

# GENE VINCENT



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1956-1971</i>	<i>Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i><a href="#">Race With The Devil (1956)</a></i>

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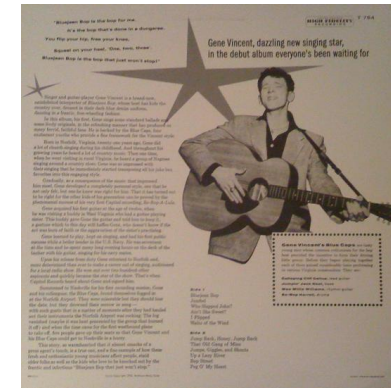
## BLUEJEAN BOP!

Album released:

Aug. 13, 1956

V A L U E  
2 4 4 4 5

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Bluejean Bop; 2) Jezebel; 3) Who Slapped John?; 4) Ain't She Sweet?; 5) I Flipped; 6) Waltz Of The Wind; 7) Jump Back, Honey, Jump Back; 8) That Old Gang Of Mine; 9) Jumps, Giggles & Shouts; 10) **Lazy River**; 11) Bop Street; 12) Peg O' My Heart; 13\*) **Race With The Devil**; 14\*) Be-Bop-A-Lula; 15\*) Woman Love; 16\*) Crazy Legs; 17\*) Gonna Back Up Baby; 18\*) Well, I Knocked Bim Bam.

### REVIEW

Gene Vincent's first and unquestionably best album arrived precisely at a time when the world of hormone-drenched white teenage kids seemed fully prepared for something a bit wilder and raunchier than Elvis — particularly since with his new career at RCA, Elvis had already sacrificed a serious chunk of the original raw rockabilly spirit in favor of a glossier, less openly rebellious approach. Somebody just *had* to carry that spark — and not just carry it, but actually try to fuel it into something even wilder than it was. Jerry Lee Lewis was a good candidate, but it was harder to raise the proper ruckus on a piano than in a guitar-based band; plus, one could always argue that Jerry's quiet Southern background was a less suitable asset than Gene's turbulent adventures in the Navy — I mean, between a Bible school student and a sailor-cum-biker, who'd be the better candidate for a true rock'n'roll rebel?



Although Gene's first two singles were not included on this LP, you can find them attached as bonus tracks on some editions, and, of course, this is precisely where one should start — want it or not, 'Be-Bop-A-Lula' will forever remain his

signature tune. For one thing, it brought new life and meaning to the echo effect — although the latter had already been popularized by Elvis at the start of the rockabilly revolution, Ken Nelson's production goes completely overboard, to the point where it is almost impossible to decipher the words (personally, I've *always* heard "she's the queen of all the teens" as "she's the queen of the Ovaltines", and it always made more sense to me) and the lead guitar sounds like it's suffering from a really bad hangover, yet still manages to carry the melody. For another, it sort of urbanized the rock'n'roll vocal: in the place of the cheerful hillbilly (Bill Haley, Carl Perkins) or the burly hillbilly (Elvis, Jerry Lee) what you hear is a snarkier, higher-pitched, generally more slap-in-yer-face slum-hoodlum tone — with far less subtlety, perhaps, and with a singing technique that leaves much to be desired, but also one that was much easier to imitate for young white rebels across the other side of the ocean: little wonder that the Beatles, in their early years, looked way more like four copies of Gene Vincent than four copies of Carl or Elvis. Throw in the absolutely inane, caveman lyrics that will make you re-appreciate the poetic value of Elvis' hit songs, and there you have it — Gene Vincent, man of the year in mid-'56.

There was also the little surprise factor of Cliff Gallup, one of the best guitarists of the decade who got almost accidentally promoted from session man to a regular member of Gene's Blue Caps (though, unfortunately, not for very long). You can hear echoes of Carl Perkins' and Scotty Moore's playing in his lead parts, and he might not have always been their equal in terms of careful phrasing and pacing, but Cliff added flash — speed, volume, rough excitement — and, in a way, might have been the first of many rock'n'roll guitarists trying to wordlessly steal the spotlight away from the frontman: one reason why he was so revered by Jeff Beck, among others. 'Be-Bop-A-Lula', with its relatively slow tempo, might not be the best place to appreciate his talents (though that first solo is eminently hummable), but the second single, 'Race With The Devil', most certainly is — this combination of speed, precision, cleanliness, and sheer fun is quite unique in Fifties' rock. Not to mention the song's title and general message, of course — melodically, it may be the same formula as Chuck Berry's 'Reelin' And Rockin' or Elvis' 'Baby Let's Play House', but lyrically, not a lot of teenage rock'n'roll songs would directly refer to the devil as the protagonist's partner in crime. Whoever might have been shocked by something like AC/DC's 'Highway To Hell' twenty years later should have remembered that Gene Vincent was playing his own subtle games with the horned one when Bon Scott was still going to Sunshine Primary.

Moving on to the album itself, the opening title track is a classic deceptive move — starting out as a slow romantic ballad, then, a few bars into the song, abruptly jarring to a halt and restarting as a frenzied rocker (one can only guess how much of a show-stopper something like this should have been at the average school prom). "Bop" was clearly Gene's favorite word — those labials just roll off your lips, don't they? — and The Blue Caps are all about boppin' them blues, making sure each

beat hits the ground only long enough to rebound back in the air, where their rhythm section, their lead guitar, and their hiccupy vocalist all prefer to spend their time. With this levity and excitement, it is easy to forget that 'Bluejean Bop', 'Who Slapped John?', 'Jump Back, Honey, Jump Back' and whatever else are all pretty much interchangeable — the band's minimalistic arrangements and limited musical vocabulary allow them about as much moving space as the Ramones twenty years later, at least when it comes to upbeat style.

