

# TOM JONES



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1964-2021</i>	<i>Pop</i>	<i><a href="#">It's Not Unusual (1965)</a></i>

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*Only Solitaire*

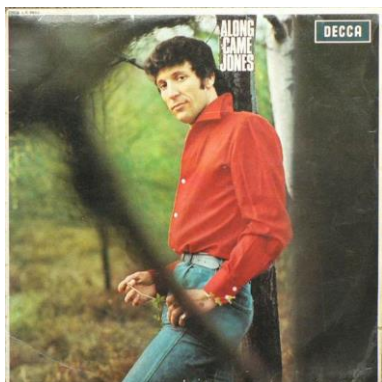
Artist: *Tom Jones*

Years: *1965*

George Starostin's Reviews

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## ALONG CAME JONES

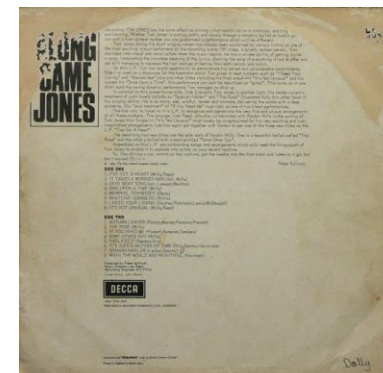
Album released:

May 1965

V A L U E

2 2 3 3 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) I've Got A Heart; 2) It Takes A Worried Man; 3) Skye Boat Song; 4) Once Upon A Time; 5) Memphis, Tennessee; 6) Whatcha' Gonna Do; 7) I Need Your Loving; 8) It's Not Unusual; 9) Autumn Leaves; 10) The Rose; 11) If You Need Me; 12) Some Other Guy; 13) Endlessly; 14) It's Just A Matter Of Time; 15) Spanish Harlem; 16) When The World Was Beautiful.

### REVIEW

I wish I could begin this – or any other – review by writing something like this: «Hard as it may be to believe, there was once a time, the briefest time in the universe, when Tom Jones was not Tom Jones...». Alas, I have a nagging suspicion that even when Tom Jones was still Thomas John Woodward, living humbly in the vicinity of the coal mines of Pontypridd, Wales, he was already aspiring to be Tom Jones. He was well on the way to be Tom Jones even on the earliest recordings featuring his voice, such as a bunch of [unreleased demos](#) by «Tommy Scott And The Senators», dating back to 1964 and marked by the well-recognizable production style of Joe Meek. And he is pretty much the Tom Jonesiest of all the Tom Joneses in the universe on his first album for Decca, **Along Came Jones**, recorded and released on the heels of the smash success of his second single and signature song, 'It's Not Unusual'. There is just no getting away from the fact that with Tom Jones, what you always see is what you always get. The man keeps no esoteric skeletons in his closet.



That said, being Tom Jones in late '64 / early '65 was not yet such a major crime against public decency as it would soon become in the upcoming age of the glitzy pop superstar. There was an entire generation of UK blue-eyed soul singers with larger-than-life voices coming up, and at first Tom Jones could be mistaken for just another soldier in the army that also included Paul Jones of Manfred Mann, Long John Baldry, Cliff Bennett, and others to whom the soulful extravertedness of American R&B was more of an inspiration than the clenched-teeth aggression of rock'n'roll. In that context, Tom Jones' *first* single for Decca, '[Chills And Fever](#)', is very much aligned with that spirit: a moody soulful groove, driven more by bluesy electric guitar and organ than Vegasy brass and specifically distinguished by a voodooistic harmonica solo (allegedly played by none other than Jimmy Page himself!), it's a pretty wild outburst, and who knows — perhaps if the song had charted, we would all be living in a different world. But it did not, and even if it did not entirely cure Tom from his good feelings towards bluesy R&B, nothing on his first album would approach this level of «jungle tension».

