



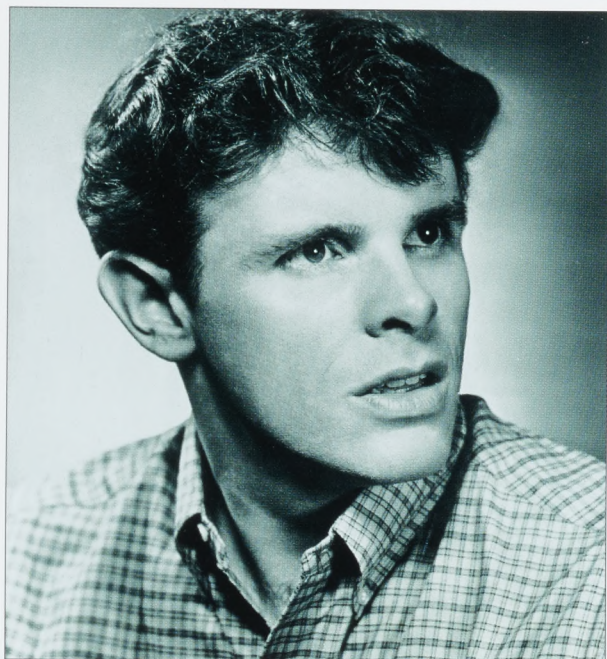
## D E L S H A N N O N

**T**he characters that populated Del Shannon's songs often could be found, to paraphrase a fellow inductee, in the darkness on the edge of town. His haunted heroes were always either leaving or being left behind, in pursuit or being pursued. For Shannon, there were no happy endings, even though his protagonists already had the girl – in fact, that's usually where the trouble started. "Love's a deadly game," he sang in one of his later tunes. ☞ But if the subject matter was dark, the music was some of the most uplifting rockin' around. There was a country twang in its recesses and a futuristic feel on the surface, thanks to the songs' nearly unearthly keyboard touches. His productions had a cinematic quality, conjuring up the shadowy streets on which his breathless characters ran. Shannon's sound and attitude have inspired artists from the Beatles to Bruce Springsteen to Chris Isaak to darkly arty modern British bands like Tindersticks. As a singer, Shannon could be appealingly passionate or gruff. He never went down without a swagger and always sounded impeccably cool. ☞ In the pure-pop world of 1961, Shannon was a man among boys. He was twenty-six years old at the time of the hard-earned overnight success of his first hit, "Runaway." He was promoted by his label, however, as a more fashionably youthful twenty-one, another young hitmaker seemingly destined to burn brightly, then fade with the next trend. The more hardy Shannon had other plans. Unlike many of his contemporaries, his career spanned more than twenty-five years, a couple of continents and a remarkable range of hits, many of which he wrote. He kept pace with the times, his modus operandi best described by the title of one of his most popular songs: "Keep Searchin'." ☞ Upon his birth in 1934 in Battle Creek, Michigan, Del Shannon was given the less marquee-worthy name Charles Westover. A guitar was his

Del Shannon  
(né Charles  
Westover), about  
to embark on his  
first British tour,  
ca. 1963

B Y M I C H A E L H I L L





constant companion throughout high school and his two years in the Army, during which he was stationed in West Germany. Shannon had always been a fan of country music, Hank Williams style, and in 1958, back home in Battle Creek where Shannon married and took a job as a carpet salesman, he frequented the Hi-Lo Club, a freewheeling honky-tonk with a country-flavored house band. There, Shannon fell in with the local musicians, who were impressed with his guitar chops. The turnover among play-

ers at the Hi-Lo was pretty steady, and soon Shannon found himself headlining the club with a combo he dubbed Charlie Johnson and the Big Little Show Band. Charlie Johnson was Shannon's first stage name, but he soon went after something slicker. He adapted Del from the name of the Cadillac Coupe de Ville and took Shannon from one of the Hi-Lo's patrons.

In 1959 Shannon found a musical soulmate in Max Crook, a keyboard player and songwriter hip enough to have had already cut a single for Dot Records. Crook could play the piano well enough, but he had a secret weapon: an instrument he had created that he called the Musitron, a primitive, homemade forerunner of the synthesizer that could produce a tantalizing variety of sounds. As legend has it, Crook was fooling around on the piano at the Hi-Lo in late 1960 when Shannon started jamming with him, and a tune took shape. By the next morning, Shannon was scribbling lyrics at the carpet store for the song that would become "Runaway." When they tried it out at the club, Shannon cued Crook, and that's when Crook came up with a wild Musitron solo echoing Shannon's equally memorable falsetto wah-wah-wahs. "Runaway" didn't just have a hook, it offered one stunning musical surprise after another in a span of two minutes and eighteen seconds.