Upbeat, of course, is not *all* they can do: not so deep down at heart, Gene Vincent was also an honest romantic, and he was certainly not above serenading the lovely ladies with slow-paced sentimental balladry. Among his idols we see not only Hank Williams ('Waltz Of The Wind'), but also the doo-woppers ('Wedding Bells') and even Hoagy Carmichael ('Up A Lazy River') — all of this stuff is faithfully converted to the Blue Caps' echoey style, but performed without the slightest hint at a tongue-in-cheek attitude. And it's not at all bad: Cliff Gallup excels at slow soloing as well (check out his «Eastern» chords on the exotica-tinged pop standard 'Jezebel'), while Gene's crooning voice on 'Lazy River', in this humble reviewer's thoroughly unworthy opinion, is more seductive and emotionally resonant than Hoagy's own. And since there is no true contradiction between Gene the raunchy be-bopping biker and Gene the sentimental doo-wopping troubadour, it would make just as little sense to dismiss these disarmingly charming minimalistic interpretations of the old classics as it would be for, say, Elvis doing 'Blue Moon' in his Sun days.

The worst that could be said about **Bluejean Bop** is that the album basically knows only two formulas — the sweet and the explosive — and just keeps swinging from one to the other. This is the same worst that can also be said about 99% of LPs released in the Fifties; the important thing that makes **Bluejean Bop** one of the classics is the feeling of fresh, raw excitement. Like with most of Gene's contemporaries, it could easily be predicted that he would never be able to top this initial batch, but don't let the leather jacket and greased hair image fool you: Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps were the real deal, capturing millions of teenage hearts with their sounds first and foremost, and their visual image always coming second. The best of these songs represent some of the wildest rock'n'roll ever put on tape.





## GENE VINCENT AND THE BLUE CAPS

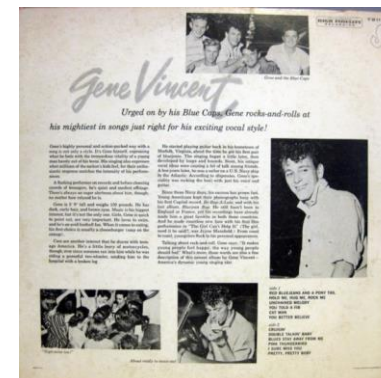
Album released:

March 4, 1957

V A L U E

2 3 4 3 4

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) *Red Blue Jeans And A Pony Tail*; 2) *Hold Me, Hug Me, Rock Me*; 3) *Unchained Melody*; 4) *You Told A Fib*; 5) *Cat Man*; 6) *You Better Believe*; 7) *Cruisin'*; 8) *Double Talkin' Baby*; 9) *Blues Stay Away From Me*; 10) *Pink Thunderbird*; 11) *I Sure Miss You*; 12) *Pretty, Pretty Baby*; 13\*) *Important Words*; 14\*) *B-I-Bickey-Bi, Bo-Bo-Go*; 15\*) *Five Days, Five Days*; 16\*) *Teenage Partner*; 17\*) *Five Feet Of Lovin'*.

### REVIEW

As we now know, the second and last genuinely important album released in Gene Vincent's heyday was recorded in bitter conditions — lead guitarist Cliff Gallup, Gene's chief instrumental selling point, had actually left the Blue Caps a few months before the sessions (held in late '56) and had to be convinced to briefly rejoin the band in order to save the day. Apparently, this was not because his replacement Russell Williford was found lacking, but because Williford himself had resigned from the band right before they had to go back to the studio. And given that, according to some sources, Cliff may have resigned from the band precisely because he himself had grown dissatisfied with the «Gallup Sound» and wanted to go for a more conventional Nashville type of sound, it would be easy to suspect that the overall spirit must have suffered as a result.



Yet this is not the main problem with the album — in fact, on the surface at least the level of primal energy necessary to keep the Gene Vincent motor running seems just as high, if not higher, than during the early days of 'Be-Bop-A-Lula'. Indeed, the record is full to the brim with speedy, thrashy rockers, only very rarely interrupted by a sentimental ballad or a

slow blues burner. Most of the tunes are originals, too, written by Gene himself or by other members of the Blue Caps or by his personal songwriters — at least one, ‘You Better Believe’, is even credited to Gallup himself, meaning there was more dedication behind his brief return than the one of a mere session player. Whoever says that the album «drags» can easily be sued for libel with no hopes of winning.

In a way, though, the album might be trying a bit *too* hard. A good example of a song that ends up overdoing it is ‘Cat Man’, on which Gene is sucked into the emploi of Dangerous Ladies’ Man so much that the «wildness» gets all hyperbolic and almost ridiculous. The song uses the same trick of slow creeping build-up as Elvis’ ‘King Creole’: the verse is all about quietly creeping up on the unsuspecting victim, and then the chorus is all about springing out and going for a quick kill — "CAT MA-A-A-N!" But there is really no menace felt within the song, though its combination of a «relaxed Bo Diddley beat» with Gallup’s hard-to-define style of playing (something in between the Wild West and Mexico, I’d say) makes it melodically interesting, if not downright challenging. And this is typical of the album: Gene keeps pushing forward his Wild Man agenda, but the friendly rockabilly music does not properly back up that claim. When each second verse on every second tune is capped off with a primal "RO-O-OCK!" before launching into the guitar solo, the gag gets old pretty darn fast: gee wiz, Mr. Vincent, do you *have* to necessarily end each of these on a fast-rising pitch?

