

THEM



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
1964-1966	Classic rhythm'n'blues	<i>Mystic Eyes</i> (1965)

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Them*

Years: *1964-1965*

George Starostin's Reviews

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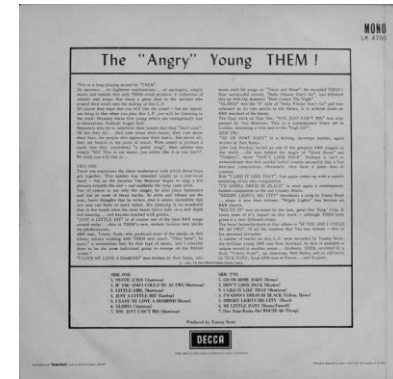
THE "ANGRY" YOUNG THEM

Album released:

June 11, 1965

V A L U E
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More info:



Tracks: 1) *Mystic Eyes*; 2) If You And I Could Be As Two; 3) Little Girl; 4) Just A Little Bit; 5) I Gave My Love A Diamond; 6) *Gloria*; 7) You Just Can't Win; 8) Go On Home Baby; 9) Don't Look Back; 10) I Like It Like That; 11) I'm Gonna Dress In Black; 12) Bright Lights Big City; 13) My Little Baby; 14) (Get Your Kicks On) Route 66.

REVIEW

The entire recorded legacy of Them in their Van Morrison years is pretty small — two albums and a bunch of singles (and yes, there are also a few Them albums made after Van Morrison left the band, but only bearded rock historians remember about those) — and, unfortunately, the band's legacy is also seriously hampered by the annoying attitude that tends to dismiss the early work of young British (or, in this case, Irish) rhythm'n'blues artists in the early Sixties as that of «mere» copycats of their American teachers. I personally detest the idea that «the *true* Rolling Stones do not start until **Aftermath**» (let alone «until **Beggars' Banquet**»), or that there is no point in listening to the Animals covering Ray Charles, or that the best thing that ever happened to the Yardbirds was Eric Clapton deciding to leave so that they could finally start recording original material. What gets totally lost in this kind of simplistic, trivialized musical philosophy is an understanding of the glorious *synthesis* of the musical form developed (mostly) by black Americans with the rebellious, aggressive spirit of young middle-class Britishers (or, in this case, Irishmen) — who, either intentionally or subconsciously, were replacing the *entertainment* values of their teachers with much more *anger* and *provocation*. And few examples are as telling here as that of «The "Angry" Young» Them.



In strictly chronological terms, *Them* were a little late for the party. Their first serious gigs — at the R&B club of the Maritime Hotel in Belfast — took place in April 1964; their first recording session was held in London on July 5 of the same year; and their first single was not released until a few months later (August or even October, as the sources contradict each other). By that time, the Stones and the Animals had already established their reputation as top contenders on the nascent rhythm'n'blues scene — and then there were the Yardbirds ('I Wish You Would' — May '64), the Pretty Things ('Rosalyn' — June '64), and, of course, the Kinks ('You Really Got Me' — August 4, 1964). Against this sort of competition, an emerging group from faraway Belfast had fairly few chances of establishing its own identity if, like everybody else, they would be locking themselves into the exciting, but already well-explored formula of contemporary rhythm'n'blues.

It probably did not help that the band never had a particularly stable line-up — throughout their history with and without Van Morrison, there were literally *dozens* of different members coming and going, and even when you get more or less certain about which people were in the band at the time of some particular recording session, this still means nothing because one can never be sure about who of them actually did play in the studio and who was replaced by session musicians (such as Jimmy Page, for instance). Amusingly, at least two of their keyboard players would later go on to star in other famous bands: Eric Wrixon would be one of the founding fathers of Thin Lizzy, and Peter Bardens would go on to become a much bigger star in Camel. Other members, such as Alan Henderson on bass and Billy Harrison on guitar, would not have any additional fame in their pedigree — nor were they particularly gifted or unusual on their own instruments.

