

THE COASTERS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1955-2015</i>	<i>Classic R&B</i>	<i><u>Yakety Yak</u> (1958)</i>

Only Solitaire

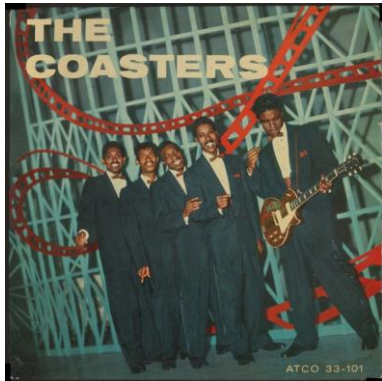
Artist: *The Coasters*

Years: *1955-1960*

George Starostin's Reviews

Page contents:

- [THE COASTERS](#) (1957)
- [GREATEST HITS](#) (1959)
- [One By One](#) (1960)



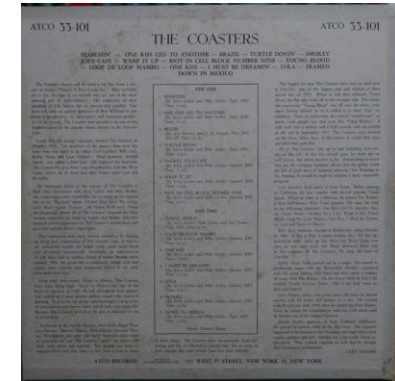
THE COASTERS

Compilation released:

1957

V A L U E
3 5 4 4 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Searchin'; 2) One Kiss Led To Another; 3) Brazil; 4) Turtle Dovin'; 5) **Smokey Joe's Cafe**; 6) Wrap It Up; 7) Riot In Cell Block #9; 8) Young Blood; 9) Loop De Loop; 10) One Kiss; 11) I Must Be Dreamin'; 12) Lola; 13) Framed; 14) Down In Mexico.

REVIEW

Calling the Coasters the first great post-modern band in the world of pop entertainment would be a bit of a stretch — not only because the term and concept themselves did not yet exist in the 1950s, but also because, most likely, neither the Coasters themselves nor the songwriting team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, standing behind them all the way through their classic period, had any self-conscious big idea about what it is they were doing. Leiber and Stoller (lovingly) called the band a bunch of clowns, and the band most likely just thought they were delivering comic entertainment for their fans: which they did, for sure, yet the actual music goes seriously beyond pure silly comedy, and the Coasters were not just Atlantic Records' most openly vaudevillian act — they were one of the most unique R&B groups of the entire period, if not *the* most unique. Certainly no other vocal band of the time, no matter how gifted, not even the Drifters, has claimed such a large shelf within the space of my own personal memory.



Unfortunate as it is, during their golden years of 1956–59, Atlantic, always placing its trust in the 45" market, only allowed them the release of one self-titled LP — a crime if there ever was one, for if such a measure is notably understandable for a lot of their regular clients, the quality of Leiber-Stoller material on this album is so stellar that one can only guess how many potential LPs of similar quality we have missed to the decisions of record executives; instead, today everything has to be scrambled together from well-known A-sides and obscure B-sides, stuck on God knows where.

Anyway, technically the record should have been credited to the Coasters and the Robins — exactly half of the songs on here are taken from singles released by the band in 1954–55 when they were still located on the West Coast and called the Robins, while the other half post-dates the fateful split in October 1955, when half of the band, namely, lead tenor Carl Gardner and bass vocalist Bobby Nunn, agreed to make the move to the East Coast (hence «the Coasters»). What keeps both of these halves together is the creativity of Leiber and Stoller, who wrote *all* the songs on the album with the exception of 'Brazil', and the overall comical-satirical tone of all of them.

Although the introduction of vaudeville elements into R&B began earlier (most notably by the Clovers, with songs like 'One Mint Julep' and 'Lovey Dovey'), it really took the Robins / Clovers to fully merge their R&B and «drama» in a truly Wagnerian vision of the unity between music and theater. Theirs is a deeply personal tale, with almost every song presented from the 1st person perspective and introducing the protagonist as — usually — a bumbling but loveable fool, the proverbial little man who somehow finds the resources to stay alive in this mad, crazy world. The stories that Leiber and Stoller give them are nothing particularly special, but they do combine humor, vivaciousness, and just a small touch of the *risqué*, enough to titillate sensitive souls back in the 1950s and cause a small chuckle even in the 21st century.

