

SAM COOKE



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1951-1964</i>	<i>Classic soul-pop</i>	<i><u>Cupid</u> (1961)</i>

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SAM COOKE

Album released:
March 1958

V A L U E
2 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) *You Send Me*; 2) *The Lonesome Road*; 3) *Tammy*; 4) *Ol' Man River*; 5) *Moonlight In Vermont*; 6) *Canadian Sunset*; 7) *Summertime*; 8) *Around The World*; 9) *Ain't Misbehavin'*; 10) *The Bells Of St. Mary's*; 11) *So Long*; 12) *Danny Boy*; 13) *That Lucky Old Sun*.

REVIEW

Among all the great black artists of the 1950s, Sam Cooke is one of the least probable to be appreciated through an LP-based trajectory. For the first few years of the secular — and, as history would have it, the most important — segment of his musical career, his LPs were not essentially collections of his biggest singles with a few fillerish album-only tracks thrown in here and there, but rather side projects, designed with only the most devoted fans in mind. Thus, his self-titled debut album for the Keen label only includes one of those singles — and of the other tracks, not one has been seen fit to be included on **The Man Who Invented Soul**, a nicely representative 4-CD boxset overview of the man's soul years which should satisfy most listeners' curiosity about the man who, well, invented soul (though the title of the boxset does sort of equate Ray Charles with chopped liver in the process). Of course, Sam Cooke is first and foremost The Voice, which means there is always a payoff, whether you're listening to 'A Change Is Gonna Come' or 'Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate The Positive'. But he was also a trailblazer — and most, if not all, of his trailblazing is to be found on his singles.



So let us start appropriately with his first single — ironically, also his biggest one, since he would never get to have another #1 on the US pop charts. According to most memoirs, the original recording of ‘You Send Me’ turned into a battleground between Art Rupe, the head of Specialty Records where Sam had previously done most of his gospel work with the Soul Stirrers, and Bumps Blackwell, the man responsible for steering Cooke away from God and producing his early secular recordings for the small Keen label. Back in those days, making a crossover from gospel to pop for a black singer was somewhat akin to making a crossover from classic opera to Andrew Lloyd Webber for a white one — and, in all honesty, nobody could prove that the young and ambitious singer was seriously tempted with the perspective of fame and fortune when he ultimately made his stand with Blackwell rather than Rupe. Yet when fame and fortune come hand-in-hand with innovative artistic vision and startling musical results, who could blame this kind of sellout?

Because ‘You Send Me’ (along with its lesser known predecessor ‘Lovable’, which was still released on Specialty and credited, out of caution, to Sam’s alias «Dale Cook») really did create a new type of sound: the gospel-influenced romantic pop ballad, Nat King Cole meets Thomas Dorsey. The backing track is a doo-woppy waltz; the back vocals are gospel crooning; and Sam’s lead vocal combines the suave and seductive overtones of a ladykiller idol with the epic vocal power of a musical preacher (particularly on the bridge section). Of course, this is pop-oriented «light soul» as compared to Ray Charles’ R&B-oriented «deep soul»; but it is also the perfect romantic counterpoint to Uncle Ray’s much more rough and physical approach to the subject matter of his songs. With ‘Lovable’ and ‘You Send Me’, Cooke creates the image of a gallant, courteous ladies’ gentleman who somehow manages to come across as both classy *and* genuine — a relatively rare exception in the world of pop, particularly black one (with people like Marvin Gaye, it felt like they were only waiting for the right moment to get rid of those cuffs and ties; Sam, on the other hand, sort of seemed like he was naturally born into that particular image).

The B-side of ‘You Send Me’ was, however, closer in spirit to the general composure of Sam’s first LP — a cover of ‘Summertime’ from *Porgy and Bess*, far from the first and much further from the last one. It gets an imaginative musical reinvention, almost proto-Bondian with its echoey bass pattern and ghostly-haunting background wailing; but Sam’s reading of the text itself is fairly literal and not particularly exciting per se, unless you simply adore the sound of his singing voice (and there is every reason why you should). *This* is the general formula that was expanded for the self-titled debut album: mostly classic or slightly more modern show tunes, mixed in with some folk oldies and delivered by Sam in a sincere, but somewhat perfunctory manner.

If you are a big fan of 'Moonlight In Vermont' and 'Danny Boy' all by themselves, Sam's versions of these classics will soothe your soul for sure. But if, like me, you only like them in outstanding interpretations (for instance, as vehicles for Billy Holiday or some other singer with a unique personality), the suave and delicate vibe which Cooke provides them makes it all way too dangerously close to harmless and cuddly lounge entertainment. A nice touch of class is provided by the backing band, ambitiously called «The Bumps Blackwell Orchestra» but in reality more of a small jazz combo, with prominent bass, jazzy electric guitar, and only occasional piano and horns here and there. The downside of this, however, is a fairly lo-fi level of production: you can distinctly hear the difference between the crystal clear and sharp sound of 'You Send Me' (an earlier recording from June '57) and the comparably muddy and flat sound of the early '58 Keen recordings for the LP.

Therefore, if you want to get a clearer picture of Cooke's musical evolution in the early days of his solo career, it will make much more sense to follow the trail of his singles (which honestly should all be attached as bonus tracks to this album). The first one of these was 'I'll Come Running Back To You', deceitfully beginning with a classic Ink Spots guitar line but quickly turning out to be more in an R&B vein — it actually has more «soul» to it than 'You Send Me', which fully explains why it also went to #1 on the R&B charts but only stalled at #17 on the pop register. (If you listen really closely, you can spot the melodic similarities with 'A Change Is Gonna Come' — it is mostly the faster tempo that is confusing). Ironically, the single was released not on Keen, but on Specialty Records: apparently, Art Rupe was trying to cash in on the newly found popularity of his former protégé, gospel purity be damned and all.

Meanwhile, on Keen Bumps Blackwell was still trying to cultivate Sam's honey-drippin' image: December '57 sees the release of '(I Love You) For Sentimental Reasons', the first Cooke single not actually written by Cooke and, honestly, just not a very good song: it has no distinctive hook and mainly gets by on its doo-woppy / crooning atmosphere. Much better is 'You Were Made For Me', again written by Sam and released three months later: here, the hook power is unmistakable — following each set of Sam's favored lists of comparisons ("a fish was made to swim in the ocean, a boat was made to sail on the sea..."), delivered with the usual gallant suaveness, he finishes each verse with an almost doom-laden epic delivery of "you were made for me", subtly lowering his pitch with each new verse to hammer that nail deeper and deeper in.

On the whole, this little string of singles illustrates Cooke's early stylistic fluctuations much better than the LP. Not every song he wrote or performed in those days was great (his best years would not really begin until his transfer from Keen to RCA), but the important journey in search of himself had truly begun. You can discern all the influences — sometimes it feels like he is trying to be a one-man Ink Spots, sometimes a black Sinatra, sometimes a Nat King Cole in the R&B era —

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Sam Cooke*

Album: *Sam Cooke (1958)*

George Starostin's Reviews

but in the end, slowly but surely, he was working toward his own singular style, smudging and ignoring genre borders and being almost equally well palatable for old-fashioned audiences and long-haired musical rebels.





