

BILLY FURY



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1959-1982</i>	<i>Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i>Halfway To Paradise (1961)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Billy Fury*

Years: *1960-1963*

George Starostin's Reviews

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THE SOUND OF FURY

Album released:

V A L U E

May 21, 1960

2 3 3 1 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) That's Love; 2) My Advice; 3) Phone Call; 4) You Don't Know; 5) Turn My Back On You; 6) Don't Say It's Over; 7) Since You've Been Gone; 8) It's You I Need; 9) Alright, Goodbye; 10) Don't Leave Me This Way.

REVIEW

So... Billy Fury, a name every bit as awe-inspiring as Johnny Thunder and just as solidly forgotten as the latter. Was this guy just a plastic imitation of American rock'n'roll, temporarily acting as a cheap local substitute on UK soil before the real thing, a.k.a. the Beatles and the Stones, came along? Or was *he* the real thing all along, whose only problem was the inability to carve out his own distinctive image? The question is in the same category as the one so commonly asked about acts like the Monkees on the other side of the ocean, meaning that there can be no objective answer to satisfy everyone. But an even more important question is — real or plastic, is there actually a single solitary reason to listen to any of his recordings today?



The key factor here might be that — unlike *quite* a few of the supposedly more «authentic» British Invasion acts that came in the guy's wake — Ronald Wycherley, a.k.a. Billy Fury, wrote all of his material himself. Yes, he idolized American pop music and rockabilly, and he had no intention whatsoever to go out there and make something different. But he did craft his own melodies and construct his own lyrics, and when you are doing this in the genre of light entertainment, there is rarely any middle ground — either you fall flat on your face in a puddle of embarrassing clichés, or you somehow mobilize these clichés, spruce them up with some personality, and make them come alive in an interesting way. Given Billy's tremendous

popularity from about 1960 to 1963, you'd think that he *must* have come up with the second strategy. And just a quick listen to **The Sound Of Fury**, his first and unquestionably best record, might convince you that he may have succeeded in it.

Yes, he likes all of them whitebread rockers overseas and hardly likes anything else, and he alternately writes and sings in the style of Buddy Holly, Carl Perkins, Gene Vincent, the Burnette brothers, and/or Elvis — *all* of whom he had to be at once for the hungry British crowds. But the simplest thing to do would be to simply appropriate their melodies and add new lyrics, and yet I do not recognize direct rip-offs. Each time a song starts off exactly like some other classic, it quickly shifts into its own territory — like 'It's You I Need', for instance, whose verse starts off just like 'That's Alright (Mama)', but then gets its own brief poppy chorus in a different key. A trifle, of course, and one might argue that all these cosmetic changes were mainly designed as safe guarantee against lawsuits while all the royalties could be kept for the artist. But I still hope that there was more to it than just financial reasons — that Billy Fury really liked writing his *own* songs in the manner of his idols. They weren't better songs, but they did bear the mark of individual creativity.

Of course, **The Sound Of Fury** is quite a misleading title in itself, and anyone looking forward to uncover a long-lost classic of kick-ass early rock'n'roll must immediately lower those pulsating expectations. Even something like 'Shakin' All Over', also recorded in the UK that same year by Johnny Kidd & The Pirates, blows Fury's «fury» out of the water — not to mention *most* of the major American rock stars of the 1950s. The «wildest» track on here is 'Turn My Back On You', an echoey, suggestive, bass-heavy rockabilly romp in the vein of Gene Vincent and Johnny Burnette, but altogether about four years late to seem in any way «dangerous» to anybody but the most killingly conservative grandparents (not that there weren't still quite a lot of them in 1960, of course). Everything else is even more tame, with each rock'n'roll number usually having a pop or country underlining. Hell, even such a little-known wussy band as the Silver Beetles, who once refused to become a backing band for Billy because he wanted them to fire their bass player (Stuart Sutcliffe at the time, not Paul McCartney, so I sort of understand), was consistently «heavier» in its pre-glory days than Fury's ensemble. So always remember to take the album title with a grain of salt.

