

LONNIE DONEGAN



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1955-2000</i>	<i>Skiffle</i>	<i>Nobody's Child (1956)</i>

Only Solitaire

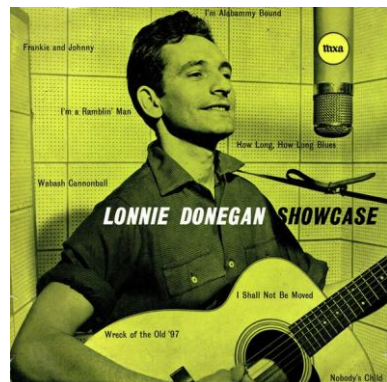
Artist: *Lonnie Donegan*

Years: *1955-1962*

George Starostin's Reviews

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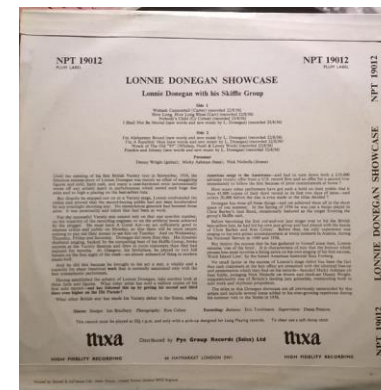
LONNIE DONEGAN SHOWCASE

Album released:

Dec. 1956

V A L U E
3 4 3 2 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) Wabash Cannonball; 2) How Long, How Long Blues; 3) **Nobody's Child**; 4) I Shall Not Be Moved; 5) I'm Alabammy Bound; 6) I'm A Ramblin' Man; 7) Wreck Of The Old '97; 8) Frankie And Johnny.

REVIEW

Like just about everybody else, I imagine, my first and only knowledge of Lonnie Donegan — for a long, long, long time — was that he was the father (or, at least, one of the main fathers) of «skiffle», some sort of cheap-brewn British folk-rock which happened to be very influential on the Beatles and just about every other British Invasion act for the mere reason that it *happened*. And, like everybody else, my only actual exposure to Lonnie Donegan was through a brief televised clip of 'Rock Island Line', a snippet of which is always included in every Beatles documentary because there is hardly any other documented evidence of Lonnie Donegan in his prime — that is, between 1955, when the 'Rock Island Line' single introduced him to nationwide audiences, and 1962, when his significance was essentially cancelled with the arrival of Merseybeat and mop tops.



Is there actually a good reason, then, to dig up these old records other than teach yourself an extended history lesson? Yes and no: it is downright impossible to evaluate or even properly enjoy Lonnie's music outside of the context of what it was

influenced by *and* what it ended up influencing — but *within* that context, **Lonnie Donegan Showcase**, an album covering two days' worth of recording and an age's worth of tradition, is a fascinating relic with its own limited charm and even its own unique spirit.

The fact that information on «skiffle» is usually fed to us in between information on Elvis Presley and information on the Beatles may result in thinking that «skiffle» was some sort of early British rock'n'roll, like Billy Fury or Johnny Kidd. In reality, the skiffle movement was a British tribute to rural Americana — a blues / folk / country mix sucking in everything from the Delta to Appalachia and trying to sound as authentic as possible. The very point is that you *have* to hear Lonnie sing and believe he was born in Alabama, rather than in Glasgow, England — and if you do not, you are one mean party pooper. In the absence of real American heroes across the Atlantic (their tours in the Fifties were extremely rare), there just had to be some sort of local substitute, and Lonnie was happy to oblige, going as far as to dump his background in jazz (he used to play banjo with Chris Barber) in order to satisfy the public demand for Leadbelly, Big Bill Broonzy, Woody Guthrie, and Jimmie Rodgers all at the same time.

Much to Lonnie's credit, he does a pretty good job with it. His chief asset is his singing voice — tense, sharp, raspy, capable of maintaining and building up excitement over a pretty long time: hear him here, for instance, belting out a five-minute long version of 'Frankie And Johnny' with each following verse (a few of which he improvised himself) shriller and wilder than the next one. Ironically, this may be the one thing that actually betrays his authenticity: none of the blues or country heroes whose material he is interpreting used to be *that* ecstatic and jumpy on their records, or else they would probably have been booted out of their studios before completing the first take. The vocal energy which Donegan brought to the hypnotized British kids was indeed pure rock'n'roll, more in line with Gene Vincent and Jerry Lee Lewis than with Big Bill or, for that matter, even with Johnny Cash — making the man, in a sense, Britain's first genuine «folk-rocker».

