

RICKY NELSON: 1957-1972



TIME  
LIFE  
MUSIC

*The*  
**ROCK'N'ROLL**  
•ERA•

Digital Remaster

# RICKY NELSON: 1957-1972

- 1 I'm Walkin' (1957)
- 2 A Teenager's Romance (1957)
- 3 Waitin' In School (1957)
- 4 Be-Bop Baby (1957)
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- 22 She Belongs to Me (1969)
- 23 Garden Party (1972)

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**ROCK'N'ROLL**  
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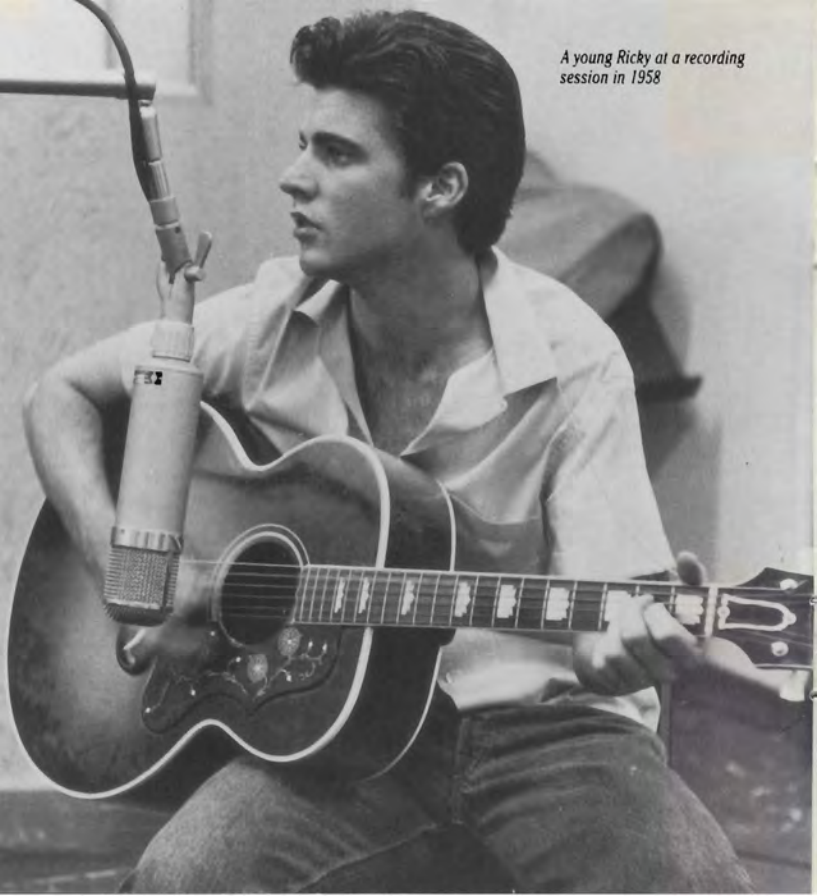
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TIME  
**LIFE**  
MUSIC

- 1 I'm Walkin' 2 A Teenager's Romance 3 Waitin' in School 4 Be-Bop  
Baby 5 Shirley Lee 6 Stood Up 7 Believe What You Say 8 Hello,  
Mary Lou 9 Travelin' Man 10 It's Late 11 Never Be Anyone Else  
but You 12 Just a Little Too Much 13 Lonesome Town  
14 Fools Rush In 15 Young World 16 It's Up to You  
17 Poor Little Fool 18 A Teenage Idol 19 String  
Along 20 For You 21 Mystery Train 22 She  
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*A young Ricky at a recording session in 1958*



## RICKY NELSON: 1957-1972

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Ricky Nelson was the first rock 'n' roll star created by television, and given that medium's history of subverting popular music, television could have done worse. Ricky may not have been a raw, raving rockabilly like Elvis Presley or Jerry Lee Lewis, but he was a great rock 'n' roll artist nevertheless.

He was born Eric Hilliard Nelson on May 8, 1940, into a show business family: his father, Ozzie, was the leader of a well-known dance band featuring Ricky's mother, Harriet, as vocalist. In 1944, the couple premiered *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* on radio, with child actors playing Ricky and his older brother, David. By 1949, at the insistence of Ricky and David, the two brothers were playing themselves. The entire family made the jump to television when the ABC program premiered on October 3, 1952. *Ozzie and Harriet* presented the quintessential white, middle-class American family of the Eisenhower years. Ricky grew up on television, literally.

While Ricky was a student at Hollywood High, he dated a girl named Arline. Listening to her swoon over an Elvis record on the car radio one night, Ricky told Arline in a cool, casual manner that he too was cutting a rock 'n' roll disc. Arline stifled a snicker; the gauntlet had been thrown.

