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An Ethnographic Exploration of Nostalgia in the Contemporary Rockabilly Scene in the United States

S'identifier au rebelle du passé. Une exploration ethnographique de la nostalgie dans la scène rockabilly *américaine contemporaine*

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Identifying with the Rebel of the Past:

An Ethnographic Exploration of Nostalgia in the Contemporary Rockabilly Scene in the United States

by

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Abstract: This article explores the ways in which the subcultural community of rockabilly revivalists use music as a vehicle for expressing their nostalgia for a specific moment in the 1950s, when rockabilly reflected a countercultural rebellion. As most of the participants feel marginalized and alienated from mainstream culture, they perform their identification with the rockabilly rebel of the 1950s, and demonstrate their refusal of modern culture through their attentiveness to the music, cars, and fashion of the past. Drawing on ethnographic research, this article explores the contradictory tendencies of nostalgic subcultures which can be simultaneously regressive and progressive, reactionary and rebellious, as subversive values of the past can help improve present and future experiences.

Keywords: *nostalgia – revival – subcultures – identity – everyday life.*

Résumé : Cet article explore les façons dont la communauté des revivalistes rockabilly expriment leur nostalgie pour un moment bien précis des années 1950, lorsque la subculture d'origine reflétait une révolte contre-culturelle. Dans la mesure où la plupart d'entre eux se sentent marginalisés, voire étrangers à la culture mainstream, ils mettent en scène leur identification à cette figure du passé et affirment leur refus de la culture contemporaine par leur fascination pour la musique, les voitures et la mode de cette époque. Ce travail, basé sur en enquête ethnographique, explore les tendances contradictoires des subcultures nostalgiques, qui peuvent être simultanément régressives et progressives, réactionnaires et rebelles : des valeurs subversives du passé peuvent contribuer à l'amélioration des expériences présentes et futures.

Mots-clés: *nostalgie – revival – subcultures – identité – quotidien.*

In his classic monograph *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige (1979: 17) demonstrated how British punks appropriated objects from mainstream culture to create stylistic symbols of deviation that exemplified their displacement from the majority, or parent, society. During the same decade that punk surfaced as a marker of discontent, another group emerged in England that signified rebellion not through the development of a new genre, but rather through the nostalgic re-interpretation of a previous one: rockabilly. Revivalists expressed their dissatisfaction with contemporary music and pop culture by returning to the aesthetic traditions of 1950s rockabilly, a genre they identified as the original rebel music. Most of these fans were born after rockabilly's heyday, so they explored the lifestyle of the past by imitating fashion from old magazines, coaxing vintage cars back to life, unearthing and spinning previously unreleased records, playing rockabilly music with original equipment, and supporting the revived careers of 1950s performers. This subculture has grown to international proportions over the decades as members continue to preserve the material and sonic symbols of a bygone era to express their opposition to mainstream contemporary culture.

Contributing to the growing interest in popular music scholarship regarding nostalgic performance (see Lebrun, 2009; Party, 2009; Sharp, 2011; Tinker, 2012), this article contextualizes the continued presence of the rockabilly subculture through an ethnographic lens, focusing on the meanings participants derive from their identification with this community. I am not concerned with qualifying the "authenticity" or accuracy of the revivalists' interpretation of the past. Scholars of nostalgia have already pointed out that nostalgia is necessarily distorted and (re)constructed by one's memory or second-hand interpretation of the past which creates "a romance with one's fantasy" (Boym, 2001: xiii). Rather, my purpose is to uncover the reasons behind their strong identification with the popular culture of the past, evaluating the importance of this embodied performance and the valued meanings it has in their negotiation of everyday life.[1]

