

ROOTS ROCK

BY DON WALLER

n one finger, the whole "roots-rock revival" is simply a predictable, pendulum-like reaction to the slick, videogenic acts that currently rule the upper

reaches of the pop music charts.

On the other, it's a measure of how fragmented the audience for pop music has become that even the purist rock 'n' roll band these days requires

clarification by hyphenation.

Hence the term "roots rock," which is as strangely, eerily close to redundancy as any two pair of words can get. B-sides, how can rock 'n' roll be revived when it never died?

Nevertheless, what is true—and germane—is that a loose group of musicians, led by Bruce Springsteen and former Creedence Clearwater Revival mainman John Fogerty, most of whom had been playing the exact same music for years, has captured America's orbs 'n ears of late.

Considering most of you reading this are college students and therefore don't have anything better to do until Letterman comes on, take 60 seconds out of your lives and subject Bruce Springsteen's music to some S-E-R-I-O-U-S historical analysis...

Time's up! Blue books in!

Now, what have you got? Jr. Walker and the All Stars' "Shotgun"? Gary 'U.S.' Bonds' "Quarter to Three"? Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone"? Trashy white bands from Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels to the Young Rascals on down the Jersey shore? Just about every guitar-oriented British Invasion band of '64-'65? And, of course, the spectre of Phil hanging over the entire linguini-with-Valvoline, dying Northeastern industrial base mess around?

Yes, as you can tell, I was an English major. But right now, Ah'm old and tired. Been interviewin' rock 'n'

roll bands for elebenty-sebben years.

So, when my future grandchillen climb up on my knee and say, "Yo, Poppa, Poppa. Straighten us to the Great Roots-Rock Revival of 1985," what am I gonna say? 'Go away, kids, you bother me,' that's what.

Whereupon, they will threaten to



The Boss.

use all my web-top Checker records for Frisbees, so I'll smile the slowest of slow-sad smiles, bum a forbidden cigarette and regale the tiny monsters with **this** do-wah diddy. "Fads are irrelevant. They change every three months. In the end, only the underlying restlessness matters."

That was Nik Cohn, circa 1969, in



Elvis in action.

his .457 magnum opus, "Rock: From the Beginning."

Wait a minute. Talk about your contradictions; I wish you could see mine. First, I tell you that this roots-rock music isn't a fad, that it's been around as long as rock 'n' roll itself. Then, I say that it's **only** a fad and therefore not to take it too seriously.

Well, welcome to America. Where, as I write it is July 4, 1985. Independence Day. Fireworks. Bruce Springsteen on the radio at the 7-11, singing "Born in the USA," which the Iranian clerk behind the counter doesn't notice. His grandchildren, however, will grow up to be musicians. What'll they be playing? Why, roots-rock, of course.

What we're taking so long to say here is that a whole lotta these cool-kats walking around in pearl-buttoned shirts 'n' toting vintage Telecasters were playing in a synth-pop hairstyle combo two years ago, in a skinny-tie "new wave" band five years ago and in a disco lounge act three years before that.

Anyway, here's the sanctified low-down on the roots-rock sound that's going 'round. So open your mind, clean up your face, buy a few of these records or—better yet—go see these bands when they hit **your** college town and decide for yourself if they're jivin' or jammin'.

Along with Springsteen and Fogerty, the roots-rock acts with the most impact have been Los Lobos and The Blasters. Los Lobos, the more successful on record, came to Hollywood as Blasters protégés, having played everything from authentic acoustic Mexican folk music to R&B to '50's rock 'n' roll in front of multi-generational crowds in East El Lay for the past ten years.

The Lobos may look like they just got off work at the body shop, but they capture the ambience of a small-time border town dance hall on a Saturday night. This is partyin' music.

Neither do The Blasters, who've been recording what they like to call "American Music" for the last six years. Blues, country, rock, gospel—it's all grist for these steel mill union leader's sons: Phil ("the Man of 1,000 Voices") Alvin and Dave, his penman/git-tar pickin' brother.