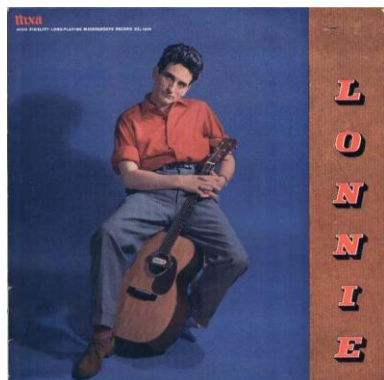
But while 'Frankie And Johnny' does indeed «rock», and so do a few of the album's faster numbers like 'Wreck Of The Old '97', Lonnie can also come across as a subtle and sensitive balladeer: arguably the major highlight on here is Hank Snow's 'Nobody's Child', which the man transforms into a captivating journey across moods and registers before pulling all the stops at the end with an all-out heroic delivery of the final verse. It may all be a little theatrical, sure, but given that Lonnie clearly does not have the strongest or deepest voice in the world, the way he is able to perfectly control it and mold it into sheer tenderness or pure desperation within seconds is extremely impressive.

The musical backing, as befits a bona fide skiffle band, is minimalistic throughout, but far from laughable: Denny Wright

was a professional jazz guitarist who could easily recalibrate his skills towards Delta blues — check out his acoustic soloing on ‘I’m A Ramblin’ Man’, which could hold its fair ground against the average black bluesman; and the quirky, plaintive licks on ‘Nobody’s Child’ complement Lonnie’s mourning vocals ideally. Meanwhile, Micky Ashman adds solid bottom with his bass hops on the fast numbers (‘Wabash Cannonball’), and drummer Nick Nicholls is quite the wild man on ‘Frankie And Johnny’, playing in a rough, burly style that could almost seem proto-punkish for 1956.

All in all, I have to admit that this is a much better **Showcase** for the man than the quotation from Roger Daltrey would have you believe (“I wanted to be Elvis Presley when I grew up... but the man who really made me feel like I could actually go out and do it was a chap by the name of Lonnie Donegan”). Lonnie Donegan did help open the floodgates, and from a historical point of view, this was unquestionably his main achievement. But the LP shows that he was more than just «the first guy who dared to do it»: he also had an above-average voice and an exquisite charisma to do it, and his band had the above-average chops to help him do it. The best of these recordings still hold up today: play ‘Nobody’s Child’ or ‘Frankie And Johnny’ in the supermarket and I am sure that people *will* stop, listen, and wonder. And even if it may seem funny to hear a bona fide Glaswegian sing ‘I’m Alabammy Bound’, in a certain way it *was* true: he is not singing ‘I’m Alabammy *Born*’, after all, he is Alabammy *Bound*, and at the time, he most definitely was. You might even say he made it further on his way there than the absolute majority of those who followed in his footsteps.





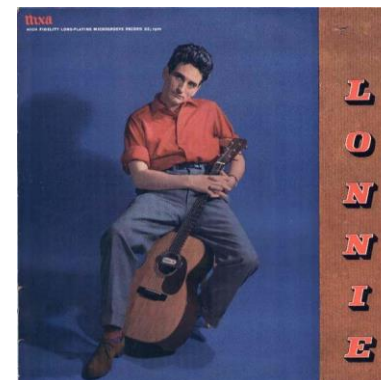
LONNIE

Album released:

Nov. 1957

V A L U E
2 4 3 1 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) *Lonesome Traveller*; 2) *The Sunshine Of His Love*; 3) *Ain't No More Cane On The Brazos*; 4) *Ain't You Glad You Got Religion*; 5) *Times Are Getting Hard, Boys*; 6) *Lazy John*; 7) *Light From The Lighthouse*; 8) *I've Got Rocks In My Bed*; 9) *Long Summer Day*; 10*) *Aunt Rhody*; 11*) *Whoa Back, Buck*.

