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‘I Forgot to Remember to Forget’
or, ‘Rockabilly Rebel, What Ya Gonna Do’?

Introduction: Subcultural Paradoxes in the Performance Frame

In the previous chapter, I examined a set of practices associated with fashion b/vlogging that could be taken as emblematic of the virtual, postmodern, ‘prosumer’/crowdsourced culture of the early 21st century. The reflexive thematization of an oscillating and unstable performing subject, and even the routine celebration of the same within this world constitutes a therapeutic response to the centuries-old demands for capable performance that have been transformed and destabilized by a range of sociotechnical and cultural developments. In this final case-based chapter, I turn to an altogether different genre of social performance with a dramatically distinct stylistic vocabulary and set of aesthetic and cultural norms; nonetheless, this particular case, contemporary rockabilly culture, displays its own palliative relationship to the trauma of appearance.

I take the title of the chapter from two songs, recorded nearly fifty years apart and reflective of the rockabilly musical tradition. ‘I Forgot to Remember to Forget’ is a 1955 recording by Elvis Presley, part of his legendary Sun Sessions recorded at Sam Phillips’ studio of the same name, recordings that would arguably constitute the very center of a classic rockabilly canon. ‘Rockabilly rebel, what’cha ya gonna do?’ is the opening lyrical question posed in a 2004 song, ‘Yeah Baby!,’ by rockabilly revival act Heavy Trash, a band led by prominent alternative rock auteur Jon Spencer, and the final track on their critically praised debut album. I begin with these songs, sonically characteristic of the rockabilly tradition in its classical and contemporary variations, as nice formal examples of the genre but also as unintended allusions to
two important aspects of the current rockabilly scene. The more recent song asks a question—‘what’cha gonna do?’—that haunts the modern rockabilly rebel: how does one fashion a cultural persona from archaic materials in the context of expanding access to a range of musical, sartorial, and other cultural styles? The earlier song is explicitly a lament for the inability to expunge the memory of a lost love, but in referencing the dynamic of remembering and forgetting, it answers the question posed by Heavy Trash. The modern rockabilly rebel is inevitably facing a tension between succumbing to the pull of the past—a kind of remembering—and a forgetting that the integrity of any embrace of the past is challenged as contrivance and dissimulation by the near-universal availability of the once-local, once-rebellious, and once-novel style. Remembering to forget, then, is crucial to the culture in two ways: remembering a past with undeniable musical, vestiary, and even erotic charms as a means of forgetting a potentially distasteful cultural present; and, remembering to forget that this first act of forgetting must be accompanied by another forgetting of the artificiality of the act itself. Examining the world of rockabilly in the frame of social performance and the corollary anxieties described in the previous chapters, then, demands a careful analysis of the techniques of forgetting and remembering that surround a decision to ‘put your cat clothes on’.¹

There is not adequate space for even a greatly compressed account of the history of rockabilly, both in its original 1950s form and subsequent revivals, and there are certainly many detailed accounts of the musical and cultural history of the genre.² The musical style, a hybrid of rhythm and blues and country music, has informing traditions that can be traced back to the 1930s and earlier, but is generally viewed by critics and historians as emerging in the 1950s. Certainly, the clothing, grooming products, automobiles, and other stylistic elements associated with rockabilly tend to have their origins in 1950s American culture. The current international rockabilly scene and particularly its North American manifestations, though, has strong ties to the major revival of rockabilly music and culture in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period in which an American rockabilly band, the Stray Cats, achieved brief but massive popular success, thanks at least partly to their frequent appearances on the then-exploding MTV cable channel; in this era, rockabilly, along with a range of subcultures associated with historical musical styles such as ska, mods, and new romantics, drew from the energy of the punk and new wave movement, one that connected music with fashion and a range of other aesthetic components to constitute a multifaceted cultural response to dominant tendencies.