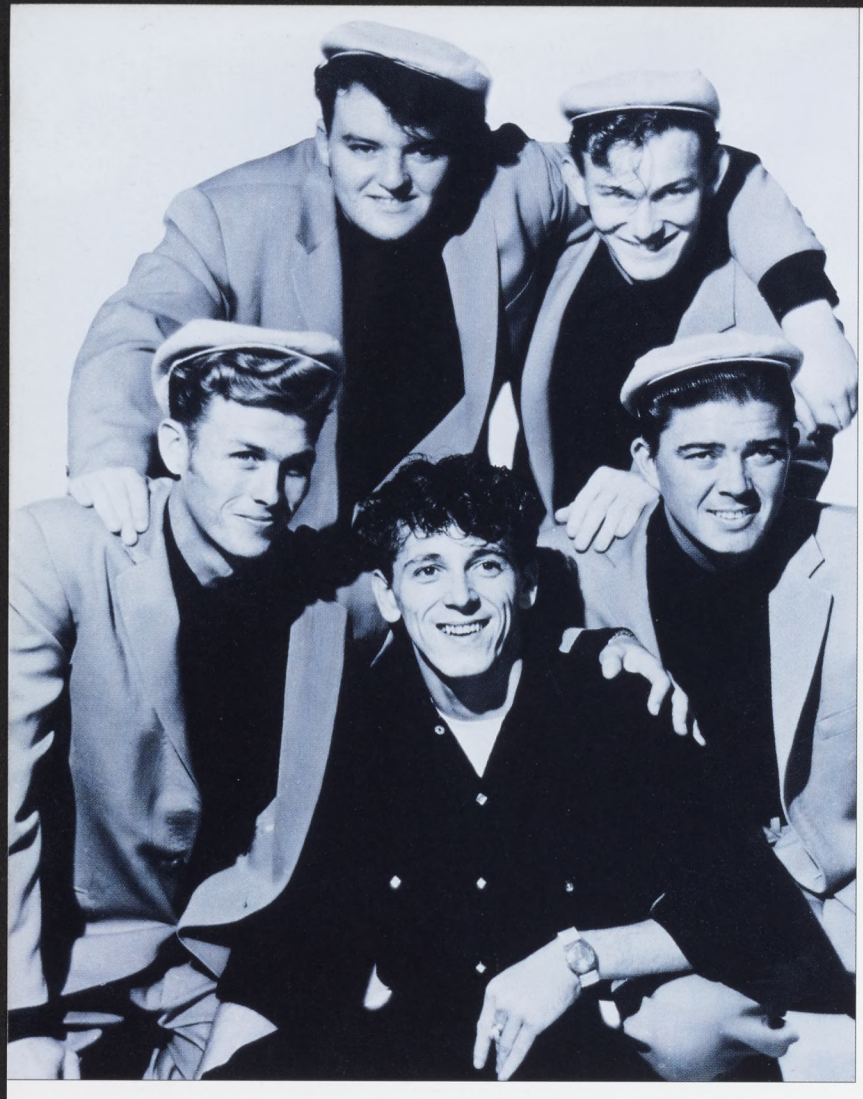
GENE VINCENT

THE PRODUCER WAS AFRAID HE'D LOSE HIS JOB. THE STUDIO was barely solvent. The engineer wrestled through twelve takes trying to get something usable. The record label didn't really believe in the song, the artist or even in rock & roll. Out of such gloom came the bubbling magic of "Be-Bop-a-Lula," and a career that was born under a bad sign. ℭ Harold and Owen Bradley had constructed their Nashville studio a little over a year before Gene Vincent arrived on May 4, 1956. It had been built as a country-music recording base for Decca Records, but times were tough and the brothers were renting it out to anyone who wanted to use it. ℭ "For the first few years, Decca couldn't get a hit out of that studio," recalls Harold Bradley. Capitol producer Ken Nelson, on the other hand, was doing well with his sessions at the facility. ℭ "Owen said, 'Ken has been really good to us; we ought to take him to lunch.' I was sitting in the backseat and the two of them were in the front seat as we headed down the alley from the studio. I looked over and said, 'I guess the French Navy must be in town – look at those guys with those blue hats on.' ℭ "Ken said, 'Oh, no, no. That's Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps. I just signed them and I'll probably get fired for it. I was hired to do country, but I'm doing a rock & roll session.' " ℭ Four months earlier, Elvis Presley had recorded "Heartbreak Hotel" a few blocks away. By springtime, he was a national phenomenon. Capitol had signed Gene Vincent to cash in, but was far more committed to Frank Sinatra and

