

1950s Radio

in *Color*

**The Lost Photographs of
Deejay Tommy Edwards**

Christopher Kennedy

Foreword by Terry Stewart



Between 1955 and 1960, popular Cleveland deejay Tommy Edwards photographed the parade of performers who passed through the WERE-AM radio studio for on-air interviews, shooting more than 1,700 Ektachrome slides. Following his death in 1981, most of the collection vanished and was presumed lost. The few images that remained were often reprinted and rarely credited to Edwards, labeled “photographer unknown.” Until now.

Discovered by musician Chris Kennedy in 2006, Tommy Edwards’s candid photographs capture the birth of rock ‘n’ roll at its flashpoint: Elvis Presley while he was still dangerous, a raw and incomplete Chuck Berry before his star ascended, and some beady-eyed, high-voiced kid named Roy Orbison. It wasn’t just the architects of rock music whom Edwards had in his viewfinder. There were also pop and country music’s biggest stars, mysterious, unknown hopefuls, and vulnerable, deglamourized Hollywood celebrities. Edwards’s passion for photography immortalized hundreds of pioneers of rock ‘n’ roll and pop culture in the radio studio, a setting that was often unseen. His photos offer a rare look behind a closed door.

In 2009, Kennedy located the only surviving copy of the “T.E. Newsletter” collection, Tommy Edwards’s self-published weekly two-page recap of Cleveland radio and record news for music business insiders, spanning from 1953 through 1960. The wealth of information and dates contained in the newsletters are the photo collection’s indispensable companion piece, and Edwards’s anecdotal quips are interspersed throughout the text of the book.

1950s Radio in Color gives Tommy Edwards his due recognition as the deejay responsible for perhaps the most important photographic and written documentation of twentieth-century popular music ever produced. Featuring over 200 color photographs, this book will transport readers back in time, allowing them to step into Edwards’s shoes for a moment and to feel the wonder and excitement he must have felt every day while witnessing a cultural revolution.

For Keith



Keith Winters, fifteen years old, Uncle Tommy's house, 8025 Parmenter Drive, Parma, Ohio, July 1954

Foreword Terry Stewart

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In the early days of the music that was first christened here as rock 'n' roll, Cleveland was blessed with a bevy of groundbreaking disc jockeys, including Alan Freed, Bill Randle, and Tommy Edwards. Each moved the needle, so to speak, for various reasons: Freed blazed the way for so many artists and jocks and became the first publicly acclaimed king of rock 'n' roll; Randle broke and produced many records, introduced Elvis for the first time on national TV, and helped create the concept of white cover records; and, finally, Tommy Edwards owned a prominent record store, made records himself, and is credited with bringing Elvis to Cleveland for his first gig north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

In this pantheon, Tommy is often the forgotten one. With this tome, Chris Kennedy will go a long way in making sure that his legacy is never lost again.

Everyone has seen the famous photo of Elvis and Bill Haley together for the first and maybe only time. Few know that the photographer was Tommy Edwards. Bill Randle produced this legendary show at Brooklyn High School in a suburb of Cleveland. The lineup was unprecedented then and now, with Pat Boone headlining, complemented by Bill Haley and the Comets, the Four Lads, Priscilla Wright, and a largely unknown Elvis. To top it off, the show was filmed in Technicolor.

This mythical hour or so of celluloid

film, *The Pied Piper*, was Bill's attempt to capture a day in his life with the biggest musical stars of the day. The film remains the Holy Grail of rock 'n' roll, sought by crusading sleuths for over five decades, including the ingenious and assiduous Chris Kennedy. In fact, while writing this foreword, I couldn't help but think of one of my favorite Leiber-Stoller compositions, "Searchin'," with Chris playing the multiple roles of Bull Dog Drummond, Charlie Chan, and Boston Blackie.

