

SCREAMIN' JAY HAWKINS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1953–1998</i>	<i>Classic R&B</i>	<i>Little Demon (1956)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Screamin' Jay Hawkins*

Years: *1956–1958*

George Starostin's Reviews

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AT HOME WITH SCREAMIN' JAY HAWKINS

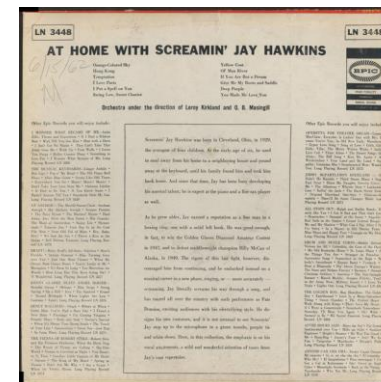
Album released:

April 1958

V A L U E

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More info:



Tracks: 1) Orange Colored Sky; 2) Hong Kong; 3) Temptation; 4) I Love Paris; 5) **I Put A Spell On You**; 6) Swing Low, Sweet Chariot; 7) Yellow Coat; 8) Ol' Man River; 9) If You Are But A Dream; 10) Give Me My Boots And Saddle; 11) Deep Purple; 12) You Made Me Love You; 13*) **Little Demon**; 14*) Alligator Wine; 15*) Frenzy; 16*) Person To Person; 17*) There's Something Wrong With You; 18*) You Ain't Foolin' Me; 19*) Darling Please Forgive Me.

REVIEW

Not only do they not make men like these any more, but they really didn't make that much of them in the mid-20th century either. Indeed, what kind of music would you expect from an African-American born in Cleveland, adopted and raised by Blackfoot Indians, who studied classical piano and blues guitar, wanted to become an opera singer, but instead became the middleweight boxing champion in the state of Alaska, and opened his performances jumping out of a coffin in a leopard-skin costume?

Whatever kind it was, chances are it would not be the kind of music that record labels would knock each other over to record, meaning that in the end, Hawkins only got to record less than a dozen singles and this one LP in the Fifties — his best decade as an artist, because later on, time would eventually catch up with him, yet his prime output of 1955–58 is totally in a class of its own. Formally, it should probably be classified as R&B — indeed, his earliest singles, some of which were still issued under his original name of Jalacy Hawkins, are strictly within the formula, standing out only because of his already unmistakable voice. But as the man really came into his own, «formula» quickly became the word you would *least* associate with his music.



Indeed, some time around 1956 Screamin' Jay Hawkins grew into, perhaps, the single greatest rebel in the world of musical entertainment — black or white, rock'n'roll or country. Where Chicago-based bluesmen like Muddy Waters or Howlin' Wolf would carefully and cautiously toy with that old voodoo magic, Hawkins dove into it head forward without even holding his breath, splurging and splattering and making big bubbles all along the way. By no means was it serious — no evidence has surfaced of the man cutting chicken throats at the crossroads at midnight or anything, and Hawkins' primary atmospheric influences came from old-fashioned vaudeville and B-movies rather than anything else. But for the cozy, family-friendly Fifties whatever he did was still enough to terrify audiences, which makes titles such as «Godfather of Shock-Rock» perfectly understandable, if maybe not perfectly appropriate.

The legend actually begins a little earlier than 'I Put A Spell On You': a key single in Hawkins' career is a February '55 release for Mercury, whose A-side, 'This Is All', is a rough and nasty, but compositionally generic, slow R&B groove only distinguished by a typically huge, gurgling, bombastic, Tom-Waits-had-to-smoke-fifty-tons-of-cigarettes-to-get-to-this vocal performance. However, the B-side is an entirely different matter: '(She Put The) Wamee (On Me)' is Hawkins' first exercise in convention-breaking «Voodoo R&B», a creepy tale of the proverbial «witchy woman» putting a hex on her man, arranged in a suspenseful manner which all but predicts the likes of 'Black Sabbath' (too bad Screamin' Jay missed having a Tony Iommi at his side, though his guitarist Mickey Baker does as fine a job as could be done in 1955, getting those hoodoo electric blues licks out). The overtly theatrical staging, the transition from a nearly rhythmless expository verse to the stuttering waltz of the chorus, the insane screamfest of said chorus where melodic hooks are sacrificed for sheer lung torture — this is more daring than any commercially-oriented single in 1955's America, particularly *black* America, could ever be. Acts like The Robins, whose collaborations with Leiber-Stoller were also bringing (occasionally dark) comedy and vaudeville into R&B at the time, could compete with this stuff in terms of imagination and humor, but never ever in terms of sheer power and madness.

