

Rockabilly

1. "Youth Culture" develops in post-war America. Post-war prosperity placed money in the hands of young people. Music became a source of rebellion for teenagers. Disc-jockeys recognized this, began building a youth market, recognizing that adolescent rebellion was a building block.

2. Black music became an underground favorite of many white youths. Louis Jordan, Wynnonie Harris, Big Joe Turner, Dina Washington, Roy Brown, Lloyd Price, Ruth Brown, the Clovers...performing songs like "Sixty-Minute Man," "Work With Me Annie," "Good Rockin' Tonight," "Lawdy Miss Clawdy," "I Got a Woman" were all impassioned alternatives to "How much is that Doggie in the Window," "Three Coins in the Fountain," and "Shrimp Boats Area Coming."

"Ironically, despite the Nashville music establishment's fear of rockabilly, the music itself and the performers who sang it were steeped deeply in country. Rockabilly was basically country music played with an intensity and beat borrowed from black gospel and rhythm-n-blues. The fact that many of the southern white performers associated with rockabilly returned to country music once their popularity as pop stars began to fade indicated they had never completely abandoned their roots. Their explorations into rockabilly had simply expanded the boundaries of country music." Michael Bertran in The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture (on-line)

3. Many previous country singers had been raised with and influenced by black music and performers: Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, and Jimmie Davis among others. Many listened to, admired, and to some extent imitated black artists. A few began to experiment with more honest, direct expressions of their emotions.

4. By 1950, alternative music in the south centered on New Orleans and Cosimo Matassa's J&M Recording Studio (with Fats Domino, Little Richard, T-Bone Walker, Guitar Slim, Clarence Frogman Henry and Lloyd Price); Syd Nathan's King Records in Cincinnati--famous using racially mixed bands (James Brown, Earl Bostic, Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, Valerie Carr, Ivory Joe Hunter); and Sam Phillips' Sun Records in Memphis (Howlin' Wolf, Rufus Thomas, B.B. King, and Little Junior Parker).

Sun produced in 1951 "Rocket 88" by Jackie Brenston and Ike Turner, which many historians consider the first rock-n-roll record.

5. Knowing that audiences for black performers remained limited in those days, Phillips looked for a white singer who could perform with the power and emotion of black artists. READ WMB p. 134-35. Sun released a disk with "That's All Right Mama" on one side, "Blue Moon of Kentucky" on the other in 1954. It was a regional hit. The next year, RCA Victor bought Presley's contract, and Phillips used the money to produce records by Carl Perkins ("Blue Suede Shoes") and Johnny Cash ("Hey Porter" & "Cry, Cry, Cry").

Presley's success as a country singer who could perform rhythm-and-blues opened the door for other similar singers, the best of whom included Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Wanda Jackson, Janis Martin, Conway Twitty, Gene Vincent, Brenda Lee, Johnny & Dorsey Burnette.

Among the less well known but admired rockabillics are Billy Lee Riley, Sleepy LeBeef, Jo Ann Campbell, Sonny Burgess Alys Lesley, Warren Smith, Charlie Feathers, Paul Burlison, and Bob Luman.

1940s- Major country precursors, the Maddox Brothers and Rose employed rocking techniques. They were at the leading edge of rockabilly with the slapped bass that Fred Maddox had developed. Maddox himself said, "You've got to have something' they can tap their foot, or dance to, or to make 'em feel it." The Maddoxes helped release white bodies from traditional notions of decorum.

1951- country band leader Bill Haley covers Jackie Brenston & Ike Turner's "Rocket 88"

1954- Haley leads the charts with "Rock Around the Clock" (due to "Blackboard Jungle"); Presley records "That's Alright Mama" and "Blue Moon of Kentucky"

1955- Johnny Cash records "Hey Porter" and "Cry! Cry! Cry!"; Presley's "I Forgot to Remember to Forget" #1 on country charts; Chuck Berry cuts "Maybelene".

1956- "Blue Suede Shoes" by Perkins becomes first million-selling country son to cross over into both pop' and R&B charts,

and Presley covers it; Cash records "Folsom Prison Blues"; Presley records "Heartbreak Hotel"; Roy Orbison records "Ooby Dooby" as a member of the Teen Kings; Janis Martin cuts first hit, "Drugstore Rock 'n' Roll"; Gene Vincent and His Blue Caps release "Be-Bop-A-Lula," which topped both pop' and country charts for 20 weeks; the queen of rock'n'roll, Wanda Jackson, releases "Hot Dog That Made Him Mad"; Jerry Lee Lewis records "Crazy Arms.

1957- Lewis enjoys big hits with "Whole Lot of Shaking Going ON" and "Great Balls of Fire"; Buddy Holly and the Crickets record "That'll Be the Day" and "Peggy Sue"; "Bye Bye Love" by Everly Brothers

1958- "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" by Brenda Lee; Ricky Nelson's "Believe What You Say"

1959- First wave of rockabilly beginning to fade

Calif: As a result of Ozzie Nelson's knowledge and clout, Ricky Nelson enjoyed a debut like no other. The father arranged for his son to be recorded by Verve (with major sidemen like Merle Travis and Earl Palmer), singing a cover of Fats Domino's "I'm Walkin'," plus "A Teenager's Romance" and "You're My One and Only Love." Ricky, himself, had considered cutting a Hank Williams song, but Ozzie's choices prevailed. The first two of those recorded numbers were released as the youngster's initial sides after his debut on the television show, and the impact of that earlier TV performance was immediate and overwhelming: Both songs vaulted onto the national charts, and remained there for five months, selling more than 700,000 copies. Rarely had a

beginner enjoyed such success; never had one enjoyed such exposure.

