

DUANE EDDY

Forget grunge and consider twang, Duane Eddy-style.

Forget grunge and consider twang. Twang, according to Webster's, is, among other things, "a harsh ringing sound like that of a plucked bowstring." Twang, according to Duane Eddy, is a reverberating, bass-heavy guitar sound bolstered by primitive studio wizardry. Concocted by Eddy and producer Lee Hazelwood in 1957 in Phoenix, AZ, twang came to represent a walk on the wild side, late fifties-style: the sound of revved-up hotrods, of rebels with or without a cause, an echo of the wild west on the frontier of rock & roll. It was the battle cry of the early guitar hero, embodied by the lean and handsome Eddy, who arrives in town slinging a guitar like a gun. He didn't need to speak or sing; he said it all with his terse playing.

Although Eddy was born in upstate New York, he got his start in Arizona. He was already hooked on country music and playing the guitar. Around 16, he made a demo of a Chet Atkins tune that garnered local airplay and caught the ear of a likeminded fellow teen, singer-pianist Jimmy Dellbridge. They formed a duo, Jimmy & Duane, and eventually cut two sides with local deejay and producer Lee Hazelwood. The pair didn't generate much excitement, but an instrumental track Hazelwood co-wrote and cut with Eddy on guitar, "Movin' N' Groovin'," in late '57 was picked up by the Philadelphia-based Jamie Records.

Therein lie the roots of twang. Archivist Dan Forte, who put together an outstanding Duane Eddy anthology, *Twang Thang*, on Rhino, describes twang rather scientifically as the result of Eddy "bending the E-string in the A-flat position then wanging the open E by crossing his left arm over to the guitar's vibrato bar." It was like hearing a bass voice command centerstage in a vocal group: cool, authoritative, and kind of otherworldly. Eddy's riffs stood out all the more dramatically as he engaged in seemingly spontaneous call and response with the frenzied saxophone of L.A. session player Plas Johnson, who was actually overdubbed onto the original track.

Eddy's debut just cracked the *Billboard* singles chart, reaching #72 in early '58. His second single, "Stalkin'" didn't fare so well. However, its flipside "Rebel Rouser," which would become Eddy's first Top Ten hit, "Stalkin'" was moody, dark, slow, and sultry; "Rebel Rouser" had a more energetic rockabilly style and featured another guitar-sax face-off plus lots of whoops, hollers, and gen-

eral egging-on from vocal group the Sharps. After initial exposure on *American Bandstand*, the song was embraced by radio and reached #6 on the pop chart in mid '58.

Eddy and his shifting lineup of backing players, billed as Duane Eddy, His Twangy Guitar, and the Rebels, led the instrumental invasion from 1958 to 1960, both as consistent chart makers and as performers in popular rock and roll caravans that toured America. Although he was better known as a prolific singles artist, Eddy used the LP format to expand his repertoire into country, blues and jazz, starting with his 1958, *Have "Twangy" Guitar Will Travel*.

Eddy and Hazelwood didn't so much rely on a single formula as bend, twist and embellish their original idea. "Ramrod," the followup to "Rebel Rouser," had a Coasters-gone-cowboy, galloping gospel feel; Eddy's second Top Ten Hit, "Forty Miles Of Bad Road" (1959), was an amiable, loping track gone slightly gonzo thanks to the "rebel yells" of session man Ben DeMotto. "Peter Gunn" (1960) was not as great a single success — although it became a big hit overseas — but the TV series theme became Eddy's calling card. Eddy's biggest hit, "Because They're Young" (1960), which reached #4 on the pop chart, was also a theme, in this case for a movie of the same name that starred Dick Clark and Tuesday Weld and featured Eddy himself in a role. It was a lush number, with a dramatic western feel, that featured strings and a stellar L.A. session combo and followed the successful Hollywood tradition of tying in a movie with a romantic pop single.

The instrumental groups rooted in the fifties had a short shelf life, giving way to surf music, girl groups, Motown soul, and, finally, the conquering horde of British bands. But Eddy's versatility ensured that he neither remained stuck in time nor became a novelty act. He was a longstanding album artist for both Jamie and RCA. He amassed a large following in Europe where he inspired popular instrumental groups like the Shadows.

Duane Eddy's guitar sound has reverberated through thirty years of pop music. A twangy guitar drove Bruce Springsteen's epochal "Born To Run." Twang was the sinister soundtrack signature to David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*. Twang echoes in the work of the Beatles, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Chris Isaak, k.d. lang, even Adam & the Ants and the Lemonheads.

Twang lives.

—Michael Hill



**The guitar
slinger,
Duane Eddy.**