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## Up Beat Down South

# From Memphis to Nashville

## The Odyssey of Jerry Lee Lewis

BY MARK ROYDEN WINCHELL



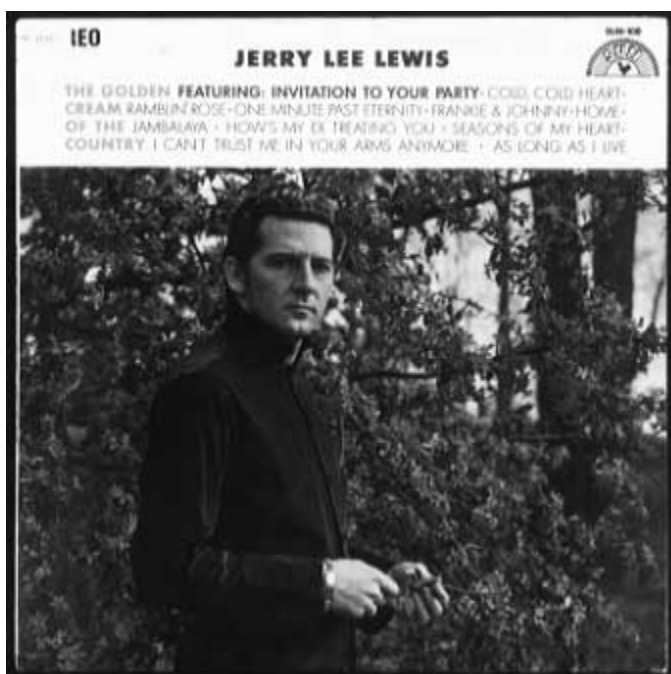
*"This old boy wanted to kill me a while back, because I married his daughter, but we're friends again now,"  
Jerry Lee Lewis once explained. Lewis, photographed by Devin Miller.*

I first saw Jerry Lee Lewis in the Vanderbilt University football stadium on Labor Day 1973. The opening act that night was Kinky Friedman and the Texas Jewboys. Although political incorrectness was not yet in vogue, the irrepressible Kinky managed to insult every conceivable racial and ethnic group. After Kinky, Jerry Lee's kid sister, Linda Gail Lewis, took the stage. By this time the crowd had grown restless. Because of his battles with the three scourges of modern life—booze, drugs, and the IRS—"the Killer" had begun to get a reputation for not showing up for scheduled gigs. Fearing that this might be a night of disappointment, the crowd began shouting for little sister to get the hell off the stage.

After what seemed an interminable wait, Jerry Lee finally did appear, with a big bandage across his nose (broken, as I later learned, in a brawl with some Arkansas rednecks in a barroom in Memphis the previous week), sat down behind the piano, and made us all glad that we had stayed. It had been a good fifteen years since Jerry Lee Lewis had wrecked his career as a rock 'n' roll idol by marrying his thirteen-year-old cousin, Myra Gale Brown. He had consumed enough mind-altering substances, legal and otherwise, to send a dozen hippie rockers to the skull orchard. But for an hour or more that night, you could have sworn that the Killer was possessed by the spirit of his three great show business idols—Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, and Al Jolson. By the time he kicked the stool out from underneath the piano and went into his manic rendition of "Great Balls of Fire" and "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On," Jerry Lee owned that audience—not just nostalgia freaks but also kids who had grown up listening to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.

Since that night over twenty-five years ago, Jerry Lee Lewis has continued to live a life designed to make Dionysus look like a pansy. He has buried wives and children and has come back from the jaws of death himself. In 1981, for example, he was given virtually no chance of surviving an operation for a tear in his stomach but managed to cheat death, as legions of his fans—led by ex-wife Myra—held vigil in the lobby of a Memphis hospital. Although it's easy to appreciate his music without knowing anything about his life, the sense of persona is so strong in a Jerry Lee Lewis performance that we believe he has lived what he sings. Elvis, in contrast, for the last ten to fifteen years of his life was like a god who occasionally descended from the Mount Olympus of Graceland to give a carefully scripted performance. Accounts of his life, which have inundated us in the two decades since his death, reveal a private Elvis often very different from his public image. No such distance seems to separate the private from the public Jerry Lee Lewis. The protagonist of Nick Tosches's classic biography *Hellfire: The Jerry Lee Lewis Story* could be inferred from the music itself.