TRIBUTE TO THE LADY

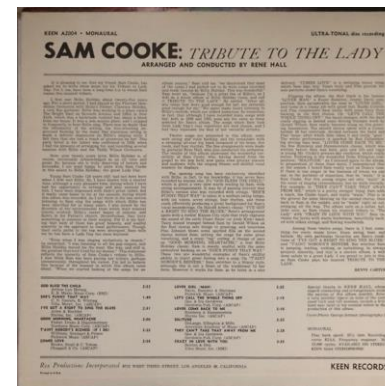
Album released:

April 1959

V A L U E

2 1 2 1 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) God Bless The Child; 2) She's Funny That Way; 3) I've Got A Right To Sing The Blues; 4) Good Morning Heartache; 5) T'Aint Nobody's Bizness (If I Do); 6) Comes Love; 7) Lover Girl (Man); 8) Let's Call The Whole Thing Off; 9) Lover Come Back To Me; 10) Solitude; 11) They Can't Take That Away From Me; 12) Crazy In Love With You.

REVIEW

Every once in a while in the professional life of any linguist (myself not excluded), somebody from the big bad outside world is bound to contact the expert and ask: «what's your opinion on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis?», the purpose of the question usually being to (a) show that the person in question knows what the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is, (b) let you know that, no matter what your answer may be, it shall never shatter the ironclad opinion that the person already holds on the subject. In all honesty, I have never given that much thought to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, a.k.a. the «hypothesis of linguistic relativity», since it is more a matter of linguistic philosophy than linguistic science. But on the other hand, when it comes to linguistic philosophy, almost every theory ever put out by reasonable professionals usually finds itself in limbo between truth and falsehood — and every once in a while each of us may come across specific situations in which the way that things are put into words by somebody else genuinely impacts your perception of said things. (Admittedly, the hypothesis has more to do with structural / grammatical properties of language than pure lexis, but for the sake of this review, let's get a little bit expansive).



What exactly does this have to do with Sam Cooke's third and last album for the Keen label, released in the spring of 1959? (The second one was **Encore**, a bunch of orchestrated standards produced by Bumps Blackwell which I have agreed to skip in this chronological survey of Cooke's career — there's only so much schlock I can agree to take from the guy, considering that his main strengths lay so drastically elsewhere). From a purely musical perspective, this is a collection of old jazz, blues, and vaudeville standards, on which Cooke is backed by the René Hall Orchestra — another exercise in retro stylistics, but not fully unreasonable per se; why shouldn't Sam Cooke be deprived of the pleasure to perform pre-war material in his own style, particularly if the songs have actual class? (as opposed to most of the stuff on **Encore**).

Unfortunately, the album is called **Tribute To The Lady**, and there is absolutely no getting away from the fact that it *was* recorded as a musical homage to Billie Holiday — not just because of the title, but also because all the songs on the album come from Billie's setlist, and some have, indeed, very specifically been associated with Lady Day ('God Bless The Child', 'Lover Man', 'Solitude', etc.). Initially, I quite naturally thought that this was a posthumous tribute; however, Billie died on July 17, 1959, whereas sessions for **Tribute** were held in January / February of the same year, and the album was released in April (meaning that Billie herself might have had a chance to hear it before her demise). One can only speculate on how the track list, the arrangements, and the general mood might have been drastically different, had the Keen label given the green light for this just a few months later than it did — but even if we agree to judge it strictly in the context of *early* 1959, when nobody could yet see the future with 100% clarity and foreknowledge, **Tribute To The Lady** is still rotten to the core, and remains the most pointless and embarrassing entry in Sam's entire catalog (though at least a somewhat intriguing and perversely fascinating entry, as opposed to **Encore**, which is just a big fat nothing).

Now, it is no secret that I deeply and dearly love Billie Holiday, whose status in the world of vocal jazz is akin to that of Jimi Hendrix in the world of electric rock music simply because there has never been anybody else in the world quite like her. I also admire Sam Cooke when he is at his best, charging the listener with the spiritual optimism and sexual energy of his pop, R&B, and even gospel performances. Unfortunately, the idea that Sam Cooke could ever «pay tribute» to Billie Holiday is one of those catastrophic types of mismatches like when Woody Allen tries to make an Ingmar Bergman movie (*Interiors*) or, closer to home, when Paul Stanley begins to sing opera arias. I certainly realize that when "comes love, nothing can be done", but love also makes us stupid, which is fine if you don't run around and make it public, but will definitely bite you in the ass if you decide to run naked across a football field yelling "*SHE LOVES ME!*" — which, in a way, is the everyday life equivalent of **Tribute To The Lady**.

The overproduced, schmaltzy, Vegas-y arrangements of all the songs are only one, and far from the biggest, problem with this «tribute» — after all, Billie had also had quite a few big band and orchestral arrangements in her life, though even her most overproduced efforts late in life (e.g. on the **Lady In Satin** album) never really sounded like they were supposed to be accompanied by scantily clad parading models in boas and feathers, a glittery vision that cannot escape my eyes over the entire course of this musical disaster. The *biggest* problem is that not a single one of these tracks betrays *any* signs of actual understanding between the covered artist and the one offering the tribute. Billie's unique delivery of these songs, be it the deeply personal 'God Bless The Child' or even the generically playful 'Let's Call The Whole Thing Off', involved humanizing the material, making it sound realistic — a bit bumbling, a bit vulnerable, almost completely devoid of scenic mannerisms and artificialities.

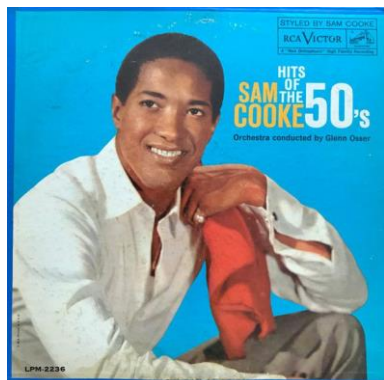
Cooke, in comparison, sings everything here like a perfectly oiled, well-trained robot, stripping the songs of whatever pain and emotion Billie might have endowed them with and turning them back into their empty sheet music shells. It is hard to blame him because he largely does the exact same thing he does on all of his pop hits — it's just that this exact same thing does not work on this pre-war material, where pretty much *everything*, due to its initially non-descript or, worse, initially schlocky nature, depends on personality and interpretation rather than pre-written hooks. I do not believe it was ever in his power to do this thing differently, which means that he should never have tackled the job in the first place. Songs like 'Solitude' and 'Good Morning Heartache', which used to be the perfect vehicles for conveying an atmosphere of bitter melancholy in Billie's hands, here sound like fluffy crooning lounge ditties, a reasonable accompaniment for digesting your lamb chops or steak in some high-class nightclub and nothing more.

Perhaps the worst offender is Sam's recording of 'T'Ain't Nobody's Bizness (If I Do)', once a powerful statement of self-assertion for Bessie Smith, later subverted and personalized by Billie, and now turned into a meaningless lounge husk of a song by Sam — of course, *this* was the song to be released as the lead single from the album (fortunately, it at least flopped). Does this mean that Cooke cannot sing the blues? Definitely not, as he would later prove with **Night Beat**; but on this album, he is not really singing the blues — he has been saddled with the idea of Billie Holiday as a glitzy nightclub entertainer, charming the pants off all the gentlemen the same way Sam Cooke is expected to charm the skirts off all the ladies. Consequently, this all ends up being more of a tribute to, say, Dinah Washington than Billie Holiday; a good analogy for this perception would be learning to love the Beatles by only listening to those artists whose songs they had covered, rather than to the Beatles' own compositions.

