



# The Ventures



BY JOHN TEAGLE



**F**ifty years ago, a pair of Tacoma, Washington, construction workers – Bob Bogle and Don Wilson – began picking guitars together in their spare time. The band they formed – the Ventures – would establish itself as the premier guitar-based combo in America. Beginning with 1960’s “Walk Don’t Run,” the Ventures created a body of work that remains untouchable by any other instrumental group in the history of rock & roll. The band’s influence has extended from nascent surf music to the British Invasion, garage rock, psychedelia, heavy metal, new wave, and beyond. Releasing more than 250 albums and recording more than a thousand songs, the Ventures pioneered the use of guitar effects to create sounds never before heard on record. And over five decades, the Ventures have never stopped performing.

In 1958, Bogle and Wilson worked construction sites by day, playing the Northwest club circuit at night. Their first recording, a vocal number, went nowhere, so the following year they enlisted Nokie Edwards to play bass. With his banjo rolls and “chicken pickin’” style, Edwards had already established himself as one of the Northwest’s top guitarists. In 1960, they cut jazz legend Johnny Smith’s “Walk Don’t Run,” albeit inspired by Chet Atkins’s version of the song, stripped down to a rockin’ exercise in simplicity. The track featured Wilson’s opening chords, punctuated by Bogle’s clever lead – riffs that are still played note for note by countless guitarists around the world. Having originally worked

up the arrangement before they had a rhythm section, Wilson and Bogle devised a strong beat for the rhythm guitar, which became a key element of the band’s signature sound. Dolton Records had initially passed on hearing a demo of “Walk Don’t Run” but ended up signing the Ventures after the band released the song on its own Blue Horizon label. Dolton’s rerelease of “Walk Don’t Run” rocketed to Number Two and, a few months later, the group’s version of Xavier Cugat’s “Perfidia” hit Number Fifteen.

The Ventures remained enormously popular and influential during their first decade; among rock acts, only Elvis Presley, the Beatles, and Ray Charles sold more records in the sixties. The Ventures landed in the singles

charts almost every year, earning a total of fourteen Top 100 hits. But singles were not where the band found its hard-core fan base. By the end of 1961, the Ventures had released four charting albums, with the debut *Walk Don’t Run* reaching Number Eleven. Because the band was so busy recording and playing TV shows and concerts, its label had to use stand-ins for the first cover photo session. (The self-titled sophomore album featured the real band on the jacket.) Predating the late-sixties trend toward album sales, at least one Ventures release made the *Billboard* albums chart every year for ten years straight, with twenty-nine making the Top 100 between 1960 and 1970.

The Ventures’ personnel fluctuated over the years. Early on, Bogle swapped roles with guitar maestro Edwards and became the band’s bassist. Original drum-

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## WALK — DON'T RUN '64

and THE CRUEL SEA

## THE VENTURES



The Ventures reprise their breakthrough hit four years later.

mer Howie Johnson, who joined after "Walk Don't Run," was forced to retire in 1963, following a back injury. His replacement, L.A. session drummer Mel Taylor, had played on "Alley Oop," "The Lonely Bull," and "The Monster Mash," among other hits. With Edwards on lead, the Ventures reached a level of musicianship that set a new standard for America's

pre-British Invasion surf bands. Wilson's trademark chording style, intros, and bass-string glissandos complemented Edwards's high-string magic, and, with Bogle and Taylor taking the rhythm section to new heights, the quartet refined and expanded its repertoire. This lineup re-cut "Walk Don't Run" in 1964, garnering another Top Ten single.

By the end of 1968, Edwards had left the band and was replaced by session ace Gerry McGee. The guitarist's studio résumé featured recordings with Elvis Presley, the Everly Brothers, and the Monkees (including the opening chords of their TV show theme song). With McGee and keyboardist John Durrill on board, the Ventures cut the 1969 theme song to *Hawaii Five-O*, replacing the horns of the hit television series with guitar and keyboards. This would be the group's last Top Ten hit, peaking at Number Four.

The Ventures' recordings often included groundbreaking production techniques — eerie organ, special effects, sirens, barking dogs, echo, underwater reverb and tremolo, gongs, dropped tunings, and possibly the first recorded use of fuzz-tone pedal. Gibson introduced its Maestro Fuzz-Tone unit around 1961, but apparently a custom-made model used by the Ventures on "The 2,000 Pound Bee (Parts One and Two)" was the first to hit the singles chart, in December 1962. This device was built by pedal steel player Red Rhodes, who also mimicked a theremin and other incidentals on *Ventures in Space*.