Nelson's musical career was certainly energized when he introduced his numbers on the national television show, and by the preexisting popularity he brought to his new pursuit. As a result, his string of hits was long and eclectic, with a surprising country tilt, including Hank Williams' "My Bucket's Got a Hole in It," Johnny and Dorsey Burnette's "Believe What You Say," Sharon Sheeley's "Poor Little Fool," his own "Travelin' Man." By 1958, he was accompanied by the powerful rockabilly guitar of James Burton and by the country strumming of Joe Maphis, as well as by bassist Joe Osborne; some of his songs "were as raw as anything coming out of Memphis," argues music writer Michael Bane. Ricky--that nice, clean-cut boy on television--was able to bring rockabilly into homes that had not previously tolerated it.

Predictably, Nelson's California and showbiz base led many people to consider him a fake who'd enjoyed a back-door entry into recording. Thus they did not recognize how good he was becoming. By the time his third and fourth records were released, "He was," writes Selvin, "no longer a Hollywood imitation of rock 'n' roll but was beginning to sound like the genuine article...." California rockabilly had its own star.

Hank and Eddie

In Southern California in 1954, two unrelated white singers named Cochran, Hank and Eddie, teamed up. Mississippi-native

Hank and Oklahoma-native Eddie were living in Bell Gardens when they joined forces. Hank had been a regular at the Riverside Rancho--as a customer not a performer--and the two may have met there. Eddie had come of age in the Golden State, since his family relocated in 1949 when he was 11. When the duo joined forces, teenager Eddie was back-up guitarist behind aspiring vocalist Hank. The two eventually became the Cochran Brothers, and were big favorites in the Los Angeles area, playing everything from store openings to county fairs.

They recorded two country singles ("Mr. Fiddle" and "Guilty Conscience") in 1955, but moved to rockabilly after seeing Elvis Presley perform in Dallas. Their next record ("Tired and Sleepy" and "Fool's Paradise") was described as "frantic, country-based rock." In 1956 the duo broke up, and Hank headed back into traditional country music as singer and composer, performing at such undistinguished venues as the Fort Ord NCO Club before he began to gain some recognition after becoming a regular on the California Hayride TV show in Stockton. Eventually, he moved to Nashville and, while his singing career never took off, he wrote a string of hits that made him a premier songwriter: "Make the World Go Away," "Don't Touch Me," "I Want to Go With You," "Don't You Ever Get Tired of Hurting Me?" and (with Harlan Howard) "I Fall to Pieces."

Eddie, on the other hand, was destined to become one of rock 'n' roll's tragic tales of early death and great promise. In 1956, he sang "Twenty Flight Rock" in the classic rock movie, The Girl Can't Help It, charted with a teenybopper ballad "Smoochin' in the Balcony" the next year, then became a major star with the

chart-topping "Summertime Blues" in 1958, a song he co-wrote with Jerry Capheart.

A pioneer of overdubbing, he followed that classic record (in which he played and sang all parts) with another multi-track hit, "C'mon Everybody," then with "Somethin' Else," both of which charted in the U.S. and became hits in Britain, where he was a major influence on the rock scene. He also appeared in two other movies--Untamed Youth (1957) and Go Johnny Go (1959). By 1960, he was a signal figure in the youth-driven rock scene of the time. That spring, he toured Britain and, on April 17, a day after appearing at the Bristol Hippodrome, he was killed--only 21 years old--in an auto accident that also injured his fiance Sharon Sheeley and his buddy Gene "Be-Bop-A-Lula" Vincent.

As a songwriter, Cochran's wry revelations of teenage life during that period of emerging youth culture were rivaled only by Chuck Berry's. He was also ahead of his time in studio techniques, but is best remembered as a gifted guitarist and a dynamic performer. The Encyclopedia of Rock asserts that he was "probably the most widely talented rock star of the fifties."

For a decade or more before Ricky Nelson's first record, the Maddox Brothers & Rose had been performing proto-rockabilly, a hot, blended music with no regard for labels. As Fred Maddox explained, "We was always about ten or twelve years ahead of ourselves, but it was just a-happenin', so we just let it happen." So did other established West Coast performers such as Wynn Stewart and Ferlin Husky, as well as emerging artists such as

Glen Glenn (nee, Glen Trout), whose "Everybody's Movin'" charted; Jackie Lee Waukeen Cochran, who recorded for Decca; and especially the popular Collins Kids, television favorites whose "wholesome, all-America looks made them the perfect ambassadors of the new rockabilly style to a country audience," points out writer Richard Carlin.

A year before Ricky's first record, unknown Corky Jones had released a rockabilly side, "Hot Dog," on Pep Records; Corky would eventually become famous using his real name, Buck Owens. In this state, rockabilly and honky-tonk, both of which much influenced the later Owens style, were integral parts of the region's less conservative musical mix. Local TV programs and clubs were thriving; bandleader Bill Woods, who worked both venues then, recalls, "We played it all, whatever they called it--rock, country, jazz."