

ALEX HARVEY



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1964–1982</i>	<i>Classic rhythm'n'blues</i>	<i>Reelin' And Rockin' (1964)</i>

Only Solitaire

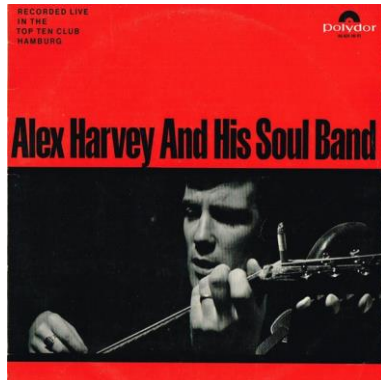
Artist: *Alex Harvey*

Years: *1964*

George Starostin's Reviews

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ALEX HARVEY AND HIS SOUL BAND

Album released:

March 1964

V A L U E
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More info:



Tracks: 1) Framed; 2) I Ain't Worrying Baby; 3) Backwater Blues; 4) Let The Good Times Roll; 5) Going Home; 6) I've Got My Mojo Working; 7) Teensville USA; 8) New Orleans; 9) Bo Diddley Is A Gun Slinger; 10) When I Grow Too Old To Rock; 11) Evil Hearted Man; 12) I Just Wanna Make Love To You; 13) The Blind Man; 14*) Reeling And Rocking.

REVIEW

Of all those artists whose musical career took years and years to get off the ground, Alex Harvey, the national hero of Scotland, must hold an indisputable world record. Success and notability were not to be his until the launching of the Sensational Alex Harvey Band in 1972 — yet his first musical outfit, the Alex Harvey (Big) Soul Band, was active and kicking around the circuits of Scotland and adjacent lands to the south since at least 1959, when the Beatles were still the Quarrymen, Elvis was still in the army, and the word «glam» was still only applicable to describing a certain type of feminine charm.



Then again, was there anything truly special about the Soul Band? Based on their first and only official LP, you would never really know, because, according to [Richie Unterberger](#), it was not actually recorded by the Soul Band itself, but rather by Alex and a little-known Liverpool band, Kingsize Taylor and The Dominoes, during one of Harvey's stays at the club scene in Hamburg (where, as we all know, Liverpool bands were particularly welcome in the early 1960s). The deception likely does not stop there, because the entire session formally looks like a live album, with crowd noise and applause generously sprinkled all over the proceedings, yet the sound quality is too suspiciously clear for a true live club performance — most

probably, the band did perform live, but the audience bits were overdubbed later for «authenticity»'s sake. Nevertheless, it is all *reasonably* close to what the true Soul Band was up to, as heard from the evidence of a much later, semi-legal, [archival release on Bear Family Records](#) which came out in 1999, featured exactly the same title as the original album (do not confuse the two!) and contained a hodge-podge of studio recordings made in 1963–64 both in Germany and in the UK. (One of these recordings, a cover of Chuck Berry's 'Reeling And Rocking', was actually appended as a bonus track to the official CD release of **Alex Harvey And His Soul Band** — and although it is definitely one of the best sounding tracks on this record, I suspect that this is probably just due to the lack of annoying crowd noises in the background).

One thing you can certainly say about both the «true» Soul Band and their doppelgängers is that they (or, at least, their charismatic frontman) had a mighty fine taste in selecting the proper cover material, even if, at this point, Alex himself was almost completely a performer and interpreter rather than an original songwriter. The track listing reflects impressive diversity, featuring everything from straightahead pop-rock ('I Ain't Worrying Baby', one of the two «Harvey originals» but in reality just a carbon copy of the generic Merseybeat sound) to classic R&B ('Let The Good Times Roll') to Chicago blues ('Got My Mojo Working') to Chicago rock'n'roll ('Bo Diddley Is A Gunslinger'). Above everything else, Harvey is more than happy to dig out and rearrange old pre-war blues standards such as 'Backwater Blues' or 'The Blind Man' — and his childhood fascination with music hall values, which would truly flourish again with the rise of the Sensational band, is hinted at by the inclusion of Romberg and Hammerstein's 'When I Grow Too Old To Dream', which is given a much faster tempo, a completely new set of lyrics, and even an appropriately new title ('When I Grow Too Old To Rock', arguably making Harvey the first artist to have raised this subject in his music), yet still ends up credited to Romberg and Hammerstein (yeah, I too was surprised to see that Oscar had actually penned something called 'When I Grow Too Old To Rock', and would probably have remained flabbergasted for life if not for the Internet age).