Famous for his raucous live performances – Gene Vincent was the original punk rocker

BY ROBERT K. OERMANN



Vincent (center) and the Blue Caps: guitarist Williams, drummer Harrell, bassist Neal, lead guitarist Gallup (from left)

the rest of its easy-listening roster. Among the label executives, only Nelson seemed interested in the possibilities of the twenty-one-year-old Virginian.

By the time he and the Bradleys got back from their meal, the Blue Caps were well into their session. "Race With the Devil" had taken eleven frustrating takes to capture. Now they were struggling through take after take of "Be-Bop-a-Lula."

"Ken said, 'Why don't you come in?'" Harold recalls. "We weren't real comfortable with that. Even though we were the owners; for the sessions we weren't playing on we tried not to be in the building. We didn't want to be in the way. But we went in and listened for a while. The engineer was having a terrible time. It was rock & roll. The drummer was playing real loud and he was bleeding into Gene Vincent's mike. Well, I guess it was fortunate that we were there. Because Owen said, 'Okay, let's try this.'

"He goes out into the studio and puts Gene Vincent in the back hallway. The only thing keeping the door open is the mike cable, and he's singing, all the way back there. Then they ran a tape echo to get that 'slap-back.' I don't know how Owen did it, but it worked great. I think it's a wonderful moment in time. It's a historic record that will live forever."

"Be-Bop-a-Lula" became a rock landmark. Ken Nelson kept his job and created a generation of Capitol country stars. Owen Bradley went on to produce everyone from Patsy Cline and Brenda Lee to Conway Twitty and k.d. lang. Harold Bradley became the most-recorded session guitarist in history, and the president of the Nashville musicians' union. In the wake of "Be-Bop-a-Lula," the studio became the founding business of the famed Music Row district.

But for Gene Vincent, that spring day in Nashville would be as good as it ever got. His recorded performances have stood the test of time, but during his life he never again touched gold. The pounding "I Got It," the rollicking "Rocky Road Blues," the suggestive "Woman Love" and the relentlessly frantic "B-I-Bickey-Bi, Bo-Bo-Go" remain among the most refreshing discs of the rockabilly movement. The can't-sit-still energy in "Dance to the Bop," the galloping "I Got a Baby" and the impossibly catchy hand-clapper "Lotta Lovin'" have influenced rock performers for forty years. But the man who created them was broke and nearly forgotten when he died in 1971. Even today, Vincent's tormented, self-destructive lifestyle often overshadows his remarkable music.

The uncompromising, elemental rawness of his records is still impressive. And Gene Vincent's live-performance attack matched and surpassed his studio skills. Even in a field noted for its intense eccentrics, Gene Vincent stands out among rock stars.

It was Vincent who first wore the all-black-leather uniform that has symbolized rock rebellion through musical styles ranging from heavy metal to alternative rock. It was Vincent who developed the biker image, menacing stage swagger, juvenile-delinquent sneer and "death wish" angst that still characterize rockers today. Decades before punk rock, Vincent was writhing on stage floors, leaping from pianos, thrashing wildly, wrapping himself around mike stands and bashing in drum kits. Along with Bill Haley's Comets and Elvis Presley's Blue Moon Boys, the Blue Caps were among the earliest self-contained rock recording ensembles. Gene Vincent was also among the first to take the rock & roll revolution overseas.

