

RockingRecords1956TextTVS

New Suede Shoes

The Lively Sounds of 1956

1956- Rocking Records

by Tim Van Schmidt

1956

The lights go on, June 8, 1956. This is what I imagine: a radio is on in the nurse's station in Harvard, Illinois and one of the top hit records of the time- Carl Perkins' "Blue Suede Shoes"- has just kicked in. I take my first breath and wail just about the time Perkins yelps "go, cat, go" in the intro. Let that fantasy be the place this project begins.

Rocking Records

I knew that pile of dusty old records I've been saving for years would come in handy someday. Same with those books I have collected about the history of contemporary music. Just sit right down and crack one open and get more details than you need. Then go diving into the stacks and see what you can find. It's kind of like a treasure hunt and each scratchy old chunk of vinyl is a prize.

45s- the main music product of the day in the 1950s, the main outlet for the artist. Two songs, one on each side. Sometimes there are two on each side, like those Little Richard Specialty releases I found. I managed to collect a bunch of 45s by burning leisure time in the late 1970s at garage sales. I'd look for records, but found it was even more effective to just ask, "Do you have any old records?" Many times, the people would turn around and grab a dusty record case off a shelf and say, "Sure, how about these." "How much?" "How about a nickel each?" I did garage sales like that in northern Wisconsin and in New Jersey and found some gems. What I'm finding out now is that I didn't even really know what I was collecting, but I had some good luck.

Such is the power of a great record collection- to be able to go to the shelf and pull out the record itself- either the original release, or on a collection. Oh, it's OK for me to talk about "records" now because that's what everyone called the round pieces of vinyl everyone was buying as music products- "records." Later, much later, using the word "records" will get much more complicated. Wrangle with that then. For now I'll declare that I'm going to use the term "records" to refer to any format of music product- 78s, 45s, LPs, cassettes, compact disks, files. They are "recordings," "records" for short.

Carl Perkins

My good luck at record hunting includes an original copy of Carl Perkins' "Blue Suede Shoes" on the Sun Records label. I don't care if the thing is beat to smithereens, dirty, written on and part of the label has leaked away, it's still an original- one of the greats. And I'm not just talking about a record that sold some units, I'm talking about a record that really works. What I mean is that when I gritted my teeth and put the thing on the turntable to start this study of the music of 1956, the needle dragging through the scars of reckless abuse, it popped right out of the speakers and my heart beat quicker. Perkins had it going on, no doubt about it- it sure sounded like fun to be playing the new "rock and roll" in the Sun studios. More than 50 years later, it still sounds like fun.

"Blue Suede Shoes" is THE song- a devil-may-care anthem for the rock and roll movement that was breaking out in 1956- but I can't help but also get the same pulse quickening out of the back side of this beat up old thing from Memphis- "Honey Don't." Same format- get the band in gear and at some point turn them loose while yelping like a real cool cat who can't help himself.

But "Honey Don't" percolates with something even more real than "Blue Suede Shoes." "Blue Suede Shoes" is about drawing some kind of line, and for a rock and roller, that's his shoes- maybe a frivolous claim to an outsider. But in "Honey Don't," you don't have to be a rocker to relate to the sentiment. That is, don't say you will when you won't- a common frustration for teenagers and lovers of all ages.

The main common point between the two sides of Perkins' music is fun. The songs are first and foremost upbeat dance tunes. I have tried it personally- that is, dancing to Perkins' songs- and even though they are each less than three minutes each- "Blue Suede Shoes" is only 2:14, compared to the hefty 2:48 of "Honey Don't"- you WILL get worked up physically if you stick with the beat.

The two songs also share attitude. Both tunes are high energy dance tunes, and that in itself displays an attitude, but the song lyrics also reveal a confidence, even an arrogance. They are a declaration of independence from the blind acceptance of style and romance. Combined, the tempo and the attitude are just what a teenager looking for a little excitement ordered- just drop in a dime and go, cat, go- a little bit of fun, a little bit of swagger, even a shade of danger. I get it.

But not just a singer, Perkins is a guitarist too and the strong presence of the instrument points toward a particular element of the rock and roll that was coming out of Memphis. Perkins' snaky, wiry lead kicks off "Honey Don't" and winds its way through "Blue Suede Shoes".

