

LAVERN BAKER



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1953-1992</i>	<i>Classic R&B</i>	<i>Tweedlee Dee (1955)</i>

Only Solitaire

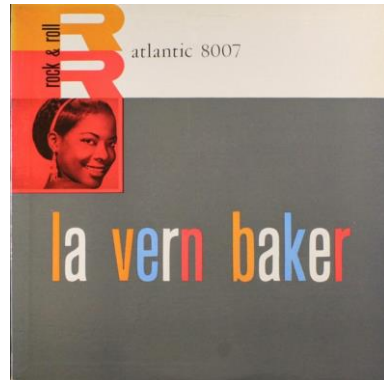
Artist: *LaVern Baker*

Years: *1953-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

Page contents:

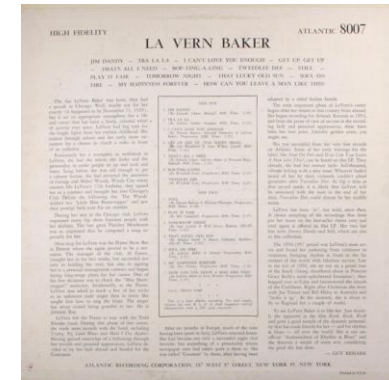
- [LAVERN BAKER](#) (1957)
- [Sings Bessie Smith](#) (1958)
- [Blues Ballads](#) (1959)
- [Saved](#) (1961)



LAVERN BAKER

Compilation released: **V** **A** **L** **U** **E**
1957 **3** **4** **4** **3** **4**

More info:



Tracks: 1) **Jim Dandy**; 2) Tra La La; 3) I Can't Love You Enough; 4) Get Up, Get Up (You Sleepy Head); 5) That's All I Need; 6) Bop-Ting-A-Ling; 7) Tweedlee Dee; 8) Still; 9) Play It Fair; 10) Tomorrow Night; 11) That Lucky Old Sun; 12) Soul On Fire; 13) My Happiness Forever; 14) How Can You Leave A Man Like This.

REVIEW

Born two years after Ruth Brown and signed to Atlantic Records four years later than Ruth Brown, LaVern Baker had little choice but to settle for silver in the virtual competition between the two leading ladies of 1950s' R&B — which, however, should not obscure such interesting trivia as, for instance, her first recording in 1951 (for the short-lived National label) called 'I Want To Rock' (actually, a nice example of pre-Atlantic jump blues); or the fact that, unlike Ruth Brown, she did have her own first LP of LP-exclusive material released fairly early in her Atlantic career (the record is very obscure and nothing special, but it is called **LaVern** and it really truly exists).



That said, LaVern Baker did join the ranks of Atlantic heroes relatively late (in 1953) and had fewer than 10 singles in total under her belt before the huge success of 'Jim Dandy' finally prompted Ertegun and Co. to add her to the list of artists generously graced with their own best-of LP in the label's *Rock & Roll* series. Scarceness of material meant that, (again) unlike Ruth Brown, LaVern also had to have quite a few B-sides pad out the vinyl's grooves: more accurately, 7 out of 9 of her singles are on here in their entirety, which gives us a nice chance to have a comprehensive look at the scope of the lady's

talents, but also, unfortunately, makes us remember all the formulaic and fillerish principles of commercial pop music in its early days (though some might argue that those have not so much changed as impressively camouflaged themselves).

The good luck of LaVern Baker is that it took slightly more than a year for her to become one of Atlantic's superstars; the bad luck is that the superstardom did not come to her as naturally as it did to some of the label's other artists. As the bulk of her recorded output shows, LaVern was primarily a deep blues / soul singer — related by blood to the legendary Memphis Minnie, and stylistically close to the even more legendary Bessie Smith. These echoes are quite clearly felt in her very first single for the label, 'Soul On Fire', co-written by her with Ertegun and Jerry Wexler and being essentially a slow, sensual soul waltz with a fairly complex emotional landscape — a joyful and tragic ballad at the same time, with a brilliant move in the chorus when they represent the joy by slowly going up the scale ("..now you've set... my soul... on *FIRE!*") and the ensuing sadness by quickly sliding down ("...and I really *had* my fun" — note the past tense here). It is a wonderful vocal performance, but clearly not too innovative from a strictly musical perspective, and because of that, listeners failed to pay much attention to the new bright personality — the single flopped. (Do not miss the funny 'Mack The Knife' rip-off 'How Can You Leave A Man Like This' on the B-side — some fun electric guitar and piano interplay on that one).

