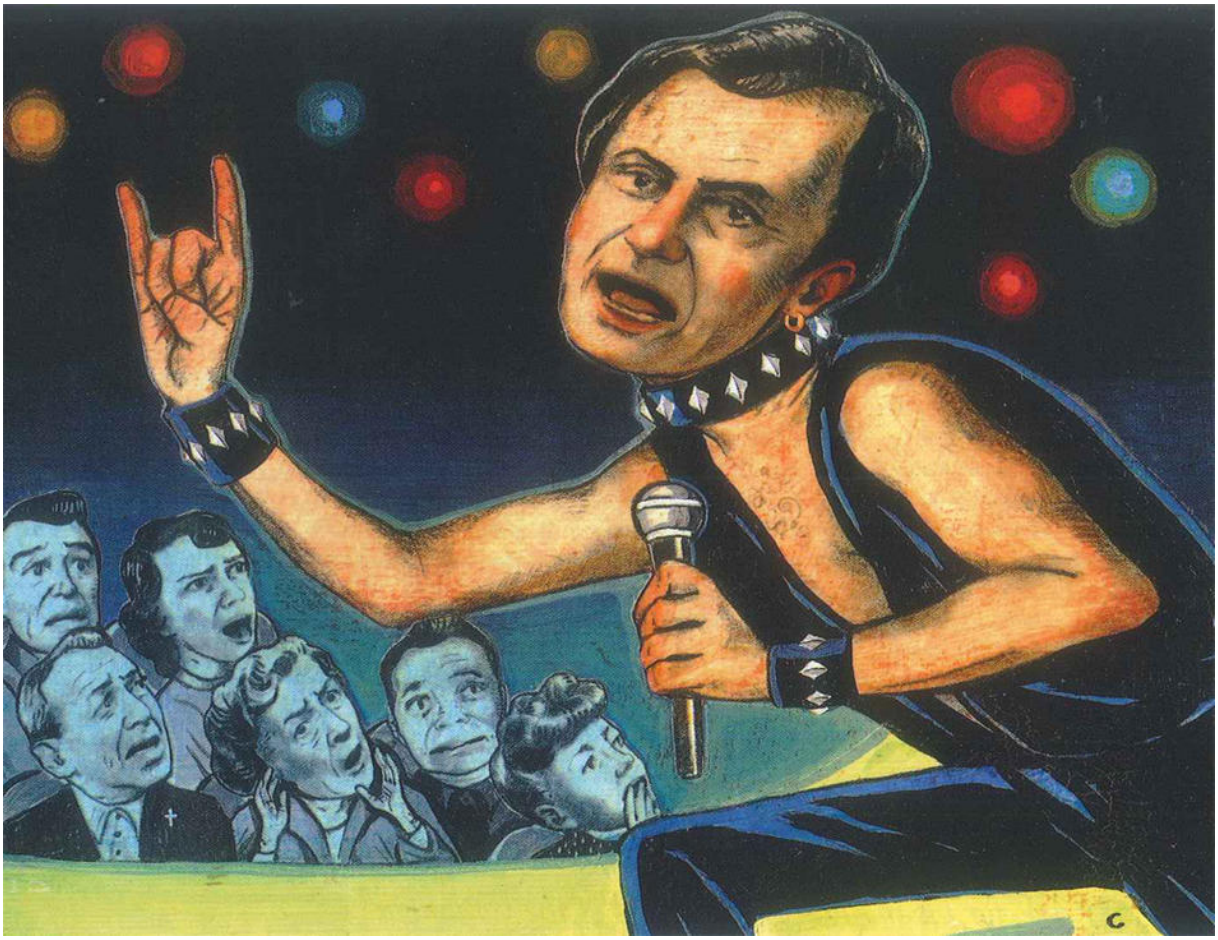
Arts & Humanities

Pat 'n Leather

Pat Boone '58GS talks about his music career

By
Peter Gerstenzang '82GS, '85SOA
|
Winter 2007-08



Craig Larotonda

Pat Boone ’58GS gets paid to sing, but he sure loves to talk. On the phone the other day, Boone, who is 73, expounded upon his youth in Jacksonville, Florida, his rise to pop stardom, the proximity of his movie-lot dressing room to those of Cary Grant and Elvis Presley, his friendship with ghoul-rocker Pat ’n Leather Alice Cooper

(“I have to call him ‘Coop,’ I can’t refer to a man as ‘Alice’), his support for the war in Iraq (“The critics of the war are going to eat their words by next November, mark my words”), his conservative Christian beliefs, his big band CD of heavy-metal clas-sics, his friendship with Vice Presi-dent Dick Cheney (“He does the job out of love for his country; he certainly didn’t need the money”), and, yep, his days at Columbia, without forgetting a name, missing a beat, or failing to mention that he likes to talk.“Please, forgive me. I’m loquacious,” says Mr. Boone.