Listening to the band's very first A-side, a cover of Slim Harpo's fast blues-rock piece 'Don't Start Crying Now', brings on memories of 'Beautiful Delilah' by the Kinks — yet another rock'n'roll band that has the ability to rock out but not the ability to rock out with *a message*. You can certainly dance to the tune, but other than pure speed, the rhythm section and the organ and lead guitar players are not talking to you the way an Alan Price, an Eric Clapton, or even a Mick Jagger on mouth harp could get you going. And then there's that oddly annoying singer who seems to want to bark out the lines but rather ends up croaking them out, more in a drunken stupor than with any real aggressive vitriol. Surely *these* guys aren't really going any place special... right?

However, flip the record over and something weird starts taking place. The opening percussion pattern is sort of a bossa-nova thing, but instead of introducing something playful and sensual, as would befit true bossa-nova, it brings in a dark, naggin' bass riff, influenced partly by Bo Diddley and partly by 'I Wish You Would' — and the combination, as was astutely pointed out by Richie Unterberger, in turn is oddly reminiscent of the Doors' future debut with 'Break On Through'. The

title, too, is intriguing: "One Two Brown Eyes" brings on to mind "*one two buckle my shoe*" but is far more syntactically clumsy than any line in any counting song, hinting at chaos and confusion even before the song starts. And is it even a song? There are no proper verses or choruses, just two and a half minutes of a barely organized stream of consciousness, as the singer veers between bluesy threats ("*You better stop tellin' those lies / I'm gonna cut you down to my size*"), mesmerized compliments ("*You got one, you got two brown eyes / Hypnotize, hypnotize*") and random wordless vocalizing, while the lead guitarist alternates between sharp, jagged bluesy licks and bee-like stinging attacks on the slide guitar, also seemingly at random. Literally *nothing* released in the UK by mid-'64 sounded as odd as this short groove — sure, plenty of things had been tried out by rhythm'n'blues bands during their jamming sessions around the little clubs, but not the Stones, not the Animals, not the Yardbirds had ever dreamed of putting something like that on a *record*. Not yet, at least.

It takes but one listen to 'One Two Brown Eyes' to understand the influence that Them would have not only on the Doors, but on the Stooges as well — the sound of the song may be tamer and thinner than anything on **Fun House** (it was 1964, for Christ's sake!), but the *ideology* is exactly the same. Chaos in place of order; improvisation and spontaneity in place of calculated pre-planning; guitar work that puts surprise and hooliganry over technique and discipline. And above all, of course, a singer who sounds like he's been dining on broken glass for the past few months, still spitting chunks of it right in your face. Normal people would have to soak their vocal cords in wine and oil after two minutes of such tension: Van Morrison, however, was not a normal person (just like Iggy who came after him), and he would probably just whet it some more with a couple bottles of Johnnie Walker.

Indeed, one could make a strong case that it was not in the first years of his illustrious solo career, with **Astral Weeks** and **Moondance** and all those other acclaimed «singer-songwriter» albums, when Sir George Ivan Morrison could rightfully rock the moniker of «unique visionary artist», but instead, during the first and best recording year of his being the front-man for Them. See, the thing is that in 1964-1965, there were really no «visionaries» on the UK rhythm'n'blues scene. There were rockers, seduced and captivated by the trance of the primal groove, and there were pop artists, in love with the art of melody and (to a lesser or larger extent) the color of money. But the idea that pop / rock music could be *art*, a way of true self-expression, would not properly crystallize until at least the end of 1965, by which time John Lennon, Ray Davies, Pete Townshend, and others would be making the first tentative attempts at putting that idea into practice. Even a band as musically sophisticated from the outset as the Zombies was using its sophistication to craft what was essentially just commercial pop songs.

