



Wanda Jackson

BY HOLLY GEORGE-WARREN



“Some people like to rock/Some people like to roll/
But movin’ and a-groovin’s gonna satisfy my soul/Let’s have a party!”

In 1958, when a gutsy, guitar-playing gal from Oklahoma belted out this mandate for new music, she was the rare woman among the rockabilly cats mixing up rhythm & blues and country & western, creating primal rock & roll in the process. Wanda Jackson wasn't afraid to step outside the prim confines of a woman's place in pop – sonically, lyrically, and aesthetically. She snarled, using a “nasty” voice to sing sassy lyrics, when “girl singers” were supposed to sound pretty and look pretty. Instead of going the cowgirl, country lass, or prom queen route, the gorgeous brunette dressed in befringed cocktail dresses that shimmered and shook as she cut the rug onstage. With her unique bluesy yelps and raucous growls, sensual and energized stage presence, and catchy, rhythmic repertoire, Jackson helped change the face of popular music. Today, fifty-five years after recording her first single, in 1954, Jackson is still rockin' on stages around the world.

Wanda Lavonne Jackson was born on October 20, 1937, the only child of Tom and Nellie Jackson, who met in Maud, Oklahoma, at a dance where Tom was playing fiddle. In 1942, Tom sought better opportunities for his family in Los Angeles, where Nellie and Wanda joined him the following year. Before long, six-year-old Wanda was singing along with her dad's Jimmie Rodgers 78s, as well as to the Western swing and hillbilly-boogie staples on the Jackson record player. Tom and Nellie took Wanda with them to the Riverside Rancho to see Bob Wills, Spade Cooley, and Tex Williams.

“They said I would stand at the bandstand all night long and just look up there,” Wanda recalls. “My neck would nearly be broke from looking straight up. I'd cry when we had to leave. I saw Rose Maddox and the Maddox Brothers somewhere along the way. It really stuck – she was so feisty, so full of spunk, and they

wore all those colorful, sparkly clothes. I said, ‘I gotta be like her!’”

The Jacksons' next stop was Bakersfield, where Tom took up barbering. He bought Wanda a guitar and showed her some chords. Nellie missed the folks back home, though, so in 1949 the Jacksons settled in Oklahoma City, with Tom spending his days selling cars and driving a cab and evenings giving Wanda music lessons, which had expanded to piano.

By the time she was thirteen, she sounded like a professional – her strong, distinctive voice belying her youth. After winning several talent shows, she auditioned for a radio program on Oklahoma City's KLPR. Hitting all the high notes on Jimmie Rodgers's “Blue Yodel No. 6,” she got the gig, winning a daily 30-minute show at 5:15 P.M. In addition to singing and playing her Martin D-18 on the program, she enlisted sponsors for whom she wrote and announced ad copy.

One day in 1953, Wanda's radio show caught the attention of Hank Thompson, whose Brazos Valley Boys – a multi-piece Western-swing orchestra – held court at the city's largest dancehall, the Trianon Ballroom. Thompson had his own Oklahoma City-based TV program, and he'd scored the Number One C&W song of 1951 with “Wild Side of Life.” He called Wanda at the station and asked her to guest at his Trianon show that very Saturday night. When the excited Jackson told him she'd have to get her mother's permission, Thompson asked, “How old are you, gal?” Jackson later recalled. When Wanda told him, “Fifteen,” he gasped, “Ain't that *some*thin'!”

Nellie and Tom Jackson stood front and center when their teenage daughter made her big-band debut, and from that night on, Wanda was hooked: In addition to frequently performing with Thompson, she began



Jackson performing alongside Roy Clark at the Prom Ballroom, St. Paul, 1960

fronting Lindsay's Oklahoma Night Riders, who had a Saturday-afternoon radio show, followed by a gig at Merl Lindsay's Funspot.

