

WANDA JACKSON



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1954-2021</i>	<i>Country / Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i>Fujiyama Mama (1957)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Wanda Jackson*

Years: *1956-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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WANDA JACKSON

Album released:
July 21, 1958

V A L U E
2 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Day Dreaming; 2) I Wanna Waltz; 3) Heartbreak Ahead; 4) Making Believe; 5) Here We Are Again; 6) Long Tall Sally; 7) Just Call Me Lonesome; 8) Let Me Go Lover; 9) Money, Honey; 10) I Can't Make My Dreams Understand; 11) Happy, Happy Birthday; 12) **Let's Have A Party**; 13*) Half As Good A Girl; 14*) Silver Threads And Golden Needles; 15*) Cryin' Through The Night; 16*) Let Me Explain; 17*) No Wedding Bells For Joe; 18*) Just A Queen For A Day.

REVIEW

Perhaps by chance, perhaps by spurious intention Wanda Jackson's first self-titled LP for Capitol Records was released on exactly the same day (July 21) as her very first «crossover» single from country to rockabilly, 'I Gotta Know', two years earlier (July 21, 1956). And yet, this connection is quite feebly reinforced on the LP, only four of whose tracks can be decisively identified as rockabilly. The irony of the whole matter is in that, although it was unquestionably Wanda's «Queen of Rockabilly» image that made her so interesting and iconic for subsequent generations, most of those rockabilly singles did not chart or sell all that well — and while some of Wanda's Southern male colleagues such as Carl Perkins or Jerry Lee Lewis swore full allegiance to the god of rock'n'roll, retaining their country careers as an auxiliary mechanism of staying alive through tough times, for Wanda Jackson it was rather the reverse. It is hard to tell whether she actually enjoyed pure country more than rock'n'roll, or vice versa (more likely, she did not care to distinctly separate between the two), but it is quite clear that in those conservative years, people would generally look with more benevolence and less moral judgement on a country-western girl than on a rockabilly girl —



so, from that point of view, Capitol's split of her material into 2/3rds country, 1/3rd rock'n'roll is a perfectly understandable business decision.

The lamentable side effects of it are that almost none of Wanda's classic 1956–58 rockabilly singles, such as 'Hot Dog! That Made Him Mad', 'Cool Love', or the immortal 'Fujiyama Mama', are included here; to get them all on one LP, fans would have to wait until 1960's **Rockin' With Wanda** (a retro-compilation which works perfectly well as a stand-alone LP, so we will get to it later). The decision to keep her finest A-sides off the LP means that the fast-paced material they *did* include is mostly second-rate rather than first-rate. Thus, 'I Wanna Waltz' on its own is a funny concatenation of seductive rockabilly with mournful waltz — but in the overall context, it is just another collaboration with songwriter Thelma Blackmon, intent on recreating the vibe of the earlier and fresher 'I Gotta Know'. Wanda's cover of 'Long Tall Sally', expectedly following in the steps of Elvis' version rather than Little Richard's, is fun, but perfunctory and predictable.

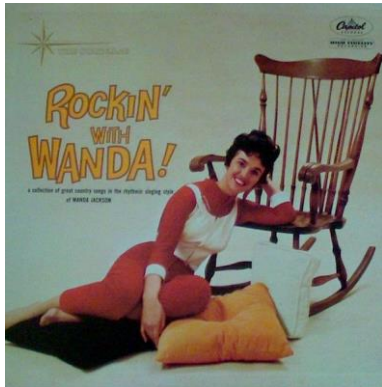
'Money Honey', probably also borrowed from Elvis rather than the Drifters, is at least curious in that, for the first time (I think), the song is played at a fast tempo — though I half-suspect the main reason for this was to somewhat blur out the necessary changes in the lyrics ("the *men* they come and the *men* they go"), which do begin to look outrageously risqué in the pre-sexual revolution era. Chalk one up for bravery and feminism, but from a purely musical standpoint, speeding up the song made it lose its face in the sea of 'Rip It Up's and 'Ready Teddy's rather than get a more expressive one (and the slick, note-perfect, and personality-free country guitar solo seals the deal on mediocrity).

The album does end on a perfect note with 'Let's Have A Party', the only time here when Jackson genuinely improves upon a Presley original — which was simply titled 'Party' and included in the soundtrack to **Loving You** in a shorter, looser, genuinely party-friendly version. Wanda's band gives the number a full-on rock'n'roll treatment, as if rather taking their inspiration from a 'Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On', with some wild guitar / piano interplay; most importantly, Wanda's croaky, defiantly stand-and-deliver performance just hits the spot perfectly. I have never understood the enigmatic verse about never having kissed a bear or a goon (a *goo*? apparently Paul McCartney never knew either when he covered the song late in his career), but it is all most certainly about going wild and crazy, and this is one of those few Wanda Jackson classics whose delivery is perfectly adequate to the intention. Silly record executives only understood to release it as a single two years later, upon which it became Wanda's biggest ever international hit and biggest ever US rockabilly hit (she did score higher with some of her country recordings, though).

