

CAN A FUJIYAMA MAMA BE THE FEMALE ELVIS?

The wild, wild women of rockabilly

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I don't want a headstone for my grave. I want a fucking monument!
(Jerry Lee Lewis)¹

You see, I was always a well-endowed girl, and the guys used to tell me that they didn't know how to fit a 42 into a 33 1/3.
(Sun Records artist Barbara Pittman)²

Female artists just don't really sell.
(Capital Records producer Ken Nelson)³

In the opening scene of the 1993 film *True Romance* (directed by Tony Scott from a script by Quentin Tarantino), Clarence Worly (Christian Slater) perches on a stool in an anonymous, rundown bar. Addressing his comments to no one in particular, he soliloquises about 'the King'. Simply put, he asserts, in *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), Elvis embodied everything that rockabilly is about. 'I mean', he states, 'he is rockabilly. Mean, surly, nasty, rude. In that movie he couldn't give a fuck about nothin' except rockin' and rollin' and livin' fast and dyin' young and leavin' a good lookin' corpse, you know.' As he continues, Clarence's admiration for Elvis transcends mere identification with the performer's public image. He adds, 'Man, Elvis looked good. Yeah, I ain't no fag, but Elvis, he was prettier than most women, most women.' He now acknowledges the presence on the barstool next to him of a blank-faced, blonde young woman. Unconcerned that his overheard thoughts might have disturbed her, he continues, 'I always said if I had to fuck a guy – had to if my life depended on it – I'd

fuck Elvis.' The woman concurs with his desire to copulate with 'the King', but adds, 'Well, when he was alive, not now.'

In the heyday of rockabilly, one imagines more than a few young men shared Clarence's fantasy, although the urge to perform Elvis's music (even at the risk of repeating his premature and inglorious death) presumably exceeded that of making love to the 'King'. One observes in the features and the voices of any number of musicians – the well known, the unknown, and the obscure – the shadow cast by a young Southern man to whom fortune and talent ascribed the figure of royalty.⁴ Furthermore, most histories of rockabilly, or the musical culture of the 1950s broadly speaking, characterise the period as one of wild boys at play, a brief moment when the grey-flannelled consciousness of American masculinity bordered on mania. Nick Tosches hyperbolically writes of the form as constituting 'the face of Dionysos, full of febrile sexuality and senselessness'; the vehement emotion at large in the culture aroused women, he adds, and made 'teen-age boys reinvent themselves as flaming creatures'.⁵ The last two words of his comment, a reference to underground film-maker Jack Smith's 1963 paean to omnisexual behaviour, underscores the degree to which infatuation with Elvis not only crossed all gender boundaries but also fused if not confused those parameters. Bill C. Malone again encodes rockabilly as predominantly if not exclusively masculine. He underscores the synchronicity of the persona of the rockabilly musician with that of the prototypical white male Southerner as described by W. J. Cash in his epochal 1941 analysis of the region, as well as Jack Kirby's more recent observations on the region's entrenched myth of fevered emotionalism:

If W. J. Cash had lived, he might have recognized them as the simple 'men-at-the-center' whom he discussed in *Mind Of The South*: men who felt rather than thought and who embodied, without hypocrisy, both hedonistic and puritanical traits . . . Jack Kirby in his recent book *Media-Made Dixie*, describes country musicians as conveyors of the myth of the 'visceral white Southerner,' a character who is 'languid, innocent of caprice and wisdom in handling money, moonstruck and often drunk.' He might have been more accurate if he had centered his discussion on the rockabillys.⁶

John Morthland echoes Malone's gender-specific formulation when he describes rockabilly as 'the young white Southerner's every Saturday night blowout wrapped up in about two minutes of explosive music'.⁷ Charlie Gillett does too in his standard history, *The Sound of the City. The Rise of Rock*

and Roll; rockabilly, he writes, 'suggested a young white man celebrating freedom, ready to do anything, go anywhere, pausing long enough for apologies and recriminations, but then hustling on towards the new'.⁸

The preponderance of white male rock historians themselves pause all too briefly and apologise all too little for the gender-biased narratives they propose. Unquestionably, they reconstruct the male-centred 'crucial image' that Greil Marcus asserts to be the embodiment of rockabilly: 'the sexy, half-crazed fool standing on stage singing his guts out'.⁹ That notion continues to dominate in the popular music discourse surrounding rockabilly as constituting 'a moment when boys were men and men were boys' without somehow establishing the fact that the music these individuals performed and their fans admired remains curiously detached, 'almost self-contained, a world of its own'.¹⁰ The milieu the predominantly Caucasian male performers inhabited routinely rejected the presence of women other than as the objects of sexual appetite. It should, therefore, come as little surprise how the public record of 1950s American popular music selectively acknowledges that, like Clarence Worly, many young women wanted not simply to fuck Elvis but, instead, to assimilate a portion of his authority and cultural power and assert that they too were ready, ready, ready to rock and roll, rip it up. Janis Martin, marketed by RCA Victor Records as the distaff version of the King, expressed that desire in song. On her 1956 release 'My Boy Elvis,' she expressed the desire to accompany the vocalist on the 'mystery train' of which he sang in his 'cover' version of the Junior Parker Sun classic and, by so doing, excise the pain and trouble of her life.¹¹

I wish in this chapter to illustrate that women were fellow travellers on that 'mystery train' of which Elvis sang on its all-too-brief journey of rebellion and shared with their male peers a desire to exceed the familiar, worn-out parameters of social and cultural behaviour, thereby counteracting the prevalent 'predisposition to map processes of cultural reproduction onto processes of biological reproduction'.¹² Winning back a place for female rockabilly artists in the narrative of American popular music history constitutes more, however, than merely redressing an instance of cultural amnesia. It might as well, to some degree, facilitate the realisation that 'The existence of music, like the existence of women, is potentially threatening to men to the extent that it (sonically) insists on the social relatedness of human worlds and as a consequence implicitly demands that individuals respond'.¹³ Both those men and women who created and performed rockabilly participated in the usurpation of cultural space and power from the dominant society by resisting incorporation into that society and insinuating themselves into those interstices where the predilection

for oppositional consciousness resided. Their raw energy and bravado, which was chastised in many quarters as juvenile excess at best and outright depravity at worst, resulted in the generational rearticulation of 'taste', which, as W.T. Lhamon, Jr. asserts, constitutes 'a euphemism for the inherited repertoire of shibboleths by which the empowered recognize one another'.¹⁴

The sheer force of women taking on the stylistic signifiers of rock and roll eroded those shibboleths as when, in the song 'Fujiyama Mama' incorporated in my title, Wanda Jackson sang in 1958 of eradicating the forces of male-centred social hegemony. The singer announces authoritatively that she has visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki and can display the same cataclysmic energy as did the devices dropped on those cities. In the final chorus she asserts, 'You can say I'm crazy. So deaf and dumb/But I can cause destruction just like the atom bomb!'¹⁵ Ironically, in these lyrics, Jackson echoes the very language used to repress women during the Cold War and confirm them in a repressively maternal and familial role. As Elaine Tyler May observes, the fear of atomic attack was symbolically connected with anxiety over transforming gender roles, sexual chaos mimicking post-nuclear catastrophe.¹⁶ Descriptions of nuclear warfare frequently incorporated feminine diction and imagery, thereby conflating atomic conflagration with the purported excesses of the 'second sex'. The predominant social and cultural discourse argued that family stability and serial monogamy provided a haven in a hapless world, but, in the end, neither bomb shelters nor basement rumpus rooms could keep at bay, particularly from susceptible adolescents, the energies unleashed by popular culture in general and rock and roll in particular. To wit, Wanda Jackson concludes 'Fujiyama Mama' by wailing, 'And when I start erupting, ain't nobody gonna make me stop!'

To illustrate the manner in which female rockabilly singers acted as, to borrow a phrase from Marshall McLuhan, 'counter-irritants' to the social consensus of the 1950s, I will first indicate the parallels with an earlier African-American female musical constituency of the 1920s, the 'blues queens', and how they too contested the male hegemony of the musical and social domain. Then, I will argue that rockabilly, and the female component of that form in particular, must be situated more fully in a historical frame by its continuity with certain sub-genres of Country music, specifically the honky-tonk compositions and performers of the 1940s and early 1950s. Finally, I will examine some of the key female rockabilly artists, dividing them into three categories: the nymphets (Brenda Lee and the Collins Kids), the heiresses apparent (Barbara Pittman and Janis Martin), and the unrequited queens (Rose Maddox and Wanda

Jackson). In conclusion, I will point out that the inaccessibility of recordings by many if not most of the female rockabilly singers constitutes an even more effective silencing than their (in most cases) truncated careers in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Their ride on that 'mystery train' may have been short, but the virtual absence of both track and engine in the present day reinforces that once the voices of history are extinguished, little can be done to resurrect them. The disappearance of a vast number of recordings from public circulation reminds one that there is an acoustic component to the 'tree falling in the woods' conundrum of Philosophy 101: if a recording is made, but no one can hear it, the performer effectively has been silenced.

