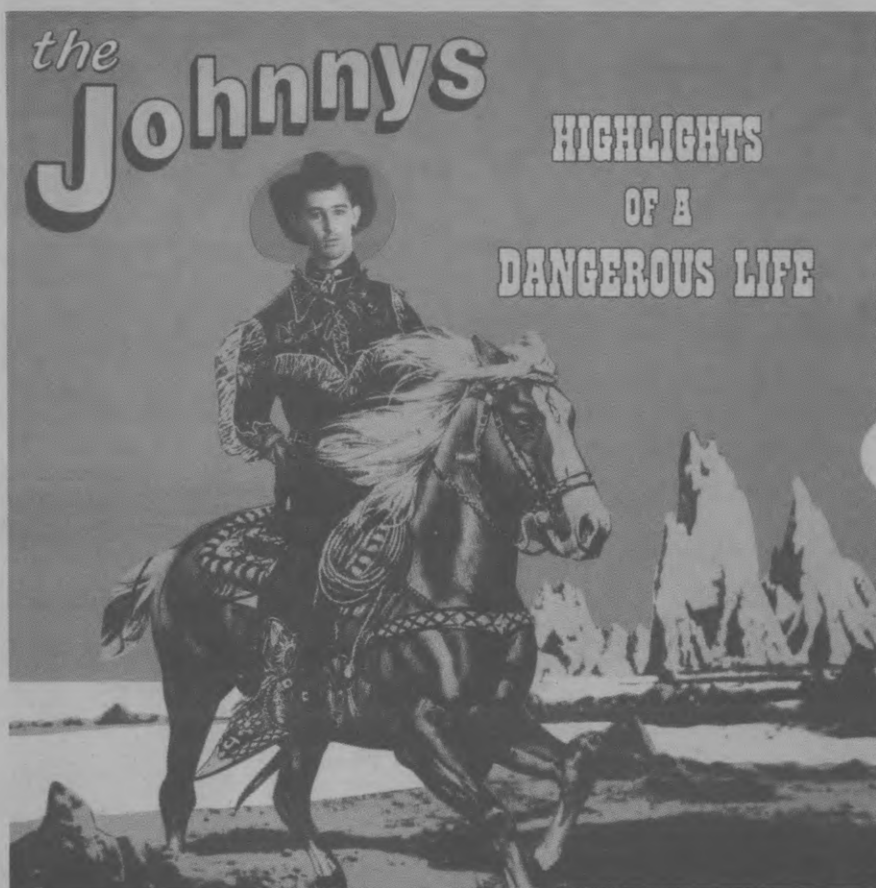


the Johnnys

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Backwater 'billy

The Texas Rangers Rock this Town

Getting your quiff right is number one on a rockabilly rebel's list of priorities. You comb some Brylcreem in your hair, then you sorta pile it up high, push it out at the top, and slick the sides round into a duck's ass at the back. Roll your sleeves up past your biceps, check that sneer out in the mirror, and practise the moves.

The hips. The closed eyes. The arm-shaking. The waddaya-rebelling-against-waddaya-got look. The voice — hiccupping, yodelling, wailing, burbling — wella, wella, wella, *That's alrighta, Mama, that's alright with me ...* It's time to hit town.

They're an incongruous lot, these Texas Rangers who've been playing round Auckland for the best part of six years. Enter a pub where they're playing and the rootsy sounds of tight rockabilly strikes some in-born aural response mechanism. The spare, twangy guitar licks. The walking bass. The stabbing snare. The yelping, gulping vocals. And dominating it all is the echo.

Then you see them. On drums, there's a punk throwback. Tossing out the perfect Scotty Moore licks is Barry from *Auf Wiederseh'n Pet*. To the side on electric bass is a tight-jeaned rocker. And in front of them all is ... the look, the voice, the moves ... a rockabilly rebel.

Rob Ranger's been fronting the band since he formed it with Warwick, the lead guitarist, in 1979. "We were more purist rockabilly back then, with a stand-up bass and a small drum kit," he says. "I'd played in a few punk/skinhead bands when a friend of mine took me to see Billy and the Blue Flames. That, plus the first of the new wave rockabilly bands like the Stray Cats, influenced me to get into it. I thought, this is excellent, and started listening a lot more to Eddie Cochran and Elvis. And I began to really stylise myself on them."

Tony, the ex-punk drummer, joined after eight months, and the Rangers spent the next few years gigging around Auckland at pubs and parties. "At the end of '81 we lost our double bass player, and the band started changing — it got a harder feel to it," says Rob.

Originally from the United States, Rob returned there in 1983 to live in Hollywood for 18 months. "I played in a couple of bands and got to know the Blasters and a few bands like that," he says. "You mix in easily as a foreigner, and with my Doc Martens, braces and quiff, I stuck out ... The time in Hollywood brought me more from the rockabilly of the Stray Cats into country — Hank Williams and the more purist country people. The Blasters were



Rob of the Rangers

great guys, with excellent record collections of stuff I hadn't heard of. They opened my mind to country music.

"The Hollywood scene is bizarre, and very mixed. There's a musos' club there where bands like X, the Cramps, the Gun Club, and the Blasters go. The underground scene is totally bizarre — take the Mentors: weird grossness."

After the odd job as a sound technician, Rob caught the LA flu. "With no money except the fare home, I thought, what to do next? I was hyped up from the bit of playing I'd done over there, so I thought it was best to come back to New Zealand and get the band back together. When I jammed with Warwick again, all the songs came out one after another."

It took a while, however, to find a suitable bass-player. They finally settled on John Robbie. "He'd never played the walking bass of rockabilly, but commercial rock with Tomorrow's Parties. But he gave us a fantastic fat sound."

The Texas Rangers now play 60 percent original material, according to Rob, with the covers from Eddie, Hank, Elvis and Gene receiving dedications for the purists in the audience. "I'm still a purist at heart," he says, "you'll never catch me playing disco. I love my Elvis tapes. I'm still trying to retain the feel of the music those people had — it's a gut feeling. You have to feel it to be able to play it; it comes across."

Rob is determined to be more than a revivalist, however. "We're trying to create our image, it's hard, cos it's all been done," he says. "But we dress on stage as we do normally. Everyone in the band is a complete individual, and their influence comes out in the music. My influence is strongest though, so we retain that purist feel."

Diversifying their music is something Rob thinks the Rangers achieved on their EP which is out this month, *Texas Rangers Live*. "Jungle Juice" is a psychobilly song, while "Backwater Billy" is outright cowpunk and "Dance No 9" is jazzy. But we'll always keep the rockabilly edge."

The EP was recorded live at the Gluepot, straight from the mixing desk to cassette to disc, with no

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