On the other hand, Billy did have himself a nice playing outfit — including a young and ambitious guitarist called Joe Brown (yes, *that* Joe Brown who later went on to befriend George Harrison, become the father of Sam Brown, and write some decent music in between), helping him out with original riffs (he doesn't solo all that much), and Reg Guest on piano, typically playing in the style of such American greats as Amos Milburn and Johnny Johnson (the boogie pattern above everything else). If anything, **The Sound Of Fury** does sound like a perfectly professional endeavor — it just seems a little

bit out of date for 1960, what with all the echo and reverb and bass slapping and a near-total lack of drums (at least loud ones; extra bit of trivia — Andy White, later to play on the Beatles' recording of 'Love Me Do', is the drummer here). You'd almost think the radio did not work and it took these guys four years for a steamship to deliver **The Sun Sessions** to their doorstep. (The story also goes that, while doing the bass slapping, they had to have two bassists — one to pick the notes and one to actually do the slapping. Hey, it actually works!).

But they made their own **Sun Sessions**, and they *do* sound somewhat like the real thing. As a singer, Billy never had a unique voice, but it was capable of many things: he can have it all glottalic and hiccupy and rockabilish on 'Turn My Back', or he can have it slyly sweet with a hillbilly whiff à la Buddy Holly on 'That's Love', or he can do tender sentimental pleading on 'Alright, Goodbye' (although the from-the-bottom-of-my-heart crooning style on 'You Don't Know' is one time where he seems to severely overcook it: his frail lungs simply cannot handle the ambition). So, looking back on this stuff from more than a half-century distance, I would hesitate to call this «empty posing»: the guy really dug whatever he was doing here.

That said, the best track on the current CD issue is to be found not on the album itself, but on one of the accompanying bonus B-sides: 'Don't Jump' is a terrific pop-rock exercise in the style of post-army Elvis (think something like 'Little Sister'), but with heavy emphasis on Duane Eddy-ish twangy guitar and an independently invented «heartbreaking» story of a teenage suicide set to Billy's own lyrics. Just a juicy, seductive example of one of those «light somber moods», set to a steady pop rhythms, that were produced so frequently in the early Sixties and then vanished almost completely, replaced by genuinely depressing heavy somberness.





BILLY FURY

Album released:

May 21, 1960

V A L U E
2 3 3 1 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Maybe Tomorrow; 2) Gonna Type A Letter; 3) Margo; 4) **Don't Knock Upon My Door**; 5) Time Has Come; 6) Collette; 7) Baby How I Cried; 8) Angel Face; 9) Last Kiss; 10) Wondrous Place.

REVIEW

Billy's second LP seems to have been little more than a scoop-up of his latest singles, which is perhaps why, unlike most of his early 1960s records, this one never got a CD release, and I had to do a bit of a reconstruction from a variety of sources (including some extremely poor quality recordings). It is relatively important to include it here, though, since the self-titled LP contains both the A- and B-sides to his first two singles from 1959 — the stuff that made him a star in the first place.



Interestingly, both of the A-sides are sweet ballads, with the rocking material relegated to the B-sides: apparently, British marketers were not willing to take chances and counted on Billy's potential lady fans to be a more stable source of income than the rowdy masculine rock'n'roll riff-raff rabble. Indeed, the ballads are syrupy enough, but not hopeless: 'Maybe Tomorrow' is an attempt to write something in the Everlys' style, with a vocal part that finds a good balance between pathos and humility (it also helps that no strings are involved, though the ghostly female backup vocals are almost comically spooky), and the somewhat denser 'Margo', based on the same chord progression and replete with the same echoey female backups and woodwind flourishes, is more in the vein of sugary post-Army Elvis. (My favorite thing about 'Margo' just

might be the ridiculously ambiguous lyrical line "Oh please be mine / *Most of the time*" — I am all but sure the author himself never paid much attention to the idea that *some* of the time Margo might be somebody else's, but I do wonder if the BBC radio services ever had any problems with this).

Of the rockers, 'Don't Knock Upon My Door' is the more important one — one of Billy's fastest and craziest tunes, a straightforward Elvis homage in the spirit of 'Hard Headed Woman', but a little less dangerous-sounding due to the oddly placed have-a-good-time cheerleader harmonies (replete with obligatory mental visions of early 1960's girls in sexy tights) and the lack of any sharp lead guitar work (in a curious twist, the solo is relegated over to the bass edge of the piano). Still, it is as fun as any second-tier rockabilly number, and so is 'Gonna Type A Letter', although the latter is, unfortunately, marred by a rather corny brass backing (whatever these wind blowers were doing in the studio on that day, they surely were not prepared for a true rock'n'roll number) — do, however, spare a minute to appreciate the novelty touch of using the keys of an actual typewriter for additional percussion (at least, as somebody who still remembers well enough the sound of a proper typewriter, I *think* it's an actual typewriter).

