

# 20 Best Rockabilly Albums

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

From the pioneers of the golden era to the faces of the rockin' revival and through to 21st century roots stars, this is *Vintage Rock's* rundown of the cream of rockabilly long-players...

**T**here are some who say that rockabilly lives best in its singles, not its albums. However, there are countless LPs that really show off this most rockin' of musical genres, and we've scanned the decades from the 50s right up to the present day, to find the greatest. From the earliest practitioners to the revivalists of the 80s, through to those artists such as Imelda May and JD McPherson who are still keeping the spirit of rockabilly alive 65 years after its fiery birth, these are the albums that no self-respecting hepcat can be without...



**20** ROBERT GORDON WITH LINK WRAY  
**Fresh Fish Special**  
Private Stock (1978)

Robert Gordon's debt to Sun-era Elvis is obvious in this, the Maryland-born singer's feisty sophomore effort from 1978, though the addition of the great Link Wray gives this 10-track collection a pleasing layer of dirt. With one deep cut from *Jailhouse Rock* (*I Want To Be Free*) and guest turns from The Jordanaires, Presley's ghost certainly hovers over this album. Yet even when the generously-quiffed Gordon ventures outside the rockabilly playbook – such as on a cover of Bruce Springsteen's *Fire* – he manages to give it some old-time rock'n'roll sleaze.



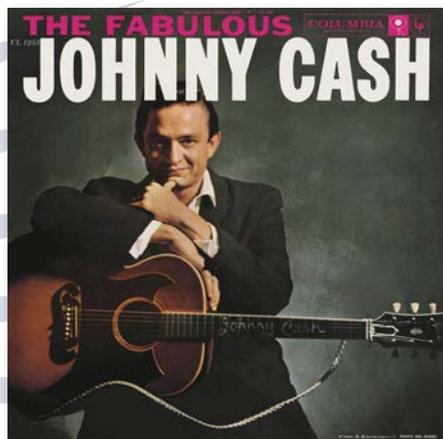
**19** JD McPHERSON  
**Let The Good Times Roll**  
Rounder (2015)

A rare 21st century entry, but we couldn't ignore JD McPherson's hot-blooded second album from 2015. Cranking up the drums and bass this time round, he brings a psychobilly intensity to many of the tracks here, without sacrificing their rootsy authenticity. McPherson's voice, which sounds like Jackie Wilson if he'd fallen in with the Burnettes, has never been better, particularly on the *Summertime Blues*-like title track, while *It Shook Me Up* screams like a lost Little Richard classic and *Mother Of Lies* has a cool Stray Cat strut.



**18** MATCHBOX  
**Matchbox**  
Magnet (1979)

Of all the rockabilly revivalists, Matchbox learned from the best up close, having backed or supported visiting American acts such as Carl Perkins, Bo Diddley, Mac Curtis, Ray Campi and Sleepy LaBeef. This, their third long-player, offers up an array of well-chosen covers (Freddy Cannon's *Buzz Buzz A-Diddle-It*, Jerry Reed's *Lord, Mr Ford* et al), with a good dose of rockin' originals, the standout being *Rockabilly Rebel*, which gave the band their first major hit, peaking at No.18 in the UK charts in November 1979.



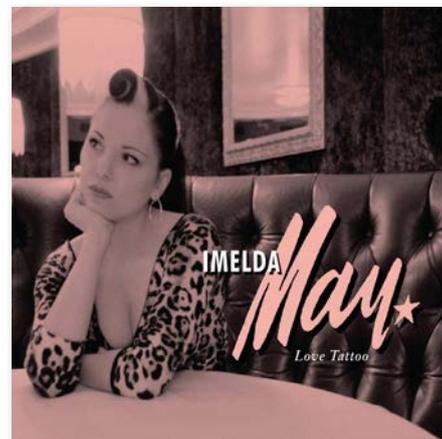
**17 JOHNNY CASH**  
**The Fabulous Johnny Cash**  
 Columbia (1958)

Johnny Cash's first studio LP for Columbia Records is an all killer, no filler collection of instant favourites. Clocking in at a swift 28 minutes, Cash had clearly been saving up his best stuff 'til he was free of Sun and of Sam Phillips' stipulation of no drums or gospel. The 12 songs here are just as lean and spare as his Sun material, albeit with an extra coat of varnish. The solemn *Don't Take Your Guns To Town* and chugging *One More Ride* are priceless and timeless, while *I Still Miss Someone* will tear your heart wide open.



