

RUTH BROWN



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1949-1999</i>	<i>Classic R&B</i>	<i>Mama He Treats Your Daughter Mean (1953)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Ruth Brown*

Years: *1950-1959*

George Starostin's Reviews

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RUTH BROWN

Compilation released:

1957

V A L U E
4 5 5 3 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) Lucky Lips; 2) As Long As I'm Moving; 3) Wild Wild Young Men; 4) Daddy Daddy; 5) Mambo Baby; 6) Teardrops From My Eyes; 7) Hello Little Boy; 8) **Mama He Treats Your Daughter Mean**; 9) 5-10-15 Hours; 10) It's Love Baby (24 Hours Of The Day); 11) Sentimental Journey; 12) Old Man River; 13) So Long; 14) Oh What A Dream.

REVIEW

There is a slight touch of irony concerning Ruth Brown's path to stardom: while it is true that she ran away from home at the age of 17, preferring to sing at nightclubs rather than (at her family's insistence) the church choir, her rebellious streak only took her about as far as 'So Long' — her first hit for Atlantic, a slow jazzy torch ballad which she sings with as much power and passion as she could be capable of... but which, after all, is just a slow jazzy torch ballad, definitely not enough to lift the future Miss Rhythm above the crowd and perhaps even misplacing her true God-given talent; nor is this kind of music really indicative of the visionary mischievousness with which the musicians at Atlantic would soon be conquering the world. Of course, that was merely the year 1949...



...and it all changed in 1950, with a little encouraging prod from the fresh young songwriter Rudy Toombs and Ruth's boss, Mr. Ahmet Ertegun himself. (Inverting Annie and Aretha, «behind every great woman there had to be a great man»). In the fall of that year, Atlantic Records released 'Teardrops From My Eyes', and the world would never be the same — just briefly checking out my **Atlantic Rhythm And Blues 1947–1974** boxset shows that no prior record on the label could boast

that kind of steady, driving, enthusiastic rhythm'n'blues sound, and that Atlantic Records didn't really get its well-deserved moniker of «The House That Ruth Built» for nothing. We do not even remember the names of most of the people who played on that track, except for Budd Johnson who delivers the ecstatic tenor sax solo — but can we deny, even 70 years later, the atmosphere of total exuberance which permeates it?

If there is a single flaw in this number, that would be the rather awkward mismatch of the overall triumphant mood to the bitter lyrics: Ruth delivers lines like "Every time it rains, I think of you / And that's the time when I feel blue" with all the sassiness of a powerhouse kitchen mama ready to whomp your sorry ass with a frying pan. But this little disconnect is hardly unheard of, going all the way back to the pre-war queens of urban blues and all the way up to, say, the Beatles' 'I'm A Loser', and ultimately the words — sometimes very clumsily and amateurishly strung together — do not matter one bit; what matters is the aggressive delirium of the music, starting with the steady cog-grind of the brass instruments against one another and ending with Ruth's perfect phrasing. In these three minutes, we witness the birth of the prototypical Queen of R'n'B — while there most certainly have been numerous powerful black ladies belting their hearts out before, rarely, if ever, had they been captured in such pristine quality, with such rhythmic precision, rising high and mighty over such well-oiled backing bands. When, midway through the song, the tenor sax breaks away from the choir to provide a few bars of respite for the singer, it sounds almost intoxicated by the hot, sexy fumes left behind — a mind-blowing effect which would later be repeated on at least several of Ruth's seemingly endless hits.

And endless they seemed to be indeed. By the time Atlantic finally made their minds about rewarding Ruth Brown with an actual LP, as late as 1957, she had already had more than 15 Top 10 entries on the R&B charts — the majority of which may actually be found on **Ruth Brown**, though the compilers tried to make the album chronologically comprehensive by including at least two songs ('So Long' and 'Sentimental Journey') from Ruth's pre-'Teardrops' days. What this means, quite predictably, is that **Ruth Brown** is a non-stop top-notch R&B celebration, with nary a single clunker and barely a single moment to let you catch your breath and recuperate. Moreover, if you forego the typically odd sequencing of the tracks on the original record and put them all in chronological order, you shall witness a startling progression, with almost each new single departing from the formula of its predecessor, rather than repeating it. (Admittedly, there *were* quite a few repetitions in Ruth's career — witness 'The Tears Keep Tumbling Down' as a sequel to 'Teardrops From My Eyes', or 'Bye Bye Young Men' as a sequel to 'Wild Wild Young Men', for instance — but this is precisely what the compilation principle is intended to make us forget).