And what of the pure country material? Well, I am not much of a country guy, and I typically treat generic country the same way I treat generic Broadway show tunes — it all depends on the performer rather than on the strength of the original melody. The instrumental arrangements and performance level of Wanda's backing band is more or less what you would expect of Nashville-reared professionals: tight, honest, and relatively faceless. However, when it comes to her vocal expressiveness, I must confess that, given the necessity of choice, I would rather listen to her than to, say, Patsy Cline: that husky, croaky, sandpaper-ish style she imposes on everything she sings, in my opinion, conveys more personality than the textbookishly immaculate feminine beauty of Patsy's vocals. On some of the more broken-hearted numbers like 'Just Call Me Lonesome', she almost sounds like the female equivalent of Hank Williams — and maybe you'd even believe me if she had died at age 30 from heart insufficiency, but, fortunately for her as a person and unfortunately for her as a legend, Mother Nature decided to be more benevolent in this case.

It is true that Wanda's natural overtones, or her willingness to keep her vocal cords tensely vibrating for almost the entire duration of her singing parts, may eventually become grating (a good example is the bonus track 'Half As Good A Girl', the original B-side to 'I Gotta Know', on which she delights in extending and knife-sharpening pretty much every vowel of the slow-moving performance); her country balladeering, when you come to think of it, shows just as little restraint as her rockabilly romps, and this lack of subtlety may quickly wear you down or at least generate an atmosphere of relative monotonousness and «one-trick-poniness». But then, stylistic versatility is hardly the thing commonly associated with country performers in the first place — and the best remedy is to simply take this stuff in small doses, rather than subjecting yourself to the entire LP (plus six more bonus tracks culled from various B-sides) in one go. And while **Wanda Jackson** is by no means a great album, and its best tracks may all easily be found on various representative compilations, at least its balanced ratio of country and rockabilly seems to present a fairly authentic picture of Wanda Jackson, the Country Girl Who Dared Make That Extra Step, in the prime of her artistic powers.





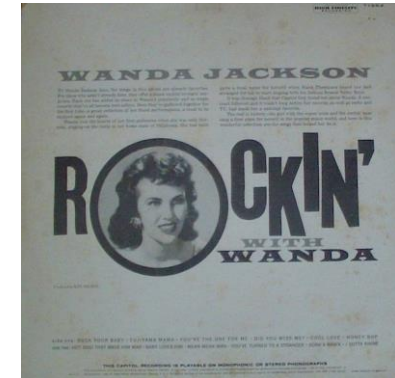
ROCKIN' WITH WANDA

Compilation released:

May 1960

V A L U E
3 3 4 3 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) Rock Your Baby; 2) Fujiyama Mama; 3) You're The One For Me; 4) Did You Miss Me?; 5) Cool Love; 6) Honey Bop; 7) Hot Dog! That Made Him Mad; 8) Baby Loves Him; 9) Mean Mean Man; 10) You've Turned To A Stranger; 11) Don'a Wan'a; 12) I Gotta Know; 13*) (Everytime They Play) Our Song; 14*) Sinful Heart; 15*) Savin' My Love; 16*) A Date With Jerry; 17*) Reaching; 18*) I'd Rather Have You.

REVIEW

Richie Unterberger, one of the leading experts on «golden oldies», cautiously named **Rockin' With Wanda** «a leading candidate for the best female rock & roll album of the 1950s». And even if, technically, the LP itself only came out in 1960, and branding it an 'album' is a bit of a cheat since it mainly just compiles her singles from 1956 to 1959, I would still like, if possible, to clinch that vote and turn it into *the* best female rock & roll album of the 1950s, period. Which, on its own, is perhaps still not saying that much, given how few female rock & roll albums there were in the 1950s in general — in fact, Wanda hardly had any other serious competitors than Brenda Lee and a couple of somewhat unjustly forgotten rockabilly ladies like Janis Martin — but let's rather put it this way: **Rockin' With Wanda** would most certainly make my own Top 10 list of «Essential Rockabilly Albums», male, female, or any other gender you could think of in the 1950s, when there was so much less choice than in our modern era of total availability.



Unlike the self-titled debut, which was more of a country album with a few nods to the rockabilly genre, **Rockin' With Wanda** pushes the envelope in the other direction — it really does put together the absolute majority of A-sides from mid-1956 to early 1959, and pretty much all of them were rock (with a natural tinge of country) rather than country. This may not actually give a completely accurate portrait of Wanda, to whom rockabilly was really *second* nature after country, but it does give a breathtakingly *cool* portrait of Wanda, which, in this particular case, matters much more than accuracy. Just to get this out of the way quickly, let us mention that 1957's 'Did You Miss Me?', a doo-wop-country hybrid, suffers from excess sentimentality which is not one of Wanda's fortes — but 1959's 'You've Turned To A Stranger' is one of the best Hank Williams tributes I've ever heard (not that I've heard too many), and its lyrics and vocal intonations are perfectly consistent with the half-wicked, half-tortured psychologism of Wanda's rocking material. That's about it for the country aspects of this record, now let's rock'n'roll!

