VINTAGE★ROCK PRESENTS

The Ultimate 1950s Rock'n'Roll Companion

YOUR GUIDE TO THE DECADE THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

Featuring
Elvis Presley
Eddie Cochran
Chuck Berry
Buddy Holly
Little Richard
Jerry Lee Lewis
Bill Haley
and more...

Plus THE TOP 100 50s TRACKS

ANTHEM PUBLISHING
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VINTAGE*ROCK PRESENTS

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WELCOME

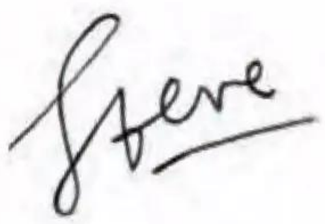
Never had the world seen a cultural and generational earthquake as it experienced in the 50s. Rock'n'roll may have been present in nascent form before 1950, but the following years would see it truly detonate, creating international superstars in Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, Bill Haley, Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley. In this *Vintage Rock* special, we shine a spotlight on that epochal decade, and celebrate many of its most influential artists.

We, of course, have features on the greats of the era, but we're also honouring some of the decade's less celebrated, but equally crucial, voices. Gene Vincent, Johnny Burnette and Billy Lee Riley may not be names that your regular Joe in the street will instantly recognise, but their 45s were just as incendiary, and helped shape the sound of music for years to come.

Elsewhere in this issue, we're saluting some of the very best albums of the era, including *The 'Chirping' Crickets*, *Rock Around The Clock*, *Here's Little Richard*, *Chuck Berry On Top*, Eddie Cochran's *Singing To My Baby* and Elvis Presley's first two seismic long-players. We're also counting down the Top 100 45s from that game-changing decade. There'll be plenty you'll know but hopefully a few more obscure gems for you to get your ears around.

We also have a feature exploring the roots of rock'n'roll, and articles on the smash movie *The Girl Can't Help It*, the great Bo Diddley and that tragic day in February 1959 when we lost Buddy Holly, The Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens.

We hope you enjoy this deep dive into music's most important decade.



Steve O'Brien
Editor

DON'T MISS OUR GREAT SUBS OFFER!
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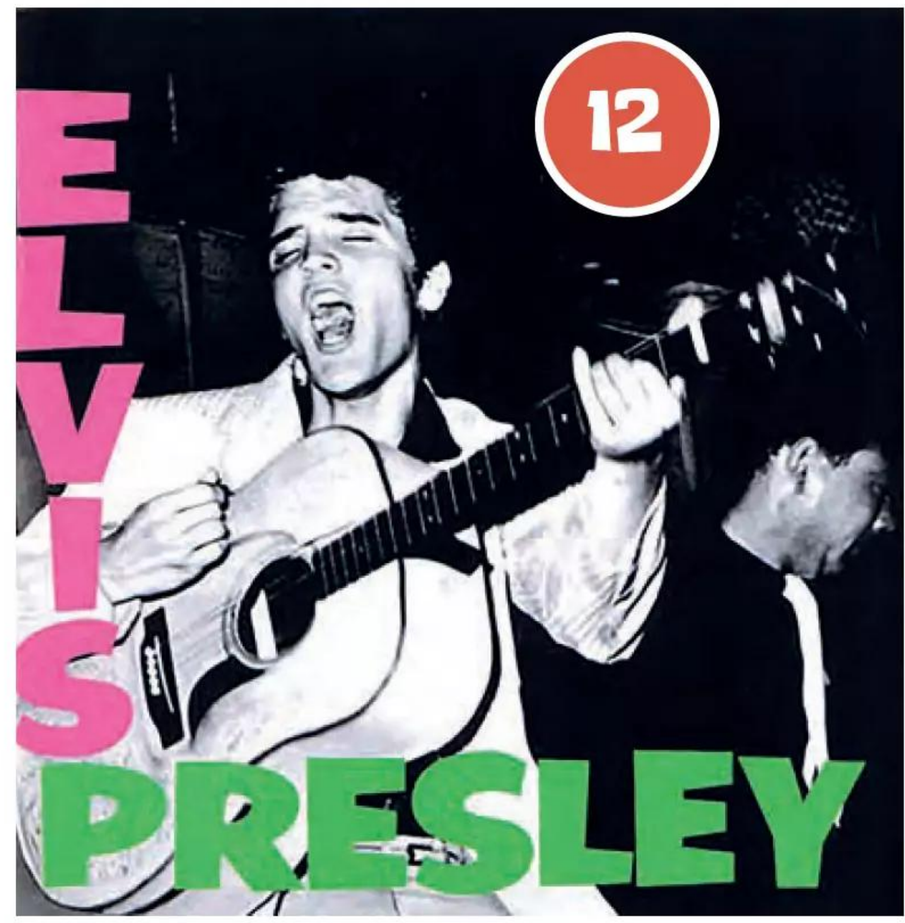

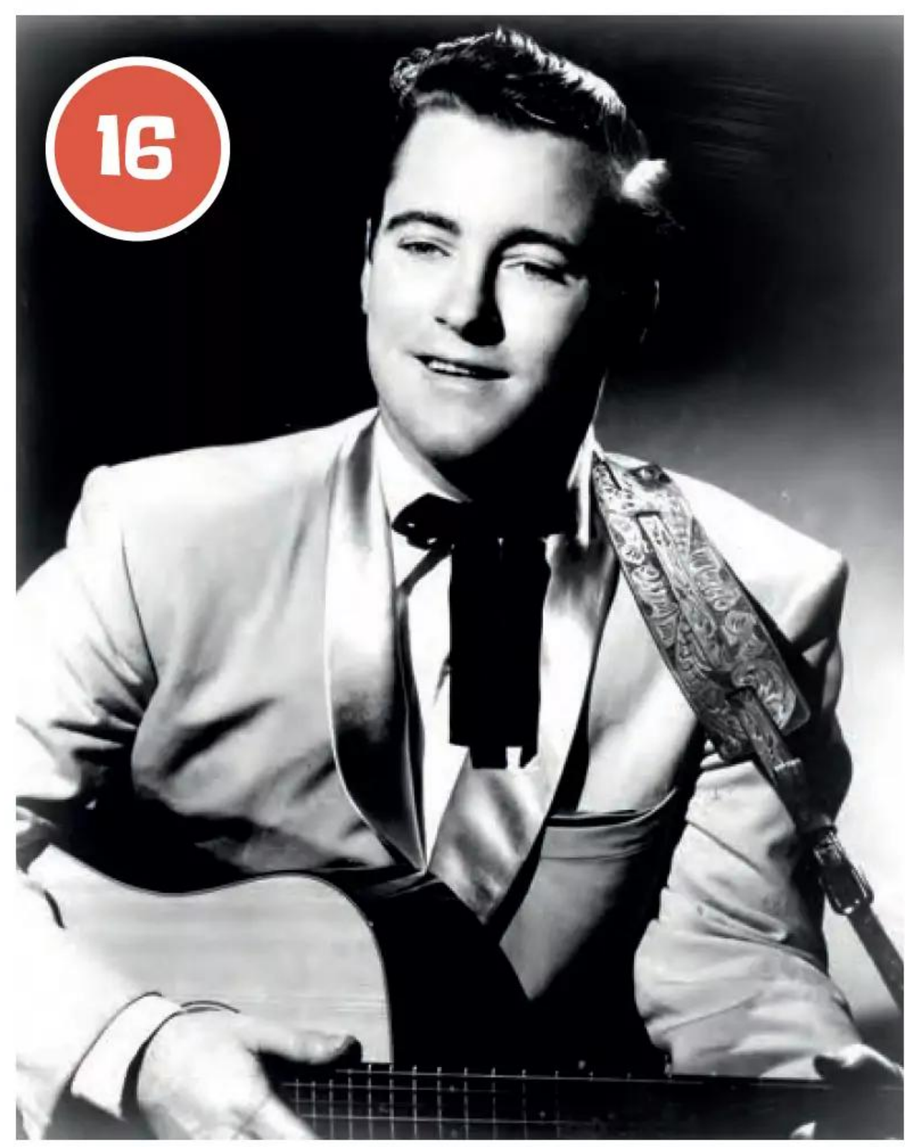

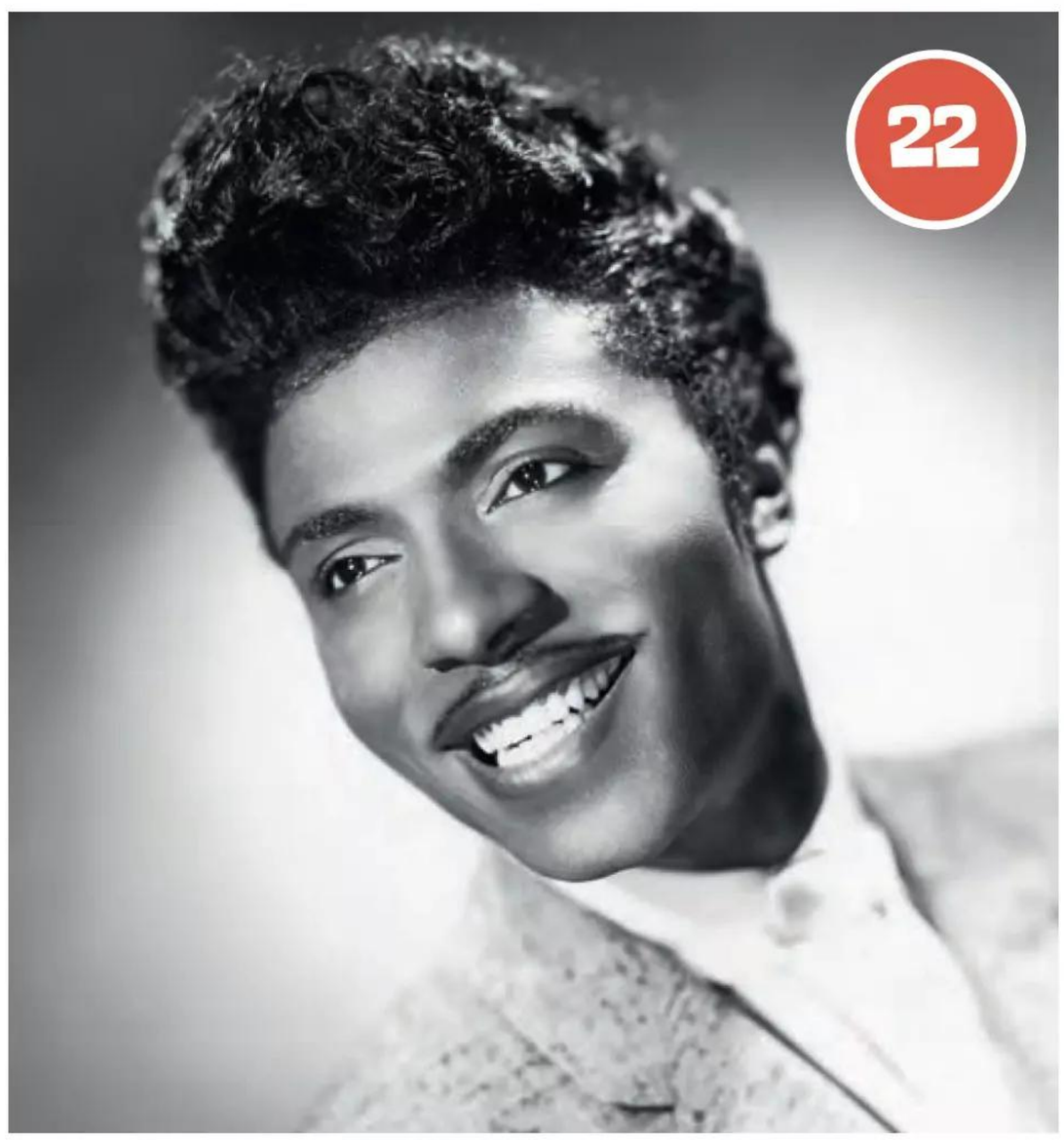

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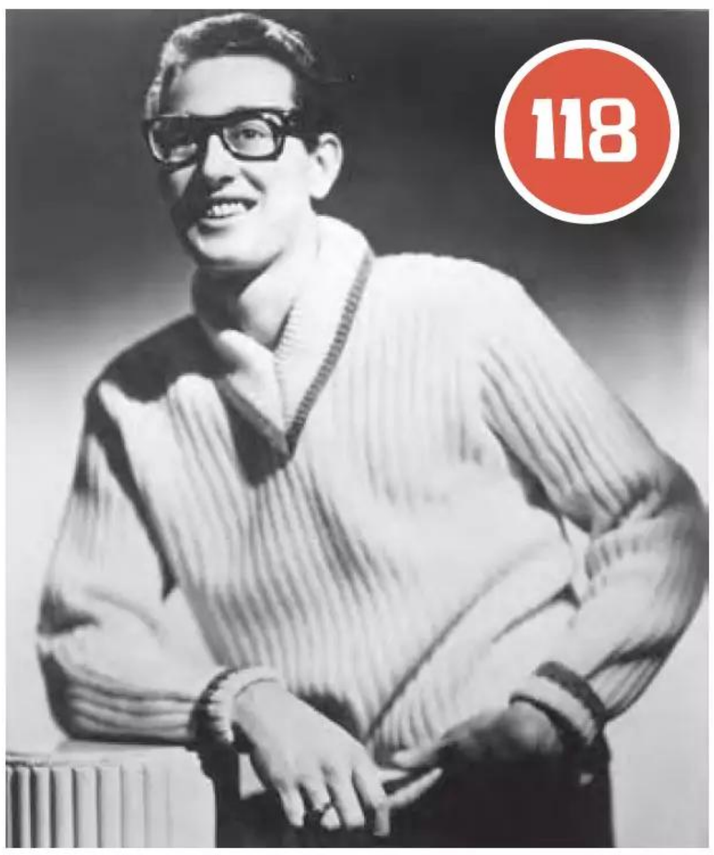

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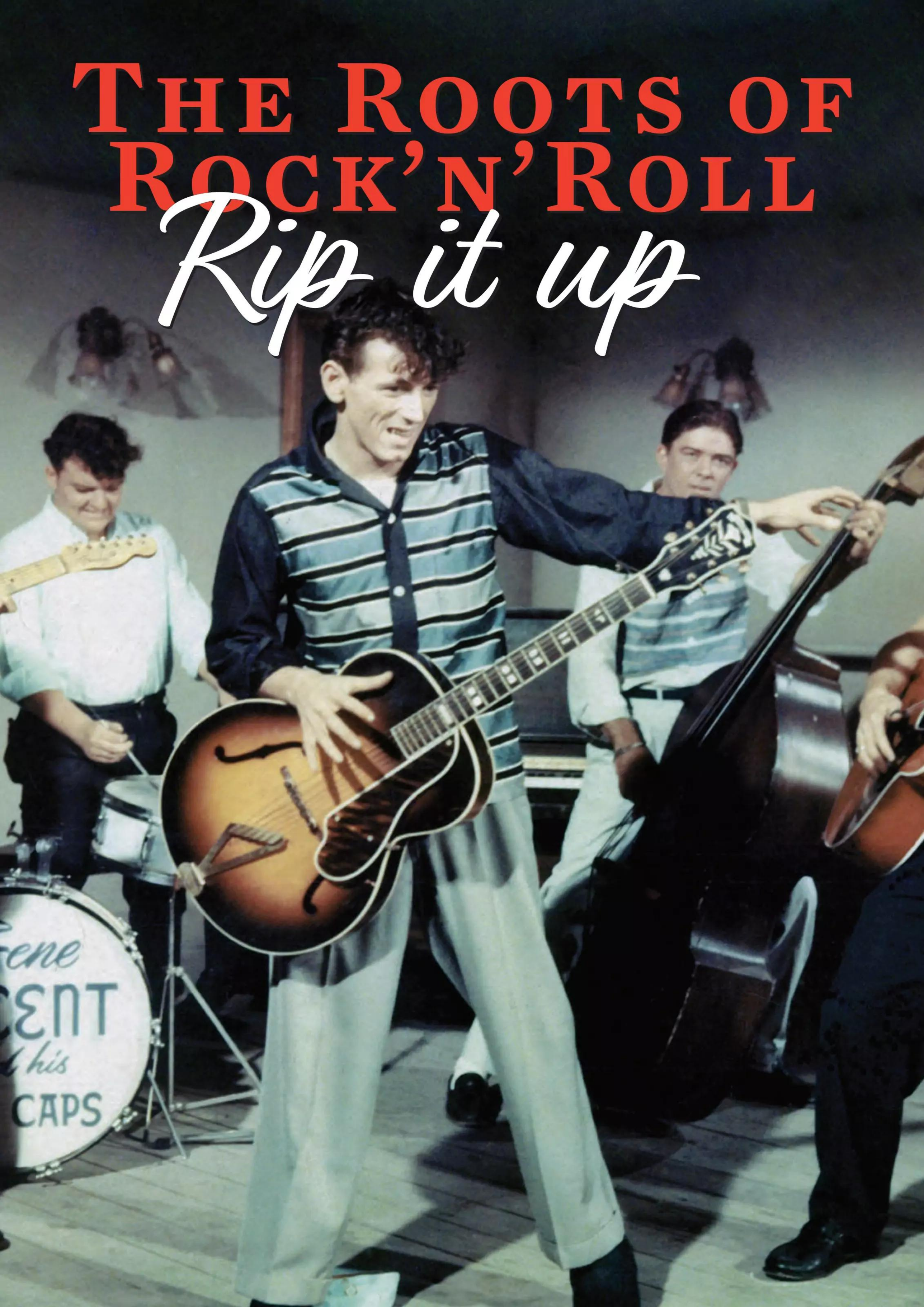
The Roots of Rock'n'Roll

Rip it up



When blues, country, jazz and R&B collided, rock'n'roll was born. We pay tribute to the stars of the music that turned the world upside down...

© Michael Ochs Archives/Getty

Music fans have been arguing about the origins of rock'n'roll for decades. Some will claim the key lies with Muddy Waters, or Howlin' Wolf, or Hank Williams, or Ike Turner, or a host of other artists and records both famous and obscure. In truth, rock'n'roll was a convergence of influences, some local – the live music spilling out of clubs, dances and restaurants – and some national, thanks to the spread of specialist radio programming. For back in the days when learning opportunities were harder to come by and more keenly absorbed, a 14-year old kid clutching his $7 guitar in some isolated corner of the United States could spin across the frequencies and, among the usual stifling fare of middle-aged ballads and string-laden popular songs, happen across stations playing new and thrilling music.

blues and R&B. Of course, there was also gospel music, whose wind blew stronger the further down south you were born, and jazz of many different shades.

Through the 1930s and into the 1940s, horn players claimed most of the musical glory. But after the war, the new electric guitar became the defining instrument for a new kind of rhythm-driven rebel music. Its combination of background and solo abilities, plus the exhilarating sound of an amp being pushed way past its design parameters, gave the instrument an advantage over the saxophone, for several decades the king of melodic decadence. Les Paul's fleet-fingered speeded-up melodies hinted of almost unimaginable capabilities: so did the young Chet Atkins' complex country style. An

TODAY'S CD REISSUES ARE A MIND-BOGGLING RESOURCE FOR THOSE LOOKING FOR THE FIRE AND VERVE OF ORIGINAL AMERICAN ROCK'N'ROLL

From one side of the tracks, the ultra-safe music policy of trad country shows like the Grand Ole Opry would sometimes be shattered by the hair-raising whine of Hank Williams and his guitarists Bob McNett or Sammy Pruit. Hank wore a hat and suit and sang in his own lethal take on the country style, but much of his music edged eerily close to rock'n'roll: Duane Eddy once pointed out the unmistakable similarities between Hank Williams' *Move It On Over* (1947) and Bill Haley's *Rock Around The Clock* (written '52; Haley's version, 1954).

Then there was the inescapably propulsive rhythms of boogie-woogie piano playing and the 12-bar and eight-bar patterns of blues: the stylish T-Bone Walker, the stripped-down electric Chicago sound of Muddy Waters, the transcendental drone of John Lee Hooker, plus hundreds of bands playing variants on piano and horn-driven jump

entirely new type of quartet group was born: drums, bass, guitar, vocal.

The golden age of rock'n'roll was brief – about 1954 to 1959. In this fashion-led, quick-hit world of tiny record labels and appalling business practices, musicians' fortunes rose like a rocket and came down like a stick. Today, we're incredibly lucky, for the wealth of CD reissues now available – plus Spotify, as an exploratory starting point – that form a mind-boggling resource. Famous names and one-hit hopefuls are all there for the appreciation of those looking for the fire and the verve of original American rock'n'roll. There were just a handful of years before pop absorbed and sweetened the initial blast and before fashion shifted over to surf and instrumental music in the not-so-safe hands of Dick Dale and Link Wray but there's still more incredible music out there than you can handle, just waiting to be discovered. ➨

BILL HALEY AND HIS COMETS

The fault-line between sax-led jump blues and guitar-driven rock'n'roll runs right thought the middle of Bill Haley And His Comets. Haley started out as a Western Swing artist and first achieved fame as a cowboy-style yodeller, but he adopted a new beat and fresh vocal stylings without hesitation. With his good-natured appearance and kiss-curled hair Haley might lack threat and sex-drive to today's eyes, but so early did he appear on the scene – *Rock The Joint* came out in 1952, *Crazy Man Crazy* in '53 – that nothing but the music really mattered. Haley's wonderful band played a huge part in his success: the guitarist on the early records was Danny Cedrone, who also played on *Rock Around The Clock*, and after his death in 1954 the slot was occupied by Frank Beecher who contributed more brilliant guitar playing, sometimes sharing the spotlight with the sax player, as on the harmonised leads on *Mambo Rock* (1955).

Classic tracks ***Rock Around The Clock, Shake, Rattle And Roll*** and ***Razzle Dazzle***

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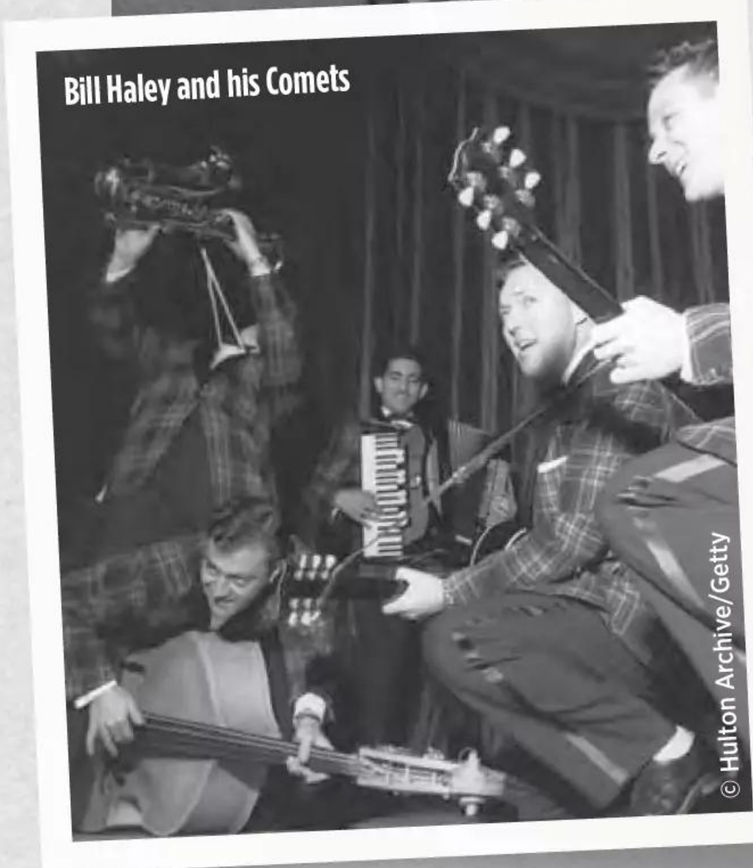

Bill Haley and his Comets
© Hulton Archive/Getty

Scotty Moore, Elvis and Bill Black broadcasting for the *Lousiana Hayride* at the Shreveport Auditorium
© Michael Ochs Archives/Getty

ELVIS & SCOTTY MOORE

It was a hot day in 1954 when Sun Records producer Sam Phillips made rock'n'roll history in his small recording studio. The singer was Elvis Presley, the bassist Bill Black, the guitarist Scotty Moore – the last two being experienced pickers who held down a regular slot with a combo called the Starlight Wranglers at a Memphis nitespot called the Bon Air. As the fledgling outfit ran down a selection of covers, Scotty Moore reached into his Merle Travis/Chet Atkins bag of tricks, interjecting stabbing fills when he could. The second tune was *Blue Moon Of Kentucky*, the third or fourth was *That's Alright Mama*. Even today, Elvis's delivery makes these raw takes accelerate out of the speakers like a juiced-up '38 Ford with the pedal jammed to the metal.

Elvis' band played a crucial part. Scotty Moore combined jazz, country and blues to define rockabilly guitar. For all his knowledge of Chet Atkins plus hip jazzers like Django Reinhardt, Tal Farlow and Johnny Smith, Moore was a wild player who could produce chaotic, colliding chords and runs. It's this crazy streak that makes Scotty such a lasting figure. *Too Much* is the sound of a guitarist losing the plot. All the early Elvis sessions are full of happy accidents: "The solo on *Hound Dog* sounds like a load of scaffolding poles being dropped on the ground," blues rocker Alvin Lee once said. "I once asked Scotty Moore how he did it and he said, "I just pulled a handful o' them strings. If you like, I'll tell you about another time I messed up, too..."'

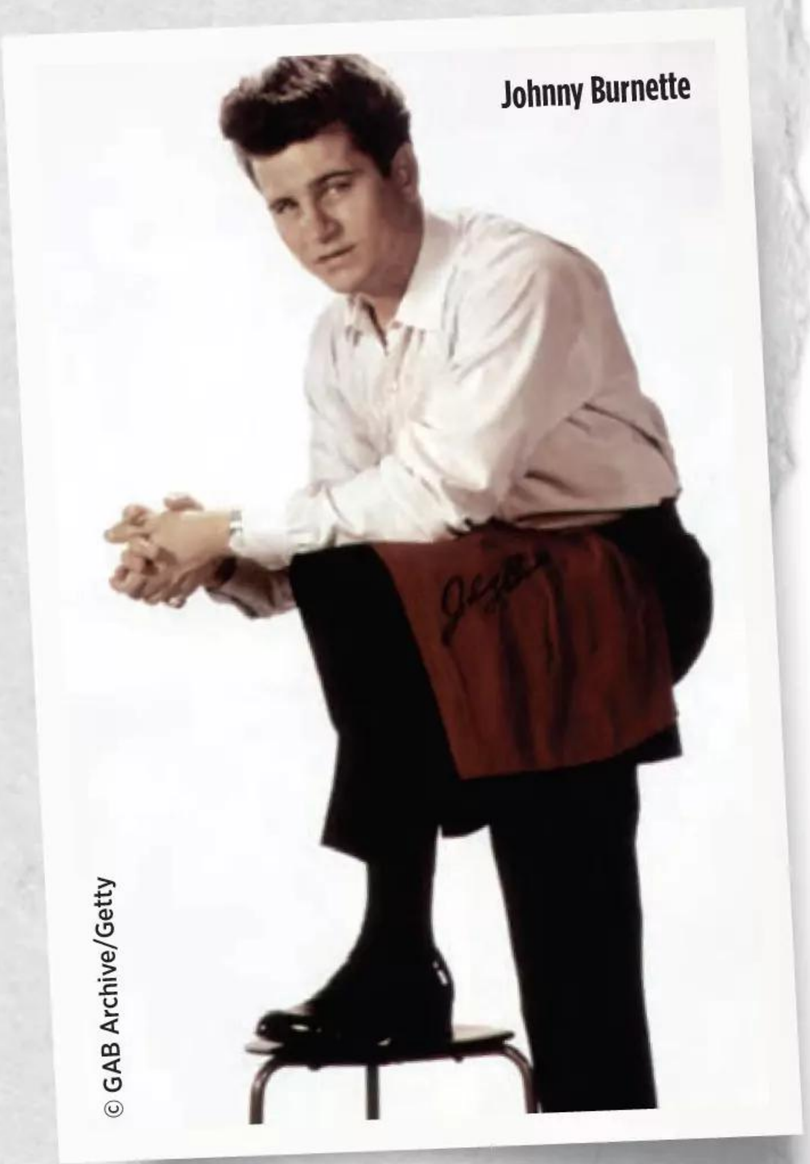
ELVIS'S DELIVERY MAKES THE SONGS ACCELERATE OUT OF THE SPEAKERS LIKE A JUICED-UP '38 FORD WITH THE PEDAL TO THE METAL

The amazing trio would not last. 'Colonel' Tom Parker came on board and tried to get rid of Moore and Black. Soon the pair were soon making less from concerts than the souvenir-sellers. The band fell apart in '58 when Elvis joined the army, but when the musicians buried the hatchet to help him out on the '68 'comeback' TV special, Elvis pocketed $50,000, Bill Black and Scotty Moore little over $200 each. But none of the bad history changes the simple fact that, without Bill and Scotty, Elvis's early work would never have had the same effect.

Classic tracks ***That's Alright Mama, Heartbreak Hotel, Too Much, Good Rockin' Tonight***

JOHNNY BURNETTE AND THE ROCK AND ROLL TRIO

When were country, blues and R&B first fused together to form rockabilly? Maybe in 1956, when Memphis outfit Johnny Burnette & The Rock And Roll Trio – Johnny, his bassist brother Dorsey and guitarist Paul Burlison – moved to New York, gaining a record contract and a string of TV appearances and going out on tour with Carl Perkins and Gene Vincent. The band's early cuts – *Tear It Up, Midnight Train, Train Kept A-Rollin', Honey Hush* – were pure, thrilling rock'n'roll, but the big time proved elusive. For rockabilly fans, the early years with the Trio hold most of the appeal. Some of the band's 1956 Coral Records songs were recorded in New York's Pythian Temple, the same room where Bill Haley laid down *Rock Around The Clock*, while the rest was recorded in Nashville with added guitar from Grady Martin. Alas, the Trio was a stormy band to be in, with arguments ensuing over who would get billing as the bandleader. Dorsey quit just before the band were due to appear in the movie *Rock, Rock, Rock*, so Johnny Black was brought in. Nobody is sure who actually played on some of the 1957 releases. Johnny moved to California in the late '50s and wrote songs for Ricky Nelson, then went solo up until his tragic death in a boating accident in 1964.
Classic tracks ***Honey Hush* and the proto-fuzz outing *Train Kept A-Rollin'***


Johnny Burnette

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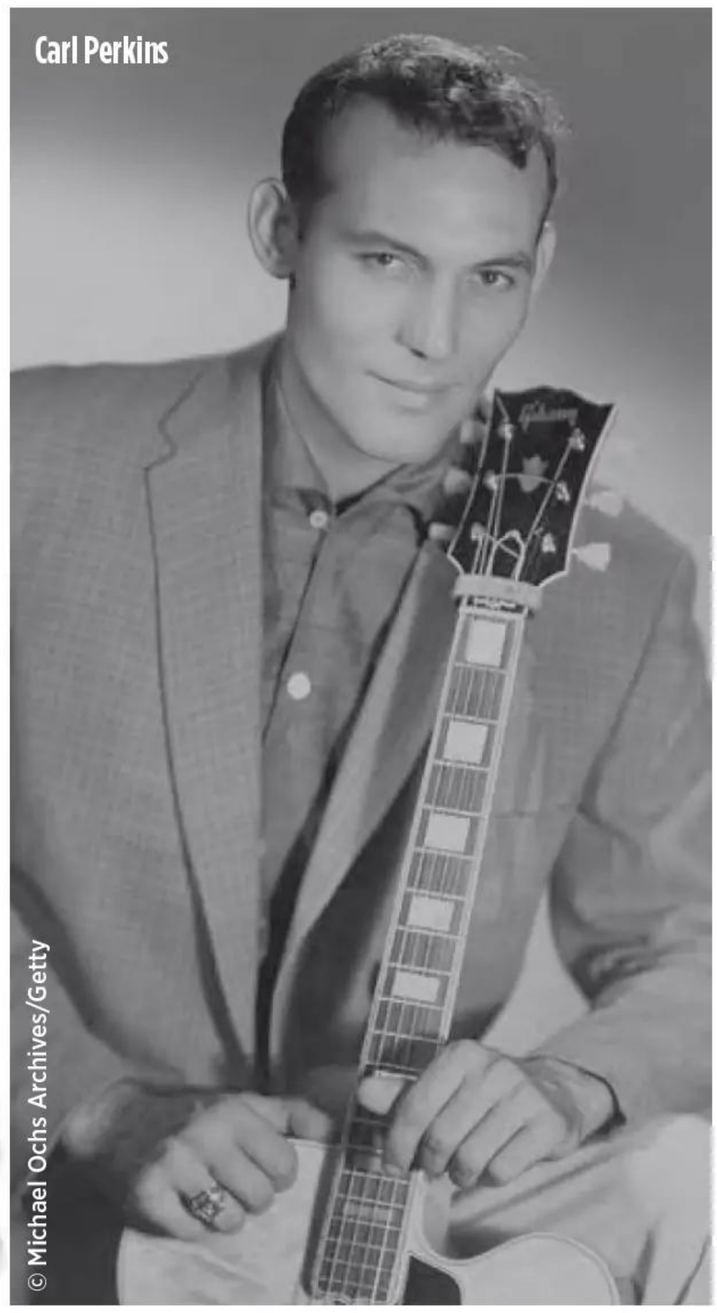

Carl Perkins

© Michael Ochs Archives/Getty

CARL PERKINS

America's country, pop and R&B charts were considered an unconquerable trio until Carl Perkins' *Blue Suede Shoes* topped all three in 1956. It was his only hit in a lifetime of almost-chances – his worst moment being a car crash in that same year, an accident that left the door wide open for his Sun stablemate Elvis Presley – but his enthusiastic style echoes on down the years.

Perkins' good-time rock'n'roll moves were largely gleaned from country players, but juiced up with a hefty dose of relentlessly funky, bluesy double-string guitar, catchy chordal work and clean, clipped licks. His driving guitar proved an essential push for a host of followers: not just revivalists like Brian Setzer but also the Beatles (listen to virtually all of Harrison's early work for a virtual lesson in Carl Perkins guitar) and even Eric Clapton – who once cited Perkins' classic solo on *Matchbox* as the reason he first picked up the instrument.
Classic tracks ***Blue Suede Shoes, Matchbox, Dixie Fried, Everybody's Trying To Be My Baby***

Gene Vincent

© Michael Ochs Archives/Getty

GENE VINCENT & CLIFF GALLUP

No 50s rock artist – apart from Jerry Lee Lewis – escaped the airbrush's caress quite like Gene Vincent, born Vincent Eugene Craddock. In the UK we think of him as we first saw him, with his post-'58 look – in black leather strides, his motorcycle-injured leg stuck out backwards for balance, clutching the microphone stand like a man possessed and unleashing a fusillade of churning rock'n'roll that had an indelible effect on all witnesses.

No guitarist could have backed Gene Vincent quite like the rip-roaring yet modest Cliff Gallup, maybe the finest player in the whole of rock'n'roll. Nashville-born Gallup had all the jazz moves down, but he knew how to rock. He employed reverb for a smooth sound, and structured his solos with extraordinary imagination and a nose for surprise tactics, shifting between off-the-wall jazzy in-jokes, concise note clusters and steel guitar impressions.
Classic tracks ***Be-Bop-A-Lula, Bluejean Bop* and *Race With The Devil***

GENE VINCENT CLUTCHED THE MICROPHONE STAND LIKE A MAN POSSESSED AND UNLEASHED A FUSILLADE OF CHURNING ROCK'N'ROLL

© Michael Ochs Archives/Getty

Swing low: Eddie Cochran

EDDIE COCHRAN

As much as the lexicon of rock'n'roll lyrics owes to fast cars and the lure of the open road, the faulty aeroplane and the ill-handled automobile have taken a terrible toll on musicians' lives. Eddie Cochran was lost to the world when a Ford Zodiac blew a tyre and failed to negotiate a bend in Chippenham, Wiltshire. Fellow traveller Gene Vincent suffered broken bones and Cochran's girlfriend Sharon broke her pelvis, and Eddie died the next day in hospital. To think that since the death of his friend Buddy Holly, he had avoided taking planes whenever possible...

Cochran's family had moved from Minnesota to LA in 1953, and the 15-year old was soon playing guitar every moment he could find. In 1954 he hooked up with country singer Hank Cochran – no relation – and in 1955 the duo recorded a pair of strictly country singles with one A-side, *Two Blue Singin' Stars*, dedicated to Hank Williams and Jimmy Rodgers. But Eddie was moving towards rock'n'roll, as the rare '56 rockabilly classics *Tired And Sleepy* and *Fool's Paradise* clearly show. The two Cochrans split up, with Eddie recording the Little Richard-influenced *Skinny Jim* and nailing a part in the rock'n'roll cash-in movie *The Girl Can't Help It*.

From then on it was all up, with a string of great songs – *Twenty Flight Rock, Summertime Blues, Jeanie Jeanie Jeanie* – backed by fabulously straightforward guitar-playing including driving acoustic rhythm work and percussive electric lead breaks (find, if you can, the impassioned *Eddie's Blues*). Cochran may have been inspired by Elvis, but his music appealed just as much – or even more – to the next wave of 60s rock bands such as the Beatles and the Who, and his continuing appeal is proved by the amazing variety of covers of his songs... everybody from the White Stripes to the Sex Pistols. Grab a 'best of' in tribute to a fine rock'n'roll star and one of the era's greatest lyricists: 'Congressman' and 'United Nations' in a popular song? Perhaps only Chuck Berry could conjure finer contemporary images.

Classic tracks ***Twenty Flight Rock, Jeanie Jeanie Jeanie, Summertime Blues, C'mon Everybody***

COCHRAN MAY HAVE BEEN INSPIRED BY ELVIS, BUT HIS MUSIC APPEALED AS MUCH OR EVEN MORE TO THE NEXT WAVE OF 1960S ROCK BANDS

© Michael Ochs Archives/Getty

BO DIDDLEY

Jang-ker-jang-ker-jang, ker-jang-jang: Bo Diddley's trademark 'shave and a haircut, two bits' guitar rhythm, which actually only ever appeared on a couple of his early songs, was one of the great 'inventions' of rock'n'roll in the '50s and echoes on in the music of countless others: Buddy Holly, Duane Eddy, the Stones, the Doors, The Clash, Prince and even U2. And there are some who whisper that 1959's *Say Man* was the first-ever rap record.

Born Elias Bates in 1928, Bo Diddley first learned violin (and composed two concertos) before falling for Mississippi-moved-to-the-city blues – Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker – and began to develop a unique 'playing drums on guitar' style on a guitar slackly tuned to open D. Signing to Chicago's Chess label in 1955, Diddley changed the name of one song from *Uncle John* to *Bo Diddley*, and his career was launched.

For sure, since those glory days the man rarely strayed far from his template... but what a template. Classic self-glorification blues shoutin' over a wall of distortion and reverb delivered via custom-built oblong, spiky or fur-covered Gretsch guitars, plus a fabulously high-glam backing band invariably including a female foil (Lady Bo, the Duchess, Cookie). Find a reissue of Bo's '58 debut LP *Boss Man*... and play it in the car – loud.

Classic tracks ***Bo Diddley, Who Do You Love***

BUDDY HOLLY

Considering his incalculable influence in terms of songwriting, no review of the best rock'n'roll of the 50s can leave out the great Buddy Holly. The Crickets were the first of their kind: a guitar-led trio who wrote, played and sang all their records: no session player back-up, no cover versions. Buddy's deceptively simple rhythm guitar style came largely from country (he loved Hank Williams, Bob Wills and the Louvin Brothers) and black R&B (he adored Little Richard), plus gospel, blues and pop. Buddy and his first musical partner, Bob Montgomery, abandoned their laid-back C&W style on hearing Elvis in 1954 and soon added a bassist, Larry Welborn, but the band that first recorded for Decca in 1956 featured Don Guess on bass plus new guitarist Sonny Curtis and session twanger Grady Martin. The sessions were received badly, so Holly changed bands again, bringing in drummer Jerry Allison, bassist Joe Maudlin and guitarist Niki Sullivan. These sessions soared, and *That'll Be The Day* gave Holly a No.1 hit. 1957 brought further glory in *Not Fade Away*, while 1958 found Holly re-hiring guitarist Tommy Allsup for the Latin-flavoured *Love's Made A Fool Of You*.

We'll never know what would have become of that new four-piece group because a mere five months after they formed, Holly was killed – aged just 22 – in the plane-crash that also took away Ritchie Valens and The Big Bopper. Controversially, a number of Holly's home demos were released with extra orchestration by producer Norman Petty, including *Peggy Sue Got Married* and *Crying, Waiting, Hoping* (a fourth demo, the bittersweet *Learning The Game*, showed that personal, legal and financial troubles had taken their toll).

BUDDY HOLLY AND THE CRICKETS WERE THE FIRST OF THEIR KIND: A TRIO WHO WROTE, PLAYED AND SANG ALL THEIR OWN RECORDS

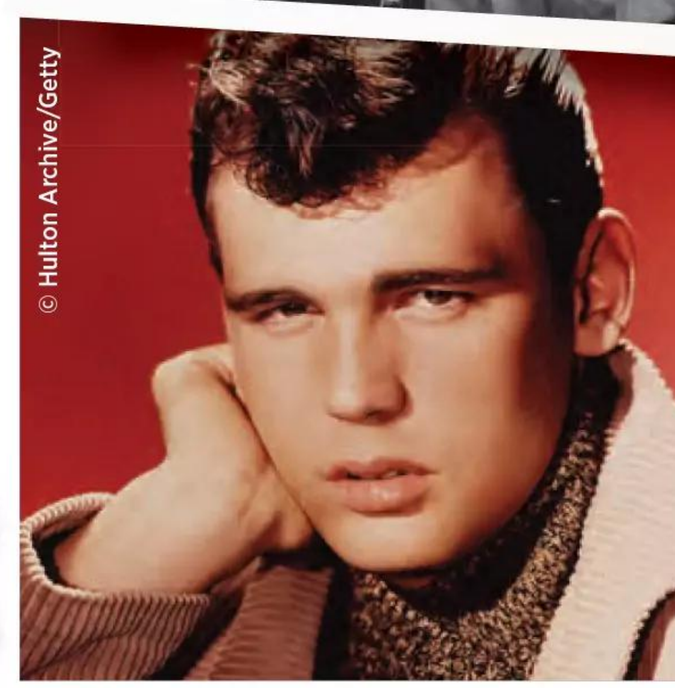
Among all the lost 50s rock'n'roll heroes there's no doubt that Buddy, out of all of them, would have most deserved the chance to develop his music further – and it's cold comfort that without him there would have been a different, more difficult path ahead for everyone from the Beatles to Bob Dylan and Springsteen. Classic tracks ***That'll Be The Day, Peggy Sue, Not Fade Away***

© Popperfoto/Getty

Buddy Holly and the Crickets

© Hulton Archive/Getty

Duane Eddy and his band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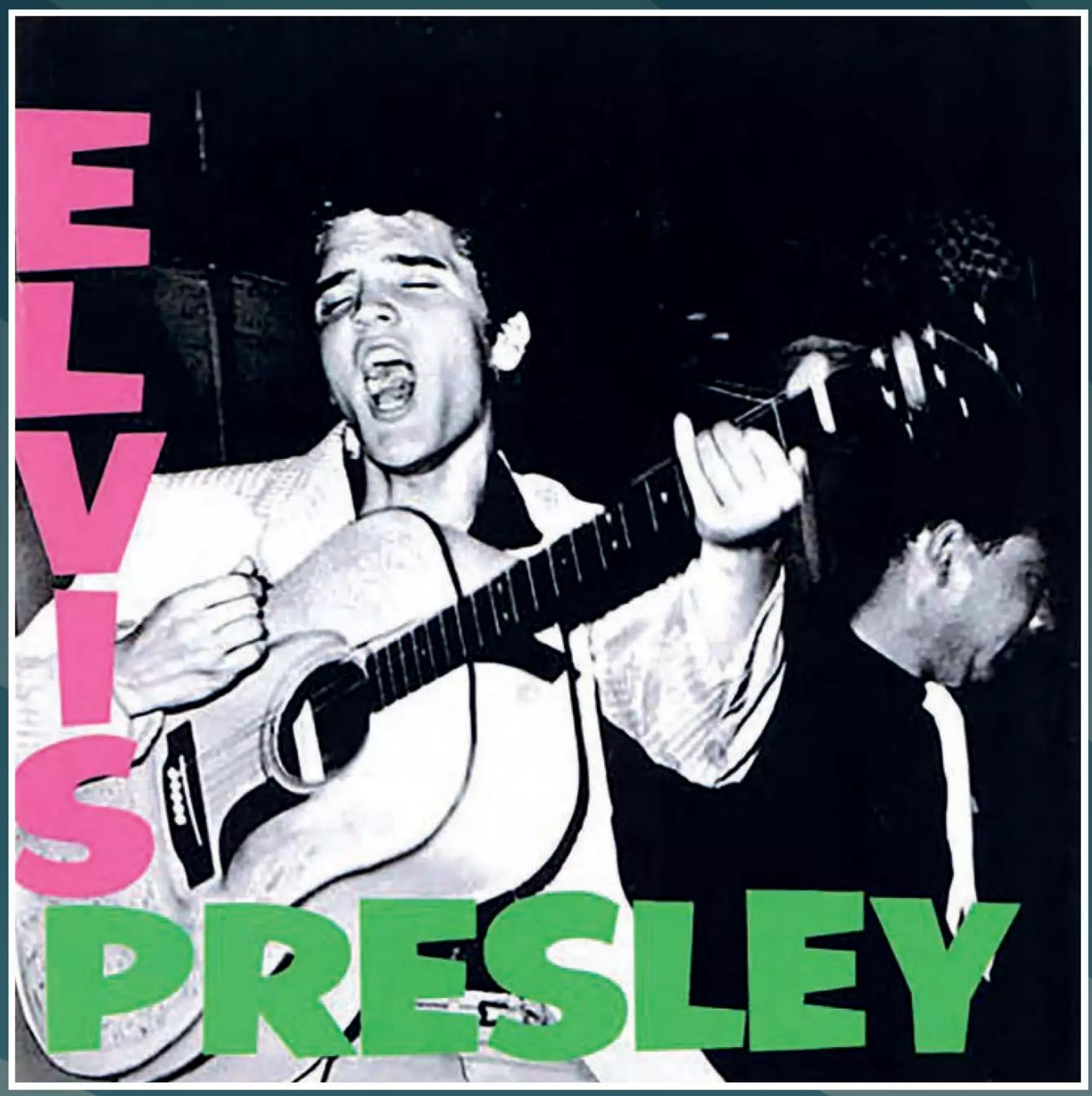
DUANE EDDY

There were great rock'n'roll guitar players before Duane Eddy, but they played with singers. Eddy's twangy, low-string runs provided a template for pure guitar rock'n'roll – and that's why he's tipped as a influence by everyone from the Ventures and the Shadows to George Harrison. John Fogerty hailed him as 'the first rock'n'roll guitar god'. He was astonishingly successful, not just in the US but also in Europe (he beat Elvis to the top of the *NME* poll in 1960). He's a hero for recording the shortest-ever Top 40 single: 1959's *Some Kind-A Earthquake*, which tipped the scales at a magnificent one minute 17 seconds (callously re-edited to 2:12 in the UK). And note Duane's total record sales: over 100 million.

Growing up in Tucson, Arizona, Eddy was aiming for a career as a singer/guitarist ("I wanted to sing like Hank Williams and play like Chet Atkins"), but *Rebel Rouser* set him on the instrumental road, showing that guitar lead breaks were just as effective played low as high. The essential ingredients of the Eddy sound were his faithful Gretsch, a Bigsby tremolo and hefty doses of tremolo and reverb. His music was a haven of rebelliousness at the very end of rock'n'roll's golden period, when the charts became swamped by clean-cut teen acts. Classic tracks ***Movin' 'N' Groovin', Rebel Rouser, Peter Gunn, 40 Miles Of Bad Road, Boss Guitar*** ✶

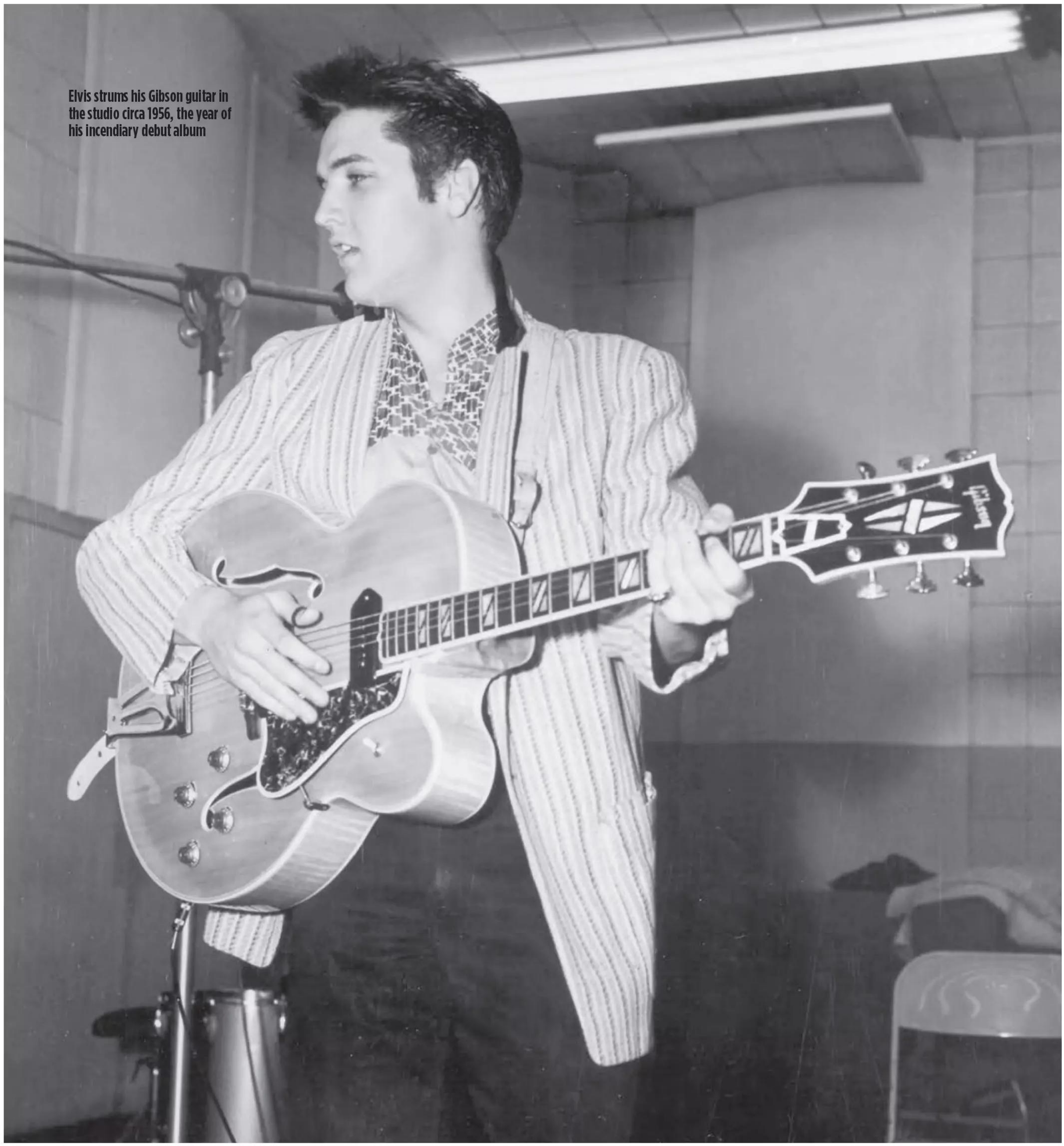


Classic album

WORDS BY MARTIN RUDDOCK

ELVIS PRESLEY

ELVIS PRESLEY



Elvis strums his Gibson guitar in the studio circa 1956, the year of his incendiary debut album

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Elvis Presley's first long-player is one of the most iconic records in history and set the template for the rock'n'roll revolution...

On 21 November 1955, RCA's divisional head of country and western and rhythm and blues, Steve Sholes signed a piece of paper that changed the world.

The exact circumstances of Elvis Presley's signing to RCA wasn't so much a case of the stars aligning, more of a friendly hostile takeover. A prolonged game of chicken between Colonel Tom Parker and Sun Records owner Sam Phillips led to Phillips (who, despite mounting debts, had not originally intended to sell) finally agreeing to sign over Elvis' Sun contract for $40,000. RCA were wary at this 20-year-old kid's price tag, and expressed reservations about the longevity of this new fad called rock and roll, but the Colonel kept plugging until the deal was rubber-stamped. For Phillips, it was a mix of emotions. Sun didn't have the commercial heft to support an artist that had gone, in a little over a year, from complete unknown to a one-man youth explosion. A new home at a major label seemed the natural course for Elvis as his star rose first regionally, then nationally.

The Colonel, whose actual role at this ➡

point of 'Special Advisor' was still a little vague had been driving the buy-out for some time, with the backing of Elvis' parents, and tacitly, Elvis' manager Bob Neal. That said, it was blindingly obvious to anybody with eyes and ears that Neal was being quite openly sidelined by Parker. Within months, when Neal's contract with Presley expired, the Colonel stepped, as expected, into his shoes and never left them. The RCA deal signed over everything Elvis had cut at Sun, including previously unreleased sides. The label then immediately started reissuing his Sun 45s. Then, in March 1956, the same month that Parker formally relieved Neal of his command and his percentage, the *Elvis Presley* LP arrived on shelves nationwide.

Born as much from runaway success as a pressing need to rush out new product (not to mention nominal producer Sholes' anxiety about Elvis' ability to deliver on RCA's hefty investment), the album landed so fast it almost burned holes in the racks, appearing barely ten weeks after their new star signing first set foot in RCA's Nashville studios on 10 January 1956. Three weeks later after a further set of sessions at RCA New York, the LP was ready to go.

Twelve tracks and 29 minutes long, *Elvis Presley* is the daddy of the modern LP. A perfect halfway house between the raw, joyous Sun sound and the more polished, amped-up RCA sound (albeit with improvised 'slapback' that isn't quite up to Sam Phillips' post-production tape echo), it shows Elvis in the ascendant, still working it out – but already flinging darts all over the musical map and scoring bullseyes.

