

THE SPENCER DAVIS GROUP



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1964-1974</i>	<i>Classic rhythm'n'blues</i>	<i>I'm A Man (1967)</i>

Only Solitaire

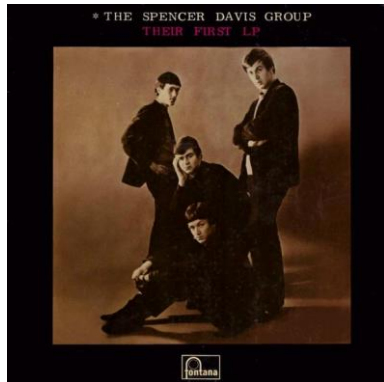
Artist: *The Spencer Davis Group*

Years: *1964-1965*

George Starostin's Reviews

Page contents:

- [Their First LP](#) (1965)



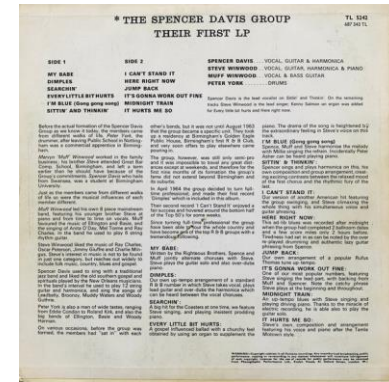
THEIR FIRST LP

Album released:

July 1965

V A L U E
3 3 3 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) My Babe; 2) Dimples; 3) Searchin'; 4) Every Little Bit Hurts; 5) I'm Blue (Gong Gong Song); 6) Sittin' And Thinkin'; 7) I Can't Stand It; 8) Here Right Now; 9) Jump Back; 10) It's Gonna Work Out Fine; 11) Midnight Train; 12) It Hurts Me So; 13*) She Put The Hurt On Me; 14*) I'm Getting Better; 15*) I'll Drown In My Own Tears; 16*) Goodbye Stevie.

REVIEW

It is fairly impressive, considering the band's original reputation was heavily built around the vocal powers of their 16-year old singer, that the band decided to call itself The Spencer Davis Group — simply because, according to Muff Winwood, "*Spencer was the only one who enjoyed doing interviews, so I pointed out that if we called it the Spencer Davis Group, the rest of us could stay in bed and let him do them*". Just like that. Well, almost certainly in real life it *wasn't* quite like that, but the fact remains that for the three first and most important years in the history of The Spencer Davis Group, it was really The Steve Winwood Group all along, what with «little (white) Stevie Wonder» handling most of the vocal duties, much of the playing duties (both guitar and keyboards), and also serving as the band's principal songwriter — when they did decide that they wanted to write their own songs, a decision that did not come all too easy (although at least in the early context of 1964–65, this can be understood and forgiven).

At the time when they were discovered by Chris Blackwell and signed to his own Island Records, though, songwriting was the last thing on the collective minds of Spencer Davis himself (rhythm guitar), brothers Steve (lead guitar, vocals, and what-not) and Muff Winwood (bass), and Pete York (drums), all hailing from the same city of Birmingham that was also busy rearing The Applejacks and The Moody Blues at the same time. (Davis was actually Welsh, but it was his busking stint



in Birmingham that led him to associate with his future bandmates). Like so many others at the time, they idolized all sorts of black Americana — Chicago blues, R&B, John Lee Hooker, Ray Charles, early Motown, etc. — and nurtured no ambitions beyond being able to get into the same spirit and preach the new religion to whoever'd buy it in a big British city. And young Stevie Winwood, the local 16-year old prodigy who could, by some accounts at least, sing with as much soul in his voice as Uncle Ray himself, would be their own St. Paul.