REVIEW

It might be a little too much, perhaps, to seriously talk about «artistic growth» when talking about Lonnie Donegan, the man who found himself a working formula and rode it all the way to the bank and, later on, all the way to oblivion. But it could still be argued that Lonnie's self-titled second album was notoriously less «commercial» than the debut, moving into deeper, more spiritual territory — without losing the quasi-rock'n'roll exuberance of its predecessor, but opting for a darker, less playful tone all the same. There are some old timers out there who actually point to **Lonnie** as his masterpiece, and after a couple of listens I can hear why.



For one thing, the album features a different style of production: throughout the sessions, Lonnie moves in closer on the mike, dropping the echoey effect which instantaneously gave him a sort of «star vibe»; 'Wabash Cannonball' gave the impression of an aspiring young artist giving it his all at some sprightly TV audition, but 'Lonesome Traveller', opening this record, rather gives us a weary, slightly melancholic old troubadour, with a sack of humble charisma making up for the lack of grizzly authenticity. In fact, it is generally easier to forget that you are really dealing with an impersonator over the course of these songs than on **Showcase**, perhaps, ironically, precisely because Lonnie isn't trying *that* hard. On songs like 'Times Are Getting Hard, Boys', he adopts a soft, introspective vocal tone, with occasional elements of recitative, and never strays

far from his middle range; on 'Light From The Lighthouse', he leads his backing lads in an expectedly rousing spiritual, but does so with restraint and playfulness rather than trying to throw a possessed spiritual fit in an African American manner. None of these tunes feature the sort of audience-inciting tricks he'd do so expertly with 'Rock Island Line' — which, I might suggest, makes the average performance here less exciting and less annoying at the same time.

Of note is the presence of electric instrumentation on a few of the tracks: in particular, the lengthy blues number 'I've Got Rocks In My Bed' features several decent, though not outstanding, electric solos — perhaps this could be enough to label Lonnie as the UK's first electric bluesman (at the very least, this definitely precedes Alexis Korner). I honestly have no idea whether a move like that could be considered traitorous in the skiffle movement circa 1957, but it definitely does not help out much: Lonnie is still at his best not when he delivers a textbook case of slow 12-bar blues, but rather when he revs it up on numbers like the closing 'Long Summer Day', a song where you have to listen really hard to realize that it is a slave working song because here, it is really all about the little man slowly whipping himself into a trance — here, it is all about vocal acrobatics in which the line "long summer day make a white man lazy" is used more like a gymnastic ribbon than a genuine sarcastic slogan. And it works — an album that began by putting you in a grim mood eventually snaps out of it and leaves you with a spinning head and an overall positive vibe.





LONNIE RIDES AGAIN

Album released:

May 1959

V A L U E
2 4 3 1 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) **Fancy Talking Tinker**; 2) Miss Otis Regrets; 3) Gloryland; 4) Jimmy Brown The Newsboy; 5) Mr. Froggy; 6) Take This Hammer; 7) The Gold Rush Is Over; 8) You Pass Me By; 9) Talking Guitar Blues; 10) John Hardy; 11) The House Of The Rising Sun; 12) **San Miguel**.

REVIEW

In early 1959, Lonnie committed the worst mistake of his entire career (or not?) by recording ‘Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavor (On The Bedpost Overnight)?’, an ancient novelty song from the radio repertoire of The Happiness Boys in the 1920s which quickly became not only one of his biggest hits in his native country, but also *the* Lonnie Donegan song in the United States — his own ‘I Want To Hold Your Hand’, if you wish, the one that somehow made him into a household name across the Atlantic, with many a kid from the early Sixties still fondly remembering that novelty humor (Bruce Springsteen is allegedly among the self-professed admirers). Of course, it is a fun little vaudeville number, and Lonnie does it the same sort of near-authentic justice that he gave everything else, but it is *way* on the whimsy-comical side, and recognizing it as the man’s masterpiece is essentially the same as placing ‘Yellow Submarine’ at the top of the Beatles’ pyramid.

One does not need to go much further, though, than Lonnie’s next LP from the same year to witness just how much more breadth *and* depth this guy had in his prime. Even though he probably never saddled an actual horse in his life (at least, there is definitely no photo evidence in close reach), **Lonnie Rides Again** is as good a metaphor as possible for this collection, showing him in total control of his folk, blues, ballad, and spiritual instincts; I think that the only place where he actually falters is the closing ‘San Miguel’ — I mean, «cultural appropriation» is one thing when a Scotsman brews up a



telepathic connection with his close-of-kin across the Atlantic, but an entirely different one when he sends out his vibes across the Mexican border, the final result giving off a rather comic and instantly dated impression. Fortunately, it is just a very short piece, and it closes the album, so you can just shut it off one song early.