Although first things first, let us cool down our expectations. Wanda Jackson's original dream never really included rocking the house down; she herself admits that she was actually pushed to embrace rockabilly by Elvis while touring with him and briefly dating him some time around 1955-56. When that finally happened, she began accepting rockabilly-styled songs from outside songwriters as well as composing some of her own material, but none of those songs genuinely pushed forward the boundaries of the genre or anything; for just about any of them, you can easily find an earlier prototype from Elvis, Carl Perkins or somebody else. And while Wanda's backing band from that period, The Poe Kats, were inarguably professional and energetic (some of those lead guitar parts by Vernon Sandusky could proudly stand next to Scotty Moore's solos — well, *second-rate* Scotty Moore's solos), I couldn't say that they had any striking individual identity; as in, I could easily take delight in a purely instrumental rendition of something like Elvis' 'Good Rockin' Tonight', but The Poe Kats were just doing a strict job of backing Wanda Jackson, and who could blame them for that?

Where there *was* striking individual identity was in the spirit of the songs that Wanda's songwriters and Wanda herself came up with — and in their delivery by Wanda herself. The very first tune that put her on the rock'n'roll map was 'I Gotta Know', occupying the honorable «grand finale» position on **Rockin' With Wanda** — incidentally, credited not to Wanda herself, but to little-remembered country artist Thelma Blackmon, mother of Vicki Countryman, who was a school friend of Wanda's and would also follow in her mother's footsteps. Apparently, judging by the tiniest amount of musical legacy left behind by Thelma, she was a fan of genre-bending — on '[I Wanta Waltz](#)' (sic!), for instance, she plays off the contrast between rock'n'roll and country waltzing in a funny musical battle of attitudes. However, the release of that single actually post-dates 'I Gotta Know', so it is possible that she was simply fueled by Wanda's success to try and do something in the

same vein for her own self this time — and failed, because writing songs is one thing, and making them come alive on record is another... and, alas, some people are simply more fit to be songwriters for others.

That particular other, as late as the fall of 1955, was still performing and tentatively writing melancholic country ballads, clearly worshipping at the altar of Hank Williams — and actually doing a pretty good job at winning the coveted title of «Miss Hank Williams» at least technically (on songs like '[Don't Do The Things He'd Do](#)', she nails Hank's sustained nasal drawl pretty good). The problem is, there was just not enough genuine melancholy and heartbreak in those vocals; it's clear that she loved Hank, but she *wasn't* Hank — she was somebody else altogether. And for all of Elvis' alleged sexism and «toxic masculinity», the man should be commended for being able to see through that: he must have sensed that somebody with Wanda's character was actually more suited to singing rebellious rock'n'roll than plaintive country, and that little push he gave her to build up the confidence to do it was quite a fine act of psychotherapy.

Anyway, while I am not sure how exactly 'I Gotta Know' sounded like in Thelma Blackmon's original vision, Wanda's arrangement is clearly inspired by Elvis' own playful-teasing genre-bending on early Sun singles such as 'I'll Never Let You Go' or 'Blue Moon Of Kentucky'. Ideology-wise, it's actually a little «conservative»: its rocking part is sort of presented from the male perspective ("*all you ever do is dance dance dance, so we boppity bop the whole night long*"), while the lady keeps bringing the tempo down to slow country waltz in the chorus ("*if our love's the real thing, where is my wedding ring?*"). From that point of view, you might even say that the song (much like Thelma's own follow-up with 'I Wanta Waltz') is a *mockery* of the rock'n'roll lifestyle — the rockabilly-lovin' guy is up to no good, whereas the steady and stable country-waltz girl is the one advocating wholesome values — but what makes it so much more complicated (and fun!) is the utmost dedication and excitement with which Wanda delivers the rock'n'rolling parts. It's as if the verse is at the same time symbolizing the vapid party attitude of the guy *and* the fiery determination of the girl to bring him up to speed. That transition from the strict, clenched-teeth "*one thing I gotta know, I gotta know...*" to the plaintive waltz of the chorus is one of the smoothest and most original mood changes in Fifties' pop music, and the resulting rock-country hybrid is just screaming for a complex psychoanalytical approach.

The best news about it is that 'I Gotta Know' put Wanda back on the country charts again, for the first time since her early debut single with Billy Gray ('You Can't Have My Love', from way back in 1954), and confirmed that this was just the right direction for her to take... at least while the going was good. For her second single, she chose a song with a rather complicated history. Originally, it was written around 1938 by New Orleanian guitarist Danny Barker and performed by his

spouse, Louisa "Blue Lu" Barker, as '[That Made Him Mad](#)' — a song about a no-good girl who just likes cheating on her husband for no apparent reason, very Boccaccio-like. Fifteen years later, it was revived by the Page Cavanaugh trio, with a significantly different set of lyrics by Don Raye, and reinvented as '[Hot Dawg That Made Her Mad](#)' — this time, it is the guy who is a cheater, *but* he only cheats on his girl because "*she takes me for granted all of the time*", so "*to teach her a lesson, make her mad, I went out on a date with the best friend she had*". That felt rather assholeish, and just one year later the song was re-appropriated *once again* — this time, by Betty Hutton, who left in the new lyrics but reversed the genres once again, releasing the song under the orthographically and pronominally finalized spelling of '[Hot Dog! That Made Him Mad](#)' and setting things straight: "*he takes me for granted all of the time... to teach **him** a lesson, make **him** mad, I went out on a date with the best friend **he** had*". That's pretty much the way it's been ever since — whenever there is a serious battle of the sexes, women tend to come out as winners even back in the patriarchal Fifties.

