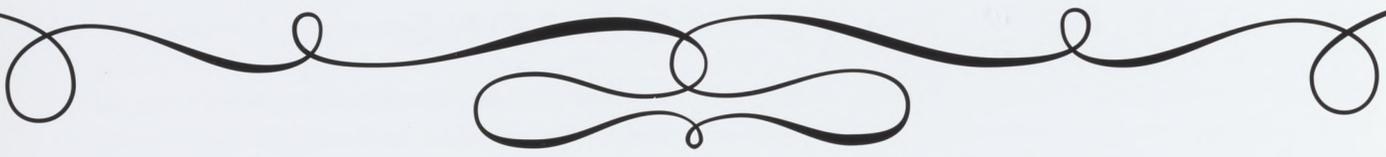


PERFORMERS
THE LEGENDARY GROUPS



THE BLUE CAPS • THE COMETS
THE CRICKETS • THE FAMOUS FLAMES
THE MIDNIGHTERS • THE MIRACLES



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FROM POWERFUL HARMONIZERS
TO TREND-SETTING INSTRUMENTALISTS,
THESE **INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS** BLAZED
THE ROCK & ROLL TRAIL





FROM TOP Bobby Jones, Dickie Harrell, Tommy Facenda, Gene Vincent, Paul Peek, and Johnny Meeks (from left); Cliff Gallup, Vincent, Willie Williams, Harrell, and Jack Neal (from left), 1956.

Miss You,” the strutting “Woman Love,” and the slow-burn “Be-Bop-A-Lula.”

Packaged as the B side to “Woman Love,” “Be-Bop-A-Lula” caught fire. It sold 200,000 copies right out of the gate and rocketed to Number Seven in June 1956. Although all original Blue Caps but Harrell would leave by year’s end, the impact made on rock & roll by the band is immense. Many up-and-coming rockers would take inspiration from the rough-hewn gems

contained on Vincent’s debut, *Bluejean Bop!*, and his 1957 followup *Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps*, featuring both raw texture and rare finesse. The rawness was a result of the quintet’s club chops; they were a working band, tearing it up on sweaty stages night after night. Producer Ken Nelson knew better than to spend time trying to soften their considerable edge, and allowed Harrell’s and Williams’ whoops and yells to stay in the mix. The finesse came from secret weapon Gallup, who had joined the Blue Caps at 26, already steeped in the technique of Charlie Christian and Chet Atkins. Gallup incorporated thumb and finger picks, producing dazzling chordal shadings and dizzying, clean runs up and down the neck of his black Gretsch Duo Jet. (Budding young guitarists Jeff Beck and Eric Clapton took notice.) The combination of his classy versatility and the other Blue Caps’ feral energy made for some lasting, potent rock. Sadly, while they created astounding music and delivered high-energy performances, Gallup, Williams, and Neal did not care for the road.

In the wake of their departure, the volatile Vincent formed a new Blue Caps with pedal steel player-cum-background singer Paul Peek. Peek and Tommy “Bubba” Facenda became the “clapper boys,” offering hand percussion, vocals, and shameless showmanship to the Blue Caps’ evolving stage show, while fresh-faced guitarist Johnny Meeks ably filled Gallup’s very big shoes. Bobby Jones rocked the low end on his Fender Telecaster bass. This band lasted the longest and—thankfully—was captured on film several times.

While Vincent continued to stun audiences and release records into the 1970s, he would never again assemble the right constellation of musical personalities to capture the excitement level of his earliest recordings. But even though none of the Blue Caps were in it for the long haul, their contributions to rock & roll have gone the distance.

R . B . W .



THE BLUE CAPS

In the mid-1950s, everyone in the music business was looking for the next Elvis. Enter Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps and their massive hit, the insinuating, catchy “Be-Bop-A-Lula.” One of the first self-contained rock & roll bands, Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps would relentlessly tour America, Europe, Australia, and Japan, introducing countless audiences to the untamed exuberance of rockabilly.

Fresh out of the navy in the spring of 1956, Vincent was spending time at the Norfolk, Virginia, radio station WCMS, singing a ditty he had written—or bought, depending on which story you believe—called “Be-Bop-A-Lula.” He was backed by the Virginians, an in-studio group of musicians that included “Galloping” Cliff Gallup on lead guitar, “Wee” Willie Williams on rhythm guitar, “Jumpin’” Jack Neal on upright bass, and 15-year-old Dickie “Be-Bop” Harrell on drums. The enterprising WCMS disc jockey “Sheriff Tex” Davis heard it, signed on as Vincent’s manager, and brought the group to the attention of Capitol Records’ Ken Nelson. Renamed the Blue Caps (in honor of the headgear worn by Vincent’s fellow sailors), the band initially cut four songs for the label: the breathless “Race With the Devil,” the countrified “I Sure