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GENE VINCENT AND EDDIE COCHRAN

Rock’n’Roll Revolutionaries

John Collis

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the memory of my brother Hugh, a rock'n'roll fan and producer of the musical Race with the Devil: the Legend of Eddie Cochran and Gene Vincent*, who died on 28 June 2003*

INTRODUCTION

Eddie Cochran caught up with the Gene Vincent tour of the UK on 24 January 1960, at the Ipswich Granada. It was the first-ever tour in Britain to offer wall-to-wall pop music, billed by impresario Larry Parnes as ‘A Fast Moving Beat Show’. Previous exotic visitors like Bill Haley, Buddy Holly and Jerry Lee Lewis had starred on variety bills with comics and crooners – or with Des O’Connor, who claimed to be both – but Vincent and Cochran were hardcore. Although the bill varied, particularly between one-night stands and week-long residencies, compere Billy Raymond introduced such artists as the Tony Sheridan Trio and Dean Webb, who featured on Jack Good’s mould-breaking television show *Oh Boy!*, the ‘new singing pianist’ Georgie Fame and ‘the new golden voice’ of Peter Wynne.

The timing of the tour had a potent symbolism. It marked the end of the monochrome 1950s, as the nation slowly recovered from the privations of war, and it launched the Swinging Sixties. It educated the first generation of British rock’n’roll guitarists like Big Jim Sullivan and Joe Brown, it inspired the Beatles when they saw the show at the Liverpool Empire, and it was the spark that ignited the rock’n’roll revolution. This was the pivotal moment, as a drunken Vincent and Cochran thrashed around the country.

Rock’n’roll would always be an American music, based on strong folk roots in black R&B and white hillbilly with an essential added measure of hype, but Vincent and Cochran provided a living seminar to eager students in the UK. They planted an enthusiasm for unadorned rock music that

survived its apparent demise as yet another fad – just as the records of Buddy Holly were hits in Britain when he was little more than a fading memory at home, the same would prove true of Cochran. And, in the last ten years of his often sad and chaotic life, Vincent even found words like ‘chaps’ slipping naturally into his language, as his Virginia drawl moved one step away from its homeland.

During the 1950s a new species, the teenager, evolved from a spongy, spotty, lower life form known to doctors as the adolescent, seen but rarely heard except when asking politely for a second helping at the family dinner table. The teenager was new because he or she was above all an economic animal, something not possible before as the effects of war lingered on, and by the end of the decade there were five million of us in Britain. It has been calculated, God knows how, that in 1959 we had £800 million to spend.

My share, if Christmas and birthday banknotes and postal orders were added to the weekly half-crown, was probably no more than £20, lamentably short of the fabulous £160 per head that the equation implies. But with seven-inch records at 6*s*. 8*d*. (you could buy three for a pound) and a front seat at the Gaiety in Station Road, Taunton, costing ninepence, a modest cultural life was possible.

Without the deadening responsibility of paying the mortgage and putting bread on the table, teenagers gave their money to the record companies, to the Gaumonts and the Odeons. The cyclical con trick of the fashion industry was yet to grease itself into action – jeans were jeans, shirts were shirts and pullovers were sensible. There were no computer games, and amusement arcades were found only at the seaside, where one could watch a papier-mâché execution for a penny. But the distinctive smell of warm plastic that arose from the valve-glowing record player in the corner of the room lured us towards rock’n’roll heaven.

Teenage eyes always gazed enviously across the Atlantic, where youthful access to cars was seemingly commonplace if Chuck Berry was to be believed and where, in the words of Willie Dixon and Muddy Waters, ‘the blues had a baby and they called it rock and roll’. In those years before the Beatles, pop music, not just rock’n’roll, remained almost exclusively American. This was in spite of the fact that British artists like Marty Wilde would briskly cover American hits and, thanks to their availability for promotion, the bias of disc jockeys and geared-up distribution, would often enjoy hits that many fans thought were theirs alone. If we take 1959 and 1960 together, only seven British records were accorded million-selling status, however, and they do not make a groovy bunch.

Chris Barber and his Jazz Band, with clarinettist Monty Sunshine to the fore, revived Sidney Bechet’s 1952 Parisian reverie, the haunting ‘Petite Fleur’. Grinning pianist Russ Conway honky-tonked his way through ‘Side Saddle’. The king of skiffle, Lonnie Donegan, abandoned his love affair with American folk-blues, the seed of British rock’n’roll, in favour of the fag end of music hall, with ‘Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavour on the Bedpost Overnight?’ and ‘My Old Man’s a Dustman’. Emile Ford turned to a ballad written in 1916 to ask ‘What Do You Want To Make Those Eyes At Me For?’, top of the charts at Christmas 1959 when Vincent arrived, Cliff Richard rejected the rock’n’roll verve of ‘Move It’ and ‘High Class Baby’ for the sing-along croon tune ‘Living Doll’, and children’s television entertainer Rolf Harris arrived from Australia with the injunction ‘Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport’. Yes, Britain was ready for Vincent and Cochran. Desperate for them, indeed.

