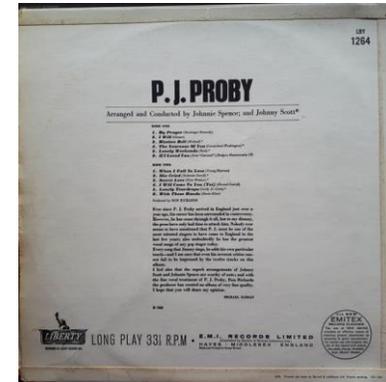


# P. J. PROBY

Album released:  
August 23, 1965

V A L U E  
2 2 2 2 2

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) My Prayer; 2) I Will; 3) Mission Bell; 4) The Nearness Of You; 5) Lonely Weekends; 6) If I Loved You; 7) Let The Water Run Down; 8) She Cried; 9) Secret Love; 10) I Will Come To You; 11) Lonely Teardrops; 12) With These Hands.

## REVIEW

On January 29, 1965 — just as the whole world was preparing to witness the solemn state funeral of Sir Winston Churchill — at the relatively small venue of Castle Hall, Croydon, world history was changed forever in a drastic incident when P. J. Proby, enjoying the perks of a double-bill tour with Cilla Black, inadvertently (or so he claimed) ripped both legs of his pants onstage while performing some of his famous body moves. No recordings exist of the incident, so it is impossible to verify precisely how much skin tissue (and in which particular locations) was exposed, but it definitely was enough to set the local — and then the national — newspapers on fire. Long hair and wild body gyrations are one thing, but naked hairy knees? Impossible!



Proby's own recollections and explanations of the incident have been conflicting over the years, but I particularly like the conspirology version in which he complains that the manager of Tom Jones had been trying to bribe the tour manager to replace P. J. with Tom, implying that, when that attempt failed, some saboteur must have loosened the threads on the poor trousers to wreck Proby's reputation. The problem with that version is that P. J. split his pants not once, but *twice*: precisely the same thing repeated itself two days later at the Ritz Cinema in Luton, and you'd think the singer would have been

careful about checking his wardrobe after his enemies got the best of him first time around. Far more likely is that the second time around, the splitting was intentional — in the same way that Pete Townshend began intentionally smashing his guitars after an accidental first time — and that Proby and his own crew were operating under the «there ain't no such thing as bad publicity» principle, to further enhance his wildman image.

Unfortunately, as the 2004 Super Bowl event would show, bad publicity *does* exist even in the 21st century, where self-appointed taste arbiters, hypocritical tabloids, and cowardly business executives continue to divert public indignation to silly trivialities instead of anything that might expose *their* own asses — and there was certainly a lot more of that back in 1965. Moral pundits, such as the almighty Mary Whitehouse (thankfully immortalized by Roger Waters in the lyrics to 'Pigs' so that the name is not completely empty even to those who never lived through those times), raised such a fuss over the incident that P. J. was, indeed, booted from the tour and replaced by Tom Jones, whose 'It's Not Unusual' was climbing up in the charts at the same time. More than that: Tom Jones, preserving some of Proby's onstage wildness and freedom of expression, was careful enough to cut down on his edgier tricks and quickly became accepted by Proby's (mostly female) fan audiences — while poor P. J. found himself barred from touring in the U.K. and even had his work visa revoked for a while, so he had to relocate to Canada for his live shows. What an insult!

The truly bad news is that the accident pretty much put an end to any hopes one could have for Proby making it as a hard-'n'-heavy rock'n'roller. His early singles were interesting in that they managed to combine pop, soul, and rock elements in a well-working cocktail: already 'Hold Me', his first UK record, had a super-heavy, bombastic drum beat and a shrill, nastily distorted guitar solo from Big Jim Sullivan — but his very best experience in that genre, I think, was '[Together](#)', released in August 1964 and counting as one of the year's finest pop concoctions. On that song, Proby tests out the highest limits of his vocal range (those double-tracked falsetto bits are almost psychedelic!), and Big Jim Sullivan lets rip with one of the weirdest guitar breaks of that early era, combining an early example of the «woman tone» with a proto-Gilmouresque approach to note-bending — highly unusual and exciting (some people mistakenly assume that the leads on both 'Hold Me' and 'Together' were played by Jimmy Page, but he, as per his own memories, only played rhythm guitar on both of these songs; so give Big Jim his due, as he was actually a more accomplished lead player at that time, being three years older than Jimmy and all).