The presence of black women in the history of the blues has been an active one, while the documentation of that presence remains spotty, even criminally undernourished. In few cases is that obliviousness more evident than the work of the performers often referred to as the 'blues queens' of the 1920s. While the accomplishments of such quintessential individuals as Bessie Smith remain a durable portion of blues history, as does Ma Rainey to a considerable though lesser degree, many other estimable if not so illustrious women have come to be the property of the cognoscenti. True, Mamie Smith acquires a presence in any creditable historical narrative by virtue of her recording the first credited successful blues song – Percy Bradford's 'Crazy Blues' (1920) – as does Alberta Hunter, less so for the work of her youth than the fact that she successfully retook the stage in her 80s. Many others, however, remain footnotes: Eliza Brown, Ida Cox, Mary Dixon, Lilian Glinn, Lil Green, Sara Martin, Memphis Minnie, Clara Smith, Victoria Spivey, Sippie Wallace, and Edith Wilson to name a few.¹⁷ As a body, these women ritually exorcised the feelings of their peers, who collectively engaged in and suffered the benefits as well as the repercussions of the mass migration of rural African Americans to the urban centres of the North; they can be assessed as 'pivotal figures in the assertion of black women's ideas and ideals from the standpoint of the working class and the poor'.¹⁸ While viewing them as a collective body too easily results in the reduction of concrete individuals into a unitary black female subject, who, as Hazel Carby observes, 'is frequently reduced to a single dimension of either suffering or nobility,' the manner in which these women's role in black musical history has been denied or reduced permits one some power of generalisation.¹⁹ As Carby has written, their work collectively constitutes 'an alternative form of representation, an oral and musical woman's culture that explicitly addresses the contradictions of feminism, sexuality and power'; their lyrics and voicings of them:

articulates a cultural and political struggle over sexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order but which also tries to reclaim women's bodies as the sexual and sensuous objects of women's song.²⁰

While Carby's analysis remains incontestable, the reasons for these women's virtual expurgation from most histories of the blues are several and parallel, as we shall see, with the erasure of women from the delinication of rockabilly. They include, first, the false bifurcation between 'traditional standard' and 'nightclub' blues forms; second, the inference that since most of these women's songs were written by men, they must remain mere vessels of other individuals' sentiments; and third, the limited period of time during which these artists recorded and consequently the small number of available tracks they completed are employed as a means of belittling their contribution to musical history.

Few terms are as loaded or carry as much baggage as the blues, and few elements of its definition remain as contested as that of the 'authenticity' of performance. For some, only those blues that possess rural origins or can claim descent from rural forms deserve the nomenclature. Many if not most of the 'blues queens' came from rural backgrounds, but the places in which they performed exceeded that physically limited domain and the material they sang arose from a wide range of sources. In fact, should these performers have anything in common, Derrick Stewart-Baxter states, it is 'their comparatively wide range of material, including other songs than blues, and the debt they owed to the tent shows and the vaudeville stage'.²¹ They sang what the circumstances required and retained few rigid stylistic distinctions about what material was appropriate and what verboten. A blues song delivered at the Cotton Club, on the stage of a London theatre, or in a rural juke joint remains similar in kind though different in place. The rounding off of the rough edges of melodies by those individuals pejoratively labelled as 'supper club' singers therefore remains a matter of semantics, not musicology. Regardless of the source of their material, these women brought to their performances a unique meaning as a consequence of their position as black females. That ability to translate into racial- and gender-specific terms material that does not fall under some people's definition of blues supports Daphne Duval Harrison's assertion that 'It is idle to argue whether they were closer to vaudeville blues or jazz singing than to authentic blues; what counts is that the audience for the recordings accepted and endorsed them as blues.'²² As we shall see, female rockabilly singers often crossed generic and racial boundaries –

Wanda Jackson's 'Fujiyama Mama', for example, was a cover of a 1955 track by black rhythm and blues artist Anisteen Allen – but brought, by virtue of their gender, a distinct voicing to a disparate repertoire. Quarrelling over issues of definitional purity merely provides a convenient expurgation of a body of artists from the history of a form that they practised, whatever its agreed-upon definition.

The fact that many if not most of the songs performed by the 'blues queens' were not written by them but, in fact, by men, and in some cases Caucasian men as well, equally does not take away from the substance or the significance of their achievement. The actual author of the material matters less than how the work was utilised to project an image of feminine autonomy and racial solidarity. Black women used the formal dynamics of the blues as a means of, as Daphne Duval Harrison argues, 'talking smart'; i.e. using language to 'go public' with attitudes and points of view that the dominant society, Caucasian and African American alike, wished to expurgate.²³ In the process:

the silent, suffering woman is replaced by a loud-talking mama, reared-back with one hand on her hip and with the other wagging a pointed finger vigorously as she denounces the two-timing dude Going public is their declaration of independence. Blues of this nature communicated to women listeners that they were members of a sisterhood that did not have to tolerate mistreatment.²⁴

Regardless of the origins of the material, it is the fact that the blues provides the female performer with an opportunity for 'going public' that matters. To think otherwise is to confuse issues of intellectual property with performance and, in the process, falsely valorise the 'author' as the sole source of meaning. Likewise, the female rockabilly singers were rarely in a position to write, let alone choose, their songs, but the opportunity to place their personal signature upon a song that implied if not endorsed individual liberation remains a rare opportunity not to be denied. Whether the flamboyant, gender-bending Little Richard or sexually aggressive Wanda Jackson sings 'Rip It Up', the call remains a potent exclamation.²⁵

The limited number of recordings by the 'blues queens' constitutes an instance when an interested public succumbed to the collapse of the financial markets following the Depression. The bottom fell out of the recording business, and the manufacture of 'race records', as blues recordings were referred to at the time, ground to a halt. Similarly, the number

of public spaces in which the 'blues queens' appeared before the public evaporated. Paradoxically, those performers who were the most traditional suffered the greatest, whereas the 'supper club' artists possessed the range of experience and expertise to weather out the Depression and find alternate platforms to make a living musically. Admittedly, those individuals are often portrayed, even by the friendliest commentators, as 'selling out', reducing themselves to the lowest common denominator, whereas the individuals who disappeared from the scene – some, like Sippie Wallace or Alberta Hunter, to reappear years later – are valorised as not prostituting their talents. Such a reading seems to me to mistake circumstance with compromise and in the process once again conflate suffering nobility with the essential black female subject. Likewise, the fact that, like their male peers, the heyday of rockabilly's female performers was short-lived should not be held against them. It was stalled as much by the fickle will of the public as the loss of key figures from the scene: Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens in a plane crash, Elvis to the army, Jerry Lee Lewis to public ignominy, and Chuck Berry to jail for allegedly breaking the Mann Act. In response to that truncating of rockabilly's ascendance, many of the female rockabilly singers either retreated from the genre to the Country field from which they originally arose, or from the recording studio, but not the public stage altogether. This should be viewed as an instance of women artists adapting their talents to an alternate domain, not abandoning them altogether. Too often, the scenario that occurs when an artist falls from commercial grace or becomes left by the wayside through a transformation of the zeitgeist is translated into an abnegation of a calling rather than an insightful renegotiation of uncertain circumstances.

The denigration of those artists who 'crossed over' (or in many cases 'crossed back') to Country music when the rockabilly bandwagon hit a speedbump reminds one that while the influence of Country music upon the rock genre remains considerable, most historians and analysts (and more than a few fans) downplay or deny it. By stressing the degree to which rockabilly broke away from the most staid and retrograde elements of Country, the continuities between the two forms remain obscured. Furthermore, those instances of dyed-in-the-wool Country musicians who unsuccessfully dabbled in rock and roll as well as the animosity held by members of the Country industry against rockers for curbing the ascendancy upon the pop charts of their efforts still colours the account of the two forms' interfusion. Few are the instances of tribute paid from one field to the other, as when Bill Monroe so admired Elvis's speeded-up cover of 'Blue Moon of Kentucky' that the progenitor of bluegrass forever after played it in overdrive. More common was the Maddox Brothers and

Rose's sarcastic but nonetheless telling bluegrass-tinged 'The Death of Rock and Roll', a cover of Ray Charles' 'I Got Woman' that concludes with the Maddoxes' characteristic high-pitched laughter. Nevertheless, rockabilly hardly arose out of a vacuum, and in the case of its female performers, their 'foremothers' include the honky-tonk singers of the 1940s and early 1950s who brought to the Country genre a refreshing matter-of-factness and exuberance that their successors emulated. As Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann write:

Honky-tonk vocalists went for unabashed theatricality. They wailed; they moaned; they whimpered; they shouted; they pleaded; they cried. With slurred phrases, bent-note effects, vocal breaks, and slippery yodel techniques, they practically wept in tune.²⁶

However, one cannot consider the essence of honky-tonk and its influence upon female rockabilly artists a matter of vocal legerdemain alone. The continuities result more substantially from the manner in which certain female country vocalists transformed the affective register of the genre and ceased being the demure flower of earlier generations.

