



"I Hear You Knocking" - Smiley Lewis (g, voc); a.o.

Pure Pleasure LP9141

Smiley Lewis: I Hear You Knocking

Format: LP / standard sleeve

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Dave Bartholomew has often been quoted to the effect that Smiley Lewis was a »bad luck singer«, because he never sold more than 100,000 copies of his Imperial singles. In retrospect, Lewis was a lucky man in many respects - he enjoyed stellar support from New Orleans' ace sessioneers at Cosimo's, benefited from top-flight material and production (by Bartholomew), and left behind a legacy of marvelous Crescent City R&B. We're lucky he was there, that's for sure.

Born with the unwieldy handle of Overton Lemons, Lewis hit the Big Easy in his mid-teens, armed with a big, booming voice and some guitar skills. He played clubs in the French Quarter, often with pianist Tuts Washington (and sometimes billed as 'Smiling' Lewis).

As the New Orleans R&B sound developed rapidly during the early '50s, so did Lewis. He scored his first national hit in 1952 with "The Bells Are Ringing", but enjoyed his biggest sales in 1955 with the exultant "I Hear You Knocking" (its immortal piano solo courtesy of Huey Smith). Here's where that alleged bad luck rears its head - pop chanteuse Gale Storm swiped his thunder for any pop crossover possibilities with her ludicrous whitewashed cover of the plaintive ballad.

But Storm wouldn't dare come near its roaring flip, the Joe Turnerish rocker "Bumpity Bump," or some of Smiley Lewis' other classic mid-'50s jumpers ("Down the Road", "Lost Weekend", "Real Gone Lover"). In front of the Crescent City's hottest players (saxists Lee Allen, Clarence Hall, and Herb Hardesty usually worked his dates), Lewis

roared like a lion.

Strangely, Fats Domino fared better with some of Smiley Lewis' tunes than Lewis did ("Blue Monday" in particular). Similarly, Elvis Presley cleaned up the naughty "One Night" and hit big with it, but Lewis's original had already done well in 1956.

By then, stomach cancer was eating the once-stout singer up. He died in the autumn of 1966, all but forgotten outside his New Orleans home base.

The ensuing decades have rectified that miscarriage of justice, however. Smiley Lewis' place as one of the greatest New Orleans R&B artists of the 1950s is certainly assured.

It's magnificent, exuberant R&B, and deserved a much better national fate than it enjoyed.

Recording: At Cosimo's (New Orleans)

Production: Dave Bartholomew