But what do we *really* have left if we try to flush out «linguistic relativity»? Well, in that case we simply replace the reaction of embarrassment with that of boredom. I find nothing interesting in René Hall's perfunctory arrangements, and no quirky traces of color introduced by Sam in his performances. I have no worthwhile observations on any particular details, on *anything* that would stand out at least slightly from these utterly generic readings. If you are enamored with Cooke's voice as such — losing your head over every note the man ever sang — by all means, go ahead and dive in; I myself prefer to be similarly enamored with Billie's voice instead. To me, this remains a very proverbial case of how somebody's love for somebody else is not at all guaranteed to produce worthy results (a situation more than common with 21st century artists influenced and inspired by all the great musical output of the 20th century, but one which obviously goes all the way back to at least Icarus' appreciation for his Dad's craftsmanship).

It is also an interesting case of how moving to a bigger, more overtly «capitalistic» record label actually improved things for the artist — although Cooke's discography for RCA would still include old-school crooner material (**Hits Of The 50's**), the label would at least not make such a rigid distinction between placing all of his good stuff on singles and all of his schlock on albums, like Keen did. God only knows what sort of ridiculous LP projects Bumps Blackwell would put Sam through, had he continued along that same trajectory.





HITS OF THE 50'S

Album released:

V A L U E

August 1960

1 1 2 1 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Hey There; 2) Mona Lisa; 3) Too Young; 4) The Great Pretender; 5) You, You, You; 6) Unchained Melody; 7) The Wayward Wind; 8) Secret Love; 9) The Song From Moulin Rouge; 10) I'm Walking Behind You; 11) Cry; 12) Venus.

REVIEW

There are some conflicting reports on whether **Cooke's Tour**, Sam's other 1960 album for RCA, was commercially released before or after **Hits Of The 50's** — some sources say May 1960, others say November — but in the long run, it probably does not matter too much, since the first couple of years spent by Sam at RCA generally followed the principle already introduced by Keen with **Tribute To The Lady**: leave the tasteful teenage-oriented stuff for the singles, use the LPs to pander to the boring bourgeois tastes of the businessmen and businessmen's wives who can actually afford to buy an LP. Blaming Sam for going along with this strategy would be near-sighted — he strove to break through to every audience, white and black, young and old, and this was probably a winning strategy for him — but striving to understand the reasons behind the existence of such records certainly places no obligations on us to like them, either.



This particular LP, as well as every other single and album recorded by Sam at RCA, was produced by «Hugo & Luigi», a duo whose names probably bring on anachronistic associations with Super Mario Bros. but who were really Hugo Peretti and Luigi Creatore, cousins (not brothers, but close!) who wrote some songs out of the Brill Building (mostly known for Elvis' 'Can't Help Falling In Love') but more commonly acted as producers for RCA; quite tellingly, their most famous client

besides Sam was Perry Como. And Hugo & Luigi's mission — at least, the way they saw it in early 1960 — is so clearly stated in the liner notes to the album that I feel like heavily quoting the opening paragraph: "*When rock hit the Fifties, a lot of sensitive citizens corked their ears, crawled into their woofers and occasionally sent messages to the outside world, demanding, 'Where is the good new music — and where are the good young singers?' Well, this album gives the answer, for the music was there all the time. Out of the Fifties we have chosen a dozen ballads... to prove that along with The Chicken Scratch and other record hop pops there were new songs, beautiful by any standard. And the answer to the second part of the question is Sam Cooke, a young man who has developed his own style and sensitivities to a song.*"

I am not even altogether sure which particular 'Chicken Scratch' the two Italian gentlemen are referring to, but if it is this particular wild mix of surf guitar with yakety-sax on [the Commandos' single from 1958](#), then count me as a severely desensitized citizen who would rather listen to 'Chicken Scratch' twelve times in a row than ever put on **Hits Of The 50's** again after having properly listened to it three times for the purposes of objective, analytical, scientific evaluation (*not*). I mean, they couldn't even dare bring themselves to write 'Tutti Frutti' or 'Hound Dog' — obviously so, since Elvis had the same RCA Victor contract as Sam — so they had to go for a dirty cheap trick instead and still fell flat on their faces. Well, I guess the most appropriate answer for this entire tirade would be "*OK Radio Baby!*"

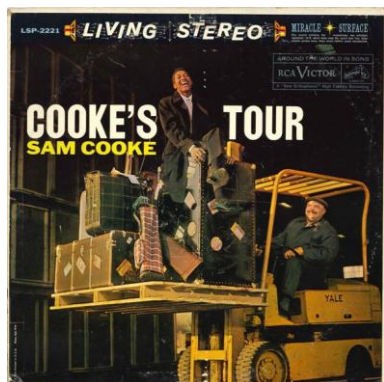
Almost every single criticism voiced in the preceding review of **Tribute To The Lady** applies here, and to this should be added that this time around, the songs are mostly crappy. Billie Holiday's tasteful and generally down-to-earth vocal jazz and blues numbers could still be spoiled by generic production and a superficial approach to singing — but *this* stuff is mostly overblown sentimental schmaltz, a mix of well-known chestnuts like 'Mona Lisa', 'The Great Pretender', and 'Unchained Melody' with largely forgotten oldies — although, honestly, I couldn't really bother to think about what makes 'Mona Lisa' so memorable next to, say, 'You, You, You'.

The mere fact that this corny schlock is being covered by one of the greatest voices in the history of soul and R&B means absolutely nothing, because the purity of the voice and the precision of the phrasing cannot compensate for the fact that Sam is unable to provide these creations with new lives; instead of appropriating the material, he is enslaved by it. The lounge-jazzy production may not be the worst ever — at least Hugo and Luigi do not oversaturate the recordings with Mantovani strings, relying instead on harps, chimes, and woodwinds to concoct their desired Candyland atmosphere — but there's only so much walking on puffy clouds that a thoroughly insensitive citizen like me can endure, particularly since the production is pretty much the same throughout all the twelve numbers.

Admittedly, few of the songs are just simplistic head-over-heels-in-love serenades; many carry a deeper, darker melancholy vibe, and apparently Hugo & Luigi took a serious approach to the selection process, choosing the songs they thought would best fit Cooke's natural talent for expressing unfulfilled yearning and sadness. Sometimes this strategy backfires, though. For instance, 'The Great Pretender', which is probably the only song here I'd ever agree to listen to by my own free will in the Platters' original, is indeed slower, sadder, and more vulnerable than the Platters' louder and more upbeat version; however, that one actually agreed *better* with the lyrics — certainly a line like "*I'm lonely but no one can tell*" as delivered by the Platters is more efficient than the way Sam sings it here, where just about everybody can tell that he's really very, very, very lonely. The whole "being a pretender" thing just sails out the window in this interpretation. (Try to imagine Robert Smith or Jeff Buckley covering Lennon's 'I'm A Loser' and judge for yourself if the product of your imagination could ever outperform the effect of the original).