Another Toombs-penned single, '5-10-15 Hours', dispenses with the big band format in favor of a smaller combo with just two outstanding instruments (Harry Van Walls' piano and Willis Jackson's tenor sax), makes darn clever use of stop-and-start dynamics by tying it to the stutter of the track title, and finally matches the song's lyrics to the song's performer, presenting Ruth Brown as that unstoppable sexual predator we'd all like to be predated upon. Then, just a few months later, 'Daddy Daddy', also by Toombs, introduces a bit of a rhumba beat, pushing musical (*and* lyrical) sexualization even further: that little "aah" in the bridge section, echoed by a single high-pitched guitar ping, might be the first explicit portrayal of a female orgasm in R&B — and that transition from Ruth's lust-drippin' "sweeeeeet, gently-tiiiiight..." to Willis' dark, sweet, viscous sax break should definitely make the Top 10 Dirtiest Moments in Fifties' Music list for every respectable critic.

However, Ruth's incontestable masterpiece only arrived at the end of 1952 and was not written by Toombs, but rather by another songwriter, Herbert Lance (along with his friend Johnny Wallace). 'Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean' is one of the decade's finest creations, a one-in-a-thousand ideal mix of classic Delta blues with the newly-arisen R&B style, and a song which I really have a hard time imagining anybody other than Ruth delivering with the same incredible emotional complexity. There is already an initial intrigue here, created by the rubbing together of Willis Jackson's sax and Mickey Baker's paranoidly repetitive guitar riff — but most of the show is Ruth's own, as she all but presages Little Richard's high-pitched scream with her unhurriedly efficient string of "MAMA!"s and gets so much into character that, in the end, we still remained baffled as to whether the song is a desperate feminist liberation-from-male-oppression rant or if (which seems more likely to me) the singer is really so madly in love with her oppressor that his vices feel like bothersome annoyances to be overcome. In any case, what really matters is the intensity of the performance, which Ruth skilfully pumps up all the way through — by the end, she is literally drowning in her own hysterics, and there is a degree of gritty realism to the song which totally extracts it from the regular ballpark and puts it in a class of its own. (By the way, do not make the mistake of judging the song based on its later re-recorded fast version; although it gives us a fine opportunity to witness Ruth Brown [live in her prime](#) — with her only early documented appearance — the original, slower version is truly where it's at).

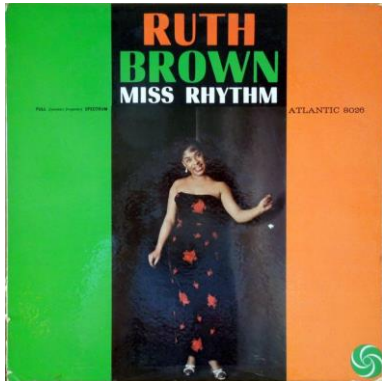
But even if 'Mama' was Brown's peak, this does not mean that she was ready to quickly go downhill upon reaching it. Instead, more hits in more different styles kept coming. 'Wild Wild Young Men', written by Mr. Ertegun himself (and humorously credited to a certain «A. Nugetre»), was Ruth's fastest and most exuberant number yet, an early rock'n'roll anthem on which Miss Rhythm practiced a new style of machine-gun vocal delivery — and as if that was not enough, it was quickly followed by the even faster, even more ecstatic 'Hello Little Boy' (in terms of speed and madness, a solid predecessor to the Rolling Stones' 'Rip This Joint', which it predates by about 18 years). 'As Long As I'm Moving' from early

1955 is not quite as startling, sounding more like a polished and modernized recreation of the sound of Big Joe Turner's classic jump blues, but it still has Ruth at the peak of her self-confident power, and the Atlantic music-making machine at the peak of its boogie-woogie magic.

Finally, the song that actually opens the LP was Ruth's latest hit single to-date: 'Lucky Lips', written by Leiber & Stoller and featuring a more overtly pop sound — which, unsurprisingly, gave Ruth her biggest success on the pop charts (#25, to be precise). Melodically, it is indeed the kind of catchy lightweight vaudeville number which would derail the rock'n'roll credibility of Elvis in a few years' time — but the difference is that the Atlantic machine, with its deep bass rumble and meaty brass section, still gives it plenty of muscle, and that Ruth, even when she is singing lines like "with lucky lips I'll always have a fellow in my arms", still sounds like a total badass. Plus, score another point for diversity, won't you?