For the second single, a much poppier song was chosen: 'It's Not Unusual', co-written by Tom's manager Gordon Mills (the one who actually came up with the idea of turning «Thomas John Woodward» into «Tom Jones») and professional pop songwriter Les Reed. Although the musical foundation of the song still features a pretty nice and uncommon duet between proto-slappin' bass and proto-funky guitar, the mix prioritizes pompous horns, bringing on visions of bright lights and floating confetti — and although the song's subject matter is unrequited love, the arrangement makes Tom's "*oh, I wanna die*" feel more like "*oh, I'm in heaven, guys, let's PARTY!*" I'm not even sure myself what I feel about the song — well, I guess it's more or less on the level of contemporary Motown material, and Tom Jones has nothing to be embarrassed about when competing against Berry Gordy's teams of professional belters. (Fun fact: the song was originally intended for Sandie Shaw, but she gave it back to Tom after hearing his singing on the demo version. Perhaps had *she* chosen to do it, she might have preserved the melancholic intention of the lyrics).

In any case, the song made Tom Jones into what he would be for the entirety of his career — a pop star who would channel his boundless energy into permanently celebrating the joys of life rather than tapping into its mysteries or exposing its evils. The fact that he came from a rhythm-and-blues background helped immensely: both in his vocals *and* in his stage presence he would display a wild level of freedom that regular, «polite» pop performers would never dare embrace. The public loved his persona because he was one of the first people in the UK to give them the primal power of rock'n'roll without the «anti-social» element that usually goes along with it. Mick Jagger and Eric Burdon were scary; Tom Jones was the «*I love you one and all!*» guy who only wanted to be loved in return. Preferably by hot young babes, of course, but middle-aged housewives worked, too, because they bought his records and made him enough money to attract even more hot young babes. In a way,

it would be Tom Jones to point the way for Elvis (meaning, of course, the last part of Elvis' career) rather than the other way around... but we'll get to that eventually.

At least **Along Came Jones**, probably titled more after the Coasters song (remember "*along came long, lean, lanky Jones?*") than the Gary Cooper movie, has the advantage of featuring a young, excited, and hungry Tom Jones, hunting for fortune and fame rather than resting on it. There is not a single tune out of these sixteen numbers (Decca really went out of their way to accommodate their newest acquisition, even giving him two more grooves than was customary on a UK LP) where the man would not be pulling his entire weight, be it suave ballad, sleazy pop-rocker, or sexy R&B groove — nor could you accuse the backing band of slacking, as the rhythm section, guitars, organs, and horns all integrate in the most organic and professional manner. (Another fun fact: the drummer on this and the next several Tom Jones album was Chris Slade, a guy who went through a long and diverse musical journey only to achieve his greatest fame decades later as a replacement for Phil Rudd in AC/DC. It sure is a long way from 'It's Not Unusual' to 'Thunderstruck', but the astonishing thing is that it is a way that actually *exists*.)

On the down side, this is still a Tom Jones album, and this means every single song on here, regardless of its genre, style, tonality, origins, or intentions, is going to be a Tom Jones song — loud, braggard, in your face, and with all the subtlety of a Donald Trump on the WWE ring. When the opening piano chords to 'Memphis, Tennessee' ring out with all the raving force of a 'Can I Get A Witness', you know this is going to get hysterical, and, indeed, Tom's opening wail of "*LONG DISTANCE INFORMATION! GIVE ME MEMPHIS TENNESSEE!*" already reminds me of the old Soviet joke having to do with the overall quality of phone service in the country ("*HELLO MOSCOW, THIS IS VLADIVOSTOK CALLING!*" — Japanese tourist from an adjacent room: "*Why can't he just use the telephone instead?*"). The good news is that Tom Jones covers way too few rock'n'roll songs to ruin all of them at once; frankly, I'm not even sure why he would think that 'Memphis, Tennessee' would be a suitable choice — either he never understood what genuine rock'n'roll is supposed to be about, or he thought that it wouldn't hurt anyway to turn it into a quasi-operatic extravaganza. But it *does* hurt. If Chuck Berry were already in his grave, he would be duck-walking all over it.