Anyway, I cannot even end this album on a wishful "I sure hope I could be awesomely different from the rest and give the record a positive assessment" note (if you *do* want a positive assessment, here is [Sam Scott's take on the album](#) that proves, once again, that there is no single piece of music on Earth that would not be loved by at least one person) — because I do *not* want to be awesomely different here. Certain things are sacred to me, like insisting that most of the whitebread schmaltz from the Fifties continues to be just that; re-evaluating it as some sort of meaningful and genuinely emotional art form, especially with the aid of such a revered black singer like Sam, is out of the question. Of course, if you got the hots for Cooke so much that you'd enjoy his singing the phonebook, **Hits Of The 50's** is just as impeccable as the rest. But I think I'd rather have him actually sing the phonebook than 'The Song From Moulin Rouge' or whatever.



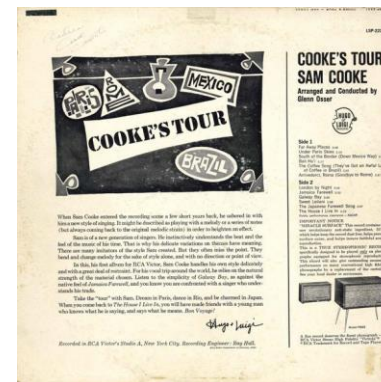


COOKE'S TOUR

Album released:
November 1960

V A L U E
3 0 2 1 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Far Away Places; 2) Under Paris Skies; 3) South Of The Border (Down Mexico Way); 4) Bali Ha'i; 5) The Coffee Song (They've Got An Awful Lot Of Coffee In Brazil); 6) Arrivederci, Roma (Goodbye To Rome); 7) London By Night; 8) **Jamaica Farewell**; 9) Galway Bay; 10) Sweet Leilani; 11) The Japanese Farewell Song; 12) The House I Live In.

REVIEW

If you agreed with me that **Hits Of The 50's** was pretty embarrassing, you might want to know *that* album's corn factor was almost nothing next to **Cooke's Tour** — by all means, the absolute nadir of Sam's artistic career, a record so utterly stupid and pointless that it drags the very idea of a «concept album» through the thickest mud before it even has had the time frame to properly crystallize. It was bad even by the standards of 1960; by those of the 2020s, it is much worse. So, of course, you just *got* to hear it. It gives a pretty good idea of where the average «bourgeois American society» was at the end of 1960, and of what the white record executive's idea of a «polite» musical program by a black artist used to be at the time. (*Not* taking a big part of the responsibility off Sam's own shoulders, though: he was quite consciously and of his own free will embarking on this path of endearing himself to conservative white audiences by pandering to their cheapest tastes).



Anyway, **Cooke's Tour** is indeed a «concept album» — basically a Broadway / Hollywood musical in the good old-fashioned musical tradition, where each of the songs, usually nicked from its own musical, deals with one of the world's locations, from European cities like Paris, Rome, and London, to Asia (Japan, Melanesia) and Central / South America

(Mexico, Brazil), curiously leaving out Africa in the process; the list is bookmarked at the beginning with 'Far Away Places', an old Bing Crosby standard that acts as a general prelude to the «travelog», and ends with 'The House I Live In', a song originally written by Lewis Allen and Earl Robinson as a human rights anthem but, in the context of this album, feeling more like a patriotic «*after all, there's no place like home*» conclusion.

I will refrain from saying that the album sucks because, to the best of my knowledge, up to 1960 Sam Cooke had never even set foot on any territory outside the United States of America and its closest neighbors in the Caribbean — at the very least, his recorded touring schedule indicates that he would only visit Germany and England as late as 1962, and no records exist of Mr. Cooke ever setting foot in Japan or Brazil. (In theory at least, he may certainly have taken a vacation in Hawai'i or Mexico, but I have no idea). Even so, it is very close-minded to insist that somebody is physically incapable of conveying the atmosphere of a certain environment without having «lived» it to the fullest — even if the result is an approximation, it can be a very deeply felt one, or one that actually offers a unique angle (e.g. I could never understand the artificially puffed-up hatred that some people spew at the California-bred Creedence Clearwater Revival for daring to sing from a «Southern» perspective — all that mattered to me is that John Fogerty deeply and sincerely loved the world of the bayous, which, as far as I'm concerned, gave him a perfectly valid right to eulogize them in his beautiful crafted songs).

However, this is clearly not the case with **Cooke's Tour**. Sam Cooke was by no means an ignoramus — he is usually described in biographies as always having had an inquisitive mind, and well-versed in both movies and literature — but the «setlist» in this «program» has nothing whatsoever to do with anybody's love for anything, except for the general American public's love for the candy-colored «*a whole new world*» aesthetics. Most of these songs are stiff, stuffy, cheesy pieces of musical-exotica, borrowing superficial bits of other countries' musical stylistics (Paris = accordion, Mexico = castanets, Hawai'i = steel guitar, Japan = koto, etc.) only to drown them all in the monotonous and equally superficial sentimentalism of old school Tin Pan Alley songwriting. Sure, if we go down history lane, there are some nice stories behind some of them — like Harry Owens' dedication of 'Sweet Leilani' to his newborn Hawai'ian daughter, etc. — but absolutely none of it matters under these particular circumstances.

If this was not a concept album — if, say, I'd encountered some of these songs individually, scattered around some of Sam's other records where they would be mixed together with more contemporary and meaningful material — the individual impressions of *some* of them could, perhaps, be slightly ameliorated. Thus, the 1946 Sinatra-sung joke tune 'The Coffee Song' ("*they've got an awful lot of coffee in Brazil*") could simply be perceived as a joke tune, at least if you take a time trip

to 1946 when lines like "*a politician's daughter was accused of drinking water / and fined a great big fifty dollar bill*" were indeed considered cutting-edge humor. But (a) in the context of *this* album, the song sort of pretends to occupy a «culturological» niche, introducing listeners to the peculiarities of Brazilian society as opposed to Italian or Jamaican society; (b) at least Sinatra sang this with his usual humorous flair — Sam's performance almost gives the impression that he takes the lyrics *seriously*, with his usual perfect vocal tone and a caressing lightness that, however, betrays no hints of irony. This is one of Sam's natural limitations — he could perfectly convey beauty, tenderness, or melancholy, but irony and humor were largely out of his reach — and it just makes me wonder about who were the idiots who suggested that he sing this kind of material. Hopefully we don't have to blame it on Hugo & Luigi, who, after all, would do a good job of producing all those *good* songs for Sam... eventually.

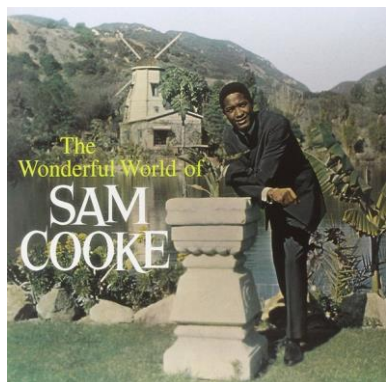
In the end, of all the tourist stops made along the way, there is only one toward which I feel a little bit partial: 'Jamaica Farewell'. Unlike most of the Tin Pan Alley / Bing Crosby / Frank Sinatra fluff, this one is at least somewhat «authentic», written or re-invented by Lord Burgess, the acknowledged master of all things Caribbean and a frequent writer for Harry Belafonte; likewise, Sam was also well-versed in the Caribbean spirit, having been a frequent visitor to Kingston on his tours (probably the *only* place outside of the U.S. proper that he'd visited more than once). And the song, for once, is recorded in style, with a sympathetic woodwind / electric guitar melody making a nice change from Belafonte's original acoustic guitar recording. Each time Sam melancholizes about having "*to leave a little girl in Kingston Town*" in the chorus, there's a tiny authentic shiver running down my spine — the only time this generally wretched album does it to me. 'Jamaica Farewell' is the one song I'd heartily recommend here for any Sam Cooke playlist; everything else is mostly just fodder for objectively sarcastic culturological analysis.