Contemporary rockabillies face a number of frustrations with today's post-modern climate that are alleviated by their identification with the rockabilly rebel of the 1950s. Given the length constraints of this article-sized discussion, I focus here specifically on how participation in this subculture transforms three aspects of their marginalized experience: their disinterest in mainstream cultural trends and their consequent "outsider" identity, their working-class or unemployed economic status, and their non-conformity with mediatized portrayals of the ideal body type. This article explores how rockabillies validate these aspects of their subaltern identity through the three most obvious signifiers of this subculture: the music, the cars, and pin-up and burlesque-inspired fashion. Because their nostalgia for 1950s rockabilly culture helps them construct an optimistic outlook for the future in response to the "uncertainties of the present" (Pickering and Keightley, 2006: 920), the study of this particular community sheds light on the paradox inherent within nostalgic subcultures,

Picture 1: By posing in front of this car in blue jeans, bandanna, and dark lipstick, pin-up model Angela Ryan conveys the way in which mechanical skills are valued within the rockabilly community, while simultaneously illustrating the ways in which rockabilly women transgress the fashion and gender norms considered appropriate for modest women in the 1950s. (photograph by Adam Mars, Lucky Devil Pin Ups)

the "incohérences" and "contradictions" that Barbara Lebrun described in her assessment of French chanson néo-réaliste (2009: 59-60): even as rockabilly revivalists base their daily identity on the culture and values of the past (one which most participants did not personally experience), they do so not because of a total loss of faith in the future and a completely reactionary retreat into the past, but rather as "a device for the generation of future identity and action structures, a mediator of future existence" (DeNora, 2000: 63). The particular values they identify with from the past were the ones that were revolutionary and rebellious in the 1950s; thus, contemporary rockabillies' seemingly regressive stance is in actuality a way to express progressive values and preserve the subversive history of the 1950s.

The Scene: Lonestar Rod and Kustom Round-Up, Austin, TX, 2009

I tried to look confident and steady as I struggled to walk across the uneven terrain in my high heels and restrictive pencil skirt, but I don't think I fooled anyone. I took in the gleaming, pinstriped Chevys and Fords from the '40s and '50s, the roar of a revving motor doing a "burnout" and the choking fumes from the thick smoke that billowed from the car's exhaust pipe, and the pin-up model who was being photographed as she struck a sexy pose on the hood of a classic hot rod. Many of the men were dressed like Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* (1953), the look that was later copied by James Dean, Elvis Presley, and Henry Winkler in his role as Fonzie on *Happy Days*: the leather motorcycle "Perfecto" jacket worn over a white t-shirt, cuffed jeans, biker boots, and a greased-back pompadour with sideburns. Those who had given into the brutal Texas heat had slung their jacket over their shoulder and rolled their cigarette pack into the sleeve of their t-shirt for easy access. I could tell that some of the women would be performing later that day in either the burlesque showcase or the pin-up model competition, based on whether they had a feathered boa draped over their shoulders or were unselfconsciously strutting around in a Fifties-style bikini like the ones I'd seen in photos of Bettie Page, the legendary "Queen of Pinups". Rather than emulating the straight-laced suburban '50s housewife fashion of June Cleaver from *Leave It To Beaver* or the wholesome teenager who hung out in soda shops in her poodle skirt and saddle shoes, most of the women seemed more like the wild, rebellious, and sexually provocative Rizzo from *Grease*. Some sported high-waisted shorts or capris with off-the-shoulder tops; others flaunted skirts or dresses that either flattered all shapes and sizes with an A-line pattern or snuggly fitted their form with a pencil style that emphasized their curves. They completed their look with very high heels, perfectly coiffed hairstyles featuring meticulously manicured curls and waves that must have taken an hour (and a can of hair spray) to produce, a strategically-placed artificial flower in their hair, and a parasol.

As soon as I heard live music coming from one of the stages, I headed away from the cars to get a closer look at the band. A quartet hammered away at a ferocious pace with unbridled energy on vin-

tage instruments: an acoustic Gibson for rhythm, a 1957 Gibson ES for lead, an upright bass, and a sparse drum kit (kick, snare, one floor tom, one rack tom, ride, and hi-hat). At the moment, they were playing a cover of "Be-Bop-A-Lula", recreating the intensity of Gene Vincent's manic performances from the late 1950s. Proving that they weren't just a cover band, next they played some originals, but even these sounded a lot like the songs I knew from 1950s artists, reflecting the band's deep appreciation for, and mastery of, traditional rockabilly with 12-bar-blues chord progressions, basic verse-chorus structures, lead guitar solos during the bridges, the percussive slap-back technique of the bass, and lyrics about love, heartbreak, hot rods, parties, teenage rebellion, and rock 'n' roll.

