

Johnny Burnette

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Birth name	John Joseph Burnette
Born	March 25, 1934 Memphis, Tennessee, U.S.
Died	August 14, 1964 (aged 30) Clear Lake, California, U.S.
Genres	Rockabilly, rock and roll
Occupation(s)	Musician, singer, songwriter
Instruments	Vocals, acoustic guitar
Years active	1952–1964
Labels	Capitol, Charly, Sahara, Liberty



John Joseph Burnette (March 25, 1934 – August 14, 1964) was an American singer-songwriter of [rockabilly](#) and pop music.^[1] In 1952, he and his brother, [Dorsey Burnette](#), and their friend [Paul Burlison](#) formed the band that became known as [the Rock and Roll Trio](#).^[2] His career was cut short on August 14, 1964, when he was killed in a boat crash at age 30. He is the father of the 1980s rockabilly singer [Rocky Burnette](#).

Early life

Johnny Burnette was born to Willie May and Dorsey Burnett Sr. in [Memphis, Tennessee](#), United States. Johnny grew up with his parents and Dorsey Jr. in a public housing project in the Lauderdale Courts area of Memphis, which from 1948 until 1954 was also the home of Gladys and Vernon Presley and their son, [Elvis](#). Johnny attended Blessed Sacrament School, and after graduating from eighth grade he went to [Catholic High School](#), in Memphis. “My brother Dorsey and I first got to know Elvis Presley when he went to Humes High and we went to the Catholic High... Elvis would tote his guitar on his back when he rode past on his motor-cycle on his way to school. He would see us and always wave.” He showed an aptitude for sports, being on the school baseball team and playing linebacker on the football team. Both he and Dorsey were also keen amateur boxers and later became Golden Gloves champions. After leaving high school, Burnette tried his hand at becoming a professional boxer, but after one fight with a sixty-dollar purse and a broken nose or an encounter with Norris Ray, a top paycheck of \$150, he decided to quit boxing. He went to work on barges traversing the [Mississippi River](#), where Dorsey also worked. Johnny worked mainly as a deck hand; Dorsey worked as an oiler. After work, they would go back to Memphis and perform songs in local bars with a varying array of sidemen, including another former Golden Gloves champion, [Paul Burlison](#), whom Dorsey had met at an amateur boxing tournament in Memphis in 1949.



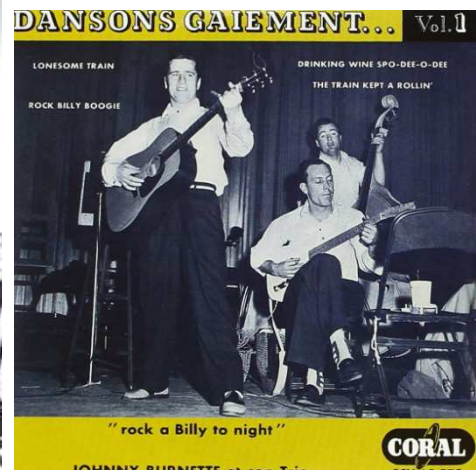
With Gene Vincent (2nd from right)

□ The Rock and Roll Trio

In 1952, the Burnette brothers and Burlison formed a group called the Rhythm Rangers. Johnny sang and played acoustic guitar, Dorsey played bass and Paul Burlison played lead guitar. For economic reasons, the three moved to New York in 1956 and managed to get an audition for [Ted Mack's *Original Amateur Hour*](#).^[1] Winning the competition three times in a row gained them a place in the finals and a recording contract with [Coral Records](#), and they renamed themselves the [Rock and Roll Trio](#). They also gained a manager, the bandleader [Henry Jerome](#), and a drummer, Tony Austin (a cousin of [Carl Perkins](#)).^[2]

Promotional appearances were arranged on [Dick Clark's *American Bandstand*](#), [Steve Allen's *Tonight Show*](#) and [Perry Como's *Kraft Music Hall*](#), together with a summer tour with [Carl Perkins](#) and [Gene Vincent](#). On Sunday September 9, 1956, they appeared as finalists in the *Original Amateur Hour* at [Madison Square Garden](#). Despite this activity, the three singles they released over this period failed to make the national charts.^[2]

In order to cover their living expenses, the Trio was forced to go on the road, for what seemed to be an endless stream of one-night stands.^[citation needed] This exhausting regime led to squabbles, which were exacerbated in Dorsey's case by Jerome's use of the name Johnny Burnette and the Rock and Roll Trio on records and live dates. Things finally came to a head at a gig in [Niagara Falls](#) in autumn 1956, when, as a result of a fight, Dorsey quit the group a week before they were to appear in [Alan Freed's](#) film *Rock, Rock, Rock*. Johnny Black, the brother of Elvis's bassist [Bill Black](#), was rapidly recruited to fill Dorsey's place. Despite the film appearance and three more single releases and one [LP](#) release, the group failed to achieve any chart success. The Rock and Roll Trio disbanded in autumn 1957.