In 1954, Thompson recommended his sixteen-year-old protégée to his Capitol Records A&R man, Ken Nelson. Citing her youth, Nelson passed, so Thompson pitched Jackson, his guitarist and singer, Billy Gray, and a song that belonged to his publishing company, "You Can't Have My Love," to Decca Records' Paul Cohen, who'd later sign Buddy Holly. The deal went through, though Jackson had serious qualms about starting her recording career as half of a boy-girl pairing: "I

didn't want to be known as a duet act," Wanda says. "I wanted my own career. But it was a hit."

After "You Can't Have My Love" rose to Number Eight on the country chart, Jackson cut fifteen more singles for Decca, including her friend Tommy Collins's "The Right to Love" and her own composition, "If You Knew What I Know," which her father encouraged her to write. Soon, she had her own TV show in Oklahoma City. And just as she started writing her own songs, she began to create a new image for herself, with the help of her seamstress mother: "A lot of the girls wore the cowboy hats then," Wanda remembers, "and they hung them on their backs. But I started wearing the go-go dresses. We put fringe all the way around so that I could look like I was shaking and moving a lot. It turned out to be a lot like what the go-go girls wore in the sixties. Well, I'd been wearing them for ten years by then."

After graduating high school, Jackson joined the Bob Neal C&W package tour during the summer of '55. Also in the revue was Elvis Presley, who met Jackson at a Cape Girardeau, Missouri, radio station just prior to their first show together. The two hit it off, and the following October they hooked up for a tour of West Texas. By then, Tom Jackson had quit his job to be his daughter's full-time road manager, so when Elvis wanted her to ride along to gigs in his Cadillac, the answer was no. But before and after each show, the two singers hung out, talked about music, and caught a few movies. Presley urged Wanda to sing the up-tempo, bluesy stuff he was doing, rather than stick to straight country.



Wanda Jackson and the Party Timers, c. 1962



A Capitol recording: Jackson in the studio, c. 1957

A few months later, after she cut her last C&W sides for Decca, Jackson inked a deal with Capitol. Ken Nelson and the label tried to “pigeonhole” her as a country artist, Jackson recalls, but “I wanted to do country *and* rockabilly. I told Capitol, ‘I’m a singer – I’m gonna sing whatever I want to sing!’” Nelson allowed the eighteen-year-old firebrand to split her early singles between country weepers and red-hot rock & roll. For her first sessions, in June and September 1956, Capitol teamed Jackson with some of its flashiest pickers, including Joe Maphis, Buck Owens, Lewis Talley, and, on steel, Ralph Mooney. “I Gotta Know,” written by Thelma Blackmon (a high school friend’s mother, who’d provided several C&W songs for Jackson’s Decca recordings), showcased both sides of Jackson’s sound, with verses alternating between a slow country fiddle tune and an electric guitar-fueled rave-up, with Wanda’s vocals seesawing easily between the two styles. The single hit Number Fifteen on the C&W chart.

Her September session found Jackson sounding as if her pent-up energy had reached its boiling point, spewing like an out-of-control Mount Vesuvius, resulting in the rollicking “Honey Bop” (cowritten by Mae Axton, coauthor of “Heart-break Hotel”) and the combustible “Hot Dog! That Made Him Mad,” earlier crooned on disc by Betty Hutton. Another highlight of the session was “Silver Threads and Golden Needles,” which Jackson emoted with unbridled passion. Her own “Baby Loves Him” seemingly was inspired by her relationship with Elvis.

The following year, Jackson segued between constant gigging and cutting more rockabilly and country for Capitol, including her catchy cowrite with Vicki Countryman, “Cool Love,” and the two songs that would become her signature numbers: the incendiary call-to-teenage-arms “Let’s Have a Party” and the searing “Fujiyama Mama,” ironically a 1958 smash in Japan, with Jackson hurling out the words, “You can say I’m crazy, so deaf and dumb/But I can cause destruction just like the atom bomb...”

To back her live performances, Jackson needed her own band and found a rockin’ combo in Kansas: Bobby Poe and the Poe Kats, featuring Bobby Poe, lead guitarist Vernon Sandusky, drummer Joe Brawley, and the poundin’ R&B-styled pianist Big Al Downing, who happened to be black.

