

SONNY BURGESS AND THE PACERS

ROCKABILLY MUSIC FROM ARKANSAS

Rockabilly, the merging of black “rockin’” rhythm ‘n’ blues with white country or “hillbilly” music, is usually dated to July 1954 when Elvis Presley first recorded up-tempo versions of blues and bluegrass. Such music was the natural flower of the mid-south delta region of Arkansas, Tennessee, and Mississippi where black and white farm and factory workers labored side by side. At night the airwaves were filled with R’n’B and the Grand Ole Opry. Musicians throughout the region were working the local clubs playing a mix of R’n’B, hillbilly boogie, honky tonk, and pop songs.

One of the earliest and best rockabilly bandleaders was Sonny Burgess of Newport, Arkansas, ninety miles east of Memphis. Born on a farm there in 1929, Burgess had grown up with a Gene Autry guitar from Sears and Roebuck and the family radio tuned to WSM and WLAC out of Nashville. In 1950, he and three friends formed a band and played country and boogie until Sonny joined the army a year later. When he returned from Germany in 1954, the band regrouped as the Moonlighters named for the local Silver Moon Club where they had a regular gig. In October, 1955 Elvis Presley performed at the Silver Moon with the Moonlighters opening the show. Presley liked the band, had them open four additional shows for him, and suggested they go to Memphis to record. At Sun Records, Sam Phillips told them that with a fuller sound he would record them. The Moonlighters merged with another Newport band and became The Pacers.

The Pacers visited Sun Studios on May 2nd, 1956 and cut what many still consider the wildest rockabilly record ever made, the two-sided marvel “Red Headed Woman” and “We Wanna Boogie.” Burgess wrote the tunes, sang lead, and played ferocious electric guitar. Second guitarist Joe Lewis was equally fierce, and Jack Nance blasted out bursts of screaming hillbilly bop trumpet. There had never been anything that sounded like it before. In performance, the band became legendary. Sonny Burgess dyed his hair red to match his red Fender guitar and his red jacket, pants, and shoes. They played furiously and would leap off the stage mid performance to lead the audience in war dances and build human pyramids on the dance floor. They made mincemeat of the competition on package tours.

Their 1957 record, a reworking of the New Orleans chestnut “My Bucket’s Got a Hole in It,” was covered

note for note by television rocker Ricky Nelson who went top ten with the record in April, 1958. The Pacers had no such success. Sonny Burgess made two more records for Sun using the house musicians, including what some cite as the last true rockabilly record, the January 1960 “Sadie’s Back in Town.” After a brief stint with Conway Twitty’s band, Burgess came home to Newport where he continued to work the Silver Moon Club until he took a job outside of music in 1972.

Following the death of Elvis in 1977, there was a new interest in the music and increased opportunities to play and record overseas. At the 1986 Festival of American Folklife, Sonny Burgess, Paul Burlison, Stan Kesler, D.J. Fontana, Marcus Van Story, and Jerry Lee “Smoochy” Smith played as the Original Sun Rhythm Section. During their two-week engagement on the Mall, they wowed the crowds. An appearance at a DC club brought out Bob Dylan and other luminaries. They recorded for Flying Fish and then Burgess made two high profile records of his own for Hightone and Rounder produced by members of the Blasters and Bruce Springsteen’s E. Street Band.

Despite such glories, Sonny Burgess continues to play the Silver Moon and other area clubs, and to work with some of the same musicians that he first played with back in 1950. He hosts a weekly radio program on a local public radio station called “We Wanna Boogie.” A kind, generous, and gentle man, he keeps the rockabilly flame burning, and he glows red hot when he takes the stage. Sonny Burgess and the Pacers today continue to play dates both at home and abroad. 2006 dates already include performances in the UK, France, and Austria.

Mike Luster

Arkansas Folklife Program

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to “preserve and present American Folklife” through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Folklife Center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site at <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.

