



GENE PITNEY

By ANDY SCHWARTZ

OF ALL THE AMERICAN ROCK & ROLLERS TO EMERGE in the period between Elvis Presley's induction into the army in 1958 and the arrival of the Beatles in 1964, Gene Pitney is one of the select few to have not just survived but also prospered into the Twenty-first Century.

At age sixty-one, the singer still performs to adoring audiences on four continents. In 1999–2000, for example, Pitney headlined sold-out tours of Australia and the U.K., including the London Palladium; taped a widely aired PBS concert special; mixed and edited with his son, Todd, in his home studio, the CD and DVD versions of the performance; and tended to the administration of his impressive catalogue of songs and other, extramusical investments.

Gene Pitney was born February 17, 1941, in Hartford, Connecticut, and grew up in the village of Rockville, where he played in a local band, Gene Pitney and the Genials. Pitney began writing songs in his midteens, and in 1959 he cut his first single, "Classical Rock & Roll," as half of a duo called Jamie and Jane. The following year, while studying electronic engineering at the University of Connecticut, Pitney released his first solo recording, "Cradle of My Arms," under the name Billy Bryan.

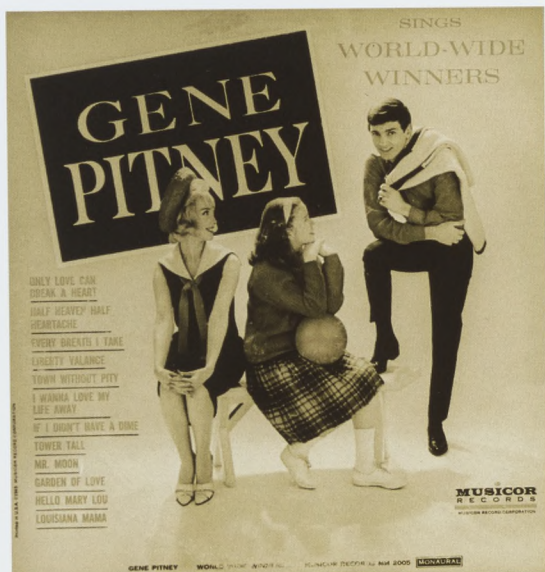
While these discs passed unnoticed, Pitney became an increasingly prolific

songwriter whose tunes were well received by hit-hungry New York music publishers. His first notable cover, the Kalin Twins' "Loneliness," was soon followed by others from Steve Lawrence ("Tears From Heaven"), Tommy Edwards ("Blue Heartaches"), Billy Bland ("Harmony") and Roy Orbison ("Today's Teardrops"). In 1960 Pitney made a chart breakthrough when his song "Rubber Ball" reached the Top Ten in both the United States and Great Britain, in versions by Bobby Vee and Marty Wilde, respectively.

Toward the end of 1960, Pitney entered a four-track studio in midtown Manhattan and paid \$30 to cut a demo of a self-penned uptempo song titled "(I Wanna) Love My Life Away." Pitney sang seven vocals on the track; played piano, guitar and drums; and deployed his extensive knowledge of electronics to get the most out of the primitive mixing board. The result was a vibrant and expansive production that bolstered Pitney's instantly identifiable tenor. "(I Wanna) Love My Life Away" became the first Top Forty hit for Musicor Records (the label founded by Pitney's publisher and manager, Aaron Schroeder) and reached Number Twenty-six in Britain.

In 1961 Gene Pitney was hot. As recorded by Ricky Nelson, his "Hello Mary Lou" was coupled with "Travelin' Man" to become a double-sided mil-

**Songwriter, vocalist
extraordinaire and teen
idol Gene Pitney
performing, ca. 1963**



lion-selling hit. Pitney's dramatic reading of the Goffin/King ballad "Every Breath I Take" was Phil Spector's most extravagant (and expensive) early production prior to his string of Philles hits. The haunting "Town Without Pity" reached Number Thirteen, won the Golden Globe Award for Best Song in a Motion Picture, earned an Academy Award nomination and made Gene Pitney the first rock & roll artist ever to perform at the Academy Awards. His second movie-related hit, "(The Man Who Shot) Liberty Valance" (written by Burt Bacharach and Hal David), reached Number Four despite its exclusion from the John Ford film of the same name.