“It was so hard on Al in those days,” Wanda recalls. “We had to hide him in the car when we’d check into a motel and get a room for him. At one of the clubs, when we started playing, the owner came up and said, ‘You’re gonna have to get the black man off the stage; they’re not welcome in here.’ So I said, ‘If he goes, I go.’ So he finally gave in. Al plays and sings backup on a lot of my early Capitol recordings.”

Though Jackson and the Poe Kats performed frequently, pop chart action didn’t come until 1960, when a Des Moines DJ adopted her “Let’s Have a Party” as his theme song. When requests poured in, he informed Capitol that a single of the two-year-old number would be a Top Forty hit. He was right.



Still the Queen: Jackson performs at Hootenanny 2006, Irvine, California . . .

Soon after, Jackson formed a new band called the Party Timers, revolving around hotshot lead guitarist Roy Clark, whom she had discovered in Baltimore. Clark joined her in Capitol's Nashville studio for several sessions in October 1960, resulting in such memorable tracks as the sultry "Funnel of Love," punctuated by Clark's exotic, reverb-drenched licks. That number's flip side, the self-penned "Right or Wrong," got the full-on Patsy Cline-style treatment, propelling Jackson back into the charts and yielding her second biggest hit (Number 9 country, Number 29 pop). On the barnburner "Hard Headed Woman," Clark played an "astonishing solo that must have had every other picker in the city of pickers shaking their heads," according to music historian Colin Escott.

In 1961, Jackson married Texan Wendell Goodman, who became his wife's manager – the two have been together ever since. "Wendell was in computer work, and he had a great future ahead of him," Jackson says. "But he said, 'No, you've worked too hard for the success you have now. Don't throw it away. I'll quit my work and join you as long as I can be helpful. But I'm not gonna just tag along.' He proved himself indispensable to me." The couple had two children, who stayed home in Oklahoma with their grandparents while Jackson continued to tour.

Over the next decade, Jackson focused again on country, scoring numerous Top Twenty hits. In 1971, she found Jesus and devoted herself to gospel music, recording for Myrrh and other gospel labels and performing mostly at churches. Then in 1985, a European rockabilly promoter convinced her to tour Scandinavia, Germany, and England, where she performed for ecstatic audiences. A decade later, Texas-born, L.A.-based Rosie Flores, a prominent guitarist/singer-songwriter in the roots-rock movement, sought out Jackson to sing on her *Rockabilly Filly* album. A tour ensued, during which Flores shared the stage with Jackson.

Since 1995, Jackson has continuously toured, introducing a new generation of fans to her music. Released in 2003, *The Wanda Jackson Show: Live and Still Kickin'* documents a pair of New York City club dates from December 2002. In



... at Arlene's Grocery in December 2002, recorded for a live album ...

2003, she recorded her first new studio album in fifteen years, *Heart Trouble*, featuring several of her admirers, including members of the Cramps and the Stray Cats, as well as Flores, Dave Alvin, and Elvis Costello. Recording a duet of "Crying Time" with this Elvis, says Jackson, felt as comfortable "as an old pair of shoes. He played the guitar and we stood facing each other and sang. It made getting the phrasing a lot easier." As for Costello: "It was a real thrill to cut 'Crying Time' with Wanda. It was done live and spontaneously, just the way all her best records sound. She's certainly got the spark."

Most recently, in 2006, Jackson released a tribute album, *I Remember Elvis*, celebrating the songs made famous by the one-time flame who turned her on to rock & roll. On stages from Melbourne to Minneapolis, Jackson, at age 71, still demonstrates nightly the hook to her signature song – "Let's Have a Party!" – with Bob Dylan recently referring to her as "an atomic fireball of a lady." Tonight, the Queen of Rockabilly rightly takes her place in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. ♪



... and at Tramps, New York City, 1997, with Robert Burke Warren on bass and Will Rigby on drums.