That said, what *saves* the record and makes it worth revisiting every now and then is the songwriting: as evident as the formula is, you gotta give the boys credit for actually working on each song and trying out various small ideas to capture your attention in various small ways in which it has not been captured before. At the very start, ‘Red Blue Jeans And A Ponytail’ begins in a fairly traditional ‘Drinkin’ Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee’ type of way, but a fresh hook is thrown in on the fourth line — instead of letting it be the regular end of the verse, Gene makes a «false stop» with a lecherous *oooh-weee*, and then mutates the ending ("...red blue jeans and a ponytail!") into becoming the song’s chorus and memorable point. That’s all there is, honestly, but how much else is needed for a two minute long rockabilly song?

Likewise, ‘You Better Believe’ sounds as if it has been welded together from bits and pieces of ‘Hard Headed Woman’ and ‘Got A Lot O’ Livin’ To Do’ (not sure if the latter song came out earlier or later, but it does not really matter), yet what gives it its tiny bit of special edge is the echoey call-and-answer ritual between Gene and the boys as they keep hurling "believe, believe, believe" at each other before the obligatory "RO-O-OCK!" sweeps the moody haze away and opens the gates for another maniacal solo. Or take ‘Pink Thunderbird’, whose opening rockabilly line ("I got a pink Thunderbird, with a red fur seat...") is suddenly broken up by a spoken interlude — "well baby, it’s mine", Gene warns in a very clearly transmitted

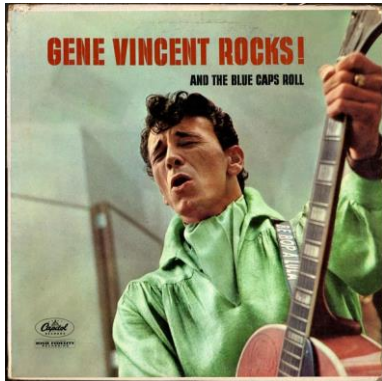
keep-your-paws-off-it intonation — and then the same shit happens with the next two lines, meaning that the verse never gets a chance to be properly resolved, and it is not until the chorus that a «normal» melody is introduced. It is a classic case of teasing and confusing the listener before delivering the punchline, and at the height of the rock'n'roll era, Gene Vincent could be the mightiest teaser of them all.

He could also get mighty serious: I am not sold on his interpretation of 'Unchained Melody' (though I would never call him unfit to take on its epic sentimentality), but the slow and moody 'Blues Stay Away From Me' is done really well, with Gene working across several registers and eventually settling upon a ghostly, echoey vocal tone which is neither flat and generic nor overdramatic. He then applies the same ghostly breathiness to the slow-rolling country shuffle 'I Sure Miss You', a number you'd rather expect from the likes of Carl Perkins — but Carl would most likely have sung it in his earthy, porch-sitting tone, whereas Vincent always sings as if he were hovering a few inches above ground.

In the end, though, the record comes across as significantly less diverse than **Bluejean Bop!**, even if in sheer numbers of classic Gene Vincent numbers they are more or less equal. But compared to the subpar quality of the post-Gallup era, it is still essential listening, and it can also teach us quite a few valuable lessons on how to make things fresh, playful, and catchy within the framework of a highly limited melodic and instrumental formula.





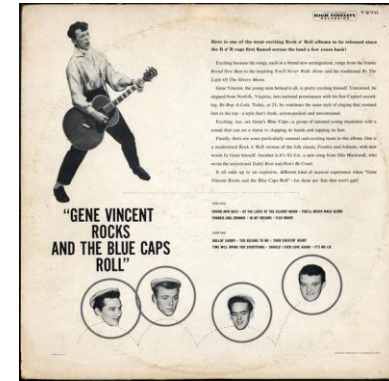


# GENE VINCENT ROCKS! AND THE BLUE CAPS ROLL

Album released:  
March 18, 1958

V A L U E  
2 3 3 2 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Brand New Beat; 2) *By The Light Of The Silvery Moon*; 3) You'll Never Walk Alone; 4) Frankie And Johnnie; 5) In My Dreams; 6) Flea Brain; 7) Rollin' Danny; 8) You Belong To Me; 9) Your Cheatin' Heart; 10) Time Will Bring You Everything; 11) Should I Ever Love Again; 12) It's No Lie.

## REVIEW

The golden era for Gene Vincent lasted approximately one year and 3–4 months: the time it takes to get from 'Be-Bop-A-Lula' to 'Dance To The Bop', his first and last entries on the US charts and a proverbial demonstration of how, sometimes, one artist's artistic *and* commercial peaks may totally coincide. What exactly happened after that summer of 1957 is not entirely clear: the only thing that is obvious is that it had little to do with the departure of Cliff Gallup and his eventual replacement by Johnny Meeks, or with any other change in the lineup of the Blue Caps. It is far more likely that the drastic change in style was Gene's own initiative — an initiative that put his career on the downward track a solid couple of years *before* his unfortunate accident with Eddie Cochran, which would be the final nail in that coffin.