Ricky went home and asked his father if he could borrow the TV-series orchestra to cut a demo. Perhaps remembering that a recent episode of the show had revealed that Ricky was forming a band, Ozzie quickly agreed. Ricky decided to record Fats Domino's **I'm Walkin'** because it contained the only two chords he knew how to play. He sang the song at the end of the TV show on April 10, 1957, and young America approved. Within a month, *I'm Walkin'*, with **A Teenag-**

**er's Romance** on the flip side, entered the charts. After that, every episode of *Ozzie and Harriet* ended with Ricky and his combo playing a rock 'n' roll tune.

It was not a bad little combo, either. Country star Joe Maphis played lead guitar on such early hits as **Stood Up**, but by 1958, rockabilly whiz James Burton, who had played rhythm on the early sides, took over the lead. Burton, a 17-year-old Louisiana boy lost in the wilds of wicked Los Angeles, soon moved into the Nelson home. Besides Ricky on rhythm guitar (later replaced by Glen Campbell), the rest of the band consisted of James Kirkland on bass, Richie Frost on drums and Gene Garth on piano. Later, Ray Johnson (and then Leon Russell) played piano, and Joe Osborne bass. The combo turned out a tight rockabilly sound under the supervision of Jimmy Haskell and Ozzie Nelson.

To select the tunes for the show, Haskell would sort through a couple hundred songs weekly, taking the 30 or more he liked best to the Stage Five Productions set where the TV program was filmed. Ricky would go to his dressing room, which had a piano and a phonograph, and sort through Haskell's choices, narrowing the selection to one or two songs. The band went into the studio around 7 p.m. to rehearse, and Ricky arrived around 8 to sing with them. They would then work until 2 or 3 a.m. Ozzie never lasted that late, however, so Haskell would play the finished tapes back to him at Stage Five the next morning.

Ricky was not a writer, so his material came from a variety of sources. *Stood Up* was suggested to him by Lew Chudd, the president of his label, Imperial. **Shirley Lee** was written and first recorded by Bobby Lee Trammell with, appropriately enough, James Burton on

lead guitar; Ricky decided to remake the song after Burton played him the original single one night at the Nelson house. **Hello, Mary Lou** was written and recorded by Gene Pitney, but his version failed to chart. Ricky never even heard the original until his own interpretation became a hit.

**Poor Little Fool** was written by Shari Sheeley, the girlfriend of Eddie Cochran, the rockabilly singer who scored with *Summertime Blues*. Along with rockabilly artist Gene Vincent, she was badly injured in the 1960 car wreck in England that took Cochran's life. Ricky and Burton used to ride motorcycles and spend time with Cochran and Vincent, which is how Ricky first met Sheeley. When he heard the demo of *Poor Little Fool* (sung by P. J. Proby, an Elvis hopeful then known as Jet Powers), Ricky did not like it because it sounded "too much like Elvis," whom he idolized. The arrangement, therefore, was completely revamped, and it became Ricky's first No. 1 single as well as the first single to top *Billboard's* Hot 100 chart (instituted August 4, 1958).

Once Ricky was established, writers quickly recognized the promotional potential of having their songs sung on nationwide television and began tailoring their material to him. Baker Knight (**Never Be Anyone Else but You** and **Lonesome Town**), for example, was one who wrote specifically with Ricky in mind.

The brothers Dorsey and Johnny Burnette had begun their careers in Memphis with the wild rockabilly of the Rock 'n' Roll Trio, but relocated to Hollywood, where they established a softer sound that was right up Ricky's alley. "We wanted to hear anything written by either of them," Haskell recalls of the Burnettes. In the case of **Waitin' in School** (one of four Burnette songs included in this volume), this caused some problems. Ricky was dragging his heels as to whether he'd record the song; Dorsey Burnette



Ricky Nelson performs on *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, with Joe



borne on bass, Richie Frost on drums and James Burton on guitar.

planned to record it himself if Ricky didn't. The day after Dorsey finally cut the song, Ricky decided to record it as well. Dorsey wound up killing his own recording to give Ricky the exclusive.

Songwriter Jerry Fuller hooked up with Ricky by accident. Armed with a world atlas, he wrote **Travelin' Man** while waiting in the park to pick up his wife after work. He had written it for Sam Cooke and cut the demo in Cooke's style; but when he played the tape to J. W. Alexander, Cooke's manager, Alexander tossed the demo into the trash can. Nelson's bassist, Joe Osborne, heard the song through the walls while visiting Imperial head Lew Chudd next door and asked Alexander to fish the tape out of the garbage and give it to him. Ricky then recorded the song (with *Hello, Mary Lou* on the flip side) and immediately performed it on TV. Meanwhile, Fuller was drafted and sent to update New York. He wrote **It's Up to You** there, procuring a weekend pass to fly his tape of the song back to Ricky in Los Angeles.