Not the case with Van "The Man" Morrison, though. The first semi-lame attempt with 'Don't Start Cryin' Now' aside, even when he was reaching out to other artists for material, the idea right from the start was to turn it into something wild, dark, and deeply personal. The problem was solved with the A-side of the band's second single, released on November 6, 1964 — quite an epochal day in the history of the evolution of rock music, one might say. The song was 'Baby Please Don't Go', which already had a long, long history of its own and multiple well-known blues versions, especially by Big Joe Williams, John Lee Hooker, and Muddy Waters. But it took a bunch of somber Irish boors, led by a red-haired wildman, to turn the song into a fast, desperate, and insanely catchy rock'n'roll anthem that has since been covered by just about anybody — off the top of my head, I can list versions by the Amboy Dukes, Budgie, Aerosmith, and, of course, AC/DC. Each of those has its own charm, and each of those trumps Them's original reinvention in terms of polish, loudness, technical virtuosity, and/or excessive showmanship.

Where none of them trump the original, however, is in the intimate liaison between Van Morrison's voice and that insane *chugga-chugga* of the bass guitar. Where AC/DC, for instance, would make the song *all* about the frenetic, tight-as-heck dueling guitar work of the Young brothers, while the Amboy Dukes' version, in turn, was all about the psychedelic show-off of Ted Nugent's feedback control, Them's version is basically a raging-bass-bull, with the red-haired wildman frantically riding the apocalyptic beast along the highway. Note how, after the opening "*baby please don't go, baby please don't go*", the guitar and organ temporarily shut up, briefly leaving Van alone with the bass to deliver the rest of the verse — this devious use of loud-quiet dynamics would later be exploited by the Amboy Dukes, but not by Budgie or AC/DC. Leaving the singer all alone in the company of just a chuggin' bassline, echoing his throbbing heart, was definitely *not* a common thing for young rock'n'rollers in 1964. It's spooky. Too spooky for the likes of the Stones, the Kinks, the Animals. And — get this — too spooky even for the likes of Muddy Waters or Howlin' Wolf. Those big black guys were scary, sure enough, but they weren't trying to scare you — the «primal» nature of what they were doing was simply, well, a *natural* thing with them. They were entertainers, singing and playing the blues in a perfectly organic manner. 'Baby Please Don't Go', however, is an early example of «proto-shock-rock», a song that intentionally searches for ways to be disturbing and unnerving... and boy, does it ever find them.

But while the A-side of the single was undeniably influential on the hard'n'heavy rock scene of at least the next ten years, it is usually the B-side that gets most of the accolades — for being equally, if not more influential on the garage / proto-punk / avantgarde / «intellectual» rock scene for the exact same ten years. (Is it really a coincidence, I wonder, that AC/DC's reworking of 'Baby Please Don't Go' and Patti Smith's reimagining of 'Gloria' both came out in 1975, the year that «old

rock» all but died and «new waves» of it were being born?). Technically, 'Gloria' was Van Morrison's personal response to 'Louie Louie' — three incessantly repeated chords (even 'You Really Got Me' actually had *five*) and an absolute minimum of singing. But 'Louie Louie' was deliberately dumb and unpretentious, a drunken sailor's rant if there ever was one. The 18-year old Van Morrison, however, was already an Artist (that's a capital A alright) when he wrote the song. Like some of the early Bob Dylan songs, it may start out deceptively-traditionally enough ("*like to tell ya about my baby*" — sounds like Bo Diddley or John Lee Hooker or any other cocky black dude from across the Atlantic), but there's already a slight mystical twinge by the time he gets to "*you know she comes around here / at just about midnight*"... why exactly does his baby prefer to visit him around midnight? Okay, so maybe she's a hooker, or an adultress. But then we get around to spelling her name, letter by letter, and then the entire band begins chanting it with a clearly religious ring — it is not for nothing, after all, that the girl is called G-L-O-R-I-A, rather than Suzie-Q or something.

Now it's easier to get, perhaps, why Patti Smith, in her own transformation of the song, prefaced it with "*Jesus died for somebody's sins but not mine*" — the connection is through the "*Lord Jesus Christ, you take away the sins of the world*" of the Gloria part of the Mass, which is most certainly referenced in the original version as well. (Unlike Bono's part-Catholic background, Van was strictly Protestant from birth, but he must have been familiar with at least some Catholic sights and sounds). This junction of the rambunctious with the anthemic, of the profane with the holy is what really gives the song its timeless appeal — together with the voice, of course, ceaselessly screaming out each line as if the singer were trapped in some truly ecstatic rapture. Naturally, the short single version only hints at the song's trance-inducing potential; in live performance, Them sometimes transformed the song into a lengthy jam with ad-libbed lyrics (no recordings have survived, unfortunately — the closest thing to that vibe would probably be a live Doors cover of the song, though the spirit of Jim Morrison is a completely different matter from that of his namesake).

