

THE PRETTY THINGS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
1964-2020	Rhythm 'n' blues	<i>Get A Buzz</i> (1965)

Only Solitaire

Artist: *The Pretty Things*

Years: *1964-1965*

George Starostin's Reviews

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Album released:
March 12, 1965

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Tracks: 1) Road Runner; 2) Judgement Day; 3) 13 Chester Street; 4) Big City; 5) Unknown Blues; 6) Mama, Keep Your Big Mouth Shut; 7) Honey, I Need; 8) Oh Baby Doll; 9) She's Fine She's Mine; 10) Don't Lie To Me; 11) Moon Is Rising; 12) Pretty Thing; 13*) Rosalyn; 14*) Big Boss Man; 15*) Don't Bring Me Down; 16*) We'll Be Together; 17*) I Can Never Say; 18*) Get Yourself Home.

REVIEW

It is almost impossible to discuss the early phase of the Pretty Things' career outside of the context of the Rolling Stones — and not just for formal reasons, such as the fact that Dick Taylor, who was the Stones' former lead guitar and (later) bass player, became one of the founding fathers of the Pretties around early 1963. If the band could be said to have an artistic «purpose» at all, its definition would be simple — to one-up the Stones and wrestle the title of Britain's wildest band from the snotty, way too self-confident, and (to certain tastes) way too blatantly commercialized clique, whose public image at the time was much too heavily dependent on the artificial strategies of Andrew Loog Oldham. (In comparison, the Pretties' own manager, Bryan Morrison — yes, the same one who would arguably serve as the prototype for the antagonist of Pink Floyd's 'Have A Cigar' a decade later — pretty much let them do their own thing, caring for little other than sheer revenue).



Even the cover art here brings on memories of the front sleeve for the Stones' debut album: a bunch of long-haired, grim-looking, fuck-off-will-ya street thugs either staring you down or simply ignoring you out of the darkness, except *their* hair is

actually longer than that of the Stones (plus, Dick Taylor actually has a *beard!* like a real grown-up!), and their facial expressions are way more Neanderthal, particularly that of drummer Viv Prince, the immediate spiritual and aesthetic predecessor of Keith Moon in his love for raising noisy hell. Yet at the same time, there is already something faintly artsier about this image as well — stare at the picture long enough and you might experience visions of the 17th century passing through your head. Look at bass player John Stax there on the right: doesn't he actually look like he just came off a Rembrandt painting or something? Who are these guys, anyway — hoodlums from the seediest areas of London Town in the early 1960s, or a pack of time-traveling Dutch merchants and scholars from the warehouses and colleges of Amsterdam in the late 1630s?..

Whoever they were, they liked the blues more than anything else in life, so, like the Stones, they took their own name from the song of a Chess artist as well; however, for their own mascot they chose Bo Diddley rather than Muddy Waters, taking wild, energetic, and friendly African paganism of the former over the more relaxed and sinister sexual power of the latter. In fact, I would not even call the music of the Pretties particularly «sexual» in nature: while they must have had their female admirers, like every respectable British Invasion outfit, there is a certain watermark at which speed, noise, and aggression become «anti-sexual» rather than «pro-sexual». They may be singing "oh Rosalyn, you're the girl for me", but what they're really thinking is "oh Rosalyn, let's go bash some teeth out". If the Rolling Stones were the Devil's little PR agents, then the Pretty Things were his trusty tax collectors.

Were we to regard «rebellion» as the be-all end-all component of rock'n'roll music, the Pretty Things would have quickly and definitively knocked the Stones down into oblivion, exposing Jagger and Richards for the poseurs that they were and leaving us no reasons other than pure history to listen to early Stones' records. But things are never that simple, and nature is a big fan of trade-offs. Of the three components that constitute a great pop record — musicianship, songwriting, and attitude — the Pretty Things had most heavily invested in the third one, somewhat downplaying the other two. Although the collective effect of the group on the senses is undeniable, none of the players on their own seem to be particularly outstanding musicians by the standards of early 1965; and as for truly original songwriting, at this point nobody in the band really gives a damn about such matters.

The emphasis is strictly on loudness and wildness, reflected, above all, in the ferocious predator vocals of Phil May, who is probably the single most interesting link in the chain: murmuring, muttering, barking, growling, yelling rather than singing at any given moment, he gives his voice a certain rabid quality that no other British or American rhythm'n'blues singer

could dare expose at the time — not even Eric Burdon or Don Craine of the Downliners Sect (another spiritual predecessor of the Pretties, whose nasty garage spirit was, unfortunately, not able to fully come through in their recorded music). Maybe Gerry Roslie of the Sonics could compare as far as the sturdy mechanics of «throat singing» are concerned, but ultimately the Sonics were descendants of Little Richard, providing rowdy pub-style entertainment rather than promoting Satan's personal agenda. In the meantime, there is a pretty direct beeline from Phil May to Iggy Pop — you can see the obvious similarities even in the band's [stage act](#) (all that's missing is some peanut butter, though I guess the proper UK equivalent would rather be marmalade or something).

Wild vocal antics alone are not gonna get you through the day, though: the entire band needs to get wild as well along with you, and this is precisely what you get on the Pretties' first single, 'Rosalyn' (conveniently appended as a bonus track to the 2000 CD edition of the album). «Written» by the band's co-manager Jimmy Duncan, 'Rosalyn' is an amalgamation of the Bo Diddley beat with the Chuck Berry rap — part-time 'Maybellene', part-time 'Who Do You Love' — also somewhat influenced by the geographically closer harmony style of the Animals; the really important thing about it, though, is that the collective level of «nasty energy», worked out by the band, matters far more here than original melodic ideas or outstanding playing technique.