Like most performers of his generation, Ricky was overpowered by the British Invasion. He recorded a few uninspired country and "adult" pop albums for Decca before beginning a serious comeback in 1969 with the Stone Canyon Band, one of the first and best of the new Hollywood country-rock groups (with Buck Owens alumnus Tom Brumley on pedal steel guitar). The band's version of Bob Dylan's **She Belongs to Me** proved Ricky's feel for country music was genuine.

Ricky's new fans at least tolerated his old material, but his old fans didn't feel the same way about the contemporary "Rick" Nelson, as he now billed himself. While headlining one of Richard Nader's Rock and Roll Revival shows at Madison Square Garden in 1972, Rick began the set with oldies, then segued into the new material. The revival crowd booed him, and he wrote **Garden Party** about the evening's events. It was the

only major hit he'd ever penned for himself.

His quandary was too difficult to be resolved by one hit, however. Rick Nelson continued working into the middle of the next decade with little luck. He stuck to his guns, combining pop-rockabilly classics with modern, country-flavored material, but he had no hits. He seemed stuck on a circuit of rock oldies packages and country joints.

Late in the afternoon of December 31, 1985, his pri-

vate plane, en route to a New Year's Eve gig at a Dallas hotel, crashed into a hayfield near DeKalb, Texas. Four band members, a roadie and Rick's fiancée, Helen Blair, were killed along with him. In the aftermath, there were lurid tales about drugs and the personal tragedies they cost him. But to most Americans, Ricky Nelson remained, first and foremost, Ozzie and Harriet's kid from that old TV show.

—John Morthland



*The Nelsons at home*



## DISCOGRAPHY

*\*Indicates highest Billboard chart position*

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- 1. I'm Walkin'** Music and lyrics by Antoine Domino and Dave Bartholomeu. Verve 10047 (1957). Courtesy of PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc. No. 17\*
- 2. A Teenager's Romance** Music and lyrics by David Gillam. Verve 10047 (1957). Courtesy of PolyGram Special Products, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc. No. 8\*
- 3. Waltin' in School** Music and lyrics by Johnny Burnette and Dorsey Burnette. Imperial 5483 (1957). No. 18\*
- 4. Be-Bop Baby** Music and lyrics by Pearl Lendhurst. Imperial 5463 (1957). No. 5\*
- 5. Shirley Lee** Music and lyrics by Bobby Lee Trammell. Imperial LP 9050 (1958). Did not chart.
- 6. Stood Up** Music and lyrics by Dub Dickerson and Erma Herold. Imperial 5483 (1957). No. 5\*
- 7. Believe What You Say** Music and lyrics by Johnny Burnette and Dorsey Burnette. Imperial 5503 (1958). No. 8\*
- 8. Hello, Mary Lou** Music and lyrics by Gene Pitney. Imperial 5741 (1961). No. 9\*
- 9. Travellin' Man** Music and lyrics by Jerry Fuller. Imperial 5741 (1961). No. 1\*
- 10. It's Late** Music and lyrics by Dorsey Burnette. Imperial 5565 (1959). No. 9\*
- 11. Never Be Anyone Else but You** Music and lyrics by Baker Knight. Imperial 5565 (1959). No. 6\*
- 12. Just a Little Too Much** Music and lyrics by Johnny Burnette. Imperial 5595 (1959). No. 9\*
- 13. Lonesome Town** Music and lyrics by Baker Knight. Imperial 5545 (1958). No. 7\*
- 14. Fools Rush In (Where Angels Fear to Tread)** Music by Rube Bloom, lyrics by Johnny Mercer. Decca 31533 (1963). Courtesy of MCA Records, Inc. No. 12\*
- 15. Young World** Music and lyrics by Jerry Fuller. Imperial 5805 (1962). No. 5\*
- 16. It's Up to You** Music and lyrics by Jerry Fuller. Imperial 5901 (1962). No. 6\*
- 17. Poor Little Fool** Music and lyrics by Shari Sheeley. Imperial 5528 (1958). No. 1\*
- 18. A Teenage Idol** Music and lyrics by Jack Lewis. Imperial 5864 (1962). No. 5\*
- 19. String Along** Music and lyrics by J. Duncan and Bobby Doyle. Decca 31495 (1963). Courtesy of MCA Records, Inc. No. 25\*
- 20. For You** Music by Joe Burke, lyrics by Al Dubin. Decca 31574 (1963). Courtesy of MCA Records, Inc. No. 6\*
- 21. Mystery Train** Music and lyrics by Sam Phillips and Herman Parker Jr. Decca LP 74837 (1967). Courtesy of MCA Records, Inc. Did not chart.
- 22. She Belongs to Me** Music and lyrics by Bob Dylan. Decca 32550 (1969). Courtesy of MCA Records, Inc. No. 33\*
- 23. Garden Party** Music and lyrics by Rick Nelson. Decca 32980 (1972). Courtesy of MCA Records, Inc. No. 6\*

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