

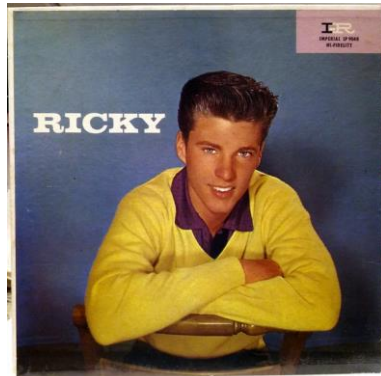
RICKY NELSON



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1957-1985</i>	<i>Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i><u>Be-Boop Baby</u> (1957)</i>

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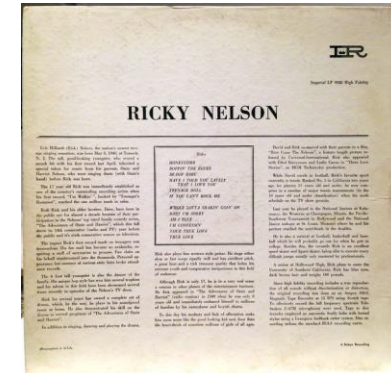


RICKY

Album released:
November 1957

V A L U E
3 4 3 3 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Honeycomb; 2) Boppin' The Blues; 3) Be-Bop Baby; 4) Have I Told You Lately That I Love You; 5) Teenage Doll; 6) If You Can't Rock Me; 7) Whole Lot Of Shakin' Goin' On; 8) Baby I'm Sorry; 9) Am I Blue; 10) I'm Confessin'; 11) Your True Love; 12) True Love.

REVIEW

Apparently, during his early years on the Verve and Imperial record labels Ricky actively disliked being put in the hands of older session musicians, and kept dreaming about getting his own backing band which would match his age and style until he was finally able to get one. The irony of this is that the self-titled **Ricky**, released at the end of 1957, still ended up being his only #1 album on the US charts — and, in a rare case of unity between public and personal opinion, arguably his best album ever. And why? Precisely because of the presence of those older session musicians, if you ask me.

Admittedly, the choice of material is strong on the whole — solid rock'n'roll numbers, memorable country tunes, and meaningful ballads. But let us face it, would there really be a reason to waste one's positive emotions on covers of Carl Perkins and Cole Porter by a 16-year old boy with a sweet, but unremarkable vocal tone, if nothing about the record suggested the presence of a special type of sound? Hundreds of sweet boys were playing watered-down versions of rock'n'roll all over the States by 1957, and at least dozens of them probably got recording contracts; what was it that made Ricky Nelson at the time more than just another pretty face in the crowd?



The answer is that the main heroes of **Ricky**, rather than Ricky himself (though his presence is certainly important), are producer Jimmie Haskell and sound engineer Bunny Robin. Between themselves, Ricky, and the backing musicians, they manage here to generate a clean, clear, unaggressive, yet fairly punchy sound which somehow manages to thrill and energize you without even trying to emulate the rockabilly wildness of Carl Perkins, Gene Vincent, or Jerry Lee Lewis. It certainly precludes the artist from the status of a «rock'n'roll god», yet it just as certainly *EX*cludes him from the cohort of laughable young imitators churning out bland surrogate for wholesome family entertainment.

Just take a quick look at 'Boppin' The Blues', the first true rock'n'roll number on the album. Carl Perkins wrote the song and originally recorded it in his own giddily sloppy style — and the original recording is quite exciting, but you can't even hear the bass all too well, and isn't a deep, bulky bass sound *the* perfect ingredient for rockabilly fever? Here, though, veteran bass player Judd Denaut (who had first made his name playing with Artie Shaw) lays it down fast and thick, while the sound engineer ensures proper separation from both rhythm and lead guitar. Said guitars, played by Howard Roberts and Joe Maphis (also veterans of the jazz and country scenes), ooze professionalism without completely forgetting the idea of going it rough-and-tough: rhythm guitar lays down a rock-steady boogie line, lead guitar plays choppy, twangy, audacious strings of broken licks to upgrade the «punchiness» level of the sound.

On top of all that, Ricky delivers an unnerving, almost expressionless vocal — «wooden», one might call it, but the total and utter lack of agitation, over-emoting, aggression, passion, etc., is oddly charming on its own; there is a special sort of quasi-mystical coolness to his stable, quiet, and self-confident tone, enhanced by just a tiny bit of echo / reverb which gives the voice an «aura» without making the lyrics incomprehensible *à la* Gene Vincent. It all combines to regale the young Mr. Nelson with a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*; perhaps *authority* could be a good word. Your average teen idol would woo you over with sweetness and tenderness, but Ricky's voice is not particularly «sweet» even on the ballads — and, by the way, there are only very few ballads on the record as such: 'Have I Told You Lately', 'I'm Confessin', 'True Love', and that's about it. All three are sung tenderly, but without a shred of cheap sentimentality, and, once again, with Ricky's voice perfectly gelling with the thick, deep bass patterns, producing almost the same effect as a good Elvis ballad, but with the bass guitar taking on the precious functions of the bass voice.

If there is a real problem, it is that the album totally lacks highlights. It has a style, deeply ingrained in all of its tracks, but since all the tracks are covers and the style is applied to all of them in equal doses, nothing really sticks out. The highest charting single off the album was 'Be-Bop Baby', one of two songs written specially for Ricky by Pearl Lendhurst, but in

terms of composition and atmosphere it is no more and no less of a generic, lightweight country tune than any other similar number on the album — I actually prefer the cover of Jimmie Rodgers' 'Honeycomb' by a hair, maybe because it has sharper bass clicks and funny stop-and-start moments, whatever. I prefer the fast and rocking numbers even more, but I could not really say which one is my favorite, or if anything even simply catches the eye in particular.

Okay, *one* song catches the eye in particular, largely due to an accident: 'If You Can't Rock Me', amusingly, shares its title with a much later Rolling Stones song of the same name — but this one is credited to Willie Jacobs, an old Texan schoolmate of Roy Orbison who had a few recordings with his pals in 1956 credited to «The Strikes». The [original recording](#) was fast and energetic, but under the command of Haskell and Robin, it becomes an unstoppable bass train with even more tough bass «zoops» added by the lead guitarist during the solo — a fun, crunchy sound. Not fun and crunchy enough, though, to tower and hover over any other fast number on the record.