Success in California with Ricky Nelson

Now unemployed in Memphis, Burnette decided to try his luck in California. He and a friend, Joe Campbell, hitchhiked to the West Coast, where they joined Dorsey. With their past differences forgotten, the brothers attempted to resurrect the Rock and Roll Trio and sent for Paul Burlison. He joined them briefly but decided to return to Memphis and concentrate on his electrical business. Dorsey and Johnny continued with their songwriting, but Dorsey kept his day job as an electrician to pay the family expenses.

The Burnettes' brashness got them their first success in the music business in California. On arriving in Los Angeles, Joe Campbell bought a copy of "A Map to the Stars", which showed the location of the house of the [teen idol Ricky Nelson](#). In an effort to get their songs to him, the Burnettes and Campbell decided to sit on the steps of his house until they could get a meeting with him. Their persistence worked, and Nelson was sufficiently impressed with their work that he eventually recorded several of their songs, including "[Believe What You Say](#)", "[It's Late](#)", "[Waitin' in School](#)", and "[Just a Little Too Much](#)", amongst others. Other [Imperial Records](#) artists, such as [Roy Brown](#), benefited from their songwriting. The success of his recording of the brothers' "Hip Shakin' Baby" led to a recording contract with Imperial Records as a duo. While in California, they met [Doyle Holly](#), who played bass guitar for a short time with the band. Holly went on to become the bass player for [Buck Owens](#) and the [Buckaroos](#) and to record as a solo artist.

As the Burnette Brothers, they released one single, for Imperial, "Warm Love" backed with "My Honey" (Imperial X5509), on May 5, 1958. It did not make the charts.^[1] After this failure, they continued to work together as songwriters but began to follow separate careers as performing artists.^[2] In 1961, however, Johnny and Dorsey released two instrumental singles, credited to the Texans, for two small labels, Infinity and Gothic: "Green Grass of Texas" backed with "Bloody River" (Infinity INX-001), released on February 20, 1961, and "Rockin' Johnny Home" backed with "Ole Reb" (Gothic GOX-001), released on May 29, 1961. Another instrumental, "Lonely Island" backed with "Green Hills" (Liberty 55460), credited to the Shamrocks, was released by [Liberty Records](#) on June 6, 1962. "Green Grass of Texas" and "Bloody River" were to be re-released in February 1965 on the Vee Jay label (VJ 658), again credited to the Texans.



Solo career

The Liberty years

In the fall of 1958, Johnny Burnette obtained a recording contract as a solo artist with [Freedom Records](#), an offshoot of Liberty Records. He released three singles on this label: "Kiss Me" backed with "I'm Restless" (44001), released on September 11, 1958; "Gumbo" backed with "Me and the Bear" (44011), released on March 6, 1959; and "Sweet Baby Doll" backed with "I'll Never Love Again" (44017), released on June 24, 1959. All of these songs except "Sweet Baby Doll" were written by Burnette. None of these records were hits.^[1]

In mid-1959, the Freedom label was shut down, and Burnette moved to the parent Liberty label, under the direction of the producer [Snuff Garrett](#). Liberty had better promotional capabilities than Freedom, so that Johnny's singles for Liberty stood a greater chance of succeeding. His first two singles for Liberty, "Settin' the Woods on Fire" backed with "Kentucky Waltz" (Liberty F-55222), released on November 10, 1959, and "Patrick Henry" backed with "Don't Do It" (Liberty F-55243), released on March 4, 1960, sold well regionally but were not national hits. However, his third single, "[Dreamin](#)" backed with "Cincinnati Fireball" (Liberty F-55285), released on May 4, 1960, reached number 11 on the [Billboard Hot 100](#) and number 5 in Britain. It sold over one million copies and was awarded a [gold disc](#) by the [RIAA](#).