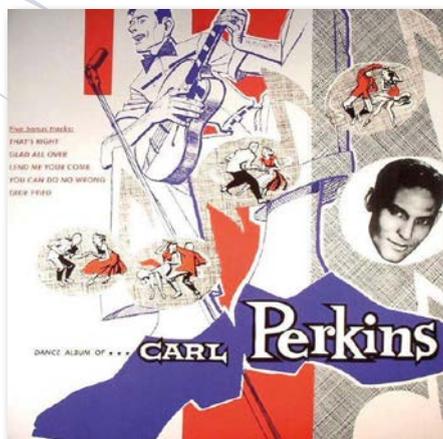
**16 GENE VINCENT & HIS BLUE CAPS**  
**Bluejean Bop!**  
 Capitol (1956)

Gene Vincent's debut LP is not the most consistent of his career (it was made in a rush to ride the Elvis wave of '56), but it works to the record's favour. Its hurried production and scattershot song selection feel like it's captured a moment. Rock'n'roll was never intended to be well-thought-out, it was always meant to feel spontaneous and there's a palpable energy here, whether the band are tearing into old standards (*Up A Lazy River*, *Peg O' My Heart*, *Ain't She Sweet*) or their own rave-ups (*Jumps*, *Giggles And Shouts* and the title track).



**15 IMELDA MAY**  
**Love Tattoo**  
 Universal (2008)

She may have left rock'n'roll behind over the past few years, but – for a time – Imelda May put rockabilly back in the spotlight, giving it a profile it hadn't enjoyed since the early 80s. Though not actually her debut (May released the LP *No Turning Back* in 2003 under her real name of Imelda Clabby), this was the album that announced her to the world, particularly on the stomping *Johnny Got A Boom Boom*. There's also blues, jazz and swing in May's idiosyncratic gumbo, but it's the rockabilly that gives *Love Tattoo* its distinctive swagger.



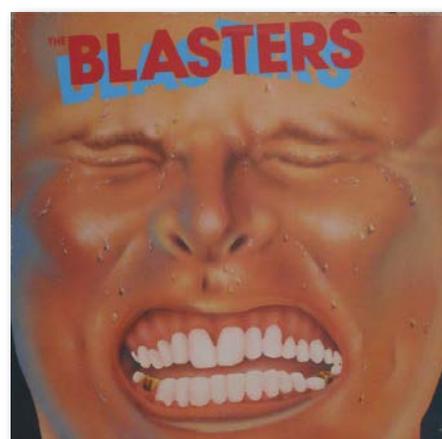
**14 CARL PERKINS**  
**Dance Album Of Carl Perkins**  
 Sun (1957)

Rush-released by Sun after Carl Perkins upped sticks and headed off to record for Columbia, *Dance Album...* failed to make much of an impact back in 1957, which seems crazy now for an LP that essentially reads like a Greatest Hits compilation. They're all here – *Blue Suede Shoes*, *Matchbox*, *Movie Magg*, *Honey Don't*, *Everybody's Trying to Be My Baby*, *Boppin' The Blues*, *Gone, Gone, Gone...* The pace rarely drops on a rollicking set of songs. Check out the expanded 2004 reissue which adds a further six tracks for even more hits that never were.



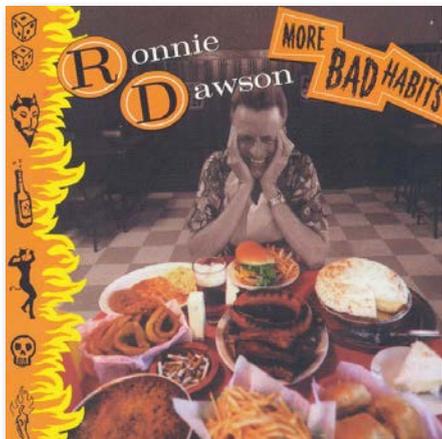
**13 THE CRICKETS**  
**The "Chirping" Crickets**  
 Brunswick (1957)

Okay, so ignoring the groan-worthy title, the only album Buddy Holly released in his lifetime is a belter. How could it not be when it includes such jukebox evergreens as *That'll Be the Day*, *Not Fade Away*, *Maybe Baby*, *I'm Lookin' For Someone To Love* and *Oh, Boy!* Even if the other seven numbers had been duds – which they most certainly aren't – we'd still be talking a 24-carat classic. Considering the ages of everyone involved (Buddy was just 20 years old when he made it) it's a breathtakingly assured debut.



