

RITCHIE VALENS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1958-1959</i>	<i>Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i>Come On Let's Go (1958)</i>

Only Solitaire

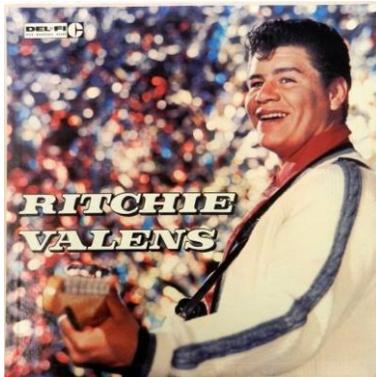
Artist: *Ritchie Valens*

Years: *1958-1960*

George Starostin's Reviews

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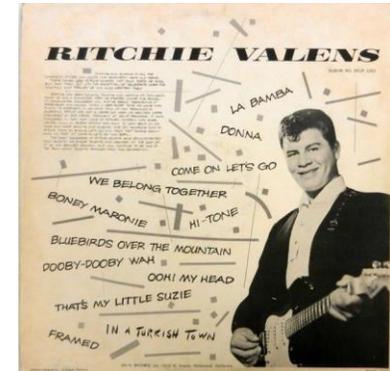
RITCHIE VALENS

Album released:

Feb. 12, 1959

V A L U E
3 3 3 3 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) That's My Little Suzie; 2) In A Turkish Town; 3) Come On, Let's Go; 4) Donna; 5) Boney-Moronie; 6) Ooh, My Head; 7) **La Bamba**; 8) Bluebirds Over The Mountain; 9) Hi-Tone; 10) Framed; 11) We Belong Together; 12) Dooby-Dooby-Wah.

REVIEW

Easily the most striking thing about Richard Steven Valenzuela, a.k.a. Ritchie Valens, is that on every single photo from his short musical career he looks like a burly, rugged, been-there-done-that guy in his thirties, late twenties at the least — more Charles Bronson than Buddy Holly — and yet he hadn't actually turned *eighteen* on "the day the music died" (February 3, 1959). While these elevated levels of testosterone were indeed far more common back in the old days, the circumstance that they manifested so specifically in the shortest-lived rock'n'roller of the entire decade further adds to the mystery — who knows, maybe Ritchie Valens somehow actually lived ten or fifteen additional years within himself, of which we can only guess? Maybe he had somehow managed to fool the space-time continuum? Maybe he'd been there, done that, saw what this world would get up to in ten years, and decided to go out before the shit hit the fan?..



Anyway, all nonsense aside, if anything of the sort was even close to reality, it would have certainly been manifested in the music — and while there are indeed some odd things about the way Ritchie took to constructing his rock'n'roll personality, his music on the whole does not sound like the sounds, thoughts, and feels of a 30-year old. It does sound like the music of an imaginative teenager who is every bit as concerned about taking it to the future as he is about admiring his elders and peers, even if he might still be somewhat confused as to how exactly he should be achieving his goal.

Indeed, while every single source invariably mentions the term «Chicano rock» next to the name of Ritchie Valens, that association largely rests on two things — Richard's Mexican ethnicity and 'La Bamba'. The first of these is a little shaky, considering that Ritchie's childhood in Pacoima largely took place in an English-speaking environment and that, according to legend, he even had to learn the words to 'La Bamba' phonetically; nevertheless, his parents *were* genuinely Mexican and there was a lot of mariachi music and such to which he was consistently exposed since birth, so the Latin influence does manifest itself, albeit in subtle ways, in many of his tunes. Still, they did call him the «Little Richard of San Fernando», not the «Andrés Huesca of San Fernando» or anything — the fact remains that, more than anything else, Ritchie Valens just wanted to be a rock'n'roll player, rather than a godfather to Carlos Santana and Los Lobos, which is a posthumous title that he himself might have resented. Or maybe he wouldn't. We'll never know anyway until we all die and get a ticket to that never-ending Heavenly jam session that he's forever stuck in with Buddy Holly and The Big Bopper.

