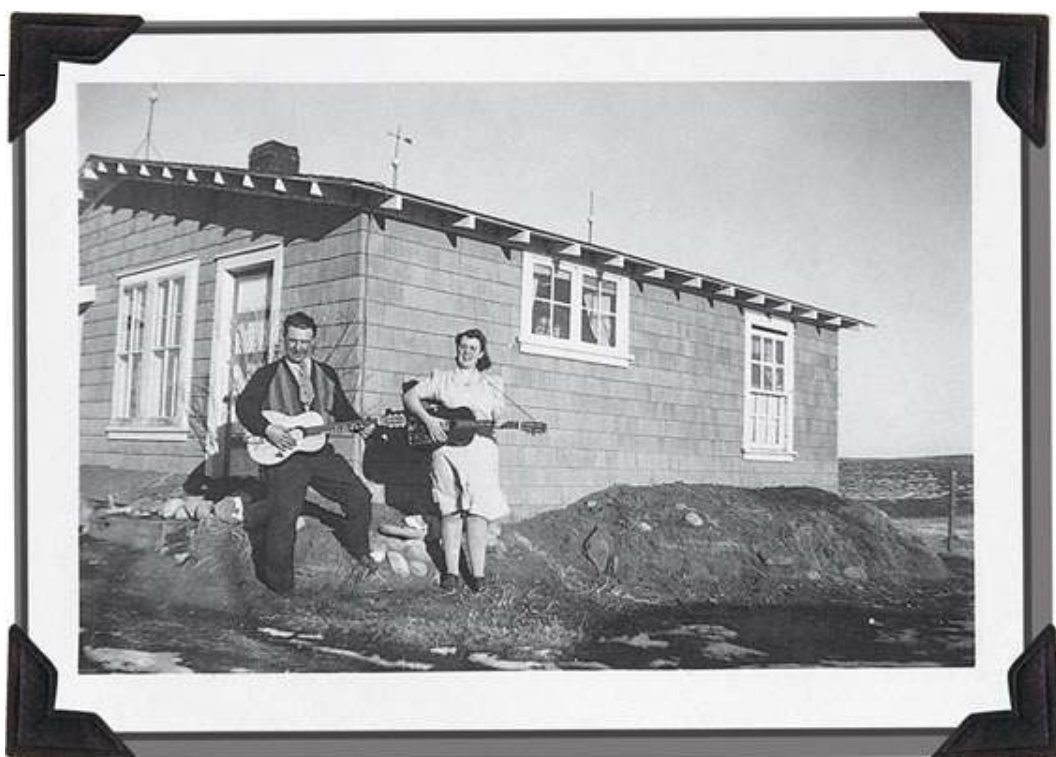




WELL IT'S **ONE**  
FOR THE MONEY,  
**TWO**  
FOR THE SHOW,  
**THREE**  
TO GET READY,  
**NOW**  
GO, CAT, GO!







You pick the tune And you slap the bass I'll play the rhythm And I'll set the pace But we gotta get  
with it Ain't no time to waste!

—Charlie Feathers, "Get With It," 1956





JUL • 57 •







I got a rocket in my pocket and the fuse is lit . . .

—Jimmy Lloyd, “I Got a Rocket in My Pocket,” 1958



# ROCKABILLY

THE TWANG HEARD 'ROUND THE WORLD

★ The Complete Illustrated History ★

FOREWORD BY SONNY BURGESS

*Featuring*

GREIL MARCUS ★ PETER GURALNICK

LUC SANTE ★ ROBERT GORDON

DEKE DICKERSON ★ DAVID MCGEE

CRAIG MORRISON ★ RANDY MCNUTT

DAN FORTE ★ GARTH CARTWRIGHT

VINCE GORDON ★ AND MORE



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WITH INTERVIEWS + REMINISCENCES FROM

BRIAN SETZER \* WANDA JACKSON  
CARL PERKINS \* CHARLIE FEATHERS \* BILLY RILEY  
CLIFF GALLUP \* SCOTTY MOORE \* REV. HORTON HEAT  
THE CRAMPS \* TAV FALCO \* HEAVY TRASH  
GLEN GLENN \* DALE HAWKINS \* ROSE MADDOX  
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ROLAND JAMES \* SONNY CURTIS \* MARVEL FELTS  
JOE LEE \* JIMMY LLOYD \* MARCUS VAN STORY  
and many more...

MICHAEL DREGNI, EDITOR



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BY SONNY BURGESS

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**By Sonny Burgess**



Sonny Burgess with red hair, red tux, and red Telecaster leads the red-hot Pacers in 1957. Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images



**I NEVER HEARD THE TERM** “rockabilly” back then. Nobody did. Everybody said, “Where’d that term come from?” I don’t know. We never really pinned it down, where that term came from. When people asked what music we played, we were rock ’n’ rollers. We didn’t think about “rockabilly.” We were rock ’n’ rollers.