*Much* better are Tom's covers of actual soul (or «soul-pop») material from his African-American colleagues across the sea. Here, Solomon Burke's 'If You Need Me' is an obvious highlight — I still remain partial to the Stones' cover (just because Jagger gives it such an amusingly «jagged» edge), but Tom's booming, bigger-than-life take is really what the song was destined for. There's quite a gorgeous arrangement, too, with a beautifully busy «delicate» lead guitar line weaving around

Tom's imposing vocal torso and a gradual crescendo of organ, horns, and strings (which only emerge for the semi-spoken bridge section). This kind of cover, my gut feeling tells me, is genuine art that needs no apology. Nor does Tom's version of Chuck Willis' 1956 single 'Whatcha' Gonna Do' — a blues-de-luxe tune with a highly derivative melody but a somewhat original dramatization, it was a good show from Chuck and it works just fine when Tom unleashes his full-on God-of-War power; his phrasing on the "*whatcha' gonna do when your baby le-e-e-eaves you*" bit makes things much more expressive, as if Tom were really addressing *you*, the listener, in person, taunting you for being so much less of an alpha male than the curly-haired guy who just took over your speakers.

These, however, are songs that were written with full frontal... *assault* in mind; where things get much, much worse is on numbers that require a bit of calm and subtlety, like 'Spanish Harlem' or 'Autumn Leaves'. The arrangements on the ballads are fairly dull, and the singing just goes to remind you how loudness and exuberance can easily smooth away and demolish all the tiny emotional nuances preserved in softer, more «pensive» performances. Pushing on like a tank, Mr. Jones scores an easy win each time his approach matches the original design, and gets stuck in a ditch each time he overscreams on a song that was never supposed to be submitted to such brutal treatment.

At least Gordon Mills seemed to understand what sort of material should be written for his brawny protégé, and out of the six songs that he writes, co-writes, or arranges for Jones, only 'The Rose', a folk-themed ballad combining sentimental clichés with unbridled pomp, is a barely bearable dud. "*My love said to me / A hero you'll be / If you bring me the rose of love*" — by the end of the song, I'm fully convinced that the main reason why Tom Jones is finding his errand to be a problem is that he's decided that such a rose must be at least the size of an elephant. But the faster-moving, danceable numbers like 'I've Got A Heart' can be fun: taking a rhythmic cue from Martha & The Vandellas' 'Heatwave' (if anything, Martha & The Vandellas *would* be the perfect Motown band for Tom to emulate as far as exuberance is concerned), Jones is perfectly believable when he sings "*I've got a heart that really needs somebody / Someone comes along / Take this heart of mine, I'll give it free*" (except your arms probably won't open wide enough to hold such a huge heart). It's pompous, but playful, and the jumpy arrangement is infectious — clearly, the song was written to repeat the impact of 'It's Not Unusual', and it may even reflect Tom's personality more accurately and directly than the big hit.

Finally, a big cheer to whoever was smart enough to invent such a rousing arrangement for 'The Skye Boat Song' — now *that* one totally hits the bull's eye! Forget all those slow, somber, foggy-mystical Celtic-Woman style neo-pagan versions by moody green-eyed girls from the Highlands — and just come shake your booty with Mr. Jones to the most rousing, jog-

friendly version of Bonnie Prince Charlie's tale ever recorded! Now *that* is a true "speed bonnie boat" if there ever was one! With a merry organ solo to boot, the entire band is just hoppin' along, and if somebody tries to protest and say that they have completely demolished the true spirit of the song, well... well, yes, they have, but admit it, *that* is the proper spirit of delivering the message that "*Charlie will come again*". None of that whining and sighing, just hold your head up proudly and let the suckers know that it's only a matter of time!

