

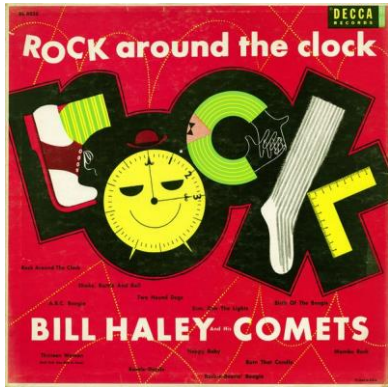
BILL HALEY



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1948-1979</i>	<i>Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i>Rock Around The Clock (1954)</i>

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ROCK AROUND THE CLOCK

Compilation released:

Dec. 19, 1955

V
A
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2
4
3
4
4

More info:



Tracks: 1) *(We're Gonna) Rock Around The Clock*; 2) Shake, Rattle & Roll; 3) A.B.C. Boogie; 4) *Thirteen Women*; 5) Razzle Dazzle; 6) Two Hound Dogs; 7) Dim, Dim The Lights; 8) Happy Baby; 9) Birth Of The Boogie; 10) Mambo Rock; 11) Burn That Candle; 12) Rock A-Beatin' Boogie.

REVIEW

No matter how you approach the matter, there can be no denying that Bill Haley's first bunch of rock'n'roll singles was genuinely groundbreaking for its time — so groundbreaking, in fact, that, once the rock'n'roll bug had properly caught on, people probably began to suspect that it may have been nothing *but* groundbreaking. Next to Chuck and Elvis, not to mention the British Invasion, Bill Haley very quickly began sounding like a comparatively timid voice from the past, barely daring to hold one hand out into the future — meaning that 'Rock Around The Clock' found itself more often heard



at the beginning of every single documentary on the history of rock'n'roll rather than on somebody's actual playlist. When was the last time you heard a John Lennon or a Keith Richards extolling the virtues of Bill Haley and the Comets? Like *never*, right? So it just might be high time to re-evaluate this material in the same way that culture buffs re-evaluate «conservative» artists of the era such as Douglas Sirk, or any other Fifties' memorabilia, long thought of simply as packages of nostalgia for our grand-grand-parents, when, in reality, they offer so much more for the modern consumer... or do they?

Technically speaking, **Rock Around The Clock** — the album — is an early Decca compilation that collects six consecutive A- and B-sides for Bill and his Comets, beginning with ‘Rock Around The Clock’ — the song — recorded on April 12, 1954, and all the way to ‘Rock A-Beatin’ Boogie’, recorded September 22, 1955. It might be worth noting that, although chronologically ‘Rock Around The Clock’ was indeed the first single included in this package, it did not become a big hit until someone got the bright idea to include it in the soundtrack to Richard Brooks’ classic *Blackboard Jungle*. Actually, Haley’s first major «rock and roll era» hit was the lyrically sanitized version of Big Joe Turner’s ‘Shake, Rattle & Roll’ — appropriately, an even earlier Decca compilation placed huger emphasis on that particular song, naming the record after it; however, there is no point in allocating a separate review to **Shake, Rattle & Roll** since it is merely a mini-LP with but eight songs on it, and all of its material would eventually be incorporated into **Rock Around The Clock** anyway, after ‘Rock Around The Clock’ (the song) turned out to be so much more impactful.

So what’s the real deal about these particular six 45’s? Doubtlessly, this is the finest «small» set of Bill Haley & The Comets in existence — the birth of a new type of music, and a 100%-motivated band which seems only too happy to serve as the midwife. Yet it is also undeniable that, compared to the general rock’n’roll sound of 1956, it comes across as way too «clean» and «sanitized». The 30-year old (already not be trusted!) Bill Haley, with his background in country music, was, first and foremost, a professional entertainer, quite interested in having fun and gaining fame and fortune, but hardly interested in coming across as an «aggressive», «rebellious» icon for American youth. Come to think about it, don’t all those wild stories about teen riots across the States and the UK during the initial run of *Rock Around The Clock* (the *second*, not the first movie to feature the song) seem so hard to believe nowadays — considering the utterly peaceful and friendly message of the tune? How did it all come to this? Surely, when The Comets recorded the song, they were simply thinking of doing their own take on some good old jump blues, albeit in just a slightly rowdier and speedier way than this stuff used to be played by the likes of Wynonie Harris and Big Joe Turner (and even that can be debatable). The last thing on their mind must have been to awake the sleeping dragon in the American (let alone worldwide) teenager.

Not that the band felt too shocked or terrified when they did realize what they had unleashed — because no sooner had ‘Shake, Rattle & Roll’ and ‘Rock Around The Clock’ hit the big time than Haley’s country-western schtick of the past was all but forgotten. Well, it’s not as if it does not leave any traces — but the album is all about stepping up and taking it to the next level: 12 tracks of non-stop boogie beats, with energetic danceable grooves all the way through and not even a single

itty bitty ballad to let us catch our breath in between. In terms of loudness, cleanness, and discipline it is certainly «softer» than whatever followed, and some of it may seem «dumber» than one would expect from a bunch of true classics (for instance, Al Russel's 'ABC Boogie' comes to mind as a really tepid and unconvincing projection of rock'n'roll values onto the subject of school education, particularly next to something like Chuck Berry's 'Ring Ring Goes The Bell'), but if it is primarily F-U-N you're after, rather than a commitment to revolutionary ideals, The Comets come across as serious experts in the matter, even if it is totally unclear where all that expertise came from in the first place.

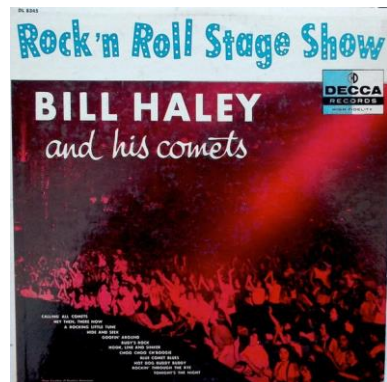
Of course, we might as well mention the technical aspects of these guys' musical approach. The efficiency of basic rock'n'roll depends, tooth and claw, upon the individual prowess of the players, and The Comets had one of the hottest rhythm sections around (simple double-bass lines and drum fills, but each note and each hit is delivered with the motivation of a bulldozer), and a great lead guitarist in the newly-arrived Franny Beecher, who had formerly made a name for himself in the Benny Goodman Orchestra; for a particularly awesome example, check out his fast, lilting, arch-precise, melodic-as-heck solo on 'Happy Baby'. (It is also important to note that Beecher had replaced the prematurely deceased Danny Cedrone, who was no quack himself, responsible for the slightly whacky, wobbly soloing on 'Rock Around The Clock'). And even if Bill himself could never, by a long stretch, be called a «great» vocalist, his decidedly non-rock'n'rollish vocals not only seem perfectly suited for The Comets' «inoffensive» sound, they can also be a nice change from the «rougher» performers — after all, nobody said that true rock'n'roll *always* has to exude burly masculinity, and in a way, it is even more of a challenge to combine genuine rock'n'roll excitement and energy with a touch of gentlemanly restraint, which somehow Bill and the boys were able to achieve on their best cuts.

That said, burly masculinity is still implicitly present all over the place, and from time to time, you might come across a relatively more «daring» number — for instance, not only does 'Thirteen Women' covertly convey every man's wish to get it on with several lovely ladies at once, but it also hints at the H-bomb as one possible way to get that wish accomplished, all of this fantasy being set to an ominous, if not exactly apocalyptic, combination of sax riff and lead guitar siren. Ironically, the song used to be the A-side on the single where 'Rock Around The Clock' was the B-side — how coincidental is it, then, that the single in question was produced by Milt Gabler, the same man who had, fifteen years earlier, taken on the risk of producing Billie Holiday's 'Strange Fruit'?