Most of the other tracks are ballads, ballads, ballads, ranging from the easily tolerable (the bluesy waltz 'Baby How I Cried') to the highly questionable ('Collette' — *way* too hard trying to become the Everlys here, even double-tracking the vocals so as to sound like Phil *and* Don at the same time) to the awful (an overtly-sickeningly sweet attitude on 'Angel Face', sadly, presaging many of the disappointments to come). But at least the album does get a modestly-excellent conclusion with 'Wondrous Place', a moody Latin/Western hybrid with a melancholic flair which Billy pulls off real well, even if, once again, it is just one of several of Elvis' incarnations that he is modelling here (I can just picture the song becoming even better with Elvis' gruff baritone instead of Billy's nasal tenor).

Overall, the album does sound significantly different from **The Sound Of Fury** — more echo, more atmosphere, less rockabilly, more balladry — which is mildly curious, considering that most of this stuff was recorded at approximately the same time. Openly recommending it is beyond my honesty-bending skills (not to mention that this would require setting up a special Ebay search), but putting it down for reasons of cheesiness or lack of originality is not something I would like to do, either: even most of the ballads are well within the adequacy limits, and some *do* have original melodic hooks. It is rather pathetic, though, just how few rockers they let Billy place on the LP, despite his obvious attraction to the bawdy side of the business. For a guy named "Fury", there sure is a sore deficiency of genuine fury — 'Don't Knock Upon My Door' is the only song on which the singer sounds even remotely angry. It is things like these that make me wonder what was the

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Artist: *Billy Fury*

Album: *Billy Fury (1960)*

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precise mechanism to get all those brash young rock'n'roll-loving guys to tone down their image once they'd made the big time — big money? free pussy? promises of even bigger stardom? all of the above and a complementary ticket to Disneyland? Unfortunately, the further we get removed from that epoch, the more difficult it becomes to answer that question... yet in some ways, it is one of those perennial questions where you might actually get insights from the present in order to clear up the past.





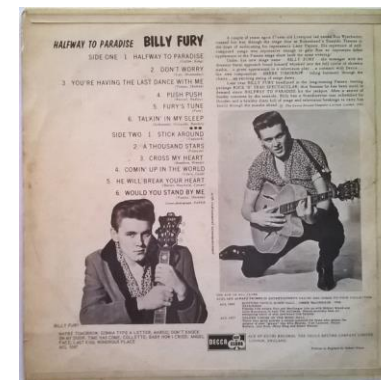
HALFWAY TO PARADISE

Album released:

1961

V A L U E
3 3 3 1 2

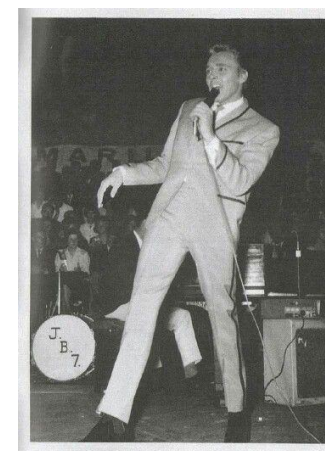
More info:



Tracks: 1) *Halfway To Paradise*; 2) Don't Worry; 3) You're Having The Last Dance With Me; 4) Push Push; 5) Fury's Tune; 6) Talkin' In My Sleep; 7) Stick Around; 8) A Thousand Stars; 9) Cross My Heart; 10) Comin' Up In The World; 11) He Will Break Your Heart; 12) Would You Stand By Me.