His fourth Liberty single, "[You're Sixteen](#)" (written by the [Sherman Brothers](#)) backed with "I Beg Your Pardon" (Liberty F-55285), released on October 5, 1960, did even better, reaching number 8 on the Hot 100 and number 3 in the [UK Singles Chart](#),^[2] and earned him another gold record.^[1] Burnette went back into the studio and under [Snuff Garrett](#)'s direction recorded "[Little Boy Sad](#)".^[2] This was released on January 3, 1961, backed with "(I Go) Down to the River" (Liberty F-55298). Shortly after its release, Burnette was hospitalized with a ruptured appendix, which kept him bedridden for several weeks. He was unable to undertake many personal appearances to promote the new record, and it reached only number 17 on the Billboard Hot 100 and number 12 in Britain. Frustrated by this prolonged inactivity he tried to return to work too early, and he promptly collapsed. This meant that his fifth Liberty single, "Big Big World" backed with "Ballad of the One Eyed Jacks" (Liberty F-55318), released on March 30, 1961, received no promotion at all and reached only number 58 on the Hot 100.

His sixth Liberty single, "I've Got a Lot of Things to Do" backed with "Girls" (Liberty F-55345), released June 14, 1961, was handled differently from his previous records. In Britain, the upbeat side, "Girls", was promoted as the topside and reached number 23 in the UK chart in September 1961. In the United States it was flipped over with "I've Got a Lot of Things to Do" as the topside, but despite heavy promotion it failed to become a hit, peaking just outside the Hot 100 at number 109.

After recovering from his illness, Burnette returned to the road with a tour of Northern cities, culminating in a season at the [Brooklyn](#) Paramount Theatre, after which he undertook a tour of Australia with [Connie Francis](#). Back in the limelight, his next release was scheduled to be a [Carl Perkins](#) song, "Fools Like Me", backed with "Honestly I Do" (Liberty 55377), but this was cancelled in favour of "[God, Country and My Baby](#)" backed with "Honestly I Do" (Liberty 55379), which was released on September 27, 1961.^[2] It reached number 18 on the Hot 100, but was to be Burnette's last major American hit.

In 1962, Burnette toured Britain for the first time, with [Gary U.S. Bonds](#) and [Gene McDaniels](#), where he made an appearance on the [New Musical Express](#) Poll Winners' Concert and several TV appearances. His next single "Clown Shoes" backed with "The Way I Am" (Liberty 55416) was released on January 26, 1962, but it failed to make the US Hot 100. It was more successful in Britain, where it reached number 35. "Clown Shoes" was written by [P. J. Proby](#).

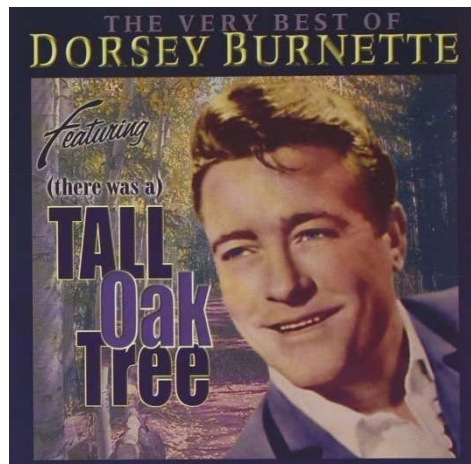
Burnette had two more single releases on Liberty Records. These were "The Fool of the Year" backed with "The Poorest Boy in Town" (Liberty 55448), which was released on April 13, 1962 and "Damn the Defiant" backed with "Lonesome Waters" (Liberty 55489), which was released on July 30, 1962. Neither of these singles was a hit, but "Damn the Defiant", a [Johnny Horton](#)-style naval saga, was Burnette's first self-penned A-side for Liberty, It was also his last single for the label.

The Chancellor stint

Burnette moved to [Chancellor Records](#), which had had success with [teen idols](#) like [Fabian Forte](#) and [Frankie Avalon](#). Chancellor released three singles by Burnette in 1962: "I Wanna Thank Your Folks" backed with "The Giant" (Chancellor C-1116), "Tag Along" backed with "Party Girl" (Chancellor C-1123) and "Remember Me (I'm the One Who Loves You)" backed with "Time Is Not Enough" (Chancellor C-1129). None of these singles were hits.

