

# Sam Phillips, Elvis, & Rock N' Roll: A Cultural Revolution

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## ABSTRACT

*In the 1940's, major record companies in the North failed to capitalize on a growing interest in Rhythm and Blues with musicians such as Fats Domino, Bill Haley, Chuck Berry, and Little Richard. A young man from rural Alabama, however, sensed what the major labels could not. Although Sam Phillips could not wholly articulate what that “something” was, he nonetheless saw potential in a cross-pollination of blues and country music. Phillips thus set out to create a new genre of music tailored to America's booming postwar teenage population. Lacking capital and the newest technological recording devices, Phillips relied instead on unique cultural experiences and a fire in his heart, fueled by early childhood encounters with the blues. Not only was Phillips one of the major creators of Rock 'n' Roll, but his success in tapping the new teenage consumer through Elvis Presley contributed to jump-starting a cultural revolution.*

John Lennon once said: “Before Elvis there was nothing, after Elvis nothing was the same.” While Lennon may have been right, major record companies in the North, like RCA, Columbia, and Decca, had been hard at work attempting to create “something.” The problem was that they did not know what that “something” was. Fats Domino, Bill Haley, Chuck Berry, and Little Richard had been on the music scene since the late 1940s trying to capitalize on a growing interest in Rhythm and Blues music, but to no avail. Fats Domino was considered too “laid-back,” Bill Haley was in his late twenties and lacked “youthful charisma and sexual swagger,” Chuck Berry struggled with the law and was “too black,” and Little Richard was viewed as too outrageous, “too raw,” and also “too black.”<sup>1</sup> While the major labels struggled

with their search in the North, a young man in the South believed he knew what that “something” was. Although at first he could not define or articulate this musical element, Sam Phillips knew that the answer, however amorphous, would come to him in time.

As a young adult in the 1940s, Phillips became acutely aware that no genre of music existed primarily for teenagers. Eventually, Phillips saw potential in a cross-pollination of blues and country music, a new sound that America's booming postwar teenage population would connect with and call its own. He also grasped the financial benefits that would result from this audience. Although he did not have the money or the newest technological recording devices that the major labels had, he did have unique cultural experiences and the knowledge

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1 Paul Friedlander, *Rock and Roll A Social History*

(Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 28-37.

to work with what he had. He also possessed a fire in his heart that had been fueled by his early childhood encounters with blues music through his family's African American farm workers and an inspiring trip to Memphis, Tennessee. Ultimately, Phillips would use Elvis Presley to create a style of music so innovative and alive that it would become a revolutionary force.<sup>2</sup> Not only was Phillips one of the major creators of Rock n' Roll, a genre of music created for teens, but his success in tapping the new teenage consumer would contribute to jump-starting a cultural revolution, one that would change forever the face of American life.

Sam Phillips was born in Florence, Alabama in 1923. The youngest of eight siblings, he was raised comfortably on a three-hundred-acre farm until the stock market crash of 1929. Growing up during the Depression, Phillips learned to pick cotton alongside of his family's black farm workers. The black workers would often sing gospel and blues songs while working in the fields, and it was here that Phillips was introduced to this "race" music that reflected subjects of heartache and despair, love and loss, loneliness, longing for home, and hope of better times to come.<sup>3</sup> Silas Payne, a worker that Phillips considered a father figure, routinely sang the blues to him. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Phillips stated, "I saw how [workers like Payne] kept their spirituality. They felt hope, and that said something to me. He taught music to me. Not musical notes or reading, but real intuitive music."<sup>4</sup> Phillips

also was influenced by gospel music heard in his church. Ultimately, however, it was not the white expression of gospel music that appealed to him; but rather, the black expression. Phillips recalled walking home one Sunday from services and passing by a black church: "Their windows were open," he said, "and their choir was just getting going good."<sup>5</sup> The dancing, the beat, and the excitement radiating from the congregation captivated Phillips. In addition, Phillips was a devoted listener of regional radio, regularly tuning in to Memphis stations WMC and WREC, and Nashville's WSM—home of the legendary Grand Ole Opry.<sup>6</sup> Radio allowed him to "travel in his mind."<sup>7</sup> He was especially interested in one particular street in Memphis where he believed his musical mind could roam freely.