Though Shannon was convinced "Runaway" was a hit, the Detroit-based producers and entrepreneurs Irving Micahnik and Harry Balk, who had landed Shannon and Crook a deal with the



Shannon's 1963 Big Top album, *Little Town Flirt*; Below: Shannon (left) jams backstage with Dion (center)





sively hip as the overlooked Oldham tracks.

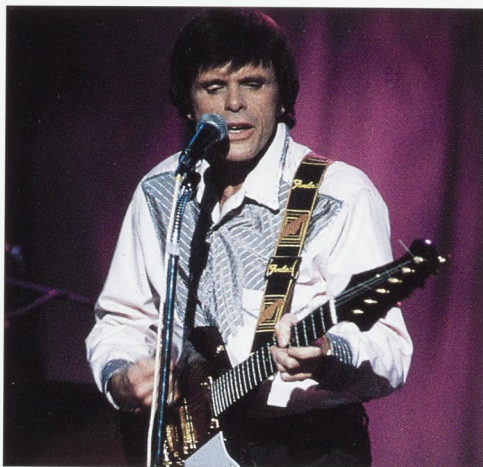
Shannon's musical adventures eventually led to collaborations with such artists as Jeff Lynne, Dave Edmunds, Tom Petty and the Divinyls. The Petty-produced *Drop Down and Get Me*, from 1982, featured "Sea of Love." Throughout his career, Shannon cannily chose other artists' material to retool as his own, from Jimmy Jones's "Handy Man" to Bobby Freeman's "Do You Wanna Dance" to the Rolling Stones' "Under My Thumb" to Nazareth's "Broken Down Angel." He liked to produce other artists and had an equally sharp ear in choosing material for them. He discovered and developed the

**Top:** Shannon and his Gretsch guitar in England, 1964;  
**Center:** Shannon in 1981, the year he returned to the charts with the Tom Petty-produced "Sea of Love";  
**Below:** Shannon in 1976

band Smith, who recorded a memorably tough and sexy remake of the Shirelles' "Baby, It's You" in 1969. Shannon also revived the career of teen idol Brian Hyland with a sultry reworking of the Impressions' "Gypsy Woman." He rerecorded "Runaway" yet again in 1986 for the wise-guy TV series *Crime Story*.

Throughout his rich career, Shannon struggled nobly to avoid the fate of being simply an oldies act, but he also faced more serious problems with alcohol and depression. Shannon admirably tried to conquer his demons and, with the encouragement of devotees like Lynne and Petty, always returned to his music. Shannon had been working with Lynne, Petty and Heartbreaker Mike Campbell on an album, *Rock On!*, before he died from an apparently self-inflicted gun shot wound, on February 8, 1990. *Rock On!* became a posthumous tribute to an artist who refused to be a one-hit wonder and thereby helped chart the course of rock & roll. ✪

New York-based Big Top Records, weren't so sure. Shannon had flown to New York City in mid-1960 to record some earlier sides, and the results had underwhelmed everyone. After Shannon and Crook returned to New York in early '61 to audition "Runaway," producer Balk and the Big Top brass still felt something was missing, so they decided to speed up his vocals. Shannon was more than a little surprised by the studio trickery but had little time to protest: As soon as "Runaway" hit the radio, it was an instant smash, destined to climb to the top of the charts all over the world.



Shannon followed up "Runaway" with the Top Ten "Hats Off to Larry," an enduring anthem for dumped guys everywhere. Subsequent singles faltered on the U.S. charts, but his success in the United Kingdom and Australia only grew. "Little Town Flirt," which brought him back to the U.S. Top Forty in 1962, foreshadowed the sound that would emerge from Liverpool and launch the British Invasion. Shannon was a frequent performer in England, so he got to experience firsthand this new wave of bands - his young admirers the Beatles opened shows for him. Shannon was astute enough to recognize the songwriting talents of the young Lennon and McCartney, and he became the first American artist to cover a Beatles song, releasing "From Me to You" in 1963.

During the height of stateside Beatlemania in 1964, Shannon still found his way into the Top Ten with "Keep Searchin'." English duo Peter and Gordon, who specialized in Beatles covers, chose Shannon's "I Go to Pieces" as their first non-Lennon/McCartney single. His run of Top Forty hits ended in 1965 with the melodramatic "Stranger in Town," and he wouldn't reappear on the charts until 1981, with a remake of Phil Phillips's "Sea of Love." In between, though, Shannon pursued some of his most remarkable work, artfully incorporating contemporary sounds into his classic style. His 1967 sessions in London with Andrew Loog Oldham barely made it onto vinyl, but they yielded some extravagantly arranged tunes with a decided *Pet Sounds* influence, like the stunning "Cut and Come Again," the harmony-rich "Friendly With You" and an ambitiously revamped "Runaway ('67)." L.A. sessions with producer/songwriter Dan Bourgoise in 1968 are documented on *The Further Adventures of Charles Westover*; and these experiments with Sunset Strip-style psychedelic sounds are as impres-