As far back as the mid-'60's, the largest, most loyal audience for any single style of American roots music has always been the exalted brotherhood of blues fans. And there are an amazing number of good blues bands around: AOR guitar heroes Stevie Ray Vaughan, a Texan who mates the bluesy side of Jimi Hendrix with the rockin' side of Buddy Guy and George Thorogood, a Delaware slide specialist who worships at the Shrine of St. Elmore (James), are the current commercial champs.

They are followed by the Fabulous Thunderbirds, who play amplified country blues à la Slim Harpo and spotlight Stevie's big brother Jimmy Vaughan; Roomful of Blues, a Rhode Island-based, multi-horned jump, jive and jazz outfit; and L.A.'s criminally underrated James Harman band, whose duel guitars of Kid Ramos and Hollywood Fats enable them to whip ass on just about any local blues band in the land.

While the blues is such a traditional element of rock 'n' roll as to have been transformed into heavy metal—think about it—the recent groundswell of country-oriented roots-rockers represents a more significant shift in rock 'n' role models. Led by ex-punk-rockers, brothers Tony and Chip Kinman, Rank And File got there first. Mixing Everly

Brothers harmonies with Lefty Frizzell's roadhouse rhythms.

Led by the lovely and talented Maria McKee, Lone Justice has been the most-ballyhooed, although it's even money whether this bourbon 'n' branchwater-voiced thoroughbred wouldn't be better off doing pure country material rather than the corporate rock she's saddled with.

My money, racing fans, is on the Long Ryders, who take off from such second-generation country-rock acts as the Flying Burrito Brothers, the Gram Parsons-era Byrds, the Buffalo Springfield and the Band.

And, if that ain't rock 'n' roll, or roots rock, or whatever you wanna call it, what is?

And, if it isn't, then whaddya call Zoo York City's Fleshtones, other than "the wildest band this side of Birdland?" Or how 'bout the Bangles, the Del Fuegos, Three O'Clock, the Rain Parade, the Del Lords, the Droogs, True West or the Pandoras, all of which can be lumped with varying accuracy under the generic heading of '60's-influenced, semi-psychedelic, boom-boom revivalists?

And what about R.E.M., drawing on the Velvet Underground and Byrds for inspiration, and winding up the most successful act working this particular side of the street?

After all, who would've thought that the biggest bands to come out of the "punk-rock revolution of '77" would be the Police and the Talking Heads? Only those hip enough to trap the rap of that great rock 'n' roller, Heraclitus, who said, "You can't step in the same river twice."

Which means that guesstimating which of the aforementioned acts' songs will still be bar-band standards in the year 2010 is a task better left to those with crystal balls.

Or, let me put it to you another way...If Bob Seger came out with his debut album this year and it sounded exactly like his 1976 "Night Music," would people hail it as "a triumph of hauntingly accessible roots-rock?"

In the words of that ancient Greek philosopher, Lou Reed:

"Despite all the complications, You could still dance to a rock 'n' roll station."

And it was all right...

DISCOGRAPHY

10 Hot Historical Tracks



You won't find Elvis Presley, or even Muddy Waters, here. Rather than rounding up the usual list of seminal roots-rockers (Little Richard, Chuck, Jerry Lee) or simply rehashing the past glories of such household names as Hank Williams and B.B. King, what follows is a purposefully mixed-up, shook-up set of sides that'll turn even the normiest of dorms into the hippest room in town...

► **The Jackie Wilson Story**, Jackie Wilson. (Epic/CBS, 2 Vols.) Arguably the greatest vocalist of his generation, the late Wilson is also among the most underappreciated. This package omits the sap with which his producers often saddled Wilson in favor of his more—shall we say, uptown?—performances: gospel, blues, R&B, soul, smash hits like "Lonely Teardrops." That sound at the end of Wilson's rendition of "Danny Boy," in which he wrings 24—count 'em—notes out of the single syllable "fo," is your jaw hitting the floor.