In 1939, at the age of sixteen, Sam Phillips took a road trip to Memphis with some of his friends. He had always heard stories about the music scene that thrived in Memphis and, more specifically, the music heard around Beale Street. As a curious teen with a burning passion for music, Phillips wanted to witness the city where there was, as he said, "a meeting of musics."<sup>8</sup> Arriving on Beale Street, Phillips recalled, "It was rockin'! The street was busy. It was active both musically and socially. God I loved it!"<sup>9</sup> The unique vibe that resonated around Beale Street convinced Phillips that he would one day make Memphis his home—and to further

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2 Sam Phillips, interviewed by Elizabeth Kaye, "The Rolling Stone Interview," *Rolling Stone Magazine*, February 13, 1986.

3 Kevin and Tanja Crouch, *Sun King: The Life and Times of Sam Phillips, the Man Behind Sun Records* (Great Britain: Piatkus, 2008), ix.

4 Sam Phillips, interviewed by Elizabeth Kaye, "The Rolling Stone Interview," from Kevin and Tanja Crouch, *Sun King*, 5.

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5 Kevin and Tanja Crouch, *Sun King*, 6.

6 Radio was the cheapest form of entertainment available, and offered an escape to Depression-stricken Americans like Phillips.

7 "Sam Phillips: Sun Records—The Man Who Invented Rock & Roll," *Elvis Australia*, [www.elvis.com.au/presley/articles\\_samphillips.shtml](http://www.elvis.com.au/presley/articles_samphillips.shtml).

8 Colin Escott, *Good Rockin' Tonight: Sun Records and the Birth of Rock N' Roll* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 1.

9 *Ibid.*, 1.

explore his passion for music by getting into radio. Through radio, Phillips realized he could expose listeners to the music he grew up with and loved, and hopefully deliver the same impact that radio hosts had made on him during his childhood.

Phillips immersed himself professionally in the world of music by taking audio engineering courses at the Alabama Polytechnic Institute in Auburn, and winning a couple of radio jobs in Muscle Shoals, Alabama and Nashville, Tennessee. Then, in 1945, at the age of twenty-two, Phillips' dream came true as he was offered a job at WREC, just blocks away from Beale Street in downtown Memphis. Here, he gained valuable engineering skills (pre-recording programs on to sixteen-inch acetate discs to be played later on air), and broadened his own tastes and the station's playlist (routinely shopping at record stores for "daring" records that other stations overlooked).<sup>10</sup> On his WREC show, "Saturday Afternoon Tea Dance," Phillips became known for his eclectic mix of jazz, pop, and blues. Eventually, the vibrant sounds of these overlooked records inspired Phillips to open his own recording studio, where he could record the music that he loved, with no boundaries to creativity.

On January 1, 1950, Phillips opened Memphis Recording Service, in downtown Memphis, as a side job to supplement his income. This type of business had remained unproven in Memphis.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Phillips' co-workers at WREC claimed his idea was crazy and reminded him of

Royal Recording, which had opened in Memphis two years earlier but went bankrupt within a year. But Phillips was bored by the popular music of established singers such as Bing Crosby, Perry Como, and Frank Sinatra, and wanted to record the style of music that he heard growing up: blues, country, and gospel.<sup>12</sup> Although a few friends were wary of Phillips associating with blacks, the young would-be producer was insistent, saying he "wanted to record black people, those folks who never had the opportunity to record. My unconscious mind was just saying I should do it."<sup>13</sup> This was not part of a social or political agenda; Phillips had no desire to speak for the black community. To him, it was simply about the music.<sup>14</sup> Memories of Uncle Silas Payne, his family's black farm workers, and the black church back at home turned the musical wheels of his mind. "People didn't look upon black blues as real artistry," Phillips told Bob Edwards in a 1993 interview for NPR.<sup>15</sup> However, Phillips knew that the abilities of black musicians had been overlooked, and he saw potential in their unique talents. "The only thing I wanted to do," he said, "is to see if I was right or wrong. I wanted to record it, get it out on the market, and see if the people would accept it or reject it."<sup>16</sup> Phillips, a commercial entrepreneur, aimed to capture and secure a kind of music that might become lost: "With society changing, I knew that this music wasn't going to be available in a pure sense forever."<sup>17</sup> Memphis, Phillips became convinced, was

10 Kevin and Tanja Crouch, *Sun King*, 12; Escott, *Good Rockin' Tonight*, 10.

11 Colin Escott, *Good Rockin' Tonight*, 13. The studio, located on 706 Union Ave. is still in operation today, not only as a recording studio, but as a tourist attraction that hosts tours for fans. When Phillips purchased the building, the lease was \$150 a month. Phillips and his only assistant, Marion Keisker, renovated the building themselves. This included the creation of a control room, laying floor tiles, painting, carpentry work, and the installation of sound equipment.

