

RockingRecords1958TextTVS

by Tim Van Schmidt

1958- Rocking Records

At one time, I thought I had a pretty great stereo system- all cool black boxes that put out a lot of sound. Unfortunately, it was not to last. I had noticed that my turntable was dying when I was making my work tapes for 1956 and 1957 in this review of 1950s music- apparently the belt that rotates the platter has worn out and you just can't get the thing going fast enough, particularly to play 45s.

This was a problem when I turned to the music of 1958. In order to continue, I had to replace that belt- or did I? I've been keeping a friend's old stereo- a compact, all-in-one Panasonic unit- on a shelf for years because it is the only turntable I have that will play 78s. It is also so retro-looking that it actually looks kind of cool just sitting there like an antique.

But it's not just an antique because it can still play records. I found out by pulling it down off its perch, plugging it in and giving it a try with some of the 1958 45s I pulled out of my dusty stack of records. One channel was weak, but with a little manipulation with the balance knob and the volume, I could hear the records just fine.

As the first tune was spinning on the old Panasonic- Ritchie Valens' "Donna"- I realized that the loss of sound quality from my "quality" system on the old, cheap system, just didn't matter. In fact, the records I played almost sounded better. Maybe that's because originally, sound quality wasn't particularly the issue- it was just being able to play your records. The Panasonic played the 45s like they were meant to be heard- everything coming out of the little speakers, simple yet mighty.

Making my 1958 work tape for this project, however became a challenge with a faulty turntable. I used 45s, LPs, cassettes and CDs to assemble the music. For the vinyl stuff, I had to plug the old Panasonic into the bigger system. One channel was missing completely. Going from tape to tape, I discovered tape machine two had something going on with its motor, making a loud sound as it played. Then, as I used the Panasonic, its motor seemed to be having some trouble keeping things going, songs occasionally slowing down a little, then picking up speed again.

Despite all this, the 1958 tape is a success. The music still works- over the years and strained through all the various formats and equipment.

Ritchie Valens

The most influential song of 1958- "La Bamba"- was a pop hit, but originally was a Mexican folk song. Young Mexican-American performer Ritchie Valens took a traditional Mexican wedding song, added some rock and roll drive, inspired vocals and full-flight electric guitar to it to create a classic that is probably being played at a social event somewhere right now.

That's why I consider it influential. "La Bamba" is not just a popular song, but an indelible part of world culture. Nearly everybody knows the song. Without even knowing the words- in Spanish- it is an international invitation to celebrate and can often be heard when a dance band wants to get people moving. You often hear people let out a little yelp when the song comes up- like it's definitely time to get down.

But more, the song also affects people off of the dance floor. In March 2010, I personally witnessed a principal lead the entire population of a Colorado bilingual school in a rousing version of "La Bamba" before an assembly. The kids sang it like it was just as much their song as anybody else's. The whole group added an enthusiastic "arriba" at the end leaving all with an upbeat vibe.

What did Ritchie Valens have to do with it? His recording stuck that song in the public mind and his basic rock and roll arrangement of it will last for a very long time.

The flip side to "La Bamba," "Donna," is another story. It's a slow dance, romance song. Valens' high, clear voice turns over the usual teenage heartache adequately, but if there was anything to distinguish the song from others of the time it would probably be the sound mix of the recording. The electric guitar is very prominent on "Donna," snaking around Valens' vocals throughout the whole tune. There's a nice vocal harmony flourish at the end to top it off sweetly. You can practically hear the swishing dresses and smell the hairspray.

The Champs

The lofty words I've given to Richie Valens' "La Bamba" actually apply to the Champs' 1958 hit "Tequila." It also is an international invitation to celebrate. All you need to know is one word- "tequila"- and the drums, guitar and the sax do the rest. Now, "La Bamba" is a general call to celebrate, but "Tequila" is a particular kind of celebration- a wailing party where you drink up and get down. At least get out and shake a leg. The record is well-built, the music changing up every eight bars and there are no words to get in the way. "Tequila" swings in the bridge section and the sax is hot and sassy throughout- a quintessential sax showcase if there ever was one.

Interestingly, another Champs instrumental party song, "Train to Nowhere," is the "side one" on the 45 release of "Tequila," which is side two. The same strong sax work is featured, and there's this cool tinkling piano playing throughout. There's also a little bit of vocals here- just some "oooo wa wa" sounds, perhaps to imitate a train whistle- but again, this is more about the instrumental arrangement.