As openers go, *Blue Suede Shoes* takes some beating – but Elvis, feeling a sense of loyalty to its composer Carl Perkins (and to Phillips, who'd just put it out on Sun), initially refused to cut the song. After some persuasion, and a guarantee from Sholes that *Blue Suede Shoes* wouldn't come out on 45 and clash with Perkins' own version, Elvis and the Blue Moon Boys obliged with a supercharged, swinging rendition that adds adrenaline and sinew to Carl's cool rockabilly canter. Perkins' original is still generally thought superior to Elvis' by rockabilly purists to this day, but you can't deny the raw power of the King's version. Cutting out the middle man of the extra stabs between "One for the money..." and "Two for the show," Elvis can't wait to get stuck in. His joyful, off the cuff yells of "Yeah!" are still electrifying, a singer caught totally in the moment. *Blue Suede Shoes* would eventually come out as a single in August after Perkins' original had peaked in the R&B and Country charts, but as part of RCA's gimmicky decision to issue the whole album on a series of simultaneous 45s.

Next is Don Robertson's stately ballad, *I'm Counting On You*. Sitting snugly in the middle of country and western balladry and gutbucket R&B shuffle, it's delivered with commitment by Elvis – occupying a space somewhere between crooning, keening country twang and a shot of the blues.

I'm Counting On You also introduces other key elements of Elvis' new sound, Floyd Cramer's piano grace notes and vocal harmonies from Gordon Stoker of the Jordanaires alongside siblings Ben and Brock of The Speer Family. It's a sometimes uneasy vocal mix, and Stoker

Mystery frame: the iconic live shot of Elvis taken in Florida on 31 July 1955

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

PICTURE PERFECT

Iconic is a desperately overused adjective, but if there's ever been a truly iconic record sleeve, the dynamic cover for Elvis Presley is right up there.

Based on an action shot of the King snapped at Fort Homer Hesterly Armory in Tampa, Florida on 31 July 1955, Elvis is caught in full flow, framed from the waist up, naturally, for reasons of decency. Long thought to be the work of photographer 'Popsie' Randolph (who took the portraits on the back cover), the famous shot is now believed to have been taken by snapper William V. 'Red' Robertson, of Tampa photo agency Robertson and Fresh. The simple, arresting design frames Robertson's monochrome shot with 'ELVIS' down the left hand side in hot pink, and 'PRESLEY' in a nicely lurid lime green along the bottom. Simple and visually striking, few 1950s album sleeves beat it for pure visual impact. It's inspired numerous homages and parodies, most famously The Clash's 1979 sleeve for *London Calling*, which uses the same typeface over Pennie Smith's image of bassist Paul Simonon smashing his Fender bass into the stage of New York's Palladium nightclub. Simonon probably didn't know that bassist Bill Black (also featured on the original sleeve, partially obscured behind Elvis), also frustrated with his instrument, angrily launched his new Fender Tele electric bass across the floor before storming out of a '57 studio session, leaving Elvis to play the intro to *(You're So Square) Baby I Don't Care*, but he'd probably have approved.

was vocally annoyed at the rest of his group being subbed out for the RCA-signed Speer brothers.

Ray Charles' *I Got A Woman* follows, with Elvis effortlessly taking Ray's R&B showstopper and turning it into a skittering, driving vehicle for Scotty Moore, Bill Black, and DJ Fontana (with interjections from Cramer) to go to town. Another triumph for Elvis the genre-defying interpreter, his freewheeling vocal ducks and dives like a trick pilot. He might as well be wing-walking.

Bill Campbell's *One Sided Love Affair* is the first track from New York, (and Elvis' favourite, according to a March '56 interview with Robert Brown). Given a bit of boogie by Shorty Long's piano, it's his freest, most playful, and most untamed performance. Rhythmically hiccupping, he dances around his vowels and Campbell's tongue-twister lyrics, culminating in that outrageous first "Under-STAND!-in" at 0:41.

We're way back at Sun for *I Love You* July 1954, it's the sound of the King-in-waiting captured on tape just hours before the lightning bulb moment when Elvis, Scotty and Bill started jamming *That's All Right*. The song would be a change of pace even if it wasn't from those early, tentative days. There's no drums, and Scotty is all over the fretboard with meandering jazz guitar runs that occasionally feel like they're going to run away with him. The difference in 19-year-old Elvis' voice is quite striking. His vocal is featherlight and airy, except for a final, steely "I love you...". He's hours from divine inspiration, and still mastering the range of his mighty instrument, but is utterly unselfconscious.

In an odd bit of thematic sequencing, (title-wise, anyway) the September '54 Sun cut *Just Because* is next. An old-time cowboy song, it's given an infectious dancing rockabilly treatment by Elvis and the Blue Moon Boys (whose former boss Doug Poindexter from the Starlite Wranglers doubles up on guitar and percussion somehow according to the credits).

Little Richard's *Tutti Frutti* follows. Elvis doesn't attempt to match Richard's paint-stripping delivery, but gives it his best shot, announcing his own take with a growling "a-wop-bop-a-loo-bop" and kicking into a rough and ready, but taut version that determinedly swings in its own right. Scotty's rapid-fire staccato guitar is the co-star here, playing off Elvis' nimble lead. He's more subdued than the song's manic, leather-lunged author, but allows himself a little stray "ooo" before signing off.

BORN AS MUCH FROM RUNAWAY SUCCESS AS A NEED TO RUSH OUT NEW PRODUCT, THE ALBUM LANDED SO FAST IT ALMOST BURNED HOLES IN THE RACKS

Tryin' To Get To You, an old R&B favourite by Washington DC vocal group The Eagles is next. Just as well known from its sweaty, memorable shakedown at the June 1968 'sit-down' shows featured in Singer Presents Elvis, this July '55 cut from Sun has Elvis leading on piano and Scotty and Bill joined by Johnny Bernero on drums. It's a joyfully spontaneous performance, very different from the howling intensity that Elvis deploys on the later version. Elvis belts the bridge, but elsewhere sings with authority pitched between blues and hillbilly twang.

We're back in New York for *I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Cry (Over You)*, previously recorded by Elvis' R&B idol Roy Hamilton. Amped up and accelerated from Hamilton's finger-snapping shuffle into a dancing slice of rockabilly – it's a genuine fusion, with Scotty's nimble licks duelling with Shorty Long's barrelhouse piano trills, and Elvis soaring effortlessly above. He doesn't sound one bit like he's going to even sit down, let alone cry, but it's a performance loaded with pelvis-shaking charisma. So much so, that when The Beatles covered the song in their early-60s live sets, rather than attempt to replicate their idol's nuanced performance, they all but rewrote part of the melody and gave it a clanging hiding for their adrenalised version.

Two more of the '54 Sun tracks follow. *I'll Never Let You Go (Little Darlin')*, from September '54 is short but sweet. A tender, barely-there take on singing cowboy Jimmy Wakely's ballad, it suddenly strikes up into a lively canter 30 seconds from the end. If *I'll Never Let You Go* is draped in sensuous echo, *Blue Moon*, from a month earlier sounds like it's beamed in from a distant star. Sparse, spooky, and hauntingly beautiful – Elvis' sincere version of Rodgers and Hart's venerable 30s ballad, with its disembodied feel (and eerie wordless vocal scatting) was actually the first by a rock and roller. It didn't become a standard in the same way The Marcel's seminal '61 doo-wop version did, but it's quite unlike anything recorded before, or since.

We're back at RCA Nashville for the final cut, Jesse Stone's *Money Honey*, a 1953 R&B hit for Clyde McPhatter and the Drifters. Easing in on an effortlessly cool semitonal riff and kept grounded by Cramer's hammering high piano trills, it's a relaxed, slightly understated finale with an elastic, insistent vocal from Elvis. It ends abruptly and without fuss, but in just under half an hour Elvis has taken up rent free space in the hearts and minds of millions.

The UK tracklisting (subtitled *Rock N' Roll* on the spine and sleeve, but with its iconic cover image unaltered) differed substantially with *I Love You Because, Just Because, Tutti Frutti, I'll Never Let You Go* and *Blue Moon* all jettisoned. In a harbinger of the 'pick and mix' approach RCA and the Colonel took to compiling Elvis' army-era LPs, they were replaced with the recent 45 *Shake, Rattle and Roll*, its raucous flip *Lawdy Miss Clawdy*, and a clutch of orphaned Sun-era sides yet to arrive in Blighty – including *That's All Right, Mystery Train* and *I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone*. Opinion differs over which version of the LP is best, but the UK variant helping establish a second kingdom for Elvis that would wait in vain for a royal visit. ✶

ELVIS PRESLEY

ELVIS PRESLEY

1956 • RCA VICTOR

Side 1

Blue Suede Shoes
I'm Counting on You
I Got A Woman
One Sided Love Affair
I Love You Because
Just Because

Side 2

Tutti Frutti
Trying to Get to You
I'm Gonna Sit Right Down And Cry (Over You)
I'll Never Let You Go (Little Darlin')
Blue Moon
Money Honey

Rockabilly pioneer: The late, great Johnny Burnette (1934-1964)

Michael Ochs Archives/Getty

THE FIRST FAMILY OF ROCK'N'ROLL

Too wild for the charts in 1956, Johnny Burnette And The Rock 'n Roll Trio nevertheless left an indelible mark on music history. Family members Jimmy, Chanti and Diane Burnette discuss the wide-ranging legacy of the rockabilly pioneers...

WORDS BY **DOUGLAS MCPHERSON**

When Johnny and Dorsey Burnette were children, their father gave them each a Gene Autry guitar and told them that if they practised hard and learned to play they might one day sing on the Grand Ole Opry. The brothers responded by smashing the instruments over each other's heads.

"That's a true story!" laughs Dorsey's son, Jimmy. "They got their guitars as Christmas presents and before January they'd beat each other over the heads with them and broke both guitars!"

Forget Ike Turner's *Rocket 88* and Elvis singing *That's All Right* – the spirit of rockabilly was born right there in the Burnette family lounge with the thwack of splintering wood and twang of distressed strings.

Many years later, in 1956, Johnny Burnette And The Rock 'n Roll Trio laid out the blueprint for every self-respecting rockabilly record recorded since on one classic self-titled album and half a dozen singles, including *Tear It Up, The Train Kept A-Rollin', Lonesome Train* and *Eager Beaver Baby*.

With Johnny on lead vocals and acoustic guitar, Dorsey on stand-up bass and Paul Burlinson on lead guitar, they had the swagger, the echo, the slapping bass and the stinging guitar, all punctuated with random yelps and yells thrown in for no other reason than that the guys were wound up like a spring.

"That was the first rockabilly band," says Johnny's granddaughter Chanti. "That's the story that I've always been told: that they were the groundbreaking band that came up with that sound. Real, authentic to their roots and where they came from in the south. I think they're foundational for rockabilly and for rock'n'roll as well."

"They were innovators," confirms Chanti's mom, Diane Burnette, the former wife and childhood sweetheart of Johnny's son Rocky.

> "ALL THESE BANDS, IF THEY'RE A ROCKABILLY BAND, DO TEAR IT UP"

On the day we speak, Jimmy, Chanti and Diane Burnette are star guests at the Wildest Cats In Town weekender, but it's not only their portion of the show that pays tribute to the legacy of the Rock 'n Roll Trio.

"All these bands, if they're a rockabilly band, do *Tear It Up*," Jimmy points out. "They all do one or two songs off the Rock 'n Roll Trio album. Last night we were watching one do *Baby Blue Eyes*, while another closed with *Tear It Up*. Those songs are staples of rockabilly."

Born in Memphis in 1932 (Dorsey) and 1934 (Johnny), the Burnette brothers were wild. So much so that their neighbour and schoolmate Elvis Presley called them 'The Daltons', after the notorious outlaw gang.

By their mid-teens, the brothers were keen boxers and it was at an amateur boxing tournament that Dorsey met another duker, Paul Burlinson, who would soon join them in a band initially called Johnny Burnette & His Rhythm Rangers.

They played country and bluegrass with a touch of blues (Burlinson's big inspiration as a guitarist was Howlin' Wolf), plus some uptempo swing and boogie for those who wanted to jitterbug.

There's some uncertainty about when the brothers released their first single, *You're Undecided*, on Colonel Sam Thomas' label Von. *The Guinness Book Of Rock Stars* says 1953, which was a year before Elvis made his bow with *That's All Right*, on Sun. Other sources say the disc, which was solely credited to Johnny Burnette as artist, came out in 1954 or '55. Since it only sold a reported 200 copies no one was paying much attention at the time.

Whenever it was released, the Von recording of *You're Undecided* was not the first rockabilly record. Penned by

Michael Ochs Archives/Getty

The Burnette brothers formed the Rock 'n Roll Trio with their friend Paul Burlison

there's no doubt that they hung out with the future king of rock'n'roll, before any of them were heard of, in a laundry room of the Lauderdale Courts low-income federal housing project where the Presleys and Burnettes both lived. The echoing concrete walls made it the perfect rehearsal space, although relations between Elvis and the Burnettes weren't always cordial.

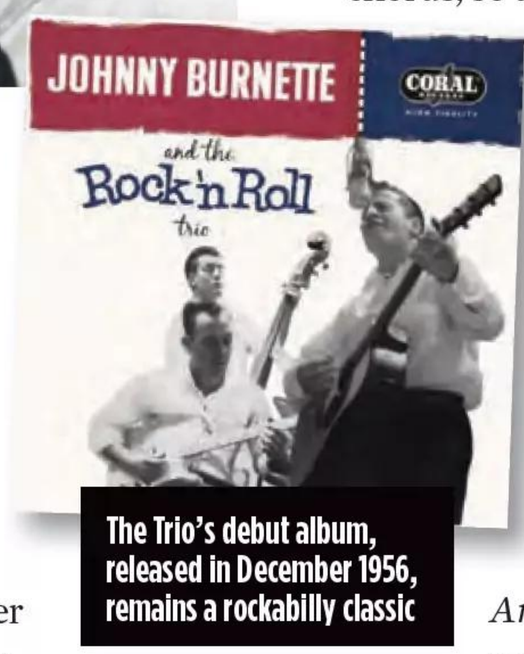
"Apparently, Dorsey stole Elvis' girlfriend," Chanti says, provoking laughter from Jimmy. "So Elvis was very angry about that!"

"That laundry room was where Elvis first learned how to play guitar," says Jimmy, taking up the story. "One of my dad's friends, Jesse Lee Denson, taught Elvis a few chords. And Elvis, up to the day he died, only knew four or five chords, so those were the ones he was taught there."

When Presley signed to Sun, the Burnettes auditioned for the same label but Sam Phillips turned them down for being too similar to Elvis. Instead, they headed for New York where they auditioned for the Ted Mack-fronted *Original Amateur Hour*. In 1956 – the year Elvis broke worldwide with *Heartbreak Hotel* – they won three of the nationally televised talent shows in a row and were signed to Coral Records.

With sessions at the well-appointed Pythian Temple studio in New York, where Bill Haley had recorded *Rock Around The Clock*, and Owen Bradley's studio in Nashville, they recorded their eponymous – and only – album, *Johnny Burnette & The Rock 'n Roll Trio* with Eddie Gray from the Dick Jacobs Orchestra on drums and Nashville session legend Grady Martin providing additional guitar work.

From beginning to end it was a classic slice of wax with defining rockabilly interpretations of the blues songs *Honey Hush* and *Train Kept A-Rollin'* alongside originals



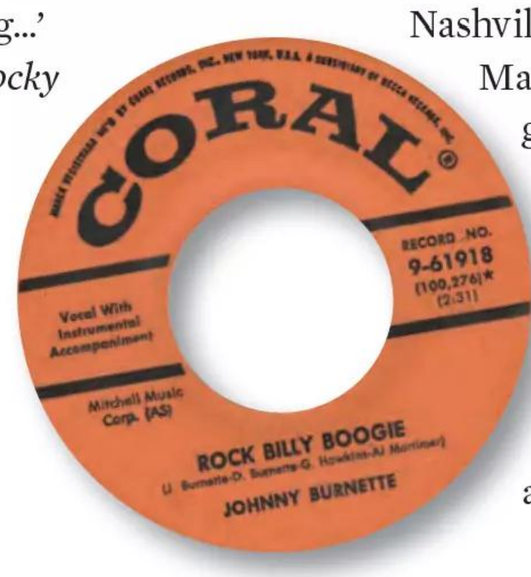
The Trio's debut album, released in December 1956, remains a rockabilly classic

Dorsey, it was a straight uptempo country track not to be confused with the bluesy, echo-drenched rockabilly remake that the Trio cut during their classic sessions in 1956. The B-side, *Go Mule Go*, was a hillbilly hoedown.

Jerry Naylor, who took over as lead singer of The Crickets following Buddy Holly's death, claims in his book *The Rockabilly Legends: They Called It Rockabilly Long Before They Called It Rock And Roll*, that the Burnettes were responsible for the invention of the word rockabilly.

According to Naylor, Johnny and Dorsey had sons in consecutive months in 1953. Johnny named his son Rocky. Dorsey called his Billy. Dedicating their shows to their boys, they'd introduce a number as "Here's a Rocky 'n' Billy song...' before eventually writing *Rocky 'n' Billy Boogie* or *Rock Billy Boogie*, which prompted fans to request "that rock-a-billy song..."

WHETHER OR NOT the Burnettes were playing rockabilly before Presley,



Chanti, Jimmy and Diane Burnette at the Wildest Cats Weekender, 2018

FAMILY STORIES
IT AIN'T ALL ROCK'N'ROLL

Looking back on the Burnette family history, Chanti (daughter of Johnny's son, Rocky) says: "A story that's kind of a tender one for me is when my dad was a little boy. They were getting up in the morning, Johnny, my grandma and Randy, my dad's younger brother, to go to Disneyland.

"My dad ran to the bathroom and grabbed a washcloth to wash his face and didn't know Johnny had left his razor blades in the washcloth. He cut his face pretty severely and it affected Johnny so much to see his little boy injured in that way. My grandmother told me that when they got back from the hospital Johnny stayed up all night right next to his bed.

"You hear so much about the Burnettes being roughnecks, but they had a tender side, too. They were all about family."

"APPARENTLY, DORSEY STOLE ELVIS' GIRLFRIEND, SO ELVIS WAS VERY ANGRY ABOUT THAT!"

Dorsey Burnette outlived his brother by 15 years. Both are buried in the same cemetary in Glendale, California

Michael Ochs Archives/Getty

"THEY WERE GRITTIER THAN ELVIS. A LITTLE BIT MORE RAW"

Lonesome Tears In My Eyes and *Your Baby Blue Eyes* (later covered by the Stray Cats).

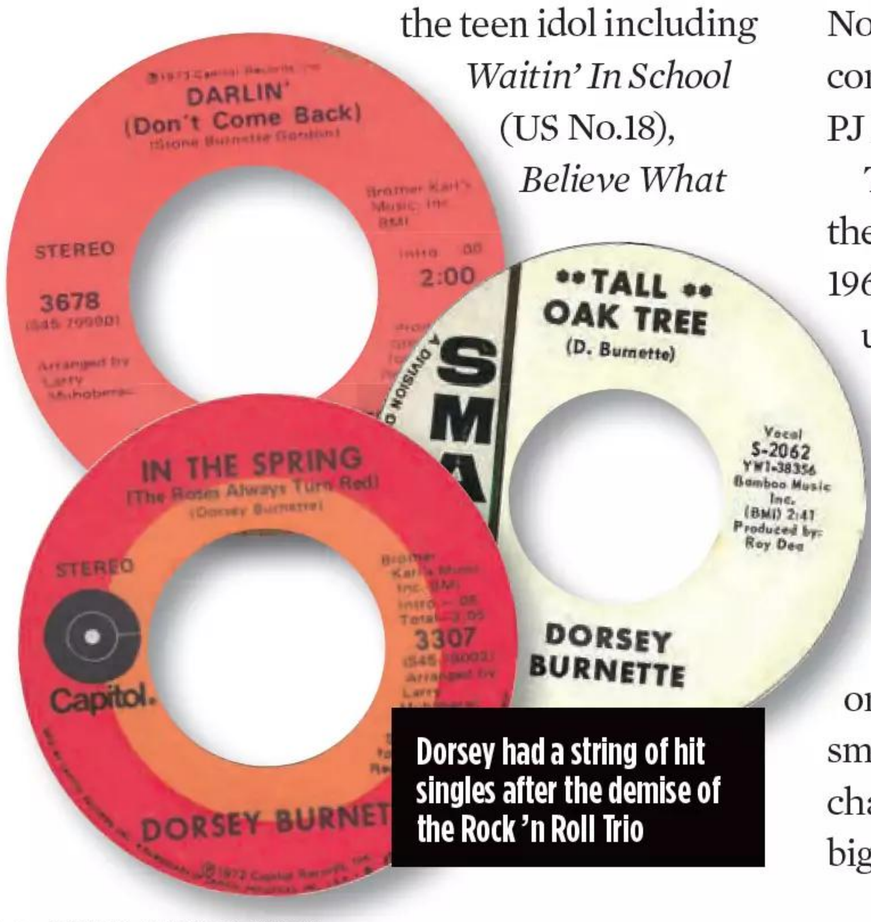
Everything they touched was rockabilly gold while an appearance in the Alan Freed film *Rock, Rock, Rock*, performing *Lonesome Train*, proved they had an electrifying stage show to back up their records. Exposure was provided on tour with Gene Vincent and Carl Perkins.

So why did none of their singles make the chart at a time when Elvis, Perkins, Vincent and so many others were soaring to the top? Chanti attributes the lack of commercial success to the fact that the Burnettes were too hardcore, musically and personally.

"They were grittier than Elvis. A little bit more raw. Elvis allowed himself to get prettied up and kinda glamorous and lived that life," she says, "and these were boys from the south and they were gonna remain boys from the south until they died. They were roughnecks. They weren't polished. It's not rock'n'roll, it's rockabilly."

Michael Ochs Archives/Getty

DISILLUSIONED BY THE lack of chart action, the Trio disbanded in 1957 but the Burnettes went on to find success as songwriters. Having moved to California and camped out on Ricky Nelson's lawn in order to ambush him and present him with their songs, they together and individually wrote a string of hits for the teen idol including *Waitin' In School* (US No.18), *Believe What You Say* (No.4), *It's Late* (No.9) and *Just A Little Too Much* (No.9).



Dorsey had a string of hit singles after the demise of the Rock 'n Roll Trio

The success prompted them to return to recording, this time as solo artists with a softer, more pop-oriented sound.

When Nelson turned down the folk-pop ballad *Tall Oak Tree*, Dorsey released it himself and scored his first Top 30 hit, in 1960. In the same year, Johnny hit No.11 in the US and No.5 in the UK with the teen ballad *Dreamin'*. Johnny's follow up with the evergreen *You're Sixteen* was an even bigger smash, hitting No.8 in America and No.3 in Britain. His other hits included the comically maudlin *Clown Shoes*, penned by PJ Proby.

Tragically, Johnny's life was cut short at the age of 30 on the night of 14 August, 1964, when a cabin cruiser ran into his unlit fishing boat on Clear Lake, California, and he drowned.

The loss devastated Dorsey.

"They fought like all brothers do," says Jimmy, "but they loved each other more than anything."

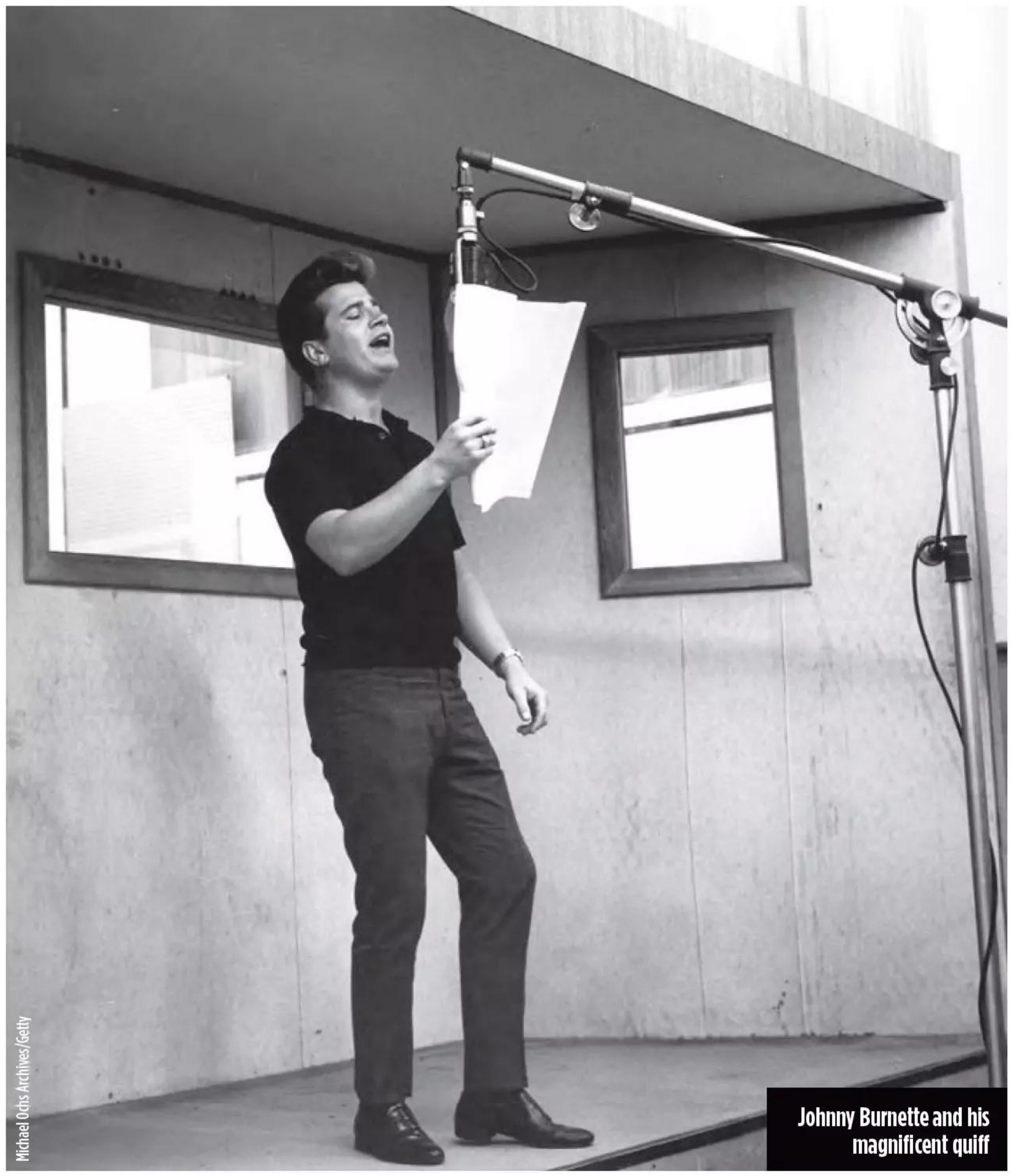
During the 70s, Dorsey focused on country music and had a string of small but regular hits on the country chart throughout the decade with the biggest being *In The Spring (The Roses Always Turn Red)* (No.21), *Darlin' (Don't Come Back)* (No.26) and *Things I Treasure* (No.31).

"I grew up watching my dad play guitar and write songs in the living room," Jimmy recalls. "That was all he did, in his spare time. He was gone a lot, he did a lot of shows, and that was how I grew up."

During that period, the Burnettes largely forgot about the recordings of the Rock 'n Roll Trio, unaware of their influence on a generation of musicians across the pond.

IN 1963, THE Beatles sang the Trio's *Lonesome Tears Of My Eyes* live on the radio programme *Pop Go The Beatles*. The performance was released on the 1994 album, *Live At The BBC*, and it was chancing upon the latter that made Chanti fully appreciate the significance of her family's musical legacy.

"They say in the lead-in, 'This is a Dorsey Burnette track, brother of Johnny Burnette...' and the first time I heard that I was like, 'Whoa...! John Lennon said that?' It was a big deal to me as a kid, because The Beatles were the biggest thing. It was like, this is the real deal. These are legends to the legends."



Michael Ochs Archives/Getty

Johnny Burnette and his magnificent quiff

Jimmy finds the clip on his phone and the cheeky chappy voice of John Lennon suddenly fills the room: "This is a Dorsey Burnette number, brother of Johnny Burnette, called *Lonesome Tears of My Eyes*, recorded on their very first LP... in 1822!"

"That was huge for me, because I've always been a big Beatles fan," Jimmy enthuses. "Then, later, Rod Stewart did *Tear It Up* on his *Tonight I'm Yours* album and for the next two or three years he would close all his shows with *Tear It Up*. Because *Tear It Up* is a show closer."

Tear It Up has become a rockabilly staple since its release in 1956

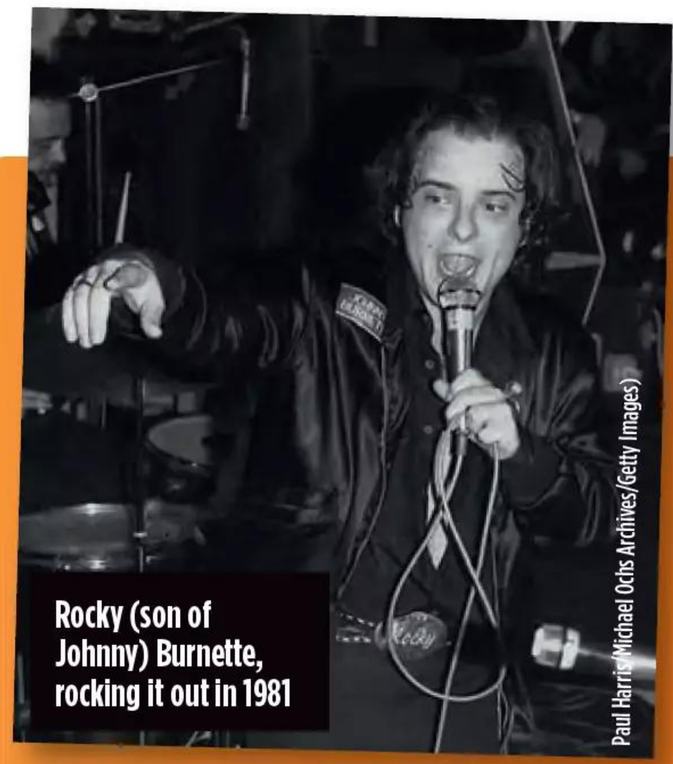
The Yardbirds, Aerosmith and Motörhead all covered *Train Kept A-Rollin'* in the 60s and 70s, while Led Zeppelin adopted it as a concert opener. Ringo Starr topped the chart with a cover of *You're Sixteen* in 1974. Jimmy Page, meanwhile, invited Dorsey to play on a Led Zeppelin album.

"My dad was like, 'Who's Led Zeppelin?'" Jimmy laughs. "At the time I didn't know, but my brother Billy was hip to it and tried to talk dad into it. But by the time he got around to saying that he would do it, he passed away."

Dorsey died of a heart attack on 19 August, 1979, aged just 46. It's a consolation to Jimmy that his father lived long enough to see the Rock 'n Roll Trio rediscovered by record collectors during the European rockabilly revival of the late 70s.

When the Stray Cats took rockabilly back to the charts in the 80s it was with a sound and swagger almost identical to the Burnettes.

"Right before my dad died it got real popular, and he was as surprised as all of us were," says Jimmy. "It was an album he had done 20 years earlier, and he found out just before he died that it was very popular over here and that the entire British Invasion was people that were listening to his music in the 50s. That's when he started doing *Tear It Up* in his sets, and doing some rockabilly, because before that he was doing all country. He didn't do any Rock 'n Roll Trio stuff until about two years before he died. In his last shows, he'd close with *Tear It Up*. It was a toe-tapper that got the crowd going." ✶



Paul Harris/Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

Rocky (son of Johnny) Burnette, rocking it out in 1981

IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR

The sons of Johnny and Dorsey Burnette grew up surrounded by music. Family friends included the country singers Roger Miller, Glen Campbell and Buck Owens.

"We went fishing with Charlie Rich a couple of times," recalls Dorsey's son Jimmy, who formed a band with Glen Campbell's son, Travis Campbell, on drums in the 1980s.

The most prominent of the second generation of Burnettes, Dorsey's oldest son Billy, began his recording career at the age of five when he appeared with Rick Nelson on *Hey Daddy (I'm Gonna Tell Santa On You)*.

In 1972, he released his first album, *Billy Burnette*, and at the height of the rockabilly revival in 1980 recorded *another* album called *Billy Burnette* that included covers of the Rock 'n Roll Trio songs *Honey Hush* and *Tear It Up*.

In 1987, Billy replaced guitarist Lindsey Buckingham in Fleetwood Mac and wrote two songs, *Hard Feelings* and *When It Comes To Love*, on the band's album *Behind The Mask*, as well as co-writing three more.

Johnny Burnette's son Rocky is also no stranger to the charts, and launched his musical career in 1979 with the album *The Son Of Rock'n'Roll*. His biggest hit, 1980's *Tired Of Toein' The Line*, sounded uncannily like a Shakin' Stevens record, vocally and musically, which perhaps shot down its chances in the UK while it soared into the Top 10 in America and hit No.1 in Australia.

Jimmy, Chanti and Diane Burnette are not professionally involved in music but increasingly make personal appearances to keep alive the legacy of Johnny Burnette and the Rock 'n Roll Trio.

Classic album

WORDS BY JACK WATKINS

HERE'S LITTLE RICHARD

LITTLE RICHARD

Another glammed-up studio shot for Specialty, this one taken in Hollywood in 1956

Michael Ochs Archives/Getty

Capturing lightning in a bottle seemed no easy task until Little Richard unleashed a live favourite that he never thought he would ever commit to tape...

Richard Wayne Penniman, aka Little Richard, was the man who put the camp into rock'n'roll. Promoters announced him as "the Georgia Peach", and he declared himself "the Bronze Liberace". While his raucous singing could rival that of any self-respecting blues shouter, he offset the machismo with effeminate squeals and pleading high notes. Physically, he cut an outrageous figure. He sported a six-inch pompadour from which tresses would break loose as he bobbed and jerked his head around to the music. He exaggerated his already exotic looks by wearing mascara which emphasised his flashing eyes and wide smile. Jerry Lee Lewis recalled that once, when sharing the bill with his fellow manic exponent of boogie-woogie piano, he had to wipe nail-polish off the keys.

If parents of the mid-50s were horrified by Little Richard's gender-bending persona, kids just laughed and lapped it up, rejoicing in the antics of a generous, fun-loving free spirit. Arguably, he did more to break down racial barriers for a certain generation than any amount of civil rights protests in the years that followed.

The fact that no-one encapsulated the visual thrill of early rock quite like the man from Macon, Georgia, has tended to obscure the quality of his recorded material, and that's a mistake. For all his brash, boisterous on-stage energy, Little Richard's debut album from 1957, *Here's Little Richard*, is a period piece that plays like a house-wrecker even today.

The record deserves revaluation, as there's a sense that Little Richard has never quite received his critical dues. True, his time at the top as a creative hit-maker was sadly brief, spanning two years between 1956 and 1958, by which time he'd "found God" and become a preacher. It's also true that his music lacked diversity: he had little of Chuck Berry's lyrical wit, and wasn't quite in Jerry Lee's league as a piano player. Neither did he share Buddy Holly's fascination with experimenting with sound and musical forms. But if you want the supreme example of take-no-prisoners rock, with no filler, no slowing down for an intake of breath, just drop *Here's Little Richard* onto the turntable and listen to the boy go.

The LP, released in March 1957 by the small independent label Specialty, is by far Little Richard's biggest-selling album, reaching #13 on the Billboard chart that spring. While it doesn't include subsequent hit singles like *Lucille* or *Good Golly, Miss Molly*, it's an unfettered expression of Little Richard's mad genius, backed by choice New Orleans sidemen, recorded at a time when rock'n'roll was at its absolute creative and commercial height.

It kicks off with *Tutti Frutti*, Little Richard's breakthrough single and a key song in any account of the genesis of popular music. It's sometimes been written as if Little Richard chanced upon the rapturous, exclamatory opening – "Wop-bop-a-loo-bop, a-wop-bam-bam!" – in a revelatory moment in the recording booth during his first session for Specialty, at the J&M Studios, run by Cosimo Matassa, in 1955. In fact, a racier version of the song had been part of his live repertoire for some time, but he'd never thought that it would make a hit. "I'd been singing *Tutti Frutti* for years, but it never struck me as a song you'd record," he told biographer Charles White. He'd just used it as a throwaway to loosen up audiences, who roared at the ribald lyrics. But when it came to making records, as he explained to White, "I didn't go to New Orleans to record no *Tutti Frutti*."

Ready to rock'n'roll

When he arrived at Art Rupe's Specialty, he was already hardened by several years on the road. Probably, he was intent on graduating to serious R&B, in the manner of one of his favourites, Fats Domino. Yet Little Richard had been markedly different even while he'd been building up a following on the club scene in Georgia and Mississippi in the early 1950s. Bandleader Johnny Otis recalled catching his act in Houston, walking in to see "this outrageous person, good-looking and very effeminate, with a big pompadour. He started singing and he was so good... he reminded me of Dinah Washington... when he got through he remarked: 'This is Little Richard, King of the Blues,' and then he added, 'and the Queen, too.'"

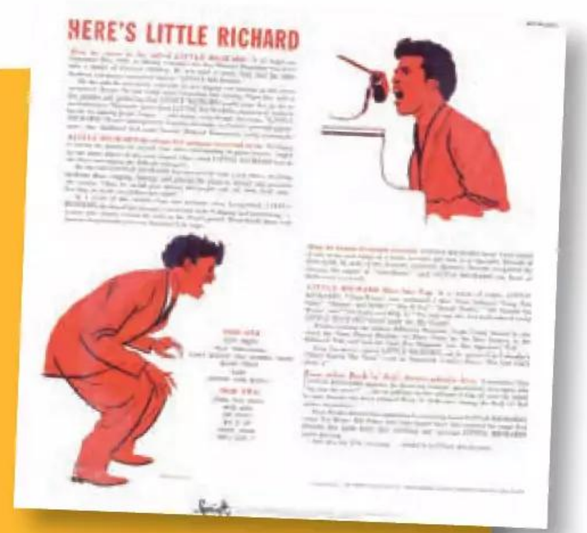
Little of this had transmitted itself on Little Richard's early recordings. Sides cut for RCA in 1951/'52 and Don Robey's Peacock label in 1953, where he worked with Otis, only hinted at the hard-driving R&B he would come to perfect. At Specialty, Art Rupe had been looking for someone who'd provide a "big band sound expressed in a churchy way". Rupe and producer Robert 'Bumps' Blackwell thought they'd found it when they listened to a tape that Richard had sent them. But at that first session at the J&M Studios, Blackwell recalled, the future star may have turned up looking like Tarzan, but he came through the speakers sounding like Mickey Mouse.

A dismayed Blackwell decided to call a break, and took his nervous new recruit and the rest of the recording crew off to lunch. Little Richard started fooling around on an old piano, "like any other ham", in Blackwell's description, and fell into a rendition of *Tutti Frutti*.

In an instant Blackwell recognised the unique bawling style he'd so liked on the demo tape. He got writer Dorothy LaBostrie, who was present, having contributed one of the songs to the hitherto lacklustre session, to clean up the words. Richard was allowed to accompany himself on the piano, and with one mic placed next to him and another inside the piano, it took just 15 minutes and three takes to record. By the time it appeared on *Here's Little Richard*, it had

LITTLE RICHARD'S DEBUT ALBUM IS A PERIOD PIECE THAT PLAYS LIKE A HOUSE-WRECKER, EVEN TODAY

LISTEN UP!
HERE'S LITTLE RICHARD (SPECIALTY, 1957)



SIDE A

Tutti Frutti (Dorothy La Bostrie, Richard Penniman, Robert 'Bumps' Blackwell) 2:26
True Fine Mama (Richard Penniman) 2:43
Can't Believe You Wanna Leave (Lloyd Price) 2:28
Ready Teddy (Robert 'Bumps' Blackwell, John Marascalco) 2:09
Baby (Richard Penniman) 2:06
Slippin' and Slidin' (Peepin' and Hidin') (Eddie Bocage, Albert Collins, Richard Penniman, James Smith) 2:44

SIDE B

Long Tall Sally (Robert 'Bumps' Blackwell, Enotris Johnson, Richard Penniman) 2:11
Miss Ann (Enotris Johnson, Richard Penniman) 2:17
Oh, Why? (William Scott) 2:10
Rip It Up (Robert 'Bumps' Blackwell, John Marascalco) 2:24
Jenny, Jenny (Enotris Johnson, Richard Penniman) 2:05
She's Got It (John Marascalco, Richard Penniman) 2:27

LITTLE RICHARD Vocals, Piano • **HUEY SMITH** Piano • **ALVIN 'RED' TYLER** Baritone Sax • **EARL PALMER** Drums • **LEE ALLEN** Tenor Sax • **FRANK FIELDS** Bass • **JUSTIN ADAMS** Guitar • **EDGAR BLANCHARD** Guitar • **CLIFFORD BURKS** Tenor Sax • **DANNY CARMICHAEL** Tenor Sax • **CHARLES CONNOR** Drums • **NATHANIEL DOUGLAS** Guitar • **CLARENCE FORD** Tenor and Baritone Sax • **EDWARD FRANK** Piano • **GRADY GAINES** Tenor Sax • **LUCAS FATS GONDER** Piano • **JEWELL GRANT** Baritone Sax • **THOMAS HARWELL** Guitar • **LLOYD LAMBERT** Bass • **ERNEST MCCLEAN** Guitar • **ROY MONTRELL** Guitar • **OSCAR MOORE** Drums • **WILLIAM H. 'FROSTY' PYLES** Guitar • **JIMMY RICE** Bass • **RENALD RICHARD** Trumpet **OLSIE ROBINSON** Guitar • **WIBERT SMITH** Guitar • **JOE TILLMAN** Tenor Sax

Michael Ochs Archives/Getty

Up in lights at the Apollo Theater, New York City – Little Richard and his band onstage circa 1957

BACKBEAT BOYS THE DRUMMER MAN

"If a single musician can be credited with defining rock'n'roll as a rhythmic idiom distinct from the jump, R&B, and all else that preceded it," wrote the music critic Robert Palmer, "that musician is surely Earl Palmer."

You might not know it, but the killer beats and shuffles propelling countless classics of the 1950s and early 1960s like *I'm Walkin'* (Fats Domino), *Donna* (Richie Valens), *Bony Moronie* (Larry Williams), *Be-Bop Baby* (Ricky Nelson) and *The Night Has A Thousand Eyes* (Bobby Vee), as well as Little Richard's Specialty hits, was a man from New Orleans who didn't even think that much of rock'n'roll, considering himself as primarily a jazzer.

Earl Palmer's life was brilliantly recounted in Tony Scherman's biography *Backbeat* (Da Capo Press, 1999). In it, Palmer recalled: "The only reason I started what they come to call a rock'n'roll beat came from trying to match Little Richard's right hand. Ding-ding-ding-ding!" On *Tutti Frutti* though, he was still trying to work it out, and just played a shuffle, as he had done with such artists as Fats Domino or Smiley Lewis. "Listen to it now, it's easy to hear I should have been playing a rock beat," reckoned the hyper-critical backbeat pioneer.

HIS HIGH-STRUNG ENERGY WOUND UP THE TENSION AND EXCITEMENT TO THE MAX

already given him a first hit single, reaching No.17 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart in January 1957.

The lyrics of another killer track, *Long Tall Sally,* came courtesy of a little girl named Enotris Johnson, who'd walked a vast distance across the state of Mississippi to the J&M Studios to present the song so she could earn money to support her sick aunt in hospital. Lacking a melody, Little Richard and Blackwell were at first unenthusiastic, but they loved lines like Uncle John and Long Tall Sally having to "duck back in the alley". Little Richard's fraught delivery was deliberately speeded up with the intention of frustrating Pat Boone, whose tamer version of *Tutti Frutti* had outsold the original. It didn't succeed, but at least this time Boone's cover didn't outsell Little Richard's version, which was also notable for being the first time he recorded one of his trademarks, the exultant, extended scream "Oooooh!!"

It's been said that Little Richard's records had little time for the usual boy-meets-girl-sentiments common in that period. In fact, at least one track, *Rip It Up – "Saturday night and I just got paid/ Fool about my money, don't try to save"* – did capture teenage feelings of living in the moment, but primarily, his song content was earthier and more in the tradition of black R&B performers whose music had been confined to what had been known as the "race chart". A lot of the singers on that chart sounded like they'd swallowed a packet of nails, and Little Richard was similarly raucous. But he spiced it up, ratcheting up the pace, energy and noise levels. This, combined with his image of – in Charles White's words – the "way-out demento", was intensely appealing.

Here's Little Richard is pretty much pedal to the metal all the way through, but some tracks are more "demento" than others. Even by his own histrionic standards, *Jenny, Jenny* is fruitcake-wild on the scale of Screamin' Jay Hawkins. Little Richard sounds so keyed up, he barely bothers finishing off a line before bouncing into the next one. *Ready Teddy*

DR. ROCK ON LITTLE RICHARD

Despite his enormous impact on pop and rock, a biography of Little Richard did not come out until Charles (Dr Rock) White's *The Life and Times of Little Richard: The Authorised Biography* in 1984. Even today it remains the most authoritative work on the subject of the Georgia Peach. We spoke to him in 2018...

Why did you want to write the biography?
I was doing Radio London work with [producer and broadcaster] Stuart Colman and there was this big deal about the Bay City Rollers having a new book out. They'd been in business for about three seconds, whereas Little Richard had influenced everyone. Chuck Berry acclaimed *Tutti Frutti*, so did Jerry Lee Lewis, and his impact on British pop was massive. I thought, "To hell with this, I'm writing the book."

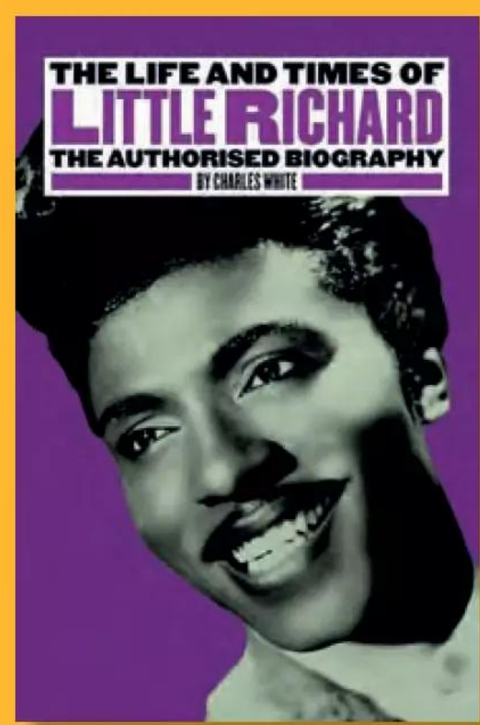
Was it easy getting access to the great man himself?
Ah, no. He was very difficult to get hold of. It was like climbing Mount Everest with two broken legs. He's a very complex man. I told Anthony Clare, who did the TV show *In The Psychiatrist's Chair*, that he should get Little Richard on it. He's got 15 different personalities, constantly changing.

You had some key intermediaries to help...
A record engineer, who'd worked on Frank Sinatra's album, put me in touch with Bumps Blackwell, who invited me over to California. Guess who met me at the airport – Bobby Day [singer of *Rockin' Robin* and writer of *Little Bitty Pretty One*, immortalised by Thurston Harris and Clyde McPhatter]. He had this nice-looking Cadillac, but he'd obviously had a crash in it. Bumps, who let's not forget also worked with Sam Cooke and Ray Charles, was in contact with Richard, even though there was this titanic clash of jealousies between them. So I was sent down to meet him at a hotel with two other writers who were also trying to write his biography. He was in religious mode, all dressed in white, surrounded by 14 people. We each made our pitches, after which he stood up and declared: "God has sent Dr Rock to write my life story!" I spent three years going back and forward doing interviews with him. But English publishers didn't want to know about the book, and it was first published in America.

What made Little Richard so appealing to youngsters?
His voice was so powerful – it was like a fire blizzard across an Arctic waste, but it was so full of joy and energy. It totally changed my life. It was like coming out of the Bastille after years of imprisonment.

What was the first record of his you ever heard?
A friend played me *Long Tall Sally* at his house. Living in the west of Ireland all you heard was religious and national songs, so you can't imagine what it was like. It was so new, so exhilarating, at a time when songs were all "moon in June" and "I love you". The opera singers were good, of course, but Little Richard was deliberate exhilaration. The power of *Long Tally Sally* left us gobsmacked.

Which is your all-time favourite Little Richard song?
Good Golly, Miss Molly. It's so powerful. They play the intro, then there's this pause, and his voice comes in and knocks you over. But for proof of why his is the most extraordinary voice of all, making Pavarotti sound like a squeaky mouse, it's *I Can't Believe You Wanna Leave*. And listen to his cut of *Get Rhythm* on the album, released in 2002, *Kindred Spirits: A Tribute To The Songs Of Johnny Cash*. His voice is nuclear on that. Cash rang him up and said it was better than his version.



hit the ground running, and just seeming to get faster. *True Fine Mama* was the sort of R&B number The Dominoes might have recorded, but it had a great backbeat and Little Richard was in top squawking form. *I Can't Believe You Wanna Leave*, written by Lloyd Price's brother Leo, was almost stately in pace in the style of Fats Domino, but Little Richard's high-strung energy wound up tension and excitement to the max.

Alongside Little Richard's frenzied vocals, a key element of the sound on these songs was the support of top Crescent City session men, especially Earl Palmer on drums, Lee Allen on tenor sax and Alvin 'Red' Tyler on baritone sax. They were veterans of sessions with the relatively sedate Fats Domino, but they were energised by Little Richard, so *Ready Teddy* and *Jenny, Jenny* f eatured blizzards of sax playing and an irresistible rhythm.