12 John Floyd, *Sun Records: An Oral History* (New York: Avon Books, 1998), 33.

13 Kevin and Tanja Crouch, *Sun King*, 15.

14 *Ibid.*, 18.

15 Sam Phillips, interviewed by Bob Edwards, *Morning Edition*, NPR, September 24, 1993.

16 Kevin and Tanja Crouch, *Sun King*, 18.

17 Colin Escott, *Good Rockin' Tonight*, 19.

where that amorphous “something” could be found and made concrete.

By the 1940s, Beale Street in Memphis had become a center for African American culture and urban life as blacks traveled from the Delta to load cotton, find work, and play the blues. Beale Street became the black musical equivalence of the Grand Ole Opry. The jug band music, jazz, and blues played in juke-joints, saloons, and clubs brought Beale Street to life. Blues music at this time had fallen into a period of transition as it dropped its acoustic sound for an electric sound, characterized by a thriving rhythm. As Phillips told NPR’s Bob Edwards, “Beale Street convinced me that with all the talent coming out of the Delta, I wanted to do something with the music.” Phillips’s studio, located seconds away from Beale Street, was perfectly situated to tap into this vibrant musical atmosphere.

The motto of the Memphis Recording Services was “We Record Anything – Anywhere – Anytime.” Phillips’ first recorder, a portable Presto five-input mixer, allowed him to record outside of his studio; he therefore recorded weddings, bar mitzvahs, speeches, and even funerals until he had accrued enough capital and public profile to produce blues records for independent record labels. As blues is a creative response to oppression, Phillips was adamant in his desire to record the feeling of the oppressed. He wanted to capture emotions on record, because the blues, in his words, “is a symphony of the soul.” More pleasingly, he said he “wanted to feel what was inside of the black artists’ soul.” Phillips recalls some artists thinking, “that white man behind the glass don’t want to hear what I do out on the back porch.”<sup>18</sup> In reality, that is exactly what Phillips wanted

to hear.

Phillips started by recording artists from WDIA, which was a black-oriented radio station in Memphis. His first success came from recording B.B. King for RPM Records. As word spread, Ike Turner and his band drove from Mississippi to see Phillips. During the trip, a guitar amplifier fell off the top of the car, damaging the speaker cone. When the band arrived, Phillips began to play with the amp, stuffed paper into the broken cone, and proceeded to record “Rocket 88.” The amp produced the sound of a saxophone. Phillips maxed out the volume of the amp which ultimately allowed this unique sound to drive the song. Phillips told Rolling Stone, “the more unconventional the sound, the more interested I become in it.”<sup>19</sup> Phillips sold the masters to Chess Records in Chicago, and “Rocket 88” rocketed to number one on the R&B charts. Sam Phillips had his first hit record.<sup>20</sup> Still, despite this success, Phillips felt as though that special “something” had eluded him.

Before World War II, major record label companies had abandoned race music and country music, deeming it unprofitable. Instead, they had focused on popular music by introducing musicians such as Bing Crosby, Perry Como, and Frank Sinatra. Popular music had been established in the North for the white-middle class; country music was established for the white working-class of the South; and now, rhythm and blues had become established in the South for the African American au-

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18 Good Rockin’ Tonight: The Legacy of Sun Records, produced by Bruce Sinofsky, 112 minutes, American Masters, 2001, dvd; Sam Phillips, interviewed by Rita Houston, Words and Music from Studio A, 90.7 FMWFUV, July, 2003; Kevin and Tanja Crouch, Sun King, 29.

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19 Sam Phillips, interviewed by Elizabeth Kaye, “The Rolling Stone Interview.”

