

ROCK'N'ROLL'S 1ST DECADE

Week Three: Rock in the Mid-1950s

Recommended Listening:

Chuck Berry, *The Anthology* (Chess, 2000). Two-CD, 50-song compilation of his most essential tracks from the mid-1950s through the early 1970s, including hits and his most influential non-hits. These include some of the most familiar and most-covered songs in all of rock, important both for the quality of the songwriting and the many classic riffs in tunes like "Johnny B. Goode," "Roll Over Beethoven," "Rock and Roll Music," "Sweet Little Sixteen," and "Reelin' & Rockin'." The single-disc collection *The Great Twenty-Eight* contains most of his most well known songs.

Johnny Cash, *The Sun Years* (Rhino, 1990). Cash is usually considered a country artist, not a rock one. There's no denying, however, that much of his mid-1950s material for Sun had a rockabilly and pop-rock flavor. This has his most popular recordings for the label, including the hits "I Walk the Line," "Ballad of a Teenage Queen," and "Folsom Prison Blues."

Fats Domino, *Fats Domino Jukebox: 20 Greatest Hits the Way You Originally Heard Them* (Capitol, 2002). Fats Domino had more than 20 hits, but this has the most famous ones by the greatest exponent of New Orleans rock'n'roll, including "The Fat Man," "Ain't That a Shame," and "Blueberry Hill."

Wanda Jackson, *Queen of Rockabilly* (Ace, 2000). Commonly and rightfully referred to as the best woman rock artist of the 1950s, Jackson was more than that. She was one of the best rockabilly singers, period. She recorded a lot of country music too, but this 30-track compilation focuses on her hardest-rocking '50s rockabilly performances, such as "Let's Have a Party" and the inimitable "Fujiyama Mama."

Jerry Lee Lewis, *18 Original Sun Greatest Hits* (Rhino, 1984). Lewis was one of the leading rock'n'rollers (and its most prominent piano player) prior to the derailment of his career by scandal in

1958. This has his big hits, including "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On," "Great Balls of Fire," "Breathless," and "High School Confidential," as well as some material he recorded in the next few years after his fall from grace.

Little Richard, *The Georgia Peach* (Specialty, 1991). A 25-track compilation of his most popular 1950s recordings, including the big hits "Tutti Frutti," "Long Tall Sally," "Rip It Up," "Lucille," and "The Girl Can't Help It," as well as some worthy lesser known tunes like "Ooh! My Soul," covered by the Beatles on the BBC in 1963.

Carl Perkins, *Original Sun Greatest Hits* (Rhino, 1986). "Blue Suede Shoes" was his only big hit, but the first rockabilly star to emerge after Elvis Presley had other classic mid-1950s tracks that are also on this collection. Some of them ("Honey Don't," "Matchbox," and "Everybody's Trying to Be My Baby") were covered by the Beatles, whose George Harrison is one of many guitarists Perkins heavily influenced.

Elvis Presley, *Elvis' Golden Records* (RCA, 1958). There are many Presley albums and compilations, but this one contains the biggest and most essential of his hits from 1956 and 1957, including "Hound Dog," "Heartbreak Hotel," "Don't Be Cruel," "All Shook Up," and "Jailhouse Rock." Those who want more should check out the five-CD box set *Elvis: The King of Rock'n'Roll: The Complete 50's Masters*.

Elvis Presley, *Elvis Presley* (RCA, 1956). Elvis's first album was the rawest he would record for RCA, and dominated by covers like "I Got a Woman," "Blue Suede Shoes," "Tutti Frutti," and "Money Honey." Expanded CD editions add other material he cut for RCA around the time.

Gene Vincent, *The Screaming End: The Best of Gene Vincent* (Razor & Tie, 1997). Known by too many people only for his big 1956 hit "Be-Bop-a-Lula," Vincent was one of rockabilly's most exciting performers, and his early band some of its best and wildest musicians. This collection focuses on his earliest and best work, including "Be-Bop-a-Lula" and songs that should be almost as

well known, like "Race with the Devil," "Catman," and "Bluejean Bop."