Little Richard reckoned Palmer and Allen were two of the greatest session musicians of all time, but he also expressed regret that Rupe and Blackwell didn't let him make the records using his own band, the Upsetters, who backed him on his live shows. "That," he reckoned, "would have been the most exciting rock'n'roll of all." The maestro of mayhem may not have been far wrong, for on one track on *Here's Little Richard* he was allowed to use those musicians, recorded in Hollywood, on *She's Got It*. With blazing saxophone, mad drumming and a pounding piano, it roars off like a train thundering downhill with the brakes off. It's a blistering closer to an LP once chosen by *Rolling Stone* as one of the 100 Best Debut Albums Of All Time. ✶

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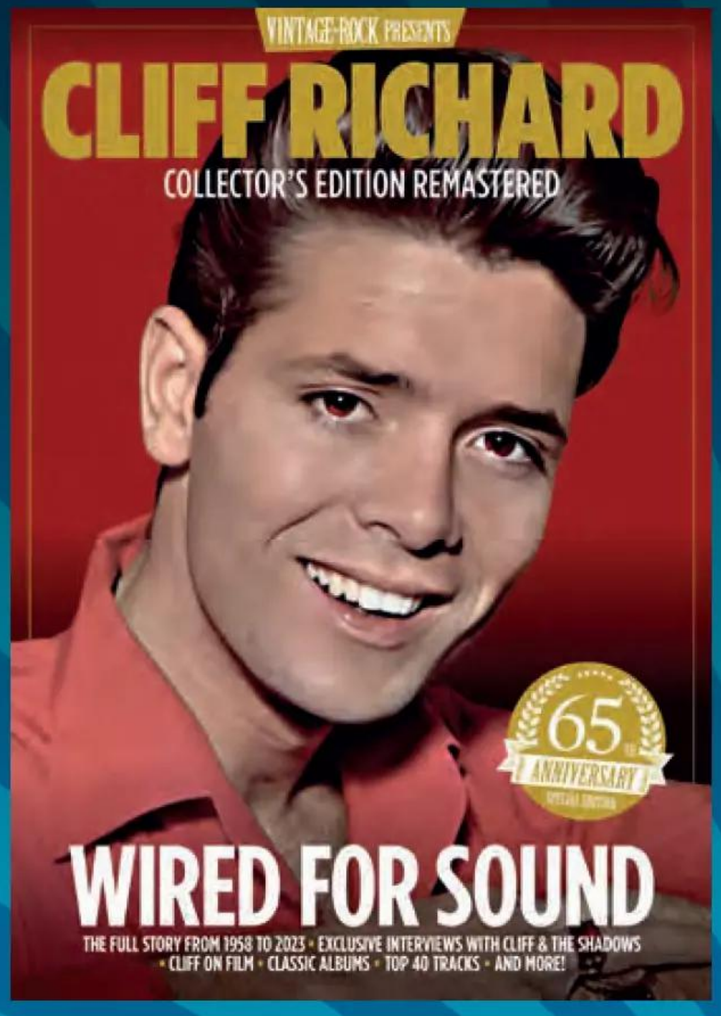

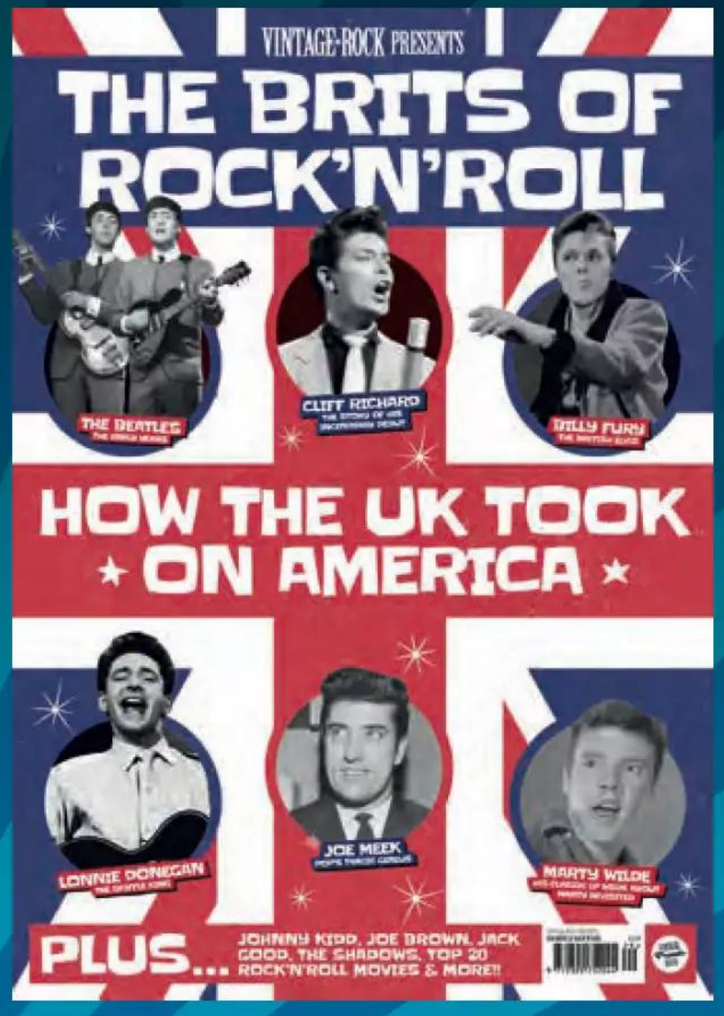

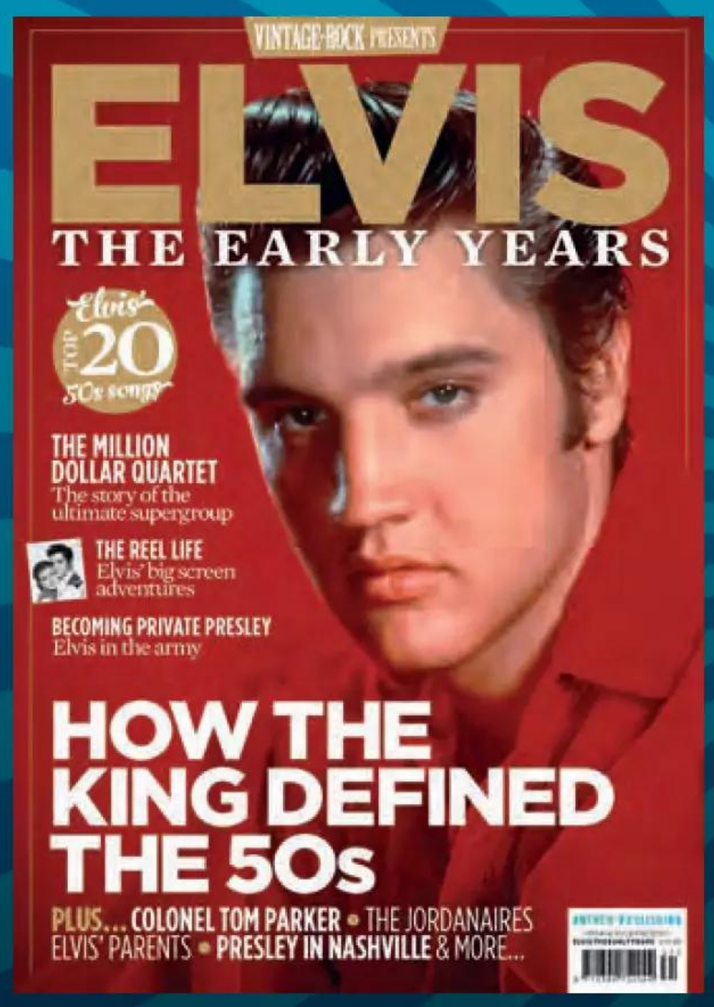

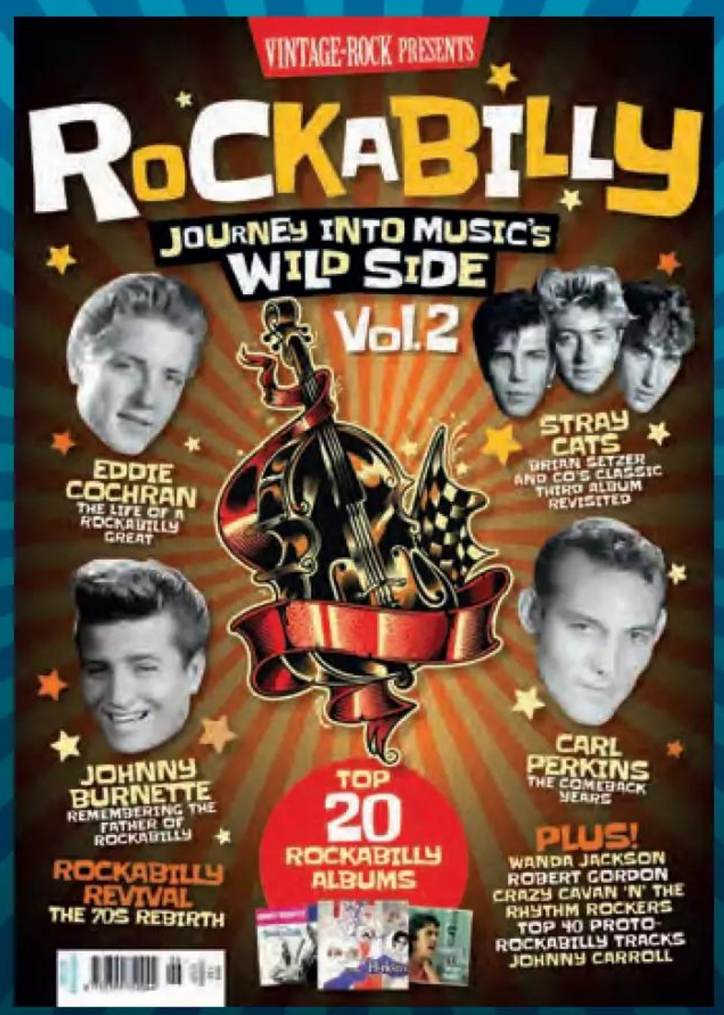

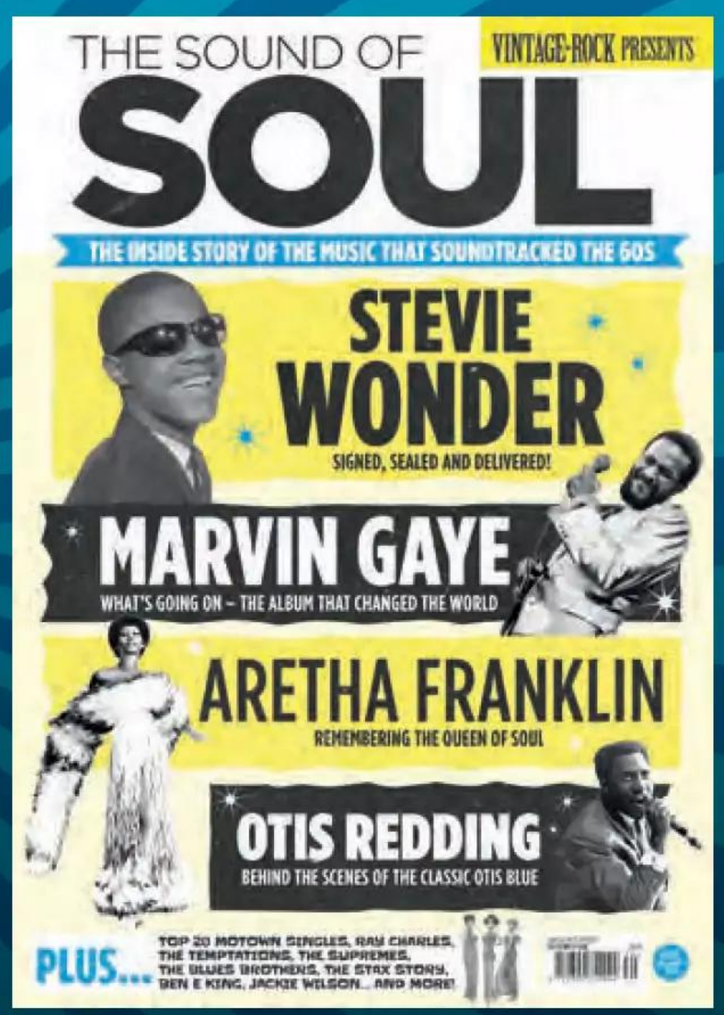

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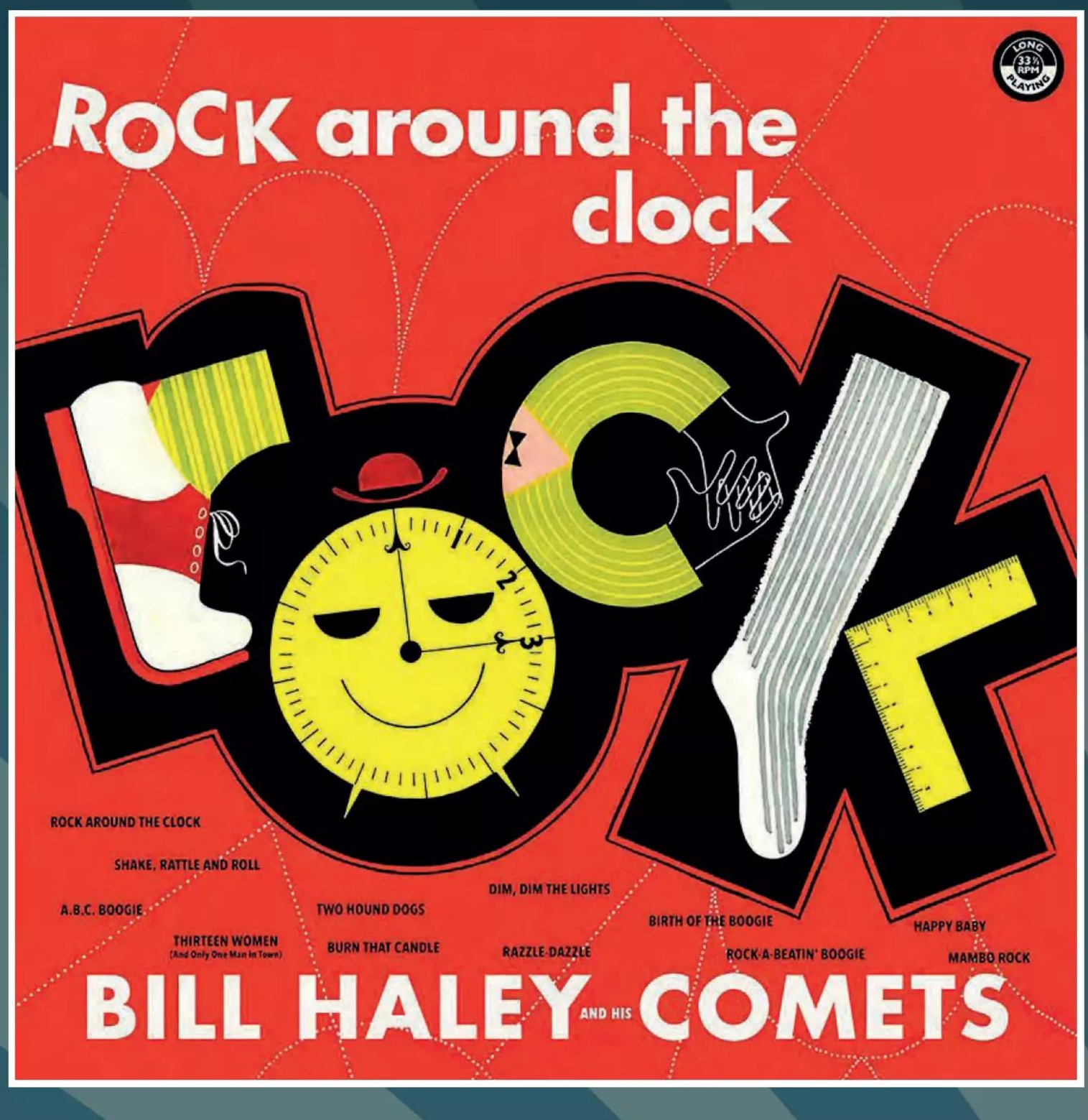


Classic album

WORDS BY JACK WATKINS

ROCK AROUND THE CLOCK

BILL HALEY AND HIS COMETS

Rock Around The Clock was the third album from Bill Haley And His Comets

ROCK AROUND THE CLOCK
BILL HALEY AND HIS COMETS

1955 • DECCA

Side 1

(We're Gonna) Rock Around The Clock (Jimmy DeKnight/Max Freedman)
Shake, Rattle And Roll (Charles E Calhoun)
ABC Boogie (Al Russell/Max Spickol)
Thirteen Women (And Only One Man In Town) (Dickie Thompson)
Razzle-Dazzle (Charles E Calhoun)
Two Hound Dogs (Bill Haley/Frank Pingatore)

Side 2

Dim, Dim The Lights (I Want Some Atmosphere) (Beverley Ross/Julius Dixon)
Happy Baby (Frank Pingatore)
Birth Of The Boogie (Bill Haley/Billy Williamson/Johnny Grande)
Mambo Rock (Bix Reichner/Mildred Phillips/Jimmy Ayre)
Burn That Candle (Winfield Scott)
Rock-A-Beatin' Boogie (Bill Haley)

Released at the height of Bill Haley's popularity on both sides of the Atlantic, *Rock Around The Clock* was a compilation album stuffed full of what has come to be seen as some of his finest rockers...

The historic significance of Bill Haley's *(We're Gonna) Rock Around The Clock* single has been well documented. Much less discussed is his album of the same name, unsurprisingly in that it was not a specially studio-crafted LP, but a compilation of recordings Haley made with the Comets for Decca, from shortly after they joined the label in April 1954 up to September 1955.

However, after its Stateside release at the end of 1955, it climbed to No.12 on the Billboard pop album chart. Then, when released in the UK the following summer, it did even better, reaching No.2 on the British equivalent. This made it, just ahead of Elvis Presley's eponymous debut album, effectively the first rock'n'roll long-player to make a serious dent on the charts.

While the album track running order didn't follow the sequence of releases chronologically, the LP brought together each side of Bill Haley's first six Decca singles, drawn from seven sessions. These produced a body of work that amounted to the pinnacle of the band's most commercial offerings.

Haley signed to Decca in early 1954, partly because of the failure to achieve a follow-up success to his first national breakthrough in April 1953 with the single *Crazy Man, Crazy* on the small Philadelphia label Essex Records, and partly in frustration at the refusal of that company's owner and producer Dave Miller to allow him to record *Rock Around The Clock*. James Myers, a Haley associate and music publisher, claimed to have written the song under the pseudonym Jimmy DeKnight with Tin Pan Alley songsmith Max Freedman, but a personality clash between Myers and Miller had frustrated Haley's attempts to record it. The original version was eventually laid down by Sonny Dae And His Knights, but Myers remained convinced it was the perfect song for Haley. Just five days after his Decca contract was signed, Bill and his band would be in New York recording what would become the definitive version.

THE LP BROUGHT TOGETHER EACH SIDE OF HALEY'S FIRST SIX DECCA SINGLES, DRAWN FROM SEVEN SESSIONS

As Nick Tosches put it in his book *Unsung Heroes Of Rock'n'Roll*, Haley was "one of the first instances of a white boy really getting down to the art of hep." His thrilling new rock'n'roll sound and crowd-pleasing stage show had already reached full formation at Essex where, with his tireless experimentation with sound, he "was like a scientist putting one thing after another into a test tube," as his long-serving steel guitarist Bill Williamson put it.

Even so, Decca, as one of the big five record labels, represented a considerable step up. It also brought Haley into the orbit of A&R man Milt Gabler. Although ➡

SILVER SCREEN COLLECTION/GETTY

COWBOY JIVE

Milt Gabler is credited with sharpening up the Bill Haley sound, but much of the spadework had already been done earlier when Haley was recording for Dave Miller's Holiday and Essex labels. With his band still known as The Saddlemen, Haley described their version of *Rocket "88"*, and the Haley original *Green Tree Boogie* as "up-tempo, blues-inspired, western-swing boogie". Both were released in late 1951. *Rock The Joint* was the band's first hit, selling 150,000 copies. A reworking of an old jump blues number, Haley noticed that when they played it at their gigs everybody got up and danced. Calling themselves a "cowboy jive" band at this point, it was the success of the single that caused Haley and his group to ditch the cowboy suits and stetsons for tuxedos. Another fine Saddlemen-era recording is *Rocking Chair On The Moon*, Billy Williamson firing off what were to become his distinctive steel guitar strafe-style notes against the beat. At this stage the band was still drummerless, but by the end of 1952, the name had been changed to the Comets, and drums had been introduced, played by Billy Gussak on *Stop Beatin' 'Round The Mulberry Bush* and *Real Rock Drive*. In 1953, they recorded probably the greatest of all the pre-Decca era rockers, *Crazy Man, Crazy*. A young Tom Dowd, who carved a reputation as one of the greats of the recording studio at Atlantic, was the engineer on the session. This was the first rock'n'roll song to be heard on a nationwide TV network when it featured in the series *Omnibus*, whose cast included James Dean. *Crazy Man, Crazy* was the band's first nationwide hit in the spring of 1953.

Bill Haley with The Saddlemen, circa 1950

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY

Gabler was steeped in jazz, having worked with the likes of Lionel Hampton, Woody Herman and Billie Holliday, unlike a lot of veteran A&R men in the 50s, he was also attuned to the rhythms of R&B, and had helped shape some of Louis Jordan's best jump blues sides.

The venue for the Decca recordings was the memorably named Pythian Temple, an old New York ballroom. It had retained its wooden floor, and had a stage at the back, along with a small control room and an echo chamber where the natural acoustics created by the ballroom's high ceiling were enhanced by a reverb effect. Gabler's method for recording Haley and his band was straightforward – The Comets were placed on the stage. As a live act they were notable for playing extremely loud, and Haley's likeable, yet relatively thin voice, often struggled to be heard above them. So Gabler placed him on the ballroom floor facing the band and a few feet below them, singing directly into his own microphone. The one-track recordings were effectively done live with minimal retakes, a mic set in front of each instrument with no use of separating boards between them, and minimal tape splicing by Gabler after the sessions were completed.

Gabler later recalled that Haley and his band weren't trained musicians and had to rehearse hard to learn songs by rote, but "boy, when they had that down it used to rock." At the first session, Danny Cedrone's scattergun solo on his Gibson for *Rock Around the Clock* was identical to the one he'd delivered on Haley's version of *Rock The Joint*, recorded two years previously when the band were still a drummerless line-up known as The Saddlemen. Now, his guitar, alongside Billy Williamson's steel guitar notes that Gabler described as "lightning flashes," the echoing crack of Billy Gussak's snare drum rimshots, fired off on the backbeat, Joey Ambrose's tenor sax, Marshall Lytle's string bass and Haley's hard-strummed guitar and good-time vocals, all came together to create just over two minutes of magic. This noisy recording would come to be seen as the moment when rock's fusion of hopped-up country music and African-American rhythms truly arrived as a nationwide and, ultimately worldwide, phenomenon.

However, the breakthrough didn't come immediately. Gabler had actually spent most of the session getting the band to record *Thirteen Women (And Only One Man In Town)*, thinking it could take off with its

The Comets in 1956. From left to right: Rudy Pompilli, Billy Williamson, Al Rex, Bill Haley, Johnny Grande, Ralph Jones, Franny Beecher

topical reference to the H-bomb. It is indeed a much better song than has sometimes been suggested, a sauntering, atmospheric jazz-blues hybrid with an eerie air, but by putting it on the topside, it meant *Rock Around The Clock* went relatively unnoticed, selling a respectable but unremarkable 75,000 copies on first release. DJs just weren't interested, said Haley, recalling their standard response was, "If you want money, my car or even to borrow my girlfriend, you can have it, but please don't ask me to play your record." Their tune changed when *Rock Around The Clock* was used as the theme song to the teen rebellion flick *Blackboard Jungle* the following year. After Decca's hurried re-release, teens lined up to buy it, allowing the song to really take off, hitting the top spot in the US in May 1955.

But a version of Joe Turner's *Shake, Rattle And Roll*, recorded by the band at their second Decca session a couple of months later, had already given Haley his first million seller by then. This was effectively a cover, as Turner's song was still on the R&B charts at the time, but with Billboard running an ad which described them as "The Nation's 'Rockingest Rhythm Group", Haley and the Comets' version, backed by *ABC Boogie*, raced up the pop chart, reaching No.7 in August 1954. Tragically, Danny Cedrone would not be around to see the success of either song, after a fatal accident when he fell down the stairs at his home and broke his neck.

Haley, though visibly moved at Cedrone's funeral, had little trouble in finding a replacement guitarist. Franny Beecher was an ex-member of the Benny Goodman band who worshipped bop maestro Charlie Christian. He was well able to replicate Cedrone's historic licks. However, when he turned up at the band's next session, and started ad-libbing a jazzy solo as they rehearsed *Happy Baby*, he was pulled up by Haley. "I played the first four bars and everything came to a halt," Beecher remembered, "Haley said he'd never sell any records if I played like that. I had to stick to the major chords – no flatted fifths or anything like that." The band played so loud Beecher also had to replace his favoured Epiphone guitar for a Les Paul. ➡

AS A LIVE ACT THEY WERE NOTABLE FOR PLAYING LOUD, AND HALEY'S THIN VOICE OFTEN STRUGGLED TO BE HEARD ABOVE THEM

SILVER SCREEN COLLECTION/GETTY

Bill Haley And His Comets onstage in New York, 1955

TWO HOUND DOGS FEATURED THE COMETS YELPING AND HOWLING LIKE DOGS OVER THE FADE

Happy Baby, paired with *Dim, Dim The Lights* pitched up outside the Top 10, while the follow-up, *Birth Of The Boogie/Mambo Rock* just made the Top 20. Haley would say of the latter when they played it live, "Not quite so much mambo, but just enough so we could call it that!" By this time, Dick Richards had joined as drummer, playing tom toms on *Birth Of The Boogie*, the song's monster opening rumble reminiscent of the big sound the Goodman band created at the famed Carnegie Hall concert of 1938. Listen to Marshall Lytle's rumbling bass. The intro the Stray Cats used to *Runaway Boys* 25 years later sounds suspiciously similar.

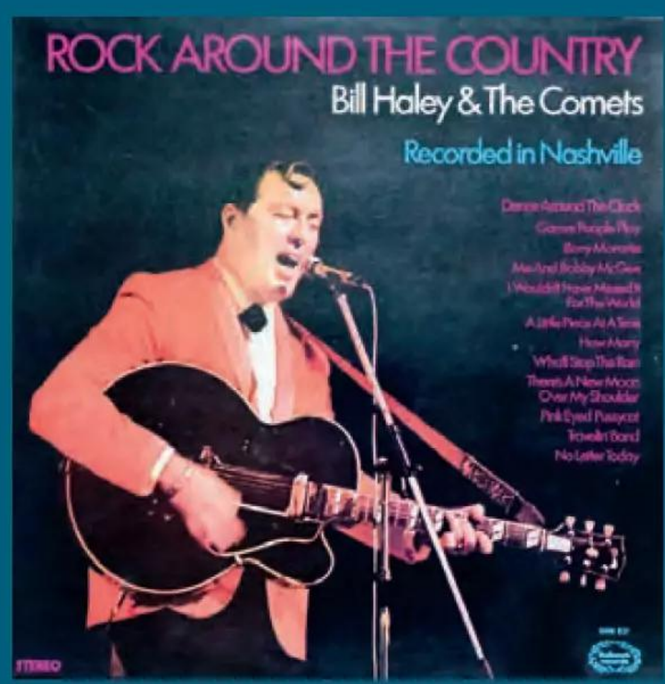
The success of the re-release of *Rock Around The Clock* helped drive the next single, *Two Hound Dogs/Razzle-Dazzle*, up to No.15 in the US, occupying the charts for a month. The former track featured the Comets yelping and howling like dogs over the fade. *Razzle-Dazzle* was featured in the "troubled teen" movie *Running Wild*, starring Mamie Van Doren, reaffirming rock'n'roll's link in the minds of many adults with juvenile delinquency, much to Haley's dismay.

By the next time the band went into the studio, three of the Comets, Ambrose, Lytle and Richards, had decamped to form their own Comets soundalike group The Jodimars, after a salary disagreement. Jazz saxophonist Rudy Pompilli replaced Ambrose, Al Rex who'd played in Haley's band in the early 50s, came back in on bass, and Cliff Leeman, another jazz veteran, played drums on the session yielding *Rock-A-Beatin'-Boogie*. The latter showed Beecher and Pompilli already linking up well with a call-and-response passage. Haley had originally written the song and given it to The Treniers, who influenced the Comets' stage presentation, and who recorded the song for Okeh. *Burn That Candle* showcased Haley's likeable, jaunty tones, so suited to the upbeat, fun nature of his patented rock'n'roll sound. It took him back into the Top 10 towards the end of 1955, in December of which *Downbeat* magazine's annual poll had named him as their No.1 Rhythm and Blues Personality Of The Year. ★

COUNTRY BILL

One of the saddest stories in rock'n'roll is the struggle of Bill Haley in his later years. Permanently hitched to the songs that had made him famous, at least he was grateful for the success they had brought him. As he reflected on the importance of *Rock Around The Clock*, "I don't even think of it as a song anymore. Even if the show doesn't go over, I know I've got this little piece of gold for the end of the show." Even so, every creative artist craves variety. In 1971, he went to Nashville to record *Rock Around The Country*, for the Sonet label. Many first-generation rockers had turned to their country roots after the hits had faded, and Haley had started out as a country artist, recording in the late 40s and early 50s in the cowboy yodelling and western swing tradition.

On *Rock Around The Country* he had fine Nashville sidemen behind him like steel guitar great Curly Chalker, who'd played on Lefty Frizzell's *Always Late (With Your Kisses)* and Hank Thompson's *Wild Side Of Life*, pianist Hargus "Pig" Robbins, who'd worked with everyone from George Jones and Patsy Cline to Bob Dylan, and multi-instrumentalist Jimmy Riddle, a staple member of Roy Acuff's Smoky Mountain Boys. The Comets' Nick Masters played lead guitar and contributed a notable vocal on the album's version of Creedence Clearwater Revival's *Travellin' Band*. Haley sung another of that band's material, *Who'll Stop The Rain*, and Kris Kristofferson's *Me And Bobby McGee*. By and large, Sam Charters' production was too busy and some of the song choices were poor, but there was one Haley connected with and had high hopes for, the country ballad *A Little Piece At A Time*. Sadly, the album was a commercial failure.



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The Girl Can't Help It grossed over $6 million and had a profound influence on youth culture

IN LIVING COLOUR

It's the movie that brought us our favourite 50s rock'n'rollers in glorious full colour. Now, nearly 70 years on from its release, we look back at the legacy of Frank Tashlin's The Girl Can't Help It.

WORDS BY **STEVE O'BRIEN**

Look up Eddie Cochran or Gene Vincent on YouTube and you'll find a miserably short list of foggy monochrome TV recordings that make these two icons of the 1950s seem as historically distant as Charlie Chaplin or Edward VII. But type in 'Eddie Cochran' and 'The Girl Can't Help It' and there the late rocker is, in full glorious colour and in high-definition, as vivid and alive as he was in 1956.

Thank the maker, then, for *The Girl Can't Help It*. Frank Tashlin's movie may not have won rapturous write-ups at the time, but, 69 years on from its release, this cult rock'n'roll comedy is now rightly celebrated as a classic of its genre – and a cherishable record of a precious time in pop culture.

"It's still *the* great music film," Paul McCartney once enthused. "They had only treated music films as B-pictures up till then, or used the music just as a theme tune, as in *Blackboard Jungle*. Or those little black and white productions with Alan Freed as the personality, and lots of what they thought were 'Black acts'... We idolised these people and always thought they were given crummy treatment – until *The Girl Can't Help It*."

While grown-up critics may have savaged the movie on its release, it was passionately embraced by the younger set, hungry as they were to see the culture they were living up there on the big screen. Sure, there'd been rock'n'roll flicks before *The Girl Can't Help It*, but never before had so many of the era's starriest names been collected together in just one film, and in colour, too. When actor Tom Ewell appears at the beginning of the movie, it's in black and white and in the old 4.3 television ratio. "Ladies and gentlemen," he announces, "this motion picture was photographed in the grandeur of Cinescope," he continues, before looking around and then flicking left and right as the picture opens out into widescreen. "And with gorgeous life-like colour by De Luxe," he adds, as the monochrome screen suddenly floods with oranges and blues. According to McCartney, who saw the film when he was just 14, that opening sequence was "the most fantastic trick ever".

Much has been made over the years of this movie's importance in the story of The Beatles. It's said it inspired John Lennon to pick up his first guitar and that it was Macca's approximation of Eddie Cochran's performance of *Twenty Flight Rock* from the film that sealed his place in The Quarrymen. It was clearly a movie that was so critical to the Fabs that, on 18 September 1968,

DONALDSON COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

FAST FILM FACTS

1 The wedding dress that Jayne Mansfield wears at the end of the film was, two years later, loaned to her to use on her real-life wedding day with body-builder Mickey Hargitay.

2 Two uncredited songwriters on *The Girl Can't Help It*, Hugo Friedhofer and Lionel Newman (father of film composer Thomas Newman), also wrote music for the Elvis Presley movie, *Love Me Tender*, released in 1956.

3 When Abbey Lincoln is performing *Spread The Word* in the nightclub scene with Jayne Mansfield and Tom Ewell, she's wearing a costume worn by Marilyn Monroe in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* three years before. Another costume from that film appears later, when Ewell passes a chorus girl on the stairs. She's wearing the dress Jane Russell wore when she sang *Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend*.

they purposely rescheduled the recording of *Birthday* from *'The White Album'* simply so they could watch the British TV premiere of *The Girl Can't Help It*. As Beatles historian Mark Lewisohn wrote: "It is impossible to overestimate the impact made by *The Girl Can't Help It* on Liverpool teenagers."

McCartney had a point when he suggested that, before *The Girl Can't Help It*, the big screen's flirtation with the emerging rock'n'roll scene was either half-hearted, patronising or exploitative. There's none of that in Frank Tashlin's picture. Rock'n'roll is woven into the very fabric of the movie, and even the older characters are in thrall to this musical revolution. "Okay, so Jerri can't sing," says the fortysomething 'Fats' Murdock after showing his apparently tone-deaf girlfriend a clip of Eddie Cochran on TV. "Well that guy ain't got a trained voice either and he's one of the top record stars in the country. Why? Cos he's got a new sound!"

The movie showcases many of the biggest and buzziest recording names of the time, including Little Richard, Gene Vincent And His Blue Caps, Fats Domino, The Platters, The Treniers and Eddie Fontaine. And, generally speaking, they're not relegated to the background either. There are no teases of tracks in *The Girl Can't Help It*. If you were a fan of Little Richard's *Ready Teddy* or Fats Domino's *Blue Monday*, you were getting almost the full song in this film, which, at a time when TV appearances from Black artists were rare, makes *The Girl Can't Help It* one of the most culturally valuable movies of the 1950s.

Of course, one stellar name is conspicuous by his absence. Fox certainly wanted Elvis Presley for the picture, but Colonel Tom Parker demanded £50,000 for his boy to sing two songs. The studio's Head Of Production Buddy Adler erred. Parker made them an offer – he would flip a coin. Heads, Fox gets Elvis for free *and* a third song; tails, Fox coughs up £100,000. Adler declined the offer.

One person who believed Fox had made a mistake in not agreeing to Parker's demands was the film's star Jayne Mansfield. It can't be underestimated how crucial the 23-year-old actress was to the success of *The Girl Can't Help It*. Unfairly maligned as a kind of poundshop Marilyn Monroe, Mansfield had made a name for herself on Broadway the year before with the satirical play *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* Beyond her obvious assets ("Jayne Mansfield and her cantilevered cleavage – what more do young teenagers want?" recalled a still lust-struck Paul McCartney many years later), the actress brings effortless warmth to the role of Jerri, whose dreams of domestic bliss are cruelly ignored by her Svengali boyfriend whose only ambition is to make her into a star, despite her apparent lack of any talent. The film has fun with the paralysing

Gene Vincent And His Blue Caps on the set

THE BEATLES RESCHEDULED THE RECORDING OF BIRTHDAY SIMPLY SO THEY COULD WATCH THE BRITISH TV PREMIERE OF THE GIRL CAN'T HELP IT

Little Richard belting out his performance of *Ready Teddy*

HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGE GAB ARCHIVE/REDFERN MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

4 Along with 1957's *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?*, this was the first of two comedies that Frank Tashlin directed which headlined Jayne Mansfield. He's quoted as saying: "There's nothing in the world to me that's funnier than big breasts".

5 When Jerri performs with her own singing voice at the end of the picture, it's really singer Eileen Wilson that we're hearing. She also dubbed Ava Gardner in the films *One Touch Of Venus* and *The Hucksters* and Barbara Bel Geddes in *The Five Pennies*.

6 One surprise fan of the movie is German arthouse director Wim Wenders. He told *Film Comment* magazine in 1992: "This is my definitive guilty pleasure. It's actually a terribly stupid movie, with a story you would shudder to tell, Jayne Mansfield is such a non-actress; she's just a ploy, pretext or gimmick to get you from one rock'n'roll event to another. But you get to see Gene Vincent, Little Richard, Eddie Cochran – these unbelievable musicians who don't exist on 35mm otherwise."

THE BEST OF THE BEST

Five of the most sizzling performances from the movie...

READY TEDDY
LITTLE RICHARD

Standing at the piano, an impossibly youthful Little Richard belts out this rock'n'roll standard that can be found as the B-side to his 1956 hit *Rip It Up*.

CRY ME A RIVER
JULIE LONDON

Julie London had her big break in the movie, starring as the singer that slipped through Tom Miller's fingers. Originally written in the early 50s for Ella Fitzgerald for the film *Pete Kelly's Blues*, *Cry Me A River* was eventually recorded by London in 1955.

BE-BOP-A-LULA
GENE VINCENT AND HIS BLUE CAPS

Gene Vincent gives it his all in this electrifying performance of his signature hit. It had been released just six months previously, reaching No.7 on the Billboard chart.

TWENTY FLIGHT ROCK
EDDIE COCHRAN

Eddie was just 18 when he delivered this much-imitated performance of his classic track. With his shoulders hunched and a little too much makeup on his face, he bashes away at his Gretsch G6120, giving us a movie clip that would go down in history.

BLUE MONDAY
FATS DOMINO

Like all the songs here, *Blue Monday* was a recent release for Fats Domino when he performed it for *The Girl Can't Help It*. It was one of the earliest R&B songs to make the Billboard chart, peaking at No.5 and reaching No.1 on the R&B Best Sellers chart.

The Girl Can't Help It played a pivotal role in Jayne Mansfield's movie career

effect Mansfield's beauty had on men. Tashlin's background as a *Looney Tunes* animator is clearly on show with moments like that when a man's glasses crack as she shimmies up the stairs and when a lovestruck milkman's bottle overspills as she passes, in a lewd visual joke that might have been considered too on-the-nose even for the Carry Ons.

It's fascinating how prescient much of *The Girl Can't Help It* seems now, in an age where the pursuit of celebrity more than ever has little to do with talent or achievement. When Murdock asks agent Tom Miller to make Jerri into a star, he's tasked with simply showing her off around town, telling her, "Don't say

THE GIRL CAN'T HELP IT WENT ON TO GROSS CONSIDERABLY MORE THAN ANY ROCK'N'ROLL MOVIE BEFORE. ITS INFLUENCE WAS PROFOUND.

Mansfield with Edmond O'Brien and Tom Ewell

anything, just say, 'Ask my agent'." It's only later that Miller discovers quite how little talent his new project has. Visiting a rehearsal studio, he sets out to ascertain how good a singer she is. Alarmingly, her voice is so wretched it shatters lightbulbs.

Jerri's lack of vocal prowess doesn't deter Murdock, however, and he digs out a song he penned in the joint, *Rock Around The Rockpile*. Jerri's job on the track is to deliver the sound of a prison siren, and when it's completed he asks Miller to tout it around.

Taking the record to Chicago in an attempt to get it on the country's jukeboxes, Miller soon discovers that the person he's talking to, jukebox king Wheeler, is an old rival of Murdock's, who refuses to playlist the song. Undeterred, Murdock simply muscles in on Wheeler's business, replacing his old adversary's jukeboxes with his own.

And what do you know, the song becomes a giant hit and the film climaxes with Jerri taking to the stage at the Rock And Roll Jubilee and revealing a dazzlingly beautiful singing voice. "I always could sing," Jerri confesses to Miller afterwards. "I thought if I was real awful, I'd get out of owing him."

Against a budget of $1,310,000, *The Girl Can't Help It* went on to gross $6,250,000 – considerably more than any rock'n'roll movie before it, including *Rock Around The Clock*, which had premiered nine months earlier. Its influence was profound. It's clear that director Richard Thorpe was watching, because the iconic *Jailhouse Rock* sequence from the film of the same name – released one year later – has striking similarities to the *Rock Around The Rockpile* finale of *The Girl Can't Help It*. And, as Mark Lewisohn pointed out, it can't be overstated quite how seismic the movie was for young people in the 50s. Jimmy Page and Jeff Beck, both later of The Yardbirds, have spoken of their love of *The Girl Can't Help It*, with Beck calling it "the best rock'n'roll movie ever filmed".

The film also made Jayne Mansfield a bona fide star and one of the most enduring sex symbols of the 20th century. She brings real heart and a touching sweetness to the role of Jerri, and often acts her more seasoned co-stars off the screen.

But, above all, it's for its music that *The Girl Can't Help It* is remembered. In 1956, it brought rock'n'roll's most exciting names to the attention of millions. It delivered the thrills, the glamour and the voltage of American music right into the laps of rock-thirsty British teens. And nearly 70 years on, it's a pristine, 35mm snapshot of one of the most important years in rock'n'roll history. The adults might have sneered at *The Girl Can't Help It* in 1956, but, as ever, what did they know? ✶

SILVER SCREEN COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES FILM PUBLICITY ARCHIVE/UNITED ARCHIVES VIA GETTY IMAGES

THEPLAYERS

Jayne mansfield (Jerri Jordan)

Born in Pennsylvania in 1933, Jayne Mansfield first made a splash as one of *Playboy* magazine's Playmates Of The Month. After starring in the stage production of *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* in 1955, she was offered a six-year contract by Twentieth Century Fox. Her career declined in the 60s and she died in 1967 after a car crash.

Tom Ewell (Tom Miller)

Most famous for his role opposite Marilyn Monroe in 1955's *The Seven Year Itch*, Ewell was more of a stage actor than a film one, though he continued to perform on the big and small screen until his retirement in 1986. He died in 1994 at the age of 85.

Edmond O'Brien (Fats Murdock)

As a child, O'Brien put on magic shows for fellow kids in his neighbourhood after being taught by his neighbour, Harry Houdini. As a grown-up, Edmond would become one of the most reliable supporting actors of his generation, scooping an Oscar in 1955 for *The Barefoot Contessa*. He died in 1985.

Barry Gordon (Barry the paperboy)

Just eight years old at the time of filming *The Girl Can't Help It*, Gordon (who almost steals the movie with the line, "If she's a girl, I don't know what my sister is!") later went on to become the longest-serving president (1988 to 1995) of the Screen Actors Guild. He also voiced Donatello in the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* cartoons and was, until 2019, the host of Pasadena's talk news show, *NewsRap*.

Ray Anthony (Himself)

Ray Anthony, who sings the single version of *Rock Around The Rockpile* in the movie, played in Glenn Miller's band from 1940-41 and as bandleader of The Ray Anthony Orchestra, enjoying hits in the early 50s with *The Bunny Hop*, *Hokey Pokey* and the theme from *Dragnet*. He celebrated his 103rd birthday on 20 January.

John Emery (Wheeler)

Emery played Murdock's old slot machine rival Wheeler in the film. An actor since the 1930s, he also starred in movies such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) and 1948's *The Woman In White*. A former husband of Tallulah Bankhead, he died in 1964 shortly after completing his final film, *Youngblood Hawke*.

ROCK'N'ROLL REBEL

The End has no end: Gene Vincent's rockin' legacy endures to this day

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

More than half a century on from his passing, Gene Vincent's influence remains undiminished. We look back on the legacy of 'The Screaming End' and how his black leather-clad shadow has fallen upon other rock'n'roll enthusiasts and artists through the years.

WORDS BY **CRAIG BRACKENRIDGE**

Who would have known back in 1954 when a shy, soft-spoken Vincent Eugene Craddock auditioned for William Beauregard Davis – aka Sheriff Tex – at the radio studios of WCMS in Norfolk, Virginia, that a rock'n'roll behemoth, who would leave a lasting impression on so many, was about to be unleashed?

Legend has it that John Lennon was belting out *Be-Bop-A-Lula* at St Peter's Church fete in Woolton, Liverpool, on the day he first met Paul McCartney. With up to 14 Gene Vincent covers appearing in their early gigs and rehearsals, the Fab Four remain the most high-profile act to have carried Vincent's influence through their career, but his reach has been vast, inspiring huge numbers of fledgling rockers. For many, that first blast of Gene Vincent and His Blue Caps would stay with them forever.

Dell Richardson, of Fury Records and Radio Caroline, remembers that effect clearly. "I have been a fan of Gene Vincent since I was eight years old. My sister had a Dansette record player in the front room and she would put on this 78rpm record of *Be-Bop-A-Lula*. It would play over and over. My dad used to come in the room saying, 'I've heard this a dozen times, I'm even saying the words'."

It was more than just a passing fancy for Dell, and years later the Vincent vibe was still strong. "When I was 16, I went to my local youth club and they had a Rock-Ola jukebox. I can remember another record by Gene that was playing, called *Held For Questioning*. In Harrow, there was this guy called Dave who sold records at the back of his dad's greengrocer's shop. I went up to him and said, 'do you have anything by Gene Vincent?' He pulled out this brown paper bag, which had about eight singles in. I wanted the lot, but I had only two bob. Every week when I got my pocket money, I would buy another Gene Vincent record from this bag. I can still remember hearing *Race With The Devil* for the very first time. It was electrifying."

The first record that really hits you emotionally is a key moment in anyone's life – especially if it's a primitive slice of raw energy. Dave Phillips (Blue Cats Trio/ Dave Phillips And The Hot Rod Gang) had a similar early experience to Dell: "Among my first memories as an infant was hearing *Be-Bop-A-Lula* on the record deck at my uncle Bill's house."

Clint Bradley of The Blue Cats also had an epiphany with a more Hi-De-Hi-Fi flavour. "I remember as a kid hearing a DJ play *Be-Bop-A-Lula* during a golden oldies set at Butlin's," he says. "It totally captivated me and induced a search to find out more about the glorious sound that erupted from those old PA speakers."

The initial thrill stimulated by Gene Vincent's music continues to reach through the decades. Even in the 21st century, his back catalogue has the power to influence new generations. Danny Dawkins (Danny 'O' & The Astrotones and The Caezars) had a similar experience when spending time with his dad, Paul O of The Rough Diamonds and The Kingbeats. "I would've been around eight when I first heard Gene on my dad's tapes in his Triumph Herald convertible," he recalls. "A lot of my early musical memories were from being in that car, Gene's one of them. *She She Little Sheila* is the one that sticks out to me as the first track I remember."

DIGITAL FREIGHT TRAIN

Vincent's music continued to influence Dawkins into the new millennium, when he began digitising his father's music collection. "It was around 2000 when I first heard the later Capitol sessions, and then around 2006 when I really started to hear the early Blue Caps stuff. There is a wildness and a ferocity to Gene Vincent, it's like a 100mph freight train."

Gene's early music remains a visceral experience

Blue Cats singer Clint Bradley

DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

GENE ON SCREEN

Thanks to the advent of a certain online video platform and some enthusiastic DVD releases, footage of Gene Vincent remains plentiful. Stacks of TV appearances and live performances, captured for posterity, offer a first-hand opportunity to witness the true genius of Vincent, but a trio of features in particular capture just what made him so eternally special.

THE GIRL CAN'T HELP IT (1956)
When Dickie Harrell unleashes his first scream during *Be-Bop-A-Lula* and the band all shake off their blue caps, it's a seminal moment in rock'n'roll. Seconds later, Vincent clenches his fists and wails "more, more, more" with an intensity that can't possibly be faked. "It's just untamed youth isn't it? It still looks exciting today," says Dean Amos. "Imagine what it must have looked like for the parents of these kids in the 1950s. They've come out of wartime and they are very strait-laced and all of a sudden you've got this backlash of teenagers that are watching Gene Vincent on *The Girl Can't Help It*."

HOT ROD GANG (1958)
This rambunctious B-movie treats us to celluloid performances of *Dance In The Street*, *Baby Blue* and *Dance To The Bop,* but it also delivers a few chunks of dialogue for Gene, which he performs in an easy-going natural manner that knocks the wooden antics of the film's supposed star John Ashley off the screen. The car is not the star in this drive-in clunker... Gene Vincent is.

THE ROCK AND ROLL SINGER (1969)
Capturing the first four days of Gene's UK tour from November 1969, this short fly-on-the-wall documentary is a moving piece indeed. It follows Vincent's movements from a Teddy Boy-filled airport concourse through the cheap hotels, dingy rehearsal spaces and some sparsely populated gigs. Despite being grimly heartbreaking viewing, Gene's vital spark is still in there.

Vincent fans The Blue Cats

T'S NOT ONLY THE SOUND THAT ECHOES DOWN THE DECADES, GENE'S IMAGE IS STAMPED ON THE HISTORY OF ROCK'N'ROLL

not only because of the way it was played but also the recording techniques of the time. Unlike today's technological advances, which can make even a mediocre group sound passable, studios in 1954 were a little more rudimentary. As Dean Amos of Sugar Ray's Vintage Recording Studio explains, this resulted in a very specific audio experience. "The equipment available at the time, which I now have at my recording studio, was totally honest in its capabilities of producing sound. You had microphones that have got high sensitivity, so they pick up everything, and tube equipment that gives a nice, warm but very natural sound," says Amos. "The result was all the guys in one room working together and producing heartfelt music."

"That early Blue Caps stuff, like *Cat Man*, *Be-Bop-A-Lula* and *Race With The Devil*, it's music from outer space, there's nothing like it," agrees Dawkins. "I don't think anyone in the world would be able to find records that are more exciting than that sounds. *B-I-Bickey-Bi, Bo-Bo-Go* is one of the most frantic, insane pieces of music that's ever been recorded."

CAPITOL GAINS

Dave Phillips also appreciates the spontaneity of those early sessions. "Gene had convinced the producers at Capitol Records that his band members screaming with excitement during recordings was, and should be, accepted as legitimate voicing of expression," enthuses Phillips. "Blue Caps drummer Dickie Harrell explained to me himself that on the first sessions at some point early on, the producer halted everything, shouting: 'shut that kid on the drums up, he keeps yelling during the takes!' Dickie had his microphone taken away forthwith, but Gene in his inimitably iconoclastic fashion insisted that it would not stop Dickie nor any of the rest of the guys vocalising at will on any of the tracks."

It is not only the sound of Gene Vincent that echoes down the decades, his image is indelibly stamped on the history of rock'n'roll. He may have been prodded in a black leather direction by TV producer Jack Good, but that clobber fitted his image like a glove. Whether it was The Beatles in their early days glowering in cowboy boots and 'blue caps' or Vince Taylor all in black waving a chain at frightened locals in a French beat club, the look remains a clear signifier that dangerous rock'n'roll is on the menu – and no one carried it off with more style than Gene Vincent. That image remains a staple of rock'n'roll rebellion that many, from Jim Morrison to The Jesus And Mary Chain, have grasped onto.

Vincent's image was far more than just window dressing, though. He didn't ➡

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Real rockin' sound: The 50s studio gear Vincent used enhanced his raw edge

Vincent shared six-string duties in the Blue Caps with lead guitarist Cliff Gallup

Vincent's rugged looks made him an icon for countless rockers

even need his clothes on to spread terror among the squares. The legendary 1957 photograph featuring Vincent lounging shirtless against his Thunderbird alongside Johnny Burnette, Paul Burlison and Johnny Black emits a hint of hillbilly fury. His surly glare is a reminder that while many carried the image of the rock'n'roll rebel, Gene was the authentic article.

When Elvis was ensconced comfortably in the Hollywood lifestyle in 1963 knocking out three films a year, Vincent was doing hard time on the road and up before the beak at London's Marylebone Court being fined for possessing two pistols and ammunition without a licence. He was the real deal, the man Jack Good referred to as "rock'n'roll's James Cagney". "I always look on Gene Vincent as someone you wouldn't want to meet down a dark alley," laughs Dawkins. "He always looked like he'd been in a fight... or was just about to get in one."

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

VINCENT ON VINCENT

While establishing the Gene Vincent Foundation, Gene's daughter Sherri Vincent has had time of her own to reflect on her father's legacy.

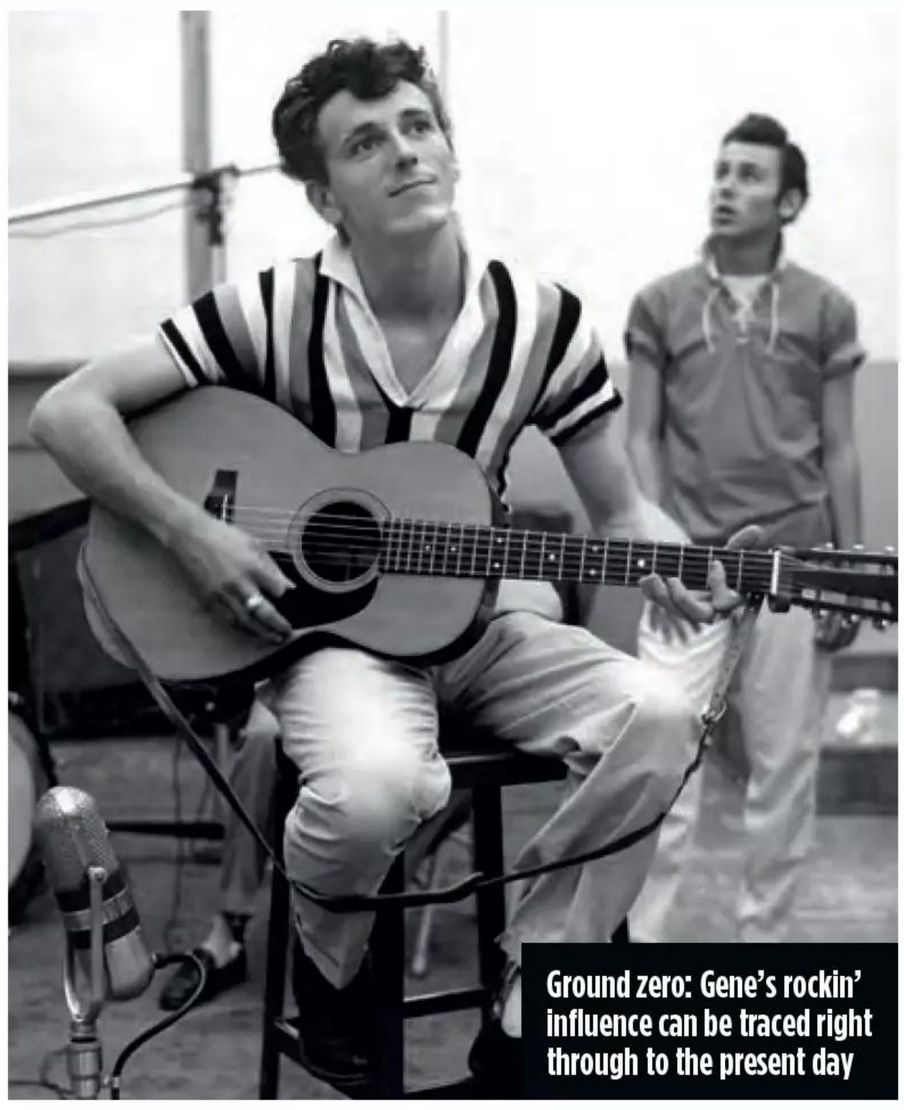
"It never ceases to amaze me how he continues to live on in the hearts and minds of so many," she says with genuine awe. "Particularly in the light of the fact that nobody has really managed his estate. I think 'what is it about my father that has had such an impact on people?' When I talk to die-hard fans it is incredible the passion that they have. They tell me how he changed their life and that how, even now, they get through the day because of him. It's incredible!"

Could it be the air of danger, even menace, that Gene possessed that has such a lasting effect on people? "I think he was authentic," reasons Sherri. "He was what he was, there was no smoke and mirrors around him. He clearly exuded this kind of energy that was felt. I think he was volatile, unpredictable and I don't think you knew what you were going to get on any given day. I've always seen him as a tortured soul really."

Maybe this unvarnished honesty was his greatest strength. "He was true to his music," agrees Sherri. "He didn't try to be that way, it was just second nature to him... he just did it."

Gene cutting a track for Capitol Records

Radio Caroline's Dell Richardson


Ground zero: Gene's rockin' influence can be traced right through to the present day

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

WHILE MANY CARRIED THE IMAGE OF THE ROCK'N'ROLL REBEL, GENE VINCENT WAS THE AUTHENTIC ARTICLE

Amos agrees: "I think Gene kind of spearheaded that rebellious look, the haunting eyes, the clothes. He definitely had that edginess about him."

It's hard to pinpoint exactly why Gene's influence remains so strong. For some, it's deeply personal. "Throughout my long career in music there has always been a very intentional acknowledgment of influence attributed to Gene and the Blue Caps," says Phillips. "The direction of my music and image, even elements of my philosophy alike, make some tribute to the everlasting impression he made. For me, Gene left a legacy of insurgent necessity for freedom of thought and individualistic expression. To this very day, in my life as an artist there are still many recurrent moments that I consciously recognise that persistent influence of his."

Phillips also believes Vincent's bandmates deserve recognition: "When talking about Gene's contribution to the history of rock'n'roll, it becomes impossible not to consider the outstanding performances of the band members he worked with from the beginning. The pioneering guitar style that Cliff Gallup introduced, the wild yet disciplined drum technique of Dickie Harrell, subtle basslines from Jack Neal and the rebellious vocal eruptions from everybody in the band."

THE WILD ONE

Dawkins believes Vincent's wild antics beat a straight path through music history. "He was certainly the most unhinged and untamed. His sort of music is almost ground-zero for a certain level of aggression in music and you can track that lineage into the 1960s garage stuff and punk, it all flows through. His way of distilling that wild energy into a minute-and-a-half or two minutes on a piece of plastic is unrivalled."

That influence shows no sign of fading. "Today you've got a lot of kids interested in music and listening to Gene Vincent," explains Amos. "They're taking a little bit from all of them, but they're also aware the music that was recorded back then was very real. These young kids are looking for a little bit of Gene Vincent, something raw with the spontaneity. I've played these tracks so many different times that it's unbelievable and yet if I put them on now it's almost as exciting as the day I first heard them."

Bradley also manages to capture the essence of Vincent's originality. "The influence he had on all of us is insurmountable, and not only those on the rocking scene. The whole of popular music owes him a huge debt. The sound of Gene's vocal sitting on top of that magical backing of the Blue Caps is beyond superb, totally captivating and timeless."