**12 THE BLASTERS**  
**The Blasters**  
 Slash (1981)

With most of its tracks clocking in around the two-minute mark, there's a case to be made that The Blasters' second LP (their first, *American Music*, was barely heard at time, due to only a couple of thousand copies being pressed) was to the rockabilly revival what the Ramones' first record was to punk – instant, no messin' around, get-to-the-point rock'n'roll. The Blasters cherry-picked the best from punk, swing and country and put it all through a rockabilly grinder. Opening track *Marie, Marie* would later become a Top 20 hit for Shakin' Stevens. ➔



**11** **RONNIE DAWSON**  
**More Bad Habits**

Yep Roc Records (1999)

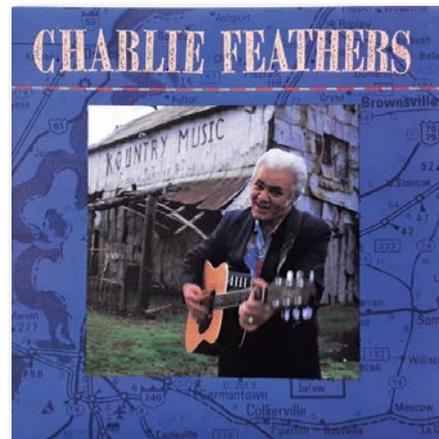
Though Ronnie Dawson always referred to his own music as rock'n'roll, not rockabilly, truth is he was as rockabilly as it comes. Despite achieving a modicum of success in the 50s, his career didn't really take off until the 80s, and in 1999 he recorded what was considered his comeback album. Given Dawson's age at the time – he was 60 when the record came out – this rock's pretty hard. Maybe it was a sense in which The Blond Bomber still had something to prove, more than 40 years after he'd started out, that makes this LP so fierce.



**10** **THE POLECATS**  
**Polecats Are Go!**

Mercury Records (1981)

Though Britain's very own Polecats couldn't quite match the Stray Cats for UK chart success (only two of their singles went Top 40), their debut album, produced by Dave Edmunds, is a must-have for true rockabilly-heads. A mix of self-penned originals (mostly inked by Brit rockabilly hero Boz Boorer) and some eccentric covers (they give David Bowie's *John, I'm Only Dancing* a thoroughly rockabilly facelift) make this one of the great rock'n'roll records of the 80s. It deserved better than its No.28 UK chart placing.



**09** **CHARLIE FEATHERS**  
**Charlie Feathers**

Elektra (1991)

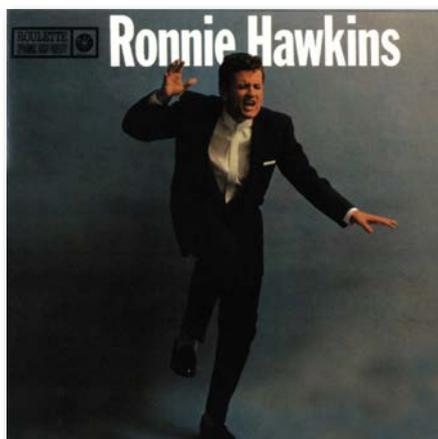
Charlie Feathers is one of the great unsung heroes of rockabilly. He cut records for Flip, Sun, Meteor and King in the 50s and released a raft of albums right through to the 80s, though we're plumping for his final studio long-player from 1991, which, considering it was waxed by a 59-year-old, is so much better than it has any right to be. Feathers penned seven of its 14 hard-rockin' tracks here, and clearly had more fire in his belly than many singers half his age. He may not have been lauded in his heyday, but he sure went out on a high.



