

Wanda Jackson Pioneering Changes

By Alicia Stone-Jackson

Without realizing it, Wanda Jackson was pioneering changes in gender roles and the acceptance of feminine sexuality. While performing, she was a force who made many changes to how women were viewed. She became a role model for the women who are performing in the music industry today with her strong belief in what can be done, should be done regardless of gender or race. Along with this belief, Jackson showed the world ability, rather than the gender or ethnicity, were how performers should be judged. “With her snarling, powerhouse singing Wanda Jackson captured the elemental low-class wildness of this music better than any other female of her day”¹ Wanda Jackson started to perform in the 1950’s and while she doesn’t see herself as a feminist she has become a hero to the feminist movement. With elegance, she changed how women were seen and portrayed while performing in the music industry. She said, “I was the first female artist in country music to wear sexy clothes and adopt a glamorous image.”²

At the time Jackson started performing, most women performers were there as backup performers or part of a duet not the main act. Jackson pushed against the belief that women couldn’t be forceful and carry the performance for a show. When she started out, she had help and guidance from some of the well-known artists of the day, Hank Thompson, Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, and Carl Perkins to name a few. These were her buddies even though she was the only female in the group as they traveled to different performances. She followed their lead when giving her performances. Starting with country music, she moved to rock or rockabilly music and

¹ Bufwack, Mary A., and Robert K. Oermann. *Finding her voice: the saga of women in country music*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1993. Pg. 200

² Jackson, Wanda, and Scott B. Bomar. *Every night is Saturday night: a country girls journey to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame*. United States: BMG, 2017.pg. 74

later into gospel, Jackson performs the music as she feels it should be performed. Jackson always behaved as a lady yet did things in the way she wanted to do them.

In the 1950's, radio was the way most people accessed entertainment. When she was in high school, Jackson won a local competition to have a fifteen-minute radio show, which quickly expanded to a half hour. Jackson talked to the people who sponsored her radio show and found out about advertising and how to promote their products. This helped her understand how to promote herself and her radio show. She credits Grant Lad with teaching her how long the commercials should be; how to get all the information into them; and how to make them interesting to listeners so they would come back. By learning this skill, she learned how to promote herself which as she puts it "Plenty of young girls pursue careers in music today, but they have something I didn't have: role models to look to."³

Jackson was considered "the most assertive woman rocker of her era...She had fire, energy and uninhibited verve that doubtless shocked conservatives"⁴ When she was first recording her producer wanted her to record as a duet rather than solo. "Ken added girls don't selling records."⁵ Jackson pushed to do solo albums, and proved him wrong with the success she had in both the country and rockabilly genres. She was one of the first female artists who stepped out of the role of being part of a duet or group. Jackson wasn't sure about the rockabilly style but with encouragement from Elvis Presley she recorded several songs. She states in her memoirs "In the rock genre, I do. I was the first girl to have the nerve to do it. It wasn't easy because, there weren't many people doing it at all. You had Bill Halley and Elvis, then Jerry Lee

³ Jackson, Wanda, and Scott B. Bomar. *Every night is Saturday night: a country girls journey to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame*. United States: BMG, 2017.pg. 34

⁴ Bufwack, Mary A., and Robert K. Oermann. *Finding her voice: the saga of women in country music*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1993. Pg. 201

⁵ Jackson, Wanda, and Scott B. Bomar. *Every night is Saturday night: a country girls journey to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame*. United States: BMG, 2017.pg. 53

Lewis, Carl Perkins, and Johnny Cash. Those are the guys I worked with and I was always the only girl. I knew I was stepping into new territory, but I wasn't afraid of it. I had this growl and this attitude in me I didn't even know existed. Rock 'n' Roll songs pulled it to me.”⁶