Peggy Lee

I like "La Bamba" and "Tequila" a lot- who doesn't?- but my favorite recording of 1958 is Peggy Lee's "Fever." It's hot; it's atmospheric thanks to the sparse arrangement- just standup bass and drums. The percussion in particular is cool- easily answering Lee's simmering vocals. It's smooth, it's sexy- you get a little history lesson of romance in it too. The finger snaps complete this smoky midnight confessional. The only other recording I've heard by Lee- "Mr. Wonderful"- was a big production. This one just cooks by stripping away the excess and letting Lee's vocals purr, rather than strain.

Elvis Presley

Even the biggest pop star on earth must knuckle under to the United States military. That's what happened to the rock roll icon- Elvis Presley- in 1958. He was drafted and inducted into the Army. It has been suggested by some that perhaps Presley was served his notice to help put an end to the rock and roll craze, but for whatever reason, it punched a hole right in his career momentum when Presley reported for service in September.

Or did it? The world had experienced two full years of Presley mania by 1958. He catapulted to fame as a recording artist and became a movie star and a money making machine in that time. There is some

good strategy to taking a superstar out of circulation for a time in order to build up the public's interest again. Doing your duty in the armed forces was considered a good thing, so if your superstar had to cool his heels a bit, being in the Army could be a constructive, image-building opportunity. Besides, his hitch in the Army didn't stop Presley from continuing to dominate on the record charts.

The top hits kept rolling, including "Wear My Ring Around Your Neck," "Hard Headed Woman," "Don't," "I Beg of You," "One Night," and "I Got Stung." Still, it could be said that the releases do not have the consistency that might be there if Presley had been free to work on his recordings, without the Army gig. As a result, Presley's 1958 hits are a mixed bag of music.

"Don't" is a gorgeous gospel-flavored recording, almost reverent in its sincere approach. It has an intimate atmosphere, with cool, cascading backing vocals. Presley applies a simmering control over his voice, which also reveals a deeper, more mature quality.

But two of Presley's 1958 hits in particular- "Wear My Ring Around Your Neck" and "Hard Headed Woman"- are ill-advised, garish show tunes. I have a hard time with the quality of lyrics that rhyme "neck" with "by heck" in "Wear My Ring"- it's just bad writing. And "Hard Headed Woman"- with its outlandish trombone glissandos- sounds more like a Dixieland rave up than a rocker. It's also misogynist- lyrics blaming the failures of some famous men on pushy women. Presley's forced vocal hiccups during the tune and a mess of a horn arrangement reveal high blood pressure more than rock and roll abandon.

Two of Presley's 1958 hits- both "I Beg of You" and "I Got Stung"- suffer greatly from over-production. With a vocal intro that goes something like "bum bumba bum," "I Beg of You" features so much vocal support, the vocal chorus doing most of the work here, that Presley is kind of drowned out of the mix. Besides, there's nothing about the music, the lyrics or the performance that stands out- it has the feel of a production line recording. It's the same with "I Got Stung," also plagued by a fuzzy sound mix, Presley again getting lost in the thick arrangement.

The closest recording in 1958 to Presley's rock and roll roots is "One Night," a powerful blues-flavored work out for him and a smaller musical outfit. The layers of background vocals and fat instrumental excess are gone on "One Night," giving Presley room to do the stuff that catapulted him to fame- use his voice to make a song howl.

For anyone who thought Presley was the king of rock and roll, his induction in the Army must have been a little bit of a let down. After all, part of rock and roll is rebellion and it's hard to be a rebel in the Army. The famous photos of Presley getting his GI haircut say it all. Here was the chosen image of rock and roll, now another grunt. A famous grunt, for sure, who would not go away, but busted down nonetheless.

Ricky Nelson

The rise of young television star Ricky Nelson to recording star and teen heartthrob could have been exactly what the public needed to fill the vacuum left by Presley's preoccupation with the Army. It has been said that pop hit maker Pat Boone was the antidote to the frenzy created by Presley- but I think Nelson was the real answer. His music was calm, purposeful and steady, nearly sedate, but there was some rock and roll spark in there somewhere.

There is a big difference between the young kid singing "I'm Walkin" on television in 1957 and the artist pumping out hit recordings in 1958. On record, Nelson had developed a kind of understated but somewhat seductive vocal style easily applied to a variety of material. He was smooth, cool. The songs themselves had fine melodies and apparently Nelson had some great players at his disposal because the backing work is top notch.