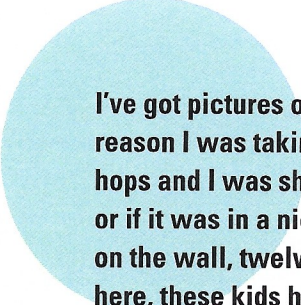
I wish I could report that Chris has found *The Pied Piper*. Unfortunately, that's not the case, but it doesn't mean he won't someday. What he has done is uncovered another mother lode and brought back to life the glorious archive of color photos taken by Tommy Edwards over a five-year period at the height of his prominence. These color shots truly run the gamut of Tommy's sphere of influence: country, pop, and, most important, rock 'n' roll. In addition, he has buttressed these images with Tommy's own descriptions of what was going on behind the scenes, as taken from the weekly "T.E. Newsletter."

All I can say is "Wow!" So dive in and experience a time capsule of a period when rock 'n' roll first started to change the world, while en route to becoming one of the most powerful art forms of all time.

Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum
Cleveland, Ohio

Preface Discoveries

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I've got pictures of almost everybody that came through Cleveland. The reason I was taking these color slides was I was taking them along to record hops and I was showing them at intermission. I brought my own screen along or if it was in a nice place where they had a big blank wall I'd project them on the wall, twelve feet high. Can you imagine? At that time color TV wasn't here, these kids had never seen pictures of their favorite artists in color. But could you imagine when I showed the pictures of Presley or when I showed the pictures of Pat Boone or any of the other current top pop favorites? Why, they'd go crazy. There'd be a lot of mumbling by the kids when I'd say we're gonna have a little intermission here, we're gonna show you some slides, have a big slideshow. They'd say nah, we don't want to see any damn slides, we wanna go on dancing, ya know. The minute I flashed that first picture on the screen, they were mine.

—Tommy Edwards interviewed by Rick Whitesell, January 1981

The photographs you hold in your hands and stories they tell are the most personal, comprehensive, and visually thrilling account of the five years that encompass the rise, reign, and fall of rock 'n' roll's first wave. A great number of things happened, both on purpose and accidentally, to make their discovery and this book a reality.

First of all, before anything, my father exposed me to the sound that would fuel my passion and appreciation for all forms of music and inspire me to become a musician. One lazy Sunday afternoon back in my young buck days, I was called into the

den and asked if I wanted to hear "something good." As my dad and I sat on the floor, the record player's clunky needle scratched down on an orange-labeled disc. A somber acoustic guitar followed by a scary cello introduced me to a song called "In the Ghetto." I heard something incredibly powerful, and I've been a fan of Elvis Presley's music ever since.

The aftershocks of this little episode between father and son are being felt today as I look back on a successful recording career and across the room at my guitar, patiently waiting for whatever's next. For inspiration, I often to turn to my record

collection, which over time has grown to include a wide variety of artists, many of whom are found within these pages.

Fast forward to July 9, 2004. I learn that legendary Cleveland deejay Bill Randle has passed away. I'm reminded of his 1955 movie short, *The Pied Piper of Cleveland*, which costarred a pre-fame, untamed Elvis and the fact that it has never been seen. Spurred on by simple curiosity, I'm determined to either find the film or at least unravel its mysteries.

By November 2006, my research has yielded some exciting discoveries and I've debunked many of the myths that shroud *The Pied Piper*, though I have yet to find the film. The investigation turns to Tommy Edwards (born Thomas Edward Mull), a deejay at WERE-AM in Cleveland who worked alongside Randle. The two talented and ambitious men shared the station's hallways, but that's about all. Their relationship was one of intense competitive rivalry, with Edwards's undemonstrative efficiency often clashing with Randle's perceived intellectual snobbery. More succinctly, they hated each other with a passion, according to WERE overnight jock Carl Reese. Whatever animosity may have existed between them, Randle did invite Edwards to make a cameo appearance in *The Pied Piper*, crediting him as being the first deejay in Cleveland to recognize and promote the talents of Elvis Presley. It's Edwards's color photograph of Bill Haley and Elvis taken backstage on the day of shooting that most people are familiar with, although he has rarely received credit for it.