It is hardly a coincidence that the first song on the Blue Caps' third LP is called 'Brand New Beat': perhaps the beat as such is not new in general, but it definitely is a new kind of beat for Gene Vincent, a beat that he might have thought to be more

mature and palatable to a wider audience, but which in reality simply came across as much more tame and conventional. Never even mind the fact that the song was formally credited to Joe Allison (and his wife Audrey), a professional songwriter for country and doo-wop artists: what matters most is that it rides atop a strict, smooth and jangly electric guitar line (and a piano part, for the first time ever on a Gene Vincent rocker), features doo-woppy back-up vocals from a new addition called «the Clapper Boys», and has Gene sing more in Buddy Holly fashion than in his own wild man style. It is still mildly catchy (though the melody feels seriously influenced by Buddy's 'Rock Me My Baby'), but it has no personality.

Truth be told, the problem was already evident on the last of Gene's hit singles, such as 'Lotta Lovin' and 'Dance To The Bop': the wild man of yesteryear was slowly giving way to a more polished and civilized singer of rock'n'roll for people who wouldn't mind to see rebellion mutate into entertainment. But on **Gene Vincent Rocks!**, contrary to the self-assured nature of that exclamation mark, there is very little rock'n'roll as such. There is some pop, some country, some crooning balladry, and, at best, two or three songs that would even formally qualify as the Devil's music — one of these, 'Flea Brain', being little more than a rehash of several of Gene's rockabilly classics, except for maybe featuring what could qualify as the most misogynistic lyrics of his entire career ("stacked just right from her head to her shoe, she acts like somethin' that escaped from the zoo"... "if she wasn't good lookin' she'd be better off dead").

Some people actually swear by the ballads on this album, finding exquisite quality in Vincent's soulful deliveries of such classics as 'You'll Never Walk Alone' and such new titles as Bernice Bedwell's 'In My Dreams'. I would say this is *very* much a matter of taste, and that while I can certainly see how Gene's rough, unpolished approach to crooning could stimulate one's emotional centers, it still feels to me that he was largely trying to emulate the styles and techniques of Elvis, and inevitably failing as a result. Want it or not, there is a reason why Gene Vincent is hardly ever remembered for his romantic side — probably the same reason why we tend to remember the Troggs more for 'Wild Thing' and less for 'Love Is All Around' (at least, I do surmise that most people who actually remember 'Love Is All Around' will have a hard time remembering that it was actually done by the same dudes who did 'Wild Thing').

Arguably the single most interesting thing going on here is the rough and rowdy way with which Gene attacks golden country standards — his delivery of 'Frankie And Johnnie' is downright hysterical, replete with hiccups, heavy breathing, and drawled-out syllables that occupy 90% of sonic space, so much so that it makes you wonder why he didn't want to put the finishing touch on it by speeding up the song and turning it into an equally frantic rocker. On the other hand, Hank Williams' 'Your Cheatin' Heart' is ever so slightly poppified and made to look like an Elvis number — the deep bass loop of

"...will tell on you" is 100% pure Elvis in nature. On the *third* hand, 'By The Light Of The Silvery Moon', which Gene most likely copped from the then-recent Jimmy Bowen hit version rather than the pre-war original, has always been an awfully corny song and gets an equally corny delivery (for some reason, the mesmerizing effect of the song was so huge in the Fifties that even Little Richard tried to remake it in his own style a year later — it's just that the innate stupidity of the tune always had the upper hand on everybody who tried to defeat it in a fair fight).

In short, the only way to defend the album is by saying that very little on it, with the possible exception of 'By The Light', is explicitly bad — at the very least, there are certainly no signs of Gene Vincent trying to remodel himself as a teenage idol, à la Johnny Burnette or any other rockabilly heroes of his generation. But if the first two LPs, and the non-LP singles surrounding them, were and still remain an integral part of the early rock'n'roll canon, *this* album will only be of special interest to those who are, for some reason or other, fascinated with the character evolution of Gene Vincent — or those who would like to know what exactly it takes to go from Top Artist to Average Artist without embracing a whole new sound or a whole new artistic persona.





## A GENE VINCENT RECORD DATE

Album released:

V A L U E

November 1958

2 3 3 2 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Five Feet Of Lovin'; 2) The Wayward Wind; 3) Somebody Help Me; 4) Keep It A Secret; 5) Hey, Good Lookin'; 6) Git It; 7) Teen Age Partner; 8) Peace Of Mind; 9) Look What You Gone And Done To Me; 10) Summertime; 11) I Can't Help It (If I'm Still In Love With You); 12) I Love You; 13\*) Lotta Lovin'; 14\*) I Got It.

### REVIEW

By early 1958, Vincent had vanished from the US charts: although he released six singles throughout the year, not one of them was able to repeat the modest successes of 'Lotta Lovin' and 'Dance To The Bop', even if 'I Got A Baby' rocked at a frenetic tempo, with one of Johnny Meeks' wildest solos ever (still not on the Cliff Gallup level, though), and 'Git It' was funny, catchy, and had plenty of teen appeal ("I don't have it now but I can get it... and I'll do the best I can"). Not quite clear what happened here: perhaps the songs were just dropping into the infamous middle-of-the-road void, being much too rock'n'roll-ish for that part of the public taste which was veering toward teen idols, and not enough rock'n'roll-ish for the original fans who still remembered the rip-roarin' leather-clad echo-boomin' Gene Vincent with the true, original, authentic Blue Caps. Then again, perhaps Capitol Records just forgot to promote them or something — answers to these questions are often more dry and business-like than we, the philosophizing inspectors of pop culture, would like to imagine.