► **Live at the Harlem Square Club 1963**, Sam Cooke. (RCA) This previously unreleased live LP captured Cooke at his most soulful. Playing a small Miami nitespot, Cooke reworks his then-current hits with a gospel-drenched intensity that sacrifices none of the rich tone, fluid phrasing and calculatedly casual attitude that inspired later imitators from Otis Redding to Rod Stewart. Finger-popping soul never sounded better.

► **Groovin' the Blues**, Otis Rush. (Flyright English Import) Industrial-strength guitar-blues from the beginning of this singer/riff-singer's ill-starred career. Hear where Jimmy Page learned "I Can't Quit You, Baby." Hear where Eric Clapton learned "All Your Love." Hear Rush take solos so tough you'd have to shave 'em with a blowtorch. Hear

► **Chicken Shack Boogie**, Amos Milburn. (Pathe/French Import) The rompin', stompin' title track dates back to '49 and ought to conclusively prove once and for all that rock 'n' roll did not spring forth from Elvis Presley's ducktail like Minerva from the brow of Jove. "Down the Road Apiece" (inexplicably not included here) goes back even further. To 1946, when pianist/vocalist Milburn bossed the West Coast jump blues scene, wherein small, horn-driven combos boogied their woogies around such adult topics as reckless eyeballing and reckless highbaling.

► **VU**, The Velvet Underground. (Polygram) After sitting in the vaults for 15 years, this recently-released album still sounds ahead of its time. Uninitiates will find that this first, self-conscious band of art-rock primitives was not only capable of a wider range of styles than is commonly thought, but also that leader Lou Reed once sang as if he—or at least the character he portrayed—really meant all the tension, mystery and stark beauty packed into these grooves. Often imitated, never duplicated.

► **Nuggets, Vol. 1**, Various Artists. (Rhino) This collection of klassick garage-rock hits of the 60's bats 10 for 13, if you can believe the klaims of the clown who writ the liner notes. If energy, raunch, suburban punk posturings and veiled references to taking tea with Mary Jane make you wanna tune in, turn on and drop out, then join the Standells, the Leaves, the Seeds, the Count Five, Music Machine, Chocolate Watch Band and many more in Wonderful Wig City, just over the Shadowline from Anywhereville, U.S.A.

► **The Johnny Burnette Rock 'n' Roll Trio**, The Johnny Burnette Trio. (Charly/English, 2 LP import) The wildest, hairiest, sloberriest, most manic rockabilly ever recorded. Dig guitarist Paul Burnette's accidental fuzztone on "The Train Kept A-Rollin'." (The Yardbirds and Aerosmith did.) Color these rednecked, white-hot and blue Memphis peckerwoods gone, REAL gone.

► **Rockin' Until Midnight, Rollin' Until Dawn**, Don & Dewey. (Specialty) This dynamic duo of soul screamers taught Sam & Dave—not to mention the Righteous Brothers—everything they know. The aural equivalent of a bar fight, this flipped disc nonetheless contains the original—they wrote 'em—versions of such oft-covered classics as "Justine," "Big Boy Pete," "Koko Joe," "Farmer John" and "Leaving It All Up to You." Whaw!

► **Louisiana Blues and Zydeco**, Clifton Chenier. (Arhoolie) You can substitute just about any of this accordionist/vocalist's several albums for this '60's effort. Whether singing in French patois or American jive, playing swirling R&B or snappy two-steps, this legend has been the undisputed king of zydeco, a highly rhythmic form of indigenous American folk music, since the 50's. Bon ton roulet.

► **The Wild Tchoupitoulas**, The Wild Tchoupitoulas. (Antilles) In honor of Indian tribes that helped runaway slaves escape, it's a Mardi Gras tradition that certain families of Afro-American men dress up as Native American warriors. They have songs—more accurately, chants—that have been handed down from generation to generation to go along with the spectacle. Pulsating with polyrhythmic power and—again—a uniquely American expression, this music is the perfect antidote for a hot summer's day. You don't have to know that the Neville Brothers are members of the tribe to believe that when the Wild Tchoupitoulas brag they're "gonna stomp some rump," Jack, they back their wax.



Lou Reed



Clifton Chenier

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