Move Over, Link Wray

First time I saw Elvis on television, I knew immediately that I had to get a guitar, learn to play it quickly, and get in a rock and roll band. It was, no doubt, my destiny to entertain the fans, who would surely flock to see and hear me. Look at all those girls screaming at Elvis! Hmmm…Elvis. I may want to change my name to something cooler than Ed.

What a life! He’s got his own pink Cadillac, while I have to borrow the Old Man’s maroon Nash Ambassador if I want to go on a date. And he’s making appearances on the Ed Sullivan show! Instantly, in a Walter Mitty fantasy, I was being introduced by Ed himself, striding on-stage while my family and friends watched me admiringly on national TV. I relived that fantasy over and over.

I started dropping hints about getting a guitar, but my Old Man just wrinkled his nose and said, “Get you a guitar? So you can be one of those sissy boys like that Pelvis fellow?”

Rats. Maybe I’d better work on Mom.

Mom was a little more sympathetic. I did have a birthday coming up, my sixteenth. She asked, “How much do guitars cost? Maybe if they aren’t too much, we could think about it.”

Money. There was that grim reality check again. Mom and Dad had grown up during the Depression, and were pretty much convinced the next Depression was right around the corner. Especially with, “those rich Kennedys in office.”

I had no idea how much a guitar cost but, hey, I was making progress here. I could already hear the first sweet chords emanating from my skilled fingers.

A few days later, I was doing homework, and thinking from time to time, “bet Elvis never worries about homework.”

Mom came into my room. She had the Sears Roebuck catalog opened to the musical instruments section. “Here’s a guitar in the catalog. It’s not too much. Maybe we could get that for your birthday.”

I took the catalog, and looked at the guitars pictured there. Wow!! One was blue and white! Just like the guitars Phil and Don were pictured with on the latest Everly Brothers album! Much later, I learned their guitars were specially made Gretsch acoustics, worth probably one thousand dollars or more. The one pictured in the catalog was a Silvertone… for sixteen dollars.

But I was already in love with my guitar. Heck, I didn’t know Gretsch from Gumdrops. Who was worrying about those details? Lets get it ON ORDER!
I said, “Mom, I think that would be a fine guitar to get started on.” I didn’t want to seem too eager.

She looked at the picture of the guitar I was admiring and said, “No, not that one. This one.”

I looked at the picture of the guitar she was pointing to. It was a plain brown model with a braided string for a strap, and an outline drawing of a cowboy on a horse on the body. Price: ten dollars and fifty cents.

My heart sank. Mom, I thought to myself, we’re talking about the world’s next major ROCK ‘N ROLL STAR! And, think about your future and Dad’s when I start raking in the big bucks from my record sales. Dad could retire from the Prison Service and be my manager. Heck, my thirteen-year-old brother John could even be my tour manager. This was no time to worry about a few dollars.

Trying to sound thoughtful and reasonable I said, “Mom, for another five dollars and fifty cents, we can get better quality, a fine musical instrument. And you know how successful musicians always play the best instruments. Heck, that guy on Lawrence Welk has a Stradivarius violin.”

Bingo! I could see that I’d accidentally stumbled onto the ultimate trump card. At the mere mention of Lawrence Welk, Mom immediately saw the logic in spending the extra dough. Buy quality. Spend a little more. Get what you pay for.

She ordered the guitar. I wasn’t sure she had cleared it with Dad, but I certainly wasn’t going to bring it up. Now the burning question was how soon would it be here?

Mom said, “Six to eight weeks.” My birthday was about a month away.

Where were they making that guitar…Pluto? By the time it got here I’d be way too old to for rock and roll.

As the days passed, an idea grew- that rock ‘n roll was a fad that would pass before I could ever strapped on my blue and white Silvertone. I imagined Elvis was long forgotten. And I was trying to convince America that they still had to hear from me. Where the devil WAS my guitar? Was the order lost? Had my Old Man shortstopped the process?