Anyway, one thing is for sure: despite the lack of commercial success, Capitol executives continued to be more than willing to accommodate their artist when it came to recording. In 1958 alone, Vincent pulled off not one, but two LPs — and neither of the two was just a collection of A- and B-sides. This second one, recorded with more or less the same personnel as **Gene Vincent Rocks!**, also reflects the results of a single recording session held sometime in the fall of '58 and released in November — and the only song here to have been featured as a single is 'Git It', the rest are LP-only tracks.

Of course, it would be odd to expect something radically different from **Gene Vincent Rocks!** If anything, this record feels a tad *more* mellow than its predecessor, reflecting even more softness and quiet than before. In fact, on several of the tracks Vincent ends up sounding exactly like Buddy Holly — 'I Love You', closing out the album, has Holly-style jangly pop guitar, Holly-style romantic chimes, Holly-style nerdy-hiccupy vocals, and Holly-style simplistic-romantic lyrics; play this tune to anybody with less than subtle ear-hearing and see if the mistake is not made (at the very least, nobody will be able to identify this as Gene Vincent if all one knows are the classic hits). Likewise, the bonus track 'I Got It' (the original B-side to 'Dance To The Bop') appropriates the Crickets' percussive style and Buddy's vocal melody contours, with the Clapper Boys providing Picks-style harmonies as well.

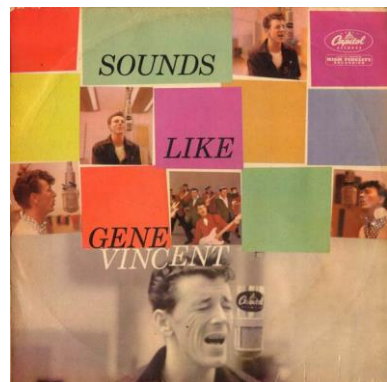
Elsewhere, Gene is continuing his love affair with old-fashioned country, borrowing two Hank Williams tunes and slightly rockifying them — 'Hey, Good Lookin' is seriously sped up, set to the piano boogie riff of 'Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On', graced with a wild piano solo, and touched up with a bit of barking as Gene reaches out for his wildman throaty delivery at the end of the bridge section; meanwhile, 'I Can't Help It (If I'm Still In Love With You)' has barrelhouse piano and sharp, bluesy lead guitar phrasing all over it, ditching the romantic melancholy of the original and transforming into something more upbeat and aggressive. Unfortunately, the rearrangements do not really work: 'Hey, Good Lookin' loses its perfectly paced subtle salaciousness with the new tempo, and 'I Can't Help It' is devoid of magic with Gene's lackluster, uninspired, largely expressionless vocal performance (at least that's the way it feels if you remember Hank).

It's not really a matter of running out of ideas — it's more a matter of being unable to find ideas that *mean* something. We can certainly give credit to Gene, for instance, for not wanting to record just another cover of 'Summertime', but instead reimagining it as an exotic, mambo-influenced danceable number with fussy guitar and piano solos. But does it *work*? It's a frickin' lullaby, for Christ's sake. Your mummy and daddy aren't supposed to be rockin' it out in front of the cradle. If you scratch out all the sadness and depth and internalised pain from the tune, what exactly are you intending to replace it with? A Les Baxter-style arrangement?

Even Gene's own compositions are not spared from humiliation: for some reason, we have to endure a «proto-soft rock» re-recording of 'Teen Age Partner', with the Clapper Boys and Gene competing over who can inject more tenderness into a rockabilly classic which was never intended to be tender in the first place. The only point in this new version's existence is that, by comparing the 1956 Cliff Gallup-era recording with the 1958 Johnny Meeks-era one, you can get a much more transparent and obvious picture of the «temporary death of rock'n'roll in the US» than you would from reading a hundred books or watching a hundred documentaries on the subject. It is one thing when your wild and rebellious rock'n'roll heroes are being squeezed out of the public eye by teen idols; it is quite another one when they begin reducing themselves to the level of teen idols to fit in with the times.

This does not mean that **A Gene Vincent Record Date** does not at all rock, or is somehow unlistenable — by the average standard of 1958, the album does OK, and the new Blue Caps continue to be more slick, tight, and professional than the old ones. For fairness' sake, Gene sounds sincere and beautiful on the gospel-style love ballad 'Peace Of Mind' (still would rather hear this from Elvis), and further matures as a singer on slow country tunes such as 'The Wayward Wind' and 'Keep It A Secret'. And yet, it is not difficult to understand why none of *these* songs ever became classics, and why all the young British lads would rather prefer to cover 'Be-Bop-A-Lula' for the millionth time than give a damn about whatever Mr. Vincent was up to in the fall of 1958.