Actually, the very first single he cut for Del-Fi Records was much more Buddy Holly than Little Richard: 'Come On, Let's Go' opens with a slightly modified melody of 'Peggy Sue' — the biggest difference is the closing phrase, which breaks away from the grumbly bass pattern of the song and replaces it with a ringing, upbeat phrase coming expressly from Chuck Berry's rather than Buddy's stock. Thus, in twelve seconds time you can already see the rock'n'roll of July 1958 as a well-established institution, whose canons and trademarks can be played with, reshuffled, reconstructed and deconstructed by a new generation of admirers. The song in general plays out like a toughened up, tightened up version of a Buddy rocker, with the legendary Earl Palmer helping Ritchie out with his big, echoey drum sound — and, for the record, this is indeed one of the earliest recordings where you can hear the equally legendary future Wrecking Crew member Carol Kaye (for now, still on rhythm guitar rather than bass, to which she would permanently switch only in the early 1960s), though her role here is mostly to provide reliable support rather than to be particularly expressive. Completing the picture is René Hall on lead guitar (excellently clean and melodic solo, still a rarity on rock'n'roll records at the time) and, of course, Valens himself, who kinda tries to sound like Buddy but still rather comes across as a bit of a friendly, klutzy lumberjack.

This is not a new style — more like a demonstration of the infinite possibilities of a new language — and in that light, even the B-side of the single, a rather lackluster cover of the Coasters' 'Framed', is forgivable because its main point seems to be Ritchie proclaiming, "see, and now I can do something *completely* different with all those cool Lego parts that all those swell guys left for me to play with", adding blues-comedy-tinged R&B to the list. Of course, this was nowhere as surprising as the decision to adorn his next A-side with a sugary-sentimental doo-wop ballad: 'Donna' was written for his high school sweetheart (and probably sung under her balcony, too) and is more Flamingos than Buddy Holly. There's probably even less actual «writing» involved here than in 'Come On Let's Go', but the song was still an important milestone in the evolution of sentimental teen-pop — not a lot of white (or Latin) young boys at the time based their balladeering personalities on the structural and soulful laws of doo-wop or R&B. Honestly, it is not a particularly listenable or inspiring number, but it had its own historical function and it played it well.

And then, of course, THE song, which, as it fairly often happens with THE songs, initially remained semi-concealed on the B-side of the single. While plenty of Latin artists did their own 'La Bamba' before Valens, and plenty more of rock and pop artists would cover it (often in more professionally and cleanly-sounding versions) in later years, it was Valens who took it from the dimension of Mexican folk and firmly inserted it into the dimension of rock'n'roll, almost singlehandedly creating «Latin Rock» in the process. His main achievement here can also be heard in the opening six seconds of the song — the unmistakable riff, which seems itself to be of Cuban origin (though I could never pinpoint the exact source) but is played rock'n'roll-style on a thick-sounding electric guitar. Once Ritchie begins to sing the Spanish lyrics, the riff fades into the background, yet its presence is still acutely felt throughout the song, giving it a full, massive, virile drive that could not have been provided by any mariachi outfit — while still preserving the joyful, carnivalesque Latin spirit of the original.

It is fun to realize that the very same riff would later be incorporated by the Beatles into their cover of 'Twist And Shout' (yes, the Beatles: the original version by the Top Notes was melodically dissimilar, and the Isley Brothers' version which the Beatles based theirs upon only gave hints at the same chord progression without making the resemblance so blatantly obvious) — which would later lead to many performers, including Bruce Springsteen, playing the two songs in a medley. With the defining emotion found in most popular Latin-style dance-oriented numbers being «energetic, non-aggressive happiness», it could be argued that any early rock'n'roll number that only served to express joy, without any shades of anger or irony, must have had a Latin seed inside it — hence the defining role of 'Twist And Shout' in the Beatles' early repertoire (especially live), and the reason why Ritchie Valens, with his «synthesizing» mind and feel-good attitude, must have been a far stronger influence on the Fab Four than one could imagine.

