

THE WAILERS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1959-1969</i>	<i>Pop-rock</i>	<i>Beat Guitar (1959)</i>

Only Solitaire

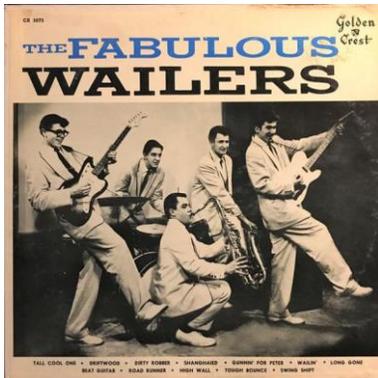
Artist: *The Wailers*

Years: *1959*

George Starostin's Reviews

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THE FABULOUS WAILERS

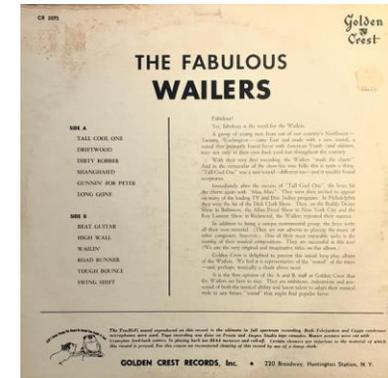
Album released:

V A L U E

December 1959

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More info:



Tracks: 1) Tall Cool One; 2) Driftwood; 3) Dirty Robber; 4) Shanghaied; 5) Gunnin' For Peter; 6) Long Gone; 7) Beat Guitar; 8) High Wall; 9) Wailin'; 10) Road Runner; 11) Tough Bounce; 12) Swing Shift.

REVIEW

The Wailers – or The Fabulous Wailers, as they would later be known, due to the influence of their first album sleeve and also, probably, to be distinguished from Bob Marley’s Wailers, with whom they have nothing in common – anyway, the Wailers are usually mentioned in rock history as one of the forefathers, or even *the* forefathers of «garage rock», which is not inaccurate; but it is probably even more important that in my own chronologically organized history of 1950s rock, they happen to be the very first instance of an American *rock’n’roll band*, period. Not a subordinate unit formed to back some outstanding frontman, like the Crickets or the Blue Caps; not a vocal group like the Drifters or the Chantels – but a more or less democratic unit of young musicians, writing some, if not most, of their own compositions with each member contributing something to the collective spirit. Naturally, they were hardly the first such band to be formed within the confines of a US high school – but, arguably, they might have been the first such band to make rock’n’roll history, and, even more importantly, the first such band whose work may still be heard and enjoyed today.



To be honest, I have no idea what it is exactly about the ocean-meets-mountain air of Tacoma and Seattle, Washington, that makes the place into such a significant motherlode for rock music, all the way from those early garage bands to the arising of the grunge scene thirty years later. Maybe there is a perfectly logical and valid socio-political explanation, or it could simply have been the sinister influence of the nearby Black Lodge. But it is also quite telling that, as a rule, Tacoma / Seattle bands have a certain level of integrity to them that tends to elevate their position as artists while blocking them from too much fame and fortune — one of the reasons why the Wailers did not make it big after their initial bit of success is that they allegedly refused to stay on the East Coast to make further recordings, losing their record contract upon returning back to Washington State. There's somebody, finally, whose heart was *really* in the highlands!

Another reason, however, might have been that the Wailers' sound was, well, relatively unusual for the typical expectations of a rock'n'roll band. Somewhat contrary to the well-established narrative of teen-pop boy bands completely squeezing out the values of wild, unbridled rock'n'roll by 1959, there *was* still some commercial demand for such music left, objective proof of which is the success of artists such as Link Wray and the Ventures; however, what most of these guys had in common was a desire to explore the potential of the electric guitar — thus, the saxophone, still such a prominent component of the classic sound of Fats Domino and Little Richard, was largely considered outdated for the kids' purposes. The Wailers, however, placed a comparably equal emphasis on all their lead instruments — the tenor sax of Mark Marush, the piano and organ of Kent Morrill, and the electric guitar of Richard Dangel; in addition, rhythm guitarist John Greek occasionally switched to trumpet (!), while Mike Burk on drums, in trying to keep up with the others, added plenty of noise on his own, abusing the heck out of those cymbals several years before Ringo made this approach truly popular.

