

THE SEEKERS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1963-2019</i>	<i>Classic folk-pop</i>	<i><u>Lady Mary</u> (1964)</i>

Only Solitaire

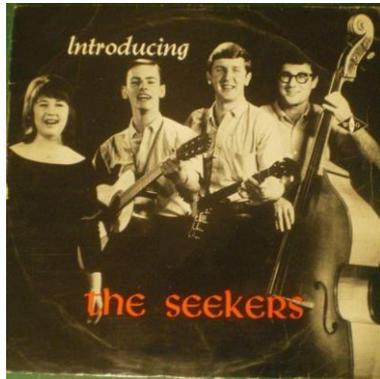
Artist: *The Seekers*

Years: *1963-1964*

George Starostin's Reviews

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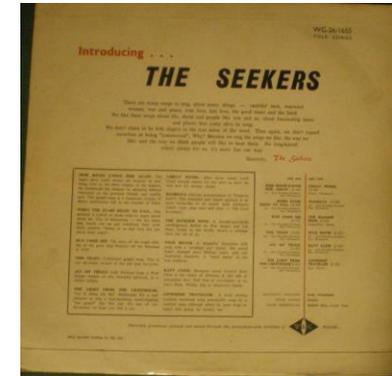
INTRODUCING THE SEEKERS

Album released:

1963

V A L U E
2 4 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Dese Bones G'Wine Rise Again; 2) When The Stars Begin To Fall; 3) Run Come See; 4) This Train; 5) All My Trials; 6) The Light From The Lighthouse; 7) Chilly Winds; 8) Kumbaya; 9) The Hammer Song; 10) Wild Rover; 11) Katy Cline; 12) Lonesome Traveller.

REVIEW

Today, the Seekers are mainly remembered as the first Australian band to make it big on the international scene — several years before the Bee Gees, and a whole decade before AC/DC, with both of whom they had little in common anyway. Well, actually, they did have one very important thing in common: just like the Bee Gees and just like AC/DC, the Seekers were *entertainers* first and *artists* second, which seems to be a fairly common thing indeed for internationally famous Australian musical teams, probably because Australia is so damn far from everywhere, you'd *really* have to struggle to get yourself noticed. Play it humble and reticent, and you'll just be stuck in Sydney with the Melbourne blues again for the entirety of your sad antipode life — you don't really have the advantage of sharing Greenwich Village as your home turf, where you can just cool it and wear a frown and still get written about in media that matter.



Really, this is the first thing that springs to mind when listening to the Seekers' very first album, which, upon its original release, did not even chart in Australia, let alone the rest of the world (later, after the Seekers gained fame, it was published for the international market as simply **The Seekers**, with the same tracks but in a different running order). At the time, the folk quartet focused exclusively on traditional ballads and spirituals, neither writing their own material nor yet taking it out

of the hands of contemporary songwriters — the track list here is pretty much the same as in the general Pete Seeger or Peter, Paul, and Mary repertoire. There is hardly even anything specifically related to Australia, although the band's very first single was indeed a rendition of 'Waltzing Matilda' — not being an expert, I cannot say if this is due to particular dearth of the specifically Australian folk tradition or to the fact that the Seekers, from the very start, were aiming to fit in on the international scene.

Anyway, what matters is not the precise scope of the material, but the approach taken by the band. From the opening vocal lines and acoustic chords of 'Dese Bones G'wine Rise Again', the good old Negro spiritual retelling the beginning of the Book of Genesis in an accessible fashion, it is clear that the Seekers are not here to emphasize the Deepest Depth, Most Serious Seriousness, and Most Holy Holiness of the folk tradition — on the contrary, they are promoting its lightness, its fun, its ability to ignite a merry campfire inside the hearts of listeners, and even, where possible, its humor and irony. Athol Guy slaps his double bass like a proper village square entertainer; Keith Potger and Bruce Woodley chop up their guitars like hyper-energetic pop musicians; and Judith Durham, the group's only non-playing singer (later, she would occasionally sit in on keyboards), raises her energetic voice over those of her male companions with all the verve and passion of an inspired Soviet Young Pioneer. (The latter is not necessarily a compliment, at least not in some contexts, but Judith is alright).

