

ROCKIN' ART

Sublimely aggressive portraits of our generation's outlaws.

Linda McGreevy

Sure, it's been done before. It's a Pop concept. But the Popsters were too cool to do it like *this*. Andy Warhol's got nothing on Brett Wilson when it comes to portraits of the kings and queens of rock 'n' roll. If you dig the giants — Little Richard, Buddy Holly, Fats Domino, Jerry Lee Lewis, the Shirelles, Bo Diddley, Wynonie Harris, Professor Longhair, and Elvis (natch), put on your blue suedes and stroll on down to the Virginia Beach Arts Center to get a load of Wilson's Visions of American Music, a series of vibrant, brash, and sublimely aggressive portraits of our generation's outlaws.

Wilson's style is expressive, crude, and more than a little junky, which fits these mass culture heroes to a tee. Warhol's images, like anglo-pop Peter Blake's, comment on the media manipulation which eventually replaced these powerhouses with more acceptable middle-class icons. Another revolt was quietly suburbanized. Wilson's not interested in that phase of rock, but in the raw streetwise iconoclasm of the originals. I mean, Jerry Lee Lewis isn't called "the killer" for nothing, is he? He's *mean*, low-down, full of festering genes and an empathetic sense of backwoods frustration. He has no training and the worst possible sense of class. And he can flat out rock when he feels like it.

Wilson's Jerry Lee, like all the other portraits, is a spitballed billboard, scaled up to grandeur and chewed down to low reality. His sneer physically projects at the viewer; his yellow pompadour bristles with energy. He makes everybody else look angelic by comparison.

And angels they weren't, as recent biographies are revealing, but we always knew there was dirt to dish. And Little Richard sure could dish it out, pulling a fey version of Jerry Lee's piano-stomping techniques in every performance. Wilson's Richard rolls those big eyes up to meet his do, a gigan-

their rhythmic appeal.

Also on view, accompanied by a continuously running tape of their hits compiled by Joe Lowrey, are the rockin' nerd Buddy Holly, a purple-lipped Bo Diddley, the sublime Professor Longhair in his shades, the original pelviswiveller Wynonie Harris (who once reported, "Women Won't Leave Me Alone"), and the King. Elvis looks subdued here though, and it's my bet that Wilson probably prefers the guys like Harris that Presley covered in those long-gone days. Presley's versions of their songs were toned down to suit mass audiences — and we know what happened to Elvis as he met his masses.

Youth Wants to Know though: Where's Chuck Berry, Screamin' Jay Hawkins (whose "I Put a Spell on You" animates the odyssey of the outsiders in that iconic independent film *Stranger than Paradise*), and most of all, Gene Vincent and the Bluecaps, who rose from the wrong side of Norfolk's tracks? Berry's image is cloistered in a Richmond collection and Gene's next, says the artist. Good Golly, Miss Molly!



Brett Wilson's Jerry Lee.

tic flamelike pomp that convincingly mimics the real-life pile. There's no irony in Wilson's appreciation of these rockers, no New York attitude here. Little Richard's exuberance is matched by every portrait.

Johnny Burnette, whose hillbilly wails covered the Deep South, is characterized by his late-afternoon squint, rendered in Wilson's chunky assemblage by the most massive pouches this side of a chipmunk's cheeks. And lugubrious Roy Orbison, getting pork-rind fat long before he hit 40, balloons off the wall like the Goodyear blimp. Now we know who Elvis Costello looks like, a carbon copy of the crooner whose "Pretty Woman" drove our parents up the ranch-style walls of our dens.

The Shirelles, queens of the doo-wop girl groups, inspired Wilson to extend his scale to eight feet, not quite as long as a limo, but consistent with their status. Like Burnette's, their mounded hair constructed of newspaper, projects in a Medusa-coil, an apt metaphor for

The exhibit will continue to rock through Oct. 27.