



# VIRGINIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*The Story of Virginia*

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## **Virginia Rocks! Oh Yes it Does! Rockabilly Music Made in the Commonwealth Explored in Exhibition at the Virginia Historical Society**

Richmond, VA—It is 1956. Teenagers are hanging out at the drugstore after school having a cheeseburger and malt from the soda fountain. The males are dressed in slim-legged pants with greased DA hairstyles, and the females sport ponytails, bobby sox, and pedal pushers. All are listening to the rockabilly music blasting from the jukebox.

This isn't a scene from the movie *American Graffiti*, it is from a new exhibition opening at the Virginia Historical Society on August 28, 2010. *Virginia Rocks! The History of Rockabilly in the Commonwealth*—a traveling exhibition organized by the Blue Ridge Institute & Museum of Ferrum College—looks at the more than 60 artists and bands from all over the state who cut 45 rpm rockabilly records in small recording studios and radio stations in the 1950s and early 1960s. The exhibit explores well-known musicians like Elvis Presley and Patsy Cline, but also includes Virginia artists Janis Martin, Phil Gray, the Rock-A-Teens, the Dazzlers, and many more who may have only had one or two popular hits.

“Virginia rockers from the ‘50s, such as Gene Vincent and Link Wray, have been praised by the likes of Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Jimmy Page, and Neil Young, but their impact on Virginia’s cultural legacy has been largely overlooked by historians and musicologists,” said Roddy Moore, exhibition curator and director of the Blue Ridge Institute & Museum. “*Virginia Rocks* is the first exhibition to explore the state’s place in rock ‘n’ roll history. It is especially important that the exhibit is being displayed in Richmond because numerous rockabilly musicians hailed from that city, and Richmond dance parties such as the Teen Age Party and Old Dominion Barn Dance helped boost the prominence of many rockabilly acts.”

Rockabilly was one of several musical styles of rock-and-roll, the catch phrase for youth music of the post-World War II era. Rockabilly was an energetic blend of blues and country powered by dramatic solo singers, fast-walking bass runs, strong guitar licks, catchy lyrics, and bold stage movements.

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The *Virginia Rocks* exhibition explores the rise of rockabilly as a then-radical departure from established popular music and an early chapter in the phenomenon of youth rebellion, the place of rockabilly in the larger youth culture of the pre-Beatles era, and the demise of the genre as the music and movie industries invested in the softer sound of “teen idols.”

Rare audio and video recordings, musical instruments, hundreds of photographs, stage costumes, a jukebox, and other memorabilia are included in the exhibition to showcase dozens of Virginians who stirred up the country-boogie in recording studios and on stage.

“This exhibition will bring back a flood of memories and emotions from visitors, especially those who lived through the 1950s and 1960s and experienced first-hand the important cultural and economic phenomenon that was rockabilly music,” said Paul Levengood, Virginia Historical Society President and CEO. “Rockabilly music has influenced musicians all the way up to present day and crossed barriers of race, class, and geography. More than fifty years later, rockabilly music continues to fascinate and entertain. And, the twentieth-century was the period in which Virginia changed the most. More and more, the VHS is using pop culture stories to demonstrate the scope and depth of changes in the state’s history.”

Music historians Don Harrison and Brent Hosier worked with the Blue Ridge Institute & Museum to develop a two-disk CD featuring an 80 page booklet and 61 vintage cuts by rockabilly artists from across Virginia to accompany the exhibition. The CD will be for sale in the VHS Museum Shop while the exhibition is on display.

“In doing research for the *Virginia Rocks* CD, we found that there are so many influential musicians and regional hometown heroes that were discovered and recorded in Richmond that people have never even heard of,” Harrison said. “In a way, the Virginia Historical Society’s presentation of *Virginia Rocks* will be like a homecoming.”

*Virginia Rocks*—which was funded in part by a grant from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities—will be on display at the Virginia Historical Society through December 12, 2010. Admission to the VHS museum is free. On October 21 at noon, Paul Levengood will give a gallery walk of the exhibition. Gallery walks cost \$6/adults, \$5/seniors 55+, \$4/students and children under 18, and are free for VHS members. Reservations are not required.

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“Rockabilly music was brash and rowdy, but it was fun and teenagers loved it,” Moore added. “People still have stories to tell about the high-octane rock ‘n’ roll performances they saw all across the Old Dominion. I feel certain that this exhibit is going to be as well-received in Richmond at the VHS as it was in southwest Virginia at the Blue Ridge Institute & Museum.”

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For more than 182 years, the **Virginia Historical Society** (VHS) has been connecting people to America’s past through the unparalleled story of Virginia. The VHS—a history museum and research library—features award-winning exhibitions that are entertaining and educational for visitors of all ages. The Society is the only museum with all of Virginia’s history under one roof—all centuries, all regions, and all topics are covered. Although designated the Official State Historical Society, the VHS is a privately funded non-profit organization that relies on contributions from individuals, corporations, and foundations to sustain its operations. The VHS is located at 428 North Boulevard in Richmond’s Museum District. Admission is free. Museum hours are Monday–Saturday 10 a.m.–5 p.m. and Sunday 1 p.m.–5 p.m. Library hours are Monday–Saturday 10 a.m.–5 p.m. For more information, call (804) 358-4901, visit [www.vahistorical.org](http://www.vahistorical.org), or find the VHS on Facebook and Twitter.

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