**08** **WANDA JACKSON**  
**Rockin' With Wanda**

Capitol (1960)

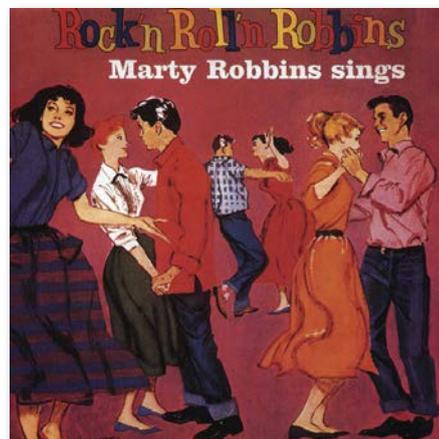
Unlike her more country-tilted, self-titled debut album from 1958, this 1960 compilation, released to capitalise on the success of *Let's Have A Party* (UK No.32/US No.37), captures Wanda Jackson at her rockin' best. From the volcanic rock'n'roll of *Fujiyama Mama* to the brilliantly mean-spirited *Hot Dog! That Made Him Mad* to *Rock Your Baby* and the get-on-the-dancefloor-now punch of *Honey Bop*, *Rockin' With Wanda* does exactly what it says on the tin. The best female rock'n'roll record of the 50s and 60s? It's a slam-dunk.



**07** **RONNIE HAWKINS**  
**Ronnie Hawkins**

Roulette (1959)

Rompin' Ronnie may now be better known as the man who mentored The Band, but his rockabilly credentials are rock-solid. Not only was he the cousin of fellow rockabilly ledge Dale Hawkins, but he waxed one of the most blistering debuts of the 50s. Admirably, most of the songs from this self-titled classic are self-penned, though he also tears through some deftly-chosen covers including Billy 'The Kid' Emerson's *Red Hot* (as *My Gal Is Red Hot*), Chuck Berry's *Thirty Days* (reworked as *Forty Days*) and Larry Williams' *Dizzy Miss Lizzy*.



**06** **MARTY ROBBINS**  
**Rock'n Roll'n Robbins**

Columbia (1956)

Marty Robbins was one of music's true polymaths – a country star, rockabilly hero and award-winning NASCAR driver. The C&W-tinged *Gunfighter Ballads And Trail Songs* may be his most famous release, but this more rockabilly-infused LP is our pick. Though it's missing possibly his finest rock'n'roller, *Sugaree*, fine originals include *Tennessee Toddy*, *Respectfully Miss Brooks* and *Mean Mama Blues*. Robbins is remembered as a country balladeer, but it's worth reminding ourselves how convincingly he rocked at the start of his career.

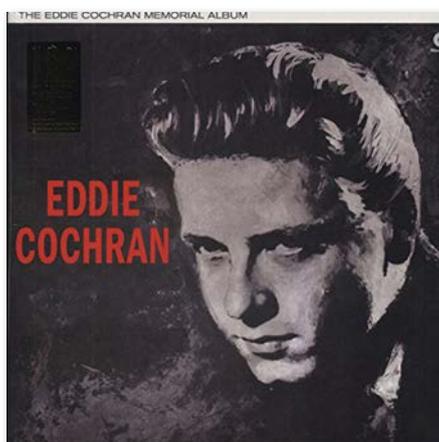


## 05 STRAY CATS

**Stray Cats**

Arista (1981)

Perhaps the greatest compliment we can pay the Stray Cats' debut is that, if it had come out in the mid-50s, we would still be talking about it as a classic. Neo-rockabilly was bubbling over into the mainstream in the early 80s, but it took this uber-cool trio from Massapequa, New York, to catapult rock'n'roll back into the public consciousness. The fact that their originals – *Runaway Boys*, *Rock This Town* et al – can stand proudly next to some well-chosen covers (*Ubangi Stomp*, *My One Desire*) only confirms how accomplished this album is.

