

ROBERT GORDON:

Robert Gordon broke out with his hit "Red Hot" in 1977, knocking down disco queens, would-be punks, and new wave wannabes with his no-holds-barred take on hot-rodded rockabilly. Since then he has been like a turbo jet, and is often credited for lighting up the roots-rock revival and paving the way for real rock'n'rollers to find their niche among the overblown dance music and arena rock that dominated the airwaves.

Robert's legacy has been fueled by his partnership with some of the greatest guitar players in history — Link Wray, Danny Gatton, and Chris Spedding. Robert first saw Link Wray at an amusement park in Glenn Echo Park, Maryland, in 1962, and knew he had to play with him. Together they recorded a successful string of records, which included the song "Fire," a gift from Bruce Springsteen. Although he is best known for being a tough-as-nails rockabilly artist, Robert is always quick to point out "I'm not trying to recreate something. This is how I feel." That feeling continues to glow red hot on his latest release with his old partner Chris Spedding, *It's Now or Never*, a collection of mostly lesser-known Elvis Presley songs.

ROBERT GORDON BIO

The first major rockabilly artist to emerge after the death of Elvis Presley, Robert Gordon became the hard-edged antidote to nostalgia-based oldies acts such as Flash Cadillac and the Continental Kids and Sha Na Na. Moreover, by reviving their songs Gordon created fresh interest in several 1950s cult rockers both at home and abroad. Less eccentric than the Cramps, far tougher than Chris Isaak, his work embraced 1960s garage rock, rockabilly noir, screaming R&B, and country heartache. Gordon has also shown a knack for building his recordings around some of the finest guitarists of his era, including Link Wray, Chris Spedding, Danny Gatton, and Eddie Angel.

Born on March 29, 1946, Gordon was thrilled when he first heard Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel." "It was like the first teen rebel movies. It just changed things, man," he told *Country Standard Time*. "When you look back on it, there wasn't anything threatening about it at all. But at the time, it was just amazing." He was born and raised just outside of Washington, D.C., in Montgomery County, where he was able to absorb many different musical cultures.

"Washington was more of a crossroads for everything," recalled Gordon. "It was right near Virginia and real close to New York. So, I was exposed to everything, man. Of course rhythm and blues was a big influence too. During the early '60s, I went to the Howard Theater down there, which was really like the Apollo in New York. ... At the same time, you could get a lot of radio stations in Washington that were primarily country."

Gordon recalled how, at age 15, he began to get ideas about performing. "I was at summer camp with my brother," he told Arjan Delan, who runs his European website, "and he wanted me to sing for his pals. So, I sang Jackie Wilson's 'Lonely Teardrops,' and they really liked it." The following year he began singing with local garage rock groups, including the *Confidentials*, who later transformed into the *Newtons*.

After a stint in the National Guard, Gordon married his childhood sweetheart, started a family and moved to New York, where he opened a clothing store. After his first marriage ended, Gordon's thoughts of a singing career resurfaced. His dark good looks and street-tough demeanor made him a perfect fit in the Big Apple's growing punk scene of the 1970s. With his persona already formed, Gordon began playing clubs with a contingent known as the Tuff Darts.

Mainstream Americans first became aware of Gordon via his 1977 album on Private Stock, titled Robert Gordon and Link Wray. Wray, who recorded such instrumental hits as "Rumble" (1958) and "Raw-Hide" (1959), provided the newcomer with genre credibility. In return, the album single-handedly revived Wray's nearly forgotten career of the 1950s and 1960s. Musically, Gordon mined a series of oldies and rockabilly cult favorites, such as Billy Lee Riley's "Red Hot," Eddie Cochran's "Twenty Flight Rock," Sanford Clark's "The Fool," and Gene Vincent's "Five Days, Five Days." Sounding rawer and wilder than any current act, Gordon's first album for Private Stock was a groundbreaker for the neo-rockabilly trend. "Then all of a sudden, a lot of cats started doing it again," Gordon recalled. "So, it did start a movement, I have to admit."

Gordon's versions of the old songs were also appreciated by many of the surviving original artists. One former Sun Records artist of the 1950's, Sonny Burgess, proclaimed that "Robert Gordon is one of the best singers I ever heard." However, Gordon was never comfortable being strictly typecast as a rockabilly performer. "It's not what I set out to do," he explained to Country Standard Time. "In fact, I always try to put a tougher edge on the songs than traditional rockabilly has." Part of that edge comes from traditional country music, which provided the stark, emotional underpinning for rockabilly and early rock 'n' roll. The singer added, "I have used [pedal] steel before. I've always done at least a couple of country things on my records. It's always been important to me."

Gordon's second LP for Private Stock, *Fresh Fish Special*, was named after the haircut foisted upon Elvis Presley's character in the 1957 film *Jailhouse Rock*. Songwise it was more of the same, with the exception of a song written especially for Gordon by rock icon Bruce Springsteen. "Fire," with its brooding sexuality and passionate hook, received pockets of airplay in the northeastern United States. Unfortunately for Gordon, the Pointer Sisters appropriated the tune and beat him to the hit.

Although artistically successful, the two LPs with Wray posed something of a dilemma for Gordon, who recalled, "He did some brilliant stuff in the studio, man. He can play a sensitive solo on a ballad that is so ferocious at the same time." But Gordon also felt that Wray "doesn't play live like he played on those records. I must say, he's a sweet guy, but it was difficult live." As a result, when Gordon decided to make the 1979 move to RCA, he dropped Wray.

More productive was the collaboration with British session ace Chris Spedding. "Chris was in London when we contacted him, and he was tired of doing session work for all the biggest names in the business," Gordon told Country Standard Time. "So, it was a perfect way to get him over here at the time. Rock Billy Boogie was our first album and we were together for ten years." Another great guitarist in his clique was Danny Gatton, who was so good that other musicians referred to him as "The Humbler." Gatton recorded and played live dates with Gordon sporadically until his death in 1994.

The RCA albums contained some of Gordon's finest work and took in shades of 1950s Nashville country as well as hyper-kinetic rockabilly. Boasting a far better promotional set-up and radio contacts, the label was able to get a few singles, notably the Marshall Crenshaw-penned "Someday, Someway," onto the charts.

The American rockabilly revival lasted only a little longer than the original movement. After his last album for RCA in 1982, Gordon began cutting sides for such European labels as New Rose and Bear Family. Live albums appeared on New Rose, King Biscuit, and others.

After three-plus decades in the business, can he still possibly get a kick out of all this? "Performing the music is just as joyful as it ever was," he stated. "But I think more so now, because I'm not as crazy as I once was and I finally know what the hell I'm doing."