Throughout their career, the Ventures have continually crafted distinctive covers featuring the band's unique



Wilson, Bogle, drummer Mel Taylor, and Edwards (from left)



The late-sixties look: Taylor, Wilson, Bogle, keyboardist John Durrill, and new guitarist Gerry McGee (from left)



Surfin' into a new century: The Ventures sign with Pat Boone's Gold label, Los Angeles, 2000.

arrangements, resulting in complete remakes of many songs. On Richard Rodgers's "Slaughter on 10th Avenue," Brahms's "Hungarian Dances," and Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee," for example, the group pulled a section of each composition, ran with it, and made it a Ventures song. Their vast range of covers veers from surf hits to the incredibly menacing "Bat," with its wailing sirens and fuzz guitars. In the case of the Frantics' "No Werewolf," the band played the original note for note and re-titled it "The Fourth Dimension." Frequently, the Ventures have mimicked a song's vocal melody with the lead guitar, as on their versions of "Ghost Riders in the Sky," "When You Walk in the Room," and "I Feel Fine."

The band also has a penchant for theme albums, such as 1963's *Ventures in Space* and 1966's *The Ventures Play the Batman Theme*. Also released during this prime '63-'66 period, *The Fabulous Ventures*, *Walk Don't Run '64*, *Knock Me Out!*, *Live on Stage*, *Ventures A-Go-Go*, and *Where the Action Is* featured original compositions by Bogle/Edwards/Taylor/Wilson. Among the band's hundreds of originals, "War of the Satellites," "Journey to the Stars," "Runnin' Wild," "Lonely Girl," "The Creeper," "Go-Go Slow," "Stop Action," "007-11," "Zocko!," and "Vamp Camp" are just a few of the many that have held up remarkably well. In 1995, Edwards received a double-platinum record when the Lively Ones' version of his composition "Surf Rider" (originally titled "Spudnik" on the

Ventures' 1962 LP *Mashed Potatoes & Gravy*) was featured on the *Pulp Fiction* soundtrack. The band's "Play Guitar With the Ventures" album series taught many novices songs and licks they could really use, inspiring them to keep learning. The first of this series actually made it onto *Billboard's* Top 100 albums chart, in 1965.

For decades, the Ventures have been a great live act. As documented on the 1966 film *Beloved Invaders*, shot during the Ventures' 1965 tour of Japan, the band spread out in a straight line across the stage, the classic four-piece Gretsch drum set to the left, with three white Fender amps in a row to the right. The pearly white Mosrite Ventures-model guitars and bass formed a wall of vibrating strings, each player contributing a very distinctive and equally important role. Standouts include "Caravan" (a vehicle for Taylor's big band-era drum solo, plus electrifying lead guitar), the bass-driven "Out of Limits," the frantic rhythm guitar of "Bumble Bee Twist," plus the surf classics "Walk Don't Run '64," "Diamond Head," "Pipeline," "Penetration," "The Cruel Sea," and "Wipe Out." A stripped-down "Slaughter on 10th Avenue" epitomizes everything an instrumental band should be — tight, dynamic, and nimble.

The early seventies saw more personnel changes among the Ventures, with all members at one time or another taking a break from the road: Edwards returned for a while, then left again, as did Mel Taylor. Once Taylor came back, he stayed

Onstage in Detroit, 1981: Edwards, Bogle, Taylor, and J.D. Hoag (from left)



until his death in 1996 during one of the band's Japanese tours. Fortunately, he has been ably replaced by his son Leon. Today, the group also includes Bob Spalding, who has filled in on bass and lead guitar as needed over the past twenty-five-plus years. Spalding's association actually goes back to 1972, when he recorded and toured with Mel Taylor and the Dynamics, which also included Gerry McGee and John Durrill. By the early eighties, Edwards had returned to the band and would sporadically perform with the group in the decades to come.

Over the years, countless musicians have sat in with the Ventures: Highlights include the Doors' Robby Krieger harmonizing with Edwards on "Perfidia," Peter Frampton beaming like a little kid on "Apache," and the Raybeats doubling up the rhythm section on "Out of Limits." Drummers as diverse as Keith Moon, Mick Fleetwood, Max Weinberg, and Marky Ramone have cited the band's influence on their playing, as have bassists Gene Simmons, Stanley Clarke, Paul Simonon, and Jack Blades. And such Hall of Famers as Jimmy Page, Joe Walsh, John Fogerty, Mike Campbell, Joe Perry, Tom Hamilton, Lindsey Buckingham, and Eddie Van Halen are among the guitarists who sing their praises. George Harrison once exclaimed, "The Ventures' guitars knock me out!" And now the Ventures – Bob Bogle, Don Wilson, Nokie Edwards, Mel Taylor, and Gerry McGee – rightfully join their devoted disciples in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. ♪



Taylor, Wilson, Edwards, and Bogle (clockwise from top), 1981