In fact, in 1960 American music was somewhat in the doldrums as well. Tin Pan Alley was regaining control from the rebellious rock’n’rollers, and as the new decade dawned Frankie Avalon – clean-living, polite and respectful

to his seniors – was at the top of the American charts with a three-minute shot of sickly saccharine called ‘Why’, soon to be replaced by Mark Dinning’s death ballad ‘Teen Angel’. Dinning was an improvement in that at least his song was actually *accused* of being ‘sick’, but in truth it was almost as sugary.

There were admittedly some delightful one-offs – Johnny Preston’s Big Bopper chant ‘Running Bear’, Marty Robbins creating a cowboy film in song with ‘El Paso’, the Hollywood Argyles drawling ‘Alley-Oop’ and a handful of raw hits from New Orleans – but unadulterated rock’n’roll had gone the way of bobbysox and hula hoops. ‘I told you,’ the cigar-chomping record moguls said, ‘it was just a passing craze. Now let’s get back to some *real* music.’

Gene Vincent had not had a hit of any kind since late 1957, when ‘Dance to the Bop’ just made the American Top 50, and it was 18 months since Cochran’s ‘Summertime Blues’. But in Britain no one told us we were meant to prefer Frankie Avalon. Or Fabian with his atrocious ‘Hound Dog Man’, or Bobby Rydell with ‘Wild One’, two titles that surely transgressed the Trades Descriptions Act. What next – Ken Dodd? Well, yes, actually – ‘Love Is Like a Violin’ was to make the Top 10 in the summer. What we renegade rockers desperately needed in the face of Radio Naff was some black-leather grease, some real heroes. Cue Gene and Eddie.

At its purest, rock’n’roll was always a synthesis of sound and image, equally weighted. Sun Records boss Sam Phillips may have thought that he had found the holy grail of mid-50s pop music with a white boy who sounded black, but without Elvis Presley’s dangerous, heavy-lidded sexuality as well, the grail would have been severely tarnished.

Carl Perkins had two immense talents denied to Presley – as a jaw-droppingly nimble guitarist he laid down the blueprint for clean, incisive rockabilly picking, whereas

Presley was no more than a half-decent strummer, and as a songwriter Perkins brought both wit and social observation to the music in a way perhaps only surpassed by Chuck Berry and Jerry Leiber, while Presley wrote nothing. Sure, he may have seemingly coauthored some of his songs, particularly when the actual writer was as black and hungry as Otis Blackwell, but of course the undeserved co-credit was just part of 'Colonel' Tom Parker's pension portfolio.

As a sixteen-year-old Eddie Cochran, with his country-and-western partner Hank Cochran (no relation), travelled to Memphis and happened upon a performance by Presley. This experience must have been the first step towards their friendly parting a year or so later. Cochran wanted everything that Presley seemed to represent – rock'n'roll flash, wild and urgent music, screaming girls. He noted the way that Presley moved, and how a twitch here or a pelvic thrust there cued the screams like turning on a tap. Hank, on the other hand, was a dyed-in-the-wool country purist, wanting none of this vulgarity.

His younger partner was soon to develop his own distinctive but Presley-inspired mannerisms – the piston motion of his guitar, the shaking shoulders, the cunning build-up of hysteria by starting his act in darkness, back to the audience. Cochran's stage persona was also clearly – and unusually for the time – influenced by the black artists he admired, notably Little Richard.

Cochran's appearance was a curious amalgam of blond god and boy next door, a combination that could hardly fail. Although we all know that the camera lies, particularly when taking passport pictures, photographs do seem to suggest that he found it difficult to control his weight, with the puppy-fat jaws and pimples of an 'ordinary' teenager in one shot, the clean, chiselled lines of James Dean in the next. But this simply added to the dynamic contrast between the platonic, slightly jowly schoolmate and the

untouchable pop star. And when he wielded his guitar, it is clear that he needed no latter-day Sigmund Freud to point out the phallic symbolism of his Gretsch. He ground it at his hip in that trademark circular motion, imitating the motion of a steam train's wheels, but the girls in the audience did not immediately think of train spotting as they watched him.

If a genetic computer had taken the narcissistic, curled-lip beauty of teenage idol Ricky Nelson and blended it with Elvis Presley's unwholesome raunchiness, it would have invented Eddie Cochran. In appearance, then, he was the perfect pop star for the age, evoking healthy jealousy in boys, moistness in girls. But the former was no bar to his popularity among half the population because his prodigious skill on the guitar was defining masculinity on *behalf* of the boys in the audience, not creating a barrier between him and them. A star like Cochran sang *to* the girls but *for* the boys, and it was ever thus.

And just to cap this image made in heaven, he suddenly upped and went there. As has been pointed out many times – and Elvis is richer now than he ever was alive – premature death is a smart rock'n'roll career move. But when it takes away a pretty boy so cruelly young, before the booze that he enjoyed with such enthusiasm could give middle-aged permanence to that puppy fat, it also adds a perfect polish to the image. Suddenly Cochran shone as brightly as Buddy Holly, and was better looking with it.