Again, nothing at all like this existed in late '64, and you can easily see why so many garage bands whose members only did know those three chords were so excited — Them were showing them a way to create not just something meaningful, but something downright *magical* out of three chords. Powerful. Anthemic. Shout-it-out-loud, let-it-all-out, not the gloomy introverted schtick of John Lee Hooker or the relaxed repetitiveness of Jimmy Reed. Throw in a little extra distortion and feedback and maybe some dissonant violin, and you got yourself the blueprint for the Velvet Underground. Expand the lyrics to epic poem length, and you get yourself Patti Smith. *Very* indirectly, echoes of the song might even be felt in U2's 'Gloria', although its melody is completely different and the subject matter is much more explicitly religious (but Bono did think of Van Morrison when they were recording). Its effect is essentially the reverse equivalent of what happened when

Ray Charles secularized gospel music with 'I Got A Woman' — here, on the contrary, Them congregate to «religify» simple pop-rock, with Van Morrison as the High Priest of the Garage Church. And even if I would rather get my kicks out of the galloping bass line of 'Baby Please Don't Go' (because I am more attracted by the «evil» than the «angelic» side of the band), there is no denying that 'Gloria' opened the doors for much grander things to come.

The song brought Them plenty of fame — especially after they debuted it on *Ready, Steady, Go!* — if not a lot of fortune; however, «improved visibility» also meant that Decca, their record label, would start to get more involved in the grooming aspect of the band's career, suggesting that their next single should maybe feature a professional contemporary pop song written by a professional contemporary pop songwriter. This already created a rift between the label and the rebellious red-haired Irish rebel, but it was probably hard for him to refuse Bert Berns, the American producer and songwriter who had just done such a fine job on the sound of 'Baby Please Don't Go' — so the band recorded 'Here Comes The Night', a lyrically trivial and melodically nice-but-unexceptional broken-hearted pop ballad that Decca simultaneously commissioned from Them and Lulu... and [Lulu's version](#) actually came out four months earlier, which left the band in the position of looking like «Five Irish Wildmen Taking Cues From A Scottish Pop Queen». Fortunately for Them, Lulu's version was slow, draggy, hookless, and sounded just like any commercial fluffy ditty — theirs, on the other hand, inventively mixed two different tempos and added an element of drama with Morrison's clever performance: this time, he does not scream his head off right from the start, but slowly draws you in, going from a paranoid whisper to all-out rave and back.

Still, despite the fact that 'Here Comes The Night' became Them's biggest — and last — chart success, its light-pop sound was hardly a natural ambience for the band. (To compensate for that a little bit, they had the B-side contain 'All For Myself', Van's barely concealed imitation of Muddy Waters' 'Rolling Stone' and 'Mannish Boy': not particularly interesting, but a pretty useful antidote for those who might have feared that the band had gotten too soft and commercial). It is, therefore, no surprise that the song was conspicuously lacking on the «proper», 14-track-long UK version of the band's first LP, finally released in June '65 (by contrast, the 12-track-long US version predictably opened with it, because what kind of fool keeps his biggest hit off his latest LP?). The album did include 'Gloria' — though not 'Baby Please Don't Do' — but all the rest of the material was new, with five more Morrison originals; a few older covers from idols such as Jimmy Reed, John Lee Hooker, and Chuck Berry; and a few more contemporary contributions, mostly by Bert Berns and his co-writers.