It was shocking music to people at the time. Elvis, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Warren Smith, Billy Riley, Roy Orbison, Carl Perkins, Johnny Burnette and the Rock ’n’ Roll Trio—we played shows together all over the country. It was wild back then.

Sonny Burgess and the Pacers—we had a real *show*. We used to have these 50-foot-long cables for our guitars which would allow us to jump off stage and play out in the crowd. We had the cables specially made. One night back in ’56, we were playing a show with Marty Robbins, Ray Price, and the Maddox Brothers and Rose at Robinson Auditorium in Little Rock, Arkansas. My guitarist Joe Lewis, our bassist Johnny Ray Hubbard, and I all jumped off the stage and we didn’t look before we leaped. Usually stages were about 12 inches up to three foot high. We just assumed this was the same, so we jumped off and there was an orchestra pit and we went *down*. We must have dropped 10 foot. Johnny Ray’s upright bass just came all to pieces. But the show had to go on, and so we climbed back up on stage and kept on playing.

Another time, I tried to dye my hair *white*. It was black and I wanted to dye it white. Perkins was blue with his blue suede shows. Elvis was pink and black. I wanted a color, too. I was reading about a guy named Shell Scotty, a detective in pulp magazines, and he had white hair with black eyebrows. I thought that would be really cool, different. Me and my wife, Joann, we decided we’d do it—but it turned out *red*. It was *really* red. We were heading out to California that week to join the tour with Cash in ’57. So the Pacers and I all got red tux jackets with black shirts, black ties, and black pants. I had that red tuxedo and got red shoes, red socks, and played a red Telecaster and red Stratocaster. I sure stood out.

My band also had a trumpet player, Jack Nance. Adding a trumpet to the band was actually good for us, because nobody else had a trumpet—they all had saxophones. We *wanted* a sax player, but couldn't find one. We already had Russ Smith playing drums; Jack Nance was also a drummer but he was also a music major and played a little bit of everything. He had an old trumpet and that's how we wound up with a trumpet player. In clubs, it was fantastic, you could play it *loud!* It turned out great for us. But Jack would get hit a lot. See, people would reach up to touch us and hit his trumpet and he had false teeth—young guy, but he had false teeth—which put things out of whack.

We were in Truman, Arkansas, one night at the Cotton Club, drove up there in our old green Cadillac, and we had a big crowd and we were really going strong. Jack and Johnny Ray had got themselves some Prince Albert smoking tobacco and some cigarette papers and they took aspirin tablets, ground them up, and rolled them cigarettes with this aspirin in it. Boy, they got *wild*. I've never seen anyone do that before or since, but they got wild. Jack was playing that horn so bad, Joe Lewis finally took it away from him. Jack said, "You can't do this—that's the best I've ever played in my life!" We had to send Jack and Johnny home.

Our band also did the bug dance. We got the bug trick from Orbison. He played the Silver Moon in Newport, Arkansas, in 1955 along with Warren Smith, Eddie Bond, and us. He had a guy named Big Jack playing the upright bass and a little guy named Willie playing rhythm guitar; Roy's playing guitar, then he had a mandolin player and a drummer. Anyway, they done this bug dance. Big Jack and the little guy. They'd reach down on the floor and pick up this "bug" and throw it on each other. That's where we got it. So four of us would do it and we outdid them on it. We had four of us, throw it on each other, shake around, try to catch it, and then throw it on the next guy.

Playing those shows on the road became our life. Marcus Van Story was the bass player for Warren Smith. He couldn't wait to get on the road. Our pianist, Smoochy Smith, accused Marcus of hanging his clothes up out on the tree in his front yard two days before he left the house. He loved the road—and he put on a show, rolling on his back, playing his bass behind his head.

Warren Smith had a couple good records. As soon as he got "Ubangi Stomp" and "Rock and Roll Ruby" out, he thought he was *the* star, but we'd blow his ass off the stage because we had a *show*. It wasn't just a couple songs, it was a *show* we had.

Orbison was a good guy, and we toured with him a lot. See, the Teen Kings quit him when they got paid for "Ooby Dooby" in '55—it was a big seller; sold about 400,000, and that was pretty big back then. Well, they got their money and Little Willie and Big Jack, they thought *they* were stars, so they said, "We're going to go back to Texas and become stars ourselves." So they all left Orbison there in Memphis. Now, Bob Neal was booking us all then, so he put us and Orbison with Cash, because Cash was big then in '56, '57 because he had "Folsom Prison Blues" and he just kept getting bigger and bigger and was pulling huge crowds. Orbison traveled with us a million miles and never bought a nickel's worth of gas! We'd get a cheap room in a motel and there'd be four of us, two guys to each bed. And Orbison would pay just \$5 and get a rollaway bed and roll in there with us.

Jerry Lee was different than anyone else who ever came along. I love Jerry Lee's piano playing; he's so good. He's a little bit crazy, but he's allright crazy.