And then there was Gene Vincent. Was ever sound and image so intriguingly blended? We are talking here, of course, partly of the image imposed on him by British pop producer and all-round genius Jack Good – except that to an extent Good was only tarting up what already existed. Vincent could be wild, debauched and destructive to himself and those around him. He could also be polite in the extreme, with a kind of resigned patience, and he spoke softly, like a real Southern gentleman. So far so good – or

Good, who spotted the potential in Vincent’s tortured contradictions.

For a start he had the purest, most beautiful voice in rock’n’roll. Listen to ‘Over the Rainbow’. What would otherwise be remembered as a schmaltzy torch song oversold by Judy Garland, as subtle as a lump hammer, is revealed as an aching meditation on mortality. Vincent, his left leg screaming in pain as a lasting legacy of his 1955 motorcycle crash, lived that song every day.

And so we must add to the lovely voice the bruised body – the useless, clanking, stinking, suppurating leg, the big, wide eyes gazing beseechingly upwards. Pathetic? OK, so put him in black leather and massage him in lard so that his jet-black hair dangles greasily over his sweating forehead. Make him abuse the microphone – lean on it like a crutch, fellate it, kick it, strangle it, turn it upside down, swing it around as if to decapitate the guitarist. The Southern gentleman with the angelic voice becomes a devil. Pure rock’n’roll, pure sound and image. Gene and Eddie, ready to take on the staid old United Kingdom.

And it is there that their legend lives on, far more than in their home country – fanzines, projects like *The Eddie Cochran Connection*, musicals, biographies, reissues. Rock’n’roll was never seen as a passing craze in the UK; it was always clearly and rightly recognised as the bedrock of popular music, resistant to fashion. Everything that has happened in pop music since owes something to the collision of rhythm and blues and hillbilly that gave birth to the music of Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Buddy Holly, Gene Vincent and Eddie Cochran.

Rock’n’roll guitarist Terry Clemson sums it up like this: ‘There has always been a rock’n’roll scene in Britain. In America they seemed to have no idea of how it shaped the music. Rock’n’roll to them could mean the Beach Boys – just another name for popular music. The real rock’n’roll only lasted for a couple of years over there, but here it has

just carried on. If Gene Vincent hadn't come to the UK his career would have been dead by the early sixties. He'd have been a truck driver or something.' Or, somehow, he may have achieved his oft-expressed dream of becoming a farmer. His last years were not prestigious, and the gigs were, in Clemson's word, 'shabby'. But at least he kept on rocking.

1. THE MARCH OF THE TEDDY BOYS

FOR ANY FORM of social rebellion to take root in modern-day western society, even one as straightforward as drainpipe trousers, economic health seems to be a prerequisite. After all, those trousers have to be paid for. This health breeds complacency, which in turn encourages protest. In the United Kingdom, after the bombings, bereavements and upheavals of the Second World War, such a situation had developed by the mid-1950s. Post-war reconstruction was completed in 1954, and unemployment was at its lowest since the Industrial Revolution – apart from periods of war, of course, when alas there is work for everyone. It remained below 2% until the mid-1960s.

This brought about what came to be tagged ‘the affluent society’, indulging in unprecedented consumption. ‘Most of our people have never had it so good,’ boasted Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in 1957. Industrial production increased by 80% in the 20 years from 1950, and the economy was growing faster than at any time since those boom years of Victorian industrialisation. Thanks to the establishment of the welfare state under the post-war Labour government, in particular its central glory the National Health Service, the country was healthier than ever before, nurtured on free orange juice and foul-tasting but wholesome cod-liver oil.

Food, after the fourteen long years of rationing that continued until July 1954, was now more plentiful, varied and exotic. There were lemons, bananas, oranges. It was also cheaper, with the proportion of the household budget spent on food actually declining, in spite of the temptations

of extra choice. It seems strange to recall that, in these pre-battery days of non-intensive farming, chicken was an Easter treat and beef was the regular Sunday staple – though an ingenious home economist would ensure that it did manage to reappear under various guises until midweek.

The growth areas absorbing the new money were private housing – owner-occupancy doubled in the two decades from 1950 – and leisure. In the 1950s television, with a second, commercial channel symbolising the new affluence when it was launched in September 1955, was steadily transformed from rare novelty into part of the furniture. The taking of holidays abroad quadrupled in twenty years, even though the era of the cheap package deal was yet to arrive. And more and more families enjoyed the ultimate symbol of domestic prosperity and freedom, the motorcar. At the end of the war there were 1.5 million in the UK. By 1960 the figure was 5.5 million, and this doubled in the following decade. Further education was taken up by increasing numbers of teenagers: there were 50,000 university students in 1939, more than double that figure by 1960, and double again by 1970.

