Rockabilly Idol

Levi Dexter

by Greg Laxton

PUTTIN' THE ROCK IN Rockabilly

Rockabilly has seen three distinct phases. First up are the pioneers - Carl Perkins, Elvis, Bill Haley's Comets... those cats who developed the music we love. Today, rockabilly music is stronger than at any time since the 1950's, sharing the umbrella with other roots music styles, seen in the likes of Deke Dickerson and Big Sandy and The Blasters.

Somewhere in-between the pioneers and the artists of today, rockabilly enjoyed a huge revival in the USA about 35 years ago. Rockabilly rode the MTV wave - the rockabilly beat was always there, but the music was recorded in a modern setting. Rockin' style was amped up with mile high pompadours and tattoos.

Around this time came a cat out of England by the name of Levi Dexter. Although he was born shortly after the pioneers cut their first records, in my book, Levi Dexter is a rockabilly pioneer. At a time when punk rock was the rage in the UK, he refused to fall in line, forming Levi and the Rockats. In the USA of 1979, rockabilly was sitting on the door step, but few were listening. Levi changed that. Levi Dexter has stuck to rockabilly through the years, influencing countless of new generation rockabilly musicians and fans the world over.

Fresh off a Japan tour, let's check in with the Rockabilly Idol, Levi Dexter.

1. Where were you born and raised?

I was born January 28th 1957 in London. I grew up in the Chelsea area very close to the Kings Road.

By 1972 I was hanging out at the Teddyboy shop "Too Fast To Live ..Too Young To Die" also known as "Let It Rock". It was run by Malcolm McLaren (later of Sex Pistols fame) and Vivienne Westwood.

The first concert I went to was the London Rock 'n' Roll show at the Wembley Stadium in 1972. It was an all-day show with Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Bill Haley & his Comets, Billy Fury and many many more greats from the 1950's.

At the end of that year, my mother moved us to Southend-On-Sea in Essex.

It was a seaside town that was full of Teddyboys who kept order during the rowdy holiday weekends. This is when I became a Teddyboy and my life of rock 'n' roll and rockabilly began.

For readers that may be unfamiliar with a Teddy Boy, Levi explains, *"Teds are part of a counter culture that are devoted to 1950's rock 'n' roll music. They wear Edwardian style long drape jackets, tight "drainpipe" pants and crepe soles "creepers". They sport the greasy "quiff" hair (pompadour) and long sideburns. Teddyboys and Teddygirls are the defenders of 1950's rock 'n' roll and lifestyle."*

2. With all the great UK rock bands and music genres, what was it about US rockabilly that hooked you?

In 1973, during my early days as a Teddyboy, I would go to the Pier Bar in Southend (also known as the Long Bar). I would see bands like Crazy Cavan & the Rhythm Rockers, Flying Saucers, The Riot Rockers and many others.

One night I was asked if I'd like to sing a song with Crazy Cavan. This was my first time on stage. Pretty soon I was jamming with Crazy Cavan & the Rhythm Rockers and also the Flying Saucers whenever I saw them.

Though strictly 50's rock 'n' roll, it was about this time that rockabilly came on the scene.

The DJ there, "Little Pete", started mixing more obscure rockabilly tracks into his DJing and we all loved it. Soon many DJ's were playing rockabilly tracks too.

During this period rockabilly compilation albums from Holland became available. Sun Rockabillies Vol. 1, 2 & 3 were released in the UK, along with The Kings Of Rockabilly album (one side all Charlie Feathers and the other side Mac Curtis). The Johnny Burnette Trio album was released about this time.

Crazy Cavan & the Rhythm Rockers and Flying Saucers started to include more obscure rockabilly songs into their live shows. They also started writing original songs in the rockabilly style.

Rockabilly music had everything that rock 'n' roll had but the addition of the slap bass featured in the mix and added more rhythm. There was also more slap-back echo and the pace of the songs were more up-tempo making it a little bit wilder for me and better for bopping to.

This is what attracted me to rockabilly music. Also none of the songs had been hits so there was a lot more music for me to look for and discover.

