PERFORMERS

THE LEGENDARY GROUPS

THE BLUE CAPS • THE COMETS

THE CRICKETS • THE FAMOUS FLAMES

THE MIDNIGHTERS • THE MIRACLES

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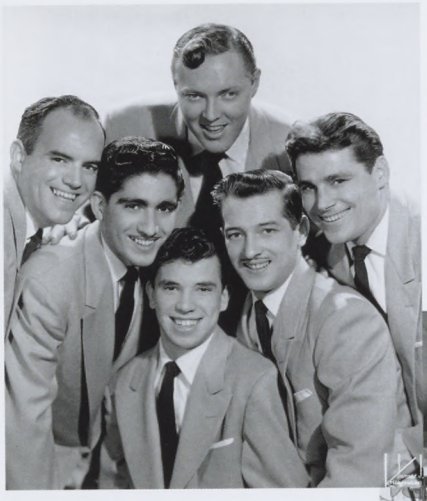
FROM POWERFUL HARMONIZERS
TO TREND-SETTING INSTRUMENTALISTS,
THESE **INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS** BLAZED
THE ROCK & ROLL TRAIL



FROM TOP Bill Haley, Dick Richards, Marshall Lytle, Joey D'Ambrosio, Johnny Grande, and Billy Williamson (clockwise from top), 1955; Danny Cedrone, early fifties; Williamson, Rudy Pompilli, Haley, Ralph Jones, Fran Beecher, Grande, and Al Rex (clockwise from top left), 1956.

THE COMETS

Bill Haley needed a lot of musical oomph to get from second-string singing cowboy to one of the first rock & roll stars in history. A huge portion of that power came from the appropriately named Comets.

Marshall Lytle, stand-up bassist and songwriter (he cowrote Haley's first hit, "Crazy Man, Crazy"), had been in Haley's C&W group, Bill Haley and the Saddlemen. The multitalented Haley actually taught Lytle—initially a guitarist—the basics of percussive slap bass, which Lytle soon mastered. The distinctive rhythmic attack of Lytle's bass, in conjunction with a succession of drummers, gave the Comets that extra bit of backbeat that made the tunes pop. As the Saddlemen morphed into the Comets, Lytle developed a wildly theatrical performing style that included riding his bass like a horse and tossing it into the air, helping to make the Comets a formidable live act.

Guitarist Danny Cedrone played in both the Saddlemen and the Comets. His renowned solo on 1954's "Rock Around the Clock" (identical to one he'd played on Haley's 1952 single "Rock the Joint," considered by some to be the first rockabilly record) is an integral part of the song—and one of the greatest rock & roll solos ever.

Pianist Johnny Grande also served in both incarnations of the band. His rollicking piano colors many of Haley's recordings and, as one of the only members who could read music, he proved invaluable as an arranger. For live shows he often resorted to an accordion so he could engage in the Comets' acrobatic stage antics.

While the Saddlemen did not have a touring drummer, when Haley and his cohorts crossed over to rock & roll and became the Comets in 1952, Haley knew it was time for the big beat. Although he is not on the classic early Haley singles, Dick Richards—a.k.a. Dick Boccelli—did time as one of the Comets' first drummers, touring extensively and appearing with the rising rockers on *The Milton Berle Show* and Ed Sullivan's *Toast of the Town.*

The wailing tenor sax on Haley's early recordings often took center stage. That was Joey D'Ambrosio—a.k.a. Joey Ambrose—who presented the tenor sax as a rock & roll instrument every bit as seductive and commanding as the guitar. A consummate showman, D'Ambrosio did much to enhance the Comets' reputation as a must-see act.

In 1955, D'Ambrosio, Lytle, and Richards left the Comets over a salary dispute. Haley replaced them with tenor saxman Rudy Pompilli, bassist Al Rex, and drummer Ralph Jones. These players recorded, toured, and delivered legendary, raucous performances with the Comets in the first two full-length rock & roll movies, *Rock Around the Clock* and *Don't Knock the Rock*, taking up the mantle of madcap rock & roll entertainers as Haley blazed through the rest of the fifties and beyond.