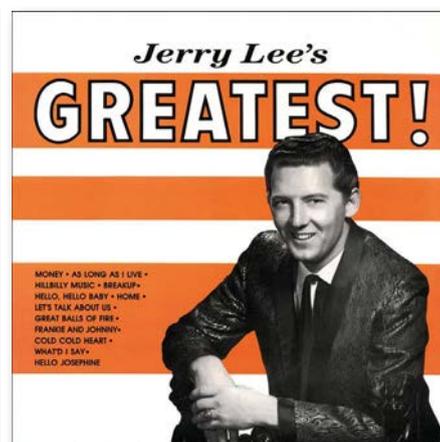


## 04 EDDIE COCHRAN

**The Eddie Cochran Memorial Album**

Liberty (1960)

Eddie Cochran released just one album in his lifetime, 1957's *Singin' To My Baby*, but that covers-heavy set never quite captured the raw, voltaic energy of the performer at his peak. Much more representative – and rockin' – is *The Eddie Cochran Memorial Album* (originally issued in May 1960, a month after his death, as *12 Of His Biggest Hits*), which at least includes *C'mon Everybody*, *Three Steps To Heaven*, *Somethin' Else* and *Teenage Heaven*. Also worth checking out is a swaggering cover of Ray Charles' *Hallelujah, I Love Her So*.

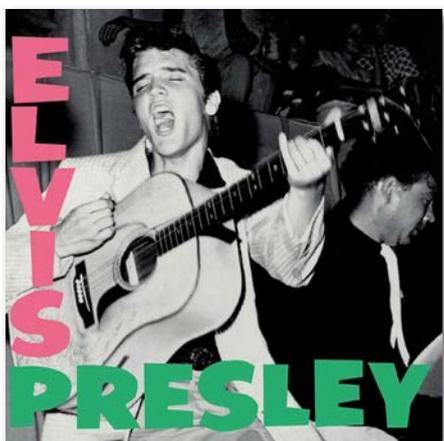


## 03 JERRY LEE LEWIS

**Jerry Lee's Greatest!**

Sun (1961)

We could have chosen Jerry Lee Lewis' self-titled debut, but the absence of both *Great Balls Of Fire* and *Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On* now seems a bizarre omission. *Great Balls...* finally turned up on his sophomore effort, *Jerry Lee's Greatest!* (you gotta admire the chutzpah of an artist who titles his second album like it's a Best Of compilation), along with scorching covers of *Money*, *Let's Talk About Us* and *What'd I Say*. Despite Lewis being at Sun for a total of seven years, this was only the second and final Jerry Lee LP issued by Sam Phillips.



## 02 ELVIS PRESLEY

**Elvis Presley**

RCA Victor (1956)

Comprising three tracks from a Nashville session, four from New York and five unreleased Sun sides, Elvis Presley's eponymous debut may appear a bit of a mess, but that's only because it was rush-released to capitalise on the King's sky-rocketing popularity. Kicking off with *Blue Suede Shoes* there are songs here representing every side of Presley's musical education – rockabilly, blues, R&B, country, and pop, only presented in a way that nobody had ever heard before. A star was born on one of the most iconic rock'n'roll albums of all time.

## 01 JOHNNY BURNETTE AND THE ROCK 'N ROLL TRIO

**Johnny Burnette & The Rock 'n Roll Trio**

Coral Records (1956)

Johnny Burnette & The Rock 'n Roll Trio may not have been the biggest selling album of the 50s, but, over time, it's certainly proved to be one of the most influential.

Scores of singers and bands – from the likes of Led Zeppelin and Rod Stewart to the Stray Cats – have cited The Rock 'n Roll Trio (brothers Johnny and Dorsey Burnette and friend Paul Burlison) among their most important formative influences.

Recorded between May and July of 1956, this was rockabilly music at its rawest and most pure, clocking in at just 26 minutes and including such unimpeachable classics as *Honey Hush* and *Train Kept A-Rollin'*. In fact, the Trio's cover of Tiny Bradshaw's jump boogie tune from 1951 is credited as being one of the first songs to include guitar distortion, a huge leap forward in the sound of rock'n'roll. What really marks this debut album out, however, is the sheer amount of self-composed numbers.

*Rock Billy Boogie*, *Lonesome Tears In My Eyes*, *I Just Found Out* and *Your Baby Blue Eyes* are all punchy and self-assured, while the covers, including Stick McGhee's jump blues standard *Drinkin' Wine, Spo-Dee-O-Dee*, *Drinking Wine* are given a thorough Rock'n'Roll Trio makeover.