After the pant-splitting debacle, however, it was decided that P. J., unable to give any more concerts in the UK but still capable of recording new material, would have to tone down his image, and that meant concentrating more on the «soul»

and «pop» aspects of his artistry and less on the hard-rockin' angle. Not coincidentally — not coincidentally *at all*, I'm sure — Proby's first single release of 1965 was a cover of Bing Crosby's 'I Apologize', arranged with plenty of schmaltzy strings and angelic backup vocals and delivered in Proby's finest Elvis-imitating mode. The opening "*I'm sorry, I am so sorry, what more can I say?*" must have sounded quite unambiguously to everyone concerned at the time — today, P. J. would probably have simply tweeted same the words, which makes for a much more generic and artistically less interesting manner of self-flagellation — but taken outside of its educational historical context, the song would probably have Mary Whitehouse as its biggest fan. Personally, I miss Big Jim Sullivan.

Fortunately for Proby, his UK fans remained steadfast and true; despite an inevitable drop in sales due to lack of public appearances, the singles continued to fare nicely on the charts ('I Apologize' reached #11), and by June 1965, he was already feeling confident enough to record something a bit less schmaltzy, such as the recent, but relatively obscure, Ben E. King song '[Let The Water Run Down](#)'. I'm not 100% sure, but I do believe it also has Jimmy Page on rhythm guitar, playing that frantic Bo Diddley-style rhythm, and while the shrill vocals of the backup girls already sound a bit cheesy for 1965, the overall groove is efficient and tasteful — already [the original](#) did a damn good job of combining the Bo Diddley punch with the energy and beauty of a great soul vocal, and Proby's version sounds both more raw (instrument-wise) and more polished (vocal-wise) than the original.

Another minor success, released around the same time as Proby's second LP (in fact, it was chosen to replace the lead-in track for the US issue of **P. J. Proby**), was '[That Means A Lot](#)', a Beatles self-reject that, paradoxically, is probably still better remembered these days in the Beatles' demo version, after it was officially released on **Anthology 2**. The song, conceived by Paul during the sessions for **Help!**, was ultimately rejected because they thought none of them had the proper singing power needed to make it work — so, naturally, they bestowed it upon their good friend P. J., and while it is true that his range and power make those soaring lines like "*...you know that your love is all you've go-o-whoa-whoa-whoa-oo-t!*" stand out much stronger, somehow it still ends up sounding half-finished. The reason is that Proby is heavily investing here in the production, with thick layers of strings, horns, backing vocals, and his own bombast — but he has no incentive, of course, to invest in the melodic tightening of the verses. (Some critics had dubbed the song as a weak attempt on Paul's part to mimic Lennon's 'Ticket To Ride', and I would have to agree).

Still, when push comes to shove, I do believe I'd rather end up with Proby's take on 'That Means A Lot' on my playlist than with most of the songs that ended up on his second record, uninventively titled just **P. J. Proby** because **P. J. Proby**

**With His Brand New Pants On** probably felt too painfully suggestive, and **P. J. Proby Still Kicks The Shit Out Of Long, Lean, Lanky, Back-Stabbin' Tom Jones** could not fit in its entirety on the front sleeve. The reason is that most of the songs are way too old-fashioned: the selection is squarely targeted at those whose musical tastes had been fully formed *before* the British Invasion — and while it could be said that P. J. is still possessed by the idea of playing Elvis to his audiences, much of this, oddly enough, sounds like a preview of the «1970s mark» Vegas-era Elvis, rather than even the cheesy movie-era Elvis of the early Sixties.