A new moral climate developed in the 1950s as many old barriers and beliefs began to crumble. People were no longer willing to accept the rigidly imposed puritanical standards that had governed the nation since Victorian times. The sanctity of the monarchy, the church, the law and British imperial superiority were beginning to be questioned. On radio *The Goon Show*, running from 1952 until 1960, lampooned the Establishment, representing them as cowardly army officers, suave confidence tricksters and braindead Lords. This process continued triumphantly when *That Was The Week That Was* first appeared on BBC television in November 1962. This was a topical show of unprecedented irreverence, protected from protesting politicians by a liberal-minded director-general, Hugh

Carlton-Greene. On the streets *Private Eye* magazine – little changed over the years – continued the mood of impertinent questioning, as did the ex-Footlights revue *Beyond the Fringe* on stage, in what came to be known as the ‘satire boom’. *Fringe* performer Peter Cook, financial fairy godmother to *Private Eye*, opened the Establishment Club in Soho, its name defining its target rather than its audience.

The outmoded concept of an all-powerful British Empire finally died in the autumn of 1956, in humiliation. President Nasser of Egypt provocatively announced that he had nationalised the vital trade route of the Suez Canal, which linked the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and saved the long, expensive and often dangerous voyage around the Cape. In spite of huge opposition within the UK, Prime Minister Anthony Eden sent troops in support of an effort to seize back control of the canal. But in the face of disapproval and lack of support from both superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union, the exercise was doomed, the troops withdrew and Eden, in failing health, resigned.

And so the conditions were ripe for protest – economic stability, moral questioning and a collapse of the proud assumption of national superiority. Added to this was the irritating fact that the old class system seemed to remain intact, even if the occasional duke was forced to allow the hoi polloi to trample over his gardens and his carpets in an attempt to make ends meet. The Establishment may have lost the automatic right to respect, and may have been forced to grapple with death duties, but it was still in power.

In 1956 John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger* was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre, a radical alternative to the staid, evening-dressed West End. It was largely a vehicle for the leading character Jimmy Porter to sound off against that Establishment, and though much of it sounds today like an unfocused rant its effect was powerful

at the time. It marked the rude arrival of 'kitchen sink drama', with Osborne as the first of the 'angry young men'. The actual sink appeared above all in the slice-of-life plays by East Ender Arnold Wesker such as *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958), *Roots* (1959) and *The Kitchen* (1959).

The mysterious minimalist humour and coded blasphemy of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (first produced in English translation in 1955), the Goonish 'Theatre of the Absurd' exemplified by N.F. Simpson's *A Resounding Tinkle* (1957) and *One-Way Pendulum* (1959) together with Eugene Ionesco's *The Rhinoceros* (1960), and the strange comic menace of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1957) added to the heady sense of creative liberation. Perhaps their inscrutability was all that saved these subversive pioneers from the easily offended eye and twitching blue pencil of Her Majesty's theatrical censor, the Lord Chamberlain. Whatever, drama no longer took place exclusively in the middle-class drawing room so waspishly observed by Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan.

Novels like John Wain's *Hurry On Down* (1953), Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net* (1954), and John Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957) shared the youthful anger, if often conveyed with humour. It is ironic that Osborne, Amis and Braine moved steadily to the right in their political and social beliefs, finishing up as angry *old* men, never to be satisfied. But in their youth they spoke to a new, liberated generation, questioning authority, seeking a moral and intellectual freedom that formerly was simply not available outside the Bohemian other-world of Soho, which had always behaved just as it wished.

In November 1960, following a prosecution under the spanking new Obscene Publications Act, D.H. Lawrence's 1928 last novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, originally printed privately in Florence but outlawed in its unexpurgated version in the UK, was deemed to be not obscene on the grounds of overriding literary merit. Penguin's 3s. *6d.*

edition was soon being thumbed beneath every school desk, and we learned about a rather unusual approach to flower arranging as well as gazing at words in sober print that had previously been restricted to the walls of public lavatories at the rougher end of town.

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, provoked by guilt at the awful effects of the atom bombs on Japan, and stimulated by the continuing fear of a nuclear winter as the Cold War lingered on, reached its peak in 1960. This unlikely alliance of left-wing activists, radical churchmen and free thinkers like crusty philosopher Bertrand Russell was the most significant crusade since so many of the previous generation had travelled to Spain to confront fascism. The World War that separated these two movements was a compulsory national effort, whereas these were exercises of individual moral conviction, appealing in particular to the young.

And now that the concept of the teenager was economically viable, gang culture arrived in 1953 with the rise of the teddy boys. Originating in working-class south London, the Teds chose a style of dress that was a deliberate caricature of that worn by Edwardian dandies – drainpipe trousers, long ‘drape’ jackets and embroidered waistcoats, to which were added western-style bootlace neckties and suede shoes with thick rubber soles, ‘brothel creepers’. The new fad for hissing, clattering coffee bars gave the Teds their natural home, while the jukebox supplied the soundtrack.

In 1955 the film *Blackboard Jungle* was released and Bill Haley’s crisp syncopation ‘Rock Around the Clock’, initially put out unsuccessfully as a B side a year earlier, was used behind the credits. The Teds were in their element, jiving in the aisles and in some cases attacking the seats. In February 1957 Haley and his Comets became the first rock’n’roll artists to tour Britain, and the Teds came out in force to greet his ship at Southampton Docks, to join the

train that steamed triumphantly into Victoria Station and to block the pavements outside every concert venue.