There are also tunes here that feature surprisingly self-analytical lyrics: 'Birth Of The Boogie', for instance, twenty years before AC/DC's 'Let There Be Rock' tries to come up with a mythological origin for the «boogie lick», acknowledging its African roots in a slightly Br'er Rabbit-ish (but perfectly respectable for the time) fashion while Franny offers yet another top notch example of the «boogie lick» in question. And yet it was not the lyrically disturbing and provoking, but musically less exciting 'Thirteen Women', and not the lyrically educational 'Birth Of The Boogie' with its flattering portrayal of «Zulu Joe», but the lyrically inane, yet musically riveting 'Rock Around The Clock' that made history after all — as well as 'Razzle Dazzle' ("if it's all night long") and the already mentioned 'ABC Boogie'.

And that's the way it goes in general: the common mood of **Rock Around The Clock** is not paranoia or innuendo, but reckless love of life, perfect not only for the middle-ground-oriented teens from happy American families in the 1950s, but, most of the time, even for their parents, if they'd only be willing to loosen up just for a moment (actually, it is hard to understand how any American parent at the time who had, at least once in his/her life, somersaulted to a wild performance by a big jazz band or a jump blues combo — which would probably include the absolute majority of American parents, at least in the big cities — could, even in theory, object to The Comets' rock'n'roll antics). Yet, at the same time, even fifty years after the fact, the aura of freshness, excitement, and inspiration of these recordings still persists. Perhaps this is not the proverbial spirit of perfectly distilled rock'n'roll that we find here, but if not, then it is at least the proverbial spirit of rock'n'roll's elder, slightly less rebellion-prone, brother.





ROCK' N' ROLL STAGE SHOW

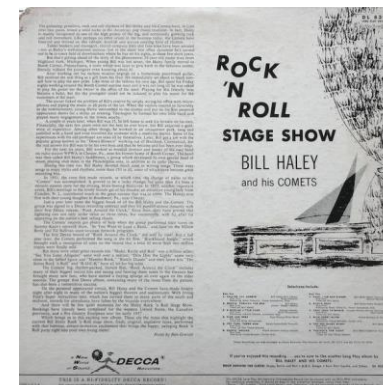
Album released:

V A L U E

Aug. 13, 1956

3 3 3 3 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) Calling All Comets; 2) **Rockin' Thru The Rye**; 3) A Rockin' Little Tune; 4) Hide And Seek; 5) Hey Then, There Now; 6) Goofin' Around; 7) Hook, Line And Sinker; 8) Rudy's Rock; 9) Choo Choo Ch'Boogie; 10) Blue Comet Blues; 11) Hot Dog Buddy Buddy; 12) Tonight's The Night.

REVIEW

Like its predecessor, this LP puts together a few songs originally released as singles, but it also throws on some LP-only tracks — a first for Bill and the boys. In addition, to reflect the burgeoning democratic spirit of the outfit, the emphasis here is more on *The Comets* than on *Bill Haley*. Several of the numbers are complete instrumentals; and, surprisingly, plenty of lead vocal time is given to guitarists Franny Beecher and Billy Williamson, so that Bill himself only handles the lead on four numbers in toto. The fact that he did not seemingly have a problem with that actually says a lot about Bill — with most of the rock'n'rollers around flaunting their big egos, Bill's relative reticence and humility actually make him stand out in the crowd, though it would take a keen eye to actually notice that.



Of the Haley-sung vocal numbers, 'Rockin' Thru The Rye' is the obvious highlight, not least because it is the first attempt to adapt a classic old bit of poetry to the newly emerged rockabilly genre — Robert Burns' 'Comin' Thro' The Rye' is given an unexpected twist, but, since the latter had originally been written in the style of a party folk tune, it would make perfect sense to adapt it to *contemporary* folk values, and the band does fine, placing another early rockabilly classic under their

belt. Nobody in his right mind would call this the emergence of Celtic folk-rock, but as a subtle demonstration of the all-encompassing powers of young baby rock'n'roll, it works perfectly as long as you are even aware of the origins of the song (there's hardly anything in the melody to betray them, though I guess an innocent bystander *might* be confused as to the exact reasons why this hillbilly from Pennsylvania would start singing "Bonny me lassie is on the beat").

Some of the new tunes sound a little silly and hoedown-ish (even in 1956, it would probably be a little distasteful to start a song called 'A Rockin' Little Tune' with the sound of an accordeon, no matter how well played). But in general, the instrumentals are fine. Rudy Pompilli's sax rarely ventured on a wilder spree than on 'Calling All Comets', and it sounds particularly delicious when punctuated by wild-west-style twanging from Beecher's guitar. Beecher himself gets to rip it up on 'Goofin' Around', playing sped-up jazzy licks like a maniac schoolboy (presaging a similar, if much more progressive, attitude from Ten Years After's Alvin Lee), and on 'Blue Comet Blues', one of those angular, slow-paced compositions that lies at the foundations of «blues rock» as a genre, even if no one would probably remember this, what with «blues rock» always being associated with the likes of John Mayall and Canned Heat.

One thing that is really satisfying is that the band clearly wishes to experiment: try as you might, you shall not find even a single tune here that would blatantly rewrite any of Haley's biggest hits — no clones of 'Rock Around The Clock' or 'Razzle Dazzle' in sight. Instead, in addition to the «Celtic» trace of 'Rockin' Through The Rye', we find a touch of «Oriental exotica» on 'Rudy's Rock', which begins as a standard dance number and then unexpectedly shifts to a jungle-style tribal attack in the middle section, or a pinch of old school vaudeville or two ('Hey Then, There Now', 'Tonight's The Night'). Perhaps it does not always work as well as intended, and most of the «experiments» are just bouts of meek synthesis with well-established conservative genres, but in the context of a Fifties' pop band such «experimentation» already places them on the genre's cutting edge.

On the down side, tinkering with all these traditions means that this LP does not pack nearly as much punch as its predecessor — not to mention that it lacks one or two truly killer stand-out tracks that would really make all the difference; why they didn't, for instance, include 'See You Later, Alligator', easily the most well-known Haley tune at the time whose appearance on an LP was, nevertheless, delayed until 1958 is beyond my understanding of Decca's commercial strategies. But on the other hand, this way you can simply suck in the record's overall consistency — without a 'Rock Around The Clock' on it, it is much easier to come to the conclusion that Bill Haley and his Comets were not a one-hit or two-hit wonder, but actually one of the most professional, inventive, and exciting rock'n'roll outfits of the decade, despite the lack

Only Solitaire

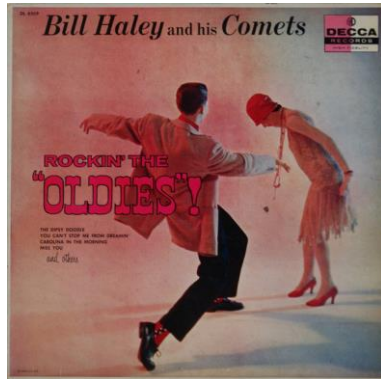
Artist: *Bill Haley*

Album: *Rock'n'Roll Stage Show (1956)*

George Starostin's Reviews

of leather jackets, burning pianos, swiveling hips, duck walks, or any other extra-musical markers which, unfortunately, were often deemed necessary to gain the performer rightful entry into the VIP rock'n'roller club. Poor Bill just had to do with his signature curl instead.