Jackson was a teenager when she started to perform. Her mother helped her style the clothes she wore when she performed. They created “a tight-fitting sheath with rhinestone ‘spaghetti straps’ and little short fringe.” This allowed her to just “tap her foot and the fringe would jiggle”.⁷ She chose clothes many considered provocative for that time, yet the clothes were sophisticated and showed her sexuality. Women of the time were wearing clothes that covered them without showing the womanly curves. During the 1960's women's clothing styles were changing drastically. With her more sensual clothing, she was a forerunner to the changes in women's fashion. By the mid 1960's new styles came out with the advent of the mini skirt. This was just one of the many changes in women's clothing, young women were wearing clothing that showed their figures rather than hiding it. In one of her interviews it was noted that “More than 50 years ago, Ms. Jackson became a rock-'n'-roll pioneer with that throaty growl, an incongruously sweet singing voice and daring outfits that got her into trouble at the Grand Ole Opry.”⁸ When she went to perform at the Grand Ole Opry she was told to cover up as her arms and shoulders were bare. She had to wear her coat while she performed. She told her father she was never coming back to the Grand Ole Opry. Jackson continued to wear the clothes her mother made for her which truly showed her arms and shoulders. Her style allowed girls to see they didn't need to cover up to be a lady but could still be glamorous with bared arms and shoulders.

⁶ Jackson, Wanda, and Scott B. Bomar. *Every night is Saturday night: a country girls journey to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame*. United States: BMG, 2017.

⁷ Bufwack, Mary A., and Robert K. Oermann. *Finding her voice: the saga of women in country music*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1993. Pg. 202

⁸ Jackson, Wanda, and Scott B. Bomar. *Every night is Saturday night: a country girls journey to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame*. United States: BMG, 2017.pg.

From her memoir she stated, “I was the first female artist in country music to wear sexy clothes and adopt a glamorous image.”⁹ Her style of dress and manners helped women entering the field of music today have confidence to dress differently. “With her growling voice and sensual clothing, she became a role model to the women who came after her in the music industry.”

In 1958, Jackson hired a group to back her while she was performing, called the Poe Kats. The piano player was black, when they were playing in the some of the venues the managers didn’t want the black man on the stage. She said if he goes, we go as he is part of the band. Jackson understood the segregation but didn’t see why she should have to perform without her piano player. She asked him why he continued to play. He said it was because of the music. While touring they had to find places where Big Al Downing could eat and sleep due to the segregation at the time.¹⁰ Big Al Downing went on to perform and make a name for himself in the 1970’s on the country charts. Jackson had several other band members who went on to have careers in the country genre. Both Buck Owens and Roy Clark played for her as part of her backup band at different times. Jackson was an inspiration to many artists. One of the artist was Rocker Elle King “whose voice is a powerful instrument that reflects the influence of Aretha Franklin and rockabilly pioneer Wanda Jackson.”¹¹

⁹ Jackson, Wanda, and Scott B. Bomar. *Every night is Saturday night: a country girls journey to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame*. United States: BMG, 2017.pg. 74

¹⁰ Dahl, B. (2004, Feb 06). Wanda Jackson: Queen of Rockabilly recalls 50 years of Rockin' with the best of them, including Elvis Presley. *Goldmine*, 30, 14-17. Retrieved from <https://libproxy.uww.edu:9443/login?url=https://libproxy.uww.edu:3202/docview/1498127?accountid=14791>

¹¹ Jurgensen, J. (2015, Feb 21). Rocker Elle King's Gritty Debut; Elle King, Whose debut album 'love stuff,' is out this week, spent years writing songs and performing before finding her voice in old-school rock 'n' roll. *Wall Street Journal (Online)* Retrieved from <https://libproxy.uww.edu:9443/login?url=https://libproxy.uww.edu:3202/docview/1656525200?accountid=14791>

Jackson on the feminist movement says “I’ve been asked if I’m a feminist, and I’ve been told I’m a hero to feminists. But I don’t put myself in that category.”¹² Yet looking at what Jackson has done throughout her career, she was a precursor to the second wave of feminism just by the way she pushed to be creative in her own way. The Feminism movement in the 1960’s grew stronger as the women worked to gain civil rights for groups such as the Black Civil Rights, Gay and Lesbian Movement, and Anti-Vietnam War Movement as well as many more groups. This movement worked towards gender equality.