In all honesty, I wanted to shut down the record and forget about its existence in the opening six seconds of ‘My Prayer’, when Proby’s grandiose "WHEN THE TWILIGHT IS GO-O-O-ONE!" already has him jumping down the Empire State Building, and the introductory orchestral sweep promises you, at the very least, a soul-shattering Hollywood drama on the scale of *That Hamilton Woman* or something like that. Not even The Righteous Brothers offered that kind of bombast with their version, let alone Roy Orbison, The Shirelles, or whoever’d covered that Georges Boulanger oldie over the previous half-decade, and for a good reason, too, but subtlety was certainly not on the menu for P. J., who, deprived of the classic opportunity to sway teenage girls in movie theaters, now had to unleash all the sixty tons of his swashbuckler charm on little old ladies. In addition to ‘My Prayer’, said ladies also receive hyper-inflated versions of such oldies as ‘The Nearness Of You’, ‘If I Loved You’, and ‘When I Fall In Love’, all featuring the *HEALING SEXUAL POWER* of *THE MOST MASCULINE VOICE IN THE WORLD*, riding atop an endless whirl of romantic waves of strings and horns... this is simply one massive musical orgasm after another... by the end of it all, you’ll be so exhausted you’ll want to join a monastery.

Seriously, this is *heavy* stuff, man. Even the cover of Jackie Wilson’s ‘Lonely Teardrops’, compared to the light, on-its-feet groove of the original, feels massive and lumbering; the backing band and orchestra are all given orders to whack and smash at it for all they’re worth, and Proby sings with the effort of an Atlas trying to get the weight of Heaven off his back. Sometimes it’s hilarious, sometimes (fairly rarely) it can be taken seriously, but the general impression is that he overcooks pretty much everything that falls into his hands — which, granted, makes this kind of approach somewhat unique for 1965, because sometimes even Tom Jones sounds like a wimp in comparison. Half an hour later, I have bass drums, violins, and French horns seeping out of my ears and no individual memories of any songs whatsoever.

Of course, it cannot be said that this switch to 100% old-fashioned operatic bombast was all due to the split pants incident. There had been quite a few bombastic orchestrated oldies on the first LP already, and one of P. J.’s biggest hits in 1964 was *West Side Story*’s ‘Somewhere’. But he did make sure to alternate them with lighter stuff like ‘Rockin’ Pneumonia’ or

'Louisiana Man', not to mention all those nice singles with Big Jim Sullivan — I so sorely miss his inventive lead guitar on this record that it's not even funny. In some strange manner, then, the split pants incident sort of mirrors the various misdemeanors that, several years earlier, had all but extinguished the fames and fortunes of Fifties' rockers like Jerry Lee Lewis and Chuck Berry; but «mirrors» in an ironically comical manner, because what *is* a pair of ripped pants next to marrying your underage cousin or trafficking a minor across state lines? In the end, all this story does is amply demonstrate that «standards of morality» in the UK circa 1965 tended to be upheld even harsher than they were in the US, and that it is quite a miracle that the Beatles, Stones, etc. all somehow evaded the fate of P. J. Pantsmaster; it was not until the coming of the Drug Age that open season would be declared upon all those gentlemen.

At least it can be argued that P. J. gave us all a damn good story that year, which is more than can be said about the album. Outside of that context, **P. J. Proby** is worth very little. But the next time you put it on and the earth-rattling wail of 'My Prayer' brings the ceiling down on your head, don't forget to remember — this is the guy who ripped his pants on stage and suffered years of hell for it. *When the twilight is gone / And no songbirds are singing... RIP! When the twilight is gone / You come into my heart... RIP! And here in my heart / You will stay while I pray... BANNED!* Brings on a whole different perspective, I tell you. Just put two and two together and you're all set.

