

RONNIE HAWKINS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1959-2002</i>	<i>Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i>My Gal Is Red Hot (1959)</i>

Only Solitaire

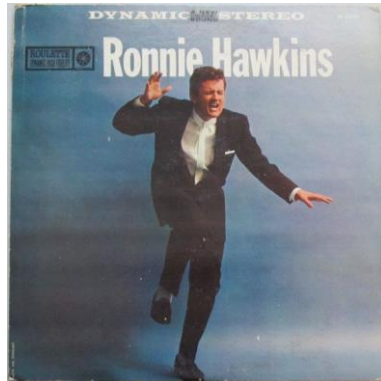
Artist: *Ronnie Hawkins*

Years: *1959-1960*

George Starostin's Reviews

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RONNIE HAWKINS

Album released:

1959

V A L U E
2 3 3 3 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Forty Days; 2) Odessa; 3) Wild Little Willy; 4) Ruby Baby; 5) Horace; 6) Mary Lou; 7) Need Your Lovin' (Oh So Bad); 8) Dizzy Miss Lizzy; 9) One Of These Days; 10) Oh Sugar; 11) What' Cha Gonna Do (When The Creek Runs Dry); 12) My Gal Is Red-Hot.

REVIEW

"He looked like a shitkicker, but he spoke with the wisdom of a sage. He was like a gladiator that wrestled and raced in some nondescript Roman arena. You expected him to wear a toga instead of that ratty cowboy hat." That's Bob Dylan on Ronnie Hawkins, the man who is mostly remembered today for putting together the first proper backing band for Bob — *The Band*, to be more precise — and whom most of us only ever see just once in our life, whenever we finally get around to watch Scorsese's *The Last Waltz*, where he shares a bit of a tender «family reunion moment» with his original band, in one of those «and now we're gonna bring our lumberjack Dad out of his log cabin for a bit... thanks, Dad, see you in another ten years, don't forget to wave back!» episodes.



As is usual for him, Bob sounds like a wisecracker in that interview, but actually speaks with the snarkiness of a bullshitter; it is never recommendable to take his words at face value, even if they always mean something — just not really what you would expect them to mean at the outset. Neither in the literal nor in the straightforward-figurative sense was Ronnie

Hawkins ever a «sage» or even a «gladiator». In reality, he was a rough and tough kid from Huntsville, Arkansas, who used to make money by running bootleg liquor from Missouri to Oklahoma, studied physical education, and, for a while, played in a band with four black musicians calling themselves the Blackhawks — no mean feat for an integrated bunch of young guys in the American heartland of the mid-1950s.

By 1959, when Ronnie got his first record contract with Roulette Records in New York, the «integrated stage» was long past him, and his Hawks consisted of Jimmy Ray Paulman on guitars, Will 'Pop' Jones on piano, and an ambitious 19-year old drummer called Levon Helm (who'd actually joined back in 1957, with Hawkins still having to negotiate his acceptance into the band with his parents). What these guys wanted to play was simple enough — rock'n'roll, with a little bit of soul on the side — but with American public interest in the genre beginning to fade, especially around their natural habitat of Southern states, they kept struggling for acceptance until they unexpectedly found it for themselves in Canada, which was a wee bit more open-minded for wildly energetic rock'n'roll acts in 1959 than most American venues, much like Hamburg welcomed early British rockers with more verve than London around the same time.

And "wildly energetic" is key, because this is really where the «gladiator» analogy comes in. Ronnie Hawkins loved the music he played — adored it, in fact — but he did not himself play any instruments (not seriously, at least), he was hardly an accomplished singer, and all of his songwriting was strictly conventional and derivative. The only thing he had that made him special was *energy*, an almost limitless supply of it, and he made it sure to push the *physical* boundaries of rock'n'roll to the absolute limit, at least, the absolute limit of what could be considered «legal» back in 1959. When it came to moving around, Elvis had nothing on this guy, who would do backflips, moonwalk across the stage decades before Michael Jackson made it cool for everybody, and whip his bandmates into total musical frenzy in almost cartoonish fashion. No other frontman in a rock'n'roll band at the time showed comparable stage freedom — then again, no other frontman was a nearly-professional athlete who'd only narrowly missed graduation to concentrate full-time on a musical career.