3. What was the first record you purchased? Do you still have it?

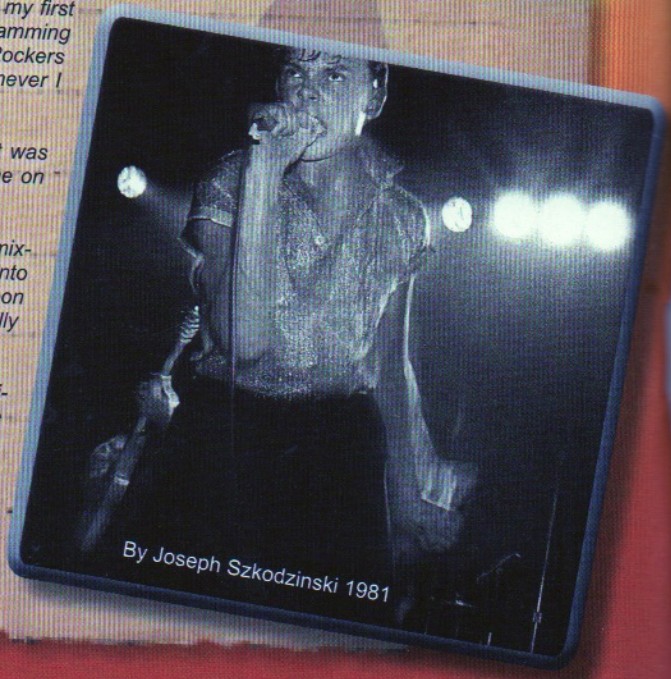
When I was about 9 years old, I was given an old record player and a big bag of 78's and 45's by a friend.

I sorted them into two stacks. The first being pop vocal records: Perry Como, Harry Belafonte, Frank Sinatra etc. The other stack was Elvis, Bill Haley & his Comets, Gene Vincent, Tommy Steele, Cliff Richard and many more rock 'n' roll records.

This made me realize that rock 'n' roll was the music of choice for me. Growing up, Bill Haley & his Comets were my favorite. I would come home from school and put Bill Haley on and instantly feel good. All these years later and I still get the same feeling when I hear his music.

The first records I ever purchased where bought at the same time.

We had a record afternoon at school and each pupil was allowed to bring a record and play a song and say why they liked it. I took a 45 of R-O-C-K by Bill Haley & his Comets and played it for the class. One of the kids brought the Elvis Presley - Rock 'n' Roll album and played Blue Suede Shoes from it. Apart from having a super-rockin' cover, the music was just as great.



By Joseph Szkodzinski 1981

I ran out and got my copy the next weekend. At the same time I also got the Bill Haley & his Comets - Rock Around The Clock album.

Yes...I still have both!

4. When did you realize you would take the step from being a rockabilly fan to rockabilly artist?

Since 1973 I had been jamming with Crazy Cavan & the Rhythm Rockers and also Flying Saucers whenever I went out and they were playing. I had never considered the possibilities of forming my own band. I had no friends who played or had instruments.

I was just happy to jam whenever there was an opportunity.

Then one night in July 1977, I went to an all night rock 'n' roll movie show to see The Girl Can't Help It and a few other 50's rock 'n' roll movies. After the movies were over, Shakin' Stevens & the Sunsets were to play a live show. My friends asked if I could sing a song or two and they were told, "If the band wants to stick around and play for him after I'm done with my show, that's their choice"!

During their show I was approached by Lee Childers who asked me if I really wanted to sing with the band. I answered "Sure...If they're up for it!"

At the end of the show everyone left the stage and I figured it wasn't meant to happen.

Lee went back stage and soon I was on stage to sing a couple of songs. The audience kept themselves very separated, as half were punks and the other half Teds & Rockers. Until then, the atmosphere had been tense as Teds and Punks were at war with each other but everyone came to the front of the stage and rocked out together.

Lee then told me he was a manager and he wanted to help me form my own band.

He told me to be at his office at Track Records (the same label Shakin' Stevens was on) the next morning at 10am. I was there at 8am.