Arguably the most common trope exploited by Leiber and Stoller is that of *coitus interruptus*, or, okay, maybe not quite, *but* the idea of a burgeoning romance blocked by an unforeseen obstacle is certainly one of their chief sources of laughs. This can be just the factor of time ('One Kiss Led To Another', in which the clock chiming midnight separates the hero from his babysitting lover — though the song itself is mostly notable for featuring enough sounds of kissing to make any loyal adept of the Hays code to explode in disgust); more commonly, it is the factor of the Third Guy disrupting the idyll, be it the owner of 'Smokey Joe's Cafe' or the deep bass-voiced father of 'Young Blood' spooking the hero away. Getting the girl is not an option in these blood-curdlin' tales — the best you can hope for is to get out of this mess alive.

In the early days of the Robins, though, Leiber and Stoller allowed themselves to dip deeper into the pool of social relevance, as their «little man» tended to get in trouble with the law: 'Framed', in particular, rings a solid bell with the

theme of social (*and* racial, given the Robins' skin color) injustice, beginning with what looks like comedy and ending with what might just pass for a local chronicle ("when the judge came down, poured whiskey on my head, turned around to the jury and said 'convict this man he's drunk' what could I do?"). Given that the song's main riff is lifted directly from 'Hoochie Coochie Man' with its cocky theme of empowerment, 'Framed' is a short piece of pretty bitter satire — something that was well understood by the struggling bitter soul of Alex Harvey when, fifteen years later, he took the song and made it into a centerpiece of his own stage show.

But even before 'Framed', that exact same riff was also recycled for 'Riot In Cell Block #9', a song probably inspired by Don Siegel's *Riot In Cell Block 11* and itself the source of inspiration for quite a few things to come, including (probably) the title of a famous album by Sly & The Family Stone. With the lyrics sounding almost like a transcript of an inmate's evidence, and with the chorus sounding like a cross between a doo-wop chant and a working song, this is the most serious-looking, gritty-feeling number on this LP, and it is somewhat telling that Leiber and Stoller stopped writing this kind of material after their clients moved on to Atlantic Records ('Riot', like other contemporary Robins songs, was originally released on Leiber and Stoller's own Spark Record Co. label). Certainly 'Jailhouse Rock' sounds like Humpty-Dumpty in comparison to "on the forty-seventh hour the tear gas got our men...".

Still, the combination of Leiber and Stoller's composing talent, the Coasters' theatrical vocal skills, and Atlantic Records' professional musicianship can result in a masterpiece through sheer power of impression — even without a comical narrative twist or a biting bit of social commentary. Case in point is 'Down In Mexico', the first «proper» Coasters (not Robins) hit single after the East Coast move — a song about nothing in particular, other than a vivid description of the proverbial Coaster suddenly finding himself in a wild'n'sleazy Mexican bar. Gil Bernal's moody, but aggressive sax attack, Barney Kessel's gunslingin' guitar twangs, and Carl Gardner's ecstatically excited tenor are just about perfect spiritual conductors into the dangerous world of temptation (something that Quentin Tarantino knew all too well when he chose the song to accompany the lap dance scene in *Death Proof*, though he used the much later re-recorded and obviously inferior version from 1973). Again, what other R&B number sounded *that* hot and sleazy in 1956?

A different example of how great the band could be is 'Searchin'', one of Paul McCartney's favorite songs of all time: the Beatles recorded it for their Decca audition, among other things, and the Hollies had an early hit with it as well, but nobody ever really outdid the original version, with Billy Guy on lead vocals. The idea is simple, but stern: take the "searching high and low for your love" trope and push it, lyrically and musically, as far as it can go — with the band members endlessly

nagging out "searchin', searchin'... gonna find her, gonna find her", the lead vocalist straining like he could burst at any time, the lyrics referencing everybody from Sherlock Holmes to Charlie Chan, and the melody frankly more reminiscent of Berlin cabaret than good old jump blues: it effectively transferred the Coasters from the limited-coverage R&B charts to nationwide and worldwide pop charts (even reaching #30 in the UK!) and made them a household name.