Born Eugene Vincent Craddock in 1935, Gene Vincent joined the navy as a teenager and entertained his fellow sailors by singing the country tunes of his boyhood. A motorcycle accident in 1955 sent him home to a Virginia hospital. It is likely that he heard Haley's "Rock Around the Clock" during his recuperation, for that is the summer it topped the Hit Parade. In any case, Vincent

and a patient named Donald Graves cowrote "Be-Bop-a-Lula" and "Race With the Devil" at this time. Vincent's left leg never healed properly and he remained in pain for the rest of his life.

Still in a cast, he attended a Hank Snow show in Norfolk that featured the red-hot Presley. In March 1956, Vincent wowed local audiences with his Elvis impersonations at an amateur show. He was accompanied by a startlingly inventive house band called Wee Willie and the Virginians. Radio DJ "Sheriff" Tex Davis was impressed with the performance, as well as with "Be-Bop-a-Lula," to which he added his name as a composer when he began managing Vincent. Davis alerted Capitol talent scout Nelson.

The Virginians became the Blue Caps – electric lead guitarist Cliff Gallup, rhythm guitarist Willie Williams, upright bass player Jack Neal and drummer Dickie Harrell. Six weeks after being spotted by Davis they were in Bradley Studios making rock & roll history. By July, "Be-Bop-a-Lula" was a Top Ten sensation.

Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps hit the road with a vengeance, reportedly leaving a trail of trashed hotel rooms and deflowered schoolgirls in their wake. Vincent's alcohol and pill consumption escalated rapidly as he numbed his physical pain and sought onstage abandon. His mood swings, gunplay and violent outbursts were legendary. Band members came and went with alarming frequency. Four wives and several girlfriends would also arrive and depart over the next decade. His dark, erratic behavior drove crowds wild, but alienated music-industry professionals. Despite charismatic appearances in the early rock movies *The Girl Can't Help It* and *Hot Rod Gang;* despite introducing songs by Bobby Darin, Jerry Reed and Johnny Burnette; despite giving early breaks to Buck Owens, D.J. Fontana and Tommy Facenda as Blue Caps members and despite five uniformly excellent LPs, Gene Vincent's Capitol career was over by 1960.

His stage career was not. Especially overseas, Vincent remained an idol. In 1957 Vincent, Little Richard and Eddie Cochran had launched the first rock tour of Australia. Two years later, Vincent made history again when he starred in the first rock tour of the Orient. In late 1959 he took Europe by storm – to this day, Gene Vincent's popularity in France far outstrips any other rock pioneer's, including Elvis's. In 1961 he conquered South Africa.

Vincent made few friends among his peers, apart from fellow rockabilly Eddie Cochran, whose vocals appear on the 1958 Vincent pile driver "Git It." In 1956 they'd become pals on the set of *The Girl Can't Help It,* in which they both appeared. Cochran joined his buddy in England in January 1960, and the two spent the next three months playing mobbed shows there. En route to London's airport in April their driver lost control of his taxi. Thrown from the car, Cochran died of massive head injuries. Gene Vincent recovered from his injuries – a fractured collarbone, ribs and leg – but was emotionally devastated by his best friend's death. He was never the same again.

Vincent sustained his career in Britain throughout the Sixties. He made the U.K. charts fourteen times, appeared in two additional films there and was the subject of a 1969 BBC-TV documentary titled *The Rock 'n' Roll Singer.*

American recordings for Challenge (1966–67) and Kama Sutra (1970–71) didn't rekindle his career. Comeback attempts failed. His alcoholism careened out of control. When his parents found him drunk, disoriented and despondent in October 1971, they took him to their home. He tripped when he entered it, fell and began vomiting blood. He died an hour later in a Newhall, California, emergency room of hemorrhaged stomach ulcers at age thirty-six.