Phillips perhaps deserves the final word on why Gene Vincent's legacy is so important today. "Gene possessed not only the sound and image that continues to virtually define rock'n'roll but, possibly even more importantly, he had the attitude. Beneath that polite southern accent was nothing but total honesty. He meant it." ✶

Classic album

WORDS BY RANDY FOX

THE "CHIRPING" CRICKETS

THE CRICKETS

John Beecher

The Crickets – Left to right: Niki Sullivan, Jerry Allison, Buddy Holly and Joe Mauldin

The debut long-player from the great Buddy Holly is one of the classics of the 50s, offering up some of the decade's most iconic songs, including *Oh, Boy!*, *That'll Be The Day* and *Not Fade Away*...

"**I always wondered why they put 'vocal group with orchestra' on the record, because we were a rock'n'roll band." – Jerry Allison**

In November 1957 something new arrived on the rock'n'roll scene. The cover of *The "Chirping" Crickets*, the first album from the rock'n'roll band The Crickets, featured the four members – Buddy Holly, Niki Sullivan, Jerry Allison and Joe Mauldin – smiling and squinting in bright sunlight. They looked incredibly normal. There was no delineated "star", no "pretty boy" or "wild man" that took centre stage on the cover. Nor did they appear to be a doo-wop vocal group, despite their matching suits. A quick listen to the album demonstrated the dominance of lead vocals, guitar, bass and drums, with backing vocals on a few of the tracks.

Unsuspecting and possibly confused music fans didn't realise this was a totally new paradigm — the first album by a rock'n'roll band.

In 1957 there were two types of rock'n'roll artists, at least as far as the record companies were concerned. There were solo stars — Elvis Presley, Little Richard, Chuck Berry — and vocal groups — The Drifters, The Coasters, The Midnighters. Some solo acts also credited bands such as Bill Haley And His Comets or Gene Vincent And His Blue Caps, but there was never

UNSUSPECTING MUSIC FANS DIDN'T REALISE THIS WAS A NEW PARADIGM – THE FIRST ALBUM BY A ROCK'N'ROLL BAND

any doubt who the "star" was on records or on album covers. It was a template rock'n'roll inherited from mainstream pop, geared entirely toward the promotion of solo artists and vocal groups, both of which were routinely backed by professional studio musicians on recordings.

The idea that a small band of four musicians could be the "star" was a radical idea. Many rock'n'roll stars began their careers as members of bands, playing juke joints and honky-tonks, but record companies invariably pushed lead singers to the forefront as "solo" artists. But The Crickets' road to stardom had been an unusual one, and the decision to de-emphasise the band's frontman, Buddy Holly, was born of necessity.

Twenty-two months earlier, Holly had signed with Decca Records as a solo artist as record labels scrambled to find another Elvis Presley. After three recording sessions and two unsuccessful singles, Decca executives concluded Holly was not the rock'n'roll star they were looking for. Dropped from Decca in January 1957, he was unsure about his freedom to record for other labels under his own name, and was notified he could not re-record any of the material he recorded for Decca for a period of five years. The moratorium included *That'll Be The Day*, a song co-written by Holly and his drummer Jerry Allison that Holly recorded in June 1956 but Decca refused to release.

DESPITE THE LEGAL restriction, Holly and his band re-recorded the song in February 1957 at Norman Petty's studio in Clovis, New Mexico. Confident of a hit, Petty pitched the song to his friend Murray Deutsch at Peer-Southern Publishing in New York, and Deutsch secured a deal with Bob Thiele of Coral Records to release the song on the Brunswick subsidiary label. Even though Coral and Brunswick were both owned by Decca, it was technically a violation of Holly's earlier Decca contract to release the song, and the decision was made to credit the single as simply "The Crickets".

Released by Brunswick on 27 May 1957, *That'll Be The Day* first grabbed the attention of radio DJs in Buffalo, New York and Philadelphia, slowly spreading to other regional markets. The success of the single brought attention from Decca's legal department, and despite the fact that the company was making money from sales of the new version, the label forced financial penalties on Holly in exchange for a full release from his old contract.

THE "CHIRPING" CRICKETS

THE CRICKETS

1957 • BRUNSWICK RECORDS

Side 1

Oh, Boy! (Sonny West, Bill Tilghman & Norman Petty) 2:07
Not Fade Away (Buddy Holly & Norman Petty) 2:21
You've Got Love (Roy Orbison, Johnny Wilson & Norman Petty) 2:05
Maybe Baby (Buddy Holly & Norman Petty) 2:01
It's Too Late (Chuck Willis) 2:22
Tell Me How (Buddy Holly, Jerry Allison & Norman Petty) 1:58

Side 2

That'll Be the Day (Buddy Holly, Jerry Allison & Norman Petty) 2:14
I'm Looking For Someone To Love (Buddy Holly & Norman Petty) 1:56
An Empty Cup (And A Broken Date) (Roy Orbison & Norman Petty) 2:11
Send Me Some Lovin' (John Marascalco & Leo Price) 2:33
Last Night (Joe B Mauldin & Norman Petty) 1:53
Rock Me My Baby (Shorty Long & Susan Heather) 1:47

BUDDY HOLLY LEAD VOCALS, LEAD GUITAR, ACOUSTIC GUITAR & BACKING VOCALS JERRY ALLISON DRUMS & BACKING VOCALS JOE B MAULDIN BASS NIKI SULLIVAN RHYTHM GUITAR & BACKING VOCALS LARRY WELBORN BASS THE PICKS (BILL PICKERING, JOHN PICKERING & BOB LAPHAM) BACKING VOCALS RAMONA & GARY TOLLETT BACKING VOCALS

With Holly completely free to record under his own name, Bob Thiele signed Holly as a "solo" artist to Coral Records and released The Crickets' recording of *Words Of Love* under Holly's name in June 1957. The single garnered attention from a few regional markets but sputtered and failed to chart. Meanwhile, *That'll Be The Day* continued its rise, entering Billboard's Top 100 chart in early August and hitting No.1 pop and No.2 R&B in September. The single would also reach No.1 in the UK and sell over a million copies worldwide in just a few months. Faced with the overwhelming success of the single, Thiele decided to rush a Crickets album into stores.

As the single was conquering the charts, The Crickets were hard at work, appearing on several rock'n'roll multi-artist package shows through the month of August 1957, and then for 10 days at the Brooklyn Paramount Theater in New York as part of the "Alan Freed Holiday Show," 30 August through 8 September.

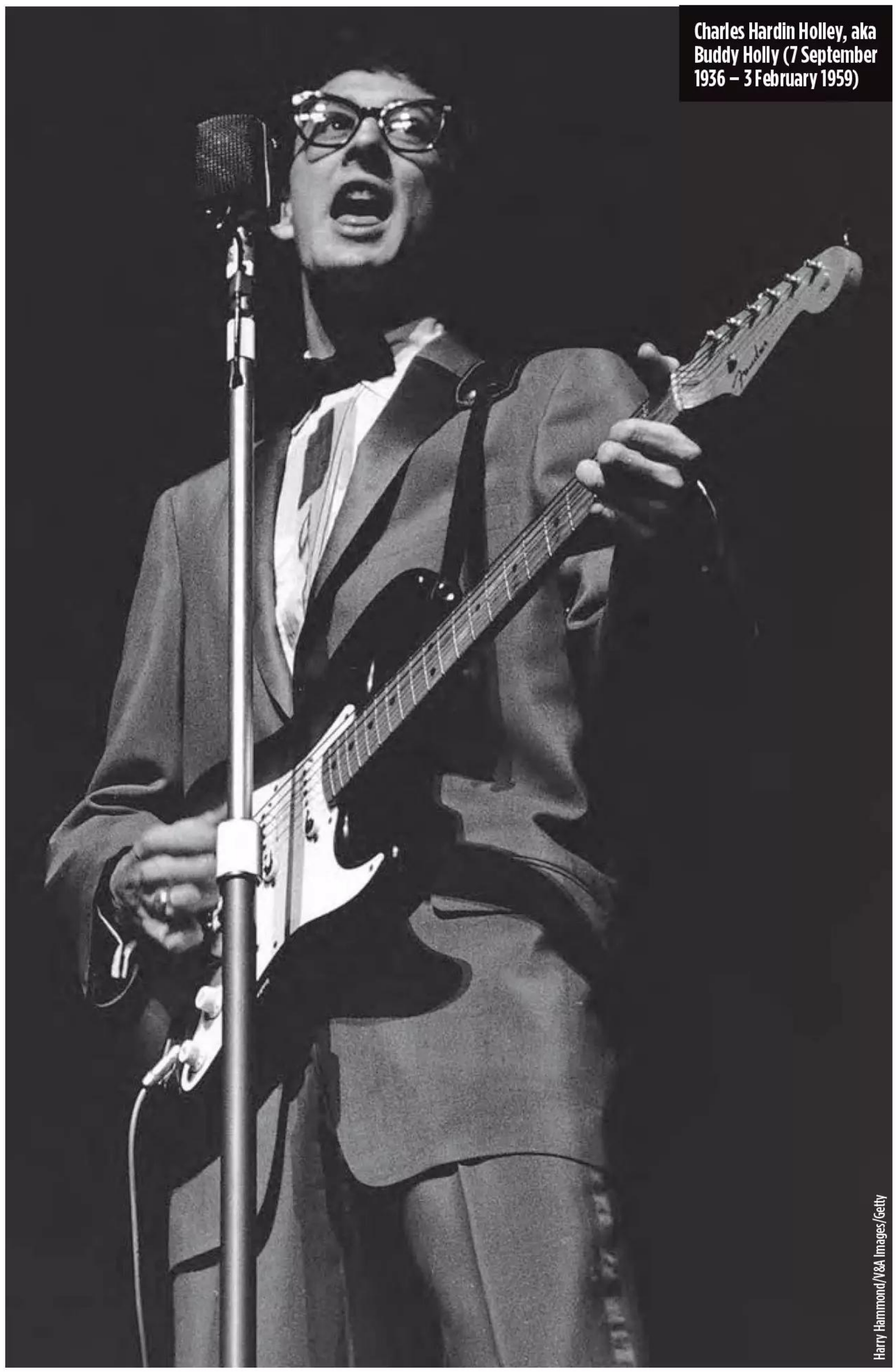
As the late Jerry Allison recalled in an interview for *Vintage Rock*, the first time the group heard of their upcoming album, they were appearing on the Alan Freed show. "The record label didn't talk to us much, we would just hear from Norman Petty," Allison said.

With The Crickets in New York, Bob Thiele dispatched a photographer to shoot the album cover on the roof of the Brooklyn Paramount. The rush to release the album led to Allison sporting a less-than-perfect visage on the cover.

"Just before the photo shoot, Niki Sullivan and I got in a scuffle over squirting each other with spray bottles," Allison recounted. "I had him around the neck, and he said, 'I give!' I let him loose and he punched me in my left eye. I told him, 'I'll whip your ass later,' but I didn't."

Despite Allison's swollen eye, the photo session proceeded and the minor injury would become immortalised on one of the landmark albums of rock'n'roll.

THAT'LL BE THE DAY WOULD REACH NO.1 IN THE UK AND SELL OVER A MILLION COPIES WORLDWIDE



Charles Hardin Holley, aka Buddy Holly (7 September 1936 – 3 February 1959)

Harry Hammond/V&A Images/Getty

THE NAME GAME

HOW THE CRICKETS BECAME THE CRICKETS

Over the years, several explanations have emerged regarding the origins of The Crickets' name. The most popular and repeated story centres on a persistent cricket in Norman Petty's studio that chirped while the band was recording, but immediately halted its contributions as soon as anyone began searching for it. According to *Remembering Buddy: The Definitive Biography Of Buddy Holly* by John Goldrosen the tuneful insect did exist but did not begin his disruptions until several months after The Crickets name was already in place.

The name was actually chosen during a meeting at Jerry Allison's house in early 1957. Unable to use Holly's name on *That'll Be The Day*, the band needed a name quickly in order to submit the demo to record companies. After pitching several ideas back and forth, the group decided an insect name might be the best choice. Several were considered, including "The Beetles", a name Jerry Allison shot down with the comment, "Aw, that's just a bug you'd want to step on." Finally, Allison suggested "The Crickets", reasoning it was an insect that made a happy sound. After a short discussion, everyone agreed and The Crickets were officially christened.

With the cover complete, Thiele poured through tapes of Crickets recording sessions to compile the tracks for the album. It soon became apparent they needed to record new material to complete the LP.

By that point, The Crickets had departed New York for a 17-week tour with "The Biggest Show Of Stars For '57" package tour. Studying the map of the tour, Petty noticed The Crickets would be appearing in Oklahoma City on 29 September 1957, a date that coincided with a booking for Petty's pop combo, The Norman Petty Trio, at the nearby Tinker Air Force Base Officer's Club.

"We were in the middle of that long tour when Norman called us to Tinker Air Force Base," Allison told *Vintage Rock*. "He brought some of his recording equipment and we recorded a few tunes for the album. I know we did the Little Richard song, *Send Me Some Lovin'*, for Larry, Buddy's brother, because he wanted us to record that song."

RELEASED ON 27 November 1957, *The "Chirping" Crickets* opens with the powerful rocker, *Oh, Boy!*, written by rockabilly artists Sonny West and Bill Tilghman. West originally planned to record the song himself, but Norman Petty pitched Sonny West's demo recording to The Crickets. After West and Tilghman heard The Crickets' version, they knew it had the better chance of scoring a hit. Their assessment was right on the money. Released as a single one month before *The "Chirping" Crickets* album, *Oh, Boy!* shot to No.10 on the Billboard Top 100 and hit No.3 on the UK chart, bringing in a steady stream of royalties for West and Tilghman for decades.

The rockers continue with *Not Fade Away*. Recorded on 29 May 1957, just two days after the release of *That'll Be The Day*, *Not Fade Away* demonstrated The Crickets gaining ground with every recording, both creatively and technically. Built around a Bo Diddley beat, the rhythm was driven by Jerry Allison's drumming on a cardboard box rather than a drum kit and vocal "bop-bops" that were overdubbed by Niki Sullivan and Holly. This unusual arrangement softened the volume of the backbeat while losing none of its excitement, allowing Holly's vocals and lead guitar work to soar above the mix. Initially released as the B-side of *Oh, Boy!*, *Not Fade Away* has since become an essential

The Crickets were the first rock'n'roll band not based around an obvious "star" member

Michael Ochs Archives/Getty

rock'n'roll classic. Downshifting to a love ballad, The Crickets delivered a playful take on Roy Orbison and Peanuts Wilson's tune, *You've Got Love*. Originally written while Wilson was a member of Orbison's band, The Teen Kings, Wilson recorded a version of the song at Norman Petty's studio in May 1957. At the time of The Crickets' Tinker AFB session, Wilson's version was still unreleased, and Petty suggested the song as a way of getting another track on the album that his publishing company could profit from. Wilson's original version was eventually released by Brunswick as the B-side of his rockabilly classic, *Cast Iron Arm*.

Maybe Baby was definitely the standout track from the Tinker AFB session. Inspired by a handful of lyrics written by Holly's mother, Ella Holley, Buddy completed the song but Mrs Holley refused to accept any credit. The Crickets first recorded the song at the March 1957 session that produced *Last Night*, but Holly wasn't happy with the tempo of the recording. After tinkering with the arrangement for several months, they tried it again and nailed a perfect version. In addition to its appearance on *The "Chirping" Crickets*, Brunswick released it as the A-side of The Crickets' third single, scoring a No.17 hit on the Billboard Top 100 in March 1958.

THE CRICKETS HEAD back to balladville with the Chuck Willis-penned weeper, *It's Too Late*. Originally recorded by Willis in early 1956, the song scored No.3 on the R&B chart, and became a favourite of Holly's older brother, Larry. The Crickets recorded their version at Petty's studio in July 1957, closely following the tempo and arrangement of Willis' original.

To close the first side of the album, Holly and Allison supplied another rocker (with Norman Petty following his usual practice of attaching his name to the credits no matter how small or large his contribution). The jangly masterpiece *Tell Me How* was recorded at Petty's studio during the late spring of 1957. The track also appeared on the four-song EP released concurrently with the album, and was paired up with *Maybe Baby* for The Crickets' third single. The song was written by Buddy Holly and Jerry Allison, but Holly's credit was masked by the name "Charles Hardin" (Holly's legal first and middle name) on copyright records because of uncertainty regarding a publishing contract he signed before starting to work with Norman Petty. The same pseudonym was also used on *Not Fade Away* and *Maybe Baby*, all songs Holly wrote in the early months of 1957.

THE ALBUM MADE A BIGGER SPLASH IN THE UK, EVENTUALLY REACHING NO.5 ON THE ALBUMS CHART

Flipping the record over, Side B kicks off with the hit that transformed The Crickets' life and fortunes. *That'll Be The Day* was inspired by the 1956 John Ford-directed Western epic *The Searchers* and the film's bitter anti-hero, Ethan Edwards, as portrayed by John Wayne. Throughout the film, Edwards repeats the phrase "That'll be the day" to express his contempt for threats. Holly and the rest of The Crickets loved the film, and the phrase became a joking smart-ass catchphrase for the group.

The rockin' continues with *I'm Looking For Someone To Love*, the B-side of The Crickets' debut single and another first class Holly composition. Recorded at the same February 1957 session that produced *That'll Be The Day*, The Crickets considered both recordings demos and intended to re-record the songs if they attracted interest from record labels. But Norman Petty believed the recordings stood on their own as master takes, and millions of rock'n'roll fans agreed.

Two ballads from the Tinker AFB session slow the pace down. *An Empty Cup (And A Broken Date)* was another Roy Orbison song, while the John Marascalco and Leo Price composition, *Send Me Some Lovin'* had been a No.54 hit for Little Richard in April 1957. While Holly delivered solid versions of both songs, the final versions were oversweetened by Petty's extensive overdubbing of background choruses from the vocal group The Picks.

The weeper, *Last Night*, closes out the trilogy of Side B ballads. Written by Crickets bass player Joe Mauldin for his previous band, The Four Teens, the song features a solid vocal workout by Holly that The Crickets recorded shortly after Mauldin

Joe B Mauldin, Buddy Holly and Jerry Allison at the height of their fame

Harry Hammond/V&A Images/Getty

WHICH IS WHICH
BUDDY OR THE CRICKETS?

Although The Crickets name was first deployed out of necessity, once the legal issues were settled, Buddy Holly could once again record as a "solo" artist. This left Brunswick/Coral Records head, Bob Thiele with an unusual problem. The "rules" of record marketing emphasised solo stars, but The Crickets was a proven success. Thiele decided to double his chances for hits by signing Holly to a separate contract on Coral, while releases by The Crickets continued on Brunswick.

Although Thiele was making a distinction between Crickets records and Buddy Holly records, it had no effect on the way the records were recorded. The Crickets continued recording sessions with Norman Petty without any changes and left the decision as to which were Crickets songs or Buddy Holly songs entirely up to Thiele. After the release of *The "Chirping" Crickets* album, Thiele decided recordings with backing vocals, usually by the vocal group The Picks, would be credited to The Crickets, and recordings with only Holly singing were solo records. Since The Picks' vocals were often overdubbed later, without The Crickets' involvement, the band frequently did not know which label their recordings would appear on until they saw the actual record.

joined the band in March 1957. The final Tinker AFB recording closes out the album on a high note. *Rock Me My Baby* was a hot novelty tune by Santa Fe, New Mexico-based songwriter and hillbilly bandleader Shorty Long and his writing partner, Susan Heather. The Crickets delivered a rockin' performance, featuring a sizzling guitar solo from Holly.

Although *The "Chirping" Crickets* enjoyed solid sales in the US, it failed to chart. The song made a bigger splash in the UK, eventually reaching No.5 on the albums chart in April 1958, shortly after The Crickets' first UK tour in March 1958.

Beyond the album sales, the concept of a rock'n'roll band proved enthralling to teenagers on both sides of the Atlantic. The Crickets were not matinée idols or teen dreams. For any would-be, teenaged rock'n'roller, the group looked ordinary, like the friends you went to school with, scuffled with on a Saturday night, or shared off-colour jokes with. "Roger Cook, who's a great songwriter, told me one time that when he saw us, he realised you didn't have to be Elvis Presley to be in a band," Jerry Allison said. "Paul McCartney told me if it wasn't for The Crickets there wouldn't be any Beatles. And when we were inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall Of Fame, Keith Richards said, 'If it wasn't for these cats here there wouldn't be any Rolling Stones."

THE IDEA THAT anyone — a tall nerdy looking guy in glasses or even a guy with a swollen eye from a recent fight — could be a rock'n'roll star was revolutionary. All it required was some talent, luck and rock'n'roll cheek. This was especially true for British youth who were emerging from more than a decade of post-war austerity. As Philip Norman wrote in *Rave On: The Biography Of Buddy Holly*, "As much as anything he sang or played, Buddy's appearance on *The "Chirping" Crickets* cover was a revelation. It showed that to play rock'n'roll you did not have to be a bespangled Technicolor freak — you could be turned out conservatively enough to satisfy the most exacting parent, vicar or teacher ... he put the music into everyone's reach."

Even though Holly's profile as a "solo" artist would soon eclipse The Crickets, the template of the rock'n'roll band as an artist unto itself was planted in the minds of aspiring teenage musicians. And the power of *The "Chirping" Crickets* to entertain, excite and inspire generations of rock'n'roll fans has not diminished. Its place as one of the greatest and most iconic rock'n'roll albums remains just as powerful as it was in 1957. ★

The Big Bang of UK Rock'n'Roll

Bill Haley And His Comets, rockin' it up at Tottenham Court Road's Dominion Theatre in 1957

BETTMANN/GETTY

In February 1957, Bill Haley And His Comets began the most successful, groundbreaking rock'n'roll tour the UK had ever seen. Nearly 70 years on, we look back at this grand undertaking that seized the imagination of the nation's youth and inspired a future generation of British rock musicians...

WORDS BY **JACK WATKINS**

As the midnight chimes rang in the new year of 1957, Britain was still living in the rock'n'roll dark ages. Records by American artists released in the UK, despite finding a ready market, were usually met with scorn by a conservative or jazz-centric music press. Information on the music's pioneers was scarce, with the likes of Elvis Presley seen as mysterious, if not dangerous, exotics. Radio Luxembourg was a rare resource of more clued-up fans trying to follow developments across the Atlantic.

So when the *New Musical Express* announced in early January 1957 that Bill Haley And His Comets were due to arrive for a nationwide tour the following month it was greeted with a sense of anticipation akin to the second coming of the Messiah.

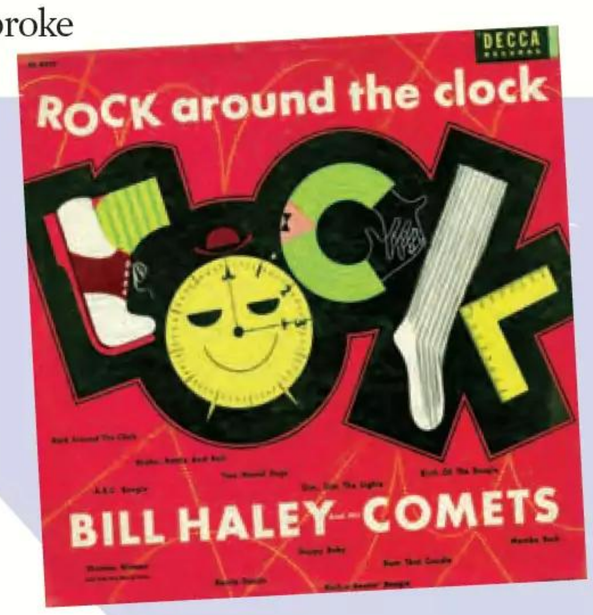
There had been rumours of a tour the previous year, as there had been of one featuring Presley, a prospect sadly never to be fulfilled. However, Haley, up to this point at least, had the higher profile. Trendsetting Teddy Boys had been at large in Britain for several years before the advent of rock'n'roll, but once they heard Haley's music, they made clear their approval. Tommy Steele, the first British rock'n'roll hitmaker, had also stated his allegiance. Asked if he was an Elvis imitator, he replied emphatically: "I was singing like this before Presley. Haley's my man."

There had been a steady flow of his singles out in this country since *Crazy Man, Crazy* in 1953. *Shake, Rattle And Roll* had made the Top 10 and *(We're Gonna) Rock Around The Clock* was the first rock'n'roll single to sell a million in the UK, thanks to its inclusion in the teenage delinquency movie *Blackboard Jungle* and then the film of the same name, *Rock Around the Clock*. These had pushed Haley to the forefront of mid-50s youth culture. Even though the films had, much to his dismay, linked him with teenage hoodlums, the music itself, with its swing-era undertow, had a cachet with some of the older generation who couldn't accept what they thought

18th February 1957: Bill Haley and His Comets at the Dominion Theatre, London, February 1957, on the cover of Picture Post magazine. Original Publication: Picture Post Cover - Vol 74 No 7 - pub. 1957. (Photo by IPC Magazines/Picture Post/Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

was childish fodder by the likes of Presley and Little Richard. When Haley's *Birth Of The Boogie/Mambo Rock* single had been released, *Record Mirror* patronisingly acknowledged that it "lifts the atmosphere with these loud, jolly and vulgar sounds."

Haley and the Comets had just finished a successful, but exhausting tour of Australia, supported by Big Joe Turner, LaVern Baker, The Platters and Freddie Bell. Despite drawing audiences which broke every known attendance record in the country, Haley had found it a gruelling experience, but he and the band had just a few days back in the States to recharge their batteries before departing for Britain.



THERE HAD BEEN SEVERAL CHANGES in the Comets personnel in the previous years, but the group that toured the UK, comprising Franny Beecher (lead guitar), Rudy Pompilli (tenor sax), Billy Williamson (steel guitar), Al Rex (double bass), Ralph Jones (drums) and Johnny Grande (piano/accordion), was "the classic line-up", avers Bill Haley Jr. "In my opinion, Rex, Pompilli and Jones were more experienced, and perhaps more talented, than the musicians they'd replaced in September 1955, Marshall Lytle, Joey Ambrose and Dick Richards respectively (who'd departed to form The Jodimars). The addition of Franny Beecher as a full-time member in 1955 was the icing on the cake. With the Comets dominating the US charts, this band had toured relentlessly all over their homeland for a year-and-a-half leading up to the Australian and UK tours, and they were in top form."

They arrived in the UK to a big reception. This was the first music tour to receive saturation coverage by the British press, and the first to show that rock musicians could dominate the news agenda, foreshadowing the impact of The Beatles when they visited the States in 1964. The *Daily Mirror* had been running front page stories, including a Haley-penned column, about the tour build-up for days in advance. At Southampton, disembarking from the mighty transatlantic liner RMS Queen Elizabeth, Haley and his entourage were greeted by banner-waving fans. There was a contribution from Britain's homegrown rock'n'roll scene as Rory Blackwell And His Blackjacks performed quayside. Further crowds gathered on the platform of the railway station to wave them off as the special "Rock'n'Roll Express" sped them on to London. On board were 100 lucky fans who'd won tickets to travel with their American hero. Newsreel footage shows the cornered star gamely smiling and clapping along to a rendition of *Giddy-Up-A Ding-Dong*. The train rolled into London Waterloo awaited by, according to the newscaster, more "happy cats, with not a square in sight."

Here, Haley stood at the train door,

PHOTO BY IPC MAGAZINES/PICTURE POST/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

Bill Haley and the Comets entertain their fellow travellers on the "Rock'n'Roll Express"

immaculate in a long white raincoat, waving like the visiting royalty he was to these youngsters. But as he exited the station, he was jostled and was lucky to make it to the waiting limousine, kiss curl only slightly askew. As the limo departed, the mob sang *See You Later, Alligator*, a humorous nod to one of his hits, and reporters scurried off to file their copy. Headlines the next day declared it had been the Second Battle of Waterloo.

Relaxing with wife 'Cuppy' in their suite at the Savoy Hotel on the Strand, Haley noted in his diary that this was "the greatest welcome ever given to an American artist." With his mother having been born in Lancashire, the tour would have meant much to the artist emotionally, says Bill Haley Jr. "My father had a great affection for all things English because of his mother's influence on him. She'd retained her British accent, and more important, raised him to appreciate the food, culture and history of her native land."

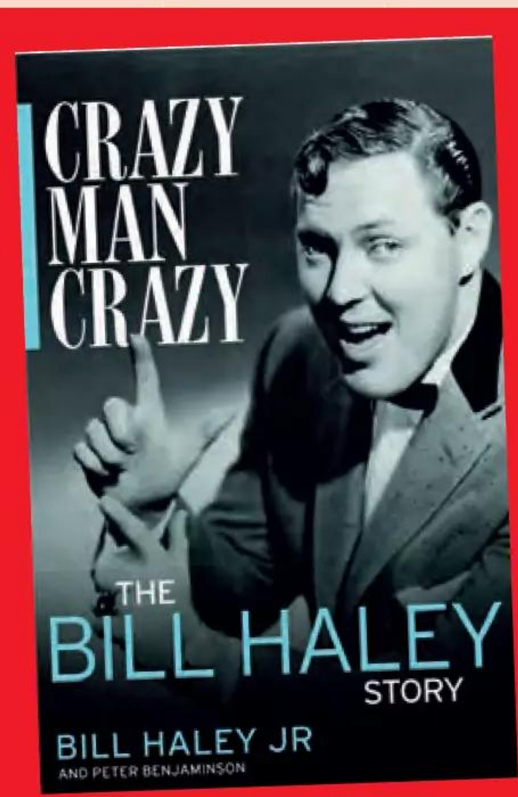
The tour opened at the Dominion Theatre, in London's Tottenham Court Road, before a largely teen audience. According to Bill Haley Jr, despite

MOTIVATING FACTORS

Bill Haley Jr speaks!

Bill Haley Jr says the initial research that produced his recent biography of his dad, *Crazy Man Crazy*, began "out of curiosity to learn more about the father who was absent from my life. But I became fascinated by his career, like any fan, and that led me to interview musicians and business associates who knew my father, as well as family members. It took years to complete because it led me down so many rabbit holes, but thanks to two primary sources I was able to delve more deeply into my father's personality and his motivations, providing a fuller picture than previously available."

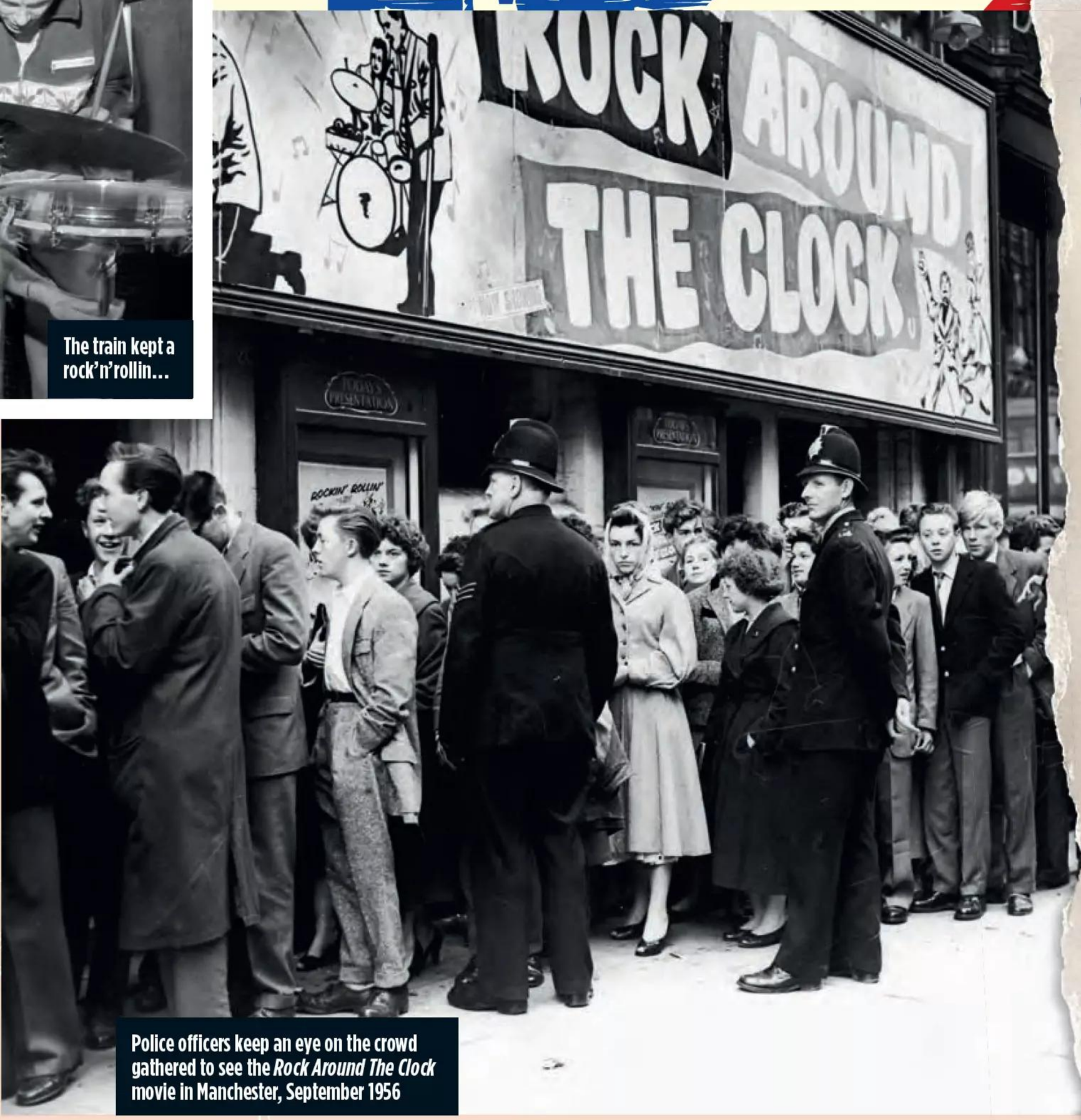
Given his relationship with his father was distant and troubled, he found the process was cathartic. "For much of my life I struggled with a great deal of animosity towards him in the way that he abandoned our family. I needed to reconcile my personal disappointment and understand the complete person. It was never my intention to embarrass my father – and myself – or harm his reputation by discussing these negative aspects. I can honestly say I have great admiration and respect for his achieving his lofty musical ambitions, but he made personal decisions that didn't serve him well and he suffered the consequences tragically." He says performing his music and sharing his story in the last 12 years also helped him come to terms with his feelings, "not only in realising how much joy he brought to others, but also travelling to performances has helped me realise how difficult it would have been to retain a sense of oneness and affinity with your family, spending 40-plus weeks on the road year after year. It doesn't ease the pain of rejection, but it makes it more understandable."



***Crazy Man Crazy*, by Bill Haley Jr and Peter Benjaminson, is published by Backbeat Books**

GEORGE STROUD/EXPRESS/GETTY KEYSTONE/GETTY

The train kept a rock'n'rollin...



Police officers keep an eye on the crowd gathered to see the *Rock Around The Clock* movie in Manchester, September 1956

Bill Haley's 1957 UK Tour

6-9 February: Dominion Theatre, London
10 February: Coventry Gaumont
11 February: Nottingham Odeon
12 February: Birmingham Odeon
13 February: Manchester Odeon
14 February: Leeds Odeon
15 February: Sunderland Odeon
16 February: Newcastle Odeon
17 February: Bradford Gaumont
18-19 February: Glasgow Odeon
20 February: Liverpool Odeon
21 February: Cardiff Capitol
22 February: Plymouth Odeon
23 February: Southampton Gaumont
24-26 February: Kilburn Gaumont State
1-2 March: Belfast Hippodrome
3 March: Edmonton Regal
4-5 March: Croydon Davis Theatre
6 March: Norwich Carlton
7 March: Doncaster Gaumont
8 March: Wolverhampton Gaumont
9 March: Cheltenham Gaumont
10 March: Dominion theatre, london

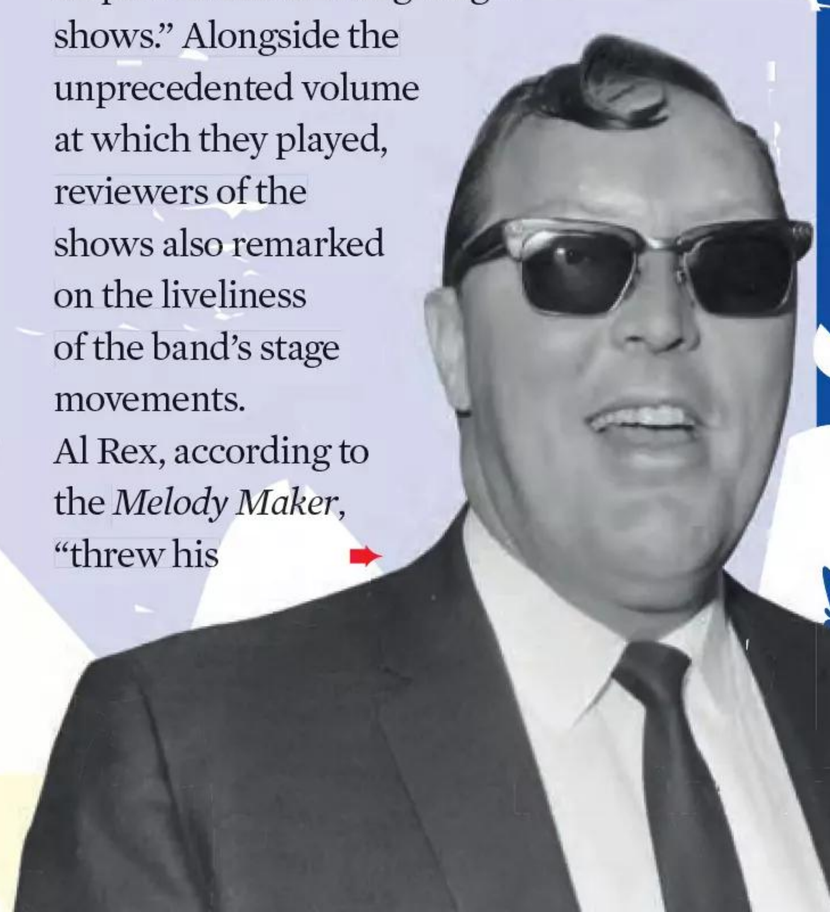
using only three microphones and three amplifiers, the band "still managed to create an unprecedented wall of sound, thanks in large part to the powerful drumming of Ralph Jones and the searing saxophone playing of Rudy Pompilli."

Yet they were up against it, with the sound quality at the venues no great help. Drummer Ricky Lee Brawn, founder member of The Stargazers, The Space Cadets and The Big Six, who cites Haley drummers Ralph Jones and Billy Gussak as influences on his style, worked with Marshall Lytle, another of the classic Comets bassists in his later years. He says Lytle told him the sound was never good at gigs for the Comets of that era. "The bass had no amplification at all, and the band had to turn down to try to get some sort of decent stage mix to match the volume of the lower instruments. On the UK tour, the screaming from the audience was so loud the band couldn't be heard!"

"The screaming from the audience was so loud the band couldn't be heard!"
RICKY LEE BRAWN

The kids, of course, were going just to be there, but for the more musically inclined it must have been frustrating. Brawn says: "The cavernous arenas and cinemas that they played in on the tour were totally unsuitable for the Haley sound. The old systems Haley had to use were mainly vocal public address systems that were wholly inadequate for a band."

After the early shows, there was criticism that, having had to endure the warm-up variety acts which included the Vic Lewis Orchestra, a comedy singing duo and a penny whistler, the band's sets were only 30 minutes long. There was disappointment among fans that Haley never responded to calls for encores. The set running time was upped to 45 minutes in response, but the wonder must be if Haley's never powerful voice was up to it? Bill Haley Jr says his father did have issues with his vocals during the Australian tour but thinks the main reason for the short sets was "that this was what they were used to. Throughout 1956 and 1957 they'd appeared on bills with numerous other acts, each one only getting a few songs, and the Comets closing each show with a 30-minute set. These were the first rock'n'roll tours, and there was no precedent for doing longer shows." Alongside the unprecedented volume at which they played, reviewers of the shows also remarked on the liveliness of the band's stage movements. Al Rex, according to the *Melody Maker*, "threw his



EXPRESS NEWSPAPERS/GETTY

BILL HALEY WAS HERE

Tracing the singer's steps

Wherever Bill Haley stepped in London on the 1957 tour is hallowed ground, befitting a Haley Heritage Trail. It starts off at Waterloo Station, where he was greeted and then mobbed by swarms of fans when his train rolled in from Southampton. A short limousine ride over the Thames via the Hungerford Bridge and along the Strand brought him to the Savoy Hotel, where he and wife Cuppy stayed. Haley was such hot news, with his suite at the front of the building, the press had reporters posted in offices across the road watching his every move. When Cuppy ventured out to shop, she only managed to walk down the Strand and up to Charing Cross Road before being mobbed by fans. Haley and The Comets' *Piccadilly Rock*, which they recorded later that year for their *Rockin' Around The World* album, was hooked round the celebrated tourist spot not far away. The Dominion Theatre on the corner of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street was the venue for the opening shows of the tour. Two of the capital's most historic cinemas also hosted sell-out Haley shows in 1957. The massive Gaumont State on Kilburn High Road was one. The largest movie palace ever built in England (seating 4,000), many other great artists also performed there including Louis Armstrong, Frank Sinatra, Jerry Lee Lewis and The Beatles. The building remains a striking Kilburn landmark to this day. Sadly, another huge cinema, the Regal in Edmonton, where Cliff Richard saw Haley and The Comets perform, was demolished in 1985.

Given the slip by their idol Bill Haley, these teens outside a Cardiff hotel console themselves with autographed pictures of the Comets when the singer played a show in the city on 21 February 1957

PHOTO BY WESTERN MAIL ARCHIVE/MIRRORPIX VIA GETTY IMAGES

bass around with the abandon of an Apache ill-treating his dance partner, then rode it like a Derby winner." Rudy Pompilli lay full length on the floor, still honking on his horn.

As for Haley, *Melody Maker* described him as looking like a genial butcher, while *The Times* referred to his "chubby, well-nourished face". This has been taken by later commentators to mean that Haley looked middle-aged and ponderous, but footage of a gig before a rather staid audience in Brussels in 1958, despite the venue's poor sound system, doesn't tell the same story. Haley may not have conformed to the slender, wiggle-hipped rebel rocker-boy stereotype, but the film shows he was a more mobile, animated performer on stage than has been described. Tall and big-boned, but certainly not overweight, he didn't talk down to his audience and, always ready with a quip, was clearly the ringmaster of the action. He can be seen playing slap bass in the footage when Al Rex steps up to take a vocal, and Bill Haley Jr agrees that his instrumental contributions have tended to be overlooked. "My father was a superb rhythm guitarist and bass player. He'd carried the rhythm and shared 'guitar-boogie'-style leads with Billy Williamson's steel guitar in live shows until Beecher joined the band. He mimed the lead guitar to *Rock Around The Clock* on early TV appearances and his rhythm guitar skills are clear on YouTube."

THE CLAMOUR TO SEE THE SHOWS was unrelenting throughout the schedule. The late Paul Barrett, later to become a leading UK rock'n'roll promoter, and manager of Shakin' Stevens And The Sunsets and Crazy Cavan And The Rhythm Rockers, when interviewed in 2016, credited

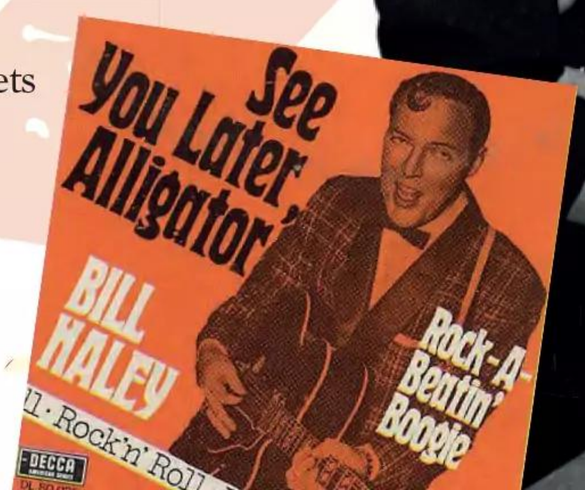
> **"The birth of rock'n'roll for me? Seeing Bill Haley And His Comets"**
> **PETE TOWNSHEND**

Haley with getting him into music. "I was a teenager at the time of the tour. I'd seen *Rock Around The Clock* when it came out in the Windsor Kinema in Penarth in 1956. I certainly didn't rip any seats up, but I do strongly remember trying to emulate what was going on the screen by dancing in the aisles."

The impact of seeing that film made Barrett desperate for a ticket when Haley arrived to play the Capital Theatre, Cardiff. "It was a huge deal for me. I was working at a photographers' shop and sneaked out to get a ticket. There was an incredible queue and I was there for hours. In time I'd see

Bill and his wife, Barbara Joan 'Cuppy' Cupchak

HARRY KERR/BIPS/GETTY



Little Richard, The Everly Brothers and The Rolling Stones in Cardiff, but the only other time I saw a queue like the one for Haley was for Bob Dylan and The Hawks in 1965. Unfortunately, when I reached the desk, the only tickets left cost a guinea, and I only had 15 shillings."

Several future rock'n'rollers were luckier. When Haley played two sold-out shows at the Manchester Odeon, sitting in the balcony was 15-year-old Graham Nash, later co-founder of The Hollies and Crosby, Stills And Nash.

He'd skived off school the previous day just to get a ticket. At the end of the show, among a gathering of fans, he got to touch Rudy Pompilli's elbow. He later said the show "changed my life", retaining the ticket stub in his wallet. "Over the years I've lost houses, I've lost wives, but I've never lost that ticket stub," he joked.

Paul McCartney and John Lennon, though attending separately, were in the audience when Haley played the Odeon, Liverpool. While Lennon would say that Haley's music largely "passed him by", McCartney recalled that the first time he'd ever got "a tingle up the spine was when I saw Bill Haley And His Comets on the telly. Then I went to see them live. I was the only one of my mates who could afford a ticket. But I was single-minded about it. I knew something was going on there."

Cliff Richard, then still known as Harry Webb, saw the Haley show at the Regal, Edmonton, and Pete Townshend, initially mesmerised by seeing Haley and his band in *Rock Around The Clock*, found their music "extremely cheerful. Bordering on manic." He also caught one of their shows in 1957, remarking, "The birth of rock'n'roll for me? Seeing Bill Haley And His Comets. God, that band swung!"

So popular were the shows, with the entire tour an almost total sell-out, at the end two more gigs were put on back at the Dominion in London. Six thousand fans took the chance, as the *Daily Mirror* put it, "to say 'so long' to Bill Haley". He departed to less fanfare than he'd arrived to, not because of a lack of interest, but because he was simply exhausted.

The music of Bill Haley faded from the minds of teenagers soon after, not so much because of he and his bands' mature looks –having seen them in *Rock Around The Clock*, they'd already known about that – but that his singles had grown increasingly formulaic and safe. He struggled to find strong new material, at the same time as earthier, clearly more youthful artists were emerging. Bill Haley Jr says that his father "got there first with rock'n'roll, perhaps alongside Fats Domino," but argues that his music failed to evolve. "He was kind of confined and limited by the style he had created, which had become passé when Elvis, Little Richard, Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis each came out with more raw, elemental blends."

HALEY WAS TO BE MORE THAN just the messenger boy to Britain, though. While David Gilmour of Pink Floyd has stated that *Rock Around The Clock* was one of the things that made him pick up a guitar, of more direct relevance to the British rock'n'roll and rockabilly scene, his work has been a wellspring of inspiration to musicians of the revivalist school who rediscovered his music and found that it had stood the test of time. Shakin' Stevens, Graham Fenton, The Dynamite Band, Phil Haley, Ray Gelato, The Stargazers, The Big Six and Darrel Higham are among those who signalled their appreciation or love of his recordings. Sadly, Haley's health failed and he died in 1981, unable to reap the full acclaim he would have received had he been able to participate in the revival.

Derek Johnson in his obituary for Haley in the *NME* recalled "the frenzy" of 1957, the "leather-clad teenagers jiving in the aisles, the tingling atmosphere of fever-pitch excitement. London had never witnessed anything like it." Bill Haley's music may have soon reached saturation point, wrote Johnson, but, "he had done his job. He had been entirely responsible for the biggest revolution the pop world had ever known."

Bill Haley's 1957 visit, and the Haleymania it induced, changed music in this country forever. As Ian Dury put it, he was "the first cuckoo of spring." ★

BOB HASWELL/EXPRESS/GETTY

Promoter Paul Barrett credited Haley with g him into rock'n'roll

A young Graham Nash bunked off school to see Bill Haley in concert

THE KING BOWS OUT

Bill Haley's final years

In 1980, Bill Haley was lined up for a British tour with Matchbox, but it wasn't to be. Haley was by now a sick man. Tour plans were abandoned, and he died in February 1981, a sad, demoralised, washed-up figure. However, there had been one last triumph under the British spotlights. In November 1979, Haley performed at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane for the Royal Variety Show before the Queen. His appearance is viewable on YouTube. The blue curtain opens and there is Haley, resplendent in tux and bow tie, the kiss-curl immaculate, beaming that familiar, slightly bashful schoolboy grin. He launches into a shortened *See You Later, Alligator*, followed by *Rock Around The Clock*, and for a few delirious minutes, it's 1957 all over again. Bill gets a huge cheer and then, rounding off the evening, as the entire night's performers come out for a final bow, forming a line across the stage, it's Haley, the epitome of American class and style, who gets the biggest cheer of the lot.

Classic album

WORDS BY MARTIN RUDDOCK

ELVIS

ELVIS PRESLEY

PHOTO BY DON CRAVENS/GETTY IMAGES

The King's sophomore long-player featured yet more instant classics and further cemented Elvis as the most electrifying performer of the rock'n'roll era

Mostly recorded in a mad dash between 1 and 3 September 1956 at Radio Recorders, Hollywood, you'd have thought that Elvis' second album Elvis (retitled Elvis Presley No.2 in the UK) might betray its fraught, rushed origins and contain audible signs of fatigue, jet lag and weariness – but none of this is in evidence.

Recorded (mostly) after his meteoric rise to stardom, what it lacks in the nervous energy of his earliest recordings is made up for by steely confidence, hardened by the road and TV performances, and his sheer enjoyment of the whole shebang.

Judged by today's standards, it's hard to understand in 2025, with its meticulous marketing strategies and staggered release patterns, why Elvis was rushed into the studio with such manic urgency. However, producer Steve Sholes was writing panicked missives to Colonel Tom Parker pushing for the completion of a new LP by 15 April 1956 as early as February, before *Elvis Presley* was released. "I know you have Elvis on a heavy personal appearance program and I certainly can't blame you," the flustered RCA man wrote, "but the main purpose of this letter is to

point out that we still must get a number of additional recordings from Elvis in the near future." Such was the pressure from RCA that they nearly lost Elvis and the Blue Moon Boys when the engine cut out during a hair-raising, rickety chartered flight from Amarillo to Nashville to cut new 45, *I Want You, I Need You, I Love You* in April.

There was certainly no shortage of 'additional recordings' to pick from, had RCA been a little less gung ho about their remorseless release pattern during 1956. Even if the label hadn't baulked at reusing cuts that had already been issued on 45, there was still a brace of unissued Sun-era recordings that could easily have been pressed into service. But RCA continued rattling out Elvis releases with a fever. Over the last year, the label had flooded the market with represses of Sun 45s, new standalone singles (recorded during and after the Nashville and New York RCA sessions from earlier in the year), cut-down double EPs drawn from the *Elvis Presley* LP, and repackages of recent 45s on standard EPs. To boot, the day before the Radio Recorders sessions kicked off and not even six months since its release, RCA had already re-released the entire first album across six 45s.

Eventually, after coolly stalling Sholes while Elvis filmed his motion picture debut in 20th Century Fox's western melodrama *The Reno Brothers* (renamed *Love Me Tender* by Fox on September 2nd), the Colonel relented and agreed to further recordings during a break in filming before Elvis finished off the soundtrack and his last days of filming. Somehow finding a blank week to fill on the office planner, RCA duly rushed *Love Me Tender* out on 45 on 14 September, two months before the picture was due to land in movie theatres.

At any rate, as the Radio Recorders sessions kicked off, the Elvis machine had received a fine-tuning, and a new, more regimented regime was in place since the January sessions for Elvis Presley. Due to new publishing arrangements made behind the scenes, it was no longer just a case of recording whatever Elvis felt like singing that day. Songs were now largely being brought in via publisher Hill & Range and selected by Elvis – an arrangement that started with the recording of *Don't Be Cruel* in July. This approach brought more songs by the likes of the gifted duo of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, but as the years went on, would become a bone of contention with Elvis. There was also the added dimension of the velvety vocal backing of the Jordanaires, after Elvis had successfully lobbied to drop backing singers Ben and Brock Speer and for the full group to join Gordon Stoker.

Steve Sholes was nominally the producer, calling for retakes and supervising from the control room, but there was no doubt who was in charge. If Elvis wanted to break off and sing spirituals with the Jordanaires, he would, sometimes for hours. But he led from the floor, working out arrangements and firing up the room until it was ready to cook.

A trio of Little Richard songs, *Rip It Up*, *Long Tall Sally* and *Ready Teddy*, are three killer rockers and cornerstones of Elvis, drip-fed throughout the album.

It's clear from the first bar of the opening *Rip It Up* that things have moved on

"Elvis is one of the greatest performers who ever lived" – Little Richard

THE KING AND THE KING

"I love him. That's my buddy, my baby," Little Richard once said of Elvis in an 1980s TV interview. "Elvis is one of the greatest performers who ever lived in this world." But were the two Kings actually friends? One performance of Richard's *Long Tall Sally* at Memphis' Cotton Carnival in May 1956 was introduced by Elvis as being a song by a "friend of his he'd never met," and there's no evidence that they ever crossed paths. In the 50s, Richard often played through gritted teeth to segregated audiences, but his influence on the musically colourblind Elvis was heavy in his early recording career. Richard's opinion on Elvis' recordings of his songs was more ambivalent. Never shy about his talent and influence, he saw nobody as a rival. Richard pointedly declared himself "the architect of rock'n'roll", but on the flip side was wounded at being sidelined when white artists covered his songs.

"I believe that if Elvis had been black, he wouldn't have been as big as he was," Richard told *Rolling Stone* in 1990. "If I was white, do you know how huge I'd be? If I was white, I'd be able to sit on top of the White House!" That said, he told *60 Minutes* that he'd like to "thank, not praise" Elvis and Pat Boone for recording *Tutti Frutti*, in a February 1985 interview. "By being white they made that door bigger for me to walk through with my songs."