A year later Jerry Lee Lewis arrived and left abruptly, his proposed six-week tour cancelled after three dates. He was harried out of the country by a press outraged that his third wife Myra was his thirteen-year-old cousin. 'Don't know what all the fuss was about,' said Lewis later. 'Hell, everyone knew she was only twelve.' Former fan Joyce Stevens said outside the stage door of the Tooting Granada: 'It's disgusting. He's finished as far as I'm concerned.' Her friend Barbara Morden agreed. 'We don't like him now … One of my friends has even smashed all the records she had of him.' Buddy Holly fared far better on his 1958 tour and, though he was still billed as a variety act, he and his band the Crickets were the noisiest, most exciting thing we had ever heard.

From the Teds to mods and rockers, to hippies and skinheads, and on to the punk rockers of the late 1970s, youth culture continued to spawn rebellious peer groups until the 1980s, when greed was installed as the national religion by Margaret Thatcher and unemployment soared. There was now no time nor inclination among the winners to join a tribe, since Thatcherism was based on the grasping individual rather than the collective good, and there was nothing left for the losers but drugs and despair. But in a more innocent age, in the years before Gene Vincent and Eddie Cochran arrived, the Teds laid the foundation for rock'n'roll culture.

To put our heroes into context, we need to consider what else the world was up to in 1960. It was a year of upheaval in Africa, a time when the death sentence was finally passed on colonialism. Prime Minister Macmillan, although a High Tory of the old school, offended his racist hosts when he addressed the South African government in Cape Town on 20 January. In a memorable and prophetic speech he observed: 'The wind of change is blowing through this

continent and, whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact.'

Macmillan advocated moves towards greater racial equality, advice that naturally went unheeded in bull-necked Afrikaner circles. His philosophy may not have been entirely altruistic – he saw that change, sooner or later, would be inevitable, but could not be sure whether the emerging black independent states would turn towards the West or to Soviet Russia. He recognised the need to woo them.

The process had begun in 1952 when in the British colony of Kenya the Mau Mau movement, members of the Kikuyu tribe, rose up against the white landowners. British troops were sent to Nairobi as the violence got worse, but reforms put hastily into place to improve the lot of the indigenous population were too late to halt the inevitable. In 1957 Ghana, a new nation created from two former British colonies, the Gold Coast and British Togoland, achieved independence under Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah. 'Our task is not done until the last vestiges of colonialism have been swept from Africa,' proclaimed Nkrumah.

Just how perceptive Macmillan's acceptance of necessary change turned out to be was soon demonstrated. On the day of his South African speech a conference began in Brussels with the aim of moving the Belgian Congo towards independence. Elections were held on 11 May 1960 and Patrice Lumumba became prime minister, though without an outright majority. On 14 July the Katanga province, led by Moise Tshombe, declared its own independence from Lumumba's government, and so a day later United Nations troops moved in to secure the capital Leopoldville. Two months later Lumumba was deposed and imprisoned by troops led by Joseph Mobutu. He escaped and sought UN protection, which was refused. In desperation Lumumba went on the run but was captured,

tortured and executed by Mobutu’s men. African independence had made a bloody start, and more than four decades later blood is still being spilled.

On 21 February 1960, in London, agreement was reached at last on the parliamentary system that would lead to black majority rule in Kenya, and on 1 April the ‘dangerous agitator’ Dr Hastings Banda was released from prison. Independence for Sierra Leone was agreed, followed by British Somaliland and Nigeria.

Meanwhile France was shedding its African possessions like confetti – Madagascar, Niger, Dahomey, Ivory Coast, Upper Volta, Chad, the Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville and Mauritania. Algeria, where guerrillas had been fighting for independence since 1954, proved a more intractable problem, as French settlers there rose in revolt against President Charles De Gaulle’s proposals for self-determination. Terrorists on both sides, Christian and Muslim, took their toll and when, in December 1960, De Gaulle visited the country, he somehow survived four assassination attempts. The police reaction cost 123 lives, mostly Muslim. At last, in January 1961, a French public tired of the violence gave majority approval in a referendum to independence for France’s troublesome African neighbour.

In the face of this ‘wind of change’, the whites in southern Africa dug in their heels. Rhodesia gave the police even greater powers to stifle dissent, and they were enthusiastically employed. And in South Africa, on 21 March 1960, came the darkest day of all, the Sharpeville massacre. In this black township in Transvaal a campaign of civil disobedience in protest at the hated pass laws, which required blacks to carry identity cards in designated ‘white’ areas, gathered force, and many ignored their leaders’ appeals for peaceful demonstrations.