Some CD editions of **Ricky** extend the album's duration from 12 to 14 tracks, throwing on the classic single 'Stood Up' / 'Waiting In School' (the latter song probably being mostly familiar to post-boomer generations from *Pulp Fiction*): this is where you first get to hear Nelson's soon-to-be regular guitar player James Burton, though here he is still playing rhythm guitar while Joe Maphis delivers the same «zoops» as on 'If You Can't Rock Me'. Written by the Burnette Brothers (but, strange enough, not recorded by them), 'Waiting In School' is like the white schoolkid's anthemic answer to the black schoolkid's 'Ring Ring Goes The Bell' — a little easier on the dissatisfaction angle, a little heavier on the having pure, innocent fun angle — but who's to say it *isn't* pure, innocent fun? "Five, six, come get your kicks / Down on the corner of Lincoln and Fourty-six" clearly owes its punch to "get your kicks on Route 66", but Route 66 is, after all, a faraway and obscure reality, whereas every big city probably has its own Lincoln and 46th intersection (people are still debating this one: they probably meant L.A., where Ricky and the Burnettes were living at the time).

And this, too, may have been a big part of Nelson's success: there is a whiff of urbanization of the country sound in his recordings which is not often found among his contemporaries — most of which swing either too far to one side, retaining that sweet country-bumpkin taint (Perkins), or to the other, completely wiping it out (Vincent). Ricky, on the other side, has this «country boy done gone naturalized in the city» feeling to him — a fake one, perhaps, since the boy had always been a big city dweller, but reeking of authenticity all the same if you refrain from identity-checking. But even if this opinion sounds like total bullshit to you, there is no denying that there *is* a bit of mystique to the classic Ricky Nelson sound, and that behind all those pretty looks hides a very serious attitude to music making, certainly *uniquely* serious for a 16-year old,

Only Solitaire

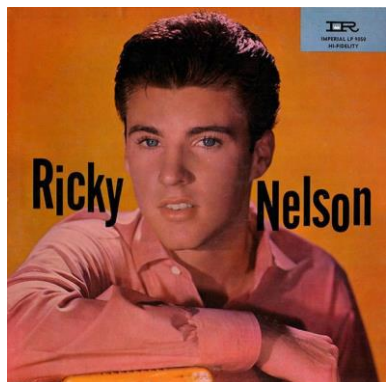
Artist: *Ricky Nelson*

Album: *Ricky (1957)*

George Starostin's Reviews

and certainly sufficient to dispel any possible suspicions that Nelson's early successes were only due to the influence of his father — unquestionably, that influence helped his career a lot, but no, it wasn't merely out of old loyal love for *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* that listeners were enthralled by 'Be-Bop Baby' and 'Waiting In School' back in 1957.





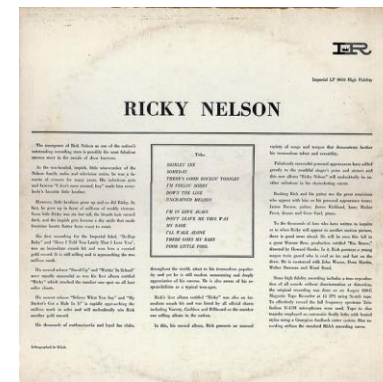
RICKY NELSON

Album released:

July 1958

V A L U E
3 3 3 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Shirley Lee; 2) Someday; 3) There's Good Rockin' Tonight; 4) I'm Feeling Sorry; 5) Down The Line; 6) Unchained Melody; 7) I'm In Love Again; 8) Don't Leave Me This Way; 9) My Babe; 10) I'll Walk Alone; 11) There Goes My Baby; 12) Poor Little Fool.

REVIEW

The biggest formal difference between Ricky's first and second albums is the arrival of a completely new studio (and touring) band — Ricky's first proper band, in first, comprised of generally young musicians, including the now-legendary James Burton on guitar, James Kirkland on bass, and Richie Frost on drums. One might suppose that with all that fresh blood, Nelson's sound might become sharper, or looser, or both, what with 1958 still being a relatively good year for rock'n'roll values and all. Unfortunately and paradoxically, precisely the opposite thing happened: **Ricky Nelson**, apparently so titled with twice as much imagination as simply **Ricky**, ends up much *less* exciting and intriguing than its predecessor.



In the previous review, I tried to point out that if you wanted to treat that record as something slightly more than light pop entertainment, it would be possible to focus on the near-mystical «dialog» between Ricky's morose, echoey voice and the deep, jumpy, slapp-happy bass of Judd Denaut — the combination had a certain unique playfulness to it that could not be found on contemporary records by the more rambunctious rockers. Alas, that sound is all but gone on **Ricky Nelson**,

which goes for a marginally louder, noisier approach on its rocking numbers, which is still nowhere near as loud as noisy as Ricky's true competition, yet totally loses the subtlety of the previous album.

Good case in point: opening number 'Shirley Lee', the cover of a recent single by Bobby Trammell, which was probably brought to Ricky's attention by Burton and Kirkland, who played on the original recording. It is faster and denser than Trammell's version, but not as crunchy and raw, and Nelson himself sounds distant and cavernous, as if fighting for Gene Vincent's turf, which would be a hopeless fight under any conditions. The fast and raucous rockabilly sound is decent, but there is absolutely nothing outstanding about it — not even James Burton's lead guitar playing, fast, fluent, and precise, but more or less «texbookish rockabilly», as I'd call it. A couple of tracks later, the same disappointment hits with 'Good Rockin' Tonight', closely based on Elvis' version but with a smoother, less flashy sound and a quieter, less passionate vocal delivery that does not have much in the way of mystique to it. Still later, the same kind of defacing awaits Roy Orbison's 'Down The Line', then Fats Domino's 'I'm In Love Again' — and so on, and on, and on.

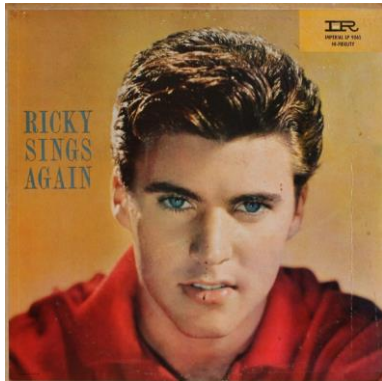
At this point, it is difficult not to admit that Ricky makes for a far more convincing teenage idol than a rock'n'roller: the slow, romantic ballads that almost mechanically inject themselves in between all of the rocking tracks are consistently more memorable and enjoyable than the latter, if only for the reason that Ricky's crooning is becoming less predictable, while his rocking voice stays as predictably monotonous as ever. Thus, he does a great job on the old country song 'Someday (You'll Want Me To Want You)', bringing out all those subtle shifts in overtones, gliding from higher to lower frequencies with the ultimate sexiness in a way that would be unreachable even for the likes of Gene Autry. He also debuts his own composition 'Don't Leave Me This Way', not much in terms of melodic originality but very nice in terms of how Ricky's own tenor contrasts with the Jordanaires' backing vocals — the suave glide of his "oh baby...", echoed by the deep bass "OH BABY" of the backing vocals, is quite an aural delight.

