

# The Music and History of Carl Perkins



Group 1



# Growing Up



- ❧ Perkins was born on April 9<sup>th</sup> 1932 and grew up in Tiptonville Tennessee.
- ❧ His father, Buck Perkins, was a poor sharecropper.
- ❧ Some of the musical influences heard by Perkins as he grew up were gospel music (white churchgoers), and field music (African Americans).
- ❧ As a Pastime, Perkins would listen to the “Grand Ole Opry” on the radio with his dad. Hearing Roy Acuff’s broadcasts instilled in him a desperate desire for a guitar. His parents did not have the money, so they made one for him using a cigar box and a broomstick.
- ❧ A neighbor ended up selling a guitar (old, used, and dented) to Perkins.
- ❧ A field worker by the name of John Westbrook taught Carl Perkins how to play the guitar. Westbrook taught Perkins how to feel the vibrations of the guitar.
- ❧ Perkins could not afford to replace strings when they broke, so he tied them. This resulted in cuts when he slid down the string, so he bent the notes giving his sound a blue’s sound.
- ❧ Perkin’s was recruited into the grade school marching band with his skill, and ended up writing a song called “Let Me Take You to the Movie, Magg”.

# How He Got His Start



- At the age of 14 Carl and “The Perkins Brothers” got gigs playing at local bars such as the “Sand Ditch”.
- This start allowed a reputation to grow and the brothers started playing at other bars in the area as well.
- Eventually, the string of bar gigs and playing where they could built the Perkins brothers a large enough reputation to enable them to play on the WTJS- am radio by the later 1940’s- and they became popular around the area.
- In 1953, Carl Perkins married Valda Crider. When Carl was experiencing some hard time getting hours through his day jobs, his wife encouraged him and his band to start playing at more bars and casting a wider net.
- Carl was noted to have a unique blues style when playing the guitar, probably due to having to tie his strings when he was young and could not afford new ones, creating an edgier blues sound.
- His band soon started sending their recordings to various record companies.
- In 1954 Perkins auditioned in front of Sam Philips who was with Sun Records, and was soon to be successfully recording for them within the year. This was also the same recording company that Elvis Presley started with.
- In 1956, “Blue Suede Shoes” became a huge success being number 2 on Billboard’s Best Seller Popular Music Chart. In addition to this success, Perkins became the 1<sup>st</sup> country singer to get number three in the R&B charts.

# During His Golden Years



- ❧ In 1956 Perkins was involved in a tragic car accident while driving to New York to be featured on different broadcasts. The driver fell asleep at the wheel and the car slammed into a truck, killing the driver and seriously injuring both Perkins and his brother.
- ❧ During 1958, Perkins switched to Columbia records where he recorded hit after hit.
- ❧ Carl soon began touring all over the Midwest and even overseas in Germany.
- ❧ In 1964 he toured with Chuck Berry in England, during which time he was able to get to know the Beatles who went on to cover more of his songs than they covered any other artist.
- ❧ Carl opened for Johnny Cash as well and after a hallucination incident on the tour bus with Cash, they both decided to refrain from alcohol and drugs (Perkins had become an alcoholic by this point.)
- ❧ In 1969 Perkins and Bob Dylan wrote “Campaign Illinois”.
- ❧ By the 1970’s Perkins finally got the royalties for his songs through many long battles with Sam Philips.

# Golden Years Cont'd



- ☞ In the early '80s Perkins worked and appeared on TV shows with Paul McCartney, George Harrison, Ringo Star, Roseanne Cash, and many others. In 1985 he was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame. In 1987 he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, received the Grammy Hall of Fame Award, and was recognized by the Rockabilly Hall of Fame.
- ☞ In 1986 Perkins, Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison, and Jerry Lee Lewis all returned to Sun Records to record a tribute to their early years there.
- ☞ In 1997 he played an All Star charity concert called Music for Montserrat in London.
- ☞ Four months later on January 19th, 1998 Perkins died of throat cancer. Many country stars showed up to pay their respects at his funeral including Johnny Cash, Garth Brooks, Winona Judd, and Jerry Lee Lewis to name a few.

# Perkin's Unique and Innovative Methods



- ❧ One of the important things about Perkin's style is his versatility, in terms of being significant in different genres.
- ❧ He was one of the first pioneers of rockabilly music, which is a combination of C&W and R&B music.
- ❧ He was one of the few early mainstream white rockers (most of the early ones were black artists).
- ❧ He was also one of the more notable artists for the label Sun Studios, which was basically the center for the early development of rockabilly music.

# Methods Cont'd



- ❧ He always stayed true to his rockabilly style, but many of his songs became successful country and pop hits.
- ❧ His most popular song, "Blue Suede Shoes", was a Top 10 hit on C&W, R&B, and pop charts in 1956.
- ❧ His songs "Dixie Fried", "Boppin' the Blues", and "Your True Love" became big country hits. He also had a few minor pop hits, but eventually he stuck to composing country songs.