The influential figures in this context range from the renowned to the recondite. Of the latter, one can point to Ruby Agnes Owens aka Texas Ruby (1908–63), who was billed as 'the Sophie Tucker of the Feminine Folk Singers' and lived an off-stage existence as 'a hard-drinking, good-time mama with a cigarette in her red lips, a rowdy laugh, and a heart of pure gold'.²⁷ Possessed of a deep, almost masculine alto, conversant with a variety of genres, and gifted with a rare skill for profanity, her recordings for Columbia (1945–6) and King (1947) remain more memorable for their thematic content than their instrumentation, although one wonders what kind of public presence she presented during her years on the Grand Ole Opry (1944–8) and successful career at tent shows, where she was one of the first Opry stars to demand and receive top dollar – as much as \$500 a night. Better known but not as widely as her considerable achievement deserves is the still-active Jean Shepard, whom Bufwack and Oermann consider the best female honky-tonk singer of all. Signed to Capital Records in 1952 at the age of 17, despite the animosity of staff producer Ken Nelson as quoted in one of the epigraphs to this essay, she scored forty-five chart hits. The bluntness of many of her songs mirrored her no-nonsense temperament; as she states, 'I've always been sassy to a certain extent. But I've had to be to survive.'²⁸ This led her to agitate for better union pay for her band members and participate in the back-to-

Country movement of the early 1970s that occurred in the wake of the Country Music Association's awarding of honours to performers that Shepard and others of her peers believed had little familiarity with or affinity for the genre. In addition to her many hit singles – 'A Satisfied Mind' (1954), 'Beautiful Lies' (1955), and 'I Thought of You' (1955) amongst them – she released in 1954 what might be considered the first female-centred concept album in the field, *Songs of a Love Affair*. A linked cycle of compositions that charted the trajectory of a belated romance from a woman's perspective, this long out-of-print album permitted Shepard to display a broad affective register that more adequately represented the range of female emotion than the restricted emotional palette of earlier Country performers. Best-known of all the female honky-tonk vocalists is the Country Music Hall of Fame honoree Kitty Wells, whose eighty-one charting singles began with the landmark 'It Wasn't God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels' (1952). That song's piercing, though restrained lament of pent-up animosity against wayward men admittedly mirrored a longstanding tradition in Country music but gave it a stamp of unadorned directness that not only established Wells's career but also the public posture of women in Country as capable of asserting if not their independence then certainly their heart-felt point of view. At the same time, the trajectory of Wells's career remains perplexing. A mother, aged 33 when she recorded her first hit, Wells remains:

as much a part of the dying, Victorian, old-time country culture as she was a standard-bearer of the postwar style. Publicly she sang of guilt and remorse, of illicit romance and sin, of betrayal and broken dreams. Privately, she was the polite mother of three and a shy, soft-spoken, dutiful housewife. She was steeped in tradition, but became a star as an innovator.²⁹

The continuity of form and disparity of approach that Texas Ruby, Jean Shepard, and Kitty Wells took to Country music indicates that, like the 'blues queens', female honky-tonk singers, and the rockabilly artists that succeeded them, cannot be reduced to a single unitary subject. Neither the demure and abandoned wife nor the ballsy hell-bent firebrand constitute the whole of the genre. The women who sang rockabilly had a range of personae from which to choose, and many, if not most, assumed a portion of both these types.

There remains, however, a figure unknown to virtually all but the cognoscenti who prefigures, at the risk of romantic overstatement, the core of the rockabilly point of view before its time and whose early and ill-

timed departure from the scene constitutes all the impediments, then and now, to an unimpeded assertion of femininity in the musical arena. That hapless individual – one hesitates to say victim – was Charlene Arthur (1929–87). Stylistically and temperamentally out of step with her times, her stormy, explosive personality collided with the Nashville establishment in general and Chet Atkins, the father of 'the Nashville Sound', in particular. She recorded for RCA Victor Records from 1953–6, a total of thirteen sessions yielding twenty-eight sides. Like many of the rockabilly singers, she came from a large, impoverished family, the second of twelve children. Arthur wrote her first song at the age of 12. Titled 'I've Got The Boogie Blues', it was later to be her initial recording on Bullet Records in 1949. A featured artist on KERB in Kermit, Texas, she was discovered by Colonel Tom Parker, the handler of 'the King', and recommended to Gene and Julian Auerbach, the New York-based heads of Hill and Range Publishing, who sold her and her material to RCA Victor. There, as Bufwack and Oermann write, 'she fought to become country's first truly aggressive, independent female of the postwar era. Ultimately she lost.'³⁰

Arthur's combative personality, so suited to the music she wrote and performed, failed her in the studio. It collided with the commercially-driven and head-strong A&R man Chet Atkins. She states:

He and I would get up in arms. He always had songs he wanted me to record that I didn't wanta record, and I had ones I'd written that he wouldn't let me record. I'll give the devil his due: I admire Chet Atkins' talents, but I didn't like his guitar style, even though he played on my records. I just felt he didn't have the right substance for my vocal style. But he was top dog, and there was nothin' I could do. I remember the last time we recorded together, me and him had it out good and proper. I was cryin' so bad.³¹

At the same time, despite their animosity, a fair amount of Arthur's sensibility emerges from what she often felt to be unsympathetic material and production. 'Burn That Candle' in title and lyric comments on her hellbent point of view; while the title refers to a candle placed in the window by the singer's mother to light her way home, the lyrics and Arthur's treatment of them accentuate the manner in which she pursued her life without quarter. The tongue-in-cheek 'Kiss the Baby Goodnight', a paean to assertive romance, unsurprisingly inflamed the moralistic denizens of Nashville, and she was consequently made by Grant Turner of the Grand Ole Opry to screen her material prior to airtime. 'Welcome To The Club',

written by Mae Axton, the co-author of Elvis's 'Heartbreak Hotel', remains perhaps her most memorable side and the clearest precursor to rockabilly. The raw edge to her voice and sweeping delivery of the chorus still inspire dismay that Nashville was unable to accommodate her venturesome spirit.

That club to which Charlene Arthur belonged eventually broke her heart. Despite finishing second to Kitty Wells as 'Best Female Singer' in a 1955 disc jockey poll and touring with, among others, Elvis, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Marty Robbins, and Lefty Frizzell, she was dropped by RCA in 1956 following her final 19 May session. The last track cut at that time was the touching 'What About Tomorrow?', a question whose implied answer, in Arthur's case, was truly heartbreaking. To add insult to injury, while that song was written by Charlene, the copyright is credited to her then husband, Jack. She thereafter drifted from label to label, state to state, and ended up in rural Idaho, crippled with arthritis, without a phone, and living on a \$335-a-month disability cheque. Alice M. Michaels, who managed Arthur at the end of her life, reports that she would weep when seeing former friends and co-workers appear on the Nashville network. She died a year after Bear Family Records, a West German reissue label devoted to Country and 1950s rock and roll, released an LP containing sixteen tracks from the RCA sessions. 'I was a blues singer, and I wanted to sing something different. I wanted to be an original', Arthur asserted.³² She was original, perhaps, but the legacy of her fate as well as her good fortune to pursue a memorable if truncated career is a reminder of all the obstacles that the female rockabilly singers who followed her had to overcome.

Concurrent with those obstacles was the emergence of that demographic bulge characterised as the 'baby boom': a confluence of adolescents who formed a generational constituency as well as the ripe target of eager advertisers. In 1956, the national census included thirteen million teenagers; they contributed seven billion dollars annually to the national economy, a twenty-six per cent rise over just three years before.³³ The average teenager earned \$10.55 a week, of which boys saved twice as much as girls, but the boys spent a third more.³⁴ One of the principal consumer items purchased by teenagers was records. By 1959, seventy-five million dollars worth of 45s alone were sold annually, most of them to teenagers with young girls in the majority.³⁵ According to Ed Ward:

Junior high school girls bought most of the records, with 61.7% of them buying at least one a month, as opposed to 46.6% of junior high school boys, 48.9% of senior high school girls, and

41.9% of senior high boys. The average buyer brought two records a month, but among the ones who brought over twelve a month, the boys took the lead.³⁶

In the course of 1957 alone, rock and roll began to control that market and body of consumers. The ascendance was so swift that whereas in March of that year all the positions on *Billboard's* Top Ten list were taken up by male pop artists, by the end of December they had been virtually replaced by rock and rollers, albeit still exclusively male.³⁷ Rock and roll successfully conquered radio before its domination of the charts, for, at the close of 1956, sixty-eight per cent of the public airwaves was occupied by disc jockeys dedicated to the genre, a two-thirds increase in the course of a single year.³⁸ Many advertisers complained that broadcasters single-mindedly devoted themselves to the young, who statistically constituted only twelve per cent of the population.³⁹ Nevertheless, in short order, the music produced by heretofore marginalised individuals in the music business – African-Americans, working-class whites, women, Chicanos, and others – occupied if not the centre of the national culture then certainly prompted many of those in the majority to reconsider their behaviour and point of view, some even further to constitute what Michel Foucault has called a 'counter-discourse' and W.T. Lhamon, Jr. designates 'an alternative pest consciousness'.⁴⁰ So accelerated and abandoned was the energy unleashed by popular music culture at this time that the very society frequently seemed as revved-up and hyperactive as the overwrought rhythms and hysterical vocals of the performers on the radio. And while portions of the country vehemently resisted the legal promptings towards integration promulgated by *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), or the calling out of federal troops to integrate Little Rock, Arkansas Central High School (1957), a vast majority of the nation eagerly assimilated an acoustic equivalent of integration in the routine amalgamation of disparate music forms – blues, country, rhythm and blues, jazz, and pop – in rock and roll.