We crossed paths with the Rock 'n' Roll Trio all the time. Johnny Burnette used to come to the Silver Moon and watch us—always had three or four gals with him. The Trio didn't make much of an impression back then, because there was so much of those little bands back then. But

they were nice guys—and they liked to fight. We'd play Memphis three or four times a year, Paul would always come play those deals with us. And years later, we became the Sun Rhythm Section together, an all-star band.

My first record came out on Sun Records in '56, "We Wanna Boogie" and "Red Headed Woman." When Sam Phillips recorded us, he just sat up there and rolled tape. He just let us set up our equipment wherever we wanted to, just like we were on stage. He had that one good mic, an RCA 77, in the middle of the room and we'd all stand around that mic. Sam didn't say anything; he just sits up there and turned that machine on and we'd play like he was the audience, playing like he was 10,000 people out there. We were a-beating and a-banging around in there, just like we do on stage. And he'd say, "Well, go through it again." When he got the one he felt was right and sounded good to him, that's what he put out. He had a talent for putting out stuff that was different, that felt good.

Jerry Lee recorded "Whole Lotta Shakin'" with just him, drummer J. M. Van Eaton, and guitarist Roland Janes on it. Billy Riley was setting around there somewhere, maybe playing bass. In the middle of that song, if you listen real close, J. M. gets off—he tries to take a drum roll and he gets off; he gets out of time but gets back in it real quick. But it sold over 12 million records—*ha!* That was Sam's talent, capturing that.

Nowadays they want it too pretty. Everything's got to be perfect. They have machines that will put you in tune if you sing out of tune or put you back in time. And I think that's where music has lost its soul. There's no feeling to it any more.

Back then we didn't have any sort of feeling we were doing anything revolutionary—or we would have put out more records! We weren't even trying to make a dollar—there was no money to be made back then. That wasn't why I was in it, to make money. You had a lot of fun. And you'd meet a lot of gals.

We did it for fun. You felt good playing it. You got your high off the music. You didn't have to have whiskey or drugs. It was just fun, and you'd get high off that music.



"We Wanna Boogie" called it exactly like it was. Sonny Burgess' first single on Sun records was released in August 1956 and reportedly sold more than 90,000 copies. Presumably, others wanted to boogie as well.

**INTRODUCTION**



CLASSIC ROCKABILLY GUITAR

A 1956 Gretsch Model 6120 Chet Atkins Hollow Body. Steve Catlin/Redferns/Getty Images

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# **ROCKABILLY CAME AND WENT LIKE A SATURDAY NIGHT.**

It's arrival can be pinpointed: July 5, 1954, the night Elvis Presley, Scotty Moore, and Bill Black recorded "That's All Right" in Memphis' Sun Studios.

Its departure is a bit more foggy: Some say it was March 24, 1958, the day Elvis was issued his discharge tags and entered the U.S. Army as Private Presley. Others claim February 3, 1959, the infamous "day the music died" when Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and the Big Bopper lost their lives in the plane crash in an Iowa cornfield. Or the May 1958 derailment of Jerry Lee Lewis' first career due to outrage over his polygamous marriage to his 13-year-old cousin. Or the April 17, 1960 death of Eddie Cochran in a car accident in England, a crash that Gene Vincent just barely survived.

Whatever the date, rockabilly was a flash in the pan, burning with a brilliant intensity, but lasting just three or four or five years in its glory days. But oh what a fire it sent spreading through the musical world—and popular culture at large. Almost by accident, almost like a joke, just as Elvis had joshed around recording "That's All Right."

# **ROCKABILLY WAS TRULY THE TWANG HEARD 'ROUND THE WORLD.**

## CHAPTER 1

**ELVIS' "THAT'S ALL RIGHT" WAS A HARMONIC CONVERGENCE.**

There was Sam Phillips with his open eyes and ears seeking something special in music and with the means to go with it if and when he found it. There was Scotty Moore and Bill Black—part of the traditional Starlite Wranglers country band—who were willing, eager, and able to make a new music. And there was of course Elvis himself.

It was more than mere symbolism that “That’s All Right” would not have been possible without five previous years of Sun Studios. Sam Phillips had been shocking listeners with his recordings, from Howlin’ Wolf to B. B. King, Bobby Bland to Junior Parker, Jackie Brenston and Ike Turner, and many more. These past records were more than just inspirations and influences. They were revolutionary in their own right.

**THEY ALSO SET THE STAGE FOR THE FUTURE, FOR ROCKABILLY.**

ELVIS PRESLEY AT THE DAWN OF ROCKABILLY

With Scotty Moore on guitar and bassist Bill Black just out of the picture to the right, the trio performs at Fort Homer Hesterly Armory in Tampa, Florida, on July 31, 1955. Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images



Young Elvis Presley poses for a family portrait with his parents Vernon Presley and Gladys Presley in Tupelo, Mississippi, in 1937. Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images



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