Those were the only two singles that managed to come out while Valens was still alive and allow him to bask a short bit in the light of new-found fame and fortune — though, gruesome as it is to realize it, it was precisely the success of ‘La Bamba’ that would be directly responsible for his demise. The album that included both of the singles was issued two weeks after his death, although, confusingly, some sources list the issue date as «January 1959»; one thing that is for certain is that the LP was in the works prior to the plane crash, since the liner notes on the back make no mention of the catastrophe, instead promising the unsuspecting listener that Ritchie "will continue to be one of the really great talents produced from this generation" — meaning that they did not even have time to replace the album cover.

But does the *album*, in fact, produce this kind of impression? This is difficult to say, as there is always an obvious impulse to exaggerate and hyperbolize the talents of anybody so unjustly taken away in his prime (or, perhaps more accurately, *before* his potential prime). Honestly, there are way too many covers and blatant rewrites here for us to be able to make a proper judgement. For one thing, it is as if Ritchie really needed to justify the «Little Richard of San Fernando» moniker — he flat-out steals Mr. Penniman’s ‘Ooh! My Soul’, remaking it as ‘Ooh, My Head’; writes his own tribute to Little Richard, directly quoting from ‘Tutti Frutti’ and mixing it up with a little Elvis poppiness (‘That’s My Little Suzie’); and covers Larry Williams (‘Boney-Moronie’), who was one of the most diligent students of the Little Richard spirit. The best thing about all these tunes is that the Great Ancestral Spirit of Rock’n’Roll, in all of its gloriously inebriated state, is present in all of them — with shaky guitar sounds, Earl Palmer’s maniacal drumming, and Ritchie’s vocals (which typically sound as those of a nerdy teenager who just gulped down a whole bottle of whiskey in order to make himself look MANLY), they all sound delightfully irreverent and crazy-fun, *particularly* for an age in which production and parental control were beginning to descend like leeches on the young, but already mutilated body of Mr. Rock’n’Roll.

Somewhat charming, but less fun is the acoustic pop bit of ‘Dooby-Dooby-Wah’, written directly in the style of Buddy Holly; *much* more interesting is the ballad ‘In A Turkish Town’, which, as [claimed by](#) Lou Diamond Phillips who played Ritchie in a biopic, actually reflects «Eastern influence» — personally, I hear no Eastern influence other than in the song title and the lyrics’ references to "the mystic Turks", but I *do* hear a beautifully and unusually colored guitar tone with a sort of «spicy-reverb» effect that might have been expected from a British producer like Crazy Joe Meek, but hardly from Robert Keane, and, apparently, that’s Ritchie himself milking the orange juice out of that guitar. It’s not *that* much of an effort, but it is a highly unusual song for its time, and it does hint that Ritchie might have been interested in the psychedelic revolution, had he lived long enough to sniff it on the horizon.

Another mini-highlight is his cover of Ersel Hickey's 'Bluebirds Over The Mountain', a song that most people know from the Beach Boys' single version from a decade later — but it was actually Valens who started working on «beautifying» Hickey's raw, skeletal original, with the deep echoey production (probably fit for a song that refers to mountains, right?) that makes his voice sound as if ghostly floating across a wide canyon. The vibe emanating from the song is anything *but* rock'n'roll — if anything, it is indeed more reminiscent of classic Beach Boys melancholy, stuck somewhere in between lonesome cowboy meditation of the old days and sorrowful art-pop odes of the future.

