

BILL HALEY



The Father of Rock 'n' Roll

THE RISE OF BILL HALEY

AND

ROCK 'N' ROLL

By Otto Fuchs



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**This book is dedicated to Bill Haley & His Comets,
all their fans, to my lovely girl Nicky, to my daughter
Lucienne Laura Fuchs and to my parents.**

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About The Author



Otto Fuchs was born on May 13th 1978 in Mariazell, Styria / Austria. He discovered a deep passion for rock & roll while still in his early teens. At fourteen years old, he becomes the youngest writer for the German "Rock & Roll Music Magazine". From 2000-2004 he hosted "The Rocket 88 Show" for KRKT 99.1 FM Rock It Radio, Ventura, California. Numerous interviews with 1950s Rock & Roll Legends such as Billy Lee Riley, Marvin Rainwater, Gene Vincent Blue Cap Drummer Dickie "Be Bop" Harrell, Bill Haley's Comets members Marshall Lytle and Bill Turner are led & recorded by Fuchs for this show... During that period he also places various articles in the German "Dynamite - The World Of Rock & Roll" magazine.

In 2005 he began to contribute reviews and interviews for German jive, swing & rockabilly magazine "Slam Bam". Bob Timmers of the Rockabilly Hall Of Fame recruited him as columnist for the Tennessee-based Rockabilly Hall Of Fame.

While Otto Fuchs continues to write in German for the "Stompin' News" magazine, the column for the Rockabilly Hall Of Fame is the first medium requiring him to write in his second language, English. During a trip to his former home, London (where he lived from 1997-1999), Otto Fuchs met John Howard. Soon the two men come to the agreement that "UK Rock" (whose editor John Howard was, at that time) will publish his work as well. Otto Fuchs currently hosts the Internet Radio Program "Rockabilly Rules OK" on Rockabilly Radio (www.rockabillyradio.net) and the "Rockin' The Juke Joint Show" on www.rockitradio.net. As February 9th 2011 marked the 30th year of the death of Bill Haley, this book's central purpose was to contribute to the continuation of Bill Haley's legacy. This newly revised two volume edition aims for the same goals.

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Also in deep respect and affection to my late father Otto Fuchs senior, who made it possible for me to travel to Bill Haley's birthplace (Highland Park, Michigan); to see Bill Haley's house "Melody Manor" in Boothwyn, Pennsylvania; as well as visiting his last residence in Harlingen, Texas.

Again, I must mention Bill Turner, lead guitarist of the Comets, and an authority on Bill Haley, who not only contributed two lengthy interviews, but also many days and nights editing the facts, and overseeing the English-language translation from the original German text.

Otto Fuchs, Baden (Austria), 2016

Bill Haley - "Father Of Rock & Roll"



- * "I owe him so much...without him, I would not have discovered rock & roll..." **Elvis Presley**
- * "Bill Haley was a very nice person...he was a gentleman. 'Rock Around The Clock' was magic - still exciting today...one of the first classic rock & roll records." **Jerry Lee Lewis**
- * "I have all of his records in my collection!" **Buddy Holly**
- * "To Bill: You started it all!" **Beatles**
- * "The great element of rioting in pop was represented through 'Rock Around The Clock'. The school of rock & roll concentrated onto a minimum of melody and a maximum of rhythmic noise; whereas it intentionally

tried to succeed the artistic ideals of the jungle... **Frank Zappa**

- * "He was the man, who brought black music into the consciousness of the whites... **Little Richard**
- * "You could describe him as the 'foster father' of guitar as lead instrument. Without him, some thousand top guitarists would rather have become drummers...take me, for instance!" **George Thorogood**
- * "Haley created the hymn for a new age. He was the first boss of rock and the ignition point for my love of rock & roll music." **Ted Herold**
- * "Bill Haley is where it all began...he is the best. I have all his records...He is 'The King!'" **Tommy Steele**
- * "It was the year that rock 'n' roll hit Britain in the shape of the American artist Bill Haley and the Comets and an unforgettable song called 'Rock Around The Clock'. He took the country by storm, and my friends and I were all desperate to see him. We thought we'd never get tickets unless we went very early on the Monday morning the ticket office opened, so three of us volunteered (although I am not sure that "volunteered" is actually the right word) to get up at four o'clock in the morning to go to the Regal Cinema in Edmonton, where he was playing, to buy tickets. We had been planning to go back to school for the afternoon - we had got there at six - but the box office didn't open until midday, so we decided it was too late to go in to school and went home instead and started playing records. Unfortunately, someone snitched on us and we were hauled before the headmaster. "This is very disappointing," he said, as he solemnly stripped us all of

