

## ROCK'N'ROLL'S 1<sup>ST</sup> DECADE

### Week Five: Rock in the Late 1950s

#### Recommended Listening:

**Ray Charles, *The Best of Ray Charles: The Atlantic Years*** (Rhino, 1994). This collection of Charles's most popular 1950s recordings is in retrospect the most important material for supplying the foundation of soul music. Includes standards like "I Got a Woman," "Hallelujah I Love Her So," "Drown in My Own Tears," and the hit that made him a pop star, "What'd I Say."

**Eddie Cochran, *Somethin' Else: The Fine Lookin' Hits of Eddie Cochran*** (Razor & Tie, 1998). Though not quite in the class of the very top rockabilly singers, Eddie Cochran was #1 in the tier just below them. This has his hits "Summertime Blues," "Somethin' Else," "C'mon Everybody," "Twenty Flight Rock," and "Sittin' in the Balcony," which with the best of his other recordings remain classic brash rockabilly, as well as displaying his pioneering use of power chords and studio overdubbing.

**The Everly Brothers, *Cadence Classics: Their 20 Greatest Hits*** (Rhino, 1986). The Everly Brothers went on to have some hits in the early 1960s, and make a lot of good records in that decade. Most of their biggest hits, however, were issued on the Cadence label between 1957 and 1960. This has all of them, including "Bye Bye Love," "All I Have to Do Is Dream," "When Will I Be Loved," and "Bird Dog." They remain some of the finest close-harmony pop-rock of all time, and were crucial to rock'n'roll's branching into more expansive melodies and sophisticated production.

**Buddy Holly, *The Definitive Collection*** (Geffen/Decca, 2006). The best single-disc Holly collection has 26 songs, including the hits "That'll Be the Day," "Peggy Sue," "Oh, Boy!," and "Maybe Baby," as well as numerous classics subsequently given popular cover versions, like "Words of Love," "Not Fade Away," "I'm Gonna Love You Too," "Love's Made a Fool of You," and "Well...All Right." He was only a star for about a year and a half before his death in early 1959, but such was his prolific brilliance as a singer, songwriter,

guitarist, and melodic fuser of rockabilly, R&B, and pop that he made some other fine recordings not included here, which are all available on the box set *Not Fade Away: The Complete Studio Recordings and More*.

**Ricky Nelson, *Greatest Hits*** (Capitol, 2005). The most popular and best of the teen idols was a good rockabilly-pop singer with excellent backing (particularly by guitarist James Burton). This has 25 of his hits, mostly from the late 1950s and early 1960s.

**Cliff Richard, *Move It! The Early Years 1958-1959*** (Jasmine, 2010). The 1950s recordings by the first credible British rock star, who was obviously inspired by Elvis Presley. He never had much success in the US, but the guitar work by his backing bands was innovative and highly influential on the British Invasion bands to follow, especially in his first hit, "Move It," which is commonly regarded as the first British rock classic. This two-CD, 62-track import might be a bit of an extensive introduction, but it's cheap.

### **Recommended Books:**

***The Everly Brothers: Walk Right Back***, by Roger White (Plexus, 1984). Though it's not easy to find these days, this is a pretty good, straightforward, and well-illustrated book on the great duo, if not extremely long.

***Ray Charles: Man and Music***, by Michael Lydon (Riverhead Books, 1998). The best biography of the soul pioneer, covering of course not just the 1950s, but also his massively influential soul and pop-country-influenced work in the 1960s.

***Remembering Buddy: The Definitive Biography of Buddy Holly***, by John Goldrosen and John Beecher (Da Capo Press, 2001). One of the best rock biographies ever, with in-depth coverage of his life, music, and recordings, written with detail and critical insight.

***The Restless Generation***, by Pete Frame (Rogan House, 2007). Subtitled "how rock music changed the face of 1950s Britain," this is a lengthy (nearly 500 pages) and well-written account of how the introduction of rock'n'roll changed British youth culture. It also

details the beginnings of a homegrown British rock'n'roll scene, although it would not be until several years after the 1950s ended that British rock groups made an international impact.

***Ricky Nelson: Idol for a Generation***, by Joel Selvin (Contemporary Books, 1990). Ricky Nelson wasn't the most colorful of rock or TV stars, but this biography documents his steady journey from childhood fame through teen idoldom and a more difficult adulthood.

***Rock, Roll & Remember***, by Dick Clark and Richard Robinson (Popular Library, 1978). Autobiography of the longtime *American Bandstand* host focuses on the launch of the most popular rock'n'roll TV show in the late 1950s, and gives a meticulous account of his rebuttals to accusations against him in the payola scandal. Not too much personal passion for specific rock'n'roll artists and records comes through, but he does make some relevant observations about the role of independent labels, black musicians, and teen tastes in the rise of the music.

***Teenage Idol, Travelin' Man: The Complete Biography of Rick Nelson***, by Philip Bashe (Hyperion, 1992). Inevitably this covers a lot of the same territory as the Ricky Nelson biography mentioned above by Joel Selvin, but this is a commendably researched and written book about the singer.

#### **Recommended DVDs:**

**Ray Charles, *On Voice of America, 1960 (Live at the Newport Jazz Festival)*** (Rhino, 2005). A 45-minute, black-and-white performance from July 2, 1960, including exciting renditions of highlights of his early repertoire like "What'd I Say," "I Believe to My Soul," "Drown in My Own Tears," "Sticks and Stones," and "Don't Let the Sun Catch You Cryin'." Unfortunately, this is only available as part of the eight-disc box set *Pure Genius: The Atlantic Recordings 1952-1959*.

