

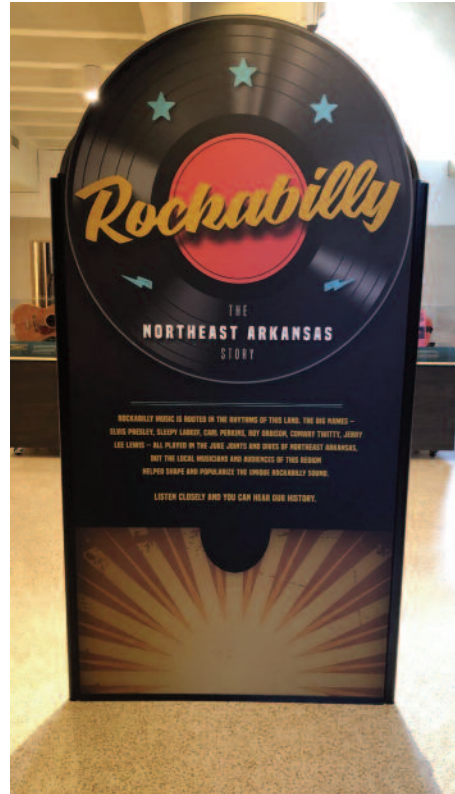
# Delta Sources and Resources

## Rockabilly—Remembered and Celebrated: A Trip to Arkansas State University Museum’s Rockabilly Exhibit Jonesboro, Arkansas by: LaDawn Lee Fuhr

On the campus of Arkansas State University in Jonesboro, Arkansas, there is a whole lotta shaking going on. In August 2019, ASU Museum opened its eagerly anticipated exhibit, “Rockabilly: The Northeast Arkansas Story.” Celebrating the rich musical heritage of the region, “Rockabilly” showcases the unique story of a musical genre that laid a foundation for the future. Rockabilly is considered one of the earliest forms of rock and roll and began as a hybrid musical art form that combined rhythm and blues with country music. ASU Museum’s homage to rockabilly through this exhibit is essential to the cultural conservation and awareness building of rockabilly as an important musical art form to this region and globally.

In the Delta, rockabilly music was playing in the clubs. It was widely broadcast on radio by Sun Studios and KWEM, a popular radio station in West Memphis, Arkansas, located across the bridge from Memphis, Tennessee, on the “rockabilly corridor” of Arkansas Highway 63. Rockabilly was wildly popular but short-lived, with most music authorities giving the years 1954–1959 as the heyday for the style. Yet, in Northeast Arkansas, rockabilly music continued to be performed in clubs and on the radio, both in new compositions as well as covers, years after it was considered passé in the mainstream American music scene. Visitors to the “Rockabilly” exhibit in ASU Museum will discover exciting new facts about a bygone era that has roots in the present and the future.

ASU Museum has become a hallowed hall of historical significance since its founding in



Entry “Rockabilly: The Northeast Arkansas Story.”  
Photograph by LaDawn Lee Fuhr.

1933 as part of the former Arkansas State College’s history department. Drs. Sam Leath, H.C. Huitt, and C.C. Truitt hatched the idea based on their individual and unique interests. The museum began by displaying artifacts housed in wooden cases in its first location, the former Wilson Hall. The museum curations grew to include Civil War weaponry, gifts from the international travels of benefactors, specialty glassware, Native American artifacts, wildlife exhibits, and a candelabra that was a wedding gift from Napoleon III. In 1948, ASU Museum was one of the first museums in the Southeast to be accredited by the American Association of Museums, now the American Museum Alliance, and maintains that accreditation today. Through the years, ASU Museum grew expo-

nentially under the guidance of groundbreaking directors including, E. B. Wittlake from 1959-1979 and Dr. Charlott Jones from 1983-1999.

Dr. Marti Allen is the current director of ASU Museum and came aboard in 2006. Since that time, Dr. Allen has overseen not only the implementation and launch of the rockabilly exhibit but also other exhibitions of cultural and historical importance. ASU Museum holds a multitude of significant historical, archaeological, and natural history collections, making it the largest and most comprehensive museum in the region. Kiplinger's praised the museum as one of the best reasons to move into Jonesboro and the Northeast Arkansas area. Under Allen's guidance, the museum has developed essential best practices in curation and implementation, along with collaborations that also make ASU Museum a hands-on, interactive, informal learning destination museum for children. With additions such as the Tinkering Studio and a multitude of educational traveling exhibitions, ASU Museum lives up to its tagline—"Learning is fun." And, when Allen learned about the rockabilly legacy, more fun was about to begin.