Finally, there it was. While I was in school, the Sears truck had delivered it to our small home. It was in the living room when I got home in a big cardboard box. My guitar! My Everly Brothers guitar! I struggled to get the carton open so I could try it out.

What’s this? No strings? What kind of cheap, rotten trick was this? Then, I found a packet of strings buried deeper in the box…
Crap. For sixteen dollars, Sears could have put the blasted strings on.

I opened the string pack. Six strings all right, but how did you put them on? What was the right order? Should the big, thick string go on top, or on the bottom? There were no directions. I silently cursed the charlatans who were selling “quality” musical instruments. Hell, maybe Sears didn’t know how to put the strings on either. That’s why they came separately.

But I was ready to PLAY GUITAR. My pal Roger on the next street had an uncle who was a guitar player. Roger had volunteered his uncle to give me a couple of lessons as soon as my guitar was in, and time was wastin’!

Time to get that guitar strung up. I looked at the guitar, and then looked at the picture of Don and Phil on the album cover to see how theirs were strung. Hmm….kinda hard to tell from the photo. But common sense told me the little string belonged on top, and the big string on the bottom, with the others in ascending order of size. I strung the guitar, leaving the actual tuning to Roger’s uncle.

I called Roger; ”Hey, got my guitar. Do you suppose your uncle would have time to teach me a few licks?”

Roger told me he’d be right over, and we’d walk down to where his uncle lived. I carried that guitar slung casually over my shoulder just as I’d seen Elvis and Buddy and Ricky carry theirs, reveling in the knowledge that our neighbors (and their teen-aged daughters) were watching me, and restraining themselves from running out and asking for my autograph.

Roger’s uncle was waiting for us on the porch. A pipe fitter for the paper mill south of town, he was relaxing on his front porch in jeans, a white tee-shirt with a pack of Luckys rolled in the sleeve, smoking a cigarette. He was tall and lanky; his hair cut in a butch with the sides left long, combed into a perfect ducktail.

”I’ll have to give this man credit for his help on one of my albums after I get famous,” I thought to myself. It would look good to give credit to the ‘little people’ who had helped me on my way to the top. Mom and Dad would be proud.

Uncle stood up as we walked up the short front walk. ”Lemme see that box,” he said, his cigarette bobbing in the corner of his mouth as he spoke.

”You left handed?” he asked, looking at me, squinting as smoke drifted into his eye…

“No….I’m right handed. Why?”

He grinned, a big grin to signal his amusement. ”Son,” he said, ”you got the strings on backward. We’re gonna have to restring this bad boy!”
Crap. I could feel my pal Roger smiling and staring at me, just like I was some goofy puppy that had pooped on the carpet. I couldn’t look at him. Just stood there feeling stupid as uncle sat back down in his porch swing and started restringing my guitar.

When he finally got the strings on, he lit another cigarette, and began to tune it. “What’d you have to pay for this thing,” he asked, one eye shut against the lazy curl of the smoke from his cigarette.

I told him, and he just shook his head with a slight grin.

“All right, that’s about as close as I can get it with these strings. Next time you go to town, see if you can get new strings. These ain’t very good.”

I started to tell him again that I’d spent a whopping sixteen dollars for that guitar, but caught myself. Maybe a good guitar cost up to fifty dollars, and, he undoubtedly had his own. So I just nodded that yes, next time to town, new strings would have my highest priority.

Uncle sat up, reached in his pocket and pulled out a pick. I made a mental note to immediately start carrying a pick in my pocket, the trademark of us serious guitar players. He crossed his feet comfortably, and put his left hand high on the guitar neck. His fingers effortlessly formed a chord.

In no time flat, I thought to myself, I’d be doing that.

He started to pick out some notes I recognized… but what was it? It sure wasn’t Duane Eddy or Link Wray, my two favorite guitar heroes at that time. He played for about a minute, occasionally uttering “dammit” when he hit the wrong note.

Hey Uncle, I thought to myself; ol’ Duane never hit a wrong note. But then, I thought, Uncle would just blame it on my sixteen-dollar guitar.