Looking at the 14-song selection on the LP as a whole, it is clear that there are «great» and merely «good» numbers here, but essentially there is no filler — each song is an individual creation in its own right, with its own story to tell and its own hook to deliver, be it a strictly musical hook or more of a theatrical one. Even allegedly standard fare love songs such as 'Wrap It Up' focus on original metaphors, and even a standard tale of picking up a lady at a Tennessee dancehall has rarely been delivered with that much starry-eyed idiot excitement ('I Must Be Dreamin' — "life never been this good to me, oh oh oh oh!"). No other forty minutes of 1950s' music, stacked on top of each other, will make you smile and giggle more often than these ones — and, mind you, this is *before* the age of King Curtis' sax, 'Yakety Yak', and 'Charlie Brown' which would push the Coasters into even more explicitly clownish territory (which may or may not have been a good thing). And if we think long and hard enough, we might even come to the conclusion that *this* is precisely where lie the roots of so much satirical «meta-rock» from the ensuing decades. After all, is not 'Rubber Bullets', 10cc's entry into the world of popular music, largely an expansion of 'Riot In Cell Block #9', albeit with a Beach Boy strain thrown in? Would there even *be* a 10cc without the Coasters? or a Sparks? or the Turtles?..

Then again, you can just disregard the influence discussion and simply enjoy the songs for what they are. I like high quality R&B as much as the next guy (actually, much *more* than the next guy), but even I often get bored with the never ending love serenades and twist-and-shout invitations; in the middle of all that, the Coasters give you a unique and refreshing take that pokes gentle fun at all these things without invalidating them. Look all of these songs up whenever you get the chance: the Robins / Coasters truly deserve much more from you than just familiarity with the half a dozen hits that ended up on all of Atlantic's multi-artist compilations.





GREATEST HITS

Compilation released:

1959

V A L U E
3 5 4 4 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) **Poison Ivy**; 2) **Along Came Jones**; 3) Down In Mexico; 4) The Shadow Knows; 5) I'm A Hog For You; 6) **Charlie Brown**; 7) **Yakety Yak**; 8) Zing! Went The Strings Of My Heart; 9) That Is Rock & Roll; 10) Young Blood; 11) Sweet Georgia Brown; 12) Searchin'.

REVIEW

As much as I try to stay away from mentioning **Greatest Hits**-like album in my chronological account of the early era of LPs, completely bypassing them out of principle would make no sense — for one thing, many albums released by Atlantic, Sun Records, Columbia, Decca and other major or important labels of the era were actually «greatest hit» records in all but name; for another, LPs that included material recorded specially for the LP itself were a common thing on the jazz market, and maybe even on the «adult pop» market of Frank Sinatra and Doris Day, but certainly not on the «teen pop» market of rock'n'roll and R&B. And if there was an artist at the tail end of the Fifties who could be labeled as a more quintessential teen pop artist than the Coasters... I'm sure I don't even *want* to know.



In any case, instead of directly discussing this **Greatest Hits** package, rather clumsily put together by Atlantic — it does repeat three songs from **The Coasters** because they were indeed hits, but it also adds a few tracks that were B-sides or

non-hit A-sides — we shall simply use it as a base reference point to make a quick overview of the group's career from late 1957 to the end of 1959, the period which, most would probably agree, was the true Golden Age of the Coasters. If you are well-versed in rock music from the 1960s, you shall quickly recognize at least half of these songs — 'Poison Ivy' (the Stones, the Paramounts, God knows who else), 'Zing! Went The Strings...' (The Move), 'I'm A Hog For You' ('The Kinks)... no UK band ever dared do 'Yakety Yak', though, and for good reason. But let's step back and get on track.

Reshuffling these songs and putting them in rough chronological order, the first single after the smash success of 'Searchin' is actually a strange misfire — not only is 'Sweet Georgia Brown' not a Leiber-Stoller composition at all (so what was it doing as an A-side?), but, for some reason, they slowed it down to a miserable, barely moving crawl. It does give you a nice opportunity to study all the micro-modulations of the lead singers' voices, as Billy Guy and Carl Gardner trade lead lines in a technically solid «comic-soul» performance, but the end result is neither funny nor soulful, just boring vaudeville. The B-side *was* actually a Leiber-Stoller song: 'What Is The Secret Of Your Success?' is the first of several «socially biting» tunes that the young iconoclastic songwriters would write for the Coasters, but this is not the best of them, either — too slow and repetitive, and the punchline is honestly weak: "*some cats got it and some cats ain't*" is neither a particularly funny nor a particularly smart answer to the title question, even when it is delivered in a goofy bass tone.

