

## **The Maddox Brothers and Rose** **By Dennis Powers**

Riding the rails during the Depression days of 1933, the Maddox children (Cal, Henry, Fred, Don, Cliff, and Rose) with their parents left Boaz, Alabama, to find work as “fruit tramps” and settled in Modesto, California. Working from dawn to dusk, eating and sleeping in the fields, the family worked picking fruits and vegetables in the San Joaquin Valley and from Washington to Arizona.

To earn extra money, the musical family began playing for local dances with 12-year-old Rose in 1937 providing the vocals, even in honky-tonks. Two years later at the Centennial Sacramento State Fair, they entered a hillbilly band competition with a risqué, rocking and rhythmic, “Sally Let Your Bangs Hang Down.” They then officially were voted as and became California’s best hillbilly band. By 1941 they were popular due to being featured on far-reaching KFBK-Sacramento radio; however, they disbanded when the brothers were drafted or worked in the war effort.

After World War II, the group returned in 1946 as the Maddox Brothers & Rose, and their showy stage dress gave them the title “the most colorful hillbilly band in America.” When Cliff died in 1949, Henry replaced him to join the other Maddox brothers (Fred, Cal, and Don) in the band. In the early 1950s, they performed on the Las Vegas strip and Grand Ole Opry along with regular appearances on the Louisiana Hayride, having recorded for Four Star Records before moving to Columbia Records. Among their successes were Rose’s recordings of the Woody Guthrie song “The Philadelphia Lawyer,” “The Tramp on the Street,” and “Whoa, Sailor.”

In the early days, songs weren’t called country or Western, but instead hillbilly music. In the 1950’s, when hillbilly was losing its prominence, this transformed into pop country and rockabilly--and the Maddox Brothers and Rose were at the leading edge with the slapped bass that Fred Maddox developed. (Others believe that the group was one of the first rockabilly groups, if not the first.) This music had hillbilly vocals and instrumentation with a boogie-bass line.

The group was hot and known for its lively antics on stage with rakish costumes and a comedic approach from Don Maddox; Fred’s slapping bass style helped drive this broad change in popular music. The band disbanded in 1956 due to a changing music scene and Rose wanting to be out on her own with brother Cal on the guitar.

Don Maddox, then 34-years old, decided that he wanted to be a cowboy or a range rider; he had to be in another livelihood as his income was really down. Realizing that this took education, Don enrolled at a college of agriculture in the San Fernando Valley, even though he had never attended high school. With that education, he was looking in trade magazines for a cattle ranch and saw one advertised in Ashland, Oregon, for \$35,000 with 300-acres, some irrigated, and a house. Although this took his last money, Don Maddox bought it.

Rose Maddox continued singing with her solo hits in the late 1950s and early 1960s being “Sing a Little Song of Heartache,” “Gambler’s Love,” “Kissing My Pillow,” and

“Bluebird, Let Me Tag Along.” In the early ‘80s, she recorded an album of gospel music, “A Beautiful Bouquet,” in memory of her son, Donnie, who had recently passed away. In 1996, her CD of “\$35 and a Dream” received a Grammy nomination.

Don Maddox was the one, however, who became the bedrock of the Maddox family. First, when Rose and Cal returned, Don sold them 5 acres of his Ashland ranch to build a house on. They and their mother lived there, later joined by Rose’s son, his wife, and children. When Rose became in poor health and fell on hard financial times, Don bought the house back to help pay the bills and gave her a life estate to live there. When brother Henry ran into bad times and fell ill, he moved in with Rose.

When Rose died in 1998, all of the original Maddox family had passed away but for Don. Fred Maddox’s bass is on display at the Experience Music Project in Seattle, as the exhibitors believe he might have hit the first note of rock and roll on it. At the Country Music Hall of Fame, an entire section is dedicated to the group as part of the Bakersfield Sound Exhibit.

The surviving member of the Maddox Brothers & Rose--Don Maddox--was then “rediscovered” as an artist. With Merle Haggard, Marty Stuart, and “Little” Jimmy Dickens, he was one of the headliners at the Muddy Roots Festival in Cookeville, Tennessee. As Don said in an interview: “I’ve been working the place for fifty-four years, and nobody recognized me as a famous country music singer until now.” And as a grand man.

Sources: “CMT.com: About Maddox Brothers & Rose”, at [On Maddox Brothers & Rose](#); Modesto Radio Museum--Jeff Bernard, “Country Music’s Rose Maddox dies at 71,” *Associated Press*, April 15, 1998, at [Rose Maddox Background](#); Saving County Music, “Interview: Don Maddox of Maddox Brothers & Rose at [Interview Don Maddox \(With Images\)](#)).