There have been three waves of feminism in the United States. The first wave was from the 1830’s to the early 1900’s. This wave was concerned with contractual and property rights, including the rights of women to vote. The second wave was the 1960’s to the 1980’s “Coming off the heels of World War II, the second wave of feminism focused on the workplace, sexuality, family and reproductive rights. During a time when the United States was already trying to restructure itself, it was perceived that women had met their equality goals with the exception of the failure of the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (which has still yet to be passed) ” The third wave of feminism is the current wave which started in the 1990’s which is focusing on more of the gender equality.¹³

In the 1960’s besides being a wife and mother the choices for a woman was to be a nurse, secretary, teacher or waitress. Most universities would not admit a woman to programs such as engineers, doctors or lawyers. Although there was not a strict structure to the movement, it was gaining membership because of some of the leaders, such as Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem and

¹² Jackson, Wanda, and Scott B. Bomar. *Every night is Saturday night: a country girls journey to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame*. United States: BMG, 2017. pg. xiii Preface

¹³ Dorey-Stein, Caroline, "A Brief History: The Three Waves of Feminism." Progressive Women's Leadership. September 24, 2015. Accessed December 17, 2017. <https://www.progressivewomensleadership.com/a-brief-history-the-three-waves-of-feminism/>.

Germaine Greer. They each had a different outlook on what feminism should be. While Betty Friedan was more radical, Gloria Steinem and Germaine Greer each portrayed feminism with class. Steinem and Greer showed you didn't have to be negative to get the issues across. This is why the feminist movement considers Jackson as a hero because she may have been sensual in her dress, but she was always a lady. By the 1970's, more women were applying to colleges and taking courses that would lead them into more fields than secretary, teacher or nurse.

Jackson pushed to make her own decisions about what music she recorded and which genre she was willing to perform. She even stepped out of the country and rockabilly music genres for several years when she and her husband found God. Even when not performing, she was unknowingly still popular in Europe and Japan. The general population may not remember her but several people such as Jack White, Elvis Costello and Bruce Springsteen all still remember her and admire her accomplishments.

When Elvis Costello wrote to the nominating committee of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in his letter stated "Look around today and you can hear lots of rocking girl singers who owe an unconscious debt to the mere idea of a woman like Wanda Jackson. She was standing on stage with a guitar in her hands and making a sound that was as wild and raw as any rocker, man or woman"¹⁴ It took several years before Jackson was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. When she was inducted on April 4, 2009, Roseann Cash told those attending "Every young woman I know, musician or otherwise, worships her as the prototype, the first female rock star"¹⁵

¹⁴ Jackson, Wanda, and Scott B. Bomar. *Every night is Saturday night: a country girls journey to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame*. United States: BMG, 2017.pg. 244

¹⁵ Cash, Roseanne. "Inducts Wanda Jackson into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame" Cleveland OH. April 4, 2009 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wz7gH-vI0ik>

Jackson's influence continues even as she moved into her older years. In an interview for the American Music Festival in 2016, Jackson revealed her music was reviled in the 50s. "But after I worked with Rosie Flores in 1995, recording a couple of songs on her album, we wound up getting calls from club operators and radio stations wanting us to bring the show to their town. So we ended up doing a five week tour across America, we started in San Francisco and ended in DC. And I had no idea all these fans were there because I'd been working Europe. So it was a very nice surprise to find all these fans I had I wasn't even aware of. At my age, getting to enjoy the fruit of my labor from the '50s is nice because let me tell you, in the '50s I didn't get much airplay because people up in the air about rockabilly being the devil's music. And we all knew it wasn't so we kept recording and doing our thing. It's like a gift from Heaven!"¹⁶

Music lovers still enjoy hearing her music as well as recognizing her importance in the industry. Her ability to remain relevant helps her influence on the music industry and feminism continue to grow. She has global appeal with fans spanning the world, Europe, Australia, and Japan.¹⁷

Though unintentional, Wanda Jackson in her quiet way became a leader to the young women of the day by showing her sensual styles while still acting like a lady. She was willing to say no when the people around her told her she should do something more in line with traditional roles for her gender. Jackson stood up for the rights of people who were excellent performers no matter their gender or race. As a precursor to the feminist movement in the 1960's she was telling people with her actions that women can be smart, sensual and understanding. In the years

¹⁶ <https://www.axs.com/interview-wanda-jackson-talks-about-the-american-music-festival-and-h-106368>

¹⁷ Jackson, Wanda, and Scott B. Bomar. *Every night is Saturday night: a country girls journey to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame*. United States: BMG, 2017.

since she has inspired many women performers. Through her clothing, her personal moral beliefs, Wanda Jackson stands out as a forerunner in fashion and social issues. She inspired multiple generations of musicians and women to stand up and be heard while at the same time being polite. Her strength to break barriers sparked strength in others within and outside the music industry. As a precursor to the second wave of feminism, Wanda Jackson was a powerhouse in singing and standing up for her own style and her own morals.

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