John Lennon (1975's "Be-Bop-a-Lula"), Ian Dury (1977's "Sweet Gene Vincent") and Jeff Beck (1993's *Crazy Legs* tribute) have paid him homage in song. Vincent's classics have been sung by everyone from Rod Stewart to the Sex Pistols. Robert Plant, Albert Lee, Dave Edmunds and Brian Setzer are just a few who cite his records as inspirations. The legend of Gene Vincent as a rock & roll martyr seems to grow stronger each year. More important, the excitement in his music is undimmed by time.

ROCKABILLY FILLIES

THE PIONEER WOMEN OF ROCK & ROLL

IN A SPIRITED CONTRAST TO THE EASY-LISTENING MUSIC OF mainstream America, rockabilly came along in the 1950s and shook things up. An amalgam of country, swing, rhythm & blues and gospel, rockabilly was born of the music of poor whites and blacks, carrying with it all the subversive and anti-establishment attitudes and feelings of the disenfranchised. In the climate of a racist society suffused with Cold War politics, rockabilly – characterized by ecstasy, celebration and abandon – became a social and political statement. Teenagers rebelling against an older generation raised on the catastrophic economic Depression and a devastating world war took rockabilly as their own. ℭ Not your typical male artists, rockabilly performers wore their hair long, they posed in a sultry way and they were emotional, often appearing vulnerable and hurt. It was this essential androgyny of early rockabilly that created the space for an earth-shattering development in pop culture: It allowed young, white women the opportunity to express their energy, excitement and sexuality. In their estimation, the assertive, loud, sensual rockabilly music of Elvis was not reserved only for men. ℭ Some rockabilly artists got their start at country music barn dances, which often included on the bill a

"The Female Elvis Presley," circa 1957: Janis Martin cut her first rockabilly record in 1956

BY MARY A. BUFWACK

Florida native Jo-Ann Campbell was billed as "the Blond Bombshell"

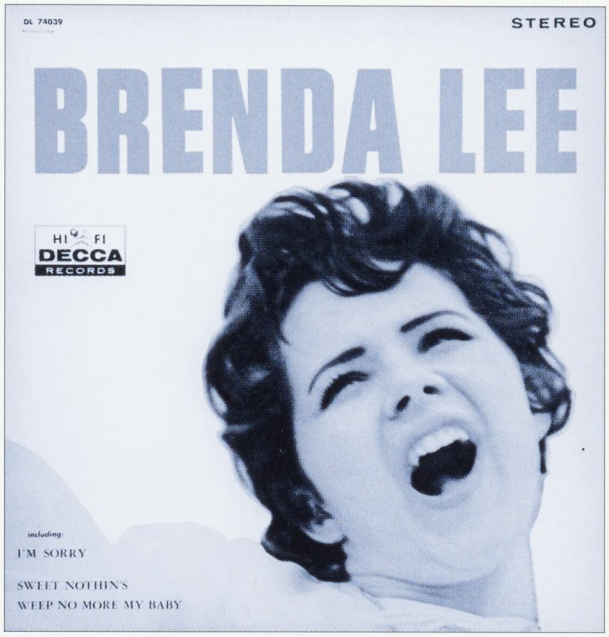
rockabilly act for the junior members of the audience (early in his career, Elvis performed on KWKH's Louisiana Hayride). Frequently, young women performing novelty songs filled these spots – apparently their bouncing enthusiasm was not as threatening as the performances of the older male rockabilly artists.