A crowd of 15,000, boisterous but not violent, made their way to the police station in Sharpeville, where they

were confronted by a rank of 75 armed officers. Stones were thrown, the crowd surged forward, and the police opened fire indiscriminately. The scene was soon like a First World War battlefield, with 56 bodies lying where they fell, and 162 injured, many of whom later died of their wounds.. A later enquiry established that 70% of the dead were shot in the back, fleeing the guns. ‘If they do these things they must learn their lesson the hard way,’ sneered unrepentant police chief Colonel D.H. Pienaar. A state of emergency was declared on 30 March.

Two weeks after Sharpeville Africans protested against apartheid in a township outside Durban. Police opened fire and one protestor died. The mob then headed for the city and three more died. In the township of Nyanga outside Cape Town an African policeman was hacked to death. The area was cordoned off, and an African woman asked for permission to drive through to take her sick child to hospital. She was refused, and as her car reversed a soldier fired, killing the baby.

Two days later, on 9 April, South African Prime Minister Dr Hendrik Verwoerd gave a speech at Johannesburg Agricultural Show. A 52-year-old white farmer, David Pratt, stepped forward as Verwoerd completed his speech and fired two shots from a .22 pistol, injuring Verwoerd.

Meanwhile neo-Fascist supporters of Sir Oswald Mosley attacked an anti-apartheid rally in London, and in America there were violent reactions to black and white integration. Following the desegregation in 1957 of Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas, when the National Guard had to escort black children through an angry white barricade, a bomb was now detonated at the home of one of the first black pupils to attend. In April there was a riot when blacks gathered on a segregated beach in Mississippi, and ten were shot. Martin Luther King was arrested in February on a trumped-up charge of perjury in relation to income tax affairs, only to be acquitted in May. In early 1960 the world

was changing slowly, but white racists in Africa, America and Britain were not going to give up without a fight. Meanwhile, to the eternal glory of rock'n'roll, the late Buddy Holly had formed a deep and genuine friendship with Little Richard, and now Eddie Cochran was promoting the work of the little-known Ray Charles.

At the outset of the year the tension between the United States and Russia was increasing, and on 1 May it reached dangerous levels when an American spy plane, a Lockheed U-2, was shot down by a ground-to-air missile while pilot Gary Powers was taking photographs of Russian military installations. Powers was captured unhurt and Soviet president Nikita Khrushchev, seizing the propaganda moment, demanded an apology from Washington. This coincided with a scheduled summit meeting in Paris, due to be attended both by Khrushchev and his American counterpart, Dwight D. Eisenhower.

America initially denied that Powers was on a spying mission, claiming that he had simply lost his way. This was easily refuted by the Russians, who produced cameras, photographs and maps salvaged from the wreckage of the U-2. Eisenhower would still not apologise, however, citing the number of Russian spies known to be active, and the summit conference collapsed. Powers was tried in August, sentenced to ten years imprisonment, and released after two years in exchange for a Russian spy.

Eisenhower moved on to a ticker-tape welcome in Rio de Janeiro, part of the USA's strategy of improving links with South America as a bulwark against communism. Khrushchev, meanwhile, returned to France on an official state visit, and was presented with a live pig, which he graciously accepted. Relations between the UK and Russia thawed when a twice-weekly Comet service was inaugurated between London and Moscow. In November the Democratic candidate, John F. Kennedy, was elected to

the White House, where he inherited Eisenhower's Cold War problems.

On 1 March the city of Agadir in Morocco was flattened in seconds, destroyed by an earthquake and the subsequent tidal wave and fires. It was reckoned to be the worst natural disaster of modern times. Once 2,000 bodies had been dug from the rubble and an estimated 3,000 remained buried, the entire city was bulldozed and sealed off to prevent the spread of disease. On 25 April the town of Lar in Iran was similarly devastated by earthquake.

With their relationship with Russia under such strain, and feeling newly threatened by 1959's revolution in Cuba when guerrilla troops led by Fidel Castro removed the government of the dictator General Batista, the US put on a symbolic show of strength. Off the Florida coast, the nearest point to Cuba, the submarine Washington fired two Polaris missiles, which found their practice targets 1,100 miles away in the ocean.

In September, though, Castro was in New York for talks, but any hope of accommodation between the government of the United States and Castro's communist revolutionaries was to be finally destroyed in the following April, when the CIA bungled an attempt to foment a right-wing coup in Cuba. Anti-Castro exiles were landed at the Bay of Pigs on the island but Castro's troops were ready for them, presumably as a result of leaky security. Eighteen months further on and the world came the closest it has ever been to nuclear war, when American reconnaissance activity confirmed that Russian missiles had been supplied to Cuba. After a tense period of brinkmanship, including an American naval blockade of Cuban supply lines, Khrushchev agreed to remove the weapons.

In 1960 there were two nuclear-age landmarks in Britain: in June the Windscale (now Sellafield) nuclear reactor came on stream, and in October the Queen visited the shipyard at Barrow-in-Furness to launch the UK's first

nuclear-powered submarine, the *Dreadnought*, named after the first British battleship of the modern era.

