

## Further Reading

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## Discography

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# 22. Elvis Presley, Sam Phillips, and Rockabilly

As the most successful artist of the mid-1950s rock 'n' roll explosion, Elvis Presley (1935–77) had a profound impact on popular music. His sense of style, both musical and personal, was both the focal point of the media reaction to early rock 'n' roll and the inspiration for some of the most important rock musicians to follow. The narrative of his meteoric rise and subsequent decline amid mysterious and tawdry circumstances fueled many myths both during his life and after his death at 42.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest musical experiences of Presley, who was raised in poverty in the Deep South, came in the Pentecostal services of the First Assembly of God Church.<sup>2</sup> Other formative influences included popular

1. The mythologizing after his death has been prolific enough to spawn at least two books that are devoted to understanding it, as well as numerous articles; see Gilbert Rodman, *Elvis after Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Greil Marcus, *Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

2. C. Wolfe, "Presley and the Gospel Tradition," in *The Elvis Reader: Texts and Sources on the King of Rock 'n' Roll*, ed. K. Quain, 13–27 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

tunes of the day, country music, blues, and rhythm and blues. Although he had little experience as a performer, in 1954, at age 19, he came to the attention of Sam Phillips, owner of a Memphis recording company, Sun Records. Phillips teamed Presley, who sang and played guitar, with local country and western musicians Scotty Moore (guitar) and Bill Black (bass). During their first recording session in June 1954, the trio recorded a single with "That's All Right, Mama" (originally recorded in 1946 by blues singer Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup) on one side and "Blue Moon of Kentucky" (originally recorded in 1946 by bluegrass pioneer Bill Monroe) on the other. The group's style blended elements of country and rhythm and blues without being identifiable as either; the distinctive sound included Moore's rhythmically oriented lead guitar playing, Black's slapped bass, and Presley's forceful, if crude, rhythm guitar, with the recording swathed in a distinctive electronic echo effect. Presley's voice, however, attracted the most attention: swooping almost two octaves at times, changing timbre from a croon to a growl instantaneously, he seemed not so much to be synthesizing pre-existing styles as to be juxtaposing them, sometimes within the course of a single phrase.<sup>3</sup> While the trio's initial record provoked enthusiastic responses immediately upon being broadcast on Memphis radio, it confused audiences, who wondered if the singer was white or black. And although white musicians' music had incorporated African American instrumental and vocal approaches since the earliest "hillbilly" recordings of the 1920s, no previous white singer had so successfully forged an individual style clearly rooted in a contemporaneous African American idiom.

Presley, Moore, and Black released four more singles on Sun during 1954–55; each one featured a blues or rhythm and blues song backed with a country-style number. Presley's uninhibited, sexually charged performances throughout the Southeast provoked frenzied responses and influenced other musicians: by the end of 1955, performers such as Carl Perkins and Johnny Cash had emerged with a style (coined "rockabilly") that resembled Presley's.

Presley's growing popularity attracted the attention of promoter "Colonel" Tom Parker, who negotiated the sale of Presley's contract to RCA Records for the then-unheard-of sum of \$35,000. Presley's first recording for RCA, "Heartbreak Hotel" (released in March 1956), achieved the unprecedented feat of reaching the Top 5 on the pop, rhythm and blues, and country charts simultaneously. This recording and the songs that followed in 1956 all combined aspects of his spare Sun recordings with increasingly heavy instrumentation—including piano, drums, and background singers—that moved the sound closer to that of mainstream pop. Both sides of his third RCA single "Hound Dog"/"Don't Be Cruel" hit number one on all three charts. "Hound Dog" radically transformed

3. These aspects of Presley's style are described in Richard Middleton, "All Shook Up," in *The Elvis Reader*, 3–12.

Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton's 1952 R&B hit, while "Don't Be Cruel" was a more pop-oriented recording written specifically for Presley by Otis Blackwell. Presley's vocal style already showed signs of mannerism, trading the unpredictable exchanges of different voices of the early recordings for a single affect throughout each song.