Another Bacharach/David song, "Only Love Can Break a Heart," became Pitney's highest-charting U.S. single. (Oddly, for a talented writer who composed significant hits for other artists, almost none of Pitney's chart songs were self-penned.) It peaked at Number Two in November 1962 and was barred from the top spot only by the Crystals' "He's a Rebel" – a song produced by Spector and written by Pitney!

In 1963 the U.K. release of "Twenty Four Hours From Tulsa" prompted the first of many trips to Great Britain, where the single rose to Number Five. There the budding Rolling Stones and their manager/publicist, Andrew Loog Oldham, were greatly impressed by Pitney's professionalism, song-writing savvy and studio expertise. Pitney and Spector were in the studio when the Stones cut their seminal single "Not Fade Away," and Pitney played piano on "Little by Little," the B side of the U.K. version of the 45. In early '64 Pitney's rendition of "That Girl Belongs to Yesterday" became not only the singer's second Top Ten U.K. hit but the first Mick Jagger/Keith Richards song to crack the U.S. Hot 100 – some six months be-

fore the Stones managed this feat with "Tell Me (You're Coming Back)."

"Working with Gene remains one of the outstanding pleasures of my formative years," wrote Oldham in his autobiography, *Stoned: A Memoir of London in the 1960s*. "He hired me as his publicist, he encouraged Mick and Keith as writers, he attempted to help Brian Jones find his voice as a writer. . . . He was inspirational."

Unlike many other American artists of the Brill Building era, Pitney held his own chartwise through the British Invasion, the rise of folk rock and Motown, and the early psychedelic years. He alternated moody, dramatic ballads – "I'm Gonna Be Strong," "Backstage" – with cannily arranged stompers like "It Hurts to Be in Love" and "Last Chance to Turn Around." (The latter song is perhaps better known as "Last Exit to Brooklyn," at least to fans of author Hubert Selby Jr.) Pitney was also an early and skillful interpreter of Randy Newman ("Nobody Needs Your Love" and "Just One Smile," both 1966). His vinyl output was immense, with more than two dozen Musicor LPs released between 1962 and 1971, among them *Blue Gene*, *Gene Italiano* (in Italian), *Gene Pitney Sings Bacharach & Others*, *Gene Pitney Meets the Fair Young Ladies of Folkland* and his collaborations with country stars George Jones and Melba Montgomery.

Gene Pitney scored his last U.S. Top Forty hit in 1968 with "She's a Heartbreaker" (Number Sixteen). The resistance of American radio barely slowed him down, however, as he extended his British and European hit streak into the early Seventies and





continued to tour the globe. (To spend more time with his family, beginning in 1970, Pitney cut back from eleven to six months per year on the road.)

Neither the man nor his songs could ever be counted out. Marshall Crenshaw covered his "(I Wanna) Love My Life Away," and Cyndi Lauper turned the Pitney hit "I'm Gonna Be Strong" into a live tour de force. In 1983 Pitney undertook his first full-scale North American tour in more than a dozen years – it was a resounding success. In

early 1989 he unexpectedly earned the first U.K. Number One hit of his career when he and former Soft Cell singer Marc Almond revived "Something's Gotten Hold of My Heart" – a song first recorded by Pitney in 1967.

The secret of Pitney's phenomenal achievements over several decades is quite simple, according to admirer Andrew Loog Oldham: "Gene Pitney, like all great vocal stylists, was successful because he knew who he was and what was good for him." +

Opposite, top: The hit-filled 'Sings World-Wide Winners,' one of Pitney's two-dozen-plus albums on the Musicor label; bottom: Pitney composed hits for the Crystals and Roy Orbison, among others; above: Pitney has toured the globe for four decades