Unfortunately, history has not properly preserved for us what a complete live performance of Ronnie Hawkins and the Hawks in their youthful prime might have looked like; the closest you shall ever get to a squinted glimpse of that is Ronnie's brief appearance at the Dick Clark show in full country-western garb, lip-syncing to his first single '[Forty Days](#)' (basically just a retitled version of Chuck Berry's 'Thirty Days') with as many antics as possible, to a select audience of clearly bewildered teenage girls. The important thing to notice is how every member of the band is trying to adapt to the «wild» schtick as well, completely going against the predominant grain at the time — with rock'n'roll growing more «smooth» and

«polite» with each new day, Ronnie's idea was all about having wild (though not *maliciously* wild) cowboy fun. And I'm not really using the word 'cowboy' in vain here: there is a definite saloon spirit in all of Hawkins' music — his vision of rock and roll is compatible with how it would have been if rock and roll had been invented somewhere out there in the Wild West around the late 1880s or 1890s, rather than born in Memphis in the 1950s and then quickly exiled, like a nasty prodigal child, to the big progressive cities on the East and West coasts.

Ronnie's voice itself — at least, in his younger days — is reminiscent of the typical «young cowboy hero» voice in so many Western movies: high-pitched, Southern-swirlin', a little sly-tricksterish, a little exuberant, brimming with a lust for love and life but hardly ever descending into burly machismo, which is almost weird for such an obviously «physical» type of entertainer. To use a *Magnificent Seven* analogy, he's far more Horst Buchholz than Yul Brynner or Steve McQueen: part-time young romantic, part-time slapstick clown, part-time ambitious glory seeker. Sometimes the clown takes way too much over, bordering on annoying ('Horace' in particular dips into low-level vaudeville territory), but usually all the three sides are kept in decent balance, and whenever he is rattling off those lyrics at top speeds, demonstrating great breath control and powerful dynamics, it really gets infectious.

Yet the really important thing is that this short LP — twelve songs that do not even go over thirty minutes in total — is really very much a *band* artifact. Although billed as just «Ronnie Hawkins» in front, the back cover does not forget to put «Ronnie Hawkins And The Hawks» in big type, and this is essential: all the three Hawks are not merely backing up Ronnie, they have to demonstrate precisely the same level of physical fitness and energy as the bandleader. Particularly astonishing are, of course, the chops of Levon Helm, who plays here with such speed and fury as you have probably never heard him play in his classic years with The Band — not even on an album like **Moondog Matinee**, where he and his bandmates were supposed to nostalgize about precisely the kind of music they were playing in the Ronnie Hawkins era, but instead tried to play it through their own Rock-of-Ages filters and quickly got boring as hell.

Here, though, oh boy — just listen to Levon doing all those speedfreak fills on 'Forty Days' or 'Wild Little Willy', taking his cues from the more maniacal rock drummers of the day such as D.J. Fontana but pushing the skill even further, pounding those skins with the light-but-tight youthful ferociousness that we wouldn't really begin to get accustomed to until the young bands of the early 1960s came along. It's all the more amusing considering how tinny his little drum kit sounds, almost as if he were using some toy set made out of cardboard — but he still kicks and pounds the shit out of it, never ever satisfied with a strict 4/4 beat, filling up as much space as possible, ravaging those cymbals and setting up maniacal tempos

which the guitar, piano, and sax players are finding it hard to keep up with. (In the overall frenzy, you barely even notice that the band does not have a bass player: after Jimmy Paulman's brother George had been fired for unruly behavior, the band remained without a bassist for quite some time, with the guitar and piano player taking on bass responsibilities wherever necessary... and looks like it wasn't always considered necessary).