Even more, in these recordings you get the sense that Perkins was a part of a group of other musicians, the band he is recording with in the studio. In both songs Perkins speaks to the band, his cats, who he's having a great time with. That is an infectious element to the records- Perkins isn't alone having fun in the studio and hopefully you're not alone when you're listening to it. The rock and roll musicians- perhaps like cool jazz musicians- had a special camaraderie going that the audience could share by dancing together.

How does Perkins' music stand up over time? At a January 2010 party for some close friends who were born in 1956, I put on "Blue Suede Shoes" and within seconds everybody in the room was into the rhythm. A few seconds more and just about everyone was dancing- proof positive that great music can still do what it sets out to do, even 54 years later.

Elvis Presley

Despite the cool fun of Perkins' tunes, the big fish in the sea in 1956 was Elvis Presley. He broke way out in 1956 with hit record after hit record, starting with "Heartbreak Hotel," his first release on the big time RCA label, and in feature movies. Presley had come out of the Sun Studios stable with authentic rock and roll credentials and became the number one popular recording artist of the time. It became hard to tell if Presley was riding on the popularity wave of rock and roll, or if rock and roll was riding on the Presley wave, so intense was his domination of the market.

"Heartbreak Hotel" can be called a rock and roll song, although it almost seems like a novelty record of sorts- a hyped up blues tune with exaggerated instrumental elements- like the raw, rough guitar solo- and dramatic, vivid lyrics. It's kind of a slow tune to dance to, but riveting in Presley's dominating vocal

performance. It truly sounds like Presley is howling at the end of an alley. There's also the sense of a band playing together when the song breaks for the guitar solo and a little piano tinkling- harkening back to the fun of the old Sun days, perhaps.

"Hound Dog," however, was the real rock and roll deal- upbeat, raw, just a little bit out of control, lyrics that don't really mean much but who cares when you're have fun? It's a dance tune, accentuated by an insistent snare drum. The other side, "Don't Be Cruel," is also a snappy kind of dance tune, but smoother, gentler. This allows for certain elements of Presley's recordings to come to the forefront- especially the rich backing vocals. The song still bubbles along, despite being relatively calm.

But Presley was also playing the other side of the fence too. He was induced to also record some slower crooner type ballads, perhaps by his big record label who not only wanted to cash in on the rock and roll craze, but also put their new star into old commercial molds. "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You" could be a slow dance tune, but plays more like a showpiece. Presley could certainly croon, his voice at times piercing through the thick arrangement. But it's what he does with it- playing with the sounds of the words and approaching the whole thing with just a little bit of aggressiveness, exaggeration- that sets his crooning apart.

The words to "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You" are full of what I want to call "male myths," statements that males make to convince females of the sincerity of their advances. Even if the guy thinks it's all a load of hogwash personally, often he ends up saying them anyway, that is, if he is going to progress in the potential relationship. You get that feeling out of Presley on "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You"- that these statements are not particularly sincere- so he vocally plays with the melodies to get something out of it all.

I got that feeling doubly out of another 1956 Presley nod to the crooners, "Love Me." Here, Presley is all over the melody like a drunken sailor, exaggerating the words, playing with the sound quality of his voice and generally trying to have fun with the song- perhaps not the most sincere way to approach a lady, either. This is what rock and roll brought to crooning- the tongue in cheek.

However, Presley's other 1956 ballad, "Love Me Tender," is a classic of vocal music. Presley plays it straight here, singing simply with the accompaniment of an acoustic guitar. His nice, graceful rendering of the song- singing it as gingerly as one might sing a favorite hymn- results in sincerity you can believe in. Yeah, there are male myths throughout this one, but the solemn tone and heartfelt reverence with

which Presley approaches the song seem to bypass those questions. In this case, Presley's vocal talent is very real.

Presley's image itself became an indelible reflection of the time- the slicked back hair, the little unruly curl, that surly scowl. In this investigation, however, I ran into multiple male artists who were working on the same look- including Gene Vincent and Wayne Cochran. Again was rock and roll chasing Presley, or was Presley chasing rock and roll? Were Presley's peers imitating him, or was Presley the lucky stiff who won the popularity contest and ended up being the one who defined the image?

How enduring has this image been? On January 8, 2010, more than 30 years after his death and 75 years from his birth, the Denver Post ran a full-sized color photo of Presley impersonator Jonny Barber, billed as the "Velvet Elvis," who was performing in Denver that day- Presley's birthday. The next day, on January 9, the Post ran an Associated Press article in the business section that revealed the big money behind the enduring image of Presley, owned by a CKX, who purchased Elvis Presley Enterprises in 2005 for \$100 million. On January 17, during a national broadcast of a football play-off game between the San Diego Chargers and the New York Jets, the cameras scanned the stands and sure enough, in the crowd, was a guy in a Presley outfit.