Although Elvis Presley did participate in some interviews throughout his career, the questions and his answers in these interviews tended toward the perfunctory (e.g., in response to questions about rock 'n' roll, Elvis responded, "It's hard to explain rock 'n' roll. It's not what you call folk music. It's a beat that gets you. You feel it.")<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Presley's first producer, Sam Phillips, has reflected at length on those early recording sessions and the conditions that gave rise to rockabilly. Prior to recording Presley's first five singles and the appearance of Elvis's rockabilly successors at Sun such as Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, and Roy Orbison, Phillips recorded local blues and R&B musicians like B. B. King, Ike Turner, and Howlin' Wolf, including a session that resulted in the important proto-rock 'n' roll recording, Jackie Brenston's "Rocket 88" (with a band led by Turner) in 1951. Phillips is also a natural-born storyteller, as revealed by many of the anecdotes in this interview.

## Sam Phillips Interview

Elizabeth Kaye

*There are many stories about how Elvis came to Sun in 1954. I'd like to hear your version of it.*

He was working for Crown Electric. I'd seen the truck go back and forth outside, and I thought, "They sure are doing a hell of a lot of business around here." But I never saw it stop anywhere. So Elvis had . . . he had cased the joint a long time before he stopped the truck and got out. And there's no telling how many days and nights behind that wheel he was figuring out some way to come in and make a record without saying, "Mr. Phillips, would you audition me?" So his mother's birthday gave him the opportunity to come in and make a little personal record. [Elvis claimed he was making the record for his mother, but her birthday was, in fact, months away, so perhaps he had other motives.]

*The first song he recorded was "My Happiness." What do you think when you heard it?* There wasn't anything that striking about Elvis, except his sideburns were down to here [gestures], which I kind of thought, well, you know, "That's pretty cool, man. Ain't nobody else got them that damn long." We talked in the studio. And

4. This quote comes from Mick Farren and Pearce Marchbank, *Elvis in His Own Words* (London: Omnibus Press, 1977), 27.

Source: Elizabeth Kaye, "Sam Phillips Interview," *Rolling Stone*, 13 February 1986, pp. 54-58, 86-88.

I played the record back for him in the control room on the little crystal turntable and walked up front and told Marion [Phillips's assistant, Marion Keisker] to write down Elvis' name and a number and how we can get ahold of him.

*You called him back to cut a ballad called "Without You." That song was never released. What went wrong?*

We got some pretty good cuts on the thing, but I wanted to check him out other ways before I made a final decision as to which route we were going to attempt to go with him.

And I decided I wanted to look at things with a little tempo, because you can really hang yourself out on ballads or when you go up against Perry Como or Eddie Fisher or even Patti Page, all of those people. I wasn't looking for anything that greatly polished.

*After that, you put Elvis with a band, Scotty Moore on guitar and Bill Black on bass. Why did you choose them?*

The two of them, they'd been around the studio, Lord, I don't know how many damned times, you know? Scotty had been playing with different bands, and although he hadn't ever done a session for me, I knew he had the patience and he wasn't afraid to try anything, and that's so important when you're doing laboratory experiments.

Scotty was also the type of person who could take instruction real good. And I kidded him a lot. I said, "If you don't quit trying to copy Chet Atkins, I'll throw you out of this damn place." And Bill, he was just Bill Black, and the best slap bass player in the city.

*What were you trying to achieve with Elvis?*

Now you've got to keep in mind Elvis Presley probably innately was the most introverted person that came into that studio. Because he didn't play with bands. He didn't go to this little club and pick and grin. All he did was set with his guitar on the side of his bed at home. I don't think he even played on the front porch.

So I had to try to establish a direction for him. And I had to look into the market, and if the market was full of one type of thing, why try to go in there? There's only so many pieces in a pie. That's how I figured it. I knew from the beginning that I was going to have to do something different and that it might be harder to get it going. But if I got it going, I might have something.

*How did you come to cut "That's All Right"?*

That night we had gone through a number of things, and I was getting ready to fold it up. But I didn't want to discourage the damn people, you understand? I knew how enthusiastic Elvis was to try to do something naturally. I knew also that Scotty Moore was staying there till he dropped dead, you know? I don't remember exactly what I said, but it was light hearted. I think I told him, "There ain't a damn song you can do that sounds worth a damn," or something like that. He knew it was tongue in cheek. But it was getting to be a critical time, because we had been in the studio a lot. Well, I went back into the booth. I left the mikes open, and I think Elvis felt like, really, "What the hell have I got to lose? I'm really gonna blow his head off, man." And they cut down on "That's All Right," and hell, man, they was just as instinctive as they could be.