20 Phillips and most music historians consider “Rocket 88” to be the first Rock N’ Roll song. Phillips also considered Howlin’ Wolf his greatest discovery and favorite artist, putting him above the likes of Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, and even Elvis Presley. Curiously, Howlin’ Wolf was signed away by Chess Records, which recorded Wolf by attempting to recreate Phillips’ sound.

dience.<sup>21</sup> Some radio stations began to pick up on this new African American market, abandoning their country and popular music programs for the blues. The blues helped broaden the base of music because a cross-pollination emerged: whites began listening to blues, and blacks to country music. As an early advocate of this cross-pollination, Phillips was not surprised. In fact, he believed that whites, up to this point, had been secretly listening to the blues, as if it were socially unacceptable. "It hadn't occurred to too many people that white people would listen to black singers," Phillips told *Rolling Stone*. "I was in it to record something I felt, something I thought other people ought to have an opportunity to render a judgment on."<sup>22</sup> But it was not white adults who became excited about this music; it was white teenagers.

In the 1940s, the word "teenager" became the standard term for young people from the ages of thirteen to eighteen. It started as a marketing term that reflected the newly visible spending power of adolescents.<sup>23</sup> During postwar years, the new teen market exploded. Declaring independence from their parents, in search of their true identity, teens looked for symbols and entertainment that mirrored their existence. Hollywood, in particular, succeeded

in capturing the image of teens through their actors. In response, teens idolized actors such as James Dean, whose attitude, indifferent shrugs, confused postures, inarticulate mumbings, and antiauthoritarian stances paralleled their own.<sup>24</sup> Teens, however, begged for more. They longed for a new form of entertainment that communicated specifically with them.

In the early and mid-1950s there was little in mainstream popular culture that teens could truly identify with. Popular music could not satisfy their crave for excitement. Ahmet Ertegun, founder of Atlantic Records, reflecting on those times, stated, "When we were making the music we made, we hoped to reach the large segment of the black American population, which we did, but we also reached a lot of white kids."<sup>25</sup> The radio, unlike schools and churches, could not be segregated. So it was through the airwaves that teens were exposed to the blues and began raiding record stores for albums. With its throbbing backbeat and sexual lyrics the blues appealed to teens, and Sam Phillips looked to capitalize.

The teen phenomenon of the 1950s gave Phillips a new idea: to create a new genre of music tailored to teens. "Before Rock N' Roll," said Phillips, "teens didn't have any type of music they could call their own, once they got over four or five years old, until they were in their twenties."<sup>26</sup> Simply hoping to make profit, the major record labels had their popular singers cover blues songs; their attempt to establish a firm grasp on this new phenomenon, however, was mostly unsuccessful. Conversely, Phillips

21 By the beginning of World War II, there were essentially only three record companies: Victor, Columbia, and Decca. They recorded country and blues music on subsidiary labels, such as Bluebird (Victor) and Okeh (Columbia), issuing records for black or Southern white audiences only. The big jazz band leaders like Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman, and crooners such as Bing Crosby, Perry Como, and Frank Sinatra were the pop stars for the mainstream audience. See Andre Millard, *American Record: A History of Recorded Sound* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 252, and Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues: A Musical and Cultural History of the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 135, 145.

22 Sam Phillips, interviewed by Elizabeth Kaye, "The Rolling Stone Interview."

23 Jon Savage, *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture* (New York: Viking, 2007), XV.

24 Bill C. Malone, *Southern Music American Music* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 97.

25 Good Rockin' Tonight: The Legacy of Sun Records, produced by Bruce Sinofsky.

26 Douglas Martin, "Sam Phillips, Who Discovered Elvis Presley, Dies at 80," *New York Times*, [www.nytimes.com/2003/08/01/arts/sam-phillips-who-discovered-elvis-presley-dies-at-80.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/01/arts/sam-phillips-who-discovered-elvis-presley-dies-at-80.html?pagewanted=all).