At the same time, that predilection for hybrid forms of expression was not without social or ideological impediments, particularly as regards female performers. It must be stressed that, for all the new-found liberality at home amongst the nation's youth, many if not most of the female rockabilly artists failed to appear on the national record charts at all. This reinforces one of the recurrent responses to any threat posed by any 'other', that in this case an uninhibited and sexually aggressive woman, was 'transforming it into a bit of exotica so other as to be meaningless.'⁴¹ Such a strategy particularly influenced the careers of that first category of

female rockabilly performer I designate the nymphet: a pre-pubescent girl or adolescent young woman who was exploited by their record label as a sexually venturesome individual. Each of the female rockabilly performers began to sing at a young age, some as young as 5 years, and often came across as unselfconsciously flirtatious, but the manner in which they projected their sexuality was quite another matter when it comprised a portion of a corporate marketing scheme. These young women were often technical prodigies, gifted with voices whose affective range seemed in advance of their actual age. Producers took advantage of this discrepancy and accentuated the paradox of a sexually alluring adolescent through the choice of suggestive lyrics and the form of their presentation.

Chief amongst the rockabilly nymphets was Brenda Lee, nicknamed 'Little Miss Dynamite', who Decca Records signed in 1955 when she was eleven years old. Described by Red Foley, the country music veteran who sponsored the young girl on his ABC-TV series 'Ozark Jubilee', as 'a little girl with grown-up reactions', Brenda Lee found herself delivering words whose connotations she often did not understand.⁴² She states, 'When I listen to the rock songs I sang, not knowing what the words must've meant, I was singing them like I knew.'⁴³ So successful was she at this process of imposture that portions of the public were convinced that Lee must be a midget. Others took the singer's physical appearance at face value, disregarding her affective maturity, only to be brought rudely to task, as when Decca executive Paul Cohen tried to explain something to the young girl in baby talk. 'Well, goo-goo!', she disdainfully is said to have replied.⁴⁴

The early singles Lee recorded should have predisposed Cohen to act otherwise, as the authority of her voice goes against the grain of her actual appearance at the time: a diminutive, curly-haired child in puff-sleeved dresses. He had only, for example, to know her 1959 hit 'Sweet Nothin's' on which 'the then-fourteen-year-old Brenda shouts, pants and purrs over a steady beat, in a way that can only be described as "adult"' to realize the weight of his error.⁴⁵ With that in mind, when listening to her first million-seller, the stirring 'I'm Sorry' (1960), one might ask what she possibly could have need to apologise for? Her non-professional life remained squeaky clean – 'I wanted to get in trouble, but there was no way', she recalled as an adult – for parental intercession kept her publicly salacious but privately demure.⁴⁶ This strategy, whatever its psychic cost, paid off, for she scored the most hits of any of the female rockabilly singers during the 1950s and well thereafter, although some people found her undeniable skills smothered by her producer Owen Bradley's trademark studio style. (John Morthland castigates her as 'fulfilling the role of

Patsy Cline for kids'.⁴⁷) Nevertheless, the discrepancy between her appearance and age still remains disturbing, especially when one encounters photographs of the young Brenda appearing uncomfortably world-weary or physically self-conscious for one so young.⁴⁸ Her early success reminds one that the public was, perhaps, most comfortable with female sexuality when they could distance themselves from it by reducing the phenomenon to a caricature. Brenda Lee's youth prohibited anyone from taking her expressions of desire seriously. Much as certain cinematic icons of the period, Marilyn Monroe or perhaps more so Jayne Mansfield, she exaggerated female sexuality to the point that it was effectively neutralised.

Such was not the case with the career of the adolescent Larry and Lorrie Collins, the Collins Kids. Even when their material addressed romance, it never even alluded to the sexually suggestive. Instead, their unthreatening, perennially upbeat wholesomeness radiated the effervescence and buoyancy of youth, not its delinquent darker side. Natives of Oklahoma, this sister and younger brother moved to California in 1953 at the respective ages of eleven and nine to appear on the popular 'Town Hall Party', hosted by the avuncular Tex Ritter. Two years later, they were signed by Columbia Records and remained on the label through 1959. Their first single, 'Beetle Bug Bop'/'Hush Money' (1955), typifies what followed: an uptempo nonsensical song backed by a domestic scenario in which Larry demands cash in return for his silence about his sister's romantic liaisons. As it illustrates, the duo, both on record and more vividly in their television appearances, contrasted in temperament and musical orientation: Lorrie comes across as a demure but nonetheless assertive lead vocalist, all the more so as she grew older, about whom her hyperactive instrumentalist sibling capered, his fingers leaping across the fretboard of his signature double-necked guitar. Even when their songs addressed affairs of the heart, the content remained incontestably adolescent, neither in advance of or behind their actual years. The fact that both siblings wrote a portion of their own material accounts for its thematic consistence and appropriateness. Some of the titles attest to their interests: 'In My Teens', 'Whistle Bait', 'Hot Rod', and 'My First Love'.

At the same time, however high-spirited and lightweight the duo's work may appear retrospectively, it holds up far better than the recordings of the other juvenile performers of the period, particularly the manufactured male and female 'teen idols' or any of the television actors who made their mark, however briefly, on the charts. (The sole exception to that rule remains Ricky Nelson, with whom Lorrie Collins had a heart-felt romantic relationship as an ardent 15-year-old.) Part of that durability results from Lorrie's vocal assurance and Larry's considerable instrumental

skills, attributable in large part to his tutoring by Joe Maphis, leader of the house band on 'Town Hall Party' and one of the West Coast's most renowned musicians.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, the Collins' unblemished youth lost its appeal when Lorrie met and married Johnny Cash's manager, Stu Carnell, nineteen years her senior, during a tour in 1959. Their relationship relegated her fresh-faced appeal to mundane matrimony. Furthermore, now that she was perceived as a woman, how could she innocently sing about 'soda poppin' around' with her sweetheart and be taken seriously?⁵⁰ The duo split up, but in recent years have revived their surprisingly undated material. In their heyday Lorrie and Larry Collins could address issues vital to the young without repercussions as long as they remained chronologically affiliated with the subjects and audience of their songs. Lorrie's sexuality, however unassertive, demonstrated in an audience-friendly manner the passions of youth. If she was a nymphet by virtue of her age, Lorrie Collins never displayed an unseemly or unsettling demeanour. An ironic footnote, Larry continued his musical career as a songwriter, most notably co-authoring 'Delta Dawn' in 1972. That song established the still vital career of then 13-year-old Tanya Tucker who authoritatively delivered its sexually potent content.⁵¹ Her success indicates how the ambiguous maturity of the rockabilly nymphet could readily be recycled.

The second category of female rockabilly singers, the heiresses apparent, takes in the numerous young women who, like many if not most of the 'blues queens', never achieved the level of success necessary for long-lasting fame. Known only to devotees of the genre, they remain ciphers to the general public, faceless reminders of a day and sound gone by. In most cases, their commercial failure and obliteration even from the reputable histories cannot be blamed on technical ineptitude or a lack of moxie. More to the point, their record companies either were unable to perfect a winning promotional strategy or the public simply failed to recognise their talents. Bufwack and Oermann's book resurrects the careers of a number of these figures -- Bonnie-Lou, Jo-Ann Campbell, Jean Chapel, Sparkle Moore, Lauri Lee Perkins, as well as Lucille Starr and Bob Reagan to name a few -- of which two, Barbara Pittman and Janis Martin, might be said to epitomise the also-rans that the record industry dismisses with the flip phrase 'one-hit wonder'.