The album's most successful and best remembered recording was 'Poor Little Fool', a song written by 15-year old Sharon Sheeley after her breakup with Don Everley which ended up providing Ricky with his first #1 entry on the Billboard Top 100 charts. Melodically, it is a nice hybrid of classic country with girl-group stylistics, i.e. the quintessential «country-pop» track, and I have to wonder whether Sheeley's specific decision to donate the song to Ricky, as opposed to any other rocker out there, had anything to do with his decidedly «anti-masculine» looks, as in, «the likeliest male performer to perform this song about being dumped from a female perspective». Regardless of the circumstances, this is indeed the kind of material much better suited to Nelson's voice and persona than 'Shirley Lee' or 'Down The Line', and while I am not sure that its

melody or vocal hooks automatically qualify it for a potential #1 over most of the other ballads that Ricky performs here, it at least sort of makes sense that it ended up charting much higher than, for instance, 'Waitin' In School'.

Just for the record, the other two Ricky Nelson singles from that same period (early to mid-'58) were 'Believe What You Say', another fine little pop-rocker co-written by the Dorsette brothers (it would later end up on **Ricky Sings Again**), and a rockabilified version of Hank Williams' 'My Bucket's Got A Hole In It' because every respectable rocker has to make an old Hank Williams song into a rock'n'roll tune or suffer the consequences. It wasn't a particularly memorable tune from Hank, and it certainly is nothing special as a Ricky Nelson rocker. But, like just about anything on this expressly mediocre record, it is totally listenable and danceable if you're in the mood for a very bland Fifties-theme party.





RICKY SINGS AGAIN

Album released:

January 1959

V A L U E
3 3 3 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) It's Late; 2) One Of These Mornings; 3) Believe What You Say; 4) **Lonesome Town**; 5) Trying To Get To You; 6) Be True To Me; 7) Old Enough To Love; 8) Never Be Anyone Else But You; 9) I Can't Help It; 10) You Tear Me Up; 11) It's All In The Game; 12) Restless Kid; 13*) I Got A Feeling; 14*) Gloomy Sunday; 15*) Brand New Girl; 16*) Cindy; 17*) My Rifle, My Pony, And Me.

REVIEW

Perhaps I'm imagining things, but it does feel to me as if Ricky's third LP made a rather conscious move to specifically occupy the vacuum left behind by Elvis' army draft. His image had already been crafted to somewhat mirror Elvis — the shy, fragile, retiring shadow of a far more powerful presence — but now that the presence itself was removed, here was a good chance to slightly flesh out and materialize the shadow. Notice how those big, blue eyes become bigger and bluer with each new album cover? This here is no longer the stare of a boychik, but that of a Serious Young Man, grown in stature and all set to assume new, more demanding responsibilities toward a generation of adolescent music lovers *and* their parents. Move over, old Elvis, cause the new one's moving in.



Consistent with that idea, there is a slightly higher percentage of fast rockabilly numbers — the first three tracks in a row are, in effect, credited to Dorsey Burnette, and each of the three could have been an adrenaline smash for the Rock'n'Roll

Trio in their prime. As recorded by Ricky, they are, of course, comparatively more tepid, but still sound fun after all these years. 'It's Late' explores the same vibe as the Everlys' 'Wake Up Little Susie', though melodically it owes far more to Hank Williams — and, honestly, Ricky Nelson just doesn't look like the kind of kid who'd ever dare to bring his date back home one minute later than allowed, but at least he can do a good job of sounding scared shitless ("I hate to face your Dad, I know he's gonna be mad" and all that, although the best lines of the song are probably "look up, is that the moon we see? can't be, looks like the sun to me" — there's something genuinely biblical about that stuff). 'One Of These Mornings' is more or less a rewrite of 'Down The Line', but it still rocks, and James Burton's minimalistic «wobbly» solo oozes class. And 'Believe What You Say', which I already mentioned in the last review, joins a standard rock'n'roll melody with a catchy pop chorus that reinforces the status of Ricky Nelson as that one rock'n'roller who is always particularly gallant with his ladies ("I believe, pretty baby, believe you're goin' steady with nobody else but me" — yeah, you just keep on believin' that, Mr. Nelson).

And then, *wham!*, after three fun, but stereotypical soft-rockers in a row, comes something completely different. We can all poke fun at poor Ricky for being the poor man's Elvis from dusk till dawn, but once the dust clouds of cynical neurotoxin have dissipated, there is *still* no getting away from the fact that his stripped-down, moody performance of Baker Knight's 'Lonesome Town', subtly echoed by the ghostly-shaped backing vocals of the Jordanaires, is one of the defining moments of the 1950s. I mean, hey, if it was good enough for Quentin, it's good enough for us, right? The song is always compared with Elvis' 'Heartbreak Hotel', but while they do explore the same topic, the vibes are seriously different — 'Hotel' is crunchy, bluesy, and depicts a hysterically depressed protagonist on the brink of suicide; 'Lonesome Town' is quiet, doo-woppy, and shows a melancholically depressed protagonist adjusting to a new plane of existence. For 'Heartbreak Hotel', the key word is "die", for 'Lonesome Town' it is "forget", and it is safe to say that I can no more imagine Nelson doing a convincing rendition of the former than I could imagine Elvis singing "maybe down in Lonesome Town, I can learn to forget" with the same pang of emotional resonance.

I think that the secret to the magic of 'Lonesome Town' is really quite straightforward — it is simply the song that Ricky was born to sing. In fact, he'd *always* been singing it, even on 'Be-Bop Baby' he was already singing it, which is part of the reason why his rockabilly vibe is so idiosyncratic. Ever the shy, introspective, asthmatic little kid who would probably never even get roped into show business if not for Ozzie and Harriet, he and 'Lonesome Town' were made for each other. And since shy, introspective, asthmatic (or allergic, or just generally depressed) kids keep on surging higher and higher with each new generation, it is hardly surprising just how many amateur covers of young people with guitars singing 'Lonesome Town' you can find on YouTube — far more than there are of 'Heartbreak Hotel', as it seems to me. Few can match the

courteous beauty of these dark overtones, though, not to mention how hard it is to pack an entire group of Jordanaires into your bedroom (you could certainly synthesize them digitally, but there's a big difference between the erotica of «me and my acoustic guitar» and the pornography of «me, my acoustic guitar, and my laptop»).

