

RockingRecords1957TextTVS

by Tim Van Schmidt

1957- Rocking Records

More. That seems to be the general theme for contemporary music in 1957- just more of everything. In 1956, things broke wide open commercially and culturally, especially for Elvis Presley and rock and roll. In 1957, the music industry had gotten its firm grip on the new music movement and positioned itself better than before to cash in on it. But by this time, it wasn't new anymore. When something gets accepted as business of the day by the music industry, then you know it has settled securely into the public consciousness. The record industry doesn't just chase trends, it captures them, twists them into commercial formats and beats the life out of them with imitations.

However, that doesn't mean that the creativity of the artists of 1957 was particularly stifled. New artists- notably performers like Buddy Holly and the Everly Brothers- were coming up so fast that the record industry couldn't re-shape everything in its own image. The flood had started with the establishment of rock and roll and was gathering force. Despite the power the record companies wielded, they could not tame everything that came their way, solidly indicating that rock and roll was a movement of the people and not a corporate invention. Rather than trying to tame it all, they just kept shoveling it out there.

When I'm talking about there being MORE of everything in 1957, I mean it literally. When I finally decided I'd had enough of 1956, I started my research for 1957 and came up with a much longer list of potential tracks to listen to. When I pulled out the appropriate records from that dusty old stack of vinyl I've got piled up in my basement, the 1957 pile was three times as big as the records from 1956 I studied. That could well be a function of myself as a record collector- just what I came into contact with, almost by random selection- but my supply of 1957 music was just much bigger.

I'd like to add a little footnote to how I ranked the 1957 records I pulled out- and this is highly unscientific. However, I think it does indicate something about the music. That is, I kept track of how many times certain 1957 records occurred in my collection- as original issue 45s and a few albums, plus LP collections. It was the occurrence of several tunes over and over in the LP collections that caught my eye. The number one most reproduced song of 1957 was Jerry Lee Lewis' "Great Balls of Fire," indicating that there was something there a lot of people liked.

That seemed like a good place to start this investigation into the popular music of 1957- the songs that have thrived- and the songs that took a dive. Some of the popular songs in the charts in 1957 have not survived- or are buried deep in the back of some Readers' Digest collection. And in the process of the search, some unknown gems that still move the listener more than fifty years later have surfaced.

Jerry Lee Lewis

If you want "more," then "more" you will have and in 1957, "more" came in the explosion of Jerry Lee Lewis. His body-rattling hit "Great Balls of Fire" is a thrilling rock and roll classic. His nervous, aggressive vocal style mixes with the madcap abandon he applies to the piano for a riveting performance indeed.

Lewis came from the Sun Records camp, but his music was all about that hyper-active piano of his, rather than the guy-and-a-guitar approach so popular in Memphis. Rock and roll piano seemed to be a combination of boogie and ragtime- the boogie element gave it its rhythmic underpinnings while the ragtime element gave it constant, unrelenting motion. It's a percussive and jangly sound to begin with. But Lewis takes it further- he bangs on the piano keys, runs his hands up and down the whole keyboard, revs up his attack so that it is the attack itself that is important- stray wrong notes and all. He's a frenzied piano punk doing whatever he wants in the face of conventional playing.

But above and beyond the busy piano work, Lewis' vocals on "Great Balls of Fire" are a rock and roll showcase in itself. He plays with the sounds of the words ("you mo-o-ove me...") and has this consciously shakey delivery that underscores the nervousness of the character in the song. The recording itself supports this- there is a heavy echo/reverb effect on the vocals- sounding like this guy is locked up tight inside a bottle. Lewis sounds crazy through and through, but he's admittedly happy about it too. All he can do about it is "twiddle" his thumbs in his predicament- and shock those around him with his untamed passion.

If "Great Balls of Fire" doesn't have enough of the independent rock and roll attitude, the flip side to the single I collected- an English release- "Mean Woman Blues," does. She must be mean alright because she's "almost as mean" as Lewis and he doesn't mind admitting it. It must be a strained relationship, but strained or not, Lewis plunges right into the middle of it with fiery abandon.