PHOTO BY GEMS/REDFERN VIA GETTY IMAGES

musically in just a few months. Ushered in with a cool jazz shuffle from DJ Fontana, Elvis' take on the song starts off leaner than Richard's raucous version, but gradually snowballs into a swinging rock and roll behemoth driven by DJ, whose excitable fills keep building the momentum. And what about Elvis himself? He's audibly learned a lot on the road, and is clearly much more sure of himself. Rather than trying to out-yell Richard like he did on *Tutti Frutti* on the *Elvis Presley* album, he delivers a graceful performance that contrasts with the motoring of the Blue Moon Boys, he sounds like he's barely lifting a finger.

Long Tall Sally, taken at a slower lick than Richard's version is attacked with more grit, and Elvis revives his *Tutti Frutti* growl. A live favourite in '56, it would return to his sets in the 1970s when he stepped up his live commitments.

Ready Teddy is given the most full pelt treatment of the three. Elvis is in full rhythmic rapid-fire belt mode, and the band respond with a raw, hammering performance that's one of his finest out-and-out rockers of his golden first act. More than on any of his early cuts, the roots of what would eventually become hard rock are on show here.

Track two, *Love Me* marks the return of Leiber and Stoller, after their runaway success with *Hound Dog* earlier in the year. An older song, intended as a parody of earnest country ballads by its authors, in Elvis' hands it becomes one of his all-time classics. Treated with utmost sincerity (and dexterous melodic flourishes, like his tricky syncopated "if-a-you-ever-go" 28 seconds in), it's delivered with sensuous peaks and dips and vibrato with his vocal notably pushed way out in front of the band and the Jordanaires in the mix. More than any other track on Elvis, *Love Me* would become a standard, performed by the King live until his final days.

Wiley Walker and Gene Sullivan's 1940s cowboy song *When My Blue Moon Turns To Gold Again* is next. A fun, bouncy country-rockabilly swinger that would have fitted in perfectly at Sun, Elvis croons it lightly with the Jordanaires happily bouncing off his lead. Scotty Moore lifts it with a nimble, twangy solo around the halfway mark before Elvis returns to lead the song home with Stoker and company helping land the very Hollywood a capella ending.

A TRIO OF LITTLE RICHARD SONGS, RIP IT UP, LONG TALL SALLY AND REDDY TEDDY, ARE THREE KILLER ROCKERS AND CORNERSTONES OF ELVIS, DRIP-FED THROUGHOUT THE ALBUM

First In Line, a doo wop-flavoured ballad by Aaron Schroeder and Ben Weisman is a sonic oddity. Caked in extreme echo almost to the point that it rivals the debut album's haunting take on *Blue Moon*, it's atmospheric and noirish, again foregrounding Elvis and mixing the Blue Moon Boys so low that they sound like they're bleeding through from next door.

Paralyzed, penned by *Don't Be Cruel* author Otis Blackwell (also co-credited to Elvis) is a hip-swinging rock'n'roll shuffle. Scotty Moore isn't really in evidence until a chiming chord at the very end, but it's a masterpiece of 'less is more' arrangement. Elvis leads on piano with a swampy, rolling walking bass from Bill Black, a sparse but insistent beat from DJ and happy "ba-bas" from the Jordanaires. Best of all is Elvis' coolly assured vocal, deploying hiccupping phrasing, bits of twang and breaking out some sensual "ooo-oohs" on the bridge.

So Glad You're Mine is a call-back to earlier days in more ways than one. Another song by Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup of *That's All Right* fame, it's the raunchiest thing on *Elvis* by some distance. This is partly due to being an outtake from the January *Elvis Presley* sessions in New York, but it's a fun, lusty piece of barrelhouse R&B– driven by Shorty Long's boogie woogie piano and Scotty's tough, low-slung riffs. It's alsounashamedly sexual ("My baby's long and tall, shaped like a cannonball/ Say, every time she loves me/ Lordy, you can hear me squall"), and Elvis knows it, belting out apowerful, but playful vocal that leaves youin absolutely no doubt what his baby's capable of.

Red Foley's *Old Shep* had been the first song ever performed by Elvis in public at the Mississippi-Alabama Fair and Dairy Show at a fairground in Tupelo, aged just 10 ("I wore glasses, no music, and I won, I think it was fifth place in this state talent competition," he recalled in a 1972 interview. Famously about a man and his faithful, dying dog, it's not clear exactly how Shep checks out, but, mawkish as it is, it's oddly affecting – and sung without any frills or drama by Elvis. It would be the first in a long series of maudlin weepers from the King, who kept a lifelong soft spot for them.

Joe Thomas's *Anyplace Is Paradise* is a sparse, bluesy four-square shuffle that has the air of a relaxed wee-hours club jam. Elvis is having a bit of fun with his vocal, while Scotty's lead break, mixed up high gives it a bit of bite.

How's The World Treating You by Chet Atkins and Boudleaux Bryant is a bereft, country-ish ballad with just a hint of sarcastic self-parody, as Elvis slides from dreamy verses ("All my dreams have been shattered") to a vibrato-laden chorus line ("Howww's the worrrld treating you")

Elvis signs off with *How Do You Think I Feel*, by Webb Pierce and Wayne Walker. Influenced by Jimmie Rodgers Snow's '54 version, in Elvis' hands it becomes an energetic country rhumba with a touch of showtune about it. Bill's bass-slapping is high in the mix and Scotty shadows the melody on guitar. Well-sung and executed, it's an unusual finale but rounds off Elvis' triumphant second chapter in style. ✶

ELVIS
ELVIS PRESLEY

1956 • RCA VICTOR

Side 1

Rip It Up
Love Me
When My Blue Moon Turns To Gold Again
Long Tall Sally
First in Line
Paralyzed

Side 2

So Glad You're Mine
Old Shep
Ready Teddy
Anyplace Is Paradise
How's The World Treating You
How Do You Think I Feel

Classic album

WORDS BY JACK WATKINS

SINGIN' TO MY BABY

EDDIE COCHRAN

GRANT GODDARD/REDFERNS/GETTY

Critics haven't always been kind to *Singin' To My Baby* but while the only album released in Eddie Cochran's lifetime lacks the songs that established him as one of the greats, it's still an underrated gem...

In the early years after his death, Eddie Cochran fans got used to compilations of his best-known songs. Just five months after his fatal accident in the UK, *The Eddie Cochran Memorial Album* climbed to No.9 in the British LP charts. Reissued three years later, there was still enough demand for it make No.11. It followed the success of another compilation album *Cherished Memories*, which had charted at No.15 that year. A different sort of product was *Singin' To My Baby*, reissued several times in the 1960s, and briefly charting on a couple of occasions in this country. First released in the States in 1957, and in the UK a few months later, *Singin' To My Baby* had been the only album to have been released in Cochran's lifetime. With its classy sleeve cover, the beautifully lit images included one of the artist holding his striking Gretsch 6120, and looking pensively into the middle distance. While a lot of people have been a bit sniffy about the choice of songs on this record over the years, it deserves better, not least because, unlike so many albums by rock'n'rollers in that period, it was not some hastily slung together assemblage of a star's big hits, but was genuinely conceived as a studio

album, all the tracks laid down in sessions at Gold Star Studios in Hollywood between the early spring and summer of 1957. It is also a fascinating timepiece, reflecting the confusion and dilemma that confronted many studio bosses and performers at the time as to how to present their recorded music to the public.

COCHRAN WAS ONLY 18 when he recorded the songs for this album. As Rob Finnis wrote in his detailed essay to accompany Rockstar Records' *The Eddie Cochran Box Set*, it was "probably as unrepresentative a set" as Gene Vincent's first LP for Capitol Records, *Bluejean Bop!* which had been released the previous year.

Yet the tendency of many writers to disparage both of these albums because of the sedate nature of some of the content stems from a partial misreading of music history. A lot of rock-orientated journalists, contemptuous of the 1950s music scene, have painted the era as just a revved-up prelude to the real hard stuff that was to come from the mid-1960s. But rock'n'roll did not arrive on the block fully-formed, and most of its early exponents grew up listening to pop and country crooners like Perry Como and Eddy Arnold and belters like Frankie Lane and Johnnie Ray, alongside more blues influenced country artists like Hank Williams and a string of R&B performers. They were, within reason, happy to incorporate a few standards in their recorded repertoire, and usually performed them brilliantly, as proven many times over by Elvis Presley and Vincent across their careers. The ability to sing standards at that time was proof of your artistic integrity. Cochran, fractionally younger, was alive to the changing musical climate and was inspired by Presley, but as a consummate musician first and foremost, he would have been across all the styles, even if his instinct was always to add the inflections of rock'n'roll.

All the same, you'd have to say the British got lucky with later versions of *Singin' To My Baby*, licensed for release on the London Records label, because of the inclusion of three extra, high quality tracks which add a little extra zip. Most notably these included *Twenty Flight Rock* which, albeit with a different arrangement, had been the song Cochran performed in the Frank Tashlin-directed satire of the music business *The Girl Can't Help It*. Despite still being hitless at the time, with only one single as a solo artist, *Skinny Jim*, released on the Crest label, behind him, Cochran is introduced in the film as one of America's "top rock'n'rollers," and his slightly mannered performance made a big impression at the time. The version of *Twenty Flight Rock* he performs in the picture was released as a single in this country to coincide with the film's arrival in British cinemas, but the version on *Singin' To My Baby* was a later cut. Many prefer the original with the rockabilly style click of Connie "Guybo" Smith's slap bass more forward in the sound mix, whereas it is hardly noticeable in the second version. But whichever version you prefer, it's still an exciting song, and the lyric about an amorous young guy with a girlfriend who inconveniently lives 20 floors up in an apartment block has helped make it become an accepted Cochran favourite.

However, *Twenty Flight Rock* is not reflective of the overall sound which Liberty were clearly keen to use to present Cochran as at this time, more as a romantic teen lover than as a horny young dude. So the first pressing of the album in 1957 kicks off with *Sittin' In The Balcony*. Instead of putting out *Twenty Flight Rock* to capitalise on the impact of Cochran's film appearance, this was the song Liberty boss Si Waronker had chosen to release as his first single. It was a cover of a song by a young singer Johnny Dee (better known to us as John D Loudermilk) which Waronker had tried to secure the distribution rights for. In failing to do so, he got Cochran to record a note for note remake, complete with metallic guitar break, and heavy use of echo, including for a big smoochy kiss at the end. They laboured long over getting the sound right, however, and were rewarded when it outsold the Dee original, reaching No.18 to give Cochran his first Top 20 hit early in 1957, though it didn't enjoy the same success in Britain.

Kissin' Cochran must have had some traction, because *Singin' To My Baby*'s closer *One Kiss*, a Cochran-Jerry Capeheart collaboration, had been the follow-up single. It's a none too subtle retreading of similar ground to *Sittin' In The Balcony*, with some more twangy guitar on the bridge.

COCHRAN WAS ONLY 18 WHEN HE RECORDED THE SONGS FOR THIS ALBUM

TRACK LISTING

Side 1

Sittin' In The Balcony
Completely Sweet
Undying Love
I'm Alone Because I Love You
Lovin' Time
Proud Of You

Side 2

Mean When I'm Mad
Stockings And Shoes
Tell Me Why
Have I Told You Lately That I Love You
Cradle Baby
One Kiss

The driving mid-paced rocker *Mean When I'm Mad*, recorded at the same session, was the flip on the poor selling single, and featured more good guitar work, and an aggressive Cochran vocal performance.

ONE OF THE most interesting tracks on the album was *Completely Sweet*. The instrumentation on the *Singin' To My Baby* album was always sparse, led by Cochran on guitar. Long-time friend and musical associate "Guybo" Smith was at this stage ➡

GAB ARCHIVE/REDFERNS/GETTY

Singin' To My Baby was the only album Eddie Cochran released during his short lifetime

still playing stand-up bass on Cochran's recording sessions, rather than the electric bass he would switch to on later hits like *Summertime Blues* and *C'mon Everybody*. The veteran sideman Perry Botkin Sr, who'd worked with everyone from Al Jolson, Bing Crosby and Bob Hope to Spike Jones, was on rhythm guitar, and on tracks without Jerry Capeheart's box tapping contributions, there was an unspecified drummer. Then there were the Johnny Mann Singers, a vocal group who were at Liberty under a separate contract. Backing vocal groups have got a bad name over the years. Indiscriminately used on so many 50s' and early 60s records to the point of cliché, they sweetened and softened the edges of many songs, but the Mann Singers were more skilfully deployed on Cochran's recordings.

COCHRAN DIGS DEEP. INCREDIBLY, LET'S NOT FORGET, HE WAS STILL ONLY A TEENAGER

Completely Sweet, transformed from a more basic earlier Cochran effort at this song which he had penned with Capeheart, is a striking example of the value of the Mann Singers. The vocals add depth to a track that also features one of the mid-song rhythmic shifts Cochran often favoured, in this case from a rhumba rhythm to a shuffle and back again, before closing out with a guitar and slap bass coda, and Cochran dropping his voice into bass mode to sing, "She's so completely sweet."

Cradle Baby, written by a country singer Terry Fell whose real gift was for song-writing, followed the same stylistic model as *Completely Sweet*, with another short, sweet killer guitar break, great backing vocals and cleverly layered, syncopated rhythm. *Stockings And Shoes* was another good song, keeping up the energy levels with good call and response interplay between Cochran and the Mann Singers, but the same could not be said for the Cochran-Capeheart composition *Undying Love*, which was just plodding, while *Tell Me Why*, which had an embarrassing spoken passage, was even worse. To be fair, while it is usually listed as

having been penned by Cochran, he doesn't bear the responsibility for this mournful dirge, which was actually a cover of an earlier song by ballad singer Betty Johnson, *Please Tell Me Why*.

THE YEAR 1957

BEAR FAMILY RECORDS' RELEASE IS A MUST-HAVE FOR EDDIE OBSESSIVES

Singin' To My Baby was released in the autumn of 1957. Bear Family Records' *Eddie Cochran: The Year 1957* traces the period. An essay from *Vintage Rock*'s Bill Dahl points out that while Cochran probably got signed by Liberty Records because the company saw him as their answer to Elvis, he had several innate talents that even Presley could not match, already being a prolific songwriter, a great lead guitarist and "a natural in the recording studio."

While *Singin' To My Baby* was recorded under the auspices of Liberty boss Si Waronker, the Hungarian émigré who had been a violinist on film soundtracks, knew enough to allow Cochran some leeway when it came to the sound of his records. The gritty sense of rhythmic depth on album tracks like *Cradle Baby* and *Completely Sweet* surely came from Cochran. It would not be until the following year, and the likes of *Nervous Breakdown*, *Summertime Blues* and *C'Mon Everybody*, that Cochran's studio creativity, including his interest in building sound layer by layer would fully bear fruit, but the signs are there in some of his 1957 work.

The Year 1957 also features several interviews by the singer, and some live performances of *Sittin' In The Balcony*, *Twenty Flight Rock* and *Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On*. In interviews Cochran cut an amiable personality. Had he lived he would surely have become a great spokesperson for rock'n'roll at a time when the music really needed articulate advocates.

PROUD OF YOU was a mildly swinging little ditty, with Cochran extolling the delights of his girl over a liberal dose of doo-wahs from the Johnny Mann Singers. One of the main curiosities of this song is that it was written by Dale Fitzsimmons, who'd previously joint-penned with Ray Stanley *Latch On* – one of the best songs Eddie and his unrelated namesake Hank Cochran recorded together during their formative earlier partnership as The Cochran Brothers. *Lovin' Time* had Cochran strumming a ukulele, and qualifies as a pleasant enough filler.

There were two traditional ballads on *Singin' To My Baby*. There's no doubt that Cochran generally struggled to sound convincing on outright slowies, *I'm Alone Because I Love You* being a case in point. Much better was *Have I Told You Lately That I Love You*, however, which Cochran would almost certainly have heard being sung by Presley on his recent RCA album *Loving Time* album. This sentimental song, written by Mac Wiseman, has been performed by many country singers over the years, including Gene Autry and Jim Reeves, whose maturity made them better placed to deliver the lyric with conviction, yet Cochran digs deep to produce a solid new version. Incredibly, let's not forget, he was still only a teenager, and *Singin' To My Baby* remains a monument to a talent who, at 18, had already passed the precocious stage. ✶

GAB ARCHIVE/REDFERNS/GETTY

TOP 100 ROCK'N'ROLL TRACKS

Rock'n'roll music brought with it significant social and cultural change, altering our attitudes to fashion and lifestyles forever, but a quick inspection of our list of its greatest tracks proves its longest lasting legacy will always be its songs...

WORDS BY **ALISTAIR POWELL**

From racy early sides such as Trixie Smith's *My Daddy Rocks Me (With One Steady Roll)*, Goree Carter's *Rock Awhile* and *Good Rocking Tonight* by Roy Brown, the seeds of rebellion were planted early on in the juke joints up and down the States. Although the precise dawning of rock'n'roll is incredibly hard to define, plenty of Black artists, generally classed as R&B, and numerous feisty country and hillbilly rebels were laying down the foundations at the vanguard of the genre long before a young Elvis turned up at Memphis' Sun Studios.

As this is intended as a definitive greatest of all time listing, we've allowed numerous entries from single artists in here, mainly as the giants – Chuck, Little Richard, Fats, Elvis, Wanda, Buddy, Gene Vincent, Jerry Lee and Johnny Burnette had far too many golden discs to leave out. Although, to keep it upbeat and electric, all ballads were off the table. And while the big tunes make it here, it must be said, a fair few exemplary sides from the world of early rock had to remain excluded.

In fact, while a veritable raft of sides could – and quite possibly *should* – have made our listing, we went with the consensus, having polled all at *Vintage Rock* and a fair few rock'n'roll connoisseurs from the world outside. You'll find a selection of those Top 10s, supplied by some of the Big Beat's contemporary movers and shakers, included in these pages.

What you will find here is a great variety of tunes presented under the umbrella of rock'n'roll, from proto-sides still leaning towards the R&B tradition but punching hard enough for inclusion, through to some of the rockabilly belters that broke off from the central strain to wilder plains. Add a handful of lesser-known fare, plus some of the genre's early pioneers well deserving of their time in the sun, and we've got ourselves a staggering collection of discs that helped to define the genre we all know and love. Long live rock'n'roll!

100

Welcome To The Club

JEAN CHAPEL

Written by Queen Mother of Nashville Mae B. Axton (who co-wrote *Heartbreak Hotel* for Elvis) this sprightly rocker was laid down at RCA's studios in April 1956. It was then licensed to Sun Records and announced rockin' filly Jean Chapel to the US.

99

Move It

CLIFF RICHARD

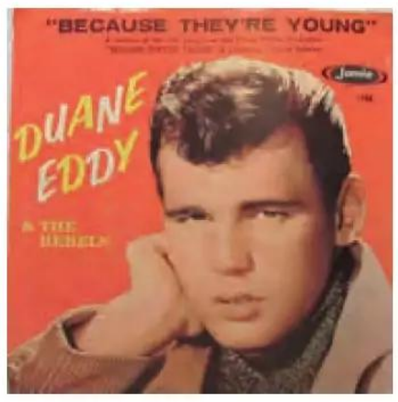
Cliff and the Drifters debut 45 is often referred to as one of the UK's first rock'n'roll songs. Recorded in the final 45 minutes of an Abbey Road session in July 1958, *Move It* was aired on Jack Good's influential *Oh Boy* TV show and the band's upward curve was assured.

98

Is There A Man In The House?

LILLIAN BRIGGS

Lillian Briggs doesn't get much of a mention these days, but she was one of the first females rockers and this 1959 Coral side is a belter. Aside from Briggs' own boisterous, hiccupping charms, she's ably backed here via the hooky "yay, yay, yay" backing and a primitive, piercing guitar solo.



97

Because They're Young

DUANE EDDY

Penned by Aaron Schroeder, Don Costa and Wally Gold, Duane Eddy's 1960 grandiose string-augmented instrumental sailed into the Top Five on both sides of the pond, a rare feat for a vocal-less tune, and took pride of place on his tremulous *$1,000,000 Worth of Twang* album.

96

Travelin' Man

RICKY NELSON

Hit-writer Jerry Fuller first took his tune about "a girl in every port" to Sam Cooke. Deposited in the trash, if not for Ricky's bassist Joe Osborn hearing it through the wall, it would have been lost completely. Here, the Jordanaires back up Ricky for his second and final US No.1.

95

Tear It Up

THE ROCK'N'ROLL TRIO

Country, bluegrass, hillbilly and blues meet for pure form rockabilly. Johnny Dorsey and Paul Burlison's first single as The Rock'n'Roll Trio is enlivened by flighty guitar-riffing coupled with Johnny's yelping delivery to mould one of the genre's greatest sides.

94

Hang Up My Rock And Roll Shoes

CHUCK WILLIS

"Rock'n'roll is here to stay!" sings Willis on this Atlantic hit from 1958. Nicknamed The King of the Stroll for conjuring up the slow dance, Chuck was the soulful voice behind the classic R&B perennial No.1 hits *CC Rider* and *What Am I Living For.*

93

Ooby Dooby

ROY ORBISON

When unlikely rock'n'roll wannabe Roy Oribison cut this debut single, Roy hadn't yet donned the shades. Orbison's classmates Dick Penner and Wade Moore wrote this classic track on the roof of their frat house, before Roy cut it for small indie Je-Wel, before redoing it for Sun.

92

My Boy Elvis

JANIS MARTIN

This stop-start rockin' message from the then 16-year-old Female Elvis to her label mate at RCA, is pure class. Cut with some of Nashville's finest session crew, it gave the "first female rock 'n' roller" her crown. The royal couple's South African 10" LP *Janis & Elvis* is unmissable too.

10 OF THE BEST...

BY ALAN WILSON
Western Star Records

GOOD GOLLY MISS MOLLY
LITTLE RICHARD

HONEY HUSH
THE JOHNNY BURNETTE TRIO

PINK THUNDERBIRD
GENE VINCENT & THE BLUECAPS

JOHNNY REMEMBER ME
JOHN LEYTON

ROCK'N'ROLL RUBY
WARREN SMITH

THAT'LL BE THE DAY
BUDDY HOLLY

BECAUSE THEY'RE YOUNG
DUANE EDDY

FLYIN' SAUCERS ROCK'N'ROLL
BILLY LEE RILEY

BABY LET'S PLAY HOUSE
ELVIS PRESLEY

SOMETHING' ELSE
EDDIE COCHRAN

10 OF THE BEST...

BY BOB BUTFOY
Jack Rabbit Slim

BIG HUNK O' LOVE
ELVIS PRESLEY

PSYCHO
THE SONICS

DON'T KNOCK UPON MY DOOR
BILLY FURY

SOMETHIN' ELSE
EDDIE COCHRAN

THAT CERTAIN FEMALE
CHARLE FEATHERS

ROCK AROUND WITH OLLIE VEE
BUDDY HOLLY

TRAIN KEPT A ROLLIN'
JOHNNY BURNETTE

BI-I-BICKEY- BI
GENE VINCENT

BLUE JEANS AND A BOYS' SHIRT
GLEN GLENN

ROCKIN' ROLLIN' STONE
ANDY STARR

91
Black Slacks
JOE BENNETT AND THE SPARKLETONES

Clean-living Joe Bennett and his band fashioned this buzzing slice on brilliance having been discovered at a talent contest and were soon in front of the cameras on *The Ed Sullivan Show* all sporting black sequinned tuxedos (strangely no black slacks!).

90
At The Hop
DANNY & THE JUNIORS

Built around a thumping turn on the ivories from sessioneer Walt Gates and some peppy vocal arrangements, this classy rocker was changed from *Do The Bop* to *At The Hop* at Dick Clark's suggestion. After an airing on Clark's American Bandstand it made instant stars of the group.

89
I Need A Man
BARBARA PITTMAN

An apprenticeship with Memphis' Snearly Ranch Boys, Barbara Pittman was recording her own sides within Sun's hallowed walls. "I've got me pups and a Persian cat/ But I can't be satisfied with no pet/ I need a man to love-a me," snarls rockabilly filly Pittman on this crackerjack classic.

88
Rock'n'Roll Ruby
WARREN SMITH

Warren Smith's Sun side about a wild night "on the outskirts of town" with his nubile lover bottles up the energy of the genre via freewheelin' piano-hammering and slick guitar licks. Either written by Johnny Cash or George Jones, depending on which story you choose to believe.

87
The Fat Man
FATS DOMINO

Cut at Cosimo Matassa's New Orleans hit factory and delivered via Imperial in December 1949, The *Fat Man* has a shout as one of the first rock'n'roll sides. Prompted by 1941's *Junker's Blues*, Fats' upped the energy with his signature triplets on the 88s for a slice of rockin' perfection.

86
Sea Cruise
FRANKIE FORD

Initially recorded by Huey 'Piano' Smith in 1959, it was Frankie Ford's version that saw release first, his voice cut over Smith's original backing track, complete with ship's horns and bell sounds. Out on Ace Records, this shifted over a million copies securing Ford a place in the US Top 20.

85
Suzie Q
DALE HAWKINS

Recorded at the KWKH Radio station in Shreveport, Louisiana and released in 1957, swamp-rock torchbearer Dale Hawkins' rockabilly calling card was lifted by the fretwork of 17-year-old James Burton. Burton later claimed to have written the track instrumentally, but was never credited.

84
Cry! Cry! Cry!
JOHNNY CASH

Cash had intended to sing gospel at Sun, but still possessed a number of rockabilly-flavoured tunes in his armoury, of which *Cry! Cry! Cry!* was one of his finest. Johnny bagged a slot on tour with Elvis and a spot on the Louisiana Hayride off the back of it, and his career upturn was set.

83
Money Honey
DRIFTERS FEATURING CLYDE MCPHATTER

With one of the most wildly revolving casts in rock'n'roll history, The Drifters have had their fair share of line-up changes since their inception back in 1953 but none fired quite as hot as the scorching sixpiece that delivered this phenomenal rockin' mainstay.

82

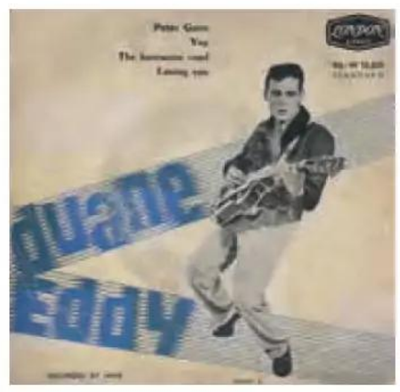
Rock Billy Boogie
THE JOHNNY BURNETTE TRIO

It doesn't get more feral than this raging rockabilly monster from Memphis' finest threesome. From Paul Burlison's gritty guitar-playing and Dorsey's thumping upright to Johnny's hicupping vocal, its little wonder that Robert Gordon chose to adopt the name for his classic 1979 LP.

81

Rockin' Pneumonia & The Boogie Woogie Flu
HUEY 'PIANO' SMITH & THE CLOWNS

Call it proto-rock'n'roll if you like, but this infectious boogie-woogie 45 is laced with the raw spirit of the Big Beat. Smith played piano in Little Richard's band in 1955, as well as for Lloyd Price, Earl King and Smiley Lewis.



80

Peter Gunn
DUANE EDDY

Written by Henry Mancini for the TV show of the same name, Duane's crashing 1958 instrumental serviced with Wrecking Crew member Steve Douglas' honking sax, gave him a US No.27 and UK No.6. Eddy later paired with synth-pop noiseniks the Art Of Noise for a reworked version in 1986.

79

Drugstore Rock And Roll
JANIS MARTIN

On the flipside of her biggest hit *Will You Willyum*, lay one of Martin's self-penned rockers, the rambunctious *Drugstore Rock And Roll*. Soon, Billboard were backing her, Elvis was sending her flowers and his manager, Colonel Tom Parker, was offering her a contract – which was turned down.

78

I'm Walkin'
FATS DOMINO

Worked up with his trusted songwriting partner Dave Bartholomew, *I'm Walkin'* was Fats' third successive R&B chart-topper and a Top Five pop hit too. Sax lines don't come much more effervescent than Herbert Hardesty's buoyant honk here and – forget walkin' – Fats is flying!

77

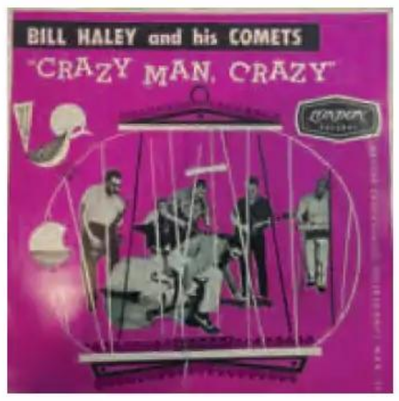
High School Confidential
JERRY LEE LEWIS

One of rock'n'roll's finest intros precedes a frantic piano-pounding outing from the Killer, cut at Sun Studios in early 1958. Jerry Lee and his touring band, Jay W. Brown and Russ Smith, were filmed performing the song for the film of the same name on the back of a flatbed truck.

76

Will You, Willyum
JANIS MARTIN

Will You, Willyum was demoed with Janis Martin on vocals and taken on by RCA Victor's Steve Sholes, who apparently requested "the girl on the demo" to perform it. Martin was just 15 when she signed to RCA, cutting this 45 almost immediately. It would be her biggest hit.



75

Crazy Man, Crazy
BILL HALEY & HIS COMETS

Bill Haley was ahead of the game when he cut this track with the Comets in 1953 and won plaudits as one of the first rock'n'roll songs on the Billboard. Incorporating lyrics gleaned from his audience of hep cat teens at school dances, the single was released on Essex Records.

74

A Teenager In Love
DION & THE BELMONTS

Written by dream songwriting team Mort Shuman and Doc Pomus, this doo wop-flecked slice of dream rock was intended for Brooklyn group The Mystics, but was instead handed over to fellow New Yorkers Dion & The Belmonts, who hit the Top 5 of the Hot 100 with it in spring 1959.

10 OF THE BEST...

BY RUSTI STEEL
Singer

CRAZY MAN CRAZY
BILL HALEY & HIS COMETS

LOOK OUT MABEL
G. L. CROCKETT

HER LOVE RUBBED OFF
CARL PERKINS

MESS AROUND
RAY CHARLES

MOVE IT ON OVER
HANK WILLIAMS

WHEN I FOUND YOU
JERRY REED

MILKCOW BLUES BOOGIE
ELVIS PRESLEY

BERTHA LOU
JOHNNY FAIRE

FLYING SAUCERS ROCK'N'ROLL
BILLY LEE RILEY

SNEAKY PETE
SONNY FISHER

73

Come On Let's Go
RITCHIE VALENS

One of our favourite tracks from the Chicano star whose music career lasted just eight short months, debut single *Come On Let's Go* narrowly missed the Billboard Top 10 in Spring 1958. Valens aired the track during his debut performance on American Bandstand in October of that year.

72

Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean
RUTH BROWN

Recorded in 1952, it took some persuasion from the song's writers, Johnny Wallace as well as Herbert J. Lance, to turn Brown on to the tune, but thankfully she agreed and her third Billboard R&B chart-topper was the result.

71

Reddy Teddy
LITTLE RICHARD

Words written by John Marascalco and Robert 'Bumps' Blackwell were quickly converted into Richard's explosive a capella verses. This sax-infused, piano-assaulting spectacular contains all the elements that made Little Richard the Architect of Rock'n'Roll.

70

Folsom Prison Blues
JOHNNY CASH AND THE TENNESSEE TWO

Dwelling more on the country side of the genre, the Man In Black embodied the vagabond spirit with this, his live set opener. Cash commenced his show at the actual Folsom Prison with this tune, to whoops of appreciation from the gathered inmates.

69

Brand New Cadillac
VINCE TAYLOR & THE PLAYBOYS

This 12-bar hammers along on a fearsome guitar hook, over which the Middlesex-born US emigree Vince Taylor drawls his infectious plea to his Cadillac-driving lover. Taylor wooed the 2is Coffee Shop crowd with his sharp jawline and Uncle Sam-inspired rockin' persona.

68

Flying Saucers Rock'n'Roll
BILLY LEE RILEY

One of Sun Records' finest young guns, Billy Lee Riley recorded a few quintessential rockabilly sides in his tenure at the label. With Roland Janes' quivering, devilish guitar breaks, those unhinged background screams, and Jerry Lee on the 88s, this is raw as they come – and magic to boot.

67

Race With The Devil
GENE VINCENT

This slinking rockabilly mainstay is now much revered but at the time even some peerless fretting from Cliff Gallup flighty digits couldn't mark it out as a hit. Still, with its tale of living the "evil life" and draggin' up against Beezebub, *Race With The Devil* is pure rockabilly gold.

66

Not Fade Away
BUDDY HOLLY

A simple, effective rock'n'roll tune from Buddy and The Crickets that made use of the Bo Diddley beat, *Not Fade Away* was laid down at Norman Petty's studio in Clovis, New Mexico in Spring 1957 in the same session as another classic, *Everyday*. Released on the flip of *Oh Boy!*

65

Brown-Eyed Handsome Man
CHUCK BERRY

This 1956 Chess side cleverly addressed the racial issues of the time, Berry as ever supported by Johnnie Johnson's classy ivory twinkling. The track was famously covered by Buddy Holly and aired during the celebrated *Million Dollar Quartet* sessions.

64

Big Hunk O' Love
ELVIS PRESLEY

Augmented by driving piano, some characterful backing vocals from the Jordanaires, Elvis mounts a yelping attack on this sumptuous rocker. Written by Aaron Schroeder and Sidney Wyche and recorded in Nashville at the one and only studio session during his army service.

63

The Way I Walk
JACK SCOTT

One of Canada's scant rock'n'roll stable, the debonair Jack Scott moved to Detroit and signed with ABC Paramount before he'd reached 21. Scott recorded the song in 1959 prior to his stint in the US Army aided by vocal quartet the Chantones and a killer sax solo from George Kazakas.

62

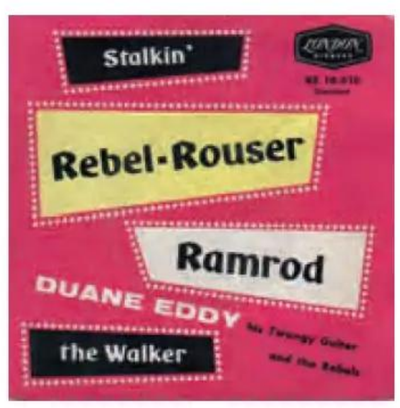
Black Cadillac
JOYCE GREEN

Considering its utter marvellousness, it's tragic this was the raven-haired Joyce Green's one and only release, a noir affair about knocking off her cheating man and riding to his funeral in a black Cadillac. Green was a proficient guitarist, and her ample skills are on show here.

61

Bluejean Bop!
GENE VINCENT

Bluejean Bop! may not have managed to maintain the upward curve suggested when *Be-Bop-A-Lula* hit big, but has since become a standard. With Gene's demands us to "Dip your hip, free your knee/ Squeal on your heel baby, one two three!", it's a track that will always fill the floor



58

Rebel-Rouser
DUANE EDDY

America's gun guitarist Duane Eddy took instrumental music to bold heights armed with his infamous reverb-laden twang, influencing everyone from The Shadows to The Beatles. Issued on Jamie in 1958 and inspired by Tennessee Ernie Ford, *Rebel-Rouser* was Eddy's first big hit.

55

Rumble
LINK WRAY AND HIS RAY MEN

Axeman Link Wray paved the way for guitar rock with this power-chorded 1958 side. Described by the Library Of Congress as "the toughest sounding guitar riff in all of rock music history", *Rumble* conjured up street-fighting scenes and gave youth insurrection a formidable clarion call.

60

Get Rhythm
JOHNNY CASH

First issued on the flipside of his early Sun Records calling card *I Walk The Line* in 1956, this cranked-up rockin' country side was given the lead spot via a later release in 1969. The Tennessee Two, Luther Perkins on guitar and Marshall Grant on bass, are present to expand the magic.

57

Work With Me Annie
HANK BALLARD & THE MIDNIGHTERS

While their crossover smash *The Twist* gets all the attention, in part thanks to Chubby Checker's classic version, this salacious, rocking R&B nugget from Chitlin Circuit heroes Hank & The Midnighters placed them firmly at the vanguard of early rock'n'roll.

54

Let The Good Times Roll
SHIRLEY & LEE

Soulful rockin' from the male-female partnership of Shirley Goodman and Leonard Lee, this thinly-veiled explicit rocker was kept in time by Earl Palmer, while New Orleans' finest twosome sparred to sparkling effect – one of the first Black acts to be taken in by the white audiences of the time.

10 OF THE BEST...

BY BRETT WATERS
The Bullets

ROCK BILLY BOOGIE
THE JOHNNY BURNETTE TRIO

4 O'CLOCK BABY
DARREL RHOADS

DRUMS A GOGO
HOLLYWOOD PERSUADERS

CAT SQUIRREL
DOCTOR ROSS

STRAIGHT SKIRT
GENE SUMMERS

RED HOT
BILLY LEE RILEY

BAD BAD BOY
BOBBY LOLLAR

CRACKERJACK
JANIS MARTIN

SHE'S MY BABY
ROY ORBISON

THAT'S ALRIGHT MAMA
ELVIS PRESLEY

59

Funnel Of Love
WANDA JACKSON

While hidden on the underside of Wanda's country-pop hit *Right Or Wrong*, this wirling slice of wondrous wax is one of the most pioneeering tracks of the lot. Jackson's voice is utterly ferocious, the track's Eastern vibes courtesy of sessioneer Roy Clark's unforgettable guitar.

56

Maybe Baby
THE CRICKETS

Produced by regular Holly collaborator Norman Petty, this made the Top Five in the UK. With its neat rockabilly twang, *Maybe Baby* – somewhat bizarrely – was cut at the club in Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma, while the band were on the 'Show Of Stars '57' package tour.

53

Rip It Up
LITTLE RICHARD

Little Richard's 1956 Specialty waxing partnered with A-side *Reddy Teddy*, but still topped the R&B chart and squeezed into the Pop Top 10. Its lyrics spring from that just-been-paid feeling of recklessness, while Lee Allen's blistering sax and Richard's piano soundtrack the party.

52

Shake, Rattle And Roll

BILL HALEY & HIS COMETS

The first hit version of this came from Kansas City blues shouter Big Joe Turner who helped usher in the age of rock, but it was when Bill Haley took it on that it melded with country and became pure rock'n'roll. Haley's take went to the Top 10 and, by the following year, Elvis had had a go too.

51

Rocket '88'

JACKIE BRENSTON AND HIS DELTA CATS

It was Ike Turner's Kings of Rhythm moonlighting as the Delta Cats, with saxophonist Jackie Brenston taking the mic, who laid down their ode to 'America's First Muscle Car' way back in March 1951. A trailblazing, fuzz-toned slice of rock'n'roll history.

50

Twenty Flight Rock

EDDIE COCHRAN

Performed in famed rock'n'roll flick *The Girl Can't Help It*, *Twenty Flight Rock* was written by Eddie with Ned Fairchild and recorded at Gold Star in Los Angeles. in 1956. It was also the song that helped a young Paul McCartney secure a spot in John Lennon's fledgling band.

49

Lawdy Miss Clawdy

LLOYD PRICE

Cut with producer Dave Bartholomew and with the mighty Fats Domino perched on the piano stool, Lloyd Price's fired-up Specialty debut borrowed its curious title from local DJ James 'Okey Dokey' Smith's catchphrase. It went on to become one of 1952's biggest-sellers.

48

Matchbox

CARL PERKINS

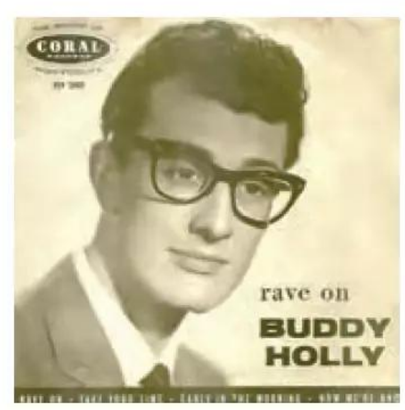
Adapted from Blind Lemon Jefferson's *Match Box Blues* and recorded just before Elvis, Johnny Cash and Jerry Lee got together for the *Million Dollar Quartet*. Carl's father Buck suggested he record it, with Carl adapting the lyrics and Jerry Lee adding his infectious boogie-woogie piano.

47

Keep A-Knockin'

LITTLE RICHARD

This bombastic firecracker was a seismic influence on all that followed. Earl Palmer's drums, a blistering sax attack and Little Richard's inspired vocal barrage took this side to the extremities of rock'n'roll and a Billboard Top 10 that had never witnessed the like of it before.



46

Rave On

BUDDY HOLLY

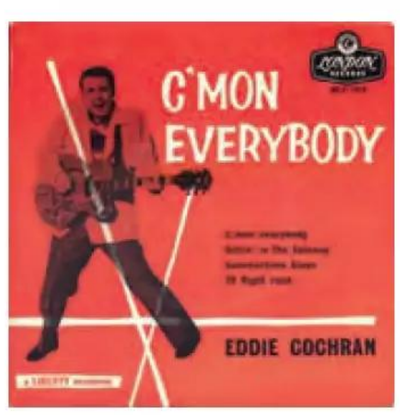
First recorded by rockabilly pioneer Sonny West, Buddy's 1958 single was one of the speediest and hardest rocking recordings of his entire career, clocking in at under two explosive minutes. Cut in New York with producer Milton DeLugg, the track made the US Top 40 and UK Top Five.

45

Runaway

DEL SHANNON

Topping the Billboard Hot 100 in 1961, Del Shannon wrote his smash hit with Max Crook, who famously showcased his then space-age Musitron keyboard in the tunes' mesmeric solo. *Runaway* was laid down at Bell Sound Studios in New York City and aired on Dick Clark's American Bandstand later that year.



44

C'Mon Everybody

EDDIE COCHRAN

Cut in Hollywood in October '58, its original vocal hook of 'Let's Get Together' quickly morphed into 'C'Mon Everybody' and magic duly ensued. Notable for 'Guybo' Smith's rumbling bass combined with Eddie's rhythmic strums, it was later adapted for the punk crowd by The Sex Pistols.

43

Red Hot

BILLY LEE RILEY

Billy 'The Kid' Emerson first released this as a blues number cut at Sun Studios in the May of 1955, before being vamped up with guitarist Roland Janes and drummer J. M. Van Eaton, in the same room as Billy Riley And His Little Green Men. It didn't chart, but is now a rockabilly classic.

42

Sweet Nothin's

BRENDA LEE

Little Brenda Lee earned her explosive nickname Little Miss Dynamite, taken from her 1957 single *Dynamite*. Still a teenager when this record came out on Decca in 1959, and armed with one of the year's finest and most powerful voices, Brenda rocketed straight into the Top Five.

41

All Shook Up

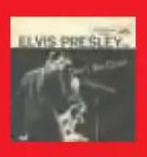
ELVIS PRESLEY

One of several hits written by Otis Blackwell for the Hillbilly Cat, *All Shook Up* was born of a challenge to write a song based on a shaken bottle of Pepsi, although Elvis once said it was inspired by waking up from a dream "all shook up". It was Presley's second US No.1 and his first UK chart-topper.

10 OF THE BEST...

BY MARCEL RIESCO
Singer

ROCK AROUND THE CLOCK
BILL HALEY & HIS COMETS


DON'T BE CRUEL
ELVIS PRESLEY

BLUE SUEDE SHOES
CARL PERKINS

GREAT BALLS OF FIRE
JERRY LEE LEWIS

OOBY DOOBY
ROY ORBISON

BE-BOP-A-LULA
GENE VINCENT

AIN'T THAT A SHAME
FATS DOMINO

SUMMERTIME BLUES
EDDIE COCHRAN

THAT'LL BE THE DAY
BUDDY HOLLY

TUTTI FRUTTI
LITTLE RICHARD

40
Honey Hush
THE JOHNNY BURNETTE TRIO
A highlight of the Rock'n'Roll Trio's incendiary 1956 debut album, this memorable take on Big Joe Turner's million-selling R&B No.1 was explosively recast via Paul Burlison's primal fuzz guitar with Johnny delivering his signature vocals in pure maverick rockabilly style.

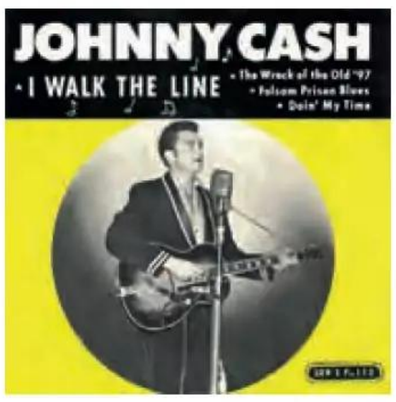
39
Jim Dandy
LAVERN BAKER
One of the artists that played a big part in shaping rock'n'roll, Windy City powerhouse LaVern Baker's 1956 single *Jim Dandy* was, as with several of her sides, augmented by the honking sax blasts of Sam 'The Man' Taylor and Atlantic's in-house harmonic vocal outfit, The Cues.

38
Runaround Sue
DION
Dion DiMucci's rock-pop calling card was inspired by then recent hit *Quarter To Three* by Gary U.S. Bonds. Written by Dion with record exec Ernie Maresca, it was recorded in summer 1961 at Bell Sound Studios in New York City after the star had split with the Belmonts to brave it alone.

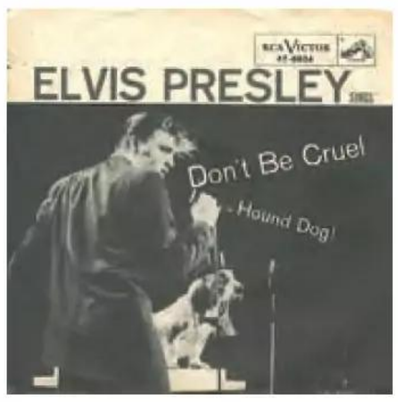
37
Wake Up Little Susie
THE EVERLY BROTHERS
The Everlys embedded their sibling harmonies into rock'n'roll and took it deep into the mainstream. Yet, at its heart, Felice and Boudleaux Bryant's *Wake Up Little Susie* is actually very r'n'r, telling the tale of two straying adolescents who've landed in deep water with their parents.

36
La Bamba
RITCHIE VALENS
While his end was a tragic one, Ritchie Valens made some astoundingly good music for a kid in his teens and what's more he was assisted in his travails by some of the finest stock of musicians: the likes of Carol Kaye, Earl Palmer and Rene Hall amongst them. This is, of course, a Chicano rock'n'roll perennial.

35
Long Tall Sally
LITTLE RICHARD
Fiery fun from the get-go, Little Richard wrote *Long Tall Sally* with producer 'Bumps' Blackwell and Enotris Johnson, making R&B No.1 in 1956. With Pat Boone having scored a Pop hit with *Tutti Frutti*, Richard apparently wrote this to be so fast that his glory couldn't be stolen twice.



34
I Walk The Line
JOHNNY CASH
Begun in Germany while in the Air Force and intended as a slow ballad, *I Walk The Line* was raised in tempo and given a rockabilly flavour by Sam Phillips. That familiar click-clack rhythm drives Cash's most famed tune and coupled with his inimitable baritone, created a superstar.



33
Don't Be Cruel
ELVIS PRESLEY
Elvis took Otis Blackwell's *Don't Be Cruel* by the scruff of the neck in Summer 1956. He enriched it with lip-curled charisma, ably backed up by his usual band, plus Shorty Long on piano and the Jordanaires in vocal support. It made No.1 on all three Billboard charts.

32
Fujiyama Mama
WANDA JACKSON
First cut by R&B singer Annisteen Allen in 1955, the Queen Of Rock'n'Roll recast *Great Balls Of Fire* co-scribe Jack Hammer's clumsy adoption of the nuclear attacks on Nagasaki and Hiroshima to illustrate female empowerment, and bizarrely took it to No.1 in Japan. A stone-cold belter.

10 OF THE BEST...

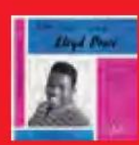
BY STEVE O'BRIEN
Editor

CHANTILLY LACE
THE BIG BOPPER

AIN'T THAT A SHAME
FATS DOMINO

SUMMERTIME BLUES
EDDIE COCHRAN

EARTH ANGEL
THE PENGUINS



LAWDY MISS CLAWDY
LLOYD PRICE

SH-BOOM
THE CHORDS

HOUND DOG
ELVIS PRESLEY

SCHOOL DAYS
CHUCK BERRY

YAKETY YAK
THE COASTERS

BE-BOP-A-LULA
GENE VINCENT

31

Heartbreak Hotel
ELVIS PRESLEY

The Hillbilly Cat's first No.1 came from musician Tommy Durden and PR Mae Boren Axton, inspired by the final words of a suicidal man found in a newspaper article. "You need a million-seller and I'm going to write it for you," Axton told Col. Tom Parker. And that's exactly what she did.

28

Blueberry Hill
FATS DOMINO

While this first appeared in 1936 movie *The Singing Cowboy* and was later covered by Glenn Miller, it was Fats' 1956 cover that is the pick of the lot, its laid-back rolling piano and souped-up tempo leading to a slot of *The Ed Sullivan Show* and, selling a million 45s the day after, a US No.2.

25

Oh, Boy!
BUDDY HOLLY

This 1957 Brunswick single featured on *The "Chirping" Crickets* LP and took Buddy into both the US and UK Top 10s. Emerging from a Sonny West demo, recorded with Norman Petty, West decided to offer the track to Buddy rather than release it himself. The Picks sing backing vocals here.

30

Stagger Lee
LLOYD PRICE

This track can be traced back to the American folk tradition and Fred Waring's Pennsylvanians' *Stack O' Lee Blues* telling the story of the murder of a St. Louis pimp. Many memorable versions had been recorded by the time Lloyd Price got his pipes around it and took it to the top in the States.

27

Shakin' All Over
JOHNNY KIDD AND THE PIRATES

Written by eye-patched frontman Johnny Kidd, this rockin' confection is famed as much for its tremulous vocal hook as for Joe Moretti's unforgettable guitar lick. A UK No.1, the song was inspired, said Kidd, by seeing "a girl who was a real sizzler" who gave them "quivers down the membranes".

24

Summertime Blues
EDDIE COCHRAN

Recorded on 28 March 1958 *Summertime Blues* was the perfect soundtrack to teenage rebellion. With his boss getting in the way of time with his girl in the sun, Cochran's protagonist was fuelled for a fight. The track made the Billboard Top 10 in the summer of 1958.

29

Move It On Over
HANK WILLIAMS

Another candidate for 'first rock'n'roll song' and, without doubt, one of the most influential. The Hillbilly Shakespeare's first big hit was recorded in 1947 in Nashville. Hank's MGM debut, written of his time in the doghouse, blended western swing and blues to classic effect.

26

Baby Let's Play House
ELVIS PRESLEY

Written by Excello bluesman Arthur Gunter in 1954, this became one of Elvis, Scotty and Bill's early Sun 45s just one year later. Presley and co switched up the structure and vamped up the lyrics and, with mention of his Pink Cadillac adding a touch of cool to titillate his fans.

23

Bo Diddley
BO DIDDLEY

Bo Diddley's self-titled theme tune showcased his much-aped, hambone-inspired 'Bo Diddley' beat to the mainstream, who lapped up its vibesome juba rhythm. A Billboard R&B No.1 hit, it, it was a clear inspiration to the likes of Buddy Holly and, later, The Rolling Stones.

22

Mystery Train
ELVIS PRESLEY

Originally cut at Sun Studio in 1953 as a blues shuffle by Herman 'Junior' Parker, Elvis Presley and the boys deftly recast this eerie 12-bar in the rockabilly mould, firing up a locomotive rhythm with an echo-heavy vocal leading the charge. *Mystery Train* placed Elvis in the country charts for the first time.

21

Roll Over Beethoven
CHUCK BERRY

Another of Chuck's definitive rockin' masterpieces arrived on Chess in 1956, written in response to his sister playing classical music in the Berry household. It was out with the old and in with the new, as Berry sings of his "jumping little record I want my jockey to play". A US R&B No.2.

20

Be-Bop-A-Lula
GENE VINCENT

Inspired by the Little Lulu comic strip and written while in a US Navy hospital, this was unleashed in summer 1956, Capitol Records main man squaring up to Elvis with one of r'n'r's most infections bops. *Be-Bop-A-Lula* blazed a trail to the Billboard Top 10 in 1956.

19

Hound Dog
ELVIS PRESLEY

A fiery 12-bar blues initially written specifically for Big Mama Thornton, *Hound Dog* first landed in the Billboard R&B chart in 1953. The King cut his own version in 1956 having heard it performed in Vegas by Freddy Bell And The Bellboys, crafting a rock'n'roll classic.

18

Reet Petite
JACKIE WILSON

Jackie Wilson's monstrous, brass-driven party anthem set his career off to a blistering start. Penned by Berry Gordy – later to found Motown – with his sister Gwen and friend Roquel 'Billy' Davis, the title was nabbed from Louis Jordan's 1947 number *Reet, Petite And Gone*.

17

Lucille
LITTLE RICHARD

A Billboard R&B No.1 and just missing the Top 20 in the Pop listings, *Lucille* has since gone on to classic status. The song was written by Albert Collins (not the blues guitarist) and laid down by a killer band that included Lee Allen and Alvin 'Red' Tyler on sax, and Earl Palmer on drums.

16

That's All Right
ELVIS PRESLEY

The 45 that started it all. Goofing around in between takes, Elvis ran through Arthur Crudup's driving blues and Sam Phillips sensed a hit. "To be honest, we just stumbled on it," Elvis told Frank Page at the Louisiana Hayride. DJ Dewey Phillips was first to spin it and the switchboards lit up.

15

Whole Lot Of Shakin' Going On
JERRY LEE LEWIS

Jerry Lee gets the plaudits for his 1957 version, but Big Maybelle's original version also packs a powerful punchl. Recorded at Lewis' second Sun Session, *Whole Lot Of Shakin' Going On* was ramped up via a thunderous boogie piano. A Billboard No.3.

14

Peggy Sue
BUDDY HOLLY

Although intended for Buddy's niece Cindy Lou, the lyrics were altered when Crickets' drummer Jerry Alisson's was dumped by his girlfriend, Peggy Sue Garron. *Peggy Sue* stormed the Top 10 in the US and UK in 1957, and in 1958 Jerry's romance was rekindled and the two married.

13

Ain't That A Shame
FATS DOMINO

Rightfully declared by Elvis himself as the real King Of Rock'n'Roll, Fats Domino ruled New Orleans during his mighty tenure behind the 88s. This classic moment in the Fat Man's catalogue was released by Imperial in 1955, reaching R&B No.1 and going on to shift a million copies.

