

Richie Lee rocks as next generation of rockabilly

By J. SHARPE SMITH

Special to the Register

Usher's R&B single "U Got It Bad" was number one on Billboard's Chart in 2002 when Richie Lee attended his first Winter Dance Party at Clear Lake's Surf Ballroom, but the 11-year-old's mind was on music that was recorded more than 50 years earlier.

Learning guitar at the time, Lee decided on that cold February day that '50s rockabilly was the music for him.

"I grew up listening to '50s music. My parents always played it around the house," Lee said in a phone interview. "I like the beat, the style and the creativity it took to make it. It's nice and simple, not complex like the later Brian Setzer (Stray Cats) stuff."

At the age of 15, Lee's talent was recognized by the drummer of the **Stray Cats**, **Slim Jim Phantom**, who called him up on stage for a week of jamming during the Rockin' '50s Fest in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

Earlier this year, he played on the "50th Anniversary of the Last Tour," which commemorated the last shows of Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and the Big Bopper, with dates in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa.

At the age of 19, Lee is a graduate of North High School and is playing with his band "The Fabulous Fifties" this spring at Riverside Casino, Prairie Meadows Casino and Tulip Time in Pella, among other venues in central Iowa.

"I do a lot of Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis and Buddy Holly, of course. Holly is my favorite. His music inspired me more than anybody else's," Lee said. His favorite songs are "Maybe Baby," "Peggy Sue," "True Love Ways" and "It Doesn't Matter Anymore."

Lee played at or attended every Winter Dance Party since 2002, getting to know Dennis Farland, head of the Winter Dance Party Musical Scholarship fund, and Jerry Naylor, former lead singer of the post-Buddy Holly Crickets.

"Richie Lee is a talented young man, talented young man," Naylor said. "He is a perfect example of the great influence of rockabilly and someone who is carrying the torch on. He is dedicated and passionate about this music."

High praise from a man who himself has devoted 55 years of his life to the music.

As a result, Lee will play on Iowa dates of **Naylor's Rockabilly Legends "Live Concert Series,"** in Davenport tonight, Des Moines, Friday night and Clear Lake on Saturday. He will be called up on stage during the Buddy Holly tribute and play "**Maybe Baby,**" "**Rave On,**" "**It's So Easy**" and "**Raining In My Heart.**"

"I think what (Jerry Naylor) is doing is really cool. It is an honor to be chosen to play with them," Lee said. "It is important for young people to carry on this music. That's what keeps it alive today."



North High School graduate Richie Lee will play as part of the Rockabilly Legends show on Friday at the Val Air in West Des Moines.

(RICHIE LEE PRODUCTIONS/SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER)

A night of rockabilly sound

By J. SHARPE SMITH *Special to the Register*

Iowa might be known as the place "where the music died," but former lead singer of the post Buddy Holly Crickets Jerry Naylor is keeping it alive with the launch of his Rockabilly Legends concert tour. And he is doing it in Iowa.

"Yes, Buddy Holly's last live performance at the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake is a major reason we are premiering our Rockabilly Legends 'Live Concert Series' in Iowa," Naylor said. "But I have thousands of reasons to come back to Iowa, and it begins with my friend, Dennis Farland (head of the Winter Dance Party Musical Scholarship Fund) unmistakably one of the most passionate and faithful Buddy Holly/Crickets fans in the world."

In the two-hour concert, Naylor and Stan Perkins, son of Carl Perkins, tell the story of rockabilly as they set up each song. A multimedia production, the musicians play the hits while video of the rockabilly stars runs on the screen above.

Beginning with a 17th century African spiritual, the show explores the roots of rockabilly with a Southern gospel medley, a black Delta blues piece and some "hillbilly" country music.

"We played the honkytonks at night and on Sunday morning we sang in the church," Naylor said. "All those different genres of music were stirring within us."

The show then moves into tributes to Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison, Jerry Lee Lewis and Buddy Holly and the Crickets. "Our whole idea is to preserve the era, pay proper tribute to these iconic figures and to entertain and educate people who don't know about all of it," Naylor said.

But the story doesn't end there. The show transitions into post-rockabilly artists who were influenced by the phenomenon, such as the Rolling Stones and the Beatles.

"The influence of this music is amazing. It has actually influenced virtually all of the rock and roll music that followed," Naylor.

For Naylor, paying tribute to rockabilly legends is personal. During his 55-year career, he wrote and recorded a number of hits and played on bills with Presley, Cash and Orbison. After Holly's death, he stepped in and led the Crickets to several hits overseas.

"These (musicians) were my friends and still are my friends. They are living within me within this project," Naylor said.

In 2007, Naylor completed an exhaustive anthology of rockabilly music that includes a documentary, book and 16 CDs that feature 113 original master recordings. The documentary has been broadcast on 176 Public Broadcast Stations, including Iowa Public Television.

"(In watching this documentary) our viewers come to appreciate this music more than they otherwise would have," said Dan Miller, IPTV president. "This program is tremendously rich and is part of the American tapestry that we ought not forget."

And now, Naylor is taking his rockabilly tribute on the road, beginning in Iowa.

Icons of Rockabilly

Elvis Presley

Presley's fast songs that mixed blues and country sounds are considered by some to be the starting point of rockabilly.

KEY SONG: "That's All Right"

Johnny Cash

Cash recorded rockabilly tracks in the mid-1950s at Sun Studios in Memphis with his band the Tennessee Two.

KEY SONG: "Cry, Cry, Cry"

Carl Perkins

Perkins toured with Presley and Cash. His fast guitar playing influenced Presley, the Beatles and others.

KEY SONG: "Blue Suede Shoes"

Buddy Holly

Holly decided to get into music after seeing Presley perform. Holly's sophisticated songs would impact many musicians.

KEY SONG: "Peggy Sue"



Roy Orbison

Orbison's first song was the rockabilly track "Ooby Dooby." He is known for his high, haunting voice.

KEY SONG: "Pretty Woman"

Jerry Lee Lewis

Lewis served as a session musician for Perkins and Cash. He is credited with introducing piano to rockabilly.

KEY SONG: "Great Balls of Fire"

For more 1950s rock

For more on '50s rock, go to

www.DesMoinesRegister.com/BuddyHolly, our special site dedicated to the influence of the 1959 Winter Dance Party and the crash that changed rock 'n' roll.

Additional Facts Rockabilly Legends

WHEN: 8 p.m. Friday

WHERE: Val Air, 301 Ashworth Road, West Des Moines

TICKETS: \$17.50 at Ticketmaster or the Val Air box office

INFO: www.valairballroom.com