Barbara Pittman, native of Memphis, Tennessee and classmate as well as neighbour of Elvis Presley, remains one of the few women to record on Sam Phillips's Sun Records. Signed to the label from 1956-60, she recorded more tracks than any other woman with whom the legendary producer worked, but he neither seemed to be capable of or, in Pittman's

eyes, interested in concocting the proper strategy or locating the appropriate material to make her a star as he had with so many other young men. Possessed of a rich, bluesy voice, Pittman's account of her commercially unremarkable recording career amounts to a litany of denied opportunities and dashed hopes, most of them, she believes, due to Phillips's implicit or unconscious misogyny. In the liner notes to the Bear Family reissue of her Sun recordings she states, 'Sam didn't like female artists. He had no confidence in them. Especially me. I had a low, bluesy, husky voice and his favorite female artist was Doris Day. That should tell you something.'⁵² Pittman's comments might be said to amount to little more than sour grapes were it not for the fact that the only other women Phillips notably recorded were the Davis Sisters, a sweet-voiced duo who must have reminded him vocally of the blonde movie star. In light of her experiences at Sun, some of Pittman's song titles possess more than a touch of irony. 'I Forgot To Remember To Forget', in which the chorus states 'I think about him all the time', reminds one of her seeming obsession with Phillips's dereliction of his duties as a promoter of her talents.⁵³ Even more telling, the inclusion on the Bear Family album of three takes of the song 'I'm Getting Better All The Time' comes across as a cruel reminder of Pittman's truncated career. In the end, Pittman realises how little she fits the common pattern of feminine behaviour of the day. She was incapable of being, in her words, 'cutesy, petite, and pretty'.⁵⁴ As much as any of the female rockabilly singers, she protests against the gendered exclusiveness of the period by acknowledging that 'recording for Sun in the fifties was, for a woman, being part of a man's world.'⁵⁵ At the same time, whatever one might think of the quality of her work (much of it, admittedly, of dubious substance), it remains appalling that Pittman does not even rate a mention, let alone a footnote, in the standard history of the label by Colin Escott and Martin Hawkins, reinforcing many women's paranoia that the music business, then and now, remains a deck stacked in a man's favour.⁵⁶

The career of Janis Martin, 'the Female Elvis', presents an equally unflattering example of corporate ineptitude and neglect. Her career was as abruptly curtailed as Pittman's, but, at the same time, resulted in a more demonstrable level of commercial achievement. John Morthland considers her the only female rockabilly singer, except Wanda Jackson, worth talking about and remarks that she 'phrased like running a line of jive came pretty natural to her.'⁵⁷ Like many of her peers, Martin began to sing professionally at a young age, in her case 11 years old, on the WDVA Barndance of Danville, Virginia. Her career took off when two staff announcers and part-time songwriters at SRVA, the station that carried the

Barndance over the CBS network, took notice of the teenage Martin and asked her to sing the demo of their rockabilly composition 'Will You, Willyum'. They succeeded in selling the song and its 16-year-old singer to RCA Victor Records in 1956. Interestingly the flipside to that first single, 'Drugstore Rock and Roll', was written by the vocalist, who seems, however, not to have had the opportunity to do so again in the future.

When that first release sold 750,000 copies, Martin's career took off. She appeared on a host of network television variety shows, including 'American Bandstand' and 'The Tonight Show', and was screen-tested by MGM. Two other RCA Victor singles made some headway on the charts, a cover of Roy Orbison's 'Ooby Dooby' and the aforementioned 'My Boy Elvis'. The entertainment press recognised her talents, for she was voted 'Most Promising Female Vocalist' at the annual disc jockey convention in 1956, an acknowledgement that Martin's clean-scrubbed looks and pert appearance, blonde ponytail bobbing as she sang, made her an accessible representative of her generation, neither too aggressive nor too sugar-coated. However, the production of her material – too sedate for rockabilly, too wild for country – placed Martin's long-term career in jeopardy, devoid of a stable acoustic identity. Her facade, moreover, withheld a complex private life that proved to be her downfall. Married secretly to her childhood sweetheart since 1955 at the age of 15, Martin gave birth to a son in 1958. As in the case of Lorrie Collins, marriage and motherhood eroded her persona of the excitable teenager as well as her label's interest in her. RCA apparently felt that teenage motherhood and a career as the 'Rockin' Country Gal' did not go hand-in-hand and dropped Martin in 1959. Divorced soon after by her first husband, she remarried in due course just as a small label, Palette Records, began to record her. Her second husband, much like RCA Victor Records, felt motherhood and a performing career to be incompatible and demanded that she choose between them. Janis Martin got off the 'mystery train' and has not recorded since until a recent tribute album to rockabilly by Rosie Flores included a duet with her. Like the nymphets, Janis Martin possessed commercial credibility so long as her sexuality remained contained and composed; once maturity set in, that composure no longer proved creditable. It was one thing to sing about high school boyfriends; it was quite another, in the eyes of the public, to marry one. A sexually mature woman who celebrated her physicality in song walked, so it would seem, an uncertain path in Cold War America.

The third category of performer, the unrequited queen, includes that body of individuals who have affirmed the full affective range of the female personality but remain, despite all that, better known to the

cognoscenti than the general public. Two women who typify the unrequited queen are Rose Maddox and Wanda Jackson. Both received awards and recorded hit records, but never in the numbers that they should. Rose Maddox, who rightfully deserves an essay all her own, could not officially be deemed a rockabilly performer, but needs to be discussed, however briefly, as a precursor of the form and an inspiration to many women who followed in her path.⁵⁸ A professional vocalist for nearly sixty years, at first alongside her five brothers as part of 'The Most Colorful Hillbilly Band In The Land' and later as a soloist, her stylistic range, like that of many of the 'blues queens', encompasses a variety of genres, including country, rock, gospel, and bluegrass. As the Maddox Brothers and Rose, her family, migrants in the course of the Depression from Oklahoma to California, reigned throughout the 1940s and 1950s as one of the West Coast's most successful and audacious live acts. Clad in their eye-popping Nudie-designed suits, they alternately clowning and crooned their way on three-hundred sides for 4 Star Records (1946–51) and another two-hundred for Columbia (1951–8), playing what John Morthland tags 'a weird kind of up-tempo post-country and western with some of rock 'n' roll's energy and humor.'⁵⁹ Rose's public persona was that of a no-nonsense, straight-from-the-hip young woman who, surrounded by her siblings, 'may have sounded like she just wandered down from the hills, but she took lip from nobody and held her own among the strong-minded men.'⁶⁰ Whatever obstacles she faced – and they were many, including a teenage marriage and divorce, loss of her only son at a relatively young age, loss of several of her brothers, and a recent series of crippling heart attacks – Rose Maddox has met them with good humour, energy and vigour combined with a clear-headed sense of making up the rules for herself. As she states:

Back then, women were expected to get married and have children. That's all. Well, I just wasn't made that way. I wasn't married and music was all I thought about in life. So I plunged into it. The whole thing was such a terrific challenge. You had to give yourself support every day, because nobody else was going to do it.⁶¹

One hears that unequivocal sense of self-determination in such tracks as her covers of Woody Guthrie's 'Philadelphia Lawyer' (she knew the writer and his performing cousin, Jack, as fellow Oakie migrants to California) and Ruth Brown's rhythm and blues-inflected 'Wild Wild Young Men', a clear precursor, though played in a Country style, to rockabilly. Her sense

of humour pervades much of her work and that of her family's, whose recordings are regularly punctuated with whoops of joy and braying laughter that reminds one of the evocative interjections of western swing pioneer Bob Wills throughout all his material. One can hear it particularly in the riotous 'Ugly and Slouchy (That's The Way I Like 'Em)', a send-up of both male and female lust. Much like those 'blues queens' who found the means to continue a career when the Depression eroded the recording industry, Rose Maddox has availed herself of one opportunity after another to 'talk smart' in a world that wanted women to remain silent and routinely restricted the full affective range of their emotions. The fact that honourific organisations have not seen fit to reward her indicates that skill must always be its own reward, particularly for assertive women.

Of all the six vocalists discussed here, Wanda Jackson remains the most aggressive and sexually adventurous in her public persona. For Bufwack and Oermann, she 'captures the elemental, low-class wildness of this music better than any other female of her day', while Nick Tosches exclaims with characteristic enthusiasm that for him she is the 'greatest menstruating rock-'n'-roll singer whom the world has ever known', irrefutably 'one of the most exceptional rock-'n'-roll stylists of her or any other day.'⁶² Her gruff, rough-edged voice still rises out of the speakers with unquestionable authority. Tosches memorably describes its range: 'a wild-fluttering thing of sexy subtleties and sudden harshnesses, feral feline purrings, and raving banshee shriekings, was a vulgar wonder to hear. She was a girl who could growl.'⁶³ It is that unrestrained intensity that makes her a potent symbol of the quintessence of rockabilly, which, Tosches asserts, constitutes a 'demonic incantation' and 'an invitation to holocaust', the latter attribute reinforcing the earlier reading of 'Fujiyama Mama.'⁶⁴ Jackson's career possesses a circular pattern, starting in the Country field, turning to rockabilly, returning to Country, taking an experientially determined side-route to gospel, and then, finally, taking up once again in middle age the rock and roll of her youth. Wanda Jackson began as a Country vocalist in her native Oklahoma and was the star of her own radio show on KPLR in Oklahoma City at the age of thirteen. Through that outlet, she came to the attention of honky-tonk star Hank Thompson, whose 1952 hit 'Wild Side Of Life' inspired in response Kitty Wells' 'It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels'. As a teenager, she toured with Thompson and his award-winning backup band, the Brazos Valley Boys, only to land a contract with Decca Records in 1954. Following graduation from high school, she toured with Elvis Presley in 1955 and the following year, at the instigation of her manager, Jim Halsey (who also represented Thompson), she signed with Capitol Records.