He finished playing, leaned back in the swing, took the cigarette from his mouth and flicked the ash into the yard. “That was some pretty good playin’,” I said. ”What was that?”

“Golden Wildwood Flower” he said, taking a drag on his cigarette, “written by Mother Maybelle Carter. Watched her play it on the Opry on TV just last Saturday.”

Holy God in Heaven, I thought to myself; Mother Maybelle Carter? I wanted to learn some rock guitar RIGHT NOW, and he was playing country and hillbilly? Instead of launching me on the express elevator to rock guitar greatness, he had me stuck in the bluegrass basement with Mother Maybelle.

I tried to hide my disappointment and get back on track. “Do you know any Chuck Berry stuff? Maybe Johnny B. Good?”
He looked at me, then at Roger. ”Who’s Chuck Berry?”

Who is Chuck Berry? Only the hottest rock guitar player in the universe. The man was a musical moron.

I said, “Chuck Berry does Johnny B. Good. It’s the number one record in the country. Larry Lujak plays it all the time on WLS.” WLS was the 50,000-watt AM blowtorch out of Chicago. All of us listened to Larry Lujak at night, when the signal came in loud and clear there in Chillicothe, Ohio.

“Never listen to the stuff,” he said, propping my guitar against the porch rail. He stood up and pulled another Lucky Strike from the pack in his sleeve. “I’m a country and western man; Lefty Frizzell, Porter Waggoner; Flatt and Scruggs…. now that’s God’s music.” He lit up, blowing smoke out of the corner of his mouth. “This here rock and roll ain’t gonna last, boys. Don’t waste your time. It was country and western that built this great nation.”

Well, it was now absolutely clear that I had hitched my wagon to a dead horse. I looked at my watch. “I gotta get back to my homework. Got a math test tomorrow.”

I thanked Uncle profusely for restringing my guitar, and showing me a few licks. I promised to give Lefty Waggoner a listen, and would take his sage advice about country music. Uncle just grinned and shook his head slightly. Rats. I never could tell a convincing lie.

The next day, after school, I drove my ’52 Ford downtown to Chillicothe Music. My ’52 Ford was the pride of my young life, my new guitar being second. It was black, with full wheel covers, your basic straight 6-cylinder engine, a manual transmission, and shifter on the steering column. Not a muscle car, but much cooler than the Plymouth it replaced. I’d bought that fine car with the insurance settlement I got after I was rear-ended in the lime green ’51 Plymouth I’d bought for one hundred and fifty dollars, my life savings at the time.

I parked in front of Chillicothe Music and went inside. I needed a pick and a guitar book. New strings had to wait. I didn’t want to waste time stringing that guitar again. I browsed the music books. Learn to Play the Flute. Learn the Piano in Your Spare Time. There! Mel Bay’s Learn to Play the Guitar!! This had to be a stroke of luck; only one copy of it in the store. The best part was two sure fire words on the cover…. Easy, and Fast. This was more like it. A dollar five lighter in the wallet, I couldn’t wait to get home.

I went to my room and closed the door. My brother John was watching Howdy Doody on TV in the living room, so I had the privacy a serious musician needed.

I skipped the first couple of pages called, “How To Read Music.” That was for sissies. I’d read where Elvis couldn’t read music. I found the pictures of the first three chords ol’ Mel said I needed.
Let’s see…the E chord; 1st finger, 3rd string up, first fret. Second finger…and so on. I looked at my fingers on the guitar neck, and double-checked the picture…perfect! I pressed down and strummed the strings, but all I got was a muffled sound from the strings.

Hmmm…this was gonna take some practice.

I looked at the indentations on my fingers from pressing the strings. I remembered what Mel had told me. “In about two weeks you’ll build up a callus on your fingertips, so you’ll be able to play without discomfort.”

Two weeks? Just to build some lousy calluses? This was Fast and Easy?

At the supper table later Mom said, “There’s a man on the second floor of my office building who gives music lessons. I asked him if he gave guitar lessons, and he does. Would you like me to sign you up?”