Anyway, because of Betty Hutton's version, we cannot really say that Wanda's take on it is revolutionary — but what she did is take a light big-band vocal jazz number and turn it into a bona fide rock'n'roll classic. The melody here, with its little stop-and-start bits, is more than a bit reminiscent of Carl Perkins' 'Everybody's Trying To Be My Baby', which is a bit odd given that at the time of 'Hot Dog!'s release (October 1956), the Perkins tune had already been recorded but not yet published, so maybe it's just a coincidence — in any case, what really matters is the vibe, and above all the amazing versatility in Wanda's voice, which is by now able to make each line come alive in a different way. Just the opening itself is telling: watch the change of intonation from "*I got a guy...*" (problem!) to "*I like him fine...*" (cooing! not so serious a problem!) and then back to "*but he takes me for granted...*" (*big* problem!). Very naturally, and perhaps not even realizing it herself, she gives a dynamic, dramatic performance that somehow manages to walk that very thin line between rebelliousness and acceptance symbolizing «feminism without fanaticism» — and introduces way more nuances than Hutton's strong, but lumbering delivery. Also, Joe Maphis plays a cool guitar solo (watch out for those funny bass *zoops!* along the way). They could really rock the house down with [that thing live](#), too.

Wanda's next single was mostly important for being the first rockabilly song she wrote herself — it feels obvious that 'Baby Loves Him' is rather a beginner's take on the genre, being musically derivative of the boogie pattern going all the way back to 'Drinkin' Wine Spo-Dee-Oo-Dee', lyrically simplistic (no signs of the feminist approach here, just an 'Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da'-type happy love story), and naïvely priding itself on just how many rock'n'roll clichés it can fit inside its two minutes (blue suede shoes, pink Cadillacs, solid beats, jukeboxes, etc.; this *may* have been the first mention of "*peroxide hair*" in a rock'n'roll song, though!). But that's not to say it isn't thoroughly enjoyable — a blast of tough, positive energy that makes

Carl Perkins sound like a wimp in comparison and actually rushes all the way to the top to fight it out with the likes of Gene Vincent (and you can actually make out the words that Wanda is singing — she don't go for that slurring thing, or for putting a shitload of reverb on her vocals. She can still sing like a damn fine cavewoman even without the cave!).

Then, just to show there is no such thing as a 100% guarantee for lack of taste, out of the blue comes the ugly duckling of this record — not a rockabilly song, not a country song, but rather a random «homage» to the calypso craze, contributed by none other than Boudleaux Bryant, who wrote so much great stuff for the Everly Brothers but whose only gift to Wanda Jackson ended up being this comical number on which she impersonates a tough Caribbean chick with a terrible mock-Caribbean accent. I don't give a damn about the thing being «offensive» or «appropriative»; I just feel that the poorly imitated accent makes Wanda sound not so much «different» as just a tad cuckoo. Together with things like Chuck Berry's 'Havana Moon' and 'Pedro', 'Dona'a Wan'a' remains one of those dated, unhappy ethnic jokes which date very quickly just because they weren't particularly funny in the first place (which is not to say there aren't, or weren't, ethnic jokes that were genuinely funny — it's just that you should never force an ethnic joke on a person who's never done one before).

Luckily, Wanda quickly returned to form with 'Cool Love' (August '57), co-written with her abovementioned friend Vicki Countryman — a steady, midtempo rocker with fine guitar and piano solos on which Miss Jackson continues educating her man about what it *really* means to love a demanding lady like her ("*this ain't no ice cube that you are with tonight!*"). Lyrically, this was her most provocative number to date, and the final vocal twist, when she suddenly changes her stern and gruff "*see you tomorrow night*" to a wink-wink sexy-kitten "*see ya!*" with the guys on the backing vocals letting out a sigh of relief ("*yeah!*"), is hilariously unforgettable.

For the next single, it seemed necessary to step up the game. There's been a veritable boatload of texts written about 'Fujiyama Mama' over the years — here's a [huge essay on the subject](#) by Leah Branstetter, specializing in the «Women In Early Rock'n'Roll» subject — so I don't really want to stuff *this* text with yet another retelling of the song's history (if you *are* interested in it, I do suggest checking out Annisteen Allen's [original version](#) as well as Eileen Barton's [first cover](#)), but I do want to stress that it was for *this* song, quite specifically, that Wanda came up with her famous growling voice, which some people love (I know I do) and some hate in a nails-on-chalkboard kind of way. One thing's for certain: the growling voice makes a *lot* more sense than the Caribbean voice. Also, the fact that the Japanese people sent a song with lyrics like "*I've been to Nagasaki, Hiroshima too / The same I did to them baby I can do to you*" to the top of the charts (unlike those stuffy Americans) simply mean that the Japanese people know a good metaphor when they see one, without trying to find

offense where none was truly intended. After all, the song is about female orgasm, not atomic warfare — "*and when I start erupting, ain't nobody gonna make me stop*" is Wanda's equivalent of Muddy's "*I'm drinking TNT, smoking dynamite, I hope some screwball start a fight*".