(though he, too, was keen on tapping into the vast teenage market) wanted most of all to create a genre of music that teens could identify with, one that would bring together the booming generation. As Phillips noted, “[Teens at the time] had emotional starvation, and the most active, imaginative years of your life were going to waste because you didn’t have a thing for just sheer enjoyment, or an ability to say hey this would help me make contact with this girl or boy.” Believing that the vehicle would come from blues music, Phillips reflected, “Thank God that the statue of limitations didn’t run on the blues and what came from it.”<sup>27</sup>

In February 1952, Phillips created Sun Records and quit WREC so he could fully commit himself to running his own record label.<sup>28</sup> Phillips’ own design for his label was a rooster with a rising sun behind it. Symbolically, the sun is universal and represents a new day for a new opportunity, so Sun Records would offer an opportunity to black artists who could not make the trip north to Chicago, or who were rejected by major record labels. Phillips could now release records on his own label and avoid dealing with the politics of major labels. Looking for a new raw sound characterized with feeling, Phillips held open auditions in an unsophisticated, informal atmosphere. Phillips recalled that he “wanted something ugly and honest. They’d [blacks] look at the recording booth and see a white man, and they’d start trying to be like [popular white] singers.”<sup>29</sup> Phillips wanted the opposite. He was interested in the music that major labels turned away. As such, he urged his musicians to play with the enthusiasm of playing in front of a live audience—and to

tell their story with feeling and simplicity.

In the first four years, Phillips recorded the likes of Walter Horton, Little Junior Parker, the Prisonaires, Little Milton, and Roscoe Gordon. But because of their failure to make an impact on the charts, Sun began to face financial burdens.<sup>30</sup> To remedy his financial situation, Phillips would, for \$1.99 per side, record a personal record for anybody who walked in the door. At the same time, blues started to lose commercial acceptance. For example, white retailers told Phillips that black music was ruining their children. Phillips therefore contemplated on how he could take the element of “feeling” from blues music and make it appeal to teens. According to Phillips, his philosophy at the time was, “If I can find a white person who can give the feel and the true essence of the black blues-type song, then I’ve got the chance to broaden the base and get plays that otherwise we couldn’t.”<sup>31</sup> Phillips had seemingly tried it all: he had perfected his sound skills, he had succeeded with the blues, and he had even made an unsuccessful attempt at recording white country artists, but he was still missing that “something.” Unbeknownst to Phillips, that “something” had been roaming in the vicinity of Sun Records for quite some time; in the summer of 1953, he finally worked up enough courage to enter Sun Studios.

He was an eighteen year old named Elvis Presley. Presley walked into Sun Studio wanting to record a song for his

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27 Good Rockin’ Tonight: The Legacy of Sun Records, produced by Bruce Sinofsky.

28 When Phillips quit WREC, he still had to support his wife, two sons, his mother, and his deaf aunt.

29 Ibid.; David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993), 470.

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30 Perhaps one of Phillips’ most unique musical talents was a group called the Prisonaires. They consisted of five inmates of the Tennessee State Penitentiary, whom Phillips would record inside the prison walls. In light of such recordings, what’s clear is that although Phillips’ business had evolved, his musical integrity remained in tact—he still embraced his “Anything – Anytime – Anywhere” motto.

31 Sam Phillips, interviewed by Barbara Schultz. Other stories say that Phillips said something to the likes of “If I could just find me a white boy that could sing like a black person, I could make myself a million dollars.”

mother's birthday. Phillips' secretary, Marion Keisker, asked Presley, "Who do you sound like?" Elvis replied, "I don't sound like nobody." Phillips proceeded to record Presley singing two popular ballads: "My Happiness," and "That's When Your Heartache Begins." Phillips later remarked, "The only lie [Elvis] ever told me was that he wanted to make the record for his mother's birthday."<sup>32</sup> His mother's birthday actually was in April, which was five months earlier (in later years, it was also discovered that the Presleys did not own a record player). Elvis simply wanted to be heard—and had either saved enough money to make a record, or finally worked up enough courage to visit Sun. Phillips saw some potential in Elvis, took the young singer's information, and told him that he would give him a call. Phillips was so focused on the blues that he let "something" walk right back out the door.

Born in Tupelo, Mississippi, Presley had moved to Memphis with his family in 1945. Similar to Phillips, Presley grew up listening to the radio and was heavily influenced by the gospel music that he heard at his church. At school, Elvis was bullied and had few friends. When not working at the Precision Tool Company in Memphis or driving a truck for Crown Electric, he visited Beale Street to listen to the blues singers, and frequently attended gospel programs. As Phillips recalled, "[Elvis] didn't play with bands, he didn't go to this little club and pick and grin. All he did was sit with his guitar on the side of his bed at home."<sup>33</sup> Presley's physical appearance was also different: he bought his clothes from Beale Street and greased his hair into a pompadour style that sported long sideburns. Phillips remembers seeing Elvis walk by the studio many times and even

remembers a Crown Electric truck periodically driving by. A year later, Phillips finally gave Presley a call to come in for a recording session.

