

Only Solitaire

Artist: *The Renegades*

Years: 1964

George Starostin's Review

THE RENEGADES



Recording years	Main genre	Music sample
1964–1971	Classic pop-rock	<u>Cadillac</u> (1964)

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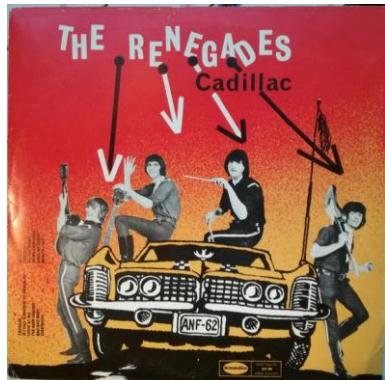
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CADILLAC

Album released:

1964

V A L U E
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More info:



Tracks: 1) Cadillac; 2) If I Had Someone To Dream Of; 3) Look At Me; 4) I've Been Unkind; 5) Everybody; 6) Bad Bad Baby; 7) Lucille; 8) One Day; 9) Do The Shake; 10) Seven Daffodils; 11) Hold Me Close; 12) What'd I Say.

REVIEW

You may have heard of many an American artist making it big in the UK rather than in their own homeland, from Jimi Hendrix to Sparks; but admit it, you probably have not heard of too many UK artists making it big in *Finland*, of all places — not even Hamburg or anything — rather than by the banks of their own lagoon. Yet this is exactly what happened to the Renegades, a perfectly normal band of four young moptops from Birmingham, who worked four long years for one woman, uh, I mean, for a record contract, and ended up getting one in Helsinki after a fateful visit in October 1964 led the rock'n'roll-hungry Finns think along the lines of "if she don't love me, I know her sister will" and adopt the Renegades as their personal idols.



Maybe it was bound to happen, one way or the other. After all, the Beatles toured all over Denmark and Sweden, but never even once crossed the Finnish border. The Rolling Stones did not reach Finland until June 25, 1965, and then only to play one tiny set in the port town of Pori, according to the logs. Unfortunately, I have neither the means nor the time to check up on Gerry and the Pacemakers or Herman's Hermits, but something tells me the results would be comparable — famous UK bands simply had no interest to travel as far as the snows of Finland, and non-famous ones were on a tight travel budget.

This was precisely the kind of gap that an outfit like the Renegades needed — to be first in a Gaulish village rather than second (or, more accurately, one hundred and first) in Rome — and the result is that even in some encyclopaedic sources, they are sometimes advertised as a «British-Finnish» band, despite, to the best of my knowledge, no Finnish blood running in any of the members' veins.

Ironically, the song that made them big in Finland, and arguably the only one in their catalog that even rock historians can remember, fits in pretty well with stereotypical ethnic jokes on the slowpoke nature of Finns (and Estonians). 'Cadillac', credited to all four members of the Renegades but in reality stolen by them from Vince Taylor (yes, it is the same 'Brand New Cadillac' that everybody recognizes from the Clash cover on **London Calling**), represents a curiously innovative approach to rockabilly that we might as well christen *lethargobilly* — the song is drastically slowed and quieted down, marking a sharper contrast in volume between the verses and the chorus than just about anything in the rock'n'roll genre you'd heard before. Band leader Kim Brown quietly plucks off the rhythm with the forgetful indecisiveness of a Pete Townshend in the middle of a 15-minute long improvisation, and recites the "my baby drove up in a brand new Cadillac" lyrics with the trembling voice of a freshly stoned aspiring young singer-songwriter. The rhythm section (Ian Mallet on bass and Graham Johnson on drums) follow his lead in a similarly relaxed and lethargic state — and it is not until the lead guitar kicks in properly that the song finally asserts its rock'n'roll, rather than dirge, nature.

That lead guitar break, by the way, is probably the best thing about this stolen cover, and on the whole, lead guitar player Denis Gibson (who, conveniently, did play a Gibson guitar) is probably the single best thing about the band: he is endowed with a fine garage-rock spirit *and* a nifty pair of hands, extracting crispy, juicy tones with surprising fluency. Some of the leads on this album are up there with the most ass-kicking solo guitar breaks from 1964 — and the fact that, judging by the few surviving videos, Denis played them without a pick makes his work all the more unique and expressive.

