

"The Johnny Givins Originals" CD Review

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John Givins has been coming along to the Society Concerts as a regular for a number of years now under the nom de plume of **Johnny G.** We've gotten to know his family, particularly Jen, his songwriting daughter, as they've come and performed.

We have laughed at John's humorous material, listened seriously to his dramatic material and nodded to his themed songs as he is a consummate show man. Coming from doing years of theatre work he knows how to work crowds.

So, now Johnny has gone and done it! He's released some CDs, which he had at the Society Concert. I grabbed one to do the reviews of entitled **"The Johnny Givins Originals"**, with John resplendent in his...of course Panama hat and a big smile.

The first song, *"Terrible Night"* starts with howling winds and chain clinks as though you were in a dark castle on a stormy night. Then the chords, ring smooth and clean, as Johnny's voice comes in with a Bryan Ferry tone to his Bela Lugosi style monologue. Similar in style to the *"Monster Mash"* a 1962 for Bobby 'Boris' Pickett & the Crypt-Kicker 5 it details what can happen on a 'terrible night'. Not sure why it was a terrible night, but it sounds like someone took something they shouldn't have? Maybe it owes a little to *"Love Potion No. 9"* (The Clovers in 1956, or Searchers 1964) in the reasons why some things need to be left alone? However, I like what Johnny has done to the beginning of the chorus, the drum change really works to bring out that it's the chorus. "I was as high as a kite", "Boy, oh, boy did I look white", "All of my senses started rocking and reeling", are some great lines. I like the outro's almost ad lib ending, with definite touches of *"The Monster Mash"* especially with the laugh. Are you sure it was just about a stormy night, where you tried to scare your girlfriend, with stories of monsters?? A good recording of the song, though, Johnny. One day you'll have to send me the lyrics to put in The Songsmith.

There wasn't much of a pause, or gap, between songs when *"Make It Legal"* charges in. Full of violins and piano the song features Johnny's middle-of-the-road jazz balladeer style, a la Engelbert Humperdinck. There is a slight country influence in the theme of a proposal, which is to make the relationship "legal" i.e. marriage. So, it's the romantic side of Johnny's nature, hence the violins and balladeer entries. There are musical moments that hark back to The Beatles' *"Octopus' Garden"*, but in a much slower vein. I like the use of the backing harmonies as it enhances the piece. Maybe leaning more towards Tony Bennett in the middle eight. I like the pauses, especially before the hook lines. The whistling solo is great, I just wish it had been at the beginning, and maybe in the middle as another hook?

Johnny has a vocal that really suits the middle-of-the-road jazz balladeer style, which works really well in RSLs. I just wish there had been a change of style, for variety, on the next song, *"When You Hold A Baby In Your Arms"*. It doesn't have the violins, which distracted a bit from the vocals in the last song, so the tones of Johnny's vocal delivery shine through well enhancing the recording. I feel a better keyboard, maybe like the Grand at the Paddo RSL would have been a better background choice? You can tell it's written about one of Johnny's children as there is a lot of paternal emotion in both the delivery and lyrics. There's a sense of wonder and happiness in the song. Then the song takes a real left turn as the synth drums kick in with an upbeat tempo. An interesting juxtaposition between 80's beats and 60's crooner style, that is quite tasty, Johnny's own style. Once again Johnny uses a whistling solo that really works well. There's a country essence in the middle, with its repeat of "Hold a baby in your arms" and whiplash synth drums, but it did make me scratch my head? Maybe Johnny has Tamworth ambitions? Quite a good song that goes in unexpected directions. Think Tony Bennett singing with Madonna's 80's beats. Its quite catchy in the outro repeats.

We all heard *"Teddy On The Floor"* a song Johnny had written for his daughter, Jennifer, when she was really young and had a teddy bear bigger than her. With just the piano start, and a backing violin, you know you are in crooner territory, but I like the close mic technique that Johnny uses to sing with as it makes the song more personal. The enunciation is great adding a precision to the lyrics that give them a real crispness. A father's observations of his daughter's love for her big teddy bear, as well as that paternal love for your children all fathers have. I like how the bass guitar comes in in the main chord progression, with the song building its dynamics. This such a heartfelt song that its warmth is amazing as it captures a time, a person and a place – Jennifer is now a grown woman, recently engaged, but this song will always have her as a young child in its loving arms. Something I think Jennifer will always value in later years. I like the talked, semi sung bridges as it adds to the emotional realism. The drums sneak in as the song builds, there is even some Hawaiian style leads, which give a different slant and take the song into the rock pathway. The ending leads well fading into a little girl's voice (Is that Jennifer as a child?), with two parents' saying "Goodnight Jennifer, we love you" at the coda. A lot of sentiment, but this captures a family at one point in time.