Their very first single, upon first glance, seems pretty unassuming and forgettable these days — just another cover of John Lee Hooker's classic 'Dimples', hardly a matter of competing with the master original itself, or even with the cool and cocky Animals version that postdates the Spencer Davis release by a few months (the single came out in May '64). But it is curious to note that the Spencer Davis version is actually a hybrid of 'Dimples' with the more aggressive 'Boom Boom', and it is important that, for all of his prodigiousness, Steve Winwood cannot sing like John Lee Hooker — his voice just doesn't go that deep. Instead, he gives the performance more of an exuberant Ray Charles feel, only using harmonica rather than organ as lead instrument, and in the process, sort of performs an exorcism on the Devil's music: 'Dimples' remains fun, danceable, and moderately ecstatic, but ceases to be scary and suggestive. You certainly won't feel much as a «bad boy» while listening to it.

This is Steve Winwood in a nutshell — with all that long, long journey he'd go on to make through The Spencer Davis Group, Traffic, Blind Faith, his solo career, and all the innumerable side projects and collaborations over the years, his very first performance on his very first recording already defines him as «The Man Who Sold Out The Devil», which is, perhaps, the number one reason why I never fell in genuine love with any of his music. To put it simply, there is something not quite right about taking John Lee Hooker and performing him as if he were Ray Charles; but on the other hand, it's at least more fun to try such a hybridization than approach the original head-on and most likely fail in the process. And for the moment at least, it wouldn't be fair of accusing The Spencer Davis Group of the same things for which I might otherwise praise The Yardbirds (who were a better rhythm'n'blues band on the whole, but could certainly use a frontman like Stevie).

Interestingly, at this earliest point in their career they might still have been entertaining a spirit of relative democracy, given that the B-side is a slow blues number officially credited to Spencer Davis himself — who also sings on it and blows his own harmonica (Steve accompanies on piano). The result is far less interesting than 'Dimples', though: sounds like something off an Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated record — by-the-book blues with a respectful, imitative feel, a reasonably well-drawn but boring shadow of the real thing. The harmonica part is sufficiently frantic, but it kinda feels like drummer guy

Pete York is pulling most of the weight during the heated-up «rave» parts of the blues ritual, anyway, and the overall result can only be exciting for fans of the stereotypical white blues performance (with the hyper-prominent harmonica, it sort of predicts the sound of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, which, coming from me, is not necessarily a compliment).

Over the five months separating the band's first single from the second one, the issue of leadership seems to have been largely solved: Winwood's presence dominates both the A- and B-side on the October '64 release of 'I Can't Stand It' and 'Midnight Train'. The former number, written by Smokey McAllister, was a recent big hit for the short-lived duo The Soul Sisters — and remains [a minor classic](#) of «proto-funky» R&B: catchy, spunky, fiery, spiced up by an oddly «dirty» trombone solo (instead of the usual sax), and with a lyrically pretty interesting second verse for the likes of 1963: "*I can stand up for my rights / When the going gets tough / I can stand up in a fight / When I know I've had enough*". Naturally, this declaration of personal freedom is nullified by the song's overall message ("*But when I hear you say / That you will go away / And leave me someday / I can't stand it*"), but still, who'd ever heard of something like "*I can stand up for my rights*" making its way into a popular black artist's lingo before? — and, curiously, this is precisely the verse that disappeared in The Spencer Davis Group's version, replaced by the repetition of the far more toothless third verse ("*Standing close to me / It makes me kinda weak / And when you hold me tight / My poor heart skips a beat*").

In all likelihood, Stevie and the boys just did not feel at ease impersonating a couple of US black gals pronouncing these particular words — but as far as everything else is concerned, they fare quite well. Perhaps the defining moment here is when Winwood raises his voice in a tone-and-pitch-matching duo with his own lead guitar — a trick that would later be adopted by lots of hard rock performers, presaging the Page-Plant and Blackmore-Gillan «duels» of the next generation. It was certainly not invented by Winwood, but I do believe it is the first time it might have appeared on a UK rhythm'n'blues record, which is not *that* surprising, because to do it properly, you need to have the according vocal range, and none of the famous rhythm'n'blues singers around 1964 actually had it, so go Stevie! That chaotic battle between the guitar and vocal in the song's coda is definitely something that gave the band its own individuality.