In between 'Bluebirds', 'Turkish Town', 'La Bamba', and even all the rough, patchy, but creative rock'n'roll Frankensteins on the record, there is no denying, the way I see it, that what we had here was a promising artist on the rise — there is no telling, of course, if that promise would have been realised had he lived, but I don't see anything other than a weaker voice, for instance, that might have precluded him from becoming an alternate Roy Orbison (at the very least, there are plenty of songs here to match the potential of 'Ooby Dooby', and who knew in 1956 that the author of 'Ooby Dooby' would go on to the levels of 'Crying' and 'Oh, Pretty Woman'?). In any case, the record, short as it is, is well worth listening to in its entirety if only to reinforce one's shattered faith in 1959 as the infamous «year that strangled rock'n'roll» — because, yes, the Lord did put *two*, not just *one*, of the most promising artists of the year on the same doomed plane, merely to give Liverpool, England an unfair advantage over the states of Texas and California. Go figure.





RITCHIE

Album released:

October 1959

V A L U E

3 2 2 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Stay Beside Me; 2) Cry, Cry, Cry; 3) Big Baby Blues; 4) Paddi-Wack Song; 5) My Darling Is Gone; 6) Hurry Up; 7) Little Girl; 8) Now You're Gone; 9) Fast Freight; 10) Ritchie's Blues; 11) Rockin' All Night.

REVIEW

Public interest in Ritchie's music predictably soared for a while after his death, just as it did for Buddy Holly — but at least Buddy's vaults, what with him making a much earlier start than Valens and all, contained plenty of material to be released (and more often than not, tampered with through unnecessary overdubs) in the upcoming years. Ritchie's unpublished backlog, in comparison, was fairly small; for his second and last «proper» LP of studio material Del-Fi Records could only scrape together 11 tracks, barely amounting to 25 minutes of new music — furthermore, at least several of these songs are bare-bone lo-fi demos, put together by Ritchie in his hotel room and looking more like preliminary sketches, faint ideas of songs put down for later elaboration.



Even so, there are a few moments salvaged here that make the record more than a simple cash-grab and even more than a simple memorial to a prematurely departed artist. First, the stuff that still had the official «seal of approval»: 'Fast Freight', a gritty rock'n'roll instrumental that had already been released as a single in December 1958, though, for some reason, credited to «Arvee Allens» (an unsophisticated play on «R. Valens») — an excellent, crunchy groove that rocks harder and harsher than most possible competition at the tail end of the First Age of Rock'n'Roll, no small thanks to the fat, distorted, rock-steady bassline holding down the foundation for Ritchie's soloing (at one point, the bass actually takes the lead itself,

in what was still a relative rarity for a simple rock'n'roll track). There might be some inspiration here from Link Wray, who'd just emerged on the scene in 1958 and was already setting new standards for ballsy guitar players — although one short exercise of this kind cannot constitute good proof that Ritchie was truly heading into the «demonic» depths of rock and roll, instead of firmly clinging to its «fun», entertainment side. In any case, the B-side, 'Big Baby Blues', was already more Duane Eddy than Link Wray — a slow and playful bluesy shuffle, nowhere near as memorable as the A-side.

I do not know if 'Little Girl', released as a single in June 1959 and remembered as the very last time a Ritchie Valens song hit the charts, was already planned for such release while the man was still alive. It is very much a completed recording, for sure, but the melody is way too similar to Little Richard's and Buddy Holly's 'Send Me Some Lovin'', even employing the same hook of raising the singer's voice up an octave midway through the song for an extra punch. Arguably the most inventive thing about the track is how Ritchie deceptively begins it like a 12-bar blues — that's Elmore James' 'Dust My Broom' riff in the opening bars, isn't it? — and then quickly brings it back into the pop sphere. But it's just a couple of bars, so it doesn't really mean all that much, just a teasy little gimmick.