You can start with "Poor Little Fool," a light she-done-me-wrong tune with some memorable vocal refrains. It's got a melody that easily and naturally goes somewhere- to a chorus laden with various hooks. The song also features a notable acoustic guitar solo in the bridge section, a little bit bluesy, a little bit country. The flip side to "Poor Little Fool" was the upbeat "Don't Leave Me This Way." Compared to recordings like Presley's "I Got Stung," this has a smooth mix, Nelson's vocal out front.

"Lonesome Town" is another great recording, a slow acoustic number with prominent recording effects sending the vocal off in la-la land- perfect for a song about all the lonely hearts. It's interesting to compare and contrast "Lonesome Town" with Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel," released two years earlier. In Presley's case, lonely people keep filling up a fictitious hotel and he tells the story by howling. In Nelson's case, there's a whole town of lonely people and he tells their story by barely moaning. Presley succeeds by ripping it up a little. Nelson succeeds with a steady, pure voice. The recordings are opposites in effect but made from the same basic material- the lonely hearts club.

The opposite side to "Lonesome Town, "I Got a Feeling," is another upbeat arrangement featuring Jordinaire-like vocal backing, a first class rock and roll guitar solo and some infectious handclapping. Nelson has plenty of support here, but exhibits plenty of style. He was the smooth rocker, making excellent records.

Everly Brothers

Speaking of style, the Everly Brothers continued to create some of the finest vocal arrangements of the 1950. All it takes is that one luscious, reverberating electric guitar chord in the intro to "All I Have to Do is Dream" to set the stage for an easygoing melody and the Everlys' close, intimate harmonies. I don't even mind that the song rhymes "is" with "gee whiz."

"Bird Dog" also begins with the trademark Everly Brothers guitar intro, then digs into the meat of teenage relationships. One guy, it turns out, is funny and cool, which also makes him a little dangerous around your girlfriend. It's shocking to hear the Everlys reveal that this kid even kissed the teacher- oh my! That would result in a firing and perhaps a prison sentence in the 21st Century. The monotone refrain that keeps coming up in the song- "He's a bird dog"- is also kind of funny, off-setting the Everlys' sweet vocals. Rhyming "quail" and "trail," "Bird Dog" makes the best of the hunting motif with their voices, not the lyrics.

"Devoted to You," on the opposite side from "Bird Dog," is slow and sweet. You can't seriously focus on the lyrics- they're a jumble of dry male myths so elemental they almost don't mean anything- but you must admire the successful traditional approach to the vocal arrangement.

Not surprisingly, 1958 Everly hit "Problems" also starts up with a distinctive guitar phrase. The lyrics mull over mundane stuff- worries about romance and school- but some acoustic guitar/electric guitar point/counterpoint makes the recording plenty lively. The flip side to "Problems" is "Love of My Life," full of as many male myths as swelling harmonies, again featuring a mix of electric and acoustic guitar in the introduction.

Rock and Roll

Rock and roll had become a public menace by 1958- and was already becoming old hat. Fortunately some familiar characters were still holding up the rock and roll banner- and creating seminal work.

That included Chuck Berry, who released two of his signature pieces in 1958, "Sweet Little Sixteen" and "Johnny B Goode." "Johnny B. Goode" is certainly in the category of indelible pieces of the culture- like "La Bamba" and "Tequila." When people think of the basics of rock and roll, they usually think of "Johnny B Goode." That makes three strong elemental songs coming out in 1958, a good harvest.

"Johnny B Goode" is the quintessential, guitar-based show tune, starting out with some instrumental fire that inspires instant recognition. Then Berry's vocals come in loud and clear, piercing through the rest of the sound with confidence and style. But "Johnny B Goode" is also a story song about that character Johnny whose talent was- surprise- playing guitar. This song clearly defines the rock and roll dream- rising to popularity and success from humble beginnings and Berry turns it into a rocking celebration.

"Sweet Little Sixteen" is not just talking about a cute female rock and roller, but about the whole scene- listing many of the hot spots of rock and roll around the country- from Pittsburgh and "Philadelphia, PA" to Texas and beyond. Dancing is the top priority for the young cutie in question and it sounds like a blast, even if she has to get back to class when the rocking night is through.

The other 1958 Berry hits, "Carol" and "Beautiful Delilah," also have the same elemental quality to them. "Carol" features some call and response action between Berry's vocals and lead guitar work- and an uncharacteristically loose guitar solo. "Beautiful Delilah" is real upbeat, the guitar up front, the Berry basics allowing even less distinctive efforts like this to raise the pulse.