Presley is everywhere in the 21st Century- more than 50 years after his first hit. His photo appeared on the cover of the January 29, 2010 issue of The Week to tease a lengthy article discussing Presley's taste for pajama parties with 14-year-old girls. The Winter/Spring 2010 booklet for the Rialto Theater in Loveland, Colorado featured one upcoming show by Bill Chrastil, pictured as Presley, but who also reportedly does impressions of other performers as well. And then on a recent Northern Colorado restaurant experience, I heard a female cover of Presley's big hit "Love Me Tender"- so long after the frenzy had started, Presley, as a character any way, still peaks out from around the corner. The man may be dead, but his image, his character, his place in history lives on.

So what did Presley bring to the table musically? A sense of style and timing. His vocal quality was plenty good enough, but there were plenty of great singers around. But perhaps thanks to his association with the feisty beginnings of rock and roll, Presley was able to infuse some personality and attitude into the recordings that was fresh in 1956. As a star, he was making movies and records at an amazing rate, which could confuse anybody. But somewhere deep in the belly of his early work, Presley still seemed to be having a good time.

Easy Listening

Despite the incredible domination that Presley maintained on the record charts in 1956, he was by no means the only thing going on. Rock and roll was the new, exciting thing, but the contemporary music scene at the time offered plenty of alternatives for those who didn't like the brash new dance music for teenagers.

Just look at the record that bumped Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel" off of its number one perch on the charts- Gogi Grant's "Wayward Wind." It's got a big orchestra arrangement- complete with trumpeting horns, layers of angelic background vocals and Grant's purposeful, deliberate lead vocal performance. The song tells an epic story about a relationship gone astray and plays like a movie theme song- and is a long way away from the hot fun of rock and roll. Still, there is a nice swelling quality to Grant's voice that makes this showpiece a comfortable enough ride, despite the clunky arrangement.

The charts were full of a lot of other calm, non-rock and roll stuff including several instrumental pieces. Les Baxter's "The Poor People of Paris" and Nelson Riddle's "Lisbon Antigua" both sound like they were perfect for the ballroom dance set- nice, clean, deliberate music- sugary and bland with slippery strings, cheesy vocal parts, a few light jazz touches and even a little whistling. There's some kind of elegance to them, a formal kind of pride- that this is BEAUTIFUL music- but so measured I can't help but think of ballroom dancing. Even better, the records seem like they would also be perfect for an ice skating rink- there'd be no ice melting when these tunes were on. It should be said that despite the rather vapid nature of the music itself, both recordings have very clean, crisp sound- a testament to probably the best the recording industry had at the time. These sound like movie songs too.

Also still chugging along were the crooners, who had inherited the music scene from the Big Bands as vocal music became more popular after World War II. Perhaps at the top of the heap was Perry Como, whose recording of "More" is as much a dance floor waltz as a sing-along tune. Como's voice has a nice, warm quality to it, not as strident or effected as Martin's. You get the sense that Como was going for a general audience with this- the chorus of male and female voices heartily supporting the choruses. In my imagination, I can see people swaying back and forth, singing this one in a German beer garden somewhere. This one is also a good one for the ballroom floor- clean, conservative and very deliberate.

On the complete other end of the crooner mix from Como was Vic Damone, whose "On the Street Where You Live" is more bluster than art. It starts out with this incredible outburst about a "towering feeling." It all ends up with a dramatic finish, complete with cascading voices. When he does the "towering feeling" thing again later on in the song, you kind of have to chuckle. No one is believing these

male myths. It's all a set up- some arranger's fantasy. First of all, nobody has time to just walk around mooning about their girl. And nowadays, a guy doing that would be arrested for stalking.

Not all of the crooner style music sounds out of place in the 21st century. Nat King Cole's "Night Lights" sounds very smooth and graceful indeed. First of all, Cole had some great sound- apparently using a top notch recording studio. Everything about the track is crisp and clear, from Cole's deep, rich vocals to the bright, but muted, punctuation of the horns. Sure, there's a big arrangement here- even including some ice rink strings- but it's also tempered by Cole's calm, smooth vocal performance and just the right amount of tinkling jazz piano, mellow bass and soft brushes on the drums. Cole makes it all seem so effortless and it makes you want to be in the nightclub that he's performing in- maybe a dimly lit place with stiff drinks and elegant people.