Information gleaned from the deejay's 1981 obituary leads me to his nephew, one of the most inspiring individuals I've ever met. Keith Winters reads my email inquiring about his uncle's photographs and says to his partner, Susan Gaspar, "If this bird-dog tracked me down, let's hear what he has to say." I quickly learn that Keith is

a no-bullshit straight shooter, a business-savvy success, and a big sweetheart. Conversations with Keith reveal that his father, Gerald Winters, was Tommy Edwards's half brother. Upon Edwards's death, Gerald inherited five Ektachrome slides, photographs of recording stars Edwards had taken in the 1950s. Keith had the five Ektachrome slides, including the famous Haley-Presley shot and a few photos of Tommy. My discovery of Tommy Edwards's small cache of photos was a nice coup for a novice rock 'n' roll detective but it was nothing compared to what was to come.

Within a few weeks of our first communications, I receive an excited, late-night call from Keith, who asks if I'm sitting down. While looking for Christmas decorations, he found treasure stashed away under a basement workbench: several dusty cardboard boxes with the family name "Mull" handwritten on the sides, containing 1,790 more slides. Gerald Winters had, in fact, inherited *all* of his deceased half-brother's photographs. Sometime around 1988, Gerald gave the slide collection to his son Keith to thank him for all that he had done for his parents over the past thirteen years. Keith simply had forgotten he had them.

Shortly thereafter, I board a plane armed with a trusty old 35 mm slide projector on loan from my father. I'm welcomed into Keith and Sue's home just outside Milwaukee to experience the photographs firsthand. As I see the amazing lost images of my musical heroes projected onto the basement wall in breathtaking color, I'm surprised to find myself overcome with emotion. The collection's candid beauty and historical importance convince me that it should be shared with music fans everywhere. In that moment, this book is conceived.

With Keith and Sue's enthusiastic support, my foray into the uncharted waters of authorship commences. The research sends

some pretty colorful characters my way, such as the affable Sheriff Porter of Epps, Louisiana, who goes knocking on farm doors for me, searching for elusive rockabilly star Sanford Clark. And it provides rousing encounters with Pennsylvanian rocker George Darro, who gave me the very much appreciated initiation into his exclusive “Friendly Force” club. Interviews with Pat Boone, Wanda Jackson, country music legend Sonny James, and many others enhance the collection’s intimate portraits.

Not that it is all fun and games. There were many blind alleyways, and countless doors were slammed in my face, perhaps none so discouraging as my attempts to locate surviving copies of the “T.E. Newsletter.” During the 1950s, Tommy Edwards self-published a weekly, two-page recap of Cleveland radio and record news for music business insiders. Only two complete runs of the newsletter are known to exist: Tommy’s original bound copy, which vanished upon his death, and a duplicate, requested by Bill Randle for research purposes sometime in the 1970s. My numerous attempts to locate Randle’s copy through his survivors prove fruitless.

Soon after signing a publishing deal with Kent State University Press in April 2009, I receive a call from Cleveland journalist David Barnett. We’d kept in touch since 2005, when David conducted a radio interview with me regarding my quest for *The Pied Piper*. I bring him up to speed on the Tommy Edwards book and my futile newsletter search. David reveals that in the 1990s, Randle, his friend, let him copy a few key pages from the “T.E. Newsletter” that concerned Elvis Presley’s 1955 Cleveland appearances. When I express my excited disbelief, Barnett readily offers to share them with me.

Upon review, my suspicions are confirmed. The wealth of information and dates contained in the newsletters are the photo collection’s indispensable companion piece. Although I am glad to have whatever crumbs were available for research, this tantalizing view into Tommy Edwards’s diary from the trenches of 1950s radio only heightens my exasperation over the newsletters’ disappearance.