Also continuing to raise the pulse on the rock and roll scene was Jerry Lee Lewis. His frenetic hit, "High School Confidential," was the introductory song to a 1958 movie of the same name that explored the subject of drugs and crime in school. On record, the jukebox in the song is "blowing a fuse," just like Lewis' full throttle performance, nailing his solo with ease and even inspiring a little more adventurous guitar work. Still, it sounds a little weird having this guy singing so authoritatively about the high school hop.

"Breathless" is also a rocker, but comes off as a kind of a boogie woogie novelty record. Lewis often stops the progress of the song to let off an airy "breathless" which becomes the song's most distinctive

element. However, he does interject some wild exclamations about his "crazy" girlfriend, who is "much too much," that underscore the fact that Lewis' passion- and music- can't be restrained by mere song form.

Added to these 1958 hits are others that prove Lewis wasn't constrained by rock and roll- because he had some other musical tricks up his sleeve, such as country music. "Fools Like Me" is pretty energetic for a she-done-me-wrong song, but the country blues flavor is unmistakable. Still, you might call this progressive country. His honky-tonking piano solo sounds easy for him and the sound mix includes some of that handclapping that was becoming a staple of pop records of the time.

Two other Lewis hits in 1958 were Charlie Rich songs- "Break-Up" and "I'll Make it All Up to You." "Break-Up" is kind of a rocker- though the frenzy seems toned down quite a bit. However, Lewis still manages to fly all up and down the keyboard during his solo and get in a little play with the sound of the words- extending words like "night" and "tight" to "nigh-hight...tigh-hight." "I'll Make it All Up to You" is a slow confessional ballad with a slow conventional piano solo that's very calm for Lewis.

Also still on the rock and roll scene in 1958 was Buddy Holly, whose "Maybe Baby" is simply based on that rhyming word hook in the title. Here, Holly gets plenty of help from the strong, active supporting vocals- maybe too much help. Like some of the Presley recordings from 1958, Holly also seems to get drowned out some on this one.

Novelty Records

To prove that the public was open to new sounds- above and beyond the rock and roll phenomenon- witness the tomfoolery involved in the novelty record hits of 1958.

Some may protest that I include the Big Bopper's "Chantilly Lace" in a section of novelty records, but that is exactly how it sounds 50 years later. I get it- it's a riff by a rollicking rock and roll DJ- with a rocking chorus- but that's about it. It comes off like a parody and while the piece swings, Bopper's vocal antics don't mean very much in the end- it's a lark, a laugh and once the joke has been heard several times, it just gets tedious.

Now, Sheb Wooley's "Purple People Eater" is a different story. "Purple People Eater" makes no bones about being a novelty record- it exists to make people laugh. If there's a little toe tapping, or even a little rock and roll in there, then all the better.

In fact, "Purple People Eater" helps prove that rock and roll had become common place by 1958- it was common enough to be made fun of. The tune references several popular hits of the time- the Royal Teens' "Short Shorts," the Champs' "Tequila" and even Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti"- but all as goofy asides. Not only that but the monster states he came to Earth to get a job in a rock and roll band, which he does successfully and ends up playing some wailing music on TV out of the horn on his head.

I always chuckle a little when the monster's instrumental solo comes on in the end- sounding like a toy saxophone, but crisply played. Other elements to "Purple People Eater" also tickle the ear- like the effected vocals of the monster. The backing vocals are also a little odd, deliberately mixing and emphasizing a diversity of male and female voices. The chorus of the song sounds like one of those nursery rhymes that add new parts each time it comes around again. All of these elements work together to make "Purple People Eater" a fun and memorable production.

The Playmates' "Beep Beep" is also a song meant to make you laugh. It also brings to mind the 1956 Nervous Norvus hit "Transfusion." They're both highway shenanigans songs- both with a little road rage built into it.

The king of the novelty record, however, would have to be David Seville- you know, the guy responsible for the Chipmunks. Well, Seville got all that kick started with his hit "Witch Doctor," which not only features some of the most tongue-twisting, but somehow memorable word play of the 1950s, but also altered recordings that foreshadow his biggest hit creation.