As for the songwriting, well, who needs songwriting when you've got Levon Helm playing drums for you? The actual credits for most of these songs are a bit of a nightmare — most of the songs, regardless of whether they are complete rip-offs or at least a wee bit original, are credited to Ronnie Hawkins and a certain mysterious «Jacqueline Magill», who, as the official The Band site suggests, *may* have been an actual girlfriend of Roulette Records' boss Morris Levy, although even Ronnie himself was not entirely sure of that; hilariously, this «Magill» (but not even Ronnie!) is even listed as co-writer on a cover of Larry Williams' 'Dizzy Miss Lizzy' (!), whose riff, by the way, is played by Jimmy Paulman with a sort of «I *really* have to go!» high-pitch intensity. Anyway, I'm pretty sure the Roulette guys just concocted it all so that they could land as much cash in their pockets as possible — but I'm also pretty sure the album did not sell well even in Canada, let alone Arkansas, so all these shady business intricacies would be for naught anyway.

The actual songs are okay, crudely cobbled together by Ronnie from bits and pieces of his favorite folk and country tunes and translated into the rock'n'roll idiom. 'Mary Lou' is probably the most soulful one, and, along with a couple others, could be mistaken for a plaintive Elvis tune if only that voice were just a bit lower — on the other hand, Ronnie's «young cowboy» vibe may fare a little better if he wants to raise sympathy from the listener with his pitiful tale of how "*she took my diamond ring, she took my watch and chain, she took the keys to my Cadillac car...*". The catchiest one is probably 'One Of These Days', which I was *certain* Ronnie ripped from somewhere... then remembered that it was actually the Searchers who would cover it later on their **Sugar & Spice** album! Hmm, maybe I should actually try and re-evaluate his competence as a genuine songwriter...

Anyway, the important thing is not the actual chord sequences here, but rather this charismatic, subtly sophisticated musical persona that Ronnie has painted of himself. With his vocals always really high in the mix, he creates the impression of a volatile, explosive Jack-in-a-box, with his bandmates constantly adding fuel to the fire — and yet, because of the light elements of comedy and vaudeville, he never makes himself feel *too* serious. It's a never ending ego trip that hardly ever gets to be annoying, in *precisely* the same way Horst Buchholz endears himself to the audience in the *Magnificent Seven*: you just sense that he's got a good heart behind that clownish nature.

And although Ronnie would go on to have a pretty long-winded recording career, with and without the Hawks, one might seriously argue that he never ever got any better than on these short, simple, frenetic early recordings — later on, he'd get more bluesy, more complex, more gruff and hairy, largely losing himself in the huge crowd of similarly scruffy blues-rockers and rootsy prophets, but on *this* album, he's got a corny, hicky, and surprisingly adorable youthful personality which, in 1959, you could not confuse with anybody else. Throw in the unprecedented and — seriously! — the never-to-be-matched-again exuberance of young Levon Helm, and what you get is a rather unique, if not particularly dirty or aggressive, brand of rock'n'roll that would certainly stand its ground against the general atmosphere of the era.





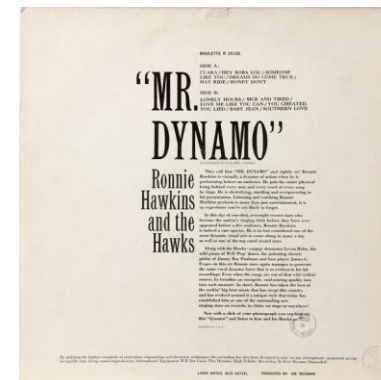
MR. DYNAMO

Album released:

January 1960

V A L U E
2 3 3 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Clara; 2) Hey Boba Lou; 3) Someone Like You; 4) Dreams Do Come True; 5) Hay Ride; 6) Honey Don't; 7) Lonely Hours; 8) Sick And Tired; 9) Love Me Like You Can; 10) You Cheated, You Lied; 11) Baby Jean; 12) Southern Love.