People who tolerate rather than enjoy the Seekers tend to point to the beauty of Durham's voice as the main, if not the only, reason to listen to this stuff in the first place — I'm guessing that they will point to 'All My Trials' as the indisputable highlight of the album, since this is the only song here on which Judith not only takes lead, but is actually allowed to sing solo all the time. But while she does have a stronger and more flexible voice than, say, Shirley Collins, it is a fairly ordinary strong and flexible voice, with not a lot of unique personality to it; I probably would not be able to tell Durham from a thousand other lovely folk maidens going all the way from the early Sixties and into the present age. On the other hand, she is a good alternative if, like some people I know, you happen to be aurally allergic to the sharp and shrill pitch of the likes of Joan Baez — now *there* is a singer with an unmistakable identity, yet that particular identity can just as easily piss off people as enchant them. At least Durham is steadily reliable; I can't imagine how she could be «hated» on an instinctive level.

In any case, the Seekers are first and foremost a *group*, and they are at their best when they play, sing, and juggle their harmonies in ways that combine folksy earnestness with doo-wop playfulness (do not forget that the Seekers, initially the Escorts, actually started out as a doo-wop group) — for instance, on the non-stop power trip that is 'The Light From The Lighthouse', with each member taking on lead vocals for one verse and various members constantly going off on their own

tangents during the chorus, creating a rich, complex, unpredictable kaleidoscope of vocal effects. I have seen a few listeners complain about the excessive «religiousness» of the record, but nothing could be further from the truth: the Seekers just want you to get caught up in this game they play, they don't actually want to make you go to church.

In terms of musicianship, there is nothing particularly outstanding here, but the Seekers always knew how to play their instruments — in fact, Woodley's acoustic lead that introduces 'The Hammer Song' makes me wish they would have thrown on a couple pure instrumentals, being played so cleanly, precisely, and meaningfully. Other than that brief bit, however, instrumental performance always takes second place to group harmonies, even when the commonly used guitars cede their places to the more rarely used banjos and fiddles. The most important instrument, however, is Guy's double bass, giving most of the songs a strong rhythmic «bottom» and constantly luring you into clapping your hands, tapping your feet, or just giving it up and getting to dancing — entertainment, remember? This is the closest that early folk comes not just to «folk pop», but to «dance-oriented folk pop», and there is nothing wrong with that — on the contrary, this is a nice fresh change from all the exaggerated seriousness of the typical folk scene, even if, at the time, it meant that the Seekers would always be looked at rather condescendingly by their brethren from across both oceans.

I mean, the album, as well as most of the stuff that followed, can easily allow us to treat the Seekers as the Monkees of the folk movement — but given that it did not take us too long to learn to love the Monkees, or, at least, give them their own due respect, there is nothing wrong about doing the same for Judith Durham and her well-meaning Aussie compatriots. As for this debut album, though, while it does introduce the Seekers, it is also understandable that, with such a predictable song selection, it is more interesting in the overall exclusive musical context of 1963 than it is in the overall context of the band's entire career — so let us close this page, and move on.





THE SEEKERS

Album released:

1964

V A L U E
3 3 3 1 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) The Wreck Of The Old '97; 2) Danny Boy; 3) Waltzing Matilda; 4) Cotton Fields; 5) Lemon Tree; 6) Gotta Travel On; 7) With My Swag All On My Shoulder; 8) Plaisir D'Amour; 9) Isa Lei; 10) Whisky In The Jar; 11) Five Hundred Miles; 12) The Gypsy Rover; 13) South Australia.

REVIEW

When the band's second Australian album was re-released in the UK in 1971, three years after the Seekers' first breakup, the record label people, searching for a more interesting title than just **The Seekers**, eventually settled on **Roving With The Seekers** — probably by association with one of the song titles ("The Gypsy Rover"), but one could just as well tie the new title to the areal expansion seen in the track list. **Introducing The Seekers**, for the most part, defined its musical mission as introducing the average Greenwich Village set to Australian audiences. On **The Seekers**, the band broadens its horizons quite significantly — first, with songs taken from its native turf ("Waltzing Matilda", "South Australia"), and second, with tunes that have their origins from all over the world, even if most of them probably still came to the Seekers' attention through the likes of Peter, Paul, and Mary.



Thus, Will Holt's 'Lemon Tree' has its roots in a Brazilian folk song — incidentally, you can still hear a faint touch of Latin rhythms in Peter, Paul and Mary's version, but they have all been neutralized in the Seekers' strictly 4/4 rhythm play; on the positive side, their version is louder, rawer, more campfire-friendly than Peter, Paul and Mary's china-cup performance, so you can make your own fun choice here. 'Plaisir D'Amour' is, of course, the classic(al) French romance song underlying

Elvis' 'Can't Help Falling In Love'; not entirely sure where the Seekers nicked it from, since most of the song's famous covers post-date rather than pre-date their version (Joan Baez, Marianne Faithfull, Nana Mouskouri etc.) — in any case, Judith Durham's delivery is as fine as anybody's. 'Isa Lei' takes us to Fiji, and the guys even make a serious effort to perform it in its native Austronesian tongue — granted, Fiji is geographically closer to Australia than it is to the UK or even to the US, but musically the song still finds itself translated to the Anglo-Saxon folk language (and is credited to A. W. Caten, the bandmaster who originally set the lyrics to a foxtrot arrangement, rather than to anybody who is actually from Fiji). Finally, 'Whisky In The Jar', of course, possesses a specifically Irish flavor, which is somewhat respected by the band as they try to reproduce the essence of a pub drinking song... but they are no Dubliners, after all.