"Witch Doctor" goes quick and the nonsense lyrics are classic in their own way- just try to sing the "ooo eee ooo ah ah, ting tang...etc." at the speed of the record and pronounce clearly each syllable. Despite the silliness, it's hard work. "Witch Doctor" is well-mixed and demonstrates recording studio mastery- and experimentation. The chorus is sung by an effected voice, one that sounds kind of like a chipmunk

Naturally, that leads us to Seville's next big hit, "Chipmunk Song." The setting here is that Seville is acting like a producer for a recording session featuring three singing chipmunks. One of the chipmunks- Alvin- is a malcontent and this creates some tension in the studio. In between the outbursts over Alvin's

behavior and a general melee at the end, the chipmunks deliver a sweet little Christmas song, in chipmunk harmony all the way. The record is cute and distinctive and vividly establishes a new kind of pop star- completely and undeniably fictitious.

It is important to note that the Chipmunks have lasted more than fifty years as a cultural element. There are still Chipmunk movies. In 2007, the movie "Alvin and the Chipmunks," directed by Tim Hill, brought live actors and computer graphics together to reheat the old story of Seville and the singing chipmunks.

The flip side to "The Chipmunk Song" was "Almost Good." It's not really a novelty recording. Other than the occasional spoken part, "That's almost good," it's an instrumental that cooks along nicely. It's got a deep beat, some effective handclapping and a jazzy change-up that keeps the recording interesting. This speaks to the fact that despite the fact that Seville's hit records generally were comedy records, he really did know what he was doing musically.

Vocal Groups

Rock and roll may have been sputtering a little, but vocal music in general was burgeoning.

On the top of the heap was the Platters, whose pure vocal power overwhelms even the heavy handed arrangements of their records- big orchestra arrangements, full of bluster. But lead vocalist Tony Williams is just so strong and powerful that he can sing over just about anything, including the syrupy strings on their 1958 hit "Twilight Time." Perhaps it's the drum beat that ties "Twilight Time" to the other popular music of the time better than anything else, but other than that, the Platters apply full vocal power to the tune with combined voices as thick as the strings.

That also goes for their other big 1958 hit, "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." It's a remake of an old standard tune, with a swelling melody and dramatic, "Bolero"-like progress in the instrumental arrangement. "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" is full of emotion, Williams again nailing the mood with passion.

But other groups were also working hard to make vocal music interesting- and fun. On the top of the list is the Monotones with their 1958 hit, "Book of Love." The record begins with a funky vocal introduction- one of the most distinctive of the time- "I wonder, wonder who....who wrote the book of love." All the voices on "Book of Love" are active and energetic, playing with the sound and rhythm of the words. The

vocals are supported by a snappy drum part and the electric guitar helps maintain the rhythm. The bass vocalist in particular reveals a distinctive, fun character.

"Book of Love" itself is a kind of primer for teenagers- or any aged person for that matter- for love relationships. Each chapter of that "Book of Love" offers some good advice- to love her with all your heart, tell her you'll never part, remember the meaning of romance and when things go badly, give her another chance. As simple as all that fits into the lyrics, its pretty poignant stuff.

The B-side of the Monotones' "Book of Love" is "You Never Loved Me," a slow dance tune full of "chapel bells" and "angel choirs" and a poor young guy with a sad story. Though the vocalists remain completely involved in the purposeful arrangement, it remains a surety that it's hard for this music to be convincing at a slower pace- apparently the curse of vocal music. Interestingly, both sides of this 45 attribute the songs to the Monotones- an early example of group work.

Just as effective as "Book of Love" is the Silhouettes' "Get a Job," which opens up with a distinctive "yip, yip, yip, yip." It's all about the trials of looking for work, something certainly less exciting than the Silhouettes' music, which is strong and upbeat. "I Am Lonely" is on the opposite side of "Get A Job." The vocals are up front, the emphasis on voices not instruments. It's a calmer tune, for sure, even a little subdued, featuring a breathy sax solo, but in this case, it allows the opportunity to really hear what the group is doing with their vocal arrangement, escaping the B-side curse somewhat.

The Shields' 1958 record "You Cheated" is a much more serious song than "Short Shorts." It turns over the angst-ridden confusion of teenage romance with a full, purposeful sound. As the lead vocal admits the truth about a love interest that doesn't work, some effective falsetto vocals soar in the background. "You Cheated" makes dramatic progress thanks to this confessional soul-baring, but in the end, the young would-be lover can't help but continue to be interested in his object of desire- hence the angst and confusion.

Vocal Hits

Two of the most fun songs of 1958, Bobby Darin's "Splish Splash" and Bobby Day's "Rockin Robin," could well be considered quintessential recordings of the time. What I mean here is that both records are completely successful productions in and of themselves and stand up very well more than fifty years later. The people making these records knew exactly what they were doing.