I glanced uneasily at Dad. He just seemed to grit his teeth as he worked at cutting the left over ham we were having. I thought for a second. Somehow, I couldn’t see Elvis taking guitar lessons. But I wasn’t making too much headway with Mel. Maybe a few lessons from a real guitar instructor was the answer after all.

“Sure,” I said.

Now, it was Dad’s turn. He asked Mom, ”How much are these lessons anyway?”

“No, Carl, “ she said. ”It’s only a dollar for 30 minutes.”

Dad turned to me. “Now, when I was your age….”

I thought, Oh no, here we go again…

Worked for a quarter an hour. Split wood. Walked to school. Didn’t wear shoes in the summer ‘cause I had to save ’em for winter.

I knew this wasn’t the last time I’d hear “The Lecture.”

But Mom prevailed and signed me up. A few days later, I made my way downtown with my guitar in the cardboard case. I trooped upstairs to my teacher’s studio, over Mom’s office at the Insurance Agency, hoping people would notice me carrying my guitar. Carrying that guitar around was most of the fun of owning it so far. At least people might think I could play it.

Good night, I thought, on meeting my teacher for the first time. This guy is older than dirt! Bet he’s never heard of Chuck Berry either. Mr. Witherspoon was probably 70. Short, thin with a white fringe of hair around his otherwise bald little head. Rimless
glasses on the end of his nose. An old cardigan sweater that he had mis-buttoned. Baggy suit pants and bedroom slippers. I’ve missed that Express Elevator again, I thought to myself. Another disappointment on the road to rock stardom.

I unpacked my guitar while Mr. Witherspoon pulled up the two folding chairs and a music stand an a….what the heck was that? “This is a metronome” he said. ”It helps you keep time to the music.” It looked like a relic from the Middle Ages.

He took my guitar, and strummed it to check the tuning. ”Hmmm, a Silvertone…from Sears Roebuck?” he asked, cocking his head slightly.

Yup! Cost sixteen bucks,” I said proudly.

“I assumed as much,” he sighed. ”We’d best get started. Here’s the music for the notes we’ll practice on the first string.”

Music? I thought. You’re gonna teach me music? Elvis never….and just the first string? This is gonna take forever!

I agonized through the lesson- plink, plink, plink….over and over. Three stupid notes, and not a one of them sounded like “Rebel Rouser.” Duane Eddy would be laughing his butt off if he could see me. Plink, plink, plink.

I told Mom later I didn’t think I’d be going back. A dollar for 30 minutes did sound a little extravagant to me. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the slightest hint of a smile on the Old Man’s face.

I gave Mel another chance. Every evening I’d practice the chords pictured, and Mel was right. I developed the promised calluses. Finally, I was able to play the E chord without muffling the strings.

Jody Reynolds had a hit record out at about that time, probably 1960 called “Endless Sea,” a simple 3- chord song. I thought it sounded like Jody was playing the E chord. Sure enough, he was. And, whaddya know….the other 2 chords were in fact, A and B. Just like in the book. My respect for Mel went up a notch. I bought the record, and sat in front of the hi-fi, playing along with the record. E, then A…then B. Man, I’m on my way!

Even my Old Man was impressed. He walked in one day and said in an astonished tone, “You can actually play that thing!”

Hey Dad, I thought, it’s in my blood. It’s my destiny.

Lefty Waggoner, eat your heart out. Ed Friel’s about to Blast Off!
I got into a band with a friend at school. He told me he played guitar. I said I did too. He knew a guy who had a set of drums, and another kid who wanted to sing. My friend Danny was a sax player in the school band. Every rock band worth its salt in those days had a sax, so we were set. We agreed to all get together. The drummer, Walt, lived with his Mom just outside of town, and she worked the 3:00-11:00 shift driving a forklift at the mill. So we even had a place to practice, Walt’s basement.

Chuck, the guitar player, had a Fender Strat, just like Buddy Holly’s. Walt had a basic drum set. Danny had his sax from the school band, and Willie sang in his church. We were gonna be sensational.