The situation did not exactly improve with their next single, which apparently flopped so badly that it was not even included on this album: 'Dance!' is Leiber and Stoller's misguided attempt to give the Coasters their own «dance anthem», which does not really work, regardless of whether you try to take it seriously or treat it like a parody of all the 'hey baby there's a brand new dance now' motivators out there. Actually, *that* is the problem: the song itself never seems to know just how serious or how ironic it is, and by trying to appeal to both camps at once, ultimately fails. The B-side, 'Gee Golly!', is a bit more honestly funny, but feels too much like a pale shadow of the wolf-whistling in 'Young Blood' to earn its own proper plate of respect. And that's a whole two singles in a row failing to do the group justice... one might begin wondering if R&B's patented smart-pant clowns and their «Jewish-humor» crown songwriter duo had lost their way forever.

And then... and then... and then along came 'Yakety Yak', and the world was never the same after that. What can one say about 'Yakety Yak', really? It has long since become one of those fixtures of pop culture which, even if you are unfamiliar with the source itself, still invisibly manifests itself every now and then, from the ubiquitous 'Yakety Sax' that was directly inspired by the song to just about anything that uses ridiculously fast tempos for comical purposes. The song almost singlehandedly invented a new musical language — or, at least, a new musical *dialect* — and while I am not sure of this, I

think that it pretty much opened the doors for King Curtis, who, until then, was a relatively unknown jazz session player. Of course, he plays a «joke sax» on the track, nothing particularly serious; but there is something absolutely ecstatic and delirious about that insanely fast, comically syncopated style of playing — and at the same time, something in-yer-face defiant and arrogant, totally in line with the song's cheerfully rebellious spirit.

On a side note, 'Yakety Yak' would become the first in a series of decidedly *white*, «suburban-middle class» musical stories that would specifically be written by Leiber and Stoller to be sung by a bunch of *black* R&B dudes from the Atlantic label. That entire "*you just put on your coat and hat / and walk yourself to the laundromat / and when you finish doing that / bring in the dog and put out the cat*" vibe would, on the average, be so much more applicable to the neighborhoods in which Leiber and Stoller grew in, rather than Guy and Gardner, that it can hardly be doubted — the young whippersnappers were consciously trying to market their performing clients to America as a whole, rather than just the black R&B market, and in that they completely succeeded: 'Yakety Yak' hit #1 on the Billboard Hot 100 charts *as well* as the R&B charts, a rare case of total racial union in 1959 if there ever was one. Simply put, everybody loved it. Heck, maybe even the parents loved it. I mean, if some parents are totally cool in the 2020s with the «OK boomer» stuff, why wouldn't they be in 1959? 'Yakety-yak!' is the closest thing to a 1959 «OK boomer» you could ever get.

The funny thing is, the B-side of the single sounded as if, in a redemption kind of move, it was designed especially for the proto-boomer parents: 'Zing! Went The Strings Of My Heart' is an oldie from the 1930s, previously associated with the likes of Judy Garland, done in grand comical style by Will Jones (the bass voice of the band) — with that delivery, there is no question of taking the song too seriously, and its attachment to the ultra-popular 'Yakety Yak' is probably responsible for the tune becoming a pop staple, to be remembered, cherished, and revived later by everybody from The Move to The Trammps and beyond. If ever you thought that the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band or Frank Zappa or any other artist from the post-Beatlemania era were the first ones to invert doo-wop... well, basically, whatever *funny* things you discover about popular music in general, I suppose The Coasters were always there first.

With the 'Yakety Yak' craze gripping hold of the nation, it was practically inevitable that the Leiber-Stoller team would have to go back there again and again... first, though, they honestly tried doing something completely different, saddling the Coasters with 'The Shadow Knows', their not-too-funny homage to the classic radio show. The main problem? Too slow. Nobody wanted a Chicago-style slow blues from these guys, even if the deep laughter and the echoey chorus give it a slightly voodooistic, Screamin' Jay Hawkins-like angle. Actually, *especially* if they give it that angle: having become the personal

heroes of every rebellious teenager with a yakety-yak attitude, what were they even doing, trying to rope them in once more with references to a show that was far more relevant to their parents than themselves?..

