JERRY LEE LEWIS

At the outskirts of Ferriday, Louisiana, there is a sign proudly proclaiming it the home of Jimmy Swaggart, Mickey Gilley and Jerry Lee Lewis. The three are first cousins, and between them they pretty well sum up the extremes of the white South, from fire 'n' brimstone religion to good ol' boy country & western to raving madman rock & roll.

Actually, Jerry Lee Lewis pretty well sums up those extremes by himself. Religion was deeply ingrained in young Jerry Lee: raised a Pentecostal, he even attended the Southwestern Bible Institute with an eye toward becoming a preacher, before he was expelled for playing hymns over a boogie-woogie bass(!) A tape of a "theological debate" he had with Sam Phillips is a testament to the inner battles that continued to haunt him. In the Sun studio to record his second hit, "Great Balls of Fire," Jerry has a sudden attack of conscience, brought on by the hell-fire images in the song he was about to sing. As the recording session grinds to a halt, Sam and Jerry debate whether one can sing rock & roll and be a true Christian at the same time. Sam sees no contradiction, but Jerry's answer is unequivocally NO: if you choose to pursue "worldly music," you'll find heaven's gates closed to you come Judgement Day. Or as Jerry put it, "Man, I got the Devil in me!" Truer words have rarely been spoken. The irony, of course, is that Jerry Lee Lewis *did* pursue worldly music, with a vengeance and with the passion of a man possessed. For Jerry Lee, there is no middle ground and, as if to prove it, he finally tears into the first take of "Great Balls of Fire," playing with a particularly demonic intensity and sounding for all the world like a man laughing at the face of eternal damnation—like a man who believes, just as surely as Robert Johnson, that he owed the Devil Himself for his extraordinary talent.

It's certainly no coincidence that the two great piano playing wildmen of rock & roll—Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard—were both tormented by their religious convictions and driven to manic excess by the guilt and the exhilarating freedom of ignoring them. One extreme seemed to feed the other, passionate belief fueling an equally passionate reaction. Jerry Lee played the "Devil's music" as if a Faustian bargain had made it his alone, and the reckless spontaneity of his music and flamboyant personality were the essence of rockabilly's freewheeling spirit. While Elvis invented rockabilly and Carl Perkins gave it a defined, even dignified, form, Jerry Lee Lewis gave it its very soul—the soul he sold for rock & roll.

Ferriday to Memphis

His own religious convictions notwithstanding, Jerry Lee (born Sept. 29, 1935) was the hell-raiser of the family, a redneck Eddie Haskell continually getting his poor cousins into trouble with his penchant for going places he didn't belong. Lewis found plenty of trouble, and his own version of "country boy discovers the blues," at Haney's Big House, the black club in Ferriday where he could hide in the rafters and watch the great barrelhouse piano players who floated up-river from New Orleans, adding their influences to those of his heroes Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, Moon Mullican and Al Jolson. Lewis began performing in area clubs and then, with the arrival and inspiration of Elvis Presley, set his sights on Sun Records and Sam Phillips, who signed him in 1956 on the basis of both his solo talent and his usefulness as a session piano player. Lewis' first record, a cover of Ray Price's "Crazy Arms" backed with the self-penned "End of the Road," received little attention, but he did lend his inimitable piano style to several other Sun releases while waiting for a hit of his own, including Carl Perkins' "Matchbox" and "Put Your Cat Clothes On" and Billy Lee Riley's "Red Hot." As Jerry had no band of his own, Riley's Little Green Men (named to capitalize on Riley's regional hit, "Flying Saucers Rock & Roll") became Lewis' backup band as well, with Roland Janes on guitar, Jimmy Van Eaton on drums, and Jay Brown and Riley alternating on bass.

Shake, Baby, Shake!

"**Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On**" was Jerry Lee's first hit, a rock & roll classic recorded at the end of an otherwise unproductive session in February 1957. Recorded originally and obscurely by Roy Hall, and more memorably by Big Maybelle, Lewis' rowdy version has a huge sound enhanced by Sun's trademark slap-back echo which Sam Phillips, in an inspired moment, layered onto the piano and drums as well as the voice. Jerry Lee's "pumpin' piano" trademarks also appear in all their glory: the driving boogie bass figures, high pounding chords, flashy runs, sweeping glissandi and a sprawling, confident command of the entire keyboard.

"Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On" also introduces a favorite Lewis device, a method of pacing tension and release that was particularly effective in live shows. In the extended middle section he pulls the band back ("let's get *real* low one time..."), drops to a near-whisper and nearly abandons the song itself to tell his pretty young listeners that "all you gotta do, honey, is kinda stand in one spot and wiggle around just a little bit... that's when you got somethin', ye-e-aah..." Then, almost as an aside, "... now let's go one time," and the full fury of the song kicks back in with a sweep up the keyboard and a triumphant "shake it, baby, shake!" "Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On" made everything else on the radio, save Little Richard, seem somewhat tame by comparison, and it was a shot of adrenaline for a rock market that was already starting to soften. Just as Elvis was beginning to seem like a nice guy after all, and newcomers like Buddy Holly and the Everly Brothers held out hope for decency and melodies, Jerry Lee Lewis' frenzied, leering delivery and recalcitrant redneck image were a timely reminder of rock's raucous roots.

Lewis' great follow-up hit, "**Great Balls of Fire**," seems barely able to contain itself to a mere piece of plastic. Written by Otis Blackwell, author of "Don't Be Cruel" and "All Shook Up," the song might have sounded fairly innocuous had it ended up in

Elvis' hands. In Jerry Lee's it becomes a joyous surrender to temptation. Having exorcised the pangs of religious conscience that threatened to derail the recording session, he wrings out every ounce of lust and transcends the song itself with the sensual abandon of his delivery. Backed only by drums and his own piano, Lewis twists and bends the melody, glides into falsetto, trails off mischievously into thin air then dives back into song with a wonderfully elastic energy, while the piano and drums stop, start, push forward and pull back in perfect sync.

Another Otis Blackwell song, the aptly-titled "**Breathless**," followed "Great Balls of Fire" with an equally inspired performance full of sudden pauses, unexpected accents and dynamic shifts and pure, redemptive lust. The exciting spontaneity of the music owes much to the band's uncanny ability to follow the unpredictable Lewis, who never sang or played a song the same way twice. Jimmy Van Eaton's drumming was particularly important in creating the fluid feel of the records: "A lot of people try to copy Jerry Lee Lewis' sound, but they'll never copy it because they're trying to play a straight 4/4 beat when, in fact, it's a shuffle with a backbeat. That's the whole rhythm."[i] The huge, hammering rhythm section formed by Van Eaton's drums and Lewis' left-hand boogie runs was intensified still further by Sam Phillips' knack for achieving maximum effect from minimal resources.

"The Killer"

Jerry Lee Lewis was even more impressive in concert: a vintage Lewis performance was an exercise in controlled frenzy from one of rock's greatest showmen. "Controlled" may be too strong a word, however, for he often enough crossed the line into an *uncontrolled* frenzy unleashed on hapless piano benches, piano keys and piano lids, which rarely escaped intact or without a few sets of footprints as proof of their surrender. At the end of the show, after pummeling the piano into submission, he'd leap on top of it, hair flying and eyes bulging like a madman as he shouted out the final song. The television public got its first glimpse of Lewis in action on July 28, 1957, on the Steve Allen Show: "Viewers were shocked by the display—this boy appearing on national television and mistreating a fine instrument. He was out of control. And the audience loved it."[ii]

Chuck Berry may have detailed rock's attack on High Culture in "Roll Over, Beethoven," but the image of Jerry Lee Lewis—the Killer, as he was called—savagely attacking a concert grand delivered a more powerful and threatening punch. The two stars had a chance to fight it out, in fact, on a memorable Alan Freed package show which Berry was chosen to close, much to Lewis' chagrin. Determined to make Berry rue the day he had to follow the Killer onstage, Jerry Lee played the show of his life, poured out his energy and soul and, when things were reaching a climax, poured a can of kerosene over the piano, lit it, and broke into "Great Balls of Fire!" As he walked away from the smoldering piano and disbelieving audience, he smiled at Freed and Berry and quietly said "Follow that..." (There has been some dispute about whether this story is actually rooted in fact, but if it's not true, it ought to be.)

