

GENE VINCENT

Gene Vincent was the original fifties hood: the black-leather biker with dirty, greasy hair and a mind and singing style to match. Unlike Elvis, he seemed threatening both onstage and off, smashing up hotel rooms, scowling at the press and public and definitely *not* talking about how much he loved his mother and his country... Vincent was actually, by all accounts, a perfectly nice guy, but he played up his rock wildman role to great effect and even managed to incorporate a crippled leg into his act. After first attempting to minimize his handicap (the result of a motorcycle accident), Vincent chose instead to exaggerate it, and took to dragging his bad leg behind him to the horror and delight of his audience in an early Alice Cooper-ish bit of macabre rock theater.

Gene Vincent had Elvis Presley to thank, even more directly than most, for his style and career. In the wake of RCA's huge success with Elvis, other major record labels suddenly displayed a newfound interest in the music they had fought and condemned so vehemently (if you can't beat it, at least make a profit off it). Capitol Records held a contest to find "their Elvis," and found and promptly signed Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps, largely on the basis of his similarity to the King. (Vincent's backing band was named after President Eisenhower's golfing cap.)

Vincent scored quickly for Capitol with "**Be-Bop-a-Lula**," a Top Ten hit in the summer of 1956. Whether it really fooled Mrs. Presley or not, Vincent's voice certainly owed much to the Elvis model. Vincent took the rebel side Elvis to a dramatic extreme, exaggerating the brooding demeanor and agitated sensuality that Elvis always balanced with a playful, self-mocking response. (Buddy Holly, by contrast, took Elvis' model in an opposite, playful direction.) Vincent's panting delivery of "Be-Bop-a-Lula" has a sinister edge that transcends the song's inane lyrics, while the Blue Caps provide a darkly-lit aural backdrop, with a hushed tempo, heavy echo and brushed drums that lend an eerie jazz tinge to the proceedings.

The suggestive lyrics and lecherous delivery, heavily reverberated vocals, brushed drums and spacious, jazzy sound of "Be-Bop-a-Lula" were used to equally striking effect on "Woman Love," "Race With the Devil" and other early Vincent efforts, all featuring the searing guitar work of **Cliff Gallup**. (Gallup tired of rock & roll life and was replaced in 1957 by Johnny Meeks, who played lead guitar on "Lotta Lovin'" and "Dance to the Bop," both relatively minor hits.)

Unfortunately, Capitol Records didn't have much of a taste for rock & roll or much of a talent for promoting it. (A few years later, Capitol would drag its feet for a full year before agreeing to sign and promote the Beatles.) Repeated record bannings and fines and court battles over obscenity charges didn't help matters much, and Vincent's career quickly floundered in America. He did find a second home and wildly enthusiastic audiences in England, and did quite well there until a tragic car wreck in London killed his friend Eddie Cochran and badly re-injured Vincent's crippled leg. His life in the sixties was a depressing slide through pain killers, alcoholism and a series of unsuccessful comeback attempts. He died in 1971 at the age of 36, but his image still haunts and gives shape to rockabilly's timeless rebellion.