It is hardly a coincidence that the scratchy guitar riff on 'It's Not Unusual' (as well as, probably, some of the other songs on the album, though I'm not sure about the exact credits) was played by Vic Flick — the guitarist on the original recording of the *James Bond* theme — and *doubly* not a coincidence when you remember that Tom got to sing the title theme for *Thunderball* later that year. For all of Britain's musical explosion of 1963-64, that musical world was a «boys' world», and now the rejuvenated and reinvented musical scene desperately needed a «*Man*», its own Sean Connery, to appeal to all those people who wanted a sound that would feel both «contemporary» and «mature» at the same time. And then along came Jones — who may have been only a few months older than John Lennon, but looked, acted, and sounded almost «fatherly» in comparison. No *actual* wide-open hairy chest yet, but you can easily visualize it when listening to about half of the songs on here. There's so much rampant masculinity here, it makes even the likes of Eric Burdon (let alone Mick Jagger) seem like a snotty short-pants teenager.

The good thing about this vibe is that it hardly feels like «toxic» masculinity — most of the songs are either laments or respectable serenades, rather than rude innuendos; Tom's treatment of his lady prey is certainly more courteous than Sean Connery's. The bad thing is that it is simply quite shallow and one-sided: each song delivers 100% of its message upon the very first play and never really has anything more to say to you. Every once in a while, this approach works like a charm, with about a third of the album delivering the goods; but whenever it is being applied to songs that require a more nuanced approach, **Along Came Jones** becomes the equivalent of a low-bitrate MP3 file next to a lossless format, if I might be allowed to conclude this on a metaphor from an age that, surprisingly enough, still has not managed to make Tom Jones irrelevant (his latest album from 2021 still managed to hit #1 on the UK charts).





## WHAT'S NEW, PUSSYCAT?

Album released:

September 1965

V A L U E  
2 2 3 2 2

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) What's New Pussycat?; 2) Some Other Guy; 3) I've Got A Heart; 4) Little By Little; 5) Won't You Give Him (One More Chance); 6) Bama Lama Bama Loo; 7) With These Hands; 8) Untrue Unfaithful; 9) To Wait For Love; 10) And I Tell The Sea; 11) The Rose; 12) Endlessly.

### REVIEW

The big problem with 'What's New, Pussycat?' — one of the most controversial songs ever to come out of the Bacharach/David camp — is not that it's sexist (although it certainly is, but then what *wasn't* sexist back in 1965?). The big problem is that it's simply *not sexy*. It's a loud, jarring waltz with a country fair / carnival flavor, with a loud, jarring, and highly obnoxious lead singer who's coming on so strong that it feels like he's *way* more interested in showing the whole world just how big and burly and overpowering he is, rather than, you know, actually make love or anything like that. I don't really know why that song exists, honestly. It's not seductive, it's not funny, its vocal hooks are blunt and tasteless, and the only possible reason to sing it in a karaoke bar would be a desire to cherish the single most embarrassing memory of your entire life in case you need source material for a game of Truth or Dare somewhere along the line.

Oh no, wait, I know the *real* purpose of the song. They wrote it simply so that somebody could put the line "*I'll soon be kissing your sweet little pussy*" on record and get away with it. Yeah, that's pretty much what Tom Jones sings in the last





verse, heh heh (with the last two syllables merely a clever ruse to cover it up). Who knows, maybe Burt and Hal weren't strangers to Truth or Dare themselves. In any case, if there's any true historical importance to the song, it is that it represents a rare case of mischievous hooliganry on the part of Messrs. "They Long To Be Close To You" Bacharach and David, perhaps worth a listen for that very fact and nothing else.

*It's not unusual*, of course, that the number, used as the title song for the infamous 1965 screwball comedy of the same name, became Tom's biggest US hit (meanwhile, in the UK it proved unable to beat the success of 'It's Not Unusual'), unmatched in popularity until 'She's A Lady' five years later (a song that largely delivered the same message, but in a funkier, more straightforward manner). America, as we know, just loves all things B-I-G, and 'What's New, Pussycat?', with its bombastic arrangement and the most in-yer-face performance put up by Tom until then, fit right in with the public tastes. Here was something that one of those hip British Invasion guys was singing with the flair of a Texan oil magnate; how could it *not* be a big hit for the man?