REVIEW

Ronnie's second LP for Roulette Records came out only a few months after the debut, so there would be little reason to expect any serious changes — yet changes there have been, some merely foreshadowing major future events, others rather reflective of the times. On the trivia front, the most notable fact is the appearance of two tracks ('Hey Boba Lou' and 'Someone Like You') co-credited to Ronnie, the ubiquitous «Jacqueline Magill», and an aspiring young musician by the name of Robbie Robertson — who, as of late 1959 / early 1960, was still playing in Toronto with his own band, the Suedes, but was already developing a friendship with Ronnie and Levon, occasionally joining them for live shows, serving as a roadie, and, apparently, even participating in their recording sessions in New York — although, to the best of my understanding, **Mr. Dynamo** still features no actual contributions from Robertson, other than the above-mentioned songwriting credits and, according to some sources, some advice on which songs from their live set the Hawks should select for their record.



In all honesty, though, I fail to discern any «Robertson-esque» spirit on those two songs — it's not even the fact that a 16-year old kid could hardly have been expected to have any individual «spirit», it's more like Ronnie probably just wanted to give the youngster a friendly pat on the back for suggesting a chord change or a lyrical line or something, because the songs are not in any way substantially different from all the other quasi-original compositions. And speaking of substantial, this is where we run into a bit of trouble: despite the cocky title, **Mr. Dynamo** is notably richer in «light» material, ranging from old-fashioned doo-wop to the sentimental side of the Buddy Holly influence, than its predecessor. Much more than earlier, Ronnie is trying to emphasize the soulful angle of his cowboy nature, which is not a particularly embarrassing or unlikable angle, but certainly not the one to help promote him as an embodiment of pure rock'n'roll for the upcoming new decade.

In fact, when it comes to pure, distilled rock'n'roll, the only song here to properly carry that spirit is a cover of Carl Perkins' 'Honey Don't', which the Hawks do in their usual «rodeo» style, propelled by Levon's galloping drums and featuring a pretty categorical "*ah-ah, honey don't*" from Ronnie — the guy did have a subtle way of using his seemingly wimpy, high-pitched vocal to intimidate the audience, or at least the deuteragonist of the song itself. I suppose that 'Clara', the Hawks' slightly poppified take on the Bo Diddley beat, could also classify as rock'n'roll, but the best thing about the song is arguably the percussion — a tricky mix of bongos and cowbells in one channel and some regular (though fairly quiet) drumming in the other. If it's really Levon, this puts another feather in his cap (or medal on his chest, whatever); but even if it is Levon, it's not enough to save the song from being just a tribute.

Somewhat better are the soul-infused danceable numbers like 'Hey Boba Lou' and 'Southern Love'. The former (although it could certainly do without those «exotic» female backup vocals) reveals a pleasant marriage between Ronnie's vocals and the accompanying snowy organ, conjuring a bit of genuine desperation even against the ridiculousness of writing a song about somebody called «Boba Lou». The latter is essentially 'The Return Of Boba Lou' with all of its flaws and virtues, just featuring slightly better lyrics and a more obvious debt to old blues chestnuts such as Little Walter's 'My Babe'. It's interesting to contrast 'Southern Love' with 'Whatcha Gonna Do (When The Creek Runs Dry)' from the previous album — both are, in a way, the same song, but the former was faster, more rocking and sneering-aggressive in spirit, while 'Southern Love' is slower and decidedly more melancholic. It's as if Ronnie was trying to discover and develop this sensitive, vulnerable side to himself — which kinda makes his marketing as «Mr. Dynamo» a little deceptive.

The more doo-woppy side of that vulnerability is listenable, but absolutely unexceptional ('Lonely Hours'; 'You Cheated, You Lied'), and I am not sure that for a guy like Ronnie it ever made sense to intrude on the turf of somebody like Ricky

Nelson (whom Ronnie could probably take out with a single punch). Stuff like 'Hay Ride', if I'm not mistaken, is an attempt to adapt the nascent surf-rock sound to heartland realities — culturologically hilarious, anthropologically ridiculous. All that remains, then, is marvel at how adeptly the rhythm section adapts Fats Domino to the Hawks' paradigm: 'Sick And Tired' once again features some groovy percussion, as Levon decorates that steady bassline with his fills and trills like a Christmas tree with fancy homemade ornaments.

