



Left: The Fireballs, with singer Jimmy Gilmer (third from left). Right: Memorabilia at the Norman & Vi Petty Rock & Roll Museum, in Clovis.

## Dancing on Top of the Cars

Fifty-five years ago, the Fireballs drove two cars out of Ratón and went to No. 1 on the national charts. Yep—they're still killin' it.

In January 1958, high school student George Tomsco talked his best friend, Stan Lark, into joining an unnamed little combo for the annual PTA talent show at Ratón High School. "There were some other guys in high school that had bands, too, but we just kinda came out of the woodwork and went *bam!*" Lark recalls.

"And we won it!" Tomsco adds, his enthusiasm undimmed by the passing of time. "From there on, it was straight up."

The boys caused such a ruckus in the high school gym that day that they were called back for an encore. "The only rock and roll song we knew was 'Great Balls of Fire,' so we did it again," says Tomsco.

They were on to something—times were changing, thanks to Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Chuck Berry, and company. They quit playing country music and named their new band the Fireballs. "We were the only band within 200 miles playing rock and roll," says Lark. By the time they graduated from Ratón High that spring, they were playing to wildly enthusiastic

crowds at Ratón's Shuler Theater and throughout northeastern New Mexico.

Tomsco was astonished to discover that radio hits by Buddy Holly, Roy Orbison, Buddy Knox, and others were recorded right here in New Mexico, at the Norman Petty Recording Studios in Clovis. He called and talked to Petty himself, requesting an audition for The Fireballs. He still remembers the phone number. "Norman was really nice, and said to send him a tape recording, but we didn't have a tape recording, so I fibbed and told him we were going to be playing down near Clovis in two weeks, that we'd rather just come play for him."

"I quickly booked us a gig at Rigoni's, in Roy, for the Saturday night on the way down. We made \$200 there. We set up at Petty's studio on Sunday. We couldn't audition until 2 o'clock because the Pettys went to church."

They kept practicing even as they noticed a young man enter the control booth. Petty eventually came out to intro-

duce himself. "I've been listening," he said. "Do you have any original music?"

"What's that?" Tomsco recalls saying.

"Anything you've written yourself."

The 18-year-olds played Petty an instrumental called "Fireball" that Tomsco had made up to showcase his electric-guitar playing, backed by Dan Trammel on rhythm guitar, Lark on bass, and Eric Budd on drums. They did a second song to feature their singer, Chuck Tharp.

Petty had Buddy Holly sessions scheduled for Monday and Tuesday. He scheduled the Fireballs for Wednesday, September 3, 1958. Lark was scheduled to start college at NMSU on Monday. He never made it. Tomsco had already started at NM Tech; he quit. They spent their money on a motel and food to stay in Clovis until Wednesday, when they made their first record.

Returning to the studio from a dinner break at Foxy's Drive-In, they found a pink Cadillac with Texas plates parked outside. When Tomsco entered the control booth

and peered through the studio glass, he was upset to see a guy in a white T-shirt and jeans playing Tomsco's guitar, his foot on Tomsco's amp. "Who's that?" he demanded of Petty. Petty replied, "Buddy Holly." The Fireballs were starstruck—Tomsco says he got "lockjaw"—but they all shook hands and visited with the star, who was about to move to New York.

Petty got "Fireball" released on Kapp Records in January 1959. It went to No. 90 for one week, then disappeared. But the boys were hooked. Tomsco wrote more instrumentals; Petty recorded "Bulldog" and "Torquay," then sent the band to T. B. Skarning, an agent who booked big Midwestern tours.

"We drove up to Skarning's house in Minneapolis in two cars, Lark's 1950 Buick Roadmaster and Eric's 1953 Ford Starliner," Tomsco says. "Skarning put us out on tour playing ballrooms and dance halls. Every town had one."

"We were driving in Minnesota," Lark adds, "when we first heard 'Torquay' come on the radio, and we thought, *Wow!* We stopped to listen. I think that's the most excited I've ever been. We were almost dancing on top of the cars."

"Torquay" launched The Fireballs' national career. "It took off like a rocket!" Lark says. Tomsco's instrumentals sounded a lot like the surf music popularized by the Ventures, whose hits started charting a year after the Fireballs' success with "Torquay." Of course, it's a long way from Ratón to the nearest surfing beach.

In January 1960 they performed in Philadelphia, as guests on Dick Clark's *American Bandstand*, then went to New York City for more TV appearances. Petty recorded their first long-playing album, *The Fireballs*, an even mix of original instrumentals and vocals. And then, one by one, the other three members quit the band and returned to Ratón.

Tomsco and Lark moved back to Clovis, into the apartment behind Petty Studios. The Fireballs became Norman Petty's house band, even adding tracks to unfinished Buddy Holly songs after Holly's death. Petty played matchmaker, finding an Amarillo singer the same age as Tomsco and Lark. Jimmy Gilmer became the voice of the Fireballs throughout the 1960s, as the band recorded hit after hit at Petty Studios.

Lark was convinced that one song was ruined when Petty himself added a

kitschy 20-note riff on a little Hammond Solovox (a short keyboard attached to a speaker), but he was glad to be proven wrong. Complete with a random homage to "espresso coffee," the loping, infectious "Sugar Shack" topped *Billboard Magazine's* national sales chart for five weeks in the fall of 1963, and became the No. 1 single for the year. It's an accomplishment no New Mexico band has equaled.

Other songs charted well, including "Daisy Petal Pickin'" at No. 15 and "Bottle of Wine" at No. 9, along with more of Tomsco's twangy guitar workouts, such as "Vaquero" and "Gunshot."

By 1972, Gilmer and Lark had left the band, leaving Tomsco to carry on with just his guitar and replacement players. He sold insurance for a few years; Lark did technical work for local coal mines. When original singer Chuck Tharp rejoined Tomsco in 1989, Lark followed. The three original Fireballs performed from 1990 until Tharp's death, in 2006.

Fifty-five years after the first gig, Tomsco and Lark still play a handful of Fireballs concerts around the country each year, as New Mexico's energetic rock and roll legends. Jimmy Gilmer, today an artists' manager in Nashville, joins them for a couple of shows.

Joined by drummer Chris Segura and keyboardist Paul Goad, Tomsco and Lark's Fireballs rocked a whole block of downtown Albuquerque at the June 2012 Centennial Summerfest. Dressed in black pants and shirts decorated with images of flames and guitars, the Fireballs laid down a groove that quickly filled Sixth Street for a half block to Central Avenue. There was dancing in the streets. As Tomsco rocked his signature swinging guitar lines, he couldn't help but smile every time Lark matched his moves step for step—like a pair of 72-year-olds who have just discovered the joys of rock and roll. ♣

Writer and photographer **Tim Keller** teaches honors English classes at Ratón High School. Find more of his work at [TimKellerArts.com](http://TimKellerArts.com).



Founding Fireballs George Tomsco and Stan Lark burning it up at the Centennial Summerfest.