

Pop Talk: Jerry Lee Lewis' swagger untamed 5 decades later

by George Varga

What's Kid Rock got that Bruce Springsteen, Mick Jagger and country-music icons Merle Haggard and George Jones don't?

Musically speaking, not much, although all of them are featured on "Last Man Standing," the surprisingly robust new album by Jerry Lee Lewis that also features B.B. King, Neil Young and 14 other all-star guests.

But Rock, the rap, rock and country vocal upstart from Detroit whose soon-to-be ex-wife is Pamela Anderson, has swagger and attitude to spare. That's why he reminds Lewis - the pioneering rock 'n' roll singer-pianist whose nickname is "The Killer" - of, well, Lewis himself.

JERRY LEE LEWIS AND KID ROCK - Jerry Lee Lewis and Kid Rock share a moment. Lewis credits the Kid for inspiring him to come out of semiretirement and make his new star-studded album, 'Last Man Standing.' CNS Photo."He does remind me some of me. He's a good boy," said Lewis, 71, who has raised more hell and generated more controversy than Rock can dream of matching. "Kid inspired me and got me kind of fired up."

So fired up that Lewis, who had not recorded a new album since 1995's "Young Blood," is assuming a high profile again after years of semi-retirement. Rock, for one, is delighted. "I would put him on Mount Rushmore. He is a legend and a hero," he said of Lewis.

"Just get me a piano and give me the money," Lewis said.

He lives in a ranch-style home in Nesbit, Miss. - which he shares with his daughter, Phoebe, 42, and his nine pet dogs - 25 miles south of Memphis. It was there, in 1956, that the then 20-year-old Lewis was signed by Sun Records' honcho Sam Phillips. His first Sun release, the uproarious "Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On,"

made him an instant star.

"When Sam heard me, he said: 'I can sell that!' He was really enthusiastic about it," Lewis recalled. An astute talent scout, Phillips is famous for having signed the young Elvis Presley. He was also instrumental in launching the careers of Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison, and - in early 1951 - Ike Turner.

Yet, while rock 'n' roll was largely created by Turner, Fats Domino and many other vital black musicians, Presley is generally credited with introducing the music to mainstream (read: white) America in the mid-1950s.

"No," Lewis said. "I introduced rock 'n' roll to the world with 'Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On.' Elvis? He was rockabilly; he wasn't really rock 'n' roll. When I came out with 'Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On,' that was rock 'n' roll."

Lewis' stage shows were riotous affairs that saw him regularly kick his piano stool across the stage as he pounded out rollicking riffs like a man possessed. The son of a sharecropper and his wife, the Louisiana-born Lewis scored all of his biggest hits in the 1950s. They included "Breathless," "High School Confidential" and the Otis Blackwell-penned "Great Balls of Fire," which was quickly banned by many radio stations because of its more than suggestive lyrics.

Those lyrics were so salacious that Lewis, the cousin of disgraced televangelist Jimmy Swaggart, initially refused to record "Great Balls of Fire" because he believed the song was the work of the devil. Its release came soon after his third marriage, in late 1957, to his 13-year-old second cousin, Myra Gale Brown. At the time, Lewis hadn't bothered to divorce either of his first two wives. The ensuing scandal, fueled by a media frenzy during his subsequent concert tour of England, sent Lewis' career plummeting.

He would marry four more times after he and Brown split up in 1970, and two of his later wives died under mysterious circumstances.

Not surprisingly, questions about his ex-wives usually prompt Lewis to curtail his interviews. But he did admit to having regrets. "Well, I'd change a lot of things," he said, while declining to be more specific. "I would change a lot of ways of living - I'd do that - and a lot of things I did and a lot of things I do. That goes without saying."

Five years in the making, Lewis' new album could have been a rote affair by an over-the-hill rocker. Instead, it's a vital work that has earned rave reviews and rocks with vigor from the first bars of its opening cut, Led Zeppelin's "Rock and Roll."

"Jerry had never heard the Led Zeppelin song before," said Jimmy Ripp, who co-produced "Last Man Standing" with Hollywood film producer Steve Bing. "This was absolutely a Jerry Lee album from the beginning, and the duets part didn't start until sometime later. It was a very organic project and nothing was forced."

Lewis, a man who in his prime made album guest Keith Richards seem like a pussycat by comparison, had been in a divorce-fueled funk before he made "Last Man Standing" and even asked Ripp and Bing if he could record his parts at home in bed. But the music perked him up, and he easily holds his own whether duetting with such musical contemporaries as Little Richard or with younger admirers like Toby Keith.

"Without attitude and inspiration and fire behind your music, you don't have anything," said Lewis, who is now at work with Ripp and Bing on two new albums, one rock, one gospel. "But I hope people remember me for my music, and not for my wild and woolly ways."

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