





THE ROCKABILLY REVOLUTION

The legendary career of Lonnie Lee started with his first hit in 1959 that he wrote with Johnny O'Keefe. Today, with eight national number one hits to his credit, Lonnie Lee is still going strong.

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Like any hybrid genre, Rockabilly is tough to define without using broad and bulky terms, and its weird, disparate influences...bluegrass, cowboys, pomade, Eisenhower, *Levi's 501s*, Betty Crocker, Delta blues, Hank Williams, R&B, country music, white t-shirts, Texas, and creeper shoes are as varied and serendipitous symbols as the songs themselves. Given the repression of the classic nuclear 1950s, the notion of affluent white teenagers rebelling, hiding banned 45s under their canopied beds, wiggling into black leather jackets, and unapologetically worshipping the most famed phallus of them all, the electric guitar – seems both inevitable and revolutionary.

While Rockabilly faded by the mid-1960s (plenty will attempt to convince you it went down, in 1959, with Buddy Holly's plane), its aesthetic is periodically revived with great success. Meanwhile, historians and critics are still squabbling over what, exactly, Rockabilly signifies in the larger socio-political context of the 1950s, and to what extent its players were just snatching and re-appropriating other performance styles, or, maybe, recreating what they saw in Pentecostal church pews. Regardless, Rockabilly still endures as one of the purest home-grown sounds in music, bolstered, as all good things are, by cascading hormones, a healthy dose of teen-insurgency, and just enough freedom to fully swing it across the dance floor to let loose.

But if your club's looking for a Memphis contemporary of Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis to perfectly capture that Rockabilly retrospection then look no further than Australia's pioneering Rockabilly musician, Lonnie Lee. Handsome, reputedly a wild live performer back in his youth and in possession of a distinctive sound of his own, Lonnie Lee was then, and still remains today, →

the equal of his contemporaries. Having sustained a stellar stage presence for an incredible 55 years, it's hard to wrap your mind around the fact that Lonnie Lee began recording not long after Presley and Lewis...and he's outlived almost all of them.

Born and raised on a sheep property a few miles from a small railway siding called Rowena in North West NSW between Moree and Walgett, Lee's earliest ambitions were always seemingly connected to music. Even when he assembled his own wireless crystal set in boarding school, little did he realise he was prepping the pathway for a lifetime love-affair with music. "Strangely enough, I never once dreamed I'd have a full time career doing what I loved to do. It seemed at first I was destined to follow my family on our sheep property or become a wool classer yet somehow fate intervened and my singing career has never stopped," reveals Lee. "My motivation to be a performer is my passion for singing. Unlike many of the current stars who are attracted to the world of show business for money, fame, sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll as they say, all I wanted to do was sing and once I started, one day seemed to just follow another taking me to right now. I still have the same love and desire to sing as I did as a youngster when I was just starting out."

In May 1956, Lee entered a radio contest on the 2UW amateur hour singing Elvis Presley's first hit, *Heartbreak Hotel* which as far as I can tell is the first time an Elvis song was ever sung on Australian radio. Whilst he may have come second, a few months later he won the title of Australia's Elvis Presley when MGM Studios found that not too many people in the land Down Under knew who Elvis was (they were keen to promote his first movie *Love Me Tender*). By this time Lee had assembled his own Rockabilly combo, and the rest, as they say, is history.

"Because the teenage population of the 50s and early 60s were not involved in a complicated world like today, the doorway into their psyche was wide open to accept the simple

music of rock'n'roll, and it brought with it fashion and a whole new social setting, which was new to teenagers so, the total input was incredibly strong," fondly recalls Lee. "Because of this, people today who were around at that time, still embrace the music just as much as they did then. In a way it's like the era really never died for those who were there. To others, new genres and eras came and went, yet we were all still locked into the era that gave us the most fun and good memories."

With the hits steadily building, including *Starlight Starbright* (1959), *Yes Indeed I Do* (1960), and *I Found A New Love, Defenceless* (1960), in 1961 and 1962 he also recorded *Sit Around And Talk*, *When The Bells Stop Ringing*, *Sitting By The River*, and *Don't You Know Pretty Baby*. Interestingly, Lee's recording career was also achieving a number of notable firsts including the first Australian to have a full colour album cover; the first Australian to record a stereo album; the first Australian to have a double-sided #1 record; and, the first Australian to have a #1 song from an album. So, it's no surprise he was later honoured with a commercial radio award in 1961 – the *Golden Microphone Award* as Australia's most popular recording artist.

In 1966 after many top selling records, main event live shows, and helping to promote up-and-comers including Normie Rowe and John Rowles, Lee jumped from Australia's shores to explore the New World and the opportunities that beckoned. Successfully gigging his way across the UK and Europe, Lee eventually made his way to the US in 1971 where during his many years as a successful recording artist he co-wrote with Roy Orbison, Cher, Florence Henderson, and Glen Campbell.

"In a way I see myself as someone who stimulates memories of people's early lives. Part of that then is to also reintroduce some of the artists and their songs who were also big then," reflects Lee. "There are hundreds of songs which were very well known in the 50s and 60s, but never get radio or even live play today, so I go out of my way to find the songs I know meant a lot."

The legendary career of Lonnie Lee is truly too much to contain within these pages, but know this: Lonnie Lee is Rockabilly's finest, offering a show unlike any other. It's Lee's natural knack of transforming relatively staid songs into something spectacularly sexy, with throats-a-rumblin' and sharp shoulders twitchin' to the rhythm that will see your body bop and boogie all night long. It's a gloriously comprehensive set, nodding to both the obvious staples and plenty of more obscure tracks, and comes packaged in Lee's latest tour: *Solid Gold*.

"My *Solid Gold* show brings everything into one authentic songbook, which I and my band the Leemen, as well as the audiences, enjoy performing very much," explains Lee. "I identify with all the songs I sing, as if they're my own, as they're close to mine and my audience's hearts. I take my live shows very seriously and am quite well-known for changing my sets and incorporating fresh material so that my audiences don't get bored. I'm so very appreciative of the fact that people, after so many years, still come to my shows. I feel blessed to be healthy and able enough to still do what I love the most; and that is to sing!"

Considered to be the 'Last Man Standing' of his era, Lee still writes and releases songs with all stations who appreciate his genre play-listing them. He still performs his unique and energetic shows in all major venues and festivals...and all who see him truly can't believe his energy and vocal abilities. That's not strange as whilst 55 years ago, both Brian Henderson of *Bandstand* and Johnny O'Keefe said he was the best singer of his era. Today those who see his shows are saying the exact same words. But just don't just believe all you read here; why not secure a show at your club and witness the magic that is Rockabilly.

For further details and booking enquiries, simply contact Suzanne Rix at Starlite Records on telephone **02 9826 0220** or email suzanne@starlite.com.au. You can also check out Lonnie Lee's official website at lonnielee.com ■

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