5. How did Levi and the Rockats come about?

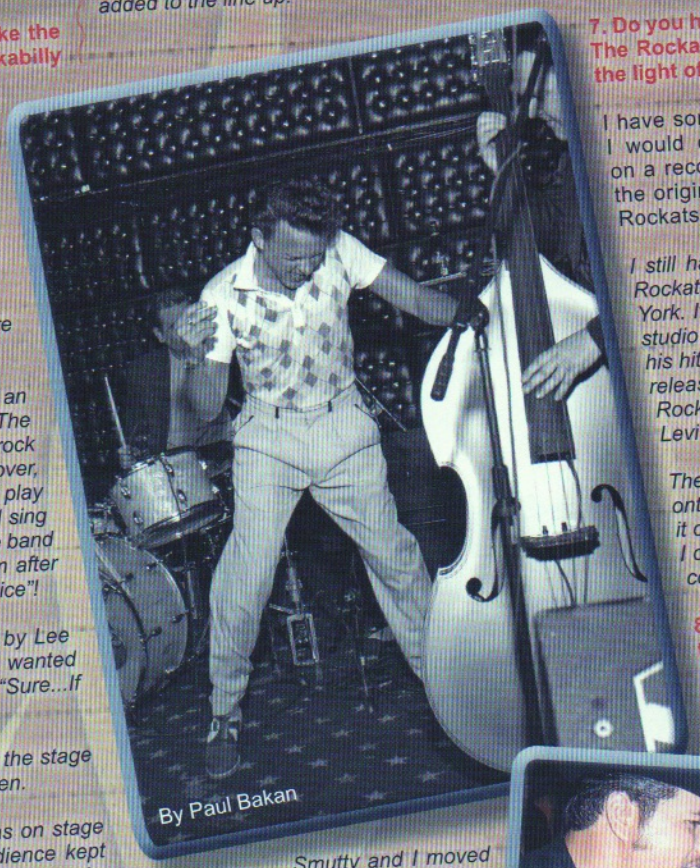
At my meeting with Lee Childers I realized that he was a manager of bands.

He had worked with many over the years, including Mott The Hoople, David Bowie and was presently managing Johnny Thunders band, The Hearbreakers at the time. We went to work straight away scouting musicians.

Lee and I went to the Royalty Ballroom on one of their rock 'n' roll nights and while we stood in the balcony looking at the people dancing, Lee spotted Smut (or Smutty Smith as he's known now) bopping and said "Who is that guy?? He's great!! He should be in the band"!!

I told him I had lived with him and his family for 3 years and he couldn't play music. He said "Nonsense" and called him over. At first Smutty said he could probably learn to play drums but Lee said "With all those tattoos you have to play bass".

Lee already knew Dibbs Preston and suggested him as a guitar player. He also knew English Don who was added as a drummer. Shortly after that we found Mick Barry who was already an established guitar player and he was also added to the line up.



By Paul Bakan

Smutty and I moved into Lee's 3 story victorian house and Levi & the Rockats began rehearsing on the top floor there. Within weeks we were starting to sound like a band. We were very rough around the edges but we realized it could be done.

Our first show was November 10th 1977, at the end-of-term party at the Royal College of Art in London. We opened for the reggae band, Steel Pulse (their 3rd gig ever).

After we came off stage Johnny Thunders told us "Go back on and I'll save you"!

We came back on stage with Johnny and we did a medley of Chuck Berry songs. The place went wild.

December 26th we played at the Music Machine with Adam & the Ants and Siouxsie and the Banshees and lots of punk bands. Nobody wanted to go on last so we closed the show. We considered it our first headlining show.

6. How hard was it to turn over the business aspect of the band to a manager and trust that they had the same drive that The Rockats did to make the band take-off?

Lee Childers had formed and managed the band from the beginning until the end (1977 - 1979) and was an old school manager who handled all of the business end and also handled our booking of shows and rehearsals, transport, housing and press and just about every aspect of the business and left the music development to us.

He really was the most dedicated manager and we had total trust in him in all his decisions.