Wanda sentered the studios of the Capitol Tower in Hollywood for the first time in June 1956. Backed-up by, among others, the ubiquitous Joe Maphis, rocker Skeets McDonald, future Country star Buck Owens, and steel guitar virtuoso Speedy West, she cut two tracks: 'Half As Good A Girl' and 'I Gotta Know'. The former was a piece of routine Country sentimentality, but the latter rocked. Such a pattern continued in the sequencing of her 45 single recordings: one side appealed to the Country audience while the other was pitched to the burgeoning youth market. It was not until 1958 with the cutting of 'Fujiyama Mama' and subsequent sessions in 1960 and 1962 that her rocker side grew dominant, these recordings also being a vehicle for her integrated back-up band that included more than able guitarist (and subsequent star of 'Hee Haw') Roy Clark as well as black pianist/vocalist (and a recording artist in his own right) Big Al Downing. They produced what some have called the 'party trilogy': 'Let's Have A Party' (recorded 1958 but released in 1960), 'There's A Party Goin' On' (1960), and 'Man We Had A Party' (1960). The success of the 'party trilogy' led Capitol to pursue more material of a similar nature. Therefore, Jackson tackled covers of a number of other rock hits or rhythm and blues classics, including 'Riot In Cell Block No. 9', 1960 (the Robins); 'Brown Eyed Handsome Man', 1961 (Chuck Berry); and 'Rip It Up', 1963 (Little Richard). Each offered the opportunity for her to rearticulate previously male-encoded lyrics with a feminine perspective and furthermore indicate that, contrary to the so-called experts, rockabilly did not end with the 1950s. Jackson energetically took the genre forward into the next decade.

At the same time, the record company's practice of segregating the portions of Jackson's repertoire into either side of a single paralleled the ambivalence she apparently felt towards the social community centred about rock and roll. While Jackson may sing on her recordings with a kind of unquenchable abandon, what Bufwack and Oermann call an 'almost frightening savagery', her comments on this period of her life lead one to question how much of that tone was a performance, not the expression of heart-felt passion.⁶⁵ The photographs taken of her during the time she recorded for Capitol remain testaments to the vigour, even audacity, of her personality. Nonetheless, she worried about appearing low-class. Jackson states:

My mother and I designed a tight-fitting sheath with rhinestone spaghetti straps and a little short silk fringe. . . . I dreamed it up because I said that way I don't have to wiggle. I can just pat my foot, and the fringe will shake. I didn't want to look vulgar; I

wanted to look sexy. I wanted to look like a lady, but I wanted to cause a little stir, too.⁶⁶

That uncertainty about her public persona, reflecting in turn the mixed signals society then as now sends women about adorning themselves, is paralleled by a further comment as to what she felt to be objectionable qualities of the ambiance surrounding rockabilly and the audiences who attended her shows:

I love to sing the rock songs. . . . But I didn't like that rock 'n' roll scene that all of a sudden I was thrown back into workin' with. That whole scene – those little teenyboppers . . . the bubble-gum set – of course I wasn't that much older myself, but I thought I was grown up. And I just didn't like all that screamin' and hol-lerin'.⁶⁷

This divided consciousness over her career and her fans reinforces how tenuous even the most seemingly aggressive behaviour may be. Maintaining the public posture of a counter-irritant to socially-generated gender stereotypes amounts to hard work, usually fruitless and more often destructive of one's equilibrium. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that by 1961, when rockabilly's commercial viability had waned, Jackson returned, almost exclusively, to Country material. Her self-penned song 'Right Or Wrong', its very title a reflection of her divided consciousness, was a substantial hit, rising as high as number 9 on the Country charts. In October of that same year, she married an IBM programmer and soon after gave birth to two children, a son and a daughter. For Nick Tosches, this amounted to a virtual fall from grace, proof that society can eventually contain and control virtually any alternate form of expression that the popular culture might unleash. She was, he concluded, 'too hot a package to sell over the counter', for 'what the Devil laced, God unlaced.'⁶⁸ The latter comment alludes to the fact that, in 1971, her marriage in disarray, Wanda Jackson found religion. Two years later Capitol Records released her from the further five years on her contract in order to sign with Word Records as a gospel artist. 'Wanda's fire was out', Tosches mourns; 'From Fujiyama Mama to hibachi hostess: such are the wages of survival in a democracy of mediocrity.'⁶⁹ Even though in 1984, aged 47, she recorded an LP of rock and roll with a set of Swedish musicians, Tosches' comments, for all their rhetorical excess, capture the evanescence of the lives of virtually all female rockabilly singers. The short duration during which they, and the genre that supported them,

captured the public imagination reminds one that the ability to act as a 'pest consciousness' lasts only as long as society at large lacks an effective form of extermination.

In conclusion, the role women have played in popular American music, and rock and roll in particular, remains a matter of public record, however hard that record may be to construct. Works like Bufwack and Oermann's *Finding Her Voice* or Gillian Gaar's *She's A Rebel* indicate how little we know, empirically and otherwise, of the contributions made by women to American popular music.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, as Mim Udovitch states in a recent special issue of *Rolling Stone* on 'Women In Rock':

in rock as in life, what is male continues to be perceived as known, normal, and natural, whereas what is female is taken to be a mystery in need of explication. In other words, to most . . . female artists, to be classified as women in rock is not so much recognition as a cleverly disguised attempt to prevent them from speaking for themselves as themselves.⁷¹

Udovitch's article does permit a number of present day musicians to speak both for themselves and their gender, but their predecessors receive at best a token and at worst an absurdly selective role in the discussion. The timeline of performers accompanying the piece only dates back as far as 1945, and a paltry six individuals represent the mass of women who sang, played, or wrote music from that date until 1964. No 'blues queens'; only Wanda Jackson to represent the rockabilly singers; and no Country artists save Kitty Wells. If these are the 'foremothers' young women are to be presented with by the publication which more of them will read than any full-length history of popular music, then we have a lot of work ahead of us.

When compiling that record, too much time, in the past as well as the present, has been spent in the hagiographic mode alone. True, the documentation remains so paltry and fugitive that the facts alone bear exhumation, but they alone will not suffice. Insufficient attention has been paid to the consumers of popular music; we desperately need an ethnography of fanhood in order to discover what meanings specific individuals discovered in popular music and, even more importantly, what use they made of those meanings in their lives. Ray Pratt reminds us that not only is the personal political, but it bears cultural roots, too.

It has long been a matter of debate whether the intentions expressed or 'encoded' in any song are received by those hearing

it. The ways any musical performance, song, or recording functions politically is a complex matter of analysis and attribution growing out of its essentially interactional character. The meaning of any song, indeed any artifact in popular culture, is determined by the multiplicity of uses it receives.⁷²

We must therefore, in pursuing these questions, recognise that a political existence ineluctably bears a cultural dimension; that consuming cultural artefacts in and of itself may not change the world, but the transformation of consciousness potentially encouraged by that consumption can. George Lipsitz reinforces this possibility when he comments:

If one views politics only as the public struggle for political power, then rock and roll songs (are) apolitical. But if one defines politics as the social struggle for a good life, then these songs represent politics of the highest order.⁷³

Who knows what effect the performance of any of the six women examined in this essay had on their audience, particularly the women who watched them strut their stuff? By addressing their lives and work from a principally hagiographic perspective, a fault of this essay as it is of too much secondary literature, we potentially give too much autonomy to individuals forced to work as agents of the culture industry and assume that their perseverance diminished some of its hold over them. That is a great deal to presume, but, again, George Lipsitz provides a sensible gloss on this thorny dilemma: 'These songs do not plot social revolution, but they do keep alive hopes for a better life . . . (each) carves away a limited sphere of autonomy in an increasingly regimented world.'⁷⁴ The people who sell culture cannot themselves create it nor can they determine how or why individuals consume it. That remains in our hands and constitutes a portion of our limited but genuine autonomy.

Still, plundering the past for solace in a limited present can breed a corrosive nostalgia as well as impede the need to construct present-tense forms of 'talking smart'. In desperation, we can ignore that 'The task confronting us . . . is to be critical of cultural developments in the representation of women without dismissing every instance of co-option merely as evidence of the omnipotence of sexism, or celebrating every shift as the beginning of the end.'⁷⁵ A loss of faith in the generation of our own forms of meaning may lead to the construction of an alternate canon to replace the inflexible systems of value placed before us, thereby forming a hierarchy in spite of ourselves to replace the one which we feel

oppresses us. Angela McRobbie warns of the impasse to which that may lead.