Various Artists, *Crescent City Soul: The Sound of New Orleans 1947-1974* (EMI, 1996). Although this four-CD set spans 1947-1974, much of the music is from the 1950s. A great compilation of rhythm and blues from one of the cities most responsible for originating rock and roll, including tracks by the likes of Fat Domino, Lloyd Price, and stars who recorded in the city, like Little Richard. The post-mid-1950s selections are classic too, illustrating how strongly the roots of New Orleans R&B endured into the 1960s and 1970s as it mutated into soul.

Various Artists, *The Golden Age of American Rock'n'Roll Vols. 1-12* (Ace, 1991-2011). Now up to a dozen volumes, this long-running series on the British Ace label is simply the best ever done for American rock'n'roll oldies. Each CD has thirty hits of all rock'n'roll styles that made the charts between 1954 and 1963, ranging from superstars and massive smashes to all but unknown obscurities. The liner notes are excellent, featuring in-depth research into the background of the records and the musicians. Ace has also done supplementary volumes for doo wop, novelty songs, country songs that made the pop charts, folk songs that made the pop charts, instrumentals, and follow-up hits between 1954 and 1963.

Various Artists, *The Golden Era of Rock'n'Roll 1954-1963* (Hip-O, 2004). The best box set compilation of early rock'n'roll, though it has relatively little from 1962 and 1963. This three-CD collection contains most of the single most definitive hits by early rock'n'roll's biggest artists, as well as some of its the greatest classics by one-shot or two-shot artists. The only major omission is the absence of anything by Elvis Presley.

Various Artists, *Loud, Fast & Out of Control* (Rhino, 1999). Four-CD, 104-song box set of the more raucous side of 1950s rock, with hits by big stars from Elvis on down, and plenty of worthwhile obscurities.

Various Artists, *Rockin' Bones: 1950s Punk & Rockabilly* (Rhino, 2006). The use of the word "punk" in the title might be hyperbolic considering the term didn't exist in the musical sense in the 1950s. This four-CD box does, however, have much of the wildest 1950s rockabilly, including some big hits, but oriented toward little-known cuts and rarities, many known primarily to collectors.

Various Artists, *The Sun Story* (Rhino, 1990). While there are a few disappointing omissions, this has key rockabilly tracks by Sun stars Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, and Jerry Lee Lewis, as well as early cuts by Roy Orbison and Charlie Rich, and good songs by minor Sun artists like Billy Lee Riley, Bill Justis, and Carl Mann.

Recommended Books:

Blue Monday: Fats Domino and the Lost Dawn of Rock'n'Roll, by Rick Coleman (Da Capo Press, 2006). Though Domino is not the most colorful or revealing of personalities, the only detailed biography of the man has a lot of information about his music and recordings, and the New Orleans scene from which it sprung.

Brown Eyed Handsome Man: The Life and Hard Times of Chuck Berry: An Unauthorized Biography, by Bruce Pegg (Routledge, 2002). The first thorough Berry biography (though Berry wrote an autobiography) is for the most part very good and meticulously researched. His classic 1950s and 1960s Chess recordings are discussed in reasonable detail, as is the late-'50s violation of the Mann Act that landed him in jail.

Elvis: The Illustrated Record, by Roy Carr & Mick Farren (Harmony Books, 1982). The most extensive critical guide to Elvis Presley's music, with detailed critiques of everything he released during his lifetime, along with many illustrations and commentary about his life and career.

Every Night Is Saturday Night, by Wanda Jackson with Scott B. Bomar (BMG, 2017). Jackson's autobiography is a decent overview of her music and life, if not as fiery as her finest rockabilly records.

The writing's a bit cutesy at times, but the music takes equal or slightly greater footing to her personal life, which included a brief time as an early girlfriend of Elvis Presley's.

Go, Cat, Go!, by Carl Perkins and David McGee (Hyperion, 1996). The story of one of rockabilly's leading figures, not just through his rise at Sun Records, but also following his life through his struggles with alcoholism, move into country music, and work with Johnny Cash.