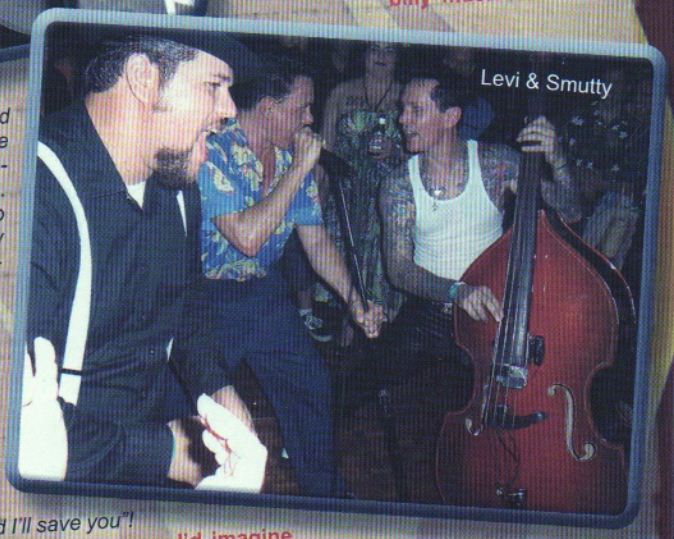
7. Do you have any unreleased material - with The Rockats or solo - that may one day see the light of day?

I have some old live tapes that are not what I would consider good enough to release on a record going back as for as 1977 with the original all English line-up of Levi & the Rockats.

I still have the tapes from when Levi & the Rockats recorded demos for RCA in New York. It was a big thrill to record in the same studio where Elvis had recorded so many of his hits. RCA didn't sign us but they did later release the "Make That Move" record for the Rockats, but this was in 1980 and was after Levi & the Rockats had broken up.

There are normally tracks that don't make it onto an album, but I figure if it didn't make it onto the album, it shouldn't be released. I only want the best recordings on my records.

8. Can you tell the readers the importance of your gig at the Louisiana Hayride? What was the reaction of the US crowd having a rockabilly band from the UK re-introducing them to rockabilly music in 1979?



Levi & Smutty

I'd imagine it was quite similar to Elvis playing the Hayride to country folks that never heard rockabilly in 1954.

I was able to get on the Louisiana Hayride due to Tom Ayres, who was a good friend who had managed Gene Vincent before he died. It was a big coup for Levi & the Rockats.

We had already been on national TV in America on the Merv Griffin Show and had also been on the Wolfman Jack Midnight Special TV show in Los Angeles.

Apart from being a live show, the Louisiana Hayride was also beamed all over the southern states on the radio. Frank Page, who introduced Elvis on the Hayride in 1954, was to introduce us and he was retiring that night, so we were the last band he would introduce on the Louisiana Hayride.

They had stopped having rockabilly on the Hayride after 1957 when Elvis did his last show there and had gone back to having only country western and gospel music only.

We were very eager to see how the people there would react to us playing rockabilly there once again.

The first half of the show was the regular game plan with country and gospel guests playing one or two songs with the house band. Then there was an intermission before we came on to play a whole set. (This set would later be released on the Levi & the Rockats on the Louisiana Hayride LP).

It was like time had stood still since the mid 50's. Women and girls in their summer dresses took pictures with box brownie cameras. Men were dressed in western suits and colonel ties. The audience would respond mildly between songs but applaud after each guitar break.

We did what we normally do: a mixture of new and 50's rockabilly with plenty of action on stage. The audience enjoyed it and it was a landmark for me. Rockabilly was back where it belonged.

9. What is your one "I can't believe this" moment as a performer ?

When I was inducted into the Rockabilly Hall Of Fame this year

10. Why did you and The Rockats part ways? Any regrets?

We had gone as far as we could with the musical ability we had. Even though I was asked, I wouldn't record with studio session guys and desert them so we couldn't get a record deal.

The band was pulling in different directions. Most of the band members wanted to base themselves in New York. I wanted to stay based in Los Angeles. The band wanted to get a new manager, blaming Lee for not being able to get us a record contract. I blamed the band for not working hard enough to become better musicians.

Considering Lee had made everything happen for us and always handled every aspect of managing the band, I said I wouldn't switch to another manager.

Smutty wanted to play electric bass. I insisted on using only an upright bass.

It was clear that there were too many differences, so we broke up Christmas 1979, playing our last show at the Starwood in Hollywood.

A new version of "The Rockats" would be formed in New York. I would form "Levi Dexter & the Rip-Chords" in L.A.