12

Maybelline
CHUCK BERRY

Chuck recast Bob Wills' western swing mainstay *Ida Red* with a hot rod race at its centre. Blues icon Muddy Waters had first persuaded Berry to take the track to Chess Records and, named by Berry's pianist Johnny Johnson who'd seen a discarded make-up packet on the floor.

11

Good Golly Miss Molly
LITTLE RICHARD

Cut for Specialty Records in October 1956, Little Richard's rockin' behemoth was helmed by Robert 'Bumps' Blackwell. The phrase itself had been borrowed from Southern DJ Jimmy Pennick and with Ike Turner's *Rocket '88'* as its musical inspiration, a rock'n'roll masterwork was born.

10
Strange Things Happening Every Day
SISTER ROSETTA THARPE

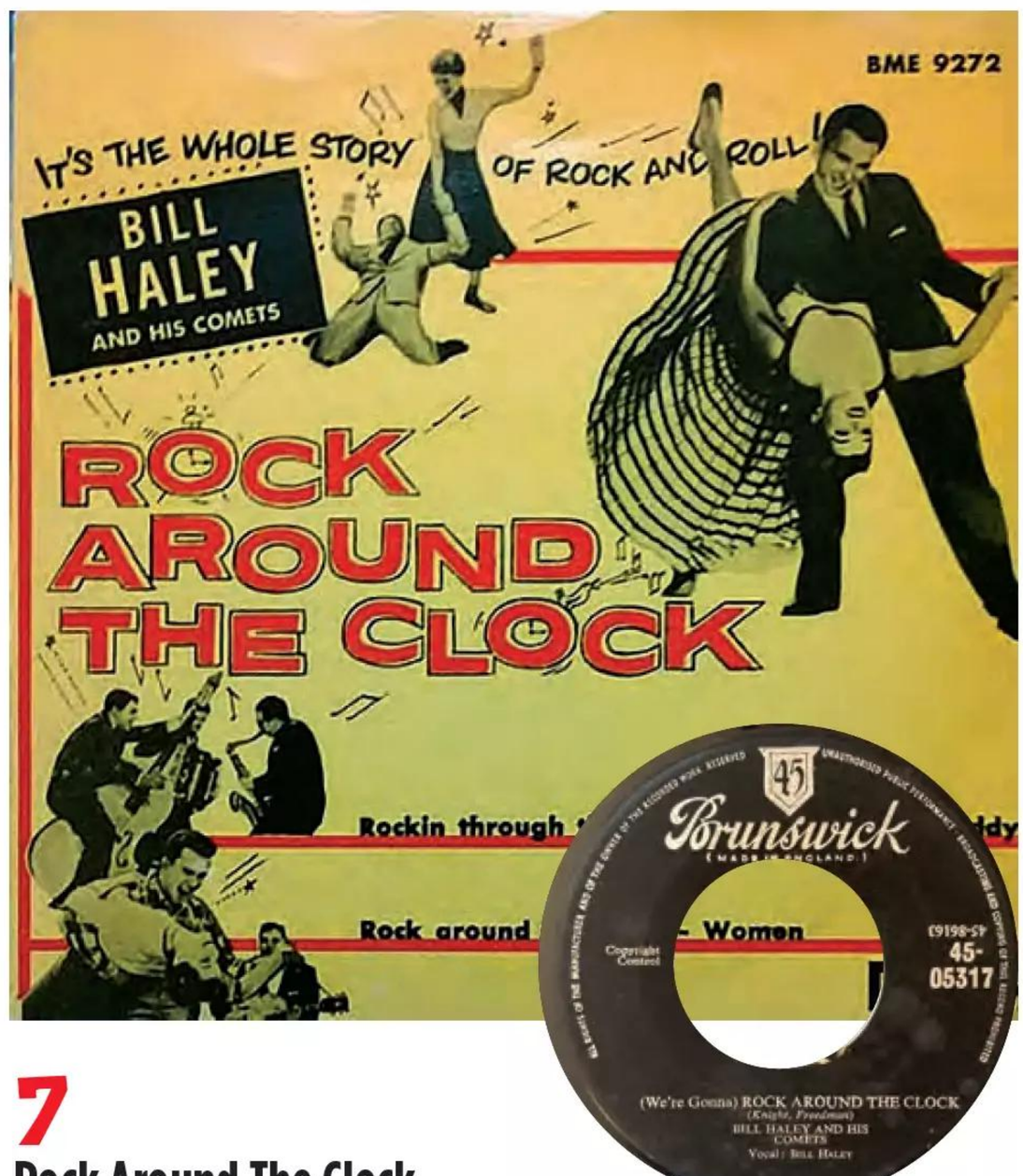
Widely considered as one of rock'n'roll's first entries, this 1944 waxing showcases Rosetta Tharpe's mighty pipes amid fluttering boogie-woogie-styled piano, shuffling rhythm, call-and-response vocals and Tharpe's inimitable guitar-picking. Championed by DJ Dewey Phillips, and armed with her Gibson guitar, Tharpe gave most players a good run for their money, and while her material encapsulates folk, R&B and gospel, it holds all of the raw materials for rock'n'roll.

9
Somethin' Else
EDDIE COCHRAN

Written by Cochran's older brother Bob together with girlfriend Sharon Sheeley, *Somethin' Else* cut at Hollywood's Gold Star studios in Summer 1959 with Eddie providing both guitar and bass and sessioner Earl Palmer behind the kit. While it missed the Top 40 in his homeland, it managed UK No.22. The Sex Pistols' cartoonish punk recasting, released after Sid Vicious' death, gave them a fifth consecutive Top 10 in 1979.

8
The Train Kept A Rollin'
THE JOHNNY BURNETTE TRIO

Originally based on *Cow-Cow Boogie* from 1942, this began life as a shuffling jump blues in 1951 from R&B pioneer Tiny Bradshaw before the Burnette Trio recast it with fuzz guitar – achieved when Paul Burlison loosened his amp tubes – and with a rockabilly arrangement. Cut at Owen Bradley's studios, Dorsey Burnette pounds his bass, Burlison cranks the guitars and Johnny hiccups and hollers like no one's business.

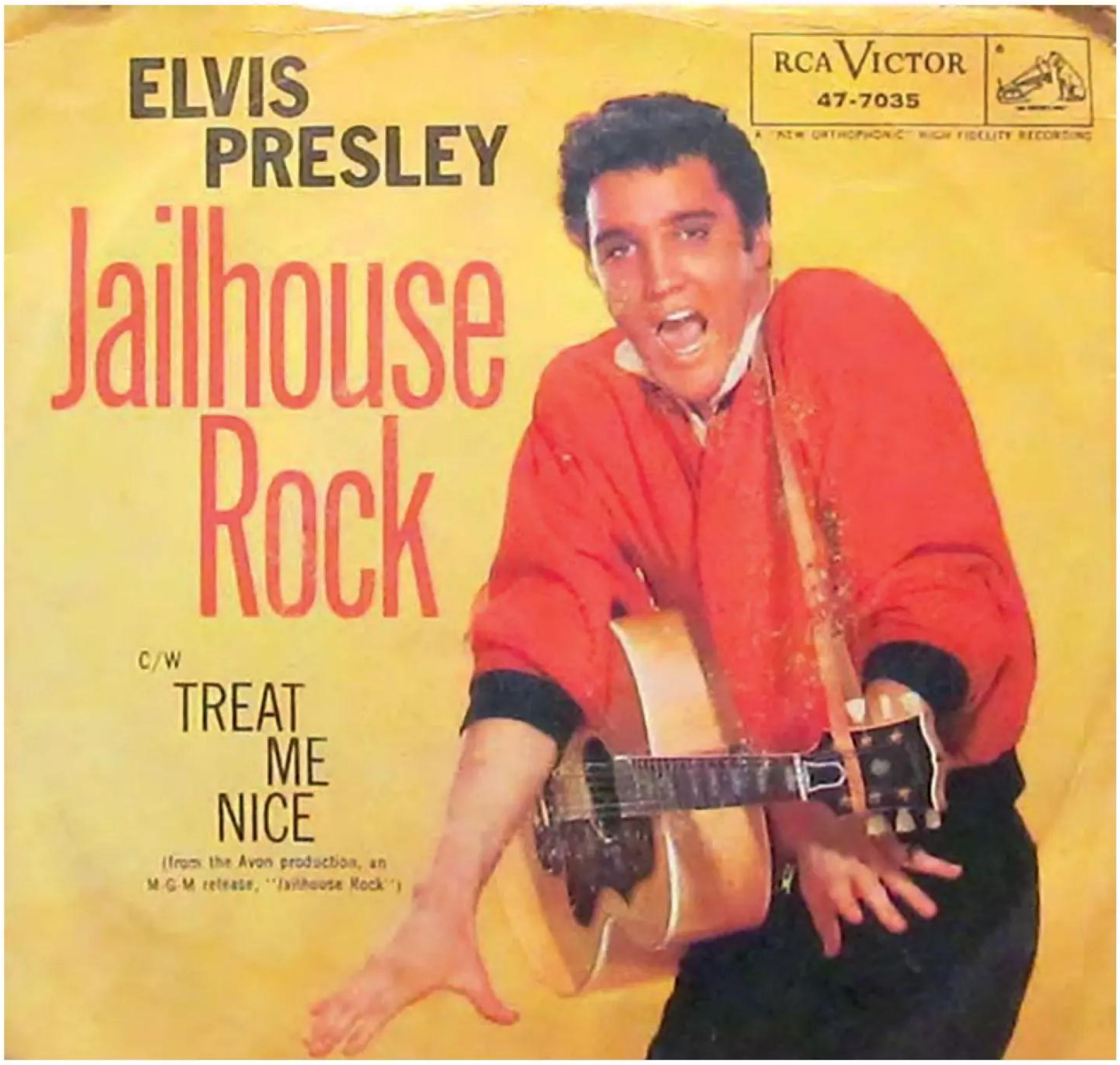


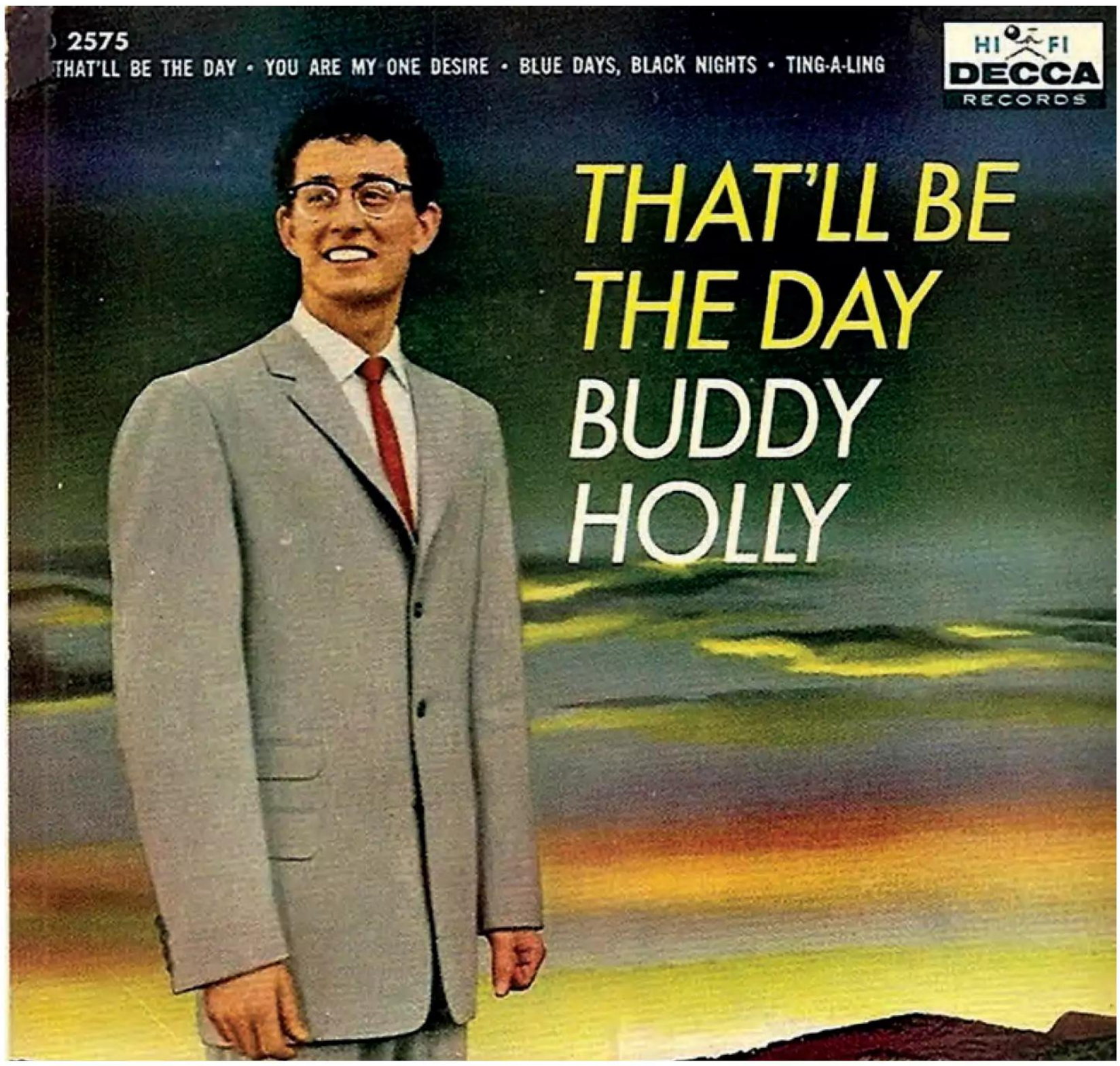
7
Rock Around The Clock
BILL HALEY AND HIS COMETS

One of the most renowned rock'n'rollers thanks to its inclusion in 1955's revelatory Blackboard Jungle movie, this really set the movement in motion. Owing a fair debt to Hank William's hit *Move It On Over*, it was first cut by Sonny Dae And His Knights in 1954, but it was Haley and co's rendition that topped the pile in the US and UK, the first r'n'r track to do so.

6
Jailhouse Rock
ELVIS PRESLEY

While landing at No.6 in our listing, Elvis' classic 1957 hit *Jailhouse Rock* is possibly the most iconic entry here thanks in part to the prison scene that it soundtracked from the movie of the same name, Elvis' third big-screen appearance. Written by the King's most trusted songsmiths Mike Lieber & Jerry Stoller, the first single from the soundtrack EP blended several real-life characters in its lyrics – L.A. musician Shifty Henry and criminal gang The Purple Mob – with tongue-in-cheek homo-erotica ("Number 47 said to number three/ You're the cutest jailbird I ever did see") but thanks to Elvis' rockin' swagger it was delivered without a hint of the humour its writers intended. Featuring Elvis usual band together Dudley Brooks on piano, the song scored No.1 in both the US and UK.





5
That'll Be The Day
BUDDY HOLLY

Written in just 30 minutes, inspired by John Wayne's line from Western *The Searchers* and taking inspiration from New Orleans bluesman Lonnie Johnson, *That'll Be The Day* was first laid down at Owen Bradley's Barn in Summer 1956 with the Two Tones – Sonny Curtis (guitar) and Don Guess (bass). After 19 fruitless takes Bradley declared it "the worst song [he'd] ever heard". It wasn't until it was revisited with Norman Petty one year later that it really fired. With its pitch lowered and showcasing the 'Texas Shuffle' rhythm, it was released via Brunswick as The Crickets (to avoid contractual issues with old label Decca). What for Billboard was nothing more than "medium rockabilly", it would go on to be the band's best-selling single and entered into the National Recording Registry in 2005.

4
Blue Suede Shoes
CARL PERKINS

It doesn't get more iconic than Carl Perkins signature hit, *Blue Suede Shoes*. Johnny Cash told that it was he who inspired the infamous theme, recounting the story of an airman who called his regulation boots his 'blue suede shoes'. Perkins also remembered hearing a guy at a dance telling his girl not to "step on (his) suedes!" One of the rockabilly's first defining records, Perkins recorded it in December 1955 and it was released in early 1956. DJ Bill Randle had soon picked up on it and Perkins was airing it on the Big D Jamboree and via his TV debut on ABC-TV's *Ozark Jubilee*. It was then that a car accident scuppered any further promotion of the single. Still, Billboard No.2 ain't bad, the first of Sun's roster to sell a million.

3
Great Balls Of Fire
JERRY LEE LEWIS

Often described as rock'n'roll's first great wild man, although he certainly trod the footsteps of many mavericks before him – Jerry Lee Lewis treated the 88s like few others, pounding the ivories with insubordinate vigour like his life genuinely depended on it. And nowhere was this more in evidence than within the barely tethered boogie-woogie bars of his signature Sun 45, the lustful barrage that is *Great Balls Of Fire*. Torn between his God-fearing upbringing and the onset of rock'n'roll, Jerry Lee's convictions wavered while in the studio and he entered into a philosophical discussion with Sun boss Sam Phillips about the ways of the Devil. Lucky for devotees to the Big Beat Jerry relented and let loose with one of the most elemental 45s of the whole lineage.

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2
Tutti Frutti
LITTLE RICHARD

Self-proclaimed as the Architect of Rock'n'Roll, a vast proportion of Little Richard's catalogue could easily make this list. Yet, few defined the rock'n'roll era as much as *Tutti Frutti*, Richard's racy ode to libidinous ways while out on the road. It's two and a half minutes that bristles with a thousand volts of electricity, bursting with the jubilant, restless energy that defines the greats of the genre. Without him there'd be no The Beatles, no James Brown, no Jagger, no Bowie, no Prince and, well, it's a list could run and run. Throwing shade on his peers – Elvis included – with his unhinged exuberance, fiery flamboyance and white-hot sexual charge, Richard was a one-man spectacular, the likes of which has never been witnessed since. The innovator, the originator, Little Richard was one in a million.

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1

Johnny B. Goode

CHUCK BERRY

Released on Chess Records in April 1958, this may be an obvious pick for the Top 100 crown but, nevertheless, it's the rock'n'roll tune that's likely best known by the world at large and one that will likely represent the genre for the rest of time. Produced by Leonard and Phil Chess, Chuck told *Rolling Stone* in 1972 that the track was "more or less" autobiographical, with Berry changing its protagonist from "coloured boy" to "country boy" in order to get it out on the airwaves, and altering the geographical locations from his own story.

Berry also took inspiration from his piano player Johnnie Johnson as well as lifting the opening guitar lick from Louis Jordan's jump blues *Ain't That Just Like A Woman*. With the swing elements removed and straightened up, that infamous hook was complete. Its lead character Johnny makes the Dick Whittington-esque journey to the bright lights of the big smoke to find his fortune with just his guitar on his back and Berry would of course play out his dreams soon after signing with Chess. This solid gold waxing made the Top 10 of the Billboard pop chart, and landed at No.2 on the R&B chart – plus, it was later included on the Voyager Golden Records launched into space for aliens to enjoy. "It is still the greatest rock and roll song about the democracy of fame in pop music," writes *Rolling Stone* magazine, and it's certainly a strong candidate for greatest rock'n'roll song of all time.

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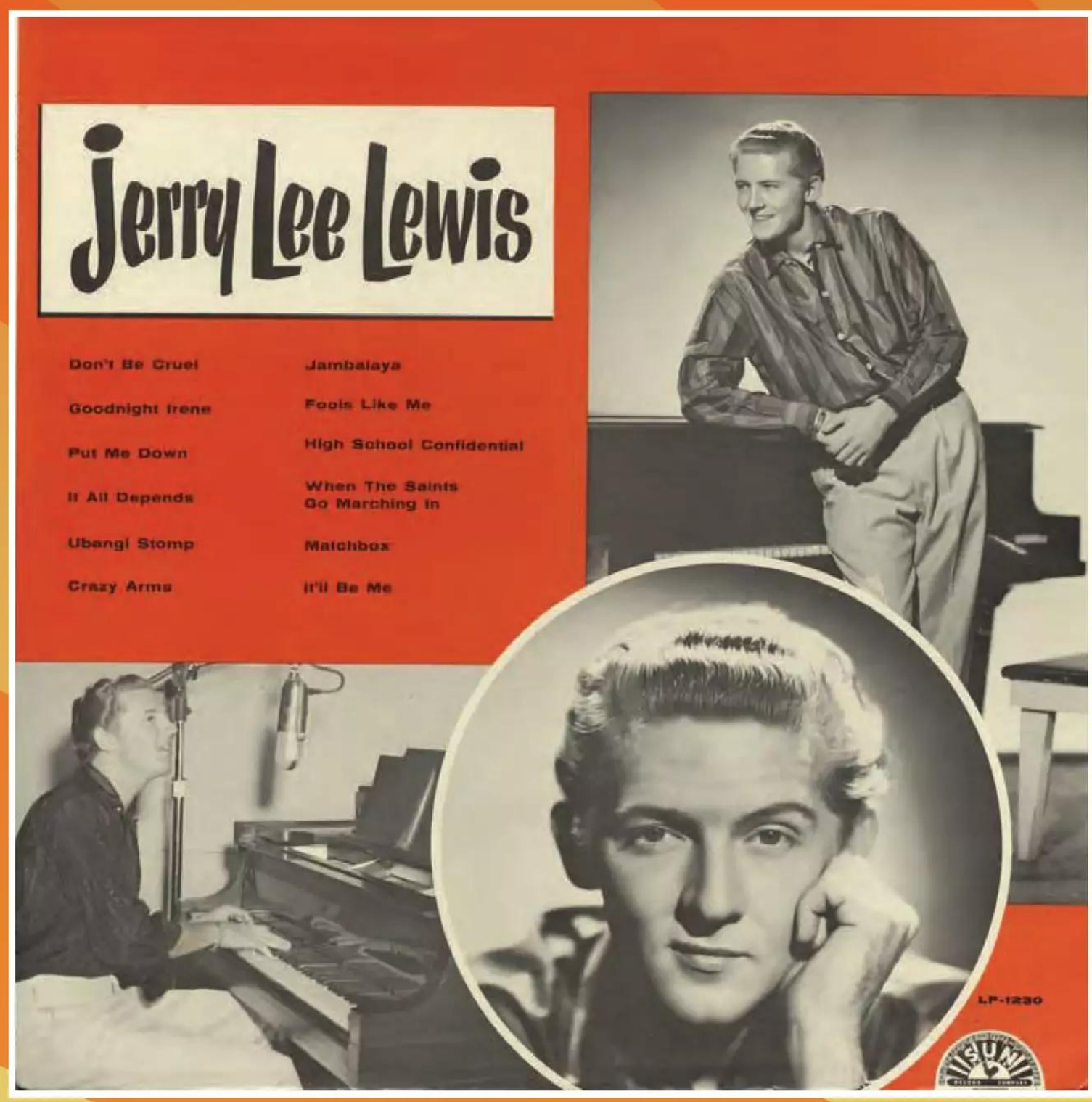


Classic album

WORDS BY JACK WATKINS

JERRY LEE LEWIS

JERRY LEE LEWIS

Hulton Archive/Getty

In the LP sleeve notes, Sam Phillips described Jerry Lee as a "fabulous showman' and "the very epitome" of rock'n'roll

It may have missed out the big hits, but Jerry Lee's long-playing debut showed his extreme versatility, from rockers to ballads... and even a traditional gospel number. *Vintage Rock* listens back to a Sun classic

Sam Phillips didn't set much store by long-playing records. His policy at Sun was geared to producing singles, which were cheaper to make, and offered the prospect of quicker returns and a more regular cash flow for his tightly budgeted operation. And it's fair to say that Jerry Lee Lewis, one of the most instinctive and uncalculating performing artists in popular music history, never gave the matter much thought either.

It's no surprise, then, that Jerry Lee's eponymously named debut album, released in 1958, has sometimes been disparaged as a slackly assembled hotchpotch. Criminally, in some eyes, it even omitted to include the Killer's two monster hits of the previous year, *Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On* and *Great Balls Of Fire*, the singles which had marked his commercial breakthrough, and which revealed him as the most likely of the Sun rockers to fill the label's charisma vacuum left by Elvis Presley's departure for RCA.

But while the absence of these songs was definitely an own goal by Phillips, speaking volumes about his disregard for the LP market, the passage of time lends a more favourable perspective. Not only is *Jerry Lee Lewis* now highly collectible, but it also provides an early hint of the deep well of influences and material from which the Ferriday Fireball would draw upon, not only during his Sun years, but across his entire career.

As well as that, the timing of its release now seems highly poignant. You could even imagine the Killer looking at his boyish face on the sleeve now and reflecting back on those times with a tinge of sadness, a sense of what might have been – because when it arrived in the record racks in the spring of 1958, he was riding the crest of the wave, his records charting in Europe, and just about to depart on his first international tour.

But, within a month, the British press would slay him for his marriage to his 13 year-old cousin Myra, and the tour would be aborted after just three shows. The negative headlines followed him all the way back across the Atlantic, and pretty soon his stateside career would be in bitter decline, too. Jerry Lee never faded into oblivion, but it would take years for him to repair his standing after such concerted character assassination, and he never truly recovered from the experience.

IF THERE'S ONE major criticism that can be levelled at the album, the tracks for which were drawn from a series of Union Avenue studio sessions from late 1956 to the spring of 1958, it is that many of the offerings are of songs more readily associated with other artists. But in Jerry Lee's case, this matters less than with most singers, since no performer was less interested in making stale, faithful remakes. Throughout his career, he has shown a remarkable capacity to take old songs and make them utterly his own so that, even when the original is as essential as, say, Little Richard's *Good Golly Miss Molly*, or Hank Williams's *Cold, Cold Heart*, they are transformed into something bearing Jerry Lee's unmistakable signature.

And while the disc wasn't exactly wall-to-wall with barn burners, the track list did include one of his greatest rockers, *High School Confidential*, which also turned out to be his last major hit single. The number was written by Ron Hargrave, and was the title song from a movie starring the pneumatic blonde Mamie Van Doren, directed by mid-'50s pulp sci-fi maestro Jack Arnold (*It Came From Outer Space, Creature From The Black Lagoon, The Incredible Shrinking Man*). The film would have been unmemorable were it not for the appearance of Jerry Lee, backed by the pair who formed his road band, his bass-playing uncle JW Brown and drummer Russ Smith, belting out the aforesaid song on the back of a flatbed truck.

With its 50s teen references to high school hops and boppin' shoes, on the face of it you might think this was one of Jerry Lee's more dated rock'n'roll confections. Not a bit of it. His opening declamation: "Open up a-honey, it's your lover boy me that's knockin," followed by three hammer blows at the piano – simultaneously echoed by Sun session man JM Van Eaton's drums – is one of the great moments in the Ferriday Fireball's recording career, and there are quite a few of those to choose from. It's quintessential Killer in his swaggering pomp, the boyfriend every parent dreaded rolling up to their front door to sweep away their daughter. What follows is delirious, barely controlled mayhem, with Roland Janes' electric guitar ringing like a delinquent school bell and tussling for attention with Jerry Lee's stabbing chords.

Janes and Van Eaton would accompany Jerry Lee on a large proportion of his Sun recordings, the chemistry between the trio seemingly being instantaneous, and they were present at his very first session on November 1956. This date yielded *Crazy Arms*; hearing just a few bars of this song had convinced Phillips to sign the confident young man from Louisiana who'd walked into the studio boasting that he could play his piano the way Chet Atkins played the guitar. The track is on the album, and you can only marvel at the assured way he seized the honky tonk hit – already one of country music's classic shuffles, as sung by the great stylist Ray Price – and made it his own, breaking up the lines, and stretching syllables for maximum soulful effect. It was also his first Sun single, credited to "Jerry Lee Lewis with his Pumping Piano".

The artist backstage in 1958, warming up on an upright piano

IT WOULD BE a country song, *Another Place, Another Time*, recorded for Mercury in 1968, that would spark Jerry Lee's late 60s revival, but this wasn't a piece of career opportunism shaped to exploit the growing popularity of the genre towards the end of that decade. Country ballads had been part of his repertoire before he even walked through the doors at Sun, and there's no better example on Jerry Lee Lewis than *Fools Like Me*, executed with impeccable gravity, and so good it had been the flipside of the *High School Confidential* 45rpm. Roy Orbison was one of the backing vocalists.

It All Depends – fully entitled *It All Depends (On Who Will Buy The Wine)*, but abbreviated on this LP's sleeve and centre label – was another sombre ballad whose concerns were about as far removed from rock'n'roll's teenage kicks as it was possible to get. Jerry Lee's voice had not yet acquired a weathered air, yet he sang lines like "Not long ago you held our baby's bottle/But the one you're holding now's a different kind" with the conviction of a veteran. Listen, too, to the way his left hand on the piano anchors the song in the

IF THERE'S ONE UNDISCOVERED ROCKING CLASSIC ON THE JERRY LEE LEWIS ALBUM, IT'S SURELY THE LEAN-HIPPED PUT ME DOWN

Hulton Archive/Getty

manner of a bass player. Given that he covered so much of the music of Hank Williams in his time at Sun, it's no surprise that he kicks off side two of the album with one of his hero's songs. But whereas Hank Williams sounded like he was in a pit of dejection, it was the trick of "rock'n'roll's first wild man" to sound resilient, to discover chinks of hope in the lyrics of country music's finest manic-depressive. So *Jambalaya*, which was always one of Williams' more upbeat numbers anyway, was amped up and transformed into a good-natured semi-rocker.

OTHER HIGH QUALITY rockers on the album included lively takes on Otis Blackwell's *Don't Be Cruel*, the Warren Smith hit *Ubangi Stomp*, and *Matchbox*, whose origins lay in a composition by 1920s bluesman Blind Lemon Jefferson, but which had been reworked to devastating effect ➡

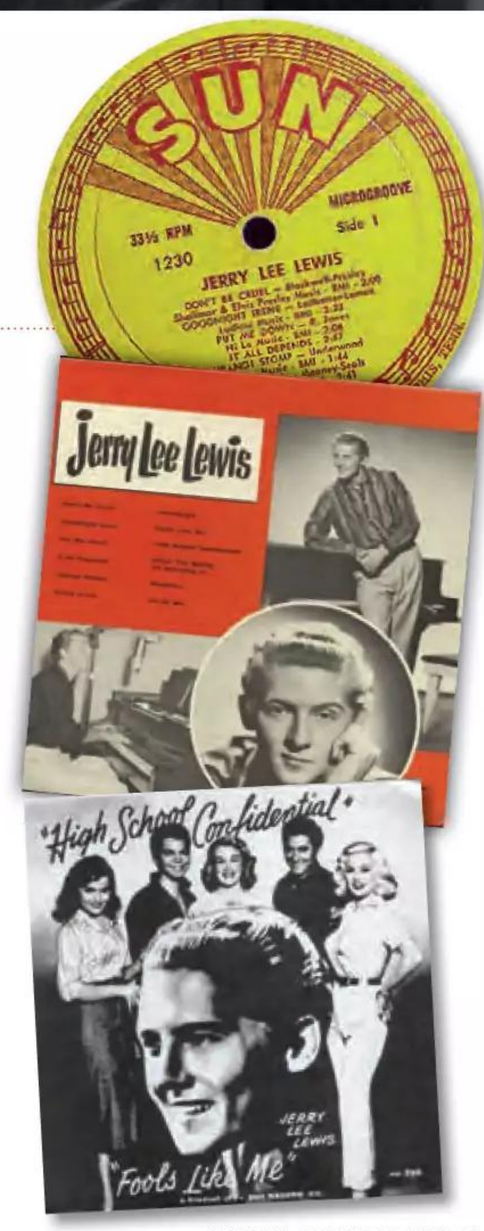
LISTEN UP!
JERRY LEE LEWIS (SUN LP-1230)

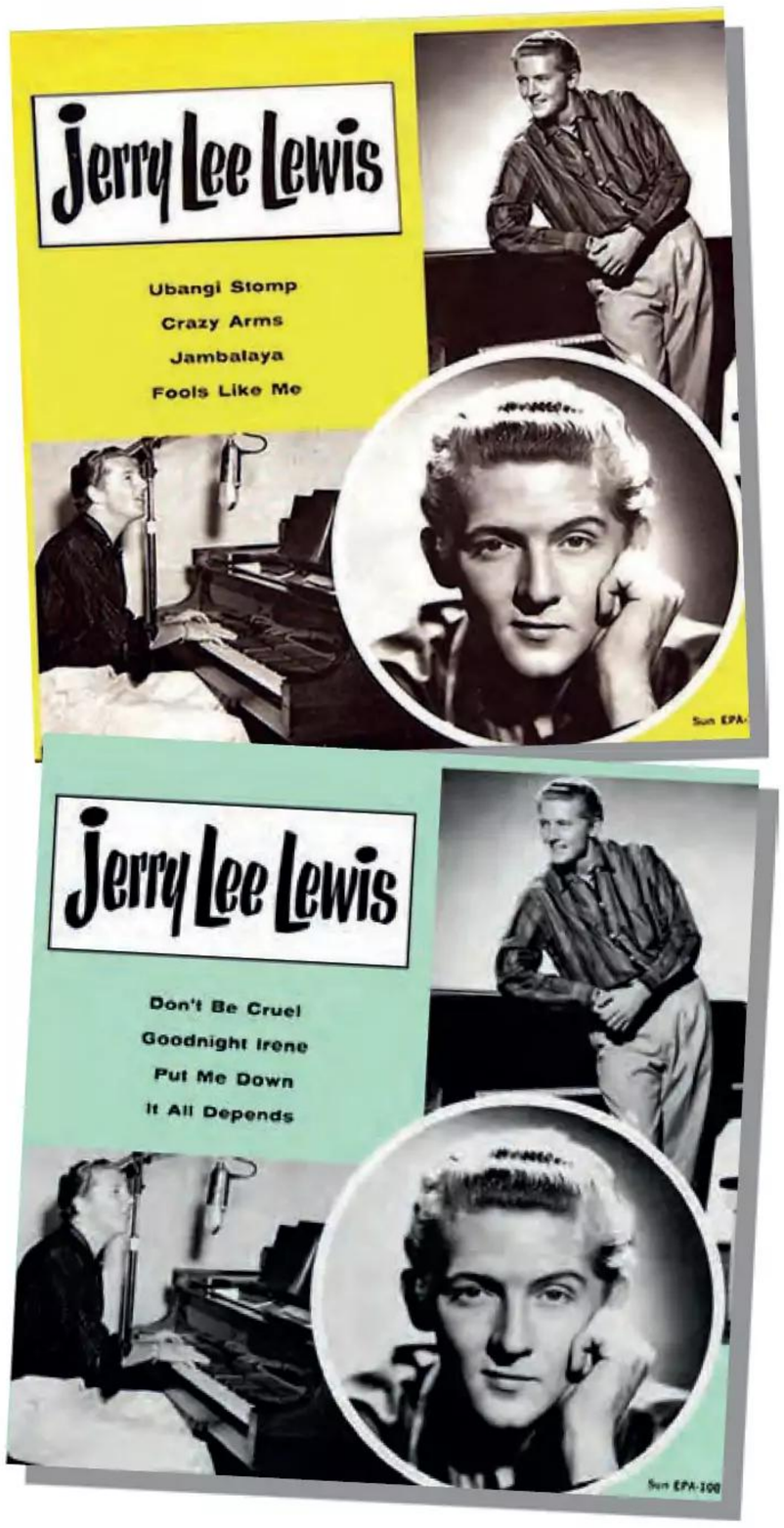
Side 1

Don't Be Cruel (Otis Blackwell)
Goodnight Irene (Huddie Ledbetter / John Lomax)
Put Me Down (Roland James)
It All Depends (Billy Mize)
Ubangi Stomp (Charles Underwood)
Crazy Arms (Ralph Mooney / Chuck Seals)

Side 2

Jambalaya (Hank Williams)
Fools Like Me (Jack Clement / Murphy Maddux)
High School Confidential (Ron Hargrave / Jerry Lee Lewis)
When The Saints Go Marching In (traditional)
Matchbox (Carl Perkins)
It'll Be Me (Jack Clement)





by Jerry Lee's labelmate Carl Perkins. But if there's one 'undiscovered' rocking classic on the album, it's surely *Put Me Down*, a lean-hipped shaker which showcases Jerry Lee's piano and the understated guitar of Roland Janes, who also wrote the song.

Proving that, even in his early twenties, Jerry Lee had an astonishing ability to absorb and then refashion songs from the past, the album also featured his take on Leadbelly's folk number *Goodnight Irene*, and the aged gospel standard *When The Saints Go Marching In*. But it's a measure of how what turned out to be music history was being made on the hop in the late '50s in that Sam Phillips reckoned the track *It'll Be Me* shaped up as the bigger potential hit when it was released on the opposite side of *Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On*.

At the recording session Jack Clement had certainly been far more interested in getting Jerry Lee to record former song, which Clement had wrote himself while sitting on the toilet, contemplating reincarnation. "That's a hit," he announced to the rising star, once he'd got his precious song in the can. "Now what do you want to do for the flip?"

It'll Be Me is certainly a good tune, with Jerry Lee's piano rumbling away beneath an amusing lyric, but fortunately Phillips eventually recognised the alternate side for the monster it was, putting his full weight behind it, and getting Jerry Lee a slot on *The Steve Allen Show*.

By the time *Jerry Lee Lewis* came out, the artist was a headliner on the point of a massive fall. In time, he'd recover and issue many far more skilfully conceived albums. But his opener for Sun doesn't just play like a great start to a long career. These days, it's a reminder of the moment when he really did appear to have been blessed with the Midas touch. ✶

THE OPENING DECLAMATION WITH THREE HAMMER BLOWS ON THE PIANO IS ONE OF THE GREAT MOMENTS IN HIS CAREER

1958 K && K Ulf Kruger OHG/Getty

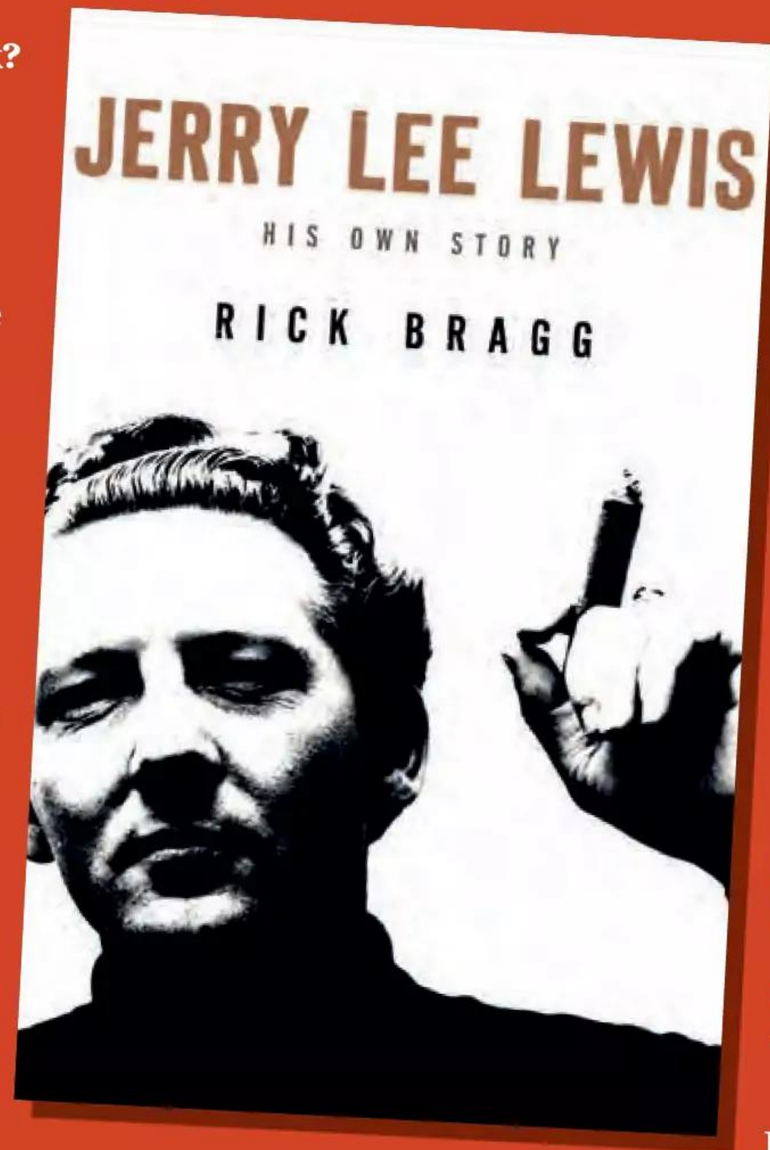
THE JERRY LEE LEWIS TRIO

SUN RECORDS' IN-HOUSE SPECIALISTS

The Ferriday Fireball's reputation as a one- or two-take maestro shatters when you examine the genesis of some of his finest Sun records. *High School Confidential*, for instance, sounds like spontaneous combustion, but it took several goes before the respective musical chops of Jerry Lee, drummer JM Van Eaton and guitarist Roland Janes felt sufficiently loosened... and the immortal *Great Balls Of Fire* took Jerry Lee two days to perfect. But the easily-bored Killer was blessed in his collaborators. JM Van Eaton's drumming was, in the words of Colin Escott, "the pulse of Sun Records". Guitarist Roland Janes avoided the limelight as much as Jerry Lee soaked it up, which was fine, since the latter largely reckoned on playing the guitar parts on his piano. But peruse Jerry Lee's Sun back catalogue and, with the exception of when Billy Riley took his place, Janes' guitar is invariably there, understated but delightful in tone.

RICK BRAGG ON JERRY LEE LEWIS

In 2014 the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Rick Bragg spoke to *Vintage Rock* about the music of Jerry Lee Lewis and the experience of spending several weeks at the Mississippi home of the Killer, hearing his words first hand and enabling him to publish, for the first time, "his own story"....



What prompted you to write this book?
I'd love to be able to say Jerry Lee and I bumped into each other in some bar in northern Mississippi, which would have been very picturesque, but the reality is I got a call from my agent in New York. I've often joked since that I should have run away and hid under the bed after I took that call, but my first thought was: "How could this be dull, how could this not be wilder than a drunken goat roping?"

Interviewing Jerry Lee has always been a daunting prospect. Did you feel you were walking a tightrope?
Well, I figured there was no point trying to live with Jerry Lee that way, because you're always going to make him mad sooner or later anyway. So we came to an understanding that we had to talk about the bad things, the violence, the scandals, the broken marriages and the tragedies. He knew I wasn't going to rewrite history.

Have the years mellowed him?
It wasn't the easiest interview I've ever done, but I never felt we were on a fault line, that he was going to shout: "Get out of my house!" He certainly allowed me some stumbles and faux pas that he wouldn't have allowed 20 years ago. I'd love to say that he threw something at me, or cussed me out, but Jerry Lee just doesn't do that anymore. But he did show me the revolver he keeps under his pillow, just so I knew it was there!

How did you first hear his music?
I was born the year after his "fall". I grew up with the big R&B and country hits, but my favourites were his blues covers, things like *Big Legged Woman*. I love the way he can take a Hank Williams song and make you feel you are in a honky tonk with blue cigarette smoke in the air, that the floor under your feet has had 1,000 years of beer spilled on it.

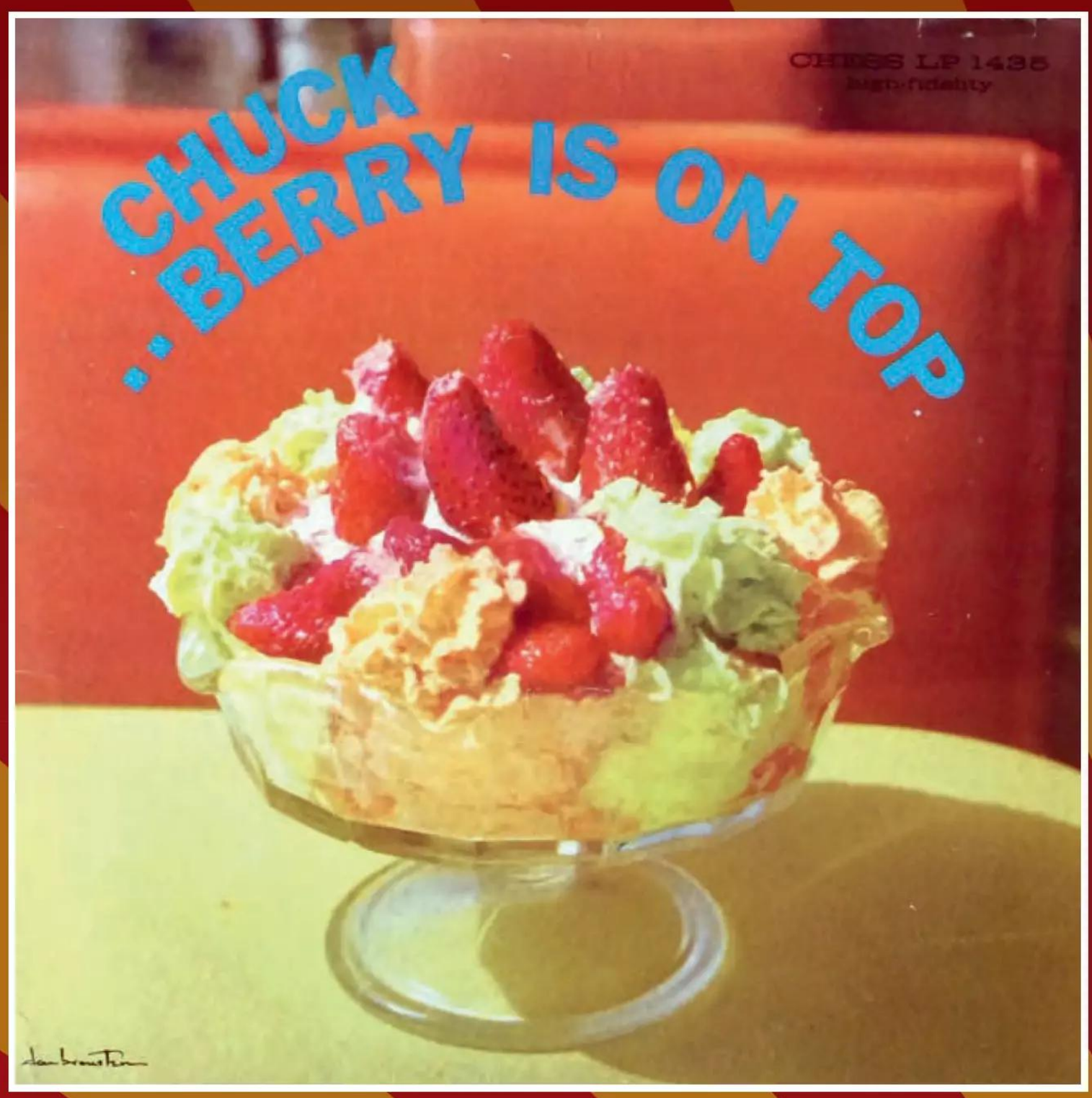
He still achieved that effect on his 2014 album, *Rock & Roll Time*...
I'm glad to hear you say that. I drive 300 miles a week and I listened to the CD in my car. When it got to *Mississippi Kid*, and he's singing: "Got my pistols in my pocket, Alabama bound," I thought to myself, what better beer joint song is there than that? *Folsom Prison Blues* startled me a bit. It's really hard to do, Johnny Cash's rendition is so stamped on everybody's brain. Only Jerry Lee would have the guts to do it, aged 79.

Did you sense that, in his late 70s, the urge to perform still ran deep?
He doesn't leap on the piano or kick the stool back anymore, but he still plays those beautiful melodies, and even though his back is in terrible shape and he has trouble with his legs – as he told me holding them straight in front of him – his hands are still perfect. And listen to the way he delivers those high-pitched near-yodels. That's not a man going through the motions, it's someone thinking about the inflections of his voice, it's proof that he still cares.

He talked a lot about his contemporaries?
Of course. He talked a lot about Elvis, with whom he had a very complicated relationship. He really loved the guy, though he felt that his striving to be a movie star took him away from rock'n'roll, and that is when he lost respect for Elvis's music. He spoke a lot about Carl Perkins on the road trip he made with him, along with Wanda Jackson, Johnny Cash, Sonny James and Marvin Rainwater, on their long Canada tour. He thought that Carl was the finest musician of all the people on that tour – with the exception, of course, of Jerry Lee Lewis. But if there is one guy who he has utmost respect for it is Kris Kristofferson. Jerry Lee is proud of the fact that he has never stuck to a lyric in his life, but the exception is with the work of Kristofferson. "You don't mess with a Kristofferson song," he told me.

Was he happy with the eventual outcome of your collaboration?
Yes. He read the manuscript with his [seventh] wife, Judith, and there was only one thing he asked me to change, and that was the spelling of the name of his cousin. I also know that he was pleased with the cover, because he looks so handsome on it.

***Jerry Lee Lewis: His Own Story*, by Rick Bragg, is published by Canongate Books**



Classic album

WORDS BY JACK WATKINS

CHUCK BERRY IS ON TOP

CHUCK BERRY

© Getty Images

The great Chuck Berry (1926–2017)

It contained both his first hit and arguably the most famous song in rock'n'roll, plus a host of other classics. *Vintage Rock* examines an album which plays like a mini-sampler of Chuck Berry's greatest hits...

There's a certain unplanned irony in the title of *Chuck Berry Is On Top*, album number three from the St Louis-raised rocker. Released in July 1959, it came just months before his career went into a sharp nosedive, with his arrest for alleged sexual offences and a subsequent jail sentence. It would take him nearly five years to climb back to anything close to his former heights.

In posterity's terms, though, the album lives up to its name, offering the listener a vastly superior collection of songs to its immediate predecessor *One Dozen Berrys*. And though its lesser known tracks are arguably not of the same quality as those on Berry's Chess debut album *After School Session*, it was more satisfying to fans of the big beat, with eight outright rockers. These included several of the songs on which he built his lasting reputation, namely *Maybellene, Roll Over Beethoven, Johnny B Goode, Carol* and *Little Queenie*.

Once again, the 12 tracks were assembled from a range of recording sessions for the Chess label spread across almost four years, and all the songs had been previously released either as singles A or B sides, with the exception of the closer, the instrumental *Blues For Hawaiians*. The song with

CHUCK BERRY IS ON TOP

CHUCK BERRY

1956 • CHESS

Side 1

Almost Grown
Carol
Maybellene
Sweet Little Rock & Roller
Anthony
Johnny B Goode

Side 2

Little Queenie
Jo Jo Gunne
Roll Over Beethoven
Around And Around
Hey Pedro
Blues For Hawaiians

Berry captured in a scene from the movie *Go, Johnny, Go!*, released in June 1959

© Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

the oldest vintage was *Maybellene*, which surely vies with *Johnny B Goode* and *Roll Over Beethoven* as the supreme expression of Berry's rock'n'roll. Arguably, it's the most distinctive, the finest realisation of the artist's avowed desire in his early days to fuse the closely related genres of black blues and white country music. "*Maybellene* was my effort to sing country-western, which I had always liked," Berry related in his un-ghosted autobiography, published in 1987.

When he'd started playing with pianist Johnnie Johnson's band the Sir John's Trio at the Cosmopolitan Club in St Louis in 1953, curiosity had led him to try out some country songs on the clientele, prompting the oft-quoted query: "Who's that black hillbilly at the Cosmo?" Among the numbers he'd sing were *Mountain Dew*, a traditional hillbilly favourite, *Jambalaya*, written by Hank Williams and Moon Mullican, and *Ida Red*. The latter provided inspiration for *Maybellene*.

The band most famously associated with the song was the western swing outfit Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, who recorded it in 1938, and then again in 1949, as *Ida Red Likes The Boogie*. But Cowboy Copas' recording may have been more influential on Berry's actual delivery, although one of Berry's biographers Bruce Pegg, has pointed out that Wills' 1949 recording could have contributed musically because "its guitar parts featured a double-stopped bend" which Berry would also have heard in the records of another of his early guitar-playing influences, the stylish Chicago bluesman T-Bone Walker.

Arriving at the Chess studio for his first session along with Johnnie Johnson, and drummer Ebby Hardy, it was label boss Leonard Chess who advised the song title change to avoid confusion – but who came up with the name *Maybellene*? Like so much about the Berry recording sessions, it's been the subject of conjecture. Possibly it was the name of a cow in a book Berry had read and loved as a child. Or was it

named after a brand of cosmetics which, as a former hairdresser, Berry would have been aware of and, ever the businessman, spotted as a possible marketing opportunity? Others say it was simply the suggestion of Chess' in-house bass player Willie Dixon, himself no stranger to writing memorable songs.

Apparently, it took 36 takes to come up with something satisfactory, a testimony to Berry and Johnson's studio inexperience, but also because nobody in the studio that day was quite sure what they were looking for. According to co-producer Phil Chess, the number was "like nothing we'd heard before. We figured if we could get that sound down on record we'd have a hit... the song had a new kind of feel about it."

If fatigue was setting in by take 36, it didn't show. The track burns with intensity, Chuck's playing is mean and rugged, Ebby Hardy thumps away on the skins, and Johnson's piano wafts across the back of the song as if the recording tape caught the sound of music floating through an open window from a bar across the street. Berry's licks are economical, propulsive and powerful, made more so by the coarse quality of the recording.

