

Walnut Ridge Rock 'N Roll Highway

As the train rolls through northeastern Arkansas and you listen to the rhythm of the rails, let your imagination roam back in time to 1955 when rock 'n roll was fresh and wild in local nightclubs. Cotton fields surrounded towns like Walnut Ridge and nearby Swifton and Newport. Many people, black and white, spent long, hot days in the cotton fields, and were more than ready to rock on a Friday or Saturday night.

And rock they did, to the music and magnetism of Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, Charlie Rich, Jerry Lee Lewis, Conway Twitty, Rob Orbison, Sonny Burgess and Billy Lee Riley. Every weekend, folks here could dance to the fast new beats and be energized by the entertainers of early rock 'n roll history. What drew these great performers and audiences to rural Jackson County? Those who drove in from surrounding counties to listen and dance were drawn by the music, of course, but also for refreshments. All of the surrounding counties were "dry," meaning they prohibited alcohol, so folks would come from miles around to drink and rock in Jackson County. We remember Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash as famous, wealthy performers, but during the 50s they were struggling musicians trying to make enough money to get by. In order to entice early rockers to Arkansas, the venues on Route 67 paid more than clubs in Memphis and other cities, so they were able to attract novel talent to perform in nightspots which ranged from dangerous dives to upscale clubs.

As described by the Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture Project, "Some (of these) establishments were small, rough country venues where farmers in bib overalls arrived on tractors, seeking evenings of excessive drinking, fighting, and flirtation. Some clubs, such as Beverly Gardens in Little Rock, could accommodate 200 to 300 people. The largest club in Arkansas at this time was the Silver Moon in Newport, which could seat more than 800." Music lovers at the classier clubs, like Silver Moon and Bob King's, dressed in coat and tie or party dress in the 1950s. Those folks might be shocked at the attire of today's audience at the Bob King's Club. Although none of the other 1950s nightclubs are still standing except Bob King's, the memories of rock's early days in Arkansas are treasured.

In 2009 the Arkansas legislature designated U.S. 67 in Jackson, Lawrence and Randolph counties as "Rock 'n' Roll Highway 67." At the signing of the bill, Governor Mike Beebe strummed an acoustic guitar and sang with Billy Lee Riley and Sonny Burgess. Plans are underway for a festival connected to the newly named highway.

If you listen hard, you can almost hear Elvis playing along with the rhythm of the train.

Source(s):

DeMillio, A. (2009). Arkansas hopes 'Rock 'n' Roll Highway' will boost tourism. Retrieved January 10, 2011 from http://www.usatoday.com/travel/destinations/2009-03-24-arkansas-rock-n-roll-highway_N.htm.

Jacobsen, D. (2009). Opening of Rock 'N Roll Highway Set for Saturday in The Beachwood Reporter. Retrieved January 18, 2011 from http://www.beachwoodreporter.com/music/arkansas_rock_n_roll_highway.php.

Texas Eagle Route Guide. (citation needed)

Walker, C. (2009). The Rock 'N Roll Highway Revisited in The Newport Independent. Retrieved January 18, 2011 from <http://www.newportindependent.com/news/x1699596680/Opening-of-Rock-n-Roll-Highway-67-set-for-Saturday-a>.

Author(s):

Written by Susan G. Scott, Lecturer in the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University, as part of a National Park Service Trails and Rails project funded by Amtrak, 2011.