This community clearly was not trying to imitate the hegemonic culture of the 1950s, but rather the non-normative, rebellious subculture that rockabillies created and fostered during the latter half of that decade. Bruce Berenson, host of the "Rockabilly Roadtrip" program on Sirius/XM Radio, points out that the Fifties decade "is a period now thought to represent conformity and allegiance to a mythologically homogenous culture as represented by tightly controlled media outlets of the day" (in Greenburg, 2009: 86). Several scholars (see Biskind, 1983; Marcus, 2004; Caputi, 2005) have highlighted the role of the Reagan administration in propagating the myth of the '50s as a time of economic stability, moral conservatism, safety and innocence, and a "simpler, happier time when cars had fins, gas was almost free, women were home and men were on the range" (Biskind, 1983: 4). As historian Michael Wood puts it, "this was (and to some extent still is) the official story of the fifties, the way they have been packaged for us" (in Biskind, 1983: ix). But the members of today's rockabilly subculture are determined to keep alive what they think that other part of the 1950s was like, the counter-hegemonic lifestyle that was practiced by rebellious rockabilly musicians and their fans, rabble-rousing hot rodders, and sexually provocative pin-up models and burlesque dancers. In other words, this was the culture of the misfits of the 1950s.

Herein lies one of the many contradictions of nostalgia that several scholars have explored: it can be both "reactionary and rebellious" (Lebrun, 2009: 59), demonstrating "progressive, even utopian impulses" through "regressive stances" (Pickering and Keightley, 2006: 919). Even though nostalgia is by definition reactionary due to its backwards-cast gaze, today's rockabillies crave what they understand as the progressive aspects of that past era, and want to salvage these values for use in the present and future. They are attracted to the non-conservative attitude of the original rockabilly scene, to the ways in which rockabillies back then rebelled against normative values. The music represented a radical integrationist approach through its combination of white hillbilly and black rhythm & blues. The blues roots of the music contributed to the overt sexuality associated with the music and its dance styles, represented by Elvis the Pelvis' gyrating hips and the subsequent censorship of his televised appearances. The fashion rockabilly men wear today reflects their idolization of the '50s blue-collar greaser mechanic

who revved his modified hot rod to its fullest potential in life-threatening drag races, rather than the upwardly mobile gentleman who worked in an office all day to afford the consumer goods that the media told him he couldn't live without. The women in the scene today admire the strides taken by pin-up models and burlesque performers who proved that there could be more to being a woman than cooking, cleaning, and raising the children. Thus, even though rockabilly revivalists clearly have one foot in the past, they specifically identify with what they perceive to be some of the most progressive attitudes of that time by adopting the counterhegemonic values and style of the original rockabillies who pushed racial, economic, gendered, and sexual assumptions of their time while, for the most part, casting a critical eye on the hegemonic norms of the 1950s.

This prompts the question of why rockabillies today feel the need to identify with the rebellious values of the original rockabilly culture. Many theorists have explored the ways in which nostalgia functions to alleviate some aspect(s) of one's contemporary situation, especially in times of change, fear, and trouble (see Davis, 1979: 5; Brown, 1999: 368; Usner, 2001: 89; Pickering and Keightley, 2006: 936; Sedikides et al., 2008; 230). During the escalation of the Cold War, modernist author and artist John Dos Passos wrote:

> "In easy times, history is more or less of an ornamental art, but in times of danger we are driven to the [past] by a pressing need to find answers to the riddles of today... In times of change and danger when there is a quicksand of fear under men's reasoning, a sense of continuity with generations gone before can stretch like a lifeline across the scary present and get us past that idiot delusion of the exceptional Now that blocks good thinking." (1956: 153)