Guitars and Pianos

The genius of rock and roll was partly that it cut all the big production stuff way down to its basics- a piano, guitar, drums, bass, maybe a sax. This trend had also hit country music in 1956 and was even exaggerated. The pure country sound of Johnny Cash's hit "I Walk the Line" is as simple and honest a production as it gets- it features Cash's voice, a guitar and a little chugging percussion. Cash hums a little at the beginning, maybe to find the key he launches the song in, but there are no extra vocals to back him up. It's very bare, the fragile guitar seems a little out of tune and Cash bulls on through with the power of repetition, the deep timbre of his voice becoming the focus of the music.

What a difference between Johnny Cash and Fats Domino. Domino's tune, "Blueberry Hill," starts with this robust roll on the piano and a full band launches in right behind him. Domino's New Orleans-influenced sound is a little bit bluesy and his voice has a kind of ageless quality that wasn't particularly indicative of the teenage pop music at the time. His medium tempo dance song, propelled partly by some insistent cymbal work, is full, thick and rich.

Domino's "Blue Monday" has some big band punch to it too. The song was featured in the 1956 rock and roll movie "The Girl Can't Help It," his wide face beaming, the dance floor full. By the way, this tune, despite its general success has perhaps one of the worst sax solos on record. The flip side of the record- a kind of nervous, medium tempo dance tune titled "What's the Reason I'm Not Pleasing You"- has a significantly better sax solo.

Roughly, this illustrates what seem to be two main camps in the burgeoning contemporary music scene in 1956. The first is the one that Domino represents- the one where the performers depended on the piano and horns to make their arrangements successful. Saxophone was often applied in these cases as the solo instrument of choice. This could be directly tied to the dance bands of preceding years. The piano, however, took the place of multiple horns and helped cut the band down to a more manageable size.

The second camp is the one that Cash (and Perkins, Presley and others) represents, where the guitar is strapped on right up front and plays a major part in the arrangement, including instrumental breaks. The epicenter for this approach to the song arrangement seems to be Sun Records in Memphis, which sired so many of the up and coming rock and rollers. Part of the difference here could well be that those who wrote their songs on guitars, performed with guitars, and those who wrote their material on piano, performed with a piano.

The difference between the two could be as simple as convenience- you can carry around a guitar easier than a piano. However, the guitar had not enjoyed much time in the spotlight up to this point, so it is reasonable that most bands still clung to the piano and horns to fulfill the expectations of their audiences. But the guitar's time had come thanks to rock and roll.

Little Richard

The king of the bands- at least the piano-sax driven bands- had to be Little Richard. On all of his recordings- "Long Tall Sally," "Slippin and Slidin," "Rip It Up," "She's Got It" and "Miss Ann"- his band just wails. The sax player particularly defines the rock and roll sax solo- honking, squeezing, blasting, blaring- everything within a few seconds- all with that piano banging hard in the background. The backbeat was especially strong on "Slippin and Slidin" making the rhythm irresistible. All of this made Richard's music undeniably energetic and fun.

Little Richard could rightly be called the most exciting act of 1956- even more so than Presley thanks to his over-the-top vocal style, maniac stage presence and jamming band. Presley took rock and roll histrionics to the mainstream, but you got a sense that it was less musical abandonment and more of a marketing ploy. But Richard is so intense, so worked up, you get the idea that the guy just can't help being such a character, yowling and howling, roughing up his own vocals unmercifully. That the songs were about carrying on no matter what makes them a great escape from the real troubles of the world. When Richard was doing his thing, you just couldn't think about anything else

I had the good luck of not only collecting a couple of Little Richard single 45s in my big garage sale hunt, but I also found a couple of 45 releases that featured two Richard songs on each side, including one with "She's Got It," which acted like a theme for the movie "The Girl Can't Help It." That was paired on one side with "Can't Believe You Want to Leave." The other side is the great "Long Tall Sally," paired with "Miss Ann"- a great discovery. "Miss Ann" is everything that was great about Little Richard and his band- the raspy, roughed up voice, the yowl just before the instrumental break, the honking saxophone- just slowed down a little. That one increment less in the tempo department serves to let the band have even more room to nail the tune.

