PARIS JOURNAL

A French Original With Studied American Flair

By CRAIG S. SMITH

PARIS, June 15 — The French may turn their noses up at what they see as the boorish United States, but the country's only rock icon is a reminder that Gallic dreams of America run deep.

Johnny Hallyday, who turned 60 today belting out "Blue Suede Shoes" and other American rock standards to 60,000 loyal French fans, built his durable identity on a carefully cultivated American mystique that he continues to nurture well into the fifth decade of his career.

But don't tell the French that.

"There's nothing false about him," said Daniel Beux, a 55-year-old Parisian in a blue blazer, as he left Mr. Hallyday's fireworks-spangled spectacle at the capital's Parc des Princes soccer stadium on Saturday night. "He's a myth," he added.

Mr. Beux probably meant to say "legend," but myth isn't a bad way to describe the rebel persona created by Jean-Philippe Smet (Mr. Hallyday's real name) back when the war-weary French were still enthralled by their wild and free American liberators.

That persona has kept his countrymen fascinated through multiple permutations, interpreting American music and mind-sets from Elvis Presley to Creedence Clearwater Revival to Bruce Springsteen.

Mr. Hallyday has been transformed into a national treasure, who, despite multiple divorces and chronic tax troubles, can seemingly do...
Princes soccer stadium in Paris as part of a birthday tour of the country.

His birthday tour of the country's major stadiums created such hype that some cities planned to subsidize tickets for those who could not afford them. (The proposals set off a mini-scandal and were scrapped.)

His four Paris shows, the last of them tonight, all filled the field and seats of the soccer stadium with jumping, screaming fans who sang the choruses of many songs with such enthusiasm that Mr. Hallyday just stood back and listened.

He is a staple of the French tabloids, the stuff of intellectual discourse, and the toast of the French political left and right alike.

France's prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, even invoked the aging rocker's name recently in urging striking state workers to accept the government's pension reforms, which will require them to stay on the job a few more years than is required now. If Mr. Hallyday can keep working, Mr. Raffarin seemed to suggest, why can't everyone else?

Mr. Hallyday was born in Paris to a Belgian father and French mother but was taken in as an infant by his aunt after his father left one day to buy butter and never returned. The boy grew up largely on the road with his aunt's two daughters, who were dancers, and at the age of 6 met his namesake, an American from Oklahoma singing in the chorus of the musical "Oklahoma!" with the stage name Lee Halliday.

Lee Halliday married one of the dancing cousins and took the young Jean-Philippe under his wing, calling him Johnny. It was the beginning of a lifelong devotion to American style that continues today. His official biography is peppered with American adventures, including a motorcycle trip across Death Valley and through the Navajo reservation.

The latest version of Johnny Hallyday, whose name conjures up both Hollywood and Billie Holiday, sports black leather pants and Von Dutch T-shirts from Los Angeles's Melrose Avenue.

For generations of French youth, bound by the country's sometimes suffocating culture of family and tradition, Mr. Hallyday provided a digestible dose of the American dream à la James Dean. He was early Elvis in a French wrapper.

Jean-Luc Haquelle, 38, a French biker who rides a "custom Virago" — made by the Japanese motorcycle company Yamaha — has a tattoo of Elvis on one shoulder and a tattoo of Mr. Hallyday on the other. His tattoos were on display at Mr. Hallyday's concert on Saturday night, where the biker extolled the French rocker's talents, albeit not very eloquently.
"He's the biggest," Mr. Haquelle said.

So while millions of Americans have grown up imitating Elvis or James Dean, millions of French have grown up imitating Mr. Hallyday's interpretation of Elvis or James Dean.

Much is lost in the translation, though that hardly matters to the French.

"He's even better than Elvis," said Jacky Duranteau, 49, a factory worker wearing an extreme mullet — a haircut that, in Mr. Duranteau's case, consists of a crew cut on top with shoulder-length locks in the back. Mr. Duranteau, who has seen Mr. Hallyday perform 35 times, said he saw America largely through the singer's eyes.

"I'm a great Johnny Hallyday fan," he said after the concert on Saturday, "and I'm also a great fan of the Indians."

But the United States is an obsession that many of Mr. Hallyday's fans would prefer to forget.

"Of course he was very influenced by America at the beginning, but less now," said Marie Noëll, 51, at his show on Saturday. She said of the country's only rock icon, "we have a certain pride."

It is true that these days Mr. Hallyday is as famous for singing French ballads as for singing American rock 'n' roll, but many of his most popular songs still draw on France's romantic notion of the United States.

In his signature "Something of Tennessee," he sings a line that might sum up French attitudes toward America: "There's so little love with so much desire."