Steel guitarist Billy Williamson joined Bill Haley from 1949 to 1963, and was with him from the Saddlemen years well into the rise and decline of the Comets. Although the steel guitar is not usually considered a rock & roll instrument, Williamson was indispensable to Haley's ventures. In addition to MC'ing concerts, he was a noted clown, offering a bit of vaudevillian humor between songs. He also wrote or cowrote several hits for Haley.

Jazz pro and former Benny Goodman guitarist

Fran Beecher first came to the Comets in 1954, after the untimely death of Danny Cedrone. It did not take long for Beecher to pare down his fluid jazz style into the country and rhythm & blues hybrid then called rockabilly. He remained onboard as a Comet throughout the glory years, performing, writing songs for Haley, and recording with the group into the sixties.

R . B . W .

THE CRICKETS

There are few bands whose moniker is surrounded by more apocrypha than the Crickets. Contrary to the hit 1978 movie *The Buddy Holly Story,* they were not christened by a crazed DJ. Nor did they take the name from an uninvited cricket chirping in the studio as the tape rolled. The truth, for once, is actually an interesting story.

Producer and manager Norman Petty knew he had a smash with "That'll Be the Day," a tune by singer-guitarist Buddy Holly and drummer Jerry "J.I." Allison, but Holly was under contract to Decca. The label had lost interest in Holly yet prevented him from recording his songs elsewhere for five years. It was Petty's idea to market Holly's material as a group effort, thereby circumnavigating this limitation. Holly was a fan of R&B group the Spiders, so he and Allison, along with fellow Lubbock youngsters Joe B. Mauldin (on bass) and Niki Sullivan (on guitar) went through a list of bugs, settling on the Crickets. (They almost called themselves the Beetles.) This allowed Petty to shop their material without Holly's name on it. Independent label Brunswick bit, and the Crickets' "That'll Be the Day" hit big in 1957.

FROM TOP Buddy Holly (left) and Sonny Curtis, live in Lubbock, Texas, 1956; Joe B. Mauldin, Holly, Jerry Allison (holding Holly's guitar), and Niki Sullivan (from left), 1957.

The Crickets burst onto a plate-shifting terrain that was thick with solo artists—Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, Chuck Berry—but short on bands composed of young white kids who wrote their own songs. Although it began as a ruse to distract the suits (eventually Decca caught on, and everyone made nice), the presentation of the Crickets as a gang of barnstorming pals soon became a source of fascination for teens everywhere, from America to the U.K. In Liverpool, Paul McCartney and John Lennon, then in the Quarrymen, caught the Crickets on the TV show *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* in 1958, and took inspiration from the "specky git" and his friends.

Allison's drumming—not to mention songwriting input—stands out as a major asset to the Crickets' unique sound. The most notable track is "Peggy Sue," which—like many Crickets singles recorded in the eighteen months prior to Holly's death—sounds like nothing else. Rather than hew to the traditional kick-and-snare template, Allison played paradiddles—drum rolls—throughout the track. And on "Not Fade Away" (later covered by the Rolling Stones and the Grateful Dead), Allison eschewed his kit for a cardboard box, delivering a famously funky take on the "Bo Diddley" beat.

Mauldin's solid stand-up bass often took a percussive role in the Crickets, as Allison's more experimental touches, encouraged and sometimes initiated by Norman Petty, carried the drums away from traditional time-keeping. As for live performances, Mauldin was a rock & roll showman. Guitarist Niki Sullivan's presence in the Crickets was short-lived but important, as it gave Holly room to develop his distinctive lead-guitar work and occasional "lead rhythm" approach. Sullivan's bespectacled face and loose-limbed moves, documented on the group's first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show,* helped ingrain the image of rock &