

Few rock'n'roll fans are ever lucky enough to own their hero's gold discs, belt buckles and personal photos, but Sonny West found himself buying up the contents of Eddie Cochran's bedroom. *Vintage Rock* speaks to West about his enviable collection and to author Lee Bullman about the duo's new book, *Eddie Cochran In Person...*

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An intimate photo captures Eddie strumming his guitar inside Sharon Sheeley's flat

RELIC HUNTER





Eddie and Sharon, late to a photoshoot after partying all night with Johnny Burnette!

An unseen outtake from Eddie's famous shoot, used on the cover of the new book



Sippin' In The Balcony: This seemingly candid shot is in fact taken from a professional photoshoot arranged by Sharon Sheeley

Wiltshire. His mother, Alice, is bereft and keeps her son's bedroom exactly as he left it, until her death in 1994, when her daughter Gloria inherits. After that, the family home goes to Eddie's nephew who later sells the house, with everything from his late uncle's bedroom ending up in two storage lockers. When the nephew defaults on the payments to the units, they're auctioned off, only to be bought by two Mexicans, who have no idea as to the treasure trove they now have in their hands.

Long story short – after discovering some of Eddie's gold discs in their haul, they get in touch with a local antiques dealer who promptly Googles 'Eddie Cochran'. Realising he might be able to make some decent cash from this long-dead rock'n'roller, the dealer buys the lot and starts uploading the items to eBay.

Enter Sonny West.

"Someone messaged me and said, 'Have you seen all the Eddie Cochran stuff on eBay?'" he tells *Vintage Rock*. "At this point, acetates for *C'mon Everybody* were going up and reaching \$6,000-\$7,000."

West is a long-time Cochran-head ("If Elvis is oversold," he says, "Eddie's

Nearly 64 years on from his death, it had long been assumed by almost every fan, that anything and everything from Eddie Cochran's tragically short life

had been thoroughly excavated. Few musicians inspire the full-hearted devotion that the Minnesota-born rock'n'roll trailblazer continues to arouse and so when, one day in 2021, a number of personal items of Cochran's started turning up on eBay, word quickly spread that something was up.

"Anything to do with Eddie is super-rare," says Cochran uberfan Sonny West.

"It's very difficult even to find an autograph of him, because he wasn't around very long."

Eddie Cochran died, of course, on 17 April 1960, at the age of just 21. At the time of his death, he wasn't living in some Graceland-type pile somewhere in Tennessee or Beverly Hills and hadn't accumulated a vast collection of vintage cars. Instead, Eddie's home was still the bedroom he'd grown up on James Street in the city of Albert Lea, Minnesota.

Let's rewind to 1960: Eddie Cochran, the impossibly swoonsome singer behind such rock'n'roll classics as *Summertime Blues*, *C'mon Everybody* and *Somethin' Else*, is killed in a car crash in Chippenham,

Eddie as a boy with sisters Gloria and Patty outside the family home



Young Eddie leans on the family car while his dad peers through the rear window

“There are so many question marks with him, about his life, about how he lived and where he was heading, and this answers a lot of questions”

SONNY WEST

A super-rare acetate of Cochran's own recordings from Wallar's



always been undersold”) and, having retired in the mid-noughties after years in the restaurant game (as well as a side hustle as a musician), was one of the few fans with enough dough to bid. Except West didn’t have his eye on just one or two objects from the Eddie Cochran collection, he wanted the entire lot.

“For it to be fragmented off into private collections, it would just disappear,” West says. “There are so many question marks with him, about his life, about how he lived and where he was heading, and this answers a lot of questions.”

COCHRAN CATALOGUE

Reaching an agreement with the dealer, West arranged to have what was left of the collection (a few pieces had been sold, items West tried, sadly in vain, to buy back) delivered to England.

“Nothing was individually wrapped, it was all just sent to me in the boxes that they were found in, so cardboard boxes with tape on them,” he remembers. “They were quite emotional to open up.”

Included in the haul were Eddie’s entire vinyl collection, as well as clothes, handwritten notes from Gene Vincent, the Everlys and Little Richard, various acetates, and hundreds of never-before-seen photos.