Unfortunately, it also applies to 'The House I Live In', the pompous conclusion to the album which, technically, should count as the first authentically «socially conscious» song recorded by Sam — a good four years before 'A Change Is Gonna Come'. Given the album's overall fluffy popcorn nature, the decision to finish it off with a song by Earl Robinson, blacklisted until only recently, may feel almost unusually brave; but since there is nothing specifically «communist» in this people's anthem (originally conceived as an anti-racist rather than anti-capitalist manifesto), in the context of **Cooke's Tour** it rather just plays the part of a *home sweet home* epilog. It's sort of as if the protagonist of the album took his stereotypically clichéd tour all around the world, then came back only to placate himself with the idea that "*all races, all religions, that's America to me*", or that "*the air of feeling free, the right to speak my mind out, that's America to me*", and this makes him feel just a little bit better after having to leave that little girl behind in Kingston Town, not to mention all his other seedy

love affairs in Paris, Rome, London, and Japan. I mean, who really needs to break little girls' hearts all around the world when all races and religions are already available back in the USA?

Again, if you fish the song *outside* its stupid context, it works much better — unlike 'The Coffee Song', this is the kind of material that Sam was really born to sing — but it is still smothered in cloying, mawkish strings and chimes that try to carry us back to 1945, when Sinatra introduced the song to the world, rather than to any place in the near future. If you are able to concentrate exclusively on Sam's hypnotizing overtones and smooth phrasing — in fact, if you can do this throughout the entire album — then **Cooke's Tour** may indeed turn out to be not just a delightful journey through a set of locally-flavored happy-or-sad frames of mind, but firm proof that Sam Cooke is, by definition, incapable of turning out a single bad LP, or even a single bad song; everything he sings turns to gold just on the strength of the Magic Voice. If, however, like myself, you are typically immune to the Magic Voice factor and always require a little something extra to bring out the full effect of the Magic Voice, I don't see how **Cooke's Tour** could be perceived as anything other than an awkward lapse of taste in a rather ruthless hunt for public acceptance. Perhaps it is best to rewrite history and pretend that the album simply never happened — which would be quite in line with the 21st century's multiple attempts to rewrite history in whichever way pleases the concerned party — but then again, it is also true that a deeper understanding of the embarrassment of artistic failure can often gain a deeper insight into the wonder of artistic success, isn't it?





THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF SAM COOKE

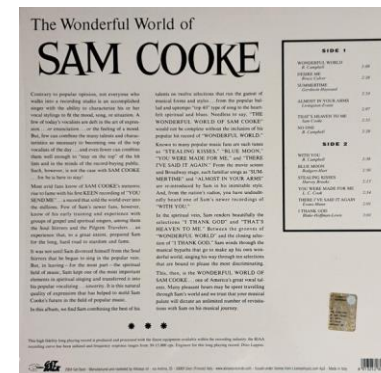
Album released:

November 1960

V A L U E

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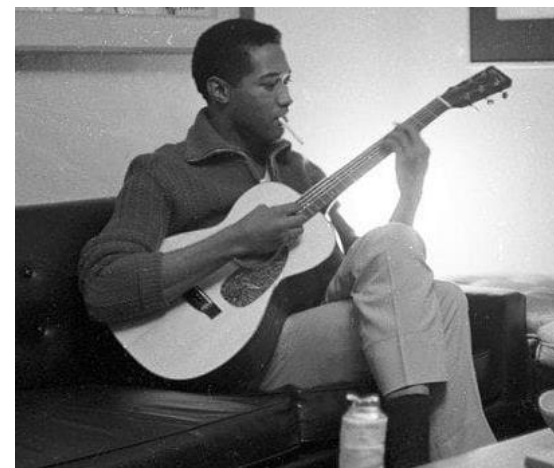
More info:



Tracks: 1) Wonderful World; 2) Desire Me; 3) Summertime; 4) Almost In Your Arms; 5) That's Heaven To Me; 6) No One; 7) With You; 8) Blue Moon; 9) Stealing Kisses; 10) You Were Made For Me; 11) There I've Said It Again; 12) I Thank God.

REVIEW

While all through 1960 RCA was busy «grooming» Sam Cooke to push up that proverbial respectability quotient, his old label, Keen Records, was doing something that, under different circumstances, would only have qualified as an equally proverbial cash-grab — but in the context of 1960, might have looked almost like an attempt at redeeming the artist's plummeting artistic reputation. That is, they were collecting every archived outtake and obscure B-side they could find, and putting them on a Sam Cooke LP of their own. The result was **The Wonderful World Of Sam Cooke**, named after the LP's most famous and successful song; and although the album made no more impression on the charts than its tackier RCA competitors, it is at least consistently listenable.



The chief incentive here was, quite naturally, the impressive commercial success of '(What A) Wonderful World', originally recorded in March 1959 at Sam's last session for Keen, briefly forgotten during the turbulent period in which he switched to RCA, then resurrected about a year later as there was hardly any sense to just keep sitting on that potential pot of gold. Allegedly, Lou Adler and Herb Alpert, who wrote the song for Sam, regarded it as a mere trifle, but Cooke really took to the song — apparently, there was something about its unvarnished simplicity that really got him in the feels, and, for that

matter, it is no surprise that some of Sam's most enduring classics are as musically simple as they come: sentimentality works best when it is not masked with a barrage of orchestral flourishes and witty Bacharach chord changes, but when you simply get the instant urge to hum along with it.

The song features a very sparse arrangement indeed — just an acoustic guitar, a rhythm section, and some modest backing vocals — and (from the point of view of a lenient schoolboy, at least) some of the most memorable lyrics in the world. "*Don't know much about history / Don't know much biology*" almost brings back memories of Chuck Berry's "*American history, practical math / You studyin' hard and hopin' to pass*", but where Chuck Berry sought his salvation in sweet rock'n'roll, Sam, with a little help from Adler and Alpert, finds it in love, which, according to the song, only requires knowledge of the fact that $1 + 1 = 2$. It is just as easy to ridicule the song's naïve message as it would later be to do the same for the likes of 'All You Need Is Love' or 'Imagine' — in fact, year after year shows us that knowing at least *something* about history and biology, in addition to the arithmetics of human passion, is absolutely essential to making the world a much more wonderful place than it happens to be. But at least, in his delivery of the song, Cooke is not being disrespectful of such matters: he sings the words *geography* and *trigonometry* with such politeness and consideration in his voice that you quickly get the impression his protagonist is simply not given the choice to study such complex matters, rather than skips it of his own volition in favor of amorous adventures.