The other two full-band, polished tracks would already be paired as a single in 1960, after their release on the LP. Of these, 'Cry Cry Cry' is the unquestionable highlight — even if its basic melody is just a slightly sped-up, Latinized take on 'See You Later Alligator', the band is fully revved-up all the same, and Ritchie's thick, trebly guitar tone and jagged staccato picking on the solo sounds tremendously «modern» for the late Fifties: in fact, this is very much like George Harrison's playing on all those early Beatle rock'n'roll songs, such as 'One After 909'. The B-side, 'Paddi-Wack Song', is either a daring, dashing artistic move to synthesize traditional folk entertainment and the magical world of nursery rhyme with the new iconoclastic values of rock'n'roll — or a stupid and pointless waste of tape and studio time, depending on your priorities in life. But I must say I like how the rhythm section comes "rolling home" on that one, with more of that chuggin' bass and the poor drummer probably sweating like crazy from the unending stream of those trills.

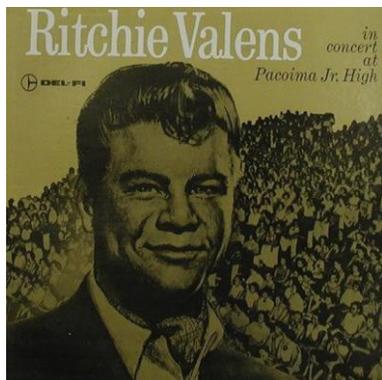
Somewhat less polished is the ballad 'Stay Beside Me', which would become the last single from the album; not particularly interesting from a musical standpoint, it focuses on the image of Ritchie as a gentle, echoey crooner — in which image he, like Gene Vincent and several other white rock'n'rollers from the era, possessed a certain rugged charm but not a lot of screeching individuality. Two more such ballads are also included as raw demos — 'My Darling Is Gone' and 'Now You're Gone' (Ritchie must have had a *real* tough time getting all those girls not to dump him!) — and while many listeners would certainly appreciate the softness and vulnerability displayed therein, I do not find either of them nearly as «haunting» as

the Ritchie Valens Legend would require them to be. The guitar strumming is too predictable and pedestrian, and the vocal ideas too derivative — in fact, on ‘My Darling Is Gone’ he *directly* quotes from ‘Send Me Some Lovin’ (“*my nights are so lonely...*”) and it is clear that he is, essentially, just trying to riff on that tune once again, feeling out whether it can be used as an anchor for something different. Unfortunately, he didn’t have enough time to get there.

Finally, there are some more second-rate takes on old ideas, such as ‘Hurry Up’, another tiny little Chicano rocker trying to marry R&B rhythms to Mexican ways of singing, but nowhere near as energetic as ‘La Bamba’; ‘Ritchie’s Blues’, a nice attempt to work out another Mexico-meets-Delta groove that is unfortunately only captured in its initial stage; and ‘Rockin’ All Night’, a crude rehearsal of a potentially solid rockabilly number *à la* Gene Vincent that, in this form, does not do much other than show us the brute strength with which Ritchie could shake up that acoustic guitar. Well, he was quite young *and* muscular, that’s for sure.

If there is anything thought-provoking or bizarre about this record, it is mainly the realization that one absolutely cannot predict in which direction this guy’s career could have gone, had he survived or avoided the plane crash. Would he have «sold out», like a Johnny Burnette, and become a teen idol? some of the softer songs on here could point in that direction. Would he have held on to his rock’n’roll soul and remain the crunchiest guy on the scene before the British Invasion? stuff like ‘Fast Freight’, which rocks heavier than anything in the Buddy Holly catalog, shows that it was possible. Would he have carried on the «Chicano Rock» crown, continuing to pioneer and promote the Latin spirit in his output? you have tracks like ‘Hurry Up’, proving that he still believed in such an approach. Perhaps he was going to be all these things at once — which is why God, heavily paid off by the British secret services, preferred to eliminate him and Buddy so as to clear out the scene completely in preparation for the Liverpool takeover. Then again, maybe not and we’re simply too easily swayed by the «epic» factor of each tragic event. In the meantime, it is at least good to have all these memories by our side.