For the record, 'Lonesome Town' is not even the epitome of Nelson's moodiness: if you have the extended CD edition of the album, one of the bonus tracks is Ricky's own solo recording («me and my guitar» again) of the infamous 'Gloomy Sunday', a.k.a. the 'Hungarian Suicide Song', whose composer would later take his own life and whose defining English-language version, recorded by Billie Holiday in 1941, was famously banned by the BBC as being «detrimental to the war morale». Ricky's version was apparently recorded at about the same time as 'Lonesome Town', but it is not even clear if it was ever intended for release, or if it was made merely for his own «amusement» — it would only resurface in 2000, when Ricky's children made a clean sweep of the archives and put it out on the **Legacy** box set. Obviously, there could be no question of a song like that officially published under Ricky's name in 1958 — especially since he did not bother to include the fakey-fakey Hollywoodish «happy ending» that was tacked on in Billie's version ("Dreaming, I was only dreaming / I wake and find you asleep"), instead rounding it up with the truly uplifting "with the last breath of my soul I'll be blessing you" and what might have been the single creepiest use of a baritone twist in 1950s popular music on the final "gloomy Sundaayyy". If there ever is one song that can completely and utterly change your perspective on an artist, 'Gloomy Sunday' should at least be in the top ten runners or so.

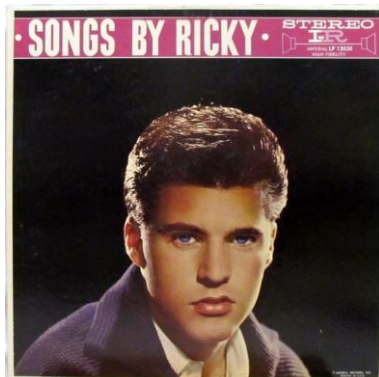
Meanwhile, on another plane of existence **Ricky Sings Again** in his quest to banish memories of Sergeant Presley from the young people's hearts — for instance, attempting to directly re-appropriate Elvis' own classic 'Trying To Get To You' (nice, but no banana), or successfully adopting his doo-wop waltzing mode only to fall into an embarrassing lyrical trap: if your verse begins with "higher than the mountains, taller than the trees" and ends with "...yeah, I'm old enough to love", this alone should be enough to raise serious suspicions about the veracity of the latter line (Elvis could definitely start out with the former, but could you imagine him ever needing to prove to anybody that he's 'Old Enough To Love'?). I mean, come on, Ricky, you proved well enough with 'Lonesome Town' that you're old enough to *get over* love; why the hell do you still need to show your fans that you have reached the age of consent?

There is also a so-so cover of Hank Williams (no matter how many millions of covers 'I Can't Help It' endures, you still cannot beat the original), yet another song donated by Baker Knight ('Never Be Anyone Else But You', a bit of sweet sappy country-pop which is hardly even believable as coming from the same guy who wrote 'Lonesome Town'), and an interesting

case in which Johnny Cash apparently wrote a song specially for Ricky — ‘Restless Kid’, with its reference to Rio Bravo, is clearly a gift related to Ricky’s concurrent starring in Howard Hawks’ movie. You can almost hear echoes of Cash singing the vocals himself (in fact, there is a demo version of him doing exactly that), and the song is clearly better suited for Johnny than for Ricky, but then there’s always a place for grizzled old cowboys like Johnny and perky young cowhands like Ricky, right? (and that was pretty much the part he played in the movie anyway). At least that’s one way to finish the LP on a starkly non-Elvis-related note, as compared to at least half of the songs on here all giving out an *I-wanna-be-Elvis* (or, maybe, *I-don’t-really-wanna-be-Elvis-but-what-choice-do-I-have?*) vibe.

Actually, Ricky’s acting turn in *Rio Bravo* is honored in more detail on the extended CD edition, which throws in alternate (studio and movie) versions of the several tracks he performs on screen, such as ‘Cindy’ and ‘My Rifle, My Pony, And Me’. The very fact of his starring (albeit in a relatively minor role) in his first movie was quite symbolic — if you want to be the substitute Elvis, do what Elvis does — but, although he did good, one must give credit to both Rick and his management that they never pushed him the same way Colonel Parker did with his client (he would only reprise his acting career every once in a long while, always placing the music first). Although, overall, it could probably be argued that Ricky, by his very nature, could never rise to the highest of Elvis’ highs — nor sink to the lowest of Elvis’ lows; so a busy acting career would probably not be able to blow up his reputation. Yet for all his young cowboy charm, they’d never make a Clint Eastwood out of him, either.





SONGS BY RICKY

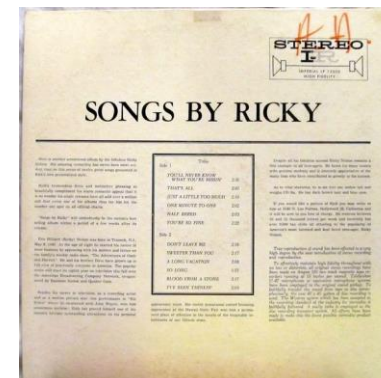
Album released:

September 1959

V A L U E

2 3 3 2 2

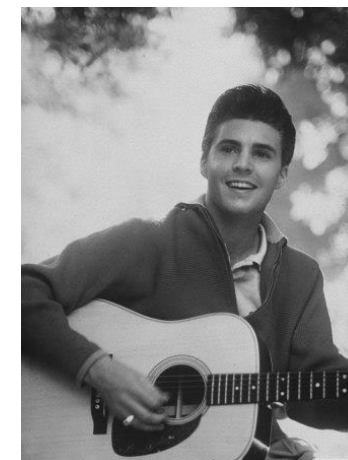
More info:



Tracks: 1) You'll Never Know What You're Missin'; 2) That's All; 3) Just A Little Too Much; 4) One Minute To One; 5) Half Breed; 6) You're So Fine; 7) Don't Leave Me; 8) Sweeter Than You; 9) A Long Vacation; 10) So Long; 11) Blood From A Stone; 12) I've Been Thinkin'.