Now cue forward to Miss Sharecropper's third single, 'Tweedlee Dee', and watch the magic happen. Winfield Scott, mainly known for being a songwriting partner for Otis Blackwell (and thus, responsible for quite a few Elvis numbers), wrote this bouncy little novelty number with a Latin twist; no depth to it whatsoever, but quite a bit of naughty-sassy provocative attitude to justify the use of nursery language ("tweedlee-tweedlee-tweedlee-dot, how you gonna keep that honey you got?" is one of those coveted questions that every guy probably wants to be asked in his lifetime). Sooner or later, Atlantic Records would probably have to bring back and redefine ye olde silly playful vaudeville, and, accidentally, it was LaVern's fate to help them do just that — in the process, she established her reputation on the R&B charts, but narrowly missed the chance to establish it on the general pop charts as well, after the song was essentially «stolen» by the Mercury label, who recorded a very similar, but predictably brushed-up and polished version with Georgia Gibbs on lead vocals for white audiences. (No badmouthing Georgia Gibbs as a solid entertainer in her own rights, but if you listen to the two versions back to back, the old cliché about the white man stealing the black man's thunder really begins making much more sense than when you apply it to Elvis — who, at least, was always prepared to genuinely amplify the thunder rather than produce a diet version of it).

Anyway, this particular problem has most likely been remedied by time, since subsequent generations in their time travels

are all much more likely to fall upon LaVern's version rather than Gibbs'. A much worse problem was that the huge success of 'Tweedlee Dee' had locked LaVern into a formula — her very next single was named 'Bop-Ting-A-Ling', and another one released in 1956 was called 'Fee Fee Fi Fo Fum', and then another song was called 'Tra La La'... get the pattern? The former was at least popular enough to be included on the LP, but the latter flopped completely and was written out of existence. The ultimate irony of it all is that these kiddie numbers, when you come to think of it, seem really more appropriate for the likes of Georgia Gibbs — with her powerful, rumbling, raspy vocals LaVern is clearly overqualified for this stuff.

Much to the label's honor, they did let her stew in her own element every once in a while: thus, the B-side to 'Tweedlee Dee' was the cover of the old Lonnie Johnson ballad 'Tomorrow Night' (which she drives to a much more explosive climax than Lonnie, or Elvis, or anybody else ever did), and the slow waltz 'Play It Fair' was delivered with such tense passion that it gave her another big hit on the R&B charts, this time without any pandering toward the inner child in all of us (also, the B-side contains one of the most solemnly and anthemically recorded versions of 'Lucky Old Sun' I have ever heard). But still, for some reason most of these songs either gave us LaVern «Soul On Fire» Baker, the soulful queen of slow blues ballads, or LaVern «Tweedlee Dee» Baker, the consummate cabaret entertainer. Nothing like a 'Mama He Treats Your Daughter Mean' or a 'Wild Wild Young Men' in the repertoire to send her off to the tougher corners of the R&B front.

A bit of a compromise was reached with 'Jim Dandy' — the first track on the LP because it was LaVern's latest and biggest hit at the time, and, as it would soon become obvious, for *all* time. To be honest, primary credit here has to be given to the backing band, none of which can be identified with certainty (other than the Gliders on backing vocals): the drummer hits really hard, heavy, and precise while setting an almost breakneck tempo (for 1955 at least), the barrelhouse piano player does not stop his fluent and merry rollickin' even for a second, and the brass players get into the groove like a bunch of bug-eyed arcade players. The song's melody is still on the novelty side, but at least it no longer mimicks the 'Tweedlee Dee' formula, and the lyrics are more ironic than corny — sort of like *The Perils Of Pauline* condensed into two minutes ("Jim Dandy in a submarine / Got a message from a mermaid queen..."), poking harmless fun at cinematic stereotypes while essentially just providing fodder for LaVern's rock'n'rolliest performance so far. Again, she seems overqualified for this business, but at least this time, nobody dared to steal her thunder (maybe because no white performer could see the right angle from which to approach these crazyass lyrics — LaVern, on the other hand, simply took the bull by the horns).