The B-side was 'Midnight Train', a poorly concealed re-write of 'Mystery Train' by British musicians and songwriters Alvin Roy and Gerry Hicks — for all we know, it's just 'Mystery Train' with slightly amended lyrics — which Winwood sings with the same Ray Charles-induced flair, while also showing that he just might have given quite a serious listen to the recent Stones releases: that guitar solo is a near-flawless imitation of Keith's lead style on all those Jimmy Reed and Chuck Berry covers off the band's debut LP, though it still somehow fails to properly convey that «badass feel», either because the rest of

the band does not fully match the supportive capacity of the Stones' rhythm section, or simply because Keith Richards is a natural badass and Steve Winwood is a natural choirboy. (No offense — Steve *was* an actual choirboy while growing up). Still, it's a fun track, especially when played at full volume, with Winwood's high-powered vocals spring-propelled up by Davis' choppy rhythm chords.

For their third single, released in February '65, the band made a fairly daring choice with Brenda Holloway's 'Every Little Bit Hurts' — a near-perfect Motown ballad where everything (strings, piano, and Brenda's own powerful-yet-vulnerable vocal blast) worked in perfect chemical order, meaning one question and one question only: «Can a 16-year old British kid singlehandedly match the might of Detroit's mighty music machine?» Well... yes, in a certain sense, he can. The single was an almost note-for-note cover, with a similar approach to orchestration, the same piano solo, and Winwood matching the modulation, emotionality, and mood swings of Holloway's original performance to a tee. Two problems, though: (a) 'Every Little Bit Hurts' is such a quintessentially «*woman* song» that it feels weird as hell hearing Stevie sing "*to you I'm a toy, and you're the girl who has the say why I should play...*" — gender role reversal in such a context would be an odd thing even for 2020, let alone 1965; (b) «just because we can» isn't much of an argument when the time factor is counted in — for a British record buyer to hear this cover in 1965 might have been a revelation (how many people around were familiar with Brenda's original anyway?), but sixty years on, the only people who'd prefer the cover to the original are probably limited to Steve Winwood's own blood relatives... oh, and maybe Jann Wenner.

More important, probably, is the fact that the B-side of the single was 'It Hurts Me So', credited to Winwood himself, and thus, the first instance of an original Steve Winwood composition to be officially released. It's not much to write home about: a slow, soulful R&B ballad drawn from the rhythms and chords of the same Motown stock, and even the title recycles the word 'hurts' from the Brenda Holloway cover — but it's a start, and the soft, lulling, comforting mood that it creates would stay with Winwood through all of his further career, be it Traffic, Blind Faith, or his solo years, for better or worse, in sickness and in health.

Somewhat unusually for the UK market — perhaps because Chris Blackwell, releasing the record on his Island label and distributing it through Fontana, preferred to orient himself at US rather than UK practices — all three A-sides and B-sides would be included on the band's first UK LP, ingeniously named **Their First LP** (probably since everybody thought the title should match the band's own name in directness and simplicity). This reduces my task to discussing, or at least just mentioning, only six more tracks (again, according to American practices, even if the album in its original incarnation

would not even have a US release!), and they present fairly few surprises next to the early singles. In addition to the overseas artists already mentioned, The Spencer Davis Group cover The Coasters ('Searchin'), Ike & Tina Turner ('It's Gonna Work Out Fine'), The Righteous Brothers ('My Babe'), and Rufus Thomas ('Jump Back') — and while not one of these performances is genuinely embarrassing, Steve's voice is pretty much the only point of possible special interest on all of them, and even then it's always more of a game than a serious re-interpretation: «can you make Rufus proud? can you make Tina proud? can you preserve that Coasters humor? can you this and can you that?...» In the end, I feel like sitting out a musical examination at the local art school rather than expanding my horizons, or even just plain having fun.