During his first session, Presley sang numerous pop ballads which amounted to nothing. "I guess I must have sat there at least three hours," Elvis told Memphis reporter Bob Johnson in 1956. "I sang everything I knew – pop, spirituals, just a few words of anything I remembered."<sup>34</sup> Presley felt inferior, and due to his shyness and insecurity, his session ended in failure. Presley's voice, nonetheless, showed potential, and Phillips saw something "different" in him, although he could not define exactly what it was. As a result, Phillips asked Presley back for another session with accompaniment.

On July 5, 1954, Phillips paired Presley with guitarist Scotty Moore and bassist Bill Black. As usual, the session was informal, and the band was told to play whatever came to mind; however, the early results were to no avail. Phillips lightheartedly exclaimed to Presley, "there ain't a damn song you can do that sounds worth a damn."<sup>35</sup> But as they took a break, some magic happened. Elvis recalled, "This song popped into my mind that I heard years ago, and I started kidding around with it." As Moore tells it, "Elvis started singing this song, jumping around and acting a fool, and then Bill picked up his bass, and he started acting a fool too, so I started playing with them."<sup>36</sup> The song was Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup's 1946 release, "That's All Right Mama." Phillips remembered, "It came through loud and clear. It was like a big flash of lightning and the thunder that follows. I

32 Sam Phillips, interviewed by Rita Houston.

33 Peter Guralnick, *Last Train To Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1994), 120.

34 *Ibid.*, 85.

35 Sam Phillips, interviewed by Elizabeth Kaye, "The Rolling Stone Interview."

36 Guralnick, *Last Train To Memphis*, 94-95.

knew it was what I was looking for.”<sup>37</sup> Elvis was the living vision of the dream that lingered in Phillips’ mind ever since leaving Alabama. Shocked that Presley knew this old blues song, Phillips asked Presley, “Why have you been holding out on me this whole time?” An unconfident Presley responded, “You liked that Mr. Phillips?”<sup>38</sup> Based on Elvis’ past pop ballad sessions, Phillips was unaware that Presley was interested in blues music, and that night, they recorded “That’s All Right.”

Elvis’ rendition was original and exciting. Phillips did not know what to make of it; it was not black, white, pop, or country. Not even were blues characteristic evident. Bill Black played a bass rhythm that consisted of both tone and a slap beat, while Moore delivered a simple guitar rhythm that combined a blues style with a country style. Presley started the song off by strumming his acoustic guitar to an upbeat tempo. His voice boasted the confidence that his personality had lacked. The finished product satisfied Phillips’ need for something raw and ragged. A few days later, another session was held to record the B-side. Once again joking around during a break, Black began playing Bill Monroe’s 1946 bluegrass hit “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” imitating Monroe’s high pitched voice. When Presley and Moore joined in, the time signature changed, the tempo was picked up, and Phillips hit the recording button.

The two sessions broke musical boundaries and left Moore and Black nervous about their version of “That’s All Right,” claiming it was so different that they would be run out of town. Phillips disagreed, thinking that if he was run out of town, it would be due to “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” because he said, “you don’t mess with

bluegrass. Bluegrass is kind of sacred, you know.”<sup>39</sup> But Elvis had just re-created a hit for Sun Records. After adding “slapback,” the main element of “the Sun sound” which was a tape delay that added echo to the performer’s voice, Phillips exclaimed, “That’s fine! Hell that’s different! That’s a pop song now, nearly about!”<sup>40</sup>