Of course, Atlantic Records could hardly fail to exploit this new success as well, saddling poor Miss Baker with nothing less than a direct sequel the next year ('Jim Dandy Got Married' — the only thing that's funny about this is that it probably

inspired Buddy Holly to follow up his own 'Peggy Sue' with 'Peggy Sue Got Married' a year later), but this should hardly detract from the dippy genius of the original. That said, it pretty much crumbled any remaining hopes for LaVern to be recognized as a «serious» soul artist: 'Tweedlee Dee' and 'Jim Dandy' would forever remain her calling cards — and Atlantic Records flubbed their chance at hosting their own Queen of Soul all the way until the signing of Aretha, a good decade later. Fortunately, compilations like these are still available, providing the discerning listener with a good chance to make their own decision and enjoy 'Soul On Fire' and 'Play It Fair' as much as, or perhaps even much more than, the super-catchy novelty numbers which find more resonance in the lower than in the higher parts of one's body (*which* lower parts is, of course, for you to decide, dear discerning readers).





SINGS BESSIE SMITH

Album released:

March 1958

V A L U E

1 3 3 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Gimme A Pigfoot; 2) Baby Doll; 3) On Revival Day; 4) Money Blues; 5) I Ain't Gonna Play No Second Fiddle; 6) Back Water Blues; 7) Empty Bed Blues; 8) There'll Be A Hot Time In The Old Town Tonight; 9) Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out; 10) After You've Gone; 11) Young Woman's Blues; 12) Preaching The Blues.

REVIEW

There were actually *two* separate tribute LPs to Bessie Smith released in 1958 — one by Dinah Washington, the other by LaVern Baker; I think that Dinah's came first, so it is possible that somebody at Atlantic got wind of that and decided to steal the idea for one of Atlantic's own artists because it just seemed too awesome not to steal. Or maybe it was just one of those epochal odd coincidences, which is hard to believe given that it wasn't even Bessie's anniversary or anything. Whatever the circumstances, I do believe that the two records were among the first LP-scale tributes to pre-war blues heroes, helping create the tradition — today, such tributes are released on a casual basis, hardly likely to surprise anybody, but in the technically innovative climate of the 1950s such retro-oriented moves were still a novelty.



Of the two homages to the Empress of the Blues, LaVern's — upon first hearing, at least — should be unquestionably declared the big winner. Dinah Washington was an elegant, polite, well-mannered jazz lounge performer, a master of exquisite phrasing and manneristic sentimentality; LaVern Baker was a rough, gruff, loud-mouthed soul sister who looked like she could easily punch your lights out at the first opportunity. When the idea to record a set of Bessie Smith songs was pitched to her, she allegedly agreed only if she were allowed to do it «her way», which, naturally, was the best way to do it,

because «her way» of doing things, from the very start, had a lot of obvious similarities with Bessie's way: loud, powerful, uncompromising, feministic, dominant. And she could have that aggressive bark'n'roar in her voice which was lacking even in the wildest performances of her direct predecessor and strongest competitor at Atlantic (Ruth Brown). If ever there was one performer at the time to give these gritty old tunes a coloring of Fifties-style sassiness and grittiness, it'd be Miss Baker. (Sister Rosetta Tharpe might be a good candidate, too, but she'd probably refuse to sing such Godless smut).

For the recording, Baker was given a full-on jazz backing band rather than Atlantic's standard R&B session players; I do not easily recognize any of the names, but this is simply because I am not a well-versed jazz connoisseur — those who dig deep enough into classic recordings to diligently study the liner notes will most certainly be familiar with Buck Clayton on trumpet, Jimmy Cleveland on trombone, Wendell Marshall on bass, and others (also, note the legendary Tom Dowd on engineering duty, although he'd already been a regular on Atlantic records for a couple of years at least). Predictably, the arrangements are tight, thick, meaty, imposing, celebratory... and not particularly memorable, though I guess the same could be said about the original, much more lean-and-mean, Bessie Smith recordings (unless she paired up with somebody truly outstanding, such as Louis Armstrong).