But as with "Great Balls of Fire," the lyrics on "Mean Woman Blues" aren't all that's testy. Lewis also shows plenty of attitude on the piano, going even further overboard than on "Great Balls of Fire." He's all over the keys during the instrumental breaks, playing at break-neck speeds, raking his hands all up and down. He lets loose and the supporting band lets loose and "Mean Woman Blues" gets hyperactive.

However, Lewis adds a little something extra here. He tells the band to take it "easy now," and brings the progress of the song down a couple of notches, only to build it back up in a hurry. This is a well-worn musical device- you shouldn't always keep up a frenzied pace. It works better if you back off a little once in a while, then you have somewhere to go when getting back to business. Whatever- it sure sounds like Lewis and band are having fun in the studio recording this one. Lewis laughs, he does a little tiger growl and keeps on rocking.

Lewis' "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin On"- his initial breakout hit- took it even one step further. In a way, the track imitates a live concert setting. During one of those "easy now" moments in the song, Lewis talks to an imaginary girlfriend about how to dance to his rock and roll. But he could be talking to a whole crowd in effect. I would have loved to see Lewis in action in his prime, getting everyone in the audience to "shake"- and I bet they did too. It probably worked in the juke joint too.

Interestingly, "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin On," also points out just how crazy Lewis was as a performer. First of all, when Lewis gets to the instrumental break in the song and tells the band "let's go," the drums seem to stumble, momentarily producing a jarring effect in the recording. It sounds like the drummer wasn't quite ready for his big moment. Also, the guitar solo in the recording is so tame and, well, "regular," compared to Lewis' wild keyboard excursions. This indicates that perhaps it was just really hard for musicians to keep up with Lewis.

This holds true also for his own 1957 signature tune, "Lewis Boogie." It's a song meant to introduce Lewis' music and his style. His vocals are just a little bit wired and his piano solo is, of course, hyperactive, but also fairly precise. The guitar once again responds with a dull attempt at a solo- slower, lacking fire and dexterity. Still, Lewis and band do find the groove together and put in a reasonably intense performance.

Lewis also released a version of Hank Williams' "You Win Again" in 1957. It's not much of a stretch either because Lewis' nasally vocal quality is reminiscent of Williams and he handles the song with authority, apparently comfortable with country music. While Lewis pretty much plays it straight here, his piano

solo remaining relatively calm, the group does put a little fiddling around into the arrangement, putting a little extra rhythmic trill in here and there, working towards making it their own.

The quicker tempo of Lewis' '57 recording of "Drinkin' Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee" seems to agree with him much more than the more sedate "You Win Again." It's a revved up tune about drinking, plain and simple, and it gives Lewis the opportunity to just bang on those piano keys with abandonment. Again, the guitar seems to get a little bit lost, but that's OK, because everybody's drinking wine, wine, wine.

It seems to me that the development of rock and roll gave characters like Lewis a platform to launch from. In the typical commercial environment of previous years, Lewis wouldn't have made it because he was so on-the-edge. If Lewis, who might have been diagnosed with ADD, didn't have rock and roll as an outlet, he might have been one of those roiling personalities that would eventually snap mentally. Instead, he became a feisty star, maniac or not.

Little Richard

Speaking of a maniac piano player, Little Richard was still going strong going into 1957- maybe even a little too strong. It's somehow understandable that Little Richard quit the music industry in the fall of 1957. There are several stories about why and when that happened- Richard praying to God to avoid a plane wreck, throwing an expensive ring into a river to prove his point while abruptly leaving a tour of Australia after seeing a "ball of fire" fly through the air during one of his concerts. No matter about the actual impetus of his decision, Richard just shut down his rock and roll to work as an evangelist. These are not necessarily inconsolable roles, as he found out later, but in dramatic fashion, Richard made a choice in 1957, while his career itself was a "ball of fire."

Part of his decision to stop rocking had to be that Richard was such an intense performer. His music was rough, raw and generally played at break-neck speed. He had a reputation for wild stage shows and that came through on his recordings too.

Just listen to "Keep A-Knockin" and hear some hair-raising music. It all starts with that unrestrained drum intro and Richard's out-of-control howl just before the standard sax solo is primal and wicked. I mean "standard sax solo" here not that the sax work is pedestrian. On the contrary, Richard had some deluxe sax players- their instrumental breaks define the rock and roll solo, squeezing plenty into just a few seconds with funky be-bopping precision. I just mean that it seemed to be standard business for

Richard to feature a sax solo in each song- along with his rhythmic banging on the piano keys in the background to heighten the tension.