My first practice with a real rock band! Talk about exciting! I unpacked by blue and white Silvertone. Chuck came over to examine it; played a couple of chords, and said, “Maybe you ought to get some new strings before our first appearance.”

We got tuned up, and stood around the drum set. Chuck knew a song called “Sugaree” a regional hit by a band out of Cincinnati. He played it through. Walt caught on to the beat. Danny chimed in with the sax, and Willy, who knew the song, was wailin’!

As for me, I was completely lost. Chuck was playing lead, and as the rhythm guitar player, I was supposed to follow him. None of the chords I played sounded right. Chuck played on…watching my shaking hands, and stopped.

“I thought you could play that thing,” he said.

“Guess I’m a little rusty on that song,” I replied.

“Rusty? You ain’t played the right chord yet!”

My face reddened as the other guys looked at me. Chuck said, “Well, I don’t know anybody else who has a guitar. Fellows, take a break while I teach our rhythm guy how to play the song.”

I sighed with genuine relief. I thought he was going to fire me on the spot. Give my place in the band to another guitar player. I could have hugged him.

I knew the chords by name by now…just couldn’t put ‘em together in a song, except for “Endless Sleep.” Chuck patiently went through ‘Sugaree’ with me a few times. Showed me where to change chords, and finally said, “Just keep your eye on me. I’ll tell you which chord to play.”

Pretty nice of Chuck. He was a redhead, and I thought guys with red hair were short tempered and always spoiling for a fight. But Chuck worked with me, thus assuring my place in the band.
At that first rehearsal, we learned three songs; Sugaree, Walk, Don’t Run, an instrumental, (Willy just snapped his fingers and boogied during that one) and a really simplified three-chord version of Night Train.

We were ready. We were “The Contours,” a name Chuck liked, and since he had a Fender Strat, and an old station wagon to haul our gear, he got to pick. I was officially the Rhythm Guitar Player in a genuine Rock Band. The Contours! Chillicothe today, American Bandstand tomorrow. Nothing could stop The Contours.

We got our first gig from Chuck’s friend in Jackson, about twenty-five miles away. There was a Saturday night sock hop at the local American Legion hall, with a disc jockey spinning records. Chuck allowed as to how The Contours were available to play a set, and that was that…no audition; we were hired. Free. They couldn’t afford to pay us.

No problem! This was our big opportunity! People would see us, word would spread. Wasn’t this the way Little Richard started out?

So, with one rehearsal under our belts, we set up our instruments under the surprisingly excited gaze of some of the teenage girls in the crowd. They’d probably never seen a real rock band, and here we were right in their midst. We were introduced midway through the sock hop by the local DJ; “Lets hear it for the Contours!” We launched into Sugaree, my hands shaking from excitement as I did my best to watch Chuck and follow the chord changes. When we finished Sugaree, the girls in front of the stage were clapping and screaming, just like they had seen the crowd do on American Bandstand. But, I noticed most of the guys standing towards the back of the hall, just staring at us. Uh oh.

We got through Walk, Don’t Run and Night Train without too many crippling errors, and set our instruments down. The DJ put on a record, and came over to us. He asked us how long we’d been together. We told him this was our first appearance.

“I kinda thought that,” he said.

But we’d done it. I had just finished my first appearance with a rock band. My dream was coming true! And, some of the girls actually wanted our autographs! I was signing a scrap of paper for one of the girls when a huge crewcut guy in a Jackson Football jacket tapped me roughly on the chest. He looked down at me and said “You keep messin’ with my girl, Blackie and I’m gonna kick your ass ‘till my shoes catch on fire”.

I glanced down. He was wearing engineer boots, black with a square heel. My rear end would be the anatomical equivalent of Hiroshima before those things even got warm, I thought.

No wonder Elvis had all those bodyguards.

