

Cats, Pyramids keep rockabilly spirit alive

By Mike Frost

OK, let me make sure I've got this straight. Rockabilly music first started back in the early '50s when a handful of white musicians like Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis and Gene Vincent decided they wanted to sound more like black singers.

The music enjoyed a certain amount of popularity for a while, until it disappeared for nearly 20 years. Then, the British, hot for a new musical genre after punk began to fade, rediscovered rockabilly. Soon

Records

artists like Dave Edmunds, the Shakin' Pyramids and Shakin' Stevens became the toast of the British pub scene.

Meanwhile, Brian Setzer and his band had heard that British rockabilly was hot stuff, so The Stray Cats quickly hightailed to England to do rockabilly the way the British did.

So, what do we end up with here: an American band trying to sound like a British band trying to sound like Southern white singers trying to sound like black singers. Hardly sounds like a good start for a musical genre, does it?

However, rockabilly has always been able to overcome this lack of originality, with its sheer energy. Three recent releases from each of the "golden periods" of rockabilly music illustrate this point.

Jerry Lee Lewis' *Greatest Hits* (Rhino) is a brilliant collection of Lewis' early recordings for Sun records. Despite the archaic sound of these songs, (made even worse by the picture disc format), the energy and drive that Lewis possessed are stunning.

Cuts like "Breathless," "Lewis Boogie," "Wild One" and the quintessential "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On" virtually leap from the vinyl.

Sometimes it is hard to imagine Lewis as a powerful music force, especially after hearing his pale country recordings. However, *Jerry Lee Lewis' Greatest Hits* is a perfect example of the singer's energy and the sheer force of early rockabilly music.

If it is Lewis' originality which sets him apart from other rockabilly artists, it is their striking lack of originality that distinguishes (or perhaps indistinguishes) the Shakin' Pyramids.

The Pyramids were one of the British groups that sprung up in the '70s. The band recorded two European albums which sold moderately well, and have recently released their first domestic album, *Shakin' Pyramids*, on guitarist Rick Derringer's Rock 'N' Roll



Some records loaned courtesy Pickles Records

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Unfortunately this album, recorded nearly two years ago, is a pretty plebian effort as far as rockabilly releases go. While the power is there, it offers little in the way of surprises, and most of the instrumental breaks are quite plain.

One must seriously question why, nearly two years after it was first recorded, the band did not attempt to improve the material. Perhaps one of the side effects of unoriginality is laziness.

One group that could never be accused of not being original or energetic is the Stray Cats. The Cats' latest effort, *Rant 'n' Rave with the Stray Cats* (EMI) is illustrative of just what a tireless and inventive talent Brian Setzer is.

Setzer wrote all the selections on *Rant 'n' Rave*. The album itself is a brilliant collection of American music types. All sound strikingly authentic. "Rebels Rule," "Sexy and 17" and "Something's Wrong with my Radio" are classic rockabilly. "I Won't Stand in Your Way" is the best example of doo-wop music since Paul Simon's "Loves me Like A Rock." "18 Miles to Memphis" has a distinct country feel to it.

Despite all these prototypes, the Cats manage to do what few rockabilly outfits can: they make the music sound new. They're not saying anything new (the sentiments expressed by Setzer are identical to those expressed by his idol Eddie Cochran), yet they make it sound new. It's a lesson bands like the Shakin' Pyramids should take note of.

Rant 'n' Rave is a proud part of the music that Jerry Lee Lewis and his contemporaries originated more than a quarter of a century ago.

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