The Capitol sessions

Burnette moved on from Chancellor, briefly joining Dorsey on [Reprise Records](#) for one single, "Hey Sue" backed with "It Don't Take Much" (20153), before signing a one-year contract with [Capitol Records](#) in the summer of 1963. Johnny's first recording session was held on July 23, 1963, at the Capitol Tower with Jim Economides and Jimmie Haskell overseeing the proceedings. A number of tracks were recorded: "It Isn't There", "Wish It Were Saturday Night", "I'll Give You Three Guesses", "All Week Long" and "Congratulations, You've Hurt Me Again". Of these "It Isn't There" backed with "Wish It Were Saturday Night" (Capitol 5023) were issued on August 19, 1963, as his first American single. In Britain, the flipside was changed to "All Week Long", but neither single made the charts. On December 13, 1963, a second session was held, with the same two men in charge. Four more songs were recorded, of which "The Opposite" backed with "You Taught Me the Way to Love You" (Capitol 5114) was released as a single on January 20, 1964. Again it failed to find chart success. A third session was held on February 14, 1964, which produced four songs: "Aunt Marie", "Two Feet in Front of Me", "If I Were An Artist", and "And Her Name Is Scarlett". None of these songs were deemed fit for release and remained in the can for thirty years. A fourth session was held on March 16, 1964, which was overseen by [David Gates](#), who later went on to fame with the band [Bread](#). This session produced "Sweet Suzie, I Think She Knows" and "It All Depends on Linda", which was written by [Bobby Bare](#). Of these songs, "Sweet Suzie" backed with "Walkin' Talkin' Doll", which had been held back from the December 1963 session, were released as Capitol single (Capitol 5176) on April 5, 1964. This single also failed to make the charts.



Sahara and Magic Lamp labels

When his Capitol contract ran out, Burnette decided to take charge of his own affairs on his own terms. He formed his own label Sahara and in July 1964 released the single "Fountain of Love" backed with "What a Summer Day" (Sahara 512). When he was informed that the name Sahara had already been taken, he renamed the label Magic Lamp and a different single, "Bigger Man" backed with "Less Than a Heartbeat" (Magic Lamp 515) was released.

Death



On August 14, 1964, Burnette's unlit fishing boat was struck by an unaware [cabin cruiser](#) in [Clear Lake, California](#). The impact threw him off the boat, and he drowned.^[4] When he received the news, Dorsey Burnette called Paul Burlison, who flew out to comfort him and attend Johnny's funeral. The two men were to keep in touch until Dorsey's death of a [heart attack](#) in 1979. Johnny Burnette is interred at [Forest Lawn Memorial Park Cemetery](#) in [Glendale, California](#).



Legacy

Burnette gained prominence in 1973 both for the inclusion of "[You're Sixteen](#)" (song written by the [Sherman Brothers](#)) on the [American Graffiti soundtrack](#) and for [Ringo Starr](#)'s version of the same song. In addition, Burnette's original song was recognized by the [Rockabilly Hall of Fame](#).^[] One of his songs, "[Train Kept A-Rollin](#)" by [Tiny Bradshaw](#), would later be recorded by [the Yardbirds](#), [Motörhead](#) and [Aerosmith](#).

[The Cramps](#) covered his song "Tear it Up", [Poison Ivy](#) heavily influenced by Burnette's raw guitar style and [Lux Interior](#) borrowing Burnette's vocal approach, and fellow [rockabilly](#) band [Tav Falco's Panther Burns](#) did a cover of "You're Undecided", both songs from Burnette's first album and again, heavily indebted to Burnette quivering, emotional vocal delivery.

[The Beatles](#), with [John Lennon](#) on vocal, performed "[Lonesome Tears in My Eyes](#)" at the BBC on July 10, 1963 for broadcast airing on July 23, 1963. During the airing Lennon introduced the song, originally recorded by Johnny Burnette and the Rock 'n Roll Trio on July 3, 1956 and released in March 1957, joking, "This is a Dorsey Burnette number, brother of Johnny Burnette, called 'Lonesome Tears in My Eyes', recorded on their very first LP in 1822!" This live in-studio recording of 'Lonesome Tears in My Eyes' (including Lennon's spoken intro) was later included on the Beatles' 1994 two-CD set, [Live at the BBC](#).

On June 25, 2019, [The New York Times Magazine](#) listed Johnny Burnette among hundreds of artists whose material was reportedly destroyed in the [2008 Universal fire](#).

