

Features

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By **Cory Albertson**

Catching Up With... Wanda Jackson



In 1955, a woman baring her shoulders on stage was considered controversial, as was doing so while shaking it in a satin-fringe dress. But that's how an 18-year-old Wanda Jackson burst onto the music scene—"an atomic bomb in lipstick," as Bob Dylan famously described her. Many consider her to be the first woman to write and perform rock 'n' roll. Her initial roots were in country, but at the suggestion of Elvis Presley, whom she dated briefly and toured with in 1955 and '56, she took up rock. Hits like 1960's "Let's Have a Party" and the cult favorite "Fujiyama Mama" followed, giving her the moniker "The Queen of Rockabilly" and securing her 2009 induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Now, at 73, she finds herself working with another young rock impresario, Jack White of The White Stripes, who serves as producer on her latest *The Party Ain't Over*. The set ranges from classics like "Busted" and "Dust on the Bible" to covers of Amy Winehouse's "You Know I'm No Good" and Dylan's "Thunder on the Mountain"—all of which show that Jackson's searing rock sensibility and trademark primal growl stand little changed. *Paste* caught up with Jackson just before the album's Jan. 25 release to talk about recording with White, Elvis' influence and the power of fringe.

Paste: How did you come to work with Jack White?

Wanda Jackson: My publicist Jon Hensley...we were kicking around ideas about a future album and we kind of decided we'd do a *Wanda Jackson and Friends* whenever we got an opportunity. He said, "Maybe we should start calling people that are fans of yours and see if they'd be interested in doing a duet with you." He mentioned to a friend of his that is a hairstylist / makeup girl in Nashville and so they were just talking about it. She said, "Well, if you do that, be sure you call Jack White. I happen to know he's a fan of Wanda's and of the whole genre." So, Jon got excited about that—he's a young man, you know. He called him and Jack said, no, he wouldn't be interested in doing a duet, but he would be interested in recording a single and possibly an album with me. It's just kind of laid in my lap, you know—one of those deals you don't have to stew over. It just kind of was put together for us and it happened. So, he gave us a call. My husband [Wendell Goodman], you know, is my manager and my booking agent, so after we got some business details worked out, then Jack and I got our heads together and got busy.

Paste: I read that you were initially hesitant about the collaboration and that you actually fought against it in the beginning—why was that?

Jackson: Well, I was...the word would be apprehensive. It wasn't that I didn't want to work with this creative, very popular young man. I was just afraid he was going to want me to sing the contemporary rock 'n' roll stuff, you know, maybe more in the lines of what he does or some of the more popish ones. That worried me and then I thought, well, if I do these kinds of songs, will my fans accept that? It was strictly a business type thing I was thinking about. [But] I found out pretty quick that I was wrong on both counts, that he didn't want to change my style. He just wanted to give me a fresh, contemporary sound. And so that's what he set out to do and I let the project really just be in his hands. Once I decided to jump in and do it, I saw the songs he was wanting, so I relaxed. And so I said, "I'm putting the whole project just in your hands. If you want my opinion on something, I'll be glad to give it to you. Otherwise, it's your baby." And so as it happens, I did.

Paste: Did you have any challenging moments during the making of the record?

Jackson: [*laughs*] Oh yeah! Oh yes, I did. Strange you should ask!

Paste: Well, I noticed on the cover of Amy Winehouse's "You Know I'm No Good," before the song starts, you say, "I always have to push."

Jackson: Yes, I was getting a little, I don't know, frustrated that I couldn't understand exactly what he was wanting me to do. And I kept trying and trying, but he was very patient. I didn't even know the melody properly when we went in to record—he had to teach me the melody. Then, he had to start pulling out the performance from me that he wanted. And his [phrase] is "push a little bit more for me." And I said, "Jack, I'm pushing." He said, "Yeah, but..." And it dawned on me he was wanting to hear that 18-year-old girl [*laughs*]. I said, "I'm not 18 anymore, you know." He said, "No, but, but she's still in there, you know. That's what I'm wanting." So, he kept working with me and the take right before the one that he settled on—the one on the record—he said, "That was just great." And so, boy, I said, "Whew! I made it. I got what he liked." Then, he came back on the loud speaker and he said, "Now, if you do one more take and just push a little harder for me." And, of course, I didn't know my mic was open. I was just kind of muttering to myself, I said, "I always have to push." And dern if he didn't leave it on there. I got on to him, I said, "Jack! What do you mean leaving that on there!" He said, "Oh, I think people will get a kick out of it."

Paste: You're relationship with Jack White is very special. What do you think you've learned from him?

Jackson: I'm sure I've learned a lot, but right now it hasn't been long enough that I can actually pinpoint something. I found out some things. I found that I enjoyed having somebody direct me, because for so long now, just simply because of my status, when I'd record something, no one ever made any suggestions. It's just however I wanted to do it. Well, I mean, you can be a big name and all that stuff, but you still need another ear listening and saying, try it this way, let's do that here, let's take that verse out, you know. He did a lot of that and I found I really enjoyed it to have someone so interested that they knew what they wanted from my performance. A lot of people don't take direction too well, probably. But I'm one that does. I'm always open to suggestions and criticism, constructive criticism. So, we've just gotten along so great. He's a very special young man to me—always will be now, I tell you.