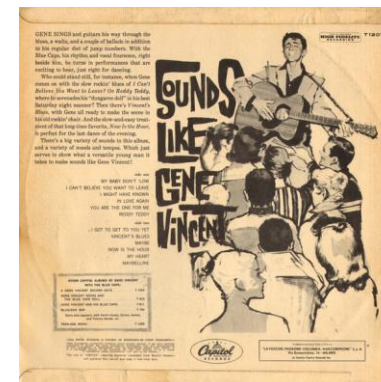
## SOUNDS LIKE GENE VINCENT

Album released:

June 1959

V A L U E  
2 2 3 1 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) My Baby Don't Low; 2) I Can't Believe You Want To Leave; 3) I Might Have Known; 4) In Love Again; 5) You Are The One For Me; 6) Reddy Teddy; 7) I Got To Get To You Yet; 8) Vincent's Blues; 9) Maybe; 10) Now Is The Hour; 11) My Heart; 12) Maybellene.

### REVIEW

By early 1959, having had no luck whatsoever with the charts for more than a year, Gene was desperate enough to try out whatever came his way — even if it was a cover of ‘Over The Rainbow’, which Capitol put out as his first single in 1959 and promoted fairly heavily (you can actually see Vincent singing it live at the [Town Hall Party show](#) in mid-’59). This did not help; rock’n’rollers would most likely tear down their posters of Gene upon hearing him turn into Judy Garland, while grannies would find this version too rough and crude for consumption. If anything, it just served as further proof that Gene Vincent, once the amazing wildcat to rule over all the less-than-amazing wildcats, had lost his spark and was helplessly groping around in the dark, scrounging for survival without much luck.



Even the title of his next LP for Capitol feels pathetic: any record by Mr. X titled **Sounds Like Mr. X** subtly implies that it most likely doesn't (which is why there actually aren't a lot of them — the nearest example I know is 1965's **Sounds Like Searchers**, released right after the Searchers had lost a key member and not really sounding *that* much like the classic

Searchers from 1964). But even more ironic, **Sounds Like Gene Vincent** turns out to be a pathetically laughable title precisely because this is the first ever Gene Vincent record on which at least two-thirds of the tracks clearly give us Gene Vincent trying to sound like somebody *else*.

Sounds like... Little Richard on 'I Can't Believe You Want To Leave', a slow doo-wop ballad on which Mr. Penniman gave us his more sentimental and vulnerable, uh, I mean, paranoid side, with a monumentally hystrionic performance. Next to that, Gene's delivery is pure milquetoast, though he does formally succeed in conveying a state of emotional derangement. The accompanying lead guitar and sax solos are purely perfunctory. Further on down the line, another tribute to Little Richard is 'Ready Teddy' (misspelled as 'Reddy Teddy!'), although Johnny Meeks' guitar solo is more reminiscent of Scotty Moore's work on Elvis' records. The recording is every bit as exciting as any randomly chosen Little Richard tribute by a bunch of randomly chosen rockabilly enthusiasts performed at any time from 1960 to 2020.

Sounds like... Bo Diddley on 'In Love Again', a song formally credited to Gene himself but based primarily and almost exclusively on appropriating the Bo Diddley beat. A decent enough appropriation, and it is curious to watch the electric guitar weave all those extra chords into the rhythm pattern, making it less syncopated and more melodic, but also stripping it clean of that primal animal energy. It's like an attempt to take Bo Diddley's rock'n'roll and convert it into a pop song, but it does not go far enough to become melodically interesting, while going far enough to make it slothful.

Sounds like... Buddy Holly on 'Maybe', written for Gene by a couple of amateur rockabilly songwriters who had mastered the formula well enough for the sound to be pleasant and recognizable, but not well enough to be able to do anything with it that Buddy hadn't already done. Worse, the exact same 'Words Of Love' chord progression is then used *again* on 'My Heart', written by none other than Johnny Burnette. To Gene's credit, he does capture the sweetness and charm of Buddy's vocal style almost to the extent that you could mistake any of these two tunes for a real Buddy outtake — but even if you persisted in your mistake, neither of the two would be outstanding Buddy outtakes. (Particularly since Buddy did have his share of non-outstanding and self-repetitive outtakes).

Sounds like... Elvis on 'Now Is The Hour' (originally Clement Scott's 'Swiss Cradle Song', later gaining a secondary association with New Zealand after being oddly mistaken for a traditional Maori song). Although I don't think Elvis ever did that one, Gene here adopts his vocal stylistics and makes his backing band sound like the Jordanaires — quite likely, this could fool some beginner fans, though not seasoned ones. Nice, but cheap.

Sounds like... Chuck Berry on 'Maybellene'; this, at least, is a straight cover rather than a tricky imitation. The tempo is

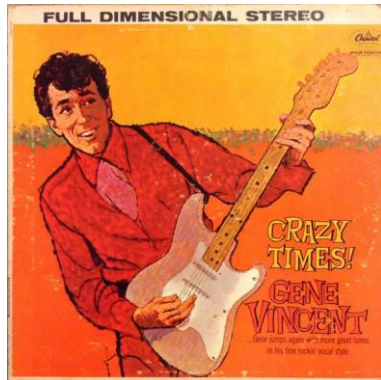


solid, but the sax replacement for Chuck's guitar is limp, and so is Gene's vocal performance. As usual, it can be clearly felt that he is simply not giving it his all — almost as if he does not really believe in the material, and that's precisely what is ruining the effect. Utterly pointless.