Although 'Clara' and 'Southern Love' were both released as singles, this was a hopeless affair from the start — perhaps they sold a bit in Canada, but neither had the tiniest influence across the border, and, honestly, it is hard to imagine how they *could* have. At least 'Forty Days' gave out a shot of fresh energy: one could argue that Ronnie and Levon managed to reinvent and revitalize the Chuck Berry groove in a special way. But with Bo Diddley, 'Clara' fails to generate the same level of vitality, and who needed a pale shadow of Bo Diddley in 1960 if Bo Diddley was still around to produce a pale shadow of himself in the first place? All in all, **Mr. Dynamo** is nice enough to be listened to, but it also pretty much made it clear that Ronnie would forever get stuck in his «boy from Arkansas makes it big in Toronto clubs» loop, with few hopes of a bigger, brighter future anywhere down the line. From here on, his chief importance for history would be to serve as the focus of attraction for people more gifted than himself.





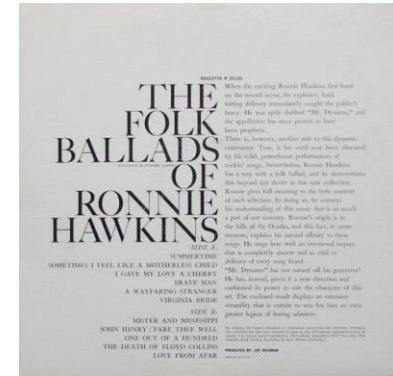
THE FOLK BALLADS OF RONNIE HAWKINS

Album released:

1960

V A L U E
2 3 3 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Summertime; 2) Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child; 3) I Gave My Love A Cherry; 4) Brave Man; 5) A Poor Wayfaring Stranger; 6) Virginia Bride; 7) Mr & Mrs Mississippi; 8) John Henry; 9) Fare Thee Well; 10) One Out Of A Hundred; 11) The Death Of Floyd Collins; 12) Love From Afar.

REVIEW

Despite the fact that for the next several years after 'Mary Lou', Ronnie would not manage to get even a single hit on the charts, either US or Canadian ones, 1960 still ended up an unusually productive year for him. In addition to **Mr. Dynamo** and its accompanying singles, he released *two* more LPs whose goal was to present him in a completely different light: as an interpreter of the folk side of Americana on **The Folk Ballads**, released some time in mid-1960, and of its country side on **Sings The Songs Of Hank Williams**, which arrived well in time for the Christmas market of the same year. Given that *any* LP that is fully dedicated to covering Hank Williams usually ends up as a fiasco (see my **Johnny Cash Sings Hank Williams** review for more on that), I'm going to take some liberties and skip a detailed analysis of that second record (I did have an obligatory listen to 'Hey Good Lookin', just to confirm once more that nobody who ever sang the song could even remotely approach to capturing the exquisite mood of the original).

The Folk Ballads, however, is at the very least deserving of a casual and unprejudiced inspection. And I do stress *unprejudiced*: the official website of The Band, for instance, describes the album as a "*rather desperate attempt to market the fading rockabilly-star Hawkins as a folk singer*", implying that (a) Ronnie himself had no agency in the matter and



that (b) rockabilly stars have no right to be interested in folk music, or something. For statement (b), there is no theoretical basis whatsoever, and as for (a), maybe the site writers have their own sources of information, but somehow just a glance at the size of the guy tells me that this "*shitkicker with the wisdom of a sage*", as per Bob Dylan's words, would probably have his own last word on what musical style he'd like to play in on any particular day of the week.

