

## Bill Haley

Born: William John Clifton Haley

*A rock 'n' roll overnight success story.*

July 6, 1925 (Highland Park MI) – Feb 9, 1981 (Harlingen TX)

**I**NSIDE A NEW YORK recording studio at precisely 4:30 pm on April 12, 1954, drummer Billy Gussak struck a drumstick smartly against the rim of a drum – twice. Rap! Rap! There was a full second of anticipatory silence before Bill Haley leaned into the microphone and sharply enunciated the timeless cadence-inspired lyrics that literally brought rock ‘n’ roll<sup>1</sup> music to life: *One-two-three o’clock, four o’clock rock . . .*

While it is the song that everyone remembers – the song that gave birth to the rock ‘n’ roll movement – it took more than just the words of the song to bring it all together.

It also required a 1955 black-and-white movie with serious social overtones starring Glenn Ford, Ann Francis, and Sidney Poitier. It’s that part of the history of rock ‘n’ roll that most people have forgotten.

To explore the genre’s roots, we need to go back in time, five or six years before April 12, 1954, when Gussak gave the rim of his drum those two sharp raps!

From 1949 to 1953, Bill Haley was the leader of a talented group from Chester, Pennsylvania, who performed as *Bill Haley and the Saddlemen*, with Haley acknowledged as one of America’s finest yodeling cowboys.<sup>2</sup>

Always searching for that elusive name to convey the star power that he and his group knew existed somewhere, Haley and the Saddlemen recorded under a host of names, including: *Johnny Clifton and His String Band*, *Bill Haley and the Four Aces of Western Swing*, *The Kingsmen*, and *The Lifeguards*.

They even cut a single as *Reno Browne and her Buckaroos*, although B-actress Reno Browne, the wife of western star Lash LaRue, never sung a note, nor strummed a guitar. However, her photo does appear on the sheet music for “My Sweet Little Girl from Nevada,” one side of the 45-rpm single.

By 1951, Haley’s music had become more rhythm and blues than country-western, and the term “rockabilly” was easing into America’s consciousness. The group recorded “Rocket 88,” a

musical tribute to the Oldsmobile Rocket 88 automobile with the rockabilly sound, and the recording sold moderately well.

A year later they cut another rockabilly record, this one more *rock* than *billy*, titled “Rock the Joint,” and Bill Haley and the Saddlemen were “this close,” – hold up a hand and show an eighth-inch gap between thumb and index finger – to perfecting the sound that would rock them all the way to the top.

But, their fame wouldn’t be as the Saddlemen.

It was time for the group to try yet another identity.

That’s when a friend of Haley’s suggested that since most people mispronounce “Halley’s Comet”<sup>3</sup> (named for English astronomer Edmund Halley<sup>4</sup>) when discussing the famous comet that circles the earth every seventy-five years, that they might capitalize on the spelling similarities of *Haley* and *Halley*.

And so, Larry, Dick, and Harry, and the rest of you from the ‘50s and ‘60s, that’s how *Bill Haley and the Saddlemen* became *Bill Haley and His Comets*. And yes, the group’s name is Bill Haley and *His Comets*, although most everyone refers to them as Bill Haley and *the Comets*.

In 1953, although rarely remembered today, the group recorded what rock ‘n’ roll purists consider the first song of the new genre, “Crazy Man, Crazy.” It was the first to be recorded with the new beat, reaching #15 on the charts.

In 1954, the group recorded what would become their biggest hit (over 25-million records sold), but it took a full year for the song to catch on. The song was “Rock Around the Clock,” and for some reason, it lacked traction when first released, clinging precariously to the bottom of the charts for a week before burning out like, well, like a fading comet.

*Bill Haley and His Comets* fared better with their next recording, their version of a Big Joe Turner hit, “Shake, Rattle and Roll.” It was money in the bank, a million records sold.

So, what was it that propelled “Rock Around the Clock” into the history books as the best known, best-selling, and the most famous rock ‘n’ roll song of all time?

The answer lies in the 1955 movie briefly alluded to in the third paragraph, a movie blessed with a musical score by Max C. Freedman and James E. Myers, the same two gentlemen who three years earlier had co-composed “Rock Around the Clock.”

And the name of the movie? *Blackboard Jungle*. It was a dark, violent, racially-charged movie that opened with Billy Gussak's two famous rim shots. Rap! Rap! A second of breathless silence, followed by Bill Haley's sharply enunciated, *One-two-three o'clock, four o'clock rock . . .*

This time "Rock Around the Clock" shot like a Roman candle to number #1 and stayed there eight consecutive weeks, and the kids of America rocked around the clock that night and the next, and the next, for a decade or more.

In February of 2006, the International Astronomical Union named an asteroid, "79896 Billhaley," in honor of the 25th anniversary of the death of the man who ushered in the golden age of rock 'n' roll. The man who helped a generation of 1950s and '60s teenagers put their glad-rags on, and in broad daylight, rock all the way to seventh heaven, and beyond.

<sup>1</sup> Don't confuse the *rock 'n' roll* of the 1950s – '70s, danceable music with a toe-tapping, finger-snapping beat and intelligible lyrics, with the eardrum-busting, profanity-laced "music" of the new millennium. The only thing the two musical genres share is the name, *rock 'n' roll*.

<sup>2</sup> To hear Bill Haley sing a yodeling song, check the internet for his rendition of *Yodel Your Blues Away*, (1949) with the Four Aces of Western Swing.

<sup>2</sup> *Stories from History's Dust Bin* (additional reading):  
Vol 3, Nov 30: Halley's Comet with Mark Twain

<sup>4</sup> To impress your rock 'n' roll friends, *Halley's* (rhymes with *Sally's*) *Comet* is named for English astronomer Edmond Halley (1656–1742). The comet, visible every 75-76 years, will make its next appearance in 2061.

*Just let me hear some of that Rock and Roll Music,  
Any old way you choose it.  
It's got to be Rock and Roll Music,  
If you want to dance with me.  
Chuck Berry (1926-2017) Singer, songwriter*