It's the same with other 1957 Richard hits. "She's Got It" just plows right ahead in a frenzy and there are no brakes. The flip side, "Heeby-Jeebies" just keeps it going- the "jump back, jump back" lyrics highlighting Richard's skill at coming up with effective hooks. The flip side to "Keep A-Knockin," "Can't Believe You Wanna Leave" is a medium tempo piece- a kind of relief, actually. Richard's piercing vocal quality- perhaps best described as a vocal saxophone- probably came through just fine on a car AM radio.

Richard's definitive 1957 recording- if you had to pare it down to just one- would have to be "Lucille." For this investigation, I listened to original 45 releases of Richard's work- all on that colorful Specialty label. The sound on the "Lucille" 45 was just so far superior to the other records- maybe a higher grade of vinyl, a much better recording studio or both. Compared to "Keep A-Knockin" and "She's Got It," "Lucille" seemed a little "sedate" at first, tempo-wise, but Richard's eardrum-piercing vocal glissando at the end of each "Lucillllllle" in the song makes up for that. This record has a great sax solo- the hot blowing imitating Richard's vocal craziness.

The extent of Richard's distinctive rock and roll artistry- his voice- became clear to me after listening to the flip side of "Lucille." The song, "Send Me Some Lovin'" features vocals by Richard that reveal the real, unaffected quality of his voice. It's actually very nice, but perhaps lacking the character of his rougher work. That's why he developed his Little Richard persona- the wild man with the unbelievably raw voice. The uncharacteristic vocal clarity doesn't last long on "Send Me Some Lovin," because he just has to get into it by the end, but this one is like a great actor breaking character.

Maybe with all that energy Richard was putting out, he just couldn't stay sane in the rock and roll world. Legends jump off the page in the history books about rampant sex and suitcases full of cash- so a retreat to a holier life is an understandable survival tactic. That he eventually returned to writing and performing secular material, however, indicates that he was truly a natural musician, but the craziness of those initial rock and roll years must have had to stop because that's what happened.

Fats Domino

Of course, the piano had also played an important role in the music of Fats Domino- particularly in his 1956 hit "Blueberry Hill." In 1957, however, Domino was letting the guitar have its due. On "I'm Walkin," the rhythm guitar plays an upfront part in the success of the tune. It's an upbeat arrangement and the electric guitar prominently accentuates the rhythmic motion, matched by a bubbly sax solo and all underscored by an irresistible shuffle in the drums. I've come to really enjoy Domino's vocal performances. His voice carries a kind of ageless quality that defies the youth trend at the time- it's warm, round and friendly, even while sporting a little arrogance, as in "I'm Walkin."

The flip side to "I'm Walkin" is "I'm in the Mood for Love." It's a slow dance tune with slippery saxes in the background. The slower tempo offers the opportunity to get more of the flavor of Domino's distinctive voice- rich and expressive without much hoopla.

Everly Brothers

Meanwhile, the guy-and-his-guitar approach to rock and roll was still gathering steam. In the case of the Everly Brothers, actually, it was two-guys-and-guitars. The Everlys were coming out of the country end of things, but their songs were about common teenage strife, they had a nice energetic bounce to them and their harmony vocals were irresistible.

The guitar played an important part in the Everly Brothers' music. Both 1957 hits "Bye Bye Love" and "Wake Up Little Susie" kick off with distinctive guitar figures. The guitar also serves to interject instrumental counterpoints to the vocals at key times throughout the songs.

But it was the Everly's vocal arrangements that set them apart. Their voices have the same basic timbre and they kept their harmonies tight. But more, those harmonies weren't just reserved for the choruses, but were often woven throughout the entire song, establishing a vocal signature that was easy to recognize.

It seems "Wake Up Little Susie" stirred up some moral controversy at the time, but sounds pretty innocent 50 years later. A lot more of the Everly's country roots are evident on "Susie's" flip side, "Maybe Tomorrow," an easygoing medium tempo tune that gives their blend of voices a chance to flow.

Despite its sad story, "Bye Bye Love," has an energetic, almost happy, kind of bounce to it. Its flip side is "I Wonder if I Care as Much," a waltz-time tune featuring syrupy steel guitar and savory vocal harmonies.