Good Rockin' Tonight: Sun Records and the Birth of Rock'n'Roll, by Colin Escott with Martin Hawkins (St. Martin's Griffin, 1992). The best and most thorough history of Sun Records, from its blues roots through its transition to rockabilly and its success with Elvis, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, and others.

Johnny Cash: The Life, by Robert Hilburn (Little, Brown, 2013). Of the numerous Cash biographies (including some autobiographies by Cash and members of his family), this 650-page one is the most thorough, paying the most attention to his early years with Sun Records and his pop crossover stardom in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Rhythm & Blues in New Orleans, by John Broven (Pelican, 1978). Not the most smoothly written volume, but a wide-ranging look at the heyday of New Orleans R&B, covering the performers and the labels, and extending through the 1960s into the 1970s in its later sections.

Recommended DVDs:

Johnny Cash, At Town Hall Party (Bear Family, 2002). Though filmed in the Los Angeles area, the 1950s television show *Town Hall Party* featured country music performers. They did, however, also allow some early rock'n'rollers to appear, particularly rockabilly ones. This has two extensive sets from Cash (performed live, not mimed to the records) filmed in 1958 and 1959. There are also DVDs of *Town Hall Party* clips of Eddie Cochran and Gene Vincent (see below).

Fats Domino, *The Big Beat: Fats Domino and the Birth of Rock'n'Roll* (Shanachie, 2016). Documentary has fairly thorough coverage of Domino's early years and rise to stardom in the mid-1950s, including interviews with Fats (who isn't too talkative or eloquent) and some of his associates, like writer/arranger Dave Bartholomew. It's pretty skimpy on his post-'50s work and career, though. While an hour-long version of this was shown as part of the *American Masters* series on PBS, the DVD expands it to ninety minutes, along with a few bonus 1962 live performances.

Elvis Presley, *Elvis '56 in the Beginning* (Lightyear Video, 2000). Fine documentary of Presley's first year of stardom, including excerpts from vintage clips, narrated by Levon Helm, drummer of the Band.

Elvis Presley, *Elvis Presley* (Eagle Eye Media, 2001). Based around Elvis's debut album (and part of the "Classic Albums" series of DVDs), this actually serves as a documentary of his rise to national stardom, with vintage live mid-'50s performance clips, home movie footage, and interviews, as well as interviews with close associates, Elvis experts, and musicians he influenced.

Elvis Presley, *The Great Performances Vol. 1-3* (Rhino, 2002). Three DVDs, each about 50 minutes, each built around vintage performance footage, mostly from the 1950s. The technical quality isn't always great, but these are among the very most influential entertainment clips in the history of mass media.

Elvis Presley, *The Searcher* (Sony, 2018). Over two parts and nearly four hours, it's the most serious Elvis documentary yet, and notable for focusing as much, or more, on the music than his well-known volatile personal life. It's not a conventional music documentary in that, rather than using talking heads, the interviews done for the film are heard as voiceovers over footage and stills. It employs quite a few uncommon images and filmed bits, often from private/home movies.

Gene Vincent, *At Town Hall Party* (Bear Family, 2002). High-energy clips of Vincent in 1958 and 1959, including a couple

versions of "Be-Bop-A-Lula." Also on Bear Family are no less than three DVDs of *Town Hall Party* performances by the Collins Kids, one of the best rockabilly acts never to have a hit.

The Girl Can't Help It (1956). Of the numerous exploitation movies built around 1950s rock'n'roll, this is by far the best, including lip-synced performances by Little Richard, Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran, the Platters, and Fats Domino. It's not clear what company is legitimately issuing this on DVD, but it's available through several online outlets.

On VHS only:

Rock and Roll: The Early Days (Chromatic, 1991). Fine hour-long documentary of rock'n'roll's early years includes footage of Elvis Presley, Fats Domino, Bill Haley, Little Richard, Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry, Carl Perkins, the Everly Brothers, and more.

Notable Figures (Excluding Star Musicians):

Bumps Blackwell: Involved in Little Richard's hits as producer and songwriter, and also involved in Sam Cooke's early career.