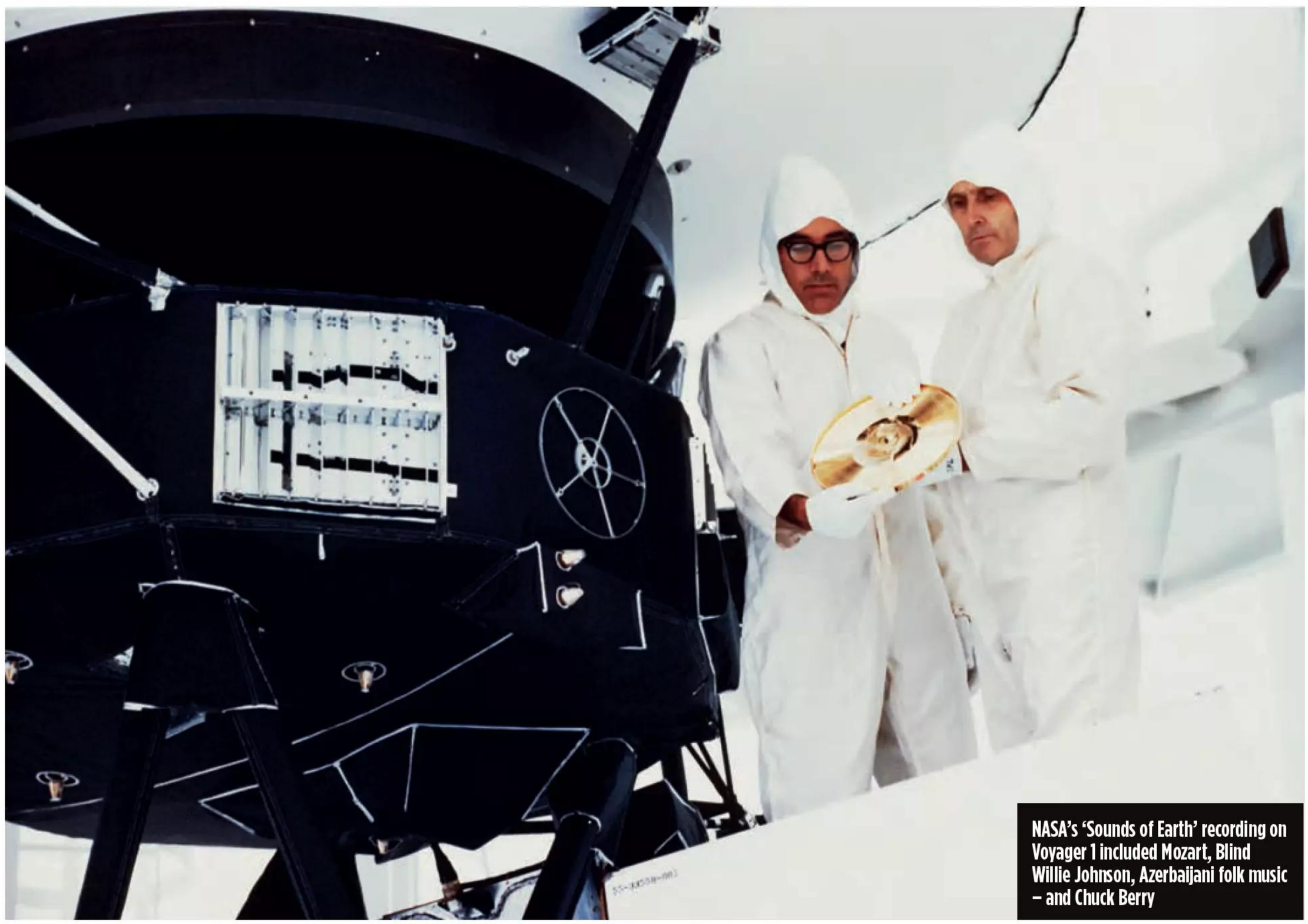
An instant hit, *Maybellene* shot to the top of the R&B charts in the summer of 1955, and crossed over onto the Billboard pop charts, reaching No.5. The song's charm is imperishable, owing to the shrewd melding of the curious country two-four rhythm and the roaring electric guitar, blazing away like a car horn, along with a quiverfull of unforgettable lines.

Roll Over Beethoven had been hit No.2 for Berry, marking his return to the pop charts nearly a year after *Maybellene*, after misses with *Thirty Days* and *No Money Down*, two strong songs which had nevertheless not been picked up by Berry's new teen audience. *Roll Over Beethoven* is marked by a killer opening guitar riff, and compellingly loose, almost ramshackle, rhythmic backing. Above all, it had a lyric to send shivers down the spine of Middle America. "Roll Over Beethoven and tell Tchaikovsky the news" must have seemed like a declaration of war by the nation's youth, not just on classical music, but on long held cultural values. "Rockin' pneumonia" sounds innocuous enough today, but in 1956, it sounded like a frighteningly contagious disease.

Yet the song was also rooted in the past, as was all Berry's music. Johnson was a pianist in the proud boogie woogie tradition, and *Roll Over Beethoven* rested on the back of it. Johnson's "choppin' bass left hand figure," as he described it, was endlessly adaptable to slow blues, or more uptempo material, and playing alongside him at the Cosmo Club, Berry, after stepping forward to deliver a solo, would then drop back to follow a similar rhythmic pattern on the guitar. Johnson's own *Johnnie's Boogie* was a big club favourite. All they did on *Roll Over Beethoven*, according to Johnson, was take the "choppin' bass left hand" from *Johnnie's Boogie* "and speed it up a little bit so it had more of a drive to it instead of that bounce."

When the NASA Voyager 1 left Earth in 1977 to travel into interstellar space, it was armed with copies of the American Constitution, the Declaration of Independence and, most crucially of all, a recording of Chuck Berry's *Johnny B Goode*. That says it all. They could have taken *Rock Around The Clock* or any number of Elvis ➡

ROLL OVER BEETHOVEN HAD A LYRIC TO SEND SHIVERS DOWN THE SPINE OF MIDDLE AMERICA



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NASA's 'Sounds of Earth' recording on Voyager 1 included Mozart, Blind Willie Johnson, Azerbaijani folk music – and Chuck Berry

MYSTERY MEN

The personnel on Chuck Berry's seminal Chess sessions has long been the subject of conjecture. Was it Jerome Green, Bo Diddley's lynchpin, who played maracas on *Maybellene*, for instance, or was it producer Leonard Chess? On which tracks did Fred Below, one time member of Muddy Waters' band, play drums, and when was it Johnnie Johnson, Lafayette Leake or Otis Spann, another Waters associate, tickling the ivories?
On *Johnny B Goode*, it's generally thought to have been Leake, a favourite of Willie Dixon, who played piano. In his biography, *Father Of Rock'n'Roll*, Johnnie Johnson recalled that the first time he heard the song was at a gig, Berry glancing back over his shoulder as he introduced the number, saying "This is one I did for you." "I had no idea he'd recorded it... Chuck wrote it as a surprise for me." Yet recent academic research involving an inspection of the Chess recording contracts suggests that Johnson did indeed play on the studio recording. Surely even he wasn't so sozzled he'd have forgotten that? Do these things matter? Not really; it doesn't spoil our enjoyment of the songs. But given they are all-time classics, it would be nice to know for sure, and to be able to give credit where it's due.

Presley songs, but no, they chose *Johnny B Goode*. Even though it only made it to No.5 in the Billboard pop charts in May 1958, this is the song that is considered to define the essence of rock'n'roll, from its rags to riches story about a boy from the backwoods, to its mean and nasty machine-gunning guitar runs, which say so much with so little.

"'Johnny' is more or less myself, although I wrote it intending it to be a song for Johnnie Johnson," wrote Berry who, being abstemious himself, disliked his musical partner's boozy ways, hence the injunction: "Johnny be good!" But it quickly became semi-autobiographical as he painted a picture of a boy with ambitions to be a great guitar player, stirred by his own mother's exhortations – "Go, Johnny, go!" With its placement in New Orleans, it also had racial connotations to the days of slavery. "The gateway to freedom, I was led to understand, was somewhere close to New Orleans where most Africans were sorted through and sold," wrote Berry in his autobiography. "I had driven through New Orleans on tour and I'd been told my great grandfather lived 'way up back in the woods among the evergreens' in a log cabin. I revived the era with a story about a 'coloured boy named Johnny B Goode'... but I thought it would seem biased to white fans to say coloured boy, and changed it to country boy."

But it was the extended guitar soloing that made the song. "Without the Chuck Berry Riff, we'd lose not just the Beach Boys, but essential elements of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Bob Seger and

Did Johnnie Johnson play piano on the recording of *Johnny B Goode*?

© Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

Bruce Springsteen," wrote Dave Marsh in *The Heart of Rock & Soul: The 1001 Greatest Singles Ever Made*. Recorded without echo or reverb, it became the rocker's riff, endlessly, in fact tediously, revived through the 1960s and beyond. Yet once again Berry had his sources. The opening solo was actually a note for note, though rocked up and more stinging, rehash of Carl Hogan's guitar playing on Louis Jordan's 1946 R&B hit *Ain't That Just Like A Woman*.

The stop-time *Around And Around*, which was on the flipside of *Johnny B Goode*, apparently sprung from a pre-concert jam session. It's a likeable but fairly middling sort of Berry rocker, but was apparently the first song Mick Jagger, accompanied by Keith Richards, sang before a public audience.

Blues For Hawaiians was cut at the same session, with Berry ditching the trademark Gibson for a pedal steel guitar. It's not great, and you can hear very loud feedback just past the two-minute point, yet it would have meant something to its creator. Marshall Chess, in the Chess studio at the age of 16 having just started working for his father Leonard, years later recalled Berry's Hawaiian leanings. "He had his sort of persona of wanting to be Hawaiian, his hair, his shirts. He would say he was part Hawaiian, and in a way he could look Hawaiian."

Hey Pedro and Carol were laid down in the same recording session in September 1958 and paired as a single which would make No.18 in the charts in September that year. Hey Pedro had Berry affecting a silly Spanish accent across some nice Latin percussive effects, and is largely unmemorable, but Carol was a decidedly hot little number, right up with his finest work, even if Bruce Pegg in *Brown-Eyed Handsome Man: The Life And Hard Times Of Chuck Berry* opined that "lyrically, the song is hardly one of Berry's best". The session personnel is once again unclear, but may have included Willie Dixon on bass and Odie Payne on drums. Whoever it was, they provide the thumping rhythm to a completely infectious number, made distinctive by the stop-time moment just as it heads into and out of the chorus.

Jo Jo Gunne reflected a penchant for story songs, being derived from an African folk tale, but it was inferior to a number such as *Downbound Train*, the thoroughly successful example of a Berry narrative song which had graced the *After School Session* album. Around the same time, *Sweet Little Rock & Roller* was cut – a song which on its release as a single had been greeted by Billboard as "another good jumper right up the teeners' alley". Berry wrote it on the urgings of Leonard Chess "to bring something in for teenagers that could be a Christmas song," hence the song's reference to being "dressed up like a downtown Christmas tree". But it smacked too much of *Sweet Little Sixteen*, a much better song and a bigger hit that had reached No.2, whereas *Sweet Little...* only managed No.47.

Anthony Boy, one of the weakest tracks on the album, emerged at the same session. Berry recalled that it was "directed towards Italians at the request of Phil Chess who encouraged me to give 'Mama Mia' a little something to rock on."

Little Queenie, however, is a standalone classic. Despite being 32 years old when he recorded it, Berry perfectly evoked the world of the teenage hop, a guy slyly eyeing up his desired honey "standing over by the record machine, looking like a model on the cover of a magazine", his agonising indecision cleverly signified by the repeated use of the word "meanwhile". The clincher with this song, however, is the chugging, mid-paced rhythm, not merely because it mimicked the shy guy's leaden feet, but because it exemplifies the way so many 1950s rock'n'rollers were able to rock out without needing to have all the guns blazing.

Chuck Berry performs on the Alan Freed-hosted TV show *The Big Beat* in New York City, 1959

© Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

ON THE STANDALONE CLASSIC LITTLE QUEENIE, BERRY PERFECTLY EVOKED THE WORLD OF THE TEENAGE HOP

Inevitably, Berry the commercial operator was at work here, admitting that he'd created a story aimed squarely at the teen market that had worked so well for him in the past – although, incredibly it was only released as the B-side to the rather tedious *Almost Grown*, and thus only achieved a No.80 chart placing. One element of interest on *Almost Grown* was that, for once, Berry had backing singers on board – and they weren't just any session vocalists, being The Moonglows, led by Harvey Fuqua, and including a very young Marvin Gaye, Etta James and Chuck Barksdale.

Of course, the calculating approach to his work meant many of the lines in Berry's greatest songs became dated as teen culture moved on. Yet the images he created have not, and neither has the thrill of the sound of that old Gibson – so strangely metallic, like the cars he so loved singing about. Of all the great rockers, probably only Bill Haley was as limited a vocalist, but while there may have been more eloquent guitarists, the visceral attack of Berry's double string solos goes beyond words, and *Chuck Berry Is On Top*, while not faultless, supplies plenty of examples of it. The album also reminds the listener of the fact that, even if he didn't invent rock'n'roll, as so many have claimed, Chuck Berry was one of several progenitors, along with the likes of Haley, Presley, Jerry Lee and Little Richard, who sounded like no-one else. It's why he'll always be on top. ✶

Arkansas rocker Billy Lee Riley lost out when Sam Phillips' focus shifted to new signing Jerry Lee Lewis

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Rock 'n' Roll Hero

BILLY LEE RILEY

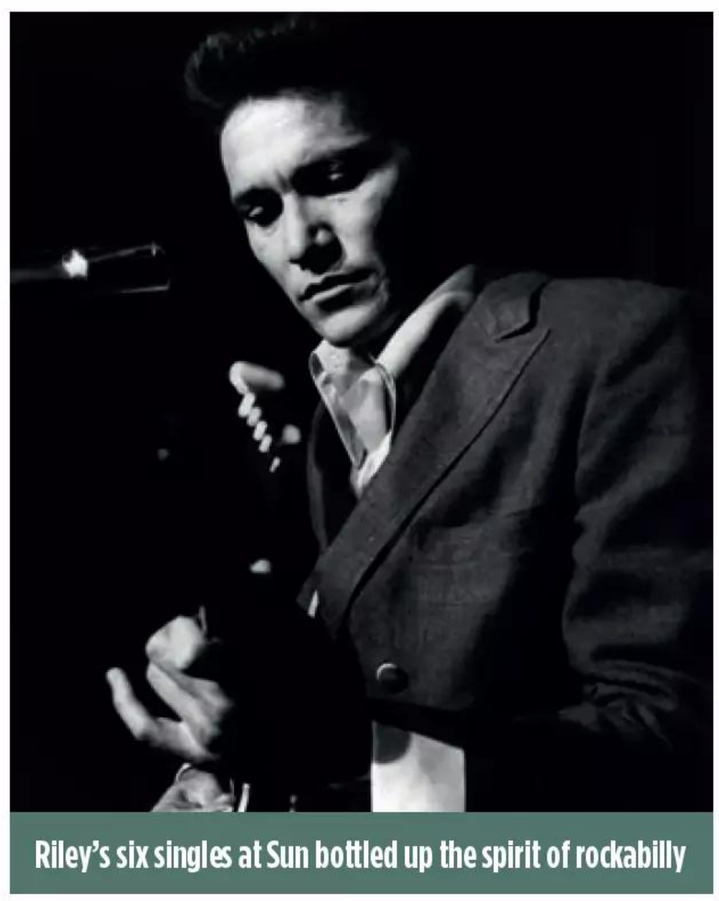
When young fans caught the red hot act of Billy Lee Riley and The Little Green Men in the late 50s, such was their enthusiastic response, the band would be lucky to exit the venue without their bright green suits having been ripped to shreds. Yet Riley would remain bafflingly hitless...

WORDS BY **JACK WATKINS**

To read some accounts of the Memphis record scene in the 1950s, you could be forgiven for thinking Sam Philips walked on water. But Billy Lee Riley, a wild man from Arkansas, might have told you different. While acknowledging his charm and ability to make an artist feel 10 feet tall, Riley felt the Sun boss didn't respect him enough to properly promote his records. He reckoned Phillips sabotaged his chances of getting a hit by stacking all his resources behind Jerry Lee Lewis. Just to rub it in, Riley maintained that he'd been key to giving Lewis' career some impetus at Sun by inviting him to play on one of his sessions, against the inclination of Phillips, who felt a piano didn't belong on a rock'n'roll record.

FLYIN' COLOURS

In reality, talented as he was, Riley lacked the focus for top level success. But the voice was searing, if a little hard to take in more than small doses, and the greasy rocker image was perfect. He was a good-looking boy, cool and lean, with high cheekbones. And his time on Sun was definitely not wasted. Here he etched his name in the rockabilly annals – once again with some irony because Riley considered himself strictly rock'n'roll. But, however you classify them, *Flyin' Saucers Rock & Roll* and *Red Hot* were without question two of the greatest records to emerge from Memphis, or anywhere, in the 50s. His band, The Little Green Men, as well as being a superb road band, for a while operated as Sun's unofficial house band, playing a key role in thrashing out rock'n'roll's early blueprints.



Riley's six singles at Sun bottled up the spirit of rockabilly

Riley was born in Pocahontas in the foothills of the Ozarks, in north-east Arkansas, in 1933. He was playing the harmonica from the age of six, and he had the usual musical upbringing of the son of a poor sharecropper of the time, namely blues songs learnt in the field from fellow labourers while picking cotton, and hearing country and western swing on the radio. After a spell in the US Army, Riley formed a country band in 1953, before hooking up with Jack Clement who was heading for Memphis to start his own Fernwood record label.

Arriving in the city in 1955, Clement recorded Riley in a makeshift studio rigged up in his friend Slim Wallace's garage. One of the songs, written up by the trio, was the moody *Trouble Bound*. It had another youngster originally from Arkansas, Roland Janes, on guitar, and Johnny Bernero on drums. Bernero had been the drummer on a few of Elvis' Sun sessions, and on *Trouble Bound* he played something similar to the infectious shuffle beat he'd done on *I Forgot To Remember To Forget*. Pleased with the outcome, Clement took the tape to Phillips, who liked *Trouble Bound* enough to suggest that Riley cut something in a teenage vein ➡

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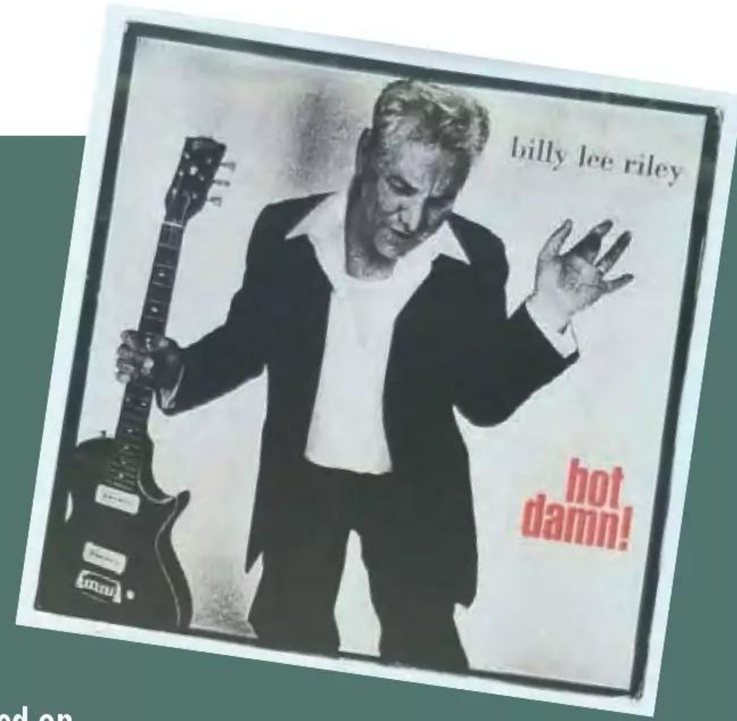
Life without Sun Records



With his multi-instrumental abilities, including guitar, harmonica, electric bass and drums, Billy Lee Riley played on the records of many other Sun artists, including Jerry Lee Lewis, Charlie Rich, Ray Smith and Bill Justis. He famously played on Jerry Lee's first release on the label, *Crazy Arms*, or at least, the one guitar chord heard right at the end of the song.

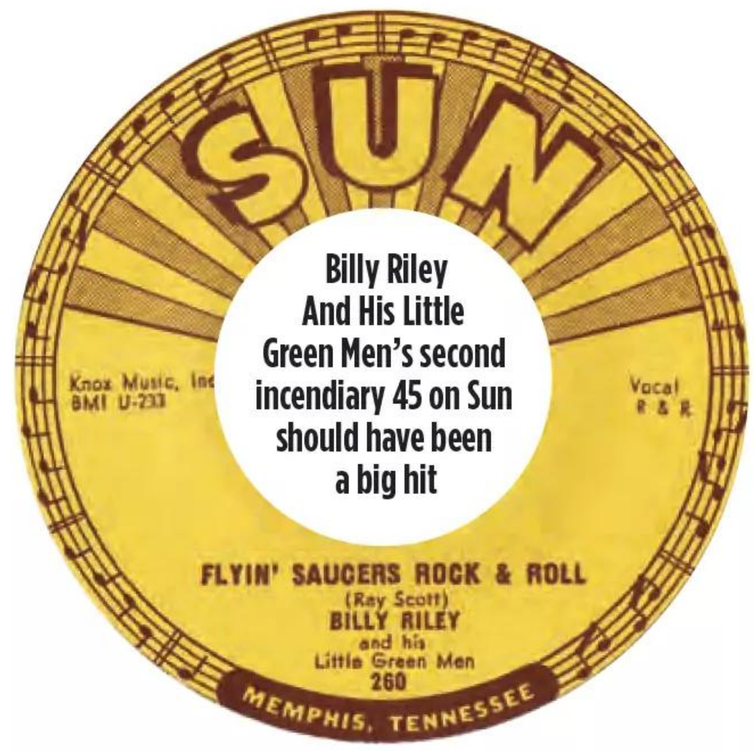
Riley also moonlighted on tracks done by other Memphis rockers, contributing the Scotty Moore-like guitar on Jess Hooper & The Daydreamers' *All Messed Up* on the Bihari's Meteor label. Post-Sun, he set up Rita Records with Roland Janes, where he co-produced Harold Dorman's big-selling *Mountain Of Love*.

Heading out to the West Coast, he claimed to have played lead guitar on Herb Alpert's massive 1962 hit *The Lonely Bull*, and also did session work for the likes of Dean Martin, Johnny Rivers and The Beach Boys.

Returning to Memphis in the mid-60s, he had a stint on Stax, and recorded a countryfied version of their big Johnnie Taylor hit *Who's Making Love*, under the name Daaron Lee, released on Hip.

But his only semblance of official chart action as a solo artist was with *I Got A Thing About You Baby*, released on Chips Moman's Entrance label, in 1972 (No.93). Back on the scene in the 1990s, his Capricorn album *Hot Damn!*, a mix of rockabilly, country and blues, which he professed to be his first love, was nominated for a Grammy in 1997.

One of rockabilly's most pioneering players, Billy Lee Riley is yet to be inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame



Billy Riley And His Little Green Men's second incendiary 45 on Sun should have been a big hit

for a prospective B-side. So, they came back with *Rock With Me Baby*, another brisk shuffle which, as with *Trouble Bound*, was somewhat in the Elvis mode. The two songs went out as a Sun single in May 1956. Although not a great seller, Phillips was delighted because it was a rare occasion when someone had walked into his studio with ready-made rock'n'roll. The upshot was that Clement was taken on as a producer and Riley put on a recording contract.

It was now that Riley, a decent guitarist in his own right, put together the band that became known as The Little Green Men. Roland Janes on lead guitar was joined by drummer, James (J.M.) Van Eaton, who gave up a scholarship to study music at Memphis State University in the process, and Marvin Pepper on string bass. Another key member was Van Eaton's long-time pal from school days, the talented sax player Martin Willis. Pat O'Neil later replaced Pepper. "Billy was a great showman," recalled the recently deceased Van Eaton, interviewed in 2017 by this writer. "He had the looks, and he was a great musician. He played guitar and harmonica and we had a real good stage show. We played all of the colleges in the south, the fraternity parties and dances. In fact, we played everywhere and consequently the band got real tight. We were really good, man."

Van Eaton was frustrated that Riley never had the hit record with The Little Green Men that would have sealed their live reputation. They certainly should have had one. The extraordinary *Flyin' Saucers Rock & Roll* was recorded at the tail end of 1956, having been sourced from a Ray Scott demo. Homing in on the 1950s fascination with invaders from outer space, this is a song of rapid-fire greatness, thrillingly announced by Roland Janes' echoing tremolo and Van Eaton's crashing cymbal. For the vocal, Riley employed a dry, throaty rasp completely different to the moaning, bluesy intonation of *Trouble Bound*. He attributed it to having been singing a spate of Little Richard songs in the shows and enjoying the effect, but *Flyin' Saucers Rock & Roll* stands four square

©LINDA VARTOOGIAN/GETTY IMAGES

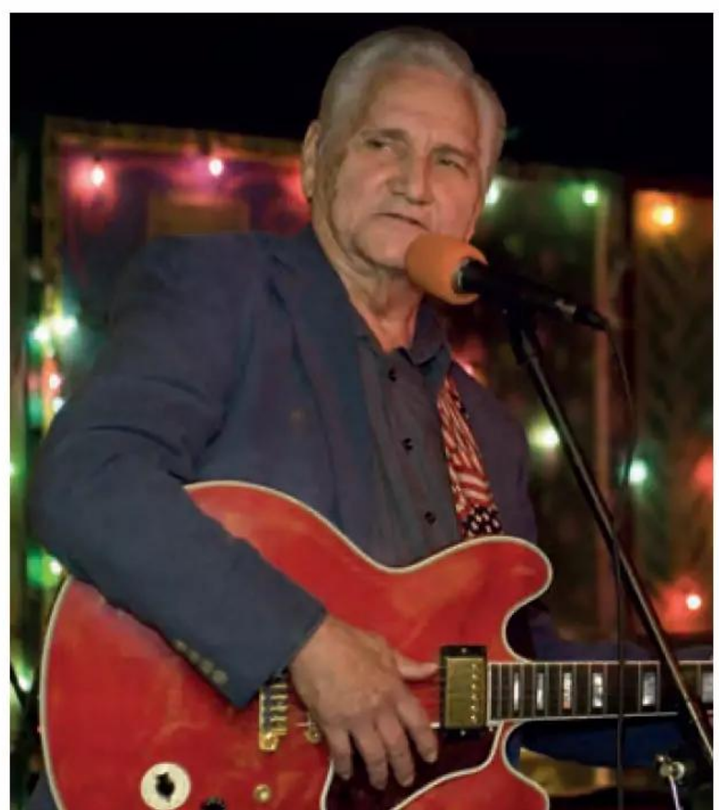
Billy Lee Riley and his Little Green Men cut loose on stage, circa 1956, the year of Riley's debut Sun Records single

©MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

as a thing of greatness in its own right. Jerry Lee Lewis, under instruction from Phillips merely to stick to the rhythm, played piano on the track. "Yes, it's a haunting, totally spaced-out recording. Even Roland's Fender guitar solo is kind of 'outta space,'" Van Eaton remembered. Crucially, Phillips liked it, too, suggesting the band "sounded like little green men". It was put out as a single, backed by the strictly rockabilly *I Want You Baby* at the start of 1957. The name on the label read Billy Riley and his Little Green Men. The band immediately rushed off to Lansky's on Beale Street to get measured up for specially tailored bright green suits for their shows.

Remarkably, though it would become a favourite of rock'n'roll revivalists, *Flyin' Saucers Rock & Roll* only attracted good regional sales, but Riley thought he was onto a winner when they followed it up with *Red Hot*. Billy Emerson had previously recorded the song at Sun as a jokey R&B novelty. Riley turned it into something more abrasive and frantic. The refrain, "My gal is red hot!" and the band's reply, "Your gal ain't doodly squat" was lifted from the Emerson release, but Riley's snarling retort "Yeah!!" introduced a more menacing quality. There was more fine guitar from Janes, and Van Eaton was solid in support. Jerry Lee is widely assumed to have played piano again, although Riley himself later maintained that it was another maverick, Jimmy Wilson, a clever pianist who could play in many styles, and who'd become a member of the Riley road band.

Red Hot, paired with the Riley original *Pearly Lee*, seemed all set to give Riley the breakthrough he longed for, with even Alan Freed telling him he had a hit on his hands. However, released in September 1957, by the end of the year sales amounted to only 38,000. To Riley's fury, Phillips cancelled further orders, telling his distributors to concentrate their energy on pushing Lewis' *Great Balls Of Fire*. The hot-headed Riley, having tried to wreck the studio, was on the point of leaving Sun, but was persuaded to stay. However, when another single, the distinctly average *Wouldn't You Know* bombed, he walked out.



Billy rode the revival wave right up to his passing in 2009

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TO THE MOON AND BACK

A brief flirtation with Brunswick yielded another space-themed rocker, the dire *Rockin' On The Moon*, but soon Riley was back at Sun. There were three more singles, including *Baby Please Don't Go*, and a cover of The Regals' *Got The Water Boiling* which was paired with *One More Time*. Riley reckoned the latter was the best thing he recorded at Sun. In truth, the magic of the earlier sides wasn't there. Riley went off on his musical travels again, but by the early 70s had largely left the industry. Like so many 50s rockers, a later era would 'rediscover' Riley, but in his case he had an especially big-name fan, namely Bob Dylan. When Dylan invited him to play a guest slot on one of his shows in the early 90s, the singer-songwriter declared to the cheering audience that: "It was the greatest honour in the world to be even standing on the stage with him." ✶

Classic album

WORDS BY RANDY FOX

CLIFF

CLIFF RICHARD AND THE DRIFTERS

everly Lebarrow/Redferns/Getty

Cliff and The Drifters larking about. From left to right: Hank Marvin, Tony Meehan, Cliff Richard, Bruce Welch

Released in April 1959, Cliff Richard's debut long-player was a thrilling introduction to one of the UK's first ever rock'n'roll stars and proved that we could rock just as hard as those across the pond...

On the evening of 9 February 1959 Cliff Richard arrived at EMI Recording Studios on Abbey Road in London to record his first album. With three hit singles and sold-out concert halls across Britain, Richard was one of the most successful homegrown rock'n'roll stars to date. The album would cap a whirlwind seven months of his rise through a string of hits and electrifying TV appearances.

With Richard's initial rise to fame rooted in live performances, Columbia Records producer Norrie Paramor insisted on live recordings for the singer's first album. Remote concert recording was an iffy proposition at best, and therefore staging a concert in Abbey Road's largest recording room, Studio 2, seemed the best option.

With over 198 square metres of floor space and a ceiling two storeys high, Studio 2 was one of the largest recording studios in the world, more than adequate to host a sizable concert. For the album sessions, a stage was constructed against one wall of the studio, directly below the large glass window of the second story control room overlooking the recording area. Requiring an enthusiastic audience, Columbia sent invitations to London-area members of Richard's fan club. Several hundred teenagers secured tickets for the two nights of recording.

THE ALBUM WOULD CAP A WHIRLWIND SEVEN MONTHS OF CLIFF'S RISE

Also on hand were Richard's band, The Drifters. While the group backed

The girl can't help it: A 19-year-old Cliff poses with 50s sex siren Jayne Mansfield

Harry Hammond/V&A Images/getty

Richard on all of his live appearances, Paramor generally preferred to work with more experienced musicians for recording sessions. That had been the case for Richard's first session with Columbia in July 1958 where half of The Drifters were replaced by session players. By the time of the album sessions, the line-up of The Drifters had changed. All of the group's original members had been replaced for various reasons over the previous seven months. The current line-up — Hank Marvin on lead guitar, Bruce Welch on rhythm guitar, Jet Harris on bass and Tony Meehan on drums — was a powerful group of young musicians whose talent made up for their lack of experience. In just a few months, the group would change its name to The Shadows (due to a lawsuit from the US vocal group, The Drifters) and would gain a reputation as one of Britain's greatest rock'n'roll bands with a string of instrumental hits. Furthermore, Paramor knew the chemistry between the singer and the band was a vital element in capturing the excitement he wanted on the album.

Eighteen songs were initially chosen for the two nights of performances with nine songs to be recorded each night. *Move It*, Richard's first single and his biggest hit to date, was an obvious choice for inclusion, while his other original songs were rejected in favour of covers of popular American rock'n'roll tunes regularly featured at his live performances. British rock'n'rollers' reliance on covers in live shows was not unusual at the time. Only a few American rock'n'roll artists were able to tour in the UK because of strict regulations on live performances by non-British artists. Live covers by homegrown artists were as close as British youth could come to seeing their American heroes in the flesh.

Rounding out the setlists for the two nights were a handful of instrumentals by The Drifters. Columbia Records originally signed Richard to the label as a solo artist with no provision for recording the band separately. After the success of *Move It*, Columbia reversed their position and signed The Drifters to a separate contract. The band's first instrumental single was released just a week before the *Cliff* album sessions.

MOVE IT, RICHARD'S FIRST SINGLE AND HIS BIGGEST HIT TO DATE, WAS AN OBVIOUS CHOICE FOR INCLUSION

THE FIRST NIGHT of recording, and side one of the album opened with *Apron Springs*, a song originally recorded and released by the mysterious "Billy the Kid" on Kapp Records in the US. Although the song is often credited to R&B singer Billy "The Kid" Emerson (who did originate the rockabilly classic *Red Hot*), the Billy the Kid

in question was an unknown white singer whose identity has never been conclusively verified. How Richard learned the song is also a mystery considering the album sessions took place less than four weeks after the original version was recorded. Whatever the explanation, Richard delivered a supercharged version bringing the album roaring out of the gate.

The Willie Dixon composition *My Babe* follows. Recorded by Little Walter on Chess Records in January 1955, the song hit No.1 on the Billboard R&B chart and was released in the UK as the lead track of a Little Walter EP in October 1956. Although *My Babe* didn't chart, it immediately became a favourite of British blues fans and gained further traction with rock'n'roll fans after Ricky Nelson's version was released in the UK in November 1958.

Down The Line was written and originally recorded by Roy Orbison under the title *Go! Go! Go!* as the B-side to his first hit, *Ooby Dooby*. Although it received little notice at the time, a year later fellow Sun Records star Jerry Lee Lewis recut the song under the title *Down The Line* as the B-side to his hit single *Breathless*. Lewis' version attracted Richard's attention, becoming his favourite Jerry Lee Lewis recording and a standard of his own live performances.

I Got A Feeling was another perfect fit for Cliff Richard. Written by professional songwriter Baker Knight and a No.27 hit for Ricky Nelson in the UK in the autumn of 1958, Richard upped the tempo and delivered a harder rockin' version than the original. The Drifters follow it up with the first of their instrumentals, *Jet Black*, written by bass player Jet Harris and debuting on the album. The Drifters would soon re-record a studio version for their second single in June 1959.

Richard jumps back into the show with Elvis Presley's *Baby I Don't Care*. Recorded for the soundtrack of the movie *Jailhouse Rock*, Presley's version was first released in the UK on the *Jailhouse Rock* EP in April 1958. Richard demonstrates his mimicry of Elvis' phrasing with his hot version, ramping up the tempo from the original.

Next up on the album is one of the two songs Richard and The Drifters recorded at a later, separate session without an audience. Both songs were ballads, the only two included on the album, and were recorded at a different session, presumably to ensure proper sound mix levels as well as Paramor's desire to use the Mike Sammes Singers on backup vocals.

CLIFF
CLIFF RICHARD AND THE DRIFTERS

1959 • COLUMBIA RECORDS

Side 1

Apron Strings *(George Weiss & Aaron Schroeder)* **2:40**
My Babe *(Willie Dixon)* **2:21**
Down The Line *(Roy Orbison)* **1:59**
I Got A Feeling *(Baker Knight)* **1:48**
Jet Black *(Jet Harris)* **2:13**
Baby I Don't Care *(Jerry Leiber & Mike Stoller)* **2:08**
Donna *(Ritchie Valens)* **3:06**
Move It *(Ian Samwell)* **2:09**

Side 2

Ready Teddy *(John Marascalco & Robert Blackwell)* **1:47**
Too Much *(Lee Rosenberg & Bernard Weinman)* **2:16**
Don't Bug Me Baby *(Leon Luallen & Johnny Bragg)* **2:16**
Driftin' *(Hank Marvin)* **2:46**
That'll Be The Day *(Buddy Holly & Jerry Allison)* **2:09**
Be-Bop-A-Lula *(Gene Vincent & Bill "Sheriff Tex" Davis)* **2:13**
Danny *(Ben Weisman & Fred Wise)* **2:54**
Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On *(Dave "Curly" Williams)* **2:59**

CLIFF RICHARD LEAD VOCALS HANK MARVIN LEAD GUITAR, VOCALS BRUCE WELCH RHYTHM GUITAR, VOCALS JET HARRIS BASS GUITAR, VOCALS TONY MEEHAN DRUMS MIKE SAMMES SINGERS BACKGROUND VOCALS

The first ballad was a faithful cover of the Ritchie Valens love song *Donna*. Released in the US in late 1958, the record hit No.2 in January 1959, and was popular in the UK, although failed to chart. Richard's version particularly resonates considering a plane crash in Clear Lake, Iowa took Valens' life only a few days prior to the session.

TO CLOSE OUT the 9 May session and side one of the album, Richard and The Drifters ripped into his first hit, *Move It*. Written by former Drifters member Ian Samwell, it was one of the first truly authentic British born and bred rock'n'roll records to achieve huge chart success. The song was originally slated as the B-side of Richard's first single with a cover of the Bobby Helms pop ditty *Schoolboy Crush* as the A-side. Plans changed when television producer Jack Good insisted Richard perform *Move It* for his first appearance on the TV programme *Oh Boy!*. Good's instincts proved to be right on the money as Richard's hot performance sparked a nationwide craze for the song, pushing it to No.2 on the charts in the autumn of 1958.

The next night, Cliff and The Drifters returned to Abbey Road to record side two of the album, kicking off the performance with the Little Richard classic, *Ready Teddy*. Richard's love of Little Richard was plainly obvious considering the former "Harry Webb" had been inspired to adopt the name "Cliff Richard" partially as a tribute to his rock'n'roll hero. Richard followed it with *Too Much*, another Elvis Presley song. Released in the UK in the spring of 1957, the song became a No.9 hit for Presley and was a fixture in Richard's live sets.

Similar to *Apron Strings* from the first night of recording, *Don't Bug Me Baby* was another rather obscure rockabilly single from the US. Originally recorded by Milton Allen for RCA, the record was only released in the US. Presumably Richard learned the song from an imported single.

Richard took a break from the mic as The Drifters moved to the forefront again with the instrumental *Driftin'*. Written by The Drifters' lead guitarist Hank Marvin, the tune demonstrates an obvious Duane Eddy influence. Shortly after the *Cliff* album, The Drifters returned to Abbey Road to re-record the song sans audience for the B-side of the *Jet Black* single.

Richard re-takes the mic with a faithful rendition of Buddy Holly's *That'll Be The* ➡

Day. As with the Ritchie Valens cover from side one, the song carried extra meaning in light of Holly's recent demise. The Drifters then moved back to the spotlight with a revved-up version of Gene Vincent's *Be-Bop-A-Lula*. It's an unusual track for a band primarily known for instrumentals, featuring harmony lead vocals from Hank Marvin and Bruce Welch, and inspired by The Everly Brothers' arrangement of the song for their 1958 debut album.

Danny was the second ballad from the follow-up, audience-free session. As with *Donna*, cheers from the audience were overdubbed onto the beginning and end of the song to integrate it into the live recordings. *Danny* was written by American songwriters Ben Weisman and Fred Wise as the theme song for the proposed Elvis Presley film, *A Stone For Danny Fisher*. Elvis recorded the song on 11 February 1958 for the movie's soundtrack, but after the film's title was changed to *King Creole*, *Danny* was dropped from the movie. Demos of the song continued to circulate and eventually made their way to the UK where Richard picked up the tune, along with fellow Brit rock'n'roller Marty Wilde who recorded his own version shortly after the *Cliff* album sessions. Elvis' version was finally released in 1978, on the album, *A Legendary Performer – Volume 3*.

TO CLOSE OUT the second night of performances, Richard turned to another favourite from Jerry Lee Lewis, *Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On*. Originally recorded by American R&B artist Big Maybelle, Lewis' version became his first hit single, reaching No.3 in the US and No.8 in the UK in the spring of 1957. Richard's version captures the energy of Lewis' version while toning down its lasciviousness, and The Drifters successfully transpose the piano-driven rocker to guitars through their hot arrangement.

In addition to the 16 songs featured on the final album, four more songs were originally scheduled for recording. The Elvis song *One Night* was definitely recorded during one of the sessions but was dropped from the final album. It would eventually appear on the 1997 Cliff Richard compilation album, *The Rock'n'Roll Years 1958-1963*. Paperwork has surfaced indicating the Conway Twitty hit, *It's Only Make Believe*, The Weavers' *Kisses Sweeter Than Wine* and the Eddie Fontaine rocker, *Nothin' Shakin' (But The Leaves On The Trees)* were scheduled for the sessions, but master tapes have never been located.

DRIFTIN' TO THE SHADOWS

ENTER THE UK'S GREATEST INSTRUMENTAL GROUP

Cliff was not only the long-player introduction of Cliff Richard to the world, but also the full-length introduction of one of the first truly great British rock'n'roll bands, The Shadows. Formed in March 1958, the original line-up of "The Drifters" included guitarist Norman Mitham, drummer Terry Smart and singer and guitarist Harry Webb (who would soon change his name to "Cliff Richard"). Ian Samwell joined the group a month later, just as the mania for their live appearances began to take off, a process that transformed the rechristened "Cliff Richard And The Drifters" into stars.

After the chart success of Richard's first single, *Move It*, in the autumn of 1958, it became clear the group needed a stronger guitar player than Mitham. Richard's manager, Johnny Foster, found two — Hank Marvin and Bruce Welch — who were playing as a duo in Soho's 2i's coffee bar. Samwell moved to the bass for a few months, but it was not his forte. Luckily, in the wake of the success of *Move It* (which Samwell wrote), he found success as a songwriter, so there were few hard feelings when he was asked to step aside.

His replacement was Jet Harris, a 19-year-old wunderkind who had worked with Marvin and Welch in previous bands and already established himself as a top-notch jazz and rock'n'roll musician. In late December 1958, the missing piece of the transformed Drifters arrived, when another teenage musical prodigy, Tony Meehan, replaced Smart on drums.

The group signed their own recording contract with Columbia Records in January 1959, and began recording a series of rock'n'roll instrumentals. Their first single, *Feelin' Fine*, sold poorly in both the UK and the US but attracted the attention of the US vocal group, The Drifters, who filed suit over their ownership of the name. Based on a suggestion from Harris, the group changed their name to The Shadows in the summer of 1959 and made their recording debut under the moniker in October 1959 on the Cliff Richard single *Travellin' Light*. In July 1960, the group scored their first No.1 hit in the UK, *Apache*, launching a string of hit singles over the next three decades.

Released in April 1959, *Cliff* was an immediate hit, rising to No.4 on the UK chart. The album was also popular in France, as *Dance With Cliff Richard* and released with an alternative cover. Although all the tracks for *Cliff* were recorded in stereo on Abbey Road's BTR3 two-track tape machine, the album was released in mono only. Stereo mixes, which differed from the mono version primarily in the amount of crowd noise, appeared only on the *Cliff No.1* and *Cliff No.2* EPs, which each contained five tracks culled from the album. The full stereo mix of the album was not released until EMI's 1998 reissue on CD.

Despite its lack of original tunes, *Cliff* was 16 tracks of pure, unrelenting rock'n'roll, establishing Cliff Richard as the UK's first "authentic" rocker. Before Richard's rise to the top of the chart, the majority of British attempts at recording rock'n'roll relied on teen idols primarily recruited for their good looks, established studio musicians and gimmicky songs bordering on parody. The breakout success of Cliff Richard confirmed British singers and bands could rock as hard as their American counterparts. The Drifters/Shadows' eventual success as a chart-busting instrumental act inspired hundreds of British youth to form their own rock'n'roll combos.

Unfortunately, Cliff Richard's first album of undiluted rock'n'roll also proved to be his last. Producer Norrie Paramor suspected Richard was capable of bigger chart success with mainstream pop, and the runaway success of the pop single *Living Doll* in the summer of 1959 confirmed his theory. Richard's second album, *Cliff Sings*, released in November 1959, inaugurated the practice of splitting his albums between rock'n'roll songs backed by the recently rechristened Shadows and pop songs backed by the Norrie Paramor Orchestra.

Although Cliff Richard recorded more classic examples of British rock'n'roll, he would never again capture lightning in a bottle in the same manner as his first LP. Sixty-six years later, *Cliff* still brings rock'n'roll excitement to life with the simple drop of a needle. ★

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Bo Diddley slinging his trademark rectangular guitar, the Twang Machine, circa 1958

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HAVE GUITAR, WILL TRAVEL

When namechecking the trailblazers of rock'n'roll it's absurd that Bo Diddley far too often gets overlooked. *Vintage Rock* rights that wrong by paying tribute to 'The Originator'...

WORDS BY DAN BIGGANE

Sixty-two years ago, in the autumn of 1963, promoter Don Arden compiled a dream rock'n'roll package tour for UK fans when he teamed up headliners The Everly Brothers and Little Richard with a fledgling Rolling Stones and the pioneering powerhouse Bo Diddley.

Performing for audiences on British soil for the first time, the larger-than-life character famed for his splendid self-referential songs and radical rectangular guitars, had already gifted the world a legendary hambone beat that changed music forever.

'The Originator' would go on to be a regular visitor throughout the 80s, 90s and into the 2000s alongside his sidekick bassist and band leader Debby Hastings. His last trip here was two shows at Camden's Jazz Café in July 2006, just two years before he passed away on 2 June 2008.

"The first time I came to England, Keith Richards and Mick Jagger and all of those guys here treated me like a king," Diddley told *Mojo* magazine in 2002. "People who say, 'Oh, Bo Diddley's the king of rock'n'roll', I tell them right quick, 'I'm not a king, baby, but I'm good. Real good.' I feel like I'm a monument in my own time."

HEY! BO DIDDLEY

Diddley was born Ellas Bates in McComb, Mississippi, to Ethel Wilson and Eugene Bates on 30 December 1928. His biological mother was only 16 years old at the time and placed baby Bo in the care of her cousin, Gussie McDaniel, who raised him as her own. When Diddley's adoptive father Robert died in 1934, Gussie relocated to the South Side of Chicago where Bo began to take an interest in music.

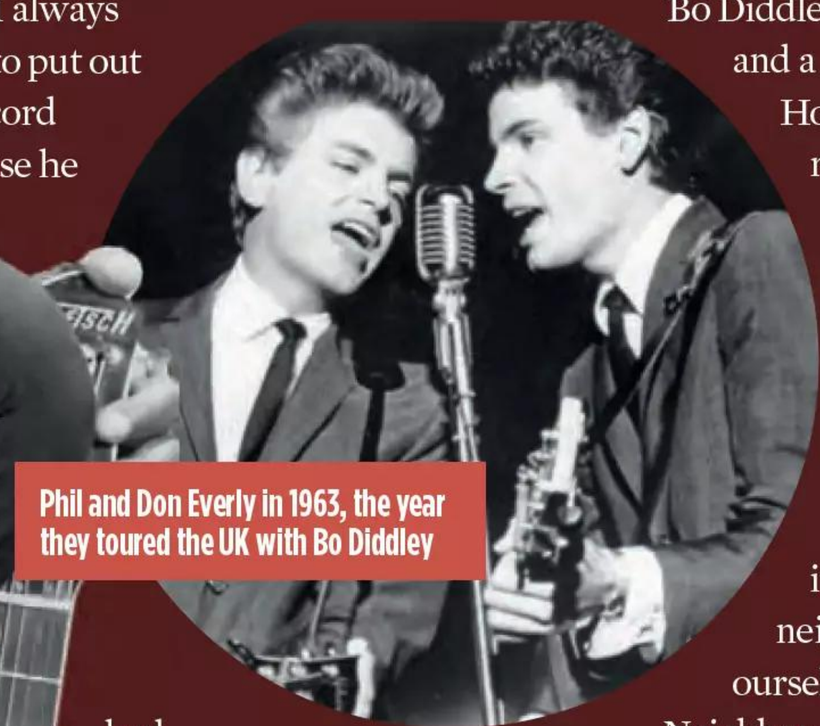
Bo pictured circa 1957 – he would make the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame three decades on

Diddley was a technological innovator, fitting effects into the body of his guitars

"I didn't play no blues music until I was maybe 13... I wasn't even allowed to listen to any... I'd catch hell from my mother... it was the Devil's music" – BO DIDDLEY

"Bo would talk about the Ebeneezer Baptist Church where he first took violin lessons with his music teacher, Professor O. W. Frederick," Debby Hastings tells *Vintage Rock*. "He liked the violin but he had very large hands, 'meat hooks' as he called them, and he was not able to play such a delicate instrument. So, he picked up the guitar.

"Bo wanted to play like Gene Autry believe it or not, but he was not able to. I don't believe his classical schooling necessarily helped his guitar-playing, but it did open his eyes to classical music and opera. You should have heard him sing one of his 'pretend' opera Arias! I always wanted him to put out a gospel record because he had such a rich voice."



Phil and Don Everly in 1963, the year they toured the UK with Bo Diddley

Talking with journalist Paul Trynka in 1996, Diddley revealed: "I didn't play no blues music until I was maybe 13. Up to then, I wasn't even allowed to listen to any blues music, cause if I did then I'd catch hell from my mother... it was the Devil's music."

Thankfully, Diddley disregarded his mother's scaremongering and succumbed to the music of the Windy City, saying, "If John Lee Hooker could play guitar, I knew I could learn." He cut his teeth singing on street corners while practising to play a guitar that his sister Lucille gifted him one Christmas. Inspired by the likes of Muddy Waters and Elmore James, he performed with renowned slide guitarist Earl Hooker at the Maxwell Street market. Any cash that he earned playing music in his band The Hipsters, who later became the Langley Avenue Jive Cats, was supplemented by working numerous jobs around town.

PUNCHING IN

For an artist who would go on to namecheck himself in so many songs, the origins of the Bo Diddley moniker remains murky and a number of theories exist. However, the man himself revealed in a 2001 interview with Arlene R. Weiss, that it was bestowed on him as a youngster. "I was in grammar school in Chicago and the kids started calling me Bo Diddley," he said. "I used it when I'd box in the neighbourhood. We called ourselves The Little Neighbourhood Golden Gloves Bunch. We used to spar with each other, stuff like that, so it was like a nickname."

In late 1954, he teamed up with harmonica player Billy Boy Arnold, drummer Clifton James and bass player Roosevelt Jackson to cut demos of *I'm A Man* and his eponymous theme tune, *Bo Diddley*. On hearing the demo, an impressed Phil and Leonard Chess of Chicago's Chess Records offered Diddley a deal with subsidiary label Checker, and his irresistible take on R&B would go on to completely change the future of music.

Diddley's pioneering prowess extended far beyond anything many other artists at the time could have envisaged. He developed many innovations with his self-designed, rectangular 'Twang Machine', which was later christened a 'cigar box guitar' by music promoter Dick Clark.

"I made one when I was a teenager," Diddley told *Vintage Guitar* in 1997. "Its pickup was the part of a Victrola record player where the needle went in. I clamped it to the metal tailpiece to pick up

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the vibrations. I wasn't able to buy electric guitars back then, so I built them, and they worked pretty good."

"He was a big man and a prizefighter in his younger days," continues Hastings. "He would dance a lot on stage, perform deep knee bends and jump around. He wanted a slimmer guitar that would make it easier for him to do these stage antics and that's how he developed what some called the 'square guitar'. Of course, it isn't square at all, it's a rectangle.

"He was a real innovator and put electronics inside the guitar that would normally be found in an amplifier. The tremolo, echo, EQ, and all of these effects, made the guitar very heavy. He used weighty strings as well.

"When he played, it had a very solid sound. The 'Bo Diddley Beat' is very definitive with continuous accents and downbeats, like a freight train chugging along the tracks. If you mention it, people will know exactly what you're talking about and can sing it back to you. It has come to replace any other references. When he played that rhythm on his guitar, you could feel it deep in your bones. He will always be known for *that* beat. It's so profound, so rockin', so important!"

When Diddley's Checker debut 45 landed with its belting 'bomp-ba-domp-ba-domp, ba-domp-domp' beat, the music world shook with its relentless pattin' juba rhythm. While the song only topped the Billboard R&B chart for two weeks in 1955, its syncopated sound would reverberate around the world and down the generations.

BACK TO BASS-ICS

Bo Diddley's band leader, bassist and collaborator, Debby Hastings, played with him longer than the likes of Lady Bo and The Duchess, and also appeared on his 1996 swansong *A Man Amongst Men*. Debby started her career in Wisconsin and moved to Memphis before settling in New York where she joined the Diddley group.

"Going to shows, I would always crush out on the bass player," she tells *Vintage Rock*. "Then I thought, 'Wait a minute, maybe I want to *be* the bass player!' My sort of boyfriend, Mark Healey, who is now the bassist for Badfinger, taught me a blues progression and I was hooked. I borrowed money from my brother and bought an Echo bass, which looked like a Höfner but is much cheaper.

"I practised 12 hours every day and faked my way into my first group. Then I got into better bands playing rock'n'roll, country and western, and even polka!

"I taught myself how to sight read and joined a 16-piece big band, then a Dixieland band with Jeannie Cheatham, and one summer I performed in a travelling theatre troupe. I even played for a circus.

"In 1983, I didn't have a very good car so I moved to New York where you don't need one. I was a girl and it was very difficult because I didn't know anyone and nobody would let me sit in with them. I almost quit music but heard about an audition for an all-female jazz band called Sandra Reaves-Phillips & The Late Great Ladies Of Blues And Jazz. They were all seasoned jazz musicians and older than me, but I got the gig and we toured all over.

"After I joined a rock band, I met Margo Lewis who had just taken over as Bo Diddley's manager. She wanted to recreate what Bo had started years ago, which was to have a female musician in the band. So, she booked me with Bo on a few gigs and we hit it off. I ended up being with Bo for 24 years as his bass player and the last 15 as band leader, too."

Besides Diddley, Hastings has played with many greats like Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Jerry Lee Lewis. She toured with Diddley and Ronnie Wood on their Gunslinger Tour and appears on the subsequent live album, *Live At The Ritz*.

Hastings, who worked with Bo until his death in 2008, said: "I can't pinpoint the first time I heard Bo or the 'Bo Diddley Beat'. It's just always been a part of my musicality and anybody who has ever played rock'n'roll is very familiar with it. I love the way he sings blues but couldn't possibly choose a favourite song because there are just so many."

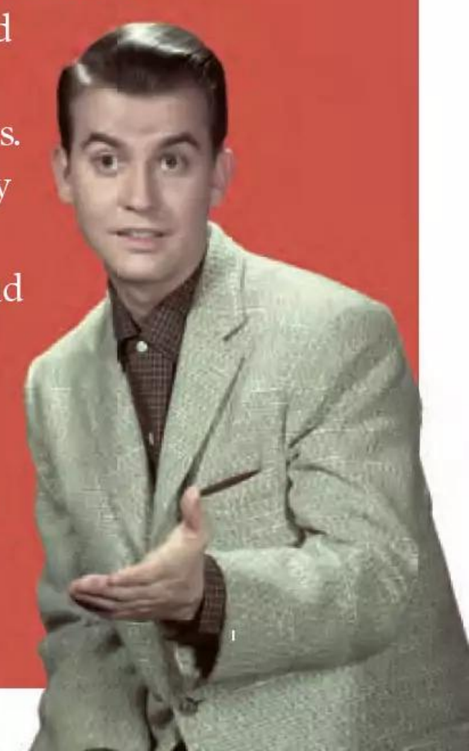
BEAT BOX

There have been many high-profile instances of other artists incorporating Bo's beat in their music. Everyone from Elvis Presley, Duane Eddy, The Byrds, The Who, and Them to David Bowie, Bruce Springsteen, The Clash, U2 and George Michael, have utilised that stimulating stomp. But perhaps the most notable variation came two years after the release of *Bo Diddley* in 1957 when Jerry Allison tapped out a similar beat on a cardboard box for The Crickets' *Not Fade Away*. Buddy Holly, who was indubitably a fan, had covered *Bo Diddley* in 1956 and scored a No.4 hit with it in July 1963 when it was posthumously released as a single. *Not Fade Away*, which was included on *The "Chirping" Crickets* album, only featured as the B-side to *Oh, Boy!* and never charted in its own right for Holly. However, The Rolling Stones would rectify that when they broke the UK Top 10 for the first time and took it to No.3 on the British hit parade in 1964.