Buddy Knox

In the 21st century, it's just not cool to consider women as sex objects. But back in 1957, Buddy Knox apparently didn't have such social constraints. His hit "Party Doll" is about just that- hooking up with a woman, just about any woman, who wants to party. Knox comes on like a cowboy who's been out on the range for a long time. He's all wired up and looking for action. There's an honesty here, but also a wildness that might spell trouble. A double wallop on the drums gives "Party Doll" an infectious skipping beat while a savory background vocal mix helps support Knox's quest for fun.

Elvis Presley

You could talk all day long about the new artists of 1957 and what already established artists of the time were doing, but all of them were operating within the huge shadow of Elvis Presley. Presley's marketing machine, which got its kick start in 1956 thanks to his first national hit, "Heartbreak Hotel," was in full swing in 1957 with two movies, multiple record releases and just a ton of Presley merchandise. The record industry and related businesses were having a field day with Presley-mania.

This could easily make Presley a suspicious rock and roller- a commercial contrivance rather than a folk artist. Some of his records bear this out- insincere performances and bloated arrangements mark some of Presley's 1957 records. But there are particular gems in the mix as well- Presley had real vocal talent that couldn't be restrained by commercial invention. And it may be accurate to say that Presley's talent included rock and roll, but once unleashed, went in other directions as well.

There's something about "(Let Me Be Your) Teddy Bear" that seems very fake to me. The song bubbles along nicely enough I suppose, and while the lyrics are full of male myths, Presley does take the opportunity to work the vocals a little bit, underscoring the rhythm with his voice, injecting a little fun into a song that is a trifle at best. It's a big production, though, and the whole thing sounds like a radio commercial with a resounding barbershop quartet-like ending. It could be said that this song was a commercial- for helping sell Elvis Presley teddy bear products. What finally sunk it for me was when Presley says "Oh let me be" the backing vocals respond "Oh let him be"- it's all about Presley, here.

Besides, what kind of a stand-up guy would tell a girl to "put a chain around my neck and lead me anywhere?"

Let's throw the flip side to "All Shook Up," "That's When Your Heartaches Begin," into the insincere bag with "Teddy Bear." It's a slow crooner tune that breaks down into some talk-singing, making the lyrics sound all the more hollow when brought down into a conversational tone. It's just cheesy and evidence that even the great Presley could make some clinkers.

But then again, Presley sure made some strong records in 1957. There is "All Shook Up" itself, for example. It's a little subdued- revealing some sophistication in the arrangement- but jumpy, a little nervous. In terms of male myths, this is exactly what girls want to hear- that their guy is so in love with them that they are truly confused. The movement of the vocals, not the instrumental arrangement, defines the movement of the music, showcasing Presley's distinctive sense of style.

"Treat Me Nice" is the same kind of thing music-wise- a simmering medium tempo arrangement- but in the lyrics there's a real attitude, even arrogance. I got to like this one even more after I saw the "Treat Me Nice" recording session scenes in "Jailhouse Rock."

Speaking of "Jailhouse Rock," that pile of old records in my basement yielded a five-song EP from the movie that includes the title song plus "Young and Beautiful," "I Want to Be Free," "Don't Leave Me Now" and "(You're So Square) Baby I Don't Care."

"Young and Beautiful" starts out simple- with just the vocals and piano and it takes the hype out of it, offering a more sincere approach. Some additional vocals are added, but unnecessary. The purposeful "I Want to Be Free" exhibits an aggressive energy, with a powerful refrain and an extra emphasis on the drums. "Don't Leave Me Now" is a bluesy, medium tempo crooner. But my favorite on this record, other than "Jailhouse Rock" itself, is "Baby I Don't Care." It's kind of a dumb scene in the movie- performed during a pool party- but the recording is upbeat, starting with a funky bass intro, and lyrically throws in going to the movies, hot rodding and new dance steps.

"Jailhouse Rock," of course, is a bona fide classic, its guitar-drum intro is instantly recognizable and Presley's vocals are roughed up and wild, a little like Little Richard. The instrumental guitar solo in the bridge section is loud and proud and the subject is dangerous- why, even hardened convicts want to rock and roll. There is a sense that the song is really a novelty number, a clever play on words- just like

"Heartbreak Hotel" painted a vivid urban scenario with its lyrics. That aside, "Jailhouse Rock" may stand as the most effective- and exciting- recording of Presley's career.