Although Africa's wind of change, Cold War posturing and Jack Kennedy's presidential campaign dominated world news in 1960, there were lighter items in the news. Doctor Martens boots, claiming to bring a 'walking on air' sensation to the working man, arrived in the UK, Princess Margaret married Antony Armstrong-Jones in Westminster Abbey, while Tommy Steele arrived at St Patrick's in Soho Square for his own wedding. A Bolton couple won £100 in the Rock'n'roll Championships of Great Britain at the Lyceum Ballroom in the Strand and a Hull carpenter, Stanley Wilson, did rather better. His penny stake on the football pools netted him £100,000.

Traffic wardens took to the streets of London to 'assist' motorists with their parking problems and Elvis Presley – his hair already restored to civilian luxuriance – left Frankfurt after seventeen months in the service of Uncle Sam, stopping off briefly at Prestwick Airport near Glasgow while his plane refuelled. On his arrival on American soil a breathless press corps wanted to know if being in the army had changed his mind about rock'n'roll. After a moment's thought Elvis replied: 'No, it's not. I was in tanks for a long time and they rock and roll quite a bit.'

Britain's women tennis players regained the Wightman Cup from America, seemingly in slow motion on the evidence of newsreel footage, and on the salt flats of Bonneville, Utah, Donald Campbell climbed unhurt from the wreckage of his 40-ton, £1 million car Bluebird, capsized by a side wind during his attempt on the world land-speed record. He was within the measured mile of the course, accelerating towards success, when the accident happened, and owed his life to his safety belt.

Although the Derby was filmed in Technicolor for the first time in 1960 (Lester Piggott triumphant) most of these events, both world-threatening and trivial, were reflections

of a monochrome world. Buildings, cars, films and clothes were in muted tones. But to the Teds, living rock’n’roll colour had already arrived in the shape of Gene Vincent and Eddie Cochran.

2. ON THE ROAD

AT THE TIME of Gene Vincent's arrival in the UK for his first tour, the British music industry was in one of its periodic agonies over alleged corrupt practices. On 28 November 1959 the *Melody Maker* led with 'Payola Probe Sensation: Split in Tin Pan Alley', reflecting questions that had been raised in the national press and had even reached the floor of the House of Commons. But hard facts were thin on the ground, merely musings as to whether 'deejays, music publishers and record A&R managers were involved in an American-styled "payola scandal" concerning plug-money payments and record-pushing rackets'. Surely not. It was also suggested that it was unfair that artists and recording managers should have interests in publishing, since inevitably they would favour material they had a financial interest in, regardless of quality.

There was logic in this. In America the disc jockey and all-powerful television presenter Dick Clark emerged from the payola investigation smelling of roses, in spite of extensive publishing interests involving artists he ceaselessly plugged on *American Bandstand*.

Disc jockey Pete Murray reacted haughtily to the controversy. 'I have been offered a bribe only once,' he said loftily. 'A character in a club offered me ten pounds to plug an American singer he was interested in. I told him what he could do with his money.' And the producer of *Juke Box Jury*, Russell Turner, claimed that 'you get so that you can brush off an approach before it has even been made'.

The controversy rumbled on as the tour proceeded around the country. On 16 April 1960 – a fateful day for

rock'n'roll as Vincent and Cochran took to the stage together for the last time in Bristol – the *MM*'s parliamentary correspondent, Reg Robinson (holder of a post most readers were no doubt unaware of until then), wrote: 'Disc jockeys emerged victorious in the House of Commons last week despite a slashing payola attack on them by Mr Roy Mason, Labour MP for Barnsley. All his allegations were shot down by Postmaster General Reginald Bevin, who spoke of disc jockeys as "men of honour".' With this bizarre endorsement the matter slid from the headlines.

Meanwhile, plans had been announced for a VIP dawn greeting to be laid on when Vincent's plane landed at London Airport North on Saturday 5 December 1959. At this stage he was principally flying in to star on Jack Good's ABC-TV show *Boy Meets Girls* on 12, 19 and 26 December, a visit coinciding with the release of his latest single 'Wild Cat', coupled with 'Right Here On Earth', and he was to be met by the show's residents Marty Wilde and the Vernons Girls. 'Other TV and possible concert dates were being lined up at press time,' said the *MM*. Rival *New Musical Express* added the detail that Vincent would also be entertaining American servicemen in Germany over Christmas – the second and third *Boy Meets Girls* appearances would be tele-recorded.

The *NME* writer Ifor Griffiths pointed out that, unlike other recent visitors such as Jerry Keller and the Browns, Vincent had not had a hit for about three years – accurate indeed, with 'Bluejean Bop' in autumn 1956 his most recent UK success. But reference was made to his loyal following, and while the tour did revive his chart career in Britain this would remain true for the rest of his career – Vincent became the first artist of the rock'n'roll generation to transcend the need for a current hit, although naturally his appeal dwindled among those influenced only by the latest chart heart-throbs. Among true rockers, his charismatic

image remained potent until his death. As he arrived *Disc* went to town with a front-page story greeting ‘The Rock’n’roll Idol of Millions’.