As we worked on our three songs in Walt’s basement over the next few weeks, we decided to let Walt have a drum solo in the middle of Night Train. Chuck thought it
would be cool if the rest of us set down our instruments and left the stage while Walt pounded away. Then we’d come back on stage, backs to the audience, put our guitars and sax on, and at just the right moment, whirl around and start playing again. It would set the crowd wild, we thought.

We got another gig. This time it was the Union Hall down by the mill for a crowd of about 50 kids, with a few adults as chaperones. “Sugaree” got pretty much the same crowd reaction. A few girls up front screaming. Most of the guys gazing at us sullenly from the back. The adults just stared at us. We followed with “Walk, Don’t Run. By now, I could get through this without watching Chuck. Then, for our finale, “Night Train,” with a show stopping performance of our drum solo routine.

Danny started blowing the opening notes of Night Train with Chuck and me filling in. Willie was on fire with the vocals, ”Niiiiight Traiiiiin…that took my baby far away…”

We took off our instruments. Walt pounded his drum set like he was possessed. Willie, Danny, Chuck and I sauntered importantly to the side of the room, where Chuck lit up. After a few minutes, we looked at each other, smiled and walked back on stage. The crowd had to be loving this, I thought. Backs to the audience, we strapped on our guitars. Danny fastened his sax to the neck strap…and we whirled around.

The neck of my guitar hit Danny’s sax just as he brought it to his lips. The mouthpiece was driven sharply into his mouth, splitting his lip…just as Chuck started to play. I dropped my pick. Danny was holding his fingers to his swelling and bleeding lip. I stood there as Danny gave me a dirty look, and walked off the stage to check on the damage to his mouth. Chuck and Walt brought Night Train to a ragged close, and we left the stage.

I went to check on Danny. As I passed the table of adults, one of them said, “Y’all boys may want to work on your choreography else that sax player ain’t gonna have any teeth left.”

The world needs more comedians, I thought to myself. When I’m on Bandstand, Jack, you’re still gonna be takin’ up space at this Union Hall workin’ for a living at that stupid mill.

............................................................................................................................... 

Over the next few months, the Contours played their 3- song set at another half dozen sock hops around the area. Still all for free. Then one day Chuck called and said, “We’ve been hired to play for the Huntington High Prom. We’re gonna get twenty-five dollars!”

“Apiece?” I asked, not believing our good fortune.

“Well, no,” he said. “We’ll have to split it, but hell, man, we’re actually getting paid to perform!”
Now, we really should have thought this through a little better. There would be a DJ playing records, but we were expected to do 3 sets with three songs each set. After all, this wasn’t a sock hop. This was the Prom.

We all piled into Chuck’s station on that memorable Friday evening. We were dressed in our Contours uniform—white dress shirt, black pants, white socks and black shoes. Chuck and Walt didn’t own a long sleeved white shirt. Theirs were short sleeved. Wille’s was white, with a faint brown splotch near the shoulder where the iron had stayed too long. But by golly, we thought we were hot stuff.

This was the biggest crowd we’d ever played for, probably 150 high school teens dressed in their finest, and a group of teachers acting as chaperones. Huntington was a high school out in the country, so there wasn’t a tux in sight. Nevertheless, it was a good crowd. The gym was decorated with strands of crepe in the school colors, and colored spotlights added to the atmosphere.

The DJ was from the local radio station. He was dressed in a suit. His equipment had the station call letters, WCHI, prominently featured. This was as close to the big time as we had ever been.

The DJ played records for the first half hour, while we set up our gear. We stayed backstage, out of sight of the crowd. After all, we were the Talent. We were above taking part in the action on the dance floor.

The DJ came looking for us behind the stage curtain. “Okay, guys, you ready?” We nodded, ready to knock their socks off.

And we did. We had those three songs down pretty well by now. We’d gotten over the stage fright, and we’d rehearsed the routine in Night Train to insure Danny would suffer no further indignities. Willie was in good voice, and Chuck was impressive on lead guitar. We got a strong welcome from the crowd. The girls were screaming…and even the guys seemed not to mind the attention we were getting.