But if you want to hear a little of Presley's raw rock and roll spirit to the extreme, turn to "Too Much." The song has an aggressive, exaggerated tone, Presley huffing it up mightily with his delivery. The guitar solo, however, is what really stands out. It just takes off and goes a little wacko, veering into some different kind of scale. It's a little hard to believe that this record passed corporate inspection compared to most of the rest of Presley's productions, but maybe this was a concession to Presley's power- he could do anything he wanted.

Buddy Holly

That Presley became so very popular- so popular that no one could really compete- ended up actually working for the some of the other artists of the time- after all, even Presley couldn't be everywhere, all the time, and the hunger for whatever was being called rock and roll was voracious. That the public accepted, and even sought out, alternative rock and roll icons above and beyond Presley indicates just how big this movement had gotten.

The guy-and-a-guitar from Texas, Buddy Holly, for example, stepped up to claim a spot in 1957 with top hit records and a very different style than Presley. He wasn't handsome like Presley and his glasses- big thick things- became a kind of Holly trademark. Holly's music also differed from Presley's- it was simpler and cleaner. While Presley was having the time of his life making heavily produced records, Holly's records seemed closer to the original intent of the music, more authentic. Presley's records were big and dynamic, but I think fans could more easily identify with Holly's on a personal level. They could imagine themselves playing Holly's songs. They could imagine themselves BEING Holly.

Holly's breakout hit, "Peggy Sue," gets jumpstarted by the rolling rhythm of the drums, sending notice that Holly's band, the Crickets, was an integral part of the music from the start. There's a mix of electric and acoustic guitar chording in "Peggy Sue" that adds to the percussive quality of the tune. But it's Holly's distinctive, affected voice that stands out, exaggerating and playing with the sound quality of the words. The flip side to "Peggy Sue," was "Everyday," a very sweet recording featuring a simple melody supported by the tinkling of bells. It's subdued and intimate compared to "Peggy Sue," but Holly manages to spice things up a little with his vocal delivery anyhow.

Holly's other great 1957 hit, "That'll Be the Day" is more aggressive, featuring a rolling guitar intro and more prominent backing vocals. Holly and band play with the arrangement and work little hiccups into it that help underscore the dramatic tension of the song. The opposite side of "That'll Be the Day" is an upbeat rocker, "I'm Looking for Someone to Love."

Chuck Berry

Of course, leave it up to Chuck Berry to pen 1957's main rock and roll anthem. That is, the great tune "Rock and Roll Music." It's an entire song devoted to rock and roll. In fact, one verse is made up almost entirely of the term. There's a piano tinkling in the background throughout the recording, but it's Berry's upfront vocals this time that carries the song. It's also a showcase for Berry's creative lyric play, especially in rhyming unusual combinations of words. He manages to make combinations like "band...hurricane" and "mambo...tango...piano" work despite the stretch. The flip side to the "Rock and Roll Music" 45, "Blue Feeling," is a slow blues instrumental, a rare recording without Berry's signature vocal or his clever lyrics. It's just filler, a chugging jam piece featuring more piano than guitar.

Other key Berry hits rolled out in 1957 included "School Day." It opens up with a little guitar flurry that could act as an alarm clock going off, then breezes through a typical day for an American teenager. Berry has a knack for writing lyrics that keenly reflect the trials and tribulations of getting through a day of school while gently poking fun at it- from "working your fingers right down to the bone" in the classroom to lunchroom activities to finally laying the "burden" down at the end of the school day. It all ends well at the juke joint, however, dancing and romancing. Another Berry hit in 1957 was "Oh Baby Doll." This one wistfully recalls those school days too, but the song is really about the changing times in a relationship.

Vocal Groups

Perhaps partially because of the popularity- and energy- of rock and roll, the vocal group music in 1957 (the term "doo wop" would be coined some years later) featured more aggressive vocal performances. Singing groups wanted to rock too, it turns out.