The Fall

Lewis was at the peak of his formidable powers in 1958, viewed as Elvis' only serious rival—even by the recently drafted King himself. Lewis' outlandish image was a perfect foil to Elvis' increasing "respectability," and he seemed primed and eager to fill the void left by Elvis' absence. Instead, his next rock & roll hit, "High School Confidential," was his last, thanks to his marriage to his 13-year-old cousin, Myra Brown. Lewis married Myra, his third wife, in December 1957 at the ripe old age of 22.[iii] While certainly odd, such a marriage was not as uncommon in the South as it might have seemed, though it *was* complicated by the fact that Jerry had neglected to divorce his second wife! At any rate, things might have been fine if Jerry Lee had kept quiet about it. Instead, unable to keep quiet about anything, he flaunted his new bride before the press and public on an important tour of England in May 1958. Outraged by Lewis and his "child-bride," newspapers savaged Lewis and angry crowds heckled and picketed his appearances until the tour was finally scrapped.

The backlash of moral indignation quickly spread to America, where the media and scandalized public seized the chance to bring down another rock & roll degenerate who was corrupting their youth. Just a year after "Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On," Lewis' career fell victim to a ruthlessly effective boycott that killed his record sales and media exposure. Fearing the public's reaction, and the loss of their advertising revenue, radio stations wouldn't play his records, stores were afraid to stock them and TV shows and concert promoters refused to book him. (Dick Clark, for one, considers bowing to the commercial pressures that fueled Lewis' blacklisting to be the biggest mistake of his career. Clark liked Lewis, who had appeared on "American Bandstand" several times, but he buckled under when the show's sponsors threatened to pull out if he booked him again. Clark says now that, if he had it to do over again, he would book Jerry Lee every week until the boycott was crushed, and he did, later, go out of his way to help Jerry get his career going again.)

Middle Age Crazy

Jerry Lee kept recording great records for Sun, but no one seemed to notice. A switch to Mercury Records in 1963 did little to improve matters, despite some excellent releases like 1964's "I'm on Fire." The early sixties were bleak years, spent drinking and playing the county fairs, but his live shows remained as exciting as ever. He was eventually able to reestablish himself as a headlining act in Europe, winning back even the British fans. And though America may have turned its back on him, Jerry Lee Lewis never lost his biggest fan and greatest admirer—himself. The stubborn, arrogant pride that precipitated his fall from grace also got him through the hard times with his dignity intact. He refused to apologize for marrying a woman he loved, and never pandered to the public with syrupy ballads or Las Vegas routines. Live recordings from the early sixties attest to the undiminished energy of an unrepentant Lewis—a man who knew he was the greatest of them all, and proved it night after night.

A mid-sixties move to the country & western market finally revived his career and established Lewis as a country star, with self-referential hits like "Another Place, Another Time," "Middle Age Crazy," "39 and Holding" and "What Made Milwaukee Famous (Made a Loser Out of Me)." It was not really a major shift for Lewis, as he had always recorded country songs along with the rock & roll at Sun, though he now abandoned the back-to-basics Sun style in favor of the slick, string and choir-laden "modern Nashville" sound. With country music and audiences as his home base, Jerry Lee continued to record new material, with no intention of living out his days as a mere oldies act. (He can, however, still fire off a mean "Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On" when so moved.)

Lewis' legacy far transcends his record sales and *Billboard* chart listings. He was one of rock's true pioneers—an original rock & roll spirit who refused to be tamed. Driven by a supreme confidence in his inexhaustible talent, he has survived through personal tragedies that would have defeated weaker souls, including the boycott and blacklisting, the death of his two sons, severe drug and alcohol problems, frequent run-ins with the police, press and IRS, and two serious illnesses that nearly killed him. Whether you love or detest his personality, his hell-bent determination to live his life and play his music the way he chooses is inspiring. As the title of one of his later country-rock hits put it, "I Am What I Am (Not What You Want Me to Be)." With so many of the original stars gone or—like rock & roll itself—creeping respectably into old age, it's somehow comforting to know that Jerry Lee Lewis is still, well, Jerry Lee Lewis: a living legacy of the original, wild-eyed spirit of rock & roll.

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[i] Jimmy Van Eaton, from June, 1987 *Modern Drummer* magazine interview.

[ii] Myra Lewis and Murray Silver, "Great Balls of Fire," (New York: Quill, 1982), p. 79.

[iii] To add further insult to injury, Myra was the daughter of Lewis' bass player, Jay Brown. Myra and Jerry Lee were divorced in 1970.