La Vern Baker

Perhaps a good female counterpart to Little Richard in 1956 was La Vern Baker. Baker is featured in the movie "Rock, Rock, Rock!" performing her tune "Tra La La"- a robust woman in a sea of male dominance. "Tra La La" is a trifle- a sing songy jingle of an excuse for a song and you get the sense that Baker's talent- her strong voice and delivery- is wasted here.

But Baker gets the real prize with the flip side of the "Tra La La" single, that is, "Jim Dandy." Baker's voice isn't wasted here- she growls and roughs up the words, like Little Richard, even giving a little howl just before the honking sax break. My problem here- the song fades out in the climax of the song. There should have been more to "Jim Dandy" because Baker and band, listed on the record as the Gliders, are truly rocking.

Bill Doggett

Unlike the beautiful music orchestra arrangements of Nelson Riddle and Les Baxter, the instrumental hit by Bill Doggett, "Honky Tonk" is a bottom basic production, using a pared down band formation. But in this case, there's just a little twist. That is, underneath the jazzy, slippery guitar and the aggressive sax is this insistent chugging on the keyboards, giving the groove a little extra push. It sounds like an organ, giving the chords a nice, thick character. However, Doggett plays his keyboard gingerly, lightly adding the supporting chords like a rhythm guitar might- you can hardly detect he's there at points, but his work is crucial to keeping "Honky Tonk" moving along.

But the element I like most about "Honky Tonk" is the handclapping in the background- and a little bit of shouting and yelping. This seems to say that the band is having fun with music- like Perkins on his recordings. Rather than being just another medium tempo dance tune, it comes off like a jam you want to be there for. It's pure theme and variation structure-wise- which is what jamming really is- and comes off like a party.

Vocal Groups

The simplicity of production that rock and roll championed was also the genius of the music of the vocal groups of 1956. That style of vocal music, later termed "doo wop," featured a lead voice supported by layers of other voices, usually in harmony- kind of like barbershop quartet music, but so much more passionate and more intricate arrangement-wise. Doo wop could be exciting like Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, chilling like the Five Satins and highly dramatic like the Platters.

The top vocal group of 1956 seems to be the Platters. On "My Prayer" the soaring lead vocals are anchored solidly by layers of harmony vocals. However, as a top act, the Platters' recordings also included orchestra arrangements- the full production treatment. For all the power on "My Prayer," it works because it is all based on something intensely personal. It's a love song and passion comes pouring out of the pipes of the lead singer. He compares thoughts of his loved one to prayer which is also intensely personal and passionate. The group scores a home run for the beating heart with grandeur and sincerity- after all, a feeling likened to something so sacred as prayer has to be the real thing.

The most exciting of the 1956 vocal groups, however, would have to be Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers. Their hit "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" doesn't waste any time snapping the listener to attention- it's crisp, energetic and sonically aggressive. Lymon's strong and confident vocal attack propels this song, there's a great sax solo and the Teenagers fill out the progress of the song with a cascade of voices. All of this comes across loud and clear five decades later, busy and fun.

One of the songs that really grew on me as I listened to the vocal music of 1956 is "Eddie My Love" by the Teen Queens. For one thing, the song comes from the female perspective. It's a "letter song," with the girl pleading with the guy to just get in touch- or it might be her last day. The melancholy is so infused in the song, the voices seem to get lost a little in the crowd- as though, really, Eddie doesn't matter anymore, it's more about mooning over his memory. What I like about the song is the multiple female vocals, the thick layers of saxophones and a nimble signature piano line thrown in between the

vocals. This song could have been penned by any teenage girl in love, perhaps a true expression of everyday life for the American teenager.

One tune that seemed to come more from the street than the recording industry was "In the Still of the Night" by the Five Satins. I really do imagine this group standing together underneath a streetlight somewhere in the city, singing about love. The highly purposeful backing vocals on the record sometimes result in a raw mix of voices that cannot be mistaken for pure studio invention. There's a homespun quality to the arrangement and the group performance suggests that the vocalists had their own hand in it. It's got kind of a plodding movement to it tempo-wise, however, thanks to the strong backing vocals and a demure sax solo it all winds up in a stirring emotional climax. "In the Still of the Night" features the real thing, the very basis for doo wop- "doo wop doo wah" in the bridge section of the song. The great falsetto crooning at end of the song could be wafting down a city alley somewhere, a sweet, dreamy fade out.

