

The Renaissance

2008-09: volume 7

Jerry Lee Lewis Oct. 11, 2008, 8:00

Jerry Lee Lewis' first musical influences were eclectic. His parents, who were poor, spun swing and Al Jolson records. But his earliest big influence was country star Jimmie Rodgers. In his early teens he absorbed both the softer country style of Gene Autry and the more rocking music of local black clubs, along with the gospel hymns of the local Assembly of God church. Lewis first played his aunt's piano at age eight and made his public debut in 1949 at age 14, sitting in with a local C&W band in a Ford dealership parking lot. When he was 15, Lewis went to a fundamentalist Bible school in Waxahachie, Texas, from which he was soon expelled. He has often said that rock & roll is the Devil's music.

In 1956 Lewis headed for Memphis (financed by his father) to audition for Sam Phillips' Sun Records. Phillips' assistant, Jack

Clement, was impressed with Lewis' piano style but suggested he play more rock & roll, in a style similar to Elvis Presley's. Presley had recently switched from Sun to RCA. Lewis' debut single, "Crazy Arms" (previously a country hit for Ray Price), did well regionally, but it was the follow-up, 1957's "Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On" (#3), that finally broke through. The song first sold 100,000 copies in the South. After Lewis' appearance on Steve Allen's TV show, it sold over 6 million copies nationally. "Great Balls of Fire" (#2 in 1957) sold more than 5 million copies, and was followed by more than a half million in sales for "Breathless" (#7 in 1958) and "High School Confidential" (#21 in 1958), the title theme song of a movie in which Lewis also appeared. Both "Whole Lotta Shakin'" and "Great Balls" were in the pop, country, and R&B Top 5 simultaneously, "Shakin'" at #3 pop, and #1 R&B and C&W, and "Great Balls" at #2 pop, #3 R&B, and #1 C&W. Lewis' high school nickname was the "Killer," and it stuck with him as he established a reputation as a tough, rowdy performer with a flamboyant piano style that used careening glissandos, pounding chords, and bench-toppling acrobatics.

Lewis' career slammed to a stop after he married his 13-year-old third cousin, Myra Gale Brown, in December 1957. She was his third wife. At age 16, he had wed a 17-year-old, and soon after that ended, got caught in a shotgun marriage. The marriage to Myra Gale Brown lasted 13 years, but at the time, Lewis was condemned by the church in the U.S. and hounded by the British press on a 1958 tour. His career ran dry for nearly a decade. He had a modest 1961 hit with "What'd I Say," but in 1963 he left Sun for Smash/Mercury. He toured relentlessly, playing clubs, billing his act as "the greatest show on earth." On the way, he developed a drinking problem. In 1968 he played Iago in a rock-musical version of Shakespeare's *Othello* called *Catch My Soul*.

Continued on back.



Eventually, Lewis and his producer, Jerry Kennedy, decided to abandon rock & roll for country music. In 1968 Lewis had the first of many Top 10 country hits with “Another Place, Another Time,” followed by “What Made Milwaukee Famous (Made a Loser Out of Me).” Between then and the early '80s he had more than 30 big country hits, including “To Make Love Sweeter for You” (#1 C&W in 1968), “There Must Be More to Love Than This” (#1 C&W in 1971), “Would You Take Another Chance on Me” (#1 C&W in 1971), “Chantilly Lace” (#1 C&W in 1972), “Middle Age Crazy” (#4 C&W in 1977), and “Thirty-nine and Holding” (#4 C&W in 1981). Subsequent singles were minor C&W hits, none charting higher than #43.

In 1973 Lewis released *The Session*, a return-to-rock album recorded in London with a host of top British musicians, including Peter Frampton, Alvin Lee, Klaus Voormann, and Rory Gallagher, redoing oldies. It resulted in some pop chart success with “Drinkin’ Wine Spo Dee Odee,” an R&B song he’d performed at his public debut in 1949. In 1978 Lewis signed with Elektra and enjoyed some FM radio play with “Rockin’ My Life Away.” He also continued to tour, performing all the styles of his career: rock, country, gospel, blues, spirituals, and more. In 1981 Lewis played a German concert with fellow Sun alumni Johnny Cash and Carl Perkins. The show was released as an album called *Survivors* in 1982. On June 30, 1981, Lewis was hospitalized in Memphis with hemorrhaging from a perforated stomach ulcer. After two operations, he was given a 50-50 chance of survival; four months later he was back on tour. He appeared on the 1982 Grammy Awards telecast with his cousin Mickey Gilley; another cousin is TV evangelist Jimmy Swaggart.

Lewis’ personal life has been marked by tragedy and controversy. In 1973 Jerry Lee Lewis Jr., who played drums in his father’s band, was killed in an automobile accident. Lewis’ brother had died when hit by a car when Jerry was two. His other son, Steve Allen (named after the talk-show host), drowned in 1962 at age three. In 1982 his estranged fourth wife, Jaren Gunn Lewis, also drowned in a pool. His fifth wife, Shawn Stephens Lewis, was found dead in their home 77 days after their wedding. Jerry Lee Lewis remarried again, taking his sixth wife. She later gave birth to Jerry Lee Lewis III, Lewis’ only surviving son (he also had a daughter with Myra).

In recent years, Lewis has been plagued by serious health problems and battles with the IRS. He was treated at the Betty Ford Clinic for addiction to painkillers. His health has been poor and record sales have dropped off. He last came to widespread public attention in 1989, when the biographical film *Great Balls of Fire*, starring Dennis Quaid as Lewis, was released. Lewis was among the first 10 inductees into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986. In 1995 he finally released a new album, *Young Blood*. He continues to gig sporadically. In 1999 he performed in Baltimore, Maryland, at the Smithsonian Institution’s bash celebrating the 300th anniversary of the piano.

from The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock and Roll (Simon & Schuster, 2001)




EMBARQ
Concert Connection

sponsored by
Seckel Group Architects

presented by

ArcelorMittal