Violins, syths and piccolo style keys start off *"September"*, the fifth track on the album. With tones of Barry Manilow Johnny croons "Sometimes", which is one of the song's hooks. I like the guitar picking as it adds a country sense to the atmosphere. Maybe you could enter this song in a Tamworth song competition? I like the soaring vocals it really suits the style. Then the drums and backing vocals come in a la early 1970's style, having a late Elvis Presley musical build which works well with this recording. You really do need to have a good voice to cover this song, and Johnny delivers. A great soaring ending.

The start of *"My Girl"* (Not the Temptation's song, this is an original) has me thinking of The Marcel's version of *"Blue Moon"*, with its 50's do wop mix. There's touches of The Platter's *"The Great Pretender"*, or even songs by Franki Valli & The Four Seasons in the style. The imagery is straight out of the 50's, but the vocal style is Val Doonican like. There is even the high pitched "eeooo"s in this obvious honouring of that ages' music as Johnny has a romantic edge, and this is all drive-ins, finned cars and petticoats.



Johnny further delves into his romantic nature with two Valentine Day songs he sung at the last Concert. The first of these, on this album, is *"Love You, Valentine"*, whose start reminds me of *"A Whiter Shade Of Pale"*, with its organ style in a more Barry Manilow 70's essence, especially when Johnny's vocal comes in. I like how there is a pull back, so its only soft organ and bass stabs behind the verses, as it allows the lyrics to breathe. Definitely one for the romantics, even the bass has that fat early seventies bass in it, typical of the middle-of-the-road jazz balladeer from that era. Once again Johnny uses a build, with the drums coming in, although I prefer the snare rim hits of the later sections, rather than a full kit. The repeated "They love you Valentine", sets up a query, is the song about a lover talking to his Valentine, or someone talking to a hopeful Valentine, or referencing St Valentine? There are many questions for the romantic music lover to answer! One way, or another, the repeats are a good hook of the song. "It's the romantic time of the year" – you know where Johnny's thoughts lie. Once again there are soaring vocals and whistling solos, a trade mark Johnny G sound. If you ever need a whistling solo on a recording, I can tell you Johnny is your musician! He has great control, vibrato and fluency. Then the horns come in in the fade out, completing that atmosphere.

The following Valentine Day song, *"Valentine's Day Feeling"*, has recently been played on Radio 90.1 to acclaim on Valentine's Day, much to the delight of Johnny. The recording being played is the same one as on this album. A synth pad is used at the beginning, then the drums and bass come in a soft rock style, while a cabasa is rhythmically struck, then it rocks on with the vocals. An almost New Wave in rhythm, but with touches of early 70's soul in the vocal tones. The middle eight's use of violins and driven guitar add a very modern tone, which would have appealed to the radio station. Especially as Johnny's vocal is so clear and precise. There is still a 50's chordal change in the main verses, but that is allowed in romantic songs as they hark back to an earlier, more romantic time. Johnny's vocal really soars near the end, giving the recording a real dynamic build.

Last song of the album is *"She's Suzie"*, which starts off in a similar crooner style, asking those pertinent questions in a relationship. It reminds me a bit of The Monkees' hit *"Valerie"* in its melody. Weirdly I also get a whiff of Marty Robbin's *"El Paso"* in the song's essence. "She's Suzie" is quite strong lyrical hook, with its alliteration grabbing the ear well. Soft rock in the Barry Manilow style the song details the good points of the girl, and do I deserve her? The run downs and builds remind me of something I can't put my finger on, but they are very typical musical devices of the late 60's and early 70's so it could be any number of songs, even some Easybeat's material. The chorus melody also is very close to something else I can't quite recall. Then again, that could be a good thing as an almost melody can mean a hit.

Overall Johnny Givens has produced a good package of original songs in an album. Its not recorded at the top-notch studio level, but definitely good enough for demo level and so for fans a faithful record of some of his material. I prefer Johnny's more humorous songs, like *"Terrible Night"*, or rockier songs etc and this is a more emotional, more romantic album. However, if you like that middle-of-the-road jazz balladeer style then this is a definite album for you. Light, breezy with soaring vocals. For some people this is just what the doctor ordered.