ROCKIN' THE "OLDIES"!

Album released:

Aug. 12, 1957

V A L U E
2 2 3 4 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) The Dipsy Doodle; 2) You Can't Stop Me From Dreaming; 3) Apple Blossom Time; 4) Moon Over Miami; 5) Is It True What They Say About Dixie?; 6) Carolina In The Morning; 7) Miss You; 8) Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone; 9) Ain't Misbehavin'; 10) One Sweet Letter From You; 11) I'm Gonna Sit Right Down And Write Myself A Letter; 12) Somebody Else Is Taking My Place.

REVIEW

We're goin' conceptual, boys. So this was clearly not the very first time that the Comets attempted to mine golden oldies territory for inspiration, but it certainly *was* the very first time that they — or, for that matter, *anybody*, gaining the band an extra point for innovation — attempted to «rock the oldies» over the course of an entire LP. Twelve rusty old standards from the Songbook here, dusted off and polished late Fifties style, for your pleasure and mine. What a better way to put an end to hostilities between the young people and their parents than by taking parents' music and performing it just the way that the young people want to hear it?



As you might have already guessed, this is far from the most illuminating moment in Bill Haley's life story. Although the album's opening track, 'The Dipsy Doodle', was released as a single, it failed to become a hit, and the album never attracted much attention either: if there really ever was a goal to create «wholesome family entertainment» in this manner, it never reached the mark — in reality, teen fans must not have been too happy about dancing their heads off to all these titles they knew (and probably abhorred at the time) from their parents' records; likewise, the conservative parents would not be too

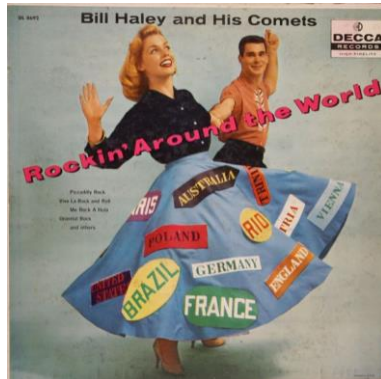
thrilled to hear their old favorites not-too-subtly transformed into the Devil's own music. Time, of course, brings new perspectives; and now, in retrospect, when titles like 'Apple Blossom Time' and 'Carolina In The Morning' no longer provoke the kind of allergies that they used to for rebellious teens in the 1950s, and now that Bill Haley's brand of rock'n'roll is, in itself, an antique as quaint as the swing movement that it was meant to replace, **Rockin' The Oldies** has actually become a quirky — and moderately instructive — historical artefact to observe and cherish.

With the Comets still in top instrumental form, and all the standards revved up to proper band standard, these songs hardly sound *that* much worse than the band's original classic hits. It is true that most of them get very similar arrangements, that the original Broadway melodies are drastically simplified to fit inside the rockabilly formula, and that, conversely, due to the nature of the material the overall atmosphere is oftentimes too lightweight even for Haley's usual standards. The one true rocking number on the record is not even 'Dipsy Doodle': it is the even faster-moving 'You Can't Stop Me From Dreaming', going all the way to Guy Lombardo's songbook and given new life here through Franny Beecher's one-note guitar «shots» and boogie solos.

All the other oldies do seem to be «rocked» indeed, but whether they accept the rockabilly virus happily or quickly develop antibodies is a big open question. Some of this stuff ends up quite similar in tone and mood to Carl Perkins' early brand of country-bop, except that the Comets are far more fluent and tight in their performance than Carl's backing band. Some of it ends up just boring and pathetic if you know the context: 'Ain't Misbehavin', for instance, is so inextricably associated with Fats Waller and his piano chops that hearing it deconstructed this way (and there ain't even a guitar solo in sight!) just makes me sad and confused.

Still, do give the record some love even if it is essentially a failed experiment — to the best of my knowledge, this is the first album in rock history to do the «nostalgic genre reversal» thing, at least formally paving the way to all similar experiments in the future. Call it the granddaddy of David Bowie's **Pin Ups**, if you wish. Of course, it might be the most miserable type of rock experiment in general, but at least they sometimes get you a-thinkin' on metaphysical issues, such as what it is that makes a song great and how does relevance get transferred through the ages and what the hell is a dipsy doodle anyway... you know, that kind of train of thought.





ROCKIN' AROUND THE WORLD

Album released:

March 17, 1958

V A L U E
4 2 3 4 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Pretty Alouette; 2) Piccadilly Rock; 3) Rockin' Rollin' Schnitzlebank; 4) Vive La Rock And Roll; 5) Come Rock With Me; 6) Wooden Shoe Rock; 7) Me Rock-A-Hula; 8) Oriental Rock; 9) Rockin' Matilda; 10) El Rocko; 11) Rockin' Rita; 12) Jamaica, D.J.

REVIEW

Not only are we still going conceptual — we are actually witnessing the true birth of worldbeat!! Forget Peter Gabriel, discard David Byrne, toss down Paul Simon — *this* is where it all really begins... well, at least from one possible perspective. Although it would be tough to suspect Mr. Haley of a particularly high level of musical sophistication, **Rockin' Around The World** shows that his knowledge and love of pop music was hardly limited to contemporary or traditional American forms. Now that those traditional American forms have all been taken care of with **Rockin' The Oldies**, the next artistic goal is to sail across the Atlantic, take bits and pieces of traditional folk tunes and classic «ethnic» melodies, and mold them all in a rock'n'roll fashion, along the same lines the Comets used for the old swing and lounge tunes half a year earlier.



Overall, this seems like a silly novelty idea, and the predictable result is a silly novelty sound. But at least it is a *hilariously* silly novelty sound — at the very least, it is exciting and instructive to see just how much technical effort the band, and Bill in person, had invested in the creation of these odd concoctions. They rewrote most of the lyrics, inserting all sorts of

contemporary references to «rocking». They sped up the tempos. They bluesified the main melodies. They appropriated and modified everything to the point of making source material barely recognizable — all in the name of the all-powerful rock'n'roll, conqueror of all. And they did it all in the friendliest of spirits, so much so that you'd really have to be on the batshit crazy spectrum of political correctness to condemn them for such musical mischief. Unfortunately, few people, if any at all, saw the entire effort as anything other than a one-time musical joke — which, for all I know, it might have been, but this does not prevent us from being able to dig up some musical symbolism along the way.

For instance, all of us are well acquainted with Elvis' transformation of 'O Sole Mio' into 'It's Now Or Never', which basically amounted to a new set of English lyrics and the addition of a steady pop rhythmic base. But few of us know that two years *before* the fact, the Comets took the same tune, did all the same things with it, but also accelerated the tempo, installed a boogie bass line, threw out the romantic sap (while still leaving the romantic plot), and ended up with a driving dance number called 'Come Rock With Me'. So if this were a creative contest, who'd be the winner? Would it be Elvis, just because Elvis can always sing Bill Haley under the table? Or would it be Bill, who actually did a far more complicated job of showing how far in a completely different direction you can go with that kind of melody?.. okay, cutting the bullshit, it would still be Elvis, but actually, if you ever thought romantic Neapolitan songs were corny as hell in the first place, the Comets' recipe for cooking them up might work for you just fine.