I have no regrets, but did miss playing with friends I had played with since the very beginning.

11. Speaking of "Levi Dexter and the Rip Chords", I understand a young guitar player named Brian Setzer auditioned for the band...

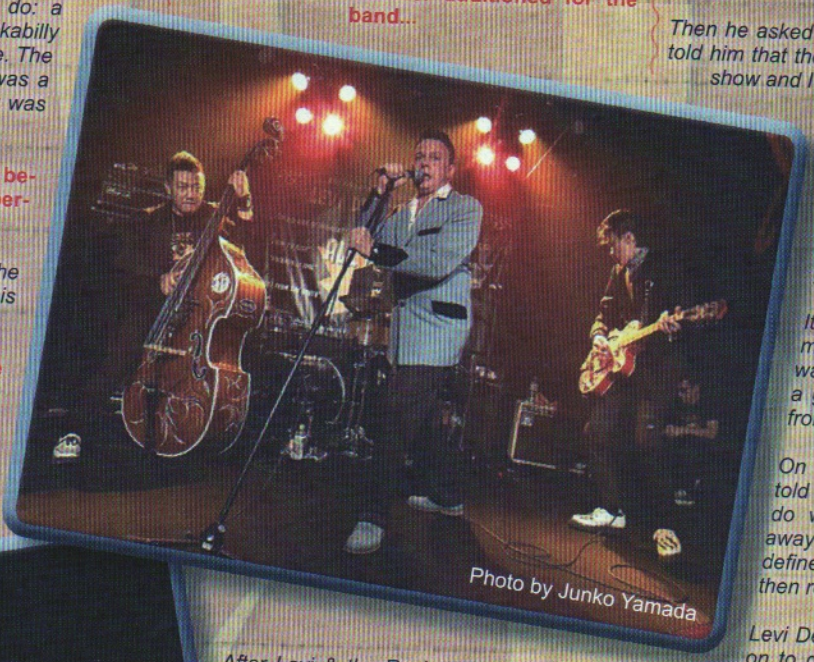


Photo by Junko Yamada

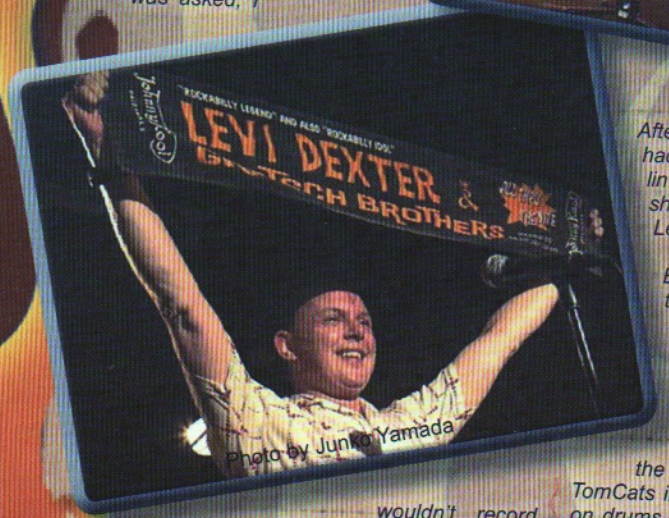


Photo by Junko Yamada

After Levi & the Rockats broke up, there had already been shows booked in Berlin and London. Rather than cancel the shows, they were to be the first shows for Levi Dexter & the Rip-Chords.

Earlier in 1979, Brian Setzer had come to one of our shows and asked me to come and see his band, Brian Setzer and the TomCats, who played often in Long Island and New Jersey. I told him it was too far for me to go as I didn't drive, so he said he would pick me up and bring me back at the end of the night. So I said O.K. The TomCats included Brian's brother, Gary Setzer on drums. They would play 5 half-hour sets in this little bar I was taken to.

When I heard Brian play guitar my jaw dropped open! He played perfect Cliff Gallup, Scotty Moore and Chet Atkins guitar licks. He was very skilled for his age.

I watched the first 2 sets and did the last three sets with him: a set of Gene Vincent songs, a set of Johnny Burnette songs and a set of Elvis songs.

When Levi & the Rockats broke up I knew who to send for, so I flew Brian and Gary out to Hollywood to stay a week with us and try out for the Rip-Chords.