In the case of contemporary rockabillies, they do indeed experience a "scary present" that stems from their marginalized status. Many of participants face tremendous economic hardship, attempting to support their families on a very low income. Many feel rejected by society, and some of them have even been shunned by their friends and family because they look and act different from the norm. Some encounter racial, class-based, or sexual discrimination. Others have lost their loved ones in the military campaigns overseas. The reasons for rockabillies' alienation from society varies from individual to individual. But what is clear is that the rockabilly scene is a subculture composed of people who feel subaltern for one reason or another, and look for answers in the past to find some alleviation to their sense of marginalization today. As Daniel Marcus notes, "postmodern society has not done away with the desire for continuity, for the ability of people to locate themselves in a narrative of the nation, for a sense that such a narrative indeed exists. The fragmentation of the postmodern experience may make such a desire even stronger". (Marcus, 2004: 5) The ethnographic exploration of this scene demonstrates how contemporary rockabillies identify with certain values of the past, ones that transform their feelings of alienation and difference into sources of pride, fulfillment, and validation. I begin by exploring how rockabillies' interpretation of the original rockabilly rebel affirms their own non-conformity with contemporary hegemonic culture. Second, I examine how the DIY

(Do-It-Yourself) values associated with the custom car culture offer a sense of pride in blue-collar status. Finally, I consider the role that burlesque and pin-up fashion plays in validating alternative ideas about female body image.

Identifying with the Rockabilly Rebel

When I ask contemporary rockabillies why they participate in this subculture, their most common response is to explain that modern popular trends (for instance, music, fashion, and cars) do not appeal to them. Countless fans have described to me how they have never "fit in". This is clearly not unique to the rockabilly scene, as any ethnographic exploration of a subculture, such as punk, metal, or goth, uncovers the disaffection that members feel for mainstream culture. Contemporary rockabillies choose this particular subculture to express their difference from hegemonic values because they identify with the rebelliousness of the original rockabillies, and their sense of continuity with the subversive history of this music culture gives them a sense of pride in their difference from the mainstream today.

Contemporary rockabillies look back to a time when music changed dramatically due to the contributions of a few Southern men who rebelliously defied accepted norms of their day. Carl Perkins, Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, and Jerry Lee Lewis were some of those men who created rockabilly in Sam Phillips' one-room Sun Records recording studio in Memphis, TN, between about 1954 and 1956. They combined the rhythmic intensity of the black music they liked, which deejay Alan Freed was already calling "rock and roll", with the country twang of their rural, Southern, Anglo-American "hillbilly" heritage. By about 1957, the popularity of rockabilly among teenagers significantly threatened the Tin Pan Alley-derived songs and smooth orchestral arrangements which had dominated the pop music industry for some fifty-plus years. But it wasn't only the commercial music industry that was enraged. Authorities were nervous that the integrationist approach of the music, with its liberal interest in black culture and music, might break down segregationist policies (and it did, as ropes separating black and white teenagers were thrown aside quickly by the rock 'n' roll crowds). Parents and religious leaders were horrified by the sexual nature of the music, lyrics, and dancing. Billy Poore, who was a young teenager in the heyday of rockabilly, remembers being slapped by a nun at his Catholic school after confessing that he had seen *Love Me Tender*, since they had warned him repeatedly that "the *Catholic Standard* newspaper had condemned the movie because of Elvis's immoral, seductive gyrations, and we'd go to hell if we got hit by a car comin' out of the movie house after seein' it". (1998: 19) Many rockabilly musicians were known for their own wild personalities, performances, and behavior, which, for some, included drugs, illicit sexual relationships, crowd riots, and instrument-smashing. Contemporary rockabillies' romance with these particular aspects again demonstrates that they are not idealizing the hegemonic normativity of the 1950s, but the taboo-breaking rebels. Accordingly, the lead singer of the California rockabilly band The

Chop Tops, who goes by the stage name Sinner, often tells the audience: "Anyone who thinks that rock 'n' roll was about poodle skirts, sock hops, and soda fountains is freakin' delusional. It was about fuckin', fightin', and drinkin'."

