

## Rockabilly Beyond Sun

### THE JOHNNY BURNETTE ROCK & ROLL TRIO

Sam Phillips could only sign and record a select few from the steady stream—often approaching flood levels—of singers and groups that turned up at his door. The Johnny Burnette Rock & Roll Trio was one of the many acts Phillips auditioned and turned down, though their credentials were certainly impeccable: they were from Memphis, went to high school with Elvis and even worked at the Crown Electric Company with their old schoolmate. The Trio finally signed with Brunswick/Coral in 1956 after a winning performance on Ted Mack's *Amateur Hour* show. They were produced by Owen Bradley in the "Bradley Barn" studio in Nashville, marking one of Nashville's first forays into rockabilly, though they met with only slightly more commercial success than Bradley's Buddy Holly recordings of the same year.

Singer Johnny Burnette, bassist Dorsey Burnette and lead guitarist Paul Burlison represented the lunatic fringe of rockabilly, thanks to Johnny's high-octane vocals and a aggressively distorted guitar sound Burlison used on several recordings—a "fuzz" tone he stumbled onto when a tube in his amplifier shook loose, then created intentionally by loosening the tube for subsequent recordings.

"Honey Hush," "Rock Therapy," "Tear It Up," "Eager Beaver Baby" and other Rock & Roll Trio recordings are now revivalist favorites, but the group received little attention at the time and disbanded within a year. They left a lasting mark, however, with "**Train Kept A-Rollin'**," an inspired set of sexual metaphors and musical madness and that has been frequently covered by over-the-edge bands of later eras, most notably the Yardbirds, Aerosmith and Led Zeppelin, who opened their early shows with the song. Originally recorded by R&B bandleader Tiny Bradshaw, the Burnette's recording features all of the classic rockabilly traits and Elvis-isms taken to a deranged extreme, climaxing in a bizarre guitar solo played in octaves with a heavily distorted sound and a snaking modal melody that sounds as if it was transported back in time from a psychedelic raga-rock song.

The Burnette brothers moved to California in 1957 to concentrate on songwriting and wrote several hits for Ricky Nelson and others before Johnny changed styles and reemerged as a pop singer in 1960 with "You're Sixteen." Johnny drowned in a fishing accident in 1964. Dorsey was a well-respected country artist until his death in 1979, while Burlison has chosen to remain in relative seclusion. Johnny's son Rocky ("Tired of Toein' the Line") and Dorsey's son Billy have carried on the Burnette name in the rock world.