“As soon as I got the stuff, I cleaned, catalogued and separated everything,” says West. “It took me the best part of nine months. Then I thought, ‘People need to see this’. I’m not a collector that wants to hide stuff away and just say, ‘Oh, I’ve got Eddie Cochran’s this, that and the other’ as a show-off thing. For me, it was saving a bit of history – now what do I do with it? At that point, I came up with a couple of ideas, because we have his family photo albums. I had every photo digitally copied and enhanced and they all were blown up and framed. And so I thought, I can do an exhibition. The fans have been waiting for this for 60-odd years as they’ve been looking at the same photos all that time.”

Since then, Sonny’s put on three exhibitions, all free of charge. But staging an exhibition – even three of them – wasn’t getting the collection out to everyone it needed to reach. So West cooked up an idea to showcase the items in a way that every fan could access them, in the form of a lavish coffee table book. After a successful pitch to Omnibus Press, the search was then on for a writer.

“When I heard there was an Eddie Cochran book in the offing,” says journalist and author Lee Bullman, “I went all-out to try and get it. I’m a big Eddie fan.”

The book, *Eddie Cochran In Person*, was released in October, and is a must-have tome not just for every diehard Cochran aficionado, but for every serious music fan.

There's plenty of vinyl in the haul including Eddie's own recording of *Milk Cow Blues*



Eddie's personal recording from Goldstar with sleeve notes by Jerry Capehart



Eddie and Sharon fooling around during a session at Goldstar Studios

SONNY SIDE UP

Rock'n'roller, promoter and Killertone label boss



Sonny West has been a major player in rockabilly for over 40 years. His dad was an old-time Ted who instilled a love in his son of all things rock'n'roll and it was West Snr who took Sonny to see Chuck Berry live when he was just nine years old.

During his career, West has played with some of rock'n'roll's biggest names, including The Jordanares and Scotty Moore as part of the *Forever Elvis* stage show. He's also the co-owner of Killertone Records.

"I had a rockabilly band back in the late 80s for two or three years," he tells us, "and I've also written music for TV and film. I lived abroad for many years and came back and opened a restaurant and a Champagne bar in London. It was a two-storey restaurant in Camden where Amy Winehouse started her career. We used to do jam nights where I'd put music on, so I ended up becoming a bit of a promoter. Then I decided to retire about 14 years ago, and I moved down to Kent, where I brought my kids up."

It's rare for a book to be published about a performer who died more than six decades ago and to be able to offer so much that's never been seen before.

"I thought I knew a lot about Eddie Cochran until I started writing this, then realised how little I knew," laughs Bullman, whose books include the best-selling true crime biography *Blowback* and the neo-noir novel *Twenty Sixteen*. Obviously, with Bullman tackling the words that would give context to West's collection photos, he set off for Sonny's house on the south coast to see the collection for himself.

"Sonny has an acetate recording of an Eddie song called *Pink Peg Slacks*," he says, "and holding that was a very, very emotional moment, because that was a really big song for me. And there was a note from Gene Vincent to Eddie Cochran, written in Gene's handwriting on a programme. You hold that in your hand and go, 'This is Gene Vincent and Eddie Cochran talking to each other...' That got me a little teary-eyed. When you're in the room and you take a second to breathe it in,

especially if Sonny's showing it to you, because he's the most enthusiastic museum guide in the world, it's awesome."

3D VISUALISATION

The book aims to, in Bullman's words, "tell Eddie's story and remind us that there was more to it than senseless tragedy." In its words and through its photos, it's a book that three-dimensionalises Eddie, highlighting that there was a real person behind the myth.

"It's easy to look up Eddie Cochran and you get this iconic silhouette," the author explains. "Here was this good looking guy, with a space-age guitar, shaking his hips and playing crazy rock'n'roll – it was important to go beyond that."

"The book came about because it is very difficult to get people to take the exhibition," explains Sonny. "I've put on three at my own cost, but to get this to travel logistically is very tricky. The problem is getting the interest because Eddie's not really that known – he's not like Elvis."