our prefects' badges. Back in the classroom, Jay (the teacher) said the same thing; "And to think you would do this for something so inconsequential. You won't even remember Bill Haley ten years from now." "I bet we do!" I retorted. Ten years after the day after I had left school, I knocked on Jay's door with a big box of chocolates and I said "You don't owe me anything, but I'm reminding you: Bill Haley!" It was my first rock concert and it was unbelievably exciting. I am sorry I lost my prefect's badge but I needed to be there - I can remember that feeling. We couldn't afford anything better than balcony seats and we were four or five rows back. He started with 'Razzle Dazzle'. There was no introduction. Red velvet curtains opened and we heard, "On your marks, get set...get ready, go man go!" And we were up on our feet, stomping on the floor, and we stayed on our feet for the whole of the show. I thought the balcony was going to give way - and people have said this when they come to my shows - the whole thing was shaking. Everybody was on their feet, fists in the air. It was a fantastic experience...The man I lost my prefect's badge for: Bill Haley." **Cliff Richard**

* "...There hasn't been a real 'rock and roll band' since Bill Haley and the Comets..." **Buddy Rich**

Introduction

Bill Haley, of all the rock & roll pioneers, is the one who deserves the utmost respect, for not only did his “Rock Around The Clock” start the age of rock & roll, he also laid the foundation for what we recognize today as “teenage culture”.

Moreover, he was the archetype of the modern rock singer. Not necessarily visually, in the manner of what Elvis was to become a couple of years later, but artistically. Among a notable list of “firsts”, Bill Haley was the:

01. First band leader to form a rock & roll group;
02. First rock & roll star to write and publish his own music;
03. First rock & roll star to reach the national charts - with music he wrote and recorded;
04. First rock & roll star to actually own his own music publishing companies;
05. First rock & roll star to own his own record label and recording company;
06. First white artist to be elected as the “Rhythm & Blues Personality of the Year”;
07. First rock & roll star to sell a million records;
08. First rock & roll star to receive a gold record;
09. First rock & roll star to go on a world tour;
10. First rock & roll star to sell a million records in the United Kingdom;

11. First rock & roll artist to star in a full length motion picture;
12. First white rock & roll star to tour with all-black supporting artists; and
13. First rock & roll star to appear on a national network television show.

(Courtesy: Sound & Glory / Dyne American Publications)

The greatest accomplishment of Bill Haley & His Comets lies in their paving the way for all the other artists that followed. From 1952 until 1960, Bill Haley & His Comets scored 30 hits in the US and UK charts. In 1957, at the beginning of Bill Haley's first UK tour, he was greeted by 4,000 fans at London's Waterloo train station. The following year, his 1958 European tour included appearances in Germany, (which began approximately three weeks after Elvis Presley was shipped there, courtesy of Uncle Sam) and caught the attention of the international press.

The Haley concerts held at the West Berlin Sports palace erupted in mass rioting and became a daily news item. The East German newspaper "Neues Deutschland" condemned him as *"the rock & roll gangster, Haley celebrating an orgy of American un-culture. 'The West German periodical "Rheinische Merkur" reported: "he, of all people, the Comet of instinct-unchaining started a major offensive against taste, standing and self-respect. All that in the bishopric of Essen on the day of the Papacy vote"*.

The Soviet paper "Pravda" declared him, along with rock & roll, as *"a secret weapon of the west against socialism"*, whereas the FBI under the infamous J. Edgar Hoover (best known for his wiretapping of anyone whom he viewed as "suspicious") started an investigation into theories and accusations of what was feared and suspected as

“communist music”. Asa Carter, head of the “Alabama White Citizens Committee”, charged the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) with seducing and corrupting white teenage girls by promoting rock & roll. He is quoted as saying in 1956, *“with its basic heavy beat of the Negroes, it appeals to the base in man; it brings out animalism and vulgarity”*. He then promised to initiate a *“... campaign to force radio stations and jukebox owners to boycott this immoral music”*.