We went in the studio with Brian on his Gretsch guitar, Danny B. Harvey on his Fender Telecaster, Gary on drums and a 15 year old Adam Stern (who later would play bass in Royal Crown Review).

It seemed like the perfect band to me. Two killer guitarists who really complimented each other and a solid rhythm section.

After saying "yes" to joining the band, a few days later Brian told me he couldn't be in another band with Gary, as they fought too much. I told him I would get another drummer.

Then Brian said he had plans to start his own band in the future and asked "How many songs do I get to sing"? I told him "Dibbs only got to sing one .. so how about one"?

Then he asked me if it could be a ballad and told him that there was only one ballad in the show and I'd be singing it.

Brian then asked me "When will we be back in New York"? I told him "We're going to Germany and England and after that I don't know. When New York calls, we'll go".

It became clear after many more questions that Brian wasn't ready to join a band as a guitarist and wanted to be a front man.

On the way back to the airport I told him the best thing he could do would be to take his band away from the New York area and define their sound and image and then return to New York.

Levi Dexter & the Rip-Chords went on to debut in Berlin in April 1980 and then go on to base ourselves in London for a while. By the time we arrived, kids were coming up to us and asking "Have you seen Brian Setzer"? "Have you seen the Stray Cats"? Within months of arriving in England they had landed a contract with Arista Records, recorded "Runaway Boys" and were getting airplay on the BBC radio. Up until this time most people outside of the rockin' scene hadn't heard of rockabilly music.

Now that the Stray Cats were on regular rotation on the radio, it got harder and harder to get noticed or considered by record companies. Without record company support and booking and press agents, it would be much harder to compete, but I just kept on rockin' on. I wasn't anywhere near ready to secede to the Stray Cats!

12. Tell us a bit about Levi and The Rip Chords opening for The Clash during their booking at Bond's in NYC.

In 1981, it had been a rumor that New York was about to consider having legalized gambling in Manhattan and a millionaire investor had bought Bond's. Their famous neon sign

has always been very visible in Times Square. In the 40's it was Manhattan's largest floorspace as a clothing store.

Now it had been converted into Bond's International Casino with The Clash playing booked to play 8 nights there. The capacity was 3,500 people, but the promoters had sold way too many tickets. After the second show the fire department intervened and said the other shows booked would not go on.

The Clash's management and the promoters renegotiated with the fire department and the Clash went on to play a total of 17 shows there to accommodate all the ticket holders. Levi Dexter & the Rip-Chords would play the 4th of the 17 shows booked. The Clash were very gracious and Joe Strummer insisted that we play an encore. It was a very special night for me. One I will always remember.

Levi & Wolfman Jack
By Lee Childers

13. Do you have any highlights to share of your time on national television in the US - from the Midnight Special featuring Wolfman Jack, Merv Griffin, 20/20 etc?

Levi & the Rockats were playing a show in Santa Monica in L.A. with the Go-Go's (Belinda was my roommate) and a scout from the Merv Griffin show. The Go-Go's still hadn't come on stage by 1am so the scout came backstage and asked if we'd be interested in being on the show.

Of course, we said yes and arrived for rehearsals at the studio the next morning. They were shocked that we didn't have a record or even a demo tape to lip-sync to.

We insisted that they set up microphones and let us play live. We did "Note from the South" and "All Through The Night."

After rehearsal Merv asked me what I thought of the stage. I said "It looks cool but all the lightbulbs make it look a bit disco"! He asked if there was anything I wanted and I asked him if we could hang our flag at the back of the stage. He shouted to his stage manager "Hang the kids flag"!!

I think he was expecting an English Union Jack flag not our Confederate flag. He bought a lot of slack for that as the show was national. It didn't go down too well with some people. To us, it represented rebel rockabilly from the south not the civil war or slavery.

I was more excited to play on Wolfman Jack's Midnight Special TV show even though it was only broadcast on the west coast. I had seen American Graffiti and had listened to The Wolfman when he came to England and did four hours on the radio. He did his exact show he would do in the mid 50's, complete with commercials and great oldies and blues music. To me, he was a legend of rock 'n' roll.

