

# “Cry Me a River”—Julie London (1955)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



*Julie London*

Though it's a complete cliché to say it, about Julie London, it's true: if she hadn't existed, we would have had to invent her.

...Because, when you listen to Julie London, suddenly the room is dark and smoke-filled, and it's immediately 'round midnight. Few other performers, in any genre, are so completely transportative in their style and delivery.

Julie London so fully embodies a particular musical milieu and genre of performance that it's impossible to conceptualize it without thinking of her. So fully does London's image, persona, and, of course, her voice, convey and encompass the world of smoky nightclubs and intimate stages that every would-be chanteuse whenever they take to the stage to sing out a song, are (whether they know it or not, whether they credit her or not) both channeling and paying homage to Miss Julie London.

Fittingly, the ascent of Julie London into show business has a fairy tale, only-in-Hollywood, bound-to-happen ring to it. Legend—*print the legend!*—has it that Julie London (then Julie Peck, born 1926 in Santa Rosa, California) was discovered while working as an elevator operator at a department store on Hollywood Blvd. One day, former actress and then talent agent (and wife of matinee idol Alan Ladd) Sue Carol came across the young Julie and told the then 15-year old, 5'3" beauty that she should be in pictures....

London entered immortality though in 1955 with the recording and release of her first single, “Cry Me a River,” written by a former classmate of hers, Arthur Hamilton.

Delivered in a soft and breathy style, “Cry” is basically a revenge anthem but it nevertheless becomes a romantic come-hither. Backed only by two instruments (Barney Kessel on guitar and Ray Leatherwood on bass), the song, released over the newly-founded Liberty music label, caught the nation's imagination and would go on to hit all the charts (songs played by disc jockeys, sold in stores, those selected on juke boxes). Ultimately, the single would sell over 800,000 copies, a most impressive feat in those days before chain music superstores and digital downloads. It also propelled London's debut album, “Julie Is Her Name,” to the top of the charts that same year.

At the time of the song's release and subsequent success, critics and journalists fell all over themselves trying to describe London's vocal magic. “Smoky” and “sultry” were perhaps the

two most called-upon words but other adjectives included “sexy,” “slinky,” “sensual,” “seductive,” “suggestive,” “sophisticated,” and even a few descriptors that didn’t start with “S”!

Adding, no doubt, to some of the single’s appeal was the 45 and LP cover art which featured a photo of a dewy London revealing a daring level of décolletage.

In his 1997 book on “cocktail culture,” “The Cocktail,” author Joseph Lanza spelled out how and why Julie London was the perfect embodiment of that “Mad Men” era:

Julie London emerged as the consummate cocktail siren. Movie star, club performer, recording artist and occasional television personality, she was the perfect physical type for conveying aerodynamic glamour in the new age of mass-produced Frigidaire’s and televisions. She was a blend of Dionysian flesh and Detroit steel, streamlined car and cocktail shaker combined. Her cool, sleek supple contours, cobalt blue eyes and high tech vocals satisfied America’s fascination for what Marshall McLuhan called “the assembly line goddess.”

Often it seemed that it was as much Julie London’s face and figure as her voice that people gravitated towards. Bob Hope once famously called her a “London in better shape than Paris.” But pretty, provocative pictures don’t sell records, certainly not 23 of them, the total number of original LP’s London recorded during her career. London herself often lamented that she only had a “thimbleful of a voice.” She said once in an early interview:

I’m a girl who needs amplification. You can put that down to my style. Somebody else said I have a well-smoked voice. By that maybe he meant that I smoke too many cigarettes. As for what you call “breathy,” I’ve never learned how to breathe properly. I always run out of breath during a song; then I gasp in the wrong places... I have to stay real close to the mike....

As has been pointed out before, of the top female vocalists of the 1950s (Peggy Lee, Dinah Shore, Rosemary Clooney, et.al.), London was the only one without roots in the big band era; she was not a belter. Yet “limited” vocal ranges never held back other top vocalists like Peggy Lee and Anita O’Day who also each made the very most of their limited octaves.

Actually, London could easily have crafted a long career for herself by playing it safe, falling back repeatedly on the breathy and sexy aspects of her voice, but she didn’t. She refused to be one-note and almost always packed a little surprise somewhere in her songs and vocals. In her performances, just when you think you’ve got her figured out, there will inevitably be that subtle, unexpected inflection or an alteration in tone or an extra little bit of emotion at the end of a lyric, placed there to remind you (as if you needed reminding), that you are listening to more than just sex symbol who can sing; you are very much within the aural presence of a gifted and resourceful artist.

Furthermore, London was never limited, or restrained, by her range when it came to her choice of material. Though we don’t know how much coaxing it might have taken in the studio, over the course of her recording career, London bravely took on, recorded and released some pretty challenging songs. “Lush Life” is included on her “Around Midnight” collection from 1960 and “I Love You Porgy” is included on her “Love Letters” album of 1962.

Furthermore, London proved herself fearless in bravely putting her stamp on some standards made famous by others—“I Left My Heart in San Francisco” (from her “The End of the World” LP in 1963); “The Man That Got Away” (from “Love on the Rocks,” 1962); “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend” (from “Whatever Julie Wants,” 1961) and “God Bless the Child” (from “For

the Night People,” 1966). She even did an album of all Cole Porter tunes—“All Through the Night”—in 1965.

With the exception of a one-off recording of “My Funny Valentine” in 1981, London stopped recording in 1969. Today, she is best remembered for her role on the 1970’s action series “Emergency!” But, regardless, she has never left us. She was one of the inspirations behind cartoon character Jessica Rabbit and was clearly referenced by Michelle Pfeiffer’s slinking on the piano in “The Fabulous Baker Boys” and rendering “Makin’ Whoopee,” a song London covered on her 1959 album “Your Number Please.” And Sinéad O’Connor acknowledged Julie as an influence in the liner notes of her 1992 collection of standards “Am I Not Your Girl.”

Thankfully, as well, almost all of London’s original albums are out on CD. And Youtube is aglow with various vintage performance clips. So, it’s not too late to “rediscover” her. So do it. Go get an album. Fire up the “hi-fi.” And turn down the lights and listen. Julie is (still) her name.

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