Griffiths was more analytical. ‘His powerful rocking style has a pronounced country-and-western flavour to it,’ he said, ‘no doubt due to Gene’s interest in folk music during his youth. When he was a mere twelve-year-old, he used to delight in listening to the Negro folk songs he heard on visits to a Virginia backwoods store.’ Vincent was said to own a farm in California ready for his eventual retirement from the music business – over the years, the location of this fantasy farm was to vary.

In 1959 he said: ‘I intend to settle down one of these days and farm … after all, this business cannot go on the way it is for ever … Just outside of Norfolk I bought me some acres, and one of these days I intend to start a farm going.’

A week before he was due to arrive, a single concert date was confirmed for 6 December, when he would be guest star on *The Marty Wilde Show*, featuring various artists from the ‘stable’ of management impresario Larry Parnes, at the Granada, Tooting, and he was also booked for an interview on Brian Mathews’ *Saturday Club* on the Light Programme. Tooting was where Jerry Lee Lewis’s tour had been abruptly aborted. At the time that the concert date was announced, incidentally, a feature headline in the *Melody Maker* screamed: ‘“Biscuits? I Dunk Them!” says hit singer Adam Faith.’ Gritty, no-holds-barred stuff.

As Vincent’s plane crossed Ireland a huge reception committee assembled in the arrivals building at the airport. His record company had been active in papering the house, laying on buses to take fans from central London to greet him, and alerting the press to this ‘spontaneous’ demonstration of support. Meanwhile *Boy Meets Girls* was represented not just by Wilde and backing group the

Vernons Girls as announced, but by Good himself and Italian rocker Little Tony. At Jack Good's suggestion Joe Brown and his band were also there and had set up their equipment in the corner, desperately trying to keep their fingers warm and supple in the dark December chill. Brown and the band, the Firing Squad, said the *NME*, would later be rehearsing with Vincent for his Tooting date.

In 1998 Brown recalled his first impressions of Vincent. 'We went down to Heathrow and played him off the plane … We were a little bit in awe of him … He was very, very polite, called everybody sir, but he had this glint in his eye … He was a bit of a strange bloke but we put this down to artistic temperament, really.' Brown later observed: 'He had this great presence on stage, and he looked ominous … He had this evil eye he used to fix on you.'

Vincent came in off the tarmac to be greeted with 'Be Bop a Lula', and of course was moved and delighted by the reception. Among the fans present was Alan Vince. 'When I first came face to face with Gene … I couldn't have been more thrilled or excited had it been Elvis Presley. In fact I doubt if Elvis could have meant as much to us all … Gene must have been tired but he still managed to keep smiling and sign autographs.'

There was a busy day ahead – a live appearance on *Saturday Club*, a recorded interview for Radio Luxembourg with disc jockey Ray Orchard, who followed Vincent around and taped more snippets for his Friday-night *Capitol Show*, and a press reception held by EMI at the New Bagatelle Club in Mayfair. As the day wore on, Jack Good became more and more worried. 'Oh dear, this won't do,' he thought. The wild man of rock, the banned orgasmic moaner of 'Woman Love', turned out to be a polite, softly spoken man in a sensible winter jacket. And his years of living with disability had taught him almost to mask his limp. Good realised that he had some image work to do.

He later reflected on the problem, and his inspired solution. 'He was a quiet, thin, wan fellow in a baseball jacket, and he said, "Hello, sir, I am very happy and proud to make your acquaintance." … I was deeply disturbed and I wondered what we were going to do. I thought he was going to be a dagger boy, the rock'n'roll screaming end … I had to fix him.'

Good noticed the leg iron and the slight hobble. 'I was a Shakespeare fan, so hobbling to me meant Richard III. I even thought of giving him a hunchback! … Then I thought, "He can be moody like Hamlet." I once played a murderer, Lightbourne, with gloves on … so I added that. I arranged for some steps so he could hobble nicely on TV, but he negotiated them very well and hardly looked as if he was hobbling at all. I had to yell out, "Limp, you bugger, limp!" He didn't mind, he limped.' The leather-clad biker image was perfected by mid-January.

However, Joe Brown may have had a hand in giving Good the idea. 'I wore [black leather] all the time because I had a motorbike. Jack could possibly have got the idea from me. I don't lay claim to it, but I've got a feeling it was … As if you needed to make Gene Vincent look more sinister than he was!'

And so, after some jet-lagged sleep, it was on to the Tooting Granada the night after his arrival, as guest star attraction on Marty Wilde's show. Also on the bill were Terry Dene, Vince Eager, Dickie Pride and Johnny Gentle. Vincent's inclusion had guaranteed a full house, noisy in their adulation. After an uncertain start to the evening thanks to a reluctant microphone, Vincent turned in a manic, acrobatic, sweaty and fevered set, proof indeed that with Jerry Lee off the scene, at least for the time being, he was the most dynamic performer in rock'n'roll.

'That was some welcome,' he said in his dressing room after the show. He diplomatically did not refer to the failed microphone, claiming instead that he left the stage briefly