As nonconformists and misfits in today's culture, many rockabillies today find a sense of strength and independence by identifying with the cool rockabilly rebel greaser. As Shawn described to me, "rockabilly has to do with being a rebel and an outsider, and being ok with that, embracing it" (personal communication). "Rebel Rouser" agrees: "I've always been one to go against the grain, never letting anyone or anything tell me what to do or what not to do, always standing by what I believe in and having to stick up for myself as a kid. [Being a greaser] is about sticking to your guns, and being able to hold your own." (Rebel Rouser, 2013) Identifying with the rockabilly rebel helped Brandon feel like he could "hold his own" after being picked on in high school because he was different than his peers: "Then I watched *Dazed and Confused*. Remember Clint, the rockabilly greaser? He beats up that one guy at the party, and the guy was so pissed off that he'd been beaten up by a rockabilly kid. And I thought that's so cool – I want to be like that." (personal communication) Austin rockabilly fan Jenna adds with a laugh, "And we all know that where the 'bad boys' are, the ladies will follow" (personal communication).

In short, contemporary rockabillies romanticize and identify with the rockabilly rebel, unbound by conservative societal restrictions, as a way of feeling more secure in their own nonconformity. Reb Kennedy, founder of Wild Records (a label which supports '50s-inspired artists), told me that this is why he thinks the rockabilly revival will continue to endure: "there will always be those people that go outside the sheep mentality." (personal communication) It is perhaps symbolic, then, that the first 45 RPM record he released on the label was a song by Lil' Luis y Los Wild Teens called "La Rebeldona" with lyrics that describe the singer's love for a rebellious rock 'n' roll girl who doesn't dress or dance like everyone else. Participating in rockabilly today shows their pride for a subculture which created a musical revolution when independent musicians and producers broke the taboos of their day, and it gives today's rockabillies a sense of validation in their own difference from contemporary mainstream trends.

Identifying with the Resourceful Greaser Mechanic

For many contemporary rockabillies, vintage cars are an important part of the subculture. They imagine a time when 1950s rockabilly "greasers" (known for the way they greased their hair back) diligently worked on cars, modifying their speed and power to run them in dangerous drag races or "chickie runs" that test the drivers' bravery in deadly racing situations. Dozens of 1950s movies capitalized on the connections between rebellious teenagers, rock and roll, and hot rods,[2] and nostalgic interpretations of the 1950s hot rod and rock 'n' roll culture were further romanticized in flicks such as *American Graffiti* (1973) and *Grease* (1978). Many contemporary rockabillies identify

with the way these images of the bold and brave hot rod mechanic valorize the blue-collar worker and his resourcefulness and ingenuity.

Many of today's rockabillies identify as working-class, and most of them count themselves lucky if they keep a stable job for several years. Some of my consultants have lost their jobs several times in the last five years due to the economic recession, and they constitute part of the statistics for the high unemployment rate. Accordingly, many contemporary rockabilly fans and musicians cannot afford monthly car payments for modern cars. Instead, they value their ability to create their own inexpensive works of art that are both aesthetic and functional. I was surprised to discover that most vintage cars are actually reconstructed quite cheaply, averaging about $5000, clearly less expensive than buying a new car.