*It's said that you heard him singing it, and you said, "What are you doing?" and he said, "I don't know," and you said, "Do it again." Is that true?*

I don't remember exactly verbatim. But it was something along the lines that I've been quoted.

Scotty Moore says that when he heard the playback he thought he'd be run out of town. How did you feel when you heard it?

First of all, Scotty wasn't shocked at any damned thing I attempted to do. Scotty isn't shockable. And for me, that damned thing came through so loud and clear it was just like a big flash of lightning and the thunder that follows. I knew it was what I was looking for for Elvis. When anybody tells you they know they've got a hit, they don't know what the hell they're talking about. But I knew I had it on "That's All Right." I just knew I had found a groove. In my opinion. And that's all I had to go on, honey. I mean I let people hear it. But I didn't ask them their damn opinions.

Then what happened?

I let Scotty, Bill and Elvis know I was pretty damn pleased. Then I made an acetate dub of it and took it up to [Memphis disc jockey] Dewey Phillips and played him the tape. And Daddy-O Dewey wanted to hear it again. "Goddamn, man," he says, "I got to have it." Red, hot and blue. You'd have to know Dewey.

And two nights later he played that thing, and the phones started ringing. Honey, I'll tell you, all hell broke loose. People were calling that station, and it really actually surprised me, because I knew nobody knew Elvis. Elvis just didn't have friends, didn't have a bunch of guys he ran with or anything, you know? Anyway, it was just fantastic. To my knowledge, there weren't any adverse calls.

Why did you decide to back "That's All Right" with "Blue Moon of Kentucky"?

This was before anybody thought of young people being interested in bluegrass. But we did this thing, and it just had an intrigue. And that's the one where I thought maybe there was a good possibility of getting run out of town, 'cause hey, man, you didn't mess with bluegrass. Bluegrass is kind of sacred, you know.

Once the record was released, there was an incredible furor. How did it affect you?

Rock & roll probably put more money in the collection boxes of the churches across America than anything the preacher could have said. I certainly know that to be a fact. Not only them. Disc jockeys broke the hell out of my records. Broke 'em on the air. Slam them over the damn microphone. Now if I hadn't affected people like that, I might have been in trouble.

Do you remember the session for "Good Rockin' Tonight"?

Oh, God, we all loved that song, man. I took Bill, and I said, "I don't want none of this damned slapping. I want you to pull them damned strings, boy."

Your contract with Elvis had him completely locked up, so the only way Colonel Parker could have become involved was as a concert booker. Why did you decide to sell his contract just a year and a half after he started with you?

I had looked at everything for how I could take a little extra money and get myself out of a real bind. I mean, I wasn't broke, but man, it was hand-to-mouth. I made an offer to Tom Parker, but the whole thing was that I made an offer I didn't think they'd even consider—\$35,000, plus I owed Elvis \$4000 or \$5000.

So you thought the offer was so high no one would take it?

I didn't necessarily want them not to take it.

Did you realize how much Elvis was worth?

Hell, no. I didn't have any idea the man was going to be the biggest thing that ever happened to the industry.

Were you ever sorry you let him go?

No. That was the best judgment call I could make at the time, and I still think it is. And Sun went on and did many, many things. I hoped the one thing that wouldn't happen to me was that I would be a one-artist or a one-hit label.

Did you give Elvis any advice when he left Sun?

The one real ammunition I gave him was "Don't let them tell you what to do. Don't lose your individuality."

Then how did you feel when he started making the type of movies he made?

They were just things that you could make for nothing and make millions off of, and Elvis didn't have anything to do with it. That was Colonel Tom Parker and the moguls at the different studios. I think it was almost sinister, I really do.

Did you ever think of becoming a manager?

I'm insane. But I'm not that insane.

Once Elvis was gone, were you banking Sun's future on Carl Perkins?

Absolutely. And there was another one of those instincts. I was giving up some kind of a cat, man, but, sure enough, I sold him, and that's what financed "Blue Suede Shoes."

Steve Sholes of RCA called you at the time "Blue Suede Shoes" was climbing the charts. RCA couldn't get anything going with Elvis, and Sholes asked you, "Did we buy the wrong guy?" What did you tell him?

