

Jerry Lee Lewis, galvanic force of early rock and roll (1935-2022)

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Jerry Lee Lewis, one of rock and roll's trailblazers, died in late October at age 87. The singer had been in poor health, but no cause of death was given.

Nicknamed "the Killer," Lewis epitomized rock and roll and rebellion in the late 1950s. He left an indelible mark with his hard-driving, boogie-woogie piano playing and forceful singing, both of which were prominent on hits such as "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On" and "Great Balls of Fire." He is perhaps equally known for having married his first cousin once removed when she was 13 years old. The marriage caused a scandal that nearly ended his career barely a year after it had begun.

In the 1960s, Lewis reinvented himself as a country singer and scored many more hits such as "Another Place, Another Time" and "What's Made Milwaukee Famous (Has Made a Loser Out of Me)." Despite substance abuse, run-ins with the law and serious health problems, he remained musically active. His arresting musical presence and his reputation as a hellraiser have influenced generations of musicians.

Lewis was born in Ferriday, Louisiana, in 1935. His father Elmo was a carpenter, and his mother Mary Ethel (also known as Mamie) was a Pentecostal Christian who reportedly spoke in tongues. Lewis grew up listening to gospel and country music. He often went to a local dance hall to listen to blues musicians with his cousins Jimmy Swaggart, who later became an evangelist, and Mickey Gilley, who gained fame as a country singer.

From his mother, Lewis endured sermons about the evils of liquor and promiscuity. His father, however, encouraged his interest in piano. "The more he practiced, the surer the left hand and wilder the right hand became," wrote Nick Tosches in *Hellfire*, his biography of Lewis. As a teenager, Lewis began performing locally and then in nearby Natchez, Mississippi.

His disapproving and worried mother sent Lewis to a Bible college. He was later thrown out for playing a

boogie-woogie version of "My God Is Real." School officials grumbled that he had played the hymn "like colored people." He responded that they "might as well accept it, 'cause someday that's how it's gonna be."

When Lewis went to Nashville, Tennessee, to make records, he met with one refusal after another from the labels in town. He kept performing, nevertheless, traveling from gig to gig with his father acting as roadie.

In what might have been a last-ditch effort, Lewis walked into Sun Studio in November 1956 and demanded an audition. The now-legendary Sun was based in Memphis, Tennessee, and had released records by Elvis Presley. At the time, the label had contracts with Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash and Roy Orbison. Lewis presented himself as a country artist, but producer Jack Clement encouraged him to try rock and roll.

The result was "Crazy Arms," a Ray Price song that earned Lewis regional success. His next single, "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On," was released in April 1957. At first, many stations refused to play the song because they considered it lewd. But after Lewis gave a barnstorming performance of the song on *The Steve Allen Show*, it reached Number 3 on the pop charts, and Lewis became a star. "Great Balls of Fire" followed in November, ultimately reaching Number 2.

Perhaps as much as Chuck Berry's guitar, Lewis's piano helped to define rock and roll. His left hand played crisp, jumping rhythms that rendered his bassists practically superfluous. With his right hand, Lewis pounded out minor thirds and threw in exuberant, cheeky glissandos. Though he seemed to play with abandon, he nevertheless demonstrated technique and control. His appreciation of dynamics was also apparent, particularly in his singing. Lewis whispered, crooned, switched to a mischievous falsetto and let loose full-throated shouts.

The influence of the singer's religious upbringing was easy to see in his stage performance. He seemed not

consumed by the Holy Spirit but possessed by the devil. He sang with fervor, as if at a revival meeting. He often kicked away the piano bench and attacked the piano while standing up. Sometimes he dragged a foot along the keys. As he bobbed with the rhythm, his slicked-back hair would come loose, flopping down in long, blond waves. Lewis represented a challenge to conventional morality and Jim Crow segregation. He embodied the teenagers who, increasingly encouraged by Madison Avenue to think of themselves as a distinct group, were becoming more confident and rebellious.

“Breathless” became a hit in 1958, and Lewis began a tour of the United Kingdom. Reporters discovered that Myra Gale Brown, a girl in his entourage, was not only 13 years old but also his wife and his first cousin once removed. In fact, Lewis had still been married to his previous wife when he wed Myra several months earlier. Scandal soon erupted, and Lewis ended the tour and returned home. His next single, “High School Confidential,” became a hit, but the following singles went nowhere.

Myra has occasionally spoken publicly about the marriage, which lasted for about 13 years. “I was the adult, and Jerry was the child,” she recently told the *Los Angeles Times*. “It was because of our marriage that his career hit the pavement. You know, you were judged for everything you did back then.”

For about a decade, Lewis struggled. Sun wouldn’t promote him, radio stations wouldn’t play his records, and he couldn’t book concert dates. He was too rebellious even for rock and roll. Yet during this period, he released *Live at the Star Club, Hamburg* (1964), which many critics consider one of the best rock albums ever.

Lewis then switched to country music, to which his resonant voice was equally well adapted. His single “Another Place, Another Time” reached Number 4 on the country charts in 1968. His next singles, “What’s Made Milwaukee Famous (Has Made a Loser Out of Me)” and “She Still Comes Around (to Love What’s Left of Me)” were also hits. Lewis recorded almost two dozen Top 10 country singles, and many Top 10 country albums, throughout the 1970s. He had another pop hit in 1972 with “Me and Bobby McGee,” the Kris Kristofferson song recorded memorably by Janis Joplin.

Though his singing was not as wild on these songs, it retained its confidence, authority and magnetism. By choice, he no longer blazed but smoldered.

Renewed success did not bring tranquility, however. Lewis ran afoul of the Internal Revenue Service, and his

reckless impulsivity got him in trouble with the police. While aiming at a Coke bottle, he once shot his bassist in the chest. After being released from jail on a drunk driving charge, he once crashed his car into the gates at Graceland, brandished a gun and demanded to see Presley.

Lewis’ immense gifts were interwoven with social backwardness and other wounds inflicted by his background. For years, he abused alcohol, methadone, tranquilizers and other drugs. He also endured a litany of medical crises that included bleeding stomach ulcers, a collapsed lung, gall bladder removal and injuries resulting from a car crash.

Lewis’s religious upbringing and his chronic status as a pariah may well have influenced this behavior. “The man is tortured,” Myra once told *People*. “Jerry Lee thinks that Jerry Lee is too wicked to be saved.”

The singer put it slightly differently. “I’m dragging the audience to hell with me,” he said.

Lewis also suffered many personal tragedies. His son Steve drowned in his swimming pool at age three. Eleven years later, his son Jerry Lee Jr., died in a car crash at age 19. In 1982, Jaren Pate, his fourth wife, drowned while she was swimming. The following year, his fifth wife, Shawn Michelle Stephens, fatally overdosed on methadone.

Yet Lewis survived, continuing to record until recently. He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986 and enjoyed renewed interest in his music when actor Dennis Quaid portrayed him in the film *Great Balls of Fire!* (1989). Earlier this year, Lewis was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame.

Because the singer had survived other early rock musicians such as Presley, Berry, Perkins and Eddie Cochran, he earned the nickname “the last man standing.” In a 1970 review, rock critic Robert Christgau described why the musical legacy of “the Killer” was sure to endure: “His drive, his timing, his offhand vocal power, his unmistakable boogie-plus piano and his absolute confidence in the face of the void make Jerry Lee the quintessential rock and roller.”



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