

Echoes: Jerry Lee Lewis

Bill Millar, Record Mirror, March 1972

ON 22nd MAY 1958, an immigration officer manning the desk for TWA flights from New York to London Airport North scratched his head, sighed, picked up the passport of Myra Gale Brown Lewis and promptly fell off his seat.

Fresh-faced but tall, Myra would have passed for sixteen. But the passport revealed all. Born July 1944, Vicksburg, Mississippi. Thirteen years old and housewife for the big, flash, yellow-haired, cigar-eating Southern hustler who waited in the lounge with his father-in-law, fender-bass playing JW "I ain't got no Christian names" Brown.

Folks bringing child-brides into the country is more common than you'd 'think. If, every now and then, the press huffs and puffs about Africans doing so, it's a mild reaction compared to that touched off by the arrival of Jerry Lee Lewis almost fourteen years ago. But he was white, thrice-married at 22 and, perhaps the cardinal sin, he played rock 'n' roll.

Lewis blew the lid off Fleet Street. "Here is a chance," crowed one leading Sunday, "for Britain's teenagers to show that even rock 'n' roll hasn't entirely robbed them of their sanity". It worked, of course.

The late Iain Macleod reminded the then Minister of Labour that we had enough rock 'n' roll singers of our own without importing more (another reason to vote Labour); shows at Kilburn and Tooting were stopped in less than thirty minutes and Jerry flew back to New York International within five days.

"We had a very good reception in England," he told reporters. "I just got homesick. People treated us very nice."

I've never written about Lewis before. It's too difficult. How do you describe the sort of charisma that has grown men of thirty recalling his concerts. with tears in their eyes? Tunbridge Wells 1962. What's so GREAT about a guy lifting his right trouser to his knee and combing the blond hairs on his leg? Mitcham the same year. Why pay to see one of those contests where somebody sees how quickly they can dismantle a piano? (It was too small to stand on – he got so annoyed he damn near ate the pieces!) Stratford 1964. What makes a whole theatre roar with one voice at the sight of a maniac who plays piano with his butt? Whew! It's gunna git goooooood inah minute.

There's no answer to these questions. You just had to be there. Dripping with anticipation. Heaving and shaking alongside two thousand others for whom Lewis is The Governor and the rest are just...well, the rest. South Harrow one time. Before he got big again there were always half a dozen dates within 50 miles of London whenever he toured.

Anyway, I'm crushed up the back of someone's drape. Jerry smashes the piano lid down; throws it up again; juts his chin in and out; weaves an imperial hand around the mike and – wham! – three outrageous flourishes in top C. This piece of pure theatre lasts a couple of blinks. In between "your cheatin' heart" and "will make you weep". Drape-jacket's old lady looks up. "Thinks he's God, don't he?". The response is peculiarly gentle. "Well, he is, dear".

Jerry Lee...Jerry Lee... he joins in the cheers mocking our British accents. He looks at the audience, at the roof, into the wings. Anywhere except at what his fingers are doing. They operate by remote control, falling contemptuously on to notes which are so right. And on the next torrid solo he leans back. Long greasy tresses cascade over ears which stick out at right angles. Dig the killer hair, y'all. The man is in love with himself. Frightening. Drunk on rock 'n' roll but equally intoxicated by his own insane talent.

And then he sneers. Forget about Presley's comical upper lip. This is a sneer a mile long. All the arrogance, sex and soul of The White South is in that sneer. How can he sing 'Old Black Joe' and make me believe him?' Yeah, he sings as well. Yodels, falsetto howls and blistering pile-driving hysterics bring life to songs that anyone else would have been forced to bury fifteen years ago. A gravel-chorded 'Hound Dog' goes on for twenty minutes. And when he stops rockin' it's no less astonishing. If there's a superficially impudent unconcern about the rest of his talents he can't disguise the respect he holds for his own voice. Loose, down-home and laced with experience, it turns a country weepie into a desolate expression of real despair.

You didn't see him climb on the piano at Tunbridge. With a wave that said "Watch this, cretins," he minced from one side of the stage to the other and sorta glided up there. Taunting a whole theatre by swinging his paunch round in a lascivious arc. On top of the piano Lewis just overflowed. Looking back becomes sheer fantasy.

There are these crescendoes where insolence gives way to aggression; the sneer evaporates, his face disappears into a bloated mess and his shirt billows and ripples like the obscene figure from a Michelin X advert. First aid would seem to be inevitable but that's Jerry – jest satisfyin' his soul's anguish.

At Birmingham, on his last tour, he was fractionally quieter. I guess he's mellowed a little, if only a little. The killer hair is shorter, darker and he doesn't wear custard-yellow suits with black braiding any more. His voice is a deeper – dare I say soulful – baritone; the high notes in 'You Win Again' don't come quite so effortlessly and instead of kicking the piano stool into the orchestra pit he uses it to climb on the piano. But make no mistake, he can't be beat. As John Grissim, Charlie Gillett, Nik Cohn, Peter Guralnick and the man himself keep telling you, Jerry Lee Lewis is still the greatest performer in the history of universal entertainment.

I had intended to talk about the handful of albums that have been released in secret during the past few months. But waiting for Philips to send them is like waiting for Godot. Meanwhile I'll be at The London Palladium on 23rd April. And if you decide to go you'd better book up for Birmingham and Ipswich as well. Lewis can be a cathartic experience but he's also highly addictive.

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