So the mistake was quickly corrected, as Leiber and Stoller dutifully provided the *true* sequel to 'Yakety Yak' — 'Charlie Brown' featured the same ridiculously insane tempos, the same style of «bumbling» yakety sax from King Curtis, the same playful interaction between the band's vocals, and the same appeal to middle-class white audiences, but this time, chose a slightly different setting — the classroom as a field of operations for the proverbial school hooligan. Although just a tad less biting than 'Yakety Yak' (which is why it only went to #2 on both types of charts), it's still a perfect early example of how it is possible for a talented songwriter-performer combination to stay strictly within a given formula, yet twist its possibilities just enough to make things not the least bit boring. Melodically, the only significant difference is that the song has a «luring» slow part ("*who walks in the classroom, cool and slow?..*"), which makes the transition to ultra-fast chorus even more heartwarming — yet even though the protagonists of 'Yakety Yak' and 'Charlie Brown' are probably the same, this new episode in the life of our hero never sounds like a reread of past glories, more like a colorful expansion pack. And the punchline — "why's everybody always pickin' on me?" — is only a pinch less memorable than "yakety-yak, don't talk back", but actually delivered with a whole lot more expression. If you ever wondered how it might be possible to sound lazy, mischievous, and deeply socially offended at the same time, take a lesson from 'Charlie Brown'.

Amusingly, it is the B-side of the single (not included on the album) that may be more familiar to people today, since 'Three Cool Cats' was one of the songs included by the Beatles in their Decca audition tape and now commonly available as part of **Anthology I**. It is not one of the Coasters' greatest vocal highlights, but it's a pretty fun tune all the same, meaning that the Beatles could actually do it justice — in fact, this short story of failed communication between 'three cool cats' and 'three cool chicks' must have been perfectly synchronized between Los Angeles, Liverpool, and/or Hamburg, and I'm pretty sure John, Paul, and George must have had relatable experiences every now and then. We do not exactly get to know how "three cool chicks made three fools of these three cool cats", but (a) we can guess and (b) does it even matter? The important thing is, it's a nice piece of catchy simplistic satire on adolescent group interaction, and it's fun to see the slight differences between the Coasters, who take the song at a slightly more leisurely pace, playing it cool and relaxed, and the Beatles, who speed it up and have the guitars and drums in a much more nervous and agitated mood.

By now, the Coasters were on a genuine roll, so it's no wonder lightning struck thrice — although, yet again, Leiber and Stoller introduced a subtle variation to the yakety-yak formula: 'Along Came Jones' returned us back home from school, but

this time we were directed to the TV screen, with probably the first direct mock-up of a generic TV show in pop music history. It's still frickin' funny even today, even after we have long since abandoned flogging the dead horse of cheesy tropes and clichés in old-school popular entertainment (replacing them with, for now, slightly less detectable, but no less annoying, cheesy tropes and clichés in new-school popular entertainment). It's just so marvelously constructed, in a far more complex way than 'Yakety Yak' — there's the «ticking clock» percussion referring to both the alarm clock timing of the show and (probably) to «Salty Sam»'s timed dynamite explosions; the group talk simulation ("*and then?.. and then?..*"); the hilarious little «ahem» cough before the chorus; and, of course, the fabulous omission — we're never told about how exactly "long, lean, lanky Jones" is supposed to pull poor Sweet Sue out of her latest predicament, because it honestly does not matter. I also have a personal fondness for the lines "commercial came on / so I got up to get myself a snack", which might possibly be the first ever direct putdown of the advertisement industry in the context of a pop song — I mean, everybody watching TV or listening to the radio probably did that in the Fifties and even earlier, but to mention that expressly in a commercial recording?..

The B-side here was more serious, and sounds today like a natural predecessor to AC/DC's 'Let There Be Rock': "*In the beginning, there weren't nothing but rocks... then somebody invented the wheel — and things just started to roll!*" There's a slight shade of ecstatic gospel to 'That Is Rock & Roll', and although Leiber and Stoller and their performing clients were certainly not the first to go «meta» and sing hallelujah to this new style of music (everybody from Bill Haley to Chuck Berry had already done it by 1959), their anthem turned out to be one of the most poetic and soulful ("*did you ever hear a tenor sax swingin' like a rusty axe?*" is a great line, really, and then along came long, lean, lanky tenor sax and it *does* swing a little bit like a rusty axe).