If you have not already made the correct deduction, **Ruth Brown** — tossing aside the pedantic fact that it is totally a best-of compilation — is one of the finest pop music LPs of the entire decade, and the fact that these singles have not been firmly ensconced in public opinion as being on the same level of quality with Ray Charles, Chuck Berry, Elvis, Johnny Cash, or just about any other black or white entertainer of the day, can only be ascribed to old-timey sexist attitudes (Fifties-style, accidentally and atavistically carried over to future representations of the decade). Even if no other collection of Ruth Brown material comes close to the collective punch of these songs, the classic dozen or so of her biggest hits shows everything you want to hear from a great performer and more — the power, the versatility, the challenge, and the ability to not merely step out of one's comfort zone, but, in fact, to make each new zone you step into feel as comfortable to you as your previous one.





MISS RHYTHM

Compilation released:
1959

V A L U E
3 4 4 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) This Little Girl's Gone Rockin'; 2) Just Too Much; 3) I Hope We Meet (On The Road Some Day); 4) Why Me; 5) Somebody Touched Me; 6) When I Get You Baby; 7) Jack O' Diamonds; 8) I Can't Hear A Word You Say; 9) One More Time; 10) Book Of Lies; 11) I Can See Everybody's Baby; 12) Show Me.

REVIEW

By the time Atlantic Records decided to reward Ruth with a second LP, she was no longer a certified cash cow for the label — in fact, not a single song from this LP, even if it *does* include a couple of hit singles, was later included on the label's representative **Atlantic Rhythm & Blues** box set, which kind of engineers history in such a way as if Ruth Brown had vanished off the earth right after 'Lucky Lips'. Actually, she stayed with the label for about four more years, and while the quality of her material over that period *did* degrade — nothing like the crazy mind-blowing run of R&B classics from her pre-1955 period — there are still plenty of goodies here to satisfy those who love their «classic» Ruth Brown and would like her to stay as she was, not trying to evolve and adapt too much to the changing times.



Because, just like about every other 1950s artist (with but a tiny handful of exceptions), having cozily settled in her groove of jazzy, loungy, brass-heavy R&B, Ruth Brown soon became unable, or unwilling, or both, to try and scale any potentially new heights. Most of the songs on **Miss Rhythm**, taken off various A- and B-sides recorded from 1957 to 1959, could just as well have been cut in 1951–52 — their tempos, arrangements, moods all feel rather quaint and old-fashioned even compared to the changing patterns of the late Fifties, never mind today. Long story short, after 'Lucky Lips' Ruth Brown

ceased to be on the cutting edge of the music business — something that was immediately reflected in her commercial performance. Still respected as the chief architect of «The House That Ruth Built», she had first-rate professional songwriters continue to write stuff for her, like Leiber & Stoller and even the newly emerged star Bobby Darin (who actually began his career as a songwriter for other artists); but what they did write was usually quaint, dinky, old-fashioned R&B numbers that would suit the star of ‘Teardrops From My Eyes’ rather than a truly contemporary artist.

That said, decades later, when 1960, 1962, and even 1964 are just about as «old-fashioned» in our eyes as 1950, 1952, or 1954, we can look back at some of these titles without any anachronistic biases — and, perhaps, see that quite a few of them are moderately lovely, catchy, and spirited, offering us subtle variations on the «Ruth Brown Formula» that are nearly always listenable, and occasionally inspiring. Sometimes we’ll have to lower our expectations, or at least reframe them, but there shall still be a genuine fun vibe that’d be a shame to miss.

Thus, the album opens with one of Miss Brown’s biggest R&B chart hits post-1957: [‘This Little Girl’s Gone Rockin’](#), written for her by Bobby Darin and Mann Curtis and very tellingly contrasting with earlier material such as ‘Hello Little Boy’ and ‘Wild Wild Young Men’ — this is what might be called «toothless-rebellion» pop rock, a song whose melody *and* lyrics both offer a faint vision of teenage ruckus, but with all the hormones strictly kept in check. Musically, the «shock» is confined to the opening bars, when the song goes from a slow, serenade-ish intro (*"I wrote my mom a letter, and this is what I said..."*) to a fast, rocking romp which is nevertheless generally smooth and polished; and lyrically, the song really goes on a limb trying to teach us an important moral lesson — namely, that it’s only okay for a lady to "go rockin'" and "meet that special one" *after* washing the dishes, buying dinner at the grocery store, and putting fresh water in the puppy’s cup. Moreover, *"I'll be home about twelve tonight and not a minute, minute, minute later"* — odd, isn’t it, to hear this from the mouth of a performer who allegedly ran away from home at the age of 17? Definitely a far cry from: *"Wild wild young men like to have a good time / Wild men dig me, but I love a cool one"...*