Released in May 1964, 'Rosalyn' may have been Britain's wildest single for about three months, before getting undercut by 'You Really Got Me'. Viv Prince's overdriven, proto-Keith Moon drum work; John Stax's heavy-hitting bass riff, running around in steady chromatic circles; Phil May's throaty, obsessed screaming; Brian Pendleton's tremolo waves of rhythm guitar, updating and fattening out Bo Diddley's trademark patterns; Dick Taylor's minimalistic, monotonous, relentless attack patterns of lead slide guitar, pursuing your ears like a pack of annoying mosquitoes — none of these components is particularly jaw-dropping on its own, but together they rush into battle with more grit and power than anything else heard in pop music at the time, all signs of subtlety going out the window.

The inevitable pay-off is that when experienced and judged *outside* the immediate context of May 1964, the song might feel a bit boring in retrospect — simply because this sort of sound would soon be overtaken by even more caveman-like styles of various garage bands on both sides of the Atlantic (not to mention the Who, taking this collective sonic onslaught thing to its highest possible peak over the next few years). Furthermore, the problem with 'Rosalyn' is that once its groove has been fully established in the first ten seconds, they stay with it for like *forever*, not bothering all that much to let it evolve into anything different. At the time, you could hardly frame this as a serious accusation, since it would apply just as adequately

to Bo Diddley himself, or any other mighty groove-master of the past, as it does to the Pretties; but this is precisely what makes the Sixties a more musically interesting decade than the Fifties — you don't tend to stay in exactly one place for too long, whereas these guys, having found their happy spot, were content to soak in it for as long as it was allowed.

Indeed, the same formula is applicable to pretty much every single song on the album: the first 10-20 seconds always tell you everything about the performance you actually need to know. This is not how it worked with the Stones, for instance, who cared about the build-up aspect of their songs and typically left you some space for intrigue — the Pretty Things, in comparison, just hit you with Thor's mighty hammer right over the head on the opening chords and then simply proceed to bash it in, over and over again, until the very end. Not that it ain't appropriately psychotherapeutic in certain ways, but it might occasionally get tiresome to scrape your brains off the floor time and time again. It also makes it hard to address specific songs and comment on their individual features and oddities.

In terms of melodic creativity, the Pretty Things had little to offer at the time. Unlike the Stones or Animals, who mostly just covered other people's material, the Pretties frequently followed the alternate strategy of putting out «original» material by combining a stolen (or, at best, a very slightly modified) melody with new, or heavily altered, lyrics. Hence, '13 Chester Street' = 'Got Love If You Want It'; 'Unknown Blues' = just about any 12-bar blues (e.g. Robert Johnson's 'Kindhearted Woman Blues'); 'Judgement Day' = cannot pinpoint exactly, but pretty sure John Lee Hooker must have had a ton of this stuff in his backlog. Only the band's third single, 'Honey I Need', does not seem to be immediately ripped off, but neither is it particularly memorable — more like a Chuck Berry-style equivalent of the power onslaught of the Bo Diddley-style 'Rosalyn', only a little thinner and lazier. At other times, they were simply content to fall back on covers, covers, covers, usually choosing the rudimentary rhythmic and melodic structures of Bo Diddley, Jimmy Reed, and Chuck Berry as the launchpads for their wildman styles.

As for the lack of first-rate quality musicianship, this circumstance comes back to bite them in the ass whenever things take a turn for the slow and moody — because this is where the high-energy wall of noise can no longer conceal the fact that the band just lacks the subtle smoothness, sharpness, and stylistic variety of the early Stones. A good starting point for comparison would be 'The Moon Is Rising', a Jimmy Reed cover which (no surprise here) sounds almost identical to his own 'Honest I Do' that the Stones covered on their debut album (although 'Honest I Do' was much better known, the band probably settled on this one to avoid being called Stones copycats). Playing both covers back-to-back cannot help but show that the Stones' version had far more sonic clarity, with their guitar and harmonica parts just «slicing through» the

speakers — and, even more importantly, had more *intrigue*, with a fascinating stop-and-start structure, quirky percussive experiments, and more dynamic development. ‘The Moon Is Rising’, in comparison, has more of a caveman feel to it, but no surprises whatsoever, and Dick Taylor’s generic blues guitar solo sounds like... well, like the average imitative blues solo played by just about every amateur guitarist who ever took the stage with Alexis Korner’s Blues Incorporated. They do even less with straightforward slow 12-bar blues — the cover of Tampa Red’s ‘Don’t Lie To Me’ drags on, weakly and pointlessly, for almost four minutes without getting anywhere interesting (at least they could have done the sped-up version by Chuck Berry instead, but this sudden desire for old-time authenticity ended up ruining the performance).

Both of these factors mean that **The Pretty Things** is one of those albums which it is easier to write about with theoretical admiration than to actually listen and enjoy on a casual, everyday basis. If you need a solid 35-minute long punch in the guts, *and* would like it to be relatively soft, with no danger of scaring off the neighbors or something (so no **Fun House** for you), this is a decent choice. If, more specifically, you are curious about what it takes to transpose Bo Diddley from a topless beach party to a mental health unit, this is probably the *best* choice (especially since, in celebration of their own name, there are *four* Bo Diddley covers on the album). But there is little here to even *hint* at the creative growth of the band over the next couple of years — much like the abovementioned Downliners Sect or Sonics, the Pretty Things could have very easily gone down the drain of history, had they not found the strength and wisdom to eventually expand their reach.