I told him, "You haven't bought the wrong person." And I gave him the reasons. Number one, Elvis certainly had the talent. And unlike Carl, he was single and had no children and was a helluva-looking man. He said, "Well, would you be mad at us if we put out 'Blue Suede Shoes'?" Man, that staggered me. I said, "Steve, you all are big enough to kill me, you know." But they didn't put it out as a single. They released it as an EP.

Did it outsell Perkins' version?

Hell, no. Well, I guess over the years when it was put in nineteen packages. But the only reason Carl is not recognized for "Blue Suede Shoes" is that Elvis became so mammothly big.

When did you realize how big Elvis would be?

Not when I heard "Heartbreak Hotel." That was the worst record. I knew it when I heard "Don't Be Cruel." I was driving back from the first vacation I'd had in my life, and it came on the radio, and I said, "Wait a minute. Jesus; he's off and gone, man." I'd like to run off the road.

Were you jealous?

Hell, no, 'cause when I heard "Heartbreak Hotel," I said, "Damned sons of bitches are going to mess this man up." Then, boy, I heard "Don't Be Cruel," and I was the happiest man in the world.

What was the difference in what you were trying to achieve first with Elvis, then with Perkins?

With Elvis I kind of wanted to lean more toward the blues. I wanted to get Carl more into modifying country music.

What was your favorite Perkins song?

This is the craziest thing, but one of the cutest songs I ever heard was his "Movie Magg." And "Boppin' the Blues."

*Do you remember when you first heard Jerry Lee?*

It was the day after I first heard "Don't Be Cruel." Jerry had come to Memphis with his cousin, staying at his house. He was a pretty determined person, and he made up his mind he was going to see Sam Phillips. Jack Clement [Sun's producer] was at the studio, and Jerry didn't even want to audition for him. But they cut this little audition tape. And when I went to the studio, Jack says, "Man, I got a cat I want you to hear." Well, I had been looking for somebody that could do tricks on the piano as a lead instrument. Lo and behold, man, I hear this guy and his total spontaneity.

*Then, when you met Jerry Lee and he played for you, you're supposed to have told him, "You are a rich man."*

I probably did. Not in the connotation of money, but of talent.

*You've said that Jerry Lee was the most talented person you ever worked with but that you don't think he could have been bigger than Elvis. Why is that?*

That gets into the thing of the total effect of the person. There is no question that the most talented person I ever worked with is Jerry Lee Lewis. Black or white. But Elvis had a certain type of total charisma that was just almost untouchable by any other human that I know of or have ever seen.

But this is a tough comparison for me to make. It looks like I'm drawing lines between two of the most talented people in the world, and I don't like to do that. But I would say that if they were both at their peak, and Elvis was booked for a show but Jerry Lee showed up, no one would be disappointed. Is there a better answer you can think of than that?

*What do you remember about recording "Great Balls of Fire"?*

That was the toughest record I ever recorded in my life. Otis Blackwell had done the demo.<sup>5</sup> When I heard it, I said, "What in the hell are they doing sending me a record like this? It ought to be out." He'd written the damn thing on a napkin in a bar he owed a lot of money to. And we worked our ass off because those breaks . . . with Jerry having to do his piano, it had to be exactly synced with his voice.

*You didn't do any overdubbing on it?*

Hell, no. We didn't have nothing to overdub with.

*When Elvis died, you said that he died of a broken heart. Can you amplify that?*

When you really don't have something to look forward to with a good, sweet, beautiful attitude, you're in trouble. I don't care who you are. You're also in trouble if you're in bondage in any way. I'm talking about emotional entrapment. That's deep stuff. And it's serious stuff. And no matter what happens to you in this world, if you don't make it your business to be happy, then you may have gained the whole world and lost your spirit and maybe even your damned soul.

*But wasn't Elvis entrapped by circumstance?*

Absolutely.

*What could he have done differently?*

Been hardheaded like me and said, "I will break your damned neck, I don't care—you can't scare me. Monetary factors can't scare me. Starvation can't scare me. Threats can't scare me." I mean you have to have that attitude.

Elvis also knew that success wasn't enough. It's like Mac Davis said, man, and I think this is one of the greatest quotes, Bible included: "Stop and smell the roses." Now that's where we can all find ourselves if we don't stop and smell the roses.

And the sad thing about it is dying before you actually physically die. I mean, you know, bless his heart.

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5. Blackwell also wrote many songs for Presley, including "Don't Be Cruel," "All Shook Up," and "Jailhouse Rock."