The one remaining «original» number, 'Here Right Now', is a rather generic exercise in slow 12-bar blues (session player Kenny Salmon adds a moody organ part, but he ain't no Alan Price or Rod Argent) — and this leaves us with what is likely the weirdest number, a cover of the Ikettes hit 'I'm Blue (Gong Gong Song)'. The original, [as you probably remember it](#), was catchy, tough, sexy, and funny, with a powerful lead vocal pitted against supporting back vocals and very much retaining the genuine Tina Turner spirit (even though Tina herself only added her voice to the backing singers). The cover, of course, retains the catchiness, but the lead vocal role is given over to guest star Millie Small, the Jamaican singer who had just had her first (and last) big success with '[My Boy Lollipop](#)' (one of those guilty pleasure things which you might at first feel deeply embarrassed about, but then you remember to treat it with the same sense of irony as 'Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da' and life instantly gets better).

Millie's presence is easily explainable — she was the protégée of the very same Chris Blackwell who managed the Spencer Davis Group (Blackwell had spent his childhood in Jamaica, where he helped popularize local music and bring it to the attention of European audiences — actually, you don't name your label *Island* Records for nothing), and maybe if he'd bothered to produce an authentic «Jamaican-flavor» re-working of 'Gong Gong Song', it might have ended up just as grinningly exciting as 'My Boy Lollipop'. In reality, what we have here is a disastrous combination: the band gears up for some tough, choppy R&B, with blazing Clapton-esque guitar solos and stuff, and on top of that we have Millie's child-like screeching Jamaican accent, sending up waves of premonition of the «Yoko Ono effect». The only good thing about it is the silly novelty effect — the synthesis makes the performance into quite a stand-out on the album, but ultimately it's a failed experiment if there ever was one. Let's just count this as a small, but painful price to pay for having themselves a bona fide record contract, and move on.

Actually, there's nowhere to move on except mention the fact that **Their First LP** eventually made it to a very respectable

#6 on the UK charts — which would seem quite impressive, given that the preceding singles never made it even into the Top 40, and that the band's first smash hit was still about half a year away. But the mystery is easily explained: the LP only moved into the Top 10 in early 1966, boosted by the immense success of 'Keep On Running'. Before that, it was routinely ignored in the same way as the early singles: no matter how prodigious Steve Winwood was in terms of singing, in mid-'65 people wanted original songs to fill their minds, not impressive-sounding covers of famous American artists.

Yet for a while, the band persisted with their original approach: in September '65, for instance, they put out an EP called **You Put The Hurt On Me**, with three more covers, the most ambitious of which was Stevie's take on Ray Charles with 'I'll Drown In My Own Tears' — and again, the best thing I can say about it is that it is *believable*, yet hardly features any interpretative ideas that would go beyond Ray's original: a respectable shadow-tribute. (The fourth song was 'Goodbye Stevie', an improvised piece of lighthearted, old-fashioned piano boogie). The EP is usually tacked on as a set of bonus tracks to the standard CD edition of **Their First LP**, turning the album from a 12-track one into a 16-track one but adding absolutely nothing in terms of artistic development.

For one final bit of trivia, we should probably also mention the final track on the same CD: an upbeat mix of New Orleanian jazz with modern R&B called 'Incense' and credited to «The Anglos», also released on Island / Fontana in 1965. The story here is a little bit mysterious, since no accompanying information on the band was published, and rumors circulated that «The Anglos» were really The Spencer Davis Group in disguise and that the ecstatic lead vocalist on the tune was none other than Steve Winwood himself. I think it's pretty obvious from [the record itself](#) that the singer is *not* Winwood, but then again, some people would mistake Klaatu for the Beatles, too, wouldn't they? Anyway, modern day intelligence typically reports that the band was American, and the singer was a guy called Joe Webster — and the reason for the Spencer Davis association was that the song was originally co-written and co-produced in the States by Jimmy Miller, who then came to the UK to work with Island Records and brought the single with him. Yes, just another of those little crazy everyday things that make the Sixties such a fun time to explore in depth...