That said, the song is still pretty catchy, and the Atlantic groove is still pretty hot, and the twangy guitar flourishes are still tasty, and the sentiment is still relatable — after all, not *all* the young girls who liked to go out rocking in 1959 were flaming rebels at heart; many, if not most, simply wanted to have a bit of a good time, without necessarily antagonizing their parents or intentionally defying conservative social standards. ‘This Little Girl’s Gone Rockin’ kind of speaks out for all those happy middle-of-the-road souls, and Ruth makes a great impersonation of this little exuberant personality; check out especially her excited *wows!* and *yeays!* during the fadeout. If you want to hear a not-particularly impressive version of the song,

there's always the old British cover from [Glenda Collins](#), who somehow seems to miss the song's entire point — she sings the whole thing in a strong, confident, «manly» tone as if she were the rock'n'roll reincarnation of Marlene Dietrich or something, when in reality what is needed here is a much lighter, frailer approach; and chalk it up to Ruth's versatility that she is able to get into this *other* character so well.

Unfortunately, the album does not include Ruth's biggest chart success of 1959, the slow lounge-blues ballad 'I Don't Know'; it's not particularly great, but it could have added an extra mood angle to the collection, which gives us very little of Ruth's «vulnerable» side (only the B-side 'Book Of Lies' from 1958 can probably qualify, but it's an overwrought torch ballad with too much loungey pathos in place of actual feeling, and I really don't like it very much; 'I Don't Know' establishes a much more adequate balance between vocals and music). It does, however, include 'Jack O' Diamonds', one of Brown's very last hit singles and also the only instance of her collaboration with Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller — who, it must be said, did not waste a lot of their time on Atlantic's fading star: 'Jack O' Diamonds' is a simple pop ballad about an unlucky gambler whose melody is rather generic and whose words are neither too funny nor too serious, while the B-side, 'I Can't Hear A Word You Say', is much more interesting lyrically (Ruth delightfully gets into character as she is playing a self-confident lady putting down an obnoxiously loaded «talent scout») but musically is more or less a rewrite of Leiber and Stoller's already famous 'Framed', so no big surprises here.

Other songs worth hearing at least once include: '[Just Too Much](#)', a fast-paced 'Mack The Knife' variation with an unusually prominent organ part (the instrumental break in the middle is technically simple, but totally kick-ass! wish I knew who exactly was rocking the keys with such verve); 'Somebody Touched Me', an unearthed B-side way back from 1954 with one of Ruth's sexiest deliveries ever — the melody is a very standard 'My Babe'-type blues pattern, but the way she swoons over those "*somebody touched me, in the dark last night*" lines really makes the tune into one of the naughtiest sex songs of the decade (it's up to the defendant to prove they're not narrating the details of a blind orgy!); and the slow, old-fashioned doo-wop ballad 'I Can See Everybody's Baby', also way back from 1955, with Ruth's powerful, ecstatic voice rising dramatically over the accompanying backing vocalists, as if she were really singing this from within a crowd of people, frantically looking for her one and only in a faceless crowd.

On the other hand, there *is* quite a bit of filler, particularly a bunch of vaudeville pop numbers (like 'When I Get You Baby' and 'Show Me') released in the wake of the success of 'Lucky Lips' — and all of them were flops, because they may have used similar musical formulae but they carried over none of the seductive sassiness of 'Lucky Lips'. Honestly, they should have

thrown all those away and replaced them with some of the more qualified oldies — in addition to ‘Somebody Touched Me’, for instance, a couple editions of this album also throw on ‘Love Contest’ from 1954, which, honestly, might be *the* single most «indecent» number on the R&B market of the 1950s that I’ve ever heard: "*Well, me and my baby / Had a love contest / 'Cause we just had to find out / Who could love the best*". Now *this* little girl’s really gone rockin’...

Overall, it is hard to get rid of the impression that **Ruth Brown** symbolizes «The Rise» of Atlantic’s R&B queen, whereas **Miss Rhythm** reflects «The Fall» of a star who was outliving her own epoch; but there are very different kinds of falls, and this one was not particularly embarrassing — for a lady like Ruth Brown to soothen and smoothen her formerly «wild» sound was nowhere near as disheartening as for somebody like, say, Gene Vincent, who was never versatile and whose idea of «subtlety» and «nuance» was so Neanderthal in essence that when he found himself in an epoch calling for subtlety and rejecting brutal wildness, he lost most of his commercial and critical appeal in a flash. For Ruth, it seems, stuff like ‘Wild Wild Young Men’ and ‘Mama He Treats Your Daughter Mean’ was more like just a phase — arguably, the most heavily demanded and the most artistically relevant phase in her musical life — yet she could wield and convincingly present multiple personalities, and even if you get bored with much of this material, it is hard to deny that in her prime years, the lady was capable of just about anything. That her musical career did not really survive into the next decade is more a result of the general «Fifties’ Curse» than her personal shortcomings.