Although Jerry Lee Lewis closes his shows with "Great Balls of Fire" and "Whole Lotta Shakin'," an essential part of his appeal also lies in the country songs he recorded in the late sixties and early seventies. Although artists such as



*Although country music has always been a part of his repertoire, Lewis did not begin marketing himself as a country artist until 1968. He is pictured here on the cover of 'The Golden Cream of the Country,' a Sun Records release, courtesy of the Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Sun Entertainment Corporation.*

Charlie Rich and Conway Twitty enjoyed greater commercial success than Lewis in making the transition from rock to country, they seem simply to have changed musical styles, as one might change a suit of clothes. Jerry Lee Lewis had to reinvent himself. But it is an entirely plausible reinvention. Rock 'n' roll Jerry once said, "I'm draggin' the audience to hell with me." Country Jerry brings them back. Not to the Pentecostal salvation preached by his cousin Jimmy Lee Swaggart and periodically embraced by Jerry himself, but to a stoic acceptance of all the bitter heartaches and woes that flesh is heir to. Yes, life *is* hell, he seems to be saying, but there is redemption in recognizing that fact and living with it.

If Jerry Lee Lewis's persona as a country singer seems mellower and more reflective than that of the fifties rocker, the roots of that persona run surprisingly deep. Jerry's first release, for Sun Studios in Memphis, was a cover of Ray Price's country hit "Crazy Arms," recorded while Price's rendition was still on the country charts. (In words that have since become the stuff of legends, Sam Phillips said, "I can sell that.")

Jerry's first rendition of Hank Williams's "You Win Again" also came relatively early in his career. The version that Bill Malone included in the collection of classic country music he compiled for the Smithsonian Institution was originally recorded in Sun Studios on September 5, 1957, less than a month before Jerry's twenty-second birthday, and released as the flip-side of "Great Balls of Fire." Hank himself was already twenty-eight when he recorded the song for the first and only time on July 11, 1952.

While Jerry's first recording of "You Win Again" is a competent and respect-

ful rendition of the song, it lacks the pathos and immediacy that Williams brought to the same material. If nothing is quite as passionate as high school love, neither is anything quite as heartrending as one's first experience of betrayal. Even though the guy singing this song has been jilted more than once by the same woman, the purity of his rage remains undiminished. Because Hank never lived long enough to record subsequent versions of the song, we do not know how his attitude and approach might have changed over the years. In contrast, Jerry Lee has recorded the song several times, and each rendition seems to have grown deeper and more heartfelt. The tempo has remained basically the same, but there is more emotional experience in the phrasing. It is not primarily rage that Jerry expresses, however, rather the fatalistic realization that infidelity is often a part of life and love. As much as he knows that this woman is bad news, she is so much a part of him that he can't let her go. It was only fitting that in his historic appearance on "Austin City Limits" after surviving his near-fatal operation, Jerry sang "You Win Again" as if it were a message from Hank Williams to "Miss Audrey," the wife Hank loved and hated for most of his adult life.

Although country music was always part of his repertoire, Jerry did not begin marketing himself as a country artist until 1968. Despite some television appearances on "Shindig" in the mid-sixties, his career had been on the skids for a decade. The British rockers who had been influenced by his music were all the rage, while his own new records got very little playtime and his concert price plummeted. Almost in desperation, Eddie Kilroy of Smash records suggested that Jerry consider singing a country song that Del Reeves had cut but never released. So on January 9, 1968, Jerry Lee Lewis began a new phase of his career by recording "Another Place, Another Time." He sang that song "with the voice of one trying to conceal . . . anguish and . . . loneliness," writes Nick Tosches. "[W]hen Eddie Kilroy and the musicians who were in the studio that day heard that voice, they felt shivers like cold crawling things up and down their spines, and they closed and opened their eyes, breathing, as if to shake loose a sudden inward fright."