Also add in the Heartbeats' "A Thousand Miles Away" for the same sort of street credibility- a sense of original, personal expression. There's something a little funny about the affected lead vocal- a falsetto- but then again the backing vocals are so up front, filling in the spaces between the lines so well, that the whole thing continues to tease the ear. The slow dance intensity of the tune is underscored by the idea that this seems to be a group effort despite the distinctive lead voice, with very deliberate sounds coming from the backing chorus. That last great "Oo-oo-oo-ooo" is a tremendous release, a classic ending with a vocal flurry.

Pop

It's my impression that the music business in 1956 was an adult business, haphazardly filling constant commercial need with various singers to see what flew. By not really being hip to what was going on, by running a production machine dictated by numbers, the record industry not only found its hits as certain quality artists rose to the top, but also by leaving the door open for trend-chasers looking for the quick buck. These trend-chasers saw elements that worked in successful records- like the nervous boogie underpinnings of rock and roll, or the cascading multi-layered vocals of doo wop- and quickly made records of their own that used the new tricks, but with varying degrees of success. This stuff became known as "pop music," a watered down, or softer, version of other more original efforts.

The king of pop in 1956 seems to be Pat Boone. It's tempting to say his tune, "I'll Be Home," is full of male myths, but his promises to his loved one go over the top, vowing to come home to "start serving

you." Boone isn't exactly a strong crooner and not a rock and roller- by the time he gets to the spoken word part of the song, it's a done deal that he really isn't a loyal member of the male club- he's playing the other side with shameless pandering. Pull the plug. Break the record. This "letter song" may work on the "girlfriend"- the teenage female record buyer who doesn't know any better- but it makes for terrible listening for everybody else. I'd tell the unlucky recipient of this limp musical missive to run the other way from this smarmy brownnoser.

Speaking of smarmy, how about the Four Lads' "Standing on the Corner"? It's all about ogling the girls, the "harem" parading by. This song plays especially badly fifty years later thanks to its baldly misogynist attitude. The line that is completely out of place now is "You can't go to jail for what you're thinking." Don't count on it these days, bub. This one sounds like a bunch of fraternity brothers doing a talent show in their secret lair- some of them performing in drag. Perhaps imitating doo wop, the group sings in multi-vocal layers. But it comes off more like Barbershop Quartet music- maybe some drunk barbers- or a Vaudeville sketch. These guys obviously don't have enough to do with their time and are setting themselves up to be arrested for sexual harassment. I say lock 'em up- at least lock the doors to the recording studio.

Johnnie Ray's 1956 pop song, "Just Walkin in the Rain," has more to do with Tin Pan Alley- the original source for manufactured music- than rock and roll. It's just another song for the market. The fact that it starts out with easygoing whistling indicates from the get-go that this record won't be rocking too much. That's underscored by the lyrics- this poor sap doesn't have anything better to do than walk around out in the rain. Now, Ray isn't a bad crooner and there're some great multi-layered harmony vocals, but there's something fake about the production, fluffy. Ray might also be picked up for loitering for hanging out on the street, thinking about girls. Maybe he'd be in the same paddy wagon as Vic Damone. In both of their songs, both guys mention people stopping and staring at these love struck dopes- their hearts on their sleeves and mouths wide open- so somebody is probably call the cops. I imagine them in the same jail cell as the Four Lads.

Guy Mitchell's pop hit "Singing the Blues" also seems to be keeping alive the Tin Pan Alley songwriting tradition- a trite ditty. But, there's a slight effect on his crooner vocals- like he was singing through a megaphone. There's whistling too- apparently a definite musical trend in 1956- but it's more like an instrument answering Mitchell's vocals than an attempt to "sing" the melody. While Mitchell plays it mostly straight here vocally, he does play with the melody just a little throughout the production. Despite similarities, I liked "Singing the Blues" much more than Ray's "Walkin in the Rain." Maybe the gentle strum of the ukulele and the effective backing harmony vocals have something to do with it, but it just has a different spirit, maybe a hair bit faster tempo that makes it more memorable than dispensable.

Chuck Berry

Thank God for Chuck Berry, who was simultaneously a great performer and a savvy synthesizer of what was going on around him. He synthesized it in his songs and it's important to note that Berry wrote his own material- go ahead and look at a collection of his recordings and you'll see only one name in the credits- Chuck Berry. That wasn't the case with most musicians, who depended on that special animal, the songwriter, to keep them supplied with new material. In his quest for new material- or in his case, to CREATE new material- apparently Berry was a keen observer of the trials and joys of the people around him.