Phillips did not know what to do with the record, or even how to categorize it, so he called his close friend, Dewey Phillips, for advice. In 1948, the Memphis radio station WHBQ debuted a show hosted by Dewey Phillips (no relation to Sam) called “Red Hot and Blue.” Dewey programmed an eclectic mix of blues, hillbilly, and popular white crooners that would become an institution in Memphis.<sup>41</sup> His slang, “hip” voice-overs made the show “insane,” “chaotic,” and “inspiring.”<sup>42</sup> The “Red, Hot, and Blue” Show was popular among white teens like Elvis, because Dewey Phillips played the music that most adults had forbidden their teens to listen to. If Dewey liked a song, he would tell his listeners they were hits; songs that he did not like, he would smash to pieces, live on the air. Excited over Presley’s unique sound, Dewey agreed to play “That’s All Right” on his program. As soon as the song hit the airwave, Dewey was bombarded with nonstop telephone calls from his listeners. Presley recalled, “I was scared to death; I was shaking all over, I just couldn’t believe

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39 Sam Phillips, interviewed by Elizabeth Kaye, “The Rolling Stone Interview.”

40 Phillips’ quotation culled from an outtake of Elvis Presley’s recording of “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” on *Elvis: A Golden Celebration*, RCA compact disc 1, track 3. Phillip’s new equipment consisted of two Ampex 350 recorders and a RCA 76-D radio console. He also switched to magnetic tape, which allowed him to issue on 45 rpm records with better sound quality. Because the magnetic tape was reusable, he would record over outtakes to save money; therefore, not many outtakes from Elvis’ sessions exist.

41 Escott, *Good Rockin’ Tonight*, 5.

42 Floyd, *Sun Records*, 35.

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37 Sam Phillips, interviewed by Elizabeth Kaye, “The Rolling Stone Interview.”

38 *Good Rockin’ Tonight: The Legacy of Sun Records*, produced by Bruce Sinofsky.

it."<sup>43</sup>

After Sun Records released Elvis' first record in July 1954, Presley and his band mates embarked on a journey of scheduled appearances that would take them from county fairs to the Grand Ole Opry and, in the process, popularize Presley's image.<sup>44</sup> Sam Phillips recalls that Billboard's response to Elvis' record was that Phillips had to be either a genius or an idiot, because he had taken a black blues song and paired it with a classic bluegrass hit. Phillips' response was, "I ain't a genius, maybe we got lucky."<sup>45</sup> Although luck may have been on his side, considering the two songs were stumbled upon, Phillips was, in fact, a genius. He had explored the music of down-trodden people, recorded music without racial bias, experimented with sound, broken musical boundaries, and was able to extract feeling and raw emotions from his musicians. Had Phillips not accomplished these things or given anybody the opportunity to be heard, perhaps Elvis would have remained an unknown truck driver, and the future of teen-oriented pop music might have been different or non-existent. Former Sun recording artist Jack Clement stated, "Sun Records influenced the world in a pretty spectacular way. Without it, there wouldn't have been any Elvis, might have been Beatles, but they sure would have been different. It was a hell of a thing."<sup>46</sup>

Sam Phillips now had that

"something"—a singer whose sound and appearance could not be categorized. Elvis was in fact the total package that would soon revolutionize American culture. Realizing, however, that Elvis was headed for national and international fame, and also that he had other talented artists to produce (like Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash), Phillips, in 1955, agreed to sell Elvis' contract to RCA Victor Records for \$35,000.<sup>47</sup>

Meanwhile, in the 1950s, teen purchasing power exploded. Part-time jobs became readily available, and teens had few responsibilities other than school. During the fifties, teens spent more than nine billion dollars a year—six billion coming from allowances, three billion from their own earnings.<sup>48</sup> This mass audience of teens with disposable income was exactly what Phillips had hoped to exploit, and in the 1950s, it all came together. Phillips' new genre of music had been established in the South, but soon began to spread to the North where it had failed years ago. Helped along by a few key factors, DJ's and television, this nameless style of music would gain a name and begin to rock teens all across the nation.

Alan Freed, a Cleveland disc jockey, became famous in the early 1950s among teens in the north for playing R&B. Interestingly, his first impression on "race music" was that it was too raw for his audience. But as young listeners called in with approval, Freed decided to create a program especially for the blues. In 1954, Freed moved to New York and coined the term Rock N' Roll as the name for this nameless music, like Presley's, that mixed blues with country. Freed's popularity with teen listeners would help Rock N' Roll spread through

43 Guralnick, *Last Train To Memphis*, 101.

44 When Presley was a guest performer on the Grand Ole Opry, Monroe remembers, "he come around, apologized for the way that he changed "Blue Moon of Kentucky." Monroe's response to Presley's version was positive, and it led Monroe to re-record his version, starting with the original 3/4 time signature and then speeding up to a 4/4 time just like Presley. Neil V. Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 121.