It is interesting that 'Wamee' actually shares its slightly cartoonish 3/4 tempo with 'I Put A Spell On You', the song that made Hawkins into a legend and still remains his only tune whose name most people would be able to remember (though arguably, not many of them would also remember the author). Actually, both were originally recorded at about the same time, but the earliest version of 'Spell', slightly tamer and moodier and jazzier than the classic one, remained unreleased until a much later purging of the archives. The classic version, recorded in September '56 and released on O'Keh the following month, is the one that, according to Hawkins himself, was mainly produced for laughs — an all-out drunken, grotesquely exaggerated take — but somehow, almost accidentally, ended up on the record. "I found out I could do more

destroying a song and screaming it to death", Hawkins remembered later on, and while this statement is a bit hyperbolic (because even his screaming, as a rule, is surprisingly melodic here), 'I Put A Spell On You' did the trick. This went way farther than even Howlin' Wolf — the Wolf bared his teeth all the time, but never really took a bite; the mood of 'I Put A Spell On You' is outright aggressive, almost as if you could vividly see the protagonist in his somber little voodoo shack, mixing together the required ingredients and toasting the spirits over his triumph in the demonic arts.

The big reason, however, that 'I Put A Spell On You' became such a classic is that it works on several levels: behind the cartoonish, phantasmagoric presentation intended to spook little children and old grannies lies an emotional confession of a broken-hearted man, driven to the depths of despair and madness by rejection. It is precisely this layer that would be extracted by future renters of the song, from Nina Simone to Creedence Clearwater Revival, and taken to new levels of artistry; nobody, to the best of my knowledge, would ever cover the tune «as is», because trying to beat the Demon of Screaming at his own game would be, at best, impossible, and at worst, embarrassing (not even Arthur Brown, who covered the song on his classic **Crazy World** album, dared to sound half as demented as Hawkins). And it is precisely this layer of deep soulfulness that separates 'I Put A Spell On You' from most — not *all*, as we shall soon see, but *most* — of Hawkins' subsequent creations, ensuring general immortality for the former and cult status for the latter.

Because typically, the singles that Hawkins recorded over the following two years all rather follow not the model of 'I Put A Spell On You', but that of its B-side, the completely different but equally awesome fast-paced pop-rocker 'Little Demon'. Now *that* song looks decidedly to have been taken out of the Robins / Coasters textbook, from its comically boppy roll to its absolutely whacky lyrics ("he took the Fourth of July and put it in May / he took this morning for a drive yesterday" deserves at least *some* sort of literary prize) — but throw in the gravelly overtones of Chicago blues and the hystrionics of a Little Richard, and what you get is pure, distilled comic delirium with a deeply unsettling attitude. The Little Demon of Screamin' Jay Hawkins is not very dangerous — more of a mischievous trickster — but he feels almost real, unlike the more allegoric, implied images of classic bluesmen.

A small trickle of similarly first-rate classics followed. 'Frenzy', composed by Bobby Stevenson, expanded Hawkins' style to Western- and Latin-influenced pop music all at once (the rhythm is Latin, but the lead guitar is reminiscent of a Morricone soundtrack), and gave him another chance to present a truly demonic declaration of love (the lyrics are nowhere near as crazy as on 'Little Demon', but their delivery most certainly is). The B-side 'Person To Person' as well as the next single, 'You Made Me Love You' (included on this LP), are more traditional pieces of R&B, but with the Screamin' Demon unleashed,

Hawkins truly "destroys" both tunes, replacing their potential soulfulness with vaudevillian madness — unfortunately, the difference between them and 'I Put A Spell On You' is that it is impossible to take them with even a grain of seriousness, as both are cast (including their melodic arrangements) in a more lightweight, comic mould from the start.

It took only a matter of time, though, before fate would finally bring Screamin' Jay in contact with the Leiber and Stoller songwriting duo — a match made in Heaven which produced another classic, 'Alligator Wine'. The guys knew precisely what the man needed: a voodoo-themed song that could be humorous and menacing at the same time, and so they created this slow, ponderous mother, pinned to a repetitive 'Hoochie Coochie Man'-type groove, overlaid with swamp noises and wild fits of maniacal laughter, and detailing the process of preparing a love potion. Neither the lyrics nor the groove have the soulfulness of 'I Put A Spell On You', but the song is not played just for laughs either — it is ritualistic in nature, and brings out the feeling of the ol' voodoo magic better than anything Hawkins wrote himself.