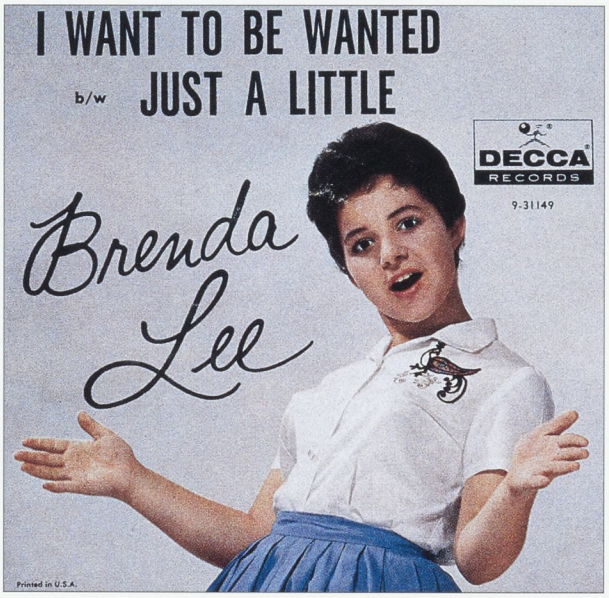
Honky-tonk queen Rose Maddox was one of rockabilly's earliest female performers. With her mid-1950s releases, "Hey Little Dreamboat" and "Wild, Wild Young Men," Maddox threw her California-style C&W into overdrive. Known as the "Most Colorful Hillbilly Band in the Land," Rose and her brothers, migrants from the South to the land of opportunity, had a predilection for rhythm, boogie and onstage anarchy, reflecting the raucous mood of the working people who frequented the large dancehalls where they performed. At the same time that Maddox and her gang were being encouraged by California's general nonconformist attitude and mobile society, Texas's rowdy dancehalls spawned the hard-driving rockabilly of Charline Arthur, who was also finding expression in uninhibited stage antics and energetic music.

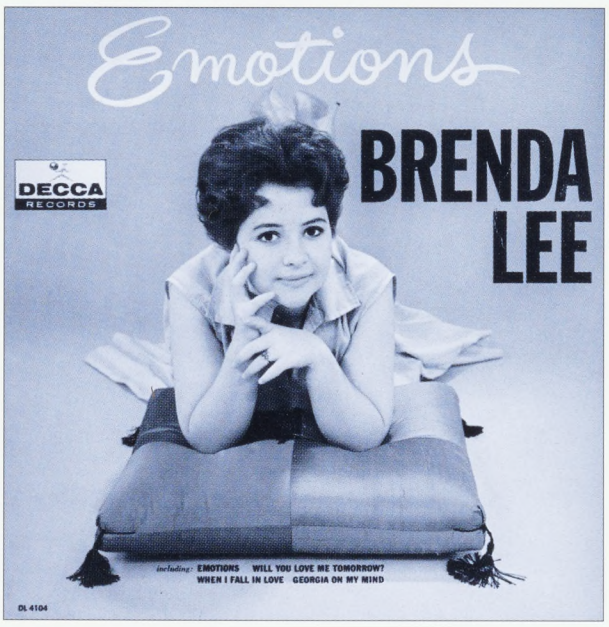
Meanwhile, women with country-music origins were being recorded and nurtured at Memphis's Sun Records Studio, the birthplace of rockabilly. The Miller Sisters, Barbara Pittman and Maggie Sue Wimberly all joined Sam Phillips's roster there. Perhaps the label's finest recording of a female rockabilly performance was Jean Chapel's "Welcome to the Club." The former Opal Amburgey, of Neon, Kentucky, Chapel had worked with her sisters as a member of the first female hillbilly country group, the Coon Creek Girls, and had completed a stint on the Grand Ole Opry, using the moniker Mattie O'Neill. Her graduation to Sun Records in the mid-1950s, at the age of thirty, produced several fine rockabilly performances, among them "Oo-ba-la Baby."

Following in Rose Maddox's footsteps on the West Coast was Lorrie Collins, who, with her younger brother Larry, performed rockabilly as the Collins Kids on Town Hall Party, a California barn dance program. An Oklahoman by birth, Lorrie was thirteen years old in 1955 when she and her brother began recording for Columbia. Demonstrating Lorrie's buoyant and exuberant vocals and Larry's fine guitar leads, "Beetle Bug Bop," the gifted siblings' first release, set the standard for their energized rockabilly efforts. "Rock Boppin' Baby," one of rockabilly's finest female vocal performances, illustrated a growing maturity and sensuality within Lorrie's voice. By 1960, however, she chose to withdraw from music.