That said, by the end of 1959 Leiber and Stoller obviously got tired of the formula, and possibly the Coasters themselves might have become afraid of being labeled as a pure novelty act with a vaudeville show. So the next single, although not featuring any «half-serious» songs of the 'That Is Rock & Roll Variety', was more of a «sing-songy» single than a «character impersonation» single — which is the reason why you so rarely encounter covers of 'Charlie Brown' or 'Along Came Jones' (neither the Beatles nor the Stones could ever do their theatrical nature proper justice), yet 'Poison Ivy' turned out to be one of the most frequently covered American songs in the history of UK Sixties' pop. Indeed, the song is Pop Incarnate: no sax or other instrumental breaks at all, catchiest verse and chorus structure in the world, smooth vocal harmonies, and a bit of a Latin rhythmic vibe underneath it all. And the lyrics — which, for some of us, could look like a shallow, superficial metaphor of a conniving gold-digging killer lady getting her hooks into a naïve male victim, but in reality turns out to be a deep,

meaningful allegory of the dangers of catching a venereal disease from the local hooker. "You're gonna need an ocean of calamine lotion" is pure T. S. Eliot, anyway.

The B-side of the song totally ignored the warning of the A-side, though, proclaiming that 'I'm A Hog For You', baby, and that "this little piggie's comin' over your house" — now that Charlie "Yakety-Yak" Brown is all grown up, he's gonna put those nursery rhymes to slightly more adult use. Not a great pop-rocker, certainly not as melodically inventive as 'Poison Ivy', but there is one thing about it that's pure gold: the amazingly daring [one-note guitar solo](#) that takes up the entire instrumental break and feels like the most rock'n'roll thing *ever*, for 1959 at least. (Said to be contributed by Mickey Baker, one of the most creative guitar wizards of the early rock era, although he is usually more known for having been part of the Mickey & Sylvia duo with their 'Love Is Strange' hit). Although both Canned Heat and Dr. Feelgood, who'd cover the song later, would have their lead guitarists jam over the same chord as well, neither of the two dared to repeat this minimalistic exercise in exactly the same way — incidentally, this honor would go to none other than John Fogerty, who would totally borrow the one-note solo for his own '[Tombstone Shadow](#)' a decade later; of course, I always thought this was his original discovery until Mickey Baker pointed me towards the light).

Unfortunately, 'Poison Ivy' would complete the Coasters' glorious run of hits — as good as Leiber and Stoller were, their creative pool was not inexhaustible, and their brand of oddness would eventually begin to clash with their commercial sensibility. This is fully evident on the Coasters' last single of 1959 (not included on the album as it probably came out already after the LP): 'Run Red Run' is an ultra-fast, energetic pop-rocker which, however, quickly gets bogged down in its lengthy, bizarre tale of a gambler and his gunslingin' monkey — I guess the inspiration might have come from Chuck Berry's 'Jo Jo Gun', with its equally convoluted, absurdist tale of a monkey adventure, but both songs share the same problem: they are neither as funny or as dazzlingly surrealist as they seem to want to be, and they both take too much time spinning their yarn instead of entertaining. 'Along Came Jones' solved that issue brilliantly by cutting out the «unnecessary» parts of the story, but 'Run Red Run' just can't stop from yappin', and, for Chrissake, this is certainly not on the level of 'Bob Dylan's 115th Dream' or anything like that; it's just Leiber and Stoller getting a bit too big for their britches.

Much more interesting and daring is actually the B-side — although I do wonder if a song like 'What About Us', with its almost Communist message, could have in any way harmed the public image or business perspectives of the Coasters upon release. Musically, it's not too great, but the emphasis is clearly on the lyrics, with their well-described social contrast: "*He goes to eat at the Ritz / Big steaks, that's the breaks / We eat hominy grits / From a bag, what a drag*". This was the first

time Leiber and Stoller had actually provided the Coasters with such a directly biting social message, and even though they are careful enough to sing it in their usual «clownish» fashion, still alternating between tenor and bass lines for comical effect, it is clear that "beneath this mask they are wearing a frown" and everything. The chorus is cautious enough — "*don't wanna cause no fuss, but what about us?*" — as if Leiber and Stoller included that first line as a safeguard against any potential appearances before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, but even so, I can hardly think of any other song from the entire Atlantic catalog in the 1950s that would describe the plight of the underprivileged so transparently, and it is hardly a coincidence that the honor went to the label's house band of Funny Clowns, as they were now being promoted to the cultural status of King Lear's Fool. Unfortunately, the record-buying public around Christmastime could not be bothered either by the long-winded storytelling of 'Run Red Run' or by the cautiously revolutionary social message of 'What About Us', and while the single was not a total flop, neither of the songs ever entered the public conscience to the level of 'Yakety Yak' or 'Poison Ivy'.