Perhaps the culmination of all this hysteria, however, was the opinion published as the headline of the prestigious New York Times on March 28th 1956:

“Rock & Roll Called ‘Communicable Disease’” in which the Hartford, Connecticut psychiatrist Francis Braceland declared rock music *“cannibalistic and tribalistic”*, claiming, *“...it is insecurity and rebellion. It impels teenagers to wear ducktail haircuts, wear zoot suits, and carry on boisterously at rock & roll affair”*.

While classical cellist Pablo Casals described the music of Bill Haley in the 1950s as the *“distillation of all disgust of our time”*, the German music expert Barry Graves (recognized equally in the cultural circles of Berlin and New York) in hearing Haley’s style during the first rock & roll revival at the end of the 1960s conversely declared, *“The definitive rock & roll style (is) blended from country & western, Dixieland-jazz and rhythm & blues”*.

Haley himself, taking a calm, confident and somewhat more level headed approach, explained *“I thought if I were to take a Dixieland melody and leave out the emphasis on the first and third beat, but emphasize the second and fourth, and add a beat to which the listeners can clap or even dance – that would serve their wishes. The rest was easy – I took catchy phrases like ‘Crazy Man, Crazy’ and made songs out of them with the method I just explained.”*

In 1960, Bill Haley signed a lucrative recording contract with Warner Brothers. It was not that the label he was on until then -Decca (now as MCA, a part of Universal) - did not want to keep the star who had served them well with 30 hit singles and strong album sales, but the offer by Warner Brothers was this new label's attempt at building an artist roster by signing a number of well-established stars. After fulfilling his Decca contract with the album "Strictly Instrumental", which besides providing a pair of instrumental hit singles with "Joey's Song" (1959) and "Skokiaan" (1960) also pointed the Comets in a musical new direction with its Billy Vaughn influenced approach, also made the music of Bill Haley interesting to listeners beyond the strictly teenage radio audiences. Bill Haley then signed with Warner Brothers' new label venture along with the Everly Brothers, who had similarly departed from Cadence Records. However, when Don and Phil Everly scored a number one hit in the US with "Cathy's Clown" in 1960, Haley's single release of "Tamiami" b/w "Candy Kisses" then pressed on gold vinyl, only reached the lower end of Billboard's Top 100 chart.

The musical hit-making machinery that Bill Haley & His Comets had always possessed, began losing momentum as the musical market now began to focus upon the new younger, good looking, clean cut, but not necessarily untalented teen idols of the time; such as fellow Philadelphians, Fabian, Frankie Avalon, Bobby Rydell, Bobby Vee, as well as New Jersey's Bobby Darin and Ricky Nelson. The time of the wild, animalistic rockabilly/rock & roll sound of the likes of Bill Haley, Gene Vincent, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Eddie Cochran, and Buddy Holly was, for various reasons, seemingly over, in no small part due to the exploding "Payola" scandal which erupted in June 1959 and the ensuing witch hunt launched by the House Legislative Oversight Committee, sending the recording industry as well

as the radio and TV broadcasting industries into panic mode. Seemingly all at once, the individual radio disc jockeys were stripped of their own artistic “license” to feature recordings and artists they themselves felt strongly about (or were paid to feel strongly about, by the record labels) to promote heavily over the airwaves. In the tumult, the labels and radio decided to “play it safe” and thus, programming committees were formed to decide upon which records and artists should be played; a much criticized practice that still continues to the present day in almost all commercial radio formats; while the record labels began seeking benign, less threatening young artists who would appeal to their imagined image of public decency.

Public tastes were again changing as a direct result and after a TV appearance on Dick Clark’s “American Bandstand” performing “Tamiami” and “Rock Around The Clock,” Bill Haley & His Comets’ star began waning slowly, while softer, newer orchestrated sounds began usurping public attention in the record industry and on the airwaves.