Less predictable is LaVern's song selection: she seems to consciously avoid most of Bessie's «broken-hearted and lonely» ballads (other than 'After You've Gone') and concentrate more on her affirmative sides — the reckless fun of 'Gimme A Pigfoot', the religious ecstasy of 'On Revival Day', the fight-for-your-right attitude of 'I Ain't Gonna Play No Second Fiddle', and basically anything that, no matter how grim or desperate, ends with an "as God is my witness, I'll never be hungry again" attitude ('Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out', etc.). Consequently, this is not a complete portrait of Bessie Smith — she had her share of lay-me-down-and-die songs, too — but a legitimate one, since such, indeed, was the stereotypical image of Bessie transmitted to us from her times.

Still, despite the updated and expanded arrangements, despite the interesting track selection, despite Baker's vocal powers that are beyond questioning — I cannot help but ultimately find the record a bit dull. Amazingly, I find it easier to make my way through an entire 70-minute CD of Bessie's own recordings, poor sound quality and everything, than to patiently make it to the end of this 42-minute long experience. There is a nagging feeling that once you've enjoyed the opening song, 'Gimme A Pigfoot', you've pretty much heard it all — a feeling that is not quite as pervasive when you listen to the originals. Of course, part of the reason is technical: Bessie's blues tunes, even if they are usually not far from each other melodically, were recorded over a period of about ten years, with lots of different players and Bessie herself passing through different

stages — as opposed to this record, made up quickly with the exact same band and featuring the exact same arrangement style, so even if the arrangements are richer, they can still feel more monotonous. But unfortunately, that's not all.

There is, after all, a reason why Bessie Smith is a *major* legend and LaVern Baker is a *minor* legend, and it is good to have this tribute album to help us get to the bottom of it, instead of wasting time on useless debates about whether 'Soul On Fire' and 'Tweedlee Dee' are more powerful than 'Back Water Blues' and 'On Revival Day'. LaVern gets it absolutely right when she sees Bessie Smith as a proverbially strong, imposing character — and she does her best to match Bessie's strength and monumentality with her own. But that is pretty much the *only* aspect of Bessie that she sees, or, at least, is able to extract and adapt to her own personality. The result is that every single song on here feels like an onslaught: with the very first song, LaVern boxes you into a corner and then just keeps punching and punching and punching. It's deliciously brutal at first, but then you kind of just get used to it, go a bit numb, and start taking the punches like Rocky from Apollo Creed. At the end of it all, you got a good beating, but that's pretty much all you got.

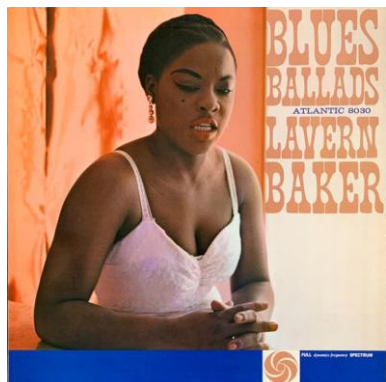
At the same time, what goes almost completely untransferred is the sensitive — *sensitive*, not *sentimental* — side of Bessie Smith. At her best, the Empress of the Blues can bring me to tears, even through all the crackling and distortion of her voice, because she had the uncanny talent of sounding powerful *and* vulnerable at the same time: strong and determined, yes, but just as well in need of comfort, mercy, and pity. This part of her personality is all but missing in LaVern's versions; ironically, it might make more sense to hunt for it in the interpretations of Dinah Washington — it's as if the two ladies split the complex character of Bessie Smith in half and each ended up with but one side of it (though, admittedly, LaVern got the bigger and better part). From a rigidly progressive point of view, you could fully justify this — for instance, describing the sensitive and vulnerable qualities of Bessie's singing as elements of patriarchal submission, rightfully cleansed out by LaVern's aggressive stance — but I'd rather cleanse out the rigidity of the (pseudo-)progressive point of view instead.