The result is a thick, massive, polyphonous sound which, honestly, feels a little messy for the production values of 1959, especially since the Golden Crest label, with whom the Wailers signed up for their original run of records, was unable to provide them with the best possible studio or a proper producer. (Besides, American production values were still quite crappy in general at the time — one can only wonder how these tunes would have sounded if they were engineered at Abbey Road Studios). But once your ears get a little adjusted to the mess, the Wailers emerge as an interesting, innovative band with their own vision; some of these tracks are absolutely unique for the standards of 1959, and most of them feature a brand of rock'n'roll that feels antiquated and progressive at the same time.

The band's very first single was also their first and only modest bit of commercial success from that era: originally called 'Scotch On The Rocks' (an earlier demo version can still be found under that title as a bonus track on some of the album's

editions), it was rebranded into 'Tall Cool One' at somebody's insistence because, apparently, direct mention of alcoholic drinks in song titles could still impede radio play a quarter century after the repeal of Prohibition. In the overall context of the Wailers' discography, 'Tall Cool One' occupies more or less the same place as Elvis' 'Heartbreak Hotel' or Link Wray's 'Rumble' — it's a bit subtler, slower, moodier than the artists' overall styles, but seems to hit a certain spot for the listeners that the faster, more rhythmic and aggressive numbers don't seem to reach. I'm pretty sure that those opening suspenseful proto-Bondian chords were ringing in Leiber and Stoller's ears when they sat down to write 'Love Potion #9' (recorded and released about a couple months after 'Tall Cool One' hit the airwaves), and the song's well-engineered build-up, going from the same kind of playful bluesy piano that got us so agitated on 'Heartbreak Hotel' to a powerful all-out jam with Marush blowing his lungs out on sax and Morrill continuing to support him on the keys, was something people had never heard before. It's, like, Atlantic R&B meets Memphis rock'n'roll and the unholy union of the two produces a child of highly unconventionally beauty-ugliness.

But as good as the song is, I think I like [the B-side](#) even more. *Not* taking its title from Bo Diddley's 'Road Runner', which would not be released until a few months later, it's a deceptively simple instrumental which you have to listen to a couple of times attentively before realizing just how unique it is for the times. That opening dialog between the two guitars — one scratchily riffing on one distorted chord, the other offering an almost proto-reggae syncopated rhythm pattern. The sudden emerging of a Duane Eddy-like surfy twang melody out of nowhere, with faintly menacing echoes of a sax countermelody in the background. Then, at about 1:09 into the song, the proto-reggae guitar becomes a proto-funk one: okay, they probably borrowed that style of playing from Bo Diddley, but somehow it ends up sounding more like proto-Talking Heads than post-Bo Diddley, if you get my drift. Then, miraculously, at about 1:30 the sax emerges from its hideout and begins imitating that funky bit the guitars were playing earlier — I mean, had anybody ever before tried to play the saxophone as if it were a Bo Diddley-carried square guitar? It's less than two minutes of music, and already we got a small hodge-podge of interesting and exciting musical ideas that had to take a bunch of high school kids from Tacoma to bring into this world. Interestingly, for comparison, when the much-beloved Ventures would [later cover](#) their compatriots' song, they would throw out most of these ideas, reducing the tune to a minimalistic shell of its former glory. No sax, no funk, just a nice lil' ditty to dance along to (well, it *was* placed on an album called **Twist With The Ventures**, after all).

For that matter, the Ventures also covered 'Shanghied', the Wailers' second single, on the same album — and again, in a far more watered-down and toothless manner than their more rebellious Tacoma brethren. This time, it's more about simply rocking out than coming up with tall cool new ideas, but those lead guitar breaks are quite badass — hysterical, dirty,

threatening, now that the guitar has finally been allowed to function as the band's leading voice over the saxophone, buried in the mix. The 'Susie-Q'-like drum beat is no slouch, either, adding a bit of jungle power to the proceedings (the Ventures would completely dispense with that one as well, sharpening and cleaning up the tune to sound more like a Duane Eddy number — certainly not bad, but nowhere near as rock'n'roll).