Unfortunately, while 'Fujiyama Mama' really made Wanda big in Japan, nothing much changed in her still unreceptive homeland, despite the continuing string of classic rockabilly hits. 'Honey Bop' (March '58) was another one in the style of Carl Perkins, a bit more old-fashioned than 'Fujiyama Mama' (no growling and plenty of the old-school rockabilly reverb on the vocals) but every bit as fun and energy-packed as everything that came before it. 'Mean Mean Man' (August '58), Wanda's own unabashed re-write of 'Mean Woman Blues', brings back the 'Fujiyama' growl and paints a cool picture of toughness and submissiveness at the same time, precisely what Elvis did with 'Mean Woman Blues', but from a female perspective. Finally, 'Rock Your Baby' is arguably the single best song Wanda ever wrote by herself — the "rock your baby, all night long!" hook is clearly borrowed from "*train kept a-rollin' all night long*", but she finds a new way to emphasize it, with each word descending like a whiplash, and the alternation of lighter, *whee!*-style intonations in the verses with the all-out attack in the chorus creates an almost delirious effect. (Here's a fortunately-surviving [live version](#), taken at a slightly slower tempo than the studio recording, but with even more rasp on the vocals — how this insane chord shredding had not taken out her voice in over half a century is one of the universe's unexplained mysteries).

Still, commercial success did not come — not only was this kind of music unwelcome from a lady singer, but the golden days of rock'n'roll themselves seemed to be coming to an end by late 1958 — and so it is no secret, perhaps, that in desperation Wanda turned back to country. I forgot to mention that most of the B-sides to all those rockabilly classics were country tunes, as Wanda was trying to placate both her old and new fans at the same time; in 1959, however, for a brief period she once again switched to country exclusively, which could sometimes be a good thing (as I already said, 'You've Turned To A Stranger' is quite beautiful in its melancholy) and sometimes questionable (Cindy Walker's 'A Date With Jerry' is almost unbearably corny — what in the world is Wanda Jackson doing, singing a dippy sacchariny ditty about dating "the key of the school" "at the prom in my dreams"? And who the heck is Jerry? Are they referring to Jerry Lee Lewis? Is this a veiled metaphor at the mistreatment of the Killer after his infamous marriage?).

Even after the belated release of 'Let's Have A Party' and its unpredictable and unprecedented commercial success showed everybody that under certain conditions, the public would be willing to accept Wanda Jackson as a rock performer rather than a country one, it was already a bit too late for that — the classic stretch of her rocking singles from 'I Gotta Know' to

'Rock Your Baby' would never be repeated. That particular stretch, however, can still be honored, admired, and freely enjoyed on all sort of levels with as much gusto as any similar stretch from Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Elvis, Buddy Holly, or any other black or white male rocker from the 1950s. It's just about the most perfect combination of early feminism, down-to-earth rootsiness, musical professionalism, catchiness, and unpretentious fun one could theoretically imagine.





THERE'S A PARTY GOIN' ON

Album released:

V A L U E

January 1961

2 4 4 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) There's A Party Goin' On; 2) Lonely Week-Ends; 3) Kansas City; 4) Bye Bye Baby; 5) Fallin'; 6) **Hard Headed Woman**; 7) Tongue Tied; 8) It Doesn't Matter Anymore; 9) Tweedlee Dee; 10) Sparkling Brown Eyes; 11) Lost Week-End; 12) Man We Had A Party.

REVIEW

On October 28, 1960, Wanda Jackson entered the Bradley Film and Recording Studio in Nashville, Tennessee, to record what would, somewhat arguably, remain as her single most badass studio performance: a cover of Leiber and Stoller's 'Riot In Cell Block #9', originally a hit for The Robins (soon to be The Coasters) back in 1954 but then largely forgotten until it was revived by Wanda in this blistering version, with some of the lyrics appropriately re-written to put the action inside a women's penitentiary — which might just make this cover the first ever song to detail (albeit humorously) the daily business of a bunch of female inmates. Backed by Roy Clark, a rising star in both the musical and TV industries, she rocks every bit as hard as usual, but this time, with the added benefit of a little bit of «social relevance», playing the bad girl behind bars rather than merely the mischievous girl at the sock hop ball, which is where that raspy growl *really* comes in handy — suspending disbelief is easy-peasy under such circumstances.

And it wasn't just one song, either. The entire five-day Nashville recording session at the end of October, 1960, produced more fire than any other period of such short duration in Wanda's life. Note the difference from the January 1960 sessions in Hollywood, which



were relatively short and only produced a small bunch of pleasant, but easily forgettable country tunes like 'Please Call Today'. That difference was very clearly triggered by the sudden and unexpected success of 'Let's Have A Party', a song that had already been issued on Wanda's first LP but, for some reason, was thought of as a potential single by Capitol only two years later. Unlike Wanda's country singles, this one put her back on the charts — for the first time since 'I Gotta Know' — and convinced both the singer and her executives that, despite the overall changing tides, there might still be some demand for Wanda Jackson as the little sister of Elvis Presley, rather than of Patsy Cline.