REVIEW

This record completes Billy's transition from wannabe-rocker into the «lite entertainment» category: the cover of Goffin & King's 'Halfway To Paradise', originally recorded in the States by Tony Orlando, sent him to the top of the UK charts, (probably) lost him a small squadron of devoted hardcore rock fans, and gained an army of newly evolved softcore ones. But can we blame this rechristening on the young artist himself, without taking a general look at the changing times? As Cliff Richard's main competition for the title of «British Elvis», he too had to follow in the footsteps of the American role model; and now that the real Elvis, back from the army, was showing the world how softening up his act is doing nothing but boosting the sales, the UK shadows had to follow suit, with no serious marketable alternatives. After all, «guitar bands are on their way out», as they said in Decca, and not entirely without reason.



What is significantly worse than just «softening up», though, is that Billy was no longer willing to (or allowed to) write his own songs. Apart from 'Fury's Tune', a short semi-nostalgic, semi-comic folk-pop ditty in which he amuses himself by quoting as many titles of his own past hits as possible, everything else is just stuff by contemporary US and UK professional songwriters, writing for the lite-pop scene: for the most part, I do not recognize the titles, other than 'You're Having The

Last Dance With Me', which, probably for copyright reasons, invents new lyrics for the recent contemporary Ben E. King classic 'Save The Last Dance For Me', otherwise leaving the melody intact.

Still, if you have nothing against early 1960s soft-rock per se, **Halfway To Paradise** is as nice and elegant as an overall musical sketch of that epoch could hope to be. Pure pathos syrup is largely confined to just one orchestral ballad ('A Thousand Stars'), floating along at a somnambulant waltz tempo and quickly forgotten; most of the rest is lively, upbeat, often catchy pop with occasional echoes of blues and R'n'B, and if only the arrangements were relying a little less on keyboards, strings, and girly harmonies and a bit more on tastefully recorded guitar patterns, the whole thing could have been extolled as a cool, worthwhile example of pre-Beatles pop-rock.

For starters, 'Halfway To Paradise', want it or not, is a Carole King classic about being friendzoned, perfect melodic resolution and all, and Billy, with his Elvis-like style, actually does a grittier, less manneristic job with it than Tony Orlando. Then there is some piano-led country-pop stuff like 'Don't Worry' and 'Talkin' In My Sleep' (imagine Elvis guest singing lead on a Jerry Lee Lewis album from his country period, but do remember to dim the lights a little — this *is* Billy, after all, not Elvis or Jerry); some bossa nova influences ('He Will Break Your Heart'); some further cuddlifying of the sentimental approach of Buddy Holly ('Stick Around')... nothing jaw-dropping, that is, but still a respectably diverse bag of styles, created with a modicum of intelligence, arranged with a big nod to catchiness, and, for the most part, delivered without any signs of overt sweetening or theatrical exaggeration.

Of course, the extra smoothness begs for at least a few licks of salt — the addition of even a single track that would have a faint hint at going a little deeper (such as 'Wondrous Place') would have helped a lot. From a historic perspective, **Halfway To Paradise** helped make Billy a national star while at the same time forever burying his hopes of future artistic growth — but the exact same thing applies to Elvis, and apparently what was good for Elvis was also good for all his imitators across the ocean. At the very least, there is still much more integrity in this kind of record than there was in contemporary albums by Cliff Richard, who chose to bury himself up to his neck in old standards and sentimental journeys home; the core of Billy's intended audience still consists of kids rather than their parents, and I would take this album over something like **Listen To Cliff!** any time.



Only Solitaire

Artist: *Billy Fury*

Album: *Billy* (1963)

George Starostin's Reviews



BILLY

Album released:
April 1963

V
A
L
U
E
2
2
2
1
2

More info:



Tracks: 1) We Were Meant For Each Other; 2) How Many Nights, How Many Days; 3) Willow Weep For Me; 4) Bumble Bee; 5) She Cried; 6) Let Me Know; 7) The Chapel On The Hill; 8) Like I've Never Been Gone; 9) A Million Miles From Nowhere; 10) I'll Show You; 11) Our Day Will Come; 12) All My Hopes; 13) One Step From Heaven; 14) One Kiss; 15) Hard Times; 16) (Here Am I) Broken Hearted.

REVIEW

Not too surprisingly for a guy who willingly surrendered into the mechanical arms of the mighty pop machine, Billy's best-selling LP was his artistic nadir — and with the Beatles having already released their first LP, ironically, this would be his last chance to feel himself at least a little relevant (or, for that matter, his last chance to actually put one more proper LP under his belt at all). Not a single song here even pretends to be self-written; most of the new songwriters involved in the project are boring professional hacks, long since forgotten; and the general emphasis is rapidly shifting from light and cutesy pop-rock to rose-colored balladry.