The story told by this song is a familiar one, particularly in honky-tonk music. A guy is in a bar at closing time, facing the prospect of returning to his lonely room. They're putting out the lights and stacking the chairs as he feeds his last dime into the juke box. The woman in his arms does not hold the promise of even a one-night stand. She offers only to meet him in another place, another time. How many such women there have been he does not say, but happiness (or just plain sensual fulfillment) seems always just out of reach. The situation may be commonplace, but the note of self-pity that infects so much blues and honky-tonk music is absent. The singer does not particularly relish his lot in life, but he accepts it. Like the old waiter in Hemingway's "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," he has come face to face with *nada* and made his peace with it.



Sottoscarico del  
**JERRY LEE LEWIS**

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JERRY LEE'S STORY

Jerry Lee Lewis nasce a Ferriday, Louisiana, il 29 settembre 1933 da Mary Ethel e Clem Lewis. Ha due sorelle, Frankie Jean e Linda Gail, ed aveva un fratello di sei anni più anziano, morto nel 1928 in un incidente d'auto.

Jerry attira l'attenzione sulle sue doti musicali verso i nove anni quando, in nome di una cia, ricorrendo ad improvvisare qualche nota al pianoforte. Il padre rimane così favorevolmente impressionato da comprargli un piano per permettergli di studiare, anche se per far ciò è costretto ad ipotecare la casa.

In breve tempo Jerry si impadronisce dello strumento ed orecchio (senza mai aver imparato a legger gli spartiti) tanto da meritare al primo premio alla locale "County Fair" per la sua interpretazione di "Inland Song".

Dopo aver frequentato le scuole primarie si iscrive al sibile Institute di Tushetahia, nel Texas, un collegio dove dovrebbe diventare org. direttore. In sua irregolarità ed il suo amore per la musica partecipa nel tempo libero alla sua carriera poliglotta: un giorno, dovendo accompagnare al piano i suoi compagni nel brano gospel "If God Is Real", pensa bene di mettere un po' più di ritmo nel pezzo. Come risultato viene espulso e ricoverato immediatamente a casa!

In seguito lavora ancora al padre e naturalmente si esibisce in fa. Ma ed in locali dove si balla, al "Foggy Night" di Datchet, Windsor, vi, invece a suonare anche la batteria ed il fiddle (il violino americano). E' in questo periodo che sviluppa, indipendentemente la parte di cantante cantata in chiesa, la parte alla musica country ed in parte al canto regolare dei cori del Sud, quel serio modo di cantare e di suonare il piano, arricchendo a tutto ciò una vivace voglia di comicità affatto giunga e cresce un uomo dal tutto particolare ed esplosivo, dove la sorte vengono addirittura "pompati" a ritmo velocissimo (da qui il soprannome di "pumping piano" al suo strumento), tanto da meravigliare alla scoperta di un futuro intraprenditore.

Un giorno del 1956 decide di tentare d'incassare un disco e perciò si reca a Memphis presso lo studio della Sun Records Co., in fuga in quel suo periodo per la scoperta di artisti come ELVIS, Ray CHARLTON, Jacky Mc GINN. Jerry incide qualche pezzo di prova e, sebbene non sia nel pieno della sua possibilità, suscita un notevole interesse in Sam e Paddy PHILLIPS, i due fratelli proprietari della Sun, che decidono di fargli firmare un contratto esclusivo.