Admittedly, it *does* seem weird for a guy who used to go by the name of "Mr. Dynamo", do head flips while singing Chuck Berry covers, and roll the piano (along with its piano player) across the stage during the instrumental breaks, to suddenly go all "*sometimes I feel like a motherless child*" on our asses. You wouldn't expect Angus Young to do that, for instance, so why should you believe in the sincerity and naturalness of Ronnie Hawkins in the matter? But if you took a good enough listen to the two rock'n'roll albums that he and the early Hawks put out in 1959-60, you probably remember that they always had a very strong «soul» vibe in the first place. There used to be mournful backing vocals, minor key weeping guitar and organ parts, and Ronnie's own voice was perfectly suited for some deeply-felt sorrow right from the heart(lands) — and there's but a small musical step that separates something like 'Southern Love' from 'A Poor Wayfaring Stranger'.

In fact, **The Folk Ballads** start off in such a way that you'd barely even notice the transition from **Mr. Dynamo**. The (non-absolute) majority of the recordings do feature a stripped-down approach, with acoustic guitars, banjos, harmonicas, and a «spiritual choir» as its main ingredients; but some of the songs are recorded with a full band, and those could have easily fit on either of the first two albums. The very first number is, in fact, 'Summertime' — not much of a «folk ballad», if we want to strive for historical accuracy, but if we don't, well, 'Summertime' *has* pretty much been turned over to the folk domain ever since its inception — and one of its chief attractions is a rather angry-sounding electric guitar lead running through the entire song. (I hesitate to guess who that is: probably not Robbie Robertson yet, most likely his predecessor — Fred Carter Jr., who had replaced Jimmy Ray Paulman sometime in early 1960 or so. Documentation on the Hawks' pre-Dylan history is frustratingly scarce and unreliable).

And, let's face it, «Mr. Dynamo» has a pretty good voice for singing the likes of 'Summertime', or even 'Motherless Child', which also comes in with a full band arrangement. All he has to do is to switch the tumbler from the «giddy cowboy» to «lonesome cowboy» position, and the mood swing feels fully believable to my senses. His is a relatively light and superficial vocal tone, never reaching down to the very center of the Earth like Ray Charles', and never conveying upon you the chronic incurable pain of Hank Williams, but the overtones sound very natural, there are no attempts to over-dramatize the situation, and even the backing choir, which some reviewers are very put off by, does not bother me all that much. There's

sort of an «average Joe and his imaginary band of heavenly angels»' vibe to it all, as could be represented by some moody-broody romantic young lad *à la* Montgomery Clift or Rock Hudson in an old-fashioned western movie, and it is perfectly organic for Ronnie, who was not that much of a rock'n'roll rebel in the first place — just a prairie-wise soulful kid from the Heartlands who could have mindless fun one minute and get all sad and serious the next one.

Still, the soulful kid from the Heartlands tends to do a little better with a full band behind his back (it returns later for a full-on stomping rock'n'roll version of 'John Henry') than with a minimalistic backing, where the «heavenly angels» usually draw too much attention to themselves. The quiet folksy arrangements are admittedly tight, professional, and diverse, with banjos, harmonicas, and mandolins sneaking in and out to make company for the acoustic guitar; and the song selection is not entirely predictable, including such curious oddities as 'The Death Of Floyd Collins', a musical commemoration of the tragic demise of a formerly famous spelunker that made serious headlines in early 1925 — and then, of course, was fully forgotten until people like Ronnie would drag it out of oblivion.

But even so, while I am totally sympathetic to the overall vibe of the album, it is useless to pretend that it leaves much of a lasting impression. Hawkins' charisma on all these recordings is just a little too slick — not enough grit, not enough humor, not enough depth, and none of the subtle ability possessed by, say, Johnny Cash to make it all look like the confessional diary of a sensitive and troubled rough soul. In the end, it's just another of these "I-love-this-music-but-I'm-not-too-sure-how-to-make-it-mine" endless series of albums that stretch all the way from the dawn of the LP era and up to the present times — sure, there are much worse cases out there (when the artist in question really does *not* love this music, or when the artist does not have a shred of talent or discipline to pull it off), and I certainly do not consider three listens to this little collection as a complete waste of time, but there have been far more treasurable lonesome cowboys out there in the 20th century than «Mr. Dynamo» with a banjo on his knee.