REVIEW

As far as I can tell, nothing particularly exciting or out of the ordinary happened to Ricky or his career in the second half of 1959. He had another big hit with 'Just A Little Too Much', written for him by Johnny Burnette, who had by now joined his brother Dorsey as a breadwinner for the family in this department — it's a fun, catchy, solid little pop-rocker, never straying too far away from the middle-of-the-road pop-rock formula, not even when James Burton tries to enliven it with a relatively aggressive (for Ricky's standards, that is) guitar solo. If you are looking for something just a little more special and exclusive to Nelson's personality, I'd rather have to recommend the B-side, 'Sweeter Than You' — a sugary, tender-as-heaven ballad from the pen of 'Lonesome Town's Baker Knight; much as I generally prefer energetic pop-rock to sentimental balladry, there is no denying that Ricky's deep overtones are way better suited for under-the-balcony serenades than dance proms, so there is nothing surprising about the fact that the B-side eventually caught up to the A-side in terms of popularity.



(For the sake of those who really care, the CD version of the album includes early takes on both sides of the single that are actually *better* than the final versions — 'Just A Little Too Much', in particular, is rawer, faster, with crunchier, more

rock'n'rollish guitar tones. It must have been a rehearsal take, but then, of course, they had to «polish» and «smoothen out» the raw angles because it would probably be «unprofessional» to release the song without giving it a proper crew cut. Listen to these two takes back to back — the [official single](#) and the [alternate take](#) — and that's the difference between domesticated and untamed rock'n'roll circa 1959 for you right there).

The rest of the album, coming upon the heels of the hit single about two months later, feels like it diligently takes its cues from either of its two sides — there are the catchy pop-rockers, typically supplied by the Burnette brothers, and the chivalrous ballads, usually provided by Baker Knight or dusted off the vault shelves. Not that Baker Knight couldn't pen a catchy pop-rocker all by himself, as is quickly proven by the lead-in track, 'You'll Never Know What You're Missing', which straightahead borrows its «baiting» chorus line from Elvis' 'Treat Me Nice' ("well I'm sorry for you but I really don't know why..." = "if you want my loving, take my advice..."), but then resolves it in a much less interesting manner, mostly just repeating the same phrase ("...cause you'll never know what you're missin' till you try") instead of the mysterious stop-and-start ellipsis that Leiber & Stoller came up with for Elvis. Still sounds fun, though — but now that I think about it, Baker Knight then also stole the main melodic hook from 'Don't Be Cruel' to screw it inside 'One Minute To One', whose main line is like a hybrid of... well, let's say Carl Perkins' 'Glad All Over' (first four measures) with 'Don't Be Cruel' (next four measures). Damn those mediocre songwriting mechanics!

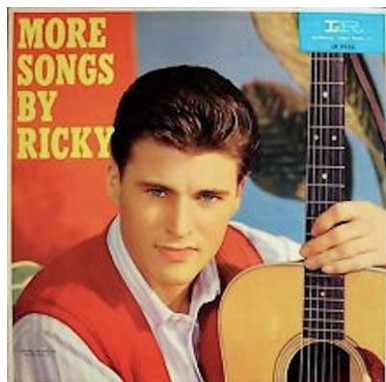
Not that the Burnettes fare that much better — 'A Long Vacation', for instance, is different from Buddy Holly's 'Not Fade Away' only because of the obligatory (and a little annoying) pauses between each repetition of the Bo Diddley beat. 'You're So Fine' also feels like it's composed out of bits and sratches of Buddy Holly chords (there's definitely a bit of '(You're So Square) Baby I Don't Care' in there, and others as well), and 'Don't Leave Me' begins by quoting the Burnettes' own 'All By Myself' (itself a Fats Domino cover)... all in all, I understand that this is the kind of situation where a good knowledge of 1950s rock'n'roll can seriously hinder one's ability to just relax and enjoy the music — but the fact remains that most of this music is quite half-assed in all respects. Lazily written, lazily recorded, with just enough professionalism and feeling to let me be content with it as tasteful enough background accompaniment; but also good proof that by mid-1959, the «1950s pop-rock» formula had *really* run dry, if songwriters were already dismantling hits from the past three years and using their singular elements as building blocks for potential new hits.

Therefore, if my opinion matters at all, I'd like to single out an absolute non-hit, the song 'So Long' (written by Ricky's uncle Don Nelson), as my favorite on the album — two minutes of simple jazzy melancholy in the one and only musical and

emotional style of which Ricky Nelson *might* be called the unpeered master. Nowhere near as memorable as 'Lonely Town' or as eerily depressive as 'Gloomy Sunday', it still belongs in the same category, and I especially appreciate the deep, dark bass tone laid down by James Kirkland; when Ricky's and James' notes merge together at the end of each first line of each verse, there is a haunting, ghostly effect there which, for just a couple seconds, takes this out of the sphere of regular entertainment and into the Twilight Zone. If you ask me real hard, I'd say that it is for tiny moments like these, and *only* for tiny moments like these, that it still makes good sense to remember Ricky Nelson as a unique planetary treasure.

Alas, it does not work quite as well on Ricky's last hit single from 1959, which came out too late to be included on this album (November 1959), but too early to be included on any of the following ones, either, so it makes sense to mention it here: 'I Wanna Be Loved', another Baker Knight contribution on which the out-of-ideas songwriter plunders 'Fever'. It's slow, bluesy, with a sensual and melancholic Burton lead and all, but it simply does not have the magic of 'So Long'; Ricky Nelson as master of the «voodoo-flavored seduction» technique is no Elvis, let alone Muddy Waters. The B-side, 'Mighty Good', works better, but it is merely one more of those middle-of-the-road pop-rockers on which, furthermore, he makes the mistake of trying to sound just a tad more cheerful than necessary. Truth of the matter is, a happy Ricky Nelson is almost as hard to believe as a smooth-operating Ricky Nelson. Give me a sad, brooding Ricky Nelson any time of day over all those other attitudes, and I'll be glad to brood along with him for as long as needed.