After we did our 2 songs (live again, not lip synched), I asked for his autograph. He signed a piece of paper "To Levi from Wolfman Jack. Keep a stiff upper lip and a tight ass. -Wolfman Jack". Ha ha!! I still have it.

14. You're also a well-known rockabilly DJ — What is the highlight of your collection and how large is it?

I do like to DJ once in a while. I have collected vinyl and CD's (since they first came out). I couldn't tell you how many records I have.

Many of the compilation vinyl albums have been thinned out and replaced with the CD version. Everything else I have kept. I even had two Sun and one RCA Elvis acetates that were in mint condition, but sold them a few years ago. I don't like to part with any records or tapes. It sounds obsessive, but I have kept every cassette tape I ever made or was given.

15. Do you have any upcoming record or video releases?

I have a new album (Levi Dexter - Roots Man) that's been finished for a while but was delayed getting the cover designed. It's going to be released on my own Dextone label in the U.S. and will be released on a limited edition vinyl album early in 2013.

It has the band I play with when I'm in California .. Buzz Campbell on guitar, Johnny Bowler on bass and Stinky on drums. The Buzz Campbell band is awesome!!

Also, while I was in Japan last month I recorded a CD with the Gretsch Brothers.

Kenichi Yamaguchi played guitar on the album. He played on the Levi Dexter & Magic - The Kings Of Cat Street CD. The Levi Dexter & the Gretsch Brothers album will also be released sometime in early 2013.

There are no plans for a new video or DVD at this time .. but you never know!

16. Who is the one person you have yet to share the stage with, but would like to? Any standout memory of an artist you have shared the stage with to date?

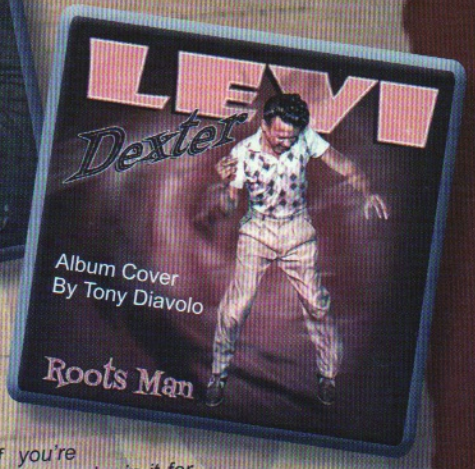
I've yet to be invited to jam with the Stray Cats. That seems strange to me.

One of the greatest moments for me was playing 2 shows in California with Gene Vincent's BlueCaps in the mid-90's. It just blew my mind to get to play with them.

16. Any words of wisdom for an up and coming rockabilly performer?

Practice, practice, practice!! It will prepare you for opportunities you may not see coming but when they do, you'll be ready. Keep faith in rockabilly music even when interest may be at a low point. You should get your high from playing rockabilly music. Stay away from drugs.

Never sell out and compromise your sound or style when other people try to tell you to.



Album Cover
By Tony Diavolo

If you're in this you're in it for the long haul and you're in it for rockabilly music.

17. Where do you see yourself 20 years from now?

Geez!!! I'll be 75 then!!

I see myself semi-retired and living in my mansion in Essex, England and going to the local pub with my wife Bernie. Of course, I still hope to be recording and playing the occasional show. Most of all I'd like to be producing bands and releasing albums on my Dextone label.

I plan to keep on rocking' as long as I'm able!

Ladies! Check out the clothing line of Levi's wife Bernie: www.BernieDexter.com (this issue's cover girl & centerfold)

Info on gigs or to book Levi Dexter - Rockabilly Idol:
www.ActionPackedEvents.com

SEE LEVI AND THE ROCKATS ON THE MERV GRIFFIN SHOW:
www.YouTube.com/watch?v=2wKztxnvLiE&sns=em

About the Writer, Greg Laxton

An avid old car nut, Harley enthusiast and record collector, GREG LAXTON has been a rockabilly/roots music fan since catching the Stray Cats on the ABC show Fridays back in 1981. His Dad turned him on to Link Wray's crunching guitar in the late 70's, starting an obsession that continues to this day with the websites, LinkWray.com and VernonWray.com.