Paste: Another important relationship you had was with Elvis so I'm going to ask you the same question about him. What did you learn from him?

Jackson: Well, see, now, in retrospect, I know what I picked up from him—a couple of things. I learned not to take myself and my career, what's going on in my life, so seriously. I was kind of working at this, you know, and he was happy-go-lucky all the time, just going with the flow. I also learned to have fun on stage. I was probably doing that somewhat, but I saw how much fun he had. He caused the audience to have fun when he did. He flirted with the girls and played with them and acted silly and they loved it. So, I do a lot of that with my audience, that's why I like up close

and personal. I like them standing right there in my face when I'm working, because I like to draw from them and help them have a good time.

Paste: Do you think he learned anything from you?

Jackson: Oh, I doubt it [*laughs*]. I don't think I had much to offer in 1955 and '56. I was, you know, finding my own wings and my own legs. But he's the one that encouraged me to stretch myself. Just like Jack has done now—stretch yourself, keep doing challenging things and different things. Without Elvis' encouragement, I kind of doubt that I would've tried it, because I thought of myself as a country singer, period. But he just convinced me that there was some latent talent in there I hadn't pulled out. So, he was pretty wise for his age and I never got a serious word out of him, it seemed like. He just always had a lot of fun. He was serious—he predicted that Johnny Cash would be the biggest name in country music and that turned out to be right, you know.

Paste: You said that you needed people like Elvis and Jack White and even your dad to give you that push and encouragement—why was that?

Jackson: Well, it's just a matter of self-esteem I think. For many artists, after you get to know them, they're pretty insecure in one way or another. Certainly not all of them, but so many are. I just always think I can't do that much. I can't throw a big party, but once I jump in and get my feet wet and start doing it, I've thrown some nice parties, you know. I have to have these challenges [*laughs*].

Paste: You're actually quite shy, but listening to your records, both then and now, it just seems so hard to believe.

Jackson: Yeah, but that was my release, that was who I wanted to be. And singing I could be that person. The stage never scared me. Audiences didn't scare me much. I got over it real quick. So, in that sense, I had confidence that I could handle an audience, I could handle a band. But it's just in these other areas that I didn't. Everybody, even then, my daddy [*said*], "Well, Wanda, you know you can do this. What makes you think you can't?" I said, "I don't know daddy, I just can't." So, I just think I need the encouragement. The Lord has been so good to me in surrounding me with good people.

Paste: Was there a pivotal moment where you became the Wanda Jackson, Queen of Rockabilly, that everybody knows?

Jackson: Yeah, there certainly was. I was recording "Fujiyama Mama" and I loved the song. I knew I wanted to do it and I didn't exactly know how I wanted to sing it. My producer Ken Nelson was giving me suggestions and all and, once again, I was frustrated, so my daddy, he was in all the sessions with me too, for that very same reason, to push me and encourage me. He came in the studio and called me aside. And he said, "Wanda, stop listening to anybody. You get out there and sing that song

the way you want to do it and don't let anybody tell you different." And so I said, "Oh, just do what I want to do?" He said, "Right." So I did. And that was the sound of, you know, "Fujiyama Mama's" pretty wild sound. That's where the confidence really began. I started gaining confidence.

Paste: You could also see your confidence take hold when you started wearing those fringe dresses, which caused quite a stir at the time.

Jackson: Yeah, I guess it did. I don't know what comment to make there, just that I knew I wasn't any longer going to wear cowboy boots and hats and old thick western-style shirts. When I turned about 16, I guess, I was wearing high heels and my street clothes were always tight-fitting skirts and sweaters. I decided those clothes were covering up my assets, so I needed to do something about that.

Paste: So you were really just wearing what made you feel the most comfortable.

Jackson: Yeah, absolutely. And I felt like it helped me have a lot more motion and action on stage without actually doing any gyrations or anything like that. I was just having fun, but when you kick your heels up and twirl or something, you get a lot of movement. [It] looked like I was doing more than I was [*laughs*]. So you can pat your foot in those fringe dresses and everything shakes!

Paste: That's true—I hadn't thought about it like that!

Jackson: Now you got the picture.

Paste: I get it.

Jackson: [*laughing*] Something was going on under there but nobody knew what.

Paste: Looking back, is there any advice you'd like to tell that shy 18-year-old Wanda Jackson?

Jackson: Yeah, I'd probably say take good care of yourself honey; you're going to need it when you're in your 70s. I probably would've just said, "You go, girl. Just gain some confidence but keep doing what you're doing." And so I have. I've gained confidence. Even being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame has given me just another depth to my confidence, because when you're selected from your peers, being accepted by your fans and all is one thing, but people in the business are all recognized by early influence. And it's come to light finally these days. That gives you quite a bit of confidence, just [in] what you're doing and who you are and [that] you have done some things right.