MORE SONGS BY RICKY

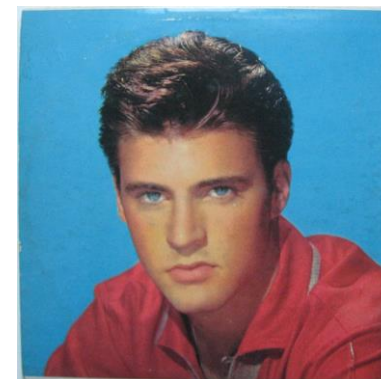
Album released:

July 1960

V A L U E

2 3 3 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) I'm Not Afraid; 2) Baby Won't You Please Come Home; 3) Here I Go Again; 4) I'd Climb The Highest Mountain; 5) Make Believe; 6) Ain't Nothin' But Love; 7) When Your Lover Has Gone; 8) Proving My Love; 9) Hey Pretty Baby; 10) Time After Time; 11) I'm All Through With You; 12) Again.

REVIEW

In retrospect, as I have noticed, **More Songs By Ricky** tends to get a rather bad rap; thus, William Ruhlmann's brief assessment on the *All-Music Guide* largely talks about the album in the context of the general decline of rockabilly around 1960, mentioning how Ricky'd lost the assistance of the Burnette brothers as his trusty songwriters and had to replace the losses by falling back on oldies from Ozzie's 1920s-1930s repertoire. If there were such a thing as a «stable general consensus» on the ups and downs of Nelson's career (there isn't really, because the statistical basis is laughably low), it would probably describe 1960 as a pretty bad year for the guy, followed by a miraculous, if brief, resurgence in 1961–62 with the triumph of 'Travelin' Man' and 'Hello Mary Lou'.



However, I do not seriously believe that such an impression could arise from simply listening to the music, rather than consciously placing it within the overall context of 1960 in a mental framework like «Well, Elvis, Chuck Berry, Gene Vincent, Bill Haley, and pretty much all the other survivors had lukewarm records that year, so it makes sense that Ricky would have a lukewarm record, too». The thing that makes Ricky different from all these guys is that Ricky had *always* had

lukewarm records — «Lukewarm» was pretty much his middle name from birth — and thus, was lucky enough to have far less distance to fall than the «fully authentic» heroes of rockabilly. Listen to Gene Vincent in 1956 and then to Gene Vincent in 1960 and the difference hits you like a ton of marshmallows hits the feeding trough of a fighting dog. Listen to the stylistic and emotional distance traveled in the same period by Ricky Nelson, and you have a much more difficult case on your hands trying to prove that the boy had «sold out» to the record industry. Paradoxically, having been designed from the start as a softer, more polite antidote to the rock'n'roll craze, Ricky Nelson in 1960 almost sounds like a reliable little island of stability in a rapidly deteriorating landscape.

It is true that 1960 opened on a single particularly sickly-sweet note for Ricky, with the release of 'Young Emotions', a maudlin string-saturated ballad from the pen of Disney songwriter Jerry Livingston; the B-side, Baker Knight's 'Right By My Side', was a much more acceptable piece of upbeat pop-rock that would be far more typical of the ensuing LP — along with its loud arrangement, prominently emphasizing Plas Johnson's saxophone and the backing vocals: in addition to The Jordanaires, who had already been shadowing Ricky since 1958, 1960 marked a prominent use of female backup vocals, provided by Darlene Love & The Blossoms — which, perhaps, made the recordings a little cornier than usual, but also a bit more fun, even humorous at times. On 'Young Emotions', sappy sentimentality washes all over Ricky's melancholic nuances that can occasionally ennoble his ballads, so I don't really feel the song; 'Right By My Side', however, is a fun little romp with little pretense, and if you, too, happen to think that the B-side trumps the A-side here, I'm happy to say that **More Songs By Ricky** might be right up our alleys after all.

There are only two more of those sappy ballads on the album — although, like two faithful guard dogs, they bookmark it as the first and last track, so you'd have a completely skewed picture of the record if you were to simply taste it from the front and from the back. They do illustrate pretty well the contrast between manneristic cliché and emotional freshness: 'Again', a Tommy Dorsey oldie from the 1940s, feels like a dusty, lifeless formula — but 'I'm Not Afraid', newly contributed by Felice Bryant of the Boudleaux and Felice Bryant fame, sounds genuinely touching. Elvis would certainly have sung it with more depth, but Elvis would have a harder time with lyrics such as "*People tell me I'm too young / But I disagree / Love can come to anyone / And love has come to me*" than Ricky (who was, after all, not 21 yet — and Elvis, for that matter, already sounded like he was way over 21 when he was still 19).

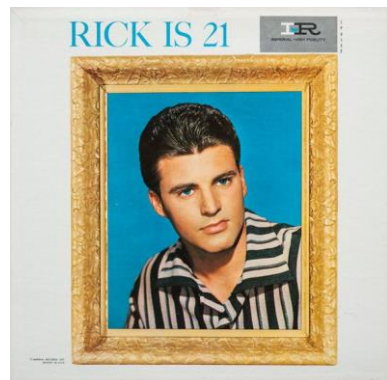
The relative dearth of contemporary outside songwriters does push Nelson this time into falling back on oldies, including, surprisingly enough, a whole two songs from the crown repertoire of the legendary blues queens — 'Baby Won't You Please

Come Home' and 'When Your Lover Has Gone'. Both of these are delivered in mild-lounge jazz style, sort of a «Sinatra-meets-Nashville» arrangement, and saving them from total oblivion is (a) the inspired interplay between Plas Johnson on sax and his brother Ray Johnson on piano (nothing ground-shaking, but quite tasteful) and (b) the fact that Ricky's «emotionally frozen» vocal delivery always works better with melancholic-depressive material than it does with sweet romantic serenading. One problem I have with, for instance, Sinatra's acclaimed «depressive» classics such as **In The Wee Small Hours** is that Frank is not really a natural when it comes to creating a light suicidal mood; Ricky, despite all of his popularity and teen idol status, always feels like the protagonist of the Beach Boys' 'In My Room', and this helps him put his own little spin on those old time melancholy urban blues. He's certainly not trying to steal the crown of Bessie Smith or Billie Holiday, but he *gets* this material. It's more than just «a little something for the old folks».

As for the outside songwriters, at least our good old friend Baker Knight could still be relied upon. He's in exceptionally high spirits this time around, providing three rhythmic, energetic numbers, of which 'Ain't Nothin' But Love' is probably the catchiest, totally in line with Elvis' contemporary pop-rock stuff, and the slower 'I'm All Through With You' is probably the funniest, mainly due to The Blossoms' ridiculous backing vocals (whatever they're chirping there in the background, it sounds like *shut up shut up shut up* to me, which feels like a pretty adequate response to Ricky's unfounded accusations of infidelity). Don Covay's 'Here I Go Again' and one last gift from Dorsey Burnette, 'Hey Pretty Baby', are a bit too happy for Ricky to pull them off as convincingly, but their respectively New Orleanian, Fats Domino-style and Texan, Buddy Holly-like atmospheres are still fun.