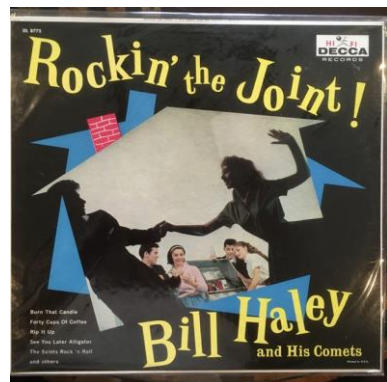
Now, obviously, modern day purists and puritans would castigate Haley for almost completely identifying «the World» with «the *Western* World»: other than a brief clarinet-centered incorporation of unspecified Middle Eastern motives into 'Oriental Rock' (what a title!), and steel guitarist Billy Williamson's oh-so-1950s imitation of the Caribbean accent on 'Jamaica, D. J.', all of the source material essentially stems from Europe (France, Germany, England, Holland), maybe with a little Latin America in tow: in short, no attempts to put Australian aboriginal music or Mongolian throat singing to a good old rock beat. Then again, it is unlikely that the record was motivated by some profound understanding of conceptual artistry, let alone any early predecessor to the modern feeling of liberal guilt. It is *more* likely that Bill and the people at Decca genuinely believed that this would be a good way to bring the new sounds of rock'n'roll closer to the ears of as many different immigrant minorities in the US as possible (too bad we all had to wait for the Ramones in order to bring 'Chinese Rock' into this world, though).

If this were indeed so, odds of success for the Comets would have been hardly any higher than when they were wooing teenagers' mothers with the nostalgia-meets-modernity sounds of **Rockin' The Oldies**. For instance, would a conservative

citizen of French origin be genuinely able to admire the re-write of 'Frère Jacques' as 'Vive La (*sic!*) Rock And Roll'? Or, conversely, would a not-so-conservative citizen of French origin, already sick to death of all the stereotypes about «gay Paris», find new respect for 'Frère Jacques' upon finding out that it has been remade as a fast dance number for the local ballroom? And would the average German-American really be happy to hear the old nursery rhyme of 'Schnitzelbank' remade as 'Rockin' Rollin' Schnitzlebank (*sic!*)' instead of an actual 'Rock Around The Clock'? In any case, I have no info on **Rockin' Around The World** to have been a smash hit in circles of American citizens with non-Anglo-Saxon European ancestry, so if I got that marketing strategy right, it was doomed to fail.

Yet as a curious experiment in genre-mashing which could be fun for younger generations to dig out fifty years after the fact, **Rockin' Around The World** is, I believe, a total gas. The only way one can truly enjoy all these classic ditties these days (for the record, Haley's range also covers 'London Bridge Is Falling Down', 'Hawaiian War Chant', and 'La Cucaracha' in one sitting — I feel silly even typing out all these names) is from a deconstructivist point of view, and, without knowing it, Haley went on record as their first, or one of the first, post-modern interpreters. Too bad there was nobody to see it from that point of view back in 1958 — had the record made more of an impact on discerning musical minds, who knows, maybe rock music could have turned into an art form several years earlier than it did. Then again, by 1958 Bill Haley's image was so much set in stone that even if he wrote a rock opera about a deaf, dumb, and blind pinball wizard, critics and fans alike would just call it virtually undanceable and move on.



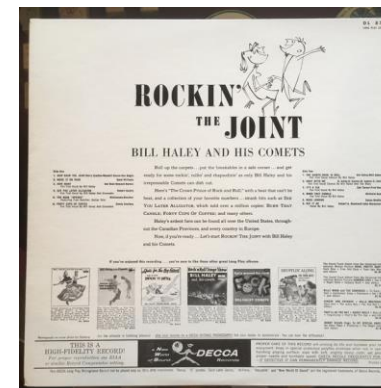


ROCKIN' THE JOINT

Album released:
Aug. 11, 1958

V A L U E
2 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) New Rock The Joint; 2) Move It On Over; 3) How Many?; 4) **See You Later, Alligator**; 5) The Beak Speaks; 6) Forty Cups Of Coffee; 7) The Saints' Rock And Roll; 8) Sway With Me; 9) It's A Sin; 10) Burn That Candle; 11) Rock Lomond; 12) Rip It Up.

REVIEW

Naughty genre experiments and quasi-conceptual LPs may all be fine and dandy for anybody, but if we are talking Bill Haley and his Comets, there can hardly be any question what we *really* love these guys for: their hit singles! So, down with all the Dipsy Doodles and Pretty Alouettes and let us welcome **Rockin' The Joint** as one of the earliest «back-to-basics» LPs. Who cares if it is actually just a collection of non-LP A- and B-sides from 1956-58, with only one new instrumental? What matters is that during those years the band still felt fresh, its rock'n'roll spirit was still vivacious, and there were plenty of subtle melodic hooks and funny lyrical twists to ensure that the formula was still far from creative exhaustion.



Two classic singles, 'See You Later Alligator' and 'The Saints' Rock And Roll', alone suffice to guarantee for this record the status of second most important Bill Haley release from the classic years of the Comets. The [original version](#) of 'Alligator', written and recorded by the obscure Cajun songwriter Bobby Charles, is a cute little piece of jump blues, but next to Haley's interpretation, it sounds downright dead – a stiff and monotonous vamp, waiting for somebody to come along and light that spark properly. The Comets did precisely that, creating the perfect swinger anthem for their era and immortalizing the

trademark Louisiana farewell for generations to come. And nobody else in the rockabilly business could have delivered the tune as efficiently as Haley — perhaps only Carl Perkins was as good at converting bitterness into cheerfulness, but he did not typically perform that sort of «blues-pop».

The same old state of Louisiana continues to be relevant on the band's cover of 'The Saints', arguably the one and only rock'n'roll variant of the song that matters — again, because the song is perfectly adaptable to the Comets' style, so much so that Haley even changed the lyrics to match the band's identity ("...when old Rudy starts to wail... when the Comets rock and roll..."). You might complain that the band takes all the soul out of the tune, and you might even be right from a certain angle, but every once in a while, in order to breathe a bit of new soul into a tune, you have to shake the old one out first. On this particular number, the Comets really give it all they got — one hundred percent, each single band member; if that ain't soul, I don't really know what is. The frantic shootout between Rudy's sax and Franny's guitar on the coda is one of the most breathtaking moments in the band's catalog. Nobody else in the business had that kind of sound going on at the time — like a crazyass Benny Goodman big band condensed and packed into one tight rock'n'roll unit.

Other, less notorious, highlights on this collection include 'The Beak Speaks', a Franny Beecher instrumental composition co-written with the band's steel guitarist Billy Williamson, giving Franny an opportunity to showcase a few nice jazzy licks; and 'How Many', a relatively recent Nashville ballad which Haley gives a bit of a gospel flair, adding suitable backing vocals in an unusual stylistic departure from the formula.

On the darker side of things, 'New Rock The Joint' may be a louder, more aggressive and «modern» version of the original 'Rock The Joint', released by Bill way back in 1952, yet the important thing is that it was really a timid melodic precursor to 'Rock Around The Clock', and reviving it for another single is basically self-repetition. 'Move It On Over' is a rather unfortunate re-adaptation of the Hank Williams' original — one of the very few cases when Haley's cover of an oldie is *less* rock'n'roll than the source material, since Hank's tune was actually faster and livelier. (Rule of thumb: you do *not* cover Hank Williams unless you totally and completely reinvent Hank Williams, because Hank will get you beat every time). 'It's A Sin' is another Nashville ballad with a semi-doo-wop, semi-gospel topping, but it gives off a generic rather than epic feeling, with its far less distinctive vocal melody. 'Rock Lomond', as you might guess from the title, is actually an outtake from **Rockin' The Oldies**, where it should properly belong. And they probably forgot that 'Burn That Candle' had already been released on an earlier LP — great song, but why do we need it twice?