"Splish Splash," which kicks off with some water sound effects, is just a little bit wild. Darin isn't so focused on precision as he is on nailing the mood of the piece, which is something like "this Saturday night turned out to be a lot different than it began." It's kind of funny- a guy's taking a bath, but then a dance party erupts in his living room and he can't help but join in.

Bobby Day's performance of "Rockin Robin" is inspirational because despite lyrics that could be considered really dumb- with a lot of "tweet tweets" throughout- he gets down and owns the song. Both Day and the backing vocals really work the song, rather than endure it and the results are exciting.

I'm not exactly sure what to do with the Diamonds' "The Stroll." The Diamonds were responsible for the 1957 vocal group hit "Little Darlin," but "The Stroll" is a different animal. The song basically features one lead voice and minimal input from any other voices, except for the vocal/saxophone swells that underscore the whole thing.

"The Stroll" has a low, simmering groove, perfect for some kind of dance style that doesn't require much exertion. Though the tempo is restrained, the lyrics still mention "rock and rolling." It sounds to me like "The Stroll" was recorded at midnight as kind of a lark. It's a rough production, without much grace, and it ends up with some aimless whistling and sax suggesting a lack of ideas as to how to get it finished.

Laurie London's 1958 hit "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" is a curious record indeed. It's an old spiritual tune- a simple melody, repeated over and over- and stands out, first of all, as an interesting choice for an English vocalist. Added to this is the obviously young voice of London- he was 13 when he recorded it- backed by more mature voices. Also, London's accent sounds odd in the context of an American spiritual, especially his pronunciation of the word "hands"(more like "honds") and the way he sings about the "little bitty babies" ("bay-bies.")

All of this makes "He's Got the Whole World" come off like a novelty side, but it doesn't seem to be meant to entertain in that way. Except for a the little bit of jazzy vocal riffing at the end of the record, this is a big serious production- maybe even a little too big with heavy, extraneous backing vocals.

Less serious is the flip side to the "He's Got the Whole World" 45, "Handed Down." It's a goofy song about getting clothing and shoes handed down from older siblings. The twist here is that after

complaining about the handed down clothes, London declares he's going to get his own "gal." It seems like quite a jump to me to go from practical concerns like clothing to making plans about romance- that was a songwriter's trick, rather than a natural extension of the singer's basic concerns.

"Handed Down" is also a big production and the heavy layers of mature backing vocals are over done without really adding much. Without the elemental spiritual power of "He's Got the Whole World," "Handed Down" comes closer to being a novelty record. In terms of being a young performer, London's efforts fall short in terms of convincing the listener of the recording's authenticity, particularly when compared to the records of another youngster of the time, Frankie Lymon.

After all of the above, the Kingston Trio's "Tom Dooley" is a breath of fresh air. It's calm, measured, yet full of drama- murder and hanging- all to the simple accompaniment of acoustic instruments, including banjo (decidedly NOT a rock and roll instrument.) The record builds up nicely from a single voice telling the tragic story to criss-crossing vocal parts, swelling and achieving its own musical power.

But more than just effective music, "Tom Dooley" is the start of something new. It's not a get-up-and-dance song. It's a sit-down-and-listen song, meant for the concert hall seat, providing entertainment for those who are not going to the high school sock hop or hanging around at the juke joint. It's a more mature approach to songwriting, telling a story and dealing with elemental passions far removed from middle American teenage concerns. That the tune is based on an older folk song gives it age and depth even as it introduced a new, more intellectual purpose for popular music.

Pop

Meanwhile, some crooners were still in business in 1958, including Dean Martin, a hit maker, performer and movie star. His recordings of songs like "Return To Me" were big orchestra productions to be sure, complete with angelic female supporting vocals. It's a graceful showpiece in a way- also somehow appropriate for the movies- and sometimes Martin's voice kind of fades off into this pleasant kind of honeyed hum while delivering some more of those male myths Presley did in "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You."

But it's a little hard to keep a straight face when Martin delivers some of the lyrics of "Return to Me" in Italian, a deliberate nod I suspect to one of the crooner-style's biggest supporters. Referring to his love

as "darlin" rings a little hollow too. When hearing this, I imagine a showroom in Florida or Las Vegas and a dance floor full of beautiful people in suits and gowns, cocktails on the tables.

Nat King Cole's "Looking Back" features that great deep, rich voice, but guitar accompaniment rather than piano. After hearing it several times, I'm warming up to it, but truly I think Nat King Cole's voice just begs for a piano.