Discography

Albums

Year	Album	Record label
1957	<i>Rock 'n Roll Trio</i>	Coral Records
1960	<i>Dreamin'</i>	Liberty Records
1961	<i>Johnny Burnette</i>	
	<i>Sings</i>	
1962	<i>Roses Are Red</i>	
	<i>Johnny Burnette's Hits and Other Favorites</i>	
2004	<i>The Complete Recordings 1955–1964</i>	Bear Family Records

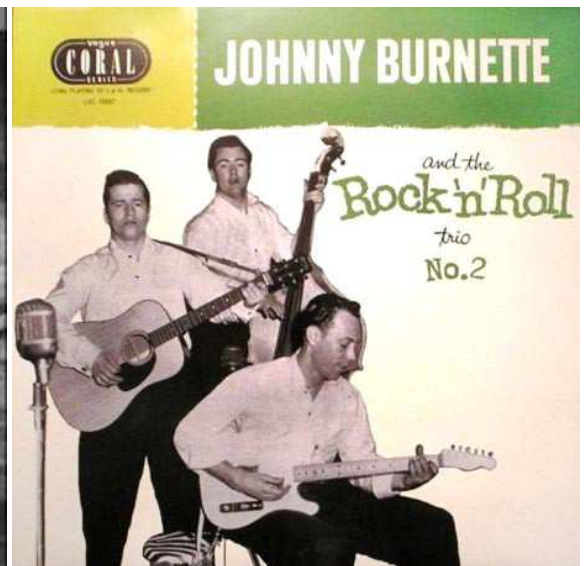
Singles

Johnny Burnette and the Rock 'n' Roll Trio

Year	Title	Peak chart positions		<u>Record label</u>	<u>B-side</u>
		<u>US</u>	<u>UK</u>		
1956	"Tear It Up"	–	–	Coral Records	"You're Undecided"

The Johnny Burnette Trio

Year	Title	Peak chart positions		<u>Record label</u>	<u>B-side</u>	Album
		<u>US</u>	<u>UK</u>			
1956	"Oh Baby Babe"	–	–	Coral Records	"Midnight Train"	<i>Rock 'n Roll Trio</i>
	<u>"The Train Kept a-Rollin'"</u>	–	–		<u>"Honey Hush"</u>	
1957	"Lonesome Train (On a Lonesome Track)"	–	–		"I Just Found Out"	



Johnny Burnette

Year	Title	Peak chart positions		<u>Record label</u>	<u>B-side</u>	Album
		<u>US</u>	<u>UK</u>			
1955	"You're Undecided"	–	–	Von Records	"Go Mule Go"	
1957	"Eager Beaver Baby"	–	–	Coral Records	"Touch Me"	
	"Butterfingers"	–	–		"Drinking Wine, Spo-Dee-O-Dee, Drinking Wine"	
	"Rock Billy Boogie"	–	–		"If You Want It Enough"	
1958	"Kiss Me"	–	–	Freedom Records	"I'm Restless"	
1959	"Me and the Bear"	–	–		"Gumbo"	
	"I'll Never Love Again"	–	–		"Sweet Baby Doll"	
	"Settin' the Woods on Fire"	–	–	"Kentucky Waltz"	<i>Dreamin'</i>	
1960	"Patrick Henry"	–	–	Liberty Records	"Don't Do It"	
	"Dreamin'"	11	5		"Cincinnati Fireball"	<i>Dreamin'</i>
	"You're Sixteen"	8	3		"I Beg Your Pardon"	<i>Johnny Burnette</i>
1961	"Little Boy Sad"	17	12		"(I Go) Down to the River"	<i>Sings</i>
	"Big Big World"	58	–		"Ballad of the One Eyed Jacks"	
	"Girls"	–	37		"I've Got a Lot of Things to	<i>Roses Are Red</i>

					Do" (#109 BB)	
	"Fools Like Me"	–	–		"Honestly I Do"	
	"God, Country and My Baby"	18	–		"Honestly I Do"	<i>Johnny Burnette's Hits and Other Favorites</i>
1962	"Clown Shoes"	113	35		"The Way I Am"	<i>Roses Are Red</i>
	"The Fool of the Year"	113	35		"The Poorest Boy in Town"	
	"I Wanna Thank Your Folks"	117	–	Chancellor Records	"The Giant"	
	"Damn the Defiant"	–	–	Liberty Records	"Lonesome Waters"	
	"Tag-Along"	–	–	Chancellor Records	"Party Girl"	
	"(Remember Me) I'm the One Who Loves You"	–	–		"Time is Not Enough"	
1963	"It Isn't There"	–	–		"(Wish It Were Saturday Night) All Week Long"	
1964	"You Taught Me the Way to Love You"	–	–	Capitol Records	"The Opposite"	
	"Sweet Suzie"	–	–		"Walkin', Talkin' Doll"	
	"What a Summer Day"	–	–	Sahara Records	"Fountain of Love"	
	"Bigger Man"	–	–	Magic Lamp Records	"Less Than a Heartbeat"	

The End