Contemporary rockabillies who participate in the vintage car culture derive a sense of pride from the validation they receive from the scene regarding their abilities. While they think mainstream society disregards the talents of blue-collar workers, the rockabilly community applauds them for their skills. Many rockabilly events include car shows that offer coveted prizes for various categories: Best Interior, Best Engine, Best Rat Rod,[3] Best Pinstriping,[4] and so on, with emphasis placed on customization, creativity, mechanical work, and attention to detail. One rockabilly published a comic book called *Rockabilly Roadtrip* that demonstrates how much craftsmanship is privileged within the community. The author explains the premise:

> "We follow our hero, Nicky 'The Pipe,' who has just completed work on his long time project 'The Devil Driver,' his dream automobile. Nicky is an average guy with one special talent, he can build ANYTHING! He often refers to his special talent as his superpower and rightfully so. After completing work on his amazing, custom car he used his talents to build himself a driving companion to complement … his newest creation." (Wroblewski, 2007)

The blue-collar laborer in this comic, ignored by mainstream society, becomes a superhero in this fantasy due to his ability not only to build a dream machine, but also a dream lover. The predominance of car clubs and car shows within the rockabilly subculture today further illustrates how much these skills are respected and valued in this community.

Moreover, the ways in which car customizers transform old, wrecked, forgotten cars from the past into lean, mean, revving machines acts as a metaphor for their transformed sense of value about themselves–after feeling discarded from mainstream society due to their economically marginalized status they find a sense of pride and strength from rockabilly culture's enthusiasm for creative resourcefulness. Consider the personal metaphor in this statement from Brian Darwas, the owner of Atomic Hot Rods:

> "I love that when you look at, say, a stock '32 Ford; it appears so rickety and timid. But you can take that same car and turn it into something that looks sinister. I love that you can take an engine that was never meant to be fast, and with a little bit of elbow grease make it fast. I'm taking a pile of parts and turning them into a running, driving car again. Most of the cars were used, abused and then dumped off somewhere when the next big thing came along. I like that I'm putting them back into service." (2012: 32)

Murph Murphy, a mechanic in Austin, TX, alludes to a similar sense of accomplishment: "It's about bringing old cars back from the dead and then driving them down the open road that gives me the most enjoyment. Having that feeling of being behind the wheel on her maiden voyage into a part of history—returning these cars to their glory day—that's what it's about." (2012: 32) Murph's statement highlights the ways in participants see themselves as returning to the "glory days" of the 1950s heyday when hot rods were associated with rebellious bravado, the coolness—and respected status—of the blue-collar greaser, and, of course, rock 'n' roll.

Identifying with the Daring Women of the Past

Although an integral part of the rockabilly subculture today, pin-up modeling and burlesque performers were not specifically associated with rockabilly culture in the 1950s. Pin-up art and photography reached its height during WWII when soldiers pinned-up the sexually alluring images of models on their lockers. American burlesque, with its seductive striptease performances, was even further removed from the era of rockabilly, being most accessible in the 1920s and 1930s. Nevertheless, rockabilly enthusiasts, who tend to be fans of many artifacts of American culture, have incorporated these performances into their subculture. Most festivals, and even many regular nightly shows, feature pin-up fashion contests or burlesque routines, and rockabilly-lifestyle magazines often include a pin-up centerfold.

I argue that contemporary rockabillies' adoption of burlesque and pin-up has to do with more than just a general interest in all things vintage: they see a commonality between the progressive sexuality of the original pin-up models and burlesque performers and the rebellious values of the original rockabillies. Lacey McCool from Austin, TX wrote a feature on the history of pin-ups for *Rockabilly Deluxe Magazine*, encouraging fans today to understand how 1940s and 1950s pin-ups took great risks by breaking with traditional norms of female modesty. "The next time you throw on your crop top and high-waisted short shorts, keep in mind that these cute outfits … exposed women in a way that society had not seen before and caused an uproar of controversy to the modesty that families were accustomed to" (2013: 8). Rockabilly musician Shawn agreed: "Now we can look back at those burlesque dances and pin-up photos as kitchy because it's not raunchy compared to modern-day standards, but it was really risqué for its time. People were starting to break out of their understanding of sexuality. Bettie Page, with all her fetish and bondage stuff, it was like holy shit! There were senate hearings about it! People were really breaking out of the mold." (personal communication) Shawn refers to the Kefauver Hearings of the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency which in 1957 attempted to link pornography to teenage criminality. It spelled the end of the career for Irving Klaw, who photographed and filmed model Bettie Page in the 1950s. The prosecutors skewered the photographs of Page, especially those which featured S&M fetish and

bondage themes, and ordered them to be burned. Page stopped modeling not long after.