Throw in an equally middle-of-the-road performance of Little Walter's 'My Babe' (for some reason, spelled as 'My Baby Don't Low' — sic! — on the original album cover; Capitol really messed up with proofreading on this one) and a ridiculous attempt to turn Big Joe Turner's 'Flip Flop And Fly' into a slow, feeble, piano-led 12-bar blues ('Vincent's Blues', cheekily credited to Gene again), and the result is, on the whole, the single most pathetic assembly of meaningless performances from Gene to-date. While it is true that 1959 was, on the whole, a fairly devastating and depressing year for the first wave of rock'n'rollers all through the USA, you could at least find plenty of excuses for most of them — from marrying their underage cousins to finding God to joining the army to being dead. For Vincent, there is really no such excuse: **Sounds Like Gene Vincent (Lost His Way)** is the album of a man whose short-term pact with the Devil had run out and who suddenly found himself utterly bereft of his special gift.

Admittedly, he could still sing his heart out, and his band could still play; like before, there is nothing here that would be way too unlistenable or too corny. Yet it is still a small step further down from the quality of the previous two records — which had at least a few occasional attempts at trying to retain or reinvent his own personality. Here, it's like he just threw his hands up and said, «take me and do what you want with me». A pretty sad denouement.





## CRAZY TIMES!

Album released:

March 1960

V A L U E  
2 2 3 1 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Crazy Times; 2) She She Little Sheila; 3) Darlene; 4) Everybody's Got A Date But Me; 5) Why Don't You People Learn How To Drive; 6) Green Back Dollar; 7) Big Fat Saturday Night; 8) Mitchiko From Tokyo; 9) Hot Dollar; 10) Accentuate The Positive; 11) Blue Eyes Crying In The Rain; 12) Pretty Pearly.

### REVIEW

Although all of the recordings for this album date from an early August 1959 recording session in Hollywood, by the time it actually came out Gene was a tax exile in Europe — having run into some unexpected trouble with the mighty IRS, he decided that *now*, perhaps, was the time to conquer Europe in person, rather than through hearsay, and left for the UK, where he was briefly pampered by Jack Good, the notorious early TV promoter of various rock and roll stars, and then for the Netherlands and Germany, where, I believe, he was particularly well received in Hamburg, paving the road for you-know-who-from-Liverpool half a year later.



Formally, this might have been the right thing to do: British kids likely flocked to their TV screens to watch the leather-clad rock god on Jack Good's *Boy Meets Girl*, and rewarded Gene for his effort by putting his latest record, 'Wild Cat', on the UK charts — #21 may not seem like such a big deal, but for Gene, it was his first chart entry *anywhere* since late 1957. The only problem, of course, is that 'Wild Cat' is thoroughly mislabeled — only those particular British kids who'd never heard any of Gene's classic early records could have been fooled into thinking that this is what real rock'n'roll sounds like. In reality, the

song, recorded already after Johnny Meeks had left the band (with a couple of totally unknown rhythm and lead guitarists replacing him), is a mid-tempo sax-led R&B shuffle, a slightly upbeat take on a common bluesy pattern (see, e.g., Ivory Joe Hunter's 'I Almost Lost My Mind') over which Gene keeps trying to convince his lady friend to "don't ever try to tame a wild cat" — the bitter irony of this, of course, being that the song *represents* a former wild cat being completely tamed and docile. The «wildest» part of the song is arguably Jimmy Pruett's energetic hammering break on the piano, but even that one sounds like a feeble shadow of the classic Jerry Lee Lewis country-rock vibe. I can't help wondering if Gene himself felt that irony, or if he *really* thought that on numbers like these, he was still exorcising his demons with the same verve as he did with the Blue Caps in his prime, without ever pausing to reflect on how drastically his sound had changed...

Anyway, the UK kids bought it (perhaps the black leather outfit proudly displayed on British TV helped more than the music itself), and this led to a small string of similar hits. First, the Buddy Holly pastiche 'My Heart', taken from the previous album, went all the way to #15; then came the turn of 'Pistol Packin' Mama', actually recorded in England, so we'll return to this a little bit later; finally, as late as 1961 one of the tracks from this album, 'She She Little Sheila', also nearly made the UK Top 20, showing the world that if the blasted Yankees were no longer keen on paying their dues to one of their own, the Brits were still more than willing to take him off those colonial hands. Even that little patch of hits, however, dried up well before the age of Beatlemania, so it is useless to accuse the Fab Four and their retinue of shooting down Gene Vincent's trans-Atlantic star.

Returning to the album, I'd say it represents a slight improvement over **Sounds Like Gene Vincent** — the songwriting is a little less «obvious» this time around, in that the various rip-offs of superior composers are at least better masked, and there are no in-yer-face inferior covers of stuff like 'Maybellene' or 'Ready Teddy' whose only purpose is to show how it is possible to play an energetic rock'n'roll song by leaving exactly 75% of the energy sweatin' it out outside the studio door. Also, by this time Gene has gotten a little better with his completely new type of charisma — that of a smooth, pleasant, occasionally sharp-tongued young lad who'll graciously "open doors for little old ladies" as he sends them off with an ironic witticism or two — and at the very least, this image is still way preferable to all the Pat Boones and Frankie Avalons of the new age of teenage entertainment. By the standards of early 1960, **Crazy Times!** won't have you growing mush out of your ears, and that's already an achievement.