Bill Haley performing on Dick Clark's "American Bandstand"

A completely unforeseen remaining tax debt from Haley's wildly successful 1957 UK tour led to a hasty and ill-advised

business decision to flee the United States and relocate “Bill Haley y Sus Cometas” across the international border to Mexico City, where Bill Haley established his new residence and business headquarters, while his Philadelphia-based booking agent Jolly Joyce continued to book and manage Haley’s career as before.

Haley soon began establishing himself as a recording artist on the Mexican “Orfeon” label, and as a new supper club and casino star attraction on the Mexican nightclub circuit, introducing the new American “Twist” dance craze and ironically, beating Chubby Checker to this international market! His fame in Latin America increased with cameo appearances in several Mexican movies loosely based on the “Blackboard Jungle” theme. They soon scored a major hit with “Florida Twist” in 1960 for their new Mexican Orfeon label, which to date remains the best-selling single in the history of Latin America, while “Rock Around The Clock” by Bill Haley & His Comets concurrently became the best selling rock single of all time worldwide, with estimates of between 50 and 90 million copies being sold to date.

“Bill Haley y Sus Cometas” continued recording in Mexico on the Orfeon, Maya and Dimsa labels (presently owned by Sony Latino) up until 1966, having a string of hits with their interpretations of the new American twist dance and surf music trends of the “swinging sixties”, as well as rearranged treatments of swing band instrumental favorites, introducing them to the Latin American public for the first time, including “Jalisco Twist” (1962), “Avenida Madison” (1963) and albums such as “Surf, Surf, Surf” (1964) and “Whisky A-Go-Go” (1966).



"Bill Haley Y Sus Cometas" on "Orfeon A Go Go" (Mexican Television Show)

This new-found success filled the pockets, quite literally speaking, of the now slightly heavier Bill Haley during the sixties, though not as much as he had hoped for. After a disagreement over royalties with the Orfeon / Dimisa / Maya label corporate group, he chose not to renew his contract option for further recordings. Also in 1966, he was first booked by a new UK/European agent, Patrick Malynn, for an appearance at the Alhambra Theatre in Paris. He was booked as the opening act on a package show starring the younger UK recording chart breakers of the time; the artists

all being the new innovators of the “British Invasion”. The Paris press already speculated if the seemingly mis-cast Haley, could possibly compete in comparison to ‘the long haired groups, with his antique kiss curl’. On the 24th and 25th of September 1966, Bill Haley & His Comets appeared on stage opening before Jimmy Cliff, The Walker Brothers, The Pretty Things and The Spencer Davis Group in the city on the Seine.



Spencer Davis & Bill Haley

Haley was greeted with banners and screams of “Biiil Haaleeey” and cheers that were still audible in the backstage dressing rooms of the young beat musicians. Although his stage spot was supposed to only be a 20 minute set, he was forced to perform encore after encore and finally, after performing for one hour, Bill Haley & His Comets were allowed off the stage, their dinner jackets soaked in sweat! The Walker Brothers (“The Sun Ain’t Gonna’ Shine Anymore”) were greeted by the French audience with booing and were heckled throughout their set. The other bands, The Spencer Davis Group and Manfred Mann, endured the same treatment. They simply could not

follow Bill Haley and his final number, "Rock Around The Clock" on stage.

In 1968, "the national anthem of teenagers" (as it was also called by Dick Clark), "Rock Around The Clock", made the international charts once again and even managed to reach the number 1 spot on several British radio station charts. In 1969, Bill had a minor hit in Canada with Nashville songwriter Tom T. Hall's composition "That's How I Got to Memphis". In 1970, on the critically acclaimed album for Sonet Records, "Rock Around the Country", Kris Kristofferson gave special praise for the Haley reading of his composition "Me And Bobby McGee". This album was recorded by Haley and the band in the famous Music City, USA - Nashville, Tennessee.

Yet, as was proven a year before in 1969, when at Madison Square Garden in New York City on the first of "Richard Nader's Rock & Roll Revival " concerts, Haley received a 8 ½ minute standing ovation, the public seemed to still love him more for his rock & roll. His next album was released on another new label, GNP Crescendo, in 1973. Instead of trying to modernize his style for the 1970s, however, it was decided that it should be simply titled "Just Rock & Roll Music". It featured a selection of songs spanning the rhythm & blues catalog of the 1950s, as well as an understated flirt with more country music alongside more recycled selections from Haley's older rock & roll sound.. This formula worked, and it was commercially a far greater success than its predecessor on Sonet Records, "Rock Around the Country".