We have gone so far down the road of the popular (where there is no art/non-art, no good/bad) that we are in danger of choosing our own canon for analysis and being able to justify this only on the grounds that it has mass appeal. . . . We produce our own inverted canon. . . . We have not entirely abandoned the notion of art even when it does not come with a prefix certifying the authenticity of its cultural origins.⁷⁶

However, in the case of popular music, it is difficult to go 'down the road of the popular'. To continue the automotive metaphor, not only are maps unavailable but also many of the routes have been abandoned, the toll booths closed down. As the discographical notes at the end of this chapter indicate, my choice of the six subjects here under review remains driven in part by the weight of their achievements but even more so by the fact that their achievements can be judged at all. The reissue of historic material, for all the ballyhoo over box sets and back catalogues, remains itself a political process that determines the history of popular music by permitting only a fraction of existent recordings to be heard. One is forced therefore to take secondary scholars at their word when the empirical evidence remains out of reach. To wit, no CDs and in most cases not even out-of-print LPs are available by Bonnie-Lou, Jo-Ann Campbell, Jean Chapel, Joe and Rose Lee Maphis, Lauri Lee Perkins, Lucille Starr and Bob Reagan. They are therefore marginalised without possibility of recourse. George Lipsitz might state that 'no cultural moment exists within a hermetically sealed cultural present', but in this case, paradoxical though it may sound, the present will remain hermetically sealed unless and until our access to the past is unencumbered.⁷⁷ Furthermore that access should not be exclusively acoustic, for, as my periodic comments on photographs and costume indicate, the acoustic dimension alone obviously does not define musical expression. As much as we need to hear the recordings of as many of the female rockabilly singers as possible, we need even more to see any and all photographs, evidence of television appearances, and comments about them in the public press. One wonders, as I mentioned in the case of Brenda Lee, why certain photographs remain available while others are removed from public view. The past may be a distant country, but without full account of its substance, it continues to recede from view.

The female rockabilly singers themselves have not disappeared altogether, although hearing them in a live context can be as difficult as

finding their recordings. The rare opportunities when one of them takes to the stage and brings her material to life once again underscores that the 'counter-irritant' their careers have been to the dominant masculine heterosexual culture only ceases when either their lives end or their songs can no longer be heard. Until then, Johnny Whiteside's comments on a recent show by Janis Martin at the Palomino Club in Los Angeles should reinforce that sound itself can create a new space and posit a new order when those who hear it allow the music to help them to negotiate the contradictions of their lives.

She used the Palomino bandstand like a playground, immediately turning on the juice that makes rockabilly an undying music form: the untamed, liberty-or-death defiance that stunned America four decades ago. The Virginia-born-and-bred Martin remains completely enchanted by the rebel attitude, gaudy parlance and spiritual freedom of the rockabilly threat. Her strong, fiery vocals, driven by the momentum of this ongoing fascination, gorged on the big-beat thrills. . . . Making all this stuff about huggin', kissin' and dancin' wash isn't easy, but Martin's reverent wail was as touching as it was powerful. . . . Simply put, Janis Martin popped off like a titanic Roman candle; she shook her hips, she roared, she strutted about the stage with enviable passion. She indulged in the art of true fine rocking. Hell, she positively luxuriated in it. 'You know, I'm 53 years old, but it still feels good,' she said, basking in the heat of adoration and beery abandon. 'Everything dies but this.'⁷⁸

DISCOGRAPHY

Regardless of my diatribe in the conclusion of this chapter, a significant amount of material by female rockabilly artists remains in print or is available on out-of-print vinyl that can be found with sufficient patience. To address them in alphabetical order: Charlene Arthur's pitifully short career can be heard on the Bear Family LP *Welcome to the Club*, and her first side, 'I've Got The Boogie Blues', released by Nashville's pioneering label Bullet Records, is on Volume 28 of the Dutch Collector Records' *Boppin' Hillbilly* series. Surprisingly, all the Collins Kids' Columbia sides remain in print and a good deal of the audio portion of their Town Hall Party appearances to boot. The Bear Family two-CD set *Hop, Skip and Jump* includes the Columbia work, while a shorter Sony Special Products CD, *Introducing Larry*

and *Lorrie*, picks out twelve songs. The television appearances can be located on two LPs: *Country Routes' The Collins Kids at Town Hall Party* and the obscure TV Records' *Television Party*. Wanda Jackson has also benefited from Bear Family's completist proclivities. All her work on Capitol from 1954 to 1962 is contained on the four-CD box set *Right or Wrong*, while Rhino has an abridged eighteen-track compilation, *Rockin' in the Country*. The 1984 Swedish recordings were released domestically on LP and cassette by Varrick Records, a division of Rounder Records, in 1986. Brenda Lee's major recordings on Decca are contained in a two-CD set, *Anthology 1956-1980* (MCA). Much of Rose Maddox's extensive discography remains readily available. Arhoolie Records released two LPs of radio performances from 1940 and 1945, *On the Air Vols 1 and 2*, as well as a twenty-seven-track CD of selected 4 Star Records sides, *America's Most Colorful Hillbilly Band, 1946-51*. They also pressed a CD of twenty-four early 1980s performances of acoustic bluegrass, *Rose of the West Coast City*. The Columbia sides of the late 1950s are on two Bear Family LPs, each featuring sixteen tracks and named after the group. They also market a four-CD package of all Rose's solo work on Capital Records from 1959 to 1965, *The One Rose*. Janis Martin regrettably only pressed 26 sides for RCA from 1956-8, all included on Bear Family's *The Female Elvis: Complete Recordings, 1956-60*. Certain of Barbara Pittman's Sun sides can be found on various anthologies and the complete work on the Bear Family LP *I Need A Man*. The label run by Nashville's Country Music Foundation released a long overdue selection of Jean Shepard's work, *Honky-Tonk Heroine: Classic Capitol Recordings 1952-64*. Bear Family followed with a five-CD package, *The Melody Ranch Girl*, of Shepard's complete works for Capitol from 1952 to 1964. The German Bronco Buster label compiled a set of twenty sides by Texas Ruby and Curly Fox, *A Memorial Tribute*, that includes material recorded for Columbia in addition to transcriptions of Grand Ole Opry programmes. Kitty Wells's work, like much of Country music's pioneers, remains in print but not as widely available as it should be. The MCA Country Music Hall of Fame series has a single CD of sixteen tracks, and Rounder Records released a set of a dozen more obscure sides on LP and cassette, *The Golden Years*. Bear Family once again takes the lead with *The Golden Years 1949-1957*, a six-LP box set of ninety-five Decca tracks. Finally, the Rounder collection *Wild Wild Women* – an indispensable anthology that highlights Janis Martin and the Collins Kids, key minor figures like Sparkle Moore, and such obscurities as Linda and the Epics or Alvadean Coker and the Cokers – remains technically out of print and not released on CD but can be found with a little luck and even greater perseverance. The Sparkle Moore sides are also available on an Ace CD of work released by the Fraternity label, *All American*

Rock'n'Roll, and the vocalist's striking features dominate the recording's cover. The rest remain in the domain of collectors and cognoscenti, subject to cultural amnesia and the perils of public memory.