Still, all in all, 1959 was quite a fascinating year for the Coasters, and this amazing run of singles, give or take a few, arguably represents the single best combination of novelty humor, satirical intelligence, and driving R&B sound in the history of popular music. For a brief while, armed with the best couple of popular songwriters in the business and their own shade of interpretative genius, the Coasters were like the Marx Brothers of the pop industry — light years ahead of any competition. For reasons beyond their control, this comedic bliss could not make a solid transition into the Sixties, but we do still have the records, and as far as I'm concerned, none of them have aged a bit half a century later.





ONE BY ONE

Album released:

1960

V A L U E

1 2 2 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) But Beautiful; 2) Satin Doll; 3) Gee Baby Ain't I Good To You; 4) Autumn Leaves; 5) You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To; 6) Moonlight In Vermont; 7) Moonglow; 8) Easy Living; 9) The Way You Look Tonight; 10) Don't Get Around Much Anymore; 11) Willow Weep For Me; 12) On The Sunny Side Of The Street.

REVIEW

«Fresh thinking — the developing of new concepts in the presentation of music — is the basis of creative progress in the record industry». Thus open the liner notes to this album, written by Billboard editor Paul Ackerman, and if that don't *already* communicate to you the idea that you're about to get bullshitted on a grand level, listen to this: «*The present album... taps an even broader vein of the consumer market than earlier records. It will appeal not only to youthful fans, but to adults of cultivated and more advanced musical taste*». Translation: The Coasters are about to go all easy listening on your ass, you poor unfortunate adult of cultivated and advanced musical taste.



Admittedly, we should not rush to blame the record industry on this disaster — sometimes the responsibility lies as much on the individual as it does on the system, and in this particular case, sources indicate that it was actually the initiative of Carl Gardner, the informal «leader» of the group (Coaster #1, so to speak), who took the relative commercial failure of some of the group's regular singles in early 1960 as a sign that it was high time they did something «serious», shaking off the sticky tag of «clown princes of R&B» and showing the world that behind those masks they were all wearing frowns, or

something to that effect. Theoretically — why not? All of the Coasters were excellent singers, whose individual range and expressiveness were always hidden from view by the group approach and the novelty factor of the recordings. What could be wrong with trying to recast themselves as a serious pop outfit?

Surprisingly, they got everybody to come on board with the plan — even Leiber and Stoller, who are credited with «supervising» the album, whatever that means. Legendary Phil Ramone engineers the album, and the equally legendary Stanley Applebaum, whose strings would grace so many Atlantic releases, oversees the orchestration. Although the band only had two days to complete the sessions, everything went smoothly, and seemingly everybody — most importantly, Gardner himself — was pleased with the final result. Everybody but the buyers, that is.

The LP title itself gives a very clear hint that The Coasters are presented here individually: each of the four members gets three lead vocals all to himself, while the others stick to quiet, unintrusive occasional harmonies. And it is hard to argue that this approach is entirely unsuccessful: each of the band's three tenors is capable of demonstrating his accomplishments on a scale that was all but impossible in the context of their group-oriented «novelty» material, although arguably the biggest boost is for the bass voice of Will Jones, who rarely ever got any lead lines at all (other than the hicky punchlines) on the band's hit singles. So yes, each and every one of The Coasters could sing, that much is understood. The problem is: what exactly did they *like* to sing?

Again, in sheer theory an album of musty standards as covered by The Coasters, with their trademark satire and irony, could have been something special. But the catch is precisely that the album had to be 100% free from the smallest demonstrations of satire and irony. Okay, that's fine too: Atlantic vocal groups and solo artists were performing plenty of top-notch original pop songs at the time, from Ben E. King's 'Spanish Harlem' to The Drifters' 'This Magic Moment' etc., so it would not have been impossible for Leiber and Stoller to properly «supervise» the album by accumulating some newer material in order for each of the Coasters to try and leave his own mark on it.

Instead, they settled on the tried and true, following the Sam Cooke model of doing things: «uncultured» pop singles, written by contemporary songwriters, are targeted at young audiences who don't have enough money to buy LPs — but «serious» LPs, oriented at adults with fatter checkbooks, have to pander to the musical tastes of yesterday and re-promote the glory of classic Tin Pan Alley. And no satire and irony! Grown-ups are easily offended by satire and irony. After all, they did *not* win the war for us through satire and irony, did they?