IN CONCERT AT PACOIMA JR. HIGH

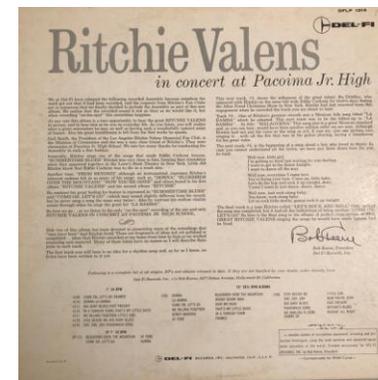
Album released:

V A L U E

December 1960

3 2 1 3 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Bob Keane Intro; 2) Come On, Let's Go; 3) Donna; 4) Summertime Blues; 5) From Beyond; 6) La Bamba; 7) Bob Keane Intro; 8) Rhythm Song; 9) Guitar Instrumental; 10) Malaguena; 11) Rock Little Darlin'; 12) Let's Rock And Roll.

REVIEW

This is, by all means, one of the oddest-sounding records released in 1960 — and the very fact that it exists is the result of a highly accidental set of circumstances. First, much like Generalissimo Francisco Franco, Ritchie Valens was still dead, but his legend was still very much alive and demanded extra fuel to burn. Unfortunately, with his career being so short and all, he had a lot less left behind in the vaults than his older partner Buddy Holly, and most of it had already been assembled and released on **Ritchie** the previous year. All that was left behind were some *really* rough-quality demos and live recordings that a major label like Decca or Columbia would probably never have dared to put out, at the risk of ruining their professional reputation.

Luckily, Ritchie was not signed to Decca or Columbia, but rather to Del-Fi Records, the property of the entrepreneurial Bob Keane (who, at the time, spelled himself as *Keene*) — set up after he'd been tricked out of his first label, Keen Records (the one that had all those early Sam Cooke singles). Valens was Keane's biggest and most successful find on the label, so it was only natural that he had to squeeze out every last drop of Ritchie's legacy — and, quite likely, not even just for the money,



but rather because he may have had a hunch he'd never again be able to sign up anybody of Ritchie's caliber to his label (the closest he ever got to was with some of Frank Zappa's earliest doo-wop recordings, but Keane and Zappa parted ways even before Zappa really became Zappa as we properly know him). The result is this short, strange, confusing record, which somehow accidentally ends up being (a) officially the first live rock'n'roll album by an American artist (Cliff Richard's **Cliff** over in the UK actually beat it by more than a year), and (b) unofficially — one of the first examples of the «lo-fi» genre, as thoroughly accidental as it is... but we do know that most of the trends in music are due to accidents, one way or another. Some people drop their amps, some cut off the tips of their fingers, and some just... die.

Anyway, there's really not that much to write about the actual contents of the album. The most listenable component of it consists of Bob Keane's introductions, as he explains that Side A contains low quality recordings of a short set that Ritchie performed on December 10, 1958, at his own school (Pacoima Junior High), while Side B hosts a few unfinished demos from late 1958 and early 1959 that Ritchie apparently had recorded at Keane's own home studio.

Keane takes the time to stress that it is *only* by the fans' own demand that these low quality recordings are being released — but it is a little hard to believe him when the very first song on the album already turns out to be a lie. Apparently Ritchie *did* play 'Come On Let's Go' on that particular night, since we hear the song introduced by Ritchie's schoolmate Gail Smith, the MC for the evening (and later the president of Ritchie's fan club) — but if you are wondering why he only plays it on acoustic guitar, without any accompaniment from the rest of his band, it is because the recording is actually an early studio demo with overdubbed crowd noises. So much for «authenticity». It's a nice demo, and it wouldn't have sounded out of place or un-exciting even if Ritchie *did* open his show with just his acoustic guitar, but it's not nice to begin your tribute to your recently fallen hero with a lie. The Only Solitaire Morality Police disapproves.