The happy result, still left behind for us to enjoy, are these five days in Nashville that yielded the entirety of this LP, plus a couple of additional singles, starting with 'Riot In Cell Block #9' and ending with the famous 'Funnel Of Love' that we shall discuss in connection with her second LP from 1961. The absolute majority of these tracks were rockers, and although there was almost no original songwriting involved, each and every one was ideally molded to reflect Wanda's personality. The only thing that makes the record bow down to **Rockin' With Wanda** is that there are few truly outstanding numbers like 'Fujiyama Mama' or 'Rock Your Baby' — but then again, **Rockin' With Wanda** was really a compilation, with the benefit of choosing the best from an approximately two-year period of successes and failures; **There's A Party Goin' On** is a cohesive *album*, indeed reflecting a sort of «rock'n'roll party» over a five-day musical bash in a Nashville studio — and it is one of those albums that works better as a whole rather than a sum of the individual parts. Remember, it was the fall of 1960 — Brenda Lee's 'I Want To Be Wanted' was riding all the way to #1, symbolizing «Little Ms. Dynamite» succumbing to the sweet temptations of «Europop» — and not even any boys were rocking as hard as Wanda and her team in Nashville, let alone any girls.

It's easy enough to poke fun at the fact that the album opens with 'There's A Party Goin' On' (credited, by the way, to Don Covay of future 'Mercy Mercy' and 'See-Saw' fame) and closes with 'Man We Had A Party' (Jessie Mae Robinson's sequel to 'Let's Have A Party') — but there's every reason to pocket the irony when you understand that 'There's A Party Goin' On' rocks even harder than the song whose formula it was so clearly destined to emulate. It's louder, it's tighter, the vocal performance is even raspier, the "yeeaaaahs!" are even dirtier, and Roy Clark's shrill and sharp lead guitar work is even more aggressive. Admittedly, third time around, 'Man We Had A Party' is less of a smash (although there are a few more original high-pitched electric licks to rock your boat), but its past tense makes for a nice finale — it works fine enough in the context of the album.

In between the party-goin' and the party-endin' anthems, you get rocker after rocker after rocker, almost as if the «soft

revolution» of 1960 never happened. Probably the most famous of those LP-only tracks is 'Hard Headed Woman', another Elvis-inherited chestnut that Wanda used to introduce in concert as "[one of the most beautiful love songs that's ever been written](#)", proving to the world that Okie girls *can* have a Hollywood diva-level sense of irony. The double irony is, of course, that Wanda acknowledges and *owns* the song's allegedly misogynistic lyrics — switching the message from "*girls are nothing but trouble*" to "*us girls are trouble, and you'd better know it!*" In Elvis' hands, the song was just a fast and furious rock'n'roll number (and you probably didn't pay as much attention to the lyrics anyway as you did to Elvis' breathtaking light-speed delivery of them); Wanda, with her naughty girl rasp, gives it an aura of playful mischief, making you really root for Eve, Jezebel, and Delilah deep down in your heart. It's also a somewhat rawer version, without the mildly Vegas-y horns of Elvis' original and full emphasis on the pumpin' rhythm section and interlocking guitar/piano lead lines — the toughest rock'n'roll sound you're going to hear from 1960.

Even when Wanda decides to cover LaVern Baker's classic novelty number 'Tweedle Dee', her rasp and growling are no slouch compared to LaVern's imposing «Big African Mama» presence — and Clark, once again, manages to make the song sound more dynamic and aggressive with his no-funny-business soloing. Then there's 'Kansas City', also convincingly gender-inverted ("*got some crazy little fellows and I'm a-gonna get me one*") and every bit as fun as every male version ever played, though you probably won't help noticing how Wanda finishes the song with her little disclaimer: "...*just one!*", she purrs in her sexiest tone, letting you and your parents know that she does have her lady standards for playing around. However, she does *not* edit out the line about a "*bottle of Kansas City wine*", despite any implied risks of promoting female alcoholism. Good for you, Wanda.

Most of the other songs are covers of country and pop artists, from Charlie Rich to Neil Sedaka, but pretty much all of them are toughened up significantly. Fast tempos, deep bass, heavy drums, sharp guitar solos are the norm here for all the rearrangements; a song like 'Fallin', for instance, is downright superior to Connie Francis' original hit from 1958, fully preserving the «love-is-dangerous-magic» spirit of the original and further enhancing it through the collected effort of the rhythm section, Clark's solo, and Wanda's wolf-howl. Or take 'Sparkling Brown Eyes', made into a country hit earlier that year by George Jones: [George's version](#) is a fast-paced, but starry-eyed (and perhaps slightly drunk) serenade — Wanda and Roy Clark introduce a whiff of menace, as if it weren't really the "wings of a beautiful dove" the singer was pining for, but more like the "fins of a ravenous shark" (hey, too bad I wasn't even alive at the time when such a lyrical amendment could have been offered to make perfect sense).

Overall, even if not every song has its share of truly memorable moments, the session as a whole is a total gas. Really, there is no special kind of ambition here — just a desire to quickly capitalize on a brief moment of triumph while the iron is still hot — but everybody is having so much fun that the thirty minutes fly by in a flash. *This* is precisely the kind of album that loyal old school fans must have been waiting for from Elvis in 1960, losing faith in the man when they were presented with **Elvis Is Back!** instead — too bad most of them were probably too snub-nosed to agree to place the same faith in an «Elvis in a skirt». Of course, the album did not chart, and neither did all those sequels to 'Let's Have A Party', and this is probably why Wanda Jackson would never have this kind of energetic recording session ever again.