On November 26th 1979, Bill Haley & His Comets performed at the Royal Variety Show - a Command Performance for Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II. A lot had happened in the 25 years since Bill Haley & His Comets had stepped into a New York recording studio, Decca Records' "Pythian Temple" on

Broadway & West 70th Street, to cut "Rock Around The Clock".

On February 9th, 1981 Bill Haley died suddenly of an apparent heart attack at his home in Harlingen, Texas. He was only 55 years old.

What occurred before, during, after, and in between the many successes and phases of Bill Haley's career? What was actually behind the professional image of "the star" Bill Haley? And what led to his untimely death at the relatively young age of 55? These are a few of the questions that this book shall attempt to address. And perhaps one more can be answered in the process: WHO, really was the man who invented rock & roll?

Motown Born To Country Grown

Bill Haley was born on a Monday, the 6th of July 1925 in Highland Park, Michigan, a blue collar working class neighborhood to the immediate northeast of the industrial city of Detroit. Highland Park is situated inland from Lake Sinclair, between the Great Lakes Huron and Erie, to the north and south, respectively. Henry Ford famously chose in 1908, Highland Park as the location for the factory to build his famous Ford Model T vehicles. Tens of thousands of people flocked there to work in his factory for a wage of \$5 per day, then an unprecedented amount of money for a daily wage.

It was a hot afternoon, when Maude Haley, who was an immigrant from Ulverston, Lancashire (England) and whose maiden name was Green, gave birth to a seven pound, eight ounce boy in a small, second floor apartment on Florence Avenue. Maude and her husband William A. C. Haley, who hailed originally from Firebrick, in northeastern Kentucky, on the Ohio border, christened their second child William John Clifton Haley.

Bill Haley's birth certificate names the attending surgeon as G. S. McAlpine. William Albert Clifton Haley gave his occupation as "Gas Station Attendant", while the mother gave her name as Maude Green and her occupation as housewife.

William A. C. Haley was a man who did not have much time to enjoy his adolescence. His own father had died young, and as the oldest son, had to take the responsibilities to care financially for his mother, brothers and sisters and of course, for himself. He did not marry until the last of his siblings left home, and for the times he lived in, he was relatively old when he finally did marry, at the age of thirty.



Bill Haley as an infant in his father's arms,
Boothwyn PA (circa 1926)
(Courtesy:J. Ketrick)

Maude, the daughter of a baker, helped to raise income by giving piano lessons for 25 cents an hour. With two children, one being Bill, the other his two-year old sister Margaret, the Haleys did not have a lot time, if any at all, to enjoy the nightlife of the million-inhabitant metropolitan community of Detroit with its many jazz and blues clubs. The social life of the Haleys mostly involved being at home and entertaining each other with music. Maude played the piano; while William Albert Clifton Haley was a talented banjo and mandolin player, while daughter Margaret had a fine singing voice. Baby Bill Haley was more or less the „whistle buoy“, as conservative critics would judge him also in his later years.

James Otis, a working colleague of Bill Haley's father described Will Haley as very musically inclined. It seems as if the genetic path was set for young Bill Haley. Mr. Otis also provides a good characterization of the father of the boy who would become rock & roll's first star: "... [*Bill Haley's*

father] had a bad speech impediment which made him shy of talking very much. He was very good with his hands, a born mechanic... [He] could fix almost anything. He kept to himself and, you know, I seldom saw him smile. I guess you would call him a real hillbilly at heart, but I tell you, he could play both the mandolin and banjo. He couldn't read no music, but he could pick out any tune he wanted. He had an ear for good country music. I think that's where little Billy got his ear for them foot stomping hillbilly tunes."