Especially considering that some of Bill's finest singles from that period, for some reason, did *not* make the grade. For my

own digital version of the album, I compiled some of them as bonus tracks — most importantly, ‘Teenager’s Mother’ (the B-side to ‘Rip It Up’), a surprisingly grim lyrical indictment of stubborn parents (“cause the same thing that’s worrying you is the same thing you used to do yourself”) set to one of the band’s toughest and fastest grooves on record; ‘Rockin’ Rollin’ Rover’, one of the happiest rock’n’roll tunes about a dog ever written; and ‘Don’t Knock The Rock’, the title track to the movie of the same name which was basically a follow-up to *Rock Around The Clock*, but failed to replicate its success. These three should have been there instead of ‘Rock Lomond’ and ‘Move It On Over’.

Naturally, these «complaints» are all anachronistic: like most of Haley’s original LPs, **Rockin’ The Joint** has long since been retired from the catalog, and today all of these songs find themselves in solitary streaming rotation, or, for those of us who still like the feel of something solid in our hands (excuse me), on Decca’s compilation CDs and boxsets. The main point of the review, for what it’s worth, is to stress that the Comets had about 5–6 years of «vital» singles in them, which, if you think about it, is actually a longer period of time than fortune allocated to most of the classic early rock’n’rollers (who typically only lasted about three, four at max) — a good argument for preferring a calmer and healthier lifestyle to a more raucous and rebellious one, if you think about it!





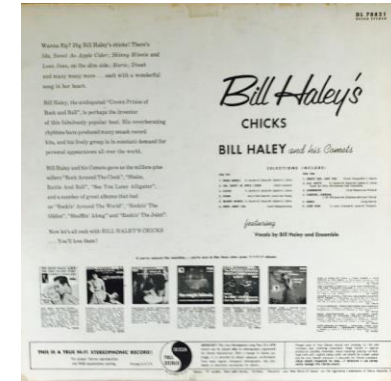
BILL HALEY'S CHICKS

Album released:

Jan. 5, 1959

V A L U E
3 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Whoa Mabel!; 2) Ida, Sweet As Apple Cider; 3) Eloise; 4) Dinah; 5) **Skinny Minnie**; 6) Mary, Mary Lou; 7) Sweet Sue, Just You; 8) B.B. Betty; 9) Charmaine; 10) Corrine, Corrina; 11) Marie; 12) Lean Jean.

REVIEW

Had more Fifties' artists adopted that particular practice after Bill Haley — namely, building a concept LP around a successful hit single or two — art-rock might have been born, baptized, graduated, become the basic laughing stock currency of the Addison DeWitts of pop music, and buried six feet under way before the hippie movement even started. It is, consequently, unclear if we should be thankful to Fifties' artists for refusing to follow the advice, or pouting at them for such conservatism. It probably depends on whether the idea of, say, Gene Vincent as the author of the first rock opera rather than Pete Townshend appeals to you or not. Either way, it's fun to think back on all those golden opportunities that Fifties' rock passed over for future generations to pick up.



That said, in this particular case the «concept» of **Bill Haley's Chicks** is restricted to song titles and choruses, rather than actual music themes — which suggests that the man's penultimate LP for Decca would probably sound less odd to the general ear, but might have the potential to beat all previous experimental records in terms of pure entertainment. Which is exactly what it is: even more of a joke record than **Rockin' The Oldies** or **Rockin' Around The World**, but a far more consistent and generally enjoyable one.

On March 3, 1958 the Comets released 'Skinny Minnie', a song credited to Bill and some of his mates, which went on to become their last significant chart success. Lyrically and, uh, conceptually it was clearly inspired by Larry Williams and his 'Bony Moronie' (it is hard to believe that Williams and Haley were independently obsessed with their imaginary girlfriends' anorexia), but musically, it was quite an original creation — not so much rock'n'roll as blues-pop-meets-nursery-rhyme and crowns it with a glorious proto-surf rock guitar trill. Despite the overtly comic tone (the verses are so funny that the song even gets by without a proper hook for the chorus), the song became so widely popular that even Tony Sheridan would record it on several different occasions in Hamburg (*not* with the Beatles), and even such wild guys as the Sonics would be bringing it into the mid-Sixties garage era.

The unexpected popularity of the song, which temporarily returned Bill to the chart area from which the Comets had fell off a whole two years earlier, defined 1958 for the band — all through the year, they would be trying to capitalize on its success by releasing more and more singles with the same verbal formula, both self-penned and covers: 'Lean Jean', 'Mary, Mary Lou', 'Whoa Mabel!', 'Corrine, Corrina'. Alas, of these, only 'Lean Jean' briefly made the charts, although it is the least interesting of the four — essentially just a musical variation on 'Skinny Minnie', but with the guitar trill hook replaced by a simple and much less exciting brass mini-riff. Undeterred and determined, Bill would push on and ultimately release this entire LP, focused on a variety of named girls — perhaps in the hope that at least all the Mabels, Idas, Eloises, Dinahs, Mary Lous, Sues, Bettys, and Maries in the world would be interested in owning a copy?

The bad news is that the Comets' songwriting energies were not enough to back the concept with fully original songwriting, which meant that they would still be obligated to delve into the Great American Songbook — which means quite a bit of overlap with the spirit of **Rockin' The Oldies**: not necessarily a good thing, no matter how much rockabilly makeup is applied to the faces of old swing numbers and crooner tunes. I mean, 'Charmaine'? the most popular version of that song was recorded in 1951 by the Mantovani Orchestra — what else is there to say? 'Ida, Sweet As Apple Cider'? They probably got that one from the Mills Brothers rather than Bing Crosby, but that only makes it more vaudeville in spirit.

The good news is that there are many sides to this story — for every unfortunate lottery pick in an affair like this, there will always be a corresponding lucky number. Thus, the project gave Bill a pretext to make another solid cover of Big Joe Turner: his 'Corrine, Corrina' relates to Turner's version exactly the same way as 'Shake, Rattle, & Roll', transforming black R&B into white rockabilly and slightly sanitizing it, but with the purest of intentions at heart. Personally, I much prefer the classic Atlantic vibe of Turner's version (that opening tight-as-hell boogie guitar line alone is worth the admission price),

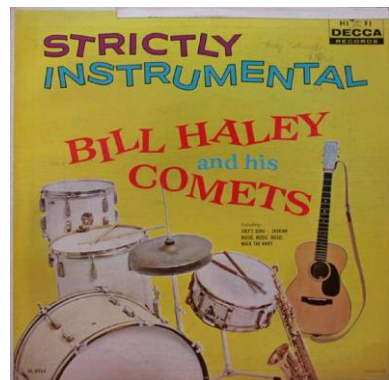
but Bill's cheery delivery is hard to resist as well, unless you want to consciously make one of those «stealing the black man's music» virtue-signaling stands or something.