And only now, finally, do we come to **At Home With Screamin' Jay Hawkins**, the only proper LP by the artist released at his Fifties' peak, on the Epic label (which had inherited the O'Keh catalog). Unfortunately, it almost seems as if the offer caught him unprepared. Of all his glorious singles, only 'I Put A Spell On You' was included (probably because none of the others managed to achieve comparable sales). Of all his original compositions, only two were approved. And the other tracks were mostly various classic show tunes and other oldies, which, although still performed in Hawkins' inimitable style, were not at all up to the standards of 'Little Demon' or 'Alligator Wine'. That said, the 12-song collection still lets you form a fairly wholesome and truthful portrait of the artist, without necessarily reducing him to a caricature-like vaudeville joker — provided your attention span genuinely reaches all the hot spots.

Of those hot spots, arguably the hottest is a fairly long and epic rendition of 'Ol' Man River', whose verses and interludes Hawkins quasi-chaotically distributes over fast, rollickin', lounge-jazzy passages and slow, soulful, gospel-style pieces of prayer. When he gets around to the "I'm tired of livin', but scared of dyin'" bit, he truly gives it his all — there is not an ounce of clowning in his voice, precisely the moment to realize how much honest soul there was behind all the voodoo paraphernalia and shit. Similarly, he is being deadpan serious on the acappella rendition of 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot', backed only by a gospel choir and quite transparently indicating that, had he truly worked for it, he might have had a fantastic career in gospel waiting for him... but then, fine gospel singers are plentiful, yet there is only one man capable of 'I Put A Spell On You' and 'Little Demon', isn't there?

As for the showtunes, well, the best ones are clearly the ones that our trickster guy succeeds in properly deconstructing, and

he does give a few solid tries. 'Orange Colored Sky' is a clear standout — the song, with its ballsy and crazy-sounding mix of slow and fast tempos, already had the potential for mischief in its original Nat King Cole incarnation, and you only have to hear our man Jay shout "TIMBEEEEER!" to get into the demonic spirit that has possessed the tune. 'I Love Paris' is another nice bit: the song starts out as inconspicuously and innocently as possible, but midway through, the Little Demon takes over the Fourth of July and puts it in May, as Hawkins suddenly goes off the rails and begins parodying national stereotypes, as if the word 'Paris', upon having been uttered seven times in a row, finally triggered his internal madman. The whole thing is hilarious in its unpredictability (and, for goodness' sake, shut out the "ooh, he's being so RACIST!" idiots commenting on the song these days, without the least understanding of what true racism actually is).

On the other hand, standards performed with a bit more reverence for source material, such as 'If You Are But A Dream' and 'Deep Purple', are also a bit more boring, other than simply presenting the listener with more specimens of Jay's fine operatic voice. And the «originals» are disappointing: 'Yellow Coat' feels like an attempt to do something in one of Chuck Berry's styles (think 'No Money Down'), for which the screaming approach does not truly work, and 'Hong Kong' once again revives the rhythmic base of 'I Put A Spell On You', but this time for a bunch of demented scat-style pseudo-Chinese vocalizing that overall feels like an uninspired self-parody.

It is not clear exactly how much creative freedom Hawkins had for these sessions, and whether he was completely at liberty to select his material or not. But he did like show tunes (in another world, he'd probably have made it on Broadway in the first place), and he never really grew into his classic image enough to forget that it was only an image. So, in a way, the mix of comic *and* serious approach on this LP is probably just the way he wanted it to be — as it often happens, though, the outlandish-outstanding elements end up outweighing the solid-but-ordinary elements, and who of us really needs the guy professionally blasting his way through an *ordinary* rendition of 'If You Are But A Dream' when right next to it sits an extraordinary rendition of 'I Love Paris' — which you might find stupid and/or offensive if you so desire, but which you are hardly likely to forget any old time?

Subsequently, my technical advice is to acquire or stream this album not by itself, but in the context of the classic singles surrounding it; there is, for instance, an excellent Japanese CD edition which adds 'Alligator Wine', 'Little Demon', 'Frenzy' and other hot numbers as bonus tracks. Or just gorge yourself on any representative compilation, which might steal a few tracks off the LP, though, to the best of my knowledge, such compilations usually do not include any of the «serious» tracks such as 'Ol' Man River' — and thus, by definition, limit your understanding of the versatility and depth of Hawkins to the

deconstructed-demented vaudeville aspect, which is a bit undeserved. Then again, if you ask me, it seems like a miracle that he even got the chance for this LP in the late Fifties in the first place: his next albums would not come out until the mid- and late Sixties, probably as the result of the newly found popularity of 'I Put A Spell On You' in hit covers by Nina and CCR — and, of course, by that time the «shock value» of The Great Dementor had become fairly devalued, though, as we shall eventually see, the man had quite a few things left to say even to his younger and savvier competitors.