None of this serious criticism should, of course, undermine the importance of this record for LaVern's own legend: at the very least, having it sit alongside her seemingly novelty pop hits such as 'Tweedlee Dee' and 'Jim Dandy' raises the stakes for those very songs themselves, much as we can feel more respect for 'Yellow Submarine' and 'All Together Now' knowing that they came from the very same minds that created 'Eleanor Rigby' and 'Hey Jude' — or, to use a chronologically and stylistically closer analogy, this is somewhat akin to the jazz albums of Ray Charles, which are never going to occupy the same pedestal as records by proper jazz greats, but help provide a solid musical context for Ray's comparatively «light weight» three-minute R&B hits for his label. It is all the more impressive considering that not a lot of Atlantic artists were

allowed — much less stimulated — to have such parallel «serious» careers alongside their blatantly commercial projects; Ruth Brown, for instance, was never offered to make any such conceptual records.

So, ultimately, there is quite a lot going for **LaVern Sings Bessie Smith** — or, at the very least, it is one of those forgotten records which easily lends itself to digging out and finding all kinds of historical and sociological importance (just see how much I have already written, without even discussing most of the music). Yet even if you develop a true taste for all things Fifties-related, it is hard for me to imagine anybody being more attracted to this kind of stuff than to the guilty pleasures of ‘Jim Dandy’ — or even ‘Jim Dandy Got Married’, for that matter.





BLUES BALLADS

Album released:

August 1959

V A L U E

3 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) I Cried A Tear; 2) If You Love Me; 3) You're Teasing Me; 4) Love Me Right; 5) Dix-A-Billy; 6) So High So Low; 7) I Waited Too Long; 8) Why Baby Why; 9) Humpty Dumpty Heart; 10) It's So Fine; 11) Whipper Snapper; 12) St. Louis Blues.

REVIEW

After the daring, but questionable experiment of luring the spirit of Bessie Smith into the body of LaVern Baker, Atlantic Records went back to the tried and true formula of packaging the artist's next LP as a collection of her most promising singles from recent years. For some reason, this time around they slapped the title **Blues Ballads** on the cover, even if there is hardly a single song here that I could honestly describe as a «blues ballad». B. B. King sang «blues ballads»; LaVern Baker, at least in the late Fifties, mostly sang pop songs. Maybe some creative person at Atlantic was inspired by a title like Odetta's **Sings Ballads And Blues** and thought along the lines of "if Odetta can define herself as something like this, why can't our own Little Miss Sharecropper get the same honors?" *And* not even the inclusion of lightweight pop jingles such as 'Humpty Dumpty Heart' made any difference. Then again, who really cares?



Instead of poking the usual fun at record executives (especially now that we have already poked the usual fun at record executives), let us simply continue to trace the singles history of Ms. Baker, picking up from where we last left it with 'Jim Dandy' and 'Jim Dandy Got Married'. LaVern's very next release, from August 1957, was the above-mentioned 'Humpty

Dumpty Heart' — arguably the nadir of her «novelty phase», catchy enough for a quick laugh but completely lacking that little bit of nitty-gritty toughness that made 'Tweedlee Dee' and 'Jim Dandy' pack a real punch together with their comedy spirit. Honestly, it's a bit of an embarrassment (even if it gives you a rare chance [to see the real LaVern Baker](#) in a bit of lip-sync action, from Alan Freed's Mr. Rock And Roll programme). The B-side, 'Love Me Right', is far superior — a dramatic rather than comic performance, on which Baker's voice commands actual respect; it's still very much «pop» rather than «blues», but it's really the spirit that matters, and she's in truly fine form here.

At least the record-buying public seemed to share the same opinion; the flop of 'Humpty Dumpty Heart' thankfully heralded a return to more sensible musical territory for LaVern's subsequent releases. Her oddly upbeat take on 'St. Louis Blues' (November '57) did not chart either, and I am not entirely sure if setting the drama of the song to a galloping 'Jim Dandy'-style beat really made much sense, but at least it was a novel thing to do, and quite likely inspired the idea of the entire **Sings Bessie Smith** album as a consequence. Next came her own take on the old chestnut of 'Harbor Lights' (not included on the LP) — decent if you're into this kind of material, but I far prefer the fast-tempo blues-rock of 'Whipper Snapper' on the B-side (*included* on the LP). At least it's credited to Leiber & Stoller, has classy interplay between piano, regular brass, and sax, and has LaVern acting tough rather than trying to «seduce» you as she did on 'Humpty Dumpty Heart'. What's up with all those B-sides ending up better than the «money sides», anyway?