Other points of interest include reserving a spotlight for Billy Williamson, who provides a funny, slightly asthmatic-paranoid-sounding lead vocal on the original (somewhat Chuck Berry-influenced, I'd say) composition 'B. B. Betty' (unfortunately, no solo steel guitar part). Another original composition, 'Whoa Mabel!', returns us to the world of nursery rhymes, but this time at an insanely fast tempo even for the Comets — and, for what it's worth, the song may have provided some inspiration for Procol Harum's Keith Reed almost a decade later (remember 'Mabel' from the band's debut? "Mabel, whoah Mabel, please get off the kitchen table", that one? it also had a nursery rhyme echo running through it — "put the peas in the pot, put the pot on the hot, in the cellar lies my wife, in my wife there's a knife". Gee, I wish some smartpants post-rock outfit made a medley of these two...)

Unfortunately, fans of Franny Beecher will have to be disappointed: he only gets to thoroughly shine on Irving Berlin's 'Marie' — most of the other songs either do not have instrumental solos at all, or most of the soloing goes to Rudy's sax; only on 'Marie' do the two lead instruments get a chance to shine on their own, as well as engage in some friendly sparring. Whether this oversight, in any way, reflected a rift between Bill and Franny that would eventually lead to their parting ways in 1960, I have no current way of knowing, but that's simply the way it is on the record. Regardless, this is just a minor nitpick, since, after all, most people would probably associate the classic Comets sound with Rudy rather than Franny, and with a sax player of that caliber, we can step away from fetishizing the electric guitar for a bit.

In any case, **Bill Haley's Chicks** is probably the last Comets album that makes perfect sense to own and hear as an album, rather than just pick out the obvious highlight and run with it — that is, the last time when the whole is somewhat greater than its individual parts. You can read it as a set of consecutive pages from Don Juan's diary if you wish, or just a bunch of harmless, friendly love letters arranged in the Comets' usual inoffensive, entertaining style. Most importantly, it is still an inspired musical statement from a band that feels it is still somewhat relevant for its time.





STRICTLY INSTRUMENTAL

Album released:

Dec. 14, 1959

V A L U E
3 3 3 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) *Joey's Song*; 2) (Put Another Nickel In) Music! Music! Music!; 3) Mack The Knife; 4) In A Little Spanish Town; 5) Two Shadows; 6) Shaky; 7) Strictly Instrumental; 8) Skokiaan (South African Song); 9) Puerto Rican Peddler; 10) Drowsy Waters; 11) Chiquita Linda (Un Poquite De Tu Amor); 12) The Catwalk.

REVIEW

Amusingly, Bill's last LP for Decca Records did not break the established «conceptual» paradigm — this time, the concept being for Bill to stay away from the microphone and let the Comets do all the work (there was actually some suspicion that Bill was not involved in these recordings at all, but research on sessionography shows that this is apparently not true — although who really cares?). The album was actually assembled from recordings made at various sessions throughout 1958 and 1959, and I think that most of them would have remained officially unreleased unless it weren't for 'Joey's Song', which, when issued as a single in August of 1959, gave Bill his biggest chart results since 'Skinny Minnie' — and would go on to become his very last charting single within the Top 50, even if he himself had no idea at the time of how grim the coming future would be for him and his band.



'Joey's Song', of course, is terrific. Written by Patti Page's bandleader and record producer Joe Reisman (hence the title), it's not very rock'n'roll — more like a bit of old-fashioned ragtime-slash-vaudeville sped up to rock'n'roll tempo — but it

features the Comets at their absolute best. The chugging rhythm section, the flying brass section, the combination of joyful energy and tight musical discipline — I don't know how it could be possible to keep that grin off your face with the band in such full swing. It's, like, the perfect marriage of the new rhythmic foundations of the rock'n'roll era with the gay (not *that* gay), innocent vibe of the pre-war jazz-pop aesthetics. It's **Rockin' The Oldies** all over again, yes, but with extra energy and creativity — this is, after all, a fully original composition — and it falls squarely into the category of 'Mack The Knife' style tunes: little musical reminders of how to pick yourself up and brush yourself off after life hits you in the face. Even despite the main theme being so hopelessly outdated in 1959, its catchiness was seemingly so impossible to resist that the chart success was completely understandable.

It must have been this unexpected last blaze of success that prompted Decca to commission a Bill Haley album «without» Bill Haley — which, by itself, does not seem like such a bad proposition, given the tightness, experience, and creativity of the Comets throughout the decade. The problem, as it always happens, was with carrying out the theoretical angle into practice. With such a project, there would simply not be enough original contributions from outside songwriters or band members themselves, so they'd inevitably end up falling upon classics, and then it would all be down to their choice of material... and when it came to choice of material, Bill and his boys weren't too picky, and did not always display great taste.

Thus, my association with 'Mack The Knife' was not triggered randomly, but was actually aided by the fact that they *did* cover 'Mack The Knife' on this very same album, and while the arrangement is not entirely free of creative touches — for one thing, I really admire those space rocket-style *whooshes* and *zoops* that Billy Williamson lets fly off his guitar to counter the main brass theme — by 1959, 'Mack The Knife' was such a well-established jazz standard that the Comets could hardly hope to match the likes of Ella Fitzgerald here. Then there's their version of 'Music! Music! Music!', so carefully arranged as 'Joey's Song, Pt. 2' that an inattentive listener might not even realize that the previous track has ended — except that it's ever so slightly less infectious and energetic, and there's a piano lead instead of a guitar lead. It all sounds good because it's classic Comets... but ever so slightly underwhelming.

For the second single off the album (well, formally the first, since 'Joey's Song' was released several months earlier than the LP), Decca chose the band's version of 'Skokiaan', a song with tremendous historical importance for South Africa, since it was one of the first tunes to put the country on the map as a serious presence in jazz and pop, but hardly with any historical importance for the Comets — once again, when you have people like Louis Armstrong to compete against, you're inevitably bound to lose. This does not mean that we need to dismiss it: there is a beautiful battle of talent between Pompilli's sax and

Beecher's guitar raging all over the track, with the two sometimes weaving rings around each other and sometimes joining in perfect unison while celebrating the joys of afterwork intoxication ('Skokiaan' apparently means *moonshine* in Afrikaans, although the roots of the word probably lie in some unclear Bantu idiom). It is simply not a composition to which the Comets could lay a «native» claim, unlike 'Joey's Song'.

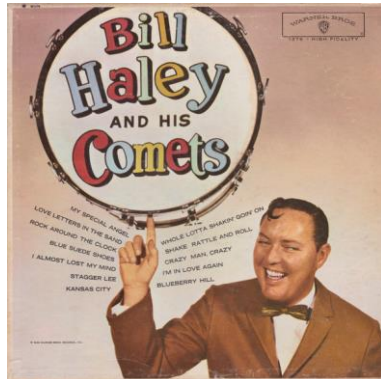
Of the three compositions actually credited to members of the Comets, Beecher and Williamson's 'Cat Walk' feels like a rather monotonous instrumental variation on 'ABC Boogie', heavy on trills and little else; and Williamson's and pianist Johnny Grande's 'Two Shadows' sounds, oddly enough, like a proto-Shadows ballad, with the exact same muffled-ringing guitar tone that Hank Marvin would soon favor for his work on the sentimental side of the band — nice, clean, and generally forgettable. Slightly better is 'Shaky', another Beecher-Williamson collaboration so called because of the «wobbly» effect on the guitar that they probably get from running it through some early version of the Leslie speaker or another gadget; but it hardly goes anywhere interesting after piquing our interest with that audio effect on the main riff.