The most exciting group to come out with vocal-based records in 1957 was the Del-Vikings. Their two hits, "Come Go With Me" and "Whispering Bells," are happy workouts that sport strong musical invention. What sets this music apart from vocal songs merely supported by background vocals is the

involvement of the singers and what they are singing. Rather than adding chords to the arrangements, group vocalists added various sounds, making up words, augmenting the rhythm in a way that drums and percussion instruments cannot. Everybody in the Del-Vikings seems to be involved in their arrangements and the diverse sounds make for interesting listening.

There was plenty more where that came from. The Monotones, Danny and the Juniors, the Diamonds and Five Satins all produced vocal group records in 1957 that remain fresh and lively more than fifty years later.

The Monotones' "Book of Love" begins with a funky vocal introduction- one of the most distinctive of the time- "I wonder wonder who....who wrote the book of love." All the voices on "Book of Love" are active and energetic, playing with the sound and rhythm of the words. The vocals are supported by a snappy drum part and the electric guitar helps maintain the rhythm. The bass vocalist in particular reveals a distinctive, fun character. The song itself is a kind of primer for teenagers- or any aged person for that matter- for love relationships. Each chapter of that "Book of Love" offers some good advice- to love her with all your heart, tell her you'll never part, remember the meaning of romance and when things go badly, give her another chance. As simple as all that fits into the lyrics, its pretty poignant stuff.

Danny and the Juniors "At the Hop," then, is a raucous call to party. It's about getting together to dance the latest dances, to be where the action is.

But also add in the Diamonds' "Little Darlin." The tune starts out with some castanets and a mambo beat, then plows into some real aggressive vocal work. It's actually fairly strident, the lead vocalist dramatically clipping off the words, playfully adding vowel sounds to produce a jerky, jumpy rhythm. There's a brief spoken word section, full of male myths, which stands out from the rest, though not any more sincere due to its energy. The Five Satins' "To the Aisle" features an interesting mix of sax and guitar in the supporting arrangement.

The flip side to "Little Darlin," "Faithful and True," is a much slower tune. The vocals slide around in easy-going harmony, a hot sax solo livening things up. That seems to be the record-making formula for this genre- a faster song on one side, a slow one on the other. Almost universally, the slower tunes are not as effective, as in the case of the Diamonds. The B-side of the Monotones' "Book of Love" is "You Never Loved Me," a slow dance tune about a poor young guy with a sad story. Though the vocalists remain completely involved in the purposeful arrangement, it remains a surety that it's hard for this

music to be convincing at a slower pace. That also goes for Danny and the Juniors' "Sometimes (When I'm All Alone,)" another plodding slow dance tune full of male myths.

The best of the vocal group B-sides would have to be the Del-Vikings' "Don't Be a Fool," opposite "Whispering Bells." "Don't Be a Fool" benefits from the slower pace, spotlighting the group's intersecting, crisscrossing vocal parts. This recording also features an interesting guitar and sax dual solo.

Other Vocal Hits

On the Specialty label, the same as Little Richard, Larry Williams' "Bony Maronie" comes on just like a Richard record at first. For this investigation, I made a work tape out of many of the records I would be listening to- to cut down on all the turntable work- and since then I have been duped several times into thinking the Little Richard portion had come around on the tape when "Bony Maronie" kicked in. But it becomes apparent as the song progresses that Williams is no Richard- his voice even cracks at one point. That gives it a non-professional charm. The flip side is "You Bug Me, Baby," a trifling ditty that features both a sax solo and a piano solo.

Thurston Harris' "Little Bitty Pretty One" could be attributed to a single artist, but the power of the recording is a group effort. Most of the song is a kind of hum-along melody, easy to pick up and uncomplicated by actual words, carried by multiple voices. Harris sings on top of that, but it's the punch of the vocal chorus- and the additional handclapping- that keeps this one moving.

For true vocal grace for a solo artist, however, turn to Sam Cooke on "You Send Me." It seems significant to me that "You Send Me" features female voices in the background. They are there for support only- adding nice, crisp chords to the arrangement- and the feminine touch seems especially important. Meanwhile, the vocal spotlight remains on Cooke, who maintains a smooth, silky approach throughout. His vocals seem effortless, not forced or strident in any way. He knows his way around the melody but is in no hurry to get it done.