That includes the rock and roll movement- "Roll Over Beethoven" takes full advantage of rock and roll by pasting together many of the key indicative phrases being used by and about rock and rollers at the time into an irresistible dance tune of its own- including a reference to Perkins' "blue suede shoes." Berry points out that all it takes is one thin dime- in the jukebox, that is- to keep the dance party rolling. This was a sly piece of self-promotion.

"Roll Over Beethoven" stands next to "Blue Suede Shoes" as another of the important theme songs of what was happening in music in 1956. But more than just running down a grocery list of rock and roll terms, the song also displays that feisty rock and roll attitude. It tells the grand old daddies of accepted music- Beethoven and Tchaikovsky- to step on over because there's a new music in town. Berry was one of the stylistic leaders of the movement as well as a pretty good musical spokesman.

Berry's song "Too Much Monkey Business" is also a synthesis of the times, but it isn't about rock and roll, rather, it's about real life- jobs, bills, school and Army life. I like the words fine, but nothing expresses the things he's talking about- frustrated about- better than that "ahhhh" at the end of each verse. It's also an expression of an attitude, like "look at all the bull I have to contend with, oh well..." but in just one exhausted sound. That's what rock and roll is good for too- to get over that kind of feeling. It's interesting to note that Berry was deliberately working on a format he could rely on in terms of arranging his songs- the guitar part in "Too Much Monkey Business" is just like the guitar part in "Roll Over Beethoven." He had found a vein of gold and he was working it for all he could.

Berry keeps his guitar upfront on these records and that puts him roughly in the company of the Sun Records boys- the guitar-based rock and rollers. But Berry had his own style, a manic kind of eagerness

to please that was perhaps more steeped in rhythm and blues than country. This clearly set him apart from the Memphis fellows in terms of roots, but the result was the same- the dance floor filled up. Berry was a take-charge performer- he wrote his own stuff, developed his own style and even played his own guitar solos, a multi-talented powerhouse of a rock and roller, for sure.

However, Berry wasn't 100 percent about rabble rousing and the flip side to "You Can't Catch Me," "Havana Moon," proves a point. That is, that Berry's songwriting skills were not necessarily limited to the trend of the day. "Havana Moon," in its kind of hushed tone, is a bold step away from rock and roll, entering into a more exotic, foreign sound. For one thing, the lyrics are in Berry's version of a Cuban dialect, and its simple structure- Berry's voice, guitar and a little bass only- naturally backs away from the brashness of the more popular music of the day.

"Havana Moon" tells a story, not unlike Berry's other songs. But this story is not about an American teenager, but a love struck Cuban waiting for his American girlfriend to arrive by boat. The wait is excruciating for the young man and it drives him to drink rum to ease the pain. Unfortunately, the rum does too good of a job and the fellow passes out as the girl arrives, fails to find him and gets back on the boat for home. It's a story of tragic proportions, the tragedy of losing this burning love because of bad decision-making. The guy is kind of an idiot, and he's constantly talking, in his dialect, about "me," but the music makes it easy to eavesdrop on his sad story. He's a dreamer, fantasizing about moving to New York with his love and finding "...a home up in the sky." Such is the genius of Berry's songwriting, creating a whole vivid scenario in just a few minutes time.

The lyrics are interesting, but I think the haunting thing about it is the guitar part- perhaps more Oriental sounding to me than Cuban. It keeps coming back to counter Berry's crooning of the refrain "Havana moon..." Of course, even in the midst of "Havana Moon's" foreign ambiance, Berry can't help but mention the term "rock and roll." No matter, the tune is just another little bit of treasure from Berry's catalog.

Presley was anointed the "king of rock and roll" a long time ago, but my vote would have to be for Berry. I'll say that Perkins perhaps had the number one rock and roll record with "Blue Suede Shoes," but Berry's amazingly prolific output, with "Roll Over Beethoven" right on top, his energetic delivery and words that continually reflected the world around him tips the scales his way. Maybe it's best to say that Chuck Berry was A king of rock and roll in 1956, wise and sassy.

Harry Belafonte

The biggest surprise of this investigation was how much I enjoyed pulling out a copy of the top selling, long playing album of 1956- Harry Belafonte's "Calypso" record. In the midst of all the new rock and rollers, the pop star wannabes, the rhythm and blues divas and easy listening slop of the time, here was someone who was trying to do something truly refreshing, foreign. This music didn't have much to do with the rest of the music industry, being folk music- steeped in tradition.

