



SUPER COUNTRY MUSIC
TRADING CARDS

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WANDA JACKSON

T E N N Y  C A R D S

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Rockabilly legend Wanda Jackson launched her first tour with Elvis Presley 40 years ago this month. The road show lasted nearly three years, and it's impossible to frame its social and musical impact.

Jackson was an 18-year-old native of Maud, Okla., when she met Presley. She was a perky and polished country stylist fresh off Red Foley's "Ozark Jubilee" TV show. Jackson's road band featured Big Al Downing, a rhythm-and-blues pianist. Big Al also had his own outfit, the Poe Cats.

The King told Jackson and her band to pump up the volume.

"He encouraged me to try rock 'n' roll," Jackson said from a Mississippi stopover on the "Rockabilly Filly" tour that hits town this week with Tex-Mex singer-songwriter Rosie Flores. "He said it was music that the kids liked, and that I should get in on it. He played me some black blues stuff he had. He was a nice guy. My folks met him and thought the world of him.

"I was out on the cutting edge of everything. I was the first one to use a black guy (Downing). Big Al Downing was also an Okie and he already had his own band. But certainly it was hard for a group like that to be on the road. And it's harder for a woman. America just wasn't ready for a girl screaming in Elvis Presley/Little Richard style. And I did it pretty well."

After leaving Jackson, Downing enjoyed a short solo career. Between 1978 and 1980 he had three Top 20 singles: "Touch Me," "Mr. Jones" and "Bring It On Home," making him the only black artist besides Charley Pride to score a top 20 country hit. Jackson said Big Al still works the honky-tonk circuit in the Northeast.

And this is Jackson's first American tour in more than a decade. Jackson and Flores duet on the vintage Jackson hits "Rock Your Baby" and "His Rockin' Little Angel" on Flores' new "Rockabilly Filly" CD on HighTone Records.

The energy should be reminiscent of the immensely popular "Happy Wanda Jackson Country Gospel Rockabilly Show" tours of Europe that she and her husband/manager Wendell Goodman began in 1983.

"I'm excited about seeing so many rockabilly fans," said Jackson, who on this tour has rolled through hipster havens such as Bimbo's in San Francisco, House of Blues in Los Angeles and Howlin' Wolf in New Orleans. "I'm really enjoying talking to fans and signing their records. Some of them are real collectors."

Since becoming a Christian in 1971, Jackson has blended gospel with country

music. She recorded a gospel album for Capitol Records - a long stretch from wailing "When I start eruptin' ain't nobody gonna make me stop" in the 1958 hit "Fujiyama Mama."

"People heard I became a Christian and assumed I stopped singing or recording or something," said Jackson, who lives in Oklahoma City with her husband. "Actually, I never stopped doing neither."

Her comeback break happened last year when Pam Tillis asked Jackson, Flores and Iris DeMent to guest on the TNN special "Live at the Ryman" filmed at the original Grand Ole Opry in Nashville. After the taping, Flores invited her to appear on "Rockabilly Filly." Jackson said, "She had recorded one of my songs and I knew she was fan. I told her that, when the project was released, I'd be more than happy to help her in promotion in any way."

The idea has grown from what was to be an exclusively West Coast tour to a national scope. Next year a "Rockabilly Filly" package with Flores, Jackson, California honky tonk singer Jann Browne and '50s rockabilly star Janis Martin is a possibility. In 1990 Browne and Jackson dueted on "I Forgot More" on her "Tell Me Why" album for Curb Records.

An only child, Jackson moved with her family from Oklahoma to Los Angeles when she was 6. Her father Tom was a professional musician in search of greener pastures. So it was in Southern California that Jackson was exposed to the cutting edge Western swing of Spade Cooley, Tex Williams and, most important, the Dust Bowl Soul of Rose Maddox (The Maddox Brothers and Rose).

"My parents went to all the dances on the West Coast," Jackson said. "And they'd take me with them. I'd listen to the bands all night."