But in retrospect, one thing is probably true: because of her sex, Wanda Jackson may have been one of the last performers to jump on the original rockabilly bandwagon — forfeiting any claims to «laying down the foundations» of rock'n'roll — but she was also one of the last performers to jump *off* it, keeping on rockin' for quite a while after the original founding fathers had all succumbed to the Fifties' Curse (well, «a while» meaning about one year, at most, but time did move on pretty fast in 1960 — not as fast as in 1967, for sure, yet one year did make quite a bit of difference). If, in January 1961, you wanted yourself a nice fresh slab of crunchy rock'n'roll, who could you turn to? Kudos to the crazy little girl-fellow from Oklahoma for keeping that flame alive for at least a few more months.





RIGHT OR WRONG

Album released:

October 1961

V A L U E
2 2 3 1 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Right Or Wrong; 2) Why I'm Walkin'; 3) So Soon; 4) The Last Letter; 5) I May Never Get To Heaven; 6) The Window Up Above; 7) Sticks And Stones; 8) Stupid Cupid; 9) Slippin' And A Slidin'; 10) Brown Eyed Handsome Man; 11) Who Shot Sam; 12) My Baby Left Me.

REVIEW

One of the few «soft country» songs recorded by Wanda and her band during those tumultuous sessions of October 1960 was 'Right Or Wrong', a pretty little ballad that she, surprisingly, wrote herself — surprisingly, because in stark contrast to all of her rebellious, self-asserting, feminist-empowering rock'n'roll material, this one's subject was perfectly adapted to country music's classic «stand-by-your-man» ideology: "*Right or wrong I'll be with you / I'll do what you ask me to / For I believe that I belong / By your side, right or wrong*" — quite a long distance from 'Hot Dog! That Made Him Mad', I'd say. Not that there's anything *inherently* wrong with this approach: people are allowed to have multiple sides, and as long as we decide to interpret such songs, for instance, as advocating devotion, compassion, and forgiveness rather than mindless slavish submission, there's really nothing to be ashamed of. The *specific* problem with 'Right Or Wrong' is that it is simply not a very interesting song — feels like a pretty generic country tune with a bit of a doo-wop flavor, spilling all its charm in the first fifteen seconds and kept alive only by Wanda's careful articulation of each syllable; say what you will, but the girl could be pretty seductive in her sentimental-submissive avatar. The Nashville-style backing vocals and the Magical Mystery Chimes throughout are quite corny, though.



Ironically, in retrospect it is the B-side to the 'Right Or Wrong' single, originally forgotten and only resuscitated decades later on extensive compilations, that has eventually managed to draw critical and fan attention and is generally considered today to be one of the artistic highlights of Wanda's career. 'Funnel Of Love', written by country great Charlie McCoy and the relatively unknown Kent Westbury, is one of those «what the fuck?» songs where you'd *expect* things to be normal and predictable, but somehow they turn out really, really weird. *Under* the surface, it's more or less typical catchy country-pop; *on* the surface, it's sort of a «Carmen-meets-Madame-Butterfly» display of dangerous and exotic sensual passion, a perfect Dionysian antidote to the Apollonian declarations of 'Right Or Wrong' if there ever was one.

For starters, what's up with Roy Clark's guitar sound here, all twangy and flangy and bending those notes as if he was playing a koto rather than an ordinary electric guitar? The song completely draws you in from the opening chords that promise you a very special ride — maybe even an excitingly warped and deviant one, replete with the same wolfey "*aah-oommm*" vocal harmonies you typically meet on a titillating Coasters record. Next, there's Wanda's own vocal — with that devilish rasp coming back in its full glory — and, funny enough, the vocal melody is structured a little like a «funnel», swirling over the same phrases a couple of times before being «sucked inside» the instrumentation. The message of the song is the same as in Johnny Kidd & The Pirates' 'Shakin' All Over' (no coincidence here that Wanda would resuscitate that one half a century later during her «grandma years» with Jack White) — but where Kidd always emphasized the idea of «love as *fear*», Wanda here is more happy with the concept of «love as orgasmic submission to the unknown», so next time you consider a hentai tentacle porn project or something, think of adding 'Funnel Of Love' to the soundtrack.

But as cool as it is to see justice served in the historical perspective, back in April 1961 it was 'Right Or Wrong', the A-side, that gained most of the airplay and not only earned Wanda her highest place so far in the country charts (#9), but even broke her into the general Top 30 — and that was the deal which sealed her fate. Whether it was truly her own decision to revert back to pure country or it was subtly forced on her by her record label is something we'll probably never know; in any case, it would be unjust to blame her for taking that decision at the time — when even stalwart Southern rockers like Jerry Lee Lewis were going back to the good old country barn. While **There's A Party Goin' On** did give some hope that the spirit of rock'n'roll would live on in soldier girls such as Wanda, in the end it is worth remembering that «Wanda Jackson, the rock'n'roller» was, after all, just an artistic persona — and when the time, as it seemed back then, came to retire that artistic persona, that was just what she did, without any extra tear shedding or anything. No, it wasn't «fake» — some might argue that «Wanda the rocker» was always closer to «the real Wanda» than «Wanda the country singer» — but it would be ridiculous to assume that Wanda Jackson was some sort of, you know, Keith Richards, cruelly trampled upon and choked

by the record industry to prevent her from realizing and making use of her true nature. Above all, she was a normal Fifties' gal, and she, too, probably felt that the exuberance of rock'n'roll was a «phase» that had to be let go once the artist stepped into his or her «mature» period.