The rest of the album is given over to even less exciting renditions of various Latin-tinged numbers ('Puerto Rican Peddler'; 'In A Little Spanish Town'), one of which ('Chiquita Linda') features the only vocals on the entire album — thus making it a tad *less* strictly than instrumental — but this hardly makes it interesting. (I do like the desperately-drastic effect when Beecher cuts in with a high-pitched, rough-wailing, rocking guitar lead midway through, adding grit to smoothness, but it's really not enough to save the tune for a best-of compilation or anything). In short, strange as it is, 'Joey's Song' still remains an obvious highlight on a collection of tunes most of which strive to be 'Joey's Song' as well, but all fail like Penelope's suitors next to brave Ulysses, to use a metaphor of comparable antiquity with this record's aesthetics.

For the sake of thoroughness, let us mention that the second half of 1959 was not spent by Bill in completely silent mood: he still put out several vocal singles, most notably his take on Louis Jordan's classic 'Caldonia', as well as a (rather belated) interpretation of Ray Charles' 'I Got A Woman' and producer Milt Gabler's own novelty pop-rock number 'Where Did You Go Last Night?'. All of these songs feature the classic Comets sound and are thoroughly enjoyable — but, just like most of this album, totally expendable if you are not simply rooting for «more Comets, for God's sake more of that Comets sound!» None of them charted, either — even in such a supposedly «backward» year for rock'n'roll as 1959, people were still looking for new types of sounds (even if they were to be supplied by Chubby Checker), and the Comets, even with all their joviality, friendliness, catchiness, and professionalism, were perceived as something hopelessly stuck in 1955. In a way, it was a miracle that 'Joey's Song' still managed to break through to the public — well, it was probably just *that* good.

It is probably not coincidental that Bill's breakup with Decca Records took place soon afterwards — formally, it took place over a financial dispute, but in reality I think that Decca was more than happy to let him go for no longer being a serious cash-cow; and, on the other hand, Bill may have suspected himself that the label bore *some* responsibility for his failing status. Unfortunately, by losing Decca he also lost Milt Gabler, the best producer and arranger he ever had; and as his subsequent career on other labels would clearly prove, the root of the problem lay not within his record label, but within his inability to adapt to changing times — an inability that was pretty common for *most* of the early rock'n'rollers, but which may have hit Haley even more than the others, given how much older he was than the others; after all, *his* musical foundation was constructed in the mid-1940s, whereas for most people of the Elvis breed it happened in the early 1950s, and that's like an entire world of difference for that particular age.





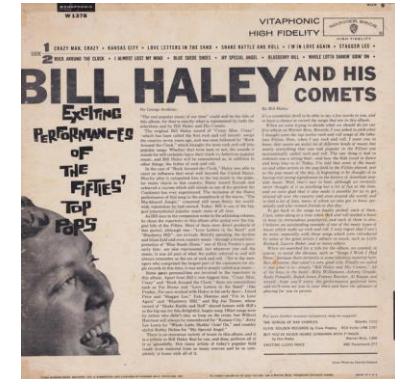
BILL HALEY AND HIS COMETS

Album released:

April 1960

V A L U E
2 2 3 1 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Crazy Man, Crazy; 2) Kansas City; 3) Love Letters In The Sand; 4) Shake Rattle And Roll; 5) I'm In Love Again; 6) Stagger Lee; 7) Rock Around The Clock; 8) I Almost Lost My Mind; 9) Blue Suede Shoes; 10) My Special Angel; 11) Blueberry Hill; 12) Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On.

REVIEW

It is quite an ironic coincidence that the first man to have placed a bona fide rock'n'roll hit on the charts and introduced his entire nation, if not the entire world, to the Devil's latest tastes in music, would also become the first man to introduce the soon-to-be-common practice of endlessly re-recording those older hits for new labels. The practice as such was, of course, already widespread in the jazz and blues communities (I have already lost count of how many different versions of Duke Ellington's 'The Mooche' I have sitting in my music library), yet, funny enough, I do not see it openly popping up in the early rockabilly circles prior to Bill

Haley's migration from Decca to Warner Bros. in early 1960. Probably just because of the short time span — most of the rockers did not yet have the time to juggle their contracts, or were simply too busy dying or marrying their cousins anyway.

Anyway, it's clear enough, when you look at the album cover, that with his move to Warner Bros. Haley sort of intended to «reboot» himself from a clean slate. Not only is the record self-titled — drawing all the attention to the freshly re-announced man and his band, rather than one of Decca's «concepts» — but it even has a picture of Haley on the front sleeve, something that never ever happened with Decca (for some reason, the executives there probably thought that Bill's



«over-age» mug would not find much appeal with the rock'n'roll-loving youngsters, and who knows, they might even have been right about that). Admittedly, only three out of twelve songs are straightahead re-recordings of Bill's classic hits for Decca; however, all the others are respectable and well-remembered oldies, rather than new compositions, ranging from the straightforward rock'n'roll of 'Blue Suede Shoes' and 'Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On' to softer R&B like 'I Almost Lost My Mind' and Lloyd Price's version of 'Stagger Lee' to old standards like 'Love Letters In The Sand'. Apparently, a complete album of nothing but hit re-recordings felt embarrassing even to Bill himself — even so, unless 1960 was *the* year in which you were first introduced to music as a form of entertainment, **Bill Haley And His Comets** must have produced a fairly morose impression on, let's say, the somewhat more critically-minded part of Bill's fanbase.

On the surface, it's not *that* bad. As a band, the Comets escaped the label change largely intact: the line-up for the sessions is pretty much the same as it was for **Strictly Instrumental**, and the change of producer from Milt Gabler to George Avakian (whose reputation in the jazz community was even higher) meant that the overall quality of the recordings was not expected to suffer at all. The new versions of the oldies were not complete carbon copies, either: 'Shake, Rattle And Roll', for instance, was remade in a slightly more Chuck Berry-esque manner (even borrowing the classic 'Johnny B. Goode' bridge for the intro), 'Rock Around The Clock' gets collective vocal harmonies for the introduction, and 'Crazy Man, Crazy' is totally dominated by Ralph Jones' percussion work, making it sound more aggressive than the original.

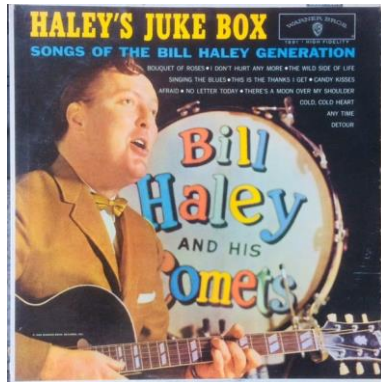
Play it all by itself, outside of any context, and you can still appreciate The Comets as one of the tightest, most energetic, most entertaining bands of its time. But play it next to Bill's classic recordings from the mid-1950's and you just might feel, like I do, that the spark is really missing. It simply doesn't seem as if they went into the studio, inspired by the prospect of a brand new day and a glorious new future, thinking, «*hey! we once set the world on fire with 'Rock Around The Clock', today we'll be rekindling it even higher!*». They might even have been *saying* something like this to each other and / or to the record executives at Warners, but were they *believing* in it? Listen to Bill's voice throughout — it sounds good, but it's a professional kind of good, not a wowsers-kind-of-good. Or to Franny Beecher taking those solos — they are tight and melodic as ever, but they don't really fly up in the air quite the same way they used to.