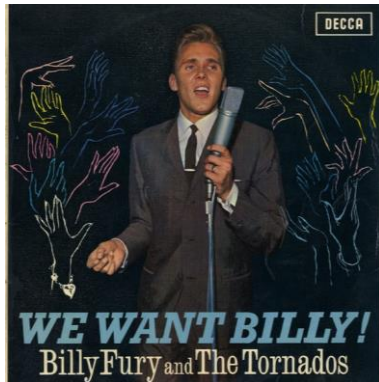
Admittedly, the voice is still there. Actually, Billy's vocal range and impeccable art of imitating his betters are just about the only things that seem to have improved, rather than deteriorated, with time. For instance, while this cover of Ray Charles' 'Hard Times' will hardly make you devalue the original, it is objectively not bad: sung with proper feeling, delivered without superfluous over-emoting, and it is unlikely that the record industry forced this cover on Billy — why not just another hack tune from local craftsmanship instead? Even at this point he might have been allowed the liberty to make a small bunch of independent artistic choices, and this one feels genuine. And so does the LaVern Baker nursery-R'n'B of 'Bumble Bee', although Billy's British audiences were probably wondering their heads off about the title: instead of the expected "you hurt me like a bee, an evil bee, an evil bumble bee", Billy prefers to sing "oo-wee, my life is misery, get out of here and don't come

back to me", leaving the title a total enigma. Was 'bumble bee' a slang term for something offensive at the time in Britain? Is it something about the word 'evil'? I have no idea.

Alas, the rest of the songs leave rather faint memory traces, to put it mildly — even a bare glance at song titles like 'The Chapel On The Hill' is quite enough to get a preliminary idea of content *and* style: strings, strings, even more strings, super-strings (okay, not really), and epic romantic vocalizing over passable, ten-for-a-dime melodies, of which old Tin Pan Alley standards such as 'Willow Weep For Me' are actually the highlights. The upbeat, but still heavily orchestrated, 'How Many Nights' and especially 'Let Me Know' are the only tracks on here that could even barely suggest that four years earlier, this gentleman was the unofficial head of Britain's rockabilly scene — on 'Let Me Know', the familiar Elvis-style «snap» reaches out from under the softcore arrangement — but *barely suggest* is the key phrase here.

Overall, this is just for those who cannot get enough out of their Paul Anka records; but, perhaps, Beatles fans also deserve a listen — it would be interesting to try and imagine the Fab Four's reaction to this act of «musical betrayal» (and appreciate their *own* force of resistance: as we all remember, even George Martin initially almost fell into the trap of «taming» and «teenifying» their act by trying to saddle them with silly soft stuff like 'How Do You Do It'). Then again, this stylistic reinvention is completely consistent with the contemporary development of Cliff Richard's career — and ultimately, both were taking their cues from Elvis, whose UK facsimiles they were trying to be. Come to think of it, neither Billy nor Cliff ever had their freedom of choice: they started out as rockabilly imitators and predictably ended up as soft-pop imitators, loyally taking the British musical scene in the same direction where, it seemed to them, the American scene was heading. It had to be the willpower of four scruffy lads from Liverpool to turn things around.



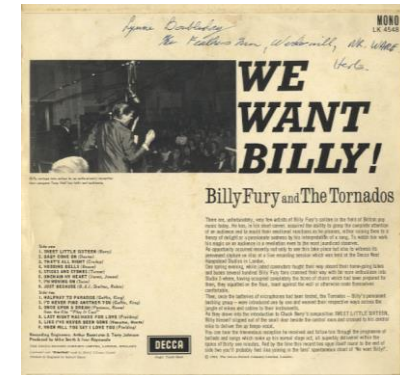


WE WANT BILLY!

Album released:
Oct. 1963

V A L U E
3 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Sweet Little Sixteen; 2) Baby Come On; 3) That's All Right; 4) Wedding Bells; 5) Sticks And Stones; 6) Unchain My Heart; 7) I'm Moving On; 8) Just Because; 9) Halfway To Paradise; 10) I'd Never Find Another You; 11) Once Upon A Dream; 12) Last Night Was Made For Love; 13) Like I've Never Been Gone; 14) When Will You Say I Love You.