Otis Blackwell: Wrote or co-wrote some of Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis's biggest early hits, including "Don't Be Cruel," "All Shook Up," and "Great Balls of Fire."

Lew Chudd: While he had a lower profile than some other early rock'n'roll label heads, as chief of Imperial Records, he played a role in the success of some important early rock'n'roll acts, including Fats Domino and Ricky Nelson.

Cliff Gallup: Perhaps the greatest unheralded side musician in early rock'n'roll, playing phenomenal rockabilly guitar on Gene Vincent's early recordings.

The Jordanares: Gospel-pop-flavored backup vocalists for many of Elvis Presley's recordings, and also for many other rock'n'roll and country records of the 1950s and 1960s.

Earl Palmer: Drummer on many classic New Orleans 1950s R&B and rock'n'roll records, and then on many Los Angeles rock records for the next few decades after moving to Hollywood in 1957.

Colonel Tom Parker: Notorious and powerful manager of Elvis Presley. Undisputably a huge force in his rise to stardom, but often blamed for steering Presley toward less adventurous music, and away from the stage toward acting in mediocre movies.

John Richbourg: Known as "John R.," this DJ on Nashville's WLAC might have been more widely heard than any other playing R&B and rock'n'roll from the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s, as the station's signal was so strong it could be heard in many states at night. Also moved into artist management and production, most notably with soul singer Joe Simon in the 1960s.

Steve Sholes: RCA A&R man most responsible for buying Elvis Presley's contract from Sun Records (for \$40,000), also producing much of Presley's early work for RCA.

Notable Places:

Capitol Records Building: Perhaps the most architecturally famous record label headquarters, built in Hollywood in 1956 to simulate a stack of records.

Graceland: Elvis Presley's Memphis mansion, where he lived in eccentric seclusion from 1957 until his death. Opened to public tours in 1982, it has been one of the most popular tourist attractions in the world since then.

The Paramount Theatre: Brooklyn venue where Alan Freed staged many rock'n'roll concerts from 1955 to 1958.

Important Record Labels:

Dot: Although it had a few rock'n'roll acts such as the Dell Vikings, Dot was most famous for its superstar Pat Boone, who rose to success by covering rock'n'roll songs by Little Richard and Fats Domino for the pop market. Somewhat notorious for specializing in

sanitized covers of R&B material by white singers in the mid-1950s, many of which can be heard on the Ace Records compilation *Dot Records Cover to Cover...Hit Upon Hit*.

Imperial: Had its greatest early rock success with Fats Domino and Ricky Nelson, but also recorded R&B and blues artists based in Los Angeles and New Orleans.

Okeh: Actually an R&B-oriented subsidiary of Columbia Records whose artists included Chuck Wilils and Screamin' Jay Hawkins.

Audiovisual Clips

Elvis Presley: Hound Dog (video)

Carl Perkins: Blue Suede Shoes (video)

Elvis Presley: My Baby Left Me (audio)

Elvis Presley: I Want You, I Need You, I Love You (video)

Elvis Presley: Don't Be Cruel (video)

Chuck Berry: Roll Over Beethoven (audio)

Little Richard: Long Tall Sally (video)

Fats Domino: Blueberry Hill (video)

Fats Domino: I'm Ready (video)

Frankie Lymon: Why Do Fools Fall in Love (video)

Bill Haley: See You Later Alligator (video)

Gene Vincent: Be-Bop-a-Lula (video)

Gene Vincent: Race with the Devil (audio)

Gene Vincent: Cat Man (audio)

Johnny Cash: Guess Things Happen That Way (video)

Jerry Lee Lewis: Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On (video)

Sparkletones: Black Slacks (video)

Ronnie Dawson: Action Packed (audio)

George Jones: White Lightnin' (audio)

Collins Kids: Hoy Hoy (video)

Lorrie Collins: Mercy (video)

Wanda Jackson: Hard Hearted Woman (video)

Wanda Jackson: Fujiyama Mama (audio)