All those earlier «conceptual» albums on Decca could be written off as somewhat silly, but they all had an underlying inspirational theme — «*let us take the world and rewrite it as rock'n'roll!*» Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't, but it gave the band a reason to exist. What **Bill Haley And The Comets** does, in comparison, is take rock'n'roll... and rewrite it as rock'n'roll. The band isn't trying to change its style — there's really nothing to change it to, unless they tried recasting

themselves as surf-rockers or something — and it's pretty much run out of creative ideas. And, you know, a guy like Elvis could at least take a Fats Domino song and add a new vibe to it on the sheer power of his voice; but what is it, exactly, that a guy like Bill Haley can add to songs like 'Blueberry Hill' or 'I'm In Love Again'? Charisma? Fats already gave them charisma. Virtuosity? The Comets are fine, but not *that* fine (actually, they don't even try all that much on either of these songs). Country and western flavor? Ehh... you don't really want to do that to a bunch of New Orleanian classics.

The best I can say about these 27 minutes of music is that they do not sound truly embarrassing. As long as he and his musicians are not battling alcoholism or rheumatism, you can always count on Bill Haley And The Comets to deliver a tight, professional sound; to understand the essence of the songs they're singing (even Bill's merry romp through the murderous lyrics of 'Stagger Lee' is done with the understanding that the song *has* to be performed merrily for maximum psychological effect); and to simply give you a good time without too many layers of the subconscious. It's all nice and listenable — but on the symbolic side of the affair, **Bill Haley And The Comets**, as much as it's been made to look like the start of a new life with new promise, is precisely the moment where Bill Haley And The Comets lost their struggle for life, success, and artistic relevance. Perhaps it deserves to be heard just because of that very reason.





HALEY'S JUKE BOX

Album released:

August 1960

V A L U E
2 3 3 1 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Singing The Blues; 2) Candy Kisses; 3) No Letter Today; 4) This Is The Thanks I Get; 5) Bouquet Of Roses; 6) There's A New Moon Over My Shoulder; 7) Cold, Cold Heart; 8) The Wild Side Of Life; 9) Any Time; 10) Afraid; 11) I Don't Hurt Anymore; 12) Detour.

REVIEW

Producer George Avakian wrote some really passionate, occasionally tear-jerking liner notes for this album, eulogizing both the covered songs and the effort that the Comets invested into making them their own. Unfortunately, all they really do is offer us one more reminder of that faraway age when every bit of extra promotion for your LP was deemed as precious — and in the case of Bill Haley & The Comets going all the way back to their roots and all but abandoning rock'n'roll for country, only a good word from the famous George Avakian in person could save the project from becoming a financial disaster... or so, at least, might have thought the nice, but somewhat clueless people at Warner Bros. Records.



What started out as an attempt to build himself and his band a new life in the future quickly turned into a bizarre and rapid slide into the past. After the first album, for which Bill had no better idea than to set out a retrospective of his rockabilly glories, just half a year came a second one which was oriented even deeper into the past — subtitled **Songs Of The Bill Haley Generation**, the record mostly carried five-to-fifteen-years old country songs, the exact kind of material with which Bill had originally launched his musical career. Granted, the Comets around 1960 would not and could not sound exactly the same way as «Bill Haley And The Saddlemen» back in 1949; and with Rudy Pompilli and Franny Beecher still in the

band, the Comets' classic rocking sound is still in evidence whenever they pick up the tempo. But they don't do it too often, and it is hard to understand the kind of audiences for whom this project was intended. Retreating into the shadows of country was one acceptable way of «maturing» for rock'n'roll pioneers — Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Brenda Lee, etc. — but the way this particular LP is subtitled shows that Haley wasn't really willing to switch to a different target group; rather, **Bill Haley's Jukebox** was intended to introduce the classic young fans of 'Rock Around The Clock', now moving into their twenties, to the kind of music without which there would ultimately be no 'Rock Around The Clock'. Whether the fans really needed such an introduction remains debatable; judging by the fact that the album flopped the same way its predecessor did, and ultimately lost Haley his contract with Warners, they probably didn't.

That said, unless you're deeply allergic to all forms of country, including a relatively «lively» variety of it as played by the Comets, **Jukebox** isn't too bad. At the very least, I'll definitely take it over Bill's Warners debut — given the choice between an inferior re-recording of 'Rock Around The Clock' and an okay take on 'Cold, Cold Heart', I'll certainly prefer the latter. Bill's charismatic voice is perfectly suited for this material, and Beecher's and Williamson's guitar playing is every bit as good as your average Nashville professional's; meanwhile, Johnny Grande on piano gets some extra chances to shine, as he is typically outshadowed on the band's rock'n'roll material. All of this is evident, for instance, on their version of 'Candy Kisses', basically impeccable from any point of view; you may not want to prefer it to the original crooning [performance of George Morgan](#) from 1949, but I respect how Haley succeeds in stripping the song from its cooing excesses, bringing it closer to earth while still retaining the tenderness aura.

A particular highlight is the Comets' unexpectedly loud, bombastic romp through the old Tex Ritter chestnut 'There's A New Moon Over My Shoulder'. It's important to forget about the lyrics — their heartbroken ring is all but incompatible with this take, in which Haley's triumphant intonation on "*there's a NEW moon!..*" almost makes it seem as if he were starting a new life or something — but the groove, with Pompilli's sax and Grande's piano weaving tiny, playful rings around each other, is playful and uplifting, completely transforming the original song into something it was never intended to be, yet Haley and his boys, with their usual panache, almost succeed in convincing us that this kind of spirit was always inherently present in the song in the first place.

Likewise, you could probably predict that 'Detour', even with the vocals and all, would rather follow the twangy Duane Eddy version than the original Jimmy Walker performance from 1945, or the famous Patti Page cover from 1951. There's some fabulous competition between Williamson and Beecher going on in this one — and even if it doesn't twang *quite* as juicily as

the Duane Eddy version, it manages to kick more ass during the instrumental section. All in all, it would be a flat-out lie to label the Comets as «tired» or «uninspired» on these recordings: nostalgia or not, they clearly had fun working on the new arrangements for these old songs.

Of course, every now and then Bill would take on the impossible or the unnecessary; it is one thing when he strips the croon away from the old crooners, but quite another when he takes the heart-tugging misery out of 'Cold, Cold Heart' — covering Hank Williams is a titanic challenge which you shouldn't really take on unless you're ready to transform the song into something completely different (at least when the Comets did 'Move It On Over' years earlier, they were showing the world how it works when you transform an old fast country tune into modern day rock'n'roll). He sings the song reasonably well, but with Hank, «reasonably well» is never enough for more than a late night karaoke session with friends. The addition of a «cold, cold» Christmas-ey organ part is a creative touch, but it still cannot compensate for the lack of aching desperation in Haley's delivery. This guy couldn't really sound miserable even when he *was* miserable (and as of mid-1960, he wasn't even miserable enough, though slowly getting there).

Still, while the major and minor shortcomings of the record are fairly obvious, let us remember that this is the very last chance we get to hear the classic Comets lineup (at least in LP form), with Beecher and Pompilli both still in the band, perform something that is still relatively up their alley. As a swan song, it's not too bad (certainly much better than if the Comets tried to fully embrace the new 1960 brand of sweetened-up teen pop, for instance), and both 'There's A New Moon' and 'Detour' could easily squeeze themselves into any solid collection of Haley's rock'n'roll highlights. The main problem was that this direction was a dead end — either the band would have to spend the rest of its days churning out modernized productions of old country hits, or it would have to die. The record executives at Warners decided on the latter, releasing Bill from his contract; and although the Comets, in various incarnations, would continue their ever more chaotic and unpredictable Odyssey for more than a decade, **Haley's Juke Box** would arguably be the very last LP on which they made music with a fair share of confidence, clearly believing in it and subtly nudging us to believe in it, too.