With all this new stuff, some of which is bound to be less inspired than other, the band's deficiencies immediately come into focus — namely, the fact that the band is not as much of a real band as a relatively trusty, if a bit creaky, vehicle for the

artistic and theatrical genius of Sir Ivan. Although I am not even sure of who played what on which song — quite a bit of the work here may have been contributed by session players — the arrangements, be it blues, rock'n'roll, or soulful R&B, rarely strike me as in any way memorable on their own. The three producers involved with the record (Berns, Dick Rowe, and Tommy Scott) help the band get a sharp, aggressive sound, but there is hardly one second on the entire album when Van Morrison is not the main center of attraction. This, unfortunately, puts Them in a difficult spot next to most of their «elder» rhythm'n'blues competitors — you could never say that Mick Jagger makes you forget all about Keith Richards or Brian Jones, or that 'The House Of The Rising Sun' would have the same effect without Alan Price on the organ, or that the Yardbirds would have made it big without their fabulous roster of guitar players. But if you think of the record more as of «Van Morrison featuring Them» than «Them featuring Van Morrison», even the filler eventually becomes enjoyable.

Like, when you listen to the [original version](#) of 'Just A Little Bit' by Rosco Gordon, it's a fun little boppy number where the singer easily makes you believe that, truly and verily, he don't want much, he just wants a little bit — "*a teeny-weeny bit of your love*". Eric Burdon and the Animals sang it in more or less the same vein. What Them do, however, is different: they set the tune to the ominous riff of Booker T. & The MG's 'Green Onions' and then let Van explode all over the opening "*I DON'T WANT IT ALL!*" with such power, there is no room for misinterpretation here — the man is a filthy liar who very clearly wants *ALL* of it and much, much more, right here and right now. It's a predatorial, no-holds-barred delivery that does make Mick Jagger look like a schoolboy, taking Eric Burdon and Phil May along for the ride. From here, it's less than a half-step to reach the intensity level of Iggy Pop's **Fun House** performance — and it's not as if Van wasn't capable of matching that intensity completely, it's just that 1965 was still five years away from 1970, and certain «standards» had to be observed for the time being.

This ability to raise everything to the status of hot-blooded drama makes the success or failure of each single track on here squarely dependent on the high-or-low state of Morrison's spirit while doing the takes — in that respect, 'Just A Little Bit' is a major highlight, while Jimmy Reed's 'Bright Lights, Big City' and Bobby Troup's / Chuck Berry's 'Route 66' are relatively minor ones (and 'Route 66' also suffers unfavorably in comparison to the tightness and riff-a-liciousness of the Stones' version from 1964). One might also question the usefulness of all those Bert Berns covers: 'I Gave My Love A Diamond' is a lyrical re-write of the classic 'Riddle Song' with more «contemporary» lyrics, but I wouldn't call Van's singing style a good fit for what essentially used to be a soft lullaby. 'Go On Home Baby' is a more typical rhythm'n'blues number in the Stones' vein, but once again Berns' thieving practices come through unfavorably as the chorus of the song is very transparently nicked off 'Sloop John B' (a.k.a. 'The John B. Sails'), still in the domain of The Kingston Trio at the time rather than the

Beach Boys, but pretty cheap as far as «original» songwriting is concerned. (This is more a jab at Berns, though, than at Van, who does a mighty pissed-off ‘Sloop John B’ anyway, as compared to the Beach Boys’ humorous melancholy).

Of Morrison’s originals, the most widely lauded one here (next to ‘Gloria’, of course), is ‘Mystic Eyes’, a fast, loud, bubbling rave whose groove is quite reminiscent of the famous live raves by the Yardbirds — all the way, that is, until Van comes into his own with half-sung, half-slurred lyrics that seem totally ad-libbed: "*One Sunday morning / A-we went walkin' / Down by the old graveyard*". What sort of pop band starts off their first album with a song about walking down by the old graveyard? What sort of pop band even had a song in 1965 that would contain the word ‘graveyard’? "*I looked into those mystic eyes*". Whose mystic eyes? Of the one he was walking with? Or were these some kind of Edgar Allen Poe mystic eyes, with a white shroud to go along with them? And why does that bit of vocal improvisation suddenly emerge out of the wild rhythm’n’blues groove, only to be buried along with it in the fade-out?..