The success was so smashing that Tom's American label, Parrot, decided to go ahead and follow it up with an extra LP — so keep in mind that the resulting album, also titled **What's New Pussycat?**, is in no way a soundtrack to the actual movie (which mostly consisted of Bacharach/David songs as performed by Dionne Warwick and Manfred Mann, among others), but rather consists of various scattered 1965 recordings from Tom, including a bunch of songs that had originally been left off the US version of **Along Came Jones**, some obscure B-sides from contemporary singles, and a few outtakes specially preserved for the American market. In fact, if you chop off the four songs that had already been included on Tom's UK debut, what you're left with are eight short songs barely amounting to 20 minutes of new material.

Of these, the most remembered one is probably Tom's take on the old standard 'With These Hands', which, coincidentally (or not), was also recorded the same year by P. J. Proby for his second album, so if you have six minutes to kill, you can compare the two Gigantic Vocal Giants of 1965 side-by-side — personally, I'm at a loss for words here, because this glitzy pomp always refuses to get digested by my emotional tract, and the best I can say is "*gee, nice lung power!*" But at least when Mr. Jones uses this power instead on a flamboyant piece of pure lose-your-head entertainment like the cover of Little Richard's 'Bama Lama Bama Loo', it makes adequate sense — and, for that matter, of all the old school rockers Little Richard was probably the closest figure in spirit to Tom: pure wild-eyed maniacal energy with no room for subtlety, irony, or reservation. (Their [conjoined 1969 performance](#) on Tom Jones' TV show is probably my personal favorite of all the Tom Jones duets with other «legends» on that show, just because they match each other so well in form and purpose).

Most of the other new material here is credited to Gordon Mills (sometimes with Tom sharing the credits), and although nothing stands out in terms of originality, the rocking material is a little preferable to the Vegas side of the pie: 'Little By Little', stealing its title from the Rolling Stones and its melody from Chuck Berry's 'Memphis Tennessee' (which, not coincidentally, Tom also recorded a cover of that same year), is a good showcase for The Squires, with a bit of the good old garage spirit there shining through all the brass encumbrance; of course, Tom's fundamental approach to singing is always on the campy side, but sometimes a bit of camp mixed with a bit of garage can be fun! The «exotica»-style flute-and-organ touch on 'Untrue Unfaithful' is also amusing — Tom in «witchy-woman» mode is just a little reminiscent of Screamin' Jay Hawkins (odd thing, really, that he never ended up covering 'I Put A Spell On You').

Everything else ultimately depends on the arrangement: I appreciate the cover of Solomon Burke's 'Won't You Give Him (One More Chance)' for its primary reliance on tasteful, almost harpsichord-flavored, acoustic guitar — and I actively dislike how the potentially decent folk-pop ballad 'I Tell The Sea' has that same guitar swallowed up and overwhelmed by the swooping strings (not to mention Tom's laying it *really* thick on the vibrato, but oh well, that's how one infiltrates the hearts of the middle-aged housewives and if it never fails, who am I to criticize an efficient technique?).

In the end, I can more or less paint a mental portrait of the potential audience for each single song on here — with the glaring exception of the title track; in this case, I simply have no idea who you have to be in order to get your kicks from a song like 'What's New, Pussycat?'. I've even listened to several cover versions, just to see if anybody fared better with the idea, and found most of them even more clueless than the original (the one by Bobby Darin is particularly bland and boring). In the end, I think I am decreeing that the best way to listen to the song is by plugging in [Alvin & The Chipmunks](#): it's pretty much the only version that felt adequate to me — though, for best effect, it should probably be accompanied with a Loony Tunes cartoon.