Returning to 'Cadillac', though, the song not only broke the boys big in Finland, but, apparently, became so famous across the entire Scandinavian territory that the very next year it was made into an even bigger hit by Sweden's Hep Stars — the notorious predecessors to ABBA (with Benny Andersson in the lineup); amusingly, the Hep Stars claimed to only be familiar with the Renegades version of the song and were unpleasantly surprised when Vince Taylor hit *them* first, rather than the sneaky Renegades, though the latter eventually got what they deserved as well and had to add Taylor's name to the credits. In addition, the song was also recorded by the Shamrocks and became a hit for them in France — spreading this lethargo-garage-mania throughout continental Europe. Thus did the Renegades make serious history.

But was there anything to this band beyond ‘Cadillac’? Well, actually this self-titled debut album, quickly released on the Scandia label after the success of the single, is not all that bad. Of the three acknowledged covers they put on it, Buddy Holly’s ‘Look At Me’ is irreproachable, a sharp, clear, and intelligent homage with slightly less expressive vocals (Brown is not even trying to reproduce Buddy’s hiccups, and maybe all for the best) and a magnificent trebly guitar break replacing the piano solo of the original. Little Richard’s ‘Lucille’ becomes another representative of «lethargobilly», slowed down to match the traditional Finnish dance tempo (sorry!), but once again making good use of quiet-loud dynamics and giving Gibson another good chance to raise distorted hell in a bucket. Only ‘What’d I Say’ is a disappointment, not because Ray Charles’ piano is once again swapped for guitar — *that* is a good thing — but because for all their renegadeness, the band is incapable of reaching Ray’s levels of sexual intensity.

Then there are seven more songs credited to the band members themselves, and yet another credited to a couple of Swedish songwriters (‘If I Had Someone To Dream Of’); none of those I recognize directly as pilfered, though the precedent of ‘Cadillac’ is certainly enough to raise suspicions. They do, however, show obvious influence on the part of such British R&B bands as the Animals and the Kinks, and in most cases comparison is clearly not in favor of the Renegades: ‘Hold Me Close’, for instance, is clearly an attempt to do something Animal-ish in the style of ‘The Girl Can’t Help It’ or ‘Roberta’, but the band lacks the vocal energy and the concentrated instrumental power of the Animals.

Even then, on each and every song I just wait for Gibson’s guitar break to come along and make everything alright. ‘I’ve Been Unkind’ starts out as a timid and tepid fast pop rocker with risibly feeble vocals, but at 1:06 into the song the brilliant lead kicks in, and for 25 seconds the song gets that classic ‘I Saw Her Standing There’ vibe, except that Gibson plays *his* break more fluently and inventively than Harrison does his. On ‘Bad Bad Baby’, the B-side to ‘Cadillac’, the guitar stings and scorches with the acuteness of a young bumblebee, and on the ballad ‘One Day’, the same tone is played out with a softer, more romantic subtlety. Clearly, the chief influence for these chords and tones is Buddy Holly, but I would say that Gibson makes a serious step forward, doing for Holly the same kind of thing that Keith Richards was doing for Chuck Berry — perfecting and sharpening all the technical aspects without losing the soul of the matter.

Weirdest of the lot is ‘Seven Daffodils’, an almost proto-psychadelic reimagining of a traditional love ballad; the chief oddity is that the song begins in one tonality, sounding like a stern, ominous folk dirge, then makes a seamless chorus transition into romantic guitar pop à la Shadows, then switches back and forth between the two styles so that the song inadvertently begins to resemble a murder ballad. Curiously, they even dared release it as their next single, laying a unique claim on the

newly nascent folk-rock territory — and who knows, maybe you really had to be in Finland at the time to tap into the commercial potential of this sort of material. Whatever the case, oddities like these clearly prove there was more to the Renegades than just the novelty factor of remaking ‘Brand New Cadillac’ the Finnish way.

On a technical note, apparently, the album is available in CD format on some of the European markets, but beware: there is a *ton* of Renegades compilations out there and most of them are titled **Cadillac**, with completely different track listings — the twelve tracks listed here are indeed the ones on the original LP, but the Renegades did go on to have at least two more years of recordings, and many of the compilations that I’ve seen treat those in a completely randomized manner (there is even a huge 2-CD Finnish compilation called **Complete Cadillac** which somehow still manages to omit a few of the songs, e.g. ‘If I Had Someone To Dream Of’). Naturally, it does not matter if you really only are after ‘Cadillac’, but as far as I’m concerned, it is even far from the best song on the LP (I’d take their Buddy Holly and Little Richard covers over it any time of day); in any case, a bit of law and order in sorting out the band’s catalog wouldn’t hurt, even if most of it lies so far outside of the good old Anglo-Saxon jurisdiction.