Next up (September '58) is another misfire — a cover of 'It's So Fine', which was one of the highlights on Jackie Wilson's recent **He's So Fine** album. What works for Jackie, who has the same way with sounds as a natural-born juggler has with oranges, does not in the least work for LaVern Baker, whose painfully labored "it's so fi-ayee-ayee-ayee-aiine" hiccups in the chorus make her sound like she's hopping around on hot coals. Again, the B-side, 'Why Baby Why', is a comparatively superior, if not outstanding, piece of mid-tempo R&B, too seriously derivative of Leiber & Stoller's 'Young Blood', perhaps, to be remembered, but at least not containing any cringeworthy moments.

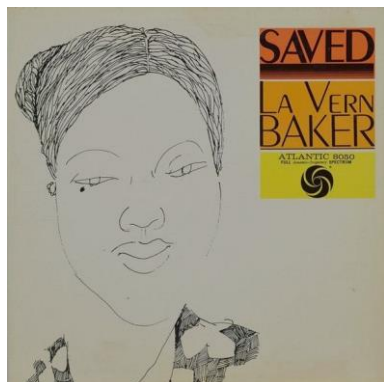
Eventually, the gods smiled on the poor artist in November '58, with the release of 'I Cried A Tear', which became LaVern's biggest ever chart hit and her signature ballad. Musically, to be honest, it is nothing but a re-write of Chuck Willis' 'What Am I Living For' from earlier the same year — but sonically, it is much more polished, with a sophisticated, multi-layered arrangement, a great King Curtis sax solo, and a nuanced vocal performance, in which LaVern juggles soft, dreamy vocals with powerful operatic rocket launches on an almost entirely new level of expertise. The novelty tune 'Dix-A-Billy' was this time happily relegated to the B-side, where nobody has bothered to remember it and for a very good reason.

The huge success of 'I Cried A Tear' obviously predicted that the next song, too, would be a slow-waltzing ballad; this time, the writers were Neil Sedaka and Howard Greenfield, but what they wrote was 'I Waited Too Long', yet another variation on the same formula, albeit with a couple of different key changes in the middle to avoid accusations of plagiarism. It plays out like a little brother to 'I Cried A Tear', similar to it but just a trifle inferior in every single respect, so it's certainly no surprise that it was unable to repeat the success of its predecessor. The B-side was 'You're Teasing Me', a mambo-influenced bit of lightweight dance fun whose little bit of interplay between a curiously distorted electric guitar and King Curtis' wobbly «up-and-down-the-ladder» sax runs is frankly more interesting than LaVern's singing.

Finally, we pause our journey around June '59, with 'So High, So Low', the best thing about which is that it breaks LaVern out of the formula, only to put her back into the pure upbeat pop mode — not too bad, not too good. More impressive is the B-side, 'If You Love Me', which begins as inauspicious doo-wop but quickly begins to rise to gospel heights, showcasing Ms. Baker's talent in the sphere of «heavy belting». In its own way, it sets out the path to a more prominent gospel career that would soon follow, culminating in hits like 'Saved' and an entire gospel album later in the year (**Precious Memories**) which was, not coincidentally, recorded at around the same time as 'If You Love Me'.

All in all, it's a fun journey even if it contains more relative lows than highs — fun to see an artist surfing atop all those different genres, perhaps not really understanding whether she loves silly novelty songs more than gritty R&B or if she prefers sophisticated pop ballads to Latin dance pastiches; or maybe she just preferred to see herself as some sort of «R&B-naissance Woman» who could be equally good at all those things. In any case, examples like these clearly show just how progressive the Atlantic label was in those days — while those guys obviously knew (and often abused) the power of stable commercial formula, they were also flexible enough to twist and vary the formula at the exact moment when its commercial stability was no longer guaranteed.