Contemporary rockabilly fans esteem these pioneers who, as Lacey McCool writes, "hardly went unscathed" for their revolutionary attitudes towards nudity and female sexuality. Their flagrant rebellion from normative standards of modesty directly influenced rockabilly fashion in the 1950s, as rockabilly women became some of the first to flaunt "pedal pushers" (capris) at a time when it was still considered indecent for women to wear pants. Pants had been adopted by women during the war, as they went to work in place of the men, but only the most rebellious women turned this momentary necessity into a fashion trend after the war was over. Many schools and parent teacher organizations, horrified by the tight, curve-enhancing, sexually-alluring capris, attempted to ban the types of fashion worn by rockabilly teenagers. Thus, while many observers might assume that rockabillies' romanticization of the 1950s aligns with the conservative gender roles of the decade, in actuality rockabillies applaud and identify with the women who went against the grain, women who dared to suggest that they wanted to use their bodies in sexual or provocative ways, and women who rebelled against traditional and modest fashion standards.

Moreover, as burlesque performance and pin-up fashion has become integrated into the rockabilly subculture, the scene has become associated with the acceptance of all types of body images. When I ask women what they like about participating in this community, one of the most common responses is to describe how they find more acceptance in this group than they do in mainstream environments. Margorie, the singer of a Houston-based band, explained to me why she identified with Bettie Page: "I liked her because she wasn't like everybody else. I just liked the way she looked, because she was like me. She wasn't little. Like Marilyn Monroe, too. They were bigger, curvy girls but they were so beautiful and there was nothing wrong with their physique." (personal communication) Audrey, a burlesque dancer in Texas, finds that the community is very supportive of all body types:

> "It's about being happy and confident with your naked body. We all support each other backstage when we're getting ready. We might be feeling fat or bloated that particular night. But then we remember burlesque is about loving all body types. And when you're out there, shaking your booty, it works *because* we've got curves. People love us up there for those 3 minutes just the way we look. We're proud of how we are and want to show it off." (personal communication)

Pin-up model Calamity Amelie from Sweden concurs: "People have an idea of what naked bodies are supposed to look like, and they don't know that bodies come in many different shapes because they never see anything but the 'right' bodies. Then they get uncomfortable if their own [bodies] don't fit the commercial standards." (2012: 22) She feels that the rockabilly culture's support for models and dancers of all types acts as an alternative to mainstream society's non-realistic ideals about body image.

Many women in the scene agree that rockabilly and pin-up fashion flatters shapes and sizes that mainstream fashion does not suit. Pin-up model

Miss V Haven writes: "I first started wearing vintage clothing because of my body. I was curvy, and Girbaud jeans (yes, I am a product of the '90s) just didn't fit my figure … I began wearing dresses with full skirts and nipped-in waistlines. All of a sudden, I had a little skip in my step and a confident stride! That is what is truly beautiful about the pinup style–it allows all women to feel beautiful and confident." (2013: 24) Many women tell me that, outside of the rockabilly community, they feel the sting of non-normativity and feel as if they are perceived as ugly, overweight, and undesirable. But when they dress up in rockabilly fashion, they feel self-assured and beautiful because it flatters and flaunts their figure. And they note that "the guys seem to like it too!" (Jenna, personal communication). Rockabilly women identify with the sexual confidence and alternative body images that they associate with pin-up models and burlesque dancers, explaining why these associated performances, while not explicitly related to the original rockabilly scene, have become an integral part of the subculture as women find validation in this community compared to their feelings of non-normativity in hegemonic contexts.