RCA Victor, Elvis's record company, actually searched for female artists with whom to exploit this emerging musical market. Dubbed "the Female Elvis Presley," Janis Martin was the label's major discovery. Martin began her career at age eleven on Danville, Virginia's WDVA Barn Dance. Five years later, in 1956, on the strength of a rockabilly demo, the fifteen-year-old was signed to a recording contract by RCA's Steve Sholes, who sent Martin to Nashville to record with Chet Atkins. Her first release, "Will You, Willyum," was backed by her own composi-







"Little Miss Dynamite": Brenda Lee's rockabilly career began at age eleven

tion "Drugstore Rock 'n' Roll." Martin's throaty delivery was influenced by rhythm & blues artists like LaVern Baker and Ruth Brown. With her bouncy blond ponytail, dungarees and guitar, Martin was ingenue, tomboy and musician all rolled into one. With the release of the single "My Boy Elvis," an extensive promotional tour and several television appearances, Martin's popularity increased. Unable to garner sustained chart success, though, she was dropped by RCA in 1958. (The label also discovered that the eighteen-year-old was pregnant and had been secretly married since she was fifteen.)

Florida native Jo-Ann Campbell, like Martin, bypassed the country music scene and headed straight for the rock & roll arena. In 1954, at the age of sixteen, she hit the Big Apple, focusing on a dancing career – but it was her singing that garnered attention. Billed as "the Blond Bombshell," the barely five-foot-tall blonde developed a stage show exhibiting a sexuality then more often found on the urban rhythm & blues scene. At nineteen, Campbell was recording self-composed tunes for predominantly rhythm & blues labels like Eldorado and Gone. While "Mama (Can I Go Out Tonight)," written by Bo Diddley, featured doo-wop background vocals, several Campbell tunes consisted of sparse rockabilly-style arrangements; yet others were driven by a more frantic beat. Campbell became renowned for her onstage dancing to the uptempo numbers, which won her a spot on Alan Freed's all-star tour of 1958. Campbell kept rocking with appearances on *American Bandstand* and in rock & roll movies, and in 1961 she starred in *Hey, Let's Twist!,* the film immortalizing the latest dance sensa-

tion. Eventually, as rock & roll faced increasing censorship, Jo-Ann made the transition to pop and country music.

Rockabilly's most artistically significant and commercially successful women performers were Brenda Lee and Wanda Jackson, both of whom began their careers in the face of economic hardship and were carried to success by enormous raw talent. At the tender age of eight, Brenda Mae Tarpley found herself the breadwinner for a family of five. As a five-year-old, she had won a talent contest and had become a regular on Atlanta radio, the next year earning a slot on a television show. Her father's death made this youthful pastime an economic necessity. After being discovered by country star Red Foley, "Little Brenda Lee" moved to Nashville in 1956. There, the eleven-year-old's stage shows incorporated rockabilly

performances of Hank Williams's "Jambalaya" and Little Richard's "Tutti-Frutti," which led to her being signed by Decca Records.

Lee's first single was "Jambalaya (on the Bayou)," backed by her purest rockabilly performance, "Bigelow 6-200." Even as her musical arrangements became more lush, Lee maintained a rocking feel and a growling, gravel-voiced singing style. Her vocals transcended her age: Though she was just a child, her singing voice was that of a woman. Her mother refused to let "Little Miss Dynamite" tour with Jerry Lee Lewis, but some conservative critics nonetheless questioned the propriety of Brenda's performances due to the strong emotions evoked by her mature voice. Undaunted, the precocious Lee defied all criticism with her sharp sense of humor.

As was the case with other great rockabilly singers, Lee's voice communicated fun and mischief as well as the pain and tragedy of the darker side of life. Her diverse repertoire included assertive, suggestive hits like 1959's "Sweet Nothin's" and 1961's "Dum Dum," as well as a succession of heartbreak songs that perhaps best illustrated Lee's vocal conviction and authority: "I'm Sorry," "I Want to Be Wanted," "Fool #1," "All Alone Am I" and "As Usual," among many others, made her one of the biggest-selling

Above: Wanda Jackson in 1956, a year she toured with Elvis
At right: Jackson with Capitol labelmate and fellow rockabilly artist Gene Vincent, 1957

female singers in the world.

