

Rock 'n' roll tour of America

IT'S a rare thing for anyone to actively choose their favourite type of music.

Instead, musical taste is inherited, forced by friends or fed by whatever is on the radio until commercial punk wailings are as unconsciously comfortable as your worn-out Green Day T-shirt, or as familiar as your Veronicas-endorsed lipgloss.

But suppose you had to start afresh. Recommit your musical devotion and pick one genre to love.

For mine, rockabilly — a musical genre that comes complete with clothes, cars and lifestyle — would be hard to pass up.

And a weekend with several thousand devotees of the standout subculture is definitely helping make up my mind.

I'm at the Viva Las Vegas rockabilly weekend with Aussie mate Annalise.

In its 12th year, the three-day Easter event has drawn a record crowd of 6500 hepcats and dolls to the Orleans Hotel and Casino and it looks like we've travelled back in time.

Patrons wear sharp shirts, cuffed jeans, hip-swinging skirts and more leopard print than an African safari.

Up-do hairstyles shine on guys and girls, *Rock Around the Clock* blares on the sound system and it all looks like a sock-hop scene from an Elvis movie — but with plenty of beer and tattoos as an entry requirement.

Rockabilly music is first and foremost original rock 'n' roll — think

A colourful '50s-inspired musical rock genre has Mary Bolling in a twist

Buddy Holly and the King — with a mix of hillbilly country sounds.

Johnny Cash is a big hero for rockabilly types, double bass is a must-have instrument, with plenty of fiddles, brass and even the occasional washboard, plus regular cross-over with 1950s swing.

Since the 1970s, bands including head scenesters the Stray Cats have added tattoos and an obsession with the '50s look to the mix.

Devotees range from teens to grandparents, all decked out in the same uniform.

And sure, rockabilly's not the only musical genre to have a dress code.

But unlike those goths, emos and metalheads, at least these hepcats are guaranteed they'll look sharp as a result — on and off stage.

Including Perth lads Blue Denim and Sydney cats Wes Pudsey and the Sonic Aces, the line-up is a dream of rocking guitars, in-your-face brass and huge double basses just waiting to be climbed.

More than 50 acts mean a scramble from one show to the next — hard to do in the requirement heels.

On Saturday, we squeeze into a huge ballroom that's filling fast for a set from Royal Crown Revue.

The sharp-dressed swing band delivers a high-energy set, with their zeal only matched by the furious

swing-dancers who fly around the dance floor.

Outside the band rooms, aisles of rockabilly wares are on offer.

A '50s-style barber shop, imported from California, is set up and offering fine grooming products and a mind-boggling variety of pomades, guaranteed to keep a towering pompadour in place.

While lads do their proverbial best James Dean in rolled up jeans and white tees or vintage shirts, girls are vying for the prettiest pouts and highest hair.

For \$35, I could get a primped up-do. Instead, I go for a \$42 red pencil skirt and feel like I can almost fit in with the hordes of hour-glassed hepkittens swinging in front of the stage.

Other stalls advertise social networking websites for rockabillies — That '50s Guy and That '50s Gal, in case you're interested.

And in the car park out the back, more traditional social networking is in full swing, as folks mill around hundreds of vintage and custom cars, comparing notes on pin-stripping.

That night, it's a different kind of bodywork on display, with a burlesque competition featuring sassy performers from all over the world.

But in a show that's more saucy than seductive, girls of all shapes and sizes tease the audience to a



Rock on: Mary Bolling (right) and friend Annalise get in the swing.

rockabilly soundtrack, including last year's winner, Dizzy Von Damn, who adorably, but awkwardly, shakes off a comical feather costume to the Trashmen's fast-paced hit *Surfin' Bird*.

(The winner this year, a hula-themed Lucy Fur, deserved the prize just for her name.)

Commitment to the lifestyle goes further than clothes, cars and music.

One dolled-up lady almost loses her high-heeled footing as she chases after her pompadour-ed two-year-old.

"Jack Daniel, you come back here now!" she screams.

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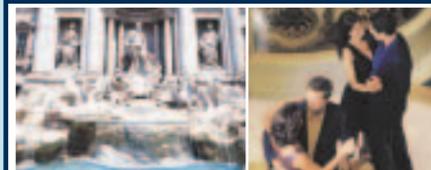


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