Clearly, this sort of eclectic and unpredictable approach makes the Soul Band stand out among all the other UK bands, or, heck, make that all the other white bands of the early 1960s — since most of the competition consisted of either Chicago blues purists or big fans of the contemporary Motown and Atlantic scenes; Alex, on the other hand, preferred to cast his net much wider, while at the same time largely avoiding covering the more popular, commercialized hits. Yet this is probably as high as I can go praising this record, whose function as a historical curio by far surpasses its intrinsic artistic value or direct emotional impact. Because simply listening to it is not nearly such a fun experience as its lovable, ambitious frontman would like us all to have.

Although blessed from the start with a powerful, expressive voice, Alex Harvey was still years away from crafting and extolling his tragicomic madman stage persona, and his belaboured attempts to make a difference too frequently come across as blunt obnoxiousness — though, admittedly, with a full-blown band behind his back he is nowhere near as obnoxious here as he would soon be on **The Blues**, where there would be nothing and nobody in between his ego and his listeners. Most of the time, he just sounds like that rowdy Scottish stereotype — you know, the barroom guy who is allowed to sound dirtier, swaggier, screechier, and (occasionally) funnier than the rest just because he is from the Northlands where people are wiser and rowdier by definition. But given Alex's natural whiny and nasal pitch, there is only so much of that voice one can safely take if it is not supported by other helpful factors; and trying to channel the spirit of Muddy Waters, Bo Diddley, or Lonnie Johnson is *not* a helpful factor under these conditions.

As far as the pseudo-Soul Band is concerned, Alex's sidemen from Liverpool are unquestionably competent — the way your local barroom band would be competent after having played each night for five years — but I keep struggling to find any «edge» to the way they are playing. The only unusual thing is that they have a lead sax player in the standard place of a lead guitar player on most of the tracks, and the guy is good, but not wild enough, and the problem with prominent saxophone in a rock'n'roll band is that you really have to go all-out on the instrument to make it matter (like in the Sonics, for instance). Maybe it works for those who truly appreciate lengthy sax improvs in jazz music; I do not, so do not take my word for this as the ultimate truth. I just think this particular type of sax playing decreases the sharpness of the impact rather than adds to the overall adrenaline level.

A good case in point is to compare the album's opening number, a cover of Leiber & Stoller and the Coasters' 'Framed' — first, with the original, whose perfectly timed and phrased vocal performance is absolutely no match for Harvey's earnest, but underpowered performance; and second, with Alex's own reworking of this number on the 1972 debut of the Sensational Band — by which time he would master the *epic* approach to musical material, and manage to transform the 2-minute little joke number into a slow, sprawling, monumental masterpiece of paranoid-demented musical theater. On here, the song is barely noticeable; on **Framed**, it would become unforgettable. But the time was not right yet. Nor was it right for convincing people that Alex Harvey could be an impressive solo performer: 'The Blind Man', concluding the album on a lonesome acoustic-and-vocal note, presages the overall boredom of his first solo album by dipping far more directly into the area of «whiny» than into that of «soulful».

In the end, Alex Harvey's Soul Band just did not stand a chance if you took it in the context of Johnny Kidd & The Pirates

(who rocked out better), the Beatles (who had better songs), the Beach Boys (who had better vocals), the Dave Clark 5 (who had an edgier sax player), the Animals (who had a crazier frontman), the Rolling Stones (who had a more provocative sound), the Americans (who wrote all these songs that Harvey covered), the Russians (who had just flown Gagarin into space three years ago), and the Romulans (who all looked more handsome than Alex Harvey could ever hope to get). If you did *not* take them in all that context, things would look more on the sunny side, but there is very little chance that future historians of early 1960s' music will fall upon the Soul Band's recordings prior to have experienced all those other guys. One thing is for certain: **Alex Harvey And His Soul Band** is the first of many pieces of evidence which prove that, in the world of popular music, certain types of talents flourish much better at certain times — somewhat like David Bowie, Alex Harvey just happened to be a man of the Seventies whom God, for some reason, had permitted to be born into this world about ten years earlier than necessary.