SAVED

Album released:

September 1961

V A L U E

3 3 3 1 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) *Saved*; 2) For Love Of You; 3) Manana; 4) My Time Will Come; 5) Shadows Of Love; 6) Must I Cry Again; 7) *Bumble Bee*; 8) Shake A Hand; 9) Don Juan; 10) Wheel Of Fortune; 11) Senor Big And Fine; 12) Eternally.

REVIEW

Some chronological justice is probably served by the fact that LaVern Baker started out about three years later than Ruth Brown — and, consequently, her chart successes also ran out about three years later. Brown never succeeded in making the transition to the early Sixties; her last singles that sold well were all recorded in 1959, and she was either unable or unwilling to make friends with any of the trendy songwriters on the scene, most importantly, Leiber & Stoller, whose chief clients on Atlantic Records at the time were The Coasters but who wouldn't mind curating some of the other artists as well. And LaVern had the useful distinction of being able to make it as both a serious, monumental, emotional soul singer *and* a tongue-in-cheek vaudeville performer; it was her skill of being equally convincing when singing 'Soul On Fire' and 'Jim Dandy' that ensured her commercial survival almost to the beginning of the British Invasion (though it would be rash to directly blame the Beatles on her eventual disappearance from the charts).

Anyway, listening to this next bunch of singles and a few LP-only tracks assembled on **Saved** does occasionally show that we are dealing with an artist out of the past — a few of the songs have that early 1950s R&B sheen all over them — but on the whole, this is hardly a nostalgia fest, and, more importantly, it's a *fun* record, brimming with energy and excitement where so many other singers would simply prefer to dissolve themselves in syrupy strings and succulent sentimentality, so



characteristic of mainstream pop around 1960-62. There are a few orchestrated ballads here, but even on those LaVern pushes forward with a fiery gospel or hot Latin spirit, rarely, if ever, allowing herself to step out of her «tough girl» persona, though maybe this wasn't really such a tremendous achievement, considering that persona was her own nature. A Dionne Warwick she was most certainly not born to be.

There is no question that the title track — released as a single in April 1961 and becoming Baker's biggest hit in two years — is the primary highlight here. How many people saw the album cover in record stores and passed it by, disappointed by the idea of their favorite R&B belter becoming a straightforward gospel singer? And how many people actually saw the Leiber & Stoller credit before putting on the song, completely unaware of its tongue-in-cheek nature? If you do so wish, you *can* try and play it straight, like a genuine exuberant redemption dance from a certified sinner; ultimately, though, the simplistic symmetry of the lyrics ("*I used to smoke / I used to drink / I used to smoke, drink / And dance the hoochie koo..*") and the arch-hyper-ecstatic overdrive of the groove betray the song as a good-natured parody on the genre, though on the formal level it's literally immune from any criticism on the part of any God-fearing pundit. Certainly LaVern belts the lyrics out with a completely straight face on, but, you know, when that line about "*I'm in that soul saving army / Beating on that big bass drum*" is dutifully echoed by six crashing beats on the big bass drum in question, it's impossible not to smile. It's more of a 'Jim Dandy' song than a 'Soul On Fire', that's for sure. Mahalia Jackson wouldn't touch this with a ten-foot cross — but leave it to Jerry and Mike to end up as the writers of one of the catchiest gospel tunes ever made.

I have listened to several later covers of the song, by the way, from The Band's tribute version on 1973's **Moondog Matinee** to the recent live resuscitation by Beth Hart and Joe Bonamassa (ugh!), and all of them are doing the same mistake — playing it as more of a rock'n'roll number, with an unnecessary aggressive component, when in reality it's a vibe that's 50% pure giggly hilariousness and 50% sarcasm. It is interesting, though, that LaVern was on an actual bit of a gospel kick at the end of 1960: prior to 'Saved', Atlantic had issued her cover of Sister Rosetta Thorpe's famous 'Didn't It Rain' — with plenty of spirit and an impressive arrangement, though obviously not enough to wrestle the song away from Sister Rosetta. The decision to switch to a subtly parodic angle, on the other hand, was brilliant, because LaVern had this bit of inborn vaudeville comedy genius, and Leiber & Stoller came up with the perfect recipe.