Just check out what Belafonte's smash hit "Day-O" was all about- hard work. While the Four Lads were singing about ogling girls, Belafonte was singing about long days, dangerous jobs and hard rum. Just the intro sets "Day-O" apart from the other pop music of the time- a wailing voice, maybe way off in the distance, and a fluttering, trembling flutter on some drums. The supporting vocals are crucial for helping maintain the tempo of the piece, making the progress of the song a group effort. Belafonte's voice prevails, but it is in no ways alone.

"Jamaica Farewell," the other big Belafonte hit on "Calypso," features a nice warm acoustic guitar right up front. Like many pop songs, it's about a girl, sure, but its exotic locale offers a cool escape from urban America. The delicate nature of the arrangement tends to bring the listener in close and personal and Belafonte's voice is so measured, forming the words- and the melody- so purposefully, that it is an intimate and memorable musical narrative.

The rest of the "Calypso" album gives the opportunity to see Belafonte's vision in a bigger scope. On the record, with only a little more than 30 minutes of total music, Belafonte includes some bigger band arrangements and dance tunes- especially songs such as "Man Smart (Woman Smarter.)" But, again, what really come on like a breath of fresh air are the quieter, very deliberate tracks. Belafonte is uniformly controlled as an artist throughout the production. Though he's willing to play a little with language and rhythm, it remains a closely defined effort overall.

Belafonte's folk experiment is a bold journey to another place, as opposed to just a trip to the musical marketplace. His music challenged the industry to recognize that the songs weren't just a commodity, but a part of a particular culture, and that people still wanted to hear them. It was the record-buying public who proved him right. Artistically, however, Belafonte was an innovator and a champion for the people's music.

James Brown

If all that isn't enough, then let's put on something really rough, raw and passionate- like James Brown's 1956 hit "Please, Please, Please." I was playing it for a friend the other day and he started toward the stereo system thinking that the record was stuck. It wasn't stuck, it was just Brown hammering a single word, "please," right into the ground. There is no mistaking his intention as such a seriously fanatical character- he means to get your attention. Brown threw out the common expectations of a song and just went with the skeleton, then filled in with his raspy, sandpaper rough voice while dramatically lengthening the groove. He's spreading some more male myths, but it's the delivery not the words that prove his over-the-edge sincerity.

Nervous Norvus

Way on the extreme of recording in 1956 is the weird and wild "Transfusion" by Nervous Norvus. Oddly enough, this thumping novelty record is the most serious effort at social comment of all the music I heard from 1956. It takes a tongue-in-cheek swipe at drunk drivers, guys hot rodding to their dates and dangerous drivers of all kinds on the highways. Rather than change their speeding ways, which always leads to a loud wreck, the pushy drivers just ask for a transfusion of blood and then they'll be on their way again. Norvus has fun with it, rhyming creative synonyms for blood with the offbeat names of the ambulance drivers. He uses some of the youthful slang of the day to give his narrative character some hipness. But it's the sound effects in the recording- the loud car crash sound that punctuates each verse- that brings a smile. It's a fun tune, wild and wacky, but ends up with a message: slow down today.

Doris Day

On the whole other end of the spectrum from artists like James Brown and Little Richard- and Nervous Norvus- were easy listening vocalists such as Doris Day. I separate her from the other pop artists of the time because her big 1956 hit, "Que Sara Sara," strikes an emotional chord that is not as easy to dismiss as a lot of the more dispensable material pop artists were doing. "Que Sara Sara" was a movie song- introduced in Alfred Hitchcock's 1956 feature with Day and James Stewart, "The Man Who Knew Too Much"- but stood by itself as a record that turned Day from the girl next door to a warm, loving mother in the space of just a few minutes. Her friendly voice seemed to invite love and trust.

I read a story that Day didn't even like "Que Sara Sara" when she recorded it, but it became her signature recording for very good reason. In a world that was breaking wide open with the rough energy

of teenage America, Day's recording offered a happy innocence that is not altogether unenviable. It's a neat package of a song, a confessional narrative touching on several phases of life, always coming to the same conclusion- your fate is in the wind, so why worry? That's a fine fantasy, especially in a time when war was still fresh in the public psyche and teenagers were becoming a massive, unruly force to contend with. "Que Sara Sara" is easygoing, clear, clean and smooth and a wonderful escape from reality. This is a feel-good escape, not one of dance floor rock and roll abandonment; something to help balance all that wildness out.