

Robert Gordon, Punk Rocker Turned Rockabilly Revivalist, Dies at 75

Weary of the angry and aggressive sound of New York's musical underground of the late 1970s, he returned to rock's roots and seeded a rockabilly revival.



By Alex Williams

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Robert Gordon, a 1950s-influenced rocker with a silky baritone and towering pompadour who emerged from the New York punk underground of the 1970s to help stoke a rockabilly revival, died on Oct. 18 in a hospice in Manhattan. He was 75.

His sister Melissa Gordon Uram said the cause was acute myeloid leukemia.

Mr. Gordon had been the frontman for the buzzy CBGB-era band Tuff Darts when he traded his punk attitude for a tin of Nu Nile pomade and released his first album, a collaboration with the fuzz-guitar pioneer Link Wray, in 1977. At the time, 1950s signifiers like ducktail haircuts and pink pegged slacks had scarcely been glimpsed for years outside the set of “Happy Days” or the Broadway production of “Grease.”

But, turning his back on both the pomp of '70s stadium rock and the rock 'n' roll arsonist ethos of punk, Mr. Gordon helped seed a rockabilly resurgence that would flower during the 1980s, with bands like the Stray Cats and the Blasters hitting the charts and punk titans like the Clash and X also paying their respects.

Neo-rockabilly became the soundtrack to a broader wave of '50s nostalgia during the Reagan years, marked by Buddy Holly-esque Wayfarer sunglasses, James Dean haircuts and ubiquitous images of tail-fin Cadillacs in music videos, in retro-themed malt shops and at the Hard Rock Cafe.

With a look and sound that seemed to travel by time machine from Sun Studio circa 1956, Mr. Gordon was a curious presence in an era when the rock world seemed split between Fleetwood Mac-type rockers with feathered tresses and Sex Pistols-style punks with spiked locks. Lester Bangs, the gonzo rock critic, once said of Mr. Gordon's neo-hepcat look that he could be a museum display labeled “Bopcatulus Americanus.”

Mr. Gordon never achieved the fame of the musicians who followed in his wake, but his influence was felt. “Many fans and music historians believe that, had he been recording in the '50s, he might have become a rockabilly legend,” the music journalist Mark McStea wrote in *Guitar Player* magazine last year. “Instead, he kick-started the worldwide rockabilly revival.”

He never scored a hit on the level of the Stray Cats' “Stray Cat Strut” or another '50s-nostalgia chestnut, Los Lobos' cover of Richie Valens' “La Bamba,” which hit No. 1 on the Billboard singles chart in 1987.



Mr. Gordon, left, with his band backstage at the Lone Star Cafe in New York in 1981. From left: the guitarist Chris Spedding, the drummer David Van Tieghem and the bassist Tony Garnier. John Kisch Archive/Getty Images

But, with Mr. Wray — who carved his place in rock history with the '50s instrumental classics “Rumble” and “Raw-Hide” — he hit No. 83 on the Hot 100 with “Red Hot,” a cover of a 1955 R&B song by Billy “The Kid” Emerson that became a rockabilly staple when Billy Lee Riley and the Little Green Men covered it two years later.

If it was too early for him to reap a windfall from the rockabilly wave he had helped begin, Mr. Gordon also had the misfortune of coming in early with songs that would become hits for other artists. His 1981 solo album, “Are You Gonna Be the One,” included the single “Someday, Someway,” a Gene Vincent-inspired number written by his fellow retro-rocker Marshall Crenshaw, which peaked at No. 76 a year before Mr. Crenshaw’s version hit the Top 40.

His 1978 album, “Fresh Fish Special,” which featured the Jordanaires, a vocal group famous for backing Elvis Presley, included the song “Fire,” written by his friend Bruce Springsteen, with Mr. Springsteen himself on piano. The song became a smash for the Pointer Sisters, climbing to No. 2 on the Hot 100.

Later in his career, Mr. Gordon bristled at the rockabilly pigeonhole, referring to his sound as “roots music” and citing his forays into country and other genres. Still, rockabilly was in his bones, and he said that his life changed the first time he heard Presley’s “Heartbreak Hotel.”

“I just remember hearing that one as a kid, I guess I was 9 years old, and it just opened new horizons,” Mr. Gordon recalled in a 2010 Australian radio interview. “The sound of that echo, and of course his smoldering delivery, was great. For a little kid, it was just amazing.”

Robert Ira Gordon was born in Washington on March 29, 1947, the second of four children of Samuel Gordon, an antitrust lawyer and later a judge, and Arline (Rose) Gordon, a painter who did sets for regional theater companies.

Growing up in the Bethesda-Chevy Chase area of Maryland, Mr. Gordon lived in a house where a record player or radio was usually blaring, Ms. Uram said in an interview. Their parents had a huge record collection, heavy on jazz and opera, and the children cranked up the volume on everything from rockabilly to Motown to British Invasion bands.

But Mr. Gordon set his sights on a different retro genre when he turned to a singing career. “He fashioned

himself after crooners like Frank Sinatra and Jack Jones,” Ms. Uram said. “He could sing ballads like the best of them.”

He moved to New York in the early 1970s to pursue a career in music, starting out in a folk trio called Reunion. But when punk hit, with its stripped-down sound and frenetic energy, an echo of early rock 'n' roll, he joined the fray.

His band Tuff Darts became a fixture in the scene centered on CBGB, the Bowery punk cauldron where future industry game-changers like Talking Heads, Blondie and the Ramones were launching careers.

But Tuff Darts never broke out like the others, and Mr. Gordon left the band before it recorded its first album in 1978.

“I left that group because, I’ll tell you the truth, because it was pretty sadistic,” he said on “The It’s Only Rock 'n’ Roll Podcast” in 2020. “The lyrics were pretty chauvinistic. I was into more of the roots thing.”

With the pouty good looks and Eisenhower-era attire of an old-school Brooklyn street tough, Mr. Gordon also tried his hand at acting. He played a killer in a 1976 film, “Unmade Beds,” which also featured Blondie’s Debbie Harry, and a greaser thug in “The Loveless,” a low-budget “Wild Ones”-style motorcycle-gang movie from 1981 starring Willem Dafoe and co-directed by Kathryn Bigelow.



Mr. Gordon in performance at a festival in Spain in 2020. Juan Naharro Gimenez/Redferns

In addition to Ms. Uram, Mr. Gordon is survived by his wife, Marylee, whom he married in 1995; his son, Jesse, from a previous marriage; and another sister, Jackie Gordon Spalding.

Over the course of a half century, Mr. Gordon continued to churn out albums, collaborating with influential musicians like Chris Spedding, who has played guitar with Elton John and Paul McCartney, and Danny Gatton, the guitarist known for what he called “redneck jazz.” His final album, “Hellafied,” with Mr. Spedding, is set to be released by Cleopatra Records in November.

“I always thought that Rob never had the stardom that he should have had,” Ms. Uram said. “He was incredibly handsome and photogenic and his voice was amazing, and his choice of musicians to play with was always spot on.”

Still, Mr. Gordon played an important role as a bridge between eras, helping keep a treasured American music genre alive. He recorded his first album in April 1977. His idol, Elvis Presley, died four months later.