On the other hand, it *does* sound marginally clearer than the actual four live recordings that follow. "*I can't hear what I'm singing*", Ritchie smirks before launching into 'Donna', and while this rather refers to the overwhelming screaming of his Ritchiemaniacal girl fans than to the quality of the equipment, it is a pretty symbolic statement all the same. Actually, the singing is less problematic than the music, with all the guitars splurging together in an ugly gray mix, the kind we are all familiar with through audio-quality bootleg recordings of our favorite artists. Which is just too bad if you want to learn for certain whether Ritchie's backing band showed more *pizzazz* while blasting their way through Eddie Cochran's 'Summertime Blues' than Eddie's own band did. (Vocally, it is not very impressive: Ritchie's natural shyness prevents him from giving the song the same cocky, jerky attitude that came so naturally for Eddie).

In addition to that particular cover and the predictable ‘Donna’ and ‘La Bamba’, the only «new» song performed at the show is the instrumental ‘From Beyond’, a lumbering, mid-tempo twangy instrumental with an impressively proto-metallic sheen to it — another tiny touch to Ritchie’s reputation as one of the forefathers of classic hard rock, though it is unclear just how much of that low distortion was intentional and how much is the result of an auditory illusion stemming from the overall piss-poor quality of the recording. In any case, it’s definitely heavier than The Ventures.

In between the songs, there’s a lot of stage banter between Ritchie and Gail Smith, most of which I have serious trouble deciphering — although you don’t even need to understand the English language to deduce that (a) the president of the Ritchie Valens fan club must have had a serious crush on Ritchie Valens (*DUH!*) and (b) Ritchie Valens was a sympathetic, modest, and shy teen, which actually does quite often come hand-in-hand with a lumbering and burly appearance. He certainly had less confidence in himself than Elvis, and was more of a natural musician than showman — confirming, once again, that there was no way to predict anything about his future in the music business, since it is always more difficult to make predictions about natural musicians than it is about natural showmen.

The shorter and sonically clearer (though still obviously lo-fi) second side of the album, where each track is preceded by a quick Keane introduction, agrees with that. On one hand, the demo version of ‘Malagueña’ here clearly shows that Ritchie’s dedication to the Latin side of his musical ancestry was serious: although his Spanish guitar skills remain relatively amateurish (but keep improving — maybe in a few years’ time, Ritchie could have become a serious master of the craft), ‘Malagueña’ is a far more complicated piece than ‘La Bamba’ — and far more on the classical than the rock’n’roll side as well, showing a desire to expand into wider, more «progressive» areas.

On the other hand, the short unfinished pop-rock ditties ‘Rock Little Darlin’ and ‘Let’s Rock & Roll’ are fairly second-rate Buddy Holly-isms which I do not really see evolving into anything more outstanding and memorable; and the two instrumentals are... okay. (Ironically, ‘Rhythm Song’ features some really tasty *lead* guitar licks — too bad it all went to waste). ‘Guitar Instrumental’, as Keane justifiedly introduces it, shows a strong Bo Diddley influence, but is interesting in that it tries to build on the Bo Diddley beat rather than copy it blindly; even so, it is essentially just a piece of focused jamming, more of an ongoing attempt to find something that works than a careful fixation of something that has already been found and fixed in place.

Overall, there’s no harm in hearing the album at least once — just out of historical interest — but other than the frantic assault at mastering flamenco guitar on ‘Malagueña’, there is hardly anything here to recommend for inclusion on that

abstract «perfectly comprehensive» Ritchie Valens playlist. The attempt to expand a promising young artist's discography in the face of his terribly premature demise is commendable, but you can't really create something out of nothing. Oh well, at least Bob Keane did not endorse the wonderful idea of overdubbing these leftovers with extra rhythm sections and strings and releasing them as genuinely new commercial material, sparing Ritchie from the indignant treatment that Coral and Decca had reserved for Buddy Holly. Let us be thankful for that at least.