Legend has it that the whole thing was actually a 10-minute long studio jam, with the whole band just merrily stomping along and Morrison just blowing away on harmonica and then, suddenly, out of nowhere, deciding to improvise a couple of verses from a song he was working on. Arguably the worst decision they ever made was to condense the entire jam into less than three minutes — had they boldly decided to keep the entire thing, *they* would have had the honor of being the first pop band to feature a lengthy improvised jam session on a studio LP, rather than Love with ‘Revelation’ or the Stones with ‘Going Home’ a year later. But even so, ‘Mystic Eyes’ gives Them one of the most bizarre, if not outright *the* most bizarre album opening ever seen in pop music until that particular moment. Most other bands would probably want to hook the listener in with a catchy pop tune or a solidly danceable rocker. Only "*The "Angry" Young Them!*" dared to open things up with a tribal ritual and a trance-induced shamanistic epiphany instead. No wonder Iggy Pop was such a major fan.

But it’s not as if Van was incapable of seducing the listener with a solidly written soul number, either. ‘If You And I Could Be As Two’, floating on the waves of a wobbly, but steady bassline, is a fairly traditional one in the vein of Solomon Burke, with Van sounding like Mick Jagger on a whole lot of extra steroids — not to mention already featuring the early sprouts of his poetic gift ("*If we could dream and by our dreams / Sew this wicked world up at the seams*" is definitely not a line you’d expect to meet in a Solomon Burke song). Even better is ‘You Just Can’t Win’, a dark piece of social criticism — thematically in the same ballpark as the Stones’ ‘Play With Fire’ — with a vocal melody and delivery that could have easily fit on any of Van’s classic albums, starting with **Astral Weeks** and onward. This is dark, semi-Gothic folk-rock with a clearly European rather than American atmosphere: "*One more coffee / One more cigarette / One more morning trying to forget*" is, I

would guess, already more Jacques Brel than John Lee Hooker. The punchline — "*baby, it's a sin, you know you just can't win when you are in!*" — hits real hard, even if it is not immediately clear what, where, and how it hits precisely. (Wikipedia claims, without references, that the song was inspired by Dylan, but I have my doubts about that, unless we imply that just about any pop song that discussed serious matters in 1965 was inspired by Dylan).

"*The important thing is that when you play this LP, you will be listening to the truth*", pompously state the original liner notes on the back of the album — and, for once, the guys at Decca weren't really bullshitting us (like Andrew Loog Oldham always tended to do when writing his liner notes for the Stones' albums). A bit of filler aside, Them's first long-playing album fully delivers on the original premise of the singles — nothing here truly outperforms 'Baby Please Don't Go' or 'Gloria', but (almost) nothing sallies the reputation of the guys who made those in any possible way. What the band lacks in the departments of writing creative melodies or virtuoso playing, it fully compensates with energy, passion, and belief in the great artistic credo of «all or nothing» — if you're not ready to engage 100% in whatever you're doing, better don't do it at all, but if you *are* ready, those areas in which you are lacking won't even matter in the end.

I sometimes wonder why the designers of the original LP, having decided to brand the record as **The Angry Young Them**, then hastened to put the word "**Angry**" in quotation marks, as if reneging a little on their initial pledge. Perhaps they thought that the quotes would «soften» the impact — as in, these guys aren't *really* angry, you know, they're just sort of artistically pretending to be angry, they don't *really* want their fans to engage in anti-social behavior... But it may well have been that the quotation marks were put in at Van's own request, because labeling the band as «angry» also sort of cheapens their vibe and diminishes their status. **The "Angry" Young Them** is not really an «angry» record in the same sense as a Clash album, for instance; it is more of an «ecstatic» record, where the word «anger» is just one of the possible ways to describe the elevated emotional state in which it is introduced to us with 'Mystic Eyes' and which is then preserved all through its 14 songs. Just, you know, fourteen rounds of adrenaline-heavy ecstatic music-making. *Very* pretentious for its time period, yes — but a kind of pretense that's worth every penny for each drop of sweat off Van The Man's brow.