Verso la fine dell'anno esce il primo 45 giri CHASTY ANN/END OF THE ROAD. Il disco ottiene un buon successo, seppure ancora locale: 75.000 copie vendute nelle zone di Memphis. Dopo qualche mese incide WHO'S LYING SHAKIN' GOIN' ON. La canzone in un primo tempo riceve una accoglienza buona, ma non eccezionale. E' solo nel luglio del '57 che la "beach" esplode su scala nazionale quando Jerry partecipa alla "Steve Allen Show" in TV. Il successo è strepitoso ed il disco diventa un "million seller" (Secondo Paddy Phillips, che ancor oggi collabora con Jerry, "solo letto... aveva venduto più di ogni altro 75 milioni di copie in tutto il mondo").

(i. continua)

*Great Balls of Fire, a film about his early career, made Lewis's legend familiar to millions around the world who had never heard him sing. Newsletter for the Italian section of his International Fan Club, courtesy of the Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*

The second time I saw Jerry Lee perform was in June of 1990 at Lake Lanier, a recreational area north of Atlanta. Nearly seventeen years had passed since that night in the Vanderbilt football stadium. I can't remember whether the term "Hot New Country" had been invented yet, but the hideous phenomenon to which it refers was very much with us. Veterans such as George Jones and Merle Haggard could still pack concert halls on the strength of decades of hits, but country music radio had been turned over to kids with hats. Fashion had once again passed the Killer by.

Jerry showed up at Lake Lanier—on time and without a bandage on his nose. Kinky Friedman had given up music to become a mystery novelist, and the opening act was the Crystals, a black girl group from the early sixties, now middle-aged women, whose best remembered hit was "He's a Rebel." Jerry Lee himself seemed like nothing so much as a rebel emeritus. He still kicked the piano stool out of the way on "Whole Lotta Shakin'" and "Great Balls of Fire," but he was no longer the twenty-two-year-old kid who had taken the nation by storm on the Steve Allen Show. (The uninhibited Allen had joined Jerry in throwing furniture around the set that Sunday night in 1957, something his buttoned-up rival Ed Sullivan could never have imagined doing.) Nor was he the thirty-eight-year-old hell raiser who was making a comeback as a country singer in Music City. Jerry was now a survivor in his mid-fifties. When he went into his pyrotechnics on stage (which no longer included setting the piano on fire), it was as if he were saying, "Yeah, that's how I used to act as a kid. You can go home and tell your friends that the Killer ain't dead yet."

Although Jerry's last hit, "Thirty-nine and Holding," was nine years in the past, *Great Balls of Fire*, a film about his early career, was making his legend familiar to millions who had never heard him sing. It is a wretched movie, with Dennis Quaid playing Jerry as an unthreatening goofball, Alec Baldwin badly miscast as Jimmy Swaggart, and Winona Rider as Myra—the only bright spot in the film. Nevertheless, *Great Balls* made a lot of people curious to see Jerry Lee in the flesh. That night at Lake Lanier he capitalized on their curiosity with some biographical patter in between songs. "This old boy wanted to kill me a while back because I married his daughter, but we're friends again now," he said when introducing his bass player, Myra's father, J. W. Brown. When he sang "Me and Bobbie McGee," he added a topical reference to Cousin Swaggart, who had recently been caught with a hooker.

In a sense, Jerry Lee's rendition of "Me and Bobbie McGee" typifies the persona he has now come to project. The song's author, Kris Kristofferson, sings a wistful ballad of lost love. Janis Joplin brings a charged sexual immediacy to her version of the song. The Killer picks up the tempo and turns Bobbie's memory into a rollicking, beer-drinking anthem, a celebration of good times past. ("My God, that Bobbie *was* a helluva a woman!" he seems to proclaim.) The point of

Jerry's rendition is not the insight that "freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose," or even the thrill of "holdin' Bobbie's body next to mine," but the recollection that "feelin' good was easy, Lord." It is the irony and the glory of Jerry Lee Lewis's career that he went to Hell and back to discover that elusive truth.