Arguably, the song's only serious flaw is that it is virtually impervious to modified interpretations — and, as such, no matter who covered it over the next fifty years, from Herman's Hermits to Art Garfunkel to, God help us, Michael Bolton, all they could do is detract from the original rather than add to it. Perhaps Devo or Oingo Boingo should have tried to make a run at it, or, at least, Weird Al could have written a parody; as it is, '(What A) Wonderful World' stubbornly refuses to open up any additional dimensions, unlike its similarly-titled little cousin by Bob Thiele and Louis Armstrong, which somehow ends up existing in 30,000 different places at once (the Flaming Lips cover alone takes it to another planet). But that's fine — every great artist needs some legacy that cannot be taken away from them at any cost, for fear of forfeiting their legitimate claim to (relative) immortality.

Three months later, Keen Records tried to repeat their luck, releasing 'With Me', another sweet ballad whose much less captivating lyrics, they probably hoped, would not get in the way of commercial success — but the old-fashioned doo-wop rhythmic and the lack of a distinct original vocal hook ultimately did. The difference between 'Wonderful World' and 'With Me' is that the former is still a great song even when Peter Noone or, Lord save us, Michael Bolton take over the micro-

phone; the latter only works with Sam Cooke shooting it high up in the sky and then giving it his trademark smooth landing at the end of each verse. At least it's a Sam Cooke original, rather than some worn-out old standard; but a rather lazily written original at that.

Undeterred at the single's failure, Keen went all out and followed it up with this entire LP of «new» material, most of which had actually been officially released as B-sides from 1957 to 1959 and made relatively little impact. It is definitely *not* true, though, as some retro-reviewers suggest, that there is nothing of special interest on the LP except for 'Wonderful World' itself. At the very least, there is 'You Were Made For Me', the original B-side to the corny pop song 'Lonely Island' — written by Sam himself, it is another of those simple-as-pie, parallelism-peppered rhythmic ballads that contain some odd magic depth inside their superficial triviality. In this particular case, I'm talking about the overtones on that chorus: Sam starts each verse off with lightweight, breezy nonchalance ("*a fish was made to swim in the ocean, a boat was made to sail on the sea...*") and finishes it in a deeper, moodier, more serious tone that might even betray a note of anxiousness — that *I know you were made for me* line is not so much a simple expression of admiration for his loved one as it is a subtle, manipulative voodoo enchantment, occasionally followed by a bar or two of moody humming to cement the effect. It's difficult to write about it, though — when your impression of a song depends on tiny fluctuations of amplitude rather than on the actual chord structure. This is where subjectivity in perspective rules supreme.

The rest of the material, assembled by Keen, is here and there, mostly decent but unexceptional. 'Desire Me' is a sweet, uninventive attempt to repeat the success of 'You Send Me'. 'That's Heaven To Me', an outtake from the earlier days with the Soul Stirrers, is like 'The House I Live In' without the extra bombast, but still a bit spoiled by the unnecessary angelic strings. The recording of 'Blue Moon' is somewhat musically unusual, with heavy emphasis on a thick bass line and the same descending acoustic chords we shall later hear on the Beatles' 'Do You Want To Know A Secret?' — but the vocal delivery is rather perfunctory for Sam, and the strings in the background, this time, just add extra clutter to the already odd arrangement. And the version of 'Summertime' on here seems to be 'Pt. 2' — a little sped-up soulful jam session built around the original cover; interesting, but passable.

The important conclusion to take away with you is that even Sam's second-rate material, reserved for filler B-sides on Keen singles, is still preferable to most of the material he was cutting for RCA in his early days on the label. At the very least, most of this is naturally-sounding and «progressive» (for the times) R&B and soul, rather than pre-war Tin Pan Alley stuff or hits from recent Hollywood musicals. It is still pop — make no mistake about it, even at his best Sam Cooke would never go for

the soulful depth of Ray Charles or the aggressive grit of James Brown — but at least it's pop that tries to pander to young, contemporary listeners of all races, rather than schmaltz for TV-watching middle-aged white-only audiences. Much to Sam's honor, he would finally begin crawling out of that hole by early 1961, rather than sinking even deeper; and who knows, perhaps **The Wonderful World Of Sam Cooke**, released right around the lowest point in his artistic career, might have actually played its part in reminding him of what was really the right thing to do. (Then again, we must also thank the TV-watching middle-aged American public for *not* buying either **Hits Of The 50's** or **Cooke's Tour** — had any of those become big hits on the LP market, it's a safe bet that a change would never gonna come!).





SAM COOKE (SWING LOW)

Album released:

February 1961

V A L U E

2 3 3 1 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Swing Low, Sweet Chariot; 2) I'm Just A Country Boy; 3) They Call The Wind Maria; 4) Twilight On The Trail; 5) If I Had You; 6) **Chain Gang**; 7) Grandfather's Clock; 8) Jeanie With The Light Brown Hair; 9) Long, Long Ago; 10) Pray; 11) You Belong To Me; 12) Goin' Home.

REVIEW

I do not know whose idea it was to continue the «conceptual conveyor» of «Sam Cooke Becomes Billie Holiday», «Sam Cooke Becomes Frank Sinatra», «Sam Cooke Becomes Tony Bennett», etc., with the gimmick of «Sam Cooke Becomes Johnny Cash», but I do know I owe a debt of surprising gratitude to that person — for providing me with the first Sam Cooke LP in quite a long time where enjoyment of his wonderful voice is *mostly* free of any accompanying pangs of cringe at the corny material he is provided with or at the schlocky arrangements in which the material is draped. That the album was titled simply **Sam Cooke**, the same way as his old debut for Keen (although it would later be retitled **Swing Low** in some countries to avoid confusion), is probably just a coincidence, but a symbolic one: starting with this «reboot» of sorts, Sam's subsequent LPs for RCA would slowly, slowly, slowly gain in artistic quality, reflecting both the gradually improving artistic status of the LP medium in pop music and Sam's own maturation. Had he lived but two or three years more, who knows, we might eventually have gotten a **What's Goin' On** or a **Talking Book** out of him. In the meantime, though, it is almost amusing that it took the image of Sam Cooke as a «lonesome cowboy» to inject some true artistic value in his long-players.



It still begins with a single, though. Released on July 26, 1960, 'Chain Gang' was arguably *the* most important song in all of Sam's career — a turning point that was necessary to prepare the ground for 'A Change Is Gonna Come' four years later. Prior to that moment, pretty much all of the songs Sam wrote himself were love ballads; what exactly triggered his brain to write a (mildly, but still) «socially conscious» number instead is a mystery we won't be able to solve — all we can say is that it was probably bound to happen sooner or later.

Of course, unlike 'Change', 'Chain Gang' did not mark too much of a *stylistic* change in Sam's writing. It's a bouncy, fun, danceable tune whose mood could be easily taken for that of a love song, especially if you'd failed to notice the lyrics or did not pose yourself the question of why exactly does that ringing percussion in the background sound like a hammer on rock, or why the background "ooh, aah" vocals sound like rhythmic work grunts. But this, precisely, was the trick: by sending the song all the way up to #2 on the Billboard charts, Sam Cooke made the entire nation swing its hips to a sad tale of a bunch of convicts lost in the monotonousness of their daily duties by the roadside. And then there's the sublime agenda of stirring up pity for his protagonists, as he takes that same wistful melancholy of his lost-love serenades and applies it to the plight of men in prison uniforms. There's even a nice textual throwback here — at the very end of the song, when he begins to ad-lib while impersonating a convict, the line "*give me water, I'm thirsty*" clearly hearkens back to Sam's gospel days with The Soul Stirrers when one of their main highlights was 'Jesus Gave Me Water'.