# Methods Cont'd



- ❧ A significant part of Carl's style seems to be the strong sense of family and its importance, which can be traced back to his family and his beginning.
- ❧ His family was poor, but they managed to get Perkin's his first guitar, which he learned to play quickly, and then recruited his two brothers to learn to play as well so he could form his first band, The Perkins Brothers Band, which was composed only of him and his brothers.

# Methods Cont'd



- ❧ He wrote "Blue Suede Shoes" after hearing a boy telling his prom date not to step on his blue suede shoes. Perkins went back to his home in a housing project and wrote the song on a brown potato sack.
- ❧ Carl Perkins virtually defined and established rockabilly music in the rock and roll cannon and launched Sun Records into national prominence. Carl Perkins is regarded by many as one of the founding fathers of rock-and-roll.

# Methods Cont'd



- ❧ As a singer, Perkin's interpretation of country ballads is every bit as fine as his better-known rockers. And within the framework of the best of his music is a strong sense of family and roots, all of which trace straight back to his humble beginnings.
- ❧ His guitar playing was also a key element to Rockabilly artists, as many will automatically gravitate towards playing some of Carl's original compositions, sometimes even note for note, without even realizing it.

# Methods Cont'd



- ❧ Perkins listened to country music, gospel, and blues, and began to write some of his own compositions at an early age. This story is a lot like that of Presley.
- ❧ Carl pioneered some of the first Rockabilly styles by mixing together the country twang he was so used to along with the influences of R&B that he was taught while learning to play the guitar.

# Other Music of the Period (The 1950s)



- ☞ At the same time that Perkins was learning to play the guitar, and even developing his own style of Rockabilly by integrating his knowledge of C&W and R&B, other musicians were also doing similar things.
- ☞ These were people like Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, and Jerry Lee Lewis, who all happened to be recording at the same studio, leading to the “Million Dollar Quartet.”
- ☞ Much of the music that was being recorded and played were covers of previous artists, a lot of the time black artists who weren’t receiving royalties for the songs.
- ☞ For example Elvis made a cover of Perkins’ “Blue Suede Shoes” and played that during his show on the *Milton Berle show*.
- ☞ The ‘50s was a time where the genre of Rock was being developed, and Perkins was one of the leading creators of the Rockabilly style.

# Musical Influences



- ☞ Carl Perkins was an artist who has been classified as a Rockabilly artist. Rockabilly is a style of rock that is described as a blend between R&B and C&W.
- ☞ Rhythm & Blues influences include things such as a driving backbeat, usually played by the drums, and the 12-bar blues musical form. The drum part itself is an influence of R&B. There can also be saxophones, and other big band instruments from the swing era.
- ☞ Country and Western influenced the emphasis on guitars, and the making of the vocal melodies as the most important part of the songs.
- ☞ Carl Perkins, from living in the South in Tennessee, gained his C&W influence from the radios, while the R&B influence came from taking lessons from a nearby sharecropper, and the Black folks that were working in the fields with him while he was young.
- ☞ The sharecropper is the man who taught Perkins how to play the guitar, and he taught him the Boogie lines and 12-bar blues chord progressions.

# Social and Political Events of the 1950s



- The 1950s was a time of social strife, mainly based on racism and racial segregation throughout the nation.
- In 1954 the USA made it unconstitutional to have racially segregated schools, leading to a better integration of races.
- In 1955 the Rosa Parks scheme went into action when she refused to give up her bus seat to a white man, which in turn led to the bus boycotts amongst other efforts to formulate a more racially integrated nation.
- These events and others of the 1950s that involved elements of racial segregation affected Carl Perkins, because if such events that made the races become more integrated had never happened, the influences of R&B from the southern black community wouldn't have reached Perkins. This could have made him stay as only a C&W artist, instead of his historic musical mixture that brought him to Rockabilly infamy.

# Influencing Artists of His Time



- ❧ Perkins had a very crucial impact on many artists that were performing at the same time he was or right after.
- ❧ The rockabilly style of his music influenced one of the most famous rockabilly performers: Elvis Presley.
- ❧ Elvis and Johnny Cash have recorded songs by Perkins, along with many others.



# Perkins' Influence on the British Invasion



- ❧ Perkins' contributions to the rockabilly era were major factors in the British Rock n' Roll bands that came to the U.S. in the "British Invasion".
- ❧ The Beatles were influenced by many things Perkins did with his music. For example, his softer side of rock, along with his R&B roots.
- ❧ The Rolling Stones also incorporated the harder style of rock that Perkins had in his music.

# Today's Artists Influenced by Perkins



- ❧ Carl Perkins still has a considerable impact on the music we hear today.
- ❧ Bruno Mars is an up and coming artist in today's music industry. He says that his R&B oriented voice, his slicked back hair, and his hip-swinging moves are influenced by the Rockabilly era.
- ❧ Some southern rock we hear today was influenced by Carl Perkins, for example, bands like Lynyrd Skynyrd.
- ❧ Perkins continues to influence many artists, no matter if they sing Country, R&B, Pop, or good old Rock n' Roll.

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