A notable fact is that the album includes the Seekers' first self-penned song: 'With My Swag All On My Shoulders', credited to all four band members, is a lively country-pop saga of a ramblin' man travelling all over Australia, clearly self-referential to a degree and much closer in style to the merry, upbeat travel tales from the Irish tradition than to the generally more moody and introspective takes on the subject, common for places like the Appalachies. It's nothing too special, but it is nice to see how authentic they could sound on something they'd created themselves (at least, I *assume* they created it on their own — though I do realize one should never trust songwriting credits on those rusty LPs from days long gone by). Linguistic note: "swag" should be understood here in its specifically Australian meaning of "load", rather than the 18th century slang meaning of "loot", let alone the 21st century slang meaning of... well, whatever "swag" is translated to in Commontongue.

The songs I like the most on here, unsurprisingly, are the ones featuring the exquisite lead vocal talents of Judith Durham: unfortunately, I've heard one too many versions of 'Danny Boy' to be inspired by the song ever again (though some of those high notes she hits are breathtaking if you are in the right mood), but Hedy West's '500 Miles', a beautiful song that was still fairly new and unspoiled at the time, is arguably the best rendition of it up to that time — Durham's solo delivery is naturally more gorgeous than versions by the Journeymen or the Kingston Trio, and she gives the song more depth and breadth than Mary Travers; it is one of those few occasions where you (almost) begin to forget just how «pop» the Seekers were, and (almost) start looking to them for spiritual guidance.

That said, **The Seekers** still makes precious little effort at crossing the line separating loyal interpretation from original creativity... and why should it? At the time of its release (I have not been able to find the precise date, but I'm guessing some time early in 1964, before the band took off for Europe), the Seekers were still based in Australia, where demand for local performers of classic folk material was high and supply of high-quality bands relatively low — who else could deliver 'Cotton

Fields' or 'Gotta Travel On' for the local crowds with as much verve, fun, and authenticity? It would not be until the band had set a tentative foot in European waters — where they could hardly be looked upon at first as anything but a cute musical curio from the land of kangaroos and didgeridoos — that they would get a genuine incentive for breaking out of that pattern. For now, though, they seemed relatively content to have produced the finest-sounding and highest-charting version of 'Waltzing Matilda' for their hometown market. Hmm, was it actually the highest-charting version of 'Waltzing Matilda' in Australia? I'm not that sure, honestly. But I'd like to believe that it was.





HIDE & SEEKERS

Album released:

1964

V A L U E
2 3 3 1 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) This Little Light Of Mine; 2) Morning Town Ride; 3) The Water Is Wide; 4) Well Well Well; 5) **Lady Mary**; 6) We're Moving On; 7) Ox Driving Song; 8) Kumbaya; 9) Blowin' In The Wind; 10) The Eriskay Love Lilt; 11) Chilly Winds; 12) What Have They Done To The Rain.

REVIEW

The third and last Seekers album before the band «sold out» and broke through to international fame is even more of a discographical mess than the previous two: in Germany it was released simply as **The Seekers** (though it had nothing to do with the self-titled second album), in the US it was titled **The New Seekers** (as if there were *The Old Seekers?*), and several years later, after the group had disbanded, it was re-released for the European markets as **The Four & Only Seekers**. The diagnostic sign is that they all begin with 'This Little Light Of Mine', so we're just gonna let it shine and this will give us the power divine to battle the evil schemes of nefarious record label executives.



Although upon first sight the music here seems to be just the same standard Seekers fare, in reality there already were some important changes in the air. The most significant of these was that the band had finally reached the British shores, where they originally intended to spend only a little time, but were quickly picked up by the World Record Club label and offered a chance to work and record five hundred, uh, that is, ten thousand miles away from home. Naturally, they could not go back home this ole way, because who the heck would prefer Melbourne over London? With much more lucrative commercial proposals, chances to mingle with heroes of the British Invasion, superb recording studios, and even the World Record

Club's own Bobby Richards Orchestra at their disposal, the only catch was that they ran the danger of getting swallowed up in a much larger, much more competitive field — but in all actuality, few, if any, bands in Britain sounded like the Seekers at the time: straightforward folk was more of an individual affair, represented by loners like Shirley Collins, while bands that did cover folk repertoire did it more in a folk-rock vein, like the closely titled Searchers, whose first love was rock'n'roll and who only gradually came to embrace a more «traditionally-sanctioned» sound.