Indeed, the much-lauded inventive gimmick of conveying «road work atmosphere» through the available studio means of a pop song production does not amaze or move me nearly as much as hearing a great human voice realizing its true potential. As a romantic crooner, Cooke could easily slip into schlocky sentimentality when he gave it his all; but when he used his voice to channel mercy and compassion, there was simply no way he could fail. So even if the main hook of the song is its chorus — in which even the final nasals of the heavily accentuated words ('*mennn*', '*chainnn*', '*gannnnng*'...) echo the relentless fall and resonance of the hammer — the main message of the song is in the verses, which don't even arrive until about one-third-way into the tune. It's quite a subtle achievement, and a sort of double-agent trick on Sam's fanbase. Once, along with Ray Charles and others, Sam would use his experience in the gospel genre to inject the «sacred» spirit into the «profane» (or, at least, «secular») art of serenading. Now here, he is taking the fully-formed sexual body of the pop song and inverting it with a message that is as close to that original gospel as possible — which makes 'Chain Gang' an absolutely outstanding number even in comparison to most of the other highlights of his catalog.

I do not know if the success of 'Chain Gang' had anything to do with the concept of this LP, but I do know that the song

itself, stuck right in the middle of the album, fits it like a glove. The overriding theme here is life outside the big city — the Wild West, the countryside, the roamin' and the ramblin' — and the image of the 'Chain Gang', "working on the highways and byways", becomes an appropriate part of a larger whole, even if not a single one of these songs comes close to mirroring its impact or importance. But they *are* tremendously helped by Hugo & Luigi's decision to cut down on the bombast a little, and give Sam more space at the expense of monumental orchestration. Not that strings and brass are going anywhere, but they are used more sparingly and subtly — surprisingly, the most notable instrument on the record is the bass, always at the center of the groove and a perfect «dark» counterpoint for Sam's «light» singing style. Given that all the bass work is credited to Milt Hinton, a veteran of the Cab Calloway orchestra and one of the most prolific bass session players on both the jazz *and* the pop market, this is perhaps not *such* a big surprise...

Obviously, the opening 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' is a natural highlight; even the «poppified» arrangement of the gospel classic cannot detract from the fact that this material and Sam Cooke were born for each other — unlike, say, Sam Cooke and 'Under Paris Skies' — and although the brass fanfare at the end spoils the mood a bit, the verses deliver exactly the way we'd expect them to. I do suppose that to some gospel purists, Sam's approach to the genre, particularly in his post-Soul Stirrers days, might feel a bit blasphemous, what with that same purring, seductive voice he'd used for his lady fans now directed to singing the Lord's praise — but lighten up, people, you don't always need to put on the heavy boots of Mahalia Jackson to talk to the old man up in the sky. Soft and sentimental works, too, as long as it's not overpowered by dazzling glitz and flashing glam, and this recording mostly stays away from such excesses.

It is difficult to dwell too much on the other songs individually — what should I write about cover versions of 'They Call The Wind Maria' or 'Jeanie With The Light Brown Hair'? — but, as I said, collectively they do not prompt such a repulsive reaction as the material covered on **Hits Of The 50's** or **Cooke's Tour**. Somehow, there's an atmosphere of improved sincerity and authenticity, as if this kind of «saloon music» were closer to Sam Cooke's essence than «cabaret music» or «casino music», if you get my drift. But also the emphasis on quiet, solid rhythm, only occasionally spruced up by brass, woodwinds, and strings helps immensely.

Another piece of good news is that for the first time *ever*, the album boasts not one, but *three* Sam Cooke originals: in addition to 'Chain Gang', there are 'If I Had You' and 'You Belong To Me', two straightforward love serenades co-written by Sam with his manager, James W. Alexander. Of those, 'You Belong To Me' is especially notable, like a perfect illustration of how much can be done by a beautiful and versatile voice with the tiniest of lyrical means — hear how Sam sings the line "*all*

of my love belongs to you" in three different ways (call them «tender», «pensive», and «ecstatic», if you wish), only to cap it off with a "*because you, you belong to me*" that is at the same time respectfully sentimental and sternly possessive. (How am I doing with my adjectives so far?). You can definitely feel how this kind of modulation, bearing much more meaning than the words themselves, would influence Paul McCartney, for instance, in his early (and not just early) Beatle days. But even if Paul McCartney would write more interesting and innovative melodies, his control of his own voice's overtones would never even remotely approach Sam's.

By the time the album closes down with the appropriately placed 'Goin' Home', Cooke has more or less repaired his reputation as an LP artist (with me, anyway) – even if the record could certainly profit from the inclusion of a couple more of his contemporary singles, such as 'Sad Mood' from November 1960, which was, I think, recorded during more or less the same sessions that yielded the bulk of this album (it definitely has Milt Hinton on it as well, given the prominence of the simple, but important bass line reinforcing the «sadness» of the song). With the power of 'Chain Gang' behind it and, for the first time, a consistently satisfying background sound for the man's vocal artistry, **Sam Cooke** should really count as a reboot, and the opening statement of Sam's «mature» period, which would, unfortunately, only last for three years, but which would also be one of the major blessings for the American pop music scene specifically in its (generally rather bleak) pre-British Invasion period.





MY KIND OF BLUES

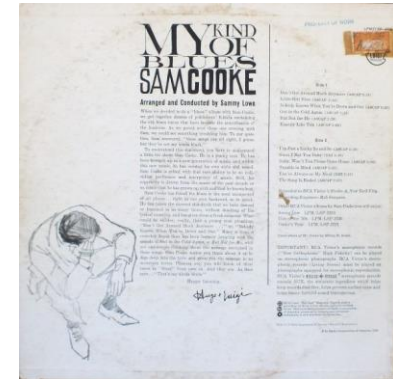
Album released:

V A L U E

October 1961

2 3 2 1 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Don't Get Around Much Anymore; 2) Little Girl Blue; 3) Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out; 4) Out In The Cold Again; 5) But Not For Me; 6) Exactly Like You; 7) I'm Just A Lucky So And So; 8) Since I Met You Baby; 9) Baby, Won't You Please Come Home; 10) Trouble In Mind; 11) You're Always On My Mind; 12) The Song Is Ended.

REVIEW

On May 16, 1961, the world was treated to 'Cupid', a song Sam allegedly wrote for some nameless lady singer but was then convinced by Hugo and Luigi to keep for himself. It wasn't a tremendous hit in the US — compared to 'Chain Gang', its chart success was much more modest — but it did become one of his biggest hits across the Atlantic, and possibly did more to popularize Cooke in the UK than anything else. Most importantly, it was just a great pop song, and up until this day, it remains one of Sam's three or four most recognizable calling cards. (Heck, it was even sampled by frickin' Carly Rae Jepsen for her own "Tiny Little Bows"! Adorable, right?).