Few would argue with that.

“After I won *The Ted Mack Amateur Hour* in 1954 and then went pro that same week on *The Arthur Godfrey Show*, I got signed to Dot Records,” Boone says, when asked how he ended up at Columbia. “Although I had been studying at North Texas State, I was making constant trips to New York to record. In ’55 I had my first million seller, ‘Ain’t That A Shame,’ and my wife, Shirley, and I moved to New Jersey, and in the midst of making records, I enrolled in the School of General Studies. I had the notion to study Greek, so I could read the New Testament in its original form, but I ended up being an English major. How I managed to be a student, have a family, do *The Arthur Godfrey Show*, and study acting with Sandy Meisner is anybody’s guess. Of course, it helps to have a 170 IQ. Yep, I had it tested. I had the ability back then to open a book on the subway up to school and be well prepared for a test. What a wonderfully crazy life it was back then. I’d be cramming for some test on a movie set, then do a scene with, oh, Gina Lollobrigida! Lots of people were giving me grief around this time. They’d say, ‘Pat, most people go to college because they want to get a good job. You already have a good job, so why the heck are you going to college?’ Well, not only did I want a superior education, but at the time, I had millions of impressionable fans. I was a role model. I hate it when stars today say they aren’t role models. So, I went partly to show my younger fans that education is important. By the way, I graduated magna cum laude.”

Boone had six million-selling records in the ’50s, among them, “Ain’t That A Shame” and “Tutti Frutti.” Viewing a clip of the sport jacket-clad Boone snapping his fingers just slightly off the beat while crooning Little Richard, one appreciates the wisdom of his decision to become, in the late ’50s, a balladeer like his hero, Bing Crosby. The clean-cut Boone also gave a nice, understated performance alongside James Mason in *Journey to The Center of the Earth*, and had the enviable task of playing Ann-Margret’s love interest in the movie musical State Fair in 1962. But there’s no question that the ’60s, with its Beatle-driven artistry, long hair, and “that burn your

draft card mentality that I never cared for," were not always kind to the Nixon-friendly father of "four beautiful and intelligent girls."

The next decade was a lot more Boone-friendly, however — and not just for Pat.

"I made the decision in the '70s to tour with my daughters," Boone says. "I knew what kind of trouble there was in this world, so I thought, better that they travel with me than maybe end up married to a bad guy or in some sort of trouble. Eventually some decent guys did break through my defenses and married my girls." In 1977, daughter Debby released the inescapable "You Light Up My Life," which became the best-selling single of the decade.

"We played state fairs and broke all sorts of attendance records," Boone recalls. "People thought I did nothing but record Christian music during this time, but in '71, I did an album in the pop/country field that I'm very proud of, called *July, You're A Woman*, though I did have to change some lyrics to the title song so they weren't so salacious. I just wanted to people to know I wasn't simply some Holy Joe, that I liked pop. Of course, I also made a number of best-selling gospel albums during this period. In fact, I'm proud to say I'm in the Gospel Hall Of Fame."

Genre crossing has always been part of the mix for Boone, but when he went off in 1997 and cut *In a Metal Mood* — perhaps the world's first heavy-metal big-band record — his Christian fan base revolted.

"I must have known that my fans would freak out over my association with Coop," Boone says, "but I thought people would see me at the American Music Awards and know I was just being ironic."

That might have been naïve. The sight of Boone, dressed in a sleeveless leather vest, leather pants, and a dog collar, had a traumatic effect on Christians and headbangers alike. The result? Boone was banned from Christian stations until he sent a letter to all of the "major evangelical leaders, telling them that I had researched the tunes, which were often biblical in nature — especially the Megadeth one. I was eventually reinstated. But not before I went on *Regis* and *Geraldo* and did my heavy-metal act and had a ball."

With a new book called *Pat Boone's America: 50 Years* and a recent record of soul songs with help from Smokey Robinson, Boone remains on the lookout for his next

creative challenge.

“I’d like to follow in the footsteps of Bing Crosby and do something powerful and dramatic, like he did in The Country Girl [a movie based on a play by Clifford Odets]. Of course,” Boone adds, chuckling, “because of my views, I haven’t gotten even a nibble. Lots of people don’t want to work with Pat Boone. They think I’m a nut, an extremist. But you know something? I’ve had an incredible career. I said recently to Shirley, ‘Let’s start enjoying the fruits of my labor, instead of me working so hard. Let’s enjoy them now, while we still can.’”

Read more from ***Peter Gerstenzang '82GS, '85SOA***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >

Read more from ***Peter Gerstenzang '82GS, '85SOA***