Nothing else on the album quite matches the energy and catchiness of this masterpiece, but I'd say that 'Bumble Bee' at least comes close. The song was originally written by Leroy Fullylove and recorded with his own group, The Tads — [the original demo](#), for a very long time, remained unreleased because the Atlantic executives apparently decided that the song

was just perfect for their already established star, LaVern Baker, and almost literally stole it from Fullylove (even adding Baker as a co-writer on the original release), changing nothing in the melody but giving the song a fuller and somewhat more inventive rearrangement. The most inventive touch is the «bumble bee» guitar riff, probably played by technology wiz Mickey Baker in such a loud and naggy manner, it almost overshadows Baker's vocals; but we shall also have to admit that LaVern's "...a bumble bee, an EVIL bumble bee!" is more expressive than Fullylove's original vocal part, and that the extra vibraphone solo is deliciously beautiful in tone and phrasing. (The song itself would later be covered by The Searchers in 1965, which was the first version I'd heard; but in this case, it sounds positively tame and cuddly next to LaVern's performance). It might be instructive to note that the song made it into the Top 50 on the general pop charts, but did not register at all on the R&B ones — apparently, LaVern's African-American audiences were not impressed with the general «pop» vibe of the song ('Saved', on the contrary, was a bigger hit on the R&B charts, for quite transparent reasons).

Other than 'Saved' and 'Bumble Bee', both classics for the ages, the material on **Saved** ranges from nice to mediocre. There is nothing particularly cringeworthy, and there is a fair amount of genre diversity to keep one entertained, but it's unlikely that any of the other songs might produce some sort of *special* effect on you. We see that there are clear attempts to try and market LaVern as a sort of «black female pop Elvis»: one of the songs, 'Shadows Of Love', comes from Otis Blackwell and feels as if it were *very* specifically written for Elvis' voice but somehow accidentally ended up with Atlantic (LaVern sings it much too high, I sense a desperate craving for Elvis' deeper baritone) — and another, 'Señor Big And Fine', is a slightly corny tango number from the Doc Pomus / Mort Shuman team, again quite reminiscent of the average Latin-style numbers peddled to Elvis by his songwriters. Not that this was a particularly new development: the Elvis touch for LaVern was already evident as early as 1958's [Substitute](#) — a cross between 'Treat Me Nice' and 'Santa Bring My Baby Back To Me' — but it is surprising that they even tried to project the different stages of Elvis' evolution from rock'n'roll to pop onto Baker. Come to think of it, was 'Tomorrow Night' *also* a shadowing of the King, rather than Lonnie Johnson?..

Anyway, the problem is that there's just too much trying to be somebody else here. Other than Elvis, LaVern covers Peggy Lee ('Manana'), The Hilltoppers ('Must I Cry Again'), and even Charlie Chaplin ('Eternally', the song from *Limelight*). One song that is credited to herself is 'For Love Of You', but it is nothing to write home about — it's actually *another* re-write of 'What Am I Living For?', completely redundant in the presence of 'I Cried A Tear'. And finally, one more Leiber & Stoller contribution, 'Don Juan', is a lightweight bit of bossa nova with weak hooks and lyrics that don't really match the title (you'd expect a song about Don Juan to cover the subject of adultery at least, but it goes somewhere completely different: "*Don Juan, your money's gone / And when your money's gone, Don, your baby's gone*" — what? how? why?). It's all

perfectly listenable, but thoroughly unnecessary; in fact, I'd rather prefer it if they had at least completed the Elvis transformation and turned the whole thing into an Atlantic shadow of **Elvis Is Back!** — that way, I'd have more to write about and we could carve out the impression of a curious pop/R&B phenomenon, regardless of whether you'd like to store it in your heart or not. As it is, **Saved** — the LP — ends up a mixed bag of imitations and innovations, with one foot firmly in the present and the other one still bogged in already obsolete Fifties' conventions. Yet it does prove that, of all the Atlantic veterans signed to the label when the original R&B vibe was still king, LaVern Baker was the only solo artist on the label that could still remain at least partially fresh and relevant in the early 1960s — long enough, at least, to keep the flame burning until the full-on establishment of Motown and the early British Invasion.