It's a bit oddly structured, basically collating verse and chorus in one so that the short bridge sections end up feeling like actual verses. I don't particularly like that bridge — the entire "*now I don't mean to bother you but I'm in distress...*" part sounds lifted from some generic Mexican dance number, rather lightweight and unimaginative. But given that it's twice as short as the verse-chorus thing, repeated thrice in its entirety over the song, it is clear that Sam's focus of pride here was the "*Cupid draw back your bow...*" section, and for a good reason: it features one of the greatest open-close vowel alterations in pop music history. Let's get a little on the phonetic side, okay? Some of the finest emotional contrasts can be gotten out of



the "oooh" – "aaah" juggling of close rounded vowels and open unrounded ones, like at the very start of the Beach Boys' '[I Can Hear Music](#)' (not in the original Ronettes version), or in the variation between "ooh ooh OOH ooh" and "aah aah AAH aah" in the Stones' 'Miss You'. It's not just cool because it's cool; it's *emotionally* cool because the close vowels create a sort of «introspective», «inward-soul» feeling while the open vowels, of course, give the reverse, and when done properly, this thing gives the song a multi-dimensional flavor where it feels like the singer(s) is/are alternately pouring their feelings out to the world *and* channelling them within themselves (or towards God dwelling in our heart, if you so desire).

'Cupid' has precisely that effect, with its delicious contrast between "*Cupid, draw back your boow-ooow... and let your arrow goow-ooow...*" (introverted) and "*Cupid, please hear my cry-y-y-y and let your arrow fly-y-y-y*" (extraverted). I have heard several covers of the song by people who supposedly «get» Sam Cooke, from the Supremes to Rod Stewart, and out of all the crowd, only Otis Redding comes close to getting that contrast right – but still not as emphatic or disciplined as on the original version. So the next time somebody asks you the question, "what's so great or special about Sam Cooke?", just say, "who else can juggle their oooh's and aaah's with such simple elegance and emotional depth?" (and then hit them on the head with something heavy while they're busy trying to come up with an answer, take their money and run away).

Given the brilliance of 'Cupid', a good idea might have been to follow it up with an album of original or mostly original material that could have finally unveiled the talents of Sam Cooke, the songwriter, on a large-scale basis. Naturally, instead of that Hugo & Luigi followed it up with a *bad* idea – another album consisting of nothing but covers of mostly old, pre-1950s material; as you can probably tell by merely looking at the track listing, **My Kind Of Blues** uses a pretty wide definition of the word «blues» – if you're hoping for Sam Cooke's take on Robert Johnson or Muddy Waters, you're stark out of luck here. The closest the record comes to actual «blues» in the sense in which we still use the word today is in its inclusion of several vaudeville-style urban blues from the legendary black queens of the 1920s, e.g. 'Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out' (Ida Cox) or 'Baby Won't You Please Come Home' (Bessie Smith). The rest are essentially pop standards with a bluesy or jazzy vibe to them, ranging from Duke Ellington to Gershwin to Rodgers & Hart – something like a tightly condensed summary of the Ella Fitzgerald series of **Songbooks**. Well... I guess it *might* just be «Sam Cooke's Kind Of Blues», because I *would* have a hard time imagining Sam singing 'Come On In My Kitchen'. (At least, singing it with the generally desired psychological effect, that is).

Still, **My Kind Of Blues** is not the worst of all those cover / tribute albums plaguing Sam's career. As an LP, it is, of course, a temporary disappointment after the right moves made with **Swing Low**. However, the choice of source material usually

makes sense — there's barely any glitzy-corny stuff such as made **Cooke's Tour** virtually unlistenable, and no conscious attempts to emulate Sinatra or Nat King Cole, or, Heaven forbid, «emulate» Billie Holiday. As for the production, it is predictably Vegas as usual, but with much more emphasis on horns and pianos than strings — definitely not enough to make things feel «gritty», but enough to make them feel a little less «schmaltzy» than usual. Actually, there's some pretty tasteful piano playing on these numbers: a stripped-down version of the whole thing, maybe with just Sam and a small jazz combo with those piano players would have earned him a lot more reputation points in retrospect.

Curiously, the biggest overall problem with the album is not even the production, but Sam's attitude. Needless to say, his singing is technically impeccable and inimitable; but the flashy, on-top-of-the-world vibe of the music also infects the vocal delivery, and this leads to a whole lot of oversinging — it's as if Sam felt himself way overconfident at the mike this time around, and so he chokes the songs with lots of ad-libbing, extra melismatic runs, quasi-scating, and suchlike, filling up almost any hole in the vocals that allows for filling. This sort of «wild vocal rampage» was hardly invented by Cooke — he probably borrowed it from some of the jazz singers — but I cannot help feeling that this is the first time, chronologically, that I am witnessing it on a soul-pop record, and so, ultimately, I guess you could even trace all of Robert Plant's annoying *baby-baby-babies* someplace back here, because Robert Plant really inherited all those from the likes of Rod Stewart and Steve Marriott, and both Rod and Steve were big Sam Cooke fans back in the day.

If not for all the unnecessary vocal acrobatics, this opening rendition of 'Don't Get Around Much Anymore' would be pretty decent: the occasionally overbearing horns usually make enough openings for the rhythm section to swing and the piano player to exercise his Art Tatum-influenced runs, keeping you busy each time Sam pauses to take a breath. Unfortunately, as the song progresses, the horns become ever more glitzy and Sam gets ever more carried away; the song pretty much ends with the singer on top of the world, even if the song's lyrics never ever suggested anything of the sort. This Vegas-style crescendo is then repeated on many, if not most, of the other numbers, with the album quickly settling into a predictable formula — it actually sounds better if you press the skip button around halfway through most of the tracks.

Similarity of the arrangements and Sam's adoption of the same «all-out» approach to singing on all the tracks leads to an inevitable consequence: no matter the original mood or purpose of these songs, they all sound the same in the end. Clearly, the message and mood of 'I'm Just A Lucky So And So' and 'Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out' could not be any more different, but you wouldn't ever know it just by listening to the two songs outside of any context. As beautiful as Sam's voice is, there is no danger of this «showtune» version of 'Nobody Knows You' ever wiping out memories of Bessie

Smith's original; and for all the melancholy generated by the opening verse of 'Baby Won't You Please Come Home', those silly horns still do a great job of blowing all those clouds away. Who needs their baby to come home, anyway, when there's top hats and neon lights and showgirls a-plenty?

Probably the most musically satisfying little bit on here is Sam's interpretation of 'Little Girl Blue', which cuts down on both the thickness of the horn sound (in favor of a slightly more pastoral attitude) and the incessant ad-libbing. I can only wonder if this in any way reflects the impact of Nina Simone's then-recent version, but the pure fact is that it is the only song on this album without the obligatory Vegas touch — though, of course, it still does not even begin to poke at the melancholy depths of Nina's take.

All said, though, as I have already pointed out, **My Kind Of Blues** is on the whole imminently more listenable than any of Sam's previous LP of «old-timey» material. Two years later, Sam would make a step in the right direction and update this vibe for **Night Beat**, with its comparatively minimalistic and tasteful arrangements; but even here, the selection of material allows him — at least, formally — to come across not just as the stereotypical «breaker of hearts», but occasionally as a man who's got his own heart broken, adding a bit of a cloudy sky to the usual eternal sunshine. That's not much of a consolation for those who would rather have themselves a full LP of songs like 'Cupid', I know. But it's all we got when it comes down to satisfying our appetites for something that would go beyond a mere greatest hits compilation.

