



The Malcolm Garrett Collection Playlist #5

40 Hot Rod Highs

Compiled in 2014

"It started in 1963, with The Beach Boys, Jan & Dean and me..."

Hot on the heels of rock'n'roll, and its harmonic vocal sibling doo-wop, that had only recently enriched and enlivened the American musical consciousness, a distinctly fresh and flavoursome musical form came rolling in with the surf along the beaches of California as the 60s crashed on to the West Coast shoreline.

Everyone is familiar with the vibrant sounds of the Beach Boys, Jan & Dean or even The Surfaris. Along with a host of other more obscure bands, they brought a toned and tanned, fun lovin' presence to the US charts. Following the audio assault of rockers such as Elvis, Chuck Berry and Little Richard, who had torn up the musical rule book, in stark counterpoint 'surf' music entertained this new audience with a flurry of short and sweet pop tunes. Revelling in a healthily outdoor lifestyle that worshipped the sun, but cooled off in the ocean by 'catching a wave' or 'shooting the curl', an aural celebration of youth-oriented beach culture burst forth like one massive soundwave breaking across the USA.

Pulling up right alongside this sunny musical genre was a complementary sub-genre of songs about cars (how else do you get to the beach, right?), or more specifically about 'Hot Rods'. These were generally hand-me-down family cars from mom or dad that the surfing kids stripped down, customised, tuned the engine, took racing or just showed-off to other surfers. Every surfer needed a cool set of wheels in which to be seen on the street, and to 'shut 'em down' at the dragstrip.

All of the artists on 'the scene' therefore felt compelled to record their own versions of songs about cars. What's seldom appreciated is that so specific was the terminology that even the better known bands had to draw on expert knowledge when it came to writing 'authentic' hot rod lyrics. Getting this terminology right was essential. And in amongst the California surf music crowd were a few key 'motorheads', often with their own bands, who lived the life and knew what terms like 'chopped and channelled' or 'stroked and bored' would mean.

Thus songwriters and producers such as Terry Melcher (The Rip Chords), Gary Usher (The Super Stocks), P. F. Sloan (The Fantastic Baggys) and Roger Christian (a radio DJ) were called upon to provide the automotive detail for many of the best car songs of the period. The Beach Boys' Brian Wilson would work with Gary Usher on *409* and Jan Berry with Roger Christian to write *Drag City* for example.

Confusingly though, there is much disagreement about who wrote or performed what, as the scene appears to have been somewhat incestuous and the recording and release of singles and albums was driven by record labels, record producers, and songwriters

rather than by artists. Consequently what went on behind closed studio doors is still the subject of much debate and legal wrangling. Consequently, I'm not able to give much about many of these songs, especially as accurate detail about many of them is hard to track down, and the lyrics literally speak for themselves. Suffice to say that the songs I've included by The Rip Chords and The Trashmen (whose releases came out on the 'Garrett' label) are particular favourites of mine. I am especially fond of the falsetto vocal on *I Gotta Drive* and the gruff voice singing *A-Bone*.

Many of the same songs were covered by many different bands, some of which existed only as studio fronts for writers or session musicians. For this reason I've chosen some of the lesser known versions, as they offer a different take on what may otherwise be familiar tunes - *Little Deuce Coupe*, written by Terry Melcher for example.

As you'll hear, a key feature of the surf sound is that many tunes were guitar-based instrumentals, simply with hot rod related titles, and often with 'authentic' engine sounds over-dubbed. Special mention must therefore go to Dick Dale, the self-proclaimed 'King of the Surf Guitar' whose playing influenced the entire West Coast scene and was even referenced as an early influence by a young Jimi Hendrix hailing from just up the coast in Seattle. Being left-handed, they both played a right-handed Fender Stratocaster upside down!

No substitute for inches.

Whenever a number like 409, 413 or 427 is mentioned in a song then it's a reference to the size of the engine 'under the hood'. Engines were predominantly V8 configuration (twice the number of cylinders as most European cars) and their volume was always measured in cubic inches, which varied from manufacturer to manufacturer, so the number alone would identify if it was a Chevy or a Ford, say. And then it's a simple equation - more inches equals more power.

Hot Rod Terminology

There's a pretty comprehensive explanation on Wikipedia about Hot Rods. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hot_rod

More Trivia

Terry Melcher is the son of Doris Day, and wrote the song 'Move over Darlin' which she sang in the film of the same name.

Oh, and The Trashmen are from Minneapolis, Minnesota, and not from California.

This playlist was first posted on Matt Cooper-Wright's 'Internet Music Programme' in 2014.