Compared to 1957's rock and roll and pop hits, Terry Gilkyson and the Outriders' "Marianne" sounds like a novelty record. It's really a folk music sing-along with a snappy island beat. It may have served as a dance song, but all the intent is in the lyrics and the vocals. It's a little seaside story, a mini movie about life with this beautiful girl with an ugly mother. The lover is personable enough and has an upbeat

attitude about it, so everything turns out in the end. "Marianne" features both humor and love, an inoffensive combination for sure.

The Real Thing

Though Carl Perkins' career had been derailed by a traffic accident in 1956- just as "Blue Suede Shoes" was peaking- that didn't mean he was down and out. Perkins kept recording and his 1957 tune "Matchbox" proves that his gift at making irresistible recordings was very real.

On "Matchbox," a revved up old blues tune, Perkins just digs right in with a roughed up boogie shuffle. His nasally vocals cut right through the mix, spitting out the hobo lyrics right in time with the brisk swing of the music. Guitar and vocals are matched with intensity for just a touch of the real thing- rocking music you just can't arrange and make happen. It's a fusion of sound and intent that rises above and beyond musical formula. In this case, it's Perkins wailing away with abandonment- again.

Another artist with the same rocking authenticity as Perkins would be Dale Hawkins. His 1957 tune "Susie Q" displays the same digging in quality as "Matchbox." But here, the lyrics are just an excuse to play guitar, the instrumental breaks in "Susie Q" sharp and sizzling. It's another touch of the real thing- aggressive and loud- maybe a little ahead of its time considering the tentative quality of most guitar solos on record in 1957.

Country

Somewhere along the line, I must have run into a big Johnny Cash fan because my collection of 45s sports a nice fistful of original Sun Records releases by Cash. These include his big 1957 hit "Ballad of a Teenage Queen" as well as "Next in Line" and a four-track release, featuring "Rock Island."

"Ballad of a Teenage Queen" is a story song about a hometown girl who becomes a movie star, but gives it all up to return home to "the boy next door." You never forget that because Cash underscores it every time with a quick repeating rhyme- "who worked at the candy store." The song is about roots, of course, and it is no mistake that the queen in question takes a train home from the big city. The train was traditionally how country folk were connected with the rest of the world and though that wasn't

particularly the case in 1957, it was still a favorite country notion. Cash's deep, rolling voice makes it easy to assume he is, in fact, the "boy next door" and you think to yourself just how lucky he is.

The flip side to "Ballad of a Teenage Queen" is "Big River," a funky, kind of jumpy tune that features an energetic mix of acoustic and electric guitar work and a lot of clever rhyming. It sounds like Cash and band had fun recording this one.

On "Next in Line," Cash overemphasizes his deep voice, almost talking the lyrics, or rather, intoning them. This helps set the appropriate tone for a song about a steadfast, victimized lover whose time, he feels, has come- but he's willing to wait too. The flip side, "Don't Make Me Go," is also a pleading confessional, the two tunes hinting at a sense of vulnerability in Cash's character.

The four songs released together on a special Cash EP release on Sun in my collection were all recorded in 1957 and includes two train songs and two "country" songs- that's "country" as in non-urban, for sure. "Rock Island" is a talk-song that tells a story about a scheming train engineer and his love for "the road." The song is fun because as the story picks up speed, so does the tempo until Cash is really talking fast. "I Heard That Lonesome Whistle Blow" is about a convict who hears a train off in the distance and it makes him wistful for the life he can't have. Both "Country Boy" and "If the Good Lord's Willing" reflect country living with an upbeat attitude, from chores to romance.

Other 1957 country hits include Marty Robbins' "White Sport Coat"- he's all dressed up for the dance, but all alone in romance- and Bobby Helms' twangy "My Special Angel," which prominently features steel guitar in the arrangement. Jim Reeves' deep voice underscores the lonely, waltz-time country blues tune, "Four Walls," also featuring gospel-like vocal support. The most infectious of them all, however, is Jimmie Rogers' "Honeycomb," which features a lively melody, easy sing-along chorus and plenty of infectious handclapping. Rogers' voice is interesting here- he just doesn't sound like a kid- and the lyrics, as sing-songy as they are, are clever enough to go beyond being just a "cute little song" to become a respectable love song. This guy adores his honey right down to hair and bone- and you're happy for both of the lovers on that score.