The Rolling Stones joined their hero on the road for the band's first national UK tour in 1963

Talking about how fellow acts latched on to his hard-hitting hambone style, Diddley confessed to *Vintage Guitar*: "I didn't like it at first, because I wasn't educated in understanding the importance of other people copying your material... When I found out it was good for Bo Diddley, I thought I could go to the bank with royalties, but that never happened."

Like many other artists to emerge during the burgeoning British beat boom of the 1960s, the Stones would cover Bo's work or 'Diddleyfy' their own tracks. Aside from perhaps Muddy Waters or Chuck Berry, you'd be hard pushed to find another artist who had a greater stranglehold ➡



American Bandstand host Dick Clark, circa 1955

over a young Jagger and Richards than Diddley. However, the admiration was mutual, as Hastings pointed out: "He loved The Rolling Stones. It was early on in Bo's career when he went to England on tour with them and he was always one of their heroes."

"When he played that rhythm, you could feel it deep in your bones. He will always be known for *that* beat. It's so profound, so rockin', so important!" – DEBBY HASTINGS

LONDON STOMP

When Gene Vincent's manager and gig promoter, Don Arden, offered the Stones a slot on the same package tour as the main man they seized the opportunity and respectfully dropped renditions of tracks such as *Cops And Robbers*, *Crackin' Up*, *Diddley Daddy*, *Mona*, *Pretty Thing* and *Road Runner* from their set. "For us, the big thrill is that Bo Diddley will be on the bill," they told the *NME* at the time. "He's been one of our great influences. It won't be a case of the pupils competing with the master, though. We're dropping from our act on the tour all the Bo Diddley numbers we sing."

Opening at London's New Victoria on 29 September 1963, the extensive run of shows was not only the Stones' first nationwide jaunt, it was also Diddley's debut visit to the UK. Other acts appearing on the original poster included The Flintstones, a group of musicians who could sit in with an act when required, Julie Grant, Mickie Most and headliners, The Everly Brothers.

Like the Stones, the inclusion of Diddley on the bill was keenly received by Don and Phil who appreciated his music wholeheartedly. Indeed, Don would later write in his foreword to George R White's biography, *Bo Diddley: Living Legend*: "After hearing Bo Diddley for the first time in 1955 my idea of music was forever changed... I think his influence is very evident in my intro to *Bye Bye Love*, which was my attempt to connect to that same rhythm he alone originated."

Unfortunately, by the autumn of 1963, all was not going well for the brothers following their earlier split from publishers Acuff-Rose and their hit-making team of Felice and Boudleaux Bryant. Exacerbated by the arrival of The Beatles on the scene, the harmonious duo were experiencing something of a dip in both chart success and popularity. Fearing the tour would be a financial failure, Arden reached out to Little Richard for help in boosting ticket sales. Before you could say, "A-wop-bop-a-loo-bop-a-lop-bam-boom!", the US firecracker was en route to join the bill as a co-headliner.

The tour kicked off swimmingly for all the star attractions involved. Following Bo's opening night performance, Chris Hutchins in his *NME* review wrote: "The familiar strains of the song to which he gave his name earned Bo a warm reception that had turned to

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THE BLACK GLADIATOR

From the striking plaid jackets and pompadours of the 1950s, through to the ubiquitous Stetson hat – complete with authentic law enforcement badge he wore after serving as a Deputy Sheriff in Valencia in New Mexico during the 1970s – Bo Diddley's sartorial style made him one of the most instantly recognisable figures in rock'n'roll.

From that dramatic red suit jacket he dons on the cover of 1960's *Have Guitar, Will Travel*, to the outlandish cowboy costume on the *Bo Diddley Is A Gunslinger* sleeve, there was no outfit that was too outrageous for the self-mythologising star.

However, when he returned in 1970 with his first album of new material since 1965's *500% More Man*, nothing could have prepared fans for the image of the shirtless He-Man depicted screaming on the back of *The Black Gladiator*. Dressed in a hardcore leather belt bondage get-up that would put the blackest of Norway's black metallers to shame, Diddley set about putting the X in extreme.

"I just decided to do somethin' different," he told *Living Legend* biographer George R White. "Everybody was wearin' funny lookin' crap – Isaac Hayes had come out with chains an' stuff on, an' it was kinda flowin' in that area at that particular time – so I got me some belts an' stuff, an' said I was 'The Black Gladiator'".

Recorded at Ter Mar Studios in Chicago and released through Checker in June 1970, the album might've originally got lost at the time, but *The Black Gladiator* stands as a brazen, bold, behemoth of soulful R&B with a filthy funky edge. Unmistakably still 'the greatest man in town', it was quite obvious that Bo Diddley had the power of the Gladiators.

something approaching red heat before his startling, though comparatively brief, set was completed." However, the arrival of *Vintage Rock*'s recent cover star Little Richard at Watford's Gaumont Cinema on 5 October 1963, immediately set the cat amongst the pigeons. Tearing through tracks such as *Long Tall Sally*, *Tutti Frutti*, *Rip It Up*, and *Lucille*, the flamboyant rocker overran his allocated time slot and would continue to do so night after night. Richard was not only grabbing the headlines but was also stealing the show and fans lapped up the sensational spectacle. It truly was a rock'n'roll education, as Keith Richards remembered in his autobiography: "Little Richard's stage presentation was outrageous and brilliant."

Richard's theatrics did little to phase Diddley, though, who simply let the music do the talking, and his explosive R&B left fans wanting more. Between October and December 1963 his latest single, *Pretty Thing*, made the Top 40 and his *Bo Diddley*, *Bo Diddley Is A Gunslinger* and *Bo Diddley Rides Again* albums all hit the Top 20. The tour was heralded as a success for Bo, for fans, and members of The Rolling Stones who got to witness the master deliver the goods every night.

Two years later, Diddley was back in Britain for a second time. In the interim year *Bo Diddley's Beach Party* album had spent six weeks in the Top 20 while his *Hey, Good Lookin'* single also broke the Top 40 in August 1965 when it made No.39. Sadly, the '65 tour was a mismanaged affair and stumbled its way around Britain before Bo skedaddled back to the States prior to the final show on 18 October.

British music impresario Don Arden was the brains behind 1963's star-studded UK package tour

Despite all the problems encountered, Bo still left a lasting impression on one particular fan, future Rolling Stone, Ronnie Wood, whose band The Birds opened for the star at London's 100 Club on 28 September. Writing for *The Guardian*, Wood remembered: "He didn't have a band with him so he asked us if we could back him up. What made him so great was his freedom, his reckless abandon, and the confidence that shone through in his music.

"I got to know him really well and he was always very affectionate towards me," Wood continued. "He would more or less sit you on his knee, a bit like your granddad, and tell you a story about back in the old days."

"Ron was Bo's good friend," confirms Hastings. "They would go on to tour together for almost two years between 1988 and 1989. I was on the road with them and they had a lot of fun 'cutting' each other up. I remember there was always a lot of laughter going on. Bo loved life on the road and didn't mind living out of a suitcase.

"He very much liked touring the UK and loved to meet fans over there. He enjoyed holding court like the king!"

Bo poses for a studio portrait in New York circa 1957 sporting his flamboyant tartan stagewear

"The big thrill is that Bo Diddley will be on the bill!" the Stones told *NME* pre-tour

"What made him so great was his freedom, his reckless abandon, and the confidence that shone through in his music" – RONNIE WOOD

For that first 1963 tour Diddley brought his manic maraca shaker Jerome Green and glamorous guitarist Norma-Jean Wofford with him on the road. Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Wofford was Bo's second female guitarist, replacing Peggy Jones who was better known as Lady Bo. Jones joined Diddley's band at just 16 years of age and recorded with him from 1957. Appearing on singles such as *Hey! Bo Diddley*, *Road Runner* and *Bo Diddley's A Gunslinger*, Lady Bo would state: "Yes, Bo Diddley helped shape the sound of rock'n'roll, but I did too because I was there by his side."

THE DUCHESS

When Jones left Bo in 1961 to start her own group The Jewels, later known as Lady Bo & The Family Jewel, Diddley recruited Wofford and christened her The Duchess. Known for her sultry skin-tight stage outfit, the protective band leader would tell male admirers that she was his sister.

Leaving the band to focus on her family in 1966, Diddley later stated: "We did everything together. "She was like family, which was why I told everyone that she was my sister."

In a time when it was rare for women in rock'n'roll music to be anything other than backing singers, Diddley challenged the norm and placed his female associates firmly in the spotlight.

"He never talked about being a supporter of female musicians in particular," revealed Hastings, who followed Lady Bo and The Duchess when she joined Diddley's band in the early 80s. "To him, it made no difference. Women have always been able to play as well as men and he embraced the reality of that, unlike others. For him it was silly to do otherwise, he was very progressive and ahead of his time."

From 1994, Hastings also acted as his music director. "He loved to improvise on stage and it was rarely the same way twice," Hastings continues.

"My job was to count off the tunes in the right tempo, bring the band in, signal stops such as in the middle of *Can't Judge A Book*, and also cue the endings. I would shape the improvisation in a way that made it interesting for us and also pushed Bo into a place he had maybe never been before. Sometimes I would take it pretty far out.

"Once we were performing with The Everly Brothers' band and they had some serious musicians in that group. I took one of the two-beats and started walking it in 'fours'... Now it turned into a serious fast jazz swing session. Sometimes he would get into a groove that would go on so I, in the effort of making it more interesting, would signal 'stop times' and attempt to signal the ending if I felt it was becoming too long. He never got mad

Bo poses with his guitarist Norma-Jean Wofford and Jerome Green, circa 1957

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Close friends Ronnie Wood and Bo Diddley in 1987, the year they collaborated as The Gunslingers – their live LP, *Live At The Ritz*, recorded in New York, was issued in 1988

at me for it. He was very easy to work with and a lot of fun.

"He was such an imposing figure and had a very strong stage persona. He took over the stage like a storm cloud. You were enveloped in the thunder and the lightning and it wouldn't let go!

"Bo had a very good sense of humour and also had quite a sweet side. He always thought of his people back home and the kids in the neighbourhood. I remember how he would make sure to get enough T-shirts to pass out to those kids. It was always 32 shirts for Bo and six for the band. He could also be obstinate and ornery. He didn't trust people very much, although he trusted his management and me. We always had his back."

A MAN AMONGST MEN

When Diddley died, aged 79, at his home in Florida, Hastings joined numerous family members and his manager, Margo Lewis, to be by his side. "I had been called down the day before because it was expected," Hastings recalls. "I had alone time with him throughout the day and I just sat with him, held his hand, and told him what an honour it was to be able to share the stage with him. His eyes were closed, but I know he heard me because he would give a little smile.

"He loved his manager Margo and the two were very close right up to the time that he actually passed. He called her over, blew her a kiss, and I will never forget that tender moment. He was surrounded by extended members of his family and they started singing a hymn called *Walk Around Heaven*. When it was over, Bo spoke his last words: 'Wow, I'm goin' to heaven'."

When considering the trailblazers of rock'n'roll, it seems criminal that 'The Originator' is often overlooked. "I opened the door for a lot of people and they just ran through and left me holding the knob," he told *The New York Times* in 2003. So *Vintage Rock* wonders how Bo would feel about the fact we're still talking about him today and continue to enjoy his music. "He was absolutely right to say that, after all he was their father/grandfather," Hastings replies. "As an innovator, I think that he was disappointed, upset, and frustrated. He didn't follow them, they followed him.

"I know he was upset with Elvis. Bo would tell me about seeing this young white kid at shows who would often watch him from the wings. The kid was brought in specifically to watch what Bo was doing on stage and that kid was Elvis. When we played Memphis, Tennessee, we took Bo to Graceland. What a mistake that was... The white kid ran over the black kid... boy, did he ever.

"For me, Bo Diddley is the rock that the roll was built upon and I think he would be very happy that he put his deep stamp on music. And you can't really ask for anything better than that can you?" ✶

HANGING WITH THE LAST GANG IN TOWN

Following the release of *Give 'Em Enough Rope*, the sophomore UK and US debut full-length LP by The Clash, the iconic punks sacked their manager Bernie Rhodes while preparing for their first shows across the pond. Caroline Coon, who took responsibility for the group's affairs, was charged with the task of tracking down Bo Diddley to see if the great man would support them on their Pearl Harbour Tour '79.

"They requested that I be on the show with 'em," Diddley is quoted in George R White's biography, *Bo Diddley: Living Legend*. "Our music is entirely different, but it was a gas! When they first met me, I think they were scared to death, you know, but they finally came round an' we began talkin' an' laughin' an' jokin' an' stuff. When they found out that I was a cool dude, then everything was really beautiful."

"In the flesh, he was more awe-inspiring than we could possibly imagine," The Clash's Joe Strummer recalled to *Q* magazine. "He dressed like he was ready to fight. He always had his huge sheriff's hat on and a giant belt buckle, and you were unmistakably in the presence of someone who gave no quarter."

During the tour, which opened on 31 January 1979 at Vancouver's Commodore Ballroom, the rock'n'roll giant stayed up all night drinking whiskey and entertaining the party with memories while his trademark Twang Machine rested on his bed.

"To ride on a bus with him and listen to him talk was great," Strummer later recalled to *Mojo*. "I noticed Bo was sitting up late, so I said, 'You know you've got a bunk, don't you Bo?' He said, 'Come and look at this'. He pulled back the curtains and his square guitar was there in the bunk, all strapped up. He went, 'Guitar rides in the bunk, I ride in the seat'."

"He encouraged me to think I could play," Strummer continued. "People like Bo gave me strength and encouragement."

Bo Peeps: (L-R) Frank Daley, Margo Lewis, Bo Diddley, Sandy Gennaro and Debby Hastings

© BOBBY LEVINS

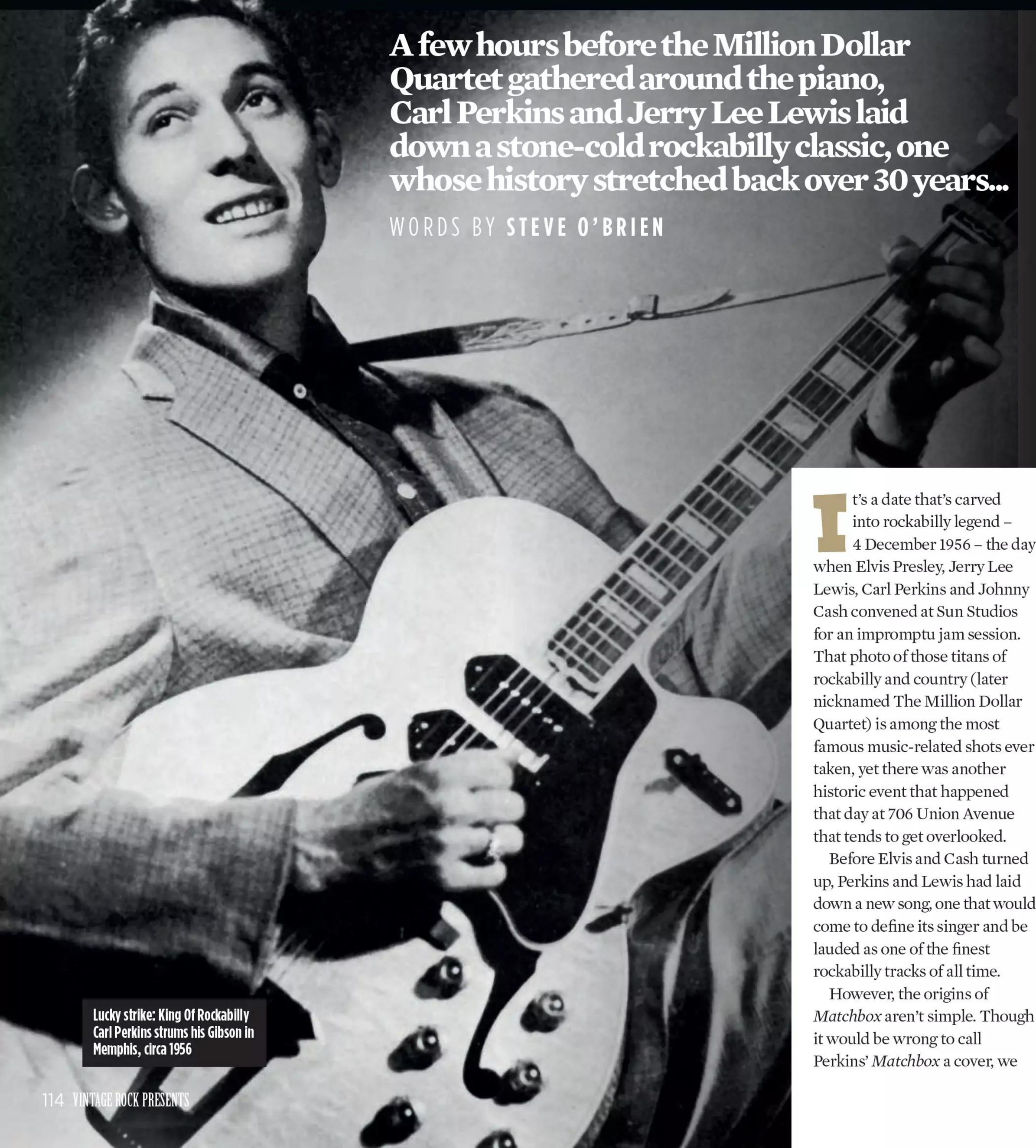
Matchbox

CARL PERKINS

SUN (1957)

A few hours before the Million Dollar Quartet gathered around the piano, Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis laid down a stone-cold rockabilly classic, one whose history stretched back over 30 years...

WORDS BY **STEVE O'BRIEN**



Lucky strike: King Of Rockabilly Carl Perkins strums his Gibson in Memphis, circa 1956

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It's a date that's carved into rockabilly legend – 4 December 1956 – the day when Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins and Johnny Cash convened at Sun Studios for an impromptu jam session. That photo of those titans of rockabilly and country (later nicknamed The Million Dollar Quartet) is among the most famous music-related shots ever taken, yet there was another historic event that happened that day at 706 Union Avenue that tends to get overlooked.

Before Elvis and Cash turned up, Perkins and Lewis had laid down a new song, one that would come to define its singer and be lauded as one of the finest rockabilly tracks of all time.

However, the origins of *Matchbox* aren't simple. Though it would be wrong to call Perkins' *Matchbox* a cover, we

With *Matchbox* in the can, history was made via the so-called Million Dollar Quartet

have to rewind 32 years to a song titled *Lost Wandering Blues* for its genesis. Performed by 'The Mother of the Blues', Ma Rainey, it included the lyrics, "I'm leaving this morning, with my clothes in my hand/ I won't stop to wandering, 'til I find my man/ I'm sitting here wondering, will a matchbox hold my clothes/ I've got a sun to beat, I'll be farther down the road."

Skip to 1927 and Blind Lemon Jefferson used the matchbox reference for a 12-bar blues number of his own, titled *Match Box Blues*. Jefferson's song included a few lyrical cribs from Rainey's track, but would prove far more influential, being covered by such artists as Lead Belly, Big Bill Broonzy, The Shelton Brothers and Roy Newman & His Boys.

Fast forward once more to 4 December '56 and Perkins and Lewis are at Sun, along with Carl's father, Buck. Jerry Lee, who was just 21 at the time, had been booked by Sam Philips to work his piano magic on a couple of tracks they were laying down for Carl. First up was Perkins' self-penned *Your True Love*, the recording of which went so well that Phillips proclaimed, "That's a hit!". "That song ain't worth a damn!" came the response from the ever-cocky Lewis.

For the flipside, Buck suggested a song that he remembered from his youth, *Match Box Blues*. It's not clear if Buck's father, always more a country music man, recalled Blind Lemon Jefferson's version or one of its many covers, but it had stayed with him. However, nobody that day had the song to hand or could remember all of its lyrics. Instead of performing an actual cover of the song, Carl cooked up a new track around the few lyrics that Buck was able to recall, while Jerry Lee began improvising a fresh boogie-woogie riff around it.

Musically, Blind Lemon Jefferson's number was raw and spare, and lyrically told the story of a man walking away from a toxic relationship. Perkins' version, in contrast, is rockabilly to its core and is about a "poor boy" who's "a long way from home". The lyrics – "Well I'm sitting here wondering/ Will a matchbox hold my clothes" – are really the only words that link *Lost Wandering Blues*, *Match Box Blues* and *Matchbox*.

What's surprising now is that *Matchbox* was issued not as the A-side, but as the B-side to the patently inferior *Your True Love*. Despite the disc making No.13 on the Billboard country and western chart and No.67 on the US pop chart, it's *Matchbox* which remains the most recognised and most covered.

Perkins performed the song on ABC's country-focused *Ozark Jubilee* on 2 February 1957 and later on the syndicated TV show *Ranch Party* hosted by Tex Ritter. Sun also paid out for an advert for the single in *Billboard*.

Meanwhile, *Matchbox* was enthusiastically embraced in the UK. The Beatles were all devoted Perkins fanboys (during the group's first tour of Scotland, in 1960, George used the pseudonym 'Carl Harrison', in reference to his favourite singer, while Paul McCartney described Perkins as "our big hero") and began covering *Matchbox* in their live shows. Initially it was Pete Best who would perform the song on stage, a role taken over by John Lennon after the drummer was fired. Later, when the band waxed the track for their *Long Tall Sally* EP, it was Best's replacement, Ringo Starr, who stepped up to the mic. Remarkably, Perkins was visiting London at the time and was invited to observe the session at Abbey Road in June 1964. Starr recalled feeling "very embarrassed" about his vocals due to a bad throat (he was hospitalised two days later with acute tonsillitis and pharyngitis). There were rumours at the time that Perkins contributed to the track, but there's sadly no proof, bar a modest jam before recording took place. Ringo would get to perform *Matchbox* alongside Perkins and Eric Clapton 21 years later, for the televised concert, *Blue Suede Shoes: A Rockabilly Session*.

Matchbox is unique in that it's almost the first example of sampling. Blind Lemon Jefferson pilfered a few lines from a song and created something new and then 29 years later, Perkins did the same.

There was clearly something in the air around Sun Studio on 4 December 1956. But remember that The Million Dollar Quartet wouldn't have happened had Perkins and Lewis not been booked to record two new songs that day. And had Buck Perkins not turned up alongside his son, that B-side to *Your True Love* would have turned out very different.

Matchbox is a unique song in that it's almost the first example of sampling. Blind Lemon Jefferson pilfered a few lines from a song made three years before and created something completely different, and then 29 years later Carl Perkins did the same – three contrasting songs based around the same couple of lines. Given the choice of all three, however, we know which disc we'd be taking to our desert island. ✶

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The Tour From Hell

When the rock'n'roll pioneers set off on a chilly tour in January 1959, no-one suspected it would spell the end of an era. By Randy Fox

On 3 February 1959, Jerry Dwyer's small plane left the runway of the Mason City, Iowa airport. It was a clear, beautiful Tuesday morning, but Dwyer was on a grim mission. Filled with foreboding, he immediately began scanning the ground below him. A little over eight hours earlier, slightly before one o'clock in the morning, Dwyer had watched a Beechcraft Bonanza owned by his charter flight company depart from the same airport.

The small, four-seater plane was piloted by 21-year-old Roger Peterson, and carried three passengers – rock'n'roll singers Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and JP Richardson, aka The Big Bopper. After leaving the field, the plane levelled off and made a 180 degree left turn, heading to the northwest and its planned destination of Fargo, North Dakota. The musicians were due to perform in nearby Moorhead, Minnesota on the evening of 3 February, and the plane had been chartered to avoid a long, cold and tedious bus ride over icy roads.

Despite moderate wind gusts and snow, the takeoff was flawless. Dwyer watched the tail light of the plane as it receded from sight. About four miles from the field,

RIGHT Buddy and the new Crickets – with Waylon Jennings on bass and Tommy Allsup on guitar – in one of the last-ever photos of Holly from the final show, February 2, 1959

© James McCool and Sevan Garabedian. Photographer Mary Gerber

'The audience enthusiasm was overwhelming. But Holly and the other acts knew they had a hard road ahead of them'

the plane appeared to descend, almost as if heading for a landing, but given the snowfall and the angle of the turn, that apparent descent was surely an optical illusion.

By daybreak, Dwyer was less sure it had been an illusion. Shortly after the plane departed, he had attempted to reach Peterson by radio, without response. The radio silence continued throughout the whole night. By the next morning, Peterson was sure something was wrong. The plane had not arrived in Fargo, and an alert was issued for the missing aircraft. Taking matters into his own hands, Dwyer decided to follow the most likely flightpath and see what he could find.

Just a few minutes after takeoff, at approximately 9:35a.m. local time, Dwyer spotted the wreckage in a nearby cornfield. It was obvious the plane had hit the ground at a high rate of speed, as the main fuselage was a tangled ball of metal, wood and fabric resting against a barbed wire fence, while bits of debris and bodies were strewn across the field.

ELEVEN DAYS EARLIER, the Winter Dance Party tour had kicked off on 23 January 1959 with a show in George Devine's Ballroom in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Rock'n'roll tours were a genuine rarity in the Midwest, and the enthusiasm of the audience proved to be overwhelming. But Buddy Holly and the four other featured acts – Ritchie Valens, The Big Bopper, Dion and the Belmonts, and Frankie Sardo – knew they had a hard road stretching ahead of them. Travelling through the flat, frozen plains of Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa during the harshest months of the winter would be a difficult task under any circumstances, but the booking agency, General Artists Corporation (GAC), had seemingly given little or no thought to geography while planning the tour. Rather than follow a logical path from city to nearby city, the tour instead would zig-zag its way between distant locations, guaranteeing gruelling all-night rides in bare-bones buses over icy and dangerous two-lane highways.

© Donna Fischer Doffing

ABOVE 16-year-old fan Donna Fischer Doffing took this snap of Valens with Jennings and Allsup in Milwaukee on January 23

RIGHT The payphone at the Surf in Clear Lake, used by Holly to call his wife

A MISSED PHONE CALL
THE REUNION THAT NEVER WAS

As Buddy Holly was playing for an eager and enthusiastic audience in Clear Lake, Iowa, over 1000 miles away, some of his old friends were discussing plans for the future. Holly had split with The Crickets in November 1958. The remaining members, Jerry Allison and Joe B Mauldin, recruited long-time friend Sonny Curtis, who previously backed and recorded with Holly in 1956.

Through the months that followed, The Crickets worked in Norman Petty's studio, eventually cutting two songs for a potential single with vocalist Earl Sinks. But Petty showed little urgency in sending the master tapes to New York for release and also displayed an open animosity to Curtis' role in the revised line-up. Frustrated at their lack of progress with Petty, Allison, Curtis, and Maudlin decided to call Holly and suggest a possible reunion.

As Maudlin recalled to writer John Goldrosen, "We started trying to get in touch with Buddy because he had said, 'You ever want to get back together with me, then all you have to do is call.'"

After first trying to reach Holly at his New York apartment, the trio called the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, Iowa. By the time of their call, the show was over and Holly had already left for the airport – ending the chance for what could have been a magnificent reunion.

Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

© Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

Despite these challenges, Holly had little choice in signing on for the tour. In November 1958, he announced he was moving to New York and would no longer work with the Clovis, New Mexico-based producer Norman Petty. Holly and Petty had enjoyed a successful partnership for almost two years, scoring hit after hit. But as time progressed, Holly came to suspect that all was not well with his share of recording and songwriting royalties. The legal actions following the split led to Petty freezing all royalty payments to Holly. By January 1959, Holly was finding himself low on ready cash, and the offer to headline the Winter Dance Party tour offered the chance for some much-needed income.

ABOVE Having moved to New York, Buddy had some publicity shots taken by fashion and celebrity photographer Bruno

Holly's past experience on GAC package tours had been mostly pleasant, but times had changed for the rock'n'roll tour circuit. Rock'n'roll shows were simply

© Don Larson

© Don Larson

not as profitable as they had been just a few years earlier. GAC badly needed to cut costs, and their performers' comfort was where the axe fell.

The budget cuts were obvious to everyone who embarked on the tour. The performers were required to travel without a road crew, and were forced to load and unload their own equipment at each stop. Even worse, they were required to travel in cheap, second-hand school buses ill-equipped for the harsh road conditions and freezing temperatures, often traversing more than 300 miles of icy roads in a single night.

Within days the performers had worked their way through several replacement buses as they experienced breakdowns, severe lack of heat, and sleepless, all-night rides on the chilly and uncomfortable coaches. By the end of the first week, the performers were exhausted, and none had come at all prepared for the weather. Holly and Richardson were from Texas, and Valens was from Southern California, where freezing temperatures were a rarity. Even the New Yorkers, Dion and the Belmonts and Frankie Sardo, were underdressed for the sub-zero temperatures. The Winter Dance Party quickly received a new name, "the tour from hell".

OPPOSITE Don Larson took these shots of Ritchie Valens and Dion and the Belmonts at the Fournier's Ballroom, Eau Claire, Wisconsin on January 26

RIGHT Ritchie Valens with fan Donna Fischer Doffing at the Milwaukee show. Valens enjoyed the fact that she shared a name with his hit record

© Donna Fischer Doffing

AFTER REPORTING THE location of the crash, Jerry Dwyer turned his plane back towards the Mason City Airport, landed, then hurried to his car to drive to the crash site. When he arrived, the police were already on the scene. It quickly became obvious that as the plane crashed, the right wing had struck the ground first, ripping it away. The remainder of the plane had cartwheeled across the field for 500 yards, crumpling the fuselage before coming to rest at a woven-wire fence.

Crash investigators later estimated the plane was travelling at 170mph when it struck the ground. The bodies of Holly, Valens, and Richardson had been flung clear of the plane as it tumbled across the field, with Holly's and Valens' bodies lying 20 feet south of the main wreckage and Richardson's body 40 feet beyond the fence row. The body of pilot Roger Peterson was found crushed in the ball of the wreckage. All four men died on impact.

'By the end of the first week the performers were exhausted, and none had come prepared for the weather'

FOR HOLLY THE turning point on the tour from hell came in the early morning hours of 1 February. On the evening of 31 January, the Winter Dance Party tour rocked the National Guard Armory in Duluth, Minnesota. Despite the hardships, the performers gave their all for each performance. Over 58 years later, one attendee, Bob Dylan – a high school student at the time – recalled Holly's performance in his 2017 Nobel Prize lecture. "He looked me right straight dead in the eye, and he transmitted something," Dylan said. "Something, I didn't know what. And it gave me the chills."

But a sparkling performance provided little comfort once Holly and the other musicians had traipsed back out to the freezing bus. They had been on the road for only a few hours when the vehicle slowed and came to a complete stop. With heavy snow falling

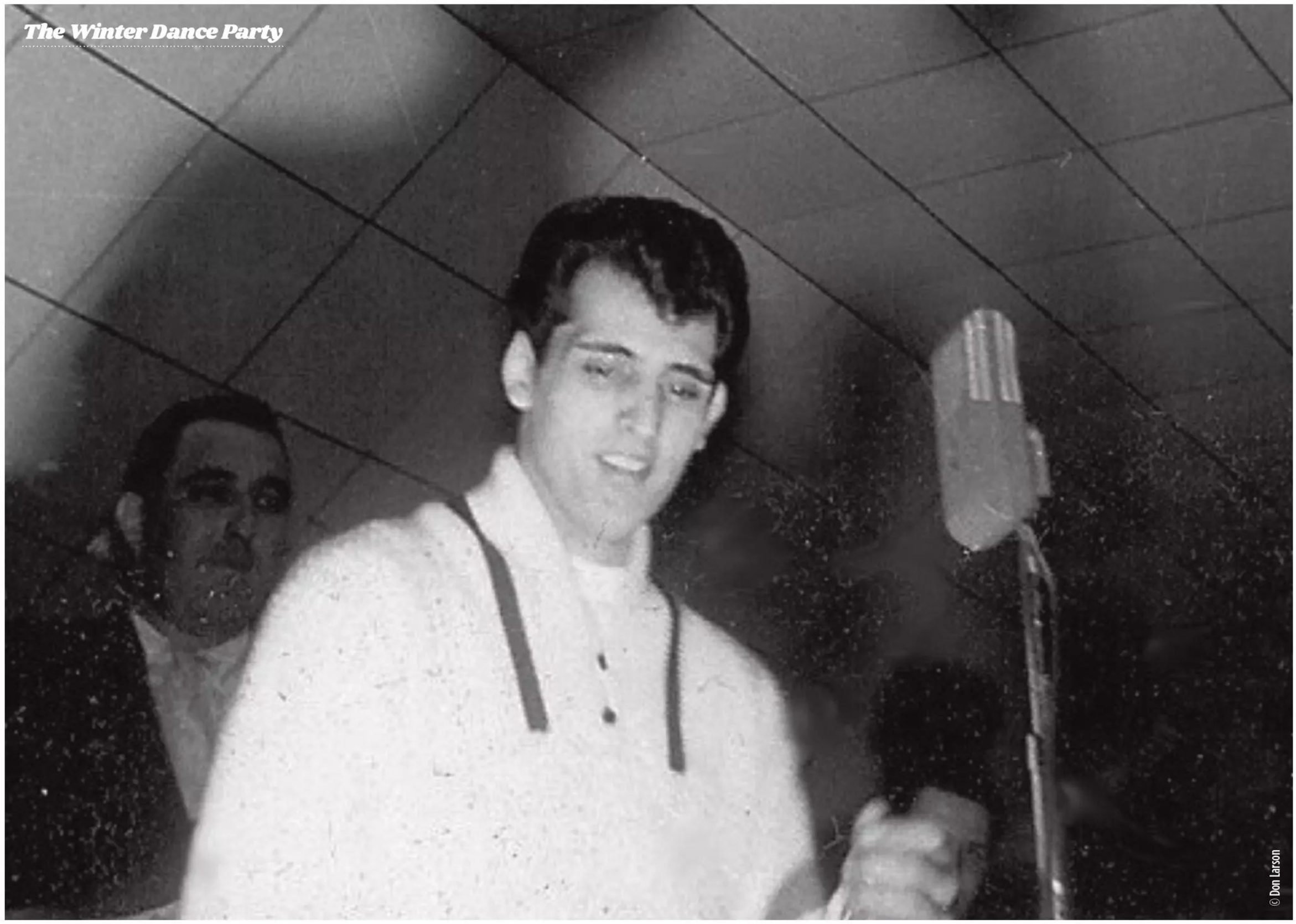
FRANKIE SARDO
THE OTHER WINTER DANCE PARTY STAR

In comparison to Dion and of course the big names that lost their lives that night, relatively little is said about the Winter Dance Party opening act, Frankie Sardo. Sardo died in 2014, but fortunately the genial Brooklyn-born singer relayed his memories of the tour to Jim McCool and Sevan Garabedian in 2010.

"I ended up on this tour... it wasn't the first one I did, but it was the last," said Sardo. "I'd met Dion, and Buddy, and I knew Waylon. I'd just lived through the [Korean] war, what did I care? I was just having fun!

"Buddy had a great sense of humour. Most cowboys do! We all joked, sang, played poker. We'd meet with the fans all the time – no separation. If anybody had played the star routine, they'd have been thrown off the bus!

"It was the bus breaking down a second time at Clear Lake that did it. Buddy said. 'Screw it, let's get a plane.' When the crash came, I could not adjust to it. That flight was just a hop, skip and a jump... I'd jumped out of planes in combat! We found out at the next hotel lobby. We cried, called our families... total shock. We decided to carry on, as a tribute. We sang their numbers. I did *La Bamba*. You see... I was never a rock star. But Buddy, he would have ended up a writer, an A&R man, like Clive Davis. He LOVED music. He would have had a life in the business."



and temperatures dipping to 35 degrees below zero, the musicians found themselves stranded on a lonely stretch of highway in the wilds of northern Wisconsin.

While several of the musicians began burning newspapers in an effort to stay warm, Carl Bunch, Holly's drummer, was having difficulty moving his legs and the pain in his feet was quickly becoming intense. In the dim light, guitarist Tommy Allsup examined Bunch's feet, which had turned a disturbing shade of brown.

Finally, a deputy sheriff arrived on the scene and called for additional patrol cars that ferried the dangerously hypothermic musicians to Hurley, Wisconsin on the Wisconsin/Michigan border where they were able to get a few hours of warm sleep in a hotel. The situation was more dire for Carl Bunch. Diagnosed with a severe case of frostbite, he was admitted to the hospital in nearby Ironwood, Michigan, where he spent the next several days recovering.

A scheduled matinee show in Appleton, Wisconsin was cancelled, but the assembled musicians continued on to Green Bay, Wisconsin in the relative comfort of a Greyhound bus for an evening performance at the Riverside Ballroom.

The next day, 2 February, had been scheduled as an official day off, but a call from New York ruined any hope for rest and relaxation. Hoping to wring every possible nickel from the tour, a last minute booking had been arranged at the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, Iowa – and it was 350 miles away. Holly and the rest had little choice, and boarded yet another second-hand school bus for the long trip west. "Surely," Holly thought, "there has to be a better way to travel."

ABOVE Show opener Frankie Sardo was enjoying the success of his surprise regional hit *Fake Out*

OPPOSITE Two more great shots by Don Larson of the Eau Claire show of Buddy and the Crickets and The Big Bopper in their element

'Hoping to wring every nickel from the tour, a last-minute booking had been arranged at the Surf Ballroom'

AS POLICE AND emergency calls about the crash filled the airwaves of Clear Lake and Mason City, a nearby radio station picked up on the reports while monitoring police calls. As soon as the first identification of the bodies was reported, the station began running announcements of the crash, as well as submitting the story to national wire services.

Initial announcements were short on details; many reported Buddy Holly's death along with unidentified "members of his band". At least part of this early confusion was caused by the discovery of Tommy Allsup's wallet lying in the debris. The night before, Allsup had given Holly his wallet so he could use the identification to pick up a registered letter waiting for Allsup in Moorhead, Minnesota.

Surf Ballroom manager Carroll Anderson was called to make an identification of the bodies, and shortly afterwards corrected news reports went out over the wire services and the story was broadcast coast-to-cost over radio and television stations. No consideration was given to the families and friends of the victims. Maria Elena Holly would endure the shock of learning of her husband's death through her television. Allsup spotted a picture of The Big Bopper on TV as he entered the Moorhead hotel; only when he spoke to the check-in desk did he realise the terrible truth.

© Don Larson

(c) Don Larson

Photo by Ronald Martinez/Getty Images

LEFT A statue of Buddy Holly at Buddy Holly Plaza

RIGHT By February 4, the papers had the names of the deceased and pictures of the wreckage in a field on the Albert Juhl farm

MASON C

"The Newspa

VOL. 97 Associated Press and United Press International Full Lease Wires

Rock 'n' Roll Ide

Bodies of two victims (arrows) lie r

Iowa's Right-
Withstands

Convoy

BERLIN — The Russian army Tuesday was holding an American military convoy within sight of the West German border after being refused permission to examine an open cargo of jeeps.

The U.S. Army charged detention of the four-truck convoy from Berlin was with the "obvi intention of creating an incident." Two stiff protests and demands for immediate release the trucks were sent the Red Army.

The trucks were stopped at the

DES MOINES — Iowa's "right to work law" withstood all attacks in the House Tuesday.

On a final vote, after two attacking amendments were defeated, the House turned down a repealer which would have eliminated the right to work statute by a vote of 74 opposed, 33 for.

Earlier, a Democratic plan to amend the repealer to legalize

a union shop was defeat 59-49. Democrats voted for all Republicans except Re Riley Dietz (R-Walcott), vot against it.

A Dietz plan to require secr union balloting was also feated by the same lineup the Democratic proposal drew

DIETZ DECLARED that would "not only vote for even argue for" the Democra

ZUMA Press, Inc. / Alamy Stock Photo

BY THE TIME the bus arrived in Clear Lake, Iowa, Holly was fed up. They were exhausted and cold, and with no time to have laundry done the look and smell of his band's clothing was becoming repulsive. As Waylon Jennings recalled in his 1996 autobiography, "We'd change in the dressing room, go on, get all sweated up, and then run back to the bus. We tried to hang our wrinkled suits in the aisle, and after a while, it got kind of ripe in there. We all smelled like goats."

> ***'Chartering a plane would give them time to get some sleep, take a bath, and make arrangements for the next show'***

On the way to Clear Lake, Holly suggested chartering a plane to fly himself, Allsup and Jennings to the next stop in Moorhead, Minnesota. It would give them time to get some sleep, take a bath, have their clothes laundered, and make arrangements for the following show. Allsup and Jennings agreed, and after arriving at Clear Lake, Holly asked Carroll Anderson to make the arrangements with the nearby airport in Mason City, Iowa.

During the show, JP Richardson heard about the plan. As The Big Bopper was over six feet tall and weighed

CITY GLOBE-GAZETTE

aper That Makes All North Iowans Neighbors"

MASON CITY, IOWA, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 1959 (7c a copy)—This paper consists of Four Sections—Section One No. 100

ols Among Lake Crash Dead

near the demolished plane in stubble field

Plane Piloted by Clear Lake Man Plows Into Field

Four persons, three identified as nationally famous rock 'n' roll singers, died early Tuesday in a plane crash five miles north of Clear Lake.

The three singers were Buddy Holly, 22, Texas, Ritchie Valens, 21, Los Angeles, and J. P. Richardson, 24, of Louisiana, known professionally as the "Big Bopper."

Also killed was the pilot of the plane, Roger Peterson, 21, Clear Lake.

The entertainers had appeared at the Surf Ballroom Monday night and were to appear at Fargo, N.D., Tuesday night.

Other members of the troupe which appeared at Clear Lake left after the show by chartered bus for Fargo. They are Dion and the Belmonts, Frankie Sardo and the Crickets, of which Holly was the singing star.

APPARENTLY HOLLY, Valens and Richardson decided to fly in order to arrive ahead of the troupe and make advance preparations.

The single-engine, four-place Beechcraft Bonanza left the Mason City Municipal airport shortly after 1 a.m. It crashed about seven miles northwest of the airport. The plane was owned by the Dwyer Flying Service, Mason City.

The trip to Fargo was expected to take about 3½ hours. When no word of the plane's arrival was heard, Jerry Dwyer, owner of the flying service, set out to look for the party. He was delayed several hours because of early morning fog.

Dwyer discovered the wreckage on the Albert Juhl farm at about 9:30 a.m.

It was obvious that the pilot [illegible] straight [illegible] low angle to the ground [illegible] toward the northwest.

THE LEFT WING of the plane seemingly struck the ground

BUDDY HOLLY

3 Singers Made Top Recordings

(Another Story on Page 2)

All three of the singers killed in Tuesday's plane crash near Clear Lake were among the nation's top rock

-to-Work Law House Attacks

amendment if the changes he suggested were adopted.

He proposed that before a union shop contract could be negotiated, workers vote by secret ballot as to whether the union would represent them. Union officers also would have [illegible] elected by secret ballot. The Dietz amendment also would require use of the secret ballot in strike votes.

Rep. Scott Swisher (D-Iowa City), Democratic floor leader, said he would be glad to go along with Dietz's amendment. But Rep. Clark McNeal (R-Belmond), the House majority leader, declared:

"I don't know where in the [illegible] child was born but [illegible] appearance of the little [illegible]

"If we adopt this amendment we will be going a long way. And when you look at it in the cold light of human liberty everyone in this room will re-

'3 Reasons' for Flight by Singers

The three rock 'n' roll stars who died in Tuesday's plane crash north of Clear Lake had three reasons for chartering a plane to take them to their next stop at Fargo, N. D., according to Carroll Anderson, manager of the Surf Ballroom.

They expressed a desire [illegible] Anderson said [illegible] make advance preparations for the troupe's Fargo appearance, said they were weary of bus travel and that "they wanted to have time to get their clothes laundered."

Hulton Archive/Getty

more than 250lbs, attempting to sleep on the tiny bus seats was agony for him. Furthermore, he was coming down with a bad case of the flu. Desperate to avoid more bus travel, he had little problem convincing Jennings to give up his seat. Ritchie Valens, equally keen, tried the same tactic with Allsup. The two tossed a coin, with Valens winning the coveted spot.

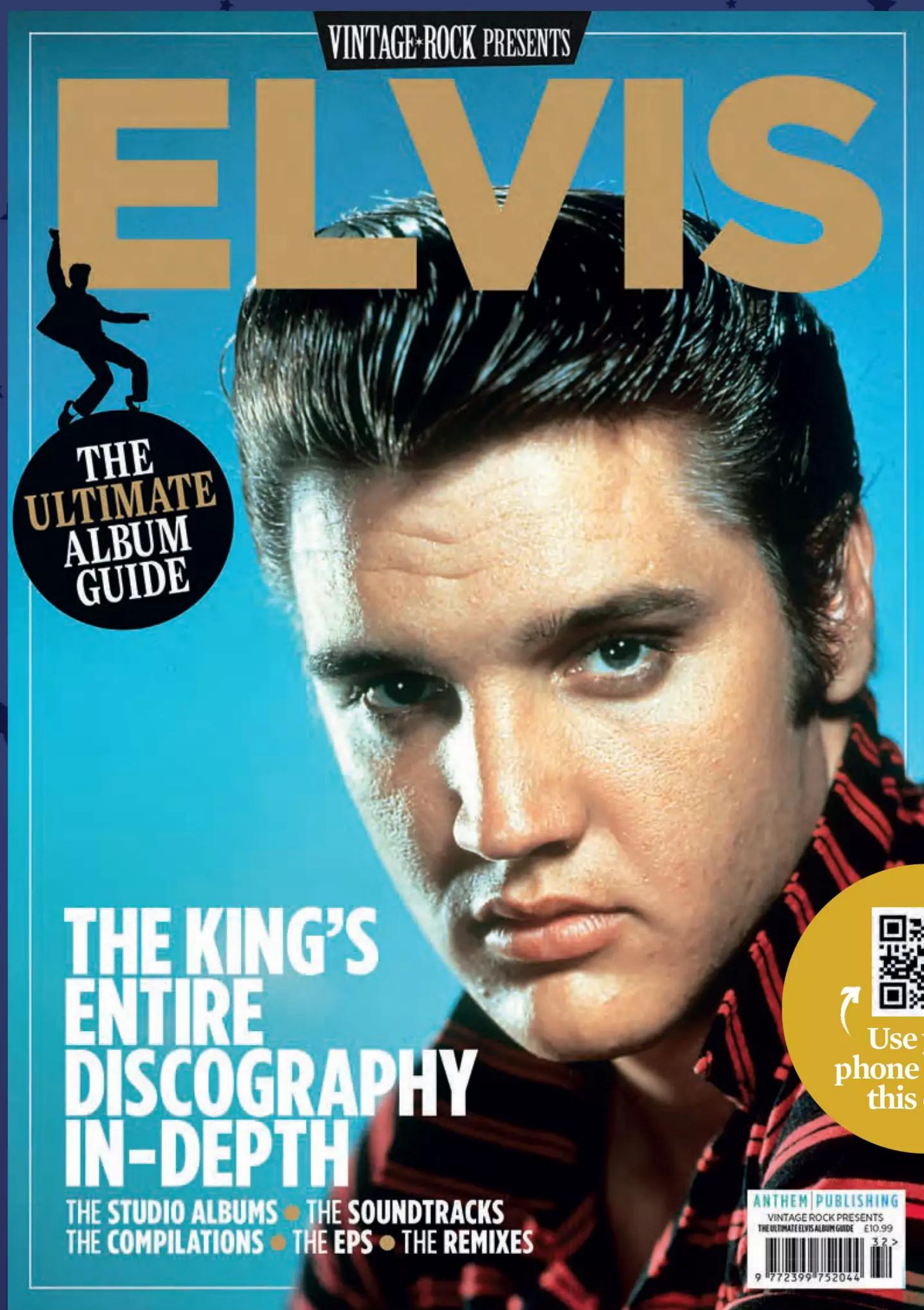
SOMETIME DURING THE evening, Holly made a call to Maria Elena. As she later recalled to writer John Goldrosen, "He told me what an awful tour it had been... everybody on the tour was really disgusted with the whole thing. He said the tour was behind schedule, and he had to go on ahead to the next stop to make arrangements for the show. He didn't tell me that he was going to fly. I said, 'Why should you go ahead?' And he said, 'There's nobody else to do it.'"

Holly, Richardson and Valens arrived at the Mason City airport at 12:40a.m. on 3 February. They were met by Jerry Dwyer, the owner of Dwyer's Flying Service, and pilot Roger Peterson. The forecasts for the night indicated excellent visibility of 10 miles or greater. With the temperature dipping to 18 degrees Fahrenheit and wind gusts to 35mph with light snowfall predicted, conditions were less than perfect but still adequate for normal visual flight.

But Peterson had missed a weather advisory for lowered visibility due to fog and snow. This would necessitate flying by instruments – a skill he was not certified for. Also, the plane was equipped with an old-style attitude gyro which displayed the plane's bank and pitch in the opposite manner to more modern instruments. For a younger, less experienced pilot flying with no visibility, it meant one might believe the plane was climbing when it was descending. Unaware of these potential pitfalls, Holly, Richardson, and Valens stowed their luggage and climbed into their seats – relieved for a respite from the tour from hell and oblivious to the destiny that awaited them. ★

ABOVE The wreckage of the Beechcraft lies in several inches of snow in the field on the morning of February 3, 1959

'Buddy said he had to go on ahead of the others. I said, why should you go? He said, there's nobody else to do it'



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OCTOBER 1958

FANS RIOT AT BILL HALEY SHOWS IN GERMANY

When the trailblazing Bill Haley And His Comets arrived in Germany for live shows in October 1958, few could have predicted the trail of chaos that would follow in their wake. Trouble was already seemingly brewing at Hamburg's Ernst-Merck-Halle when young gig-goers fought with guards from the city's student association and 100 policemen who tried to clear the venue. At the Berlin Sportspalast on 26 October, though, things turned even uglier as 500 rock'n'roll fans among the 7,000-strong crowd battled with police. Five policemen were beaten and six audience members were severely injured. Damage to the Berlin venue was estimated at more than 50,000 DM (the equivalent to 120,000 EUR in today's money). The chaos left the authorities on both the West and East sides of the city enraged. The West Berlin senate banned all future rock'n'roll concerts while the official Communist Party newspaper of East Germany, *Neues Deutschland*, blasted Haley in a front page editorial claiming he was "turning the youth of the land of Bach and Beethoven into raging beasts." Local media considered the riots the worst that Berlin had ever seen.

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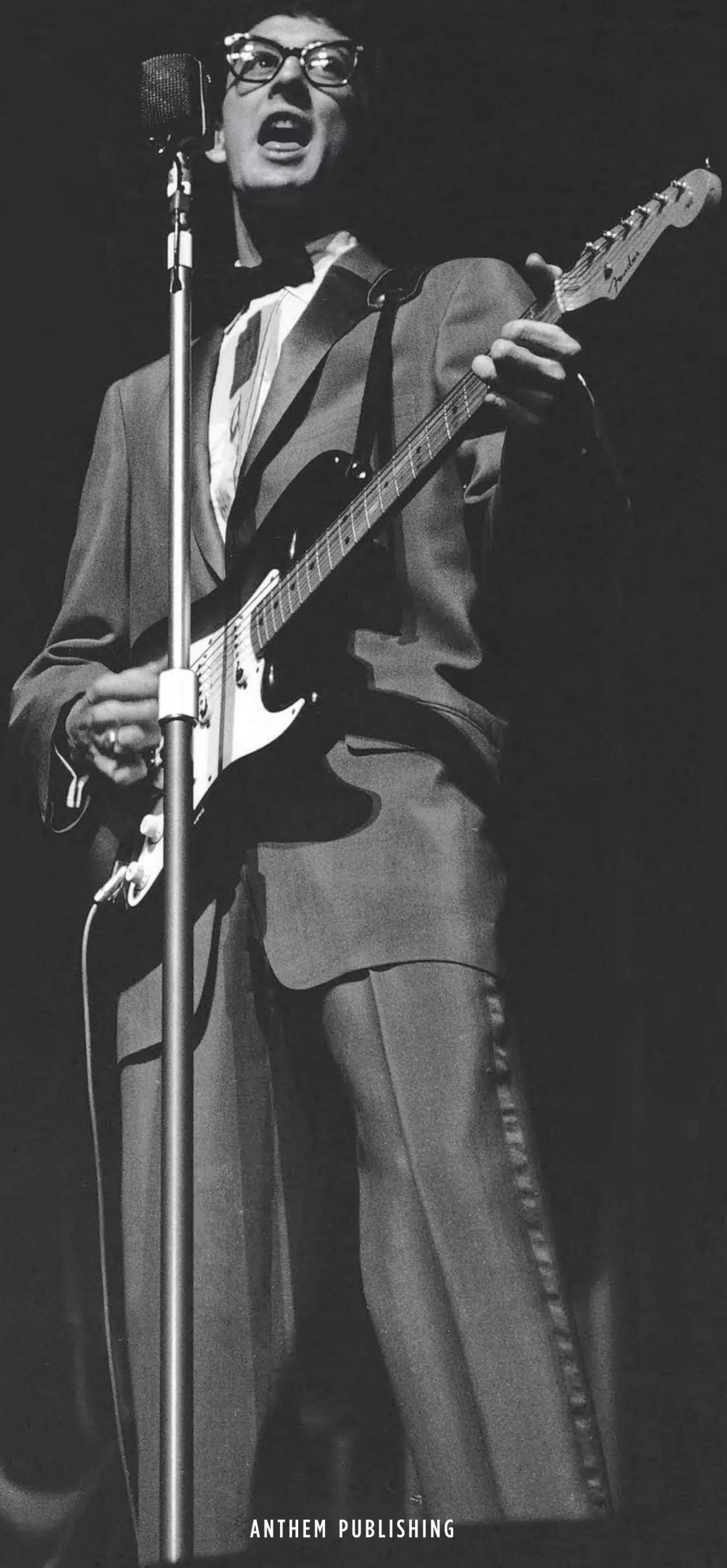

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