After our first set, the DJ told us, “That was pretty good fellows. You’ll be on again in about 30 minutes. What’s in your second set?”

And that’s when it sunk in. I thought, uh oh, maybe we should have worked a little harder on some of the songs we were trying to learn.

We didn’t really answer him. Chuck mumbled something about how much the crowd liked Night Train.

Back at his microphone, the DJ introduced The Belmont’s latest hit record.

Backstage, Chuck told us, “Let’s mix up the order next time. Walk, Don’t Run first, then Night Train, then Sugaree.” It was the only thing we could do.
We were introduced again and went through our set. The crowd wasn’t as receptive this time, I noticed. Not as much screaming, and some of the kids just stared at us. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the DJ looking at his watch and frowning. When we finished, there was polite clapping from the crowd.

When the DJ came over to us backstage, he was still frowning. “You guys got one more set. You can’t go out there and play those same three songs. This is a Prom. This is my reputation! I’m paying you guys. Don’t you know anything else?” He started to walk away, but came back. “Surely you guys know something else!” He walked out to his turntables, smiled at the crowd, and introduced Ronnie and the Daytona’s latest hit, “Little GTO.”

We had been working on “Chain Gang,” that great Sam Cooke hit. We hadn’t gotten it down. “Chain Gang” had five chords, and some tricky chord changes. We were a three-chord band. Our only salvation was with Willie. He could really sing. “Guys, it’s Chain Gang. We gotta do it,” Chuck said. “We’ll do “Chain Gang” and finish with “Night Train.” Willie, give it all you got. You got to get us through this.”

I started to panic. What chord did we start in? I couldn’t ask Chuck. He was sweating as it was. No sense in ruining his mood further by telling him I didn’t remember ANY of the chords. I thought, maybe I could watch him and fake it.

The DJ came back. “All right you guys, what’s your first number? And don’t tell me Sugaree.” Chuck told him to introduce “the Contours’ version of Chain Gang.”

My heart was pounding, my stomach in a knot.

“Ladies and gentlemen, for their final set, let’s hear it for the Contours doing Chain Gang!”

The curtain slid open, and we were on stage. The blinding spotlights were trained on us. My knees began shaking.

Willie started in, strong as usual.

“All day long I hear the sounds of the men, workin’ on the chain gang.”

Chuck fell in with the C chord. Walt’s drums picked up the pace, but with the wrong beat. Way too fast. I strummed the C chord, but Chuck changed. Where did he go? I played an F. Wrong…oh crap! Danny played in the wrong key completely. God help us.

Willie, still doing his best, looked around and caught my eye.
I thought, God, look at that expression on his face. We’re killing him.

Chuck turned up his guitar volume, trying to drown me out. At that moment, the spotlights blinked off. Chuck was still playing, but the power to our amp was cut off. Danny’s sax, was the last sound I heard from us.

Bobby Rydell’s music suddenly filled the gym. The DJ had killed our power, turned off our mikes, and put on a record.

I looked out at the crowd. They were just staring at us. No applause, no screaming. They just stared, then slowly resumed dancing or talking among themselves.

The DJ confronted us. “That’s it! Pack up. You’re through. And forget the dough. You just better hope this doesn’t reflect on me. Now…OUT!”

All we could do was pack up…silently. I put my guitar in the cardboard case. I helped Walt carry his stuff to the station wagon. The rest of the guys followed. No one stopped us for an autograph.

We drove back to Walt’s place in silence. We were devastated. We had embarrassed ourselves in front of 150 kids. Word would spread, and we’d be a joke for weeks to come.

I didn’t see Willie after that. A year or so later, I ran into Chuck at the paper mill. I had a summer job there, saving my money for my sophomore year at Ohio U. Chuck was working at the mill full time as ‘third hand’ on one of the paper machines. We didn’t spend much time reminiscing. We just greeted one another and, parted with a promise to get together sometime…knowing we never would.

It was the end of the Contours, and the end of my boyhood dream of Rock Stardom.