EDDIE COCHRAN

Eddie Cochran was born in Albert Lea, Minnesota on October 3, 1938, and grew up in Albert Lea, Minnesota, just a half-hour drive from Clear Lake, Iowa, where his friend Buddy Holly died in 1959. Cochran's family moved to the Los Angeles area in 1953, making Cochran another "L. A. Rockabilly" (he was even engaged to one of Ricky Nelson's songwriters, Sharon Sheely, at the time of his death). Although he was a big star in England and a major influence on a generation of British guitar players, Cochran's fame in America was short-lived and based largely on the eternal popularity of one song: "Summertime Blues."

Eddie Cochran's musical and vocal style—and clothes and hair style and moody look—were strongly influenced by Elvis. After discovering Elvis' Sun recordings, Cochran switched from country to rockabilly and hooked up with **Jerry Capehart**, who would be the co-writer and co-producer for all of his recordings. Cochran's first break came in 1956, when he signed with Liberty Records and landed an appearance in *The Girl Can't Help It*, one of the first big-budget "rocksploitation" films. The movie featured Cochran singing his own "**Twenty Flight Rock**," a great rockabilly number that seemed destined to be a hit until Liberty inexplicably chose instead to release a much weaker song, "Sittin' in the Balcony." Although "Sittin' in the Balcony" did hit the Top Twenty in 1957, the far superior "Twenty Flight Rock" was lost in the shuffle.

The record and the movie appearance landed Cochran on the national package tours in 1957, but it was another year before he returned to the record charts. In the meantime he recorded steadily, having worked out a deal with Liberty and his publishing company that allowed him generous access to the recording studio. Capehart and Cochran used the opportunity to refine their studio technique, and in the summer of 1958 they came up with a classic.

"Summertime Blues"

"Summertime Blues" has been covered by countless bands—most notably by the Who and the San Francisco band Blue Cheer, who recorded a ponderously thundering version in 1968 that is often pegged as the "first heavy metal record." "Summertime Blues" was the first "power chord" classic, with a signature guitar riff played out in strong chords that obliterate the line between "rhythm" and "lead." Of course, power chords are custom-made for the electric guitar, where sheer volume can create a riveting effect and turn the hammered chords into an act of primitive defiance (as in later power chord classics like the Kinks' "You Really Got Me" and "All Day and All of the Night" and the Who's "My Generation" and "Baba O'Riley"). It is something of a shock, then, to notice that Cochran's original version is played on *acoustic* guitars, yet it still manages to sound full and exciting. Cochran close-miked his acoustic and used the still novel technique of overdubbing to create a layer of several acoustic guitars all playing the same part, giving the record a strong sound while retaining the airy quality of the acoustic guitar.

The rhythm track of "Summertime Blues" mirrors the understated power of the guitars, dispensing with the expected drum beats in favor of overdubbed hand claps and light percussion (also supplied by Cochran, who played virtually everything on the record and provided the deep, echoing voice of the boss, father and congressman as well). The

prominent bass line which begins the song and provides much of its rhythmic drive is played on a six-string electric bass—an uncommon instrument, especially at a time when *any* type of electric bass was still a rarity. The overall effect of the record is unique: full yet light, simple yet intricately crafted, "Summertime Blues" is a masterpiece of production work from one of rock's first studio visionaries. Cochran and Capehart purposefully crafted an "artificial" sound that couldn't be recreated live—created a *record* rather than simply a recorded performance. The Beatles later popularized this conception of recording as an art in itself, but in the fifties only Cochran and Buddy Holly had such a clear vision of the studio as a creative tool.

The lyrics of "Summertime Blues" are as ageless as the music: any teenager can relate to the song's restless boredom and frustration. Like Chuck Berry, Cochran and Capehart recognized and wrote to the concerns of teenagers, focusing on the annoying parents and despotic bosses and all the other hassles from the adult world that are the real truths of summer. (Capehart: "I knew that there had been a lot of songs about summer, but none about the *hardships* of summer."[i]) Cochran highlights the frustration and its cause in dramatic stops and starts that punctuate the song, half filled by the lamenting refrain ("there ain't no cure for the summertime blues") and half overtaken by the Voices of Authority that form the immovable objects of teenage life, all the way up to the Halls of Congress: "I'd like to help you, son, but you're too young to vote!"

"C'mon Everybody"

Cochran's next release, "C'mon Everybody," followed the "Summertime Blues" blueprint: layers of acoustic guitar power chords, light percussion (in this case tambourines), a prominent six-string bass and lyrics aimed right at teenage life—this time the *fun* side of teenage life. Like its predecessor, "C'mon Everybody" is punctuated with stops and starts that highlight the title refrain, which is now a call for everyone to come on over and party: the house is empty, the folks are gone... and if they come home early? "Who *cares*? C'mon Everybody!"

"C'mon Everybody," released at the end of 1958, was a big hit in England but barely reached the Top Forty in America. The power chords and stop-and-start arrangement appeared again in "Nervous Breakdown," a great song but a dismal chart failure. Cochran responded with a variety of country, R&B and pop styles that hint at the range of his talent but did little to reverse his fortunes in his homeland.[ii] When the excellent "Something Else" failed to hit, Cochran headed for England, where packed houses greeted him as a conquering hero. Cochran's records and live performances had a profound and direct influence on the power chord guitar style of the Who's Pete Townshend and the Kinks' Dave Davies, and on other stars of rock's second generation.

Then, suddenly, it was over. On April 17, 1960, Cochran died in a car crash while on his way to the airport for a trip back to the States. The same crash badly injured his friend Gene Vincent and shocked fans still mourning the loss of Buddy Holly. Only 21 at the time of his death, Eddie Cochran had already proven himself a formidable creative talent. He left behind one of rock's all-time classics, but it's safe and sad to say that his potential remained largely untapped.

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[i]From album liner notes for "Eddie Cochran: Legendary Masters Series," (United Artists Records - UAS-9959, 1971).

[ii]The country-style "Cut Across Shorty" was recorded at Cochran's last session, in January 1960, and featured Buddy Holly's old band, the Crickets--less than a year after Holly's death, and only three months before Cochran's.