Other than that, it is all good — as usual, never truly exceptional, but consistently listenable and enjoyable. There are only but a few flirtations with rock'n'roll, most notably on the opening number, 'Fancy Talking Tinker', Lonnie's reworking of a traditional folk melody chiseled into the form of a pop-rock (pop-blues?) tune with first-rate electric guitar backing (from Denny Wright, probably) and Lonnie's half-yodeling, half-rock'n'roll-growling vocal build-ups making these particular deliveries of the age-old cliché "I'm on the road again" almost unforgettable. Another fast-rolling kicker is 'Gloryland', which, I guess, sounds exactly as it would end up sounding if you took Blind Willie Johnson, gave him a rhythm section, turned up the speed, and made him inhale a couple of helium balloons before recording — and yes, that's a compliment. In a way, it is almost a psychedelic experience hearing Lonnie go through all the different vocal ranges and intonations as he turns the second half of the song into a half-comical, half-humble shamanistic experience. As cartoonish as it all may feel next to the old African-American spirituals he is «emulating», the one thing that is absolutely real and genuine is Lonnie's ability to send himself off into an exuberant trance — and spread that feeling around.

On the slower (and occasionally creepier) side, Lonnie pays homage to Cole Porter with the murder ballad 'Miss Otis Regrets' (now here's one *definitely* not for the kids), to the Foggy Mountain Boys with a highly credible rendition of 'Jimmy Brown The Newsboy', to Leadbelly with 'Take This Hammer', and to Hank Snow with 'The Gold Rush Is Over'. He also delivers a pretty mournful version of 'The House Of The Rising Sun' (probably the first version of the song recorded on the other side of the Atlantic?), going for extra expressivity wherever possible — though never reaching the level of paranoia in Bob Dylan's early cover, let alone the thunderstorm vibes of the Animals. Nevertheless, the atmosphere never truly rubs you the wrong way; like I said, 'San Miguel' is probably the only true misstep on the record.

If there are any general complaints, it is only that there is not a single attempt at growth: other than, perhaps, the backing band sounding even tighter and more polished than before, this is just another handful of Americana, tastefully selected from his idols and presented in a pleasant and respectable manner. But this is exactly what Lonnie wanted to do — he had no serious artistic ambitions whatsoever and no Bob Dylan to show him the way it could be done. And who could blame him? The man had chosen to do one job — act as an authentic mouthpiece for grassroots American music in front of British audiences — and he did it to the best of his (and everybody's) abilities.



SING HALLELUJAH

Album released:

Dec. 1962

V A L U E
2 3 3 2 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) Sing Hallelujah; 2) We Shall Walk Through The Valley; 3) No Hiding Place; 4) Good News! Chariots A'Comin'; 5) Steal Away; 6) Noah Found Grace In The Eyes Of The Lord; 7) Joshua Fit De Battle Of Jericho; 8) His Eye Is On The Sparrow; 9) Born In Bethlehem; 10) This Train; 11) New Burying Ground; 12) **Nobody Knows The Trouble I've Seen.**

REVIEW

Throughout 1960–62, Lonnie kept a steady and respectable profile, releasing about 4–5 singles per year, most of which never failed to land in the UK Top 20, though his American success with ‘Chewing Gum’ would never be repeated. The very last of these to make an impression on the public was ‘Pick A Bale Of Cotton’ in August 1962 — and after that, not a single Donegan record would ever register on the charts at all: ‘The Market Song’ followed in December, but it did not have enough time to register, since in early January the Beatles released ‘Please Please Me’, and the next day Britain forgot that Lonnie Donegan ever existed. After all, who cares about a guy who is only concerned with the past when you have just been introduced to a most spectacular future?