Still, it is hard to believe Gene when he declares that "I promise crazy times will happen for you and me" on the opening title track — co-written by Burt Bacharach and Paul Hampton (of 'Sea Of Heartbreak' fame), and it may be suspected that

the notion of «crazy times» for Burt Bacharach is not quite the same as it would be, say, for Screamin' Jay Hawkins. The «craziest» thing about the track is its fast tempo, and I keep noticing these really tasty piano breaks from Jimmy Pruett, who seems to have been the best musician in the band on this particular session. Vincent, however, sings the main melody in such a smooth and caring tone as if the girl to whom he was making the promise in question was only just discharged from the hospital — carefully fixing her in place behind him on the bike and making absolutely sure not to drive it faster than 20 mph, not even in the countryside. It's rock'n'roll, for sure... for kiddies.

This driving association may actually have been triggered by listening to one of the most symbolic numbers on the album — 'Why Don't You People Learn How To Drive', credited to a certain James A. Noble but fully compatible with Vincent's new vision: a song that, contrary to just about everything we have learned from the foundations of rock'n'roll, encourages the listener to take it easy and drive *slow* rather than *fast*: "*Well, the wreck on the highway, the traffic's pilin' up / I gotta see my baby and I can't go fast enough / Why don't you people learn to drive, huh? / You know you just might stay alive / Oh, ain't it a shame, the smoke an' the flames / I think you people is nuts*". Leaving aside the dark irony of how this message connects with what would happen to Gene himself on April 16, 1960, the idea of a rock'n'roll song admonishing people to drive slow feels somewhere right in the ballpark of Christian rock. I mean, next thing you know, those damn rockers will start teaching us not to use drugs, refrain from smoking, and always use protection during intercourse. Ridiculous!!!

Elsewhere, Gene is engaging in bouts of self-pity: 'Everybody's Got A Date But Me' is pretty much defined by its title, and while it would be a stretch to regard the entire song as a metaphor for the artist's shriveling career ("*Well I'll find a brand new baby / I don't know how right now / They're all booked up, I'm out of luck / I don't care anyhow*"), playing it back to back with 'Be Bop-A-Lula' or 'Crazy Legs' shall certainly hint at a crisis of confidence. It's still a nice, fast rock'n'roll number with decent guitar and sax solos, but it's not even *supposed* to have a spark of life in it. It's more of a "too old to rock'n'roll, too young to die" kind of thing, and that's kinda sad for somebody who was just 25 years old at the time.

That said, at least there's a touch of melancholic / ironic humor about most of these tracks, which saves them from being complete embarrassments. Only two out of twelve songs are those I'd never ever want to hear again — 'Darlene', a slow, stuttery mix of blues and doo-wop for which Vincent has absolutely no voice, feel, or sense of phrasing; and 'Mitchiko From Tokyo', a corny pop ditty that must have been inspired by the Crown Princess, but has little to offer as redemption for its silly stereotypes (and, for that matter, I think that Aneka's 'Japanese Boy' is a *great* pop song, regardless of any «cultural appropriation»; it's only when the song's *primary* purpose is to titillate and exploit when it becomes offensive).

On the other hand, he puts in a surprisingly uplifting take on 'Accentuate The Positive' (the song works real good with a steady pop beat), sounds tender and sweet without extra syrup on 'Blue Eyes Crying In The Rain', and produces at least one minor classic in 'She She Little Sheila', which, as I already said above, gave him one more UK hit. The song's main vocal hook makes it more of a «comic rock» tune, of course, something in the vein of Larry Williams, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. If you can no longer provide a steady adrenaline punch, might as well put a smile on their faces, right?

Which brings us up to the paradoxical conclusion: **Crazy Times!** tries to solidify Gene Vincent's new image as that of a «jovial» entertainer, stressing the light-headed fun and humor in rock'n'roll, while at the same time concealing a subtle internal bitterness, probably stemming from the artist's own realization of his fall — once a true King of all the wild cats, now more of a meek, friendly little rock'n'roll clown. Ironically, in real life the meek and friendly clown seems to have still been upholding a threatening image — constantly getting into fights and gun-totin' like crazy; at least he had nothing to do himself with the terrible tragedy of April 16, 1960, in which Eddie Cochran lost his life and Gene suffered severe injuries — another severe setback to his European career.

I do believe that Gene's last UK hit for 1960, a cover of the old Bing Crosby / Andrews Sisters hillbilly hit 'Pistol Packin' Mama' which he recorded at Abbey Road in May, right after his recovery, was intended as a bit of tribute for Eddie — since it borrows its drum-and-bass intro directly from Eddie's 'Somethin' Else'. It does not change Gene's overall comic vibe all that much — the lyrics are delivered in a joking manner, the sax break is hilarious, the piano line (played by a very young, pre-fame Georgie Fame) is breezy — but the subject matter seems to be right up Vincent's alley, as he was pretty pistol-packin' himself and sang the thing with complete dedication. Still, this is pretty toothless hooliganry; I dare say the song was far more cutting edge back in good old 1943.

To add one final insult to one final injury, the album was released in several countries (France and Sweden, among others) under the odd title of **Twist Crazy Times!** — as if to suggest that Gene was now influenced by the likes of Hank Ballard or Chubby Checker, which he was anything but. This would be the equivalent of some subsidiary record label releasing Fleetwood Mac's 1977 album as **Disco Rumours**, just because anything with the word 'disco' on it sells 20% more copies automatically. Did they even ask Vincent's permission?.. I seriously doubt that.