If I understand correctly (reliable chronological information on the Seekers is not the easiest thing to come by), **Hide & Seekers** was recorded and released before the group's fateful encounter with Tom Springfield that produced 'I'll Never Find Another You'; at least, there is no mention of anything of the sort in the original liner notes, which mainly just praise the Seekers for their work on the «international folksong» circuit. Indeed, almost every inclusion on the album goes back at least 50 to 100–200 years back in history: *almost*, because the band also tentatively begins to acknowledge the new «post-folk» generation of singer-songwriters, covering Dylan's 'Blowin' In The Wind' and Malvina Reynolds' 'What Have They Done To The Rain' — neither of the two covers does anything particularly interesting to the originals, but if you are in love with Judith or anything, you will be thrilled to hear her take lead vocals on both of them.

The big musical difference is the presence of the Bobby Richards Orchestra on at least half of the tracks, which, some might say, sentimentalizes and cheapens the effort, while others might insist that it adds a sense of grandiosity and epicness to the band's formerly secluded, chamber-like sound. I would be in the middle here — I don't think the orchestra manages to spoil any of the songs, largely because they had the good sense to keep it politely in the background, without overwhelming either the singers or even the players; but I also think that each and every song here would work just as efficiently on its own, because when the Seekers are really in the zone, they need no amplification to convince us of their worth. I *do* like the extra sonic depth of the production, though: a subtle bit of echo / reverb on the vocals goes a longer way to achieve that coveted effect of solemnity than an entire orchestra.

Case in point — 'Lady Mary', an old ballad on a fairly mysterious subject whose lyrics almost ring like an Edgar Allan Poe poem; it seems to have first been published in Harper's Magazine in 1871, credited to somebody called Francis Behrynge, but the Seekers most likely heard it from Joan Baez (oddly enough, both this song and several other traditional ones, even including 'Kumbaya', are unscrupulously credited to all four band members on the original vinyl; apparently, the people at World Record Club were ever so much more business-savvy than those at W&G). The opening orchestral swoop, with a really cheap violin line, promises you schmaltz; but once Judith steps in with the opening line ("he came from his palace

grand..."), the orchestra humbly retreats to the pit, letting the lady overwhelm you with her interpretation — which, I must say, in this particular case totally puts Baez to shame. Joan sings the song more or less like she sings everything else, with a steady, even type of phrasing throughout; Judith imbues it with Shakesperian grandness, with a sharp shift in pitch from "the look in his sad dark eyes / more tender than words could be" to "but I was nothing to him / and he was the world to me" that puts such a stern, tragic flair into "but I was nothing to him" that it really makes you care for the poor broken-hearted protagonist. In the end, the strings neither spoil nor help out the picture — but the faraway, ghostly production on Judith's voice makes a lot of difference. It is not often that you find a Seekers track which can make you forget all about the lightweight nature of this band, but 'Lady Mary' is that early masterpiece which does the trick.

Other than that, the record goes a bit too heavy on the spiritual side: 'This Little Light Of Mine', 'Well Well Well', 'We're Moving On', and 'Kumbaya' (which, along with 'Chilly Winds', was specially re-recorded for this album), almost turn the album into a celebration of «Negro Gospel», as the liner notes describe the material, which is a bit of a step back from the emphasized diversity of the previous LP. There is plenty of verve in those performances, of course, but hardly any ground for offering inventive personal interpretation, as in the case of 'Lady Mary', and there is only so much spiritual demand for 'Kumbaya' in our life that we can take, I suppose. There are also so many versions of the Scottish classic 'The Water Is Wide' that this particular one, on which Bruce takes lead vocals, is just «nice» (for a special type of experience, I'd rather pull out Dylan's performance from the Rolling Thunder Revue).

Perhaps the best news, as a whole, is that, despite the changed circumstances, the Seekers had not lost their original, semi-professional, semi-homebrewn charm; the deeper production and the orchestral arrangements certainly put them on a throne and elevate them above the campfire which they shared with us on the previous two albums, but not high enough to prevent us from still sharing a sense of unity. That sense would eventually be diminished, exactly the way it works with so many artists spoiled by fame and fortune, but **Hide & Seekers** does not even hint at potential disappointments to come.