REVIEW

Well, at least *this* was a semi-interesting project — allowing Billy one last chance to burn down whatever little of the «fury» was still left in the old barnyard. Perhaps the sound is too clean and tight to sound precisely like a real live album from the real early 1960s, but according to sources, it was indeed recorded live at Decca Studio No. 3, in front of a small (but still annoyingly loud) audience — hence, **We Want Billy!** may be counted as the second live album by a UK pop-rock act of any importance (the first one was, of course, Cliff Richard's **Cliff** from several years back). Of course, both these efforts should be distinguished from «the first truly *important* live album by a UK pop-rock act», which may or may not have been **Five Live Yardbirds** a year later — produced in worse sound quality, but in an actual club environment with people coming to actually soak in and enjoy the music rather than just scream their heads off at their pretty idols.



The most interesting detail here is that Billy is being backed by the Tornados — who actually served as his touring band for much of 1962-1963, despite having made a name for themselves with 'Telstar' and other Joe Meek-produced whacky «sci-

pop» instrumentals. If you have already heard any of them, you will quickly distinguish Roger LaVern's trademark cosmic organ and Alan Caddy's metal-ringing lead chords — both of which are quite refreshing to hear in the context of a long chain of well known classic rock'n'roll and R&B tunes; after which, approximately halfway through the album Billy switches gears and gives us a long medley of his «sweeter» hits.

Given the tight and limited confines of Decca's studio, the screaming girls are nowhere near as overwhelming as if we were at Shea Stadium or Madison Square Garden, but it is not quite clear which is actually better — an evenly spread screaming background of tens of thousands, to which your ears eventually get accustomed, or singular howls and yelps of dozens that come and go completely at random. (The funniest moment is 'Wedding Bells', where all the major screaming fits are triggered by the chorus of "wedding bells are ringing in my ears..." — supposedly, were polygamy to be allowed, Billy could have walked right out of that studio prouder than a Turkish sultan).

Anyway, the rock'n'roll part is passable and sometimes even a little inventive. For instance, 'That's All Right (Mama)' starts out as slow country, spiced up with organ flourishes, then gradually accelerates, turning only about halfway into the classic Elvis version: a somewhat clichéd way, perhaps, for us today to symbolically appreciate the roots and sources of the rockabilly craze, but still a viable artistic move in 1963 when not yet an entire decade had passed since Elvis inaugurated that practice at Sun Studios. Meanwhile, 'Just Because' subtly develops, with a key change, out of a short «clap your hands» R&B baby-jam (curious, but unnecessary — Billy can do a passable Elvis, but he is no single-handed match for the Isley Brothers). The two Ray Charles tributes ('Sticks And Stones' and 'Unchain My Heart') are duly charged with emotion and stuff and further prove that Billy Fury was the biggest promoter of Uncle Ray's genius across the Atlantic; unfortunately, you'd have to have a throat (and an ego) the size of an Eric Burdon or a Joe Cocker to do Ray true justice — Billy, on the other hand, isn't much of a soul singer.

The balladeering part, unfortunately, is quite skippable: the only reason to listen to these songs in the first place is a willingness to take them in as «pop confections» — the strings, the harmonies, the meticulously rehearsed notes and modulations. In this quasi-live context, though, even a really good song like 'Halfway To Paradise' becomes limp and unconvincing (and the idea of recreating the five-note string motif with pseudo-martial drumming does not work), not to mention all the lesser ones, whose titles all speak for themselves.

Still, in the overall context of Billy's post-**Sound Of Fury** career, **We Want Billy!** is a relatively high point, and a much better swan song than the self-titled album — the arrival of the Beatles and those who followed in their footsteps pretty

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Artist: *Billy Fury*

Album: *We Want Billy! (1963)*

George Starostin's Reviews

much put the man out of business, despite a few more minor chart entries in 1964-65, yet at least he faded away on a relatively respectable note, rather than continuing to pollute the artistic sphere with fluff. His later years were unstable and plagued with health problems, ultimately leading to an early death in 1983, yet surely that kind of obscurity was still preferable to what happened, say, to Elvis in his twilight years.