Three listens into the album (which I probably could not see myself even imagining getting into twenty years ago... but now

I'm sort of a grown-up myself, you know, though I wear this crown of thorns with shame and regret), I was still not sure what exactly I could write about it, so I turned to other reviews for inspiration — somebody called «j. poet» on the All-Music Guide, for instance, as well as others — and most of them seemed to be trying *way* too hard to extol the virtues and wonders of The Coasters' take on these twelve classic tunes. Not doing too good of a job on it, though. For instance: "*Bass singer Will Jones croons 'But Beautiful' to the backing of celesta, vibes, and swooning strings*" — uh, well, yes, he does. Perhaps the implication is that everything sounds better with celesta. Or: "*The arrangement of 'Gee Baby, Ain't I Good To You' is pure pop, but Billy Guy sings it with an anguished bluesy feeling*". Well, duh, it's sort of a blues song anyway, and many people sang it with an anguished feeling — Ray Charles, for instance, to whose interpretation Billy Guy finds little to add.

The underlying feeling for all those assessments is probably that we have to take a stance here and find it in our hearts to defend the natural right of The Coasters to (a) produce «serious» music and (b) lay their own Coaster claim to the legacy of Americana; also, (c) it is always a healthy thing to line up at the old shooting range and take down some of those musty prejudices like «clowns will be clowns, it's stupid for a clown to take off his makeup and pretend he's a normal human being». But it is just as healthy to admit there is a good reason why, after all these years, many people still hold fond memories of 'Searchin', 'Yakety Yak', and 'Along Came Jones' while **One By One** is completely forgotten — and no amount of retrospective admiration is ever going to properly restore that extra artistic dimension to our mental image of The Coasters and what they did for the sake of our entertainment.

It's pretty simple — the voices are splendid, the arrangements are complex and professional, but in the end, this is just generic, unimaginative, old-fashioned pop, and Carl Gardner, Cornell Gunter, Billy Guy, and Will Jones can do no more with it than could Sam Cooke with his own **Hits Of The 50's** and other similar albums. They may have set out to «prove» to the world that they were «serious» artists, but the only thing this album proves is that, for all their seriousness, they had no idea of how to add a whiff of true «creative progress» to songs that had already been interpreted in millions of ways by everybody from Frank Sinatra to Billie Holiday to Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald.

Additionally, the gesture somewhat demeans everything the Coasters did prior to this effort — yes, much of what they did could be formally classified as «novelty», but those were *intelligently* written, *satirical* novelty numbers, with serious messages underlying lightweight surfaces. The very existence of **One By One** would somehow imply that when the Coasters sing 'Autumn Leaves' or 'Willow Weep For Me', they are somehow being «deeper» than when they sing *yakety-yak, don't talk back*, but this is a logically improper implication that puts an equality sign between statements such as

«tragedy tends to be more noble than comedy» (which could be argued for) and «*any* tragedy is inherently superior to *any* comedy» (which is obviously incorrect). We love classic Coasters in the same way we love classic Marx Brothers, or *Seinfeld*, or *Catch-22*, and while I would be the last person to ever use mainstream public taste as a prime measure of quality, in this particular case the fact that ‘Yakety-Yak’ sold and **One By One** did not can hardly be used as incriminating evidence. If you already have Sinatra in that niche, why bother overpopulating it with The Coasters, of all people?

In the end, the only pragmatic use this album might hold for anyone is a demonstration of why a successful cover of a classic Coasters song is not the easiest thing in the world to do. For sure, it is easy to learn to play and sing most of them, but not at all easy to get four such vocally talented people to assemble in one room and give them such a musically and dramatically coherent and entertaining makeover. **One By One** discloses to us the individual bits of magic that come together in such a great whole; *one by one*, each of those is not particularly ground-shaking, but you can actually see just how well-versed in the art of singing they all are — which is one of the big reasons why the «silliness» of the classic records penetrates so deeply into our hearts. As one of the keys to a better understanding of why we feel so good from listening to ‘Yakety-Yak’, **One By One** certainly has its use. But if I’m ever in the mood for a fresh take on ‘Moonlight In Vermont’, **One By One** is hardly likely to appear on the radar.