Conclusion

When Stuart Hall and other founding popular culture theorists asked "What specifically does a subcultural style signify to the members of the subculture themselves?" they found that "the appropriated objects reassembled in the distinctive subcultural ensembles were 'made to reflect, express and resonate ... aspects of group life... objects in which [the subcultural members] could see their central values held and reflected'" (Hebdige, 1979: 114). The contemporary rockabilly scene reassembles objects and values from an array of vintage traditions, some of which were not directly part of the original rockabilly scene, to express the members' nonconformity from mainstream culture today and to provide strategies for feeling pride and validation in those differences. They have built their own "audiotopia", to use Josh Kun's term, "that offers the listener and/or musician new maps for reimagining the present social world" (Kun, 2005: 22-3).

In order to reimagine their present world, they look back to a cutting-edge moment when hegemonic norms were being contested by cool leather-clad, hot rod-racing, bikini-wearing rebels. This was an exciting time, as George Lipsitz notes, "when popular culture began to cross previously insurmountable barriers of race, class, and ethnicity [and, I would add, gender norms and sexuality]–a time when young artists and audiences transformed the dissonance and noise of urban life into a chorus of many voices" (Lipsitz, 1989: 282). Contemporary rockabillies, then, demonstrate the dually progressive and regressive nature of nostalgia: while looking back to the past, they fixate on a moment when conservative trends were subverted, and this provides a survival narrative that mediates their understanding of their own non-normative identity today.

This case study offers us an example of the ways in which nostalgic performances can challenge mainstream understandings of the past and offer a way for participants to revive and engage with

marginalized histories. Rockabillies' daily performance of their interpretation of the rebel culture of the 1950s exposes an alternative to the myth of the conservative Golden Era that was promoted so strongly during Reagan's administration and has continued to endure in the collective (constructed) consciousness. While there have been filmic narratives in popular culture that contest that depiction of the 1950s, such as *American Graffiti* (1973), *Grease* (1978), *The Outsiders* (1983), *Cry-Baby (*1990), and *Johnny Suede* (1991), this ethnographic study demonstrates how this history and the values associated with the original rock'n'roll rebels– values that privileged non-normativity, practical "blue-collar" skills, and alternative expressions of female sexuality, body image, and fashion–are still meaningful to the lived experienced of people who consider themselves "outsiders" today, even (and mostly) to people who did not experience the 1950s. I conclude with John Lara's "Rockabilly Prayer" (2007), which graced the back cover of each issue of *Rockabilly Magazine*, as it represents how contemporary rockabillies nostalgically long for that freeing sense of being a rebel, of going one's own course, that seems just as relevant now as it did then as a strategy for transforming one's marginalized position in mainstream society into a statement of proud defiance of hegemonic norms and values:

> "Oh Lord,Keep me Rockin'
> Keep me Rollin'
> Guide my switchblade
> Straight and true
> Keep my Chevy on the road
> And smite the squares ... you know who …
> Keep my beer cold
> And my baby red hot
> Always let the law
> Just drive on by
> And my pompadour
> Reaching for the sky
> Amen"

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Notes

1. In this respect, I am influenced by the ethnographic work of scholars such as Cohen 1991; Cavicchi 1991; Craft, Cavicchi, Keil, and the Music in Daily Life Project 1993; DeNora 2000; Bromell 2001; and Berger and del Negro 2004 who shed light on the “everyday role” that music plays in peoples’ lives.

2. The 1955 movie *Running Wild,* about a teenage gang of car thieves, featured a soundtrack by rock ‘n’ roll band Bill Haley and the Comets, and 1958’s *The Hot Rod Gang* features rockabilly musician Gene Vincent in an acting role. Other examples of movies which associated teenager rock ‘n’ rollers with delinquency and car racing include the 1956 *Hot Rod Girl,* 1957’s *Hot Rod Rumble* and *Dragstrip Girl*, and 1959’s *Speed Crazy.*

3. A rat rod is a particular type of custom car that seeks to imitate or exaggerate the features of late-1920s to late-1950s coupes or roadsters, with emphasis on practical drivability and sometimes an unfinished or rusted look.

4. Pinstriping refers to the application of a very thin line of paint to create an artistic design on a motorcycle or car.