

RICKY NELSON

Ricky Nelson grew up in front of the entire nation as "little Ricky" on *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, television's longest running sitcom, which starred Ricky and his real-life parents Ozzie and Harriet and brother David. As a recording artist, Nelson has too often been written off as simply another "teen idol." He certainly was good-looking and safe as milk—a wholesome member of America's most wholesome family. And the fact that he was already "America's darling" before he ever sang a note *did* make his career seem cynically calculated in typical teen idol fashion. He had a pleasant voice, though, and a genuine talent, and he had the good sense and taste to surround himself with excellent songwriters and backup musicians. His producer, Jimmie Haskell, recalls: "Ricky knew what he wanted. He couldn't analyze it, but he knew. He had a good ear and was a good musician. Most people aren't aware of that."ⁱ Nelson made consistently good, if polite, records and was a major figure on the pop charts from 1957 to 1963.

The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet was even, in its small way, a victory for rock & roll. Once Ricky began making records, his songs were routinely worked into the plots of the show. There was Ricky, every week, playing his latest hit at the ice cream social, church picnic, high school mixer or fraternity dance. The exposure obviously helped sell his records, but it also put rock & roll in America's living room—right there in front of Mom and Dad. As with Pat Boone, though with infinitely more conviction, the unthreatening "little Ricky" was able to get a reasonable facsimile of rock & roll to a general audience that would never have given it a chance otherwise.

Ricky Nelson—again like Pat Boone—had his first hit with a cover of a Fats Domino song: "I'm Walking," a 1957 hit for the seventeen-year-old Ricky on the Verve label. (He later switched to Domino's label, Imperial Records.) Nelson was prodded into a singing career to counter his girlfriend's infatuation with Elvis: Ricky bragged that he could sing rock & roll too, then had to back it up! Nelson's own infatuation with Presley is clear in his versions of Elvis' "Milkcow Blues" and "Tryin' To Get To You," and in the rockabilly slant of many of his other recordings. But the world Nelson grew up in was far removed from the rural South, and his smooth voice and temperament really weren't suited for the rock & roll rave-ups he attempted. The hopped-up singing and manly stance in "Milkcow Blues," "Down the Line" and "My Babe," for example, seem beyond his range and a bit contrived.

The "L. A. Rockabilly"

Nelson was at his best in the songs written for him, where no existing model made him feel compelled to alter his natural style. His most effective songs combined a hot but controlled band accompaniment with his smooth pop singing and polished state-of-the-art productions. "Stood Up" (1957) and "Hello Mary Lou" (1961) are good examples of Nelson's "L. A. Rockabilly" style of cool vocals over a hot band. They also feature the guitar work of the two lead players that highlighted Nelson's stellar backup bands: Joe Maphis and rockabilly legend James Burton. Maphis' aggressive style can be heard on "Stood Up" and Nelson's other early records. Burton's hard-driving but exquisitely polished playing lights up the majority of Nelson's hits. Burton could always make a good song great, as he did with "Hello Mary Lou," "Believe What You Say" and

"Travelin' Man," and even Nelson's more lightweight outings are punctuated with classy guitar breaks.

Nelson had his biggest hits with midtempo pop songs that left plenty of room for his sensitive voice and personality. His singing is especially graceful on 1958's "Poor Little Fool" and 1961's "Travelin' Man," his biggest hits, and on 1962's "Teenage Idol." His voice was also well-suited for ballads—"Lonesome Town" and "Young Emotions" are particularly lovely—and he sang his songs of young love, heartache and the trials of growing up with an unaffected sincerity. He was, after all, growing up. Nelson's music generally steered clear of the melodramatic excesses and stylized mannerisms that marred most "teen idol" music. His songs were as good-natured and pleasant as the young man who sang them.

After seven successful years, Nelson joined most of his peers in the "overnight has-been" category created by the British Invasion. *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* went off the air in 1966 and, no longer a "teenage idol," or even a teenager, Nelson spent the late sixties searching for a musical direction. In 1969 he formed a pioneering country-rock group, the Stone Canyon Band, and officially became "Rick" to emphasize his new maturity. The success of a 1969 cover of Bob Dylan's "She Belongs to Me" fueled his determination to remain a contemporary artist and not a mere "oldies" act.

His resolve to avoid relic status was strengthened in 1972 by a traumatic appearance at a "rock revival" show at New York's Madison Square Garden. After a quick swing through his old hits, Nelson launched into his newer songs only to be jeered by the oldies crowd who wanted to hear "little Ricky." Hurt and enraged, Nelson wrote his response in "Garden Party" ("if memories were all I sang, I'd rather drive a truck"). It was Nelson's last Top Ten hit. He continued performing through the rest of his life, playing a mix of old songs and new, stuck in limbo between past and present. Rick Nelson died in a plane crash on December 31, 1985. His twin sons Gunnar and Matthew now perform as "Nelson," negotiating a rather similar balance between rock and pop, image and substance.

¹Joe Smith, "Off the Record," (New York: Warner, 1988), p. 138.