45 Sam Phillips, interviewed by Bob Edwards.

46 *Good Rockin' Tonight: The Legacy of Sun Records*, produced by Bruce Sinofsky.

47 RCA also reverted to earlier blues songs, including Presley's recording of Big Mama Thornton's "Hound Dog."

48 Brash & Britten, eds, *Rock & Roll Generation: Teen Life in the 50's*, 98.

the North as well as nationally. Indeed, Freed would become known as an “entrepreneur of entertainment for the new teen market,” but a new form of entertainment signaled the death of the radio.<sup>49</sup>

The new medium of television also helped promote Rock N’ Roll. In 1955, nearly two-thirds of American homes had a television set. Shows like the Steve Allen Show, American Bandstand, and the Ed Sullivan Show helped popularize music as it allowed viewers to actually see their favorite singers. Adult disapproval of Rock N’ Roll music led to censorship, including Elvis’ appearances on the Ed Sullivan Show, which only showed Presley from the waist up. However, in 1959, three years after his Ed Sullivan Show performances, Elvis had sold 25 million copies of single records in four years, an all-time high.<sup>50</sup> Significantly, teens were spending \$1.5 billion a year on music, record sales tripled, and by the end of the decade the teenage market had amounted to \$10 billion.<sup>51</sup> Rock N’ Roll not only changed the way teens spent money, but it changed the way they walked, talked, dressed, and wore their hair. A catchy, insistent Rock N’ Roll encouraged teens to resist their parents’ authority, be more sexually adventurous, and learn from their peers about what to wear, watch, and listen to, when to study, and where to go on

Saturday night.<sup>52</sup> Former Beatles member Paul McCartney remembers, “In England, until Rock N’ Roll had arrived, it had been popular ballads, and then suddenly this stuff is coming over. The sailors [brought] it in from the states, and it started to creep onto the radio. We’d hear some of the stuff you guys were doing [talking to Moore and Black]. Just wow! What is this?”<sup>53</sup>

Most record executives in the fifties had viewed Rock N’ Roll as another musical trend; however, Sam Phillips saw it as a cultural revolution—one that could be used by generation after generation to express deeply felt aspirations and ideas.<sup>54</sup> “It’s really mind-boggling sometimes to think of how Rock N’ Roll enabled us to bring this big world a little closer together,” Phillips said during an interview. By tapping into the musical atmosphere of Memphis Tennessee, Sam Phillips created a new form of entertainment for teens, Rock N’ Roll music, and helped revolutionize American culture. When asked in an interview if he thought Rock N’ Roll would have happened without Sun, Phillips replied, “I think that there might have been, but it would’ve been a long time coming.”<sup>55</sup> Sam Phillips died in 2003, but inherent in the music of Sun Records is a vibrancy that has stood the test of time and reached across race and age.

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49 Ibid., 20.

50 “A Young \$10 Billion Power: The Teen-age Consumer Has Become a Major Factor in the Nation’s Economy,” *Life*, August 31, 1959, 78-84.

51 Brash & Britten, eds, *Rock & Roll Generation: Teen Life in the 50’s*, 27. Teens were able to buy a wide variety of consumer electronics, among other gadgets. For example, teens could purchase a transistor radio for \$25. For \$50, they could buy an Elvis Presley portable record player.

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52 Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock ‘N’ Roll Changed America* (New York: Oxford, 2003), 185.

53 *Good Rockin’ Tonight: The Legacy of Sun Records*, produced by Bruce Sinofsky. Towards the end of the fifties, Rock N’ Roll music went into a period of decline, and it would not be until the early sixties that Rock N’ Roll would regain popularity due to the British Invasion and the birth of Motown.

54 Spencer Leigh, “Sam Phillips: Proprietor Who Discovered Elvis Presley,” *Elvis From Poland*, [www.kki.pl/elvisal/sun\\_209.htm](http://www.kki.pl/elvisal/sun_209.htm).

55 Keith Phipps, “Sam Phillips,” *The Official Rockabilly Hall of Fame*, <http://www.rockabillyhall.com/SamPhillips1.html>.