

1957- "Ricky the Drummer"

by Tim Van Schmidt

It's plenty understandable to me why rock and roll would invade the lives of squeaky clean families like the Nelson brood on television's "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet." Despite the light all-American humor the show was centered around- and its polite yes-sir, no-ma'am manners- the truth was that the Nelson boys- David and Ricky- were teenagers and for them to seem typical to the rest of America's teenagers in the 1950s, popular music had to become a part of the story. So, in April 1957, the Ozzie and Harriet episode titled "Ricky the Drummer," did exactly just that.

But more than just include popular music in the storyline, "Ricky the Drummer" actually created a new pop star. In the process of the thin plot that gets young Ricky on stage with a touring band to sit in on drums, then to sing the popular Fats Domino tune "I'm Walkin," he became a new singing heartthrob to the world at large. Nelson had recorded a version of "I'm Walkin" previous to the episode, he lip-synched his own version on TV and when the record was released, it became an instant hit- such is the power of television. "I'm Walkin" would be the first of many hits for Ricky in the following years.

The "Ricky the Drummer" episode is a lot about the music business above and beyond Ricky's specific performance. In it, Ricky shows a passion for music by first of all going up to his room to practice his drumming to the latest record by the artist appearing at the town's dance that evening. He turns the music up and finds the groove, even playing it with a little swing in his body language.

The story of the Nelson family already includes music, since Ozzie had been a sax player and bandleader earlier in life. So when an invitation comes Ricky's way to actually sit in with the band that night, everyone in the family gets excited, especially Ozzie who is full of old-fashioned advice. Ricky ends up donning David's tuxedo for the gig, but when he arrives, he finds that what the band really wanted was a boy to "sit in" and haul the equipment for them. This disappoints Ricky, but he takes it well and seems happy to just be around the musicians, serving them soft drinks.

But the Nelson clan does not know how to lie down when they don't get what they want, so David pulls a few strings with the bandleader and Ricky is called up to the bandstand to play anyway. He plays the drums on one song, attempting with some success to "drum synch" his playing to the soundtrack, including a rather impressive drum solo, while looking cool and collected.

But then, Ricky is called up to the mike and the band plows into "I'm Walkin." Nelson approaches the tune with his own vocal style- a kind of relaxed, cool kind of delivery. It's a unique take on the song, not a copy of Fats Domino's music. But, there's nothing striking about the performance in particular until the instrumental break where Ricky puts a little of his body into it, doing just the slightest Elvis Presley twitch. That elicits a couple of squeals from the girls in the audience- but not too much.

Of course, not to outdone or overshadowed, Ozzie, Harriet and David then take the stage and the whole thing winds up in a big band/barbershop quartet version of "My Gal Sal." However, in the middle of the piece, Ricky leaves the bandstand and does a little dancing with a pretty girl in the crowd. He doesn't flip her around or anything- a few stiff twists is all- but he does apply some smooth footwork to the song. He then returns to the stage to finish the song with the family- always back to the safety of the family.

"Ricky the Drummer" is a Ricky showcase for sure- featuring his drumming, singing and even dancing- all within a short 20 minutes. That 20 minutes, however, would establish a whole new career for him that would, so to speak, get him out of the house, like the rest of teenage America was dreaming of. It is significant that it is music- you could even call it rock and roll music- that gets it done.