Ultimately, the worst that can be said about **More Songs By Ricky** is not that there's too much saxophone, or too few Burnette brothers, or too little rock'n'roll excitement, but largely that there are no obvious standouts — except for too many strings on 'Again', it's a pretty even, tasteful, pleasant listening experience that does not disappoint, unlike quite a few records released by former rockabilly heroes in the same year. And since very few Ricky Nelson albums can actually be said to have any standout tracks at all, there's no reason whatsoever to panick. For the standards of 1960, this music is perfectly adequate and self-sufficient.





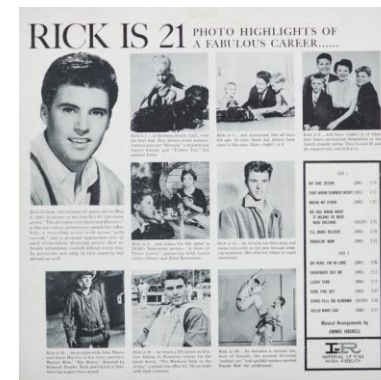
RICK IS 21

Album released:

May 1961

V A L U E
2 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) My One Desire; 2) That Warm Summer Night; 3) Break My Chain; 4) Do You Know What It Means To Miss New Orleans; 5) I'll Make Believe; 6) **Travelin' Man**; 7) Oh Yeah, I'm In Love; 8) Everybody But Me; 9) Lucky Star; 10) Sure Fire Bet; 11) Stars Fell On Alabama; 12) Hello Mary Lou; 13*) You Are The Only One; 14*) Milk Cow Blues; 15*) Everlovin'; 16*) A Wonder Like You.

REVIEW

With an album title like that, I sort of expected the opening track on the record to be a spirited cover of 'Drinkin' Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee' — or, if you *insist* on Father Ozzie choosing your selections from the pre-war era, at the least, 'Gimme A Pigfoot And A Bottle Of Beer'. After all, age ain't nothing but a threshold past which you need no longer bother about fake IDs, and given that the adult Ricky would be no stranger to the temptations of karma-altering substances, you *might* hypothetically have suggested that there'd be some stylistic border between an LP called **Rick Is 21** and all those other LPs like **Ricky Is 17**, **Ricky Nelson's 18th Birthday Party**, **The 19-Year Old Ricky Sings Again**, and **More Songs By Ricky Who's Just Turned 20 But Betcha Didn't Even Notice**.



You'd be dead wrong, though. Just as there is hardly any difference between Ricky's, uh, sorry, *Rick's* good looks on the front cover and all his previous photos, so is there hardly any musical sign on here that the boy is no longer a boy, but a man, spelled M-A-N, no B-O-Y child. «Wait a minute», you'll say, «but there's 'Travelin' Man' on here! Surely a song like

‘Travelin’ Man’ is all toxic macho testosterone material, the kind of tune he’d be too shy to sing even a couple of years earlier?» Indeed, these days, in our age of heightened sensitivity, no positive account of ‘Travelin’ Man’ that you encounter anywhere in cyberspace can pass without at least a little bit of apology for the «cringey» lyrics. Yet there are nuances.

‘Travelin’ Man’, written by the as yet largely unknown Texan songwriter Jerry Fuller, was originally offered to Sam Cooke — and, for some reason, downvoted, even though I can *easily* imagine Sam singing the song, which would have fit neatly into the concept of some of his glitzier albums like **Cooke’s Tour**. Instead, it was passed down to Ricky, almost by accident, and although he allegedly loved Fuller’s demo, I can hardly believe that he didn’t have a bit of a hard time putting himself into the shoes of a jaded polyamorous sailor who has, *in every port, owned the heart of at least (at least!!!) one lovely girl*. Actually, I don’t know what I’m talking about, because Ricky Nelson does not really put himself into the shoes of anyone: he is, and has always been, Ricky Nelson.

And *that*, by the way, is the saving grace of ‘Travelin’ Man’ as performed by Ricky Nelson. Yes, Fuller’s lyrics are tacky — not so much for the concept, really, which is in itself a time-honored sailor’s trope, but rather for the sheer amount of tired «exotic clichés» (‘pretty Señorita waiting for me’, ‘my sweet Fraulein’, ‘my China doll’, etc.) that would make Tin Pan Alley stalwarts like Cole Porter throw up in disgust at the rapid decline of poetic craft in popular music. And if the song were sung by, say, the likes of Tom Jones, or even Elvis — «*real men*» with lotsa hair on their chests and everything — that tackiness would be multiplied to scary dimensions. Nelson, however, delivers the words in his usual style: soft, tender, melancholic, and without a shred of annoying braggadocio. In his performance, the protagonist is no modern day Casanova — this here is more of an ‘Everybody’s Trying To Be My Baby’ vibe, except that the Perkins song portrayed a flamboyant rock star, besieged by obsessed girl admirers: the Nelson-sung ‘Travelin’ Man’ would have ladies all over the world flinging themselves at «travelin’ man Ricky» for his shyness, politeness, and courteousness instead. None of that is in the lyrics, of course; it is all in the voice, which oozes respect and admiration for every one of his «conquests».

What really makes the song into a mini-pop masterpiece, though, and is quite likely responsible for a good number of additional sales, is its musical arrangement — and, above everything else, that mesmerizing bassline played by Joe Osborn (who, by the way, was the one to bring the song to Ricky’s attention). The little rise-and-fall, fall-and-rise melody here is roughly the same as on Arthur Alexander’s ‘Anna (Go With Him)’, which we usually know from the Beatles’ **Please Please Me** cover, evoking a world-weary feel from someone who’s accepted that life shall never again be the way it was meant to be in one’s naïve, idealistic past — and thus, the bass foundation helps reinforce the *tragic* feeling of all those ladies waiting for

Ricky back in Mexico and Hong Kong, a tragedy both for them *and* the protagonist, whose fatal wanderlust prevents him from ever settling down with one of them. Thus it is a thematic prequel for the Allmans' "*when it's time for leavin', I hope you'll understand that I was born a ramblin' man*", but in between Dickey and Ricky, Dickey is the one here who sounds more like a dick (duh), and Ricky the one who sounds like... well, like somebody whom I'd be more likely willing to want to «understand» rather than simply condemn off the bat.