More than any female rockabilly performer, though, it was Wanda Jackson who claimed for women a stance of independence, assertiveness, rebelliousness and sexuality. By age nine, Jackson could read and write music and was proficient on guitar and piano. Dedicated to and obsessed with music and her guitar, she had a daily radio show in Oklahoma City when she was thirteen. In 1954, while a junior in high school, Jackson was invited to record with Western swing and honky-tonk star Hank Thompson. When Thompson took her to Capitol Records, the label would not sign a contract with her until she was eighteen. From 1955 to 1956, Jackson toured with Elvis, whom she credits with inspiring her stylistic shift toward the rockabilly sound.

Comparable to Elvis's Sun recordings, Jackson's singles from the next six years, such as her self-penned "Mean Mean Man," are unparalleled. Her powerhouse vocals and assertive phrasing were paired on disc with some of the finest instrumentalists, including piano-pounding Merrill Moore and fiery guitarists Joe Maphis, Buck Owens and Roy Clark. Jackson's second and third LPs, *Rockin' With Wanda* and *There's a Party Goin' On,* further established her musical distinctiveness, featuring frighteningly raw covers of Leiber and Stoller's "Riot in Cell Block #9" (a Coasters hit) and Little Richard's "Rip It Up." These songs acquired a new meaning and intensity via Jackson's uninhibited energy, as she transformed them into much more than mere imitations of male recordings.

Jackson continued to play pure rockabilly longer than any other female performer, releasing her "Party" trilogy "Let's Have a Party," "There's a Party Goin' On" and "Man, We Had a Party" in the early 1960s. With Elvis in the army, Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis embroiled in moral scandals, Carl Perkins sunk into alcoholism, Buddy Holly and Eddie Cochran dead and Gene Vincent self-exiled in England, rockabilly had little future. Wanda's performances were among the genre's last. And within them, in a jarring and profoundly meaningful way, Jackson marries female personal anger with what was for those times a more typically male social rebellion.

In the waning days of rockabilly, one more female recording artist emerged who could trace her musical development directly to the style. Jackie DeShannon was born Sharon Lee Myers in Hazel, Kentucky, in 1944. Like other rocking women, DeShannon began as a country artist at a young age: She had her own radio show by the age of six and first recorded at thirteen. By age fifteen, she had relocated to Nashville where she continued recording and promoting herself. In 1958, as Jacquie Shannon and the Cajuns, she issued her purest rockabilly single "Buddy" and the bopping "Just Another Lie." Encouraged as a songwriter in Nashville, DeShannon provided Brenda Lee with several songs, including 1961's "Dum Dum."

Jackie DeShannon, pictured here in 1967, got her start in the Fifties

By 1960, DeShannon, following the advice of pal Eddie Cochran, had relocated to California. There, her recording career didn't immediately take off, so she sustained herself as a writer. Her first hit single, a 1963 cover of Bob Wills's "Faded Love," was a soulful reworking of the country classic. Her 1963–64 recordings of her own compositions "Needles and Pins" and "When You Walk in the Room," as well as Buddy Holly's "Oh, Boy!," became antecedents of the country rock that evolved in the late Sixties.

When DeShannon took rockabilly as her own, she – like her most prolific and successful peers, Brenda Lee, Wanda Jackson, Janis Martin, Jo-Ann Campbell and Lorrie Collins – never could have foreseen the impact her music would make, nor the extent to which she would open doors for other women. The rich and diverse legacy, as well as the superb catalogue of performances these independent women created, reminds us that – despite the male stranglehold on the commercial rock scene – joy, celebration, sexuality, rebellion, pain, tragedy and musical expression cannot be bounded by gender.