Anyway, the transition was still gradual: the sessions for **Right Or Wrong**, most of which took place over just two days (April 17–18, 1961) at the very same Nashville studio that yielded the bulk of **There's A Party** half a year earlier, yielded a more or less equal number of country-oriented and rock'n'roll-style tracks, with the label deciding that, in accordance with the fad of the times (see Elvis' **Something For Everybody** as a natural inspiration), one side of the LP would consist of nothing but country ballads and the other of rockin' material — a bad, *bad* fad, *especially* bad if your source material is not all that great in the first place.

The country side is just a total snooze. Back when Wanda was still a bona fide rocker, a country ballad slipping in now and then was a perfectly sensible choice, for the sake of diversity and mood swing — not to mention that, when she was not recording that material *en masse*, some of those had interesting and quirky melodic and vocal touches. Here, the title track is followed by five covers of contemporary country artists, and it's dull as heck. Yes, it's a professional Nashville backing, and yes, Wanda does good as a country singer, but this is all painfully stereotypical, the waltzing mid-tempo quickly gets unbearable, and the idea of a «quirky touch» for any of those songs is, for instance, to include a deep-set thunderous drum roll in the middle of chanting the title to 'I May Never Get To Heaven' because... because what? to punctuate the self-sacrificing stunning blasphemy of the line? ... whatever.

If you are a fan of the generic country sound of early Sixties' Nashville, the A-side of the LP will be perfectly enjoyable, but it seems she is striving for the fame of Patsy Cline here more than ever before, without giving any convincing arguments as to why we should actually bother. So let's skip right ahead to the rocking side and... it should be awesome, right? Just like her previous album and all?...

Alas, no. The B-side has nowhere near the same exhilarating party energy as the tracks Wanda and her band recorded on the previous album. Perhaps it was a different set of musicians (no source has been able to properly identify who specifically is playing along here), but mostly it was just a matter of ever so slightly toning down the intensity of yesterday. Even when Wanda covers classic rock'n'roll material, such as Little Richard's 'Slippin' And Slidin' or Chuck Berry's 'Brown Eyed Handsome Man', she seems to be holding back. The rhythm section is a bit more cuddly and playful, the guitars are altogether more melodic, and the brutal rasp is unleashed only very occasionally (on 'Slippin' And Slidin', mostly).

Just a few months earlier, Wanda's version of 'Hard Headed Woman' showed that she was fully able to tackle the King head-on, all but beating him at his own game when the fire was fed well enough. Now, this relatively much more tepid cover of 'My Baby Left Me' sounds slower, more stiff and disciplined than Elvis' classic performance of the Arthur Crudup classic: decent, but utterly unimportant, with Wanda singing in a perfunctory, disinterested manner, almost as if somebody just begged her to do an Elvis number and she reluctantly agreed upon this one. Her run through the befuddling verses of Chuck Berry's 'Brown-Eyed Handsome Man' is much more inspired and involving in comparison, but the song is still way too polished and fragile next to Chuck's own version.

An attempt to branch out is made by covering Ray Charles' 'Sticks And Stones', with the electric piano player, whoever he is, actually doing an excellent job in capturing the essence of Ray's playing — it's only too just that the extended solo takes up about a third of the song's running time — but the impact of such a branching is lessened when the other two «rocking» songs actually turn out to be facetious country-pop numbers, namely, Neil Sedaka's 'Stupid Cupid', originally a hit for Connie Francis back in 1958, and George Jones' 'Who Shot Sam?' from 1959. Both songs were fluffy, if fun, from the start, and neither of these performances is much of an improvement on the original.

In the end, the «rocking» side leaves you a bit bewildered. If it is so seemingly uninspired, and if the general strategy was to move Wanda away into the country market for good, why did they include it in the first place? The most logical answer that springs to mind is that they *intentionally* recorded a subpar rocking set so as to make the old fans believe that Wanda Jackson, the «female Elvis», had naturally run out of rock'n'roll juice, and make it easier for them to accept her crossing to the other side. Or maybe they were just following actual guidelines from Elvis' camp — «feel free to do a rock'n'rolling number from time to time, but remember that the word of day is *playful*, not *provocative*». Regardless, the fact of the matter is that the rocking tracks on this album are just OK. Enjoyable as background music, but nothing «iconic» about them whatsoever. In the end, one single 'Funnel Of Love' is worth all the twelve tracks on this album put together and multiplied by ten — an unfortunate historical anomaly, as it turns out, rather than an exciting artistic path that the lady may have pursued to continue forging her own identity. Or, perhaps, may *not* have pursued, if we accept that Fate is always stronger than one person's dreams and ambitions, in the end.