It was not until their third single that the Wailers dared to actually *wail* with a bit of vocal power: 'Dirty Robber' is their first composition to feature a full set of lyrics, delivered by Morrill, and, appropriately for a proper proto-garage tune, it's all about the lying, cheating bitch that left the protagonist high and dry ("*you've taken my money, you've taken my car, little girl you even took my guitar!*") Much better known today as a cover by the Sonics, the most famous of the Wailers' protégés to come in their footsteps, this original stands pretty good on its own, though Morrill's thin, nasal vocals can hardly hold their ground against Gerry Roslie's sandpapered throat. But the Wailers themselves knew well enough that singing was not one of their fortes, and the only other vocal number from those early sessions is their cover of Little Richard's 'Lucille' (not a particular highlight, although their electric guitar transcription of the original's sax solo is quite teasing).

Of the tracks recorded specifically for their first LP, most are mid-to-fast instrumental rock'n'roll numbers that do not show too much progression over the sound of the first single, but are consistently listenable and exciting. Everything — every single track, other than the bonus additions on CD versions — is credited to Greek, Dangel, and occasionally Morrill, though much of what they do constitutes variations on previously published tunes: e.g. 'Gunnin' For Peter', as they already hint at in the title, is indeed set to the basic melody of the 'Peter Gunn Theme', the suspenseful bass intro of 'Beat Guitar' is clearly influenced by Vince Taylor's 'Brand New Cadillac', and I think I counted at least a couple variations on Chuck Berry's 'Johnny B. Goode' as well. But even if something like 'Long Gone' is basically just Chuck Berry sped up to the max, it's still a step up in terms of energy level, what with those sax and piano banging away like mad in the background, forming a power trio with the lead guitar that Chuck, always the egomaniac, never had in *his* own band (poor Johnnie Johnson never got to sound as loud on those classic sides as Kent Morrill does here).

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to what might be not just *the* most unique composition on this album, but one of the least typical instrumental compositions on the late Fifties' pop market in general. The only soft and slow «ballad» on the record, '[Driftwood](#)' could be defined as an early example of surf-rock, but it sounds like no other surf-rock tune I've ever heard. The repetitive, minimalistic, slightly flanged-sounding rhythm guitar, framed by Morrill's quietly lapping piano waves and overhung by Greek's simple, but atmospheric jazzy trumpet — all of that creates a relaxing, slightly melancholic

mood with early shades of psychedelia, making the song more akin to something like Fleetwood Mac's 'Albatross' or some late 1960s psycho-folk bit of trippy jamming than a typical walk-on-the-beach-hand-in-hand surf ballad from the hands of the Ventures or the Shadows. Indeed, when I first heard the song I was almost convinced that my digital copy was the result of somebody's error and that somebody accidentally included some Lee Hazlewood demo from around 1969 instead of an actual Wailers tune — yet, apparently, there is no mistake about it. They never did anything like that again, and while the actual song, assessed by the general overall standards, hardly goes over «pretty» and «nice», there's honestly nothing else quite like it from *those* days.

Certainly, this is not to say that **The Fabulous Wailers** is some jaw-dropping masterpiece from the pre-Beatles era, unjustly relegated to the status of a footnote for music historians and general trash diggers. For one thing, this raw, ballsy, sax-heavy sound would fairly soon be taken up a notch by the Sonics — who would be even louder, more brash, and (not unimportantly) much better recorded; any big fans of the Sonics, winding their way backwards to the Wailers, will almost inevitably come to think of this LP as the caring and influential, but less talented and more cautious, (spiritual) father of a far more prodigious child. But each epoch sets its own rules, limitations, and distinctive features, and I would say that the Wailers, as befitted an era that still placed some heavy restrictions on «wildness» as an artistic factor, compensated for this with a bit more musicality — I actually get more pleasure from mentally tracing the guitar, sax, and piano patterns the way they are played on these rock'n'roll numbers than in the case of the Sonics, where the whole point is simply to let yourself be carried away by the awesome noise without getting sidetracked by any of its individual sources. There are far more memorable sax riffs on this album, for instance, than on any of the Sonics' records — definitely an advantage that the less fortunate teachers have on their more famous students.

In short, there is *definitely* a reason, other than pure history, for which you should pick up this record if you just like good rock'n'roll played in a slightly (sometimes seriously) different manner from those you are typically used to. And in terms of pure history, well, this is simply one of the best rock'n'roll records from 1959 — a year that has *not* gone down in history in general as a particularly good one for rock'n'roll, so all the more reason and all the more intrigue to check it out!