NOTES

- 1 Interjected after his performance of 'No Headstone for My Grave', a song made famous by Charlie Rich, on *The Complete Palomino Club Recordings* (Tomato R2 70385, 1989, distributed by Rhino Records). Of those performances recorded in 1979-81 and 1985, Robert Christgau observes that 'the Killer' sounds 'old, old and lecherous, old and lecherous and determined to enjoy it'. See *Christgau's Record Guide to the 90s* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), p. 246.
- 2 Randy McNutt, *We Wanna Boogie. An Illustrated History of the American Rockabilly Movement*. Revised, 2nd ed (Hamilton, OH: HIP Books, 1988), p. 185.
- 3 Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice. The Saga of Women in Country Music* (New York: Crown, 1993), p. 185.
- 4 It is curious to note that, while the auteur theory has lost credibility virtually altogether in film studies, a species of it remains in the analysis of popular music, specifically the tendency to rank performers hierarchically. Even the nicknames – the 'King' and the 'Boss' – carry on the desire to concoct hierarchical taxonomies. This attempt to erect a set of disciplined standards colours Robert Christgau's influential consumer guides, printed monthly in the *Village Voice*; how many artists must feel as if they had returned to school when confronted by the critic's letter grades? One might easily read into this practice a carryover of the categories contained in Andrew Sarris's landmark canonic analysis *The American Cinema. Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (New York: Dutton, 1948). I leave it up to the reader who they might include in the acoustic version of Sarris's pinnacle, the 'Pantheon'; who would lose face when placed in the category 'Less Than Meets The Eye' or 'Strained Seriousness'; and who would be banished to the locale titled 'Subjects For Further Research'. (That last category led one film-maker to state, 'I thought that was how they referred to cancer.')
- 5 Nick Tosches in Patrick Carr (ed.) *The Illustrated History of Country Music* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), p. 230.
- 6 Bill C. Malone, 'Elvis, Country Music, and the South', in George H. Lewis (ed.) *All That Glitters. Country Music in America* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University/Popular Culture Press, 1993), p. 55.
- 7 John Morthland, *The Best of Country Music* (Garden City, NY: Dolphin Books/Doubleday, 1984), pp. 241-2.
- 8 Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City. The Rise of Rock and Roll*, revised and expanded ed (New York: Pantheon, 1983), p. 28.
- 9 Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train. Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll*, revised and expanded ed (New York: Dutton, 1982), p. 169.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 168, 170.
- 11 Janis Martin's song was written by Doc Rockingham and Virginia Fitting (Unichappel Music/Rachel's Own Music, 1956) and the lyric references Junior Parker's 1954 recording which he co-wrote with Sun's Sam Phillips (Hi-Lo Music; Unichappell Music).
- 12 John Shepherd, 'Music and Male Hegemony', in Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (eds) *Music and Society. The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 152.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 158.
- 14 W.T. Lhamon, Jr. *Deliberate Speed. The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), p. 113.
- 15 Earl Burrows, 'Fujiyama Mama' (Hammer Hits, copyright 1954).
- 16 Elaine Tyler May, 'Explosive Issue: Sex, Women, and the Bomb', in Lary May (ed.) *Recasting America. Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). This striking essay illustrates that this gender-specific rhetoric of repressive maternalism did not end with the height of the Cold War. As late as 1972, the Civil Defense authorities were utilising the figure of sexually aggressive women as a metaphor for nuclear power. A pamphlet featured the female figures of Alpha, Beta, and Gamma (see Figure 8.1 in May 1989) as personifications of dangerous radioactive rays and stated 'like energy from the sun, these rays are potentially both harmful and helpful' (p. 164). May adds, these images are 'powerful testimony to the symbolic connections among the fears of atomic power, sex, and women out of control' (p. 165). The soundtrack album to the 1982 documentary *The Atomic Cafe*, co-produced and annotated by country scholar Charles K. Wolfe and released on Rounder Records, illustrates the degree to which both the anxiety and enthusiasm raised by nuclear energy found expression in popular musical form in a range of genres: rhythm and blues, country, rock and roll, and gospel.
- 17 The historiography of female blues singers of this period is limited. The key texts include Chris Albertson, *Bessie* (New York: Stein & Day, 1972) and *Bessie Smith: Empress of the Blues* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1975); Paul and Beth Garon, *Woman With Guitar. Memphis Minnie's Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992); Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls. Blues Queens of the 1920s* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Sandra Lieb, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981); and Derrick Stewart-Baxter, *Ma Rainey and the Classic Blues Singers* (New York: Stein & Day, 1970). The field is also inestimably in debt to the work of Rosetta Ruiz, whose *Rosetta Records* reissues the work of those women in blues, jazz, and gospel she calls our 'foremothers'.
- 18 Harrison, p. 10.
- 19 Hazel Carby, 'In Body and Spirit: Representing Black Women Musicians', *Black Music Research Journal* 11(2) (Fall 1991): 178.
- 20 Hazel Carby, "'It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime": The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues', *Radical America* 20(1) (1987): 12.
- 21 Derrick Stewart-Baxter, *Ma Rainey and the Classic Blues Singers* (New York: Stein & Day, 1970), p. 7.
- 22 Harrison, p. 56.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- 25 Robert 'Bumps' Blackwell and John Marascalco, 'Rip It Up' (published by ATV Music, 1956).
- 26 Bufwak and Oermann, p. 168.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 169.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- 31 Quoted in the notes by Bob Allen to Charlene Arthur, *Welcome To The Club*, Bear Family LP BFX 15234 [1986].
- 32 Bufwack and Oermann, p. 173.
- 33 Ed Ward in E. Ward, Geoffrey Stokes, and Ken Tucker (eds) *Rock of Ages. The Rolling Stone History of Rock and Roll* (New York: Rolling Stone Press/Summit Press, 1986), p. 123.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 134.

- 39 Ibid., p. 156.
- 40 Michel Foucault in M. Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, 'Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation Between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze', in P.F. Couchard (ed.) *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 209; Lhamon, Jr., p. 141.
- 41 Bruce Tucker, "'Tell Tchaikovsky The News": Post Modernism and the Emergence of Rock and Roll', *Black Music Research Journal* 9(2) (Fall 1989): 280.
- 42 Ibid., p. 234.
- 43 Ibid., p. 226.
- 44 Ibid., p. 226.
- 45 Ibid., p. 226.
- 46 Ibid., p. 226.
- 47 Morthland, p. 324. Owen Bradley produced all of Patsy Cline's major recordings and was a key figure in the formation of the 'countrypolitan' sound of the 1960s that assisted the genre in its ascendance once again to the pop charts. His works typically include lush orchestrations, dotted with smooth vocal choruses, decorative string sections, and the ubiquitous voicings of Floyd Cramer's piano.
- 48 The three images of Lee included in Bufwack and Oermann's pioneering article 'Rockabilly Women', *Journal of Country Music* 8(1) (May 1979) sum up this persona but did not for some reason appear in the recent volume *Finding Her Voice*. They range from a pert, crisp-dressed youngster to what appears to be virtually a ready tart. Nothing like the latter appears, I might add, in the MCA *Anthology* liner notes, yet a shot of Lee dancing in 1957 with a smiling Elvis comes across as at one and the same time wide-eyed and wanton. Maybe that's also due to the fact that the image just opposite it is of Lee smiling with a dollar bill in her hands.
- 49 Maphis and his wife Rose Lee were among the most estimable honky-tonk performers; John Morthland refers to the now unavailable sides they recorded for Columbia in the 1950s as 'West Coast honky-tonk at its most aggressive' (p. 229).
- 50 The title of a song performed by the duo and written by Johnny Bond, Harlan Howard, and Joe Maphis. *Red River Songs*, 1957. Bond was a popular West Coast performer and a featured star on 'Town Hall Party', while Howard, then a resident of Los Angeles, would in 1959 begin a career as one of Nashville's most successful and prolific songwriters with Ray Price's recording of 'Heartaches By The Number'.
- 51 Tanya Tucker's rocky but resilient career is chronicled in Daniel Cooper's 'Tanya Tucker Almost Grown', *The Journal of Country Music* 17(1) (1994): 10-25.
- 52 Quoted in the notes by Hank Davis to Barbara Pittman, *I Need A Man*, Bear Family LP BFX 15359 [1989].
- 53 Charlie Feathers and Stanley Kesler, 'I Forgot To Remember To Forget' (published by Hi-Lo Music, 1955).
- 54 Quoted in Hank Davis notes.
- 55 Bufwack and Oermann, p. 218.
- 56 Colin Escott and Martin Hawkins, *Good Rockin' Tonight*. Sun Records and the Birth of Rock and Roll (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).
- 57 Morthland, p. 259.
- 58 Johnny Whiteside has written the first biography of this major figure, *Ramblin' Rose: The Life and Career of Rose Maddox*. (Nashville: Vanderbilt/Country Music Foundation, 1995).
- 59 Morthland, p. 228.
- 60 Ibid., p. 228.
- 61 McNutt, pp. 185-6.
- 62 Bufwack and Oermann, p. 233; Nick Tosches, *Unsung Heroes of Rock 'n' Roll. The Birth of Rock in the Wild Years Before Elvis*. Revised ed (New York: Harmony Press, 1991), pp. 165, 167.
- 63 Tosches (1991), p. 167.
- 64 Tosches (1980), p. 230.
- 65 Bufwack and Oermann, p. 233.
- 66 Ibid., p. 235.
- 67 Ibid., p. 236.
- 68 Tosches (1991), p. 168.
- 69 Ibid., p. 169.
- 70 Gillian Gaar, *She's A Rebel. The History of Women in Rock and Roll* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1992).
- 71 Mim Udovitch, 'Mothers Of Invention', *Rolling Stone* (692) (6 October 1994): 50.
- 72 Ray Pratt, *Rhythm and Resistance. The Political Uses of American Popular Music* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), p. 5.
- 73 George Lipsitz, *Rainbow At Midnight. Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 327.
- 74 Ibid., p. 327.
- 75 Margaret Marshment, 'Substantial Women', in Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment (eds) *The Female Gaze: Women As Viewers of Popular Culture* (Seattle: The Comet Press, 1989), p. 29.
- 76 Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 94.
- 77 George Lipsitz, *Time Passages. Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 13.
- 78 Johnny Whiteside, *LA Weekly* (25 February-3 March 1994), p. 83.