A funny, but sharp assessment of the 'Travelin' Man' / 'Hello Mary Lou' single on RateYourMusic notes that the B-side is "I'm not one that gets around", while the A-side is "Sex tourist anthem". Ironically, though, it is the fast tempo and slightly comical country jerkiness of 'Hello Mary Lou' that make it *feel* more like an improvised passion fling on the part of the protagonist, while 'Travelin' Man' actually ends up feeling more sincere and «gentlemanly» in spirit. The bottomline here is that 'Hello Mary Lou' is just a feel-good piece of country-pop: [the original version](#) by Johnny Duncan, released less than a year prior to Ricky's, or later versions (for instance, the CCR cover on **Mardi Gras**), though formally different in terms of arrangements, all share more or less the same merry spirit, and you can't do much of anything about it. Rick's performance is okay, I guess, but he tries to invoke the feeling of ecstasy, and it comes nowhere near as naturally to him as the feeling of world-weariness and melancholy.

Even a quick check on the SecondHandSongs resource shows that there have been more than 150 different covers of 'Hello Mary Lou', including some pretty big names — yet less than 50 for 'Travelin' Man', mostly by various obscure (at least for non-country fans like myself) country artists. Perhaps it was the lyrics that drove people away, but in the end it is no simple coincidence that 'Travelin' Man' seems as if it could *only* work if sung by the likes of Nelson (maybe Nick Drake or Elliott Smith could have given it a go?), while 'Hello Mary Lou' could have been belted out by anybody from Robert Plant to Freddie Mercury, had they ever wanted to. Actually, both of them did.

It's a little odd, though, that two of Ricky's best-remembered hits ended up on two sides of the same single, in light of the fact that the chronologically adjacent singles on both sides aren't too hot. 'You Are The Only One', from the hands of the trustworthy Baker Knight, was released in November 1960 and only made it to #25 — a rather tepid rhythmic ballad exploiting Ricky's «paranoid lover» image (the hookline throughout is *what'll I do if you leave me?*, to which all of us insecure men desperately needing their partners as anchors can relate), but without any strong musical ideas to back it up. Curiously, the B-side was a cover of Elvis' rendition of 'Milk Cow Blues' — I don't know why, maybe James Burton wanted to play some tough rock'n'roll for a change, but this is not Nelson-ready material, really.

Then, several months after 'Travelin' Man', the Nelson team decided to make lightning strike twice and commissioned yet another «travelog» from Jerry Fuller — 'A Wonder Like You'. With the momentum still going strong, the record shot up the charts but still ended up stalling at #11 — and, once again, I can hardly blame the instincts of the people. Formally, it seems to follow the same formula: a similar tempo, the exact same tinkling piano rolls, and lyrics that exploit the same subject yet are far more wholesome and family-friendly. This time, our hero is no longer falling for the charms of all the places he is visiting or all the different types of girls he is encountering: "*I've seen the pretty dancing girls of Siam / The happy Polynesian people, too / But they're not as happy as I am / 'Cause they haven't got a wonder like you*" (and note the beauty of the rhyming — "Siam" and "as I am"! Finally, Cole Porter would be proud).

The problem is, 'A Wonder Like You' is a bland, diet version of 'Travelin' Man'. Do spare a few minutes of your time and play them back to back, just to imprint in your mind the difference between «musical depth» and «musical shallowness». The follow-up single is a bundle of simplistic sentimentality, delivering its trivial message with no subtext whatsoever; 'Travelin' Man', in comparison, feels like a Shakesperian tragedy. Even if you dislike the song, you cannot deny that it lends itself to all sorts of different interpretations, and that your feelings for its protagonist can range from sympathy and devotion to pity and hatred, depending on where your mind takes you. The protagonist — and the emotional content of — 'A Wonder Like You' — is just a puddle of warm milk. Even the B-side, 'Everlovin', a Buddy Holly-esque pop rocker originally recorded by The Crescents, an Australian vocal trio that supported Ricky on his tour of the continent, is preferable, due to the lack of any artificial sentimentality.

Neither of these two singles made it onto **Ricky 21** (well, 'A Wonder Like You' was recorded already after the album), but both 'Travelin' Man' and 'Hello Mary Lou' did, and, naturally, they overshadow most of the other selections — even if the team did manage to get both Jerry Fuller, the author of the former, and Gene Pitney, of the latter, to contribute several other numbers to complete the LP. Of Fuller's two additional numbers, 'Break My Chain' is the faster, more energetic and more memorable one, but what strikes me most about the song is that Bob Dylan actually took it as the basis for his own 'On A Night Like This' fourteen years later — although the general pop structure of the verse doesn't look terribly original, for some reason, it is the Dylan song that springs to my mind most immediately. 'That Warm Summer Night' is a rather non-descript romantic ballad, though it still has more soul to it than 'A Wonder Like You'. Meanwhile, Pitney's 'Sure Fire Bet' is 'Hello Mary Lou' all over again, only with a little less verve. The future of these little pop ditties often depends on the subtlest detail. "*Hello Mary Lou, goodbye heart*" delivered the goods; "*you're a sure fire bet to win my lips*" sorta didn't.

The other lightweight pop-rock contributions made by big names such as Dorsey Burnette ('My One Desire'), Johnny Rivers ('I'll Make Believe') and Dave Burgess ('Everybody But Me') are all nice, but, well, lightweight — nothing in particular tickles the ear in any unusual manner. To round out the record, Ricky falls back on old standards: 'Do You Know What It Means To Miss New Orleans' is a waste of time because I'm not at all sure that Ricky *really* knows what it means to miss New Orleans, but for 'Stars Fell On Alabama', he is somehow able to put on his 'Lonesome Town' «cloak of intangibility» and remind us all once again of that mystical aura of icy emotion he could so effortlessly exude on his earliest recordings. I'm not a fan of this style at all, but I'm pretty sure 'Alabama' is his best vocal performance here after 'Travelin' Man'.

Even so, there is no question that **Rick Is 21** is only going to live on in history as a repository for the biggest single of Nelson's entire career. Perhaps *therein* lies the symbolism — look at how the world is ready to greet an adult Rick Nelson with open arms, sending him back to the top of the charts and everything. If so, the irony is cruel in retrospect, seeing as how the poor guy only had, at best, a couple years of limited fame and fortune in front of him before the British Invasion and new musical standards would forever brand him as a has-been teen idol... but let us not jump too far ahead: for now, we are still in 1961, and as of now, Rick Nelson, Travelin' Man Number One, is on top of the world.