Around 2007, Allen became familiar with the music that rocked the region and rocked the world—rockabilly. From that time on, securing support to develop and execute a full rockabilly exhibit for public presentation was a driving passion for her. A permanent exhibition on rockabilly would be a jewel in the crown of the museum's existing collections. Local, regional, and international travelers embark on musical pilgrimages to the Delta, the birthplace of many styles of music, and this exhibit would be a "must-see" for those visitors and the residents of the area. Her staff, advisory council, and other volunteer supporters signed up for the incredible journey that would end with the finished product, "Rockabilly: The Northeast Arkansas Story." The exhibit was funded in total, as Allen says, "by us . . ." through hard work, donations, a National Endowment for the Humanities Exploratory Grant, and proceeds from the two fundraising concerts, called Rock-

abilly Boogiefest, and planned by a dedicated team of volunteers.

ASU Museum's Rockabilly Boogiefest was the key fundraising and awareness-building event for the future exhibit. The concerts were held for two consecutive years, beginning in 2013. The inaugural entertainment extravaganza featured Rockabilly legends and former Sun Recording Artists Narvel Felts and Sonny Burgess and the Legendary Pacers, Stan Perkins, son of rockabilly icon, and fellow Sun artist Carl Perkins, and Memphis based sensations The Stunning Cunning Band. The concert location was the historic ASU Armory, wherein the late 1950s Sonny Burgess had been banned from playing his Rockabilly music because he played it too loudly. Before Burgess took the stage during the 2013 concert, a special "dispensation" was read to a sold-out crowd by an ASU dignitary allowing Burgess back in the Armory and permitting him to play his music.

Northeast Arkansas is also the home of a well-known recording studio, Variety Studios, which had the popular label Alley Records, aptly named because of the building's location in an alley in downtown Jonesboro. Owned and operated by renowned studio musician and producer, "Papa Joe" Lee, Alley Records helped put the area on the music map, producing artists such as Larry Donn, The Pacers, and "The Arkansas Twist," by Bobby Lee Trammell. Rockabilly Boogiefest 2013's dedication was to "Papa Joe" for his contributions, and he was recognized with a plaque during the festivities. "Papa Joe" passed away later that year.

Capacity crowds flocked back to the ASU Armory in 2014 for Rockabilly Boogiefest, and to hear more live rockabilly music, while supporting the efforts of the museum. Headlining were Sonny Burgess and the Legendary Pacers. The organizers of the concert named Sonny "International Godfather of Rockabilly" by presenting him with a plaque, and along with the band, custom-designed, limited edition International Godfather of Rockabilly t-shirts. Charlie Rich, Jr., another son of Sun Records artist

the later Charlie Rich, and the Stunning Cunnning Band rounded out the bill. The music and the performers brought in the crowds that eventually helped fund this important exhibit, and it is here now.

Visitors to ASU Museum's Rockabilly exhibit are in for an appealing treat, literally from head to toe. "Rockabilly: The Northeast Arkansas Story" is told in rich detail with photographs, carefully curated historical artifacts, and other images designed to entertain and educate attendees. The entire design is a tribute to the era when Rockabilly was born, transporting attendees to another time. When entering the exhibit area, guests will see that the record of hard work is evident from the plaques on the wall. The first plaque is the Rockabilly Hall of Fame, honoring the individuals who participated in the creation of the exhibit, including, but not limited to, scholars, donors, supporters, and the Rockabilly Boogiefest Planning Team. The "Rockabilly" exhibition is dedicated to the late Sonny Burgess and the Legendary Pacers, who were vital cultural contributors to the display.

Guests of ASU Museum's "Rockabilly" exhibit will enjoy interactive listening stations, offering toe-tapping experiences while providing an opportunity to hear the music that was homemade in the Delta by Northeast Arkansas

natives. Some key displays not to be missed include Sonny Burgess's Fender six-string guitar, Pacer Bobby Crafford's drumsticks, and drummer Jim Y. Davidson's drum set. While Davidson started down this musical road with his band, Jimmy Davidson and the River Kings, his career path would lead him into the telecommunications industry where he created a regional cable business. In 1948, Davidson built one of the first known cable systems in the world in Tuckerman, Arkansas. Attendees can learn about the origins of rockabilly along with other musical forms. They can see objects from "Papa Joe" Lee's Variety Studios/Alley Records, the Sonny Burgess collection, vintage concert materials, and be swept back to another time with authentic artifacts from the artists who played the music.

ASU Museum is open Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday from 9 am to 5 pm, Tuesday, 9 am to 7 pm, and Saturday from 10 am to 5 pm. ASU Museum is closed on Sunday and university holidays and is located at 320 University Loop on the ASU campus in Jonesboro, Arkansas. For more information, please email [museum@astate.edu](mailto:museum@astate.edu) or call (870) 972-22074 or visit Museum sites online at:

[www.astate.edu.museum](http://www.astate.edu.museum)

<https://www.facebook.com/ASU.Museum/>



Artifacts from "Papa Joe" Lee's Variety Recording Studio/Alley Records in Jonesboro, Arkansas.  
Photograph by LaDawn Lee Fuhr.