

“Cry Me a River” – Julie London (1955)

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Essay by Michael Owen (guest post)*



Julie London

An unknown song...an unknown singer...an unknown label. Not an ideal combination for a hit record.

Julie London was born Nancy Gayle Peck in Santa Rosa, California, in 1926. As a child, London was surrounded by music. Her parents were singers who often performed on the radio and at nightclubs in San Bernardino, California, and she soaked up songs and a relaxed vocal style that matured into a uniquely throaty purr as she reached adulthood.

At the age of sixteen, London was discovered by an agent who spotted her running an elevator at an upscale men’s clothing store on Hollywood Boulevard. She appeared in 11 movies during the 1940s and 1950s--among them supporting roles opposite Edward G. Robinson and Gary Cooper --but with little success, and retired at the age of 25 to raise a family with her husband, actor Jack Webb (“Dragnet”). After the couple’s divorce two years later, London intended to resume her acting career, when fate arrived in the person of songwriter Bobby Troup (“Route 66”).

Troup encouraged London to sing professionally from the moment they met. The natural, unaffected qualities in her voice set her apart from other female vocalists of the day, he reasoned, and would help her regain a footing in show business. While London often sang around the house--she described herself as a “living room singer”--with friends who gathered around her piano at the end of the evening, she had no interest in singing for her supper. Undeterred by her fierce reluctance, Troup’s contacts in the music business soon brought London a booking--without an audition--at a small Hollywood nightclub in the summer of 1955. Accompanied solely by the influential jazz guitarist Barney Kessel and double-bassist Ray Leatherwood, who succeeded Ralph Peña midway through the engagement, London’s intimate performances of standards from the Great American Songbook were immediately successful among the Hollywood cognoscenti.

Two weeks of shows became ten. One night, Troup sent Si Waronker, the owner of a new Los Angeles-based independent record label, to see London perform. Impressed by the uniquely-individual sound London made with just guitar and bass, and the visceral effect her physical presence had on audiences, Waronker signed her as one of the first artists on Liberty Records.

“Cry Me a River,” the song that cemented London’s reputation, came out of the blue and was a last-minute addition to her first recording sessions. Arthur Hamilton, a high school boyfriend of London’s, had been working as a songwriter for the production company of her ex-husband, Jack Webb. (She had helped Hamilton land the job.) In 1955, Webb was making “Pete Kelly’s Blues,” a movie set in the 1920s with appearances by singers Peggy Lee and Ella Fitzgerald. The lyrics for one of Hamilton’s songs intended for Fitzgerald included the word “plebeian,” which Webb told the songwriter no one would believe her singing. Hamilton was unwilling to change the word. Webb dropped the number from the picture.

A few nights later, Hamilton played the song for London at her house. She immediately fell in love with its haunting melody and coolly defiant lyrics, hearing echoes of her troubled relationship with Webb. Hamilton said “yes” when London asked if she could record it. As with all of the arrangements for London’s early performances, “Cry Me a River” was very quickly sketched out in a head arrangement by the singer and her accompanists. Guitarist Barney Kessel and bass player Ray Leatherwood had never heard or seen the music to “Cry Me a River” when London suggested it in the last few minutes of a recording session at Western Recorders. It would be the one new song added to the collection of standards taken from her nightclub act that had already been laid down. Captured in just a few takes, Kessel’s chords and Leatherwood’s descending bass introduction set the stage for London’s coolly-detached performance that kept the slow pace of Hamilton’s original and allowed his lyrics to come through with the precision they required.

Test pressings of the album were sent to disc jockeys around the country, and they found “Cry Me a River” as intriguing and unique as its singer did. The whispered, murmured sound of “Cry Me a River” was unlike anything they’d heard in recent years. London’s soft-sell approach, and the understated quality of the record, was a sharp contrast to contemporary hits such as “Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing” and “I Hear You Knockin’.”

Liberty Records released the song as a single in Fall of 1955. Aided by television appearances on Perry Como’s popular variety program and Steve Allen’s “Tonight” show, “Cry Me a River” began an unlikely five month run on the pop singles chart. It was Liberty’s first hit and the company had difficulty fulfilling the demand for orders from record distributors. The release of London’s first album, “Julie Is Her Name,” which topped industry charts, soon followed.

London had rejected the idea of recording her first record in front of a live audience, rightly judging that her “thimbleful of voice” would be drowned out by the clattering of dishes and conversation. Audio engineer John Neal recognized that London lacked the ability to project her voice, and asked her to move in as closely as she could to the sensitive Telefunken microphone, which accurately captured the intimate sound of London’s breathing on the recording tape. The

addition of a subtle echo gave a near three-dimensional presence to her voice that encouraged listeners to come ever closer to their speakers.

Shocked by her unexpected success, London's New York nightclub debut in January 1956 was another major milestone, and her appearance in the hit movie musical "The Girl Can't Help It," in which she sang "Cry Me a River" as an ethereal presence haunting actor Tom Ewell, helped cement her relationship to the song. London remade the song, complete with strings and a tinkling cocktail piano, for a 1959 single. For the remainder of a career that took her around the world, from nightclubs in Rio de Janeiro to Tokyo, to a long series of engagements at the Tropicana Hotel in Las Vegas, London sang to audiences that could never get enough of her first hit.

"Cry Me a River" is now a standard and has been covered by many artists in a wealth of diverse styles. Barbra Streisand included the song on her 1963 debut album, while Ray Charles and Joe Cocker delivered soulful renditions in 1964 and 1970, respectively. In 1993, it was released as the first single by the lounge revival act Combustible Edison, and was returned to its roots by Canadian jazz/pop vocalist Diana Krall eight years later.

But there can only be one first recording, one chance to make something of nothing. Although Julie London released more than 350 recordings during her career as a singer (1955-1981), "Cry Me a River"—with its subtle, and uniquely-suitable, guitar and bass accompaniment—remains her most popular, a signature tune that set a standard few have ever equaled.

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