**Eddie Cochran, *At Town Hall Party*** (Bear Family, 2002). Unlike the other *Town Hall Party* DVDs listed here, this is on the short side,

with just nine songs from two 1959 performances. They do include, however, his hits "Summertime Blues" and "C'mon Everybody."

**Buddy Holly, *The Music of Buddy Holly and the Crickets: The Definitive Story*** (Universal, 2005). Fine 90-minute Holly documentary includes interviews with the Crickets and all three of his live performances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Also good is the earlier documentary *The Real Buddy Holly Story*, hosted by Paul McCartney and not to be confused with the Hollywood docudrama *The Buddy Holly Story*.

**Ricky Nelson, *Ricky Nelson Sings*** (Capitol, 2005). Although this compilation built around Ricky Nelson performances from the *Ozzie & Harriet* TV show is mimed, it still features plenty of his hits, as well as documenting some of rock'n'roll's first crossover into mainstream American television.

**On VHS only:**

**The Everly Brothers, *Rock'n'Roll Odyssey*** (Atlantic, 1991). Good 75-minute documentary mixing vintage performance footage with interviews with the Everlys done specifically for the project. The 2016 double DVD *Harmonies from Heaven* features an hour-long BBC documentary from not long before its release date that's not as good, though it has additional performance footage (if in frustratingly brief excerpts), and puts a 1968 Sydney nightclub concert on disc two.

**Notable Figures (Excluding Star Musicians):**

**Chet Atkins:** Although he is primarily known as a country artist and guitarist, he also worked on rock records as a session musician and producer, including major 1950s discs by Elvis Presley and the Everly Brothers.

**Boudleaux & Felice Bryant:** Husband-and-wife songwriting team that penned numerous early hits for the Everly Brothers, although their primary concentration was country music.

**James Burton:** One of rock's great session guitarists. First rose to prominence on Dale Hawkins's classic 1957 rockabilly hit "Susie Q"; established himself on Ricky Nelson's hits after moving from Louisiana to Los Angeles; and continued to be a top Hollywood session guitarist for many years, also playing live with Elvis Presley's band from 1969 to 1977.

**Dick Clark:** Host of *American Bandstand*, the television program most responsible for spreading the popularity of rock'n'roll across the country (and, some would say, commercializing and sanitizing it). Like many other radio and TV hosts, he came under suspicion in the payola scandal, but escaped unscathed and continued to work in music television for *American Bandstand* and other programs for decades.

**Bob Keene:** As head of Keene and Del-Fi Records, helped launch the careers of Sam Cooke and Ritchie Valens. Del-Fi continued through the 1960s, experiencing its greatest success with Bobby Fuller.

**Norman Petty:** Producer and songwriter instrumental in the creation of Buddy Holly's most famous records in his studios in the small town of Clovis, New Mexico. Sometimes criticized for his handling of aspects of Holly's career, he was undoubtedly a pioneer of independent rock production outside of the primary urban centers (New York, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Memphis, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Nashville) in which most early rock'n'roll was recorded.

### **Notable Places:**

**Radio Luxembourg:** From the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s, rock was only played sporadically on British radio, where the BBC controlled the airwaves. Many British teenagers tuned into Radio Luxembourg, usually at night when the shaky signal was stronger (and sometimes listening under the covers when they were supposed to be sleeping), in order to hear the American rock records they craved.

**RCA Recording Studios, Nashville branch:** The Everly Brothers recorded their 1950s hits here (although their records were on

Cadence, not RCA), and Elvis Presley often used it as well. While it was mostly used for country music, rock was sometimes recorded there after the 1950s too, notably by Roy Orbison. Entrance to RCA Studio B is included in the price of a visit to the Country Music Hall of Fame.

**Surf Ballroom:** Site of the final show played by Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and the Big Bopper on February 2, 1959, in Clear Lake, Iowa, on their ill-fated winter tour. They all died in a nearby plane crash several hours later.

**WFIL-TV:** Philadelphia television studio where *American Bandstand* was filmed.

### **Important Record Labels:**

**Vee Jay:** Chicago label that recorded plenty of blues (Jimmy Reed and John Lee Hooker) and R&B, and became instrumental to the birth of soul with its records by Jerry Butler, the Impressions, Dee Clark, and Gene Chandler. Had some huge success in white rock with early records by the Four Seasons and the Beatles before losing those acts to other labels.

### **Audiovisual Clips**

Jerry Lee Lewis: High School Confidential (video)

Buddy Holly: That'll Be the Day (audio)

Buddy Holly: Oh Boy (video)

Buddy Holly: Peggy Sue (video)

Buddy Holly: Wishing (audio)

Eddie Cochran: Summertime Blues (video)

Eddie Cochran: C'mon Everybody (video)

Ricky Nelson: Be Bop Baby (video)

Ricky Nelson: Stood Up (video)

Dale Hawkins: Suzy Q (video)

Cliff Richard: Move It (video)

Ritchie Valens: Ooh My Soul (video)

Ritchie Valens: La Bamba (audio)

The Big Bopper: Chantilly Lace (video)

Everly Brothers: Bye Bye Love (video)

Everly Brothers: All I Have to Do Is Dream (video)  
Everly Brothers: Bird Dog (video)  
Everly Brothers: Til I Kissed You (video)  
Sam Cooke: You Send Me (video)  
Jackie Wilson: That Is Why (video)  
The Drifters: There Goes My Baby (audio)  
Buddy Holly: Well Alright (audio)  
Roy Orbison: Only the Lonely (audio)  
Ray Charles: What'd I Say (video)