One unusual 1957 hit is Bill Justis' "Raunchy," unusual because it was an upbeat instrumental workout. I place it in the "country" category because it has a strong country flavor, but really, it is a crossroads recording in that it features both sax and guitar. This turns it into something new- a kind of summit meeting between country and urban styles.

Female Performers

As I listened to the music of 1957, nothing jumped out of my hi-fi speakers like the record by Patti Page, "Old Cape Cod." OK, this has nothing to do with rock and roll, but the recording features gorgeous multi-layered harmony vocals working over a simmering melody- and it is a decidedly female recording.

On "Old Cape Cod," Page's rich voice is in the lead, but she is supported by fully harmonized female vocals that help keep things cool and easy. Added to this is a string arrangement, brushes on the drums and the distinctive bottom of a stand-up bass helping to illustrate the "breath of salt air," the taste of "lobster stew," and the gorgeous "ocean view" in the song. Page has a distinctive singing style too- kind of drawing out some of the vowel sounds, applying a little accent to the melody.

Also making inroads on the charts with a rich female voice, but coming from the country side rather than the pop side, was Patsy Cline. Her 1957 breakout hit, "Walkin' After Midnight," was the result of a successful appearance on Arthur Godfrey's talent show on television.

Meanwhile, Debby Reynolds had a hit song, "Tammy," from her movie "Tammy and the Bachelor." Simple, warm and direct, "Tammy" is a time-out record, creating its own atmosphere away from the hub bub of popular music. This is a place where it doesn't really sound so bad when Reynolds sings about the "hooty-owls" and whipperwills- it's actually kind of nice.

Not so successful is Peggy Lee's "Mr. Wonderful," a schmaltzy, full orchestra work out that kind of buries Lee's crooning. Her voice is just not powerful enough to contend with all that stuff in the arrangement and the female myths she's shoveling out in the lyrics sound pretty insincere to boot.

Pop

I thought I had found the ultimate in pop music flaccidness in the recordings of Pat Boone. But actor Tab Hunter takes the cake in 1957 with his record, "Young Love." No wonder the stories say that Hunter was scared to death of performing- because really, he wasn't a singer. His vocal performance on "Young

"Love" is weak at best and the song itself is an inconsequential ditty. The able arrangement- with strong backing vocals- only serves to underscore Hunter's lack of vocal punch.

Meanwhile, Boone was shoveling out the hit records in 1957, even outpacing Elvis Presley. In fact, Boone was kind of an antidote to the frenzy of Presley and rock and roll in general and his hits included "April Love," "Love Letters in the Sand" and "Why Baby Why." "April Love" combines weak vocals with a weak sax solo to produce a real wet noodle of a tune. There's a whistling break during "Love Letters in the Sand" that makes you involuntarily say "ughhh." And "Why Baby Why" starts off promising enough, propelled by the light, consistent triple figure on the piano, and Boone even gets a little blues bend into his vocals, but when he gets into promising that he'll be "your slave the rest of my life," you have to just barf.

More pop on the charts in 1957 included the Tune Weavers' letter song, "Happy, Happy Birthday Baby." The Ames Brothers released the island-flavored "Melodie d'Amour," a big production but surprisingly fun despite a kind of jarring harpsichord-ish keyboards solo. And Perry Como's "Round and Round" is an unabashed sing-along, a simple melody repeated and modulated over and over, adding extra voices until everything is in full, gregarious swing.

Not all of pop is frivolous, however. More on the crooner end of things, Johnny Mathis brought a fresh grace to a stiff genre. Mathis' voice had a clear, pliable quality that mixed just fine with full orchestra arrangements. It also worked on more intimate arrangements. "It's Not for Me to Say" for example, has a stringed section, but most of the song is a slow-burning back and forth affair between Mathis' voice and the tinkling piano figure that counterpoints the melody. "Chances Are" works the same formula. Another Mathis hit, "Wonderful, Wonderful," features a big production complete with orchestra and vocal support, but creates a nice ambiance anyway.

Also, I continue to find the music of Nat King Cole irresistible. His 1957 hit, "Send for Me," features swelling strings but transcends the touch of schmaltz with clean, clear vocal work, slipping into something smooth, flowing gracefully.