However, before vanishing into obscurity, Lonnie managed to leave behind what was arguably his most ambitious project: a full-fledged gospel album. Prior to that, he’d taken on the gospel spirit every once in a while (‘Light From The Lighthouse’, etc.), but this time his selection of cherished folk standards is strictly conceptual. Of course, this has nothing to do with the fact that Mr. Donegan had suddenly found the Lord (he might have, I have no idea, actually), but rather with the fact that he wanted to make good use of the LP medium: with the idea that LPs should not be collections of singles but rather artistic entities in their own right seemingly more popular in the UK than in the US at the time, it is no wonder that **Sing**



Hallelujah does not reproduce any of Lonnie's 45" records, but instead paints a wholesome picture of the artist as a God-fearin' and a God-lovin' man. It is much more of a wonder, though, that it does so quite convincingly and, in places, even *admirably* well.

Of course, there is no huge difference between this album and Lonnie's typical skiffle output. This is not «gospel» in the solemn Mahalia Jackson sense of the word: this is largely folk-gospel, with the main difference being the religious rather than secular nature of the lyrics. On some of the tracks, Lonnie and his backing band are fortified by some extra choir singers, but that's about it — otherwise, we have just the same folk-blues and country-blues melodies, and the same vocal style which hasn't evolved all that much since 1956. But neither has it deteriorated or lost its charisma; Lonnie's thin, frail, but highly flexible and, at times, surprisingly determined tenor voice, when it enters religious mode, can often bring forth the same kind of vibe that you get from, for instance, George Harrison's solo records — a sense of «conviction through weakness», the faint intuitive understanding that you are witnessing a frail and insecure human being attempting something overtly courageous, taking a crazy risk which can pay off only if you manage to put all of your heart in it.

It all begins already on the title song, where Donegan sets himself the mission of impersonating a zealous preacher, capable of lighting the Lord's fire in his listeners' hearts — a pompous track, punctuated by deep bass, almost jungle-level drums, and swampy electric guitar licks, while Lonnie himself skilfully relies on the quiet-to-loud vocal dynamics to mark that exact «jump of courage» I'm talking about. It might not be true fire-and-brimstone level, but I find the effect believable and inspiring, and definitely going beyond the level of «cute little Scotsman impersonating a deep Southern preacher man for the local sailors' amusement»; in fact, I might have felt even more respect for the track had I never known the artist behind it in the first place.

A lot of the other tracks are less overtly spiritual in atmosphere, closer to the slight-and-joyful merry-go-rounds for which Lonnie was already well known — 'No Hiding Place', 'Chariots A'-Comin', 'This Train', etc. — but Lonnie is at his best here on the more quiet, intimate tracks, such as 'His Eye Is On The Sparrow', which he performs in the tender, sentimental style of the Everly Brothers, and 'Steal Away', which gets an arrangement not unlike a romantic Elvis ballad from one of his soundtracks, and features one of Donegan's most exquisite vocal performances.

But the best is saved for last, because Lonnie's rendition of 'Nobody Knows The Trouble I've Seen' may easily be the best of *all* the versions of this tune that exist — and I have heard quite a few, but most of them were either too happy (Louis Armstrong), too overdramatized (Mahalia Jackson), too poppified (Sam Cooke), or too restrained by instrumental and vocal conventions of the respective age (Marian Anderson's performance from 1924 is outstanding, but much too academic-

operatic, if you get my drift). Lonnie takes it as a torch ballad of sorts and uses each square inch of his vocal powers to do precisely what the song requires to do — convey a full spectrum of emotions from utter depression and desperation to undefeatable optimism and hope for a light in the darkness. The man clearly gets it, and is able to make *you* get it. This is not imitation; it is a deeply personal interpretation of a hymn which may be relevant for us all, Christian or not, beautifully performed in the quintessential humanistic spirit. It is much too sad that, even in the hearts of those few aging fans who still remember Lonnie with nostalgia, he will probably be forever present with that ‘Chewing Gum’ song rather than [this absolutely phenomenal performance](#).

Ultimately, if you ever find yourself doing an inquisitive sweep-up of neglected pre-Beatles music, do not forget about this record. It gets a pitifully low rating on RateYourMusic, probably from people who did not even listen to it in the first place but simply dismissed it because, come on, skiffle clown Lonnie Donegan singing gospel? what a joke, right? Wrong: as Shakespeare already would have us know, clowns are often more intelligent, sensitive, and humane than Serious Artists, and I personally would take Lonnie’s idea of a gospel album over ninety percent of gospel artists I have heard. Because it is one thing to inspire respect and reverence, and quite another thing to actually endear yourself to the listener by performing century-old museum pieces like these.