A few days later David sends an email with the opening line “Oh . . . I forgot.” Here we go again. Just prior to his death, Randle had bequeathed to the journalist a tattered and frayed loose-leaf binder, the duplicate copy containing *every single issue* of the “T.E. Newsletter.” David had simply forgotten he had them, tucked away in some closet. This kind of thing happens quite a lot, apparently.

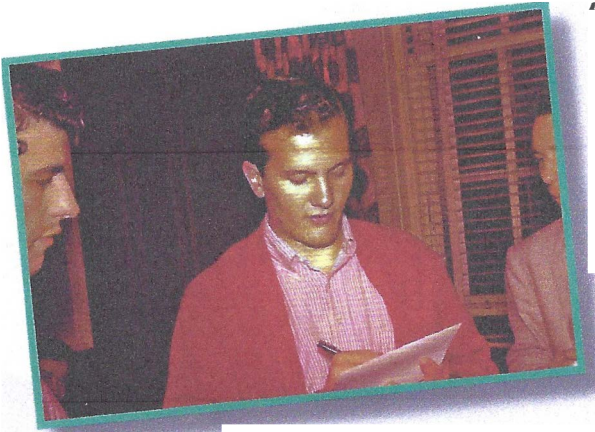
From its inspired October 13, 1953, beginning to its heartbreaking conclusion on February 15, 1960, the “T.E. Newsletter” is unprecedented in its scope. Essential facts and anecdotal quips, spanning 577 pages, allow the reader to step into Tommy Edwards’s shoes and sense the wonder and excitement he must have felt every day while bearing witness to a cultural revolution marked by intense creativity and groundbreaking moments.

So there you have it. It’s my hope that this book, chronicling one man’s life’s work, respectfully fulfills Keith Winters’s wish for his uncle: Tommy Edwards’s recognition as not only one of early rock’s most effective champions but also the deejay responsible for perhaps the most important photographic and written documentation of twentieth-century music that has ever been produced.

Christopher Kennedy,

Warwick, New York, October 2009

A remarkable collection of previously unpublished photos by one of rock's early champions

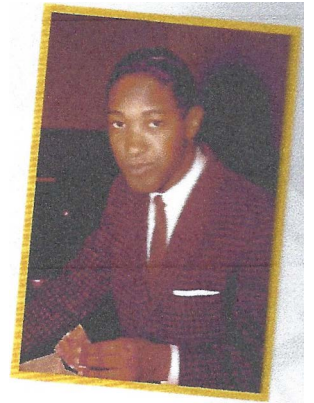


"Tommy Edwards helped establish many a successful recording artist—including me!"—Pat Boone

"Warning: This is a very hard book to put down. Viewing these photographs delivers the same exquisite, intimate, irresistible thrill as looking through family albums and yearbooks. They are casual, unforced, immediately accessible, unpretentious—and revelatory. As Tommy Edwards

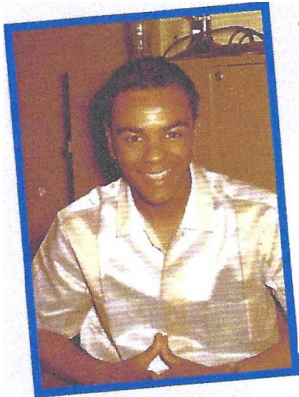
himself surely would have said: What a blast!"

— **Anthony DeCurtis**, Contributing Editor, *Rolling Stone*



"1950s *Radio in Color* will be a treasure to many who remember those simpler times when we were much younger."—**Alfred Wertheimer**, photographer

"What a great idea. Candid pictures from 1955–1960 in Technicolor, annotated by Chris Kennedy. Look and read!!!"—**Richard Weize**, Bear Family Records



"As producer and historian for Sony Music I sometimes run into kindred spirits—people who are as passionate as I am about documenting long-forgotten pieces of our cultural heritage. Chris Kennedy is such a person, and *1950s Radio in Color* is a splendid example of Chris's dedication to his craft."—**Ernst Jørgensen**