According to John W. (Jack) Haley, Will was viewed by his son's boyhood friends as *"being a peaceful man of few words."* Further, he was described as a *"gentle, hard working, but quiet man"*. Similarly, authors John W. Haley and John Von Hoelle concluded in their book *"Sound & Glory"* (Dyne-American Publications, Wilmington DE) in regard to Will Haley: *"It seems as if the Great Depression had left a bit sadness in his eyes, and a sense of doom, at times, descended on him. The lack of a good education and the hard life he had known in his youth gave him few grand illusions or great expectations. His quiet strength of character and a deep love of playing lively hillbilly music pulled him through many periods of personal depression."*

The year 1928 brought a new President to the United States - Herbert Hoover. When Hoover started to govern, American industry was still somewhat inefficient, and not even Detroit, with its Chrysler, General Motors and Ford auto factories, among others, had yet changed that fact. Nearly everything still depended on the agriculture, and a growing agricultural slump cast an ominous shadow over the future. With the 1929 stock market crash, out of which the Great Depression of the 1930s was triggered, millions of middle class families who had invested in stocks soon drifted into poverty. Today, it seems clear that the President and his advisors miscalculated the situation. Soon factories closed

everywhere, and as the early 1930s arrived, a full twenty five per cent of the population was unemployed.

Detroit and its surroundings were soon devastated and William A. C. Haley was one of that twenty five percent. The only opportunity for the Haley family to survive seemed to be moving to Maude's family in Pennsylvania. They bought an used Model T Ford and traveled 550 miles to Boothwyn, Pennsylvania in the hope that things would ultimately get better. In Boothwyn, Will received word from his wife's brother, Frank Green, of the possibility of securing a job in a viscose factory. With family help, Will secured a position paying a wage of twenty-five cents an hour. After a few months of living with Maude's family, they moved to a small second floor apartment in Shaw Terrace in Chester, Pennsylvania.

In 1933, the Haley family managed to get out of its financial difficulties, and Will exchanged his old Model T Ford for a newer car, and son Billy soon was the proud owner of his own bicycle. In Tupelo Mississippi, another little boy named Elvis soon also asked his mother Gladys and his father Vernon for a bicycle for his birthday...though Gladys Presley thought a guitar was safer...

Huett Davis, a neighbor and schoolmate of Bill Haley, recalls the financial strength of the Haley family in an interview with Haley biographer John Swenson:

"His father had a job, you see. At the time I didn't have a father, my father was dead and we were in poverty you might say. My mother was trying to raise a bunch of kids and we always thought he had quite a bit - he had a bicycle. His father had a cigarette making machine, and he'd get his father's tobacco and paper and he'd make cigarettes for us and bring them down to our place, and we'd go down to the creek and smoke and swim, so that's how we liked Bill Haley. We always waited for Bill to come down and bring us

cigarettes. We were kids and we were all about on the same level as far as what we had and did and we were all poor and we didn't realize it. At the time everybody was poor around the community here, everybody had the same thing - and it wasn't too much, but we all enjoyed it, whatever it was. Once in a while we'd get enough pennies together and get Marlboro cigarettes for ten cents a pack and boy, they were really great."

Despite smoking, Bill and Huett went to Sunday school and played baseball. Boothwyn was an idyllic little town that does not count more than five thousand inhabitants today. Bill Haley himself recalled his childhood there as his "Tom Sawyer days". Bill enrolled in Chelsea school, a one-room schoolhouse for the education of the town's youngsters; one can still find Haley's school marks in the archives of the "Bethel Historical Society". His teachers were Sara Jane Zebley and Sara Brodhead. In the years 1933 and 1934, Bill was awarded with A grades, with only two days of absence. In the grade following, however, he „worsened“ to a B average.

At an open field near the Davis house was the local boys gathering point for playing baseball. As a boy, this was a place where you could go to live out your sports heroics and relate even more to your baseball idols...unless your name was Bill John Clifton Haley.

In 1929, the four year old Bill Haley had to undergo an inner ear mastoid operation, which accidentally severed an optic nerve and left him blind in his left eye for the rest of his life. Only later did Will A. C. notice the handicap. One day in Highland Park, father and son were watching a plane in the sky. While Will was shading both his eyes from the sun, little Billy only shaded one eye. Will then knew that, whereas Bill could still hopefully amount to much in adult life, one thing was sure: he had no chance of becoming the next Knute